
# No Country for Old Men? An Introduction

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Traditionally, gender studies have focused on women. Politically, this is logical enough. It is women who have undergone the worst effects of gender discrimination, and so it is women who had to make gender visible as a political category for the first time. Nevertheless, gender studies have since the late 1980s started to pay increasing attention to men's lives as well, recognizing that the lives of women are inextricably linked to men's, and that men can, indeed should, actively participate in the struggle for gender equality if we are all to live better, happier lives (Kimmel 2009). Over the last twenty years, then, gender studies have increasingly expanded to incorporate both women and critical studies on men and masculinities. This has contributed to promoting a thriving interdisciplinary masculinity research, which has given way to a fast-growing number of publications in the Social Sciences and the Humanities, including sociological, psychological, historical, anthropological, and cultural studies of masculinity, among others (see, for example, Michael Flood's bibliography at mensbiblio.xyonline.net). While

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the first studies of masculinities in the late 1980s stemmed from sociology and psychology, the focus has since the late 1990s shifted into the Humanities (Kimmel 2009), resulting in the recent publication of a growing number of studies on cultural representations of masculinity in literature, cinema, art, music, the media, etc. These studies have covered a multiplicity of topics, such as cultural representations of male sexualities, the male body, fatherhood, friendship, and gender violence, to name but a few.

Much less attention seems to have been paid, however, to specific studies on cultural representations of masculinity and age. Yet the UN World Population Prospects, for example, insist on the global challenge posed by the continuously growing older population of most developed countries, especially Europe and the USA. Indeed, it is estimated that, given the fast increase in life expectancy and parallel decrease in fertility rates, the global population of 65+ will triple to 1.5 billion by mid-century. By 2025, near one-third of the U.S. population will also be aged 60+, with a particularly rapid increase in the number of people aged 80+, due to the aging of postwar baby boomers. This will have an enormous impact at both economic and social levels, affecting factors like healthcare, the active workforce, pensions, family structures, and intergenerational relations, among others. Yet while aging is increasingly being scrutinized from multiple perspectives, both gender and gerontology studies have recurrently overlooked analyses of older men, concentrating, respectively, on older women (Segal; Maierhofer; Wyatt-Brown and Rossen) or on "ungendered portraits of aging" (Saxton and Cole). As a consequence, both fields, as Saxton and Cole insist, have "contributed to the cultural 'invisibility' of older men" and, even more, "the inverse correlation between masculinity and aging." In other words, both fields seem to have failed to study the specificities of older men as men. "Especially outside, but even inside, the field of gerontology," Edward H. Thompson (xi) lamented, "there has been a tendency to view the elderly population as…homogeneous."

While there exist numerous studies on the influence on masculinity of race, class, sexuality, or nationality, among other factors, little has been done on how age can affect masculine identity in decisive ways throughout the life course, particularly late life. Indeed, much of the existing scholarship seems to keep overlooking the fact that, together with racism or sexism, ageism is one of the main problems in our societies. Western cultures seem to be obsessed with eternal youth, stigmatizing

old age and trying to prolong youth through bodybuilding, sport, or even plastic surgery. Yet, probably as a result of this very ageism, scholarship on men and masculinities has tended to focus on boyhood and youth culture, rather than old age. Moreover, the few studies available on aging masculinities have come either from sociological (Thompson; Jackson) or biomedical sources (Wentzell). So, the innovative scientific potential of this project lies in "gendering" age from the perspective of masculinity, and especially in the Humanities, as scientific research has seldom focused on a cultural (especially literary) arena. If, as Teresa De Lauretis has argued, "the representation of gender is (its) construction" (3), then there is no doubt that cultural representations play a key role in the social construction and de-construction of masculinities, the wide variety and psychological complexity of literary characters and cultural representations proving particularly helpful to rethink masculinities in new and profound ways.

