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*Promenade au pays de la vieillesse:*

Literary and Cinematic Representations of Ageing in Simone de Beauvoir

If the mother-daughter relationship formed a key focus of 1970s French feminism, critical and literary representations of subsequent stages in the topography of the female life trajectory have been notably sparse in contemporary French women's writing. That trajectory encompasses certain key developmental goals and life events, such as the advent of childhood and adolescence, marriage and motherhood, yet late adulthood – the period of old age preceding mortality – would appear to be a quasi-featureless landscape with few distinguishing contour lines. Grandmotherhood, for example, remains remarkably absent in contemporary French women's writing: there is no grandmaternal equivalent of Victor Hugo's canonical *L'Art d'être grand-père* [*How to be a Grandfather*].<sup>1</sup> While man's mortality has been the topic of numerous existentialist texts, its usual *avant-coureur*, old age, has proved far less attractive a subject.<sup>2</sup> As the old man, La Pérouse, comments in André Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* [*The Counterfeiters*], '[P]ourquoi est-il si rarement question des vieillards dans les livres?... Cela vient, je crois, de ce que les vieux ne sont plus capables d'en écrire et que, lorsqu'on est jeune, on ne s'occupe pas d'eux. Un vieillard, ça n'intéresse plus personne...' (Gide 1972: 118) ['Why is there so little about old people in books?... I suppose it's because old people aren't able to write themselves and young ones don't take any interest in them. No one's interested in an old man' (1973: 118)]. None the less, Oliver Davis' remark that '[a]ge has never been more than a secondary or incidental concern in Western attempts to theorise human subjectivity' (Davis 2006: 10) has less resonance in the field of contemporary French women's writing than previously, even if any increase in the number of texts dealing with old age is no doubt attributable to sheer temporal progression: in other words, French women writers are writing more about ageing because there are more

ageing French women writers around, as the *soixante-huitardes* [women of May '68] become *soixante-huit* [sixty-eight] and older themselves.<sup>3</sup> If 'gerontological' elements are gradually becoming more visible in contemporary female-authored literature nearly fifty years after Beauvoir published *La Vieillesse*,<sup>4</sup> positive representations of the ageing process remain less prevalent.<sup>5</sup>

The following article examines the portrayal of ageing, both textual and cinematic, in the work of the twentieth-century's most iconic French woman writer and *vieillard*e [old woman], Simone de Beauvoir, who wrote *La Vieillesse* (1970) when she was sixty-two, and starred in a documentary about old age, *Promenade au pays de la vieillesse* [A Walk Through the Land of Old Age] (1974), when she was sixty-six. The general perception of Beauvoir's position on ageing in these texts is one of an enraged negativity, particularly in *La Vieillesse*, her key publication dealing with the topic, and one which remains relatively unknown – in itself surely indicative of academia's conventional uninterest in senescence.<sup>6</sup> Beauvoir's 'existence before essence' approach so prominent in *Le Deuxième Sexe* [*The Second Sex*], appears somewhat defeated, if not exhausted, in *La Vieillesse*: 'Pour chaque individu la vieillesse entraîne une dégradation qu'il redoute' (51) [For each individual age brings with it a dreaded decline (40)]; the verb 'entraîner' [to bring; drag down] with its pessimistic connotations of an irresistible inevitability recurs frequently in the work. Yet, this article challenges the critical consensus surrounding *La Vieillesse* which tends to portray it both as an unremittingly pessimistic work – albeit one peppered with instances of furious rebellion – and one which provides a representative portrayal of old age; it argues, rather, that almost *malgré elle*, Beauvoir's representation of ageing does allow us some room for a positive recuperation of senescence, not in any putative statements of incandescent resistance, but rather in tangential comments which slip in between the remarkably uniform, but far from representative, examples of ageing the text provides.

