

Claws, Paws, and Menopause: Feline Metaphors and the Performance of Aging

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Abstract: In this article, I stage a critique of feline metaphors that pathologize women, sex, and aging. Through monologues modeled on the rhetoric of the duelling logoi in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, I spotlight the non-deliberate work that "cougar" and "cat lady" metaphors perform to reduce the complexity of later-life female sexuality to absurd caricatures. Indeed, drawing on recent research in critical metaphor theory, gender and aging studies, animal studies/human-animal interaction research, and cultural criticism, the performances I feature enact how these metaphors frame femininity as a choice between "polishing" oneself into sexual viability through intensive anti-aging labor or succumbing to the centuries old spinster trope. By making these metaphors deliberate through Aristophanes' rhetorical moves and bawdy humour, and taking inspiration from Caitlyn Moran's irreverent feminism, these performances render visceral how these metaphoric constructs work to delegitimize aging women's sexuality. This work advances performance-based methods for feminist rhetorical criticism while challenging linguistic structures that constrain aging women's sexual agency.

Keywords: [Feline metaphors](#), [cougar](#), [cat lady](#), [aging women's sexuality](#), [Aristophanes comedy](#), [conceptual metaphor theory](#), [feminist rhetorical criticism](#), [performance-as-method](#), [embodied rhetoric](#)

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Cat ladies have enjoyed something of a resurgence lately. *NPR* references Vice President JD Vance's 2021 hairball comments, coughed up prior to the United States 2024 general election: "Vance complained that the U.S. was being run by Democrats . . . and a bunch of childless cat ladies who are miserable at their own lives and [their] choices . . . so they want to make the rest of the country miserable, too" (Treisman, 2024). While Vance has since admitted his comments were "dumb," (Maher & Bradner, 2024), celebrity cat lovers retaliated: Theo Larue (2024) reports that, while endorsing democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris, Taylor Swift, adorned in red lipstick, black turtleneck, and a black and white cat, signed a photo "Taylor Swift—Childless Cat Lady" (p. 254). Cat ladies everywhere attempted to reclaim what has, for eons, been perceived as a slight.

This cattiness illuminates a broader phenomenon I've grappled with as a white, middle-aged, London-born academic. While acknowledging the limitations of my positionality, as I meander through my 50s, I'm increasingly intrigued by *why* (mostly) heterosexual femininity is often established through a menagerie of feline metaphors: If we are young, lithe, and "hot," we are *sex kittens*. If sexual partners feel risqué, they'll snarl out the *p-word*. Business-savvy women might be *tigresses* in the boardroom.

In the last 20 years, we've added another to the list: If a woman over a certain age wants to date younger men, rather than follow a sexual cultural script and date within her age bracket, she's labeled a *cougar*.¹ Vance's metaphor, which has enjoyed quite a lengthy history, rounds out the list: if we reject or lack romantic companionship as we age, we're *cat ladies*.

1 Since researching and writing this article, I have become aware of a new *cat-adjacent* term for Gen Z men dating older millennial women: "hagmaxxing" (Hadge, 2024). I call this *cat-adjacent* because it returns us to the original witch-and-familiar dynamic, wherein older women are once again cast as "hags" with their feline companions.

The conceptual metaphor of “women are cats” establishes visual frameworks evident in any Google search: “sex kitten” yields provocatively posed young women, while “cougar woman” and “cat lady” searches offer equally stereotyped imagery. For fun, watch “#coolcatlady” on YouTube, featuring young women responding to “what first comes to mind when you hear the phrase cat lady?” My favorite? “Has dust bunnies in their uterus and watches *The Notebook* 5 times a day.”

Inspired by the comic playwright Aristophanes, who often characterized metaphors and put their linguistic limitations on the ancient Greek stage, I analyze these metaphors and the visuals they evoke through feminist comedic performance. Indeed, on closer examination, “women are cats” metaphors are so absurd, they deserve this bawdy ridicule. In this spirit, my project farcically *performs* cat metaphors that have enabled specific representations of older women and sex since the early 2000s. And following British journalist, Caitlyn Moran’s (2010) approach of laughing at women-denigrating linguistic structures (pp. 13-14),² my performances spotlight what Gerald Steen (2023) terms the “non-deliberate” nature of these metaphors—unmasking how they prescribe visual and behavioral boundaries of acceptable aging femininity and sexuality through theatrical embodiment.³

Extending metaphoric influence from Amy Koerber’s (2018) work on early 20th century metaphors that pathologized women’s reproductive biology, I’ve written 2 monologues, performed below, in the style of two of Aristophanes’ famed characters—Philosophy and Sophistry—from *Clouds* (423 BCE). In this spirit, both monologues satirize how 2 feline-related⁴ metaphors—the *cougar* and *cat lady*—delegitimize aging women’s sexuality. My monologues draw content directly from research that analyzes these metaphors and the visual cultures they conjure: the “cat lady” metaphor, and its accompanying representations, stigmatizes aging women’s independence as pathological, while “cougar” both “celebrates” sexuality (somewhat) in terms of how she should look, yet undermines women’s sexual agency by framing it as predatory. Finally, leveraging Sara Ahmed’s (2023) “Killjoy Feminism” through what is termed the “Happy Idea” in Old Comedy, my cat lady and cougar performances also enact an underlying imperative these metaphors advance. Drawing from Ahmed’s commentary that acts of “polishing” constitute feminine labor, my performances illustrate how women must polish (or not)—through beauty products, anti-aging treatments, and other appearance-management rituals—their “pathologies” to remain sexually viable as they age. My performances thus flesh out visual frameworks that delegitimize aging women’s sexuality and render them humorously *felt*.

