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## Of Cosmetic Value Only: Make-Up and Terrible Old Ladies in Victorian Literature

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By looking at the figure of the painted older woman in nineteenth-century novels, this article examines how changing attitudes to cosmetics punished ageing women who clung to the make-up of their youth. As a warning against such continued practices, Catherine Gore's ageing Lady Ormington demonstrates how devotion to make-up cannot hold back the signs of ageing. In a similar manner, Dickens's Mrs Skewton shows how Georgian make-up, her ageing features, and her corrupt personality are equally contaminative. Finally, Percy Fitzgerald's 'Terrible Old Lady' shows how heavy make-up is a literary motif that better delineates the ravages of female ageing than biological change alone. I conclude that in nineteenth-century novels, cosmetics do not function as a worrying disguise or serve as a medical warning, but rather act to depict the ageing woman as extraneous, purposeless, and aesthetically irrelevant.

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## Face value

Ageing female protagonists in mid-Victorian fiction face a particular double bind. They are criticized for their ageing appearance and ridiculed for using cosmetics to hide the signs of ageing. This article shows how ageing features *and* the use of cosmetics are used to signify wider disapproval of old women, while registering make-up as a sign of attachment to the perceived immorality of a previous era. This change also affected the way that Victorian writers present ageing women. Make-up might seem like a minor cultural consideration, but the way that Victorian authors write about ageing female protagonists wearing cosmetics tells us a good deal about how Victorian society interpreted the value of older women.

It is not impossible to imagine that a more progressive attitude towards the visible signs of ageing in older women might have emerged by the *fin de siècle*, by which time, as Karen Chase reminds us, old age became ‘an established “category” of scientific and political discourse’.<sup>1</sup> Yet Victorian society continued to hold women up to harsher aesthetic judgement, largely because of the value placed on youth. As Esther Godfrey notes, it was taken for granted that men would want to marry ‘girls younger than themselves and from whom the bloom [had] not been rubbed away’.<sup>2</sup> However, ageing Victorian women who tried to recreate that bloom were considered suspect and capable of hiding more than wrinkles under their cosmetics.

As Kay Heath has argued, old age was judged by appearance in the Victorian period; a person was old when they looked old, but women were usually ‘considered elderly sooner’.<sup>3</sup> The belief that women aged more quickly than men did not start with the Victorians; it had its origins in classical philosophy. For example, Aristotle wrote about women as naturally cold ‘inferior creatures’ who reach ‘their end sooner’, while Hippocrates pronounced women old at ‘forty-five to fifty’ (but men at ‘fifty-five to sixty’).<sup>4</sup> In spite of medical progress, the Victorian gerontologist George Day retained a similar view about women’s ageing. In *A Practical Treatise on the Domestic Management and Most Important Diseases of Advanced Life*, Day claims that women decline into old age around their ‘fifty-second year’ while men are not old until their ‘sixtieth’ year.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Karen Chase, *The Victorians and Old Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Esther Godfrey, *The January–May Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Kay Heath, *Aging by the Book: The Emergence of Midlife in Victorian Britain* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. by A. L. Peck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943), p. 461; Peter N. Stearns, *Old Age in European Society: The Case of France* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> George E. Day, *A Practical Treatise on the Domestic Management and Most Important Diseases of Advanced Life* (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1849), p. 26. Day uses a sliding scale to measure the stages of ageing, but women are always ahead. Day calls these ‘declining age, extending in women to about the fifty-second year, and in men to about the sixtieth.

Therefore, rather surprisingly, even as Victorian doctors began to treat the diseases of old age as a separate branch of medicine, it was still held that women aged more quickly than men.

In line with this attitude of medical gendered ageism, mid-Victorian fiction typically presents female characters who are harshly judged for looking older. Ageing heroines are shown to have fallen victim to disproportionate aesthetic changes, and many female characters bemoan their loss of youth. The changes that appear on the skin of ageing female protagonists are often framed as bearing causal links to the way these women have lived their lives. This is because in Victorian literature skin operates as a text to be read, just as Victorian society thought of skin as a tool of moral evaluation.<sup>6</sup> The natural process of ageing in a woman's skin was often interpreted in relation to what she had done in her past.

The idea of ageing as a physical manifestation of wrongdoing is supported by the work of the Victorian dermatologist, Erasmus Wilson. Wilson wrote that while everyone's skin would inevitably lose elasticity, lines and wrinkles would take on an unattractive and 'permanent character' in individuals who had been party to bad actions and who had allowed 'grosser' thoughts 'unrestricted play'.<sup>7</sup> Wilson's theories are reflected in the work of mid-Victorian authors who imply that even though ageing is a natural life stage, its manifestations in women's complexions are determined by moral, rather than physiological, processes.

### Neither use nor ornament

We would not normally expect to find nuanced representations of female ageing among the heroines of 'silver fork novels', such as Catherine Gore's *Cecil; or, The Adventures of a Coxcomb* (1841): the genre is, after all, composed of superficial characters carrying before them signs of 'vanity for everyone to see'.<sup>8</sup> Yet Gore's late novel does offer a helpful means of signposting the ways in which attitudes to make-up participated in a wider transition of Regency to Victorian culture that took place early in Victoria's reign. The character of Lady Ormington cleaves to outmoded cosmetics in an

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Advanced age, or incipient old age, extending in women from fifty-three to about sixty-five, and in men from sixty to seventy. Mature or ripe old age, dating from the preceding period, and extending to about seventy-five in the female, and eighty in the male' (p. 26).

