

**“I Fear I Have the Heart of a Boy”:  
Age Consciousness and Age Difference in George Meredith’s  
“The Gentleman of Fifty and the Damsel of Nineteen”**

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In various guises, George Meredith exhibits fascination for the processes and experience of aging through the life course, and his writing regularly interrogates the implications of particular ages on identity construction. While writing relatively little about the figure of the child, in comparison with many of his contemporaries, Meredith’s work is nonetheless preoccupied with the impact of the *latter* stages of growing up and growing old, from adolescence to midlife to advanced old age. We might think about Richard Feverel or Harry Richmond, adolescent boys who become young men over the course of their respective narratives, or characters such as Mrs. Burman in *One of our Conquerors*, who exhibits a debilitating infirmity associated with elderliness as decline, and Master Gammon in *Rhoda Fleming*, who displays a comic, stubborn cantankerousness matched by a stolidly massive appetite deemed permissible by virtue of his many years. The quirks and foibles designated as belonging to particular life-stages come under scrutiny throughout Meredith’s writing, and emerge as a recurrent theme across both fiction and poetry. In particular, in his verse, Meredith often observes wryly the cultural dominance of youth, which appears to take precedence over old age.<sup>i</sup> “Earth loves her young”, he declares in “Earth’s Preference”:

She prompts them to her fruits and flower-beds;  
Their beauty with her choicest interthreads,  
And makes her revel of their merry zest. (*Poems* 175)

The theme of the primacy of youth – the vitality with which it is associated, the hedonistic pleasures in which it appears free to indulge, and the sense of community it cultivates – becomes a persistent theme in his work. With regular urgency Meredith returns again and again

to the disjunction between youth, imagined as beloved of nature – a period when “the ball of our vision/ Had eagles that flew unabashed to sun” (“Youth in Memory”, *Poems* 229) – and old age, in which youth is recollected as a distant past, drawing forth a nostalgic sigh while recognizing an increasing sense of marginalization now that the speaker is old. The experience of inhabiting a particular age, together with its associated sense of license or rigidity, involves a tussle for power as well as a continual process of readjustment to accommodate or conform to each stage of the life course. Often uncomfortable, this attempt to align with expectations of aging also involves negotiation about what age means, how it signifies, and how such implications might be revised. Age is often revealed to cement one’s position within wider culture on the one hand, implicitly providing status and validation, whilst on the other, age refracts and manipulates social experience, altering perceptions of selfhood. This process of negotiation, as it emerges within Meredith’s novels’ focus on sustained psychological reflection, frequently maintains age as a crucial – yet contested and opaque – aspect of identity.

This essay is concerned with Meredith’s oppositional accounts of male midlife and female youth in an early, unfinished fragment, “The Gentleman of Fifty and the Damsel of Nineteen”.<sup>ii</sup> Unpublished during the author’s lifetime, the text itself is brief. The six short chapters it contains, however, establish age – and, especially, intergenerational relationships – as a vexing, puzzling, but pressing issue for identity formation, social relations, and gender performance. The protagonists to whom the title refers find themselves defined through their relative youth or maturity, and both struggle to accommodate the cultural pressures to which their ages expose them. Despite their sense of dissatisfaction with their age-accorded status, the “Gentleman of Fifty” and the “Damsel of Nineteen” seek (but largely fail) to find an alternative mode of interaction beyond the ages ascribed to them. They do begin to discover, however, a mutual interest in one another that forces each of them to revise their understanding of what is appropriate for a fifty year old man, or for a young woman of nineteen – according

to their own personal inclinations, and in relation to external, social assumptions about their ages. As each muses on the strictures and vagaries of aging (their own and others'), conventions assumed to belong to each stage of the life course are scrutinized according to the extent to which each might enable status or provide safety, or be challenged and usefully dismantled.

Meredith stages this study of midlife and youth through the stimulus of a courtship narrative. The gentleman in question, Gilbert Pollingray, delicately sensitive about his age, finds himself surprisingly attracted to his friend's young daughter Alice Amble. In return Alice, while initially finding Pollingray a faintly ridiculous figure (his bachelor status is neutralized at first by his mature age and paternal status as her godfather), swiftly realizes that she is drawn to him – although neither dares to declare their interest to the other or to speak openly about their fascination. The shared sense of awkwardness, shame, and inadequacy to which they are both subject, brought about explicitly by the generational gap consequent on their uneven ages, proves revelatory. Each protagonist engages in first-person accounts of their particular experiences of midlife and adolescence respectively, reflecting on the difficulties of each. Their musings on their situation and consequent emotions, together with their observations and assumptions about each other in light of their own and others' age bias, articulates a complex system of Victorian responses to age.

The tale itself opens in a farcical manner, with Alice's parents standing fully clothed in the river, having fallen out of a rowing boat, and finding themselves unable to climb the steep bank. Faced with this "extraordinary spectacle" ("The Gentleman of Fifty" 331) Pollingray watches with curiosity the "very portly lady" (330) whose voluminous skirt keeps ballooning around her, and her clergyman-husband-"partner in joy and adversity"(330) who mops his head with a soggy handkerchief while declaiming in Latin to his wife. Standing unobtrusively under a willow tree whilst watching the debacle, Pollingray is initially unobserved until the arrival of Alice in the garden: "I had hitherto resisted, but the young lady's frank and boisterous laughter

