‘The stock character of a middle-aged woman?’

Rediscovering *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* through Age and Gender Performance

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Abstract

In the context of age studies, Anne Basting (2001) refers to the performative quality of aging and Katharine Woodward (2006) claims that age can be performed in the same way as gender is also performed. Since Margaret Gullette (2004) refers to acting age both on the stage and in everyday life, the analysis of the character of the older actress acquires relevance in narratives that explicitly revolve around performing and aging. Deborah Jermyn (2012) contends that the older actress can be approached in different ways, as either an embodiment of compliance or as an agent of rebellion. This article aims to analyze the character of Karen Stone in Tennessee Williams’s novel *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1950) through a two-fold interpretation, taking into account social responses derived from the refusal to act one’s age, which can be demeaning, since the older actress is often scorned for not acting according to age standards, but also subversive, because she enacts a powerful resistance against the constructed discourses of age and gender.

Keywords

Age Performance; Aging Studies; Gender Studies; Mirrors; Performing Arts; Tennessee Williams.

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Introduction

Only three years after envisioning the character of Blanche Dubois in his renowned play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), Tennessee Williams published his novel, *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1950). Its female protagonist, Karen Stone—like the character of Blanche Dubois in the play—is also a middle-aged woman who sets off on a symbolic journey following her lifetime quest for desire. Both Karen Stone and Blanche Dubois are portrayed as aging female characters that either play the role of an actress or are endowed with prominent theatrical ways. Karen Stone, in particular, matches what Jodi Brooks calls "the figure of the aging actress undergoing a crisis as she confronts her demise as a public star" (32). Having been under the constant scrutiny of "the youthful structure of the look" for all her career, to use Kathleen Woodward's words ("Performing Age, Performing Gender" 162), and having been praised as an enthralling object of the male gaze in the golden years of her youth, as an older actress, Karen Stone feels compelled to face the threat of invisibility both on and off the stage, as a result of what Woodward has referred to as "the normative youth-old age system" ("Performing Age" 167), which has particularly prevailed in show business since its origins.

As the plot of the novel unfolds, Karen Stone realises that she can no longer be cast in the youthful roles that she used to play at the peak of her career as an actress. Envisioning herself as an older woman who begins to gain insight into her aging process and its effects on her life, after her husband suddenly passes away, Karen decides to indulge in a holiday in Italy, where she meets Paolo, an attractive young man, who is particularly fond of having affairs with wealthy older women and with whom Karen initiates a romantic relationship. As an inborn actress, Karen constantly negotiates how to present herself in society, at first complying with the cultural dictates of age and gender that request her to act her age—thus withdrawing from the stage and public life, and adjusting her looks accordingly—in a way that renders her prematurely aged. Subsequently, in the course of her relationship with a younger man and her active social life in Rome, Karen begins to subvert those culturally constructed dictates in terms of age and gender, acting younger than her age and liberating herself through an active sexual life, which necessarily renders her an age-and-gender offender according to prevailing ageist and sexist discourses.

The figure of the older actress—who feels doubly marked both as an aging woman and as an aged celebrity, according to Brooks (233)—began to recur in many American films in the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, as was the case of Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), Margo Channing (Bette Davis) in Joseph Mankiewicz's *All About Eve* (1950), and even Baby Jane (Bette Davis) in Robert Aldrich's *What*

Ever Happened to Baby Jane? (1962), based on Henry Farrell's novel published two years before. Given her eminently performative tendencies that intersect with the discourses of gender and aging, the character of Karen Stone could also be identified as an epitome of the figure of the older actress, especially taking into consideration the prominent metanarrative quality of the novel and its self-referential dimension, which ratifies its author's insights into the semiotics of performance as a playwright and turns the novel into a narrative about performing both on and off the stage. This remarkable self-referential quality becomes even more noticeable in José Quintero's 1961 film adaptation of the original novel, featuring Vivien Leigh as Karen Stone, as well as Robert Allan Ackerman's 2003 TV film remake, in which Helen Mirren plays the leading female role, and whose parts in these films somehow replicate their own personal experience as women actors.

Featuring an aging actress as the main character, Williams's novel delves into the performative quality of age and gender as displayed by self-referential remarks, such as Karen's description as a "stock character of a middle-aged woman" (19), which underlines the pervasive role that performance plays all through the narrative. Taking this premise into account, this article will examine the intersection of age and gender through the concept of performativity, focusing on how the character of Karen Stone ultimately exemplifies two different dimensions of age and gender, acting her age as well as acting against her age, hence complying with gender dictates as well as subverting them. Accordingly, this article aims to approach the character of Karen Stone through a two-fold interpretation of the portrayal of the older actress as both adaptive and subversive according to the discourses of age and gender performance.

Given the prevalent performative quality characterizing the novel, as an actress, Karen Stone displays a double dimension of performance, insofar as she apparently conforms to age and gender dictates, but she also challenges their assumed conventions. As Brooks further argues, the relevance of the character of the older actress lies in the fact that she resists being positioned as an embodiment of loss and refuses to play a socially sanctioned role as an aging woman, even though she is also compelled to surrender to prevailing gendered discourses of aging (234). Similarly, in the context of celebrity studies, Deborah Jermyn contends that there are ambivalent ways to interpret the character of the aging actress (3), mostly through compliant or dissident perspectives, focusing on her as an ostracised embodiment of the female abject or as a rebellious personification against the dictates of age-appropriateness. Besides, in terms of gender, Deborah Chambers claims that, through her performative tendencies, the figure of the older actress illustrates "the gendered body [that] draws attention to normative gender roles, at the

same time it disrupts, disfigures and parodies them" (167), thus revealing her inherently performative potential and ambivalent qualities.

