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Ageing, the Body and Subjectivity in Three Stories by A. S. Byatt

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Introduction

Age and Subjectivity

“From the moment of birth on (in fact even before), age is a fundamental and endlessly interesting category,” proclaims Kathleen Woodward, one of the leading critics in literary gerontology (*Ageing* 4). Age impacts the way we live and the way we experience the world: it can indirectly and directly limit or widen opportunities and responsibilities we have (such as schooling, driving, drinking, voting and marriage), govern our social and personal relations (as seen in the expressions “someone is junior/senior to someone else”; “someone is younger or older for his/her age”). The following responses to the two directives of the Mass Observation Project elucidate some particular ways in which we experience age and how it informs our subjectivities; this is the concern of the present paper.¹⁾

I am 55, but I feel a bit of a Peter Pan. I may not be as agile as I was 20 or 30 years ago, but in my head I am still a teenager in lots of things. (E743. Female, aged 55, married with two children and one grandson, part-time teacher of children with special educational needs,

Warrington, Cheshire, Autumn Directive 2006, Part 3²⁾)

I think aging for women is really crap. . . . [T]he elasticity in my skin is not as good and I have age spots and grey hair and I am only 42. . . . I suppose I am middle aged. In my head I am in my early thirties. I can remember my mum at the age I am now and she has always been a real grown up with make up and hand bag. I do not feel like that. (J2891. Female, aged 42, married with two children, a part-time administrator, North Wales, Autumn Directive 2006, Part 3)

I am just coming up to 67 years old. . . . In number of years, I have to include myself as elderly: in appearance I look about 50 (so I am told) [.] Inside, I am a sort of well controlled adolescent! (U2606. Male, aged 67, married, part-time psychotherapist, Westminster, London, Winter Directive 1992, Part 1)

In some ways old age is a disappointment. I always thought that when you reached retirement age you would find that you had somehow, unconsciously and secretly, become endowed with wisdom I find it is not so. That in fact you feel exactly the same as you always have since you became aware of yourself; except that now you are in a body which has aches and pains and doesn't function as efficiently as it used to. (Y2597. Male, aged 74, Retired teacher, Colchester, Winter Directive 1992, Part 1)

These responses suggest two commonalities in our individual experiences of age and ageing regardless of sex and other social differences. One is that age is relational. We consciously or unconsciously compare ourselves to others

– our parents, grandparents, school teachers, colleagues and friends – and this provides a measurement of how old or not old we are, most certainly in terms of appearance. In addition, age is also relational to our own self in the past. Our appearance, mental and psychological states and physical capacities in the past as we remember them become a point of reference for how we see or feel about ourselves at the present time. The second commonality is that ageing always brings unexpected results. In fact, a large number of responses to the two directives abound in expressions such as “I never thought . . . ,” “I found . . . ,” and “I always thought . . . but” Ageing is bound to turn out as unexpected, and it is an endless encounter with the unknown, the other. Even our own selves in the future are strangers to us now. At the same time, the quoted and many other replies include a somewhat contradictory observation that we feel the same *inside*. It is only our appearance and our bodies that have changed. All these reflections contained in the responses suggest that the experience of age and ageing is one of contradictions and dilemmas, of the body and the mind, an experience that is unfolded in complex interactions with the body, our sense of self and cultural contexts.

The present paper aims to explore, through literary reading, how age informs our sense of self as well as how ageing is experienced, with a particular focus on the interactive relationship between ageing, the body and the self. With the acknowledgement that ageing and old age involve the element of facing the other, the paper also seeks to frame the issue of the ageing subjectivity as a matter of representation, illustrating its ethical relevance in the practices of care, gerontological research and literature. The paper begins with an overview of the debates in the fields of studies of ageing, which are key to the critical and literary inquiry that will follow.

Age, the Body and Culture

The issue of age has long been a matter of consideration in the areas limited to biomedicine and social science.³⁾ However, there have been radical reconsiderations of the ways in which the perceptions and the experiences of ageing are constructed by external forces. In particular, a Cultural Turn in gerontology has drawn attention to the subtle, complex ways in which ageing and identity are interactively experienced and constructed in everyday life by a variety of cultural forces. Age critic, Margaret Morganroth Gullette famously argues that we are “aged by culture” (*Aged by Culture*). She asserts, “Everything we know of as culture in the broadest sense – discourses, feelings, practices, institutions, material conditions – is saturated with concepts of age and aging” (*Declining to Decline* 3). Ageing is not only biological and social but also cultural. Contemporary culture is set to invest ageing with negative significations. Woodward points out that contemporary culture in the West is plagued by a deep-seated fear of ageing and is dominated by the dual categories of youth and age. While youth is a cultural and potentially economic capital, age induces “[a]nxiety, fear, denial, repression” (*Ageing* 4). The fear of ageing manifests itself in various cultural discourses. The most prevalent example is the narrative of decline that sees old life as a time characterised by decline and dependence in physical, cognitive and other terms. Gullette is concerned that the discourses of ageing which currently circulate in contemporary culture are “fatally flat,” “phony, solipsistic, body-obsessed, pseudo-universal and context denying, cognitively inhibiting, and anxiety producing” (*Aged by Culture* 11). These narratives are, she argues, moulded into the “story of decline” by the media (9).

The other, rather oppositional discourse emphasises possibilities of development and change in later life. Described in various terms such as

“active ageing,” “positive ageing” and “successful ageing,” this type of progress narrative is closely linked to the rise of consumer culture in the twentieth century, which has made ageing a highly individualised experience based on choice and action. The consumer culture of ageing has had a particularly strong impact on the lives of those in the third age, an early post-retirement phase of life. This cultural movement, constructed around “the symbols of personal development available with increased leisure time” (Vincent 167), has helped to challenge negative meanings traditionally attached to post-working life. At the same time, it has contributed to propagating the ideal of “agelessness” which virtually denies ageing by pursuing a youthful lifestyle and appearance (Andrews). Indeed, many activities of the third age are involved in extending youth and achieving desirable identities and appearances. Featherstone and Hepworth explain: “for those in the middle classes with the prospect of generous pension incomes, and who have planned for retirement, old age holds out the prospect of a prolongation of the plateau-like phase of adult life, with continued relatively high consumption of the pursuit of consumer-culture lifestyles, body maintenance and styles of self-presentation” (374).

The postmodern theory of identity, especially the idea of performativity has provided a theoretical ground for these practices of “self-presentation.” The third age consumer-style experience of ageing centres on the activities of self-presentation through and with the body. Postmodern culture also celebrates the body’s “plastic potential to fashion identities out of a cultural rather than a biological reality” (Gilleard and Higgs 130). Thus, the third age and postmodern culture work hand in hand. They embrace ever increasing possibilities of self-presentation from dieting and exercise programmes, hair products and slimming machines, from cosmetic surgery, anti-ageing medicine to biotechnologies, obscuring the distinction of what is or is not

“natural.”

These cultural practices and discourses illuminate the complex ways in which the ageing subject negotiates cultural forces, their body and their sense of self. Critics have attempted to theorise age identity using different models and metaphors. Featherstone and Hepworth formulate the idea of “the masking of age.” They suggest that older people often feel, when their bodily decline becomes so confining, that “the outer body is . . . misrepresenting and imprisoning the inner self” (Featherstone 227). The sense that age masks the authentic identity beneath the surface comes from the contradiction between “the external stereotypes of age-appropriate behaviour and the subjective experience of the self” (Featherstone and Hepworth 378). By contrast, within postmodern culture masking is an empowering form of self-presentation that has the potential to “undermine traditional age-related categories” (382). Both interpretations of masking, however, suggest “the possibility that a distance or tension exists between the external appearance . . . and the internal or subjective sense or experience of personal identity” (382). Similarly, Woodward proposes the idea of masquerade as a method of identity control. According to her, it is “a form of self-representation” which responds to the pressure of the “*youthful structure of the look*” that governs contemporary culture based on the dichotomy between youth and age (*Aging* 148, 155). In masquerade, the ageing subject performs “youthfulness” to hide the appearance of aging (155). But this allows a certain level of agency on the part of the ageing subject who is involved in masquerade, with whom remains the choice of what kind of identity to perform. Masquerade can therefore signify both “*submission* to dominant social codes” and “*resistance* to them” (153).

Woodward also formulates a mirror-stage of old age that reverses Lacan’s model of infancy. In the mirror stage of old age, “the subject is

confronted with an image” but the subject refuses to identify with it, because it is the image of the Other that “uncannily prefigur[es] the disintegration and nursling dependence of advanced age” (*Ageing* 67). Rather than reflecting the old self as it is, the mirror in old age is desired to work like “*trompe l’oeil*” and to “reveal itself precisely *not* as what it so shockingly presents to us as ourselves” (68). Here again, the governing order is the “youthful structure of the look” in contemporary culture that ageing subjects have internalised. Woodward suggests: “youth is the valued term, the point of reference for defining who is old. . . . Young and old may frame the continuum of the life course. But as people grow older, most of them – *of us* – take youth with them, as if it were a precious possession not to be left behind. Concomitantly, age – meaning ‘old age’ – is pushed ahead” (6). Within this structure the ageing subject alienates itself and refuses its own old image, while searching for what it has lost, its youth. Old age is expected to remain ““invisible”” but precisely because it is so much feared, it is paradoxically in the state of “*hypervisibility*” in our consciousness (66). Thus, in old age “the body is in opposition to the self. We are alienated from our bodies” (62).

