Aging Femininities
Aging Femininities:
Troubling Representations

Edited by
Josephine Dolan and Estella Tincknell
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction ........................................................................................................... vii
Josephine Dolan and Estella Tincknell

**Section One: Cultural Herstories**

Passion, Penury, and Psychosis: Representations of the Spinster
by Interwar Dramatists ................................................................................ 3
Rebecca D’Monte

Aged Females through the Victorian Gothic Male Gaze:
Edgar Allan Poe’s *Madame Lalande* and Sheridan le Fanu’s *Carmilla* .... 17
Marta Miquel-Baldellou

W. Barns-Graham and Old Age: *Celebration at 90* ................................. 27
Nedira Yakir

Performing Mrs Whistler: Women, Image and Identity ............................ 43
Mary MacMaster

Dowagers, Debs, Nuns and Babies: The Politics of Nostalgia
and the Older Woman in the Sunday Night Television Serial ............... 53
Estella Tincknell

**Section Two: Regulations and Transgressions**

“It isn’t going to be like this, is it?” Class, Race, and Dis-identification
at Bristol’s *A Celebration of Age Festival* ..................................................... 69
Josephine Dolan

Pleasures, Pains, and Paradoxes: Approaching the Beauty Salon
in Feminist Research ....................................................................................... 83
Terryl Bacon and Kate Brooks

Outrageous Agers: Performativity and Transgression: Take One .......... 97
Rosy Martin
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section Three: Problematic Postfeminists?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beyond Patriarchy: <em>Six Feet Under</em> and the Older Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherryl Wilson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unveiling “the Other Within”: The Crucible of Internal Alterity in Laurent Cantet’s <em>Heading South</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuria Casado-Gual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exemplary or Exceptional Embodiment? Discourses of Aging in the Case of Helen Mirren and <em>Calendar Girls</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadie Wearing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section Four: Divas and Dolls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The “Hip-Op” Generation: Representing the Aging Female Body in <em>Saga</em> Magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne Garde-Hansen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Enough to sing <em>Tosca</em>: The Paradox of Age and Femininity and the Opera Diva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamela Karantonis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grit, Glitter and Glamour: Tracing Authenticity in the Aging Artifice of Dolly Parton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abigail Gardner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“She’s so Vein”: Madonna and the Drag of Aging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane Railton and Paul Watson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filmography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endnotes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Despite the continuing proliferation of images of aging and old age across many forms of cultural representation from films to advertisements to TV makeover shows, it is striking that the cognate fields of film, media and cultural studies have had very little to say on this subject and that feminist theorists in particular in these fields are only now beginning to take up the issue. As long ago as 1999, in her introduction to *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, Kathleen Woodward observed that “[i]n the humanities and the arts, aging is a subject that many believe holds little interest or relevance for them (xi).” Very little has changed in the subsequent twelve years. Since its publication, *Figuring Age* has thus appeared in sharp relief against a backdrop in which feminist scholarship on aging was conspicuous by its absence. It continues to be the case that even where not explicitly stated, existing scholarship implicitly assumes that cultural representations are the province of the young, and that the only bodies of interest to the theoretical gaze are young bodies. In addition, while the popular media addressed to women has proliferated in the last decade it is also increasingly fragmented, with the dominance of domestically orientated magazines such as *Woman* being ceded to the gossip focused *Heat*, and the appearance of social media sites such as Mumsnet and Gransnet taking the place of the parish magazine.

Yet what are constituted as “women’s concerns” have not been radically transformed. If anything, the displacement of domesticity and maternity from traditional forms of popular media has narrowed the range of “legitimate” interests offered to women to fashion, beauty and celebrity culture. Motherhood and mothering have all but disappeared from mainstream women’s magazines unless these topics are directly linked to celebrity, and the hegemony of that culture has ensured that older women are increasingly marginalised at best, and pathologised at worst. The phenomenon of the “older mother,” who has either deferred motherhood for economic and social reasons or is struggling to conceive, is thus largely treated in relation to star pregnancies and in ways that fail to
acknowledge the pressures faced by ordinary women who are expected to work longer hours and more intensively than their foremothers within an increasingly deregulated economy, as well as sustaining the family, whether this is configured as nuclear or extended across generations. Furthermore, when older women are featured it is invariably in the context of a discourse of “successful aging” that requires women to invest considerable personal and economic resources in achieving a socially approved identity. It is interesting that a number of the chapters in this book (including those by Sadie Wearing, Terryl Bacon and Kate Brooks, Joanne Garde-Hansen and Mary MacMaster) identify the same pantheon of “successful agers,” mainly but not wholly celebrities, usually including Helen Mirren, who have become central to such media representations.

The current social and political climate is nonetheless increasingly dominated by concerns about the implications of an aging population for western societies, and this has included a great deal of non-academic commentary on the ways in which older men and women are figured in film and popular media. Indeed, an increased awareness of the specific implications of age and gender for the careers of women TV presenters led to a high profile court case against the BBC by the reporter, Miriam O’Reilly in 2010, and in 2012 to a report led by the ex-newsreader, Selina Scott, and commissioned by Age UK and Equal Justice, which accused the BBC of institutional ageism towards older women. Such cases highlight an intensification of cultural pressures around age and the importance for feminist scholars of directly addressing these concerns. Within the humanities and social sciences and over the last three decades, feminists have undertaken extensive work critiquing and challenging common sense formulations of gender, and have attempted to clear a space in which to think about women’s lives and identities beyond the conventions of neo-liberal consumerism. Theories of race, sexuality, class, disability and childhood, as well as gender, have radically shifted our understanding of the body away from essentialist formulations predicated on biology, and have established identity as a product of discourse and culture. But the intersection with age remains underdeveloped and under-theorised. Indeed, while the position in feminist cultural theory is very different to that pertaining in medical and social scientific areas of research, where gerontology is thoroughly established, scholars in these latter disciplines are themselves in the process of reflecting on the cultural mechanisms through which old age and the aging body are constructed. Given the demographic trends in which women outlive men and the absence of feminist interventions, then, there is a real risk that aging femininity especially is elided with socio-medical formulations around the “problem”
of old people. These formulations all too frequently conceive age as being a simple biological property of the human body and a conundrum to be solved by science. In such representations, the body is effectively dislocated from those strategies of discourse and power through which it is constituted and regulated.

