

# ‘How to Grow Old Gracefully’: Advice, Authority and the Mentor in Women’s Late Life Writing

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*Abstract:* This article considers what it meant to grow old gracefully as a woman in Britain in the early nineteenth century by focusing on intergenerational relationships and mentoring. Despite the ambivalent response to the figure of the older woman, her potential as mentor is frequently foregrounded in advice literature in this period. However, in contrast to this prescriptive ideal, the life writing of Lady Louisa Stuart (1757–1851) provides a rare opportunity to explore how older women navigated the culturally ascribed role of mentor. Stuart considers the vexed question of how to grow old gracefully in extensive correspondence with younger women and as a biographer of previous generations. The recovery of Stuart, a writer who barely published during her long lifetime, suggests how women’s late life writing has the potential to complicate cultural narratives of ageing and gender and provide insight into the dynamic relationship between writing and ageing.

*Keywords:* gender; life writing; Lady Louisa Stuart; Lady Mary Wortley Montagu; old age; mentors; intergenerational relationships

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## Introduction

In 1799 in *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, moralist and religious writer Hannah More noted that ‘to learn how to grow old gracefully is perhaps one of the rarest and most valuable arts which can be taught to a woman.’<sup>1</sup> Two years later in 1801 the periodical *The Lady’s Monthly Museum* included an article entitled ‘How to Grow Old Gracefully’. In its incarnation at the beginning of the nineteenth century, this phrase is understood both in spiritual terms as an encouragement to readers to age piously (with grace), as well as in its more familiar, secular guise as a demand for age-appropriate behaviour, particularly in relation to fashion, cosmetics and social conduct. For More, growing old gracefully depended on educating a young woman morally and spiritually for the ‘sober season of life’, a period when ‘admirers fall away, and flatterers become mute’ and ‘the mind will be driven to retire into itself’.<sup>2</sup> When More’s phrase is then taken up by the periodical *The Lady’s Monthly Museum* the article suggests that ‘in this age of refinement’, ‘to grow old *gracefully* in the opinion of the *world*’ is to defy ageing, as women engage in the ‘subterfuges of art’ and ‘imitate the trifling frivolity of youth’ in order to appear not to age at all.<sup>3</sup> This is regarded as a corrupting rather than instructive example, which leads to an inevitable loss of veneration for older women as ‘thoughts which ought to be turned to an approaching eternity, are either engrossed by scandal, or centered in cards’.<sup>4</sup> It is also understood as a waste of the older woman’s potential to be a source of ‘wise counsel’ and ‘set a pattern of religion and morality’.<sup>5</sup>

The early nineteenth century therefore displayed an ambivalent response to the older woman, figured simultaneously as a source of corruption and a virtuous moral influence. There have been rewarding discussions of what it meant to grow old gracefully as a woman in Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in work by Devoney Looser and Katharine Kittredge, and outside a British context by Joan Hinde Stewart, Terri Premo and Anne Kugler.<sup>6</sup> This article contributes to scholarship on narratives of gender and ageing by focusing on intergenerational relationships and mentoring. The figure of the older woman as mentor is frequently foregrounded in advice literature of the early nineteenth century. However, shifting the focus to life writing of this period enables older women to ‘bring their own voices to bear on the cultural narrative of aging, thus rendering this narrative more complex,

<sup>1</sup> More (1799: Volume 1, 71).

<sup>2</sup> More (1799: Volume 1, 72).

<sup>3</sup> *The Lady’s Monthly Museum* (February 1801: 132–3).

<sup>4</sup> *The Lady’s Monthly Museum* (February 1801: 133).

<sup>5</sup> *The Lady’s Monthly Museum* (February 1801: 133, 136).

<sup>6</sup> Looser (2008); Kittredge (2002); Hinde Stewart (2010); Premo (1990); Kugler (2002).

subjective and diverse'.<sup>7</sup> The extensive life writing (both print and manuscript) of Lady Louisa Stuart (1757–1851) provides a rare opportunity to explore the difficulties and possibilities for older women of the perceived accrual of wisdom and the culturally ascribed role of mentor in the early nineteenth century.

In contrast to the familiar figure of advice literature of the period in which the older woman is a middle-class wife and mother, Lady Louisa Stuart was a single woman, an aristocrat, intimately connected to public affairs as daughter of the 3rd Earl of Bute (George III's prime minister), and a prolific letter writer and biographer. Stuart's critical reputation has been hampered by her resistance to publication, which she regarded as a 'loss of caste', and her preference for a model of family authorship in which her writing was circulated in manuscript and posthumously published.<sup>8</sup> Despite this reticence, she has a place in the biographical records of women's writing of this period, and features in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (described as 'the least-known, but by no means the least, of the good writers of her long lifetime') and the *Orlando* series of women's writing in the British Isles as a writer 'who published almost nothing deliberately'.<sup>9</sup> Stuart's views on authorship, class and gender are illuminated by comments in her correspondence, in which she suggests that the celebrated author Maria Edgeworth 'drowned her gentility in her ink-bottle' and historian and salonnière Mary Berry, in encouraging others to 'print and publish', is compared to a woman who has committed a '*faux pas*' and is keen to 'draw another woman ... into the same scrape'.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, Stuart's anonymous publication at the age of 79 of the biographical 'Anecdotes' of her grandmother, the well-known and controversial author, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, is the focus of studies of women's historical writing and biography, and Stuart's epistolary practice is discussed in the context of women's letter-writing. Most recently, she has been identified as a 'confidant' and critical reader to Walter Scott in a study of his literary mentors.<sup>11</sup> Yet despite her longevity, and her authorship of a poem suggestively entitled 'On Growing Old', Stuart's importance for studies of gender, literature and age in this period has not been addressed and her late life writing (preserved in manuscripts and nineteenth-century editions) remains largely unexplored.

