

# “I’m an old fucking woman as of today”: Sally Clark’s Dramaturgies of Female Aging

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Sally Clark has been an influential figure in Canadian theatre and scholarship since the 1980s. While some critics have traced feminist impulses in her work, none have yet considered how some of her plays unsettle dominant paradigms of aging and old age. This article analyses Clark’s dramaturgy in two plays that offer compelling portraits of women aging into and experiencing old age: *Moo* and *Ten Ways to Abuse an Old Woman*. While at times Clark reinscribes ageist narratives, she also offers resistant and rebellious alternatives to dominant age ideology, particularly in her disruption of the decline narrative. Clark’s use of achronicity, disruption of rising conflict, intratextual polyvocality, ambiguous endings, and humor results in constructions of female aging and old age that highlight performativity, challenge disease (senility) as an objective category, and disrupt the simplistic association between aging and loss. Through considering how a play’s dramatic structure works to expose or conceal, subvert or reinforce dominant age ideology, this analysis reveals the complex processes through which age narratives are imprinted on our cultural consciousness in the ways that stories are told—not just through their themes, but also through their structure, which influences how we understand time, the finitude of events, and the prominence of voices.

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Award-winning Canadian playwright Sally Clark has been an influential figure in Canadian theatre and scholarship since the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Her unorthodox, tragicomic plays have been produced professionally in New York and across Canada, anthologized in collections,<sup>2</sup> and taught in Canadian

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<sup>1</sup> Clark has held writers’ residencies with numerous professional Canadian theatres (“Sally Clark?”), and ten of her plays have been produced professionally and published. A film version of *Ten Ways to Abuse an Old Woman* won the Henri Langlois International Short Film Festival Special Prix du Jury in 1992 (Ratsoy 315). *Moo* won a 1989 Chalmers Best Canadian Play Award (Crew, “Historica”). Sherrill Grace, D. A. Hadfield, and Robin Whittaker (“Feeling Around”) have all individually authored academic journal articles on Clark’s plays. Whittaker’s unpublished MA thesis (Narrativizations) also focuses on Clark’s work.

<sup>2</sup> *Moo* is anthologized in Jerry Wasserman’s *Modern Canadian Plays, Volume Two; Ten Ways to Abuse*

postsecondary courses. While critics have traced complex feminist impulses in her work,<sup>3</sup> none have yet focused on how her plays unsettle dominant paradigms of aging and old age—a striking omission considering the transgressiveness of her characterizations of elderly women. Here I analyze Clark’s two plays that feature central female characters in old age: *Moo* (1988) and *Ten Ways to Abuse an Old Woman* (1983; henceforth, *Ten Ways*).<sup>4</sup> Like Clark’s complex feminism, her constructions of aging and particularly old age are not straightforward; they walk the line between reinforcing ageist narratives and offering resistant alternatives to commonly held beliefs. While at times this tends toward aporia, I argue that in these plays—which were written well before the recent anti-ageism movement—Clark does important work toward contesting the fixed scripts that serve to anchor ageist notions, particularly the ubiquitous decline narrative. Neither play completely departs from tropes of physical and mental loss accompanying aging. Indeed, certain readings might interpret Clark’s writing as reinscribing these devaluing tropes of decline, particularly if they fail to consider ways in which the text’s satirical elements can be exposed through performance. I argue, however, that although Clark is not always successful, in some ways both plays resist fixed, stereotypical framings of old age, highlighting instead the ambiguities and incongruities of old age

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*an Old Woman* is included in Ginny Ratsoy and James Hoffman’s *Playing the Pacific Province: An Anthology of British Columbia Plays, 1967-2000*.

<sup>3</sup> According to *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Theatre*, Clark was among a wave of feminist playwrights of the 1970s and 1980s who dealt with issues of “family politics, stereotypes, madness, violence, sexuality, and reproductive rights” in a “more directly feminist way” than previous Canadian playwrights (Benson and Conolly 204). But according to Hadfield, “Clark’s feminism is not easily classifiable. In fact, her own feminist politics as it emerges in the media describes something more like post-feminism, a tacit assumption that feminism has already achieved a balance of power, and we no longer live in a culture that perpetuates a binary gender system of dominance and submission” (124-25).

<sup>4</sup> *Ten Ways* was first produced at Toronto’s Buddies in Bad Times Rhubarb! Festival in 1983 (Ratsoy 319). *Moo* originally premiered at the NovaPlayRites ’88, Alberta Theatre Projects’ festival of new plays coproduced by Victoria’s Belfry Theatre (Wasserman 258). Its eastern premiere was the 1989 Toronto production at the Factory Theatre (Crew, “Historica”).

identity. I contend that Clark's use of dramaturgical techniques, including achronicity, disruption of rising conflict, intratextual polyvocality, ambiguous endings, and humor, results in constructions of female aging and old age that highlight performativity, challenge disease as an objective category, and disrupt the simplistic association between aging and loss.<sup>5</sup> Clark's work has significance for an international age studies audience because of its striking, focused, and complex engagement with negative fixed assumptions about female aging and old age.

Clark's short play *Ten Ways* employs a darkly comedic approach to explore the relationship between an apparently senile elderly mother and her daughter, in which the mother seems happier and often better adjusted. *Moo* is a black comedy that tells the life story of Moo (short for Moragh) and her obsession with a "rotter" named Harry (*Moo* 11), which leads to years of mutual torture, strained relationships, and Moo's probable murder at his hand. At the same time it presents Moo as free-thinking and shows her transcendence over abuse and stereotypes. Like Clark's other plays, *Ten Ways* and *Moo* feature complex female protagonists replete with ambiguities. Unlike her other plays, however, both feature central female characters aging into and experiencing old age; in the case of *Moo*, the character ages from approximately her late teens to her seventies, while in *Ten Ways*, "Old Woman" is likely about aged seventy or more, since her daughter is described as aged fifty (319). Despite the fact that Clark's central female characters might at first seem to lack agency—both potentially suffer abuse and exhibit senility in their old age—attention to the satirical elements of the plays reveals that these women are not objects, but rather agents of comedy. According to Lisa

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<sup>5</sup> In this essay I offer close readings of *Moo* and *Ten Ways* that are primarily concerned with Clark's dramaturgical choices for character and plot construction. Although I support this analysis by considering other performance elements as they are described in reviews of the premiere performances (such as casting and actors' performances), this essay focuses more on the texts than on the plays' production history. As a result, analysis of how design elements (such as stage properties, lighting, etc.) function to construct age narratives is limited to information in Clark's stage directions or mentioned in specific production reviews, and cannot give a complete picture of the ways these plays might be realized in performance.