2 What she *actually* says in reference to her feminist agenda is as follows: “We just need to look [‘all the patriarchal bullshit’] in the eye, squarely, for a minute, and then start laughing at it. We look hot when we laugh. People fancy us when they observe us giving out relaxed, earthy chuckles. Perhaps they don’t fancy us quite as much when we go on to bang on the tables with our fists, gurgling, ‘HARGH! HARGH! Yes, that IS what it’s like! SCREW YOU, patriarchy!’ before choking on a mouthful of chips, but still” (p.13)

3 See also F. McDermott (2019). You gotta laugh: Teaching critical thinking via comedy. *Pedagogy*, 19(2), pp. 339-351. <https://doi.org/10.1215/15314200-7296002>

4 While “cat lady” describes women who own cats rather than metaphorically being cats, both concepts participate in cultural frameworks associating women with feline imagery.

Performance and Metaphor: A Very Brief Overview

As rhetoric and composition scholars grapple with artificial intelligence's impact on our field, Jessica Enoch and Jenn Fishman's call for multimodal research methods in their 2015 introduction to *Peitho* seems increasingly urgent, especially for those committed to re-centering distinctly human, embodied ways of knowing (p. 4). Using performance as a method for rhetorical analysis—in this case, critical metaphor analysis—challenges traditional textual approaches while repurposing ancient comedic traditions to tackle this moment in feminine visual culture.

I draw from conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), a branch of cognitive linguistics that examines how metaphors structure thought and social reality, with foundational theories asserting that “human thought processes are largely metaphorical” (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, p. 6). Metaphor use is cultural, complex, often contradictory, and highly contextual, influencing perceptions of everything from emotions to societal structures and ideologies (Gibbs, 2008; Kövecses, 2020; Lopez Rodríguez, 2007, 2025). Metaphors can also establish relationships between language, meaning, and power. For instance, scholarship on metaphorical mappings that frame “women as animals” suggests a systematic pattern of linguistic control rooted in hierarchical thinking, justifying subordination to men of both women and animals (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, as cited in López Rodríguez, 2007).

Women are typically metaphorized as smaller or domesticated animals—until they deviate from norms, when their metaphors venture into the wild (López Rodríguez, 2008). Caroline N. Tipler and Janet B. Ruscher (2019) argue that animal metaphors often create false binaries of the hunted or hunter, where women “are inappropriately dominating, or appropriately subordinate” (p. 115). “Women are animals” metaphors also enable broader patterns of misogyny and violence (Lacallea et al., 2024; López Rodríguez, 2007, 2025; Tipler & Ruscher, 2019). Research also shows that while positive aspects are rarely transferred to figurative use, hostile sexist comments online systematically compare women with undesirable animal traits, portraying women as sexualized and demeaned (Lacallea et al., 2024; López Rodríguez, 2025). Broadly, the literature establishes that animal metaphors delegitimize women through problematic figuration,⁵ which my project explores through the “cougar” and “cat lady.”

A last thought here: metaphors establish social realities in ways that often operate undetected. Steen argues that metaphor use in context is typically *non-deliberate*—operating below awareness, sans one's conscious recognition of the relationship between the metaphor and to what it refers (2023). Rendering metaphors *deliberate* through performance can deconstruct linguistic damage, such as the pathologizing frame-

⁵ Lacallea et al. note that, “The negative moral attitude of zoomorphic language influences and is influenced, in turn, by the abuse to which animals are often subjected (Wasniewska, 2018). Hence, the interest in animalization processes expressed by ecofeminism (Twine, 2010) and, in general, in perspectives close to what Wyckoff (2014, p. 721) has called the Linked Oppression Thesis, ‘according to which oppression of women and the oppression of animals are linked causally, materially, normatively and/or conceptually’” (p.3). Albeit tangentially, rhetoricians such as Debra Hawhee's (2016) *Rhetoric of Tooth and Claw* pushes back against non-human animals' inferior rhetoricity. This work, starting with Aristotle, accounts for non-human animals' contribution to rhetorical studies, which has typically amounted to “a tale of strict, one-way co-optation” (p. 5). As much of my brief overview on animal metaphors and the way they map meaning onto feminine sexuality suggests, the human tendency to reduce animals to symbols treats them as stand-ins for human concepts, values, and beliefs, rather than recognizing their communicative complexity (Hawhee p. 4).

works that feline metaphors conjure for aging women's sexuality.

Theoretical Landscapes to Aristophanic Critique

My Aristophanic exposé of the non-deliberate nature of cat lady and cougars metaphors is theoretically informed by Moran, Koeber and Ahmed: Bawdily, Moran lights up the absurd logic that connects cats to female sexuality. Koeber traces a history of metaphors that have pathologized women's reproductive biology. And Ahmed's killjoy disruption draws our attention to the ways women's bodies are pathologized into visual polishing to stay sexually "legitimate."

The Aristophanic tradition of using crude humor for social critique finds contemporary expression in Moran's feminist writing, which shares Aristophanes' unapologetically frank approach to sex, bodies, and bodily functions. And, again, like Aristophanes, Moran's bawdiness serves a social purpose: to wrestle feminism into the mainstream.

To pave the way for my performances, let's consider the way Moran treats perhaps the most salacious variation of the "women are cats" metaphor in controversial visual settings: the use of the P-word in porn. She writes,

I've heard "pussy" referred to in the third person too many times in porn films for it to seem like a joyful or fun word. "Your pussy likes that, doesn't it?" "Shall I give this to your pussy?" . . . One day, I think idly, all the cats who are watching porn being made will rise up, revolted by all the uncouth dialogue ostensibly being aimed at them, wander onto the set, and ostentatiously vomit up a hairball in the middle of some bumming. (p. 61)

Forgive me while I snort coffee out of my nose. While Moran suggests "pussy" has become the dominating slang word in porn for female genitalia, she clearly understands how feline metaphors constitute women's sexuality, especially those that frame women as subordinate, as is the case with the use of the word "pussy" above. And, when Moran notes that "a whole generation of girls" now defaults to this terminology (p. 61), she infers that porn's visual frameworks naturalize the connection between female sexuality and domesticated animals.

