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Forever young: Medusa's curse and the discourses of ageing

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Wherever we look, inwards or outwards, calling upon literature, psychoanalysis, feminism or demographics, fear of aging is ubiquitous, especially fears of the aging female body. This has a special significance for feminists who, in earlier days of militancy, fought for (and helped secure) women's claims to sexual pleasure and more supportive sexual intimacies. The double standards, disparagements and sexual harassment variously faced down in youth, confronting the male-centred iconographies of sex and relationships, can threaten a mocking mutation into enduring disregard in the disparities appearing in the sexual options of women and men as they age. 'How did that single aspect ... become a fixed – if regrettable – context, rather than being part of the world "we" have to change?', the feminist cultural critic, Lillian Robinson, has asked. It is not easy to answer her question.

Key words: aging; demographics; feminism; autonomy; loss; desire; disavowel.

What happens when angry young rebels become wary older women, ageing in a leaner, meaner time: a time which exalts only the 'new', in a ruling orthodoxy daily disparaging all it portrays as the 'old'? In its youthful renaissance, emerging out of the sexual revolution, second-wave feminism more or less pushed off by opposing double standards, and all the male centred, predatory understandings of straight sex. 'Down With Penile Servitude', 'Women in Labour, Keep Capitalism in Power, were the two slogans chalked up on the walls of the first-ever national Women's Liberation Conference in the UK, in Oxford in the spring of 1970. Penile servitude did not refer, as we might expect today, to the ever-rising rates of prison incarceration, but rather to men's clamour for sex, their endless desire for us. 'Women in labour', referred not, as I think we might assume today, to the long

hours women, like men nowadays, put into paid employment, but rather to our giving birth, something women on the job today often need to put off so long that many fear they may, without really choosing to, miss the chance of bearing children. Quite apart from their anachronisms, neither slogan is very compelling, for the older woman.

Like others before me, I have been cautioned, often enough, to avoid even thinking, let alone speaking or writing, about my own generation – over fifty – as ‘old’. If generational categories are ambiguous, age divisions are even more elastic, their flexibility throughout any lifetime affected by the imprint of class, ethnicity, economic options, just for a start. In prosperous settings today, the irresponsibility of youth often extends well into people’s thirties, as they face the world childfree, hedonistic and single (many, especially young men, still residing in the parental home). The idea of middle age keeps lengthening, moving on from the fears once attached to reaching thirty, to accompany many travelling effortlessly through their forties and others who find themselves working harder than ever in the workplace in their fifties. Indeed, it is a tag that remains with some of us, or so we like to think, still contemplating diverse futures at sixty.

However, the lengthening of age divisions is itself a sign of the cultural force of age anxieties, routinely surfacing as blatant gerontophobia. In cultures that fear signs of deficiency and despise dependency, we must remain ‘forever young’, if

we are to remain visible at all, even on reaching three score years and ten, once definitive of old age and immanent mortality. At seventy, the British TV presenter, Joan Bakewell launched a new column in *The Guardian*, 'Just 70', reflecting the fervor of the *zeitgeist* with her sense that she is no older than she feels: 'which is young'.¹ It is thirty odd years since we could have, but almost certainly did not, read Simone de Beauvoir's most neglected book, *Old Age*. It was everywhere a forbidden subject, she found: 'What a furious outcry I raised when I offended against this taboo ... great numbers of people, particularly old people, told me kindly or angrily but always at great length and again and again, that old age simply does not exist!'² With the two words too unpleasant to mention, some people are simply less young than others, she was told (her book at first appeared in English, with the euphemistically blurred title, '*The Coming of Age*'). Old age, Beauvoir insisted, was always evaded, except when discussed as a problem. It can never be sexy, at least in a woman. 'How can we ever have thought we age by nature alone'? is the rallying call by self-styled ageist resister, Margaret Gullette, in her impressive book, *Aged by Culture*.³

