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REVIEW

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Aging and/with Literature

A. V. Gaidash, *Dyskurs starinnia u dramaturgii SShA: problemne pole, semantyka, poetyka* [*Discourse of Aging in American Drama: Problem Sphere, Semantics, and Poetics*]. Dnipro: Aktsent PP 2019, 416 p.

In recent years, representation of aging in literature has gained popularity with literary historians, cultural theorists, and critics. In Poland over the last five years, the theme of aging and cultural phenomenon became the main topic for journals' special issues,[1] a collection of essays,[2] and numerous articles. In Anglo-American culture, scholars have attested a steady interest in aging since the late 1990s. The latest development in this area is the monograph *Aging, Duration, and the English Novel* by Jacob Jewusi-

[1] See: 1) Borowski, Marcin Maksymilian, Miłosz Bukwalt, Ewa Komisaruk, Kamila Woźniak, Sylwia Wójtowicz-Marszał, and Richard Změlík. 2016. "Wielkie tematy kultury w literaturach słowiańskich. 12, Starość" [„Big Themes of Culture in Slavic Literatures. 12, Old Age"] – a special issue. *Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis.* 3729: 1–813. 2) Szymonik, Danuta, and Walentyna Krupowies. 2017. "Młodość i starość w języku, literaturze, kulturze i sztuce" [Youth and Old Age in Language, Literature, and Culture] – a special issue. *Conversatoria Liitteraria* 11: 1–568.

[2] Kuć, Joanna. 2016. *Kobieca starość w języku, literaturze i kulturze* [*Women's Old Age in Language, Literature and Culture*]. Cracow: Aureus.

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ak.[3] In this respect, the book *Discourse of Aging in American Drama: Problem Sphere, Semantics, and Poetics* by Anna Gaidash, the Ukrainian literary historian specializing in American drama, reflects global tendencies in literary studies.

Discourse of Aging in American Drama is a monumental interdisciplinary study on aging which takes its righteous place in Ukrainian literary studies as well as American Studies in general. It embraces the whole history of American drama and analyses it from the perspective of aging, the concept which depended, throughout time, on cultural dynamics and stereotypes.

In Chapter I "Discourse of Aging: Theoretic, Historical, Cultural, and Literary Aspects", Gaidash presents the concept of ageing, contextualizing it within three main trends of gerontology: biological, psychological, and social. In addition, she proposes two more perspectives on aging: cultural and literary. Drawing attention to the changing nature of age reception since Antiquity to the present with a certain turn to stigmatization of age in the fourteenth century, the author maintains that throughout time these social tendencies found their reflection in literature. Gaidash's overview of literary gerontology presents a concise history of this field of literary studies. This field gradually becomes a transdisciplinary one, relying on knowledges from other fields, such as medicine and sociology, and work by Kathleen Woodward and Margaret M. Gullette, Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Roberta Maierhofer, Thomas M. Falkner, Steven Weiland, and Mike Hepworth. Taking into account the history and interdisciplinary character of literary gerontology, Gaidash focuses on "literary and socio-psychological characteristics that define the discourse of ageing" (p. 37), among them: 1) intergenerational conflict (sociological tool), 2) re-evaluation of life (geriatric tool) as a basis for the memory play, 3) heterotopy of geriatric care facilities and the genre of "pathography", 4) motifs of Eros and Thanatos, 5) late-life creativity theme (p. 37–44). Through these "lenses", the author interprets key plays of Western drama (Chapter II) and contemporary American drama (Chapter IV).

