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Mimicking myths of menopause. A critical phenomenological perspective on ageing and femininity in fiction TV shows

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journals.sagepub.com/home/psc**Marjolein de Boer**

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Abstract

This article offers a critical phenomenological analysis of prevailing myths of menopause. By drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's conceptions of myths that essentialize existence, we have analyzed contemporary TV series in which menopause is portrayed. We identified the following myths of menopause: the myth of the liberated woman, the unnesting (s) mother, the old, ugly, and sexless witch, the mild, wise, and uncarnal woman. We first describe these myths and analyze how they may be interpreted as marginalizing in various and sometimes ambiguous ways. Then, we trace out two distinct ways in which some TV shows expose these myths as essentializing myths, which is important for allowing us to take a distance from them, and thereby to resist them. The first one is in line with what Beauvoir herself suggested as a fruitful dealing with myths: replacing mythical thinking with actual experiences. The second way is conceptualized on the basis of Irigaray's thinking about mimicking myths. Such dealings with myths of menopause, we argue, may open the road to less marginalizing and more pluriform thinking about menopause.

Keywords

marginalizing myths, menopause, Beauvoir, Irigaray, fiction TV shows

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I. Introduction

Over the last 30 years, a growing research corpus within philosophical phenomenology emphasizes the formative role of certain female experiences and life events for women's subject positions – that is, for what it means to live as and be a woman (Zeiler and Käll 2014). Within such research, women's experiences of breast cancer, pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, infertility, and menstruation are relatively well-studied (de Boer et. al 2022, de Boer 2021; Grosz 2020; Heinämaa 2014; Trigg 2021; Young 2005; Zeiler 2013).¹ The phenomenon of menopause, however, is largely taken for granted within this line of research – even though it is a transition that almost every woman goes through. The aim of this article is to address this research lacuna and offer a phenomenological analysis of what it means to be a woman in menopausal transition.

In doing so, this article does not start from deciphering and understanding first-person experiences – like classical phenomenological analyses tend to do. Rather, it takes a critical phenomenological approach (Guenther 2021). We start from the assumption that people's experiences do not take shape in a vacuum but are influenced by and constituted within a contingent socio-cultural and historical context (de Boer et. al 2022; Weiss 2014). More specifically, we build on Simone de Beauvoir's thinking on 'myths' (2009): that in making sense of ourselves and others, we draw on cultural stories or discourses that encapsulate normative ideas about what it means to be a woman, or an old(er) person. Beauvoir is one of the few philosophers who explicitly discusses myths in relation to menopause, a life phase that she repeatedly characterizes as a 'crisis' or a 'dangerous age' (2009, 633). In *The Coming of Age* (1996) and *The Second Sex* (2009), she shows that age-old myths about ageing and femininity – tales about witches, evil mothers, virgin saints – co-constitute the meaning we attribute to that menopausal age (Barry 2019; Jönsson 2009; Weiss 2014; Woodward 1998). Such myths that defy the normative structure of femininity as youthful beauty, and as being healthy, sexually attractive and innocent, appear in literature, plays, and in our everyday thinking and conversations, and function as a tool for socializing and embedding women in the quintessential myth of woman as the Other. These marginalizing myths, according to Beauvoir, are difficult to describe. They haunt consciousness without lending themselves to being grasped or defined (2009, 166). In this article, we take up this challenge and begin to understand what it means to be a menopausal woman by describing these haunting myths of menopause that roam around in present-day culture.

For this purpose, we analyzed fiction TV series about menopause. We turned to fiction TV because, as a dramatized version of reality, these shows capture normative ideas about what it means to be a certain person – ideas that as we will argue are often based on age-old mythical understandings (Tulloch 1990). A first remarkable finding was that there is a limited amount of portrayals of menopause in TV series, which could be interpreted as part of the considerable social silence surrounding menopause. Most series neither engage with menopause as a (significant) plot line or theme, nor do they feature women in their midlife. For the purposes of this article, we decided to concentrate on series that *do* portray menopause and menopausal women, namely, *Better Things* (2020), *Big Mouth* (2021), *Borgen*. *Power and Glory* (2022), *Dun' Breedin'* (2021) *Fleabag* (2019), *Julia* (2022),

and *The real housewives and the menopause* (2022).² These shows are included in the analysis for multiple reasons. Besides explicitly discussing menopause or featuring menopausal women (i.e. at least one plot line of an episode revolves around menopause), the series are also broadcasted in the last couple of years and, as such, feature contemporary portrayals of menopause. They also have a (potentially) substantial audience as they are accessible through world-wide streaming services (i.e. Netflix; HBO; Disney+; ITV; YouTube). In watching and re-watching these shows, we identified dominant myths that all portray menopausal women as the Other: the liberated woman; the myth of the unnesting (s)mother, the old, ugly, and sexless witch, and the mild, wise, and uncarnal woman (see [section 3](#)).

