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From the third age to the third sex: A feminist framework for the life course

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ABSTRACT

Understanding of the latter part of the life course in age studies takes place largely through the lens of the third and fourth ages. Counterposing successful ageing with the failure of the fourth age, there is little conceptual room for the possibility of paradox or the co-existence of good and bad, gain and loss. Sociological studies of the life course also gives little attention to embodied subjectivity, focusing rather on structural and material aspects of inequality. All of these factors mean that women's experience in moving through the life course is inadequately conceptualised. In this paper I suggest an alternative feminist framework for the life course building on the work of Simone de Beauvoir and focusing particularly on the concept of the third sex. The paper is structured as follows. After introducing the need to construct an alternative, feminist life course framework, I review the texts and countertexts that represent women's ageing alternatively in negative and positive tones. I then turn to Beauvoir's work, focusing particularly on the 'third sex' concept as a means of mediating the embodied experience of later life. I then use it to illuminate women's accounts of their lived experience, via three themes: bodily changes; narratives and plots; and sexuality. Overall the paper seeks to show that that new insights introduced by the third sex concept can enrich cultural gerontology whilst both age and gender studies will benefit by being brought into closer alignment.

Introduction and aims

I have long been fascinated and intrigued by the disjunction between what women expect as they age past menopause and the far more positive experience that seems to await many if not most. This is something that the third/fourth age division does not adequately capture. In looking at the later stages of the life course, one of the dominant ways of examining this is contrasting the 'crown of life' (Laslett, 1987), which is the third age, with the fourth age, the time of 'dependence, decrepitude and death'; a framework which asserts a good/bad binary rather than a nuanced account of good and bad as a continuum.

This approach to the latter part of the life course is, moreover, a poor fit with the reality of most women's lives. As well as being more achievable by men, who are significantly more materially advantaged at retirement as a whole, and for whom in socio-cultural terms 'maturity' is an augmentation of masculinity in a way it is not for femininity (Sontag, 1972), the third age (for men) is also made possible by the continuing performance by women of caring and domestic work (Calasanti & King, 2011). The fourth age, by contrast, is associated with the unruly and uncontrollable body, with women most represented within the two fourth-age categories of frailty and dementia. There is no conceptual recognition within this framework that women can age

well and flourish with frailty; but similarly despite critical feminist attention to the third age privileging of men at the expense of women, there is little conceptual attention to the way material inequality can co-exist with more positive subjective experiences resulting from maturity and personal growth.

This oversight stems in part from the fact that the life course as a vehicle is focused on material and structural aspects of life' not 'human individuality' but rather the effect of social location, institutional norms and so on (Gilleard & Higgs, 2016:303). In disciplinary terms, part of the reason for this neglect of individual experience lies in the gap between sociological orientations to the life course and psychological treatments of lifespan development (Dannefer, 2012; Diewald & Mayer, 2009; Gilleard & Higgs, 2016; Settersten, 2009). This gap has detrimental effects on the way both disciplines approach individuality. Sociology does not sufficiently consider subjectivity or have a developed theory of personality (Connell, 1987), so, as Rosalind Gill has pointed out, 'we know almost nothing about how the social or cultural "gets inside" and transforms and reshapes our relationships to ourselves and others' (2008: 433). Meanwhile, psychology and psychoanalysis by contrast focus on the individual's cognitive processes and 'personality' outside of social and historical context. Critically exploring this point, Gilleard and Higgs (2016) suggest Erik Erikson (1980) as potentially

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useful in bridging the two disciplines and in offering insights of use to sociology in particular, such as generativity, intimacy and identity formation. However, Erikson's model assumed male personhood implicitly to signify full human development. Carol Gilligan (1982) was one of the first scholars to directly address the question of women's deficiencies against this model, emphasising the alternative and equally acceptable way of reaching maturity through relationality; subsequently, as Paula Bernstein describes, 'Current research suggests that the normal developmental thrust [for women] is... towards autonomy with connectedness' (2004: 608) Yet even so these models privilege the earlier part of life, assuming the daughter's perspective over that of the mother, youth over later life and little is known about the process of identity formation later in women's lives.

The feminist cultural gerontologist, Margaret Morganroth Gullette has called for more attention to be paid to the narratives that celebrate the positive and empowered themes in women's experience of age and ageing (which may, indeed, co-exist with challenging material or other conditions). Drawing on a range of media, including novels, memoirs and movies, in *Declining to Decline*, Gullette observes: 'midlife could be a name for that long rich time of life when we possess both the knowledge of the workings of the world and maximum power to make change' (1997:2). In novels written either by feminists or by women influenced by feminism, she explains, depiction of the relative attraction and value of youth and midlife is often reversed and the 'dangerous age' is that of youth, characterised as it is by struggles between care and love on the one hand and work or self-actualization on the other, combined with the onerous tasks of childrearing, navigating divorce and so on. As Gullette acknowledges, 'the midlife for heroines is risky, like any other part of life, and more dangerous because of middle-ageism. But it is also "safer" than youth because the heroine is herself a site of comparative power, intelligence, understanding, pleasure, expectation, intention' (p. 87). Indeed, she declares, 'Name any good thing (except for mere youth-in-itself) and it pertains to midlife' (p. 87). Nor is this a 'privileged' experience: movies like *Shirley Valentine* suggest that this sort of empowerment is felt by working class women also whilst the 2017 movie *Edie*, starring Sheila Hancock, shows how outwardly more privileged middle-class women may themselves be fettered in gender roles till late in life (in this case only liberated by her husband's death). All point to the entanglement of good and bad.

Indeed, in conceptual terms there is a more fundamental lack of engagement with the condition of ambivalence, paradox and ambiguity. Some of these relate to ideological frameworks, which emphasise one aspect of reality over another, but which may work together: for example 'girl power' and 'raising Ophelia' represent the aspirational and vulnerable sides of young femininity without also explaining their binary connection (Gonick, 2006). Similarly, in terms of good and bad ageing, the 'bad' aspects suggesting unwelcome truths around vulnerability and dependence in later life are similarly 'split off' and projected onto a separate category (Cole, 1992). Some element of paradox may be an ineradicable condition of social life. Psychoanalytic approaches highlight the co-existence of contradictory experiences as germane to developmental aspects of life, a condition defined as ambivalence (Parker, 2005). The paradox that particularly concerns me here is that of the 'paradox of time' because, as Helen Paloge pithily notes, 'it brings both decay and growth' (2007:21), where the decay relates to corporeal dimensions and the growth to experiential, psychological and spiritual aspects of identity.

In this paper I suggest the need for an alternative way of mapping the trajectory of the latter part of the life course for women, that a) has gender and embodiment at its heart and b) allows us to get at the 'inner' and 'outer' dimension of subjectivity. The alternative framework I present is that of Simone de Beauvoir's tripartite structure for the female life course which highlights key embodied changes and the social meanings attached to them, and which contrasts with the education-work-retirement (and variants) structure of the life course as well as the third/fourth age division in later life, as a basis on which to build.