In her intrinsic role as an older actress, Karen Stone recurrently engages in age and gender performance. In this respect, Anne Basting draws attention to the juncture between age and gender precisely on account of the "transformative quality of performance" (7) that characterizes both discourses. Drawing on Judith Butler's proposition claiming that gender identity is achieved through repeated practices, thus resulting in the subversion of gender—since it is revealed to be naturalized through repetition (191)—it is possible to argue, as Woodward admits, that "age is performed in the way we would say gender might self-consciously be performed" ("Performing Age" 165). Besides, Margaret Gullette contends that, given the performative quality of aging, one can act younger or older (163), regardless of one's chronological age. Consequently, the notion of performativity disrupts any dichotomy established between the materiality of the aging body and cultural assumptions of aging, in analogy with gender, since, as Butler further explains, we cannot address the body without resorting to discourse in the context of power relations (125), particularly within the framework of gender. In this article, it will thus be argued that, as a performer and as an older woman, the character of Karen Stone makes use of the performative quality of gender and aging to comply with their conventions, but also to take advantage of them for her own benefit.

Performing Gender: Masquerade, Gender Reversal, Androgyny

Having abandoned her career as a stage actress, Karen's initial compliance with—as well as ensuing subversion against—prevailing gender roles underlines her theatrical disposition also off the stage, hence disclosing the traditional connection established between women and masquerade based on the patriarchal conflation between femininity and artifice. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, woman's "great art is the lie, her supreme concern is appearance [arguing that] self-adornment [*das Sich-Putzen*] pertains to the eternal-womanly" (145). Drawing on the notion of womanliness as masquerade, Luce Irigaray suggests that the interrelationship between women and artifice arises as a result of "the dominant economy of desire in an attempt to remain 'on the market' [...] in spite of everything" (133). Accordingly, in the course of her relationship with Paolo, Karen's initial overstated displays of femininity can be interpreted as a form of subjection as well as of resistance against gender dictates. Based on Irigaray's ideas about womanliness as masquerade, Woodward claims that women may resort to youthfulness as a form of masquerade, which might not disclose "the fear of losing one's femininity, as we might expect, but rather the denial of a desire for masculinity"

("Youthfulness as Masquerade" 130), that is, the return of a repressed—but wished-for—masculinity that may come along with aging, which suggests a source of symbolic empowerment upon an increasingly self-perceived powerless condition.

Karen's performance of gender can thus, for the most part, be described as gender-adaptive, while inherently gender-offensive. In the course of her marriage, although her husband turns into her manager and chooses the roles that she is supposed to play on the stage, she actually adopts a more dominant and traditionally masculine part when she gets off the stage, in spite of her apparent devotion to him. As is described in the novel,

> [t]heir marriage, in its beginning, had come very close to disaster because of a sexual coldness, amounting to aversion, on her part, and a sexual awkwardness, amounting to impotence, on his. If one night, nearly twenty-five years ago, he had not broken down and wept on her breast like a baby, and in this way transferred his position from that of unsuccessful master to that of pathetic dependent, the marriage would have cracked up. (Williams 67)

Henceforth, the success of her marriage appears to be grounded in the actual reversal of traditional gender roles, since, behind her performed compliant and feminine manner, Karen manages to conceal her ambitious and cunning ways. In her youth, in spite of her apparent meekness and femininity, Karen is described as "a tomboy [...] outstanding in competitive games and sports" (82), and presently in Rome, when she meets her friend Meg Bishop, a woman journalist to whom she used to be very attached, Karen tries to avoid her presence, as she is reminded of a romantic episode that took place in the past and which "betrayed the possibility of a less innocent element" (15) along their friendship, thus disclosing a veiled homoerotic relationship.

It is only on some occasions that Karen exhibits her dormant masculine ways to her own advantage. In the course of her career as an actress, upon playing the role of Rosalind in William Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*, she realises that the young actor playing the part of Orlando threatens to overshadow her on the stage and, in order to neutralise him, she decides to adopt an overtly masculine conduct. Aptly characterised as Rosalind, who in the play is disguised as shepherd Ganymede—that is, as a young man—Karen approaches the young actor in the dressing room as follows:

> [She] was to envelope him in a violent manner, which she instantly proceeded to do, in a manner that was more like a man's with a girl, and to which he submitted in a way that also suggested a reversal of gender—although finally, at the necessary moment in the embrace, she had changed to the woman's more natural pose of acceptance and he had managed to assume the (fairly-well-acted) role of the aggressor. [...] Thereafter she dominated him upon the stage. (69)

If, on the stage, Karen plays the role of Rosalind, that is, the part of a woman disguised as a man, off the stage, she reverses this role, as she displays her overt femininity, which switches momentarily to a masculine role to approach the young actor, and reverts back to a feminine submissive demeanour once her off-stage performance has come to an end. Accordingly, Karen performs gender in a way that, pretending to be feminine and compliant, actually conceals an ambitious and assertive personality—traditionally considered as eminently masculine according to gender standards—which she only displays at intervals, and which she will gradually reveal to a greater extent with the advent of her older years.