Colletta, “Satire is an attack . . . which exposes human vices and folly to scorn and ridicule” using strategies such as inversion, exaggeration, contradiction, incongruity and juxtaposition (209). While an analysis of Clark’s comedy is not the primary focus of this article, discussions of her use of humor and satire contribute to my analysis of the ways in which her dramaturgy resists ageist narratives. These two plays represent some of the first complex characterizations of old women by Canadian playwrights to appear in Canadian professional theatre. By highlighting performativity, resisting decline, and incorporating humor, Clark’s dramaturgy creates provocative portraits of female aging that are often resistant and rebellious.

#### PERFORMATIVITY OF AGING

One way Clark creates defiant portraits of age in *Moo* and *Ten Ways* is by clearly foregrounding age performativity. The idea that age can be understood as performative has been explored by authors such as Anne Davis Basting (*The Stages of Age*), Margaret Morganroth Gullette (*Aged by Culture*), Valerie Barnes Lipscomb (“Putting on”; “Performing the Aging Self”), Lipscomb & Leni Marshall (*Staging Age*), and Kathleen Woodward (“Performing Age”). These critics and others look to the conscious performance of age on stage or in film not only as a way to understand how specific performances shape cultural understandings of age, but also as a means of understanding age itself as fundamentally performative.

The concept of age performativity draws on Judith Butler’s arguments concerning gender’s inherent performativity. For Butler, gender identity does not constitute something essential but is created through the act of its repeated performance.<sup>6</sup> According to Anna Harpin, Butler implies there are two types of repetition involved with performative

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<sup>6</sup> As Butler puts it, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*Gender Trouble* 44).

identity: “one that affirms conservative foundational narratives and one that subverts these foundations by exposing their fictionality through a process of parody and pastiche” (79). The appeal of thinking of gender as performative is that since gender identity is created through behavioral scripts that can never be repeated exactly, it offers the possibility that those scripts can be undermined and changed. The notion of age performativity holds that age identity, like gender identity (at least to some degree) is achieved by repeated stylizations of the body offered within a “highly rigid regulatory frame” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 43) that gather meanings, over time, that seem substantive and natural. This “stylized repetition of acts,” explains age and film critic Pamela Gravagne, “can institute the illusion of an essential aging or aged self” (15). So while age characteristics conventionally may be thought to manifest in innate ways at particular life stages, from an age performativity perspective, such age identities are produced through repeated performances that interact with a culturally sanctioned age script, and therefore are not essential but only appear to be so.

Both age studies scholars and theatre scholars have raised questions about the applicability of Butler’s performativity theory to their respective fields of study. Age studies critiques of performativity turn on the notion that a view of age as purely performative dismisses the very real effects of time on the body.<sup>7</sup> But while the legitimacy of this argument is widely acknowledged, most age studies scholars still find the concept of age performativity profitable because it allows for the possibility of subversion, and because, as Basting writes, it moves us toward a social space in which “no single image or experience of aging is deemed ‘natural,’ ‘normal,’ or . . . ‘pathological’” (*The Stages of Age* 19). In terms

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<sup>7</sup> Age scholars such as Basting (*The Stages of Age*), Gullette (*Aged by Culture*), Lipscomb and Marshall, and Woodward (*Figuring Age*; “Performing Age, Performing Gender”), among others, agree that age cannot be understood as merely performative. In *Figuring Age*, Woodward passionately contends that “. . . unlike other markers of difference (gender and race, for example), old age cannot be theorized or understood as a social construction only, one that erases the real changes of the body that can come with aging and old age. There is a point at which the social and cultural construction of aging must confront the physical dimensions, if not the very real limits of the body” (xxii).

of theatre, critiques of Butler's theory of performativity hinge on the lack of specificity in *Gender Trouble* between the terms "performance" and "performativity." Butler addresses this in *Bodies That Matter*, arguing that in the case of *performativity* the subject does not precede the gesture but rather is produced by it (24). On the contrary in the case of *performance*, the performer precedes the act of impersonation. However, Christina Wald points out that Butler "no longer allows for theatre's critical distance from itself, for a self-referential sense of its own history" (21). Drawing on the work of many theorists, Wald makes a case for the relevance of performativity theory to theatre studies.<sup>8</sup> For Wald, "the resignification that can take place within theatrical performance equals that of gender performativity" (18). I agree and echo her citation of Elin Diamond: "Performance [. . .] is the site in which performativity materializes in concentrated form, where the 'concealed or dissimulated conventions' of which acts are mere repetitions might be investigated and reimagined" (47).

There is widespread acceptance, then, in both age studies and theatre studies, that Butler's theory is generative to their theoretical foundations. Basting ("Performance Studies"), Lipscomb ("The Play's the Thing"), and theatre and age studies scholar Bridie Moore all argue for the role of theatre as a research site where "the performative on stage, the narrative in the script, and the critical questioning of ageism" (Lipscomb 118) might be examined through the multiple realities of performance, and where "disruptive effects might be generated or discovered" (Moore 164). Performing a character's gender or age on stage intersects with

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<sup>8</sup> Wald argues that Butler's gender performativity theory is applicable to theatre for the following reasons: that theatrical performance exists within a set of theatrical conventions that precede the performer, similar to the social ideals, rules, and rituals Butler describes as dictating gender performativity (17); that for actors, agency does not necessarily stem from deliberate and conscious acts (18); that actors must reproduce a script and performance, but the idea of an original is imaginary (18-19); and that the split awareness of theatre audiences and performers distorts complete illusion and contradicts Butler's notion that "what is performed works to conceal, if not to disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, un-performable" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 234, qtd in Wald 17).

an actor's own age; the theatrical conventions within which the actor is performing; the requirements of the character and role; the time structure, design, and staging of the play; and the culture within which the play is received. This *creates* a performative age identity on stage that can give insight into how we understand age performativity more broadly. In this spirit, I now consider how age performativity defamiliarizes dominant age scripts in *Moo* and *Ten Ways*.

