

## Chapter 4

# The rising generation and the fogram: Locating adulthood in eighteenth- century England

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Adulthood is surprisingly hard to locate in histories of eighteenth-century England. The historiography might be dominated by those between childhood and old age, but this reflects an unconscious bias in which the middle stage of life is an implicit norm, the default object of study. This obscures the diverse and frequently contested nature of adult status, and not only in the eighteenth century, as other chapters in this collection demonstrate. But more than this, the predominance of inadvertently adult-centric history has relegated the young and old to the sidelines, left to be investigated as discrete categories. This is to underestimate the relational, or co-defined, nature of life stages. As a consequence, the role intergenerational relations play in changing attitudes towards phases of the life cycle tends to be overlooked.<sup>1</sup> Again, such oversights are not confined to the eighteenth century. This investigation therefore has broad-ranging relevance regardless of place and time, not simply in locating adulthood within the life cycle but also in demonstrating the importance of age relations (both inter- and intragenerational) as a lived experience and an analytical category.

The eighteenth century has long been associated with the ‘invention of childhood’ or the ‘birth of the modern child’.<sup>2</sup> The later century has also been linked to an increasingly negative view of old age.<sup>3</sup> It will be argued here that the middle phase of life was also being reconceptualised as part of an intergenerational process of change. More specifically, the generation that came of age in the early decades of the century adopted explicitly

youthful fashions that reflected a conscious rejection of the seventeenth-century values of their elders, but their adulation of youth took on new connotations as this cohort aged and had to contend with their own children and grandchildren entering the adult world.<sup>4</sup> Investigating this process of transition exposes some of the ways in which adulthood was conceived in relation to other stages of the life cycle and, importantly, how the relationships between age cohorts acted as a driver of change.

Eighteenth-century adulthood was not, of course, a homogenous phase of the life cycle. Yet one of the few places that this is brought into sharp focus is in histories of gender, where adults pass through stages from bachelor to householder/husband and father, or from virgin/spinster to wife/mother to menopause. Although this presents a very binary and fecund perspective on gender, it demonstrates distinct phases in the middle stage of life.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, even in the history of the family, there is limited recognition that intergenerational relationships might be central to framing perceptions of the life cycle, as Lynn Botelho points out in relation to old age.<sup>6</sup> There is also a need to acknowledge the possibility of conscious generational distinctions in people's experiences of life stages and, crucially, to remember that individuals progressed through the life cycle, taking earlier experiences with them as they aged. As I have argued elsewhere, age is a particularly powerful category of historical analysis precisely because it obliges us to recognise that people lived *through* and not *in* the past.<sup>7</sup>

Age is not, however, a simple question of counting birthdays. Botelho refers to three types of age: chronological, functional and cultural.<sup>8</sup> It is the changing interplay between these aspects of age and ageing that lies at the heart of this exploration of eighteenth-century adulthood. After establishing the ways 'adult' was defined in relation to other life stages, attention will shift to the cultural discourse surrounding age relations, and in particular the social censure faced by those who failed to age gracefully. Placing this often cruel commentary in an intergenerational context exposes the complex ways in which the boundaries of adulthood were being reshaped as age-appropriate behaviours were contested. Inevitably, the timing of an individual's transition from one life stage to the next was influenced by factors such as gender, class, occupation and specific life circumstances. But the focus here is the cultural expectations surrounding the life cycle that such experiences were measured against.

## Language and the life cycle

The language used in relation to the life cycle was (and still is) imprecise. In the eighteenth century, various markers for the end of childhood

could be offered: when a young person left home and/or started work, when they reached the age of discretion or when they established an independent household and/or married.<sup>9</sup> If we ask instead when adulthood began, the evidence takes on a slightly different hue. Is it possible to see someone as an adult at ten or twelve because they had left the parental home to become a servant or apprentice? Can they be described as a juvenile at thirty (or older) if they remained unmarried? The same ambiguity can be seen when considering what it meant to be old. There might, for instance, be a period of healthy or green old age prior to senescence (physical deterioration due to age) setting in. Moreover, can it be assumed that adult status was lost with the coming of aged dependence for men or the menopause for women?<sup>10</sup>

In looking to answer these questions, it makes sense to begin in a logical order with the transition from juvenile to adult, and the age of legal responsibility is an apposite place to start. However, this exposes a bewildering complexity of legal precedent when it comes to the age at which adult rights and culpabilities were thought to commence. According to *The Infants Lawyer* (1726), fourteen was ‘the Age of Discretion’ when an ‘infant’ could be ‘privileged, punished or chargeable’, but they remained an infant. It was only at eighteen that a will could be made for goods and chattels, and not until twenty-one could this will include land. To add further complication, twenty-one was ‘the full Age in our [common] Law’, whereas this was ‘Twenty five by the Civil Law’.<sup>11</sup> Matthew Hale’s *Historia Placitorum Coronæ* (1736) also described twenty-one and twenty-five as the ‘complete full age’ in matters of contract law (common and civil respectively), even if ‘at seventeen years a man is said to be of full age to be procurator or an executor’, and in marriage contracts ‘the full age of consent in males is fourteen years, and of females twelve’ (the average age at first marriage was in fact mid-twenties).<sup>12</sup> It is interesting that Hale referred to seventeen-year-old males as men but not those of fourteen. It is also noteworthy that, after the passing of Hardwick’s Marriage Act in 1753, to marry under the age twenty-one required the consent of a guardian.<sup>13</sup> Evidently, ‘full age’ in legal terms was contextual and was not synonymous with adulthood. It is, nonetheless, possible to say that those under twenty-one/twenty-five were not considered to be entirely legally independent.