In Italy, following her quest for desire, and the advice of the Contessa—an Italian female pimp who introduces her to a series of young and attractive men—Karen initiates a relationship with Conte Paolo di Leo, who has made a reputation not only for his good looks but also for his continuous affairs with affluent older women. In spite of the initial liberating influence that her affair with Paolo exerts upon her, Karen cannot possibly leave behind the theatrical ways to which she has been accustomed, ultimately owing to the impossibility to stop performing gender, even when she is no longer acting on the stage. Karen envisions her relationship with young Paolo as another performance, thus admitting to herself that "there was practically nothing on her mind except Paolo, and yet she was more preoccupied than she had ever been during the most anxious period of preparing for the opening of a new play" (34). At the onset of their relationship, Karen displays her meek and docile ways, allowing Paolo to take the initiative and accepting to have dinner with him only at his request. Her performance of gender becomes more conspicuous as she turns into a frequent guest in social events and she indulges in the fantasy of being back in the spotlight, hence displaying her performative tendencies and her continuous turn for acting, as if envisioning Rome as her new stage, even if it is suggested that she may not only be deceiving others as an actress, but she may also be indulging in self-deceit. As is described,

> she still carried herself on the street as though she were making an entrance upon the stage. Imposing she was and still handsome, but only a naïve boy who had had comparatively little contact with the great world would allow this façade to deceive him. (41)

In the course of her relationship with young Paolo, Karen gradually leaves behind her most overtly docile and feminine ways, and becomes more possessive, trying to exert tighter control over Paolo and turning him into a man literally dependent on her. In resemblance with the affair that she had with a young actor while she was performing the role of Rosalind, in her relationship with young Paolo, Karen also indulges in an eventual reversal of gender roles. Paolo is physically

characterized as having feminine traits and his conceited ways often lead him to look at himself in the mirror, even displacing Karen if she happens to be in his way, while he also consents to being invited to dinner and accepts all the clothes and jewels that Karen buys for him. Consequently, even if tacitly, in their relationship, it is Karen who mostly leads the way, as she becomes deeply aware of the assignation of roles that is established, confessing to Paolo that, "you are very young […] and very foolish and very beautiful […] I am not so very young any more and not so beautiful, but beginning to be very wise" (53). In order to balance what she perceives as a reversal of gender roles in her relationship with Paolo, Karen tries to make continuous displays of overt femininity, thus exaggerating her feminine traits, which she associates with youthfulness, as a result of having been raised through patriarchal dictates of age and gender. Nonetheless, her concern about performing gender and holding on to "a masquerade of youthfulness," to use Woodward's words ("Youthfulness" 121), instead of concealing her aging traits, actually renders them more visible. As is portrayed in the novel,

> [a] number of times lately Mrs. Stone had gone out on the street in make-up applied almost as artfully as that she had worn on the stage, but Roman sunlight was not in sympathy with the deceit, and she was aware of receiving glances that were not merely critical but sometimes mocking. (92)

Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's aesthetic notion of the carnivalesque, Woodward claims that the concept of masquerade in relation to the aging body is mainly considered a denial of age and a form of self-representation ("Youthfulness" 121). Karen's concern to overstate her feminine traits through profuse make-up ultimately meets an unexpected end, as her appearance somehow acquires an androgynous look, which, symbolically, betrays the impossibility to repress her inherent dominant role, and also complies with Woodward's thesis about the return of a wished-for masculinity in the course of aging, which symbolically suggests Karen's propensity to display the masculine dominant role that she had been taught to repress when she was younger.

The Change: Menopause, Desire, the Spectre of Corruption

After disguising herself behind the artifice of femininity and playing the role of a meek wife, it is precisely in this period, having abandoned the stage, that Karen becomes aware of the fact that, although she has played a great number of roles all through her life, she has never quite played herself. This symbolic moment of epiphany appears to take place with the advent of her climacteric, which is described as having a significantly positive effect on Karen's life. As is portrayed in the novel, "now that her [Karen's] body was rising out of the tangled woods of the climacteric, she felt a great resurgence of physical well-being—she was continually active without ever becoming quite tired" (90). In

addition, the beginning of her menopause involves a significant turning point of personal awakening through which she gains a deeper awareness of her own body, since, as depicted in the novel,

> Mrs. Stone could not deny to herself what she felt in her body, now, for the first time, under the moon of pause which should have given immunity to such feeling but seemed, instead, to have surrendered her to it. She felt incontinent longings, and while they repelled her, they gave her a sharply immediate sense of being. […] What she felt, now, was desire without the old, implicit distraction of danger. Nothing could happen now, but the desire and its possible gratification. (51-52)

It is thus at this stage—having relinquished her former life as a public figure—that Karen feels released to give vent to the sort of desire that she had felt obliged to repress. This relentless process of awakening through the body that Karen experiences at this significant moment of her life appears to illustrate Germaine Greer's thoughts on the climacteric, which she reinterprets as a rite of passage involving "the restoration of a woman to herself" (53). According to Greer, the menopause symbolically marks women's withdrawal from the social context, but also implies not having to live mostly through responses to the needs of those in the workplace or the household (40), while, as opposed to other phases in women's lives, since the climacteric has not generally been acknowledged as a rite of passage, it concerns only the individual woman, who can envision it as a moment of reflection and introspection.

As Greer further contends, in order to mark this symbolic turning point in life, women may choose to alter their external appearance to indicate an internal alteration (37), for instance, opting to change their hairstyle. Precisely, in Williams's novel, soon after arriving in Rome, Karen's haircut can be described as discreet and ordinary, whereas, as soon as she starts dating young Paolo, she decides to change her looks completely, having her hair dyed red and wearing profuse make-up. Karen's altered appearance also becomes perceptible owing to the sharp change in her taste for clothes. As Julia Twigg claims in her seminal study about clothing and aging, the clothes that aging people tend to wear can be either described as involving neutral colours and avoiding showy styles—thus being considered age-appropriate (60)—or, in contrast, these clothes can be bright and eye-catching and, accordingly, may be regarded as age-inappropriate, but indicative of freedom and liberation of past duties and demands. In Rome, Karen displays these two styles of clothing, exchanging the plain suits that she wears soon after her arrival for the gaudy and colourful outfits that she often exhibits during her evenings out with Paolo. The noticeable change in her appearance necessarily marks an internal alteration at this stage in her life, which also has an effect on the ways she begins to alter her performance of age and gender. Karen's interpretation of this turning point in her life complies with Greer's ideas about

the menopause being liberating and "a change back into the self" (55). Besides, if Greer describes the climacteric as redemptive because women no longer feel a tool of their "sexual and reproductive destiny" (55), Karen regards this phase in her life as liberating precisely because it is at this time that she can give free rein to her sexual inhibitions, after a lifetime of repressing her desire in the course of her marriage. Furthermore, Karen's liberation seems to comply with Greer's precepts about the fact that women going through the climacteric are not afraid of losing their femininity but rather of losing their femaleness (52), which Karen begins to embrace completely.