In addition to analyzing and interpreting these myths, we discuss possible ways to resist, and therewith to not coincide with them ([section 4](#)). Even though the portrayal of women as Other is a quintessential and persisting patriarchal myth, that pops up in various disguises ([Vintges 2017](#)), Beauvoir aims at change by opposing myths as transcendent, essentializing ideas and articulating what it means to actually (fail to) live up to mythical ideas about menopause. We identified this way of deconstructing myths in some of the TV series as well. Yet, in these series, we also found another way of resisting myths. We came to understand this second way of handling myths by using Luce Irigaray's conception of mimesis. For Irigaray, mimicry is the 'path' historically assigned to the feminine ([Irigaray 1985](#), 76). As mirror of men, women reflect their image. In the case of myths, mimicry could imply 'mere reproduction of the same', a plain repetition of the age-old myths in women's lives, a flat mirror. But Irigaray suggests to play with mimesis in order for women not to be reduced to the place assigned to them by myths (*Ibid.*; [Chisholm 2010](#)). This last form of mimesis may be understood as a curved mirror. Drawing on Irigaray's work, we discuss how such curved mirroring of myths of menopause may help to resist the essentializing myths.³ But before we turn to the analysis of contemporary menopause myths and two ways to resist them, we first elaborate on the meaning of myths.

2. Meaning of myths

The images of menopause that we commonly hold, Beauvoir contends, echo (aspects of) age-old myths about what it means to be an older woman. Here, she references, amongst others, creation myths in which women are subsidiary (as Eve to Adam's rib); virginity myths in which purity is praised for young women (e.g. Virgin Mary), but dreaded in older women as unpossessed sexuality (e.g. Eumenides); earth myths in which women are celebrated for providing a fruitful basis in their fertile years (e.g. Gaia), but also feared as powerful mysterious chaos and darkness when they have passed those years (e.g. Pandora; Parcae); beauty myths in which women's bodies are fetishized as static objects (e.g. Sleeping beauty); and myths in which women are glorified for serving others (e.g. Mother Mary; Geisha) ([Beauvoir 2009](#); [Fallaise 2007](#)). In thinking through the significance of these myths, Beauvoir argues that they encapsulate age-old normative ideas that represent older women as the Other: as the inferior opposite to younger people and to Man ([Beauvoir 2009](#), 167; [Eilenberger and Halsema 2023](#), 16–17).

For Beauvoir, such myths are not merely cultural and normative ideas imposed upon a person, they have an ontological weight. Myths ‘essentialize’ existence. However, existing implies acting, for Beauvoir, without there being a truth (2009, 279), in the case of myths, essence defines existence. This, as we will see, has two sides. On the one hand, myths limit the possibilities to live menopause in a way that escapes these dominant and marginalizing thinking about menopause. On the other hand, they provide a fitting home for women’s desire to give sense to what is happening to them. However, taking refuge in mythical thinking constrains us from taking up our existential task to be free and actively project ourselves into the world (Bergoffen 2002).

This means that myths not only *resonate* marginalizing belief systems. In influencing and producing attitudes and behaviours towards and by women, they *produce and sustain* such beliefs within a patriarchal, ageist world (Weiss 2014). That is, as social generators that suit a certain operative ideology, people cannot freely choose which myths to follow and which to reject (Fallaize 2007). Even if a menopausal woman chooses not to live up to a certain mythical idea about what she should be, society will still judge and sanction her according to the ideological standards of that idea (Weiss 2014). Within this cultural-political force of myths, Beauvoir argues that myths’ archetypal motive that woman should be young, healthy, and beautiful is pivotal (2009, 181). As this leitmotif about women is repeated throughout history and across cultures, it appears to carry some kind of universal truth (Fallaize 2007), that helps to legitimize and sustain the patriarchal, ageist ideological system wherein myths such as this one operate.

Archetypal myths are not only marginalizing because they serve a patriarchal discriminatory system, but also because they are unrealizable to begin with. That is, myths typically hold certain reality-diverging and unattainable qualities, by, for example, submitting women to the impossible ‘forever young’ beauty standard (Weiss 2014, 48). This is because over time and through repetition, myths lead a life of their own, and, as such, they become entities that lack the concrete contingency of our everyday, human lives. What is more, myths often operate in juxtaposition to one another and are for that reason the more unattainable (Weiss 2014). If an ageing woman, for example, would be able to live up to the ‘forever young’ beauty standard, she would likely defy the standard that real beauty is effortless. In living up to myths, then, women are always set up for failure.

Especially pernicious to myths is that they bear extensive ontological significance, as mentioned before. For Beauvoir, a human being is a for-itself (*pour-soi*) who ‘is what it is not and is not what it is’ (Beauvoir 1976a; Bergoffen 2002). That is, as conscious beings, we are always intentionally oriented towards things or beings that are in-itself (*en-soi*) in the world. But through that consciousness, we are also aware of the fact that we are not what we are oriented towards, that we are not in-itself. This not-being makes us undetermined and leaves us with the continuous existential task to actively position ourselves in the world, to make choices, to engage with projects, and practice our freedom. Freedom for Beauvoir is not so much ontological, as it is for Sartre, but practical and ethical. It merges with existence and ‘is only by making itself be’ (Beauvoir 1976a, 25). Even though everyone is originally free, it is only in willing our freedom and projecting it that we are actually free. In this sense, human beings *are* always a *becoming*

