Introduction

The Aesthetics of Senescence

Recent years have witnessed the publication of alarming yet familiar headlines: apocalyptic visions of an imminent “grey” or “silver tsunami” of aging retirees (*The Economist*, *The Globe and Mail*); a “lost generation” of unemployed younger workers (*The Atlantic*, *Huffington Post*); and even a “war against youth” (*Esquire Magazine*). The common thread of these reports is their assumption of an inherent incompatibility between age-based cohorts—a belief reflected not only in the popular media, but in public policy and scholarly research as well. How has chronological age come to possess such far-reaching ideological, ethical, and aesthetic repercussions? How did age-based identities coalesce into such fraught realities? And how did Matthew Arnold’s question “What is it to grow old?” describe an evidently pressing problem for a diverse range of nineteenth-century British writers? In this book I argue that authors of this period used the imaginative resources of literature to engage with an unprecedented—and, as in our present day, hotly politicized—climate of crisis associated with growing old.

Two related watershed events occurred at the close of the eighteenth century, with the publication of books by leading thinkers of the day. One was philosopher William Godwin’s hugely popular *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness* (1793). The other, which first appeared anonymously in 1798, was titled *An Essay on the Principle of Population as It Affects the Future Improvement of Society, with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and other Writers*. (The English cleric and scholar Thomas Robert Malthus did not openly acknowledge authorship of his incendiary book until the larger second edition appeared in 1803.)¹ The two writers’ ideas were widely influential,
yet Godwin’s radical idealism was quickly eclipsed by Malthus’s clear-eyed critique, which took particular umbrage with Godwin’s declaration of the possibility of human life lived without end. Because their competing sets of ideas, known as the 1798 Godwin-Malthus debate, involved a profound shift in emphasis—from the individual life to the “massified” framework of population—their writings transformed not only the nature of the human subject but also, I argue, the very meaning of fleshly temporality.2

Godwin’s *Political Justice* (reprinted with significant edits in late 1795 and again in 1798) consistently asserted that old age was nothing less than the embodied symbol of political tyranny; and that radically prolonged life was the material sign of a truly free humanity. But after Malthus’s devastating critique of such idealism, Godwin’s hopes evidently broke down. Within a year, Godwin’s next novel examined exactly what the lived consequences of immortality might actually mean not only for an individual but for society as well. Following the success of his first novel, *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794), in Godwin’s *St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* (1799), the titular hero—granted everlasting youth by a magic elixir—lives beyond the ordinary span of life only to discover that this unnatural state separates him from the rest of humankind, even those closest to him. As I argue in chapter 1, Godwin’s second novel is important because it constitutes the first example of what I call the nineteenth-century “longevity narrative”—presenting an extreme case of age as a conditional state, rather than a stage, of life, one conceived specifically in relationship to the lived reality of an aging population.3

With its theme of the necessity of individual decline, in order to fuel the collective perpetuity of life, *St. Leon’s* startling reversal of a key facet of *Political Justice’s* philosophical radicalism illustrates a broader cultural reassessment of the paradoxical necessity of old age to human progress. It is also symptomatic of a broader shift away from Enlightenment perceptions of human lifespan as limited, limiting, and incarceral (as in Rousseau’s claim in his *Confessions* book VIII, that he “was born in a dying state” [95]), and toward a new cognizance of the role played by bodily decline. As a speculative case study of an unbounded life that turns out to be, in fact, disastrous, *St. Leon* signals an acute transitional moment in the early nineteenth-century politics of generation. Godwin explores the social compatibility of youth and age across a variety of disciplines: his historical novel blends elements not just of literature, but also of philosophy, medicine, economics, and fantasy, to produce a complex epistemological investigation of age, aging, and the ideological lineaments of senescence itself.
I discuss both these writers in more depth later, but for now, suffice it to say that the 1798 Godwin-Malthus debate inaugurated a new biopolitics of lifespan. A book like this could approach the subject by pointing to well-known catalysts of social change during this period: the French Revolution, industrialization, the rise of empire, and so on. My study, by contrast, asserts that a new conceptualization of human aging, and the thoroughly refigured bodies it gave rise to, constituted a major cultural upheaval in itself. I employ the language of biopolitics as a useful shorthand for describing how older age was increasingly portrayed as both a *medicalized* and *politicized* bodily state. *Medicalized* in the sense of attracting new forms of authoritative knowledge concerning human health (as per the hypothesis articulated by social theorists like Ivan Illich in *Medical Nemesis* (1976), for example); and *politicized* in the sense of such knowledge emerging as an issue of both public and private health concern (typically associated with the work of Michel Foucault, or later elaborations such as Barbara Ehrenreich’s *The American Health Empire: Power, Profits, and Politics* (1971) and *Natural Causes: An Epidemic of Wellness, the Certainty of Dying, and Killing Ourselves to Live Longer* (2018)). This shift, I propose, marks a transition away from the primarily religious thinking of earlier historical periods, toward one that made strategic use of decidedly literary ways of knowing about aging. At this time of profound cultural upheaval, the imaginative capacity of writing became an interdisciplinary crucible for testing what it meant—or could mean—to grow old. Motivated by concerns that are alive and well in our own time, this book is about the reorientation of the meaning of aging following the introduction of population as a character in the early-nineteenth-century British cultural landscape. To return to Arnold’s question, perhaps my aim is less to define “what it is to grow old” in nineteenth-century Britain than to illustrate how that century—its literature, science, politics, and culture—was radically transformed by growing old.

