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Under Review

## Demythologising Female Ageing through Narrative Transgression in Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* and Angela Carter's *Wise Children*

British contemporary authors Penelope Lively and Angela Carter are well-known for their contribution to narrative experimentation in the novels they published in the last decades of the twentieth century. Whereas Penelope Lively intended to capture the subjective condition of time and memory in retelling the past and interpreting the present, Carter defined herself as being within the demythologising business. As she expresses in one of the essays contained in *Shaking a Leg*, "I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottle explode" (41). Lively's Booker Prize-winning novel *Moon Tiger* (1987) and Carter's last novel *Wise Children* (1991) have been analysed as examples of novels which try to break with established cultural discourses in relation to gender and social class by intermingling personal and public history or, rather, by presenting a personalised version of public history. In the case of *Moon Tiger*, Mary Ann Moran, author of the only monograph on Penelope Lively's novels, highlights Lively's use of her kaleidoscopic technique in order to point to the existence of multiple versions, both personal and historical, of an event. On the other hand, the intertextual use of Shakespeare's plays in Carter's *Wise Children* has been considered an "assault" on what Fay Weldon calls 'Castle Shakespeare', understanding Shakespeare as "the huge institution of Shakespeare which is woven into the British establishment" (Eaglestone 195).

However, the novels have never been analysed from the point of view of the age of their main protagonists and narrators: three older women in their mid-seventies. Whereas the questioning of gender and social establishment through the disruptive temporal framework, as well as vivid prose of the novels, have been described in different research articles and books (Díaz Bild, Moran and Raschke in the case of *Moon Tiger*; Boehm, Childs, Day, Eaglestone, Hardin, Kendrick and Lee in the case of *Wise Children*), age has remained inconspicuous in such analysis. Thus, the main aim of this paper is to draw on how the fictional narratives of two older protagonists who have lived throughout the twentieth century contribute to the demythologisation of limiting stereotypes and beliefs attached to female ageing and, as an extension, old age. The playful and subjective nature of the narrative employed by the authors in order to question established beliefs in relation to gender and social class can also be applied to age, since, as has been argued by age scholars Kathleen Woodward and Margaret M. Gullette following the seminal studies of Simone de Beauvoir and Susan Sontag, age becomes a marker of exclusion after a certain chronological age has been achieved, especially in the case of women. Together with the categories that define the main protagonists, age seems to be taken for granted, but it is actually part of the defining traits that delineate the main characters with which the reader will engage throughout the narrative. In Lively's *Moon Tiger*, Claudia Hampton is defined as a seventy-six-year-old woman, and a middle-class professional who did not conform to social and gender expectations when having to take decisions in her life. In the case of Carter's *Wise Children*, Dora Chance, one of the seventy-five-year-old twins who explains the story of the Hazard family and their illegitimate counterpart, the Chance sisters, presents herself as being set on the wrong side of the river, both because she was born in a working-class area of London (whereas, her biological family, the Hazards, were set in an affluent one); and because she and her sister Nora were women among the patriarchal set of well-established actors who took pride in representing Shakespeare's heroes within serious theatre.

The potential value of using fictional contemporary texts to examine at the complexities of the ageing process and old age from various perspectives has been widely discussed in recent years. Among different scholars, Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent

Lenker and sociologist Mike Hepworth have proved fiction to be a valuable source for establishing a constant and dynamic interaction between cultural and social conceptions of old age and the ageing process. As Hepworth contends, “stories of ageing should be read as the products of historically established systems of ideas and beliefs” (8). By their part, Deats and Lenker add age to the spectrum of identity characteristics that contribute to creating stereotypes inscribed within specific ideologies: thus, they contend that “studying the way in which stereotypes of any kind – gender, race, class, or age – are constructed within a work of art can help us to learn about – and to challenge – the construction of stereotypes within our own society” (3). In this respect, age critics Margaret M. Gullette and Kathleen Woodward contend that the body is inscribed with cultural meanings very much related to the binaries that have been working, and remain present in Western society; in other words, the physical ageing of the body has been, and continues to be associated with a lack of agency followed by loss and decline. Old is opposed to young and each term is filled with opposing characteristics very much attached to the external appearance of the body: ugly—beautiful, infertile—fertile, unproductive—productive, to name but a few. In her study *Learning to Be Old. Gender, Culture and Ageing*, Margaret Cruickshank argues that older women are aged by culture sooner than men because once the external signs of ageing start to become visible, they are seen as “old ladies” and their “physical appearance encompasses their whole being” (4). In this sense, fiction allows entry into the inner recesses of the protagonists and to see through them. In these specific novels, the voices of the protagonists, both in terms of their irreverent ideas and beliefs and the disruptive narratives they construct, question the young—old binary and its implications. Through the voices of Claudia Hampton, in Lively's *Moon Tiger*, and Dora Chance, in Carter's *Wise Children*, the reader is guided by the thoughts of these protagonists which, entangled with their experiences, personal and historical, makes the reader look beyond the cultural implications of the age factor and become immersed in witty and engaging narratives. As Lyz Byrski states, “the way we hear ourselves discussed and see ourselves represented in culture, influences the ways women can imagine, observe and experience their own ageing” (17). Through their narratives, Claudia Hampton and Dora Chance offer an imaginative way of looking at female ageing at the end of the twentieth century.

