

How old is Miss Havisham? Age and Gender Performances in *Great Expectations* and *Sunset Boulevard*

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The characters of Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Norma Desmond in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* address a matrix of age, gender, and performance through significant points of intertextuality. They epitomize what Anne Morey has referred to as "the elegiac female grotesque" to depict older women's overstated performances of age and gender; these performances can be interpreted as ambivalent, insofar as they personify the abjection of female aging, but they also subvert the dictates of age imposed on women. Given the transformative quality of performance that characterizes both age and gender, critics such as Deborah Jermyn have argued for the need to revisit representations of aging women with special insight into their performative and, ultimately, transformative dimensions. With this purpose in mind, this article analyzes the performances of age and gender that these two classic characters exhibit, examines how they respectively overstate age and deny it, and reveals how they represent an ambivalent dimension of age performativity—acting age and acting against age—which still prevails in current cultural representations of female aging.

Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, released in 1950, laid bare the intricacies of filmmaking from a significantly cynical point of view. Both a film about the entertainment business and a by-product of the system, it unveils how mean life can be behind the scenes, particularly for aging actresses, far from the glamorous red carpet. *Sunset Boulevard* possesses an acute metanarrative quality; after all, it is—in its self-referential condition—a film about performing, with real actors and directors playing themselves, as well as with a very well-known

has-been star, Gloria Swanson, playing her alter ego, Norma Desmond. This self-referential aspect extends to a series of intertextual links that reinforce as well as subvert beliefs about issues that the film addresses, such as aging, gender, and performance.

As a case in point, early in the film, on his way to escape from creditors, scriptwriter Joe Gillis stumbles upon a mansion that reminds him of that of Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens's classic novel *Great Expectations*. As he later finds out, this mansion belongs to Norma Desmond, one of the greatest stars of silent films, who has been living detached from the world in her isolated house for nearly twenty years. At this stage, a strong parallel is established between Norma Desmond and Miss Havisham when Joe Gillis describes this bleak and odd-looking mansion:

It was a great big elephant of a place. The kind crazy movie people built in the crazy twenties. A neglected house gets an unhappy look. This one had it in spades. It was like that old woman in *Great Expectations*, that Miss Havisham in her rotting wedding dress and her torn veil, taking it out on the world because she'd been given the 'go-bye.'

Joe Gillis's early allusion linking Norma Desmond and Miss Havisham becomes a pervasive intertextual reference that echoes all through the film. In fact, both female characters share important similarities inasmuch as Norma Desmond, a histrionic actress from silent films, and Miss Havisham, legacy of the villainess in Victorian melodramas, exhibit remarkable performative tendencies that intersect with the discourses of aging and gender that both stories address.

In spite of popular culture's general tendency to erase aging women from the limelight, Norma Desmond and, by extension, Miss Havisham—through narrator Joe Gillis's direct allusion to this classic archetype of female aging—stand out as illustrative depictions of what Mary Russo defines as “the female grotesque” (*Female 1*). By means of this figure, aging is depicted as a process of decline, with aging female characters portrayed as bizarre and disturbing, when they resist the cultural demand that they should give up their sexual allure and, instead,

surrender to sheer invisibility. In the context of celebrity studies, Anne Morey adopts the term “elegiac female grotesque” to refer to celebrated female actors who play overstated performances of female aging with the same discomfoting effects (107). In her book *The Stages of Age*, Anne Basting first draws attention to the intersection between age and gender precisely because of the “transformative quality of performance” that characterizes both of them (7). Basting builds on Judith Butler’s claims that gender identity is achieved through repeated practices across time and that the hyperbolic display of these practices ultimately unveils their own performative quality, resulting in the subversion of gender as it is revealed to be naturalized through repetition (*The Stages of Age* 7-8). It is in the impossibility of exact repetition that Butler finds an entry into transformability (Basting, *The Stages of Age* 8). Similarly, exaggerated performances of female aging, both on- and off-screen, call attention to the performative nature of aging. This suggests that one can act—or be reluctant to act—according to one’s age since, as Margaret Gullette claims, given the performative quality of aging, one can act younger or older, regardless of one’s chronological age (*Aged* 163).

As embodiments of the female grotesque, Norma Desmond and Miss Havisham offer paradigmatic, histrionic performances that ultimately reveal the performative quality of female aging. In her seminal article “The Double Standard of Aging,” Susan Sontag argues that to be a woman is to be an actress, since being feminine involves a kind of theater (22) as a woman’s face is often characterized as a mask or a canvas on which she paints a revised portrait of herself that is supposed to remain unchanged through time, whereas men are more allowed not to disguise themselves and the lines in their faces are often accepted as signs of character that indicate strength and maturity (23). As Sontag further claims, this double standard of aging is further stretched by the conventions of sexual feeling, which disqualify women sexually earlier than men (21) as, traditionally, men have had little to worry because of aging, while, for women, aging has often involved gradually becoming

sexually ineligible. Owing to this social judgment that aging brings about, which is gender-differentiated, women often endure more anxiety in the face of aging in comparison with men, precisely because, as Sontag claims, “society limits how women feel free to imagine themselves” (21). Taking these premises into consideration, Miss Havisham and Norma Desmond are both aging women compelled to vanish from the spotlight far too soon, but, resorting to their remarkably theatrical ways, they subvert the dictates of age-appropriateness and refuse to act their age; they thereby run the risk of being perceived as bizarre or “anachronistic,” to use Mary Russo’s term, even though, in so doing, they ultimately reveal how age is performed (“Aging” 21). In the context of celebrity studies, Deborah Jermyn points out there are contrary ways to interpret female aging in films, through either subversive or compliant perspectives (5). These categories also apply to the role of the female grotesque, since, on the one hand, the female grotesque responds to a traditionally negative representation of female aging, which indicates the loathing that older women have usually had to bear in Western culture and, on the other hand, through her discomfiting performance, the female grotesque also personifies subversion and rage against the very system from which she arises. Given this dual interpretation, Jermyn argues, there is a need to revisit portrayals of female performers in order to reexamine the ways these representations can be illuminated by attention to the performative dimension of female aging (5).

Drawing on these premises, this comparative analysis of Norma Desmond and Miss Havisham examines these two female characters and their respective performances of aging to demonstrate the ambivalence that can be attached to the female grotesque as both a depiction of the abjection of female aging and also, potentially, as an attempt to subvert the dictates of age-appropriateness imposed on women. In this respect, Deborah Chambers claims that while “the grotesquely gendered body draws attention to normative gender roles, at the same time it disrupts, disfigures and parodies them” (167). Likewise, this analysis

responds to the need to reexamine literary and cinematic examples that underscore the performative quality of female aging through intertextuality in diverse manifestations of popular culture. The analogy between these two representatives of the female grotesque will shed light on the matrix connecting aging, gender, and performance that is particularly relevant to current threads of aging studies. Analyzing the intersection of age and gender through the concept of performativity, this article will focus on issues such as the performative quality of female aging; the disparity between the ages traditionally attributed to these characters and their chronological ages; and how they envision their own aging processes as well as the images of aging they wish to project, ultimately finding themselves exemplifying two different dimensions of age performativity—acting their ages as well as acting against their ages. As will be shown, even if apparently succumbing to the Victorian dictates of female aging and of acting her age, Miss Havisham takes advantage of acting older than her chronological age as she draws attention to her “age effects” in order to conceal her cunning plans of revenge. Likewise, although Norma Desmond is retired from the film business and apparently surrenders to the predominant ageist discourses of female aging, she acts against her age—in this case, younger than her chronological age—when she plans her imminent return to the silver screen to play the role of young Salome. Hence, their attitude towards female aging is both complying and subversive, as they seemingly act their age but often, as is particularly the case of Norma Desmond, find themselves acting against their age.

