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EngAGEing Questions: Gender and Age

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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

Opinions expressed in articles published in *gender forum* are those of individual authors and not necessarily endorsed by the editors of *gender forum*.

Submissions

Target articles should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition) and should be between 5,000 and 8,000 words in length. Please make sure to number your paragraphs and include a bio-blurb and an abstract of roughly 300 words. Files should be sent as email attachments in Word format. Please send your manuscripts to gender-forum@uni-koeln.de.

We always welcome reviews on recent releases in Gender Studies! Submitted reviews should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition), have numbered paragraphs, and should be between 750 and 1,000 words in length. Please note that the reviewed releases ought to be no older than 24 months. In most cases, we are able to secure a review copy for contributors.

Article Publishing

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Editorial

1 The notion of ageing within western culture is informed by highly ambivalent associations. While on the one hand old age seemingly speaks of a mature and accomplished self awareness, warranting a stabilised identity through the accumulation of experience and memory, age on the other hand is linked to the fears of fading health, the gradual reduction of physical capability and ultimately death. The assumed dwindling of one's "sex appeal" and sexual desire additionally marks this stage of life as a noteworthy perspective, from which to look at prevailing ideas of gender and sexual identity.

2 This issue of gender forum presents three articles which draw on narratives that, in very distinct ways, challenge common assumptions and expectations of the determining significance of age in relation to identity and subjectivity. In "Generations Connecting: Alzheimer's Disease and Changes of Cultural Values" Roberta Maierhofer refers to two narratives, which present mother-daughter-relationships strongly affected by the Alzheimer disease of the mothers. The article demonstrates, how the "loss of memory concerning not only everyday incidents but also one's very relation to others marks a starting point of a new definition of self in relation to others." Thus, instead of seeing identity as a definable and given grounding of the self, the article argues for "an acceptance of identity that is not only in flux, but defines itself in the interaction with others as the self-in-relation."

3 Whereas in Maierhofer's article it is the loss of memory, which poses a serious threat to an established and maintainable identity based on memory and continuation, David Vella's contribution deals with the ultimate threat linked to the ageing process: death. Or rather, "The Houellebecq Cure. All Malady Will End in the Neohuman" delineates our culture's attempts at death defiance as presented in the novels *Atomised* and *The Possibility of an Island* in the shape of the so-called Neohuman. As becomes evident, the attainment of immortality but concurrent bereavement of "the 'irrational' drives of love and carnality" illustrate "the futility of all efforts of subjectivity at mastering an anguish that comes from what is exterior to it; an anguish that, in truth, constitutes it."

4 In the concluding article Aagje Swinnen points up the interrelatedness of identity and narrativity and shows, by which semiological means a subversion of story telling conventions leads to a thorough interrogation of established notions of old age and its relation to gender and sexual identity. "Never Too Old to Learn or Rebel. Two Old Ladies" traces a short story collection written by the Dutch author Toon Tellegen that foregrounds and ridicules the performative reiteration of stereotypes in our culture. Drawing on questions of genre, the

semiologies of the grotesque, Butler's notion of performativity and therewith "uncovering multiple semiotic layers [...] the inherent play with age and gender ideologies becomes ever more apparent."

5 Furthermore EngAGEing Questions features reviews of two recent publications within gender studies, namely Carole Srole's *Transcribing Class and Gender: Masculinity and Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Courts and Offices* as well as *Jewish/Christian/Queer: Crossroads and Identities*, edited by Frederick Roden.

Generations Connecting: Alzheimer's Disease and Changes of Cultural Values

By Roberta Maierhofer, University of Graz, Austria

Abstract:

The emphasis of American culture on the autonomous and independent individual, and on the search for identity in opposition to defined cultural and societal rules, can be seen as a value that is undergoing rapid change. In American Studies, the quest of the individual for a self-determined life in opposition to the norms of society has often been defined as the central cultural narrative, in which the desire of the individual to seek and define an identity within or without the community is the driving force of the plot. In feminist literature, more specifically, the search for a single, private self has often been linked to the daughter's relationship to her mother within the family structure. However, this quest for identity takes on different forms when the daughter is confronted with a mother whose identity, due to Alzheimer's disease, is no longer discernable, and whose memory of whom she is and was has vanished. This loss of memory concerning not only everyday incidents but also one's very relation to others marks a starting point of a new definition of self in relation to others and reverses a mother-daughter to a daughter-mother relationship.

1 The emphasis of American culture on the autonomous and independent individual, and on the search for identity in opposition to defined cultural and societal rules, can be seen as a value that is undergoing rapid change. In American Studies, the quest of the individual for a self-determined life in opposition to the norms of society has often been defined as the central cultural narrative, in which the desire of the individual to seek and define an identity within or without the community is the driving force of the plot. In feminist literature, more specifically, the search for a single, private self has often been linked to the daughter's relationship to her mother within the family structure. However, this quest for identity takes on different forms when the daughter is confronted with a mother whose identity, due to Alzheimer's disease, is no longer discernable, and whose memory of whom she is and was has vanished. This loss of memory concerning not only everyday incidents but also one's very relation to others marks a starting point of a new definition of self in relation to others and reverses a mother-daughter to a daughter-mother relationship. In texts dealing with daughters whose mothers are Alzheimer's disease patients, a re-evaluation of the concepts of independence and autonomy is taking place. The dichotomy of self and other is being supplemented by the concept of "self-in-relation."¹ If the strength of American Studies has been to speak with both the „authority of difference“ and the "authority of connection,"

¹ I would like to thank Thomas R. Cole who pointed to the importance of this concept within a discussion of age, identity, and gender.

(Bercovitch 2) both difference and connection can be seen as values of American society. Within a context of individual and social needs – often in conflict with each other – a new value in American Studies can be identified as represented in literature and film: the necessity of mutual and supportive relationships as a key to the development of personal identity.

2 In this essay, I would like to focus on two texts portraying women with Alzheimer's disease and their relationship to their care-giving daughters. In Judith Dothard Simmons' journal article, "Connections. I Am My Mother's Keeper," the narrator asserts her responsibility for her aging mother and thus re-defines values of American society by establishing the importance of family bonding and the necessity of defining oneself in relation to others. In the film *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, Deborah Hoffmann chronicles the various stages of her mother's Alzheimer's disease and the changes in the daughter's response to her mother and to herself. When the daughter finally accepts that her relationship to her mother can no longer rely on the given relationship between mother and daughter, she manages to establish a connection to her mother that liberates both from societal expectations. Because of her mother's lack of memory, every meeting is a negotiation of their relationship, which has to be newly defined continuously in the present moment of their encounter.

3 With a rapidly growing older population, this shift in cultural values calls for a social policy that understands the interdependence of generations. This approach takes a life course perspective to help explain the seeming paradox of the autonomy and interdependence of individuals and age groups as they move through life. This suggests that in an interdependent and aging society, all generations have a common stake in family efforts and public policies or intergenerational transfers that respond to the needs of people of all ages.² When talking about family structure and cultural change, the question of life course, personal development and aging are of central concern. The aging individual and the conflicts, passions, and joys, exemplify more than any other stage in life the interplay between the private and the public, the individual and the communal, and stress the importance of relationships and connections. Sally Gadow – looking at aging from a gerontological perspective and emphasizing the cultural and humanistic aspects of aging – comments:

Historical, legal, and economic interpretations mark aging as an objective phenomenon, open to general, cultural understanding. But aging is only in part a public phenomenon. It is a heart subjective. It has, like all experience, an objective overlay of social meaning, including scientific theory, economic policy, and political/religious ideology. Beyond these, however – in keeping with them, in spite of them, or indifferent to them – the central meaning of aging is individual, subjective. (Gadow 131)

² Cf. Eric Kingson, John Cornman, Barbara Hirschorn. "Ties That Bind." *Aging. Concepts and Controversies*. Ed. Harry R. Moody. London: Pine Forge, 1994, p. 216.

By identifying aging as “a heart subjective,” Gadow centers the individual around social objectives and defines the meaning of aging as the interplay between self and other. In a different context, Thomas R. Cole speaks of the fluidity of identity and positions the definition of this self within the political frame of race, class, and gender:

Identity, loosely defined as a sense of who one is, is not a unitary thing that one simply finds and wears – like overalls, a dashiki, or a pin-striped suit. Identity is rather an unstable, relational process, a story always in flux, negotiated in difference and relationship. Identities [...] are historically conferred, subject to redefinition, resistance and change. They are ambiguous, produced through multiple identifications, some of which are salient in certain contexts and hidden in others. These insights are crucial to the future of a democratic culture and to the creation of new cognitive maps of identity which will allow individuals to form selves that are not mutilated by cultural domination of the powerful or by exclusive claims of any group. (Cole 200)

4 This definition of identity is in accordance with the position of contemporary criticism and theory, which has questioned the traditional belief that human identity can be present to the conscious mind as an accessible piece of self-knowledge. The subject is seen as perpetually in flux, pursuing an illusion of wholeness and selfhood that is ultimately unattainable, however necessary it may be to human functioning.³ In these terms, Alzheimer’s disease patients can be seen as extreme paradigms of this postmodern condition, where memories and the past only exist in a unstructured, fluid condition. Like the decentered subject that is in Lacan’s term of the mirror stage defined as constituted in and by its language, Alzheimer’s disease patients use language without any referential meaning in order to establish relationships and connect to others. The acceptance of these linguistic acts as the only form to establish connection, demands an acceptance of identity that is not only in flux, but defines itself in the interaction with others as the self-in-relation. Alix Kates Shulman describes an incident she encountered when she came to visit her mother afflicted with Alzheimer’s disease in a retirement home:

I was surprised to find Mom perched on her bed listening attentively to an attractive silver-maned man seated in a wheelchair, volubly holding forth. [...] The visitor, undeterred, continued his animated talk. After a few minutes, I realized that his words made no sense. The language was English, with its familiar grammar, vocabulary, and inflections, but the sentences lacked all discernible meaning. Still, Mom listened with seemingly rapt attention, nodding periodically and using all her social skills to make the stranger feel at home. (11)

5 In her essay “A Relational Perspective for Understanding Women’s Development,” the psychologist Judith V. Jordan asserts the limited applicability of traditional Western psychological theories of development to the psychology of women. Instead of seeing the

³ Cf. Jacques Lacan. *Ecrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1977.

“self” as the primary reality separated out from its context as a bounded and contained entity that has both object and subject qualities, she suggests the alternative conceptualization of self as a “relational self” or as a “being in relation.” (Jordan 9) The societal paradigm of the sanctity and freedom of the individual overshadows – so Jordan – the compelling reality of the communal and deeply interdependent nature of human beings and ignores the realities and needs of women. Feminist psychologists have voiced their dissatisfaction with this model and offer new models of female development of self that take into account the power of the ethic of caretaking and relationship in women’s lives. Thus, Nancy Chodorow re-examines object relations theory to find traditional theory failing to acknowledge the importance of the early and longer lasting bond between the girl and her mother.⁴ Other theorists, such as Jean Baker Miller and Carol Gilligan, have also noted the failure of previous theories of “human development” to appreciate the relational nature of women’s sense of themselves, and offer explicitly or implicitly a more contextual, relational paradigm for the study of all self experience. As Carol Gilligan notes, women “define themselves in the context of human relationship.” (Gilligan 17) In Jordan’s words:

New relational theory of self, perhaps like the “new physics” of quantum theory and uncertainty, emphasizes the contextual, approximate, responsive and process factors in experience. In short, it emphasizes relationship and connection. Rather than a primary perspective based on the formed and contained self, this model stresses the importance of the intersubjective, relationally emergent nature of human experience. (15)

6 Jordan argues that from this intersubjective perspective, the movement of relating, of mutual initiative and responsiveness, are the ongoing central organizing dynamics in women’s lives, and thus the deepest sense of one’s being is continuously formed in connection with others and is inextricably tied to relational movement. Central to this perspective is empathy, the dynamic cognitive-affective process of joining with and understanding another’s subjective experience, which profoundly alters the traditional boundaries between subject and object and the sense of separate self. In a true emphatic relationship – so Jordan – each is object and subject, mutually engaged in affecting and being affected, knowing and being known. (ibid. 15) The deep interconnectedness between people is experienced by women at the very concrete and compelling level of feelings and body experience. (ibid. 16) In the theory of separate self our metaphors of “being” is very spatial, and the “self” is conceived of as separate, alone, in control, and of personally achieving and mastering nature. The self perceived as contextual and relational is capable of forming gratifying connections, with creative action becoming possible through connection, and a greater sense of clarity and

