

«I WANTED TO BE OLD»: GENDER AND AGING
IN DAPHNE DU MAURIER'S *REBECCA* AND SUSAN
HILL'S *MRS DE WINTER*

«Quería ser mayor»: género y envejecimiento en
Rebecca de Daphne Du Maurier y *Mrs de Winter de*
*Susan Hill*¹

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ABSTRACT: This article aims to analyse the process of aging as a major factor that articulates the politics of gender in Daphne Du Maurier's novel *Rebecca* (1938) and Susan Hill's sequel *Mrs de Winter* (1993). Even though Du Maurier's seminal novel has been traditionally interpreted as a novel of romance, by means of focusing on the aging process of different characters, and especially, of the female narrator, this article intends to read Du Maurier's

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Rebecca as a novel of awakening. The comparative analysis of Du Maurier’s text with the sequel that Susan Hill published decades later will serve the purpose of defending the interpretation of Du Maurier’s narrative as a novel of awakening, since the action in Susan Hill’s novel takes place twelve years later and gives significant importance to the aging processes of the characters. This article will also analyse the association between male aging and patriarchy, female youth and traditional femininity, old age and masculinity crisis, and female aging and female awakening.

Key words: Aging; Awakening; Patriarchy; Gender; Female Otherness.

RESUMEN: Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar el proceso de envejecimiento como un factor destacado que articula las políticas de género en la novela *Rebeca* (1938) de Daphne Du Maurier y su secuela *Mrs de Winter* (1993) de Susan Hill. Pese a que la novela seminal de Du Maurier ha sido tradicionalmente interpretada como una novela de corte romántico, mediante la atención al análisis del proceso de envejecimiento de varios personajes y, especialmente de la narradora, este artículo pretende leer la novela de Du Maurier como una novela denominada del despertar. El análisis comparativo del texto de Du Maurier con la secuela que Susan Hill publicó décadas más tarde se llevará a cabo con el objetivo de defender la interpretación de la narración de Du Maurier como novela del despertar, puesto que la acción en la novela de Susan Hill acontece doce años más tarde y otorga un énfasis notorio a los procesos de envejecimiento de los personajes. Asimismo, este artículo analizará la asociación entre envejecimiento masculino y patriarcado, juventud femenina y feminidad tradicional, vejez y crisis de masculinidad, y envejecimiento femenino y despertar femenino.

Palabras clave: envejecimiento; despertar; patriarcado; género; otredad femenina.

Daphne Du Maurier’s much acclaimed novel *Rebecca* was early dismissed as a gothic romance and even labelled as «women’s fiction» soon after its publication (Beauman 2007, 47), thus misinterpreting the author’s actual purpose, since, according to biographer Margaret Forster, Du Maurier contended that there was more hatred than love in her novel, and that she had intended to show her unnamed heroine as «intimidated, humiliated, and even abused throughout most of the story» (1994, 137). Some feminist critics, such as Nina Auerbach, took the author’s cue and stated that «if Du Maurier writes romances at all, their achievement is to infuse with menace the lives women are supposed to want» (2000, 103). However, even if Auerbach was highly critical of the term «romance» to describe Du Maurier’s fiction, she also called into question the feminist discourse in *Rebecca*, stating

that, in spite of the homage that Du Maurier’s novel pays to classic Victorian texts, such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, «*Rebecca* disavows the progress and continuity inherent in even the most subversive Victorian novels» as, in Auerbach’s words, «in *Jane Eyre*, a concluding marriage was an emblem of independence [whereas] in Daphne Du Maurier’s revision, marriage is not an entitlement but a trap» (2000, 118). Nonetheless, ironically enough, Auerbach’s ambivalent positioning with regard to the rebellious discourse within Du Maurier’s novel *Rebecca* is in tune with double-edged interpretations of romance as a genre within popular fiction on behalf of critics such as Alison Light (1997, 225), who argue that, instead of closure, romance offers «a postponement of fulfilment», and that romance reading can turn into a kind of «literary anorexia», inasmuch as it involves «a protest against, as well as a restatement of oppression», thus putting forward more intricate readings of romance in comparison with former interpretations that mainly aligned this literary genre with an eminently reactionary discourse.

In spite of current ambivalent readings concerning the genre of romance, this article aims to discourage categorising Du Maurier’s *Rebecca* as a classic novel representative of the genre. In addition to the fact that the author herself was reluctant to have her novel labelled as romance, Du Maurier’s text hardly follows the established formulaic structure of the classic romance in the strictest sense. In fact, the linear plot characterising romantic novels is mostly subverted in *Rebecca*, since marriage does not put an end to the story, but rather gives rise to the mystery that sets the action in motion, as the plot actually unfolds following Maxim de Winter’s marriage to his second wife. Likewise, in comparison to the customary happy ending that typifies novels of romance, the outcome of Du Maurier’s *Rebecca* can scarcely be described as pleasing, insofar as the relationship between the spouses truly gains in strength once Maxim de Winter confesses he is guilty of murder, which rather becomes a source of dissatisfaction for the audience, as—in contrast with Alfred Hitchcock’s adaptation, in which not only is Maxim de Winter acquitted, but he is also not responsible for Rebecca’s death—in Du Maurier’s original novel, the reader ultimately realises that the narrator of the story actually consents to being married to a murderer. In addition, taking into account that Rebecca is presented as a sexually-liberated female with an enigmatic intimate relationship with Mrs Danvers, critics such as Richard Kelly (1987, 60) have identified some lesbian tendencies in the character of Rebecca, especially following Maxim de Winter’s patriarchal statement referring to his first wife’s deviant ways. This veiled but lingering suspicion of Rebecca’s lesbianism once more problematizes the condition of Du Maurier’s novel as representative of the classic romance, since, according to Alison Light

