Intersections of Ageing, Gender and Sexualities

Almack, Kathryn, King, Andrew

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Part 2
Representations
The chapters in this second section focus on representations of ageing, gender and sexuality. Representations matter because they shape discursive possibilities: what can be imagined and what actions seem possible and viable. All the chapters in this section draw on textual sources. In their chapters, Elizabeth Barry and Maricel Oró Piquerás draw on texts from English literature by authors such as Virginia Woolf, Penelope Lively, Angela Carter and Doris Lessing, while Kinneret Lahad and Karen Hvidtfeldt draw on material from online web columns and magazine articles.

In Chapter Five, Elizabeth Barry employs a reading of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* as a lens to think about cultural and scientific representations of the menopause. She responds particularly to Germaine Greer’s criticisms of Simone de Beauvoir’s representations of the menopause. Greer argues that de Beauvoir’s characterisation of the menopause as a time of loss of agency and weakness demonstrated a sexual double standard. However, Barry argues that in making this critique, Greer herself draws on pathologising understandings of the menopause and of the sexuality of older women. Barry suggest that, while not always sympathetic towards the experiences of other women experiencing the menopause, Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* ultimately offers scope for a more nuanced and complicated understanding of this underrepresented aspect of older women’s lives. Barry thus demonstrates that literature offers resources for new ways to imagine menopause and later life sexuality.

Maricel Oró Piquerás too uses literature to explore the intersection of ageing, sexuality and gender. In Chapter Six she takes an interdisciplinary approach, starting with social scientific studies of the common discursive resources for talking about older women’s sexuality (a dichotomy between ‘asexual’ and ‘sexy oldie’). Oró Piquerás then examines three contemporary British stories that focus on the sexual experiences of women in their seventies and eighties, asking whether they offer new ways of thinking about later-life sex. She demonstrates that these stories do indeed offer resources for new ways of imagining older women’s sexuality which are less binary and less heteronormative than common representations.

Kinneret Lahad and Karen Hvidtfeldt also draw on textual sources to explore issues around representations in Chapter Seven, but in everyday texts rather than literary ones. They examine Danish and
Israeli magazine articles and online web columns that focus on midlife motherhood, exploring how older ‘midlife’ mothers negotiate around normative expectations about the ‘proper’ time to become a mother. Lahad and Hvidtfeldt draw on the notion of ‘ageing capital’ to discuss how women are able to employ notions of the gains of ageing (such as greater experience and patience, and increased economic and emotional stability) to counterbalance their ‘off-time’ transition to motherhood. The comparison of Denmark and Israel demonstrates that, despite very different political and cultural contexts, remarkably similar discourses around age, gender and sexuality and their relationship to good mothering are found in both settings.

Taken together, the chapters in this section demonstrate that both literature and everyday texts can offer resources for thinking about ageing, gender and sexuality in more nuanced ways.