

Inesa Shevchenko-Hotsuliak and
Núria Casado-Gual

The Ageing Self through Dramaturgies of Memory Loss and Love: Tristan Bernays' *Old Fools* and Nick Payne's *Elegy*

This comparative study of Tristan Bernays' *Old Fools* (2018) and Nick Payne's *Elegy* (2016) concerns two contemporary plays in which love manifested in middle-age and older adulthood is a determinant factor in the reconceptualization of the ageing self, particularly when afflicted by memory loss or cognitive failure. Positioned within the framework of theatre and ageing studies, and drawing from their intersection with gender studies and disability theories, the study demonstrates that the narrative arc that both texts recreate is not free of overtones of decline. However, the manipulation of chronological time in both plays through different techniques, as well as the importance of their love story, one between a man and a woman in *Old Fools*, and the other between two women in *Elegy*, help disrupt the binary of young/old perpetuated by ageist cultures, and, ultimately, undermine rigid constructions of identity in old age. The article concludes that new theatrical representations of ageing that develop narratives of love not only enable richer debates on the construction of the self, but ultimately contribute to an all-inclusive stage and, with it, to an age-friendly society.

Inesa Shevchenko-Hotsuliak is an assistant lecturer at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of Lleida in Spain and a doctoral student. She holds a MA degree in Secondary Education Teacher Training and Language Teaching (English) from the University of Lleida. She is a member of the European Network of Ageing Studies (ENAS), the Institute for Social and Territorial Development (INDEST), and the research groups Grup Dedal-Lit and CELCA at the University of Lleida.

Núria Casado-Gual is Full Professor at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures of the University of Lleida. She is the co-editor of three volumes of essays on literary representations of ageing and of an issue on age and performance for *Theatre Research in Canada* (2021). Her articles on cultural interpretations of old age have appeared in such journals as *Ageing and Society* and *The Gerontologist*, and *Feminist Media Studies*. Núria Casado-Gual is also a theatre practitioner and playwright.

Key terms: contemporary drama, binary, disruption, disability, identity.

AT THE EPICENTRE of the so-called 'longevity revolution', ageing has become one of the most salient topics of socio-economic, health, political and cultural debates.¹ However, the theatre canon, especially in the western world, has scarcely reflected the diversity and richness of old age through which the experience of growing older can be discussed.² In fact, in classical and commercial theatre, older individuals have commonly been represented in a stereotypical, highly reductive, and therefore ageist way,³

mirroring the 'narrative of decline' by which ageing has typically been understood in our culture.⁴ As pioneering age critic Margaret M. Gullette has amply demonstrated, contemporary western societies nurture and glorify youth, yet fear and despise old age; thus the main cultural discourse around ageing inextricably (even exclusively) associates ageing with loss, decay, and, ultimately, death.⁵ Such a prejudiced association resounds in all forms of popular culture, portraying older people and, very especially,

older women, as generally lonely, burdensome and/or demented.⁶ The theatrical tradition has not been an exception in this respect.

In contemporary theatre, however, the growing importance of the theme of ageing (closely related, at the same time, with our society's anxieties around dementia and death) has started to generate some alternative accounts of later life. The effects of this cultural transformation can be seen in the emergence of a variety of artistic expressions with age-centred motifs and, in particular, in the gradual growth of a more complex dramaturgy of old age.⁷ Within this new dramaturgical tendency, an emphasis on the theme of memory can be observed – one which, in line with current debates on the self, presents memory as a dynamic component of the older person's sense of identity.⁸ At the same time, a number of plays are starting to show ageing characters developing or intersecting with a narrative of love that had typically been reserved for younger characters.⁹ While these dramaturgical intersections enrich the dramatization of old age considerably and broaden understandings of later life, the pervasive narrative of decline continues to underlie many of these new portrayals of ageing in more or less overt ways.

This article offers a comparative study of Nick Payne's *Elegy* (2016) and Tristan Bernays' *Old Fools* (2018), two British plays for mature or older actors in which both memory loss and late-life love are shown to interweave with the theme of old age.¹⁰ Both playscripts were published in the year of their respective productions. *Elegy* premiered at the Donmar Warehouse in London in 2016 and, as a clear testimony of Payne's successful career, was nominated for the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play in 2017. *Old Fools* was written in 2014, and Sharon Burrell requested it for a production that premiered at Southwark Playhouse in London in 2018. The fact that the two play-texts have drawn significant attention from both the professional sector and audiences in general testifies to a wide concern about old age that affects different generations. Even more important, the practical coincidence of both plays in the cultural context of the London scene within a relatively

short period of time reflects the need of a new generation of contemporary playwrights to explore and address the intricacies of ageing from different angles.

Positioned within the framework of theatre and ageing studies, this article demonstrates that, while the narrative arc that both texts recreate in their respective stories of memory loss clearly displays overtones of decline, their love story promotes more complex dramatizations of ageing. At the same time, the manipulation of chronological time in the two texts subverts the representation of (old) age as essentially related to the end of the life cycle. The ambivalent approaches to ageing of both plays impregnate their main dramaturgical features. The sections that follow present an analysis of their storylines (which are highly dependent on their dramatic conceptualization of memory), their elements of characterization (especially connected with their love narrative), and the disrupted temporalities of the two plot designs, which have significant connotations for the dramatization of ageing. Beyond the plays' alignment with the 'declinist' tradition in some of their features, the analysis demonstrates that Payne's and Bernays' representations of old age pave the way for richer conceptions of later life on and off the stage.