(Beauvoir 1976b). But this (not-)being that is a becoming is experienced by us as a *lack* of being. We are not things or essences that completely coincide with themselves – mere in-itselfs – but through the directedness of our consciousness to exactly such things, we long for this completed way of being. We experience, in other words, a *desire to be*; to coincide with ourselves – just as the things that we are oriented towards (Bergoffen 2002; Weiss 2012). And this is where mythical thought plays a pivotal role. Myths match a concrete person with a seemingly universal (and often reality-diverging) set of qualities (Bergoffen 2002). In this sense, myths essentialize existence – they deny the contingency of everyday existence by mirroring and luring people with a portrayal in which they coincide with those static qualities. Beauvoir elucidates: ‘It is once again a matter of replacing lived experience and the free judgements of experience it requires by a static idol’ (2009, 282). In other words, our ‘desire to be’ may find its home in myths. Being captivated by or taking refuge in myths may represent a flight from the demands of our existence as a being for-itself. Here, we may grasp the rationale behind Beauvoir characterizing the menopausal age as a ‘crisis’ or ‘dangerous’ (Beauvoir 2009, 633). In essentializing existence and exalting the illusion that we *are* serving mothers, sexual objects, myths constrain us from taking up our existential freedom, which implies that we actively project ourselves into the world (Bergoffen 2002).

In thinking through myths by discussing literary works, plays, and conversations she had with others, Beauvoir’s empirically informed philosophy is mainly situated in the period between the forties and sixties of the twentieth century. As such, her work challenged us to do an empirical philosophical analysis about *contemporary* myths about menopause. In the next section, we identify and describe menopausal myths in recent fiction TV shows and interpret them by using Beauvoir’s thinking.

3. Myths of menopause

In the fiction TV series we analyzed, we have found different myths of menopause: that of the liberated woman (section 3.1), the unnesting (s)mother (section 3.2), the old, ugly and sexless witch (section 3.3), and the wise, mild and uncarnal woman (section 3.4). While these myths intersect with and exist alongside one another in their portrayal in the series, the one of the liberated woman functions as a particularly pervasive one, and forms a fruitful basis for the persistence of the other myths. Herein, the central idea is that the menopausal woman is liberated from her painful body (menstruation, child labour, pregnancy) and from constraining norms of reproductive and youthful femininity (being nurturing, beautiful, sexy). The myth of the liberated woman prophets a freedom that has no meaning in itself but that is merely understood as ‘not-being-constrained’ anymore. It prophets that women, in their menopausal age, can take up their existential freedom to actively project themselves into the world without having to abide restraining female bodies and norms of femininity. I This myth of the liberated woman obscures the marginalizing forces of the other myths of menopause. Through the idea that menopausal women are liberated from constraining norms of femininity, mythical forces that marginalize these women are concealed – for example, forces that still require them to be

nurturing, to live up to youthful beauty and if they cannot, consider them as ugly and unsexy.

3.1. *The myth of the liberated woman*

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir seems to thematize menopause and the end of women's fertile lives as a possible liberation – all the while still contending that liberation does not equal actual freedom. She writes:

"Woman frees herself from her chains in her autumn and winter years; she uses the pretext of her age to escape burdensome chores; she knows her husband too well to let herself still be intimidated by him, she avoids his embraces. [...] She can also allow herself to disdain fashion and public opinion; she refuses social obligations, diets and beauty treatment. [...] Relieved of her duties, she finally discovers her freedom." (2009, 641).

From their menopausal years onwards, women are seemingly liberated from the many oppressive myths that marginalize them in particularly their reproductive years. With her life experience, her ageing body, and her fertile years behind her, she is no longer subjected to reproductive femininity myths that make women into sexual, aesthetic objects, with the ultimate life goal to bear a child, and reducing them to nurturing creatures in service of their husband, children, and men in general.

In contemporary fiction TV series, menopausal women's liberation is a common trope. In many series, menopause seems to herald a liberation from the objectification of women's bodies, from being (made) a sexualized object. Becoming invisible to the (often) male gaze, in this sense, is typically welcomed, for example, in *Better things*. 'I love being invisible, it's like a superpower', a friend of the main character Sam says. 'I can go around do my thing and nobody bothers me' (*Better Things*, s3e5). In other series, such as *Dun Breeding*, the life phase of menopause is depicted as a liberation from norms that a woman needs to take care of her (male) spouse and her children. And finally, menopausal women are often portrayed as being liberated from a plethora of embodied, female pains, such as pregnancy (*Big Mouth*, *Better things*), childbirth, period cramps, and sore breasts (*Fleabag*, *Better Things*). A telling example is Belinda's monologue in *Fleabag*, wherein she shares her menopause experiences with the main character Fleabag:

"We have it all going on in here inside. We have pain on a cycle for years and years and years and then just when you feel you are making peace with it all, what happens? The menopause comes, the fucking menopause comes, and it is the most wonderful fucking thing in the world. And yes, your entire pelvic floor crumbles and you get fucking hot and no one cares, but then you're free, no longer a slave, no longer a machine with parts. You're just a person, in business." (*Fleabag*, s2e3)

It is in these words, that menopause is explicitly thematized as a life phase wherein women are, as Belinda expresses it, 'no longer a slave' to their bodies (see also [Zita 2018](#)),

who no longer need to go through painful menstruations. This, then, allows them to be free: to be ‘just a person, in business’ (Fleabag, s2e3).