<sup>6</sup> Pamela K. Gilbert, *Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Erasmus Wilson, *Healthy Skin: A Popular Treatise on the Skin and Hair, Their Preservation and Management*, 5th edn (London: Churchill, 1855), pp. 8, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Copeland, *The Silver Fork Novel: Fashionable Fiction in the Age of Reform*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 81 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 29.

increasingly outdated genre, signalling a cultural moment at which both white paint and the fashionable society novel begin to reach the end of their relevance. In Victorian literature heavily made-up faces signify the older woman's physical and mental corruption, and a reluctance to leave behind the Georgian artificiality that comprised her youth. Unsurprisingly then, Victorian novels about ageing women reference both the older woman and her cosmetics as archaic.

Vain and self-centred, Lady Ormington gains her title by marrying well on the basis of her looks. She shows no interest in her husband, and only sporadic concern for her handsome son, who looks nothing like his father, and everything like her ladyship's favourite friend — an indication that, like many mid-century female characters who rely on their appearance for advancement, Lady Ormington's beauty conceals morally suspect behaviour. This suspicion is heightened by Lady Ormington's over-investment in cosmetic enhancement. Her early use of make-up is rationalized initially, as her beauty 'had been her stepping-stone to distinction; and she seemed to think too much care could not be bestowed on its adornment, as devotees erect a shrine to a favourite divinity'.<sup>9</sup> Drawing from a cabinet of 'Thévenot' cosmetics, a self-adoring Lady Ormington appears 'like the goddess that emerged from the brain of the father of the gods' (1, 14).<sup>10</sup> The comparison with deities forewarns that Lady Ormington's beauty will eventually be lost, since she is not immortal. Moreover, it points out the illusory and addictive nature of cosmetics. Initially, Lady Ormington uses make-up for youthful enhancement. Later, she comes to rely on the benefits of cosmetics, but finally, when she needs make-up the most, it lets her down, as old age inevitably triumphs over powder and paint.

The same make-up that helped elevate Lady Ormington to a position of wealth and eminence begins to fail her as her career, and the novel, progresses. Having invested so heavily in her appearance in youth, she starts to despair when she begins to look older. Her only hope is to draw more deeply from her bottles and boxes of cosmetics, in an attempt to maintain her looks. As she does so, Lady Ormington's practice begins to sound desperate. Her features now become reliant on synthetic materials, as

*flacons [...] held the lights and shades of her ladyship's complexion. Blue veins were sealed in one packet, and a rising blush was corked up in a crystal phial. Eyebrows*

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<sup>9</sup> [Catherine Gore], *Cecil; or, The Adventures of a Coxcomb*, 3 vols (London: Bentley, 1841), 1, 5.

<sup>10</sup> The reference to Thévenot relates to Jean de Thévenot, a French traveller to the East. He was a botanist, who discovered the properties of exotic beauty preparations. Gore appears to reference 'une gomme blanche, de bonne odeur, qui entre dans la composition de plusieurs onguents' ('a pleasant-smelling, white resin which goes into the composition of several unguents', my translation). See Michèle Longino, *French Travel Writing in the Ottoman Empire: Marseilles to Constantinople, 1650–1700* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 148. Gore uses this reference to give Lady Ormington's white make-up rarity and, potentially, mystical properties.

— eyelashes — lips — cheeks — chin — an ivory forehead, and a pearly row of teeth,  
 — all were indebted for their irresistibilities to a certain Pandora's box of a dress-  
 ing-case. (1, 14)

Where once Lady Ormington used make-up as 'adornment', to show her beauty in its best light, her later-stage use of cosmetics moves from the decoration of the real into the arena of the prosthetic. Gore uses the motif of a 'Pandora's box' to sound a warning that there has to be a price to pay for offering up a challenge to nature. Once cosmetics have been taken out of the box, their use cannot be forgiven or forgotten.

Lady Ormington's use of make-up serves as a limited vanguard against ageing. When faced with the inevitable facts of her declining beauty, she retires to her curtained room to age in a state of permanent twilight. Lady Ormington no longer belongs in fashionable society and is devoid of other purpose, being neither useful nor ornamental. And yet this seemingly redundant figure has not yet completed her fourth decade; but, as Gore warns her readers, 'eight-and-thirty is a frightful epoch in the life of a woman of fashion' (1, 16). The message that we are encouraged to take away from this tale is that a life based on cosmetic advantage is necessarily ephemeral.

Gore's novel also reflects changing attitudes towards the purpose of make-up and artificial embellishment in the early years of the Victorian period, registering how a society that was increasingly influenced by the moral strictures of evangelicalism began to criticize the fashions of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In Victorian literature this is evident as ageing women are shown clinging onto old-fashioned 'rouge [...] and white enamel' in order to disguise the work of time, while young women demonstrate the 'more restrained use of cosmetics' modelled on the 'young Victoria herself'.<sup>11</sup> Ageing female protagonists who continue to wear heavy cosmetics came to embody deceit, immorality, and the foolish fashions of the past.

### Painting over the lines

In the Georgian era wealthier older ladies — and men, for that matter — could rely on the socially approved use of heavy make-up to hide any imperfections. English higher society took their lead from French aristocrats who, themselves, wore 'thick layers of white paint and large streaks of rouge across their faces, from the corner of the mouth to the tip of the ear'.<sup>12</sup> In late eighteenth-century England, a heavily blanched face was held up as the model of perfection, and thick layers of white paint provided the

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Corson, *Fashions in Makeup: From Ancient to Modern Times*, rev. edn (London: Owen, 2010), p. 292; Sally Pointer, *The Artifice of Beauty: A History and Practical Guide to Perfume and Cosmetics* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2005), p. 138.