And this subordination first works grammatically. In both references, female genitalia is the object of these sentences; it is the passive recipient that's being acted upon. However, by separating cats from women—imagining literal felines as offended spectators—Moran destabilizes the pussy metaphor itself, inviting us to see its absurdity, and rendering its non-deliberate nature visible. Like Aristophanes, she shows us how metaphoric plasticity can be exploited through humor to challenge entrenched linguistic pathologizing.

Moran's critique echoes a historical pattern of metaphorically pathologizing women's sexual bodies—a pathologizing that Ahmed tangentially takes up, as I discuss below. In *From Hysteria to Hormones*, Koerber analyzes how 1930s medical discourse framed women's reproductive biology as dysfunctional, with metaphors morphing from "women are hysterical" to "women are hormonal" (p. 129). Koerber goes on to explore how these metaphors were conflated to create a transitional slippery slope that moved from certain women having "abnormal" conditions to all women being framed as *inherently problematic* because of their repro-

ductive systems—the effects of which were longstanding well into the 1950s and beyond. This language of female bodily abnormality emerges in studies like Therese Benedeck and Boris Rubenstein’s 1939 “The Correlations between Ovarian Activity and Psychodynamic Processes,” which concluded, “Progesterone is the hormone chiefly concerned with preparation of the uterus for nidation and with maintaining pregnancy. The physiological preparation of the uterus for nidation implies a task for the psychic apparatus to be *dealt with* in every cycle, namely to solve the *problem of being a woman*” (p. 147, emphasis mine & in original). Given Koerber’s observations, I’m unsurprised how these pathologizing metaphors about female biology have evolved “cat-ward” into today’s visual culture around women, sex, and aging—from “women’s reproductive health/hormones make them unstable” to “women’s sexual choices make them predatory, or nuts.” Hormonal metaphors disseminate into discourse about women, a branch of which extends to feline metaphors through registers of instability, maintaining the same underlying devaluation of women’s sexuality.

While the “problem of being a woman” is cringeworthy enough, Benedeck and Rubenstein’s assertion that hormonal womanhood must be “dealt with” infers the logic underlying the “aging cat” metaphors I examine. These metaphors perpetuate the idea that women—and their sexuality—require fixing as they age, an imperative that manifests through visual transformation, or what I term *polishing*, following Ahmed. Bear with me; I’m not talking about whipping out the Pledge and giving the sideboards a good going-over. I’m talking about the cultural demands that women polish to remain sexually viable. I’m talking about the billions of dollars women spend on trying to polish away aging.⁶

Vance’s characterization of the cat lady, when compared to the cougar construct, creates a bizarre binary: women must either *polish* themselves into sexual viability or face pathologization—a lonely, miserable, childless future—for refusing to do so. I thus apply Ahmed’s analysis of *polishing as feminist labor* in *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook* to expose this binary function, in that it exacerbates an intensifying pressure for women to maintain their socio-sexual acceptability through visible effort. Ahmed writes,

Polishing is an activity, a form of labor. To cover is to labor at an appearance . . . Polishing is about more than the removal of dust and dirt; it removes evidence of itself . . . If we refuse to polish the surfaces, we encounter what is real, all that has been removed to create a certain impression. (p. 98)

The visual cultures that contribute to metaphoric “cougaring” demand that women must labor intensively to maintain acceptable sexual appeal as they age. In these acts of polishing age, we varnish, we exfoliate, we highlight, we gild, we peel, we smooth, we wax, and we inject. The cat lady, on the other hand, embodies the pathologized consequence of refusing this labor—explored in-depth below. In revealing “what is real”—visible authentic aging—women risk being dismissed as sexually irrelevant and socially undesirable.

In the following section, I turn to performance-as-method. My performers embody scholarly analyses of cat lady and cougar metaphors (2010–present), which inform the content, setting, clothing choices, and language. Two speeches from William Arrowsmith’s (1962) translation of *The Clouds* provide the rhetorical patterns, and an Aristophanic “happy idea” sets the scene.

⁶ Matej Mikulic (2024) shares that “The global market for anti-aging products was valued at around 47 billion U.S. dollars in 2023 and is expected to increase to nearly 80 billion by the beginning of the next decade.”

The Agon at “The Curl Up or Dye” Salon

Unlike traditional Greek rhetorical theory, Aristophanes’ Old Comedy embodies social critique through wildly imaginative, bawdy performances that reveal how discourse actually functioned in 5th century Athenian civic life (Major, p. 6).

Three features of Aristophanic comedy serve my purposes here:⁷ First, Aristophanes created absurd scenarios to satirize contemporary socio-politics through his “happy idea” of “what if...” in a ridiculous setting. For instance: In *Clouds*, Socrates runs a “Thinkery” that teaches students to make weak arguments stronger.⁸ Second, his comedies feature debates in the “agon,” such as the contest between Philosophy and Sophistry in *Clouds*, where these personified abstractions represent “traditional” versus “new ideas” and attempt, in the most lewd fashion, to recruit students to their respective schools. Third, this personification of abstractions, often related to commonplace language use,⁹ typically indexes socio-political exigencies, revealing Aristophanic ethics through irreverent focus on bodily functions and sexuality.