What emerges from these theories and practices of age identity and self-presentation, and the criticisms of them, is the centrality of the body in the identity and the experience of ageing. The postmodern poetic of identity accepts much wider expressions of self for older people and thus challenges the culturally pervasive narrative of decline. However, the postmodern model of identity is not without problems. As was mentioned above, by stressing the possibility to put off ageing it rather reinforces anti-ageing culture. More importantly, its over-emphasis on the discursive and performative nature of identity tends to undervalue the corporeal dimension of human subjectivity. For instance, Twigg voices a concern that this may

invite “the revival of Cartesian dualism” between the body and the mind, “foreclos[ing] on the understandings of how the body and the self are formed and reformed in a dialectical relationship” (63, 64).

Twigg also warns about the danger of “the excesses of postmodern epistemology” that it leaves out the body from the picture, when in fact its significance radically increases in later life. The physical reality of ageing ultimately limits the apparently unlimited possibilities for self-representation. This is particularly the case in the fourth age, when physical decline begins to have a confining and dominant impact on life. Gilleard and Higgs explain:

Faced with the physicality of old age – the changes in appearance and function that are seen socially as defining adult ageing – it seems impossible to argue that ageing can be understood as rooted not in the domain of biology but in social relations. It is in the biological materiality of the body that the “cultural” approach toward understanding ageing meets its greatest challenge. (130)

It is true that in many ways old age is a cultural construct but it exists in the physical and increasingly inhibiting reality of that body. As Twigg points out, “the Fourth Age can seem to be not just about the body, but nothing but the body” (64). Within a contemporary culture which is obsessed with youth, the fourth age or deep old age is a cruel reminder of ageing as a physical decline, and death. If the third age culture flourishes upon age denial or resistance, the fourth age confronts the ageing subject with the inevitable prospects of delegating control over ourselves to our own bodies and to death. Woodward comments:

[E]ven if we do succeed in measure in rescuing aging from the scandalous contempt in which it is held, at critical points we will inevitably encounter the tension between the social construction of the body and the lived experience of the body, the facticity of the *materiality* of the body, the phenomenology of the body in advanced old age [A]s we move toward the limits of old age – and that limit is death – we move toward the limits of representation. . . . As we approach the extremity of old age, we approach in the West the limit of the pure cultural construction of aging. (*Ageing* 193–94)

Human subjectivity exists in the intersection between culture and the body, and this is why we need to understand “how the body and the self are formed and reformed in a dialectical relationship” (Twigg 64). However, when the body asserts itself as “the very stuff of subjectivity” (Grosz, ix) in old age, it implies the limits of culture, and as a signification of death, it challenges us as “the limits of representation.”

Age in Literature

“The limits of representation” impact the literary text which attempts to represent ageing and old age. Compared to other significations of difference such as gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality, it is only recently that age began to attract increasing attention in literary studies.⁴⁾ Nonetheless, recent literary studies of age are highly reflective about the discursive dimension of ageing and illuminate the rich potential of literary text to imaginatively engage with and help us to engage with issues that surround ageing and old age.⁵⁾ Woodward mentions “a potentially salutary social effect” that literary studies of age can have and states, although acknowledging it is a slightly utopian vision, “Our reading can help shape the unacknowledged

possibilities of our future experience in that largely unexplored realm of our cultural imagination – old age” (*Aging* 14). It is exactly the imaginative nature of literary text that holds the potential to challenge the oppressive narrative discourses of old age and create alternative, subversive and liberating scripts of old age. How can literary text reveal new insights and possibilities in old age? How can it meet the limit of representation?

It is with this vision of optimism and scepticism that this paper will approach three stories by A. S. Byatt. More specifically, it will explore how the texts describe the experience of ageing and old age as both embodied and cultural experience and show “the dialectical relationship” between the body and the self in imaginative and illuminating ways. Byatt’s work has so far drawn little attention in the gerontological works of literature, while some writers and texts have been frequently discussed.⁶⁾ Nonetheless, her fiction offers rich material for an exploration of the dialectical relationship between the body and the self in the experience of ageing. The interconnectedness between body, mind, and subjectivity attracts her, she explains, because as a student she was inspired by T. S. Eliot’s treatise of a “dissociation of sensibility” (Eliot 64). She states, “My lost paradise was Eliot’s elegant fiction of the undissociated sensibility” (*Passions of the Mind* 2). The attraction of metaphysical metaphors was “the mixture of intellect and passion, sense and sensuousness” (2) and the fact that “the unfallen world of the spirit was embodied in exquisite images of the fallen world of the body” (3). How we understand ourselves and the world and how the two are connected through the body have since been one of the central concerns in her fiction.⁷⁾

The three stories by Byatt to be discussed in this paper show the complex ways in which the cultural and the bodily inform the experience of ageing or old age, and the subjectivity of an ageing subject. The first story,

“Medusa’s Ankles” (1993) demonstrates how the cultural discourse of ageing dictates a woman’s identity. It depicts a middle-aged woman’s effort of self-presentation in a hair salon, which is governed by what Woodward describes as “the youthful structure of the look.” The text however makes a comical and momentary, but empowering gesture of resistance in the form of rage, suggesting that the ageing subject is not completely powerless before the spell of the mirror.

As the title suggests, “The Dried Witch” (1987) engages with the cultural stereotyping of an old woman as the threatening other. Set in a fictional, isolated, peasant village community, the story offers a highly condensed picture of how the gendered discourse of ageing operates in society. Significantly, it describes the ageing of the female protagonist in strongly corporeal language, dramatising the tension between the cultural force that moulds the human body and subjectivity, and the materiality of the body. The text affirms, ultimately, the power of the otherness of the ageing body as matter that transcends cultural dictates.

“The Pink Ribbon” (2003) further advances the inquiry into the relationship between ageing, the body and subjectivity, by linking them to issues of personhood and agency in a person with dementia. Unlike the two previous stories, which respectively depict the dominance of culture and the body in ageing, “The Pink Ribbon” firmly engages with the experience and meaning of old age, and the prospect of death. Out of the three stories, it is “The Pink Ribbon” that offers the most compelling portrayal of the embodied experience of ageing that consistently approaches the limit of representation. The text offers a literary and imaginative meditation on the issue of “the survival of the self in dementia” (Baldwin 224), asking what constitutes a self and how it is possible to represent the subjectivity of the other and speak for the other. It highlights the ethical implication of

representation which is relevant not only in the contexts of care and studies of age but also in the literary practice of reading and writing. The text ultimately accepts, not in despair but more in a humbled realisation, the limits of representation.

“Medusa’s Ankles”

Described as middle-aged, Susannah, the protagonist of the story, may not be “old” in the demographical term, but the middle years of life are subject to negative meanings in contemporary culture. According to Gullette, “‘The midlife’ is a cultural fiction” created by “the particular beliefs and feelings about the life course” and “the narratives we happen to tell at midlife” (*Declining to Decline* 3). This cultural construct, however, has an effect that equates the period after adolescence and young adulthood (needless to say, the boundaries between life stages are never clear) with a time of decline, or the beginnings of ageing. The prevailing result of this is the internalisation of the cultural narrative of decline by those at midlife themselves. The story depicts how Susannah negotiates the gendered discourse of age, the ageing body and her sense of self, while engaging with the cultural practice of self-presentation. The complex workings of self-identity and appearance are explored through the idea of “natural” and the recurrent images of the mirror. For ageing women, the image in the mirror is “doubly deplorable” (Twigg 60) as they are subjected to “the double standard of aging” (Sontag). Accordingly, the mirror in the story is framed by both the feminist account of it, as exemplified by Gilbert and Gubar’s re-reading of “Snow White” and by what Woodward theorises as the mirror stage of old age, with the latter being more prominent.

