

# Representations of female ageing and sexuality in Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger*, Angela Carter's *Wise Children* and Doris Lessing's 'The grandmothers'

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## Introduction

In her *Out of Time: The Pleasures and Perils of Ageing*, Lynne Segal (2014: 7) explains that Simone de Beauvoir despaired when she turned to her fifties since she thought she would never be able to 'experience new desires or to display her yearnings publicly'. As de Beauvoir herself explains, 'it is not I who am saying goodbye to all those things I once enjoyed, it is they who are leaving me' (Segal, 2014: 7). Despite the exponential ageing of Western populations, there are a number of deep-rooted cultural ideas that contribute to present late-middle age and old age as a time of unstoppable decline in which certain emotions and human drives, together with the biological ageing of the body, seem to magically disappear all of a sudden. This is the case with regard to desire and sexuality. However, in recent years, this limited understanding of old age and sexuality has been counterbalanced by an image of ageing and sexuality which can be found at the other extreme of the spectrum, namely, that of the 'sexy oldie' (Gott, 2005: 23). Research conducted by Gott and Hinchliff (2003) and Katz and Marshall (2003) shows how, in recent years, the message has proliferated that looking and staying sexy and having an active sexual life is the best way of fighting against the losses of ageing.

This chapter aims to present these two extremes of the continuum in relation to how sexuality and ageing have been culturally presented, especially with regard to female ageing, within the fictional texts of three contemporary British authors, namely Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* (1988), Angela Carter's *Wise Children* (1996) and Doris Lessing's

short story 'The grandmothers' (2004). The protagonists portrayed in these three texts, all of them women in their seventies and eighties, neither conform to these models of female ageing and sexuality nor to a normative understanding of relationships. The fictionalised form of the two novels and the short story allow the readers to get into the inner thoughts of the protagonists in order to witness how they think and feel, as well as to understand the ways in which they establish an interrelationship with their social background and communities. In this sense, cultural and sociological studies on the experiences of sexuality in later life will establish a dialogue with the fictional texts analysed here in order to discern to what extent and in what ways these two discourses are challenged in the texts analysed.

### **From the asexual old woman to the 'sexy oldie'**

For Kathleen Woodward, the restricted meanings attached to old age and to the ageing body come from two different sources: an overvalorisation of youth and an almost automatic association of the ageing body to decline and death. As Woodward (1991: 19) contends, 'we cannot detach the body in decline from the meanings we attach to old age'. In this respect, desire and sexuality are related to the young body and are perceived as disgusting and inadequate when felt and experienced by someone past their youth. In their article 'Sex and ageing: a gendered issue', Merryn Gott and Sharron Hinchliff (2003: 64) explain that despite the fact that sex has been integrated as a part of normal behaviour within societal norms, 'old age remains outside this "sexualized world"'. Through their research, they argue that 'sex remains important to quality of life until the point where people do not think they will have another sexual partner during their lifetime' (Gott and Hinchliff, 2003: 65). Thus, despite the fact that the informants within their study show that 'sex was perceived as something "natural" and "normal" for "adults", including for older people', the reasons why a few of them had become 'sexually retired' was because they had lost their partners and thought they would not find a new one; otherwise, sex and desire was seen as a "normal" and "pleasurable" aspect of life, as one of the informants put it' (married woman, aged 63) (Gott and Hinchliff, 2003: 68).

In other studies, mainly based on heterosexual relationships, Woodward (1999) and Gott (2005) research further the relationship between ageing, old age and sexuality, with a special emphasis on female ageing in the case of Woodward. Starting from the premise that sexuality, which is frequently described as 'the most natural thing about

us' (Gott, 2005: 79), is actually socially and culturally constructed in complex ways, Gott argues, in that 'sexual attitudes and behaviours of older women and men' have to be explored and studied 'within a wider socio-cultural and historical context' (2005: 79). In this sense, Woodward develops her argument following the seminal texts of Simone de Beauvoir (1997 [1949]) and Susan Sontag (1972), according to which women are considered to age sooner than men due to the cultural and social meanings attached to the female ageing body. As Woodward contends (1999: xiii), 'in the West, female attractiveness has long been associated with youth, and the older woman has been thought of in disparaging terms as menopausal and post-menopausal'.