Nonetheless, given the cultural and social constraints also prevailing in the Roman society, Karen inevitably succumbs to what Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*) perceives as women's double bind that urges them to 'become women,' thus conforming to cultural prejudices about age and gender. At the beginning of this new life stage, Karen admits having selected Rome as her permanent abode, precisely owing to the fact that she perceived it as "the most comfortable place to lead that kind of existence, perhaps because so much of it seemed to exist in the past" (37), which underscores Karen's nostalgia for the loss of her youth, which she tries to retain through her initial displays of femininity, but also foretells her aging process as an older woman. Having grown used to becoming the object of the male gaze, she now indulges in turning into the subject of the gaze. From the antique palazzo with a nice view of the Roman streets and of the Roman young men walking along them, when she looks down to the street from the terrace, Karen is often portrayed as a predatory bird, as "her frightened and ageing face had the look of an embattled hawk peering from the edge of a cliff in a storm" (15), as if she were going to chase down her preys among the young Italians walking along the streets. Karen's liberated and uninhibited ways cause a stir in the Roman society and are constantly censured, even by Paolo himself. Passing judgment on Karen on account of her wealth and her influence, Paolo exclaims that "you rich American ladies are the new conquerors of Rome—at least you *think* you are" (56), being well aware of how Karen often leads the way in the course of their relationship, and how, owing to her affluence, she turns Paolo into a young man economically dependent on her, thus highlighting a power imbalance between them, which also adds to the noticeable age difference separating both partners.

The pervasive dictates of age and gender acquire a spectral presence when, in the course of her surrender to rough desire at the advent of her older years, Karen begins to notice a young stranger, either from the terrace of her palazzo or along the streets of Rome—with a scruffy appearance but tremendously captivating—who pursues and haunts her wherever she goes, as an allegorical personification of the corruption that she feels her life is drifting towards. As is described,

> [h]is beauty was notable even in a province where the lack of it is more exceptional in a young man. It was the sort of beauty that is celebrated by the heroic male sculptors in the fountains of Rome. Two things disguised it a little, the dreadful poverty of his clothes and his stealth of manner. The only decent garment he wore was a black overcoat which was too small for his body. Its collar exposed a triangle of bare ivory flesh; no evidence of a shirt. [...] And yet he had an air of alertness. The tension of his figure suggested that he was continually upon the verge of raising his voice or an arm in some kind of urgent call or salutation. (10)

Karen feels both attraction and repulsion towards this young man—as a symbolic reflection of her own desire and corruption—in analogy with Williams's character of Blanche Dubois, who hears the whistling noise of a streetcar named desire but cannot quite say whether it represents the fulfilment of her longings or it actually foretells her ultimate devastation. Endowed with a highly allegorical quality, this young vagrant shows himself at specific times when Karen feels particularly disturbed and concerned about the turn her life is taking in the city of Rome. He also turns into the personification of an *alter ego* whom she still does not dare accept as part of herself, since Karen catches sight of the young man "standing just outside the glass window" (75) in what arises as a mirror scene in which they significantly confront one another. As Otto Rank argues, the double functions as an insurance against the destruction of the *ego*, whereas, it eventually reverses this role to become the harbinger of death, insofar as, for Karen, he represents the embodiment of her desire but also of her eventual destruction. His presence becomes more recurrent as Karen gains insight into the fact that her disinhibited ways are often reproached and criticized in society, while the encounters with this young vagrant gradually take a different turn, since, at the beginning, the young man tries to attract her attention, whereas, it is ultimately Karen who feels attracted towards him. The gradual transformation that Karen's consideration of this young tramp undergoes epitomizes her gradual surrender to desire but also her ultimate capitulation to the pervasive sense of vice and corruption that has been haunting her. Furthermore, the age gap between both partners evokes and even exaggerates the age difference with Paolo, which symbolically enables her to exert her female dominance once again as an older woman over a younger and weaker man.

Performing Age: The Youthful Gaze, the Scandal of Anachronism, Age Defiance

As a result of becoming increasingly aware of having been banished from the stage and no longer being the object of the gaze to which she had grown accustomed in her youth, Karen intends to move to Rome in an attempt to escape from a pervasive sense of being drifted away, which also underpins her purpose of avoiding the imminent fate of growing old. Her stay in Rome thus underscores her need to evade being constantly reminded of her age,

and hence, to subvert the ageist discourses to which she has been subjected, thus giving herself a chance to reimagine her aging process from her own perspective. Accordingly, it is by herself and in a foreign city—far away from everything and everyone she knows—that Karen moves from gaining insight into her process of growing old to being able to overlook the cultural dictates of age, as she finds herself in an unfamiliar setting which helps her diminish her inhibitions and where she hopes not to be judged by the same standards of age constraining older women. As is stated,

