

Introduction

The variety and richness of Falstaff's language is remarkable. Who else could call the disreputable band of robbers young Prince Hal will join 'Diana's foresters, gentlemen of the shade, minions of the moon', or protest, when this same prince is mocking him for being fat, that at Hal's age he was not 'an eagle's talon in the waist' and could have 'crept into any alderman's thumb ring'? This unlikely claim is followed by one of Falstaff's jokes: 'A plague of sighing and grief!' he says, 'It blows a man up like a bladder', as if the heavier breathing associated with sighing acted like a pump.

Despite unpromising titles, the first two parts of *Henry the Fourth* combine to form one of the great works of world literature and Falstaff's lines are far from being the only ones in these plays which are memorable. There is, for example, a speech of the Lord Chief Justice in *King Henry IV: Part 2* that always impressed me, even before I reached an age to appreciate it fully. When he is not distracted by more important affairs, this character has been pursuing Falstaff for various crimes and misdemeanours and, in the second scene of the second play, will not be fobbed off with 'You that are old consider not the capacities of us that are young.' Exasperated by the outrageous implications of this claim, the Lord Chief Justice explodes into:

Do you set down your name in the scroll of youth, that are written down old with all the characters of age? Have you not a moist eye, a dry hand, a yellow cheek, a white beard, a decreasing leg, an increasing belly? Is not your voice broken, your wind short, your chin double, your wit single, and every

part of you blasted with antiquity? And will you yet call yourself young? Fie, fie, fie, Sir John!

Here is a list of the stigmata of old age, delivered with impressive and enjoyable force. Not all its items register now as they would have done in the late sixteenth century and when today, for instance, men are no longer obliged to dress like male ballet dancers. A ‘decreasing leg’ is not such a problem if few people are going to be in a position to observe it, although T.S. Eliot does have his Prufrock worry that people will notice, not only that he is losing his hair, but ‘how his arms and legs are thin!’

Elsewhere in his plays, Shakespeare adds to the Lord Chief Justice’s list of the disadvantages of ageing and many modern readers could no doubt want to add to it also. A question that puzzles me is why my mind should have been determined to retain this speech when its implications are so disheartening. Why also, that is, although I enjoy all Falstaff’s efforts to demonstrate that he is a fit companion for two men about town like Hal and Poins, as full of health and vigour as they are – ‘They hate us youth!’ he famously shouts, as he leads his attack on the travellers – I also relish those exchanges he has with Doll Tearsheet in act 2 scene 4 of *King Henry IV: Part 2*. This is after Hal and Poins have contrived to overhear the unflattering remarks they rightly believed Falstaff would make about them when he thought they were out of earshot. When are you going to leave off riotous living, Doll asks him, and ‘patch up thine old body for heaven?’ ‘Peace, good Doll!’ he replies, ‘Do not speak like a death’s head. Do not bid me remember mine end.’ When she insists that the kisses she is giving him come from a sincere heart, he can only reply, in what increasingly seems to me one of the most poignant moments in Shakespeare, ‘I am old, I am old.’

Although the lessons one could learn about old age from great literature are often unpalatable, they have a linguistic or dramatic value that makes them easier to digest. While avoiding as far as possible speaking like a death’s head, I try in what follows to negotiate the encounter with various aspects of ageing through a number of literary texts I happen to admire. My choice of texts is largely based on years of teaching these works in a way that is now dropping out of fashion, so that this book is also a requiem for a style of thinking and feeling that is fast disappearing, in the universities, if not in the world at large. When I first began a course in literature at university, my father asked what I was studying and, after I had told him it was ‘English’, wondered, with far more puzzlement than sarcasm, whether that was not something I already knew. In those days, however, there was a belief abroad that to help a number of young

people to read, in a careful manner, what were then widely regarded as the classics of English literature was to perform a public service. At the lowest level, this was because grappling with the subtleties of a great writer's use of the language was believed to make students more adept at detecting and denouncing its misuse in public and commercial life. An offshoot of this conviction had been a book used in schools entitled *Reading and Discrimination*, which offered to help pupils recognise and resist those black arts of language advertisers employ to persuade the public to buy their goods. It had been put together by Denys Thompson at a time when there was a growing unease about the way commercial interests were infiltrating more and more branches of the entertainment industry, sport and public life generally. 'Good luck with that' might have been the appropriate comment on this worthy effort to put a finger in the dyke, had that fine example of modern irony been available at the time.