The story dramatises two conflicting aesthetics of the body that Susannah is forced to negotiate: one is based on “natural” beauty and the

other is inflected by the postmodern poetic of artificial beauty. The first category is represented by the painting *Pink Nude* by Matisse.⁸⁾ Byatt has expressed an active interest in Matisse's work, in particular, his use of vivid colours and the geometric and yet organic quality of the images he creates.⁹⁾ *Pink Nude*, the centrepiece in "Medusa's Ankles" is one of the best known works of Matisse, which exemplifies the "essential lines" that Matisse pursued when painting a woman's body (Matisse 36 quoted in Worton 25). In the story, Susannah was first drawn to the hair salon, Lucian's, because she saw *Pink Nude* displayed in the entrance. In fact, in the text, *Pink Nude* is referred to as the *Rosy Nude* and as Michael Worton points out, the substitution of the neutral term "pink" with "rosy" suggests Byatt's strategic appropriation of the painting as an "icon" (Worton 26). Indeed, in the story, the *Rosy Nude* represents the aesthetic that upholds abundance, dynamism and maturity. Susannah's response to the painting in the salon highlights these attributes of the nude:

That was odd, she thought, to have that lavish and complex creature stretched voluptuously above the coat rack . . . The rosy nude was pure flat colour, but suggested mass. She had huge haunches and a monumental knee, lazily propped high. She had round breasts, contemplations of the circle, reflections on flesh and its fall. (3)

The body of the "lavish and complex creature" stretches "voluptuously." The body parts are "huge," "monumental," "round" and "lazily" positioned. The relaxed and languid body resides with nature: it seems free of any cultural and social constraints. It is simply an organic "mass" of flesh, which nonetheless holds a kind of beautiful balance.

The text opposes Matisse's sensual image of female body to the

contemporary poetic of the youthful body, as Susannah notes that it is usually more likely to find “the stare, silver and supercilious or jetty and frenzied, of the model girl” in place of the Matisse painting. In this sense, the setting of the story is significant, because the hair salon is historically a space for self-fashioning. In their historical account of the development of self-fashioning culture, Gilleard and Higgs explain the role of the hair salon for creating wide options of styles for women in designing their identity (68–9). In the story Susannah recalls the hairdressing shop in the neighbourhood during the war and how her mother used to get “a rigidly bouncy ‘set’” with “those clamped domes descending and engulfing” which looked “like a mountain of wax fruit” or “some kind of electrically shocking initiation into womanhood” (6). In the image-driven youth-oriented culture, the role of the hair salon in self-fashioning is increasingly important. Indeed, in the story, Lucian’s is “full of whisking young things, male and female” and there Susannah needs to negotiate her sense of self, her body and the imperative of youth-oriented culture. Just like the hair-salon, hair plays an important role in self-presentation in later life. In the story, it not only offers a visible sign of ageing but it also functions as a “social text” through which Susannah performs a desirable identity (Gilleard and Higgs, 69). As Holland and Ward explain, hair plays “an important part in the embodied experience of ageing.” At the same time it also contributes to the “representational role of the body” for self-presentation (117). As one ages, hair “changes in colour and consistency” and thus it often needs “to be tended-to regularly” to “maintain a controlled appearance” (117). It is explained in the story that Susannah did not have to go to a hair salon when she or her hair was young but she realises that “her hair began to grow old,” finding “[t]he ends split, the weight of it broke, a kind of frizzed fur replaced the gloss,” and decides she needs to do something about it (6–7).

Lucian attends to Susannah's hair and "tactfully" achieves a natural look (7). "Medusa's Ankles" plays with the ambiguous meaning of "natural" in the contemporary self-fashioning culture. "Natural" refers to the duplicitous demand placed on the ageing female body to be "natural" and harmlessly invisible. Susannah is aware of the deception, when she observes, "natural-looking, that was, young, what was indeed natural, the death of the cells" (7). Nonetheless, she appreciates that "[h]e [Lucian] understood her hair," because "[i]t needed understanding, these days . . . its life was fading from it" (16). Susannah's choice of a "natural look" is part of her self-fashioning strategy, but she exhibits no great sense of pleasure in creating this "natural-looking" image. She looks at her new "natural-looking" hair, "quickly, quickly," confirming "it was better than before," and "averted her eyes" (7). This suggests that a "natural look" is not a positive choice for self-presentation as a resistance to cultural pressure. It is a choice for self-protection from the youthful structure of the look.

Appearance matters for Susannah, but she wants a "natural-looking" appearance that does not stand out. The dilemma in her choice of "natural look" encapsulates the double status of the ageing body in contemporary culture as being both "invisible and "hypervisible" (Woodward, "Introduction" xvi). In the story, Susannah's fear of visibility mounts when she finds out that she has been given an award for her translation work and will appear on TV delivering a speech, an opportunity for visibility that comes "too late, when she had lost the desire to be seen or looked at" (19–20). She anticipates that the surface of her body will come under cruel scrutiny: "The cameras search jowl and eye-pocket, expose brush-stroke and cracks in shadow and gloss. . . . [T]he memory of a chipped tooth, a strayed red dot, an inappropriate hair, persists and persists" (20). The cultural look obsessed with youth and fear of age probes for possible signs of blemishes

and negligence of self-care. A failure of self-presentation results in undesirable visibility.

It is not only her body that marginalises Susannah, however. Her sense of alienation deepens through her interactions with Lucian, as the text embeds a binary between the young and the old. Lucian may be a skilful hairdresser but is a narcissistic and emotionally vulnerable man, who is preoccupied with his life and his interests. He moans about his wife who “let herself go altogether” and how the sight of her “fat” swollen ankles “disgusts” him (21). He asks Susannah for advice about his affair with a “perfectly beautiful girl” (12), positioning “motherly” Susannah as “a professional listener” (8) or rather, the popular figure of the wise old woman. While he is helplessly preoccupied with his personal life, he shows no interest in Susannah’s and pays little attention to her concerned question, “Do you think I’m getting thinner on top?” (15). Susannah feels her life loses relevance in the face of his narcissism: “What she knew, what she cared about, what was coherent, was separate shards for him to flit over You wrote books and gave lectures, and these little ribbons of fact shone briefly and vanished” (9). Lucian carelessly and cruelly confirms this: “I don’t want to put the best years of my life into making suburban old dears presentable” (9). He proclaims, “Beauty, I want beauty. I must have beauty” (10).

Susannah’s sense of marginalisation intensifies when the salon is redecorated. Previously it was decorated in cosy pink, resonating with Matisse’s *The Rosy Nude*. The painting however has been taken down and replaced by “photographs of girls with grey faces, coal-black eyes and spiky lashes, under bonfires of incandescent puce hair which matched their lips rounded to suck, at microphones perhaps, or other things” (16). Everything is “done very fashionably in the latest colours, battleship-grey and maroon”

(15). But Susannah does not like the new interior at all, and she quickly detects the affinity of the space with a surgical clinic with its “[d]ried blood and instruments of slaughter” (15). The prominence of grey, steel and the heterogeneity of the “young men and the young women” in “dark grey Japanese wrappers” and “patients” in “identical maroon ones” render the salon as a factory that transforms individuals like commodities according to the standardised ideal of beauty (16).

Susannah’s unease in the newly transformed salon sharpens her gaze at her own image in the mirror: “Her face in the mirror was grey, had lost the deceptive rosy haze of the earlier lighting” (16). Susannah studies her face:

She looked at her poor face, under its dank cap and its two random corkscrews, aluminium clamped. She felt a gentle protective rage towards this stolid face. She remembered, not as a girl, as a young woman under all that chestnut fall, looking at her skin, and wondering how it could grow into the crêpe, the sag, the opulent soft bags. This was her face, she had thought then. And this, too, now, she wanted to accept for her face, trained in a respect for precision, and could not. What had left this greying skin, these flakes, these fragile stretches with no elasticity, was her, was her life, was herself. (19)

Susannah feels a sense of alienation from her own face. The working of the mirror here reflects Woodward’s theorisation of the mirror stage of old age. Susannah has internalised the youthful structure of the look and it is difficult for her to identify with the image she sees in the mirror. The “gentle protective rage” she feels towards “this stolid face” captures well this sense of alienation from one’s appearance. There is a definitive gap between what she feels to be herself and the image she sees in the mirror. The image of the

middle-aged woman in the mirror is a “stranger” to herself (Woodward, *Aging* 62).

Susannah’s sense of alienation and marginalisation deepens when she is handed over from Lucian to a young female hairdresser. Looking at her face, Susannah remembers with bitterness that she too once had an exciting and sexually wild life. She was “[o]nly the life of flesh,” she recalls, but that “began to die” (19). Susannah’s sense of loss is combined with the sense that she is irrelevant: her singular history matters to no one.

What was this to anyone now? Rage rose in her, for the fat-ankled woman, like a red flood, up from her thighs across her chest, up her neck, it must flare like a flag in her face, but how to tell in this daft cruel grey light? . . . [W]ho would have thought the old woman had so much hair on her head? Sausages and snail-shells, grape-clusters and twining coils. She could only see dimly, for the red flood was like a curtain at the back of her eyes, but she knew what she saw. The Japanese say demons of another world approach us through mirrors . . . [A] fat demon swam towards her, turret-crowned, snake-crowned, her mother fresh from the dryer in all her embarrassing irreality. (23)

Susannah’s mounting rage is described in a comical tone but it is presented as more than a personal and coincidental incident of irrationality; behind the comical image lies a glimpse of the history of women’s oppression and rage. Her hair, “sausages and snail-shells, grape-clusters and twining coils,” evokes the image of monstrous, uncontrollable Medusa. This image of Susannah/Medusa is further conflated as Byatt adds the image of the “turret-crowned” Snow Queen and her own mother, who used to overdo her hair.¹⁰⁾ The combined references to Medusa and the Snow Queen, both famous for

their tragic fates caused by or related to the mirror and Susannah's mother, the representative of a generation of oppressed women before second-wave feminism, invest Susannah's rage with a historical as well as personal significance.

