Disrupting Dictates of Gender and Ageing through Creativity: Daphne du Maurier's Writing Persona in *The Breaking Point*

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Abstract

In her collection *The Breaking Point* (1959), Daphne du Maurier gives rise to a series of short stories which feature ageing characters facing a critical period in their lives, that subvert traditional dictates of gender and ageing. Du Maurier identified her writing persona in this later stage of creativity as "neither girl nor boy but disembodied spirit," thus acknowledging how traditional cultural dictates could be blurred through creativity. This article explores the matrix of ageing, gender, and creativity with respect to du Maurier's stories "The Alibi," "The Menace," and "The Chamois" in order to describe her writing persona at this particular moment of creativity, especially through feminist critic Betty Friedan's precepts in her book *The Fountain of Age* (1993). Friedan argues that a gender-role crossover often takes place in the years following parenthood, as men and women adopt qualities that they felt required to suppress years earlier in order to fulfil their respective culturally-assigned gender roles.

Introduction

When Daphne du Maurier published her collection of short fiction *The Breaking Point* (1959), she was going through a period of particular personal strain. According to her biographer Margaret Forster, writing this collection involved "a kind of therapy" (300), as du Maurier resorted to creativity to come to terms with her identity as a woman writer in this later creative stage. In the years prior to the publication of the short stories collected in this volume, du Maurier went through a series of events that had a deep emotional effect on her, such as the debacle of her marriage, her husband's confinement in a nursing house as a result of a nervous breakdown that was aggravated by alcoholism, and the tragic deaths of her mother and of her partner, Gertrude Lawrence, who passed away when she was only in her early fifties. In addition to her experience of personal crisis, the stories in this collection of short fiction underline the author's acknowledgement of her refusal to identify with any determining role in terms of gender and ageing. In this respect, it can be argued that this collection underscores a turning point in the gradual evolution of her writing persona. As Forster claims, given the gender prescriptions prevailing at the time, du Maurier perceived her writing persona as eminently masculine, especially in her youth, referring to her creative voice as her boyish self (276). However, when du Maurier got married and embraced domestic life, she went through a sense of split subjectivity, as she often perceived that her roles as a wife and a mother clashed with her more "masculine" identity as a professional woman writer. Upon the publication of *The Breaking Point*, this masculine dimension of her writing persona underwent a metamorphosis into a more emphatic ungendered self. In a letter addressed to her friend Ellen Doubleday, wife of her American editor, in December 1947, du Maurier resorts to metaphor to describe the transition that her writing persona underwent at this later stage of creativity from "boy in the box" to "disembodied spirit":

> The boy realised he had to grow up and not be a boy any longer, so he turned into a girl, and not an unattractive one at that, and the boy was locked in a box forever […] but when she found Menabilly [du Maurier's home] and lived in it alone,

> she opened up the box sometimes and let the phantom, who was neither girl nor boy but disembodied spirit, dance in the evening when there was no one to see. (Horner and Zlosnik 5)

The transformation of du Maurier's writing persona would precede the advent of her old age as a woman writer. It was in her process of ageing that du Maurier felt more capable of acknowledging this sense of split subjectivity in her writing persona in terms of gender, thus enacting this symbolic transition from her "boy in the box" to her "disembodied spirit" as a result of her wish to pursue gender indeterminacy and reject any defining role as a woman writer in her late years. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir and her thoughts on the social construction of the older woman in her seminal work *The Coming of Age*, Marilyn Pearsall refers to the negative features that have often characterised women's transition towards ageing. Even though, according to Beauvoir, women's ageing is discontinuous, as opposed to that of men, and sudden, owing to menopause, which has usually been perceived as a crisis in femininity (Pearsall 2), there is a need to challenge this negative assessment. One way of counteracting this biased perception of women's ageing involves looking for new paradigms of female subjectivity in later life (Pearsall 14), which begin to take shape in women's middle age, as Margaret Gullette points out in *Safe at Last in the Middle Years*, and as du Maurier's transformation of her creative voice in this transitional period also shows.