Cultures of Aging

Wherever we look, inwards or outwards, calling upon the orthodoxical or the dissident, whether in literature, psychoanalysis, feminist scholarship or the language of Queer, fear or denial of aging is ubiquitous, but especially, and

overridingly, fear of the aging female. So much activity is needed, Colette once wrote, ‘to hide that horror – the old woman’.⁴ It is more acceptable, I’ve thought, for old age to ‘burn and rage’, than for it to raunch and rave. And yet, Hollywood has little problem with *Grumpy Old Men* – Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon got Grumpier with every remake. Over what are these cantankerous, crusty old males feuding? Well, usually, over the affections of beautiful young women; in other movies the aging male stars will marry them. Yesterday’s Man, is Tomorrow’s Dad!, as Michael Douglas or Jack Nicholson can testify. But not so Yesterday’s Woman, even if rich, famous and a movie star as well. What slogans have we to address the situation of the older woman? She who will not so much be press-ganged into servicing men’s sexual needs, but rather, just as coercively, will be rendered sexually invisible. Over in Hollywood, female contemporaries were jettisoned decades earlier from romantic leads, as Diane Keaton noted, in her sudden surprise at being offered such a role, at fifty eight, with the significantly older, but still regularly romantically-cast, Jack Nicholson, in *Something’s Gotta Give*. Signs of change? We have yet to see.

Men and women face the fears, challenges and losses of aging at much the same time. I have no wish to deny or diminish the anguish men experience with the losses of ageing: ‘I think the anxiety that death arouses ... torments men more than women,’ the French psychoanalyst, Jean -Bertrand Pontalis, has suggested, seeing

women as more resigned to their lot.⁵ Nevertheless cultures of aging are unquestionably gendered. This has a distinctive importance for women who, in youthful days of militancy, fought for (and helped to secure) women's claims to sexual pleasure, combating the phallocentrism of the language and iconography of sex, while, if heterosexual, striving for equality in the intimacies of sexual couplings and home-life. The double standards, disparagements and sexual harassment we had met in our youth could mockingly mutate into enduring disregard in the disparities appearing in the sexual options of women and men as they age.

In much of his compelling writing, that remarkably astute, reliably conservative observer of the human condition, Phillip Roth, delights in portraying this particular inequality in contemporary urban America. In *The Dying Animal* he skilfully evokes the plight of the older woman who, having successfully, as he puts it, 'democratized the entitlement to pleasure' in her youth, suffers the 'chronic insomnia' and 'compound of disappointments' so common in the biographies of professional women now living alone in their apartments from their forties onwards: 'evening meals more often than not are delivered to the door of their Manhattan apartments in a plastic bag by an immigrant'. His compassion for such women morphs into his triumphant bravado at the ease with which a successful older man (such as himself) can seduce a certain type of much younger woman.

These are the women who make it clear to him, he says, that: ‘to give yourself over intimately to a much older man provides [her] with the authority of a kind she cannot get in a sexual arrangement with a younger man ... both the pleasures of submission *and* the pleasures of mastery.’⁶ Fortunately, despite the multiple doppelgangers he releases, all men are not Philip Roth, though more now share a sense of his possibilities and entitlements. Older women, even when powerful and rich, especially when powerful and rich, lack a parallel sexual allure.

Here is one raw statistic, increasingly true the world over: women living alone are the fastest growing household unit, but – less well known – only lone older women. This is not merely due to differential mortality rates affecting mainstream heterosexual populations, as some believe, since it emerges well before the age when they commence and the longevity gap between the sexes is actually narrowing. Nor does living alone appear to be something women are simply choosing. When younger, in their twenties and thirties, women are far less likely to be living alone than men. In figures available from Australia and the USA, single men greatly outnumber single women up until their fifties, after which there is a rapid reversal, with roughly sixty% of people living alone from the age of sixty-five being women.⁷ In Britain, men living alone outnumber women almost three to one between the ages twenty-five to forty-four, but there are twice as many single women as men once over the age of sixty five.⁸ Divorce statistics in Britain show

exactly the same pattern, with equal numbers of divorced women and men under forty remarrying, but older men more likely, and definitely more able, to remarry after that age.⁹ Matching evidence of older women's thwarted aspirations for intimacy is evident in a host of other studies from the US and UK, which report that women and men both select sexual intimacy as the single main ingredient of 'happiness', though almost fifty per cent of women over forty report having no sexual contact in the previous year, compared to only twenty per cent of men who must, one presumes – even making allowances for male braggadocio – be engaging with younger women. Gathering information annually from 10,000 adults in 5,000 households throughout the 1990s, the British Household Panel Study reports women faring less well than men following marriage or relationship break-ups, with women who remained alone thereafter having the worst mental health of all groups surveyed. Serial cohabitation, rather than marriage or remarriage, proved most conducive to men's mental health. However, like other studies, strangely – though not inconsistently – they also suggest that women are more adept at living alone than men, with those women who have *always* lived alone having good mental health relative to other women, or to lone men.¹⁰ Certainly, the data from such demographic research lacks the nuance and complexity of studying life histories. But they do provide a rough sketch of the social background for locating the

dilemmas of many an aging woman, whether or not they were ever touched by, indifferent or even hostile to feminism.