The Drama of Memory Loss, or the Persistent Tragedy of Ageing

Memory is one of the most powerful of theatre tropes. To a certain extent, all plays evoke worlds that are remembered, or they reassemble signs that stimulate the spectators' own memories, making sense of the fictional stage world. It is on this premise that Marvin Carlson established his seminal notion of the 'haunted stage' through which every play can be regarded as a 'memory machine' that, à la Ibsen, invokes ghosts from the past – a continuous *déjà-vu* that is perpetually reinterpreted.¹¹ Besides its foundational value at a metaphorical level, memory has been of such fundamental importance to modern theatre as to generate its own subgenre: the so-called 'memory plays'. Valerie Barnes Lipscomb demonstrates, in one of the most important

studies of theatre and age to date, that this subgenre has predominantly been focused on its fluid representation of time. However, she notes, scholars 'tend to overlook that [the memory play] is always about ageing'.¹²

Plays on memory failure and its effects are sometimes presented more generally as examples of 'scientific drama', as with the case of *Elegy*, or else they are advertised as dramatic studies of Alzheimer's disease, as with *Old Fools*.¹³ But, ultimately, their resort to dementia or memory loss becomes a trope or, in the words of Hannah Zeilig, a 'cultural metaphor' that reflects a much more extended social concern, namely the fear of old age: a phobia that has even become 'a fate worse than death' in the contemporary world.¹⁴

Gullette observes through various examples of recent British and American theatre seasons that contemporary theatre often couples old age with cognitive weakness.¹⁵ More problematically, a good number of the plays she examines suggest that the most frequent denouement for older characters suffering from this condition is euthanasia or suicide. As Gullette contends, this dramaturgical tendency can promote 'neuroageism' or 'dementism', as the scholar alternatively terms it, and, in this way, the dramatic formula generates an extremely reductive view of the older person.¹⁶

Without resorting to such an extreme dramaturgical device, *Elegy* and *Old Fools* participate in this dramatic trend through the importance that memory loss has in their main storylines. In both cases, one of the older protagonists is affected by a cognitive condition that either seriously affects their capacity to remember (*Elegy*) or has a severe impact on their autonomy (*Old Fools*). Both plays, coherently with their emphasis on loss, announce the importance that memory failure will have from their very first scenes. In *Old Fools*, the opening scene, a flashback where Tom is shown flirting and joking with Viv, his wife-to-be, presents the protagonist as firmly believing this: 'I never misremember. I'm like an elephant – never forget.'¹⁷ In fact, this is the first of many examples of dramatic irony with which Tom is to be proved wrong in the play. Likewise, in *Elegy* the repetition of the word 'remember' in the first scene, as well as recurrent evocations

of a poem about a 'dead elephant' whose body is 'scattered', warns readers and spectators about the dramatic weight of memory loss in the play.¹⁸ In Payne's text, as in *Old Fools*, Lorna's memory is shown to fail through the degenerative disease she suffers (reflected especially in the scene named 'THREE'). However, in most of the scenes of the play, her memory loss mainly involves her forgetting everything about the last 'twenty, twenty-five or so years' of her life – an important lapse that erases the relationship she had with Carrie. After her brain surgery, Carrie is a stranger to her.

In both plays, memory loss (the result of a disease or of a medical procedure, or both) is not only an important trope but also the source of dramatic conflict, thereby favouring 'the tragedy of dementia' that prevails in our hypercognitive, ableist society.¹⁹ Despite their different storylines, both plays respond to the two types of tragic story about dementia which cultural gerontologist Anne Davis Basting has identified as dominating popular culture. The first type represents dementia 'as a calamity that can only be eliminated if scientists are given enough time and money to find the cure' (a pattern to which the story in *Elegy* clearly responds); the second portrays dementia as 'the tale of the loss of an accomplished, inspiring person, a person slowly emptied out by a devastating illness' (observed in *Elegy* when Lorna learns about her disease, and especially in *Old Fools* through Tom's life story).²⁰

Elegy is set in a semi-futuristic context, when groundbreaking advances in medical science extend life and make neurodegenerative diseases 'treatable' and 'curable' through a brain operation that replaces the damaged cells with a form of neural prosthesis. While the new prosthetic guarantees the brain's cognitive capacities, the 'memories associated with particular pathways or any tissue' removed are to be 'permanently lost' as if they had 'never been there in the first place'.²¹ Through the dramaturgical technique of reverse chronology, by which the seven scenes of the play are presented, the opening scene of *Elegy* – that is, the scene named 'SEVEN' – shows Carrie and Lorna, both in their sixties, contemplating the end of their relationship

shortly after Lorna has failed to recognize Carrie as a result of her surgery. Through both Carrie's reconstruction of their past in this opening scene, and in the rest of the play, the reader/viewer gets to know that Lorna and Carrie had met in their forties and had been happily married until Lorna was diagnosed with a degenerative brain disease that would severely affect both her physical and cognitive functions.

The flashback scenes also show that, as Lorna's appointed 'LPA' (the legal holder of her last will), Carrie decides to 'save' her partner from the prognosis she is given by giving her permission for Lorna's operation. Despite her initial and strongly felt wish to become Lorna's 'longanimous encourager' throughout the course of her disease,²² Carrie soon realizes she will not be able to endure witnessing her partner's descent into the vegetative state to which her prognosis binds her. Carrie's final line in a scene where the most visible signs of Lorna's dementia are manifested – 'I can't do this. I am sorry I can't do this . . . ' – suggests her taking the decision to visit the neurologist who has the key to her cure.²³ Carrie's appointment with Dr Gomez is shown in the preceding scene, 'FOUR', where her wish for Lorna to 'have a life . . . A life without [her], but a life nonetheless' outweighs Lorna's wish not to have 'the very fabric of [her] being' altered.²⁴ Through Carrie's decision, the perception of dementia as a calamity that must be avoided is clearly enhanced. In line with this perspective, the play's references to the degeneration of the ill/ageing body highlight the close connection between old age, decay, and, ultimately, death.

Tom and Viv's story in *Old Fools* also recreates a narrative of decline through the association between old age and dementia or cognitive failure. The play develops episodes of Tom and Viv's life as a couple from their youth to their old age, but as early as the second scene it is clear that Tom's will be a slow descent into dementia in his later years. In fact, in Bernays' two-hander, the actress plays a few characters other than Viv, thereby signalling the play's emphasis on Tom's experience. Many of the scenes in which

Tom is presented as an older man indicate his gradual memory loss until he cannot articulate his thoughts and becomes dependent.

