

‘What will I do / when I am too old / for such love songs?’: Desire and Midlife Sexuality in Contemporary Irish Women’s Poetry

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Abstract: This article analyses how contemporary Irish women poets explore the theme of desire with regard to ageing, especially midlife. Recently published poems by Sinéad Morrissey, Paula Meehan, Mary O’Malley, Moya Cannon, Vona Groarke, and Mary Dorcey are examined, taking into account current research in relevant disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and medicine. The findings clearly challenge lingering cultural stereotypes concerning alleged asexuality and decline in desire among older women. The examined works cover a broad range of topics from the entrance into middle age to the theme of menopause and to more advanced age. It will be shown that the female speakers in these poems never stop addressing the world as sexual beings despite their sometimes troubled relation to their ageing bodies and the cultural prejudices faced by older women. The desire that accompanies late love, as depicted in these poems, is appreciated by mature lovers as a vital, precious, and meaningful aspect of their lives. Considering that older women are not a homogeneous group, sweeping generalisations should be avoided. Nevertheless, in all works discussed here, desire remains a crucial part of female subjectivity. As shown in my analysis, ageing may change the way mature women express desire but not necessarily their experience of it.

Keywords: contemporary Irish women’s poetry, ageing, desire, sexuality, gender discourse