While modern literary criticism has, over the past three decades, thoroughly embraced the study of class, race, gender, and sexuality in the formation of individual, social, and literary subjects, less attention has been paid to the role of age as an integral element of identity. The field of Age Studies, in its broadest sense, exists to describe the critical study of the interlinking concepts of age (the chronological number of years a person has lived), aging (the ongoing temporality of the body, including mental and physiological changes often associated with post-midlife), and older age (a vague, context-dependent designation generally starting at sixty-five years of age). As defined by Margaret Gullette, Age Studies takes as “its founding
proposition, the priority of culture in constructing age . . . [f]rom the confetti of the phenomena to the confetti-factories of ideology” (DTD 106). Aging’s compulsory combination of ideology and biology makes Age Studies an intensely interdisciplinary field involving anthropological, psychosocial, historical, materialistic, and humanistic imperatives, “because it emphasizes the language we use, the genres our stories get shaped into, our visual and verbal discourses” (116).

Even studies of old age that are primarily historical—such as Susannah Ottaway’s *The Decline of Life* (2004), Pat Thane’s *Old Age in English History* (2000), or Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Coming of Age* (1972)—routinely cite the relevance of art and literature to shifts in the meaning and experience of growing old. Recent Age Studies work has focused almost exclusively on the Victorian period, emphasizing our interpretation of cultural and historical artifacts. Yet few scholars have investigated the intersection of medical, scientific, philosophical, economic, and demographic discourses around older age as represented in nineteenth-century British writing. This book therefore adopts age, and older age especially, as an *analytical category* of textual study, charting the traffic between literary and extra-literary engagements with human aging, to ask 1) how does the nineteenth-century British literary imagination employ age as a means of identifying certain age-defined populations or cohorts, and 2) in what ways do such attempts reflect, dispute, or even seek to undermine the emergence of demographic thinking during this period? This new, double-stranded question forms the basis of my exploration of the evolving attitudes toward an emergent—and unprecedentedly public—cultural politics of aging and older age in nineteenth-century Britain.

Nineteenth-century demographic data provides further context for this study, as do more modern back-projection techniques that “retropolate” (as opposed to “extrapolate”) more granular assessments of societal age structure at that time. From 1801 to 1871, national census data reported an overall increase in England’s population from 8.71 million to 21.37 million; in the early nineteenth century especially, population growth was most apparent in rapidly industrializing areas. Between 1780 and 1829 life expectancy at birth ranged from 48 (male) to 55 (female) for the property-owning classes, increasing to 50 (male) and 62 (female) between 1830 and 1879. In addition to significant variations in life expectancy at birth based on class, gender, and location, it is also important to remember that such measures are only partial reflections of demographic reality due to factors like high infant and
child mortality rates (which reduced overall life expectancy calculations) (Antonovsky 33). Over a similar period, the percentage of the population aged 60 or older was approximately 5 to 7 percent throughout the century, slightly lower than the 6 to 10 percent cited for the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (an apparent decline primarily due to high birth rates that boosted the population percentage-share of the very young). Then as now, class difference cannot be overstated: in 1838, statistician William Farr identified that the mean life expectancy of the general population was almost twelve years less than that of the peerage (40.4 versus 52 years).

This fundamentally level plateau of life expectancy and overall proportion of older persons changed abruptly in the 1890s, with both measures steeply ascending over the course of the twentieth century. Between the 1890s and 1980s, Peter Laslett writes, the “long term, enduring . . . irreversible” phenomenon he terms the secular shift in aging ”was so fundamental that it can indeed be conveyed only in geological metaphors . . . transferring the sense of fundamental, physical structure conveyed by the notion of landscape to the architectonics of society” (67). To the extent that the British case reflects broader global trends today, the shift Laslett describes is indeed reaching a new, “loftier” (67) plateau both with respect to life expectancy and proportion of older persons in the developed world. In the United Kingdom 16 percent of the population is sixty-five or older (2011), in Canada 16.9 percent (2016), and in the United States 14.9 percent (2016). Particularly in comparison to the early years of the nineteenth century, recent census data confirms a brave new age of human aging itself. It remains to be seen whether such gains in life expectancy are in fact irreversible in light of twenty-first-century socioeconomic inequalities, environmental threats, chronic illness, and other emergent population-based risk factors.