### **Beyond Reifungsroman**

Parting from the term “Bildungsroman” – understood as the literary genre that narrates the maturity process of a hero or heroine from childhood or early youth to adulthood—, by the end of the 1980s, Barbara Frey Waxman and Margaret M. Gullette coined the term “Reifungsroman”, or “midlife progress narratives”, to refer to a number of novels within which the main protagonists were women and men in their middle years and late middle years who went through a process of maturation and coming to terms with the process of ageing, thus fighting the pervading decline narrative and looking at old age as part of life long development. As Gullette put it, “a number of fiction writers have been offering Anglo-American culture new heroines and heroes in their middle years; new plots of recovery and development in those years; and favorable views of midlife looks and midlife outlooks, midlife parenting and childing, midlife subjectivity” (xii). Waxman identifies a journey “in the quest for self-knowledge” as well as a first-person or third-person limited omniscient narrators as common features in Reifungsroman. According to Waxman, “the women in Reifungsromane develop and expand more as they grow old than they did as they grew up” (17). Even though Lively's *Moon Tiger* and Carter's *Wise Children* present some of

the characteristics of “Reifungsroman”, they also differ from the genre in the fact that the older female protagonists who recount their life stories have moved from childhood to adulthood to old age outside patriarchal standards which established the 'right' age to marry and have children or the appropriate norms by which to behave as mature women and move into old age. In other words, their moving away from established social and cultural norms has always been present in their lives. The main aim of Claudia Hampton and Dora Chance in recounting their life stories, which extend throughout the twentieth century, including the many historical and social changes that the century witnessed, is to explain their own version of the period within a very specific spatial framework given by their British origins. Whereas Claudia Hampton intends to explain the “history of the world” (1) from the hospital bed in which she notes nurses looking down at her through a mixture of pity and disbelief, Dora Chance's aim is to become the “chronicler of all the Hazards” (11), those who lived on the 'right' side of the river and represented highbrow culture and also those who lived in the 'wrong' side of the river and belonged to the vaudeville, as she and her sister did, since she considers that both are closely interrelated: “right hand, left hand, right side, left side, all the dirt on everybody” (3). In this respect, the main aim of the older female protagonists is not to find “an open road to old age”, as Waxman defines the midlife progress narrative, but to become another voice, a dissident one, from the appropriate life course narrative which is also constrained by the fact that the voices who have built it belong to a specific social class, race and gender. As Claudia Hampton explains at the beginning of the novel: “The voice of history, of course, is composite. Many voices; all the voices that have managed to get themselves heard. Some louder than others, naturally. My story is tangled with the stories of others – Mother, Gordon, Jasper, Lisa, and one other person above all; their voices must be heard also, thus shall I abide by the conventions of history” (6).