The entire play is devised as a collage, in which different temporalities are juxtaposed. Within the apparently chaotic combination of scenes, which are not explicitly divided in the text, but simply indicated through the use of bold print in a line that starts a new sequence, a double sense of order is always preserved, which, again, evokes the narrative of decline. On the one hand, despite the play's temporal disruption, readers and spectators can easily reconstruct the timeline of Tom and Viv's life together. On the other hand, all the scenes in which Tom is shown as an older person with dementia are always preceded or immediately followed by a scene in which Tom is shown as a young, vigorous, cheerful, caring, independent person, who performs, more or less successfully, his expected roles as a partner, father, and man. The reader/spectator is led to reconstruct, through the play's complex temporality as well as its strategies of juxtaposition, the 'then-now tragic storyline' that aligns Tom's dementia with loss and dependence.²⁵

Both *Old Fools* and *Elegy* also include some dramaturgical elements that resist an interpretation centred on decline and its pre-ordained connection between old age and memory loss. While none of these features of the plays are univocally positive, they do introduce significant nuances in the figures' characterization and their dramatic universe, which dramatize old age from a far more complex angle.

The Complexities of 'Old Love' through its Intersection with Memory Loss

The play suggests a richer depiction of ageing and the relevance of the theme of love in its universe of discourse. In general, intersecting the topic of love with that of old age (and even more, with memory loss) allows for the older characters to participate in a narrative from which they are commonly excluded. As Amir Cohen-Shalev and Esther-Lee Marcus observe, love 'unfold[s] in tandem with age'

throughout the life course, but its conventional understanding is strongly coupled with youth.²⁶ Likewise, the representations of intimate relationships among the old are regarded as inaccurate and frightening, which clearly reflects ageist and stereotypical views of older people as emotionally disengaged or, by contrast, as sexually deviant.²⁷ Just as the rise of life expectancy has brought about a reconsideration of old age,²⁸ the narratives of intimacy between the old are also being reviewed, presenting late-life love not only as possible (and acceptable), but also as desirable, and even as another alternative way of understanding the rich spectrum of later life.²⁹

The taboo of love in old age (often in connection with the theme of sexuality) has been especially challenged in recent mainstream cinema through new narratives of romance in middle and old age.³⁰ Similarly to the big screen, the stage has slowly begun to include an alternative perspective of old age through new narratives of 'old love', to borrow Cohen-Shalev and Marcus's term.³¹ Despite the ongoing tendency to exclude older characters from new dramaturgies of love, as evidenced in Korbinian Stöckl's selection of British plays that explore this theme,³² a few adaptations of emblematic Shakespearean romantic tragedies and comedies have given the lead roles to older actors, thus challenging the long-term theatrical figure of the *senex amans*, all too often used as an object of ridicule.³³

Such cases in point include: Ben Power's *A Tender Thing*; Sean O'Connor's *Juliet and Her Romeo*; Cristopher Goodrich's 2015 production of *Romeo and Juliet: Love Knows No Age*; Gaye Taylor Upchurch's adaptation of the same play at the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival 2022 (in which the lead characters were played as a couple married for thirty-eight years); Mark Rylance's age-blind production of *Much Ado About Nothing*; and Eberhard Petschinka's *Romeo and Juliet Awaken*, performed on the Spanish stage in 2023.³⁴ The technique of age-blind casting to reimagine emblematic love stories has also contributed to generating new debates around old age, despite the mixed reviews that such experiments have often received.³⁵ However, the combination of memory loss in later life

with the theme of love is rarely found in contemporary drama. Such plays as Abi Morgan's *Lovesong* (2011), Florian Zeller's *The Height of the Storm* (2018), and Matthew Seager's *In Other Words* (2019) are among the very few that, so far, bear witness to this new dramaturgical intersection.³⁶

The plays analyzed here are certainly exceptional in this respect. More particularly, their intersection of the themes of love and memory loss in old age resists the narrative of decline in at least two ways. On the one hand, they present the protagonists within long-term (*Elegy*) or life-long (*Old Fools*) relationships, by which they render them agents of sentimental relationships in constant flux; and the theme of love is given as much dramatic weight (*Elegy*) or even more (*Old Fools*) than the dramatization of memory loss and its consequences in both plays. On the other hand, the intricacies of love itself are allowed to emerge only when the disease of one of the couple affects the couple's relationship (*Elegy*) or threatens their life together (*Old Fools*). The health crisis in both cases gives rise to important dilemmas about the nature and interpretation of (romantic) love. Such important considerations are inevitably voiced by the older characters. In terms of representation, and as mentioned earlier, *Old Fools* places great emphasis on all the episodes of Tom and Viv's relationship well before Tom's dementia changed their life. Within those episodes, and throughout the play, Tom is shown as a seducer, a lover, a husband, and a partner to Viv, as well as a caring father of their daughter. All these roles favour rich characterization as well as a life course approach to their story.

In a similar way, yet in a different direction, the semi-chronological construction of their life narrative shows the couple as undergoing several crises well before the first signs of Tom's dementia appear. By presenting this couple within the continuum of their life together, the play represents their love story as a sequence of obstacles which they face and mostly overcome. Tom's illness completely transforms his relationship with Viv into one of dependence. Yet the play effectively frames the couple within a

broader narrative, with the help not only of different flashbacks, where the care dynamics are absent, but also that of romantic referents from old songs such as 'The Way You Look Tonight' or classic films (*From Here to Eternity*), which recur at different stages of their relationship. These details make them resistant lovers beyond the severe effects that a cognitive disease has on them in their later years.