While these multivariate appearances of the myth of the liberated women seem to neatly align with Beauvoir’s mythical understanding of freedom in menopause – wherein freedom merely means not-being-constrained-anymore and does not equal actual freedom – many contemporary series seem to adhere to a more repleted understanding of freedom. In these series, the idea of women’s liberation from the burdens of their bodies and from constraining norms is often combined with a neoliberal and capitalist understanding of freedom: their ultimate liberation seems to lie in having a successful career (Julia, Borgen, Better Things), in being ‘in business’ (Fleabag). Even though Beauvoir greatly valued women’s work and their financial independence, this specific neoliberal liberation in menopause is largely absent in her treatise – perhaps because she wrote about this life phase in a time in which having a career was not on the horizon for most women to begin with. Such an understanding of neoliberal freedom attaches great emancipatory significance to the ‘self-made woman’ who is rich and financially independent (Better Things, Borgen, Julia) and has a position of power with its accompanying admiration by others (Julia, Fleabag). The dark, and potentially marginalizing side of these emancipatory portrayals is, of course, that the absence of such self-made wealth and success may be understood as (the result of) failing oneself and others, or of not being an independent, self-sufficient and overall ‘good (enough)’ person (De Graeve and De Vuyst 2022).

3.2. *The myth of the unnesting (s)mother*

While contemporary TV shows already reveal constraining, neoliberal ideas in the myth of the liberated woman, Beauvoir argues that the liberation of women in menopause is itself illusory, and as such, forms a fruitful basis for other constraining myths. She writes:

“Unfortunately, every woman’s history repeats the fact we have observed throughout the history of women: she discovers this freedom when she can find nothing more to do with it. This repetition has nothing coincidental about it: patriarchal society has made all feminine functions servile [...]. She has only been taught to devote herself and there is no one who requires her devotion any more. Useless, unjustified, she contemplates these long years without promise she still has to live and murmurs: ‘No one needs me!’ (2009, 641)

As the emphasis in (often) oppressive myths of femininity is on women’s reproductive years, menopause seems to cut the lives of women in two. This discontinuity, Beauvoir argues, invokes the illusion of a new life, one in which women are freed from being othered. But while women, also menopausal women, are always measured (and measure themselves) through aspects of secondariness and devotion to others, their supposed release from marginalizing mythical forces may be lived as a lack of meaning and purpose. And it is this lived lack of purpose that is substantiated in other marginalizing contemporary myths, such as in the ‘unnesting (s)mother’.

In describing a maladaptive reaction to one's children leaving the childhood home and developing into independent adults (Sheriff and Weatherall 2009), most of the analyzed TV shows feature female 'empty-nesters': women around the menopausal age who long for their children to return (or never leave) the 'nest'. In this portrayal, the myth of the mother is rehearsed, but in a perverse way: even when their children no longer need their care, women still long to (s)mother them. As this need cannot be actualized, it leaves them with an impoverished identity – desperately seeking a new identity and purpose in their lives. *The real housewives and the menopause* is quite explicit in portraying such 'unnesting (s)mothers'. Several cast members repeatedly lament over their children leaving the house, asking themselves whether they need to take up a new hobby or have a career (Real housewives and the menopause, e1 and e2). Most shows, however, are more ambiguous and implicit in underscoring and perverting the idea that women's main purpose is to take care of their children. Brigitta in *Borgen*, for example, states that she is glad that her children moved out of the house and that she can devote herself completely to her career in politics. But by sending herself flowers and repeatedly coming home to a dark, empty house, she is also portrayed as lonely (Borgen. Power & Glory (P&G), e2). Moreover, in regarding the possibility of resigning from her post as a foreign minister with horror – wondering who she is if she is not working 19 hours a day and is not a hands-on caring mother anymore – she is depicted as having an impoverished identity now that her children do not need her care anymore (Borgen. P&G, e6).

In these appearances of the myth of the unnesting (s)mother, Beauvoir's words that menopause is a 'crisis' are exemplified (2009, 633). This life phase may appear liberative, in that menopause frees women from the burden of their caring duties so that they can devote themselves to their careers and hobbies. All the while, however, forces of marginalization and othering women persist. In *Borgen* and *The real housewives and the menopause*, menopausal women are portrayed as (ambiguously, implicitly) longing for a (larger) nurturing role as a mother. With their children not around, such a normative identity is lost on them, thereby evoking a sense of being meaningless or at least of the difficulty of making sense of themselves.

3.3. *The myth of the old, ugly, and sexless witch*

In myths of menopause that explicitly connect normative ideas about beauty and femininity to those of old age, it becomes even more apparent that women are far from liberated. It is in menopause, Beauvoir argues, that women must grapple with their ageing appearance, with not being perceived as beautiful and sexual objects anymore. While it may seem curious, especially with our current life expectancy, to hold that women in menopause are old, we do (still) seem to regard menopausal women as such. Like when Beauvoir confessed that the realization of ageing for her started when hearing a student call her an old woman at the age of 50 (1996, 288), Rachel in *The real housewives and the menopause* says that 'when I think of menopause, I think of old. [...] And I don't want to be old' (s1e1). Moreover, when Barbara in *Big Mouth* (s1e5) is confronted with the announcement of menopause, she similarly says 'I am not ready to be old'. And Ricky in *Dun Breeding* (s1e1) also relates hot flushes and resentment of getting old to each other. In

The coming of age, Beauvoir elaborates on the constraining force of negating norms of femininity as women get older:

“Since, as men see it, a woman’s purpose in life is to be an erotic object, when she grows old and ugly she loses the place allotted to her in society: she becomes a *monstrum* that excites revulsion and even dread. [...] she takes on a supernatural character when she falls outside the human state: she is a witch, a dangerously powerful sorceress.” (1996, 122–123)

In this quote, Beauvoir argues that around the menopausal age, myths that closely tie feminine beauty to a youthful appearance are negated and as such become operative in a different way than before. In not being able to live up to the normative forces of myths of femininity anymore, ageing women are often equated with ugliness and non-humanness (Weiss 2014). The historical contours of this gendered portrayal of ageing bodies become evident when we consider that some of the physical signs of menopause – facial hair, bent posture resulting from more fragile bones, wrinkled skin, thinning hair – were often identified as witch-like in fairy tales but also in real-life witch hunts (Rider 2020).