Clark's notes concerning the casting of *Moo* play an important role in understanding the play's enactment of age performativity. Clark writes, "This play can be performed by eight actors: 5 women and 3 men" (10), and recommends under "suggested casting" that Moo be played by the same actress throughout the play (10). Moo has been cast this way in all productions I have uncovered. *Toronto Star* reviewer Robert Crew describes this casting in a review of the play's first Toronto production at Factory Theatre: "Moo starts as a determined teenager and ends as a senile woman in her seventies. It's a gloriously dangerous assignment for an actor" ("Moo Puts" C2). Because *Moo* spans fifty years, the lead actress playing Moo must play outside her age range. In the first two productions, Moo was cast and successfully played by actresses of quite different ages. The first production, at the 1988 Alberta Theatre Projects' festival of new plays, featured thirty-one-year-old Wendy Noel playing the title role. Peter Wilson reviewed her performance for the *Vancouver Sun*: "Wendy Noel, as Moo, dominates every scene she is in, always perfectly in sync with the age and mental state of her character" (D6). In the 1989 Toronto Factory Theatre production, Patricia Hamilton was about fifty-one when she played the role. Reviews also recognized her facility with performing age. Conlogue wrote in the *Globe and Mail*: "I saw the play before with a young actress doing the role, and in some ways that worked better. . . . But Hamilton is so consummately and exuberantly at one with Moo's spirit that it doesn't matter after the first two seconds. If she says she's 19, then she's 19" (C9).

In the *Toronto Star*, Crew noted that, “The final scenes, of a weak, tired and forgetful old woman still obsessed by her Harry, are powerful and touching” (“Moo Puts” C2). Much like how Lipscomb describes the character Mother Bayard in Thornton Wilder’s *The Long Christmas Dinner*, Moo “embodies senescence while recounting girlhood” in the relatively short time span of the play (“Putting On” 146). The jumps back and forth in the play’s chronology mean that the actress playing Moo is required to shift her stylized performance of age quite quickly. Similar to *The Long Christmas Dinner*, in *Moo* “the accelerated time forces audiences to confront the physical transformation of age” (151). Reviews reveal that actresses with a twenty year age difference have both successfully achieved this effect.

Not only does the actor playing Moo have to perform a wide age range, but Clark also suggests that the characters Ditty, Sarah, and Harry be played by one actor per role, so these actors, too, must produce performances of age spanning fifty years (10). Other actors are double cast and also perform various ages. The *Globe and Mail* review of *Moo’s* Factory Theatre production noted, “All these actors, over the half-century time span of the story, play several other roles: [Michael] Simpson, remarkably, goes from being Moo’s father to being her son, and pulls it off” (Conlogue C9). The responses of reviewers demonstrate that audience members were able to recognize performances of age despite the fact that the physical body of the actor did not always match the chronological age of the character. This supports the idea that potentially controllable aspects of performance (nuance in movement, facial expression, vocal tone, etc.) play a role in constructing age, but also that certain aspects of performative identity remain consistent over time, since the audience was able to recognize a character despite the character’s shifting age and the fact that the same actors played multiple characters. Because the same bodies play a variety of ages, age is revealed as a system of beliefs and behaviors mapped onto the bodies of the actors. This draws attention to what Lipscomb describes as “performative elements that mark

the self as aging and aged,” (“Putting on” 159), and serves to denaturalize and defamiliarize dominant age ideology, which tends to consider particular age characteristics as essential or “natural” to discrete life stages.

#### THE DECLINE NARRATIVE

In considering dominant age ideology, readers of this journal will be familiar with discussions of the pervasive decline narrative. First theorized in depth by Gullette (*Aged by Culture*), the decline narrative is now widely believed by age scholars to be, as Gullette claims, a master narrative for our culture (130). Writing about theatre and age, Michael Mangan describes decline as “the invisible but dominant cultural ‘message’ which encourages men and women to experience and articulate growing older essentially in terms of loss, isolation, and diminished physical mental and material resources” (Intro.). In her award-winning essay on age-effects in new British theatre, Moore specifies that writers, artists, performers, and photographers construct age through “social, mediatized, and/or representative acts,” and that “such representations exert a powerful influence on the ways subjects might conceptualize and consequently perform their age or aging . . .” (164). Therefore, consciously analyzing such representations is key to understanding the slippery and often surreptitious nature of cultural age narratives. As Gravagne demonstrates in her chapter “Masculinities and the Narrative of Decline,” it is useful to examine “how successful a character’s attempts [are] to challenge, escape from, or subvert the ability of the narrative of decline to define his [or her] life” (37). A thorough discussion of changing notions and values about aging and old age over time, and how they have contributed to the development and expression of the decline narrative in Western culture, can be found in Pat Thane’s *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues*. Similar discourses are also well summarized by Basting (*The Stages of Age*) and Harpin. Rather than repeat these, I now turn to the expression of decline in Western theatre and to the contrasting approaches to aging and old age in the plays of Sally Clark.

As scholarly work at the cross section of theatre studies and age studies continues to develop, much is still to be explored in terms of how aging and old age have been expressed in Western drama throughout history. There have been a number of rich studies considering representations of aging, old age, and their association with decline in the plays of particular historical playwrights, time periods, or theatrical genres,<sup>9</sup> but to date the most comprehensive analysis of the history of the decline narrative over time in theatre can be found in Michael Mangan's recent work, *Staging Ageing: Theatre, Performance and the Narrative of Decline*. Mangan notes, "One of the ways ageism is articulated and perpetuated is through stereotypes; and theatre and performance has always made extensive use of stereotypes and stock characters" (ch.1). Mangan tracks the development of the senex (or stock figure of the old man) and its associated negative stereotypes from its origins in Greek New Comedy and Roman Comedy through to its transformation into the trickster character that still appears (as both aged male and female variants) in contemporary drama and British sitcom (chs. 4-6). While he connects these character types over time, Mangan cautions about our tendency to generalize: "In the past, as in the present, the elderly are seen in a wide variety of ways, and are the subject of a wide range of attitudes, beliefs and opinions" (ch. 1). But although Mangan is attentive to diverse approaches and understandings of the elderly over time in theatre, he nonetheless emphasizes the prominent role of the decline narrative in shaping Western theatrical representation of aging and old age for centuries.