Thus, both authors highlight the still close relationship between attractiveness and sexuality at the turn of the 21st century. As the biological body ages, interest in sex is thought to decline too. However, different studies have proved that this is one of the prevailing narratives associated with a restricted view of the ageing process. Contrarily to this view, Gott refers to Barbara Sherman's study, *Sex, Intimacy and Aged Care*, published in 1998, in which she concludes that 'sexuality and making love are part of the fabric of our lives; part of the very essence of being human – even for older people' (Shermann, 1998, cited Gott, 2005: 16). Similarly, Rebecca L. Jones challenges other limiting cultural ideas related of older women and sex in her study "'That's very rude, I shouldn't be telling you that": older women talking about sex' in which she departs from the 'dominant cultural storyline' (Jones, 2002: 125), according to which academics and practitioners believe that older people are expected to have lost interest in sex and, moreover, they are believed not to talk about sex. Through her research, Jones proved that there actually existed a counter-narrative, with its complexities, which determined that interest in sex was lifelong and that older women talked about sex in quite a natural and straightforward way. In a more recent article, Maggie Syme (2014: 5) states that 'older adult sexuality is often ignored' among healthcare professionals, who prove to still rely on stereotypical beliefs which make old age, sexual attractiveness and, thus, interest in sex, utterly incompatible. Syme includes 'intimate partnerships' within what she calls 'quality social connections' (2014: 36), which contribute to ensure a good quality of life throughout the life course. Thus she supports the idea that professionals need to incorporate a holistic view of sexuality that extends across the lifespan, in which emotional, social and intellectual experiences go hand in hand with sexual experiences within the relationship context, with both pleasure and sexual dysfunction as part of the picture.

In her study, Syme (2014: 38) also refers to ‘body image and sexual self-esteem’ as factors that affect sexual interest in a negative way, especially in women. However, as other researchers have argued, these factors are mainly triggered by ageist views in relation to youth and beauty. As pointed out in the introduction, this stereotype has been counterbalanced by the notion that nowadays citizens, especially women, entering or in old age have the obligation to keep youthfully ‘sexy’ with the aim of having an active sexual life which is read as a sign of health in old age. Gott refers to the myth of the ‘sexy oldie’ as a stereotype whose key message is that ‘being sexual is fundamental to mental and physical well-being at any age, but particularly as a means to stave off old age’ (Gott, 2005: 24). For their part, Katz and Marshall (2003: 4) discern a narrowly defined ‘active sexuality’, based on ‘heterosexual intercourse’, as part of an over-optimistic cultural imagery of what has been called ‘the new aging’. Gott, Katz and Marshall coincide in recognising media as the main source of the creation and spreading of the stereotype of the ‘sexy oldie’. Katz and Marshall, specifically, consider the advertising industry as the main instigator of standardising the ageing experience within a frame of ‘timelessness, impermanence, and simultaneity’, which can be achieved through consumerism and a healthy life style with fitness and sexual intercourse at its core. As the authors state, ‘older individuals must cope with the impossible burden of growing older without aging, with a fundamental part of this burden attributed to the maintenance of sexual functionality and “fitness”’ (Katz and Marshall, 2003: 5). In this respect, Dolan and Tincknell (2012: viii) introduce their volume *Ageing Femininities* precisely stating that nowadays older women are encouraged to fit in ‘a discourse of “successful ageing” which basically encourages women to invest resources, both economic and personal, to achieve a “socially approved identity”’.

Thus the older woman is either invisible or rendered inadequate when trying to express her sexuality if she has accepted the vicissitudes of time on her body; alternatively, she is perceived as a plausible sexual being when she has managed to keep the signs of ageing at bay through the use of consumer products and techniques; in other words, there seems not to be a middle ground for women ageing into old age. In this respect, Lynne Segal (2014: 97) argues that there needs to be a change in the ‘youthful iconography of what it is for a woman to be a desirable sex object’. Segal refers to one of Penelope Lively’s characters, the protagonist of *Spiderweb*, Sarah Durham, a recently retired archaeologist, who, starting to experience invisibility after moving to the country on her own, considers that ‘if you have been

a beauty, ageing must be intolerable ... the process is bad enough as it is' (Lively, 1998: 187). This quote shows to what extent the cultural references of sexual attractiveness and desire are still narrow and mainly focus on youthful looks.

