

Shadows and Light: Seeing Senescence in British and
American Genre Painting, ca.1850-1910

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Abstract

*Shadows and Light: Seeing Senescence in British and
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Professor Susan P. Casteras
Art History

This study suggests the potential benefits of enhanced sensitivity towards aging in the history of art. Cultural representations of senescence in nineteenth-century genre painting, whether drawn from scenes of the hearthside, chaperonage, age-disparate coupling, or cross-generational play, provide the visual material from which a general perception of the life course can be drawn. The argument at the center of this study is that something is to be gained for Anglo-American art history from age studies and its related phenomena. Age articulates difference, and abandoning mono-generational research perspectives might sharpen our awareness of the role this difference plays in visual culture.

There are unique challenges that one must responsibly address when prying into the omissions and oversights within a discipline, and the thematic image groupings which comprise the chapters of this study were selected to present a survey of the signifiers of old age without adhering to a simple story line. Both American and British visual culture demonstrate instances of lack and plenty in relation to the complex notions of Victorian

aging, and ageism in the historiography of art can be made much clearer by reading this evidence with intention and respect. By electing to use the life cycle to appraise and navigate Victorian genre painting, historians of British and American painting would acknowledge the basic notion that ageism is perhaps the most neglected and socially permitted discriminatory system. An assessment of nineteenth-century visual culture designed by this supposition is bound to reveal significant and instructive truths.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Lee MacCormick Edwards

A woman of immense warmth, spirit, and generosity

A truly great teacher

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Introduction

In her landmark book *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life*, art historian Elizabeth Johns issues an inquiry to twenty-first-century viewers of nineteenth-century genre painting:

To characterize genre images as “scenes of everyday life” not only is inadequate but obscures the social relations that underlie this type of painting. Two simple questions underscore my diagnosis: “Just whose ‘everyday life’ is depicted?” and “What is the relationship of the actors in this ‘everyday life’ to the viewers?”¹

While Johns’ questions are intended to guide a general consideration of American genre pictures, this prompt can also be applied to an investigation of the multivalent identities found within such scenes. Whose experiences do we best understand when appraising images of race, class, gender, or age in narrative painting? In terms of this dissertation, it bears asking if viewers are able to see a clear reflection of their experience of aging when senescence is featured prominently in a “scene of everyday life.”

A pattern emerges when nineteenth-century British and American painting is considered in terms of ekphrastic inclusion and exclusion: genre pictures often prominently feature elderly figures, who are just as often excluded from the thoughtful written interpretation of these works by critics and scholars. This oversight contributes to a pronounced absence in the art historical record. Unfortunately, this evidence points to a

¹ Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), xi.

kind of inherent ageism in art historical scholarship, which severely limits the operations of disciplinary inquiry.

British and American art history would benefit from an extended examination of the issue of ageism, a concept that has been called the third “ism,” after racism and sexism.² While the corrective and sensitive art historical scholarship of the past few decades has closely examined other identity-determined “isms” in popular studies, concern for the appropriate interpretation of the aged has remained neglected.

There remains a need to disassemble the stereotypes of sedate senescence that are commonly associated with the nineteenth century in Britain and the United States. While the study of aging in visual culture has been broached by the humanities, such efforts have largely been undertaken outside the discipline of art history. It is vital to better evaluate the larger context in which aging was visually interpreted and generally understood during the nineteenth century in order to adjust scholarship accordingly. Such a re-examination can begin by asking certain key questions: Why would such ubiquitous figures be repeatedly overlooked by the texts that profess to reveal meaning in images? What was the unique status of elders in nineteenth-century Britain and America that resulted in their simultaneous inclusion and exclusion from Anglo-American art history? Who was representing older figures in Victorian visual culture, and what roles were they intended to play?

This dissertation addresses images of aging in later nineteenth-century American and British genre painting in an interdisciplinary context. In the following chapters, I

² “Aversion, hatred, and prejudice toward the aged and their manifestations in the form of discrimination on the basis of age is *ageism*, a term coined by [Dr. Robert Butler] in 1968. Ageism has been called the third “ism.” Racism and sexism are the other two.” Georgia M. Barrow and Patricia A. Smith, *Aging, the Individual, and Society* (St. Paul: West Publishing Company, 1983), 7.

explore diverse interpretations of the role and function of genre painting in the second half of the nineteenth-century by repositioning age as a central source of meaning in paintings of everyday life. By probing the disjunction between age, body, and image, this study contends that senescent subjects play a vital role in the construction of certain topics in genre painting, and a case can be made for reconsidering the ways in which older subjects determine particular narratives in American and British art. The twinned histories of American and British art express resemblance, deviation, and reciprocal exchange, and a transatlantic comparison of narrative pictures reveals the artistic and social anxieties about aging and the life cycle that were common to both cultures, as well as visual responses to later life that were uniquely American or British.³

By most accounts, the Victorians were responsible for initially shaping many of the concepts of aging that have since developed into the basic framework by which late life is still defined and understood. Diverse ideas about aging in the mid- and late-nineteenth century were entangled with a visual culture that communicated the problematic theories of “good” and “bad” aging. The production of British and American images of aging in the second half of the nineteenth century paid deference to these conflicting states, especially within the context of genre painting. Such works include examples by successful British and American Victorian artists like Thomas Hovenden,

³ Lee MacCormick Edwards describes the symbiotic relationship between British and American genre painting in her exhibition catalogue *Domestic Bliss: Family Life in American Painting, 1840-1910*. Edwards explains, “The cult of domesticity pervasive in Victorian Britain found similar expression in America. The two great English-speaking powers of the nineteenth century maintained a close relationship from about 1840, and there was a lively cultural exchange that flowed in both directions. Three of the most successful painters of American domestic genre in the second half of the nineteenth century – John George Brown, Seymour Joseph Guy, and Thomas Hovenden – emigrated to the United States from Britain as young adults, Their work was exhibited abroad in the 1870s and 1880s, and a long essay on Brown was published in an English art periodical in 1882.” Lee MacCormick Edwards, *Domestic Bliss: Family Life in American Painting, 1840-1910* (Yonkers: Hudson River Museum, 1986), 15-16.

Frank Bramley, Eastman Johnson, Walter Langley, and Thomas Webster, who painted images of seniors who were both anonymous and extraordinary. While these genre painters may not have intended to reflect the quality of senescence in their time or to present a specific idea of the habits and treatment of age, their representations of these themes had a profound, lasting impact, which irrevocably formed a conceptual basis for understanding aging that has since endured.⁴

Despite their constant presence throughout the history of art, painterly declarations of aging have generally been overlooked, resulting in crude scholarly characterizations that have contributed to misguided classifications and a lack of serious regard for the subject. It may seem that Victorian images of senescence did not illustrate the tentative and enigmatic nature of aging, especially as the reception of such pictures was usually determined by the conflicting characteristics of invisibility and hyper-visibility. In place of vague declarations, Victorian artists depicted distinctly positive and negative ideas of late life, presenting old age in terms that were “good” or “bad.” This opposition, which was inevitably determined by larger social and economic factors, may have thwarted intellectually sensitive readings of such pictures, particularly within the discipline of art history.

In their introduction to *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500*, historians Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane effectively describe the ways in which the discipline of age studies has challenged the idea that older adults were historically uncomplicated actors of passive endurance. However, art history has not yet accorded age with the critical reexamination it has given to similarly marginalized groups, like children and minority subjects, which attests to the discipline’s capacity for interrogating what

⁴ Karen Chase, *The Victorians and Old Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

Botelho and Thane call “counter-factual assumptions.”⁵ Art history has immeasurable potential to acknowledge that aging, like youth and race, is “highly nuanced...culturally embedded and not merely biological.”⁶ It is precisely the embeddedness of aging within cultural studies that should make the subject most attractive to the practice of social art history. By being more mindful of the issues of aging within Victorian culture, scholars can better interpret images of older figures from this period in a sensitive social context.

Recognizing the various identities available to seniors in Victorian Britain and America helps account for their alleged marginal significance in visual culture, while simultaneously producing an argument for the wider application of age studies to the practice of social art history.

Finally, from the outset, I would like to acknowledge that this study has been designed by a young woman’s line of thinking about growing older. My identity is disclosed here in order to fairly concede my social perspective and responsibly accept the criticisms and limitations of my own chronological age.

Foundational Scholarship

While scholars in the humanities have broached the study of aging in visual culture, such efforts have largely been undertaken outside the discipline of art history.

Key figures that have shaped the framework for my study include W. Andrew

⁵ Exemplary recent publications on these subjects include Claire Perry’s *Young America: Childhood in 19th-Century Art and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press in Association with the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University, 2006) and Henry Louis Gates et al, *The Image of the Black in Western Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, in Collaboration with the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research ; Menil Collection, 2010).

⁶ Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane, eds. *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 3.

Achenbaum, Lynn Botelho, Karen Chase, Thomas Cole, David Hackett Fischer, Pat Thane, and Kathleen Woodward. Although these scholars have all contributed greatly to age studies, none are art historians, meaning that, thus far, the fine arts have been employed by age studies solely as illustrations and not as the central substance of investigation. Additionally, the study of the unique politics of genre painting, as established by art historians like Elizabeth Johns and Patricia Hills, has been largely overlooked by age studies, and this project seeks to correct such oversights.

There is a presumed, collective notion that older adults were consistently venerated in the past, and the assumed veneration for elderly people in another era is a persistent fiction. Leading age studies scholar Teresa Mangum clarifies, “This Golden Age view tends to romanticize earlier attitudes toward aging, to obscure historical continuities with the past, and to discount cultural and psychological aspects of aging by focusing exclusively on the very real impact of broad economic changes.”⁷ Diverse projects in age studies have issued similar passionate and articulate challenges to such fantasies about aging, and an application of this kind of understanding to visual readings of late life can elucidate its portrayal in Victorian art. The social gerontologist Jill Quadagno describes the negative Victorian view of old age at length in her chapter “The Degradation of Age” in *Aging in Early Industrial Society*, a study that outlines the labor and economic patterns that contributed to the diminished position of older adults and confirms the emergence of the dual categories of “good old age” and “bad old age.”⁸

⁷ Teresa Mangum, “Growing Old: Age.” In *Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture: New Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, edited by Herbert F. Tucker (Somerset, NJ, USA: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 101.

⁸ Jill S. Quadagno, *Aging in Early Industrial Society: Work, Family, and Social Policy in Nineteenth-Century England*. New York: Academic Press, 1982.

Despite the frequency with which elderly figures populate Victorian paintings, there are not any academic volumes produced by art historians that specifically address the subject of late life in Victorian art. Granted, there are some very fine book chapters available on the subject by scholars working outside the field of art history, including Mike Hepworth's essay, "Framing Old Age: Sociological Perspectives on Ageing in Victorian Painting," in *The Sociology of Art*, edited by David Inglis and John Hughson (2005); Karen Chase's "Artistic Investigations and the Elderly Subject" in *The Victorians and Old Age* (2009); and Esther Godfrey's sensitive interpretation of the fine arts in her chapter, "Visualizing Power: Age, Embodiment, and Aesthetics" in *The January-May Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (2009). However, studies of visual culture executed by non-art historians have intrinsic limitations.

The admission of art historians to this dialogue would introduce an essential critical voice and provide necessary disciplinary context from an alternative perspective in the humanities. This lack of art-historical focus also overlooks the reality that Victorian artists themselves must have given some consideration to the subject of age. The philosopher Patrick McKee and art educator Heta Kauppinen reasoned in the 1980s, "In representing old age, artists cannot help revealing their basic ideas about it. Just by selecting old age or an elderly person as subject the artist attributes some significance to aging."⁹ Although a great deal has changed in the discipline of art history since these words were written, the evidence remains that artists considered aging to be an essential factor in the construction of their visual narratives. This fact remains, despite art history's delayed engagement with the rapidly expanding field of age studies.

⁹ Patrick McKee and Heta Kauppinen, *The Art of Aging: A Celebration of Old Age in Western Art* (New York: Insight Books: 1987), 17.

Victorian Aging

The chronological parameters of this study (ca. 1850-1910) demonstrate the distinctiveness of the condition of aging in the second half of the nineteenth century. This was also a period when genre scenes became increasingly complex in both the United States and Britain, resulting in more varied and diverse representations of senescence in the fine arts.

It was during the Victorian period in Britain and America that modern disregard for the elderly in society first developed. Businesses, factories, and government institutions grew in size and power, indelibly increasing the influence of those who held property and economic influence. Accordingly, the social climate surrounding industrialization, which adversely affected the elderly and the poor, permitted newly-minted forms of discrimination: society had been fundamentally transformed by the glorification of steam and speed, making vigor and vitality a social merit as a result. This led to the establishment of the ideal of the vigorous youthful body reemerged in the context of the popularization of “muscular Christianity,” which associated piety with activity and endurance. The inactive or afflicted body was identified with frailty and moral feebleness. These developments emerged during a period that scholars have associated with the rising ignominy of late life, which made an indelible impact on pictorial representations of old age.

Americans in the mid-nineteenth century began to experience a shift away from an agrarian economy, and industrialization began to color the lived experiences of older citizens with greater frequency. There was a conspicuous shift in perceptions of the value (or lack thereof) of older Americans in the labor force, and this change had a ripple

effect, influencing the establishment of mandatory retirement and the growing popularity of modern old-age homes, which also contributed to the mounting ignominy of late life.¹⁰ Cruel slang words for the aged also emerged swiftly at this time, and labels like “geezer,” “codger,” and “fuddy-duddy” grew increasingly popular.¹¹

In Britain, the Victorian period matured in tandem with its eponymous queen, who was nicknamed “the grandmother of Europe.”¹² Individuals at either end of the spectrum of the British class system were shown to live to old age at similar rates, though only the elderly poor lived in fear of the workhouse. Stereotypes about aging emerged as issues surrounding retirement and collective pensions became public debates throughout the end of the nineteenth century, and the language used to describe the elderly poor as a group was profoundly revealing.¹³ New forms of public debate about state support for seniors, which was partially initiated by the New Poor Law in 1834, focused on active aging populations, leaving the ‘oldest-old’ to receive little more than sympathy during this time of dramatic social change.¹⁴

¹⁰ W. Andrew Achenbaum, *Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience Since 1790* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 48.

¹¹ The proliferation of these cruel slang terms parallels the proliferation of the elderly figure in American genre painting. Using David Hackett Fischer’s *Growing Old in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) and Google Ngrams Viewer, one can find a correlation between cruel slang and the proliferation of images of senescence. Words like “codger,” “geezer,” “gramps,” and “curmudgeon” all sharply increased in frequency in English-language printed material after 1865, aligning with the period encompassed by this study.

¹² Mangum writes, “One final public spectacle that drew attention to old age in the nineteenth century was the queen herself: her reign from 1837 to 1901 spanned three generations of Victorians. Her subjects must have been uniquely aware of the particulars of aging as they watched their queen’s protracted widowhood and determined refusal to turn the reins of government over to her son, the Prince Regent, who was himself an elderly man by 1900. In effect, she became England’s most prominent and most costly elderly dependent. The aging of Queen Victoria also suggests how coincidental connections lead to sometimes-intractable associations, in this case among old age, an aged queen, and an old order. By the end of the century, the term “Victorian” itself was correlated with negative stereotypes of old age; to be Victorian was to be antiquated, dowdy, prudish, burdensome: the antithesis of youth, a newborn century, and modernity.” See Teresa Mangum, “Growing Old: Age,” 102.

¹³ Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 271.

¹⁴ Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 272.

While American and British society addressed distinct issues and political conflicts at this time, major cultural shifts were felt nearly in tandem. Both nations were reckoning with rampant industrialization, growing cities, and decreasing agrarianism during this period. The international popularization of photography promoted new questions of age, identity, and self-representation, as pension and retirement programs were designed and debated by governing bodies on both sides of the Atlantic. British subjects had to reconsider their position in the world after the horrors of the Crimean War (1853-1856) and the Indian Uprising (1857-1858) shortly before the United States nearly destroyed itself in the Civil War (1861-1865). In light of these developments in British and American culture, many middle-class men began to face the idea that, once aged, they could no longer contribute meaningfully to the working world, while middle-class women were confronted by a sentimental view of aging that held that they should principally confine their senescent attentions and activities to the domestic sphere.

The late Victorians were responsible for shaping many of the concepts of aging that have since developed into the basic framework by which late life is still defined and understood today. These widely held notions regarding aging during this period were propagated by contemporary literature, advertising, caricature, and fine art. As Anglo-American print and advertising grew exponentially at this time, this proliferation of media enabled the dissemination of images of aging in the novels, advertisements, and prints of the period. However, such images may not have been intended to reflect the quality of aged life at the time or to produce a specific, narrow idea of the habits and treatment of the Victorian life cycle. Similarly, the artists who designed the visual culture

of aging may not have realized the profound, lasting impact that such representations would have, irrevocably producing the enduring conceptual basis for appraising old age.

Around the 1840s, British genre pictures had been thoroughly disseminated in the United States through prints, which were seen and interpreted by American painters like Francis William Edmonds and Richard Caton Woodville. By mid-century, an American genre tradition had been thoroughly established, which was transatlantic in its origins. British and American genre painters shared a deeply-rooted engagement in the depiction of corresponding concerns in their images of everyday life, which were often constructed with biting criticism or a humorous bent.¹⁵

British and American images of aging demonstrate varied and diverse ways in which aging is expressed. In place of vague declarations, Victorians depicted dramatically dissimilar positive and negative ideas of late life, which would persist into the twenty-first century. This characterization falls in line with the view of aging at this time, when the aforementioned concepts of positive and negative aging were becoming increasingly popular.

This study is largely designed around cross-generational images and themes. By restricting this dissertation to the examination of age solely in contrast with youth, it is far easier to begin to navigate the diverse Victorian social rituals that reinforced performances of age, designated family hierarchies, mapped domestic geographies, and fortified the nascent concepts of productive and indolent aging.¹⁶ Most genre painters elected to portray seniors, as demonstrated by Johns' study of the subject. In their attempt

¹⁵ Joseph D. Ketner, *The Emergence of the African-American Artist: Robert S. Duncanson, 1821-1872* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 19.

¹⁶ Jo-Ann Morgan, "Henry Ossawa Tanner's *The Banjo Lesson* and the Iconic Persistence of Uncle Tom." In *Uncle Tom's Cabin as Visual Culture* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 183.

to show the alleged truths of daily life, artists who chose to include the elderly were making a logical choice, as the inclusion of seniors contributed to the verisimilitude of a scene. A focus on genre painting produces a view of the unique possibilities offered by this approach and investigates the qualities specific to genre painting that permit aging with a visibility denied by other media.

Organization

These chapters are organized thematically, with each section being dedicated to a popular Victorian intergenerational trope: the hearth, chaperonage, age-disparate coupling, and cross-generational play. It should also be noted that illustrations are not addressed chronologically, as such a linear organization would betray the complex and interwoven nature of the categories that have been selected.

Beginning with a discussion of elderly hearthside figures, these chapters progress along a pattern of increasing intimacy between youth and age. This intensification of cross-generational intimacy is paralleled by a decrease in the passiveness associated with old age. Following the first chapter's survey of relatively inactive fireside figures, the second chapter addresses mature chaperone figures, who remain physically inert while exercising great control over the determination of a picture's narrative. The third chapter addresses the depiction of May-December relationships, which require equal participation by younger and older partners. Finally, this study concludes with an examination of images of cross-generational play, which require the most vigorous and active participation by older subjects. By organizing this dissertation by degrees of senescent activeness and centrality, I hope that I am able to subtly strengthen my argument that age

is, indeed, essential to sensitive readings of various issues catalogued throughout Victorian genre painting.

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation is organized thematically, with distinct sections dedicated to some of the most common cross-generational topics in genre painting. In each of the following categories, ideas of aging are central to locating artworks within the constellations of art history, social history, and material culture, and the following categories have been designed to embrace various artistic and social complexities. These particular chapters were selected for their capacity to present a steady, repetitive, and compelling system of cross-generational images. Overall, the following themes reflect a desire to reappraise images that have often been dismissed as sentimental and trite, establishing an expanded context in which aging can be assessed as a center of artistic meaning in genre.

1. Hearth and Home – Conflations of Age and Domestic Space

As the site where domestic ideals were designed and realized, the home is the primary symbol of the family in narrative painting. In images of home dramas, older figures are often included for emotional emphasis, though art historians rarely acknowledge their presence with little more than a cursory nod. How does the life cycle determine meaning in scenes of home and hearth? This section reappraises the visual treatment of the symbolic elder in domestic scenes while paying particular attention to

the ritual identification of old age with the fireside, an often-overlooked quality that invites fresh attention.

The image of the aged parent or grandparent sitting contentedly before the hearth and “aging in place” is a canonical trope in Victorian visual culture. The fireside was, at that time, a significant center of the home and family, and older members of the household were viewed as principal organizing forces around this central gathering place. By examining the archetypal image of the senescent hearthside figure, one may better evaluate the larger context in which Victorian aging was visually interpreted and generally understood.

2. Chaperones and Other Older Obstacles to Young Romance

In nineteenth-century genre painting, courtship and young romance often unfold under the watchful eye of older, mostly female, family members. It bears asking how the visual presence of seniors alters the narratives of such scenes, and why figures like sleepy chaperones or reproving grandfathers have been historically denied as centers of meaning in pictures of younger romance. In most instances, when an older figure’s watchful gaze is acknowledged, it is rarely treated as more than a hindrance or a humorous condition which provokes the passing of surreptitious signals, like the looming stolen kiss in T.H. Matteson’s *Now or Never* (1849). However, impediments to romance play an important role in determining the narrative in courtship pictures. While art historians like Patricia Hills and Sarah Burns have addressed genre images of rustic coupling, senescent figures have largely eluded meaningful discussion in a larger sampling of such pictures.

The incursion of age into young courtship manifests itself in a variety of contexts throughout British and American genre painting. There are countless artists like Matteson who found painterly matter in the decisive moments when young lovers consider breaking the social barriers set between them by older chaperones or guardians. These “defining moment” pictures include scenes of young lovers on the brink of being disturbed or caught in the middle of connecting in a manner more intimate than was usually permitted by Victorian manners.

Stolen conversations, illicit tête-à-têtes, and covert flirtations take on new burdens and invite different interpretations when enacted just beyond the sight of elderly eyes. Young love was often reprimanded by age, and Victorian paintings of senescent guardians chastising their young charges, who are rendered innocently senseless by the throes of love, express additional layers of meaning when considered in terms of age disparity. It bears asking how contemporary interpretations of such pictures may have evaded holistic interpretation when deeper questions about the tensions between youth and age have been overlooked.

3. Re-Contextualizing the May-December Relationship

A number of visual sources illustrate the tensions caused by age disparity in late nineteenth-century marriages. Although such pairings are common in the literature of the period, visual artists did not portray May-December unions with equivalent frequency. While British painters produced critically acclaimed images of such scenes, expressions of this theme by American artists have been, with rare exception, confined to the work of popular illustrators. This disparity is surprising, as misgivings about age-disparate unions

can be readily found in contemporary publications that were produced on both sides of the Atlantic, and American critics referred to the British pictures.

Further, while intergenerational romance has been occasionally addressed as a theme in the few aforementioned examples, scholarship has largely been reductive with regard to the role of the older partner in such scenes. This chapter aims to expand the reading of the role of the older partner in these works in order to reveal the age-determined qualities and contextual evidence that enhances and expands their interpretation.

4. Cross-Generational Play in Victorian Visual Culture

Kinship across the life cycle is an important theme in many British and American Victorian genre scenes, which often depicted children playing with their grandparents in various contexts across the class spectrum. While sometimes dismissed as saccharine or overly sentimental, such pictures of co-generational amusement warrant closer investigation. The sheer number of images of this type presents a challenge to many of the accepted social divisions of the old/young binary in Victorian culture. Despite being consistently overlooked by art historians, the vast quantity of joyous genre paintings of grandparents at play supports Lewis Mumford's adage "that every generation revolts against its fathers and makes friends with its grandfathers."¹⁷

¹⁷ "The commonest axiom of history is that every generation revolts against its fathers and makes friends with its grandfathers." Lewis Mumford, *The Brown Decades: A Study of the Arts in American, 1865-1895* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 3.

This chapter considers how art history may meaningfully benefit from age studies when appraising British and American genre paintings depicting intergenerational play, which derive their meaning from portrayals of perpetual adolescence and liminal adulthood. By addressing the work of various later nineteenth-century artists who painted the spirited exchanges and leisure activities of grandparents and grandchildren, new cross-disciplinary initiatives for approaching and framing generational exchange in British and American social history can be revealed.

Methodologies

The design of this study has been most significantly influenced by the methodologies of social and feminist art histories and social gerontology. This project is indebted to social art history, which models the benefits of fluency in historical specificity. A social approach to the issues of aging and representation has opened this project up to a rich sample of cultural evidence, which helps the art historian to identify far more information in the material of her investigation. Though a social history approach is now often taken for granted, it is important to acknowledge the deliberate utilization of this method in the development of this dissertation. Similarly, it is essential to acknowledge the influence that feminist art history and social gerontology have had on this project. Together, these approaches illustrate the myriad ways in which nineteenth-century visual culture is not mimetic, as these scholarly practices demonstrate the innumerable ways in which pictures reproduce intricate social problems and tangled cultural codes.

Primary and Secondary Sources

Complex research questions require interdisciplinary investigations. The sources consulted throughout the course of this project reflect a multidisciplinary that demonstrates the contradictory nature of age studies itself, and this project attests to an expansive curiosity that found rich supporting material in a diverse survey of primary and secondary sources.

I have intentionally chosen to address images in which meaning is constructed by the active presence of older figures in order to make an argument for the essential nature of age. There are no pictures included which characterize older adults as “mute objects,” and special attention has been paid to images that attest to the coalescence between youth and age. Genre paintings are obviously the most significant texts cited in these pages, and, in instances when access to physical objects proved impossible, every effort has been made to correspond with the appropriate curators, dealers, librarians, registrars, and keepers of museum collections.

Unfortunately, the types of paintings that are most useful to these lines of inquiry are not always viewed as highly fashionable or collectable. This condition is reflected in a dearth of sentimental genre pictures in many important museum collections. A number of the works discussed have been sold to private collectors through the art markets in London and New York, and archived auction catalogues proved especially helpful in the identification of salient illustrations for each chapter.

This study also considers a wide range of printed materials and ephemera: Anglo-American print and advertising grew exponentially between 1850-1910, and this proliferation of material enabled the dissemination of images of aging in the novels,

advertisements, and prints of the period. Other publications cited include sheet music, etiquette guides, and illustrated stories and poems about the life cycle. Historical “gray literature,” play manuals, and children’s magazines feature as well. These materials reveal countless examples of representative issues in British and American print culture, consumer history, and childhood and family life. These diverse perspectives on the life cycle reveal general social attitudes and stereotypes, framing ideas of aging within a measurable range of popularly accepted preconceptions.

Prescriptive literature, which reveals a cultural appraisal of the formalized treatment of Victorian aging, illuminates the aspects of old age that were most marketable and palatable to contemporary readers. Domestic magazines, especially illustrated children’s and women’s periodicals, describe the social diagnosis of older people and the standardized treatment of age, as well as the domestic dimensions of home life in the nineteenth century that would influence popular concerns about senescence.

Conclusion

Research projects in the humanities aspire to better understand human experience, and this dissertation simply presents an extended engagement with the social values of a discipline. This study has been approached as an intellectual exercise determined by humanistic thinking, and I have prioritized compassion and curiosity over the desire to propose a concrete response to the issue of ageism in art history.

By increasing respect for, and understanding of, the discourse of aging within Victorian society, images of older figures from this period are able to greatly enrich art

historical understanding. Senescent subjects have historically remained invisible to all except for the most discerning viewers. And, if they *are* seen, older subjects are usually stereotyped. It seems that the disregard for the intractable realities of senescence, which is so rampant in art historical scholarship, gives the misleading impression that old age in visual culture can possibly be regarded as unvarying, inconsequential, or historically inaccessible.

The widespread sentimentalization of aging that typifies nineteenth-century culture is particularly evident in discussions of British and American genre painting. It is perhaps this maudlin categorization that has chiefly contributed to the general lack of serious regard for the subject of aging within the discipline of art history, despite the phenomenological insistence that the young see themselves in the old. Both American and British visual culture illuminate various degrees of paucity and abundance in relation to the complex notions of Victorian aging, and ageism in the historiography of art can be made much clearer. I hope that an identification of the visual and typological models of senescence found throughout this study of American and British genre will augment or correct these prevailing assumptions, moving age studies from the periphery to the center of art historical sensitivities.

Chapter One

Hearth and Home: Conflations of Age and Domestic Space

Seeing the hearth and its senescent sentinel

Three generations of a family are gathered in a modest room, a pall of sadness occupying most of the space. A teenage boy stands before his concerned mother with a look of sullen acceptance stretched across his face. He is bidding her goodbye, his hat clenched in his left hand, his eyes focused on the middle distance. The young man is likely leaving his rural hometown for the city, perhaps to continue his education or to seek his fortune. His grandmother and sisters look on, the tender moment between mother and son unfolding before the entire age spectrum of the family unit. Even the family dog, his eyes fixed on his young friend, seems to understand the solemnity of the moment.

Bright light pours into the room from an unseen source, which illuminates the boy's brow and emphasizes the worried expression of his mother's delicate features. They stand in the center of the room, almost completely set apart from the rest of the family and the domestic setting. Of all of the surrounding family members, the boy's seated grandmother is placed closest to the dramatic centerpiece of the picture. She is the most intimately located observer, a living emblem of home, family, and the inevitable passage of time. The close identification of age with the domestic sphere bestows a symbolism upon her presence, making her both a creator and emblem of the home that the boy must forsake.

This somber valediction is the iconic *Breaking Home Ties* (1890) by the Irish-American artist Thomas Hovenden (1840-1895). A radical departure from the intimate scale of traditional genre painting, *Breaking Home Ties* (fig. 1.1) enlarges a domestic drama to dimensions measuring more than four-by-six feet. Hovenden biographer Anne Gregory Terhune notes, “Hovenden elevated American family life to the status of history painting in this work.”¹

Breaking Home Ties reflects on its era as a time of increasingly rapid social change, and Hovenden encourages his viewers to evaluate the place of home, family, and the life cycle within the context of expanding industry and growing cities. As communities on both sides of the Atlantic saw their lives impacted by urbanization, the depiction and status of rural family life became less certain in domestic scenes. In 1893, Hovenden’s meditation on feelings of homesickness and generational connectivity easily won over audiences at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where it distinguished itself as the most popular picture at the fair.²

Hovenden’s picture shows a sad occasion in the life of a rural American family, its box-like composition suggesting the drama of a theatrical production. One of the sons has made the difficult decision to “break home ties” and go to a distant town or city to pursue his career or education. His older brother pauses near the doorway to ask if they

¹ Anne Gregory Terhune, *Thomas Hovenden: His Life and Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 154.

² In *Rave Reviews: American Art and Its Critics, 1826-1925*, David. B. Dearinger describes the phenomenal public attention Hovenden’s scene received, remarking, “the popularity of the painting not only endured but increased with the crowds who attended the fair, bordering at times on the fanatical.” He continues, “Poems were written about it and engravings and photogravures of it sold by the thousands. In the gallery at the World’s Fair, traffic was so great, it was said, that the carpet in front of the painting had to be replaced several times. In fact, for a time, the painting seems to have been a staple at world’s fairs, appearing again at both the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis in 1904 and the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco in 1915.” Dearinger, ed. *Rave Reviews: American Art and Its Critics, 1826-1925* (New York: National Academy of Design, 2000), 246.

are ready to depart, and his father stands nearby with the boy's humble carpetbag in his hands. A grandmother observes the scene with resignation, not unlike the boy's faithful dog, which will also be left behind.³ The composition is designed around the strong vertical created by the mother-son pair, which is balanced by a horizontal line made by the grandmother and her granddaughters, who are spread across the canvas.⁴

Much has been written about the relationship between the two central figures of Hovenden's mother and son; however, a great deal remains to be said of the grandmother seated at the table. Her inclusion is significant, as her character is identified with both the physical and ideological structures of the domestic sphere, and a strong light illuminates her place in the story. Hovenden's picture, while focused on maternal bonds and the distressed youthful feelings of leaving home for the first time, benefits from the conditions of age and the presence of a female grandparent in the construction of its narrative. An extended consideration of the qualities of aging and domesticity serves *Breaking Home Ties* by enhancing the emotional impact of the boy's departure. This conflation of the quality of age with the idea of home turns the grandmother into a much larger symbol of time, loss, and the disruption of the traditional family unit.

Nineteenth-century genre painting often represents senescence in the domestic sphere. The material markers of home and age, like the family table or the omnipresent hearth, are traditionally shown as being virtually interdependent. The sentimental hearthside scene, a model to which Hovenden partially subscribes, is perhaps the most

³ Terhune also mentions the figure of the grandmother in the same sentence as the boy's dog, writing, "...other family members ranging in age from the young sister seated by the family dog to the left, to the grandmother in the background, regard the tender scene." Terhune, *Thomas Hovenden*, 156. This habit of equating older figures with other arguably inessential characters, like family pets, is distressingly common in twentieth-century descriptions of nineteenth-century genre pictures.

⁴ Julia B. Rosenbaum, *Visions of Belonging: New England Art and the Making of American Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 32.

stereotypical method for visualizing aging in Victorian art, and the image of the older parent or grandparent sitting by the fireside is an established trope in Anglo-American painting.

The historical sociologist Andrew Blaikie interrogates the interwoven identities of aging and space, asking, “Why do we associate particular places with old age?”⁵ He explains,

Some places are sites of struggle and resistance, others of accommodation and incorporation; some effect sharp boundary maintenance between second-, third- and fourth-age domains, others allow easy slippage across generations. Each lends meaning to the aging experience...Aging occupies a strongly symbolic landscape in that there exists a powerful metaphorical association between chronology, place and space.⁶

Blaikie critically addresses the dynamics of senescence and its spatial organization within the home. By exploring the domestic sphere with particular attention to the hearth and interiors that are “activated” by an elderly presence, he considers the “imagined landscapes” of aging. Blaikie also advocates for an extended engagement with the psychological associations that are made between aging and the specific locations that are repeatedly designated for growing old, like the family fireside.

During the Victorian era, the hearth was the symbolic center of the home, and domestic genre often frames it as such. The frequency with which elderly figures are

⁵ Andrew Blaikie, “Imagined Landscapes of Age and Identity.” In Gavin J. Andrews and David R. Phillips, eds. *Ageing and Place: Perspectives, Policy, Practice*. London: Routledge, 2005, 164.

⁶ Blaikie, “Imagined Landscapes of Age and Identity,” 164.

shown sitting peacefully by the fire led such compositions to become relatively formulaic. It warrants inquiring if there are ways to re-contextualize Victorian aging in a way that would produce more meaning for such pictures.

By reassessing the archetypal image of the elderly hearthside figure (or Hovenden's deployment of grandparent and fireside as parallel indicators of "home"), one may better evaluate the larger context in which Victorian aging was visually interpreted and generally understood. Representations of mid- and late nineteenth-century aging are frequently situated at home, and late life in the visual arts was largely relegated to the domestic sphere. When a person reached old age, it seems that he or she was often robbed of their personhood, pictured sitting serenely by the fire, with his or her feet perched on a cushion. A senior figure was denied the compulsions of youth and the varied scenery that accompanies the occasionally free and wild years of life, being relegated instead to a predictable and sedate fireside existence in a well-appointed parlor or rustic country cottage.

Men and women alike were affected by adverse perceptions of aging in Victorian Britain and the United States. Many of these notions affected people differently, depending on their class and gender. Middle-class men often had to challenge the idea that, once aged, they could no longer contribute effectively to the working world. Alternatively, elderly middle-class women were confronted by a view of aging that held that they should principally confine their attentions and activities to the emotional world of the domestic sphere.⁷ Much like their younger counterparts, the woman was confined to the house and viewed in a restrictive and romanticized manner. However, while

⁷ Jesse F. Ballenger, *Self, Senility, and Alzheimer's Disease in Modern America: A History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 32.

images of younger middle-class mothers could be set within bedchambers, nurseries, or parlors, once that same woman reached late life, she seems to have been mostly painted by the hearthside, her limited role in society mirrored by her diminished role in the home.⁸ This diminished position was often painted sweetly or sentimentally, forming a body of images now considered normative and free of serious social context.

In the introduction to her book *From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Aging in Contemporary Literature*, Barbara Frey Waxman repeatedly discusses this domestic leitmotif, with particular attention paid to the ways that the hearthside theme has been treated in periodicals since 1890.⁹ She alternately mentions the way that the elderly were advised to “hug closer the joys of the fireside,” and “the old-fashioned hearthside archetype.”¹⁰ Waxman invokes “the inactive fireside knitter who has essentially given up,” and the idea that, “by the fireside in almost every house either grandfather or grandmother would find a place.”¹¹ None of these descriptions seem particularly respectful, joyous, or adulatory. Instead, the fireside is often treated as an unavoidable component of one’s domestic twilight years—a looming inevitability to be gladly accepted.

⁸ Susan P. Casteras, “The unsettled hearth: P.H. Calderon’s ‘*Lord! Thy Will be Done*’ and the problematics of women in Victorian interiors.” In *Reframing the Pre-Raphaelites: Historical and Theoretical Essays*, edited by Ellen Harding (Aldershot, Hants: Scolar Press, 1996), 149.

⁹ Barbara Frey Waxman, *From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Aging in Contemporary Literature*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1990.

¹⁰ Waxman notes, “For example, in an article entitled “Being Happy in Old Age,” which appeared in *Ladies’ Home Journal* in March, 1900, Mrs. Burton Kingsland admonished her female readership to enjoy the “winter of life” and keep their hearts warmed, despite the bad news in the mirror, by clinging to family and loved ones: ‘We must hug closer the joys of the fireside.’” Waxman, *From the Hearth to the Open Road*, 10-11.

¹¹ Waxman, *From the Hearth to the Open Road*, 28-29.

The negligible status of the elderly figure by the fire (and her plainly ornamental purpose) is expressed by the American social arbiter Mary Elizabeth Wilson Sherwood in her 1881 guide *Amenities of Home*. Sherwood counsels,

There is no genre picture so ornamental to the fireside as an old lady with gray curls. Home should always contain a grandmother, old aunt, or some relative who has seen the world, lived her life, and who is now waiting gently for the news which came to Christiana in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, meantime taking a pleasant interest in the little tragedy or comedy of everyday life, and being the particular providence of the younger children. Such an old lady is as agreeable as she is ornamental. So important is the respectability of a virtuous ancestor to the *nouveau riche*, that Dickens says, in his immortal way, of the Veneerings, "that if they had wanted a grandfather, they would have ordered him fresh from Fortnum's and Mason's. He would have come round with pickles."¹²

The image of the older man or woman seated by the fire has often been similarly dismissed or glibly addressed, despite their frequency. Perhaps such ideas were never questioned because the hearth was taken for granted as the focus of ceaseless domestic attentiveness.

In her book *The Victorian Parlour: A Cultural Study*, Thad Logan describes the manner in which the hearth constituted the physical and ideological center of the Victorian home. She explains how domestic manuals, in their "obsessive attention"

¹² Sherwood continues: "A grandfather is a very useful article, whether to quote from to enjoy daily. An agreeable old man is the most delightful acquisition to any society." Mary Elizabeth Wilson Sherwood, *The Amenities of Home* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1881), 79.

prescribe “the daily cleaning, polishing, and ‘blackening’ required to keep the fireplace and its accessories in an appropriately showy conditions.” Such manuals illustrate how “the hearth, besides serving very obvious purposes in providing light and warmth, was also weighted with symbolic meaning in the landscape of the parlor.”¹³

The hearth was the central gathering place in any well-appointed Victorian home, often surrounded by the comforts of rugs, overstuffed chairs, hassocks, pillows, and sofas. The prized possessions of the family were usually displayed near the fire, as the mantel often proudly held collections of clocks, mirrors, and the various treasures that could be contained within decorative bell jars. An arrangement of comfortable chairs beside the hearth was customary in most Victorian homes, and such spatial organization was to be expected.¹⁴

In describing the arrangement of the hearthside, Logan writes, “the most common arrangements included easy chairs and footstools near the fire.”¹⁵ The British writer Lucy Orrinsmith, who was associated with the Morris circle and an advocate for aesthetic homemaking, recommended in 1878, “Every effort should conduce to make the hearth the rallying spot of the home.”¹⁶ In her book, *Inside the Victorian Home: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England*, modern scholar Judith Flanders quotes the Victorian architect Robert Kerr, who noted, “For a Sitting-room, keeping in view the English climate and habits, a fireside is of all considerations practically the most important. No

¹³ Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge: The University of Cambridge, 2001), 121.

¹⁴ Logan, *The Victorian Parlour*, 79.

¹⁵ Logan, *The Victorian Parlour*, 38.

¹⁶ Lucy Orrinsmith, *The Drawing-Room: Its Decorations and Furniture* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1878), 32. Little had been known about Orrinsmith until her biography was recently recovered by Emma Ferry of Nottingham Trent University in her laudable essay, “The other Miss Faulkner: Lucy Orrinsmith and the ‘Art at Home Series’,” in *The Journal of William Morris Studies* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2011), 47-64.

such apartment can pass muster with domestic critics unless there be convenient space for a wide circle of persons round the fire.”¹⁷

At mid-century, the hearth was already widely acknowledged as the emotional center of the home and the family – it was also the setting for portraying ideal elderhood. In the prescriptive guide *The Ladies' Vase; or Polite Manual for Young Ladies* (1847), the author, identified only as “An American Lady,” asserts,

The fireside...is a seminary of infinite importance: it is important, because it is universal, and because the education it bestows, being woven in with the woof of childhood, gives form and color to the whole texture of life. There are few who can receive the honors of a college, but all are graduates of the hearth.¹⁸

According to such prescriptive literature, the seats by the fire (the places in the home closest to the treasures and warmth of the hearth and of the heart) were the most honored places in the house. In these terms, the hearth is the designated location of cross-generational exchange and the development of character. These qualities are activated in young children by a transmission of insight, presumably received from elders who have been socially installed in the seats of honor by the fire. Orrin Smith especially sentimentalizes the placement of chairs immediately beside the fire,

¹⁷ Judith Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 108.

¹⁸ An American Lady, *The Ladies' Vase; or Polite Manual for Young Ladies* (Hartford: Henry S. Parsons, 1847), 52.

In this chilly climate a natural tendency when entering a room is to seek a hearth. The seats of honor and affection are on either side; all will allow that it is a spot chosen to be cherished, that every one should strive to render it as attractive as possible.¹⁹

Knowing that the seats closest to the hearth were reserved as places of reverence and tenderness should be given some weight when considering the innumerable images of elderly Victorians sitting by the fire. Although these scenes are often treated in dismissive tones, an awareness of the assignment of “seats of honor and affection” should be more actively taken into account when evaluating the representation of domestic hearthside pictures and the inclusion of older figures.

In his lively survey of American material culture, *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life, 1876-1915*, the modern American Studies scholar Thomas J. Schlereth maps the significance of the Victorian parlor and its parts. In his dissection of the “middle-class cult of the fireplace,” Schlereth positions the hearth as a demonstrative emblem of a family’s particular, intimate culture.²⁰ He explains,

Families displayed their histories (framed photographs, marriage certificates, and the like) and their taste as consumers (lithograph prints, Rogers’s sculpture groups) in parlors that doubled as family museums.²¹

¹⁹ Orrinsmith, *The Drawing-Room*, 121.

²⁰ Thomas J. Schlereth, *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life, 1876-1915*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991.

²¹ Schlereth, *Victorian America*, 119. The significance of the small parlor sculptures by John Rogers is discussed in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

If the hearth functions as a family museum, then the older hearthside figure embodies a companionate expression of the same domestic values.

There are countless examples of such senescent fireside figures in British and American nineteenth-century painting, advertising, and prints, which, doubtlessly, have not been paid a thorough consideration. Perhaps it is their perceived mawkishness by modern viewers that has marred their potential to sustain scholarly interest. Their sentimentality, coupled with their abundance, has undoubtedly fostered the superficial treatment of the subject of the aging in this particular domestic context.

The alliance between aging and domestic space, while best expressed by the pervasive Victorian hearth, can also be identified in related interpretations of the theme, like the symbol of the sedate grandmother in Hovenden's valediction. Other artists draw formal parallels between grandparents and domestic trappings, identifying older men and women with furniture, forging a symbiosis between age and its objects. Images of the designated locations for aging at home also often emphasize the sites of generational interchange, sometimes casting a grandparent's fireside chair as a site of senescent power. Further, class does not govern the hearth's role in aged domesticity, and scenes of working-class and aristocratic interiors both rely upon the currency of these symbols when describing family structure and the age spectrum.

The hearth is a site for trans-generational transmission of insight, information, and skill, and a number of Victorian genre painters imbued this space with the qualities of exchange between youth and age. The "universal" nature of the hearth, at least in the west, also lends itself to constructing and presenting social commentary on these exchanges. The hearth and its superannuated symbols further convey their profound

power in homecoming images, which present the perfect manifestation of the aforementioned phenomena, dramatizing the presence of age and the markers of aged space.

The British social gerontologist Mike Hepworth has published widely on the “social prescription, location and situating of the expression of human emotions,” concerns which are often expressed in studies of the confluence of aging and domestic space, and the ambivalence historically expressed by historians who work with Victorian visual culture.²² Hepworth observes that, in Victorian painting, “the bodies of old age were recognized and interpreted according to gender and the moral values attributed to specific locations.”²³ Further, genre pictures that included symbolically virtuous places, like a grandparent’s chair or the family hearth, better aided “the perception of old age as a moral process.”²⁴

The nineteenth-century Illinois social reformer Mary Allen West described the conflation of aging and domestic emblems in her prescriptive guide *Childhood: Its Care and Culture* (1887). On the role of older adults within the home, she claimed that a family’s “unity is made or marred by their presence.”²⁵ West asserts, “Often the presence of grandfather or grandmother is a benediction to the entire household; their room, or their chair by the family hearth, is the center around which all cluster.”²⁶ This emblematic fireside seat is central to Victorian pictorial ideas of home and old age.

²² Mike Hepworth, “Ageing and the Emotions: Framing Old Age in Victorian Painting.” In *Emotional Geographies*, edited by Joyce Davidson, Liz Bondi, and Mick Smith (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 188.

²³ Hepworth, “Ageing and the Emotions,” 187.

²⁴ Hepworth, “Ageing and the Emotions,” 187.

²⁵ Mary Allen West. *Childhood: Its Care and Culture* (Chicago: Women’s Temperance Publications, 1887), 235.

²⁶ West, *Childhood*, 235.

A grandparent's chair

The conflation of age and domestic furnishings is evident in both British and American genre painting. This is especially true in works that so closely align elders with their domestic environments that they come to physically combine with the furniture. The mid-Victorian English artist Edward Thompson Davis (1833-1867) revisited this motif multiple times, producing pictures of grandfathers seated in sturdy kitchen chairs so closely aligned with their bodies that the two appear indivisible.²⁷ In *On Grandfather's Knee* (ca. 1860), a little girl sits on her grandfather's lap, embracing him closely in order to kiss him on the cheek (fig. 1.2). The older man is placed so firmly in his chair that it is difficult to see where the furniture ends and his body begins. Only two legs of the chair are visible, giving the impression of a symbiosis between the man and his seat. In this example, Davis fuses age with one of its emblems, demonstrating the nuanced alliance between senescence and the domestic sphere. This theme fits well within his larger oeuvre, which was largely dedicated to the subjects of childhood and everyday life.²⁸

Most of the information on Davis available to contemporary scholars comes from the connoisseur and collector Sir Richard Brinsley Ford (1908-1999), who collected notes on the artist with the intention of eventually writing a biography or monograph dedicated to his work.²⁹ In 1998, the Walpole Society published a catalogue of Ford's collection, of

²⁷ Edward Thompson Davis (1833-1867) was a genre, portrait and landscape painter. Born in Worcester, he studied at the School of Design and exhibited at the Royal Academy from 1854-1867.

²⁸ Recent Davis works at auction include a number of intergenerational genre pictures, including *Kissing Grandpa*, 1860 (Oil on panel, 18 x 13.74 in. Christie's London, King Street, December 11, 2008, Lot 76) and *An Afternoon with Grandma*, 1865 (Oil on canvas, 20 x 16.2 in. Sotheby's New York, January 26, 2008, Lot 238).

²⁹ Sir Richard Brinsley Ford, The Walpole Society, *Sir Brinsley Ford*. [The Ford Collection]. *The Volume of the Walpole Society* 60, (London: Printed for the Walpole Society by W.S. Maney & Son, 1998). In this volume, Ford notes, "I took copious notes from [the Davis sketchbooks] before two were broken up, intending to write something about Davis which never materialized. Hopefully my notes will be of use to whoever writes the definitive account of Davis for the Walpole Society." (121-122)

which a portion was dedicated to Davis, whom Ford deemed one of the best, if least recognized, of British draughtsman, an appraisal that should influence the way in which a picture like *On Grandfather's Knee* is read and understood.³⁰ Also, as an acknowledged master of figure drawing, Davis would have designed this sedentary figure with skill and intention, making the grandfather's identification with his seat an intentional expression of domestic aging.³¹

Grandmother's Favorite (ca. 1880) by the English-American genre painter John George Brown (1831-1913) provides an American response to Davis, as it draws similar parallels between senescence the particulars of domestic space – namely, the place of honor that is a grandparent's chair (fig. 1.3). In Brown's picture, an old woman occupies a large mahogany chair in a dark corner of a spare, rustic room. Her granddaughter is seated with intensely intimate proximity in an adjoining seat. Like Davis, Brown positions his older figure in a way that is indissoluble from the furniture upon which she sits. Both her feet and the legs of her chair are obscured by a shared shadow. The details of the furniture cannot be seen beneath their skirts, and the woman's pose echoes the shape of both chairs squeezed together. Brown paints a woman who is absorbed by her furniture, and he combines the details of age with its domestic props.

Although Brown is best known as a painter of childhood street types, he shifted his focus to the portrayal of rural elders in the late 1870s.³² Brown biographer Martha

³⁰ Sir Richard Brinsley Ford, "The Ford Collection," 121.

³¹ Ford recounts, "If I were to be asked which is the most remarkable acquisition I have made, taking the price into account unquestionably I would say the group of drawings (RBF227-36) that I bought in 1951 from Colnaghi's by Edward Thompson Davis (1834-67), an artist I had never heard of. I have come to consider him as one of the finest, if least known, of English nineteenth-century draughtsmen." Sir Richard Brinsley Ford, "The Ford Collection," 121.

³² Martha Hoppin, *The World of J.G. Brown* (Chesterfield, Mass.: Chameleon Books, 2010), 207. Also see "A Painter of Street Urchins," *The New York Times* (August 27, 1899), which states, "Mr. Brown's fame as a painter of street boys has in a measure overshadowed his reputation as the author of quite another class of

Hoppin attributes this development to the Colonial revival that accompanied the Philadelphia Centennial exhibition in 1876, which popularized “old-fashioned” American interiors, accessories, and rustic types.³³ After the centennial celebrations, a wave of American artists began working with the themes of aging, and this taste for scenes of senescence took pride of place at significant exhibitions. For example, *Grandmother’s Favorite* may be related to an unlocated work called *My Great Grandmother and I*, which was exhibited at the National Academy of Design in New York in 1883.³⁴

At the time Brown exhibited *Grandmother’s Favorite*, old-age themes were unusually popular, though he eventually chose to return to the subjects of rural children and urban urchins that originally established his reputation. For twenty years, his pictures of grandparents and the rural elderly elicited mixed reviews and unsteady financial success.³⁵ Perhaps the uncertain reception of Brown’s older subjects could be attributed in part to their emotional unevenness. Hoppin writes, “In paintings like these he portrayed the survival of the Yankee spirit, but in other works he captured the pathetic

work. During three months of the Summer, he allows his bootblacks unbroken rest, and devotes himself to types which he unearths in his wanderings, preferably old men and women. As he is an extremely rapid and indefatigable worker these products of his “idle” moments have reached quite formidable numbers. The sale which he held of his works in 1892 must have been a surprise to those who were ignorant of his various styles.”

³³ Hoppin, *The World of J.G. Brown*, 208. There is a wealth of information available on diverse aspects of the Colonial Revival movement in the United States, a subject that scholars have been actively exploring for the past thirty years. For an interesting essay which addresses the Colonial Revival in the context of the hearth, see Abigail Carroll, “Of Kettles and Cranes: Colonial Revival Kitchens and the Performance of National Identity,” in *Winterthur Portfolio* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2009), 335-364.

³⁴ It may be possible that the titles *Grandmother’s Favorite* and *My Great Grandmother and I* could describe the same picture. See the National Academy of Design, “Contributors and Contributions.” *Illustrated Art Notes upon the Annual Exhibition of the National Academy of Design* No. 3 (1883), 5 [cat. no. 65, W. 424]. Hoppin quotes critics who viewed *My Great Grandmother and I* at the National Academy in 1883, and their comments could aptly describe the canvas now known by the alternative title. Hoppin writes, “One [critic] found the grandmother “a wrinkled old woman, whose life has almost worn itself out,” while another judged her to have entered “the safe harbor of old age.” None of the works truly pleased the press. The *New York Times* pronounced them “repulsive,” but Brown sold two—the ones that combined youth and age—for high prices.” Hoppin, *The World of J.G. Brown*, 213.

³⁵ Brown offered fifteen pictures of older subjects at his 1892 studio sale, where the great American art collector Thomas B. Clarke bought two canvases. See Hoppin, *The World of J.G. Brown*, 216-217.

loneliness of old age.”³⁶ With their rigid brushwork and exact detail, Brown’s scenes of older Americans present aging as a firm, immovable quality. Like his grandmother, who sits resolutely in her chair, his figures are unyielding and solidly connected to their environments.³⁷

The alignment between older figures and their chairs is a persistent quality of aging in genre painting. However, the hearth itself may be an even more powerful symbol of domestic senescence than the fireside seat alone. There may be no space in the home that draws a more distinct parallel between aging and domesticity, and cross-generational pictures of the hearth emphasize this affiliation between old age and its emotive qualities.

Senescent hearthside figures serve as what Hepworth describes as an “emotional reminder of the virtues of graceful ageing.”³⁸ Perhaps this is because the domestic hearth possesses the rare ability to symbolize the moral, physical, and emotional qualities of aging and family life. For these reasons, the conflation of senescence with the fireside designates a special status for the hearth in genre painting.

In many ways, the fireplace functions as shorthand for both the family and its senior patriarchs and matriarchs. As a powerful symbol of home, the hearth stands for a space in which aged persons still demonstrate their worth. The older figure, in turn, is able to symbolize “home.” Read together, the hearth and its senescent sentinel possess a narrative potential that remains largely unexplored in studies of British and American

³⁶ Martha J. Hoppin, *Country Paths and City Sidewalks: The Art of J.G. Brown* (Springfield, Mass.: George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum, 1989), 28.

³⁷ Interestingly, Brown’s own age (and the inherent agedness of genre painting) was a focal point of his obituaries when he passed away in 1913. His obituary in *The Outlook* begins, “John George Brown is dead. He was eighty-two years old. He was also old in another sense. For he belonged to that old-fashioned school of painters who were ever “telling a story”—a school so old as to go back to the early artists...” See “The Painter of Newsboys and Bootblacks,” *The Outlook* (February 22, 1913), 378.

³⁸ Hepworth, “Ageing and the Emotions,” 188.

Victorian genre pictures, and such an investigation reveals the alignment of aging with its designated domestic environment.

Some of the most prominent writers of the Victorian era describe the fireside dynamics of the cross-generational family unit. After spending some time reflecting on his travels around England in the 1830s, Ralph Waldo Emerson published *English Traits* in 1856.³⁹ Struck by the poetic domesticity of the English family unit, he maintained, “An English family consists of a very few persons, who from youth to age are found revolving within a few feet of each other, as if tied by some tie tense as that cartilage which we have seen attaching the two Siamese.”⁴⁰ Emerson’s observation was almost certainly made upon seeing a family gathered around a central hearth. John Ruskin, too, saw in the fireside “the true nature of home.”⁴¹ He viewed the home not only as “the place of Peace” and “a shelter,” but also as “a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods, before whose faces none may come but those whom they can receive with love...”⁴² Literary giants on both sides of the Atlantic evidently saw the home as a microcosm of a superlative society, with the hearth at its emotional and moral center.⁴³

By reinterpreting aging and its spatial organization within domestic genre, art historians mindfully readdress aspects of this oft-repeated motif. A more constructive and positive reading of the senescent fireside figure might also begin to recast the hearth as a space for favorable aging and cross-generational affection and transmission. Such ways

³⁹ Emerson left for Europe on Christmas, 1832. He traveled throughout most of 1833, returning to Boston in early October. See Sterling F. Delano’s chronology given in *Ralph Waldo Emerson in Context*, edited by Wesley T. Mott (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), xxvii-xxviii.

⁴⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *English Traits* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1884; first printing 1856), 106.

⁴¹ John Ruskin, *Of Queens’ Gardens* (London: G. Allen, 1902; first printing 1865), 21.

⁴² Ruskin, *Of Queen’s Gardens*, 21-22.

⁴³ Judith Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home*, 6.

of looking could recast the hearth as a symbol of the independence, autonomy, and pleasures of later life. Within a survey of images of Victorian domestic space, such concepts about aging can reshape ideas about the family hearth and the pictorial imagination.

Placement within the parlor

In 1868, Currier & Ives published *The Four Seasons of Life*, a set of four prints after drawings by James M. Ives. The prints, which were phenomenally popular and widely distributed, trace the trajectory of an idealized middle-class life cycle, from childhood and youth to middle age and old age.^{44 45} The series illustrates the values espoused by Victorian prescriptive literature and show the lives of men and women who move through life's stages together, their fates linked through family, fidelity, and companionship.⁴⁶ The final print in the series, subtitled *The Season of Rest*, portrays a model senescence as it could best be experienced at home (fig. 1.4).⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Roger Penn Cuff notes the popularity of the *Four Seasons of Life* series in his essay, "The American Editorial Cartoon – A Critical Historical Sketch," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 19, no. 2 (October 1945), 89. The wide distribution of the series is mentioned in Linna F. Place, "Human Aging and the Aged," in *Material Culture in America*, edited by Helen Sheumaker, Shirley Teresa Wajda (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 246.

⁴⁵ While the format of the Currier & Ives prints may appear to be a reverberation of Thomas Cole's four-part *Voyage of Life* (1842), it is, in Michael Kammen's words, "a very distant echo." Kammen writes, "As their subtitles suggest, the Currier and Ives pictures are much more sanguine indeed cheerfully optimistic than Cole's. His Christian allegory, more over, is almost entirely gone from the 1868 prints. *Old Age* in the Currier and Ives series, for example, bears no resemblance whatever to Cole's *Old Age*. In the former an elderly couple is seated in their living room. The woman knits and smiles serenely. The man listens while his granddaughter reads to him. He, too, is serene. The scene is tranquil and domestic, and there is no religious element except for an oversize book, presumably the family bible, which rests unobtrusively on a table." See Michael Kammen, "Changing Perceptions of the Life Cycle in American Thought and Culture," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Third Series, vol. 91 (1979), 51-52.

⁴⁶ Corinne T. Field, *The Struggle for Equal Adulthood: Gender, Race, Age, and the Fight for Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Greensboro, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 99.

⁴⁷ Currier & Ives, *The Four Seasons of Life: Old Age, 'The Season of Rest.'* engraved by Charles R. Parsons and Lyman W. Atwater. Published by Currier & Ives, New York, 1868. Currier & Ives catalogue raisonné no. 2277. See Gale Research, *Currier & Ives: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Detroit, MI : Gale Research, 1983), 232.

In *Old Age: The Season of Rest*, an older couple sits in a comfortable parlor with a girl, presumably their granddaughter, at their feet between them. Husband and wife each have their own comfortable, upholstered armchair before the fire. She knits contentedly, while her husband has been interrupted while reading his paper. The little girl, who sits on a footstool at his feet with a large book propped on her lap, has just seemingly chirped at her grandfather to ask for help reading a challenging word. The three figures bask in the warmth of the fire's glow, contentedly enjoying a cold winter's evening together.

The domestic interior scenes of Currier & Ives were advocated proper interior decoration and healthy family culture. The prescriptive qualities of these prints was supported by the publication of guides like *The American Woman's Home*, by Catharine Esther Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, which was published the following year in 1869.⁴⁸ In their guidebook, the Beecher sisters demonstrated the proper ways of managing a household, from cooking and decorating to childcare and cooking. The Victorian conflation of domestic space and aging is made apparent by the inclusion of a section dedicated to the "Care of the Aged," which is nestled between directives about domestic amusements and managing servants.⁴⁹

The American Woman's Home advocates for the establishment of a positive family environment, one that can be largely achieved through mindful interior decoration and proper management of the cast of employees and family members. The inclusion of a chapter on the treatment of the elderly in a text largely dedicated to decorating and cleaning advice illustrates the entanglement of aging and domestic space. The Beecher

⁴⁸ Catharine Esther Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (New York: J.B. Ford and Company, 1869).

⁴⁹ "Care of the Aged" is chapter XXIV in Beecher and Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home*, 303-306.

sisters even go so far as to treat the condition of aging as an alternative form of interior design, advising,

...A true view of the design of the family state, and of the ministry of the aged and helpless in carrying out this design, would greatly lessen such apprehensions, and might be made a source of pure and elevated enjoyment.⁵⁰

By employing the idea of “design” in a discussion of the elderly and the home, the Beecher sisters emphasize the parallel between aging and its designated spaces, treating the aged as ornaments, akin to houseplants or porcelain vases.

This association of senescence with the idealized home environment established an attractive and romantic image of Victorian aging. In the scene published by Currier & Ives, the elderly couple appears to be vigorous, secure, and comfortable, sitting in a well-appointed room filled with the possessions of a happy family, including portraits, prints, and a glass-fronted cabinet filled with books.

The exceptional social gerontologist W. Andrew Achenbaum perceptively argues that this image of “good old age” proffered by Currier & Ives ably illustrates the popular sentiment of Lydia Maria Child’s poem, “Old Folks at Home,” which includes the following “chorus,”⁵¹

Near their hearthstones, warm and cheery,

Where by night or by day,

They’re free to rest when they are weary,

⁵⁰ Beecher and Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman’s Home*, 303.

⁵¹ W. Andrew Achenbaum, “The Obsolescence of Old Age in America, 1865-1914,” *Journal of Social History* 8, no. 1 (Autumn, 1974), 49.

*There the old folks love to stay.*⁵²

Child's poem encapsulates the Victorian vision of tranquil home life as it translates to the spatial designations of aging. Hearth, home, and senescence are conflated, resulting in a portrayal of the life cycle's domestic ideal.

A similarly idealized amalgamation of age and domestic space can be identified in Edward Lamson Henry's (1841-1919) *The Sitting Room* of 1883 (fig. 1.5). Henry joined other artists who produced genre pictures in a retrospective vein, often emphasizing generational ties and family harmony in nostalgic settings. As the author of works that often emphasize cross-generational bonds and exchange, Henry's rosy-hued pictures proffer visions of domestic cohesiveness.

Amy Kurtz Lansing, a curator at the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme, Connecticut, authored the most recent Henry monograph in 2005. Her study convincingly diagnoses his themes as products of the commemoration of the first centennial in 1876.⁵³ Lansing offers,

The intensifying effort to define and enshrine a collective past as the basis for a stable American identity in a period marked by industrialization, immigration, and urbanization induced Edward Lamson Henry (1841-1919), the era's premier purveyor of nostalgic images, to assert the space of memory as a private refuge.⁵⁴

⁵² Lydia Maria Child, "Old Folks at Home," in *Looking Toward Sunset: From Sources Old and New, Original and Selected* by Lydia Maria Child (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1866), 363.

⁵³ Amy Kurtz Lansing, *Historical Fictions: Edward Lamson Henry's Paintings of Past and Present* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 2005).

⁵⁴ Amy Kurtz Lansing, "A Private Preserve: Edward Lamson Henry's *Memories*," *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin, Recent Acquisitions 2001–2003* (2004), 97.