Hazards of Autonomy

Unsurprisingly, however, one knee-jerk reaction to older women's predicament is to blame feminism: look where women's foolhardy search for independence has got them – more women facing old age, unpartnered and alone! As proof, they could point out that women with more work experience and earning capacity face a greater risk of divorce.¹¹

Was it then, mere hubris, which had emboldened a women's vanguard in the late 1960s and early 1970s to try to live their lives as if we were entitled to similar sexual options as the men we related to. From the beginning, this was spelled out as a woman's right to define and determine her own sexuality. And from the beginning, the unique difficulties of maintaining what felt like appropriate, valuable sexual and loving attachments could all too easily fall hostage to feminist uncertainties, or worse, prescriptiveness. A good man was always hard to find, which is a major reason some feminists ended up having or raising their children without one, whether lesbian or straight. And feminist suspicion of 'romance' and 'love', as traditionally women servicing men, was sometimes replaced by an all-too-fleeting bravado. 'Sleeping beauty wakes up and doesn't need her prince any more', the Dutch writer Anja Meulenbelt celebrated in her best-seller of the late 1970s:

“‘Darling, when I need you, I’ll call’”, she wrote.¹² And he’ll be waiting? Well! Perhaps not. But Meulenbelt was for many years in the forefront of attempting to trade in old romantic illusions for new feminist illusions: namely, any woman can replace her desire for the love of a man (deserving or undeserving) by sensibly beginning to love herself. She even wrote her own instruction manual, *For Ourselves*: Some women have learned ‘to live alone’, she celebrated, ‘and discovered that there is more eroticism to be found in our daily living than from the odd fuck which used to have to satisfy all our needs’. Many colourful illustrations followed on the joys of masturbation and ‘how to make an orgasm’, with copious assurance, in the footsteps of Shere Hite, that it had little to do with ‘something moving up and down in the vagina’.¹³ Penetrative Sex? No Thanks!

Such writing was always a strangely, solipsistic sleight of hand, when beyond the mechanistic framings of the sexological imagination, it seems obvious that desire is always a longing to be the object of the desire of another, that very particular other whom we can manage to cathect. It is not, simply, consciously willed. This explains its basic affinity with passivity (however often, however anxiously, disavowed in men’s sensual life). This is why, at least in heterosexual arenas, feminist victories have been double-edged. They have a haunting shadow. It is without a doubt easier for many women to live independent, fuller, freer lives when living alone today, lives, it must be said, often far from devoid of intimacy –

with friends, workmates, children. Yet, it is unmistakably, also, because of the greater independence feminism helped to bring to women, that it has proved easier for a man to choose to move on from one woman to another as he ages, at a time when similar choices (once shared and perhaps indulged by their former partner) close down precipitously for her. Ironically, the more successful the woman, the less the moral guilt in leaving her, and the more likely she will end up living alone. The statistics are there.

In the heyday of feminism, invented kinship, whether in collective households, the enduring support of female friends, or the camaraderie of political attachments, usually kept the most corrosive assaults of loneliness at bay. However, visibly successful or not, it can be less easy for the older woman to beat back a looming sense of failure and diffidence in social settings, as she struggles to elude the way she fears others still look upon an ageing single woman. Cultural climates are also implicated in experiences of aging. Like all social aspirations, political struggles encourage us to be forward-looking. Women's liberation, in particular, with its reaching out to others to create a fairer world, seemed to promise that we would always have meaningful work to do, together with others. But the waxing and waning of the feminist movement occurred in tandem with the expanding and shrinking of social and emotional ties more generally for many of its activists.

Among many other voices, the American feminist, Vivian Gornick, depicts her sense of rising dread living alone in middle age. Having once flung herself exuberantly into the rise of women's liberation, finding joyful emotional shelter in its collective embrace, as well as her voice as writer, she now saw its community life receding and the movement fragmenting from the 1980s. It was a time when: 'existential loneliness ate at my heart ... A fear of lifelong solitude took hold of me ... Thirty years of politics in the street opened a door that became a floodgate, and we have poured through in our monumental numbers, in possession of the most educated discontent in history'.¹⁴ Her words resonate with those of others I hear in the UK. It may seem a bitter harvest that women who laboured hard to create more open, equal and responsible intimacies with lovers, who showed solidarity with those fighting injustice near and far, supported so many who had yet to find a voice, are often themselves living, today, unexpectedly, alone.

