

ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

## Feeling Old in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Karen Harvey  and Sarah Fox 

Department of History, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK  
Please direct any correspondence to [k.l.harvey@bham.ac.uk](mailto:k.l.harvey@bham.ac.uk).

### Abstract

This article examines the lived experiences of the older body—the embodiment of old age—from the perspective of older people. It uses letters written from 1680 to 1820 by twenty-two women and men aged between sixty and eighty-nine, selected from a corpus of over 391 letter writers. We begin by exploring the embodied experiences discussed by older people, as well as their understanding of the relationship between these experiences and their later years. The article finds that old age was experienced as highly variable and was subject to an ongoing process of recalibration. Central to that process was the corporeality of the aging body as experienced in the context of a range of social factors. The corporeality of the body was a factor for all but was not always framed negatively or even situated in the context of aging. The article then turns to the responses of older people to the life-stage of old age. The article finds them self-directed and proactive in continuing to live well. This is significant evidence for a self-consciously active, engaged, and embodied old age in early modernity. These older letter writers tended not to disavow old age but to accommodate and even embrace it.

At the age of seventy-nine, the grandmother of York lawyer Joseph Munby, Jane Pontey, gave a sorry account of herself to her grandson:

as to myself, the last two years have near wore me out. My active powers have departed and I now confess that I am an old woman, because I feel so.<sup>1</sup>

Pontey would live for another ten years, dying aged eighty-nine, but already by July 1829 she self-identified as an “old woman, because I feel so.” Pontey’s identification as an “old woman” accrued from her embodied experiences of body and mind. This study looks back over the long century before Pontey’s self-declaration to explore the lived experiences of the older body: the embodiment of old age. It examines how older men and women felt, how they spoke about their bodies and minds, and the relationship of these embodied experiences to their understandings of their life-stage. In so doing, it approaches old age from the perspective of the older person themselves rather than as a normative category. There are several accounts of how old age was seen in the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Experiences of

---

<sup>1</sup> Jane Pontey to Joseph Munby, 27 July 1829, GB 192 MFP 12/17, Explore York Libraries and Archives (EYLA). All quotes from letters retain their original spelling, grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and repetition.

<sup>2</sup> For a survey of this, see Lynn Botelho and Susannah Ottaway, “General Introduction,” in *The History of Old Age in England, 1600–1800*, vol. 1, *The Cultural Conception of Age in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Lynn Botelho (Routledge, 2008), xi–xxv. Devoney Looser sees these as especially important in responses to eighteenth-century female authors. See Devoney Looser, *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain, 1750–1850* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 10–15.

old age were likely framed to an extent by social prescription,<sup>3</sup> although some historians have insisted on old people's refusal of wider expectations.<sup>4</sup> Existing work on aging in eighteenth-century Britain focuses on the expectations attendant upon the old and the ways that they could be cared for, such as within the household, community, or institutional support. Studies of the history of old age have thus examined important practical questions of work, resources, support, care, and family formation.<sup>5</sup> Our approach is a complementary but distinct one, focusing on the words and experiences of older people themselves. How did it feel to be old in eighteenth-century Britain?

To address this question, we use letters written by older people. The article draws on a corpus of over 5,000 letters written between 1680 and 1820 from a range of religious denominations and mostly from a broadly defined "middling sort," with a roughly equal number written by men and women. These letters were selected for a project on the body, as part of which over 3,000 were transcribed and entered into a bespoke and fully searchable database that records metadata about the letters and their authors.<sup>6</sup> This corpus affords a number of opportunities to explore the experiences of old age amongst those of middling rank and above. It does, however, restrict consideration of the experiences of those of lower social status. First, it provides a large body of material that can be identified as written by older people themselves.<sup>7</sup> Second, rather than being steered to material where aging is the explicit focus, we are able to examine older people's descriptions of their embodied experiences without imposing a lens of "old age" upon them. This allows us to see the specific contexts in which older people identify as old, if at all. Third, the nature of our corpus means that in many cases we are also able to follow an individual as they age, sometimes over several decades. This enables a better appreciation of fluctuations in bodily health, uneven patterns in experiences of aging, and the rhetorical deployment of aging as a theme in letters. Fourth, the size of the corpus means that we are able to balance this depth with range, discussing a number of examples in detail within a broader corpus of material. This extends previous scholarship based upon (often single) case studies of old age.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the chronological extent of the corpus affords consideration of change over time.

Noting Susannah Ottaway's finding in *Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* that in the eighteenth century, sixty was commonly seen as the start of old age, we have chosen to focus on letter writers we consider to be aged sixty and over.<sup>9</sup> As Devoney Looser has noted of the field, "it has proven difficult to determine what to count as old, whether considered a matter of chronological age, bodily decay, or other factors."<sup>10</sup> Where Ottaway

<sup>3</sup> See Katarzyna Bronk-Bacon, "'It Is Scandalous at My Age': Horace Walpole's Epistolary Aging," *Eighteenth-century Studies* 55, no. 4 (2022): 497–516. Katarzyna Bronk-Bacon, *"And Yet I Remember": Ageing and Old(er) Age in English Drama between 1660 and the 1750s* (Peter Lang, 2019) discusses the stereotypes of old age in drama (desiring old man, lusty old widow, the nostalgic and wise elder).

<sup>4</sup> Joan Hinde Stewart, *The Enlightenment of Age. Women, Letters and Growing Old in Eighteenth-Century France* (Voltaire Foundation, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History. Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford, 2000), 114–46.

<sup>6</sup> The data used in this article were drawn from the database version 12/1/24. The biographical metadata recorded for letters writers (when obtainable) includes: gender, rank, religion, marital status, birth and death dates, and active dates.

<sup>7</sup> This is in contrast to some other studies, where the source base "most likely, concern older people." Ella Sbaraini, "The Ageing Body, Memory-Loss and Suicide in Georgian England," *Social History Of Medicine: The Journal of the Society for the Social History of Medicine* 35, no.1 (2022): 170–94, at 173–74.

<sup>8</sup> Amy Culley, "'A Journal of My Feelings, Mind & Body': Narratives of Ageing in the Life Writing of Mary Berry (1763–1852)," *Romanticism* 25, no. 3 (2019): 291–302; Anne Kugler, *Errant Plagiarist: The Life and Writing of Lady Sarah Cowper, 1644–1720* (Stanford, 2002); Anne Kugler, "'I Feel Myself Decay Apace': Old Age in the Diary of Lady Sarah Cowper (1644–1720)," in *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500*, ed. Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane (Routledge, 2014), 66–88; Stewart, *Enlightenment of Age*.

<sup>9</sup> Susannah Ottaway, *Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 2004), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Looser, *Women Writers and Old Age*, 9.

suggested sixty, Ella Sbaraini suggests instead fifty.<sup>11</sup> The variability in the age at which historians start their account of old age reflects that past categories of old age were not stable and that the criteria for defining old age have changed over time. Nonetheless, focusing on writers from the age of sixty identifies a group of people who we might reasonably expect to reflect on their own aging and enables us to consider if and how they did this. Out of a total number of 373 letter writers in the database, 47 (12.5 percent) are known to have been aged sixty or above when they produced the letters in the database (twenty women and twenty-seven men). In this article, we discuss the experiences of twenty-two of these: eleven women, and eleven men, aged between sixty and eight-nine.<sup>12</sup> Their letters have been selected to cover the entire chronological span of the long eighteenth century, with the earliest being written in 1684 and the latest in 1820. The letter writers are unevenly spread throughout the period, with three prior to 1700, three from 1700–35 and the remaining sixteen writing after 1750, five of whom were writing after 1800 (a pattern that will be addressed further below).

Our study engages critically with how historians and those in other fields have discussed past and present experiences of old age. A ground-breaking work in this area was Peter Laslett's *A Fresh Map of Life*, which argued for the emergence in the late nineteenth century of a "third age": a period of activity following retirement but prior to the onset of a dependent "fourth age" characterized by decline and ill-health.<sup>13</sup> For Laslett, the third age was defined by the individual, "a point personally chosen—rather than a marker fixed in the calendar, biological, or social age," but it was also only possible in societies that structurally and socially facilitated those with "the disposition, the freedom, and the means" to enjoy this life-stage.<sup>14</sup> Despite the primacy of individual self-identification in his definition of the third age, Laslett relied primarily on demographic data rather than qualitative sources or ego-documents. His work has not been widely used by historians and principal aspects of his argument are countered by work on the early modern period, especially that which uses qualitative material. Carvallo sees a seventeenth-century understanding of old age as decrepitude replaced by a more positive eighteenth-century vision that associated old age with longevity, for example.<sup>15</sup> Ottaway countered Laslett's argument for the modern invention of the third and fourth age with evidence of a prevailing idea of "green" (active) and "decrepit" old age in the eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

Regardless of its reception by historians, Laslett's division of later life into a "third age" and "fourth age" is foundational for the influential work of the social gerontologists Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs.<sup>17</sup> Gilleard and Higgs argue that from the 1960s the third age came to be defined not just as active but by practices of self-care and physical management—such as fashion, exercise, and medical interventions—that focus on eradicating traditional markers of old age as things "to be sloughed off to reveal the valued 'ageless' self within." The effect was to render "the ageing body more distinctly embodied."<sup>18</sup> In this

<sup>11</sup> Sbaraini, "The Ageing Body," 171.

<sup>12</sup> In alphabetical order, by surname, these are (with date ranges of their extant letters): Jael Boscawen 1700–02; John Black I 1698–1723; John II 1698–1768; Robert Black (snr) 1728–47; Hugh Boscawen 1684–1700; John Campbell 1723–67; Mrs I. Collier 1768–69; Sarah Clegg 1777–1810; Mendes da Costa 1748–86; Mary Dangerfield 1762–82; Giles Earle 1803–06; Elizabeth Elstob 1735–53; John Glover 1783–1819; Ann Hatfield 1798–1816; Mary Huddleston 1766–1806; Barbara Johnson 1775–1803; Eliezer Keyser 1813–20; Job Marple 1723–33; Mary Oliver 1775–76; Phillip Papillon 1698–1734; Joanna Pury 1688; Christiana Shuttleworth 1780–81.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Laslett, *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), 77, 87.

<sup>14</sup> Laslett, *A Fresh Map*, 99.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Carvallo, "Ageing in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Science in Context* 23, no. 3 (2010): 267–88.

<sup>16</sup> Susannah Ottaway, *Decline of Life. Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 2024), 69. See also Looser, *Women Writers and Old Age*, 9; Helen Berry and Elizabeth Foyster, "Ageing and Loneliness in England, 1500–1800," in *The Routledge History of Loneliness*, ed. Katie Barclay, Elaine Chalus and Deborah Simonton (Routledge, 2023), 219.

<sup>17</sup> Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs, "Ageing, Abjection and Embodiment in the Fourth Age," *Journal of Aging Studies* 25, no. 2 (2011): 135–42, at 135.