carried me along, and I too let loose a peal, and discovered myself.” (331) Even the first few paragraphs of the opening scene reveal a set of assumptions about age-related qualities for both men and women. The text establishes a vision of late middle age which speaks of modesty, contentment, and solidity in the persons of the jovial vicar and his wife. The reader is offered a glimpse of this long-married couple under a moment of inelegant stress, on the verge of a petty squabble. While the lady is sensitive to the ridiculousness of her situation, and increasingly ruffled by the abortive attempts to drag her heavy body out of the water, “eccentric” Rev. Amble (338) revels cheerily in their mishap. Eventually the rescue is underway and Mrs. Amble is left “dripping in grievous discomfort” (336) on the bank, lamenting her husband’s position still “standing waist-deep in the water and the sun on his bald head” (337). The comic accident is resolved, and conventional normality reasserted as each regains dry land and disappears to change clothes. There are several reminders in this first section of the couple’s age, which serve to make the whole scene more absurd; the deference implicitly accorded to older age is turned on its head, and the incongruity of the middle-aged, fully-dressed pair accidentally disporting in the river is a source of hilarity for the reader, Pollingray himself (who cannot help laughing), and the irrepressible Alice Amble who finds herself convulsed with mirth at the sight of her venerable parents immersed.

In the midst of the scrape, Rev. Amble thoughtlessly reveals his friend’s age, declaring offhand in the struggle to hoist his wife from the water that, as “he’s fifty”, Pollingray must be dismissed as a suitable assistant to help drag out Mrs. Amble (335). The assumption is that his comfortably advanced age must preclude him from such strenuous physical activity. The revelation of Pollingray’s age leaves him feeling vulnerable and exposed, and he’s almost inclined to walk away. On this issue, as Alice’s subsequent narrative reveals, Pollingray (to her mind) is shamefully sensitive; it is “his weakness” that “Mr. Pollingray wants to be thought quite youthful.” (341) Pollingray is uncomfortable about mention of his age, particularly in this

sense where it seems to exclude him. In this text, however, he is by no means alone in experiencing discomfort about his relative maturity and its implications. Age, and especially its repercussions for character and status, is a persistent topic of equivocal self-reflection for both him and Alice. Age is a crucial marker through which to cultivate knowledge of another person, too, and the opposition of youth and maturity is raised repeatedly. The witty Mrs. Romer Pattlecombe, for example, a dinner-party guest at the Ambles' home, is "thirty-one years her husband's junior, and she is twenty-six" (343). Age – and especially age difference between partners, where it exists – is an important factor in social and romantic relations. Alice recounts a story by the lady that makes her laugh so hard she has to leave the room, in which Mrs. Pattlecombe makes fun of her husband's age and old-fashioned sense of style, affectionately describing him as "an old man wear[ing] antiquated trowsers" and ridiculing the spectacle of him shaving while clothed in his shapeless, "immensely high" trousers (345). The wife describes her exquisite pain at the inelegant sight, while her husband retorts good-naturedly, "My dear, you should not have married an old man" (345). The trials of intergenerational relationships are raised here, foreshadowing the interactions of Pollingray and Alice whose age-gap is also precisely thirty one years. This is not lost on Pollingray, who is affected by this oblique reference to "an old man" as a subject of ridicule, choosing to leave the party early.

In teasing her husband about their domestic arrangements, Mrs. Pattlecombe jests about concerns over disparity in age within marriage. Although seemingly trivial, this dinner party anecdote does reveal an underlying anxiety about the potential unevenness of age-related experience. Alice's glee at Mrs Pattlecombe's disrespectful vision of her husband's outmoded dress and toilet habits returns to haunt her just a couple of chapters later, as her feelings towards Pollingray alter and deepen:

I know that I shall always hate Mrs. Romer Pattlecombe, and that I am unjust to the good woman, but I do hate her, and I think the stories shocking, and wonder intensely

what it was that I could have found in them to laugh at. I shall never laugh again for many years. Perhaps, when I am an old woman, I may. (351)

Alice comes to recognize in Mr. Pollingray's seniority of years not simply an outdated style and demeanor, but a set of values, wisdom, and lack of frivolity that she finds increasingly desirable. The comparatively elderly Mr. Pattlecombe at fifty six, and Mr. Pollingray at fifty, are no longer eligible for the mild contempt she had initially exhibited at their agedness. Her change of view relocates each, in her eyes, from relegation to the margins of society to positions of venerability, occupying an essential center from which she herself is disqualified by her youth.

Mrs. Romer Pattlecombe may make light of age as constitutive of identity, although disparity between ages forms a potentially problematic factor in personal relationships, as Alice is forced to recognize; for Pollingray, reminders that he is no longer young are wounding because of the cultural assumptions that his age de-centers him and debars him from the kind of social interaction for which he longs. In feeling that his age, at fifty, is somehow shameful and can be deployed against him as a slight, Pollingray subscribes to the cultural tendency to prize youth and marginalize midlife and old age as implicitly symptomatic of decline. He initially adheres to such assumptions that project a downward-trend consequent to his age; as a middle-aged bachelor, it is assumed that he won't marry, he is resigned to settling on the family estate following years of restless movement between France and England, his sister is alarmed at his suggestion that he stand for local parliamentary election, and he admits that there is "a loss of certain of our young tricks at fifty" (335). He would seem to be settling down into the rhythms of middle age. Increasingly, however, Pollingray regrets the way in which society assumes his sphere of action to be diminishing commensurate with his age, and he struggles to deflect the narrative of decline imposed upon him. Alice claims that, at some unspecified time before the story opens, "Papa says he has heard Mr. Pollingray boast of his age" (342-343). This, however, no longer applies once Alice piques his interest. From that point his age

becomes a seriously contentious issue, which leads to his sensitivity – what Alice calls “vanity” and a desire to be “superhuman” in strength, energy, and physical readiness for exertion (341).