> [t]he knowledge that her beauty was lost had come upon her recently and it was still occasionally forgotten. It could be forgotten, sometimes, in the silk-filtered dusk of her bedroom where the mirrors disclosed an image in cunningly soft focus. It could be forgotten sometimes in the company of Italians who had never seen her as other than she now was […]. But Mrs. Stone had instinctively avoided contact with women she had known in America, whose eyes, if not their tongues, were inclined to uncomfortable candour. (12)

Soon after her arrival, Karen refuses to take part in social gatherings and instead indulges in the seclusion of her palazzo, where, from its terrace, Karen symbolically enacts the process of transmuting from 'spectacle' to spectator. Initially giving in to the ageist discourse that banished her prematurely from the stage, Karen holds on to a performance of age that necessarily obliges her to act older than her age. According to Gullette, the performance of aging—in life as well as on stage—is achieved through the use of "age effects" (171), which contribute to revealing the constructive quality of aging. Karen holds on to her performance of age, wearing discreet clothes and a modest hairstyle that allow her to pass unnoticed in the street, while she also prefers spending her evenings at home, avoiding her old acquaintances. Nevertheless, Karen gradually notices that she is not permitted to act older either, since, having abandoned her career as an actress, when she meets some of her American friends, she cannot help identifying that their greeting often carries "the unspoken shock of her changed appearance, the hair that she was allowing to grey and the face and figure that had retired as palpably from public existence" (37). Besides, Karen's new acquaintances, mostly Paolo and the Contessa, also seem to judge her for acting older than her age. Upon meeting her for the first time, Paolo detects "the existence of a certain loneliness" (27) in her, while, when Karen initially rejects Paolo's advances, the Contessa censures the former actress's decorous behavior and accounts for her demure manners claiming that, "she has not yet reconciled herself to her age" (30), thus judging her for adopting a sort of age performance that categorises her as older than her chronological age.

Nonetheless, Karen's performance of age is mostly deprecated when she pretends to act younger. Leaving behind her age effects which contributed to characterising her as older, Karen changes her hairstyle and starts wearing

sophisticated and vivid outfits. It is when she intends to escape the constraining cultural dictates of age that Karen often gains insight into the fact that she is constantly judged by what Woodward defines as "the youthful structure of the look" ("Performing Age" 162). Soon after meeting her in Rome, her friend Meg Bishop reminds Karen of the fact that "it was a mistake for you to play Juliet at the age of Mrs. Alving" (16), while, when she realizes that Karen is dating a younger man, Meg immediately typecasts her friend as a "stock character of a middle-aged woman crazily infatuated with a pretty young boy" (19), thus disapproving of Karen merely on account of the fact that she is acting younger than her age.

Drawing on the inherent performative qualities of the discourses of aging, Basting regards the aging process as an eminently performative act both on and off the stage. Similarly, Gullette also refers to the performance of age in everyday life. In Williams's novel, Karen exemplifies this double dimension of aging, since, even if she no longer plays any character on the stage as a professional performer, she is still highly conscious of her inherent performative nature—legacy of her past as an actress—, while her relationship with Paolo is often portrayed through recurrent references to performance. In the course of Karen's romantic infatuation with the young Italian, it is revealed that "nobody was more aware of the automatic quality of her gestures than Mrs. Stone herself" (84). When she often hears the echoes of her friend Meg's reprobating words about "the ridiculously unsuitable part for a middle-aged woman to play" (99) with regard to her ill-matched role in terms of age on the stage, Karen cannot help judging herself, this time for performing age off the stage, when she starts her affair with young Paolo. Respectively, when he hears nasty rumors about the age gap characterising his relationship with Karen, Paolo rebukes her for having "made a spectacle" (95) of herself, while she retorts claiming that, if they "were playing a scene together on the stage" (95), the audience would hardly notice her because of his good looks. Accordingly, recurrent references to performance in order to describe their relationship inevitably bring attention to the performative tendencies of both characters taking part in this symbolic play off the stage.

As Paolo's condemnatory words indicate—suggestive of the prevailing dictates of age and gender—, it is implied that, by means of her performance of age that leads her to act younger than her age, Karen runs the risk of causing "a scandal of anachronism," to use Mary Russo's term ("Aging and the Scandal of Anachronism" 21), which involves not conforming to normative ideas of age-appropriate behaviour. In this respect, as Woodward argues, age and gender structure each other to declare the aging female body at once invisible and hypervisible ("Performing Age" 163). Karen's performance of youth apparently seeks to retain the male gaze, as she had done during her years of splendour as an actress, whereas, through the acknowledged realization of her age, Karen also subverts the former meaning of her traditional role as a female commodity

and constant object of the male gaze. As a case in point, when Karen notices the presence of the scruffy young vagrant in the streets of Rome, on one occasion, she decides to confront him boldly, exclaiming, "look at my face! [...] why do you follow me, can't you see my face?" (100). Through her exclamation, Karen symbolically appears to attract the male gaze in order to expose and disapprove of its biased partiality for youth, while, at the same time, being conscious that her image no longer matches that of the enthralling object that used to attract the attention of male admirers, she also contributes to subverting the cultural dictates of age. Hence, Karen appears to indulge in a masochistic act that she inflicts upon herself, as she obliges the young boy to stare at her face, while she also reproaches him for what he perceives as the male gaze's obsession with youth. This passage becomes highly reminiscent of a scene in Billy Wilder's film *Sunset Boulevard* (see Miquel-Baldellou 2018), in which Norma Desmond also demands the attention of her young partner, Joe Gillis, asking him to scrutinize her face and begging him to stare at her. Aware that the image that her face projects no longer matches that of the films and old photographs in her youth, Norma requests Joe's attention, but, in doing so, she also symbolically chastises him for his obsession with youth and his displeasure with her aging looks.

