On Becoming a Hag: Gender, Ageing and Abjection

Susan Pickard, Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology, University of Liverpool

Insert author name and affiliation please

In this paper, I explore, through the novels of Elena Ferrante, the role played by the ‘abject’ in mediating ageing in women, focusing on its role in the movement from a disempowered to a more powerful subject position.The paper has three sections. The first describes the role of the abject in constituting the feminine focusing on the place of temporality and ageing in this process. Represented by the symbolic figure of the hag, the old woman is a source of primal fear which forms the foundation of a violently misogynistic gendered (self)- formation. However, following Creed, there are two representational forms of the hag, that of victim (hag) and that of monster (Hag) which I argue also suggest alternative subjectivities associated with ageing femininity. In the second section I explore the movement from one form to the other by means of conceptual models drawn from Simone de Beauvoir and Margaret Morganroth Gullette, in which process a battle over the symbolic meaning of abjection is central. Moreover, ageing itself is significant in mediating the shift from oppressed/fragmented to powerful/integrated subject position. Whilst the structures of feeling involved in this subjectivity are emergent, fiction and imaginative literature may provide helpful early depictions and in the last section I illustrate the psychosocial domain with material drawn from two early novels by Elena Ferrante.

**Keywords:** ageing, the hag, abject, postmaternal, Elena Ferrante

**Introduction and aims: The abject feminine**

In feminist/psychoanalytic terms, the feminine is associated with the abject, a reaction to and rejection of the mother’s body originating in early infancy and constructed as a prerequisite of becoming a subject, an act of exclusion ‘necessary to guarantee that the subject takes up his/her proper place in relation to the symbolic’ (Kristeva, 1982: 69). The abject engenders disgust on account of its ambiguity, its sticky liminality, eliciting a visceral reaction which serves to introduce a distance, to separate the polluted from the clean and proper, and thereby constructs a border that has both material and psychological dimensions. Although it drives passage away from the cosy symbiosis of mother-child in the womb and early infancy into the separate autonomous state that forms the basis of the western concept of personhood, its negative associations with the mucky, leaking body continue to characterise cultural associations with femininity throughout life, whilst constituting part of the structure of masculine domination. It also affects women’s relationship to their own bodies and to their sexuality, to mothers and motherhood, including the possibility and experience of their own, and to ageing. A role traditionally played by religion, horror films have assumed the work of abjectification through conjuring up an affect of repulsion and fear towards the monstrous-feminine that helps viewers re-establish our clean and proper boundaries (Creed, 1993).

Separating oneself from the abject can also be understood in terms of Simone de Beauvoir’s immanence/transcendence dichotomy. For Beauvoir, immanence is directly constituted through woman’s abjection, is associated with the unthinking body and with the repetitive feminine labour of tending, cooking and cleaning. Transcendence, by direct contrast, is associated with a flight from such confinement constitutive of the masculine subject position, being ‘a creative, future-oriented temporality that materializes human existence as more than mere animality’ (Burke, 2018: 24). In terms of feminine subjectivity, there is an uneasy, albeit impossible need for transcendence of the feminine (within) explained by Julia Kristeva adroitly as ‘I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself’ (Kristeva, 1982: 3), as if confronting a shifting invisible line over which one must continually step in and step out displaying Rich’s ‘footwork of imagination’ (1987: 175). Transcendence also refers to a control over temporality.Immanence, by contrast, is associated with developmental cycles, blooming, ripening, withering, rotting and decaying, liquid and in flux, associated with bleeding, lactation and incontinence, with an animal or vegetable quality: the body of nature which is also the feminine body (for men). In the next section, I look in more detail at the role of temporality and particularly of age, .in relation to the abject

***Ageing femininity and the abject***

Birth and death are interlinked threads in the topos of the archaic mother, who represents both ‘the original parent, the godhead of all fertility’ and also ‘the blackness of extinction – death… a force that threatens to reincorporate what it gives birth to’ (Creed, 1993:28). William Miller explains the link between temporality and abjection, as well as its commingled beginnings and endings, with reference to the vegetative cycles of the organic world:

what disgusts, startlingly, is the capacity for life, and not just because life implies its correlative death and decay: for it is decay that seems to engender life. Images of decay imperceptibly slide into images of fertility and out again ... the gooey mud, the scummy pond are life soup, fecundity itself: slimy, slippery, wiggling, teeming animal life generating spontaneously from putrefying vegetation (Miller, 2009: 40-41).