Henry's "refuges" were located in historic interiors, and they often reflected on the familial relationships and personal reminiscences that occurred therein.

In *The Sitting Room*, a young woman sits by the fire while she works on a piece of embroidery that covers her lap. Her elderly parents are nearby, resting comfortably in their warm and richly appointed parlor. The older woman sits in a rocking chair before the fire, with her back turned towards the viewer. Her husband lies on a Queen Anne settee under a pile of blankets, with his head cradled by a pillow. The scene feels quiet and still, and all three figures are lost in their private thoughts. Surrounded by antique furnishings and decorative objects, the room is a temple dedicated to the past – a past that would have been intimately known and remembered by both of the older figures.⁵⁵

An autumn landscape is visible through the windows, and a hazy blue-grey October sky extends beyond a field punctuated by half-bare golden trees. An uncertain light heightens the shadows cast by window's large sash bars between the panes, and the golden glow of the quickening dusk implies a sense of reflection and nostalgia, of culmination, completion, or even the inevitability of death. Henry's interpretation of the geographies of domesticity is largely retrospective, tied to aspects of aging and chronology, and the inclusion of evidence of the changing seasons informs a nuanced reading of *The Sitting Room* and its heavily symbolic components.

The objects in *The Sitting Room* function as markers of continuity, the life course, and the cyclical nature of temporality.⁵⁶ Henry's subjects reinforce the extent to which the past can define the experience of the present, offering a harmonious view of family culture as it is constructed across the generations. A respectable ancestor, whose portrait

⁵⁵ Lansing, *Historical Fictions*, 22.

⁵⁶ Lansing, *Historical Fictions*, 36.

gazes down from the wall above the hallowed hearth, observes the scene. Other pieces of eighteenth-century décor, like the settee, colonial fireside table, and the eagle-topped Federal-style mirror connect this family with its predecessors, establishing continuity across the generations.⁵⁷

Henry often expended his energies in the depiction of anecdotal and domestic scenes of the manners of Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁵⁸ Born in Charleston and later making his career in New York, he was familiar with the environments and social values of Americans in both the north and the south. This scene was likely painted at Cragmoor, the New York artist colony Henry helped found in the early 1880s.⁵⁹ After beginning to paint genre subjects of Cragmoor country life in 1881, he eventually bought land to build a home there in 1883. Elizabeth McCausland, Henry's principal biographer, writes that in Cragmoor, "Henry developed his particular gift of observation into what is his most interesting expression, genre paintings of country life."⁶⁰ This scene, like other Henry conversation pieces, suggests the comforting

⁵⁷ Charles C. Eldredge describes *The Sitting Room* along similar lines, writing, "The room's old-fashioned decor suggests a time past, a backward glance: ancestral portrait, Adamesque fireplace, and antique furniture of the sort inspired by the collecting vogue begun at the Centennial Exposition a few years earlier, an enthusiasm in which Henry eagerly participated." See Charles C. Eldredge, *Tales from the Easel: American Narrative Paintings from Southeastern Museums, circa 1800-1950* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 50. *The Sitting Room*, 1883 (cat. no. 31). [illus. p. 131].

⁵⁸ A.F. Page, "Three Nineteenth-Century American Water Colorists," *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts of the City of Detroit* 27, no. 4 (1948), 91.

⁵⁹ Cragmoor is a small village near the Shawangunk Mountains in Ulster County, New York. John George Brown also painted with the community there. For more on the Cragmoor art colony, see "Chapter 4: Cragmoor Art Colony" in Steve Shipp's *American Art Colonies, 1850-1930: A Historical Guide to America's Original Art Colonies and Their Artists* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996), 25-29.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth McCausland, *The Life and Work of Edward Lamson Henry N.A., 1841-1919*. New York: Kennedy Graphics, Inc., 1970 (originally published as *New York State Museum, Bulletin no. 339*. Albany: The University of the State of New York, 1945), 40.

assurance of generational endurance and the inheritance of domestic objects that construct the experiences of youth and age.⁶¹

Domestic settings related to the age spectrum are uniquely capable of emphasizing cross-generational connections. The family hearth is not only the locus around which age is organized – it is also the place where the bonds between age and youth are designed and secured.

Victorian genre often paints the hearth as the place in the home best suited for inter-age exchange and the consecration of familial affection. Popular culture valued the cycle of youth, family, age, and death, often prioritizing the inclusion of these themes in diverse arenas, such as prescriptive literature, sermons, and the fine arts. Such varied portrayals of cross-generational connections were often set against the backdrop of the hearth—the spiritual center of the home.

In his landmark 1992 book, *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America*, the social gerontologist Thomas R. Cole describes how Victorian ministers “embellished the positive pole in Victorian culture’s divided vision of aging and old age,” usually doing so while locating the processes of aging within the domestic sphere.⁶² For example, the Massachusetts Unitarian Universalist preacher Theodore Parker often praised a domestically focused, silver-haired grandfather in his sermons, which were widely reproduced in both Britain and the United States.⁶³ His ideal senescence is set beside the “old-fashioned fire,” where a grandfather makes himself comfortable in an

⁶¹ Eldredge, *Tales from the Easel*, 50.

⁶² Thomas R. Cole, *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 136.

⁶³ In addition to his work as a Unitarian minister, Parker was a widely-known social reformer, abolitionist, leader of the Transcendentalist movement, friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and contributor to *The Dial*. “Parkerism” eventually became slang used to describe progressive and modernist positions within the Unitarian church. For a biographical sketch of Parker, see David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 302.

“old-fashioned chair.”⁶⁴ Parker describes “the very old man” as someone who “loves the sunshine and the fire, the arm-chair and the shady nook...He is not venturesome; he keeps at home.”⁶⁵ While seated in his fireside chair, this ideal grandfather gazes into the embers, thinking of his children and grandchildren—the pearls of his old age.⁶⁶

Images of fireside aging rarely reveal contempt towards senescence, dread of decay and reliance, or enmity towards elders.⁶⁷ Such negative reactions towards the life cycle are seldom present in hearthside intergenerational genre scenes. Genre paintings do not generally challenge the characterization of the hearth as the emblem of the harmonic home, the microcosm of ideal Victorian society.⁶⁸ Images of mixed generations at the fireside show a family environment protected from the outside world, where family bonds are the principal focus.

These fireside generational connections are a recurring theme in the oeuvre of the British painter and engraver George Goodwin Kilburne (1839-1924). In *Three Generations* (1879), an “angel of the house” is seen escorting her elderly mother towards an armchair beside the hearth (fig. 1.6).⁶⁹ The woman’s daughter kneels before the embers, fluffing a velvet hassock for her grandmother. Kilburne’s setting provides the

⁶⁴ “Now it is night. Grandfather sits by his old-fashioned fire. The family are all a-bed. He draws his old-fashioned chair nearer to the hearth. On the stand which his mother gave him are the candlesticks, also of old time. The candles are three quarters burnt down; the fire on the hearth is also low.” Theodore Parker, “A Sermon of Old Age: Preached at the Music Hall, on Sunday, January 29, 1854.” In Frances Power Cobb, ed. *The Collected Works of Theodore Parker, Vol. III: Discourses of Theology* (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1866), 108.

⁶⁵ Parker, “A Sermon of Old Age,” 94.

⁶⁶ Cole, *The Journey of Life*, 136.

⁶⁷ Cole, *The Journey of Life*, 136.

⁶⁸ Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home*, 6. Coventry Patmore’s famous poem, “The Angel in the House” (1854) is usually identified as the most important source for the Victorian notion of the gentle, loving mother as the paragon of domestic virtue. Patmore’s poem has been widely reproduced, and can be found in Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (London and Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1863).

⁶⁹ George Goodwin Kilburne (1839-1924), *Three Generations*, 1879. Signed and dated G.G. Kilburne/79. Inscribed ‘Three Generations’ on the stretcher. Oil on canvas, 29 ½ x 40 ½ in. (75 x 103 cm). Christie’s London, Fine Victorian Pictures, Drawings, and Watercolors (Friday, June 6, 1997), Lot 57.

three women with the ideal environment wherein each can perform the duties of her age: the young girl seeks to aid the comfort of old age. By doing so, her mother can demonstrate that she has satisfactorily done her duty of raising a kind and considerate child, while the grandmother figure is able to enjoy the fruits of her age from the seat of honor by the fire.

Kilburne repeatedly revisited and reconfigured the three-generations hearthside picture, producing a number of variations of this scene.⁷⁰ He surely understood the general appeal of the subject, as he was trained for five years by the Dalziel brothers, producers of popular prints.⁷¹ Kilburne also exhibited widely, showing his work at the Royal Academy from 1862-1918, in addition to shows at the Royal Society of British Artists, the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolours (of which he was a member from 1868), the Royal Miniature Society, the Royal Society of Arts in Birmingham, the Glasgow Institute of Fine Arts, the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, and Manchester City Art Gallery. He also produced illustrations for a wide selection of publications, including *The Graphic*, *The Illustrated London News*, and *Cassell's Magazine*.⁷² Kilburne's figures are almost exclusively fashionable and genteel, and the episodes from their daily lives are rendered with empathy and calmness.

⁷⁰ For two comparable examples of Kilburne's mixed-generation hearthside pictures, see a watercolor sketch of an identical subject, entitled *A Steadying Arm* (also known as *A Seat by the Fire and Grandma's Chair*), which was offered at Sotheby's Belgravia, 27 April 1982, lot 249. Also see *Three Generations by the Fireside*. Watercolor, 13.5 x 19.5cm. David Duggleby Auctioneers & Valuers, North Yorkshire.

⁷¹ "...he was apprenticed to Messrs Dalziel, Brothers, wood engravers, then at Camden Town. His steady attention to business and his progress in the art gained the approbation of his principals." In "George Goodwin Kilburne," *The Biograph and Review* 4, July 1880 (London: E.W. Allen, 1880), 15. Also see the Dalziel brothers' memoir, which speaks highly of Kilburne's work with the firm. George Dalziel and Edward Dalziel, *The Brothers Dalziel: A Record of Fifty Years' Work, 1840-1890* (London: Methuen and Co., 1901), 346.

⁷² s.v. "KILBURNE, George Goodwin," in the *Benezit Dictionary of British Graphic Artists and Illustrators, Vol. 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 634.

In sum, *Three Generations* expresses a condition described by Susan P. Casteras as “the multivalent iconological phenomenon of domestic interiors and their female occupants.”⁷³ Kilburne’s hearth is coded as a locus around which the ages of woman can revolve, marking this site as one of special significance to the Victorian family structure. This hearthside exchange is characterized as tranquil and controlled, especially as all involved players efficaciously enact their prescribed generational roles.

Casteras explicitly notes, “The ideology of motherhood and ‘wifeliness’ is expressed in various permutations of imagery of a woman and children at a hearth in a parlor.”⁷⁴ If the fireside is the place where ideal womanhood is expressed, it would follow that such enactments of perfect femininity should include all stages of the life cycle. Further, if the Victorian home can be read as Ruskin’s venerated “vestal temple of the hearth,” surely this fireside altar ought to encompass the chronological dimensions of this domestic metaphor.⁷⁵

Lower-class expressions of Victorian generations also unfold before the hearth, and a number of such examples can be identified in the work of the Newlyn school artists, who began settling along the Land’s End peninsula’s southern coast around 1880.⁷⁶ Rail connections to London at this time made it feasible for artists to travel between the capital and the colony with ease, and with its village life and throbbing harbor, Newlyn provided many British painters with ideal subjects of rural life.⁷⁷

⁷³ Susan P. Casteras, “The Unsettled Hearth: P.H. Calderon’s ‘Lord! Thy Will be Done’ and the Problematics of Women in Victorian Interiors,” in Ellen Harding, *Re-framing the Pre-Raphaelites: Historical and Theoretical Essays* (London: Scolar Press, 1996), 149.

⁷⁴ Casteras, “The Unsettled Hearth,” 157.

⁷⁵ Ruskin, *Of Queen’s Gardens*, 22.

⁷⁶ Michael Bird, *Art in Cornwall* (Penzance: Alison Hodge, 2012), 9. Denney argues that the Newlyn artists began settling there as early as 1884. See Denney, *At the Temple of Art*, 181.

⁷⁷ Bird, *Art in Cornwall*, 9.

The Newlyn painters strictly adhered to a rallying charge of realism, which they embodied both in their choice of subject and their gritty tones and textures. Their ranks included giants of British realist painting, like Albert Chevallier Tayler (1862–1925), Stanhope Forbes (1857-1947), Walter Langley (1852-1922), and Frank Bramley (1857-1915). They settled in Cornish fishing cottages among fishermen and their families in pursuit of the painterly details of sea mist, grey vapors, and turbulent seas. The Newlyn artists concerned themselves with the working lives of the fisherman and the impact that their occupations had on their mothers, wives, and children—subjects that reflected the everyday lives of Cornish villagers and revealed the group’s naturalist tendencies.^{78 79}

Such quotidian moments frequently unfolded before the fireside, such as in the example of Tayler’s *A Dress Rehearsal* of 1888 (fig. 1.7). Tayler commenced his artistic career with a three-year Slade Scholarship and instruction in the ateliers of Jean Paul Laurens and Carolus Duran, eventually exhibiting every season at the RA—always “on the line.”⁸⁰ Tayler was working in Cornwall with the Newlyn artists when he painted this sentimental subject.

A Dress Rehearsal depicts a family of women gathered before the fireplace in a humble Cornish fisherman’s cottage. In the center of the room, a young bride tries on her wedding dress, which has just been decorated with goldenrod ribbons. She relishes her matrimonial costume, lifting her gathered skirt with her left hand as if demonstrating a dance step she is practicing for her reception. Her sisters or cousins are smiling at her,

⁷⁸ Colleen Denney, *At the Temple of Art: The Grosvenor Gallery, 1877-1890* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2000), 182.

⁷⁹ Austin Chester, “The Art of Mr. Frank Bramley, A.R.A.” *The Windsor Magazine* 28 (June-November 1908), 126.

⁸⁰ John S. Purcell, “The Art of A. Chevallier Tayler.” *The English Illustrated Magazine* 34 (December 1905), pp. 246, 250. Also see a brief profile of Tayler in Thomas Gough’s “Newlyn and the Newlyn School of Painting.” *Papers of the Manchester Literary Club, Vol. 17* (Manchester: John Heywood, 1891), 225-240.

perhaps envisioning the dresses that they will someday wear to their own weddings. Supervising the scene is the bride's elderly mother, who looks at the wedding dress with an expression of cheerlessness, perhaps mourning the loss of her daughter to her betrothed. The older woman sits before the fireplace in the seat of regard and care, her feet propped upon a wooden box. *A Dress Rehearsal* offers its viewer a pleasant view of daily life in a typical Newlyn interior, its realistic activities likely derived from Tayler's direct experience of the local community.

In addition to his choice of subject, Tayler also discloses his associations with the Newlyn painters through his naturalist approach. Colleen Denney describes the Newlyn style as one which

...underscored careful drawing in the study of figures in nature, observed on the spot directly outdoors, rather than in a traditional studio setting. Their works further explored Bastien's broken brushwork treatment, his reliance on the blurred vision created by the camera, his preoccupation with blond tonalities, and an objective recording of nature.⁸¹

These objective renderings of the world were usually created outdoors, and when works were made in the studio, subjects were lit only by natural light. Tayler and his peers sat directly before their sitters and painted them using a square-brush technique, which resulted in pictures composed of built-up surfaces and textural effects.⁸²

⁸¹ Denney, *At the Temple of Art*, 181. "Bastien" refers to Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848–1884), the French realist who profoundly influenced the Newlyn group.

⁸² Denney, *At the Temple of Art*, 181.

Tayler was singled out among the Newlyn artists for what the Victorian critic John S. Purcell deemed, "...the felicity with which he can concentrate in one picture the romance and psychology of a whole modern novel."⁸³ He continues, "...whatever the story he has to tell, he spares no labor, shirks no effort of thought, in setting it forth."⁸⁴ Purcell's assessment of Tayler's oeuvre underscores the artist's investment in domestic drama, family relationships, and generational exchange. Among the Newlyn artists, he was also best known for his interiors, distinguished by their "exquisite cross-lights and reflections."⁸⁵ Like a well-constructed Victorian novel, *A Dress Rehearsal* uses the psychologies of space and interpersonal, cross-generational relationships to design a legible narrative.

A Dress Rehearsal was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1888 (no. 45), where it won praise for being "a clever picture in the modern *white manner*."⁸⁶ By this year, there was a marked uptick in critical interest in the Newlyn group, and other successful canvases at the 1888 RA included Newlyn works by Stanhope Forbes (*A Village Philharmonic*) and Frank Bramley (*A Hopeless Dawn*).⁸⁷ Tayler's successful reception is also evidenced by the sale of *A Dress Rehearsal* to the industrialist William Lever, Lord

⁸³ Purcell, "The Art of A. Chevallier Tayler," 241.

⁸⁴ Purcell, "The Art of A. Chevallier Tayler," 241.

⁸⁵ "[Tayler] remains best known by the painting of those interiors, with exquisite cross-lights and reflections, that were the note of the Newlyn painters." Sir Francis Cowley Burnand, ed., *The Catholic Who's Who and Yearbook 1908* (London: Burns & Oates, 1908), 71.

⁸⁶ "The Royal Academy Exhibition." *The Builder* 54, no. 2362 (May 12, 1888), 332. Also see Tayler's listing in Algernon Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts: A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and their work from its foundation in 1769 to 1904, Vol. 7* (London: Henry Graves and Co. Ltd., 1906), 326. *A Dress Rehearsal* was also reproduced in Henry Blackburn's *Academy Notes 1888*, no. 14 (London: Chatto and Windus, 1888), 24.

⁸⁷ Catalogue note for Albert Chevallier Tayler, *The Council of Three*. Oil on canvas, 66.5 x 97.5cm (26 3/16 x 38 3/8in). Bonhams London, New Bond Street, Auction 20485: 19th Century Paintings, Drawings, and Watercolours, January 23, 2013, Lot 96.

Leverhulme, who actively bought pictures at the RA from the 1860s through the 1880s.⁸⁸ *A Dress Rehearsal* was sold with its copyright to serve as an advertising image for soap, much like the oft-cited example of John Everett Millais' *Bubbles*, which was sold with its copyright to advertise Pears soap in 1887.⁸⁹ When *A Dress Rehearsal* was used as an advertisement for Sunlight Soap, it ran with the caption "As Good As New," suggesting that perhaps the wedding dress had been passed down from mother to daughter and refreshed in advance of her wedding day. This added interpretation created by Lever's advertising campaign heightens the picture's ability to function as an emblem of domestic aging and exchange.

Like most Victorian genre pictures, Tayler's scene is composed for ideal narrative effect. Blue and white china is displayed proudly on the shelves, popular prints are pinned to the wall, and an old silver teapot, dented yet shining, rests on the table beside the elderly mother's teacup. This is a family that cares about the artistic effects available to their class, and Tayler employs realistic details that communicate this esteem. Joseph Gleeson White, who served as inaugural editor for the arts magazine *The Studio*, wrote of the artist's affection for objects,

...we find every object depicted, with regard to its own texture, with realism well-nigh Dutch in effect, but achieved in a wholly different way...a lens is required to do them justice. Here, the appearance of high finish as it is seen by normal vision is most excellently rendered, so that even in reproduction the various substances

⁸⁸ Malcolm C. Salaman, "Lord Leverhulme's Pictures: His Modern Favourites." *The International Studio* 74, no. 295 (September 1921), 46.

⁸⁹ M.H. Spielmann, "Posters and Poster-Designing in England." *Scribner's Monthly Magazine* 18 (July-December 1895, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), 40.

reveal their identity unmistakably, glass as glass, silver as silver, no less than they would have done had the photograph been from the actual objects.⁹⁰

Taylor's glass and silver objects have a similar effect to those found in Henry's *The Sitting Room*: they operate as signs of generational endurance and the harmonious passage of time. Taylor's material goods demonstrate the tangible ways in which the objects of the past can inform the experience of the present, suggesting the ways in which a family can be constructed both within, and by, a domestic space.

The conflation of age and decorative domestic objects was a prescribed way of navigating the Victorian world, and many British and American writers demonstrated ways in which positive aging could be enacted by the hearthside. In his 1897 book, *The Social Spirit in America*, the Midwestern minister, sociologist, and reformer Charles Richmond Henderson presented a definition of family that aligns with these ideals. In a chapter titled, "Home-Making as a Social Art," he declares,

A family in our time and land means a group of persons united by the bond of near relationship. A longer word is household, since this may include not only parents and children, but also aged relatives... The word home means the family and its residence, with a thousand objects and memories which surround the word with sentiments beautiful and tender.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Joseph Gleeson White, ed., *The Master Painters of Britain* (New York: The International Studio, 1909), 366.

⁹¹ Charles Richmond Henderson, *The Social Spirit in America* (Meadville, PA: Flood and Vincent, 1897), 23.

Henderson sees the American home as a social institution, one which is designed by its inhabitants and their relationships, as well as their ages. When age and object are read concurrently within the domestic setting, both qualities are able to shape and inform the other.

Later nineteenth-century critics who viewed genre pictures at major exhibitions often commented on the relationships between figures and domestic details. This interest is almost invariably present in commentary about interior scenes inhabited by older subjects. A contemporary description of Thomas Faed's (1826-1900) *New Wars to an Old Soldier* (1862) describes a scene in which the older figure and the furnishings of his home are given nearly equal weight,

A handsome country girl was seen leaning her elbow on the table, reading the news to her grandfather, on whose knee a child was perched, dressing up the old man's thumb in likeness of a red-coated soldier. The face and head of the old man were a marvelous example of exact and careful study. The details of furniture were very curious and cleverly painted.⁹²

Faed's brightly hued picture portrays a senescent veteran seated in a worn armchair, listening to his daughter read aloud from the newspaper (fig. 1.8).⁹³ His grandson plays on his knee, dressing up his thumb in red fabric like a soldier's uniform. The older man, a

⁹² Lovell Reeve, F.L.S., ed. "Thomas Faed, Esq., A.R.A." in *Portraits of Men of Eminence in Literature, Science, and Art, with Biographical Memoirs* (London: Lovell Reeve & Co, 1863), 184.

⁹³ Faed was an able colorist who influenced generations of Scottish painters who followed. "From Faed and his contemporaries came a more painterly handling and strength of color that had become a feature of Scottish painting by 1880." Roger Billcliffe, "Glasgow Boys." In Jane Turner, ed. *The Grove Dictionary of Art: From Renaissance to Impressionism. Styles and Movements in Western Art, 1400-1900* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 120.

decorated veteran who likely fought under Wellington, listens to his daughter tell the news of unrest abroad, perhaps recounting the details of the recent Indian Uprising (1857-1858) or an engagement in the Crimean War (1853-1856). An 1878 Thomas Faed monograph suggests that the old veteran is listening to “the deeds of the regiment to which he belonged in the long-past days of his youth and strength.”⁹⁴ The same description details the domestic objects displayed as trophies, including “an Indian dagger in its gay velvet sheath, and beside it a bayonet; the carefully-preserved India china bowl and jar; and the tea-caddy of delicate Eastern workmanship.”⁹⁵ The contrast between these exotic objects and the humble British cottage interior is heightened by the presence of the hearth, which appears as a large, looming darkness crowning the grandfather like a monolithic halo.

Faed’s picture celebrates the dual Victorian notions of heroism and domesticity, and the inclusion of the attentive female figure heightens the idealized nature of the scene. Between the trinity of the old soldier, his “angel of the house” daughter, and the decorated hearth, *New Wars to an Old Soldier* presents three of the ultimate archetypes of Victorian home and family. As Casteras explains,

Along with the cult of the hero and public endorsements of personal temperance, seriousness, and charity went, almost hand in hand, notions of chivalry and the sanctity of the home. The inviolability of home and family were preached at all

⁹⁴ [James R. Osgood and Company], *The Faed Gallery: A Series of the Most Renowned Works of Thomas Faed Reproduced in Heliotype* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1878), 25.

⁹⁵ Osgood, *The Faed Gallery*, 25.

levels of society and were particularly embraced by the middle and upper classes, and pure female conduct served as a keystone of this domestic creed.⁹⁶

While Casteras does not explicitly suggest a connection between virtue, chivalry, and aging, she does describe a way in which Faed's picture can be read as an arrangement of age and the domestic ideal. *New Wars to an Old Soldier* demonstrates the older figure's capacity to embody a superlative fireside aging, his hearth resembling the immovable character of a war memorial. Further, Faed's fireside functions as a site of generational exchange. It is the place where a child plays with his grandfather and a daughter reads to the father, and the three figures are posed in a triangular composition, emphasizing their cross-generational interdependence and the refrain of happy, rewarded old age.⁹⁷

In addition to presenting the contrast between babyhood, youth, and age, Faed's scene also suggests a complicated contrast between the comforts of the domestic environment and the strife of the foreign battlefield, which likely still rages in the senescent veteran's mind. In her history of the military in British art, Joan Winifred Martin Hichberger charts the increased artistic interest in the theme of the aged veteran at home in the years following the Crimean war. "From this time," Hichberger notes, "there were many more representations of soldiers and, by extension, veterans, in domestic situations."⁹⁸ *New Wars to an Old Soldier* relies on its familiar domestic context in order

⁹⁶ Susan P. Casteras, *Virtue Rewarded: Victorian Paintings from the Forbes Magazine Collection* (Louisville: The JB Speed Art Museum, 1988), 4.

⁹⁷ Joan Winifred Martin Hichberger, *Images of the Army: The Military in British Art, 1815-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 146.

⁹⁸ Hichberger, *Images of the Army*, 146.

to construct a contrast with the exotic and unfamiliar environments implied by the man's Eastern trophies and the news from abroad.⁹⁹

New Wars to an Old Soldier received positive critical attention when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1862.¹⁰⁰ The art press also praised Faed, deeming him “the most eminent living artist of the school of which [David] Wilkie is the representative.”¹⁰¹ This comparison is of no small value in the context of the hearthside picture, as Wilkie (1785-1841), usually regarded as the father of nineteenth-century British genre painting, was also extolled by his peers for his capacity for handling this theme.¹⁰² Dickens famously delivered an elegy to Wilkie, praising him as an artist “who made the cottage hearth a graceful thing.”¹⁰³ Best attuned to the subjects of rural Scottish

⁹⁹ Hichberger includes an assessment of this picture that was published in *The Athenaeum* after its inclusion at the RA in 1862. The picture is described, “A veteran of the war in Egypt, stricken with the peculiar evil of that luckless campaign, ophthalmia, sits in a chair, withered and worn, his eyes shrunk deep in the face yet all their companion features playing in earnest attention, while a young woman, his daughter or daughter in law, reads from a newspaper the story of the Indian Mutiny and the deeds of the regiment to which he belonged when he was young, strong and capable of war.” *Athenaeum* No. 1801 (May 3, 1862), 680 (Hichberger, *Images of the Army*, 146).

¹⁰⁰ RA 1862, no. 64. See Algernon Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts: A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and Their Work from its Foundation in 1769 to 1904, Vol. III, Eadie to Harraden* (London: Henry Graves & Co., Ltd., 1905), 80. One critic, writing for *The Art Journal* in January, 1871, remarked, “So far as relates to size of canvas his contributions to the Academy in 1862 were on a comparatively small scale; but each one of the four pictures he exhibited would grace any gallery.” See “British Artists: Their Style and Character. No. XCVI. Thomas Faed, R.A., H.R.S.A.” *The Art Journal* 10 (January 1, 1871), 2.

¹⁰¹ Osgood, *The Faed Gallery*, 1. Of course, Faed's similarities to Wilkie were not deemed by all critics to be a positive characteristic. For instance, John Ruskin condemned Faed's *Mitherless Bairn* (1855) as “common-place Wilkieism,” which, by no form of intellectual gymnastics, could be characterized as a compliment. See Sarah Tytler, *Modern Painters and Their Paintings: For the Use of Schools and Learners in Art* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1874), 285.

¹⁰² It may be worth noting here that both David Wilkie and Thomas Faed were Scottish. Wilkie was born in Fife and left for London in 1805. Faed was born in Kirkcudbrightshire, which he later left for Edinburgh. He eventually went to London in 1852. While the topic of Scottish artist identities deserves far more attention in this paper, space does not permit an extended exploration of the unique ways in which “Scottishness” impacted the entire field of Anglo-American genre painting. On this subject, I recommend the work of Murdo Macdonald, Professor of History of Scottish Art at the University of Dundee. His book *Scottish Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000) identifies the stylistic and emotional qualities unique to Scottish painting.

¹⁰³ James William Thomas Ley, *The Dickens Circle: A Narrative of the Novelist's Friendships* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1919), 130.

domestic life, Faed's hearthside pictures embody similar qualities.¹⁰⁴ He presents the hearth as the "graceful" center of the home and a point of elegant cross-generational connection. While Faed's fireside is largely obscured by the veteran's chair, its presence signals the close identification of age with its domestic geography, bestowing upon the grandfather an enhanced status within the composition.

The seat of authority

When read concurrently in the context of domestic genre, the qualities of the fireplace and old age reinforce each other, making the hearth a site of steadfast senescent power. This power can even, at times, be interpreted as something quite mystical. The Brooklyn artist Harry Herman Roseland (1868-1950) painted countless images of older African-American women performing acts of magic and clairvoyance before the fireside—figures which were appraised by Victorian critics as being "portrayed with remarkable fidelity, [showing] a humorous spirit, originality, and distinct motives."¹⁰⁵ In these pictures, the aged sorceress often sits across from a well-dressed, upper class, young white woman. The elder figure is often attired in rags, sitting before a humble hearth hung with drying laundry and modest, repaired furniture. However, despite her clear lack of material resources, Roseland's seer is always received by her clients with intelligence and dignity, her age, hearth, and home portrayed with realism and respect.

¹⁰⁴ Marie A. Moore, "Great Artists and Their Paintings." *The Perry Magazine* 3, no. 5 (January 1901), 202.

¹⁰⁵ "Studies from Life by Artist Harry Roseland Attracting Much Attention at Exhibition in National Academy." *The Brooklyn World* (January 5, 1902). Cited in Marc Simpson, *The Rockefeller Collection of American Art at The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco* (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1994), 278.

One example of Roseland's numinous hearthside seer can be seen in *Reading the Tea Leaves* (ca. 1890). In this scene, two women sit before a large, dark brick fireplace, facing each other in their low, wooden chairs (fig. 1.9). The older African-American woman is dressed in a torn apron and golden-brown rags, her hair tied back in a dark yellow kerchief. She speaks with a young white woman, who is dressed in a pale pink dressed trimmed with delicate black ribbons. Her matching hat and parasol describe a life of wealth and comfort, notions that almost certainly seem foreign to the old clairvoyant. Both women lean towards each other, the girl in pink eagerly waiting to hear the prediction for her future. The fortune-teller gestures towards the small white teacup she holds in her hand, pointing with her little finger at something in the tea leaves that pronounces the young woman's destiny.

This contrast between rich and poor, age and youth, and black and white serves Roseland's picture by heightening the characteristics demonstrated by each of these individual qualities. For instance, age is of phenomenal importance to the narrative, as it enhances authority and acts as a kind of shield against skepticism or disbelief. The setting of the hearth is also significant: as a site identified with age, honor, and power, the fireside further intensifies any influence the elderly woman may exercise.

Roseland painted many related combinations of young white women having their fortunes told by older African-American seers who had likely experienced slavery, and the domestic settings for these pictures undoubtedly heightens their efficacy. He was first drawn to these integrated subjects after finding success with such a picture at the National Academy of Design around 1885. One critic later noted, "[the picture] met with such wide comment it changed the whole tenor of his work, and since then he has devoted

himself exclusively to the same theme, recently introducing white subjects with the colored to vary the interest.”¹⁰⁶ Roseland went on to establish a unique reputation for these works, which were regularly exhibited at the National Academy and the Brooklyn Art Club and reproduced in popular periodicals and art magazines.¹⁰⁷ A lifelong Brooklyn resident, he likely never traveled outside of the northeast, although his images are now widely regarded as records of life in the South.¹⁰⁸

The aged seer, a recurring type throughout folklore and age studies, appears in Roseland’s picture as a guardian of secrets, a custodian of life and death, and the keeper of her client’s story.¹⁰⁹ However, despite her all-knowing power, Roseland’s clairvoyant appears to earn only a precarious livelihood.¹¹⁰ Poverty does not impinge on her powers, and her ragged hearth conveys as much command as a gilded scepter. As an unwavering source of senescent power, the older woman’s fireside functions almost as an additional credential for her all-seeing abilities. Despite functioning primarily as a mark of poverty rather than one of home-loving sentiment, Roseland’s hearth is a badge of authoritative aging and a powerful signifier of a mystical domestic order.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Jenny Young Chandler, “Brooklyn as an Art Centre.” *Metropolitan* 10, no. 2 (August 1899), 151.

¹⁰⁷ Lee MacCormick Edwards, *Domestic Bliss: Family Life in American Painting, 1840-1910* (Yonkers: The Hudson River Museum, 1986), 138.

¹⁰⁸ Edwards, *Domestic Bliss*, 138. Many critics assumed Roseland was, in fact, painting southern stories, and he was often praised for his realistic way of handling this theme. One contributor to *Brush and Pencil* wrote in 1906, “Roseland could probably paint an old colored woman so natural that the very paint would smell of hoe cake and cotton bolls.” While such a comment may seem a bit backwards to a twenty-first century reader, it was almost certainly intended as emphatic praise. See The Salon’s Secretary, “Salon of the Dilettanti: II. The Face of Art Juries,” *Brush and Pencil* 17, no. 1 (January 1906), 40.

¹⁰⁹ Rima Staines, “Drawing the Old Woman in the Woods,” *Marvels & Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies* 24, no. 2 (2010), 336.

¹¹⁰ Henry Carrington Bolton, “Fortune-Telling in America To-Day. A Study of Advertisements,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 8, no. 31 (October-December 1895), 300.

¹¹¹ Jane Weiss, “Home-Loving Sentiments: Domestic Contexts for Eastman Johnson’s Paintings,” In Teresa A. Carbone and Patricia Hills, eds. *Eastman Johnson, Painting America* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2000), 169.

In the presence of age, the hearth can exercise its own authority as well as enhance the clout of older figures seated nearby. As a designated place for aging, the fireside functions as a symbolic ally with the rules and regulations determined by the older members of the family, and in Roseland's picture, the hearth reinforces the credibility of his elderly seer.

A similar operation also occurs in more traditional Victorian genre scenes, such as in instances when a grandparent is shown enforcing the rules of the house. The English painter David Hardy (1837-1870) was a proponent of traditional genre painting, and, much like his cousin Frederick Daniel Hardy (1827-1911), he produced works modeled on Dutch antecedents.¹¹² Hardy's rustic domestic pictures were influenced by the style of his cousin, who was, in turn, influenced by his fellow artists working at the Cranbrook art colony in Kent. John Callcott Horsley (1817-1903) established the colony, and F.D. Hardy, George Hardy (1822-1909), Thomas Webster (1800-1886), Augustus Edwin Mulready (1844-1904), and George Bernard O'Neill (1828-1917) later joined him in the Kentish village. Together, the Cranbrook group produced some of the most popular sentimental genre pictures of the period, which usually portrayed small rustic interiors peopled by women and children.

While David Hardy remained in Bath for most of his life, he seems to have absorbed the characteristics of the Cranbrook school painters, dedicating himself to painting the lives of children and their families in humble English cottages.¹¹³ Hardy

¹¹² Ronald Parkinson, *Victoria and Albert Museum, Catalogue of British Oil Paintings 1820-1860* (London: HMSO, 1990), 118.

¹¹³ While little is known about David Hardy today, some biographical information can be gleaned from profiles of his son, the famous illustrator Paul Hardy, who regularly provided illustrations to *The Strand Magazine*. See Bruce Durie, *Dick Donovan Stories from The Strand Magazine 1892* (Edinburgh: Gath-Askalon Publishing, 2012), 141. Also see "Artists of *The Strand Magazine*," *The Strand* 10 (July-December 1895). London: George Newnes, Ltd., 1895), 786-790. Hardy is also listed in South Kensington

found some success in London as a painter of domestic genre, and he exhibited widely from 1850-1870 at the Royal Academy, the British Institution, and the Society of British Artists.¹¹⁴

Hardy's 1859 picture *Caught in the Act* shows the authority of age as it is bolstered by the powers of the hearth (fig. 1.10).¹¹⁵ In *Caught in the Act*, an older woman is shown returning home from the market only to find her young grandsons in the middle of causing trouble. Two boys are frozen on the left side of the composition—the older boy stands still, his hands still stuck in the cupboard, perhaps about to pull out some illicit sweets. His younger brother physically reacts to their grandmother's sudden reappearance at the door, fixed in a crouched position with his arms spread widely, as if to show her that he has not taken anything from the cupboard himself. Although their grandmother peers around the doorway with a benign smile, her presence is imbued with enough authority to immediately halt the boys' mischief.

Hardy's composition takes as its center the darkness of the family hearth, the three figures organized neatly around its dark, empty space. As the site of the grandmother's authority in the home, the fireside is the worst place for the boys to cause trouble, especially because it is the place where their grandmother will most likely find herself upon her return, seated in the place of honor by its embers. In this way, the fireplace in *Caught in the Act* acts as a proxy for the grandmother and her ability to regulate the activities of the home. The scene is designed around the hearth's

Museum, *A Catalogue of the National Gallery of British Art At South Kensington: With a Supplement Containing Works by Modern Foreign Artists And Old Masters*. New ed. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode for HMSO, 1893), 70.

¹¹⁴ Algernon Graves, *A Dictionary of Artists Who Have Exhibited Works in the Principal London Exhibitions of Oil Paintings from 1760 to 1880* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1884), 107.

¹¹⁵ David Hardy (1837-1870), *Caught in the Act*, 1859. Oil on panel, 11 x 15.4 in. (28 x 39 cm). Phillips Bayswater: Tuesday, October 2, 2001 [Lot 144, 19th Century European Paintings, Sale T0525].

forcefulness, its looming presence heightening the effect of the grandmother's absence and subsequent sudden return.

Roseland and Hardy both deploy the hearth as a marker of the authority and power of age. In *Reading the Tea Leaves* and *Caught in the Act*, the fireside signals the sovereignty of older women in the home. Both pictures also illustrate the particular performance of senescent power within the working-class domestic environment. As a powerful signifier of family unity, the open fireplace is able to uniquely express aspects of lower-class aging, and hearthside pictures demonstrate the ways in which Victorian viewers recognized "good old age" in its most humble settings.¹¹⁶

As a proponent of genre painting in the Dutch tradition, the New York artist Francis William Edmonds (1806-1863) embraced established genre tropes, such as old age, handicrafts, domestic duties, and commerce. These themes all appear in his concise and effective picture, *Bargaining (The Christmas Turkey)* of 1858, in which Edmonds frames the hearth not only as the location for aging within the working-class home, but also as the place where older women are able to engage with trade from the comfort of their fireside seats (fig. 1.11).

In the center of the intimate composition sit two figures: an older woman and a young poultry salesman. They are positioned across from each other before the open hearth, and she adjusts her glasses to carefully appraise the freshly plucked turkey he holds before her. The exchange between the elderly mistress and the vendor is fair and equal, signaling the artist's regard for the woman's gender and her age. The two figures are almost placed at the same level within the composition, although his seat looks lower, and there are parallel lines between her arm and his back suggesting a downward

¹¹⁶ Weiss, "Home-Loving Sentiments," 169.

movement. Edmonds biographer H. Nichols B. Clark remarks on his egalitarianism, noting,

Edmonds portrays the participants as equals, and the salesman realizes he won't be able to hoodwink this customer. She inspects the dead fowl with a knowing eye and clutches her purse in a way that indicates she won't pay a penny too much. The intensity of this negotiation is offset nicely by the sleeping cat, the curve of whose tail establishes a visual counterpoint to the salesman's whip that lies on the ground beside him. Cat and whip underscore the contrast between the domestic nature of the woman's work and the man's livelihood that takes him farther afield.¹¹⁷

Bargaining presents an interaction between domestic aging and the more youthful worlds of trade and commerce, which exist outside of the home. Yet, despite the woman's identification with the domestic sphere, and his with the outside world (as signaled by his whip), the two characters are evenly matched. The older woman and the younger man each concentrate on their personal negotiating positions, and the viewer may sense that both figures are stalwart negotiators. This parity produces tension, rearranges social relations, and indicates the capability that each figure brings to his or her task.¹¹⁸ In

¹¹⁷ H. Nichols B. Clark, *Francis W. Edmonds: American Master in the Dutch Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 129.

¹¹⁸ Peter John Brownlee, "Francis Edmonds and the Speculative Economy of Painting." *American Art* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2007), 32.

pitting one generation against the other, Edmonds ensures that neither is given an advantage, succinctly declaring his compassionate feelings towards old age.¹¹⁹

Despite drawing heavily on Dutch antecedents as his inspiration, Edmonds painted distinctly American themes in a traditional genre style.¹²⁰ His works are often spiked with gentle comedy, which sometimes inspires comparisons with the long Island painter William Sidney Mount (1807-1868), whom he befriended through the National Academy of Design.¹²¹ Like Mount, Edmonds seems to derive satisfaction from the detailed depiction of domestic minutiae, mining the day-to-day for humorous and graphic details.¹²² In his 1867 survey of American art, *American Artist Life*, the critic and essayist Henry Theodore Tuckerman (1813-1871) praised Edmonds' ability to paint the many small details of the home. Tuckerman applauds, "Almost every subject delineated, even to the old shoe that hangs upon the wall, is a legitimate imitation."¹²³ This perception of the real and diminutive qualities of domestic life indicate that Edmonds paid close attention to the mapping of the home, and his proclivity for painting older figures effectively supports this predilection. Further, depictions of American domesticities were

¹¹⁹ Clark, *Francis W. Edmonds*, 129. Clark also notes, "Edmonds' growing emphasis on this type of subject matter and the concomitant reverence for the elderly correspond with similar Dutch attitudes in the seventeenth century. (One need only recall Rembrandt's portrayals of his mother reading the Bible or more generalized treatments such as *The Benediction by Nicolaes Maes*.) Edmonds celebrated his fiftieth birthday in 1856; constantly plagued by a fragile constitution, he perhaps sensed his own mortality more keenly than others." (124)

¹²⁰ Edwards, *Domestic Bliss*, 70.

¹²¹ Edwards, *Domestic Bliss*, 70.

¹²² Maybelle Mann, who published her dissertation on Edmonds in 1972, wrote explicitly about his similarities to Mount. She notes, "Anyone looking at Edmonds paintings will be struck with their many similarities to Mount's, especially in technique. Mount and Edmonds met in 1826 when they both attended the Antique School at the NAD. Edmonds was twenty years old and Mount was nineteen. If they had anything that could be described as a relationship, no information has turned up other than they knew each other. The influences of the foreign genre schools are evident, but in execution of even similar ideas and mood they develop their work in different directions." See Maybelle Mann, "Francis William Edmonds: Mammon and Art." *American Art Journal* 2, no. 2 (Autumn 1970), 101.

¹²³ Henry Theodore Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists: American Artist Life, Volume I* (New York: G.P. Putman & Son, 1867), 412.

of sustained interest to Edmonds, and he often centered his paintings on rural kitchens.¹²⁴ This led to a heightened realism in his works, which, coupled with Edmonds' sensitivity towards old age and his sympathy for rural subjects, results in images of a working-class hearthside aging that is gentle, empowering, and reverent.

The hearth can be read as a marker of various expressions of influence, from the clairvoyant credibility of Roseland's seer to the power of trade endowed by Edmonds. The manifestation of senescent fireside authority can also take on a lighter, comparatively benign character, as expressed by the character of the quietly watchful grandparent. Positioned in her hearthside chair, the family matriarch is empowered by her location in the home, a place that permits her to exude passive clout over the activities of younger generations.

The docile sovereignty of the supervisory older figure is a recurring theme in a number of pictures by members of the Cranbrook colony, including Thomas Webster (1800-1886), who often portrayed working-class aging with compassion and veneration. Contemporary critics praised his pictures "depicting homely rustic life, [which] were his specialty," and Webster's scenes find their currency in the serene and pleasant facets of the country, which he largely painted for the benefit of middle-class and upper middle-class urban consumers.¹²⁵

Webster began as a portrait painter, although he later went on to dedicate his efforts to genre subjects and watercolors. His romantic rustic scenes became popular with prominent Victorian collectors like John Sheepshanks, who bought Webster's *Contrary*

¹²⁴ H. Nichols B. Clark, "A Fresh Look at the Art of Francis W. Edmonds: Dutch Sources and American Meanings." *American Art Journal* 14, no. 3 (Summer 1982), 92.

¹²⁵ Will H. Low, "A Century of Painting: Notes Descriptive and Critical.—Goya and His Career.—Four English Painters of Familiar Life.—Gericault, Ingres, and Delacroix." *McClure's Magazine* 6, no. 4 (March 1896), 343.

Winds when it was painted in 1844, and later donated the picture to the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A) in 1857.¹²⁶ The picture, which was described as “one of the most pleasing specimens of this very popular artist,” offers an anodyne piece of genre that adheres to the more traditional tropes of the Victorian cottage scene (fig. 1.12).¹²⁷ It was also listed as one of Webster’s most characteristic pictures in George H. Shepherd’s 1881 history of British painting.¹²⁸

Set in a dark cottage interior, *Contrary Winds* features an older woman seated by a large darkened fireplace, concentrated on her knitting. Her dark oak chair is set in the corner, her right elbow propped upon a table covered by a green cloth. A large bible can be seen in the shadows cast by her chair, and a cat quietly dozes before the hearth.

Contrary Winds places its senior figure in the hearthside seat, endowing her with quiet authority over the bemusing play of a group of children. While the children are free to entertain themselves, the presence of the fireside guardian introduces an implied limit to the freedoms of their raucous behavior.

Four children sit on the floor in the center of the room, where they are gathered around a large wooden basin filled with water and illuminated by the light of a single window. They are engaged in a game of blowing a wood and paper sailboat across the surface of the water, each child aiming to send the little toy ship in a different direction.

¹²⁶ V&A collections record accessed through the museum’s database, September 5, 2015.

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O56543/contrary-winds-oil-painting-webster-thomas-ra/>.

¹²⁷ Francis Turner Palgrave, *Gems of English Art of this Century: Twenty-four Pictures from National Collections* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1869), 95.

¹²⁸ “Thomas Webster...has gained well deserved popularity by his accurate and sympathetic rendering of the sports and tasks of childhood...His most characteristic later pictures are *Punch*, *The Smile*, and *The Frown* (two masterpieces, well known from the engravings), *The Impenitent*, *Contrary Winds*, *Only Once a Year*, *The Boy with many Friends*, *Sickness and Health*, and *Good Night*, titles suggestive of the humorous or touching incidents which they illustrate, in the treatment of which he is unequalled by any modern painter.” George H. Shepherd, *A Short History of the British School of Painting*. (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1881), 74-75.

One critic described the children as “puffing, with eager rivalry, to urge their ship to the opposite coasts of the washing-tub.”¹²⁹ A knife and a scattering of wood chips on the floor beside them indicate that the children just finished building their toy boat.

The presence of the children’s grandmother ensures that their sport will not get out of hand, and that the children will ultimately behave themselves as the game escalates. Her presence also serves to anesthetize their game for the intended middle-class viewer, who may feel relief at her inherent authority, as it ensures that the children could not possibly engage in the vigorous play that would offend a bourgeois sensibility. Webster’s grandmother signals that the play is likely proper and virtuous rather than mischievous

When *Contrary Winds* was displayed at the British Institution in 1844, critics admired Webster’s constraint. It was noted that the children’s game had not yet become rowdy or uncontrolled, restraining the actions of the scene and offering a picture that functions more as a traditional Dutch-styled cottage study.¹³⁰ The American critic Clarence Cook noted,

Contrary Winds is strongly suggestive of Wilkie, and of the interiors of Ostade and Teniers, but as a painter no such comparison is possible, and his compositions are usually much restricted in the number of actors and in the variety of incidents.

He is very happy in his children; he had great sympathy with them...¹³¹

¹²⁹ Palgrave, *Gems of English Art of this Century*, 95.

¹³⁰ V&A collections record.

¹³¹ Clarence Cook, *Art and Artists of Our Time, Volume 5* (New York: Selmar Hess, 1888), 86.

While Webster's children command the active focus of the picture, bearing the bulk of the painter's sympathies, there is something noteworthy about the inclusion of the grandmother figure—the mature watchwoman—that has been critically unseen.

In her significant 1999 essay, "Little Women: The Aging Female Character in Nineteenth-Century British Children's Literature," Teresa Mangum recognizes the centrality of old women in images of children that were produced for adults throughout the nineteenth century.¹³² Remarking upon "the popular narrative paintings which filled exhibition halls with middle-class, middle-brow viewers of all ages," Mangum refers to Victorian genre pictures, which "tended to push children and those women marked by stooped shoulders, fallen faces, and unruly gray hair to the margins of family groups, thereby oddly linking as-yet-undeveloped youth to newly undeserving elders."¹³³ This pattern appears to present itself in Webster's *Contrary Winds*, unless the viewer interprets the fireside seat as a position of authority. Although Webster's knitting grandmother appears to be relegated to the margins of the composition, her placement more likely enhances her potential to act as guardian and caregiver. The station that Mangum reads as one of relegation is, in fact, one of power. From her hearthside position, the unobtrusive knitter is foregrounded as a major behavioral influence in the home.

The ornamented fireside

The seat of elder authority exerts its power in images of all classes, and the lower-class genre pictures of Roseland, Edmonds, and Webster find an aristocratic response in

¹³² Teresa Mangum, "Little Women: The Aging Female Character in Nineteenth-Century British Children's Literature." In *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, edited by Kathleen Woodward (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 59-87.

¹³³ Mangum, "Little Women," 60.

the interior scenes of the English painter Walter Dendy Sadler (1854-1923) and the American artist William Henry Lippincott (1849-1920).

Sadler found exceptional success with his upper-middle class parlor scenes, which were often set in well-appointed interiors in an earlier period between 1830 and 1840. Born in Surrey and trained in London and Düsseldorf, Sadler began exhibiting at the Royal Academy when he was only nineteen years old, and he was represented by pictures of “good old age” in many of the institution’s annual exhibitions.¹³⁴ With titles like *The Old Squire and The Young Squire* (RA exhibition 1887), *Old and Crusted* (RA exhibition 1888), and *The Young and the Old* (RA exhibition 1898), Sadler was identified with the senescent subjects who dominated his oeuvre.¹³⁵ He was praised by his critics for his “close sympathy with human life in its many phases, and a keen appreciation of its spirit, whether humorous or pathetic,” as described by Daniel B. Shepp in his 1905 survey *Library of History and Art*.¹³⁶

Reproductions made after Sadler’s pictures were exceedingly popular on both sides of the Atlantic, and one profile of the artist published in *Good Housekeeping Magazine* in 1912 claimed, “Few American homes contain no reproduction of Dendy Sadler’s studies of pre-Victorian middle class life...”¹³⁷ Sadler prints sold in the millions in the United States, with original canvases fetching prices in the thousands. In the same magazine profile, Sadler responds to readers who may be curious about his predilection for painting older figures. He explains, “I have been asked why so often I choose old people to smile and frown and think in my compositions. To me the dignity of old age is

¹³⁴ Richard Fletcher, “A Painter of the Quiet Life.” *Good Housekeeping Magazine* 54, no. 2 (February 1912), 171-178.

¹³⁵ Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts, Vol. 7*, 2-3.

¹³⁶ Daniel B. Shepp, *Shepp's Library of History and Art* (Philadelphia: Globe Bible Publishing Co., 1905), 236.

¹³⁷ Fletcher, “A Painter of the Quiet Life,” 171.

most appealing. To me the pathetic beauty of the autumn of our years is more stirring than the senseless impatience of youth and the heat of our amorous summers.”¹³⁸ Sadler frames his employment of older models as an intentional creative choice, one that asserts the gist of his artistic preferences.

This partiality for age is articulated in Sadler’s *The End of the Skein* of 1896, exhibited that same year at the Royal Academy (fig. 1.13). In this scene, the artist presents an ideal, well-appointed sitting room, complete with an older man and woman sitting in the seats of honor by the fire. The husband and wife, productive and independent paradigms of “good old age,” work together to ball a skein of red yarn, their cooperative activity testifying to an enduring engagement with leisure pursuits.

The couple’s quiet activity is overshadowed by their richly ornamented room. The mantel is decorated in the prescribed manner, with a naval scene hanging in an ornate frame behind a handsome clock, which is framed by two matching blue and white Chinese jars. The woman sits beside a decorative fire screen in a striped armchair across from her husband, who sits in a padded mahogany chair draped with a paisley Kashmir shawl. While many descriptions of these figures would stop at this point, there is arguably far more to say about the portrayal of elderly figures in such a well-appointed space. For instance, it is worth noting their clear upper-middle or upper-class status, which would have some bearing on their life expectancy, comfort, and veneration within the family structure.

Sadler’s genteel husband and wife likely have a higher than average life expectancy than most, due to a comfortable economic status that allowed for a better diet, restful domestic atmosphere, and higher standard of living. In *Death in the Victorian*

¹³⁸ Fletcher, “A Painter of the Quiet Life,” 173.

Family, Pat Jalland describes the diverse concerns that dictated the uncertainty of advanced age, dependent upon one's social station. Of the upper classes and upper middle classes, she writes, "...they did not have to fear old age and death in the workhouse. The chief problems for older members of the upper middle and upper classes were deteriorating mental and physical health, a declining sense of usefulness, decreasing mobility, loneliness, and increased dependency on family, friends, or servants."¹³⁹

Sadler's older couple lives their late life in discernable financial comfort. They may enjoy better care than most, and the biggest threats to their happiness are probably related to the social and physical effects of growing older rather than economic stresses.

With their collection of fine *objets d'art* and artistic decor, the various financial pressures and consequences that were visited upon many of their contemporaries in the working classes, whose access to economic stability and comfort could be rather tenuous, likely do not encumber this couple. The couple's comfortable position is also communicated by their compositional relationship with the hearth. Sadler's husband and wife are seated a few feet from the fire itself: wrapped in warm clothes, their feet resting above a fur rug, basic heating is not a concern for this pair. This picture presents a stark contrast with the images of working-class elderly, who are often depicted huddling close to a burning hearth, actively seeking warmth.

In addition to illustrating the effects of class on Victorian aging, *The End of the Skein* also demonstrates an enviable hearthside senescence made possible by long-term companionship. Portrayals of marriage lasting into advanced age were generally viewed as aspirational, and authors of prescriptive literature encouraged British and American

¹³⁹ Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 144.

readers to pursue happiness through lifelong marital connections. In his 1891 guide, *Manners, Culture, and Dress of the Best American Society*, Richard A. Wells pronounces,

None but the married man has a home in his old age. None has friends then but he; none but he knows and feels the solace of the domestic hearth; none but he lives and freshens in his green old age, amid the affections of his children. There is no tear shed for the old bachelor; there is no ready hand and kind heart to cheer him in his loneliness... he will never know the comforts of the domestic fireside.¹⁴⁰

In addition to identifying age with the hearth, Wells drives the point of “good old age” further by demonstrating how Victorian etiquette guides viewed long-lasting marriages, which ensured that older couples would better “feel the solace of the domestic hearth.”

Sadler’s able resistance of caricature also inspires identification by the viewer, further aiding his portrayal of positive aging. The British writer W.L. Woodroffe, who contributed a profile of Sadler to *The Magazine of Art* in 1896 remarked, “You sympathize with these old people of Mr. Sadler as you do with the lovers of other painters.”¹⁴¹ This sympathy is enabled, in part, by a familiarity with their surroundings and an adherence to popular Victorian notions of ornament and taste, and Sadler’s

¹⁴⁰ Richard A. Wells, *Manners, Culture and Dress of the Best American Society: Including Social, Commercial and Legal Forms, Letter Writing, Invitations, &c.; Also Valuable Suggestions on Self-Culture and Home Training* (Springfield, MA and Des Moines, IA: King, Richardson and Co., 1891), 216.

¹⁴¹ W.L. Woodroffe, “W. Dendy Sadler.” *The Magazine of Art* 19 (London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1896), 273.

viewers could recognize the established and prescribed markers of domestic comfort in his oeuvre.

The Philadelphia painter William Henry Lippincott (1849-1920) offers an American view of the domestic comforts enjoyed by Sadler's upper-class couple in their sunset years. Like Sadler, Lippincott produced many confectionery-hued interior scenes that showed the domestic lives of the leisure class.¹⁴² His aptitude for realistic details, which demonstrate a nearly-photographic eye for domestic minutiae, suggest the influence of Léon Bonnat, with whom he studied in Paris in the late 1870s.¹⁴³ This same eye for detail reveals Lippincott's master draughtsmanship, a skill that served him well as a painter of portraits upon his return to the United States from France in 1884.¹⁴⁴

In his 1895 picture *Childish Thoughts*, Lippincott presents the hearth as the central organizational element in a composition featuring three generations of women (fig. 1.14). Although set in a colonial-style drawing room, Lippincott's scene capitalizes on Victorian sentimentalities in the construction of its narrative: a little girl dances with her doll, while her lovely young mother decorously plays the piano—a nineteenth-century activity associated with gentility and refinement.¹⁴⁵ A grandmother knits in a dark, wooden rocker beside the fireplace as she watches her granddaughter play. The three women are well painted, their placid expressions vibrant and sharp, despite their relatively small scale within the grand, mostly-empty room.

¹⁴² Edwards, *Domestic Bliss*, 98.

¹⁴³ "William H. Lippincott," *American Art News* 18, No. 22 (Mar. 20, 1920), 4.

¹⁴⁴ "After studying in Europe eight years Mr. Lippincott returned to this country and opened a studio in Portland, Me., where he painted many portraits. Later he moved to this city and aided Homer Emmons in painting many scenes for operas. He was an instructor at the National Academy schools for three years, was elected an associate of the Academy in 1884 and became an academician in 1896. He was a member of the American Watercolor Society, Society of American Etchers and the Century Association." See "William H. Lippincott," *American Art News* 18, No. 22 (Mar. 20, 1920), 4.

¹⁴⁵ Holly Pyne Connor, *Angels & Tomboys: Girlhood in 19th-Century American Art* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Communications, Inc. in collaboration with the Newark Museum, 2012), 49.

The authority of Lippincott's hearthside grandmother is emphasized by the fact that she is the only figure in the picture who is engrossed in a "useful" pursuit. Holly Connor Pyne explains,

As the only figure involved in a productive activity, the grandmother attests to the strong work ethic of the previous generation, while her placement immediately in front of the large fireplace connects her to the perceived physical and emotional warmth and sustenance of home...¹⁴⁶

As a family of apparent means, these women do not need to engage in industry of any kind, so the grandmother's continued productive activity, like that of the couple in *The End of the Skein*, testifies to her "good" aging – a trait that will likely be inherited by her daughter and granddaughter.

Like a few of the aforementioned pictures, Lippincott's scene draws parallels between domestic furnishings and the value attributed to positive aging. The scene is set in a tidy paneled room filled with material comforts, including heavy leather-bound books, a model sailing ship, a Chinese-style vase, and a portrait of a male ancestor hung in a gilded frame. These elements combine to describe the positive family values of education, travel, and refinement – values that will likely be passed down before this very hearth. In her material culture study of *Childish Thoughts*, Caitlin McQuade argues,

The combination of the material culture, with its historical and moral associations, and the three female figures of different generations suggests a

¹⁴⁶ Connor, *Angels & Tomboys*, 49.

model for socialization that corresponds with the nineteenth-century “separate spheres” ideal: women preserve moral values and acculturate successive generations within domestic space.”¹⁴⁷

Lippincott’s detailed and thoughtful portrayal of the hearth and its environs invests the picture with ideas about social structure and the ideal substance of family relationships.

Childish Thoughts describes a generational cycle of renewal and rebirth, which connects the three women. Lippincott’s title, paired with the dual gazes directed towards the young girl by both her mother and grandmother, establishes double meaning.

“Childish thoughts,” which describes the child’s feelings, could also describe the childhood remembrances of her mother and grandmother. Their quiet observation of the little girl points to the figure who will continue their line, representing cultural regeneration.¹⁴⁸ In Lippincott’s drawing room, the young girl’s future is implied by her grandmother’s presence, occupying the seat beside the hearth, which she will eventually inherit.

Cross-generational transmissions

Lippincott’s picture is one of countless examples of later nineteenth-century Anglo-American genre scenes that portray the hearth as a site for generational transmission and the “seat of authority.” These conceptions can encompass morals and values, habits and attitudes, or information and skill. The diffusion of cross-generational insight can also be characterized in the form of storytelling, including the retelling of

¹⁴⁷ Caitlin McQuade, “The Depiction of Social Space in *Childish Thoughts*: A Material Culture Analysis of a Painting.” (MA thesis, Winterthur, University of Delaware, 1991), ix.

¹⁴⁸ McQuade, “The Depiction of Social Space in *Childish Thoughts*,” 69.

scripture, fables, languages, and literature. In the aforementioned, *The Social Spirit in America* (1897), C.R. Henderson pronounces,

It is in the home that children learn the national language, receive their first and most enduring impressions about industry, nature, morality, religion, their country. It is in the family, if anywhere, that all citizens learn the first lessons of obedience, thrift, usefulness, order, self-sacrifice, cooperation, which are essential virtues in the general life of mankind, and the essential preparation for the society of the heavenly world.¹⁴⁹

As the symbolic center of the home, the hearth is ideal place for genre painters to situate trans-generational education, and nineteenth-century British and American painters both modeled visual content on this idea. The theme of elderly educators and generational transmission at the hearth and the transmissions often passed from elders to children in Victorian pictures are instructive, as well as productive.

This modeled instruction finds an obvious example in Junius Sloan's *The Knitting Lesson* (1866). Although Sloan (1827-1900) is best remembered as a minor painter of landscapes and student of Robert S. Duncanson, he also completed a few noteworthy genre pictures.¹⁵⁰ Within this subset of his oeuvre, of which a few key pictures are

¹⁴⁹ Henderson, *The Social Spirit in America*, 23-24.

¹⁵⁰ For more on Sloan's apprenticeship with Duncanson, see Margaret Rose Vendryes, "Race Identity/Identifying Race: Robert S. Duncanson and Nineteenth-Century American Painting." *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 27, no. 1, Terrain of Freedom: American Art and the Civil War (2001), 82-99, 103-104. For more on Sloan's training and biography, see J. Carson Webster, "Junius R. Sloan: Self-Taught Artist," *Art in America* 40, no. 3 (Summer 1952), 103-152. Webster kindly describes Sloan as, "a prime example of the artist in America in the nineteenth century, not the major artist, but the more frequent minor artist, whose number and perseverance reveal, as the major artist cannot, the extent and strength of the impulse to fine art in that materialistic century. He can be seen as a symbolic personage, standing for art

known, one finds *The Knitting Lesson* – a carefully rendered and thoughtfully detailed portrayal of a grandmother and granddaughter in a nineteenth-century prairie farmhouse (fig. 1.15).¹⁵¹ Painted near Kewanee, Illinois, *The Knitting Lesson* was probably based on a series of preliminary pencil drawings made at the home of the artist’s parents.¹⁵² The picture features his mother and his niece sitting in the family’s rural sitting room with “faithful factuality,” and its truth and atmospheric effects echo the traditional Dutch precedents for similar genre pictures.¹⁵³

With its tightly constructed minutiae and double portrait of beloved family members, it is believed that *The Knitting Lesson* was painted for Sloan’s personal pleasure instead of commercial sale.¹⁵⁴ Seated before the fire, Sloan’s mother patiently instructs her small granddaughter in her knitting lesson. She focuses on the young girl’s handiwork from her simple wooden rocker, vigilantly following the girl’s moving hands with her eyes. A small grey kitten sits cozily curled at her feet, implying that this lesson has been quietly under way for some time.

Sloan’s rendering of the grandmother’s lesson is crisply colored and full of small details. However, despite the realism of the environment, the picture suffers from unnatural lighting, which produces a spotlight effect.¹⁵⁵ This technical flaw succeeds in drawing attention to the faces of the older woman and her little charge. They seem to glow in the light of the fire, their matching porcelain complexions intensifying the visual

and artists in closest association with the ordinary culture of the time.” Webster, “Junius R. Sloan,” 103.