PERFORMATIVE TENDENCIES, ENGENDERED IDENTITIES

As *Sunset Boulevard* shows, the exaggerated and grandiloquent performances pertaining to the villain in the cinema extended, to use Aaron Taylor’s words, “beyond the silent melodramas of the early twentieth century” (13). The role of the villain was recognizable to audiences for its overstated theatricality as this falsity was usually externalized

through a repertoire of exaggerated poses and magnified gestures that underlined the villain's duplicitous ways. Nonetheless, the advent of talking pictures destroyed the importance given to faces until then, leaving behind the art of pantomime and of facial expressivity that used to characterize silent cinema. As Norma Desmond herself contends in the first scenes of *Sunset Boulevard*, halfway between nostalgia and rage, "there was a time when they had the eyes of the world, but that wasn't good enough, they had to have the ears too, so they opened their big mouths and out came talk, talk, talk!" As a star highly acclaimed in silent pictures, Norma Desmond retains a permanent sense of melodramatic performance that still prevails decades after her career has been eclipsed, as if, day by day, she wore a perpetual mask denoting that her past splendor has managed to transcend both the screen and the passage of time.

Given the code of verisimilitude that began to characterize talking pictures as opposed to silent films, Norma Desmond's histrionic performance—a legacy of the golden era of silent cinema and, by extension, of the pantomimic expressivity of Victorian melodrama—is made to appear rather overstated and out-of-date to audiences contemporary to Billy Wilder's film. Norma's clinging to a melodramatic theatrical tradition well into the era of talking pictures also suggests a taste for anachronism that goes hand in hand with her "anachronistic" refusal to act her age. As Taylor further estimates, the melodramatic performance of the villain serves the purpose of establishing a close allegiance with the audience through the villain's intrinsic "desire to entertain," which spectators ultimately identify as a "source of pleasure" (23). In this way, the viewer suspends any initial inclination to condemn the villain and, instead, becomes an accomplice. Despite Joe Gillis's voice-over narrating the story, then, the spectator feels increasingly drawn to Norma Desmond for her permanent desire to play and entertain as an actress, which the members of the audience necessarily recognize in the same way that they also comply with their role as spectators. Along with Joe Gillis's early, explicit comparison between Norma Desmond and Miss

Havisham, Norma's compulsive obsession with performing also appears to be a veiled reference to Miss Havisham's exhortation to Pip in Charles Dickens's novel to play for her, as she blames her desire on her "sick fancies" and exclaims, "I want to see some play [...] play, play, play!" (88). Their explicit taste for theatricality, even if in the domesticity of their homes, unveils an inherent desire to entertain others and entertain themselves, which comes hand-in-hand with their literal and metaphorical condition as performers of age and gender.

Norma Desmond's performative complexity is further highlighted as biography and invention become entangled: faded star Gloria Swanson plays the role of long-forgotten Norma Desmond, who, in turn, also emulates Gloria Swanson herself, resulting in a sardonic double-performance effect. This double performance ultimately blurs fact and fiction, unleashing the audience's awareness of Norma Desmond's fictional status and at points—as happens in the last scene of the film, in which the fourth-wall effect is destroyed—almost literally revealing that she is an actress playing a role to entertain the audience that she is, in fact, addressing. It is in this way that *Sunset Boulevard* uncovers the intricacies of performance, as it can be argued that, in playing the character of Norma Desmond, Gloria Swanson was in many ways playing herself, even if in a "caricaturesque" way. In her autobiography, Swanson confirms the interweaving of fact and fiction in *Sunset Boulevard* when she acknowledges that many of the tokens belonging to Norma Desmond in the film were actually her own:

When Billy Wilder and the set designer asked me for personal props from my own life, I thought twice but I supplied them: scores of stills in old frames; the Geza Kende portrait; an idea for a large plaid bow on my head in one scene, a bit like those Mother had me wear as a child, a bit like the ones Sennett bathing beauties wore; the fact that Mr. DeMille had usually referred to me as 'young fellow.' (482)

This performative overlapping of fact and fiction off-screen finds its counterpart on-screen as the story in *Sunset Boulevard* delineates the

life of a fading actress acclaimed for deceiving others only to finally find herself lost in self-deceit. Norma's everlasting wish to act has so transcended the screen that she feels unable to cease playing, even if she no longer has a camera around. Likewise, her never-ending "performance" in front of Joe Gillis as a big star in her prime parallels her fervor to play Salome, as this part—mostly popularized through Oscar Wilde's play—articulates Norma Desmond's fantasy, in Daniel Brown's words, of "being constantly looked at and begged to perform again" (1220). However, Norma's aspiration to play young Salome not only reveals her lifetime fixation with performance but, given the significant difference of age separating actress from character, also underscores Norma's self-delusion with regard to age.

Likewise, despite being the central female character of *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham has usually been listed with prototypes of female deviance because of the duplicity whereby she seeks to bring into effect her plans of revenge.¹ With respect to Miss Havisham's deceitful ways, Juliet John argues that Miss Havisham's proclivity towards theatricality reflects the influence of Victorian melodrama (199), especially given Charles Dickens's acknowledged inclination for the theater. Miss Havisham probably arose as a counterpart to the role of the villainess popular on the stage at the time, which accounts for the remarkable turn for melodrama that she shares with Norma Desmond. The villainess in Victorian melodrama was usually characterized by the fraudulent repression of her instincts—that is, by pretense. Owing to her double-edged tendencies and her taste for trickery, she remained on the margins of Victorian discourses of gender that reinforced an essentialist view

¹ Miss Havisham suffered an emotional shock when her fiancé abandoned her on their wedding day, having previously conspired with a member of her family to deprive her of her fortune. From that day onwards, Miss Havisham locks herself in her decrepit old mansion, Satis House, and never removes her wedding dress. Years later, when she asks Pip to come and play in her house, she expects him to fall in love with her adopted daughter, Estella. Miss Havisham's plans of revenge on the male sex consist in encouraging Estella to break Pip's heart.

of femininity. The villainess was, after all, an actress and, consequently, a woman whose living necessarily depended on her appearance and on how she played a role. Since actresses made a living out of deceit, they were alleged to subvert the principles of honesty and sincerity commonly assigned to the female sex in Victorian discourses of femininity. Miss Havisham apparently agrees to the prevailing dictates of gender but she also plays a role so as to conceal what are considered “unfeminine” personality traits for women according to the Victorian discourses of femininity, in that she has a bitter and resentful temperament while she is also dishonest. In this sense, Miss Havisham should be coupled with the figure of an actress in Victorian melodrama inasmuch as, according to Juliet John, she becomes a gender offender (213).

Miss Havisham indulges in theatricality, as she is required to repress her fervent temperament and respond femininely to having been deserted as a bride. Through this performance, Miss Havisham becomes an actress. In her perpetual wedding gown, like Norma Desmond in her extravagant clothes, Miss Havisham identifies with an illusory and unchanging image. In Simone de Beauvoir’s terms, Miss Havisham holds on to “something unreal, fixed, perfect” (qtd. in John 223), to an idealized self. In her nostalgia, she seems to cling to an everlasting image of her youth perceived as a female commodity seeking to appeal to the male gaze. By playing a normative gender role, however, as John further argues, Miss Havisham adopts a “bifocal view of herself” (225) that results from the increasing gap between her appearance and her cunning intentions—her passionless look and her concealed, devious self—and thereby becomes subject and object of the gaze at the same time. As a case in point, towards the end of the novel and prior to her final confession, Miss Havisham addresses Pip, saying “I want [...] to show you that I am not all stone. But perhaps you can never believe, now, that there is anything human in my heart” (408). As an actress and, more specifically, a

villainess, Miss Havisham becomes threatening as she contributes to destabilizing the moral connection between what Erving Goffman refers to as the legitimate authorization to play a role and the capacity to play it (66-67).² Accordingly, Miss Havisham can be termed deviant precisely for subverting gender through her duplicitous ways, pretending to be passive and feminine while being cunning and dishonest as a result of having been rejected by her suitor in her youth, and, therefore, unfeminine by Victorian gender standards. In fact, although Pip believes Miss Havisham to be his benefactress, he ultimately manages to unveil “her wild resentment, spurned affection, and wounded pride” (411) shortly before she repents and tragically finds her death. Not only her turn for artifice but also her fervent and passionate temperament would be considered unfeminine according to Victorian discourses of gender.³ Through her performance, Miss Havisham incarcerates herself in a prison that, in terms of gender, manifests as simultaneously protective and oppressive, liberating and masochistic, apparently gender adaptive while inherently gender offensive.