Byatt's story captures the moment in which the spell of the mirror breaks and Susannah's masking of age loses its effect. Instead of Lucian, a young female hairdresser finishes her hair and Susannah looks at her new, "[n]ot natural" hair (24). Here the deception of the "natural" is exposed and she faces "the failure of her hopes of arresting physical decay" (Campbell 171). Seeing "exactly what she was," she deplores in an accusing note, "*I look like a middle-aged woman with a hair-do*" (24). She is upset because her hair is made "unnatural" and she wants her "*real hair back*" (24; *Italics mine*). Rejecting Lucian's placatory offer to "tone it [her hair] down" (24), she begins to break the shiny surfaces of the salon. She "threw," "lobbed" and "whirled" a "cylindrical pot," "a whole row of such bombs or grenades" and "nailbomb" (25). The mirrors "burst with a satisfying crash" and "spider-web of cracks" (25). She leaves the salon "a strange empty battlefield, full of glittering fragments and sweet-smelling rivulets and puddles of venous-blue and fuchsia-red unguents, patches of crimson-streaked foam and odd intense spills of orange henna or cobalt and copper" (26). Susannah's explosion destroys the thin, self-reflecting surface of the salon, symbolic of the self-fashioning, image-driven culture. Lucian himself admits to Susannah, "You've done me a good turn in a way. It wasn't quite right, the colours. I might do something different. . . . I've often felt like smashing it all up myself, just to get out of it – like a great glass cage it is – and go out into the real world" (27–8).

Susannah's rage is merely a "mock-heroic assault," and her story does not have a triumphant ending (Campbell 171). "Medusa's Ankles" ends in a

way that stresses the persistent power of the mirror. Back at her home, Susannah plans to undo her new hair and make it more natural and acceptable. Her husband, in whose eyes she has been invisible for a long time, “saw her.” Complimenting her, he says “You look different. You’ve had your hair done. I like it. You look lovely” as he “kissed on the shorn nape of her neck, quite as he used to do” (28). This ending contains ambiguity. If, as Campbell suggests, the husband intends to leave Susannah, like Lucian has abandoned his wife, his unusual attentiveness may come from his sense of guilt.¹¹⁾ On the other hand, this episode can be taken to stress the great degree to which women are so bound by the internalised binary of youth and age that they can be misled in their effort of self-presentation.¹²⁾

Despite the absence of a triumphant ending, however, Susannah’s rage is significant. As Campbell suggests, “she has made her statement” (171). Woodward argues that rage can be a powerful means of resistance to discrimination against age (“Against Wisdom”). As we have seen, in the story, Susannah’s rage is encapsulated by the image of Medusa, and her features serve as ironic critical commentaries on the image-driven self-presenting culture. For one thing, there are snakes on her head instead of hair; she is said to be beautiful but nobody including herself can look at her face, because one look at her face is believed to turn the person looking into stone. In fact, Medusa is a woman who never has to fear the spell of the mirror. As Kelly points out, the image of Medusa in the story evokes the laughing Medusa of *Hélène Cixous* rather than the traditional tragic figure (56–7).¹³⁾ In addition, as the title suggests, the ankle adds another meaning to the image of Susannah as Medusa. When earlier in the story, Lucian talks about his wife and her ugly swollen ankles, Susannah thinks about her own swollen ankles and although she feels sorry for her, she fails to stand up for

the wife. This memory comes back at the moment when Susannah feels her rage mounting “for the fat-ankled woman” (23). In the story, the fat ankle is mentioned as a negative signification of the woman’s ageing body. However, this image of flesh also evokes the *Rosy Nude*, a positive, sensuous icon of female body which invites “reflections on flesh and its fall” (3). Thus, the image of monstrous and yet laughing Medusa is mixed with the image of the abundant female body and together they create an exquisitely unique palimpsest for older women’s identity. Through the imaginative mixture of the images of *Pink Nude*, Medusa and the mirror, “Medusa’s Ankles” suggests that even though it may have no real political and social impact, such a small personal act of rage is meaningful as it can bring a cathartic moment of liberation.

“The Dried Witch”

As the title suggests, “The Dried Witch” engages with the cultural discourse that associates older women with the figure of the witch, a malicious and harmful outsider. In the story, A-Oa, an ageing woman transforms into a “jinx,” and through this process, the text explores the bodily dimension of the older woman’s ageing subjectivity (86). “Medusa’s Ankles” depicts the working of the discourse of age from the perspective of the interaction between the body as an appearance and an older woman’s identity. In “The Dried Witch,” as the unusual use of the word “jinx” for a person suggests, the body bears the cultural and gendered signification of ageing as neither a surface nor an image but through its materiality. While “Medusa’s Ankles” stresses how much the ageing body is culturally constructed, “The Dried Witch” affirms the almost primitive materiality of the ageing body in the face of cultural dictates.

The setting of the story helps to illuminate how the gendered discourse

of ageing operates in society in a crystallised form.¹⁴⁾ It is set in a remote, tribal village which seems to be disconnected from the outside world. There is a strong sense of enclosure to the village, which has only “two streets, crossing” and the houses which are made of “yellow stone, cemented, with wooden windows, painted pigeon-blue, and golden-brown doors” (85). The village is perched on a steep surface of the mountain. The tank, an important supply point of water, is symbolically situated at the far end of this village. A-Oa’s marginal existence is suggested in a spatial term by the fact that she crosses the boundary between the civilised world of the village and the chaotic profane world at the foot of the temple outside the village, which is suffused with “smell of sour cooking, the smell of burning pats of dung, a weaker smell of hot flour on griddles, a tinge of spice” and inhabited by “collection of the rootless and the lost, the homeless and the holy, black-veiled women huddled like clustering bats, naked holy men, still as stone, or rhythmically prostrating themselves and rising” (89).

Despite the fact that most of the men have been taken away for the war, the village is a highly segregated and male-dominant community. The social order of the community marginalises A-Oa, an ageing woman and virtually a widow, whose husband never returned from the war. In the patriarchal order of the community, ageing women are feared, if not respected, only when they are believed to have turned into a jinx. Young women may hold sexual value but they can also be punished for the sexual corruption of young men. On the other hand, the Big Brother figure of the community is Kun. He is “a necessary man,” who is “always to be seen” and who “knew everything that happened in the village before anyone else” (87). A-Oa recognises that she and Kun are similar as they are both “singletons on the edge of the circle, not woven in by kin or obligation” (88). Nonetheless, he “had known how to make himself necessary and a little feared,” whereas A-Oa will be neither

feared nor respected unless she becomes a jinx. A-Oa senses her increasingly marginalised existence in the way in which she is looked at, or rather, is not looked at: “Those [Men] who were left no longer looked at A-Oa in the street in the way she had once feared and needed. Her breasts were small and soft and dry inside her skirt; the cloth was slack over slackness.” No longer sexually desirable, she becomes invisible in the eyes of men, and children call her “the old woman, the old woman, not meeting her eyes” (86).

As in “Medusa’s Ankles,” the mirror-image plays an important role in reflecting A-Oa’s uncertainty about identity. She fears that she may have reached an age when a woman becomes a jinx. A jinx is said to live in a “spotlessly clean” house and have “red” eyes (86). A-Oa, who always keeps her house clean and tidy, is anxious to see if her eyes are turning red. Since she does not have a glass mirror, A-Oa goes to the tank and looks into the surface of the water. The water surface only projects a deep and dark shadow: “Her face looked back at her, an oval shadow on the glitter, and then, as she came nearer, provided with features, an empty fall of black hair, a black mouth, the dark holes of the eyes. The water turned everything into dark purple and greenish-brown shadows: unsmiling and uniformly olive her dark mask peered back at her, wrinkling its eyes, which, it was true, were very dark” (85–6). The featureless vacant image that faces A-Oa is symbolic of the invisibility of older women, who are made the other in the cultural gaze. If her “water-face” inside the tank is dark and featureless, her “pot-face” on the bottom of her brass pot seems to be on fire: “Her hair scattered light, her features melted and shifted shape with the contour of the bowl. Here there were colours if they could be read, in the brassy refractions, brass-brown cheek-hollows, brass-russet closed lips, burning” (86). This image may appear to be more colourful and lively than the image on the

water, and yet, it is widely distorted and swollen. In fact, as it is revealed later, the “melted and shifted” shapes and the “burning” colours are a subtle and chilling hint of her end.