The term adult was rarely used prior to the second quarter of the seventeenth century, as earlier chapters have noted. Moreover, as will become clear, it is only towards the end of the eighteenth century that adult was fully disentangled from the concept of adolescence. Turning to dictionary definitions both adds to our understanding of contemporary usage and helps to pinpoint the timing of this change. In John Kersey’s A

*New English Dictionary* (1702) adult was defined as ‘grown to full age’, which presumably related to the age of legal maturity that might range from twelve to twenty-five.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, this dictionary had no entry for adolescent, which would have offered a useful comparator. By contrast, *Cocker’s English Dictionary* (1704) chose not to include the term adult, while giving a very specific definition of ‘Adolocency’ as ‘from Fifteen years to Twenty five’, making it tempting to assume adulthood came after this.<sup>15</sup> In 1721 Nathan Bailey’s definition of adolescence introduced a gender distinction and extended the timeframe for males, describing it as ‘the Flower of Youth: the State from Fourteen to Twenty-five or Thirty in Men, and from Twelve to Twenty-one in Women’. Bailey also included a definition for adult, which was imprecisely rendered as ‘grown, or come to full ripeness of Age’.<sup>16</sup> This ripeness clearly referred to physical maturity and could be linked to the idea of a fully grown or fully fledged adult, as Maria Cannon suggests in her chapter in this volume. However, it could also be linked to puberty (or the ability to reproduce), which would make Bailey’s definitions of adult and adolescence somewhat indistinguishable.<sup>17</sup>

This ambiguity was perpetuated in the middle decades of the century by Samuel Johnson in his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), which defined adult as ‘A person above the age of infancy, or grown to some degree of strength’ but, crucially, only ‘sometimes full grown’. His entry for adolescence is only slightly clearer: ‘The age succeeding childhood, and succeeded by puberty; more largely, the part of life in which the body has not yet reached its full perfection.’ His entry for pubescent helpfully explained women arrived at puberty when they were ‘menstruent’ and men were ‘pubescent at the years of twice seven’.<sup>18</sup> So, those in their early to mid-teens were described as past the stage of adolescence, although it is not clear if this is also what Johnson meant by ‘grown to some degree of strength’ in his definition of adult. Again, in Daniel Fenning’s *Royal English Dictionary* (1761) adolescence was described as the years between infancy and ‘full growth’, but this was indistinguishable from his definition of adult, which was rendered as either ‘grown up; arrived at the age of discretion’ or ‘one who is arrived at the intermediate age between infancy and manhood’.<sup>19</sup>

In later decades these terms were becoming more distinct. The entries in John Ash’s *New and Complete Dictionary* (1775) still lacked a clear divide, with adult described as ‘grown up, arrived to the age of puberty’ and adolescence ‘the time between childhood and manhood, youth’.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, the definitions in John Bentick’s *Spelling and Explanatory Dictionary* (1786) were rather cursory, but they were much less entangled than earlier offerings; here adolescence was rendered as ‘youth’ and

adult as 'mature, full grown'.<sup>21</sup> Again, in 1790 William Perry's *General Dictionary of the English Language* offered definitions much more akin to those of the twenty-first century, adolescence being 'youth, the time between childhood and manhood' and adult 'a person grown to years of maturity'.<sup>22</sup> Even if it was not entirely clear what was meant by 'years of maturity', or when they might be reached, the difference between adolescence and adult was less vague by this time.

The definitions of 'man' and 'woman' presented an even greater imprecision in relation to adulthood. For most of the century woman was simply defined as a 'female man' or 'the Female of the Human Race'. In his entry for age in 1755, Johnson used woman in reference to a seven-year-old and man in relation to a fourteen-year-old; and demonstrating just how correlational understandings of the life cycle (and gender) could be, Johnson's definitions for man included 'not a woman' and 'not a boy'. Only Ash (1775) linked definitions of both man and woman to a life stage, rendering man as the 'male of the human species' and 'one arrived to a state of maturity' while a woman was 'a female of the human race, a marriageable female'. Even here, while the terms were presented as age dependent, they were not age specific.

Most of these dictionaries included an entry for middle age defined as 'the middle of life'. Only Fenning placed it at an 'equal distance between childhood and old age', and only he added any qualitative detail describing it as 'a moderate age'. According to Kay Heath, it was not until the nineteenth century that midlife came to be seen as 'the beginning of the end', and prior to this middle age was associated with the prime of life rather than an anxiety about ageing that we now associate with the midlife crisis.<sup>23</sup> But Amanda Vickery has argued that 'what is middle-aged by most definitions today was definitively old for the Georgians'. More specifically, she concludes that for women 'there was an alarming hemorrhage of youth' from their late twenties as they hurtled to old age by fifty, and it was only eighteenth-century men who were thought to be in their prime in their fourth and fifth decades.<sup>24</sup> Ella Sbaraini emphasises the continued sexual attractiveness of eighteenth-century women in midlife. Nevertheless, she also sets the boundary of middle age at fifty, after which women were simply old.<sup>25</sup> As will become apparent, paying close attention to how the terminology surrounding middle age was used cautions against assuming cultural old age always began later for men, or that the midlife crisis was predominantly faced by women.

To fully appreciate this last point, it is necessary to first consider the dictionary definitions of old and elderly, and how these related to each other. For Kersey (1702), old was 'aged or ancient', whereas Bailey (1721) added an element of decrepitude, defining it as 'stricken in age, stale, worn'.

