

Samuel Beckett's 'Hysterical Old Hags': The Sexual Politics of Female Ageing in *All That Fall* and *Not I*

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Abstract: In this article, I consider Samuel Beckett's representation of the ageing feminine in his plays *All That Fall* (1957) and *Not I* (1972). In a close reading through the lens of age studies, I argue that both plays deal with the embodied experiences of ageing women and their sense of longing. Scant critical attention has been paid to female ageing in Beckett's work, since much of his writing focuses upon issues to do with men's ageing. In *All That Fall*, however, Beckett's first radio play, he places the ageing Maddy Rooney at the centre of the work. The play, which is concerned with old age, abandonment and the end of sexual reproduction, enabled Beckett to access Maddy's inner world, via the medium of radio. Through the medium of sound, Maddy emerges as a complex experience of embodiment, in which her sexuality remains problematically vital. In the televised adaptation of *Not I*, the camera focuses exclusively upon Mouth, which dominates the entire screen, and the shadowy figure of the silent supplicant is omitted entirely. In consequence, Mouth resembles a vagina, an image which borders on obscenity. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, I argue that this play represents ageing in its most abject form in Beckett's theatre. In both plays, female ageing and female sexuality are portrayed by Beckett as much as a force of resistance, as of a condition to be resisted.

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