Indicative of the transformation of her writing persona in middle age, du Maurier's collection of short fiction *The Breaking Point* comprises a series of stories, such as "The Alibi," "The Menace," and "The Chamois," which feature middle-aged characters who face a critical period in their lives; a breaking-point that leads them to subvert traditional dictates of gender and ageing with differing results. In these three stories du Maurier has envisioned a series of characters, men and women, who exemplify the reversal of gender roles in their ageing process, symptomatic of the author's writing persona conceived as a "disembodied spirit" and her personal wish to disrupt culturally established prescriptions of gender and ageing through creativity. This article aims to analyse instances of gender-role crossover in the course of ageing of the characters within du Maurier's

short stories "The Alibi, "The Menace," and "The Chamois" in order to understand the author's writing persona and creative questioning of the dictates of gender and ageing.

Defying Emasculation: "The Alibi" and the Risks of Performing Gender

In "The Alibi," middle-aged man James Fenton adopts a secret identity to lead a double existence and escape the constraints of his married life, fantasising about the idea of committing a motiveless murder with the mere purpose of regaining the strength and male potency that he feels he is lacking. Once he has chosen his victims, a foreign young woman and her son, he concocts an alibi, pretending he is an artist in order to disguise his truly criminal aims. As he becomes increasingly fascinated by his recently discovered talent, instead of killing the young woman and her son, he decides to paint them, displacing his aggressiveness into art. In spite of the fact that he never really put them into practice, he is punished for his initial mischievous intentions. Despite focusing entirely on a male protagonist, this story, as Sally Beauman writes, "echoes her [du Maurier's] rage" (xiii). In fact, du Maurier wrote her story "The Alibi" at a time during which she felt she lived a tedious daily existence, as she had to leave her country house, Menabilly, and live in a flat in Chelsea, while her husband was under treatment. According to Forster, du Maurier felt almost unable to write during this period, as she felt required to play the role of the motherly wife and could not devote as much time to writing as when her husband had been absent during the war. In addition, "The Alibi" evokes the author's insights into what she perceived as a gradual period of weakening and decline that her husband was undergoing, as he was going through a nervous breakdown (Forster 290). Through the male character of her story, du Maurier seeks to explore how creativity can play a decisive role in escaping and subverting traditionally established roles of gender and ageing. Nevertheless, she suggests to herself in the conclusion of the story that in the end, reality usually imposes its own regulations regarding socially and culturally imposed roles.

With respect to precepts about gender and ageing, feminist critic Betty Friedan argues that women in later phases of life often break through "conventional expectations of decline and deterioration in age" (17), as they seem to enjoy life better in their forties, fifties, and even sixties than they did decades before. Conversely, Friedan also claims that, in comparison, "men show no such improvement" and even suffer "greater 'empty nest' crises than their wives" in the course of ageing (19). In "The Alibi," in his late middle-age, Fenton goes through a period of decline, mostly owing to the fact that the traditional gender role as male, which he has been culturally trained for, is being gradually undermined, as he feels increasingly entrapped in a domestic scenario and perceives he is going through an ongoing process of disempowerment, deprived of his male potency:

> The drowning man who sees the pattern of his life pass by as the sea engulfs him could at last be understood. The ring at the front door, the cheerful voices of the Alhusons, the drinks set out on the side-board, the standing about for a moment and then the sitting down—these things became only pieces of the tapestry that was the whole of his life-imprisonment. ("The Alibi" 3)

In order to counteract this symbolic process of emasculation, Fenton tries to recover some sense of powerfulness by indulging in behaviour associated with male aggressiveness, in an attempt to deny a gradual sense of decline in the course of ageing. Drawing on Daniel Levinson's and Erik Erikson's classic life-course theories, Friedan claims that men's lives have often been delineated as following a straight line of development from youthful preparation to adult potency, going through a midlife peak and crisis so as to finally descend onto death, standing in contrast with women's vital trajectory which often seems to follow a less orderly and more intricate progress (22). As Friedan further develops, men in their fifties and sixties appear to go through the male equivalent of what can be defined as "the problem that has no name" that women have undergone years before, which she terms as a "male midlife crisis" and suggests can

be undermined through subverting culturally established gender roles for both men and women (156). In "The Alibi," when Fenton undergoes a symbolic process of emasculation in order to neutralise his male midlife crisis, he resolves to adopt features of the traditional masculinity that he has been required figuratively to emulate by cultural standards. As Forster explains, drawing on a biographical reading of the story, through the character of Fenton, du Maurier envisioned her own husband at a stage when he was also undergoing a male midlife crisis, since he felt emotionally and economically dependent on his wife. In analogy with the character of Fenton in du Maurier's story, her own husband also tried to recover his sense of male potency by resorting to illicitness, having affairs with other women (Forster 290).