Both Beauvoir's key interdisciplinary essays, *Le Deuxième Sexe* and *La Vieillesse*, mirror one another in important ways aside from the sheer volume of pages they comprise: each is divided into two parts; the first part deals principally with the 'objective', historical, outsider position, discussing womanhood and ageing in terms of anthropology, medicine, sociology – in other words, the concern in the first part of *La Vieillesse* is with an holistic 'social' approach to gerontology; the second part of these texts looks at how femaleness or old age are experienced from within by the female or geriatric (but rarely by the female geriatric), at how one's relationship to one's ageing body is interiorised – or, as is more often the case, not. Here, the concern is with ontology.<sup>7</sup> Both publications attest to Beauvoir's political *engagement* with the marginalised and dispossessed of Western capitalist society and her drive to combat that society's desire to render them voiceless. *La Vieillesse* is a highly partisan manifesto advocating profound change in society's attitude to and treatment of its ageing population. Published in 1970, it preceded interest in the politics and praxis of ageing by several decades, both governmental, and, as this volume is testament to, academic. This partly explains Beauvoir's distinctly negative thrust in *La Vieillesse*, as well as the tensions inherent in her aim both to emphasize the importance of the individual voices she is representing and to formulate a coherent, one-size-fits-all social strategy to make visible – or audible – France's ageing population: 'si on entendait *leur* voix, on serait obligé de reconnaître que c'est *une* voix humaine; je *forcerai* mes lecteurs à l'écouter' (8; emphasis added) [if their voices were heard, the hearers would be forced to acknowledge that these were human voices. I shall compel my readers to hear them (2)]; the use of 'voix' in the singular – which the published translation overlooks – throws into relief the desired eradication of polyphony in order to present one harmonious, albeit somewhat funereal-sounding, whole. The text is riddled with potential contradictions, stating that 'une étude de la vieillesse doit tenter d'être exhaustive' (16) [a study of old age must try to be exhaustive

(9)], before undermining the achievability of this objective on the very next page by remarking that ‘[la vieillesse] prend une multiplicité de visages, irréductibles les uns aux autres’ (17) [(old age) takes on a multitude of different aspects, from which no common features may be drawn; my translation]. Despite its protestations to the contrary, *La Vieillesse* ultimately fails in its endeavour to represent ‘ce qui [...] se passe réellement dans leur tête [de personnes âgées] et dans leur coeur’ (8) [what in fact happens inside their (old people’s) minds and their hearts (2)]. It may briefly look at old people’s care homes in France but its overwhelming focus is on the literary writings of a select coterie of privileged male authors: as Beauvoir acknowledges in the preface to the more ‘personal’ second part of *La Vieillesse*, ‘mes exemples me seront surtout fournis par des privilégiés’ (343) [the main source of my examples is the writing of the privileged few (279)], in other words, by or about successful male writers, with only very occasional examples supplied from privileged women, such as Madame de Sévigné (349; 287) or, briefly, Virginia Woolf (506; 415).

As this article suggests, Beauvoir’s drive to provide both detailed micro-narrative experiential evidence of the social neglect of the aged and a macro-strategic raft of policies in order to tackle it results in a ‘totalité détotalisée’ (265) [fragmented whole; my translation], but one which provides fissures of optimism or some welcome notes of discord, in this often depressingly monotone portrayal of senescence. In this reading, my emphasis differs from that of Davis, whose work has been pivotal to a critical assessment of these literary and filmic texts. In his essay ‘Eastwood Reading Beauvoir Reading Eastwood: Ageing and Combative Self-Assertion in *Gran Torino* and *Old Age*’, he describes *La Vieillesse* as ‘an essay in which Beauvoir’s well-meaning “geronotological” intention to explain away ageing in terms of contingent socio-economic and historical factors repeatedly founders on her “ontological” conviction that ageing is inherently alienating’ (Davis 2012: 137). This position is nuanced in a later discussion of the film (331–8), which he sees as demonstrating ‘a new readiness on

Beauvoir's part to confront perspectives on old age that differ from her own' (337). I agree that the text condemns unequivocally society's treatment of the aged and that Beauvoir manifests a fundamentally existentialist horror of the ageing process. However, I read *La Vieillesse* as subtended by an ineradicable - albeit faint - note of optimism, and one which resonates more persistently in the later film - and not solely because, throughout it, we see and hear a hugely articulate and assertive older woman in the form of Simone de Beauvoir herself. Rather, however alienating and neglectful the general treatment of the aged in both texts, a geriatric *joie de vivre* occasionally manages to break through the social muting of aged individuals' experiences. And this is particularly the case with the women represented, as Beauvoir herself suggests in *La Vieillesse* - which may be why they figure so infrequently in it, in that their often positive perspectives on old age potentially undermine her key thesis and advocacy for social change.