² Erving Goffman argues that, when we ask whether a fostered impression is true or false, what we really want to ask is whether the performer is authorized to give that performance. Hence, when we discover that someone is faking, we are actually discovering that the impostor does not have the right to play that part. Goffman also claims that, paradoxically, the more closely the impostor’s performance approximates to the real thing, the more threatened we feel as the impostor may ultimately weaken in our minds the moral connection between the legitimate authorization to play a part and the capacity to play it (66-67).

³ According to Maureen Moran, Victorian structures and institutions defended a single version of “ideal femininity,” whereby qualities such as female innocence, purity, and passivity were mostly encouraged and celebrated (35). Moran also argues that theories about women’s bodies, innocence, and self-sacrificing instincts endowed the notion of Victorian femininity with a spiritually inspiring quality (35). Likewise, Nancy Armstrong claims that the representation of female subjectivity entailed the disembodiment of women, hollowing out “the material body of the woman in order to fill it with the materials of a gender-based self” (71). In this respect, Deborah Gorham contends that the qualities attached to women, to the “angels of the house,” were defined as mostly “spiritual in nature” (7).

In Wilder's film, Norma Desmond, like Miss Havisham, constantly swaps roles as star and spectator, both object and subject of the gaze. As opposed to Miss Havisham, however, Norma enacts the intensity of her passion on various occasions as she aims to seduce Joe. At the New Year's Eve party she gives in her mansion, Norma makes Joe her only guest, and when she feels rejected, she threatens to commit suicide, cutting her wrists in a demented display of passion when Joe deserts her. Her melodramatic performance proves effective as, upon his return, Joe ultimately surrenders to Norma's arts of seduction. Norma Desmond also shares Miss Havisham's duplicity with regard to gender dictates, particularly inasmuch as Norma's job as an actress further contributes to her overtly melodramatic characterization. Norma's compliance with—as well as subversion of—gender roles underlines her theatrical disposition. Joe's initial prejudice against Norma appears to be informed by an implicit masculinist connection between women and masquerade, which is rooted in a traditional conflation of femininity and artifice.⁴ However, as feminist critic Luce Irigaray claims, womanliness as a masquerade can be understood as submission to “the dominant economy of desire in an attempt to remain ‘on the market’ in spite of everything” (133). Hence Norma Desmond's theatrical displays of femininity—overstated in her case as opposed to Miss Havisham's contained performance—can be interpreted as both a form of subjection and a form of resistance.⁵ In this respect, Kathleen Woodward contends that women may resort to

⁴ Western notions of femininity have often conflated women and artifice. Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, frequently commented on the notion of masquerade in relation to women. In *The Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche wonders whether women are not “first of all and above all else actresses [claiming that] they ‘put on something’ even when they take off everything [. . .] as woman is so artistic” (317). Similarly, in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Nietzsche contends that woman's “great art is the lie, her supreme concern is appearance” (145).

⁵ Luce Irigaray argues that femininity is a role imposed on women by male systems of representation and, in this masquerade, women lose themselves by playing on their femininity. Irigaray also claims that the masquerade has to be understood as what women do in order to recuperate some element of desire to participate in men's desire but at the price of renouncing their own. In the masquerade, women thus submit to the dominant economy of desire in order to remain “on the market” (133).

youthfulness as a form of masquerade. However, that youthfulness-as-masquerade might reveal “not the fear of losing one’s femininity, as we might expect, but rather the denial of a desire for masculinity” (“Youthfulness” 130). Upon aging, this desire emerges through the return of the repressed, that is, the return of “the other,” which, for aging women, may become the return of a wished-for masculinity.⁶

In this sense, if Miss Havisham mostly conceals her “unfeminine” ways, Norma Desmond’s grandiloquent characterization can be described, at points, as remarkably androgynous. Norma’s arrogant and even despotic ways stand in contrast with any sort of meek femininity. As a case in point, among the long array of photographs of herself that Norma displays in her mansion, there is one that becomes particularly eye-catching: a drawing of Norma Desmond in a style that brings to mind Aubrey Beardsley’s popular illustrations for Oscar Wilde’s play *Salomé*. Matching Beardsley’s figuration of Salome, Norma Desmond looks particularly masculine in this drawing. In fact, Brad Bucknell interprets Salome as an emblem of not only female sensuality but also potency, and argues that “to ‘see’ Salome is to see the eye of the male beholder looking back at itself” (523). Similarly, Amanda Fernback claims that “Salome combines in her own person both male and female signifiers” (210). Given this interpretation, Norma Desmond’s drawing in the fashion of Beardsley’s illustrations underscores a mobility of gender that correlates with Kathleen Woodward’s argument about the return of a repressed masculinity with aging. Significantly, when she performs for Joe, one of the characters that Norma chooses

⁶ In her seminal article “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” published in 1929, Joan Riviere claims that to be a woman is to dissimulate a fundamental masculinity and that femininity consists of that dissimulation. Disguising herself as castrated, the woman represents man’s desire and thereby finds her identity as woman. Riviere contends, however, that the masquerade is a representation of femininity and femininity is itself a representation, hence what is perceived as ‘genuine’ womanliness and what is masquerade are one and the same thing. Alienation is thus a structural condition of being a woman, since the masquerade arises as a basic feature of female identity. Susan Sontag goes as far as to assert that “to be a woman is to be an actress” (22).

to impersonate is Charlie Chaplin's "Little Tramp," as she turns into a man and dresses up in a hat, moustache, and walking stick, emulating all of the gestures and movement that made Chaplin's persona a world-famous character. Norma's proficient impersonation evinces her expertise in playing roles as a professional actress, but it also reveals her ability to perform gender and even class since, even if momentarily, she forgets about her "role" as a glamorous actress in order to turn into a comical male tramp.⁷ If Norma Desmond's overt displays of femininity at some points in the film can be interpreted as both compliant and subversive, as shown above, the androgynous and even masculine traits that she adopts when she impersonates a male character can also be subjected to a dual interpretation: her characterisation as a male might symbolize either the literal return of a repressed masculinity or the search for a source of empowerment in her anxiety while she awaits the positive response of the studios to cast her as Salome in a new film.

PERCEIVED AS AGED, MADE TO AGE

The performance of gender necessarily intersects with the performance of aging as, to use Kathleen Woodward's words, "age is performed in the way we would say gender might self-consciously be performed" ("Performing" 165). Given that the traditional differentiation between sex and gender proves to be false—since, according to Butler, we cannot address the body without resorting to discourse)—physicality and cultural conventions also join together in the context of aging as the aging

⁷ In spite of its comicality, this scene ultimately acquires a dramatic tone when, still disguised as Chaplin, Norma receives a call from the film studios and immediately takes for granted that they are calling her to play the role of Salome, unaware that they are merely interested in hiring her antique car. Norma's delusion, as she allows herself to build castles in the air, aptly matches her disguise as a clown in what appears to be an excellent display of dramatic irony. Moreover, this scene also underscores the film's ironic self-referentiality, as Norma Desmond is not the only one to impersonate Chaplin; in her autobiography, Gloria Swanson admits she had also imitated Chaplin in the film *Manhandled*, released in 1924

body and cultural aging inevitably influence one another. The notion of performativity, which Miss Havisham and Norma Desmond exemplify, contributes to disrupting any dichotomy established between the materiality of the aging body and the cultural assumptions of aging that are often attached to it.