The regenerative element is part of what makes the abject attractive, as well as repulsive. Indeed, the symbolic form of the hag, an image with a long genealogy in literature, art and religious iconography (Creed, 1993) is depicted with an essentially dual nature: good or evil, pitiful or terrifying, as well as woman-as-monster and woman-as-victim (Creed, 1993). This figure also appears as the Phallic Mother, sometimes represented with both a penis and a vagina, the omnipotent Mother who is the ‘“whole” in relation to which man is lacking’ (Gallop, 1982: 22). As Jane Gallop explicates the hierarchies of power, the Phallic Mother is to man what the man is to the castrated woman, each highlighting the other’s lack. In her capacity for good as well as evil she is also found in Melanie Klein’s good breast/bad breast (Gullette, 2000). Thus, feelings of disgust towards the abject are composed of a complex polyphony of emotional notes, including both the terror of abandonment and the dread of engulfment, both the longing for unity and non-differentiation and at the same time by the fear of losing the self and of formlessness. These feelings underpin the particularly powerful resurgence of inequality focused on the second part of the life course, with women over 50 disadvantaged both materially and in the representational regime (the double-standard of ageing), compared with men and with younger women. However, the degree to which gender discrimination at this stage is fed by abjection is not, I suggest, sufficiently recognised.

When traced through historical representations, although older women were mostly devalued, a contrapuntal theme, also recognised their strength and power (Banner, 1993), existing in however subterranean a fashion. Resistance, then, involves harnessing this alternative stream to become what I will call the (powerful) Hag, to distinguish her from the (pitiful) hag. Another paradox is that whilst mid-life is recognised as a stage when women are at the height of their powers, at the same time it is also a point when cumulative disadvantages can converge yet appear to be the ‘natural’ result of ageing (Gullette, 1997) and thus midlife especially may be perceived as a battlefield between two representations but also between two possibilities.

Midlife is also a time in which abjection, including its conceptualisation, plays a key role. Here I refer to Imogen Tyler’s (2009) important warning that abject theory may give rise to the unintended consequence of reifying the concept, contributing to the impression that it is an inherent feature of human existence, when the latter is in fact part of the work of abjection itself. Rather, abjection should always be understood as an element of regulation, control and oppression that has both a longstanding history and is a particular manifestation of late modernity. This means, in turn, both that other conceptions of (achieving and maintaining) personhood may be possible and that more positive approaches to the abject may be adopted. The abject feminine, as a cultural feature, is depicted from an external-youthful male vantage point, perceived as what the subject is defined against, thereby depriving the Other of any subjectivity of its own (Tyler, 2009). The steeping of women in abjection, without alternative, means that there is no reciprocal recognition between men and women, as in the Master-Slave dialectic, but rather women are construed in terms of absolute alterity, as in the ‘precious objects’ of the gift-relationship defined by Claude Levi-Strauss: not the other but the Other (Direk, 2011; see also Rubin, 1975). Disrupting the reproduction of abjection as a psychosocial fact will involve placing an emphasis on alternative paradigms which emerge in co-existence with the phallic law which, among other things, include reconfiguring the meaning of abjection in order to stress its role in liberatory rather than regulatory processes. Such alternative paradigms may emerge both from feminist conceptual models and from women’s literature.

My aims in what follows are to examine the configuration of ageing feminine subjectivity, utilising conceptual frameworks drawn from Beauvoir and Gullette in particular. Through these, I will chart the subjectivities associated with pitiful (hag) and powerful (Hag) subject positions, the transformations from one to the other and the role played by the abject in mediating them. In the last section of the paper the conceptual models will be brought to life through material drawn from the novels of Elena Ferrante.

**From hag to Hag: feminist conceptual models**

Two key, and related, feminine subject positions are associated, respectively, with entering the sexual regime and becoming a mother. With regard to the first, in *The Second Sex,* de Beauvoir (1997) contributes a powerful conceptual framework for analysing the subjectivity involved in becoming ‘woman’ (in her famous assertion that one is not born but becomes a woman). This takes place through her objectification in the sexual regime and relegation to the condition of immanence in which, around puberty, her formerly unified and androgynous child’s subjectivity fragments, beneath the intense arc of the male gaze. This essentially divided woman’s subjectivity is constructed through agentic engagement on the part of the young woman, whereby she lives as a subject and simultaneously is alienated from her body which she views as if through the appraising male gaze. Her relation to her female reproductive organs and processes is here caste as abject and polluting (menopause even more so). Beauvoir’s example of the socialisation processes underpinning this is the doll given to the little girl as simultaneously foreign object and alter ego, in which she learns to be a live doll, pleasing others, whilst aware of this as a ‘charming’ constraint upon her autonomy. The particularly convoluted nature of this double consciousness, the way that abjection is lived as *se faire objet[[1]](#endnote-1)* and thus is very difficult to escape or resist is that, as the term in French in particular suggests, it is adopted from within: a woman makes herself an object, and thus is complicit, indeed gains certain advantages from this (McWeeny, 2016), at least whilst she is young and sexually attractive.