Following the exposure of his fifty years by Rev. Amble, Pollingray complains:

What justifies one man’s bawling out another man’s age? What purpose does it serve?  
... I know this will sound like the language of a man not a little jealous of his compeers.  
I can but leave it to rightly judging persons to consider whether a healthy man in his  
prime, who has enough, and is not cursed by ambition, needs be jealous of any living  
soul. (335)

His sensitivity is not simply due to being revealed as middle-aged – which, according to Kay Heath, was generally depicted in Victorian fiction as occurring from one’s forties for men (10).

Unlike his old acquaintance, Pollingray views his age as a personal and intimate matter, and not for public declaration. However, he also claims that his middle-age in fact equates to being “in his prime”, a statement that smacks of disingenuity and defensiveness as he finds himself unable to square such statements with the way that he feels, particularly when he becomes conscious of the inevitable age-inflected difference of perspectives between Alice and himself. As Alice rows with him in the rescued boat, he reflects, “What a different matter this earth must be to that girl from what it is to me! I knew it before. And – mark the difference – I feel it now” (340). He is newly-invested in revising the liminal position of midlife, yet feels the sting of disparity in their experience and viewpoint more keenly at the same time. Although he had been aware of the difference before, his new-found sensitivity makes the gap seem wider at the very moment that he desires to close it: “I feel it now.”

Having reached his fiftieth year, Pollingray now finds himself divided in his attitude towards his own age and disconcerted by its effect on his self-view. This is in part due to cultural perceptions of midlife within the aging spectrum. As Margaret Morganroth Gullette has stated, “The middle years begin when the culture gets you to say they do” (*Declining to Decline* 159). Pollingray’s difficulty, evidently, is that having embraced the already conflicted message that midlife both heralds a decline and yet is also, on the contrary, the prime of a

man's life, he develops a resistance to acknowledging his agedness which breeds an increasing degree of self-conscious embarrassment. He feels out of place and out of step. His culture – voiced through Alice, his nephew Charles, and the Ambles, all of whom are mouthpieces for the dominant age-ideology – has consigned him to midlife if not to elderliness, and the difficulty he now has is that of extricating himself from this relegation to the sidelines of society (or of being sidelined by the cult of youth from which he is necessarily excluded). Pollingray experiences the in-between-ness that Kay Heath identifies as typical of midlife:

The distinguishing characteristic of Victorian middle age in fiction that delineates it from old age is liminality. Whereas old age is depicted as a final stage increasingly associated with the end of certain activities and identities – lessened marriageability, waning sexuality, and retirement from work – midlife plots stress the possibility that characters' fortunes may go either way, from acquiescent decline to a sustained youthfulness. (13)

However, Alice in particular, at thirty one years' Pollingray's junior, tends to flatten the distinction between middle age and elderliness, at least at first. For her, the designation "old" encapsulates all that comes after youth. Her lack of sensitivity is soon remedied, but as Pollingray's own age-awareness stems from his newfound regard for the girl and her view of him, he internalizes her offhand conflation of middle and late life generally as a distant, amorphous hinterland. Alice laughs at his name (suggestive of a grey pate or head), stating that it makes him seem "ten times older than he is", and declaring rather unkindly that were he to marry "she must be a lady in a wig", implying a similar maturity, a lack of physical vigor, and the onset of physical deterioration ("The Gentleman of Fifty" 342). Pollingray's attempt at distinguishing between the vital midlife that he wishes to portray, and old-age as decline (from which he seeks to distance himself), does involve pushing back the "end of certain activities and identities."

He experiences a stinging self-consciousness about his age, later mirrored by Alice who begins to feel a sense of inadequacy over her youth. This shame, in which personal experience

sits ill-at-ease with cultural expectation, makes both protagonists feel that there is something in their feelings that ought to remain hidden. Allon White describes shame as endemic in Meredith's writing, inspired by moments from his own life which are echoed by fictional protagonists:

Shame is not only an attack upon one's sense of dignity and integrity, but upon the body. It is inseparable from the convulsive visceral leap, the 'writhe' of humiliation, which it engenders, both the body's petrification and its desperate sideways twist to escape. (81-82)

Both characters here similarly experience this sense of painful abjection as a result of their age, and it teaches Pollingray caution in his pursuit of Alice Amble. Considering one's age, and in particular the age gap, makes for an uncomfortable experience. Their years do not accurately represent their sense of self. Pollingray claims: "I am fifty years old, and I am not mature. I am undeveloped somewhere" ("The Gentleman of Fifty" 346). He has, he claims, "the heart of a boy", which disrupts the broad narrative of aging experience being commensurate with one's time of life (339). Each is made to feel, in a sense, like an imposter and, not only this, but an imposter who is not willing to perform the part in the first place.