The theatrical nature of Miss Havisham that renders her a villainess and marks her as deviant seems inextricably related to aging as a cultural sign of difference. The duplicitous quality that characterizes her aging is already hinted at by culturally determined factors such as the appellation “Miss,” determining her status as a “maiden,” which is made to contrast with her notably aging appearance. Miss Havisham’s deceitful ways are further underlined, as Pip notices early in the novel, by the presence of a mirror that is nearly covered by a vast array of accessories placed on the table. Owing to the strategic disposition of these tokens, Miss Havisham’s reflection in the mirror is suitably evaded, implying a vampire-like sense of presence as well as of absence. Miss Havisham’s duplicity becomes even more noticeable by means of the discrepancy between her chronological age and the age she is perceived to be since, in determining how old Miss Havisham is, her notorious aging appearance seems to play a more significant role than her chronological age. In fact, a large part of the drama lies in the blatant difference between the bridal moment at which Miss Havisham theatrically decided to stop the clock and the movement of time that has withered the woman. In this respect, the wedding gown that Miss Havisham is wearing, which unveils her will to cling to her youth, brings attention to the actual appearance of the body, which denotes a sense of premature aging, especially taking into consideration her chronological age.

The inconsistency between the cultural age Miss Havisham is perceived to be and her chronological age is further exemplified by the point of view from which she is described to the reader. Miss Havisham’s grotesque physical portrayal at the outset of Dickens’s novel is rendered entirely from Pip’s perspective. Pip approaches female aging from,

in Kathleen Woodward's words, "the youthful structure of the look" ("Performing" 162) and later on, as an adult narrator, he perceives her through a male gaze, just as Joe Gillis becomes the narrator of Norma Desmond's story both on the auditory track, through his voice-over, and on the visual track, since the spectator mostly perceives Norma through Joe's male gaze. The first time Pip sets eyes on Miss Havisham, he immediately perceives her as elderly, an embodiment of aging, which, from his perspective within the normative youth-old age system, also becomes an embodiment of the abject. Through Pip's eyes, Miss Havisham turns into a haunting emblem of aging associated with images of death and decay, as he portrays her in the following terms to the reader:

I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes. I saw that the dress had been put upon the rounded figure of a young woman, and that the figure upon which it now hung loose had shrunk to skin and bone. [. . .] Once, I had been taken to one of our old marsh churches to see a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress, that had been dug out of a vault under the church pavement. Now, waxwork and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me. I should have cried out, if I could. (87)

Pip's perspective on aging corresponds with the traditional concept of age as loss and decline (Gullette, *Declining*) and contributes to the discourse of ageism, as Pip obviously judges Miss Havisham's age based merely on what he perceives as a prominently aging appearance. The sight of an aging woman in a wedding gown calls attention to the age of the bride, but even if her determination to wear her wedding dress permanently evinces Miss Havisham's inability to forget her past, it also suggests a defiant attitude that subverts any assumed dictates about aging.

In analogy with Miss Havisham, who, in her wedding gown, chooses to stick to the frozen image of her past youth, Norma Desmond aptly illustrates Kathleen Woodward's premises about the masquerade of youthfulness by wearing a mask of youth that, instead of concealing

her aging traits, actually renders her process of aging more visible to others. Nonetheless, Norma's masquerade of youthfulness in her aging years also enables her to forge links with her past self, thus recreating the past in her present and blurring the boundaries between them so as to rebel against having vanished from the screen far too soon. Like Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, Norma makes her first appearance when a male beholder lays eyes on her. The portrait of Norma Desmond that is shown to the spectator is rendered entirely from the perspective of Joe's male gaze. By means of a low-angle point-of-view zoom shot, Norma first appears as nearly in disguise, all in black, showing her detachment from the world outside her apparently dilapidated house, where she spends her days awaiting her return to the silver screen. In spite of her sickly pallor and eccentric appearance—her hair is encased in a leopard-skin-patterned scarf, and she hides her eyes behind dark glasses—Norma still looks striking and even younger than her chronological age, as Wilder had in mind a woman in her fifties; this contrasts with Miss Havisham, who looks ostensibly older than her chronological age, given that Dickens had envisioned Miss Havisham as a woman in her forties.⁸ As a female grotesque, Norma's image seems adjusted to look half vampire, half femme fatale and, in this respect, Jodi Brooks's premises about aging actresses being marked twice are relevant since, to use Brooks's words, "as aging women they are marked as outside desire, and as aging stars, as image, they are both frozen and transitory" (233). As Norma attempts to conceal her aging in order to look younger, she seems to act as a vampire ready to drain the vitality of the man that she has recently met if this would allow her to accomplish her purpose of coming back to life on the screen. In addition, the encounter between Norma and Joe emulates as well as adjusts the conventions of film noir. It initially seems to invoke the politics of the male gaze pursuing the female commodity, as Norma progressively

⁸ See below for a discussion of the chronological ages of the two characters.

dominates Joe and turns him into a gigolo unable to escape from a femme fatale. Nevertheless, although the film initially appears to partake in these conventions, it gradually problematizes the age and gender politics in which the film first seems to be grounded as an example of film noir, since in her role as a femme fatale, Norma is portrayed as an *aging* sexualized and threatening woman.

As a scriptwriter and, therefore, a member of the Hollywood industry, Joe Gillis appears to comply with the prevailing ageist discourse informed by the prejudice against female stars, who vanish from the screen once the first effects of aging become perceptible. Through Joe's male gaze, Norma no longer seems to have a presence in films, and Joe retorts with ageist sarcasm when fiftyish Norma informs him about her resolve to play the role of young princess Salome in what she plans to be her imminent return to the screen:

NORMA: It's the story of Salome. I think I'll have DeMille direct it.

JOE: DeMille?

NORMA: We've made a lot of pictures together.

JOE: And you'll play Salome?

NORMA: Who else?

Whereas Miss Havisham insistently asks Pip to come and play at Satis House, Joe is hired as a full-time scriptwriter against his will in Norma's mansion. In the course of his captivity, Joe gains insight into Norma's self-delusion; he notices how she strives to cling to her past, living surrounded by photographs of her youth as a star. These photos function as a sort of substitute mirror whereby she can give free vent to her narcissism and not be bothered by the image that the actual mirror reflects back.

THE POTENTIAL OF MIRROR IMAGES IN THE PERFORMANCE OF AGE

The way that the ages of Miss Havisham and Norma Desmond have been perceived reveals the performative quality of aging, which, in turn, opens up the possibility for subversion and transformation of age dictates. As Lucy Fischer claims, specular moments in which characters

gaze in the mirror denote a sense of doubling between the aging reflection in the mirror and a youthful image frozen in time that becomes superimposed, paving the ground for envisioning and ultimately performing an alternative image of aging (171). In *Great Expectations*, Pip notices Miss Havisham's glances switching from him to herself in the course of his first visit to Satis House: "before she spoke again, she turned her eyes from me, and looked at the dress she wore, and at the dressing-table, and finally at herself in the looking-glass" (89). In *Sunset Boulevard*, Norma makes use of photographs, paintings, and films of her splendid past, transforming them into alternative mirrors that reflect the image she envisions of herself, even if she also momentarily succumbs to reality, overscrutinizing any trace of aging that her image in the mirror may reflect back.