On the rare occasions women are mentioned in *La Vieillesse*, they are characterised as adapting far better to old age than men in that they basically have less to lose professionally and more to gain personally; their career is less a key component of their primary identity and their anchor in the domestic realm alters little after 'retirement' (322; 261-2) - and in this representation of French women as principally located in the domestic realm, the text demonstrates its own 'old age'. Interestingly, when discussing ageing women's resultant sense of continuity, Beauvoir acknowledges that grandmaternity brings them new possibilities, just as old age brings them new independence. Beauvoir's existentialist-imbued terminology provides unambiguous expression of the benefits old age can represent for women: 'Pour les femmes, en particulier, le dernier âge représente une délivrance: toute leur vie soumises à leur mari, dévouées à leurs enfants, elles peuvent enfin se soucier d'elles-mêmes' (594) [It is for women in particular that the last age is a liberation: all their lives they were subjected to their husbands and given over to the care of their children; now at last they

can look after themselves (488)]. Being a grandmother (or grandfather) allows the old person to be future-facing, to escape the repetition of their deadening habits and routines, to achieve a form of transcendence through the novelty and self-redefinition accompanying this new role. Overall, however, the overwhelming majority of this text is about men, about male writers, male painters, male politicians, male philosophers. The text presents less a series of combative instances of people refusing to go gently into that good night, than a series of principally male-authored, highly privileged gripes about the inconveniences of old age.<sup>8</sup> At the end of *La Vieillesse*, the reader is saturated with the trials and tribulations of a series of canonical male authors and creators.

That the aged *female* receives very little consideration in *La Vieillesse* is all the more surprising – aside from the fact that old age is experienced by more women than men - given Beauvoir's close mapping of the socialisation process and ageing in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, even if her consideration of the aged woman is notably absent. As Penelope Deutscher comments in relation to *La Vieillesse*: '[T]he peculiarities of the work include not only that it again downplays the perspective of aged women, but also that it makes just one reference to *The Second Sex*' (Deutscher 2014: 30). In other words, even in the work of French feminism's undisputed trailblazer the perspective of the *aged* woman is quasi-invisible: indeed, despite the clear autobiographical origins of both works, the reader has the impression that, apart from a couple of striking examples in *La Vieillesse* when she is discussing her personal memories (443–9; 363–7), or her gradual acceptance of death (540–1; 444), Beauvoir always seems to be referring to the female or aged Other in these works, to someone with whom she ultimately has very little in common – whether the bourgeois housewife or the disenfranchised male pensioner.<sup>9</sup> The absence of a developed gendered perspective is particularly surprising in *La Vieillesse*, given Beauvoir's existentialist belief in the importance of acknowledging each individual's temporally-contingent *vécu* [lived

experience], and the fact that, historically, both old people and women could be seen to share a similarly limited scope of opportunities for transcendence, while possessing the same ‘psychic’ or imaginative potential to resist. While *Le Deuxième Sexe* draws its supporting documentation from an extensive range of sociological, literary, and philosophical sources, as this article has argued Beauvoir relies heavily on literary sources in *La Vieillesse*, particularly in the second section which would more aptly be entitled ‘L’Etre-dans-le-livre’ [Being-in-the-Book] as opposed to ‘L’Etre-dans-le-monde’ [Being-in-the-World], since it is principally an analysis of literary or written representations of ageing by a selection of canonical male writers. *Le vécu* is always filtered through a monocoloured literary prism, which makes the critical references to Beauvoir’s treatment of *lived* experience in *La Vieillesse* somewhat surprising.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, at times *La Vieillesse* even fails to distinguish between the *literary* factual and fictional when supposedly discussing cases of ageing ‘dans-le-monde’, presenting both Mauriac’s memoirs and Proust’s M. de Charlus as evidence of the extratextual ‘absence de curiosité du vieillard’ (551) [old man’s want of curiosity (453)].

In both criticism and literature, the advent of the third and fourth ages has traditionally, and unoriginally, been seen as a personal and social burden, as stages characterised by an increasing shrinkage in potential opportunities for individual fulfilment and a corresponding growth in financial responsibility for the state. Ageing is perceived principally in its somatic manifestations with all positive ‘psychic’ repercussions minimised. At first sight, *La Vieillesse* differs little from conventional readings of the dominant narrative of old age: Beauvoir’s position on ageing in *La Vieillesse* appears somewhat bleak, in that it posits the process as underpinned by an irreconcilable tension between the inner and constant ‘moi permanent’ [permanent self], which memorially and integrally feels no different at seventy than at thirty, and the external, progressively degenerative shell perceived by society (442–3). If the Othered female portrayed in *Le Deuxième Sexe* is potentially able to rise