Elegy also carefully tackles the possible recreation of one's self, despite and through memory loss, by placing its characters within a narrative of romantic love. Lorna's reliance on Carrie's faith to reconstruct her memories – 'I'm going to need you to remind me who I am' – is deeply grounded in the twenty years of their intimate relationship, which both women had cherished until Lorna underwent her surgery.³⁷ The fact that the love story in this dramatic piece is one between two women confronts the popular stereotype of older women as asexual and ridiculous when in love.³⁸ At the same time, although the text does not refer to the politics of Lorna's and Carrie's lesbian relationship, the play broadens its remit to older homosexuals.³⁹ Considering that gay relationships, especially between older women, are either scarce or mostly clichéd in cultural representations,⁴⁰ *Elegy* contributes to increasingly complex portrayals of love between female characters, and introduces an important element of intersectionality in its depiction of love in later life.⁴¹

Elegy and *Old Fools* reflect the extent to which the combination of memory loss and old age with a love narrative enables profound explorations (and deconstructions) of the nature of romantic love *per se*. In the case of Bernays' play, Viv's physical and emotional weariness when she visits Tom at the nursing home dramatizes the human limits that can jeopardize, and even put an end to, an otherwise solid love relationship that had been idealized as eternal. Likewise, Payne problematizes the allegedly perennial power of romantic love through Lorna's determination to start a new life without Carrie after the operation. As a matter of fact, she finds the fact that they are still married 'an issue' that needs to be made 'cleaner'.⁴²

In both cases memory loss (or dementia) seems to win the battle over romanticized views of perennial love; and, in a way, it does, considering the denouement of both love stories. However, both love relationships also bring to the fore the value of commitment in true love. Thus, while one of the spouses (Viv, Carrie) firmly believes in their marriage vows to care for their ill partner until death separates them, the other spouse (Tom, Lorna), knowing about their future role as cared-for dependant, is capable of thinking about their partner as an individual, with a life of their own to be lived without them. While Tom dares to ask Viv, 'What will you do – when it gets worse?' towards the end of the play,⁴³ Lorna more explicitly gives her wife 'permission to go' at a future stage of her illness.⁴⁴

In this sense, both *Elegy* and *Old Fools* respond to a profound exploration of love by not only wondering about its nature, but by dramatically examining its implications when memory loss becomes part of the matrix, and the lovers' self-image as a couple is not only challenged but eventually transformed by this condition. On the cover of Nick Hern Books' edition of Bernays' play-script, this is indicated through the old photograph of a couple kissing as bride and groom, printed on a scale of fading grey that suggests the passage of time. Even more clearly, Payne's play recreates aspects of Lorna's and Carrie's wedding day through Carrie's poignant reconstruction of their romance, as well as through Lorna's dispersed memories during her incipient dementia and her undecipherable dreams after her operation. Significantly, their evocations are connected to two poems they chose for that day, which, through the titles 'Wedding' and 'A Scattering', suggest both union and dissolution. The structure of both plays refuses to give definitive answers to the contradictions and dilemmas posited by their love narratives, thereby complicating further their depiction of old age.

Disrupting Time, Reconstructing the Self

The dramatic structures of *Elegy* and *Old Fools* are similarly devised through a disruption of chronological time. Although used differently,

this dramaturgical device dismantles traditional representations of the life course that underline the binaries young/old, healthy/infirm, or life/death, which polarize different life stages while at the same time reproducing a descending arc. Thus, Payne's and Bernays' inclination for a non-linear temporality allows for an alternative representation of the ageing self, which highlights the multilayered nature of the older person's identity as an amalgam of different selves. At the same time, it underlines the characters' sense of personhood. While debates around personhood are characteristic of some branches of ageing studies, especially those dedicated to the fourth age and care,⁴⁵ the interconnection of the process of ageing and identity, defined as a manifestation of various selves one has accumulated throughout life, underpins the entire field.⁴⁶ It is the latter that can be more clearly appreciated in contemporary dramaturgies of old age, which defy the vision of the self as fixed or sealed, and, similarly, destabilize a linear conception of time within their representation of the life course.

Non-linear conceptions of temporality have been embraced by cultural and mainstream gerontologists as a way of challenging the misguided perception of ageing as decline, and the separation of old age from earlier stages within the life continuum.⁴⁷ Often associated with the notion of 'queer time' and the concept of 'queer temporality', the non-linear representation of time, and, therefore, of ageing, implies stepping out of the common or (hetero)normative progression of life that evolves in vital turning points marked by 'birth, marriage, reproduction, and death', from which some social groups or communities (such as those identified as LGBTQ+) usually deviate.⁴⁸ Non-conventional approaches to dramatic time have likewise gained visibility within theatre and performative explorations of dementia and later life.⁴⁹ Dramatizing life throughout time (and, inevitably, ageing) beyond traditional (hence chronologically linear) patterns, allows for reimagining the possibility of respectable ageing for the communities often regarded as social outsiders due to their inability to comply with heteronormative and/or ableist

temporalities, all of which are associated at the same time with 'productive' and 'successful' models of ageing.⁵⁰

In *Old Fools*, the disruption of temporal linearity is attained through a collage of memories and a combination of different timeframes and spaces through which Viv and Tom (and the actors playing them) continuously flow. The play is meant to be performed by respecting this fluidity, which enhances the notion of the life course beyond the alleged separation of life stages. In this way, it completely undermines chronometric perceptions of time while recreating an impressionistic experience of times/ages lived and remembered. The play's non-linear plot structure also has a direct implication for the registers of performance it favours. Even though the realism of the dialogues and the psychological bases of the character creations suggest a concomitant style of acting, the extremely brief (and practically imperceptible) transitions between the scenes imply a cubist representation of the story and its characters – in fact, the first scene of the play includes a reference to Picasso. This not only involves a markedly physical acting style, which enhances the richness, complexity, and even beauty of an entire lifetime through the prism of each situation/experience lived, but also a non-hierarchical reconstruction of the life course, in which the past and the present, or youth and old age, are given the same value.