My happy idea stages an “agon” between a cat lady and cougar metaphor at the “Curl Up or Dye Salon.” Like Aristophanes’ Thinkery in *Clouds*, this salon becomes the backdrop for a verbal battle between competing philosophies of later-life female sexuality as they enact the systemic and resulting visual frameworks their metaphoric use evokes, reinforcing the pathologizing of older women’s sexuality and the pressure to “polish.” The Cat Lady (modeled on *Clouds*’ traditional Philosophy) duels the Cougar (modeled on Sophistry); both try to convince women to their side, with each character employing the same rhetorical strategies as their ancient counterparts in *Clouds*. I detail these “moves” in the video’s accompanying transcripts.

Introducing Marge

Marge, the Cat Lady metaphor, resides in a special wing of “The Curl up or Dye Salon.” She hangs out with multiple felines, listening to *Democracy Now*, and ruminating on her life as a liberal spinster. She delights in recruiting younger women to the cat lady lifestyle, while demeaning her opponent, Felicia, the Cougar Metaphor. To review Marge’s pitch, visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4aNGp_jJOsI or review the transcript of her video in Appendix 1

Marge the metaphor reflects the research on her metaphoric effects: The cat lady trope evolved from Egyptian goddess associations to medieval witchcraft scapegoat, complete with cat (Barak, 2024; Kogan et al.,

7 The typical structure of Greek Comedy is as follows: a prologue and entrance of the chorus (parodos), characters engaged in a central debate (agon), followed by the parabasis where the chorus broke character to address the audience directly about contemporary issues. The play concluded with an episode that elaborated on the outcome of the debate and then an exode (exit song) which featured a celebration or some riotous event (MacLennan, 1999).

8 The plot follows Strepsiades, an old farmer drowning in debt from his son’s expensive habits, who enrolls in Socrates’ “Thinkery” (a school of rhetoric/logos) hoping to learn clever arguments to avoid paying his creditors. After Strepsiades proves too old and stupid to learn, his son Pheidippides takes his place and masters the art of making weak arguments appear strong. However, Pheidippides then uses these skills to justify beating his own father, which horrifies Strepsiades. In the end, the outraged dad burns down the Thinkery. The play mocks both sophistry and a traditional rhetorical education

9 Major describes this method as a three-stage process: “First [Aristophanes demonstrates] a commonplace expression containing a latent metaphor [or other commonplace expression]. Next, the metaphor takes concrete form on stage. Finally, the concrete form emerges in a new form that defines it ethically in the comic world” (p. 87).

2024), currently framing independent aging women negatively while reinforcing heteronormativity (Probyn-Rapsey, 2018; Barak, 2024). Typically portrayed as bitter and dismal with multiple cats, reminiscent of Miss Havisham (Suen, 2022; Barak, 2024), the cat lady is pathologized as “deviant” because she “departs from a conventional script of how a woman should live her life... [representing] an implicit rejection of heteronormativity... [caring] about cats more than—maybe even instead of—men” (Suen, 2022, p. 390). Alison Suen concludes that society deems suspect anything beyond heteronormative romance boundaries (p. 393).

Visually, cat ladies frequently appear in popular media and reflect both Koeber’s comments on female pathology, and the anti-polishing sentiment raised by Ahmed: Elenor Abernathy (*The Simpsons*) suffered burnout from her career as an academic, is a raving alcoholic, and throws cats at people passing by (Suen, 2022). Angela Martin (*The Office*) “remain[s] classified as a cat lady based on her inability to relate or interact with her coworkers, her prudish attitudes, and her cat obsession” (Barak, 2024, p. 8). Susan Boyle, from *Britain’s Got Talent*, whose media coverage emphasized her “middle-aged, single status, fizzy grey hair, and beloved cat” (p. 188) was noted for her subsequent breakdown (p. 191). Finally, reality TV shows and documentaries that feature animal hoarders further serve to ferment an understanding of the cat lady trope in that their homes are often filthy and uninhabitable (Probyn-Rapsey, 2018; Baraka, 2024). These narratives frequently link a woman’s criminal devotion to cats—given the horrendous conditions these shows feature—to past trauma or emotional deficiency (Barak, 2024).

Recently, and especially in the context of the 2024 US presidential election and Vance’s remarks about miserable, single, childless Democrats (Kogan et al., 2024; Larue, 2024), we’ve seen efforts to reclaim the term, to polish the cat ladies. As noted in the introduction, all manner of celebrities have come out to claim that status (Larue, 2024). And a [fancy] feast of articles in various editions of *Vogue* reflects a move to clean these ladies up, including links to \$900 litter boxes and cat-related fashion (Kaplan, 2021). Recently, then, an alternate understanding of this metaphor, contrary to the spinster trope, indicates that far from being old, alone, and bitter, cat ladies are politically engaged, predominantly liberal, and satisfied with their lives (Kogan et al., 2024). In fact, making the decision to be childless has little to do with a lack of choice in romance and instead reflects factors like economic uncertainty and concerns about climate change. This has led to increased investment in pets, often referred to as “fur babies” (Kogan et al., 2024; Larue, 2024), which reflects a deliberate choice by women not to have children, even if they are married (Beasley, 2024). A browse through TikTok and Instagram reflects this shift, visually.

Introducing Felicia

Next up is Felicia, our cougar metaphor. Tottering in on Jimmy Choo shoes, fresh from the tanning booth, she perches at her favorite bar spot in the “Curl Up or Dye Salon,” dirty martini in hand, latest boy-toy in tow. She’s always ready to scoff at her opponent and evangelize against “graceful” aging to any woman willing to pay the steep maintenance fees.