### **Fictionalising female sexuality in later life**

The potential and value of fictional contemporary texts to look at the complexities of the ageing process and old age from various perspectives has been widely discussed in the last years. Among different scholars, Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker and sociologist Mike Hepworth have proved fiction to be a valuable source to establish a constant and dynamic interaction between cultural and social conceptions of old age and the ageing process. As Hepworth (2000: 8) contends, 'stories of ageing should be read as the products of historically established systems of ideas and beliefs'. For their part, Deats and Lenker (1999: 3) consider that 'studying the way in which stereotypes of any kind – gender, race, class, or age – are constructed within a work of art can help us to learn about – and to challenge – the construction of stereotypes within our own society'. In this respect, fictional texts turn to be a valuable source to look at topics which are especially sensitive to being stereotyped and even concealed to some extent, as it is the case of sexuality and desire in old age. As Lynne Segal suggests (2014: 173), 'there are other ways to recognize and value the mixed experiences of old age, in which beauty, pain, resilience and resistance intermingle, while time itself appears more fluid'. In her book, *Out of Time: The Pleasures and Perils of Ageing*, Segal references a wide range of Anglo-American fictional texts from which significant cultural and social conceptions of the ageing experience can be extracted and analysed; at the same time the reader is granted the opportunity to observe the older protagonists and characters from within, through their thoughts and innermost concerns, as well as to witness the social dimension of the characters, through their interaction with other characters. Deats and Lenker, Hepworth and Segal, among other scholars, from their specific disciplines, coincide in pointing to the fact that fictional texts and, actually, popular culture in general, foreground the complexity of the ageing experience within the life course at the same time as they contribute to portraying multiple perspectives and experiences.

At the end of the 1980s, Margaret M. Gullette and Barbara Frey Waxman refer to the emergence of a number of novels in which female characters in their late middle years become not only the

main protagonists and, in some cases, narrators of their own stories but they also refuse to succumb to decline narratives once past their fertile years. As Gullette (1988: xiv) states, ‘they are not “heroines” or “heroes” in a classical way, but they have resistances, strengths, or sly timely weaknesses, ingenious mental feints’. Waxman (1990) actually identifies a new kind of genre in these emerging novels which she names *Reifungsroman* (novel of ripening), reminiscing the coming of age novel known as *Bildungsroman* which usually stops when the protagonist reaches young adulthood. As Waxman argues, the biological ageing of the body and the coming to terms with it of the protagonists is not denied; conversely, these novels seek to give voice to female characters that would ordinarily be pushed into the background or silenced, and present their passions and concerns, their longing and resentments through a process which is experienced by all human beings, namely, growing older.

In her most recent study and departing from the premise that ‘today’s invisible women can only make themselves visible by distinguishing themselves as younger women’ (2013: xi), Jeannette King analysed the presence of older female characters in literature in English from the 1850s to the present times. According to King, the stereotypes of either the mother – usually inadequate, with a lack of maternal presence – or the spinster, together with the stereotype of the mad or demented older woman have been prevalent from the end of the 19th century up until the end of the 20th century. Similarly, Traies (2016) acknowledges the silencing and invisibility of same-sex desires between women. King (2013) points out the relationship between madness and female sexuality, particularly in association to the menopause. According to King, up until the 1960s, the menopause was often matched to terms such as hysteria and madness (2013: 58). Actually, both Hepworth and Brennan recognise the ‘grandmother’ as one of the very few accepted female literary images in old age. After revising and analysing older female literary figures in Anglo-American literary texts, Brennan (2005: 79) argues that

the virginal stereotype of the grandmother continues to be the most accepted one in popular imagination, either because she is too ‘grotesque’ for anyone to want as a lover or too wise to be concerned with matters of the flesh.

Thus, both Brennan and Hepworth argue that the main reasons why the figure of the grandmother remains an accepted image of female ageing is the fact that she is devoid of sexual implications; her role

being mainly that of carer and emotional support when needed in the family.

Within contemporary British fiction, Doris Lessing's novel *Love, Again* (1996) is among the first to deal with female ageing and sexuality in an explicit way by allowing the readers to go into the inner self of their female protagonists. In the case of *Love, Again* Lessing portrays a 65-year-old woman who falls in love twice, in a short period of time, and with younger men. Sarah Durham is a successful theatre producer who has been a widow for a number of years and, as Brennan (2005: 79) explains, she 'finds herself unexpectedly emerging from a calm she assumed appropriate to the old and falling passionately in love with two younger men'. Indeed, throughout the novel the protagonist goes from considering herself past sexual desire to trying to understand the mismatch between the sexual desire her body feels with her biological age, a mismatch which provokes in Sarah a good deal of anxiety over the fact that the body she scrutinises in front of the mirror is not young and beautiful anymore, according to Western cultural standards. Throughout the novel the reader understands that Sarah's coercion of her desire towards two of her work colleagues is cultural rather than biological. In this respect, literary texts allow a short, but many times intense, glimpse into multiple possibilities and probably new-imagined future, as Marshall (2016: 19) expresses in her recently published *Age Becomes Us*: 'through literature, readers connect with collective histories, and by extension, with shared futures, a potential that can create in the reader a vital and empowering obligation'.

