

## The older woman at the centre of dystopia: dramatizing the perils of ageism in Emma Adams' *Animals*

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### Abstract

This article presents an age-centered analysis of *Animals* (2015), a dystopian play by the British playwright Emma Adams in which men and women over 60 are deemed redundant and useless by a dystopian society that either ordains their murder or marginalizes them completely. Framed within the field of ageing and theatre studies and its intersection with gender theories, our analysis aims to examine the position of the play's older female protagonists in a dystopian world infested with ageism and sexism, which deprives older people (and particularly older women) of their humanity and divests them of their generational meaning. On the whole, the article intends to explore the political and symbolic significance of (female) older characters in new (and demodystopian) dramaturgies of old age, especially with the ultimate objective to search for alternative cultural narratives and conceptualizations of later life that help reconstruct the value of ageing and of intergenerational relationships.

Keywords: ageism, contemporary drama, demodystopia, intergenerational relationships, older women.

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## Introduction

The fear of old age has been identified as one of the major sources of social concern of the contemporary world (Brunton & Quartly-Scott 2015; Butler 2008: 43–44; Neuberger 2008). As any other global anxiety, this fear has also permeated multiple manifestations of high and popular culture, including the theatre. Within the growing theatrical renderings of old age, the focus on the complexities of ageing has become particularly salient, and as such it has been examined by theatre and age scholars such as Anne Davis Basting (1998), Michael Mangan (2013), Elinor Fuchs (2016), and Valerie Barnes Lipscomb (2016), to name but a few. However, neither on the stage nor in our youth-oriented societies in general are older people typically perceived from such a rich perspective. Rather, they are frequently viewed, represented, or interpreted through stereotypes, and often diminished in comparison to younger individuals or age groups, rendering their “age,” in the words of the pioneering age critic Margaretté Morganroth Gullette, “a different difference” (2004: 111) that marginalizes them rather than makes them singular in their myriad experiences of ageing. Despite the recent increase of attention on the diversity of these experiences and on the alternative, or, in Linn Sandberg’s words, “affirmative” models of old age (2013), ageing is often simplistically categorized as either “positive” or “negative” (Baars 2010: 106–108), giving way to two predominant narratives of ageing, that is, “progress” and “decline” (Gullette 2004). In this respect, while the former may be coupled with the model of “successful ageing,” originally promoted by John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn (1997) and, later on, criticized due to its promotion of neo-liberal or elitist values, such as productivity and independence, the latter, as Gullette asserts, “falls like a bludgeon on what excludes old people from the human majority” (2017: 13).

The restrictive and predominantly negative interpretation of age in our youth-centered world affects older women in a particular way. In a society that continues to demand youth and beauty from women much more than men, (old) age is also claimed to marginalize women earlier and more frequently in their life course (Friedan 1993; Gullette 2004: 23; Holstein 2017; Sontag 1972; Twigg 2004: 62). Hence, age and gender become a doubly dangerous source of social categorization, more specifically for women past their fifties or even younger. At the same time, the fear of old

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age is often expressed through the female body, which becomes its symbolic cultural embodiment (Bouson 2016; Byrski 2014; Friedan 1993; Gullette 2004; Henneberg 2010; King 2013: 76; Woodward 1991). This cultural stigmatization can also be observed in the media, albeit ambiguously: while more nuanced representations of ageing and older women are becoming more pronounced in serialized drama (Casado-Gual & Oró-Piqueras 2017; Oró-Piqueras 2023), reflecting in this way major changes in both demographics and social perceptions of later life, the Hollywood industry continues to denigrate older women who do not agree with the conventions of youthful appearance and lifestyle, effectively “erasing” the realities of ageing (Whelehan 2013: 80). In theatre, this cultural tendency is clearly illustrated through either the scarcity of roles available for actresses past their forties, or the stereotypical images of female ageing that are often provided in dramatic representations of later life (Harpin 2012; O’Neill & Schrage-Früh 2018), or both. In contrast with these social and cultural trends, contemporary plays that offer a critical view of the fear of old age while at the same time generating constructive or alternative conceptualizations of (female) ageing offer an enlightening resource whereby the generational divide that is generated by age-based typification or, even worse, that is fueled by ageism and gerontophobia, can be unveiled, counteracted, and, ultimately, redressed. After all, through its long tradition of examining sociocultural taboos, theatre as “a provocateur for social dialogue,” is an art with the potential to address a multi-generational audience and bring the issue of ageism into public discourse through both its dramatic contexts and performances (Black & Lipscomb 2017: 36), thereby generating a much urgently needed cultural change.

This article presents an age-centered analysis of *Animals* (2015), a dystopian play by the British playwright Emma Adams produced in 2015 by the London company Theatre 503. Despite receiving somewhat mixed reviews, *Animals* has been lauded for providing regular theatregoers with the opportunity to rest from “the seasoned polish of restaged classics” typically seen in central London theatres (*Animals* 2015), and to enjoy a new story by the emerging playwright with powerful messages that are well-suited for a dramatic exploration (Forsyth 2015). Moreover, theatre critics have particularly praised the play for offering “meaty roles” for older actresses (*Animals* 2015; Love 2015) – namely, Marlene Sidaway

(Norma), Sadie Shimmin (Joy), and Cara Chase (Helen) – whose appearance on the stage is celebrated, especially at a time when roles for older actors are rare (*Animals* 2015).

