THE NIPS AND TUCKS OF FEMALE AGING IN CHRISTINA ROSSETTI’S “GOBLIN MARKET,” CHARLES DICKENS’S GREAT EXPECTATIONS, AND ÉMILE ZOLA’S AU BONHEUR DES DAMES

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A Thesis Submitted to the University of North Carolina Wilmington in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

Department of English University of North Carolina Wilmington 2011

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ABSTRACT

The aged woman runs rampant in Victorian literature and yet even in our own post post-structuralist moment, this marginalized figure continues to be overlooked by historicity or only briefly mentioned as by-products of a larger discussion. Generally, a dearth of scholarship exists on the topic of aging, so this thesis, inspired by the modern Beauty Myth, gives voice to a small share of those disenfranchised women and explores the binary at work when old age squares off against youth with a market economy as a backdrop. This thesis addresses a triad of mid-nineteenth century texts: Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market,” Charles Dickens’s Great Expectations, and Émile Zola’s Au Bonheur des Dames, all of which offer us a platform from which to investigate aging as a curious function. This work covers some much needed territory in regard to the conditions of the burgeoning shopping culture (using the Great Exhibition of 1851 in Hyde Park as the dawning moment) and its disfiguring psychological effects on women of the time. Building on the contemporary framework of Kathleen Woodward’s theory of the mirror stage of old age, this thesis explores mirror imagery, bourgeois culture, the paternalistic business model, and contrasting female characters. I detail a psychoanalytic examination of the aged self—particularly a gendered self—in relation to the physical space of the market which offers an environment of false youthfulness while simultaneously functioning as a locus of hostility towards that which is not new. Anything old in Rossetti’s cautionary market, Dickens’s comedy of manners, and Zola’s New Paris must be suppressed through an other, used as a litmus test for female worth, or reduced to chasing an idealized metaphor dependent on desirability. Youthful femininity—determined by exteriority—and fertility become conflated tropes in so far as conservative bourgeois values saturate the market and drive the consumption culture’s predilection for newness, suggesting that the bourgeois state depends on femininity to perpetuate
its conservative value system. Thus, the market creates images of femininity, and through consumption, femininity feeds on itself *ad infinitum*, suspending the aging process.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I am indebted to my thesis director, Dr. Katherine Montwieler, for her unwavering support and confidence in me. I am grateful for my time spent with her personally and professionally. Her seminar class served as the catalyst for this project and I am honored to have had the opportunity to experience firsthand the manner of academic pedagogy that encourages rigorous analytical thought while simultaneously providing a caring and thoughtful proving ground for intellectual growth. The probing questions and observations that were formulated, explored, refuted, and authenticated through lively and thought-provoking discussions by my peers in that seminar class were indispensable. Of course, I cannot forget to thank Zack Rearick for introducing me to the concept of the Beauty Myth.

I am thankful for the encouragement and enthusiasm of my committee members Dr. Barbara Waxman and Dr. Katie Peel as well as for their extremely helpful edits, comments, and guidance during my revision stage. It was a dream-team committee for me and I only wish that my distance from campus could have been shorter so as to allow for more of their valuable insights into Victorian culture and their mentorship.

I am awed by the talent, perceptiveness, and embracing nature of my peers whose friendships during this journey will be forever cherished—as well as the epic discussions.

Thank you to the Randall Library and the Interlibrary Loan staff for pardoning my lateness in returning texts and for providing me with inexhaustible material to work with and read from. University libraries are the cornerstone of research and this thesis would not be as comprehensive without such a resource.

Lastly, I would like to express my thanks to my husband and daughter for putting up with the long hours, for my constant tangents, and for rallying me when I needed it most.
DEDICATION

Without the support of my husband and the encouragement of family and the dearest of friends and colleagues, this thesis would still be part of the nebula, a distant vision without form or the promise of actualization. I dedicate this work to them and to the nameless women of history, marked only by their exteriority.
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INTRODUCTION

Much of my work to date has focused on the push-pull mechanisms of gender and power, specifically the cultural, political, and historical ramifications of being “female” in any given society. Victorian literature in particular offers a Petri dish of such examinations, always ready to illuminate human behavior and provide insight into the workings of femininity. I am drawn to cultural artifacts that are set in the middle of repressive and restricted milieus because they expose the intricate knots of what it means to be human and they can show us the roadmap of how we have come to think, act, speak, perform the way we do. Even today the entrenched controversy of an issue like gender demonstrates the unseen but potent forces that still shape our Western mindset. During a graduate seminar class addressing the topics of sex, power, and Victorian secrets, a fellow graduate student introduced me to the work of Naomi Wolf when I showed an interest in the elusive quandary of beauty and aging in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market.” That a contemporary work like Wolf’s could bridge a gap and represent another plotted point on the map only reifies the knot. As a primary text, Rossetti’s poem exemplifies the multifaceted cultural work that is in action for nineteenth-century readership as well as illustrates the innate prophetic imagination indicative of the Pre-Raphaelite poets whose work, according to Antony H. Harrison, represents “timelessness” because of their mutability and modernist aims (37). It is this timelessness that allows Rossetti’s poem to be material rife with the stuff of contemporary concerns, particularly for the issue of gender. The inspiration for this thesis then is the work of Naomi Wolf whose book The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women explores how conceptions of Westernized beauty are socially constructed and then perpetuated by the media. Wolf claims that images of beauty are used against women in order to subjugate them. This “beauty myth,” as she calls it, has woven its way into the
cultural fabric and has existed since women first decided to shed their domestic skins: “It is the modern version of a social reflex that has been in force since the Industrial Revolution. As women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity, the beauty myth took over its lost ground, expanding as it waned to carry on its work of social control” (10). In as direct a way as possible, this thesis explores the connections among femininity, aging, and consumer culture, emblematized in Lady Colin Campbell’s 1892 advice manual The Lady’s Dressing Room: “The fear of wrinkles leads many women to submit to the hardest of sacrifices, in the hope of conjuring away the demon of old age” (77-78).

What are these sacrifices? They are the alterations and mutations of the female body in order to fit within a socio-economic mold of identification and production. Why must we be concerned with such transfigurations of the female body? Simone de Beauvoir contends that we must not focus on the human preoccupation with cheating death but on our preoccupation with cheating old age: “We must stop cheating: the whole meaning of our life is in question in the future that is waiting for us. If we do not know what we are going to be, we cannot know what we are: let us recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman” (5). Aging in general proves a taboo subject, much as de Beauvoir has exposed, and yet paradoxically it relies on cultural determinism, so my work aims to look at one small aspect of the cheat, the hoax of the female body, in order to set the future right by studying the past, potentially wresting the female body from the bonds of wrinkles and the exteriority complexes that prison us. The three primary texts I have chosen, Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market,” Charles Dickens’ Great Expectations, and Émile Zola’s Au Bonheur des Dames, together offer a platform from which to investigate why aging (particularly for a woman) is deemed so appalling, so demon-like, in mid-to late-nineteenth-century Europe and to what extent aging frames femininity. The timeline that I build
on is one of a sliding female subjectivity where Laura from “Goblin Market” projects herself into the future, Miss Havisham from *Great Expectations* looks backwards, and Denise and Madame Desforges from *Au Bonheur des Dames* intersect. In all instances, the female characters are acutely aware of time and where they are in relation to the physical manifestation of old age. In all three texts, aging swallows up gender; it becomes the dictate of gender. Building on textual analysis, socio-historical analyses of the European shopping culture, and psychoanalytic inquiry, I start with the basest of questions: why is growing old so objectionable? This deeply philosophical question then has spurred a quest to untangle the Gordian-like Knot of the forces at work in reinforcing Westernized women’s attempts to drink from a tainted fountain of youth and the psychological upshots of hegemonic culture. Simply put, my thesis reveals the psychology at work in the Victorian women who inject themselves with the neurotoxins of self-worth that society pimps for the sake of ensuring the success of the new retail machines of capitalism and the fortification of reproduction for the proliferation of such mores.

My starting point in this thesis and the literary *raison d’être* for examining the Beauty Myth in relation to nineteenth-century literature is, of course, Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market.” My examination begins, and persists throughout the first section of the thesis, with Rossetti’s use of language, her haunting images of perfected fruit that are used to both entice and forewarn with an undertow of fertility that drags out a desire for youthfulness. While an ongoing textual analysis provides the clues, the framework for desire must be understood with a theoretical application, for which I turn to Kathleen Woodward’s work in the mirror stage of old age. Woodward’s psychoanalytic approach is instrumental in understanding how our notions of old age are constructed and perpetuated. I apply her theory to argue that the sister characters Laura and Lizzie must be seen as mirrored images of each other and that their reflections, what
each sees in the other, triggers the formation of identity. A haunting of aging exists as well in the side story of Jeanie, whose tale also plays on the psychology of the young girls in that she serves as a mirror of horror, a warning of how an aged female body is relegated to the outlands of society and doomed for metaphorical death when it is unweddable and subsequently unproductive. When old age becomes a part of that process of identity, the girls’ adverse reactionary responses illustrate the loss of power felt when, in a domestic economic system, the reproductive capacities of a woman are rendered useless. Such a corollary indicates that the “Angel in the House”\textsuperscript{1} paradigm is motivational fodder, which a consumer market can capitalize on and use as a means of driving a youthful marketing strategy. The advertisements of the mid-nineteenth century expose such a rationale, which allows us to understand that the capitalist machine is an intelligent design that evolves from the embodiment of the social structures that form it. The power of the market, then, is in its ability to proffer a visual economy, one that identifies the female body as either desirable or not depending on cultural cues. Prior to the market, such visual cues existed in determining menopause, as noted by the work of Lynn Bothelho. But attendant with the rise of capitalism in the Victorian era, the female body becomes a tapestry of cultural codes, a language that communicates human desire and lack. The physical transformations of old age are likewise subject to examination and translation; old age is a badge not of female honor, but one of ineffectiveness and undesirability. In Rossetti’s poem, aging serves as a dysmorphia that scars the ego and raises some interesting questions about the Victorian mindset. I move next into the actual Victorian marketplace, the birth of the department store and the consumer gaze in order to position Rossetti’s poem as symptomatic of such a market. I argue that the Crystal Palace, the locus of the market, becomes an ideology of the glass

\textsuperscript{1} Coventry Patmore’s poem, “The Angel in the House” (1854).
house where visuality, reflections, and sensory articulations abound, and its center ring is the female body.

When Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” appeared in 1862, Dickens had already introduced the Victorian audience to the infamous character Miss Havisham in Great Expectations (published in serialized form from 1860-1861). Miss Havisham not only provides the impetus for the marriage plot, since Pip supposes her to be his benefactor and the ubiquitous link between him and Estella, but her state of decrepitude also serves as another cautionary tale for what happens to a woman when she is somehow deemed unwomanly. The second section of my thesis thus also moves from the—arguably—working-class females of “Goblin Market” to the aristocratic female jaded by the marriage market and set on revenge. The most curious thing about Miss Havisham is not so much her old age and the frozen-in-time persona she attempts to perpetuate, though it unquestionably warrants an examination within this thesis; but rather, how Miss Havisham merchandizes Estella, who is working-class by birth, putting her on display while appealing to the youthful girl’s beauty in order to retaliate and satisfy her own vengeance against men. Miss Havisham’s efforts parallel Jeanie and Laura’s measures to stave off old age through a market economy. I then explore the psychology of aging in regard to women’s bodies and examine the representation of goblins (Miss Havisham a potential goblin herself) as marketing pioneers, savvy at encouraging feelings of inadequacy in women, and characteristic of a Victorian market eager to sell wares for a price: the forfeiture of female power in return for remedies for aging. This subversive reading against the abuses of capitalism suggests that Victorian women of the middle class were a primary target for manipulations of aging attitudes. I build on others’ research, specifically the considerations of advertising and female economics, but offer a more nuanced argument on how Rossetti’s poem inadvertently draws our attention to the market’s
exploitation of Victorian perceptions of female aging and how Dickens’ female character capitulates to it.

I would be remiss in not bringing in a text with a setting that truly captures the consumer market and how women function within it, and perhaps Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames* from the Rougon-Macquart series is the appropriate apotheosis of the department store’s birth and subsequent reign. The third section of this work details such a spectacle of female function. Although a French novel published two decades after Rossetti’s and Dickens’ respective works and in the vein of naturalism, Zola’s text provides a comparable venue to England’s Great Exhibition, basing much of the fictional department store’s workings on the French retailer *Le Bon Marché*. It also pits the young working class shop-girl, the new bourgeoisie of Europe, against the aging aristocratic woman. Further, Zola’s prose compares to Rossetti’s poetry in that the sumptuous details evoke desire; the only difference is that Zola sees the department store for the machine monster that it really is—symbolic allegories aside. Yet I find it curious that the old/new dichotomy of Old Paris/New Paris (the small family shops versus the department stores) likewise parallels Zola’s juxtaposition of the youthful protagonist Denise, potential shop-girl *à la mode*, with her foil the aging Madame Henriette Desforges. This embittered battle proves illuminating given Zola’s realistic details of the department store. Thus, I return to the question: what is the importance of the aging Madame, particularly when coupled with myriad details of desire and outward appearances? I pursue Zola’s use of mirror and mirror-like infinite images to not only explain the real-life use of mirrors as merchandising tricks of the trade, but also how his symbolic references set the female characters Denise and Madame Desforges in opposition to one another—proving that Zola too works under a system where the aging female is something to be pitied. Using the theoretical groundings of Jacques Lacan and, again, the contemporary
work of Kathleen Woodward, I ultimately detail a psychoanalytic exploration of the aged self, particularly a gendered self, in relation to mirrors and the gaze connecting Zola’s novel to the other texts.

While I do not suggest that Rossetti intentionally wrote “Goblin Market” to articulate a specific social wronging against women’s body images (indeed she insisted there was no profound message\(^2\)), I believe that Rossetti is functioning within a society that perpetuated damaging messages for and against women’s body image. Dickens’ fiction also marinates in this societal phantasmagoria, and I contend that his character Miss Havisham repels not so much because of her lust for revenge, but simply because she aged and because she advertises Estella, taking on the subliminal role of sales-girl in a vain effort to dominate the market and to vicariously capture youth (retail for time in a bottle). Zola, however, bluntly and realistically reveals the market and its unrelenting machine-like crush, but another underbelly exists in his fiction: the negative connotation of the aging female. Indeed, the higher the age, the lower the worth. In exploring the spectacle of these three texts, I have contextualized them within the historical frameworks of Victorian advertising and attitudes towards aging. The overarching analysis of this thesis offers a look at the psychology of Victorian women, illuminates how they performed under the social constructions of image, and helps us understand the historical underpinning of the still powerful Beauty Myth.

\(^2\) A quote from Christina Rossetti’s brother William Rossetti gives us insight into authorial intent: “I have more than once heard Christina say that she did not mean anything profound by this fairy tale—it is not a moral apologue consistently carried out in detail. Still, the incidents are such as to be at any rate suggestive, and different minds may be likely to read different messages into them” (qtd. in Jones 91).
I. A Marketable Haunting: Female Aging as a Scare Tactic

Many scholars have theorized on consumerism in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” in relation to Victorian culture, but most have focused on the poem’s mercantile advertising appeal, women’s consumer power vis-à-vis commodified sex, and feminized economic configurations. James Eli Adams encapsulates the discoveries of Rossetti’s masterful poem as ones of “sexual temptation, Victorian exchange, commodity fetishism, advertising, xenophobia, [and] lesbian desire” (240). Yet no critical examination of “Goblin Market” has attempted to investigate the issue of aging in Rossetti’s cautionary tale—specifically female aging and how it relates to the poem’s underpinning message of female worth. The motivation for Lizzie to save her sister Laura from premature aging provides the pinnacle action of the tale and the justification of the poem’s happily-ever-after ending. Thus, Rossetti’s plotline depends on aging and the consequence of death. My primary inspiration for this idea is Jeanie and Laura’s malaise and downward spiral into the demise of old age (eventual death for Jeanie), which speaks to the idea of aging and its physical properties as somehow offensive and objectionable. It is due time that we explore the psychology of aging in regard to women’s bodies in Rossetti’s poem and examine the representation of the goblins as marketing pioneers, savvy at encouraging feelings of inadequacy in women, and characteristic of a Victorian market eager to sell wares for a price: the forfeiture of female power in return for remedies for aging. This subversive reading against the abuses of capitalism suggests that Victorian women of the middle class were a primary target for manipulations of aging attitudes.

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4 This attitude towards aging interestingly remains a truism for contemporary society—although arguably in a much more palpable and amplified state.
specifically the considerations of advertising and female economics, I offer a more nuanced argument on how Christina Rossetti draws our attention to the market’s exploitation of Victorian perceptions of female aging.