While we may be inclined to think that such witch-like portrayals of older women have undergone notable shifts, contemporary TV series show that constructions of wicked and ugly menopausal women are still very much present. In *Better Things*, for example, after finding out that she is in perimenopause, Sam says to her friends ‘we’re ugly, we’re disgusting, we’re obsolete. [...] we’re invisible’ (s3e5). And in *Big Mouth*, one of the featured characters is the ‘Menopause Banshee’. This hormone monster with wild, red hair and a mad laugh announces menopause and haunts the mother figure, Barbara.

Besides from simply depicting menopausal women as old and ugly or as witches, most of the series’ portrayals of menopausal bodies, like in *Big Mouth*, centre around and play with the idea that such bodies are not considered sexy and do not have sex anymore. ‘But I had sex yesterday’ Barbara objects when Menopause Banshee tells her that ‘it [the menopause] is coming’ (e5). And while some menopause TV shows depict sexuality from a woman’s perspective – showing women with a diminished libido (Julia, Borgen, Fleabag) or with a stable or heightened appetite for sex (*Better Things*, *Big Mouth*), most series predominantly focus on how menopausal women are not sexual objects for (mainly) men anymore (Julia, Fleabag, *Better Things*) – or at least that their sex appeal and them being sexual beings is subject for debate (*Big Mouth*).

Such portrayals of menopausal women that negate normative standards of beauty can, of course, be traced back to persistent taboos surrounding menopausal symptoms: looser skin and slacking breasts, increase in body weight, more body- and facial hair, sweating, and a dryer vagina (Beck, Brewis, and Davies 2020; Duffy, Iversen, and Hannaford 2011). With such tenacious taboos, it is not surprising that some women in the analyzed TV shows try to prevent them from happening. This is the case for Rachel in *The real housewives and the menopause*. After elaborating what kinds of bodily self-care routines she has and medications she uses – dieting, facials, plastic surgery, vitamins, taking hormone replacement therapy – she says:

“I basically want to stay young. I want this next stage of life to be fun, to keep the symptoms at bay, to stay cheeky. I’m not going to let menopause change me” (s1e1).

It is here that we see how being liberated from being regarded a sexual object or a sexual being may instigate a desire to still live under a marginalizing myth because the alternative seems worse: to be deemed ugly, a witch, unsexy, even invisible. Through these conceptions of ageing women, after all, women are not stripped of their humanness by objectifying them – as is the case for younger woman – they are not even regarded as a sexual being to begin with. They are, indeed, ‘obsolete’, ‘invisible’, or as [Beauvoir \(1992\)](#) puts it in her autobiography about her menopausal age: ‘In the eyes of those [others], I see myself already dead and mummified.’ (376)

3.4. *The myth of the mild, wise, and uncarnal woman*

Despite the dismal qualities and repercussions of the myth of the old, ugly witch, there also seems a positive counterpart to this portrayal: with the years and their diminished beauty, women are pictured to become serene, gentle, reflective, and introspective. In the coming of age, Beauvoir introduces this myth of the mild and wise woman by referring to the grandmother figure in Saltykov-Shchedrin’s *The Golovlevs*:

“[...] with the loss of her physical energy, her authoritarian character had grown gentler. [...] as it sometimes happens her disillusioned old age has broadened her outlook. [...] ‘These last blows of fate had [...] thrown light on some corners of her intellectual horizon that her thoughts seemed never to have reached before’.” (1996, 483)

Beauvoir argues that for older women, the failure to live up to the standards of youthful femininity is believed to lead to an emergence of virtuous qualities like gentleness, contemplation, and wisdom. It is this kind of celebration of the archetype of the wise and calm older woman that we find in contemporary popular culture, as well as in the exploding research field of successful ageing where many scholars are fascinated by (and celebrate) qualities of resilience, tranquility, and surrender in especially older women ([Gattuso 2003](#); [Lamond et al. 2008](#); [Liang and Luo 2012](#)). In the series we analyzed, it is also a recurring myth. In *The real housewives and the menopause*, Seema confesses that while she was previously unhappy in her marriage and with her menopausal body, she now is ‘at peace with it all’ (s1e2). She is much more ‘relaxed’ and ‘understanding’ (s1e2) – even though the social dynamics in her marriage as well as her menopausal complaints have not changed significantly. In personifying this calm and content women, Seema does not seem to be bothered anymore by social disruptions nor by her menopausal, carnal un comforts. In some of the TV series, such a portrayal of wise, menopausal women goes together with an activist sisterhood-rhetoric, with an expressed need for a community of women who support each other in a patriarchal world – something that would have been to Beauvoir’s liking. In *Fleabag*, for example, Belinda, sharing her menopause experiences, finds an engaged audience in the younger, pre-menopausal Fleabag. Moreover, the menopausal women in *Dun’ Breedin’* constantly contact each

other to talk and laugh about their experiences. And in *The real housewives and the menopause*, cast members express their wish to talk about their menopause in the show as a way to educate women of all ages.