Felicia does her utmost to pull off her “cougar” stature, but at times, the cracks appear. To review her pitch, go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXmTFIFTdfg>, or review the transcript of her video in

Appendix 2.

Felicia's performance embodies contradictions in the research. She appears empowered, sexually autonomous, and polished, yet this research reveals darker aspects of her metaphoric reflection: The "cougar" metaphor emerged in the early 2000s, characterized in *Cougar: The Musical* as "a woman empowered, strong, with loot... looks fine while sipping wine in her Armani suit" (as cited in Collard, 2011, p. 519). Following Valerie Gibson's 2002 book *Cougar: A Guide for Older Women Dating Younger Men*, the concept infiltrated media through TV shows (*Cougar Town*), films (who can forget Stiffler's Mom in *American Pie*), and dating sites (*dateacougar.com*) (Reyes, 2010; Collard, 2011; Kaklamanidou, 2012; Montemurro & Siefken, 2013). With Demi Moore as its "high priestess" during her relationship with Ashton Kutcher (Kaklamanidou, 2012), the "cougar" is marked as financially independent, fit, glamorous, and sexually liberated. Yet simultaneously, she's pathologized—mocked for desperation, sexual predation, violation of sexual scripts, and obsession with anti-aging procedures (Alarie & Carmichael, 2015; Burema, 2017; Kaklamanidou, 2012; Montemurro & Siefken, 2013).

The cougar metaphor and its discursive effects have mapped an artificial binary onto age-hypogamous sexual relationships: on the one hand, scholars point out societal acknowledgment of older women's sexual desire (Alarie, 2019; Burema, 2017; Montemurro & Siefken, 2013), how the cougar phenomenon challenges age-hypergamous double standards (Alarie, 2020; Montemurro & Siefken, 2013), how it offers women sexual agency when such agency is culturally expected to diminish (Alarie, 2020, p. 6; Burema, 2017; Montemurro & Siefken, 2013) and how women find these relationships more sexually satisfying than those with same-age men (Alarie, 2019).

But, in line with Koeber's studies of the pathologizing of women's bodies, scholars argue the trope perpetuates ageist and sexist narratives, with ongoing effects visible in how these romantic relationships are perceived in 2025 (see footnote 1). First, they point out that terming women "cougars" reifies sexist binaries. As a big cat, the predatory cougar masculinizes older women, which subtly infers that any female power manifests through sexual conquest rather than alternative expressions of desire and autonomy (Burema, 2017; Collard, 2021; Montemurro & Siefken, 2013). In addition, studies find that in age-hypogamous relationships, women want to downplay their agency to avoid accusations of being "desperate," "pathological," or "deviant" (Alarie, 2019; Alarie & Carmichael, 2015; Montemurro & Siefken, 2013).

And finally, the cougar trope epitomizes the polishing impulse Ahmed references. This is evident in how media representations, especially of celebrity "cougars," frequently fixate on the aging female body, evaluating women in terms of how "good they look for their age" and perpetuating the idea that attractiveness declines with age (Alarie & Carmichael, 2015; Burema, 2017; Reyes, 2010). Betty Kaklamanidou (2012) writes of the "representation of female panic" as Courtney Cox in the show *Cougar Town* consistently scrutinizes her image, starves herself before dates, so her stomach is flat (p. 83). Building on this observation, Milaine Alarie and Jason T. Carmichael (2015) nevertheless quote Rose Weiz (2010), who points out that the "cougar" lifestyle is not presented in the media as accessible and acceptable for all middle-aged women, only for those who are "taut, dyed, trim, energetic, and fit, and . . . in their early 40s" (p. 1253). Consequently, this inability

to thwart natural aging becomes a source of “anxiety and self-doubt, thereby influencing [women’s] sexuality or dating habits” (p. 1253). Some women simply don’t have the resources to polish to “cougar standards.”

Now What?

Now that we’ve watched the cougar and cat lady metaphors embodied, enacted and reflected, where do we go from here? Aristophanes’ *Clouds* ending is ambiguous: He invites audiences to imagine alternative configurations of the rhetorical landscape his duelling arguments inhabit (Harris-Ramsby, 2021). Exposing the non-deliberate nature of Marge and Felicia’s duelling metaphors also leaves us with a feeling of *what now?* This much I suspect: their performance asks us to reconfigure women, aging, and sex beyond these tropes, by forcing a conscious recognition of their absurdities, and drawing the curtain on the absurd traps that they lay for women as they age. Whether we polish ourselves into “cougars” or preen our “cat lady” beards, Marge and Felicia reduce the rich complexity of women’s later-life sexuality to cartoon caricatures. The cougar trope demands we spend exorbitant amounts of money and time to maintain sexual viability, while the cat lady trope threatens us with social exile, if we refuse, (despite efforts to reclaim cat ladies as vibrant, feline-dependent democrats). Both metaphors deny women the right to age authentically, to desire (or not desire) without judgment. For this rhetorician’s part, it’s time to retire the feline menagerie entirely. Instead of sex kittens, cougars, and cat ladies, how about we’re just women—in all our complexities, ages, sexual desires, and bodily shapes.

The performances I’ve shared—drawing on Aristophanes’ ancient theatrical tradition—demonstrate how physically enacting metaphors can expose linguistic mechanisms that often remain hidden in conventional analysis. Indeed, as the disciplines of rhetoric and composition navigate an increasingly technical landscape in the age of AI, Marge and Felicia present a comical case for returning to more embodied ways of knowing. As composition increasingly happens in digital spaces shaped by algorithms, theatrical methods of knowing and understanding remind us that rhetoric remains, at its beginnings, an embodied art—one that gains particular power when it renders visible the metaphors that often quietly structure our social realities.

