

## [Age and Aging in Texts by Goethe and His Contemporaries](#)

Discussion published by Christine Lehleiter on Thursday, February 13, 2020

Type:

Call for Papers

Date:

March 15, 2020

Subject Fields:

Cultural History / Studies, German History / Studies, History of Science, Medicine, and Technology, Literature, Women's & Gender History / Studies

Panel sponsored by the Goethe Society of North America

Annual Conference of the Modern Language Association

January 7-10, 2021, Toronto, ON

Organizers: Christine Lehleiter and Elisa Leonzio

Goethe was one of the relatively few of his generation who enjoyed an extended life span and it comes as no surprise that reflections on age and the aging process are frequent in his work. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* undoubtedly had significant impact on the establishment of an ideological context in which the young bourgeois individual was expected to leave the parents' house in order to become an autonomous being and, at the same time, a productive member of society (cf. Franco Moretti, *Andrea Charise*). Considering this framework, the elderly person that might suffer diminished economic productivity and lose autonomy when returning to the family or other support networks might seem a failure. However, while the *Meister* novel follows a young hero, in Goethe's *Elective Affinities* the narrator takes a more critical position vis-a-vis Eduard's enthusiasm for everything that is young and new while older individuals like the gardener highlight the values of maturity and duration. In other texts by Goethe, old age offers alternative perspectives from which modernity can be challenged. At the end of *Faust II*, *Philemon and Baucis* in their old age are strong reminders of the victims of the colonizing project driven by an ideology of progress. Even in those places where aging is depicted explicitly as a burden and obstacle (*The Man of Fifty Years*) new happiness is found once age is accepted and endorsed.

Against the backdrop of recent scholarship in historical and literary studies on old age in Western Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries (cf. *Andrea Charise*, *Karen Chase*, *Susannah Ottaway*), this panel seeks to explore presentations and conceptualizations of age and aging in texts by Goethe and his contemporaries. We welcome proposals from a wide range of texts and we are particularly interested in contributions that explore the topic at the intersection of literature and medicine. Beyond our overarching question of how age and aging were experienced, represented, and conceptualized in texts by Goethe and his contemporaries, topics may include (but are not limited to): What kind of values are associated with old age? How do these values inform social (in particular intergenerational) interactions (respect, stigmatization, care)? How are the categories of age, class, and gender connected (the widow, the alms receiver, the old sage)? What kind of strategies are employed in order to deal with old age or to postpone its onset (cosmetics, diet, exercise)? Is there an

aesthetics of old age? What ideal of health, and what "welfare system," emerges from the texts, and what kind of power and power discourses are implied? How do the authors deal with the pain and deterioration usually associated with aging? What are the connections between medical and literary texts regarding the conceptualization of old age?

This panel is sponsored by the Goethe Society of North America.

Please send an abstract of no more than 350 words to Christine Lehleiter ([christine.lehleiter@utoronto.ca](mailto:christine.lehleiter@utoronto.ca)) and Elisa Leonzio ([elisa.leonzio@unito.it](mailto:elisa.leonzio@unito.it)) by March 15th, 2020.