The play could be classified as a dramatic “demodystopia,” that is, a narrative that explicitly addresses demographic shifts and presents them as a critical societal issue (Domingo 2008: 275). Despite the recent spotlight on dystopian themes in theatre (De Simoni 2021; Reid 2019; Tönnies & Voigts 2022; Vieira 2013), the issue of age remains overlooked in their plots.<sup>1</sup> Adams’ “demodystopic” theatrical piece contributes to filling in this gap: in her play, men and women over 60 are deemed redundant and useless by their gerontophobic society, which either ordains the killing of its older citizens or marginalizes them completely, rendering them entirely invisible and generating, in this way, an apparently irreparable schism among generations. As a direct reflection of patriarchal societies, the play emphasizes the impact that the radical form of (state-promoted) ageism has on the female citizens of this totalitarian world. Framed within the field of ageing and theatre studies and its intersection with gender theories, our analysis aims to examine the position of the play’s older female protagonists in a dystopian world infested with ageism and sexism. Specifically, it intends to observe the mechanisms whereby the sustained marginalization against older people (and particularly older women) deprives them both of their humanity and also, in Rica Edmondson’s words, of their “generational meaning” (2015: 201), that is, their contribution to future generations. As will be shown, the intergenerational rupture depicted in Adams’ dystopian universe and directly derived from ageism not only results in the deformation of old-age identity, but also in the general moral degeneration of an entire society. Through our close reading of the play, we intend to explore the political and symbolic value of contemporary (and demodystopic) dramaturgies of old age, with the ultimate objective of searching for new cultural narratives and conceptualizations of later life that underscore their value in intergenerational

<sup>1</sup> Some exceptions to this pattern are Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* and Lucy Kirkwood’s *The Children*, two British dystopian plays published and produced in 2016. Both have received critical attention from the perspective of theatre and ageing studies (see, for example, Casado-Gual 2020), thereby contributing to the emerging cultural trend in which (old) age, dystopia, and theatre intersect.

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relationships and recognize, at the same time, the diversity and complexity of ageing femininities.

### Ageism as a Dystopic Dramatic Conflict

*Animals* complies with all the features of a (demo)dystopian text in its recreation of a futuristic society that has adjusted to severe environmental and socioeconomic transformations: the action is set in 2046, 16 years after a natural catastrophe that brought with it major environmental changes within the British region of North Yorkshire. After being hit by a tsunami (Adams 2015:20),<sup>2</sup> the imaginary “once respectable market town” in which the action is set has become completely eroded and suddenly transformed into a “seaside resort” (16) in which the local residents have become gentrified. Through its satirical tone, one could say the play delves into the catastrophic combination of climate change and the prevalence of neoliberal economies. Yet, at a more particular level, Adams’ piece also focuses on another kind of “catastrophe,” namely, the overpopulation of older people.

The global increase of ageing demographics has commonly been perceived as a “disaster” in the Western world (Charise 2012: 3; Cruikshank 2013: 27; Jewusiak 2023); in fact, in the ageist language used by the media, it has often been equated with a “tsunami” due to its magnitude and its impact, generally thought of as devastating (Calasanti 2020: 195; Cruikshank 2013: 26; Delafuente 2009; Whelehan & Gwynne 2014: 1). Moreover, the symbolic association of older people with environmental catastrophes, for which they are blamed by younger generations, has fostered a cultural narrative that condemns them as the cause of several uncontrollable social and economic issues, viewing them as a cataclysmic force that endangers the planet’s overall well-being (Jewusiak 2023: 3). In line with this cultural reading of old age and its associated anxieties, the uncanny universe of Adams’ play, which includes the clearly dystopian plot of age-related killing that is noticeable in science fiction literature (Falcus 2020; Pogońska-Baranowska 2023), uneasily projects a near-future in which the hazardous combination of ageism, sexism, ableism, and classism leads to a massive

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of style and readability, subsequent in-text citations will only include the page number of the play.

and legalized form of murdering of older people. Also, much more literally than symbolically, in the dramatic world of *Animals*, ageing becomes the form of "exile" into which everyone over 60 is driven, thus making older people the prisoners of their own homes – which they cannot leave for years, no matter how desperate the situation is (79).

In fact, the "problem" of old age in the piece leads to extreme measures that eventually cause a profound generational rupture in the totalitarian society dramatized. Thus, as the play unfolds, the reader/viewer is introduced into a chaotic world in which intergenerational contact between older and younger people has become severed, Utility Inspectors judge the citizens' "contribution to" (or toll on) society, and only those in their middle years are apparently "safe": while children are overprotected and, yet, forced to "merit" as "well-adjusted" once they turn 18 through therapy-controlled programs not everyone can afford (20), everyone who is 60 and cannot prove their "usefulness" through a green or amber permit that legitimates their existence becomes redundant and disposable – and, as such, is "cleared," that is, executed by a "Utility Inspector" who is also supposed to confiscate their property for the state (21).