<sup>12</sup> Morag Martin, 'Doctoring Beauty: The Medical Control of Women's Toiletries in France, 1750-1820', *Medical History*, 49 (2005), 351-68 (p. 351).

perfect cover for the effects of disease, blemishes, and wrinkles, giving older women the tools to diminish the signs of ageing. Wearing this type of make-up allowed women a degree of intergenerational equality; the older lady could use baroque make-up capable of painting over the lines on her face almost as if she were made of canvas. As Caroline Palmer notes, this level of camouflage was possible because ‘the ingredients for cosmetics and for artists’ materials were often the same, with identical pigments, such as white lead and carmine’.<sup>13</sup>

By the early nineteenth century, however, such heavy make-up was criticized on the grounds that it was damaging. Aside from the health concerns associated with white lead, there was also growing support for the concern that heavy make-up could disguise a woman’s identity and age rather *too* effectively. Aimée Marcereau DeGalan recounts how in 1771 one man was so deceived by his bride’s appearance that he looked to divorce her on the basis of her true, not apparent age.<sup>14</sup> In a state of shock after seeing his wife without make-up, he wrote a letter to a newspaper stating that

no man was so enamoured as I was of her fair forehead, neck and arms [...] but to my great astonishment I find they were all the effect of art. Her skin is so tarnished with this practice, that when she first wakes in a morning, she scarce seems young enough to be the mother of her whom I carried to bed the night before. (DeGalan, p. 45)

DeGalan’s anecdote makes it clear that late eighteenth-century make-up had the capacity to be an effective, if dangerous, weapon in the ageing woman’s armoury. DeGalan also points to fears about what was possible if female ageing went undetected, and if make-up provided older women with the tools to seduce, delude, and deceive unsuspecting men. Encoded here is an anxiety that repeated use of make-up is itself a form of corruption.<sup>15</sup> The bride’s ‘tarnished’ skin is equated with advanced ageing and, by extension, with an assumption of prior sexual experience. Cosmetics fell out of favour in Victorian society because of their threat to health and because make-up obscured identity, including a person’s class, race, and age. However, the representation of heavily made-up women continued as a trope in Victorian literature, with baroque cosmetics employed as emblematic of an older woman’s underhand practice, and her battle to remain attractive and relevant in changing times.

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<sup>13</sup> Caroline Palmer, ‘Brazen Cheek: Face-Painters in Late Eighteenth-Century England’, *Oxford Art Journal*, 31 (2008), 195–213 (p. 200).

<sup>14</sup> Aimée Marcereau DeGalan, ‘Lead White or Dead White? Dangerous Beauty Practices of Eighteenth-Century England’, *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts*, 76.1–2 (2002), 38–49 (p. 45). The name of the unhappy ‘man’ is not given.

<sup>15</sup> This theme is used by Wilkie Collins in *Armadale* (1866). This novel features an older character, Lydia Gwilt, whose dishonesty is linked to early use of cosmetics. She is thirty-five but looks in her twenties because of make-up. She is also a murderer who moves into a higher class because of her looks.



### Making up the rules

Much of the anti-cosmetic discourse that characterizes early Victorian attitudes to make-up was first circulated in beauty manuals and advice books for women written by doctors. Originating in late eighteenth-century France, the beauty manual became a publishing staple of the first half of the nineteenth century, as British doctors sought to control public responses to women's appearance by producing manuals that advised on beauty and hygiene. These manuals typically promoted healthy, alternative beauty practices and decried the use of white paint. As Morag Martin notes, the declared reason for the rise of the advice manual was concern for women's health, but these manuals also created a level of control over women through their promotion of a 'vision of healthy and hygienic beauty that placed female vanity within the domestic sphere, always under the strict eye of a trained professional' (p. 355). Such publications produced a narrative that cosmetics belonged in the past, as doctors used 'scientific rationality and truth' in order to move the concept of beauty care away from 'aristocratic decadence and immoral coquettes' (Martin, p. 355). By doing this, doctors made links between health and propriety. Beauty and virtue were positioned in opposition to the dissolution and excess popularly associated with eighteenth-century society, and emphasis was placed instead on middle-class family life and personal acts of discrete, modest cleanliness.

Nineteenth-century beauty manuals consistently warned against the use of commercially produced cosmetics to hide the signs of ageing. Victorian dermatologists like Erasmus Wilson and Arnold Cooley produced publications that offered a range of beauty advice, reflection on religious virtue, and an emphasis on the importance of morality. The manuals led the way in asserting medical authority over women's make-up by emphasizing the health benefits of preserving the skin, rather than encouraging its concealment beneath chemical cosmetics. Physicians used a range of different strategies to influence their female readers away from white paint. One strategy was to write under female pseudonyms to lend credibility to their claims. An example of such authorship comes from the nom de plume of *The Mirror of the Graces* (1811), an author rather cryptically called 'A Lady of Distinction'. This lady declares no interest in wanting to look younger by using cosmetics, writing emphatically that the act of preserving 'female charms in perpetual youth' is both unnatural and a form of 'sorcery'.<sup>16</sup> This avowal presents a 'real' female aristocrat acting in direct opposition to the behaviour of Catherine Gore's old-fashioned lady (Ormington), with her 'Pandora's box' of cosmetic deceit. By using the name 'A Lady of Distinction', the author was able to add to the growing discourse that fashions had changed and that even the upper classes had left such cosmetic practices in the past.