The current economic crisis provides an excellent imperative to seriously rethink the relations of power involved in aging, and an opportunity to challenge the hegemonic claims of post-feminism in a climate in which older women are faced with the potential “triple whammy” of poverty, ageism and sexism. We would therefore go so far as to suggest that the stakes are now even higher than they were in 1999 when Woodward’s crucial intervention into scholarship first appeared. In the context of an aging demographic and of economic downturn, it becomes even more urgent for theorists to reshape these debates and to (figuratively) wrest the discourse of the aging body away from a return to essentialism. The hiatus between the visibility of aging femininity in contemporary circuits of culture and its marginalisation in cultural theory is therefore one of the driving forces behind Aging Femininities: Troubling Representations. From various positions, the essays in this collection seek to forge links between contemporary social and “lived” formulations of aging femininity and feminist cultural theory and research.

A second impetus for this book comes from the desire to respond to and re-engage with important work on the topic of age by two feminist pioneers: Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer. Each argued that post-menopausal women are rendered culturally and socially invisible. For de Beauvoir, writing in 1971, the older woman is not only rendered culturally invisible but also experiences self-loathing and self-alienation as she internalises the cultural abjection of old age. We believe de Beauvoir’s account of post-menopausal femininity is deeply troubling in its acceptance of abjection. And as Woodward observes, her position is especially invidious because it is based on

the identification of a younger person with an unnamed older person who, representing all older people is cast as an object of pity, one miserable in all senses of the word (impoverished, alone, afraid), one who ultimately represents the frailty of the human condition. Here identification is part projective identification in Melanie Klein’s sense – the projection of Beauvoir’s own fear of aging onto older people as a class (Woodward, 156).

For Greer, writing twenty years later in 1992, such invisibility is re-imagined as productive not abject: as the potential to thrive outside the
scrutiny of the patriarchal male gaze. Greer argues that this positioning offers an ‘outsider’ view from which both the trappings of conventional femininity and the restrictions of patriarchal ideology can be clearly recognised and challenged. We would like to (partially) endorse this position and to encourage a creative as well as a critical response to the adventure of aging.

Having noted its relative neglect, it is important to say that the longstanding invisibility of aging femininity identified by de Beauvoir and Greer is now the critical object of a body of scholarship that has begun to emerge since some of the essays in this collection were first presented as research papers at the Aging Femininities: Representation, Identities, Feminism, conference at the University of the West of England in 2007. This conference provided the impetus for the creation of the Women, Aging, Media research network which included scholars from across the United Kingdom based at the Universities of Gloucestershire and York as well as at UWE. The WAM group subsequently ran a series of four AHRC funded workshops throughout 2008, an initiative combining academic with grassroots activity, notably from the women of the University of the Third Age, in Brent, London. The workshops attracted scholars and activists from across Britain and internationally, and culminated in a second conference, at the University of Gloucestershire, Crossing Cultures: Women, Aging and Media, in 2008 and an international one-day symposium at UWE, Retirement Deferred: Aging, Gender and Representation, in 2011. A number of the essays in this collection were seeded as a consequence of these activities and subsequent related projects.

As WAM developed over that four year period, it became apparent that other scholars, especially those who identified as feminist or with an interest in media and culture, were beginning to cast a more critical eye on the way aging is represented. Further conferences, symposia and publications began to appear and researchers from across a range of disciplines were starting to talk to, argue with and borrow from each other’s work as the emergent field of aging studies came into being. The global scope of this field was made evident by the inauguration of the European Network of Aging Studies at its first conference held at Maastricht in October 2011; a conference that exemplified the range of critical perspectives and approaches being developed, as media theorists encountered gerontology, art critics discovered feminist ethnography and film scholars re-imagined social policy.

Such work has helped to identify the ways in which many mainstream representations of aging femininity, with the honourable exception of the television soap opera, posit the older woman as a transgressive figure who
Aging Femininities

operates outside or beyond the familial. For instance, Sally Chivers’ book, *The Silvering Screen* (2011), offers the first sustained account of the gendering of old age in Hollywood cinema and its counterparts. Published after the essays in this collection were developed, Chivers suggests that discourses of physical and cognitive disability are thoroughly imbricated in conventional cinematic representations, and that this leads to the pathologisation and regulation of aging bodies on screen. The issues Chivers raises are not simply of representation in its thinnest sense – that of ‘negative’ or ‘positive’ images of older people, especially women - but of representation in its richest, fullest iteration. In other words, issues of representation as power. Imelda Whelehan takes this up in her 2010 essay on “Older Women in Recent British Cinema”, where she observes that the older woman is “rendered invisible, not purely to the desiring male gaze, but also to the eye of feminist critics” (Bell and Williams, 2010, 170). More recently, the invisibility of the aging lesbian woman in the heteronormative framing of screen culture has been foregrounded and unsettled by Eva Kramitzki’s 2011 PhD thesis, *Exploring the Hypervisibility Paradox: Older Lesbians in Contemporary Mainstream Cinema (1995-2009)*.

The interlinking aims of this book are therefore to interrogate “aging femininity” in terms both of its historic invisibility and its new visibility, in the form of “graceful agers” and Saga subscribers, make-over models and pop divas. In various ways, then, each of the essays is engaged with the relationship between women, aging and power: the power that makes it possible to ignore aging femininity, or to regulate and discipline older women into socially and culturally acceptable formations; or the power to position the aging female body as abject and in need of cosmetic or surgical intervention when it “fails” to conform to acceptable aesthetic or cultural norms. This is the kind of power that manages consent to oppression by rewarding compliance and cruelly punishing transgression. It is the kind of power that women themselves, whether scholar, journalist, nurse or teacher, scientist or shop worker, are thoroughly implicated in, since we know that often the most active policing of women’s bodies into normalisation comes from other women. That is why feminist scholarship should not be understood to mean special pleading or an uncritical celebration of popular culture but rather a process of reflection, critique and challenges to dominant discourses.