I am acutely aware of Rossetti’s fruit imagery as potentially signifying much more than prelapsarian and sexual connotations. Other scholars have copiously explored the fruit in “Goblin Market” as representative of: “[h]uman want” (Bloom 16); “women’s responses to sexual temptation” (Hickok 207); “an ideology of pumped-up abundance” (Tucker 125); “access to the enchanted place denied the maidens by the rather arbitrary rules of fantasy” (Campbell 402); and “dramas of competitive buying and selling in which women are always at risk as objects to be purchased, yet also implicated as agents of consumption” (Helsinger 904). What all these engaging analyses have in common is yearning. Desire does prove an important component, particularly since “[d]esire functions much as the zero unit in the numerical chain—its place is both constitutive and empty” (Rose, qtd in Lacan Feminine Sexuality 32). Simply put, the underlying desire of Rossetti’s poem is a constructed desire, but it does not negate the significance or efficacy of its function. Desire must be prompted and then prodded out of us. I suggest that there is something to be said of Rossetti’s succulent descriptions that evoke ideas of womanly (particularly womb) ripeness, which situates the fruit in a state of perpetual youthfulness—indeed Rossetti’s fruit is “Plucked from bowers / Where summer ripens at all hours” (lines 151-152). Adjectives to describe the fruit include: “plump unpecked” (line 7), “down-cheeked” (line 9), “Wild free-born” (line 11), “full and fine” (line 21), and “bright-fire-like” (line 26). These descriptive phrases denote the essence of youth and immediately follow the advertising cry from the goblins to “Come buy our orchard fruits, / Come buy, come buy” (lines 3-4). The goblins appeal to the senses and societal induced vanity, much like keen
marketing specialists would, and proffer to sell much more than sex or power; they aim to sell an image of eternal youth and perfection—an image that is both desired and socially constructed. The zero function of desire has been established and given value. It is the reversal of the fruit from the tree of knowledge—a yearning to return to youth and the promise of infinite beauty.\(^5\) Add to the plot the highly demonstrable matter of aging as a negative outcome and we have an altogether alternative examination of the cultural work of “Goblin Market.”

To more fully understand this notion of aging as a damaging component of female desirability, we must look to theoretical, literary and Victorian conceptions of maturation. In Kathleen Woodward’s perceptive article “The Mirror Stage of Old Age,” she draws on the theoretical frameworks of Freud’s uncanny, Lacan’s mirror stage, and Simone de Beauvoir’s “other” (from *The Coming of Age*) to formulate her own thesis that there is a “possibility of a mirror stage of old age” (104) which she applies to the internal struggle of aging for the character Marcel in Proust’s *The Past Recaptured*. Woodward’s examination of Marcel proves noteworthy when paralleled with Rossetti’s aging Laura, whom I will characterize as a mirrored image to her youthful sister Lizzie and the aged/dead Jeanie in “Goblin Market.” Woodward contends:

> The horror of the mirror image of the decrepit body can be understood as the inverse of the pleasures of the mirror image of the youthful Narcissus. As we age we increasingly separate what we take to be our real selves from our bodies. We say that our real selves—that is our youthful selves—are hidden inside our bodies. Our bodies are old, we are not. Old age can thus be described as a state in which the body is in opposition to the self, and we are alienated from our bodies. (104)

\(^5\) Kay Heath also makes a similar comparison to Wilde’s character Dorian Gray: “Like a bite taken in Eden from the fruit of the tree of knowledge, fear of aging reveals to him both his beauty and its vulnerability over time” (33). An examination of male aging in regard to marketing presents another avenue of much needed research.
If we recognize Laura and Lizzie as specular images, much like Rossetti describes them at one point in the poem, then perhaps the repulsion that Woodward speaks of correlates to the fear that comes out of the tale when Jeanie and Laura simulate that horror of old age. Laura’s body in particular ages prematurely outwardly while her self-image maintains a state of youth and desirability. Prior to Laura’s consumption of the goblin fruit, Rossetti describes the youthful Laura and Lizzie as two separate entities who each act/react according to her respective personality: “Laura bowed her head to hear,” (line 33) while “Lizzie veiled her blushes” (line 34) and then the two of them sat “Crouching close together / … / With clasping arms and cautioning lips, / With tingling cheeks and finger tips” (lines 35, 37, 38 emphasis mine). The distinction comes with them being close but not altogether as one. Rossetti’s unambiguous choice of the conjunction and denotes coordination and a symbiotic bond and establishes the two sisters as intertwined but still separate entities. They differ, but it is a differentiation still in harmony and the underlying function here is to establish a healthy sense of self. After the unaccompanied Laura acts on her longing to pursue the goblin call, and subsequent to Lizzie’s warning of Jeanie’s unfortunate maturation, Rossetti changes the dynamics and depicts the girls as more like halves of a whole:

    Golden head by golden head,
    Like two pigeons in one nest
    Folded in each other’s wings,
    They lay down in their curtained bed:
    Like two blossoms on one stem,
    Like two flakes of new-fall’n snow,
    Like two wands of ivory… (lines 184-190)
In this stanza the girls meld so that the reader cannot distinguish one from the other. We do not know where Lizzie begins or where Laura ends. Their identities are forged and effectively portray mimicry and a pre-mirror phase wholeness where misrecognition has already taken place. Such a place is a fantasy. Likewise, when the sisters slumber, “Cheek to cheek and breast to breast / Locked together in one nest” (lines 197-198), they return to a womb-like state where they are conjoined and monozygotic. At this point the impressionist representation of the sisters does not lead to rejection, repulsion, or misrecognition for they harmonize with each and they do not perceive an other. They fall outside of the symbolic order and subjectivity does not yet exist. It is almost as if the two sisters must be seen as one to truly demonstrate the psychological horror that befalls them when one of their bodies morphs into an unknowable and unrecognizable crone. Once the sisters awake, they symbiotically attend to their domestic duties of milking, cleaning, and baking—they function as rural angels of the house. These domestic tasks, these ideological responsibilities, rope the girls into the social construction of femininity by way of function which supplements bodily form.

It is at the end of this stanza, in the realm of the private sphere of feminine work, where Laura separates from her sister, feels lack and begins her downward spiral:

Lizzie with an open heart,

Laura in an absent dream,

Once content, one sick in part;

One warbling for the mere bright day’s delight,

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6 As Jacqueline Rose explains: “At the same time ‘identity’ and ‘wholeness’ remain precisely at the level of fantasy, Subjects in language persist in their belief that somewhere there is a point of certainty, of knowledge and of truth” (qtd. in Lacan Feminine Sexuality, 32).

7 Rossetti’s description of the sisters works like brush strokes, painting them so that time seems to stand still, harnessing light (Golden, snow, ivory) to emphasize their bodies as highlighted and in relief to anything else surrounding them. Impressionist here does refer to the musical and artistic movements of the late nineteenth-century, and it also, interestingly, connotes imitation. My use is two-fold, to invoke both sensualness and mimicry in order to underscore the sensory component to perceiving the self and the material world.
One longing for the night. (211-215)

The girls’ desire separates them. According to Lacan, “desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference resulting from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their splitting” (Lacan FS 81). Rossetti draws the demarcation line here between the two sisters; their oneness becomes a duality. A physical, corporeal transformation changes one of the girls. She now diametrically opposes the other sister’s body. First Laura loses her hearing for she can no longer hear the goblin cry, yet Lizzie can, and Laura reacts with jealousy, turning “cold as stone” (line 253), and then realizes she has “Gone deaf and blind” (line 259). These sensory losses bear too much on Laura and so “Her tree of life drooped from the root” (line 260). She has lost her youthfulness and ultimately feels alienated from her body when she realizes that she has begun to decay and prematurely age. Her droopy tree hearkens to her reproductive organs which are in catamenial decline. Laura cannot reckon with the fact that she no longer resembles her sister; youth has fled her face and her uterus; thus she has lost any semblance of interconnectedness with her sister, now her other. Such a loss equates to lost female desirability—desirability proclaimed so imperative and natural by the goblins. Laura’s identity has taken a detour from its original, constructed path. Laura’s sister’s sustained image betrays her own sense of identity for she also has experienced that horror or inverse pleasure. The formative mirror stage has rendered Laura’s imago as barren. Kay Heath, who also refers to Woodward’s thesis in her essay “In The Eye of The Beholder: Victorian Age Construction and The Specular Self,” suggests that the mirror reveals “difficult truths” (27), ones psychological in nature, and that “women looking into the mirror tend to evaluate themselves as objects of desire” (30); therefore, “females pay a much higher price for becoming older than do males” (30). Rossetti’s female characters do indeed evaluate themselves
through the physical representations of each other; they become mirrored selves and through each other they identify those “difficult truths” of desirability. Laura’s realization of her agedness, is a return to that “striking spectacle of the nursling in front of the mirror” (Lacan “Mirror Stage” 4). That return to the *infans* is now riddled with the burden of the symbolic order and its traumatic messaging of old age.

While absent to date within the scholarly discourse of “Goblin Market,” the psychological component of aging and its overarching meanings within the Western novel have not gone completely unnoticed by literary scholars. Kay Heath explores aging in Anthony Trolloppe’s *Phineas Redux* and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, claiming they depict “a pattern of age anxiety…especially those with marriage plots” (28). Further, Heath suggests that “men [have] a far greater latitude of youthfulness than women” (28), and Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” also portrays this anxiety and limitation. What prompts Lizzie to rescue her dear sister Laura is the thought of Jeanie, who also withered into old age but who ultimately died and missed the opportunity of marriage:

She thought of Jeanie in her grave,
Who should have been a bride;
But who for joys brides hope to have
Fell sick and died
In her gay prime,… (lines 312-316)

Lizzie not only frets over the possibility of Laura missing out on marriage, but she also fears her own demise. If her sister Laura can age, so too can she. In forecasting her latent fear of the future, and Laura’s desiccated outlook, Lizzie accomplishes what Woodward suggests is the “drama of aging and its discontents [which] turns more importantly on the character’s relation to
future time than it does to past time” (Woodward 97). Jeanie’s past and Laura’s present motivates Lizzie to fear her own future. Before the image of Jeanie snaps Lizzie out of her own anxiety, she “Longed to buy fruit to comfort her [Laura] / But feared to pay too dear” (lines 310-311). What does Lizzie fear to pay? I offer the answer as the price of youth, which in turn is the price of beauty, the price of desirability, the price of marriageability, and the price of being reproductive. There are many motivators in this market. Nevertheless, Lizzie’s love for Laura coupled with the fear of Jeanie’s fate (another mirror) for her sister provides enough of a motivation for her to act and confront the goblins. Again, the emphasis on aging and its repulsive connotations in this poem substantiate this reading. Other scholars have noticed that older characters in British and American literature often go unnoticed or have “been on the periphery of the action” (Fallis 35) with “much of the imagery around the old reflect[ing] physical decay” (36). Aging in Rossetti’s poem is indeed a snare; both the act and the idea of aging immobilize the sisters. Yet scholarly reflection has failed to notice this nucleus within “Goblin Market’s” story-line—it has gone to the periphery. I think the psychological factor that Woodward establishes provides some insight, but where does this anxiety fit in concerning gender? As Heath suggested, men experience much more maneuverability in regard to physical appearance, which goes beyond a self-image or human psychological influence. So what then of the cultural constructions and social influences of aging and how they characterize/define women? The ending of “Goblin Market” provides the key to one probable answer.

Both Laura and Lizzie manage to escape the goblins with either their youth intact (depending on how we define youth) or retrieved allowing them to becomes wives “With children of their own; / Their mother-hearts beset with fears, / Their lives bound up in tender lives” (545-547). For the Victorian woman, marriage, children, home and hearth equate to
feminine success. The key ingredient to attaining that status is attractive youthfulness. The angel in the house, the Victorian moral exemplar, must look the part for she “was the focus of family life” by default of her “being more delicate, fragile, reserved, yet virtuous, loving, and pretty” (Loeb 19 emphasis mine). Lori Anne Loeb’s highly applicable book *Consuming Angels* reflects on Victorian advertising in order to “explore late Victorian cultural ideals” (vii). She argues that commercial portrayals of domestic life were often romanticized (16), but that they also adapted and shifted, becoming interpretations that spurred a material definition of family (45). Advertisers made use of cultural domestic ideologies “because the ‘woman at home [represents] the power of the purse in household affairs’” and thus “[t]he woman was perceived as a careful critic” (Loeb 8-9). The cultural marketing tactics bear weight here in my argument, tactics that I will shortly explore, but in order to first understand why Victorian advertisers may have exploited youth and beauty, we must look at how Victorian culture viewed aging—particularly how it viewed aging women.

Mirrored images of our aged selves can evoke a sense of rejection, as noted by Woodward and Heath through Kristevan semiotics, so we must then assume that there is something about the appearance that would provoke such rejection; that is, what is the connotation of frailty and decay—beyond the obvious proximity of mortality—when paralleled with the feminine body? Lynn Bothelho’s essay “Old Age and Menopause in Rural Women of Early Modern Suffolk” offers a foundation for how the physical aging process can define women. Her essay suggests that “old age was determined primarily by cultural considerations” (42). Through parish and family records, Bothelho analyzes how the conception of old age came to pass in the rural community of Cratfield, Suffolk in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Though two to three hundred years earlier, the notion that outward physical attributes prove
much more diagnostic in classifying old age is a worthwhile aside since it parallels the idea of what constitutes Victorian marriageability. Bothelho’s historical unearthing underscores Loeb’s articulation that “[w]omen exhibited the signs of ageing significantly sooner than men…[and] were considered old, on average, at age 52, while men were not publicly acknowledged as such until a full nine years later, at age 61” (49). The most significant commonality among these women, “something distinctive about the female experience” (51), was menopause. This marked entry into senescence, as Loeb articulates, “when neither treated by modern medicine nor counteracted by a modern diet, can produce physical changes and characteristics associated with ageing [sic]” (51). These physical changes include facial hair, development of a stoop, loose skin, wrinkles, age spots, and “a toothless mouth” (51). These women, then, were culturally classified as old by their infertility, “a verdict also reached by many physicians and social commentators from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries” (52). As Loeb also articulates, the pattern of women’s old age (although chronologically younger) would eventually coalesce with men’s old age since they eventually shared physical traits (52). So, the mutual experience of women (a marked stage of infertility) ultimately leads to shared physical attributes experienced by men—or what we could call situational androgyny. Heath likewise notes that “[a]s the eminent obstetrician J. Braxton Hicks described in 1877, at menopause a woman had ‘a tendency to revert to the neutral man-woman state’ and entered a period of healthy and happy androgyny” (31). While this supposedly harmonious stage of androgyny may put less stress on a woman since she is no longer defined by her fertility, we cannot deny the fact that there is then a pressure prior to menopause to visually look fertile in order to acquiesce to Victorian cultural definitions of femininity. After all, we could argue that “visual clues and physical signifiers” (Loeb 61) locate women according to their marriageability. The women of rural Suffolk were
considered old by age 52, yet in the Victorian era, some centuries later, aging for women became a much more contestable boundary, particularly for the spinster. This evocative, clichéd female image of expired marketability may be the juggernaut of all Victorian cultural mores. To be the spinster is to be that which is un-feminine—given the Victorian definition of what constitutes successful femininity. Therefore, aging for the Victorian woman proves exceedingly important when the age of thirty could characterize a single woman as a spinster (Heath 30).

Given the lack of agency and power for Victorian women, aging and its physical consequences (connotations of infertility) illustrate a detrimental and threatening limitation to female identity. Perhaps this is where the market, and what it brought to bear on Victorian culture, reveals its strategies of inducing the psychology of aging and femininity. In *Come Buy*, *Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women’s Writings*, Krista Lysack shows how the burgeoning markets of Victorian England were visually stimulating and that “Goblin Market” replicates the sensory appeal analogous to advertising techniques of the mid to late nineteenth century. Lysack agrees that “there remains more to explore of the cultural work of consumption in the poem” (16), and, drawing from archived materials, she situates “Goblin Market” as reflective of Rossetti’s “sustained exploration of consumer desire, particularly the specific kinds of desires that formed through an imperial marketplace” (17-18).

The imperial marketplace that Lysack alludes to grew out of a culture that predicated its image on superiority and progress. The inception of marketing prowess within Great Britain could be traced to the Great Exhibition of 1851 in Hyde Park. Thomas Richards suggests that this colossal showcase of culture and industrial accomplishments “represents a pivotal moment in the history of advertising, for the particular style it created for the commodity ultimately transformed the advertising industry and contributed to the formation of a new commodity culture in
Victorian England” (53). Richards’ investigation of how the Great Exhibition influenced commerce industries provides insight into the proliferation and power of marketing strategies in Victorian England. Because Victorians had a “taste for spectacle” (Richards 54), the Great Exhibition capitalized on images of grandiose goods that came to life through merchandising, classification, and advertising. Ultimately, the Great Exhibition provoked an acculturation of thought because “during and after the Exhibition the commodity became and remained the still center of the turning earth, the focal point of all gazing” (18). We must not forget the reciprocity involved with a gaze since the commodity must hold a consumer’s gaze by some form of enticement or necessity, and for the commodity to be accepted as such, the psychology of the consumer must be observed, discovered, and subsequently manipulated by those who merchandize the commodity—a surrogate return of the gaze. By order of transposition through the Great Exhibition, the gaze becomes tactically important, and what ensued in Victorian advertising is tantamount to an emotional appeal—a strategy of pathos and narcissism.