¹⁵¹ Lora Lee Walker, “Junius R. Sloan: Nineteenth Century American Portrait and Landscape Painter.” *The Crescent*, Valparaiso University (September 1988), 8.

¹⁵² Object catalogue record, Percy H. Sloan Bequest, Brauer Museum of Art, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana, 1953.1.126.

¹⁵³ Richard H.W. Brauer, “In Quest of Beauty: Junius R. Sloan, 1827-1900.” *CRSA Forum: The Journal of the Catalogue Raisonné Scholars Association*, no. 22 (Summer 2008), 11.

¹⁵⁴ Valparaiso object record.

¹⁵⁵ Walker, “Junius R. Sloan,” 5.

connection between them. This high degree of finish lessens the realism of the scene, while making the action of the generational transmission appear more symbolic and significant.

Sloan was remembered in his obituary for “the uniform painstaking care with which he executed his work and his faithfulness throughout his career to the tenets of his art as he interpreted them.”¹⁵⁶ This quality is apparent in *The Knitting Lesson*, which locates charity, patience, and education at home, in front of the fire. His prairie-styled intergenerational tutorial is emblematic of American Victorian ideals of family-based learning, and it finds correlation with a vast field of British examples. For example, the admirable qualities of Sloan’s Midwestern family romance can also be seen in the work of working-class, Newcastle painter Ralph Hedley (1851-1913).

Hedley’s *ABC* of 1887 is a sympathetic and sentimental picture of an older man teaching his grandson how to read (fig. 1.16). Seated before a large stone fireplace, Hedley’s grandfather and grandchild embody the contrasts of youth in age in the context of education, literacy, and cross-generational transmission, and the artist preserves the dignity of the older figure while portraying him as a teacher and guide to his young charge.

Here, Hedley portrays a grandfather (the same model who sat for his *Preparing for Market*, 1888) reading the book *Old Aunt Elspa’s ABC* with his grandson.¹⁵⁷ It is a tender moment, and rare in its depiction of a working class figure reading to a child.

While the young boy is shown as an idealized English Victorian child, his grandfather,

¹⁵⁶ “Pioneer Chicago Artist Dies.” Obituary clipping in the Junius Sloan scrapbooks, Archives of American Art, Junius Sloan microfilm, reel 1081.

¹⁵⁷ Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums Online. “Ralph Hedley: *A.B.C.*” <http://www.twmuseums.org.uk/artonline/search/details.php?id=TWCMS:G2338>. Accessed October 20, 2012.

too, seems kind and gentle, lacking most of the stereotypical physical trappings of old age except for his receding grey curls. Here there is no exaggeration, no reliance on simple caricature. Instead, Hedley empowers his subjects with the truth and kindness available only to those artists who possess these same qualities.

In this picture, the young boy stands between his grandfather's legs, listening intently to his ABCs. The family dog observes the lesson, too, almost as if he can also understand. The boy's attention is completely fixed on the picture book, his rosy face almost expressionless as focuses on the page. The grandfather, however, is alert, aware of the impact of this home education. His current task seems to be far from routine, as his erect posture and engaged manner signify this moment as a special occasion. He is also not dressed for this sedate, fireside activity: the older man is properly attired for a day out, as he wears a vest and jacket. His trousers are covered below the knees by a pair of leather gaiters, an accessory that will protect him from dirt and mud when he is working outdoors.

Hedley's grandfather is a laborer, but he seems to want more for his grandson, and perhaps through the power of education, this little boy can someday aspire to a different kind of life. In spite of his humble dress, the older man appears insightful and intelligent. His face looks dignified, regardless of his age and class. His well-knotted kerchief and chiseled jaw are evidence of his handsomeness in his younger years. His arthritic hands still look strong and capable as they hold the book before the boy's face. Altogether, these small details convey an image of a working-class Victorian man who has maintained his vigor and pride, as well as a sense of striving for the next generation.

The scene takes place in the softly lit corner of a working class home, where the man sits on a large carved wooden chair next to the fireplace. Although the viewer can only see a slim portion of the hearth, its stone texture, which catches the light of the window, fully conveys its presence. As an understood, pervasive symbol of family and home, this fireplace emphasizes the cross-generational relationship between the boy and his tutor.¹⁵⁸

Hedley masterfully depicts the qualities of the life cycle with dignity and realism, refusing to place either the man or his grandson within the spectrum of age-based stereotypes readily available to him as an artist. When painting an older man, an artist has at his disposal countless visual devices that can serve as shorthand for age and waning virility. However, Hedley restrains himself from the worn tropes of wrinkled skin and long, grey beards, preferring instead to communicate his subject's age with simpler details. The man's shock of white hair and work-worn hands suffice in satisfying one's appetite for physical details without succumbing to the lure of caricature.

Hedley's young boy, too, defies simple categorization within the field of Victorian stereotypes. While his family and environment signal that he is a member of the working class, he also possesses the most venerated facial features of the period, the same characteristics that can be seen in contemporaneous pictures of the children of the upper classes. In many ways, he would not look out of place among portraits of children of the aristocracy, with his intelligent gaze, soft, dark hair, rosy cheeks, pink cupid lips, and a perfect, stainless white smock. Hedley does not patronize the boy by staining or

¹⁵⁸ Barbara Miller Lane, *Housing and Dwelling: Perspectives on Modern Domestic Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 153.

patching his clothes. Instead, the artist subtly conveys his place both in society and at home by using more delicate painterly devices.¹⁵⁹

Although he is not widely known or recognized today, Hedley was uniquely talented when it came to painting scenes of working class life, regularly imbuing his figures with dignity, regardless of their station. His considerable talent was most often dedicated to the subject of life in his local Newcastle and the surrounding area in the north of England, and his oeuvre is characterized by a respectful approach towards laborers, miners, teachers, and their families. Often restricting himself to a subdued palette, Hedley caringly renders each of his individual subjects without adhering to many of the cultural codes of physiognomy that were widely embraced by other genre painters of the Victorian period.

Modern scholar John House describes the many ways in which other realist painters would construct a genre scene like *ABC*. He writes,

Many devices were used to locate the poor in relation to the viewer, both by the physical viewpoint suggested, and by techniques of typecasting, gesture and physiognomy and so on.¹⁶⁰

While many such scenes of daily life are created from an interest in “locating the poor in relation to the viewer,” it feels as though Hedley is more interested in locating these people in relation to each other. The picture is intended to gather neither sympathy nor

¹⁵⁹ John Millard, *Ralph Hedley: Tyneside Painter* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Tyne and Wear Museums, 1990), 40.

¹⁶⁰ John House. Review: “Hard Times. Manchester, Amsterdam, New Haven.” *The Burlington Magazine* 130, no. 1020, Special Issue on Degas (March 1988), 250.

pity, and the artist likewise resists “techniques of typecasting, gesture and physiognomy.”

Around the time of Hedley’s death in 1913, the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* stated that “What Burns did for the peasantry of Scotland with his pen, Ralph Hedley with his brush and palette has done for the Northumberland miner and laboring man.”¹⁶¹ And, while there is not a single work that encapsulates the warm humanity of his entire output as an artist, *ABC* represents a powerful example of his unique voice as the creator of pictures of character without caricature and an illustrator of the lives of aged laborers seen without patronizing pity.¹⁶²

Hedley paints the hearth as the site for cross-generational transmission and education, holding it up as a place where working class families can better themselves by learning from their elders. This theme of the elderly educator in the home can also be identified in the portrayal of older storytellers, who are also often painted in the vicinity of the fireside. The elder storyteller/educator is also featured in *Fireside Tales* (1896), a cottage picture drawn from the body of work by the Newlyn painter Frank Bramley (1857-1915), one of Britain’s greatest realists.

The serious-minded Bramley tackled grittier, more emotionally challenging themes than his aforementioned Newlyn colleague, Albert Chevallier Tayler. Bramley was concerned with rusticity, anxiety, and the significance of the daily trials encountered by the Newlyn villagers, sympathy for whom his pictures made a powerful appeal.¹⁶³

This description suits *Fireside Tales*, which illustrates one of Bramley’s signature

¹⁶¹ Eddie Cass, “Ralph Hedley and His Sword-Dance Paintings.” *Folk Music Journal* 8, no. 3 (2003), 336.

¹⁶² Julian Brown, Foreword to *Ralph Hedley: Tyneside Painter* by John Millard (Newcastle upon Tyne: Tyne and Wear Museums, 1990), 3.

¹⁶³ “Studio-Talk.” *The International Studio* 57, no. 225 (November 1915), 60.

subjects – an older woman comforting or keeping company with a young girl, usually in the absence of the girl’s father or husband (fig. 1.17).

Fireside Tales features a girl and her grandmother, who are seated before an unseen fire. Their faces are illuminated by the mysterious glow, which picks up the warm tones in their dresses. The composition is tightly constructed, as the figures occupy most of the square canvas – any reference to the rest of the room is largely missing. Instead, Bramley focuses on the interaction between the two figures as a balanced and self-contained exchange. Both the grandmother and her granddaughter gaze into the burning fire as the older woman speaks. The girl leans into the older woman attentively and lovingly, their bond emphasized both by their shared physical intimacy and the isolation implied by female subjects in a fishing cottage, where women were often left waiting for their sons, brothers, and husbands who were out at sea.

Contemporary critics noted Bramley’s talent for this kind of cross-generational arrangement. A profile in *The Windsor Magazine* extolled, “His old people were creatures of sentiment as well as of earth, and his young men, maidens, and children were, seemingly, as flawless as was the tonality in which they were shown.”¹⁶⁴ In *Fireside Tales*, Bramley intelligently portrays youth and age as sharing comparable painterly qualities, naturalistically presenting a family romance as it is enacted across the spectrum of aging.

Although Bramley was dedicated to making images that avoided obvious sentimentality, he sometimes encountered threads of mawkishness in his pursuit of the complete and minute illustration of Newlyn life.¹⁶⁵ This inquiry into the reality of

¹⁶⁴ Chester, “The Art of Mr. Frank Bramley, A.R.A.,” 126.

¹⁶⁵ Charles Hiatt, “Mr. Frank Bramley, A.R.A., and His Work.” *The Magazine of Art* 1 (1903), 54, 58.

Cornish experience is reflected by Bramley's use of amateur models, who were chosen from the local village community. The critic Charles Hiatt, writing for *The Magazine of Art* in 1903, praised Bramley's lay sitters for their "inevitableness," identifying in the use of such models the artist's pursuit of "the real and the true with a whole-hearted devotion which is worthy of sympathy and respect."¹⁶⁶ This choice of subject and sitter, executed in a free and direct style of painting, contributes significant pathos to Bramley's work.¹⁶⁷

Bramley spent nearly a decade living in a small, two-room fisherman's cottage in Newlyn, enabling him to become intimately familiar with the somber side of Cornish fishing life.¹⁶⁸ Taking as his subject the quotidian experiences of Newlyn families, he often turned his gaze to the world of women who were affected by the absence of the men who went to sea. This interest is apparent in the titles of some of his best-known pictures, like *A Hopeless Dawn* (1888, Tate) and the funeral scene *For Such is the Kingdom of Heaven* (1891, Auckland Art Gallery).¹⁶⁹ *Fireside Tales* demonstrates Bramley's remarkable skill in the construction of a succinct narrative, using little to aid the pathos of his pictures aside from his intelligent employment of color and light, as well as a perceptive evocation of human emotion.

Fireside Tales derives a great deal from the interaction between the grandmother and granddaughter as they are seated in front of a glowing fire. The grandmother's storytelling signals an important connection between age and youth, and the unfolding of the action before the fire heightens the dramatic visual impact of the transmission.

¹⁶⁶ Hiatt, "Mr. Frank Bramley, A.R.A. and His Work," 58-59.

¹⁶⁷ Edmund Buckley and the International Art Association, "Other Contemporary English Painters – Concluded." *The Fine Arts: A Course of University Lessons on Sculpture, Painting, Architecture and Decoration in Both Their Principles and History* (Chicago: The International Art Association, 1900), 660.

¹⁶⁸ David Cordingly, *Seafaring Women: Adventures of Pirate Queens, Female Stowaways, and Sailors' Wives* (New York: Random House, 2007), 249-250.

¹⁶⁹ Both pictures are referred to in Thomas Gough's essay, "Newlyn and the Newlyn School of Painting" in the *Papers of the Manchester Literary Club, Vol. 17* (Manchester: John Heywood, 1891), 237.

The significance of cross-generational storytelling has been addressed by a number of scholars working across a wide range of fields, and the functions of storytelling within a family structure are varied. Psychologists Joan E. Norris, Stephanie Kuiack, and Michael W. Pratt have identified at least four benefits of cross-generational storytelling.¹⁷⁰ These include, “building the relationship, education about personal and historical events, value transmission, and the expression of generativity.”¹⁷¹ Bramley’s scene provides a useful illustration of these diverse benefits. In *Fireside Tales*, the storytelling exchange between grandmother and granddaughter alludes to a close and meaningful relationship and an interest in the girl’s knowledge about her family and the world. Bramley also offers a context in which morals and values are shown to be shared, and the young girl in his picture would arguably bear sympathy for her older relatives after sharing interactions such as this.

Fireside Tales shows intergenerational interaction as an important force in the development of Newlyn families. Bramley also tenders to his viewer a sense of generativity, which Norris, Kuiack, and Pratt describe as, “an attempt to strengthen family ties across the generations, [which] can be both accomplished and expressed through storytelling.”¹⁷² This practice of sharing “fireside tales” signals the vital relationship between the grandmother and her offspring, and the practice of telling stories inevitably creates a connection between them. That the stories are told before the hearth, in all of its symbolic complexity, emphasizes the allied expressions and interests of both of Bramley’s figures.

¹⁷⁰ Joan E. Norris, Stephanie Kuiack, and Michael W. Pratt, “As Long as They Go Down the Driveway at the End of the Day: Stories of the Satisfactions and Challenges of Grandparenthood.” In *Family Stories and the Life Course: Across Time and Generations*, edited by Michael W. Pratt, Barbara H. Fiese (New York: Routledge, 2013), 353-374.

¹⁷¹ Norris, Kuiack, and Pratt, “As Long as They Go,” 367.

¹⁷² Norris, Kuiack, and Pratt, “As Long as They Go,” 368.

Like his fellow painters on the Cornish coast, Bramley “voiced in paint the whole romance of the naturalistic school.”¹⁷³ Painting with poetic, sometimes painful, accuracy, his oeuvre repeatedly returns to the life cycle as a driving narrative force. Indeed, Bramley’s work points to an additional benefit of age inclusion in Victorian genre painting – an artist’s concern for the life cycle signals a larger investment in social issues. Social realist pictures like Bramley’s *Fireside Tales* demonstrate the artist’s interest in describing the hardships experienced by the elderly, and his prolonged engagement with adversity and privation demonstrates the agency of hearthside aging in the pursuit of social awareness.

Positions of difficulty

Many Victorian British and American artists explored the multivalent possibilities for social commentary enabled by characterizations of age. The American expatriate artist Richard Caton Woodville (1825-1855) and the English painter Frank Holl (1845-1888) both meditated on aging in their social realist pictures, which often drew upon generational schisms and shared intergenerational experiences in their design. Steeped in dark tones and serious themes, the genre scenes of Woodville and Holl present aging on the canvas through a lens of journalistic observation.

Woodville’s *Old '76 and Young '48* (1849) is a multi-generational drama set in a well-appointed parlor (fig. 1.18). Sitting beside the hearth in a handsome armchair is an older man, described in the title as a veteran of the Revolutionary War, dressed in old-

¹⁷³ Chester, “The Art of Mr. Frank Bramley, A.R.A.,” 127.

fashioned knee breeches and clasping a cane.¹⁷⁴ His grandson sits across from him, dressed in a military uniform, with his arm in a sling. The mud on his boots and the gloves tossed on the carpet signal to the viewer that he has just returned from his own military service, also described in the title as that of the Mexican-American War (1846-1848). The young man gestures excitedly towards a portrait of George Washington hanging high upon the shadowed wall, as though trying to make a connection between his own service to his country and his grandfather's. The young soldier's parents, or the grandfather's children, stand between them, listening attentively. In the doorway stands a group of African-American servants, who observe the heated conversation with concern.¹⁷⁵

The picture invites a close inspection of the room's minutiae: a clock on the mantle, the worn leather on the grandfather's footstool, the shimmering glint of the mother's silver wedding band. A crack can be found in the glass in front of a print of Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence*, and the older man's slippers are tired and worn. The representation of Washington gazes towards an (oddly) illuminated Greco-Roman bust, perhaps pointing to the founder's admiration for empires graced with democratic and republican values, but which were ultimately ruined by expansionism. The artist clearly meditated on the symbols of age, time, and national history when deciding to set this tense visual program within a *horror vacui*.

¹⁷⁴ Catalogue entry in *New Eyes on America: The Genius of Richard Caton Woodville*, edited by Joy Peterson Heyrman (Baltimore: The Walters Art Museum, 2012), 106-107.

¹⁷⁵ "...Woodville understood that genre painting could speak to the historic present more directly than history paintings of long-ago events. In *Old '76 and Young '48*, the African-Americans in the doorway are not mere bystanders but central to the narrative that unfolds. While they are listening in on the debate between old and young, it is their lives that are at stake in the great historic struggle over territorial expansion and slavery." Jochen Wierich, "Woodville and the Düsseldorf School." In *New Eyes on America: The Genius of Richard Caton Woodville*, edited by Joy Peterson Heyrman (Baltimore: The Walters Art Museum, 2012), 46.

Members of Woodville's family served as models for the picture, which distinguishes the work as something personal, as well as symbolic. Thus, he presents a vision of history, a public statement, through a highly subjective lens.¹⁷⁶ In his juxtaposition of the aims of the Revolutionary War with those of the Mexican-American War, Woodville enters political territory while indicting several constituencies, and the gap between these two early major American wars produced generational tensions.¹⁷⁷ The historian Edward L. Widmer describes how *Old '76 and Young '48*

...captured perfectly the complicated reverence and disgust for the past many youthful Americans felt in the 1840s. The immediate generation (a father with a watch fob) is shunted into the background, while the revolutionary ancestor and the youthful warrior heroically dominate the foreground.¹⁷⁸

Rather than looking to the Revolutionary veteran as a model, the young man sees his grandfather's military experience as a detriment or burden to his own. He has not adopted the affectations of eighteenth-century heroes, who he views, instead, as adversaries to be shaken off. In Woodville's drama, the young man is asserting his viewpoint to a much older man who has far too much perspective to engage in the debate that the young man is trying to spark.

Old '76 and Young '48 portrays two soldiers who fought for very different American ideologies. While the Revolutionary War aimed to liberate the country and

¹⁷⁶ Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 79.

¹⁷⁷ Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 180.

¹⁷⁸ Edward L. Widmer, *Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 136.

establish an independent and democratic republic, the Mexican-American War was, in some citizens' eyes, the United States' first exercise in an imperialist campaign. While the nation's founding fathers conceived of a new nation as a beacon of enlightenment and advancement, the road to the war with Mexico was paved by the War of 1812, which hastened the growth of warped and unrestrained nationalism.¹⁷⁹

The American Revolution, in which Woodville's grandfather presumably participated valiantly, engendered patriotism and steadfast belief in the promise of a united young nation. However, the popular opinion of the war with Mexico was not as supportive. Some saw the conflict as a challenge to the romanticism of the country, as a sweeping sense of unlimited power and unbridled materialism began to grow in its shadows. In his introduction to Karl Jack Bauer's popular history of the Mexican-American War, Robert W. Johannsen describes the pall that threatened the war hawk spirit,

As the war dragged on and a peaceful settlement of the conflict seemed as elusive as ever, many Americans became more ambivalent in their attitude. War, as they had always been told, was out of place in a republic. A remnant of barbarism, it was employed only by monarchies and absolutist governments, while republics, where government rested upon the consent of the governed, were dedicated to the arts of peace, to the worth and dignity of human beings.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ Karl Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 1.

¹⁸⁰ Robert W. Johannsen's introduction to Bauer, *The Mexican War*, xx.

A familiarity with these tensions helps a contemporary viewer understand the political context for Woodville's scene. The heated discussion between the two soldiers goes beyond the kind of simple debate that usually takes place on either side of a generational divide. These two men represent contradictory American ideologies: the grandfather embodies the idealism of an earlier generation, while his passionate grandson argues in favor of a war that was viewed as imperialistic and corrupt in its mission. In his landmark Woodville monograph, Justin Wolff explains that the older man's "presence speaks for the many Americans who believed that the morally dubious Mexican War, and all the gloating that accompanied it, was destroying what the Revolution had made."¹⁸¹

Although H. Barbara Weinberg and Carrie Rebora Barratt have claimed that *Old '76 and Young '48* "shows a young soldier who has internalized the lessons of George Washington and the Revolution," it could be far more convincingly argued that the young man has not internalized history's lessons at all – instead, he seems determined to challenge them, re-contextualize them, and overlay them with his own experiences of a very different conflict.¹⁸²

The antagonisms of *Old '76 and Young '48* are proclaimed by the picture's title. As Wolff describes, "The old are wise – fidelity is the issue that matters – while the young are hasty and presumptuous."¹⁸³ By casting the two generations as embodiments of actual episodes of American military history, Woodville presents war rhetoric as a complex generational entanglement. That this scene unfolds before the hearth, the symbolic center of the family, is not of small consequence.

¹⁸¹ Justin Wolff, *Richard Caton Woodville: American Painter, Artful Dodger* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 109.

¹⁸² H. Barbara Weinberg and Carrie Rebora Barratt, eds. *American Stories: Paintings of Everyday Life, 1765-1915* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009), 40.

¹⁸³ Wolff, *Richard Caton Woodville*, 123.

The picture presents a complex family dynamic, which is exacerbated by the passivity of the boy's parents. Even though he is head of the household (and presumably the most powerful figure in the parlor during almost any other conversation), the father stands in the center of the discussion muted and withdrawn. He says nothing, refraining from his right to interject. This abstinence is coupled with other challenges to conventional masculinity in the figures of both veterans, who are each injured or disabled in different ways. Grandfather walks with a cane, and his grandson's arm is stuck in a sling. This group of fragile men is organized around the mother, who is placed in the center of the composition. These masculine deficiencies, in addition to the heated cross-generational debate, makes *Old '76 and Young '48* a lens through which one can view a wretched, realist defacement of the heavenly family hearth—in Woodville's able hands, history is brought home from the battlefield and segmented by a generational divide.

British artists also designed difficult realist scene around the organizational center of the hearth, of which there are countless examples. A particularly fine picture of this type is Frank Holl's early career Royal Academy picture of 1870, *Better is a Dinner of Herbs where Love is, than a Stalled Ox and Hatred Therewith* (fig. 1.19). Taking an entire proverb as its title, Holl's scene presents a legible scene of cross-generational deprivation.¹⁸⁴ The picture features an older woman who seems to suffer silently in her chair by the hearth as she watches her children and grandchildren go hungry. Like his fellow social realists Luke Fildes and Hubert von Herkomer (both of whom also contributed to *The Graphic*), Holl regularly produced such scenes which proffered to

¹⁸⁴ Proverbs 15:17 KJV.

audiences an unequivocal exposure to the hardships visited upon the urban and rural poor.¹⁸⁵

Better is a Dinner shows a large family of nine, all crammed into the main room of a small, working-class cottage. The aforementioned grandmother sits like a senescent sentinel in her chair by the cold fireplace, which appears to be unlit. In her white cap and black dress, she seems sober and worried, fretting with hunger. The parents, who are also both seated, flank her chair. The father wears the smock-frock of a Victorian shepherd, although the open book on his lap (perhaps the King James Bible, opened to the appropriate page of psalms) signals that he is literate.¹⁸⁶ In turn, this may signal that the elderly woman did a very fine job as a mother, if she was indeed able to educate her son despite her status as a member of the working poor.

On the other side of grandmother's chair sits a lovely, raven-haired mother who, despite her obvious dejection, embodies the traditional type of beauty that was most valued during the late nineteenth century—pale skin, well-proportioned features, and a small and pretty rosebud mouth. Her face is almost expressionless, giving the impression that her forlornness consumes the total of her emotional capacity. Holl's young mother defies simple categorization within the field of Victorian stereotypes. While she is a

¹⁸⁵ It is often interesting to note the significant impact of the *Graphic* group. Vincent van Gogh's enthusiasm for the work of Herkomer, Fildes, and Holl is apparent when parallels are drawn between a canvas like Holl's *Better is a Dinner* and van Gogh's related picture, *The Potato Eaters* (*De Aardappeleters*), 1885 (Oil on canvas, 32 x 45 in. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam). In 1881, van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo, "For me one of the highest and noblest expressions of art is always that of the English, for instance [John Everett] Millais and [Hubert von] Herkomer and Frank Holl". See Mike W Bucknole, "Sir Hubert von Herkomer, CVO, RA (1849-1914): His Southampton life and early artistic influences," in *The British Art Journal* 7, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2006), 72-79. Also see Lee M. Edwards, "From Pop to Glitz: Hubert Von Herkomer at the "Graphic" and the Royal Academy." *Victorian Periodicals Review* 24, no. 2 (Summer, 1991), 71-80.

¹⁸⁶ The symbolic shepherd's smock-frock is a recurring image in Victorian painting, perhaps most easily identified in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's unfinished *Found* (designed 1865; begun 1869). Oil on canvas, 30 x 35 in. Delaware Art Museum, Samuel and Mary R. Bancroft Memorial, 1935. In Rossetti's picture, the young man's laborer's smock signifies his status and origins, which is key to understanding the interaction between him and the scene's red-haired fallen woman.

member of the working class, she also possesses the most venerated facial features of the period—characteristics that can be seen in contemporaneous pictures of the aristocracy and upper classes. In many ways, she would not look out of place among the ladies of the court, as depicted in Charles Robert Leslie's images of Queen Victoria.¹⁸⁷ Holl permits her the beauty of a national ideal while realistically preserving her place on the social ladder. While she is not in a privileged position or dressed in silk or satin, the young woman is by no means the antithesis of English womanhood. Despite her lack and hunger, the viewer understands that this young mother is an active force in trying her best to care for her home and family with feminine dignity.

The grandmother's glance towards a baby sleeping in a crib indicates that this family's suffering is bound to persist throughout the generations. However, the family's faith and stoicism in the light of their suffering indicate the comfort that they (and Holl) found in their faith and instinctive ethics, as indicated by the title.¹⁸⁸ Holl's early works often emanated this religious sensibility, regularly taking biblical quotations as their titles.¹⁸⁹ *Better is a Dinner* inculcates the duty of gratitude and contentment as imparted by Solomon in Proverbs.¹⁹⁰ Holl's invocation of loving-kindness argues that a family can be sustained by very little, so long as their household is managed with love and

¹⁸⁷ See Charles Robert Leslie (1794-1859), *Queen Victoria in Her Coronation Robes*, 1838. Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in. (45.7 X 61 cm.) Victoria and Albert Museum, Sheepshanks Gift 1857, FA.129 [O].

¹⁸⁸ Mark Bills, "Death and Absence Differ But in Name: The Subject Paintings of Frank Holl." In *Frank Holl: Emerging from the Shadows*, Mark Bills et al. Exhibition catalogue (London: Philip Wilson in association with the Watts Gallery, 2013), 34.

¹⁸⁹ Other biblically-titled scenes by Holl from this early period include *The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away*, *Blessed be the Name of the Lord*, 1868 (Oil on canvas, 21 x 29½in. Sotheby's London, British and Irish Art, December 10, 2014, Lot 33) and *I am the Resurrection and the Life (The Village Funeral)*, 1872 (Oil on canvas, 46 x 64 in. Leeds City Art Gallery, LEEAG.PA.1894.0016).

¹⁹⁰ James Dafforne, "The Works of Frank Holl." *The Art Journal* 2 (1876), 6.

contentment.¹⁹¹ Additionally, the artist's inclusion of an older figure weaves intergenerational experience into the interpretation of the proverb. *Better is a Dinner* presents a difficult, mixed-ages subject as it is observed through a journalistic lens.

In spite of his success, which saw him receive gold medals, travel scholarships, and status as a Royal Academician and Associate of the Royal Watercolour Society, Holl was not without his critics. Most of his detractors censured his choice to draw inspiration from the hardships he observed in the world around him. The Irish critic, architectural historian, and clergyman William John Loftie (1839-1911) advised art collectors,

I counsel what can seldom be done. I suppose somebody enjoys pictures like those of [Jozef Israëls] or of his English imitator, the late Frank Holl, but such melancholy scenes, such gloom and unrelieved shade, such sad monotony of color, convey only a disagreeable impression, and instead of paying a large sum to have the privilege of hanging them in my room, I should prefer to look at bare wallpaper.¹⁹²

Holl's interests in psychological complexity, misfortune, and empathy were undoubtedly difficult qualities for some audiences to admire. Lacking in refinement, his scenes expressed great tenderness and conviction nonetheless.¹⁹³

Mrs. Julian Hawthorne, a contributor to the New York arts magazine, *The Aldine*, wrote that although Holl was "not without ability...he is destitute of imagination, and

¹⁹¹ A pessimistic reading of this picture could also frame the scene as critical or cynical, showing the insufficiency of "a Dinner of Herbs" in the pained faces of the subjects, urging social action instead of reliance on religious platitudes.

¹⁹² W. J. Loftie, "The House." *The Art Amateur* 23, no. 6 (November 1890), 123.

¹⁹³ Montezuma, "My Note Book." *The Art Amateur* 19, no. 5 (October 1888), 98.

wastes his power on disagreeable subjects.”¹⁹⁴ His pathos, which enhanced the efficacy of his social realist turn, resulted at times in “depths of woe into which it were indecorous to penetrate.”¹⁹⁵ A great deal of his “indecorous” pathos derives its potency from his inclusion of aging as a subject, which broadly generalizes and universalizes the experience of human suffering and social deprivation.

Despite the mixed critical reception, Holl’s early social realist scenes demonstrate significant expressive nuance. Holl’s installation of a “grandmotherly element” in *Better is a Dinner* is an important gesture within the scene and the composition of its figures. His decision to include both an older woman and a little baby in the same cramped quarters demonstrates an awareness of the narrative powers of the embodied life cycle and the cyclical, lingering, and generational affects of poverty. For every single deprivation experienced by the children, the elderly fireside sitter has likely known multiple hardships. With this pursuit in mind, one can easily observe the paramount importance of each figure – Holl endows each family member with a compositional (and emotional) responsibility, and the subtle contrast between each figure make the parts irremovable from the whole. The peculiarly tense arrangement endows the cottage room with a formidable feeling of unease.

Better is a Dinner shows the family hearth as an unsentimental symbolic center of the home. In Holl’s case, this symbolic center becomes the ganglion of suffering. In the hands of such a staunch social realist, the family hearth becomes the location where woe

¹⁹⁴ Mrs. Julian Hawthorne, “Art in London. The Winter Exhibitions.” *The Aldine* 8, no. 2 (1876), 72. Mrs. Hawthorne also offered a more formal analysis, writing, “Mr. Holl wields an exceedingly rough brush; but his perspective is good, and the darkest parts of his pictures have light and clearness in them.”

¹⁹⁵ Mrs. Julian Hawthorne, “Art in London,” 72.

is best expressed—and where it will become consecrated and memorialized for the next generation.

Selling the image of the fireside family

Deified by genre painters on both sides of the Atlantic, the family fireside is simple Victorian shorthand for far more complex issues of generativity, inheritance, and moral education. Excellent visual representations of the hearth as symbolic center of the multi-generational family (and its status as the rightful place for the senescent figure) can be identified within every category of British and American Victorian ephemera. From greeting cards and product labels, to calendars and sheet music, the cross-generational hearth is a pervasive emblem of aging and the place of aging within the family structure.¹⁹⁶

A pleasing example of the canonical image of the fireside grandparent in Victorian ephemera can be seen in the cover illustration for the 1851 song sheet, “Happy Family Polka.”¹⁹⁷ Like many of the aforementioned examples, the scene features a few generations of a family, all gathered together before a glowing fireplace (fig. 1.20). A grandfather sits in an ornate chair in the “place of honor,” closest to the grand, imposing hearth. He looks down at his granddaughter, who sits on a low footstool beside him. They are positioned opposite a larger family group, which includes a white-capped

¹⁹⁶ As a Dissertation Research Fellow at the Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library in 2014, a substantial portion of my tenure was dedicated to mining through the incomparable John and Carolyn Grossman Collection, which features countless boxes of ephemera. Of particular interest were images of aging as it appeared in cross-generational contexts. Unfortunately, the results of much of that research has had to be trimmed from the present paper, but this note marks another instance in which I would like to express gratitude to the members of the Winterthur staff who shared this extraordinary resource with me. The kindest thanks must be extended to Jeanne Solensky and Laura Parrish of the Winterthur archives for their encouragement and guidance.

¹⁹⁷ “Happy Family Polka,” 1851. Composer: Francis Henry Brown. Lithography: Sarony & Major. Publisher: Firth Pond & Co.; Clapp & Cory. Grossman Collection, Winterthur. Sheet music, 3-1.

grandmother sewing by the fire's light. She is flanked on either side by the younger generation—a father and mother surrounded by their young children. The father reads a newspaper, while the mother divides her attention between a child standing beside her and the baby being held in her nanny's arms. In the shadows of the back of the room, a girl sits at an ornate piano. She sits at her instrument gracefully, playing her music without drawing attention to herself.¹⁹⁸

The very ephemerality of the Victorian song sheet makes it a highly expressive visual medium, which means that its portrayal of the mixed-generation fireside scene is actually quite complex. In his work on Jewish immigrant music and American popular culture, ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin describes the visual milieu to which song sheets belong. He writes,

[Songs] appeared in a folio form, which featured a cover illustration relating directly to the song's music and text. Indeed, a piece of sheet music must be seen as a complex cultural package of various expressive and commercial media, all of which combine to create a pleasing product... the contemporary artists' interpretation of the popular songs that they were hired to illustrate...¹⁹⁹

A song sheet is a physical embodiment of the ephemeral qualities of music, and in order to endow song illustrations with expressive appeal, they had to reflect the ambitions of

¹⁹⁸ She appears to be “performing some piece almost solely for her own enjoyment—certainly no one appears to be listening to her. Her performance does not draw attention to her nor distracts the others within hearing but continues on as pleasant background music.” Candace Bailey, *Music and the Southern Belle: From Accomplished Lady to Confederate Composer* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University, 2010), 93.

¹⁹⁹ Mark Slobin, *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 164.

the society in which they were marketed and of the people who would perform these songs.²⁰⁰ This was especially true during the Victorian period, as there was steep competition among music publishers—it has been suggested that more pieces of sheet music were produced during Victoria’s reign than in the first half of the twentieth century.²⁰¹

The illustration for the “Happy Family Polka” presents a hybrid of diverse cultural phenomena: sheet music covers appealed to many different kinds of people, which meant that more universal and aspirational cover themes would likely appeal to a larger number of consumers. Sheet music covers encapsulate the desirable qualities of the genteel lifestyle associated with home musical performance in the mid- and late-nineteenth century. This scene succeeds in proffering a vision of the welcoming hearth, the bosom of the multigenerational family. Embellishing the positive vision of home life, the figure of the grandfather presents a romantic image of the song’s intended listener.

“Happy Family Polka” succinctly offers a view of the canonical hearthside grandparent who gazes across three generations at his feet, thinking about his children and grandchildren—the joys of his golden years. The illustration shows the parlor and the fireplace as a place “to which one is attached by so many tender and yet strong

²⁰⁰ “With infinitely varied subject matter, music covers present a kaleidoscope of public life that would do justice to a newspaper or magazine. If we remember too that they span the entire spectrum of musical culture—from chamber and symphonic classical music to popular songs—the covers give us a vivid mental picture of the cultural background in which they were created.” Viktor Kholodkov, “The Art of Music Cover Design.” *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 11, Issue 2 (Winter, 1989), 68.

²⁰¹ John Hadfield, *Victorian Delights: Reflections of Taste in the Nineteenth Century* (London: The Herbert Press, 1987), 48.

chords.”²⁰² Its memories are enduring, the presence of a loving grandmother or grandfather an inspired element of childhood reminiscence.

Age welcomes youth: the homecoming picture

Although hearth and home represented ideal Victorian society in miniature, they were not insulated from the outside world. As demonstrated by Woodville and Holl (two very different artists, with Holl often striking a lugubrious note), the family hearth could also operate in dramatic ways. The homecoming picture, or the visualization of migration and mobility, was a symptom of various cultural operations in Britain and the United States. These scenes present a concise manifestation of the aforementioned social phenomena, dramatizing the diverse experiences of the family and aged family members who were affected by domestic and international crossings made by a younger generation.

Immigration and progress affected all members of a family—even those who stayed close to home. Passages made by grandchildren often had a profound impact on their grandparents, who were likely to never see their descendants again. In Victorian households, one could sense a domestication of the larger transitions that were unfolding beyond the walls—and sometimes beyond the seas. Schlereth describes the ways in which migration so affected this era,

Everyone seemed en route: emigrating and immigrating, removing or being removed, resettling and relocating, in many directions—east to west, south to

²⁰² Rose E. Cleveland. *The Social Mirror: A Complete Treatise on the Laws, Rules, and Usages that Govern Our Most Refined Homes and Social Circles* (St. Louis: Dan Linahan Publishing Co., 1888), 390.

north, rural to urban, urban to suburban. In American slang, “going places” came to mean a geographic as well as a social destination.²⁰³

Persistent domestic movement affected British and American families, as Hovenden successfully demonstrated in *Breaking Home Ties*, which garnered transatlantic accolades.

The homecoming theme, a traditional genre subject painted on the scale of a grand history picture, overlays an unpretentious subject with a veneer of complexity.²⁰⁴ In Hovenden’s scene, a young man is shown leaving his rural family of three generations in order to make his mark in an urban environment. This moment, familiar to so many late-nineteenth-century families, captured an idea of youthful destiny, national expansion, and the promise of the country’s future growth.²⁰⁵ But something symbolically different emerges from the homecoming picture, in which the young person is shown returning to the homestead he previously left behind. Narrative scenes of return are not about expansion or growth – instead, these images present heightened allegories of home and family.

The homecoming picture, in which a young person returns to the bosom of their parents and grandparents, is made more poignant when age is considered as a significant dramatic element. In the leaving picture, best represented in American genre painting by *Breaking Home Ties*, parting was portrayed as something that could very well be final.

Victorian society was exuberantly expansive, magnanimously making room for young

²⁰³ Schlereth, *Victorian America*, 7.

²⁰⁴ Sarah Burns, *Pastoral Inventions: Rural Life in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 198.

²⁰⁵ Julia B. Rosenbaum, *Visions of Belonging: New England Art and the Making of American Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 32.

adults to leave home and make their own way, and the opportunities to leave the comforts of home were innumerable.²⁰⁶ These comforts of home were illustrated by the presence of extended family members, especially siblings, friends, grandparents, aunts, and uncles—all the figures in a family who are less central than mothers and fathers, and thus more illustrative of the tenuous ties that could easily be lost when leaving home.²⁰⁷

For these reasons, the inclusion of an older figure like a grandmother or grandfather in a homecoming picture intensifies the emotional impact of the scene. It can easily be understood how the young man leaving home likely once said goodbye to his elderly relatives, not knowing whether they would ever be reunited. Accordingly, the senescent figure in the homecoming picture becomes a living embodiment of home—a remarkable signal of reintegration. If the hearth is the traditionally understood Victorian symbol of the home, then the elderly relative intensifies and animates its presence in the narrative homecoming picture.

Felix Octavius Carr Darley (1835-1918) was a singular force in the development of American art towards the end of the nineteenth century. A multi-talented and self-taught artist, Darley's visual imagination influenced the trajectory of illustration in the United States. After beginning his career as an illustrator in Philadelphia in 1842, Darley went on to illustrate stories by the giants of Anglo-American literature, including Charles Dickens, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allen Poe, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Individual lithographs of his scenes were published by the American Art Union and

²⁰⁶ Oscar Handlin and Mary F. Handlin, *Facing Life: Youth and the Family in American History* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 91.

²⁰⁷ Handlin and Handlin, *Facing Life*, 74.

became highly collectible.²⁰⁸ Aside from his fame as an illustrator, Darley also developed talents as a genre painter, and his accuracy and attention to detail characterize an oeuvre that was graphic in its origins and wholly painterly in its vision.

The Return of the Volunteer of 1866 is representative of Darley's strengths as a narrative painter (fig. 1.21). Created during a period when he experimented with working on a larger scale than he used for his book illustrations, *Return of the Volunteer* demonstrates how Darley masterfully designed his figure compositions.²⁰⁹ Darley's work in oils is very scarce and little known, of which the two most significant examples are arguably *The Departure of the Volunteer* (1865) and its companion picture.²¹⁰ These two sequential images of Civil War subjects both relate to the event of a young soldier's departure and return to the family home. As a pair, the pictures describe the relationships affected by war over the course of the conflict, across a span of four years.

The first picture, *The Departure of the Volunteer*, takes place outside, with the young soldier looking back towards his teary young wife and elderly parents as a battle rages yards away. He is dressed in a Zouave's uniform as he says his goodbyes, a humble foot soldier marching towards an unknown fate. The image's sequel takes place indoors in the family parlor, the warmth of the hearth illuminating the group's jubilant faces. The soldier is dressed in the uniform of an officer in the Union Army – he has succeeded at war, earning a promotion in rank and returning home to an exultant family. Darley's

²⁰⁸ David M. Sokol, "Felix Octavius Carr Darley." In Joan M. Marter, ed., *The Grove Encyclopedia of American Art, Volume 1* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 21-22.

²⁰⁹ Theodore Bolton, "The Book Illustrations of Felix Octavius Carr Darley," *American Antiquarian Society* 61 (April 1951), 141.

²¹⁰ *The Departure of the Volunteer*, 1865, signed F. O. C. Darley, lower left, oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches and *The Return of the Volunteer*, 1866, oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches. Debra Force Fine Art, New York. Kind thanks to Ms. Force for sharing images of both pictures, along with William Gerdt's wonderful catalogue essay about the pair.

return image describes various transformations, its joyful interior infused with the elation of Northern victory.

The Return of the Volunteer is set in a humble country home, a place where a closely-knit family would have spent a great deal of time together at the hearth or gathered around the table. The intergenerational family is composed of his aging parents, wife, sister, and young child. Unlike the departure, which is set outdoors—closer in proximity to the activities of the battlefield—the return is set in the heart of the home. The combination of the roaring fire, the presence of the soldier’s elderly parents, and heartfelt reception of the man by his family emphasize the sanctuary and comfort of the domestic hearth.

Darley fills the canvas with thoughtful details that underscore the emotional impact of the soldier’s homecoming. The young man’s wife falls into his arms, her back turned towards the viewer, her balance unsteady as her knees buckle towards him. She has jumped out of her chair and flung aside her sewing, which now lie fallen on the floor. He has also hurried to embrace her, leaving his kit bag in the doorway. His elderly mother and father also move towards him—the older man slowly rising out of his fireside seat while his wife holds firmly onto her son’s hand. Every figure is frozen in mid-action, moving towards the soldier with euphoric affection.

As the source to which young men drew for warmth and support, the family is the ideal signifier of the homecoming subject.²¹¹ The inclusion of aging figures in such compositions signified “yearning and welcome,” and later nineteenth-century grandparents were viewed as the “wisest and gentlest of mentors, most devout and

²¹¹ Handlin and Handlin, *Facing Life*, 73.

inspiring of...home presences.”²¹² It would be a very different scene if Darley’s Union soldier were to return to an empty cottage or to the intimate embrace of his wife and children alone. However, the inclusion of the hearthside grandfather and clasping grandmother signals a larger impact for the young man’s valiant arrival, installing him in the home with due pomp and ceremony.²¹³ The multi-generational impact of Darley’s scene may also demonstrate a broader social impact, as the return of soldiers affected every member of society.

As the encapsulation of the tenets of an ideal society, the home represented love and warmth. The hearth tidily symbolized those sentiments as the epicenter of the home, and the elderly parent or grandparent serves as the reification of the hearth. Each symbol serves the others in a formalist reading and interpretation of the traditional homecoming picture.

Similar compositions can be found throughout British painting of the same period, with Joseph Clark (1834-1926) providing a charming example of a homecoming picture in his *Return of the Runaway* (ca. 1862). Clark portrays a young man who has returned home after running away to join the navy many years prior (fig. 1.22). He has walked through the door, standing before his elderly parents who look at his face, searching for recognition. His mother, hunched over with age, her grey hair covered by a white cap, stands beside a little girl who gazes at him like he is a perfect stranger, despite the fact that he is probably her father. The humble cottage room is filled with emblems of his adventures: a painting of the sea is tacked to the wall, and a model of a sailing ship is displayed on the mantle. The little girl’s hat, which is modeled on those worn by sailors,

²¹² Esther J. Ruskay, “An Ideal New Grandmother,” in *Hearth and Home Essays* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of American, 1902), 73.

²¹³ Ruskay, “An Ideal New Grandmother,” 73.

hangs on the back of her high chair. The drama of Clark's picture unfolds before the open darkness of the unlit family hearth, its black emptiness conveying the sense of mystery surrounding the young man's ancient flight and his sudden reappearance.

Clark was born in Dorsetshire, leaving at the age of eighteen to pursue his art training in London. He began his studies in the private art school of James Mathews Leigh, later enrolling at the Royal Academy Schools.²¹⁴ As he developed a reputation as a talented painter of genre pictures, Clark mastered the realistic details of cottage interiors and the minutiae of working-class life. In his review of the 1907 Royal Academy exhibition, the writer Paul Naumann celebrated Clark's career, proclaiming his excellence in scenes of "homely life" and recalling *The Return of the Runaway* as one of his best-known pictures.²¹⁵

Earlier critics writing in 1877 praised Clark's "rare truth of expression, clearness of conception, and purity of sentiment," calling his work "blameless and often pathetic in feeling."²¹⁶ *Return of the Runaway* capitalizes on the currency of its mixed-generational figures and powerfully symbolic unlit hearth in the construction of an image that is most expressive and clear in the modes of Victorian genre.

Return of the Runaway encapsulates the sense of home described by John Ruskin in *Of Queen's Gardens* as,

²¹⁴ Edward T. Cook, ed. *A Popular Handbook to the National Gallery, Volume II.—British Schools (Including the Tate Gallery)* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1901), 464. James Mathews Leigh (1808-1860) was himself a student of William Etty. Originally contracted to teach in the Normal School of Design in Somerset House, he later went on to establish his own Leigh's School. Leigh's later became Heatherly's Art School, which may be better known to art historians today. For more on the development of these art schools, see Stuart Macdonald's *The History and Philosophy of Art Education* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2004).

²¹⁵ Paul Naumann, "The Royal Academy Exhibition of 1907," *The English Illustrated Magazine* 37 (July 1907), 311.

²¹⁶ H.C. Richardson, ed. *Academy Criticisms 1877. A collection of the principal notices and critiques which have appeared in the leading journals and art publications, upon the paintings exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts, May 1877* (London: The Auxiliary Steam Printing Co., 1877), 11, 76.

...a sacred place, a vestal temple of the hearth watched over by household gods, before whose faces none may come but those who they can receive with love, so far as... roof and fire are types only of a nobler shade and light... so far as it vindicates the name, and fulfills the praise, it Is Home...²¹⁷

Ruskin's home is emotionally and visually realized through the intergenerational domestic constructions of artists like Clark, Darley, and Hovenden. These visions of home, as designed by the coupling of age and the geography of the fireside, convey an explicit sense of Victorian self-realization—one centered on the conflation of age and place.²¹⁸

To late nineteenth-century viewers in Britain and the United States, the domestic spaces of quotidian life were not simply locations—they were also metaphors.²¹⁹ In the same way that the hearth symbolized the center of the domestic landscape, the presence of older hearthside figures demonstrated the indissoluble links between family, chronology, and domesticity. If Victorian “homefulness” was enacted before the “vestal temple of the hearth,” then the elderly hearthside figure serves as a kind of symbolic household priest or priestess of Vesta, enacting the rituals of that sacred place.

Although twenty-first century viewers may disregard this catalogue of hearthside scenes as hackneyed or mawkish, these pictures present significant commentary on the domestic values of aging and domestic spaces for cross-generational exchange. From the

²¹⁷ John Ruskin, *Of Queen's Gardens* (London: G. Allen, 1902), 22.

²¹⁸ Stephen A. Webb, “The Comfort of Strangers: Social Work, Modernity and Late Victorian England—Part II.” *European Journal of Social Work* 10, no. 2 (June 2007), 194.

²¹⁹ Webb, “The Comfort of Strangers,” 194.

colonial period to the television age, the hearth has remained a politically neutral location—a space dedicated to the rites of family life.²²⁰ The Victorian dualism of aging in Britain and America presents a spectrum of “good old age” and “bad old age,” with both prospects being offered by the fireside seat. The presence of these figures is not just a normative depiction of aging; their inclusion signals generational transmission and an endurance of values, lending domestic scenes a historical weight.

²²⁰ Cecilia Tichi, *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 43. Tichi writes, “The embrace of the hearth was really a way out of the discordant, tumultuous processes of history and an entry into American myth. That myth says that social change is not occurring as long as the hearth remains in place. Political shiftings, violence, social hierarchy, transformation of family patterns and demographics—all these are denied by the symbolism of the hearth. Dynamic processes of virtually every kind are denied. In fact, the meaning of the hearth is that history does not exist.” (56)

Chapter Two

Chaperones and Other Older Obstacles to Young Romance

“The interior of a farmer’s kitchen, with cooking utensils, poultry, vegetables, &c., displayed. In the background an old woman is stirring a pan over a cooking stove. A man sits beside her smoking. On the left, in front, beside an open window, through which the summer breeze is blowing, sits the young lady of the house, who has fallen asleep while sewing. Her lover has just made up his mind and his lips to kiss her, but turns partly around to ascertain if his motions are perceived by the old people.”¹

Tompkins Harrison Matteson’s 1849 picture *Now or Never* (fig. 2.1) portrays the decisive moment when a young man considers leaning in for a kiss with his slumbering sweetheart. As the above description from the *Bulletin of the American Art-Union* attests, Matteson’s (1813-1884) scene derives its dramatic substance from the tension between the young lady, her lover, and “the old people” who sit at the back of the country kitchen, watching the emboldened boy as he advances towards the sleeping and vulnerable girl.²

The young man steadies himself with one hand against the wall as he looks over his shoulder towards her family, who are gathered around a wood stove behind them. The lovers are young and beautiful, with matching peachy complexions and rosy lips. The open window allows a soft breeze to blow around them, likely carrying the scent of the flowers and plants perched on the windowsill. The bristling energy of young love swirls around this highly charged interaction, intensified by the threat posed by the sleeping young woman’s aged parents or grandparents in the background.

¹ “Catalogue of Works of Art Purchased by the American Art-Union.” *Bulletin of the American Art Union* 2, no. 8 (November 1849), 31.

² *Now or Never* was exhibited at the American Art-Union, 497 Broadway, New York, June 1849, no. 21. See Bartlett Cowdrey, “First Exhibition of American Paintings,” in *The Old Print Shop Portfolio* 3, no. 2 (October 1943) pp. 27-47.

The presence of age escalates the tensions of young romance. While British and American genre painting of the later nineteenth century occasionally casts older men and women as facilitators of youthful relationships, they are more frequently portrayed as an obstacle to young courtship and coupling. In some ways, age acts as a kind of courtship barrier, not unlike the physical obstructions of garden walls and country fences described by Susan P. Casteras in “John Everett Millais’ *Secret-Looking Garden Wall* and the Courtship Barrier in Victorian Art.”³ While Casteras explores the various qualities of physical barricades set between young lovers, similar obstacles can, in many ways, also be read in the presence of aged parents, grandparents, and chaperones.

Like the “interchangeable barrier components” of the rustic stile, wooden fence, and stone wall described by Casteras, the presence of senescent figures in Victorian courtship scenes serves to heighten the melodrama of these narrative pictures by keeping couples physically separate, which produces flirtatious effects.⁴ Physical contact is made nearly impossible under the watchful eye of concerned grandparents and chaperones, and age itself becomes a force equivalent to the elements Casteras defines as “the insuperable bar or safety gap between the sexes.”⁵ In this context, the dichotomy of youth and age and the restraint and distance enforced by older onlookers comes to mirror common nineteenth-century anxieties about romance and privacy.

The incursion of age into young courtship manifests itself in a variety of contexts throughout Anglo-American genre painting. There are countless painters like Matteson who found painterly matter in the decisive moments when young lovers consider

³ Susan P. Casteras, “John Everett Millais’ *Secret-Looking Garden Wall* and the Courtship Barrier in Victorian Art.” *Browning Institute Studies* 13, *Victorian Women and Men* (1985), pp. ii, 71-98.

⁴ Casteras, “The Courtship Barrier in Victorian Art,” 78.

⁵ Casteras, “The Courtship Barrier in Victorian Art,” 91.

breaking the social barriers set between them by older family members. These “defining moment” pictures include scenes of young lovers on the brink of being disturbed or caught in the act of interacting in a manner far more intimate than permitted by Victorian manners.⁶ Stolen conversations, illicit tête-à-têtes, and covert flirtations take on new levels of excitement and complexity and invite different interpretations when enacted just beyond the sight of elderly eyes.

Such pictures are related to scenes of young love’s reprimand by age. Victorian paintings of senescent guardians chastising their young charges, who are rendered innocently senseless by the throes of love, express additional layers of meaning when considered in terms of age disparity. It bears asking how contemporary interpretations of such pictures may be incomplete when deeper questions about the tensions between youth and age are overlooked.

In addition to pictures of young lovers meeting under clandestine circumstances, later nineteenth-century British and American genre pictures also include examples of romances unfolding under senescent supervision at home. In the domestic sphere, young romantic pairings arranged under the eyes of elderly figures are largely protected from the risks associated with stolen kisses. In such scenes, the anesthetizing presence of watchful elders prevents uncontrolled courting and reframes young romance in anodyne terms, lowering the volume, so to speak, of possibly escalating romance. Such pictures

⁶ For more on the theme of the “defining moment” in Victorian painting, see Susan P. Casteras, *The Defining Moment: Victorian Narrative Paintings from the Forbes Magazine Collection* (Charlotte, North Carolina: Mint Museum of Art, 1999). This exhibition catalogue presents a concise survey of nineteenth-century British narrative paintings located in the middle of dramatic moments. Casteras explains, “...Defining moments concentrate on a broad variety of conditions and emotions. Most common, perhaps, is the pregnant moment, when an action or effect is pending, and, like other momentary parallels, deliberately arrests viewer attention.” (14)

also reveal the similarities and differences between British and American approaches to chaperonage and elderly participation in young courtship.

However, when the operations of courtship are transposed into an outdoor setting, away from the hearth and home, fissures develop in the relationship between the chaperone and her charges. The chaperone in the garden is faced with a far less controllable situation, and the diverse perspectives of youth and age make even more disharmonious pronouncements on courtship and manners when they are released from the restrictions of the domestic sphere.

Age also occasionally makes itself complicit in the pairings of youth, a phenomenon portrayed in scenes about exchanging love letters, which will be discussed later in this chapter. The issues of experience and memory influence interpretations of this activity when older figures participate in the sending and receiving of youthful declarations. Alternatively, when love letters are traded *despite* the presence of older figures, the characterization of age as a living courtship barrier resurfaces. Furtive correspondence carried out under the watchful gaze of shielding grandparents introduces a tension greater than that evoked by the act of sending love letters without these external threats.

Along similar lines, nineteenth-century Anglo-American genre painters also present the dramas of young love when its very existence depends upon the sleep of old age. Coy flirtations and seductive signals sent in the presence of slumbering senescent chaperones occupy a captivating place in the Victorian visual imagination. How much of the dramatic tension in these pictures is produced by the risks and rewards of the

participants' actions, and how much is merely a result of the general tensions produced by the disparities between age and youth?

Despite having been overlooked in some instances as a significant center of meaning, age unquestionably affects the content of these types of pictures. When young lovers pursue their relationships despite the interventions threatened by older interlopers, issues of trans-generational tensions undoubtedly affect the drama of the dynamic. Sensitivity to aging in images of young courtship may reveal unseen meaning in one of the most frequent tropes in Victorian art.

Returning to Matteson's meditation on an almost-stolen kiss, *Now or Never* derives its thrust from a twofold drama: that of the defining moment of illicit affection, as well as the threat of being caught in the act by the elderly chaperones. The picture's title contributes to the viewer's sense of the scene's potency. In his history of later nineteenth and early twentieth-century romance, *The Culture of Love: Victorians to Moderns*, Stephen Kern explains,

The joy of "love at first sight" draws its intensity from the "firstness" but also from the sense that it's "now or never." Pressed for time, men and women were less able to reflect on past experience and approach first meetings their own way. The authenticity of meetings could also be diminished by the mediation of chaperons and match-makers, and, most important, by the internalization of society's impersonal sense of how things are done—what "they" do.⁷

⁷ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Love: Victorians to Moderns* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 39-40.

Matteson's young suitor pays no mind to "how things are done," and the viewer of the picture is made complicit in his challenge to the social standards of courtship. Kern also explains, "The Victorians waited long and then kissed quickly, making a fetish of the first kiss and complicating the course of love," an idea that further complicates the interpretation of Matteson's picture.⁸ If this proposed kiss would indeed be the first exchanged between the young couple, what would it mean if it were disrupted by an interjection from the older figures in the room? The tensions of this potential first kiss, already exacerbated by its denial of strict Victorian cultural codes, are amplified by the looming threat of interference.⁹

While little-known today, Matteson's contemporaries identified him as a singularly able painter of American genre scenes.¹⁰ The critic and essayist Henry Theodore Tuckerman praised him for his expressive subjects, which resonated with popular taste.¹¹ In his 1867 survey of contemporary art, *Book of the Artists: American Artist Life*, Tuckerman commended Matteson's "domestic rural scenes conceived with

⁸ Kern, *The Culture of Love*, 172. Kern goes on to describe Victorian kisses in greater detail, calling them "...ineffable, if not also invisible. They were sudden, brief, and blind, intensely felt gestures, which novelists described with minimal detail. Heroes and heroines may have talked about the obligations that a kiss implied in the courtship scenario, but they never discussed the nature of the kiss itself." (176)

⁹ It should be mentioned that the reading of this picture as a narrative about stolen kisses is one of two popular interpretations. Both Lee MacCormick Edwards and Patricia Hills write about *Now or Never* as the depiction of a woman deciding whether or not to agree to a proposal of marriage from her suitor. Edwards and Hills regard the older figures in the background as anxiously awaiting news of the young woman's decision, posing no threat to physical intimacy, as the very possibility is not broached by this alternative interpretation. See Lee MacCormick Edwards, *Domestic Bliss: Family Life in American Painting: 1840-1910* (Yonkers: Hudson River Museum, 1986), 21-22 and Patricia Hills, *The Painter's America: Rural and Urban Life, 1810-1910* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1974), 41.

¹⁰ Dr. Frederick Baekeland describes the stumbling blocks that have affected Matteson's legacy: "Work by the portraitist and literary, genre, and historical painter Tompkins Harrison Matteson is familiar only to specialists and is rarely offered for sale. Two things have marginalized him in the art world. He pursued his calling in a small upstate New York town rather than in New York City and he concentrated on genre and history painting. Until recently museum curators and art historians, with collectors dutifully traipsing behind them, have dismissed genre as "anecdotal," and they continue to treat historical works with either benign indifference or active repugnance." Frederick Baekeland, *Roads Less Traveled: American Paintings, 1833-1935* (Ithaca: Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1999), 103.

¹¹ Baekeland, *Roads Less Traveled*, 103.

simplicity and graceful feeling...familiar subjects, unpretending and genial in treatment, and well fitted to charm rural households.”¹² *Now or Never* fits with this characterization, presenting its highly charged content in a straightforward and unembellished fashion.

Despite the direct compositional strategy of the nearly stolen kiss in the foreground, the distance between the young lovers and their older relatives psychologically isolates them from each other.¹³ This gulf serves to intensify the effect of generational detachment, compounding the oppositions of foreground/background, light/shadow, and youth/age. *Now or Never* illustrates the codes of middle-class behavior by flouting them – a process facilitated by the fractures between these oppositions.

The age disparity between the older and younger couples can also function positively, with the older pair modeling a virtuous coupling. In her essay, “Debating Domesticity: Gender Roles in Tompkins Matteson's *Now or Never*,” Cory Pillen claims that the older couple provides viewers “with a model of familial harmony,” and enact an ideal to which the young pair can aspire.¹⁴¹⁵ The man smokes a pipe as his wife cooks on the stove, perhaps presenting an example of the lifelong rewards of constant commitment.

Matteson embraces ambiguity, ascribing a great deal of power to the unknown actions and consequences that will happen in the following moments of tension or relief. This furtive flirtation and discomfort, largely produced by the aged attendants to the courtships of youth, points to the possibilities of interpretation that are created by an applied concern for aging and age studies in the discipline of art history. Further, there are many other examples of American and British genre paintings that derive their

¹² Henry Theodore Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists: American Artist Life* (New York: G.P. Putnam & Son, 1867), 433.

¹³ Baekeland, *Roads Less Traveled*, 104.

¹⁴ Cory Pillen, “Debating Domesticity: Gender Roles in Tompkins Matteson's *Now or Never*.” *Rutgers Art Review* 23 (2007), 6.

¹⁵ Pillen, “Debating Domesticity,” 10.

potency from similarly liminal moments when age appears to be poised to disrupt youth's amorous advances.

It is important to remember that the transatlantic divide announces itself in a comparison between American and British courtship practices during the Victorian period. Social differences in notions of appropriateness, chaperonage, and acceptability should be taken into consideration when appraising images of love and romance produced on both sides of the Atlantic. In simplest terms, American youths more easily enjoyed unchaperoned activities both inside and outside the domestic sphere, and it is generally understood that English courtship activities were carried out under more stringently controlled social conditions.¹⁶

The historian Harvey Green ascribes this significant difference in privacy and chaperonage to “the less rigid class structure of the United States and, in part, of the less secure and respected position of older single women in American culture.”¹⁷ It is perhaps due to these differences that American images of impaired or restrained young romance are largely less severe in their emotional impact than their European counterparts. However, these differences do not seem to apply to American artists working in Europe, who portrayed higher levels of tension, risk, and reward in the decisive moments when older obstacles come to threaten the prospects of young love.

Further, the decisive moment that so often threatens blooming young romance can be characterized in a variety of terms. Casteras describes the narrative turn in Victorian genre as an effect produced by “truth, tension, anticipation, crisis, discovery, dilemma, departure, comedy, transformation or psychological change, confrontation, hesitation,

¹⁶ Harvey Green, *The Light of the Home: An Intimate View of the Lives of Women in Victorian America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 12.

¹⁷ Green, *The Light of the Home*, 12.

self-revelation, transcendence, witness or personal testimony, and other heightened states of being or consciousness appeared in countless works.”¹⁸ Both British and American examples of these “threatened courtship” pictures capitalize on this wide spectrum of emotional attributes, resulting in an ease of legibility that deepens the viewer’s identification with the scene.

Rustic romantic interventions

American expatriate painter Henry Mosler (1841-1920) draws upon the narratively rich qualities of the decisive moment in his 1885 Paris Salon picture *The Approaching Storm (L’Orage qui Approche)* (fig.2.2).¹⁹ In this scene, an older woman quietly watches a young couple flirt from behind the corner of a humble Breton cottage. She holds a cane in her right hand, ready to take a swing at the mustachioed scythe bearer, steadying herself against the wall with her left hand. The young lovers, unaware of the woman’s presence and the “coming storm” of her cudgel, seem adrift in their flirtation, and both have abandoned their labors to engage in conversation. His scythe rests on the ground, his head tilted away from its blade. Her water jug sits untouched on the ground beside her feet – it is unclear if he has distracted her on her way to the well or on her journey home.

Contemporary critics described Mosler’s “crone [intending] to trounce” in a variety of negative age-centered terms, with one contributor to the *New York Times*

¹⁸ Casteras, *The Defining Moment*, 15.