Karen's moments of capitulation to a culturally-established ageist discourse recur through the final stages of her relationship with young Paolo. While she accompanies him to buy him fine new clothes, she finds herself reflecting upon the fact that she is thirty years his senior, which immediately leads her to feeling "ashamed of herself" (94). Karen gains insight into the fact that she has been acting young, while she has been growing old, and this moment of epiphany reaches its climax when, in the course of an argument, in which Paolo feels overwhelmed by Karen's affluence and apparent self-assuredness, he retaliates stating,

> "[y]ou won't listen to me," he hissed. "You won't take any warning. You are too puffed up with your glory, your wealth, your magazine fashion-pictures, your wax-paper king of a husband that left you millions. But this is a very old city. Rome is three thousand years old, and how old are you? Fifty?"
> "Fifty!" she gasped. (113)

For the first time, Karen finds herself admitting her chronological age, which symbolically breaks her character and the spell that helped her act younger and indulge in age performance, while it also obliges her to discontinue her performance of youth. As her relationship with Paolo comes to an end, when he abandons her for a younger woman, Karen apparently lets go of her mask of youth, as she feels rebuked for having dared subvert the dictates of female aging. Nonetheless, instead of accepting the evidence that her youth is drifting away—as she reminds herself on many occasions throughout the novel—she is determined

to give free vent to desire and propitiate an encounter with the scruffy young tramp that has been chasing and haunting her. Through an ambivalent end that gives closure to Williams's novel, this final encounter can be interpreted symbolically as either the fulfilment of Karen's passionate yearning, or rather, the confirmation of her ultimate destruction at the hands of a character that turns into the personification of rough desire. In any case, far from succumbing to the constraining dictates that oblige her to act her age, Karen indulges in her nostalgia for her lost youth, insofar as her embrace of this young man once more enacts her defiance of age standards and her ever-lasting wish to act against her age.

The Aging Other: Mirrored Images, Alternative Mirrors, Imagined Selves

In a series of different passages in the novel, Karen stares at her reflection in the mirror at introspective moments when she shifts from object to subject of the gaze, thus scrutinizing herself through the ageist discourse she has imbibed and, alternatively, reimagining herself, insofar as the performative quality of aging ultimately reveals age as a cultural construct and paves the way for subverting and transforming age dictates. As a case in point, after encountering her friend Meg Bishop at a party and bearing her reproaches as a result of her flirtatious ways with young men, when Karen finds herself alone in her bedroom, a mirror scene ensues which turns into a reflective moment whereby she succumbs to the dictates of age-appropriateness. As is stated, "she [Karen] closed the door which became her face in a mirror, and she saw the face looking at her, somewhat curiously, somewhat uneasily, and she looked at it, a flush spread over the face as if she had surprised it in doing something that it was ashamed of… the drift" (20). As Sally Chivers argues, it is at these moments that the character of the aging actress, looking at herself from without, succumbs to "external norms of age-appropriate behavior" (219) addressed to women, and judges herself from the perspective of the gaze of the other, which she has imbibed since her youth.

Furthermore, Karen surrounds herself with theatrical keepsakes and photographs of her as cast in the roles that she has played during her career, together with a picture of her last part as Juliet, which reminds her of the impracticality of playing certain characters anymore owing to age dictates. As is portrayed in the novel, "as if she were about to discover some carefully guarded secret about herself, Mrs. Stone started towards the mirror with the photograph in her hand, but half way there she turned back and slipped the picture, like a card of ill omen, into the bottom of the pile" (102). These symbolically substitute mirror images stand in sharp contrast with the actual image that the mirror reverts back and serve the purpose of underlining the passage of time and her process of aging.

Conversely, according to Lucy Fischer, specular moments in which characters gaze in the mirror also denote a sense of doubling between the aging reflection and a youthful image frozen in time that becomes superimposed, paving the ground for alternative images that contribute to reimagining aging (171). As is depicted in the novel, in another mirror scene, it is described that "her face in the mirror, which she could see at an angle from where she sat, became continually more indistinct and lovely, as the knowledge of having nothing to fear moved steadily deeper within her" (52). Karen is thus reflected in alternative mirrors that offer her ancillary mirror replications of her image and allow her to imagine an alternative way of performing female aging.

Henceforth, Karen gradually adopts a bifocal view of herself, as a result of the increasing gap between her youthful image as shown in old photographs and the image of herself that she beholds in the mirror, but also because of the growing difference between the aging image that she starts being associated with by old acquaintances and the rejuvenated appearance that she decides to hold on to in the course of her relationship with Paolo. If Karen no longer feels identified with her former image in the photographs of her youth, she also refuses to be categorized as one of the grotesque aging ladies whom Paolo is used to courting, contending that she is not "a wretched old fool of a woman with five hairs and two teeth in her head and nothing but money to give" (103), thus rejecting the role of a ludicrous aging lady with which the Contessa and, ultimately, Paolo may be willing to associate her. As a result of the pervasive fear of being relegated to the role of the female grotesque, to use Russo's term (*The Female Grotesque*), as time goes by, Karen is also haunted by another alternative mirror image which, at some point, she also considers emulating. Among her photographs and mementoes of her glorious past as an actress, Karen also keeps a card and photograph that she has recently been sent, which are strategically placed next to a clock suggesting the passage of time. As is described,

> [s]he [Karen] had drifted across the mantel and from it, from underneath the ornamental glass clock which exposed all its workings as it announced the steady drift of time, she removed a piece of magenta stationery folded about two other slips of paper. One was a tiny white card bearing the name of a surgeon in Paris. The other was a small photograph, showing a face curiously unreal beauty: unreal because it wore no expression, expressionless because the lines of it had been removed by the plastic surgeon whose name was in the card. And on the back of the photograph, in a handwriting that shook with tremors of exultation, was the short message: "This is how I look now!" (115)

Karen aptly keeps this photograph under a clock, which inevitably suggests the fleeting nature of youth, insofar as she feels constantly exposed to the scrutiny of her face and the necessity to match an ideal image of youth that her appearance

can no longer project. Being surrounded by the frozen image of her youthful physique, which reverts back in her old photographs, and being subjected to constant scrutiny and permanent self-inspection, Karen inevitably falls prey to the pressure of ageist dictates pervading her circle of friends and acquaintances through the relentless comparison between her former image legacy of her golden years as an acclaimed actress and her current image as a retired performer.