above and reject the social imposition of immanence forced upon her and replace it with a forward-looking, independent transcendence, no such amelioration seems achievable in Beauvoir's representation of the Othered state of the ageing self in *La Vieillesse*: Beauvoir accepts medical and ideological discourses unchallenged and emphasises the distaste, indeed revulsion, the sight of an ageing body provokes in its premonitory embodiment of our own mortality. It is therefore not surprising if the youthful 'inner' subject is shown to experience profound difficulty in establishing any sense of continuity or identification with the declining physical object. Kathleen Woodward highlights the inverse Lacanian 'mirror stage' undergone by the ageing individual which is relevant to the representation of senescence in Beauvoir's text. If 'Lacan theorizes that the infant *perceives* the image of his body as a harmonious whole and ideal unity while simultaneously *experiencing* his own body as uncoordinated' (Woodward 1991: 67; original emphasis), the aged individual portrayed in *La Vieillesse* experiences an *internal* sense of wholeness and unity, and only when s/he looks in the mirror/sees the self reflected in the eyes of the Other does dissolution occur between the experiential and the visible. If the infant anticipates a trajectory – or 'promenade' – towards bodily wholeness, the geriatric fears physical disintegration.

Yet, this article suggests that the 'moi permanent' could be seen to represent a core continuity of identity, a more stable sense of the individual's self which valorises inner agency and emotions over specular superficiality, depth over surface, and does not depend on the gaze of the Other for validation. It is this well-travelled and familiar emotional topography which ballasts the self throughout the changing externalities undergone by it, which could help rather than hinder its acceptance of the ageing process. As Woodward remarks in *Aging and its Discontents*: '[A]s we age, we increasingly separate what we take to be our real selves from our bodies. We say that our real selves – that is, our youthful selves – are hidden inside our bodies. Our *bodies* are old, *we* are not. Old age is thus understood as a

state in which the body is in opposition to the self. We are alienated from our bodies' (62). While such severance can potentially be viewed as regressive and imbued with a distinct *mauvaise foi*, it can none the less facilitate the promotion of interiority, of intellect, of emotional depth, of wisdom; we can do nothing to stop physical degeneration, but we can learn to value the inner permanence of our sense of self – until society learns to value our ageing bodies. In other words, agency should not solely be associated with effecting change externally but with continuing to actualise the self internally. In his chapter 'In Pursuit of Successful Identities and Authentic Aging', Simon Biggs expresses this as follows: 'It is within this imaginative realm, beyond the masquerade, that personal development and integration may take place. Agency therefore takes on an aspect of interiority' (Biggs 2004: 138). Biggs uses the term 'masquerade' to refer to the conformism of the self to dominant cultural discourses reinforcing stereotypical expectations and experiences of ageing, a *strategic* conformism which the self has chosen to assume in order to open up 'a critical distance between surface appearance and personal desire. And it is within this space that agency takes place' (139). Beauvoir can only perceive such distance negatively or distastefully and – crucially – prioritises the role of the Other in entrenching the internal/external divide and the self's inevitable distress when confronted with it; for Biggs, a more positive interpretation would foreground the key proactive role played by the self and the greater valorisation which should be accorded its 'moi permanent'.<sup>11</sup> While Woodward emphasises the 'youthful' qualities of the inner self, it might be more helpful to conceptualise such a 'moi permanent' in a non-chronological manner in opposition to the external self, as an experiential and existential amalgamation, as a constantly processing bank of knowledge not anchored in a particular epoch or life stage – the 'permanent' thus denoting constancy rather than rigidity.

In *La Vieillesse*, that ‘moi permanent’ and its external ‘certitude objective’ [objective certainty] are similarly compared to an inner self donning a mask constructed by social norms (360; 296).<sup>12</sup> Beauvoir’s refusal to read such non-merging from the more positive perspectives illustrated above is aggravated by her highly conventional judgements about the unattractiveness of the ageing woman which occur throughout the work, judgements not easily reconciled with her feminism. In the same way that she accepts wholesale the components of Great Literature in the final section of *Le Deuxième Sexe II, Vers la libération*, Beauvoir never challenges what constitutes a sexually desirable older woman, thereby seeking to bridge the divide between inner and outer selves: ‘Certaines conservent des activités érotiques jusqu’à plus de 80 ans. Cela prouve qu’elles demeurent capables de désir alors que depuis longtemps elles ont cessé d’être aux yeux des hommes désirables’ (425) [Some continue their erotic activities well into their eighties. This proves that women go on feeling desire long after they have stopped being attractive to men (348)]. This belittling of the older female body occurs repeatedly throughout the work – the ageing female body is intrinsically unattractive (393; 322), although women are less fussy about the decrepit male body than men about its female equivalent (423; 347). Beauvoir also includes numerous references to mirrors and mirror images in *La Vieillesse*, illustrating both her belief that one’s experience of old age is filtered through an image of the self externally viewed by the Other, as well as intimating her own conventional assimilation of chronological interpretations of beauty: ‘On a le cœur serré quand à côté d’une belle jeune femme on aperçoit son reflet dans le miroir des années futures: sa mère’, (11–12) [‘It wounds one’s heart to see a lovely young woman and then next to her her reflection in the mirror of the years to come – her mother’ (5)].<sup>13</sup> See also 345; 283. She repeatedly portrays the visible signs of ageing as overwhelmingly traumatic for both the person in question and for those who may not have seen her for some time – and the negative examples of the transformative effects of ageing