<sup>18</sup> Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs, *Ageing, Corporeality and Embodiment* (Anthem Press, 2014), xi and elsewhere.

vision, the third-age body might be managed in such a way as to avoid becoming old.<sup>19</sup> The overriding objective of these practices is to disavow the fourth age: the site of abject old age, horror, and decay from which there is “little chance of return and restitution of the embodied self that existed before the threshold was crossed.”<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that Gilleard and Higgs do not examine the experience of old age from the perspective of the old but instead approach the third and fourth ages as “contested cultural spaces.”<sup>21</sup> Work on the body and aging in the modern world that draws on the words of older people offers a significantly different account, with the older body acquiring shifting meanings or at times receding entirely from view in older people’s understanding of their life-stage.<sup>22</sup>

Evidently, the “what” and the “when” of old age has varied, while the approach taken to explore these questions yields distinct answers. Old age is and has been experienced as both an embodied and a social category, as well as being subject to cultural construction. In the eighteenth century, old age as a life-stage was fluid and flexible. It was not marked by religious or social rituals as was childbirth by churching or youth by apprenticeship. Nor was it a clearly defined moment of biological transition, such as that of menarche or the transition from maid to mother. Some have argued that menopause was widely regarded as the start of old age for women, particularly in the seventeenth century.<sup>23</sup> There is some evidence that this was the case in eighteenth-century France.<sup>24</sup> Yet this is not as clear for eighteenth-century Britain.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the relationship between the physical body and old age is elusive. As archaeologists have demonstrated, “biological age”—let alone the social identity of old age—does not track “chronological age.”<sup>26</sup> Patterns and rates of human physical decline have themselves also changed over time.<sup>27</sup> Aging is a life-long process and symptoms of old age were felt long before the age of sixty. An alternative study might usefully consider the ways in which “age” was deployed by men and women across their life-course. But, as explained above, this article takes a different approach, tracking not the language of old age but asking what language older persons used to describe their experiences.

Focusing on the perspectives of older people themselves, we show that old age was experienced as highly variable and that there was a range of criteria upon which older people judged the presence of old age. There was also a notable gap between chronological age and “felt age.” Indeed, although there were commonalities in how older people thought about and experienced old age, some older people chose not to identify as socially, chronologically, or biologically old. What constituted old age for an individual was subject to an ongoing process of recalibration. Central to that process was the corporeality of the aging body situated in the context of a range of social factors. Illness, changing relationships with younger family members, and the deaths of friends and spouses could all be watersheds

<sup>19</sup> Gilleard and Higgs, *Ageing*, 25.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Higgs and Chris Gilleard, “Frailty, Abjection and the ‘Othering’ of the Fourth Age,” *Health Sociology Review* 23, no. 1 (2014): 10–19, at 14; Gilleard and Higgs, “Ageing, Abjection.”

<sup>21</sup> Gilleard and Higgs, “Ageing, Abjection,” 140.

<sup>22</sup> Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, “The Everyday Visibility of the Aging Body,” in *Aging Bodies: Images and Everyday Experiences*, ed. Christopher A. Faircloth (Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 205–22.

<sup>23</sup> Lynn Botelho, “Old Age and Menopause in Rural Women of Early Modern Suffolk,” in *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500*, 1st ed., ed. Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane (Routledge, 2001), 43–65; Ottaway, *Decline of Life*, 36.

<sup>24</sup> Stewart, *Enlightenment of Age*, 33–91; Michael Stolberg, “A Woman’s Hell: Medical Perceptions of Menopause in Pre-industrial Europe,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 73, no. 3 (1999): 404–28, at 411.

<sup>25</sup> Ottaway, *Decline of Life*, 35–41; Rebecca Brannon and Susannah Ottaway, “Introduction,” in *A Cultural History of Old Age in the Enlightenment* (forthcoming), n.p. See also Daniel Schafer, *Old Age and Disease in Early Modern Medicine* (Routledge, 2011), 272–92; Stolberg, “A Woman’s Hell.”

<sup>26</sup> Joanna E. P. Appleby, “Why We Need an Archaeology of Old Age, and a Suggested Approach,” *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 43, no. 2 (2010): 145–68. Our decision to focus on letter writers aged sixty and over purposefully excludes the gendered impact of menopause, not least because this research suggests menopause was not equated with aging.

<sup>27</sup> Theya Molleson, “Rates of Ageing in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Grave Reflections: Portraying the Past through Cemetery Studies*, ed. Shelley R. Saunders and Ann Herring (Canadian Scholars Press, 1995), 199–222.

in the way that an individual's later years were experienced. Sociological studies of older people in modern settings have highlighted the constantly shifting nature of older people's embodiment, given that old age, and particularly aging "well," is defined in relation to others.<sup>28</sup> We should note that social dynamics were amongst the reasons people might choose to ignore or reject self-identification as old in their letters. Older writers sometimes sought to elicit sympathy from friends and family or to petition for care and company.<sup>29</sup> Just as often, they will also have wanted to avoid generating unnecessary anguish amongst their loved ones. That the experiences of old age in this study were communicated in familiar letters—those sent to family and friends—undoubtedly shaped their reporting in ways that are not always accessible to the historian.<sup>30</sup>

The article begins by exploring the embodied experiences discussed by older people and their understanding of the relationship between these experiences and their later years. Written by those who retained the physical, mental, and emotional resources required to produce letters, our sample perhaps over-represents those who were aging well, yet it also shows that these writers shared common experiences of the aging body, from impaired mobility to low mood and mental decline. Significantly, they did not necessarily signify a descent into the frailties and indignity of a discernible "fourth age" nor frame these experiences in the "negative iconography steeped in a language of loss, erosion, lack, decline."<sup>31</sup> Familiar letters tell a story that is significantly different to that garnered from other sources, such as suicide letters.<sup>32</sup> Many older people spoke about this later stage of life in positive terms regardless of decline, some did not attribute changes to their life-stage, and a significant minority acknowledged their life-stage without recording any form of decline. It is striking, nonetheless, that only one of the letter writers wrote neither about decline nor about old age. Regardless of their varied embodied experiences, older people generally shared an understanding that they occupied a discrete stage of life and that it could threaten health and happiness. Old age was a fluctuating state that encompassed activity and agency, decline and dependency, in varying degrees. Letter-writers adjusted their expectations of old age in response to embodied, relational, and emotional factors; they tended not to disavow old age but to accommodate and even embrace it. As such, we do not find evidence of a clearly demarcated or recognized boundary between the third and fourth age, or between the categories of green and decrepit old age. This article thus offers a revision to an approach to old age that carves it into definable stages. Our references to "older people," rather than "old people," indicates this wariness of imposing discrete stages onto the later life-course.

The article then turns to the responses of older people to this life-stage. They were active in making choices that improved their own day-to-day lives. Regimen—the proper maintenance of a healthful lifestyle through diet and nutrition, sleep, environment, routine, and exercise—played a particularly important part in keeping old bodies healthy. George Cheyne, a proponent of regimen, noted that for older people it could, "preserve their

<sup>28</sup> Cheryl Laz, "Age Embodied," *Journal of Aging Studies* 17 (2003): 503–19, at 516; Lucie Galcanova and Marcela Petrova Kafkova, "Self-perception During the Transition to the Fourth Age in the Czech Republic," *Ethnologie Française* 48 (2018): 413–26, at 415.

<sup>29</sup> See Sarah Goldsmith, Sheryllynne Haggerty and Karen Harvey, eds., *Letters and the Body, 1700–1830: Writing and Embodiment* (Routledge, 2023), especially the chapters by Karen Harvey, "Sympathy in Practice: Eighteenth-century Letters and the Material Body," 85–102, and Steven King, "Constructing the Body in English Pauper Letters, 1780–1834," 191–211.

<sup>30</sup> On the purposeful crafting of old age in eighteenth-century texts, see Bronk-Bacon, "It Is Scandalous at My Age"; Culley, "A Journal of My Feelings."

<sup>31</sup> Emmanuelle Tulle and Clary Krekula, "Ageing Embodiment and the Search for Social Change," *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life* 8, no. 1 (2013): 7–10, at 9; Jenny Hockey and Allison James, *Growing Up and Growing Old: Ageing and Dependency in the Life Course* (Sage, 1993), 75–83.

<sup>32</sup> Sbaraini, "The Ageing Body."



Health and Freedom of Spirits more entire and to a longer Date.”<sup>33</sup> Older people’s manipulation of regimen, alongside other strategies, counters the historical claims made by Gilleard and Higgs (*pace* Laslett) and raises questions about the distinctiveness of the plastic body at the heart of their late-modern third age.<sup>34</sup> Certainly, the lack of medicalization of the older body in the eighteenth century contrasts with the prominence of late-twentieth-century medical responses discussed by Gilleard and Higgs. Regimen drew on medical knowledge but its application did not constitute a “medicalization” of aging: it did not involve a professional practitioner of medicine or approach aging as a medical problem in need of preventive treatment.<sup>35</sup> Letter-writers sometimes engaged with the medical profession in the treatment of illness. This was marginally more common amongst the wealthier letter writers in our corpus, but recourse to medical assistance rarely featured amongst older people’s strategies to remain strong, alert, and happy: eating and sleeping well, travel, social contact, good humor, grandparenting, work, and faith. A self-consciously active, engaged, and embodied old age is not exclusive to late modernity.

These findings apply to the whole period from which these letters are drawn. Throughout, we identify major continuities in the experience of aging. Nevertheless, there are indications of some changes that need to be placed in the context of broader shifts in epistolary culture. Just as survival rates for familiar letters rise during the eighteenth century, so does this sample feature a preponderance of letters written between 1750 and 1820. Later letters tend to be more fulsome on personal matters, while their authors feature growing proportions of middling-rank and women writers. All of these changes may have affected the experiences and reports of older people. Transformations in the postal system, paper, literacy, and transport that fueled the expansion in letter writing facilitated greater social contact, which could generate more positive experiences for the old.<sup>36</sup> The huge growth in circulation of familiar letters in which people were open and informal—especially in letters by women—perhaps itself generated a caring culture in which older people might find affirmation, solace, and fellow-feeling. Together, these factors may have generated a growing positivity in letters by the old. There is not sufficient compelling evidence, however, for firm conclusions about change over time. The fewer and less-detailed letters prevent assured claims about the earlier period, while there remain many negative experiences scattered amongst the positive in later eighteenth-century letters.

What does emerge clearly from this study is the variability in older people’s concepts and experiences of aging, together with their self-directed and proactive attempts to continue to live well. This underscores the value of historians—and those working on aging in other disciplines—putting aside cultural studies of widely circulating motifs of old people or social studies of structural responses to aging. If we want to better understand, account for, and meet the challenges of the lives of older people, listening to their voices is invaluable.

### Embodied Experiences of Old Age

Older people were united in their recognition of old age as an identifiable stage in the life-course and many associated this especially with physical decline. A significant proportion of letter writers did not, however, explicitly identify old age as the cause of their problems. In this way, they reinforce Ottaway and Tague’s findings from eighteenth-century personal narratives, in which the old did not “dwell on age as the sole cause for their distress.”<sup>37</sup> Nor do

<sup>33</sup> George Cheyne, *An Essay of Health and Long Life* (London, 1724), xiv.

<sup>34</sup> Gilleard and Higgs, *Ageing*, 116–17, 132, 147.

<sup>35</sup> Stolberg, “A Woman’s Hell,” 404; Helen Yallop, *Age and Identity in Eighteenth-Century England* (Routledge, 2013), 145.