In 1775, Johnson's definition lacked any reference to decrepitude, simply being 'past the middle part of life; not young'. Elderly was also described by Johnson as 'No longer young'; although strikingly, this was qualified as 'bordering on old age'. This notion of elderly as a life stage prior to old age was surely related to his definition of elder as 'Persons whose age gives them a claim to credit and reverence'; and Johnson's definitions imply that reaching old age was to lose this claim. As late as 1775, Ash defined elderly as 'past the time of youth, bordering on old age'. Yet, by the close of the century the entries of both Bentick (1786) and Perry (1795) suggest elderly had, in the eyes of the dictionary writer, become more synonymous with being 'advanced in years' without any sense of this being distinct from old age. Again, then, there was some level of change over time, even if these definitions present an inexact sense of the later stages of life.

Looking beyond the dictionaries, elderly was mostly used ambiguously to describe a person of an unspecified age, and it was sometimes used as synonymous with the equally vague term old. It is therefore difficult to draw any clear conclusion from the occasions when a chronological age was apparent; for instance, when a fictional character was called an elderly woman at fifty-two or an elderly gentleman of about sixty.<sup>26</sup> But tellingly, *The Diseases of Women with Child* (1710) repeatedly used elderly in relation to older pregnant women in order to distinguish them from younger mothers-to-be, and by any definition the pre-menopausal could not be said to have reached old age.<sup>27</sup> Clearly, at the beginning of the century the terms old and elderly could be more distinct than might be expected, but this distinction was being blurred in later decades. This was in contrast to adolescent and adult, where there was a level of overlap before dictionary definitions began to emphasise a clearer distinction towards the end of the century.

## Age-appropriate behaviour

The language used during the eighteenth century to describe adulthood makes it clear that life stages were framed in relation to one another, and this was not a static relationship. Particularly telling evidence of this shifting cultural landscape can be found in the prevalent commentary on age-appropriate behaviour. There was criticism of the young, who were accused of assuming the wisdom of age.<sup>28</sup> However, the more audible, and much crueller, contributions to this discourse were centred on those beyond the midpoint of the life cycle, and it is perhaps unsurprising that this social censure often came from younger voices. In 1699, for instance, at the age of thirty-one, Jonathan Swift penned a set of resolutions entitled

‘When I Come to Be Old’, which provide some very revealing prejudices about older men. He resolved

Not to keep young company, unless they really desire it ... Not to scorn present ways, or wits, or fashions, or men, or wars, &c. ... Not to tell the same story over and over to the same people ... Not to be too free of advice, nor trouble any but those who deserve it. ... Not to boast of my former beauty, or strength, or favour with the ladies, &c.

The continuing resonance of these criticisms can be seen in their uncredited inclusion in the periodical *The Berwick Museum* in 1787.<sup>29</sup> However, notably, Swift did not specify when someone might become old, and this ambiguity gave his comments durability even as ideas about the onset and duration of life stages changed.

Others were more chronologically specific in their ridicule, which meant their comments lacked this longevity. Thomas Gordon was in his thirties when he included an essay in *The Humourist* (1724) mocking the habits of the older generation. The claimed intention was to disprove the notion that modern times were ‘miserably inferior to the Ancients in Genius and Invention’. His older contemporaries were not, he asserted, to be beaten in the art of ‘Restoring old Age to Youth’. The wide range of products that rejuvenated diminishing youth, which were advertised in the ‘Fag-End of our News-Papers’, were certainly less magical than Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* but they were surely no less miraculous in outcome. The trade in such goods was said to employ ‘Fifteen Hundred to Two Thousand Souls’ in London alone, and to prove the efficacy of these products it was claimed that there were ‘blooming Toasts’ who were in fact old enough to be grandmothers and ‘old Boys’ of seventy ‘that rake about Town’ as if they were only twenty-three.<sup>30</sup> In this case, Gordon was clearly talking about men who, by contemporary definitions, were old and masquerading as young rakes. By contrast, while a grandmother might also be in her seventies, she could just as easily be several decades younger (given that average age at first marriage was mid-twenties), which would fit with the idea that women reached a cultural old age sooner than men. The terminology also hints at life-cycle expectations for women (daughter-wife-mother-grandmother) that are mostly absent in the description of older men.

The sentiment remained the same half a century later, but it was no longer men in their seventies and grandmothers who were the target of the anonymous contribution to Henry Mackenzie’s periodical paper *The Lounger* (1786). When it came to men, it was complained that ‘We see every day sexagenary beaux, and grey-haired rakes, who mix with the gay and the dissipated of the present time.’<sup>31</sup> It is noteworthy that Mackenzie, who wrote most of the content for his magazine, was in his early forties at this



time, and this might explain the tone of disapproval for both the older and the younger generations. What can be said for certain is that whoever wrote this thought that a man in his sixties was no longer of the present times. This chimes with the laments of Horace Walpole (1717–97), whose correspondence was littered with examples of how he measured his experiences of ageing against cultural expectations. Katarzyna Bronk-Bacon concludes that Walpole did not think himself old until he reached sixty.<sup>32</sup> Yet, he evidently considered himself to be knocking on the door of old age at fifty-eight, when he complained he would be laughed at by young men if he were to claim he was ‘still in the fashionable world ... for old and old-fashioned are synonymous in the vocabulary of mode, alas!’<sup>33</sup>

Mackenzie also disapproved of female ‘rebels against time, who wish to extend the period of their youth beyond its natural duration’, but while he harshly condemned grey-haired rakes, he thought more allowances could be made in the case of ‘the other sex’. This is in stark contrast to the conclusions drawn by Vickery, who argues that it was women who were under the most social pressure to avoid accusations of feigning youth.<sup>34</sup> However, Mackenzie’s indulgence was only extended ‘to those who have no other part to perform’. Meanwhile,