In these texts Stuart considers the vexed question of how to grow old gracefully through dialogues that span the generations. She explores her identity as an older

<sup>7</sup> O'Neill and Schrage-Früh (2019: 2).

<sup>8</sup> Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 407).

<sup>9</sup> ODNB (2004); <https://orlando.cambridge.org/>.

<sup>10</sup> Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 170, 408–9).

<sup>11</sup> On the biographical 'Anecdotes', see Looser (2005); Nerio (2017); and Rubenstein (1986). For a discussion of the correspondence, see Barnes (2015) and Rubenstein (1988). Stuart's role as a literary mentor to Walter Scott is explored in Mayer (2017).

woman in her extensive correspondence with younger female friends and nieces, as well as through her role as a biographer, which began during her 60s and 70s, focusing on women of previous generations. In contrast to the older woman of conduct literature invested with a qualified moral, spiritual and domestic authority, Stuart's letters express an ambivalence regarding taking on the role of mentor in later life. Instead, she suggests that intergenerational exchange is a more complex process that prompts self-scrutiny, self-doubt and self-knowledge and is reciprocal and ongoing rather than unidirectional and based on a life foreclosed. Likewise, her role as a biographer enables her to reflect on her younger self, explore instances of women growing old (dis)gracefully, and address questions of intellectual inheritance. This article therefore suggests that the recovery of women's late life writing provides insights into the gendered experience of growing older and the dynamic relationship between writing and ageing.

The eighteenth century developed a 'vital conceptual interest in mentoring', as Anthony Lee has shown, as a period when the term 'mentor' first comes into general usage and mentoring emerges as a prominent literary theme.<sup>12</sup> It therefore merits more sustained attention from scholars interested in gender and older age in this period. Likewise, the cultural association between wisdom and older age, and its implications for gerontology, are the focus of debate but are rarely discussed from the perspective of women's older age in the past. Kathleen Woodward highlights the ways in which the social ideal of old age wisdom is predicated upon a loss of emotional intensity and 'carries the connotation of detachment'. This leads her to call for 'a moratorium on wisdom' for its problematic association (particularly for older women) with acceptance and disengagement rather than 'wise anger'.<sup>13</sup> However, in her study of the historical and conceptual complexities of the term, Ricca Edmondson encourages a more capacious definition of wisdom rooted in co-creation in interpersonal contexts and everyday transactions between imperfect individuals 'not one that seeks out sages, remote from bewilderment or confusion, but one that responds constructively to the turmoil of everyday lives'.<sup>14</sup> In Lady Louisa Stuart's reflections on her identity as an older woman through dialogue with her younger correspondents, she reveals both the anxieties inspired by Woodward's model of wisdom dispensed by the cool, rational exemplar and the potential of Edmondson's 'quotidian account of what wisdom might be'.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Lee (2009: 5–6).

<sup>13</sup> Woodward (2003: 63, 56).

<sup>14</sup> Edmondson (2015: 2).

<sup>15</sup> Edmondson (2015: 203).

## On Growing Old: An Intergenerational Correspondence

Stuart's correspondence with Louisa Clinton, a woman 40 years her junior, began in earnest in 1818 and developed throughout her 60s and 70s. Clinton's mother apparently wrote to Stuart in 1818 encouraging Stuart to enter into a correspondence as a friend to her daughter, given her own precarious state of health, and assuring Stuart 'I am not one of those *very good mammas* who think it necessary to read all their daughters' letters.'<sup>16</sup> The correspondence is characterised by self-conscious reflection on the role of the mentor and provides valuable insights into how the epistolary relationship changes as the correspondents grow older together. In 1830 at the age of 73, Stuart wrote a letter to Clinton who was in her 30s:

By the bye, apropos of verses, you will be astonished, and I daresay glad (though you ought to be *amused*) to hear that I, *at my age*, have been writing some. Those on growing old which you made me read to you so lately have always been an unfinished fragment, and the other day ... they suddenly came into my head, and with them a continuation, longer (though short) than anything I have written these fourteen years. ... I am disposed to prize my superannuated sermon beyond its predecessors.<sup>17</sup>

The poem referred to here, 'On Growing Old', is in two parts entitled 'Near fifty' and 'Past seventy' and the letter suggests that, rather than a single work of retrospection, the second part is composed more than 20 years after the first and is prompted by reading the fragment to Clinton.<sup>18</sup> There is a tantalising reference to the existence of a lost section of the poem entitled 'on approaching ninety', which is yet to be found.<sup>19</sup> An important thread in the poem, which is also central to its mode of composition, is the role of the older woman as mentor. 'Near fifty' Stuart is concerned she will be read by the young as 'a volume drily wise' with 'crabb'd characters', while at 'Past seventy' she stresses that when she sees youth pursue a path that 'we perversely trod and deeply rue' she cannot refrain from pointing out the pitfalls, but nonetheless will avoid 'chilling counsel' or the desire to 'school thee and control'.<sup>20</sup>

Stuart takes to heart here Samuel Johnson's advice in his *Rambler* essay 'Age and Youth' (1750), in which he suggests a vice to be avoided in older age is 'severity and censoriousness, that gives no allowance to the failings of early life.' Instead, he advocates for a model of mutual sympathy based on an ability to think flexibly across the life course:

<sup>16</sup> Stuart (1903: Volume 2, v).

<sup>17</sup> Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 215–16).

<sup>18</sup> Clark (1898: Volume 3, 330).

<sup>19</sup> Clark (1898: Volume 3, 331).

<sup>20</sup> Clark (1898: Volume 3, 330–2).