Miss Havisham's and Norma Desmond's brief encounters with their reflections in the mirror can be understood through Kathleen Woodward's theory of the mirror stage of old age insofar as they often entail shock and misrecognition. In contrast with the psychological process of the infant mirror stage articulated by Jacques Lacan, whereby the infant seeks to identify with her unified reflection in the mirror as opposed to what she perceives as her disunified body, in Woodward's mirror stage of old age the aged person feels that her fragmented image in the mirror does not match her unified self, since, as Woodward argues, "as we age we increasingly separate what we take to be our real selves from our bodies" ("The Mirror Stage of Old Age" 104). When Miss Havisham looks at her image in the mirror, there is a difference between the way she looks and a younger identity—reminiscent of her tragic past—which the mirror cannot possibly reproduce but which, nevertheless, lies dormant, waiting to accomplish her plans of revenge. In this respect, Miss Havisham takes a sort of angry, masochistic pleasure in the shock generated by her aging appearance in contrast with the wedding dress, evocative of her youth, which she decides to wear for life. Likewise, Norma Desmond identifies the difference

between the younger image that her old photographs as alternative mirrors reflect back and the current aging image that she perceives, but rejects, in the mirror. In order to match the image of herself in youth that she is constantly exposed to and that she identifies with, Norma undertakes agonizing beauty treatments in the hope that they will erase the passage of time and grant her the opportunity to return to the screen.

Drawing on Woodward's theory of the mirror stage of old age, Leni Marshall claims that the "méconnaissance," or misrecognition, of the second mirror stage, may contribute to modifying the person's vision of the self in old age (63). Marshall claims that there are different potential responses to "méconnaissance," and that this exposure can lead to "recognizing the discontinuity of the human subject" (67), which implies that the subject is released from rigid categories and the fallacy of "wholeness" and, instead, she is led to a more flexible sort of self-awareness. In this respect, in relation to Woodward's theory of the mirror stage of old age, Norma Desmond and Miss Havisham cling to rigid masks of youth and age respectively, insofar as, whereas Norma Desmond holds on to youthfulness as her masquerade and sticks to her youthful past of splendor, Miss Havisham protects herself behind a mask of age, given the prevailing normative discourse of age and gender for aging single women in Victorian times. Nevertheless, drawing on Marshall's more flexible concept of "méconnaissance," Norma's use of photographs and films from her youth as alternative mirrors also allows her to replace moments of exposure in the mirror with other illusions, while Miss Havisham's use of her daughter Estella as an alternative mirror of herself also allows her to give shape to her plans of revenge. In both cases, moments of misrecognition of their current image in the mirror enable Norma Desmond and Miss Havisham to recognize their discontinuity as subjects, looking for alternative images that allow them to act against their age.

**ON-SCREEN AND OFF-SCREEN: THE CHRONOLOGICAL AGE
OF THE DEFAULT BODY**

The approach to age through what Margaret Gullette calls “the default body”—that is, the “current visible manifestation” of the self and the “embodied psyche in culture over time” (*Aged* 161)—usually coincides with prevailing cultural discourses of aging that influence both the way the aging body is perceived and the way the aging subject feels required to perform age. In this respect, the difference between the chronological ages of Miss Havisham and Norma Desmond and how old they are perceived to be by Pip and Joe, respectively—and, by extension, by readers and viewers, in general—underscores a gap between the number of years lived and cultural interpretations of age. Indeed, although both characters are broadly the same age, contemporary adaptations of Dickens’s novel suggest that the image of Miss Havisham as an elderly woman has prevailed until our days, whereas Norma Desmond’s good looks still seem to claim that she was prematurely banished from the screen. A closer look at what we know of the chronological ages of both aging women will shed light on the constructed quality of the ages they are perceived to be.

To the manuscript of the novel *Great Expectations*, currently on display at Wisbech and Fenland Museum in England, Charles Dickens added calculations of the characters’s age through the different chapters of the novel until its final conclusion (Calder 497). These annotations not only evince the author’s concern about age as a determining factor in the creation of his characters, they also clarify the intricacies of Miss Havisham’s aging process, particularly with regard to her age performance. According to Dickens’s annotations, Pip appears to be seven at the opening of the story and twenty-three towards the end, while in the last stage of the narrative, Dickens portrays Miss Havisham as a woman of fifty-six. If the story that Pip unfolds covers the span of approximately sixteen years, Dickens’s annotations signify that, when Pip meets Miss Havisham for the first time, at the beginning of the novel, she is

a woman of scarcely forty years of age. Nonetheless, in spite of her chronological age, her markedly aging appearance at first sight has taken precedence in the reception of the novel. Accordingly, in adaptations of Dickens's novel, Miss Havisham has traditionally been depicted as a remarkably aged woman—a true embodiment of old age—and it is as such that her image has prevailed from Victorian times up to now.

According to Teresa Mangum, Victorians were taught to “perform their old age” in specific ways that were reflected in images reproduced through narrative or illustration (Mangum, “Little Women” qtd. in Chase 5). In fact, although the original serialization of *Great Expectations* and the subsequent first edition in book form were issued without illustrations, the 1885 Robson and Kerslake edition included Frederick William Pailthorpe's illustrations, exhibiting plates with images of a distinctly aged Miss Havisham. In the Victorian period, there were mostly intuitive folk ways to define old age (Mangum, “Growing Old” 98), through which the body was deemed old according to a visible set of signs that indicated apparent deterioration (Katz qtd. in Mangum, “Growing Old” 105). Men and women were considered old according to different criteria: men were deemed aged depending on their capacity for work, while age in women was mostly determined by their reproductive capacity, that is, by the advent of menopause, which suggests that women were generally considered old rather earlier than men (Mangum, “Growing Old” 99). Indeed, Kay Heath argues that Victorian novels often depict women of thirty as already middle-aged, while their male counterparts are considered still young (10). Owing to the prevailing concept of spinsterhood in the Victorian period, as a paradigm inherited from the eighteenth century, midlife was nearly erased for women; those that were single and beyond thirty, like Miss Havisham, “were pushed ‘across the threshold from marriageable girls to old maids’” (Ottaway qtd. in Heath 9). The persistence of these Victorian assumptions of gendered differences in aging are evident in Susan Sontag's observation in 1972 that, in Western culture, “women become sexually ineligible much earlier than men do” (20).

The inconsistency between Miss Havisham's chronological age and how old she is culturally perceived to be was brought to the fore when one of the most recent adaptations of *Great Expectations* to the screen began to take shape. It seems that Helena Bonham-Carter at first felt concerned about her appropriateness for the role of Miss Havisham in Mike Newell's 2012 film version. She worried about the way Dickens's classic character had typically been portrayed as she described Miss Havisham as "a pensioner in a bridesmaid's dress" and later admitted that Mike Newell's proposal had initially been to her "like a slap in the face" (Preston). Subsequently, though, Newell convinced her to accept the part, assuring her that she was the right age for the role and arguing that the character in the book is "actually in her forties," Bonham-Carter's own age at the time (Preston). In fact, Bonham-Carter's haunting characterization as a woman in white, with ashy hair and pallid skin, is reminiscent of Martita Hunt's performance in David Lean's 1946 highly acclaimed film adaptation and also brings to mind that of Gillian Anderson in Brian Kirk's 2011 BBC television series. In all of these adaptations of Dickens's novel to the screen, Miss Havisham is made to look not only aged but also distinctly ghostly. Consistently, actresses playing the role of Miss Havisham on-screen—even if matching the original character's chronological age according to Dickens's annotations—have been required to look and act ostensibly older, indulging in a sort of age affectation so as to correspond with the image of Miss Havisham that has generally prevailed through time.⁹

⁹ In cinematic adaptations, television films, and television series based on Dickens's novel, Miss Havisham has generally been characterized as an older-aged woman. However, the degree of age affectation and the chronological age of the actresses playing the role have differed in the various portrayals of Dickens's character.