are overwhelmingly related to women. She never questions conventional paradigms of beauty, but simply accepts patriarchal and ageist aesthetic norms. Given her fundamental belief in the influence of environment and the contingency of an individual's situation – not to mention her feminism -, challenging her own reductive and somewhat monolithic perception of the externalities of ageing would surely impact positively on her overall view of senescence: 'le rapport au temps est éprouvé différemment selon que le corps est plus ou moins délabré' (15) [the individual experiences their relationship with time differently depending on whether their body is more or less dilapidated; my translation]. When the quality of 'délabrement' [dilapidation] is perceived in aesthetic terms as is so often the case in *La Vieillesse*'s representation of ageing women, the text, rather than represent a radical challenge to the social perception of old age, simply reinforces it.

If *La Vieillesse* sets out to give voice to the voiceless – the realisation of which this article repudiates, in that it mainly gives voice to those who have it already – to increase knowledge through an historical, and then a principally literary excavation of a little-studied destination and the trials encountered en route, Beauvoir also starred in a cinematic representation of old age, *Promenade au pays de la vieillesse*. This documentary film was made in 1974 by the Swedish filmmaker Marianne Ahrne for Swedish television, and is basically unknown. It is viewed as the cinematic accompaniment to *La Vieillesse*, yet this is not wholly accurate: it too is a predominantly bleak representation of the ageing process; it encapsulates both the medical or sociological, the 'certitude objective', in which a doctor, Professor Bourlière, is filmed referring to old age as 'l'antichambre du cimetière' [the antechamber to the cemetery] (0.03.28 – 0.03.29), and we see Dantean images of institutions in which old people are incarcerated, neglected and erased from the social psyche (Beauvoir has a Marxist explanation of old age's taboo status, in that when man no longer serves a material function in capitalist society, when he is no longer a productive wage-earner, he is

discarded and his fellow producers are thus encouraged to disparage his non-productivity). The opening shots of the film comprise dichotomised representations of the ageing spectrum, with young people gambolling around like excited lambs, nearly knocking over their shuffling or sedentary senescent counterparts (0.00.39 – 0.01.04), who – should the message not be sufficiently clear – are also filmed doing an old-fashioned ballroom dance in a children’s playpark (0.05.44 - 0.05.59). Corresponding to the section ‘La Vieillesse dans la société d’aujourd’hui’ [Old age in present-day society] in the book, the film focuses on the physical neglect of old people in postwar France, who are abandoned in *taudis* [slums] or *hospices*, also referred to as *mouroirs* [places people go to die], which gives a distinct spatial form to the earlier chronological usage of ‘l’antichambre du cimetière’ and which, to quote Davis, ‘bear more than a passing resemblance both to the Victorian workhouse and the madhouses of Charcot’s day’ [Davis 2012: 143].<sup>14</sup> In *La Vieillesse*, Beauvoir characterises their condition in the following terms, – ‘abandon, ségrégation, déchéance, démence, mort’ (315) [abandonment, segregation, decay, dementia, death (256)] and the film reinforces this description. Long shots of endless corridors and *dortoirs* [dormitories], old couples being forced to live apart, old people using alcohol as a crutch to get through their diminished existence, yet a crutch which can be read as its own form of rebellion against the system – all of which are mentioned in *La Vieillesse* – are illustrated in this film.