Significantly, Adams renders those segregated and displaced by the play's ageist regime the protagonists of her play, and gives older women in particular the lead roles, hence conflating their gender- and age-based marginality in a dystopia that perpetuates patriarchy through male domination, while becoming a daring anti-ageist critique. The play's storyline spans the period of about 24 hours in the lives of three older women, namely, Norma, aged 77, a retired nurse with poor mobility and, yet, the owner of "a forged amber permit" that allows her to live on (22); Norma's carer, Joy, aged 59 and, therefore, with only "one legal year left" before her "usefulness to society" is submitted to a test (18), and Norma's neighbour, Helen, aged 70, who is presented as one of the well-off "incomers" that moved to the area after the tsunami, and who also owns an amber permit. The apparently unobtrusive lives of these women, which nevertheless cross the border of "legality" all too often – Norma's forged permits are obtained through Joy's blackmailing a Postmaster, Helen keeps stimulating drugs in her cupboards, and Norma and Joy lead a very suspicious and completely illegal "Sandwich Circle" – are threatened by the imminent arrival of Noah, a new Utility Inspector. The potential conflict marked by Norma's forged permit, which is soon announced in the first

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scene of the play, becomes further complicated by Noah's daughter, Maya, described by the playwright as an "innocent" and "a sweet but spoilt and wilful" girl who, on the eve of her 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and despite having received all the therapy needed for her to merit as "well-adjusted," (15) does not manage to have a single "happy memory" that allows her to pass a validation test as an adult (24, 94).

Despite the marginality represented by Maya within the middle-aged-dominated regime of the play, Adams' piece explicitly makes ageing and old age its primary issues. In this sense, the fear of old age is the major force whereby ageing individuals are constructed as fixed and undesirable in the play's dramatic universe. Within the context of demodystopian literature, fear has been classified into three types, namely, "fear of population decline," "fear of population excess," and "fear of population professionals," that is, fear of those who believe they have the solution (Shriver 2004). Against that background, Adams' dramatic demodystopia complies with all types of fear, which are "treated" or confronted in various ways, and all of which create a "generational" form of disorder, both within the life courses depicted in the piece and also within its dramatized society. Hence, readers/audience are immersed into a world in which younger people are literally bubble-wrapped in special coats (23), treated like children until they turn 18, and kept in the dark about any potentially "disturbing" fact (ranging from weather conditions to scientific knowledge up to the reality of death) and, in this way, kept aside from all the possible "dangers" of the world (including old age). On the other hand, in compliance with the anti-ageing politics of this imagined universe (or simply in order to survive in the world impregnated with ageism), older people falsify their permits (22), deny, or lie about their real age (55, 59–60), or hide it under the "mask of ageing," to borrow Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth's term (1991), that is, the form of appearance attained by those who can afford the embellishment of plastic surgery to display rejuvenated faces and bodies. By means of cosmetic interventions, wealthy and affluent citizens like the professionally face-lifted Grandma mentioned at the beginning of the play (20) conceal (or rather repulse) old age, thereby figuring it, as Kathleen Woodward notes, "as a dirty secret that had best remain undetected, latent, not manifest" (1991: 151). In fact, in the totalitarian system imagined by Adams, where words such as "flooding" (24), "forgive" (42), "library" (66), or "dead" (44)

are banned or simply do not appear in censored dictionaries (27), “ageing” or “older” have lost their daily usage and have been replaced by “diminishing” (66), a term that avoids referring to old age while at the same time identifying it with decline. Whether they are issued “an amber permit” as “diminishing citizens” or receive “a red permit” right before having their “officially useless” lives “cleared,” older people are homogeneously presented as a dependent, largely unsustainable social group.

As the legal wardens of this middle-aged-oriented, totalitarian state, Utility Inspectors are meant to control the threat that older citizens pose to a society oriented towards productivity, efficiency, and “happiness.” In this way, they promote the image of older people as “a burden on good people,” as Maya proudly puts it, referring to Noah, her newly promoted Daddy (52). Mirroring the dissociation that Western, youth-infatuated materialistic cultures generate between working-class people over 60 and the rest of young and/or rich individuals (Friedan 1993: 191-226), the older citizens in the society imagined by Adams are not only gentrified by the arrival of Incomers, but “othered” and equated with “nothingness” (93), and considered “non-existent” (37) by their own society. As Noah tells Maya in their encounter with older women: “Don’t look at them. They’re fucking nothing. They’re not you and me. Just ignore them.” (93) In a deeply sarcastic way, this piece portrays a gerontophobic and (implicitly) a misogynist society in which older people are tested at utility value, despite “utility” being “the wrong measure for old women’s lives” (Cruikshank 2013: 196). They are likewise “gerontified” by the status quo, generating a deadly division between “young/useful” and “old/useless” that renders older people “officially worthless” (92) at the mercy of a utilitarian and highly materialistic elite. In Adams’ dramatic demodystopia, the “excess” of the ageing population is translated into general gerontophobia that fuels ageism and becomes lethal. The “clearance” of the useless aged in their own premises (30, 61) has become a usual everyday procedure for those who question the system or simply do not comply with its laws and requirements, that is, are not young, healthy, and/or rich.