In order to overcome this sense of emasculation that he feels ageing brings about, as Richard Kelly claims, Fenton ventures to become a sort of Nietzschean superman (129). He admits to himself, in devising his plans to commit murder, that "he was aware of a sense of power within—he was in control—his was the master-hand that set the puppets jiggling" ("The Alibi" 3). Nonetheless, Fenton's criminal intentions ultimately undergo an ironic twist when, upon pretending he is an artist in order to conceal his wicked aims, he discovers that painting is gradually becoming his real vocation. As an author, du Maurier was well aware of the power that creativity bestowed upon her, to the extent that, like her character Fenton, she fantasised about the artistic power of giving and taking life in fiction, claiming:

> I can even confess I enjoyed the killing—it gave a certain zest to the writing, and if I felt an inward pang for the loss of the character I had created, the pang was soon forgotten and the memory faded. ("Death and Widowhood" 122)

It was precisely in this period, when she had to move to London to take care of her husband during his illness and could not give free vent to her creativity, that du Maurier fantasised about the artistic power she enjoyed when she was writing. In the course of the creative process, not only did du Maurier feel that she acquired an unusual degree of authority

and that she often played the part of the breadwinner in her family, but she noticed that, through writing, she often found herself subverting the traditional assignation of gender roles. However, du Maurier also felt that her profession as a woman writer—which, given her upbringing, she would regard as eminently "masculine"—was mostly responsible for the crisis that was befalling her marriage. In a letter addressed to Ellen Doubleday in September 1948, only a few years before the publication of her collection *The Breaking Point*, du Maurier went as far as to contend that "women should not have careers—it's people like me who have careers who really have bitched up the old relationship between men and women" (Horner and Zlosnik 5), unveiling her sense of guilt at what she perceived as a wishful gender cross-over that took place when she envisioned herself as a woman writer. However, owing to the troublesome period she was undergoing emotionally, du Maurier noticed that her "masculine" writing persona suffered a gradual process of emasculation, which would lead to the metaphorical transformation of her creative voice into a "disembodied spirit" (Horner and Zlosnik 5).

In "The Alibi," owing to an increasing sense of mid-life crisis, Fenton realises that painting endows him with the authority to escape the subservient role that he feels he is playing in his marriage, and instead, regain the male authority and potency of which he believes he has been gradually dispossessed. When Fenton paints Anna Kaufman, he becomes aware of "a tremendous sense of power to put the woman upon canvas" ("The Alibi" 23), and in a rather misogynistic way he fantasises about patriarchal power and women's subjugation, precisely on account of the fact that he feels that, in real life, in his marriage and as a late middle-aged man, his male authority is continually put in jeopardy. In his artistic delusions, Fenton thus admits,

> If there was one thing he could not stand it was a woman who argued, a woman who was self-assertive, a woman who nagged, a woman who stood upon her rights. Because of course they were not made for that. They were intended by their Creator to be pliable, and accommodating, and gentle, and meek. The trouble was that they were so seldom like that in reality. ("The Alibi" 24)

In the course of his patriarchal delusions of power, Fenton envisions an alternative existence in which not only is he able to live by a dependable young woman over whom he can exert his authority, but given his new artistic talent, he becomes a reputed painter in order to regain his wife's admiration and respect.

Significantly enough, when Fenton tries to produce his own portrait, it can be claimed that he experiences what Kathleen Woodward defines as the phenomenon of the mirror of old age, as he feels unable to look at his image in the mirror, especially his eyes, that is, his "I," his self. In the narrative, this scene is portrayed as follows,

> The self-portrait was absorbing. Madame Kaufman had found a mirror and hung it on the wall for him, so the start was easy enough. But he found he couldn't paint his own eyes. They had to be closed, which gave him the appearance of a sleeping man. A sick man. It was rather uncanny. ("The Alibi" 28)

This passage seems to ratify Woodward's thesis, which, drawing on Freud, describes the shock of recognition upon meeting one's double in the mirror as elderly, which she defines as "the mirror of old age," claiming that, in old age, individuals tend to separate their real selves from their bodies, acknowledging that the recognition of old age ultimately comes from the other ("The Mirror of Old Age" 104). Likewise, Woodward's "mirror of old age" turns into a reversal of Lacan's "mirror stage of infancy," since, while infants fantasise about an integrated image in the mirror which contrasts with their perception of a still undeveloped self, ageing individuals notice the contrast between their fully developed self and a disintegrated body image.