In The Shape of Irish History (2001), A.T.Q. Stewart writes, “The days, weeks, months and years mark out our lives, and we measure time by the customary life-span. A century seems a very long time to us precisely because it is just beyond the normal” (16). Following Godwin’s epic experiment, nineteenth-century British literature contributed important strategies for representing what old age was—or might be—in the context of longer life spans not only for individuals but for populations as well. One of the questions I explore is how prominent British writers shaped, witnessed, and represented “the invention of the elderly subject” (as Karen Chase puts it in The Victorians and Old Age, 276). Of course, this requires some reading against the grain, since literature of that era typically took youth as its default perspective...
and subject—from its young protagonists, to marriage plots, to the novel as a form itself. In *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, Franco Moretti distinguishes between the hero of the classical epic—a mature man like Achilles, Hector, or Ulysses—and that of the novel (for example, Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*), which effectively “codifies the new paradigm, and sees youth as the most meaningful part of life” (3, emphasis in original). Yet such a perspective has rarely accounted for a considerably more varied understanding of aging throughout nineteenth-century writing, the novel especially. For these reasons, this book considers how the theme of senescence can also help us to analyze the “aging” nineteenth century in new ways. The Victorian response to its precedent Romanticism is one such trope; another might be the insistent rhetoric of “life-course” so often used to characterize the culture and literature of this period. Consider the critical lexicon used to describe this century’s literary production: we speak of “proto-Romanticism,” and of “first- and second-generation” Romanticism; and then of “early,” “mid-” and “late” Victorianism—ending, of course, with the terminal throes of the *fin de siècle*. No other period has generated as detailed an inventory of chronologized stages. Then as now, that century has aged anxiously, and literary scholarship continues to project vivid visions of aging onto it and its textual productions.

My aim in this work is twofold. First, I demonstrate how introducing the concept of “population” as a character into the cultural landscape in the early years of the century helped reconceive older age as a biopolitical state of life; and second, I investigate how nineteenth-century literature, in particular, became an important experimental space for shaping an emergent aesthetics of aging, longevity, life-course, and even life-extension in response to new disciplinary understandings of aging bodies. Regarding the first objective: each chapter explores how senescence became a potent nexus of theory, imagination, and embodiment, provoking a distinctly modern suite of concerns about its implications for both individual and social bodies. Famously, Malthus’s invention of demography in 1798 shifted emphasis from individual lives to the framework of population. What are less well considered, however, are the consequences that form the through-line of my study: how this radical reconfiguration of the body politic had profound consequences for longstanding views of human temporality. Before Malthus, aging was conceptualized as a linear progression through ordained “stages”—as recounted, for instance, in Jaques’s “Seven Ages of Man” monologue in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*:
All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages . . .

(2.7.138–142)

After Malthus, aging began to acquire an unfamiliar biopolitical overlay. The new consciousness of population recast aging as a *state* of life, fluid and unstable, and inseparable from the broader health and future of society. Contemporary critics including Emily Steinlight, Maureen McLane, and Frances Ferguson have shown that in the same period—which saw the birth of the human sciences such as moral philosophy, political economy, and anthropology—thinkers were profoundly concerned not only with the lives experienced by individuals, but with populations as well. It was the construction of the elderly as an identifiable population that made older citizens newly subject to social discourse, especially as burden, difficulty, or disruption: a pattern of thought readily available in our own day precisely because of its development over the long nineteenth century. By bringing this established research to bear on my investigation of age-based visions of generational identity, my book builds on these discussions to consider the nineteenth-century construction of youth, older age, and intergenerational conflict as matters of not just familial but social and demographic trepidation.

Although generational conflict has long existed as a trope in Western literature (e.g. *Oedipus Rex*, *King Lear*, *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*), a diverse range of nineteenth-century texts indicate the intimate linkage of the emergent science of demography with shifting perceptions of human age as the flashpoint of social crisis. My second aim in this book is to build on these discussions to investigate how multiple disciplinary paradigms used literary strategies to examine, and appraise, newly medicalized ideas of what it was to grow old. In stark contrast to the Old Testament injunction “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1.28, King James Bible), a distinctly Malthusian strain of thought identified the thriving reproductive capacities of youth as the catastrophic basis of overpopulation. As chapter 2 describes, the immense backlash generated by such age-based anxieties effected what we might today call a culture war, pitting those hostile to the “juvenile warmth” of post-Revolution Europe (to use politician Edmund Burke’s phrasing in the *Reflections*, 213) against those who viewed youth and its aesthetics—championed by literary figures that included, for a time at least, William Godwin, William
Wordsworth, and Percy Bysshe Shelley—as antithetical to the rank inequities of an ancien régime. Textual modes of experimentation, and especially the imaginative capacity of literature, afforded a crucial interdisciplinary apparatus through which human aging—its meaning, representational strategies, and symbolic and lived repercussions—could be investigated, tested, illustrated, or even remedied. Such a study further allows us to see that ideologies also live in and through time; in other words, they age. What produces stability and coherence for one generation will not do the same for another, a truth forcefully displayed in the contrast of George Eliot and George Gissing’s respective portraits of age and aging in chapters 3 and 4. As the second half of my book lays bare, clearly the images that fed midcentury dreams of older age left hungry those in the fin de siècle.