In *Elegy*, the manipulation of time is achieved through the technique of reverse chronology, which echoes the dramaturgical innovations of early and mid-twentieth century authors and creates an inverted sense of suspense by focusing on the origins of the dramatic conflict.⁵¹ By drawing on this particular disruption of time, *Elegy* does not completely deviate from the narrative of decline, since the play closes with the moment in which Carrie and Lorna get to know about Lorna's fatal illness; nor does it leave room for a narrative of progress in which Lorna's recovery and her life with Carrie can be integrated. However, the play's disruption of the traditional timeline leads to the progressive recreation of Lorna's removed memories, taking viewers and readers into the world of

Lorna and Carrie as a mature couple, and culminating in a moment of hope in which Carrie believes that they will be able to go through it all 'together' (the last word of the play). In this way, the play's inverted chronology makes readers and viewers re-examine the decisions that each of the two characters took in the last stage of their life together, not only around Lorna's disease, but also around who they were and who they will become individually, as well as for each other.

The plays' non-linear temporalities not only have implications for their intricate representation of the process of ageing in its intersection with memory loss, but also allow a complex reconstruction of identity in old age, whereby the nature of identity itself is explored and even questioned. In this vein, both *Elegy* and *Old Fools* address the complex issue of identity construction when memory failure occurs, thus inheriting the long-lasting theatrical tradition that has examined the interplay between memory and the self within the life continuum. Starting from Tennessee Williams's famous phrase 'Life is all memory',⁵² the metaphor of memory as the central constituent of one's multiple identities has been prominent in age-centred dramaturgies and performances.⁵³ Even though the plurality of the self has been widely accepted within social and cultural research on later life,⁵⁴ the stage has generally promoted an eclectic view that includes both the singularity and the multiplicity of selfhood.⁵⁵ In particular, the question of the (dis)continuity and/or transformation of the self as one grows older has gained popularity on the contemporary stage, with the core focus on the performativity of age within, and outside, the theatrical domain.⁵⁶

Old Fools clearly favours the interpretation of identity as a 'single, continuous self [that] has experiences'.⁵⁷ Within the play's continued performance (the author's note at the beginning demands the play be performed seamlessly, 'like thoughts'),⁵⁸ the different versions of Tom's self are constantly juxtaposed with other representations of himself in previous, as well as ensuing, stages of his life, hence making evident the amalgam of his multiple selves without showing the actual

transitions that led one version to the next. The extreme brevity or even absence of those transitions (and of the sense of linearity they would entail) favours the representation of the complexity of the (aged) self to the detriment of the process of ageing itself. At the same time, resort to continuous acting in the representation of Tom creates a sense of 'essential self' in the recreation of Tom's identity – a unitary and permanent reading of the age-old conundrum that, as Barnes Lipscomb has broadly discussed, is especially promoted by many memory plays.⁵⁹ Together with the suspension of time established by the play, the contrast between the singularity of the actor playing Tom and all the versions of Tom's self as manifested through several life stages, liberates the character from ageist cultural assumptions around dementia. The play's constant reconstruction of the life of an older character from various angles underlines the dynamism and multilayered nature of the self (rather than its rigidity), as well as the continuity and integrity of all stages/ages within the life continuum.

In this regard, *Elegy* stands in clear contrast to *Old Fools*. Payne's play reinforces the idea that the young or the healthy self is the real or genuine one, and, similarly to Bernays' piece, it suggests the reciprocal and relational dimensions of identity construction. Yet, through a structure permeated with dramatic irony, the play shows the effects of the actual alteration of the 'very fabric' of Lorna's self, which both characters had dismissed as neither desirable nor even possible.⁶⁰ The radical alteration of Lorna's (older and yet new) self does not result from an illness (as would have been the case without the operation), but from a medical intervention derived from the interpretation of ageing itself as 'a disease' which only 'appears natural' and which, therefore, can be avoided, as Dr Gomez believes.⁶¹ For a post-operation Lorna, the sense of unity of self is not attached to her past experiences with Carrie. 'I'm not that person,' Lorna claims, thus failing to identify with the woman she was when she met Carrie, and whom Carrie desperately misses.⁶²

By separating Lorna's younger self from her present one, *Elegy* clearly favours a

discontinuous representation of identity and, consequently, breaks with the illusion of the essential self that affects unitary conceptualizations of both the life course and of long-term relationships. In this respect, the clash between Lorna's former identity and the one resulting from her surgery creates a sense of alienation or, to borrow Elinor Fuchs's conceptual pun, generates a sense of 'estr(age)ment' – an old-age-related moment when the familiar past selves become strange.⁶³ Although *Elegy* (as the title indicates) can be read as the dramatic lament for the death of Lorna's former self, through her operation, the ambiguity of Lorna's last statement in her new self-definition also reflects the extent to which the play points to the possibility of new beginnings in old age, even when these may be severely disentangled from previous stages.

Despite their different dramaturgical approaches to the intricacies of the ageing self, *Elegy* and *Old Fools* allow for the co-existence of plural readings of identity, and demonstrate that whether the process of ageing is subject to intervention or allowed to flow naturally, growing older entails a constant re-examination of the self. Through the disruption of chronology and its impact on how the characters are presented, the two plays profoundly reconsider the strong bonds between one's past, present, and future in the construction of one's identity and, more broadly, in the process of ageing.

Conclusion

At a moment when theatrical representations of old age continue to be scarce or reduced to stereotypical roles, *Old Fools* and *Elegy* demonstrate the gradual engagement of contemporary theatre with complex issues related to ageing, including memory loss, intimate relations in later life, and explorations of late-life identity. Considering the ongoing influence of the London scene on other contemporary theatre cultures, and also taking into account the relative youth of the two authors of the plays discussed, the new approaches towards old age in *Elegy* and *Old Fools* can be interpreted as signs of a cultural turn in the theatre and in society at large. Even though both plays are

seemingly laden with contradiction – in that they bring to the fore the prevalent narrative of decline while at the same time challenging it – they can each be considered innovative in the dramaturgical strategies to which they resort in order to move towards a more intricate representation of the process of growing older. As has been demonstrated in our analysis, this is achieved in various ways.