Biography

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Appendix 1

Marge at the “Curl Up or Dye” Salon

This transcript accompanies the video of Marge: The Cat Lady Metaphor. Her mission? To convert women to her vision of aging femininity and sexual behaviour. Matching the persuasive moves of the character “Philosophy” from Aristophanes’ *The Clouds* (Arrowsmith, 1962), she alternates between speaking to potential followers of her philosophy, and directing accusations at her opponent: The Cougar Metaphor. Below are two columns: on the left is “Philosophy’s” speech. On the right, Marge’s.



<p>“Philosophy” from <i>Clouds</i> (The duelling logoi at the Agon)</p>	<p>Marge the Cat Lady</p>
<p>Proem: I propose to speak of the Old Education, as it flourished once beneath my tutelage, when Homespun Honesty, Plainspeaking, Truth were still honored and practiced, and throughout the schools of Athens the regime of the three D's:</p> <p>DISCIPLINE, DECORUM, and DUTY—enjoyed unchallenged supremacy.</p> <p>Our Principles: Our curriculum was Music and Gymnastic, enforced by that rigorous discipline summed up in the old adage: BOYS SHOULD BE SEEN BUT NOT HEARD. This was our cardinal rule, and when the students, mustered by groups according to region, were marched in squads to school, discipline and absolute silence prevailed.</p> <p>Nostalgic Hardiness: Ah, they were hardy, manly youngsters. Why, even on winter mornings when the snow, like powdered chaff, came sifting down, their only protection against the bitter weather was a thin and scanty tunic.</p> <p>Rigid Discipline: In the classes, posture was stressed and the decencies firmly enforced:</p>	<p>Proem: I am the epitome of elder femininity that flourishes under feline fellowship. I salute the ancient Egyptians where Cat Lady Wisdom was revered. I persevered through dark times, when evil men persecuted wise women and her feline familiars. And in America from the shores of the Pacific, through the Great Plains, to the temperate East, we honor the regime of the three Cs:</p> <p>CHILDLESS, CRANKY CAT-DEPENDENT--enjoying unchallenged sexual invisibility.</p> <p>Our Principles: Our principles were simple: LADIES OVER 40 SHOULD TUNE INTO NPR AND STOCK UP ON MEOW MIX. [<i>She exaggerates the meow</i>]. This was our cardinal rule, as we sat silently by fireplaces, our tweed skirts knitting our knees firmly together!</p> <p>Nostalgic Hardiness: Ah, we were resilient, graceful women! Why, even during menopause, when hot flashes seemed sure to power the entire eastern seaboard, our only response was to dress in layers next to a well-placed fan, bearing our erotic extinction with dignity.</p> <p>Rigid Discipline: Independence was stressed, and dignified singleness firmly</p>

the students stood in rows, rigidly at attention, while the master rehearsed them by rote, over and over. The music itself was traditional and standard—such familiar anthems and hymns as those, for instance, beginning *A Voice from Afar* or *Hail, O Pallas, Destroyer!*—and the old modes were strictly preserved in all their austere and simple beauty.

Clowning in class was sternly forbidden, and those who improvised or indulged in those fantastic flourishes and trills so much in vogue with the degenerate, effeminate school of Phrynis, were promptly thrashed for subverting the Muses.

In the gymnasium too decorum was demanded. The boys were seated together, stripped to the skin, on the bare ground, keeping their legs thrust forward, shyly screening their nakedness from the gaze of the curious. Why, so modest were students then, that when they rose, they carefully smoothed out the ground beneath them, lest even a pair of naked buttocks leaving its trace in the sand should draw the eyes of desire.

Modesty/Authenticity: Anointing with oil was forbidden below the line of the navel, and consequently their genitals kept their boyish bloom intact and the quincelike freshness of youth.

Toward their lovers their conduct was manly: you didn't see them mincing or strutting, or prostituting themselves with girlish voices or

embraced: we poised gracefully on the shelf in our unmarried truth—whether chosen or, y'know circumstantial—spoke wisely but softly, while, masturbating [sic] mastering the traditional arts: reading voraciously, gardening in flowery gloves with those big floppy hats, and sighing audibly in concert with public news radio.

She groans.

Other activities were time-honored and fulfilling—volunteer work with the local democrats, getting tattoos like Helen Mirren's, not really "loving" Taylor Smiths [sic] music but appreciating the impulse – the old ways of single woman wisdom were strictly preserved, whether born of choice or yog-dick-ally [sic] accepted. Namaste.

Desperate husband-hunting, and coiffing beyond Susan Boyle, strictly forbidden! And it don't matter how many *Vo-gue* articles claim the "Cat Lady Cliche is Over Thanks to New Feline Fashion", [*she laughs*] woe betide any woman who dared bleach, pluck or wax. Those who indulged in any hair removal events were gently guided to relinquish their tweezers, accepting the migration of whiskers to their chins with grace.

And those who batted their thinning eyelashes at men in a last ditch attempt at heteronor-may-tive coupling were quietly reminded to accept their status with dignity

Modesty/Authenticity: At night in quiet and chaste acceptance of their romantic status, Women chose feline loyalty and watching reruns of *Midsommer Murders* over the frailty of romantic relationships, keeping their standards realistic and their cats close.

Forsake the brothels and the low, salacious leer of prostituted love—which, being bought, corrupts your manhood and destroys your name. Toward your father scrupulous obedience; to honor his declining years who spent his prime in rearing you. Not to call him Dotard or Foggy...

I promise you, not contentious disputations and the cheap, courtroom cant of this flabby, subpoena-serving, shyster-jargoned generation, but true athletic prowess, the vigor of contending manhood in prime perfection of physique, muscular and hard, glowing with health.

