**The Red Dressing Gown: reflections on the ageing of a dutiful daughter**

**1 Background and introduction**

In a 1960 interview about her attitude to fashion, Simone de Beauvoir tells the journalist that she is not interested in clothes and prefers to wear her dressing gown.[[1]](#footnote-1) She wears it to work in and to write all day long, she reveals, gives interviews to journalists and others whilst wearing it and is, indeed, enrobed in it in the photograph that accompanies the article. It is a dramatic Adrianople red, the colour of blood, life and death, love and war; there is a portrait of her wearing it, or a precursor, in 1957 too, with matching lips and nails and indeed the image of Beauvoir in her carmine-coloured robe has become iconic.[[2]](#footnote-2) It was both smart – I had always mistaken it for an elegant wool coat when I encountered the image – and comfortable, perhaps even comforting. Although acknowledging, “I’m getting older and I have to be more careful…ageing women are much more unforgivable,” her dressing gown was clearly important enough for her not to worry that it undermined that expressed need for care towards her ageing appearance.[[3]](#footnote-3)

More generally, ageing as a problem and how to approach it was of deep concern to Beauvoir from early in her life. However, Beauvoir’s life writing and other biographical material also reveals that, despite a lifetime of dread towards age and ageing, finally, in her late middle age, she was reconciled to it and even found pleasure and satisfaction in this life stage. It was this achievement that meant she was finally able to write her book on old age, in which she both clear-sightedly identified the inequities of ageing for the poor whilst also viewing it as a stage of continued value.[[4]](#footnote-4) In this paper, I seek to explore what might have occurred to shift her approach and in so doing I first identify and disentangle three strands that characterize Beauvoir’s long-standing approach towards ageing. These strands, which were not, in her own life, easily separable, include, variously, a feeling of depression related to the impermanence and potential futility and emptiness of life; a feeling of particularly gendered loss in relation to her appearance, sexuality and identity as a woman; and a third strand which is more positive and recognises the importance of endings as well as beginnings, of the whole life course, and finitude, in constituting a meaningful life. Next, I dig deeper to explore the more hidden dimensions that underpin these strands, drawing on a variety of conceptual approaches as explanatory frameworks. Taken from psychoanalytic theory, these include Freud’s theories of grief and mourning to explore the nature of the first strand in Beauvoir’s life and Kristeva’s concept of “abjection” to explore the second strand.[[5]](#footnote-5) In a third step, I then bring together insights from both approaches arguing that, by combining insights from Freud and Kristeva in particular, abjection as a wildly negative, unstable and never completed process is potentially modified through the completion of mourning, in turn leading to the achievement of individuation incorporating a somewhat different attitude towards boundary-making and relations with others. This, then, facilitates the achievement of a more positive approach towards ageing. I turn next to Beauvoir’s life and apply these insights to interrogating Beauvoir’s relationship with her mother where both the abjection and grief I am referring to concerns that of the lost object of Françoise de Beauvoir, both in terms of the original closeness of infancy and in terms of her death as an old woman. I suggest that the many long-standing tensions and complexities that existed between Simone and her mother were finally resolved during the period in which Françoise de Beauvoir was dying, which in turn made possible the realisation of this third positive strand towards old age in her own life. In this process of excavation, the red dressing gown will make several appearances, pointing to the unacknowledged but significant life-long connection and identification between mother and daughter. Finally, I briefly explore the contemporary relevance of these conceptional insights and the lessons that we can glean from Beauvoir’s experience at a time of heightened intergenerational discord as well as the profound othering of old age.

My purpose is to use psychoanalytic theory as a critical interpretive framework primarily for examining Beauvoir’s autobiographical texts rather than psychoanalysing the woman herself, whilst acknowledging two things. First, life and text are inextricably intertwined, as Ladimer observes, “especially because the autobiographical self is inevitably fictionalized to some degree, whereas a writer’s fiction constantly and inevitably refers to her autobiography.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Secondly, the meaning-making of autobiography has much in common with psychoanalysis and in addition can be littered with buried motifs and signs of conflict.[[7]](#footnote-7) My purview here also includes the sociological dimension I am interested in the specific social context that facilitates the othering of old age in the forms it takes in contemporary times, particularly with regard to older women.

I start by describing Beauvoir’s approach to the prospect of ageing, old age and finitude, an approach in which the negative or despondent approach is prominent.

**2 Never again shall I…. Beauvoir and the tragedy of ageing and old age**

Beauvoir ends *Force of Circumstance*, the memoir she published when she was fifty-four, with a piercing cry of loss: about the approach of death, the loss of her looks, the demise of her sexuality, and the end of her involvement in beloved recreational activities comprising strength and stamina such as vigorous hiking in the mountains. She says: “To grow old is to set limits on oneself, to shrink. I have fought always not to let them label me; but I have not been able to prevent the years from enmeshing me…. Creation is adventure, it is youth and liberty.”[[8]](#footnote-8) A little later in the same section: ”I loathe my appearance now: the eyebrows slipping down towards the eyes, the bags underneath, the excessive fullness of the cheeks, and that air of sadness around the mouth that wrinkles always bring….”[[9]](#footnote-9) She continues: “Never again shall I collapse, drunk with fatigue, into the smell of hay. Never again shall I slide down through the solitary morning snows. Never again a man.”[[10]](#footnote-10) All these associations, images and fears relating to age and ageing are present from the earliest years of Beauvoir’s life, if we turn to *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter.*[[11]](#footnote-11) In this first volume of her memoirs, which recounts her childhood and adolescence up to the time of her meeting with Sartre at the Sorbonne, Beauvoir already records a fear and loathing of ageing and old age. One of the consistent themes in this volume is the young Simone’s struggle with the facts of ageing and impermanence and the possibly meaningless nature of existence they reveal.