The book is divided into four sections: *Cultural Herstories; Regulations and Transgressions; Problematic Postfeminists? and Divas and Dolls*. In **Section One: Cultural Herstories**, Rebecca D’ Monte’s essay, “Passion, Penury, and Psychosis: Representations of the Spinster by
Interwar Dramatists” begins the focus on an historical overview of the ways in which aging has been represented as a pathology for women. D’Monte argues that while the first wave of feminism in the United Kingdom, together with the social changes effected by the First World War, appeared to offer new opportunities for women in the 1920s and 30s, it also led to a cultural unease that manifested itself in the emergence of three problematic figures within the literature and drama of the period: the mother, the flapper, and the spinster. The latter in particular was largely represented as a disruptive and sexually disturbing influence: undermining the marital union, fighting over the men who were not already married, or exhibiting other forms of “sexually deviant” behaviour, such as lesbianism. The psychotic or disturbed spinster appears in a range of plays as apparently diverse as Dodie Smith’s *Autumn Crocus* (1931), Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour* (1934) and Noel Coward’s *This Happy Breed* (1939), amongst many, and in each instance is presented as the site of social and cultural tensions around gender and family. These plays presented a new emphasis on the inherent social, sexual, and psychological problems for women in not getting married, rooted in the way the presence of so many unmarried women had originally rendered the losses caused by war more visible. As the country later slid into economic depression, female workers were a further reminder of the inability of men to provide for their families. As D’Monte argues, interwar drama helped express a deep seismic shift taking place around gender roles in Britain, and articulated a tension between the unmarried woman as overly “feminine” or as inevitably masculinised.

This section continues with Marta Miquel-Baldellou’s essay, “Aged Females through the Victorian Gothic Male Gaze: Edgar Allan Poe’s Madame Lalande and Sheridan le Fanu’s Carmilla.” which explores two different yet linked gothic tales about desire, age and femininity. The first, Poe’s short story “The Spectacles” (1844), portrays an elderly woman, Eugenie Lalande, who teaches a much younger man a lesson about vanity and inexperience when he falls in love with her, believing her to be his own age. She forces him to confront her “true” aged self and the implications of transgressive romantic love when he dons the titular spectacles. The second, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s novella *Carmilla* (1872), portrays a mysterious countess who is really a vampire, and who ensures her longevity and attractiveness by drinking the blood of the virginal young women she befriends. For Miquel-Baldellou, both tales represent important examples of the complex way in which the gothic genre engages with the problematic of aging femininity. She points out that they have both traditionally been interpreted as inherently misogynistic,
but that it is possible to re-imagine them as a deliberate and ironic critique of patriarchal attitudes towards women. Indeed, such double readings echo Poe’s syncopated relationship to American culture. However, in both cases the women must ultimately be made to conform to the cultural norms of aging imposed by patriarchy and this process is entirely mediated through the male gaze represented by the narrator’s voice in these stories. For both Carmilla and Eugénie Lalande, once their “true” age is revealed, they must either vanish from the text or be replaced by a younger female double.

Nedira Yakir’s essay, “W. Barns-Graham and Old Age: Celebration at 90,” deals with a very different history of aging and cultural production in its account of the St Ives based artist, Wilhelmina Barns-Graham (1912 – 2004), who produced one of the most striking works of her career when aged 90. This extraordinary painting, Celebration at 90, signified a positive commitment to creativity which challenged dominant notions which equate age with creative decline. Yakir questions Simone de Beauvoir’s (1972) argument that age and gender produce the “double jeopardy” of ageism and sexism in her exploration of the dynamic between the aging body of the female artist and the artist’s body of work. As she emphasises, the vibrancy of Barns-Graham’s artistic output towards the end of her life contrasts sharply with the grief and sadness expressed most poignantly in her diary, but also expresses a sense of liberation and urgency around her artistic production. Barns-Graham saw her work as a challenge to gendered perceptions of art and was concerned to make paintings that equalled “men’s art” even in her advanced years. For Yakir, the act of painting on such a grand scale in old age is an act of age and gender defiance. The “Departure Paintings,” as Yakir calls them, are of a thematic and stylistic grandeur that destabilises the gendered binaries that shape some art analysis, and ensure that these “structural” paintings can be read as “masculine”. Just as she revelled in the gendered ambiguity of being called “Willie,” Barns-Graham knowingly unsettled the dichotomy of gender and age in her work. And, as Yakir observes, Barns-Graham’s lifelong ill health and constant pain unsettled the easy assumption that frailty is an especial property of the aging body and an inevitable hindrance to artistic output.

In a different vein, Mary MacMaster’s essay “Performing Mrs Whistler: Women, Image and Identity,” is also inflected through an engagement with fine art in a project which tested theories about aging, performativity and femininity by combining interviews with “the real voices of elders as they age” with a series of photographic portraits to form an integrated form of critical research. Macmaster began with the famous oil painting by James McNeill Whistler of his mother, painted in
1871 and popularly known as “Whistler’s Mother,” which she used as the model for a series of photographic portraits of older women, some of which are included in the essay. The iconic image was chosen partly because of its status within the discourse of visual representation of aging femininity, and partly because of its focus on the clothed body. MacMaster also undertook a range of semi-structured interviews. The participants included teachers, artists, shop assistants, cleaners, cooks, and unwaged women, some of whom were in relationships and had children and grandchildren, others of whom were single. These conversations then informed the issues for the photographic portfolio of portraits, which were posed by a separate group of 20 amateur models over the age of 55 who were seated in “Mrs. Whistler’s” pose. For MacMaster, just as “Mrs. Whistler” presents a very particular and conventional version of the nineteenth-century woman, so these modern women, in the same pose, reflect the availability of more “choice” and more life chances for modern women, albeit within the confines of income, life experience and societal pressures to maintain a youthful appearance.