He that would pass the latter part of life with honour and decency, must, when he is young, consider that he shall one day be old; and remember, when he is old, that he has once been young. In youth he must lay up knowledge for his support, when his powers of acting shall forsake him; and in age forbear to animadvert with rigour on faults which experience only can correct.<sup>21</sup>

Older age is therefore recognised as a collective identity we all have the potential to inhabit, while the role of the mentor is implicitly undermined by the value attached to personal experience. Similarly, Stuart's poem concludes with an implied address to a youthful reader and an explicit disavowal of the role of mentor and her assumed wisdom:

The part of monitress I dare not play,  
Nor (scarce) accept the def'rence thou would'st pay;  
But know a kind illusion gives it rise,  
And blush thy simpleness should count me wise.<sup>22</sup>

This is a self-deprecating distancing from the culturally sanctioned role of 'monitress' (a term for a female adviser, mentor or admonisher that came into use in the eighteenth century).<sup>23</sup> Stuart's epistolary identity often responds, both anxiously and playfully, to the cultural stereotype of the older woman. In writing to a friend at the age of 92 she describes her seal as 'the *arms* of an *old maid*', which depicts an owl perched on a teapot over the line 'Sometimes Counsel, Sometimes Tea'.<sup>24</sup> This image of the owl and the teapot, counsel and tea, coupled with the literary allusion to Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1712–14) combine the association of the old maid with the feminine frivolity and gossip of the tea table, as well as wisdom, mentoring and authority. This is characteristic of Stuart's tone in the extensive correspondence with young friends and nieces, which offers a blend of personal reflection, social commentary, politics, literary criticism and travels and establish Stuart as a repository of family memory and historian of her milieu. The letters also suggest the challenges and rewards of the role of mentor from the perspective of the older woman.

In her exchange with Clinton, Stuart rehearses the conventional idea that being of 'use' to a younger woman is a consolation for growing older.<sup>25</sup> She movingly comments that at a time of life when 'my friends drop off one by one', Clinton's friendship is

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, quoted in *Ottaway* (2008: Volume 2, 33–4).

<sup>22</sup> *Clark* (1898: Volume 3, 332).

<sup>23</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'Monitress' (2023).

<sup>24</sup> *Rubenstein* (1985: 10).

<sup>25</sup> This ideal of the satisfaction of imparting wisdom in older age was familiar from classical authors, exemplified in this period by Cicero's popular insight in *de Senectute* that 'however infirm with age a man has become, if he is imparting to others a liberal education he cannot fail to be accounted happy'. *Cicero* (2004: 27). 'Nearly a hundred versions and reprints of Cicero's classic text were issued

'what Heaven has been pleased to raise up for me to cast a ray of sunshine on the gloom of my latter days'.<sup>26</sup> And yet, notably, this relationship often conflates the categories of young and old in its dialectic of identification and distance and therefore rejects Johnson's insight that 'the notions of the old and young are like liquors of different gravity and texture which never can unite'.<sup>27</sup> In fact, the chronological distance between Stuart and Clinton is lost in shared characteristics and mutual understanding, exemplified by Stuart's comment early on in their correspondence that 'different as our ages are, recent as our acquaintance is, it has more than once passed through my mind that you could perhaps enter better into my feelings than many older people'.<sup>28</sup> This is reinforced by Stuart's identification of Clinton as 'my contemporary', since 'I know your heart understands what your years can have allowed you no experience of.'<sup>29</sup>

Rather than imagining herself as a repository of wisdom to be bestowed, for Stuart interaction with a youthful correspondent prompts self-scrutiny and self-recrimination and this accumulation of self-knowledge is then made available to another generation of women. Like Johnson, she willingly dismisses the efficacy of advice as knowledge would 'come too cheap if we could get it from our elders for the mere trouble of listening while they sat and prosed'.<sup>30</sup> She is also highly resistant to accepting the role of wise exemplar, insisting on her own failings which she identifies as a violent temper, reclusiveness, and an unruly imagination, and she accuses Clinton of delusion regarding her merits. She positions herself as a warning rather than a model, but nonetheless uniquely valuable for Clinton, who Stuart suggests shares her flaws and therefore 'stands beside me like my youth' (a quotation scattered across the correspondence).<sup>31</sup> In a curious inversion of the mentoring process, Stuart notes that reading the younger woman's self-reflection 'recalls a thousand little circumstances to my memory', thereby prompting her own retrospective autobiographical narrative in the letters.<sup>32</sup> On one occasion she accuses Clinton of adopting a pose of premature ageing (world-weary at the age of 25), and to combat this she sends letters written in her own youth when she made the false assumption that her best days were behind her. Elsewhere, texts from the past are sent in the spirit of identification rather than correction, as she notes that Clinton's dejection 'puts me so much in mind of my own

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from 1600–1800, and these were increasingly available in English in the eighteenth century.' *Ottaway* (2008: Volume 4, 2).

<sup>26</sup> *Stuart* (1901: Volume 1, 49).

<sup>27</sup> Johnson, quoted in *Ottaway* (2008: Volume 2, 35).

<sup>28</sup> *Stuart* (1901: Volume 1, 3–4).

<sup>29</sup> *Stuart* (1901: Volume 1, 32).

<sup>30</sup> *Stuart* (1901: Volume 1, 335).

<sup>31</sup> *Stuart* (1901: Volume 1, 197).

<sup>32</sup> *Stuart* (1901: Volume 1, 263).

old days!’ that though ‘I know I am spoiling you and encouraging exactly what I ought to combat ... I cannot help setting down some verses that I formerly copied out of an old book, and quoted to myself morning, noon, and night.’<sup>33</sup> In this conversation that is often mediated through discussions of reading, the older woman’s younger self speaks to her protégée as one young woman to another in a flexible approach to the life course.