But in *Better Things*, this myth of the wise, menopausal woman that forms and sustains a sisterhood is portrayed in a more complex way. While having a dinner, Sam and her exclusively female table companions fiercely and unanimously agree that it is important to share their menopause experiences with each other and with other women. ‘Women have to. We have to. We owe it to the future’, Sam concludes after which they toast to celebrate their good intentions (s3e10). But then the husband of one of the women and his friend come in, and suddenly all the attention of the women goes to them – asking them about the game they went to, how bad the traffic was, and whether they want something to eat. It is this shift of focus that portrays how difficult it is to form and maintain a sisterhood in a patriarchal world: a world wherein the focal point of women’s attention is often not on themselves or other women but on men, and wherein women are typically positioned, and position themselves, in service to their male counterparts. This discrepancy between celebrating an intended sisterhood and the real world wherein this sisterhood is immediately broken down because of systemic inequalities resonates in Sam’s words when she addresses one of her friends: ‘you become some kind of Geisha [when men are around]’ (s3e10).

The myth of the calm and wise woman bears yet another constraining force in it: it often goes together with the belief that these women are unsexed. With their heightened contemplative qualities, menopausal women supposedly said goodbye to some of their carnal needs. We find a clear example of this in *Fleabag*. After Belinda shares her menopause wisdom, Fleabag tries to kiss her. While this may be interpreted as a counter example to the myth of the unsexy woman, the significance of this scene lies in what follows. It is Belinda who stops the kiss and gently rejects Fleabag, saying ‘No, I did not mean this. [...] Honestly, I can’t be arced’. Here, it is suggested that with her enhanced wisdom, Belinda does not bow for her sexual needs anymore, or by using her own words: she is ‘no longer a slave’ of her libido.

Despite the uncarnal, unsexing aspects, the myth of the mild and wise menopausal woman still is seductive. After all, in being typified this way, women may gain stature and respect, and as such, find a meaningful place in a world that has discredited, even dehumanized them for not being able to live up to norms of nurturing and beautiful femininity anymore. But Beauvoir is clear that this myth is still highly marginalizing: ‘Clearly there is one preconceived notion that must be totally set aside – the idea that old age brings serenity. [...] It allows one to suppose, in spite of all the ills and misfortunes that are known to overwhelm them, that the old are happy and that they can be left to their fate’ (1996, 485). That is, portraying older women as mild and content with patriarchal dynamics and uncomfortable bodies, functions not only as a justification that one does not need to question and (help to) alter such dynamics and discomforts, but also that these women do not need our on-going attention to begin with (Weiss 2014). We may conclude that it is indeed through its seductiveness that the myth of the mild and wise old women forcefully marginalizes menopausal women. What happens in and through this mythical belief is that perverse social dynamics may be condoned, uncomfortable bodies may be

ignored, carnal, sexual needs may be set aside, and, overall, that casting older women outside of everyday social life may be validated.

4. Mimicking myths as resistance

It is at this point that we may understand the extent of what Beauvoir calls ‘the crisis of the change of life’ (2009, 587). Upon the threshold of old age, women may not only be shocked by being called ‘old’ or by actually experiencing the first signs of a decaying body. It is around the menopausal life phase that women experience marginalizing myths of aging women, that hold them in the place of the other – some of which we have analyzed in the previous section. Such prevailing and marginalizing myths significantly co-shape the ways in which these women give sense to the bodily changes they experience. Myths, as mentioned earlier, essentialize existence. They, on the one hand, provide women who experience life- and bodily changes at a certain age with the words and portrayals to give meaning to these changes. On the other hand, they limit the possibilities to give meaning themselves by replacing actual experience with ‘a static idol’, as Beauvoir contends (2009: 282). The first step towards sensibly engaging with them, is by making explicit which myths exist – just like Beauvoir did in *The Second Sex* and *The Coming of Age* and as we did in the former section. A second step is finding out how to resist these marginalizing myths.

In several of her works, Beauvoir suggests that mythical thinking can be replaced with actual experiences (existence instead of essence), and that we thus need to describe and spell out what it actually means to live with and through menopause. In some of the analyzed TV series, we found portrayals of menopause that come close to this professed resistance by showing what it means to actually try to live up to myths of menopause (see [section 4.1](#)). In doing so, we may not only be able to expose myths for what they truly are: static, unattainable ideas that marginalize women – thereby distancing us from these ideas – but also to replace them with more pluriform, and perhaps realistic ideas about menopause. A second way to demythologize myths of menopause that we found in the analyzed series can be interpreted in terms of a strategy Irigaray describes and uses in her early works: mimesis (see [section 4.2](#)).