First, both plays situate older people with dementia or memory loss at the centre of their plotlines rather than making them secondary characters, or simply symbolic evocations of a blurred and mostly feared image of old age. While this thematic focus is *per se* significant within our youth-oriented cultural landscapes, it still reproduces the feared narrative of dementia that lies at the heart of our gerontophobic society. In the worlds of Payne's and Bernays' plays, Alzheimer's disease, dementia, and other degenerative illnesses commonly associated with old age are visibly considered as a tragic destiny that must be avoided at all costs.

Second, and in contrast with this reading, both plays epitomize some shifts in cultural renderings of later life, whereby the stories of dementia and memory loss are enriched with the representation of love in old age. By prioritizing intimate relationships between ageing characters in the two plotlines, Payne and Bernays favour an 'age-sensitive perspective' towards older age, through which older characters are not deprived of the possibility of experiencing intimacy and love.⁶⁴ In contrast with models of ageing that associate success with physical vigour, cognitive stability, and an active lifestyle, the alternative depiction of later life (and of cognitive failure in old age) through a love narrative allows for the representation of a form of 'successful frailty' which, borrowing from Ulla Kirebernegg, Roberta Maierhofer, and Barbara Ratzenböck, can lead to the acceptance and appreciation of later stages of life, despite physical and/or cognitive deterioration.⁶⁵

Last, but not least, the plays' temporal structures and characterizations have a crucial role in prompting alternative visions of later life. By dramatizing ageing through non-linear time, they unsettle stereotypical

portrayals of old age and liberate older figures from monolithic narratives of the life course. In this sense, they help to perceive ageing as part and parcel of a broader spectrum in which old age is not separated from other stages of life, but mingles with and complements other life experiences. Moreover, the representation of multiple selfhood undermines the clichéd views of older people as devoid of rich experiences, or even free from significant conflicts, at a stage of their lives generally perceived to be definitive, uneventful, and final. For all these reasons, *Elegy* and *Old Fools* may be considered part of an age-turn in contemporary theatre and, as such, they make room for truly inclusive narratives of frailty and memory loss, where the recreation of love and, more generally, the exploration of meaning throughout the life course, are perceived in an integrated way.

Notes and References

1. See Robert Butler, *The Longevity Revolution: The Benefits and Challenges of Living a Long Life* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).
2. See *Autumnal Faces: Old Age in British and Irish Dramatic Narratives*, ed. Katarzyna Bronk (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017).
3. See, for example, *ibid.*; and Michael Mangan, *Staging Ageing: Theatre, Performance, and the Narrative of Decline* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2013).
4. See Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
5. *ibid.*: on ageing and the loss of youthful beauty (p. 3–4, 19, 22), the loss of a job (p. 80–1), ageing as decline (p. 7, 9, 27, 31–2, 38, 48, 122, 137), and the (stereotyped) associations of ageing/old age with death (p. 107–8, 187).
6. See Jeannette King, *Discourses of Ageing in Fiction and Feminism: The Invisible Woman* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
7. For some recent work in this direction, see *Theatre Research In Canada*, XLII, No. 2, Special Issue: ‘Age and Performance: Expanding Intersectionality’, ed. Julia Henderson, Benjamin Gillespie, and Núria Casado-Gual (2021); *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Ageing in Contemporary Literature and Film*, ed. Sarah Falcus, Heike Hartung, and Raquel Medina (London: Bloomsbury, 2023); and *The Palgrave Handbook of Literature and Ageing*, ed. Valerie Barnes Lipscomb and Aagje Swinnen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).
8. See, for example, Mangan, *Staging Ageing*; Anne Davis Basting, *The Stages of Age: Performing Age in Contemporary American Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Valerie Barnes Lipscomb, *Performing Age in Modern Drama* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); and Bridie Moore, ‘Depth, Significance, and Absence: Age-Effects in New British Theatre’, *Age, Culture, Humanities*, I (2014), p. 163–95, <<https://ageculturehumanities.org/WP/depth-significance-and-absence-age-effects-in-new-british-theatre/>>.
9. As gerontologist Amanda Smith Barusch observes in her innovative monograph *Love Stories in Later Life: A Narrative Approach to Understanding Romance* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), love relationships are often determined by cultural norms that dictate that ‘only the young and unwrinkled can enjoy romance’, while intimacy between the individuals of advanced age is seen as ‘either comic or disgusting’ (p. 4).
10. Nick Payne, *Elegy* (London: Faber, 2016); Tristan Bernays, *Old Fools* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2018). All quotations are from these editions.
11. Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003).
12. Barnes Lipscomb, *Performing Age*, p. 6.
13. According to theatre scholar Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, ‘scientific plays’ – a new artistic genre that has emerged as a result of the conflation of scientific and humanistic cultures – have several characteristics in common: the scientists are cast as heroes or villains (or both); ‘real’ scientific issues and moral controversies are boldly addressed; and the link between scientific content and theatrical form (commonly expressed through the alternation of time) depends on performances transmitting the science (*Science on Stage: From ‘Doctor Faustus’ to ‘Copenhagen’* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 2).
14. Hannah Zeilig, ‘Dementia as a Cultural Metaphor’, *Gerontologist*, LIV, No. 2 (2014), p. 258–67, DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gns203>>; and Hannah Zeilig, ‘What Do We Mean When We Talk about Dementia? Exploring Cultural Representations of “Dementia”’, *Working with Older People*, XIX, No. 1 (2015), p. 12–20, DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.1108/WWOP-10-2014-0032>> (p. 17).
15. Margaret Morganroth Gullette, ‘Politics, Pathology, Suicide, and Social Fates: Tony Kushner’s *The Intelligent Homosexual’s Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures*’, *Modern Drama*, LIX, No. 2 (2016), p. 231–48, DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.3138/md.59.2.6>>.
16. See *ibid.*, p. 233; and Gullette, ‘Being Old Is Not a Death Sentence, Even Now’, Silver Century Foundation: Preparing for a Longer Life (20 October 2020), <<https://www.silvercentury.org/2020/10/being-old-is-not-a-death-sentence-even-now/>>.
17. Bernays, *Old Fools*, p. 9.
18. Payne, *Elegy*, p. 6, 9, 32, 34–6.
19. Anne Davis Basting, *Forget Memory: Creating Better Lives for People with Dementia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), p. 40.
20. *ibid.*, p. 33.
21. Payne, *Elegy*, p. 52.
22. *ibid.*, p. 37.
23. *ibid.*, p. 43.
24. *ibid.*, p. 46.
25. Davis Basting, *Forget Memory*, p. 41.
26. Amir Cohen-Shalev and Esther-Lee Marcus, ‘“Equality Mixed”’: Artistic Representations of Old Love’, *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*, X, No. 2 (2016), p. 61–81 (p. 61).
27. See Thomas Walz, ‘Crones, Dirty Old Men, Sexy Seniors: Representations of the Sexuality of Older Persons’, *Journal of Aging and Identity*, VII, No. 2 (2002), p. 99–112, DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1015487101438>>; and Ingrid Arnet Connidis, ‘Intimate Relationships: Learning from Later Life Experience’, in