In the subchapter "Discourse of Ageing in Western Literature: Historical Perspective", Gaidash presents a substantial survey of old age representation in literature and culture since antiquity till the present. This overview, based on essays of Simone de Beauvoir (*The Coming of Age*), David H. Fischer (*Growing Old in America*) and Thomas R. Cole (*The Journey of Life: a Cultural History of Aging in America*), seems particularly interesting in terms of tracing fluctuations in the cultural perception of ageing for nearly two thousand years. While Antiquity furnished a dichotomist interpretation of old age (respect on the judicial level and disrespect expressed in poetry), the Middle Ages showed the first signs of promoting the cult of youth, which was caused by the establishment of Christianity and barbarian invasion of the Western Roman Empire (p.51). Prioritizing youth over old age was reinforced onwards, forcing elderly people out from the visible part of society, with old women being its most unwanted

[3] Jewusiak, Jacob. 2019. *Aging, Duration, and the English Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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and, hence, silent and invisible members. A detailed story of cultural perception of the elderly in Europe that the author presents is inseparable from the history of aging in America providing a socio-cultural background within which American literature was created. The American history of ageing, however, has its own turning points defined by society's wellbeing and social structure, which Gaidash places in the colonial period, mid-nineteenth century, turn of the twentieth century and turn of the twenty-first century, stating that "at the end of the twentieth century the main problem of gerontology is to oppose ageist stereotypes (which are strong in the US) and balancing the needs of the elderly with the needs of other generations" (p.73). Speaking about the socio-cultural profile of the present-day USA, Gaidash maintains that contemporary American drama stands up to historically embedded ageing stereotypes, which show old age as trauma, infantilize, and asexualize the elderly, marginalize them through institutionalized ageism, impose masking or social invisibility on elderly people. Thus, American drama overturns stigmatization of ageing by introducing new characters to the theatrical stage, which remains an efficient tool of influencing public opinion.

In Chapter II "Discourse of Aging in Key Plays from the World Literature", Gaidash underlines that "preservation of one's identity is an important part of geronthogenesis" (p. 89) the illustration of which can be found in ancient drama. Hence, the author analyzes the archetypal characters of wise and demonic Old Man and Old Woman and their transformations in the tragedies of Sophocles (*Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone*), Euripides (*Medea, Hippolytus*), comedies of Aristophanes (*The Clouds, The Wasps, Lysistrata*), Menander (*Dyscolos*), Plautus (*The Treasure, The Twins*), Terence (*Phormion*) as well as the role of chorus in ancient drama, which is represented through the socio-demographic category of elders. A separate subchapter focuses on the conflict of generations, which the author analyses by appropriating Shakespeare's *King Lear* as a literary matrix for her interpretations of contemporary East-European (*Łucja i jej dzieci* by Marek Pruchniewski, *Hypermarket* by Viliam Klimáček, *Buna* by Vira Makoviy) and British (*The Beauty Queen of Leenane* by Martin McDonagh) drama. The author's attention is also directed towards the role of reminiscences (p. 138–153), heterotopy of geriatric care facilities (p. 153–158), Eros and Thanatos (p. 159–168), and the image of the late-life artist in "the third age" plays of European dramatists from the mid-nineteenth century till the present. Standing outside the history of American drama *per se*, this chapter covers the aging discourse in the earliest plays in European and English literature in search for patterns of age representation, which are still palpable in contemporary drama not only in America but also in Slavic countries.

Historians of American literature will be particularly interested in Chapter III "Artistic Models of Old Age Construction in American Drama: from Beginnings to the Present", which provides an overview of American drama from the perspective of ageing. Although, up until the early twentieth century, elderly people appeared in plays only as secondary characters, they still illustrated the changing attitude of Americans towards ageing. Puritan colonists treated late age respectfully and believed that as the period of preparation for death and atonement for sins it was granted only to the few

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and hence symbolized wisdom. The eighteenth century with the War of Independence revealed the conflict of generations, which not only evinced the change in perceiving the young (associated with the new country, new goals) and the old (bearers of old values) (Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787)), but also in the growing importance of political awareness on the part of ordinary citizens (Robert Munford III's *The Patriots*). The nineteenth-century hit *Fashion; Or, Life in New York* by Anne Cora Mowatt (1845) proposed the image of a new American: a newly-formed middle-class representative, who would follow the fashion rather than being guided by reason and experience, which the seventy-two year old Adam Truman and his life philosophy represent. However, despite being marginal, rare, and stereotypical, the old characters in these plays affirm a positive model of ageing, which is characterized by an active engagement with family matters and social life (p. 176, 178, 185).