Partly, she links this to the existential abyss created by her loss of early, religious faith, as she describes: “I was responding ceaselessly to a necessity which spared me from asking: why am I here?”[[12]](#footnote-12) She also links it to the gendered lifespan she sees ahead of her at that point in her life and she describes having flashes and visions of a meaningless, repetitive future: “One afternoon I was helping Mama to wash up; she was washing the plates and I was drying, through the window I could see the wall of the barracks, and other kitchens in which women were scrubbing out saucepans or peeling vegetables. Everyday lunch and dinner; everyday washing-up; all those hours, those endlessly recurring hours, all leading nowhere: could I live like that?”[[13]](#footnote-13) She continues: “An image was formed in my mind, an image of such desolate clarity that I can still remember it today; a row of grey squares, diminishing according to the laws of perspective, but all flat, all identical, extending away to the horizon; they were for days and weeks and years.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

If we can view the above as relating to the threat of a gendered life sunk in immanence, something that endured her whole life, then the other fear of ageing conversely relates to the loss of the “advantages” of femininity in terms of the value accorded to it by the male gaze which is threatened profoundly by ageing (“never again a man”). From the first, Beauvoir’s sexuality was connected to her identity as a thinker and free-spirit and while she fully appreciated the danger love and sexuality also presented to women, nevertheless it provided enormous meaning to her life at its best. Another way of assessing its importance is looking at what she feels she is about to lose when age and ageing means that what she views as her ‘last love affair’ is over[[15]](#footnote-15).

In *Force of Circumstance* Beauvoir describes her life from her late thirties to her mid-fifties She conveys a feeling of regaining a body (with love) and losing it again (at the end of love possibly, as she is an ageing woman, for good). This emerges when her affair with Nelson Algren ends and she reflects: “I’ll never sleep again warmed by another’s body”.[[16]](#footnote-16) She goes on to describe this as a (death) “knell’ and reflects: “When the realization of these facts penetrated me, I felt myself sinking into death. The void had always frightened me, but till now I had been dying day by day without paying attention to it; suddenly, at one blow, a whole piece of myself was being engulfed before my eyes”.[[17]](#footnote-17) Describing her affair aged forty-four with Claude Lanzmann she notes: “I had rediscovered my body”[[18]](#footnote-18) and at the end of it: “It’s strange not to be a body anymore” - that is, not to be seen as a woman.[[19]](#footnote-19)

In the next sections I consider, and build on, the conceptual and psychoanalytical explanations that have been suggested to explain Beauvoir’s long-standing dread of age and her shift later in life.

**3 Melancholia, mourning and anticipatory mourning**

Toril Moi points out that Beauvoir’s obsession with old age is a smokescreen for a broader depression from which she suffered, even in her twenties, but which was hard for her to face directly: “When life comes to seem repetitive, colourless, drained of vitality and significance, Beauvoir immediately leaps to the conclusion that all this happens because she is growing old.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Beauvoir’s ‘depression’, Moi maintains, particularly caught up with her as she headed into mid-life. She observes: “Clearly recognizing her mood as one of ‘melancholia’, she refuses to consider other reasons why she might be suffering from a feeling of ‘irreparable loss’”.[[21]](#footnote-21) The other reasons Moi points to concern love and its loss, “her constant fear of solitude and separation.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

Deirdre Bair identifies the key problem as fear of “abandonment.” She writes: “It was as if from her earliest rational moments in childhood she began to prepare herself for people and things to be taken away from her.” [[23]](#footnote-23) This was focused on her fear of Sartre’s death which she also equated with abandonment: “It is appalling that he should abandon you and then not speak to you again.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Countering this were the pleasures of life, the companionship of Sylvie le Bon, the latter’s encouragement to travel and socialise, as well as Beauvoir’s satisfaction in her work which finally helped her to reconcile herself with ageing.

Kathleen Woodward concurs that Beauvoir’s “preoccupation with the death drive” is based on her dread and fear of losing Sartre and develops this explanatory strand with the help of Freud and Gregory Rochlin.[[25]](#footnote-25) In Freud, whilst in mourning we withdraw libido from one object and invest it in another, which then functions as a substitute for the lost object, in melancholia no such disinvestment and reinvestment of libido is made. Drawing on earlier writings of Freud, Woodward stresses that even in mourning the loved object is only ever substituted and thus not ever completely replaced.[[26]](#footnote-26) She adds: “The work of mourning, then, is to restore what has been lost, to bring us back to our previous condition.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Rochlin’s contribution is to add a temporal dimension. He notes that this process starts in early infancy and continues to the end of life, where substitutions (for example, for key relationships) are less possible and melancholia, thus, increasingly likely.[[28]](#footnote-28) He also points out that much mourning is actually fantastical, an imaginative rehearsal or “anticipatory grief” for something that may or may not happen in the future. Yet in itself, it shores up psychological defences and is thus an important protective practice against future melancholia or depression. Woodward applies this thesis to Beauvoir’s life suggesting that anticipatory grief, specifically for the losses she anticipated in old age, is the reason that age was less bad than she feared and expected, not just because of what she found there but because she had spent many years accommodating to the losses, imaginary and real, of old age.