If much of the film’s content could be perceived as somewhat clichéd, in its melancholic shots of old people in wheelchairs, sitting around waiting for death, reminiscing about the past, there are also instances of surprising optimism and a life-affirming present not least, as we have seen, in the figure of Beauvoir herself who voices her own opinions at great length and thus contradicts the stereotype of the passive, voiceless old person. Unlike its literary companion *La Vieillesse*, much of the film does give voice to the personal thoughts and feelings of old people and, in particular, working-class women who figure more

prominently than men and who thus redress the male middle-class bias of the written text. Unlike *Le Deuxième Sexe* which presents women's socialisation process from a fundamentally bourgeois perspective and *La Vieillesse*, which presents ageing from a fundamentally male middle-class perspective, in *Promenade*, there is a clear aim to give old working-class men and particularly women more representation. One wonderful exchange concerns a conversation about sex between two older women, one of whom is seventy, the other, sixty, plus their silent friend, a conversation which signals the possibility of bridging the Cartesian separation so fundamental to Beauvoir's perception of ageing, in which the internal psyche is at odds with the external physicality (0.51.40 – 0.55.13).<sup>15</sup> In *La Vieillesse*, Beauvoir comments on – and supports – the general presumption that old people do not enjoy sexual experiences (386; 317), or that they have internalised society's standards of 'decency' which decree that celibacy is a natural condition of old age.

These women talk remarkably openly about their sexual needs, about orgasm and masturbation, pointing up a schism of light and marvel – a few erotic elevations – in a landscape characterised by a predictable flatness and monotony.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly this discussion both maps onto and challenges a recurrent point in *La Vieillesse*, where Beauvoir makes repeated reference to older women's unattractive physical appearance, yet also highlights the fact that they can be sexually desiring until a very old age – their invisible 'moi permanent' is at odds once again with the supposed 'certitude objective' of their physical 'dilapidation'. In this particular scene, it is older men whose physical unattractiveness is presented as a potential obstacle to female sexual satisfaction, whereas *La Vieillesse* repeatedly mentions older women's aesthetic degeneration. It is important to highlight that the women in question are seated in a comfortable, lower-middle class setting and have an articulacy and ease not visible in many of the working-class women interviewed. Class is clearly an important factor in determining people's experience of old age, today as fifty years

ago – as Beauvoir remarks in *La Vieillesse*: ‘[L]a lutte des classes commande la manière dont un homme est saisi par la vieillesse’ (17) [the class-struggle governs the manner in which old age takes hold of a man (10)]. Just as the thesis of *Le Deuxième Sexe* argues for the role of individual will and subjectivity in overcoming the patriarchal mythologisation of the Othered female, who is passive, immanent and beholden to circumstance, this discussion intimates the potential for a more positive, individualised and, importantly, female response to societal perceptions of what constitutes appropriate conduct in old age.

It is important to reiterate that Beauvoir herself acknowledges this potential tension in *La Vieillesse* between constructing a theoretical grand narrative encapsulating the process of old age and the inevitably differentiated individual responses to that process: ‘La vieillesse, c’est ce qui arrive aux gens qui deviennent vieux; impossible d’enfermer cette pluralité d’expériences dans un concept ou même une notion’ (343) [‘It (old age) is just something that happens to people who become old, and this plurality of experiences cannot possibly be confined in a concept or even in a notion’ (279)]. As this article has remarked, *La Vieillesse* is a polemical essay, a social critique with the principal aim of initiating change, and thus adopts a clear teleological discursive approach to its treatment of the topic – which may also be why ‘old age’ is examined as a generally genderless social category, as the title of the work indicates. (Even in *Promenade*, Beauvoir makes reference to *La Vieillesse*’s focus on both ageing men and women, when the latter are almost completely absent [0.04.17 – 0.04.29]). Equally, a key reason for Beauvoir’s existential pessimism in representing old age is surely its inevitability. Given the significance of voluntarism in her philosophy, albeit one tempered by historical and familial circumstances, the sheer irreversibility of the chronological ageing process may account for her bleak summary of senescence – in the same manner that her account of menstruation in *Le Deuxième Sexe* is imbued with a sense of distaste. Any event which cannot be brought into abeyance by the human will is given shorter

shrift. Old age is an intrinsic and inevitable component of the human lifespan – what Beauvoir refers to as ‘la loi même de la vie’ (37) [the law of life itself (28)] – in a way that women’s secondary status is clearly not.