Interpreting the history of aging populations is a comparatively recent investigation. Yet equally germane is the matter of disciplinary methods: how was the aging body apprehended at the dawn of that century? In our own time, fields of research, academic departments, and funding agencies are rigorously segregated. More often than not, so-called “interdisciplinary” initiatives merely serve to reinforce the trend toward hyper-specialization: they engage only fields that already share assumptions, narratives, and vocabularies (literature and history, for example, or medicine and nursing). The recent emergence of initiatives like “narrative medicine” or “Health” (also “Medical”) Humanities marks a significant attempt to articulate, and occasionally bridge, such disciplinary and epistemological fissures. (Of course, the very act of doing so—as required when proposing interdisciplinary courses, securing research funds, building a tenure file, or writing a book—indicates the conceptual distance that still persists to separate these fields of interest.) But in the nineteenth century, these realities were not nearly so pronounced. Then as now, the concept of aging was a particularly good example of this multidirectional epistemological traffic. The Aesthetics of Senescence: Aging, Population, and the Nineteenth-Century British Novel is therefore also about the nature of interdisciplinary exchange between literary and non-literary ways of knowing at that time, habits of thinking that reveal themselves as newly germane to our understanding of similar issues in the twenty-first century.

The Malthusian Intervention

To set the stage for my argument, I will briefly examine the intellectual context of England and Europe before Malthus published his Essay in
1798. Before then, the sheer proliferation of human bodies had long been knit to positive indices of social and national prosperity. Throughout the early modern period, for example, the prevailing mercantile system directly linked a nation’s political and economic power to the size of its working population. Growth was actively encouraged by laws that penalized celibates and made marriage a prerequisite for holding public office. Yet despite such official endorsements of reproduction, the reality was that the destitute class was growing ever larger. In 1601, the English Poor Laws were introduced at the parish level to provide relief (money, food, clothing, and so on) to paupers and to those too ill or debilitated to work. Within a century, the British population had increased to such a degree that these policies had to be revised and Europe was witnessing an explosion of population literature that would soon challenge the pronatalist ideology of a former era.8 Clearly, population growth was not interpreted as a universal boon.

One significant controversy, which in some ways presaged the Godwin-Malthus debate of 1798, was the question of whether or not human fecundity had diminished since antiquity. In his 1752 essay “Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations,” David Hume contends that in the present, “every wise, just, and mild government, by rendering the conditions of its subjects easy and secure, will always abound most in people, as well as in commodities and riches” (Essays 226). In contrast, Hume believed, the dependence of the ancients on slaves, and the draconian restrictions placed on this large class of people, significantly hampered early populations. Robert Wallace’s Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind in Ancient and Modern Times (1753) shared the broad ideological contours of Hume’s position, but arrived at the opposite conclusion—that the ancient world was in fact more populous than the present. This debate, moot as it was, can be interpreted as a remnant of the seventeenth century’s obsession with the decay of nature and the apparent old age of the world. This “melancholy of mutability” (Williamson 121) was a popular motif in the literature, religion, and philosophy of that era, and inspired some of Romanticism’s key themes.

The ideas of Hume and Wallace laid the groundwork for more practical studies of population: not just how many people might have lived in the past, but how they might be measured in the present—and forecast in the future. Then, against the mercantilist paternalism of Hume and Wallace, Adam Smith’s An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (1776) rejected the premise that government should engineer economic wellbeing. Smith’s Wealth of Nations held that population numbers are simply another expression of free market forces, guided by the invisible yet
insistent hand of supply and demand: “The demand for men, like that for any other commodity, necessarily regulates the production of men; quickens it when it goes on too slowly, and stops it when it advances too fast” (81). While Smith was appalled by the practice of infanticide (which, he noted in Wealth of Nations and elsewhere, was common in China), at home the abstracted hand of demand and supply was nevertheless free to exert its suffocating influence to identical effect.

In fact, Smith cites China as a case study of perfectly balanced, stationary rate of population growth—thereby perpetuating historians’ longstanding view of the Orient as an orderly, populous empire. For example, the translator’s dedication of French Jesuit historian Jean-Baptiste Du Halde’s encyclopedic and widely translated The General History of China (1738, 1741) conspicuously praises the country’s orderly population control:

No Laws or Institutions appear in the general so well contrived as the Chinese to make both King and People happy. . . . Nations as numerous as the Sands of the Sea are restrained within the Bounds of the most perfect Submission. . . . Hence likewise China has but seldom experienced Revolutions, which have so often overturned other States; and were it not for the superstitious Sects that have been suffer'd to propagate themselves, had probably never felt any.

Yet this ostensible situation of “most perfect submission” made some European observers suspect that China’s population restraint might be less the embodiment of good government, and more the result of tyrannical and despotic micromanagement. “Might not our missionaries have been deceived by an appearance of order?” wondered Montesquieu in The Spirit of Laws (1748) (154). By the late eighteenth century, China’s population was estimated to be 300 million (Europe’s, by contrast, was some 200 million, and England’s a mere 8 million); even there, however, poverty was widespread. Despite his qualms, Montesquieu could not help concluding that Chinese women must be “the most prolific in the whole world” to enable that country to rapidly recover from the regular devastations of famine (155).