4.1. Portraying the complexity of actually living with myths of menopause

For Beauvoir, resisting and deconstructing marginalizing myths of menopause can be done by describing the diverse range of actual experiences of this life phase. In the TV series, we found several examples of such lived diversity. In *Dun’ Breedin’*, for instance, the group of friends portrayed experiences severe and moderate hot flashes, and none at all; they have night bleedings and no bleedings; heightened and diminished libidos; they go on with their regular yoga practice while others experience stiffness after a short run. All the while, they share these experiences, often laughing about (and sometimes lamenting over) them. By portraying this range of experiences, the series opens up the discourse on what it actually means to live through menopause and suggests that it helps to share these experiences with friends who have similar experiences. The existence of

more pluriform portrayals of menopausal experiences may open up the imagined possibilities of what menopause means, and may allow women to realize their freedom and actively project themselves into the world without abiding (too much) to restrictive norms of femininity. Pluriform portrayals of menopause, in other words, de-essentialize menopausal myths, thereby allowing women to take up their existential freedom in a more effective manner.

However, demythologizing myths implies not only showcasing the pluriformity of what living with menopause entails but also revealing what living with *myths* of menopause implies. In *Borgen. P&G*.⁴ Birgitta is portrayed as a believer in the myth of the liberated woman. She frequently says things like: ‘I have the time of my life. No children, no husband I neglect, no duties. I have so much energy for my work (e1)’, thereby exemplifying this myth. But we also see her eating cold meals out of the fridge while working on her computer and standing alone in a dark room while calling her son who is celebrating his birthday with his father and family (e2). The myth of the liberated woman is reproduced explicitly by the main character, while at the same time being questioned by showing the situation Birgitta is actually living in. So in portraying the actual experiences of living with and through menopause and the myths that accompany this life phase, *Borgen* and *Dun’ Breedin’* de-essentialize menopause myths and replace these static tales with the multiplicity of actual experiences. But particularly *Borgen* exemplifies that this does not necessarily imply that myths cease to be repeated, because the primordial myth of the liberated women is still both believed in and (partly) replaced by another myth: that of the unnesting (s)mother. By explicitly portraying Birgitta’s struggle with both of these myths and the lived incompatibility between them, *Borgen* shows us the myth *as* myth, and that is a first step in taking a distance from them. What these series (*Dun’ Breedin’* and *Borgen*) do, then, is to lay bare what living through menopause may actually mean – on a bodily level and in a mythical-proliferate world – all the while showing that myths of menopause are not the truth of our existence.

4.2. Mimicking myths of menopause in a curved mirror

Beauvoir’s suggestion to replace myths with actual experiences of living with menopause perhaps demythologizes myths, but it still means that one lives with myths and that one myth is replaced by another, as we have seen in the former section. That is, not a refutation of Beauvoir’s analysis, but affirms her idea that the myth of Woman as Other generates “a multiplicity of incompatible myths” (2009: 276). In other words, this marginalizing myth of Woman is persistent and emerges in different disguises again and again. In a mythical-proliferate world, women’s existential freedom is refuted again and again by others or by themselves.

However, in the TV series, we also identified ways of portraying and resisting menopause myths that cannot be interpreted on the basis of Beauvoir’s thinking. In *Big Mouth*, for instance, the fear of menopause and its dangers are magnified and therewith ridiculed. And in *Dun’ Breedin’* the bodily experiences of sleeplessness and hot flushes are augmented and thereby become hilarious. The women in these series often laugh about their experiences, thereby making fun of the menopausal transition all together.

Magnifying, ridiculing, making hilarious may be considered as just underscoring the taboo and silence surrounding menopause – as ‘something laughable’ – but, significantly in doing so, it may also be considered as a way of taking a distance from the menopausal experiences and the myths that signify them. Irigaray’s ‘mimesis’ and particularly a repetition in a *curved* mirror help to conceptualize these menopause portrayals.

In Irigaray’s perspective, the archetypical portrayals of menopausal women are not explicitly related to age-old myths, but to the identities available to women in a patriarchal order. Irigaray (1985) suggests that women miss a language of her own and are subjected to the masculine discourse that allows the existence of only one subject position. The only possibility this leaves concrete women is *mimicry*; that is, repeating the positions assigned to her in a masculine, patriarchal order. Irigaray’s project of the articulation of the feminine is an attempt to bring about change and to open up discourse towards subject positions that are defined by women themselves, in which they are no longer ‘the other’ of men.

Irigaray distinguishes two forms of mimesis: mimesis as production and mimesis that ‘is already caught up in a process of *imitation, specularization, adequation, and re-production*’ (Irigaray 1985, 131). It is the first form, mimesis as production, that she relates with ‘the possibility of a woman’s writing’ (Ibid.). Mimesis in Irigaray’s works is, for instance, associated with the style of writing in her early works, in which she aims at destruction by citing and paraphrasing texts of psychoanalysts such as Freud and philosophers such as Plato (Irigaray 1985). By repeating their words in another context, by questioning what they say, by asking what this means for the feminine, Irigaray ridicules and sexualizes the philosopher’s discourse. It is this strategy of repetition with a twist, enlargening and thereby making it laughable that we also found in the TV Series. For Irigaray, this is a strategy or tactics that is reserved for women in a masculine world. As such, it has two sides: it means at once a route ‘back through’ essentialism, that is through male metaphors, male images of the feminine, *and* the production of difference (Whitford 1991, 71; Braidotti 1994, 184), that is the creation of novel images and alternative representations that correspond to women’s embodied experience.