Age Matters: Realigning Feminist Thinking, ed. Toni M. Calasanti and Kathleen F. Slevin (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 123–53.

28. See Sharon R. Kaufman, 'The Age of Reflexive Longevity: How the Clinic and Changing Expectations of the Life Course Are Reshaping Old Age', in *A Guide to Humanistic Studies in Old Age: What Does It Mean to Grow Old?*, ed. Thomas R. Cole, Ruth E. Ray, and Robert Kastenbaum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), p. 225–43 (p. 227); and Pat Thane, 'The History of Ageing and Old Age in "Western" Cultures', in *ibid.*, p. 33–56 (p. 38–40).

29. See, for example, Smith Barusch, *Love Stories*; Cohen-Shalev and Marcus, "'Equality Mixed'"; and Connidis, 'Intimate Relationships'; see also Meike Dackweiler, 'Illness and Love in Old Age', in *Alive and Kicking at All Ages: Cultural Constructions of Health and Life Identity*, ed. Ulla Kriebner, Roberta Maierhofer, and Barbara Ratzenböck (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2014), p. 203–19.

30. See Núria Casado-Gual, 'Unexpected Turns in Lifelong Sentimental Journeys: Redefining Love, Memory and Old Age through Alice Munro's "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" and its Film Adaptation, *Away from Her*', *Ageing and Society*, XXXV, Issue 2 (2015), p. 389–404, DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X13000780>>. See also Núria Casado-Gual, 'Ageing and Romance on the Big Screen: The "Silvering Romantic Comedy" *Elsa & Fred*', *Ageing and Society*, XL, Issue 10 (2020), p. 2257–65, DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X19000643>>; Núria Casado-Gual and Maricel Oró-Piqueras, 'Diane Keaton's Late Films: Ageing Gracefully for the Silvering Screen', *Feminist Media Studies*, XXIII, Issue 1 (May 2022), p. 1–14, DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2071318>>; Alex Hobbs, 'Romancing the Crone: Hollywood's Recent Mature Love Stories', *Journal of American Culture*, XXXVI, No. 1 (2013), p. 42–51; and Jim Vanden Bosch, 'New Love/Older Adults', *Gerontologist*, LVI, Issue 5 (2016), p. 966–7, DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnw121>>.

31. Cohen-Shalev and Marcus, "'Equality Mixed'".

32. Korbinian Stöckl, *Love in Contemporary British Drama: Traditions and Transformations of a Cultural Emotion* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2021).

33. In several chapters of his seminal work *Staging Ageing*, Michael Mangan shows how this cultural myth has been perpetuated by the stage through the figure of *senex amans*: that is, the old wo/man who 'foolishly and inappropriately' falls in love with much younger characters. The scholar traces the origins of this figure in classical and medieval drama with comic love plots in which, while the older man's lust and treachery are motivated by the young woman's body and wealth, a female *senex* in 'old age becomes a foil for the values of youth'. Both of them, as Mangan explains, have re-emerged across cultural history in various shapes and forms (p. 80, 98).

34. Ben Power, *A Tender Thing* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2009); Sean O'Connor and Tom Morris, *Juliet and Her Romeo: A Geriatric Romeo & Juliet* (London: Oberon Books, 2010); *Romeo and Juliet: Love Knows No Age*, directed by Christopher Goodrich, with Elliott Bales and Claire Schoonover, Unexpected Stage Company at Randolph Road Theatre, Silver Spring, Washington DC (16 July–9 August 2015); *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Gaye Taylor Úpchurch, with Kurt Rhoads and Nance Williamson, Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival Garrison, New York (Summer Season, 2022); *Much Ado About Nothing*, directed by Mark Rylance, with James Earl Jones

and Vanessa Redgrave, Old Vic, London (September–November 2013); and Eberhard Petschinka, *Romeo and Juliet Awaken (Romeo y Julieta Despiertan)*, directed by Rafael Sánchez, with Ana Belén and José Luis Gómez, Teatro Español, Madrid (15 April–4 June 2023).

35. See, for example, Michael Billington's review of Rylance's *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Guardian*, 20 September 2013, <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2013/sep/20/much-ado-about-nothing-review-rylance>>.

36. In her award-winning analysis of five British productions of the 2011–12 autumn/winter season, theatre and ageing studies scholar Bridie Moore exemplifies the ways in which mainstream British theatre creates somewhat troublesome age effects on the viewers. Despite the fact that Abi Morgan's *Lovesong* underpins the fluidity and dynamism of time and, with it, ageing, it still produces a negative age effect as old age is portrayed as a period of life which is anticipated with fear, rather than embraced with confidence. See Bridie Moore, 'Depth, Significance, and Absence: Age-Effects in New British Theatre', *Age, Culture, Humanities*, I (2014), p. 163–95, <<https://ageculturehumanities.org/WP/depth-significance-and-absence-age-effects-in-new-british-theatre/>> (p. 171).