Beauvoir's focus is on embodied subjectivity, women's lived experience at each 'age'; the tripartite structure provides the conceptual framework for a more positive view of the latter part of the life course, including the way it supports individual empowerment, in contrast to the ageing-as-decline narrative that fuels the dominant cultural model, which is especially powerful in relation to women. In particular, she notes that mid-life has the potential to usher women into a stage she associated with the 'third sex', leading to a more positive and liberated stage of old (er) age. Importantly also, this framework offers the opportunity to acknowledge the paradoxical 'truths' of the life course that, on the one hand, women accumulate disadvantage with ageing as well as suffer inequalities specifically associated with ageing and, on the other, that they experience opportunities for real social and personal power including for liberation *with* ageing (rather, that is, than in a third-age denial or resistance of it), because at the same time ageing offers potential for release from constraining modes and roles associated with youthful femininity.

The paper will proceed as follows. First, I will explore the entanglement of both positive and negative experiences of gendered embodiment in later life as they appear in texts and discourses. In the next section of the paper I turn to Beauvoir's life course framework, more accurately the stages of a woman's life, as expounded in *The Second Sex*. Having set out what is no more than a brief outline in Beauvoir's own work, my aim is to develop it by means of material drawn mainly from women's autobiographical writing (both fiction and non-fiction) combined with conceptual approaches from cultural gerontology. In the final section I consider how we may use this alternative perspective to better understand the challenges and opportunities presented to women over the life course.

Women's ages and stages: Texts and countertexts

As noted earlier, concentration on the negative aspect of gendered experiences of ageing through the life course, important as this for understanding and addressing ongoing social inequality, is nevertheless only part of the story. Other literature, focused on subjective experience, suggests that, contrary to experiencing the life course past youth in terms of a downward trajectory and an accumulation of disadvantages, women are at the height of their powers in midlife in a variety of ways that are less easy to capture through statistical indicators. One of the main points emerging from this literature is the 'discovery' of a more positive and rich later life than women were primed to expect. Indeed, failure to stress this theme may itself contribute to a continuation of this inequality. Such a paradoxical picture has a long history. Lois Banner's history of the cultural representations of, and attitude towards, older women through the ages reveals a text and countertext, either intertwined or running in parallel. One is positive and often based on lived experience 'involving freedom and fulfilment'; the other, usually official, text is 'negative, involving debasement and, finally, persecution' (Banner, 1993: 168). These contrasting texts are found in medicine, psychology, literature and politics, up to this day; this dual history of representations, an official or theoretical one at odds with women's lived experience, results in part from the embedding of the male standpoint in the life course framework itself. This experience for women, as Dorothy Smith has observed, involves 'disjuncture between experience and the forms in which experience is socially expressed' (1987: 50). For example, there is a disjunction between representations of menopausal women who are 'routinely shown as the crone, the hag, or the dried-up grandmother figure' whereas many women 'feel more positive and comfortable in their bodies after menopause' (Ussher, Hawkey, & Perz, 2019). The negative theme, meanwhile, can be contrasted with the more positive account of men's ageing where, taking cinema as an example, 'femininity is represented as a slide into abjected decline whereas for masculinity, as with vintage furniture, wines, cheese and cars, age connotes improvement' (Dolan, 2019).

Where the sexual double standard characterises the dominant approach to women's ageing, Betty Friedan was one of the first, as second wave feminists aged, to see the importance of highlighting the positive aspects. In *The Fountain of Age* she champions the frequently-found reality of 'vital ageing' in older women and the breaking of the 'age mystique' involving 'redefining ourselves as women, recreating ourselves as people, accepting challenges we never even dreamed of in our youth' (Friedan, 1993: 92). She takes a Jungian approach, with the flip from outer to inner directedness noted by Jung (as applying to men) often reversed in women, now their childrearing days are over, but which also casts aside the (gendered) values of youth as no longer either appropriate or desirable and which results in a contrasting, but equally valuable, enjoyment of sexuality, embodiment, and relationships with self and others. Friedan writes: 'I was feeling better about myself as a woman, more at ease about growing older... perhaps freer to be myself than I had ever been before or after feminism' (Friedan, 1993: xxiv-xxx).

The positive meaning to be found in this life stage is something with which other (ageing, especially second wave) feminists concur. Carolyn Heilbrun (1989) urges that women can increase personal freedom in midlife since, partly because they are devalued in terms of the sexual regime, they can now access active rather than passive narratives, as they no longer expect the 'closure' that is a part of the standard feminine plot (associated with some 'solution' to life's problems such as romance/marriage/motherhood and with variants of this found in everything from shopping, dieting and makeovers) and that, anyway, *end* at midlife and with them 'the delusion of a passive life' (p. 130). Concurring with Friedan regarding the opportunity to redefine womanhood, her theoretical framework is that of androgyny, whereby women take on male plots and make them 'womanly', thereby expanding the scope of femininity. Germaine Greer's (1991) suggestion similarly is that of a new adulthood or maturity that accrues with mid-life, with the menopause as its nodal event. For Greer, the menopause precipitates stock-taking and inaugurates physical and spiritual change resulting in what is effectively a new life stage. In terms of a woman's subjectivity, there is a new focus on the self, an extraction of ego from the reproductive roles in terms of which society has viewed her and a new attitude to self, relationships, and sexuality. But Greer calls this empowering subjectivity the 'undescribed experience' (pp 9 forward) and finds 'mainly silence' in texts about and by older women, thus basing her insight largely on personal experience. In trying to capture it in conceptual terms, she makes the distinction between femininity and femaleness; where women had previously been obligated to perform the 'drag act' of femininity, femaleness by contrast is a 'self-defining female libido that is not expressed merely in response to demands by the male, and a female way of being and experiencing the world' (p. 59). Her approach has been criticised for its essentialism but although she declares herself to be a liberationist feminist, not, that is, an equality feminist, recognizing that women's lived embodied experience will always be mediated through their biology, as compared to men, (Greer, 1999), she does not suggest that the form that femaleness will take is determined or innate. She refers back to the memory of femaleness experienced in one's childhood and early youth, and thus signposts a reconstruction, albeit in general, impressionistic terms, of 'the self you were before you became a tool of your sexual and reproductive destiny' (p. 62).

Since Greer wrote, other women have added their voices and their accounts, compiling rich layers of detail and complexity to the depiction of both the transition and the life stage itself (many of them hailing Greer's work as still relevant and powerful). Although a crop of inspiring memoirs over the past few years have stressed the possibilities for liberation and self-invention they mostly (with the exception of a few self-help texts) do not construct a discourse of obligatory positive cheer but are nuanced accounts interweaving positive with negative stressing loss, alongside gain and misery, alongside contentment, 'failure' alongside success. For example, nearly thirty years after Greer

published her book, writer Marina Benjamin (2016) in *The Middlepause: on turning fifty*, whilst noting the multiple losses, also eagerly tallies up the significant gains of passing through the midlife. Of the former, she notes an accidental fall on the way to the bathroom at night which she thinks 'foreshadows' the vulnerability of old age, approaching on the horizon; she regrets lost opportunities and disappointments; she has a 'stranger in the mirror' moment wherein the dissonance between self-perception and reality is deeply disturbing and again gives her a presentiment of the terrible future losses to come. By contrast, there are a somewhat less dramatic set of advantages: self-belief and confidence in her own judgements; self-knowledge and an embodied knowledge regarding her capabilities and limitations, as well as the reality of ageing, which, she considers, underpins maturity. Daily Telegraph columnist Jane Shilling easily enumerates the mid-life losses which include not just the possibility of having children but a youthful feeling of joyful invulnerability, a thrill of anticipation for what is still to come. But mid-life also has its rewards, albeit ones that have to be strived for, and she assesses: 'To wrestle from the intractable catalogue of large and small diminutions a life that remains rich with hope and interest, while at the same time not denying that you're on the downward curve of that arc that leads from the stark simplicity of birth to the answering simplicity of death, is the proper business of middle-age' (2011: 92). Cumulatively, these accounts mean that the 'moment of change, the turning of the corner' (Greer, 1991:19) may today be thought of as, if not 'undescribed', then perhaps at least *partially* described.