⁴ Cf. Nancy Chodorow. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1978.

confidence arises within relationship; others are perceived as participating in relational growth in a particular way that contributes to the connected sense of self:

Further, if mutuality prevails, not only will I be influenced, moved, changed by context, and most importantly by my relational context, but I will also be shaping and participating in the development of others' "selves." (ibid. 17)

7 Within our culture, the tendency to objectify and render into "thingdom" is powerful as it is based on the need to control and predict. The material world, the person as discrete body in space, is a compelling reality. Moreover, language is used to both express and create this reality. Jordan suggests leaving a language of structure and dualism for one of process, and looking beyond the polarities of egoism versus altruism, self versus other. (ibid. 19) This language of process would contribute to the growth of something that is of the self, but beyond the self, the relationship. Self, other, and the relationship – no longer clearly separated entities but mutually forming – are interconnected rather than in competition in a model of relational movement. Growth occurs in becoming a part of relationship rather than apart from relationship. Jordan identifies the basic human need as the need to participate in relationship. Central to any discussion of self is the dilemma of process and structure. Our language does impose limits on our ability to delineate modes of being, to trace continuities of intention, memory, energy, and sensation; we quickly resort to reifications, making solid that which is fluid, changing and ongoing. (ibid. 20)

8 Thus, Jordan prefers the term "relational being" to "relational self" or "self-in-relation" as it expresses the process nature of experience. Whereas the metaphor of "voice" is often used to characterize the experience of self, Jordan emphasizes the aspect of listening in this process. (ibid. 20) As the texts show, the mothers with Alzheimer's disease do recognize their daughters as someone they know well, but they cannot define on what basis their relationship is founded and what constitutes their connection. They see their daughters as contemporaries, such as childhood friends, but almost never as blood related. Petirim Sorokin argues that there is no integrative self-process, but that the individual is a separate and new self in each context in which he or she participates. This applies to the depicted Alzheimer's disease patients as well: every meeting between mother and daughter defines a new context and a new relationship. The need of individuals for connection and essential emotional joining is served by empathy, which in authentic relatedness, is characterized by mutuality. A larger paradigm shift from the primacy of separate self to relational being must be considered to further our understanding of all human experience.

9 In American culture, the impact of feminism and multiculturalism has taught us that in recording experience and life stories the important aspect is to let people speak in their own voices and record their own experiences. In the case of fictional representations of Alzheimer's disease patients, however, others take on the task of speaking for them. These texts also reveal a traditional position of speaking for others in order to define one's own self in relation to others. In the feminist tradition, identity is not seen as the goal but the point of departure of any process of self-consciousness, and women writing about the lives of their mothers tried to position their role in history and thus define their own identity. By openly positioning themselves as personally involved, they read the life stories of others through the readings of their own histories.

10 Old people capable of self-expression have given voice to their concerns, often in the form of autobiographical works, encouraging younger generations to participate in the experience of aging. In the case of old people inflicted with Alzheimer's disease, their voices can only be heard indirectly. Based on an understanding that creative expression is a human need, projects such as "timeslips," located at the Center for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, uses the power of self-representation for patients with Alzheimer's disease. The web site presents stories told by people with Alzheimer's disease with the intention to improve the quality of their lives by encouraging creative expression, and to increase and deepen public perception of Alzheimer's disease by sharing compelling stories with extended communities in which they emerge. The aim of this site is to establish connection within the isolated, and to battle existing stereotypes about the quality of life with Alzheimer's disease.⁵ This concept is in keeping with the intention to, on the one hand, oppose the reduction of a person to the status of an object through an emphasis upon individuality, and on the other, to establish the relationship to others on the basis of interdependence and reciprocity. In both the short article "Connections. I am My Mother's Keeper," and the documentary film *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, it is the narrating act as such that establishes mutuality between daughter and mother and presents the relationship as the story of two selves in an authentic relatedness.

11 The narrating voices in the texts by Simmons and Hoffmann belong to women who are young, healthy and capable of recounting their life stories and as such part of a dominant cultural group, but they can also be seen as envisioning life stories from a position from the margins. The lesbian filmmaker and the Afro-American poet, and journalist, are aware that their own positions are in opposition to the dominant culture. Feminist literary theorists argue

⁵ Cf. www.timeslips.org.

that the representation of the voice in literature by women writers is a textual strategy used by writers to deconstruct images of women inherited from male literature.⁶ In this sense, the female authorial voice is the essence of feminism.⁷ What then does the representation of individuals no longer capable of self-expression through others mean? Based on the assumption that the individual's relationship to the self has already developed as aging advances, the meaning of aging involves the meaning of the past, of time, and memory. The daughters' stories and their relationship to their mothers are presented as specific and personal, but at the same time, they represent the dilemma of the traditional cultural narrative of American culture: the emphasis of individualism. Although the texts reveal the difficulty and the necessity of accepting the separate and related selves, maintaining a relationship and negotiating difference is the task of the future, especially when the language of negotiation is not shared. Within the interplay between the fields of sciences and humanities, autobiographical and biographical texts are important sources that contribute towards understanding both individual and shared aspects of aging over the life course.

Examining reactions to personal crises and turning points could provide researchers with unique insights into the way individuals construct their lives. Equally, however, studying lives provides a perspective on the influence of social institutions such as work and the family. (Phillipson 23)

12 Sociologists have suggested that narratives or stories play a central part in the construction of lives, as what is meaningful about our selves is expressed through the telling of stories. Whereas on the public level these stories communicate the significance of particular lives and communities for society as a whole, on the individual level the telling of stories is a medium for the integration of lives, for explaining discontinuities as well as continuities. (Phillipson 24) The fluidity of identity opens up possibilities to move beyond the defined position of self and makes it not only possible but also necessary to view family structure and relationships in new ways:

A potentially optimistic feature of viewing human ageing biographically is that there is an openness or flexibility to the human journey [...]. While there is continuity, there is also change and the possibility of change. In other words, there may be no necessary connection between the events of our lives, our number of years, and the meaning ascribed to those events; stories can be re-written, plots altered, and the metaphors traded in and traded up [...] according to the needs of the self. (Ruth and Kenyon 6)

⁶ Cf. S. Gilbert, S. Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1979.

⁷ Cf. Maggie Humm. *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*. New York: Harvester, 1989, p.232.

However – as the social gerontologist Phillipson has stated when discussing Jaber Gubrium’s work on how the meaning of Alzheimer’s disease is derived and communicated⁸ – aspects of aging always remain uncharted and ambiguous and many situations that affect older individuals and their caregivers are literally beyond their experience, thus creating complexities in terms of naming and identifying feelings and beliefs. (Phillipson 25) The title of a collaborative essay by the cultural historian and medical humanist Thomas R. Cole, “In Whose Voice? Composing an Ethics Case as a Song of Life,” points to the dilemma of giving a voice to a person without a voice who can neither sing her own song of life – in Cole’s metaphor – nor can evaluate and consent to others intoning the song. In this essay, Cole describes the case of a patient with Alzheimer’s disease in which two colleagues, Dr. Barbara Thompson, a family physician, and Dr. Linda Rounds, a geriatric nurse practitioner, asked him for his opinion about the moral factors involved. The 90-year-old patient, Mrs. Green, was strapped to the bed to prevent her from pulling out a feeding tube that sustained her life. Cole approaches the case not from an academic and formal philosophical position, but from his own personal involvement with his 87-year old grandmother, for whom he was then legally responsible, who was also suffering from advanced Alzheimer’s disease. Cole’s interest in narrative and phenomenological dimensions of both aging and ethics leads him to an approach to the “case” of Mrs. Green as a “multivoiced narrative” (Cole 23):

Mrs. Green could not tell us what she wanted, but perhaps if we thought of her voice as the silent melody in a larger musical composition, we could hear the voices of others who provide the harmonies and descant lines. Perhaps we could even hear the silent melody by listening closely to the other voices singing together, each contributing something important to the song of Mrs. Green’s life, no one voice drowning out any of the others. (ibid. 24)

13 When dealing with dementia and loss of memory, we as individuals are challenged to recognize our own feelings of worth and identity and define them in the interaction and connection with others. Based on her very practical and concrete experience of working with patients, the nurse’s aide, Mrs. Brooks, comes to the same conclusion as the feminist theorists defining her identity grounded in an interaction with others:

I just have this feeling that maybe getting old is different. I think it’s a blessing. I feel like when you’re old, you should be treated with respect, not put out to pasture, or sent to the glue factory like they do horses. I’d like somebody, even if I’m demented to treat me like a person and talk to me. This might be the happiest time of my life. I wouldn’t have any bills to pay, I wouldn’t have the mental capacity to worry. I just might be *happy*. *I have this feeling* about being old. (ibid. 29)

⁸ Cf. Jaber F. Gubrium. „Voices and Context in a New Gerontology.“ Thomas R. Cole, et.al. Eds. *Voices and Visions of Aging : Toward a Critical Gerontology*. New York: Springer, 1993.

14 When Cole one day comes to take pictures of Mrs. Green, she is alert and responsive and the nurses had her ready for the occasion by bathing, dressing and stimulating her. Comparing her to a loving child, Cole reaches the conclusion that Mrs. Green was “fully human in that her capacity for relationships remained intact.” (ibid. 30)

15 The text “Connections. I Am My Mother’s Keeper” by Judy Dothard Simmons published in 1996, uses autobiographical details to define identity within the interrelation of self and the other. When the New York based writer and poet Simmons decides to return to the South to take care of her mother who suffers from Alzheimer’s disease, she has to confront her ambivalence to live up to her decision of giving up her life of autonomy, and come to terms with an existence that links her in an absolute way to another person. Initially, she experiences her identity linked to another person as lack of control and this leads to frustration and resentment. The title with the biblical reference proudly asserts the daughter’s responsibility for her mother: “I am My Mother’s Keeper” blurs the boundaries between self and other and defines both her mother’s and her own self in their interaction. Although the term “keeper” implies control and authority, within the text the meaning is used to express the caring, protecting and sustaining quality that the daughter assumes when caring for her mother, and the authority of voice with which she recounts both her mother’s and her own situation. The emphasis, however, is not on the narrative authority, but on the relational identity she attains through her care giving function. Although mocking what Simmons calls the “Reader’s Digest-like version of our heartwarming story” (86), where she would be depicted as “the family-values heroine who gives up a high-powered New York media career and discovers the true meaning of life wiping feces off her feisty, 70-something mother” (86), it is exactly her care giving and nurturing that makes Simmons life meaningful and fulfilling:

I am being gentled and healed by living in a loving relationship - with my mom. Being around her is instructive. Watching her improvise around the gaps that Alzheimer’s gouges into her brain humbles and shames me. She is aware of being changed, impaired, but she doesn’t despair and she doesn’t complain. (90)

16 Simmons speaks of the forgetfulness of an Alzheimer patient as “the terrible engagement between a human and the impersonal poetics of life, existence, being.” (90) Alzheimer’s disease is to Simmons the stripping away of pretense and socially and culturally learned behavior, and a movement from the asserting of “I am” to the “you are.” Both patient and caregiver in the relational interaction are forced to achieve a form of understanding, and thus the disease is linked to a poem and stands as a metaphor for life in its crude form:

Each of us can be viewed as trying to distill our own poem, to make our own sense of existence take on shape and structure out of the indifferent elemental processes we call life. (90)

Simmons interprets her own text “Poems” as an expression of how the disease forces both mother and daughter to an understanding of their existence on a pure level without the possibility of expression. Thus her mother is identified as being “driven by the poem of her particular spirit, and committed to it.” (90)

poems are cruel
to poets, people
weak and strong

their birth is labor
women scream
their sense, bone terror
in a soldier

poems lack tact and secrets
they are innocent of mercy
with a tyranny to kill
all arrogant defiance

pity, then, we humans
born in ignorance, and finite:
deprived of sight and sound and tongue
driven by a poem (90)

17 In the absence of tact and secrets, Simmons learns to establish identity in the present moment, in the immediate interaction between daughter and mother, which is negotiated each time as a meeting of selves without recurrence. The daughter can now view her well-educated, capable and intelligent mother in her purest form, as the “skeleton of a personality, of a soul:”

It is amazing to look at the very skeleton of a personality, of a soul ... no, it is awesome and rather terrifying, for it attests to the loss of the basic tool of human intercourse – the mask. Alzheimer’s disease is stripping Momma of the ability to dissemble and disguise that creates our private selves and fosters civility. As a result, her communications and actions reveal the bare bones of her character, not the careful image we are generally at pains to present to others. (90)