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<sup>16</sup> A Lady of Distinction, *The Mirror of the Graces*; or, *The English Lady's Costume* (London: Cosby, 1811), p. 33.

If a declaration made by a woman of class and innate virtue was not sufficient to prevent older, middle-class women from using make-up, beauty manuals frequently resorted to frightening their female readers. What better way of dissuading an ageing woman from using make-up than by emphasizing how much older she could look by wearing cosmetics? This ploy was used in the manual *The Art of Beauty*. The advice is both authoritative and threatening, as it warns against the use of ‘white paints’ because these are ‘extracted from minerals, more or less pernicious, but always corrosive’.<sup>17</sup> If damage from burning skin were not frightening enough, such cosmetics are also presented as affecting the eyes rendering them ‘painful and watery’ (p. 194). The manual also presents white paint as attacking the skin and, in doing so, producing ‘pimples’, which, it argues, could stop ‘the pores’ to the detriment of the skin’s respiration. Finally, it warns that white paint could repress all ‘perspiration’ and lead to ‘peril’, raising the possibility that make-up could actually kill the wearer (p. 194). Thus these beauty manuals raised the authority of the doctor, while compounding the belief that women had more to fear from the use of cosmetics than from the process of ageing itself.

### Soap-and-water beauty

While Victorian doctors promoted the value of natural, fresh-looking beauty, it is clear that their advice was principally useful to and directed at younger women. The dermatologist Cooley writes in praise of skin more generally as healthy, and best unadorned, with its velvet softness and its colours that mimic ‘the delicate hues of the lily, the carnation, and the rose’, praising its capacity for repairing and ‘renewing itself’.<sup>18</sup> Cooley does not mention whose skin he is writing about, but references to pink and white flowers signpost youthful skin. Furthermore, the notion of floral blooming was fundamentally connected to the physical development of young women in the minds of Victorian readers. As Amy King argues, puberty and early sexual attractiveness were openly communicated to a reading public through flowers.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, only young skin has the capacity for continued self-repair; Victorian medical writers were quick to point out that ageing skin did *not* bloom, but rather that it loses its ‘functions of absorption and secretion’ and, over time, becomes less and less capable of ‘repairing the injuries sustained from accident or disease’ (Day, p. 33). Medical advice on women’s

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<sup>17</sup> *The Art of Beauty; or, The Best Methods of Improving and Preserving the Shape, Carriage, and Complexion* (London: printed for Knight and Lacey, 1825), p. 194.

<sup>18</sup> Arnold J. Cooley, *The Toilet and Cosmetic Arts in Ancient and Modern Times* (London: Hardwicke, 1866), p. 197.

<sup>19</sup> See Amy M. King, *Bloom: The Botanical Vernacular in the English Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 45.



skin could, therefore, be divided into that which was addressed to women in bloom and that which was of little consolation to those women who were long past blooming.

In light of such medical dissuasion against cosmetics, what could an older Victorian woman do to avoid showing signs of ageing? Turning to the pages of early nineteenth-century beauty manuals, there is little real hope offered. Despite its encouraging title, *The Art of Beauty; or, The Best Methods of Improving and Preserving the Shape, Carriage, and Complexion* does not offer ways of improving the appearance of older skin: the manual merely advises that ‘those who are past the meridian of life, and have dry skins, and begin to be emaciated’ should take a ‘warm bath, for an hour twice a week’ in order to retard ‘the advances of old age’ (p. 161). In a similar manner, Cooley carefully explains how ‘wrinkles and looseness of the skin’ are produced through nature and by the ‘general emaciation’ caused by ‘old age’, but he gives little advice on how to hide such wrinkles (p. 224, emphases in original). If looking to stop lines forming in her skin, the only suggestions an ageing woman could find in Cooley’s work is a regime of ‘cleanliness, nutritious food, vigorous out-door exercise’ and the maintenance of an ‘agreeable occupation of the mind, and an equable and happy temper’ (p. 224). This advice demonstrates that doctors believed that an ageing external presentation of ageing was affected by a person’s disposition. In practical terms the only real guidance that *The Art of Beauty* and Cooley could offer older women was to wash, eat well, and think happy thoughts. The underlying message of these beauty manuals was that visible female ageing was inevitable, and that a woman should accept her period of youthful beauty as finite.

### Essentially corrupt

Few ageing female characters better exemplify a rejection of soap and water and happy thoughts than Mrs Skewton in Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1848) (Fig. 1). Her skin is testament to all the unnatural qualities of deception, corruption, and anachronism that the beauty manuals sought to reject from society. Where Lady Ormington tries to rejuvenate her fading features, Mrs Skewton goes further and uses cosmetics to replace them outright. Since Mrs Skewton is about seventy, and the novel in which she appears can be precisely dated to the railway boom of the 1840s, it is easy to associate her with cosmetic practices of the eighteenth century. There is little place for her in a new Victorian era of health and natural beauty. Dickens establishes Mrs Skewton as out of fashion through her fruitless manipulation of her skin in an attempt to preserve the ‘attitude’ she had in her youth, when she was drawn ‘some fifty years before, by a then fashionable artist’.<sup>20</sup> This was when Mrs Skewton was the toast of society, ‘a beauty’,

<sup>20</sup> Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1995), p. 268.



Fig. 1: Hablot Knight Brown ('Phiz'), Mrs Skewton, illustration to Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1848), etching, 22.6 × 14.3 cm, British Museum, London.  
 © The Trustees of the British Museum.