Where one is no longer classed as a sexual being, in the context of ageing, Jennifer McWeeny suggests that this in turn may institute the end of *se faire objet* which then enables the loosening of the binds of double consciousness and occupation once again of a unified consciousness. However, it also comes with the end of the category ‘woman’ where, in Beauvoir’s rendition , the latter term directly refers to the subject who has become a subject through making herself an object. This is the paradox that Beauvoir captures so well in her account of the post-menopausal woman of whom she says, ‘she is no longer the prey of overwhelming forces; she is herself, she and her body are one…’ but that at the same time this renders her ‘unsexed but complete: an old woman’ (1997: 595). Cultural representations emphasising the essential connection of femininity with youth, beauty and sexuality provide powerful obstacles to this process, even more so in the context of a hyper-sexualised culture where, even as women’s agency is celebrated, sexuality is equivalent to success (Nielsen, 2019). In this context, Nielsen suggests that the #MeToo movement arises precisely from the intense conflict between these two positions, a war between the self as subject and self as objecor ageing women, this may also mean that, instead of seizing the opportunity for liberation, they may suffer a crisis of self-reproach and a desire for retaining the non-abject youthful self through aesthetic and other practices, accompanied by the more or (increasingly with time) less successful continuation of *se faire objet*. What is needed as a countervailing force are both conceptual models and also representations and stories in the public domain highlighting the constitution of the consciousness of an older woman for whom, finally, ‘she and her body are one’.

In terms of the maternal consciousness, Beauvoir sees a mother’s relation with a daughter as constituted by sticky boundaries, seeing in her not an ‘other’ but a ‘double’ upon whom she projects ‘all the ambiguity of her relation with herself’ (p. 536). As Adrienne Rich (1976) has shown, motherhood as an institution is shaped within the terms of the patriarchal sexual regime and her consciousness becomes more deeply divided yet. I have found no better depiction of this state than in Rachel Cusk’s reflection that also recalls the adroitly skipping footwork of Kristeva’s position:

Birth is not merely that which divides women from men; it also divides women from themselves. Another person has existed in her, and after their birth they live within the jurisdiction of her consciousness. When she is with them she is not herself; when she is without them she is not herself ... to discover this is to feel that your life has become …caught in some mythic snare in which you will perpetually, vainly, struggle (Cusk, 2000: 7).

Akin to the ending of *se faire objet* Gullette (2002) describes possibilities for liberation in terms of the ‘postmaternal’ subjectivity, which acknowledges that ‘mother’ is but *one* of the roles that may make up the identity of a mature woman. She terms this a ‘revolutionary feminist concept’ indeed for its potential to conjure the repressed cultural theme of women’s power to the surface. In order to achieve postmaternal subjectivity, Gullette stresses, work is necessary on the part of both mothers and adult children. Mothers are required to ‘separate’ in some way from their offspring, to reach a state which Gullette likens to that of peers, or ‘friendship reinforced by kinship’ (2002: 559), which, among other things, involves ‘letting go’ of the deep pull towards the romanticised identification with ideal motherhood (which in turn is partly a return to their own pre-Oedipal state). Adult children in turn must let go of their ‘dominant dependence’, recognising the mother as a person in order that a position of ‘joint adulthood’ can be achieved.

This process faces particular challenges in the contemporary cultural context - the extension of ‘youth’, incomplete individuation, insecurity based on precarious capitalism and emphasis on compensatory (material and psychological) maternal care - which, rather, foregrounds older women’s mothering roles and re-subjugates them In addition, feminist theory and autobiographical writing have a long history of theorising from the daughter’s perspective, leaving the (post)maternal largely unacknowledged and unexamined. When accompanied by the powerful taboos against being a ‘bad mother’ this leads to its being surrounded by a profound cultural silence. For example, in hermemoir, the influential and important second-wave feminist writer, Alix Kates Shulman, charts a daughter’s journey of separation and autonomy from her parents deep into her adulthood and their old age. In doing so, she hints at, but cannot bring herself to describe, the parallel journey of maternal separation she must have been making at the same time from her own children. Shulman acknowledges that ‘this leaves a great hole in our knowledge that few are willing to fill’, but insists, ‘certainly not I’ (1999: 194). As a result, we miss not only the opportunity to contrast both kinds of ‘separations’ but also to trace the origins of postmaternality in earlier mothering, what Gullette describes as the ‘force in the psyche impelling her away from fusion and toward autonomy-in-connection’ ensuring that ‘she welcomed her child’s autonomy’ (2002: 564). The central question as Elena Ferrante describes it (in discussing a character, Leda, in a novel to which I shall return later in the paper), is: ‘can I, a woman of today, succeed in being loved by my daughters, in loving them, without having of necessity to sacrifice myself and therefore hate myself?’ (2016: 220). Indeed, the same question, when flipped on its head, equally applies to the adult daughter: ‘can I succeed in loving my mother while recognising the person in her, letting go of feelings of her omnipotence which lead me to both fear and/or need to dominate her and which may be prolonged deep into my own adult life?’