Envisioning a future: Ah, I can see you now, as through an idyl moving—you with some companion of your age, modest and manly like you, strolling by Akademe perhaps, or there among the olives, sprinting side by side together, crowned with white reed, breathing with every breath the ecstasy of Spring returning, the sudden fragrance of the season's leisure, the smell of woodbine and the catkins flung by the poplar, while touching overhead, the leaves of the linden and plane rustle, in love, together.

Your reward: So follow me, young man, and win perfection of physique. To wit: BUILD: Stupendous.

COMPLEXION: Splendid.
 SHOULDERS: Gigantic.
 TONGUE: Petite.
 BUTTOCKS: Brawny.
 PECKER: Discreet.

The price you'll pay: But follow my opponent here, and your reward shall be, as follows:

BUILD: Effeminate.
 COMPLEXION: Ghastly.
 SHOULDERS: Hunched.
 TONGUE: Enormous.
 BUTTOCKS: Flabby.

romantic marketplace.

Envisioning a future: Ah, I can see you now, as through a peaceful tableau—you with some lady companion of your age, modest and graceful like you, strolling through the farmer's market, or there among the library stacks, crowned with silver hair, breathing in the gentle fragrance of your homemade bread, not having to pay for a kid's college.

Your reward: *[To the prospective pupil]* So follow me, sister and win perfection of spinster spirit. To wit:

BUILD: heel free
 COMPLEXION: Justine Bateman
 SHOULDERS: tote bagged
 BUTTOCKS: cat haired
 PECKERS? None! (Duh)

The price you'll pay: But follow my opponent here, and your reward shall be as follows:

BUILD: Surgically enhanced
 COMPLEXION: spray tanned
 SHOULDERS: athleisure deprived
 TOUNGE; vapid
 ANUS: bleached

<p>PECKER: Preposterous! (but thereby insuring you an enormous and devoted political following.)</p> <p>Final Moral Warning: What is worse, you shall learn to make a mockery of all morality, systematically confounding good with evil and evil with good, so plumped and pursy with villainy, sodomy, disgrace, and perversion, you resemble ANTIMACHOS himself. Depravity can sink no lower.</p>	<p>PECKERS: insatiable [<i>She spits up a hairball</i>] (ugh! And thereby ensuring you become a cautionary tale and object of pity, wasting effort on futile romantic pursuits!)</p> <p>Final Moral Warning What is worse, you shall learn to make a mockery of all natural order, systematically confounding wisdom with folly and grace with desperation, so plumped and bloated with vanity, surgery, delusion and desire, you resemble every tragic stereotype of the woman who refuses to age gracefully. Depravity can sink no longer [sic].</p>
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Appendix 2

Felicia at “The Curl Up & Dye” Salon

This transcript accompanies the video of Felicia: The Cougar Metaphor. Her mission? To persuade women to refute Marge, the cat lady’s argument. Matching the persuasive moves of the character “Sophistry” from Aristophanes’ *The Clouds* (Arrowsmith, 1962), she alternates between speaking to potential followers of her philosophy, and directing accusations at her opponent: The Cady Lady Metaphor. Below are two columns: on the left is “Sophistry’s” speech. On the right, Felicia’s.

<p>"Sophistry" from <i>Clouds</i> (The duelling logoi at the Agon)</p>	<p>Felicia: The Cougar Metaphor</p>
<p>At last! A few minutes more and I would have exploded from sheer impatience to refute him and demolish his case.</p> <p>A quick concession: Now then, I freely admit that among men of learning I am-somewhat pejoratively-dubbed the Sophistic, or Immoral, Logic. And why? Because I first devised a Method for the Subversion of Established Social Beliefs and the Undermining of Morality. Moreover, this little invention of mine, this knack of taking what might appear to be the worse argument and nonetheless winning my case, has, I might add, proved to be an extremely lucrative source of income.</p> <p>Direct Challenge: But observe, gentlemen, how I refute his vaunted Education</p>	<p>Oh My Gawd. Any more of her mewling, and I'd have stuck a stiletto in my jugular.</p> <p>A quick concession: Now, I freely admit some have dubbed me a Cougar and I understand they're concerned that my "cougaring" perpetuates the performative pecker parade of the patriarchy, linking my power to masculine sexual aggression, blah blah blah-eee-oww blah. But <i>why</i>? Because I founded an entire movement: I established <i>the</i> method for the <i>subversion</i> of age-appropriate dating; I dismantled her outdated norms, and pitiful descent into sexual insignificance.</p> <p>And, what of it if some women reject this little invention of mine, designating it desperate? BFD if some women resist the label, feeling ashamed to admit it; I am, nonetheless, securing limitless satisfaction in my pursuits. Come here darling [<i>She beckons to her "cub" who brings her a drink. She reaches for a cookie. He admonishes her and gestures to her to hand over the cookie. She is momentarily disappointed but relinquishes it. He points to her midsection. She sucks it in</i>]</p> <p>Direct challenge: Shall we burst her bubble just a teensy bit? [<i>She scratches the cub on the head as though he is a cat</i>]</p>

Rebuttal with Examples: Now then, in your curriculum hot baths are sternly prohibited. But what grounds can you possibly adduce for this condemnation of hot baths?

Answer me this: which of the sons of Zeus was the most heroic?
Who suffered most? Performed the greatest labors?

Philosophy responds: In my opinion, the greatest hero who ever lived was Herakles.

Sophistry continues: But when we speak of the famous Baths of Herakles,* are we speaking of hot baths or cold baths? Necessarily, sir, of hot baths. Whence it clearly follows, by your own logic, that Herakles was both flabby and effeminate!

Another example: if you like, consider our national passion for politics and debating, pastimes which you condemn and I approve.