She who is a wife or a mother, has other objects to which her attention may be turned, from which her respectability may be drawn. I cannot therefore easily pardon those whom we see at the public places, the rivals of their daughters, with their airy gait, the sauntering dress, and the playful giggle of fifteen.<sup>35</sup>

So, just as the septuagenarian rake had been transformed into the sexagenarian beau, the grandmothers masquerading as blooming toasts had been replaced by mothers acting like their teenage daughters. The targets of this caustic indignation were therefore much more likely to be women in their forties or fifties than their sixties. This is not to say older spinsters and grandmothers were never lampooned by satirists; they most certainly were with regularity and often obtuse cruelty. Nonetheless, those ridiculed as ‘superannuated coquettes’<sup>36</sup> possibly included younger women as the century progressed. Either way, both Gordon and Mackenzie can be read as presenting women as past their prime sooner than men, although care should be taken in assuming this always meant these women were seen as having reached old age as opposed to being middle-aged.

The growing censure of feigning youth was very often targeted at those in the middle decades of life. The satirical print ‘A speedy and effectual preparation for the next world’ (Figure 4.1), published in 1777, is a good example of this. Here the historian Catherine Macaulay, who was at this time in her mid-forties, is depicted sitting at her dressing table applying



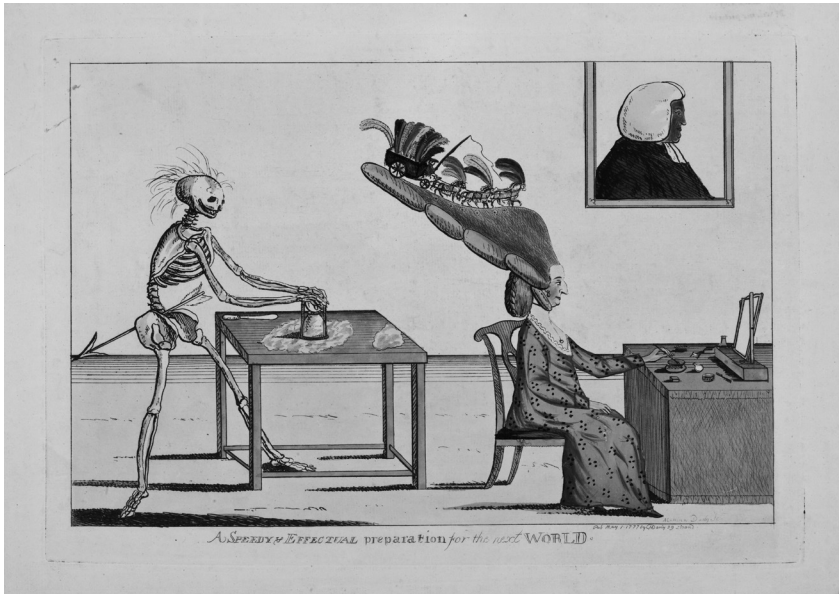


Figure 4.1. 'A speedy and effectual preparation for the next world' (1777). © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

make-up while sporting an exaggeratedly large wig adorned with a horse-drawn hearse. Behind her stands a skeleton with an hourglass and the sand of time has not only run out but is spilling onto the table. Macaulay did apparently wear a notable amount of rouge, and she was evidently not embracing a sober middle age given that a year after this print was published she married a man half her age. The mocking cruelty in this image is only heightened by the knowledge that the credited artist, Mattina Darly, was in her teens.<sup>37</sup>

The disdain for middle age felt by those with youth on their side is the theme of two letters included in Eliza Haywood's *Epistles for the Ladies* (1750), and here there is an unmistakable anxiety about ageing that would seem to refute any suggestion that the midlife crisis was a nineteenth-century invention. Haywood was almost sixty at the time of publication, while her fictional correspondents were both women in their early thirties. The first of these women expressed alarm at being seen to be ageing after a peddler tried to sell her spectacles. She mused on why everyone shared this concern but 'few of us desire to die young'. Rather, she thought, 'we would live forever if we could, and yet be always young; we would have a Gap in Time from fifteen to sixty; and even then not be content perhaps to be thought on as in the Decline'. Clearly, her main concern was the process of gradual ageing in midlife, even if she thought old age would

still be intolerable at sixty. She was fully aware that the physiological signs of ageing did not neatly fit with this chronology. It might be that everyone had 'a natural Aversion for Grey Hairs and Wrinkles' but this could not be because old age was 'the forerunner of death' and 'attended by infirmities', as neither death nor infirmity were exclusive to old people. In fact, she claimed, 'most people would rather chuse *Deformity* with *Youth*, than *Comeliness* with *old Age*'. In response, her friend suggested that 'the true Motive which makes People afraid of growing old' was 'being treated with Contempt by every one who is a few Years younger than ourselves'. She agreed that 'a long Life is a Blessing every one is desirous of attaining', noting 'we all do every Thing in our Power, in order to preserve it'. Here, she thought, 'lies the Absurdity, to despise that in others, which we take so much Pains to be one Day ourselves'.<sup>38</sup> Despite their relative youth, these fictional women were expressing midlife anxieties about their current position as well as their futures. They were of course also ventriloquising Haywood's views, and she was in that stage of life described by Samuel Johnson as elderly; at very nearly sixty she seemingly considered herself on the cusp of old age. Interestingly, despite the claims that women were seen as socially old earlier in life than men, we see in Haywood's construction of these letters the same anxiety as was felt by Horace Walpole when he was about to turn sixty.