Where this is not resolved there may be violent attempts at separation and this is certainly a feature both of contemporary ‘age wars’ more generally as well as of feminist ‘waves’ where, in feminist writing by young women, one finds depictions of second-wave pioneers such as Germaine Greer and Susan Brownmiller as abject, grotesque, ugly, bitter witches, their views as third wave feminist Kate Harding (2015) maintains, ‘a bunch of crap that sounds hopelessly outdated to anyone pre-menopausal’. (For me it is as if their faces were blending into that of the splendidly hideous bad mother Violet, in *August: Osage County*). Such conflictual age relations unfortunately mean that younger women may not discern anything positive about the life stage that lies ahead. For all these reasons it is not surprising that the transformation I have sketched out here between the inscription of the body as aged/lacking in femininity and the adoption of an empowered subject position, from a divided subjectivity to one that is whole, from *se faire objet* to a subjectivity that has removed itself from this gaze, from maternal subjugation to postmaternal wholeness – all ways of describing the journey (by no means pre-determined or assured) from the pitiful hag to the powerful Hag – remains shadowy and hidden, rarely talked about and even more rarely celebrated.

Yet, Raymond Williams considers it mistaken to talk in terms of silence; rather one can see this transformation represented in ‘a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material’ but in an ‘embryonic phase’ before full articulation is possible (1977: 131). Early blossoming forms of this, he notes, are to be found in the creative arts and for me Elena Ferrante is one writer whose novels map out these models and themes in women’s subjectivity in some vibrant detail. I consider this next.

**Structures of feeling in imaginative literature: feminist consciousness in Elena Ferrante**

Williams’ argues that emergent structures of feeling, such as , for my purposes, those associated with the movement from hag to Hag, appear precisely in the gap opened up between ‘the received interpretation and practical experience’ leading to a ‘tension... an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency…’ (1977: 128 – 135). As emergent forms, for example in describing women’s new experiences of both inequality and freedom (and their mixtures), they ‘exert palpable pressures’ on the terms in which experience and action can be understood, even whilst they may be discussed as ‘idiosyncratic, and even isolating’. Where they appear in imaginative fiction – by which I mean that fiction that, perhaps through its language, plots or style – has the particular capacity to guide the reader to see the world anew -they thus contain the potential to configure a new orderIn Deleuze’s terms,they create a line of flight which ‘moves in the direction of the ill-informed or the incomplete’ (Deleuze, 1998:1) and offer readers guidance into becoming-other (Stenner, 2017). These ‘becomings’ are aspects of the liminal; events and passages of time ‘during which psychosocial structures melt down into liquids, the better to be formed into a new pattern’ (Stenner, 2017: 16). Here, indeed, is also the realm of the abject. Additionally, new symbolism is required where the old symbolism fails to express such events, forming building blocks of new psychosocial structures (Stenner, 2017) and turning barely audible whispers, or secret knowledge, into the kind of claims that can be made out loud.

Many commentators have noted the importance of Ferrante’s writing in giving voice to the subterranean themes of women’s lives. Admirers consistently cite the radical originality of her tone and expression: Margaret Drabble (2016) speaks of her ‘unprecedented’ veracity; Jacqueline Rose declares that it is ‘like nothing else I have read’ (2018. 151). If, as Virginia Woolf suggested, embedded in women’s writing is that fragmented consciousness of self as simultaneously subject-and-object that Beauvoir extrapolated, both Ferrante’s veracity and originality suggests that she has succeeded in transcending this in an important way. In my reading of Ferrante, a powerful aspect of this veracity lies in her suggestion that ageing, whilst a further means of oppression in multiple ways, can also constitute the medium of liberation, for both mothers and daughters, although powerful struggle is necessary and success is not a foregone conclusion. This transgressive and revolutionary quality of her prose is betrayed in the strong reactions it receives: from the publishers who decided against publication on the ground that the behaviour of the mother (in *Days of Abandonment*) is ‘morally reprehensible’ (Rose, 2018: 151), to that of her mainly female and extremely fervent readership which is ‘something like a club or secret society whose members have taken a vow never to explain exactly what … behind closed doors, they really talk about’ (Rose, 2018: 179).

In the last section of this essay, I will explore two early novels by Ferrante which evoke richly the two truths of good/bad ageing. *Days of Abandonment*, (2005) which is Ferrante’s second novel, maps the journey from confident young mother to pitiful hag; the protagonist, Olga, is a woman in her late 30s who is suddenly aged when her husband leaves her for a younger woman. *The Lost Daughter*, (2008) Ferrante’s third novel, focuses on Leda, an academic in her late 40s, who, after a previous failed attempt at freedom from maternal subjugation, and latterly a slow diminishing of self into the pitiful hag, is engaged in the painful and exhilarating business of rebirth as the strong Hag. Here I view Ferrante’s writing as depicting, in symbolic imagery and often fabular form, the psychic terrain that constitutes an important next frontier in women’s struggle for equality. Part of this struggle, as Ferrante depicts it, takes place in and over the abject realm, and her writing conjures this up through the use of startling symbolic imagery that reveals, perhaps, where words can still not yet go.