¹⁹ Exhibited at the 1885 Paris Salon, no. 1817 as *L’Orage qui Approche*. Alternatively known as *The Coming Storm*. See Lois Marie Fink, *American Art at the Nineteenth-Century Paris Salons* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1990), 373.

deeming her a “Nemesis in the usual shape of an old woman.”²⁰ An 1892 description published in *The Illustrated American* called her a “wrinkled old hag, with her mahogany colored skin, and her soured old temper,” ascribing her disapproval to the effects of her old age.²¹ A column in an 1899 issue of *The Art Amateur* calls her “an unfeeling old woman,” too easily conflating her lack of empathy with her senescence.²²

The narrow judgments of age and character apparent in readings of *The Approaching Storm* are by no means limited to nineteenth-century publications. Even recent scholarship on Mosler’s Breton pictures asserts, “while [his] young women are usually shy, idealized beauties, his young men are usually bumptious fools and his old women disagreeable nags.”²³ Overall, these appraisals are undeniably reductive, and their inability to delve more deeply into the multivalent meanings of age in the context of young courtship performs a disservice to Mosler, whose particular gifts for subtle narrative were acknowledged during his lifetime.

While his name is less frequently found in current publications, Mosler was well recognized at home and abroad during the final years of the nineteenth century. From about 1880 until 1897, he was most closely associated with his Breton genre scenes, which he successfully exhibited in Paris and the United States. Although he was not a forerunner in the development of the aesthetic of expatriate French peasant pictures,

²⁰ “Pictures by Henry Mosler.” *New York Times* (October 19, 1885), 4.

²¹ “Paintings of the Day. VII. *The Approaching Storm*.” *The Illustrated American* 12, no. 131 (August 20, 1892), 26.

²² R.R. “Henry Mosler.” *The Art Amateur* 41, no. 1 (June 1899), 5.

²³ Julia Rowland Myers, “The American Expatriate Painters of the French Peasantry, 1863-1893” (Ph.D. dissertation. University of Maryland, College Park, 1989), 169.

Mosler's talents for pictorial storytelling and insightful domestic dramas were widely acknowledged.²⁴ One particularly kind reviewer for *The Art Amateur* noted,

It is not at all difficult to define Henry Mosler's position in American art. We have more dashing, more brilliant painters, but none more thorough, painstaking and generally satisfactory...[his] talent for storytelling, which amounts almost to genius, [is] not to be lightly estimated. Indomitable study has made him a master of composition; his keen powers of observation, aided by an enviable memory, have enabled him to store his brain with a myriad types of gesture and expression, and, with his nice sense of discernment, these are ready at his call whenever he may need them.²⁵

Mosler's perceived talent for observantly painting the minutiae of social domesticity does not perfectly align with the aforementioned interpretations of *The Approaching Storm*. By largely dismissing the narrative potential of the older figure in this scene, these appraisals devalue the diverse meanings conveyed by her presence. In these terms, her status is reduced to that of a living, aged "courting wall" – a veritable breathing bollard.

Such a simplification does a disservice to Mosler, whose gift for storytelling exceeds the limitations imposed by his critics. The composition and gestures of his nascent tempest invite a deeper engagement with the question of age and its function as a maker of pictorial meaning. An extended consideration of the older woman's role in this

²⁴ Barbara C. Gilbert, "The Art and Life of Henry Mosler." In Barbara C. Gilbert, ed. *Henry Mosler Rediscovered: A Nineteenth-Century American-Jewish Artist* (Los Angeles: Skirball Museum/ Skirball Cultural Center, 1995), 42.

²⁵ "Henry Mosler." *The Art Amateur* 13, no. 6 (November 1885), 113-115.

scene also absolves her of some of her guilt, as a prolonged engagement with the lovers reveals the ways in which their behavior almost warrants intervention.

The older woman, perhaps the young girl's elderly mother or protective grandmother, introduces an element of observation and tension to a quietly sexually-charged scene. The young man's arm is wrapped sensuously around the girl, who hikes up her apron in a manner that emphasizes her belly and waist. Her cheeks are flushed with ardor, though she manages to timidly gaze downwards as he leans towards her, whispering in her ear. When the presence of a threatening, older obstacle is introduced amid these carnal energies, the narratives of desire, surveillance, and the threat of violent suppression complicate what could be mistaken today for an innocuous Breton peasant narrative.

The Approaching Storm stands apart from Mosler's other Breton pictures, scenes usually dedicated to explorations of domestic interiors in the dark tones indicative of his early training in Düsseldorf.²⁶ As a garden picture painted in a light, colorful key, the tensions of *The Approaching Storm* may be numbed in part by its brightness.²⁷ Some contemporary viewers may have been prevented from accessing the picture's complete meaning, distracted as they were by its soft colors and pleasing composition. For example, one American assessment described the scene as one of

²⁶ Mosler left Cincinnati for Düsseldorf in 1863 to study with the genre painter Albert Kindler (1833-1876) and the history painter Heinrich Mücke (1806-1891). Like many American painters of German heritage, he found an important community in student life at the Academy. For more on Cincinnati painters who pursued training in Germany, see John Wilson, "Cincinnati Artists and the Lure of Germany in the Nineteenth Century." *Queen City Heritage* 57, no. 4, (Winter 1999), 2-19.

²⁷ One critic writing for *The Art Interchange* in September 1885 described, "Aside from the subject, the picture is well enough painted, and it is different from most of Mr. Mosler's work in that it is an out-door picture painted in a light key and with more delicacy of color than usual." See "Art Notes and News." *The Art Interchange: A Household Journal* 15, no. 7 (September 24, 1885), 118.

...two lovers, happy in each other's presence, oblivious of all surroundings, and in entire ignorance of the presence of the sweetheart's mother, who is concealed at the end of the high, old-fashioned wall of the garden, waiting, stick in hand, for the tardy lovers to approach her place of concealment.²⁸

Such an appraisal fails to completely appreciate the fine construction of Mosler's picture, including the delicate tensions produced by the ballet of his courtship performed in the presence of an older individual.

In constructing these decisive romantic moments, like the stolen love interview on the verge of interruption, artists make conscious decisions in terms of cross-generational casting. The threat of discovery by a peer is incomparable to that of detection by grandparents, older chaperones, or aging parents. The difficulties posed by the risk of detection supports Kern's charge that "Victorian love was deficient."²⁹ He continues,

Often it was a disaster. Victorians had less time to court and were more rushed toward irreversible, now-or-never decisions about a one-and-only lover. They had a more restricted courting space, a smaller pool of lovers from which to draw, and greater anxiety about the judgment of society, family, and God.³⁰

Young lovers, like those imagined by Matteson and Mosler, often conducted their courtship in stolen moments. The attendance of grandparents and aged guardians created yet another boundary for couples to surmount, in addition to a lack of privacy and the

²⁸ "A Cincinnati Artist." *The Stock Farm* 3-4. No. 16 (October 15, 1885), 9.

²⁹ Kern, *The Culture of Love*, 403.

³⁰ Kern, *The Culture of Love*, 403.

dearth of opportunities for interaction. These restrictions contribute to the titillation of such clandestine meetings.

One such layered collage of romantic obstacles can be seen in *The Stolen Interview* by the English artist Carlton Alfred Smith (1853-1946). Smith was a noted painter of genre works, best known for his idealized pictures of cottage life at the end of the nineteenth century.³¹ Called “an able exponent of domestic genre” by one contemporary critic, he was a member of the Royal Society of British Artists, the Royal Institution, and the Royal Institute of Oil Painters, and he exhibited at the Royal Academy and the Glasgow Institute of Fine Arts.^{32 33} His success as an exhibitor implies that this scene of two lovers interrupted in their secret meeting would have had wide appeal.

The Stolen Interview (1889) takes place in a rustic coastal farmhouse overflowing with humble clutter (fig. 2.3). In the center of the picture stands a dark-haired young woman dressed in working clothes. She is engaged in a love interview with a handsome suitor who speaks to her through the open window, holding her hand. While the young man seems completely fixated on his sweetheart, she appears to be distracted. Her gaze is directed towards the interior doorway, where she hears the approaching sound of an elderly female relative coming down the stairs with her cane. In addition to the sound of the cane tapping on the wooden steps, the family dog has begun to bark, alerting the old woman about the clandestine meeting downstairs. The triangulation of the threatening approach of an older woman’s footsteps, the physical courtship barrier of the open

³¹ Regina Haggio, “The Pleasant Peasant.” *The Spectator* [Hamilton, Ontario] (December 6, 2005), G12.

³² M.P.J., “Current Art.” *The Magazine of Art* 19 (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1896), 319.

³³ David Buckman, *The Dictionary of Artists in Britain Since 1945* (Bristol: Art Dictionaries Ltd., 1998), 122.

window, and the sounding alarm of a barking dog combine to heighten the tension of this decisive moment, which unfolds at the center of the composition between all three inauspicious elements.

It would be treacherous if this rustic couple were discovered holding hands. While this is seen as small gesture today, such contact between the would-be lovers illustrates a degree of physical contact that would flout period notions of propriety. There is also an interesting contrast between the dilated, hyper-specific moment of tension, and the broader gulf of time, age and experience between the subjects. Casteras addresses the tensions of holding hands across the threshold of the courtship barrier,

...while conversation and facial contact are possible, physical accessibility is restricted to holding hands...While flirtation and some exchange of affection are possible, real sexual contact is hindered or rendered quite implausible...Much of Victorian social life involved erecting barriers against strangers, improper actions, or sexual advances. Restraint and caution were the touchstones of respectability in almost every situation.³⁴

This transgression of the boundary erected by the cottage wall is made more pronounced by the impending discovery of the action. The young man leans through the window, looking towards his intended, perhaps considering leaning in for a kiss, just as the older woman reaches the bottom step. Their discovery is impending, as signaled by the hesitant and distracted look on the young woman's face.

³⁴ Casteras, "The Courtship Barrier in Victorian Art," 91.

It is difficult to determine where in this romantic drama Smith has imbued the most tension. Between the bold young man, the approaching older woman, and the barking of the dog, the element to which the young woman may be reacting most strongly is uncertain. Compositionally, she is placed at the center between the three opposing details, with the contrasting figures of the old woman and the lover emphasized by their placement within frames formed by the modest architectural details of the cottage. However, the older woman, who has yet to discover the dalliance that is already in progress, may tip the scales on this matter. The young sweetheart's eyes search around the corner for her interloper, preparing for her personal approaching storm.

Both Mosler and Smith capture the last few moments before the detection of a furtive tête-à-tête, episodes intensified by the physical propinquity of age and youth. This proximity is emphasized by the acknowledgement by one figure of the others. In Mosler's case, the narrative is made by the older woman's recognition of her charge and her lover; in Smith's picture, the drama is designed by the young woman's awareness of her guardian's approach. In this context, it bears drawing a comparison between the aforementioned works and a scene in which the drama is set a few minutes earlier, in the brief moment before the young sweethearts or their older guardian are able to recognize that anything is amiss.

The British painter Marcus Stone (1840-1921), perhaps one of the greatest architects of late Victorian romance pictures, produced one such episode.³⁵ His small

³⁵ "In eighteen Academy exhibitions he had illustrated the varieties of human passion, and then apparently he at last decided to limit himself to the one which makes the widest appeal to all sorts and conditions of men and women, and to produce idyllic compositions full of tender expression, subtle domestic dramas in which Love would always be found playing the leading part. Within these limits he left himself, it is true, no little scope for variety. It was not merely Love triumphant that he elected to paint; he has concerned himself more often with the same sort of by-play that he had used in his historical situations." Alfred Lys

Rustic Courtship of 1860 features three figures in the now-familiar configuration of two dreamy young lovers and an approaching older woman (fig. 2.4). The two lovers speak intimately outside a crumbling farmhouse. The young woman has placed her water jug and washtub on the ground, stealing a moment with her country beau who appears to have come to visit her on foot. Lost in conversation, they fail to hear the sound of an older woman who will momentarily approach them. The matron is painted standing in an internal doorway of the house, set back from the courtyard by an exterior portal, which gives her some physical distance from the lovers and grants them a few more private moments before their discovery.

The only party with full knowledge of the unfolding drama of *Rustic Courtship* is the viewer, who is made complicit with either party, depending on where their sympathies may lie. If the viewer feels an allegiance towards the young lovers, then she, too, may immediately feel threatened by the approaching presence of the older guardian. Alternatively, if the viewer identifies her interest in the older woman, she may feel more empathetic about her difficult task of addressing the two sweethearts, who are likely disrupting some form of social protocol. Either reading of the picture requires a method of engagement with the viewer that is unlike the more observational stance engendered by the perspectives offered by Mosler and Smith.

Over the course of his long career, Stone established a reputation as an illustrator of the “varieties of human passion” that characterize domestic genre.³⁶ The son of the talented and self-taught artist Frank Stone (1800-1859), he was often portrayed as a prodigy who benefited more from a natural transmission of skill than from any formal

Baldry, “Marcus Stone, R.A.—His Pictures.” *The Art Journal* 58 (London: J.S. Virtue & Co., Ltd., 1896), 406.

³⁶ Baldry, “Marcus Stone, R.A.—His Pictures,” 406.

training.³⁷ An 1892 profile of the younger Stone in *Munsey's Magazine* claimed, "...the same family twice attained membership in the historical and dignified body supposed to include the foremost exponents of British Art. To his father Marcus Stone owes no artistic debt."³⁸

The younger Stone established himself as a painter of idyllic love stories, though he also explored courtship in its more challenging permutations. The artist and writer Alfred Lys Baldry (1858-1939) explained that, while Stone was perhaps best known for his "domestic dramas in which Love would always be found playing the leading part," he also found raw material in the "...quarrels, reconciliations, disappointments, the pleasure of perfect accord, and the thousand and one lights and shades of courtship and recent matrimony."³⁹ *Rustic Courtship* certainly foregrounds its depiction of tender romance, though the inclusion of the older woman produces a slight element of suggested discord.

Stone's work enjoyed tremendous popularity, and his Arcadian romances were widely reproduced and circulated.⁴⁰ This is likely due in part to his dedication to depicting the complexities of courtship, which occupied the Victorian imagination. Stone explained to a critic for *Pearson's Magazine*, "When I paint a love story...I always try to tell it in a respectful way—not trivially. The old story of love is a story that I never will tell lightly. I give it that intensity, that exaltation, that it has in actual life, so far as in me

³⁷ "Son of Frank Stone, A.R.A., an artist of much repute. Marcus Stone was born in London in 1840. He worked in his father's studio, inheriting some of his father's genius, but receiving little instruction in art." Clara Erskine Clement Waters and Laurence Hutton, *Artists of the Nineteenth Century and Their Works: A Handbook. Volume II* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Company, 1879), 275. Also see Clarence Cook's profile of Stone in *Art and Artists of Our Time, Volume 5* (New York: Selmar Hess, 1888), 114.

³⁸ C. Stuart Johnson, "Famous Artists and Their Work: I.—Marcus Stone, A.R.A." *Munsey's Magazine* 6, no. 4 (January 1892), 421.

³⁹ Baldry, "Marcus Stone, R.A. – His Pictures," 406.

⁴⁰ "The pictures of Marcus Stone, R.A. enjoy a greater circulation, in the form of engravings, than the works of any other painter, and this is nowadays the surest test of public popularity." "The Art of the Age: The Love Stories of Marcus Stone, R.A." *Pearson's Magazine* 13 (January-June 1902), 235.

lies.”⁴¹ In the case of *Rustic Courtship*, his dedication to an authentic interpretation of the theme of pastoral romance results in the portrayal of a complicated moment, one that is certainly not told “lightly.”

Contemporary critics acknowledged the subtle complexity of Stone’s compositions, a quality that was likely produced in part by the variety of creative choices that led to the design of *Rustic Courtship*. Magazine reviews and profiles remarked upon the intelligent timing of his scenes, which capitalizes on the tensions produced by decisive moments. R.C. Trafford, writing for *The Windsor Magazine* in 1906, describes the manner in which Stone’s pictures benefit from “elisions and assertions.”⁴² Trafford contends, “His work is not to make portraits of ordinary men and women, but to be, as it were, the visual echo of those emotional moments in which we see them radiant in the glory of eternal youth.”⁴³ *Rustic Courtship* successfully uses the qualities of timing and suggestion as means for illustrating the emotional thrust of a critical instant.⁴⁴

Poor timing is usually responsible for the insertion of an older figure into the courting rituals of youth. While Stone’s sweethearts are able to enjoy their love interview without awareness of its looming derailment, other artists found interest in the scenes that resulted from the discovery and disruption of courting pairs. In all of these pictures, age remains the greatest threatening hindrance to young romance.

In *Surprised*, ca. 1860, attributed to the British painter John Ritchie (active ca. 1858-1875), the action of the scene takes place in the moments following a rustic

⁴¹ “The Art of the Age,” 240.

⁴² R.C. Trafford, “The Art of Mr. Marcus Stone, R.A.” *The Windsor Magazine* 24 (June-November 1906), 262.

⁴³ Trafford, “The Art of Mr. Marcus Stone,” 260.

⁴⁴ Trafford, “The Art of Mr. Marcus Stone,” 262.

couple's detection in a shaded bower (fig. 2.5).⁴⁵ Unlike the aforementioned scenes, which only implied that the courting couples would be subsequently be discovered and chastised by their elders, *Surprised* is designed around the moment of intergenerational exposure. A young rural couple has just been interrupted in their sweethearts' hideaway, made in the seclusion of a leafy hideaway. The pretty, raven-haired young woman looks only slightly surprised by the incursion. However, her smocked and towheaded suitor appears nearly terrified – he cowers behind a tree, apprehensively clutching his hat and shepherd's staff.

A young child with golden curls accompanies the interloper, an older woman wearing a cap and walking with a cane. The woman peers into the shadow of the wood as the child points and smiles directly at the lovers. Suddenly, the narrative becomes clear: the very young child had found the courting couple beyond the dell and ran to her grandmother to tattle. The juvenile informant introduces a new element into the common dynamic, reframing *Surprised* as a picture of youth and age conspiring against the throes of love. By incorporating the presence of the small child, Ritchie also injects an element of humor into what would otherwise be a dramatic scene. While the shepherd's face is

⁴⁵ This picture has been alternately attributed to both John Ritchie and Joseph Hunt. Ritchie and Hunt both worked most actively between ca. 1850-1875, and both produced multiple genre scenes of humorous episodes unfolding under bright bowers. However, this discussion will refer to the Ritchie attribution. The reasons for this choice are varied, but this decision has been made primarily as a result of the sheer number of related Ritchie works that have been identified and sold as such. The Ritchie attribution was most recently made when *Surprised* was sold by Bearness Hampton & Littlewood of Exeter (Autumn Sale, Wednesday, October 25, 1995, Lot 480). The Joseph Hunt attribution was made later by Christie's South Kensington (British and Victorian Pictures, Thursday, November 7, 2002, Lot 214). There are also a number of formal similarities between *Surprised* and other Ritchie pictures with definite provenance. For example, Ritchie's *Hide and Seek*, which was most recently sold at Christie's London, South Kensington (November 10, 2011, Lot 148), is another example of a picture of a young couple being discovered in a leafy bower. The picture was sold in its original arched and gilded frame, which features inscriptions of the title and Ritchie's name along the bottom edge. It has been difficult to locate equally convincing evidence for the Hunt attribution.

stricken with fear, it does provide an amusing contrast to the giggling, anesthetizing visage of the young child who gleefully discovered his tête-à-tête.

While there is little documentary information available about Ritchie, it is understood that he was influenced by the detailed and high-keyed approach to nature advocated by Pre-Raphaelitism.⁴⁶ An assumed admirer of William Powell Frith (1819-1909) and Ford Madox Brown (1821-1893), Ritchie's pictures balance a taste for the sentimental with the expressiveness of a scene studied in life, and he exhibits a thoughtful approach to the details of the natural world, which augments the unfolding drama of the scene. Individual leaves and branches are painted with as much care as the details of each of the figures' faces.

The artist's consideration of these small details also enhances the markers of age, weaving the narrative of the picture. The female sweetheart's face, glowing with a dewy brightness, invites comparison with the cherubic appearance of the little tattletale. These differences emphasize the clearly delineated stages of a woman's life, from childhood to adolescence and old age. This juxtaposition reminds viewers that all three women in the picture will, at some stage in their lives, have played all three roles. In this manner, Ritchie's *Surprised* relies on physical distinctions to establish meaningful relationships across the spectrum of age and youth. These comparisons rely on visualization of the life cycle, and a powerful storytelling element is lost if senescence is overlooked as a major site of meaning.

The discovery of Ritchie's lovers by an older guardian also invites comparisons with images in which the discovery of an illicit meeting is inevitably followed by harsh

⁴⁶ Catalogue note for John Ritchie, *Extracting a Thorn*, n.d. (Oil on canvas, 16.1 x 20.1 in.). Sotheby's London. The British Sale: Paintings, Drawings, and Watercolors (Friday, March 26, 2004), Lot 61.

repercussions. The subject of age chastising youth for her romantic indiscretions is remarkably rich in the variety of possible interpretations it invites.

A disappointed employer

A fitting comparison can be made between the aforementioned pictures and an image of a young lover finally being disciplined by an elder for her indiscreet behavior. In *The Reproof*, 1867, by the British Cranbrook artist George Bernard O'Neill (1828-1917), a young woman is reprimanded by her older employer for being distracted from her work by her beau, who waits anxiously outside (fig. 2.6). Providing an alternative narrative structure for the disruption of young love by a mature meddler, *The Reproof* physically removes the young man from the scene, placing him beyond the front door, which establishes a different dynamic between the two women. Instead of presenting a physical barrier or acting as a threatening interloper, the older woman in this picture simply appears as a reminder of the young woman's responsibility to herself and to others, despite the distraction of her nascent romance.⁴⁷

O'Neill's young rose has arrived tardily at the house of her mistress, who gestures towards a basket of eggs at her feet. The older employer is clearly displeased, and the source of her annoyance can be traced to the boy waiting outside, visible just behind the front gate. The rose on the floor suggests the romantic nature of the distraction, and

⁴⁷ The theme of the older employer reprimanding his or her young employee was also surprisingly popular in British and American genre painting of the later nineteenth century. An investigation of this recurring idea would be interesting, though space does not permit such a discussion in this paper. Other interesting images of this idea were produced by George Goodwin Kilburne in *A Domestic Reprimand* (Watercolor and pencil and bodycolor on paper, 10 x 14.02 in. / 25.40 x 35.60cm. Christie's London, South Kensington, February 22, 2011, Lot 245) and Eastman Johnson's *The Reprimand*, 1880 (Oil on board, 19 x 22.50 in. / 48.26 x 57.15cm. Sotheby's New York, December 3, 1998, Lot 127).

perhaps it is an ill-fated courtship or misguided affair. A calico cat rubs against the girl's skirt, perhaps symbolizing her amorous feelings and desire for independence.

Surprisingly, the older employer does not appear to be angry with the young woman. Instead, her expression is one of disappointment or exasperation. She has no interest in disturbing or destroying the young woman's illicit courtship. Instead, she merely wants her to accomplish her professional duties in a timely manner. It is in this way that O'Neill's elderly courtship barrier takes on a novel set of qualities. As the young woman's employer, she has little interest in performing the duties of chaperone or guardian. Thus, this reprimand may not actually result in derailing the blooming romance. Instead, the young lady's personal priorities may merely have to adjust in response to her obligations to her employer.

Like the aforementioned decisive moments in which older figures threaten young love, *The Reproof* benefits from a delicate choreography of timing. The art historian Nina Lübbren explicitly addresses O'Neill's picture in these terms, interpreting it as a layered vision of the girl's past, present, and future. Lübbren describes, "the girl is late because she has dawdled with the boy (the past), and she will, we assume, resume her tête-à-tête because the boy is waiting for her (the future)."⁴⁸ However, this assessment overlooks an even more obvious trajectory of past, present, and future – that being the chronological sweep of the life cycle as it appears in age-disparate pairings such as this.

O'Neill's canvas significantly juxtaposes age and youth in terms of their dramatic potential. When considering age as a barrier to young love, one must also grant that the older figure may have historically encountered the same barrier that she presently

⁴⁸ Nina Lübbren, "Time, Narrative, Genre." In *The Cranbrook Colony: Fresh Perspectives* (Wolverhampton: Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 2010), 72.

embodies. This contrast is heightened in a composition like *The Reproof*, which distances and excludes the young suitor for greater effect. Alone in a sparse interior, twinned by their white caps, pale complexions, and graceful hands, the respective age and youth of each woman can be seen more easily. Given an extended review in these terms, O'Neill's reprimand, which lends itself to being easily dismissed as little more than a single castigation, actually invites an extended meditation on the pleasures and pains of the female life cycle.

O'Neill's considered design also structures and heightens a complex reading of the issues of age and obstruction. The older woman is seated in a chair turned away from the front entrance, and the thin boundary of an interior door prevents her from seeing the young man who has distracted her young employee. This subtle divider, the delicate nuance of which is emphasized by the characters' minute gestures, produces tension. The older woman signals with her open left hand, asking the girl to explain herself, while her right hand proffers a pocket watch. These two elements spark the curiosity of the viewer, who is led to map the dynamic of romantic cause and censoring effect that exists between the two women.

O'Neill's mistress is not portrayed as a comical figure, like those in the previously discussed pictures by Mosler and Ritchie. Instead, she authentically embodies the frictions that may naturally arise when age and young romance co-exist. Between her role as employer and the treatment of her home as clandestine trysting place, O'Neill's older woman personifies a courtship obstacle that produces narrative content.

Although O'Neill's admonishing employer does not formally act as a chaperone to the young woman and her suitor, *The Reproof* does introduce the importance of the

presence of older guardians in the act of domestic courtship. The pursuit of romance in the Victorian home allowed older participation in young coupling in the form of chaperonage and close surveillance.

Kern reflects on the institution of chaperonage throughout his study of the nineteenth-century development of the concept of romantic love. He notes that, “The fact that many nineteenth-century lovers met in the woman’s home under close supervision is a matter of record.”⁴⁹ While chaperonage usually challenged the tenets of romantic love, such external checks were necessary components of young Victorian coupling.⁵⁰ The presence of age in the rites of romance likely served to sedate and stifle the expression of excitement, desire, anxiety, and suffering, though the introduction of older guardians did not necessarily ensure the prevention of dramatic emotional crises.⁵¹

The inclusion of older figures in scenes of young domestic courtship aids the narrative content of these pictures, wordlessly challenging a couple’s autonomy and illustrating the obstacles that need to be surmounted in order to pursue companionate relationships. Further, while it has been argued that the role of chaperones in Victorian courtship (and courtship pictures) was often more decorative than protective, the very presence of a supervisory figure inevitably altered the nature of interactions between lovers.⁵² When the guardian is portrayed as being significantly older, the qualities of age disparity emphasize this impingement.

The insertion of an older chaperone into a scene of young courtship illustrates notions of time and the delicate choreography of the life course. In her chronicle of

⁴⁹ Kern, *The Culture of Love*, 29.

⁵⁰ Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 159.

⁵¹ Lystra, *Searching the Heart*, 157.

⁵² Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1984), 209.

courtship in America, historian Ellen K. Rothman suggests, “While the concept of life cycles sets the general direction of our course, it does not provide specific coordinates for every step along the way. Courtship was not a linear progression but an amalgam of expectation, experience, and convention.”⁵³ When the possibility of young love is portrayed in the vicinity of a mature marriage, the resulting narrative is heightened by its allusions to time and notions of lifelong companionship.

American country courtships

In *Love’s Young Dream* of 1887, Jennie Augusta Brownscombe (1850-1936) revels in the romantic possibilities of youth and the cohesion of the rural American family (fig. 2.7). These themes are presented in the context of age and the life course, and romance is characterized as both a youthful aspiration and a benefit of old age.

Brownscombe’s scene portrays a young woman and her elderly parents on the front steps of their humble country home. While her mother and father sit higher on the steps, closer towards the domestic realm they established together, she stands on the bottom step, clutching a bouquet of wildflowers and gazing hopefully towards an open road that winds through the valley below. A man on horseback approaches in the distance, and his route leads directly to the family home perched on the hillside.

The young woman is lost in her reverie, unaware of the supervisory glance cast towards her by her mother, whose doting expression conveys affection and concern. The older woman could also be remembering the details of falling in love with her own husband sitting nearby. Lost in his book, he is seemingly unaware of the emotional energies swirling around his wife and daughter. The young woman’s loveliness and

⁵³ Rothman, *Hands and Hearts*, 5.

hopeful contemplation contrast with the absorption and isolation of the older couple who pay no attention to each other.⁵⁴ Despite their physical proximity, it is not clear if they register the physical presence of the other.

The composition of *Love's Young Dream* adeptly conveys the diverse sensations of romance as experienced by youth and age. The fallen autumn leaves scattered around the veranda mark the season as one of transition, and the gold and red foliage of the trees across the landscape punctuates a hazy fog, giving the picture an idyllic, dream-like quality. The placement of the figures is imbalanced, and a contrast between the right and left halves of the composition amplifies the feeling of the young woman's longing. A juxtaposition of the populated right side of the picture and the empty and expansive landscape on the left heightens the viewer's ability to access the young woman's feelings as she contemplates the road that will bring her suitor to her door.

Brownscombe also includes auspicious symbols of love and romance in the picture, like the woman's bouquet of wildflowers and the playful kitten pawing at the mother's ball of yarn. Wildflowers arguably suggest the power of natural forces, their beauty the product of timing, serendipity, and environmental conditions.⁵⁵

Kittens are perhaps a more complex symbol in nineteenth-century Anglo-American culture, alternately associated with blissful domestic virtue or the threat of spinsterhood. Victorians also associated cats and kittens with formidable presaging fixations. Ray Broadus Brown, forefather of the discipline of popular culture studies, has

⁵⁴ National Museum of Women in the Arts. *National Museum of Women in the Arts* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1987), 52.

⁵⁵ There are many useful sources for the study of floriography, and this interpretation of Brownscombe's symbolism was grounded in a consultation of contemporary guides, including Gretchen Scoble and Ann Field's *The Meaning of Flowers: Myth, Language & Lore* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998) and Mandy Kirkby's *A Victorian Flower Dictionary: The Language of Flowers Companion* (New York: Random House, 2011).

written about the association between felines and matrimonial superstitions in his work on fetishism in popular culture.⁵⁶ In *The Cat and the Human Imagination*, literary scholar Katharine M. Rogers questions the connection between cats, women, and integration with the family, stating, “As the household cat became an object of affection, it came to embody the Victorian ideal of Home.”⁵⁷ As a symbol of the domestic sphere and an affirmation of homely domestic values, Brownscombe’s kitten likely signals an idealized, contented, and peaceful household.⁵⁸

Alternatively, the kitten can also function as a warning against the failure to attract a suitor and build a loving family of one’s own. Monica Flegel argues, “Mistaking or replacing domestic pet for human progeny, and eschewing or failing to achieve proper male attachment and guardianship, the female who makes a family of herself and her pet threatens femininity and its role within the home, family, and nation.”⁵⁹ In this way, the black and white kitten innocently pawing at the ball of red yarn functions as a cautionary sign: if the girl’s suitor disappoints her, she may well create an alternative bond with her feline companion instead and remain a spinster.

Highly sensitive and symbolic, *Love’s Young Dream* is representative of Brownscombe’s capacity as a painter of Americana and sentimental genre pictures. Her status as a purveyor of nostalgic imagery belied her affiliation with the progressive Art

⁵⁶ “Cats were a powerful presaging fetish. If a cat sneezed near or rubbed up against the bride on her wedding day, she would be happy. On the other hand, if it rained on the wedding day, she would be happy. On the other hand, if it rained on the wedding way—always a bad sign—it was because she did not feed the cats—placating the fetish.” Ray Broadus Browne, *Objects of Special Devotion: Fetishism in Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1982), 230.

⁵⁷ Katharine M. Rogers, *The Cat and the Human Imagination: Feline Images from Bast to Garfield* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 101.

⁵⁸ Rogers, *The Cat and the Human Imagination*, 103.

⁵⁹ Monica Flegel, “Becoming Crazy Cat Lady: Women and Their Pets in the Domestic Circle” in *Pets and Domesticity in Victorian Literature and Culture: Animality, Queer Relations, and the Victorian Family* (New York: Routledge, 2015, pp. 56-95), 56.

Students League of New York, of which she was a founder.⁶⁰ Her popularity and compositional cleverness was expressed in her history and genre paintings of “the halcyon days in the home life of America.”⁶¹

Brownscombe successfully straddled the spheres of fine art and the commercial market, and aesthetic and merchandisable works like *Love’s Young Dream* were widely reproduced in photogravures, etchings, and engravings.⁶² She was praised in *The Art Amateur* in 1880 as “one of the best known among the figure painters, her pictures bringing readily several hundred dollars for a small figure,” and her stellar reputation as an artist was matched by her status as an independent and financially successful individual.⁶³

Darlene Miller-Lanning describes Brownscombe as “A perceptive and disciplined artist [who] utilized all means available to produce paintings, prints, and commercial pieces that could serve as a touchstone in changing times,” and it is believed that Brownscombe produced over a hundred copyrighted prints throughout the course of her career.⁶⁴ ⁶⁵ Unfortunately, her works eventually grew so plentiful in reproduction that they were liable to be recognized by a popular public who remained unaware of her name—a fate commonly suffered by women artists.⁶⁶ Interestingly, her compromised reputation benefited a male artist, as an engraving made after this picture by Charles Schlecht of

⁶⁰ Carol Kort, s.v. “Brownscombe, Jennie Augusta.” In *A to Z of American Women in the Visual Arts*, edited by Carol Kort and Liz Sonneborn (New York: Facts on File, 2001), 35.

⁶¹ Kent Ahrens, “Jennie Brownscombe: American History Painter.” *Woman’s Art Journal* 1, no. 2 (Autumn 1980-Winter 1981), 25.

⁶² Darlene Miller-Lanning, “The Art of Jennie Brownscombe.” *American Art Review* 23, no. 1 (January-February 2011, pp. 70-77, 127-128), 70.

⁶³ “Some Lady Artists of New York.” *The Art Amateur* 3, no. 2 (July 1880), 27-28.

⁶⁴ Miller-Lanning, “The Art of Jennie Brownscombe,” 128.

⁶⁵ Ahrens, “Jennie Brownscombe: American History Painter,” 26.

⁶⁶ Florence Woolsey Hazzard, “Brownscombe,” in *Notable American Women 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary, Vol. 1. A-F*, Edward T. James, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: 1971), 258-59.

New York was exhibited at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago 1893.⁶⁷

Brownscombe also reproduced her pictures in magazines and calendars, beginning in 1892, and her illustrations were featured in *Scribner's Magazine* and *Harper's Weekly* and on cards produced by Louis Prang and her commercial success enabled her to eventually turn her attentions towards history painting – an exceptional choice for a female artist working at the time.^{68 69 70}

Love's Young Dream enjoyed great visibility at exhibitions and in reproductions, and Brownscombe's meditation on love, youth, and age is characteristic of late nineteenth-century genre pictures of courtship as it was conducted under the watchful gaze of older guardians.⁷¹ The young woman's hopefulness for the excitement of a new love contrasts with the reality of her parents' comfortable and durable pairing. In this way, their age difference presents a commentary on the idealization and realization of romantic relationships. The presence of the mature couple provides a grounding counter-balance to the sentimentality of the young woman's wistfulness, and the right half of the

⁶⁷ Schlecht's print was exhibited in the section of American engravings, etchings, prints, chalk, charcoal, pastel and other drawings. See Halsey Cooley Ives, *World's Columbian Exposition, 1893: Official Catalogue. Part X, Department K: Fine Arts* (Chicago: W.B. Gonkey Company, 1893), 41. Cat. no. 1984.

⁶⁸ Laura R. Prieto, *At Home in the Studio: The Professionalization of Women Artists in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 161.

⁶⁹ Eleanor Tufts, *American Women Artists 1830-1930* (Washington, D.C.: The National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1987), unpagged.

⁷⁰ A bulletin in a November 1920 issue of *American Art News* describes an exhibition of published works held at Brownscombe's studio at 96 Fifth Avenue, New York City. The show included several history pictures, including *A Colonial Minuet*, *The First Meeting of Washington and Martha Custis*, and *The First American Thanksgiving*. The reviewer concedes, "although over-sweet in style, they will be of interest and a pleasant contrast at least to much of the kaleidoscope art which is attracting attention at this time." See "Jennie Brownscombe Shows Reproductions," *American Art News* 19, no. 6 (November 20, 1920), 5. In his profile of Brownscombe for the *Women's Art Journal*, Kent Ahrens divides Brownscombe's oeuvre into three broad categories: "contemporary genre scenes (sometimes laced with allegorical or literary associations), colonial costume pieces which may or may not be related to specific historical events, and portraits." For more on the division of subjects in her body of work, see Kent Ahrens, "Jennie Brownscombe: American History Painter." *Women's Art Journal* 1, no. 2 (Autumn 1980 – Winter 1981), 25-29.

⁷¹ The picture was exhibited at the *Sixty-Second Annual Exhibition* at the National Academy of Design, New York, April – May 1887, cat. no. 105.

composition serves to temper the left, which, independently, could be read as mawkish or saccharine. This pairing also serves to condone the young woman's longing and wistfulness, which could be subject to moralization, but here its shown to be the precursor to a long, loving, and virtuous relationship.

Further, although Brownscombe's young woman is physically supervised by both of her elderly parents, the lack of the man's concern imbues the older woman's attention with more power. The older woman, looking on with care at her young daughter, embodies the tender descriptions of an ideal chaperone, which can be found throughout the popular British and American prescriptive literature of the period. One such manual, published in London in 1853, provides a particularly fitting sketch of Brownscombe's protective and sensitive guardian:

That silver-haired lady who seems so thoroughly to enjoy all the details of her loved one's wooing, who watches with all a mother's anxiety and care, and whose heart is filled with the liveliest emotion when she notices the changing color on her daughter's cheek, and the bright eyes that grow brighter when he is near—ah, watching all this as a woman only can, entering into all this—the meaning of that smile, the tenor of that glance—as one who has loved only knows how, the mother lives again her own young life and recalls the pleasant house when she herself was wooed. The spring time of her life has departed, the green leaves all turned yellow, but the autumn leaves still remind her of the opening summer, and dead and decayed though she be, she cherishes them as mementoes of the past.⁷²

⁷² A Lady, *A Manual of the Etiquette of Love, Courtship, and Marriage* (London: Thomas Allman, 1853), 4.

The young woman's elderly mother is completely aware of the spectrum of emotions being experienced by her charge. After all, her contented union with her own husband likely began with the same anxiousness, joy, and impatience so many years prior. She looks towards her daughter with raised eyebrows, "watching all this as a woman only can." Their age disparity, as described by the aforementioned manual's natural metaphors, intensifies the evocative subtleties of their individual positions within the narrative.

Although the legacy of Brownscombe's work has been largely overlooked or dismissed as sentimental, the qualities of aging in *Love's Young Dream* are anything but flimsy. Age difference enhances the reality of Brownscombe's scene, which was likely inspired by her own experiences growing up in a log cabin in rural Honesdale, Pennsylvania.⁷³ Images of rural American courtship often include a large generational spectrum, and parallels can be found between the work of Brownscombe and that of her friends and teachers who worked on similar rural genre subjects, including Henry Mosler (1841-1920) and Lemuel Wilmarth (1835-1918).⁷⁴ Such idealized impressions of bucolic life and family values appealed to Anglo-American Victorian tastes, which leaned towards a preference for Arcadian native landscapes and domestic harmony.

⁷³ Kort, "Brownscombe, Jennie Augusta," 35. Also see the contemporary profile of Brownscombe in Frances E. Willard and Mary A. Livermore, eds. *A Woman of the Century: Fourteen Hundred-seventy Biographical Sketches Accompanied by Portraits of Leading American Women in All Walks of Life* (Chicago: Charles Wells Moulton, 1893), 132-133.

⁷⁴ Eleanor Tufts, "Brownscombe, Jennie Augusta (1850-1936)," in *North American Women Artists of the Twentieth Century: A Biographical Dictionary*. Jules Heller and Nancy G. Heller, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 94. The still-life specialist George Henry Hall, whom she befriended in Rome around 1900, also influenced Brownscombe. The two artists formed an important working relationship, sharing a summer studio in the Catskills until Hall's death in 1913. See Kort, "Brownscombe, Jennie Augusta," 36.

Rural settings lend themselves to the construction of piercing solitude, especially for the figure of the young Victorian woman who was assumed to swoon and daydream about her future love in near-seclusion. The open frontier, an especially American symptom, functions as what Casteras diagnoses as “an unconscious metaphor of that era’s fixation with sequestering female innocence.”⁷⁵ Though this sketch was intended to describe the “velvet cage” of the Victorian homestead, it also characterizes the tableau of female virtue as it was expected to manifest in the American countryside.

Rustic courtship provided artists with a picturesque opportunity for age to supervise youth and to potentially function as an obstacle to nascent romance. John Carlin’s (1813-1891) *Sunday Afternoon* of 1859 presents an example of coupling conducted under older supervision that predates Brownscombe’s interpretation of the same theme (fig. 2.8).⁷⁶

At a lakeside frontier cabin built in view of a resplendent, sun-kissed mountain, a young couple speaks lovingly on the porch, gazing into each other’s eyes with palpable excitement. They are partially visible through the window, painted from the perspective of an interior where a mature couple spends their Sunday leisure indoors. An older man, perhaps the girl’s grandfather or elderly father, leans against the bottom half of a Dutch door. He smokes his pipe and looks either towards the lovers or at the mountain lake, which shimmers behind them. His wife pays no attention to the couple, turning her back away from the window. Instead, she focuses on her book, perhaps engaged in afternoon bible study.

⁷⁵ Susan P. Casteras, *Virtue Rewarded: Victorian Paintings from the Forbes Magazine Collection* (Louisville: The JB Speed Art Museum, 1988), 6.

⁷⁶ *Sunday Afternoon*, 1859. Exhibited at the National Academy of Design, New York, 1860, no. 370.

Like Brownscombe, who intelligently placed youth and age in a compositional counter-balance, Carlin structures *Sunday Afternoon* in a way that suggests clear comparisons between the generations. The deep integration of the natural surroundings in both works also suggests that these romantic domestic dramas are a part of a natural life cycle.

Similar to the pose of the girl in *Love's Young Dream*, Carlin's young couple is turned away from the house, instead looking towards the sunset and the potential future they can someday build together. While the older woman is engrossed by her book (like Brownscombe's oblivious male figure), her husband gazes towards the couple, perhaps remembering his own young coupling, proving that nostalgia for a romantic past is not bound by gender. A clock hangs prominently in the center of the composition, announcing the passage of time as a central element in the scene's narrative.

Carlin was well recognized for his achievements as a poet and painter of miniatures, landscapes, and genre scenes. However, when he did paint genre pictures, he often worked with courtship themes. An unlocated canvas, also from 1859, was entitled *May I Marry Your Daughter?* He returned to courting couples again in 1875, when he painted a similar scene in watercolors entitled *The Suitor* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).⁷⁷

A deaf-mute from infancy, Carlin was one of the first pupils to enroll in the institution that would later be known as the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf. His tremendous intelligence led him to graduate at the age of twelve, and his early interest in

⁷⁷ *The Suitor*, 1875. Watercolor on paper, 9 ½ x 12 ½ in. Inscribed lower left: J. Carlin 1875. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Maxim Karolik for the M. and M. Karolik Collection of American Watercolors and Drawings, 1800–1875. Karolik (1962) cat. 102. Sheet: 26 x 32.4 cm (10 1/4 x 12 3/4 in.) 56.702. Information received from Godel & Company, New York, July 2014. Another related work, entitled *The Lover's Ordeal* (unlocated), was auctioned by Doyle New York, April 5, 1989.

art led him to study portraiture and drawing in Philadelphia.⁷⁸ He supported himself in his endeavors, paying his way through his artistic training by working as a sign and house painter.⁷⁹ He left for Europe in 1838, becoming the first deaf American artist to study abroad.⁸⁰ Carlin first went to London, where he studied objects in the British Museum. He then went to Paris, where he studied portrait painting under Paul Delaroche.⁸¹

Carlin returned to America in 1841 to establish a studio in New York, where he found success as a miniaturist.⁸² Between 1841 and 1856 he produced nearly two thousand miniatures, including portraits of personalities such as William Seward, Horace Greeley, and Jefferson Davis.⁸³ When portrait photography became more accessible to the general public, his craft became obsolete, leading him to turn his attention towards landscapes and genre scenes. These works were exhibited frequently at institutions including the National Academy of Design, the American Institute, the American Art-Union, the Pennsylvania Academy, and the Artists' Fund Society of New York, which he joined in 1859.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ "A Notable Deaf-Mute: He Was Poet, Painter, Useful Educator, and True Friend of His Kind." *Washington Post* (April 28, 1891), 4.

⁷⁹ Christopher Krentz, *A Mighty Change: An Anthology of Deaf American Writing, 1816-1864* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2000), 90.

⁸⁰ Thomas K. Holcomb, *Introduction to American Deaf Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 183.

⁸¹ Harry G. Lang and Bonnie Meath-Lang, *Deaf Persons in the Arts and Sciences: A Biographical Dictionary* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995), 68.

⁸² "His clients were chiefly among the old Knickerbocker families of this city and prominent people throughout the State. At Washington, in the days preceding the war, he was on familiar terms, by virtue of his profession, with most of the leading men of the day. He counted among his friends William H. Seward, Thurlow Weed, Horace Greeley, Hamilton Fish, and other men of prominence." See "A Notable Deaf-Mute," 4.

⁸³ See John Caldwell and Oswaldo Rodriguez Roque, with Dale T. Johnson, *American Paintings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Vol. 1: A Catalogue of Works by Artists Born by 1815* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994), 566-568; and Melvia M. Nomeland and Ronald E. Nomeland, *The Deaf Community in America: History in the Making* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012), 200.

⁸⁴ Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. *M. & M. Karolik Collection of American Water Colors & Drawings: 1800-1875* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1962), 94.

Carlin's genre scenes are characterized by their compassion and humor for everyday situations. *Sunday Afternoon* is a gentle reflection on first love, both as it is experienced firsthand and as it is remembered years later. It also illustrates the advantages of rustic courtship, which generally placed the senior chaperone in a more superfluous position than her urban counterpart. A later reflection on "Cupid in the Country," published in *Puck* magazine in 1894, argues,

What glorious privileges country lovers have! When Obadiah comes to call on Ruth, who ever thinks of such a useless superfluity as a chaperon? Country people are too busy to waste their time keeping the young folks from enjoying themselves. So Ruth's mother goes about her household duties, and Ruth and Obadiah slip into the "settin' room," or the parlor, or wherever the sofa is, and Obadiah's left arm goes to the usual place, and remains there, with the usual unconsciousness of fatigue, until ten or eleven o'clock in the evening; about which time the candle or lamp sputters out... Happy the rustic lovers who still enjoy and appreciate the privileges of their grandfathers and grandmothers. Then, let come what will in life, that which was best and truest survives.⁸⁵

Carlin's picture offers a convincing example of the special dispensations enjoyed by country couples. Unlike an urban beau, who may be expected to sit in the parlor with the girl's family or guardian, the rural suitor is able to enjoy some private time with his intended on the front porch while her parents busy themselves indoors. Although the woman's father looks out towards the sweethearts, he obviously has no intentions of

⁸⁵ Paul Pastnor, "Cupid in the Country." *Puck* 34, no. 881 (January 24, 1894), 388.

“keeping the young folks from enjoying themselves.” In this way, he severely compromises his capacity to serve as a kind of living courtship barrier.

The qualities of rustic courtship presented by Brownscombe and Carlin are counterbalanced by images of aristocratic coupling. While location and class are qualities which can significantly alter the contexts for courtship, the dichotomy of youth and age is universal, meaning that the anxieties and benefits of senior chaperonage can be easily identified across the class spectrum. Further, regardless of social station, lengthy courtships were unfavorable—the courting period was expected to be just long enough for fiancées to become as familiar with each other as possible while still being supervised by chaperones or family members.⁸⁶

Upper-class obstacles

In the later example of *Silver Threads Among the Gold – A Nocturne*, the Manchester painter George Sheridan Knowles (1863-1931) sets a supervised courtship in an upper class, periodized context (fig. 2.9). Like William Quiller Orchardson (1832-1910) and Marcus Stone, Knowles glamorizes romantic procedure by placing a young flirtation in a time slightly outside of the era in which the picture was made (1914). Set in a Regency parlor, *Silver Threads Among the Gold* portrays a young couple conversing by the fire. Despite the presence of grandparents and a younger sibling, they seem lost in each other. The other family members listen to the grandfather playing a violin as they gaze into the hearth. In this picture, Knowles sensitively offers an image of a romantic past, appeasing an early twentieth-century taste for the bygone Regency period.

⁸⁶ Jennifer Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012), 38.

Knowles trained at the Manchester School of Art and the Royal Academy Schools, where he worked for a few years beginning in 1884.⁸⁷ He frequently exhibited at the Academy, often revisiting sundry romantic themes, which is apparent in an exhibition record that includes works with titles like *The Proposal* (1900) and *Signing the Marriage Contract* (1905).⁸⁸ Throughout the course of his career, Knowles enjoyed a reputation for producing graceful images of a recent past, and *Silver Threads Among the Gold* offers an antique vision of young courtship conducted under the watchful eye of older guardians.⁸⁹ The rituals of courtship, choreographed in period dress, remained, beneath their opulent façades, modern life subjects. Despite their portrayal of what Royal Academy Collection Senior Curator Helen Valentine deems “chocolate-boxy flirting couples,” such pictures offer insight into the social order and romantic anxieties of late Victorian coupling.⁹⁰

In *Silver Threads Among the Gold*, age is again made an accessory to young courtship, and the older couple supervises and obstructs the young sweethearts. Their

⁸⁷ s.v. “Knowles, G. Sheridan,” in Henry Robert Addison, Charles Henry Oakes, William John Lawson, Douglas Brooke Wheelton Sladen, eds. *Who's Who 1900: An Annual Biographical Dictionary* 52 (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1900), 602.

⁸⁸ *The Proposal*, 1900 (Oil on canvas, 26.38 x 38.39 in. / 67 x 97.50 cm. Bonhams Knightsbridge, November 25, 2014, Lot 373) and *Signing the Marriage Contract*, 1905 (Oil on canvas, 24.02 x 40 in. / 61 x 101.60 cm. Bonhams Bond Street, January 27, 2011, Lot 118). Also see Addison et al, *Who's Who 1900*, 602.

⁸⁹ While Knowles is not well known or researched today, the general public seems to have enjoyed an intimate familiarity with his work, especially during the last years of the nineteenth century. In an 1897 review of an annual exhibition at the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolours, Piccadilly, a critic notes, “Graceful as Mr. G. Sheridan Knowles always is, his *Impromptu* (125) seems a trifle heavy in tone, though the posing of the girl dancing and the visitor looking on are both good.” See “At the Institute, Piccadilly.” *Atalanta* 10 (October 1896-September 1897, 195-200), 198. His work was so recognizable that it was even able to function as a stylistic shorthand when describing works in other fields or other media. One theater critic for *The Sketch*, reviewing the play “Her Father’s Friend” by H.A. Rudall, described, “Perhaps, in the days when Sheridan Knowles was popular, people could be found to take pleasure in the one-act idea watered out to three; but last week even the really able acting by Mr. G.A. Cockburn as the self-sacrificing father could not give life to the piece.” See Monocle, “Notes from the Theaters.” *The Sketch* 14, no. 180 (July 8, 1896), 459. These references imply that despite the dearth of information about Knowles and his work, general Victorian and Edwardian audiences were well aware of his painterly styles and thematic inclinations.

⁹⁰ Helen Valentine, *Art in the Age of Queen Victoria: Treasures from the Royal Academy of Arts Permanent Collection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 24.

presence, like that of the mature couples presented by Brownscombe and Carlin, also foreshadows a likely future that awaits the lovers. When two young people conduct their courtship in isolation, their actions are rooted firmly in the present. However, when the presence of an older couple is introduced to the composition, the scene is immediately saddled with the potentiality of their shared future, as well as notions of memory, reflection, and comparison.

The setting of the upper-class parlor is also significant to Knowles' picture. It signals that the participants in this particular mating ritual are likely more familiar with the dictates of higher English society, which, according to one 1887 social manual, "[pronounced] a chaperon an indispensable adjunct of every unmarried young woman."⁹¹ Unlike the aforementioned rural couples, their aristocratic counterparts enjoyed slightly less freedom, and their courtships were prone to more direct or intimate interventions by older generations.

Walter Dendy Sadler's (1854-1923) *Sweethearts* of 1892 offers an image of just such a refined interrogation (fig. 2.10). Sadler's casting of a cross-generational courtship ritual in an upper-middle class parlor probes the greater social framework for recognizing the position of the elderly within the practices of young Victorian coupling.

Exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1892, *Sweethearts* focuses on an elderly matriarch's critical inspection of her son's intended.⁹² Set in a finely appointed interior, Sadler's picture capitalizes on age disparity as a center of meaning. The young man cautiously holds his fiancée's hand while gesturing towards his aged mother or

⁹¹ M.E.W. Sherwood, *Manners and Social Usages* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1887), 214.

⁹² Jeremy Maas, *Victorian Painters* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1969), 243.

grandmother for approval. The young rose stands confidently before her assessor, awaiting the elderly woman's verdict on the couple's desired union.

Unlike the elderly chaperone who accompanies a young woman throughout her courtship, and the senescent guardian, who inhabits the same space as young lovers, Sadler's matron represents a final point of negotiation for the lovers. Characterizing a different type of older obstacle to young romance, the older figure in *Sweethearts* presents a hindrance to a coupling that has already progressed beyond the point where it could be kindly terminated. In this way, Sadler's older woman holds more power than her counterparts produced by Brownscombe, Carlin, or Knowles. She is not a barrier to flirtation – instead, she presents an overt potential snag to the ultimate goal of matrimony.

Pictures such as *Sweethearts* have the ability not only to describe the role of seniors in young courtship, but also to contextualize both youth and age within the wider spectrum of the Victorian life cycle and social strata. Viewers could recognize the established and prescribed markers of domestic comfort in Sadler's picture, reducing the sense of "otherness" that may be perceived by some younger viewers upon encountering such a scene of age appraising youth in its most vulnerable, romantic state.

So much of the tension and narrative thrust of *Sweethearts* depends on its setting in a domestic space. The introduction of a fiancée within the family parlor implies the couple's likely desire to eventually create their own home with its own private rituals. The same artists produced subtly different works with similar effect when they moved the action of the scene outdoors, away from the cloistered spaces of the Victorian home. Both Knowles and Sadler also produced historicized, romantic images of age disrupting young coupling in outdoor settings, with varied results.

In Knowles' *One Too Many* (ca. 1910), the title describes the picture's drama, which centers on a somber older chaperone and her two eager young charges (fig. 2.11). Attired in Regency walking dress, they sit on a bench with a view of the sea. Two younger gentlemen admire the women from behind as they lean against a fence, their backs turned towards the lapping waves. The women are aware of the young men studying them, but the girls dare not turn around to reciprocate their gaze in the presence of their staid companion.

In this context, the older figure is capable of preventing any form of romantic exchange. Without her approval, even the pursuit of exchanging glances is made treacherous. Knowles' elder matron personifies the ideal English duenna, who was believed to be stricter than her American counterpart. Writers on both sides of the Atlantic debated the merits of chaperonage, often considering age as a significant factor in the chaperone's efficacy. One American perspective offered in a 1894 *Scribner's* column claimed,

...the custom—perhaps it would be better to call it the fashion—of chaperoning is advocated on our happier shores, on the ground that it tends to cultivate among our young women the freshness, the modesty, the calm innocence of mind and manner that are attributed in English girls to the strictness with which their associations are regulated by the presence of an older and more experienced companion.⁹³

⁹³ "Point of View: The Chaperon." *Scribners* (January 1894), 131.

In the author's view, the presence of an older chaperone better instills diffidence and virtuousness in young women. In Knowles' scene, however, this "calm innocence of mind" is noticeably absent. The young woman seated on the left seems to be exceptionally taken by the prospect of flirting with the well-attired young bucks, and she is clearly calculating the various romantic possibilities of the situation.

Sadler also presents the obstacle of age in an outdoor context in *The Chaperone* (undated). Set in a walled garden, Sadler's scene features a courting couple sitting uncomfortably beside the young woman's stately male chaperone on a round bench wrapped around a tree (fig. 2.12). Each of the figures looks out in a different direction with a dissimilar emotion written across his or her face. The young suitor on the right is painted in profile, and he gazes towards an unseen part of the garden, apparently frustrated at his inability to be alone with his intended. His sweetheart sits beside him, looking into the middle distance. She may be daydreaming about her suitor and their possible future together. Her green parasol points away from her guardian and towards the direction of her admirer's line of vision.

The young woman's chaperon, an older gentleman, watches her from the corner of his eye. Although he holds a newspaper in his hands, it is tilted towards the ground, and he is obviously not reading. Instead, he is far more invested in remaining completely aware of the romantic situation at hand, ready to interrupt if things between the fiancés should take an unsuitable turn.

Age marks this stately chaperon as an unwanted accessory to young romance. Further, Sadler exhibits visual correlations between the older gentleman and the suitor, encouraging the viewer to consider the qualities of time and the life cycle when

appraising the scene. A likeness between the two men is conveyed by their shared old-fashioned costumes, including their aristocratic silk top hats and black cravats. One sees a foreshadowing of the young man's future, wherein perhaps he may one day accompany his own daughter or granddaughter during her courtship. Alternatively, a kind of reminiscence can also be inferred in the countenance of the older gentleman, who is perhaps in this moment reminded of his own young romance, which must have taken place so many years prior. This alliance between youth/age and prophesy/remembrance deepens the significance of the senescent chaperone's presence. Here he is not merely an obstacle: he is also a keystone in the construction of Sadler's multitudinous narratives. Here one may also draw a parallel to *Rustic Courtship*, in that the viewer may be "allied" with the younger or older figures depending on his or her own place in life.

Love letters passed by older hands

Interestingly, as accessories to young courtship, older figures need not necessarily characterize an obstacle. In some instances, Victorian artists also portrayed them as aids to the operations of illicit youthful exchange. For example, a survey of Anglo-American genre painting reveals a number of pictures that depict the participation of seniors in the exchange of love letters by much younger couples. Such trans-generational collusion disrupts any previously determined assumptions about the nature of aging in the context of Victorian courtship pictures.

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw an exponential proliferation in communication by mail, both in Britain and the United States. On either side of the Atlantic, letter writing became more prevalent, thanks to advancements in literacy and

transportation, as well as improvements in the cost and infrastructure associated with the post.⁹⁴ The introduction of the Penny Post in 1840 allowed a simple letter to be sent anywhere in United Kingdom for a penny, doubling popular communication through the mail.⁹⁵ In the United States, an Act of Congress on March 3, 1863, established postage for letters based on weight, eliminating a pricing structure determined by distance.⁹⁶ The same act initiated a program of free city delivery, which eventually spread to sixty-five cities nationwide.⁹⁷ These improvements in mid-century postal systems democratized the sending and receiving of love letters, leading to the popularization of new courtship practices and an introduction of new viable inter-age dynamics therein.

The love letter came to embody an essential incongruity in nineteenth-century courtship dramas. As signals of ardor and affection, they were supposed to express authentic private sentiments. However, they still managed to be bound by popular laws of social practice.⁹⁸ The love letter also had to balance this dichotomy with its inherent

⁹⁴ Nigel Hall, "The Materiality of Letter Writing: A Nineteenth-Century Perspective" In *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, David Barton and Nigel Hall, eds. *Studies in Written Language and Literacy* 9 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2000), 88.

⁹⁵ "On 6 May 1840 the first Penny Black adhesive postage stamp was inaugurated, and a simple letter could be sent anywhere within the United Kingdom for one penny. The number of letters sent through the Royal Mail in the UK doubled from 75.9 million in 1839 to 168.8 million in 1840, though most of this increase was certainly merchant post and some portion of that had previously circulated by older means. This innovation also removed the recipient from the responsibility of paying for the letter, whether it was wanted or not. Consequently, many more people began writing, and there was a concomitant increase in sales of stationery, pens, paper knives, and stamp boxes. There were also reductions in prices as economies of scale evolved and industrialized production increased." See Gary Krug, *Communication, Technology and Cultural Change* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 121.

⁹⁶ "The act also created three classes of mail: First-Class Mail, which embraced letters; second-class mail, which covered publications issued at regular periods; and third-class mail, which included all otherailable matter." *The United States Postal Service: The United States Postal Service: An American History, 1775-2006* (Washington, D.C.: Government Relations, United States Postal Service, 2012), 11.

⁹⁷ The same Act of Congress "provided that free city delivery be established at Post Offices where income from local postage was more than sufficient to pay all expenses of the service. For the first time, Americans had to put street addresses on their letters. By June 30, 1864, free city delivery had been established in 65 cities nationwide, with 685 carriers delivering mail in cities such as Baltimore, Boston, Brooklyn, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C. By 1880, 104 cities were served by 2,628 letter carriers, and by 1900, 15,322 carriers provided service to 796 cities." *The United States Postal Service*, 20.

⁹⁸ Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England*, 54.

nature as an object dependent upon reciprocity, a quality finely described by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst:

A love letter is...offered as a revelation of love, the letter is also a request for love, because it trusts in the reader's ability to complete its halting blanks and unpick its knots of ambiguity in a way that will prove how in tune with, true to, the writer he or she is.⁹⁹

This reciprocity is also defined by Gary Krug, who asserts, "The writer is creating a relationship with the absent thing by sending a part of his or her self in the form of a letter, and the recipient of the letter obtains a part of the sender."¹⁰⁰ A love letter bears tremendous responsibility as a token of trust and sincerity. In order to write a true "revelation of love," the author of such a letter must feel at ease with his or her greatest vulnerabilities. This exposure may make the sender or recipient even more sensitive to the meddling of outsiders, including older parents or guardians.

The private nature of letter writing allows young lovers to enact courtship without familial supervision. Letter-writing manuals (the prescriptive literature that developed in tandem with the expansion of the British and American post offices) included templates for letters replying to appeals for clandestine tête-à-têtes. These books also included instructions for writing sometimes-apologetic letters to parents about courtship conducted in their absence. Remarkably, these manuals often offered encouragement to young

⁹⁹ Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives: The Shaping of Influence in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 114.

¹⁰⁰ Krug, *Communication, Technology and Cultural Change*, 122. Krug is Professor of Communication and Chair of Communication Studies at Eastern Washington University.

lovers trying to establish a partnership outside of the controlling forces of parental supervision and domestic courtship practices.¹⁰¹

During the Victorian period, letters exchanged by courting couples was sacrosanct material. They were carefully guarded, kept from the prying eyes of most friends and relatives. This was due in part to the heightened emotions associated with receiving, opening, and reading a letter, which was intensely private and personal. Karen Lystra clarifies,

As a romantic relationship deepened, middle-class correspondents experienced certain letters as actual visits of their lover. Insisting on seclusion, they often read and wrote love letters as if they were in a conversation that might be overheard. When alone, they kissed their love letters, carried them to bed, and even spoke to them. In both the act of reading and writing love letters, Victorians displayed an intimacy that affords the historian a remarkable opportunity to cross once forbidden boundaries without affecting behavior on the other side.¹⁰²

This intensely felt presence of a lover could be aided or obstructed by a figure that is neither the sender nor the receiver of the love letter in question. As a medium that Victorians sent as their proxy, love letters were highly charged social sites, and the outsider involved in the exchange of letters could be characterized as a modified chaperone.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England*, 54.

¹⁰² Lystra, *Searching the Heart*, 4.

¹⁰³ “Post-letters and soon telegrams became the texts that Victorians sent before themselves, after themselves, or instead of themselves, as their proxy or their go-between, and they enfolded the

Some artists were drawn to the consuming narratives enabled by the exchange of love letters. Described by Kate Thomas as “a universal disclosure system, provided by the state in order to facilitate circulation and intimacy,” the Victorian post presented young lovers with new channels for courtship, flirtation, evasion, and cloaked exchanges.¹⁰⁴ Whether portrayed as collaborators or barricades to the exchange of young love letters, the inclusion of older figures in images of sending and receiving Cupid’s missives invariably alters the social dynamics of the picture. In these contexts, generational forces collaborate with institutional forces (cheap, robust postal services), creating a social fabric that supports romantic introductions and interventions through a medium of exchange.

