

Reimagining the Fourth Age: The Ageing Mother in the Poetry of Mary Dorcey and Paul Durcan

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Abstract: In my analysis of selected poems by Mary Dorcey and Paul Durcan, literary representations of the ageing mother are explored in conjunction with research in cultural and social gerontology relating to the demographic group of ‘deep’ old age. Presented with pervasive stereotypes such as old age as a second childhood or the cultural ‘decline narrative’, these poets seek to find a language and perspective that does not diminish the ageing mother’s dignity, agency, and personhood while still attending to the physical and sociocultural realities of old age. In light of the iconic, timeless image of the mother in Irish culture, such explorations gain special pertinence. They also reveal how the mother’s ageing process impacts the mother-child relationship and informs the adult child’s own ageing. By thus moving the ageing mother to the centre of their poems, these poets not only reimagine what has been termed the ‘social imaginary of the fourth age’ but remind us of our shared vulnerability and the need for intergenerational connection and care.

Keywords: Irish poetry, ageing mother, second childhood, Mary Dorcey, Paul Durcan