As this article has argued, a more positive perspective may none the less be visible in individual reactions to ageing, since it remains a life stage whose limits, whatever Beauvoir’s doom-laden theoretical generalisations, individuals continually strive to transgress and whose actual lived experience does not always conform to theoretical assumptions. Also, old age occurs when the subject (but not subjectivity) is fully formed, having gone through a series of chronological stages or other life events such as marriage or motherhood when s/he may have been more susceptible to conforming to social expectations. As we have seen, Beauvoir herself comments on the divide separating the Other’s perception of the ageing self and that self’s perception, so it is perhaps not surprising to find more optimistic counternarratives springing up thanks to the ‘contradiction indépassable’ separating these inner and outer selves. If Beauvoir fails to challenge the standard discourses of old age, to offer more than interstitial comments which point up the possibility of constructing other economic, emotional and intellectual responses to senescence, the very existence of these two texts dealing with this much-neglected topic offers irrefutable evidence that old age can continue to be characterised by personal growth and exploration; indeed, in this sense, they represent their own counternarrative. And while Beauvoir’s existential distaste for physiology’s disregard of voluntarism may blind her to the potential joys and agency of ageing, these find unexpected expression in both a gender-inflected reading of *La Vieillesse* and *Promenade*, and in the discourses of ageing women themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> In *La Vieillesse* [*Old Age*], Beauvoir claims that ‘[j]amais, chez aucun écrivain, la vieillesse n’a occupé tant de place et n’a été si hautement exaltée que dans l’oeuvre de Victor Hugo’ (251) [In no writer’s work has old age been so important or so highly glorified as in that of



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Victor Hugo (204)], and that more than any previous author he foregrounded the similarities uniting grandparents and grandchildren (254; 206-7). The translations are from the 1972 English translation, *Old Age*. I have used my own translation when the published translation fails to reflect the original French accurately.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term ‘man’ in its gendered, as opposed to universal, sense, in that the majority of philosophical works grappling with the advent of mortality are male-authored. See Nancy Huston’s *Professeurs de désespoir* [Professors of Despair] (2005) for a consideration of what she views as the quintessentially nihilistic approach to the topic of death articulated by a selection of principally male philosophers and writers. Equally, throughout *La Vieillesse*, Beauvoir uses the term ‘l’homme’ [man] overwhelmingly in its gender-specific sense. In the space of one page, the reader finds references to particular male individuals – ‘Nul homme qui vit longtemps n’échappe à la vieillesse’ [No man who lives long can escape old age; 35] – alongside those with a more universal scope: ‘La longévité de l’homme est supérieure à celle des autres mammifères’ (46) [Man lives longer than the other mammals (36)].

<sup>3</sup> Jean Anderson’s chapter ‘The Veiled Mirror: Epiphany and Epicalyptry in Contemporary French Women’s Writing about Ageing’ presents a selection of contemporary works dealing with ageing (2013: 9–26).

<sup>4</sup> If geriatrics deals with diseases in old age, gerontology is a useful umbrella term encompassing research into chronological, physiological, psychological and social ageing. The former two, and their accompanying crises in physical confidence, seem to have been the main focus of female-authored French works dealing with ageing thus far, as exemplified, for example, in the works of Annie Ernaux.

<sup>5</sup> A notable exception is the philosopher and writer, Noëlle Châtelet who writes about the joys of senescence from a variety of gynocentric positions. For a more detailed analysis of her work dealing with grandmaternity *Au pays des vermeilles* (2009), see my article

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‘Grandmother Through the Looking-glass: (Anti)ageing Perspectives in Noëlle Châtelet’s *Au pays des merveilles*’, (2016).

<sup>6</sup> This lack of academic interest has partly been rectified by the recent publication of a collection of essays dealing exclusively with *La Vieillesse*, albeit referred to throughout by its mistranslated English title of *The Coming of Age*, which, rather than have associations with the advent of senescence, has connotations of a twenty-one-year-old reaching adulthood, *Simone de Beauvoir’s Philosophy of Age: Gender, Ethics, and Time* (2014) edited by Silvia Stoller.

<sup>7</sup> These two sections can be seen to correspond broadly to the two categories Davis delineates when discussing representations of old age, namely, the social-scientific emphasis (gerontological) and the literary-philosophical (ontological) analysis of old age in literature (as exemplified by Montaigne or the sixteenth-century essayist Francis Bacon’s work).

<sup>8</sup> This highly constrained demographics and form of testimonial evidence are all the more surprising given the political impetus for change underpinning the text. Beauvoir comments that intellectuals have a far easier old age than numerous others, due to both material wealth and intellectual preoccupations (a remark which contains inevitable self-referencing echoes): ‘plus le niveau intellectuel du sujet est élevé, plus la décroissance de ses facultés est faible et lente’ (44) [the higher the subject’s intellectual level, the slower and less marked is the decline of his powers (34)]. See also 472; 386.