At times, Stuart subscribes to the conventional idea that age naturally subdues ‘violence of temper’ and therefore Clinton has a false impression of her merits because: ‘you come into the scene at midnight, and cannot comprehend that the day was not cool, because you find the night so.’<sup>34</sup> Stuart rehearses here the conventional notion that older age is (or should be) accompanied by a loss of emotional intensity. Yet in a helpful reminder of the ability of letters to disrupt linear narratives of ageing, and for lived experience to undermine the equation between older age and emotional detachment, by the end of the same year Stuart confesses a lapse of self-control:

I flattered myself I had outlived these tempests ... I thought the sunset would be calm, and I cannot tell you the humiliating sensation such a proof of the contrary has produced. Oh, that I could be a warning to you, dear girl! but that I cannot be while you persist in taking me for a model of perfection. Do not reply with a panegyric, for just now it would run a dagger into me.<sup>35</sup>

The culturally proscribed identity of the mentor; the wise, venerated, and calm older woman worthy of panegyric, compounds Stuart’s feelings of shame regarding her own emotions. This proscription is widespread, inherent in the *Instructions for the Conduct of Females, From Infancy to Old Age* (1788), in which the ‘author’ who presents herself as a woman near 70, advises her ‘brothers and sisters’ in ‘Old Age’ that ‘they have every opportunity of being useful to society, by their experience and example’ provided they remain patient, affable, good-humoured, grateful and calm.<sup>36</sup> Wisdom, as Woodward suggests in a more contemporary context, is ‘predicated on a lack of certain kinds of feelings – the passions in particular, including anger.’<sup>37</sup> However, in Stuart’s acknowledgement that she has not ‘outlived’ the ‘tempests’ she moves closer to Edmondson’s idea of wisdom based on ‘more transient, but still illuminating, contributions to confronting everyday challenges’ than wisdom based on the model of a ‘distant and perfect’ ideal.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Stuart (1901: Volume 2, 215).

<sup>34</sup> Stuart (1901: Volume 1, 310).

<sup>35</sup> Stuart (1901: Volume 1, 324).

<sup>36</sup> *Instructions for the Conduct of Females*, quoted in Ottaway (2008: Volume 4, 53, 58).

<sup>37</sup> Woodward (2003: 56).

<sup>38</sup> Edmondson (2015: 22–3).



In the later correspondence, the frequent regrets expressed regarding her irascible temper subside, perhaps in reaction to Clinton's own ageing into midlife. Nonetheless, the need to regulate emotion remains a continuous thread, particularly in response to the deaths of friends from early life. Stuart notes that 'the losses are now so many, and are so evidently increasing, that my life seems to be like a book from which so many pages have been torn away that the connection and interest cannot be resumed.'<sup>39</sup> This image of self-erasure and narrative disruption, prompted by the death of her peers, reflects the intimate expressions of grief and mourning that feature in the letters as she can no longer rely on interpreters of her story. Yet these are often accompanied by assertions of the need for emotional temperance and self-control. Writing about the death of a friend she has known since her youth to an acquaintance, Stuart reflects on her grief by claiming that 'such is the tranquillising effect of time that I have borne the blow without those violent emotions it would have produced formerly.'<sup>40</sup> However, in writing to Clinton, the effort of repression is revealed as she notes that 'My whole former life was connected with her and has ended with her ... but though it is deep within, you would not perceive anything particular without.'<sup>41</sup> Stuart also shares with her younger correspondent reflections on the challenges of social interaction and marginalisation in older age, imagining on one occasion that she is perceived as 'an inoffensive piece of furniture' as the company 'think as little about me as I am apt to do about them'.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, following a dinner she reveals her feelings of social displacement, 'between not hearing what is said, not remembering names, and not knowing faces, I am a perfect owl in sunshine.'<sup>43</sup> Here the image of the owl above the teapot (the coat of arms of the old maid) is reworked, but nonetheless the symbol of wisdom is retained.

The extant correspondence with Clinton continues until 1834, when Stuart was in her late 70s, but Stuart's letters to her two nieces written during her 80s and 90s remain available in manuscript. Stuart's nieces were Clinton's contemporaries, and the three women weave in and out of Stuart's life as visitors and correspondents. During these decades, Stuart retains her role as an adviser on books, travel plans, party politics and public affairs, recent history, courtship, court etiquette and servants. However, in this later correspondence there are more frequent evocations of cultural stereotypes regarding the older woman, references to her chronological age,

<sup>39</sup> Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 421). This poignant reflection is prompted by reading *Trevelyan* (1833) by Lady Caroline Scott which reminds Stuart of old friends and acquaintances through its semi-fictionalised portraits of her circle.

<sup>40</sup> Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 361).

<sup>41</sup> Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 360–1).

<sup>42</sup> Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 227).

<sup>43</sup> Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 380).

and apologies for her excessive longevity. In her study of eighteenth-century satirical prints, Cindy McCreery has shown that ‘single old aristocratic women bore the brunt of satirists’ attacks’ on the figure of the ageing woman.<sup>44</sup> Stuart engages directly with the stereotype, comically identifying herself in the character of Lady Bluemantle, who featured in *The Spectator* in the early eighteenth century as a ‘peevish old gentlewoman’ renowned for malice, deceit and the circulation of unsubstantiated gossip.<sup>45</sup> Yet, in the letters, cultural stereotypes co-exist with more poignant reflections that articulate Stuart’s concerns expressed to her niece Louisa that ‘I am a sad plague to everybody’.<sup>46</sup> These sorrows are often concluded with self-regulation exemplified by a phrase in a letter to her niece Anna Maria: ‘I had better have done, now I am got into this melancholy strain.’<sup>47</sup>

Her identity as an older woman is understood relationally, as the infirmities of friends and relatives provoke fears at her own future, particularly the threat of the loss of memory. She notes after a visit to a friend that ‘forgetting and confounding people’s names is a symptom by which decay of intellect begins.’<sup>48</sup> Likewise, mourning is accompanied by reflections on her status as a survivor, prompting comments such as ‘it is one more gone before me whom I seemingly ought not to have survived – no wonder, considering my unreasonable length of life.’<sup>49</sup> At one point, she extends this theme of excessive longevity in an intriguing reworking of Shakespeare’s ‘All the world’s a stage’:

I often think human life when prolonged resembles what one has seen at a theatre if detained there among the last of the audience – one light extinguished after another until at length all is dark and silent around.<sup>50</sup>

Like the image of her past as a book with pages torn out by each bereavement, the theatrical metaphor suggests a feeling of having outlived a collective narrative. While this implies an intensification of Stuart’s age consciousness, references to calendar age are notably rare until she reaches 90, from which point she returns to it frequently and precisely. Her 92nd and 93rd birthdays are ‘announced’ in letters, but she suggests she meets them with a sense of shame and should be ‘condoled with’ and ‘not congratulated’.<sup>51</sup> The letters written after this point lose some of the playfulness of the earlier correspondence and Stuart seems more anxiously aware of the figure of

<sup>44</sup> McCreery (2004: 253).