Focusing on representations of aging masculinities in contemporary U.S. fiction, the innovative component of this book project thus lies in a number of different albeit interrelated factors. First of all, while there have been studies concerned with female-authored portrayals of older women in fiction—for example, Zoe Brennan's *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction* (2004)—there has not been a comparative study for aging male characters.[1] "While in relation to early and middle adulthood we find clear models of dignified masculinity," Gabriela Spector-Mersel contends, "these become vague, even non-existent, when referring to later life…Western masculinity scripts are not designed for elderly men, and thus are concluded somewhere before 'old age'" (73). Given the fast-growing number of representations of older men available in U.S. literature and culture over the last few years—including a large number of popular films with older (male) characters as protagonists ("No Country for Old Men" [2007]; "Gran Torino" [2008]; "Up" [2009]; "Nebraska" [2013], for example)—it now seems both possible and desirable to rethink the specific influence on masculinity of aging in contemporary U.S. fiction. As many contemporary U.S. (and, indeed, global) writers (e.g., Paul Auster, Philip Roth, John Updike, Stephen King, Elizabeth Strout, Toni Morrison, Diana Abu-Jaber, Jhumpa Lahiri) have entered maturity, older characters have become increasingly present in contemporary U.S. fiction in recent years, which makes the present study both timely and necessary.

Taking up Roberta Maierhofer's claim to explore age and gender in relation to each other, this book thus engages with, and revisits, traditional assumptions of gender and/in aging studies, especially those which establish clear-cut distinctions of aging according to sex. In particular, this study seeks to question the seemingly accepted gendered classification and critique, issued by scholars like Barbara Waxman, that women are much more likely to author *Reifungsromane*—"a novel of ripening" (2), presenting "newly self-knowledgeable, self-confident, and independent" women (17)—than men, who tend to produce portraits of old men that are characterized by sadness and decline. Drawing on a wide range of U.S. critical and literary texts, the project will investigate a selection of literary texts that place old men at the center of the narrative, analyzing these authors' depiction of issues such as older men's health problems, body changes and shifting perceptions of sexual prowess, depression, loneliness and loss, but also greater wisdom and confidence, legacy, changing notions and appraisals of time, joyful forms of "retirement" and (grand)parenting, as well as new friendships, relationships, and affective patterns, among others. Thus, the overall aim of this project is to explore the intersections between masculinity and aging, especially their representations, in different contemporary U.S. literary works, by canonical or established writers like Roth and Morrison but also more popular authors such as Stephen King or William Shatner, including a wide variety of literary genres, ranging from novels (including detective, horror, and science fiction) to autobiography and memoirs. The cultural productions analyzed in the proposed study are both male- and female-authored, gay and straight, as well as from different cultural, ethnic and/or religious backgrounds, including African-, Arab-, Asian-, Jewish, and American cultures.

In line with this, the project is divided into five main sections. The first section focuses on gendering age in/through contemporary U.S. fiction, analyzing a number of texts, male and female-authored, which set the tone for some of the main gendered issues affecting older male characters throughout the volume. The second section moves on to analyze some more specific examples from popular fiction, including detective, horror, and science fiction novels, just as the third section deals with men's aging in autobiography and memoir. The last two sections, on the other hand, add an extra layer of complexity by exploring the effects on men of aging beyond whiteness and heterosexuality, focusing on non-white and queer fictions, respectively. Ultimately, then, the study will aim to prove that

there is no common male vision of aging, but that men's aging experiences as described in contemporary U.S. literature and culture are as complex and varied as those of their female counterparts. To do so, the book will draw on both an interdisciplinary and intersectional methodology, examining not only the interrelationship of age and gender, as well as aging and gender studies, but also cultural variations by factors like race-ethnicity (Lamb), sexuality (Bergling; Halberstam; Freeman; Goltz), and/or religious affiliation (Geffen), among others, thus proving the decisive influence of all these factors on their conceptions and representations of old age. Moreover, several, though by no means all, of the literary texts analyzed in the volume are by authors who might themselves be considered as "aging," which might raise interesting questions (allowing for Roland Barthes's classic death of the author views) on the relevance of the age of the author, male or female, to the aging experiences of his/her characters. This is most obvious, perhaps, in the case of authors like Philip Roth or John Updike, whose literary characters seem to have aged alongside their authors, as Juan González-Echeverría's chapter argues of Updike's Rabbit, for example. Yet, as in the case of the "sex" of the author, this book aims, again, to avoid any simplistic equation between text and artist, or characters and authors, emphasizing instead the social and cultural constructedness of aging itself, as well as the complex, changing, multifaceted, and far from univocal experience(s) of (men's) aging in contemporary U.S. literature. As Thompson argued, "much of the research on men failed to recognize that numerous masculinities coexist for older men, and that these individuals are not living equally by the same standard" (xii).