The fact that the voice of the older female protagonists in Lively's *Moon Tiger* and Carter's *Wise Children* belong to women in their mid-seventies also distances the novels from Reifungsroman narratives within British fiction such as Doris Lessing's novels *Diary of a Good Neighbour* and *If the Old Could...*, in which the main voice of the protagonist is represented by a woman in her fifties who becomes a good neighbour to two women in their eighties. Even though the voice of the women in their eighties is transmitted to the reader through the increasingly critical voice of Jane Somers, the middle-aged protagonist in Lessing's novels, the focus is still on the progress narrative through which Jane Somers is travelling rather than on the voice of the older female protagonists. In this sense, Lively's and Carter's novels shift the focus to old female voices who have always been strong dissident ones within the communities in which they found themselves. On the other hand, within the popular British imagination there exists an accepted image of old age in women which is that of the grandmother. In his article ““Wrinkles of Vice and Wrinkles of Virtue”: The Moral Interpretation of the Ageing Body”, Mike Hepworth argues that a growing concern for the ageing process as well as the position of old people within the community during the Victorian era resulted in the creation of a positive and accepted image of old age for women. Within the idealised rural paradise that Victorian artists used to portray with the aim of mirroring the values and beliefs of the middle class, the granny was represented as a sweet and innocent figure who would either be sitting in the corner of a room proudly observing her descendants or helping without judging or questioning. As Hepworth explains, “the granny represents a sentimentalised embodiment of 'mother nature' whose prime function, once her own capacity to reproduce children has come to an end, is to supervise the reproduction of women younger than herself and generally to preserve hearth and home” (58). Thus, the accepted figure of the grandmother stands for a continuation of values such as family structure and domesticity as accepted positive representations of the older woman. Claudia

Hampton and Dora Chance are not only portrayed as being far away from the accepted image of the grandmother in fiction and art, but they also represent critical voices that did not and will not follow normative standards of ageing.

### Queer Temporalities: Down Memory Lane as Opposed to Linear Narratives

In her *In a Queer Time and Place. Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Judith Halberstam refers to “queer time” as living and organising one’s life outside “the conventions of family, inheritance and child rearing” (5) and highlights the potentiality of “queerness”, when considered in a wider spectrum to that of sexuality, to “open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space” (5). Halberstam connects queer temporalities with postmodernism, as both refer to a questioning of form that goes hand in hand with a questioning of meaning in order to “rethink” cultural hierarchies and “power dynamics” (6). More recently, Cynthia Port and Eva Krainitzki have applied Halberstam's concept of queer temporalities to the readings of cinematic representations of time, ageing and old age in films such as *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* and the character of M in the Bond films. Whereas Port suggests that disruptive representations of youthening and ageing contribute to disorientating the viewers' internalised sense of cultural temporality and open up possibilities, Krainitzki supports that “M's disruptions of chrono-temporality similarly allow viewers to imagine an ageing process outside of paradigmatic markers” (36). Taking these arguments into account, I contend that the concept of queer time applies to both novels, *Moon Tiger* and *Wise Children*, in two directions: on the one hand, neither Claudia Hampton nor Dora Chance have lived through their lives following the conventions of heteronormative temporality defined by Halberstam; and, on the other hand, the narrative structures of the novels escape a chronological and ordered conception of time, both historical time and personal time, as contended in Port's and Krainitzki's articles when referring to the temporal disruption of the texts they analyse. Both disruptive temporalities, the fictional lives of the older protagonists as well as the narrative structures of the novels, go hand in hand (and will be analysed jointly).

Whereas *Moon Tiger* shifts from a third-person narrator to a first-person narrator with dialogues between Claudia and members of her family intersected in the narrative, *Wise Children* has a first person narrator ready to make her story sound like that of a carnivalesque fairy tale. The witty and irreverent personalities of both older women are sensed through their narratives, at the same time as they make the reader realise that theirs is going to be a playful narrative: playful because the reader will have to take an active role to put the bits and pieces together; and playful because social and cultural structures will be questioned and undermined through their storytelling. In Carter's *Wise Children*, Dora Chance starts asking the reader to position him/herself in terms of constructed divisions such as north/south, poor/affluent, legitimate/bastard and continues with an ironic vision giving a patriarchal personification of natural elements such as the River Thames: “Good morning! Let me introduce myself. My name is Dora Chance. Welcome to the wrong side of the tracks. Put it another way. If you're from the States, think of Manhattan. Then think of Brooklyn. See what I mean? Or, for a Parisian, it might be a question of rive gauche, rive droite. With London, it's the North and the South divide. Me and Nora, that's my sister, we've always lived on the left-hand side, the side the tourist rarely sees, the bastard side of Old Father Thames” (1). Dora continues her narrative with the well-known “Once upon a time, you could make a crude distinction [...]” (1), implying that such distinctions, which are so well established and may seem 'natural', are also part of a narrative which may have the same amount of fiction and

fantasy as that of a fairy tale. In the case of Claudia Hampton, her intention is also to give a personalised version of the history of the world that she has witnessed: “A history of the world, yes. And in the process, my own. The Life and Times of Claudia H. The bit of the twentieth century to which I’ve been shackled, willy-nilly, like it or not. Let me contemplate myself within my context: everything and nothing. The history of the world as selected by Claudia: fact and fiction, myth and evidence, images and documents” (1). As the main narrator of her own story and history, her narrative will be filled with interpretations. However, what Claudia Hampton implies in this first statement is that interpretation is also part of historiography, since, at the end of the day, history is and has been written by men, mainly, who were inscribed within an ideology and were constrained by specific cultural and social circumstances.