<sup>45</sup> *The Spectator*, No. 427 (1712: 10 July, 123).

<sup>46</sup> MS.Eng. lett.d.377. To Lady Louisa Davenport Bromley, 11 September 1841.

<sup>47</sup> MS.Eng. lett.d.383. To Lady Anna Maria Dawson, 30 August 1847.

<sup>48</sup> MS.Eng. lett.d.383. To Lady Anna Maria Dawson, 13 July 1845.

<sup>49</sup> MS.Eng. lett.d.383. To Lady Anna Maria Dawson, 30 August 1847. Emphasis in original.

<sup>50</sup> MS.Eng. lett.d.377. To Lady Louisa Davenport Bromley [?], 1841 [?].

<sup>51</sup> MS.Eng. lett.d.383. To Lady Anna Maria Dawson, 12 August 1850.

the garrulous old woman. There is a new self-consciousness regarding the length of her letters and choice of topics, and they become punctuated by self-admonishment such as 'what nonsense I am talking!' or fears of repetition 'perhaps I have already said all this ... – but you must forgive the old fool's prosing ... I am writing too much for the very little I have to say.'<sup>52</sup> She concludes her remarks on slippers received for her birthday with the self-criticism 'a pretty thing to write about truly! Well forgive dullness and so Adieu!'<sup>53</sup>

In her theorisation of the epistolary gift, Liz Stanley argues that letter writing involves 'the circulation and symbolic gifting of relationships – the reciprocity of correspondences.'<sup>54</sup> Stuart seems increasingly concerned that rather than reciprocity her letters represent obligation, as she imagines Louisa in receipt: 'Behold a letter from your indefatigable persecutress according to custom. I conclude you do not hold it requisite to answer every one you receive or you would do little else. The woman must be a little deranged.'<sup>55</sup> Stuart's epistolary performance evokes the spectre of the mad, garrulous, burdensome older woman (by custom, now a persecutress rather than a monitress). But this figure is also held at a distance through the third person reference, as her niece is counselled by her aunt to feel no compulsion to answer. In the straightforward dynamic imagined by the prescriptive literature of the period, the young might 'derive both pleasure and profit' from the 'strictures' of an 'Old Woman'.<sup>56</sup> But Stuart's address to her niece at the age of 87 is a more complex evocation of their relationship in which she 'can only be thankful that you have such feelings towards one who is little worthy of them in her own sight and infinitely less, I fear in the sight of Him from whom no secrets are hid.'<sup>57</sup>

### **Narratives of Ageing: The Lives of Others**

Alongside the composition of her poem 'On Growing Old', and the development of her epistolary identity in the correspondence, Stuart was also engaging in life writing experiments in biography during her late 60s and 70s. She narrated a series of women's lives that forged connections across the generations in accounts of Lady Frances Douglas (1750–1817), Lady Mary Coke (1727–1811), and, most notably, her grandmother, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762). These biographies were an

<sup>52</sup> MS.Eng. lett.d.383. To Lady Anna Maria Dawson, 28 October 1850, 30 October 1845.

<sup>53</sup> MS.Eng. lett.d.383. To Lady Anna Maria Dawson, 12 August 1850.

<sup>54</sup> Stanley (2011: 140).

<sup>55</sup> MS.Eng. lett.d.377. To Lady Louisa Davenport Bromley, 14 August 1843.

<sup>56</sup> *The Lady's Monthly Museum* (August 1798: 96).

<sup>57</sup> MS.Eng. lett.d.377. To Lady Louisa Davenport Bromley, 30 September 1844.

extension of familial and social connections and designed to create and perpetuate intergenerational memories beyond her own lifetime. Stuart's model of biographical authority rests on her longevity and her self-recognition as a precious repository of memories (both personal and inherited). Yet the textual interaction with the lives of others also inspires reflections on her own life course and a return to familiar themes of the role of the mentor and how to grow old gracefully.

The first of these works was *Memoire of Frances, Lady Douglas* which was a moving tribute to Stuart's childhood friend and cousin, seemingly written during the 1820s several years after Lady Douglas's death at the age of 67, and addressed to her middle-aged daughter the author Lady Caroline Scott.<sup>58</sup> Stuart establishes her authority as a biographer through the intimacy of her relationship with her subject, as the story of Lady Douglas's miserable childhood with a neglectful mother was allegedly revealed to her friend Stuart through confidential conversations in parks and by riverbanks, and in letters and visits:

I was the first person to whom, at the distance of thirty three years, she intrusted these particulars, and I believe I continued to be the only one who knew them as long as she lived. Am I doing well in revealing them to you? ... I want you to know fully the singular superiority of her character, to see clearly what she was and all she was.<sup>59</sup>

The biography invites Lady Douglas's daughter into this intimate friendship, revealing Lady Douglas's experience of unrequited love prior to her marriage to Caroline's father, and the transformative effects of motherhood. In a remarkable passage Stuart relates Lady Douglas's first words spoken to the newborn Caroline (now reading these memoirs herself in middle age). Lady Douglas is repeatedly identified as a character who has been undervalued and underestimated, including by Stuart herself who engages in 'self-reproach' at her own youthful misjudgements.<sup>60</sup> Stuart suggests the role of the late life biographer here is, at least in part, to foster posthumous sympathy between generations through removing distortions and misunderstandings. Caroline is invited to see her mother as one who recognised all too well the pain of unfulfilled passion and therefore rejoiced when Caroline was able to marry for love. Stuart suggests that 'when time has poured it's [sic] oil on the waves of life, allayed every turbulent emotion, we are all unwilling that the young people who look up to us with some share of respect should know those long past weaknesses which we have learned to blush at.'<sup>61</sup> Yet, in choosing to reveal the past of her friend, Stuart concludes that she

<sup>58</sup> The *Memoire* circulated in manuscript and remained unpublished until it was edited by Jill Rubenstein in 1985.