(1997, 223), «romance fiction deals above all with the doubts and delights of heterosexuality». Likewise, the overwhelming haunting presence of Rebecca throughout the novel in spite of her death has led feminist critics such as Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik (1998, 108) to interpret the character of Rebecca as the narrator's *alter ego*, in clear analogy with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's reading of the character of Bertha Mason as Jane Eyre's rebellious double in Charlotte Brontë's classic. In fact, the increasing attention that has been drawn to the character of Rebecca in postmodern and feminist readings of Du Maurier's novel has ultimately given way to sequels that give voice to Maxim's first wife, as is the case with Antonia Fraser's short-story entitled «Rebecca's Story» (1976), in which Rebecca vindicates herself as a victim of Maxim's cruelty, and Sally Beauman's novel *Rebecca's Tale* (2001), in which Rebecca's true story, which greatly differs from that provided by her husband, is finally brought to light through her personal diary.

Given the manifold features that render Du Maurier's novel hardly illustrative of the genre of romance, this article proposes analysing *Rebecca* as a novel of awakening and of female development, inasmuch as it follows the established pattern of female growth characterising the novels comprised within this category. According to Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland (1983, 12), in novels of awakening, the female protagonist grows after fulfilling the fairy-tale expectation that she will marry and live happily ever after, as they often portray a departure not from parental but from marital authority, and this process of female development does not take place through a continuous procedure but rather through a series of brief epiphanic moments, which ultimately reflect internal changes befalling the female protagonist. In Du Maurier's novel *Rebecca*, age and the process of aging gain special relevance, particularly as references to the age and the process of aging of the characters are significantly pervasive. In fact, the age gap between the spouses is often brought to the fore to reveal the politics of power prevailing in their relationship, and aging is interpreted differently according to gender, since age is revealed to possess a cultural, psychological, and emotional dimension in addition to its evident chronological quality. Likewise, the symbolic awakening of the female protagonist is mostly enacted through her process of aging, as she recollects her past and gives voice to her story years later. Therefore, even though readings of Du Maurier's *Rebecca* have mostly tackled the exploration of power relations between men and women in the novel as focused on an unnamed female narrator who negotiates her identity in the shadow of her patronising husband and the almost ghostly presence of his sexually-liberated first wife, this article aims to look into aging as a catalyst

of gender politics in Du Maurier’s novel, insofar as aging plays a major role in articulating the politics of power between male and female characters, as well as in contributing to the progressive symbolic awakening of the female narrator.

With the view to emphasise the role that aging plays in *Rebecca*, this article will also provide a comparative analysis between Du Maurier’s novel and Hill’s *Mrs de Winter*, insofar as Hill’s sequel to *Rebecca* sets the plot of the story twelve years later and delves further into the evolution of the characters in the original novel through their process of aging. Hill’s *Mrs de Winter*, published in the year 1993, mostly responds to increasingly feminist readings of Du Maurier’s seminal novel that identified a latent protofeminist discourse in *Rebecca*. Hence, Hill’s novel aims to offer a feminist rereading of the original plot, mostly in response to the problematic ending posed in Du Maurier’s seminal text underscoring the thwarted development of the narrator, who apparently feels contented with her marriage in spite of gaining insight into the blatant truth about her husband’s criminal background. Likewise, in comparison to other literary sequels to *Rebecca*, Hill’s novel *Mrs de Winter* is faithful to the original and focuses on the female narrator entirely, underpinning her development as a character in the course of aging, and thus, sanctioning the interpretation of Du Maurier’s story as a novel of awakening rather than as classic representative of the genre of romance.