<sup>36</sup> On these changes, see Susan E. Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660–1800* (Oxford, 2009), 19–72.

<sup>37</sup> Susannah Ottaway and Ingrid Tague, “Introduction,” in *The History of Old Age in England*, vol. 8, *Personal Narratives of Ageing*, ed. Susannah Ottaway and Ingrid Tague, lx.

letters show that old age was itself seen as an illness, suggesting that these letter writers were able to disentangle illness and old age more easily than others.<sup>38</sup> Our letters underscore that older people were less concerned with physical markers of age than they were with the way they felt.<sup>39</sup> They focus almost exclusively on the impacts of old age on the interior body, rather than external markers such as hair or skin. In the rare case where there was concern about appearance, this was on the part of men, a finding that contrasts with previous studies that suggest such concerns would be a greater burden for women.<sup>40</sup> The lack of evidence of women commenting on their appearance in the context of aging perhaps reflects an epistolary context of family and friends in which such anxieties were allayed, that it was simply too difficult to admit to one's aging appearance as a woman, or that this was not in fact a major concern for women. Of the physical experiences of older people, historians have noted mobility and physical weakness as the challenges most commonly reported by the old.<sup>41</sup> In our letters, restricted physical mobility was common but there was a range of felt physical experiences of the older body.

Several letter writers in their sixties experienced old age as a progressive decline that affected multiple functions of the body, including sight, strength, mobility, and overall capacity. Writing from London to his brother in 1723, 62-year-old Job Marple (occupied in "business") tied aging to overall physical incapacity, impaired sight, and a perceived proximity to death. Importantly, Marple's reflection on his own decline is framed by a discussion about his nephew's capacity for work, indicating that his sense of himself as old was compounded by his impression of those who were younger. He wrote,

did desire to know w<sup>t</sup> he is most inclined  
to w<sup>t</sup> trade or business I am now  
grown old and very much broke and in all [damaged]  
probably cannot live long my sight is exceeding  
weak and I should be very glad to hear if Job  
has any inclination to any particular trade either.<sup>42</sup>

Marple's body was a central agent in his understanding of himself as old. His impaired sight, strength, and mobility marked him as an old man and, to Marple, this suggested that he was not long for this world. Ten years on, Marple was still alive but felt much worse; the change in his handwriting is clear material evidence of his physical decline. "I am in the Land of y<sup>e</sup> Living but in a very weak condition," he wrote in one of his final surviving letters, "so weak yt I cannot rise out of my chair without help."<sup>43</sup> Marple had evidently experienced the physical decline of aging, but that decline had not happened as quickly as he had anticipated, nor did it restrict him in the ways he had foreseen in 1723. Aging was an uneven process that older people themselves were not always able to predict.

Like Marple, Giles Earle, a Yorkshire gentleman and owner of Beningbrough Hall, experienced old age as an all-encompassing physical decline. Aged 65 in 1806, he wrote:

My disorders are non-descript, and even by myself undescribable, all I know and can tell is I perceive myself unwell; and finally believe that Gout is in alliance with old age to

<sup>38</sup> Bronk-Bacon, "It Is Scandalous at My Age".

<sup>39</sup> Kugler, "I Feel Myself Decay Apace," 73; Amie Bolissian, "The Aged Patient in Early Modern England: Perceptions and Experiences of Health and Medicine in Old Age, c.1570–1730" (PhD diss., University of Reading, 2022), 52.

<sup>40</sup> Ottaway, *Decline of Life*, 34–35; Botelho, "Old Age and Menopause."

<sup>41</sup> Louise Gray, "Experience of Old Age in the Narratives of the Rural Poor in Early Modern Germany," in *Power and Poverty: Old Age in the Pre-Industrial Past*, ed. Susannah Ottaway, Lynn Botelho and Katharine Kitteridge (Bloomsbury, 2002), 112; Ottaway and Tague, "Introduction," lx.

<sup>42</sup> Job Marple to Thomas Marple, 9 May 1723, D5759\_1 [1], Derbyshire Record Office (DRO).

<sup>43</sup> Job Marple to his unnamed nephew, 18 December 1733, D5759\_3 [2], DRO.

torment me—Patience and flannel are the only rational panaceas hitherto devised for the former—I fear I must have recourse also to Patience, as in turning over all the Dispensories I can discover no other plaster against longevity and its satellites.<sup>44</sup>

He clearly distinguishes between illness and old age, although it is their “alliance” that causes suffering. The language of his letter implies a grudging reconciliation of these corporeal changes with his sense of self. Though writing over 100 years apart, both Marple’s use of the word “probably” in speculating about his likely demise and Earle’s declaration “all I know,” suggest a degree of helplessness in the face of the process of aging, perhaps patterned by enduring beliefs in the intervention of divine providence in matters of the body.<sup>45</sup>

By the following week, Giles Earle had not improved: “my health hangs, like Mahomet’s coffin, between heaven and earth,” he wrote. His vivid description of his burden of poor health as “my bundle of infirmities on my back” drew on a long-standing lexicon referring to the weakness of the old body.<sup>46</sup> Terms such as “weakness,” “decay,” “feeble,” “frail,” and “infirmity” convey the sense of overall physical decline associated with old age. Ottaway has found not only that loss of physical strength was more prominent in representations of old men but that men themselves were more likely to frame their old age in this way, whilst women were more likely to complain of specific ailments.<sup>47</sup> Our large corpus of letters allows us to test these conclusions against suggestive quantitative data. In this context, our corpus demonstrates some significant differences in the language used by older male and female writers. Older male authors used the word “frail” twice (no older women did); but older women used the words “weak” (26:9), “infirm” (15:6), “decay,” (5:1), and “feeble” (4:1) more often than older men. Whilst the older men in our sample used the language of general physical decline, older women used it more.

Similarly, this lexicon of old age was used to describe both men and women but was more likely to be used when talking about old women. Of the twenty-six uses of the term “weak” in older women’s letters, nineteen refer to women (ten to other women, nine to themselves) and seven to men; six of the nine instances of “weak” in older men’s letters refer to themselves. Of the fifteen uses of “infirm” by older women, thirteen refer to women (five to other women, eight to themselves). Four of the five instances of women’s use of “decay” referred to women, including three instances describing themselves. All four instances of women using the word “feeble” referred to women, including two instances referring to themselves. Eighteenth-century women’s letters were more likely to include more bodily terms generally. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that older women felt more able to discuss their own and other women’s physical weakness in familiar letters than did older men. Long-held understandings of the relative strength of gendered bodies echoed well into older age.

Regardless of quantities, however, the meaning of such terms reveals no noticeable gender difference. Whether used by women or men, terms such as “weakness,” “decay,” “feeble,” “frail,” and “infirmity” invariably connoted old age. Wife of a Herefordshire vicar, Mary Dangerfield used the word “infirm” in direct association with old age. In November 1775 she noted that “the weather has been trying for the old and infirm;”<sup>48</sup> a few years later, obliquely referring to herself, she darkly remarked that “infirmities and winter will return together.”<sup>49</sup> Seventy years earlier, Jael Boscawen (from a gentry Cornish family)

<sup>44</sup> Giles Earle to Joseph Munby, 15 June 1806, MFP 2/94, EYLA.

<sup>45</sup> Karen Harvey and Emily Vine, “Prayer for Family and Friends: The Body and Religion in Eighteenth-century Britain,” *The Historical Journal* 67 (2024): 406–29.

<sup>46</sup> Giles Earle to Joseph Munby, 20 June 1806, MFP 2/95, EYLA.

<sup>47</sup> Ottaway, *Decline of Life*, 33–35.

<sup>48</sup> Mary Dangerfield to Mrs Osbourne, 19 November 1775, HM60968, Huntington Library (HL).

<sup>49</sup> Mary Dangerfield to Mrs Osbourne, 17 August 1782, HM60992, HL. Mary Dangerfield was buried on 15 November 1782 (Burial register for St Giles, Goodrich, Herefordshire: <https://findmypast.co.uk>). We have not traced Mary Dangerfield’s (née Garrett) birth date. Her husband, Henry, was baptized on 7 March 1708. He was appointed



expressed regret that she might never again see her niece Bridget Fortescue: “I am sensible of soe many infirmities & dayly find soe many decays in my self, y<sup>t</sup> I am apt to think I shall never more make such a jorney.”<sup>50</sup> Her comment, made as she and her correspondent mildly disputed the administering of Fortescue’s recently deceased father’s will, perhaps deployed a discourse of “decay” to strengthen her suit, reminding Fortescue of her advanced age and the family’s duty towards her. In 1767, the Ulster wine merchant John Black II similarly plied the language of age and infirmity. In a letter requesting that his sons implement his plans for the payments relating to his estate after his death, he concluded:

that our gracious & mercyfull Lord God  
Allmighty may Ever blesse & propose your well doing is the Wish & prayers of your aged  
& infirm John Black Sen<sup>51</sup>

His father had used the same terminology in 1723, referring to himself (then aged seventy-six) as “a Survivour: although: very Infirm.”<sup>52</sup> Throughout the century, the language of “decay” and “infirmity” served as synonyms for “aged” or “old,” as others have noted.<sup>53</sup> As the body aged, it became increasingly central to experiences and expressions of aging. The deployment of this language by older men and women suggests that they expected old age to deliver authority and inspire duty and deference amongst younger family members.

Becoming old—and feeling old—developed over time, as is evident in letters written over a period of many years. Elizabeth Elstob, the antiquarian and tutor, experienced very poor health for many years. Starting in at least her fifties, her symptoms became particularly acute in her sixties. Aged sixty-seven in April 1750 she reported, “just at this time my chief complaint is weakness, & the dread I am in of Los<sup>e</sup>ing<sup>the use of</sup> my right Hand by a contraction in the sinews which Disables me from writing & obliges me to give my sweet Lady’s the trouble of writing for me.”<sup>54</sup> Elstob expressed her fear of a functional loss that would prevent her from writing, an activity from which she derived considerable solace. This was a common anxiety in letters written by older people. Reading and writing were important outlets and, as we discuss below, letters were a principal method of maintaining social contact.<sup>55</sup> Elstob’s sense of the sinews in her limbs contracting was a rare reference in these letters to the idea that the process of aging was a drying out and subsequent hardening of the body (and one that affected the brain as well as the rest of the body).<sup>56</sup> Unlike her descriptions of illness in her mid-fifties—illness that came from without—this process of later decline was taking place from within. As she approached the age of seventy, references to her “wretched health”<sup>57</sup> and “many infirmities,” and her admission, “I am so weak & infirm,”<sup>58</sup> suggest general physical deterioration rather than specific illnesses. Elstob’s

---

vicar of Yarkhill in 1740. They married on 6 February 1743 in Hereford Cathedral, when Henry was thirty-four. If Mary was the same age, her surviving letters would have begun when she was aged ca. fifty-four and run until she died at the age of ca. seventy-four, in 1782. At the age of seventy, Henry Dangerfield is described as “an infirm old Man, between 70 and 80 Years of Age” (*St. James’s Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 17 November 1778–19 November 1778). His will, dated 1784, refers to his ratification of “the last Will of my late dear Wife” (PROB 11/1115/202, 1 April 1784).