In the ageist, ableist, socially-divided world of the play, fear mainly operates against older people who feel abandoned by the government and discarded by society itself: the only resources of the state in which they are taken into account are used to ensure their control or disempowerment; and all their legal rights are reduced to a minimum that threatens

both their integrity and subsistence, as they are not allowed to work, they cannot use whatever economic resources they are left with (32), and they are excluded of medical services (30), thus experiencing a form of extreme precarity that makes hunger a common daily experience (17, 21, 96–97) and group solidarity – such as the “Sandwich Circle” Norma caters for with Joy’s help (22) – an essential survival mechanism. As a reflection of the intersectional aspects of age in our own world, within Adams’ universe, the combination of old age, class, and gender strongly predicts the experience of poverty in later life as a common one for many older women (Barusch 1994; Cruikshank 2013: 115–118). Portrayed as a burden on the social, health, financial, and economic systems, the older female characters in the play have definitely been converted into a “handy new group to target,” as Gullette puts it referring to older people in the ageist Western world (2017: xxi). The excess of fear towards old age that dominates Adams’ piece and the absence of “real” images of the elderly at the center of its imagined world disguise the reality of ageing. At the same time, “a miasma of dread” around later stages of life, as Betty Friedan put it (1993: 41), is generated and “[helps] *create* the ‘problem’ of age” (1993: 42, emphasis in original), the carriers of which (i.e. older people themselves) must be kept at distance, or, as the feminist scholar argued, “must be quarantined lest they contaminate, in mind or body, the rest of society” (1993: 50). In this sense, Adams’ imaginative demodystopia isolates “the problem,” which is also gender-ridden, thus preventing “the contamination of age” (Friedan 1993: 65) from spreading.

### Ambivalent Portrayals of Gendered Ageing

*Animals* not only demonstrates that cultural renderings of ageing and old age that lead to ageism against the old continue to be entrapped within the “narrative of decline” (Gullette 2004), but also that this is particularly notable in the case of older women. In Adam’s piece, the portrayal of female old age is strongly anchored within images of impairment and notions of physical difference – a depiction that is doubly problematic in that, while mirroring the predominant narrative of age, it conflates ableist and ageist assumptions (Aubrecht et al. 2020). Hence, even though the play’s protagonists occupy diverse positions within the spectrum of later life, they similarly signify the female experience of ageing through signs

of physical decay and infirmity (29, 96); the deformity of their wrinkled faces, which younger characters like Maya find distressing (35, 37); their constant dependence, either on medicine (96) or the help of others (35, 46, 57); loss (18, 70) and loneliness (31); and even poverty (32), all of which paradoxically make the three female figures victims of the so-called “disorders of longevity” (Butler 2008: 75) in a society for which living into old age has become a serious problem instead of the medical or social victory it was meant to be. At the same time, the narrative arcs of the three characters similarly show that the intersection of gender, class, and (old) age is especially dangerous for any individual in the ageist and sexist universe they inhabit.

Nonetheless, the individual portrayals of the three older women also exude other aspects of female ageing that offer important nuances to what could also be deemed an essentially ageist and ableist depiction of female old age, especially because they reinforce the sociocultural elements that condition their predominantly negative experiences of growing older. Norma, the oldest of the three women, is also the frailest one: she suffers from severe arthritis that keeps her awake at nights (29), uses a cane to support herself (17), is no longer apt to successfully test in one of the “readings” that the Utility Inspector may demand of her (60), and regards her scarce visitors as “Trojan horses” potentially carrying infections (30). Norma has a permit that indicates that she is, in fact, 37 years old. To the shock of Helen (55) and Joy (59–60), Norma claims she was “feeling optimistic” when she last forged this document: “I thought, I feel 37, so I’ll put down 37. Why not?” (60) Beyond its intended comical effect, the woman’s denial of her chronological age enables a more complex interpretation of female ageing in at least two ways. At one level, the disparity between Norma’s actual age and her “feeling” much younger reflects the complexities of age as a construct, and enhances the power of “personal age” (Woodward 1991: 149) within this construction. The subjective experience of age that Norma exemplifies is at odds with its social projection: in its “social” version, a far more negative image of the older person becomes “distorted” and returned in this way to them through their reflection in the mirror – a commonly experienced feeling which Woodward, extending Lacan’s theories, has seminally called “the mirror stage of old age” (1991: 67). Closely connected with this, and in a more direct association with the dramatic world of the play, Norma’s belief

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that she could “pass for” a woman in her late thirties with just a touch of make-up (67) can also be understood as a desperate gesture; that is to say, “a defense mechanism,” to borrow from Friedan (1993: 66), whereby older women can protect themselves from the extremely dangerous aura of “uselessness” that permeates and obscures their lives in the play’s dystopian society. When Joy assures Norma that to forge her age as 59 would have been more reasonable, Norma remorsefully remarks: “But 59 is too close to 60. It’s all down hill from there” (60), thus, accepting the idea that ageing equals decline and foreseeing, at the same time, the “dangers” of this realization.