As will be shown throughout the study of these novels, aging is exposed to be entirely conditioned by gender precepts to the extent that the processes of female and male aging are perceived differently, while women and men also approach their aging in a dissimilar way. Taking into consideration that aging is culturally constructed by the politics of gender, Susan Sontag (1997, 21) warns about «the double standard of aging», which involves a discrepancy between the aging process of men and women that operates mostly to women’s disadvantage, contending that, in most cases, women are more penalised by aging than men, as society limits the way women feel free to imagine themselves. Likewise, drawing on Simone de Beauvoir’s precepts about the social construction of women, Marilyn Pearsall (1997, 1) argues that «as hard as it is to become a woman, it is even harder to become an old woman in patriarchal society», thus pointing at the need to reconstruct female aging from a feminist perspective. In her seminal work *The Coming of Age* (1970), Simone de Beauvoir (1972, 284) already referred to the process of alienation that female aging involves, claiming that «within me it is the Other –that is to say the person I am for the outsider– who is old and that Other is myself», and contending that women become partially accountable for the social

construction of their otherness, as they submit to the gaze of «the other» and perceive their aging process as representative of a «crisis in femininity». In this respect, Kathleen Woodward (1986, 110) refers to «the mirror stage of old age», as the reverse of the infant mirror stage proposed by Jacques Lacan, in the sense that, if in Lacan’s model, the infant fantasises with the whole image of her body as reflected in the mirror in contrast with her experience of fragmentation, in «the mirror stage of old age», the aging subject fears that her fragmented image in the mirror, which contrasts with her experience of unity may precipitate the loss of the imaginary. Nonetheless, feminist critics such as Betty Friedan (1994, 18) argue that it is upon the advent of aging that women find some strength that men seem to lack, as women leave behind what Friedan calls «the feminine mystique» and instead, feel enabled to transcend the gender roles that they have been culturally assigned.

Taking into consideration these tenets regarding female aging from a feminist perspective, this analysis will address the association between age and masculinity in the portrayal of male characters such as Maxim de Winter and the connection between youth and femininity in the depiction of female characters such as the narrator, which contribute to reinforcing patriarchal values particularly, but not exclusively, in Du Maurier’s text. In addition, this study will also tackle the connection of old age with a process of symbolic emasculation in male characters, as well as the relation established between aging and a symbolic awakening of female characters, which underpin a more explicit feminist discourse, especially, but again not exclusively, in Hill’s novel. The relationship between Maxim de Winter and his second wife, the female narrator in both *Rebecca* and *Mrs de Winter*, enacts a politics of gender highly representative of patriarchy, at least, on its onset, mostly based on a significant age gap between the spouses, as a profusely experienced and older husband protects his much younger wife, establishing a parallelism between her youth, and her lack of knowledge as well as her perpetual need for protection, while emphasising his wish she remained in a state of perpetual youth, and thus, of everlasting innocence so that he could symbolically continue exerting his patriarchal control. In contrast, though, as the story progresses and the female narrator grows older, she gains a deeper insight into her role as a wife and begins to strive for a more balanced politics of power in her marriage. This increasing awareness of her situation comes hand in hand with the advent of old age that befalls her husband, which destabilises the gender politics that had prevailed in their marriage so far and unleashes a process of symbolic awakening for the female narrator, since, as opposed to her husband, who becomes more fragile and dependable, her aging process endows her with

more power and freedom to release herself from patriarchal values. The chronological coming of age, together with the symbolic process of development that the female narrator starts undergoing in Du Maurier’s novel, becomes more evident in Hill’s sequel, which paves the ground for reading them as novels of awakening rather than romance, despite the fact that both texts share some tenets pertaining to this genre.

1. AGE, MALE AUTHORITY, AND PATRIARCHY

In Du Maurier’s novel *Rebecca*, the politics of gender –and by extension, of power– that articulate the relationship between the spouses, Maxim de Winter and his second wife, is particularly grounded in the age gap established between them, as Maxim is depicted as considerably older than his young wife, since he is in his early forties whereas his second wife is in her early twenties. In principle, the difference in the age of the partners should be no matter for concern, but Maxim often makes a point of emphasising this age gap, especially in the first years of their marriage, even explicitly admitting to his wife that «there are too many years between us» (Du Maurier 1992, 153). Maxim de Winter’s older chronological age comes hand in hand with an attitude highly representative of patriarchy, as he often displays a paternalistic and even an overprotective behaviour towards his young wife, which especially shows in his concern to divest her of any knowledge regarding the secretive nature of Manderley and the mysterious puzzle surrounding Rebecca’s death. In fact, Maxim de Winter’s patriarchal attitude comes to the surface when the female narrator becomes too inquisitive, and he feels the need to deter her curiosity through a patronising and infantilizing speech, thus mentioning sarcastically but solemnly:

«A husband is not so very different from a father after all. There is a certain type of knowledge I prefer you not to have. It’s better kept under lock and key. So that’s that. And now eat up your peaches, and don’t ask any more questions, or I shall put you in the corner».