In *Love Letter* (ca. 1880) by Arthur Stocks (1846-1889), an older letter carrier is portrayed as instrumental to the practice of sending and receiving love letters between young lovers (fig. 2.13). Stocks portrays a young woman stealthily intercepting the post from the mailman through a parlor window. She has stood up to reach towards him in a rush, as evidenced by her book, which she has dropped to the floor in her haste. The cause for her concern can be seen in the reflection of an oval-shaped mirror hanging behind her: a woman in a white cap and red shawl has momentarily turned her back, presenting an ideal opportunity for the young woman to retrieve what must be illicit correspondence. The older mailman, white-whiskered and simply attired, acts as the young lover’s co-conspirator, ready to hand her the cherished correspondence through the window. However, he takes slightly too long to check the name and address on the

correspondents and their desires in envelopes stamped with the approval of the nation.” Kate Thomas, *Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.

¹⁰⁴ Kate Thomas, *Postal Pleasures*, 4.

envelope he holds in his hands, exacerbating the young woman's nervousness in this guarded moment.

Stocks entered the Royal Academy in 1868, where he won various accolades, and he exhibited at a number of revered institutions, including the Society of British Artists, the Royal Academy, and the Royal Institute.¹⁰⁵ The third son of the engraver Lumb Stocks, R.A., the young Arthur originally trained in line engraving, but showed great aptitude for painting.¹⁰⁶ After his studies at the Academy, he found success in genre painting, often isolating specific moments within larger domestic dramas, as seen in pictures like *The Best of Husbands* (1877, National Museums Liverpool), *Her Sweetest Flower* (1880, Towneley Hall Art Gallery & Museum), and *Motherless* (1883, National Museums Liverpool).¹⁰⁷

Love Letter is distinguished for its high drama, due in equal parts to the decisive timing of the action to the dynamic nature of the mail itself. Thomas describes the posted letter as an object that is always “unfaithful,” made wanton by being passed through so many hands before reaching its final destination.¹⁰⁸ She writes,

Circulation through the state apparatus of the postal system interfered with the conceit that intercourse between two correspondents was direct, discrete, limited,

¹⁰⁵ R.E. Graves, “Arthur Stocks.” *Dictionary of National Biography* 54, Sidney Lee, ed. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1898), 393.

¹⁰⁶ Obituary: Mr. Arthur Stocks. *The Builder* 57, no. 2432 (November 2, 1889), 314.

¹⁰⁷ Algernon Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts: A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and Their Work from its Foundation in 1769 to 1904* (London: Henry Grave and Sons, 1905), 266-267.

¹⁰⁸ Thomas, *Postal Pleasures*, 2.

or private. Instead it construed postal exchange and its attendant passions and fields of relation as always, and often deliciously, intermediated.¹⁰⁹

That a letter is passed through so many sets of hands is enough of a complication to problematize the intimacy of a love note and may have struck some viewers as amusing. However, this disruption is intensified when the facilitators of the Royal Mail are also elderly. Stock's postman is significantly older than the letter's recipient, and it is likely that he has overseen various episodes of young courtship in his own life. As a senescent Victorian Englishman, he was likely expected to supervise and anesthetize the romantic activities of his daughters, sisters, or nieces. Alternatively, as a postal carrier, he would have also been required to work as a kind of footman in Cupid's army, and his efforts to move mail through the side window casts him as a knowing facilitator.

As both an older figure and postman, the mail carrier needs to balance his dual personas as guardian *from* and participant *in* certain romantic activities. Age is a quality that complicates these matters. At a time when courting was more regulated by chaperones and older family members, postal carriers were entrusted with facilitating the unsupervised aspects of young coupling.¹¹⁰

In an earlier example, painted just a few years after the establishment of the Penny Post, Charles West Cope (1811-1890) presents a similar scene of young anxiety over love letters passed through older intermediaries. *Palpitation* (1844) is an early specimen of a great Victorian "problem picture"—a purposely-vague scene of modern

¹⁰⁹ Thomas, *Postal Pleasures*, 2.

¹¹⁰ Kern, *The Culture of Love*, 403.

life, usually involving gender dynamics in its design (fig. 2.14).¹¹¹ Such pictures were intended to spark multiple diverse interpretations, a quality which was enabled by their deliberate ambiguities.¹¹² Throughout the Victorian era, anxieties about the relationships between men and women provided artists with the material to represent various social and domestic dramas to interpret, including those enabled by the expansion of the Royal Mail and the regular delivery of love letters across Britain.

Cope belonged to the first generation of Victorian genre painters, and he established a reputation for his work with domestic genre, as well as literary, biblical, and historical subjects.¹¹³ Appointed Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy in 1867 and Examiner in Painting for the South Kensington Schools of Art 1870, Cope was in a privileged position to influence subsequent generations of British genre painters.¹¹⁴ His friendship with the passionate art collector John Sheepshanks also ensured a public reception and legacy for his work.¹¹⁵

Palpitation presents its narrative with deliberate ambiguity. Cope's picture shows the decisive moment when a postman arrives at the house of a young woman who is clearly expecting a love letter. Like the protagonist in Stocks' *Love Letter*, Cope's young

¹¹¹ In *Problem Pictures: Women and Men in Victorian Painting* (Hants: Scolar Press, 1995), Pamela Gerrish Nunn argues that "any Victorian picture that involved women and men in its making or its content can be construed as a problematic picture." (2)

¹¹² Pamela M. Fletcher, "Masculinity, money, and modern art: *The Sentence of Death* by John Collier." In *English Art, 1860-1914: Modern Artists and Identity*, edited by David Peters Corbett and Lara Perry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 84.

¹¹³ "...an English portrait and history painter and son of Charles Cope, landscape painter. He pursued studies in Paris, Venice, Florence, Rome and Naples, and on his return to England attained great success. He painted eight large frescoes for the British Houses of Parliament. His best known works deal principally with famous events in English history, with Shakespeare's plays, with numerous Biblical themes, and with a considerable and meritorious variety of miscellaneous subjects. He was elected a member of the Royal Academy in 1848." Shepp, *Shepp's Library of History and Art*, 150.

¹¹⁴ Ronald Parkinson, *Catalogue of British Oil Paintings 1820-1860*, Victoria and Albert Museum (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1990), 45-46.

¹¹⁵ Now in the collection of the V&A, *Palpitation* was sold to Sheepshanks before the Royal Academy exhibition of 1844 and later given to the museum as part of the 1857 Sheepshanks Gift. See Charles West Cope, *Reminiscences of Charles West Cope, R.A.* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1891), 378.

heroine has clearly dropped a few belongings in her rush to intercept the mail. Standing behind the front door with a glove, bag, and parasol at her feet, she looks towards the half-open portal in nervous anticipation. Another woman, perhaps her mother or a maid, has reached the door first. The older matron speaks with the mailman, who, like Stocks' letter carrier, is significantly older than the letter's intended recipient. The age disparity between the young woman and those acting as barriers to her *billet-doux* heightens the tension of the scene.

Although Cope defines the mood of the picture with his title, it is unclear why the woman is experiencing tremors. The artist did not explicitly clarify his intended meaning, describing the scene in his memoirs simply as, "a young lady waiting for her letter, while the postman and servant are gossiping on the doorstep."¹¹⁶ Perhaps she is already married and awaiting a letter from her lover—the man's hat on the table could belong to someone who already has her heart or her hand. Further, the action unfolds beneath a pair of stag's horns—a traditional emblem of cuckoldry. Alternatively, if the hat belongs to the young woman's father, then perhaps a genuine suitor has sent the awaited letter as an innocent act of courtship. In this case, there would be less cause for her nervous pose and worried expression.

The fact that the letter is being kept from the young woman by an older pair of figures is significant. Age is employed as a marker of difference, further distancing the plight of the young lover from the sympathies of her postman and her guardian. The angst felt by the young woman was almost certainly generational, as she was a member of the first generation of Englishwomen to conduct courtship in the age of the Penny Post. A critic writing for the *Art Union* in 1844 observed,

¹¹⁶ Cope, *Reminiscences*, 165.

The receipt of letters is at all times a home subject of anxiety to the female bosom. Here, we may presume the little hope indulged under circumstances not uncommon to young ladies ... the extreme anxiety pictured in the girl's countenance enlists the best wishes of the spectator on her side - he shares her solicitude: and this is a good criterion of the excellence of the picture.¹¹⁷

This generational anxiety, which would have been familiar to younger viewers of Cope's picture, would have been less intelligible to older audiences. Older viewers would likely have courted in an era when mail was less accessible and had not yet achieved a place in the pantheon of romance. For those viewers, an interpretation of this problem picture would unequivocally be dictated by their chronological age.

Cope continued to think about the exchange of love letters in the context of generational disconnect, returning to the theme thirty-six years after presenting *Palpitation* at the Royal Academy. Cope's 1880 contribution to the annual exhibition again took as its subject a young woman and two older figures meddling with her *billets-doux*. In *The Inquisition*, a rosy-cheeked lassie stands defiantly before two older women who have discovered her box of private letters (fig. 2.15). They are going through her trove systematically, as evidenced by the piles of correspondence neatly set beside the box. Although the two busybodies do not exhibit a significantly advanced chronological age, their implied status as spinsters enables a kind of socialized senescence.

The young woman stands unapologetically before her guardians. With her right hand placed defiantly on her hip, she emits a preternatural confidence. Perhaps this

¹¹⁷ *Art Union* (1844), 159. Quoted in the collections database of the Victoria & Albert Museum, FA.52.

attitude is enabled by the fact that she seems to have tucked one letter in her left hand, keeping it from view. She may have impeded the detection of her most revealing and incriminating missive, allowing her to appear self-assured in this otherwise taxing moment.

The contents of the hidden letter are almost certainly passionate and intensely private. Although Victorian men were generally instructed to behave in a sedate manner when courting, the dynamics of power and gender roles were largely reversed when writing love letters. Jennifer Phegley explains,

...women were presumed to be more restrained and reasonable in their responses to admirers and men more sentimental and romantic in their attempts to woo women. Indeed, courtship conduct books and letter-writing manuals provide a rare instance of the belief in women's ability to "keep their heads" rather than act impulsively "from the heart," demonstrating that while women were perhaps expected to need advice literature more than men, they were also expected to behave more rationally as a result of their training.¹¹⁸

Because men were urged to be more overt in their written romantic declarations, it can be safely imagined that the hidden note contains outright declarations of affection. The young woman has made particular efforts to keep this single letter from the two prying matrons, whose nosiness has the potential to obstruct or derail her ability to receive similarly impassioned letters in the future. In this context, age threatens youth, and male expressiveness is endangered by female intrusiveness.

¹¹⁸ Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England*, 55.

Cope codes his characters through their age, emphasizing their generational differences through dress, expression, and complexion. The young woman wears a virginal white, gauzy gown tied with pink ribbons. The gold cross she prominently wears around her neck signals to the viewer that her love is pure and that the letters are not lascivious but earnest expressions of devotion. The woman's porcelain skin, expressive eyes, and rosebud mouth indicate that she is a virtuous Victorian beauty.¹¹⁹

The artist's clear adherence to the standards of young beauty is balanced against the markers of old age, which was prematurely experienced by widows and spinsters. The woman's maiden aunts are dressed in the colors of early and late-stage mourning (black for full mourning and shades of softened purple, such as mauve or lavender, for half-mourning, respectively). Companionate indicators of senescence, like the prying aunt's eyeglasses, bolster these indicators of advanced social aging. These qualities reinforce the generational gulf between the letter writer and the letter readers, providing another example of age obstructing young love.

The *Athenaeum* described *The Inquisition* when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1880,

Mr. Cope, is in unusual force, with a picture to which we have before referred by the title of by the title of *An Inquisition* (200), where two lean maiden aunts, who are apparently shrill of voice and sharp of temper, discuss letters found in the casket of a very young woman, a love-smitten culprit, who stands before them half pointing, half indignant, yet afraid to fight. The senior, with the rigid ringlets,

¹¹⁹ For more on Victorian beauty standards and their transmission, see Kathryn Ledbetter, *British Victorian Women's Periodicals: Beauty, Civilization, and Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

has a quaint, somewhat caricatured head, and a lively and acute expression that is well conceived and happily rendered.¹²⁰

The *Athenaeum* critic, who associates the picture with the aforementioned stereotypical markers of senescence, prematurely ripens the two “maiden aunts,” despite a lack of physical indicators of their advanced age. Again, the generational divide expresses itself as a barrier to young coupling—even if that age disparity has been exaggerated or artificially constructed by social standards.

The qualities of courtship associated with letter writing can also prompt younger people to hide their activities from older guardians. Victorian genre painters repeatedly visited the theme of such underhanded exchange, especially while elders were sleeping. In *Love’s Messenger* (1856), the Manchester artist William Knight Keeling (1807-1901) portrays a young woman holding a clandestine love letter before the viewer while an older woman sleeps behind her, unwittingly (fig. 2.16). A Victorian beauty dressed in Stuart costume, Knight anesthetizes the scene by cloaking the picture in historicism and symbolic language.

Love’s Messenger suggests the furtive nature of the young woman’s romance, which is underscored by the presence of the sleeping matron. If the letter were sanctioned by domestic courtship codes, the young belle would not have to wait for her guardian’s sleep to display it so proudly to the viewer. She deliberately regards her audience, inviting tacit collusion. She holds an arrow between her hands, a pierced love letter fixed on its shaft. Judging by the unbroken seal, she has not yet read the letter, and the lute at

¹²⁰ *Athenaeum* no. 2742 (May 15, 1880), 638.

her feet would indicate that she has just placed her instrument on the ground in order to receive her missive.

The drama of Keeling's picture depends upon the fragile sleep of the older woman, as so much in this scenario is determined by delicate consequences. The woman stands beside a pot of passionate, red flowers, their color signaling lust, risk, and warning. Her scarlet bodice and hair ribbons indicate passion and danger. If her guardian should wake, her romance may be just as easily pierced as the letter she has just received.

Keeling was born in Manchester and worked there for most of his life. After a brief sojourn in London, where he assisted the portrait painter William Bradley (1801-1857), he returned to Manchester, where he helped to establish the Manchester Academy of Fine Arts.¹²¹ Best remembered as an illustrator of the works of Shakespeare and Walter Scott, Keeling uses costume in *Love's Messenger* to place Victorian courtship and anxiety in another era. Despite the sedating qualities of the picture's *mise-en-scène*, Keeling's historical drama still produces a drama driven by the tensions produced by age disparity and the threat of the older woman's waking.

The theme of younger lovers passing letters in the presence of a sleeping chaperone also appeared in popular illustration. In his illustration *Where There's a Will There's a Way* (n.d.), Charles Joseph Staniland (1838-1916) depicts a young woman in Regency dress, reading a book while leaning against the frame of a doorway (fig. 2.17). The light from a nearby window illuminates her face and the book in her hands. A young man, cloaked in shadows, reaches though the doorway to pass her a letter. Her left hand knowingly reaches behind for the *billet-doux*, implying that the lovers planned the

¹²¹ South Kensington Museum, *A Catalogue of the National Gallery of British Art at South Kensington, Part I* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1893), 116.

exchange in advance. The action unfolds before an old woman sleeping in a kitchen chair, just a few feet away from her charge. The sleeping chaperone is positioned at the perfect angle to catch the couple, who are saved from castigation by her sleep.

Where There's a Will portrays a decisive moment in which the young man transmits to his sweetheart his pleasures and sensations in the form of a letter. His clandestine effort to reach out from the shadows implies that the family does not approve of the courtship, and, if the old woman awakes, she will surely thwart their romance. Such clandestine letter writing was considered disreputable, and was generally enacted when there was disapproval from the woman's family.¹²² The secretive tactics of Staniland's sweethearts indicates that if the guardian awakes and catches them, there will be consequences to suffer. In this context, age threatens youth's ability to fully inhabit the sphere of passion and romance, encouraging the establishment of alternative modes of communication.

Staniland's response to the theme of age as an obstacle to young romance comes from the perspective of a social realist. Trained at the Birmingham School of Art, the National Art Training School (South Kensington), and the Royal Academy, he contributed illustrations to a number of popular periodicals.¹²³ Particularly associated with *The Graphic* and *The Illustrated London News*, Staniland developed a prolific and successful career as an illustrator.¹²⁴ In addition to his images of the London poor and

¹²² Lydia Murdoch, *Daily Life of Victorian Women* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2014), 77.

¹²³ s.v. "STANILAND, Charles Joseph." Oxford University Press, *Benedit Dictionary of British Graphic Artists and Illustrators, Volume 1* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 414.

¹²⁴ Chris Beetles, Ltd. *The Illustrators: The British Art of Illustration, 1800-2014* (London: Chris Beetles, Ltd., 2014), 51. A catalogue note accompanying the sale of another Staniland illustration at Christie's London adds, "By the mid-1870s many of its leading artists - Luke Fildes, Hubert von Herkomer, Charles Green and William Small - had ceased to be regular contributors, and Staniland, who had proved himself working for the Illustrated London News, particularly by reporting the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, was

rural British mining communities, he developed a specialization in genre and historical subjects.¹²⁵ This sub-specialization, coupled with his success as a social realist illustrator, lends veracity to Staniland's drawing of this secretive exchange.

So much is threatened by the incursion of age into the courtship of youth. In addition to possibly disrupting or upsetting the processes of young coupling, the peril of an older guardian discovering the exchange of letters also threatens to expose the deepest desires of the letter writer. Krug explains,

The love letter is a composition which draws on the ancient techniques of rhetoric, poetry, and poesie; that is, the words and phrases are crafted to create a unique physical object, an artifact or *techne*, which, being sent into the world of another person, will convey not information but a reordering of that person's world.¹²⁶

This creation of a "unique physical object" from the private world of one's emotions makes the risk of discovery that much more complicated. When age menaces young romance, it also obstructs the transmission of private information and threatens to expose closely guarded aspects of one's personality, perhaps even threatening the process of courtship and healthy cross-generational relationships.

Of course, the threat of discovery lent itself well to the whims of artistic license, and some artists and illustrators created biting portrayals of the desire of older figures to

one of those brought in to fill the gap." See the lot notes for Charles Joseph Staniland, *The Back of the Church*. Christie's London, Sale 4978, Victorian Watercolors & Drawings (March 5, 1993), Lot 15.

¹²⁵ Chris Beetles, Ltd., *The Illustrators*, 51.

¹²⁶ Krug, *Communication, Technology and Cultural Change*, 126.

disrupt young courtship, especially through the seizure of private letters. The problem of guardians intercepting romantic mail was enough of a social phenomenon to warrant comment by M.E.W. Sherwood, the great author of late nineteenth-century prescriptive literature. In *Manners and Social Usages* (1887), Sherwood warned,

A chaperon should in her turn remember that she must not open a letter, She must not exercise an unwise surveillance. She must not *suspect* her charge. All that sort of Spanish *espionage* is always outwitted. The most successful chaperons are those who love their young charges, respect them, try to be in every way what the mother would have been. Of course, all relations of this sort are open to many drawbacks on both sides, but it is not impossible that it may be an agreeable relation, if both parties exercise a little tact.¹²⁷

In spite of Sherwood's denunciations, more than a few elderly chaperones and guardians gladly practiced the "unwise surveillance" of their charges by reading their mail. Cope portrayed the restrained glee of this reconnaissance in *The Inquisition*, while the figures in *Love Letter*, *Palpitation*, *Love's Messenger*, and *Where There's a Will* all exercise enormous care in avoiding being discovered in the middle of an exchange of letters by their elders.

Although the few aforementioned examples are all British, the phenomenon of love letters (and the threat of older people disrupting young courtship by intercepting love notes) was also addressed in American culture. The world of love letters was inhabited by sweethearts on both sides of the Atlantic, and both British and American

¹²⁷ Sherwood, *Manners and Social Usages*, 200.

artists made light of the social issues associated with this highly-charged aspect of Victorian courtship.

The issues of age, youth, and romantic intrusions were even common enough to warrant parody in comic valentines, and the interception of love letters by older figures was selected as a subject for mass reproduction in print, which conveys something about the pervasiveness of elderly surveillance at this time.

Alternatively called “penny dreadfuls” or “vinegar valentines,” comic valentines were popular in Britain and the United States beginning in the 1840s. Sold for a cent apiece, “those horrors in red, yellow, and blue” were easily spread by cheap postage.¹²⁸ Punishing and tasteless, such valentines were often composed of cruel caricatures and poems sent anonymously to people who exhibited unsavory behavior, like drunks, flirts, and penny-pinchers.¹²⁹ In his study of the commodification of Valentine’s Day, the historian Leigh Eric Schmidt describes,

¹²⁸ “Cheap postage was responsible for the so-called “comic valentines”—those horrors in red, yellow, and blue, which are sold for a cent a piece, and which are accompanied by verses more or less scurrilous, affording a chance for malicious persons to hurt the feelings of those against whom they have a grudge. This sort of valentine has all the hateful offensiveness of an anonymous letter; and, unfortunately, they are so varied in character that one can always be found which will, like a poisoned arrow, fly forth and rankle in the recipient’s most vulnerable part.” “The Valentines of Yesterday.” *The Scrap Book* 5, no. 2 (February 1908), 246-247. Other early twentieth-century periodicals also railed against this earlier Victorian practice. For example, see an essay titled “Comic Valentines” in *The Children’s Friend* 9, no. 2 (February 1910), 72: “The custom of sending comic valentines is comparatively new. May it perish at once! The so-called comic valentines are never funny. They are coarse, they are cruel, they are unkind. They do not spring from a loving thought, but from a feeling of ill-will and dislike. They stand for hate and revenge, not for love and forgiveness. They are a disgrace to a Christian land, bad in art and worse in morals. Boys, if you ever feel tempted to send one of these, stop and think and you won’t do it. You’ll send a valentine that’s worthy of the day, not a gross and insulting caricature to misrepresent the gentle saint whom the day commemorates.”

¹²⁹ Cameron C. Nickels, *Civil War Humor* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 11. For more on the history and context of comic valentines, see Barry Shank, *A Token of My Affection: Greeting Cards and American Business Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

These caricatures were a kind of extortion, especially when directed at women: Behave modestly and decorously or suffer the consequences of social rejection, ridicule, or even violence. In this regard, the comic valentines were transparent.¹³⁰

Such caricatures did not spare the figure of the meddlesome chaperone or elderly maiden aunt, whose violations of the treaties of courtship subjected her to fair derision.

One such example can be seen in a valentine titled, “A Mischief Maker,” likely dating from around 1850 (fig. 2.18). The valentine’s poem reads,

*Sly old peeper, mischief making,
Take care now whose note you’re taking;
We’ve found you out, and so despise you,
And send this warning to advise you.*¹³¹

The accompanying illustration features a middle-aged woman peering into a love letter, which she has neatly sliced open on one end. Like the meddlesome matron reading letters in *The Inquisition*, the Mischief Maker is prematurely aged. Despite her relatively young chronological age, she has been identified as an enemy of young romance by qualities that give her a much older appearance, and casting her as an embodiment of “bad old age.”

¹³⁰ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying & Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 84.

¹³¹ 6.28, “Mischief Maker,” Library Company of Philadelphia. McAllister Collection Valentines 5774.F.

An elderly matron offers a formidable opponent to cupid's quiver, and the unidentified artist who drew this illustration understood that age could be comic in its aversion to young love. The popularity of comic valentines, and the insertion of the meddling guardian into such a ritualized mockery, allowed the sender to express discomfort with certain aspects of Victorian socialization.

The theme of older guardians scrutinizing young courtship was also popular enough to be popularly featured in *Harper's Weekly* in February 1864, when it was arguably the most popular newspaper in the United States.¹³² In a large engraving titled, "St. Valentine's Day 1864," various vignettes illustrate diverse Civil War-era observances of the Valentine's holiday (fig. 2.19). Two of the vignettes prominently feature older women in the company of younger women, who read or receive love letters (ostensibly from their soldier beaux). In the center vignette, two children draw on the floor while their siblings read and write valentines. The oldest daughters stand in a cluster, swooning over a particularly lovely letter, which one of them has just received. An older woman stands behind the action, sneering at the merriment. Though she does not actively prevent the women from engaging in this romantic activity, she clearly does not approve. In the vignette on the right side of the print, a young woman reaches out the window to receive her love letter from a cherub in an army uniform. Unfortunately, an older woman opens the door to greet the heavenly postman herself, likely intercepting the letter in the process.

That such a popular news source as *Harper's* would feature the clash between age and romance is significant. The wide publication of this illustration elevates the

¹³² *St. Valentine's Day* in *Harper's Weekly* 13 (February 20, 1864), 120-121.

obstruction of young romance by older figures from simply being an effective genre theme to being a phenomenon that is popular, universally understood, and ripe for parody. In these terms, the artists at *Harper's* validate and corroborate the aforementioned British genre works, which could otherwise be dismissed as mawkish or needlessly dramatic.

For many young couples in Victorian Britain and America, the exchange of love letters became a defining activity in the courtship process. Letters were an outlet where social rules had more flexibility and young men and women could communicate with privacy and frequency. However, older guardians presented a multi-dimensional threat to these exchanges. The desire for discretion and autonomy led many young lovers, usually women, to design methods for intercepting letters or receiving them while their elderly chaperones slept.

Young love aided by the sleep of age

So much of Victorian courtship could be more easily conducted while elders slept, and British and American artists both produced pictures in which the development of young love is contingent upon the sleep of old age. Like Matteson's *Now or Never*, these pictures contain the appeal of romance, coupled with the drama of decisive moments. Age disparity between lovers and their guardians enhanced the drama of such pictures, and generational tensions manifested themselves in the treacherous spaces between lovers/chaperones, men/women, desire/attainment, and the lust of youth/impotence of age.

Abraham Solomon's (1823–1862) *First Class: The Meeting...and at First Meeting Loved* (1854) is undoubtedly one of the period's most famous examples of young courtship unfolding while an older figure sleeps (fig. 2.20). The subject scandalized audiences when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1854, precisely due to the tensions produced by a sleeping chaperone and the would-be lovers who sit in his presence, attempting to flirt without waking him.

Having previously dedicated himself to painting scenes set in the eighteenth-century, *First Class* marked Solomon's first foray into painting an incident derived from contemporary life.¹³³ It is also important to note that the version of *First Class* in question was received with great controversy, provoking Solomon to repaint the picture with an alert and awake guardian who sits between the young beau and his intended. However, in Solomon's original version, the elderly guardian sleeps in the shadows, allowing the young couple to speak intimately in their adjoining seats, uninterrupted.

A young man, stricken with feelings of love at first sight, gazes adoringly at an idealized Victorian beauty. With raven hair, porcelain complexion, and a rosebud mouth, she is the epitome of English virtue. The young woman is traveling in the first class compartment of a train with her senior father, who has fallen asleep while reading the newspaper. Accessories strewn throughout the carriage imply that all three characters are returning from a leisurely holiday: there are fishing rods, walking sticks, a basket of flowers, and a novel, all signaling that they have enjoyed some time in the country. A pastoral landscape outside the window evokes the harmony and contentment of Arcadia.

¹³³ Jeffrey Daniels, "Abraham Solomon." *Solomon: A Family of Painters* (London: Inner London Education Authority, 1985), 51.

The older gentleman sleeps obliviously while the bold young man admires his daughter. She smiles and appears to enjoy his attention, although she behaves in accordance with Victorian social practice and averts his gaze. A soft sunset light keeps her father in the shadows while illuminating her face and that of her suitor, the warmth of the fading sun dancing across her skirts and the velvet upholstery of the car. The American art historian Robert Rosenblum has written of this picture's ability to dazzle its viewer with its "astonishing luminary effects (a golden sunset suffusing the carriage and merging with the red translucence of the drawn shade behind a sleeping passenger)."¹³⁴ The light also sparkles across a heart-shaped charm, which the young lady dangles flirtatiously on a chain.

The unmistakable attraction and unrestrained flirtation between the young strangers is enabled by two major factors: the privacy of the first class carriage and the sleep of the unwitting chaperone. Many Victorian genre painters investigated the theme of train travel, with some being especially drawn to the complicated social dynamics engendered by these shared spaces. Humanities scholar Julie Wosk describes,

Artists also portrayed railroad cars as places for intimacy where men and women could feel free to engage in flirtation, courtship, and kissing, though these artists were usually amused rather than horrified at the idea.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Robert Rosenblum, "Victorian Art in Ottawa." *Art Journal* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1965), 139.

¹³⁵ Julie Wosk, *Women and the Machine: Representations from the Spinning Wheel to the Electronic Age* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 8.

Unfortunately, Solomon's reviews were overwhelmingly unfavorable, with many critics responding with horror at the sight of this unsanctioned flirtation. A critic for the *Art Journal* censured,

The subject (of *First Class*) is an adventure in a railway - carriage; there are three figures: one, an elderly gentleman in the right [sic] hand corner, is asleep, while between the other two, a youth and a maiden, there seems to have arisen a *tendresse*. As a picture, it is executed with great knowledge and power, but it is, we think, to be regretted that so much facility should be lavished on so bald - or vulgar - a subject.¹³⁶

The physical proximity between the two would-be sweethearts would have stoked the controversy. Solomon immediately set to appeasing his detractors, creating the second version of the picture the following year, absent its "bald" and "vulgar" qualities.¹³⁷ In the revised canvas, the light is brighter, and there are fewer shadows cloaking the suggestive actions of the pair. Further, the father is shown alert and awake, conversing eagerly with the young beau. He has been moved from the corner of the carriage to the center, where he can protect his charge and negotiate her courtship.

Solomon's complete title, *First Class: The Meeting...and at First Meeting Loved*, explains that the young man has fallen in love with the young beauty at first sight. This powerful sensation would present a clear challenge to the authority of any chaperone,

¹³⁶ *The Art Journal* (June 1, 1854); The Royal Academy, The Exhibition, 1854, p. 164, No. 314; p. 165, No. 361. Quoted in Ian Lowe, "Two Paintings by Abraham Solomon." *National Gallery of Canada Bulletin* 1-2, no. 9-10 (1967), pp. 41-46, 50. <http://www.gallery.ca/bulletin/num9-10/lowe2.html>

¹³⁷ See *The Return: First Class* (1855), oil on canvas, 87.1 x 115.2 cm, National Railway Museum / Yale Center for British Art; and *First Class - the Meeting: Revised Version* (1856 or later), oil on canvas, 54.5 x 76.3 cm, Southampton City Art Gallery.

regardless of his or her age. The experience of desire conveyed by Solomon's title emphasizes the vulnerability of the girl's virtue. In his essay, "Love at First Sight: The Velocity of Victorian Heterosexuality," Christopher Matthews argues that if,

...love at first sight is defined in this period not only by instantaneous desire but by its transformation of public space into libidinal space, then the railway's technologies offer an ideal figurative and material setting.¹³⁸

Introducing the morally hazardous qualities of rail travel to the preexisting conditions of age disparity and the romantic obstacles it produces makes *First Class* an unparalleled example of the potential transgressions that can be enacted by young lovers while their guardians sleep.

Victorian genre painters were interested in mining visual details for their narrative potential, and Solomon chose to cast his scene in a manner that would intensify the scene's drama. The artist's decision to include a sleeping chaperone who was visibly older (emphasized by his white hair and eyeglasses) enhances the delicacy of the picture. The railway already incited considerable anxiety about the danger of contact with strangers during travel, and to add the fragile sleep of an older guardian to this dynamic augmented the scene's ability to provoke nervousness and discomfort.¹³⁹

Many artists interpreted the themes of young courtship and sleeping chaperones in a variety of contexts. While some, like Staniland and Solomon, chose to set their scenes

¹³⁸ Christopher Matthews, "Love at First Sight: The Velocity of Victorian Heterosexuality." *Victorian Studies* 46, no. 3 (Spring, 2004), 427.

¹³⁹ Julian Treuherz, "The Human Drama of the Railway." In Ian Kennedy and Julian Treuherz, *The Railway: Art in The Age of Steam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 83.

within intimate interiors, others found ways to play with this dynamic in outdoor settings. When transposed from the world of railway travel to the garden, the sleeping elderly guardian maintains his or her narrative function as an embodied courtship barrier.

The period painter Henry Gillard Glindoni (1852-1913) renders a similar situation in *Why Hesitate?* (1899), which features a young, titillated couple who flirt near the woman's sleeping chaperone (fig. 2.21). The two women share a long, green bench in a garden surrounded by pale pink rose bushes. The older woman, seated at the far end of the bench, nearly recedes into the middle distance. She wears the muted lavender of half-mourning and sleeps with her arms folded, her head resting upon the angle of her straw poke bonnet. The bonnet has the potential to act like a pair of horse's blinders, limiting the chaperone's peripheral vision and better permitting the concomitant flirtation.

The young woman, dressed in a sensuous and gauzy empire dress, leans towards her beau. However, she restrains herself from completely giving in to his ardor, instead looking away from him. The suitor, dressed in an impressive military uniform, displays a bold lack of hesitation around the chaperone, bowing towards his intended as if to bestow her with a kiss on the cheek or a whisper in her ear.¹⁴⁰

The Regency costuming of *Why Hesitate?* anesthetizes the situation, placing the unfolding drama in the recent past, beyond the corrective controls of late Victorian morality. A 1928 profile of Glindoni in *Pearson's Magazine* describes the artist's taste for the previous century,

¹⁴⁰ Glindoni's taste for military finery was known to critics. A 1904 profile of the artist notes, "His father was a designer of military embellishments at a time when decorations formed a very essential and costly part of a soldier's accoutrements," and "His principal hobby, that of collecting old military uniforms and shoes, has probably been inherited." Marcus Bourne Huish, *British Water-Colour Art in the First Year of the Reign of King Edward the Seventh* (London: The Fine Art Society, Adam and Charles Black, 1904), 120.

The periods of powder and patches, flower-faced ladies, and courtly gallants appeal to him much more than the sidelights of the stage, and most of his charming pictures are of those bygone days. When once an artist falls under the spell of the picturesque past, there is small likelihood of his ever being satisfied with present-day fashion in clothes and love-making...The truly English artist loves to linger among the days of yore, and does his best to bring them back again...¹⁴¹

Glindoni established a reputation as an artist who devoted his energy to the portrayal of romantic situations set in the picturesque environments of “bygone days.” This historicism makes this flirtation feel less threatening, and coupled with the wide-open space of the rose garden, Glindoni’s composition seems outright innocent. Despite the inclusion of an older sleeping figure, *Why Hesitate?* lacks the urgency and ominous intimacy of Solomon’s portrayal of the same dynamic. This comparison reveals the limits of age disparity and chaperonage in the production of narrative discomfort.

The theme of young love unfolding in the presence of sleeping elders derives its power from domestic settings and intimate environments. The slumbering matron aunt or elderly father exerts significantly more power when courtship is enacted in a shared space, a quality evidenced by a work like *Her Signal* (ca. 1892) by the Newlyn painter Norman Garstin (1847-1926).

Widely reproduced during the artist’s lifetime, *Her Signal* combines the tensions of young coupling, senescent surveillance, and the frictions produced by these qualities

¹⁴¹ L. Van der Veer, “The Art of the Age: The Work of H.G. Glindoni, A.R.W.S.” *Pearson’s Magazine* 26 (July-December 1928), 463.

when they are hosted by the same intimate domestic space (fig. 2.22).¹⁴² Garstin's canvas shares narrative qualities with the aforementioned picture by O'Neill, in which the aged potential interloper is not a relative but an employer. An old woman has fallen asleep while reading in her armchair, a nearby lamp casting a dim glow over her shawl and the pages in her lap. The rest of the room remains dark, except for the contained glow of a single candle held by a maid standing at the window. She is sending a signal to her sweetheart outside the house, letting him know that it is safe to approach the house.

When the picture was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1892, it invited comment in a number of publications. A critic writing for the *Pall Mall Gazette* simply described the scene as, "an old lady has at last fallen asleep in her chair. A lamp is on the table, and beyond, at the great uncurtained window, a girl, released from further tendance on the sick, stands with a lighted taper—her signal to one who stands without."¹⁴³ A contributor to *The Tablet* opined, "The feeling of ignorance as to whether that candle-light finds or does not find a wanderer, is completely expressed in the melancholy and undemonstrative figures of the women."¹⁴⁴ The ambiguity of the scene underscores the delicacy of the dynamics at its center—nothing is certain in Garstin's picture, neither an assuredness of slumber nor confidence that the illicit signal is being received.

Like O'Neill's reprimand, *Her Signal* detaches the physical presence of the young suitor from the scene, placing him just outside the realm of discovery. The lover's absence, combined with the mistress's slumber, establishes a charged dynamic between the two women. If the maid is caught, she will be alone in her chastisement, with no beau

¹⁴² During Garstin's lifetime, reproductions of *Her Signal* appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, "Pictures of 1892" (1892), 63; *Magazine of Art*, "Royal Academy Pictures" (1892), 127; *Black & White, Handbook to the Royal Academy* (1892), 137; and *The Walker* (1892), 62.

¹⁴³ "The Royal Academy, 1892" *The Pictures of 1892 and the Men who Paint Them*. Extra to the *Pall Mall Gazette* no. 62 (May 2, 1892), 13.

¹⁴⁴ "ROYAL ACADEMY. [CONCLUDING NOTICE.]" *The Tablet* 79, no. 2716 (May 28, 1892), 843.

to share the repercussions. It is in this way that Garstin's elderly courtship barrier performs an unusual function. As the young woman's employer, the slumbering matron would have little interest in performing the duties of chaperone or guardian. If the lovers are caught, the punishment incurred by the young maid will likely be professional or financial in nature, instead of the likely more emotional or social repercussions that would be experienced by a non-employee caught in the same circumstances.

Called "the greatest of the uncelebrated British artists of his era," Norman Garstin has received little contemporary recognition, despite exhibiting at the Royal Academy and working in the celebrated atelier of Carolus-Duran.¹⁴⁵ A strong proponent of Realism, he is most closely identified with the Newlyn school of artists who found their ideal subjects in the domestic minutiae of the Cornwall coast. Garstin and his fellow Newlyn painters, like Stanhope Forbes and Walter Langley, shared a common hostility towards the Royal Academy, favoring *plein air* techniques and quotidian subjects.¹⁴⁶ Garstin even located his distaste for the Academy within the spectrum of aging and ageism, criticizing the RA for being "so constituted as to preclude nearly all growth except perhaps the inalienable right of each member to grow old...And so, by sheer dint of longevity, he yields an extravagant power."¹⁴⁷

This perspective, coupled with the finely designed drama of *Her Signal*, implies that Garstin understood the significant narrative potential of age and aging. He was also interested in social disconnectedness, and it is worth considering his employment of age disparity in these terms. Garstin's biographer Richard Pryke writes,

¹⁴⁵ Richard Pryke, *Norman Garstin. Irishman & Newlyn Artist* (Reading: Spire Books Ltd., 2005), 13, 33.

¹⁴⁶ Pryke, *Norman Garstin*, 64.

¹⁴⁷ Excerpted from the Garstin papers – Pryke, *Norman Garstin*, 65.

Garstin's pictures had the distinguishing feature of extreme emotional coolness and the absence of any element of social realism or sentimentality...A striking feature of his pictures, throughout his career, is that, where they contain more than one person, there is little or no interaction between them.¹⁴⁸

This emotional distance and social separation is underscored by generational difference, which further alienates the two women from each other. Age is merely one quality in a number of oppositions that enhance the isolation and contrast apparent throughout *Her Signal*. This is an emotionally cool courtship, many degrees removed from the salaciousness or sensuality of *First Class* or the amorous danger of Stocks' *Love Letter*.

A variety of symbols enhance the scene, though the darkness of the room impedes their discovery. A birdcage can be seen near the young maid, suggesting that she, too, feels like a caged bird, her freedom and love limited by her obligations to her employer and her station. An hourglass sits on the table near the sleeping woman's arm, frozen halfway through its cycle. This emblem of time's passing suggests that Garstin has considered time and the life course to be major factors in the design of his narrative. The hourglass also functions effectively within the scenography of waiting—another essential facet of courtship.

In many of the aforementioned pictures, the incursion of age into the romantic spheres of youth personifies a kind of social or emotional crisis. Identified by Karen Lystra as a common feature of middle-class courtship in the nineteenth century, crises

¹⁴⁸ Pryke, *Norman Garstin*, 78. It is also important to note that before Pryke's book, there had been no monographic study of Garstin's career. For more on Pryke's reappraisal of Garstin, see the review of Richard Pryke's *Norman Garstin. Irishman & Newlyn Artist* in *The British Art Journal* 6, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2005), 92.

(like the threat of discovery, in most of these examples) helped women to gauge the intensity and depth of their suitor's love.¹⁴⁹ Lystra explains,

...both men and women relied upon nineteenth-century courtship testing to gauge their partner's emotional commitment. This testing involved the creation of major or minor crises in a courting relationship. Often the participants used the life materials at hand to set obstacles in the pathway of love, which one or the other partner had to overcome, usually through either actions or words of reassurance.¹⁵⁰

The violation of privacy and insertion into the private spaces of young lovers typifies age's ability to challenge the desires of youth. The presence of an elderly parent, grandparent, or chaperone provides an ideal "life material at hand" to challenge the sincerity and devotion of one's intended.

The incursion of an older figure in a scene of young love comprises several points of influence on the construction of the larger narrative. He or she may, for example, simply embody a kind of living courtship wall—a physical barrier one must transcend. Alternatively, the senescent guardian can be read as a foreshadowing element, appearing before fiancés as a visual reminder of the passage of time and the inevitability of old age. In this way, age in the context of young courtship can be interpreted as a kind of relationship-centered *memento mori*. The insertion of an older figure into the world of

¹⁴⁹ Lystra, *Searching the Heart*, 157.

¹⁵⁰ Lystra, *Searching the Heart*, 157-158.

young lovers also violates the barriers erected to separate the dream-like world of fresh romance from the trappings of social prescriptions and lived experience.

Returning to Matteson's *Now or Never* after this extended survey of age disparities and disruptions of courtship rituals, it is clear to see how a consideration of the life cycle can influence interpretations of such nineteenth-century genre pictures.

Looking again at Matteson's almost-stolen kiss, it appears that the young country suitor is not only hesitating for fear of rejection: his vacillation before his sweetheart's cheek also signals his choice to violate the principles of his elders in the pursuit of his own desires.

The intended kiss would both indicate his intentions towards the young woman and challenge the courtship barrier erected by the presence of their senescent surveillants who watch from the shadows.

Qualities of aging profoundly impact scenes like Matteson's, and countless related threads of inquiry have been overlooked as age has habitually been disregarded as a source of meaning in both British and American genre pictures. It is important to note that these artists explicitly calculated ways to portray youth tiptoeing around their elders, and the threat of age intensifies the strains and ecstasies of young romance. While British and American genre of the later nineteenth century occasionally casts older men and women as facilitators of relationships, it is more often the case that they present a living obstacle to young coupling. A more sensitive consideration of this obstacle can ably influence the pains and pleasures of reading Victorian genre.

Chapter Three

Fools and Lions: Re-Contextualizing the May-December Relationship

A bride looks down, her eyes fixed upon a grey stone slab set in the cold church floor beneath her feet, which marks a body buried below. Acting as both an aisle runner and *memento mori*, the slab conveys the dual nature of the scene, as this somber wedding march simultaneously evokes unhappy nuptials and a kind of emotional and spiritual death.

In *Till Death Do Us Part*, Edmund Blair Leighton's gloomy wedding scene of 1878, the title signals a sullen vow and looming mortality (fig. 3.1). A young bride dressed in snow-white silk limply holds the arm of a much older man as they walk down the aisle. Their backs are turned away from the altar and her head hangs down, while her elderly groom looks blankly towards the church doors as they embark upon their new, and likely disappointing, union.

The observers in the pews react as if they are at a funeral. The bride's young friends look at her imploringly and cheerlessly, perhaps silently hoping to eventually seek out more companionate marriages for themselves. The children in the crowd seem to sense the apprehension and hopelessness felt by the adults, especially the flower girl who slumps into the arms of another young boy—perhaps foreshadowing that she has learned from the downcast bride's mistake. An older woman, perhaps more equal in age to the silvered bridegroom, is dressed in widow's weeds, her chin resting in her hand as she looks over the couple with a dismal gaze. Behind her, two of the groom's senescent

contemporaries watch the recessional with their scrutiny fixed on the pretty young woman and her elderly husband, their reactions colored by a mix of jealousy and disapproval.

One young man dominates among the observers – he steadies himself by holding firmly onto a pew as he earnestly attempts to meet the young bride’s evasive glance. He yearns for her furtive acknowledgement, though she cannot bear to cast her eyes upon him. Young, handsome, and dressed in elegiac shades of black, Leighton has characterized him as the jilted love, mourning the choice made by his lost May sweetheart who, ultimately, chose a December husband.

While the *Oxford English Dictionary* states that the origins of the term “May-December romance” are debatable, the use of spring and winter months as metaphors for age-disparate unions can be traced as far back as Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale* (ca. 1395).¹ For centuries, the months of May/December or May/January have been used as simple shorthand for addressing the complex social issue of trans-generational coupling. This personification of the seasons can be found in a variety of contexts, with May embodying springtime, freshness, and development, and December symbolizing winter, decay, and decrepitude. May-December marriages have historically offended popular opinion, their provocative nature inciting a reaction similar to overhasty marriages and unions based on

¹ In Chaucer’s tale, January, an upright, elderly bachelor, decides to marry the young and lovely May, who eventually cuckolds him, a trick aided by his failing eyesight. This section of the *Merchant’s Tale* can be found in *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 158-166. Also see “May.” In *The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, edited by Elizabeth Knowles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

avarice.² However, despite the controversy of age-disparate unions, they were by no means an infrequent event in Victorian culture.³

Depictions of age-mismatched relationships reveal various degrees of sensitivity, normalcy, humor, and disrupt aesthetic conventions. When age is considered not as a peripheral quality exhibited by a tangential character, but a factor of central importance in the determination of a picture's narrative, a contemporary reading of the scene is indelibly altered. Unlike the two previous chapters, which asserted the independent significance of age and its characterization in Victorian genre, a study of May-December pairings is inevitably more focused on the dynamic between the two primary figures, which devoting more attention to the status of younger subjects. This chapter will focus on aging and the age dynamic as a subject matter, and not just the aging figure alone.

Till Death Do Us Part introduces the varied tensions surrounding age disparity in late nineteenth-century marriages, a subject that had some appeal on both sides of the Atlantic. Although such pairings are commonly found in the literature of this period, Anglo-American artists seem to have been more reluctant to describe the May-December union.⁴ While British painters made a few critically acclaimed paintings of such scenes, American equivalents seem to be largely limited to the work of popular illustrators. This disparity is surprising, as questions and fears about age-mismatched unions can be readily

² Peter Ward, *Courtship, Love, and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century English Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 199), 112.

³ "Probably extremes meet more often in marriage than in any other undertaking in life. Particularly is this the case with regard to age – the mating of May and December being no uncommon occurrence." Charles Dickens, "The Remarkable Side of Marriage: Lasting Unions." *All the Year Round: A Weekly Journal* no. 209 (December 31, 1892), 629-633.

⁴ For more on age-disparate unions in literature, see Esther Liu Godfrey's *The January-May Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Godfrey explores the history of May-December unions in British literature, from Chaucer to Shakespeare, before focusing her attentions on the nineteenth century. Her thoughtful approach to the question of such uneven unions addresses texts by Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Anthony Trollope, Charlotte Brontë, and others.

found in many texts produced on both sides of the Atlantic.⁵ British and American novels, magazine serials, and etiquette books addressed the idea of imbalance between the ages of a man and his wife. Illustrations of such anxieties were even mass-produced in the forms of valentines, greeting cards, and advertising cards.⁶

While intergenerational romance has been occasionally addressed as a theme in nineteenth-century visual culture, scholarship has largely been reductive or dismissive with regards to the role of the older partner in such scenes. The figure of the younger spouse, usually a woman, generally yields more academic inquiries, and art historical attention has traditionally been focused on the figure of the May bride, which suits recent tastes for the feminist parsing of ideas of gender and power. An expanded reading of the role of the older partner in these pictures may expand our understanding of their holistic construction, as aging and its effects was more comprehensively appraised by Victorian audiences than it is today.

⁵ Historian Stephen Kern provides the following concise survey of May-December pairings in nineteenth-century literature: “Victorian novels are full of such marriages. Rochester is 20 years older than Jane, Sergey is 19 years older than Masha, Casaubon is 26 years older than Dorothea, Levin is 14 years older than Kitt, Grandcourt is 15 years older than Gwendolen, Osmond is 11 years older than Isabel, Widdowson is 23 years older than Monica, Innstetten is 21 years older than Effie, Phillotson is 18 years older than Sue. The hero of Maupassant’s *Bel-Ami* (1885) winds up marrying his mistress’s daughter. By the end of *The Well-Beloved* (1892) Pierston is pursuing the granddaughter of his first beloved. Although some novelists such as Charlotte Brontë and Tolstoy were not troubled by such unions, most interpretations were negative, in accord with Chillingworth’s confession to Hester: “I betrayed thy budding youth into a false and unnatural union with my decay” (100). The average age difference in all the nineteenth-century novels I read is eleven years, whereas in twentieth-century novels it is two years. There are some big age gaps in the modern period...but such gaps are not so large, so typical, or so important as they are in Victorian novels.” Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Love: Victorians to Moderns* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 384.

⁶ Such ephemera is indicative of the range of materials studied in the Maxine Waldron and Thelma Mendsen Collections in the Winterthur Archives throughout the course of a Dissertation Research Fellowship in 2014. These collections feature a wide range of paper materials, including valentines, Christmas cards, temperance cards, scrapbooks, paper dolls, calling cards, and postcards. Kindest thanks to Laura Parrish and Jeanne Solensky for their support and assistance. For more on the Waldron and Mendsen collections, see Mary-Elise Haug’s essay, “The Life Cycle of Printed Ephemera: A Case Study of the Maxine Waldron and Thelma Mendsen Collections,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 30, no. 1 (Spring, 1995), 59-72.

The popularity of this theme in late Victorian fine art and popular print demonstrates how artists desiring to examine modern social issues about aging, romance, and relations across the spectrum of the life cycle employed the May-December theme. Intergenerational pairings were more common in the Victorian era than some twenty-first century viewers might expect, and images of intergenerational pairings are most often appraised without acknowledging that, in the late nineteenth century, many upper-middle-class women were often appreciably younger than their husbands.⁷ While recent art historical scholarship looks to these images as evidence of historical gender imbalances and disparities of power, an extended consideration of these pictures in a late nineteenth-century context reveals that such unions were often entered into willingly and freely by women who sometimes willingly sacrificed companionate marriages for the rank or financial security proffered by a senior suitor.

Images of age-disparate unions may conjure ideas of economic motivation and the promise of financial support that awaits a younger spouse who marries a well-heeled older suitor, and these ideas were repeated and consecrated throughout late nineteenth-century media, including music, fiction, and the fine arts. In her 1854 novel *May and December*, the British-American author Catherine Anne Hubback describes the marriage of a rich, elderly merchant and a lovely young woman, who is incidentally named “May.” As May considers the old man’s proposal, she is encouraged,

...you know you cannot have everything you want; choose between Lincolnshire and London...the dull library and a splendid establishment; old literature, and the

⁷ On the frequency with which May-December couples actually appeared in Victorian life, see Pat Jalland, *Women, Marriage, and Politics, 1860-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 79-84.

Park and opera; wading through muddy roads, or driving a splendid turn-out, and riding a thorough-bred Arab in town. Come, May, do you hesitate? ...you know the proverb, “it is better to be an old man’s darling than a young man’s slave;” depend upon it, riches and honor are the best, the very best recipe for happiness.⁸

It is expedient to equate trans-generational marriages with financial transactions.

However, Esther Liu Godfrey challenges this oversimplification of the issue in her presentation of a number of other significant considerations in her efficacious study, *The January-May Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*, which expands the conversation about age-disparate unions. Godfrey pushes the issue further, discussing the common triangulated relationships between a young bride, her age-equivalent suitor, and her much older husband – a provocative grouping that is well illustrated by Leighton’s melancholy marriage recession.

Godfrey describes such a scenario, which “typically centers on a romantic triangle consisting of the husband, wife, and young male rival for the young wife’s affection. Though occasionally more than one suitor vies for the wife’s affections, the triangular structure proves dominant, and when multiple suitors exist, they often blend, forming a composite ideal of what the husband is not.”⁹ Leighton’s two male rivals are matched in height, dress, and stature, though their complementary sullen expressions are generated by divergent motivations. The young man’s beseeching regret and the groom’s grim awareness of his new bride’s despondency are unrelated emotions expressed by similar means. In this pairing of oppositional masculinities, the young lover is portrayed as

⁸ Catherine Anne Hubback, *May and December: A Tale of Wedded Life* (London: Charles J. Skeet, 1854), 51.

⁹ Godfrey, *The January-May Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*, 7.

possessing qualities that are absent in his matrimonial alternate. He gazes at the bride with a mix of complicated emotions, while his substitute fixes his eyes upon the door, expressionless.

A wide range of other issues that characterize images of intergenerational marriages and their complexities have traditionally been addressed in terms of economics, social structure, familial expectation, and greed. Further, considered approaches to such images also reveal what Timothy L. Carens describes as “the financial transactions and valuations that underlie the union of youthful female beauty and aging male prestige.”¹⁰ These exchanges have long fascinated humanities scholars, though academic sympathies often appear biased, leaning heavily in favor with the perspective of the “youthful beauty.” An alternative, expanded understanding of pictures like *Till Death Do Us Part* would benefit from greater considerations of “aging male prestige” (or, in rare cases, aging female prestige). Further, it can be argued that by addressing the question of age as a center of meaning in such narratives, pictures like Leighton’s may effectively present an illustration of the usefulness of age studies to nineteenth-century art history.

Despite its positive reception since its presentation at the Royal Academy in 1879, *Till Death Do Us Part* has historically been treated in a reductive manner. The figure of the older bridegroom, characterized by his age and his financial success, is usually only mentioned in passing, while the bride’s multivalent role in her unhappy nuptials is often treated in a more expansive fashion. The scene, unquestionably complex in the treatment

¹⁰ Timothy L. Carens review of *The January-May Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Culture* by Esther Godfrey. *Victorian Studies* 52, no. 2 (Winter 2010), 314.

of its characters, is often addressed haphazardly or superficially, as with the English art critic Harry Quilter, who, in 1899, described it simply as “an idyll of society life.”¹¹

A reviewer writing for the *Magazine of Art* about the “Pictures of the Year” in 1879 also conveys this typical unevenness,

Mr. Blair Leighton’s scene...is from the usually more dressy than picturesque incidents of a modern wedding; he has, however, given his bride the graceful contour of a classic figure; she walks down the aisle on the arm of her moneyed lord and master, whose prosperity and respectability are well expressed without caricature; while a former admirer stands up in his place in the church to reproach the faithless fair with a look.¹²

The bride is described by her “graceful contour,” which evokes both her favorable countenance and pleasing physical appearance, while her spouse is simply deemed “moneyed.” This characterization of the December husband does not consider his life experiences, the ways in which he earned his assumed financial wealth, or the difficult decisions he, too, must have made in order to find himself in the position of the elderly bridegroom.

¹¹ “Mr. Blair Leighton’s *Till Death do us Part* was an idyll of society life told with an incisive force which Mr. Frith must have envied—for it vanquished him on his own ground; the work, moreover, was relieved from commonplaceness by the extreme solidity and sharpness of the painting, and by an amount of expression rare in this style of picture.” Harry Quilter, *Preferences in Art, Life, and Literature* (London: Swan, Sonnenschein & Co., 1892), 334.

¹² “Pictures of the Year.—IV,” *The Magazine of Art* 2, (London: Cassell, Petter, Galpin & Co., 1879), 219.

The *Magazine of Art* review is not unique in this treatment of Leighton's scene.¹³ Across a wide body of literature dating from the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries, rarely does one find any complexity with regards to the character of the older spouse in discussions of May-December wedding scenes.¹⁴ Rather, attention is generally dedicated to the bride, whom historian Stephen Kern describes as "helpless as a sacrificial lamb."¹⁵

In his 1992 study *The Culture of Love: Victorians to Moderns*, Kern addresses *Till Death Do Us Part* as an illustration of various complex issues which were imprinted upon Victorian romance, courtship and marriage. Although his text is generally thoughtful and wide-reaching in terms of its considerations of the expanded legal rights of women, alterations in Victorian public tastes, and the rigidly anxious moralities that coalesced to define and describe love in the nineteenth century, Kern's description of Leighton's picture is not unlike the comment written by the *Magazine of Art* reviewer more than one hundred years prior:

Most Victorian painters depicted the bride's happy preparations or post-wedding celebrations surrounded by other people. Some rendered a bride's darker moments, although these were embedded in a narrative and triggered by a

¹³ An attempt has been made here to be careful about how these treatments of the work are characterized – by no means should it be unintentionally implied that the author's perspective is a modern superimposition and reflective of modern sensibilities and sensitivities rather than an unpacking of social context and meaning at the time of the work, which is my intention.

¹⁴ The most distressingly simple description made about this painting may have been that which was made by C.F. Carter in an article titled, "Weddings in Art," *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly* 48 (May-October 1899). Carter writes, "In 1879 E. Blair Leighton's picture, *Until Death Do Us Part*, was exhibited. It attracted a great deal of favorable comment. It represented a bridal party marching down the aisle of a church, with guests looking on." (350-351)

¹⁵ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Love: Victorians to Moderns*, 320.

particular situation rather than by the act of wedding itself. Edmund Blair-Leighton's *Until Death Do Us Part* (1878) shows a dejected bride who has just made the wrong choice by marrying the prosperous but aloof older groom at her side instead of her true love, who is staring intently at her from the left aisle.

Again, the groom is defined solely in terms of his age and wealth—though perhaps the fact that he is mentioned at all is noteworthy. Many have successfully described the picture with fewer than two words dedicated to the figure of the new husband, despite the fact that his inclusion wholly determines the scene's narrative.

If the figure of the December groom is paid extended attention, it soon becomes apparent that his presence is vital to the interpretation of the painting. The title repeats the idea, "till death do us part." Is this promise simply a standard wedding vow? Could it be a secret wish, whispered by the bride to herself before the procession into the church? A mantra uttered by an older man who is grateful for the assurance of companionship?

An appraisal of the groom's physical appearance becomes essential to deciphering the painting. Godfrey explains, "if the groom's body suggests he has one foot in the grave, the bride will not have long to wait. If the groom's body appears vigorous, then the painting's title becomes more ominous."¹⁶ As viewers, it is also important to consider how these clues should be interpreted. Does one hope for the groom's swift decline, perhaps so the young lovers may be reunited again? Or would it be ideal for them to have a long life together in (unlikely) married bliss? Such inquiries illustrate the open hostility with which audiences may feel conditioned to interpret the December spouse.

¹⁶ Godfrey, *The January-May Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*, 99-100.

The oversimplification of the December groom's role contradicts the obvious complexities of the picture. Leighton was a master of open-ended narrative and his scene is elegantly unresolved, though the aforementioned descriptions of the husband's status do little to celebrate and enhance the myriad possibilities for his appraisal. Susan P. Casteras describes the narrative potential of works that are "open-ended and unresolved, notably...Leighton's *Till Death Do Us Part*, for which alternative endings (reunion, rejection, indifference) may be conjectured by the viewer. Open-endedness by its nature invites involvement and speculation, while closure arguably is less demanding and tolerates a greater degree of emotional detachment."¹⁷ By refusing to address the bridegroom in multivalent terms, critics and scholars have significantly limited the picture's capacity for alternative endings and varied emotional effects.

Lionel Lambourne, the former Head of Paintings at the Victoria and Albert Museum, wrote a description of *Till Death Do Us Part* on the occasion of the picture's recent sale at Christie's. Despite his status as one of the greatest experts in the field of Victorian art history, his summation of the scene similarly overlooks the December groom as a powerful force within the larger narrative. Lambourne writes, "The bride is shown on the arm of an elderly bridegroom whom she has just married. She exchanges rueful glances with a young man in one of the pews. She has become the 'bird in a gilded cage' whose 'beauty is sold for one man's gold' in a popular song of the period."¹⁸ Given little description aside from his status as "an elderly bridegroom," the aged husband is

¹⁷ Susan P. Casteras, *The Defining Moment: Victorian Narrative Paintings from the Forbes Magazine Collection* (Charlotte, NC: Mint Museum of Art, 1999), 25.

¹⁸ Lionel Lambourne, "Painters of Everyday Life: Genre Paintings in the Forbes Collection." In Christie, Manson & Woods, *The Forbes collection of Victorian Pictures and Works of Art: Wednesday 19 and Thursday 20 February 2003, Session III* (London: Christie's, 2003), 268.

again diminished in terms of his autonomy within the scene – this time by an authority on Victorian painting.

Leighton himself acknowledged the importance of the groom's fortune in determining the actions of the scene. The painting's original title, *Pounds, Shillings, and Pence*, was written *L.S.D.* or “£, s, d,” which would have foregrounded these ideas.¹⁹ However, by renaming the picture with reference to the traditional wedding vows of the Church of England, Leighton likely intended to draw attention away from the financial considerations of their union, highlighting instead the larger issues of marriage misalliance and sexual-physical incompatibilities.²⁰ A profile of the artist written by Rudolph De Cordova for *The Windsor Magazine* in 1905 also comments on the change in title, claiming that, the alteration was made “In deference...to the representations of certain older artists,” likely his fellow Academicians.²¹ From this perspective, the motivation again speaks to a heightened awareness of aging and its role in society at large, as Leighton's own sensitivity to the age of those around him is marked by this sacrifice of his own “mordant sarcasm.”²²

At twenty-six years old, Leighton's 1879 exhibition of *Till Death Do Us Part* was only his second showing at Burlington House, and, within his larger oeuvre, this scene stands apart for many reasons.²³ De Cordova explains, Leighton's “limited output was further handicapped by the fact that his versatile mind refused to be bound down to one style, and he was constantly changing his class of subject, his manner, and from a certain

¹⁹ Godfrey, *The January-May Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*, 98-99.

²⁰ Casteras, *The Defining Moment*, 100.

²¹ Rudolph De Cordova, “The Art of Mr. E. Blair Leighton.” *The Windsor Magazine* (Volume XXI, December 1904 – May 1905, Ward, Lock & Co., Limited, London 1905), 587.

²² De Cordova, “The Art of Mr. E. Blair Leighton,” 587.

²³ Casteras, *The Defining Moment*, 100.

point of view, his technique.”²⁴ Leighton’s pictures are often set in an imagined historical past, and well-known canvases like *Adieu* (1901) and *The Wedding Register* (1920) are typical of the more modern scenes within his larger output, which is better associated with scenes of medieval chivalry and Arthurian legend, like *Lady Godiva* of 1892. Leighton’s romantic pictures of historical bravery are described in his obituary in *The Connoisseur*, 1922:

The death of Mr. Edmund Blair Leighton, on September 1st, removed from our midst a painter who, though he did not attain to the higher flights of art, yet played a distinguished part in aiding the public mind to an appreciation of the romance attaching to antiquity, and to a realization of the fellowship of mankind throughout the ages.²⁵

It is curious, then, that an artist so readily identified with a romantic, imaginary past chose the theme of a May-December marriage as a rare foray into the difficult work of portraying modern moral subjects.

Perhaps Leighton’s choice to engage with the question of intergenerational marriage speaks to its status as a rich method for probing various Victorian social issues.²⁶ Godfrey stresses that the May-December romance (or ‘January-May’ pairing, as she describes) is, in many cases, a choice—not a necessity.²⁷ For some, these partnerships were clearly a result of a simple predilection, though certainly any extended meditation

²⁴ De Cordova, “The Art of Mr. E. Blair Leighton,” 587.

²⁵ “The Late Edmund Blair Leighton, R.O.I. (1853-1922),” *The Connoisseur* 64 (September-December 1922), 125.

²⁶ Godfrey, *The January-May Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*, 2.

²⁷ Godfrey, *The January-May Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*, 2.

on this phenomenon will yield difficult questions about nineteenth-century dynamics of gender and power.