18 Looking back on her former life, Simmons now finds flaws in having committed herself to the pursuit of her individual happiness, to her emphasis on her individual quest for self-fulfillment, and can now look on her mother’s life, one devoted as a school teacher and mother and stepmother of many children to the care and nurturing of others, not as a degrading of self to humility by simply fulfilling “the traditional female role of domestic and body servant,” (86) but as a source of determining meaning in life:

Maybe more so, the humility stems from her awareness of transcendence, of knowing herself to be a span in the generational bridge that brings human beings over to

something above instinctual life. Perhaps she knows intrinsically the worth of her life's work; therefore no New York ego is required. (90)

Simmons can thus define the caretaking and nurturing of her mother as the caretaking and nurturing of her own self:

The way she is playing the endgame that she must eventually concede is another of her gifts to me. Plagued by incomprehension and deprived of the intellectual activities that were her calling and pleasure, she continues to synthesize meaning from people and events, and to shape me by her steadfastness into a person more understanding, kinder, than I want to be. (90)

Because of the disconnection of words from concepts, feelings and referents that the Alzheimer's disease causes, the daughter's identity is threatened. Thus Simmons reflects:

“Daughter,” “Love,” “Judy” will not add up to anything meaningful for her. Who will I be without my mother? How will I stand it when she doesn't comprehend that I am her baby - “my one little chick” [...] (90)

19 It is her childhood and youth, Simmons mourns, as her mother's lack of memory threatens to wipe out her own memory too (“It's like the whole Alabama experience is a black hole and I'll never again reach escape velocity.”) (Simmons 90) Simmons accepts the changes in her life, which she asserts as “one hell of a transition” (90) from “habits, expectations, and hopes no longer appropriate for my location, age, and responsibilities.” (90) Referring to the Dylan Thomas' poem “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night,” Simmons can acknowledge that both her mother and she share a form of rage and passion, which is not evident on first sight. At the beginning, patience and acceptance are hard won for Simmons, since she has previously defined her life in terms of competition, success, and control:

My biggest challenge is emotional control. The sustaining rage of my life is my undoing now. It's my response, my defense, my coping mechanism, my motive power; has been for much of my life. Rage against segregation, injustice, amoral capitalism, against petty greed, lyin', cheatin' hearts, and fundamentalists of all kind. Noble, artistic rage that fueled my ambition to write poems that could change the world. Idealistic, pioneering rage that drove me to hurt myself proving that a woman and black person could cut it in Fortune 500-land. (89)

This rage, however, although a life affirming and life asserting power and the core of her creative drive is basically a self-destructive emotion, as it isolates her and separates her from meaningful relationships. Both Simmons and her mother are, through the focus of their lives in the present state of being, united in a creative act: Simmons by writing the text, her mother by simply living her life. It is – as the title “Connections” suggests – the relationship as such that is meaningful in itself. Within the written word of the text, both “authors” are thus credited with the authority of the “word”:

The “why” of my choice to stay with her is deeper than the forebrain and larger than words – and that is a wondrous statement coming from a wordsmith, especially a poet. Probing now, as at a sore tooth, I loosen a feeling, a concept: connection, and my throat aches, my eyes fill with tears. (88)

20 The film *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* eludes in its choice of title to Simone de Beauvoir’s autobiographical text *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, published in 1958. In this book, Beauvoir is fascinated with the relationship of identity to time. At age three or so, gazing at her mother's empty armchair, she understood that time would wrench her from the secure world of her mother's body, her presence, and she thought to herself, "I won't be able to sit on her knee any more if I go on growing up. [...] Suddenly the future existed; it would turn me into another being, someone who would still be, and yet no longer seem myself." (7)

21 In her discussion of fictional representations, Suzanne England and Carol Ganzer speak of the fact that one of the characteristics in dealing with Alzheimer’s patients and their caregivers and relatives is the recurrent theme of loss. It is about loss on many levels, but mainly loss of memory and thus of the quality of the relationship to others, of one’s history and that of other’s, and loss of a visible expression of identity. When in a kind of prologue, the film *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* begins with a close-up of an old woman – the mother – who discusses her relationship to her parents and remarks that she was closer to her mother, this passage points to the basic question of the film. Distance and closeness between mother and daughter without being able to build this relationship on shared memories and defined family roles. The daughter, who has so far defined identity on the basis of memory, now has to define her own and her mother’s identity in every encounter anew, and negotiate their relationship within the present moment of experience. Although her mother is able to define a familiarity in their relationship and feels comfortable in her daughter’s presence understanding that she knows her well, she is no longer able to define the nature of their relationship and cannot acknowledge the mother-daughter bond. A photo of the mother as a young girl standing between her parents is juxtaposed with the image of mother and daughter linking arms. Whereas the smiling mother appears relaxed and at ease, the daughter seems worried and preoccupied. The film makes it clear that kinship and past experience can no longer be the basis of the relationship between mother and daughter. Thus, a definition of self through the other has to be overcome by a seeking of a self-in-relation. Although dealing with loss, the film asserts the value of this new defined relationship that is no longer simply based on the given of a mother-daughter bonding, but is defined by two individuals meeting in the presences of the moment. In these opening scenes, Deborah Hoffmann states in the past tense,

"I was closer to my mother" following-up this statement with the question, "You know who my mother was?" Shaking her head, the daughter responds: "You" and in disbelief that is obvious in the puzzled expression and concentration that the mother's face reveals, she asks incredulously, "I was your mother?" and Deborah Hoffmann laughingly asserts the fact. The mother tries to find explanation for this strange statement by offering levels of interpretation: "You mean your mother liked me and decided I should be something." Reasserting Hoffmann says, "You are my mother." The almost pitying disbelief of the mother to this statement is obvious:

Mother: "How can I really be your mother? I don't know."

Daughter: You are.

Mother: Something went wrong. Well, we did something peculiar, to tell you the least.

Daughter: Well, I think something went right that's how it worked out.

Hoffmann emphasizes the narrative structure of the film by introducing different themes in the film with chapter-like stills. The film provides a review of the process of the daughter coming to terms with her mother's illness and her learning to define her relationship to her mother in new terms. The daughter's slow realization of her mother's illness and her original reluctance to acknowledge that she as daughter had to take responsibility not only for herself but also for her mother is depicted in the film mostly in a very straight-forward recounting of the immediate past. The film depicts the development of the daughter from slow realization of her mother's illness to an acceptance of the fact, which finally leads the daughter to accept her own inadequacy of taking care of her mother and to finally placing her in a home with Alzheimer's disease patients. The film provides the daughter with the authority of voice, whereas the mother has the visual authority. Dominant are the images that show the mother in the past, as in graduate photos or photos of her mother with her two children. It is Hoffmann's view of her mother as a young woman that is told and she is portrayed as an independent, intelligent, sophisticated, learned and knowledgeable person. As a university graduate, her mother had also been, in Hoffmann's words, "an intellectual snob." When the mother enjoys a trivial show on TV, where a little girl dances in a golden dress, it is the daughter's understanding of her mother that is profoundly shaken:

This is not my image of my mother and she was watching it, she was gleefully, euphorically watching it and laughing and I was very upset. This is beneath her.

22 The daughter's narrative description of the scene and her sad and troubled view of the situation are followed by a slow motion sequence of her mother dancing joyfully with beads around her neck to music, and throwing her arms in the air as an expression of happiness. Whereas the mother is shown in dynamic images in the present moment and her past is merely visualized in static photos, the daughter is linked to a development process from child

to adulthood through original home video footage emphasizing her dominant presence as the narrator of the film, and the ongoing and open definition of her self.

23 In contrast to Simmons, who has to adapt her own position of independence in order to establish a connection to her mother, Hoffman's film shows a daughter, who has to adjust to her mother's turning away and negation of family bonds and blood ties. Through her illness, the mother defines herself in new ways: she enjoys trite shows with little girls' step dancing, accepts without hesitations her daughter's homosexuality, and encounters all experiences without a theoretical or ideological background, but on the trusting and innocent acceptance of the here and now. The daughter's approach to life is determined by her knowledge of the past and understanding based on family traditions, and thus she is the one who has to adjust to the new situation with pain, frustration and denial. On a visual level, in most scenes of the film the mother looks straight at the camera with a broad smile on her face, whereas the daughter is seen staring intently at the mother with a small, reticent smile on her lips and an anxious look in her eyes. Only when the daughter can accept her mother, not as she was but as she is afflicted with Alzheimer's disease, without a memory of the past, is the daughter shown sitting next to her mother in the nursing home smiling at her. The daughter reaches the conclusion that she was the one that had to adjust to this new situation, and she had to find a definition of identity that did not rely on a static definition of self in a linkage to her mother. On a visit to the nursing home, the mother surprises the daughter by voicing this, by throwing out her arms and exclaiming periodically "the joy of me."

Little by little the only remaining memories are childhood and very early adulthood. She remembers her parents fairly well. But what I always thought of her life, what I knew to be her life, which is me and my brother and my father, and the fifty plus years that she lived in New York that kind of mostly disappeared, has become a sort of puff, that has occasionally some substance, mostly it is kind of a blur, which is a little hard for me to take.

But the daughter learns through her mother's approach to life, to live in the moment and trust the feeling and emotions every encounter brings. Within their meeting in the present the joy of connecting and relating in a mutual appreciation of the other, opens up possibilities of encounter that are no longer defined by any parameters:

For the longest time, I still insisted on truth, reality being important. She would insist on it being April instead on May. What does it matter, if she thinks it's April. Why not? It was a liberating moment, it was kind of light and fun, we were in the moment, the content did not matter, the feeling.

24 When in one scene of the film, the mother takes the camera to take a shot of Debbie and her partner Frances, who is the cinematographer of the film, the out of focus perspective of the camera with the subjects slipping beyond the frame of the finder can be seen as a metaphor of the mother's perspective of the world. The shared laughter and fun of the

moment in the pleasure of each other's company make it possible to move beyond the sorrow and pain of dealing with such a severe illness as Alzheimer's disease. Debbie must learn to integrate a vision of her mother as a independent and strong woman who set an intellectual and social standard, with the person who can meet her in the pleasure of the moment. This act of connecting Debbie links to the interpreting of dreams. Placing her mother in a nursing home was the final acceptance of the changes within her mother's life course, and the realization that against all odds life can still be meaningful and joyful:

Everybody that is there has a disease that they don't want. There is nothing uplifting about that. But once one accepts the parameters, my mother has Alzheimer's, it can still be a very joyful life. She is the ultimate of living in the moment. She is the ultimate enlightened person. Well, I don't know, I am very attached to my memory. I am very attached to my childhood memory who tells me who I am . But you still have definition of self without a past.

In lucid moments, her mother can even express the joy of living in the moment and acknowledge the fact that her illness no longer allows her the knowledge of explaining and defining, but her ability to express her feelings is still intact:

That simply hit me today. I am happy it's here and I am not sure where everyone lived and so forth; but there's something close that is still with me.

Through the mother's joyful definition of living in the moment, the daughter acknowledges a new definition of identity for herself. Although at first viewing, an audience might feel that it is the authority of the daughter that dominates the film and that it is her story that is being told, it becomes evident that we are sharing the mother's story. It might not have a beginning, middle and end, but it affirms the act of telling and focuses on the narrative act. The film itself confirms this focus by emphasizing the spoken: the scenes of the film show either mother and daughter speaking to each other, or the daughter speaks in a very straightforward way to the audience facing the camera directly, thus mimicking a conversation between her and the viewers.

25 This argument might be interpreted not as a movement in American culture from self to self-in-relation, but in Faludi's words as a "backlash," as the definition of "women's sphere" in the domestic as part of a patriarchal ideology. Focussing on relational aspect of identity does not mean confining women to the task of caretaking and presenting homage to female moral superiority in order to defuse the feminist campaign for equality. (Cf. Faludi, 358-366) As women of all generations writing the "traditional family" in the United States have alternately subverted, supported, and put to strategic use received notions of the domestic scene, they will continue to do so in the future in the view of a society growing old. For a culture, permeated as it is with images of youth, our own aging is experienced though the mirror of the family and through the care given to our older relatives. If identity is defined by both continuity and change over a life course, the importance is not only to emphasize the

daughter's position, but also to bring the subject of older women into visibility and to reflect on growing older as women. Growing old will then be seen in the larger context of fundamental human rights for both young and old, women and men.