Alice initially celebrates her immaturity, declaring that "At present I choose to be frivolous. ... I will laugh while I can" (343). She relishes the freedom and emotional flexibility of youth, claiming her independence defiantly: "Mr. Pollingray may think what he likes of me. ... It is preposterous to suppose that I am to be tied down to the views of elderly people" (the "elderly" here being a jibe aimed at Pollingray) (343). Her youth is trivialized unfairly in the text. Her immaturity leads to her dismissal in society's eyes as a serious romantic prospect for an older man. No other character makes this connection between the middle-aged man and the girl; their age-gap would seem to preclude this as a possibility in others' eyes. At the start of the text, the implied pairing of spontaneous, "frivolous" Alice with Pollingray's "wild" nephew Charles (343), close in age to one another and therefore an appropriate match, seems to be a

given. The two appear to be well suited, and both the Pollingrays (brother, sister, and nephew) and the Ambles see nothing untoward in Alice's visit to Pollingray's home Dayton Manor House in order to be studied for her fitness as Charles's prospective wife. Alice, however, swiftly comes to view the absent Charles a much paler, uninteresting, and inadequate version of his uncle – in doing so, of course, beginning to demonstrate greater suitability as a wife for Pollingray, as she is mortified at her misjudgment in having seemed to prefer the younger man: "I fancied myself so exceedingly penetrating, and it was my vanity in a glass ... I am ashamed, and so penitent ... I cannot lift up my head" (351). She becomes increasingly abashed by what she views as the insubstantiality and insufficiency of her character, as a direct result of her lack of accumulated experience over time. What, she wonders, could she have to interest a man of Pollingray's maturity? She wishes she were older: "All young people seem to me so helplessly silly. I am one of them for the present, and have no hope that I can appear to be anything else. The young are a crowd – a shoal of small fry. Their elders are the select of the world" (351). She feels herself excluded from the "select", condemning herself for being "silly" and unexceptional, acknowledging even while she longs for something different that her life experience is necessarily circumscribed. In comparison she weeps at the thought that Pollingray has been pining the last twenty years for a married Frenchwoman, Louise, whom he loved as a girl and has been friends with ever since. She both envies the assumed depth of his devotion over such a prolonged time, yet feels guilt and shame at the secret of her own love for Pollingray: "My trouble nobody knows", she declares, "Nobody knows a thing!" (364)

The struggle of both Gilbert Pollingray and Alice Amble to situate themselves beyond the social strictures of their different age groups is not a condition shared by all characters across Meredith's fiction. In Meredith's short story "The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper", the female protagonist displays an incredibly flexible attitude towards age. When wooed by the inept, vain, and mildly pompous widower General Wilson Ople, Lady Camper,

a widow, claims that she's actually a well-preserved seventy years old in order to shock her suitor and disconcert him. It is only at the end of the text, when her relentless teasing, savage caricatures, and satirical barbs aimed at the General have successfully punctured his inflated self-view, that she reveals her true age to be just over forty. Lady Camper's willingness to play boldly with her age – particularly as a Victorian woman, for whom marriageability was notoriously considered to terminate earlier in the life course than for men – draws attention to the power of age to convey meaning. General Ople, for example, considers Lady Camper to be handsome woman with certain charms, but the revelation of her age leaves him stammering at the “awful confession of the extremely ancient, the witheringly ancient” (“The Case of General Ople”133). Lady Camper is extremely open about the fact that she employs cosmetics to maintain a youthful appearance, declaring matter-of-factly and without embarrassment, “I rouge, I have told you. I like color, and I do not like to see wrinkles or have them seen. Therefore I rouge. ... I dislike the look of extreme age, so I conceal it as well as I can” (131-132). This frankness and lack of shame about being no longer young – or at least claiming to be some thirty years older than she actually is – suggests that Lady Camper is unusually flexible in her view of age in relation to gender, and in the way in which she wields age to cultivate status and power. There is no doubt in this text, for example, that the lady is possessed of greater wit, intelligence, thoughtfulness and confidence than her bumbling would-be suitor.

Lady Camper is assertive in her treatment of the General, and she operates within a female-centric sphere in which the General must accede to her authority – despite the cultural trend that places Lady Camper, as a (supposedly) elderly woman, at a disadvantage. Instead, General Ople submits to her domination: “it was partly her whippings of him, partly her penetration” of his character, which seduce him, just like an old gentleman, we are told, who relishes the “swish” because “the instrument revives [the] feeling of youth” (157; 158). He feels strangely invigorated by this “lurid Goddess” (145). In the same way that Lady Camper

manipulates the presentation of her age, she also exerts a fascinating influence over Ople who is powerless to resist her impact, and who is drawn to the apparently elderly woman in spite of himself. He finds himself exposed as Angela Camper's inferior – a stammering, deflated man, whose pride and independence have been drastically reduced by the narrative's end. Maura Ives has commented that Meredith's writing for the *New Quarterly Magazine*, of which this tale is part, reveals his "emerging feminist vision" (13). The tussle between an assumption of patriarchal authority and its resistance, or renegotiation of that power, is paralleled by the effect of age on interpersonal dynamic and the attribution of cultural status and capital. Ople's rigid egotism – fed in part by his complacency at retirement, in which he views it as his right to enjoy life even at others' expense – must be broken down so as to consider the thoughts and wishes of others as well as himself. The general is absorbed into the widow's "ladylike" home rather than occupying his own "gentlemanly residence", as a fitting conclusion to the tale of "a simple man and a complex woman" whose eventual re-marriage at middle age forms the outcome of the power-struggle enacted in the text ("The Case of General Ople" 165; 166). Lady Camper in her performance of agedness cannily resists marginalization of the elderly, and her ruse results in the General, learning that she's really forty one, to think with relief that she's his own age. Even when he thinks that she's seventy, however, he still finds her so enticing that he prefers her unfamiliar allure to the easy, genteel charms of a woman half her age: "his mad fancy reverted from the lady of perhaps thirty-five to the lady of seventy" (144). Age is therefore raised as a comic device and also as a more serious facet of social relations and courtship; at the same time, one's age, Lady Camper's conduct suggests, should hold less sway in society as a basis for the dismissal of a person's values and behavioral qualities. As Gilbert Pollingray realizes in "The Gentleman of Fifty", increasing agedness tends to equate with a growing liminality. Age is not fixed, however, and is therefore, Lady Camper implies, both less significant (why should she be considered such an attractive prospect at middle age,

but adding thirty years delegitimizes her according to Ople's vision?) and also simultaneously *more* significant (suggesting, conversely, that age ought not to be overlooked but merely reassessed from a more generous and dynamic perspective, as it forms part of one's ongoing identity). Esther Godfrey establishes this ambiguity of age as a key factor in depictions of age-difference and gender characteristics:

One of the most important attributes of age is that age is not a static characteristic of an individual. Any identity that originates from age and its influence on gender is a slippery one. ... The temporality of one's age makes it an intrinsically unstable factor within a complex social economy of power. (13)

It is this negotiation between age and gender which is the focus of both "The Case of General Ople" and "The Gentleman of Fifty." Age is what you make it, according to Meredith's narratives. It resonates as both a conventional indicator and as a queer signifier.

Like Lady Camper, who finds a way to reign uncontested whether she's perceived as elderly or middle aged, Gilbert Pollingray is unwilling to be sidelined as he grows older. He, however, unlike the dauntless Lady Camper, is self-conscious and painfully aware of his age as it impacts on his status and social enfranchisement. He is intensely wary of being thought ridiculous or foolish in his middle age. With regard to Alice's delight in laughter he rues "I am doomed to hear it at my own expense" ("The Gentleman of Fifty" 346). He is increasingly dissatisfied with and self-conscious about perceptions about his age. While on the one hand he defends himself as still vital, purposeful, and dynamic, on the other he forces himself to recognize and accommodate, while lamenting, others' tendency to relegate him to the sidelines based on his seniority of years. He recognizes that at his age, society assumes that he ought to experience a sense of being settled and satisfied with life, and evince a modest willingness to retreat into the shade in favor of youth whose time it is in the sun (346). "The reflection", he muses of about his fifty years, "should produce a gravity in men" (346). Gilbert Pollingray, however, does not feel the sense of "gravity", maturity, and resignation that he thinks he ought:

I have my books about me, my horses, my dogs, a contented household. I move in the centre of a perfect machine, and I am dissatisfied. I rise early. I do not digest badly. What is wrong? (346)

Pollingray speaks to the external trappings of middle-aged bachelorhood (a comfortable domestic situation and leisurely amusements), and to his health (digestion) as markers of his age. However, his life lacks emotional – and sexual – fulfilment. It is not necessarily his literal age that Pollingray regrets, but rather the cultural trend of relative disenfranchisement that he is supposed to feel having reached fifty. “What is wrong?”, he asks of himself (346). His middle age does not accord with his sense of self, which becomes apparent particularly through his desire for Alice.

This concern about generation gaps in courtship and marriage occurs in other works by Meredith as well. In the short story “The House on the Beach”, young Annette Van Diemen is effectively promised by her father to the middle-aged, pretentious Mart Tinman, in an engagement that is viewed as “monstrous” (292), and which draws attention to their “disparity of ages” (312) as well as the “ludicrous ... contrast” between her two suitors (one youthful and the other the same age as her father) (293). This is exacerbated when the young woman is seen to feel “the natural sympathy of the young girl for the younger man”, rather than for the older suitor – a selfish, brittle, miserly man over twice her age (293). For Pollingray in “The Gentleman of Fifty”, such anxieties about age difference accompany his interest in Alice Amble: is his desire also “monstrous”? The text is also likely to strike a chord of discomfort with readers. After all, Pollingray is more than twice Alice’s age, and her father’s contemporary. The age gap is therefore significant, and inevitably raises questions about how age division is constituted, how (and whether) age-discrepancy in marriage presents a barrier that may be overcome, or if such separation constitutes a mode of protection for the young and vulnerable. However, as Esther Godfrey has illustrated, while older men marrying significantly younger women could be a cause for concern about modes of oppression, coercion, and

exploitation, the May-December (or January-May) marriage was not necessarily considered in the Victorian period a subject of alarm. Godfrey points out that age discrepancy in marriage could therefore be both conservative and subversive:

the theme challenges sexual and gendered constructions from a position that is culturally, religiously, and ethically ‘legitimate’ and thereby privileged. Because of its peculiar relation to both standard and non-standard sexualities, the theme is at once dangerous and safe. (5)

In nineteenth-century fiction, intergenerational marriages – especially couplings of youth or adolescence and middle age – provided a way to redress other forms of power imbalance by focusing on female agency and desire. Society variously condemned the arrangements as abusive, and sanctioned such partnerships. The expression of desire within these marriages was therefore both “safe” within the confines of the institution, and “dangerous” due to the potential for calculated unevenness of desire and lack of its conjugal reciprocation.