***Women destroyed: the pitiful hag***

For Olga, the protagonist of *Days of Abandonment*, despite impressive credentials of intelligence and education together with a feminist education the bright red fear – and danger – blazing in her imagination is that she will become the pitiful hag she remembers from her childhood in the figure of the *poverella*, as the villagers called her. Her real name was irrelevant, obliterated by the archetypal or generic power of her fate: that of the no-longer-so-young mother who, abandoned by her husband, loses her role, her status, her life’s meaning and eventually her mind. The *poverella* had once been vibrant, fecund, fragrant, three children hanging from the hem of her dress, before becoming this, as seen through the eyes of a child: ‘I was eight, but I was ashamed for her, she no longer took her children with her, she no longer had that good smell.’ Her misfortune was indeed inscribed upon her body; as Sara Heinamaa notes, ‘Our body – as it is given to us in our personal dealings with the world – always implies the look of the other’ (2014: 175). Thus, after the betrayal

‘she came down the stairs stiffly, her body withered. She lost the fullness of her bosom, of her hips, of her thighs, she lost her broad jovial face, her bright smile. She became transparent skin over bones, her eyes drowning in violet wells, her hands damp spider webs. Once, my mother exclaimed *poverella*, she’s as dry now as a salted anchovy’ (p. 16).

Through abjection she has come to embody the ‘reverse of fecundity’, shifting instead to something preserved, not rotten, but not vital or truly living either, defined by the past, the violet colour of twilight shadows, hinting at the relationship between the mother and death, ‘which threatens to swallow him up’ (Beauvoir, 1997: 178). The interesting fishy metaphor invites further analysis. It can be contrasted, for example, to the *backfisch*, described by F. Stanley Hall as representative of adolescent girlhood: ‘it means a fresh fish, just caught but unbaked, though fit and ready for the process. The naivete of instinctive unconscious childhood, like the glittering sheen of sea hues, is still upon the *backfisch* … ’ (pp. 122-3; quoted in Dyhouse, 1981). In both cases, the animal metaphors define the feminine from the point of view of the masculine perspective, annihilator of female individuality in the generic feminine, which, whilst rendering one a perfect ‘catch’ the other almost inedible, sees both of them as exotic in their otherness.

As a young woman, Olga had vowed never to succumb to such a fate. In her French literature classes, she had read Beauvoir’s *The woman destroyed,* among other texts, and had dismissed the protagonists’ romantic dilemmas with a youthful hubris: ‘They seemed to me sentimental fools: I wanted to be different, I wanted to write stories about women with resources, women of invincible words, not a manual for the abandoned wife with her lost love at the top of her thoughts’ (p. 21). Femininity, as it was portrayed in these novels, seemed dense and claustrophobic; Olga’s youthful desire, like Beauvoir’s own, was towards transcendence, freedom and self-definition. But such transcendence and self-definition, already eroded with marriage and motherhood, crumbles altogether when Olga’s husband leaves her for a young student. At this point, despite her range of capitals, Olga feels herself turning in to a version of the *poverella*, suggesting that, despite the cultural distance between her and the poor labouring woman of her Neapolitan childhood, she is experiencing a gendered fate, that of replacement by a younger woman, the fact of being aged, as a woman and a mother, in the sexual regime, (which does not only happen to ‘old’ women) in the face of which individual differences are secondary. Now her body signifies for her husband time itself, in the sense of time passed, youth lost, her body like a ‘meter’. She replies: ‘“You mean that sleeping with me you felt yourself growing old? You measured death by my ass, by how once it was firm and what it is now?”’ (p. 40).

The plunge into abjection that follows brings a powerful realisation of the broader system of patriarchy in which, despite her conscious intentions, and her feminist-infused sophisticated knowledge, she had nevertheless played her old, time-honoured role. She has sacrificed her academic career to take care of the children so Mario’s career could flourish; immersed herself in the repetitive domestic tasks to allow him to pursue his own work; been degraded by the filth and muckiness of mother’s work, of cleaning up children’s shit and vomit. Marguerite Duras explained this process as follows: ‘Motherhood means that a woman gives her body over to her child*,*her children; they're on her as they might be on a hill, in a garden; they devour her*,* hit her*,* sleep on her; and she lets herself be devoured …’ (1990: 54). For Olga, exhausted by shopping, cooking, cleaning, Ferrante uses similar but more shockingly arresting descriptors, depicting children as vampires battening on their mother’s flesh and suggesting depths of anger and revolt that is not present in the Duras: ‘I was like a lump of food that my children chewed without stopping; a cud more of a living material that continually amalgamated and softened its living substance to allow two greedy bloodsuckers to nourish themselves, leaving on me the odour and taste of their gastric juices.’ (p. 91-2). It is this odour that has repelled Mario, she believes, into rejecting her for a sweet-smelling girl of 20. Mario’s masculinity allows a nimble manipulation and transcendence of time: ‘Mario must have imagined her as the future, and yet he desired the past, the girlhood that I had already given him and that he now felt nostalgia for …’ (p. 92) whilst, with his act of stealing the family heirloom earrings from Olga’s jewellery box and presenting them to his new girlfriend he makes a symbolic substitution of youth for age, redirecting the flow of time upwards in his family lineage and transcending his own chronological ageing.