Joy, Norma’s live-in help, is precisely completing the stage where she will be considered “still prime” (84) and, therefore, is regarded as a lawful citizen only for a fairly limited time before she turns 60. Characterized as a very active woman throughout the play, Joy is notably much less (if at all) affected by the effects of biological ageing than her employer. However, in a conversation she has with Maya about becoming an adult, she wistfully affirms that “[e]verything changes for ever” from the day you officially reach adulthood (34), hence confirming the declinist view of ageing that her older friends embody, while at the same time extending her negative interpretation of ageing to earlier stages within the life course and transmitting this message to younger generations. The fact that she saves some medicine for the potential encounters with the Utility Inspectors (60), and that she is delighted about the “haul” provided by Helen with the arthritis pills that the women have been unable to acquire for years (82), tacitly implies that she may need medicine to alleviate age-related pain and/or illnesses soon enough. Her lower social status as an in-home carer, especially in comparison with that of Norma (as a retired nurse) and, even more, with Helen’s (as a former Incomer), makes the prospect of her old age look even grimmer. Joy’s presentation as a character reflects the social hiatus between masters and servants in the style of old classical comedies: shown by herself in Norma’s living-room while watching out for her employer’s imminent appearance, Joy enters the scene “dragging polythene bags full of bread crusts and broken biscuits,” and sits on Norma’s cherished old recliner chair while chewing some biscuits “guiltily” (17). Very early in the play, this comical presentation, which quite effectively establishes the power dynamics between the two characters, can also be re-read as dramatically signaling not only the precarity that defines Joy’s

present life, but also the deeper disempowerment she is bound to have in the near future. In fact, Norma is aware of this, and uses their social-class difference as a source of blackmail to her own advantage, threatening Joy to dismiss her (and, therefore, leave her without both a job and a home) if she does not obey her (often extreme) orders (18-19, 50), including her doing sexual favours to the Postmaster that forges Norma's permit, and to as many other men that can help them survive in their precarious, illegal situation (19-20). Despite the fact that Joy is depicted as healthy, active, and sexually attractive, her liminal position as a "young-older person," in intersection with her gender and class, perilously announces an inescapable destiny of both destitution and the ensuing "state-induced" death.

Helen's characterization ambivalently contrasts Norma's and Joy's depiction in terms of class and gender. Defined as "healthy and excellent at crosswords" (15), a skill on which Norma and Joy depend to obtain some food that comes from crossword contests (31, 101), Helen's apparently differentiated character conception is also ambiguously situated within the narrative of decline that underlies Adams' demodystopia. On the one hand, as an Incomer that arrived in town 1 year after the tsunami with her daughter and granddaughter, Helen's portrayal is tinged with loneliness due to the loss of "the sentimental attachment" with her family (31), a bond that is now measured in extremely high fees, and which her daughter ceased to pay following "an awful mix up" involving her granddaughter (91) and for which Norma and Joy were responsible. Helen's nostalgia for the past confirms her assimilated declinist views: in her encounter with Maya, the woman heartily recommends enjoying her young years, since "[l]ife will never feel this beautiful again. Never." (43) In spite of her apparent physical and cognitive capacities, Helen's biological old age is emphasized and implicitly associated with disability when she sprains her ankle while trying to catch a balloon that Maya has been given by her father, and which the girl needs to generate happy memories to pass her test (46). Helen's groans of pain, her incapacity to stand up, and her desperately asking Maya to look for help (46) and get some amphetamines to prove her healthy appearance in front of the imminent arrival of the Utility Inspector (57), transform Helen's physical characterization. Despite her agile resourcefulness, the fragility of her ageing (female) body is emphasized in this way, which may implicitly underscore its dysfunction (Leder 1990: 85, 149).

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On the other hand, and in parallel to the declinist elements of her appearance, Helen can also be interpreted as generating a counter-narrative of female old age in the play. As shown by the episode with her sprained ankle, Helen often uses her quick wit to find a way out of predicaments, and later on in the play even dares to defy the Utility Inspector by rhetorically asking: "Does it really seem so bloody impossible, that an old person might be an intelligent human being?" (65) Her usually cheerful disposition (highly contrasted with Norma's grumpiness) is in part due to Mr. Brown, the man with whom she has intimate relationship, and who is a supporter of many of the women's illegal actions for survival. Seen from Norma's jealous point of view, a relationship with a man at her age makes the woman "always look [...] so bloody perky and smug" (60). However, now that Helen has lost her granddaughter and the ties with her daughter are broken, she realizes she has found "something to live for" (75, 76), and, therefore, does not want, nor is ready, to die (76). In Helen's characterization, love found in her later years becomes a source of resistance to the ageist system that oppresses women like her. Through this aspect of her character creation, the play contests the stereotyped image of the sexless, frigid, or simply ridiculous older woman in love, through which ageing women are often perceived in real life (Barusch 2008) or have been represented on the stage (Mangan 2013).