Meredith’s truncated tale, in which the beginning only of an age-heterogamous courtship is evident, highlights the difference in years as self-consciously problematic for both protagonists, however extensively Pollingray and Alice might work to justify or overcome the gap. Alice, as indicated above in her shifting view of Mrs Romer Pattlecombe’s marriage, moves from a position of indifference about age-heterogamous marriages, to painful awareness about others’ attitudes regarding older husbands and their much younger wives. Pollingray, however, discourses the issue with himself quite frankly, and in doing so acknowledges that he must compare his marital prospects at midlife with those of his young nephew – assumed to be Alice’s suitor:

She has plainly not centred her affections upon Charles so that a man’s conscience might be at ease if – if he chose to disregard what is due to decency. But, why, when I contest it, so I bow to the world’s opinion concerning disparity of years between husband and wife? ... the ordinary reckonings are not to be a yoke on the neck of one who earnestly seeks to spouse a fitting mate, though late in life. But, what are fifty

years? They mark the prime of a healthy man's existence. He ... is virtually more eligible ... than a young man, even for a young girl. (362)

Pollingray's monologue reveals a tension between the demands of social "decency" and his own desires. He plainly feels discomfort over the idea that he is in competition with his nephew for Alice's affections, stating with relief that he sees no evidence of her attachment to Charles. His internal coaching also results in a sense of defiance, suggesting that his claim is as good, if not better, than a younger man's: he is "virtually *more* eligible" [emphasis added]. His tone veers between pleading and defiance as he contemplates the age gap. Within the fragment, however, neither Pollingray nor Alice can completely escape the cultural inclination to discount their union on the grounds of "decency".

As Pollingray recognizes the libidinous character of his feelings towards Alice, he is distressed by the knowledge that his erotic attraction for the young girl might be conceived as inappropriate. Not only is he thirty one years her senior, but he is also her godfather.<sup>iii</sup> This reinforces the assumed paternal nature of his relationship with the young girl, which ought to be characterized by spiritual care and guidance rather than libidinous interest. It raises an incestuous valence in their relationship, which is introduced when Alice addresses him affectionately as "Godpapa" (342) during the pair's time alone rowing on the river, following the Ambles' accidental ducking. Alice's account of Pollingray's response illustrates his disquiet:

I was astonished that he should look so disconcerted, and went on: 'Have you forgotten that you are my godpapa?'

He answered: 'Am I? Oh! Yes – the name of Alice.'

Still he looked uncertain, uncomfortable, and I said, 'Do you want to cancel the past, and cast me off?'

'No, certainly not'; he, I suppose, thought he was assuring me.

I saw his lips move at the words 'cancel the past,' though he did not speak them out.

He positively blushed. ... I shall not venture to call him 'Godpapa' again. (342)

This consciousness gives rise to a sense of something akin to horror for Pollingray, a sensation which is borne out of the realization of his advanced age in comparison to her own, and the consequent recognition that his sexual appreciation for the girl might be considered inappropriate. He reveals that he is charmed by “the occasional tightening of her lips as she exerted her muscle” so that “she forms an agreeable picture” (339-340), suggesting an erotic response that is certainly not fatherly. The reminder that he is her godfather jars, and it translates into his evident confusion. It remains a problematic issue for their dynamic, and as the text progresses the fact of his spiritual guardianship is reiterated frequently, as both use it as a form of endearment even while it implicitly tortures each, addressing each other as “ma filleule” and “mon parrain” (359).

The iteration of the term highlights their age difference repeatedly, and Pollingray in particular is susceptible to the discomfort it produces: “I have seen her at the baptismal font! It is inconceivable” (349). Still, however, he admits “I am thirsting for the hour to come when I shall study her. Is not this the poison of a bite in one’s blood?” (350). Such recognition of his passion is underscored by its unlikeliness and irrationality. He feels that his love for Alice has altered him:

Search myself through as I may, I cannot tell when the change began, or what the change consists of, or what is the matter with me, or what charm there is in the person who does the mischief. She is the counterpart of dozens of girls; lively, brown-eyed, brown-haired, underbred ... She is undoubtedly the last whom I or another person would have fixed upon as one to work me this unmitigated evil. (349-350)

Pollingray finds himself strangely weakened by his attachment to Alice. He describes himself as “carried by the fascination of a musical laugh” (346), and the lack of confidence he displays reveals a sense of shame in feeling himself so unmanned by desire, seduced in part by Alice’s youth. The language he uses implies that he has been swept along involuntarily, powerless in the face of his interest and longing. It is only in the fifth chapter that Pollingray declares “I have established a proper mastery over my young lady. ‘Nous avons change de rôle’” (362).

The reader is left to question, however, the extent of his mastery, as Pollingray is still plagued by the sense of unseemliness in the relationship, and still struggles to justify his feelings for the girl; his claim for “mastery” over both self and other could reveal a lack of control rather than its exhibition.

The threat of danger and indecency in their potential union lingers in spite of his self-conscious attempts to rationalize his amatory interest in Alice. In his monologue (above) on the topic, he concludes by asking, “may not some fair and fresh reward be justly claimed as the crown of a virtuous career?” (362) This last rhetorical question, in comparison with his prior attempts at exculpation, is the most selfish reason he provides, as it relegates Alice to the status of object or possession – a “fair and fresh reward” for his “eligible” maturity. This reverts to the acclamation of youth, which is objectified here as a form of compensation for middle-aged patience. This claim by Pollingray that Alice represents a recompense for not having married earlier in life is only fleeting, but it remains disturbing nonetheless.