Olga’s tone is a mixture of ‘hysterical’ loss of control and cool wisdom and perhaps the former is necessary for the latter. She attacks Mario and his girlfriend physically, ripping the former’s shirt off his back and the earrings out of the latter’s lobes; liquid spills messily out of her body - a nosebleed, a period that starts unexpectedly - her body throwing her ever deeper into abjection. In her wise understanding, meanwhile, she sees how, through leaving her, Mario has also denied himself the possibility of maturity, opting instead to ‘skate away from us on an infinite surface’. Olga, by contrast, must sink, ‘go to the bottom, abandon myself, sink deaf and mute into my own veins, into my intestine, my bladder’ (p. 99), a depictionsuggestive of a profoundly Rabelaisian immersion in the corporeal truths of finitude, vulnerability, of birth linked with death, all of which are found also in the womb. From here, she begins to lose her place in the Symbolic: the phone will not connect; the gas and light company threaten to cut off her supplies, even though she is sure she has paid her bills; she can no longer work the lock to open the front door; there is an invasion of insects in the flat, her son becomes ill and her dog succumbs to poisoning, as if all she is defiling all in her orbit, dragging them into this soupy pre-Symbolic melting pot. Soon she begins to lose her grip on everyday meaning altogether, including her understanding of both temporal and spatial realities, for, in the disintegration of her identity, there is no longer a solid centre of certainty, no ‘I’ from which she can move outwards, and perceive the world: ‘Now I didn’t know how far the bathroom was from the living room, the living room from the storage closet, the storage closet from the front hall. I was pulled here and there, as if in a game, I had a sense of vertigo’ (p. 125). This conjures up, from the perspective of the one abjected, the brutality involved in the act of expelling the Other from the symbolic in order to secure the subject’s own place within it.

Having reassured herself in the mirror that, despite the new appearance of grey hairs, she is still juicy, not dried-up like the poveralla, she throws herself into a sexual relationship with the neighbour, Carrano, a cultured older man (for whom, unlike for Mario, she can represent youth). Finally, it is this that restores her place in the sexual regime. As she initiates sexual relations with him for the first time Ferrante gives us one of the most frank and ugly depictions of sex I have ever read, in which Olga variously feels disgust at the ‘bestiality’ involved, despair at Carrano’s inability to get an erection and then a bleak relief at her final success; as if only by abjecting herself to the limits of her imagination can she force a re-entry into the sexual regime. It works. ‘I ... felt that I was safe, I was no longer like those women, they no longer seemed a whirlpool sucking me in’ (pp183-4).

Abjection in this novel has three roles. Firstly, it works as a tool of regulation in the form of the devaluation by Mario, signalling her ‘agedness’ in the terms of the sexual regime. Secondly, it works as a vehicle of return: she uses her sexual abjection with Carrano to reinsert herself in the sexual regime. Thirdly, it brings revelation: through falling out of the system, and into a murky liminal realm, she learns how the gendered system works and what is at stake, but at the same time the understanding gives rise to a new maturity. Meanwhile, she recognises that men like her husband who abjectify women in order to resist the predations of time and particularly those who also seek to regenerate themselves by relationships with younger women succumb to a false cycle of a repeated spring, which is antithetical to growth (Paloge, 2007). By the end of the novel, she is no longer pitiful, but she is not yet powerful. What differentiates her, in her feminist consciousness, from Monique in *The Woman Destroyed* is still hidden, a social experience ‘in solution’ in Williams’ words and not yet precipitated. This further transformation comes with the next novel.

**‘I’m dead, but I’m fine’: the resurgent Hag**

In *The Lost Daughter* Ferrante explores the struggle to achieve the subjectivity associated with the powerful Hag. Its protagonist, Leda, another academic, in many ways picks up where Olga left off; ten years older at 48, the novel begins with her enjoying the beginnings of postmaternal freedom, her first holiday alone since her teenage daughters have left home. The action is centred upon her daily visits to the beach from her holiday let, where, sitting reading in the sun, she observes each day a mother, Nina, and her small daughter, Elena, playing with a doll. As she observes this education in the feminine, in between talking with the handsome young beach attendant, Gino, she reviews her past history, especially her troubled experience of motherhood comprising an early abortive attempt to combine it with personal freedom and self-actualisation, an escape from her children and husband, to pursue her career, then a defeated return and submission to motherhood.