### The Grotesque Intersections of Ageism and Sexism

In recent years, a significant shift has been observed in cultural representations of older women whereby stereotypical portrayals of female ageing have been challenged, contested, or undermined (Dolan & Tincknell 2012; Henderson 2018; Richardson 2019; Spry 2021; Whelehan & Gwynne 2014). Nonetheless, Adams' play generally capitalizes on the characterization of older women as grotesque, scary, and even monstrous in order to represent a generationally divided, extremely ageist society, thereby complying with the long-established cultural tradition that has represented older women in such a limiting way (Byrski 2014; Friedan 1993: 54). Lynne Segal contends that the dreadful characters in cultural renderings of old age are not accidentally female, but rather "quintessentially female, seen as monstrous because of the combination of age and gender" (2014: 13). In *Animals*, this problematic representation reflects both the perception

that the younger characters (including young women) have of their older “others,” as well as the “anomaly” (in both social and moral terms) within which older women themselves are depicted. This is attained through a series of uncanny interactions between the female characters, which practically transform the piece into a gothic fairy tale, echoing the deep-rooted cultural trope of the monstrous mature/older woman in literature. It can likewise be understood as a dark social fantasy of the near-future, in which the Boomer generation is attacked and perceived, in Gullette’s terms, as “the enemy [...] that sucked up too much of the oxygen” that younger generations needed (2004: 45).

The first accidental encounter between the young and older women of the play becomes fraught when Maya meets Joy and “discovers” her ageing face, and focuses on physical qualities that turn signs of ageing into a peculiar mask: “It’s so funny! When you talk, little creases ping and pop.” (35) Joy tries to excuse herself for this “inappropriate” appearance by remarking that she cannot afford a face-lift, which confuses Maya even more, since she does not know what it means (35). The girl’s shock intensifies when she sees Norma and Helen, the appearance of whom starts generating a grotesque fantasy to her age-illiterate eyes, to adapt Thomas Cole’s term (1994: 7), and for which she lacks the appropriate terms: “Your creases are even bigger than Joy’s! Are you witches? My teacher said all the modern witches had been cooked in an oven. How did you escape the oven?” (37) For a girl like Maya who has never encountered the realities of ageing, the women’s skin that is “so falling off of [their faces] and hands” (38) creates the specter of incorrectness and flaw. “You look all wrong,” (38) she claims; thus, dissociating her young self from the apparent image of her future old self, simply because “old” (with its visible signs of time passing) is a non-existent identity in her society.

Norma tries to lessen Maya’s shock by asserting they are, indeed, “witches who have wrinkled skin because [they] are a hundred years old,” and allays her fear by clarifying they are “good witches” she should not be scared of (38). Even though Maya decides to stay with the three women to have “totally brilliant fun” with their “magic potion” (39) as she waits for her father to turn up any time, the “monstrosity” of female old age is, nevertheless, suggested through their first encounter. More than Maya, it is the older women who are enhanced as the victims of their monstrous status, imposed as it is by the ageist and misogynist world of the play. In

it, older women are seen through the long-established tradition that has represented them as “hags, nags, witches or worse” (Friedan 1993: 54), ranging from traditional fairy tales (Henneberg 2010) to the golden age of Hollywood cinema and beyond (Chivers 2011: 38–57). Echoing such cultural views of female ageing, the image of the three older women has become, in Woodward’s terms, “the figure of horror and catastrophe” (1991: 8) through which Maya, rather than being scared, becomes a young “Snow White” that awakes from a long, ignorant sleep as an overprotected child.

Within the same scene, and perpetuating the play’s satirical portrayal of female ageing in its oppressive dramatic universe, Norma suggests putting on their so-called “face supports” while Maya is with them, which, as stage directions indicate, are “*very large rubber bands*” that “*Norma pulls [...] around her jaw and forehead, affecting a kind of instant, if horrific face-lift*” and provoking her some pain (38). Through this grotesque effect, which evokes the convergence of anxieties of female ageing in the portrayal of classic-Hollywood “hag figures” such as Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* (1952) or Baby Jane and Blanche Hudson in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962), Norma’s old age is submitted to the imperatives of “ageist standards of appearance,” as Ann Gerike has put it (1990: 41). With her “face supports” on, Norma “speaks” to Maya through an incongruous mask which, by intending to hide Norma’s identity as an older human being, actually enhances her age in a ridiculous way, rendering her a theatrical version of the iconic crones of the big screen (Chivers 2011; Creed 1993, 2022; Richardson 2019). This and many other comic elements of the play that underline the “inappropriateness” of the women’s age create, borrowing from Friedan, “a satire or a humorous attack on the [social and cultural] denial of age” (1993: 57).

The denial of age, however, is not only the result of the old age aversion but has its origins in the constructed gender roles (and gender rules) which are cemented from the younger stages of the life course in the dystopian universe of the play. Following the popularized sexist “colour rules,” Maya, for whom “a prince” is destined even in her afterlife (95), is supposed to like pink clothes (23) and can only be given a “legal,” that is, “pretty, totally awesome and pink” balloon (24), even though she (like her Mother, whom Daddy completely resents) would not mind having it in another color (65). Her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday test, which determines the level

of her "suitability" for society, implies the recollection of only fun memories, in which there is no place for intelligence, curiosity, or even real fun itself (24, 26). If she does not "merit," her only destiny is to become a "Comfort Girl [...] for other people's daddies" (94) – the role Maya had the chance to witness through her encounters with Ling May, "Daddy's best Comfort Girl ever," (43) of whom Maya talks in an affective and longing way (26, 43, 46), and who clearly defied the system through her "transgressive" tendency to think for herself. Maya's own "transgressive" behaviour (expressed in her wish to use forbidden weather words or her willingness to have "real fun") makes her, in Ling May's words, "totally Comfort Girl material," (43) an idea her Daddy confirms, to his horror, at the end of the play (94). As Adams' piece reveals, questioning the (patriarchal) system turns into a real threat that can determine your destiny, no matter your age. By presenting women of different ages entrapped in a sexist system that diminishes them as human beings and becomes more harmful to their dignity as they advance in the life course, *Animals* renders ageism a part and parcel of patriarchal oppression.