However, whilst many older female readers will no doubt relate to these lists, there lingers still the sense that what is lacking is not description but a coherent framework within which to identify themes across these multiple details. The lists of losses and gains, including their connection, in other words, require greater conceptual underpinning if we are really to grasp their meaning and significance in terms of the life course. In the next section, I will set out the conceptual framework for the female life course provided by Beauvoir's theory of becoming (and unbecoming) woman which possesses several benefits in terms of the focus of this paper. Firstly, it highlights embodied subjectivity and the changes that occur over the life course, based on key points in a woman's biological reproductive cycle (which, in existentialist-phenomenology is always already social (e.g. Moi, 2005)). Accordingly, the framework has a tripartite structure, encompassing a child stage, a second stage of sexual/fertile womanhood, when a woman is constructed in the gender regime as the second sex, and a third stage, precipitated by the 'crisis' of menopause which leads, possibly via a struggle to maintain one's position as the 'second sex', into a more liberated third sex stage. Beauvoir's philosophical approach to gender is one in which biology, culture and history are interlaced aspects of lived experience and indeed inseparable at that level (meaning also that sex and gender are in practice inseparable (Moi, 2005)). Indeed, when Gill asks, regarding the relationship between culture and subjectivity, 'is subjectivity the same thing as interiority? How can we think subjectivity in ways that are not simply intra-psychic, that do not abandon the social, political, cultural?' (2008: 434) a very good answer indeed is found in Beauvoir's schema. Secondly, although constructed more than half a century ago, in that its focus lies on structures of embodied consciousness, which, whilst not 'eternal', do not necessarily change with social and political reform, its relevance as a framework for understanding women's subjective experience of journeying through the life course endures to this day and may indeed be experiencing a renaissance (Mann, 2008). As such it captures dimensions of embodied female experience that the dominant third/fourth age focus in cultural and critical gerontology does not. Indeed, the focus on embodied structures of consciousness serves as a bridge between social structures and the 'inner' life of subjectivity capturing both in a way that neither sociology nor psychology (including a focus on Erikson), can do. Finally, it holds a recognition of paradox at its core, providing a new perspective onto the dual themes of good versus bad ageing. When applied to data from women's lived experience this framework permits insight not available elsewhere.

Simone de Beauvoir's framework for the female life course

Simone de Beauvoir's work offers a vividly corporeal approach to the life course that puts gender at its centre and furthermore considers both the constraints and possibilities for freedom associated with ages and stages on this basis. She presents women's lives as falling into three stages. In the first stage, female children are equally as agentic as boys, curious, self-determining and active in exploring the world. The subjectivity of the child is universal and androgynous, not being affected by sexual difference, whereby 'it is through the eyes, the hands, that children apprehend the universe, and not through the sexual parts' (Beauvoir, 1997: 295). But at puberty a woman's social situation changes the way she lives her embodied self, introducing a key difference between the sexes. Beauvoir writes, 'The young girl feels that her body is getting away from her, it is no longer the straightforward expression of her individuality; it becomes foreign to her; and at the same time she becomes for others a thing: on the street, men follow her with their eyes and comment on her anatomy' (1997: 333).

Under the spotlight of the male gaze, which perspective she internalizes alongside her own, the structure of her prereflective consciousness shifts from one in which 'her body is at the centre of her subjectivity to a double, divided consciousness that is both her own and the conduit for another's desires' (McWeeny, 2017: 5). The young women entering the sexual regime remains aware of herself as subject and as object at the same time, a fragmented doubled subjectivity of which Beauvoir writes: 'it seems to her that she has been doubled; instead of coinciding exactly with herself, she now begins to exist *outside*' herself (1997: 361; original emphasis). It is the realisation of this particular kind of doubled consciousness - '*se faire objet*' in the original - that is what Beauvoir means by 'becoming a woman'; importantly also, she acquiesces in this, as is clear in the original French semantic construction, as *se faire objet* implies an active process, a willing complicity despite reserves of reluctance, in making oneself a (sexual) object (in recognition that this is expected of one, and that fulfilment of this will accrue certain social rewards). This is the origin of the trope of Ophelia, a feeling of being split between contrary, and equally compelling, imperatives which might be described as towards being true to oneself on the one hand and achieving social recognition on the other. Although this trope has a long tradition since Shakespeare, including prominence in nineteenth century depictions of female madness (Showalter, 1985), Gonick suggests two scholars as influential in contemporary depictions of the psychological vulnerability of adolescent girls (despite increased opportunities), namely Carol Gilligan and, especially, Mary Pipher. Building on Gilligan's influential 1982 book, but drawing on examples from her own career as a therapist to adolescent girls, Pipher notes that as they enter the sexual regime at adolescence, 'girls become "female impersonators" who fit their whole selves into small, crowded spaces. Girls stop thinking, "Who am I? What do I want? And starting thinking, "what must I do to please others?"' (Pipher, 1994: 27). Such questions proceed well into adulthood. Doris Lessing's thirtyish character Anna Wulf in *The Golden Notebook* (1962) feels so torn by this experience that she takes to keeping several notebooks to record experiences which she feels are wholly irreconcilable aspects of herself. But far from this pull being something that has been swept away in more enlightened times, this doubled consciousness has, if anything, grown more complex and elusive. For example, it has been suggested that sexual 'objectification' has been replaced in part by a far more penetrative 'sexual subjectification', a disciplinary (self) moulding of the female self according to dominant cultural images highlighting sexuality (Gill, 2008); the emphasis on sexuality as a marker of success, alongside achievement in education and employment domains, meanwhile, has, according to Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen (2019) engendered profound friction between the self-as-object and self-as-subject doubled consciousness, which war *within* the self partially drives the #MeToo phenomenon. Continuity, with the condition of femininity described by Beauvoir, finally, is richly evoked where Lara Feigel, in her cultural history of Doris Lessing,

makes clear from the outset that her interest in Lessing and her life and work was at least partially inspired by the hope that she might take her for a guide and mentor in attaining freedom, declaring of Anna Wulf, 'the questions troubling Anna were questions troubling me' (2018: 5).

In describing this doubled consciousness, it is important to be clear that Beauvoir is referring to the 'prereflective' or habitual consciousness, not to conscious reflexivity; one way of understanding these is as 'bodily inscriptions' through which 'anonymous social meanings are already inside us, establishing our desires and investing our bodies with perspectives that are not originally our own' (McWeeny, 2017:25) and in turn rendering some bodies more equal than others. For example, the (negative) 'meaning' of menstruation and menopause, is derived from such social inscriptions. Moreover, as a result of learned dispositions and practices, her body acquires the closed stance of femininity (Young, 2005) and her attitude towards the future becomes the narrowed one of waiting (Heilbrun, 1989), a gendered expectation (Leccardi & Rampazi, 1993), captured, for example, by Sheryl Sandberg's (2013) observation on women's reluctance to 'lean in', by which she was referring to many younger women's inability to plan an agentic forward-looking concrete career path and take on ambitious roles because of a perceived need for passivity associated with the gendered expectation of romance/marriage/motherhood (See also Pickard, 2018).