<sup>50</sup> J[ael] Boscawen to Bridget Fortescue, 2 September [?1701], 1262M/0/FC/1 [38c], Devon Heritage Centre (DHC).

<sup>51</sup> John Black II to James and Alexander Black, 28 September 1767, HM 49163, HL.

<sup>52</sup> John Black I to the Lord of Lamont, 19 August 1723, D4457/28, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI).

<sup>53</sup> Ottaway and Tague, “Introduction,” lx.

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Elstob to George Ballard, 12 April 1750, MS Ballard 43 87v, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (BLO).

<sup>55</sup> Stewart, *Enlightenment of Age*, 250.

<sup>56</sup> On ideas of changes to the body over the life-cycle, see Hannah Newton, *The Sick Child in Early Modern England, 1580–1720* (Oxford, 2012), 34.

<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Elstob to George Ballard, 16 January 1752, MS Ballard 43 89, BLO.

<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth Elstob to George Ballard, 14 November 1752, MS Ballard 43 96v, BLO.

letters hint at a transition from cycles of chronic illness to an experience of irreversible decline, although she did not make any explicit connection between that decline and her advancing age.

Like Elstob, the Scottish manufacturer and merchant John Glover had also suffered ill-health in his mid-fifties (from 1805 to 1809); this passed and he remarked that he was never better in health.<sup>59</sup> In subsequent years, he continued to see illness or ill-health as temporary and transient, rather than as an unavoidable result of his advancing age. Glover did not avoid contemplating old age. Indeed, in a letter from November 1812 he reflected on his own aging by comparing himself with the pitiable “old” Mr Wanklyn who suffered a painful stoppage of his water. Glover commiserated that “the common weakness attending age will bow down the most strong,” though he excluded himself from this group: “under such reflections I have great thankfulness that I am so slightly visited.”<sup>60</sup> In fact, Glover had previously suffered “a weakness in the limbs” due to gout in 1808.<sup>61</sup> He again reported a “small touch” of the gout in his letter of November 1812.<sup>62</sup> It is significant that this was written at the age of sixty-three, sometimes described as one of “the Grand Climactericks.”<sup>63</sup> There is a recognition of age on the part of Glover, then, but in accounting for his advancing age and his physical symptoms, he adjusted what he considered to be good health to accommodate increasingly frequent bouts of weakness caused by gout as a corporeal reality of his life-stage. By 1818, a severe fit of gout left him unable to walk and therefore unable to take more exercise—the first mention of problems with his mobility—yet even this was reversible for Glover. Noting “great weakness” and “considerable akes, and sever pain in my ancles knees and joints from the frequent shocks of gout,” Glover also focused on signs of potential recovery or improving health. Perhaps in an attempt to reassure her, he wrote to his daughter, “I look well, eat my food, and grow more in flesh than I wish.”<sup>64</sup> It was the ailment rather than old age itself that appeared to cause Glover distress. Nevertheless, whilst most of our letter writers made little explicit connection between old age and illness in their letters, the recalibration of what it meant to be in good health implies a tacit acknowledgement of the physical realities of old age.

Glover was not alone in cataloguing a range of physical ailments without making an explicit connection to his age. In the 1780s, the London merchant Joseph Salvador wrote to his long-standing friend and cousin Emanuel Mendes da Costa about the challenges he faced but without linking physical disorder and chronological age. In the year of his death aged seventy, Salvador, writing from his South Carolina plantation, admitted that, “My eyes and hands are very much Impaired.” He had lacked a scribe that month and had “been forced to write too much my self,” although the challenge this posed related to health not age: he had “been very ill,” he reported.<sup>65</sup> In his reply, in contrast, Da Costa (a year younger than his cousin), underscored the causal connection between a weakened physical state and chronological age:

My advance in years, & Misfortunes, which fill me with cares and anxieties; are the sole causes of my apparent indolence in writing to so Dear & Beloved a Benefactor. I now begin to feel the Effect of years, my hands are often Paralytical, in so much, that I cannot write freely; my walk in enfeebled; and my memory & other faculties are somewhat

<sup>59</sup> John Glover to Lucy Glover (junior), 13 February 1809, MS.2013.004 Box 1, Folder 10\_5, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles (CL, UCLA).

<sup>60</sup> John Glover to Lucy Glover (junior), 12 November 1812, MS.2013.004 Box 1, Folder 11\_6, CL, UCLA.

<sup>61</sup> John Glover to Lucy Glover (junior), 27 March 1808, MS.2013.004 Box 1, Folder 10\_2, CL, UCLA.

<sup>62</sup> John Glover to Lucy Glover (junior), 12 November 1812, MS.2013.004 Box 1, Folder 11\_6, CL, UCLA.

<sup>63</sup> John Kersey, *A new English dictionary: or, a compleat collection of the most proper and significant words* (London, 1739), entry for “The Climacterical or Ascending Years of Man’s Life.”

<sup>64</sup> John Glover to Lucy Glover (junior), 10 December 1818, MS.2013.004 Box 1, Folder 12\_6, CL, UCLA.

<sup>65</sup> Joseph Salvador to Emanuel Mendes da Costa, 22 January 1786, British Library (BL) Add. MSS. 28542 fol. 90.

impaired; so that I cannot study; which as you well know, was formerly my sole livelihood and occupation.<sup>66</sup>

Da Costa went on to discuss “my agitated breast,” suggesting the changes that old age caused to the emotions and mind,<sup>67</sup> and echoing the “unease” or “frenzy” noted in other people’s comments about older people in this period.<sup>68</sup> Disordered thoughts or feelings, and certainly mental incapacity, are not prominent in older people’s letters, yet they sometimes featured in letters describing others.<sup>69</sup> Our sample reflects the experiences of those who retained the necessary mental capacity for letter writing, as well as the physical dexterity to compose their correspondence.

Yet these letters do show that low or bad mood was a response to the physical decline and social changes sometimes attendant on older years. Sadness was associated with old age in reference works from this period. This was nevertheless coupled with a recognition that older people’s feelings were highly dependent on social situation.<sup>70</sup> Several older letter writers were sad, lonely, or both; low mood was reported especially by those who had lost family or felt alone. For Christiana Shuttleworth, wife of an army major, this was a result of a series of combined physical and emotional challenges in her early sixties, in what were to be the final years of her life. Christiana’s experiences were communicated in letters to her younger friend Ann Hare—both of them lived in Derbyshire—the earliest of which survive from late summer of 1780, when Christiana was sixty-three and managing what would be her husband William’s final illness. Those letters were both an expression of and a lever in Christiana’s friendship with Ann, one on which Christiana relied heavily during this period. Written during Christiana’s final year of life, they express the experiences of a person during their final decline. The early letters focus on William’s poor health, although Christiana also noted her own physical struggles: “I am still so lame, that I move ab<sup>t</sup>. w<sup>th</sup>. pain and recover slowly indeed.” In the next letter to survive, with her husband away taking the (hopefully restorative) waters at Buxton, she remained “so very weak that I am a thorough wearied Traveller long before Bed time.”<sup>71</sup> These challenges persisted once her husband died when she asked Ann to send her two bedgowns: “for I am grown such an Invalid of late that I now constantly sleep in one.”<sup>72</sup> By winter, Christiana was suffering a series of conditions involving her stomach and the “disagreeable sensations of the Gout,” which caused her to presage her own demise: they “rather allarms me least they shoud terminate in a fit which woud now be dreadfull to me—having lost my Dear Comforter who always consoled me in Afflictions.”<sup>73</sup> Like Da Costa, Shuttleworth’s reports of her poor health combine the physical and affective, signaling how integral emotions were to eighteenth-century people’s experiences of embodiment.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Emanuel Mendes da Costa to Joseph Salvador, 30 January 1786, BL Add. MSS. 28542 fol. 93.

<sup>67</sup> Emanuel Mendes da Costa to Joseph Salvador, 30 January 1786, BL Add. MSS. 28542 fol. 94.2b.

<sup>68</sup> Mariana Labarca, “The Emotional Disturbances of Old Age: On the Articulation of Old-Age Mental Incapacity in Eighteenth-Century Tuscany,” *Historical Reflections* 41, no. 2 (2015): 19–36.

<sup>69</sup> None of our letter writers describes experiencing memory loss, though we are aware that this is a common theme in some studies of aging, such as Daniel Schafer, “Gulliver Meets Descartes: Early Modern Concepts of Age-Related Memory Loss,” *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 12, no. 1 (2010): 1–11; Daniel Schafer, “No Old Man Ever Forgot Where He Buried His Treasure: Concepts of Cognitive Impairment in Old Age Circa 1700,” *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* 53, no. 11 (2005): 2023–27.

<sup>70</sup> Nina Verheyen, “Age(ing) with Feeling,” in *Emotional Lexicons: Continuity and Change in the Vocabulary of Feeling, 1700–2000*, ed. Ute Frevert et al. (Oxford, 2014), 151–76.

<sup>71</sup> Christiana Shuttleworth to Ann Hare, 5 August 1780, LD1576/5 [2], Sheffield City Archives (SCA).

<sup>72</sup> Chris[tiana] Shuttleworth to Ann Hare, 15 November 1780, LD1576/5 [unnumbered], fol. 1, SCA.

<sup>73</sup> Chris[tiana] Shuttleworth to Ann Hare, 15 December 1780, LD1576/5 [unnumbered], SCA.

<sup>74</sup> See Fay Bound Alberti, “Bodies, Hearts and Minds: Why Emotions Matter to Historians of Science and Medicine,” *Isis* 100, no. 4 (2009): 798–810; Karen Harvey, “The Body,” in *Emotions in Early Modern Europe: An Introduction*, ed. Susan Broomhall (Routledge, 2017), 165–68.

Physical and emotional challenges intensified for Shuttleworth. Widowhood she described as “my Melancholy lonely Fate.”<sup>75</sup> Following William’s death, she also experienced “frequent disappointments” at her son James’s (and Ann’s husband, Thomas’s) repeated failures to visit and was “very melancholy” on hearing news of James’s poor health.<sup>76</sup> Friends acknowledged that Shuttleworth’s low spirits were exacerbated by the departure of her sons to go to war in America. Mary Moore wrote to Ann Hare in 1780: “poor M<sup>rs</sup> Shuttleworth I pity her much; it must be very distressing to have her Sons took from her at this time; indeed I think Jack out to have provided her with a companion.”<sup>77</sup> By March 1781, physical debility accelerated. Christina struggled with “the Gout and Rumatism flying all over me particularly my Stomach and right Arm that I can scarce make a Letter.”<sup>78</sup> She asked Ann to delay sending another package as she was so poorly: “I must desire you will postpone sending for the Silk till my Health is more established.”<sup>79</sup> In April, Christiana began her letter in the third person, referring to “her naughty Stomach” and the tiredness she put down to the drugs she was taking.<sup>80</sup> That letter, dated 19 April 1781 (the year she died), is the last dated letter to survive. These letters suggest a progressive physical decline as well as intensifying low mood, all compounded by her evident grief at the loss of her husband. In communicating these to her younger friend, Ann, at no point did Christiana refer explicitly to her more than sixty years. However, the convergence of factors that left her feeling weak and low—physical decline, bereavement, and enforced separation from friends and adult children—were more likely to occur in later life.