In recent years, there have been certain shifts in Western theatre away from a singular focus on decline. Anna Harpin observes that beginning in the 1980s British and Irish theatre began to mirror the increased

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<sup>9</sup> Examples of such studies include Maurice Charney's *Wrinkled Deep in Time: Aging in Shakespeare*; Thomas M. Falkner's *The Poetics of Old Age in Greek Epic, Lyric, and Tragedy*; Jeffery Henderson's "Older Women in Attic Old Comedy"; Valerie Barnes Lipscomb's "Old Gentlemen: Age Differences as Plot Subversion" (in the works of Shaw); S. Ramaswamy's "Geriatrics: The Treatment of Old Age in Tennessee Williams's Plays"; and Tamar Rapoport's "Self and Style: The Development of Artistic Expression from Youth through Midlife to Old Age in the Works of Henrik Ibsen."

cultural presence of older women (71). She claims that this period brought “an emerging focus on the complexities of the lived experience of female aging [on stages] in the UK and Ireland and the narratives of decline and stereotypes of eccentricity attendant on such experience” (72). In Canadian theatre, a similar phenomenon occurred. The 1980s saw the emergence of a greater number of older characters on English Canadian stages, and this included the appearance of several nuanced portraits of older women. The first English language productions of two important French Canadian works appeared at this time. In 1979, the well-known Acadian play *La Sagouine*, by Antonine Maillet, featuring an old washerwoman, was first performed in English on CBC (Bite Size). In 1985, *Albertine, en cinq temps* (*Albertine in Five Times*), by Michel Tremblay, had its first English production at Toronto’s Tarragon theatre (“1984-1985 Season”). It was during this period that Sally Clark’s plays *Moo* and *Ten Ways* were first produced. I now turn to a discussion of how unique elements of Clark’s dramaturgy serve to interrupt the decline narrative in these two works.

Gullette has argued that the decline narrative is deeply ingrained in our unconscious by early exposure to accepted story-structural forms that tell the meaning of time passing (*Aged by Culture* 12-13). Theatre might be understood to produce such a conditioning effect by its use of traditional dramatic structure. Theatre scholar Ric Knowles argued in 1999 that the dramaturgical unconscious of most playwrights, directors, theatre critics, and audiences in Canada for years had been shaped by the combined influence of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the Oedipus myth, and the Bible, which promote dramatic structure in the form of exposition, complication, reversal, and denouement (31). This had inspired works in the tradition of poetic naturalism that, through adhering to and reproducing familiar structures, “deny form or structure any ideological weight or cultural coding, treating them as neutral and value-free tools” (26). As audiences, then, we have tended to accept hidden messages in plays because they fit with our unconscious expectations, many of which

are shaped by ageist narratives. For example, we may fail to question why the oldest character in a play is written as eccentric or forgetful, or as unwittingly causing conflict, because the story structure unfolds in a way that we expect and thus naturalizes such depictions.

In contrast to this dramaturgical approach, Sally Clark uses what Knowles terms “dramaturgy of the perverse.” According to Knowles, “As a structural principle, perversity may usefully be seen as a revisioning of Aristotelian *reversal* (and recognition) as well as an intertextualist (or ‘interstructuralist’) rejection of modernist purity, clarity, and self-containment. Unlike the more familiar concept of subversion, however, the perverse is not simply arranged in an oppositional (and therefore affirming) relationship to the dominant. Perversion is dialogic in Bakhtin’s sense, more variously disruptive and less simply reactive than the concept of subversion suggests” (44-45, emphasis in original). Dramaturgical techniques such as chronological jumbling, narrative instability, and disruption of rising conflict are used in this approach. Prior to the 1980s, when Clark’s plays were first produced, such techniques were not uncommon in European modernist theatre. But in Canada, theatrical production had long been dominated by the tradition of realism and the well-made play (Barker and Solga vi-xi). Thus, Clark’s use of these techniques ran against the common grain of realism in Canadian theatre, and in so doing, helped to challenge the depiction of age as a natural and inevitable process of decline and loss.

Clark’s play *Moo* is constructed in forty-seven short scenes. While the overall narrative tells Moo’s life story from youth to old womanhood, the play does not unfold in a chronological sequence. For example, in act 2, scene 7 Moo appears in a nursing home; we know she is older than sixty-five at this point. In the next scene Harry, Moo’s former husband and the object of her obsessive love reappears to deliver a brief monologue. His presence reminds us of Moo’s youth when we last saw them together. Next Moo appears with her young son, locating her as the mother of a child. The direct juxtaposition of scenes in which Moo

appears as an old woman with scenes in which she is a variety of younger ages reminds us of her varied experiences at many points across her life course, and undercuts the representation of old age as a category yoked to decline and distinct from youth.

In terms of staging, Clark specifies, “With the exception of the blackout after the first scene, the play should be performed without blackouts or fades” (*Moo* 9).<sup>10</sup> The audience is not given a moment to look away or separate the scenes. Rather, the successive showcasing of multi-aged images disrupts what Kathleen Woodward describes as the cultural convention of looking away from old age and illness, which she terms “the youthful structure of the look” (“Performing Age” 164). Woodward suggests that in American (and, I would add, Canadian) visual culture, spectators typically cast themselves as younger than and superior to the old person they see portrayed, unless they are invited to do otherwise by the non-normative nature of the cultural text (164). Clark offers precisely this kind of non-normative invitation by juxtaposing scenes of old age with those of different ages, never fixing on a clear chronology. In each case the same actor plays Moo and, as audiences become invested in her narrative, they follow her in successive scenes in which her age varies. Their sense of her as a character is based on an accrual of perspectives that does not follow the neat logic of either chronology or straightforward decline. The absence of blackouts; the use of the same actor; the jumps forward and back in chronology; and the recurrence of leitmotifs such as Moo’s obsession with Harry, her recoveries from ‘illness’ and injury, and her non-conventional and often

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<sup>10</sup> Act 1, scene 1 of *Moo* consists of stage directions only: “*A man, standing, is holding a gun. A woman enters, stops, stares at the man. The man raises the gun, points it at the woman and fires. Black.*” (13). The only blackout of the play follows this scene and sets the scene apart as a framing device for the play. In the author’s preface Clark writes, “According to family lore, one of my great aunts had the misfortune to fall in love with a rotter who . . . ruined her life. I could never quite piece together the tragic image of the betrayed lover with my garrulous aunt who shocked and confronted everyone within range. I began to wonder . . . [if] he got more than he bargained for” (11).