There are ways to either alleviate or magnify the effects of such prereflective consciousness, Beauvoir suggests, thus introducing nuance into the gendered experience. Heterosexual activity strengthens these effects and draws women deeper into a feminine consciousness (and thus can be avoided, with Beauvoir seeing the Lesbian as more liberated): the male subject expresses and strengthens his subjectivity through sex but sex demands the eroticisation of the female body, so she is both subject and conscious of herself as Other, aware that her very power in this regime comes through becoming the eroticised and dominated Other. Jennifer McWeeny (2017) has helpfully divided women's liberatory possibilities into two kinds: what she calls strategic choices - the choices one makes in everyday life as well as those regarding how to live one's life - and structural changes, those that invoke a new perspective. Both can lead to what Beauvoir called 'transcendence' of the constrained feminine position and both have become far more prominent in the decades since Beauvoir wrote. The shift in perspective can, McWeeny suggests, involve changes at the level of meaning and changes at the level of the body respectively. Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity is an example of the former; but there are also changes at the level of the body which come with ageing when a woman is 'expelled' from the sexual regime. Summarising this, McWeeny writes: 'this reduced capacity to make oneself an object opens up a space for a different, more liberated kind of body-self relation' (McWeeny, 2017: 24) such as the 'subject body' (Gadow, 1983), so hard for women to attain, but achieved through ceasing to judge one's body by normative aesthetic standards and instead appreciating it for its strengths and abilities, for serving as a vehicle for one's aims and intentions.

The third stage of a woman's life begins in midlife, around the time of menopause, although, as Beauvoir puts it, the 'moral drama' - the need to face ageing, which implies the loss of one's sexual capital - begins before, and ends long after, the physiological effects end. Where her periods turned her body into 'an obscure, alien thing' (1997: 61) the ending of her periods give her the opportunity of regaining her unitary consciousness: 'she is no longer the prey of overwhelming forces; she is herself, she and her body are one' (1997: 63). Ageing means that she can no longer make of herself an 'object' and/or be seen as such: this turns her into a 'third sex', in Beauvoir's words, which, whilst not a man, is no longer a 'woman' in the terms of *se faire objet* as set out above, a sexual object to the male gaze. She now has a choice: she can resist this and do her best to remain 'feminine' for as long as possible, which is to say retaining a place as the second sex, and the associated doubled consciousness, or she can move into a new subject location with a different social and symbolic context.

Certain consequences of alternatively clinging to second sex value and resisting obsolescence within these terms versus embracing third sex values are richly revealed in Abigail Brooks' study. Brooks (2010) found a paradoxical situation among both those women who embraced anti-ageing cosmetic technologies and those who did not. Those who embraced them felt a real sense of control over biological facts and a sense that this was a part of the 'doing of femininity' and thus of successful ageing (2010: 240). Those who did not and who, indeed, as part of their resistance to anti-ageing technologies, redefined beauty to include ageing features, emphasised character and embraced maturity, whilst experiencing empowerment and a sense of authenticity, also came under tremendous pressure to conform. The fundamental difference between the two groups of women in Brooks' sample can be described in terms of whether or not they strive to remain at the 'second sex' stage of womanhood. Brooks puts it thus, saying that those 'who are ageing naturally enjoy a wealth of positive benefits as a result of being liberated from the feminine mandates of youth and beauty and from the socially prescribed feminine roles of sex object, nurturer and reproducer'. The others miss out on benefits including 'less anxiety about physical appearance and about attracting the male gaze and, therefore, less effort and pain caught up in beauty work; more freedom to observe others; more diverse and inclusive definition of beauty; reclaiming the body for oneself after years of making it available for the pleasure and nurturance of others; discovering and developing new parts of oneself outside the role of sex object/wife/mother...' She concludes: 'most detrimental, is the erasure of age signs from the face and body that mark the inevitable passage of time... changes [that] signal the positive growth and memories that accompany life experience' (2010: 253). Embodiment and consciousness are here revealed as clearly inseparable; bodily change generates a change in consciousness.

Similarly important is the question of how to approach the menopause. What seems to be key is recognizing its importance, rather than denying it, and doing so furthermore without taking on board the cargo of negative associations that is part of the 'cultural consolidation' (Gullette, 1997) or catch-all term intended to explain all negative events at this point in the life course. In this function, it is a pivotal concept, discursively employed by an ageist and sexist culture to divide 'all women's lives into two parts, the better Before and the worse After, with menopause as the magic marker of decline' (Gullette, 1997: 98). However, as Gullette also recognises, there is a buried, and equally important meaning, expressed by many women, that relates to liberation, increased health and happiness and the opportunity for authenticity. For Guardian columnist Suzanne Moore (2015), the 'moral drama' surrounding menopause comprised a quest for meaning. Although her experience involved no particularly dramatic symptoms it did instate a shift of consciousness: 'I can't avoid the questions: what does it mean to be a woman who, having served her purpose – reproduction – may have another kind of life?' She continues, 'Are we only defined by motherhood and fuckability? No, of course not. We are more than that. That's what we tell ourselves. But what is this *more*?' The view of gender contained in Beauvoir's theory makes clear that to foreground the body in this way is not to essentialise it, moreover, but to demonstrate how the social meanings given to our bodily changes pull us in and out of the gender system in various ways. As such, the meaning of menopause when considered in terms of reference to the third sex concept is *not* one that feeds decline narratives.

Whilst Beauvoir is in no doubt regarding the authentic choice for the older woman – namely embracing the change – she is also perfectly aware of the price to pay (and provides evidence, in her memoirs and fiction, of having experienced, and well into middle-age, both personal resistance and a deep-seated horror of ageing (Moi, 2008)). After such a long time 'being woman', extrication from that regime, unlike entry, seems, at the outset at least, tainted almost entirely with loss. Yet in *The Second Sex* this sense of loss is portrayed not so much as unique but rather as being but the latest of the regular crises, centred upon biological function, with which women have had to grapple throughout

their lives. Beauvoir recognises that these passages are 'brutal' for women in that they constitute irrevocable ruptures in the life course, doors slammed on what has come before; each shift from puberty, sexual initiation, pregnancy/motherhood and menopause constitutes a crisis. Each shift constitutes not change alone but profound transformation, metamorphosis indeed, inviting death and rebirth. Greer is speaking from the other side of that metamorphosis – the 'invisible Rubicon' (1991: 22) – when she advocates that women should not fear change at this point but should rather accelerate it although such reasoning is not something to which most younger women (even those barely months from the menopause themselves) can relate. In Beauvoir's words 'From the day a woman consents to growing old, her situation changes. Up to that time she was still a young woman intent on struggling against a misfortune that was mysteriously disfiguring and deforming her; now she becomes a different being, unsexed but complete: an old woman' (1997: 595). Going into this experience with one's eyes wide open means understanding the profound interlacing of loss with gain but also the profound opportunities it brings.