In his amusing social history of Victorian England, the writer Daniel Pool paints a picture of a society in which age-mismatched couples are prevalent. Casually describing the infamous cross-generational sexual and romantic interests of figures like Lewis Carroll and John Ruskin, Pool concludes, “The May-December marriage...was surely more likely among the English in the 1800s than it is today.”²⁸ Unfortunately, it is difficult to locate reliable data to support this idea, though there is something to be said for the frequency with which trans-generational couples can be found in literature and the fine arts.

It is also important to view a picture like *Till Death Do Us Part* with an awareness of twenty-first century bias. While one may desire to identify within this scene evidence of oppression and critiques of stifling gender expectations, it is imperative to remember that Leighton’s young bride is neither weak nor complacent. While she may lament her decision to marry a significantly older husband, one may assume that she chose her partner freely—the presence of her jilted suitor is evidence of this fact. The young woman elected to prioritize other considerations over the desire to commit to a companionate marriage, a choice that was far more common at this time.

Audiences who viewed *Till Death Do Us Part* at the Royal Academy in 1879 would have understood the dimensions of marriages made for property, business, or social alliances. Judith Flanders describes, “the perception and reality of marriage was that it was the core of social relationships, a social rather than personal linkage. A good

²⁸ Daniel Pool, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew: From Fox Hunting to Whist—The Facts of Daily Life in 19th-Century England* (New York: Touchstone, 1993), 188.

marriage allied families, reinforced caste, and upheld the morality of social norms.”²⁹ In these terms, perhaps Leighton’s nuptials illustrate a “bad marriage,” one that estranges family connections, disrupts social status, and challenges “the morality of social norms.”

Leighton may have chosen this subject explicitly for the many complicated ways in which it demands to be visually addressed. While this wedding is not a celebratory occasion, it does allow viewers a safe distance from which they can examine a social subject that is simultaneously appealing, abhorrent, and puzzling.

Images like *Till Death Do Us Part* challenge the rote methods by which viewers usually appraise nineteenth-century genre painting. The May-December partnership provokes discomfort, a feeling that profoundly offended Victorian sensibilities. Further, images like Leighton’s may, in the words of writer Chris Townsend, “contest the limits of how and where we look, [and] question why we find beauty and erotic pleasure in some bodies and not others.”³⁰ This appraisal of the question of how and where viewers direct their attention with regards to scenes of May-December marriages is valuable. As a quality that is often avoided, the body of the elder partner disputes the restrictions of appropriate artistic subjects and accepted ways of seeing Victorian narrative pictures.

Despite their relative rarity, scenes of intergenerational marriage and courtship can be read within the context of the larger Victorian cultural appetite for pictures of flirtation, romance, and matrimony. Casteras explains, “Neither children nor octogenarians were exempt from this mania, and “calf love” was immortalized along with

²⁹ Judith Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 214.

³⁰ Chris Townsend, *Vile Bodies: Photography and the Crisis of Looking* (Munich: Prestel, 1998), 103.

geriatric *têtes à têtes*.”³¹ It was also generally established by Victorian modes that marriage was the principal occasion in a woman’s life, though exactly what type of marriage she should embark upon was not consistently prescribed.³²

British and American etiquette books sporadically outline the appropriate ways to address age disparity in relationships, though it is unfeasible to confirm to what degree such manuals actually determined readers’ actions.³³ However, the anthology of procedures and social ceremonies described by such didactic texts still benefits studies of the illustrative minutiae that appear in genre paintings of the period. Additional references in popular literature and song can also guide an appraisal of the older figure in scenes of cross-generational courtship.

In 1864, at the age of seventy-three, the English polymath Henry Heavisides published his guide *Courtship and Matrimony; Their Lights and Shades; Practical Considerations for the Married and the Unmarried*.³⁴ Heavisides was a popular local musician, poet, political reformer, historian, literary scholar, lecturer, and Robert Burns scholar, and he declared his credentials for writing the book, acknowledging,

There may be some who think my advanced age unfits me for writing on such topics as Love and Courtship; to them, I would say, that though my courting days have long since passed away...still I have the power to recollect them...having

³¹ Susan P. Casteras, *The Substance or the Shadow: Images of Victorian Womanhood* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1982), 26.

³² Judith Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home*, 214.

³³ Susan P. Casteras, *The Substance or the Shadow: Images of Victorian Womanhood*, 26-27.

³⁴ A brief biographical sketch of Heavisides can be found in Catherine W. Reilly’s *Mid-Victorian Poetry, 1860-1879: An Annotated Bibliography* (London: Mansell Publishing Limited, 2000), 216. Also see “Henry Heavisides” in *The Literary World* 53 (February 14, 1896), 146.

been twice married, I have consequently had two Courtships, and as I have been married now upwards of half a century...³⁵

Previous to its publication, *Courtship and Matrimony* had been delivered as a series of lectures to mechanics institutes and workers' clubs, which conveys a widespread interest in the questions of courtship, marriage, aging, and the life cycle that Heavisides addresses in his book.³⁶ The publication, which was described as containing "sage advice, which young and old may alike practice to advantage," must have been relatively popular, as it went into a second printing in 1868.³⁷

Scenarios of age-mismatch can be found throughout Heavisides' book, locating the May-December romance in terms of Victorian anxieties about gender, prescribed family structures, and accepted social behavior. A chapter titled "Courtship" includes the following anecdote:

An elderly gentleman, with whom I was acquainted, once remarked to me, that during his life he had committed two gross mistakes — one was, that when young he had married an old woman, and the other was, that, when grown old, he married a young woman. In both instances he found, when too late, that he had acted very foolishly.³⁸

³⁵ Henry Heavisides, *Courtship and Matrimony; Their Lights and Shades; Practical Considerations for the Married and the Unmarried* (Stockton: Henry Heavisides, 1864), viii-ix.

³⁶ George Markham Tweddell, "Henry Heavisides." In *Bards and Authors of Cleveland and South Durham* (Stokesley: Tweddell and Sons, 1872), 318.

³⁷ George Markham Tweddell, *Bards and Authors of Cleveland and South Durham*, 319.

³⁸ Henry Heavisides, *Courtship and Matrimony*, 18.

Heavisides goes on to address recent census data, providing his readers with demographic information to support his moral judgments on the subject of age disparate partnerships.³⁹

One gentleman on arriving at his majority had led to the hymeneal altar a virgin of seventy winters. Another young man of twenty had thought proper to espouse a lady between eighty and ninety; and strange to say, there are two or three instances where the wife is more than ninety, and the husband only a young man! What could have induced so ancient a dame to marry one so young, and how could he stand, in the face of heaven, and vow that he would love and cherish one old enough to be his great, great grandmother, and that he would take her "for better for worse?" Juvenile wives, on the other hand, cut equally as ridiculous a figure in these tables, where it will be found that many of them had married men three or four times their own age. One girl of seventeen had linked herself for life to a husband of eighty-six, another had married one of seventy-five, while a wife of sixteen had actually married a man of seventy. Who would think that in the nineteenth century such things could be?⁴⁰

The author dedicates large portions of his text to anxieties about May-December marriages, effectively illustrating the fascination and consternation generated by such unions. Despite the relatively small body of visual depictions of the subject, the

³⁹ "According...to the "Population Tables" compiled from the census returns of 1861, the number of young wives much exceeds that of young husbands. Of husbands between fifteen and sixteen there are 169, and out of this number no fewer than 151 of these bold aspirants for matrimonial bliss were separated in 1861 from the dear ones whom they had vowed to love and to cherish. From these tables it appears that a youth of seven- teen, had taken to himself a buxom bride upwards of forty; two other forward youths had wooed and won wives nearly fifty..." Henry Heavisides, *Courtship and Matrimony*, 97-98.

⁴⁰ Henry Heavisides, *Courtship and Matrimony*, 98-99.

prevalence of such vivid primary source texts should help place pictures like *Till Death Do Us Part* within a larger social context of experiences and prescribed recommendations outside the usual readings determined by oft-quoted examples from nineteenth-century novels.

American authors also wrote treatises on love, marriage, and age-mismatch, and their thoughts on the subject generally mirrored those of authors on the other side of the Atlantic. Orson Squire Fowler, an eccentric phrenologist, reformer, proto-feminist, amateur architect, and the co-publisher of the first edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, wrote and lectured on the subject of appropriate and ideal marriages.⁴¹ As a passionate advocate for liberal causes, for every new campaign Fowler embraced, a new book was written.⁴² When his attentions turned to issues of courtship, marriage, and sex, he published *Matrimony: or Phrenology and Physiology Applied to the Selection of Suitable Companions for Life* (1841), which sold thousands of copies.⁴³

Years after this initial wave of publications, Fowler was still publishing and lecturing on these subjects. Until his death he continued exploring these ideas, and, according to Dwight L. Young, "Apparently he also practiced what he preached. He married twice more and fathered three children in his seventies, no mean feat for a man with *only moderate Amativeness*."⁴⁴

In 1883, at the age of seventy-four, Fowler published *Private Lectures on Perfect Men, Women and Children, in Happy Families*, taken from a series of talks given on the

⁴¹ For a colorful and highly readable biographical sketch of Fowler, see Dwight L. Young, "Orson Squire Fowler: To Form a More Perfect Human," in *The Wilson Quarterly* 14, No. 2 (Spring, 1990), 120-127.

⁴² Dwight L. Young, "Orson Squire Fowler," 123.

⁴³ This success was followed by *Love and Parentage, Applied to the Improvement of Offspring* (1844); *Maternity* (1848); and *Amativeness: or Evils and Remedies of Excessive and Perverted Sexuality* (1846). See Dwight L. Young, "Orson Squire Fowler," 124.

⁴⁴ Dwight L. Young, "Orson Squire Fowler," 127.

subject. The question of the threats posed to marriage compatibility by May-December courtship is discussed at length, as Fowler seeks to outline the “laws” which govern “important difference in ages.”⁴⁵ While Fowler mildly criticizes “A grey-haired husband escorting a young wife” as “uniting fall with spring,” he also acknowledges that “There are cases in which girls may marry seniors.” Further, Fowler adds, “can a right love be established, and fine children produced and reared, are the determining questions, which overrule absolute and relative ages; and everything else about mating and marriage, for that matter.”⁴⁶ He acknowledges that, in many ways, age is fluid, and its physical manifestations are not reliable markers of matrimonial compatibility.

Artists of the later nineteenth century portray the knotty identities that are determined by marrying age. Leighton’s December bridegroom has his own motivations for marrying his May sweetheart, which are likely to be as multifaceted as her incentives for entering into their marriage contract. This complexity, and Fowler’s flexibility on the subject of intergenerational pairings, can be attributed, in part, to age’s resistance to fixity. Godfrey explains, “Any identity that originates from age and its influence on gender is a slippery one. Old men and old women were once young, and most young men and women hope to grow old. The temporality of one’s age makes it an intrinsically unstable factor within a complex social economy of power.”⁴⁷ Some authors of etiquette books and health manuals seem to be aware of these issues, treating the May-December partnership not as a moral grey area but an observable social behavior determined by financial motivations. Such texts acknowledge the sundry intricacies inherent in such a

⁴⁵ Orson Squire Fowler, *Private Lectures on Perfect Men, Women and Children, in Happy Families* (Duchess County, NY: Mrs. O.S. Fowler, 1883), 74.

⁴⁶ Orson Squire Fowler, *Private Lectures on Perfect Men, Women and Children*, 74.

⁴⁷ Godfrey, *The January-May Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*, 13.

union. It is perhaps in these social prescriptions that a picture like *Till Death Do Us Part* might find its natural source material.

In the *Manual of the Etiquette of Love, Courtship, and Marriage* (1853), the book's anonymous female author asserts,

If May marries December, she commonly accepts his offer because he has gathered up treasures. A wealthy dowager is married to a young man, a handsome fellow, who does not object to silver hair, if there be genuine gold to keep it in countenance. The money-loving spirit has led many a blooming girl to be the wife of a man old enough to be her grandfather. Very few happy marriages can result from such unions, the principle must be sordid—dimes and ducats, ducats and dimes, vigorous youth and tottering age have but little in common—shame on the woman who sacrifices her young heart's affections at the shrine of Mammon.⁴⁸

A more sardonic description of intergenerational marriage published in *The Yorkshire Magazine* in 1873 permits that “some fair maids even prefer an elderly gentleman, with sixty years written in the wrinkles about his eye or on a bald head, provided he have money enough to set them up in a fashionable household, and make handsome settlements in case of an unforeseen and too premature demise. For then, there are prospects of the widow not being too old for a wedding of affection at last.”⁴⁹ Although social reformers like Heavisides and Fowler sought to present their readers with moral

⁴⁸ A Lady, *A Manual of the Etiquette of Love, Courtship, and Marriage* (London: Thomas Allman, 1853), 61.

⁴⁹ A. Weber, “Speculations Concerning Love and Courtship,” *The Yorkshire Magazine* 2, no. 11 (July 1873), 405.

reasons for abstaining from age-mismatched relationships, other nineteenth-century writers recognized and accepted such partnerships as a natural product of a capitalist social structure.

Artists commendably conveyed these complexities, placing their May-December narratives neither within a strict moralist sphere nor in a context completely free from judgment. Scenes like Leighton's succeed in part due to these convolutions and their attending dualities. Oppositions like surfeits of masculinity and femininity, power and powerlessness, ugliness and beauty, and youth and age all serve to subvert and heighten the tensions usually associated with Victorian genre painting.⁵⁰

Before and after

An alternative to Leighton's May-December configuration can be conveniently identified in the paired problem pictures *Mariage de Convenance* (1883) and *Mariage de Convenance – After!* (1886) by the Scottish painter William Quiller Orchardson (1832-1910). These images are perhaps those most readily identified with intergenerational pairings in Victorian art, and they are frequently reproduced, Kern explains, because they portray “not only the corruption of such May-December unions but also their rationale in [Orchardson's] time.”⁵¹ In the two scenes, Orchardson evocatively illustrates the ineffectuality of embarking on non-companionate marriage. The first shows the dissatisfaction of the young wife and her elderly bridegroom, the second renders him alone and abandoned by a cold stone hearth (figs. 3.2 and 3.3).

⁵⁰ Godfrey, *The January-May Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*, 7.

⁵¹ Kern, *The Culture of Love*, 384.

In both pictures, Orchardson bestows a great deal of responsibility upon his viewer, who is encouraged to fill narrative gaps by the powers of his or her own imagination. Orchardson biographer Walter Armstrong described in 1895, “[these scenes] afford glimpses into the kaleidoscope of society, which you cannot fail to interpret satisfactorily to yourself, and may be classed with those social notes...which threaten to supersede the regular short story, just as the latter has half superseded the novel.”⁵² When considering the possible subjective interpretations that can be made of these pictures, it can be easily understood how *Mariage de Convenance* describes a corrupt marriage. However, it is important to consider how questions of the life cycle and age disparity inform this diagnosis.

Like Leighton, Orchardson often painted scenes of an imagined past, and his turn towards a modern domestic subject was noted by contemporary critics who viewed *Mariage de Convenance* at the Manchester Royal Jubilee Exhibition in 1887.⁵³ Deemed “worthy to rank with Hogarth’s masterpieces,” the pictures received critical acclaim for their take on contemporary anxieties caused by age-incompatible unions.⁵⁴ Orchardson’s condemnation of the unsuitable marriage is understated, and, as in *Till Death Do Us Part*, both parties are liable for their own discontentedness.

In the first scene, the young, bored wife sits across from her December bridegroom, a melancholy man “between two ages,” who is approaching his later years.⁵⁵

⁵² Walter Armstrong, *The Art of William Quiller Orchardson* (London: Seeley and Co. Limited and New York: Macmillan and Co., 1895), 56.

⁵³ “Orchardson, too, no longer takes refuge among last century ways and costumes, but for the first time makes supreme pictures with a man in evening dress (384). Who shall say, after that, that our Art is not overtaking reality?” Sir Patrick Geddes, *Every Man His Own Art Critic at the Manchester Exhibition, 1887* (Manchester: J. Heywood, 1887), 12.

⁵⁴ Walter Tomlinson, *The Pictorial Record of the Royal Jubilee Exhibition, Manchester* (Manchester: J.E. Cornish, 1888), 32.

⁵⁵ Wilfred Meynell, *The Modern School of Art* (London: Cassell & Company, 1887), 203.

A long, rectangular table between them acts as both an emotional ellipsis and a dramatic marker of physical detachment. Colored by the jaundiced glow of gaslight, the couple is unable to make eye contact. She sits as far away from him as possible, her chair pushed back from the table. She rests her chin in her hand, peering at her hindsight from the corner of her eye, reappraising the catalogue of poor choices that led her to this moment. He leans towards her, his posture upright, his face angled in a vain attempt to meet her gaze. Orchardson's husband is hungry not for the ignored feast before him, but starved instead for his wife's attention. Kern describes, "The husband presses against the table, as he is unable to do against his wife, while she has pushed away from the same table as she has no doubt pushed away from him in bed many times before."⁵⁶ Their power is equally divided—both struggle with distance, either its manufacture or eradication. The trappings of opulent comfort surround them, characterizing their dining room as her gilded cage. Material rewards provide no gratification here, and Orchardson makes clear that both parties are responsible for the formation of this slipshod alliance.

In the picture's sequel, painted a few years later, the husband slumps dejectedly before a cold hearth. His shirt seems to bulge under the pressure of his crumpled lonesomeness, and he sits just beyond the shadows that fall across the young woman's portrait. He has been left alone to his long table, now set for one and adorned by claret and a bowl of pink flowers—likely placed there in vain by his staff with the intention of cheering his darkened mood. The December groom sits in his richly upholstered club

⁵⁶ Kern, *The Culture of Love*, 384-385.

chair, his back turned away from the site of countless silent exchanges with his May bride.⁵⁷

Both pictures point to an anticlimactic and misguided matrimony, borne of a social structure which could lead to a woman erroneously marrying for money instead of true love.⁵⁸ Despite the popularity of romance as a Victorian visual theme, artists were clearly also interested in addressing the absence of amorousness and the threatening results of unsentimental approaches to marriage. And, like the legions of painters and poets who sought to evoke the sensations of rhapsodic Victorian courtships, the failure of love, as evoked by Orchardson, also served as rich creative inspiration. The English poet Rosamund Marriott Watson responded to the series in her poem, “*Mariage de Convenance.—After! (Orchardson.)*,” published in the *Academy* magazine in June 1886. The verse in which the author considers the aftermath when “June and Winter wed” frames the situation as desolate. Watson begins,

The spacious room seems bare

And drear beyond compare,

A man with sparse grey hair

Sits grim and lonely,

Brooding on sin and shame,

⁵⁷ Armstrong’s description of Orchardson’s sequel is particularly evocative: “*After!* is an anticlimax in all but art. In colour, in the transparent depth of its shadows and the brilliancy of its quick sparkling points of light, and in the expression of character, it is even better than the *Mariage*. And the insinuation of a departed glory, the quiet, sympathetic fire—a crackling blaze would have spoilt the whole expression of the scene—the one lamp deepening the gulfs of shadow beyond, and the absolute immobility of the single figure, all these emphasize the disappearance of the one disturbing element in the quietude of the first scene. The man’s prospective cares have been whittled down to little more than the temperature of his claret.” Armstrong, *The Art of William Quiller Orchardson*, 60.

⁵⁸ Susan P. Casteras, *The Substance or the Shadow: Images of Victorian Womanhood*, 29.

His smirched and ruined name.

Which was the most to blame?

*He? or she only?*⁵⁹

In inviting readers to speculate about which spouse is more responsible for the couple's "sin and shame," the poem supports the view that such a union is complex, and its failures can be evenly divided between the misguided pursuits of both parties. In asking "Which was the most to blame?" while offering both husband and wife as possible culprits, Watson acknowledges that the woman's mercenary inclinations are perhaps matched by her husband's misguided desire for a younger companion.

Described as "a recorder rather than a censor," Orchardson delicately indicts an alliance both designed and destroyed by age.⁶⁰ Both parties are at fault for their yearnings, and she is as guilty for her material impulses as he is for his naïve belief in their compatibility. These intricate moral messages perhaps accounted for the popularity of *Mariage de Convenance* in Britain and the United States. In addition to Watson's poem, the paintings also inspired lectures like "Domestic Facts and Forces: Marriage," given by Rabbi J. Leonard Levy of Pittsburgh in 1902.⁶¹ In presenting his thoughts on the establishment of durable marriages, Rabbi Levy describes Orchardson's pictures as "a

⁵⁹ There are two more stanzas in the poem, which go on to describe the bitter end of this relationship. Published under the pen name R. Armytage, the poem was first printed in *Academy* 29, no. 736 (June 12, 1886), 415. It was reprinted the next month in *Littell's Living Age* 170, no. 2197 (July 31, 1886), 260, and appeared again a few years later in *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly* 35 (January-June 1893), 223, attesting to the familiarity with Orchardson's pictures (and the anxieties conveyed by his theme) on both sides of the Atlantic. For more on Watson, see Linda K. Hughes, *Graham R.: Rosamund Marriott Watson, Woman of Letters* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005). Hughes discusses this poem with particular attention beginning on p. 47.

⁶⁰ Cosmo Monkhouse, "William Quiller Orchardson, R.A." *Scribner's Magazine* 21, no.4 (April 1897), 410.

⁶¹ Rabbi J. Leonard Levy, "Domestic Facts and Forces. VI.—Marriage. A Sunday lecture before Congregation Rodeph Shalom." Series 1, no. 17 (February 16, 1902) Pittsburgh: Charles H. Joseph, 1902.

sermon in color.” He says, “They have married "for convenience' sake." She wanted more liberty, he more money. She wanted the freedom, with which his name could dower her. He wanted more of the world's goods.”⁶² The vain regret the husband feels at the story’s conclusion is portrayed as the deserved result of a misguided attempt at an impossible partnership.

The public attention paid to *Mariage de Convenance* and *After!* indicates a larger social fascination with aging and the tensions it produces in narrative painting. Nominated as “the picture of the season” in 1886 by the *Portfolio* and *The Illustrated London News*, Orchardson’s sequel articulated common fears about mismatched marriages while projecting anxieties about advanced adulthood and its role in Victorian cultures of courtship.⁶³

Married for rank or for love

While Leighton and Orchardson are responsible for the better-known Victorian scenes of age-disparate relationships, there are other examples that support the idea that the May-December marriage was the source of some social anxiety. Another British image in this vein is John Everett Millais’ drawing *Married for Rank* (1853), in which an intergenerational marriage alienates a young wife from both her elder husband and a legion of younger men vying for her attention. An alternative to Millais’ sketch can be identified in Adelaide Claxton’s watercolor *Envy* (ca. 1870), another picture in which the younger wife expresses visible regret about her decision to marry her superannuated

⁶² Levy, “Domestic Facts and Forces,” 7-8.

⁶³ Godfrey, *The January-May Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*, 97.

bridegroom. In both examples, age determines the actions of the narrative, with May-December disparity enhanced to underscore larger Victorian social anxieties.

In *Married for Rank*, Millais (1829-1896) illustrates a May-December pair entering a party, a situation that ably illustrates the diverse public reactions to their union (fig. 3.4). Like the observers who fill the pews in Leighton's scene, the mixed reception of the young, arrogant bride and her elderly escort signals the complicated social readings of such mismatched couplings. The center of the drawing is dominated by May and her December—she is dressed in a resplendent evening gown resembling a wedding dress, while her husband wears outdated breeches, which emphasize his age. Millais uses both garments to heighten the tensions of their unorthodox pairing.⁶⁴

As the married couple enters the social environment, they present their private dynamic, inviting a public reaction. The husband seems to receive a whispered word of congratulations in his ear, and his reaction reminds one of the axiomatic cat who got the cream. It is perhaps also important to note that the man proffering a word of congratulations to the groom (the only positive reaction given by any of the figures at this party) is also probably the next most senior person at the gathering.

⁶⁴ Though not necessarily a wedding dress, in many ways, the dress worn by Millais' young wife resembles the style of wedding dress that was popularized during this period by Queen Victoria when she married Prince Albert in 1840. While the pen and ink drawing does not describe the color Millais imagined for the dress, it can be assumed that the dress is supposed to be pale, and is likely a fashionable evening dress made of white silk and lace. The tiers also resemble those popular in printed images of wedding dresses at this time, perhaps leading viewers to assume that the couple has been recently joined in marriage. The clothing worn by the husband also communicates a subtle message, as his breeches are no longer fashionable eveningwear at this time. Although young boys were still wearing breeches (and they were still worn for sports like hunting and, beginning in the 1880s, for cycling), by the 1820s, long pants had largely overtaken breeches as proper male dress. The December husband's choice to wear pants that had stopped being fashionable more than thirty years prior would instantly date him for contemporary viewers. For more on these subtle changes in nineteenth-century menswear, see Nicholas Storey's *History of Men's Fashion: What the Well Dressed Man is Wearing* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2008) or Rob Schorman's *Selling Style: Clothing and Social Change at the Turn of the Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

Meanwhile, the young wife limply holds the crook of her husband's arm while turning to face two handsome young soldiers. One of the young bucks carries an injured arm in a sling, though his other hand is free to reach out to touch hers, a gesture that he seems to use to feel for a wedding band on her ring finger. His companion hugs the wall while fixedly observing their exchange. Again, the theme of the triangular romantic structure between elder husband, younger wife, and younger potential suitor appears, creating a configuration which contrasts, in Godfrey's words, "aging masculinity with feminine and masculine youth, creating three distinct specimens of age and gender for social perusal."⁶⁵

In these images of age-disparate partnerships, pride and the desire for attention are also contrasted with the warm, loving, private quietude of egalitarian and companionate romances. Other minor characters behind the couple express their own thoughts on the central relationship and present the sundry social insecurities that threaten their union. Standing erect behind the comparatively stooped figure of the elderly husband stands a younger man who, merely in the contradictory nature of his posture, serves to emphasize the relative physical age of the newlywed. Behind the bride, the figures of two young women lurk in the shadows, while the person closer to the foreground casts a visibly judgmental glance from the safety of the hall. Finally, although they are no more than sketchy outlines, one can make out the figures of two more women watching the proceedings from the stairwell in the background. While their expressions are not fully articulated by Millais' pen, it is possible to see that they are turned towards the newlyweds, their faces are drawn at an angle appropriate to gawking and whispering about the May-December pair.

⁶⁵ Godfrey, *The January-May Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*, 90.

The title of the drawing emphasizes that the young bride is not a victim—*Married for Rank* clarifies that she had some agency in making the decision to wed in this manner. However, this title also serves to rob the husband of some of his autonomy in this scene—the title is not *Married for Youth* or *Married for Pleasure* or any number of titles that would evoke the groom’s own justifications for the union. While her centrality is stressed by the title, the husband is not given such a role. Instead, he is portrayed as physically weak and primed to be cuckolded by the young, flirtatious soldier. He is hunched below everyone else in the room—his small physical stature perhaps compensated for by his status.

Such unions for rank, while not the most respectable option for young women of a marriageable age, were common enough to be the stuff of jokes in popular magazines. In one example of “Tea-table logic,” described in *Punch* in 1860, the author uses such unions to vividly demonstrate the concept of circular reasoning:

Those who marry for rank alone, are certain to repent.

Miss Lofty married for rank alone.

Miss Lofty, then, is certain to repent.

But—Lord Toddy is very old.

*Oh! then Lord Toddy, not Miss Lofty, is certain to repent.*⁶⁶

Such ideas, while written in jest, do point to the ultimate blame that is usually placed on the elder husband for the faults in the May-December pairing. While a younger woman who desires rank, wealth, or other means of security from her spouse usually enters into

⁶⁶ “Logic for Ladies. By One of Them.” *Punch* (September 22, 1860), 117.

such a match freely, it is ultimately the elderly husband who bears the major brunt of the social and moral judgments of their union.

The negative judgments called into question by such a pairing are even more apparent when contrasted with another drawing by Millais from the same series.⁶⁷ *Married for Love* (fig. 3.5) significantly diverges from the negativity of the age disparate couple in *Married for Rank*. Here, Millais presents a strict contrast by showing a companionate marriage in which both parties are of similar age. This closeness in age seems to enhance their harmoniousness, and the wife happily kisses her husband's brow. Their window frames the view of a church, signifying the sanctity of their union. An additional blessing upon their partnership is manifested in the figure of a young child who sits at the table with his father. *Married for Love* illustrates the ideal Victorian marriage, enacted in the privacy of the domestic realm, the most hallowed of spaces.

A female humorist on age disparity

The ideal marriage depicted in *Married for Love* also greatly contrasts with *Envy*, Adelaide Claxton's calamitous scene of May-December marriage (fig. 3.6). Painted in 1870, Claxton's watercolor is unique in that the young bride visibly expresses regret for electing to enter into a trans-generational union. In *Till Death Do Us Part*, the bride's remorse is clearly internalized, while *Mariage de Convenance* concludes after the young wife effectively conveys her own unhappiness by abandoning her husband who responds by flaccidly collapsing before the cold hearth. While the haughty young wife in Millais'

⁶⁷ The other drawings in this series include two pictures, *Married for Money* and *Married for Love*. While the three drawings were kept together in the same collection for quite some time, they were broken up and sold separately at Christie's in 1972. *Married for Love* is now in the British Museum, while the other two drawings are in private collections. Information from the Maas Gallery, accessed September 20, 2014. <http://www.maasgallery.co.uk/component/joomgallery/pre-raphaelitism/sir-john-everett-millais-pra-hri-hrca-1829-1896-673>.

Married for Rank does not visibly express any regret, the couple's certain demise is foreshadowed by the handsome soldier's flirtation. Unlike all of the aforementioned examples, *Envy* shows a young wife who unabashedly expresses her distress over her decision not to marry for love.

Adelaide Claxton (1835-ca.1905) established her reputation as an author of humorous social scenes. Her illustrations, which have their lineage in the work of British pictorial comedians like Phiz and John Leech, were widely reproduced in a number of periodicals, including the *Illustrated London News*, *London Society*, and *Judy*.⁶⁸ *Envy*, with its slight exaggerations and well-defined narrative, demonstrates Claxton's strengths as a subtle caricaturist of a mismatched couple.

The scene is dominated by the figure of a resplendently dressed May-December couple as they walk into a formal function, ascending the steps of a magnificently carpeted portico. The elderly husband, dressed in a fine suit and royal blue moiré sash, hunches over his steps. His stooped appearance contradicts with his midnight black hair and moustache, which are likely dyed in order to maintain some semblance of his former youthful vigor.⁶⁹ His golden-haired wife towers over him, and her glittering finery dominates a full quarter of the picture. Diamond jewelry and flowers punctuate her gown's layers of lace, silk, and silver thread embroidery.

The woman is clearly unhappy despite her obvious material comforts. It is in tracing her line of vision that the viewer finds the focus of her envious glare, which is

⁶⁸ Catherine Flood, "Contrary to the Habits of Their Sex? Women Drawing on Wood and the Careers of Florence and Adelaide Claxton." In Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreski, eds. *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century: Artistry and Industry in Britain* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), 113.

⁶⁹ It was common enough for Victorian men to dye their hair, and hair dyes and tonics were a popular subject in advertising throughout the period. The most common colorants used were nitrate of silver and lead, despite the fact that both substances were known to be poisonous. For more on the subject, see Hermann Beigel's *The Human Hair: Its Structure, Growth, Diseases, and Their Treatment* (London: Henry Renshaw, 1869).

directed towards a happy young family crossing the path behind her. The small family is not visibly wealthy, but they do seem quite blissful. The mother and father gaze into each other's eyes affectionately, while their child admires the fondness between them.

Presenting an example of a companionate marriage built on amateness instead of stature or fortune, the young family illustrates an alternative to the May-December union (perhaps showing a composite of the couples from Millais' *Married for Rank* and *Married for Love* within the same image). Their presence visibly aggravates the young woman, while her bridegroom, peering from the corner of his eye, seems to sense that something is not quite right with his lifeless young wife.

Straddling the dual styles of works usually produced by Victorian watercolorists and humorous cartoonists, Claxton's *Envy* is difficult to position, both within the range of the aforementioned images of age disparate relationships as well as within the scope of Victorian visual culture. This echoes the Irish writer Ellen Clayton's 1876 claim that, "It is a little difficult to "place" an artist, so original as Adelaide Claxton."⁷⁰ Described as a natural talent who was able to draw before she could write, Claxton developed a unique voice as an illustrator, who, "contrary to the habits of [her] sex, [took] neither a chivalric nor a serious, nor a common-place, but a satirical view of life."⁷¹ Especially adept at depicting social follies, she established her own office as a draughtsman and exhibited her drawings and watercolors widely.⁷²

Unlike other female artists and illustrators working in watercolor at this time, like the comparatively prim Helen Allingham and Kate Greenaway, Claxton embraced

⁷⁰ Ellen C. Clayton. *English Female Artists* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1876), 43.

⁷¹ "The Standard Bearer," *Illustrated Times* 8, no. 207 (March 19, 1859), 188.

⁷² Rodney K. Engen, *Dictionary of Victorian Wood Engravers* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healy, 1985), s.v. "Claxton, Adelaide (Mrs. George Turner)," 47-48.

iconoclasm. Casteras writes, “Sometimes [her] treatment was satiric; at other times it was deadly serious and trenchant about the lives of middle-class women in particular.”⁷³

These qualities stood in stark opposition to Allingham’s cottage garden pictures and Greenaway’s images of cheerful children. *Envy* straddles the qualities of lampoon and solemnity, exposing the inherent conflicts of the May-December union.

As a female artist addressing the anxieties whirling around age disparate marriages, Claxton penetrates questions of expected feminine behavior within this age-determined dynamic. She does so with a humor that is noticeably absent in the related images by Leighton, Orchardson, and Millais. Despite comedy’s tenuous status as an acceptable attribute of the fairer sex, Claxton uses humor to her advantage, allowing her May bride to visibly express her thoughts and feelings about her situation.

Catherine Flood, curator in the Word and Image Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum, suggests that, “Claxton’s social satires [was] accepted in reference to concepts of ‘amiable humor’ and drawing-room sociability and provided a medium for social comment on the condition of the middle-class woman.”⁷⁴ When a female artist undertakes the theme of trans-generational marriage, the intricate emotions and affectations that would influence the forging of such a bond are richly conveyed with different sensitivities than those expressed by male artists.

Claxton was an independent figure living in an urban setting, and her social scenes announce her position her as someone who perceptively observed the lives of other middle-class women trying to navigate the city, its class system, and their roles

⁷³ Susan P. Casteras, “From “Safe Havens” to “A Wide Sea of Notoriety.” In Susan P. Casteras and Linda H. Paterson, *A Struggle for Fame: Victorian Women Artists and Authors* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1994), 27.

⁷⁴ Flood, “Contrary to the Habits of Their Sex?” 108.

therein. These qualities belie a kind of shared sympathy between the artist and her protagonist in *Envy*, and the subtle understanding of the young bride's situation implies that Claxton may have observed such couples through her own engagement with the London social scene. Flood affirms that, "While in some eyes the Claxtons' humor was 'contrary to the habits of their sex,' there was equally a mode of discourse that assimilated their professional humor with women's sociable duties in entering into company and maintaining 'that ritual exchange of courtesies' that defined middle class social life."⁷⁵

Envy is not an isolated example of an age-mismatched couple in Claxton's oeuvre, and it was preceded by her sequential comedic illustrations "Six Stages in the Journey of French Life," in *Routledge's Christmas Annual* in 1869.⁷⁶ The six panels, which were positively reviewed, represent key stages of a woman's life from infancy to old age, from *L'Innocence* and *L'Amour* to *La Gloire*, *L'Amitié*, *L'Ennui*, and, finally, *La Religion*.⁷⁷ The second and third scenes focus on the betrothal and subsequent wedding between a very young woman and a much older, wealthier man, framing the May-December marriage as a kind of rite of passage (figs. 3.7 and 3.8). In the scene portraying their introduction and engagement, the discrepancy between their ages is obvious enough. Claxton then exaggerates the differences between their vigor, strength, and physical beauty in the next sketch, when they are shown becoming husband and wife.

⁷⁵ Flood, "Contrary to the Habits of Their Sex?" 115.

⁷⁶ Adelaide Claxton, "Six Stages on the Journey of French Life," in *Routledge's Christmas Annual*, Edmund Routledge, ed. (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1869), 109-111.

⁷⁷ A review of Routledge's 1869 *Christmas Annual* appeared in the *Illustrated Times* (December 4, 1869), in which the reviewer wrote, "High praise is due to Miss Adelaide Claxton's "Six Stages on the Journey of French Life;" there is a good deal to study in it."

In the cartoon nuptials in Claxton's third panel, the young woman, bolstered by her new husband's fortunes, is dressed in ostentatious finery. A long train of silk and flowers flows behind her, and she sports long drop earrings and a towering, elegant coiffure. Her modishness is enhanced by her perfect posture. Her groom, on the other hand, is frail and diminished. Physically reduced to the point of being represented solely as a source of economic stability, his figure cuts such a slim shape that he is almost completely lost behind the volume of her dress. And, like the handsome young soldiers who reach out for Millais' young bride, a line of alternative, age-appropriate suitors closely follow Claxton's haughty May. The scene is exaggerated and silly, perhaps diminishing the real anxieties sparked by intergenerational relationships by examining them through a humorous lens.

It is this levity that distinguishes Claxton's approach from that of the aforementioned male artists who usually represent the May-December alliance in a somber or disdainful tone. Comicality is actually an important aspect of the visual navigation of age disparate relationships, especially in the United States. While it is difficult to identify tidy American analogues to *Till Death Do Us Part* or *Mariage de Convenance* in the fine arts, myriad amusing cultural expressions of the same anxieties were produced in the form of popular songs, cartoons, and greeting cards. Such droll material culture produced and disseminated in the United States acknowledges British images of May-December pairings while further anesthetizing the theme with humor, making the subject slightly more acceptable for consumption by the comparatively puritanical American palate.

Laughing about December and May

Americans often approach uncomfortable topics with humor, and, judging by the amount of amusing material that was produced on this theme, late Victorian Americans may have felt particularly squeamish about intergenerational relationships. These anxieties expressed themselves, for instance, in a popular and playful Tin Pan Alley song of 1893, titled “December and May (Mollie Newell).” Taking “An old gray-haired bach'lor” as its protagonist, the song describes a letter he addresses to an imaginary girl who he believes will relieve him of his loneliness (fig. 3.9). The chorus follows,

*Mollie Newell, don't be cruel, my little jewel be;
I'll be true all my life if you will only marry me.
Wealth I have plenty, and though you are but twenty,
While I am past sixty to-day,
What need we care, we'll our happiness share,
Old December shall marry young May.⁷⁸*

The bachelor then falls asleep, only to dream of the reality of what would happen if his Mollie appeared: “he was too settled for so young a head, while she loved the pleasures of life. Each night to a party she'd go with young men, while he had to stay home in bed.” The lyrics foreshadow the kind of misery visited upon Orchardson’s dejected husband who is abandoned to a chilly lonesomeness. However, unlike Orchardson’s narrative, the

⁷⁸ “December and May (Mollie Newell).” Copyright 1893 by Frank Harding. Written by Edward Marks, Composed by William Loraine. Dedicated to and Sung by Lydia Yeamans Titus.

song's hero wakes up from his nightmare enlightened. He then tears up the letter to young Mollie, happier to be left alone than to be left for a younger man.

The popularity of "December and May" attests to a late Victorian public interest in the theme of these pairings, despite the fact that the marriage described in the lyrics never actually takes place.⁷⁹ The song's documented fame deserves attention when considering images of age disparate relationships as interpreted by artists. Music, like art, is subject to fluctuations of cultural taste, and its utilization as a tool for navigating May-December couplings signals an American interest in the subject — despite its relative absence in fine art. This song also operates through humor, which was the principal method by which Americans appraised age mismatched unions in popular culture.

Wendy Wick Reaves, the senior curator of prints and drawings at the National Portrait Gallery, has written widely on the intersection between humor and art, and she makes a convincing claim for the study of comedy in American art history. She writes,

We desperately want to take art seriously, especially when lawmakers and the public question its value. But humor must be added to the mix of cultural referent that we use to contextualize art. Scholars are adept at considering the political, social, and economic issues underlying the production of art and inventive in uncovering such diverse influences as sexual mores and popular scientific thinking.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ An advertisement for Frank Harding's Music Store (229 Bowery, New York City) in the *New York Clipper* (December 30, 1893) attests to the song's popularity. It reads, "DECEMBER AND MAY, Or MOLLIE NEWELL DON'T BE CRUEL." A very catchy song. Words by Ed. Marks. Music by William Loraine. Now being sung with great success by Lydia Yeamans Titus, Beatrix Hamilton, Lottie Gilson, Johnnie Carroll, Edward Parker, John W. Myers, and many more of the most prominent vocalists. The song is a gem and is a sure "Hit" for either lady or gentleman. (Orchestral parts by G.M. Rosenberg.)"

⁸⁰ Wendy Wick Reaves, "The Art in Humor, the Humor in Art," *American Art* 15, no. 2 (Summer, 2001), 4.

American visual material addresses the discomfort of age-disparate pairings through humor, which affirms both the distress caused by the subject and the balm of comicality applied to its assessment in the United States.

The fool and the lion

An exceptionally rare example of the May-December theme by an American genre painter is, unsurprisingly, amusing and unthreatening. The 1868 picture *No Fool Like an Old Fool* by Alfred Wordsworth Thompson (1840-1896) depicts a young, attractive woman fishing on a flowered, grassy embankment (fig. 3.10). She appears to have been fishing alone for some time before being approached by an older, white-haired gentleman who is overdressed for angling. His frock coat, crisp white shirt, glaucous tie, red pocket square, umbrella, and silk top hat (seen bobbing limply in the water) would not usually describe the dress of someone who woke that day intending to go fishing.⁸¹ However, his picnic basket and fishing rod may indeed attest to a well-designed plan to join this young woman in her sport.

Thompson uses dress to subtly emphasize the difference in age between the anglers. In stark contrast to the man's formal suit and accessories, the young woman wears a relaxed sporting outfit, which includes a shortened crinoline and white apron (perhaps for wiping her hands when they get wet).⁸² Her contemporary fishing costume

⁸¹ It is difficult to assess whether the gentleman wears a morning coat or a boxy frock coat, which was the most common coat worn by businessmen and sported primarily in the daytime. For information on the four principle variations of men's suit jackets in the 1860s (frock coat, morning coat, dress coat, and sack coat) see Daniel Delis Hill, *American Menswear From the Civil War to the Twenty-First Century* (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 2011), 43-50.

⁸² Although the late 1860s saw the steady decline of the crinoline, it was a period when that restrictive garment reached the apex of its relative comfort. Thompson's young woman likely wears the newly

accentuates her youth and her dedication to her pursuit, while the older man's formal attire and total disregard for his abandoned fishing rod suggests that he had little intention of actually fishing at the pond that day.

The absurdity of the senior's romantic interest in the young woman is heightened by the presence of a braying ass – the creature's name does enough to imply a certain kind of ridiculous futility. Further, the picture's evocative title, which describes the proverb "there is no fool like an old fool," connotes that the irrational behavior of older people is more ridiculous than that exhibited by the young, and this uninvited flirtation does seem quite foolish.⁸³ Fortunately, unlike those age-mismatched picture pairs who vowed, "Till death do us part," Thompson's May-December scene is little more than an episode of brief annoyance, and the older man's attempts to woo are misguided and unreciprocated.

In addition to its status as an oddity of American genre painting, *No Fool Like an Old Fool* also seems to be an outlier within Thompson's oeuvre. Trained in Paris, where he worked in the atelier of the Swiss painter Charles Gleyre (1806-1874), Thompson worked in Europe from 1861-1868.⁸⁴ Upon his return to the United States, he developed a reputation for vivid Orientalist landscapes and, later, American history pictures inspired by colonial and revolutionary incidents.

improved cage and hiked skirts preferred by active ladies, which better responded to the movements of the body when engaged in sport and leisure activities. See Patricia Campbell Warner, *When The Girls Came Out To Play: The Birth of American Sportswear* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 35. While Warner does not address the clothing worn by female anglers in specific detail, her chapter on dresses designed for ice-skating and croquet is applicable to an analysis of Thompson's picture. Painted during the same period when skating and croquet emerged as popular sports for women, the dress worn by Thompson's angler finds a comfortable comparison in those worn by the female players in the croquet pictures painted by Winslow Homer in the later 1860s.

⁸³ Wolfgang Mieder, ed., *A Dictionary of American Proverbs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), entry no. 163.

⁸⁴ Gerald M. Ackerman, *American Orientalists*, (Paris: ACR Editions, 1994), 206.

This small, humorous genre scene does not fit neatly within the body of his better-known works, though it does support the 1879 claim made by the American intellectual Samuel Greene Wheeler Benjamin that, "...since his return to America, Mr. Thompson has found subjects in his native land that are congenial to his talents. He has effectively rendered scenes of country-life...in picturesque confusion."⁸⁵ Other critics similarly noted that, "by the human element in landscape art he is forcibly impressed."⁸⁶ In 1895, the writer George Montfort Simonson described Thompson's "deep, instinctive delight in country scenery," an approach he illustrated with the inclusion of curious social dynamics, as evidenced by this particularly American interaction between December and May.⁸⁷

The humor of this scene is permitted, in part, by the acceptability of fishing as an appropriate activity for virtuous American girls. New social freedoms permitted women to fish, which was viewed as a "refined diversion" after the Civil War.⁸⁸ Improvements to fishing equipment, making it more lightweight and less burdensome, enabled both men and women to enjoy piscatorial activities together. Angling remained an "innocent amusement" so long as it was carried out "in a strictly feminine spirit and with no wish to

⁸⁵ Samuel Greene Wheeler Benjamin, *Our American Artists*, (Boston: D. Lothrop & Co., Publishers, 1879), unpagged.

⁸⁶ Walter Montgomery, ed. "A. Wordsworth Thompson." In *American Art and American Art Collections: Essays on Artistic Subjects Vol. 2* (Boston: E.W. Walker & Co., 1889), 992.

⁸⁷ George Montfort Simonson, "A Painter of American Historic Genre," *The Peterson Magazine* 5, no. 12 (December 1895), 1235. However, despite these citations of critical praise, Thompson's genre scenes were not without their faults. On critic writing for *Harper's* in 1879 conceded, "He is an excellent draughtsman, his color is a happy medium between the high and low keys of different schools—fresh, cool, and crisp—and his work is thoroughly finished, and yet broad in effect...If we have a fault to find with him, it is in a certain lack of snap, of warmth, of enthusiasm in the handling of a subject, which renders it less impressive than it might otherwise be." "Fifty Years of American Art: 1828-1878," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 59, No. 353 (October 1879), 685.

⁸⁸ David Tatham, *Winslow Homer in the Adirondacks* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 57-58.

acquire the reputation of being a fast girl, or a dashing girl, or a jolly girl.”⁸⁹ Despite the older gentleman’s attempts to “fish” for this young woman, she adheres to the firm codes that governed Victoria female leisure activities. Angling was a rare pursuit that allowed women to participate in virtuous recreation while working independently outdoors.

However, if an element of flirtation was introduced to a fishing trip, it threatened to jeopardize the innocuous pleasure of the sport. In his 1871 “Notes and Prose Idylls” on angling, the British sportsman William Barry declared, “Trout fishing and flirting cannot be reconciled with each other in a sufficiently profitable manner...flirting contributes only to the peace of the trout.”⁹⁰ While he conceded, “trout fishing has its romantic side,” Barry also understood that those who were not engaged in amorous distractions would likely catch more fish. Despite its adverse effects on the catch, courtship found its place in later nineteenth-century angling, with men and women across the class spectrum enjoying the sport and making it, on occasion, the center of their wooing and honeymoon entertainments.⁹¹

This acceptance of angling as an appropriate courting activity helps anesthetize the May-December schism in Thompson’s picture. It is also made acceptable by the fact

⁸⁹ Sydney Cox, *Friendly Counsel for Girls, or, Words in Season* (New York: G.W. Carlton, 1868), 50.

⁹⁰ William Barry, *Moorland and Stream: With Notes and Prose Idylls on Shooting and Trout Fishing* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1871), 288.

⁹¹ Ronald J. and Mary Saracino Zboray, "The Romance of Fisherwomen in Antebellum New England," *American Studies* 39, no. 1 (Spring 1998), 6. A great deal of fascinating material has been produced on courtship and the lives of Victorian female anglers, including this oft-cited article by Zboray and Zboray. For more information on fishing, courting, and the lives of Victorian fisherwomen, see a number of informative articles by David McMurray, including ““A Recreation Which Many Ladies Delight In”: Establishing a Tradition of Fisherwomen in Britain and North America Prior to the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *Sport History Review* 43, no. 2 (2012), 128-156; “Rivaling the Gentleman in the Gentle Art: The Authority of the Victorian Woman Angler,” *Sports History Review* 39, no. 2 (2008), 99-126; and “The Charm of Being Loose and Free’: Nineteenth-Century Fisherwomen in the North American Wilderness,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 30, no. 8 (April 2013), 826-852. Also see Colleen J. Sheehy, "American Angling: The Rise of Urbanism and the Romance of the Rod and Reel," in *Hard at Play: Leisure in America 1840-1940*, ed. Kathryn Grover (Rochester: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 77-92.

that fishing was understood to be a mixed-gender activity, and many nineteenth-century American fishing clubs organized co-ed outings.⁹² Due to this social permissiveness, Thompson's flirtatious December fool is not perceived as a threat, which probably explains why this controversial trope has been permitted a rare American example. It would be difficult to imagine a serious American visual treatise on this theme, and Thompson's scene does not converse easily with the aforementioned pictures that are more solemn in tone.

British artists were also able to capitalize on humor's ability to reveal the more harmless details of misguided May-December courtships. Abraham Solomon's 1858 lunette *The Lion in Love* provides an interesting comparison for Thompson's misguided "old fool" (fig. 3.11). Similarly portraying an older man who imposes himself upon a young woman's leisure activities in the misguided hope of winning her favor, *The Lion in Love* features an older military officer attempting to assist his young and lovely intended with her needlework. A critic reviewing the 1858 Royal Academy exhibition for Bentley's Miscellany described Solomon's picture,⁹³

Many a hearty laugh will be caused by Mr. A. Solomon's *Lion in Love*. A gallant colonel, in the toils of a young beauty, is playing the part of Hercules at the feet of

⁹² One of these mixed-gender fishing outings appears to be depicted in Winslow Homer's illustration *The Fishing Party* (wood engraving made by John Filmer). The picture, which appeared in *Appleton's Journal of Literature, Science, and Art* on October 2, 1869, features a group of fashionable young men and women luxuriating by a stream. Two active female anglers are placed in the foreground of the composition. A copy of the illustration is in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum [1998.105.138, Gift of Harvey Isbits]. See Marilyn S. Kushner, Barbara Dayer Gallati, Linda S. Ferber. *Winslow Homer: Illustrating America* (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art in association with G. Braziller, 2000), 110. Also see David Tatham, *Winslow Homer in the Adirondacks* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

⁹³ *The Lion in Love* was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1858, no. 558. See Algernon Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts: A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and their work from its foundation in 1769 to 1904* (London: Henry Graves and Co. Ltd. and George Bell and Sons, 1905), 388.

Omphale. He does not spin, like great Alcides, but, seated on a sofa, with a basket of variegated silks on his knee, is trying to thread the beauty's needle. To accomplish his task, he is aiming at the needle's eye with all the energy of a Balaklava charge, and—to tell the truth—like that celebrated misadventure, he goes quite as wide of the mark. His desperate earnestness, and the arch look of his fair enslaver, make a capital comic picture, all the details of which are given with great care and finish.⁹⁴

Like Thompson's fool, Solomon's officer is an unwelcome suitor. While he struggles in vain to thread the young woman's needle, she coolly hides her impatience, holding out a hand for her needlework tools, ready to return to her efforts.

Solomon's title also creates context for the picture by drawing an association with a well-known story. Aesop's fable "The Lion in Love" tells the tale of a lion who feels drawn to a beautiful young shepherdess. Unable to tame his affections, he decides to ask her father for permission to marry her. Although her parents do not want the lion to pursue their daughter, they also do not wish to anger the dangerous beast. Instead, they outsmart him by agreeing to consider his proposal if he has his teeth and claws removed. After the lion consents, having his claws clipped and teeth pulled, the parents then deny him, knowing that a toothless lion can do little to hurt them.⁹⁵

Like Aesop's lion, whose ardor influences him to agree to being placed in an absurd situation, Solomon's "lion" seems ridiculous on the settee next to his intended. A

⁹⁴ "The Exhibition of the Royal Academy for 1858," *Bentley's Miscellany* 43, 447.

⁹⁵ Eunice Clark's 1948 translation of the fable is particularly charming. After describing the father's request that he remove his teeth and claws, Clark's lion, "love-demented, Consented." See Eunice Clark and Alexander Calder, *Selected Fables* (New York: Quadrangle, 1948. Reprinted by Dover, New York in 1968.) Clark's retelling is also reproduced in John J. McKendry, ed., *Aesop: Five Centuries of Illustrated Fables* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1964), 88.

recent review, written on the occasion of a Solomon family exhibition at the Geffrye Museum in London, dismissed him as “a smitten, pink-faced colonel.”⁹⁶ Victorian writers were not much kinder to Solomon’s misguided suitor, describing him as “plethoric,”⁹⁷ “stout” and “low-bred-looking,”⁹⁸ and the entire picture was disparaged by one critic as “petty trash”⁹⁹ and another as “meretricious clap-trap.”¹⁰⁰ The most frequently cited condemnation of Solomon’s scene is probably that of the esteemed critic James Dafforne, who wrote in *The Art Journal* in 1862, “We candidly admit our regret at seeing this picture, and still more so to find it some time afterwards engraved,¹⁰¹ and so circulated over the country. Mr. Solomon unquestionably made a mistake here, if Art is to subserve any good purpose.”¹⁰² These harsh words might surprise those who find little offensive material in the picture, especially as Thompson’s innocuous and lighthearted scene provides such a tidy comparison. It begs asking, then, why this age-disparate courtship scene is appraised with such vitriol. Is Solomon’s sense of humor perhaps too subtle to assuage Victorian anxieties about cross-generational courtship?

⁹⁶ “Disgrace and Favor.” *Country Life* 178, no. 4606 (November 28, 1985), 1686.

⁹⁷ “The *Lion in Love* which represents a plethoric old general threading the needle of a laughing young lady...” Thompson Cooper, *A New Biographical Dictionary: Containing Concise Notices of Eminent Persons of All Ages and Countries: and More Particularly of Great Britain and Ireland* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1873), 1068.

⁹⁸ The Council of Four, *The Royal Academy Review: A Guide to the Exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts, 1858* (London: Thomas F.A. Day, 1858), 29-30.

⁹⁹ “How so good a painter can degrade himself with the execution of such petty trash as *The Lion in Love* of last year, or *The Sour Grapes* of the present, is a marvel to us.” See “The Art-Exhibitions of 1859,” *Titan: A Monthly Magazine* 29 (July-December 1859), London: James Hogg and Sons, 1859, 36.

¹⁰⁰ Clergymen of the United Church in Ireland, “The Art Year,” *The Dublin University Magazine: A Literary and Political Journal* 314, no. 53 (February 1859), 157.

¹⁰¹ The painting was engraved in 1860 by W.H. Simmons and published by Henry Graves & Co., London. Identification of the engraver comes from Allen Staley, et al, *The Post-Pre-Raphaelite Print: Etching, illustration, reproductive engraving, and photography in England in and around the 1860s* (New York: Miriam & Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, 1995), 32.

¹⁰² James Dafforne, “British Artists: Their Style and Character. No. LIX: Abraham Solomon,” *The Art Journal* 1 (March 1, 1862), 75.

Pictured next to Thompson's scene, *The Lion in Love* is comparatively understated in its jocularity. Alternatively, perhaps Victorians were unsettled by the physical proximity between the December lion and his May miss. Unlike Thompson's pair sitting outdoors, allowing either party to leave or move places if they desire, Solomon's couple is confined together to the small sofa, the woman unable to distance herself beyond sinking into the farthest corner of the upholstery. The flustered colonel, alternatively, seems unaware of her desire for more physical space, and he unknowingly crowds her, his toes stepping on the hem of her gown. This corporeal proximity is unique in the vein of Victorian May-December pictures, and perhaps the discomfort of this interior space threatens to outweigh the picture's capacity for humor.

Some Victorian critics commented on the grotesque physical comedy of the scene, with one Royal Academy reviewer dismissing, "The contortion of face, body, legs, and feet into which the colonel is throwing himself, sinks the whole picture into nothing better than a mere piece of buffoonery."¹⁰³ Solomon's physical comedy is a quality absent in other May-December scenes, and it was widely dismissed for its levity. Perhaps this comedy is also a metaphor for the May-December endeavor as a whole – such couplings require contortions that ultimately sully both parties' characters, as seen with Thompson's fool and *Married for Rank*.

Solomon's choice of subject may also have disappointed audiences who had been impressed by his work in the previous year's Royal Academy exhibition. In 1857 he showed *Waiting for the Verdict* and *Not Guilty (The Acquittal)*, which received rave reviews.¹⁰⁴ These "before" and "after" pictures, which show the anxious family of a man

¹⁰³ The Council of Four, *The Royal Academy Review*, 29-30.

¹⁰⁴ Both in the Tate collection.

awaiting news of his fate at court, were admired by crowds and critics who expected to see similar narrative scenes by Solomon in the following year's exhibition. One critic articulated the common sense of disappointment felt upon viewing *The Lion in Love*, writing,

When Mr. A. Solomon's picture of *Waiting for the Verdict* of last year appeared, we were in hopes that a skillful painter had applied his acquirements to a purpose evincing thought and manly intellect, for that was indeed an admirable example of both. The meretricious clap-trap of two works by this artist at the RA this year deprives us of this hope, at least for a time, for we cannot wholly believe that the painter of that woman's face, who waited to hear her husband's condemnation, could long confine himself to the silly folly of the *Lion in Love* – old and threadbare folly, too—or give himself up to the sickly sentiment of the other work of his at the RA.¹⁰⁵

Perhaps Solomon's *Lion in Love* was doomed by his success the previous year, or maybe his scene, which was intended to be humorous, just fell flat. When humor cannot be perceived in this potentially innocuous situation, the picture shifts into more threatening an uncertain territory. Through misinterpretation, an innocent genre scene of misguided romantic intentions becomes a scene of physical territoriality and encroachment.

As the differences between Thompson's and Solomon's pictures illustrate, humor requires a common context and legibility. If the visual joke of a cross-generational

¹⁰⁵ Clergymen of the United Church in Ireland, "The Art Year." *The Dublin University Magazine: A Literary and Political Journal* 314, no. 53 (February 1859), 157.

courtship is obviously tame, a large audience can more easily enjoy the scene. However, if the humor is too subtle, or if it verges on something darker, the innocuousness of the picture is jeopardized. An acceptable image of a May-December pairing is enabled by shared knowledge, and in order to find age mismatch amusing it must be somewhat familiar. The intended audience must share social values, or else something like Thompson's harmless picture or a droll ditty like "December and May" does not effectively function.¹⁰⁶ Another difference is psycho-spatial: the "fool's" May is not only outdoors, but presumably outside the confines of marriage; Solomon's May appears stuck on multiple levels – she is not in on the joke, and is instead portrayed as more of an unwilling participant in an unpleasant interaction.

The disparities between the lightheartedness of the aforementioned American May-December pairs and their relatively darker British counterparts may also reveal something about the composition of American humor, a quality which may serve to define the differences across the spectrum of Anglo-American interpretations of age-disparate unions.

Gibson Girls as May brides

If executed well, the May-December couple possesses the potential to serve what the literary scholar Louis Rubin calls "the great American joke," which he describes as an aspect of the national sense of humor that capitalizes on the incompatibility between truth and fiction or promise and reality. Rubin claims, "Incongruity lies at the heart of

¹⁰⁶ "Humor, like all forms of communication, requires *context*: to find it amusing, the audience must have certain knowledge, understanding, and values, which are subject to evolution from one century or even one decade to the next." Nancy A. Walker, "Introduction: What is Humor? What is American Humor?" in *What's So Funny? Humor in American Culture* edited by Nancy A. Walker (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1998), 4.

American experience. It is emblematic of the nature and the problem of democracy.”¹⁰⁷ In terms of this incongruity, the older/younger couple provides convenient fodder and easily points to the contradictions that permeate American culture.¹⁰⁸

It is American humor’s duality, its “refractory set of opposites,” that makes it possible to understand how the best-known American images of May-December pairings came to be made by a waggish New York illustrator.¹⁰⁹

Charles Dana Gibson (1867-1944) mapped the strains and absurdity of social change and class conflict of the fin de siècle, both in the United States and abroad. An artistic prodigy with impeccable social credentials, Gibson was championed by *Life* magazine in its infancy. In those pages, he successfully portrayed scenes of society life inspired by his own unrestricted access to exclusive tea parties, salons, and private tête-à-têtes.¹¹⁰ Gibson was an unrivaled master of Yankee social satire, exposing the faults and frivolities of the American social scene.¹¹¹

Best known as the creator of the “Gibson Girl,” with her cold demeanor, corseted waist, perky nose, and upswept hair, Gibson’s pen and ink drawings proffered what Martha H. Patterson describes as “a popular version of the New Woman that both sanctioned and undermined women’s desires for progressive sociopolitical change and

¹⁰⁷ Louis D. Rubin, Jr. “The Great American Joke.” First published in the *South Atlantic Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (Winter 1973). Reprinted in *The Humor Prism in 20th-century America*, edited by Joseph Boskin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 35.

¹⁰⁸ The May-December pairing might also benefit from the “shock between Business and Piety,” another contradiction identified as a source for American humor by H.R. Haweis in 1882. See his *American Humorists* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1882), 12.

¹⁰⁹ Joseph Boskin, *Rebellious Laughter: People's Humor in American Culture* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 38.

¹¹⁰ Simon Houfe, *Fin de Siècle: The Illustrators of the Nineties* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1992), 55-57.

¹¹¹ Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts, *The American Personality: The Artist-Illustrator of Life in the United States, 1860-1930* (Los Angeles: The Grunwald Center, 1976), 48.

personal freedom at the turn of the century.¹¹² The Gibson Girl asserted her independence, intelligence, and individualism, usually dominating the men around her by drawing upon these assets. Domineering and destructive, the independent Gibson Girl easily emasculated older men who were portrayed as gullible and weak. Journalism historian Carolyn Kitch describes,

While this motif was always presented as a joke, it never was only a joke. Inscribed in the motif discussed here were serious political issues. Yet because they were cast as comedic, these images, and the messages they contained, were meant to be read as absurd. Through humor, explosive notions were discussed but then diffused. The big woman-little man pairing motif was a way of both acknowledging and dismissing the New Woman at the height of her cultural strength, during the culmination of the "first wave" of the American women's rights movement.¹¹³

Around 1890, when an interpretation of the May-December dichotomy expands to include the figure of the "New Woman," the dynamic takes on additional descriptive responsibilities. In addition to being beautiful and young, the New Woman also possessed intimidating powers. Gibson's idealized independent woman makes an amusingly uncooperative May bride for a December bridegroom. As previously claimed, humorous portrayals of the intergenerational marriage subject makes it easier for American

¹¹² Martha H. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 28-29.

¹¹³ Carolyn Kitch, "Destructive Women and Little Men: Masculinity, the New Woman, and Power in 1910s Popular Media," *Journal of Magazine and New Media Research* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1999), online at <<http://nme.loyola.edu/newmediajournal>>

audiences to digest, as they are more willing to appraise age-mismatched relationships through a comic lens.

In Gibson's 1902 *Life* magazine drawing, "You Promised to Be My Pupil and Learn to Love Me," the title statement is made by an elderly man who eagerly offers a young female companion the crook of his arm (fig. 3.12).¹¹⁴ He looks towards her optimistically, though her gaze is cast in the opposite direction. She towers over him, much like Claxton's hesitant May brides, and responds, despondently, "But it makes such a difference when your heart isn't in your work." The discontented young woman's statement exceeds the vexation expressed by Claxton's young bride (or even Thompson's May, who simply disregards her December) – instead, Gibson allows his May to speak for herself, articulating her unease towards her elderly suitor with disarming guilelessness.