Exploring this type of character is Clark’s project in *Moo* and the first scene, separated by a blackout, sets the stage by indicating the power dynamic against which Moo will wrestle throughout the play. The blackout creates the effect that subsequent scenes stand in stark contrast to this first encounter and highlight Moo’s resistant and rebellious nature.

unorthodox responses to situations build the sense of complex continuity across Moo's different ages.

Clark also deconstructs the decline narrative by avoiding Aristotelian dramaturgy's steady, linear, cause-and-effect complication toward a single climax. Clark incorporates many small climatic moments throughout her achronological scenes; none of them leads to clear resolution. Some of the mini-climaxes show Moo's health compromised at various stages of her life. Decline is not constructed as inevitable or (apart from her probable death) as irreversible. Near the beginning of the play we see Moo as a young woman confined to an insane asylum by her husband, Harry; Moo claims that there is nothing wrong with her ("Look, Harry is lying. I don't know why he's lying but he's lying. Call my sisters" (20)). We then see Moo start to question her sense of reality ("You're sure I have a sister. . . . And Harry is not my brother" (61)), but she is then released from the asylum and again self-assured. Next we see Moo as an even younger woman who is shot in the head by Harry, yet she recovers. As an older woman, Moo experiences a broken hip; it is unclear if this was caused by a fall or by her sister, Ditty, jumping on her. As a result Moo's sisters have her confined to a nursing home, claiming she is unfit to live alone. This recalls her commitment to the asylum in her youth, and again causes us to question whether Moo is actually physically or mentally compromised, or whether her sisters construct her "decline" because it is convenient to them. Clark shows Moo in decline at a number of life stages, but this decline is not continuous; it is reversed a number of times, and its validity as a natural process is questioned. Although Clark's disruption of this narrative is not complete—Moo's decline seems accelerated as she becomes older and is questioned less at her oldest age—by highlighting and interrogating the social factors influencing decline, Clark moves toward denaturalizing it as the primary and inevitable story of aging.

In *Ten Ways* Clark employs similar dramaturgical techniques. This play, like *Moo*, is structured in short scenes, fifteen in all; the play is only thirty minutes in length. In this case the temporality is ambiguous. The repetitive

nature of both Old Woman's actions (such as boiling eggs, running the dishwasher, and preparing food for the deceased dog), and her interactions with her daughter, gives a sense of cyclical time. Old Woman is not portrayed as more physically or mentally compromised in any scene as compared to any other. Ratsoy suggests that the brevity of the play and the fragmentary nature of the scenes, combined with the play's title, echo popular how-to manuals (317). Generally, how-to manuals provide a set of specific instructions to help people (usually non-experts) accomplish a specific task, but here Clark perverts the essential purpose of the how-to manual. Not only is her topic not socially affirming (as opposed to most how-to manuals), but the goal of the manual is never accomplished. Throughout the play, we see Daughter 'abusing' her mother in different ways, but Old Woman never seems to suffer from the abuse. She remains happy throughout. For example, in scene thirteen, when Daughter and George remind Old Woman that her husband, Charlie, is dead and that she was very unhappy about it for years, Old Woman "*mulls it over*" and replies, "But, I'm happy now" (328). As Daughter grows increasingly outraged throughout the play, her angry reactions become comically excessive, particularly because Old Woman remains unfazed. Since the abuse does not appear to have any impact or to accumulate between the discrete scenes, the manual form reads more like a collection of strategies in resisting ageist mistreatment. Through such an outrageous, humorous and culturally taboo representation (including the audacity of naming the character "Old Woman" and the brazen satire of the play's title), Clark deliberately foregrounds the issue of elder abuse.

Clark also uses the structural technique of ambiguous endings to challenge the decline narrative. According to Knowles, use of such perversion techniques "disrupts the complacent, voyeuristic, oedipal, or ecstatic satisfaction and containments provided by dramatic catharsis" (45). Robin Whittaker argues that in Clark's plays ambiguous endings "function as a complication instead of a resolution or a restabilization of culture values" (*Narrativizations* 18). In the second-to-last scene in *Moo* we see

Harry enter Moo's nursing home room with a gun. He places her hand on the gun, "raises the gun to Moo's heart. Moo does not resist. She and Harry pull the trigger" (131). This is apparently assisted suicide, but it could be murder. We never get to see the outcome. We are left wondering whether this was Moo's ultimate moment of agency, whether she was victimized, and we might even wonder if Moo actually died. The idea that Moo's life would end in old age by non-precontemplated assisted suicide or by murder is clearly troublesome from the perspective of ageism. Gullette worries that the media's neoliberal messages that old people are expensive "burdens" might be putting pressure on older women, and men as well, to end their lives prematurely (by refusing care or committing suicide) ("Why I Hesitated"). She denounces the growing numbers of spousal murders (by husbands of their dependent, often memory-impaired, elderly wives) that often go unpunished, considered "euthanasia" by a legal system that isn't upset when old white men use their guns ("Our Frightened World"). I do not wish to minimize these critical issues. But Clark's ending also serves a useful purpose: the unresolved shooting of Moo, through disrupting dramatic catharsis, prompts the audience to question the personal, social, and cultural factors that would lead to such a formidable end to a long life.