‘and bucks threw wine-glasses over their heads by dozens in her honour’ (p. 269). Mrs Skewton makes it clear that she has no intention of surrendering that status. From the outset, this dubious definition of ‘honour’ becomes attached to her intention to remain made-up, dressed up, and on the quest for male approval.

Mrs Skewton’s delusional vanity is treated as simultaneously amusing and deviant. It allows her to claim that she wants to see ‘nature everywhere’, despite the narrator’s wry observation that she was composed of ‘as much that was false about her as could well go to the composition of anybody with a real individual existence’ (pp. 270, 357). Mrs Skewton’s battle to appear youthful is evident in all her cosmetic manoeuvres. When she is first introduced, the narration turns to her complexion to observe that ‘although the lady was not young, she was very blooming in the face — quite rosy’ (p. 266). Mrs Skewton’s ‘blooming’ is isolated because it has only been applied to ‘her face’ through the heavy-handed application of rouge. By focusing on the notion of ‘blooming’, Dickens employs cosmetics to parody her approximation of youthful colour. Unlike the bloom promoted by Cooley in his praise of young female skin, Mrs Skewton lacks the capacity to bloom or blush, as she is devoid of both shame and hormones. Dickens uses her faux personality and faux complexion to parody what has long been lost. She uses lipstick to mimic natural colour, and when subsequently faced with the possibility that Major Bagstock might try to kiss her, her defence parodies innocence. The major,

considering himself challenged, would have imprinted a kiss on her exceedingly red lips, but for her interposing the fan with a very winning and juvenile dexterity. It might have been in modesty; it might have been in apprehension of some danger to their bloom. (p. 344)

Mrs Skewton’s perverse avoidance of a kiss — perverse because Major Bagstock describes her as ‘an ancient flame’ (p. 271) — is only the fear of smudged red paint. In playing with her ‘juvenile dexterity’, Dickens allows the old lady’s defence to be of her make-up, to make sure that we know she is neither concerned with her ‘modesty’, nor is she any longer in ‘bloom’. Dickens focuses on the excess colour on Mrs Skewton’s lips to draw attention to her true deficiency of colour, something that is likely to be revealed at any moment if that red paint is disturbed.

Despite her artificiality, Mrs Skewton claims to love nature. However, these claims are directly undermined as her crumpled, grotesque appearance is lit up by daylight. To make the contrast between her declarations and her practice, her inauthenticity is revealed by *actual* nature in the form of sunlight, revealing the truth about her aged appearance. Mrs Skewton’s machinations are meant to show her literally in a bad light,



especially as she plans to utilize her daughter's youthful good looks to her own ends. To make the contrast between youth and old age, as Mr Dombey and Major Bagstock seek out a last look at the beautiful Edith, they are treated instead to 'the last glimpse of the wrinkled face of the mother, with that patched colour on it which the sun made infinitely more haggard' (p. 270). The use of the definite article to describe 'the wrinkled face' makes clear that 'the face' is separated by make-up from Mrs Skewton's 'face'. The face she presents to the world does not really belong to her. Additionally, her 'patched colour' serves to represent both her age-mottled skin and the make-up she uses to patch it. In this description then, ageing skin, and the make-up used to disguise it, function symbiotically as a means of generating disgust.

Constantly working to veil her ageing, Mrs Skewton calls upon a range of synthetic objects in her efforts to obscure her true complexion. In hiding her real skin, however, she is drawn to artificial 'skins' that echo the state of her own: part of an insistent pattern in which Dickens parallels Mrs Skewton's material culture of coquetry with her prosthetic beauty. For example, she has a dried-out handkerchief, capable of 'rustling' because it is stiff and 'sickly with essences' (p. 268). This handkerchief draws parallels with the old lady's own crinkled, artificially scented skin. Mrs Skewton's fan also has a surface that mimics her aged skin. Folded, lined, and papery, it too has a double purpose. It shades her face from direct gaze, and it is used to reposition 'her false curls and false eyebrows' as they slide around on top of 'her false complexion' (p. 268). This falseness and lack of adhesion between skin and artificial features finds an echo in the lack of maternal attachment with her daughter, Edith. Mrs Skewton is a bad mother. She is reticent to think about Edith's welfare, choosing instead to look after her own interests. Mrs Skewton's order of priorities is in evidence when, the night before Edith marries Mr Dombey, the aged mother worries about her own appearance rather than about the feelings of the bride-to-be. She claims that Edith should not upset her, because she is 'naturally anxious to appear to the best advantage' at *Edith's* wedding the next day (p. 402). From such self-centred behaviour, Dickens makes it clear that Mrs Skewton's unnatural looks and unnatural feelings may be read as one and the same.