The next chapter in the history of American drama and a new way of showing old age on the stage belongs to Eugene O'Neill. Among his dramatic personae one finds many elders, whose emotional and psychological portraits appear quite elaborate. Gaidash pays special attention to O'Neill's May/December plays (*A Wife for a Life, Recklessness* (1913), *The Rope* (1918), *Desire Under the Elms* (1924)), which portray male characters "over fifty" and "reflect the dynamics and perception of ageing in the US during the first half of the twentieth century" (p.192). The latter appears to be ambivalent: the strategy of active ageing, chosen by the male characters, causes conflicts between generations and subsequent alienation, which in turn leads to a negative life re-evaluation. During the second half of the twentieth century, this ambivalence acquires new motifs: re-evaluation of one's life, suicide, memory failures and fears of losing control over one's financial wellbeing, which Gaidash illustrates through the plays of Arthur Miller (*Death of a Salesman* (1949), *I Can't Remember Anything, Clara* (1986), *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* (1991), *Mr. Peters' Connections* (1998)). The fear of ageing of a female character is what, along with dark or even tragic image of old age, Tennessee Williams brings into the American history of ageing (*The Palooka* (1937), *The Unsatisfactory Supper* (1946), *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *The Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (1963), *The Frosted Glass Coffin* (1970), *This is the Peaceful Kingdom, or Good Luck God* (1978)). In her interpretation of Edward Albee's plays *Sandbox* (1959), *American Dream* (1961), *All Over* (1970), *Three Tall Women* (1990) Gaidash discusses aging as "cultural frontier" which divides generations on the basis of spiritual values (p. 226). Despite alienation of the elderly, the author sums up, Albee depicts characters in late age as "decent and honest older people, bearers of spiritual values and role models for the next generations" (p. 232).

Chapter IV "Problem and Semantic Features of Aging Discourse in American Drama at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century" deals with the representation of ageing in the American drama of the late twentieth – early twenty-first century. The first subchapter "Genre Peculiarities of the Memory Play" focuses on the plays *The Long Christmas Dinner* (1931) by Thornton Wilder, *Driving Miss Daisy* (1988) by Alfred Uhry, *Love Letters*

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(1988) by A.R. Gurney, *M. Butterfly* (1988) by Henry Hwang, *Pride's Crossing* (1997) by Tina Howe, *W;t* (1999) by Margaret Edson. The author maintains that, due to flashbacks and reminiscences covering the characters' whole lives, memory plays acquire epic features (p. 236). Reminiscences as a tool to represent ageing may be classified as integrative, instrumental, transmissible, escapist, and obsessive, referring to a whole range of psychological states of the elderly, following the strategy of active or passive ageing. Intergenerational conflict is in the focus of the author's attention in the next subchapter "Formation of the "Solidarity – Conflict" Model". Here, Gaidash presents her interpretation of the plays united by the "heterotopy of the American family", stating that contrary to the American drama of the first half of the twentieth century, which precluded "successful ageing" due to the conflict of generations, the second half of the century produces a diversified vision of geronthogenesis (p.260). In this respect, the author analyzes the following plays: *Make Way to Tomorrow* (1937) by Viña Delmar, *The Trip to Bountiful* (1953) by Horton Foote, *Everybody Loves Opal* (1962) by John Patrick, *The Oldest Living Graduate* (1976) by Preston Jones, *On Golden Pond* (1978) by Ernest Thompson, *First Monday in October* (1978) by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, *Laundromat* (1978) by Marsha Norman, *The Exact Center of Universe* (1999) by Joan Vail Thorne, *August: Osage County* (2007) by Tracy Letts, *The Velocity of Autumn* (2011) by Eric Coble, and *Between Riverside and Crazy* (2015) by Stephen Guirgis.