As this brief overview reveals, the proliferative nature of populations occupied the Orientalist dreams of European theorists long before Malthus’s notorious Essay. It was in this intellectual context that An Essay on the Principle of Population as It Affects the Future Improvement of Society, with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and other
Writers first appeared anonymously in 1798. The Essay’s lucid and original hypothesis still resonates more than two centuries later: the geometric growth of human populations (1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128 . . .) is limited by merely arithmetical increases in subsistence (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 . . .). Left unchecked, the former will always outstrip the latter. By positing a perpetual struggle between population growth and available resources, the Essay conceives nature less as a bountiful and all-giving life force than as a constraint to which humanity is inescapably subject, thereby innovating the concept of “overpopulation.”

Malthus articulated two types of checks to population growth: preventive ones that lower the birth rate (i.e., late marriage or abstinence) and positive ones that raise the death rate (i.e., disease, war, famine). Following breakfast conversations with William Godwin, Malthus also added moral restraint (sexual abstinence) to the 1803 edition as a third, if speculative, means of alleviating population pressure. As we shall see in the next chapter, the Essay asserts a harsh, temporally dynamic vision of population wholly distinct from the rational, benevolent one of Godwin’s Political Justice—essentially articulating the bifurcated terms on which conceptualizations of aging would be scaffolded in the decades and centuries that followed.

Rather than limiting its significance to a defense of a hypercapitalist status quo, it is important to note how Malthus’s Essay targets the fearsome reproductive capacity of youth. In her book The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel (2005), Catherine Gallagher astutely observes that in the Essay, “Malthus’s argument ruptures the healthy body/healthy society homology,” and that in terms of population control, “the healthy body comes to be a sign of its opposite” (BE 39). Malthus further disrupts the longstanding affiliation of health and youth by introducing a new hermeneutics of lifespan, one that does not equate youth, reproductivity, and the new with unreserved or unqualified benefit. In fact, old age—rather than an antagonist to progress or a pathology requiring eradication—instead connotes a surprising indicator of individual and national fitness. In an unusually figurative passage describing the American colonies (a newly forged nation, through Eurocentric eyes, following the 1775–83 War of Independence), Malthus imagines the body politic in terms of the inexorability of both population growth and aging:

A person who contemplated the happy state of the lower classes of people in America twenty years ago would naturally wish to retain them for ever in that state, and might think, perhaps,
that by preventing the introduction of manufactures and luxury he might effect his purpose; but he might as reasonably expect to prevent a wife or mistress from growing old by never exposing her to the sun or air. The situation of new colonies, well governed, is a bloom of youth that no efforts can arrest. There are, indeed, many modes of treatment in the political, as well as animal, body, that contribute to accelerate or retard the approaches of age, but there can be no chance of success, in any mode that could be devised, for keeping either of them in perpetual youth. (114–115)

By acknowledging one’s “natural” tendency to “wish” for an eternally favorable misfit between population and resources, Malthus anticipates a reader sympathetic both to Enlightenment ideals of perpetuity and to mercantilist assumptions of ceaseless increase. The sad truth, Malthus is obliged to inform us, is very different—as illustrated by his rhetorical migration from the tentative “would” and the conditional “might” to the harsh realism of the indubitable “is.” Prior to Malthus’s intervention, commentators such as Smith, Godwin, and Benjamin Franklin had noted with admiration the flourishing of the North American colonies. Food, jobs, and land were plentiful and it was widely remarked that human numbers had doubled in twenty-five years. Malthus checks this happy attitude by glimpsing in North America’s “well-governed” growth cause for grave concern.10

This passage is remarkable for the many ways it overturns the meaning of population growth as an axiomatic social good. Key to his rhetorical strategy is the language that emerged from the late eighteenth century’s taxonomic imagination. As Amy M. King observes in Bloom: The Botanical Vernacular in the English Novel (1998), Carl Linnaeus’s investigation of the sexual function of plants gave rise to a “botanical vernacular” that made it possible to mention female maturation in both literary and non-literary writing of this period. Writers from Jane Austen to Henry James were able to reference a woman’s “bloom” as a shorthand for her sexuality, in a way that King characterizes as both “explicit (as it is in Linnaean systematics), and safely implicit” (5). The metaphor of bloom, she points out, is “a mediating figure par excellence: a figure than can traverse the range from innocent to provocative, and that can bridge the accepted social appearances of courtship with the specifically physical manifestations of maturation and enticement” (5).
Malthus, however, employs the metaphors of bloom against its newly sexualized tenor to warn against a foreboding youthful fertility that “no efforts can arrest.” In a strikingly paternalistic metaphor of commodification, Malthus compares the lower classes to “a wife or mistress” whom the (naturally male) reader would “wish” to keep in a state of unmarred allurement. Malthus undercuts those fond hopes precisely because they defy the sequelae of this crucial organic metaphor (perhaps an insight planted by the melancholic Jaques of As You Like It: “from hour to hour we ripe and ripe, / And then from hour to hour we rot and rot” [2.7.26–27]). Hereby hangs the Essay’s sober tale: rather than a sign of good government, sexual bloom directly competes with the agricultural bloom vital to food production and subsistence. In opposition to pronatalist enthusiasts, for Malthus the value of bloom is stubbornly attached to its literal associations with farming and agriculture. Although cosmetic delays are possible, population growth—like bodily aging—retains its devastating inevitability. Bodily bloom is thus the grim augur of a withering nation.