In both novels, the concepts of chronology and objectivity are questioned through the narrative structure of the novels but also through the direct questioning of their narrators. When considering what is the best way to proceed, Claudia Hampton asks herself “shall it or shall it not be linear history? I’ve always thought a kaleidoscopic view might be an interesting heresy. Shake the tube and see what comes out. Chronology irritates me. There is no chronology inside my head” (2). In the case of *Wise Children*, Dora Chance tries to start the story from the beginning but she is constantly interrupted either by one of her cats who comes into the room while she starts tapping on her old typewriter, by a knock at the door that brings them the immediacy of the present or by the preparations for their illegitimate father's hundredth birthday party. Claudia's and Dora's narratives are as imbued by the immediacy of the present as they are by memories which follow the rumbling of emotions rather than a logical ordering of events. As Daniel L. Schacter explains in his *The Seven Sins of Memory*, we “recreate or reconstruct our experiences rather than retrieve copies of them” and, in the process, “we bias our memories” (9) by drawing on the emotions we felt at the time and the emotions triggered by our memories. For Claudia Hampton, “a lifetime is not linear but instant. That, inside the head, everything happens at once” (68), and acknowledges emotion as the force that keeps memory alive: “[i]t is feeling that survives; feeling and the place” (73). By her part, Dora confesses that “at my age, memory becomes exquisitively selective” (194–5).

In “Critical Turns of Aging, Narrative and Time”, Jan Baars analyses the interconnection between chronometric time, human-time, and narrative, and their influence on cultural perceptions of the life-course. For Baars, chronometric time refers to a social construct which was established in order to explain the beginning of the world and try to understand how human beings related to it. However, Baars acknowledges that “living nature does not tick according to chronometric time” (148), an assumption that is very much present in the narratives of the older protagonists, both in the disordered nature of their narratives in which present, past and future interconnect as well as in the blurring of youth, middle age and old age as clear-cut life stages. In *Discourses of Ageing in Fiction and Feminism. The Invisible Woman*, Jeannette King analyses *Moon Tiger* as challenging “the goal-oriented discourse of the Bildungroman, in which the ultimate goal is marriage” (115), by setting Claudia's most important love affair with soldier Tom Southern, still very much present in Claudia's memory, by the middle of the novel, after which Claudia meets her next lover, Jasper, with whom she will have a daughter, becomes a renowned journalist and adopts Laszlo as her protégé in her late middle age. As King explains, “*Moon Tiger* draws the reader's attention to how much of a woman's life exists beyond what has traditionally been considered its focal points” (116). In other words, although Claudia's relationship with Tom Southern may be the most important relationship in her life, Claudia moves on gracefully through the other stages of her life, which are equally enriching in different ways. Similarly,

Dora Chance, in *Wise Children*, recognises the Chance sisters' experience in Hollywood as the pivotal moment of their lives, also set in the middle of the novel in terms of structure. The Chance sisters were in their twenties, they were beautiful and chased by many suitors, and their talent was finally acknowledged despite them coming from the “wrong side of the tracks” (1), both socially and culturally. As in a Shakespeare comedy or an eighteenth-century romance novel, this moment of fame and social recognition reaches its peak when Dora accepts a marriage proposal from Ghengis Khan, a rich Hollywood producer much older than Nora, who promises to support both sisters for the rest of their lives in exchange for her bearing him children. However, Grandma Chance gains access to the wedding and saves the sisters from selling themselves to pervading patriarchal structures. As Dora explains, “we went home with Grandma, sadder and wiser girls” (161). After that, they went back to Brixton, London, and continued the invented family Grandma Chance had started.