So too, in a wider sense, Mrs Skewton's use of make-up represents her potential to corrupt young girls: there is a note of caution raised as Florence Dombey and Mrs Skewton move close to each other. When instructed to kiss her step-grandmother, Florence tries to show affection, but cannot find a make-up-free part of Mrs Skewton's face to kiss and, with comic timing, she ends up kissing her 'ear' (p. 393). Mrs Skewton's corruption is demonstrated both by her stage management of this show of affection and by the lack of clean skin available for Florence to kiss. Here, make-up serves as a wider metaphor for moral contamination; Florence runs the risk of something more

corrosive than powder rubbing off on her, from her brush with Mrs Skewton's painted face. If the disparity between natural youth and painted age were not enough, Mrs Skewton's language serves as a further warning about where the use of cosmetics may lead. Claiming that she sees 'a decided resemblance' between Edith and Florence, she calls attention to Florence's 'very unfinished state'; by which she means both Florence's youthful presentation (achieved without cosmetics) but also alluding to her sexual innocence (p. 393). By implication, the application of make-up would make Florence look less 'unfinished' and more like Edith who has been married off in childhood and, as a young widow, 'hawked and vended' by her mother (p. 366). Mrs Skewton's praise of 'cultivation' thus offers a link between an artificial face, sexual proclivity, and the ageing process, warning that make-up and old women should be prevented from corrupting young women through their cosmetic arts.<sup>21</sup>

However, if the sight of a cosmetically enhanced Mrs Skewton is distasteful, Dickens's description of her real appearance is far more grotesque. When she is divested of make-up, cosmetics become the less unaesthetic option. The artifices that Mrs Skewton uses to disguise her age are replaced by true old age, which Marianne Camus argues 'is based on the work of time on beauty which is nothing if not natural'.<sup>22</sup> However, even though Dickens depicts Mrs Skewton's unvarnished appearance as pathetic, he makes us disinclined to pity her. By first presenting her as painted, Dickens encourages readers to see her aged appearance as self-inflicted damage when he eventually shows her without make-up. Not unlike DeGalan's story of the aged bride, the state of Mrs Skewton's ageing becomes the result of hiding her true age in the first place.

Removing Mrs Skewton's make-up and false accoutrements does not reveal her as more attractive, because her authentic self is just as corrupt beneath the corrupting surface. If anything, she becomes less human as her real skin is revealed. Reduced, compressed, and corpse-like, Dickens makes the corruption of age seem worse than the paint that held it together, as

the painted object shrivelled underneath her hand; the form collapsed, [...] pale lips shrunk, the skin became cadaverous and loose; an old, worn, yellow, nodding woman, with red eyes, alone remained [...], huddled up, like a slovenly bundle, in a greasy flannel gown. (p. 365)

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<sup>21</sup> This sentiment is mirrored in Good Mrs Brown's treatment of her daughter, Alice Marwood.

<sup>22</sup> Marianne Camus, 'The Female Grotesque in Dickens', in *The Grotesque in the Fiction of Charles Dickens and Other 19th-Century European Novelists*, ed. by Isabelle Hervouet-Farrar and Max Vega-Ritter (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), pp. 192–202 (p. 194).

Despite the criticism levelled at Mrs Skewton for her adherence to false beautification, when divested of her cosmetics her status diminishes even further. This runs in direct opposition to the promises made by Victorian doctors that the removal of make-up could provide its own reward, and that cleanliness could retard ‘the advances of old age’ (*The Art of Beauty*, p. 161). Dickens makes it clear that this old woman’s contamination runs deeper than her make-up. He wants to show us that the old woman is dirty and ‘slovenly’ on the inside too. Far removed from the promises of soap-and-water freshness presented in beauty manuals, Mrs Skewton becomes more artificial when her make-up is removed. Her structure without make-up is ‘collapsed’, her now ‘pale lips’ appear to lose fluid as they shrink, and she is separated from her make-up-free ‘skin’ as it becomes ‘cadaverous and loose’ inching her closer to the grave. She is presented as essentially corrupt and merely an ‘object’. The ageing widow is fundamentally ‘slovenly’ and ‘greasy’. Mrs Skewton’s reliance on cosmetics becomes all that supports ‘the old, worn [...] woman’ inside. In the final analysis make-up that has so long been part of her life comes to operate like an exoskeleton and is offered as all that prevents her from dying.

Dickens stretches this analogy to the point that make-up is all that can save her after her ‘paralytic stroke’ when Mrs Skewton still dresses in ‘her finery leering and mincing at Death, and playing off her youthful tricks upon him as if he had been the Major’ (p. 489). Even on her deathbed, she insists on putting a rose-coloured complexion on the situation by requesting another skin to hide behind. She calls for ‘rose-coloured curtains for doctors [...] for the better presentation of her complexion to the faculty’ (p. 489). She requests that her own skin be similarly coloured, asking that ‘a little artificial bloom’ be ‘dropped into the hollow caverns of her cheeks’ (p. 489). The shared colour and the temporary nature of this rosiness make the curtains and the old lady’s skin one and the same. However, both ‘the curtains’ and the ‘bloom’ are thin coverings with no substance behind them. Ultimately, their fake ‘bloom’ cannot prevent Mrs Skewton’s collapse behind her final artificial curtain.

### **A terrible old lady**

So far, I have argued that the ageing, female characters Lady Ormington and Mrs Skewton are connected with motifs of late eighteenth-century cosmetics, associating them with the artificiality of the previous century. Their desire to hide the signs of ageing marks them out as anachronisms in a new era that claimed to favour nature over artifice, but which nevertheless criticizes Mrs Skewton’s physical corruption when she is devoid of her make-up. I want to conclude this article by turning to the short story, ‘A Terrible Old Lady’ by Percy Fitzgerald, which appears to offer a similar narrative by presenting yet



another painted, ageing, female protagonist.<sup>23</sup> Fitzgerald's story provides a Victorian interpretation of Charlotte Elisabeth of Bavaria, Duchesse d'Orléans, also known as Madame Palatine (1652–1722). Charlotte Elisabeth was a German duchess, famous for writing about the French court at the time of the *grand siècle*. Fitzgerald does not quote from Charlotte Elisabeth's letters, but chooses to present instead vignettes about her life through her *imagined* appearance.<sup>24</sup>

Fitzgerald's representation of an ageing woman differs from those by Gore and Dickens because the real Charlotte Elisabeth did not wear make-up, rejecting the fashionable use of cosmetics which she might have been expected to adopt in her role as a duchess in the court of Louis XIV. Charlotte Elisabeth was opposed to paint of any kind, either on her person or on her portraits. In Hyacinthe Rigaud's honest portrait of her — the one she most favoured — the duchess is portrayed with a 'deliberately unvarnished face' as she 'detested *macquillage* of any kind' (Fig. 2).<sup>25</sup> Although she is wearing regal colours, her face is clear, and her hair is unadulterated. Claiming to welcome the ageing process, Charlotte Elisabeth wrote that she had always considered herself ugly, and that she was not distressed by the prospect of looking older.