<sup>59</sup> Stuart (1985: 54).

<sup>60</sup> Stuart (1985: 71).

<sup>61</sup> Stuart (1985: 94).

tells Caroline what her mother 'perhaps' would not because 'I cannot help thinking she would not have been hurt at the idea of your ultimately hearing it from me.'<sup>62</sup> The biographer's 'task' notably ends once Stuart recognises 'I approach the time of your own remembrance' and the mother is fully restored to her daughter.<sup>63</sup>

Through the narrative of Lady Douglas's life, the biography also returns to the theme of the older woman as mentor, a discussion prompted by the maternal failures of Lady Douglas's mother and the absence of any trusted advisers in her youth. The figure of the aunt is under scrutiny, a role that was central to Stuart's identity in her relationship with her own nieces. Lady Douglas's maternal aunts are sharply criticised for claiming 'twice the authority aunts are usually held entitled to' and considering her 'under their especial tutelage'. This abuse of authority by these 'old cats'<sup>64</sup> meant that in return for Lady Douglas being 'noticed and caressed' as a child, 'they exacted in return nothing less than the implicit obedience of the grown-up woman: or rather, they never allowed her to grow up while they lived'.<sup>65</sup> Likewise, Stuart claims that Lady Douglas's marriage was regarded with envy and as a source of betrayal: 'born their vassal, bound to remain in subjection to them for life, a predestined old maid ... It was a bolus that must have choked them.'<sup>66</sup> In contrast to the spectre of the envious and controlling older woman represented by Lady Douglas's maternal ancestors, her unmarried paternal aunt, Lady Jane, fulfils an alternative stereotype, kind but ineffectual in her guardianship. Stuart notes that were Lady Jane to have wisdom to offer (and it seems that unfortunately she does not), nonetheless, 'there are few families where an old maid of moderate fortune, keeping two women-servants, one man, and a sedan chair, would have much influence; even supposing her descent from Solomon'.<sup>67</sup> The social stereotype of the old maid, easily dismissed and overlooked, is identified as incompatible with a model of wisdom. Amongst the aunts the most powerful invective is reserved for Lady Mary Coke, whose animosity and criticism of Lady Douglas and Caroline 'increased with the increasing sourness of age'.<sup>68</sup> This is an implicit contrast to Stuart herself, who as biographer commends mother and daughter to one another and fosters intergenerational ties.

The unflattering portrait of Lady Coke as a spectre of how not to age was extended in Stuart's next biographical work focusing on her father's uncle, *Some Account of*

<sup>62</sup> Stuart (1985: 94).

<sup>63</sup> Stuart (1985: 104).

<sup>64</sup> Stuart (1985: 87).

<sup>65</sup> Stuart (1985: 60–1).

<sup>66</sup> Stuart (1985: 87).

<sup>67</sup> Stuart (1985: 61).

<sup>68</sup> Stuart (1985: 103).

*John Duke of Argyll and his Family*, written in 1827 when she was 70 years old.<sup>69</sup> This text is also addressed to Caroline (who was the Duke of Argyll's great-granddaughter and Lady Coke's great-niece). Stuart's conception of the role of the family biographer in later life is consistent with her earlier portrait of Lady Douglas, as she preserves stories 'often told me by my mother' combined with the memories of her youth.<sup>70</sup> Lady Coke, 30 years Stuart's senior, was widowed at 26 and so features in Stuart's memory as a single older woman, outmoded and displaying stereotypical vices of older age (such as avarice, spleen, envy, selfishness and a tendency to meddle in politics through 'female whisperings and caballings').<sup>71</sup> Lady Coke's 'superintendance' of youthful fashions, including her hostility to ostrich feathers, prompts the following reflection:

Perhaps she might abhor them the more as in some sort the test of youth or age; for, in spite of the wisdom added by increase of years, she had no relish for growing old. Twelvemonth stealing after twelvemonth, however, this inevitable evil would come; ... she grew sourer in consequence of it, more overbearing, more contradictory, less regardful of common civility.<sup>72</sup>

As a result of Lady Coke's inability to successfully navigate the role of the older woman, the wisdom potentially accrued with age is inevitably wasted. In fact, Stuart goes further to suggest that Lady Coke achieved an 'anti-influence' and 'in an inverse ratio' to what she hoped to accomplish, as the younger generation (and Stuart in particular) were forced to 'stifle' any feelings of agreement for 'fear of being pronounced like her.' As a result, Lady Coke 'preached us out of good-breeding, regular economy, respect for authority, and many other commendable things, by dint of incessantly preaching us into them.'<sup>73</sup> From the double perspective of both her youthful self, and her retrospective vantage point as an older woman, Stuart assesses Lady Coke's inability to grow old gracefully. She also acknowledges the unfortunate consequences of Lady Coke's attempts to influence the younger generation in a biographical assessment that confronts her own position as an older woman and reluctant mentor.

Stuart's role as a biographer intensified during her 70s, as four years after completing the memoir of the Argyll family, she wrote a short biographical piece following the death of her friend Elizabeth Weddell, 'Some Account of Mrs Weddell' (1831). It was circulated at the request of friends and prepared for magazine publication. In contrast to Lady Mary Coke, Mrs Weddell provides a model of good temper and spirits into

<sup>69</sup> The account of Lady Mary Coke was inserted in this work with around 150 pages devoted to her life. The text was originally circulated in manuscript and first published in 1863.