Pollingray’s assumption that Alice – or any other young girl – could be viewed in this light speaks to the uneasiness that lies at the heart of May-December marriages: that the younger individual will be sexually exploited. This is especially true of Alice (her middle-class upbringing, gender, and age combine so that she occupies a vulnerable position ripe for culturally-legitimized subjugation in the nineteenth-century marriage market). Margaret Morganroth Gullette has explored the dynamic of pedophilic desire, highlighting the way that novels on this theme engage with idealized visions of childhood and youth, constructed as visions of perverted adult desire. The impetus to fetishize youth in such texts, Gullette shows, is often a means abjecting the present and future – the reality of aging imagined as a process of decline and frustration that involves a yearning backwards in time. This reveals a fear of adult sexuality, indicating that “repressed erotic energy is seen in adulthood as a permanent potential danger” so that “aging fortifies sexuality to the point of bestiality”, illustrating a sense

of unease over erotic impulses at midlife (Gullette, “The Exile of Adulthood” 220). Differences in age are nowhere more startlingly exposed than in the pedophilic midlife novel: “discontinuity between stages of the life course” in such fiction, is “painfully allegorized” (217-218). The vulnerability of youth is made particularly apparent alongside the experience of maturity. Pollingray’s fascination with Alice is silently underpinned by similar anxieties. His reflections on his attraction to her tackle, albeit often obliquely, the potentially problematic nature of his desire. This recognition that his attraction to Alice could be condemned by society is in part his preoccupation: it is the possibility of social censure that concerns him, more than worry that his attentions might be morally, or ethically, questionable.

Such thorny problems are at the heart of critical work on pedophilic desires in the nineteenth century. Alice, however, at nineteen, is in many ways not a child. She is, despite her resistance, defined by many of the other characters by her youth – which they consider to align her with naivety, spontaneity, and levity. Alice’s narrative, however is outspoken in its reciprocal desire for the older man. She herself is constructed as a desiring agent. The fragment charts a shift in the power dynamic between Alice and Pollingray, as each becomes aware of their sexual interests. While Pollingray – sensitive, fascinated, blushing – seems initially destabilized by his feelings for Alice, she herself is, at first, emboldened by the vitality of her youth, and the reader is privy to the sense of startled awakening she experiences as she begins to recognize and embrace her sexuality. Unable or at first unwilling to recognize Pollingray as the desired subject, Alice transfers her untethered feelings of longing, affection, and sensual awareness to the horse which Pollingray gives her instead: Prince Leboo. Alice is in a transport of delight at receiving the horse: “I could not get my fingers away from him”, she recounts, “I had no life till I was following him. I could have believed him to be a fairy prince who had charmed me ... I forgive anybody who talk about first love after what my experience has been with Prince Leboo” (352). As Pollingray’s gift, the associative function of the horse is clear,

and during her visit to Dayton Manor House Alice either caresses her horse or begins to speak of it at moments of embarrassment when she is with Pollingray. Once she is back home, feeling unaccountably changed and restless after her visit, the pony and the man are conflated in her narrative as she speaks of the two together. “What have I to tell?” she asks herself, but then presumably unwilling to scrutinize her feelings she deflects the question and exclaims “My Prince! My own Leboo, if I might lie in the stall with you, then I should feel thoroughly happy! ... Evelina declares we are not eight miles from Dayton. It seems to me I am eight million miles distant” (364). The horse substitutes her erotic inclinations towards the man.

A similar process of transference occurs in Alice’s fixation over Louise de Riverolles, Marquise de Mazarodin, with whom Pollingray was in love as a young man, and who he has loved for the past twenty years. On learning of the lady, depicted in a beautiful portrait, Alice actively desires to see other paintings of Louise and to dream of her – again, fixating on Louise as an extension of Pollingray, allowing both to occupy her mind as she lies in bed at night:

My longing to look at [her portrait] was like a sudden jet of flame within me. ... The torment of trying to conjure up that face was inconceivable. I lay, and tossed, and turned ... but by and by my thoughts reverted to Mr. Pollingray, and then like sympathetic ink held to the heat, I beheld her again ... I slept and dreamed of her. (355-356)

Alice’s sleep is tortured by a combination of admiration for and jealousy of the woman with whom she thinks Pollingray is in love. On waking, she admits that “My change of feeling towards him dates from that morning. He had previously seemed to me a man so much older. ... I could not detach him from my dreams last night” (356). Her confused emotions and agitated state indicate a depth of desire, and her efforts to displace that focus onto her horse and Louise function as a means of legitimizing her sexual response to Pollingray. Fascination with one masks the allure of the other. Despite his seniority of years, Alice’s erotically-charged, newfound interest in the older man attempts to collapse the age-gap so that it becomes less of an obstacle. In comparison with her dismissal of Pollingray as a middle aged man in the

opening pages of the text, by the end she describes him in vigorous, masculine terms, noting his blonde hair and clear eyes: “He is summer, and has not fallen into his autumn yet”, she asserts (358). As the text wears on through each short chapter, however, despite the powerful arousal of her sexual desire Alice succumbs to a sense of inferiority and inadequacy instigated by her growing appreciation for Pollingray. Nonetheless, although Alice is anxious that her (she thinks unreciprocated) love for Pollingray diminishes her, making her emotional, ill-at-ease, and uncomfortable, the sensual longing that she experiences does provide a powerful account of a young woman’s sexual awakening.

Both protagonists in this fragment experience a complex amalgamation of defiance, acceptance, and a sense of guilt over their attraction to one another. The result is a text that acknowledges cultural anxieties about sexual desire both during adolescence and at midlife, but one which also celebrates sexuality (emergent and adult) within this study of the dynamism of age. “The Gentleman of Fifty and the Damsel of Nineteen” examines the potential eroticism of age and age difference, as well as interrogating the limitations of socially-sanctioned age-characteristics ascribed to particular age groups within the Victorian period. Although Pollingray fears he has “the heart of a boy” (339), which is symptomatic of his age-sensitivity, he never expresses a desire to recapture his youth or roll back the years. Instead, Pollingray’s reflections indicate a resentment that his culture seems to relegate him to the margins at fifty years old, when he is still able to insist on his vigor at his prime of life. He is, however, fascinated by youth – or rather by Alice. His interest in her, simultaneously, is often tempered by the acknowledgement that she’s so young. He is alive to the potential social censure that would arise were he to declare his desire for the girl (both due to cultural assumptions about sexual exploitation and inequality, but also as a result of the apparent incompatibility of temperament given Alice’s frivolity). Alice herself, despite her initial sense of girlish vitality

and spontaneity, abjures her youth, and learns instead to fetishize the more advanced age of Pollingray.