It was not entirely foolish to believe that university students had to be helped to read, that 'English' was something they did not already know. Not all literary texts, and those from the past especially, are immediately accessible to all native speakers and, if they do not call for some kind of training before they reveal themselves fully, they at least require habituation. Their readers need to have the kind of space and time universities can provide to get used to unfamiliar locutions so that they can reap the benefits of a gratification which is by no means always instant. Gratification it nonetheless is, not only in the pleasures of language but also in the enjoyment or satisfaction that comes from having so many different aspects of human experience explored with the kind of intelligence certainly different from that of a philosopher or sociologist, but, in my view, of at least equal value.

Old age is one of those aspects and, as it becomes a reality for an increasing percentage of the population, it is hardly surprising that there should be an increase in those wanting to write about it. Judging by the library shelves, a majority of the more academic studies of old age do not emanate from literature departments. A key text has been a work of over 500 pages by Pat Thane called *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences and Present Issues*. Despite its title, this book begins with Greece and Rome but then moves swiftly on to the Middle Ages and surveys expertly, and in great detail, the treatment of the old in England from that point on, to the accompaniment of a considerable number of statistical tables. At its start, Thane refers to anxieties being expressed at her time of writing about the rising number of old people as a proportion of the population as a whole. This is now more than 20 years ago and,

while that proportion continues to grow, so do the anxieties. In 2019, Camilla Cavendish, a former advisor to David Cameron when he was British Prime Minister, published a book called *Extra Time: Ten Lessons for an Ageing World*, which begins with a series of graphs demonstrating that ‘by 2020, for the first time in history, there will be more people on the planet over 65 than under 5. More grandparents than grandchildren.’ With younger people in this country having to fund with their taxes pensions of a kind they themselves are unlikely to enjoy, Cavendish is interested in what can be done in the political sphere to protect a social contract which, she writes, ‘is being stretched to breaking point by the changing ratio of young to old’.

One obvious danger of the situation Cavendish describes is indeed the rise of an enmity between the generations that is perhaps always lurking, and which Thane illustrates by reference to English peasant farmers from the Middle Ages. When they became too old and weak to work their land, some of them transferred it to their children on the understanding that they would be provided with a stipulated amount of income, food or accommodation. Yet when harvests were poor, the children could bitterly resent having to fulfil these obligations and, in extreme cases, find ways of doing away with those extra mouths to feed. There is a sociological reality here that is in the background to *King Lear* and now seems to us both alien and repellent. In an interview she recorded with the distinguished gerontologist and writer Raymond Tallis for her book *About Time: Growing Old Disgracefully*, Irma Kurtz pointed out that official screening for breast cancer tends to stop at 70, even though it is after this age that its incidence is greatest. This is presumably because of a cost-benefit analysis which indicates that limited resources are better spent on those with a decent life expectancy; and yet what it amounts to, in Kurtz’s view, is ‘a subliminal euthanasia at work among us’ and therefore a translation into modern, institutional terms of those feelings that in the past occasionally led hard-pressed peasants to do away with their old folk.¹

Thane does occasionally quote literary sources in her descriptive survey, but she is not very interested in them as ways of highlighting and then pondering the individual ramifications of old age. This is also broadly true of her successors, either in social history or the so-called

1. She was, of course, writing before the recent pandemic and the measures taken which, it could be argued (and occasionally is), involved sacrificing the interests of the young so that the old could enjoy a few more years of life.