### **Lively's historian, Carter's sisters and Lessing's grandmothers**

Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* (1987), Angela Carter's *Wise Children* (1996) and Doris Lessing's 'The grandmothers' (2004) are three fictional texts, two novels and one short story, by contemporary women British writers in which the reader is guided by the voices of three women protagonists in their seventies and eighties. In these texts the reader is invited to go into the inner recesses of five women protagonists – Claudia Hampton in *Moon Tiger*, the twin sisters Nora and Dora Chance in *Wise Children* and the good friends Lil and Roz in 'The grandmothers' – who have not followed the commands and demands of their times, neither during their youth nor in their old age. They are not only strong women with clear voices, but also older women who have enjoyed and enjoy sex according to their own norms. The relationships, love affairs and sexual encounters that are

described in the novels, more or less explicitly, present relationships of these women outside a normative understanding of love and sexuality.

The female protagonist in *Moon Tiger*, Claudia Hampton, is presented as an 80-year-old woman who is bed-ridden and who intends to write a history of the world before she dies. Her history of the world will be composed of 'fact and fiction, myth and evidence, images and documents' (Lively, 1988: 1). Claudia is a journalist who claims to have had two big loves in her life: her brother Gordon and her first lover Tom Southern who died in Cairo during the Second World War. The relationship between Claudia and her brother is described as one of having had a mutual crush since they were teenagers. They shared this feeling and knew the other felt the same, but never succumbed to it: 'I saw in Gordon's maleness an erotic flicker of myself; and when he looked at me I saw in his eyes that he too saw some beckoning reflection' (1988: 137). Claudia actually set Gordon as a model to follow against any man she met; as she herself explains: '[u]ntil I was in my late twenties I never knew a man who interested me as much as Gordon did. That was why it was as it was between us. I measured each man I met against him, and they fell short: less intelligent, less witty, less attractive' (1988: 136). The peculiar relationship that Claudia had with her brother up until the moment in which the novel starts, in her death bed, foregrounds Claudia's unique character and her irreverent conceptions of both relationships and family. She believes that both Gordon and her daughter Lisa married the first woman and man who came along, as she states in the novel, and thus conformed to a restricted conception of the family. For her part, Claudia never married although she had a daughter with Jasper, a diplomat she met in her late thirties. She claims not to believe in marriage and describes her relationship with Jasper as quite an informal one, despite having a child in common. After they met and for 'the next ten years we sometimes lived together, sometimes did not, fought, made it up, parted and were reunited' (1988: 9). Apart from Gordon, Tom and Jasper, when she is in her late middle age, Claudia takes Laszlo as her protégée. Even though a sexual or romantic relationship between Claudia and Laszlo is never explicitly mentioned in the novel, they share mutual admiration as well as a common language from which Lisa and Jasper, Claudia's daughter and ex-husband, feel distanced and somehow envious. Throughout the retelling of her personal story and throughout her 80-year-old mind, Claudia's loves and desires are far from what is understood as normative heterosexuality.

In her *Discourses of Ageing*, King (2013: 114) contends that Lively's *Moon Tiger* 'challenges the goal-oriented discourse of the female

Bildungsroman, in which the ultimate goal is marriage, whatever aspirations the protagonist might harbour initially'. In terms of form and narrative, King contends that this is present in the novel in the fact that the love affair which Claudia considers to have marked her life, her relationship with soldier Tom Southern, is set in the core of the novel as well as Claudia's life; however, it does not represent the end of either. On the contrary, after her intense love relationship with Tom, Claudia understands she will never fit into the role of a normative heterosexual relationship. On the other hand, the structure of the novel contributes to portray present and past as simultaneous and coexistent and the idea of 'identity as multiple but continuous' (King, 2013: 120). In this respect, as King argues, 'it suggests that an old woman is not someone who has moved beyond into a distinct stage and category of life, but merely a woman who is old' (2013: 120). Thus in her particular history of the world, which is guided by neither chronology nor order, both the limiting conceptions of youth and old age, as well as a restricted view of relationships and family structure, are undermined.