In what follows I aim to pencil inside the outlines of the framework of the third sex provided by Beauvoir¹, by drawing upon both women's writing and feminist scholarship published in the years since Beauvoir constructed her theory, in an attempt to highlight the experiential reality and identify the texture of the lived experience.

In search of the third sex

Several themes are identifiable across the varied accounts by women of ageing through midlife and beyond. These can be grouped under the heading of bodily changes; changes to plot and narrative identity; and sexuality. The passage to the third sex moves from liminality into formation of a new structure. For many women there are life events that seem to precipitate the sense of passage into a new life stage: menopause is one such but others include death of a parent, divorce, redundancy, illness, children leaving home, or all of the above. Mostly women take a solitary and individual journey, with little foreknowledge, and few signposts. Guidance is often acquired from older friends and from literature and fiction, wherever it can be found. Acceptance of a new bodily state is often accompanied by a sense of a new consciousness, a new understanding of temporality, and/or a different relationship between self and world. There is the need to strip down one's habitual being in the world, metaphorically and sometimes literally, and retain only the things that are useful for the next stage.

I draw mostly on memoir published during the last two decades² supplemented by earlier literature published by second wave feminists on the subject of ageing; indeed the former often refer to second-wave feminists, especially Beauvoir and Greer, so the distinction between both groups is highly porous. I particularly highlight the liberatory aspects of the third sex position, not because this constitutes the entirety of the experience of the third sex but because I think it important to emphasise this possibility. As Gullette (2004) has explained, whilst the main target of critique must be the binary between progress and decline narratives, where decline narratives are dominant then the immediate task of feminist age scholars is to highlight the alternative possibilities.

¹ Beauvoir's discussion of the third sex in *The Second Sex* took up but a few paragraphs and does not appear in *The Coming of Age* (1996).

² I draw on a growing contemporary oeuvre of mid-life and ageing memoirs in which I am particularly interested in the more literary, thoughtful and usually feminist-influenced examples. Excellent contemporary and near-contemporary examples include books by Viv Albertine (2018), Marina Benjamin (2016), Claire Dederer (2017), Vivian Gornick (2015), Carolyn Heilbrun (2006), Deborah Levy (2018), Kate Millett (2001) Sandra Tsing Loh (2014), Rubin (2000) Miranda Sawyer (2016), Alix Kates Shulman Robinson (1995); Shulman (1999), Jane Shilling (2011), Helen Walmsley-Johnson (2015). In each of these works, an added dimension can be brought to bear on the material by application of the 'third sex' concept.

Bodily changes

Across the accounts by women, awareness of bodily change is the key event that precipitates the transition to the third sex. This involves a combination of menopause, confrontation with the mirror, response by others and possibly some illness or bodily event, all of which results in a reappraisal of one's body and/or the construction of a different set of bodily dispositions. Most importantly, these bodily changes precipitate a shift in consciousness as if the body were a corporeal map which tangibly and sensually impresses upon one one's current location on the roadmap of life. They may serve to signal loss of one's old self precipitating a quest for a new identity. Initial sadness and nostalgia, a lingering backward review, may soon be accompanied by optimism and a new sense of purpose (although the bittersweet flavour of loss may linger on), oriented to the future.

Jane Shilling's memoir of mid-life is a vivid example of how bodily changes precipitated profound change in her consciousness. Injury resulting from a fall from a horse, the onset of menopause, stiff joints, a dimming of vision and urgency of bladder, together signalled entry into a new life stage, and one situated beyond the high-water mark of one's prime. The distant rumble of finality she sensed in her assorted signs of decline - 'a low psychic hum' (p. 90) as she called it, propelled her into self-evaluation, reviewing past and future, revisiting dreams that were stale and needed to be updated, replacing drifting with planning, pointless busy-ness with a simpler focus. She describes an encounter with a 'stranger in the mirror' but absorbs the meaning of a face gazing back at her with all the erosions of age displayed clearly on it, eyes ringed with 'lived indigo, beneath a greenish-bronze patch' and other 'pock marks' of time, in Beauvoir's words, as she quotes. Shilling continues her body-based exploration with the aid of a family photograph album. There she is at 17; her mother a middle-aged woman. She vividly recalls the perspective of a 17 year old towards this ageing face of her mother's recalling: 'Minutely aware as I am of the pores on my adolescent nose, the precise state of every tiny blemish...I find it hard to understand how someone can get up in the mornings, contemplate their reflection in the mirror, even draw breath, looking as my mother does' (2011: 7). Now, memory allowing the brief shift in perspective to that of a 17 year old, she turns the same implacable gaze on her own face, reading the features staring back at her from the mirror and absorbing their meaning.

Further comparison – as she is made redundant – with a young woman who is a rising star at the same organisation – which literally takes place as she is on her way out the door – continues to impress upon her a corporeal understanding of her new life stage. As well as looking back and letting go, the shift also demands looking ahead and gaining resolve. As she visits her 80 year old aunt in a nursing home she reflects that she is equidistant from youth and old age: thirty years from the girl in the photograph album and thirty from that of her aunt. A sensation of *timor mortis* strikes her, but also the conviction that there is still life to live. Her life experience – a rich understanding of her capabilities and of lessons learnt – gives her the courage to go forward to meet what challenges she finds, for example to go through menopause with less anxiety than she had towards pregnancy: 'I thought that now I should try to live this crisis more gracefully than I had that one.. I had not gone entirely mad, or died of loneliness, or been unable to cope with the baby' (2011: 217). Experience enables progress, albeit not of the kind readily recognised as such in dominant cultural narratives. As a result of this, the brief temptation she notes to try cosmetic surgery is one she can withstand, recognizing that is both dangerous to her developing self and at the same time deeply misguided. It is dangerous to the self because it is so powerful – even more so, she believes, than the dreams of being saved by love, or having all one's life problems solved by a romantic relationship – in that it holds the hope of being saved by youth itself, of stopping time and keeping one 'poised for ever just at the moment before I grow old' (2011: 108). To stop time, however, she knows, is to close down her life plot, where acceptance of ageing and

the challenges and experiences it offers admits the chance of further growth. For all these reasons, it is important to recognise that mid-life has a beauty of its own, reflecting 'the depth and poignancy that clings to endings, late work, Indian summers...' (2011: 95).

Certainly, the changes can be unsettling, even terrifying: women have been primed to view 'the change' as a theatre curtain coming down on youth and hope, ushering in a sense of finality akin to dying and death itself. For this reason we interpret our bodily frailties with jaundiced eyes: Marina Benjamin's fall in the unlit darkness *en route* to the bathroom, for example, was, to her, not just an accident but, like Shilling's newly aching joints, a terrifying harbinger of the future frailties and decrements of old age: 'it was an object lesson, a warning, a sign. Like some bizarre pre-figuring of my future life, it seemed to contain within it the seed of every other fall I would henceforward suffer. In a sudden moment of clear-sightedness, I saw a future unfold before me along a path strewn with props I wanted nothing to do with – walking sticks, crutches, braces, wheelchairs' (p 63). Yet, it is not just that: as we have noted, Benjamin acknowledges that bodily change is also bodily development, a corporeal knowledge necessary for maturity itself.