Fascinating and illuminating though these explanations are, they do not factor in the gendered dimension which, as noted, was undoubtedly present in Beauvoir’s dread of age, nor do they specifically consider her identity as a daughter. To develop this aspect, I will first turn to Beauvoir’s idea of the “feminine” in *The Second Sex* and then draw out its connection to ageing and death.

**4 Femininity, alterity and ageing**

Beauvoir’s memoirs and fiction suggest that while her feminine sexuality was very important to her identity she always also needed to transcend it in certain ways, emphasising agency, the attainment of meaningful projects, being a subject and so on. This was a struggle because of the constitution of femininity in terms of alterity, the inessential Other and object to man’s subject, associated with immanence. Before proceeding further, a quick note on these terms is in order. For Beauvoir, transcendence refers to the project of world-building, of action and meaningful projects historically associated with the masculine In contrast, immanence is passivity and waiting, with relegation to the realm of immanence key to women’s structured disadvantage. Indeed, an authentic life involves the interplay of both immanence and transcendence in individual lives and recognition of the value of both. Because women were denied it, at the time she was writing, Beauvoir emphasised the importance for women of aiming for transcendence and in her own life she strove always to be independent economically, exercising enormous self-discipline, avoiding motherhood and domestic work and all the traditional roles that threatened to crush her as she had once anticipated her future life as a young woman. While she felt immanence as a constant threat, ageing and old age contributed to this threat. For Beauvoir, as an existentialist philosopher and as a woman, the future was a necessary factor for accomplishing projects. In the Introduction to *The Second Sex* she declares: “[T]here is no other justification for present existence than its expansion towards an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is degradation of existence into ‘in-itself’, of freedom into facticity; […] if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and oppression […].”[[29]](#footnote-29) She also makes it clear that this is a risk most of all for women: “But what singularly defines the situation of women is that being, like all humans, an autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: an attempt is made to freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence […]”[[30]](#footnote-30)

Thus, youth, both in the sense of time ahead for projects to unfold, as well as one in which her feminine capital remained vibrant, features as a particularly important theme in Beauvoir’s writing. This sentiment underpins Beauvoir’s disgust at the “ruined flesh” of women from mid-life onwards as she vividly depicts in *The Mandarins*: “The faces of these women of my own age, the flabby skin, those blurred features, those drooping mouths, those bodies so obviously bulging under their corsets […].”[[31]](#footnote-31) These images jar: as a reader it always struck me as a grotesque exaggeration to depict forty-yearold women as ageing in this way, just as it did to read Beauvoir writing*:* “When I look, I see my face as it was, attacked by the pox of time for which there is no cure.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Bair notes that her description of her own “loathsome” appearance is belied by photographs of her at the time. “Her skin is taut; her face unlined, no bags, no wrinkles. Hers is an enviable youthfulness – in everyone’s eyes but her own.”[[33]](#footnote-33) But this becomes understandable if one appreciates age’s role in threatening transcendence by trapping one in a stagnant present, a role which has phenomenological as well as symbolic dimensions, as captured by Joanna Frueh for mid-life: “Time, hanging heavy, claims the midlife body, enervating it, degenerating it from lassitude to sluggishness so that it hangs heavy.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Susan Gubar also captures the particular immanence of old age fraught with illness: “every day is the same – simply getting cleaned, dressed, fed, undressed, bedded takes up all our time and strength.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir notes how the threat of finitude, of ageing and death, is a key element, moreover, of the construction of the feminine as Other within a patriarchal society and is part of femininity’s essential alterity. She writes: “The cult of germination has always been associated with the cult of the dead. Mother Earth engulfs the bones of its children within it. Women […] weave human destiny; but they also cut the threads”.[[36]](#footnote-36) Again: “Mother Earth has a face of darkness […]. Man is threatened with being engulfed in this night, the reverse of fertility, and it horrifies him. ”[[37]](#footnote-37) Although constructed through the male gaze, this threat is something, Frueh’s work suggests, that women also feel in and through their bodies.

The association of femininity with finitude is a crucial, though somewhat overlooked, aspect of Beauvoir’s gender theory. One way of exploring this more deeply, together with the consequences of this dual pull of temptation and aversion, is to look at it through the conceptual lens of abjection as constructed by Julia Kristeva. Abjection is concerned with the rejection of the feminine/maternal body in the process of self-formation. I turn to this next.