Three decades after Haywood voiced her disquiet about ageing, Vicesimus Knox appeared to concur with her reflections in his essay entitled 'On the Fear of Growing Old'. However, Knox was not on the cusp of old age as he penned his essay; he was about to turn thirty and so was almost the same age as Haywood's fictional correspondents. Knox reiterated the sense of anxiety that this relatively youthful stage of life brought, noting that 'After a certain age, every returning birth-day is saluted with silent sorrow, and we conceal the number of our years with as much solicitude as the consciousness of an atrocious crime.' He went on to complain that 'middle age' was when 'all the powers of mind and body are in complete perfection' but it was now 'loathed as if it were the age of decrepitude'. Then, providing a specific chronology, he lamented that 'The boundaries of life, by nature sufficiently circumscribed, are still further contracted by the empty votary of fashion, and from threescore and ten it shrinks to thirty.' What is more, unlike Haywood who in 1750 thought it a truism that everyone desired a long life, Knox claimed 'It has been currently reported, that many fashionable beauties have expressed a devout wish, that they might not survive their thirtieth birth-day.' He conceded that in truth 'they and their many imitators will probably be inclined to live on, even when they arrive at the formidable age of thrice ten years'. Nevertheless, while the idea that you were young in your twenties remained unchanged, the

anxiety of leaving this youth behind appears (at least in the eyes of Knox) more acute than it was a generation earlier. Echoing Mackenzie, and so again at odds with prevailing historiographic assumptions, Knox thought an 'excessive dread of old age' was 'more excusable' in women. It would be wrong to assume women were necessarily afforded more leeway in such matters, as others have demonstrated this was certainly not the case.<sup>39</sup> These examples do, however, serve to modify the idea that women always suffered the greater vilification for feigning youth. According to Knox, it was men who forfeited their dignity by such behaviour. For them it was 'a mark of weakness, want of principle, and want of sense'. Consequently, those men who decorated 'their walking skeletons with every cosmetic art, and haunt[ed] every scene of vice and vanity, with all the wantonness of a stripling of eighteen' simply rendered themselves ridiculous.<sup>40</sup> It is worth noting that the eighteen-year-old stripling presented by Knox was a full five years younger than the twenty-three-year-old rake described by Thomas Gordon in 1724; so, like the giggling fifteen-year-old females cited by Mackenzie in 1786, the example used by Knox suggests perceptions of youthfulness were getting younger.

Knox wanted to believe that getting older was not inevitably wretched. There was, he thought, 'a natural dignity, authority, and beauty, in old age honourably supported', which fits with Helen Yallop's conclusion that the later eighteenth century witnessed a growing sense that ageing was 'something to be managed and controlled'.<sup>41</sup> While some turned to the ever-expanding range of consumer goods aimed at staving off the physical appearance of ageing, Knox emphasised a more rational (or cerebral) approach, advising 'For the enjoyment of the space between thirty to threescore, it will be necessary to have laid a stock of good humour', and this needed to be cultivated at an early age. Here then, despite the title of his essay, 'On the Fear of Growing Old', his main concern was not to improve experiences of old age but of middle age, specifically placed between thirty and sixty. Moreover, he was directing his advice to those who had not yet reached this formidable stage of life.

Knox's essay challenges the assumption that only women dreaded the termination of youth in midlife, while concurring with Heywood's fictional females that thirty was the age at which this transition occurred. It also casts doubt on the idea that old age always came at least a decade earlier for women than their male counterparts. Instead, Knox presents the stage of the life course between thirty and sixty as a time when both men and women felt increasing anxieties about ageing even though they had not yet reached old age. Like Heywood, Knox thought the eulogising of youth lay at the heart of the problem. 'They who have never been taught to consider any thing valuable but youth, beauty, and dissipating

pleasure, will naturally feel themselves reduced to a state of dependency, when they behold all, for which life appears worth possessing, on the eve of departure.<sup>42</sup>

This adoration of youth was a central tenet of eighteenth-century cultural mores. In particular, the cosmopolitan politeness that first gained prominence during the early decades of the century was at its inception a youthful innovation, a conscious rejection of the attitudes and habits of the older (seventeenth-century) generations.<sup>43</sup> As the century progressed, maintaining a youthful appearance became more of a social imperative for those who had used their youth as a symbol of their modern, enlightened credentials. It was as this cohort found themselves having to cope with first middle age and then, God forbid, old age that the censure of those feigning youth increased in volume and gained an ever-harsher tone. This was the context in which Horace Walpole expressed concern about no longer being part of 'the present times'. Like others of his age, Walpole struggled to reconcile his self-image as part of the youthful enlightened generation of the early century with his new-found status as old. As Bronk-Bacon notes, Walpole's copious correspondence 'reveals how much his own definition and perception of late life are built on his private ageist suppositions of how old age is perceived by the generalized construct of young(er) people'.<sup>44</sup> He was, in effect, projecting his own prejudices against the older generations of his youth onto the new rising generation.