In the final essay in this section, “Dowagers, Debs, Nuns and Babies: The Politics of Nostalgia and the Older Woman in the Sunday Night Television Serial,” Estella Tincknell returns to issues arising from the way representations of the past can shape our understanding of the present in her exploration of two period dramas screened in the United Kingdom on Sunday evenings and at prime time during the winter of 2011 – 2012: Downton Abbey (ITV, 2010 –) and Call the Midwife (BBC 2012). She identifies them as conjunctural texts linked to the global economic depression and the anti-welfarist policies of the Conservative-led Coalition government, in which two radically alternative versions of the past and of Britain as an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) are offered, with older women at their epicentre. In each a rich and varied cast of aging female characters is presented, but with very different political articulations. One is inward-looking, feudal, overtly patriarchal, hierarchical, and tied to profound inequalities of power around gender as well as class; the other is outward-looking, “modern” and recognises a public realm in which community values are egalitarian, but situates this in relation to a humanistic reframing of Christian morality. In the first, upper class women are well served as long as they comply with the restrictions imposed on them, in the other the politics of compassion are “married” to the state, and women are active agents within a predominantly matriarchal structure. Both foreground older women as crucial figures in their respective communities, but offer very different versions of the social role and ideological positioning this entails.
Section Two: Regulations and Transgressions begins with Josephine Dolan’s humorous yet deadly serious reflections on her experiences of the way in which “appropriate aging” has been culturally articulated by the local state: “It Isn’t Going to be Like This, Is It?” Class, Race, and Dis-identification at Bristol’s A Celebration of Age Festival. Dolan argues that this festival, while challenging the hegemonic youth culture characteristic of conventional festivals such as Glastonbury through its content and orientation, also operated as a mechanism of surveillance and regulation. She identifies the structuring discourse of the festival as one which positioned its participants as docile bodies, separating them into “successful” and “unsuccessful” agers. She also argues that this process meant that both male and female festival-goers were produced as subjects of “aging femininity” because, through various regulatory regimes, men who attended the festival were displaced from the privileges of masculinity. She identifies a now familiar “client based” formulation of vulnerable old age in the festival literature, the participating organisations, the kind of entertainment offered and even the timing of events, in which “the old” are passive recipients of social care, not the agents of it. Drawing on the work of Beverley Skeggs (1997), she goes on to explore the different forms of cultural capital associated with masculinity and femininity, and argues that conformity to respectability, especially through “proper” self-presentation and the controlled bodily performance of dance, became a way for some attendees to dis-identify with the vulnerable aging body that otherwise dominated the festival discourse. Dolan’s work here initiates a micro-theme of auto-ethnography that is also found elsewhere in the collection. By reflecting on her own direct experience of the Celebration of Age Festival she was able to reframe some of the larger questions of gendered identity posed by this book in terms of her own subjectivity.

In a not dissimilar fashion, the next essay, by Terryl Bacon and Kate Brooks, “Pleasures, Pains, and Paradoxes: Approaching the Beauty Salon in Feminist Research,” also offers some auto-ethnographic research, this time conducted in the private and “feminine” space of the beauty salon. Bacon and Brooks underwent the ordeal of waxing and massage in order both to observe (and participate in) the processes involved in beauty culture and to talk to the beauticians who administer them. Their essay is framed by their acknowledgment of a shared anxiety about reaching “significant” birthdays (sixty and forty respectively), noting wryly: “despite the twenty-year gap between our ages, we had both experienced the ‘invisibility’ of the older woman”. As a consequence, they became interested in different ways of “letting go” – both of the regimes of control.
over the physical body that beauty treatments entail, and of cultural prescriptions not to succumb to physical degeneration. They argue that while the salon offers a space for personal care, this is limited temporally, spatially and discursively: the client submits to being a passive (docile) consumer of “age-appropriate” treatments administered by another woman paid to care professionally. Focusing on the relationship between “beauty” and “therapeutic” treatments they explore the binaries around health and happiness, public and private, and – crucially - depth and surface in the salon discourse. Distinctions between surface and depth in beauty practices are, they argue, analogous to the “vertical logic” of academic attitudes to the superficiality of contemporary consumer society which assume that academics can see “beneath” surface appearances to the “real” underlying social relations. Avoiding such a simplistic “effects” model, their essay foregrounds feminist research as a praxis and asks what is knowable, and worth knowing, in this context.

The third and fourth elements in this section are linked by authors and by subject matter and approach. They comprise a written essay, “Outrageous Agers: Performativity and Transgression: Take One” by artist and writer Rosy Martin, who led the photo-therapy sessions at the 2010 Sheffield University Look At Me: Images of Women and Aging workshops where the cover image for this book was produced. Martin’s essay offers a theorised rationale for the following photo-essay, “Outrageous Agers: Performativity and Transgression: Take Two,” her collaboration with Kay Goodridge, community artist and photographer. Working as a form of theorised-practice, both the “Outrageous Agers” projects use photography and video to challenge and subvert stereotypes of aging femininity as decline and redundancy. In “Take One” Martin maps how phototherapeutic techniques can be used to identify and explore the cultural anxieties informing the process of becoming an aging woman, and how Bakhtin’s account of the Carnivalesque offers older women a powerful strategy to subvert this. In “Take Two” which is informed by the ideas of Judith Butler, the photographs stage and interrogate the performance of aging femininity. Through irony, humour and transgression Goodridge and Martin’s work unsettles popular clichés of aging femininity such as “mutton dressed as lamb,” foregrounding the aging female body as a product of culture and challenging the ways in which contemporary discourse constructs it as unappealing and abject. The work concentrates on those parts which have been repeatedly produced as sites of bodily anxiety: flabby bellies, crêpey bosoms, cellulite-pitted buttocks and thighs, “love handles” and triple chins, and finds ways to re-present them. The photographs thus attempt to transgress the boundaries of the frame, and the framing of beauty.
Section Three: Problematic Postfeminists? features three essays offering close readings of specific texts, and begins with Sherryl Wilson’s exploration of one of the most influential television series of the last decade in “Beyond Patriarchy: Six Feet Under and the Older Woman.” The essay focuses on the friendship between Ruth Fisher (Frances Conroy) and Bettina (Kathy Bates) in the eponymous TV drama Six Feet Under (HBO 2001–2005), and argues that the relationship between the two women offers a discursive space in which to think about the possibility of a female identity that is beyond patriarchy. For Wilson, this is important not only because these characters are unusually textured representations of older women, but also because the narrative trajectory they inhabit represents an intervention into contemporary “post-feminist” culture. She argues that the Ruth-Bettina dynamic is so powerful within the narrative that it facilitates critical reflection on the self and aging more generally, and helps to counter youth as the dominant paradigm on which to base a sense of worth. For Wilson, the show’s problematisation of consumer culture in its older characters’ refusal to be part of the economic system allows for the exploration of ways in which older (and younger) women might re-negotiate femininity and selfhood. Because Ruth’s narrative journey in Six Feet Under positions the older woman as subject-in-process, Wilson contends that the character has much to offer current debates about gender and aging.