It is, however, through the revelation of what the women's "Sandwich Circle" implies that Adams' dark satire is transformed into a demodystopic horror story. In a gradual way, a terrible mix-up around that peculiar "club" that completely ruined Helen's granddaughter is clarified to reveal that Norma, Joy, and their network of older friends are eating human meat in their sandwiches, which they obtain from "windfalls" (35, 40, 91). Through this euphemism, they actually refer to "abandoned" children whom they murder, and whose dead bodies they curate and slice up in a "larder" (91) – the same place where they had temporarily locked Helen's granddaughter without realizing their family tie. When the group's appalling cannibalistic behaviour is disclosed in the last scenes of the play, in a sequence of scenes where Maya awakens again to the realities of her world as a Gretel-figure that accidentally ends up in the larder (91, 97–98), Helen must also acknowledge the truth she had been looking away from every time she visited Norma to have something to eat. Horrified and, yet, trapped in their desperate, extremely precarious situation, Helen ends up eating sandwiches again in one of the last scenes (96–97). Likewise, Norma's words when trying to justify their having released her granddaughter – "We wouldn't ever eat a neighbour's grandchild! We are not / animals!" (91), and Joy's repeating "Animals!" in an overlapping

### The older woman at the centre of dystopia

line – similarly underline the conundrum provoked by the dehumanizing effects of a dystopian universe where ageism and sexism coalesce, which imprisons older women within the most sinister of clichés: that of the child-consuming witch. Through the re-presentation of such a monstrous figure of ageing femininity in a demodystopic light, Adams' play signifies the violent disintegration that patriarchal and youth-oriented societies can undergo, sometimes inflicted by its most marginal members.

### Representing Intergenerational Chaos

In addition to its brutal portrayal of the impact of ageism and sexism on older women, the demodystopic universe of Adams' play also illustrates the consequences of intergenerational estrangement: in the play, the rare interactions between members of different generations are not only imbued with the ideological denigration of ageing, through which the old are deprived of their personhood, but also affect the idea of generational continuity itself. This generational disorder or "generational anachronism," as Sarah Falcus terms it, drawing from Marry Russo's influential study, is a commonplace in (demo)dystopian narratives that refers to "a mistake in the 'normative systematization' – or generational organization – of time" (2020: 68). In Adams' play, generational continuity is broken by a form of "extreme polarization" between the younger and older members: the young, personified by Maya, are deprived of a phase of growth and maturity by being treated like children who must be protected from such essential aspects of life, such as ageing or death; and the older figures are "othered" into the far end of the spectrum, their lives becoming forced to exist in suspension or, to borrow from Segal's memoir, to persist "out of time" (2014). In a world deceptively depicted as "safe," therapists "help" children create "a little box in [their] mind where [they] lock away all [their] sad, horrid, non fun thoughts [and words]" (26) or, on occasion, "adjust," (20) "mend" (45), or "fix" (94) the youngsters, that is, avert critical thinking and questioning the world around them, hence distancing them even further not only from their own maturity, but also, and especially, from their future older selves. In addition, the extremely high "Sentimental Attachment fees" (45, 87, 94) that allow the families to continue keeping their kinship ties divide the members of different age groups even more, as seen through Helen's character who has lost all the

relationships with her daughter and granddaughter in exchange for the therapy sessions for the latter (45). In this way, Adams' play demonstrates, as generally discussed within age studies, that the biased attitudes of the young towards those who are on the opposite side of the life continuum are not so much self-initiated, but rather externally imposed on them by society and culture (Gullette 2004: 52).

The play's problematic depiction of intergenerational relationships is complicated further by the system of parenting that is recreated in it, which fully relies on socioeconomic strategies and imposes a form of "happiness" on both parents and children that can only be attained through artificial or material means. In fact, Noah, who is convinced that Maya will be taking care of him in his "diminished" years (66), fails to become a successful father despite, as he believes, doing everything for his daughter (64), or rather, as the play insinuates, because of the system itself (23, 64). Paradoxically enough, the solution to this apparently unbridgeable intergenerational gap comes from the older women characters, a detail that emphasizes the play's anti-ageist critique. Unable to find affection and protection in her Daddy, and having lost her Mother and Ling May as the only ones who knew how to make her happy in a genuine way, Maya finds a new constructive relationship in Helen, who can understand what fun is for the young girl, and who shares the realities of life with her, which the girl is eager to know. Even though, to Helen, this transmission of knowledge is initially a desperate selfish act, through which Maya is manipulated into helping her before Noah turns up for his inspection, it eventually becomes a sign of "generativity," the term used by Erik Erikson to refer to "the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation" (1950: 267). In fact, Helen's "generative action" quickly evolves into mutual esteem, friendship, and fondness, and in later scenes, she is actually shown to "care" for Maya (35, 44–45, 100). Several moments of the play, in which the conversations between Maya and Helen are accompanied by patience, love, support, and fun, resemble the close relationship of a grandmother with her grandchild. Hence, they foreground the idea that knowledge is transmitted not solely through words, but also through the sense of intimacy and embodied affection that is transmitted with care; and, at the same time, they suggest that intergenerational relationships founded on mentorship build richer and deeper knowledge of ageing, as demonstrated by

other narratives in which such interactions are depicted (Casado-Gual et al. 2019: 16).