<sup>9</sup> And this, despite the fact that the impetus for both *Le Deuxième Sexe* and *La Vieillesse* was a personal one. In *Tout compte fait*, she comments: ‘Femme, j’ai voulu élucider ce qu’est la condition féminine ; aux approches de la vieillesse, j’ai eu envie de savoir comment se définit la condition des vieillards’ (183). [I am a woman, and I wished to throw light upon the woman’s lot; I was on the threshold of old age, and I wished to know the bounds and the nature of the aged state (147)].

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<sup>10</sup> Michelle Royer provides a typical example: ‘Beauvoir devotes the second part of *Old Age* to the ‘Being-in-the-world’ of old people and deals with their lived experience from their own point of view’ (2012: 127).

<sup>11</sup> ‘Masquerade’ can, of course, be employed by individuals of all ages or other socially diverse groups seeking to appear to ‘fit in’, although the disparity between private and public perceptions of the self in our youth-obsessed consumer culture may be particularly pronounced in old age. What is key is that ‘masquerade’ originates with that self, constitutes a protective mask willingly donned rather than forcedly applied, and can thus be viewed as constitutive of agency. In this sense, it has strong echoes of Butlerian performativity.

<sup>12</sup> In *La Vieillesse*, Beauvoir writes: ‘Il y a une contradiction indépassable entre l’évidence intime qui nous garantit notre permanence et la certitude objective de notre métamorphose’ (354) [There is an insoluble contradiction between the obvious clarity of the inward feeling that guarantees our unchanging quality and the objective certainty of our transformation (290)].

<sup>13</sup> That negativity extends to her own self-perception, as graphically illustrated at the conclusion of *La Force des choses* when old age is described as a predatory, disfiguring disease: ‘A quarante ans, un jour, j’ai pensé: “Au fond du miroir la vieillesse guette; et c’est fatal, elle m’aura”. Elle m’a. Souvent je m’arrête, éberluée, devant cette chose qui me sert de visage. [...] Je déteste mon image: au-dessus des yeux, la casquette, les poches en dessous, la face trop pleine, et cet air de tristesse autour de la bouche que donnent les rides. Peut-être les gens qui me croisent voient-ils simplement une quinquagénaire qui n’est ni bien, ni mal, elle a l’âge qu’elle a. Mais moi je vois mon ancienne tête où une vérole s’est mise dont je ne guérirai pas’ (505–6) [I thought, one day when I was forty: ‘Deep in that mirror, old age is watching and waiting for me; and it’s fatal, it’ll get me.’ It’s got me now. I often stop, flabbergasted, at the sight of this incredible thing which serves me as a face. [...] I loathe my

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appearance now: the eyebrows slipping down toward the eyes, the bags underneath, the excessive fullness of the cheeks, and that air of sadness around the mouth that wrinkles always bring. Perhaps the people I pass in the street see merely a woman in her fifties who simply looks her age, no more, no less. But when I look, I see my face as it was, attacked by the pox of time for which there is no cure' (672-3)]. Beauvoir comments on the negative reaction this passage incited in the opening page of *La Vieillesse*, attributing it to the fact she mentioned a taboo subject for many women, when the reaction was surely also provoked by the type of language she employed to describe it.

<sup>14</sup> 'L'hospice' typically provides accommodation for the least well-off members of French society. In the past, that accommodation took the form of endless rows of beds in dormitories where residents were often severely neglected due to overcrowding and staff indifference. According to *La Vieillesse*, over 50% of those who are admitted to a hospice die within twelve months. Interestingly, in their chapter 'How do we know that we are aging? Embodiment, Agency and Later Life?', Jenny Hockey and Allison James argue that spatial metaphors are often employed to help us negotiate *temporal* transitions of identity or status, as is the case with Bourlière's image (160).

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, whatever her existentially pessimistic belief in the irreconcilability between the psychic and corporeal selves, Beauvoir herself was also known occasionally to attempt to bridge the two; she too had not quite relinquished her external appearance to 'l'antichambre du cimetière', but the flame of femininity continued to burn. As Margaret Simons comments about her first meeting with Beauvoir: 'I was shocked when she opened the door. In spite of looking old and wrinkled, she had the audacity to wear red lipstick and bright red nail polish!' (Simons 1986: 204).

<sup>16</sup> In *La Vieillesse*, Beauvoir remarks that masturbation is common among older people because it is a simpler exercise, not dependent on the Other, although her reasoning is

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somewhat lacking in feminist correctness: ‘Sans doute aussi beaucoup d’hommes âgés préfèrent-ils leurs fantasmes au corps abîmé de leur compagne’ (393) [And no doubt many elderly men prefer their fantasies to their wife’s age-worn body (322)].

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