In contrast with all these substitute mirror images, Karen resorts to an effective way of reimagining her mirror appearance and projecting a more alluring image of herself. In the course of her affair with young Paolo, Karen turns him into her own younger mirror likeness by means of a number of scenes in which she enjoys beholding his young visage and athletic physique, hence symbolically turning him into an idealised Narcissus reflection that becomes her alternative youthful and male mirror image. In this respect, aware of Karen's infatuation with Paolo, her friend Meg Bishop reprimands her moralistically, exclaiming "isn't it odd [...] how women of our age begin all at once to look for beauty in our male partners?" (17), which ratifies the evidence that Karen has turned Paolo into an embodiment of her substitute mirror of youth. Nonetheless, on some occasions, the alternative mirror that Karen has found in Paolo meets an unexpected end, as it renders an opposite image that underlines her aging traits. As is conceded, Karen admits to herself that, "she could not bear to look at him [...] she felt ignored and excluded, and usually she would reach down to cover herself, outcast, ashamed [...] she averted her face and covered it with her dyed hair" (55). Consequently, in spite of the presence of embodied alternative mirrors, Karen cannot help scrutinizing the traces of aging that her actual or substitute image in the mirror still reflects back.

Karen's rejection of her image in the mirror calls to mind Woodward's theory of the mirror stage of old age, whereby the aging individual may feel that her fragmented mirror image does not truly match her unified self, thus noticing an increasing gap between the image of our bodies that we perceive of ourselves in the mirror and what we take to be our real selves ("The Mirror Stage of Old Age" 104). According to Jacques Lacan's psychological stage of development, known as the infant mirror stage, the infant is able to identify with her unified reflection in the mirror in sharp contrast with her self-perceived disunified body. Conversely, through Woodward's mirror of old age, the aging individual is unable to identify with the image projected in the mirror, as this fragmented image no longer corresponds with what the aging individual feels to be her truly unified self. Accordingly, when Karen stares at her reflection in the mirror□which can be symbolically interpreted as the return of Medusa's gaze in an attempt to turn herself into stone, and thus, stop the clock that propels aging—she catches sight of a certain grotesque quality with which she feels unable to identify.

In mirror scenes, Karen recognises her reflection as an aging other—as an intruder—thus evoking Beauvoir's words about the inability to identify the

aging self as our own. As Beauvoir further argues, the acknowledgment of old age comes from the figure of the other, since "within me it is the Other—that is to say the person I am for the outsider—who is old" (*The Coming of Age* 420). Aging is thus described as entailing a process of alienation which evokes the Freudian notion of recognising the aging other as a source of the uncanny, that is, as a familiar—albeit repressed—self awaiting to emerge. Furthermore, Susan Sontag refers to the fact that, in the case of women, this fragmentation between selves metaphorically takes effect through the split between a body and a face, and how each of them is judged by different standards (22). In this respect, in Williams's novel, Karen becomes aware of an increasing difference between her body and her face, since, as is described, "her body had flown like a powerful bird through and above the entangling branches of the past few years, but her face now exhibited the record of the flight" (92), thus gaining insight into the fact that she feels youthful and active in body, but judges herself as aged owing to the incipient lines she begins to perceive on her face.

Nonetheless, it is also at these moments of introspection that Karen determines to act against her age and her reaction acquires subversive and even protofeminist undertones, as these moments of self-awareness pave the way for the opportunity to take action and reimagine herself. Drawing on Woodward's theory of the mirror of old age, Leni Marshall makes reference to the concept of *méconnaissance* to argue that the misrecognition that these mirror scenes involve for the aging individual may also contribute to modifying the person's self-perception, hence underscoring the potential to envision alternative images of aging. To use Marshall's words, the misrecognition of the aging self in the mirror "creates the possibility for individuals to consciously participate in producing a new set of selves" (68) in old age. Upon contemplating her aging traits in the mirror and embracing the aging other that has remained repressed owing to age dictates, Karen is determined to give in to desire in her older years, thus imagining an alternative aging female self that subverts the constraining cultural perceptions of age and gender addressed to women.

Film Adaptations: Intertextualities, Approaches, Performers

Given the constant presence of dualities and mirror scenes in the text, Williams's novel, *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, is also endowed with a remarkable metanarrative and self-referential quality. Through different film adaptations based on the original novel, attention is constantly drawn to the figure of a female performer playing the role of an actress, to the extent that the story portrayed ultimately transcends the screen. In this sense, it can be argued that in José Quintero's 1961 film adaptation and in Robert Allan Ackerman's 2003 TV remake, performers Vivien Leigh and Helen Mirren, as women actors themselves also at a later stage in their careers, respectively

replicated some of the plights befalling the character of Karen Stone as an actress.