For A-Oa, her mirror image is not a concern for self-presentation but it offers a clue as to whether she is turning into a jinx. In fact, her body matters more as matter than as text, as the cultural signification of ageing is embodied by her body rather than inscribed on its surface. Dryness in particular functions as a signifier for the ageing female body. The text opens with a declaratory sentence, “She was dry” and continues to describe A-Oa’s dryness: “It was the dry season, but this was her own dryness. Her inside-mouth felt like cloth dried into creased folds in the sun; her tongue scrubbed the silky-dry palate with its sand-ripples of flesh. The wet film was gone from her eyes; the rims and the lash-roots pricked. Between the legs was dry too” (85).

In addition to the physical dryness of her body, the text engages with another meaning of dryness that implies that the blood is dried up in her body. That is, her reproductive age is over and she is post-menopausal. Germaine Greer asserts that the menopause should be considered as being empowering, as it releases women from cultural oppression. In Byatt’s story, however, women’s roles are ruthlessly reduced to those that are assigned to women on a purely biological account, most notably sex and reproduction. The frequent appearances of eggs as an ingredient of magic charms concocted by a jinx also seem to point to the importance of reproduction. A-Oa’s marginalisation, it is suggested, has much to do with the fact that she has never born a child. Before her husband was taken by the army, A-Oa gave birth to four children but none survived. This stigmatises her and allies her with a jinx, who is said to be able to “dry up a child” (88).

A-Oa’s unstable identity becomes evident when she secretly visits the

old woman, a Shaman, and there encounters the image of the other. A-Oa expects her to be able to tell if she is turning into a jinx. She recalls that she used to see this old woman with “a mixture of repugnance, fear, and something approaching pity” but her face now reflects the image of herself: “unnecessary, waste, fragile as the fine black disintegrating films left when paper or cloth had been burned” (91). After examining A-Oa’s dry condition, the old woman tells her that she has “lost your [her] true water” and that her eyes have turned red (92). A-Oa asks the old woman how she can acquire the power of a jinx to “be respected and feared” (93).

A-Oa’s transformation into a jinx is depicted in corporeal language. The charms A-Oa is instructed to assemble by the old woman to become a jinx are suggestive of the transient condition of her body. She has to wait, she is told, “until all moisture has parted from the things that have moisture, and the dried things are plumped out” (93). The contents of the charms include a snake, a rat and “an egg about to hatch but unhatched, an egg with a chick curled inside it which must be left to rot and go beyond rotting to dryness” (94). As the contents of the charms rot and desiccate, A-Oa goes through a “sultry, transitional time of terrible smells, corruption and deliquescence” (95). When the contents of the charms become completely dry and almost purified, “quiet dryness” arrives and completes A-Oa’s transformation (96).

As a jinx, A-Oa seems to have earned respect, as she hoped. People come to her asking for cures for illness and wounds, and she teaches them. However, a jinx is a peripheral existence, both invisible and hypervisible. If she is respected, it is because she is feared as the other. Bo-Me, A-Oa’s neighbour for the first time calls her “Mother” and asks if she knows a remedy for her son’s sores. But “Bo-Me knew, and A-Oa knew, that to a close friend, a mother or a sister, Bo-Me would have said that some witch or a jinx was attacking the child with her thoughts, or with spells” (96). The

precarious status of a jinx becomes undeniably evident when A-Oa helps a young man to assemble a love charm to get his sister-in-law to fall in love with him. In the order of the village, brothers- and sisters-in-law are allowed to sleep in the same bed but they are not allowed to have any physical contact in the bed or at any time. When they violate this order, a woman is punished by death, while a man is considered to be a victim of the woman's wicked seduction. When the illicit affair that A-Oa has assisted is discovered, the young man and woman both turn to A-Oa and blame her for casting a curse over them. Betrayed for her sympathetic help, she is no longer respected but is made visible as a threat. Just as in "Medusa's Ankles" where "natural" hair offers Susannah protection from the cultural ideal of youth, invisibility can offer protection for an older woman. On the other hand, visibility comes with risk for an ageing woman. Once she is found to be harmful, she must be removed. Induced by Kun, the young man suggests that to protect the village against A-Oa's curse they "'must sun the jinx. The sun will dry out the evil'" (107).

Her prosecution, a public humiliation, is the ultimate form of visibility. A-Oa is tied to a tree and left under the direct sun, drying and burning for full three days. If she survives she will be saved, but A-Oa knows she is going to die and is resigned to her insight. In this cruel prosecution, however, the negative signification of dryness that is attached to older women is transformed. As A-Oa's body loses all its moisture, it is almost purified into matter and merged with the surrounding nature: "At first sweat came, more moisture than she'd thought she had, standing fleetingly on the hair on her upper lip, vapouring away. Parts of her body hurt in turn" (108). In extreme pain, she feels that she is becoming a mere matter: "so this is where I was coming: and everything that had once belonged to herself seemed small and husked, dust to sweep, a stain to be wiped from the grid of

the cooking-stove where something had spilled, and been baked blackly on, and had tenaciously adhered. Why begin, thought A-Oa, if we come here so quickly?' (110). As A-Oa is visited by a cosmic vision of the order of things and imagines her self within that order as a tiny material entity like "dust" or "a stain," the cultural order that has oppressed her recedes into the background. Her transformation into matter allows her to leave the realm of culture.

The ending of the story stresses the split between the body and the mind in her subjectivity at the moment of her death. On the last day, "she was two. Her mind stood outside herself, looking down on the shrivelling flesh, with its blues and umbers, on the cracked face, the snarling mouth, the bared, dry-bone teeth. Her mind moved in its own shape, stepping rapidly, so it had feet of a kind, looking out of angled vision, so it had eyes of a kind, at the poor thing tied to the tree trunk, at the thorns in their dusty blackness . . . After a time, she thought, she would step away from the thing altogether" (110). The thorns near her body begin to burn, as if she transfused her extreme, condensed dryness into them. Then "she danced a little" (110) and merges into the flame as "[t]he eddies of heat from the burning swirled out . . . and took her with them, away from the strapped and cracking thing, away" (111). Her body escapes from the cultural realm and her consciousness has stepped out of it, looking at "the thing," her drying and dying corporeal self.

The dissociation of A-Oa's mind from her body depicted in the last scene is significant for thinking about the relationship between the self, the body and culture. It certainly contributes to A-Oa's liberation that Campbell mentions, as it releases her from the pain, the loneliness of her life, and the cultural oppression.¹⁵⁾ At the same time it also evokes the Cartesian body-mind dichotomy that diminishes the corporeal dimension of the self.

However, I shall argue, the split between the body and the mind here does not suggest a privileging of the mind. Rather, the story affirms the bodily dimension of human subjectivity by presenting A-Oa's body as a pure material entity that transcends the cultural. As Twigg argues, in the experience of ageing the body and culture are in "a dialectal relationship" (70). However, the postmodern excessive emphasis on the body as a discursive construct and as a surface overlooks the bodily aspect of subjectivity, which is impossible to ignore, particularly in old age. "The Dried Witch" can be read as an antithesis to this. Although A-Oa is a victim of the cultural force that oppresses older women, through the portrayal of her body's material changes, the story asserts that ageing is both cultural and physical; that ageing subjectivity is embodied as much as it is shaped by culture.

"The Pink Ribbon"

"Medusa's Ankles" demonstrates how the ageing woman's identity is shaped as and through the image in a dialectical relationship between culture and the body. "The Dried Witch" depicts the cultural oppression on the ageing woman but ultimately affirms, symbolically, the primacy of the body, presenting ageing as a deeply corporeal experience. "The Pink Ribbon" continues to explore the relationship between ageing, the body and subjectivity, but the text develops the inquiry by adding to it a new dimension of the issue of dementia and personhood. Although the simple equation between dementia and old age is itself not valid, age is considered to be the most influential risk factor of dementia.¹⁶⁾ More importantly, this association deeply penetrates the popular discourse of dementia, causing "a *monsterizing* of senility" and consequently making "the present-day lived experience of senility and aging" "more unpleasant or horrific than it was

previously” (Herskovits 153).¹⁷⁾ The story portrays the life of married couple, Mado with dementia and James the carer. From the portrayals of their “grey isolation” from “the everyday life of ordinary society,” the text acutely raises the question of what constitutes a personhood when the person is ageing and is suffering from dementia (Cox 139). In addition, the focus of “The Pink Ribbon” is not ageing but is old age. Old age or the fourth age, as Twigg explains, is characterised by increasing physical changes which often limit the choices and types of activities and lives that the person can pursue, and severely affect the level of agency that the person can have. In the fourth age death becomes a more imminent issue than in the third age too. As will be seen, the perspective of dementia makes it possible to develop the inquiry into ageing, identity and subjectivity into a deep contemplation on the agency and personhood in old age, and death.