37. Payne, *Elegy*, p. 45.

38. Laura Hurd Clarke, *Facing Age: Women Growing Older in Anti-Ageing Culture* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), p. 138–9. See also Margaret Cruikshank, *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging*, third edition (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013); Jeannette King, *Discourses of Ageing in Fiction and Feminism: The Invisible Woman* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and Linn J. Sandberg, 'Sex, Sexuality, and Later Life', in *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*, ed. Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 218–25 (p. 218–9).

39. This facet of their romance takes on more pronounced social and political power when considering that the play's premiere coincided with the aftermath of a crucial social event that changed the lives of the representatives of the LGBTQ+ community, namely the legalization of same-sex marriages in the UK and the USA. See, for example, UK Parliament, 'The Law of Marriage', <<https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/overview/lawofmarriage/>>, and Bill Chappell, 'Supreme Court Declares Same-Sex Marriage Legal in All 50 States', *National Public Radio*, 26 June 2015, <<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/06/26/417717613/supreme-court-rules-all-states-must-allow-same-sex-marriages>>.

40. See Eva Krainitzki, 'Ghosted Images: Old Lesbians on Screen', *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, XIX, Issue 1 (2015), p.13–26, DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2015.959871>>; Niall Richardson, *Ageing Femininity on Screen: The Older Woman in Contemporary Cinema* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p. 115–42; Linn J. Sandberg, 'Sex, Sexuality and Later Life', in *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*, p. 218–25 (p. 218); and Georgina Turner, "'Bizarre Sapphic Midlife Crisis": (Re)thinking LGBTQ Representation, Age, and Mental Health', *Sexualities*, XXII, Nos. 7–8 (2019), p. 997–1016, DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460718794132>>.

41. Even though the published text does not have any explicit or implicit stage directions for moments of

intimacy between the two women, the Donmar Warehouse production, directed by Josie Rourke, with Barbara Flynn as Carrie and Zoë Wanamaker as Lorna, made the lesbian relationship more explicit and visible. See, for example, Matt Trueman's review, *Variety*, 29 April 2016, <<https://variety.com/2016/legit/reviews/elegy-review-play-nick-payne-1201763183/>>.

42. Payne, *Elegy*, p. 10–11.

43. Bernays, *Old Fools*, p. 60.

44. Payne, *Elegy*, p. 49.

45. See Paul Higgs and Chris Gilleard, *Rethinking Old Age: Theorizing the Fourth Age* (London: Palgrave, 2015); Paul Higgs and Chris Gilleard, *Personhood, Identity, and Care in Advanced Old Age* (Bristol and Chicago: Policy Press, 2016); and Liz Lloyd, 'The Fourth Age', *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*, p. 261–8.

46. Lynne Segal, *Out of Time: The Pleasures and the Perils of Ageing* (London: Verso, 2014), p. 4.

47. See Nadine Changfoot, Carla Rice, Sally Chivers, Alice Olsen Williams, Angela Connors, Ann Barrett, Mary Gordon, and Gisele Lalonde, 'Revisioning Ageing: Indigenous, Crip, and Queer Renderings', *Journal of Ageing Studies*, LXIII (December, 2022), DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2021.100930>>; Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Benjamin Gillespie and Bess Rowen, 'Against Chronology: Intergenerational Pedagogic Approaches to Queer Theatre and Performance Histories', *Theatre Topics*, XXX, No. 2 (2020), p. 69–83; Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005); Cynthia Port, 'No Future? Ageing, Temporality, History, and Reverse Chronology', *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities*, IV (May, 2012), <<https://arcade.stanford.edu/occasion/no-future-aging-temporality-history-and-reverse-chronologies>>; and Linn J. Sandberg and Barbara L. Marshall, 'Queering Ageing Futures', *Societies*, VII, Issue 3 (2017), p. 1–11, DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.3390/soc7030021>>.

48. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*, p. 3; see also Edelman, *No Future*.

49. Davis Basting, *The Stages of Age*.

50. See, for example, Port, 'No Future?'; Sandberg and Marshall, 'Queering Ageing Futures'.

51. Significant examples include George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart's 1934 play *Merrily We Roll Around*, later transformed into a Broadway musical with lyrics by Stephen Sondheim (1981), and *Betrayal* (1978), one of Harold Pinter's most emblematic plays.

52. Tennessee Williams, *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (1963; New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1998), p. 36.

53. See, for example, Barnes Lipscomb, *Performing Age*; Davis Basting, *Forget Memory*; Mangan, *Staging Ageing*.

54. See, for example, Sofia Aboim, *Plural Masculinities: The Remaking of the Self in Private Life* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010); Deborah Bowman, 'Living Through Change', in Payne, *Elegy*, p. 59–63; *The Plural Self: Multiplicity on Everyday Life*, ed. John Rowan and Mick Cooper (London: SAGE Publications, 1999); Anil K. Seth, 'The Science of Selfhood', in Payne, *Elegy*, p. 65–9; *Women Ageing: Changing Identities, Challenging Myths*, ed. Miriam Bernard, Judith Phillips, Linda Machin, and Val Harding Davies (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); and Lynne Segal, *Out of Time: The Pleasures and the Perils of Ageing* (London: Verso, 2014).

55. Barnes Lipscomb, *Performing Age*; Mangan, *Staging Ageing*.

56. Davis Basting, *The Stages of Age*; Barnes Lipscomb, *Performing Age*.

57. Susan Blackmore, *Consciousness: An Introduction* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), p. 95.

58. Bernays, *Old Fools*, p. 6.

59. Barnes Lipscomb, *Performing Age*.

60. Payne, *Elegy*, p. 46.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

63. Elinor Fuchs, 'Estrangement: Towards an "Age Theory" Theatre Criticism', *Performance Research*, XIX, Issue 3 (2014), p. 69–77 (p. 76–7), <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2014.935177>>.

64. Connidis, 'Intimate Relationships', p. 125.

65. Ulla Kriebner, Roberta Maierhofer, and Barbara Ratzenböck, 'Re-Thinking Material Realities and Cultural Representations of Age and Ageing', in *Alive and Kicking*, p. 9–17 (p. 10).