The passage quoted above, in fact, marks the crux of what Gallagher calls Malthus’s “double vision” of the body-nation analogy. As she observes, “the social body is growing ‘old’ precisely insofar as the actual demographic proportions of society are increasingly weighted toward youth . . . The social body is an ‘old woman’ insofar as it is populated by young women” (BE 39). Malthus’s conclusion—that there is “no chance of success” for keeping either the political or the physical body “in perpetual youth”—reveals the semantic extent of this double vision of youth and age (Malthus 115). He further observes that, “by encouraging the industry of the towns more than the industry of the country, Europe may be said, perhaps, to have brought on a premature old age” (115). The use of “premature” is telling here. The Essay describes an inverse relation between the health of a population and the reproductive capacity of the bodies it contains. But this also signals that Gallagher’s assessment of the social body as at once “growing old” and being “an old woman” requires some refinement. Recall Malthus’s acknowledgment that some interventions “may contribute to accelerate or retard the approaches of age” (115): Europe’s premature old age announces that the effective age of the nation is less a function of chronological time than of its rate of population growth. Malthus says as much when he explains, “the happiness of a country does not depend, absolutely, upon its poverty or its riches, upon its youth or its age, upon its being thinly or fully inhabited; but upon the rapidity with which it is increasing” (55, emphasis added). For
Malthus, it is the temporal and bodily instability implied by the process of aging—and not the state of old age _per se_—that presents the real threat to happiness. The procreative “success” of youth merely ushers in the disastrous outcome of its realization.

From this we may therefore assume that “aging,” “growing old,” and “old age” are not equivalent terms in the _Essay_, nor ought they be conflated in more general discourse—as Age Studies theorists have argued. “Two words—_age_ and _aging_—cover and blur too many separable ideas,” writes Margaret Gullette (_DTD_ 212). Margaret Cruikshank, in _Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture and Aging_, likewise observes that it is not “the changes in our bodies that define ‘old’; it is the meanings given to those changes” (5). Whereas “old states” such as Europe, France, or England are less prone to vacillations from stability to misery, national aging is concurrent with the rapid and dynamic change that accompanies the treacherous march of progress. Paradoxical as it may sound, in the Malthusian view premature national aging—that is, the too-rapid increase in youthful bodies—is the worst of both worlds: it incorporates both the vulnerability of old age, and the proliferative instability of youth. The ideal state, we might suppose, would be one that possesses the stability of the old without passing through—to borrow Mary Poovey’s apt and inadvertently Malthusian phrase—the “nightmare of . . . maturity” (153). (In chapter 2 I investigate how this peculiar circumstance might play out.)

Malthus also articulates a concept new to the nineteenth century, which we might now term _epheliphobia_—a coinage that describes the fear or dislike of youth, while also carving out a surprising admiration accorded to older age, as a check to reproduction. Malthus further challenges the assumption that the female body is the _sine qua non_ of population growth: while not exactly perpetual, the male capacity to reproduce lasts at least for most of the lifespan. This striking formulation points to the need to refine Gallagher’s assessment of the “predictably” feminized social body she ascribes to Malthus’s _Essay_ (_BE_ 39), which seems to place Malthus back within a mercantilist paradigm. By contrast, defying the ancient stigma associated with the menopausal body, Malthus takes a positive view of older women—precisely because they “are beyond the potential to multiply” (Niles, “Malthusian,” 295). The diminished female fecundity associated with menopause informs Malthus’s observation that female misery—namely illness and violence—acts as a check to population.

This assessment is consistent with his controversial comparison of the fertile woman and the childless spinster (added to the _Essay’s_ second edition of 1803). Speaking of a hypothetical “matron who has reared a
family of ten or twelve children,” Malthus warned against “the character of the monopolist” in this ostensibly “great benefactor to the state.” The “old maid,” in his view, “on the contrary has exalted others by depressing herself. . . . She has really and truly contributed more to the happiness of the rest of the society arising from the pleasures of marriage, than if she had entered in this union herself.” By remaining childless, the spinster has a better “claim to the gratitude of society” than a mother (148–149). No great imagination is required to imagine the widespread outrage this passage provoked; Malthus expunged it from the third (1806) edition.11 But despite the controversy they generated, Malthus’s ideas caught on in some circles: echoes of them are manifest in, for instance, the writings of Jane Marcet (Conversations on Political Economy, 1816), Harriet Martineau (Illustrations of Political Economy, 1832–1834), and novelist Elizabeth Gaskell.12 The old maid—be it through body or behavior—acts as a calming salve to the population crisis begotten by youth.

To modify Gallagher’s claim that population pressure in a society depends only on the number of women of childbearing age, Malthus insists that young men as well—the elect of savage and civilized nations alike—compose a formidable reproductive class whose mobility, especially in times of war and political unrest, makes them the primary agents of an ever-threatenning apocalypse. Male fecundity is dangerously coupled to other enticements and tendencies fetered in bawdy war songs. For example, the Chevalier de Boufflers’s “Love and War” (translated by poet and essayist Leigh Hunt in 1824) views the human losses of combat in lockstep with zestier duties when it rallies, “What possible debtor can pay his debts better, / Than De-population with Re-population?” (Hunt 329–330). Turning to the working class, a laborer who is unprepared to support the reproductive consequences of his vice (that is, having children) “may in some respects be considered as an enemy to all his fellow-labourers” (Malthus 44); as with the fecund woman, his fecundity serves as a symbol of the antisocial logic at the basis of species generation. By introducing masculinity as a dangerous “aging” factor for the nation, Malthus effaces the traditional gendered view of population growth as solely a female responsibility.