Moreover, achievement of bodily maturity may lead to the experience of bodiliness outside the male gaze, including realisation of the subject body. In her memoir of the third sex transition, Alix Kates Shulman first describes respectfully observing the body of an older friend to glimpse what lay ahead for her: 'I study her ageing body to see what's coming next for me. Her small breasts sag gracefully, her smooth legs are brown and firm' (1995: 130). Having absorbed this, and embraced change more generally in her life, she describes a different, more positive relationship with her body as follows:

'This ageing body, soon to be old, surprises me. Out on the trails I find it serviceable, sturdy, reliable. The sleek muscled bodies of the young who occasionally spring past me or pedal their bikes up the mountain paths are no better designed than mine, though they will doubtless outlast me. The higher I climb, the more I appreciate my body's balance, sensory apparatus, capacity to feel and think, its stamina, strength, integrity – in short, its human perfection. Gone now along with vanity the miserable parade of defects it constantly sprang on me in my youth' (pp. 157–8).

Since 'femininity' is associated with a particular set of bodily postures and stances, for some the third sex is accompanied by changes in the style and disposition of the embodied habitus, which may be more or less intentionally cultivated. In her biography of Doris Lessing, whom she regards both as a pioneer and a mentor in the search for (female) freedom, Lara Feigel writes of Lessing's midlife post-menopausal transformation: 'Lessing now sat slouched, with her legs defiantly splayed where they would once have been pertly crossed, and even failed to wash for a while, allowing herself to smell' (2018: 230). Ceasing to be both subject and object can enable the end of embodied hesitation, timidity, passivity, inhibited agency and waiting (Young, 2005). This is true of Kate Brown, the heroine of Lessing's mid-life novel *The Summer Before the Dark*, of whom Lessing writes:

'She walked home through a summer Sunday dusk, among the possibilities offered by men's eyes. Kate stood in front of the long mirror looking at the slim decorative woman... and flung off the dress, put on one of those that folded and sagged, shook her hair out into the evening... And again she might have been invisible. Yet she needed only to put on the other dress, twist her hair so and so – and she would be drawing glances and needs after her every step...' (1975:176).

In her essays and autobiography, Lessing made it clear that her own experience was of the freedom that comes with invisibility; many agree with this, from Germaine Greer to writers going through mid-life today, such as Marina Benjamin, who writes: 'Through occupying the same place but with a different status comes the unanticipated freedom of being able to look... to surmise the world around you as you might never have done before; to begin not just to see, but to see through' (2018: 36). In *The Summer before the Dark* Lessing painstakingly sets out

to depict how one ordinary smart and attractive mid-life woman, Kate Brown, negotiates this transition and, without guidance or foreknowledge of what she is doing, takes the series of fumbling and awkward steps that lead to the new subject position of the third sex. Indeed, not only does the novel demonstrate that relinquishing the performance of femininity is not something that happens naturally and inevitably it also reminds readers that it is a choice; mid-life presents women with a fork in the road and it is up to the individual woman to choose her way. This bifurcation of the path is evident especially when looking back; Beauvoir (1972) spoke about having passed through an invisible frontier between the age of 43 and 53 and for Marina Benjamin, the age of 50 held compelling and uncomfortable significance, ‘tarnished as an old coin, and worn-down and worn out’ (2018: 79). In terms of the fork in the road, Kate Brown notices an age-peer behaving rather differently, seemingly invested in remaining in the sexual regime, wearing ‘high heels, a tight skirt’. As she walked behind her along the road, Kate noticed how the woman looked to see how everyone assessed her, ‘how she was being noticed, *how she was fitting into expectations that had been set in that other person by the mores of the time....* She kept sagging into tiredness, for her heels were punishing, then pulling herself up and throwing glances everywhere that were aggressive and appealing at the same time’ (1975: 177; original emphasis). Greer also sees someone like this ‘almost every day’. She presents a parody of femininity, in tight skirts, high heels, dyed and coiffed hair and makeup. ‘For all I know she is beautiful and clever; she is certainly my age or older but all anyone can see of her is an advertisement crying “Notice me! Desire me! Love me!”’ (1991: 335).

These passages clearly suggest that it is not invisibility alone, nor indeed ageing itself, that paves the way to freedom; this has to be accompanied by the ending of *se faire objet* on the part of the midlife woman herself; and if she does so, she opens up the possibility of bodily self-reinvention.

Narratives and plots

Embracing embodied change goes hand in hand with constructing new plots and stories that include a quest for the third sex subject position. For this, Helen Paloge notes, what is needed is a confrontation with the ‘changing and “depreciating” body’ (2007: 15). Once this is grasped, a narrative shape for later life can be constructed in which ‘previously objectified and suppressed aspects of women are accepted... offering... new vistas of perception’ (p. 7). Paloge puts it in terms exactly pertinent to the argument of this paper when she writes: ‘midlife for a woman is primarily experienced as change in her sexed and gendered body. As the body’s meaning as sign shifts, so the signifier “woman” becomes the site of re-identification, reconstruction and edification’ (p. 39). The choice is between further fragmentation of subjectivity, where women separate their ‘real’ selves from their ageing corporeal selves, enabling them to remain the women they always were, or else embracing the challenge of real change allowing such new vistas.

Women like Shilling, Shulman and Benjamin, among others, are examples of those who accept the challenge. The third sex quest is so significant a plot that it may be compared with the *bildungsroman* that had as its traditional hero the young male (Paloge, 2007). Yet Paloge also warns that midlife plots, although seeming promising at first, can disappoint, in offering only minor change and indeed leading to a return or rebirth in the second sex once again, repressing the change and growth that is entry into the third sex and instead emphasising the normativity of the second, perhaps through new romance or makeovers, that foster the impression that little has changed and indeed one’s ‘old self’ has been restored. However, while certainly there are more radical stories than others, what defines the transition is a change in *consciousness*, which is not always measurable in deeds or dramatic plot turns and indeed may be largely or entirely invisible to others; rather than a public stage ‘the threshold where you stand may open upon a

region of the mind, or of the soul. You may be seeking not to express, but to understand’ (Greer, 1991: 45–6). This is, then, something intensely private and personal, yet not conveyed by linear plots in which one event follows and exceed the previous one in a march towards a known destination. The value of invisibility, the freedom many women claim as a consequence of it, at least partly, then, lies in the space it opens up for such reinvention, the freedom to craft a new story outside the surveillance of the social gaze. This is not an all-enveloping invisibility, extinguishing self, but invisibility of self as sexual object which may then permit the person in the female body to come to the fore.