However, Fitzgerald decided to add make-up to the duchess in his story, presumably because he felt that a 'terrible old lady' could not be regarded as 'terrible' if she did not resort to wearing white paint. Mixing tropes of Victorian and baroque ageing, Fitzgerald uses the application of heavy make-up to indicate that all ageing women must have an intention to deceive. Written as if from the perspective of Charlotte Elisabeth, one anecdote shows old women as hostile to one another and enjoying the sight of each other's ageing. Fitzgerald imagines the joy that Charlotte Elisabeth experiences watching the failed attempts of the 'Maréchale de \*\*\*' to retain her looks using cosmetics. The changes that the maréchale goes through include trying to hide the spots on her nose, as her 'lovely nose became long and coarse, and all mottled over with pimples' so that she was forced to cover 'each pimple' with 'a patch' (p. 500). In her attempts to hide her blemishes, Fitzgerald relishes the resultant image which is only an old woman with a nose covered with eighteenth-century beauty spots: in other words, bigger and even darker pimples.<sup>26</sup> The focus on the ageing woman's nose serves to make a link between the ageing process and natural deterioration into coarser, nosier behaviour. Moreover, as fast as she repairs the damages of ageing, the maréchale's true appearance breaks through. Fitzgerald's depiction of crumbling foundation and rouge

<sup>23</sup> [Percy Hetherington Fitzgerald], 'A Terrible Old Lady', *All the Year Round*, 2 August 1862, pp. 498–501.

<sup>24</sup> These letters were published in the Regency period.

<sup>25</sup> Elise Goodman, 'Elisabeth Charlotte, Duchesse d'Orléans: Portraits of a Modern Woman', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 29 (2007), 125–39 (p. 127).

<sup>26</sup> The French beauty spot was sometimes referred to as a 'mouche' because it resembled a black fly.



Fig. 2: After Hyacinthe Rigaud, Portrait of Elisabeth Charlotte of the Palatinate, Duchess of Orléans (1652–1722), c. 1713, oil on canvas, 132 × 109 cm, Palace of Versailles. Wikimedia Commons.

takes on the ‘look of a plastered skin’ to connect make-up with the crumbling edifices of an old building (p. 500). Fitzgerald reports on these failures in their rendering, making it clear that these types of cosmetic repair fool no one.

When it comes to presenting the eponymous old lady of this story, Fitzgerald explains that in order to do justice to her ‘wicked’ personality, he declares his intention to ‘vamp up a portrait’ of her (p. 499). He embellishes the appearance of Charlotte Elisabeth, to paint a picture of her as a decadent royal and an old lady steeped in

gossip; in order to present the duchess as outliving her usefulness, Fitzgerald has to demonstrate her artificiality. Fitzgerald, a contributor to Dickens's *Household Words* as well as to *All the Year Round*, calls upon Victorian prejudices attached to outmoded cosmetics by comparing Charlotte Elisabeth to Mrs Skewton. The author surmises that in appearance, personality, and intention, the old lady must have been 'an exact royal Skewton, snuffy, double-chinned, rouged, patched to the eyes, with wicked old eyes, and daubed profusely with the fashionable dye or pearl powder existing in those days' (p. 499). Fitzgerald moves between accusations of the old lady's naturally 'wicked' appearance and the 'wicked' 'powder' and 'dye' she applies to herself. The narration also makes this 'Skewton' both unique and a type. She is 'an exact Skewton', implying that she is the image of Dickens's original, a comparison that brings with it motifs of vanity and promiscuity. On the other hand, it seems that Dickens's Mrs Skewton has become a much broader archetype, functioning for later Victorians as a generic term for a painted old woman: a relic of the past. This oscillation between the specific and the generic is typical of Fitzgerald's text, which moves between criticizing Charlotte Elisabeth singly to criticizing old women collectively. He claims that the duchess is part of a 'herd' and that she 'renders competition hopeless' (p. 498). He then moves on to vilify the other old women in her court. The author presents all old ladies with the same intentions to deceive, depicting them as an 'aggregate of sham hair, sham teeth, sham bloom, sham plumpness, and sham smiles' (p. 498). These old women are discredited for their artificiality, their collective identity, and their worthlessness. Fitzgerald also signals that these old women do not contribute to the 'fashionable society' they inhabit, but that they spend their time as 'remains' upon 'the sofa'. The pun on 'remains' compounds the old women's indolence and draws attention to their corporal 'remains', which the narration believes should be in the ground. This is indicated through references to their archaic status as 'fearful stragglers and veteran anacronisms [sic], whose place is with that grand army who passed by, years ago' (p. 498).