With her usual poetic eloquence, Denise Riley speaks for many:

.... No, what I
really mean to say instead is, come back
won't you, just all of you come back, and give
me one more go at doing it all again but doing it
far better this time round – the work, the love stuff –¹⁵

The Brakes on Love

How should we theorize it? The sudden brakes on love. Of course, we know that age disparities have long been built into the heteronormative script. Women from

the beginning have been encouraged to eroticize the more distant, more powerful, father figure (even grandfather figure, as aging Robert Redford's impact upon our imagination), and still authenticate their femininity. This reverses for men, their masculinity achieved precisely through their flight from mother, from childhood's dependency. Such cultural framing is popularly seen as underpinned by biology, evident most recently in the enthusiastic promotion of evolutionary psychology in almost every popular science outlet. Here, accounts of sexual desire return us to the gender polarities of the late nineteenth century in the wake of Darwinian theory, with sexuality identified with its presumed reproductive imperatives: males will seek to impregnate as many young females as possible; diffident and selective, females will seek older males with resources to protect them in their biological task of nurturing offspring to reproductive age.¹⁶ Will they? Well no. For a biological imperative its predictive and explanatory power has proved meagre. Contradicting all its laws, in recent times both men and women in more affluent societies have inexorably chosen to have ever fewer children; women have been delaying motherhood and a significant minority remain childless; the dedicated pursuit of non-procreative sexual activity has proliferated. When almost no aspect of human sexual practice conforms to reproductively driven dictates, it is hardly compelling to conjecture a biological explanation for the single area of sexual conduct that can be aligned to fit its supposed purview: men in middle age are more able to find

new female sexual partners than are women of the same age. Even here, the abundant evidence that post-menopausal women do still desire sexual partners fails to fit putative reproductive underpinnings, while cultural shifts are clearly evident in the age at which women are thought to be no longer sexually alluring and marriageable across time and place: lengthening by almost two decades in modern times.¹⁷

Given the psychic complexities that Freud tried to illuminate, on how minds inhabit bodies, some might hope for richer accounts of the aging process in authoritative psychoanalytic writing, beyond pop Freudianism. Freud's emphasis on the perversities of desire, so often at odds with what is prudent, available or reproductively efficient, might lead us to expect that in this framing neither nature nor culture can easily direct sexual excitement along clearly sanctioned procreative lines. But here again we will be disappointed. Freud's own morbid dread of and preoccupation with aging, decrepitude and death, from his early forties, meant that he ignored old age, when not disparaging it, as a time of uncreative inflexibility, of little interest to psychoanalysis.¹⁸ Reprising mythic fears that turn the aging female into the grotesque and abject, Freud wrote:

It is well known, and has been a matter of much complaint, that women often alter strangely in character after they have abandoned their genital functions. They become quarrelsome, peevish, and argumentative, petty and

miserly; in fact they display sadistic and anal-erotic traits which were not theirs in the era of womanliness.¹⁹

From such foundations, it might seem just as well, perhaps, that Freud's followers have until recently made the topic 'virtually a taboo area'.²⁰ What little attention the older woman received was inevitably gloomy: Helene Deutsch, not so surprisingly, described the 'climacteric [as] a narcissistic mortification that is difficult to overcome ... everything that a woman has gained by puberty is lost piece by piece'.²¹ Everything? Yes! Apparently.

There is today a counter heteronormative trajectory gaining a new theoretical prominence in contemporary Freudian thought (sometimes calling itself 'postmodern psychoanalysis'). It incorporates a diversity of poststructuralist perspectives, all questioning the traditional naturalistic accounts of psychosexual development, where desire matures along normative heterosexual routes, binding it to procreation.²² Such perspectives, in slightly differing ways, stress the sliding, ambiguous meanings at play in our bodily interactions with significant others, as fantasy provides a space for multiple, contradictory identifications, assuaging or rerunning all the hurts or hopes of the past. It remains a dissident, though currently expanding tendency in clinical practice. In recent years, special attention has been given to the project of rescuing homosexual and other forms of dissident desire from the normative psychoanalytic disparagement that frames them as essentially narcissistic, immature or pathological compared with heterosexual couplings.