In the 1917 silent film adaptation (dir. Robert G. Vignola and Paul West), Grace Barton was only in her mid-thirties and can arguably be considered the youngest actress to play Miss Havisham on the screen to date. Most actresses who played Miss Havisham in the following years were in their forties or early fifties: Florence Reed was in her early fifties in Stuart Walker's 1934 film, Martita Hunt was in her late forties in David Lean's 1946 adaptation, Maxine Audley was in her mid-forties in Allan Bridge's 1967 BBC television series, and Margaret Leighton was in her early fifties in Joseph Hardy's 1974 television film. All these actresses were characterized as significantly older than their chronological

The constructed quality of age, revealed in the age effects that the actresses playing the role of Miss Havisham exhibit, was also brought to the fore in *Sunset Boulevard*. The deliberate difference in age separating lovers Norma Desmond and Joe Gillis, which was meant to accentuate Norma's age on the screen, finally met an ironic twist. Before casting actress Gloria Swanson as the immortal Norma Desmond, Wilder had considered other actresses for the role, in particular Mary Pickford, Pola Negri, and Mae West, all of whom Wilder finally discarded in favor of Swanson, who, at fifty years of age at the time, was the youngest of them all. Conversely, Wilder had initially selected Montgomery Clift to play the part of Joe Gillis, but Clift, who was scarcely thirty at the time, refused to play "scenes of romantic involvement with an older woman" (Swanson 480); some said his reluctance resulted from fear of rumors, as Clift was reportedly involved with an older woman in real life. Consequently, instead of strikingly young-looking Montgomery Clift, Wilder eventually chose William Holden, who was only two years older than his first choice but whose prominent physique made him appear somewhat older than Clift. Hence, even though twenty years of age separated Gloria Swanson from William Holden, at the time *Sunset Boulevard* was shot the appearance of the performers seemed to undermine the age difference intended between them. The deliberate disparity of age between the actors often becomes blurred in the film, especially

age except for Maxine Audley, whose performance used hardly any visual markers of age. In the following decades, Miss Havisham was played by somewhat older actresses: Joan Hickson was in her mid-seventies in Julian Aymes's 1981 television film; Jean Simmons (who had played the role of Estella in David Lean's film) was sixty years of age in Kevin Connor's 1989 television film; and Ann Bancroft was in her late sixties in Alfonso Cuarón's 1998 film. Still, all of them were made to look older than their chronological ages through age effects, except for Ann Bancroft, who played the role of Ms. Dinsmoor—a sexualized version of Miss Havisham—at age sixty-seven. Since then, most actresses cast as Miss Havisham have been in their forties or early fifties: Charlotte Rampling was in her early fifties in Julian Jarrold's 1999 television film; Gillian Anderson was in her early forties in Brian Kirk's 2011 BBC television series; and Helena Bonham-Carter was in her mid-forties in Mike Newell's most recent film to date. Except for Rampling, who hardly exhibited any age effects in her performance, contemporary characterizations have depicted Miss Havisham as older than the chronological age of the actresses.

as Norma Desmond looks fairly younger than her chronological age and Joe Gillis is shown as more experienced and older in comparison with his mates Artie Green and Betty Schaefer. Apparently, Holden felt concerned that Swanson looked too young to be his senior, while Swanson sardonically reminded Wilder that women of fifty still look good. In her autobiography, Swanson shares her memories about one of the scriptwriters of the film, Charlie Brackett, and his concern about the difference between how old the actors appeared to be and the chronological age their characters were intended to be:

Mr. Brackett said: 'Joe Gillis, the writer in the script, is supposed to be twenty-five and you're supposed to play fifty. But Bill Holden is thirty-one and nervous that you'll look too young. We may have to age you with make-up. Not too much. Just a little.'

'But women of fifty who take care of themselves today don't look old,' I said. 'That's the point. Can't you use make-up on Mr. Holden instead, to make him look more youthful?'

They consented to try, if only out of tact, and after they looked at the test, they decided I was right. They changed Bill Holden's hair and adjusted his make-up and left me a spruced-up fifty, which was exactly my age. (481)

In order to underline the age difference between Swanson and Holden on-screen, there was a need to use what Anne Basting describes as “visual markers of age” (9) and Bridie Moore refers to as “age effects” or “age identity as culturally generated.” That Norma Desmond does not look so aged while Joe Gillis does not look so young and the corresponding use of visual markers on the actors to achieve the intended age affectation contributes to revealing age as a construct, ultimately calling into question prejudices against relationships between lovers of different ages and dismissing them as rather overstated. However, this unexpected, subversive turn with regard to aging in the cast of Wilder's film did not make up for the general “double jeopardy” that prevailed in the film industry, which limited the number of films older actresses were offered

as well as their status as stars in relation to their male counterparts (Lincoln and Allen 611).

PERFORMING AGE: ACTING OLDER AND ACTING YOUNGER

In the context of acting age, Margaret Gullette refers to representations of old age in which younger actors are cast to play older characters, using techniques to achieve those pretended age effects such as wearing wigs or carrying canes to prevent the body from revealing its unwanted youth (*Aged* 168). In the adaptations of *Great Expectations* to the screen, actresses playing the role of Miss Havisham have mostly been required to make use of visual markers of age to enact a figure older than their chronological age. The choice of this characterization can be interpreted as an extension of the depiction in Dickens's novel, in which Miss Havisham theatrically seeks to stress her age, drawing Pip's attention to those age effects that characterize her as aged. As a case in point, at the beginning of the novel, when Miss Havisham is purported to be in her early forties, she appears leaning on a stick, which connotes infirmity and is bound to be taken to indicate old age. From his perspective as a child, when Pip notices Miss Havisham's walking stick, he exclaims that "she had a crutch-headed stick on which she leaned, and she looked like the Witch of the place" (113), invoking the traditional demonization of older women as witches (Covey 71). Miss Havisham also remarks that she is haunted by thoughts of approaching death, pointing with her stick to the long table in the dressing room where, in her words, she will be laid in her bridal gown when she passes away, adding cryptically, "so much the better if it is done on this day!" (117).¹⁰ Similarly, Miss Havisham highlights her seclusion and detachment from the outside world, warning Pip not to be afraid of someone who has not seen

¹⁰ According to Kay Heath, life expectancy grew significantly in the nineteenth century: the average life span in 1801 was thirty-six years old while, by 1901, males lived on the average forty-eight years and females fifty-two years. However, these figures might obscure the way the high incidence of infant and child mortality offset the fact that some individuals lived to be over eighty years of age (9).

the sun since the day he was born. In addition to mentioning her turn for sick fancies, she constantly demonstrates her bad temper. Miss Havisham thus takes good care to call attention to qualities that characterize her as lonely, grumpy, and in poor health, seemingly aiming to match stereotypes that have traditionally been associated with old age. Accordingly, it is not only Pip's perception as a child that characterizes Miss Havisham as old, but also her own resolve to emphasize particular traits that have contributed to shaping Miss Havisham's image as that of an aged character.

The most notable sign that underlines Miss Havisham's age affectation is her determination to contradict those who threaten to undermine her visual markers of age. Indeed, after hearing one of her distant relatives's flattering remarks, Miss Havisham responds with a bitter retort:

'Dear Miss Havisham,' said Miss Sarah Pocket. 'How well you look!'
'I do not,' returned Miss Havisham. 'I am yellow skin and bone.'
Camilla brightened when Miss Pocket met with rebuff; and she murmured, as she plaintively contemplated Miss Havisham. 'Poor dear soul! Certainly not to be expected to look well, poor thing.' (114)

These words emphasize Miss Havisham's will to draw attention to her age effects and ensure that others perceive her as an aged woman. Likewise, they also evince the discourse of age and gender prevailing at the time according to which, given her condition as an unmarried aging woman, Miss Havisham is socially expected to neither look well nor age gracefully. Nonetheless, even if publicly submitting to the role that society has ascribed to her, Miss Havisham makes use of her mask of age to conceal her ultimate intentions: taking revenge on the male sex. As Norma Desmond sticks to her mask of youth and in her metaphorical role as a vampire appears to drain Joe's vitality and youth, aged Miss Havisham makes use of Estella's youthful beauty to pursue her plans of revenge; she parasitically appropriates Estella's young body to accomplish her aim while concealing her actual intentions as she draws attention to her visual markers of age.