harder sciences. The scholars from the academic 'English' community who have tackled this subject have usually confined themselves to what was said about old age by authors within a certain period. This was true, for example, of Nina Taunton in her *Fictions of Old Age in Early Modern Literature and Culture* and Karen Chase in *The Victorians and Old Age*, while Devoney Looser adopted a limit or boundary additional to the temporal one in her *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain, 1750-1850*. Limits were clear enough in the title of Jacob Jewusiak's *Ageing, Duration, and the English Novel: Growing Old from Dickens to Woolf* and Christopher Martin's *Constituting Old Age in Early Modern Literature from Queen Elizabeth to King Lear*, while Heike Hartung's *Ageing, Gender and Illness in Anglophone Literature: Narrating Age in the Bildungsroman* begins its story in the late eighteenth century. Needless to say, I have found useful suggestions or challenges in all these books, and several more like them, but my own approach is thematic in that I have taken various features of old age and tried to discuss them in relation to the work of a number of writers from many different periods whose writings I consider 'an imaginative resource for understanding variations in the meaning of the experience of ageing in society'. This is how Mike Hepworth neatly put it in his *Stories of Ageing*, although he is a social scientist whose 'stories' are to be found only in the novels and popular culture of the second half of the twentieth century, and who studies these 'within a "symbolic interactionist" framework', symbolic interactionism being 'one of the branches of sociology that places a high value on the role of the imagination in the development of the concept of the self'.

This book begins with thoughts on retirement, especially as it affects men and their families (that women who have in the past spent their lives as housewives seldom have the opportunity to retire is an injustice Thane curtly registers). It goes on to consider the physical decay often associated with old age, no matter how valiantly or vainly it may be resisted; and then its relation to questions of sex and self-consciousness. At what point does it become appropriate to give up any pretension to sexual allure or sexual prowess? The difference having a family makes is next on my agenda along with the pressing need many people feel to leave behind some record of their having existed, apart from (or instead of) their children. How reasonable is it for people to be concerned about their 'legacy' when either its material – in the case of a monument of some kind, for example – or merely intellectual survival will be subject to conditions over which they will have no control? There are many respects in which growing old can mean a loss of not only status but also power, while one way of reasserting this, both before as well as after

death, is through a will. That wills are remarkably frequent as plot devices in many literary works prompts me to consider their effectiveness as a means of allowing the old to maintain their grasp on the future.

The retrospection that is such a prominent part of old age can often take the form of nostalgia. Although some recent work in social psychology has sought to demonstrate how much positive value it can have, nostalgia has usually been regarded with disapproval in literary circles, even though it is ubiquitous in both books and life. Distinct from it is that operation of taking stock of one's past which, for sanguine temperaments, can become a matter for geriatric self-satisfaction but, in other cases, for distress and guilt. How best to acknowledge and expiate this guilt is a problem with which many writers have been concerned, especially in their autobiographies, and which can become particularly acute as they are increasingly obliged to look forward as well as back. It is then that they, and the rest of us, are more likely to be involved with the medical profession and to have to come to terms with the fact that the common talk of 'surviving old age', which Edward Enfield relies on for the title of a collection of short pieces from the *Oldie* magazine (*Old Age and How to Survive It*), can have no logical justification. In one gloomy aspect of the Christian tradition, the whole of life is a preparation for death but for most people that process kicks in rather late, if at all, while how best to handle it is not usually evident or clear. In my penultimate chapter, I consider the circumstances or mythology surrounding a few well-known last moments and attempt myself to have a final say (although only on some of the topics I have been discussing!). There is then a postscript in which I investigate briefly the traditional seven, four or is it three 'ages of man' – as well as of women, of course – and ask a few questions about the habit of dividing a life up in this way.