Certainly the images proffered by Victorian advertisers evoked the domestic ideologies of home and hearth, thus drawing in the female consumer because they were images endorsed by middle-class bourgeois values. Yet these advertisements also provided images of beauty and youth and instilled an impression that with wealth (the ability to buy goods), there also came the ability to buy youth in order to perpetuate those ideals. I return here to Loeb’s examination of the Victorian consumer culture, where she states:

The advertisement became both a mirror and instrument of the social ideal. The advertisement suggested that with the acquisition of creams to whiten the complexion, fringes to improve the coiffure, and corsets to mold the female figure
it was possible to create the illusion of the ‘perfect lady,’ a beacon of Victorian affluence. (10 emphasis mine)

Notice that Loeb describes the advertisement as a mirror. If image is everything, and if aging somehow negates or spoils that image (much like rotten fruit), then a smart advertising strategy would include capitalizing on youthfulness and expanding a market to provide goods that appear to aid in thwarting the aging process (like the perfected goblins’ fruit of Rossetti’s market). Furthermore, if “women were expected to buy and display the ornaments of a luxury and leisure that they also represented” (Helsinger 905), then they in turn are that mirror reflecting a mirror—a virtual fun house of mirrors that distorts the self. Interestingly enough, the very real-life physical configurations of Victorian advertising and display included the potential for misrepresentation and even confusion. The editors at Punch nicknamed the Great Exhibition the Crystal Palace because it was constructed of glass, and claimed that “[b]eing inside the Crystal Palace was an almost hallucinatory experience: you felt overpowered by sweetness and light” (Richards 19, 31); a classification system helped to navigate consumers through the extensive maze of goods (32). Lysack likewise offers a glimpse at the overwhelming shopping experience when she uncovers a woman shopper’s experience at the Chesham House: “The employees’ store publication recalls that ‘the mirrored walls…deceived staff and customers alike. How many humorous situations arose at seeing oneself reflected in so many ways! I remember an elderly dame apologising to her own mirror reflection, and craving pardon for her intrusion” (27). Clearly, we can see how perceptions of the self are formed though the strategic placement of mirrors and the power of misrecognition. While the new Victorian shopping atmospheres created “a phantasmagoria of commodities” (Richards 35) and a surreal shopping experience, the psychological impact of desiring such enticing goods and then living up to, indeed reenacting,
the hype and the transmitted images left a remarkable impression on female consumers. The new era of shopping provided Victorian middle-class women an opportunity for escapism since shopping took place outside of the home and became an all-day destination activity (Lysack 21). And, the increasing disposable incomes allowed women to shop for desire rather than out of necessity (20). When advertisers ventured to offer images outside of the realm of normal, everyday Victorian life, they not only challenged what it meant to be feminine and Victorian, but they also fashioned what it meant to be beautiful and desirable. Advertisers utilized images of Grecian woman in order to “aggrandiz[e] the feminine image… [and allow] the admirer to revel an appreciation of higher ideals” (Loeb 34). One group of artists from the Alma-Tadema school manipulated the image of the classical goddess and created “sleepy, sexy beauties” (35). Half-clad Grecian women, exotic landscapes, and sexually suggestive poses came to contradict what the Victorian middle-class woman should look like and how she should act. Indeed the female image of Victorian advertising “explicitly portrays the erotic potential suppressed in the angel in the house ideal” (Loeb 36-37). The Lux Soap marketing approach included a woman “perpetually on the verge of losing control” (62) with an exposed shoulder, the hint of a breast, tousled hair, and a gaze that suggested more than finding pleasure in an effective cleansing agent. Everyday household items, like Lux soap, capitalized on this sexual repression. The patriarchal influence here seems noteworthy since these images were created by men and, “these images may have been masculine fantasies of sexy women, but the commercial success of products that used these advertising campaigns suggests that the feminine audience readily accepted the masculine fantasy as a feminine ideal” (62). In order for socially constructed femininity to work and become the paradigm by which standards are met, it must be naturalized. This distortion of beauty, or Beauty Myth as contemporary discourse would define it, then
becomes a seductive weapon against women: the more they buy into it, the more expansive and persuasive it becomes.

Christina Rossetti lived and breathed in this climate of subliminal feminine images and even suffered under the shopping indulgences of her brother Dante and the social pressures of Victorian fashion.\(^8\) To say that the market in her “Goblin Market” does not reflect any of the developing changes of the Victorian market and shopping phenomena of the late nineteenth century is to ignore her perception of and sensitivity to the Victorian world that enveloped her. We must look to the school of thought that she worked within to see a connection between concerns about chasing ideals and grappling with the discontented aftermath when those ideals are not met. Firstly, as part of the Pre-Raphaelite considerations, Rossetti also “represents herself obliquely as a cultural critic” (Harrison 157). Rossetti’s dialogue with the sociohistorical situation, whether the aesthetics of religion or sensuality, is verdant in its awareness and sublimated through her use of lyrical language. “Goblin Market” surely fits such a billet in its multi-layered associations and mutability. Antony Harrison articulates it as a “subuniverse” where there is an intertextual eclecticism to her writing that challenges nineteenth-century values (140-141). I would add that her peculiarity as a Pre-Raphaelite who worked under the “Dantean literary ideas and ideas of Christian self-perfection” (Harrison 96) translates well into understanding consumption and merchandising as the ultimate of staging and perfection since it corresponds with the core tenet of Pre-Raphaelitism: the quest for beauty. Rossetti was very much aware of and sympathetic to societal wrongs—which is not to say that she thought the Victorian marketplace was a societal wrong, but her social awareness does suggest that she was influenced by that which she encountered and witnessed (much like her concern for lower class

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\(^8\) Krista Lysack opens her first chapter of *Come Buy, Come Buy* with the Max Beerbohm caricature of Dante imploring Christina to wear something more attractive.
women and her philanthropic work at the Magdalen home). Also, as Elizabeth Helsinger suggests in “Consumer Power and the Utopia of Desire: Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market,’” Rossetti experienced first-hand how a woman’s outward appearance could influence a woman’s worth because a female portrait (painted perhaps by her own hand or her brother Dante’s) accompanying writings could make or break commercial success (910).9

Like Rossetti, Lizzie and Laura seem to perceive some sort of danger in the market. Both Lizzie and Laura initially maintain a distance from the goblins and insist on the dubious nature of these purveyors’ charmed produce: “We must not look at goblin men, / We must not buy their fruits: / Who knows upon what soil they fed” (lines 41-43). Eventually, out of curiosity, out of the pressure to conform, Laura caves and imbibes the goblins’ wares. Subsequently, when Laura has returned from her gluttonous infatuation (her impulse buy), the poem first mentions aging with the cautionary account of Jeanie:

But ever in the moonlight
She pined and pined away;
South them by night and day,
Found them no more but dwindled and grew grey;
Then fell with the first snow,
While to this day no grass will grow… (lines 153-158)

What strikes me as remarkable is the juxtaposition between the youthful (and exotic) ripened fruits that Jeanie ingested and the lifelessness that follows after she languishes into a state of

9 Even writers are marketed and based on physical appearance. Helsinger goes on to note: “Rossetti had plenty of opportunities to observe that the commercial value of women’s faces might be at odds with their ability to get what they wanted in a world structured by an exchange economy” (910). My direction then of the significance of aging and outward feminine appearance provides validity for scholars to reconceptualize Rossetti’s fictional market and see it adjacent to the poem’s underpinnings of economics, class values, and the terms of female sexual commodity.
immobility. Why does Jeanie turn grey before she dies? What is the significance of her rapid aging before the ultimate death that is supposedly caused by the fruit? Why could not she just die in her youthful prime if she was a fallen woman? Moreover, what is the importance of aging, particularly when coupled with myriad details of youth? Considering the targeted audience and marketed vision of the fruit, the suggestion is indubitably noteworthy. What we do not hear in this oral, retold version of Jeanie’s experience is what happened immediately after she ate the fruit. We only hear what eventually happens to her after “noonlight” (line 153). What transpired between moonlight, when she met the goblins and ate the fruit, and the next afternoon? Does she go about her household chores before the inception of premature aging—much as Laura does?

This lack of information and line of questioning segues into my proposed historical evidence that aging does prove important in this poetic tale. Much like the Great Exhibition and other Victorian shopping paradises, “‘Goblin Market’ is constructed along visual lines…. This visual economy is structured in particular around the commercialization and fetishization of an imagined East and its forbidden fruits” (Lysack 30). I believe that the “imagined” at work here is imagined youth and all its accoutrements necessary for fulfillment of a requisite societal norm.

To be desired is to be young and to be young and desirable is to be marketable for marriage. Class issue aside here, for it could be argued that the females of “Goblin Market” are not of middle-class, a female is socially defined by her womb. And, if Jeanie and/or Laura reach a stage of infertility because of old age, they are pushed to the peripheral regions of Old-Maidendom. Thus, the enticement of youth and beauty prompts Laura to follow in Jeanie’s footsteps and give in to the “strategic hype” and “sugar-baited words” of the goblins (Tucker 122), but she does not immediately descend into misery and a haggard state. Rather, she cuddles with her sister for the night and then wakes up to perform domestic duties: “Early in the morning
When the first cock crowed his warning, / Neat like bees, as sweet and busy” (lines 99-101). The cock’s warning alerts the reader to the importance of the events to follow for it is not until after Laura and Lizzie enter the private sphere of domestic work and after Lizzie keeps her from the alluring call of the goblins that Laura replicates Jeanie’s disintegration into old age. The fruits then do not beget old age in Laura and Jeanie but rather evoke the idea of perpetual youthfulness (an unnatural state) since the fruit is “Plucked from bowers / Where summer ripens at all hours” (lines 151-152).

What propels these young women into a condition of rapid decline is perhaps the realization of their eventual restriction to all things domestic and a learned consciousness (evoked by the goblins) that maidenhood and marketability is transitory. In “Of Mothers and Merchants: Female Economics in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market,’” Elizabeth Campbell claims “middle class women were granted a metaphorical place at the center of bourgeois society, at its hearth and its heart, but forced to the periphery of its economy” (394). Laura and Jeanie, desperate for youth and accepting of all the promised hype of the goblins, do not, therefore, have a tangible hope for anything outside the domestic realm. Instead, they are stuck to chasing an idealized metaphor—one that depends on desirability—and once they yield to the power of a marketing strategy that emphasizes a youthful, feminine appeal, their journey back to the domestic realm becomes a futile experience fraught with insecurity because they can never live up to that kind of mirage. The fruit then represents a marketed drug of youthfulness engineered around the vulnerable self-images of already disenfranchised and psychologically disfigured women. Once Lizzie keeps Laura from returning to the goblins for the promise of youth—another shot of Botox—Laura struggles to deal with the reality of her female worth:

One day remembering her kernel-stone
She set it by a wall that faced the south;
Dewed it with tears, hooped for a root,
Watched for a waxing shoot,
But there came none. (lines 290-294)

Without the fancy jargon, the packaged appeal, and the verbal stroking of the goblin men, Laura’s souvenir kernel signifies nothing more than an empty shell, an empty promise. Her kernel, a once potential seed of procreation, fails to yield and fades away as a result of her accelerated movement into menopause. Like the women of rural Suffolk, Laura becomes defined by her lack of fertility. And, like Jeanie, what is left for Laura is perpetual spinsterhood. Once this realization penetrates her damaged psyche, coupled with the physical effects of aging, Laura no longer attends to her domestic duties:

She no more swept the house,
Tended the fowl or cows,
Fetched honey, kneaded cakes of what,
Brought water from the brook:
But sat down listless in the chimney-nook
And would not eat. (lines 302-307)

Ultimately feeling worthless, Laura pines away destined for death. Because of her advanced old age, she no longer fits into the targeted audience of Victorian consumerism; thus the goblins do not waste their jingle on deaf ears. Laura unsuccessfully navigates through the emotional upheaval and psychological scarring of lost femininity and youth. This perceived state of androgyny, a state of self-hatred, may have led Laura to the same fate as Jeanie if not for Lizzie.
This debatable savior proves interesting because she buys into the ideals of hearth and home while simultaneously rejecting the beauty myth.

While Lizzie may not oppose the angel in the house mentality at the end of Rossetti’s poem, she does thwart the goblins by not buying into their marketed hype: their creams, their fringes, their corsets (aka their “plump unpecked” and unbelievably flawless fruit) while retaining her virginity. Her feminine economy comes in the form of real money and real power, the power to stand up to the male gaze and the Victorian market while challenging the framing tropes of a burgeoning capitalistic society. Lizzie thus rescues her sister Laura by reverting her to a mirror-like image of herself (an image of idealized femininity flanked by home and hearth), and they eventually become wives and mothers which we might argue is hardly a revolutionary or subversive ending. Indeed, Lizzie’s rejection of the goblin marketing campaign fits within Rossetti’s aesthetics of interiority and happiness through renunciation. However, Rossetti’s poetics contend this reading. The heady appeal of youthfulness does leave a lingering hunger and an indelible psychological mark, for in Laura’s retelling of their adventures at market she affirms that those days were “her early prime” (line 549) and that they were “Those pleasant days long gone / Of not-returning time” (lines 550-551). Note that she reminisces in order to re-capture that crystalline moment of “not-returning time.” That long gone state of market induced perpetual youthfulness would evoke a pleasant memory, at least for Laura, because at one time it created a space of perceived safety and guaranteed marriage marketability—even if market

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10 Perhaps we can also see the ending as the ultimate of the return to the pre-social Ideal-I, meaning that Lizzie reclaims Laura so as to mend the split, to return them to a state of pre-subjectivity qua socialized beings. The women at the end of this tale spin a story, returning to an oral tradition, offering an alternative discourse that is not about consumption and buying into the patriarchal beauty myth but as advice, a warning, a fairy tale that participates in an alternative language (a women-centered language), and at the same time that it is removed from the capitalist project, it also offers an alternative view of femininity—one that suggests in growing older, there is a kind of agency, a sort of power for women that is not based on desirability but wisdom. Regardless of this potential alternative, we cannot ignore the fact that the threat of old age through a market system propels them to execute a community of solidarity.
formulated for a limited-time only. Lizzie and Laura can now ultimately relive the past with a flippant approach because they both have attained Victorian female success, and as an added bonus, the oral-tradition of their tale reflects another form of perpetual youthfulness: they can be as young as they want to be in their story—an immortal story to be passed down through the generations.

Rossetti may not have intended “Goblin Market” as a missive against manipulated women’s body images within the advertising arena, but we must admit that her poem does offer us a glimpse into the psychology of middle-class Victorian women, how they performed under the social constructions of image, and that it provides a deeper understanding of the birth of the beauty myth. If Rossetti’s oral retelling of the Victorian market by way of Laura, Lizzie, and even Jeanie can bear the test of metaphorical and literal time, then perhaps we should congratulate them all for discovering the fountain of youth.
Figure 1: The Crystal Palace’s Southern Entrance to the Transept. The outer shell of the Crystal Palace, a site of architectural wonderment, an impressive glass greenhouse.

(The Crystal Palace Exhibition xvi)

Figure 2: The Transept, from the North Side
The dizzying internal structure which is made to appear naturalized.

(The Crystal Palace Exhibition xviii)
Fig. 3 The Console Table & Glass
A mirror adorned with fruit, a contribution to the exhibition by the Gutta Percha Company of London. (The Crystal Palace Exhibition 222)

Figs. 4-6 Hand Looking-Glass
A variety of ornate toilette glass that was displayed at the exhibition. (The Crystal Palace Exhibition 126, 283, 21)
II. Miss Havisham as Goblin: The Transmogrification of the Aged Female Body

The second chapter in James Eli Adams’ *A History of Victorian Literature* begins: “The 1850’s typically have been regarded as the very zenith of Victorian energy and self-confidence. ‘Of all decades in our history,’ G.M. Young remarked, ‘a wise man would choose the eighteen-fifties to be young in’” (143). That G.M. Young’s 1930’s observation resonated enough to find its place in a twenty-first century re-articulation and re-evaluation of mid-nineteenth-century England is not a highbrow oddity or a linear, historical inheritance. Rather, I see it as a confirmation of how Westernized notions of romanticized youth intertwine with and subsequently interpolate our views of aging and aged bodies. Charles Dickens’s vision of youth and gender in *Great Expectations* yields another curious slice of culture-making material and in the background of his tale exists the looming shadow of a shopping culture.