Fitzgerald also criticizes Charlotte Elisabeth's longevity, placing her alongside other 'veteran stragglers' he thinks should have died years before. Having outlived their looks, partners, and purpose, the author contends that such old women would be better off dead. He reminds us that these 'terrible old ladies of society [...] fill us with awe and fear' by their continued presence (p. 498). It is this concern that suggests why Fitzgerald chooses to apply middle-class Victorian attitudes to the behaviours of the eighteenth-century French court. Fitzgerald's criticism moves beyond the old women of Louis XIV's court to remind us that if left unchecked, terrible old ladies will continue to threaten the morals of 'every fashionable society' (p. 498). In other words,

he reasons that ageing, painted women are, and always have been, endemic, socially superfluous, and a terror to all.

### Conclusion

Fitzgerald's warning about the continued presence of ageing, painted women and their reluctance to die out sums up the Victorian literary and medical backlash against the previous corrupt fashions and behaviours of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Like Gore and Dickens, Fitzgerald takes up the theme that ageing, painted women have no place in a new Victorian era of health and morality. However, this caution against such women appears unnecessary since the protagonists examined in these texts are all inevitably foiled or punished for their artificiality. At no point in these stories are we led to believe that an ageing woman can actually hide her age even behind the most extravagant cosmetics. The protagonists are ridiculed: Lady Ormington becomes a fading Georgian relic, Mrs Skewton only deludes herself, and in the three stories the narration is positioned as seeing the ageing process even through wicked intentions and layers of enamel. Above this, Fitzgerald's declaration that he has added paint to a long-dead duchess means that her ageing can hardly be hidden.

Why then, are we offered a warning about the continued presence of old, painted ladies? If we reflect on the assertions made by the physicians and medical writers of the mid-Victorian period, it would appear that in Victorian society, ageing women had little chance of bypassing scrutiny and judgement either. Continuing in the vein of classical medicine, the Victorian gerontologist George Day asserted that women aged more quickly than men; in medical advice manuals, women could read that their signs of ageing were easy to interpret, could be linked to their own behaviour or personality, and that beauty advice was only really targeted at young women. Through the narratives I have presented, it is clear that older women were also reminded that the use of make-up was ultimately futile and could leave them open to ridicule, disfigurement, or even death. There is no denying that lead paint was dangerous, but its prohibition stemmed from a controlled medicalized narrative too.

Victorian authors, literary and medical, deliberately present ageing women and their (ab)use of cosmetics to remain secure in their reading of a woman's age. DeGalan's anecdote of the aged, denuded bride and Dickens's representation of Mrs Skewton's naked skin demonstrate especially the fear that somehow an old woman might pass for a younger one. These themes were commonly linked to pre-Victorian cultures of femininity, indicating that there has always been an anxiety that older women might disguise their age and thereby escape male attempts to reveal, define, and delineate



their body. By the mid-nineteenth century, the same white paint that had been popular in the eighteenth century had become specifically associated with the older woman's inherent duplicity and a mask against the evaluative scrutiny of the male gaze. Gore, Dickens, and Fitzgerald were by no means the first or only authors to criticize women's use of make-up and artificial beauty aids. Their work is part of a long line of explicitly misogynistic commentary on ageing women that includes literature going back as far as Juvenal.<sup>27</sup> However, their writing indicates a change of focus as female ageing came under scrutiny with authors and doctors producing narratives with a suspicion that older women might prolong their sexual attractiveness and use make-up to disguise their motivations.

As Lisa Niles has argued, when it comes to literary representation of female ageing and cosmetics they cannot win. These female protagonists face a double bind. Positioned paradoxically, they are scorned for ageing and portrayed as 'in need of restoration' but also as 'in danger of courting ridicule for attempting that restoration'.<sup>28</sup> However, I would argue that the stories I have examined move beyond this predicament. Fitzgerald's expressed decision to add white paint to the character of Charlotte Elisabeth reveals the truer purpose of combining ageing and cosmetics: he demonstrates that a terrible old lady cannot be truly terrible without make-up. By doing this, Fitzgerald indicates the true purpose of archaic cosmetics in stories about ageing, female Victorian protagonists. He shows that when it comes to representation of female biological ageing, the signs of ageing themselves are visually insufficient. His story makes clear the understanding that old women need to be covered in cosmetics to better display their corruption. In these three Victorian narratives, make-up becomes something greater than a restorative, emerging instead as a frightening, additional layer of ageing, exacerbating that which it claims to conceal. It provides a better motif for writing about female ageing than ageing alone. In these stories cosmetics are no longer about concealing ageing: they work in direct opposition to their perceived function. Thematically, old women's make-up becomes a more visible form of ageing, producing broader implications of deception, corruption, and anachronism. The novels and short story I examine in this article show how ageing features *and* the use of cosmetics are used to signify wider disapproval of old women while registering cosmetics as a sign of attachment to the perceived immorality of a previous era. Ultimately, it demonstrates

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<sup>27</sup> Juvenal, *Satire 6*, ed. by Lindsay Watson and Patricia Watson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 228. Juvenal refers to a woman's made-up face as akin to a wound.

<sup>28</sup> Lisa Niles, 'Owning "the Dreadful Truth"; Or, Is Thirty-Five Too Old?: Age and the Marriageable Body in Wilkie Collins's *Armada*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 65 (2010), 65–92 (p. 68).

that in order to show corruption in an older female character, you need to refer to her age *and* her use of make-up. It also reminds us that in Victorian society more generally, women had much to worry about when it came to ageing, living as they did in a culture that still seemed to consider them first and foremost according to their cosmetic value.

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