As she reflects, from the very start she resisted fiercely all restrictions on her selfhood, transcending her first pregnancy, controlling it via a vigilant medical regimen. She spoke to her foetus, read to it from her work, seeking to tame and purify her own abject burgeoning body with an exercise of rationality so ‘what later became Bianca was for me Bianca right away, a being at its best, purified of human blood … I managed to vanquish even the long and violent labour pains I suffered, reshaping them as an extreme test, to be confronted with solid preparation’ (p. 123). But as soon as the child emerged from her womb, she claimed her mother voraciously, stealing ‘all my energy, all my strength, all my capacity for imagination’ (p. 123). The monstrous baby metaphor, like the vampire babies in *Days of Abandonment,* reboots our perception of this dynamic, shocking us into seeing it anew. Where Beauvoir used similar language to express woman as ‘victim of the species’ (1997:52), what shocks in Ferrante is that this is a *mother* speaking.

During that time, her thwarted will to freedom, always bubbling under the surface, emerged in violent and unpredictable eruptions. One afternoon when her five-year old daughter was repeatedly interrupting her as she tried to work, she snapped and, thrusting the child away from her into another room, slammed shut the glass partition door, shattering it. ‘I looked at her in terror, how far could I go, I frightened myself’ (p. 78). This is a fear appearing as a recurrent theme in women’s writing and relates to the construction of femininity in terms of containment, the bursting out of which is highly abject. Appearing in a variety of contexts, from the psychosocial construction of mental health, to eating disorders, to the mother that claims an identity of her own, the question is the same: if there were no (self)constraint imposed what could she become (fat, mad, violent ... free and powerful)? An education in the feminine, as Iris Marion Young has shown, *is* an education in constraint.

Soon enough, she could stand no more and, abandoning both children and husband, stepped into the freedom of an independent life. That the force in her psyche impelling her towards independence (Gullette, 2002) was burning bright was clear when she found herself unmoved by her child’s illness. ‘Marta’s chicken pox sought a space inside me with the usual wave of anxiety, but instead of the emptiness of the past years, it found a joyous future, a sense of power … What’s chicken pox, I thought, Bianca had it, she’d recover. I was overwhelmed by myself. I, I, I: I am this, I can do this, I *must* do this’ (p. 97). We as readers feel the frisson of excitement that accompanies such a transgressive act: the shock, horror and vicarious delight. Yet gradually her courage faltered; cultural pressures and her own unease overwhelmed what satisfaction she felt in her career and her achievements did not feel sufficiently significant to act as counterweight; three years later she returned to her children. Return involved a collapse into the role of motherhood: to cope required that she yield entirely. Even today, she knows, her adult daughters see her only as a screen onto which to project their own self and have it reflected back to them. Thus, though now living on another continent, in the telephone calls she receives they want ‘only to know if blue shoes would go with an orange skirt, if I could find some papers left in a book and send them urgently, if I was still available to be blamed for their rages, their sorrows, in spite of the different continents and the spacious sky that separated us’ (p. 11).

Back in the present day, when one day the doll is dropped in the sand and lost, Leda finds it and moves from detached witness to participant as, when the days go by, with the child inconsolable and the family posting leaflets around the town offering a reward, she does not return it. Although her motives are obscured from herself, clearly she wishes to disrupt this education, and, rather than passing the baton of femininity onto the next generation, to snap it in two. Even as she toys with the doll, dressing it, remembering her own childhood and that of her two daughters, corpse-like it oozes blackish liquid from its mouth and there is a worm inside the cavity of its stomach.

But meanwhile she herself has been rejuvenated by freedom, and Leda recalls how, after her two adult daughters moved away, she had quickly regained ‘the slender body of my youth and felt a sensation of gentle strength … I would be 48 in four months, but by some magic years had fallen from me’ (p. 12). Yet the social gaze says otherwise: she can recall a precise point when men in the street no longer looked at her but at ther bodies of her daughters instead, a feeling of diminishment for Leda who felt ‘the force of attraction of their bodies was as if substituted from mine’ (p. 52). As if to test the truthfulness of these perspectives, one day at the beach she invites Gino, who is the same age as her oldest daughter, out to dinner and although he accepts politely, it is without any interest in her. More generally, her temporal confidence is met by an abundance of images of over-ripeness, decay and rot that ambush her from all directions. The lavish basket of fruit set out for her by the owners when she first arrives at the apartment is in fact spoiled and ‘under the beautiful show figs, pears, prunes, peaches, grapes were overripe or rotten. I took a knife and cut off large black areas, but the smell disgusted me, the taste, and I threw almost all of it in the garbage’ (p. 14). When she does find herself the object of male attention, it is not that of the young beach attendant Gino but of the elderly and lascivious caretaker, Giovanni, who flirts with her, laying a hand bespoiled with age-spots on her shoulder. Disturbing and cowing as these images are, and after one bruising encounter with a gang of young boys in a cinema – she tells them to be quiet; they jeer and insult her and afterwards follow her menacingly down the street - she finds herself switching gaze, seeing herself from the outside and feels the abjection of ageing as a regulatory force most keenly: ‘I took a shower, looked in the mirror as I dried myself. The impression I had had of myself in these months changed abruptly. I wasn’t newly youthful but aged, excessively thin, a body so lean as to seem without depth, white hairs in the black of my sex’ (p. 129).