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The Houellebecq Cure. All Malady Will End in the Neohuman

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Abstract:

Michel Houellebecq's characters frequently suffer from an obsessive thought of death: an insufferable torment undergone especially by ageing individuals. The genetically modified human clone, the neohuman, and his regime, are especially designed to at once eradicate this obsession through immortality and apprehend it through intellectual and scientific lucidity. Paradoxically however, it is seen to return and disrupt also this existential state. Focusing on Maurice Blanchot's question of the secret, 'The Houellebecq Cure' seeks to more closely define this obsession that is pivotal to Houellebecq's tragic scenarios. Moreover, it traces out the significant interaction between the thought and the "irrational" drives of love and carnality. In this light, it argues that the failure of the neohuman predicament hinges on a suppression of these drives. Its impassive detachment is seen to be similar to the existential state of the ageing human. What this points to is ultimately the futility of all efforts of subjectivity at mastering an anguish that comes from what is exterior to it; an anguish that, in truth, constitutes it.

1 Subjectivity in Michel Houellebecq's fiction is constituted through experiences of its own failure. As seen especially in his major novels *Atomised* and *The Possibility of an Island*, the suffering of its helplessness invests subjectivity with its self-referential existence and its logic. "It is in failure, and through failure, that the subject constitutes itself [...]" (Houellebecq, *Island* 118). Subjectivity is defined as a *compulsive reactivity* to its prior impotence. It seems to arise only inasmuch as it *is* a resistance to its own failure, a mechanism that *is* the force of a self-preservation. In Houellebecq, this obdurate self-assertion that is man, finds its most powerful instrument, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in the scientific worldview, "the arbiter of unique, irrefutable truth" (Houellebecq, *Atomised* 377).

2 The nature of this spokesman for subjectivity's self-assertion, its ruthlessly rationalistic outlook where God is absent and death final, is seen, however, to be ultimately incapable in sustaining humanity. At its heart is the irredeemability of death, the prospect of which is an occasion for the most agonizing distress in the subject, its reentry into the suffering of its impotence. "In contemporary Western society, death is like *white noise* to a man in good health; it fills his mind when his dreams and plans fade. With age, the noise becomes increasingly insistent, like a dull roar with an occasional clang" (95).

3 This in turn inspires the subject's irrational and unrelenting search to *affirm itself* through the intimacy of love: "Love seems to have been, for humans of the final period, the acme and the impossible, the regret and the grace, the focal point upon which all suffering

and joy could be concentrated” (*I* 162). On the other hand is the sexual drive which is creating “an artificial mankind, a frivolous one that will no longer be open to seriousness or to humour, which, until it dies will engage in an increasingly desperate quest for *fun* and sex; a generation of definitive *kids*” (26).

4 The intense experiences of love and sexuality however are defined by their fleetingness inasmuch as the subject’s will is always falling short of them. The brief taste of such experiences serves only to render their elusiveness ever more agonizing. The subject is again and again brought to face its own insufficiency. That suffering that instigates the crazed monomania of love and sexual pleasures is finally also what subverts this monomania. For Houellebecq, humanity is led straight into its suffering by the same movement of escape from it.

5 In what follows, I will attempt to address this suffering as an obsessive thought of death, and trace its intrinsic relationship with the sexual-love instinct. Moreover, in this light, I will examine closely the particular nature of Houellebecq’s neohuman and its similarity to the ageing human.

6 The neohuman is science’s endeavour to create a being that does not grow old and die and who therefore does not know death existentially through its recurrent obsessive thought. Since this thought is what initiates the monomania of love and debauchery, the neohuman must also be an intrinsic neutralization of such tendencies – an asexual being. “According to the Supreme Sister, jealousy, desire and the appetite for procreation share the same origin, which is the suffering of being. It is the suffering of being that makes us seek out the other, as a palliative; we [the neohumans] must go beyond this stage to reach the state where the simple fact of being constitutes in itself a permanent occasion for joy [...]” (*I* 326).

7 Immortality is achieved by the DNA cloning of humans, every clone giving rise to another one once his expiration time arrives. The process of memory transfer from one clone to another is accomplished by the life story – the memoirs written by the human whose DNA sample has been stored for cloning after his death. Indeed, a substantial part of the neohuman’s activity is expected to involve a contemplation of the life story and the writing of a commentary about it. This commentary will then in turn be also contemplated upon by the succeeding clone whose knowledge would thus be relatively more mature. In truth, what is perhaps mostly significant about the neohuman’s life is its undivided predilection to rational and scientific knowledge. The contemplation of the life story and its commentaries is undertaken not simply to give that neohuman the memory of his predecessor but to help him or her understand “mankind in its weaknesses, its neuroses, its doubts; we had to make them

entirely ours, in order to go beyond them” (154). Likewise the studying of the writings of the Supreme Sister and the Seven Founders has to do primarily with the acquisition of a knowledge that seeks to rationally comprehend everything once and for all, including all the things that humanity never understood about itself: all emotions and tendencies that devolve on the death predicament. The neohuman theory is thus also the attempt to reach an epitome of rational understanding.

8 Pivotal to the neohuman’s state and form of life is “[t]he existence of a residual mental activity, detached from all everyday concerns and oriented towards pure knowledge” (371). The neohuman continuously abides in the detached impassivity of what he or she considers as the “obvious neutrality of the real” (393): an existence of disciplined indifference to any individual inclinations and instincts. This ideal condition to reach the acme of knowledge is enacted through a life predetermined by routines, adamant to change, and grafted by “an exhaustive cartography of all imaginable life situations” (392). Moreover, neohumans live a sedated life in isolation, communicating with each other only electronically, and their very biology has been modified to decrease emotional intensity such as pain and joy.

9 True contemplative detachment is a total withdrawal into a noumenal sphere, a mental stasis or intemporality exercised to ponder all forms exterior to it and their alterations. Having given himself or herself to the regime and already submitted his or her individuality to the rational will, the neohuman is a spectator looking detachedly at the world as a spectacle, a world that cannot touch or alter the subject, that excludes and suppresses the being’s “irrational” drives for happiness.

10 This condition however is by no means secure in the serenity and equanimity it is supposed to inspire: “[the lucid thought that knew deliverance] had only been produced in insignificant proportions, and it was, on the contrary, sadness, melancholy, languid and finally mortal apathy that had submerged our disincarnated generations” (383). Everything in the neohuman’s regime is set to conform the world to the neutral lucidity of intellectual mastery: “We live, however; we go through life, without joy and without mystery [...]” (3). As Maurice Blanchot points out however, to submit oneself to a life “without secrets and which has taken away all possibilities” (Blanchot, *Step* 46) can also lead to a suffering of that very secret of “*no secret, or no appearance of any secret*” (Blanchot, *Disaster* 137). A life designed to exclude the unknown of secrecy finds itself suffering from this very lack of secrecy, the unbearable in the *excessive familiarity* of everything. Daniel24’s last poem before he dies testifies precisely to this specific affliction, as do the several neohumans who abscond from their isolation to venture out into the world in search of their brethren:

*Insects bang between the walls,
Limited to their tedious flight
Which carries no message other
Than the repetition of the worst. (I 153)*

11 For Blanchot, in the secret, phenomena become too transparent in their habitualness to be recognized as real. Phenomena degrade into *appearance*, and in this sense the visibility of their over-familiarity, of boredom, drags them into equivocation (see also Levinas, *Totality* 90-2). Their apparition announces an indecisiveness of everything, an anonymity that is a hollowing out of all sense. Presence appears as a disturbing, even perverse absence, an “exteriority without interiority” (Massie 49). Gripped by this repulsive ennui, a hiatus opens *within* the I and its rational powers of mastery. Like “wounds, spasms, cataleptic seizures” (Shaviro 139), the I finds itself incessantly *given up* helplessly to a passivity too passive, too infinitely lacking to be felt or understood. This is usually a physical suffering that is outside the subject’s power of suffering it. It is undergone precisely as what *cannot* be suffered, endured, and “*because of this non-power, one cannot cease suffering it*” (Blanchot, *Conversation* 44). Specifically, this is the existential suffering of an excess of impotence in subjectivity, a “death of which one does not die, a death without power, without effect, without achievement” (Blanchot, *Community* 49).

12 We are once again before the suffering of the thought, this time subverting that regime that is constructed precisely to neutralize it. The cause lies in the inherent nature of the rational worldview itself. There exists an untranslatable disjunction between reason and the “irrational” drives of love and carnality. There is in truth no rational comprehension of the drives amongst the neohumans, how they are really like, why they are pursued with such ardour, how they can be controlled. “Goodness, compassion, fidelity and altruism therefore remain for us impenetrable mysteries [...]” (I 118). Neither can they understand fear or regret, the “dull dereliction” (118) caused by their solitary individual lives, also undergone during those moments they are dying. They merely rationalize it to a “failure in perception” (118) and thus as inevitable and deterministic. There is thus *still* a persistence of emotion in the neohuman though this has been “moderated” (139) through artificial biological alterations and the absence of physical contact that the regime itself calls for (141-42). Rather than comprehending the drives and incorporating them into itself, the neohuman regime therefore functions by *excluding* them through a process of suppression, distancing, and then forgetting. And it does so because it knows that these drives lead to the thought’s suffering.

13 Ironically however, it is *because* the regime closes itself from the drives that it suffers the thought, that it is ruptured by its own insufficiency. The thought is caused by the insufficiency inherent in the lucidity of the rational worldview.

14 A similar lucidity is undergone by those human characters that have been forced to retreat from or live through a fatal disappointment in love and sexual pleasures. Particular to their torment is the emptiness left after the irrevocableness of such a failure, the presentiment that all possibility of joy in life has been exhausted. This sense of a terminus coincides with a consciousness of ageing and its effects on the body. Characters such as Annabelle and Michel in *Atomised* and Daniel and Isabelle in *The Possibility of an Island* are eventually all subjected to this obsessive thought. They are subjected mentally and emotionally to the traumatic “revelation” of a horror that keeps on *returning*. What returns is an exposure to the dread of death as alterity, as an *inaccessible proximity*: the dread of an *inability* to reach for or escape from this proximity. As Emmanuel Levinas would put it, subjectivity suddenly finds that “[i]n its skin it is stuck in its skin, not having its skin to itself, a vulnerability”, “the against oneself that is in the self” (Levinas, *Otherwise* 51). It is unable “to escape from [its] compromised identity any more than [it] can retain it or assert it” (Shaviri 103). The anguish in the thought’s return is the subject’s torture of being unable to become what it is not; of being unable to get out of itself, forget itself, and enter its otherness – death; of its self-consciousness as a confinement. Its anguish is also however at the same time the fear to surrender itself to what is not the self: the fear that comes with self-preservation and regards death as an ever looming menace from which it can have no respite. Subjectivity is compelled to be other and yet it cannot be so. “[T]here is no more justification for my presence here,” Daniel admits,

no more human contact, no more assignable objective. There is, however, something else, something terrible, which floats in space, and seems to want to approach me. Before any sadness, any sorrow or any clearly definable loss, there is something else, which might be called the *pure terror of space* [...]. There is no longer any real world, no world, no human world, I am outside time, I no longer have any past or future. I have no more sadness, plans, nostalgia, loss or hope; there is only fear. (*I* 373)

15 Houellebecq’s phenomenon of the senescent broken body, in Isabelle and Daniel for instance, refers precisely to a subjectivity that is at once itself and not itself: it *is*, it finds itself *as* – the incapability to react in any way to the menace of emptiness, its otherness gnawing away at it. Hence the logic of suicide for Annabelle and Christiane in *Atomised* in a desperate attempt at mastering the otherness of their death rather than having to suffer oneself as helpless to its approach: “This weight up of pleasure and pain which, sooner or later, everything is forced to make, leads logically, at a certain age, to suicide [...]. In part, this is

probably because [people] are somewhat tired of life; but the principal reason is that nothing – not even death – seems worse than the prospect of living in a broken body” (*A* 297).

16 Together with suicide, the drive for relief is sought also in the taking of sleeping-pills, tranquilizers, and relentless routine (*A* 336; *I* 116). Having parted company with the intensity of love and the sexual, what is now desperately sought for through all these means is a numbing of sensitivity, an impassive detachment, even the state of an anaesthetized nothingness: “I want for nothing” (*I* 116). This is not unlike the *secure*, mentally static, and self-affirming stance of the neohuman’s “obvious neutrality of the real” (393), though the intention of the latter is primarily intellectual lucidity. In both cases we have a state of being that is an ironic imitation of the emptiness of “[t]he Buddhist disengagement from the body” (384). “I live a quiet, a joyless life,” Annabelle tells Michel. “At nights I read, I make herbal tea and hot drinks. I go to see my parents every weekend, I spend a lot of time looking after my nephew and my nieces. Sometimes I get scared at night; sometimes I feel that I need a man around. I take tranquillizers and sleeping pills, but they’re never really enough. I just want life to go by as quickly as possible” (*A* 279-80).