Like Shuttleworth, the London merchant Eliezer Isaac Keyser (1746–1820) recounted being progressively more indisposed and confined to his house without once mentioning old age explicitly. Keyser also wrote to a younger correspondent: his cousin by marriage, Leah, who was twenty-six years his junior. This may have encouraged him to accentuate some of his symptoms to garner Leah’s sympathy, although it is equally likely that he tried not to overburden her, particularly because Leah’s husband, Assur Keyser, had died in 1816. In the winter of 1817–18, aged seventy-one, Keyser suffered a period of severe illness: a “deplorable affliction” that produced a “distressed state of health,”<sup>81</sup> left him confined to his home, reduced his appetite, and triggered “afflictions on my mind.”<sup>82</sup> After six weeks of medical treatment in London, he was glad to arrive home, “patchd up,” to a good night’s sleep, with medicine to take twice a day and strict rules for food and drink.<sup>83</sup> The advice suggests that his was considered a distinct illness. So much does Keyser himself wish to draw a line under the episode, that he spent many hours writing thank you cards to those who had paid him a visit or sent their good wishes.<sup>84</sup>

Yet the autumn of that year brought new physical challenges. By October he referred to his “feeble powers” and poor health.<sup>85</sup> While Keyser did not relate his experiences to old age, he does acknowledge a period of long-term decline from around 1812, noting in 1819, and at the time of a Jewish fast, that he had “not fasted so well for these seven years.”<sup>86</sup> One consequence of his decline was his inability to engage in the social life he had worked so hard to

<sup>75</sup> Chris[tiana] Shuttleworth to Ann Hare, 19 October 1780, LD1576/5 [unnumbered], SCA.

<sup>76</sup> Chris[tiana] Shuttleworth to Ann Hare, 15 November 1780, LD1576/5 [unnumbered], SCA; Christiana Shuttleworth to Ann Hare, 13 January 1781, LD1576/5 [3], SCA.

<sup>77</sup> Mary Moore to Ann Hare, c. November 1780, LD1583/10/3, SCA.

<sup>78</sup> Christiana Shuttleworth to Ann Hare, 31 March 1781, LD1576/5 [4] fol. 1r, SCA.

<sup>79</sup> Christiana Shuttleworth to Ann Hare, 31 March 1781, LD1576/5 [4] fol. 1, SCA.

<sup>80</sup> Christiana Shuttleworth to Ann Hare, 19 April 1781, LD1576/5 [5] fol. 1r, SCA.

<sup>81</sup> Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 9 January 1818, C 2002.26 fol. 9.1, Jewish Museum London (JML).

<sup>82</sup> Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 13 January 1818, C 2002.26 fol. 10.4, JML.

<sup>83</sup> Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 9 January 1818, C 2002.26 fol. 9.1, JML; Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 13 January 1818, C 2002.26 fol. 10.4, JML.

<sup>84</sup> Eliezer Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 13 January 1818, C 2002.26 fol. 10.3, JML.

<sup>85</sup> Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 26 October 1818, C 2002.26 fol. 8.1, JML.

<sup>86</sup> Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 1819, C 2002.26 fol. 16, JML.

maintain. By 1819, Keyser explained that visitors on one day “Entirely put it out of his power to repeat the attempt.” On returning home, he wrote of himself, “he was very Glad to get home as the spasm afflicted him much.” The suggestion of powerlessness chimes with the objectification effected by his striking use of the third person in this letter.<sup>87</sup> In using the third person, both Shuttleworth and Keyser briefly suggest the “simultaneous recognition and distancing of old age” that Culley sees in the later personal documents of Mary Berry.<sup>88</sup> Keyser, like Shuttleworth, returned to the first person, describing the continuation of his condition, his pains, and being instructed by a physician to stay at home and rest.<sup>89</sup> By the summer of 1820—his last—Eliezer was “indisposed,” confined to the parlor and bedroom, and only able to “hobble” into the garden, although a doctor “gives me good hopes, of getting better,” he assured Leah.<sup>90</sup> In this final year of life, Keyser’s difficulty in walking was accompanied by poor hearing, weakness, and an afflicted mind. Even in his final months, however, he hoped he would improve and become well.

Most letter writers in their sixties discussed some physical, mental, or emotional challenge borne of the physical and social conditions often attendant on later years. While some writers clearly linked the physical challenges they experienced to their advanced years, others—such as Elstob and Glover—did not mention old age when discussing these challenges, despite elsewhere explicitly recognizing themselves as old. This does not necessarily mean that these men and women did not see old age as the cause of their troubles. Ottaway has noted that “Old age was viewed as a disease regardless of the gender of the older person.”<sup>91</sup> That aging was seen as synonymous with illness or poor health could mean that these descriptions of a progressive catalogue of ills took for granted the impact of advanced years on their physical body. There may have been other reasons why old age was not explicitly recognized as the cause of poor health, not least that an admission of aging would mean acknowledging—to oneself and one’s correspondent—that life is finite and its end drawing inexorably closer. A still vitally important religious context, which counseled a need to be always prepared for death, shaped these men’s and women’s experiences of their frailties.<sup>92</sup> Yet a refusal to admit old age expressed resistance to decline, as well as a kindness to the loved ones to whom the letter was addressed. This may have driven Keyser’s tight grip on hope in his final summer, writing to a younger woman who had herself been widowed just a few years before.

Other factors, however, were evidently at work. The physical body itself—the nature and extent of specific conditions—naturally produced different experiences of old age. That some of the older people who explicitly claimed an identity as an old person nevertheless reported very little physical incapacity or decline in later life is important. Aged around seventy-seven in 1804, the Lancashire grandmother Ann Hatfield claimed herself “advanced in years.”<sup>93</sup> She conceded that her age wrought changes to her body. She was proud to be able to write at an advanced age, although simultaneously acknowledged that her ability to write had become impaired: “I am very Thankfull at my age I am able to write you must not Expect Fine Writing at the age 77.”<sup>94</sup> Yet even into her eighties Hatfield did not describe the major physical incapacity noted by some other letter writers, including some of those in their sixties. At eighty-seven she acknowledged that there was more “Danger”

<sup>87</sup> Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 1819, C 2002.26 fol. 17, JML.

<sup>88</sup> Culley, “A Journal of My Feelings,” 293.

<sup>89</sup> Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 28 February 1820, C 2002.26 fol. 19, JML.

<sup>90</sup> Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 20 June 1820, C 2002.26 fol. 20, JML.

<sup>91</sup> Ottaway, *Old Age*, 43. Ottaway and Tague also note that the old regarded age itself as an illness. See Ottaway and Tague, “Introduction,” x.

<sup>92</sup> See Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford, 2013); Ralph Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion, and the Family in England, 1480-1750* (Oxford, 2000); Harvey and Vine, “Prayer for Family and Friends,” 19–20.

<sup>93</sup> Ann Hatfield to Mary-Ann Nicholson, 6 April 1804, MSS 1041 1804 (98) fol. 1r, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester (JRL).

<sup>94</sup> Ann Hatfield to Mary-Ann Nicholson, 30 September 1803, MSS 1041 1803 (87), JRL.



for an “old person,” but explained why she herself had thrived: “I suppose I have Been cautious about that, makes me Live so Long.”<sup>95</sup> Only in her final letter, written just a few months before her death at the age of eighty-nine, did she intimate late and irreversible decline: “I am pretty well of my self, but my complaint is no better, neither do I Expect it to be Better, I hope I shall be Resighn’d.”<sup>96</sup>

Other older people evidently enjoyed good health into their seventies. Philip Papillon, a London merchant and member of parliament, appeared to stay well into his old age, signing off his letters with conventional reports of good health: “we are very well here,” he wrote to his cousin William Turner.<sup>97</sup> A rare reflection on his age in another letter to Turner was prompted by the death of an acquaintance in 1732. The seventy-two-year-old Papillon commented: “I believe he may be about my age or a little older, we being both together at Utrict when my Father lived there, these are warnings for us to take care, to Endeavour to take care to prepare for our future state when we are in health & strength not knowing how soon we may be taken away.”<sup>98</sup> Papillon’s reflection on his old age, and the implication that he currently enjoyed good health, signal the material role that the physical body itself played in the experience of aging. Poor health or incapacity was not a necessary facet of living to an advanced age. Papillon’s reflections—and the absence of any complaint—were perhaps also shaped partly by his knowledge that the cousin to whom he was writing suffered ill-health and had lost a son the year before. They may also have been affected by his experience of caring for his own father during his late decline in 1699, when Philip Papillon was thirty-nine and his father was seventy-seven. By the end of October of that year, Thomas Papillon (1623–1702) had been ill for ten weeks<sup>99</sup> and continued to be confined to the house for a further three weeks, suffering from “a long & tedious indisposition.”<sup>100</sup> In 1732 and in his early seventies, Philip Papillon was surely cognizant that he was approaching the age at which his father’s final decline took place. He was certainly acutely aware of the life-course of family members, recording their births and deaths in “the family book.”<sup>101</sup> He recognized he was well, but the principal purpose of his comment to Turner was to acknowledge that at this time of life, “health & strength” could be replaced by ill-health and weakness at any point. Yet in the end, Philip Papillon appeared to live a well life until he died, aged 75.

That both Papillon and Hatfield expressly remark on their good health despite their years underscores that although for older people themselves there was a strong association between poor health and old age, some felt themselves lucky to have avoided this. Experiences of the over sixties varied. Their experiences might range from poor mobility and weakness to loneliness and sorrow, although old people might well profess their relative good health. Their reports of these experiences are uneven and do not correlate with chronological years but instead reflect a range of physical and social factors.

### Strategies of the Old

Even if some older people used letters to describe their joyful and active lives, they understood the old body to be distinct from younger ones and requiring particular treatment and care. That older people took thoughtful care of themselves is evident from their letters. One important model of self-care that letter writers often employed was the management of their overall well-being through regimen, which involved the manipulation of factors

<sup>95</sup> Ann Hatfield to Mary-Ann Nicholson, 13 April 1814, MSS 104 1 1814 (397) fol. 2, JRL.

<sup>96</sup> Ann Hatfield to Mary-Ann and Elizabeth Nicholson, 19 April 1816, MSS 104 1 1816 (454) fol. 2, JRL.

<sup>97</sup> Philip Papillon (sen) to William Turner, 17 July 1734, U1015/C143/9, Kent History and Library Centre (KHLIC).

<sup>98</sup> Philip Papillon (sen) to William Turner, 18 April 1732, U1015/C143/5 fol. 1, KHLIC.

<sup>99</sup> Philip Papillon (sen) to Thomas Harvey, 24 October 1699, U1015/C44/173, KHLIC.

<sup>100</sup> Philip Papillon (sen) to Samuel Burders, 18 November 1699, U1015/C44/177/1, KHLIC.