We identified Irigaray’s productive mimesis, for instance, in *Big Mouth*, where Barbara does not have a clue about what is happening to her. Waving herself cool, she is suddenly confronted with the Menopause Banshee riding next to her car on a motorcycle. ‘The change is coming, Barbara’, Banshee shouts. (s3e5). The Banshee announces menopause in rhyme: ‘A year goes by, no blood to let. [...] The moods do fling, the tears do fall, and soon you will dance at the Banshee ball’ (s3e5). Barbara reacts that she doesn’t want to go to the ball: she is not ready for menopause. In a later scene, she asks her husband whether she is still attractive, and they have sex. Note that the series repeats some stereotypes about menopause – not being attractive, becoming old, being bitchy – but by aggrandizing and magnifying them, the series, at the same time, mocks them. In *Dun’ Breedin’* a similar strategy is used to expose and ridicule mythical thinking about menopause. In one episode Angela wakes up alone and finds her husband sleeping on the couch in the living room: he moved to the couch because he was dreaming that he was drowning. ‘And I was’, he contends. The bed was wet; he put towels in it and moved Angela, who had severe night sweating, to the other side. Later he seduces her to have sex with him, wearing goggles

and flippers. ‘I am not ready for this shift’, is Angela’s response (e4). Here, the series does not only magnify the experience of menopause but makes it absurd, just like when Gigi, in another episode, wakes up in a bed swamped with blood, and makes fun of it with her friend on the smartphone: ‘Shall I help you de-massacre the place?’ (e5).

Even though the strategies of aggrandizing, magnifying, and ridiculing myths of menopause in itself perhaps is not an escape from mythical thinking all together; it does expose the myth as a myth. Women may recognize their experiences in it, and at the same time, understand that it is a tale. The mentioned strategies have the effect of making those who watch these series take a distance from the prevailing myths of menopause. Mocking and humour make that we can recognize the myths and stereotypes as static tales, that do not encompass the whole truth about their existence, but at the same time, do have some truth in them. In that way, magnifying and ridiculing does create a distance to myths of menopause which may open the road to more pluriform experiences of menopause – the route that [Beauvoir \(2009\)](#) suggested when it comes to de-essentializing myths and enabling women to take up their existential freedom.

5. Feminist futures: Beyond resistance

Rather ironically, Beauvoir ends her expose on menopause in *The Second Sex* (2009) with the words that sceptical irony, as something that is akin to Irigaray’s mimesis as curved mirror, may be ‘the highest form of freedom a woman-parasite can have’ but that ‘[a]t no time in her life does she succeed in being [...] effective’ (2009, 652). Irigaray as well did not have a firm belief in the effectiveness of curved mimicry. Gail Schwab mentions that Irigaray was surprised by the interest in what she considered as merely one of her strategies to resist women’s oppression and that Irigaray associated mimicry with the behaviour of a slave ([Schwab 2007](#), 46, n.1). The reason for relating it to a slave position is that mimesis still entails repetition, and not the creation of new possibilities for women to identify with. Instead of breaking with the patriarchal facets of the myths, mimesis means to keep on repeating them.

We share the reserve both Beauvoir and Irigaray expressed about mimicking myths. In a world in which menopause is hardly represented in popular TV series and the myths we analyzed in this article are not depicted as the myths that they are, mimicry however remains important to create a future wherein static and marginalizing myths of menopause are kept at bay. In the series, we found representations of menopausal experiences and the accompanying essentializing myths. Identifying and analyzing these represented experiences and myths is a step towards considering them as such. A next step would be to represent menopause as a period in women’s lives that cannot be subsumed under a few ‘static idols’ ([Beauvoir 2009](#), 282), but that this life phase may take many different forms. Instead of subsuming experiences under the few myths that we identified in this article, we therefore argue for representing more pluriform experiences of menopause and hope for representations in series that portray menopause in novel ways. Together with Beauvoir, we hope that essentializing myths are, at some point, replaced with a multitude of actual experiences – and that we can take up our existence instead of taking shelter in essence ([Beauvoir 2009](#)). With Irigaray, we argue for aggrandizing, magnifying, and ridiculing

myths in order to expose what it means to live with a menopausal body and through myths of menopause. Describing myths of menopause, showing what living with them means, and mimicking them therewith remains a constant task to undertake in order to create a feminist future wherein women can take up their existence, and realize their freedom, instead of sheltering in essentializing myths.

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Notes

1. Infertility and also breast cancer are not exclusively female experiences. However, because of their high prevalence amongst women (e.g. breast cancer) and/or because of the ways in which they are socio-culturally framed and treated (e.g. infertility), they may be understood as particularly female experiences.
2. While it may be debated whether the reality TV show *The real housewives and the menopause* is fiction or not, we hold that this show, and reality shows in general, incorporate substantial fictional and scripted aspects (de Boer et al. 2019). For this reason, we included this show in our analysis of fiction TV shows about menopause.
3. Although Irigaray took a distance from Beauvoir's analysis of the situation of women (Irigaray 1993, 9–14), we relate their analyses. See for the discontinuities between Beauvoir and Irigaray, Schor (1994, 62–67); Chanter (1995, 73–79). Our reading is in line with Geerts & Van der Tuin (2016) who argue for a diffractive reading strategy in which the continuities between the two philosophers are brought to light.
4. Note that such experiences such as hot flashes, but perhaps also a dryer vagina and night bleedings, may not be as universal as we often hold and as Beauvoir argues. See Lock's (1993) concept 'local biologies'.

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