‘Perversion Is Us’, as the middle-aged, heterosexual New York clinician, Muriel Dimen, exuberantly suggests.²³ These theorists and practitioners aim to support and empower those who occupy marginal subject positions, exploring the fashioning of the new cultural mythologies that sustain them. They have also attended to other forms of sociocultural trauma, such as that which marks ‘racial identity as a melancholic structure’.²⁴ Yet, in one recent definitive text aiming confidently to wed the psychoanalytic and intellectual avant-garde, *Bringing the Plague: Towards a Postmodern Psychoanalysis*, the trauma of aging, male or female, receives not a solitary mention in any one of its essays addressing the clinical dilemmas of the ‘the postmodern subject’.²⁵ The post-modern subject, like the Queer subject it helped to birth, does not age. But for how long, I wonder, can s/he hold on to youth, everlasting?

Overall, psychoanalysis remains complicit in fixing the essence of female adulthood as, and only as, Mother, both reinforcing familiar fears of woman as all-engulfing female while securing women’s abject status as unconditional thankless givers, never the secure takers, of carefree joys and bodily delights. Meanwhile, I would point out, that while cultural fears of woman as engulfing mother may be exacerbated with aging, this perception is compounded by a later alarming reversal, as the older woman appears no longer omnipotent, but weak and vulnerable.²⁶

‘I only feel old when I look at you’, a man is overheard saying to his wife, without rancour.²⁷ What, is the perceptual adjustment that would be needed for that older man to look, with unthreatened desire, at the older woman, without fearing her as the Medusa who can turn him to stone? What, indeed, is the adjustment needed for we aging women to be able look at ourselves without alarm in our eyes, as sags and wrinkles appear: ‘I despair of ever being able to reconcile my overall sense of well-being, self-confidence, achievement, and pleasure in the richness of the present with the image I see in the mirror’, the US feminist Vivian Sobchack writes.²⁸ However culturally implanted – the monstrous harridan of folktale; the smothering mother of adolescence; the management bitch in the workplace; the matronly dragon on hospital wards – the older man, when dapper, fit and solvent, does not lose his erotic power quite as fast, at least in certain female eyes, as a woman knows she does in the eyes of men, and therefore, usually, in her own eyes too. Carol Duffy captures the mythic Medusa lamenting her fate, confronting her Greek Hero, the man who once loved her, the man she loves still, not only rejecting her for younger women, but forcing her to face abjection:

I’m foul mouthed now, foul tongued,
 yellow fanged.
 There are bullet tears in my eyes.
 Are you terrified?
 Be terrified.
 It’s you I love,
Perfect man; Greek God, my own;
 But I know you’ll go, betray me, stray

From home.
So better by far for me if you were stone.

...
wasn't I beautiful?
Wasn't I fragrant and young?
Look at me now.²⁹

Yes, look, and try to move beyond petrification, and silence.

Minds and bodies are not separable, and the mind that inhabits an older woman's body is quite as likely as it ever was to crave companionship, affection and the confirmation that she is desirable, she is desired. Nevertheless, as British feminist writer, Sara Maitland notes, it may be extremely helpful for older women to try to cloak our bodies with a story that denies this: 'To acknowledge and address the sexual desire of women who can no longer bear children is to expose the whole structure', she writes, 'it is better to act as though they did not desire, and if they do it is peculiar, tasteless and neurotic'.³⁰

Of all the things feminists have evaded when and if framing a new sexual politics for relationships with men, none has proved harder to face up to than the differential odds confronting older, reluctantly single women and men, beyond denouncing an agism that is far harsher in its treatment of the former. I know, because along with my friend, the American sexologist Leonore Tiefer, I have been accused of just such evasion by a feminist I respect, the Canadian literary scholar Lillian Robinson, when she reviewed our respective books on sexuality.

One problem is that when you are happily coupled it is perhaps just too frightening to believe that the possibility for the fulfilment it offers could close down, seemingly overnight, if women over fifty find themselves suddenly on their own again.

‘Doctor I’m suffering from a serious case of mind-body problem ... My head agrees with Segal, but my heart and my mind have already been shut out of her narrative ... my sexual isolation is not being addressed in these otherwise exciting books’, is how Robinson ended her generally positive review of my book, *Straight Sex*. My account of the possibilities of women finding pleasure and power in sexual relationships with men excluded her, she indicated, making her feel sad and guilty, reading of a place she now seemed forbidden to visit:

I am 53 years old, feminist, heterosexual and celibate ... I am not celibate and proud or even celibate and resigned. I am celibate and ashamed, ashamed of my involuntary condition and ashamed that it is involuntary. I feel the desire that inhabits me is a disease. ... I do my work as mother, scholar, teacher and writer. I do it well and authentically. I live – abundantly – all other kinds of love that are given me to experience. But no man desires me, and that makes the pages before me assume the shape that they do, as I avidly scan them for something that isn’t there, wondering whether I have the right to be disappointed at its absence.³¹

