Age Is Just a Number... Or Is It? A Timely Debate on Age and Ageism

Negotiating Age: Aging and Ageism in Contemporary Literature and Theatre. Edited by Mária Kurdi. Debrecen and Warsaw: Debrecen University Press and Sciendo, 2023. Pp. 328. ISBN 978-83-67405-42-3.

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The emergence of age studies – driven by demographic changes – reflects societal and cultural shifts in perceptions of ageing. This turn has not only prompted a critical examination of ageism, but also raised awareness towards the intersectionality of age with other identity factors. By revealing a multifaceted reconsideration of a topic, often relegated to the margins of literary and theatrical discourse, this scholarly discussion edited by Mária Kurdi offers a valuable contribution to the growing field of age studies that began to take shape in the late twentieth century. Particularly, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with Kathleen Woodward, age representations in literature came to be recognised as a distinct field of study. As for this current century, Kurdi in her edited volume, *Negotiating Age* (2023), seeks to bring our attention to a wide-ranging exploration of age and ageing across various cultural and literary contexts. Reading this compelling collection is like witnessing a lively debate on this topic, whose scholars (referenced in this book) speak to each other, unpacking various perspectives on this subject.

Age Studies is a relatively recent humanistic discourse "which, necessarily, is prone to explore crosscurrents between aging, feminism, gender, intersectionality, postcolonialism, class, dis/ability, and so on" (Kurdi 2023, 13).[1] Thereon, the primary lens through which the book looks at ageing is *theoretical*; the authors of this book employ contemporary theories to inquire into earlier works while reflecting on how the issue of age exists in today's society. The authors highlight how ingrained ageist stereotypes persist in contemporary British, Irish, and American literature and drama, often portraying elderly adults as debilitated or undesirable. However, these works also reveal character complexities that can challenge or reinforce these stereotypes. In response, the scholars in *Negotiating Age* advocate for a more nuanced and equitable understanding of ageing. To further emphasise varied insights into ageing, Kurdi

[1] If need be, the references to the various chapters of *Negotiating Age* include the author's name in an acknowledgement of their contribution.

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assembles in her book a range of voices – both female and male – from global regions, who analyse male-authored works that feature ageing protagonists of both genders.

This volume – co-published by DUPress and Sciendo – brings together eleven insightful essays, preceded by an introduction from the editor and followed by the coda of Donald E. Morse's essay on a more recent work on ageing. The book is organised into four parts, each one to be read as a reflection upon some aspects of ageing as presented in drama and fiction.

In the introduction, Kurdi sets up her premise that "age is performative in nature" (15). Similarly, the scholars contributing to the book share the common ground of building their argument on the assumptions that age extends beyond mere chronology or biology; further, it is a dynamic interplay between individual experience and social context (15). Kurdi argues that while the interdisciplinary scope of age studies is essential for understanding age-related issues, its potential drawbacks reside in the fact that it may, at times, oversimplify the complexities inherent in these intersections. Therefore, the predominant association of ageing with decline and invisibility could make direct comparisons to gender and race, which can also be sources of empowerment and resistance, less applicable. While Kurdi identifies the rise of academic journals within age studies as a pivotal catalyst for the advancement of sociological and psychological discourse surrounding ageing, there is little discussion of how these efforts might still uphold prevailing biases rather than challenge them. Additionally, the fact that most research in age studies is conducted by women, "suggest[s] that aging and its corollary might count as a gendered subject in both society and the world of letters or the performing arts" (16). With this in mind, Kurdi expands an initial group of women authors to include male contributors, thereby enhancing the variety of perspectives and representations of ageing across different age groups. Yet, despite her efforts for balance, the gender makeup of the volume – ten women authors to six men – raises concerns about an overly gendered perspective. Ultimately, this makeup may weaken the field's argument by inadvertently confirming that ageing is studied mainly by and about women; a potential blind spot the discipline needs to address.

Part I, "Contemporary Adaptations of Shakespeare," begins with two essays that examine the appropriation of Shakespeare's works in contemporary British theatre. In the first essay, Kevin De Ornellas and Dónall Mac Cathmhaoill identify a loose trilogy that unites Edward Bond's works – *Lear* (1971), *Bingo* (1973), and *The Worlds* (1979) – advising that his plays attend to societal attitudes towards aged males, and often portray contempt or marginalisation. The authors argue that Bond deliberately avoids any positive depictions of ageing, emphasising that "good aging cannot be bought" (28). This statement suggests that respect for older adults should be based on their inherent value as people rather than superficial measures. In the second essay,

Kinga Földváry's focus revolves around "aging characters in an environment where age brings vulnerability rather than wisdom" (65), specifically in Ronald Harwood's *The Dresser* (1980). She critiques the narrow focus of some ageism studies while asserting how Shakespeare's works reveal age-related discrimination. The scholar posits that while Harwood's characters grapple with their faltering abilities, they simultaneously reflect the connection between memory and identity, wherein the audience's perceptions are shaped by both age and performance (48). Thus, Földváry reflects that not only does *The Dresser* echo Shakespeare's exploration of age, but also serves as a platform to critique contemporary attitudes toward ageing, exposing the unfair stereotypes of older individuals in a youth-centric society.

