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## **ageing, popular culture and contemporary feminism: Harleys and hormones**

Edited by Imelda Whelehan and Joel Gwynne, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014, 272pp., ISBN: 978-1-1373-7652-7, £60.00 (Hbk).

Examining the construction of ‘successful’ femininity as opposed to ‘unsuccessful’ femininity features in most, if not all, feminist writing. The idea that a woman must transcend the traditional negative conceptualisations and boundaries of femininity and conform to certain ideals in order to become a ‘successful’ female, then, is one that permeates feminist critical theory at every level. As the editors of this collection, Imelda Whelehan and Joel Gwynne, acknowledge, however, with the exception of a few feminist writers, how these ideas intersect with age, and more specifically older age, is less frequently analysed. As such, Whelehan and Gwynne’s edited collection of essays on this topic is a welcome recent addition to this field of debate.

The chapters in this collection are thematically organised across a broad spectrum of popular culture (although not new media, as explained by the authors on page 6) including fiction and fairytales (Chapters 2 and 15); film (Chapters 3, 5, 6, 13 and 14) and well-known film actresses such as Meryl Streep, Helen Mirren and Judi Dench (Chapters 7 and 9); television (Chapters 4, 10, 11 and 12); and newspapers (Chapter 8). Perhaps unsurprisingly given that the essays contained in the collection are written from a feminist critical standpoint, a central theme that runs through all the chapters to some extent, alongside ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’ femininity, is what it means to age successfully or unsuccessfully. Interestingly, however, this is not limited to an examination of what it means to age well as a woman—although this element of analysis is undoubtedly the predominant theme in the book, featuring heavily in most of the chapters outlined above. More interestingly for the purposes of this review, however, is that the collection contains essays on how gender identities, both those that conform to stereotypical ideas of femininity/masculinity and those that do not, are constructed by examining the relationship *between* the genders. In particular, there is attention to the construction in popular culture of the relationship between the older woman and the younger man, and how these identities may be mutually constructive and reinforcing. This analysis is an overwhelming feature in Michell, Tonkin and Eate’s (Chapter 14) analysis of the films *Citizen Kane* and *J Edgar*. The chapter highlights how notions of stereotypical masculinity and femininity can be both reversed and reinforced by the same depictions. They can be reversed by dominant mothers (who conform more to traditional *masculinity* than to femininity) and their relationships with their troubled and complex sons (who conform more to *femininity* than masculinity), and yet the fact that these binary depictions are still present in such films also serves to reinforce gender stereotypes. This idea that stereotypes of femininity and masculinity can be reinforced by depictions of ageing that are supposed to transcend such binaries is also evident in other chapters. Joel Gwynne’s critique of Wendy Salisbury’s memoirs and Sharron Hinchliff’s critique of the ‘sexy female body’ in middle age

are particularly salient in this respect. In effect both chapters seek to critique what, on the face of it, seem to be depictions transcending the traditional notion of middle age as being a time of asexuality, but by doing so actually reinforce heteronormative ideas of femininity. To a lesser extent, a similar approach is present in Hill's analysis of the television programme *One Born Every Minute*, which argues that the level of control demonstrated through childbirth in the programme becomes the marker of successful motherhood.

Another interesting feature of the collection, however, is the application of feminist critiques to other contexts. In their introduction, the editors explicitly note that while there is increasing literature on what it means to be an older *woman* (significantly contributed to by the chapters in this collection), it is not as clear why or when *men* are deemed 'past it' (p. 5). As a result, some of the chapters directly attempt to tackle this lacuna—what does it mean to be a man and grow old in popular culture? Dominic Lennard's chapter (Chapter 6) on representations of 'ageing tough guys' in action films presents an interesting analysis of the juxtaposition of older men against younger men, as does Hannah Hamad's analysis of the relationships between grandfathers and younger men in Chapter 5. Given the distinct lack of literature on manhood in later life, these chapters are particularly welcome, and illustrate the role of feminist critique in dismantling assumptions about masculinity in later life. In particular, they argue that the relationships between the younger generation and the older men portrayed in these works also serve to reinforce the perceived negative difficulties associated with ageing for men, given that ageing is ultimately a time associated with decline, and ultimately how to transcend this decline and 'age well'.

One criticism of the edition is the lack of any substantive chapters that deal with how those with disabilities in extreme old age are portrayed in popular culture. With the exception of a brief mention of dementia by Hamad in her analysis of *Robot & Frank* (pp. 84–85), the physical disabilities associated with old age mentioned by Falcus and Sako in their analysis of *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (pp. 212–215), and Do Rozario and Waterhouse-Watson's interesting yet unexplored assertion that old age and childhood 'share an analogous embodied subjectivity ... articulated through physical incapacity and/or restriction' (p. 234), the position of the disabled elderly adult is missing from the collection. An analysis of current portrayals of the older disabled adult nearing the end of the life course—and in particular how feminist critiques can help to deconstruct typically negative assumptions about and portrayals of this life stage—would have been a much welcomed addition to this collection. A further area where the collection may have benefited from greater discussion is in an analysis of the intersections between ageing and ethnic identities. Although different ethnicities do appear in passing in the collection, for example in Falcus and Sako's discussion of Muriel's racial prejudice in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, or their fleeting and somewhat basic references to the 'old Indian man' and the "'modern" Indian girlfriend' (p. 215), there is no sustained focus on how ageing and ageist depictions are modified or compounded by ethnicity. One interesting suggestion hinted at by Falcus and Sako is that moving to India presents an opportunity to transcend individualistic neo-liberal culture—an opportunity for 'change' (p. 213)—and sustained analysis of this, perhaps in other contexts, would have provided an additional critical layer to the collection.

Across the varying forms of popular culture discussed, this book acknowledges that a wider variety of depictions of older women and men have recently become more forthcoming: their historic invisibility may be gradually ending. An overwhelming theme of the collection is how traditional ideals of successful ageing and successful gender are actually reinforced by depictions that on the face of it seek to transcend such

ideas, which in turn indicates the difficulties inherent in depicting and analysing how gender and age intersect. The collection of essays here challenges both traditional images of womanhood and manhood, but moreover, they challenge assumptions about ageing, and what it means to age well and to age unsuccessfully. They illustrate that these concepts are not binary—there is no definitive ‘ageing well’, or ‘ageing unsuccessfully’. They implicitly acknowledge that the subjects of their critiques may very well be flawed but that this is, in fact, itself part and parcel of human nature.

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