The secret identity he has created to try to cope with his sense of emasculation and decline is finally disclosed, and ironically, his initial fantasy of criminality and male aggressiveness is no longer constrained within the domain of art, but it is actually taken at face value: Fenton is charged with murder, as the dead bodies of Anna Kauffman and her son are discovered soon after they commit suicide. The story's sarcastic and ludicrous close implies that art may ultimately take revenge on life: Fenton is punished for fantasies of male aggressiveness and patriarchal

control, which are never truly fulfilled but are appeased and transformed through artistic catharsis, as, through the alibi of painting, he manages to neutralise the male potency that he is culturally required to adopt but which he perceives to be in decline. Hence, even if he temporarily manages to escape the decline of his male potency in his marriage and placates his urge to display male authority by effect of artistry, he is finally required to succumb to the social demands of traditional masculinity in real life. In fact, Fenton surrenders to the cultural requirements of masculine aggressiveness, as he feels obliged to confess having committed a crime that never truly took place:

> 'All right, I'll confess everything. I was her lover, of course, and the child was mine. I turned on the gas this evening before I left the house. I killed them all. I was going to kill my wife too when we got to Scotland. I want to confess that I did it… I did it… I did it…' ("The Alibi" 43)

Fenton's capitulation to the surrounding cultural pressures requesting him to acknowledge his rough masculinity responds mainly to the transformative power of gender performance. Even if he neither commits adultery nor succumbs to unlawfulness, he acts as if he is indulging in behaviour associated with rough masculinity, and thus, through his performance, it is finally assumed that he truly possesses the gender qualities he seeks to display. Fenton's conduct exemplifies Judith Butler's precepts stating that gender identity is accomplished through repeated practices that unveil its performative quality, ultimately giving rise to the subversion of gender, as it is revealed that gender becomes naturalised through "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (Butler 33). Likewise, as Anne Basting claims, together with gender, ageing is also endowed with a performative quality, taking into consideration that, as Gullette points out in *Aged by Culture*, one can act younger or older regardless of one's chronological age. As a case in point, Fenton fantasises about male potency, as it is culturally associated with male youth, but it is precisely owing to his gender and age performance

that he is ultimately punished, as he is symbolically ostracised for refusing to act his age according to social and cultural standards.

Subverting Traditionally Prescribed Roles of Masculinity in "The Menace"

If in "The Alibi" du Maurier envisions a male character whose performance of coarse masculinity brings him trouble in the course of ageing, the author revaluates the issue of gender-roles reversal upon the advent of ageing in her story "The Menace." Here, du Maurier examines the case of a middle-aged actor, who, having been considered an epitome of virility for all his career, perceives that his manhood is eventually called into question. In "The Menace," Barry Jeans is described as "a heart-throb, a lover, someone with wide shoulders and no hips" (200). Owing to the action films in which he usually takes part, the audience clearly associates him with a rough kind of masculinity, as it is conceded that

> only the muscle at the side of the lean jaw tautens, and then the fans know that Barry is either going to hit someone, and hit him hard, or stagger in a torn shirt through a jungle carrying on his back a man who hates him, or lie in an open boat after shipwreck. (200)

Barry Jeans has enjoyed fame and popularity for years, and at this stage of his career, when he has reached "the mid-fifties-age-group" (200), he is still enduringly idolised as an icon, because "the fans don't want to see a youngster stagger through the jungle or lie in an open boat – it would not look right" (200). Barry's attractiveness upon ageing is evocative of Susan Sontag's precepts about the double standard of ageing which operates in men's favour, precisely owing to the way masculinity has been traditionally constructed. As Sontag argues, men are often judged by what they do instead of how they look, their social and economic status is supposed to improve with age (20) while the lines appearing on their face are taken as signs of character indicating strength and maturity, which are considered highly-valued qualities in men (23). Hence, it is especially at

his age that Barry Jeans is considered a perfect embodiment of a timeless sort of masculinity, equally worshipped by elders and youngsters, and characterised by maturity, strength, and determination, with a professed emphasis on his ageing traits:

> The greying hair—only at the temples, mind—and the slightest suspicion of a bag under the eye, and that line on the jaw, it did the same thing to the daughters that it had done to the mothers twenty years before; it made them dream. ("The Menace" 204)

The age and gender role that this actor projects both on-screen and off-screen is endowed with an important performative quality and is ultimately revealed to be a construct. Following Kathleen Woodward's statement that, if gender is an identity that we accumulate over time through performing certain norms we have internalised, we can also say that age functions in the same way ("Performing Age" 180), du Maurier's story tackles the inherent relation between age and gender performance and its consequent subversion of its dictates. Ironically enough, in an eminently performative context such as cinema, ageing also plays an important part in Barry Jeans's performance of gender. His staff take good care that Barry preserves his image as "every woman's lover and no girl's father" ("The Menace" 205), because they assume that casting him in roles such as that of "the family man," generally assigned to older actors, would have a negative effect on his career. In their view, "when a star begins to play fathers it is the thin edge of the wedge, and a grandfather, of course, is his finish" ("The Menace" 205), which literally implies, to use Gullette's phrase that, in that way, he would become "aged by culture."

However, far from matching the icon of tough masculinity that he is believed to incarnate, in his everyday life the actor leads a rather domesticised existence, having been married for thirty years to a motherly wife. For the creation of the character of Barry Jeans, du Maurier might have had her friend Gertrude Lawrence in mind, since, as happens with Barry, whose public image as a hearthrob differs from his actual personality, Lawrence was a stage actress and an icon of female sexuality

for male audiences, but she was also admittedly homosexual. Du Maurier's relationship with Lawrence awakened what the author regarded as her "Venetian tendencies," referring to her own homosexual identity (Forster 28), and in so doing, it also emphasised the author's consideration about gender performance and its reflection in this story. In "The Menace," the image of Barry Jeans as an icon of toughness and his performance of hyper-masculinity is eventually put under threat when, owing to a major change in the film industry and the advent of films known as "feelies," his voice has to be recorded during the shooting. In the sound tests, it becomes evident that the tone of his voice is "the lowest number on the dial, and not strong enough to feed the barker" ("The Menace" 207). The sharp contrast established between the hyper-masculine look that Barry Jeans projects and his frail and delicate voice—which differs significantly from the strong voice generally associated with coarse masculinity—threatens to destabilise his reputation as an icon of manhood in the film industry. Displaying the performative quality of age and gender, the film staff surrounding Barry Jeans move heaven and earth so that their star can register a more "masculine" tone of voice, according to cultural standards, to match his image as an archetype of tough masculinity appealing to the youth. With that purpose in mind, they decide to arrange a series of celebrations and dates with exuberant young women so that he manages to counteract what they perceive as a symbolic process of emasculation that is befalling the actor. Ironically enough, during a night out, Barry Jeans meets Pinkie, the girl with whom he used to spend the summer in his childhood, and this reencounter proves a turning point for him and his performance of age and gender. In contrast with the young girls with whom the staff had arranged meetings, Pinkie is described as "plump and middle-aged, and her hair was grey in the old-fashioned manner except for a purple streak down the middle" (218). Barry's encounter with Pinkie allows him to remember his childhood and be himself, symbolically leaving behind his masquerade as an icon, and liberating himself to the extent that, as the narrator recounts, "if the press had been around at that moment they would have seen an expression on the Menace's face that none of the fans had ever seen—it might be called emotion" (220). Barry's reencounter with an old friend from his youth is interpreted in

different ways, thus revealing the constructedness of gender. On the one hand, when his staff notice Barry leaving the ladies' powder room where he has been talking to Pinkie, they believe their suspicions about the star's homosexuality are confirmed. On the other hand, when a taxi driver sees the actor leaving Pinkie's house, he takes for granted that the actor has spent the night with her, thus sanctioning his iconic image as a womaniser.