This may be understood with reference to the Ophelia trope, noted above. Pipher points out that the contrary pulls that undermine adolescent girls has in many cases still not been resolved in their mothers, and is characterised by ongoing conundrums such as: ‘How important are looks and popularity? How do I care for myself and not be selfish? How can I be honest and still be loved? How can I achieve and not threaten others? How can I be sexual and not a sex object?’ (1994: 25). Pipher suggests that if middle-aged women are now able to address these questions and put them to rest they can gain their pre-adolescent authenticity and outgrow the Ophelia trope. But the search for replacement tropes must then begin: certainly most archetypes and their stories available to women, from Athena, Artemis, Psyche and Persephone, to name a few, are chiefly available to *young* women (Chesler, 1974). Deborah Levy, describing how ‘femininity, as a cultural personality, was no longer expressive for me’ and that ‘it was time to find new main characters with other talents’ (Levy, 2018: 87), finds she is attracted to the Medusa archetype ‘who returns the male gaze instead of looking away’ (2018: 110). Some ‘new main characters’ that might populate the story are also suggested by Carolyn Heilbrun, in her discussion on androgyny, especially women taking the role of Ulysses rather than Penelope. She also suggests a role model in the younger brother figure in fairy tales who seems to combine qualities of masculinity and femininity: ‘He uses his relatedness to *help* achieve selfhood: although he is almost always rescued or helped, he does not await help as if it were his destiny and he does not expect it’ (1979: 148). These images resonate with Levy’s image of herself as betwixt and between, packing screwdriver and lipstick into her bag, doing her own plumbing in flimsy nightdress and workman’s jacket which ‘seemed to sum everything up for me, but I was not sure what the final sum equalled’ as she puts it (p. 31). For Levy, the importance of plots and archetypes is evident: the transition into a robustly womanly but not traditionally feminine persona is very much an undescribed and possibly indescribable experience and she notes: ‘How could I describe this odd feeling of dissolving and recomposing? Words have to open the mind. When words close the mind, we can be sure that someone has been reduced to nothingness’ (p. 31).

However, for Levy, Medusa dissolves back into Ophelia when she contemplates her mother’s death, and she observes: ‘When I turn my mind to my mother’s death, I can only do so for ten seconds before I start to sink’ (Levy, 2018: 118). Indeed, Opening up the plot at mid-life also involves a developmental process with the mother-daughter relationship at its centre. I have already noted the norm of autonomy-in-relatedness for women (Bernstein, 2004); the myth of Demeter and Persephone is widely cited as more reflective of women’s psychic development than is the Freudian Oedipal myth. Yet the good mother/good daughter role is freighted with (plot) expectations that draw one into traditional femininity; what is needed, Gullette suggests, is an ability, as women, to stress the ‘person’ over the (feminine) role, as in the ‘postmaternal’ subjectivity she defines in order to locate ‘maternal identity adjectivally, as part of a more encompassing personhood’ (2002: 551). Going against the trend of contemporary neoliberal times which works to enforce both the maternal role late in life (to compensate both materially and psychically for austerity, precarity and so on) and the infantilization of adult children, this separation is both more fulfilling and more supportive of growth out of the second sex

feminine. This is what Greer means when she observes: ‘When she may be permitted to give up being someone’s daughter, someone’s lover, someone’s wife and someone’s mother, she may be allowed to turn into herself’ (1991: 45). Furthermore, the memoirs of Lillian Rubin (2000) and Kate Millett (2001), among others, suggest that the ability to retain connection, but see the person beyond the mother, is crucial for ageing well. For Sociologist and psychoanalyst Rubin, one of the tasks of a prolonged third-sex quest, finally completed when she arrived in her 70s, was that of understanding that her mother’s desperate decline into Alzheimer’s Disease, was *not* also her own future. As she visited her mother in the nursing home, she describes how she struggled with the feeling that in the end, despite all the distance she had covered from the impoverished place of her origin, she would yet suffer the same fate as her poor, uneducated mother. When she finally lets go of this fear, she also stops being haunted by nightmares of a hideous old witch, and dreams instead of an attractive older woman, which she sees as herself, only further along in the life course, older, that is, but not the Other. As with the rest of her life, she now accepts that she will not succumb to a generic fate; her ageing is her own story to write.

This *bildungsroman* of the third sex is part of what Barbara Frey Waxman (1990) calls the *Reifungsroman* or ‘novel of ripening’ which presents an alternative to decline narratives which are yet not the same as progress. Waxman notes: ‘While *Reifungsromane* do not paint a uniformly rosy picture of old age... there is, nevertheless, an opening up of life for many of these ageing heroines as they literally take to the open road in search of themselves and new roles in life’ (1990: 16). In place of progress narratives, indeed, Hanne Laceulle suggests ‘narratives of becoming’. She notes: ‘This terminology...underscores the continuing search for an equilibrium between engaging in activities purposively furthering our growth and flourishing, on the one hand, while on the other, acknowledging the contingencies of life expressed in terms of existential vulnerability, which confronts us with the limitations of our purposive influence and control’ (Laceulle, 2018: 87). This explains how musician and writer Viv Albertine can conclude her narrative of her mother’s death, which she had been dreading and fearing for decades, together with her own ageing towards 60, with a thrilling sense of possibility, a celebration of being cut adrift from old certainties. She reflects: ‘I have no cousins, aunts or uncles... my sister is out of my life, my niece lives in America and Vida [her daughter] is on her own path. I don’t feel I belong to any country... I don’t believe in romantic love, gods, art, politics or rock and roll, and I don’t understand science. I have no one and nothing to lean on. And I think that’s exciting’ (2018: 276).

Sex and sexuality

Sex and sexuality in many ways is the most challenging area to negotiate when taking up the third sex position, in that for many women the losses appear greater, the gains unknown and almost unknowable and the distance between the pre-menopausal and post-menopausal identity greater. One of the abiding issues for older women is that they can go on desiring whilst not being desired, a terrible combination of sexism and ageism of which Lynne Segal (2007) notes: ‘It is the obstinacy of sexual desire, its all too familiar search for objects and recognition that I have seen, and felt, placing older women in jeopardy’ (2007: 197). In her autobiographical work (2007, 2013) she regrets that this was not a topic she covered in her well-received monograph, *Straight Sex* (1994). Looking back, she explains that, whilst not a young woman herself at the time of writing, she was fortunate enough to be ensconced at that point in a loving heterosexual partnership with a younger man. Perhaps, however, what women like Lillian Robinson, in reviewing Segal’s book with the mournful cry: ‘I am celibate and ashamed of my involuntary condition... I do my work as mother, scholar, teacher and writer... But no man desires me’ may miss just as much is the particular charged attention in which one can make oneself an object. This suggests that if, for most of one’s youth, sexual love appears to promise freedom, freedom is very often mistaken for the loss

of the (whole) self. In her cultural history-cum-memoir, it is in giving this up as a source of enchantment that Lara Feigel is least willing to follow the lead of her mentor, Doris Lessing. The questions she identifies as both hers and Anna Wulf’s include: ‘how as a woman to reconcile your need to be desired by men with your wish for sexual equality; how to have the freedom of independence while also allowing yourself the freedom to go outside yourself through love.’ (2018: 5). Lessing, although she had spent much of her youth in a quest for freedom through free love, took the opposite approach in mid-life when she turned her back on sexuality. As a younger woman, Feigel, though she struggles to take on Lessing’s viewpoint, yields finally to the conviction that this is a sad loss for the older woman, writing passionately: ‘I didn’t want Lessing to have been proved right in her certainty that for women to allow themselves middle-aged sexual need could only end in distressed rejection’ (2018: 12). Indeed, whilst she can still pass muster in the terms of the sexual regime, she reads Beauvoir and sees *se faire objet* in terms of ‘the very enticing notion of active passivity’ and she quotes, approvingly, ‘to *make* oneself object, to *make* oneself passive is very different from *being* a passive object: a woman in love is neither asleep nor a corpse’ (2018: 160).