Relying on literary texts as an aid to thoughts about ageing would seem to be an obvious move but I am not aware of many others who have made it. Someone who might have been expected to adopt this approach, but didn't, is one of the few commentators with an international reputation to have addressed the subject at any length. Published in 1970, Simone de Beauvoir's *Old Age* is described by Thane as 'relentlessly gloomy' and 'tendentious'. What prompts this last word is perhaps its author's repeated assertion that, in a capitalist country like France, the old are treated scandalously although, in fact, her book is for the most part very much like Thane's in not being a polemic at all but rather a long and impressively scholarly review of how the old have been treated throughout history. On the rare occasions it does become analytic rather than descriptive, de Beauvoir tends to turn neither to literature, nor to those remarkable

literary gifts which make her own account of how her mother died, with its ironic reference in its title to an easy death (*Une Mort très douce*), so moving, but to her background in philosophy. She considers at one point, for example, how important the idea of reciprocity is in society, that kind of understanding which one might see exemplified in the care the young are often prepared to give to the old as a return for what they received when they were not in a position to look after themselves, and the survival of which Camilla Cavendish is so worried about. Reciprocity, de Beauvoir writes, recalling the work of her life-long companion Jean-Paul Sartre:

implies (1) that the other should be the means of a transcendent end; (2) that I should acknowledge him as a praxis at the same time that I integrate him as an object in my project as a whole; (3) that I recognize his motion towards his ends in the movement by means of which I project myself towards mine; (4) that I see myself as an object and instrument of those ends through the very act which constitutes him as an objective instrument for my ends.

Anyone who has struggled with Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, or his *Being and Nothingness*, will know that this is not nonsense; and I am also aware that, as BBC commentators are obliged to say, other philosophers are available. Yet, whether in French or any other language, there are several of the latter who give an equally strong sense as de Beauvoir in the passage above that there is sometimes a hostile antithesis between philosophical and literary ways of talking about the human condition.

That philosophers do not have a lot to say of value about old age and ageing, however they choose to express it, would be an absurd position to take and I refer briefly to at least two of them later; but my own major focus is on the contribution made by writers, in both the records they or others have left of their own lives and in what they have otherwise written. This is in contrast to Helen Small who, although a professor of English, admitted in her introduction to *The Long Life* (2007) that her book was 'an attempt to show what might be required if we are to become more seriously philosophical about old age', and that her approach gave 'a structural priority to philosophy'. While not wanting to do that, I am aware that my use of literary texts in this enquiry may look to some both arbitrary and amateurish. That another book could have been written along the same lines as this one but using different examples is so irrefutable that it strikes me more as a fact of life than a potential criticism, as does what would now be known as the Euro-centrism of

those examples. (The books I happen to know have little to say on what it feels like to be old in Africa, Asia and other non-European parts of the world.) On the second issue of amateurism, I realise that I could be accused of sometimes citing certain texts without their appropriate historical and cultural context. The people who used to believe a degree in English was largely a matter of giving students the opportunity to read a great many books thought to be worthwhile were perfectly aware that there would be occasions when they would need the kind of information or knowledge that universities are traditionally in the business of supplying. This could well be about how both the historical and linguistic contexts in which works were written have changed over time; but these teachers were less worried about my knowing too little on that score than of the danger of substituting knowledge *about* a text for a reasonably intimate familiarity with it. They liked to recall the reply Matthew Arnold gave in *On Translating Homer* after he had been accused of knowing too little about the subject to be an adequate critic of it. 'Perverse as it seems to say so', Arnold wrote, 'I sometimes find myself wishing, when dealing with these matters of poetical criticism, that my ignorance were even greater than it is.' This was because 'poetical criticism' required a usually fine balance, one that 'erudition' could easily destroy. He went on to recall, with that irony for which he was notorious and which once led Robert Bridges to call him 'Mr Kid-glove Cocksure', how the Duke of Wellington had said of a certain peer that 'it was a great pity his education had been so far too much for his abilities', and claim that he himself was always apprehensive, in dealing with poetry, that even the little he knew might put him in the same position.