In *Ten Ways* the ambiguous ending similarly complicates the decline narrative. In the last scene of the play, Daughter and George discover Old Woman "sitting in the dark, staring straight ahead of her" (329). The audience is left uncertain whether Old Woman has died, as Daughter and George question her continued vitality and shockingly decide to "put a blanket over her and leave her till tomorrow morning" (330). As Daughter and George brutally turn their backs on a woman who could be either sick or dead, it is unclear whether this is the ultimate scene of abuse, or whether Old Woman has played a trick on them and will have the last laugh. Here Clark plays with the notion that the older female body is both invisible and hypervisible, a pervasive duality in Western culture and media that has been described by Woodward (*Figuring Age* xvi-xvii).

Old Woman is made invisible and objectified by being covered by a blanket. Yet, this paradoxically makes her hypervisible at the center of the final scene of the play, and serves satirically to expose the barbarity of Daughter and George's actions. In both plays, then, by creating ambiguous endings, Clark disrupts traditional dramatic catharsis and emotional resolution. Rather than restabilizing cultural values linking aging and old age to decline, Clark asks audiences to question the inevitable "decline toward death" as the master narrative for aging adults.

Finally, Clark poses a direct challenge to the decline narrative in her construction of Moo as a woman who is sexually interested and active at the age of sixty. In recent years media discourses have constructed the sexuality of aging adults such that "active sexuality—defined narrowly as the ability to perform heterosexual intercourse—has become a key indicator of positive and successful aging" (Marshall 170). Such framings of aging women's sexuality are often complex and contradictory. For example in film roles, aging stars such as Helen Mirren now represent a challenge to notions of aging women as asexual (Overton, du Prey, and Pecchioni 195). But such representations are not all positive; Mirren's sexuality is framed as having a complex relationship with power and sexual victimization, according to Sadie Wearing. While such contemporary constructions still represent progress, in the late 1980s, when Clark wrote *Moo*, these were not common media representations of women in midlife or beyond. Our cultural image repertoire of aging at that time was more in line with how Woodward described the late 1990s in "Performing Age, Performing Gender," as a culture not used to accommodating visions of older women as sexual or reproductive beings (170). Woodward pointed to the "the sexless and comfortable grandmother" as one of our stock images of older women (170). The 1967 film *The Graduate* presented one of the first depictions of a middle-aged woman (although the "middle-aged" character was only forty-two) as sexually predatory of a much younger man (Overton, du Prey, and Pecchioni 186-87). Leni Marshall and Aagje Swinnen note that such

media portrayals (another example being *Golden Girls*) serve to represent “aged female sexual agents” as “predatory ‘cougars’ or as comedic figures . . . reinforcing their social exclusion and restricting old women’s ability to act even as objects of desire” (159). So, in 1988, by writing Moo as a sexually active and interested sixty-year-old woman not predatory of a younger man, and as a character we laugh with, not at, Clark was pushing against common contemporary representations.

In a scene that stages Moo’s sixtieth birthday party (an event that highlights her age), the character twice proclaims, “I’m an old fucking woman as of today” (84, 85). Here Clark draws together Moo’s age and her sexual appetite, reclaiming the term “old” as a positive. In the scene, Moo’s sexuality is not sentimentalized, sanitized, or infantilized; rather, it is refracted through different ages and presented in excess. We see Wally, referred to as an “old man” (84), trying to pull off Moo’s dress. The two then disappear under the table as the other guests attempt to toast Moo’s birthday. Moo’s sexuality is represented as “in-the-moment” (her niece Jane complains, “Must she celebrate here and now” (86)) and somewhat reckless (she disappears with Wally under the table at an otherwise decorous party). This is consistent with her behavior at younger ages and serves as a point of character continuity. Clark also perverts the cultural norm of female attraction to a handsome man. As Moo enthusiastically talks about Wally: “[I’m] Never too old to play with Wally. Isn’t he disgusting? I think he’s the most repulsive man I’ve ever come across. And that’s saying something” (87). Moo’s interest in Wally is not represented as a last resort; she is not a victim but zealously chooses him. Clark’s construction of Moo’s sexuality recalls Mikhail Bakhtin’s descriptions of the carnivalesque (303). Moo’s sexual attraction to Wally is presented as liberating through its excess. Moo and Wally as ‘older’ characters are presented as the two people having fun at the party, while younger generations experience interpersonal friction and worry about social propriety. The audience identifies with Moo because she is enjoying herself, and because she offers an opportunity for them to admit their

own sexual perversions. Here laughter is not demeaning but liberating as Clark upends age expectations about sexuality (the young are more conservative, the old more liberated). While today representations of women's sexuality in midlife and beyond are becoming more common, the construction of a sexually interested and active sixty-year-old woman in 1980s Canadian theatre was a rare occurrence. The fact that the role of *Moo* was played (in all cases I have uncovered) by bodies chronologically younger than age sixty-five does problematize the representation, as it could suggest a more youthful physical ideal is necessary to be sexually desirable or active. The impact of such casting could only be properly analyzed by observing the actual performing bodies on stage. Still, through constructing Moo's sexuality using carnivalesque humor and performative excess, Clark opens up the possibility of representing aging women as interested and active participants in their own sexual lives.

While Clark effectively unsettles decline through the techniques I've discussed, the complexity of overcoming this narrative is also evident in her plays, particularly in *Moo*. If taken in isolation, act 2, scene 15, in which Moo appears in a nursing home, might be thought to produce a negative age-effect by emphasizing decline and personal failure. In the brief monologue that makes up this scene, Moo complains: "I'm old and Harry Parker never loved me," and also, "I'm an old dog left out in the rain. No one likes my smell and it's time to die" (118). But the suggestion that Moo has become devalued in old age is challenged in the following scene when her niece, Susan, comes to visit. Susan declares, "All the relatives say you're senile but I know you're not. Don't worry. I'll get you out of here" (119). Here Susan demonstrates ongoing trust and desire for connection with Moo. Also, the negative physical associations drawn in this monologue are countered in Moo's final scene (in which she appears at her oldest age). Harry's only line in the scene is "Moo? (*goes to MOO, takes her hand*) What beautiful hands you have. You always had beautiful hands" (131), reinforcing her enduring beauty in old age. Within the act 2, scene 15 monologue itself, Moo suggests that her youth was imperfect