17 Routine activities lull through their repetition. They repeat the actions of a past that has long lost its meaningful glow: activities undertaken after all activities have ceased to matter. They are performed in the name of an emotion or a meaning that has long faded from the individual’s existence. “[H]uman existence resembles a theatre performance which, begun by living actors, is ended by automatons dressed in the same costumes” (*I* 189-90). Ageing, for Houellebecq, is the indefinite continuation of an existence that has ceased to really belong to oneself.

18 A significant instance of such activity is the human’s and the neohuman’s “nostalgia for desire” (371). Nostalgia for desire is the desire for that bygone desire of self-affirmation in the happiness of love and carnality. We have already seen that the promise of such a self-affirmation is always already marked by its own futility, even when that self does briefly experience its plenitude in such moments. What distinguishes nostalgia for desire in this case is its occurrence at a double remove from its object. Not only does the subject now desire a goal that it *might* reach but never does, but now the *nature* of its very desire is jaded, its desire is already a failure. Whereas the goal in the first desire lies in an unreachable futurity that nonetheless seduces because the desire is truly *felt*, the goal in the second desire has always already died, it is always already buried in an irrevocable past; it is *not* felt, and yet it is *still* strained for. “Not only does sexual desire not disappear, but with age it becomes even crueller, more and more wrenching and insatiable [...] it becomes, and this is maybe even

worse, *cosa mentale*, the desire for desire” (275). Thought rather than heartfelt, this fatal desire is nonetheless the impetus behind many of the neohumans leaving their solitary lives and venturing out into the world in the hope of meeting other neohumans.

19 “I don’t know exactly what awaits me,” Marie23 says, “but I know that I need to live more” (333). And yet none of the neohumans that act upon this desire seem to meet with their brethren to experience the joy of physical and psychological communion. Daniel25, after assuming that Marie23 has failed in her search, is seen to finally abandon his venture and spend the rest of his days in an unknown beach near the sea. Once again, he seems to give in to the infinite passivity that characterizes the neohuman “real”. Daniel25 finds himself once again surrendered to the existential state proposed by his regime: an existential state that for him has now become more akin to “a certain fatalism, linked to an awareness of our own immortality, that brought us closer to the ancient human people” (415). Gone are the illusions of the regime’s promise of omniscient mastery: “I had not found deliverance [...]. The future was empty; it was the mountain. My dreams were populated with emotional presences. I was, I was no longer. Life was real” (422-23).

20 Desire for desire, much like its former more vigorous version, merely *delays* the thought’s suffering. At heart here is the inexorable turning of a vicious circle. The thought constitutes subjectivity and its actions which are at once also defined as a compulsive reactivity to the thought, an assertive resistance. Resistance through reason and science fails due to those limits particular to their nature that they are incapable of crossing. The thought’s return then instigates and constitutes a resistance through the stronger “irrational” drives – which can here therefore be recognized as *symptoms* of the disease. Failure at this point is owing to the inadequacy of the subject’s will. Subjectivity thus finds itself as a vessel for the thought’s return, a *means* by which the thought subverts. Sexuality and love are thus also recognized as *catalysts* of the disease.

21 In this respect, the neohuman follows a life-cycle similar to that of the human. Even though he or she has overcome death through cloning and the life story, his or her existential state remains analogous to that of human senescence, the “grey age” (33). And this is seen not just in the impassiveness and routine-oriented life but also in the suffering from certain “[m]ental configurations [that] generally survive the reality that gave rise to them” (415-16): the thought. And inasmuch as the neohuman suffers the thought, he or she is still dependent on sexuality and love which are intrinsically its symptoms and catalysts: a dependency undergone as nostalgia for desire.

22 As Daniel²⁵ admits resignedly: “Our existence, devoid of passions, had been that of the elderly; we looked on the world with a gaze characterized by lucidity without benevolence. The animal world was known, human societies were known; no mystery was hidden in it, and nothing could be expected from it, except the repetition of carnage” (406-7).

23 The visibility of a world where nothing is hidden becomes in turn the jaded visibility of what refuses to be known, the anonymity of nothingness. If death as an end to a life has been overcome, death as implicit *in* life hasn't.

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Never Too Old To Learn or Rebel: Two *Old Ladies* (*Twee oude vrouwtjes*)¹

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Abstract:

This article studies the literary representation of age and gender in *Two Old Ladies*, a short story composite written by the Dutch author Toon Tellegen. First, it investigates how *Two Old Ladies* refers to the narrative structure of the fairy tale and its stereotypical depiction of old women as antagonistic hags or helpful grannies. A referential reading method is substituted for a poetic one in order to arrive at a better understanding of Tellegen's fiction. Second, the analysis focuses on the conventions of the grotesque as an art form that resists dominant modes of representation and interpretation. Also, in the theories of the grotesque, the body of an old woman often functions as the prototypical grotesque body. Third, the genre characteristics of the short story composite serve to illuminate the dialogical encounter between Tellegen's different stories. The closure of every single story gets undermined by the act of collecting them. The form of the short story composite turns out to be compatible with theories of performativity. In the article, important insights of gender and age studies are called on to deepen the understanding of Tellegen's critical practice as a writer in *Two Old Ladies*.

Introduction

1 *Two Old Ladies*, published in 1994, is a short story composite written by Toon Tellegen, a contemporary Dutch author. It precedes Tellegen's series of modern fables about a squirrel and its animal friends, which made his writings immensely popular. Like the fables, the short stories of *Two Old Ladies* both entertain and challenge the reader. On the one hand, the strange events about different pairs of old women, which remind of the grim reality of the fairy tale world, raise a laugh. The playful turns of the seemingly uncomplicated tales catch the innocent reader by surprise. On the other hand, the reading experience of *Two Old Ladies* can be quite frustrating since the form of the composite persistently counters the possibility of discovering an underlying coherence. One keeps wondering what these tales are about and where they lead to. In the first short story for instance, two old ladies try to ruin their love by taking draconian measures like drinking to excess, eating teaspoons of shoe polish, and hiding behind room dividers. But it is no use. They cannot stop loving one another no matter how hard they try. The whole chain of events is rather comic until one arrives at the end of the story and the women start crying: "Old people must not love each other [...] No!" (Tellegen 5). Where do these harsh words suddenly come from and what do they imply?

2 In this article, I study the literary representation of age and gender in *Two Old Ladies*. Tellegen's short story composite does not mirror reality, but creates an intriguing

¹ All original Dutch quotes from *Two Old Ladies* are translated to English by Aagje Swinnen.

alternative that invites a critical text analysis. The question arises if and how common assumptions about women's old age are rewritten in Tellegen's tales. To answer this question, I present an intertextual reading process. First, I investigate how *Two Old Ladies* refers to the narrative structure of the fairy tale and its stereotypical depiction of old women as antagonistic hags or helpful grannies. I substitute a referential reading method for a poetic one in order to arrive at a better understanding of Tellegen's fiction. Second, I look into the conventions of the grotesque as an art form that resists dominant modes of representation and interpretation. Also, in the theories of the grotesque, the body of an old woman often functions as the prototypical grotesque body. Third, I use the genre characteristics of the short story composite to illuminate the dialogical encounter between Tellegen's different stories. The closure of every single story gets undermined by the act of collecting them. The form of the short story composite turns out to be compatible with theories of performativity. In my analysis, I call on the important insights of gender and age studies to deepen the understanding of Tellegen's critical practice as a writer in *Two Old Ladies*.

1. Bedtime/Deathtime Stories

3 All the short stories of Tellegen's composite, with the exception of the 18th tale, begin with the words *two old ladies* in capitals. The identity of these elderly women, however, is no more than lightly touched upon. The ladies remain nameless and their past is never revealed so that it is difficult to distinguish them from one another. Only details of their physical appearance are explicitly mentioned. In general, the old ladies are fragile, tiny, stiff, grey, bony, bent, wrinkled and wobbly. They wear wide skirts or dresses with large pockets in which they hide handkerchiefs, soaked in cologne. In order to stay warm, the women wrap embroidered shawls around their delicate shoulders. Whether the homes they live in are big or small, in the city or the countryside, up in the sky or low to the ground, they always testify of past glory. Their rooms store up paintings, solid chandeliers, plush fauteuils, heavy curtains, oak tables, etc. In short, both the typification of the protagonists and the depiction of the setting of the events are characterized by the adjective *old*, used as an epithet with *women* in the opening phrases of the stories. *Old* does not seem to refer to old age in its chronological sense in *Two Old Ladies*. It is of no importance if the characters are in their sixties or nineties. The epithet rather calls attention to the state of isolation that comes with old age. The two old ladies live in a world that the young(er) readers do not recognize as familiar.

4 Seldomly, narratives are centered on the adventures of old ladies, as is the case in Tellegen's short story composite. As characters with a specific function in a schematic plot, they mostly form a part of fairy tales (Dingeldein and Ranke). In fairy tales, too, elderly

women do not get a name nor have a past. They live in isolation and embody magic art. On the one hand, old women can use this magic art negatively. In the narrative function of marplots, they do everything that lies in their power to sabotage the hero in the achievement of his/her quest. As wicked witches or vice stepmothers, they are incarnations of evil – a denotation that results from Christianity. The prototypical, dangerous hag in fairy tale land is the witch from “Hansel and Gretel.” She fattens up the imprisoned little boy in order to eat him for dinner, but ends up in the oven herself. She is outright malevolent by nature and only death can put an end to her power. On the other hand, old women can make use of their magic art in a positive way. In the function of helpers, they may facilitate the mission of the hero by offering him/her guidance. In the shape of kind granny or wise crone they use their witch craft to provide for a miraculous instrument that will help solving the initial conflict of the tale – a reference to women herbalists in pre-Christian, popular belief. A famous example of the wise old granny is Mother Holle who rewards the diligent girl with a layer of gold while her lazy sister will never be rid of the indelible pitch she is covered in.

5 The prominence of the characters of the old ladies already raises the anticipation of reading fairy tales. In addition, other characteristics of Tellegen’s short stories remind of fairy tale conventions. First, the events of the short stories often balance between the real and the surreal. In the 10th tale, for instance, the one old lady creeps in a waste disposal bag waiting for the refuse cart to come. That way, she wants to give the other old woman her freedom back. Or, in the 29th story, the one elderly woman persistently pretends to be a bumble-bee as the other lady had requested at her deathbed. Second, the characters have no psychological depth. You only get to know them by the actions they are involved in. Since Vladimir Propp published his morphology of the folktale in 1928, there is no discussion about the crucial importance of events for the definition of the genre. Fairy tales are exciting because spectacular and predictable actions occur at a high pace. A change of character only happens under influence of external circumstances. Third, the recurring opening formula *two old ladies*, reminiscent of *once upon a time*, and the uncomplicated plot structure of the short stories suggest that Tellegen’s composite is meant for readers of all ages. That impression is even reinforced by the illustrations of André Sollie that accompany the tales. But do all these familiar features of the fairy tale genre suffice to get a better understanding of *Two Old Ladies*? And do the old ladies in Tellegen’s stories conform to the stereotyped roles of elderly women in fairy tales? I will elaborate on these questions by means of the 36th story.

A Change of View: The Referential versus the Poetic Mode of Reading

6 At first glance, the 36th short story of *Two Old Ladies* consists of a simple narrative structure. An initial conflict is worked out in a logical and chronological organized series of events. The conflict has to do with a crisis in the relationship of two elderly women. The story of one woman, who no longer tolerates the other being old, bent, and wrinkled is told by an uninvolved narrator. She desires a partner with firmer, younger-looking skin and starts looking for objects that will obstruct any visual contact between them. First, the one old woman builds some kind of fence between the left and right side of the table, which enables her to enjoy her dinner without the disturbing sight of the other. Second, she begins wearing goggles with blackened glasses – an even more radical change in their living together. With the problem solved in this way, the two old ladies can die peacefully. The ending can be read as an alternative to the *happily ever after* in fairy tales. When summarizing the story like this, it turns out that the narrative is reduced to its skeleton. The quest of the one elderly woman for a specific object is not told nor shown. The reader only learns that she brings a packet home with goggles. No other characters are introduced to sabotage or support the one old lady in her quest. As such, both the action and the characters of the story remain rather rudimentary. Despite this simplicity of form, the tale is more incomprehensible as one would expect. The initial conflict (the refusal of the confrontation with the aging body of one's partner) and its solution (wearing goggles with blackened glasses) are far from plausible and reasonable. The tale is characterized by an oddness that is different from the peculiarity of the world of the fairy tale.