She does, of course, especially as I am a mere year or so younger than Robinson. I regret that I did not address her sense of exclusion, other than (as she quotes dismissively) to deplore the sexism combined with ageism that haunts older women, before racing onwards to affirm – from my own reflections, and in the

words of others – that older women can and do enjoy ‘undiminished, post-menopausal sexual pleasure’.³² Robinson was not alone in her feelings. Two female friends (both well-known writers) with much the same grievance cornered me crossly in the women’s loo the very night of the launch of this book, in late 1994. Even so, I still do not know what strategies to suggest that directly address the desert of sexual opportunities that many straight older women report, for reasons that run deeper than personal bad luck: ‘How did that single aspect ... become a fixed – if regrettable – context, rather than being part of the world “we” have to change?’, Robinson chides me. It’s not my fault, I limply plead.

‘The world “we” have to change’, can’t be changed by legislative decree, trade union struggle, or any obvious form of effective collective demand, though we could try, I suppose, unfurling a brand new Post-Fifty Female Fighter’s Flag, silver thread emblazoned on the red: *A woman’s flesh can still be roused/ though she is fifty years and more. / Her need for love is as before,/men must keep knocking at her door.*

Here, of course, we face the danger of confounding physical intimacy and sexual encounter: it always being far from clear whether intimacy is desired in order to enable sexual expression, or sexual encounters are desired in order to reassure us (perhaps deceptively) of our significant ties to another. These differing aspects of intimacy have never been easy to unpick: the shakier the attachment, perhaps, the

stronger the desire for sex; the securer the coupling, the less the clamour for sex. I foresee further protests to my new feminist pitch from younger women, who sometimes tell me that they too can't 'find a man', the 'right man', asking why their situation is any different from that of older women. (Demographically, the odds look different for the bachelor girl in her twenties and thirties, but individually it must feel much the same, perhaps worse, if she is worrying about having a child, sometimes in employment that leaves her little time for pursuing relationships.) Furthermore, such heterosexual demands would prove irritating to lesbian feminists, all over again, for sidelining what they may see as their far 'better' alternative. Meanwhile, those straight women who do say they are giving and receiving the hugs, kisses and physical attention they desire, could still be accused of boasting. It's not my fault, I repeat, a little more confidently.

Feminists are going to have to become the most talented mistresses of invention to resist this concerted cultural neglect of aging women's libido. 'It's every woman's tragedy that, after a certain age, she looks like a female impersonator', Angela Carter wrote in her final novel, *Wise Children*.³³ Pondering this, feminist publisher, Ursula Owen suggests, 'I don't think the sexual liberations of the past thirty years have much altered women's experience of ageing'.³⁴ It seems easier for older women, especially if they are feminist and single, to sidestep the treacherous world of bodily passion altogether, bonding instead through shared

resignation, disavowal or proclaimed transcendence of sexual needs. All these options have been tried, especially the last two. Indeed, in age's coming of age, they are finding a new market niche.

Age Comes of Age

Despite the sexual braggadocio flaunted in her youth, in *The Female Eunuch*, thirty years down the line, Germaine Greer was one of the first to leap successfully into the publishing arena to celebrate the innocent joys of the older woman, in *The Change*. The timid female eunuchs Greer had tried to ignite in her youth, she spied, irritating her all over again, this time among the 'gallery of grotesques' who were now 'pathetically' still trying to please men – seeking to stay young by any means possible. Disengaging from the whole disruptive arena of sex and relationships was the strategy she advocated now, whilst, ever the exemplary public optimist, assuring her female readers: 'To be unwanted is to be free'.³⁵

A fantasized return to innocence may be one way of trying to keep lonesomeness at bay, and certainly being coupled does not guarantee healthy companionship. But I find the suggestion that the decline of our raging oestrogens can be celebrated as the end of heartaches about as convincing as its opposite, HRT as comprehensive panacea. A matching feminist high-mindedness is mirrored in the writing that other second-wave pioneer, the late Betty Friedan's *Fountain of Age*, published in 1993, with strong media and even U.S. government

endorsement. However, just a few other famous Americans of her age group, such as Susan Sontag, also wanting to revalue the aging process, have attacked the double standard that renders women sexually obsolete long before men, when in her middle age.³⁶ At odds with the resolutely heterosexual retrenchments of all the feminist voices I have mentioned so far, Sontag's own apparent sexual confidence, right up until the time of her death in 2004, may perhaps not be unconnected to the fact that she enjoyed a sexual partnership with another bold and beautiful woman, the photographer Annie Leibovitz, throughout the last two decades of her life (although Sontag herself never highlighted her lesbianism).