and a building block of her current situation: “I have done selfish things in my time. . . . My youth and my love—foolish, frail, self-deceits” (118). Her increased self-knowledge over time disrupts the narrative of decline. Both in this scene and throughout the play, Clark presents Moo as not just a victim, but also a highly culpable agent of her own misfortunes. In constructing Moo this way, Clark shows a complex and self-reflexive character. She avoids simplistic inspirational images of old age that can result in positive stereotypes of older people, which, according to Kathleen Woodward, can be as limiting as negative ones (*Figuring Age* xxii). However, Clark does evoke associations between negative physical images and old age, and composes a deterioration of Moo’s relationships at her oldest age (Susan becomes angry with her, the nurses in the nursing home do not believe her, her sisters no longer visit). So while Clark is able to challenge or subvert the decline narrative in many ways, in her construction of deep old age in *Moo*, the decline narrative proves difficult to escape.

#### SENILITY, NARRATIVE INSTABILITY, QUESTIONING DISEASE

The theme of memory loss, which arises in both *Moo* and *Ten Ways*, is common to stories about aging and old age, often functioning to naturalize mental decline as part of the aging process and instill a sense of fear about the prospect of aging. Critics invite us to think reflexively about the language surrounding memory loss. In the last half century a medicalized, pathology-based understanding of old-age memory loss has become increasingly favored; it is now most often articulated as the medical diagnosis of “dementia,” or, its most common form, Alzheimer’s Disease (AD) (Cohen, *Thinking About* 7-8; Gravagne 137-38). Framing old-age memory loss medically was an attempt to destigmatize the term “senility,” divorce it from negative associations established in the Inquisition (Cohen, *No Aging in India* 73-74), and root it as a physiological—not moral—problem (Gravagne 132). However, it also has served to “other” those experiencing the condition (Gravagne 132). Basting asserts that in recent years, “Alzheimer’s has . . . become

something much more than the disease. It has swollen into a fear that permeates the cultural consciousness of the United States” (and, I would add, Canada) (“Looking Back” 87). This fear both infiltrates and is bolstered by many artistic representations of AD and related dementias seen in film and theatre. Film scholar Sally Chivers argues that in film this fear has shaped the use of AD as a symbolic shorthand for old age and as a way “to neatly signify a set of simple losses rather than to convey the complex transformations that cognitive decline invites and entails” (60). In short, many of our artistic outputs reinforce a medicalized understanding of old age memory loss by naming it dementia or AD, and presenting it as an individual’s pathology. This hinders our ability to contemplate other meanings that might be given to the experience.

Contrastingly, Lawrence Cohen, in *Thinking about Dementia: Culture, Loss, and the Anthropology of Senility* discusses “senility” as a term that extends beyond the specificity of dementia or AD. He defines senility as “the perception of deleterious behavioral change in someone understood to be old, with attention to both biology and the institutional milieu in which such change is marked, measured, researched, and treated” (1). According to Cohen, senility has had at various times and places in history “broader relevance for critical thought and application” (3). He reclaims the term “senility” because it “leaves open the hierarchy of relations between the varieties of material and social process at stake in understanding loss, voice, and the body in time” (Cohen, *No Aging In India* xv). I adopt Cohen’s perspective because I am interested in how theatre (as an art form and cultural institutional milieu) has constructed—and continues to construct—meanings about senility (under which I group dementia and AD). I am attentive to how “senile” characters behave, to what various characters seemingly believe (or say) about senility, and also to how a play functions dramaturgically to construct cultural messages about what senility is and how it manifests. I adopt this term because I find the terms “dementia” and “AD” at times cannot capture the way that old age memory loss is represented in theater, and particularly in

Clark's plays, which stage a memory loss that is contested, subjective, and not medically framed.

Presentation of the oldest character in a play as senile or becoming senile is a recurrent theme in canonical Western plays: for example, Lear in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Maria Josefa in *The House of Bernarda Alba* by Federico Garcia Lorca, Mrs. Winemillar in *Summer and Smoke* by Tennessee Williams, and Firs in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. To date there has been no comprehensive overview of historical representations of senility (or dementia) in Western theatre generally, or Canadian theatre more specifically. Mangan, referring to what I term senility but what he (reflecting the inconsistent use of these terms) calls dementia, notes that "drama—and live theatre in particular—has tended to fight somewhat shy of the representation of dementia; ever since *King Lear*, certainly, comparatively few plays have attempted to portray dementia 'from the inside'" (ch. 7). In recent years more portrayals of senility, particularly medically-framed understandings of it, are appearing on North American and British stages. Some considerations stage a dementia that is not specified, but that is clearly constructed so that causes other than the physiological remain unquestioned, for example Daisy in Alfred Uhry's *Driving Miss Daisy*. Other plays tell stories specifically about AD or a related dementia, for example Peter M. Floyd's *Absence* (Aucoin). Often plays focus on the caregiver's perspective and tend to promote themes of burden and loss, for example Denis Foon's adaptation of *Scar Tissue* (Playwrights Guild of Canada) or Marscus Youssef's *How Has My Love Affected You?* (Newworld Theatre), both recent Canadian works.

While some plays reinstate negative beliefs about senility, others, particularly in recent years, have functioned to disrupt entrenched narratives. Various dramatic techniques that challenge expectations about age and memory loss have been described by Basting ("God Is"), Harpin, Pia Kontos, Mangan, and Moore, and involve the nontraditional use of dramatic structure, characterization, narrative, and language in

recent plays.<sup>11</sup> These authors highlight the richness of theatre as a site for reimagining senility, representing it as an experience beyond the memory impairment, decline, and loss that typically accompany a medicalized “dementia” perspective. These researchers and the playwrights they discuss are notably invested in questioning the varying truths surrounding representations of senility: Is senility/dementia represented accurately and from whose perspective? Is a life given value? To what extent is the disease allowed to be performed? How is identity represented? Where Clark’s works differs from these later plays is in her greater concern with questioning the social construction and validity of the condition itself. While I have already discussed the effects of her disrupted chronology, I would now like to turn to her use of narrative instability and its influence on her construction of senility.