In Carter's *Wise Children*, the protagonists, Nora and Dora, are presented through a similar lens to Claudia Hampton in Lively's *Moon Tiger*. They are twin sisters and the novel opens with their 75th birthdays. They have lived in London all their lives, on the wrong side of the river, according to Dora's narrative, and had made a living in the music-hall and show business. Despite the fact that they had had love affairs that had marked their lives (as Claudia with Tom Southern), they had always kept a distance from what was understood as normative love and sexuality as well as from the limiting position of women within traditional family structures. As Dora narrates her story in the first person, she confesses that the first man with whom she herself and her sister had fallen in love had been her uncle Perry:

Ooh, wasn't he a handsome young man, in those days. If I find myself describing him in the language of the pulp romance, then you must forgive me – there was always that quality about Perry ... . It was our Uncle Peregrine from America and we didn't know him from Adam. (Carter, 1996: 30)

The love-hate relationship the Chance twins have with their father, who only recognised them as legitimate children right at the end of his life, on his 100th birthday, as well as the open-minded life philosophy of their adoptive grandmother, who defined herself as a naturist, had

inculcated in them the idea of not taking life too seriously. As Dora explains, grandma Chance was 'a convert to naturism' (1996: 27) and used to go around the house naked while she urged the girls to allow their bodies to get some fresh air too. This philosophy allowed them to enjoy their bodies away from cultural constraints and to understand the concept of family in a broad sense. According to Dora, 'Grandma invented this family. She put it together out of whatever came to hand – a stray pair of orphaned babes, a ragamuffin in a flat cap. She created it by sheer force of personality' (1996: 35). The Chance sisters had had multiple love and sexual affairs; they had fallen in love and had suffered for love but had never succumbed to the requirements of a patriarchal understanding of the word family. On their 75th birthdays, they share the Brixton house they had inherited from Grandma Chance and take up family, friends and acquaintances who need shelter and love.

The novel opens with 75-year-old Dora and Nora getting ready to attend their father's 100th birthday party and, as they do so, they retell their story and their family's, from the time they were born to the present time of the novel. The process of getting ready for the party is described by Carter as a process of reconstruction of their younger selves which, in fact, is both comic and rebellious. As Nora explains,

It took an age but we did it; we painted the faces that we always used to have on to the faces we have now. From a distance of thirty feet with the light behind us, we looked, at first glance, just like the girl who danced with the Prince of Wales when nightingales sang in Berkeley Square on a foggy day in London Town. (Carter, 1996: 192)

The fact that the Chance sisters disguise themselves in the clothes and make-up they used to wear in their twenties blurs the boundaries between young and old. Nora's ironic and humorous narrative simultaneously undermines a narrow image of sexual attractiveness, very much related to youthful beauty, as argued by cultural gerontologists such as Kathleen Woodward and Margaret Gullette. The Chance sisters have physically aged with the century as both actresses and models; however, they have neither lost their sense of humour nor their creativity to keep on reconstructing themselves as women ageing in a time and place in which the physical signs on the body result into limiting one's participation and implication in society. Not only do they still have sexual desire and, comically, try to disguise themselves into 'sexually attractive beings', but also, and following their Grandma's philosophy, they take up any person who needs a family. This is the

case of a character they call Wheelchair, the first wife of their father Melchior, who was neglected by her ex-husband and children and who lives with them, as well as a black single mother and her little daughter, Our Cyn and Tiffany.

The ending of the novel precisely reinforces the idea that sexuality is not only the terrain of the young and beautiful, since it finishes with 75-year-old Dora and a 100-year-old Perry making love at Dora's father's birthday party, while the party guests in the dining room below can hear and see the chandelier agitating wildly. The act of making love makes time stop for a while, according to Dora, and for a few minutes Perry

was himself, when young; and also, while we were making love he turned into, of all people, that blue-eyed boy who'd never known my proper name. ... I saw myself reflected in those bracken-coloured eyes of his. I was a lanky girl with a green bow in her mouse-brown hair. (Carter, 1996: 221)

The sexual act together with the fact that there exists real love and affection between them makes Dora and Perry forget about the biological, but mainly cultural, limitations of their ageing bodies and focus on embracing their desire and enjoying that sexual part that stays with any human being until the end. According to Beth A. Boehm (1994: 88), 'it is not the act itself that makes time stand still, but rather the magic that lies in human desire'. In other words, a desire that can be as vivid in someone's twenties as in someone's seventies. For her part, Zoe Brennan (2005: 77) considers that Dora and Perry 'mock the idea that sexual fantasy and expression in old age is abnormal, taboo or inappropriate, while managing to avoid the pitfall of suggesting the other extreme: that older women should necessarily be sexually active'. Through humour, irony and drag, the Chance sisters undermine both the cultural conception that women past their fifties become 'sexually retired', as expressed by Gott (2005: 68), and the opposite conception, that is, the image of the 'sexy oldie' as the emblem of the sexually active older woman.