Part II focuses on the topic of ageing in the context of Irish drama. The editor's background in Irish literature is strongly reflected in the book's sizable Irish section, which in a way frames the narrative around specific cultural contexts and interpretations of ageing. In his analysis of Samuel Beckett, Christopher Murray argues that the Irish playwright's drama marks a "'new age' [… that] defies the conventions of realism" (72). The author highlights Beckett's departure from the *senex* trope – often depicting older characters as comedic – which is considered overly reductive. By aligning with the Theatre of Cruelty, Beckett is said to move beyond the 'bourgeois' confines of traditional narratives about age and identity (73). However, this statement by Murray disregards how realism can also engage meaningfully with existential themes surrounding ageing. In the subsequent essay, Csilla Bertha's critique of the Mommo archetype continues to dismantle cultural stereotypes of ageing as linked to specific national or ethnic identities. This placement might set the stage for a broader understanding of ageing that moves beyond simplistic, pre-defined categories. Bertha aligns her interpretations with Lars Tornstam's notion of *gerotranscendence*, through the figure of Mommo, demonstrating a shift to a cosmic and transcendent view of the world (Bertha 2023, 94). Essays of Brian Friel (Giovanna Tallone) and Martin McDonagh (Mária Kurdi and David Clare) introduce more multifaceted characters and reveal the nuances of ageing, including presence/absence, and how patriarchal and postcolonial contexts shape the ageing experience. This progression helps to explore the impact of time and historical circumstances on individuals. The paradox of ageing, described by Simone de Beauvoir as both "expected and unforeseen" (Alatawi and Jordan 2023, 167), serves as a backdrop for Maha Alatawi and Eamonn Jordan's analysis. They argue that Conor McPherson's work provides a nuanced exploration of ageing that anticipates it thoughtfully and notably includes both female and male perspectives on ageing. The authors' work, with its focus on gendered ageing and relationships, provides an integrating, intersectional perspective. This inclusion of the male viewpoint stands in contrast to Kurdi's assertion that much of the critical literature on ageing tends to focus primarily on women's experiences.

Part III examines American drama: the editor's choice to pair Réka M. Cristian's and Ambika Singh's essays illustrates the development of American theatre's portrayal of ageing. Cristian effectively uses Margaret Morganroth Gullette's *agewise* framework to examine ageing and death in Edward Albee's *The Sandbox* (1960). She moves on to argue that there is not just physical decline, but also an emotional and social journey in Tennessee Williams's *Milktrain* (1963), centring the argument around elderly female characters, Grandma and Mrs. Goforth. In Singh's essay on Arthur Miller's *Mr. Peters' Connections* (1998), the exploration of ageism is undeniably significant, given the play's explicit critique of societal attitudes toward ageing. While Singh's focus on gerontological theory offers a compelling lens for Peters's psychological state, the essay leaves room to explore how Miller's formal choices, particularly the play's circular dialogue and surreal setting, theatrically embody the fragmentation of ageing. A synthesis of these structural elements with the essay's existing themes could further illuminate how ageism distorts not only narratives about the elderly but also the very structures that contain them.

The shift to fiction in Part IV offers a broader perspective on ageing. Angelika Reichmann's exploration of intertextuality in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) is particularly insightful, revealing as Kurdi puts it in her introduction "the anxieties of the middle-aged intellectual protagonist" (22). However, Reichmann argues that "*Disgrace* in many ways is about death, and not only does it represent aging as a problem of middle-aged men but also uses it as the image of the shared human condition, it meditates on whether life […] is anything else but the disgraceful ante-room of death" (244). While this view is less optimistic, it challenges narrow interpretations of Lurie's character development. Reichmann highlights how Lurie's role as an "unreliable focalizer" (244) reveals the distorting effects of personal biases and ageist stereotypes. The essay confronts the unsettling realities of mortality and the existential burdens of ageing in post-apartheid South Africa, urging readers to engage with their complexities rather than romanticise them. Noémi Albert's essay explores how David Mitchell uses speculative elements, such as immortality, reincarnation, and the manipulation of time to represent the human attitude to ageing.

The collection concludes in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a coda by Donald E. Morse on Frank McGuinness's *The Visiting Hour* (2021). The editor offers a contemporary lens that roots the collection in today's society. Morse argues that ageing is a complex process of narrative construction, characterised by communication breakdowns, memory loss, and echoes of pandemic-era isolation, as illustrated by the father's reminiscences complicated by dementia in McGuinness's play (Morse 2023, 299). While Morse's essay foregrounds the challenging intersection of ageing and dementia – which could risk presenting a unilateral narrative of decline – his attention to enduring human connections avoids this potential limitation. The father's musical

memories (301) and McGuinness's refusal of a "bleak assessment" (Morse 2023, 304) provide crucial counterpoints that align with the volume's broader project. Like Kurdi and other contributors, Morse ultimately transcends reductive frameworks, using dementia not as shorthand for deterioration but as a lens to examine fundamental questions of human dignity. His approach thus complements, rather than contradicts, the collection's nuanced treatment of ageing – though readers might note that dementia remains a particularly acute manifestation of ageing's challenges rather than its defining feature. Essentially, Morse's analysis together with the other essays compels us to confront 'what it truly means to be human,' beyond the facade of age.

Overall, *Negotiating Age* is a valuable contribution to the field of age studies, and it is suitable for both scholars and students interested in age studies, literary criticism, and theatre studies. The book successfully demonstrates the importance of critically examining cultural attitudes towards ageing and the need for more nuanced and compassionate portrayals of elderly characters in literature and theatre. Moreover, it provides a timely reminder that the issues surrounding ageing are deeply personal, socially significant, and urgently in need of attention.