Ten years after playing the role of Blanche Dubois in Elia Kazan's film adaptation of Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Vivien Leigh was chosen to play the role of Karen Stone on the screen when she was in her late forties. In José Quintero's film adaptation, Warren Beauty, who was then in his mid-twenties, played the part of young Paolo. In the novel, the age gap between Karen and Paolo extends to thirty years, whereas, off the screen, Vivien Leigh was scarcely twenty years Warren Beauty's senior. The diminished age difference between the actors had the effect of somehow blurring the intended age gap established between Karen and Paolo in the original novel, which was counteracted by means of resorting to age affectation—mostly through the adjustment of hairstyle, make-up, and clothes—which gave Vivien Leigh an intended older appearance in comparison with that of her male counterpart.

Not in an entirely dissimilar fashion to the case of Gloria Swanson, who made her return to the silver screen through her brilliant portrayal of Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* after many years of absence, at the time, Vivien Leigh also seemed to be facing the later stages of her career as an actress and she was also going through a particularly testing period from a personal perspective. Having to cope with her divorce and feeling emotionally vulnerable, according to film reviewer Daniel Spoto, Vivien Leigh's situation at the time of shooting the film implied a case of life imitating art, given the parallelisms between the emotional struggles of the characters on the screen and the real-life actors who portrayed them. Quintero's film adaptation was considered quite bold at the time of its release, but its approach mostly displays a moralistic tone that gives way to a cautionary tale, which ultimately warns about the dangers of daring to defy the traditional cultural dictates of age and gender appropriateness. Vivien Leigh's performance of the role of Karen Stone brings attention to her vulnerability and fragility, and even though her affair with Paolo is necessarily taken as audacious and subversive, she is finally chastised and treated as an outcast, while she seems to accept her punishment gladly when she gives herself away to the young scruffy tramp, who personifies both desire and corruption, at the end of this film adaptation.

In comparison, Robert Allan Ackerman's 2003 television film featuring Helen Mirren as Karen Stone and Olivier Martinez as Paolo offers a significantly audacious adaptation of Williams's novel. In contrast with Quintero's film, in which Vivien Leigh and Warren Beauty matched the age of Karen and Paolo in the original text more faithfully, in Ackerman's adaptation, the actors playing the leading roles were somehow older than the characters in the novel, Mirren being in her late fifties and Olivier being in his late thirties. In relation with Vivien Leigh's performance, Helen Mirren's interpretation portrays Karen Stone as

a determined and strong-minded woman, who takes the lead all through the course of her affair with young Paolo and who consciously gives free vent to her sexual inhibitions. As indicative of the boldness that mostly characterizes this adaptation, scenes of explicit intercourse and moments in which Paolo contemplates Karen's naked body contribute to emphasizing the liberated and uninhibited ways characterizing this contemporary portrayal of Karen Stone.

Furthermore, Ackerman's film adaptation resorts to different instances of intertextuality, which refer back to other films also dealing with performance both on and off the stage. As cases in point, as Karen Stone attends a party, she meets an old friend of hers who happens to be a playwright that strongly resembles Tennessee Williams, while the character of the Contessa is played by Anne Bancroft, who acquired fame for her performance of the character of Mrs. Robinson in Mike Nichols's film *The Graduate* (1967), and precisely, for playing a similar part to that of Karen Stone. Analogously, prior to being finally abandoned by Paolo, while they are watching films featuring Karen in her youth, her face becomes superimposed over that of her youthful image on the screen, thus creating another mirror scene which draws attention to her performative tendencies both on and off the screen, and which is inevitably reminiscent of a scene in *Sunset Boulevard*, in which the current image of Norma Desmond also superimposes over that of her younger self as shown in her old films.

In contrast with Vivien Leigh's performance, Mirren's resolute and even histrionic performance turns Karen Stone into what Russo defines as an epitome of "the female grotesque" (*The Female Grotesque* 1) to refer to aging female characters that are portrayed as mostly disturbing, since they reject giving up their sexual allure in spite of the prevailing cultural dictates of age and gender. In a particularly distressing scene in this film adaptation, while Karen is sleeping, Paolo stares at her face, and using his fingers, he starts blurring her make-up mockingly, giving her a most ludicrous appearance of which she remains totally unaware. Hence, in spite of her boldness and determination as displayed in this film adaptation, Karen is still ostracized and sanctioned for daring to subvert the assumptions of age and gender conventions. Nonetheless, if in Quintero's film adaptation, Vivien Leigh was actually facing the later stages of her career as an actress, as also happens to Karen in the original novel, in contrast, in Ackerman's film, Helen Mirren regained access to the limelight precisely for portraying a character that dares act against her age.

Conclusion

In Williams's novel, Karen Stone's performative tendencies both on and off the stage underline the constructed quality of age and gender. By means of acting her age and acting against her age, while adjusting her roles according to gender discourses, her performance acquires an ambivalence that can be

described as both compliant and subversive according to prevailing cultural dictates. Having been exposed to normative age-and-gender roles, which have rendered her prematurely aged and have also banished her from the stage too soon, her performance of age and gender off the stage contributes to disrupting these cultural discourses in which she feels entrapped. Through a series of mirror scenes, which metaphorically stand for moments of introspection and reflection, Karen both rejects her image and attempts to reimagine it, as she re-envisions alternative ways of performing age and gender. Besides, her final encounter with the young vagrant is also suffused with significant ambivalent connotations, as it confirms her final surrender to corruption, but it also stands for her ultimate will to release her inhibitions and take final action to sanction her role as the subject of the gaze. As Williams's novel, published in 1950, is revisited and reimagined through contemporary film adaptations, it could be argued that the character of Karen Stone has been acquiring more protofeminist undertones, thus gradually shifting from ostracism to vindication, and from being age and gender compliant to becoming more age and gender subversive.

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Biography

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