In her study of old age and the Victorians, Karen Chase claims that Betty Higden, an old woman who plays a minor role in Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*, has been 'long anathematized by contemporary moderns who find her portrait sentimental and her obsession with the workhouse melodramatic'; however, Chase insists, she 'is none of these things when placed, or replaced, in her historical/institutional moment'. What then follows are numerous and quite lengthy details about the operation of the poor law in nineteenth-century England. In all literary commentary there is an uneasy compromise to be struck between how certain texts seem to us today and the impression they are likely to have made on their original readers. Interesting though they are, what Chase's details illustrate is the tendency 'English' has had, ever since it was established as a university subject, and the qualification for teaching it became a research degree, to slide towards cultural studies. Although there will

always be cases where historical or linguistic context is so important it cannot be ignored, I have chosen an organisation in this book that allows me to concentrate chiefly, if not exclusively, on what certain, mostly well-known texts can mean for us now; so that, for example, I think of *Martin Chuzzlewit's* Sarah Gamp, who is a character Chase links with Betty Higden and considers in relation to the information she herself provides about domiciliary nursing in the nineteenth century, not principally for what she tells us about her times but as one of Dickens' great comic creations. Not so much, that is, as an item in the debate that was going on in Dickens' time, and which is still going on, about the standard of care available to the sick and old, but, above all, as the woman who, reporting on her account of her family circumstances for her quite possibly mythical friend Mrs Harris, refers to her dead children as having had 'damp doorstops settled on their lungs', and to one of her ex-husbands as having been disabled so that now 'there's a wooden leg gone likewise home to its account, which in its constancy of walkin' into wine vaults, and never comin' out again 'til fetched by force, was quite as weak as flesh, if not weaker'. Cultural historians reasonably question why major works of art should be more significant and useful as evidence, more representative, than the minor ones, and it is true that period studies in English tend to stray into relatively unfamiliar areas (Devoney Looser's women writers, for example, include Fanny Burney and Jane Austen but also Catherine Macaulay, Hester Piozzi, Letitia Barbauld and Jane Porter). Since I am not limiting myself to any particular period in what follows, the writers I consider are, on the whole, those which most people in the West would think worth listening to whatever the topic, even if they do not all exhibit the same astonishing linguistic virtuosity as Dickens in his portrait of Mrs Gamp.

What Dickens is able to do with the English language could often be said to gladden the heart and make you thankful to be alive. I put it in this somewhat melodramatic fashion because I am aware that another charge that might be brought against this book is that it is hardly designed to make its older readers feel more cheerful. Helen Small shows herself aware of this problem when she suggests in her book *The Long Life* that, historically speaking, accounts of old age have tended to be more negative than positive and that they have thus 'offended most recent writers about ageing, especially when they start to look like biological essentialism'. This last term is usually associated with discussions of gender but its appearance here is presumably in implicit contrast with the idea that 'old age' is socially constructed. That in many ways it certainly is gives us reason for optimism in that the social and political circumstances

which give rise to a society's concept of what it means to be old are not set in stone and can be altered; yet it is surely also the case that there are a number of biological processes that are ineluctable and bound to give a somewhat sombre colouring to any attempt to discuss growing old. The hope is that, although the paraphraseable content of what my chosen writers have had to say on the topic is often depressing, it can be balanced, to some extent at least, by the pleasure generated from the ways they say it.

I find a very minor illustration of this possibility in those words from Shakespeare I have chosen for my title. As anyone who has ever put pen to paper knows, titles are difficult and I have looked with envy at those adopted for a number of publications within this general field. D.J. Enright was a minor poet from the fairly recent past whom I happened to have known and admired greatly, not only for his literary abilities but also his integrity (the life choices he made meant that his last years were spent in comparative poverty). When he was already ill, he wrote a prose memoir that appeared just after his death and to which he gave the splendid title *Injury Time*. The final word here also features in the title of a work by Maurice Charney that deals exclusively with old age as it appears in Shakespeare's plays and is called *Wrinkled Deep in Time*. Those words are, of course, Cleopatra's and remarkably striking. Almost equally so are those of Lear when he is describing how he intends to transfer the responsibilities of kingship to 'younger strengths' while 'we / Unburdened crawl toward death'.