The 1854 royal opening of the newly located Crystal Palace at Sydenham proved a memorable event for all of London, Charles Dickens included. Liza Picard explains:

All the great and the good were there. Dickens thought it was ‘the most gigantic Humbug ever mounted on a long-suffering people’s shoulders.’ Ruskin on the other hand thought that ‘it is impossible to estimate the influence of such an

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11 Karen Chase’s study of old age in the Victorian epoch dedicates a chapter to Dickens’s writings in her book *The Victorians and Old Age*, insisting that “Dickens’s London is an archeological wonder, grafting old with new, selective memory with equally selective reality (13). Chase argues that Dickens’s accounts of dotage were not necessarily a revelatory goal of his writing, but she also notably concurs with the underlying importance of such accounts in that “they [do] intrude, awkwardly and revealing, in his accounts” (22). I might add that in Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop*, he comments that old age is itself a cruel state: "Send forth the child and childish man together, and blush for the pride that libels our own old happy state, and gives its title to an ugly and distorted image." (Ch. 12, pg. 57). The concomitant nature of aged bodies in relation to femininity deserves further scrutiny given that the cruelty is manifest in regard to Dickens’s notable (and peripheral) aged women characters—a parallel to the “corrosive portraiture” of aged women in Victorian London (Chase 17).

12 The original palace of The Great Exhibition at Hyde Park was meant to be a temporary exhibit; the House of Commons declared it to be dismantled on April 29, 1852 and soon thereafter (May 17th) the Crystal Palace Company was established to provide the impetus for a new construction site. Ultimately it was a capitalistic endeavor proffered to the public with an assurance for profit and advertising potential (Picard 223).
institutions on the minds of the working classes, pursuits, health, intellects roused into activity within the crystal wall.' (227)

That Dickens was moved enough by this second great spectacle to use a less-than-endearing adjective in *Humbug* serves to highlight the term’s definitional grounding in a denotation of deception particularly when used in conjunction with the visual illusion of the original13 Crystal Palace. Such Dickensian commentary proves useful in understanding the psychology of a display economy: to display is to exhibit which in turn depends on a contractual economy whereby a visual image/object is exposed (sacrificed) at the expense of altering and/or reinforcing the symbolic system it exists in. Dickens saw firsthand the power of the glass menagerie, and much like Rossetti, was a product of culture. He may not have consciously approved of the mercantile edifice; he was, nonetheless, marked by its signification, which I contend may be represented within his economical configuration of Miss Havisham. We cannot deny that *Great Expectations* is a novel with a “focus on class…and unromantically, about the process of *embourgeoisement*” (Sanders 431). Unlike the rural girls of Rossetti’s poem, Miss Havisham is of another class echelon, yet her submission to the framing of aging and her belief in beauty as capable of conquering any man’s heart renders her yet another victim to a Victorian-age beauty myth. Woodward purports as much in regard to her theoretical mirror stage of old age: “the mirror stage of old age is more obviously rooted in the social and economic theatre of a given historical moment” (69). Londoners besides Dickens were undeniably marked by the first Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, which won over the general public and financiers through its visual appeal and its impressive revenues. Thus, with the original Crystal Palace dismantled and then re-erected in a different location, Dickens’s scorn points to a subterranean site of exploration: the

13 Without a doubt, the second ‘Great Exhibition’ did not garner Dickens’s endorsement of great expectations for the people.
need for carbon copies to maintain an economic stability. Here we must see the Crystal Palace as symbolic of the female body able to reproduce with the aid of an economic system. Laurence Talairach-Vielmas confirms the connection between the Crystal Palace, femininity, and reading, stating: “Tightly associated with femininity, since it contained thousands of desiring female consumers, the Crystal Palace stamped the following decades in a radical way, as novels probed the nature of womanhood and the construction of femininity” (97-98). Both Dickens’s and Rossetti’s respective oeuvres can be included in this branding (later we will add Zola to the mix as well). The structural building of the Crystal Palace is an artifice then that can be renewed through monetary means. Yes, Great Expectations does fall within “the backdrop of mid-century commercial crises” where “the sick human body becomes aged and female” (Walsh 76). But with merchandising and advertising propaganda used as weapons to sustain such economic stability, we must understand the female body as standing center stage in the psychological arena of body image and the cultural Ideal-I. Miss Havisham’s body, a climacteric ground zero, works on a dual level in that she is both a privateer of the market and also a victim within it. How Miss Havisham pays such cultural work forward is in her pimping and primping of her protégé, Estella.

Scholars have previously explored issues of gender in Dickens’s Great Expectations, yet to just simply claim that Dickens portrays positive and negative feminine-figures in his work, critics like Natalie McKnight do not untie the knot of how those portrayals come to exist in the first place—nor how they function in framing subjectivity or ontological trailblazing. In “Dickens and Gender,” McKnight rightfully acknowledges the cultural contexts that wrote such stereotypes like the Victorian Angel in the House, and she also draws attention to a “pattern of

14 I use Lacan’s Ideal-I here as representative of the imago as a conglomeration of fragmented social definitions and codes that are constantly in flux and determinant of one’s exteriority.
female betrayal in monstrous mothers and mother-figures who are punished for their sins” (195). But to end a supposedly comprehensive chapter on gender with the assertion that Dickens “almost always” does “transcend the gender stereotypes” seems to beg the question of authorial intent and fails to look inwardly—and outwardly—at the role of language within the text. I refer to such a chapter to use it as a launching point for the persistently unmentionable factor that influences gender: aging. That McKnight only alludes to age in passing: “The preponderance of docile, sweet young girls and destructive, dangerous older women in Dickens’s work reflects both the limiting gender expectations for women described above and some very unsettled feelings about his own mother” (194), proves yet again that issues of female aging elide much literary scholarship.

The cultural work of Dickens’s *Great Expectations* often situates Miss Havisham as a monstrous figure—but not just because of her assertiveness and un-angelic like qualities. Insert a market system and the psychology of aging here alongside the historical frameworks of class structure, Victorian laws and norms, and the pixels of the skeletal slice of nineteenth-century Britain come into sharper relief. Miss Havisham as monster welcomes a visual embrace where the youthful boy protagonist—Pip—the reader, and the author rely on visual grammar and other symbolic cues to determine her aged otherness. To know Miss Havisham is to have seen her, which perhaps explains Pip’s difficulty in relaying his first visit: “I felt convinced that if I described Miss Havisham’s as my eyes had seen it, I should not be understood. Not only that, but I felt convinced that Miss Havisham too would not be understood; and although she was perfectly incomprehensible to me, I entertained an impression that there would be something coarse and treacherous in my dragging her as she really was” (60). What is it that she is in Pip’s memory? Other than being “the strangest lady [he has] ever seen, or shall ever see” (52), Miss
Havisham is a sign-post for the skirmish between femininity and old age. She is adorned as the fossilized bride:

She was dressed in rich materials—satins, and lace, and silks—all of white. Her shoes were white. And she had a long white veil dependent from her hair, and she had bridal flowers in her hair, but her hair had gone white. Some bright jewels sparkled on her neck and on her hands, and some other jewels lay sparkling on the table. Dresses, less splendid that the dress she wore, and half-packed trunks, were scattered about. She had not quite finished dressing, for she had but one shoe on—the other was on the table near her hand—her veil was but half arranged, her watch and chain were not put on, and some lace for her bosom lay with those trinkets, and with her handkerchief, and gloves, and some flowers, and a prayer-book, all confusedly heaped about the looking glass. (52)

The description begins with tactile fabrics and ends with a mirror; sandwiched in between is a female body. It is the female body that must come into sharp relief for us in order to see the power it yields in its youthful form, a form that a market economy can perpetuate and constantly renew.

The significance of commodities paired with glass is the indication of the market. Talairach-Vielmas effectively explains that “[t]he motif of glass is found over and over again in Victorian narratives, whether as glass cases or as mirrors. Tightly connected to constructions of reality, glass fuels feminine representation” (93). Further, the connection of glass to the Crystal Palace bespeaks how culturally tied up merchandising was tied up with visuality. Talairach-Vielmas goes on to validate the importance of glass in not only the economic setting, but the all-encompassing cultural one as well, stating: “[i]t stamps the period from an artistic, economic,
and political viewpoint. In fact, glass resonates with Victorian ideology. It reflects and refracts, reveals and exposes, displays and flaunts” (94). Miss Havisham’s body is tied up in the market, but the breakdown in Pip’s recollection of her exists in the abjectness of her “wax-work and skeleton” body which “seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me” (Dickens 53). The sight of her contraditoriness as a skeletal, infertile bride leaves Pip confounded and “melancholy” (54). Miss Havisham’s response to his melancholy is to re-evaluate herself in front of a mirror:

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.

‘So new to him,’ she muttered, ‘so old to me; so strange to him, so familiar to me; so melancholy to both of us! Call Estella.’ (54)

Miss Havisham’s ideal-I, in that moment of visual méconnaissance, is directly connected to the commodified item (dress) that she wears and the tools (dressing-table and mirror) that reinforce such a relationship. The result of such a glance and false misrecognition is the creation of desire, objet petite a, a desire for youth that is unattainable; therefore, a state of melancholy takes root since both Pip and Miss Havisham are faced with the abject aged female body. To fill the lack and relieve the uncanny situation, one that the bridal dress can no longer fulfill, Miss Havisham turns to Estella and markets her instead: “Miss Havisham beckoned [Estella] to come close, and took up a jewel from the table, and tried its effect upon her fair young bosom and against her pretty brown hair” (54). For Pip as spectator, the contrast between the two women is highlighted and the appeal of a well displayed, youthful body as an alternative to melancholy established.

Dickens ultimately functions on a geminated stratum in dictating through the narrative a binary system of definition by negation: that which is old is anything that is not young. The
old/young binary works much like a male/female one in that Dickens’s language in the introductory scene of Miss Havisham constructs a clear division, a castration with a pronoun sleight of hand. Repetitive pronoun use allows for meaning through a rule-bound, syntactic grammatical network where “he” is not “she,” but the subtext in who or what the “she” exactly is, how “she” comes to be a “she,” needs a little linguistic push into the visual realm. Thus Dickens sets the linear signs up for gender configuration when Pip’s sister, Mrs. Joe, and Mr. Pumblechook banter over an amorphous “she,” leaving Pip confused:

‘She ain’t in that line, Mum,’ said Mr. Pumblechook. ‘She knows better.’ She? I looked at Joe, making the motion with my lips and eyebrows, ‘She?’ Joe looked at me, making the motion with his lips and eyebrows, ‘She?’ My sister catching him in the act, he drew the back of his hand across his nose with his usual conciliatory air on such occasions, and looked at her. /

‘Well?’ said my sister, in her snappish way. ‘What are you staring at? Is the house a-fire?’ ‘—Which some indiwidual,’ Joe politely hinted, ‘mentioned she.’ ‘And she is a she, I suppose?’ said my sister. ‘Unless you call Miss Havisham a he. And I doubt if even you’ll go so far as that.’ (Dickens 46-47)

The repetitive “she” reinforces the she-ness of Miss Havisham but not until the definitive oppositional parry wherein Mrs. Joe lays bare the gender exception, “[u]nless you call Miss Havisham a he,” does the binary come into play. The peculiarity of the phrase exists in the contrast between “Miss” and “he” and the subsequent challenge posed by Mrs. Joe that a blurring of the two is even possible. For Dickens to use such ambiguous gender assignment for Miss Havisham suggests a curious subtext of visual blurring given his physical descriptions of her and the environment she dwells in. For Pip, his narrative world depends on such cues, ambiguous
ones or not, and Miss Havisham as person, proper noun, is born within a Bartesian symbolic system. Hinting at masculinity as a possible defining trait for Miss Havisham suggests that she somehow lacks in femininity, but how, we might ask, under what circumstances, and to what end?

The formulation of meaning through communication is especially important since this preparatory scene follows Pip’s attempt at grappling with written language having learned to “cipher, on the very smallest scale” (40). Hence, Miss Havisham’s appearance and her exaggerated decrepitude allow for that gulf between reality and phantasy—a precondition site of neurosis. Peter Brooks takes such a psychoanalytic road into Great Expectations and reveals that the unconscious desire of the plot is “not so much for redemption from time, but redemption of time” (504). Brooks ultimately sees Pip’s quest as a search for plot, a desire for linear structure, and the scene at the beginning in which Pip attempts to cipher his familial lineage through tracing letters/words/names on his parents’ tombstones conveys this search as beginning with language. To this end, a symbolic order necessitates a feeling of lack—that desire for a linear timeline; but a horror exists as well: tombstones demarcate the end of time, whereas an aged (aging) body illustrates the passage of time. How do we best determine the passage of time and by what means are we most likely to be cognizant of the passage of time? There must be a marker, some visible or knowable means of validating that tick-tocking march, something other than a syntagmatic measured unit of the language in a time like 8:40. Changes in the environment, structures, bodies—these are visual, sensory cues that resonate with our memory and our ability to communicate through metaphor and metonymy. The correlation between visuality and the feminine runs through Great Expectations much like a connective thread of life as evidenced by Pip’s encounters with bodies of water which signal an associative chain:
“Whenever I watched the vessels standing out to sea with their white sails spread, I somehow thought of Miss Havisham and Estella; and whenever the light struck aslant, afar off, upon a cloud or sail or green hill-side or water-line, it was just the same.—Miss Havisham and Estella and the strange house and the strange life appeared to have something to do with everything that was picturesque” (Dickens 99-100). The edification\textsuperscript{15} of Pip comes in the form of bodily others and what better signifier of time than an aging body? Pictures speak of language and bodies framed in age do the same.

Dickens’s characters surely perform within a framed environment, an artificial edifice, whereby the signifiers play for each other and their extended audience. The seemingly tangential and flat characters of the Pocket children and Mr. Wopsle structure the narrative with scenes of performativity, allowing Pip to further delineate Miss Havisham’s body. That Pip cannot decipher the sex of the Pocket offspring: “There were four little girls, and two little boys, besides the baby who might have been either, and the baby’s next successor who was as yet neither” (Dickens 176), establishes the power of entering a given symbolic order, particularly when a pair of babies and a fetus, the epitome of chronological youthfulness, fail to provide “natural” visual cues other than an androgynous façade—genitalia notwithstanding. The Pocket children tumble upwards without culturally endorsed parental rearing and Pip tumbles into gender trouble

\textsuperscript{15} While my work here does not specifically address all the female characters in Great Expectations, it is incumbent that I acknowledge the character Biddy, who with Joe makes up the moral center of the novel. Biddy could be seen as a correlative image of Lizzie and Laura at the end of “Goblin Market” in that she serves as a teacher to Pip, a teller of tales like Lizzie and Laura to their children, and her and Joe’s marriage also produces another “Pip,” establishing the importance of reproductivity and grounding the text with a model family unit. Biddy may not be described according to her beauty—in fact she is more “common…pleasant and wholesome and sweet-tempered” (Dickens 113-114), but she is the touchstone good wife, the Patmorian “Angel in the House” who guarantees “historical continuity” (Walsh 94) because she embraces the feminine role as wife and mother while quelling the masculine role of scholarly learning after marriage. She reinforces the heteronormative arrangement and insists that Pip do the same at the end, “You must marry” (439). She is the locus of an ethics of care through the home, a foil to the other women of the novel.
because his rearing is based on performance and outward display. Additionally, Mr. Wopsle’s ill-received theatrical performance gives way to Pip’s pity and sympathies, further connecting Pip to that amorphous world of signs reigned into culturally ascribed syntagmatic rules of visual proportions: “Miserably I went to bed after all, and miserably though of Estella, and miserably dreamed that my expectations were all cancelled, and that I had to give my hand in marriage to Herbert’s Clara, or play Hamlet to Miss Havisham’s Ghost, before twenty thousand people, without knowing twenty words of it” (Dickens 236). The trajectory here is doubly curious given that a dream evokes the earlier trauma of Pip’s tutoring of Miss Havisham as either he or she by suggesting she take a male role as the father figure (the ghost) to Pip’s Hamlet. That the ghost is specular before an audience of twenty thousand suggests again that the body (ghost-like or not) is defined through the articulation of the other. To understand Miss Havisham as ghost-father is to understand her as *de la mère morte* or not mother at all—without womb, sans Satis. Clearly we can agree that Miss Havisham’s body is the embodiment of old age, a site worthy of exploration.

