

LIVING FOREVER:

Fictions of Radical Life Extension, 1878-1918



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OVERVIEW

Between 1878-1918, a series of 'literary thought experiments' broached the question: What would it mean to 'live forever'? Such texts - known as 'rejuvenescence fiction' - constitute an important source of information for contemporary attitudes to age and ageing, but are as yet critically neglected.

BACKGROUND

Amid a 'proliferation' and 'enrichment' within literary age studies, fantastical (i.e., non-realist) depictions of age and ageing remain poorly understood, especially in the period before 1918. This is despite understanding for how popular fiction can often better articulate collective hopes and anxieties than more literary fiction.

This project performs historicist, interdisciplinary readings of several examples of rejuvenescence fiction in order to 'recover' them and establish a critical genealogy of the genre for the first time - to clarify, in fact, whether it is possible to speak of a genre at all. Prior scholarship, based on single authors or on one or two texts, has been unable to make claims about the geographical or chronological range of such fictions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- (1) How does rejuvenescence fiction engage with the social, political, and legislative negotiations of ageing and the discursive materials that developed around them?
- (2) How is our understanding of late Victorian and Edwardian attitudes toward the aging process and life course paradigms transformed by the inclusion of these sources?
- (3) How does this historical context enhance and broaden our understanding of ageing as a perennial concern for humanity globally?

METHODOLOGY

The project is organized around in-depth, intertextual readings of rejuvenescence fiction published from 1878 to 1918, interwoven with explorations of the discursive contexts from which these accounts emerged and to which they contributed. Deploying a cultural history approach, I trace how ideas such as 'anti-aging' proliferated across and became transformed in their migration between literary and extra-literary media and disciplines such as journalism, medical treatises, and visual materials (including advertisements). Rejuvenescence fiction is therefore conceived of as a vital imaginative space for circulating and shaping ideas about aging and the life course, during years in which new disciplinary understandings of these subjects entered the public discourse.



TRANSFUSION! *Judy*, Vol 19 (Oct 11, 1876), 263



The Graphic; Feb 17, 1906; 73, 1,890;
British Periodicals pg. 225