The subchapter "Sacred and Forbidden Places" analyzes the geriatric care facilities as heterotopic places and is one of the most interesting sections of the given study, especially taking into account the current COVID-19 pandemic. Connecting dramatic representation with the actual history of care facilities in the US, the author stresses that in plays the dramatists subvert stereotypical images of ageing in care facilities, which include ageist paternalizing of the elderly, treating them like children, understanding old age as the decay of the body and mind. With these deeply rooted and long-lasting stereotypes in mind, Gaidash draws attention to the fact that American playwrights approach the problem of care facilities' representation with an unexpected genre choice: comedy or tragicomedy, turning the culturally fixed images of such "homes" from places of sufferings and horror into places of active and successful ageing (p. 229). For her detailed and insightful interpretation Gaidash choses John Patrick's *The Curious Savage* (1950), Megan Terry's *Calm Down Mother* (1966), D L Cobern's *The Gin Game* (1977), Tina Howe's *Chasing Manet* (2011), David Lindsay-Abaire's *Ripcord* (2017). The author suggests that in representing care facilities in this way, American playwrights prompt a revised socio-cultural treatment of geriatric facilities, as the interdisciplinary studies of ageing show that "personality development in old age does not stop, and identity continues to shape" (p. 316). To illustrate the genre of pathology in American drama a genre which focuses on illness as part of ageing, the author analyses *August: Osage County* (2007) by Tracy Letts, again tracing active and passive strategies of ageing represented by characters.

No less insightful are the last two subchapters on "Eros and Thanatos in the Third Age American Drama" and "Creativity as Constituent of Harmonious Ageing". Among

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plays which address the theme of death are David Berry's *The Whales of August* (1980), Tina Howe's *Painting Churches* (1983), *Approaching Zanzibar* (1989), Paula Vogel's *The Oldest Profession* (1981), Naomi Wallace's *One Flea Spare* (1995). Overcoming the writer's block is presented in David Margulies's *Collected Stories* (1996) and Theresa Rebeck's *Butterfly Collection* (2000), while adaptation to old age with the help of art is depicted in Tina Howe's *Coastal Disturbances* (1986) and *Rembrandt's Gift* (2002). Plays from the second half of the twentieth century are characterized by a growing number of female characters and various problems they deal with, as they choose their strategies of ageing, which is, in an overwhelming majority of cases, active, integrative, and harmonious.[4] This, in turn, contradicts the culturally accepted worshiping of youth characterizing American society. The author concludes that "contrary to empiric studies, literary gerontology proposes a rich variety of images of aging, … while drama with its unique "language" provides invaluable artistic data, which will assist in a deeper understanding of the dialectics of aging" (p. 381). Thus, Gaidash's monograph contributes not only to American literary studies but also to cultural studies and may potentially be an impulse for the social revision of aging in Ukraine, where old age is still perceived as the time of seclusion and disengagement from society.

On the technical side, the book would benefit from an index, summary in English, and a separate list of primary sources in English, since their dispersal in the general list of references minimizes the impression of the work done by the author, while in fact it is enormous. Due to its encyclopedically historical character, the formal presentation of sources throughout the text, to my mind, should be accompanied by full names of authors and titles in the original and dates of plays' publication. Despite that, the book provides a chance to read a unique history of American culture through the lens of aging, its representation in theatre, the oldest mass medium, and trace its impact on the American social landscape.

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[4] Compare: Oró, Maricel. 2009. "Female Aging: Between Fiction and Real Life." *Journal of Aging, Humanities, and the Arts: Official Journal of the Gerontological Society of America*, 3/3: 222–233. DOI: 10.1080/19325610903134488.

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