Pip’s entrance into the once fertile grounds of Miss Havisham’s residence offers us a potential understanding of the monstrosity of such unfeminine (un-reproductive) milieus:

Within a quarter of an hour we came to Miss Havisham’s house, which was of old brick, and dismal, and had a great many iron bars to it. Some of the windows had been walled up; of those that remained, all the lower were rustily barred. There was a courtyard in the front, and that was barred…. at the side of the house there was a large brewery. No brewing was going on in it, and none seemed to have gone on for a long time. (Dickens 50)
That this hostile environment would turn beer rancid is ironic when its name, Satis House, should suggest otherwise. Satis—meaning *enough* in Latin—also evokes an Egyptian deity, one whose name denotes fertility and flooding rivers. The name of course is ironic given that reproductive arts and bodily fluidities at Satis House are “all done with, and the place will stand as idle as it is, till it falls” (51). Miss Havisham’s residence, an extended metaphor for her body, further establishes a sense of time—specifically feminine time lost to the interpellation of phallic power. As Walsh posits, “Miss Havisham has been bilked, jilted, and humiliated by a false fiancé; in response, she had immolated her woman’s body and the brewery manufacturing economy in one furious sweep. In so doing, she effectually repudiated the role of women’s economic and bodily capital within the family enterprise system, a business model still central to Victorian culture” (74). I would augment this line of reasoning with a nod towards Brooks’ hypothesis that the plot centers specifically on education, but I argue it is an education of language and signs with the arc of time serving as the cautionary tale.

Pip’s awareness of time through Miss Havisham’s aged body becomes a site of transference where we as readers also dwell on such visual encounters of otherness. When Pip enters the symbolic order of her home, observing the frozen-in-time catacombs of her day-to-day living, the grotesque and unknowable capture his attention: “speckled-legged spiders with blotchy bodies…mice rattling behind the panels…black-beetles…[that] groped about the hearth in a ponderous elderly way, as if they were short-sighted and hard of hearing, and not on terms with one another” (Dickens 77). The greater significance of the vermin and insects is Dickens’ personification of them as aged (genderless) human-like bodies, and that “[t]hese crawling things…fascinated [Pip’s] attention” (77) further illustrates the edifying nature of aging. Much like Rossetti’s “Goblin Market,” personified creatures in Dickens’s tale serve to remind us of
visual metaphors along a paradigmatic line that we then organize according to cultural dictate.

For Rossetti, the goblin men (not women) likewise fascinate in that:

One had a cat’s face,
One whisk’d a tail
One tramp’d at a rat’s pace,
One crawl’d like a snail
One like a wombat prowl’d obtuse and furry,
One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry.
She heard a voice like voice of doves
Cooing all together. (lines 71-78)

To understand what or who these creatures are in relation to us, we must “see” them, conceptualize them, or define them through negation. If Rossetti had eliminated “men” from the definitional make-up of these creatures, we would rely on the cacophony of their visual cues to aid in our decoding with the aim to identify, to form a picture, to reinforce a language. Indeed, metaphoric language offers us a plethora of associations.

The vermin emphasizes Pip’s view of Miss Havisham as something other than a youthful “she.” And, the cross-pollination of aged bodies with animals sticks to Pip’s unconscious which later surfaces in a conversation with Mr. Wemmick who offers Pip “the best fowl in the shop” and casually says, “You don’t object to an aged parent, I hope?” to which Pip reflects, “I really thought he was still speaking of the fowl, until he added, ‘Because I have got an aged parent at my place’” (Dickens 187). The significance of such odd dialogue is the revealed transference where aged body intertwines yet again with beast. This site of neurosis for Pip establishes the binary pull at work, that “opposition between reality and phantasy” (Freud 101). A cultural code
dictates though in that Pip quickly puts on his polite hat: “I then said what politeness required” (Dickens 187), but the release of neurotic energy has already oozed from the page and the undercurrent of aged bodies as other than human strengthens. This transference is not an isolated incidence, particularly in regard to age since Dickens designs Miss Sarah Pocket as likewise animal-like in her oldness: “Miss Sarah Pocket, whom I [Pip] now saw to be a little dry brown corrugated old woman, with a small face that might have been made of walnut-shells, and a large mouth like a cat’s without the whiskers” (Dickens 79). A peripheral, minor character, Miss Sarah Pocket is an aged cannibal, feeding upon Miss Havisham’s money, much like the other aging female relatives Georgiana and Camilla to make up a ménage-a-trois of fates (sans sexuality), acting as specular figures for reinforcing that the aging process is physically and psychologically disintegrating. Miss Havisham validates the gnawing, creating an ontology for Pip: “‘On this day of the year, long before you were born, this heap of decay,’ stabbing with her crutched stick at the pile of cobwebs on the table but not touching it, ‘was brought here. It and I have worn away together. The mice have gnawed at it, and sharper teeth than teeth of mice have gnawed at me’” (81). That Dickens chooses to frame Miss Havisham with three aging females who compete for a financial footing adds to the dynamic of female worth: financial security may fill the lack for loss of youth—or it may not given that the “she” of Miss Havisham is “the Witch” in a decaying, once fertile site of heterosexual marital customs gone awry. Conversely, Mr. Wemmick’s aging father, notably given an heraldric title of “the Aged,” stands in harsh relief to the aged women. He lives in a Castle, is “clean, cheerful, comfortable, and well cared for, but intensely deaf” (190). The Aged serves as another visual reminder of aging, another empty shell, but that he still retains the respect of his son, Mr. Wemmick, and even the reverence of Pip, speaks to the disparity between aged women and aged men. The Aged is protected within
the fortress of a castle, allowed to live out his days in a loving environment and to bask in the memory of his former physical male potency through ritual reenactment: “Proceeding into the Castle again, we found the Aged heating the poker, with expectant eyes, as a preliminary to the performance of this great nightly ceremony. Wemmick stood with his watch in his hand, until the moment was come for him to take the red-hot poker from the Aged, and repair to the battery” (191). The Aged is allowed an active sexual memory, not a passive deteriorating one.

The simple inequitable equation is this then: “the Aged” may continue a pseudo-phallic presence, deafness and all, while Miss Havisham embodies menopausal otherness—she is one of W.R. Greg’s redundant women who cannot be socially redeemed through emigration because she does not make “the prime of life” cut nor is she “in the best and most attractive period of life” (12). Simply, she is not of reproductive worth, or as Walsh articulates, “the change-of-life woman is like an economy of men in acute financial distress” (70). To tie a faltering or deadened economy up with “catamenial decline” (Walsh 79) in women suggests an opportunity for a market economy to provide an economic stimulus in the form of exterior remedies to internal and biological processes. For W.R. Greg in 1861, the economic strategy of supply and demand dictated the usefulness of women, and one and a half million unmarried women were not performing the so-called naturalness of fertility and conjugality. These redundant women ultimately end up “retiring to a lonely and destitute old age: and old maids, with just enough income to live upon, but wretched and deteriorating, their minds narrowing, and their hearts withering, because they have nothing to do, and none to love, cherish, and obey” (Greg 6).

Where does Miss Havisham fit into this equation? Nina Auerbach relegates her to the realm of stereotyped Victorian Old Maid performing the heroic act of isolationism since the figure of the

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16 One of W.R. Greg’s solutions in his 1861 essay, “Why Are Women Redundant?” for the rising single-female population in London and Wales was to ship those women who were still capable of reproduction to the Americas and Australia.
old maid was able to maneuver outside of hearth and home, to explore the world without the
confinements of family, to be constantly mobile and free from constrictive heteronormative
duties. Auerbach explains: “The old maid’s isolation is her heroic mark, which the ordinary
cannot engulf. Absorption into family would deny her splendid identity, while it is the only hope
of growth for her stunted bachelor counterparts” (144). Pathetically reduced to a statistic, the
spinster figure regains power through “a shaping power ordinary fictional mothers and fathers do
not have” (114), and yet this heroic status falls completely within the trajectory of Victorian
notions of femininity since the old maid ironically cultivates relationships based on intimacy and
love outside of the ideology of the home (145). She is a figure working against the system while
simultaneously endorsing its tenets of femininity. According to Auerbach, “Miss Havisham
hides from the sun and refuses to leave her room, but instead of shrinking from life she controls
destinies from her magic spot; her lonely room becomes the novel’s dark center, from which the
lives of the other characters are shaped” (143). Thus, Miss Havisham is still an image framed by
culture-making subjectivity; in turn, her dark center (the opposite of light) becomes a compass, a
road-map for how others perceive the world. Instead of transcending the economic matrix as a
genderless entity, she morphs into a goblin-esque creature, a hawker and voyeur of youth and
beauty. She retains her economic power while simultaneously reinforcing Western phallic
power by merchandising Estella—a site of neurosis and a fissure for the release of age-induced
gynotrauma.17

A market economy within Great Expectations runs parallel to “Goblin Market” in that
merchandizing and goods coalesce with femininity—a site for the production and augmentation

17 The female Victorian identity depends on reproductive capability, a set of characteristics based on a gynecological
model, so when that identity is marred or usurped by the physical markers of old age, ones that suggest
unproductiveness, then it goes without saying that a traumatic shift occurs. Gynotrauma, then, is the resultant
psychological residue precipitated by culturally imposed norms that fracture a woman’s self-identity.
of feminine youthfulness. According to Walsh, in the subtext of “Great Expectations, women provide at least two sorts of relief. They act as angels in the house who conserve old-style domestic and economic arrangements, or alternatively, they become places where economic trouble can be displaced and thereby symbolically disposed of” (85-86). Walsh sees Miss Havisham residing in the latter but that “she is eventually rehabilitated enough also to offer the first” (86). I would have to provisionally agree with Walsh, but while my accord does not elide the economic configurations, it does question Miss Havisham as rehabilitated and why (how) aging works so well as a scarlet letter of subjectivity. Subjectivity does not allow for Miss Havisham to ever leave that first arrangement—she functions in both realms simultaneously. That Dickens, Pip, Miss Havisham herself, and the readership at large know her as proprietress of an emblematic, decaying, stagnant body serves to caution just how entrenched the corporeal signifier is within our human collective and why it works so well as a scare tactic and tool within advertising.

Miss Havisham, then, is the unfortunate high priestess of goblin merchants because her agedness reinforces the domestic status quo and it amplifies the potential buying power of a culture of women who intuit what a marketable body is worth. She believes in and buys into what she sells. Miss Havisham as a visual site with the caveat of what happens when the market fails to help in masking age because “she had immolated her woman’s body” (Walsh 74) works when the enticing storefront to this tale transfers to Estella. She becomes the heir apparent to the Crystal Palace, that Fairyland that Dickens insisted was “inhabited by gnomes and fairies, his description illustrating the paradoxes upon which the glasshouse was hinged” (Talairach-Vielmas 92). Graham Ingham asserts that “Estella scarcely exists in her own right, she is a creation of Pip’s projection of an ideal self” (757). But the projection is not only Pip’s; it is a
collective nineteenth-century parabolic projection. Through Estella, Miss Havisham writes a
code of salability in that she adorns Estella much like a fetishized object and the bodily contrast
between the two women serves to create not only the appeal of one body over the other, but also
to create a site of unconscious desire.

The pairing of property (fetishized objects) with a female character is not limited to
Estella. Prior to Pip’s visit to Satis House with Joe, who sports a court-suit rather than his
customary black-smith attire, Mrs. Joe Gargery parades along with them into town:

We walked to town, my sister leading the way in a very large beaver bonnet, and
carrying a basket like the Great Seal of England in plaited straw, a pair of
patterns, a spare shawl, and an umbrella, though it was a fine bright day. I am not
quite clear whether these articles were carried penitentially or ostentatiously; but,
I rather think they were displayed as articles of property—much like Cleopatra or
any other sovereign lady on the Rampage might exhibit her wealth in a pageant or
procession. (Dickens 90)

The layering of meaning and tectonic shifts in word play here demand more than casual look-
over, particularly given that we are offered another angle at which to understand Mrs. Gargery.
The wearing of the “large beaver bonnet” directly provides an unconscious umbilical cord to
woman as once again taking on an animalistic persona—metaphorically speaking. The beaver
within the bonnet connects into the matrix already established within the text, whisking Pip and
us back to the scene of the Havisham female clan, to a site of decay, to that primordial cobweb.
This seemingly backwards moment of memory retrieval is another structural component of the
abyss where a web within a web ensnares us all into a knowledge system of body morphology;
thus a female body becomes malleable like a Galatea in a sculptor’s hands. Mrs. Gargery is no
longer the violent, emasculating sister; her body directly corresponds to a market economy where she exhibits her possessions in an attempt to raise her market value.

The rodent animal skin of the beaver hat also functions as a metonymy of the prêt-a-porter kind, particularly if we look to the “Victorian Reading Project” through Stanford University, which has established that according to a definition from The Dictionary of Daily Wants (1858-9), “This article of female attire is one of the most important, for, according as it offends against, or conforms with, certain principles of taste, so it is rendered what is called ‘becoming’ or ‘unbecoming’ and materially influences, not only the appearance of the face of the wearer, but the whole person.”18 Pip’s narrative reflection on his sister, one that has previously been riddled with notions of hostility, now curiously evolves into sister—woman—adorned with material objects. Mrs. Joe Gargery becomes. What she becomes depends on what a narrator, an author, a readership associates with such adornments. The beaver bonnet begins the chain of things, objects of no immediate practical value: boots, shawl, and an umbrella on a sunny day; and Pip’s observation of such futile objects carries us right into the heart of femininity intertwined with commodification through a visible economy. The stamp of approval for such an act comes in the form of the Great Seal of England, which establishes a nationalistic ideology through a state apparatus. The codification here is one of possessions, things, objects to be purchased. Pip’s sister, then, performs the role of good Victorian woman who reinforces a sense of nationalism through purchasing power. Dickens lampoons Mrs.Gargery, seizing the opportunity to mock her perpetual Rampage, and yet she is a Cleopatra, a woman who can retain power through aesthetic appeals and items purchased at market.

18 Noted as page 166 within The Dictionary of Daily Wants from “Notes on the Novel: Issue 4,” Discovering Dickens: A Community Reading Project, Stanford University’s Victorian Reading Project(Web).
Aesthetics of femininity ultimately serve as the vehicle for Miss Havisham’s revenge. Her lover Compeyson left her at the altar because his transaction with her was one of a swindle thereby leaving her bodily poor and marked as a redundant woman left to fester “in her bridal shroud, [and] the brewery’s barren casks, their fermentative essence dried up long ago, convey discordant impressions of utility and disuse, productiveness and sterility, residual youth and moribund old age” (Walsh 73). The contrasting juxtapositions here—indicative of the symbols within the text—remind us of the binary between youthfulness and old age. In order for Miss Havisham to take effective revenge on men, since solely monetary clout is not enough, she understands that she must re-enter the market system with an aesthetic and emotional arsenal: Estella. This act of fostership, of sculpting Estella into “so much more beautiful, so much more womanly, in all things winning admiration had made such wonderful advance” (Dickens 214-15), signifies not only the power of youthful femininity, but also the ineffectiveness of old age, revealing Miss Havisham as missing, lacking such influencing charms anymore. She becomes the shopkeeper, merchandizing Estella, understanding the psychology of youthfulness, profiting from what Talairach-Vielmas insists was “the rise of the consumer culture, enhancing female desire and inviting women to hide themselves behind creams, powders, and fashionable clothes, magnify[ing] the extent to which the nature of woman was hinged upon contradictions” (90). In this tale, the ripe fruit (Estella) works on the psychology of Pip. And, Miss Havisham, in understanding this psychological space, capitalizes on such marketing schemes: “Do you find her much changed, Pip?” asked Miss Havisham, with her greedy look, and striking her stick upon a chair that stood between them, as a sign to me to sit down there” (Dickens 215). Miss Havisham’s greed stems from her knowledge that Estella’s visual appearance has rendered Pip at her mercy thus reinforcing the success of any future marketing campaign used against him.
The subsequent narrative from this scene in Chapter Ten, Volume Two proves instrumental in also laying the groundwork for conceivably subliminal signposts of female aging as something to rally against and youthful beauty as something to admire. After Estella appears before Pip, he comments to Miss Havisham: “‘When I came in, Miss Havisham, I thought there was nothing of Estella in the face or figure; but now it all settles down so curiously into the old—’” to which Miss Havisham immediately retaliates with: “‘What? You are not going to say into the old Estella?’” (215, emphasis mine). This freeze-frame moment where Miss Havisham unleashes annoyance at the mere mention of old in association with Estella reveals her Achilles’ heel, a sensitivity to her plan to mold and then exhibit Estella as the ultimate ideal of feminine beauty. To counter her sketch of idealized femininity, to not buy into it, is to provoke her wrath—much like Rossetti’s goblins when they attack Lizzie:

Lashing their tails
They trod and hustled her,
Elbowed and jostled her,
Clawed with their nails,
Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking,
Tore her gown and soiled her stocking,
Twitched her hair out by the roots,
Stamped upon her tender feet,
Held her hands and squeezed their fruits
Against her mouth to make her eat. (Rossetti lines 398-407)

Miss Havisham need not go so far to coerce Pip into consenting to an ideological representation of Estella’s femininity for he has already unconsciously submitted: “‘We sat in the dreamy room
among the old strange influences which had so wrought upon me… Proud and willful as of old, she had brought those qualities into such subjection to her beauty that it was impossible and out of nature—or I thought so—to separate them from her beauty” (Dickens 215, emphasis mine).