«I wish you would not treat me as if I was six», I said. (Du Maurier 1992, 211)

The pervasive parallelism that Maxim de Winter establishes between the figures of a father and a daughter and those of a husband and a wife –even if it unleashes the female narrator’s disapproval as the quote above asserts– contributes further to underlining the age gap existing between both, and the resulting association between age and authority, as well as between youth and subjection. Likewise, Maxim also explicitly states his

dislike for his wife’s inevitable process of aging, which will bring along her symbolic awakening and her gradual knowledge about the mysteries of Manderley, as he confesses to his wife that «it’s a pity you have to grow up» (Du Maurier 1992, 58), while he also identifies a telling grown-up look in his wife as she gains insight into the criminal case in which he is involved, stating that «you looked older suddenly, deceitful –it was rather unpleasant» (Du Maurier 1992, 210), thus once more associating aging with some sort of knowledge and cunningness that he finds repulsive in his young wife. In this respect, this attitude complies with Marilyn Pearsall’s ideas about the trouble involved in becoming an aging woman in a patriarchal society. In particular, Maxim rather abhors the fact that his wife is growing older, both literally and symbolically, insofar as her awakening increasingly reminds him of his late first wife, Rebecca, who is characterised as an independent mature woman all through the novel, and precisely, in order to establish an explicit distinction between his wife and Rebecca, Maxim underlines the need that his wife should remain young and innocent, and by extension, ignorant and in need for protection, as it is her youth in contrast with Maxim’s older age which initially ensures his supremacy in the politics of gender and age prevailing in the patriarchal system he exalts and defends.

It must also be acknowledged that, through her aging process, the female narrator gains increasing awareness of Maxim’s condescending attitude towards her, since the narrator recounts her story ten years later. The action in Hill’s sequel to *Rebecca* is set only two years later, at the time when Maxim de Winter and his wife have been married for twelve years, and the female narrator is a mature woman in her thirties while her husband is well into his fifties. With the view to leave behind the memories of a bitter past, Maxim de Winter and his wife have lived in exile in France for years, when they receive a letter informing them about the demise of Maxim’s sister, Beatrice, and their need to return to England to attend her funeral. The female narrator admits that, in these years of exile, she has felt closer to her husband than ever, as the secrets that separated them have been disclosed and Maxim has apparently abandoned his distant and demanding ways, showing his vulnerability and even emotional dependence on his younger wife. Nonetheless, as the female narrator soon notices, the prospects of returning to England exert an important effect on her husband, who gradually appears to acquire the old patriarchal ways that characterised him in the past and are evocative of a type of traditional masculinity. As the female narrator recounts, at this stage, Maxim begins to show his wish to deal with things alone, while he also regains his old condescending attitude towards his wife, once more treating her in an infantilizing and paternalistic manner as if she were a child. Likewise, regarding her husband,

the narrator concedes that «Maxim had never cried, never once, it was unimaginable» (Hill 1999, 58) and «he had never felt easy with any displays of emotion» (Hill 1999, 85), but it is in this period, when the spouses go back to England, that the female narrator once more becomes aware of her husband’s contemptuous and uncaring ways, thus holding on to a traditional masculinity that urges the narrator to turn back in time when they first met and she had compared her prospective husband with a medieval knight, like the hero in a gothic romance. Again, as Maxim goes back to his old ways and becomes more distant from his wife, the female narrator once more associates Maxim’s authoritarian attitude with age, as she admits that, even twelve years before «he had seemed gravely old, then, [and] that had been part of the point» (Hill 1999, 218), thus highlighting the age gap separating them and her submissive condition owing to her husband’s older age and patriarchal ways.

2. DISPLAYS OF TRADITIONAL FEMININITY: FORBIDDEN TO GROW OLDER AND AGED TOO SOON

As Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik (1998, 103) argue, the events in Du Maurier’s novel are focalised through the eyes of the female narrator’s younger self, as she recollects how young she felt in relation to her husband, and how her youth and inexperience subtly contributed to sustaining his patriarchal authority and her compliant attitude, thus cementing the gender politics of their marriage. In her recollections, the female narrator often refers to how young and powerless she felt at the time, confessing that she «was young enough to win happiness in the wearing of his clothes, playing the schoolboy again who carries his hero’s sweater» (Du Maurier 1992, 40), she «was idiotic, shy, and young» (Du Maurier 1992, 65), and she «was too young for Maxim, too inexperienced» (Du Maurier 1992, 243), thus making constant references to her blatant youth in comparison with her husband’s older age, confidence, and self-assurance. The female narrator’s young chronological age continually reinforces her sense of subservience and submissiveness, especially since she is able to perceive her husband’s unwillingness to see her grow older and wiser. In this respect, cultural pressures on women to retain perpetual youth, both physically and mentally, as well as the concern to prevent women from growing old as a principle in patriarchy align to give shape to the cultural forbiddance that hinders women’s chronological and psychological process of growing old. In fact, as Pearsall (1997, 5) points out, women in later life have been negatively stereotyped owing to the socially-constructed view of aging women in

popular fiction and media images, which show that women become sexually disqualified much earlier than men and undergo an alleged «crisis in femininity» that ultimately discloses the double marginality to which women are exposed through both sexism and ageism.