In the popular imagination, dementia is immediately associated with memory loss, although the disease manifests in many other forms (Hughes, *Alzheimer's* 23). This association contributes to another linking between dementia and the loss of personhood, because memory is considered an essential part of the Western notion of human subjectivity. Within the Western tradition, a unity of life narrative is considered to be one of the important components of personhood. One should be able to make sense of one's life, connecting oneself at different points of time. It is this view of personhood that makes memory a crucial element. According to Katz and Peters, John Locke, who firmly advances this view, believes “successful identity throughout the life course rests on good memory” (349). Furthermore, modern and scientific discourses have contributed to turning a loss of memory into an abnormality to be treated and fought against. Tom Kitwood argues that Western medicine has long adapted the technical approach to dementia that views the illness as “a problem in neurological or

biochemical engineering,” refusing to acknowledge the dementia sufferer “as a person” (102). The obsession with cognitive health, Katz argues, is so pervasive that, together with the culture of anti-ageing it has contributed to the booming of “neuroculture” not only in medicine but in many other areas of life. The privileging of memory as the key constituents of personhood presents a grave challenge to those with dementia and as Baldwin suggests, make them most susceptible for exclusion from “the personhood club”(224).

The Lockean view of personhood based on a narrative unity, however, is “reductive of the notion of the person,” because it regards a person as “constituted *solely* by psychological phenomena” (Hughes, *Thinking through Dementia* 42). Thus, there have been attempts to question the traditional understanding of human subjectivity and to recognise a wider variety of ways in which the agency of a person with dementia can be expressed. One of the major forces in this trend is a consideration of the contextual and interactive aspects of human subjectivity and agency. Another revisionist approach draws attention to the power of narrative, seeking to “reconfigure the narrative agency” (Baldwin 225). This approach also values the interactive dimension of agency and proposes concepts such as “joint authorship” (*Ibid.* 225) of narratives, “narrative sensitivity” (*Ibid.* 227) or “narrative care” (Randall 29) by carers of persons with dementia. While these two approaches stress the importance of a relationship between a person with dementia and something or someone else, it has been argued that the corporeal aspect of agency should not be neglected. For example, Hughes argues for “the situated embodied agent view,” stressing the need to consider agency including its interactive and interpersonal contexts and its embodied nature (*Thinking through Dementia* 53). Kontos also proposes the idea of “embodied selfhood,” stressing the “body as a generative source of agency” (2, 3). Thus, as Gilleard and Higgs speak of “re-interpreters of the

language of Alzheimer's," the discourses of dementia, which have been constructed around the traditional notion of human subjectivity, now problematise the idea of what constitutes personhood (186).

"The Pink Ribbon" addresses these questions and in particular, explores the body/mind binary in the notion of human subjectivity. Furthermore, it meditates on the possibility and the limit of representing the other in the contexts of care work, old age and writing itself.

In the story, the issue of agency of persons with dementia is explored in the context of care. Indeed, it opens in a scene of care as James attends on Mado. "He held the mass of hair – long, coarse, iron-grey – over his left hand, and brushed it firmly and vigorously with his right. It was greasy to the touch, despite the effort he and Mrs Bright had put into washing it" (233). Interestingly, "Medusa's Ankle" and "The Pink Ribbon" both feature hair styling. Nonetheless, there are differences, which are relevant to thinking about the discourses of ageing, the body and dementia. Susannah attends to her hair as part of her self-fashioning project and there is a sense of her agency in it. On the other hand, "The Pink Ribbon" is set in a domestic care setting. Although the opening scene depicts a similar cultural practice to do with hair, it is undertaken to make Mado's body presentable and acceptable. Therefore, Mado's agency is altogether absent in this practice. Compared to "Medusa's Ankles," which features the gendered discourse of age and identity practice, the pressure of the gendered and gendering gaze is not found here. Mado's staring at a TV screen suggests that the mirror does not concern her: "She was staring at the television screen, which was dead and grey and sprinkled with dust particles. Her face was dimly reflected in it, a heavy grey face with an angry mouth and dark eye-caverns" (233–34). In "The Pink Ribbon" the mirror is substituted by a TV screen, as TV is often used as a means to preoccupy and control Mado.

The opacity of the TV screen almost signifies Mado's clouded sense of self.

Instead, Mado's body has a strong presence in the text. It is indeed an object of "hypervisibility" (Woodward, *Aging* 66). Twigg explains that in the fourth age, "the management of the body is central to carework and to the wider ordering of the lives of older people" (66). In the story, Mado's hair represents the "de-civilized" state of her body and symbolises her lack of self-care (Gilleard and Higgs 168). In response to Mrs Bright's compliment on Mado's rich hair, James remarks, "hairs thickened with age, they got stronger. Hairs in the nostrils, hairs on the heavy chin, grasses on a rock-face" (234). In "Medusa's Ankles" Susannah's hair is a visible signification of ageing but more importantly, it is also a part of the body through which she presents the identity she desires. By contrast, Mado's hair symbolises a lack of control and self-maintenance. In the same way, her body is all that represents her self.

The way in which Mado is treated also emphasises that her agency is neglected. James and Mrs Bright, the domestic help, discuss Mado as the object of their care and their comments easily fall within widely-held popular discourses of dementia patients, turning Mado into an impenetrable and incomprehensible other. James calls her "Mado." This name's association with the adjective 'mad' is repeatedly emphasised by Mado herself when she repeats, "Maddy, Mad Mado" (233). Mrs Bright expresses her pity in a condescending tone, saying that she is "a poor creature and a wondering soul" in the "second childhood" (244, 235). As Hockey and James suggest, this common cultural metaphor that links old age and childhood has the effect of marginalising old age, associating older people with "inadequacies" (137).¹⁹ James tries a more objective understanding of her condition and explains to Mrs Bright, using another common description of dementia, "Her poor brain is a mass of thick plaques and tangles of

meaningless stuff. Like moth-eaten knitting”(236). Both Mrs Bright’s metaphor and James’ attempted objectivism place Mado as a dependent, unknown other. She is present in bodily terms but she, a child, is irrelevant within “the hegemony of adulthood” (Hockey and James 138).

It has been pointed out that the complex relationship between the care-giver and the cared in the context of dementia involves an intense power dynamics (Dunham and Cannon). In the same way, Byatt’s text captures the great sense of loss that James feels and his struggle in providing care for Mado. James’ frustration as a care-giver manifests itself in small and latently malicious acts. For instance, the title of the story comes from the pink ribbon he uses to tie Mado’s hair, knowing that she hates pink. He also buys a soft green doll called Dipsy for Mado to play with, with a full awareness that she does not like green either. At night after Mado has deserted the doll on the floor, he picks it up and distractedly inserts hairpins into the doll: “He stabbed and stabbed” (250). Feeling trapped in a life which is socially isolated and which requires a continuous exercise of patience and endurance, James sees himself as “a vessel of seething rage, against fate, against age, against, God help him (but there was no God) mad Mado herself” (241).

Byatt’s text offers a literary and imaginative approach to the exploration of the agency and personhood of someone with dementia. By utilising the framework of a fantastical ghost story, it creates a space in the narrative for Mado and James to communicate, suggesting the tentative possibility that her agency may be represented. One night when James is reading after having put Mado to bed, a beautiful young woman appears out of nowhere at his front door. She claims she is being chased and threatened and James lets her in. This mysterious woman introduces herself as Dido. At this point in the story it is not clear who she really is, but the text implies a strong link between Dido and Mado, through the similarity of their names and in other

ways. Dido's presence disturbs Mado out of her sleep, and she shouts "That's a wicked witch, that means *bad* to us all—" (254). Yet, when Dido retreats from her sight, Mado calms down and returns to her bed (254). It is as if Dido's presence necessitates the withdrawal of Mado from the scene. In fact, Dido's appearance takes the form of a *séance*, because she appears when James is stabbing Mado's hairpins into the soft doll, Dipsy. She settles herself into the wing chair, Mado's regular seat and reveals her surprising knowledge of Mado and James. She accuses James of using the pink ribbon for Mado's hair. She also accuses him of choosing Dipsy, instead of Po, which is a red colour, Mado's favourite. The fantastical narrative space for Dido/Mado to appear is thus devised.

In addition, the intertextual link drawn between this fantastical world and the world of *The Aeneid* shakes the boundaries between reality and imagination, the present and the past, the living and the dead, giving an insight into what it means to live with dementia.²⁰ The night when the young woman first appears, James is reading volume six of *The Aeneid*. Dido is also "the name of the passionate queen" in *The Aeneid*, and she also exhibits her knowledge of the classical text, pointing out that the name Dipsy is "a daft word," whereas "Po" refers to the "River Eridanus, that goes down to the Underworld. A magical river" (256).