7 If the significance of a text does not become fully clear, it is worthwhile to change one's reading method. I will no longer focus on the seemingly realistic chain of events of Tellegen's 36th story, but on its organization as a poetic unity. The composition of the tale is firmly rooted in the semantic cluster that is formed around the opposite words *seeing* and *being blind*. These oppositions are reinterpreted by the exchange of metaphorical for referential meanings. The story transforms the idiom that *love is blind*. This common turn of phrase refers to *but love is blind and lovers cannot see the pretty follies that themselves commit* of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, which means that an amorous person is blind to the failings and shortcomings of his desired one. However, in Tellegen's tale, the idiom *love is blind* is interpreted literally. The one old lady is obsessed by the physical decline of her lover's body. The radical solution lies in the elimination of sight. The woman decides to wear blackened goggles. As such, she prefers blindness to vision in order to save her relationship. This surprising ending indirectly points out the significant difference between young and old love. While falling in love is connected to the seeing ability, like

in *love at first sight*, the love of the two old ladies is vibrant in the dark. Figuratively, *being blind* means being so credulous that one's hopes are easily deceived. The reader of the 36th story does not easily accept the blackened goggles as a valid solution to the problem that the old ladies are faced with. The solution simply is too extreme to be convincing. Obviously, the play with the idiom *love is blind* is not a depiction of an exciting event, but stimulates reflection. One starts wondering what the idea behind this word play could be.

8 The 36th story indirectly refers to the invisibility of women's old bodies in contemporary culture. Today's canonical beautiful body is young and firm, not old and flabby. It is precisely the desire for this ideal of a young body that forms the catalyst of Tellegen's story. The one old woman is repulsed by the aging body of her partner. She cannot stand watching her wrinkled and sagging skin. This rejection of the other woman's old body which the reader experiences as cruel and painful, is a common practice in western society. For this reason, all kinds of products like anti-aging creams, botox injections, and facelifts are successfully put on the market. They promise to slow down the physical decline that the passing of time automatically results in. Marketers and plastic surgeons promote the makeability of the body and, as such, sell the illusion of eternal youth and beauty. The preservation of a youthful presence is more vital to women than men, since they are to a greater extent identified with their bodies. Anti-aging measures have to prevent them from becoming unattractive, or invisible in the heterosexual matrix. Aging women experience a realistic fear for replacement by younger women. Therefore, the American feminist essayist Susan Sontag launched the still relevant term *the double standard of aging* in 1972. Men can age without losing attractiveness or status. Women cannot. However, Tellegen's 36th tale not only incorporates the idea that women become invisible as soon as they age, but also transforms it. First, the negative response to women's aging bodies is not expressed by a man, but by an old woman herself. Second, the rejection of the wrinkled body of the lady is explicitly connected with the affirmation of the elderly's sexual lust instead of its denial. The one old lady makes it clear that she yearns "to caress the slender legs [of the other elderly woman] upwards with her fingertips, along the hip and straight to the front" (Tellegen 78). Third, the solution of the story's initial conflict is rather surprising. The one old woman does not expect the other old lady to change. On the contrary, she herself takes responsibility for the deadlock in their relationship and decides to wear blackened goggles. She assures her partner: "Of course, you cannot help it. It is totally my fault. I know that for sure. I wish I had other thoughts on my mind. Yet, I have these" (Tellegen 79).

9 Simone de Beauvoir writes in *La vieillesse* that one becomes old by looking through the eyes of others who resent one's aging appearance (301-302). Suddenly, the mirror reflection no longer overlaps with the internalized self-image. The disapproving gaze of the other stares back. In Tellegen's story, the look of the other is blocked by means of the blackened goggles. Like Oedipus, the one old lady redeems her guilt by choosing blindness over vision. This drastic choice is a strange method to reconfigure one's feelings of resentment and the question arises whether it is an effective one. Because of the elementary characterization of the story's main characters, the two old ladies seem to be interchangeable. As soon as the one elderly woman rejects the other's aging body, this rejection has the effect of a boomerang. The blackened goggles not only hinder the sight of the partner's body in decline, but blind the one old lady to her own aging process as well. She is blind to the truth, namely that she is aging as much as her partner. In the perspective of the one elderly woman, the other lady may have regained the appearance of youth, but she herself remains as old as before. In short, one could interpret the two old ladies as two sides of the same coin, which might explain why the second old lady never rebels against the first one who starts wearing the blackened goggles. At the end of the story, the other old lady lies awake and feels blessed. This rosy ending is no more than the disguise of the failure and denial of old women's self-acceptance. The one who is obsessed by physical decline, awaits a frustrating old age. And what can be more frustrating than sharing the bed with a partner who literally does not want to see you? Tellegen's 36th tale, for this reason, can be interpreted as a parody on the invisibility of aging women's bodies and of their sex drive by rewriting the turn of phrase that *love makes blind*.

10 The play with the words *seeing* and *being blind* is not only the cornerstone of the story's construction, but also characterizes the relationship between the tale and its reader. At first, the absurd and light-footed features of the story blind the reader. She recognizes the structure of the fairy tale, its stereotypical portrayal of one of the old ladies as ugly and repulsive, the cruelty in the behavior of the other elderly woman, and the modified happy ending. During this referential reading, the reader repeats as it were the blindness of the protagonist to the deeper ideological meaning of the events. As soon as she changes her referential reading method for a poetic one, she can successfully illuminate the many implications of blindness in the text. And then the blindness of the characters in Tellegen's tale results in the seeing of the reader. The story prompts her to reflect on the different layers of the text. In some of the stories of *Two Old Ladies*, Tellegen takes the poetic features of his art one step further. This means that he completely distances himself from using events and

characters as central plot-building elements and elaborates on a single metaphor. For instance in the 20th tale, two old ladies are chatting peacefully on the windowsill. Suddenly the wind lifts them, so that they slowly make their descent to the ground. An old man strews breadcrumbs to the elderly women when they are landed. Another tries to chase them away. The last sentences of the tale hint at an explanation of the strange events: “Grey ladies. In autumn” (Tellegen 43). The color grey refers explicitly to the old age of the ladies who are often compared with grey doves. The actions presented in the tale become familiar when interpreting the ladies as birds instead of human beings. Like pigeons, the elderly women evoke contradictory responses in the people they meet.

2. The Abasement of Eros and Thanatos

11 It has become clear that a referential reading is not the most productive strategy to analyze *Two Old Ladies*. Thus I return to the seemingly realistic events of Tellegen’s tales, but refer to theoretical insights regarding the semiotics of the grotesque. All the stories of *Two Old Ladies* are thematically structured around the abstract and elevated concepts of Eros, the urge to live, and Thanatos, the fear of death. In the translation from these themes to narrative actions, abstract theory is put into concrete practice and connected with the lowness of corporeality. On the one hand, Eros is expressed by means of the explicit sexuality of the ladies: they constantly kiss, caress and bite each other’s ears. On the other hand, Thanatos takes the form of shriveling, being tired, sleeping, and, eventually, dying. Mikhail Bakhtin calls the lowering and intertwining of abstract themes *abasement* that he ascribes to the festive aesthetics of carnival popular culture (qtd. in Van den Oever 61). The fairy tale shares its interest in scatology, sex and violence with the grotesque technique of abasement; although this interest is eliminated from the bourgeois fairy tale versions that today’s readers are most familiar with. Like I already discussed, Tellegen’s 36th story focuses precisely on the tension between Eros and Thanatos. The turn of phrase *love makes blind* is interpreted literally and linked with sexuality and bodily decay. Not only within the stories do Eros and Thanatos get systematically intertwined, but also in between the tales. Because of the specific structure of *Two Old Ladies* as a short story composite, the categories of Eros and Thanatos lose their absolute value. Tellegen’s composite is not a collection of various tales with clearly marked endings and closures, but forms a regenerative cycle. For each pair of old ladies that die in one particular story, a new couple appears at the beginning of the next tale. Therefore, the opening of every new story implies the rebirth of the main characters.

12 I will now examine and clarify the integration of the technique of abasement in Tellegen’s poetic word play of the 24th tale.

The Grotesque Body-drama: Inseparable Fingers

13 The 24th short story is situated right in the middle of *Two Old Ladies* and begins with the following dialogue:

The one lady said: "I regret that one cannot keep something from someone who dies."

"What do you mean?" the other lady asked.

"Well, neither hand, nor foot, nor nose."

"But you might keep hair or nails?"

"No, that does not count," the one lady said. "No, I mean something inseparable, or how can I put it, either way, it is not allowed." (Tellegen 50)

On the one hand, the word *inseparable* refers to the nature of the relationship between the two ladies. They are so devoted to each other that the thought of being left behind makes them feel sorry for themselves. In the sense of *always together* the adjective *inseparable* returns in many of Tellegen's tales, for instance "They were happy, they thought, and inseparable" (18). On the other hand, the term *inseparable* is connected with its opposite *separable* and projected on the dead body. The one old lady wishes to keep a body part that can be separated from the corpse of the other old lady. By body part, she means neither hair nor nails that are easily separated from a human body. On the contrary, she wishes for parts of which the separation from the body would imply this body's mutilation. This kind of violation of a corpse is prohibited in both the world in- and outside the story. In Tellegen's original Dutch text, the word *inseparable* is neologized, since its equivalent *onafscheidelijk* only exists in the first definition of the word and cannot be used in connection with things like body parts. As such, it is a so-called *non-grammaticality* that draws attention and invites an analysis that exceeds the referential reading (Riffaterre qtd. in Van Alphen et al. 41).

14 To specify her longing for inseparable body parts, the one lady recalls a moment from her childhood. At a particularly cold night, her favourite dog froze to death. Its corpse seemed to be made of china. When she tried to lift it, the frozen dog accidentally lost an ear – an analogy with the fragility of a porcelain cup. The memory of the frozen dog inspires the other lady right away. When frosty cold has come, she secretly sneaks out in the evening and waits stark naked for her body to grow numb with cold. In the morning, the one old lady finds her corpse and tries to caress it. But the stiffened body slips from her hands. Fingers, ears and feet come off the corpse and fall on the ground. Before the undertaker arrives, the one lady hides two fingers of her partner in the pocket of her fur coat. She plans to put them in a jar on the mantelpiece where one would expect to find flowers or small statues. The undertaker searches for the missing fingers among the "frozen garbage" (Tellegen 51) and blames the grabby polecats for their absence. Once again, the meaning of the story's bizarre events can be

deduced from the play with one single word: “‘Cold,’ the undertaker said. ‘It is so cold!’ [...] ‘It is much too cold, humph.’” (Tellegen 51-52). The first definition of the word *cold* has to do with low temperatures. In Tellegen’s tale, it is wintry cold outside. Also, *cold* refers to the body temperature of the corpse that is ice-cold. In its second definition, *cold* means heartless. But the women of the story are not unkind at all. On the contrary, they show great concern for one another. The second lady does not want the first one to be left out in the cold – figuratively – once she will no longer be around. She takes the desire of her partner for *inseparable* body parts seriously. Therefore, she goes out in the cold – literally – to die.

15 The fingers of the dead old lady in the jar begin to decompose. They change color and shape, which the one lady mistakes for resurrection. She has to force herself not to take them out of the jar so that she can hold them close to her cheek. In her imagination the fingers are still part of her deceased partner who invisibly is seated on the mantelpiece and watches over her. In other words, the fingers function as the figure of speech *pars pro toto* – Latin for a part for the whole. Occasionally, the one lady regrets her choice for fingers. An ear in the jar would have made it easier to declare her love to or to use for a love bite. When interpreting the structure of the story as a palimpsest, the hypogram *relic* is interwoven in the texture. The concept of the *hypogram* denotes an underlying word around which a text revolves (Riffaterre qtd. in Van Alphen et al. 141). The detection of a hypogram can support the analysis of a narrative. It is no coincidence that in the beginning of the 24th story the other lady mentions hair and nails as separable body parts. A relic is a bodily remains such as teeth, bones, hair or nails to which supernatural powers are attributed. In popular religion, one ascribes soul and spirit to relics. Also, the Catholic Church accepts and stimulates the worship of holy relics, even though the devotion of body parts is in conflict with the belief in the significance of the immortal soul.