<sup>70</sup> Stuart (1899: 5).

<sup>71</sup> Stuart (1899: 140).

<sup>72</sup> Stuart (1899: 136).

<sup>73</sup> Stuart (1899: 141–2).

her 80s for 'the outward frame alone had grown old: the mind, continuing buoyant, retained all the energy, & vivacity as well as the purity of early youth.'<sup>74</sup> At the age of 79 biography became a much more intimate and exposing practice as she turned closer to home to become the biographer of her maternal grandmother, the controversial author Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. In the course of her biography of Lady Coke, Stuart introduces a striking image of generational inheritance:

The circles produced by throwing stones into water, dear Car, are no bad emblem of the influence which generations, as they pass, have on those that succeed them. That of the immediate parents upon the children is strong and visible; the grandchildren show its traces but faintly; when it widens to the great-grandchildren it vanishes wholly away.<sup>75</sup>

Stuart explored those faint 'traces' of generational inheritance in her own life through engagement with her maternal grandmother in a development of familial life writing beyond the more traditional territory of the maternal memoir.

The introductory biographical 'Anecdotes' were written anonymously at the request of Stuart's nephew, Lord Wharncliffe, for his collection of Montagu's correspondence of 1837, that aimed to correct the 1803 edition by James Dallaway.<sup>76</sup> Wharncliffe's preface implicitly revealed Stuart's identity as the long-lived author, suggesting that the 'Anecdotes' were written by 'the only person now living who could have had the means of supplying them' and noting that the texts will 'satisfy the Reader that a ray of Lady Mary's talent has fallen upon one of her descendants.'<sup>77</sup> However, writing in the *Quarterly Review* in February 1837, John Wilson Croker attributed the work explicitly to Stuart. Croker's lengthy review is revealing regarding the ways in which Stuart's longevity was understood as an integral part of her authorial identity and the text's reception:

It will surprise the generality of readers to find that we have still amongst us, in the full vigour and activity of her faculties, a lady, who, herself born in the reign of George II., received the maternal caresses of Lady Mary Wortley, and who thus forms a link – the only one probably now existing – between the reigns of William III. and William IV. – between 1690 and 1837, a period of almost 150 years. The wonder and pleasure that such a circumstance is in itself sure to excite, will be greatly increased by the perusal of her anecdotes, which narrate the experience of age with all the vivacity of youth.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Stuart (1831: seq. 10).

<sup>75</sup> Stuart (1899: 41–2).

<sup>76</sup> For a more detailed account of the composition and publication history of this work, see Rubenstein (1986: 4–10, 19–20).

<sup>77</sup> Stuart (1837: Volume 1, vi).

<sup>78</sup> Croker (1837: 149).

Devoney Looser has identified that Croker's reviews often 'invoke[d] the rhetoric of old age' as 'he seems to have had a pronounced mean streak where *elderly* women writers were concerned', evident in his acerbic reviews of the late works of Frances Burney and Anna Barbauld.<sup>79</sup> In this case, readers are assumed to be surprised to find Stuart alive, but nonetheless her exceptional age establishes her authority and the recent past is understood as an ideal focus for the older woman writer. Her age is suitably defied by the vivacious, youthfulness of her text, and while 'she is in her *eightieth* year' her literary style suggests that she is 'in her *eighteenth*' (in an implicit equation between the late life writer and a loss of textual energy). Stuart reacted furiously to this public exposure as the anonymous author, noting in a letter that 'as he has thus dragged me out of the quiet hole in which I have hitherto passed my days and wished to end them, I do long for revenge.' She was sufficiently provoked to write a 'Supplement to the Anecdotes' and sent it to Wharnccliffe, but ultimately decided to avoid 'directly clawing Croker' in a public defence.<sup>80</sup>

The 'Anecdotes' was an attempt to recover Montagu's reputation, carefully navigating her elopement and separation from her husband and public conflicts with other writers (particularly Horace Walpole and Alexander Pope). In comparison to the emphasis on personal memories in Stuart's biographies of Douglas or Coke, her relationship to her biographical subject in the case of Montagu is at once more intimate through familial connection and yet also more distant and, as a figure of notoriety, Diana Barnes suggests Stuart 'consciously defined herself against her grandmother'.<sup>81</sup> Stuart wrote the life of a grandmother she did not know, based on memories of conversations with her mother and her grandmother's journal which she read in her youth (a manuscript that her mother subsequently burned and from which 'nothing could be transcribed').<sup>82</sup> As Jill Rubenstein has argued, the 'Anecdotes' is motivated by 'the need to preserve the otherwise ephemeral past' (an implicit responsibility of longevity) and a reckoning with Stuart's own intellectual and literary inheritance.<sup>83</sup>

Montagu was central to Stuart's identity across the life course. She recalls in a letter to Clinton at the age of 69 that her love of learning in her youth was persistently framed as an unhealthy desire to emulate Montagu and prompted rebuke from her older siblings:

<sup>79</sup> Looser (2008: 38).

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Grundy and Halsband (2008: 55).

<sup>81</sup> Barnes (2015: 573).

<sup>82</sup> Rubenstein (1986: 6).

<sup>83</sup> Rubenstein (1986: 10–11).