Miss Havisham thus presents herself as an eminently aged woman, whereas Norma Desmond conversely holds on to her masquerade of youthfulness. Norma and Joe usually spend the evening watching silent films while Norma turns into the biggest fan of the actress on the screen, who, unsurprisingly, happens to be Norma herself in her youth. Indulging in an uncanny watching of her own past performances, Norma idolizes herself as a young and talented actress. This pervasive atmosphere of replicating images inevitably gives way to a sort of arrested temporality that perpetually haunts Norma, who, by this stage, is unable—and unwilling—to accept or act her age. As with the photographs of her youth that she surrounds herself with, these silent pictures function as alternative mirrors that reflect back the image Norma feels identified with. In fact, the scene in which Norma contemplates her own performance as a young actress in a silent film acquires special relevance when one discovers that *Queen Kelly*, the film that Joe and Norma are watching, is an actual film directed by Erich von Stroheim, who plays the role of Max von Mayerling in Wilder's film and that, most importantly, it is a film featuring Gloria Swanson as both its great star and its producer. As Norma literally directs Joe's gaze towards her own image in youth again and again, inciting him to idolize it the way she seems to idolize it herself, this scene acquires additional significant implications as, when Norma "obliges" Joe to watch *Queen Kelly*, she is also metaphorically "obliging" the new film industry to redirect their gaze to the great stars of silent pictures that have been utterly forgotten. Moreover, this scene underscores the power of great stars in the film business, as Gloria Swanson became the producer of the film in which she starred, just like Norma Desmond employs a writer, Joe, to edit the script she has written for her new film. In Wilder's film, Norma Desmond thus aspires to write her own script of age and, by doing so, challenge the ageist discourses of the film business at the time, which banished actresses from the screen prematurely.¹¹

¹¹ In comparison, as Deborah Jermyn claims, the current Hollywood film industry finally seems to be embracing its older women stars, owing to the increasing release of highly successful films

This reverberation of images creates a sort of mirror effect on-screen as well as off-screen, as not only does Norma Desmond watch herself on the screen, but it is also Gloria Swanson who contemplates herself as a young actress in one of her former films. This reveals the major role that performance plays both on- and off-screen in the film, blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction as well as between actress and character. Actually, Norma Desmond and Gloria Swanson also have in common that, as great stars, they were both granted more liberty than most actresses to choose the roles they wished to play. According to Emily Carman, some female actors in early and post-classical films, as was the case with Gloria Swanson, were allowed to break from the constraints of restrictive contracts to become successful freelance stars with the capacity to make their own choices with regard to the roles to play and the films in which they wanted to appear as they aged as actresses (15). Given her role as a star, Norma Desmond—like Gloria Swanson in her prime—still sticks to her right to play the part she has chosen: that of Princess Salome in a hypothetical Cecil B. DeMille’s film. However, as Sally Chivers argues, while Norma Desmond ultimately fails in her purpose to return to the screen, in Billy Wilder’s film Gloria Swanson succeeded in her purpose of making use of the aging that kept her away from the film industry in order to regain entrance (226), as she was chosen to play a central female role in a film when she was in her fifties, receiving enormous acclaim in response.¹²

featuring a select circle of aging actresses who often play leading roles. Nevertheless, as Jermyn further argues, the representation of these aging female celebrities in films tends to be “hopeful and newly affirming one moment, and destructive and retrograde the next” (12). On a positive note, as Jermyn explains, it appears that romantic comedy has turned into one of the few genres where older women may receive an appealing portrayal of themselves (8). In addition, actresses who have managed to retain their images as countercultural figures, as is the case of Diane Keaton, are also able to meet an engaging representation on the screen (Jermyn 9). In contrast, though, as Rebecca Feasey contends, aging actresses that used to display an image of youthful sexuality may be penalized for daring retain the same role that they used to play, thus showing that, on the whole, the current film industry still consider sexuality synonymous with youth (120).

¹² In analogy with Gloria Swanson, who returned to the big screen after years of absence to play the role of Norma Desmond in Billy Wilder’s film, it has recently been the case of the much-celebrated actress Glenn Close. Over twenty years after winning a Tony award for the same part, Glenn Close has once more received high praise for her role as Norma Desmond in the

Sunset Boulevard is mostly critical of the film industry for having worshiped the film stars of the golden era only to condemn them, later on, to utter ostracism. In fact, Norma Desmond's self-delusion with respect to her age is, for the most part, rooted in the prevailing ageist discourse inherent in the star system that she has imbibed, just like Miss Havisham's performance of age is clearly influenced by the existing dictates of aging in her time. Norma has been living for years with the best preserver of her dreams of youth, Max von Mayerling, the film director who discovered her at the young age of sixteen.¹³ Having been Norma's first husband, Max gladly turns into a relic of her splendid past as well as a dutiful butler who nourishes Norma's self-delusion, sending her fan letters to assure her that the audience is still eager to see her back on the screen. Max also protects his muse loyally, defending her unquestionable celebrity whenever Joe threatens to disrupt her delusive masquerade of youthfulness, thus also contributing to promoting Norma's performance of aging as her former film director. Having been brought up as the focus of attention of the male gaze, Norma Desmond refuses to let go of her mask of youth, while her case shows that the film industry which had praised her and transformed her into a star finally turned its back on her. As she meets Gillis's skepticism and DeMille's incapacity to tell her the blatant truth—both of them representatives of the film industry—Norma Desmond's determination to play the part of youthful Salome at this stage of her career should be interpreted as a rebellious action that exposes the ageist bias underlying film business

2017 Broadway revival of Don Black and Christopher Hampton's book and lyrics, with music by Andrew Lloyd Webber, which has been directed by Lonny Price. In a review of the musical published in the *New York Times* early this year, Ben Brantley explains Glenn Close's once again successful performance as Norma Desmond on stage on account of "its veracity" and "the insights an artist accumulates over the decades."

¹³ It has traditionally been accepted that Salome was around sixteen years of age—Norma's age when she was discovered as an actress—in the passage of the Bible in which she dances the dance of the seven veils and asks Herod to bring her the head of John the Baptist. Likewise, in his opera, based on Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé*, Richard Strauss specified that Salome should be around sixteen years old. This contributes to widening further the age difference separating Norma Desmond, who is in her fifties, from the character she intends to play.

as well as Norma Desmond's inability to stop doing what she has been taught to do since youth: performing.

Hence, there is more than meets the eye in Norma Desmond's obsession to play young Princess Salome. In Wilder's film, upon meeting Joe Gillis, Norma summarizes Salome's story as she looks forward to playing this role in her forthcoming film: "Salome—what a woman—what a part. The princess in love with a holy man. She dances the dance of the seven veils. He rejects her, so she demands his head on a golden tray, kissing his cold dead lips." As Norma states, in the myth, when Salome performs her dance, she attracts all attention and gladly submits to the male gaze. Like Salome, Norma also agrees to her role as a female commodity, which she has enacted for years as a film star, and when Joe threatens to disrupt her dream of youth, she takes equal revenge on him. Taking into consideration that Salome's dance of the seven veils has traditionally been interpreted as a symbol of fertility and as an icon of erotic display (Kultermann 187), Norma's sensuous movements as she goes down the staircase—which, in her self-delusion, she believes to be that of Salome's palace—appear to be particularly subversive from the perspective of aging, given that Norma is around fifty years of age. Nonetheless, Norma is never truly granted the opportunity to perform Salome's dance since the camera cuts away from her as she brings her hands up to focus, instead, on the faces of her observers; when it returns to her, Norma admits being too overwhelmed to continue with the scene. This abrupt conclusion seems to underline the notion that Norma's dance—because of being an emblem of fecundity and eroticism analogous to that of Salome and, therefore, given Norma's age, subversive of age standards—ultimately appears to be too "grotesque" for the camera to endure.