**5 Abjection and the (ageing) female body**

In Lacan’s version of the Oedipal struggle, the infant passes through several stages in the development of selfhood.[[38]](#footnote-38) The “Imaginary” is the earliest, when the child has not yet individuated from the mother and the mother’s domain. The Oedipal crisis is then the struggle for the leaving of this domain and the entry into the Symbolic Order, the patriarchal realm presided over by the Phallus or Law of the Father. This is also the realm of language and from now on the desire for the mother’s body must be repressed. Abjection, in Kristeva’s feminist psychoanalytical account, is a process which works at this boundary between the Symbolic and memory of the Imaginary, by casting out the maternal body.[[39]](#footnote-39) Kristeva’s theory of abjection is thus a counterpart to Freud’s Oedipal theory, depicting the matricide by the sons and particularly the daughters as an alternative to the primal horde and its patricide. [[40]](#footnote-40)

Without abjection of the mother countering the attractions of this symbiotic union, Kristeva notes, integration into the Symbolic order would become difficult if not impossible. This then provokes an ambivalent reaction, associated with desire and fear/horror respectively, an oscillating movement which Kristeva describes as follows: “Unflagging, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.”[[41]](#footnote-41) In a subsequent work on melancholia, she stresses the need for abjection as an ongoing process. Where matricide is hindered – which, she stresses, is more likely for women – it is instead internalized, which can result in deep depression[[42]](#footnote-42). Such a juxtaposition of attraction and repulsion may be particularly tense and intense for contemporary generations of daughters, whether feminist or not, who are going forth in the world and striving towards accomplishments in the public domain in the way their mothers did not (and indeed, as a pioneering independent woman, would have been acutely challenging for Beauvoir herself). Using Beauvoir’s own conceptual apparatus, we can see this as an unresolved and highly strung tension between transcendence and immanence. It also suggests that both mourning and melancholia have a more complicated temporality, involving both looking back to a loss and looking ahead to future losses.

At this point, I will briefly apply elements of both conceptual frameworks (i.e., mourning/melancholia and abjection) to Beauvoir’s relationship with her mother as revealed through her memoirs. There are certainly elements of abjection in the wavering, gusty movement Beauvoir describes to and from her mother. She recounts how, though having little in common with her mother, in terms of values, and feeling herself to be closer to her father intellectually and spiritually, yet her mother wielded enormous power over her, at least in childhood and youth. In *Memoirs of a Dutiful* Daughter, Beauvoir recalls: “When she was angry with me, she gave me a ‘black look’; I used to dread that stormy look which disfigured her charming face; I needed her smile.”[[43]](#footnote-43) As she grew bigger, a progress recorded by pencilled marks on the wall, she felt melancholy at the removal it delineated, inch by inch, from union with her mother: “I would look at Maman’s armchair and think: ‘I won’t be able to sit on her knee anymore if I go on growing up.’”[[44]](#footnote-44) This melancholic sense of separation from mother directly feeds the sorrow she feels for the impermanence of life: “I had forebodings of all the separations, the refusals, the desertions to come, and of the long succession of my various deaths.”[[45]](#footnote-45) By comparison, disagreements with her Papa Georges, whilst unpleasant, lacked this primordially threatening quality: “On the other hand, any reproach made by my mother, and even her slightest frown was a threat to my security: without her approval, I no longer felt I had any right to live.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Where Beauvoir violently tugs away from this orbit, it is also a rejection of the femininity Françoise embodies.[[47]](#footnote-47) On her part, as Simone grew up and acquired friends of her own, Françoise’s extreme neediness was expressed in her imposing herself on her daughter’s privacy, including reading her letters and gate-crashing her meetings with friends. To escape this crushingly claustrophobic union, as soon as she can, the minute her studies are completed, Simone leaves the family home and lives with her grandmother, claiming her own space both from the maternal tie, from the immanent feminine itself and from its inseparable association with finitude and loss. It is reasonable to assume that hereafter, as Simone becomes an adult and free-thinking existentialist in theory and practice, the threatening quality of her relationship with her mother exists only as a memory. Indeed, the obvious reading of the first volume of her memoirs is a story of how Beauvoir *ceased* to be a “dutiful daughter”.[[48]](#footnote-48) However, the contrast in the way she approached the death of both parents suggests a continued subterranean attachment to her mother. As Beauvoir writes in *A Very Easy Death*: “Suddenly … an outburst of tears that almost degenerated into hysteria. Amazement. When my father died I did not cry at all.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

Before turning to explore this in more detail, however, I first look at the third strand in Beauvoir’s personal approach to ageing and old age, which is far more positive and appreciative of the place of old age in the life course and the shape it gives to life. This element recognizes that beginnings, profoundly important to her as they are, necessarily require endings.

**6 The value of ageing, finitude and death**

The more positive aspect of ageing and old age co-exists in Beauvoir’s philosophy with the darker, depressed tone with which she imbues old age and ageing. This emerges vividly in one of her (undeservedly) lesser known works, *All Men are Mortal.[[50]](#footnote-50)* Here, through the character of her immortal protagonist, Count Fosca, Beauvoir advances several arguments in favour of “mortality” and all it entails, including ageing. Firstly, without it one would not feel able to invest in anything and certainly one would lack human emotions which contain within them knowledge of transience. Along with that, there would be an alienation from the world, a sense of indifference to its variety, the loss of any sense of the uniqueness of people and things and also a sense of being without a home in the world. There would not be a story but simply an incoherent ramble, taking up a thread and dropping it again.