<sup>101</sup> Jane Hunt to Philip Papillon (sen) 17 January 1708, U1015/38/3, KHLIC; Jane Hunt to Philip Papillon (sen), 4 July 1704, U1015/C38/1, KHLIC; Philip Papillon (sen) to William Turner, 17 July 1734, U1015/C143/9, KHLIC.

including food, drink, sitting up, clothing, temperature in the room, circulation of air, exercise, and the regular changing of bed-linen to maintain good overall health.<sup>102</sup> Regimen was flexible, allowing it to be adjusted to suit an aging body and maintain a person's sense of agency over their physical and mental decline. Old letter writers had clear views of what they needed to do to stay healthy in body and in mind. This aligns with Yallop's argument that agency over the aging body was particularly pronounced during the eighteenth century.<sup>103</sup> If in the seventeenth century, old age was "associated with disease and decrepitude, accompanied by dependence and impotence,"<sup>104</sup> scholars detect an emerging positivity towards aging in the eighteenth century. This is epitomized by David Troyansky's account of "the emergence of a new view of old age" based on optimism (both with regard to the potential of old people to live well and of society to care for them).<sup>105</sup> These letters certainly demonstrate that old people hoped to live long and healthily.

Regimen counselled that the appropriate air and climate would sustain healthful bodies. In 1751 Robert Black was concerned when his brother John announced his intention to return to Ireland from Bordeaux at the age of seventy: "I hope it is for the best but my Concern is not the Less for your changing a Climate at this stage of Life & moving so far away from me."<sup>106</sup> When John arrived home in Dublin after traveling to Bristol later that year, Robert was relieved that, "your native air had renewed your years & vigor; may it long continue."<sup>107</sup> Given its potency, a change in environment could be harnessed by the older person themselves. In 1805, aged seventy-one, Mary Huddleston, married into a Cambridgeshire gentry family, changed both her environment and her diet, visiting the seaside at South End in Essex. Her letters to her daughter Jane describe bathing, drinking seawater, hearty breakfasts, shopping, and walking, all with the assistance of Martha, a servant who also washed her clothes and ran errands.<sup>108</sup> Mary's change in regimen seemed to be successful as she reported that "my health & spirits are so much mended."<sup>109</sup> Taking the waters was a popular restorative and preventive for those within easy reach of spa towns such as Bath and Cheltenham. For those who could not travel, the waters could be transported to them. In 1782, Mary Dangerfield (aged approximately seventy-four) was unable to travel to Cheltenham due to poor weather and resultant bad roads, "but without license from any Physical director have drank a single glass of that water between breakfast and dinner which agrees well with my stomach and in that gentle alterative way can be no force upon the Constitution."<sup>110</sup> Dangerfield's decision to deploy her own expertise rather than seek medical advice was typical of most older people, who endeavored to manage their own health.

Other aspects of diet were adjusted to ensure continuing health in old age. When in 1808 John Glover experienced an episode of illness at the age of fifty-nine, he adjusted his intake of food and drink both to help his recovery and to guard against further attacks:

I drink no Malt Liquor but soda water or Common  
Water w<sup>t</sup> a bit of Toasted bread: this altogether I  
found would not do without a Little Wine

<sup>102</sup> William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine: or, A Treatise on the Prevention and Cure of Diseases by Regimen and Simple Medicines* (London and Edinburgh, 1788).

<sup>103</sup> Yallop, *Age and Identity*, 145.

<sup>104</sup> Carvalho, "Ageing," 284.

<sup>105</sup> David G. Troyansky, *Old Age in the Old Regime: Image and Experience in Eighteenth-Century France* (Cornell University Press, 1989), esp. chapters 1–5, at 6. See also Botelho and Ottaway, "General Introduction," xx–xxii.

<sup>106</sup> Robert Black (senior) to John Black II, 27 April 1751, D 4457/131, PRONI.

<sup>107</sup> Robert Black (senior) to John Black II, 2 November 1751, D4457/62, PRONI.

<sup>108</sup> Mary Huddleston to Jane Huddleston, 25 July 1805, K488/C1/MHb/57, Cambridgeshire Archives (CA).

<sup>109</sup> Mary Huddleston to Jane Huddleston, 25 July 1805, K 488/C1/MHb/57, CA.

<sup>110</sup> Mary Dangerfield to Mrs Osborne, 17 August 1782, HM60992 fol. 3, HL.

w<sup>ch</sup> I take after Dinner, I am convinced Spirits  
w<sup>t</sup> Water is not friendly:<sup>111</sup>

Like Dangerfield, Glover decided on his own treatment. After receiving six weeks of medical care away from home, Eliezer Keyser instead followed medical advice concerning diet on his return: “I am Orderd to drink Barley Water with Gum Arabic, my Supper to be know Root Gruel of such like beside the medica I take night & morning.”<sup>112</sup> Keyser accessed medical assistance at other times, too. In February 1818 he sought medical advice for deafness, a complaint often associated with the old. Much to his delight, the condition turned out to be treatable with “a slight operation, and which, he performed, this day and without Causing the least pain,” the “WAXATION” was removed from his ears and he could hear again.<sup>113</sup> As we have already discussed, Keyser had a generally positive approach to the corporeal experience of aging, hoping and expecting an improvement in his physical condition to the last. When he did seek advice regarding treatment from a medical professional, it was for specific complaints that he rarely attributed to advanced age. Professional medical treatment was rarely accessed by middling-sort older people, confirming Yallop’s finding that old age was not subject to medicalization in the eighteenth century.<sup>114</sup>

Instead, old people sought out other remedies for the physical and mental challenges associated with their advanced years. Warmth was particularly important for old bones and was frequently harnessed for the benefit of old bodies, as the body’s heat was thought to naturally decline in old age in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.<sup>115</sup> Winter could be a period of endurance for old bodies, when the cold exacerbated rheumatic complaints, irritating old joints. A letter from John Black, written in Spring 1761, describes the captain of a ship on which he was traveling who “gave me his own bed & a constant warm fire side to comfort your dada’s old age.”<sup>116</sup> Rest on a comfortable bed was seen as important to good health in older age, particularly in the colder season. As Eliezer Keyser got older, he imposed restrictions on his travel such that he was not required to stay overnight, “so as not to change my bed.”<sup>117</sup> Even more pronounced than the desire for rest in older people’s letters is their intention to keep moving expressly for the physical and mental benefits it brought. Mary Dangerfield explained to her friend that, “no lameness appears in walking, & I take that exercise moderately whenever weather permits.” As the summer of 1782 came to an end, she admitted that, “infirmities & winter will return together but am thankful for a tolerable use of my feet several months past.”<sup>118</sup> Eliezer Keyser’s attachment to the village of Hampstead derived from the clear health benefits the rural location provided. Hampstead was, he said, his “Load stone ... not only on account of my health ... which is the chief, the air being not only very good, but the the walks, and ride, about the surrounding Countries, so delightful, that I declare I regret when I am compell’d to go to London.”<sup>119</sup> Exercise was an important part of John Glover’s routine and he understood that it played a role in his continuing good health. During a severe attack of gout at the age of sixty-nine, he complained that his affliction “prevents me from Walking as I could wish to take more exercise.”<sup>120</sup> The letters from the second half of the eighteenth century show that older people proactively took steps to improve their physical and mental state and were evidently frustrated when prevented from doing so.

<sup>111</sup> John Glover to Lucy Glover (junior), 26 September 1808, MS.2013.004 Box 1, Folder 10\_3, CL.

<sup>112</sup> Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 13 January 1818, C 2002.26 fol. 10.4, JML.

<sup>113</sup> Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 23 February 1818, C 2002.26 fol. 11, JML.

<sup>114</sup> Yallop, *Age and Identity*, 145.

<sup>115</sup> Bolissian, “Old Age,” 42.

<sup>116</sup> John Black II to George Black, 14 April 1761, D4457/164, PRONI.

<sup>117</sup> Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 13 March 1818, C 2002.26 fol. 12.1, JML.

<sup>118</sup> Mary Dangerfield to Mrs Osborne, 17 August 1782, HM60992 fol. 2, HL.

<sup>119</sup> Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 2 July 1813, C 2002.26 fol. 1.1-2, JML.

<sup>120</sup> John Glover to Lucy Glover (junior), 5 October 1818, MS.2013.004 Box 1, Folder 12\_5, CL, UCLA.

While in the previous century older people might express disappointment that they had survived illness, there are no examples of a wish for death amongst this sample.<sup>121</sup> Some writers expressed comfort at the thought of their own death within a distinctly confessional register and alongside a vision of their resurrection. Writing in 1805, John Glover, for example, knew that “The Other World (which I thank God, thro’ Jesus Christ my known Redeemer) is fast approaching” would reunite him and his daughter with his wife, in a kingdom that “shall never decay.”<sup>122</sup> Religion could be a principal source of solace, as well as authority, for the old.<sup>123</sup> Yet the more powerful response to old age was as full an engagement with the present world as possible.<sup>124</sup> These letters demonstrate a recognition that “being lonely was viewed as potentially unhealthy for body, mind and soul, especially in old age.”<sup>125</sup> Letters were themselves a prophylactic against this. Productive work might also provide continued physical and mental activity. John Black II was closely involved in the management of the family business until well into his seventies. While he stepped away from active management in his late seventies, Black nevertheless remained engaged in the business accounts into his early eighties.<sup>126</sup> It is fair to say that John Black never retired. Women’s work continued into later old age, too, and also involved the continuance of close social contact with family. John Glover’s mother-in-law, Lucy Lowder, was the primary carer for his only daughter (also Lucy). A widow in possession of two properties in Bristol, Lowder cared for the nine-year-old Lucy during her seventies and Lucy lived with her grandmother until Lucy married; Lowder also occasionally cared for her two grandsons.<sup>127</sup> Ann Hatfield’s letters report her continued domestic work well into her old age, particularly work with textiles. Like many women, Ann sent the products of her work to family, especially her grandchildren. Aged seventy-seven, Ann wrote that she was working on a finer “white worsit,” while the following year she was knitting socks for Dorothy to wear in winter.<sup>128</sup> Ann’s knitting kept her busy and involved. The work that older people undertook as grandparents, especially as grandmothers, could be considerable.<sup>129</sup>

There is some evidence that grandparenthood was becoming a more clearly defined role by the later eighteenth century.<sup>130</sup> Later letters in particular show that grandparenthood was a common prompt for older people to reflect on aging and their own status as older people. Ann Hatfield’s letters to her grandchildren show a strong sense of time passing in references such as “in former time.”<sup>131</sup> Her letters to her grandchildren often convey advice, framed by her belief that youth “is the time to Gain Knowledge.”<sup>132</sup> Hatfield had an apparently lively social life and evidently thrived on the company of youth, yet her letters show her occupying a pronounced “elder role.” In a letter from 1807, for example, she counseled her granddaughter expressly from the perspective of advanced years, her reference to chronological age girding the authority she sought to claim:

<sup>121</sup> Hannah Newton, *Misery to Mirth: Recovery from Illness in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2018), 178.

<sup>122</sup> John Glover to Lucy Glover (junior), 12 May 1805, MS.2013.004 Box 1 Folder 9\_3 fol. 2, CL, UCLA.

<sup>123</sup> See Kugler, *Errant Plagiary*, 163 and elsewhere; Anne Kugler, “Women and Aging in Transatlantic Perspective,” in *Power and Poverty*, ed. Ottaway, Botelho and Kitteridge, 65–85. See also Harvey and Vine, “Prayers for Family and Friends.”

<sup>124</sup> Ottaway, *Decline of Life*, 2.

<sup>125</sup> Berry and Foyster, “Ageing and Loneliness,” 220.