Crawling towards death is a memorable expression, in part because it evokes the common idea of old age as a second childhood equivalent in so many unfortunate ways to the first but with the major difference that no one ever grows up and out of it. Yet, when I was seriously and no doubt foolishly considering it as a title, I remembered the difficulty I had in finding something suitable for a book I wrote a long time ago on Wordsworth's great autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*. My focus had then been on those traumatic episodes in Wordsworth's childhood that he called 'spots of time', one of which took place when he was six and riding with a servant in the Lake District. Finding himself at one point alone, he led his horse into a hollow and discovered there an old gibbet where the executed body of a murderer had once been hung in chains. The apparatus had mostly 'moulder'd down' but the dead man's name had been carved into the turf nearby and kept fresh by the locals. Rapidly climbing back up from the hollow, Wordsworth vividly remembers having seen, 'A naked pool that lay beneath the hills, / The Beacon on the summit, and, more near, / A Girl, who bore a Pitcher on her head /

And seem'd with difficult steps to force her way / Against the blowing wind.' This was, as he says, an ordinary sight but he felt it would take more resources than he had available, or than anyone else possessed, to describe 'the visionary dreariness' with which it was invested. 'Well, there you are', said a witty friend with whom I was discussing this episode, 'call your book *The Visionary Dreariness* and watch how quickly it disappears off the shelves'. Crawling towards death might not be quite as off-putting as visionary dreariness but I can see that it might well have given the wrong impression, however much one insists on 'unburdened', or suggests that these are the words of a man given to self-dramatisation.² That Othello is given to self-dramatisation was what was often said in my youth and I was conscious even then of how difficult it might be to distinguish the actor playing a role from the role-playing of his character. Still, the difference is clear enough in someone like Falstaff who loves to take on various personae: 'Before I knew thee, Hal, I knew nothing; and now am I, if a man should speak truly, little better than one of the wicked.'

Because there is no reason why old age should reduce us to all fours and, as the French cabaret artist Maurice Chevalier is reputed to have said, it is at least better than the alternative, this book now has a title less forbidding than the one I first contemplated, if, for many, only marginally so. Throughout it, I have tried to maintain a focus on what would generally be considered old although in periods when life expectancy was so much less than it is now that word can often have a different meaning, and indeed it is one which alters its sense considerably according to various cultural, political and even psychological contexts. Lord Byron, for example, first became a celebrity through the invention of a persona (Childe Harold) who, while still in his early twenties, was old before his time, someone who believed that he had already anticipated all that future experience could offer and had nothing to look forward to. As he turned 30, and detected his first grey hairs, Byron himself was convinced that, since his lifespan would be short (he did, in fact, die at 36), he was already in his last phase. There are figures who knew that they had a terminal illness and, with rather more justification than Byron, had this same feeling even though they were not old in the usual sense. I have included consideration of one or two of these, from either fiction or real life, because the problems they had to face are very similar to those of people who have reached three score and ten, or some similarly advanced

2. Since writing these words my attention has been directed to Markus Poetzsch, *The Visionary Dreariness: Readings in Romanticism's Quotidian Sublime* (London: Routledge, 2006). I hope it did well.

stage, and find themselves contemplating their end. Mainly, however, this is about what it used to be considered polite to call the elderly, a rather better word perhaps than those that have been concocted around 'senior'. In former times, old age could be something of a distinction because there was relatively so little of it. Anyone who wanders into the centre of a small English town during an ordinary working day, or has occasion to visit a doctor's waiting room in the afternoon, might well feel that an invading alien force has now taken over, not always so steady on its feet, nimble or sharp-eyed, but compensating for these disadvantages by sheer force of numbers, and sometimes stubbornly reclaiming the pavement from terrorising youth on bicycles with its mobility scooters. Yet there were enough of these people around in the past for what writers said about them, or what the older ones among them said about themselves, to have some relevance still.

SAMPLE