16 In the 24th tale the fingers of the one old lady are bodily remains that decompose. By associating these remains with the notion of the relic, their meaning is elevated. The fingers are able to put new life into the deceased elderly woman and, in so doing, make the abstract idea of immortal love concrete. The text turns out to confirm that the old ladies are truly *inseparable*. In other words, a so-called body-drama that is centered round the exposure of the grotesque body replaces the conventional narrative structure (Bakhtin 32). The corpse of the old lady is of crucial importance for the story. Yet, death has multiple meanings. First, it is strongly linked with resurrection. The dead lady reappears in the eyes of her partner thanks to the fingers that are secretly kept in a jar. Second, death has no individual character. It is not introduced to portray a psychological crisis of one of the characters, but enlarges the

universal feeling of being inseparable and connects it with corporeality. Moreover, the body is no longer depicted as an organic whole. Some of its parts can almost function independently.

3. Acting One's Age: the Ban Against Old Foolishness

17 The analysis of the 24th story of *Two Old Ladies* shows that the main characters are head-strong persons who are not afraid of expressing their wishes and acting accordingly. They intentionally break the prohibition on the violation of a corpse. One of the ladies commits suicide so that two fingers can be divided from her dead body and kept as a treasure. The theme of the ban against the separation of dead body parts refers, in guarded terms, to the taboo on the implicated devotion of the women for one another. Different pairs of old ladies who love each other are in the centre of Tellegen's tales. Physical intimacy forms a crucial part of their relationships and should not be overlooked. Stories are a specific means of representation in which ideologies, circulating in our social reality, can be uncritically repeated or subtly altered. In my opinion, gender and age ideologies intersect in *Two Old Ladies*. For this reason, the focus with respect to content is shifted from the psychological portrayal of the main characters to the fundamental conflict between the workings of ideologies and the aspirations of the individual. What do we understand by gender and age ideologies?

18 From the nineties onwards, the American philosopher Judith Butler has extensively and brilliantly written on the mechanism of gender ideologies, for instance in *Gender Trouble*. She argues convincingly that the biological category of sex – in itself a category that stems from human thought – is used to legitimize cultural differences between men and women. The female sex lays the foundation for the development of a female gender identity resulting from a woman's physical attraction to the male sex. Vice versa, a so-called successful male gender identity is based on the desire for the female sex. All sexual expressions that do not conform to these rules of the heterosexual matrix are considered to be abject. The continuation of ideologies depends on the repetition of normative behavior. In Butler's opinion, gender is a performativity instead of an ontology, and as such has more to do with doing than being. The essentialist core of femininity and masculinity is nothing less than a cultural myth. A woman learns to behave according to what is expected from her gender – a rewriting of De Beauvoir's famous quote that *one is not born, but rather becomes a woman*. The same goes for masculinity. It would appear that ideologies are almighty and unchangeable. Nonetheless, the repetition of gender-normative behavior offers the prospect of the subtle alteration of ideological gender scripts. Each form of conduct that deviates from prescribed gender roles has a subversive potential.

19 Butler's theory can systematically be applied to age as an important crucial difference in today's society, like Margaret Morganroth Gullette has done in *Aged by Culture*. Neither the calculation of exact chronological age (the number of years a person has lived) nor the diagnosis of biological age (one's physical health) matters, but the accumulation of instructions for proper behavior that measurable age is attributed to. Once again, it was the French feminist De Beauvoir who first paid attention to the cultural meaning of age in *La Vieillesse*, her history of old age. Influenced by the ideas of existentialism, she observes that one ages in the eyes of the other as I mentioned before. Because the determination of age is inevitably connected with this perception of the other, age is fundamentally social by nature. An age identity is always rooted in a specific matrix, constituted by the dichotomy between young and old. On the basis of arbitrary, so-called biological evidence, generations of human beings are played off against one another. Youth automatically gets the best of it in the youth-obsessed culture of the West. In imitation of Butler's gender theory, age is interpreted as a performativity. Being thirty-two years old, for instance, really means that one has to behave as is expected of someone in her thirties. These expectations relate to the way one organizes one's private and professional life. Mary Russo calls the conformation to age-related behavioral rules *acting one's age* (*Scandal of Anachronism* 27). The repetition of age-normative conduct invites small manifestations of subversion. Within age studies these subversive age acts are characterized as *anachronisms* (Russo, *Scandal of Anachronism* 21). Anachronistic faults undermine persistent age ideologies from within. Old women's anachronistic conduct assumes the proportion of a scandal, because it is associated with the exposure of the aging body. And the display of elderly women's bodies is strictly taboo. Not surprisingly, in Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque, the prototypical grotesque body is the body of the pregnant hag (Bakhtin qtd. in Russo, *Female Grotesque* 29).

20 The short story composite is distinguished from other genres by the double function of its tales, as Rolf Lundén has pointed out (60). On the one hand, the stories are separated entities with a specific dynamics. On the other hand, they are integrated in the totality of the composite. Therefore, the genre is characterized by a permanent interaction between textual strategies that move the stories away from one another and bring them back together. These formal characteristics imply a high degree of reader involvement in the text. The reader constantly needs to detect similarities between the stories without losing sight of the heterogeneity of the totality. The discontinuity of the short story composite involves the potential to modify, rewrite and even contradict the independent stories within the borders of the unity. Subversion is to be found in the repetition of the tales. As such, the genre of the

short story composite is complementary to the theory of performativity. Because of the possible diversity of the stories' content, a dialogue between different world views might originate. For this reason, some theorists are convinced that no other fictional genre can come closer to the complexity of real life. Besides the fairy tale and the body-drama, the short story composite is the third genre, mentioned in this article, which has subversive potential. The sociological approach of the fairy tale shows how this particular genre openly sympathizes with the underdog and in so doing questions the given social structure. Hence, fairy tales could stimulate readers to think critically and act in emancipatory ways. Body-drama's are inherently rebellious as well, because they undermine the conventions of mimesis and text analysis. At the same time, however, both genres depict old women in a problematic way, respectively as witches that can never take on the position of protagonist, and as grotesque abject bodies.

21 In the next paragraph, I clarify how age- and gender-normative behavior is regulated "from above" in the 7th and 42nd story of *Two Old Ladies*. Also, I examine how the specific shape of the short story composite facilitates the subversive potential of the narrative. The 7th and 42nd stories are so-called *anchor stories* (Lundén 124), since they are of crucial importance for the significance of the composite in general.

An Overt Display of Power: In the Closet

22 The two old ladies of Tellegen's 7th tale want to change their everyday life and decide to make a journey. Soon they find out that the outer world has undergone a profound transformation: "the people have become gloomy and resentful" (Tellegen 15). This change is never explained. It remains unclear whether the elderly women themselves have altered or their surroundings. Chilled to the bone and mud-covered, the ladies are discovered, picked up and carried off. A Kafkaesque interrogation scene follows their arrest:

"What were you doing there?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. Simply embracing one another."

"There?? In that mud?? You??"

"We love each other," they whispered. (Tellegen 15)

First, the interrogator is surprised to find a pair of old ladies near the fence of a wasteland. Second, he is shocked by their overt expression of intimacy. In order to discourage the relationship between the elderly women, the interrogator gives a demonstration of exemplary love. He pulls out a dusty woman from a closet and carefully removes the dust from her body with a cloth. Then, he puts her back under lock and key. Without further explanation, the

interrogator turns the two old ladies out of his office. In the interrogation scene of the story, both the logic of the legal case and the pronouncement of a clear judgment are lacking. Why does the interrogator focus on this particularly odd crime scene? The question arises whether the age and/or the gender of the elderly women challenge his expectations.

23 Once again, I rely on the grotesque stylization of Tellegen's prose to explain the absurd performance of exemplary love by the interrogator. What could the relation between love and the removal of dust be? In the 7th story of *Two Old Ladies*, the contrast between *mortal* and *immortal* is replaced by the dichotomy between *the return to dust* and *dusting*. This implies that the removal of dust is connected with regeneration and life. The woman in the closet demonstrates the immortal love between or the inseparability of the partners. The two old ladies go along with the reasoning of the interrogator. Without protest, they accept that their way of living is wrong. Resigned, they agree with their guilt. The women's sense of powerlessness and anxiety is mounting. After the interrogation, memories of their former life and love are hurting. Finally, the story ends dramatically. The elderly women die/return to dust: "They [the two old ladies] shriveled and became stooped. In their dreams, crows, rulers and children ridiculed them. One morning, they died shortly after each other" (Tellegen 16-17). Tellegen's 7th story also proves to be rooted in the abasement of Eros and Thanatos, which is expressed by means of a body-drama. The death of the old ladies, which not only means the end of their lives but of the story as well, is preceded by a remarkable phrase including crows, rulers and children. This phrase refers to the jurisdiction of the middle ages in the Low Countries. If one had to appear in court, it was common practice to be accompanied by family members or by a cock. They had to confirm or contradict the oath of the accused by respectively remaining silent or speaking out loud. The Middle Dutch expression *kint no craet*, which literally means *neither child nor crow*, forms the etymological origin of Tellegen's enumeration of crows, rulers and children. The expression implies that one is totally alone in the world. The uncanny interrogation scene is the most important event of the 7th tale. Mysterious powers that neither the two old ladies nor the reader immediately can see through rule. In a nightmarish atmosphere, the love of the couple of old ladies is dismissed. What exactly does their relationship involve? To find an answer to this question the reader has to rely on the contrastive example of the interrogator. The expression *in the closet* refers to sexual practices that do not conform to the rules of the heterosexual matrix. The two old ladies who are confronted with the woman in the closet are part of a same-sex relationship. The woman who is pulled out of the closet, however, is the love interest of the male interrogator. Strangely, he is the one who orders the pair of old ladies

to withdraw from public life. The suppression of their love leads directly to their death. The hostility that the elderly women already meet in the beginning of the story predicts this tragic outcome.

24 Now, I like to examine the dialogical relation between the Kafkaesque 7th story of *Two Old Ladies* and the 42nd or second to last tale of the composite in which the expression *in the closet* also plays a crucial role. In the opening scene of the 42nd story, two old ladies take a walk and enjoy the idyllic environment. There is not a cloud in the sky until an old man with a pot-belly disturbs the peace:

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“We are out for a walk,” the one lady said.

All of a sudden, the man’s face turned fiery red and he started shouting: “Go home! Quick!” (Tellegen 97)

The question *What are you doing here?* reminds of the question *What were you doing there?* from the 7th story. Like the anonymous interrogator, the man with the pot-belly is surprised to come across the two old ladies outside of the house. Their rather innocent answer to his question immediately inflames the man’s anger. Determined, he drives them back home where he locks them in a closet, filled with musty, discarded, old stuff: “In the closet!” (Tellegen 97). To make sure that the ladies won’t escape, he returns several times to the house. If the women inquire after the reason of their confinement, he makes a sneer: “What reason? No reason! In the closet! [...] What reason... ridiculous. Ridiculous!” (Tellegen 98). Yet, the motivation behind the rejection of the two old ladies becomes clearer in the 42nd tale than in the 7th, because it produces straight away the kind of behavior that the man experiences as intolerable. The old women start kissing in the closet. Clearly, it is their sexuality that has to be hidden from view. The significance of their coming out at the beginning of the story is nullified by the imposed withdrawal in the closet. The old ladies realize that they won’t survive the imprisonment in the closet and try to keep the approaching death at a distance by eroticism and memories of their full life. But to no avail: the forced invisibility results in a powerlessness that hinders their survival. Irrevocably, the story ends with the death of the main characters.

25 The pair of old ladies of the 7th and 42nd story experiences a triple sense of invisibility. First, there is hostility towards women’s aging bodies. Second, the setting leaves no space for the sexuality of the elderly. Third, homosexuality is a taboo within society’s heterosexual matrix. It seems as if these particular two stories preserve this multi-faceted invisibility. But if one takes the repetitive form of the short story composite into consideration, it is worth looking for an analogous story with a different ending. In the 21st story, two old ladies get a

new upstairs neighbor who is small and fat. Presumably, he is old as well, since he lost all his hair and smells like cheese – a reference to *fully mature cheese*. Whenever the elderly women have sex at night, their behavior provokes the man's aggression: "I can hear you! Be quiet! You are too old for that.' The two old ladies whispered in each other's ears: 'Are we too old for this?' They had no idea" (Tellegen 44). The 21st story is complementary with the 7th and the 42nd, because a ban on the sexuality of the elderly ladies is declared. For the first time, the sexuality of the two old ladies is explicitly characterized as inappropriate and connected with old age. Thus, the risk of so-called anachronistic behavior is revealed unambiguously. The elderly women themselves are unaware of any provocative conduct. The controlling voice that interferes with their life style comes from above, not from within. The ladies hope that their neighbor will call it a day, so that they can resume their sexual practice. Unfortunately, they die before he dies. In light of the other stories, this tragic ending is far from unexpected. Yet, after the death of the old ladies, the story takes a surprising turn. In the second part of the tale, a new pair of elderly women and a neighbor clash in a similar way. As soon as they refuse to conform to his standards, hell breaks loose. The man smashes the furniture to pieces and spits in the ladies' faces. A moment's inattention on the part of the man enables them to steal a kiss. With this memorable kiss, the text ends. As such, the 21st story functions as a *mise en abyme*. It repeats the structure of the short story composite. One series of events is told twice but with different outcomes. The happy ending here triumphs over the death of the protagonists and silences the disapproving voice of the anonymous man. In other words, the repetitive structure of the tale makes it possible for the women to successfully, although modestly, undermine conventional age and gender scripts.