Triggered by Dido's appearance, James begins to be haunted by memories of the past. He remembers people he and Mado knew, incidents they witnessed, the times and experiences they shared. He finds it increasingly difficult to leave the past as "he slipped and lost his footing on the slopes between sleep and waking" (258). He is trapped in the Underworld as he "kept rising towards waking like a trout in a river and submerging again" (260). At the same time, the Underworld allures him, because there he can feel the life and warmth of the past. His helplessness at

the pull of the past is expressed by the repeated metaphor of drowning. He imagines himself as “a drowning man, with his life flashing before his eyes” and wonders about the moment of death, “would you *see* the quick and the dead before your real staring underwater pupils, or would they wind on a speeded-up film inside the dark theatre of the waterlogged head?” (261). Like Aeneas, James is forced to face the dead from the past in the Underworld.

This allows James, it can be argued, to share the imaginative world of Mado. James observes that she seems to be living in an imaginary world with imaginary people or people she knew before but who are now dead. However, as James continues being pulled towards the past, the distinction between the dead and the living becomes increasingly blurred. The symbolic reversal between death and life is made most striking in the contrast between their wartime memories and their present life. During the war, when “[d]eath was close,” James and Mado lived for the moment, and they were comparable to Aeneas and Dido. On the night of a bombing in London, they find each other, miraculously, alive. James was “Aeneas looking for Creusa in burning Troy,” and Mado responded, “I’m not a ghost, I’m fresh and blood. And they kissed, with soot on their tongues, and the burning city in their lungs. Flesh and blood” (272–73). Life during wartime was lived intensely, exactly because the dark prospect of death always hovered over it. By contrast, James and Mado’s current life, although peaceful, is constantly overshadowed by ageing and the prospect of death. In comparison to their wartime life, their present life is a dead one that “has no hope of a future” (Cox 140).

Dido is also a reminder of what James and Mado have lost. She seems to come from the past as she brought James a box of chocolates which was popular when James was young. She is also a beautiful young woman, full

of life and energy: “She was wearing black shiny sandals with very high, slender heels. Her toenails were painted scarlet. Her legs were young and long. She wore a kind of flimsy scarlet silk shift, slit up the thigh, with narrow shoulder straps. . . . Her hands . . . were long and slender, like her feet, and the nails were also painted red” (251). Feeling an air of life coming into his house, James “looked at her ankles with intense pleasure and without desire” (266). At the same time, she is a painful reminder of his old age, and he feels embarrassed for “life, for Mado, for age, for the fusty smell of his home, for inexorable decline” (254).

Ironically, the fantastical encounter with Dido/Mado makes it tormenting for James to live in the present. As a result, forgetting becomes preferable over remembering. Previously he feared forgetting things as he feared dementia for himself. His daily reading of *The Aeneid* in the original Latin was meant to be good training for his brain. Every time he feels or realises he has forgotten something, he asks himself “Is it beginning?” (249). But his experience of the Underworld turns his fear of forgetting into one of remembering. Now he is “tormented by remembering things, with vivid precision” (261). The past intrudes into the present, and he “saw visions, heard sounds, smelled smells, long gone, but now there to be, so to speak, read and *checked*” (261). The past is irresistibly appealing and that is precisely why remembering the past in the present is painful. Almost fearful of the seduction of the Underworld, James thinks that he needs to try to stay in this world:

When “this” began, he had known that it required more courage to get up every day, to watch over Mado’s wandering mind and shambling body, than anything he, or they, had faced in that past. And he had drawn himself up, like a soldier, to do his duty, deciding that it was in

both their interests that he should never think of Madeleine, for his duty was here, now, to Mado, whose need was extreme. (263)

As Cox points out, James is “in exile,” “wandering between two worlds” torn between the tempting past and his “duty” to Mado (Cox 140).

While the encounter with Dido leaves James feeling lost, the fantastical setting helps to restore – to some degree – the agency and personhood of Mado. On her second visit, James starts to recount his wartime memories and Dido joins his narrative, filling gaps and relating things which “I [he] might have known, and don’t [doesn’t] know” (269). James for example recalls that when he was away during the war fighting in Algiers, he sent a box full of citrus fruits to Mado and how it delighted her. Dido however reveals that all the fruits rotted during the shipping but she appreciated his thought and told him a lie. They fill in the puzzles and gaps of their shared past. The past they construct may be transient and temporary, but at this moment in this story, they are able to share and re-construct their past.

This imaginative representation of Mado, however, brings an unexpected result, a result that contains a profound implication for the debates over the agency of a person with dementia. Surprised by her knowledge, James confronts Dido about her identity and she declares herself to be “the Fetch” and “in a sense” to be Madeleine (273). It becomes clear that she has come to deliver a message from Madeleine: a plea for her death. Dido explains to James, “The etheric body can get separated . . . from the clay. . . [S]he needs to be set free” (273). James admits, “You must know I’ve thought about it” (274) but rejects Mado’s plea. His rejection, however is self-serving, as Mado accuses him, “You don’t do it, because you would be set free yourself, and you think that would be wrong. But you don’t think of her . . . What I want” (274). James responds, insisting on Mado’s lack of

agency: “She doesn’t know what she wants, she can’t rightly want or not want” (274). Dido then speaks for the first time in a voice unmistakably Mado’s, “You make me angry.” She continues, “All those young Germans in the war, with their lives in front of them . . . your own young pilots on missions with wonderful brains humming with cleverness and hope and rational fear – *that was* all right. But a miserable hulk decorated with a pink ribbon –” (274). James reaffirms his rejection by refusing to take Mado’s agency seriously, saying “You could always twist anything” (274).

“The Pink Ribbon” ends in a familiar scene of care but Mado’s plea for death lingers between the couple. Mado says, as if to the characters on the TV screen she is staring at, “more and more angrily, night, night, night, night, night.” James answers, “Come to bed,” adding “Just a rest, for a while” (276). There is no sense of ending, progress, change or promise for the future here. Mado’s death would set James free but he knows he would not be able to bear the enormous sense of guilt. When the past presents itself more alive than the present, and when there is no future, it is painful to go on living.

Ultimately, the embedded space of the fantastic in Byatt’s story is unable to recover what has been lost; neither does it make Mado’s and James’s life any easier. As was explained earlier, there have been attempts to radically change the way we understand the personhood and agency of someone with dementia. In light of this context the fantastical space created in Byatt’s text seems to be a successful example of “joint authorship”: it realises, if imaginatively, an interactive and collaborative narration by James and Mado and allows Mado to be a speaking subject. The effect of this, however, seems limited and even painful for both of them. James’s “exile” into the past/Underworld makes it difficult for him to remember the past and to live in the present, betraying an the assumption that auto/biographical

narrating is beneficial as it helps give one's life meaning. In addition, as suggested earlier in the text, Mado has never been a woman who cares about telling stories; on the contrary, she used to refuse to give stories about her past and her life (245, 248). When she regains her voice and speaks, it becomes evident that she has no interest in continuing, creating and sharing life narratives. She wishes for death, because what Kontos describes as "embodied selfhood" does not satisfy her. For her, the life of mind is as important as the life of the body. As James remembers, the word "intelligent" was Mado's "highest term of praise" and she always pursued a life in which her mind would be actively engaged (247). Although the body must be recognised, as much as the mind is, as an integral part of human subjectivity, in her own eyes, she is merely "a miserable hulk decorated with a pink ribbon." For her, the body, her ageing body affected by dementia, does not, or should not, represent her. She thus uses her momentarily restored agency to end her life, and her agency is rejected by James.

This dark outcome of the imaginative interaction between James and Mado offers a deeply pessimistic vision for the personhood of someone with dementia, denying the optimistic visions implicated in the new revisionist approaches to dementia. I argue, however, that the story here raises an important issue that has not been widely acknowledged in the revisionist approaches. It is the relationship between the subject and the object of representation. In the attempt to widen our understanding of human subjectivity, critics have emphasised the contextual, interactive and embodied aspects of it. Hughes maintains: "we co-author our lives through our mutual involvement in each other's stories. . . . However we tell our stories (in words, in pictures, in music), they locate us in a whole way of life, with its own meanings, history, and normative constraints, which define us as the beings that we are" (Hughes, *Thinking through Dementia* 231).

This model, which stresses the interpretative dimension of meaning, contains a risk of paradoxically neglecting the subjectivity of a person with dementia. If “responsibility shifts to others for the meaning making process” (Randall 29), to what degree can a person with dementia be a source of meaning? As long as there is an inevitable element of interpretation and mediation, the representation of that person is subjected to circumstantial conditions, for instance, a level of “narrative sensitivity” (Baldwin 227) or “empathy” (Maierhofer 2) of whoever undertakes “the task of speaking for them” (*Ibid.* 2). The interaction between James and Mado that takes place in the fantastical setting thus throws scepticism over the possibility that someone with dementia can be represented. If the subjectivity of the person with dementia requires mediation by someone or something else, then, the phenomenological negotiation between the subject and the object becomes a critical matter in its representation, raising the questions: Who is speaking for whom? Whose story is told?