Fosca cannot feel human emotions, because of this, and thus he feels “dead”. Interestingly, it is love focused on the unique and irreplaceable nature of the individual that offers him the only hope of re-engaging with life again. When he first meets Regina, an aspiring actress who craves ever-lasting fame as a result of her association with an immortal, he implores her: “`Save me from the night and from apathy […] Make me love you and know that you alone exist among all other women. Then the world will return to its original shape. There will be tears, smiles, expectations, fears. I’ll be a living man again.’”[[51]](#footnote-51) He suspects, even then, that this would be impossible; he had tried to go down this path once before, centuries ago, with a woman called Marianne, but of course it had not lasted: she had, eventually, died. And so, condemned to immortality, alone, “I looked hard at the saffron-coloured rose but there had been too many roses in my life, too many spring times.”[[52]](#footnote-52) And similarly he declares: “I hated old men because they were aware of their whole lives behind them, round and full like a huge cake.”[[53]](#footnote-53) Life everlasting, for Fosca, without ageing and old age, is quite simply a curse. These words, written when Beauvoir was thirty-eight, express a truth that is suppressed personally at this point by the stronger strand of melancholia.

At this point, I return to the question which underpins the paper: how is it that Beauvoir is finally able to reconcile herself to the necessity of a life course that includes old age as well as youth? My suggestion, as noted, is that Beauvoir’s relationship with her mother as it develops during the latter part of her life, when her mother is dying, as recorded in the memoir *A Very Easy Death*, is also germane to this shift. Before turning to examine this, further conceptual work is required to bring together two of our explanatory frameworks with the aim of applying them as an analytic lens to this experience. That is the aim of the next section.

**7 Between mourning, melancholia and the abject**

In this section, I suggest ways in which the practice of mourning, in detaching libidinal energy from objects of attachment, can serve to transform abjection and, if not wholly undermine, then at least reduce its power, both in terms of its instability to the subject and its threatening quality to the subject and to the object (mother). Melancholia arises from incomplete individuation from the mother, because separation, facilitated by abjection, has not occurred. However, such melancholia, Kristeva states, is imbued with dark emotions, feelings of anger as well as sorrow that yet in themselves keep alive the connection: ”[…] in sadness the self is yet joined with the other […] sadness would thus be the negative of omnipotence, the first and primary indication that the other is getting away from me, but that the self, nevertheless, does not put up with being abandoned.”[[54]](#footnote-54) That primal self, the Other, haunts the subject, indeed. The choices between self-destruction and destruction of the other seem cruelly stark, however, and consequently there is the need to explore alternative ways of understanding the process of self-assertion and individuation which may incorporate alternative images and metaphors. Can we move beyond abjection, which is to say, beyond rejection and expulsion of the Other to a more harmonious, not to mention, stable co-existence? Here I am thinking of modes that, while not denying difference and the pain of separation, also acknowledge and highlight the more benevolent and cooperative elements that clearly continue to exist between mothers and daughters (as well as generations of women).

The theories of Donald Winnicott adumbrate this middle-ground.[[55]](#footnote-55) Discussing the several stages of development of the infant self, Winnicott describes how first the child requires the mother’s attention, experienced through a mutual gazing, or mirroring, during which the child develops a sense of self. Then, as the child grows in self-confidence, there appears an oscillation between closeness and distance, in which the mother gives the child sufficient support to feel confident and secure whilst also giving them space to separate. The child must be able to be close, then separate, then return to the mother again in order to complete the process of separation. This does not involve matricide or self-destruction but is more like the mutual recognition described by Jessica Benjamin as the basis for intersubjective personhood which requires each party “to recognize the other as a separate person who is like us yet distinct.”[[56]](#footnote-56) On her part, the mother needs to be responsive, certainly, but not wholly self-sacrificing, merely “good enough” in Winnicott’s famous words. As Alice Miller further explains, a child who does not feel that security cannot separate and where she seeks to meet her own needs through the child and not vice versa, “this child would remain without a mirror.”[[57]](#footnote-57) This, too, however, seems bleakly deterministic, shutting the daughter into an infinite enfilade of mirrors without exit.

However, the adult child can surely strive to find an alternative to the forking paths of both melancholia and abjection; indeed, if women are to be recognised and to experience themselves as full subjects, this is both a psychological and social imperative. In other words, this denial of maternal subjecthood, through an account that posits her othering as the “sine- qua-non” of selfhood, requires critique and resistance.[[58]](#footnote-58) In this spirit, Madelyn Detloff stresses the work of mourning in facilitating alternative options, for example, for intergenerational dialogue and acceptance of difference between mothers and daughters. She notes: “The ambivalence that complicates individuation for women is the result of an unconscious and therefore unmourned loss of attachment to the mother.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Her suggestion is: “instead of reiterating the melancholic – suicidal consequences for connectedness – Kristeva’s ‘I am she’ – we might offer a variation of the refrain by replacing the metaphor with a simile – ‘I am like her’ (and ‘I am not like her’).”[[60]](#footnote-60) Identification with elements of the lost mother, which is part of the process of mourning according to Freud, is another way of viewing an ongoing relationship that is neither one of merging nor sharp separation. Successful mourning in that sense would make possible as well a more “mature” mother-daughter relationship: these include less conflictual relationships between generations of women/feminists for instance, and, most importantly to this paper, a different approach to age and ageing, freed from the threat of both engulfment in the dark side of femininity and the obliteration of self in deep old age and death which engenders a similar abjection of old age.[[61]](#footnote-61)