Even if Norma is, for the most part, trapped in her self-delusion, she also shows signs of weakness or, rather, "moments of melancholia," as Max calls them, hinting that, behind her mask of youthfulness, she may actually be living a dream of her past. As a case in point, once Joe

finishes editing her film script, Norma feels obliged to get ready for her “return”—she explicitly makes a point of preferring this term to Joe’s word “comeback”—going on a strict diet and submitting herself to unbearable cosmetic treatments that necessarily make her aware of the passage of time. These treatments render her age hypervisible while she seems to forget about the old photographs of her youth and rather chooses to scrutinize herself in the mirror to spot and try to erase any effects of aging. In fact, Norma subverts the former meaning of her traditional role as female commodity and eternal focus of the male gaze when, in the acknowledged realization of her age, she dramatically requests of Joe: “Look at me; look at my hands; look at my face; look under my eyes.” Norma demands the attention of Joe—and, by extension, that of the viewer—somehow conscious that she is no longer the enthralling object that attracts their gaze. But in doing so, she is also drawing attention to the male gaze and revealing its biased partiality for youth, which makes her redundant in the film industry. Norma thus becomes aware, even if temporarily, that she has been acting young while she has inevitably grown aged. This moment of epiphany comes to its climax when Joe puts it bluntly to her, stating: “Norma, you’re a woman of fifty; now grow up; there’s nothing tragic about being fifty, not unless you’re trying to be twenty-five.” However, even if Joe overtly considers her an “anachronism,” to return to Mary Russo’s term, Norma has been wearing her mask of youth for too long and, by this stage, she is completely unable—and reluctant—to awaken from her delusion in order to face reality.

Norma Desmond thus holds on to her mask of youthfulness, and eventually, even if only in her delusion, she fulfills her dream of playing young princess Salome. Norma dismisses the last bond that ties her to reality when she makes Joe vanish from the screen, aware that he poses a serious threat to the magic in which performance and filmmaking necessarily lie. As a scriptwriter, Joe is fond of simple and down-to-earth stories that could easily take place in everyday life, as he shows by means

of the realistic script he is writing with Betty Schaefer as opposed to Norma's pretentious and convoluted story of Salome. Likewise, Joe, being a writer, represents the contemporaneous film industry of talking pictures, mostly responsible for having banished the great stars and directors of silent films—Norma and Max among them—from the silver screen. Hence, Norma's final deed of getting rid of Joe can be interpreted as her personal affront against the modern film industry but also as her confirmation that she has finally rejected reality in favor of her own fantasies. In a final, mesmerizing scene, as Norma goes down the stairs, and the camera shoots her last seducing descent into madness, she shows what she is unquestionably best at—performing—while her famous words after killing Joe, “the stars are ageless” reveal an everlasting infatuation with acting that she seems determined to retain for life.

In Dickens's novel, it is when Miss Havisham shows her true colors that Pip, for the first time, envisions Miss Havisham as younger, remarking how she “dropped on her knees at my feet; with her folded hands raised to me in the manner in which, when her poor heart was young and fresh and whole, they must often have been raised to heaven” (410). As soon as Miss Havisham repents, Pip creates in his mind a rejuvenated picture of her, envisioning her as “young and fresh” (410). However, it is too late to be sorry as, in spite of her repentance, Miss Havisham ultimately meets corrective measures for having transgressed the dictates of female aging and acting older than her chronological age in order to conceal her plans of revenge. The fatal misfortune that befalls Miss Havisham—her bridal dress catches fire and she finally finds her death—evokes the punishment traditionally inflicted on women suspected of being witches, who allegedly change their appearance at will in order to conceal their real intentions. Miss Havisham is thus punished for daring to subvert age and taking advantage of the prevailing dictates of age and gender for her own benefit.

If Miss Havisham is compared with a witch in Dickens's novel, Wilder's film is brought to a close through reverberating mythical

undertones. Joe Gillis, emulating Narcissus in the Greek myth, is finally punished by Norma Desmond, an alternative Nemesis—the goddess of revenge—who determines to attract him to a pool so that he falls in love with his own image to finally drop into the water and meet his death. Similarly, Norma is like Medusa, who, having once been a beautiful maiden, is punished by Athena, who transforms her face so that, at the mere sight of it, all onlookers turn into stone. In the uncanny final scene, Norma’s haunting and defiant look staring back at the audience—taking revenge for having been forgotten—shows her complete reluctance to take off her mask of youth, threatening to turn herself into an eternal Medusa who will never stop playing. Only Perseus, by looking at her reflection from his mirrored shield, is able to behead the Medusa, just as an imaginary director stares at Norma Desmond through his camera and metaphorically beheads her through a legendary close-up of her face. However, if Norma is punished symbolically for refusing to act her age, given the self-referential quality that characterizes Wilder’s film, Norma’s alter ego, Gloria Swanson, was, instead highly-praised for her performance. Acting against her age, she returned to show business in her fifties to play the role of Norma Desmond, through whom Swanson did regain access to the spotlight, ironically by means of playing her age on the screen.

The final passages of *Great Expectations* and last scenes of *Sunset Boulevard* underscore the heroines’ concluding positions in relation to their performances of aging. Miss Havisham finally lets go of her mask of age as she confesses her intended plans of revenge but is, nevertheless, metaphorically punished for having subverted the dictates of female aging by accentuating her age affectation so as to conceal her wicked intentions. Conversely, Norma holds on to her masquerade of youthfulness until the end, finding herself lost in self-delusion and indulging in an everlasting performance of youth. Miss Havisham thus repents and succumbs to acting her age whereas, in her madness, Norma adopts a highly subversive attitude and goes on acting against her age, even if the

spectator can easily infer the tragic end that awaits her after committing a murder in cold blood.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that the performative quality of age and gender that Miss Havisham and Norma Desmond exhibit has two dimensions, in that it can be understood as both subversive and compliant at the same time. Drawing on Deborah Chambers's precepts, this comparative analysis approaching the two aging female characters as examples of the female grotesque demonstrates that normative roles of age and gender have rendered them prematurely old, but in their performance of aging, they also disrupt and disfigure the ageist discourse in which they feel entrapped. As evidence of the constructed quality of aging, Miss Havisham and Norma Desmond are essentially the same chronological age in spite of their different looks and the cultural background in which they age as well as the way they perform age. They are in their forties and fifties respectively, but they approach their age differently, acting older and younger respectively. They negotiate their age by conforming to age standards, but they also subvert them, thereby unveiling the performative quality of discourses of aging and its ambivalence.

The ongoing popularity of the characters of Miss Havisham and Norma Desmond, who are still constantly revisited through contemporary adaptations, gives evidence that the intricate discourses that they address in terms of age and gender still prevail. The duality of the age and gender performance that Miss Havisham and Norma Desmond display, insofar as the former acts older and the latter acts younger, supports current discourses of the performance of age and gender, and how older female actresses seem to face the same old dilemma. According to Anne Davis Basting, the choice of older female actresses is often that they either lament the loss of her stardom, thus necessarily emphasising their age, or they rather deny their age ("Dolly Descending" 253). Precisely, Miss Havisham overstates her old age and Norma Desmond denies her aging

process, while they come to terms with their performance of age and gender in an ambivalent way. In this respect, Miss Havisham and Norma Desmond act their age as well as act against their age, maintaining a masquerade of old age and of youth, respectively, which proves to be both protective and subversive, while in their performative quality, they also open the path for the ongoing transformation of discourses of female aging.

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