The drawing sums up the Gibson Girl's usual aims by reiterating her individualism and autonomy, while simultaneously depicting her materialism and desire to sacrifice love for the financial security of an older partner. Patterson affirms this complex social operation, claiming that "As a definitive sign of modern ethos, the legitimization of personal preference, be it in shopping for men or a mate, is often a central theme in Gibson's illustrations."¹¹⁵ The young woman in this scene is self-actualized and assertive about what she desires (wealth and stature) and what she disdains (the older gentleman who is able to provide these things). It is in this duality that Gibson's humor finds its currency.

¹¹⁴ Published in *Life* 39, no. 1020 (May 15, 1902) 419. Also included in *The Social Ladder*, a portfolio of seventy-seven drawings by Charles Dana Gibson (New York: R.H. Russell, 1902).

¹¹⁵ Martha H. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 32.

The dissatisfied May bride provides ideal comedic fodder in Gibson's drawings, especially when she takes matters into her own hands to mitigate her unsustainable circumstances.¹¹⁶ In the 1907 drawing "A Suggestion for Ill-Assorted Pairs," Gibson reimagines the unhappy marital dining room scene of Orchardson's *Mariage de Convenance* (fig. 3.13).¹¹⁷ Similar to Orchardson's series, Gibson's drawing is set within a well-appointed dining room featuring a long, rectangular table and ornate furniture. Again, the May-December pair are shown at either end of the table, the older bridegroom perched at the edge of his magisterial seat and eagerly leaning towards his young wife.

Gibson's bride also shares characteristics with her Orchardson equivalent: she is bored by her partner and turns her attention away from him completely. However, Gibson improves upon the simple snub paid by Orchardson's evasive May. The young wife in "A Suggestion" does not even bother sitting across from her husband. Instead, she sits upon the table, her attention focused on a newspaper, with her back turned away from her elderly bridegroom.

Of course, the woman's refusal to acknowledge her husband is almost superfluous, as a wall of bars resembling a partition at a zoo effectively divides the couple, splitting the dining room in half. Even if he broke the wall of silence and discomfort between them, he still could not physically approach her, her lack of feeling only partially contributing to the woman's distance from her husband.¹¹⁸ It is an amusing

¹¹⁶ Patterson expands on a simple observation that is worth including in this context: "The fabulously rich in Gibson's images are often unhappy—bloated with self-indulgence or pinched with envy..." The conflagration of these two sentiments tidily manifests itself in the May-December scene. See Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 29-30.

¹¹⁷ While the image was originally published by *Life* in 1902, it was also included in Gibson's *The Social Ladder* (New York: R.H. Russell, 1902) and reproduced as an advertisement for the book in Harper's *Monthly Magazine* 107 (November 1903), 1035.

¹¹⁸ The Gibson Girl's lack of warmth was deemed one of her greatest faults. Gibson himself remarked, "I see now that she has many faults: She is too cold, a shade too feelingless, perhaps, but—she was the best I

exaggeration and perhaps a uniquely American sequel to the *Mariage de Convenance* series. While Americans may have been unable to paint pictures of unhappy intergenerational relationships, they were willing to capitalize on the humor of such situations in popular prints and perhaps express class animus in the process.¹¹⁹

Peek-a-boo greetings

The visual gag of May-December pairings can be easily found in transatlantic popular media throughout the end of the nineteenth century. From chromolithographic die-cuts produced for scrapbook decorations to postcards and trade cards, the subject of generationally mismatched couples was a veritable source of fascination for the late Victorian middle class.¹²⁰ Of particular interest are amusing cards of a peek-a-boo variety: popular greeting cards that often made jokes about age discrepancy through visual illusions. In many of these cards, there appears to be an older man canoodling with a young woman until a flap is lifted to reveal that this improper dalliance is just a visual joke with a reasonable explanation.

In one example of this card type, a young woman in a golfing outfit appears to be giggling with a senior sportsman behind a flowering bush (fig. 3.14). Two young boys in the background appear horrified, though their response is unwarranted. The flap can be

could do at the time.” In Louis Baury, “Mr. Pipp: Tourist.” *The Bookman* 35 (March-August 1912), 40. Also see Edward Marshall, “The Gibson Girl Analyzed by Her Originator.” *New York Times* (November 20, 1910), SM6.

¹¹⁹ There is also something to be said in this image about the crisis of masculinity at the turn of the century, though for the purposes of this argument, masculinity is being considered solely in terms of age. For more on Gibson and the public debates over the roles of men in American society at this time, see Carolyn Kitch, “Destructive Women and Little Men: Masculinity, the New Woman, and Power in 1910s Popular Media,” *Journal of Magazine and New Media Research* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1999).

¹²⁰ These examples of printed ephemera were all found in the John and Carolyn Grossman Collection at the Winterthur Library, Manuscripts Division.

lifted to reveal the presence of a handsome young gentleman, and the elderly golfer is revealed to be their chaperone.

Another version of the lift-the-flap gag shows two policemen peeking through a pair of wooden shutters (fig. 3.15). They watch in horror as they observe an older man approaching a buxom blonde inside the house. One of the policemen has his nightstick raised above his head, ready to burst into the room to protect the woman from the old man's advances. However, when the flap is opened, the scene is instantly made sedate: she is shown to be innocently bringing the gentleman a glass of beer. The popularity of these peek-a-boo images likely stems from a general familiarity with the May-December trope, as well as a general sense of discomfort about such relationships. Humor aids the navigation of uncomfortable social taboos, and it is well deployed when tackling a difficult subject like age-disparate romance.¹²¹

Travelling back to Leighton's country church, moments after May and December solemnly declared, "*Till Death Do Us Part*," the picture's subtle nuances, its expression of myriad possible alternative readings, is perhaps bolstered by this expanded context. The provocative combination of the young bride and older bridegroom in Leighton's picture requires viewers to consider issues of aging, economics, gender, and social expectations. These fascinations would similarly appeal to Victorian viewers, though their understanding of the scene would likely be less reductive than contemporary interpretations. Both of Leighton's figures evade complete comprehension, despite the legibility of their unhappiness.

Contemporary scholars often treat the May-December pairing solely in terms of objectification and discontentment. However, such images also reveal sensitivity,

¹²¹ Walker, *What's So Funny? Humor in American Culture*, 5.

normalcy, humor, and disruptive aesthetic conventions when age is considered not as a peripheral quality exhibited by a tangential character, but a factor of central importance in the determination of a picture's narrative.

Chapter Four

“Bright golden locks mingling with the gray”

Re-evaluating Cross-Generational Play in Victorian Visual Culture

An older woman reads the newspaper in a richly decorated Victorian parlor. Sitting upright in her dark wooden rocking chair with her feet perched on a hassock, she blissfully pays little attention to the young boy performing handstands behind her. He jubilantly kicks her chair forward, his bare feet positioned at the top of the rocker. Although his face is turned away from the viewer, one can easily imagine his mischievous grin. His placid guardian smiles to herself contentedly, indicating an acceptance of the boy’s habitual antics.

Painted in 1865, *Home from School* by the Philadelphia artist William E. Winner (ca. 1815-1883) celebrates the special relationship between children and their older guardians and family members (fig. 4.1). This common trope in British and American Victorian genre painting disrupts preconceived notions of the propriety and formality of the era. While rules about household behavior and social decorum may have significantly governed the lives of children in the later nineteenth century, these rules were easily broken when it came to interactions with grandparents and elderly caregivers. A consideration of the emotional and informal relationships between grandparents and grandchildren significantly alters the interpretation of genre pictures of cross-generational connections – a visual trope that has traditionally escaped serious attention.

Kinship across the life cycle is an important theme in many mid- and late

nineteenth-century Anglo-American genre scenes, which often depicted children playing with their grandparents in various contexts throughout the class spectrum. While often dismissed as saccharine or overly sentimental, such pictures of co-generational amusement warrant closer investigation. The sheer number of images of this type presents a challenge to many of the accepted social divisions of the old/young binary in contemporary appraisals of Victorian culture. Despite being consistently overlooked by art historians, the vast quantity of joyous genre paintings of grandparents at play supports Lewis Mumford's adage "that every generation revolts against its fathers and makes friends with its grandfathers."¹

This chapter will consider how art history may meaningfully benefit from age studies when appraising British and American genre paintings depicting trans-generational play. By addressing the work of various late-nineteenth century artists who painted the spirited exchanges and collaborative leisure activities of grandparents and grandchildren, new cross-disciplinary initiatives for approaching and framing generational exchange in British and American social history can be revealed.

A number of scholars working in the recently-established interdisciplinary field of age studies have largely dedicated their attention to two major ideas that can be effectively applied to reading Victorian genre painting: first, that unique friendships sometimes materialize between children and their grandparents; second, there is the complicated concept of "second childhood," which long blemished the status and depiction of aging in Britain and the United States. Both of these issues inevitably

¹ "The commonest axiom of history is that every generation revolts against its fathers and makes friends with its grandfathers." Lewis Mumford, *The Brown Decades: A Study of the Arts in American, 1865-1895* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 3. Mumford (1895-1990) was a leading architectural planner, urbanist, sociologist, journalist, and historian. He wrote widely about literature, history, architecture, American studies, and American culture.

influenced the creation and reception of nineteenth-century pictures of cross-generational play, establishing a scholarly foundation for a twenty-first century reappraisal of works that have traditionally escaped serious consideration.

During the later Victorian period, diverse social factors contributed to increased opportunities for the establishment of meaningful relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren.² Lisa Dillon, a demographer at the Université de Montréal, has written about the historiography of grandparenting, using a quantitative method to explore the lives of older women at the end of the nineteenth century. With a primary focus on older women's roles within the family, Dillon's research prods the "ambiguity and discontinuity" that characterized senescence at this time. While older family members were relatively limited by their physical confinement to the domestic sphere, the emotional status of grandparenthood absorbed "multiple and contradictory visions of age."³ The complexity of the Victorian grandparent-grandchild relationship was in considerable flux.

While some work has been done to better understand the status of grandmothers at this time, less has been studied about the roles of grandfathers, which complicates some methods of inquiry.⁴ However, evidence suggests that Victorian grandfathers likely experienced a pleasure similar to that felt by grandmothers, who enjoyed relating to their grandchildren. Documentary sources illuminate the lives of nineteenth-century grandmothers, the support they gave to their grandchildren, the sense of connection that

² Lisa Dillon, *The Shady Side of Fifty: Age and Old Age in Late Victorian Canada and the United States* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 218.

³ Dillon, *The Shady Side of Fifty*, 132.

⁴ Dillon writes, "Historians interested in the social and cultural history of old age have paid greater attention to grandparents themselves than social science historians, who have preferred to focus on extended household formation in general. Since the 1980s, historians of women and gender have demonstrated consistent interest in grandmothers; comparatively little research has been conducted on grandfathers." (218)

these bonds provided, and the desirable position presented by grandparenthood.⁵ It is also understood that far more women than men lived as grandparents in cross-generational households, although this demographic discrepancy does not announce itself in the visual arts, where both grandfathers and grandmothers seem to be portrayed with corresponding frequency.⁶

Cross-generational homes lend themselves to the formation of distinctive bonds, and the grandparent-grandchild relationship in Victorian painting exhibited markedly different characteristics than those displayed by children interacting with their mothers and fathers. While images of children with their parents often conformed to the domestic proprieties of the later nineteenth century, pictures of children with their grandparents often present surprising elements of jocularly, chaos, and kinship.

The expected behavior and responsibilities unique to grandparents were noted in the periodical press. American and British writers of the later Victorian period commented on the pleasures of age and the appeal of grandparenthood. After the 1860s, there appears to have been an increase in the variety of roles available to grandparents, especially those who lived in multi-generational homes, and social reformers, novelists, and the authors of domestic manuals all contributed to a lively discussion about the ideal relationships between grandparents and grandchildren.

An article published in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1885 titled "The Growing Youthfulness of Age" asserted "age *was* older once than now."⁷ Describing "the kind of grandfather and grandmother...on whom full-page pictures were bestowed in the

⁵ Dillon, *The Shady Side of Fifty*, 219.

⁶ "...twice as many elderly women as elderly men lived as the grandparent of the household head, probably due to the greater occurrence and lengthier duration of widowhood among women." Dillon, *The Shady Side of Fifty*, 224.

⁷ "The Growing Youthfulness of Age." *Harper's Bazaar* 18, no. 1 (January 3, 1885).

juveniles of forty years ago...” the author remembers an earlier generation of grandparents as “decrepit patriarchs” who demonstrated that “age is not, of itself, venerable or interesting.”⁸ Recalling characters of “infant-senile innocence” in “self-denying caps and painful gowns,” looking out a window “opening on an allegorical sunset,” the author describes a sea change in nineteenth-century grandparenting. He goes on to describe the “actual” grandfathers and grandmothers of his time,

The actual grandfather is a keen and active personage, far too busy with the present to wax garrulous over the past...He drives out and goes to parties with “the girls,” who have girls of their own almost old enough to go with them...The actual grandmother is even busier and more active. She never has time to be “looking toward sunset...” She attends concerts, is a keen critic of the new play and players, reads the monthlies, weeklies, and dailies, has strong party convictions, crochets, knits rugs, embroiders table scarfs, goes to church, and amuses her grandchildren like an incorporate *Harper’s Young People*.⁹

Calling “mental energy” the “elixir of youth,” the author praises those who find joy and excitement in the freedoms afforded by age. Playfulness and frivolity are hailed as venerable characteristics and précised as such:

Men and women appear young by feeling young. They feel young by being vitally interested in the pursuits of youth—prosperity, enjoyment...young fellows of

⁸ “The Growing Youthfulness of Age.”

⁹ “The Growing Youthfulness of Age.”

sixty and seventy may have as good a chance and as good a time as young fellows of twenty...and young ladies of threescore may be as welcome and necessary at home and in society as ...other young ladies...

The promotion of playfulness as a salve for old age was not limited to American publications. British writers, too, romanticized the joy and liveliness embodied by modern grandparents. The writer and businessman John Stores Smith first published his essay “On Being a Grandfather” around 1850. A warm and tender reflection on the spirited joys of grandparenthood, Smith’s article went on to be reprinted in various British and American magazines, including *Leigh Hunt’s Journal*, *The Living Age*, and *The Southern Literary Messenger*.¹⁰

Smith vibrantly commences his essay with the lament, “I regret that I was not born a grandfather!” Calling “grandfatherhood” a “crowning glory of our mortal course,” he describes the special relationship between children and their grandparents.¹¹ He affectionately illustrates a scene in which, “bouncing granddaughters call in upon [“an old man”], and jump upon his knee and kiss his old lips, and pat his withered cheeks, and he strokes their smooth tresses, and touches the damask bloom upon their faces, and smiles upon them, and is happy.”¹² Far from the staid and stoic adults often associated with Victorian culture, Smith venerates a grandfather who is “swarmed” by the “little urchins” gathered around him, ready to play.

¹⁰ Published under the pseudonym “John Ackerlos,” the essay appears to have first been printed in *Leigh Hunt’s Journal* in 1849. It also appeared in *The Living Age*. The version referred to by this author is that which was published in *The Southern Literary Messenger* 34, no. 12 (December 1862), 631-633. A brief profile of Smith is included in Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Brontës* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 129. He is described as a writer, educator, and businessman who “admired and aped the style of Carlyle.”

¹¹ Smith, “On Being a Grandfather,” 631.

¹² Smith, “On Being a Grandfather,” 631.

Smith's ideal grandparent enjoys beaming affection, "snug retirement," and a wide variety of domestic entertainments. Playing at magic lanterns and parlor games, he dances and laughs along with his little saplings. The essay then concludes as Smith bemoans his youth and declares his impatience towards becoming a grandfather,

Pity the sorrows of a poor young man! I am only a nephew, a cousin, a son, a brother, a husband...but neither am I a grandfather, nor can I be permitted to act as a grandfather. I never see my young cousins but I want them to cluster round me, perch on my knee, and let me mix in their antic games; but they will not let me.¹³

Smith describes the life of a grandparent as one that is steeped in "the feeling of a life well spent." His participation in children's games and intergenerational parlor amusements is well earned, his pleasure "worthy."¹⁴

The pleasures of grandparenting were mutually beneficial. Becoming a grandparent was an opportunity to refresh family affections and experience a new role in the family. A new group of little companions who could lift the mature spirit, and, in turn, children were to be showered with love and learning opportunities. Writing in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1870, the New York Unitarian minister Samuel Osgood describes this gladdening exchange,

¹³ Smith, "On Being a Grandfather," 632.

¹⁴ Smith, "On Being a Grandfather," 633.

We insist upon making the old man young again by giving him a young playmate, who shall make him merry as well as wise, indoors and out of doors, who shall reopen his old stores of funny tales by the fireside and pull him out upon the lawn or into the garden and grove, and sing over to him the old songs, and rehearse to him the old primers of nature and the schools. If a thoughtful man of fifty five or sixty will watch carefully the growth and development of a bright child, note all the motions of instinct, intelligence, and affection, and do what he can to teach and train the little one he will be surprised to find himself learning quite as much as he teaches...¹⁵

In the context of the nursery, youth and age are on equal terms. The grandparent enjoys the feeling of being needed by the child, while the little one thrives on the attention of a loving, mature playmate. Countless Victorian magazine articles praise the exhaustless spirit of these relationships, framing them as exemplary models of domestic bliss. These relationships are also undoubtedly complicated, as the friendship that emerges between a child and a grandparent may sometimes challenge the authority of that child's mother or father. It has also been noted that unlike the grandparent, who will love their grandchild before it is born, the young creature must, in some ways, learn to love their grandparent. For these reasons, it is a relationship characterized by elasticity and ineffability.

Despite the surfeit of primary source material that attests to the multifaceted qualities of Victorian grandparenthood, rarely are these complexities explored in the context of genre painting. Notwithstanding its popularity as a theme, images of children

¹⁵ Samuel Osgood, "A Word for Grandfathers." *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 41, no. 241 (June 1870), 904.

playing with their grandmothers and grandfathers are often addressed in reductive, sentimental terms. Many art historians have not fully examined the positive qualities of aging reflected in imagery of cross-generational kinship. It would benefit twenty-first century art historians to investigate the context of Victorian perspectives on these chronologically variant relationships, which were evolving rapidly at this time.

Today, the most commonly understood ideas about nineteenth-century cross-generational exchange might be the values that were widely represented in Victorian culture, which insisted that children should behave respectfully toward their grandparents, while grandparents were believed to spoil children in return.¹⁶ However, these views, which are largely accepted today as prevailing Victorian beliefs, deny the richness and intricacy of the relationships between the oldest and youngest members of the family.

Children and grandparents are allied by a shared taste for delight and a similar freedom from responsibility. Neither youth nor advanced age is expected to act as the sole provider for the family, and this paucity of obligations allows more time and energy to devote to reading, playing, and other leisure pursuits. Pleasure was deemed vital to children and grandparents alike – in his 1900 book *Our Home; or Influences Emanating from the Hearthstone*, Charles E. Sargent urges, “...children are not the only beings that require amusements. All require it, even the aged.”¹⁷ It was this shared need for entertainment and indulgence, which likely led to the development of the unique kinship between children and their grandparents, that was eventually depicted in legions of genre

¹⁶ Anita Schorsch, *Images of Childhood: An Illustrated Social History* (New York: Main Street Press, 1979), 75.

¹⁷ Charles E. Sargent, *Our Home; or Influences Emanating from the Hearthstone* (Springfield, MA: The King-Richardson Co., 1900), 112.

pictures.

The friendship between grandparents and their grandchildren that is facilitated by this shared taste for amusement was noted for its striking visual appearance. Mary Allen West, a prominent American temperance activist, lecturer, and social reformer, described the sight of grandfathers with their young grandchildren in her 1887 child-rearing guide, *Childhood: Its Care and Culture*,

Some of the most beautiful home pictures we have ever seen were made by grandfathers and their little grandchildren, bright golden locks mingling with the gray, as each bent eagerly over some child book, made doubly delightful to the little one because grandpa read it with her...Such grandfathers and grandmothers never grow old; the dew of eternal youth is on their hearts, and whether they speak to us through books, or sit by our own firesides, childhood always loves and maturity venerates them. Such old people make their own place and fill it with a warm, bright atmosphere, wherever they may be.¹⁸

The ability of older people to “make their own place” in the home and fill it with love and warmth was discussed in various forums, even attracting the attention of social reformers like West. The felicity of this special relationship was viewed as intrinsic to the making of a happy and healthy household. Agnes B. Ormsbee, author of *The House Comfortable*, was well known for her instructive writings on domestic management.¹⁹ In an 1890 article

¹⁸ Mary Allen West. *Childhood: Its Care and Culture* (Chicago: Women’s Temperance Publications, 1887), 235-236.

¹⁹ See *The House Comfortable* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1892). Also see Ormsbee’s contributions to *The National Exposition Souvenir: What America Owes to Women*, edited by Lydia Hoyt Farmer (Buffalo:

titled “The Art of Being a Grandparent,” Ormsbee endorses West’s view. She proclaims,

No relation in life is more lovely than that of grandparent and grandchild. The cares, the struggles and the anxieties of bringing up a family, and guiding and guarding, controlling and teaching the children of the household have all passed away...The old home is lonely for a while. But soon a fresh group of little ones gather around the hearthstone and the silent rooms echo again with the calls and cries, the merriment and noise of the children’s children.²⁰

Ormsbee also counsels that the relationship between grandparent and grandchild must be nurtured, and older family members should “strive to make this relationship more ideal, more helpful, and more truly loving...” for the sake of their charges.²¹ It is the uniqueness of this relationship that should be thoroughly considered upon encountering a Victorian picture of cross-generational play. Often dismissed as “chocolate box pictures,” scenes of play between grandparents and grandchildren are in fact richly complex – a fact made apparent by an intentional engagement with such images.²²

The study of images of cross-generational play should also be informed by an awareness of the difficult and outmoded concept of “second childhood,” which long

Charles Wells Moulton, 1893). Produced as a souvenir of the Columbian Exposition with the aid of the Board of Lady Managers of the Columbian Exposition, the edited volume collects prescriptive writings by the most popular women writing in this vein at the time.

²⁰ Agnes B. Ormsbee. “The Art of Being a Grandparent.” *The Homemaker* 3 (October 1889-March 1890), 437.

²¹ Ormsbee, “The Art of Being a Grandparent,” 438.

²² The term “chocolate box artist” can unfortunately be applied to a number of painters who favored glad scenes of cross-generational kinship. Art historians have largely ignored oft-dismissed painters like Arthur John Elsley, Frederick Morgan, George Augustus Freezor, George Sheridan Knowles, William Stuart MacGeorge, and Charles Burton Barber, who painted accessible and idealized pictures of children, animals, and, occasionally, grandparents. Works by these artists were often commercially reproduced as chocolate box covers, prints, calendars, and greeting cards, further jeopardizing their status as “fine” art. More on “chocolate box pictures” will follow later in this chapter.

blemished the status and depiction of aging in Britain and the United States. In the words of one London physician writing in 1891, the phrase “second childhood” was often “used opprobriously to express the garrulity and foolishness that often mark both our exits and our entrances on life’s stage.”²³ Charles Dickens, too, famously fumed about the term, decrying,

We call this a state of childishness, but it is the same poor hollow mockery of it, that death is of sleep. Where, in the dull eyes of doting men, are the laughing light and life of childhood, the gaiety that has known no check, the frankness that has felt no chill, the hope that has never withered, the joys that fade in blossoming?²⁴

The contested axiom of “second childhood” appears to have waxed and waned in popularity and significance following the rise and fall of the Victorian period. The expression steadily increased in usage beginning around 1820, and it climbed in the following decades in British and American print, reaching the peak of its frequency around 1870. The phrase began steadily decreasing in popularity around 1900, coinciding with the end of the Victorian period and fitting within the chronological parameters of this study.²⁵

²³ Alfred Schofield, M.D. “On the Science of Old Age.” *Eclectic Magazine: Foreign Literature* 53, no. 1 (January 1891), 111.

²⁴ Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd; New ed. edition, 1998), 91.

²⁵ This data was collected using the Google Ngram Viewer, a digital language mapping tool, which charts the occurrence of selected terms across more than five million books and periodicals that have been digitized by Google. Teams at Google, Harvard, and M.I.T. developed the tool, and since its release in 2010 it has facilitated new methods for interdisciplinary research and the development of new strategies for the practice of digital public history. For the purposes of this project, the term “second childhood” was mapped on three graphs: the first was a survey of all English texts, the second data set was limited to American English, and the third data set accounted for British English. The chronological parameters for each search were restricted to 1800-1950, allowing the span of about fifty years both before and after the

The idea that senescence could so easily resemble infancy would seem offensive or unfounded today. However, in the later nineteenth century, it was not uncommon to regard the very old and the very young as equivalently precious and burdensome.²⁶ In her book *Precocious Children and Childish Adults: Age Inversion in Victorian Literature*, Claudia Nelson, who writes widely about Victorian literature and the family and the identity politics therein, draws a parallel between the Victorian fascinations with childhood and old age, describing “second childhood” as something that was “often represented as an allied but possibly inferior state.”²⁷ Nelson’s study describes how Victorian ideas of the life cycle conflated youth and age, often likening children to their elders and elders to children. Prodding “the possible motivations and meanings of such generational border crossings,” Nelson stresses the general uncertainty and interchangeability of age categories in the Victorian era.²⁸

The issues of Victorian age conflation and equivalency have been the focus of less scholarship than the problems of sexual inversion and gender of the same era.²⁹ However, the frequency with which the concept of “second childhood” appears in print should foment a kind of distrust in contemporary viewers. These ideas demand skepticism with regard to ideas of the oppositions of youth and age, responsibility and frivolity, masculinity and femininity, and vitality and decrepitude as they appear in Victorian painting. In sum, contemporary viewer should distrust the presence of these

period in question. “Smoothing,” which increases the fluidity of results by averaging events of the search term in the years before and after each given year, was set to the tool’s default setting. When the term “second childhood” was graphed across all of the digitized English texts published between 1800-1950, the peak year for occurrence of the phrase was 1868.

²⁶ Anthony Burgess, *On Going to Bed* (London: André Deutsch, 1982), 8.

²⁷ Claudia Nelson, *Precocious Children and Childish Adults: Age Inversion in Victorian Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 2.

²⁸ Nelson, *Precocious Children*, 3-4.

²⁹ Nelson, *Precocious Children*, 11.

dyads given that Victorian writers frequently equated youth and old age.

Victorian perspectives on second childhood reveal the concept's complexity, as well as its potential to reveal meaning in intergenerational genre pictures. Depending on its context, the notion of second childhood can be revered, disparaged, praised for its virtue, or vilified for its ineffectuality. The vast gulf between the possible positive and negative interpretations of the term seem to be organized chronologically, as mid-century writers were more culpable for an unconstructive application of the idea of "second childhood," while their *fin-de-siècle* counterparts argued against the blind acceptance of this loaded term.

Mid-century writers sought to reconcile the "bright cognomen of youth, Childhood" with "the infirmities, the physical and mental wreck, attendant upon broken down and decrepit old age."³⁰ In 1852, the English novelist Henry Cockton described second childhood as a time for play, especially after the birth of grandchildren. Cockton believed, "Children are the dolls of second childhood, with which the old children play with as much delight as they played with the dolls of their *earlier* infancy."³¹ This description of age conflates it with youth, which could potentially complicate readings of images of intergenerational play. How does the presence of a grandparent playmate challenge the widely accepted sense that children enjoyed little lively interaction with adults in the Victorian home?

Such a patronizing perspective as Cockton's was by no means unique. This view was echoed even in religious sermons, like the American Swedenborgian Reverend Chauncey Giles's discourse on Genesis 15.15, published in 1856. The Reverend concurs

³⁰ David Rice, M.D. "Second Childhood." *The Ladies' Garland and Family Magazine* 10 (July-December 1846), 102.

³¹ Henry Cockton, *Lady Felicia: A Novel* (London: Office of the National Illustrated Library, 1852), 245.

that old age “is a second childhood, but in a higher and better sense than is usually attributed to it. A good old age is a return to a second youth, to a second infancy even, but a higher and wiser and nobler and happier one.”³² This perspective dismisses the turmoil and richness of a life well lived. Instead, the Reverend reduces senescence to an enhanced reflection of infancy. Both Cockton and Giles seem to suggest that the further one travels away from the state of childhood, the more likely it is to reoccur.

In stark contrast to Cockton’s insubstantial description of “old children” and the Reverend’s notion of “second infancy,” the Argentinian-American writer and translator Mariano Joaquin Lorente argued against the use of the phrase “second childhood,” the origins of which he attributed to the ignorant masses. Writing more than sixty years after Cockton, Lorente’s take on “second childhood” outlines the rise and fall of the troublesome term’s popularity. In 1918, decades after the charted decline of the concept, Lorente was able to declare “second childhood” “an outrageous phrase this which displays a curious lack of differentiation between the mind of a child and that of a dotting old person.”³³

Lorente’s article was published in *A Journal of Democracy*, and it proposed a redefinition of the term, asserting that “second childhood” “is clearly a misnomer,” especially as a means for describing the deterioration of the aged mind.³⁴ Instead, he proposes a positive reframing of the concept:

³² Reverend Chauncey Giles. “Sermon from Genesis XV.15.” *The New Jerusalem Magazine* 28, no. 11 (May 1856), 536. Giles was a popular Swedenborgian minister who led congregations in a number of American cities, including Cincinnati, New York, and Philadelphia. He also served as editor of *The New Jerusalem Magazine*, a Swedenborgian journal, which published many sermons and essays by and about the Reverend.

³³ Mariano Joaquin Lorente. “A Fountain of Youth.” *A Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 1081 (December 21, 1918), 1531.

³⁴ Lorente, “A Fountain of Youth,” 1531.

In fact, to enjoy “second childhood” one needs have an unimpaired intellect. For by “second childhood” we mean the resensitizing of the mind-plate so that the experiences of life may again appear thereon as clearly as they did in the days of childhood.³⁵

This interpretation of “second childhood” is radically different than those of previous generations. Instead of using the term to illustrate an older person’s return to a childlike state, Lorente argues that “second childhood” can function in a favorable way to describe a kind of mindful and privileged aging, not an inevitable deterioration.

Lorente sees “second childhood” as a time for thoughtful reflection. This idea is reiterated in an 1898 column in *Scribner’s* magazine, which offers a similar definition of “second childhood,” calling it a “season of life when the spirit of youth lives in men, kept alive by the glorified memories of childhood...”³⁶ Instead of adhering to earlier pessimistic concepts of “second infancy,” the late Victorians had a far more complicated view of the parallels between youth and age. Instead of seeing a return to youth as a kind of decline, some suggested that the spirit of childhood could actually sustain a person in their senescence, making “second childhood” a rejuvenating and positive stage in the aging process.

The issues of cross-generational kinship and “second childhood” are complex, and have been discussed here in broad strokes. However, it is hoped that by introducing these factors to a discussion of scenes of grandparents and grandchildren at play, their

³⁵ Lorente, “A Fountain of Youth,” 1531.

³⁶ “The Point of View.” *Scribner’s* 23, no. 1 (January 1898), 123.

perceived sentimentality of such pictures can be balanced by a skepticism towards the perceived inflexibility of the gulf between first and second childhoods.³⁷

Re-reading *Home from School* after an overview of these issues, the interaction between the bouncing boy and his older guardian reflects both the unique manifestations of kinship as well as the alliance between first and second childhoods. While life at home and school was disposed to rigidity and decorum, such rules could be flouted when it came to interactions with grandparents and older guardians. In Winner's picture, for example, age can be interpreted as a quality that sedates the formality of the interaction between the woman and child, conferring unique narrative possibilities upon a type of genre picture that has customarily evaded serious reflection.

Winner was a portrait and genre painter perhaps best remembered for his pictures of popular urban types.³⁸ He was born in Philadelphia, where he worked until his death in 1883. Winner frequently exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the Boston Atheneum, the Apollo Association, the American Art-Union, and the National Academy of Design, of which he was an honorary member.³⁹ He often painted pictures with popular themes, and he selected *Home from School* as his contribution to the inaugural exhibition of the Philadelphia Sketch Club. It can be assumed that Winner held a high opinion of the picture in order to submit it to such an important exhibition. The exhibition's first prize of two thousand dollars would warrant an artist's best effort, and the inclusion of this

³⁷ "But between first and second childhood there is a great gulf fixed." Francis Jacox, *Traits of Character and Notes of Incident in Bible Story* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1873), 398.

³⁸ The best known of Winner's Philadelphia street pictures may be *Crazy Nora* (1850), also in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania Collection, Philadelphia History Museum, no. 1897.4. Winner's portrayal of Irish immigrant Honora Powers, a familiar street person in Philadelphia during the 1820s and 1830s, attests to the artist's capacity to uniquely depict the age, gender, and personality of his subjects.

³⁹ George C. Groce and David H. Wallace, *The New York Historical Society's Dictionary of Artists in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 695.

picture in the Philadelphia Sketch Club show would indicate that the subject's poor behavior was actually considered to be quite innocuous.⁴⁰

The harmlessness of the boy's horseplay in *Home from School* is confirmed by an illustration in the June 1874 issue of *St. Nicholas*, the popular American children's magazine (fig. 4.2). In a story titled "Playing Circus," a little boy named Dennis walks "softly behind his grandma, who was fast asleep in the rocking-chair." Like Winner's boy, he stands on the rockers, and, "pulling the chair back with all his might," shouts, "Hoop la! Ow! Ow!" His grandmother does not seem to notice him, and she stands up to go into the next room. "Over went the chair, and down tumbled Dennis, bumping his head so hard that he screamed "Hoop la! Ow! Ow!" louder than before."⁴¹ The short story is accompanied by illustrations of Dennis before and after his fall: the first panel looks remarkably similar to *Home from School*, with the small boy shown impishly jumping around behind his seated grandmother. *St. Nicholas* generally modeled positive behavior for children, so the inclusion of a naughty boy jumping behind his grandmother's rocking chair in this esteemed juvenile publication confirms the acceptability of the behavior shown in Winner's picture. Also, by depicting his resulting injury, this illustration could be seen as a cautionary example of how horseplay indoors could lead to trouble.

The clowning boy in "Playing Circus" could be characterized as "naughty and unsupervised," as curator Holly Pyne Connor describes Winner's little boy.⁴² This interpretation implies that the older women in both pictures are distracted and oblivious of the frolicking children. However, one could easily argue that these mature guardians

⁴⁰ Information about the prize amount for the inaugural Philadelphia Sketch Club exhibition provided by Bill Patterson, Archivist of the Philadelphia Sketch Club, in an e-mail sent on November 3, 2014.

⁴¹ Unknown author, "Playing Circus." *The St. Nicholas Magazine* 1, no. 8 (June 1874), 494-495.

⁴² Holly Pyne Connor, *Off the Pedestal: New Women in the Art of Homer, Chase, and Sargent* (Newark: The Newark Museum, 2006), 11.

are perfectly aware of their boys' mischievous acrobatics, and neglect of this tomfoolery attests to a cognizance of their antics. These older women do not intend to correct their children or hinder their play. Instead, the naughty child is depicted as a cross-generational ally – he flouts popular etiquette, which she permits.

Such rowdiness challenges the prescribed domestic behavior of the period, which was outlined in countless Victorian advice manuals. For example, in her 1877 book *Behaving; or, Papers on Children's Etiquette*, the American writer Shirley Dare Power dictated,

The house is the place to be quiet. If you want to frolic and shout, go out of doors, and have a good enough time there so you can be quiet in-doors. Move lightly and pleasantly. Don't go pounding about the house as if your boots were going through the floors, or come down stairs as if the top walls were tumbling after you. Fly round as fast as you like, but don't make a noise about it.⁴³

It is surprising that Winner's seemingly genteel matron would permit behavior that so flagrantly violates these rules of decorum.

This image of a middle-class parlor threatened by a child's pandemonium shares an easy affinity with Lilly Martin Spencer's *The War Spirit at Home*, which was painted a year after *Home from School* (fig. 4.3).⁴⁴ In Spencer's picture, a young mother reads the newspaper while her children gaily march around her, recreating a celebratory military

⁴³ Shirley Dare Power, *Behaving; or, Papers on Children's Etiquette* (Boston: D. Lothrop and Company, 1877), 46-47. Power was perhaps best known for her book *Anna Maria's House-Keeping* (Boston: D. Lothrop and Co., 1884), which was touted for its "bright and telling" style. (D. Lothrop and Co., Advertisement, *The American Bookseller* Christmas issue, 1884, 613).

⁴⁴ See Lilly Martin Spencer, *The War Spirit at Home*, 1866. Oil on canvas, 30" x 32 3/4". Purchase 1944 Wallace M. Scudder Bequest Fund. Collection of the Newark Museum.

parade. A maid looks over the scene disapprovingly as the mother ignores her children's impishness – in Spencer's picture, the mother and her children are all accused of behaving poorly.⁴⁵ Winner's picture seems innocent by contrast, as the little boy's handstand is only a minor infraction, which is pardoned by the small smile on the woman's face.

Perhaps it is the distinctive relationship between children and their grandparents that frees Winner's picture from the obligations of proper decorum. No cloud of disapproval or judgment hovers over the gymnastic boy's elation.⁴⁶ Unlike Spencer's children, who are viewed with mild condemnation by the help, Winner's misbehaving boy is fêted.⁴⁷ The late-nineteenth century saw a rise in the popularity of such images of mischievous boys in both Britain and the United States, especially those whose antics

⁴⁵ "A nineteenth-century audience would have been amused, but also shocked at Spencer's portrayal of the children, who are depicted as out of control, rowdy, and half naked because the mother is distracted from attending to their needs." Connor, *Off the Pedestal*, 10.

⁴⁶ Elisabeth Donaghy Garrett, *At Home: The American Family 1750-1870* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 71.

⁴⁷ A letter in the archives at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania also points to another possible explanation for the unique content of *Home from School*. Before Berry-Hill Galleries sold the painting to the HSP in 1973, Berry-Hill's owner, Henry D. Hill, wrote a letter to Nicholas B. Wainwright, then-director of the Historical Society. The letter states that before the picture was re-lined, there was a partially torn label on the stretcher which read "First Gr...Exhibition of the Philadelphia Sketch Club, 18..." The first exhibition of the Sketch Club was organized in 1865, and Winner is indeed listed in the show's catalogue as having contributed pictures no. 12, *The Blind by the Wayside*, and no. 346, *Mrs. Partington and Ike*. Unfortunately, the catalogue is not illustrated, and there is no record of the Mrs. Partington reference in the object file at HSP. Falk's *Annual Exhibition Record of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts* also notes that Winner exhibited a painting with a similar title, *Studies at Home*, in their 1866 exhibition. This also might be the same painting or it may just be a theme the artist favored and was the basis for several paintings. The context for the picture would be greatly altered if it were indeed an illustration of the popular humorous characters of the older widow Mrs. Partington and her naughty nephew, Ike, as created by Benjamin Penhallow Shillaber (1814-1890). Mrs. Partington and Ike were the central figures in at least three books, *Life and Sayings of Mrs. Partington* (1854), *Partingtonian Patchwork* (1873), and *Ike and his Friends* (1879). Mrs. Partington's malapropisms, domestic grace, and adherence to almanacs and undisputable facts made her a popular and recognizable American type. She is also thought to present a prototype of Tom Sawyer's Aunt Polly. See John C. Gerber, Paul Baender, Terry Firkins, eds. *Introduction to The Works of Mark Twain: The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Tom Sawyer Abroad, Tom Sawyer, Detective, Volume 4* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 4. Unfortunately, there is not enough evidence to confirm with certainty that *Home from School* absolutely portrays Shillaber's characters, though the dynamic between them would further support an appraisal of the picture as an illustration of the special relationship between children and their older guardians.

seemed ultimately inoffensive. This harmlessness was granted by the presence of older women and men, who may have posed less of a disciplinary threat than parents. While a Victorian mother or father would be expected to maintain order and reprimand a naughty child, a grandmother or grandfather was assumed to be more permissive. The generational gulf between the misbehaving child and his or her grandparent would far more appropriately afford onlookers an innocent laugh.⁴⁸

Pictures of disobedient boys and their permissive older guardians were “highly welcome” after around 1850.⁴⁹ Tolerance for disorderly boys and girls manifested itself in images that allowed just enough sendup of the rule-breaker and the rule-maker to amuse viewers.⁵⁰ Such pictures also confirm the Victorian pleasures of cross-generational relationships, which framed the natural affinity between first and “second” childhoods.

British and American genre paintings feature a surfeit of older playmates. The historiography of grandparenting in the nineteenth century attests to the particular features of the role that permitted such widespread popular interest, and it is useful to appraise grandparents separately from parents. Historians have traditionally subsumed the identity of the grandfather into fatherhood, permitting male grandparents to exert a significant position in the lives of their young charges. Grandmothers have been considered as second mothers, but freed from some maternal responsibilities to better entertain and dote on children.⁵¹

Watch and learn

⁴⁸ For more on the popularity of images of naughty children in nineteenth-century visual culture, see Mary Lynn Stevens Heinger, “Children, Childhood, and Change in America, 1820-1920,” in *A Century of Childhood 1820-1920* (Rochester: The Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum, 1984), 1-32.

⁴⁹ Heinger, “Children, Childhood, and Change,” 26.

⁵⁰ Heinger, “Children, Childhood, and Change,” 27-28.

⁵¹ Dillon, *The Shady Side of Fifty*, 218.

Victorian grandparents saw the benefits of enjoying their distinctive role in the family as an opportunity to enjoy the joys of childhood with fewer responsibilities. To embrace the role of a playful grandparent was to participate in modeling “good old age,” in opposition to the invalidity presented by the isolation and languidness of “bad old age.” Osgood writes,

...a genial grandfather has full opportunity to refresh his social affections in the society that comes to him with his new and dignified condition. He is thrown among children and young people in a way befitting his character. He has little playmates that throw the sunshine and the dew of childhood upon his path, and he meets the companions of his children upon a worthy and agreeable footing, with that due access to sprightly and refined female society which is so good for the spirits of all men, however old or young.⁵²

This reflection on the blithe condition of grandparents in the Victorian home is apparent in countless genre pictures. However, for the purposes of this study, a smaller selection of British and American pictures of this type has been made. The quantity and popularity of such works has long been attributed to the mawkish tastes of Victorian sentimentality, though one may argue that this survey presents higher narrative aspiration than previously believed.

The duality of restraint and complexity that describe images of cross-generational play is evident in a modest picture like William Hemsley’s *Bubbles*, ca. 1870 (fig. 4.4). An unaffected painter of children and their games, Hemsley (1819-1906) was recognized

⁵² Osgood, “A Word for Grandfathers,” 904.

as a prodigy when he began making portraits around the age of twelve.⁵³ Often working in a gentle manner and on a small scale, he was entirely self-taught, eventually earning rank among the chief British genre painters of his time.⁵⁴ One contemporary critic described Hemsley's pictures as "simple, straightforward, complete, and unexaggerated, employing "just the style and needful amount of sentiment intended to be conveyed."⁵⁵

Set in a humble cottage, *Bubbles* features a seated older man flanked by two small children. He sits in the center of the room, blowing a bubble from a long clay pipe. The young boy at his knee clutches a jug of soap mixture while he watches, entranced. His little sister looks up at her grandfather and his bubble with wonder, her hand resting on his leg contentedly. Their young mother works behind them at the fireplace, perhaps grateful for the grandfather's capacity to keep her children amused while she completes her chores.

Hemsley's *Bubbles* is a genuine and pleasant genre subject that ably resists oversentimentality and distortion. Its warm palette and intimate setting evoke the comfort and ease of the distinct relationship between the children and their grandfather, who are visually unified by the autumnal tones of their clothing and their triangular arrangement, which omits the figure of the mother. The children and grandfather gazing at the bubble likely see different things in its iridescence: the children watch the reflective colors as they await the bubble's burst, while their grandfather may identify with the object's

⁵³ Hemsley's success was noted in a number of contemporary reviews and is evidenced by his sales and exhibition record. While dealers mostly bought his early works directly, the Art Union of London and the Glasgow Art Union purchased his pictures to offer as prizes. He exhibited at the British Institution, the Royal Academy, the Portland Gallery, and at various regional exhibitions. See Anonymous, "William Hemsley." *Our Living Painters: Their Lives and Works* (London: James Blackwood, 1859), 115-118.

⁵⁴ Anonymous, "William Hemsley," 116-117.

⁵⁵ "Fine Arts. The National Institution." *The Literary Gazette* no. 1887 (March 19, 1853), 285.

impermanence and his own memories of blowing bubbles as a child.⁵⁶ In this way, the picture evokes what Ormsbee describes as the “two-fold warmth” of grandparenting, which is “made up of the special love for the child, and the renewal of happy memories, both brought afresh by each wee new comer.”⁵⁷ The mature playmate is forever participating in amusements as both novice and expert, repeating his or her own ancient play ad infinitum along with children who partake for the first time.

Bubble blowing was perceived as an amusing cross-generational activity on both sides of the Atlantic. In the 1883 juvenile novel *Who Told it to Me*, the Boston children’s writer Margaret Sidney dedicates a whole chapter to a bubble blowing competition between a little boy named Hapgood and his grandfather. Calling the competition a “bubble party,” a little boy named Happy is chided by his grandfather to “play fair” as he demonstrates the virtues of persistence and patience. When Happy’s little bubble bursts, he is told that he will blow a perfect bubble when he is “not proud and careless.”⁵⁸ Finally, after listening to his grandfather’s instructions and encouragement, Happy makes a wonderful bubble.

“Oh, oh!” he screamed, with a delighted shiver; “I blew that all myself!”

⁵⁶ An 1877 essay in the New York art magazine *The Aldine* describes the joys of blowing bubbles in youth and age: “In childhood we blow them the good old way, with a pipe and a basin of soap and water, and we watch with mingled delight and wonder at the transparent, filmy balloons, reflecting from their shells all the colors of the rainbow, as they sail up or down, and off, to finally burst, and disappear in thin air...old age—the “lean and slippered pantaloons,” has his bubble blown for him; this time it is hope, or some other comforting being who blows it. It brings before him visions of his youth, the time when he honored his father and mother, not “that his days might be long in the land,” but because he had for them that filial affection which is above and beyond—where it exists in full force—all considerations of wealth, time, place or standing. He is led to see, then, in the prismatic colors on the surface of his bubble visions of his children supporting his tottering footsteps on their way to the grave, toward which his legs, long since deprived of all real power, are tending.” “Blowing Bubbles.” *The Aldine* 8, no. 12 (1877), 370.

⁵⁷ Ormsbee, “The Art of Being a Grandparent,” 437.

⁵⁸ Margaret Sidney [pseud. Harriet Melford Lothrop], *Who Told it to Me* (Boston: D. Lothrop and Company, 1883), 113.

“Of course you did,” said grandpa, almost as excited, “and it’s a brave piece of work.”⁵⁹

The bubble party is a success, demonstrating the spirited relationship between grandparents and their grandchildren. Hemsley’s bubble party, like Sidney’s retelling, celebrates the simple pleasure of intergenerational play, and the virtues of learning from older family members.

Such instructive leisure pursuits are modeled in a variety of contexts in British and American genre painting. From games and crafts to sports and holiday observances, later nineteenth-century painters reveled in the narrative possibilities facilitated by cross-generational recreation. Abbott Fuller Graves’ (1859-1936) *Jack O’Lantern* of about 1892 portrays the figure of the grandfatherly playmate in a rural American context (fig. 4.5). Considered a member of the Boston School, Graves is perhaps best recognized for his flower paintings and his scenes of the cottage gardens of Kennebunkport, Maine. William Gerdts described him as “the most important painter not only to live in the town but to devote much of his art to its pictorialization.”⁶⁰ Graves painted a rich variety of genre pictures of daily life in a northern village using local characters as his models.⁶¹ The people of Kennebunkport fascinated him and easily insinuated themselves into an oeuvre which had been previously dedicated to floral still lifes.⁶²

Like Hemsley’s *Bubbles*, *Jack O’Lantern* utilizes an intimate, triangular composition. Graves also positions his grandfather between a little boy and girl, who

⁵⁹ Sidney, *Who Told it to Me*, 111.

⁶⁰ William Gerdts, *Art Across America* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1990), 24-25.

⁶¹ Lee MacCormick Edwards, *Domestic Bliss: Family Life in American Painting, 1840-1910* (Yonkers: Hudson River Museum, 1986), 86.

⁶² May Brawley Hill, *Grandmother’s Garden: The Old-Fashioned American Garden, 1865-1915* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), 70.

each stand on either side as they watch him carve the smiling jack o'lantern in the center of the picture. When this picture was painted, Halloween had only recently taken firm root in North America, and, while lanterns had traditionally been carved out of turnips, the pumpkin became New England's contribution to the holiday's proceedings.⁶³ Graves commemorates the newlyminted traditions of American Halloween while presenting a balanced intergenerational portrait of the lives of farmers and the pleasures of childhood.⁶⁴

Graves was recognized as a diligent artist who embraced democratic ideals, and *Jack O'Lantern* celebrates the rewards of working-class labor.⁶⁵ Graves' Kennebunkport grandfather works contentedly, much to the delight and amazement of the children at his knee. Although the conditions of later life are often associated with dependency, *Jack O'Lantern* portrays the spiritedness of playful old age and an individualized and distinguished variation of "second childhood." In Graves' rendering, the intersections of age, gender, and identity result in an admirable representation of stalwart senescence.

A playful conversation

The special relationship between grandfathers and grandchildren is a common refrain in nineteenth-century genre, and it is almost invariably presented in the context of a pleasant episode. Such pictures were often well received, winning awards at international expositions and important displays at the Royal Academy and the National Academy of Design. The American artist Francis Coates Jones (1857-1932) secured his

⁶³ For more on the history of Halloween and its observance in North America, see Nicholas Rogers, *Halloween: From Pagan Ritual to Party Night* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Rogers writes at length about the holiday's multivalent ethnic associations and the adoption and development of the jack o'lantern in the United States.

⁶⁴ David Sokol. *Life in 19th Century America* (Evanston: Terra Museum of American Art, 1981), 45-46.

⁶⁵ Vose Galleries, *Abbott Graves (1859-1936): Garden Masterpieces* (Boston: Vose Galleries, 2001), 3.

election as an Associate of the National Academy of Design with his picture *Exchanging Confidences*, which won the Academy's 1885 Thomas B. Clarke Prize, an award given to the best figurative painting at each annual exhibition (fig. 4.6).⁶⁶

The felicitous *Exchanging Confidences* is set in a warm and bright kitchen, where an older man sits with his baby grandchild at a small, sunny table, engaged in conversation. The infant is propped up by a small tower of pillows so he can better reach the table, and his grandfather hunches slightly in his chair to better meet the baby's gaze. The man is seated with his back to the bright light pouring through the window, and he regards his little sapling with contentment and pride as the little one recounts a fascinating story to the best of his neophytic ability.

Jones dedicated a significant portion of his oeuvre to such scenes of domestic genre and the fancies of child life.⁶⁷ During the 1880s, he painted informal interior scenes in a richly hued and controlled academic style, often placing small children in amusing interactions with their parents and grandparents.⁶⁸ His eye for the details of costumes and decorative objects proclaims his training in Paris at the Académie Julian and the École des Beaux-Arts under Gustave Boulanger, Jules-Joseph Lefèvre, and Henri Lehmann.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, *Catalogue of the Thomas B. Clarke Collection of American Pictures* [Exhibition: October 15-November 28, 1891], (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1891), 72.

⁶⁷ William Thomas Evans, William Anderson Coffin, and Thomas Ellis Kirby, *Catalogue of American Paintings Belonging to William T. Evans* (New York: American Art Galleries, 1900), 48.

⁶⁸ Doreen Bolger Burke, *American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Volume III. A Catalogue of Works by Artists Born Between 1846 and 1864* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980), 309.

An example of a comparable scene by Jones is *Left in Charge*, n.d. Oil on canvas, 23 ¾ x 19 ½ in. Shannon's: Thursday, April 29, 2010, Lot 00091, Fine American & European Paintings. The picture takes as its subject an African American grandfather sitting in a garden beneath a tree, holding a baby in his lap. The man and child gaze at each other adoringly, and the special bond between the two figures bears a radiant quality.

⁶⁹ *Catalogue of the Exhibition of Fine Arts, Pan-American Exposition* (Buffalo: D. Gray, 1901), 120; Howard E. Wooden, "The Song by Francis Coates Jones: A Note on Aspects of Classical Usage in American Renaissance Painting." *Notes in the History of Art* 13, no. 1 (Fall 1993), 16; "Artists in Their Studios," *Archives of American Art Journal* 4, no. 1 (Jan., 1964), 7.

Jones' involvement in the New York art world indicates that his choice to contrast youth and age in *Exchanging Confidences* was made with an awareness of contemporary trends in art academies and galleries. He served for more than three decades as an instructor in the school of the National Academy of Design (where he was also the treasurer), and he was also a trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁷⁰ He held memberships with the Society of American Artists, the American Water Color Society, and the Architectural League of New York.⁷¹ These associations and memberships, along with his success at various national and international expositions, attest to Jones' exposure to the arbiters of taste who shaped the reception of American art at the end of the nineteenth century. *Exchanging Confidences* received the highest accolades, indicating that its maker and its audience recognized the value of its subject.

The success of *Exchanging Confidences* is also suggested by the popularity of its reproduction in print. Produced by the Brooklyn wood engraver John Tinkey, the print version of *Exchanging Confidences* was made in 1887 and reproduced in the *Portfolio of the Society of American Wood Engravers* in 1889 (fig. 4.7).⁷² Tinkey's version was well received, deemed by one contemporary critic as "a close and sympathetic rendering of the original, and the more one dwells upon it, the more does its charm grow upon one."⁷³ The engraving preserves the individuality of Jones' painting, while the constriction of the image to black and white pares down the decorative distractions of the scene, emphasizing the distinctive friendship between grandfather and baby.

⁷⁰ David Bernard Dearing, ed. *Paintings and Sculpture in the Collection of the National Academy of Design* (Manchester, VT: Hudson Hills Press, 2004), 326.

⁷¹ Evans, Coffin, and Kirby, *Catalogue of American Paintings*, 48.

⁷² Society of American Wood Engravers, *Engravings on Wood by Members of the Society of American Wood Engravers* [Edition Deluxe] (New York: Harper Brothers, 1889).

⁷³ George Howes Whittle, "Monographs on American Wood Engravers XXXV – John Tinkey," *The Printing Art* 33, no. 1 (March 1919), 23.

Blind man's buff

The playful and sympathetic bond between grandparents and their grandchildren is perhaps best expressed in the sub-genre of blind man's buff imagery, which could be found throughout Britain and the United States during the Victorian period. While British artists more often produced the original pictures of this particularly intergenerational game, which was “probably played more times than any other parlor amusement,” reproductions of blind man's buff imagery were published with nearly corresponding frequency on both sides of the Atlantic.⁷⁴

An impressive number of artists depicted this popular parlor sport, including Alexander and John Burr, Frederick Morgan, Henry Towneley Green, William Knight, John Everett Millais, and Raldolph Caldecott. While it is sometimes portrayed as a special indoor Christmas activity and sometimes imagined as a garden occupation, there is little variation in the inclusion of a token grandparent in these scenes.

The rules of blind man's buff are, invariably, very simple. They were outlined by countless Victorian prescriptive writers, including Matilda Anne Planché Mackarness, who features the game in her 1888 guidebook, *The Young Lady's Book: A Manual of Amusements, Exercises, Studies, and Pursuits*, in a chapter titled “Games for the Little Ones Indoors.” Mackarness pronounces, “One player is blindfolded, and must try to catch the others, who of course endeavor to escape. If the blind man succeeds in catching any one, that one becomes blind in turn.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ This description of blind man's buff as a popular amusement comes from C.I Hood & Co., *Hood's Sarsaparilla Book of Parlor Games* (Lowell, Mass.: C. I. Hood & Co., [ca. 1879]), 14.

⁷⁵ Matilda Anne Planché Mackarness, *The Young Lady's Book: A Manual of Amusements, Exercises, Studies, and Pursuits* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1888), 273. The rules for playing blind man's

Victorian authors described raucous games of blind man's buff in novels and magazine stories, often including a lone older man as a significant participant in the juvenile proceedings. One story by the American humorist Frank R. Stockton published by *Scribner's* in 1872 describes a family party held by "grown-up folks." Titled "Bob's Hiding-Place," the story includes a scene in which the children are sent off to the kitchen after supper, where they play a game of blind man's buff with Old Grandfather, while their parents remain in the sitting room:

Old Grandfather, who has been smoking his pipe by the kitchen fire, takes as much pleasure in the game as the young folks, and when they tumble over his legs, or come banging up against his chair, he only laughs, and warns them not to hurt themselves. I could not tell you how often Grandfather was caught, and how they all laughed at the blind man when he found out whom he had seized.⁷⁶

The accompanying illustration features Old Grandfather dressed in eighteenth-century costume, sitting in the center of the room while the children fumble around him. He towers over them from his high-backed chair, contentedly supervising the proceedings.

Countless games manuals and parlor entertainment books referred to the

buff were reprinted widely in British and American manuals, the diversity of which may be reflected by this small sampling: The Boston Normal School of Gymnastics, *One Hundred Gymnastic Games* (Boston: George H. Ellis, Printer, 1897), 41; Greendragon and Dandelion, *Sports Spiced and Pastimes Peppered* (London: Judy Office, 1884), 118; John D. Champlin and Arthur E. Bostwick, *Young Folks' Cyclopaedia of Games and Sports* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1899), 91; G.H. Sandison, *How to Behave and How to Amuse: A Handy Manual of Etiquette and Parlor Games* (New York: The Christian Herald, 1895), 115-116. It appears that the rules were disseminated with increased frequency towards the end of the nineteenth century.

⁷⁶ Frank R. Stockton, "Bob's Hiding-Place." In *Round-About Rambles in Lands of Fact and Fancy* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Co., 1872), 49-51.

intergenerational nature of blind man's buff while detailing the rules of play. In her 1867 book *Popular Pastimes for Field and Fireside; Or, Amusements for Young and Old*, Caroline L. Smith, an author of popular entertainment manuals, features the game prominently as the first entry in a chapter entitled "Games for Old and Young."⁷⁷ Even domestic prescriptive literature concurred with the game's designation as a cross-generational pasttime. In *Childhood: Its Care and Culture* of 1887, the Illinois social reformer Mary Allen West asks her readers, "How many of you now look back with delight to the game of blindman's buff played in your mother's kitchen with father, mother, and perhaps grandpa too, joining in it? If such a picture hangs on your memory's wall I am sure you would not exchange it for any specimen of high art you can purchase at Goupil's."⁷⁸ West's invitation to her readers to recall their own memories of playing with their grandfathers underscores the wide appeal of blind man's buff as a parlor sport enjoyed by the very young and the very old, evoking again the dual tropes of friendship and second childhood.

Victorian magazine stories for children also often prominently featured blind man's buff as a special cross-generational recreation. An article titled, "All About Blind Man's Buff," published in *St. Nicholas* magazine in 1874 plainly remarks, "All of our young readers like to play Blind Man's Buff, when they can; and so do many of the older

⁷⁷ Caroline L. Smith, *Popular Pastimes for Field and Fireside; Or, Amusements for Young and Old* (Springfield, Mass.: Milton Bradley & Co., 1867), 182. Smith wrote other instructional amusement books in addition to *Popular Pastimes*. See *The American Home Book of In-door Games, Amusements, and Occupations* (1873) and *Home Arts for Old and Young* (1873). Smith's books share the theme of promoting games suitable for cross-generational play, a quality praised in an advertisement for *The American Home Book* printed by the publishers Lee and Shepard of Boston in 1875 (see William T. Adams, *Sunny Shores; or, Young America in Italy and Austria*. Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1875, p. 415). The advertisement extols Smith's recommendations to mix work and play and her ability to offer suggestions for "games for old and young."

⁷⁸ Mary Allen West. *Childhood: Its Care and Culture* (Chicago: Women's Temperance Publications, 1887), 485.

readers, for that matter.”⁷⁹ An 1859 story published in Massachusetts magazine *The Household Monthly* describes how one family enjoyed spending their Christmas holidays, when they

played all sorts of indoor games, though blind-man’s-buff was the favorite, especially for the reason that the older folks joined in the game, and nobody made a better or a more active blind man than old Uncle George himself...he was old enough to be the grandfather of the young folks. It was great fun to see him jump about and twirl himself round with as much agility as the youngest of the party.⁸⁰

British and American children’s authors made a special point of describing such mixed-generation games of Blind Man’s Buff as a holiday tradition, usually played during Christmas and, in the United States, at Thanksgiving.⁸¹ Artists who depicted these mixed-age games generally call upon these festive contexts in the representation of the sport.

Most artistic renderings of grandfathers playing at blind man’s buff support the description given by the American cartoonist Frank Bellew, who explained the frequent sight of people

⁷⁹ Hezekiah Butterworth, “All About Blind Man’s Buff.” *St. Nicholas* 1, no. 7 (May 1874), 378.

⁸⁰ Anonymous, “Uncle George: How the Morton Family Spent the Christmas Holidays.” *The Household Monthly* 3, no. 3 (December 1859), 265.

⁸¹ A number of writers explicitly describe blind man’s buff as a holiday game. Clement A. Miles describes it as “distinctly a Christmas sport...” Clement A. Miles, *Christmas Customs and Traditions, Their History and Significance* (New York: Dover Publications, 1976 reissued, unabridged republication of the work originally published by T. Fisher Unwin in 1912 under the title *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition, Christian and Pagan*), 293. Butterworth writes, “Blind Man’s Buff in England is a game of the Christmas holidays, which last from Christmas Eve to Twelfth Night.” (Butterworth, “All About Blind Man’s Buff,” 380) Blind man’s buff is invoked as a Thanksgiving tradition in a number of American stories for children, including Anson Hunter’s, “Lulu’s First Thanksgiving.” In *Our Little Ones: Illustrated Stories and Poems for Little People* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, Edinburgh and New York, 1887), 58-60, and Amy E. Blanchard’s *A Dear Little Girl’s Thanksgiving Holidays* (Racine, Wisconsin: Whitman Publishing Co., 1912).

of high degree, and of mature years, romping and frolicking together, like a lot of children, playing...*Blindman's Buff*, without the remotest idea that they had such a thing as dignity to take care of; and no one seemed to have the slightest fear that any one of the party could by any possibility do anything that would offend or mortify anyone else. The fact is, gentlemen or gentlewomen can do anything; all depends on the way of doing it. If you are a snob, for heaven's sake don't be playful; keep a stiff upper lip and look grave; it is your only safety.⁸²

Seldom are Victorian grandfathers shown participating in the children's games in a restrained manner. Instead, artists who depict playful older men playing blind man's buff pronounce, without subtlety, the distinctive alliance between children and their grandparents, boldly animating the thorny concept of "second childhood."

The Scottish painter Alexander Hohenlohe Burr (1835-1898) took up the inclusion of a mature player in children's games of blind man's buff, picturing the sport as it was played in a rustic interior between a gaggle of children and a spry, grandfatherly man (fig. 4.8).⁸³ The choice of subject complements the aims of Scottish rural genre, which drew upon the legacies of the Dutch genre tradition and the influences of David Wilkie and the Faed family.

Along with his brother John, Alexander Burr was a pupil of the painter Robert Scott Lauder, and both were members of his eponymous group, which comprised Victorian Scotland's national school of painting. Characterized by what one

⁸² Frank Bellew, *The Art of Amusing* (New York: Carleton, 1866; London: S. Low, Son and Co., 1866), 9.

⁸³ Susan P. Casteras, *The Defining Moment: Victorian Narrative Paintings from the Forbes Magazine Collection* (Charlotte, North Carolina: Mint Museum of Art, 1999), 48.

contemporary critic described as “a more purely pictorial motive, a synthetic grasp of reality, and a splendid dower of color,” the Scott Lauder Group came to signify the surge of Scottish talent between 1850 and 1860.⁸⁴ Lauder’s students developed independent styles while maintaining the technical and thematic ties that connected them.⁸⁵

Burr first exhibited at the Royal Scottish Academy in 1856 and moved to London with his brother in 1861 to pursue a relatively successful career.⁸⁶ His humble subjects were generally drawn from bucolic themes, and he often painted in bright hues with soft handling.⁸⁷ He was praised as a great “painter of child-life,” “content to paint nature as he finds it, without refining it,” without fear of “commonplaces, of dirt, rags, or any shape of poverty.”⁸⁸ Burr’s pictures convey a warmth and humor towards working-class life, and he often painted spirited representations of children playing, sometimes with their grandparents.