The alliance of youth with traditional femininity that prevails in Du Maurier’s novel is also displayed in the first chapters of Hill’s sequel, as, in spite of the passage of time and her chronological age, the female narrator confesses that she is «still not a grown woman» (Hill 1999, 68), she has «no real confidence, no belief in [herself] as a woman» (Hill 1999, 72), and she often feels «reverting again to [her] old, inferior, child-like role» (Hill 1999, 92), thus once more aligning female youth with submission in a patriarchal society. Nonetheless, in comparison with Du Maurier’s novel, in Susan Hill’s sequel, owing to the years gone by and her process of aging, the female narrator begins to gain insight into the ongoing process of symbolic awakening that she is undergoing. Despite her frequent references to her innocence and powerlessness as a woman, which are symbolically symptomatic of her youth, she also admits that, all of a sudden, while being in her thirties, she feels old as a woman, thus confessing:

I had gone from being a gauche, badly dressed girl, to being an uninterestingly, dully dressed married woman, and indeed, looking at them now, I saw that my clothes were those of someone entirely middle aged, in unadventurous background colours, and it suddenly struck me that in this way too, I had never been young, never been at all frivolous and gay. (Hill 1999, 34)

These feelings befalling the female narrator, as she feels much older than her chronological age, comply with Susan Sontag’s precepts stating that women are rendered older significantly earlier than men, and owing to patriarchal values, to use Sontag’s words, this prevailing double standard of aging often operates to women’s disadvantage, especially as women, as opposed to men, are sexually disqualified in their aging process (Sontag 1997, 20). In Hill’s novel, the female narrator gradually gains insight into her situation, acknowledging that, as a woman, she swings between the cultural requirement to remain perpetually young and the cultural pressure that subjects women to a premature process of aging, even upon the advent of their middle age. In this respect, in Hill’s sequel, despite her significantly young chronological age, the female narrator confesses that she «felt old then, and as if [her] life was more than half over, and all the important things past, not come, old before I had ever been truly young» (Hill 1999, 158), thus acknowledging a premature process of aging, which mostly lies in the patriarchal values that render women aged earlier than it is due. The

female narrator’s symbolic awakening process thus involves the realisation that women’s aging remains entirely conditioned by patriarchal values, rendering them too young or too old, and depriving them of the necessary freedom in order to envision their own process of aging.

3. AGING MEN, MASCULINITY CRISIS, AND THE DEBACLE OF PATRIARCHY

In Du Maurier’s novel, Maxim de Winter becomes the epitome of the values of patriarchy in his part as proprietor of the manor house of Manderley, husband and father figure to his young wife, and main supporter of the separation of gender roles in marriage as reflective of the politics of power favoured in a patriarchal system. However, as aforementioned, even though Maxim de Winter’s older age endows him with more authority and control as a symbolic patriarchal figure, this sort of authoritative masculinity remains increasingly under threat as Maxim de Winter grows old and the values of patriarchy that he defends gradually become a matter of the past. Through his course of aging, Maxim turns from a protector of patriarchal values into a victim of the same system, owing to an increasingly blurring of gender roles and the resulting masculinity crisis that he starts undergoing. Significantly, Maxim de Winter first comes across the subversion of the dictates of gender through his relationship with his late and first wife Rebecca, as her independent and masculine traits –and even the spectre of lesbianism that she represents– not only threaten to undermine patriarchy and endanger the continuation of Maxim de Winter’s lineage, but also unleash his ongoing masculinity crisis. In fact, the hero in Du Maurier’s novel ultimately becomes a victim of the same patriarchal values that he has strived to defend, to the extent that, as Alison Light (1991, 165) claims, it can be argued that «the manliness of [du Maurier’s] heroes is often as doubtful as the docility of her heroines», as in their masculinity crisis –which is especially symbolised by the debacle of their manor houses as is the case with Manderley– they feel emotionally dependent on their wives, who reveal themselves as older and wiser than they appeared to be at first glance.

The symbolic masculinity crisis befalling Maxim de Winter in Du Maurier’s novel is revealed through images of male aging that reflect his unrelenting physical and emotional process of aging, and metaphorically disclose his fear of emasculation, which, by extension, underpins a crisis in patriarchal values. A significant imbalance in the gender politics of his marriage ensues when Maxim de Winter confesses to his wife that he murdered Rebecca, and he reveals his vulnerability and helplessness, which stand in sharp contrast with his former detached and authoritarian personality. In

contrast, it is when Maxim de Winter shows his anxiety and tiredness that the female narrator gains in confidence and strength, and from then onwards, it is the wife that comforts her husband, revealing the change in the gender politics of their marriage through images that empower her while underscore his frailty, as the female narrator relates that

I was using the words he had used to me. I felt better and stronger. It was I now who was taking care of him. He was tired, pale. I had got over my weakness and fatigue and now he was the one to suffer from reaction. It was just because he was empty, because he was tired. (Du Maurier 1992, 392)