In Doris Lessing's 'The grandmothers', the female protagonists are two 60-year-old women, Roz and Lil, and their respective children, Tom and Ian, two men in their thirties. The short story narrates the close relationship that exists between Roz and Lil since they were teenagers and the love affairs and strong bonds between Roz and her friend Lil's son, and between Lil and her friend Roz's son. Despite the fact that the men are married to women their age and had children,

they are still in love with the older women. Their desire was contained in what their mother's friends represented, leaving aside limiting conceptions related to old age and the ageing body:

‘What did you think? We’d all just go on, indefinitely, then you and Tom, two middle-aged man, bachelors, and Roz and me, old and then you two, old, without families, and Roz and I, old, old, old ... we’re getting on for old now, can’t you see?’

‘No, you aren’t,’ said her son calmly. ‘Not at all. You and Roz knock the girls for six any time.’ (Lessing, 2004: 50)

In this specific quote and throughout the short story, Lessing focuses on the strong attraction that the boys feel towards their lovers over the years; an attraction that does not diminish with time and the ageing of the women's bodies, but actually grows and becomes stronger. For instance, Tom finds himself fantasising about Lil's body: ‘He was thinking of Lil's body that always smelled of salt, of the sea. She was like a sea creature, in and out, the sea water often drying on her and then she was in again’ (2004: 41). In this case, it is actually the women who feel inadequate because of their ageing bodies, and they advise the younger men to look for younger women. With this highly suggestive short story Lessing blurs the boundaries of time between the older women and the younger men, and, thus, ageing and the Western limitations attached to the ageing body, in the same way as Carter does in *Wise Children*, through a humorous and ironic tone.

## Conclusion

In the three fictional texts, the expression of corresponded desire and sexual interaction between the older female protagonists and other characters supports Gott's, Hinchliff's and Jones's thesis, proved through the respondents in their studies, according to which sex was seen as something natural, normal and pleasurable in healthy ageing. At a narrative level, it must be noted the fact that all the female protagonists speak for themselves, either using a confessional tone, as in the case of Dora, or through an omniscient narrator who tells the story from inside the character's minds and emotions. At a cultural level, the stories are set outside traditional family and patriarchal structures in terms of family structure so that protagonists can express their sexual desires and experiences openly, detached from social and cultural constraints. In this sense, the three stories conform to a concept that

Judith Halberstam (2005: 3) has coined as ‘queer time’ and ‘queer space’, in other words, understanding space and time ‘in opposition to the institution of the family, heterosexuality and reproduction’. And, indeed, none of the older protagonists in Lively’s, Carter’s and Lessing’s texts conform to a normative understanding of relationships. The fictional form of the texts allows the reader to witness the different ways in which each of the protagonists loves and builds family structures according to their own standards of the affective bonds that define a family. Thus, Claudia Hampton, in Lively’s *Moon Tiger*, considers Lazlo a surrogate son when she is in her fifties, while also feeling sexually attracted to the young Polish man; the Chance sisters, in Carter’s *Wise Children*, rejected by their legitimate family since their birth, create a family of their own, following their Grandma Chance’s example; and Roz and Lil, in Lessing’s ‘The grandmothers’, raise their children and grandchildren without a father figure.

Moreover, Lively’s, Carter’s and Lessing’s stories portray sexuality and desire in a broad sense; in other words, and using Syme’s definition of sexuality, the texts ‘encompass ... interest, behaviors, functioning, satisfaction, intimate relationships, and sexual self-esteem’, and thus move away from a narrow conception of ‘hetero-normative behaviour (for example, penile-vaginal intercourse), and heterosexist and ageist assumptions’ (Syme, 2014: 36). This goes hand in hand with a representation of old age and the ageing process as part of the life cycle in which different selves, different times and different experiences merge. As Segal (2014: 177) argues, taking her own experience as example, ‘it is one thing for me to point out that we can always see continuities across a lifetime, suggesting also that as we age, we retain a certain access, consciously or not, to all the selves we have been’. All in all, the older female protagonists within these texts prove that between the ‘asexualised older woman’ and the ‘sexy oldie’ there is a wide spectrum of possibilities that can and need to be explored, leaving aside restrictive and limiting conceptions not only around the ageing body and old age, but also heteronormative organisational regimes.

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