## The rising generation

Briefly turning to the other side of the conversation, and looking at the censure directed towards the young, helps to pinpoint this generational process. In a polemic '*complaint against the brutality of the present age*' made in 1726, Daniel Defoe, who was then sixty-seven, described himself as an 'Old Man' of 'small Health ... almost worn out with Age and Sickness'. His ire was targeted at '*the pertness and insolence of our youth to aged persons*', and he railed at the ways old men and women were 'derided, and ill used ... and thought to stand in the way of the present Generation'. He cautioned the 'young Ladies of this Age' against sneering at 'sober Matrons, and elderly Ladies' who were once as young and beautiful. It was not just in terms of fashion and beauty that the young were said to feel superior; the 'present Generation ... ascribe no Merit to the Virtue and Experience of Old Age, but assume to themselves the Preference in all things'.<sup>45</sup> Such grumbling could be said to reflect a perennial intergenerational tension, and it was the very behaviour that Swift targeted in his 1699 resolutions 'when I become old' as he promised 'Not to scorn present

ways'. Yet, while it might be expected that the older generation should disapprove of the habits of the rising youth, the rhetoric at this time marked a particularly pronounced generational schism.

These generational tensions were humorously played out in Bernard Mandeville's *The virgin unmask'd: or, female dialogues betwixt an elderly maiden lady and her niece* in 1709. The fictional niece was nineteen, while the aunt was that ambiguous 'elderly' stage, so at least middle-aged. Mandeville, who was about to turn forty, took neither side in the argument that ensued in his first dialogue when the aunt asked her niece to 'cover her Nakedness' as she could not abide to see her 'Naked Breast heaving up and down'. The fictional niece argued her stays were not cut any lower than was the fashion. Moreover, if something was fashionable, and so prevalent in society, then she claimed it could not be said to be immodest. This young woman did, however, concede that 'when I am as Old as you Aunt, perhaps I will do as you do'.<sup>46</sup> But, as the century progressed, this generation of women were increasingly ridiculed for failing to do just that.

Interestingly, when the fifty-two-year-old Christopher Anstey published *An Election Ball* in 1776 he referred to the same generational divide in fashion that Mandeville had critiqued in 1709. This satire was presented as a series of letters from the fictional Mr Inkle to his wife, keeping her abreast of events in Bath where he and their daughter, Madge, were to attend an election ball. While describing the scene as they readied themselves for the evening's entertainments, Anstey's Mr Inkle declared:

And now I must tell thee, dear Wife, how thy Daughter  
Makes a Progress in all the fine Things you hast taught her;  
Not like thy old Grandmother DOROTHY DISTOFF<sup>47</sup>

Anstey's Mrs Inkle had first caught her husband's eye in 1739, so she was at least late middle-aged.<sup>48</sup> However, in contrast to the elderly aunt in Mandeville's *Dialogues*, she actively encouraged the *risqué* dress of her daughter. And whatever the truth in the lowering of necklines, Mr Inkle went on:

to make a young Lady a true polite Figure  
You must cramp up her Sides that her Breast may look bigger,  
And her's tho' a Chicken as yet, my dear DINAH,  
Stand forth full as plump, and as Jolly as thine are:  
And why should ye leave any Charm for Conjecture,  
Like the Figure you see in your Grandmother's Picture,  
With her Neck in a Ruff, and her Waist in a Girdle,

...

You never as yet did those Beauties conceal,  
Which Nature intended your Sex to reveal;  
And I'm happy that MADGE has acquir'd such a Spice  
Of Your excellent Manners, and wholesome Advice<sup>49</sup>

Mr Inkle's mocking of his wife's grandmother was playing on a cultural trope. Firstly, given that the ruff had faded from fashion before 1650, it is unlikely that someone of Mrs Inkle's generation had portraits of their grandmother (as opposed to their great-grandmother) in such dated clothing. Moreover, it is evident that not all elderly women in the earlier decades of the eighteenth century were adopting the stance of the sober matrons described by Defoe and Mandeville. Nonetheless, the seventeenth-century generations were presented as being a world apart from those who had grown up with modern eighteenth-century habits.

This is not, of course, to say that these modern habits were impervious to the vagaries of fashion. As far as the bright young things of the 1760s and 1770s were concerned, Horace Walpole's generation, which included the fictional Mr and Mrs Inkle, had become thoroughly outdated.<sup>50</sup> In 1774, at the age of fifty-seven, Walpole admitted as much:

not that I am apt to dislike young folks, whom I think everything becomes. ... In the world, one cannot help perceiving one is out of fashion. ... I, who see many young men with better parts than myself, submit with a good grace, or retreat hither to my castle, where I am satisfied with what I have done. ... I do not much invite the juvenile, who think my castle and me of equal antiquity.<sup>51</sup>

Likewise, despite claiming he still cut a fine figure, the gout-ridden Mr Inkle 'very much feared' his daughter thought him a 'fogram'; a newly coined term to describe 'a fusty old fellow'.<sup>52</sup> The rising generation at this time were rejecting the cultural mores of their parents and grandparents, something I have discussed at length elsewhere.<sup>53</sup> As a consequence, those who were middle-aged and old were seen by the younger generation as not simply unfashionable but entirely out of kilter with the present times, just as sober matrons had seemed at the beginning of the century. It was in this context that Horace Walpole felt increasingly out of step with what he saw as 'a world more and more governed by the younger members of society'.<sup>54</sup>

In keeping with Walpole's assertion, the youthfulness inherent in new trends had become ever more pronounced during the 1760s and 1770s, before fashions became positively juvenile towards the close of the century.<sup>55</sup> This was when fashionable young men rejected stockings in favour of long trousers, adopting a style akin to the skeleton suit; an item



of nursery clothing first seen a decade or so earlier, when these young men had been children. And it was not only young men but also young women who were maintaining the styles they had worn in childhood when they reached adulthood during the 1790s, as the hoops and bustles of the eighteenth century were discarded. This adult adoption of children's clothing was not missed by the satirists, as can be seen in Gillray's print "\_\_\_\_\_" "*And catch the living Manners as they rise*" (1794), in which he presented a burlesque rendition of these latest styles (Figure 4.2).