<sup>126</sup> John Black II to Alexander Black, 14 December 1763, BOX 1 HM 49160, HL; John Black II to Alexander Black, 8 December 1764, BOX 1 HM 49161, HL.

<sup>127</sup> See, for example, John Glover to Lucy Glover (junior), 6 July 1801, MS.2013.004, Box 1 Folder 6\_3, CL, UCLA.

<sup>128</sup> Ann Hatfield to Mary-Ann and Elizabeth Nicholson, 9 October 1803, MSS 1041 1803 (88) fol. 1v, JRL; Ann Hatfield to James Nicholson, 16 August 1804, MSS1041 1804 (113), JRL.

<sup>129</sup> Bernard Capp, “The Missing Generation: Grandparents and Agency in Early Modern England,” *History* 108, no. 379–380 (2023): 41–63.

<sup>130</sup> Botelho and Ottaway, “General Introduction,” xxiv–xxv; Susannah Ottaway, “Introduction,” in *The History of Old Age in England*, vol. 4, *Intergenerational Relations in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Susannah Ottaway, xv–xvi.

<sup>131</sup> Ann Hatfield to Mary-Ann Nicholson, 30 September 1803, MSS 1041 1803 (87), JRL.

<sup>132</sup> Ann Hatfield to Mary-Ann Nicholson, 14 June 1803, MSS 1041 1803 (82), JRL.

it is very necessary for  
 young people to see Different ways, to Prepare  
 Them for Engaging in the World That is  
 Full of Variety & Changing Scenes, my Ex=  
 =perience of 80 years Hath convined me That  
 to Endeavour to Govern our passions in our  
 youth, is the most Certain way to secure  
 a peaceable passage Thro' Life<sup>133</sup>

Grandparenthood was a prompt for men to adopt an elder role, too. The seventy-six-year-old merchant John Eliot spoke from an acute consciousness of his advanced years in an advising letter to his grandchildren. A native of Cornwall, Eliot wrote to his grandchildren from his adopted home of London with health and dietary advice, hoping that his granddaughter Mariabella would visit the town of St Austell, a place that took him back in time; this was, as he put it, “where I drew my First Breathe.”<sup>134</sup> Younger people brought to mind the time that had passed in the life-course of the older person.

An inability to travel was one of the most common complaints of older people precisely because this limited their engagement with the world. In 1776, Mary Oliver (d. 1783) wrote from Dorset to her niece, Mary Huddleston (jnr), in Cambridgeshire, detailing Oliver’s physical restrictions: “I have been verey ill & weak bad stoomke and verey lame it’s with much difficulty I goe cross the Rome.” Later in the same letter, she continued, “I am so Lame scarce able to goe over the room by my slefe without great danger.”<sup>135</sup> Her physical incapacity prevented Oliver from traveling to be with friends and family, too. In a letter to her niece, she was explicit about the toll this took on herself and her relations and (like Marple before her) explicitly linked her immobility and age:

I think it’s a misfortain to us  
 all being at such distants from each other  
 I wishe to see you all but its not in my power  
 so to do being in years and so disabled I think  
 you might once do it whilts I am alive its  
 a concern to me that I cannot am sure in maney  
 things it’s a losse to us all.<sup>136</sup>

Oliver’s next letter to her niece ended with a hopeless sign-off: “I wish we was nearer Each other but that is In vain,” adding that she missed Mary Huddleston’s deceased father, and closing with the self-conscious apology, “I will not Trouble you <sup>with</sup> any more Complain<sup>ts</sup>.”<sup>137</sup> A few years later, Mary Huddleston (now Scully) would hear that her mother, aged around seventy, was now also unable to travel:

it wod give me real pleasure to see you and them [her family] in Ireland but so long a expensive journey and crossing the seas at my time of life renders it quite impracticable.<sup>138</sup>

Such melancholy regrets highlighted the main reason that older people traveled—to remain connected through social relationships.

<sup>133</sup> Ann Hatfield to Mary-Ann Nicholson, 4 March 1807, MSS 1041 1807 (159), JRL.

<sup>134</sup> John Eliot I to his grandchildren, 22 August 1759, LMA.ACC.1017/1007, London Metropolitan Archives (LMA).

<sup>135</sup> Mary Oliver to Mary Huddleston (Scully), 6 August 1776, K488/C1/MHb/95, CA, UCLA.

<sup>136</sup> Mary Oliver to Mary Huddleston (Scully), 6 August 1776, K488/C1/MHb/95 fol. 2r, CA, UCLA.

<sup>137</sup> Mary Oliver to Mary Huddleston (Scully), 3 September 1776, K488/C1/MHb/96, CA, UCLA.

<sup>138</sup> Mary Huddleston to Mary Huddleston (Scully), c.1802, K488/C1/MHb/77b, CA, UCLA.



We know that older women put considerable effort into maintaining networks of family and friends that sustained them;<sup>139</sup> men did this too. In his letters to his daughter, Hugh Boscawen (Jael's brother-in-law) gives an impression of resolutely active and sociable older man well into his mid-seventies: "We are still full of company, seldom free," he wrote in 1699.<sup>140</sup> His last surviving letter details travel without mention of his seventy-six years, travel that may have been undertaken to enjoy company.<sup>141</sup> Women's letters certainly show they took full advantage of all the joy that travel and visiting offered. In 1796, Sarah Clegg, the sixty-three-year-old wife of a timber merchant, seemed almost boastful when she reported to her daughter of her busy social life: "last week we had company [deleted] to Dine two Days & we Dine'd out two & This week have had Dineing company three Days & been <sup>out</sup> one."<sup>142</sup> Women also travelled despite physical deterioration. In 1803, aged sixty-five, Barbara Johnson, daughter of a vicar and creator of albums of fabric samples, complained to her brother that her eyes ached with writing so much.<sup>143</sup> Nonetheless, the following day she planned to travel the over eighty miles to Bath to enjoy the social life on offer.<sup>144</sup> Over a hundred years earlier, the sixty-three-year-old Joanna Pury had shared Johnson's passions. Unable to travel for a few months, she not only urged her son Theophilus to visit but also insisted that if his sister was going to town that she must buy Joanna something in the "newer fashion" to wear.<sup>145</sup> Such letters by older women echo the determined refusals to accept norms of female aging—the "tenacity and vitality, at the age of fifty, sixty, seventy"—that Joan Hinde Stewart and others see in the lives of eighteenth-century women.<sup>146</sup> Older British women were determined not to lose out on the pleasures that travel permitted.

An appetite for social excitement could wane, no doubt expressing personal disposition.<sup>147</sup> Aged around seventy in 1764, John Campbell, a lawyer and member of parliament until he was seventy-three, explicitly contrasted his pleasure in traveling to London with his experience when "younger": "The pleasure that dear Town now gives me is like strong perfumes too high to bear much of it."<sup>148</sup> Campbell did not remain confined at home, though. Having traveled to London from his home in Pembrokeshire, he noted that, "I had a little stufyness & found my self so well as to venture on the journey which I perform'd better than I expected."<sup>149</sup> Campbell overcame his "stufyness"—suggesting a closeness or thickness—and was pleased to have managed the journey. Similarly, the activities of Mary Dangerfield changed during the 1760s and 1770s. Her "solitary Travels" without her husband provided her with the benefits of sociable visits: "change of place & conversation certainly enlivens the mind; and is at the same time conducive to health."<sup>150</sup> She expresses an ambivalence about the quiet, even dull, life at home that then awaited her: "coming from a good deal of company into an extream of retirement is not quite the thing."<sup>151</sup> Yet she assured her friend that returning to a husband in health and with "a budget of chat" saw them through

<sup>139</sup> Sherri Klassen, "Social Lives of Elderly Women in Eighteenth-Century Toulouse," in *Power and Poverty*, ed. Ottaway, Botelho and Kitteridge, 49–66; Kugler, "Women and Aging," 67–85.

<sup>140</sup> Hugh Boscawen to Bridget Fortescue, 14 {?}July} 1699, 1262M/0/FC/1 [36], DHC.

<sup>141</sup> Hugh Boscawen to Bridget Fortescue, 6 February 1700, 1262M/0/FC/1 [37], DHC.

<sup>142</sup> Sarah Clegg to Rebekah Bateman, 19 May 1796, OSB MSS 32 Box 2, Folder 24 [4] fol. 1r, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

<sup>143</sup> On Johnson see Serena Dyer, "Barbara Johnson's Album: Material Literacy and Consumer Practice, 1746–1823," *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 42, no. 3 (2019): 263–65.

<sup>144</sup> Barbara Johnson to George William Johnson, 20 July 1803, MS. Don. C.193 39, BLO.

<sup>145</sup> Joanna Pury to Theophilus Leigh (senior), 23 June 1688, HM 81610, HL.

<sup>146</sup> Quote from Stewart, *Enlightenment of Ageing*, 252. See also Klassen, "Social Lives of Elderly Women," 61–64.

<sup>147</sup> Kugler, "Women and Aging," 78–82.

<sup>148</sup> John Campbell to Ann Woodforde, 31 May 1764, DD/X/NNT/1/4, Somerset Archives (SA).

<sup>149</sup> John Campbell to Ann Woodforde, 13 August 1767, DD/X/NNT/1/1, SA.

<sup>150</sup> Mary Dangerfield to "Dear Madam," 1 December 1762, HM 60961 fol. 1r, fol. 1v, HL.

<sup>151</sup> Mary Dangerfield to "Dear Madam," 1 December 1762, HM60961 fol. 1v, HL.

the long evenings.<sup>152</sup> Increasingly, her own health and disposition placed limits on her travel. Her “very low state” all of the winter of 1771–72 prevented her from visiting her sister in the Isle of Wight;<sup>153</sup> but while her social activities narrowed, in her final letter of 1782 she still reports being recently away in Gloucester.<sup>154</sup> The appetite for a lively social life might fade for some, but older people were united in their acknowledged need for companionship and company.

The satisfaction of some older letter writers with their social lives is palpable. In 1813, at the age of sixty-seven, Eliezer Isaac Keyser regaled his cousin Leah with news of his very active social life. Writing on a Friday, he reported that only on Wednesday he “was much solicited to take a Cup of Tea with some Ladies, and which I could not refuse, and was after Tea entertained with a Concert, Dancing & Supper.”<sup>155</sup> On Thursday he should have attended the new theatre in Hampstead but was “was engaged at home with a few visitors.” This was the second invitation he had been compelled to decline in one week. He hoped to attend the next two performances, on Saturday and Monday, in the “Company with several Ladies.”<sup>156</sup> Keyser’s outline of his social engagements was, as he explained, a direct response to his cousin’s enquiry: “I live as it were alone, and how can I find any Comfort, I will then answer you, that I make myself as Comfortable as possibly my situation will admit of, and notwithstanding all this I find no lack of amusement In my domestic situation.”<sup>157</sup> Doubtless, these writers’ reports of being “alone” skate over the presence of servants in the house who also likely cared for them.<sup>158</sup> Keyser’s remark that he lived “as it were alone” may well have been some acknowledgement of this. His insistence on how much company he enjoyed certainly refuted any suggestion that he was lonely and unhappy. Yet Keyser also insisted that even in his solitary pursuits—reading, writing, walking and angling on Hampstead Heath, and dining alone—“I pass the time very well.”<sup>159</sup> To be sure, his life was shaped by his “health” (if not explicitly by age), but he was keen to communicate the joy he gleaned from both solitary and sociable pursuits at the age of sixty-seven.