To see how these themes play out in Simone de Beauvoir’s personal approach to old age and ageing I now return to the short memoir she wrote about the dying and death of her mother, *A Very Easy Death.[[62]](#footnote-62)*

**8 The fear of ageing and old age of a dutiful daughter**

In *A Very Easy Death*, Beauvoir reflects on the dynamic between attraction and repulsion, closeness and distance involving her relationship with her mother for the duration of her life. At the age of nearly fifty-seven Beauvoir finally succeeded in integrating these opposites over the four weeks Françoise lay dying in her private nursing home in Paris. Recounting the story via a chronological structure, interspersed with flashbacks, several powerfully primal feelings and emotions about her mother’s body re-emerge which may be captured by the concept of abjection. For example, she describes how, when the nurses were treating the old, ill body, exposing its nakedness, Beauvoir turned away in horror: “The sight of my mother’s nakedness had jarred me. No body existed less for me: none existed more. As a child I had loved it dearly; as an adolescent it had filled me with an uneasy repulsion […] it seemed reasonable to me that her body should retain its dual nature, that it should be both repugnant and holy – a taboo.”[[63]](#footnote-63) She highlights the agedness of this body as part of its current taboo, for she was not just refusing to look at her mother’s body but refusing to look at “her wrinkled belly, criss-crossed with tiny lines, and her bald pubis.”[[64]](#footnote-64) Further, in her distress and identification with her mother, she blended with her, as Sartre, who was with her at the time, observed: “I talked to Sartre about my mother’s mouth as I had seen it that morning and about everything I had interpreted in it – greediness refused, an almost servile humility, hope, distress, loneliness – the loneliness of her death and of her life – that did not want to admit its existence. And he told me that my own mouth was not obeying me any more: I had put Maman’s mouth on my own face and in spite of myself, I copied its movements. Her whole person, her whole being, was concentrated there.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

Whilst both the pull and push contribute to an unstable and contradictory relationship, there is a striking detail, pulling one’s attention to that which cannot be articulated, and that features the red dressing gown. When Françoise was first found on the floor of her apartment with a broken femur, she was “in her red corduroy dressing-gown.”[[66]](#footnote-66) We see it hanging up in the wardrobe, covered with dust, when Beauvoir learns her mother has died and will never rise from bed and put it on again. Can the fact that Beauvoir wore a very similar gown, one to which she was very attached, be merely a coincidence? Or was it rather a sign of their continued inextricable, albeit subterranean, connection; a haunting of something lost? Haunting, as we have seen, is integral to abjection; reminders of lost connections flash up like dream images. If society is itself based on a haunting, “the voice of the dead father”, then for Beauvoir this red dressing gown is the embrace of the lost mother.[[67]](#footnote-67)

Alongside this outpouring of emotion, however, for Beauvoir the opportunity came at last to mourn this loss, not just that of her aged mother but her mother from childhood, the one that she had to leave behind when she grew too big to sit in her lap As this loss and separation had not been properly mourned, Simone had never wholly related to her mother as a person, a woman, as Françoise, as opposed to “Maman”. Now she seized the opportunity. She reflects: “As we talked in the half-darkness, I assuaged an old unhappiness; I was renewing the dialogue that had been broken off during my adolescence and that our differences and our likenesses had never allowed us to take up again.”[[68]](#footnote-68) This swiftly leads to a transformed relationship: “that early tenderness that I had thought dead for ever came to life again.”[[69]](#footnote-69) Again, this connection is expressed via the “dressing gown” in one memorable scene. Leaving her mother’s bedside one evening to return home, as her mother’s health continues to decline, Beauvoir gazes out of the taxi window at the shop windows and reflects: “I knew this journey through the fashionable quarters by heart: Lancôme, Houbigant, Hermès, Lanvin […]. Farther on there were beautiful downy dressing gowns, softly coloured: I thought, ‘I will buy her one to take the place of the red peignoir.’”[[70]](#footnote-70). Here is the achievement of the accommodation that Winnicott describes and which is qualitatively different, measured and conscious as well as fulfilling, as compared with the violent boomeranging of an oscillation that never resolves itself. Simone can make common cause with Françoise, acknowledging the ways in which they are similar, where before she could only assert their difference. For example, she praises her mother for training to become a librarian and travelling alone following the death of Georges, her husband. In the present, she makes common cause with her against the patriarchy of the doctors condescending to her dying mother, calling them bigwigs of “piddling self-importance.”[[71]](#footnote-71) At the same time, Beauvoir embraces the caring sides of her own femininity as they are evoked in her response to both her mother’s suffering and her bravery. Even at the very end, however, as she stands by the deathbed, she falters, whether to be consumed by her mother or to stand back in a more adult relationship: “[…] she grows as vast as the world that her absence annihilates for her and whose whole existence was caused by her being there: you feel that she should have had more room in your life – all the room, if need be. You snatch yourself away from this wildness: she was only one among many.”[[72]](#footnote-72)