Gillray, who was in his late thirties, evidently expected his audience to know the preceding line of poetry from Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man* (despite his transposing of two words); the missing line being, 'Shoot folly as it flies'. Yet while this middle-aged satirist might have seen the



Figure 4.2. "\_\_\_\_\_" "*And catch the living Manners as they rise*" (1794). © National Portrait Gallery, London.



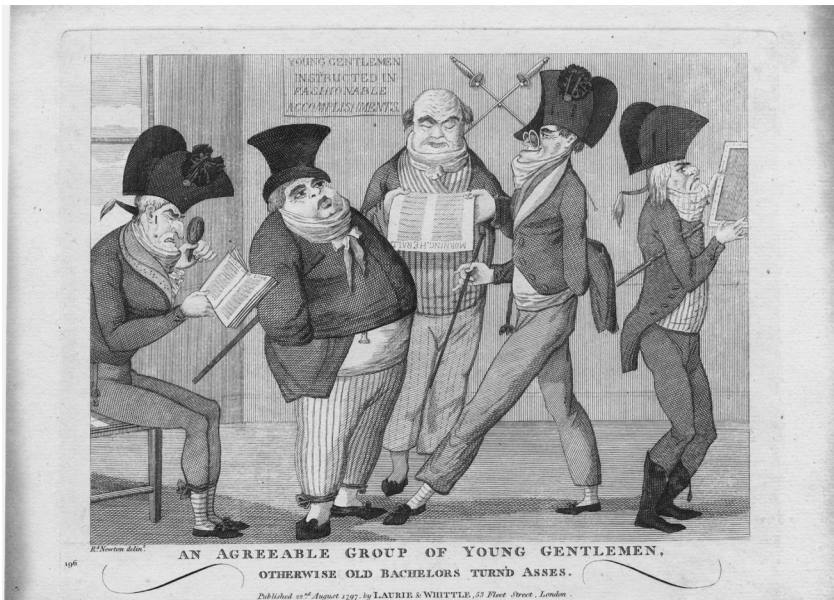


Figure 4.3. 'An agreeable group of young gentlemen, otherwise old bachelors turn'd asses' (1797). Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

rising generation's new styles as ripe for ridicule, there was no turning back the fashions. And it was in this context that the censure became particularly unforgiving of those older women and men foolhardy enough to attempt to keep up with the juvenile styles of the day, a habit often cruelly associated with being left on the shelf. This is clearly seen in the comical print 'Maiden Ewe Drest Lamb Fashion', discussed by Vickery; an image depicting an older woman dressed in the same style of neo-classical empire-waist gown as seen in Figure 4.2.<sup>56</sup> Likewise, 'An agreeable group of young gentlemen, otherwise old bachelors turn'd asses' (Figure 4.3) presents a group of older men sporting the long-trousered hyper-juvenile fashions of the day despite the tell-tale signs of their lack of youth, including bald heads, old-fashioned wigs and spectacles. Clearly, such behaviour was seen as a joke regardless of gender.

## Conclusion

Adulthood was evidently not a homogenous or stable category. Its boundaries with youth and old age were key to framing cultural understandings of this phase of the life cycle, and so too was the midlife point when both

men and women began to see their young adulthood as behind them. Moreover, those in later middle age might have been described as old in comparison to those in their twenties and even thirties, but this is not to say they were necessarily thought to have reached old age. It is this relational nature of the life cycle that makes it so important to recognise adulthood as a historical category. To study adult society without doing so is to isolate historical actors from the inherent dynamism of the life course, and from the age relations that helped to shape their experiences. In a century that eulogised youth, those entering the adult world were repeatedly framing new youthful ideas about what it meant to be an adult, and as they aged their own youthful prejudices against the older generations almost inevitably helped to shape their experience of growing older themselves. It is noteworthy that it was as the bright young things of the early century reached old age that this generational process became particularly pronounced, and the censure of those feigning youth gained a more pitiless tenor. This was not simply a generation refusing to see themselves as elderly or old at an age they might previously have considered to be so. It was a generation who had fashioned themselves on their youthful attributes reassessing what it was to be an older adult at the same time as younger adults were redefining what it meant to be young. Neither the fogram nor the rising generation can be understood in isolation. To locate adulthood in the eighteenth century is, therefore, as much about age relations as it is about any particular phase in the life course.

## Notes

1. For a wider discussion of the links between age relations and the processes of historical change, see Barbara Crosbie, *Age Relations and Cultural Change in Eighteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2020).
2. Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979) is a problematic book but his underlying claim that childhood had changed fundamentally at this time is stubbornly persistent. For an overview, see Crosbie, *Age Relations*, 19–51. For a counter-claim, see Anthony Fletcher, *Growing Up in England: The Experience of Childhood, 1600–1914* (London: Yale University Press, 2008).
3. Amanda Vickery, ‘Mutton Dressed as Lamb? Fashioning Age in Georgian England’, *Journal of British Studies*, 52, no. 4 (2013): 858–86; Susannah R. Ottaway, *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Helen Yallop, *Age and Identity in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 2013).
4. Crosbie, *Age Relations*.
5. See especially Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England, 1550–1720* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