So let me point out, just one last time, that minds and bodies are not separable, and the mind that inhabits an older woman's body is quite as likely as it ever was to crave companionship, affection and the confirmation that one is desired and needed – feelings most commonly associated with and fulfilled through the physical endearments of 'sex'. And, even if we do try to ignore – as though we could – all the psychic investment in bodies and the discourses that allow us to speak of them, the sexual cultures of ageing reflect as little about the actual biology of the male body as it does about the female. Biologically speaking, men are subject to a steady decline in fertility from the age of forty, or before; they experience a sharp drop in penile sensitivity even earlier, accompanying a dramatic increase in rates of impotency (as the soaring sales for Viagra attest), with little

accompanying cultural chatter that they no longer desire women.³⁷

As so often, we have to look to lesbian literature, where age barriers are said to be less rigid, for something a little more inspiring. ‘After forty, femmes turn butch, we would repeat laughingly,’ Joan Nestle writes in her mid-forties. She depicts her now differently gratifying ways of making love to a much younger woman, in the essay ‘A Change of Life’.³⁸ In this playful arena it becomes just a little easier, she and other lesbians sometimes report, for women’s actual age to disappear as they fancy themselves at many different ages, while in the loving arms of another. Nestle’s voice, however, is just a little sadder in her next book, written after she has been fighting colon cancer in her late fifties and recently separated from a much younger lover. She wonders, how she is ‘to love when I keep failing... to be brave when I am so fearful...to protest injustice when I am so tired ... to embrace difference when I do not even trust myself’. Nevertheless, with a body often wracked by pain, she can still write of loving sexual encounters, while asserting, with all her old conviction: ‘I find this to be a time of great passion in my life, a time of deep commitments to the forging of fragile solidarities that, if of the body, may last only a night, and if of a more sweeping kind, carry me more humbly than ever into the historic processes’.³⁹

It was reciting Beauvoir's words on how one 'becomes a woman' that many feminists launched themselves into politics over three decades ago, so let me conclude with her reflections on the closing years of such journeys:

There is only one solution if old age is not to be an absurd parody of our former life, and that is to go on pursuing the ends that gave our existence a meaning – devotion to individuals, to groups or to causes, social, political, intellectual or creative work. ... One's life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, compassion.⁴⁰

A sombre note, perhaps; or perhaps not. The more diverse and open the community we manage to attach ourselves to, the more likely the identities we present, at whatever age, can loosen, stretch and modify themselves, escaping stereotypical confinement of the age constructions placed upon us. For adults, as the most imaginative have noticed (in this case the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott), 'are not just their own age; they are to some extent every age, or no age'.⁴¹ Not an easy message to live by, but the nearest I can get to a feminist sexual politics of aging.

¹ Joan Bakewell, 'At 70', *The Guardian*, October 3, 2003

² Simone de Beauvoir, *Old Age*, [1970], Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1978, p.7.

³ Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2004, p.137.

⁴ Sidonie-Gabrielle Collette, *Chéri* [1920], pt. 2, translated by Janet Flanner, 19

⁵ J.-B. Pontalis, *Windows*, Nebraska, University of Nebraska press, 2003, p.41.

⁶ Phillip Roth, *The Dying Animal*, London, Jonathan Cope, 2001, p.47; p.32. This novel condenses Roth's account of the sexual lives and sexual politics of contemporary life in urban USA, which almost all his books have been written to explore.

⁷ Australian Demographic Statistics 2002 Population Special Article - Who'll be Home Alone in 2021?, <http://www.abs.gov.au/>; Population Profile of the United States: 2000 U.S., Census Bureau (Internet Release) 5-1 . <http://www.census.gov/population/pop-profile/2000/chap05.pdf> .p. 1

⁸ From the British Census, 2001.

⁹ Kathleen Kiernan and Ganka Mueller, *The Divorced and Who Divorces?*

Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, Web site:

<http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/case.htm>

¹⁰ Research and conclusions reported in M Willits, M Benzeval and S Stansfeld, 'Partnership history and mental health over time' *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 2004; 58 :53-58

¹¹ John Ermisch, *The Economics of the Family: Applications to Divorce and Remarriage*, Discussion Paper No. 140, November, Centre for Economic Policy Research, 1986.