Nuria Casado-Gual’s “Unveiling ‘the Other Within’: The Crucible of Internal Alterity in Laurent Cantet’s Heading South” draws on the work of Simone de Beauvoir (1996) to explore Cantet’s representation of white, middle-aged femininity and neo-colonialist encounters. Casado-Gual argues that post-feminist claims to the overcoming of gender-based inequalities and to women’s self-empowerment as individuals have reduced or even made invisible the notion of the gendered, aging “Other”, whilst the phenomenon of globalisation has induced a sense of interdependence and fluidity into modern social identities. She explores the ways in which the protagonists of Heading South (2005), Ellen (Charlotte Rampling), a fifty-five-year-old professor of French literature, and Brenda (Karen Young), a forty-eight-year-old divorcee “head south” from the United States to Haiti where they hope to find a feminist utopia and uncomplicated desire. As Casado-Gual points out, the title of the film deftly slides between three significations of “heading south”: a north-south journey, the dynamics of sexual desire connoted through the genitalia – the bodily ‘southern region’ – and the signs of aging that are generally equated to decline, or “heading south”. For Casado-Gual, the film’s spectator is left with the uncertainty of not knowing which is the most
alienating form of “Otherness” in the complex interactions of age, gender, racial and ethnic difference offered by the film. She believes that the film leaves questions unanswered with regard to the composite, fluid forms of internal alterity it signifies. But its representation of “the Other within” through its aging female protagonists creates a distinctive narrative and theoretical position by which to explore gender, age and ethnic identities.

Sadie Wearing’s “Exemplary or Exceptional Embodiment? Discourses of Aging in the Case of Helen Mirren and Calendar Girls” deals with a very different genre and style of filmmaking and extends the discussion to consider the celebrity discourses involved in female stardom. As she points out, the body is always central to the ways that stars and celebrities are made meaningful. In her essay she explores the star discourses around Helen Mirren, particularly those that coincided with the release of Calendar Girls (Nigel Cole 2003), which itself offered a reading of celebrity culture in relation to the aging female body. Wearing examines how Mirren’s celebrated sexual allure is consistently coded as transgressive, but that by its very visibility, Mirren’s star body helps to reproduce formulations of authentic differentiation that thread through star and celebrity constructions. As she points out, while the publicity for Calendar Girls reproduced images from both the film and the original Women’s Institute calendar with which the story is concerned, descriptions of Mirren’s actual body are contradictory. Such contradictions endow the sign of “Helen Mirren” as both all body/all about the body, thus, paradoxically, rendering her curiously disembodied. She argues that the film’s narrative effectively equates fame directly with the leading characters’ negotiation of acceptable modes of feminine aging and that, crucially, shame attaches itself to the exposure of the older female body during the course of the narrative in ways that run counter to the ostensible celebratory tone of the film. This also works in ways that compare to the “management” of Mirren’s body in the press. By thinking through Mirren as a performer and a celebrity the essay highlights the contradictory ways that aging and sexuality are both figured within fictionalised texts, even when these are ostensibly celebratory, as in Calendar Girls, and through the meta-narratives of aging that accompany them in celebrity discourse.

Section Four: Divas and Dolls offers four very different approaches to the figure of the aging diva, whose association with tropes of feminine excess, camp, and ironic reflexivity are what unites the aging celebrity women discussed in this final part of the book. Joanne Garde-Hansen in “The ‘Hip-Op’ Generation: Representing the Aging Female Body in Saga Magazine” deftly brings together a star study of Honor Blackman with a close reading of Saga magazine’s discursive address. She argues that work
on aging has tended to reproduce and reify a binary opposition that constrains the extent to which feminism has been able to manoeuvre away from dialogical thinking about older women. For Garde-Hansen, a polylogical approach focused on life stages would enable a more complex reading of the female celebrity. Taking an edition of Saga magazine from November 2006 which featured the seventy-nine-year-old Honor Blackman on its cover, and drawing on the work of Mike Featherstone (1995) and Andrew Blaikie (1999), she identifies the dualistic discourse that pervades representations of the “aging heroine” in the form of the image of Blackman. Garde-Hansen suggests that Saga’s framing of Blackman’s image and Blackman’s management of her “elderliness” encapsulates the tensions at the very heart of aging femininities. In response, she argues for a prosthetic approach to the aging female body that draws biology and nature back into the debate. The task for feminist scholars, she argues, should be to draw out the polylogical ways in which such complex media representations of older women create new bodily behaviours, qualities, and abilities that offer audiences and readers multifaceted narratives of aging.