Epilogue

26 As I argued in the introduction to this article, the various stories of *Two Old Ladies* both entertain and challenge the reader. At first, they remind of fairy tales that, according to a conventional notion of this genre, easily can be read by anyone. However, by uncovering multiple semiotic layers through different reading approaches, the inherent play with age and gender ideologies becomes ever more apparent. Engaging in a poetic analysis, discerning the semiologies of the grotesque and applying the theory of performativity opens up the many layers of the stories. In *Figuring Age*, the first major publication on women and aging from a cultural studies perspective, Kathleen Woodward points out the need for an *arena of visibility* for elderly women (ix). In my opinion, Tellegen's short story composite is a wonderful literary playground that forces one to reflect on the status of women's old age

in today's western society. As such, it not only makes a complex subject matter visible but puts it on the agenda as well and questions our notions of how we would like our future to be.

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Srole, Carole . *Transcribing Class and Gender: Masculinity and Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Courts and Offices*. University of Michigan Press, 2010.

By Anthony Todd, University of Chicago, USA

1 In *Transcribing Class and Gender*, Carole Srole takes on the difficult task of convincing historians that something they have ignored for years (and frankly, something that sounds fairly boring upon first hearing) is central to our understanding of gender in 19th century America. She succeeds magnificently. Typists, stenographers and clerks don't sound like they'd make a riveting subject for a monograph, but Srole paints a picture of gender in the 19th century office - and by extension, in the 19th century urban world - that is interesting and enlightening. Srole examines professional journals, short fiction, union records, and popular advertising to help her readers to understand the ways in which office workers navigated the complicated gender dynamics of the workplaces and helped to shape the image of the middle class in America.

2 The story of office workers and clerks is central to the transformation of the American economy. As the economy moved away from the small farms and artisans that dominated the late 18th century, more and more Americans went to work in offices. Initially, they worked as copyists, learning the arts of shorthand and handwriting to facilitate business transactions. Later in the century, as the corporate world continued to grow, their work expanded even further, and by the end of the century it included both office work and court reporting.

3 Parallel to the story of the transformation of work in America is a story of the transformation of gender. The 19th century was the era of the "Self-Made Man," a trope that reminded men that, in order to be successful, they had to be prosperous and independent. Ironically, this archetype reached its peak at exactly the time when fewer and fewer men were able to actually strike out on their own and form independent businesses. How did men, and especially male office workers, navigate this transition? With difficulty, as it turns out. As Srole tells us, some did rise through the ranks and lead offices of their own, especially in the realm of legal stenography and court reporting. More often, however, they maintained their masculine identity by re-defining their work as a "profession," emphasizing education and training, and by shutting women and the working class out of the highest echelons of office work.

4 Women's roles underwent a similar transition, as working outside of the home became more acceptable over the course of the 19th century. However, women's work was still degraded and associated with the working class. Thanks to the efforts of men, women were usually limited to the lowest office positions, and many fought to gain access to higher paying, more prestigious jobs. Female office workers, like their male counterparts, had to refashion their own image to include professional standards and training. In addition, women had to adopt new modes of dress and behavior - emphasizing plainness and modesty - to distinguish themselves from working-class stereotypes and emphasize their middle-class status.

5 Srole's depiction of these transformations is intricate and detailed. She uses a group of sources, the "phonographic" journals of the time, to great effect. These journals were tools of the profession, used to train office workers and inform them of the latest developments. But, they also included fiction in which the main characters were clerks and stenographers. Often, this fiction reflected the prevailing views and ambitions of the profession. For instance, male stenographers were depicted as clever and scientific, sometimes solving crimes or outsmarting their bosses. Female office workers were initially represented through the archetype of the "typewriter girl", a floozy who cared more about dressing to find a husband, especially a rich one, than her job"(8).

6 Srole uses the concept of "gender balance" to explain the way these transformations were accomplished. Rather than simply placing office workers into a crude typography of archetypes (the Self-Made Man, the New Woman) Srole points out that most office workers consciously worked to combine different parts of these identities. These "usable gender balances" (10) also allowed workers to emphasize their middle class status, as the working class was characterized by extreme gendered behavior. In their view, working class men were crude, working class women were frivolous, and they wanted to be neither.

7 In particular, both men and women worked to create a balance of masculine and feminine traits that allowed them to maintain a sense of professionalism and gendered self-respect. The standards of professionalism men created allowed (and required) them to express some "feminine" traits: neatness, dignified behavior, attention to detail. But these were balanced by their emphasis on the hard work of the stenographer, their scientific study and their equation of the mental strain of the office worker with the physical strain demanded of the "strenuous man."

8 Office women manipulated their gender balance to move away from the "typewriter girl" and to create the "businesswoman." A distinctly middle class figure, businesswomen

focused on respectability in an attempt to improve the standing of the women who worked. “By locating all of the negative feminine traits in women they deemed objectionable and accusing them of improper work habits, female commercial educators and the shorthand press helped define the competent female stenographer and typewriter as middle class and respectable” (179). However, women still maintained a feminine identity - they may have taken on masculine traits, but they were not becoming men. Women “merged the vocabulary of business with the feminine ethic of caring” (183) to become effective and indispensable workers.

9 Srole is at her best when discussing the large transformations in gender roles over the course of the 19th century, and her use of sources is magnificent. The disadvantage of this source base lies in its lack of compelling characters. While “the profession” (or the men or women within it) is described as acting as a group, it is sometimes difficult to get any sense of agency. The transformations she describes are momentous and self-conscious, but there aren’t any particular activists or individuals driving the changes she observes. She often uses fiction to stand-in for real characters, and this can be quite effective in providing texture. But a more complex understanding of the mechanics of the changes in gender and the profession could be useful and interesting.

10 Srole has succeeded in combining large historiographical and sociological trends from a variety of scholarly literatures, including the stories of professionalization, urbanization, womens’ move into the workplace and the anxiety of 19th century men, into a single narrative. As such, this book is suitable reading for a variety of audiences, and parts could be useful examples for undergraduate teaching. Another of Srole’s contributions lies in placing men and women in mixed-gender spaces and analyzing their interactions. So much work on the history of gender forgets that, despite the ideology of “separate spheres,” men and women did interact for much of their lives. That interaction is at the heart of her story, and makes her book of interest to all scholars with an interest in gender history.

Roden, Frederick (ed.). *Jewish/Christian/Queer: Crossroads and Identities.*
Queer Interventions

By Sarah Imhoff, Indiana University, USA

1 “The power of ‘queer’ is its breadth,” writes editor Frederick Roden in his introduction to *Jewish/Christian/Queer*. The volume takes advantage of—and pushes the boundaries—of that wide vastness of possibility for the signifier “queer.” Although the disparity of historical and disciplinary approaches of the essays sometimes threatens to pull the collection apart at the seams, its threads never quite break. And in the end, the risk of pulling apart is worth the reward of a better garment. Few scholars will be familiar with all of the material here: it ranges from a textual analysis of Pauline scripture to a psychoanalytic reading of Freud’s relationship to Rome to an architectural and theological argument for the queerness of Queen Anne Churches, to name a few. A queer group indeed. The radical diversity of material, however, undeniably demonstrates the versatility of queer theories. Ultimately, therein lies the lasting argument of the volume: Queer theory can and should touch religious studies scholarship across discipline and material. *Jewish/Christian/Queer* becomes Joseph’s coat: Jewish, Christian, contested, beautiful, and queer.

2 The greatest strength of *Jewish/Christian/Queer* is also its most significant liability: the refusal to confine “queer” to a stable meaning. Over the course of the volume, authors use the term differently, and even within single essays, authors play with the term. Eugene Rogers, Jr. follows Judith Butler’s formulation of queer as an act of continual repetition in order to subvert and displace the terms of a discourse (26-7) and later as an act of querying social roles (31). Caroline Gonda’s literary readings of the “half-Jewish” Pamela Frankau imagine queerness mainly as non-normative sexuality, although she explores it in conjunction with Frankau’s own split national and religious identity. Chris Mounsey uses a metaphor of sex, bodies, and desire to explore the queerness of the architecture in Anglican Queen Anne Churches. Alan Lewis and Goran Stanivukovic discuss Freud’s “queer longing” in terms of both theories of same-sex desire and hermeneutical strategies. Steven Kruger acknowledges that queer can be associated with instability and social resistance but also offers the case of Guillaume de Bourges and medieval “convert orthodoxies” as an argument for recognizing the occasions of strategic stability of queerness. Other contributors, like Bryan Mark Rigg, who concentrates his study on *Mischlinge* (partial Jews) as boundary transgressors, reference definitions of queerness only obliquely.

3 The result is a volume which, taken as a whole, reinscribes much of the “queer *equals* destabilization *equals* resistance to normativity” discourse to which Kruger takes exception. At the meeting places of Jewish and Christian, Roden asserts, “there is rhetorical, theological, and discursive difference. That is a queer crossroads. ... Likewise, the religious/homosexual meeting is always already queer” (4). Although both these locations may be shot through with difference and refusal of certain boundaries, what prevents such a broad sense of queerness from collapsing into difference more generally?

4 Although the term “queer” is a moving target, many of the contributors manage to hit it. Both chapters on early common era religious texts present the construction of Christianity, Judaism, and sexuality in a complex and compelling way. Eugene Rogers, Jr. argues, through a close reading of Paul’s use of “*para phusim*,” that the term constructs both Gentiles and non-normative sex acts as queer. In a rich recuperative textual reading, Rogers goes on to argue that the Holy Spirit also occupies the queer location of *para phusim*. Daniel Boyarin begins by taking the term “queer” in its common connotation of the presentation of gender and sexuality that deviates from dominant norms. But his analysis of the “erotic adventures of Rabbi Meir” suggest another crossing of boundaries: those of genre. Far from occupying a position of a single set of sealed literary conventions, the tales of Rabbi Meir demonstrate their reliance on and responsiveness to Roman novelistic literature and Christian gospels. In his characteristic combination of the charm of rabbinic storytelling and the incisive analysis of a queer theorist, Boyarin argues that the queerness of the tales lies both in Rabbi Meir’s sexual adventures with supernatural beings and the promiscuity of the *aggadot* with respect to genre.

5 The more modern essays also simultaneously deploy and reshape the boundaries of queer theory and religion. Alan Lewis and Goran Stanivukovic’s reading of Freud shows masterful engagement with both psychoanalytic and queer theoretical literature, but also offers an insightful new reading of Freud’s writing about homosexuality through his relationship to the figural Rome. The sword of his early writing cuts both ways, they claim: “on one hand, it is subversive by introducing the unstable split subject; on the other, his ‘authority’ is complicit in the regulation of sexuality” (140).

6 Although it does not have the same kind of thematic continuity of its most significant predecessor in wide-ranging queer theory, *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*,¹ Roden’s volume does provide sustained engagement in questions about the implications of religious conversion and *mischlingkeit* (mixed-ness) for the construction of socially recognizable

¹ Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini, *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (Columbia University Press, 2003).

identity. Its insistence on considering Judaism and Christianity as interacting partners, while requiring authors to juggle multiple sets of cultural reference, sets the collection apart from other contemporary publications on queer theory and religion.²

7 As a title in the series called “Queer Interventions,” *Jewish/Christian/Queer* is mostly likely to stage a successful intervention at the level of the scholar. Because of the quality of the individual work of the contributors, most scholars of Christianity or Judaism are likely to recognize the promise of queer theory in their own subfields, while those who work in gender studies will see exempla of the movement beyond an antagonist religion-versus-queerness.

² The bulk of these concern themselves primarily, if not exclusively, with Christian theology. See, for instance, Margaret D. Kamitsuka, *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity* (Fortress Press, 2010); and Gerard Loughlin, *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007); Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2003).

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