The subversion of the traditional gender roles that is displayed at the end of Du Maurier’s novel –as the female narrator and her husband come closer than ever, precisely because of their capacity to overcome the reactionary power politics that prevailed in their marriage– is explored further in Hill’s sequel, particularly as Maxim de Winter’s aging is more noticeable owing to the passage of time, and it is exposed to be closely related to a gradual process of male disempowerment. In fact, descriptions of Maxim de Winter’s physical appearance on behalf of the female narrator in *Mrs de Winter* often underline images of male aging that declare that «Maxim’s skin was transparent, and that there were smears of tiredness beneath his eyes, and the eyes themselves were dulled» (Hill 1999, 11), he was «a little more lined and grey haired» (Hill 1999, 23), and «he looked tired, exhausted» (Hill 1999, 88). Likewise, it is not only his looks that show his aging and fragility at this stage, but the female narrator also detects an important conversion in his personality, noticing that «he was rarely so imperious now, or so impulsive, and his temper was generally so much more even, he was more accepting of things, and of tedium most of all» (Hill 1999, 23), while he was «silent for the most part, though gentle» (Hill 1999, 35) and even «defenceless» (Hill 1999, 73), to the extent that the female narrator even contends that her husband had «become wholly broken and lost, during our years of exile, dependent on me, on my strength and devotion» (Hill 1999, 328). Hence, through the passage of time and their respective processes of aging, the female narrator acknowledges that, in the past, she succumbed to her husband’s authority, while through a process of disempowerment and symbolic emasculation, her husband began to show his vulnerability, which came hand in hand with the female narrator’s resulting process of awakening and female empowerment, thus subverting the former gender politics that used to characterise their marriage.

As shown in Hill’s novel, Maxim de Winter’s process of aging and of symbolic emasculation is symptomatic of a global crisis of patriarchal

values, as the female narrator portrays a series of male characters that, through time, have undergone a significant process of aging, which has weakened them and disempowered them also at a metaphorical level. As a case in point, when the Winters go back to England to attend Beatrice’s funeral, the female narrator meets Giles, Beatrice’s widower, after many years of exile, and she finds him much changed, and particularly, after having lost his wife, she portrays him as «bereft, vulnerable, and suddenly old» (Hill 1999, 75). In a similar way, in the course of her trip to London, the female narrator comes across Jack Favell, Rebecca’s cousin and lover, whom she had not seen for years, and portrays him, asserting that «once, he had been good looking, in an obvious way—never attractive to me, but now, he was not, he was repellent, much older, seedy» (Hill 1999, 250). It is significant to notice that the female narrator often highlights the aging traits of these male characters, mostly underlining their weakness and helplessness. In fact, the female narrator consoles Giles as he cries bitterly over the death of his wife, while she also feels compelled to give Jack Favell some money, partly owing to his threat to blackmail them, but also as a result of her realisation that Favell is patently bankrupt. In both cases, the female narrator shows her strength and resourcefulness in front of aging males that give good evidence of their dependence and powerlessness, as they seem to undergo a symbolic process of emasculation that renders them frailer, while, in comparison, the female narrator becomes gradually empowered.

In addition to the portrayal of the gradual disempowerment of a series of aging males, the event that mostly marks the debacle of a symbolic patriarchal system in Hill’s novel is the tragic end befalling Maxim de Winter. The author’s decision to dispose of the hero of the narrative in such a way mostly lies in the need to resolve the problematic conclusion posed in Du Maurier’s original novel, as, in *Rebecca*, although the female narrator ultimately realises that her husband murdered his first wife, she still agrees to remain by his side, since this discovery even seems to draw them closer and strengthen their relationship. Nonetheless, this awkward ending inevitably hinders the symbolic awakening of the female narrator in Du Maurier’s novel, as, despite the fact that she hardly dares to admit it, she literally finds herself related to a criminal for life. The demise of Maxim de Winter in a car accident in Hill’s sequel takes the cue from Du Maurier’s original ending to her novel *Rebecca*, since, as the author recounts in *The Rebecca Notebook and Other Memories* (1981), she had planned that Maxim de Winter and his second wife would suffer a car accident at the end of the novel. Likewise, the actual cause of Maxim de Winter’s death remains ambiguous, since it is not clear whether it was an accident or he committed suicide, as he knew that the truth about Rebecca’s case would ultimately come to light. In this

respect, Hill also paid homage to Du Maurier’s original novel, as Maxim de Winter’s strange death resembles Rebecca’s own end, as her case ultimately lied in ascertaining whether Maxim de Winter’s first wife had committed suicide or had been a victim of murder. In relation to the female narrator, though, the demise of her husband symbolically sanctions her process of awakening and of release from a past that precluded her aging and process of development as a woman.