These disparate readings of Barry Jeans expose the performative quality of gender and that gender roles can ultimately be subverted. In an ironic final twist of the story, while all the film crew believe that Barry Jeans is in decline and that his status as a womaniser is based on no ground, his voice is recorded again in the studio. This time it scores the highest intensity for men, which will allow him to retain his status as an icon of manhood. It becomes evident that it is owing to his encounter with Pinkie, with whom he was capable of releasing his feelings and sharing his emotions—unveiling his more "feminine" side by cultural standards—that his voice acquires a more masculine tone, implying that any prototype of masculinity is ultimately a construct and that any archetype of manliness does not exclude sensibility. Once Barry Jeans has shown his true colours with Pinkie, not only does his voice acquire a more generally considered "masculine" quality, but even his behaviour undergoes an important change, attaining an unusual degree of assertiveness and even roughness, which is traditionally related to masculinity:

> 'I'm boss here. And that goes for you, too, May. Nobody's going to ask me questions about last night. I had a good time. That's all there is to it. I never had such a time since I've been on the Coast. I feel great, just great. And if those damn fools on the floor haven't got their feelie gadget fixed by eight o'clock I'll tear up my contract with G.E. and quit business. And the first one of you who opens his mouth is fired.' ("The Menace" 238)

Drawing further on Friedan's precepts about gender and ageing, the character of Barry Jeans exemplifies how in ageing, to use Friedan's words, men and women can find "previously denied aspects of themselves" (19). A man can "discover and/or develop sensitivities in himself

that he had once sought only in women," eventually finding out the integration of masculine and feminine qualities can become "a possible stage of development in age" which grants him a symbolic process of rejuvenation at a later stage of his career (19). Through the character of Barry Jeans, du Maurier fantasises about the possibility that an ageing man could find redemption in liberating his sensitivity and subverting cultural dictates of gender. In this respect, du Maurier reflects upon her husband's situation in late middle age and the possibility that he found renewed strength in domesticity. Likewise, given the explicit reference to Barry Jeans's "feminine" or "masculine" voice, du Maurier also addresses the cross-gender quality of her own creative voice, exploring how her domestic life was influencing the "masculine" quality of her writing persona.

The Benefits of a Gender-role Crossover in "The Chamois"

While in "The Alibi" du Maurier features a character who fails to disrupt the culturally established dictates of age and gender and in "The Menace," she presents a character who succeeds in that same purpose, her story "The Chamois" could be defined as a wish-fulfilment narrative, through which she fantasises about how a reversal of gender roles in her marriage could help strengthen their relationship. In "The Chamois," a nameless female narrator recollects her trip to Greece with her husband, Stephen, who is obsessively fond of hunting chamois. From the start, the late middle-age female narrator reflects upon her marriage, confessing that, even though most people believe that they are happily married, she cannot help feeling disappointed, as she realises that their relationship is gradually being disrupted. In her role as a wife, she finds it difficult to sympathise with her husband's obsession with hunting, while Stephen gradually seems to detach himself emotionally from his wife. However, their trip to Greece ultimately proves a turning point in their marriage, insofar as Stephen and his wife manage to surmount their respective fears, and their relationship eventually gains in strength.

At a symbolic level, the protagonists of "The Chamois" undergo processes of emasculation and masculinisation respectively: despite his initial assertiveness and bravery, Stephen's vulnerability is ultimately brought to the fore, while, in spite of her preliminary established domestic role, the female narrator gradually turns into another member of the male hunting party, on equal terms with the rest of comrades, and plays an active role in the feat of hunting the chamois. This symbolic gender-role crossover is what eventually allows the protagonists to overcome the chasm that menaces to disrupt their relationship, thus once more suggesting du Maurier's anxiety about the assignation and disruption of gender roles as a married woman and as a woman writer. In her late middle age, du Maurier imagined a crossover of the gender roles traditionally assigned to each sex, as happens to the couple in "The Chamois." Her story once more exemplifies Friedan's thoughts on gender-role crossover, meaning that, later in life, men develop passive or contemplative qualities often categorised as "feminine," whereas women tend to develop bold and adventurous traits that are usually labelled as "masculine," adopting features that they felt compelled to suppress in order to match their respective traditional roles as "male aggressive hunter" and "female passive nurturer" (Friedan 157).