That the word old repeats twice over from the previous confrontation with Miss Havisham works on a subconscious level in reminding Pip of the binary from which he has to choose. It functions like a reflecting mirror: the coding of old in direct confrontation with beauty (youth) re-establishes for Pip (and us) that beauty is the desired choice.

Further, that Miss Havisham “play[s] with Estella’s hair” (215) between these verbal exchanges and again at the end of this chapter gives evidence to the invention involved with youthfulness and crystallizes the role of Miss Havisham as goblin and entrepreneur of attraction. She merchandizes Estella “in a fantastic way, [and] had put some of the most beautiful jewels from her dressing-table into Estella’s hair, and about her bosom and arms; and I saw even my guardian look at her from under his thick eyebrows, and raise them a little, when her loveliness was before him, with those rich flushes of glitter and colour in it” (222). Miss Havisham turns Estella’s body into a phantasmagoric site, framing Estella as a feminine object to be desired by all others. Perhaps the most revealing sign in this chapter is the comparison that Pip makes between himself and Estella—another one of those web like associations to direct our memory back to the comparison between the Aged and Miss Havisham. Pip remarks that the “ruined garden…was all in bloom for [him]” while he and Estella walk through the verdant overgrowths, then noting that: “There was no discrepancy of years between us, to remove her far from me; we were of nearly the same age, though of course the age told for more in her case than in mine” (218). Pip’s edification in the binary difference between men and women in regard to the markings of time on the body blossoms here, providing the reader with a similar knowledge of
what method of cultivation is needed in bridging such an arbitrary gap. Pip, although similarly affected by the market and its trappings, is, quite frankly, not held to the same visual standards as Estella. Although they are both signified by a system in that “[they] have no choice…but to obey [their] instructions. [They] are not free to follow [their] own devices” (Dickens 242).

Estella as *tabula rasa* is written within the confines of a Havisham Palace:

For you were not brought up in that strange house from a mere baby.—I was.

You had not your little wits sharpened by their intriguing against you, suppressed and defenseless, under the mask of sympathy and pity and what not that is soft and sooth.—I had. You did not gradually open your round childish eyes wider and wider to the discovery of that impostor of a woman who calculates her stores of peace of mind for when she wakes up in the night.—I did. (Dickens 244).

To perceive Miss Havisham as imposter is to recognize the masquerade of the market. The aged woman plays a role so as to shape a young girl’s femininity (another role), which in turn shapes the perceptions of those around her. It is a carnival atmosphere where once the revelry has begun the masks cannot be taken off for fear of the system falling apart.

Estella recognizes the hold that Miss Havisham has on her, yet she cannot break out of the confines of such feminine framing. Before Estella proclaims that her life has been warped by the aims of Miss Havisham, that control is out of her hands, she and Pip walk up the stairs at the Inn Yard where the waiter led them “to the black hole of the establishment: fitted up with a diminishing mirror” (242). Such a movement into an abyss leaves a psychological impression on the reader because seeing both Estella and Pip as having shrinking egos and entering a place of no return stems from a knowledge base about the female body. The language that created them, and their respective ideologies on gender and aging, stem in part from Miss Havisham. Pip
acknowledges that he “should have been happier and better if [he] had never seen Miss Havisham’s face, and had risen to manhood content to be partners with Joe in the honest old forge” (248). Why not wish that he had never met Miss Havisham, or known of Miss Havisham? Because her very agedness, her climacteric otherness, embodies much more of a powerful psychological means of emasculation since her womb is a dead womb that no man could impregnate, and to know her visually as old reinforces that old exists. To see Miss Havisham’s face is to know old, otherness, and obsoletism. Her body shocks us into that state of horror that Woodward describes as that moment of separation and knowledge. Miss Havisham’s aged body punches a hole into our body of knowledge and forever creates a vacuity that cannot be filled—unless, of course, a market system is in place to try and fill the void. Youthful beauty (the interpolation of both) can then become a space ripe for the fetish.

Miss Havisham’s traumatic experience with her lover excludes her from attempting to fetishize her own body by means of transfiguring it to a market model, so instead she uses Estella’s body to create a mirage of youthfulness, a space to drink away the lack. She takes up her sculptor’s tools and preens Estella with jewels, clothing, and a marketing cry: “You, so young, untried, and beautiful, Estella! Surely it is not in Nature” (332). The idealized Estella hearkens to Rossetti’s flawless, eroticized goblin fruit, ripe for the picking and in a perpetual state of fertility—not of or in Nature. The sale of the ripe fruit depends on a beguiling, convincing jingle or advertising layout, and Miss Havisham, to be successful at the sale, must also believe in the product. Clearly Miss Havisham does believe in the power of feminine youth, as evidenced in her consumption of Estella’s body: “She hung upon Estella’s beauty, hung upon her words, hung upon her gestures, and sat mumbling her own trembling fingers while she looked at her, as though she were devouring the beautiful creature she had reared” (276). Miss
Havisham submits to an act of consumption and then promotes it, using youth and beauty as the baiting hook for Pip. Dickens’s use of such language exposes a predatory retailing. It is particularly telling when we are told of Miss Havisham’s “witch-like eagerness” and vampiric form: “she must have looked as if the admission of the natural light of day would have struck her to dust” (55). Pip would like to escape such an insatiable game, but she draws on the fear that Pip may never see beauty again, thereby exposing the underlying desire:

‘I think I should like to go home.’

‘And never see her again, though she is so pretty?’

‘I am not sure that I shouldn’t like to see her again, but I should like to go home now.’

‘You shall go soon,’ said Miss Havisham, aloud. ‘Play the game out.’ (55-56)

A game implies a win or lose situation—a binary—as well as an underlined strategy at work to determine who wins and who loses by means of the tactics employed. In a market economy, youth trumps all for it can constantly be renewed through a theatrical staging and artificial means.

The game of the marketplace is to perpetuate an ideal, something to be attained, and in Great Expectations, the gender game stakes itself on the economics of feminine aging. If we could understand staging and the formulation of identity based only on a unit system of strung together phonemes, then perhaps we need look no further than Miss Havisham’s name as signifier since it sums up nicely the psychology at work within the market system that ordains female materiality in one fell swoop. What is in Miss Havisham’s name? Rhizomes of meaning. Hav—alluding to having less the –ing suffix—suggests a desirous motivation, a possession. Couple that with a root of sham: “Of material things or substances: Made in imitation of
something else; made to appear to be something which it is not; made of inferior or base materials” (Oxford English Dictionary), and an ironic meaning comes into relief alongside the honorific, unmarried Miss. We are to understand Miss Havisham, then, as the female prototype for a marketing campaign against aging. Her aged body, androgynous and barren, reflects a market motivation, a corporeal site to capitalize on and instruct from. And, we do not have to dig too deeply into Dickens’s text to find female aging as something otherworldly and unappealing. He may function as a character, a plot-driven author, but his metaphoric and metonymic associations provide proof positive that the Victorian female body must be pretty and young as established by the standards of a culture of consumption. Dickens’s metaphor of trees encapsulates the market at work: “Some ancient trees before the house were still cut into fashions as formal and unnatural as the hoops and wigs and stiff skirts; but their own allotted places in the great procession of the dead were not far off, and they would soon drop into them and go the silent way the rest” (247). The female body that is aged can attempt to play the market with a marketed façade of youthfulness, a guise of reproductivity, but at some point the sham can no longer hold and then there is only silence. And yet, the department store, wily with its tactical arsenal, its cacophonous array of sensory appeals, exploits the female body that faces potential muffling, a body that renders her as either visible or peripheral to society. The department store then becomes a fetishized experience, allowing for the greatest of masquerades.
Fig. 7 The Ladies’ Folding Dressing Table
Such a toilette glass could be manipulated for the purpose of “showing seven different views.” *The Lady’s Dressing Room* (Staffe O).

Fig. 8 Anna Ruppert’s Perfect Complexion
An “external medicine,” touted as a cure-all for those deformities of the skin.
*The Lady’s Dressing Room* (Staffe A).

Fig. 9 Remedies for Grey Hair and Warts
Electric treatments for the skin as well as a wrinkle smoothing cream made from “the pulp of the ripe fruit.”
*The Lady’s Dressing Room* (Staffe F).

Fig. 10 Macassar Oil
An advertisement for preserving hair and the prevention of graying.
*The Lady’s Dressing Room* (Staffe I).
III. Mirror Images of Female Subjectivity in Zola’s Department Store

The enigmatic “pretty woman,” that ostensible and enchanting, mysterious blonde, weaving in and out of Émile Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames*, making cameo appearances in the juggernaut of all Parisian department stores, offers insight into how female physicality determines the market and, conversely, how the market shapes the female body. Adding to the theatrical framing of Zola’s novel, “the pretty woman,” a stock pseudonym bestowed upon her by the department store assistants, reminds us just how politic the body is when identity intertwined with femininity renders a woman nameless and yet—paradoxically—completely identifiable on the basis of appearance. *Pretty* and *woman* become an intertwined interpellation to the extent that woman is an object of the exterior kind. Indeed, looks are everything in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, as the frequent act of merchandising in the novel illustrates, and female display, specifically how Zola portrays his women characters, is likewise important in determining late nineteenth-century attitudes about female aging. “The pretty woman” of Zola’s Rougon-Macquart series may set the bar for the ideal consumer: nameless woman with disposable income signified as a “beauty,” but Zola’s depiction of characters like Denise Baudu and Henriette Desforges provide the capital behind discriminatory ageism. My work here aims to explore Zola’s juxtaposition of these two women characters—characters that embody Old Paris/New Paris—as well as to examine his use of mirror imagery and the bourgeois culture that triggers what I call a catoptric\(^{19}\)-induced dysmorphia where *old* is tantamount to societal nothingness. While his use of mirrors and mirror-like infinite images may explain the real-life use of mirrors as merchandising tricks of the trade, I detail a psychoanalytic exploration of the aged self, particularly a gendered self, in relation to mirrors and the gaze.

\(^{19}\) Based on a theory of mirrors where reflected light forms images.
A Lacanian foundation beautifully explains how female subjectivity comes into being, but I insist on intersecting his theoretical framework with the more contemporary work of Woodward’s “possibility of a mirror stage of old age” (104) because the mirror stage never ends: we are constantly in flux with our ideal-I as cultural norms change and societal ideologies bombard us, enveloping us in a never-ending matrix of language in which we attempt to find meaning. The female body is a composite of the fragments from such a matrix, and aging, just one of an infinite set of ideologies, frames and defines the female body sociologically as well as psychologically. Lacan describes it as such: “The mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation—and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I call an ‘orthopedic’ form of its totality—and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark [the subject’s] entire mental development with its rigid structure” (“Mirror Stage” 6). The root of subjectivity stems from the desire to fill space, seek out knowledge with fragmented pieces of sensory perception to ultimately come up with a sense of self, an identity. I believe the visual component to the mirror-phase wields the strongest lure for identity formation, and when dealing with other bodies, a community of bodies, aging and gender prove pivotal in creating meaning for they seem to create the biggest binary in a visual economy.

Woodward’s summation of the oppositional horrors of the mirror stage proves timeless when paralleled with Zola’s diachronic characterizations of the youthful Denise and the aging (indeed, already aged) Madame Desforges. In Zola’s Au Bonheur des Dames, this alienation stems from a competitive basis where young versus old, and the battlefield of the department store, framed with a battery of mirrors, creates a home-field advantage for the youthful,
bourgeois-minded team. Having the means to buy in this arena ironically yields less power when up against bodily capital unless the monetary form is used as a means to buy youth—time in a bottle. The paradigmatic role of the department store is to then offer literal and metaphoric means of artifice to both cloak—to repress even—and yet emphasize female aging. Zola’s pseudo-real store, full of antonymical perplexities, offers an environment of false youthfulness, where spring and summer sales breathe fresh life into fashions, and it also functions as a locus of hostility towards that which is not new. Anything old in Zola’s New Paris must be suppressed.

I referred earlier to a bourgeois culture (i.e. bourgeois-minded) rather than a bourgeois class since Denise (and many other characters, specifically the demoiselles) is not of bourgeois monetary means; even Rossetti’s Laura and Lizzie do not fall into the stratified middle class. Rather, Zola’s characterization of Denise evokes Michael B. Miller’s insistence on a social history that explores “bourgeois values, behavior, life style, and relationships, and the institutional expressions in which these were embodied” (6). Miller’s book-length study of the late nineteenth-century French epitome of a grand magasin, the department store Le Bon Marché, reveals the role of paternalism in the internal structure of the department store business model, an important theme I shall later address, and that the department store symbolized a changing society saturated in bourgeois values: “The department store was not only the bourgeoisie’s world; it was the most visible symbol of how that world was changing” (4). To be bourgeois then is to capitulate to a set of ideals and these ideals hinge on visual cues. The bourgeois ideology of the angel in the house is not limited then to an economical base; it ripples outwards affecting the many sociological layers. Female subjectivity really knows no bounds and does not fall into neat little categories. Zola’s narratized and translated understanding for the model of his ultimate of comparative grand magasins, Au Bonheur des Dames, was the
omnipresent *Le Bon Marché*, and visibility surely proves to be the essence of Zola’s storyline. Just like Rossetti and Dickens, Zola displays a binary system of aging in regard to the female body. Zola’s use of the spectral-like “pretty woman” along with the juxtaposition of the aged Baudu family-business *Vieil Elbeuf*, forever “dead behind its black windows” (Zola 179), while the “whitewash [was] still glaringly new” (230) on the frontage of *Au Bonheur des Dames* signals to us significant visual cues—especially when scrutinized under an old/new bilaterality.

We cannot deny the perceptibility of these details nor can we disregard that a bourgeois culture depends on visuality and costuming: what to wear, how to wear it, when to wear it, when not to wear it.

Zola’s fastidious research of the inner workings of *Le Bon Marché* substantiates such optical exigencies and the theme surely materializes in his novel. Although Denise’s class position is one of a working girl direct from the countryside, she still must learn the dressing customs created and enforced for the sales girls of the department store. The chief buyer, Madame Aurelie, chastises Denise’s inexperience in such matters and does so in a large room full of mirrors: “My dear, two of you would fit into that dress. You’ll have to have it taken in…And what’s more, you don’t know how to dress yourself. Come here and let me tidy you up a bit” (Zola 88). While the sales girls of *Au Bonheur des Dames* must all look the same (they must *look* exactly like sales girls), they still *look* a part in the emphatically thematic bourgeoisie world. They must be distinguishable by their appearances. Denise hitherto does know the role, yet Madame Aurelie’s suggestion that “two” women could fit into her dress suggests that Denise will learn another role, that another identity is possible. It also suggests that Denise lacks and is in need of something more to fill that lack. Madame Aurelie then guides Denise to a physical mirror so as to point out Denise’s bodily failure: “She led her in front of one of the tall mirrors
which alternated with the paneled doors of the cupboards where they kept the clothes” (88).

Denise observes the other youthful shopgirls when she looks into the flanking mirror, an act that creates the ultimate of female prisms, an infinite chasm where female reflections bounce around penetrating Denise’s line of vision. Zola describes it as such:

The young ladies added to the impression, dressed in their silk uniforms and behaving in their most alluring manner… Each of them had a large pencil sticking up with its point in the air between two buttons on her bodice, as though piercing her breast; and one could see, half emerging from a pocket, the white shape of the credit-note book. Several of them had ventured to put on jewelry: rings, brooches, chains; but, in the uniformity imposed by their clothing, their vanity and the one extravagance in which they tried to rival one another, was their hair, uncovered, luxuriant, supplemented by plaits and chignons if not sufficient in itself, combed, curled and paraded. (88-89)

The homogenous femininity here serves to reinforce the ideology of the department store as well as the bourgeois culture that fuels the market; it creates for Denise a sense of identity and a goal for which to strive. These women must wear a uniform as dictated while simultaneously displaying their sexuality in order to be noticed. They must exaggerate their femininity through posturing and the adornments of jewelry and hairstyling, and the market allows for this adornment since it provides the artificial means to enhance, to add to or to alter the body. The curious punctuation point in this space of text is the large pencil penetrating a female breast. On one level the pencil is phallic, representative of the law of the Father, the law of capitalism, the law of the bourgeoisie, the law of the power structures that define the nineteenth-century female body, structuring how it should move, how it should look, and how it should understand itself in
relation to other bodies. These are bodies in motion, the centrifugal force of symbolic language keeping them in a state of desire. The pencil and the adjacent credit-note book signify the market as extensions of the department store and how it not only writes upon the female body, but also how it penetrates the body’s subjectivity by entering into the psychological make-up of the woman who cannot break free from the physics of fragmentation. Denise is not one person, per se—she is a composite of many women and many bodies and she is doomed to compare her body to them all. Madame Aurelie and the hall of mirrors exposes that no true self exists, no one body is truth. The corporeal representation of the female body is one of framing and in each epoch, the law of the phallic power determines the frame—the enduring nature of the aged female body, however, seems to carry on and overlap such units of time, which is why the mirror stage of old age demands our attention.