Keyser’s use of the term “amusement” is consonant with the humorous tone he adopted in many of his letters. A determination to poke fun at old age—as well as to have fun—is a prominent feature of some of these letters. People’s disposition or feelings about old age differed. Individual responses to old age were not only highly personal, they were also a way in which people might meet the challenges sometimes inherent in later life. If old age was commonly associated with wisdom and a denial of frivolity in the eighteenth century,<sup>160</sup> older letter writers were not beyond making a joke of their experiences, often with their younger correspondents. Mrs. Collier teased her friend Ann Hare, “you ought to be ashamed of yourselves, to let two such old Folks as Digby & I be so much cleverer than yourselves.”<sup>161</sup> The same gentle type of humor is suggested in a letter Ann Hatfield wrote to her granddaughter, Mary-Ann Nicholson, about a possible visit in 1804: “you know my Dear I am Far advanced in years & can’t Doo without Assistance. You are very kind in wishing me To Come, are you

<sup>152</sup> Mary Dangerfield to “Dear Madam,” 1 December 1762 HM 60961 fol. 2r, HL.

<sup>153</sup> Mary Dangerfield to Mrs Osborne, 30 July 1772, HM60962, HL.

<sup>154</sup> Mary Dangerfield to Mrs Osborne, 17 August 1782, HM60992, HL.

<sup>155</sup> Eliezer Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 2 July 1813, C 2002.26 fol. 1.3, JML.

<sup>156</sup> Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 2 July 1813, C 2002.26 fol. 1.4, JML.

<sup>157</sup> Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 2 July 1813, C 2002.26 fol. 1.2, JML.

<sup>158</sup> See Sarah Fox, Karen Harvey and Emily Vine, ‘Ties of Intimacy: The Body and the Early Modern Family’, in *Rethinking the Early Modern Family*, ed. Helen Berry and Elizabeth Foyster (Cambridge, forthcoming).

<sup>159</sup> Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 2 July 1813, C 2002.26, JML.

<sup>160</sup> Katarzyna Bronk, “Esse versus Percipi: The Old and the Elderly in Restoration and Early Eighteenth-century English Plays,” *Cultural Intertexts* 5 (2016): 21–34; Kugler, *Errant Plagiary*, 18; Susannah Ottaway, “Introduction,” in *The History of Old Age in England*, vol. 2, *The Cultural Conception of Age in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Susannah Ottaway, xviii.

<sup>161</sup> I. Collier to Ann Hare, 24 December [?1769], LD1576/9/2, SCA.

aware that an old Person will Require waiting upon, will my Dear Maryann & Betsey Doo it with pleasure?"<sup>162</sup> Hatfield's grandson, James, was treated with similarly jocular self-deprecation later that year: "you will say we have been very Gay, I shall be glad when we have paid our visits, it is a Deal Trouble when old people Goes out."<sup>163</sup> As others have noted, older women could write about themselves in ways that contrasted with "deadening prescriptions," including "graceful, self-deprecating humor."<sup>164</sup>

Humor, however, might cast merely a thin veil over the poignancy of older age. The compass of Eliezer Keyser's sociable life narrowed as he became incapacitated in his seventies. The few letters we have from the year of his death—1820—suggest that while he had several invitations to see his family, his poor health prevented him from accepting. One of the last letters explains that he will therefore have to keep "at hampstead by myself."<sup>165</sup> Keyser met this regrettable development with hope (as we have seen) and with humor, sending a comical but also profoundly poignant note and sketch to his cousin:

There was a person who happened indisposed to be  
and for many Days few of his Relations did he see  
Therefore the Burthen of his song used to Be  
I care for nobody, no not I since nobody care for me  
whoever the cap fits May wear it<sup>166</sup>

The letter was illustrated with an ink drawing of a night cap. Humor was a prophylactic to the low mood sometimes attendant on old age, as well as a deterrent to the changes in temper that were associated with older people. The "Lady of Quality" who wrote a text called *Age Made Happy as Well as Honourable*, published in 1747, advised the old not to be "obnoxious."<sup>167</sup> The solution was to maintain a cheerful disposition, taking care not to criticize the young, or to be too forthcoming with advice. Ann Hatfield was fully conscious of wider expectations that older people became less tolerant and more difficult in company as they aged. She was adamant that she would not become an objectionable older person. "I have very long been striving to prevent the peevishness that often attends upon old people," she wrote to her granddaughter, "how far I have succeeded you will be able to judge when I come amongst you."<sup>168</sup> In making light of being old in letters, older people assured their correspondents that they remained good and easy company. They might also reinforce a friendship through camaraderie. Giles Earle referred to his balding pate with some humor in the context of series of letters with his younger attorney and friend Joseph Munby in 1806. Earle asked him to collect "a couple of wigs of a Mr Hands to cover my bald pate" but requested discretion for, "whatever I know, and the Fair Sex may suspect, I wou'd not have it published in Gath or Ascalon, that I am reduced to a dry bob."<sup>169</sup> The joke reinforced a homosocial bond grounded in shared experience and witty self-deprecation; their bodies, these old friends agreed, really were a laughing matter.

## Conclusion

One's status as an older person accrued from a number of embodied experiences that were physical, cognitive, and emotional. The aging body shaped daily activities and occasionally frustrated the plans of older letter writers as it became increasingly unreliable. It could

<sup>162</sup> Ann Hatfield to Mary-Ann Nicholson, 6 April 1804, MSS 1041 1804 (98) fol. 1r–fol. 1v, JRL.

<sup>163</sup> Ann Hatfield to James Nicholson, 16 August 1804, MSS 1041 1804 (113) fol. 1r–1v, JRL.

<sup>164</sup> Stewart, *Enlightenment of Age*, 87, 251.

<sup>165</sup> Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 5 March 1820, C 2002.26 fol. 24, JML.

<sup>166</sup> Eliezer Isaac Keyser to Mrs Assur Keyser, 1820, C 2002.26 fol. 23 f1r, JML.

<sup>167</sup> A Lady of Quality, *Age Made Happy as Well as Honourable*, by a select member of cautionary rules, for the rendering it equally pleasing both to ourselves and others, instead of being obnoxious to for both (London, 1747), title page.

<sup>168</sup> Ann Hatfield to Mary-Ann Nicholson, 6 April 1804, MSS 1041 1804 (98) fol. 1v, JRL.

<sup>169</sup> Giles Earle to Joseph Munby, 19 June 1806, MFP 2/96, EYLA.

demand recognition, even in those that did not explicitly identify as old. But the body did not define old age. Some of our letter writers acknowledged neither the restrictions of the body, nor their chronological age, in later life. Even illness was not always seen as an inevitable feature of aging. Some, such as Elizabeth Elstob, explained illness by decline and old age. Others refused to give up hope of a recovery from illness despite being chronologically old. Longitudinal analysis allows us to see how some, such as John Glover, recalibrated their expectations of health over time, claiming good health despite their advanced years. Experiences of old age were both relational and social. When John Glover compared himself to “old” Mr Wanklyn, he did not feel so old and expressed gratefulness for his comparative youth and vigor. When Job Marple compared himself to his young namesake, however, he felt old and “broke” despite living another ten years with limited change in his physical health. Ann Hatfield appears to have felt invigorated by the company of young people, as did John Black. Gender shaped the experiences and expression of older men and women but not always in the ways we might expect. We know that in eighteenth-century society, “a woman’s age signified in ways that a man’s did not.”<sup>170</sup> Yet the specter of the monstrous older woman is absent in the comments of older people, while substantial evidence of older women’s sociability underscores other accounts of positive cultural representations and experiences of older women.<sup>171</sup> Physical weakness was more often associated with older women, but it was men who more often voiced worries about their aging appearance. Overall, though, the attitudes and strategies of older men and women in these letters show remarkable convergence.

Just as old age is relational and social, so are letters. While some older people no doubt wanted to present an independent image to distant relatives, others will have wanted to court sympathy and support. It is important, then, that throughout this period older people sought proactively to manage and mitigate the effects of old age. At the same time, many affirmed the joyful aspects of the later stages of life and continued to seek out satisfying and positive experiences. This provides a valuable historical perspective for what scholars in other disciplines refer to as “active aging” and “positive aging,” demonstrating that the expectation that people can enjoy their later years—and take active steps to ensure this—is not the product of modernity, nor are pressures to “age well” limited to neo-liberal societies.<sup>172</sup> Aging well in the eighteenth century combined strategies for keeping physically, socially, and mentally active, at least amongst those with the means to do so. Diet, exercise, and environment were regularly adapted by older people to suit the needs of their older body, but movement, relationships, and a positive attitude were particularly important. These strategies find striking echoes in the World Health Organization’s summary of the requirements for well-being in older age in its policy framework for the United Nations’ “Decade of Healthy Ageing” (2021–2030).<sup>173</sup> Older people in the eighteenth century had a good understanding of their well-being and needs. The physical, mental, and social challenges of old age are certainly palpable in eighteenth-century letters, but we occlude the agency, resilience, and determination—as well as the good humor—of older people if we fail to listen to their equally insistent statements of a life enjoyed.

<sup>170</sup> Stewart, *Enlightenment of Age*, 248.

<sup>171</sup> 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; Amanda Vickery, “Mutton Dressed as Lamb? Fashioning Age in Georgian England,” *Journal of British Studies* 52, no. 4 (2013): 858–86.

<sup>172</sup> Rachel Pack, Carri Hand, Debbie Laliberte Rudman and Suzanne Huot, “Governing the Ageing Body: Explicating the Negotiation of ‘Positive’ Ageing in Daily Life,” *Ageing and Society* 39, no. 9 (2019): 2085–108.

<sup>173</sup> “Healthy Ageing and Functional Ability”: <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/healthy-ageing-and-functional-ability>. See also “WHO’s work on the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030),” <https://www.who.int/initiatives/decade-of-healthy-ageing>; “Decade of Healthy Ageing: The Platform,” <https://www.decadeofhealthyageing.org/>.

**Karen Harvey** is Professor of Cultural History at the University of Birmingham, UK, and PI on the project, “Material Identities, Social Bodies: Embodiment in British Letters c.1680–1820,” Leverhulme Trust (2021–2025, Ref. RPG-2020-163), <https://socialbodies.bham.ac.uk>.

**Sarah Fox** worked as a postdoctoral researcher on the “Material Identities, Social Bodies” project, before being appointed Senior Lecturer in History at Edge Hill University, UK. The authors would like to thank Susannah Ottaway, Alexandra Shepard, Amanda Vickery, Emily Vine, Jonathan Willis, and the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their comments on the article. Karen Harvey would also like to thank the audience at the History Seminar/Eighteenth-Century Studies Centre, Queen’s University, Belfast. Please address any correspondence to [k.l.harvey@bham.ac.uk](mailto:k.l.harvey@bham.ac.uk).

---

**Cite this article:** Harvey K, Fox S (2025). Feeling Old in Eighteenth-Century Britain. *Journal of British Studies* 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2024.181>