For this reason, Malthus considers the three groups of women, children, and the aged as posing the least risk of increasing the population; and he identifies increases in the numbers of these groups as the best way to gauge the health of a nation. This contrasted with the former general tendency to focus on young men—“gentlemen-warriors” in their prime of life—as the best indicator of social vigor:
In estimating the happiness of a savage nation, we must not fix our eyes only on the warrior in the prime of life: he is one of a hundred: he is the gentleman, the man of fortune, the chances have been in his favour; and many efforts have failed ere this fortunate being was produced. . . . The true points of comparison between two nations seem to be the ranks in which each appear nearest to answer to each other. And in this view, I should compare the warriors in the prime of life with the gentlemen, and the women, children, and aged, with the lower classes of the community in civilized states. (Malthus 28)

In Malthus’s view, the lives of women, children, and the elderly are usually risked—and often sacrificed—to preserve the young male demographic. Old and young, male and female, rich and poor, civilized and savage, the old world and the new: youth trumps them all, an internal enemy with the potential to destroy the fragile balance between population and resources.

The Essay thus adopts a Blakean trope when it divides old and young into contrary states, effectively pitting youth against age, the former a natural enemy of the other. To be old is to be innocent of enabling the menacing annihilation associated with reproductivity, a state to some extent native to the female body given that the inevitability of menopause diminishes fecundity. By defining states of age based on reproductive capacity, Malthus presents a view of society as one of disastrously incompatible warring classes—its social bonds perpetually threatened by youthful bloom: a remarkable because biological reframing of longstanding ideological conceptualizations of age, aging, and older age in Britain and European culture more broadly at this time.

In some ways, Malthus’s skepticism also registers the political conservatism of Edmund Burke, whose 1790 publication Reflections on the Revolution in France celebrates the stability of “the ancient world” in contrast to the destructive ethos of innovation. Using a suite of gerontophilic motifs, Burke defensively contrasts the revolutionary French with the staid English: “I know that we are supposed a dull, sluggish race, rendered passive by finding our situation tolerable” (203). Yet these qualities, Burke maintains, constitute the very means of ensuring national longevity. His disgust for those who reject the legacy of the past is linked with an overt reverence for the aged: Burke himself was sixty when he wrote the Reflections, in “the stiff and peremptory dignity of age” (365), ostensibly addressing his observations to “a very young gentleman at Paris” (151). In this text and others (perhaps most notably five years later, in Burke’s spirited vindication
of his right to a state pension in *Letter to a Noble Lord*, the intellectual and moral stability of age serves as a rhetorical defense of England’s past against a dangerous mania for change. In his view, “juvenile politicians” sympathetic to the French cause err gravely by abandoning the value of “experience and observation” (364):

Such schemes are not like propositions coming from a man of fifty years’ wear and tear amongst mankind . . . These gentlemen deal in regeneration; but at any price I should hardly yield my rigid fibres to be regenerated by them, nor begin, in my grand climacteric, to squall in their new accents or to stammer, in my second cradle, the elemental sounds of their barbarous metaphysics. (364–365)

Burke employs an alchemical trope to defend the “grand” and “rigid fibres” of the past against the “barbarous metaphysics” of revolution, and passionately rejects the political regimen that would make an ideological infant of the man in life’s “second cradle.” Little wonder that he concludes the passage with a quotation adapted from Cicero’s *De Senectute* (*On Old Age*): “Si isti mihi largiantur ut repuerascam, et in eorum cunis vagiam, valde recusem!” In the original quotation, Cato the Elder lectures his young colleagues on the benefits and values of later life. Cicero’s original text affirms the speaker’s contentedness: “If some god should give me leave to return to infancy from my old age, to weep once more in my cradle, I should vehemently protest” (Cicero 95). Burke’s adaptation, by contrast, is motivated by a strongly ephiphobic resistance to embracing the politics of youth in the “second childhood” of old age: “But if those guys [the pejorative pronoun *isti*] should give me leave to return to infancy from my old age, to weep once more in their cradle, I should vehemently protest” (emphasis added).

With his *Reflections*, Burke effectively lays the moral and political groundwork for Malthus’s physiological ephiphobia eight years later. In other words, the *Essay* reinvents Burke’s dislike for “regeneration” in terms of sexual reproduction; the political risks of innovation and revolution Burke voiced in the *Reflections* become the *Essay*’s fears of youth and population. However, Malthus is no mere biological Burkean. As well as departing from the *Reflections’* overt mercantilism and “Augustan values” (Collings, *Monstrous* 185), the *Essay* also discards Burke’s dogged insistence on preservation, sameness, and tradition. For all the *Essay*’s anxieties about youth, Malthus is resigned to the juggernaut of change driven by the catastrophic inevitability
of human reproduction. Here lies the essential distinction between Burke’s and Malthus’s conservatisms: the latter focuses on a biological principle of continuity rather than a genealogical one. Biology effaces the singularity of ancestry by introducing the vast numbers of population: sexual generation, not ancestry, is the true basis of national history. By expanding the scope of Burke’s palpable fear of revolutionary crowds, Malthus recasts this ideological clash of generations as an outright war—while also reserving an unexpected place for older age as a tenuous bulwark against the dangers of reproduction.