¹² Anja Meulenbelt, *The Shame is Over: a Political Life Story*, London, Women's Press, 1980, p.158-9.

¹³ Anja Meulenbelt, *For Ourselves: Our Bodies and sexuality – from women's point of view*, London, Sheba Press, 1981, p.7; p. 95.

¹⁴ Vivian Gornick, *Approaching Eye Level*, Boston, Mass., Beacon Press, p.67.

¹⁵ Denise Riley, 'Knowing in the real world', in *Denise Riley, selected Poems*, London: Reality Street Editions, 2000, p 54

¹⁶ See, for example, David Buss, *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating*, London, Harper Collins, 1994.

¹⁷ See Lynne Segal, 'New Battlegrounds: Genetic Maps & Sexual Politics', in B. M. Brooks-Gordon, L.R. Gelsthorpe, M.H. Johnson & A. Bainham (eds) *Sexual Positions: Diversity and the Law* Hart Publishing, Oxford, 2004; Kaye Wellings, et.al. *Sexual Behaviour in Britain: The National Survey of Attitudes and Lifestyles*, London: Penguin Books, 1994.

¹⁸ Ernest Jones, Peter Gay, *Freud: a Life for Our Time*, London, Macmillan, Papermac, 1989, p.104; 134; 156; 218-19; 310; 369-70; 387.

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'The Predisposition to Obsessional Neurosis', *Collected Papers*. Ed. Ernest Jones. Trans. Joan Riveiere. Vol 1. London, Hogarth, 1950, p.130.

²⁰ Dinora Pines, 'Sexuality and the Older Woman', paper given at , October 19, 1996.

²¹ Helene Deutsch, *The Psychology of Women: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* . Vol. 2. New York: Grune and Stratton, 1945.

²² See, for example, Sonu Shamdasani and Michael Munchow (eds.), *Speculations After Freud: Psychoanalysis, Philosophy and Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994; Susan Fairfield, Lynne Layton and Carolyn Stack (eds.), *Bringing the Plague: Towards a Postmodern Psychoanalysis*, New York, Other Press, 2002

²³ Muriel Dimen, 'Perversion Is Us?: Eight Notes' in Muriel Dimen, *Sexuality, Intimacy, Power*, New Jersey, London, The Analytic Press, 2003, p. 257.

²⁴ David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, 'A Dialogue of racial melancholia' in *Bringing the Plague: Towards a Postmodern Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Susan Fairfield, Lynne Layton and Carolyn Stack, New York, Other Press, 2002, p.233-268.

²⁵ Susan Fairfield, et. Al (eds)., *ibid*.

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²⁷ Ann E. Gerike, 'On Gray Hair and Oppressed Brains', in *Women, Aging and Ageism*, ed. Evelyn Rosenthal, New York, Haworth, 1990, p.35.

²⁸ Vivian Sobchack, 'Cinema, Surgery, and Special Effects', *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, ed. Kathleen Woodward, p.200.

²⁹ Carol Ann Duffy, 'Medusa', *The World's Wife*, London, Picador, 1999, p.40.

³⁰ Sara Maitland, 'Role Models for the menopausal woman', in Goldsworthy, *op. cit.*, p.208.

³¹ Lillian S.Robinsion, 'Doing what comes socio-culturally', *Women's Review Of Books*, VXII, no.7, April, 1995, p.12; p.11.

³² See *ibid*; Lynne Segal, *Straight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure*, London, Virago, p.68.

³³ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*

³⁴ Ursula Owen

³⁵ Germaine Greer, *The Change: Women, Ageing and the Menopause*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1991, p.2-4; 433-435.

³⁶ Betty Friedan, *Fountain of Age*, 1993; Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, New York, W.W.Norton, 1963, p.261; Susan Sontag, 'The Double Standard of Aging', in J.H. Williams (ed.), *Psychology of Women*, New York, Norton, 1979.

³⁷ See, for example, Doreen Asso, *The Real Menstrual Cycle*, New York, John Wiley 1983

³⁸ Joan Nestle, 'A Change of Life', *A Restricted Country: Essays and Short Stories*, London, Sheba, 1986, p131.

³⁹ Joan Nestle, *A Fragile Union*, Cleis Press, San Francisco, California, 1998.p.10.

⁴⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *Old Age*, Harmondworth, Penguin Books, 1970, p.601.

⁴¹ D.W.Winnicott, *Home is Where we start from: Essays by a psychoanalyst*, London, Penguin, 1986.