Coated in the external form of a memoir, both novels, through the voices of their protagonists, present personalised versions of their lives throughout the twentieth century embedded within history, and, in the case of *Wise Children*, the history of high culture represented by the figure of Shakespeare. *Moon Tiger* and *Wise Children* have been analysed from the point of view of the use of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque<sup>1</sup> as a force through which 'official history' is questioned and undermined by giving personalised, often humorous or ironic, versions of historical events and cultural truths (Díaz and Childs respectively). Debra Raschke considers that *Moon Tiger* “functions as a metafiction” since, “by working both within and against the dominant discourse, it reshapes that discourse” (117). Claudia is a journalist who will give her version of historical events as she witnessed them through her experience. Having lived through the two world wars<sup>2</sup>, Claudia juxtaposes the official data that accounts for strategic attacks and casualty numbers with the experience of Russian soldiers on the battlefield: “The snow, the twenty degrees below zero temperatures of the winter of 1941; the Russian prisoners herded into open-air pens and left till they died of either cold or starvation [...] And beyond: the skeletal buildings pared by fire to chimney stacks and naked walls; the bodies chewed by frost; the screaming faces of wounded men” (67). By taking a very close look at one specific episode of the Second World War, Claudia intends to humanise history by relating the suffering of the soldiers and the destruction of cities. However, she continually de-dramatises her experience of war by using conversational and humorous language: “I've been on the fringes of two wars [...]. The first one preoccupied me not at all; this thing called War summoned Father and took him away for ever. The second lapped me up but spat me out intact” (66). Actually, both older protagonists, Claudia Hampton and Dora Chance, provide alternative definitions of the First and Second both world wars which are outside historical discourse. Whereas Claudia Hampton defines herself as having become an old woman together with the century which she defines as “[t]he century of war [...] How many million shot, maimed, burned, frozen, starved, drowned? God only knows. I trust He does; He should have kept a record, if only for His own purposes” (66), Dora provides the definition of war inherited from her Grandma Chance. According to Grandma Chance, “Every twenty years, it's bound to happen. It's to do with generations. The old men get so they can't stand the competition and they kill off all the young men they can lay their hands on. They daren't be seen to do it themselves, that would give the game away, the mothers wouldn't stand for it, so all the men all over the world get together and make a deal: you kill off our boys and we'll kill off yours. So that's that. Soon done. Then the old men can sleep easy in their beds again” (29). In both cases, the protagonists use irony to highlight not only the senselessness of wars but mainly the existence of many individual stories that make up history which are as truthful and valid as the only official one.



The constructed nature of myths to account for a shared and indissoluble origin is also present in Claudia Hampton's and Dora Chance's narrative. Claudia Hampton explains that once she thought she was a myth for a while when a relative took her in her arms, when she was around six and exclaimed: “And here she is! The little myth! A real delicious red-haired green-eyed little myth” (7). In the case of Carter's *Wise Children*, myth-making revolves around the figure of Shakespeare. Whereas their biological grandfather, Ranulph Hazard, travelled around the world “preaching Shakespeare's words” (14), their father, Melchior Hazard, also an acclaimed actor for playing Shakespeare's heroes, becomes obsessed with taking some earth from Stratford-upon-Avon to Hollywood. As Dora explains, “[w]e travelled with a box of earth, like Dracula, and never let it out of sight. Earth from Stratford-upon-Avon, dug out of the grounds of that big theatre [...] to bear the precious dust to the New World so that Melchior could sprinkle it on the set of *The Dream* on the first day of the shoot” (113). And yet, despite belonging to the vaudeville, Shakespeare is present in the Chance sisters' lives in different ways: they were born the same day as Shakespeare was born, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April, and the same day as their biological father Melchior and uncle Peregrine. Their family, the Hazards-Chance, is full of twins and illegitimacy, as well as love, envy, thirst for recognition which live side by side with deception and misunderstandings, which are both comic and tragic. Thus, their family shares all the vicissitudes present in Shakespeare's plays, at the same time as Shakespeare's face on twenty-pound notes reminding the Chance sisters as well as the reader that the division between high and low culture, as well as many boundaries, are being questioned at the end of the twentieth century. As Eaglestone explains in relation to Carter's *Wise Children*, “a true story or a false story are still both stories, still ways of ordering both yourself and the world”, but “not all stories are given equal weight in a world of unequal power relations” (198). In this sense, the carnivalesque in *Moon Tiger* and *Wise Children*, the fact that two older women narrate their truth through a disordered and witty narrative full of implications and irony, as well as interpretation and subjectivity, intends to destabilise official history and cultural history.