This position is the culmination of the work of a lifetime, prolonged at least partly because Françoise’s own mother was also “wounded”. Beauvoir recognises this: “It was not in my power to wipe out the unhappiness in her childhood that condemned Maman to make me unhappy and to suffer in her turn from having done so. For if she embittered several years of my life, I certainly paid her back though I did not set out to do so.”[[73]](#footnote-73) Yet this was not the whole story. In a flashback she describes how, despite leaving home young, and feeling little empathy for her mother: “Yet in my sleep […] she often played a most important part: she blended with Sartre, and we were happy together. And then the dream would turn into a nightmare: why was I living with her once more? How had I come to be in her power again?”[[74]](#footnote-74) This suggests, too, that while she did mourn Sartre’s death for many years beforehand, nested deep within this was anticipation of the loss of her mother, validating the idea that any new love object is a substitution, in an infinite regression, like a reflection of a mirror in a mirror, traceable back to the primary relationship with Mother. Now, with mourning complete, as she herself puts it, she was finally no longer in her mother’s “power”, trapped within those sad mirrors. Instead, a bright vista opens up, and as Woodward puts it, “Beauvoir discovers […] a meaning to her mother’s death and a pattern to her life – to both of their lives.”[[75]](#footnote-75)

This fundamentally reconfigured the way Beauvoir perceived ageing and old age. Looking back, from within the pages of *All Said and Done*, Beauvoir says, “I was wrong in 1962 when I thought nothing significant would happen to me anymore, apart from calamities; now once again I was given a great chance.”[[76]](#footnote-76) Moi observes that the significant event in question was the meeting with Sylvie le Bon. But Beauvoir first met le Bon in 1960; she published *Force of Circumstance* in 1963 and her anguished dread of ageing is very much in evidence in that volume. However, Françoise died in 1963 meaning that, at the very least, we can speak of the significance of both these events, including in underpinning Beauvoir’s acceptance of ageing, what Ladimer calls a ‘dialectical relationship’ between Sylvie’s presence and the death of Françoise.[[77]](#footnote-77) Returning to the red dressing gown, when Beauvoir and her sister clear the hospital bedroom of her mother’s belongings, Beauvoir makes the surely meaningful decision to leave the red dressing gown behind, on its hanger in the wardrobe, and also to leave behind the role of the “dutiful daughter” both summoned and repulsed by her femininity as well as her fear of old age. This is why in 1970 she was able to record sentiments unthinkable to the writer of *Force of Circumstance,* namely that in a just society old age “would be a period of life different from youth and maturity, but possessing its own balance and leaving a wide range of possibilities open to the individual.”[[78]](#footnote-78)

In the final section I sum up by taking a brief look at the broader relevance of the shift I have described here in Beauvoir’s approach in the context of a contemporary society that both “others” old age more than ever and is riven with intergenerational discord.

**9 Discussion and concluding comments: learning from the ageing of a dutiful daughter**

In contemporary times, the “age war” motif is increasingly used to frame social and political crises, with the trope of the older woman versus the young woman frequently counterposed in these stories.[[79]](#footnote-79) The implicit problem here is the mother and we can certainly see generational tensions between women underpinning ugly rifts between so-called feminist “waves.” Tthe term “wave” suggests a restless oscillation towards and away from, indicative of the “underwater tow,” or regressive current that drags feminist thought backwards even as it moves forward, due to deep psychic issues such as that of individuation from the mother.[[80]](#footnote-80)

The example Beauvoir provides of her own relationship with ageing and with her mother, together with the theoretical tools and insights she has bequeathed us, for example in terms of the profound link between the cultural constitution of femininity and of old age, furnishes us with an opportunity to work towards a more authentic attitude to age and intergenerational relations and to escape this deep underwater pull of the old. Similarly, Beauvoir’s own ethical theory identifies the need for a balance between transcendence and immanence in the form of ambiguity, defined as a “passageway between immanence and transcendence wherein one aspect of being never completely eclipses the other”.[[81]](#footnote-81) For this to be possible in contemporary society, psychological changes will need to be intertwined with changes to social structures and norms such that women are no longer trapped in the immanent, or fear being so trapped (where the “mystification of motherhood” shows no sign of abating and may even be increasing) and where older people are similarly supported to aim towards projects through a range of care, technologies and interactions.[[82]](#footnote-82) That we still have a long way to go (on both counts) is evident through the words of a journalist writing shortly after the death of her own older mother - words which echo Beauvoir’s own in the conclusion of *The Coming of Age* fifty years earlier: “In Britain we treat the old as barely human, rather than our future selves […] [Progress] means no longer seeing yourself as the child holding a parent’s hand [as they lay dying] but the person who, before long, will lie in the bed.”[[83]](#footnote-83) These words also hit at the complex psychological lessons Beauvoir absorbed at the bedside of her own mother.

And so we return to the Adrianople red dressing gown once again. We learn, from Bair, that Beauvoir continued to wear this robe or its replacements, in its vividly bold yet soft and warm crimson tones, supplemented in later years with a matching turban, through a happy and fulfilled old age, up to the time she died. She was laid to rest, not in the family plot at Père Lachaise, but in the Montparnasse Cemetery, in the plot beside Sartre. She was buried in her red dressing gown.[[84]](#footnote-84) She stated in *The* *Prime of Life*, “my greatest wish was to die with the one I love.”[[85]](#footnote-85) Lying next to Sartre, whilst wearing this robe that she had made her own in her later years, even whilst it bore such powerful resonances of her mother, Beauvoir had, through a lifetime’s psychological work, realised this ambition.