6. Lynn Botelho, 'Old Women in Early Modern Europe: Age as an Analytical Category' in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Jane Couchman and Allyson M. Poska (London: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 305; also see Crosbie, *Age Relations*.
7. Crosbie, *Age Relations*, 1.
8. Botelho, 'Old Women in Early Modern Europe', 296; also see Yallop, *Age and Identity*, 4–5.
9. For useful discussions of this topic, see Deborah Simonton, 'Earning and Learning: Girlhood in Pre-Industrial Europe', *Women's History Review*, 13, no. 3 (2004): 363–86; Ilana Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England* (London: Yale University Press, 1994), especially 208–35.
10. Sarah Toulalan, "'Elderly Years Cause a Total Dispaire of Conception": Old Age, Sex and Infertility in Early Modern England', *Social History of Medicine*, 29, no. 2 (2016): 333–59; Helen Yallop, 'Representing Aged Masculinity in Eighteenth-Century England: The "Old Man" of Medical Advice', *Cultural and Social History* 10, no. 2 (2013): 191–210.
11. *The Infants Lawyer* (London, 1726), 45, 50, 21, 49.
12. Sir Matthew Hale, *Historia placitorum coronæ*, vol. 1 (London, 1736), 17.
13. Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the laws of England*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1770), 437–8.
14. John Kersey, *A New English Dictionary* (London, 1702).
15. Edward Cocker, *Cocker's English Dictionary* (London, 1704).
16. Nathan Bailey, *An universal etymological English dictionary* (London, 1721).
17. 'British Maids, who in the Times of our Henries were not held marriageable til turn'd of Twenty, are now become falling ripe at twelve.' J. Dennis, *Essay upon Publick Spirit* (1711), 15, cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
18. Samuel Johnson, *A dictionary of the English language* (London, 1755).
19. Daniel Fenning, *The royal English dictionary* (London, 1761).
20. John Ash, *The New and Complete Dictionary of the English language* (London, 1775).
21. John Bentick, *The spelling and explanatory dictionary of the English language* (London, 1786).
22. William Perry, *A General Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1795).
23. Kay Heath, *Aging by the Book: The Emergence of Midlife in Victorian Britain* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009), 1–2.
24. Vickery, 'Mutton Dressed as Lamb?', 859–60.
25. Ella Sbaraini, "'Those That Prefer the Ripe Mellow Fruit to Any Other": Rethinking Depictions of Middle-Aged Women's Sexuality in England, 1700–1800', *Cultural and Social History*, 17, no. 2 (2020): 165–87.
26. Henry Fielding, *The history of Tom Jones*, vol. 1 (London, 1749), 9; *The history of Charlotte Summers*, vol. 2 (London, 1753), 317.
27. Francis Mauriceau, *The Diseases of Women with Child, and in Child-Bed*, translated by Hugh Chamberlen (London, 1710), 112, 122.
28. Crosbie, *Age Relations*, 144–6.
29. *The Berwick museum, or, Monthly literary intelligencer*, vol. 2 (Berwick, 1785–7), 144.
30. 'Of Modern Inventions' in Thomas Gordon, *The Humourist*, 3rd ed. (London, 1724), 82–90.

31. *The Lounger*, no. 51. Saturday, 21 January 1786 (London, 1787), vol. 2, 147–8.
32. Katarzyna Bronk-Bacon, “‘It Is Scandalous at My Age’: Horace Walpole’s Epistolary Aging”, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 55, no. 4 (2022): 497–516 (see esp. 500–502).
33. Peter McNeil, *Pretty Gentlemen: Macaroni Men and the Eighteenth-Century Fashion World* (London: Yale University Press, 2018), 55.
34. Vickery, ‘Mutton Dressed as Lamb?’
35. *The Lounger*.
36. A phrase used by Mary Wollstonecraft, cited in Vickery, ‘Mutton Dressed as Lamb?’, 868.
37. Mattina Darly was the daughter of the famous producers of prints, Mary and Matthias (Matthew) Darly. For details, see the curator’s comments from M. Dorothy George: [www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\\_J-5-109](http://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_J-5-109).
38. Eliza Fowler Haywood, *Epistles for the ladies*, vol. 2 (London, 1749–50), 2–4, 7.
39. See especially Vickery, ‘Mutton Dressed as Lamb?’
40. Vicesimus Knox, *Essays Moral and Literary* (London, 1782), No. LXXVIII. ‘On the Fear of Growing Old’, 337–8.
41. Knox, *Essays Moral and Literary*; Yallop, *Age and Identity*, 14.
42. Knox, *Essays Moral and Literary*.
43. Crosbie, *Age Relations*, 158.
44. Bronk-Bacon, ‘It Is Scandalous at My Age’, 506.
45. Daniel Defoe, *The Protestant monastery: or, a complaint against the brutality of the present age* (London, 1727), iv, 1, 2, 19, 20.
46. Bernard Mandeville, *The virgin unmask’d: or, female dialogues betwixt an elderly maiden lady and her niece* (London, 1731), 1, 7, 2.
47. Christopher Anstey, *An Election Ball*, 3rd ed. (Bath, 1776), 31.
48. Anstey, *An Election Ball*, 40.
49. Anstey, *An Election Ball*, 42–3.
50. For a wider discussion of the generational divisions of the 1770s, see Crosbie, *Age Relations*.
51. Bronk-Bacon, ‘It Is Scandalous at My Age’, 507.
52. Anstey, *An Election Ball*, 47; see also Francis Grose, *A classical dictionary of the vulgar tongue* (London, 1785); Fogram is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘an old person, with very old-fashioned or conservative ideas or attitudes’.
53. Crosbie, *Age Relations*, chapter 5.
54. Bronk-Bacon, ‘It Is Scandalous at My Age’, 506.
55. Crosbie, *Age Relations*, 33, 174–7, 192–201.
56. Vickery, ‘Mutton Dressed as Lamb?’, 865.

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