Helen's new "generational" role, not only as Maya's "adopted grandmother," but also as her main carer, is emphasized when Noah tries to kill his own daughter, realizing that after the horrible "truths" she has discovered in Norma's house, Maya will be forever traumatized – and, therefore, the therapy sessions she will require will be utterly unaffordable (94). In a heroic gesture, Helen stabs Noah in the back both saving Maya's life and, at the same time, providing the "Sandwich Circle" a new order whereby future killings are to only be perpetrated against threatening Utility Inspectors. In the last lines of the play, Maya's giving the answer to the last crossword puzzle Norma and Joy are trying to solve with the symbolic answer of "El Niño" – corresponding to the definition "Little child brings great sea change" (101) – conveys the inferred sign of change and further development within the relationships between Maya and the older women who, as the play insinuates, will not just "fix" the girl (94), but will also restore generational meaning for all of them, or, in Edmondson's terms, "their place in the flow of generations" (2015: 19).

With its open ending, Adams' play does not give a compelling answer to what will happen to Maya and the three older women, nor does it put an end to the atrocities of the ageist and sexist society of their dramatic world. However, its denouement implies a sense of relief in the intergenerational tensions depicted, and it suggests a sense of redemption for the main characters, generated out of their mutual forgiveness and deeper bonding. The positive reciprocity of their relationships (and, hence, generational continuity) becomes profound and meaningful as well as beneficial for young and older people: as the end of the piece insinuates, Maya is finally liberated from the lies that burdened her harming experiences with grown-ups, especially with her Daddy (94), and receives parental care and love from older women; and, while Norma and Joy make peace with Helen after the terrible incident with Helen's granddaughter (97), Helen herself recuperates her lost family through her new bond with Maya. Despite its extremely bleak prospects, towards the end of Adams' demodystopian piece, old age exhibits the characteristics of "intergeneration" and "regeneration" that Robert E. Yahnke observed in the cinematic renderings of ageing (2000, 2010): thus, the intergenerational reconciliation

implied in the last scene may be read as contributing to re-generating wholeness and unity within a self-destructive society.

### Conclusions

This article has presented an age-focused analysis of a contemporary play that highlights the close interconnection between negative interpretations of ageing and gender, ageism, intergenerational rupture, and social fragmentation. The increase of narratives of different genres with an important emphasis on old age unmistakably signals the heightened anxiety and uncertainty about the future caused by the ageing demographics. In this sense, and quite exceptionally through a theatrical demodystopia, *Animals* contributes to raising awareness about the perils of generalized gerontophobia, and especially of its consequences for older women in particular, in the following ways.

In the first place, as has been demonstrated, the play shows how the culturally-ingrained fear of ageing deforms old age identity by presenting it as a non-human entity. It also separates different age groups, leading to social degeneration and atrocity, and projecting negative “age-effects,” as Bridie Moore terms it (2014), on all the generations involved. As Adams’ demodystopia illustrates, the dread of later life strips older people of their identity and even humanity, while simultaneously leaving the young without real images or references of their future older selves. Secondly, the adverse “age-effects” of Adams’ demodystopian world are explicitly signified as gender-ridden. While the prevalence of older female characters in the piece mirrors the growing visibility of older women on the stage, it also signals the pervading power of the narrative of decline in its renderings of ageing femininity, through which female ageing is associated with loss, dependency, and poverty and, in a frequently ableist way, with impairment and physical difference. In a similar vein, the play also underlines the extent to which the older woman is regarded as “grotesque” and even as “monstrous” by societies that reject or turn a blind eye to the process of growing older. Thirdly, and counteracting what could be deemed a victimized or problematic image of the older woman, the play transforms its ageing protagonists into figures of resistance who (especially in the case of Helen) have the capacity not only to survive the double form of oppression they are subjugated to, but also to foster new bonds with the young whereby their society might be regenerated.

All in all, through its apparently realistic aesthetics and characterizations, the efficiency of its satirical tone, and the recognizable scope of its seemingly futuristic temporal frame, Emma Adams' play poignantly warns us of the dangers of organizing our world into "polar opposites," as Woodward has put it, instead of regarding "age" as "a subtle continuum" (1991: 6), whereby all ages (especially if gender-marked) can be recognized as equally leading to fulfilling relationships and forms of life. As a theatrical piece, *Animals* generates a "safe" narrative through which the dangers (and even "horrors") of ageism and sexism can be contemplated, identified, and, ultimately, confronted; and, as a cultural artefact, it enables a better understanding of the complex intersections at work in the construction of the ageing self, including the rich role older women have played and continue to have as powerful agents of social cohesion.

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