

*Discourses of Ageing in Fiction and Feminism:
The Invisible Woman*
by Jeannette King

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
(ISBN: 978-0-230-29856-9). 221 pp.

Abigail Boucher (University of Glasgow)

Jeanette King's *Discourses on Ageing in Fiction and Feminism: The Invisible Woman* breaks ground on what is an embarrassingly overlooked realm of discrimination in Western culture and academia: age. King's examination of age specifically revolves around the construction of post-menopausal women, described as 'the invisible generation' (p.xi), and 'invisible' it certainly is; in King's very thorough examination of texts on ageing, she cites only twenty-eight non-medical academic texts written in the last ten years. Of those, only nine were written in the last five. As a scholarly discourse, the topic of ageing appears to be almost entirely absent from the humanities and social sciences, and King sets out to rectify this by integrating it with feminist studies. Though age is not strictly a component of feminist theory, King aptly highlights the double standards of society's views of the 'over 50' man versus its views of the 'over 50' woman. Since a woman's value has historically been determined by her ability to produce children, her beauty, sexuality and worth are all in direct correlation to her fertility, and therefore to her youth. The loss of youth in Western culture amounts to the loss of identity.

King begins her ambitious overview of Western perceptions of menopause in the mid-nineteenth century, dividing her book into three distinct periods of time which run parallel to first-, second- and third-wave feminism. This structure

is designed to highlight the apparent discontinuity between discourses of ageing in fiction by women and the responses of the various phases of the women's movement to female ageing. It is almost impossible to find any

heroines of Victorian literature who are older than 40, in spite of the prominent part played by older women in first-wave feminism. (p.xvii)

Each chapter recapitulates the contemporary medical rhetoric regarding menopause that encouraged, and even was derived solely from, social perceptions of aged women at that time. King's intention is to show that medical discourse, despite its outward stance as the unbiased reporting of empirical data, cannot help but fall victim to and even reify the language of the patriarchal system. While Western medicine has evolved away from expressing overtly moralistic opinions, modern medicine is not exempt from the same linguistic flaws: the dominant menopausal metaphors of 'breakdown' and 'failure of production' creep into medical nomenclature even today, implying *with authority* that the older body is a pathological body, a failed body and a non-body.

Each of King's chapters also contains a concise but thorough summary of feminist theory and action during each period, which enables the text to serve as an overview for beginners of both feminist theory and ageing discourses. In addition, King includes in each chapter a section dedicated to analyzing several novels which engage with criticism of ageing written during each period. These analyses serve as the practical application of medical rhetoric and feminist theory, to show through the representative language of fiction how the views on menopause and gender were truly synthesized at the time of each novel's composition.

While the structure of the book, which aligns Western views on ageing with the history of the feminist movement, makes sense chronologically, it also limits King's historical viewpoint. By cutting short the history of old age and menopause mentioned in medical treaties and in fiction, as well as the history of feminism outside of a unified movement, King implies a false start date for both. All have roots long outside the mid-nineteenth century, going back to ancient times; to ignore these roots gives the work a feeling of incompleteness and creates the incorrect impression that views on ageing and feminism had not arisen and evolved until the 1850s, when King begins her analysis. In all fairness, King never claims to give a comprehensive history of menopause, and to drastically extend the timeframe would mean sacrificing much of her analytical depth. However, a short introductory

chapter summarizing some broad historical trends surrounding menopause would have been welcome, especially as such information can be found easily in most history texts on women's medicine.

King manages to avoid the trap that many theorists fall into, and for which Simone de Beauvoir, one of the earliest age theorists, was heavily criticized: to let one's own feelings 'interfere with the objectivity of her analysis' (p.70). King's personal feelings and experiences on ageing and feminism are almost nonexistent in her text, and she consciously addresses her desire (and other critics' failures) to keep the material more objective and less biographical. She even remains neutral on the critical readings of many debated novels with post-menopausal characters (Gaskell's *Cranford* being her prime example), and detachedly reports only the differences between these readings and their cultural impact. The result is a well-rounded, wide-ranging and rich view of menopausal and feminist history from 1850 to the present; King is able to show that the medical community and the feminist community are by no means the one-dimensional, homogenous groups that they are often portrayed, but are rather at all times evolving, fracturing, debating and redefining — and that it is time for age to be added into the discussion.

Stylistically, King's writing is skillful, while still remaining accessible to those unfamiliar with feminist and ageing theories, or even those unfamiliar with academic texts on the whole. And while she manages to stay impartial to much of what she examines, King does depart from her detached analysis when it comes to hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Her anti-HRT stance is so strong that it is not until three-fourths of the way through the text that she even acknowledges the existence of a pro-HRT feminist stance.

King ends on a buoyant note, which is representative of her whole perspective on ageing: she looks to the future. The book achieves its purpose by problematizing the issue of age and bringing forth more questions than it answers. That she leaves problems for future generations to decipher is part of King's joy, for it demonstrates that the invisible has finally been made visible, and that there *are* questions present where none were thought to be.