In the first chapter, González explores the meaning of Harry Angstrom's final life chapter in *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), the last book of the Pennsylvania tetralogy by John Updike. Much of its narrative interest lies in its protagonist's difficulty in dealing with his aging process in the 1980s, which leads him to a gender identity crisis. The ultimate sequel, where only his sexual desire survives, thus emphasizes the gradual loss of his social identity and his decline as a man from the 50s who idealizes the past. This chapter will show how, after his days as a basketball star, he sees himself as a failed man, which precipitates his fall from his American Dream. His quest for meaning thus concludes in a dead-end that represents both the self-destroying component of masculinity and the ascendance of the New Woman in postwar American culture. Jhumpa Lahiri's 1999 short story "The Third and Final Continent" and Geoffrey

Eugenides' 2002 novel *Middlesex* draw complex portraits of immigrant American masculinities that change with age. In these fictions, characters, as Sarah Hardy argues, work to construct masculine identities in a diaspora at the same time as they confront their own aging and mortality. This essay will use the short story to explore the relationship between emerging gender identity and shifting geographies and then turn to see how this relationship is complicated in Eugenides' longer work. For her part, Requena's chapter will focus on the materialities of age, and old age specifically, in order to contest popular stereotypes of older men and instead center on the complex masculinities portrayed in this period of life. More specifically, she suggests analyzing aging male bodies in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991), and Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* (2008), wherein aging male characters struggle both with their assumptions about their past masculine "embodied" identities and the instability of their present condition as older men.

In the following section, dedicated to popular fiction, M. Isabel Santaulària-Capdevila will focus on how Stephen King correlates aging masculinity to feelings of obsolescence, anxiety, and worthlessness. She contends that in his novels—especially, *It* (1986), *Dreamcatcher* (2001), and *Doctor Sleep* (2013)—King presents old age in general as pathetic, disgusting and even outright monstrous, thus turning it into a stage of life that incapacitates people in general, and especially men, from meaningful and heroic action. In so doing, he challenges patriarchal constructions of masculinity that impose impossible standards on men, especially as they age, drawing instead on qualities such as solidarity, friendship, love, and memory as essential in order to battle the forces of evil. Exploring the centrality to (science) fiction of technological advances, Mateos-Aparicio analyzes the relocation of the myth of the frontiersman to interplanetary space (the "final" frontier) and the evolution of the representations of masculinity models in science fiction, discussing hybridity in the *Star Trek* and *Zero G* sagas.

Moving into the autobiographical, the third section features Esther Zaplana's study on Philip Roth's memoir *Patrimony* (1991) and his portrayal of old age *vis-à-vis* the bond created between father and son in the context of the mother's death toward the end of Roth's father's life. Similarly, Acosta will focus on Paul Auster's *Winter Journal*, published when the writer was in his sixties, as an autobiographical writing which, in her opinion, points to a way of understanding the self as mediated by a body in constant change.

Within the framework of a new "politics of the black body" that contests any prevalent narratives of race and gender, it is Mar Gallego's contention that Toni Morrison has deeply invested in the investigation of the nature and configuration of black masculinities and the intricate link with other identity categories such as age and aging. Starting from *Song of Solomon*, the first novel which featured a male protagonist, Morrison has incessantly depicted black male characters who challenge any univocal vision of what black manhood may entail. As these characters mature, she further argues that they gradually become more articulate to address other topics such as systemic violence, the deep traumas that haunt them or the necessity to relate to other human beings on an equal basis. In her chapter, Bosch-Vilarrubias will explore the tensions between Islamic teachings and practice regarding the elderly in a situation of displacement. She will delve into the particular case of Arab immigrants to the United States and examine the specific relationships depicted between daughters, granddaughters, and elderly men, as portrayed in Arab American literature written by women. To do so, she will analyze the family dynamics and treatment of aging men in contemporary novels such as Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* (1993), Naomi Shihab Nye's *Going Going* (2005), and Alia Yunis's *The Night Counter* (2009).