The Aesthetics of Senescence

Far from an isolated idiosyncrasy, Malthus articulates distinct anxieties regarding the emergence of age as an ideologically freighted demographic identity. Malthus’s immediate impact on language, policy, and cultural discourse cannot be overestimated: in direct response to the 1798 Essay’s recommendations, Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger withdrew his support for a parliamentary bill that he had formerly endorsed, which had proposed to enhance monies given to the poor in proportion to family size (Bonar 208). Some of “Parson” or “Pop” Malthus’s most vocal detractors included prominent literary figures like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey, and William Hazlitt, who were appalled by the Essay’s apparent ruthlessness toward the poor. (Writing in 1836, Coleridge explodes: “Is it not lamentable—is it not even marvellous—that the monstrous practical sophism of Malthus should now have gained complete possession of the leading men of the kingdom! Such an essential lie in morals—such a practical lie in fact as it is too!” [Coleridge, Table 88].) Most immediately, these new biopolitics of aging inserted a wrinkle into the prevailing iconography of the deeply Christian architecture of the age-as-stage model. As historian of aging Thomas R. Cole has shown, since the mid-sixteenth century, the dramaturgical language of “stages” has served to describe the journey of the human body through time. In contrast to the immense divine machinations that gave purpose to the brutishly short medieval existence, the age-as-stage model was visually rendered as a rising and falling staircase known as the Lebenstreppe (German; English translation, “steps of life”). Widespread throughout Europe and North America until the early twentieth century, the Lebenstreppe presented the bourgeois individual with a conceptual playbill that placed him (or her, or both) at the center stage of his own life-course: an existence now replete with prescribed roles, plot, and temporal projection into the
future (see figure I.1). This motif, complete with its predictable plotting of
the life-course as a purposeful quest through life’s chaos, “provided a visual
means for each person to step outside his own life experience and view it
as a whole” (Cole 25). The upward ascent of childhood and youth, the
peak of man’s “perfect age,” followed by the downward slope of later years,
meant that the journey of modern aging implied by the stages model was
as much a spatial as temporal organization of one’s life.

In contrast to this age-as-stage model, new concepts of population
necessarily influenced, and demanded, aesthetic representations sensitive to
new conceptualizations of aging: a model or, indeed, models more reflective
of affective states and social conditions that were themselves subject to
change as both affects and conditions alter. That literary writing, the novel
especially, would be responsive to such ideations is consistent with what is
known about the nineteenth century’s interest in the body as a subject for
the literary imagination. Scholars including William A. Cohen, Nicholas
Dames, Gillian Beer, Pamela Gilbert, Athena Vrettos, and Sally Shuttleworth have shown how novelistic representations of corporeal experience are now increasingly understood to inform key modes of representation typical to the novel such as interiority, character, realism, and psychological depth. Nor were bodily sensations purely a matter for literary writing: scientific texts were also informed by an awareness of the physical realm. This intricate interconnection of disciplinary knowledges produced “a loosely affiliated coterie of scientists, journalists, and intellectuals who brought the experimental study of human physiology to bear upon the facts of novel-reading” (Dames, *Physiology* 2). My book extends this significant body of knowledge by focusing on the more and less implicit conversations between medicalized and literary understandings of aging at this time, particularly the ways in which this interdisciplinary traffic complicated conventional notions of human temporality typical to the archetypal linearity of the *Bildungs*-plot. Above all, each chapter is interested in the convergence of aesthetics, disciplinary knowledges, and nineteenth-century British culture as conceptual grounds for the twenty-first century’s profound aversion toward and fascination with the facts—and as importantly, the imaginative fictions—of human aging and older age.

Because I am taking a long view of materials produced across Romantic and Victorian periods—two periods of literary history that are often kept apart, somewhat artificially—let me be clear about some key threads and patterns that I am especially interested in tracking throughout this book:

- **The nineteenth-century British novel as an ideal form for historicizing changing senses of human temporality.** By reading the novel (the mode of literature that arguably attempts most to do justice to the span of lives—the *Bildungsroman* especially) in conjunction with scientific analyses and philosophical speculation on the rhythms and dynamics of life, I examine how novelistic fiction is uniquely prepared to grapple with the complex heteroglossia of human aging. Numerous characters I will discuss here are indeed “old,” but not necessarily, or straightforwardly, in terms of chronological age. Thus I acknowledge and assert the variety of definitions necessary to capture the range of representations discussed in the following chapters, as the assignment of “old” is deployed to describe certain features, behaviors, and actions ranging from clichés and stereotypes to more nuanced and idiosyncratic applications. By