As Miller has astutely pointed out, “This was a carefully patterned society where appearance was always, to a point, a function of occasion, a badge that one understood what was correct and adhered to it rigorously” (181). To be bourgeois was to be seen as bourgeois. The department store, with its capitalistic goal, understood this visual drive for identification and helped to fuel it. In a sense it was a reciprocal relationship between culture and business since “identity was to be found in the things one possessed. Consumption itself became a substitute for being bourgeois,” and accordingly the department store “now became the arbiter of bourgeois identity, defining it accordingly with what the House had to sell” (Miller 185). The sales girls or the demoiselles, Denise included, must not only sell, they must also use and manipulate their

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20 In Julien Duvivier’s 1930 German film adaptation of *Au Bonheur des Dames*, the scene where Denise observes her body in relation to the other shopgirls’ bodies exposes the timeless undercurrent of the youthful female body as something to be gazed upon and eroticized. The scene is riddled with mirrors and the bodies of half-clad women. An older woman orders Denise to strip so as to have her body evaluated. A man then comes into the scene and winks at Denise as she then proceeds to walk to provocative music. Duvivier’s adaptation of Zola’s novel captures quite well the visual economy at work and how the female body is merchandized like a product.
youthful bodies\textsuperscript{21} to display items. The use of mirrors adds another dimension to the display, for the added importance of such an orchestrated appearance is its ability to shape self-conception. As Jenijoy La Belle articulates in her comprehensive examination of mirror imagery in literature, “[t]he mirror image is not a metaphor of self or a presentation of part of the self; it is the self” (91). The curious bit here is that Denise must learn to adapt her bodily appearance to fit an image based on an heteronormative bourgeois cultural phenomena. Therefore, the mirror merely reinforces the act of self perception and aids in Denise’s submission to the reflection, to the other—she can exist as two selves in one dress, but at a price.

The bourgeois identity functions through appearances and it also has a predilection for newness. Bourgeois cultural identity stays the same, but in order to reinforce the ideals and the life style, perhaps to maintain the \textit{status quo ante} and to fuel the desire behind belonging to the status quo, the visual trends (or \textit{dernier cri}) must change and they must propagate. Both the culture and the market demand newness to subsist. Indeed, “the most powerful urge behind the culture of consumption [was] the belief that \textit{new meant better}, and hence indispensable” (Miller 186, emphasis mine). Zola exercises this belief throughout the novel and I cannot help but to notice the interchangeability between new and young. Old Paris must be supplanted with New Paris—old bodies with newer ones—and through Denise, Zola creates a reflection of the desire for youthful viridity. The visions of Old Paris fill Denise with revulsion: “She shuddered at this vision of Old Paris, soaked through, and was astonished to find the great city so icy and so ugly” (Zola 28). Likewise, her uncle’s shop \textit{Vieil Elbeuf}, indicative and emblematic of Old Paris, also reminds her of a barren-like vault: “The place seemed to her darker and to be lapsing more

\textsuperscript{21} The hiring climate of \textit{Le Bon Marché}, set by the Boucicaut family, prized youth since there existed a consistent policy to employ people only under the age of thirty (Miller 79). True to Zola’s realistic and paralleling details to department store procedures, Denise is asked her age during the hiring process, to which she replies “Twenty and four months” (Zola 54).
deeply into the somnolence of a ruin. There were wells of darkness in empty corners and dust was spreading over the counters and boxes, while the bolts of cloth, which no one moved nowadays, gave off an odour of saltpeter in damp cellars” (Zola 206). While Vieil Elbeuf shrinks, Au Bonheur des Dames expands, fertile with newness, bourgeois values, mirrors, and women. Vieil Elbeuf’s women are empty and faced only with the inevitability of death: “The mother was hemming napkins and the daughter, her hands resting on her knees, stared into the void ahead of her” (206). That void is the figurative old since movement entails a life instinct and the death instinct resides with rest (Woodward 49). Not only does this scene foreshadow Geneviève Baudu’s death, it also signifies her inability to reproduce a New Paris; her body is then rendered useless: “Now she was lying flat, such a slight figure beneath the blankets that one could no longer sense the shape or the existence of a body” (Zola 357). Geneviève’s body acts as a cautionary mirror for Denise who realizes later in this death processional chapter that life needs death, but in that journey she cannot help but to take notice of the disfiguring process prior to necrosis. In Bourras’ building she observes that the attempts at façade, of cloaking, “the soft green paintwork, the mirrors, the gilded sign—were already showing cracks and dirt, with the rapid, woeful deterioration of false luxury, painted over ruins” (361). The mirrors here work to remind us of visuality and that fragmentation results when an identity cannot cope with a change in outward appearance.

A healthy self must have a solid ego. Woodward’s theory of the alienation of the body, that mirror stage of old age, occurs when what appears in the mirror does not reflect the self-image within. La Belle takes that idea an additional step and explains that “[t]o exist in multiplicity is, in a sense, not to exist at all because self-conception requires some conviction in the singularity of one’s being” (119). I would argue further that what happens here is a catoptric-
induced dysmorphia, filtered through a refractive bourgeois light, since what Denise perceives is an aged, personified witch of a building “obstinately clinging to the side of Au Bonheur des Dames, like a disfiguring wart which, though it was chapped and rotting, would not fall off” (Zola 361). Old age is inescapable just like that wart, a physical, bodily manifestation of the natural aging process, and Zola’s use of such a metaphor connects to the idea that an unsullied surface proves far more agreeable than a blemished one. The metaphor also reaches further into metonymy, allusion, and cultural psychology since French history and literature proves remarkable in its adherence to such criticisms (flattery or otherwise) of the body of Paris as female personification proper. After all, Michel de Montaigne declared his love of Paris as such: “I love her so tenderly, that even her spots, her blemishes, and her warts are dear unto me” (xv). The denotation of the “even,” a qualitative and conditional phraseology, suggests that there is an alternative to the spots, blemishes, and warts. Fast forward three centuries away from the French Renaissance and Montaigne, for a woman in late nineteenth-century Europe, the wart analogy still resonates but perhaps more than skin-deep since the wart must be concealed and sublimated because to face old age is to face a psychology of fear greater than death.

If the nineteenth-century French department store reflects bourgeois cultural values and mores, ones that have been written on Zola’s Denise and the other characters of Au Bonheur des Dames to the point of entrenchment, then the importance of the ability to see and be seen are tantamount to a visual coup where an understanding of the world, its workings, its signs hinges also on operating within such a spectatorship and adhering to the rules of such a system.

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22 Later in the nineteenth century, the Victorian etiquette and advice manual The Lady’s Dressing Room, by Baroness Staffe (trans. Lady Colin Campbell), says of Montaigne’s loving contention: “That may be all very well for a great and magnificent city, but a pretty or beautiful face is terribly disfigured by these little hard bumps, vulgarly called poireaux. I will therefore give some safe and simple means of getting rid of them.” (87)

23 Woodward’s reading of Freud unearths his repressed neurosis regarding old age and that much like Westernized culture, he regarded “an infirm old age…as being something other than life, and it is implicitly understood as being worse than death” (35).
Negotiating such terrain does affect the ego since it necessitates a disciplining of the body. Diana Tietjens Meyers asserts that feminine self-discipline through the ridiculed act of performing as a woman when donning apparel “stems from the embeddedness of the aesthetic of feminine beauty and the routines of self-beautification in women’s identities. Everyone finds the thought of undergoing a radical transformation of self—in the popular idiom, of becoming a different person—unnerving” (9). Disciplining the body does in essence suggest a form of repression—a repression needed in order to combat fragmentation of the self. We cannot forget that visuality and subjectivity go hand in hand—one cannot function without the other. That Denise represents a reflection (a reflection of bourgeois culture and hierarchies) emphasizes the importance of appearances and suggests that her understanding of herself depends on other reflections—literal and symbolic. La Belle’s work confirms such psychological conclusions. She articulates her hypothesis as “one that places the mirror at a historical focus of female identity and questions dichotomies between self and reflected image, between spirit and flesh, between psychological presence and physical body” (La Belle 2). Whether we take the literal mirror—a plane of plate glass, a pool of water—or the figurative mirror of a cultural body of performances, we still end up with a system of recognition and knowing that depends on visual cues. What stranger visual cue than the aged body? The prevalence of aged bodies in the late nineteenth century, with women living longer, proves interesting in this regard as well because the visual cue then proliferates and reinforces social codes and the ethos of the market. Therefore, the female body, as it ages, alienates itself from interiority, and in the case of Au Bonheur des Dames, it does so with the helping hand of a market system.

Zola’s department store ensures that mirrors abound so as to disorient the female customers and to keep them in a state of mise en abîme—trapped in an infinite light of external
fixation. During the grand re-opening of the grand magasin even the technological innovation of a new lift cannot keep the attention of the females for “the mirrors, the velvet-covered seats and the moulded bronze doors kept them so occupied that they reached the first floor without feeling the machine slide gently upwards” (Zola 242). These women are exempt from the advancements of science and upward mobility; their station in life is one of narcissism and consumption. This renovated store also reserves a closeted space for aged parents to keep them, their bodily decrepitude, hidden from sight “left behind as though in a cloakroom, to be retrieved on departure” (243). Language cannot even rescue the women consumers from the visual bombardment since the building was “a modern version of a dream palace, a Tower of Babel with storey piled on storey and rooms expanding, opening on vistas of other storeys and other rooms reaching to infinity” (245). Zola’s description here recalls that mirror within a mirror optical illusion and the confusion that occurs as a result of trying to perceive where one room ends and another begins. It is a metaphor for female identity. The women of Zola’s world are arrested in the developmental stage of the mirror stage where a female matrix, forged from a bourgeois template of patriarchy and female fertility, overruns their senses until they comprehend and evaluate nothing but their own bodies. The environment Zola describes as such: “A fine dust rose from the floors, heavy with the smell of woman, the smell of her linen and the nape of her neck, her skirts and her hair, a penetrating, all-embracing odour which was like the incense of this temple dedicated to the cult of women’s bodies” (250). This cult of women’s bodies is ultimately a cult of youthful bodies—after all, old age need not apply for a cloakroom exists for those kinds of bodies. We must also not fail to see the missing component in this passage: the actual body. In its place are all the trappings of femininity that we then enter into—it is the cult of femininity predicated on bodies.
Contemporary examinations of the sensory appeals to Zola’s text verify the bearing that female visuality in relationship to commodification has not only on his readership (then and now), but also the characters within the novel. Rachel Bowlby’s *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (1985) originally advanced the idea that multiple tropes converge in Zola’s novel: “Women and money; ideologies of femininity and ideologies of consumption; the image decreed and the image bought; the markings of people and prices; the selling of a society of female consumers; all are related with deft precision in Zola’s story” (66-67). In *Naturalism Redressed: Identity and Clothing in the Novels of Émile Zola* (2004), Hannah Thompson parallels Zola’s work with that of the Second Empire’s social slant to intertwine commodification and sex, effectively articulating that “Zola’s women understand that it is only by making themselves attractive to men that they retain any value in this sexually driven society” (61). Lynn Penrod takes the idea of female commodification into a shopaholic space where the spatial atmosphere of merchandising works on a visual and sensory level to psychologically imprison the female customer. However, I find that scholarship on Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames* fails to directly examine the impact that such visualness has on perceptions and understandings of female aging. Femininity, yes. Beauty, yes. Sexuality, yes. Commodification, yes. But what of aging in relation to these tropes? I believe that female subjectivity depends on the properties of aging—its physical and subsequent psychological effects—and, much like Woodward theorizes, individuals and Western culture repress the aging process.

My interest in aging, however, comes with femininity, subsequent fertility, and power through consumerism—the ultimate crux of female worth. Zola’s text (representative of a culture) explores such issues and sublimates them into depicted frenzies over fetishized objects,
oppositions of new versus old, and the symbolic interjections of mirrors. The most telling, surely
foretelling, of Zola’s passages to illustrate the connection between the female self with visual
reflections again implicates the market, specifically the silks sold by the grand magasin, Au
Bonheur des Dames:

[the cloth formed] a motionless lake in which reflections of landscapes and skies
seemed to dance. Women, pale with longing, leaned over as though to see their
own reflections in it. All, confronted by this bursting cataract, stopped in their
tracks, seized by a vague fear that they might be swept up in the torrent of such
luxury and by an irresistible desire to leap and lose themselves in it. (102)
The cloth fashioned lake, indicative of the Narcissus myth\(^{24}\) works on many levels. Bowlby
zooms in on the seduction of consommation (73) here in Zola’s prose, but it seems curious that
the amalgamation of silks, satins, damasks, and brocades would be then described as a “bursting
cataract.”\(^{25}\) The opaqueness of a cloudy cataract, hearkening to the degenerative process of the
aged eye, conflicts with the opulence and seduction at work with the surface mirror-like imagery.
I say surface because on the superficial level there is a seduction of beauty and sensory
hypersensuality at work, an appeal to Narcissus, yet the blaring mention of a visual bodily
decline proves much more interesting given that the women freeze, “seized by a vague fear,” of
natural aging. This fear of the cataract indicates the uncanny since the women “see” into the
future and react with terror. Though “aging is explicitly linked with death through the affect of
the uncanny” (Woodward 65), it is not death that frightens these women, it is aging and the loss

\(^{24}\) The Narcissus angle is a conventional examination by scholars but indispensable nonetheless. Diana Tietjens
Meyers’ chapter on Narcissus examines the mythologizing evolution of the Greek myth. She insists that “the myth
recounts a more complex psychosexual trajectory” and that the lineage of the myth has taken a more feminized turn
whereby artistic renditions have emasculated the male figure in an act of narcissism thus perpetuating narcissism as
a feminine vice (101).

\(^{25}\) The term cataract in French is la cataracte which can translate into two principal translations: one as a waterfall
(chute d’eau) or as cataract, a clouded lens. Both translations work here for an exploration of the feminine, but I am
interested in the aged bodily process.
of femininity as a result of aging. The fabrics then work not only as a mirror-like surface, capturing female reflections and equating representations of women with commodified objects, but they also serve as a tactic of camouflage and costume (a smoke and mirrors effect) where the female body can be hidden, transfigured, and literally fashioned into something other than a natural state. If “old age and beauty are antithetical” (Woodward 15), then what better way to equalize the body then to hide it? The upshot here is that Zola’s market can offer such methods of repression.

Since Zola’s market is a bourgeois fueled market, it would benefit the culture to repress aged bodies incapable of literally regenerating the culture. The business model of the nineteenth-century department store reflects such a practice since it is a paternalistic business model, one where the form of control is a fatherly approach for the good of the subordinates working within the store. Miller posits that paternalism is not just “employer-sponsored benefits for employees, but [rather the] pervasive idea of an internal work community that accompanies these benefits and that informs all relationships within the enterprise” (7). Paternalism worked in such a way as to cultivate its employees into a bourgeois mindset (Miller 109). Interestingly enough, the model is one of Old Paris where lineage and familial traditions preside over the decision-making processes and the collective mentality. It is coined a gemeinschaftlich economy where a familial collectiveness and common identity regulate the culture (Miller 10-11). Thus Old Paris still exists in Zola’s New Paris but has been re-branded. Mouret is the father figure in a “nation of women” (Zola 414) who now has many children (subordinates) and they all share a common goal: the perpetuation of conservative values and capitalism. The only

26 Clothing can also enhance/exaggerate femininity, tying it to a heteronormative formula.
27 Miller’s study of Le Bon Marché exposes this paternalistic model, a business practice that even extends into the contemporary department store business culture of today.
28 From the work of German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies.
difference in the *gemeinschaftlich* model of New Paris is a lack of blood ties and the monetary/name passing down through lineage, but the core conservative ideas and mores are still perpetuated forward—paternal control carries on.\(^{29}\) Paternalism, then, is a trope of socialization, and at *Le Bon Marché* and *Au Bonheur des Dames* this trope reinforces heteronormative values for it is a family ethos, and “[t]he family was a veritable institution, the ultimate arbiter of success or failure. It stood at the very center of the nineteenth-century frame of mind” (Miller 75). Therefore, Zola’s negative characterization of the Lhomme family makes sense considering they represent a failed family ethos where the mother works outside of the home. The remainder of the *grande famille* at *Au Bonheur des Dames* “were mere cogs, carried along by the march of the machine, abdicating their personalities and simply adding their individual strength to the raw sum of the phalanstery” (Zola 132). These cogs, however, take the time to negotiate the female bodies that traverse in the paternalistic waters of the department store, referring to them as “old bags” (110) when they fail to buy and “‘pretty lady’, the elegant blond” (403) when they become regular shoppers, the youthful VIP’s of the market.