The pressure to remain sexually active, however, is at least as much culturally as personally generated: the mark of continued health and youthfulness, according to dominant cultural narratives, involves continued sexual activity (Marshall & Katz, 2006). However this clearly disadvantages women not least because, in the context of the sexual double standard, the right to ‘sexual self-expression is not one that she can exercise in the absence of an interested partner’ as Greer puts it (1991: 346). Hence the importance of not allowing herself ‘to be convinced that without the psychic release of sex she will become a “frustrated”, bitter, cruel, dried-up envious old stick’ (1991: 346–70.) Just as feminine embodiment can be positively affected by empowering third sex shifts, involving adoption of a repertoire of freer postures and stances, so too can ageism and sexism pinch and constrain in corporeal terms, working particularly powerfully through sexual disappointment. Lessing’s autobiographically infused novel, *Love Again*, in which after years of comfortable occupation of the third sex position her 65-year old protagonist, Sarah Durham, falls for a man half her age is an example of this. It demonstrates how the end of *se faire objet* is not a once and for all event and indeed one can find oneself sucked suddenly back into the second sex stage and the performance of *se faire objet* even when one thinks one has achieved a stable position out of that regime when these old patterns might be reactivated, disturbingly, should one chance to fall in love again. Sarah had been happy, confident and professionally successful. Early in the novel, the reader is told that she was often mistaken for someone decades younger than her age; ‘her back’ and hence her poise, movement and bearing ‘was erect and full of vitality’ (2007: 6). She was happy also with having left love affairs behind, finding ageing pleasurable in unexpected ways as she told her younger friends. Yet, falling in love with a younger man destroys that equanimity. Indeed, newly viewing herself through the eyes of the world, she judged herself as aged and no longer of value as a woman: ‘in exactly the same situation as the innumerable people of the world who are ugly, deformed, or crippled, or who have horrible skin disorders’ (p. 136). Stricken with misery, she briefly contemplates a ‘return’ to youth or at least to agelessness: ‘She bought beauty products which a sense of the ridiculous forbade her to use. She even thought of having her face lifted – an idea that in her normal condition could only make her smile’ (2007: 299). By the end of the book she has, with sadness, extricated herself from the sexual regime once again but the upheaval has cost her dear, a price revealing itself in her changed bodiliness: ‘her hair... now has grey bands across the front. She has acquired that slow cautious look of the elderly, as if afraid of what they will see around the next corner’ (2007: 337). Yet, she has learned a lesson and she will not, again, be ambushed by emotion, or expectations that belong to a different life stage. Here is the other meaning of Medusa: the cruel severing of women’s subjectivities from their bodily selves, as if they

cannot be simultaneously developed subjects and have attractive bodies. In Beauvoir's words: 'The ageing woman well knows that if she ceases to be an erotic object, it is not only because her flesh no longer has fresh bounties for men; it is also because her past, her experience, make her, willy-nilly, a person; she has struggled, loved, willed, suffered, enjoyed on her own account' (1997:590).

This, and Feigel's candid reflections, draw attention to the importance of timing, indicating how the third sex position, whilst theoretically available to younger women, is nearly always something only achieved in later life, when one has lost one's 'credentials' of beauty and sexuality. Of course, if younger and same-age men viewed older women as attractive partners for their maturity; if one's partner was supportive of one's third sex quest; if young women both saw through the system and rejected it; all this might permit the configuration of an entirely different relationship between older women and their sexuality. But younger women, for one, are loathe to give up a regime in which they are privileged, which may include their own version of Lessing's youthful quest of finding freedom and self-actualization through sexual expression. Indeed, there is a rather interesting combination of push and pull with regard to the sexual regime in Feigel's attitude towards the events she describes, which sees her alternatively rage against younger men for rejecting Lessing on account of her age, while at other times revelling in her own youthful sexual capital and even asserting the power she derives from this over other (older) women, and implicitly Lessing herself (for example, musing that Phillip Glass, as he was when Lessing met and fell in love with him, would probably have been attracted to Feigel, as she is now). The conflicting currents can be glimpsed glinting under the surface in the following passage: "I'm writing about the menopause", I said eagerly to a fifty-year-old acquaintance, who had just been telling me about her hot flushes. "About whether there's something to be gained from the changes it brings." I blushed under her gaze as she looked me swiftly up and down, dismissing my claim to understand her. It seemed that my supplies of oestrogen remained too high to renounce anything' (Feigel, 2018: 227).

But if there is more than the option of celibacy, if there is something beyond youth-sex what might it be? For both Lynn Segal and, allegedly, Simone de Beauvoir, the turn to same-sex relationships proved rewarding (Moi, 2008; Segal, 2013) For Lillian Rubin Rubin (2000), who remained in a heterosexual union, there was an irretrievable loss in terms of her sexual relationship with her husband: its dilution, its moderation felt dull and depressing compared to the drama and passion that had previously made life so vital. By contrast, Greer (1991) welcomes this serenity, which she describes as characterising a deeper kind of love and connection and appreciation of beauty, with as little in common with the turbulence of ecstasy, jealousy and misery as the shallow waves with the depths of the ocean. This recalls Rollo May's distinction between sex and eros. Noting: 'we fly to the sensation of sex in order to avoid the passion of eros' (original emphasis), he continues: 'whereas sex is a rhythm of stimulus and response, eros is a state of being... the end towards which sex points is gratification and relaxation, whereas eros is a desiring longing, a forever reaching out, seeking to expand' (1969: 73). Indeed, eros is a yearning for authenticity, for becoming who we are, for achieving the good life, for 'stretching of the self' (pp. 74–9). Of course, sex and eros overlap in actuality as well as in imagination. Yet this distinction chimes powerfully with Heilbrun's conviction that this sense of loss is part and parcel of women's ideological oppression, a poverty of plots: "if we could discover a word that meant 'adventure' and did not mean 'romance', we in our late decades would be able to free ourselves from the compulsion always to connect yearning and sex" (2006: 103). The need for such a word, for such a plot, is clearly just as urgent today as ever.

Concluding thoughts

In this paper I have sought to explore an alternative way of mapping a woman's life course which brings an entirely different perspective to

the life course, including its latter part, than is offered by other perspectives. Bringing themes and concepts, already familiar to cultural gerontology, in closer alignment with this framework, centred upon the third sex, has the potential to enrich both gender and age theory. The third sex concept is particularly helpful in that it puts the reality of the ageing body at the heart of its understanding of what it means to journey through time. Linking this to structures of consciousness germane to the gender regime, it shows how the reality of the ageing body may be used by women as a way of leveraging greater freedom from sexual oppression later in life. Unlike other ways of approaching the life course, such as that encapsulated in the third/fourth age dichotomy, this approach, moreover, does not separate and counterpose good and bad ageing but insists on their imbrication. Indeed, there are many obstacles in the way of achieving the third sex subject position which specifically relate to these negative elements: a fear of bodily changes, identity change, open-ended plots and the end of sexual being, among others. This conceptual apparatus adds an important dimension to our reading of diverse memoirs of ageing and indeed it is the combination of both theoretical model and rich material drawn from life that is most valuable in helping women identify the challenges and possibilities open to them, the social and personal currents that help, as well as those that hinder. Indeed, this approach lends itself over time to appreciation of the deeper changes that may occur in future generations as women age. Suzanne Moore, at the end of her reflection on menopause, concludes: 'Someone needs to explain what a woman is exactly and how she may not now become more of herself'; it is hoped that the framework developed in this paper will do exactly that.

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