If Honor Blackman has been ascribed “diva” status through cultural association, it is the “real divas,” opera stars, who are the subject of Pamela Karantonis’s essay. In “Old Enough to sing Tosca: the Paradox of Age and Femininity and the Opera Diva” she points out that a highly specific model of gendered performance can be found in the discourse of the diva, in which a form of “ageless” yet fragile femininity is articulated. Critiquing Peter Laslett’s (1989) theory of the four stages of the “life course” she notes that, for the performing artist, the boundary between the two final stages is blurred, while age itself may acquire significant cultural power in the world of opera. As she points out, opera divas can have long careers linked to their dramatic and vocal maturity, their pedagogic abilities (as shown by the legendary master classes given by Maria Callas and Elizabeth Schwarzkopf), or their potential as camp “crossover” performers, exemplified by Montserrat Caballé’s performance with the glam-rock band Queen for the Barcelona Olympic Games in 1992. However, she explores the contradictions which inform this process and the place and power of the aging diva. The essay takes as its point of departure Callas’s notoriously conservative claims about the uncertain longevity of the diva’s career, which went against her own experience but which articulated the dominant discourse of the aging female voice in opera culture. Karantonis explores the medicalisation of the menopausal voice, and then argues that the “queering” of the mature opera diva offers alternatives to the apparent redundancy of a voice that has moments of
frailty. Rather than “failing at opera”, the mature female diva’s voice extends opera’s role as a metaphor for cultural histories of listening, while also breaking down boundaries between the opera star and singers working in popular genres.

A different kind of vocal performance is required for one such genre, country music, and, as Abigail Gardner argues in “Grit, Glitter and Glamour: Tracing Authenticity in the Aging Artifice of Dolly Parton,” “Dolly” has earned her colours as a musician, and has gained the respect of younger peers. But her visibility is also linked to her self-conscious use of artifice. While visibly aging male performers continue to secure an audience without being vilified for their appearance, female stars such as Parton are faced with questions over “age-appropriateness” when they perform. For Gardner, Parton’s place is afforded through the combination of musical authenticity and celebrity artifice, an artifice that works to arrest her age and present her “as she was”. She explores the foregrounding of an overtly artificial present in Parton’s music videos, in which the veteran Dolly body has been manipulated to resemble that of her younger self through a discourse of camp. Gardner argues that camp is notably distinguishable from the idea of masquerade, which necessitates a degree of emotional investment that is absent in the former. Her position is grounded in the premise that presenting Parton as both musically authentic and corporeally artificial has shifted attention away from her aging body. She sees Parton’s video performances as synecdochal of a popular music industry in which older women are discursively constructed as either “masculine” artists or “feminine” camp figures in order to remain visible.

In the final essay in this section and in the book, “‘She’s so Vein’: Madonna and the Drag of Aging” Diane Railton and Paul Watson continue the theme of critically interrogating the aging female star as a drag performance of femininity. They begin by quoting Judith Butler’s axiom that Madonna would come to “precisely embody...the most useful future strategy to avoid oppressive binary ‘engendering’” (156), noting that in their own ways and in their own fields, Butler and Madonna seemed to offer complementary models by which feminism could be renewed and rejuvenated, not least because Gender Trouble exerted particular influence on early feminist readings of the star. However, they argue that it is no longer Madonna’s performance of liberated sexualised femininity in her music videos, but rather the images of her aging body, that regularly feature in newspaper columns and celebrity magazines. As they point out, the exaggerated display of the contradictions involved in successfully performing femininity on a fifty-year-old body continue to make Madonna a compelling figure in relation to Butler’s notion of an anti-foundational
politics of parody. The increasingly obsessive media focus on the objectification of parts of Madonna’s body seeks to present irrefutable “evidence” of the aging process. For Railton and Watson, privileged among these spectacles of decay are her hands, which figure as proof of age, supported by “expert” opinion concerning the “meaning” of these signs of aging. The authors argue that the notion of “dragging out” the process of aging should be understood in relation to making the work required to appear young, attractive, and desirable visible. For these authors, the political significance of their analysis of Madonna lies not so much in the question of whether she offers an appropriate or inappropriate image of aging femininity, but in the way these mediations of her reveal the contradictions involved in a performance of gendered identity capable of meeting society’s approval.

In various ways then, the essays in this collection interrogate the conditions under which aging femininity is rendered visible, either through recuperation from historical invisibility or as a critique of dominant formations of feminine old age. Individually, each essay offers a substantial contribution to the emerging field of aging studies and begins to lay some frameworks for the kind of research that needs to be undertaken at the intersection of old age and gender. As a body of work, Aging Femininities: Troubling Representations establishes the long overlooked richness and the complexity of this field of study. Crucially, this collection of essays wrests the concerns of aging in contemporary culture away from the intertwined hegemonies of consumer driven representations and socio-medical discourses that offer mutual support in the pathologisation of aging femininity, and instead offers ways in which these hegemonies can be subverted and resisted.
SECTION ONE:

CULTURAL HERSTORIES
The first wave of feminism in the United Kingdom, along with the changes wrought on British society by the First World War, led to a number of laws, which seemingly offered women better opportunities in life. These started in 1918 with the Qualification of Women Act, giving the vote to some women over thirty; in 1919 the Sex Disqualification Removal Act opened up the professions; Oxford University degrees were conferred on women a year later; and the 1928 Equal Franchise Act finally gave them the same voting rights as men. Inevitably, though, these breakthroughs led to a concomitant unease in many quarters. We can see this in the literary and theatrical representations of women of the period, which polarised around three problematic figures: the mother, the flapper, and the spinster. Here I will look at how the last of these—someone who is past her marriageable date—acted as a repository during the interwar period for society’s fears and anxieties about the place of the older woman.

Ruth Adam (1975) has referred to the decade after the Great War as “the age of the spinster”, although we can see this cultural moment continuing long into the 1930s and beyond (59). On top of the social and legal changes wrought by first wave feminism, and the influence of high profile women like Christabel Pankhurst, who declared “spinsterhood…a political decision, a deliberate choice made in response to the conditions of sex-slavery”, came the repercussions of the First World War (Jeffreys 1985, 91). Katherine Holden (2007) tells us, “Unprecedented casualties amongst soldiers led to a belief in a ‘lost generation’ of men”, and therefore to a generation of women “who would never be able to marry” (11). This shift in the visibility of women, politically, socially, and physically, as well as developments in psychological thought about female sexuality, impacted upon representations of the spinster. Generally, in the 1920s, spinsters were viewed as a disruptive and sexually disturbing
influence on every part of society; it was believed that they were sexually available to married men, therefore undermining the marital union, fighting over the men who were not already married, or exhibiting other forms of “sexually deviant” behaviour, such as lesbianism. Equally, because many had entered the workplace, willingly or not, they were blamed for male unemployment, or, where they lived with relatives, considered a drain on family resources.