But surely, friend, if politics were quite so vicious as you pretend, old Homer-* our mentor on moral questions-would never have portrayed Nestor and those other wise old men as politicians, would he? Surely he would not.

Dismissing "Philosophy's" Core Values: Or take the question of education in oratory in my opinion desirable, in yours the

Rebuttal with Examples. [Referring to the *Cat Lady*]. Let's see now. Her preposterous philosophy relegates us mature ladies to the cardi-wearing whisker brigade, severing us from sex completely - no more making the beast with two backs with a lovely hunk like this gorgeous chap [*She gestures to the cub*] But really, what grounds does she have for this drivel?

Answer me this: which female celebrity over 50 commands the most media attention in *People, US Weekly, Hello, Star, Entertainment Weekly, Ok!, The Sun, Weekly World News, The Enquirer*. . . Which star is most definitely *not like us*. . . I mean, *her*? [Referring to the *Cat Lady*]

[*The cub whispers in her ear*] Jennifer Lopez you say? But when we speak of J Lo, is she baking bread and cleaning cat boxes?

NO! She's defying nature! She looks spectacular for her age!

Whence it clearly follows, by her own logic, that a most celebrated woman is delighted to date younger men (Ben Affleck notwithstanding), making the age-appropriate sexual script both outdated and culturally irrelevant.

Another Example: And consider Madonna, an icon of female empowerment, consistently dating men *decades* younger.

Admittedly, one requires her level of wealth and celebrity status to pull this off successfully—the rest of us must be more... strategic. [*She claps her paws and he fumbles for a mirror. She spots a chin hair and plucks it with her claws, hissing "pssfft, she dismisses the mirror."*] But surely, if age-gap relationships were quite so pathological as she pretends, would these ladies flaunt them so publicly? On red carpets? They would not.

reverse.

As for Moderation and Decorum, the very notions are absurd. In fact, two more preposterous or pernicious prejudices, I find it hard to imagine. For example, can you cite me one instance of that profit which a man enjoys by exercising moderation? Refute me if you can.

[Dialogue has been cut here]

Listing Denied Pleasures: I might mention these: Sex. Gambling. Gluttony. Guzzling. Carousing. Etcet.

Rhetorical Question: And what on earth's the point of living, if you leach your life of all its little joys?
Very well then, consider your natural needs.

Practical Scenario: Suppose, as a scholar of Virtue, you commit some minor peccadillo, a little adultery, say, or seduction, and suddenly find yourself caught in the act. What happens? You're ruined, you can't defend yourself (since, of course, you haven't been taught).

But follow me, my boy, and obey your nature to the full; romp, play, and laugh without a scruple in the world. Then if caught in flagrante, you simply inform the poor cuckold that you're utterly innocent and refer him to Zeus as your moral sanction.

Dismissing Cat Lady Values: [directed to the Cat Lady]. Her insistence on "graceful aging" and "dignified invisibility"—pah! She moans about patriarchy? Her and your cat hair coated velour exacerbate the patriarchy, merely plucking older women off the sexual playing field.

As for hiding in the library stack and farmers markets, denying herself *this* [*she gestures to a cub*]: two more preposterous or pernicious prejudices I find it hard to imagine. What fun is that? Refute me, if you can!

Listing Denied Pleasures Specifically: Reliable hardwood. Quality plumbing. And my skilled handywork.

And here's some post feminism for ya: The thrill of defying ageist expectations!

Short-term excitement without the burden of long-term commitment [*an aside*] (although research suggests some of these relationships actually last longer than the media portrays) [*A cub whistles the first few notes of the wedding march*]

But why burden ourselves with such tedious empirical details when we can enjoy such consequence-free pleasure? [*The cub lights a "cigarette."*]

Rhetorical Question: And what on earth's the point of living, if you leach your romantic life of all its vital possibilities? Let's consider our *natural* needs.

Practical Scenario

Suppose, as a scholar of cat lady virtue, you encounter some minor temptation—28 year old Bradly Hotstuff who finds you irresistible. Suddenly those tweed skirts and teenWOLF beards don't seem so apropos.

What happens? You're frozen because she's [*addressing the cat lady*] taught you that such

<p>Ultimate Justification: After all, didn't he, a great and powerful god, succumb to the love of women? Then how in the world can you, a man, an ordinary mortal, be expected to surpass the greatest of gods in moral self-control? Clearly, you can't be.</p>	<p>passion is unseemly for women of our age?!</p> <p>Follow me and succumb to your wilder instincts: prowl the city at happy hour! Take that young man home.</p> <p>Be subtle about initiating— lest you're labeled desperate or deviant. And naturally, you'll need to maintain your appearance: [<i>The young man whips out a spray bottle and Mr. Clean magic eraser. He scrubs her forearm, her underarm, and her nails</i>]</p> <p>Get the highlights, and that \$100 glow. And make sure you wax, (But wait a couple of days for the burn to tone down or your lady parts will look like you did several nights with Freddy Krueger) Then if those kill joys call you "predatory," simply inform them you're following your natural instincts as your moral sanction.</p> <p>Ultimate Justification</p> <p>After all, don't younger men reach their sexual peak in their twenties? But women, we're just getting started? Don't they benefit from our wisdom? Why, I hear the youngest generation has even coined a new term for pursuing us—though "hagmaxxing" does sound rather less flattering than "cougar hunting," doesn't it?</p> <p>Look, how in the world can a woman with <i>decades</i> of sexual knowledge be expected to suppress her desires when nature itself has designed this perfect complementarity?</p> <p>Younger men: at their sexual peak: Older women: undeniably adroit lovers. Clearly, she cannot be.</p>
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