1. Cynthia Judah, “My Clothes and I, by Simone de Beauvoir,” *Observer,* March 20, 1960. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Beauvoir in her red dressing gown features on the cover of Toril Moi’s intellectual biography of Beauvoir as well as in Skye Cleary’s recent book on her, among others: Toril Moi *Simone de Beauvoir*: *the making of an intellectual woman,* second editionOxford, Oxford University Press, 2008 [1994]; Skye Cleary, *How to be You: Simone de Beauvoir and the art of authentic living* London: Ebury Press, London 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Judah, *My Clothes.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. Patrick O’Brian, W.W.Norton &Company, 1996 [1970], p. 543. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sigmund Freud “Mourning and Melancholia*”*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* Vol. 14, London, Hogarth Press, 1917*;* Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An essay on abjection,* trans. Leon S. Rudiez, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982 [1980]. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bethany Ladimer, *Colette, Beauvoir, and Duras*: *age and women writers*, Florida, University Press of Florida. 1999, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Genevieve Shepherd, *Simone de Beauvoir’s Fiction: a psychoanalytic rereading*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2003 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, Vol II trans. Richard Howard, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968 [1963], p. 671. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *FCEII*, p. 672. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *FCEII*, p. 673. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, trans. James Kirkup, Harmondsworth, Penguin 1963 [1958] [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *MDD,* p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *MDD,* pp. 103-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *MDD,* p. 104; a similar image appears in Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovani-Chevalier, New York, Vintage, 2010, pp. 475-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Susan Pickard, “Last Love: the ‘double standard of ageing’ and women’s experience of gender and sexuality at mid-life,” *Journal of Aging Studies*, vol. 60, 2022, doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2021.100989 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Simone de Beauvoir,, *FCEI*II, p. 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *FCEII* p. 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *FCEII* p. 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *FCEII,* p. 673. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid p. 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid, p. 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir: a biography*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1990, p. 540. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *FCEII*, pp 673-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Kathleen Woodward “Simone de Beauvoir: Aging and its discontents*”*, in *The Private Self: theory and practice of women’s autobiographical writings*, ed. Shari Benstock, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1988, 90-113 ; Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*; Gregory Rochlin, *Griefs and Discontents: the forces of change*, Boston, Little Brown, 1984. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Sigmund Freud, *“Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming”,* in *The Standard Edition of the Psychological Work of Sigmund Freud*, ed and trans. James Strachey, London: The Hogarth Press, 1908; Woodward, *Simone de Beauvoir,* p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Woodward, *Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Rochlin, *Griefs and Discontents,* pp.xvii; xix; 363 \**.* [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *SS,* p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *SS*, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Mandarins*, trans. Leonard M Friedman, London, Flamingo, 1984 [1954], p. 677. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *FCEII*, p. 673. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 541. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Joanna Frueh, *Monster/Beauty: Building the work of love*, California, University of California Press, 2000, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Susan Gubar, *Late-life Love: a memoir*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998, p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *SS*, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *SS*, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits. A selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Abingdon, Routledge, 2001 [1966]. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror.* [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong State*, trans. Howard Eiland and Joel Golb, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans Leon S.Rudiez, New York, Columbia University Press, 1992 [1987] [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *MDD*, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *MDD*, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *MDD*, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *MDD*, p. 39 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. See Ladimer*, Colette, Beauvoir, Duras,* p. 120, p 144 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Skye Cleary, *How to be You.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Simone de Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*, trans. Patrick O’Brian, New York, Pantheon Books, 1985 [1964], p.31. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Simone de Beauvoir, *All Men are Mortal*, trans. Euan Cameron, London, Virago, 2003 [1946]. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *AMM*, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. *AMM*, p. 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. *AMM*, p. 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
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62. Simone de Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*, trans. Patrick O’Brian, New York, Pantheon Books, 1985 [1964]. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. *VED,* pp 19-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. *VED*, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. *VED*, p 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. *VED*, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Andew Gallix, “Hauntology: A non-so-new critical manifestation”, *The Guardian*, 17 June, 2011; Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones, New York, Vintage, 1967 [1939] [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. *VED*, p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. *VED*, p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. *VED*, p.78. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. *VED*, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. *VED,* p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. *VED* p. 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. *VED*, p. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Woodward, *Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Simone de Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, trans. Patrick O’Brian, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1974 [1972]. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Bethany Ladimer, *Colette, Beauvoir, Duras*, p. 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
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79. Susan Pickard, “Age War as the new class war? Contemporary Representations of Intergenerational Inequity”, *Journal of Social Policy*, vol 48, no. 2, 2019, 369-386. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
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81. Christine Daigle and Christinia Landry “An analysis of Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s views on transcendence: exploring intersubjective relations” *PhaenEx*, Vol 8, no.1 , 2013, 91-121, p. 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Yolanda Astarita Patterson, “Simone de Beauvoir and the demystification of motherhood”, *Yale French Studies,* Vol. 72, 1986, pp. 87-105. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Janice Turner, “What I learnt from my mother’s final years”, *The Times*, 14 October, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir.* [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Simone de Beauvoir, *Prime of Life*, trans. Peter Green, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965 [1960] p. 477. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)