This concern over a woman’s potential as a subversive force in society, was, in many respects, similar to that afforded the disorderly “New Woman” in the 1890s, who was “[u]nchaperoned, emancipated, and free” (Gardner 1992, 4). However, whereas the New Woman could be seen as attractive in her youth and independence, the depiction of the spinster was invariably much more negative. She was seen as an “Old Maid”, “Maiden Aunt”, “surplus woman”, or “pussy”, and her age, repression, or eccentricity, were stressed, as with the prim and proper Miss Fairfield in Clemence Dane’s *Bill of Divorcement* (1921). This character stands in stark contrast to the attractive Vida Levering in Elizabeth Robins’s earlier suffrage drama, *Votes for Women* (1907), whose autonomy, intellectual abilities, and political awareness are never in doubt. By the 1930s, with the global economic crisis precipitating the Depression, the reality was less than comic. Winifred Holtby and others endeavoured to present the spinster in a more positive light; *Women and a Changing Civilization* (1934), for example, pointed out that it was possible to gain fulfilment through work and friendships. But even those sympathetic to the spinsters’ position, like Laura Hutton, still saw them in terms of a dilemma, as instanced by the title of her book, *The Single Woman and Her Emotional Problems* (1935). Thus, as Maggie Gale (1996) suggests, the proliferation of representations of older unmarried women on the interwar stage reflected “a problematised social phenomenon”, with the image of the introverted, unfulfilled or even insane spinster further disseminated through the numerous film versions of books and plays (192).

Apprehension over the “surplus” woman—that is the woman who has no man to marry and who is therefore “surplus” to society’s needs—had already surfaced during the 1840s because of increased male emigration (Vicinus 1985). But it became acute during the 1920s when it was obvious that there was a dramatic imbalance between the number of men and women in the United Kingdom. The loss of so many young men during the First World War, along with the rise in unemployment for returning soldiers, and a steady demographic shift towards female births and longevity since the nineteenth century, inopportunely coincided with women over thirty securing the vote. This led to unmarried women often
being viewed as a “menace to the country’s economy and its social and political order” by newspapers such as *The Daily Mail*, “particularly when it was touted that the franchise should be extended to women under 30”: this would have put female voters in the majority (Melman 1988, 20).

Virginia Nicholson (2007) sets out the stark marital statistics for the “surplus” woman. Between 1914 and 1918 over 700,000 British men were killed: one in eight of those who set out to fight, and 9 per cent of Britain’s males under forty-five” (13-14). Apart from this, many men were also mentally affected or physically disfigured by war, and, symbolically, the existence of the “surplus” woman acted as a reminder to the population of the ravages of war. The problem seemed to have come to a head with the 1921 Census, when it was learned that there were 1,720,802 more women than men in Britain. It is hard to say with certainty that these figures had a specific impact upon the way in which unmarried women were viewed in the United Kingdom, but it is noticeable that there was a rise in critical writing about, and popular representations of, the spinster during the interwar years (ibid.).

Maggie Gale (1996) argues that the playwrights of the interwar period “appear to have categorised single women into types, the least ‘thought out’ being the spinster. In plays of the period [she] was often, although not always, virginal, naïve or judgemental, thus becoming a comic figure or ideological device” (174). On stage, there was any number of caricatures of the spinster: the tweed-wearing Miss Murchison in *Her Shop* (1929) by Aimée and Philip Stuart, for example, or the family irritant, Sylvia, in Noel Coward’s *This Happy Breed* (1939). One of the crudest distortions came in Rodney Ackland’s adaptation of Hugh Walpole’s novel, *The Old Ladies* (1935). This involves three elderly women in varying stages of eccentricity, renting rooms in a large Georgian house. Each shows some aspect of the stereotypical “older woman”. The widowed Lucy Amorest leads an empty life, filled only by the dream that her long-lost son will return. Of the two spinsters, the pathologically timid May Beringer unsuccessfully looks for a job to stave off penury and Agatha Payne, with suggested mystical powers, becomes increasingly unhinged. The play ends tragically when Agatha terrifies May to death because of an irrational desire to own one of May’s prized possessions. The inference is that being without a man leads to a lonely and impecunious old age, triggering these various manifestations of fantasy, neurosis, and psychosis.

It can be argued that other interwar dramatists, particularly female ones, engage more thoughtfully with the “surplus” woman. Dodie Smith is perhaps better known nowadays as the writer of *The One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1956), as well as the popular coming-of-age novel, *I
Capture the Castle (1949). However, she was also a major dramatist of the 1930s. Her first play, Autumn Crocus (1931), shows two female teachers on holiday in the Tyrol: Fanny, wearing spectacles and drab colours, and Edith dressed in tweeds. Affected by the light and space of the Austrian countryside, which contrast with her “ugly and dark” furnished rooms back home, and her love for Steiner, the married innkeeper, Fanny begins to blossom like one of the “Herbstzeitlose, the timeless flower”, or the “autumn crocus” (Smith 1939a, 80, 89). Yet Edith insists that this relationship has to end: neither of them has any money, with Fanny being only the “daughter of a poor clergyman”, who would lose her job if she goes “running about the mountains with a common innkeeper” (Smith 1939, 107, 104). The play ends with Fanny realising that there is apparently nothing left for her but to grow old.

Finding that she was getting scores of letters from female members of the audience, who empathised with Fanny’s situation, Dodie Smith went on to write an article, which identified this contemporary phenomenon:

Their letters have convinced me that there exists scattered throughout this country a vast and mysterious legion of loveless women, a new type of surplus woman has arisen during the last decade. She and her sisters are filling the ranks of the legion of the loveless as they have never been filled before. Britain is creating an army of women, between the ages of thirty and fifty, whose hearts have never grown up, and probably never will grow up (Smith 1931b, n.p.).