Clark uses the technique of polyvocality in *Moo* and *Ten Ways* to create narrative instability, which serves to destabilize the assumption that disease is an objective category. Whittaker describes polyvocality as the use of conflicting voices such that synthesis is not the desired conclusion, but rather the goal is an open-endedness that allows for multiple interpretations (*Narrativizations* 29). Clark sets up opposing narratives as a catalyst for conflict (25). For example, in act 2, scene 7 of *Moo*, when Moo appears in a nursing home for the first time, she and her sisters offer different interpretations of what led to this situation:

MOO. It was your idea, wasn’t it? Lock me up for good this time.

SARAH. (to DITTY) What’s she talking about?

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<sup>11</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to summarize these authors’ analyses, but readers are invited to follow up by exploring the following: Harpin’s analysis of Bryony Lavery’s *A Wedding Story*, which features an older woman with Alzheimer’s (77); Moore’s exploration of Nick Payne’s *One Day When We Were Young*, in which one character (Leonard) experiences changing mental capacity as he ages (par. 16); Kontos’s analysis of *Making An Exit*, by Elinor Fuchs, based on transcripts of the author’s conversations with her mother who had Alzheimer’s (7-11); Basting’s descriptions of her own *Time Slips* project, which engages people with dementia in storytelling workshops, some of which were used to create a professional play (“God Is”); and Mangan’s analysis of *Autobiographer*, a play by Melanie Wilson about a woman (Flora) experiencing dementia, as well as his analysis of Charlie Higson and Paul Whitehorse’s radio drama adaptation of *Ancient Mysteries*, by David Clegg, a collection of memories of people with Alzheimer’s (ch. 7).

MOO. (to DITTY) Don't try to deny it. I saw you looking at me. Goddammit, you paused, counted to three and then you jumped.

DITTY. I did not jump on your hip.

...

SARAH. Moo? Are you going senile?

MOO. So help me, you may think you've got me right where you want me. But I'm getting out of here if it's the last thing I do.

...

DITTY. She's going senile, isn't she, Sarah?

SARAH. Yes, dear. I'm afraid she is. (100-01)

Here, Clark sets up the narrative so that we never know whose side of the story is "true." Another example of Clark's use of polyvocality is seen in *Ten Ways*: the narrative is structured so that we question whether Daughter and her partner George's reactions of anger and frustration toward Old Woman are warranted based on her actions. For example, in scene 13 Old Woman is eating with her plate on her lap and does not notice that anyone is talking to her. Her daughter asks loudly (as indicated by Clark's capitalization), "WHY DON'T YOU PUT YOUR PLATE ON THE TABLE?" (319). When the Old Woman responds, "I'm very happy, thank you, dear. . . . We're all in this world to be happy. Ho ho ho," George exclaims, "That's it! You're right, enough's enough. She has got to go!" (327). Clark's narrative formulation leads us to question whether Old Woman is acting out of true confusion and disorientation or out of choice. In actions such as not passing on phone messages or taking out her hearing aid so she cannot hear Daughter, it is not clear whether Old Woman acts "out of malice or as a result of senility" (Whittaker, *Narrativizations* 25). Here again, the audience is asked to reflect on whether (or how) senility is socially or personally constructed. We are propelled to contemplate whether Old Woman's apparent forgetfulness is an organic condition (i.e., a biomedical understanding of dementia), whether it has been caused by social factors, or whether it could be a choice to escape unpleasant conditions and interactions. Thus Clark asks us

to evaluate the role of subjectivity in our understanding of decline and, in particular, of mental losses. By compelling us to consider that senility might be socially constructed or even self-chosen, Clark destabilizes representations of elderly people that insidiously link old age to mental deterioration. On the one hand, by writing her older female characters as perhaps having memory problems, Clark does reinstate the link between old age and memory loss; she is not telling an alternative story, so the repertoire of how we talk about old age remains fixed on the same themes. But by introducing this common narrative and then undoing it through narrative instability and humor, Clark undercuts notions of old age memory loss as necessarily pathological and inevitable.

#### CONCLUSION

Clark's dark and satirical plays about two elderly women (*Moo* and *Old Woman*) speak of individual lives. While they are not attempting to be universal stories, they open up possibilities for the inclusion of a wider range of older adults' life stories, particularly those of women, in our theatrical and literary culture. By perverting traditional Western character and plot construction through the use of achronicity, disruption of rising conflict toward a single climax, intratextual polyvocality, ambiguous endings, and humor, Clark's plays work to dismantle entrenched narratives of aging and old age that link aging to physical and mental decline and limit the expression of aging female sexuality. However, the complex nature of ageist cultural narratives means that even texts like Clark's that attempt to challenge age norms, and in many ways succeed, still reassert negative age ideology in surreptitious ways. Clark does not venture far from themes such as physical and mental decay, deterioration of relationships, and the invisibility of old women to offer unique themes about aging. However, through her various dramaturgical twists on these themes, she often manages to resist and rework traditional ageist narratives, which position aging as a process of decline and loss. Her

portraits of old women are thus paradoxical, nontraditional, and in many ways rebellious. For the time in which they were written, these early works by Clark were particularly innovative.

Analyzing dramatic scripts and the way they are realized in performance provides a unique angle from which to consider cultural narratives of aging and old age. Lipscomb writes, “Too often consideration of aging in dramatic form is limited to textual themes regarding older characters, and occasionally to issues of casting” (“Putting On” 142). Less often do analyses consider how age performativity can be revealed through performance, or how a play’s dramatic structure works to expose or conceal, subvert or reinforce dominant age ideology. By considering these elements, this study of Sally Clark’s plays *Moo* and *Ten Ways* reveals the complex processes through which age narratives are imprinted on our cultural consciousness in the ways that stories are told—not just through their themes, but also through their structure, which influences how we understand time, the finitude of events, and the prominence of voices. Sally Clark was in her early thirties when she wrote *Moo* and *Ten Ways*. Now, about thirty years later, she has two new plays in the works. It will be interesting to see if and how she brings forth elderly female characters that reflect her own shifting experiences with and perspectives on aging.

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