In the last section, Armengol's chapter will concentrate on "queering" age by analyzing the representation of older men's sexualities in selected works by male authors such as Philip Roth or John Updike. The selected literary corpus includes male authors from different backgrounds so as to illustrate how (self-)representations of aging men vary according to not only gender but also ethnicity (Ernest Gaines) and sexual orientation (Edmund White), among other factors. The chapter thus ends up challenging the conventional equation of men's aging processes with (sexual) decline, exemplifying their plurality as well as irreducible contradictions. On the other hand, Ignacio Ramos-Gay and Claudia Alonso-Recarte will analyze the significance and structural development of the theme of aging in Steven Rowley's debut novel, the bestselling *Lily and the Octopus* (2016), where its protagonist Ted inadvertently parallels his own aging condition as a single gay male with the helplessly ephemeral lifespan of his beloved dog. In so doing, they argue, the former unconsciously tries to carve out his masculinity in a world of confusing homosexual and humanimal parables in which the feminine holds a central position.

Taken together, then, all these chapters set out to "gender" aging from a masculinity studies perspective, and then use aging studies to also revisit

masculinities. We hope that rethinking masculinities from the perspective of aging studies will contribute different perspectives on the topic, and that by exploring aging through masculinities we will understand new aspects of the relationships among these two constructs. By applying both masculinity and aging studies to literary and cultural analysis, we also hope to challenge stereotypical images of aging men, using cultural representations to prove the variety and irreducible complexity of men's experiences of getting older. Of course, further research will be needed to confirm these preliminary findings. In particular, it will be necessary to expand the corpus of authors and texts to include, for example, more men as well as women's representations of aging male characters, which is far beyond the scope and possibilities of this book. Yet the preliminary results do seem to suggest that while men's and women's experiences of aging may certainly differ, aging is neither less varied nor easier for men than it is for women. Although there is no doubt that ageism and sexism are deeply intertwined, the available research indicates that women not only live longer in all developed countries and a majority of less developed ones, often by as much as ten years, but they also seem to age better, with about 85% percent of all suicides among older adults in the USA, for example, being by men (Segal 82). It seems that as they retire, older men have a harder time finding themselves without gender-appropriate occupations in the domestic sphere. Since masculinity has traditionally been defined as individualistic and self-reliant, aging men also seem to have a particularly difficult time adapting to what they perceive as a gradual loss of independence, and many of them refuse to seek help even when they cannot manage well on their own. While it is true that widowers tend to remarry more often and faster than widows, which has traditionally been interpreted as an indication of gender inequality, Pat Thane is right in suggesting that maybe this should be revisited as a sign of men's greater dependence, as they have often "fared poorly without the aid of a wife" (152).[2] Even though some older men keep playing important roles as businessmen or political readers, they seem to be the exception to the rule, many of them being confined to social marginality.[3] Indeed, the feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir devoted most of her study on old age, *The Coming of Age* (1970), to men, precisely because, as Lynne Segal reminds us, she "was convinced that it was men, not women, who suffered most from growing old" (77). In Beauvoir's view, men suffered more because of aging, particularly after retirement, because old age reduced them to the situation she had earlier explored in *The Second Sex*, that is,

the situation of women. In Beauvoir's words, the aging male "becomes, and to a far greater extent than a woman, a mere object." Whereas "she is necessary to society," even if only as a lifelong carer, "he is of no worth at all" (Beauvoir 89).[4] Yet the challenge to hegemonic (*read* youthful) masculinity posed by old age may also help undermine, as we shall see, the traditional equation of masculinity with phallic prowess, thus pointing to alternative models of being a man. For men, then, old age no doubt represents a challenge, but also a unique opportunity to rethink themselves *as men*.

## Notes

1. For a few though remarkable exceptions, see Hobbs; Leverenz.
2. Pat Thane also notes that in the seventeenth century, for example, poor old women could find jobs more easily than men since (younger) men's jobs often involved manual work, which old men were no longer capable of performing because of their waning physical strength (162).
3. As early as the thirteenth century, for example, the elderly, like women and children, were already represented as a single marginal group irrespective of rank or social class. Indeed, they were usually classed with the invalids, foreigners, or the very poor, "the emphasis being on…their social inferiority and their exclusion from political influence" (Thane 80).
4. This does not mean, of course, that we can give up exploring the specificities of women's aging, or the strong historical links between sexist and ageist discriminations. On the contrary, it is precisely the strong connections between sexism and ageism, I do believe, that demand that we continue to explore the gendered effects of aging on both women and men. Not *despite* feminist contentions, but precisely *because of* them.

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