Mixed-age games of blind man’s buff are a recurring theme in Burr’s oeuvre, and he exhibited one such picture at the Royal Academy in 1888.⁸⁹ The RA picture features an older blindfolded man stumbling about happily in the center of an unassuming room. A mob of children jump and hide around him, as a small dog finds herself uncertainly situated at the lurching grandfather’s feet. The grandfather has unreservedly embraced his role as the “blind man,” and all players react to him without restraint. However, it appears that his blindfold is not properly secured, implying that perhaps the “blind man” can

⁸⁴ James Lewis Caw, “Article 1. – Victorian Art,” *The Scottish Review* 30 (July 1897), 15.

⁸⁵ Caw, “Article 1. – Victorian Art,” 16.

⁸⁶ Glasgow Fine Art Loan Exhibition, *Official Catalogue of the Glasgow Fine Art Loan Exhibition* (Glasgow: Robert Anderson, 1878), 90.

⁸⁷ James Lewis Caw, *Scottish Painting, Past and Present, 1620-1908* (Edinburgh: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1908), 262.

⁸⁸ “Titan Among the Pictures: An Hour in the Scottish Academy.” *Titan* 24 (January-June 1857), 361.

⁸⁹ A.H. Burr’s *Blind Man’s Buff* was no. 754 in the 1888 RA exhibition. See Algernon Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts: A Complete Dictionary of Contributors, Vol. 1* (London: Henry Graves and Co., 1905), 355.

actually see, despite the rules of the game. The boys and girls participate with equal vigor, and all of the players are giggling, especially at the sight of an older boy who tugs on the grandfather's coattails from beneath the table.⁹⁰

This exhibition version of *Blind Man's Buff* is delicately painted, its softness evoking the recollection of a happy family memory. Its compositional structure opens up to the viewer in a way that allows him or her to feel as though they, too, are participating in the game, which invites personal recollections of similar times spent with their own older relatives. Describing a smaller version of the same composition, Susan P. Casteras adds, "Moreover, perhaps there is another subtle point made in *Blind Man's Buff*: that the children are able to see what the older generation literally cannot. The gesture of the old man's seeking hands and the scurrying children carry the narrative, and the overall mood resonates with the sentimentalized simple joys of country life and villagers."⁹¹ Here Burr has succeeded in portraying the nuances of the playmate relationship between youth and age, utilizing their contrasting physicalities to convey the ineffable generational narrative of the picture.

The romanticism of Burr's image of a grandfather playing at blind man's buff is exaggerated in Frederick Morgan's (1856-1927) interpretation of the intergenerational game, which costumes the players in Regency fashions (fig. 4.9). Morgan's *Blind Man's Buff* was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1898 and later printed under the title *The*

⁹⁰ An appealing detail. Perhaps this tug (a recurring theme in blind man's buff imagery) describes the physicality of childhood reaching out and literally pulling back in the elder into "second childhood."

⁹¹ Casteras, *The Defining Moment*, 48. In *The Defining Moment*, Casteras describe the versions of Burr's picture that were formerly included in the Forbes Collection. Both *Blind Man's Buff* pictures were offered for sale at Christie's London as part of the sale of the Forbes Collection of Victorian Pictures and Works of Art (Sale 6747) on February 19, 2003. Burr's *Blind Man's Buff* paintings were included in the sale as lot nos. 338 and 339.

Sunshine of His Heart.⁹² This version of the game takes place outdoors at springtime, under a pleasant bower.⁹³ In Morgan's picture, the grandfather is seated while he ties the blindfold on a little boy dressed in a smart skeleton suit. The boy reaches out around him for the other young players as the older gentleman reassures and cheers him on at his turn as "it."

This scene is an appropriate illustration of one contemporary critic's description of the artist's work, "Old age and youth are extremes that often meet, and always in amity, on the canvas of Mr. Fred Morgan."⁹⁴ Despite the absence of other adults in the garden, the older man facilitating blind man's buff for these children does not merely play a supervisory role. His kind smile and encouraging glance towards the blindfolded boy signal his status as a participant, emphasizing their camaraderie and the singular relationship between youth and age.

Morgan was not alone in transposing the cross-generational blind man's buff game to a Regency setting. In a print released with the *Graphic* for Christmas of 1876, the illustrator Randolph Caldecott (1846-1886) similarly portrays an old-fashioned grandfather participating in a game of *colin-maillard* with a group of spirited children (fig. 4.10). Interestingly, despite the grandfather's inclusion in the vignette, the blind man's buff section of the print is captioned "The Young Folks," conflating first and second childhood together at play. Caldecott's style, more animated and robust than

⁹² *Sunshine of His Heart* was also widely reproduced in the United States as the frontispiece in *St. Nicholas Magazine* 38, no. 12 (October 1911).

⁹³ The garden pictured is likely in Ventnor on the Isle of Wight, where Frederick Morgan was living when he painted *Blind Man's Buff*. See John Oldcastle, "The Art of Mr. Fred Morgan," *The Windsor Magazine* 22, no. 126 (June 1905), 3-18.

⁹⁴ Oldcastle, "The Art of Mr. Fred Morgan," 15.

Morgan's, expresses the humor and mischief of this parlor sport.⁹⁵ His pleasure for the odd details of the game reveals the artist's warmth, and the energetic quality of the drawing mimic the vigorousness of the blindfolded man, reaching out to catch the children.⁹⁶ Despite being a relatively small detail within a much larger print, the blind man's buff illustration is still able to endow each player with his or her own personality. With its sense of humor and meticulous composition, Caldecott's mixed ages game is surprising and lively, presenting an older man as a vigorous participant.

There are countless examples of grandfathers playing at blind man's buff, each instance representing the accord between youth and age at play. While the aforementioned works by Burr, Morgan, and Caldecott depict the game as it was played between older men and very young children, some artists staged the game between teenagers and their grandfathers as well. Henry Towneley Green's (1836-1899) illustration *A Romp After Dinner*, published in *The Illustrated London News* in 1887, shows a raucous game of blind man's buff being played in an upper-class parlor (fig. 4.11).⁹⁷ A grandfather lurches towards a group of players, despite being tugged back by a young man pulling on his coattails (similar to the little boy under the table in Burr's version).

The heightened contrasts of Green's illustration speak to his working partnership with his younger brother, Charles Green, who is best remembered as a founder of the

⁹⁵ Anita Silvey, ed. *Children's Books and Their Creators* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 113.

⁹⁶ A similarly energetic drawing of this type can also be located in the oeuvre of John Everett Millais. His illustration *Christmas at Noningsby.—Evening*. (xii), drawn to accompany a scene in Anthony Trollope's novel *Orley Farm*, depicts another grandfather playing at blind man's buff with a large group of children. Again, a young boy is pictured pulling on the older man's coattails as the other children laugh and scamper around the room. Drafted in a similarly energetic style, it serves as a strong comparison for Caldecott's illustration. See Paul Goldman, *Beyond Decoration: The Illustrations of John Everett Millais* (London: The British Library, 2005), 104.

⁹⁷ *Illustrated London News* (January 15, 1887).

Graphic, and whose own work was aligned with the perspectives of his fellow *Graphic* artists Hubert von Herkomer and Luke Fildes.⁹⁸ Unlike Charles, who, in addition to illustrating Dickens, favored dramatic, sporting, and military subjects, Towneley was drawn to genre themes, which he often set in Hampstead, where the two brothers lived.⁹⁹

The remarkable detail of *A Romp After Dinner* demonstrates the attention Towneley Green paid to domestic ephemera. His custom of sketching all of the material minutiae of a scene was noted by the landscape artist John Fulleylove, who wrote a remembrance of the brothers for the 1900 *Hampstead Annual*. Fulleylove pronounces, “All subjects came alike to the two brothers, and the number of studies of the most diverse objects and themes found in their portfolios is marvelous!”¹⁰⁰ Such details contribute to the general sense of reality in *A Romp After Dinner*, which includes particulars like the wax melting from the candles in the chandelier, the individual buds of flowers on the mantle, and the shining glimmer of light reflecting off the picture frames on the wall. The overall verisimilitude of the setting makes the intergenerational game more credible and describes cross-generational play as a quotidian occurrence.

While the aforementioned pictures present grandfathers as active, vital, and playful figures, mixed-generational games of blind man’s buff appear throughout Victorian art in a variety of diverse permutations. In addition to its popularity as a theme in genre painting, the game appears in a far wider scope, especially when American examples are included. Although generally portrayed as a game requiring the active participation of a mature man, blind man’s buff is also capable of including a passive

⁹⁸ Ernest Knauff, “John Gilbert and Illustration in the Victorian Era,” in *The American Monthly Review of Reviews* 16, no. 6 (December 1897), 682.

⁹⁹ John Fulleylove, R.I., “Personal Recollections of Two Hampstead Artists: Charles and Towneley Green,” in Greville E. Matheson and Sydney C. Mayle, eds., *The Hampstead Annual, 1900* (London: Sydney C. Mayle, 1900), 104.

¹⁰⁰ Fulleylove, “Personal Recollections,” 104-105.

older woman, as seen in John Rogers's (1825-1904) popular 1887 group *A Frolic at the Old Homestead* (fig. 4.12).

Rogers's small plaster statuette presents an interesting comparison to paintings and illustrations of older adults and their involvement in parlor sports, and *A Frolic at the Old Homestead* renders the traditional game in a democratic, American mode. Like many genre paintings, Rogers groups neatly convey their meaning with such an economy of means that they require little in terms of didactic information. As one contemporary critic complimented this composition, "the faces, forms, and dress are in every respect life-like and exact," and the accessibility of Rogers's works was heightened by their honesty, which seldom idealized.¹⁰¹

Like Burr, Rogers admired the work of David Wilkie, and he ably animated traditional tropes of genre painting in his popular tabletop sculptures. *A Frolic at the Old Homestead* reveals an awareness of the subtle dynamics of a multigenerational group, rendering a lively game of blind man's buff being played between three teenagers, their physicality bridging the generational gap with an appealing dynamism. Their grandmother sits in the middle, and she looks up from her knitting when the blindfolded player mistakenly tags her.

The details of Rogers's group are thoughtfully executed and surprisingly complex, from the indentations on the matriarch's footstool to her glasses, which seem to have slid slightly down the bridge of her nose. Her ball of yarn is balanced delicately on her knee, and the tips of her ears are tucked beneath a lace cap. She appears unaffected by

¹⁰¹ See "Stationery and Specialties" in *American Bookseller* 22, no. 10 (November 15, 1887), 391 and Freeman Henry Morris Murray, *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture: A Study in Interpretation* (Washington, D.C.: Freeman Henry Morris Murray, 1916), 147.

the gaiety around her seat, and she seems content in the center of the composition, seated in a comfortable chair and wrapped in a warm shawl.

The work is a remarkable achievement in plaster, and its reproduction as a multiple in Rogers's studio confirms the mass appeal of mixed-ages blind man's buff imagery.¹⁰² His audience wanted to recognize themselves in his works, which usually represented "the daily life of the average man" and "stood out boldly as the first popular appeal that sculpture had made to the American people."¹⁰³ Those who bought Rogers groups wanted to see, in the words of artist and architect Charles Henry Israels, "the things that are, as well as the things that were; that a subject was not too humble to be treated by the artist, because it entered into the daily life of his own people."¹⁰⁴

Like Currier and Ives, Rogers produced works for a large and diverse audience, often pricing his pieces in a manner that enabled their purchase by middle-class families.¹⁰⁵ *A Frolic at the Old Homestead* was undoubtedly appealing to his customers, who responded well to his domestic scenes. This sculptural interpretation of mixed-ages domestic play demonstrates both Rogers's technical mastery of his medium and the mass consumer attraction to intergenerational works of art.

Games of blind man's buff are often raucous and unpredictable, and the aforementioned works place older adults, who are usually presented as sedate and

¹⁰² More than 80,000 copies of more than fifty different Rogers groups were made and sold in the artist's lifetime. See Murray, *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture*, 143.

¹⁰³ Charles Henry Israels, "John Rogers: Sculptor," *Architectural Record* 16, no. 5 (November 1904) 483. Israels continues, "The 'Rogers Groups' were reproduced in such commercial form that they were within the reach of the average man who saw in these little putty colored models a faithful picture of his own life and his own emotions." (485)

¹⁰⁴ Israels, "John Rogers: Sculptor," 487.

¹⁰⁵ Susan James-Gadzinski and Mary Mullen Cunningham, *American Sculpture in the Museum of American Art of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts* (Philadelphia: Museum of American Art at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1997), 78.

controlled, in comparatively unrestrained positions. However, the commingling of youth and age in a recreational context is not always represented in a boisterous manner. Some of the more recognizable examples of cross-generational playmates in American and British genre painting capitalize on a calmer, more restrained dynamic.

Sharing simple pleasures

Sedate interpretations of youth and age at play are presented with many of the same qualities of individualism and affection that characterize images of rowdy play. Shared participation in serene activities, like playing with dolls or musical instruments, still represent engagement with experiences which narratively benefit from age discrepancies.

This kind of quieter expression of cross-generational play can be seen in a picture like *The Banjo Lesson* by Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937). Painted and exhibited in Philadelphia in 1893, *The Banjo Lesson* is now one of Tanner's best-known and most-reproduced works (fig. 4.13).¹⁰⁶ The painting features just two figures: an older man with greying hair and a young boy who sits on his lap. They pluck a banjo together, with the grandfather fretting the instrument and pointing out the picking while the boy plucks the strings.¹⁰⁷ The boy looks down at the instrument with calm determination, while his

¹⁰⁶ It is important to mention that *The Banjo Lesson* was directly inspired by an illustration Tanner supplied to *Harper's Young People* in 1888. Commissioned to illustrate the 1893 story "Uncle Tim's Compromise on Christmas," by Ruth McEnery Stuart (1849–1917), the original illustration was inspired by the tale of a grandfather who gifts his banjo to his grandson for Christmas. For more information about the development of the picture from Tanner's magazine illustration, see Will South, "A Missing Question Mark: The Unknown Henry Ossawa Tanner," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 8, no. 2 (Autumn 2009).

¹⁰⁷ Albert Boime, "Henry Ossawa Tanner's Subversion of Genre," *The Art Bulletin* 75, no. 3 (September 1993), 423.

grandfather looks on patiently, ready to pluck the correct strings if his grandchild should falter. The pair is strategically placed in the light of their simple kitchen, which touches the boy's forehead, as if a little spark of musical talent radiates from within.

The picture builds upon similar themes seen in the work of other nineteenth-century American artists like Eastman Johnson, Thomas Hovenden, William Sidney Mount, and Thomas Eakins, who was Tanner's own teacher at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. However, *The Banjo Lesson* stands alone as an example of a banjo picture executed by an African-American artist, and Tanner's engagement with this theme reveals alternative concerns, like the unique quality Claire Perry describes as "melancholy" and "elegiac."¹⁰⁸ Marcia M. Mathews, author of the standard biography on Tanner, identifies something unique in the artist's interpretation of age. She writes, "In the figure of the old Negro man teaching the little boy to play the banjo the dignity and pathos of old age are expressed in a manner that has none of the banality of ordinary genre."¹⁰⁹

The art historian Judith Wilson describes *The Banjo Lesson* as "the site of a profound psychic break or break-through," or an affirmation of African American cultural values.¹¹⁰ Unlike more familiar contemporary representations of banjo playing, which usually signified black plantation performances, Tanner's banjo players symbolize family values, black domestic bliss, transmission of skill, and the universal experiences

¹⁰⁸ Claire Perry, *Young America: Childhood in 19th-Century Art and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 108.

¹⁰⁹ Marcia M. Mathews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner, American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 37.

¹¹⁰ Judith Wilson, "Lifting 'The Veil': Henry O. Tanner's *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor*," *Contributions in Black Studies* 9, Article 4 (January 1992), 31.

of music and play.¹¹¹ It is a deceptively simple picture that is free from condescension, and it recovers a cultural heritage and portrays its preservation in its transmission from age to youth.¹¹² Tanner dislocates the banjo player theme and reframes it within a context of education and generational continuity.¹¹³

While the fascination of *The Banjo Lesson* is usually attributed to Tanner's reclamation of the banjo theme, it can be argued that the picture's charm is, in part, also the product of the intergenerational relationship it portrays. Emphasizing the universal appeal of the old/young formula in genre painting, *The Banjo Lesson* accords his teacher with the status reserved for knowledgeable elders. Jo-Ann Morgan, a scholar of African American visual culture, argues that Tanner's teacher is afforded an enhanced status greater than comparable grandfather types found in later nineteenth-century genre painting. Morgan asserts, "Given the overabundance of dumbfounded old codgers in late nineteenth-century visual culture, if Tanner's older man were truly transmitting knowledge, as art historians contend, that would be a significant breakthrough."¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ A great deal has been written about the complex racial history of images of banjo playing. Michael D. Harris, Associate Professor of Art History and African American Studies at Emory University, provides context on the subject in his essay, "From *The Banjo Lesson* to *The Piano Lesson*: Reclaiming the Song." Harris explains, "In nineteenth-century America, the banjo often functioned as a sign for all things black. The name of the instrument derived from an African term; in the Caribbean, it was known as *banza* (Martinique), *bangil* (Barbados), *banshaw* (St. Kitts), and *bonja* (Jamaica). The name appears as *bangio* in South Carolina and *banjou* in Philadelphia as early as 1749. It probably evolved from the Kimbundu *mbanza*, a plucked string instrument constructed of a gourd, tanned skins, and hemp or gut strings... Because the instrument was originally made with a gourd and was African in origin, it became a trope for black culture during the antebellum period. Indeed, black performance was characterized as intuitive, even natural. Imagery depicting a black musician, and especially a banjo player, reinforced notions of a "happy darkey"—a slave performing his ethnicity." See Michael D. Harris, "From *The Banjo Lesson* to *The Piano Lesson*: Reclaiming the Song," in Leo G. Mazow, ed. *Picturing the Banjo* (University Park, PA: Palmer Museum of Art, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 146. Also see Karen Linn, *That Half-barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture* (Urbana Champaign: University of Illinois, 1991).

¹¹² Henry Louis Gates, *Life Upon These Shores: Looking at African American History, 1513-2008* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 197.

¹¹³ Harris, "From *The Banjo Lesson* to *The Piano Lesson*: Reclaiming the Song," 146-147.

¹¹⁴ Jo-Ann Morgan, "Henry Ossawa Tanner's *The Banjo Lesson* and the Iconic Persistence of Uncle Tom," in *Uncle Tom's Cabin as Visual Culture* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 191.

However, while Morgan claims that images of male teachers were not common in the American genre tradition, images of older men teaching are easier to identify than pictures portraying their younger counterparts.

While calmer and more sedate than the aforementioned images of cross-generational play, Tanner's picture reaps just as much significance from its age-disparate relationship. The age gap between grandfather and grandchild also takes on the additional narrative weight of the social changes experienced by African-Americans at the end of the nineteenth century. Whereas Tanner's grandfather likely grew up in a culture in which the black banjo player was a white amusement, he is able to transmit his skills and knowledge to a child whose generation may come to view the instrument as one for their own amusement and education.¹¹⁵

Despite *The Banjo Lesson*'s significance, Tanner never exhibited it or mentioned it in his memoirs.¹¹⁶ While a number of art historians, particularly Albert Boime, have made convincing claims for the picture's destabilization of genre painting, Tanner did not seem to identify the significance of his painting in his own time. In his significant essay, "Henry Ossawa Tanner's Subversion of Genre," Boime notes that, Tanner took "exception" to interpretations of the "psychology" of his work, and his refusal of race in his writing complicates the task of interpreting *The Banjo Lesson*.¹¹⁷ However, aging is a universal condition, and a reading of the picture determined by the tenderness between an older, competent grandfather and his grandson would bolster Tanner's own stance on his art.¹¹⁸ This image of play and generational exchange individualizes its subjects, endowing

¹¹⁵ Gates, *Life Upon These Shores: Looking at African American History, 1513-2008*, 197.

¹¹⁶ South, "A Missing Question Mark: The Unknown Henry Ossawa Tanner," 14.

¹¹⁷ Boime, "Henry Ossawa Tanner's Subversion of Genre," 418.

¹¹⁸ Boime, "Henry Ossawa Tanner's Subversion of Genre," 423.

them with emotional and intellectual depth and producing ideas of education and responsibility and their transmission across the life cycle, as well as the universality of the concept across cultures and socio-economic groups.

While Tanner's picture locates its meaning in the sedate manner in which the young boy plays music with his grandfather, rowdy pictures can just as easily support the argument that age has significant narrative importance in images of play. In 1893, the same year that Tanner painted *The Banjo Lesson*, the English painter Arthur John Elsley (1860-1952) produced *Besieged (Washtub)* on the other side of the Atlantic (fig. 4.14). Lively and humorous by comparison, *Besieged* presents an alternative vision of the unique relationship between children and their elders, specifically in framing play in a domestic setting.

In this lighthearted scene of Victorian play, a trio of energetic children and their happy Jack Russell Terrier interrupt an older woman at her washbasin. The dog barks at the chaos that ensues: an older boy eagerly plunges his arm into the tub, a little girl laughs when she is told to go away, and a baby blows soap bubbles behind the woman's back. Although she has clearly been disturbed in the middle of her work, the older woman smiles, laughing to herself as she tries to shoo the children away with a piece of sudsy laundry.

Painted at the height of Elsley's popularity as a painter of children and animals, *Besieged* celebrates a view of domestic life that, although idealized, still offers social insights.¹¹⁹ It demonstrates a comfort that bridges the age gap and serves as evidence of the unique compatibility between "first" and "second" childhoods. Elsley reimagines

¹¹⁹ Terry Parker, *Golden Hours: The Paintings of Arthur J. Elsley, 1860-1952* (Somerset, England: Richard Dennis, 1998), 6.

laundry day as a silly, old-fashioned habit and a fine occasion for fun and games between children and their grandmother. It is a pleasant scene, and one can easily understand why the industrialist William Hesketh Lever decided to purchase the picture to reproduce as a color chromolithograph in his company's advertisements for Sunlight Soap.¹²⁰

Despite their strong pictorial impact and spirited vision, Elsley's works are often dismissed for their consumerist associations. Often deemed a "chocolate box artist" for his success selling his works and their copyrights to companies like Sunlight Soap, Bovril, and Cadbury's, Elsley was in fact an award-winning artist who exhibited more than fifty pictures at the Royal Academy.¹²¹ However, his place at the RA has been overshadowed by his legacy in print media, as prints produced from Elsley's pictures had runs of up to half a million and were sold as postcards, advertising show cards, crystoleums, prints, and calendars.¹²²

Elsley's renown as a commercially successful painter obscures his versatility and inventiveness—attributes which are apparent in *Besieged* once its commercial qualities are set aside.¹²³ The composition is masterful in the way Elsley intertwines the children and the woman in a frenetic moment. The terrier is caught mid-leap, with all four of its paws hovering above the stone floor. Soap splatters and drips realistically, while a bubble floats weightlessly behind the commotion. The older boy and girl are depicted as being

¹²⁰ Once the picture was bought by the Sunlight campaign, a small box of Sunlight soap was added to the scene, poised precariously on the edge of the low washing table, just within perilous reach of the happy terrier's wagging tail. See Lady Lever Art Gallery and Edward Morris, *Victorian & Edwardian paintings in the Lady Lever Art Gallery: British artists born after 1810 excluding the early Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1994), 31. For more detailed information about the use of Victorian paintings in contemporary soap advertising, see Mike Dempsey, ed. *Bubbles: Early Advertising Art from A. & F. Pears Ltd.* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1978). Dempsey usefully describes the history of the popular *Pears Annual* as well as the technical aspects of the chromolithographic processes utilized in the reproduction of such images (a task that used up to twenty-four separate color blocks in the printing process).

¹²¹ Harry Hawkes, "Chocolate box' masterpieces," *The Independent*, August 1, 1998, 47.

¹²² Parker, *Golden Hours*, 6.

¹²³ Marjorie Wheatley, "Arthur J. Elsley, The Children's Artist," *This England* (Winter 1981), 15.

particularly connected and attuned with the older women, their arms coming together above the center of the picture, forming a triangle that anchors the viewer's eye in the center of the action. This sensitive composition emphasizes the interconnectedness and affection between the children and the laughing laundress, their playfulness accenting what is already a visibly strong intergenerational bond.

Besieged is also notable for its inclusion of its central model, Mrs. May Knight, who posed for the figure of the playful, superannuated washerwoman.¹²⁴ Mrs. Knight was perhaps the best-known mature artists' model of the period, and she developed a reputation for portraying idealized older women. A 1901 profile of Mrs. Knight in *Pearson's Magazine* declares,

When artists wish to paint an old lady, an ideal grandma, they send for Mrs. Knight. She has been sitting in the studios for years and years, and has seen the lights and shadows of eighty-four summers come and go. Her nerves are far more steady than those of the average schoolgirl of to-day, and the artists tell me wonderful things of her endurance in keeping a pose—no easy thing to do, by the way, as one quickly finds by trying.¹²⁵

Elsley painted Mrs. Knight countless times, and her minor celebrity and good working relationship with the artist lends another dimension to *Besieged*.¹²⁶ In this scene, Mrs. Knight is not performing her role as a model for an anonymous or interchangeable older

¹²⁴ Parker, *Golden Hours*, 24.

¹²⁵ Lenore Van Der Veer, "Models," *Pearson's Magazine* 12 (July-December 1901), 243.

¹²⁶ For an example of another Elsley picture featuring Mrs. Knight playing with children, see *Play Time* (1894), which has been deemed a companion picture to *Besieged*. Oil on canvas, 40 x 29 in. Auctioned in 1996 at the Victorian Pictures sale at Christie's, King Street, London (November 8, 1996), Sale 5694, Lot 179.

woman. Instead, she features in Elsley's picture as a popular and beloved personality, endowing the scene with additional narrative weight, as a notable or recognizable person is far less easy to dismiss than an unknown figure. This familiarity invites an extended engagement with the picture, and a prolonged consideration of the picture reveals its compositional complexities and its rich, age-determined subtexts.

Elsley's picture, much like the aforementioned scenes, sensitively addresses the kinship of "first" and "second" childhoods. Bridging episodes in the life cycle between "crude boyhood" and "ripeness," these scenes assert the alliance of youth and age in surprising ways.¹²⁷ While both childhood and senescence were subject to stringent social controls during the Victorian period, play and playfulness can be seen as a resistance of mechanisms, liberating youth and age from the period's rigorous regulations. Karen Chase notes in *The Victorians and Old Age*, "cross-generational relationships [were] an abiding preoccupation of imaginative life," probably because they undermined social standards and expectations.¹²⁸

The bond of play brings youth and age closer together, strengthening the alliance between two of the least powerful groups in society. Pictured together, youth and age at play are able to invert expectations. Or, as Nelson asserts, "The doubt and social questioning necessarily involved in any inversion of a norm, not least the age norm, provide fertile ground for insight into Victorian uncertainties."¹²⁹ In the context of genre painting, these uncertainties are perhaps best revealed by the lack of scholarly attention that has been paid to the very question of cross-generational age alliances.

¹²⁷ Edward Payson Powell, *Our Heredity from God: Consisting of Lectures on Evolution* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1888), 271.

¹²⁸ Karen Chase, *The Victorians and Old Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

¹²⁹ Nelson, *Precocious Children and Childish Adults: Age Inversion in Victorian Literature*, 11.

A 1900 definition of the term “second childhood” describes it as a period of “delighting in new pleasures in a childlike fashion.”¹³⁰ This is a more complementary interpretation of the axiom, one which reimagines an otherwise insulting turn of phrase as a kind of accolade. Lorente supports this alternative interpretation of the concept of “second childhood,” calling it “a gift enjoyed by few mortals. Some of us can enjoy it under the suggestion of others, but those who of their own volition can rejuvenate their minds are few and far between.”¹³¹ Painterly interpretations of this variation of second childhood are less common, although, once identified, such examples are capable of prompting new lines of inquiry about the construction of the alliance between youth and age through play.

Eastman Johnson’s subtle 1875 picture *What the Shell Says (What the Sea Says)* is just such an illustration of “second childhood” as a time for renewed wonder and pure enjoyment (fig. 4.15). Like many of Johnson’s paintings, *What the Shell Says* resists simple categorization, especially as an example of his work from the 1870s, which was Johnson’s most active period as a genre painter.¹³² This was a highly experimental decade in Johnson’s career when he rose to prominence as the most respected figure painter in the United States.¹³³ *What the Shell Says* showcased these developments to an

¹³⁰ Christine Ammer. *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms, Second Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), s.v. “second childhood,” 392.

¹³¹ Lorente, “A Fountain of Youth,” 1531.

¹³² John I.H. Baur, *An American Genre Painter; Eastman Johnson, 1824-1906* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 1940), 23.

¹³³ Teresa A. Carbone, “The Genius of the Hour: Eastman Johnson in New York, 1860-1880,” in Teresa A. Carbone and Patricia Hills, eds., *Eastman Johnson, Painting America* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2000), 49.

international audience when it was exhibited in Paris at the 1878 Exposition Universelle to tremendous acclaim.¹³⁴

Like Tanner's *The Banjo Lesson*, *What the Shell Says* is a deceptively simple picture, which unites Johnson's taste for rustic interiors with his interest in the effects of natural light.¹³⁵ Described in *The Century* magazine in 1894 as "one of the pictures that made [Johnson's] fame as a painter," *What the Shell Says* depicts two figures in the dim light of a bare room.¹³⁶ A young girl holds a large conch shell up to the ear of her grandfather, who crouches down earnestly to listen closely to the sounds of the sea. The girl looks up towards her grandparent with expectation, her face lit softly by an unseen window. The older man turns towards the same light, smiling with the pleasure of a child listening to a shell for the first time. The two figures are portrayed as close allies: the same soft light glows on both of their faces, and they wear matching shades of grey and red. Together, they are alone in the sparse room, lost in their shared imaginary trip to the sea.¹³⁷

With its broad touch and restricted palette, *What the Shell Says* fits Johnson's Nantucket aesthetic of the 1870s, when he devoted many studies and canvases to the subject of the aging sea captains he befriended on the island. Teresa A. Carbone suggests that *What the Shell Says* can be read as a study of local types analogous to his pictures of senescent adventurers, like his well-known portraits of Captains Nathan H. Manter and

¹³⁴ *Reports of the United States Commissioners to the Paris Universal Exposition, 1878*, 1. Published under direction of the secretary of state by authority of Congress (Washington, Govt. Print. Off., 1880), catalogue no. 70.

¹³⁵ Patricia Hills, *The Genre Painting of Eastman Johnson: The Sources and Development of His Style and Themes* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), 155.

¹³⁶ William A. Coffin, "The Century's American Artist Series – Eastman Johnson." *The Century* 48, no. 6 (October 1894), 958.

¹³⁷ He is probably reminiscing about his past experiences at the sea, while the girl is merely imagining the same.

Charles Myrick.¹³⁸ She writes, "...Johnson also offered a domesticated version of the mariner theme in his beautifully tenebrous *What the Shell Says*, in which a child's naïve curiosity conjures myriad memories of a perilously adventurous, and bygone, life."¹³⁹ However, Carbone neglects to comment on the delighted distraction of the child's companion, who may be envisioning a similarly perilous, "adventurous, and bygone, life." Johnson characterizes youth and age as allies in wonderment, playmates sharing fantasies of the sea.

However, these readings of Johnson's picture may be inappropriately sentimental. When compared to the genre paintings of many of his contemporaries, *What the Shell Says* seems nearly somber. It is a surprisingly rigid scene of intergenerational play. The debate over this picture's sentimentality is apparent in a comment made by John I.H. Baur in his 1940 Johnson exhibition catalogue, in which he asserts,

Certainly his pictures in themselves are far less sentimental than the effusions with which they were sometimes greeted in the popular press. This was the age which often wrote poetry instead of criticism—it is reported, for instance, that at the time he first exhibited his picture *What the Shell Says*, it inspired a "charming" verse in the *Zeitung* entitled "Was Sagt die Muschel?" At its worst, Johnson's work was never as mawkish as this. At its best, it rose entirely above

¹³⁸ There are wonderful portraits by Johnson of Captains Nathan H. Manter and Charles Myrick in the collections of the Nantucket Historical Association. See *Captain Charles Myrick (Study for Embers)* of 1879 (Oil on panel; 22 x 20 7/8 in. 1895.14.1) and *Captain Nathan H. Manter*, 1873 (Oil on paper board, 12 3/4 x 8 5/8 in. 2011.16.1).

¹³⁹ Carbone, "The Genius of the Hour," 84.

sentimentality of any kind and was a strong, clean painting in a peculiarly native American idiom.¹⁴⁰

In comparison to the pictures mentioned earlier in this chapter, particularly the lighthearted scenes of all-ages games of blind man's buff, *What the Shell Says* is markedly austere. It relies on very little information to convey its message, merely employing the simple gesture of a child holding a shell to her grandfather's ear. It proves a similar point about the unique bond of cross-generational play without the histrionics of Elsley's bubbles or Burr's children pulling at their grandfather's coattails. With restraint and sensitivity, Johnson presents a minimalistic rendering of a desirable "second childhood," showing an older figure who delights in life's small pleasures with a young companion discovering those same joys for the first time.

Johnson's controlled vision of cross-generational childlike pleasure can be compared with a number of similarly restrained British scenes. Such narrative pictures compensate for a lack of effusiveness simply by utilizing the highly symbolic dynamics between children and grandparents. These relationships are so rich in meaning that they compensate for the artistic understatements of more restrained examples of this kind of genre work.

The English Victorian painter Joseph Clark (1834-1926) produced countless pictures of positive aging in an intergenerational context, and his scenes often rely on the interplay between youth and age as they delight in small pleasures together. Similar to *What the Shell Says*, in many of Clark's canvases it is often implied that while the youth enjoys these new experiences, their grandmother or grandfather also relishes

¹⁴⁰ Baur, *An American Genre Painter*, 27-28.

remembering their own childhood memories of the same activity or situation. Such scenes capture the spirited interchange of cross-generational play as it regularly presented itself in Victorian visual culture, and shows that Victorian society delighted in generational exchange.

While not widely recognized by contemporary scholars, Clark enjoyed a very fine reputation during his own time and exhibited at the Royal Academy for over fifty years.¹⁴¹ As a painter of “capital little pictures,” he established himself as a master of the humble English cottage scene, and one Royal Academy critic praised him in 1877 by declaring,

Clark has so much sentiment in common with that delightful French painter, yet such grievous lack of his pictorial charm. Of all that is most prosaic and commonplace in English humble and lower middle life, in types of face, in dress, in surroundings, he is the faithful and uncompromising recorder. His truth of expression, purity of feeling, and unswerving fidelity to fact in all he paints, are the rare qualities entitling him to the respect which the Academy has shown...¹⁴²

Clark presents a striking example of a Victorian genre painter who was able to respectfully and convincingly describe scenes of quotidian country life, producing images which often feature cross-generational exchange as a major aspect of their “pictorial charm.”

One contributor to *The Athenaeum* attributed the appeal of Clark’s rustic genre

¹⁴¹ Paul Naumann, “The Royal Academy Exhibition of 1907,” *The English Illustrated Magazine* 37 (July 1907), 311.

¹⁴² H.C. Richardson, ed. *Academy Criticisms 1877. A collection of the principal notices and critiques which have appeared in the leading journals and art publications, upon the paintings exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts, May 1877* (London: The Auxiliary Steam Printing Co., 1877), 11.

pictures to “the gay vitality and good temper of the innocent English faces; the actions and attitudes, too, [of] their faithfulness and spirit.”¹⁴³ A note in the 1901 handbook to the National Gallery admiringly states, “A beautiful, tender, pious, and loving soul breathes through all his pictures...Joseph Clark is one of the most consummate artists in all that appertains to the construction of a picture...”¹⁴⁴ So much of Clark’s fine reputation was a direct product of his intergenerational pictures.

In *A New Pet (Teasing the Kitten)* of 1876, Clark tenderly offers a joyful cross-generational dynamic (fig. 4.16). A grandmother sits in a well-decorated country kitchen, where three little children surround her, all wearing broad smiles and rosy cheeks. One little girl proudly displays her writing slate; another sits beside her on the floor watching a kitten play with a spool of thread. A little boy kneels upon a chair above the kitten, pulling the end of the yellow thread in a teasing manner. Although their grandmother is in the middle of mending a sock, Clark catches her in a moment when she has looked up from her sewing to watch the kitten playing. It is a scene of remarkable warmth and tenderness, and it is clear from the grandmother’s face that she is just as enchanted and amused by the small pet as her grandchildren.

Despite the tidiness of space, small, playful objects are sprinkled across the floor and decorate the mantle above the fireplace. It is evident that this is a home in which joviality is encouraged. A child’s little stool is turned upside-down on the floor, and a small white doll sits between the legs of the seat as if it were a makeshift dollhouse. A pretty blue and white saucer can be seen nearby, presumably placed there to feed the kitten. The saucer’s value as a decorative object has been dismissed in favor of the

¹⁴³ “Mr. Joseph Clark,” *The Athenaeum* no. 3418 (April 29, 1893), 545.

¹⁴⁴ Edward T. Cook, ed. *A Popular Handbook to the National Gallery, Volume II.—British Schools (Including the Tate Gallery)* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1901), 465.

pleasure that the kitten brings to the family. A few seashells decorate the wall and a stately conch occupies a place of pride on the mantle. Perhaps this grandmother enjoys listening to the sea with her own grandchildren in a manner resembling the exchange in *What the Shell Says*.

Clark's strengths as a storyteller are evident in *A New Pet*, and the description of his work in the National Gallery handbook can be applied to a reading of this picture.

...he knows as well as any man living how to concentrate the interest of his subject, and how to bring out its central point. There is no unnecessary detail, and yet nothing which helps the story is omitted. There is complete unity in his work; all the parts unite to form a perfect whole. His pictures are full of concentrated thought and feeling—sweet, tender, and loving creations.¹⁴⁵

The composition of the scene places the family and the kitten in an interconnected manner that moves the viewer's eye continuously between them. This aligns the perspective of the grandmother with that of her grandchildren, portraying their enjoyment as something felt equally between them. The grandmother does not merely supervise the amusement of the children, but she participates equivalently. She is not alienated by her age but portrayed as someone in his or her "second childhood" who enjoys the "rejuvenated mind" of playful senescence described by Lorente.

While Clark was most often extolled by Victorian critics who praised his ability to paint children, the qualities he so ably bestowed upon his juvenile sitters can also be identified in his older subjects. In a review of the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1907

¹⁴⁵ Cook, *A Popular Handbook to the National Gallery*, 465.

published in *The English Illustrated Magazine*, one critic praised Clark for his “rare feeling for the innocent spirit of childhood, its unconscious attitudes, its joyousness and also its pathetic moods.”¹⁴⁶ These merits can just as easily be attributed to his feeling for older figures, which is expressed in an equivalently sympathetic manner.

Images which reclaim or re-contextualize “second childhood” as a period of returning to childish joys and simple amusements disrupt chronological age and its standard role in the construction of genre narratives. The aforementioned expressions of positive “second childhoods” dismantle established ideas about aging in British and American painting. These images correct misconceptions about age as something that signals loss or weakness, instead showing older playmates as forceful figures within the family. While older adults are usually ejected from their previously held social categories, their supportive status at playtime challenges accepted ideas about the balance of power within the family structure. Grandparents in these pictures enjoy a rare status as conduits to childhood, blurring the boundaries between children and adults.¹⁴⁷

Affectionate tomfoolery

The comfort of the special relationship between youth and age is particularly well expressed by the dynamics revealed in images of intergenerational practical jokes. Such pictures push the playmate dynamic to its limits, perhaps making viewers feel slightly guilty or uncomfortable. However, portrayals of pranks being played on older figures by children actually reveal a sense of ease and comfort between generations. While children are seldom portrayed playing jokes on their fathers or mothers, countless genre paintings

¹⁴⁶ Naumann, “The Royal Academy Exhibition of 1907,” 311.

¹⁴⁷ Nelson, *Precocious Children*, 11.

render jocular shenanigans designed to annoy grandmothers and grandfathers. Such pictures celebrate a spirit of play that is, at its core, a testament to the unique dynamics of the coalition of youth and age.

Often found in the repertoire of stock genre types, the popular figure of the mischievous or disobedient child reflects important nineteenth-century attitudes about youth. While few paintings of this theme are considered masterpieces of British or American painting, countless artists offered variations of this theme.¹⁴⁸ Disobedient children were often shown playing tricks on older people, an activity that could be interpreted as demonstrating a lack of respect for elders. However, in the context of a discussion of the unique qualities of cross-generational kinship, youth teasing age could be reimagined as evidence of the unique ease and comfort that can exist between a child and a grandparent.

While nineteenth-century audiences viewed some aspects of humorous genre as vulgar, the tradition managed to persist (albeit with decreasing frequency towards the end of the period).¹⁴⁹ Comic scenes often profited from the derision of the frailties and faults of their subjects, and the quality of advanced age provided a convenient and familiar condition for mockery. However, it is important to remember the role of the medium when considering genre and jocularitas. In her study of visual humor at the turn of the century, the art historian Jennifer Greenhill notes that oil painting “had significantly higher stakes, inspired a more complex investigation, inflected by ambition and an

¹⁴⁸ Jadviga M. Da Costa Nunes, “The Naughty Child in Nineteenth-Century American Art,” *Journal of American Studies* 21, no. 2 (August 1987), 225.

¹⁴⁹ Patricia Hills, *The Painters’ America: Rural and Urban Life, 1810-1910* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), 23.

awareness of painting's limits and possibilities."¹⁵⁰ Although jokes about age can be regarded as a simple and shallow theme of humorous genre, by the virtue of their medium, such pictures often appeal for a more thoughtful analysis.

Both British and American genre painters frame humor in their works with iconographic and textual suggestions that explain the joke in detail, making the gag impossible to overlook.¹⁵¹ This lucidity and legibility is particularly evident in scenes featuring innocent pranks being played upon sleeping figures. Although a number of scholars have addressed pictures in which practical jokes are played upon sleeping African-American men or dozing laborers, the nuances of this picture are invariably altered when the subject of the prank is an older person in a domestic setting rather than an unknown workhand napping outdoors.¹⁵² When transposed to a domestic context, a practical joke takes on a new meaning and indicates the dynamics of a personal relationship. The folklorist Alan Dundes has written about pranks as markers of changes in status, and in the instance of the cross-generational prank, perhaps that altered status is that of a child who has begun to recognize her elders as equals, and such images take on a nearly subversive quality, like a Saturnalia festival.¹⁵³

Unlike pictures of naughty children playing jokes on lower-class workers, scenes of cross-generational domestic gags imply affection and affinity. Representations of jokes played on sleeping elders often indicate an egalitarian and informal relationship between

¹⁵⁰ Jennifer A. Greenhill, *Playing it Straight: Art and Humor in the Gilded Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 18.

¹⁵¹ Greenhill, *Playing it Straight*, 33.

¹⁵² For more on genre pictures in which pranks are played upon sleeping African-Americans, see Patricia Hills, *The Painters' America: Rural and Urban Life, 1810-1910*, 21. For visual examples, see William Sidney Mount, *Farmers Nooning* (1836, The Museums at Stony Brook, New York); James Goodwyn Clonney, *Waking Up* (1851, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston); Currier and Ives, *Holidays In The Country. Troublesome Flies* (1868 lithograph).

¹⁵³ Alan Dundes, "April Fool and April Fish: Towards a Theory of Ritual Pranks." *Etnofoor* 1, no. 1 (1988), 10.

the youngest and oldest members of a household.¹⁵⁴ Such images are also some of the most common elaborations of what art historian Jadviga M. Da Costa Nunes describes as “the rejection of traditional hierarchical authority in the family structure and between the classes, and the revision of the rules of propriety to reflect the new egalitarian society.”¹⁵⁵ Pictures of pranks played on the elderly are not necessarily indicative of diminished respect towards old age. Instead, they can be interpreted as visual expressions of kinship and a disruption of the accepted hierarchies of the domestic environment.

The New York genre painter George W. Brenneman (1856-1906) produced an interesting example of the harmless, affection joke played on a sleeping older man (fig. 4.17). Painted around 1890, his untitled domestic scene portrays a man of advanced years dozing in a red tufted chair. Slouched comfortably in his seat with one leg resting on a footstool, he has nodded off with a lit cigar in his right hand. The table beside him is topped with an empty plate and crystal decanter, as well as an empty wine glass. The evidence of consumed food and drink suggests that he is sleeping deeply and will remain so for some time.

Two women have entered the room through the open door behind the sleeping man’s armchair. A young maid and her mistress, perhaps the man’s grown daughter, have just entered and, upon seeing the state of the slumbering septuagenarian, decide to play a little joke. The maid proceeds to delicately dust the dozing man with all the delicacy usually afforded to cleaning fine *objets d’art*. Daintily holding a small duster, she brushes him as if he were a marble statue, much to the amusement of the giggling woman supervising from the shadow of the doorway.

¹⁵⁴ Da Costa Nunes, “The Naughty Child in Nineteenth-Century American Art,” 233.

¹⁵⁵ Da Costa Nunes, “The Naughty Child in Nineteenth-Century American Art,” 247.

The maid's gracefulness with her duster gives the impression that this joke is entirely harmless, a testament to the ease she feels towards the sleeping man and his family. She is not demeaning or degrading him, but performing a gag driven by fondness and ease. It would be too simple to dismiss Brenneman's picture as a scene making fun of old age. Instead, it reveals the potential for playfulness to describe cross-generational affections.

While Brenneman was only modestly recognized during his own time and rarely accorded with public awards or honors, he did enjoy some success as a painter of small and exact genre pictures. The great art collector Thomas B. Clarke describes Brenneman in a catalogue of his collection, "his most successful works have been cabinet pieces, rich in color and executed with fine delicacy of detail."¹⁵⁶ Unfortunately, little is remembered of him today. Despite his active involvement with a number of institutions and organizations, including the American Art Association and the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, the American-born and Munich-trained Brenneman was perhaps best recognized in his own time for his talent as an interior decorator. While his pictures were insulted and mocked by some contemporary critics, the decoration of his studio on East Seventeenth Street in New York City was extolled as being "marvelously picturesque." Unfortunately, this lack of respect in his own time has likely contributed to the vagueness of his biography as it is known today.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Thomas Benedict Clarke, *Catalogue of the Thomas B. Clarke Collection of American Pictures*. (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1891), 18.

¹⁵⁷ Brenneman is listed as a member of the Membership Committee of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences in the Institute's 1890-1891 yearbook (Brooklyn: Press of Eagle Book Printing Department, 1891), 75. Commentary on his submissions to the Second Prize-Fund Exhibition of the American-Art Association can be found in *The Studio* no. 23 (May 15, 1886), 269-288. The critic writing for *The Studio* did not mask his disdain for Brenneman's pictures, often going to great lengths to write insulting commentary. Of one landscape, exhibition no. 28, he writes, "Why did the artist paint this landscape? Did he care for it himself, or expect that anybody would care for it?" (277). The critic for *The Decorator and*

Brenneman's picture offers no moralizing lesson, and it lacks the heavy-handedness of earlier, mid-century genre humor. Instead, he expresses a small, amusing episode of everyday experience in a mixed-ages household. This joke is presented without theatrics, overdone gestures, or directly addressing the viewer, which can also be identified as themes in contemporary British painting.¹⁵⁸

While many British artists were drawn to the theme of pranks played on sleeping elders, subtle and affectionate iterations of such gestures are comparatively rare. The Newlyn School painter Edwin Harris (1856-1906) presents an uncharacteristic example of this type of scene in *Sweet Dreams*, painted around 1892 (fig. 4.18).¹⁵⁹ While Harris did not enjoy a success equal to that enjoyed by other Newlyn painters, like Walter Langley, Frank Bramley, Stanhope Forbes, and Norman Garstin, he was credited by some with "discovering" Newlyn, and is known to have positively contributed to the development of the artistic community there.¹⁶⁰ Harris was recognized in his own time as the author of "excellent" Newlyn subjects, which were authentic, unpretentious, and attentive to the minute domestic details of the lives of fishermen and their families.¹⁶¹

Set in a humble Cornish fisherman's cottage, *Sweet Dreams* features an old, weathered piscator who has fallen asleep while mending his nets. Two female figures,

Furnisher is far kinder in his description of Brenneman's studio: "Quite a number of our artists are fitting up their studios on more or less elaborate and consistent plans, but none have so far reached the same results as Mr. Brenneman has attained to at comparatively little cost." See "An American Society of Decorative Art," *The Decorator and Furnisher* 6, no. 1 (April 1885), 14.

¹⁵⁸ Greenhill, *Playing it Straight*, 34.

¹⁵⁹ Clarification: Harris's birth and death dates are written here correctly. Oddly, Brenneman and Harris share the very same dates of 1856-1906.

¹⁶⁰ While Howard Fox credits Harris with the "discovery" of Newlyn, there is no agreement among scholars of the Newlyn School about Edwin Harris's role in the establishment of the early colony. It is understood that he had settled in the fishing village by 1883, after Walter Langley moved there in 1882. See Michael Bird, *Art in Cornwall* (Cornwall: Alison Hodge, 2012), 9; or Nina Lübbren, *Rural Artists' Colonies in Europe, 1870-1910* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 171.

¹⁶¹ See "Birmingham Royal Society of Artists." *The Art Journal* 66 (1904), 222; "Cornwall in Whitechapel," *The Magazine of Art* 26 (London: Cassell and Company, Limited, 1902), 380.

perhaps his adult daughter and young granddaughter, approach him with a white feather, which the woman proceeds to tickle under the senescent seafarer's nose. While the little girl appears hesitant about her mother's prank, the woman grins as she brushes the old man with her feather.

The women's studies scholar Colleen Denney describes Harris's body of work as, "straightforward records of the Newlyn folk and their families," which often featured "women seated against the light before a window, with an emphasis on carefully understood effects of backlight."¹⁶² He utilized the techniques favored by the Newlyn painters, who employed square touches of color, the use of flat brushes, and "the subordination of color to tone-gradation."¹⁶³ The most distinguishing quality of the Newlyn School, however, was its strict obedience to realism in the selection and handling of subjects. The Victorian writer Thomas Gough, who produced a rare nineteenth-century profile of the Newlyn group in 1891, extolled,

The Newlyn School of Painters may be said to be one of the products of the nineteenth century. It is an age of realism, and has produced an intensely realistic school of painting...[They] portray men and women as they are, with extraordinary vividness of conception, with the greatest accuracy of form, with marvelous truth and justness of relation of values and tone, with beautiful harmony of color and wonderful luminosity...Another leading feature is the powerful way in which they grasp their subjects, treating them with great

¹⁶² Colleen Denney, *At the Temple of Art: The Grosvenor Gallery, 1877-1890* (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Press, 2000), 195.

¹⁶³ Howard Fox, "The President's Address." *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall* 16, part 3 (Truro: Oscar Blackford, 1906), 322.

simplicity, but ever seizing the universal and ignoring the accidental. Synthesis is their ruling passion just as analysis was the sole function of the Pre-Raphaelites.¹⁶⁴

Gough's description would lead one to believe that Harris likely painted *Sweet Dreams* after a personal observance made in a real fishing cottage, where he would have encountered this antiqued angler and his family. He endeavored to portray this sweet and amusing moment with richness, precision, and harmony, all while conveying the narrative significance of three generations pictured together in this domestic genre piece.

Unlike Brenneman's picture, *Sweet Dreams* includes the presence of a small child. By watching her mother play a joke on her sleeping grandfather, the little girl is inculcated in the practices of ease and affection towards a much older person. The relatively small gesture of the feather prank signals a larger disruption of the patriarchal family structure of the fisherman's home, showing an informality and fondness between the three generations. The dozing grandfather will likely benefit from this emphasis on ease and equality between the members of his family.¹⁶⁵

Harris's scene challenges some of the widely accepted ideas about nineteenth-century genre and jocularly. Greenhill argues that jokes and games in art were "quarantined in the world of the child. The joking, laughing, and levity unacceptable in

¹⁶⁴ Thomas Gough, "Newlyn and the Newlyn School of Painting," *The Manchester Quarterly: A Journal of Literature and Art* 10 (Manchester: Manchester Literary Club, 1891), 233-234. Gough's description of the Newlyn School is one of the finest available, and his comparisons between the Cornish painters and the Pre-Raphaelites is thoughtful and persuasive. The article does a great deal to effectively place the Newlyn School in the context of late nineteenth-century British painting and presents some necessary context to explain the development of their style.

¹⁶⁵ Da Costa Nunes, "The Naughty Child in Nineteenth-Century American Art," 229.

adult spheres were expected among children.”¹⁶⁶ However, contrary to Greenhill, *Sweet Dreams* is not about a child bending her elders to her will or threatening the dignity of age. Instead, Harris represents a mother instructing her child in play as an expression of affection. The artist does not portray contempt of a grandparent, but instead commemorates the independent rules and regulations that exist in the relationships between youth and age.

Such expressions of harmless jokes being played upon sleeping grandfathers also appeared in print, and these scenarios were featured in magazine illustrations, greeting cards, and trade cards. As the major outlet for humorous British illustration, *Punch* magazine also featured examples of children playing innocent pranks on sleeping grandparents.

In the February 28, 1880 issue of *Punch*, Charles Samuel Keene published just such a cartoon titled *A Predestinate R.A.*, which shows a little boy and girl in an upper-middle class parlor as their mother catches them in the middle of making trouble (fig. 4.19). The little boy stands on top of a stack of books with a paintbrush, poised above the head of his grandfather, who has fallen asleep in his armchair. The boy had been impishly painting a series of circles and lines on top of the man’s bald head. His sister rushes towards their mother, who says, “Now, I’m sure you children are in mischief, you are so quiet!” The little girl responds, “Hush, Ma! Tommy’s been painting a spider’s web while he’s asleep, to keep the flies off!”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Greenhill, *Playing it Straight*, 53.

¹⁶⁷ Charles Samuel Keene, *A Predestinate R.A.*, in *Punch, or the London Charivari* (February 28, 1880), 94. Also see George Somes Layard, *The Life and Letters of Charles Samuel Keene* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1892), where this sketch is listed on page 448 in Appendix B., “List of Translations by Charles Keene of First Thoughts and Original Sketches by Joseph Crawhall, with Dates of their Appearance in the Pages of *Punch*.”

As one of *Punch* magazine's top comic illustrators, Keene established a reputation for wittily portraying the humor of daily life.¹⁶⁸ He was attuned to Victorian attitudes of respectability and sought out subjects that challenged the pursuit of refinement that he saw all around him.¹⁶⁹ An image like *A Predestinate R.A.* makes clear that the inflexible tradition of children's deference was outdated, and it had now become prime fodder for small domestic comedies.¹⁷⁰ Keene's cartoon profits from the rejection of old-fashioned hierarchical authority, while also conveying the sweetness and affection between the three generations he portrays.

Like the gags depicted by Brenneman and Harris, Keene's neophytic academician does not inflict harm or pain upon his sleeping grandfather. Instead, the juvenile infraction stems from a profound fondness. The little boy with his brush claims he wants to "keep the flies off" his grandfather, playfully caring for the man much like the young maid who politely and delicately dusts the dozing man in Brenneman's picture as if he were a priceless artifact. In these examples, the visualization of these harmless communal jokes obliterates generational differences.¹⁷¹ Such droll expressions of cross-generational bonds stress affection and inclusion, demonstrating youth's care for age throughout everyday experiences.¹⁷²

While the patterns of grandparenting inevitably varied between nineteenth-century British and American households, Anglo-American genre shared positive qualities in the portrayal of cross-generational play and humor. Images of the kinship

¹⁶⁸ s.v. "Charles Samuel Keene," in Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor, eds. *Dictionary of Nineteenth-century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland* (Ghent: Academia Press, 2009), 331.

¹⁶⁹ Roy T. Matthews, review of *The Works of Charles Samuel Keene* by Simon Houfe. *Victorian Studies* 40, no. 3 (Spring, 1997), 564-565.

¹⁷⁰ Da Costa Nunes, "The Naughty Child in Nineteenth-Century American Art," 231.

¹⁷¹ Greenhill, *Playing it Straight*, 52.

¹⁷² Greenhill, *Playing it Straight*, 3.

between youth and age celebrate the unique qualities of the alliance between society's less powerful age groups. Together, each emboldens the other. The child playing with his or her grandparent is instilled with emotional intimacy in a relationship free from the rules and regulations of good behavior dictated by fathers and mothers in the Victorian household. A grandparent, in turn, better maintains his or her role as a significant member of the family who contributes positively to the construction of the household's domestic bliss.

Reflecting upon his life as a grandfather, Osgood rejoices, "I declare that I never felt younger in my life, never enjoyed nature, art, society so much, and that this chubby little fellow whom I found in my daughter's arms on my return from abroad, and who has so saucily pulled my beard and laughed in my face instead of holding out to me a ticket of leave from life as a superannuated dotard."¹⁷³ The playful rapport between youth and age is emblematic of a symbiotic relationship, with both parties allied by the designations of "first" and "second" childhood.

In light of this survey of related pictures, *Home from School*, Winner's jubilant celebration of a young boy's mischievous handstand behind his grandmother's chair, appears clearer in its portrayal of the kinship between youth and age. The picture stands as an ideal example of the tropes of play, permissiveness, and the mutual regard between youth and age. Winner's scene exemplifies the theme of cross-generational playfulness in British and American painting, upsetting fixed twenty-first century ideas about the propriety and formality of senescence in Victorian genre.

¹⁷³ Osgood, "A Word for Grandfathers," 902.

Conclusion

*How does the look of age come? ...Does it come of itself, unobserved, unrecorded, unmeasured? Or do you woo it and set baits and traps for it, and watch it like the dawning brownness of a meerschaum pipe, and nail it down when it appears, just where it peeps out, and light a votive taper beneath it and give thanks to it daily? Or do you forbid it and fight it and resist it, and yet feel it settling and deepening about you, as irresistible as fate?*¹ – Henry James

A prolonged engagement with images of aging reveals the myriad ways in which art history has neglected to witness, document, and study the effects of growing older. Despite its prevalence throughout the material of the discipline, little has been done to regard senescence or to “nail it down when it appears.”

The argument at the center of this study is that Anglo-American art history can benefit from age studies and its related phenomena. Age articulates difference, and abandoning mono-generational research perspectives might sharpen our awareness of the role this difference plays in visual culture.² Certainly, there are specific challenges that one must responsibly address when prying omissions and oversights within a discipline, and the thematic image groupings which comprise the chapters of this study were selected to present a survey of the signifiers of old age.

¹ Henry James, “A Passionate Pilgrim” in *Complete Stories, 1864-1874*. [first published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1871] (New York: Library Classics of the United States, 1999), 582. First found in David Lowenthal’s *The Past is a Foreign Country – Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 206.

² Rüdiger Kunow, “Chronologically Gifted? ‘Old Age’ in American Culture.” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 56, no. 1, Age Studies (2011), 40.

In the spring of 2014, the interdisciplinary journal *Age, Culture, Humanities* published its inaugural issue.³ Affiliated with the North American Network in Aging Studies (NANAS) and the European Network in Aging Studies (ENAS), *Age, Culture, Humanities* promotes cross-disciplinary investigations of these lines of inquiry. Featuring scholarly engagement with aging and its effects across the humanities, the journal publishes manifestos urging academic engagement with aging and the cultural articulations of growing older. The successful launch of *Age, Culture, Humanities* attests to the proliferation of age studies and the increasingly popular view that sensitivity to aging is crucial to twenty-first century humanities scholarship, which generally seeks to centralize the status of subjects from the margins.

Victorian etiquette manuals counseled, “In society all should receive equal attention, the young as well as the old,”⁴ and art historians of this period should regard the material of their studies with a social regard that is similarly cognizant and sensitive. By electing to use the life cycle to appraise and navigate genre painting, historians of British and American painting would repudiate the basic notion that ageism is perhaps the most neglected and socially permitted discriminatory system. An appraisal of nineteenth-century visual culture designed by this supposition is bound to reveal significant and instructive truths.⁵

Cultural representations of senescence in nineteenth-century genre paintings, whether drawn from scenes of the hearth, chaperonage, age-disparate coupling, or cross-

³ Disclosure: the editors of *Age, Culture, Humanities* have been exceptionally generous towards my project. As the inaugural winner of the journal’s annual Graduate Student Essay Contest, my paper, “Exploding the Hearth: Considering Victorian Aging,” will be published in the second issue (forthcoming).

⁴ Richard A. Wells, *A.M. Manners, Culture, and Dress of the Best American Society* (Springfield, MA: King, Richardson & Co., 1890), 284.

⁵ Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Problem Pictures: Women and Men in Victorian Painting* (Hants: Scolar Press, 1995), 1-2.

generational play, provide the visual material from which a general perception of the life course can be drawn. This study, if only an incomplete sampling of potential issues ripe for art historical investigation, suggests the potential for a grander history of old age in the history of art. As Pat Thane advocates, “The greatly enriched histories of old age of recent years have alerted us to the complexity of attitudes to and experiences of older age in all times and over time, and the rich range of sources and methods through which historians can seek to reconstruct them.”⁶ Although Thane is not speaking specifically to the discipline of art history, her thesis can be applied to a study of the fine arts just the same.

The pictures discussed in this dissertation attempt to illustrate the Victorian public’s taste for geriatric domesticity.⁷ The attention that later nineteenth-century painters paid to images of childhood and youth can be similarly seen in romantic and charming pictures of sentimental aging. Although an identification of the parallels between this visual language and the corporeal and social realities of senescence can sometimes seem elusive, the commentary stimulated by genre paintings successfully records an artistic interest in the lives of the elderly.⁸

Even the most respected pioneers of aging research in the humanities have conceded the challenges implicit to age studies and its inherent complexities. David Hackett Fisher, whose *Growing Old in America* presents a foundational text from which one could begin charting any age studies-centered methodology, grants that such work is

⁶ Pat Thane, “Social Histories of Old Age and Aging.” *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1, Special Issue (Autumn, 2003), 106.

⁷ Philip Hook and Mark Poltimore. *Popular 19th Century Painting: A Dictionary of European Genre Painters* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors’ Club Ltd., 1986), 480.

⁸ Gabriel P. Weisberg, *Redefining Genre: French and American Painting 1850-1900* (Washington, D.C.: The Trust for Museum Exhibitions, 1995), 92.

difficult to map neatly, as a framework is needed to “help us to understand something of the intimate relationship between the past and the present.” Fisher continues,

History is not about the past alone. It is about change, with past and present in a mutual perspective. It clarifies the temporal context within which all of us must live, and helps us to understand the conditions of our own existence. That is the most important purpose of all.⁹

Aging is a constant operation of life, and any treatise on the subject will inevitably hold a mirror to its reader, who must examine her own age anxieties. There are issues explicit and implicit to any engagement with chronology and lived experience, and the aged body signifies on its surface the markers of time and its authority.

An art historical concern for the politics of senescent representation opens the field to new opportunities to bridge the biological-cultural divide. The theorization of elderly identities could be useful to art historians in a manner similar to the ways in which cultural critiques of race and gender have previously helped shape the paradigms of the discipline.¹⁰ Both American and British visual culture demonstrate instances of lack and plenty in relation to the complex notions of Victorian aging, and ageism in the historiography of art can be made much clearer by reading this evidence with intention and respect.

The pervasive disregard for aging that suffuses contemporary views of nineteenth-century culture is acutely obvious in discussions of British and American domestic genre

⁹ David Hackett Fisher, *Growing Old in America – Expanded Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), viii.

¹⁰ Kunow, “Chronologically Gifted?” 25.

scenes. It is perhaps the sentimentalization of aging that has effectively underwritten the general lack of serious regard for the subject within the discipline of art history, despite the supposition that the young see themselves in the old. This study trusts that a thoughtful identification of some of the most significant tropes of senescence challenges these prevailing assumptions, prioritizing aging as an impactful art historical concern.

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Vita

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