### Age and Relationships in Queer Time

As pointed out earlier, the acceptable image of old age in British culture has been that of the grandmother, a person within a family structure who would understand her passive role until the end of her life. Claudia Hampton in Lively's *Moon Tiger* and Dora Chance in Carter's *Wise Children* are not only far removed from this acceptable female image of old age, but they have built their lives outside the traditional family structure too. Whereas in the case of Claudia, it is her choice to be outside the traditional family structure, in the case of the Chance sisters, the fact that their mother died just after their birth, and their father Melchior Hazard never recognised them as legitimate children, made the woman with whom her mother was staying as a tenant the only family who would look after them. As Dora explains, “Grandma invented this family. She put it together out of whatever came to hand – a stray pair of orphaned babes, a ragamuffin in a flat cap. She created it by sheer force of personality” (35). In the case of Claudia Hampton in *Moon Tiger*, she lived most of her adult life as a freelance journalist. She had her daughter when she was thirty-eight and she refused to marry the girl's father. Instead, she lived on her own most of her life and took a Hungarian boy, Laszlo, as her protégé when she was in her fifties. Judith Halberstam understands “queer time” as moving away from the ordering life-course established by strict “bourgeois rules” (5) which are seen as 'natural'. As she explains, “[q]ueer uses of time and place develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” (1),

so that alternative ways of organisation and establishing relationships are brought centre stage, as opposed to being considered liminal. For Halberstam, “‘queer’ refers to non-normative logics and organisations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time” (6). Both Claudia Hampton's and Dora Chance's narratives are a celebration of queer time in the sense that they neither conform to the restrictions of the traditional family nor to prescribed time in terms of establishing love and sexual relationships and in terms of reproduction. It is also in this sense, through the use of queer time, that chronological age as well as the cultural and societal norms attached to each age stage, in other words, what is expected and what is not accepted depending on one's biological age, are questioned in both novels.

Whereas Claudia Hampton becomes a biological mother quite late in life and a surrogate mother even later, with Laszlo appearing in her life in her early fifties, the Chance sisters become mothers on the seventy-fifth birthday, when their uncle Peregrine gives them two new borns, also illegitimate twins as themselves, for their birthday. As Nora puts it to her sister: “We're both of us mothers and both of us fathers' [...]. 'They'll be wise children, all right'” (230). According to Aidan Day, “[t]hat invented or constructed family stands in the novel as the archetype of a reinvented society that has broken free of the monomania of patriarchal exclusion. The society of that family is based on loving rather than repressive relations” (209). In different moments throughout the novel, Dora Chance explains that hers is a family of missing fathers, both culturally and biologically. On the other hand, the fact that they become mothers so late in life is interpreted by Michael Hardin as Carter intending to present a wider scope of “the definition of woman by removing her central female characters from the standard roles and stereotypes associated with them, especially marriage and motherhood” (77). Similarly, Claudia Hampton abhors her sister-in-law, Sylvia, for conforming to the rules of the proper woman – wife and mother – and never questioning them. As Claudia explains, “[s]he has given no trouble. She has devoted herself to children and houses. A nice old-fashioned girl, Mother called her” (23). By her part, Claudia has tried to establish a solid adult-like relationship with her daughter from a very early age. As Claudia explains, she would not allow Lisa, her daughter, to call her mummy; for Lisa, she was Claudia. According to Debra Raschke, “Claudia's history refuses [...] the intractable myth of ministering mother-woman, the narrative product of a conventional historical narrative that clearly demarcates public and private spheres” (119).

Apart from the multi-layered undertones provided by the ageing female protagonists in their definition of motherhood, Claudia Hampton and the Chance sisters present themselves as single women who have enjoyed love and sex throughout their lives, within and outside heteronormative relationships. Claudia confesses that the first man with whom she had fallen in love was her brother Gordon. He was attractive and intelligent and a very special connection existed between them, although they never succumbed to it. As Claudia explains, “[u]ntil I was in my late twenties I never knew a man who interested me as much as Gordon did. That was why it was as it was between us. I measured each man I met against him, and they fell short” (136). In the case of Dora Chance, her first crush was on her uncle Peregrine, the twin brother of her biological father Melchior Hazard. That is why Dora asks the reader to forgive her if she describes him “in the language of the pulp romance” (30). Dora and Peregrine, aged seventy-five and a hundred respectively, actually make love by the end of the novel, during Melchior Hazard's hundredth-birthday party, to the astonishment of all the guests able to hear and see the chandelier in the dining room becoming wildly agitated. The act of making love makes time stop for a while, according to Dora, and for a few minutes Perry “was himself, when young; and also, while we were making love he turned into, of all people, that blue-eyed boy who'd never known my proper name. [...] I saw myself reflected