4. A FEMINIST RE-READING: FEMALE AGING AND «THE FEMALE OTHER»

The course of aging of the female narrator is significantly conditioned by her relationship with her husband, from its commencement until the time when Maxim de Winter’s involvement in the death of his first wife is disclosed. In Du Maurier’s novel, following her first encounter with his future husband in Montecarlo, the female narrator admits that she «had never felt so old» (Du Maurier 1992, 32) and she «was a person of importance, [she] was grown up at last» (Du Maurier 1992, 32), even stating that she felt she was «another woman, older, more mature» (Du Maurier 1992, 49). Given her young age, the prospects of becoming the wife of Maxim de Winter endow her with the social status and confidence that she lacks in order to come of age and make good progress in her way to female adulthood. Nonetheless, as a married woman, the female narrator soon begins to gain insight into the gender politics operating in her marriage, noticing that, owing to her husband’s older age and demanding ways, she feels unable to develop as a mature woman. In fact, feeling entrapped in her marriage and finding herself relapsing to the subservient and compliant ways that had characterised her youth, the female narrator timidly gives voice to her need to age as a woman, thus claiming that she «wished something would happen to make [her] look wiser, more mature» (Du Maurier 1992, 205), ultimately declaring that she «did not want to be a child –[she] wanted to be his wife, his mother– [she] wanted to be old» (Du Maurier 1992, 205). However, it is mostly when the female narrator feels obliged to quieten the rebellious voice that propels her towards maturity that the haunting memories of Rebecca, Maxim’s late first wife, become more pervasive, as if it was Rebecca who truly awakened the female narrator’s defiant ways and her will to age as a woman.

In Du Maurier’s novel, the female narrator mostly learns from Rebecca through the teachings of Mrs Danvers, who truly acts as a symbolic initiator that ironically propels the protagonist into aging and female development. It is in comparison with Rebecca that the female narrator feels utterly young

and innocent, as, according to Mrs Danvers, Rebecca «had all the knowledge of a grown person» (Du Maurier 1992, 254), while Rebecca’s liberated and even boyish ways stand in sharp contrast with the timid and obedient traits that characterise Maxim de Winter’s second wife. In fact, as Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik (1998, 105) claim, within a patriarchal society, women are considered the figure of «the other» that is required for the construction of the masculine self, but this «female other» usually possesses two faces: that of an angel, represented by the innocent female narrator, and that of a devil, personified by Rebecca. Drawing further on this interpretation, the female narrator is also characterised as eminently young, while Rebecca is mostly portrayed as a mature and independent woman, and thus, symbolically older than the female protagonist. Given the haunting influence that Rebecca exerts on the female narrator through her process of aging, Maxim de Winter’s first wife fulfils the role of the figure of «the other» for the female narrator, since, even if she is apparently reluctant, the protagonist cannot hide her curiosity to learn more things about Rebecca, and she finds herself replacing her and even emulating her, to the extent that it is truly Rebecca the woman that the female narrator aspires to become in the course of her aging process. To use Simone de Beauvoir’s terminology, Rebecca thus turns into the female narrator’s «aging other», particularly as her symbolic process of female aging also involves leaving behind her traits pertaining to a kind of traditional femininity. In fact, by the end of Du Maurier’s novel, when the female protagonist manages to destabilise the established gender politics in her marriage, she envisions herself as Rebecca in a dream, thus describing this episode as follows: «I got up and went to the looking-glass. A face stared back at me that was not my own. It was very pale, very lovely, framed in a cloud of dark hair. The eyes narrowed and smiled. The lips parted. The face in the glass stared back at me and laughed» (Du Maurier 1992, 396).

This mirror scene depicted above brings to mind Kathleen Woodward’s precepts about «the mirror stage of old age», insofar as the experience of unity that the female narrator enjoys at this stage of her aging process contrasts with the fragmented symbolic image of her defiant «other» in the mirror –inasmuch as Rebecca is dead and her reflection is that of a ghost– which becomes a source of the uncanny for the narrator, but also involves the representation of her older self that remains latent and is waiting to emerge. This highly metaphorical scene in Du Maurier’s novel ultimately implies that, even though the female narrator has achieved some status and has managed to disrupt the politics of gender that prevailed in her marriage, unconsciously, she still perceives the presence of an older and more mature self that needs to be subdued while being married to a male representative of patriarchy.

Precisely, in response to the ambiguous process of female development exemplified by the female narrator at the end of Du Maurier’s novel, Hill’s sequel can be considered a feminist rereading of the original text. In comparison with Du Maurier’s novel, from the beginning of the narrative, the female narrator in *Mrs de Winter* portrays herself as an older woman who is highly reflective and well aware of the fact that, in spite of her love for her husband, her marriage to Maxim de Winter has obliged her to live in exile and in constant fear that the dark secret of their past may eventually come to light. All through Hill’s novel, it is often the case that the female narrator cannot help observing her husband and repeating to herself like a litany that «that man is a murderer –he shot Rebecca– that is the man who killed his wife» (Hill 1999, 36). It is thus for the first time in the story of Maxim de Winter and his wife that the female narrator explicitly considers her husband a murderer and even unveils her fear that she might share the same end that befell Maxim’s first wife. Likewise, in comparison with the more timid and docile traits that used to characterise the female narrator years before, as suggestive of her aging process she is now prone to give evidence of her more mature and rebellious self, thus declaring that she «was conscious of some faint restlessness within [herself], a faint struggling, new voice» (Hill 1999, 24), and subsequently, she admits that she «was angry, angry with memory, angry with [herself], angry with the past» (Hill 1999, 66), and claims that she «was not ashamed or guilty, for once, [she] revelled in [her] own self confidence» (Hill 1999, 75). Also, as illustrative of her aging process, once back in England, the female narrator refuses to remain in exile, arguing that she «was too old for it» (Hill 1999, 110), and instead, given the fact that Manderley was destroyed, she expresses her wish to own her own house, as the fact of ruling over her own household would finally allow her to be declared rightful lady of a manor, instead of having the feeling of replacing someone else, as had happened to her when she married Maxim de Winter and lived in Manderley.