As a text that contains two first-person narratives, with each chapter alternating between “He” and “She”, the format of this fragment is unusual in Meredith’s body of work. It enables the writer, however, to reflect in detail on the experience of age from the perspective of youth and maturity simultaneously, which displays an unusually detailed and sympathetic account of the vagaries of aging and its impact on identity and sexuality. The fragment by no means prioritizes youth (unlike Meredith’s longer Bildungsromane) as both ‘Age’ and ‘Youth’ are given equal narrative space. Its open-ended, incomplete state also provides the reader with a suggestive lack of resolution and finality that disrupts implicitly the notion of forward-momentum or end-stopped decline typically associated with cultural assumptions about age, aging, and the life course – all of which are scrutinized in this partial tale.

The sense of self-consciousness, frustration, and even shame that accompanies age-awareness is key when considering the number of years that separate the protagonists in this text. The division between Pollingray and Alice is based primarily on their age gap and the disparity it implies. This assumption, that at fifty and at nineteen there can be little sympathy and common ground, provides the opposition of the text’s title; although the essential and uncompromising difference assumed to exist across age-grades is challenged. Both youth and older age work to resist such pigeonholing, although both protagonists are alive to the tensions that result from their own more fluid inclinations and the rigid ideology of discrete life-course stages which their culture seems to perpetuate. Age in this text can consolidate cultural participation and confer status, particularly when assumptions about what constitutes “appropriate” behavior are realized; but it also functions as a form of social exclusion, producing a sense of fragmented selfhood in which the individual emerges out of step with the rest of the world. While Alice sees Pollingray as one of “the select of the world” due to his age

(351), he himself feels that, due to his age, his sexual attraction to her is in part the folly of an “old fool” (339), and that his interest may be a “guilty” “act of egregious folly” (346).

“The Gentleman of Fifty and the Damsel of Nineteen” has not received any sustained critical attention since its posthumous publication in 1910. In part, this is likely due to its absolute brevity – of the six chapters in total the final two are merely a few scant paragraphs – and so its slight length is at odds with the extensive density of Meredith’s novels. It may also be set aside by some as the author was himself dissatisfied with the experimental fragment, and chose not to publish it (although this should not of course disbar literary work from proper analysis). Indeed, this was the reason given unapologetically for not discussing the text by Mary Sturge Gretton in her 1923 volume *Writings & Life of George Meredith: A Centenary Study*, together with the omission of *Celt and Saxon*, *The Sentimentalists*, and “The House on the Beach” (243).<sup>iv</sup> Its status as merely a fragment clearly works against it, and many Meredith scholars mention it briefly and move on. However, even in its curtailed, incomplete state, the interior monologues of “He” and “She” function as a window, which frames their reflections on and impressions of how age and age difference are constructed and how these might impact on gender relations. Age emerges as a problematic, but nonetheless powerful and essential, facet of identity construction.

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<sup>i</sup> For more on youth and inter-generational relationships in Meredith's novels, readers may wish to consult Alice Crossley, *Male Adolescence in Mid-Victorian Fiction: George Meredith, W.M. Thackeray, and Anthony Trollope*. Routledge, forthcoming; Stephanie Green, "'Nature was strong in him': Spoiling the Empire Boy in George Meredith's *The Egoist*." *Australasian Victorian Studies Journal*, vol. 5, 1999, pp. 88-95; Melissa Shields Jenkins, "'Stamped on Hot Wax': George Meredith's Narratives of Inheritance." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 39, 2011, pp. 525-43; Monica Mannheimer, *The Generations in Meredith's Novels*. Almqvist & Wiskell, 1972.

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<sup>ii</sup> It is not clear precisely when this was written. It is listed merely as “An early uncompleted fragment”. As the text is not freely available and has no critical edition, for readers’ ease of access a reprint edition by Dodo Press has been used for reference in this essay.

<sup>iii</sup> Valerie Sanders has written a fascinating account of the Victorian godfather within the Victorian family, with particular reference to literary and historical figures such as Dickens, Tennyson and Darwin. For Sanders, godfathering as a practice involves “a collision between the secular and the spiritual, the maternal and the paternal, and the public and the private” (244): “Godfathering: The Politics of Victorian Family Relations”, in Lucy Delap, Ben Griffin and Abigail Wills, *The Politics of Domestic Authority in Britain Since 1800*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 243-260.

<sup>iv</sup> Gretton cites as justification a letter from Meredith to A. Esdaile on September 7<sup>th</sup> 1907. Reference to this letter reveals no direct allusion to those works Gretton excludes: “An author with a conscience can hardly look back on all his writings with satisfaction. He sees where the true fire has not been present. And he knows that when he departs, the publishers, if there is inquiry about him, will be collecting the scraps. Not an agreeable prospect for him.” *Letters of George Meredith Collected and Edited by His Son*, in 2 Volumes. Vol. 2, Charles Scribner & Sons, 1913, p. 603.