in those bracken-coloured eyes of his. I was a lanky girl with a green bow in her mouse-brown hair” (221). The sexual act together with the fact that there exists real love and affection between them makes Dora and Perry forget about biological, but mainly cultural, limitations of their ageing bodies and focus on embracing their desire. According to Beth A. Boehm, “[i]t is not the act itself that makes time stand still, but rather the magic that lies in human desire” (88).

### Conclusion

Through their use of the carnivalesque as well as the integration of the concept of queer time, led by the voices of two older female protagonists, Lively's and Carter's novels present the categories of young and old as not only co-existing but actually blurring within Claudia's and Dora's narratives as their memories move from the past to the present and back again. When Claudia tries to remember a specific episode with Jasper, the father of her daughter, she realises that “[i]n my head, Jasper is fragmented: there are many Jaspers, disordered, without chronology. As there are many Gordons, many Claudias” (10). Following the ironic and humorous tone of the novel, the Chance sisters paint “their faces that we always used to have on to the faces we have now” (192) in order to attend their father's hundredth birthday party. Despite not being very successful in trying to look as they did in their twenties, the moment they enter the Hazard mansion, Dora feels “as seventeen, again, I was a virgin powdering my nose with beating heart, for there was lilac, lilac, everywhere” (198). The smell of lilac takes Dora back to the first time they visited Melchior Hazard. And any time they enter their Grandma's bedroom, they feel like girls again, either by looking at the old photographs still displayed on their Grandma's mantelpiece or by looking at their reflection in the mirror where they used to look at themselves after dressing up in their Grandma's clothes: “[a]s we opened the wardrobe, we saw ourselves swimming in the mirrored door as if in a pool of dust and, for a split second, in soft focus, we truly looked like girls, again” (187). In the case of Claudia Hampton in Lively's *Moon Tiger*, it is when she looks at her daughter Lisa that “for an instant my own face flickers back” (20) when she was in her early forties.

Through their narratives, time accelerates or stands while they recreate their memories in order to give a different version to the official one. Their version is subjective but also more humanised and composed of the many voices of those who were close to them. Both narrators, Claudia and Dora, acknowledge the power of the word to reconstruct their stories within history but also to define their identities, as older women who have lived throughout the twentieth century on the fringes of acceptable family structures and female roles. As Michael Hardin points to in relation to *Wise Children*, the Chance sisters “recognize that knowledge is power, and so long as they have knowledge of themselves, they will maintain their control; their identity is their power” (77). In the case of Claudia Hampton, she becomes aware of the importance of words to construct one's identity within one's world from a very early age when she asks her mother “[d]oes anyone know all the words in the world?” (42). For Claudia, “[w]e are walking lexicons. [...] words are more durable than anything, that they blow with the wind, hibernate and reawaken, shelter parasitic on the most unlikely hosts, survive and survive and survive” (41–42). While in hospital and retelling her history of the world, Claudia is very concerned about being able to name things and explains that she will be all right as long as language does not “fail her” (41).

Through the narrative experimentation within both novels and through the irreverent voices of their older female protagonists, social and gender categories are questioned,

together with the age factor. Through their narratives, Claudia Hampton and Dora Chance challenge the vision of life as stratified stages attached to appropriate behaviour and present a fluid vision of the life-course according to which love, sex, motherhood, happiness and deception can occur at any moment, without negating the biological decay of the body and highlighting the constructed nature of discourse and narrative. As Kathleen Woodward argues in *Figuring Age*, “we must abandon the older models of age-appropriate behavior and experience (when the birth of children should occur, or marriage, or retirement, for example)” in order to “imagine a long course of life that will realistically stretch for women into their eighties and nineties and reach to one hundred years” (xiv). Both novels contribute to undermining the characteristics and expected behaviour attached to young and old.

<sup>1</sup> In his *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin defines the carnivalesque as a literary mode in which, similarly to carnival, dominant style and discourse are temporarily led by chaos and humour.

<sup>2</sup> Claudia Hampton explains: “I have seen war; in that sense I have been present at wars, I have heard bombs and guns and observed their effects” (66).

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