The dramatic tension builds; she befriends Nina (who sees her as a role model, a guide on how to live the sophisticated, independent life of a ‘free woman’) even buying her a gift of a hatpin. But when Nina comes to her for reassurance, Leda instead affirms the worry of having children and tells her how she abandoned her daughters when they were little. The crisis of the plot is reached when Nina visits her at her apartment to ask if she can use it for an assignation with Gino, away from her husband and family’s prying eyes. This is clearly a rebuke to Leda’s femininity, another reminder of her age, and she refuses to help, deciding at that moment to return the doll, revealing the fact that she has had it all along. Furious at what she sees as a double betrayal, Nina accuses her of being an ‘unnatural mother’, which is to say a monster, not seeing that this constitutes the kernel of the education in freedom imparted by the older woman. Nina stabs her with the hatpin inflicting both minor injury and sharp shock. In an inversion of the spindle in the fairytale that, pricking the young adolescent woman in the fairy tale, causes her to fall asleep, she passes out later at the wheel of her car, in delayed reaction to this injury, and awakens into a new subjectivity. Seen from the ‘monster’s perspective, expulsion from the liminal is incorporation into a reconfigured subject space, her journey complete. As she recovers in hospital, her daughters call and for the first time see her as a separate being, not just a mother, worthy of their interest. ‘“Won’t you let us know if you’re alive or dead?”’ they ask. She replies, cryptically, but with reference to her new condition of selfhood:’ “I’m dead, but I’m fine”’ (p. 140).

In contrast to the somewhat younger Olga, abjection is a means by which Leda distances herself from the subjugated femininity of her youth which, in any case, she is being driven by cultural forces to leave behind. Her experience suggests that, while abjection is an oppressive and violent process, it also potentially enables an empowering transformation of female subjectivity, especially when experienced in the context of ageing. Looking at the experience of Olga and Leda together suggests that, if the fear of the poverella marks the limits of the feminine second-sex subject position in one direction, the fear of the monster marks the limits at the opposite side: true freedom, and escape from alterity, requires that both be confronted, a process that is mediated by the abject. Whilst Olga succeeds in overcoming the threat of the poverella, first overwhelmed by abjection and then using it to restore her place within the sexual regime, Leda’s triumph, by contrast, is one of true transgression: She has indeed embraced the abject, let it take her from structure, anti-structure to the new structure of metamorphosis. By the novel’s close, shehas burst her constraints; this monster is no longer terrified of herself, and all she may be and with Leda, Ferrante has created a line of flight, a pointer for personal and social change, turning the ‘vulnerable seed of fabulation’ that appeared in the earlier novel ‘into a fully expressive intuition’ (Stenner, 2017: 64) with the later one.

**Concluding thoughts**

In this paper, I have been keen to trace the psychosocial domain of the ageing female self, viewing it not as an individual nor an eternal phenomenon but intricately linked to ideological forces, remembering Nancy Chodorow’s observation that, ‘understanding female subjectivity is central to understanding a gendered society’ (1999: x). Where older women are being oppressed in multiple new and old ways, highlighting the processes of private empowerment that go on in parallel seems to me a task of political importance. Whether ageing is a necessary (if not sufficient) condition for this self-reclamation is a significant question: Beauvoir certainly suggests ways in which one may aim for transcendence, as well as a unified self, earlier in the life course (see McWeeny, 2017). Certainly, in marginalising and problematising older women, ageing undoubtedly adds greater impetus to this process. Ferrante’s novels, shocking as they are, crystallise these emerging structures of women’s consciousness, and give older women readers poised on the hag/Hag brink (as well as their daughters looking ahead in life) a good insight in symbolic and literal terms of the dangers they face in this journey, the things they may fear, the nature of the prize to be won and the costs both of embracing and of resisting this challenge.

Endnotes

1. McWeeny (2016; 2017) details the importance of understanding the meaning of *se faire objet*, as Beauvoir employs it in *The Second Sex* which is key to her idea that the female is not born but becomes a woman. Translating it as ‘making oneself an object’ it indicates a consciousness that is body specific, doubled or fragmented, and lies at the heart of women’s social disadvantage.
2. Charting the changes in women’s and men’s attitude to their bodies over several generations, Nielsen sees a transformation. Whereas women of Generation X resolve the tensions between gender and individuality by ‘toning down’ gender, today’s Millenials are caught up in both exhortations to be agentic individuals and a new revitalised discourse of essential gender difference which suggests that ‘the #MeToo explosion draws its energy exactly from this deepened split’

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1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)