“The Pink Ribbon” explores the subjectivity of a person with dementia and the possibility of representing it. The fantastical framework of the ghost story offers an imaginative channel through which James can access Mado’s world and through which she can speak. However, the story does not offer a redemptive ending. This does not mean that it denies the interactive relation in which human lives are lived and enriched, or the value of attempting to understand the other. But it is a humble, almost ethical rather than pessimistic gesture that acknowledges difference, difference of the other so profound that diminishes the possibility to connect in affective and empathic terms. The ending of the story, which is overshadowed by the idea of death, is an acceptance – not in despair but in honesty – of the limits of representation at the time when living and death are so close.

Conclusion

“Why can’t we imagine ourselves getting old?” inquired a BBC News Magazine article in 2011 and presented some answers from different critical and theoretical angles (De Castella and Brown). It attracted a total of 223 comments in response, a testimony to how age is now a significant concern for many individual people. The question posed by the article speaks directly to the concern that this paper has engaged with. How can we imagine and understand ageing and old age? As this paper has shown, this translates into a matter of imagining and understanding the other within and outside ourselves. This is why Gullette demands “imaginative solidarity” across generations so that we will erase the otherness of ages than our own and we will “feel at home in the life course at every age” (*Aged by Culture* 20).

A. S. Byatt’s three stories discussed here explore, in different and imaginative ways, the complex interactions between ageing, the body and subjectivity and how ageing is experienced in the cultural world. “Medusa’s Ankles” depicts the dominance of cultural codes over the older woman’s identity and the centrality of the body in Susannah’s negotiations with conflicting discourses and identities. “The Dried Witch,” by contrast, affirms the primacy of the material body that eventually defeats the cultural, as an antithesis to the postmodern concentration on discourse and performance and its obsession with surface. “The Pink Ribbon” firmly moves away from the issue of self-presentation to the issue of representation of the other. By using the fantastical framework of the ghost story, it explores the nature of subjectivity and the agency of a person with dementia, and how they can be represented. As it thus contemplates the limits of representation, it suggests scepticism over the new theoretical models of representing the subjectivity

of a person with dementia, because it recognises the risk of diminishing the subjectivity of the other that comes from the element of mediation inherent in the act of representation. This is, however, an ethical rather than pessimistic gesture that accepts the limits of representation more on the account of phenomenology than on the account of language.

While age critic Gullette believes in resistance and “revolution” in her activist vision (*Aged by Culture* 39), Byatt’s stories do not make any grand gesture such as radically dramatic, imposing or transcendental visions for later life. They do however perturb and unsettle the culturally stratifying narratives of ageing and depict moments of anger, liberation and revelation, which are momentary but nonetheless meaningful. Like “small metaphors,” these moments help create new connections, images and meanings, carrying the potential to change the conventional ways in which we see and understand ageing and old age (Byatt, *Passions of the Mind* 20).

Notes

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- 1) The Mass Observation Project is a collection of “autobiographical written accounts of everyday life” by “non-élite or non-professional volunteers (“correspondents”).” Since its first directive in 1981, it has been organised by the University of Sussex. The correspondents, although controlled to some extent, is not a “statistically representative sample” of the British population and thus the Project is best understood as “a writing project” (Sheridan 1). Part 1 of the Winter 1992 Directive, entitled “Growing Older,” asked correspondents to write their “own subjective experience.” In Part 3 of the Autumn 2006 Directive “Age,” one of the themes that the correspondents were asked to write about was “some general thoughts on age.”
- 2) For privacy protection the correspondents are given a code that comprises one alphabet and a series of numbers. In their replies they are asked to give this code

and also their sex, age, marital status, town or village, occupation or former occupation.

- 3) The birth of modern medicine is said to have medicalised ageing. Ageing was primarily considered a biological phenomenon that happens to everyone in largely the same way and was strongly associated with physiological decline, leading to the recognition that older people are inevitably dependent and in need of social security. Ageing thus entered the field of social sciences as an issue which concerned welfare, health care and other social policies. Ageing in this way was perceived as a “burden” on the state and became a “problem” to deal with (Jackson 205 cited in Vincent 84). See Gilleard and Higgs (2000) and Vincent (2005).
- 4) One of the reasons is said to be because the issue of age and ageing has been repressed in literary scholarship just as it is widely in society and culture. In particular, it has been pointed out, second-wave feminism, while contributing greatly to drawing attention to and correcting inequality in society, has been youth-oriented. Roberta Maierhofer claims, for instance, it has taken “the graying” of American feminism, that is, the growing older of second-wave feminists, to become engaged with the issue of age. As Bazin and White point out, the issue of age began to attract attention in feminism when difference between second-wave and third-wave generations of feminists began to be recognised.
- 5) Examples include: Waxman, 1990; Wyatt-Brown and Rossen, 1993; Gullette, 1988; Chivers, 2003; Brennan, 2005; Paloge, 2007; Perrakis, 2007; Morrison, 2013 (Forthcoming).
- 6) One of the reasons may be the apparent lack of feminist interest in her fiction. The majority of works in literary gerontology have taken a feminist approach and chosen to discuss texts written by women writers whose protagonists are female. Although identifying herself as “a back-to-the-wall feminist” with regard to social issues, Byatt has been sceptical about literary feminism, because she believes that a collective enterprise smothers personal and individual freedom in writing (Dusinberre 189). She has articulated her reluctance to exclusively write about “women’s issues” and her aversion to being confined by the label of “woman writer” (Byatt, “Reading, Writing and Studying” 5).
- 7) The most notable example is probably Frederica Potter, the female protagonist in

her Quartet (*The Virgin in the Garden* (1978); *Still Life* (1985); *Babel Tower* (1992) and *A Whistling Woman* (2002)), who is initially deeply sceptical about E. M. Forster's dictum "Only Connect" but whose life experience teaches her that the body and the mind are not oppositional at all and that "all this was one" (*A Whistling Woman* 422).

- 8) "Medusa's Ankles" is included in the collection of short stories, *The Matisse Stories* (1993) and as the title of the volume suggests, each of the stories is connected to a particular Matisse painting.
- 9) For example, Byatt explains that in his *Red Studio* Matisse "assembles both the two-dimensional shadowy (but brilliantly dark red) world of his everyday surroundings, and a scattering of placed icons, recalled images of images, coherently connected by the simultaneous limitations and complexity of his palette" (Byatt, "Memory and the Making of Fiction" 71).
- 10) I owe Campbell for an inspiration for my reading of this passage. She points out the implicit reference to the Snow Queen and suggests the significance of the appearance of the image of Susannah's mother (171).
- 11) Campbell explains "he [the husband], it is hinted, is about to repeat Lucian's pattern of deserting his wife: his movements are 'unpredictable and unexplained' (28)" (171).
- 12) In her discussion of Fay Weldon's *Rhode Island Blues* and the role of the mirror in it, Rubenstein argues that its "life-affirming" eighty-three year-old woman is able to "control the meaning of the mirror's images through a firm grasp of one's psychic or spiritual identity" (185). "Medusa's Ankles," I would argue, is more sceptical about the possibility that the spell of the mirror can be broken nor does Susannah seem to possess the "firm grasp of [her] psychic or spiritual identity" that is required.
- 13) Kelly reads "Medusa's Ankles" as "Byatt's response to Cixous, in which Byatt accepts Cixous's revision of Medusa but wants to keep – and honor – the terrible aspect of her beauty and the edge to her laughter" (57).
- 14) "The Dried Witch" features in Byatt's first collection of short stories, *Sugar and Other Stories* (1987). Jane Campbell points out that the link drawn between this story and the story that follows, "Loss of Face," suggests that both are set in Korea

- (88). However, apart from the names of the characters, there is no other clue that verifies the setting of “The Dried Witch.”
- 15) Campbell’s reading is more optimistic than mine: “Yet in the end, seeing a tree nearby burst into flames, she experiences power and creativity. Remembering the superstition that a jinx can set trees on fire, her imagination dances to the sound of the flames, and the last image, as her mind and body separate, is of freedom” (89).
 - 16) Hughes explains “dementia is not a condition that only affects elderly people” and that “[N]ot all older people have dementia” (*Alzheimer’s and Other Dementias* 2).
 - 17) Herskovits specifically discusses Alzheimer’s disease, the most widely known type of dementia. But her point is applicable to dementia in general.
 - 19) Hockey and James explain that “the apparent ‘limitations’ of childhood” are linked to “a parallel series of ‘inadequacies’ believed to characterize old age,” attaching to old age “images of physical decline and social marginality” (137).
 - 20) Fiona Cox’s reading of “The Pink Ribbon” which focuses on the parallel between the story and *The Aeneid* suggests many intertextual references embedded in Byatt’s text and helped to develop my reading of the story from the perspective of the issue of dementia.

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