Antithetical trends in relation to aging underlie Zola’s text, and if “[a]ge is a subtle continuum, but we organize this continuum into ‘polar opposites’” (Woodward 6), then Zola’s two characters Denise Baudu and Madame Desforges serve as the *splitting*\(^{30}\) binary. Whether purposefully or unconsciously, Zola squares the two women off in a climactic battle royal, but before their confrontation Zola coalesces the themes of trapping, Darwininan struggle, and feminine identity. I find this blending of themes indicative of survival, perhaps a literal life/death struggle, which would lend itself to the idea of “the signifier of old age […] as

\(^{29}\) The inherent characteristic of paternalism is control and working for a *grande famille* entails a false sense of agency for the employees (e.g. educational/leisure programs for employees, profit-sharing, pension and provident funds) (Miller “The Boucicauts” chapter).

\(^{30}\) Woodward uses Melanie Klein’s explanation of *splitting* as the psychoanalytic equivalent to a primary mechanism of defense.
associated with death” (Woodward 13), but that feminine identity through mirrors also weaves through the text like the three Moirai, spinning, weaving, and determining the measure of feminine life indicates a demonstrable image of the value of female age. La Belle’s survey of literature indicates that mirroring plays an intricate role in our Western culture in so far as “for at least the last two centuries a female self as a social, psychological, and literary phenomenon is defined, to a considerable degree as a visual image and structured, in part, by continued acts of mirroring” (9). As readers we see this thread of age marked upon characters by numerical information, graphic descriptions of the state of decrepitude (everything from fine laugh lines to the shadowed sagging recesses of skin), and in designation by status (e.g. grandmother), and yet coded within the text exists the psychological memory of old age, that uncanny reminder of where we are situated in our aging continuum.

In Chapter Eleven, Madame Desforges devises her own ambush, and by extension so too does Zola. Madame Desforges feels trapped by her aging body and vulnerable to Mouret’s waning desire for her, so she sets to confront her adversarial mirror inverse of Narcissus: Denise. Foremost, Zola describes Madame Desforges as fearful for losing Mouret and her youth: “But, at the idea of losing him, she could also hear the knell of her fortieth year and wondered with terror how she would replace this great love” (Zola 300). Her fear here corresponds to that of the cataract, and the bell eventually does sound and it is a Pavlonian call to Kathleen Woodward’s sketch of alienation for “[t]he bell in the antechamber had sounded” whereupon Madame Desforges inwardly appeals to her body’s failure: “One thing that she could not bear was the fact that she was putting on weight, and she would force herself into dresses of black silks, to hide her increasing embonpoint. Yet her pretty head, with its dark hair, was still pleasant and delicate” (301). The black silk dress, a merchandized and fetishized item, constricts Madame
Desforges’ body and it is a death shroud of black forecasting eventual old age, yet she uses it to conceal (improve) her aging figure. Her head has not yet failed her socially constructed idea of ideal femininity, but the caveat here is her understanding of the eventual certainty of such bodily corrosion. A silk dress can only hide so much. This reactionary body dysmorphia, a psychoanalytic trapping of mixed conceptions of identity, reveals the push-pull mechanism at work in female subjectivity.

Zola clearly understands the workings of the department store and his godfather of shopping psychology, Mouret, perceives a weakness in the socially constructed female mind, a weakness he can capitalize on. Mouret understands that women are seduced by vanity:

Woman was what the shops were fighting over when they competed, it was woman whom they ensnared with the constant trap of their bargains, after stunning her with their displays. They had aroused new desires in her flesh, they were a huge temptation to which she must fatally succumb, first of all giving in to the purchases of a good housewife, then seduced by vanity and finally consumed. By increasing their sales tenfold and democratizing luxury they became a dreadful agent of expense, causing ravages in households and operating through the madness of fashion, which was constantly more expensive. And if in store woman was queen, adulated in herself, humoured in her weaknesses, surrounded by every little attention, she reigned as a queen in love, whose subjects were swindling her so that she paid for each of her whims with a drop of her own blood. (Zola 75-76)

The department store’s snare comes in the form of a visual arrest and the propping of bodies. The desire is not a natural desire, but one that even Mouret admits the market has created; it is a
madness indicative of psychological trauma. A shopping culture of women stems from a base of cultural expectation: those purchases made by a good housewife to keep the hearth and home intact and up to bourgeois standards. Her act of consumption renders her then consumed. The fatality here is the false sense of power engendered in women and the usurpation of her body through flattery and false appeals to beauty to alter her subjectivity. Zola’s description of the process as a “democratizing luxury” suggests a political and social implication in that the rampant rise of the bourgeois ideology hinged on a woman’s consumer power. To ensure a bourgeois ideology, the female body must proliferate the ideals through an act of consumption and a capitulation to those ideals. The female body is altered in the process in order to accommodate the goals of the governing system. Therefore, her body, in essence her capital, is preyed upon so as to elicit a response in the form of buying power.

The continual upsurge in Chapter 11 contextualizes the social dysmorphia of female relationships where emotion and melancholia pour forth from one of the Four Humors31: “…the ladies vented their spleen. They tore each other to pieces behind the counters, one woman devouring another, in a bitter rivalry of money and beauty” (Zola 306). The banter between Mouret, Madame Desforges and her mixed company guests marinates in this kind of expository engrossment of the female interactions within department stores. This fixated conversation leads Mouret to rhetorically question, “Doesn’t Paris belong to women and don’t women belong to us?” (309). Indeed, we are to understand that even Madame Desforges, a wealthy aristocrat who until this point yields to no one, also capitulates to a system of patriarchal influence. She

31 According to James J. Mischler, III’s linguistic study “The Embodiment/Culture Continuum: A Historical Study of Conceptual Metaphors” in Formulaic Language, Volume 1: Distribution and Historical Change (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, 2009), Four Humors metaphors reflected the culture of a given period and that specifically “the spleen is mapped to anger in English” (261). Using the Oxford English Dictionary Online, he charts the phrase He vented his spleen to account for its “metaphoric expression which refers to verbalized emotion, particularly anger, irritation, or sarcasm” (261). Given the ironic use in Zola’s Au Bonheur des Dames, I find it curious that such a metaphor is not lost in translation from English to French.
struggles with her image, an image culturally constructed and continuously reinforced through comparison and an ever-haunting, echoing reflection. She is sensitive to her age especially in regard to her relationship with Mouret: “she gradually found herself developing a genuine, deep affection for him and loved him with the ardour of a woman who was already thirty-five—though she would only admit to twenty-nine—and was in turmoil at the idea that he was younger than her, terrified that she might lose him” (59). Madame Desforges’ worth then stems not from her financial standing, but rather from her age and by extension her fertility. La Belle sums up Madame Desforges introspective process quite succinctly: “mirroring is not a stage but a continual, ever shifting process of self-realization” (10). If we are in a perpetual state of the mirror stage, then subjectivity is also an ongoing process whereby the female interrogates herself, her body, her identity.

Zola hones his predatory prowess of female subjectivity with the delineation of mirrors in the same chapter, mirrors that frame Old Paris (Madame Desforges) with New Paris (Denise)—indeed a metonymy dichotomous in nature: “As long as the main entrance was in the Rue-Neuve-Saint-Augustin, that dark street belonging to Old Paris, his work was incomplete, and lacked logic. He wanted to proclaim it before the New Paris on one of those young avenues down which the great throng of this century’s end passed by in the full light of day” (Zola 307). The light/dark juxtaposition here hearkens to refraction and to the law of reflection where an object is visible if it emits light. Visibility then necessitates youthfulness—and vice versa. Madame Desforges comes face-à-face with mirrors in her bedroom, nonetheless, signaling her sexuality as dependent on her identity which Mouret verbally processes as inadequate: “Henriette turned round, examining herself in front of the wardrobe. ‘Will it do? Tell me honestly.’ ‘Truly, Madame, I have to say it’s not right,’ said Mouret” (312). The mirror imagery continues
in this chapter with one mirror flanked with “[a] flask of verbena, which someone had forgotten to close, [and it] gave off the vague, vanishing smell of fading flowers” (314). Madame Desforges’s fading youth, and by cultural default fading fertility, is symbolized, ironically, by the flower of enchantment. The rendering of the mirror that the decomposing verbena ornaments proves important for it emphasizes the confrontational scene between Madame Desforges and Denise: “The mirrors on the wardrobe reflected bright patches of light on the red silk hangings, across which flickered the shadows of the two women” (314). Soon after, “[t]he pair of them, face to face and trembling, stared at one another. They were no longer lady and shop girl, merely women, as though made equal by their rivalry (314). The surface rivalry could be explained as jealousy over Mouret or even enmity over class positioning, yet I find it curious that this physical contrasting occupies a space where bodily identity and visuality comes into play yet again. Denise retaliates with a knowing criticism about Madame Desforges’ figure: “Madame is a little plump. We can’t make Madame’s figure less plump” (314). That Zola chooses such a retaliatory mark so soon after Madame Desforges’s internal evaluation of her body and that mirror imagery frames the scene proves noteworthy and elucidating of a culture set on identifying marketability with visibility. The aging female body, continually assessed for its ability (or, more precisely, inability) to delight the senses, falls prey then to an anxiety that is infinitely shaped by contorted, socially constructed reflections.

This mêlée, where aging is the crux and determining factor of female subjectivity, allows for the ultimate of marriage plots to come to fruition. Monsieur Mouret’s feelings for Denise crystallize as a desire for female youth. Immediately in the next chapter (Chapter Twelve) the

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32 Floriography, the means by which Victorians communicated via flowers, may offer insight into the potential meaning of a spray of verbena (or vervain, as it is known by its common name), which according to the 1884 popular text The Language of Flowers by Jean Marsh, illustrated by Kate Greenaway (London : Routledge, 1884), was a flower that symbolized enchantment.
building that houses the department store *Au Bonheur des Dames* is given a facelift—an attempt at a perpetual state of youthfulness, of newness. Given that the department store represents a patriarchal and capitalist venture at not only facilitating femininity but also reinforcing the cultural mores of such femininity, we can certainly make the conjecture that the department store represents the mother of all metonymies—it is a matrix of mimesis where the market creates femininity and femininity feeds on itself *ad infinitum*. Zola’s portrayal of Madame Desforges and Denise exposes his understanding of the power of the gaze and its ability to create (mutate) meaning/identity. In essence, Zola’s role as author is one of a paternalistic chief executive officer. That he ends the novel with a marriage intertwined with the ultimate of retail moments (humorously named the “Great White Sale”), while simultaneously exhibiting the conquest of the older woman, a woman who at one time held Mouret’s interest, and the unwoman (Geneviève Baudu), perhaps says more about the psychological drive to beautify and turn back the clock in order to stave off death—whatever the cost. The finale of a marriage also reinforces the paternalistic business model of a conservative, bourgeois family ethos, thus Denise would be the more feminine choice since Madame Desforges represents Old Paris values without the bourgeois mark of approval.

If we are to see “the text itself as a system of internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances, and desires” (Brooks xiv), then we must accept the premise that there must be at least two conceptual (or concrete) forces, one opposing the other, in order to define each other. With this line of reasoning, we can define Zola’s novel as a death versus life conflict with femininity, that “pretty woman,” operating (performing) as a site of repression, her spectral body a psychological reminder to us all of the discontents of aging.
CONCLUSION

The curiosity of female aging can be traced back to the subtext of Victorian culture, concomitant with the inception of the department store and emblematic in the literature that reflects such tropes. After all, women of the late nineteenth century were living longer and the upward mobility and meliorism brought about by industrial growth, bourgeois business models, and even advancements in science allowed for an extension in longevity. Such an augmentation of lifespan equates to more psychological marrow especially if we accept the fact that with old age, exteriority plays a larger role in how we are defined and categorized. The Beauty Myth is as entrenched as ever and the natural physical markers of female aging seem almost a rarity (depending on socio-economic status) given the vast means available today to combat the appearance of old age. To not fight off the signs of aging is a Western deviancy, or the fight is directed into a polite femininity predicated on the use of an irregular verb phrase indicative of gestation: to grow old gracefully.

The aged body has morphed into a category all of its own—albeit a peripheral one to a cultural line of sight—and the aged female body in particular is used as a binary point of reference. It is singled out because it is female, but, ironically, it is also even further removed from femininity. The partitioning of the aged female body can be directly linked to what is visually defined as feminine through acculturation. As evidenced in the cultural relics of Victorian literature and the sociological, cultural, and historical exhumations of the past, we can perceive how, in the last two centuries in particular, the female body is evaluated in accordance with a conceptual framework of desirability, of marketability. The aging creams and hair dyes advertised in the late nineteenth century have also been granted permanence within our Western culture but with a sheer pervasiveness of influence to the extent that distorting or concealing the
body seems second-skin and naturalized, part of our DNA. The drive behind this influence is one of phallic clout, a system that continues to insist on the female body as being something other and controllable through its reproductive capabilities (or incapability). When such a body loses that reproductive means, the great definer of culture insists that it must still be seen as *feminine*, thereby the artificial enablers of masquerade, those elixirs of youth, conveniently find their way into the fabric of everyday life. They become an extension of the female body, part of the package, a ritualistic normality. Ironically, the market now does not even need to work as hard because of that normalization and because of the technological advancements in visual bombardment. The machine of capitalism has perfected the art of advertising and we must acknowledge that power, one so potent that we can make farce of it while simultaneously buying into it. (Little did Joseph Paxton know how well he articulated the vision of the Crystal Palace when he designed such a behemoth visual spectacle of glass and mirrors.) This site of ultimate exhibitionism, the department store and all of its cousins—including the virtual ones of today—embodies the essence of advertising, the gaze, and the resultant psychological effects of sensory perception.

I have attempted to expose the original sin of the market and its subliminal tentacles that reached out to Victorian writers who in return created their own fictional markets, one more tangible than the next, but all attempting to define femininity as youthful and desirable and completely attainable through the market. All three of the texts I have explored privilege the tautology of youthful femininity. Rossetti’s goblin-run market could not subsist without the threat of old age, its female window shoppers enticed by the promise of edible wares that can stave off old age and satiate a desire. Dickens uses an aged female goblin as means for reproductive and gender education while concurrently denigrating the aged female body through
an economy of language where he versus she, and the aged she falls somewhere in between, that androgynous zone of extreme categorization and alienation. Zola clearly saw the dizzying effects of the department store and display, but his binarism of New Paris versus Old Paris translates into a critique of aging bodies, bodies that can be both defined and reinvigorated, if needed, through a baiting market. All three writers share an umbilical cord with a visual and associative economy which they use to create a clear distinction between the youthful female body and the aged one. Again, age is a curious function, one that we cannot disregard or deny its survival within our exploration and deconstruction of coded systems for it is the ultimate of codes, it is the timeless grail of knots—it is, as de Beauvoir proclaims: “a reality that goes beyond history…[and] is experienced in a way that varies according to the social context” (10).

Survival: a funny way to think of aging, but for a Victorian or modern day woman, it may seem a necessary evil. The curiousness deepens if, before we take leave of the subject, we examine a snippet of Rossetti’s correspondence with a dear friend, Caroline Gemer, on looking back from a position of older age. Perhaps we can put curiosity in context:

‘Surviving’ is the lot of old age…. No, I don’t exactly take the tantalization and delusion view of past years. They all have led me up to what now I am, and the whole series is leading me to my final self. I trust all I have vainly wished for here will be more than made up to me hereafter if—an all-momentous if!—I endure to the end. After all, life is short, and I should not immerse myself too deeply in its interests. Please note that I say, ‘I should not’—I dare not pretend ‘I do not.’ (qtd. in Harrison 189)

Harrison describes the revelation here as demonstrative of Rossetti’s evasion of the issue of life and after-death, and while this explanation serves a biographical and insightful glimpse into the
life of Rossetti, it also leads us to question the connection between aging and surviving and if the “final self,” as Rossetti names it, ever really materializes. Is the final sum of woman her age? If so, then those tantalizations and delusions along the way must be explored and picked apart for the self-making material that they endow us with. We must explore the fragmentary female body in particular, for it bears the burden of subjectivity through exteriority and all the many mirrors that frame it and suspend it.
Works Cited