Another related dramatic trend at this time was that of the young female character who gives up her opportunity for marriage as a form of self-sacrifice. In Clemence Dane’s first play, A Bill of Divorcement, Sydney turns down her own chance to marry in order to look after her shell-shocked father, after her mother divorces him to wed someone else. This theme also appeared in W. S. Maugham’s ferocious anti-war play, For Services Rendered (1931), which criticised the way that survivors of the First World War had been treated. As Eva’s fiancé has been killed in the war, and there is no-one left to marry, her only option is to care for her blinded brother. He rails against the “incompetent fools who ruled the nations” and led them into a war that had nothing to do with “honour and patriotism and glory” (Maugham 1999, 67-68). Whilst the main focus of the play is on society’s callous reaction to returning soldiers, it ends with Eva undergoing a breakdown on stage as she sings the National Anthem in a cracked voice. Like Fanny, she can see the grim trajectory of her future.

If a middle-class woman could not expect to get married, either because she was one of the redundant females or because of family
commitments, then she would most probably have to go out to work. Paradoxically, if she was able to support herself financially in this way, she was castigated for “taking jobs away” from the men who were supposedly entitled to them: firstly, returning soldiers, and then men on the breadline during the Depression, struggling to feed their families. Yet the Great War afforded many middle-class women their first opportunity to work, and therefore earn their own money. The aforementioned legislation, passed in the 1920s and 1930s, also helped to improve women’s chances of financial independence, even if, as Martin Pugh (1992) notes, “by 1930 feminist politics had been decisively marginalised” (124). In her article, Dodie Smith (1931) goes on to describe the changes for unmarried women: “Before the War, the spinster was ‘the girl who stayed at home.’ But nowadays, you will find her behind a shop counter or a school-desk, or rattling the keys of a typewriter” (n.p.). Virginia Nicholson (2006) argues that the relative commonness in the interwar years of the working woman was due, not only to the impact of the war, but also to the suffrage movement: “A cohort of stay-at-home wives and mothers could never have achieved for women what this generation of spinsters did in meeting the challenge of grief and loss. For them, being denied marriage was a liberation and a launching pad” (234-35).

On the British stage, though, work was not always seen in such a glamorous light. Employment mainly consisted of monotonous drudgery in shops, offices, and schools. The idea of a wasted life crops up several times in the depiction of teaching, a job particularly associated with the older woman. The characteristics available to her, once again, are those of repression, frustration, or mental instability; alternatively, she was derided for being unworidly—ironic in itself as a woman was not allowed to continue with her job if she got married. As we have seen, Fanny in Autumn Crocus glimpses another kind of existence away from the rigours of her job as a teacher, only for this to be closed off to her. The experimental use of structure in J. B. Priestley’s Time and the Conways (1937) reinforces the theme of the loss of dreams, with the beginning and end of the play set in 1919, whilst Act II is set twenty years into the future. At the beginning, Kay is youthful and full of the promise of life, but the middle part of the play shows her as “hard, efficient, well-groomed”, with no chance of getting married. Again, as the stage directions tell us, the youthful socialist sympathiser, Madge changes into a woman who “has short, greyish hair, wears glasses, and is neatly but severely dressed. She speaks with a dry precision, but underneath her assured school-mistress manner is a suggestion of the neurotic woman” (Priestley 1948, 154, 156). It is of note that, much as Priestley could write thought-provoking and
complex plays, he found it difficult to steer clear, in this instance, of the female stereotype. In contrast, Emlyn Williams evades this in The Corn is Green (1938). Miss Moffat is more comfortable with her job as a teacher, perhaps because she has “never talked to a man for more than five minutes without wanting to box his ears” (1938, 13). Much is made of the ways in which a woman can gain fulfilment in life without marriage, and Miss Moffat (played by Bette Davis in the 1945 film directed by Irving Rapper) is portrayed as educated, ambitious, and attractive. The key difference, though, is that Miss Moffat has money, and is therefore in control of her future. Inheriting a house from her uncle in the Welsh countryside, she commandeers a local woman to help open a school for the poor because “[y]ou live alone, you have just enough money, you’re not badly educated, and time lies heavy on your hands”. When Miss Ronberry protests that she’s waiting for the right man, the ever-practical Miss Moffat bats aside this fantasy: “If you’re a spinster well on in her thirties, he’s lost his way and isn’t coming. Why don’t you face the fact and enjoy yourself, the same as I do?” (1938, 13).

Nevertheless, whilst Miss Moffat is able to find fulfilling work due to her convenient inheritance, the declining economic fortunes of Great Britain as it slid into the Depression years meant that many of those women who did not marry, either out of choice or circumstance, found themselves living a hand-to-mouth existence, or what was sometimes euphemistically called “genteel poverty”. There were several plays that more generally addressed these financial constraints on the middle classes, such as Ronald Mackenzie’s The Maitlands (1934), in which the eponymous family have been forced to move to a drab town on the coast, without the trappings of the life that they once had. Other playwrights showed more directly how lack of money affected the older unmarried woman. Busman’s Holiday is interesting in this respect. Dorothy L. Sayers first wrote it as a play in 1936, before adapting it the following year into the eleventh and last novel featuring her detective, Lord Peter Wimsey. Most critical comment about Busman’s Holiday has related to the ingenious method of murder it features, or the way in which Wimsey negotiates the beginning of his marriage to Harriet Vane. However, the plot actually revolves around Miss Agnes Twitterton, who had been a background figure in a number of Wimsey books. Living near to Wimsey’s country house, Talboys, she is the seemingly stereotypical spinster, with her inconsequential chatter and over-concern with etiquette. In Busman’s Holiday, Agnes is hopeful of inheriting money from her uncle, the miserly Noakes, who has been found dead, with his brains dashed out. She comes under suspicion of his murder, but in fact the killer