'I know as well as possible you have got it in your head that you are to be like my grandmother,' whereas it was this reproach that first informed me I had ever had a grandmother, and I am sure I heartily hated her name.<sup>84</sup>

She notes the lifelong influence of this imposed identification as 'to this late, very late hour' she is self-conscious of displaying her learning in conversation.<sup>85</sup> But despite this ambivalence, the 'Anecdotes' provides a means to position herself within a family genealogy of learned women who maintain their intellectual powers into older age. This encompasses her mother, grandmother (who returns to England with a 'youthful vigour which seemed to animate her mind'), and great-grandmother who is described as having 'a superior understanding' that she 'retained ... unimpaired at an extraordinary age.'<sup>86</sup>

The 'Anecdotes' also returns to Stuart's recurrent preoccupation with mentoring, this time through the friendship between Montagu and the feminist writer and thinker, Mary Astell, best known for her *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694) and 23 years older than Montagu.<sup>87</sup> Stuart asserts a cross-generational literary connection, claiming that Astell:

[F]elt for Lady Mary Wortley that fond partiality which old people of ardent tempers sometimes entertain for a rising genius in their own line. Literature had been hers; and she triumphed in Lady Mary's talents as proofs of what it was her first wish to demonstrate, namely, the mental equality of the sexes; if not the superiority of woman to man.<sup>88</sup>

Stuart's characterisation of this friendship (that was sustained 'across a gulf of age, rank, party loyalty, and religious faith'), echoes Astell's 'Preface' to Montagu's *Embassy Letters* of 1724–5 in which Astell imagines herself as the posthumous advocate for her literary protégée.<sup>89</sup> Astell hopes that while the *Embassy Letters* circulated only in manuscript during the lifetimes of Astell and Montagu, it would nonetheless be published 'when I am in my grave' and her preface will 'attend them, in testimony to posterity, that, among her contemporaries, *one* woman, at least, was just to her merit.' Age does not confer superior status, as Astell seeks to place her laurels at Montagu's feet, while acknowledging 'the extent of your empire over my imagination'.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 21).

<sup>85</sup> Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 22).

<sup>86</sup> Stuart (1837: Volume 1, 94, 80).

<sup>87</sup> For a more detailed analysis of Stuart's portrayal of Montagu as 'the complement and protégée of the celebrated Mary Astell', see Nerio (2017: 17–36).

<sup>88</sup> Stuart (1837: Volume 1, 50).

<sup>89</sup> Grundy (1999: 193).

<sup>90</sup> Astell (1861: 222–4).

As well as looking backwards, Montagu's letters also provided a model of mentorship that looked forwards. In her study of the mother–daughter letter across three generations, Barnes suggests that the role of 'maternal educator' modelled in Montagu's letters to her daughter were taken up in Stuart's letters to Clinton.<sup>91</sup> In letters to her daughter written in 1753 (four years prior to Stuart's birth), Montagu offers herself as a correspondent and adviser to Stuart's older sister, based on her relationship with her own grandmother with whom she corresponded regularly despite 'the difference of our time of Life.'<sup>92</sup> In the epistolary advice to her daughter on educating Lady Mary (Stuart's older sister), Montagu asserts the importance of female learning (judiciously concealed), the value of the single life, and the usefulness of a daughter who might act as a 'Secretary'.<sup>93</sup> As Barnes notes, Stuart's role as the recorder of her mother's memories and her grandmother's journal takes up this life that Montagu mapped out for her older sister.<sup>94</sup> On Stuart's death in 1851 her family engaged in an extensive correspondence regarding an appropriate epitaph for her monument (a very particular kind of late life or afterlife writing) in which questions of intellectual inheritance remained. The debated text included the suggestion that Stuart was 'blest with the full & unclouded use of extraordinary faculties to extreme old age' (speaking back to her grandmother's words on her great-grandmother who 'dy'd at 96, retaining to the last the vivacity and clearness of her understanding').<sup>95</sup> And yet the next generation also expressed their doubts about the lineage into which Stuart was implicitly writing herself and decided not to include reference to Montagu, who in the mid-nineteenth century was 'not perhaps a person of whom we sh<sup>d</sup> boast on a tomb-stone.'<sup>96</sup> These complex intergenerational connections between women mediated through text continued beyond Stuart's lifetime, as Stuart's great-niece edited her letters for posthumous publication in the later nineteenth century and, Susan Tweedsmuir, a descendent of Montagu's through maternal ancestors, published a biography of Stuart in 1932.

In her valuable conception of critical age autobiography, Margaret Morganroth Gullette suggests that this genre is particularly well placed to ask: 'How do the subjects of a particular culture come up with narratives of aging – comprehensible stories, prospective and retrospective, about moving through *all* the given ages of life?' She also extends her analysis beyond autobiography to consider how our 'implicit theories of the life course' are 'constructed and revised' in 'the biographies we tell of

<sup>91</sup> Barnes (2015: 583).

<sup>92</sup> Montagu (1967: Volume 3, 27).

<sup>93</sup> Montagu (1967: Volume 3, 24).

<sup>94</sup> Barnes (2015: 580–1).

<sup>95</sup> Montagu (1967: Volume 3, 27).

<sup>96</sup> MS.Eng.misc.b.164. Miscellaneous Papers. 225.

other, older people, especially our parents.<sup>97</sup> In these late life writing encounters that span the generations, Stuart explores the question of how to grow old gracefully and purposefully through epistolary exchange and biographical narratives that prompt a rereading of a former self and create textual interactions with a lost grandmother whose story informed her own. She therefore complicates the picture of the older woman as mentor in this period as, for Stuart, growing older is a 'continuous unfolding' as existence is 're-evaluated and rewritten'.<sup>98</sup> In the case of Stuart, life writing articulates a dynamic engagement between past and present selves, our own lives and the lives of others, that may help to challenge a narrative of older age aligned with stasis, decline, or isolation as well as suggesting the various ways in which life writing functions in women's later lives as a means to sustain a role that connects to others. Stuart's late life endeavour as a biographer of family and friends suggests she found guidance on growing old through reflecting on those who went before in writing biographical portraits of older women of a previous generation both critical and sympathetic. As the recovery of figures like Stuart shows, women's late life writing of this period has the potential to generate historical understanding of the gendered experience of ageing as well as to provide new perspectives from which to view life writing across the life course.

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<sup>97</sup> Gullette (2003: 102, 108).

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