Throughout Hill’s novel, the female narrator often ponders about her process of aging, and claims that, when she met her husband, she «had been so much younger, gauche and school-girlish, inexperienced, and stupid» (Hill 1999, 218), whereas, at this stage of her life, she felt that she «was older than [her] mother had been, as old as it was possible ever to be» (Hill 1999, 218). By means of constant references to images of aging, the female narrator acknowledges her symbolic process of awakening, which is revealed to be inextricably related to her aging process. It is thus at an older age that the female narrator becomes empowered in front of her husband, and also in front of other characters that remind her of a bitter past, such as

Jack Favell and Mrs Danvers, as she manages to face them both with confidence and without fear. Hence, drawing on Betty Friedan’s precepts about female aging, it is owing to her aging process that the female narrator eventually finds the strength that she appeared to lack in the former years of her youth. The process of awakening that the female narrator undergoes from Du Maurier’s novel to Susan Hill’s sequel is mostly exemplified through her changing consideration of the character of Rebecca, significantly in terms of her process of aging. In Du Maurier’s novel, the female narrator confesses that «Rebecca would never grow old –Rebecca would always be the same– and her I could not fight– she was too strong for me» (du Maurier 1992, 245), whereas in Hill’s sequel, the female protagonist rather finds in her aging the weapon that enables her to overthrow Rebecca, thus claiming:

Looking in the mirror on my dressing table, I saw some streaks of grey at my temples, and began to push them out of sight, but they would not be concealed, and then I thought that they did not matter. There was something else, too. I was still quite a young woman, but I was older by some years than Rebecca had ever been, and it occurred to me as a sort of triumph. She had no grey hairs, I said, and for a second, the image of her in the picture came into my mind and I felt nothing but a mild, detached kind of pity. (Hill 1999, 324)

This quotation above is strongly reminiscent of the passage in Du Maurier’s novel in which the female narrator looks at herself in the mirror and contemplates Rebecca’s face. Nonetheless, in Hill’s novel, the female protagonist no longer perceives the reflection of Rebecca in the mirror as symptomatic of her own aging self, which is latent and waiting to emerge, but, this time, in the absence of her «female other», the narrator only beholds her own actual aging image, which ultimately ratifies the fulfilment of her symbolic process of awakening and of female development. In fact, Hill’s choice of *Mrs de Winter* as the title of her novel underlines the existing close association between Rebecca and the female narrator, which ultimately comes to an end when the female protagonist completes her process of awakening as a woman and no longer feels the need to conceal her older and bellicose self that Rebecca had incarnated for years.

5. CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of Du Maurier’s seminal novel *Rebecca* and Hill’s sequel *Mrs de Winter* gives evidence of the significance attached to the aging process of the characters, and how age arises as a determinant

factor that articulates gender in these literary texts to the extent that it can be argued that aging functions as a catalyst of the politics of gender in both novels. Given the interaction between aging and gender in these texts, aging arises as a feature that can contribute significantly to empowering as well as disempowering both female and male characters from a gender perspective. Maxim de Winter’s older age in comparison with his young wife supports his characterisation as a defender of patriarchy, endowing him with authority and with a more privileged and dominant position than that of his wife. As a counterpart to Maxim de Winter’s older age, the blatant youth that characterises his second and unnamed wife, the female narrator of both narratives, underlines her submission and subservience in comparison to her older husband, especially as she reveals herself to be mostly indebted to a type of traditional femininity that plays a significant role in supporting patriarchal values. Conversely, as the characters grow older, there is an importance imbalance in the gender politics that has prevailed so far in the narratives. As Maxim de Winter’s dark secret regarding Rebecca is finally exposed and he shows his true colours and weaknesses to his second wife, he also undergoes a relentless process of aging that gradually deprives him of his authority as the personification of the figure of the patriarch. Likewise, the portrayal of the aging processes of other male characters, who display their vulnerability in the end, also echoes and symbolically represents the obsolescence of patriarchal values, while it is also indicative of the ongoing process of emasculation of all these male characters. In contrast, though, the aging process befalling the female narrator in both narratives exerts a very different effect on her, since, if aging seems to deprive these male characters of their former strength, the aging of the female narrator endows her with the resolution and confidence that she used to lack in her youth. For the female narrator, aging involves a symbolic process of female awakening, as not only is she granted more determination as a woman, but it also brings along a subversion of former gender roles in her marriage that allows her to attain more freedom to envision herself in her old age, to the point of even resembling her alter ego, Rebecca, to a feeble, but significant, extent.

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