In the beginning of the story, the female narrator emphasises her husband's assertiveness and bravery. She underlines his masculine attributes and qualities, associating him with a kind of masculinity that proves enigmatic to her and that often disables her from coming closer to him because it becomes too imposing, as she admits to herself, stating that she "watched his back, and the powerful shoulders—he looked taller than his six feet two inches because of his build" ("The Chamois" 243). Likewise, she relates this kind of stern masculinity to age, declaring that "some men are born adult, without the redeeming and endearing faults of childhood; Stephen was one of them" (242), holding on to a prototype of patriarchy, which has been traditionally associated with age. In the course of their hunting adventure, Stephen gradually shows his vulnerability and dependence, as, while in pursuit of his prey, he loses his rifle and feels exposed until the goatherd comes to his rescue. Likewise, the reason why Stephen hunts chamois is finally disclosed and responds to his need to overcome his fear of heights. He confesses that "the more I kill, the more I

destroy fear" (266), and since chamois can only be hunted in the highest mountains, this ultimately unveils his weakness.

Conversely, at the onset of their hunting adventure, the female narrator feels out of place in the company of Stephen's mates, as she is used to a domestic scenario in which she plays the role of a motherly wife and indulges in her gender performance, admitting that "making a concession to femininity I took out my lipstick—there was a little cracked mirror hanging behind the counter—the men watched in admiration—my status was established" (252). Nonetheless, like her husband, it becomes obvious that the female narrator is in need of conquering her personal fear: in her sleep, she dreams about the goatherd named Jesus, in the hunting party, who both repels and attracts her as she unconsciously associates him with her sexuality and the release of her sexual drive. It is when Stephen manages to kill the chamois and symbolically surmount his fear of heights that his wife also succeeds in defying her own anxieties, as Jesus and the dread that this goatherd personifies for the female narrator finally vanish mysteriously. In the course of their symbolic hunting adventure, not only do they manage to overcome their respective fears, but at a deeper level, they overcome the differences that threaten to destroy their relationship, as Stephen shows his weaknesses and his wife learns to enjoy hunting in his company.

"The Chamois" can be read as a reflection of the gender-role crossover in du Maurier's marriage during the years of her late middle age, as the author envisions the possibility that, by subverting traditionally assigned gender roles, a couple would ultimately manage to overcome their marital difficulties. Like Stephen gradually unveiling his vulnerability, and in so doing managing to overcome his fear, du Maurier wished that her husband's life in domesticity, would have a beneficial effect on their relationship instead of disrupting their marriage. Likewise, if in the story the female narrator's initiation into hunting, and by extension, into the world of men, brings her closer to her husband, du Maurier also hoped that her urge to write, which she would always associate with her sexual drive, would have a positive effect on her own marriage.

Conclusion

According to Anne Wyatt-Brown and her models of late-life writing, this later creative stage in du Maurier's career, through which she challenged the traditional assignation of gender roles both as a woman and as a writer, would correspond with an unexpected politics of ageing (10), meaning that literary creativity in the course of ageing can attain discourses of activism, particularly, in this case, with respect to gender. Through creativity, du Maurier put to the test a disruption of gender roles. Her narratives, featuring characters who in their late middle age enact experiences of gender-role crossover with diverse results, are an attempt to come to terms with her own anxities about the subversion of gender roles that threatened to disrupt her marriage. Du Maurier's later stage of creativity and her definition of her writing persona as a "disembodied spirit" in terms of gender, underlines ageing as a productive phase involving not only a continued evolution of the creative voice but, as Friedan argues, the acquisition of "new qualities and strengths that might emerge" (22), which paves the way for progressive change and for envisioning ageing as a fruitful stage of life. In this respect, du Maurier's evolution of her writing persona in her late middle age challenges the notion of ageing understood as a period of decline. Her later stage of creativity exemplifies Woodward's precepts about ageing as a period "of growth and change" (*Figuring Age* xiii), as her writing persona transformed and evolved with the advent of ageing. Likewise, du Maurier's creative voice identified as a "disembodied spirit" also exemplifies Germaine Greer's thoughts about ageing as a period in which women can fully become themselves: go through a transition from being reproductive to being reflective, and eventually emerge as female women, thus transforming traditional cultural dictates about women and ageing through creativity. In this sense, it can be argued that, drawing on Friedan's precepts about women's ageing, du Maurier's later stage of creativity exemplified a metaphorical achievement of "the fountain of age"—to use Friedan's reversal of the classic phrase of "the fountain of youth"—as ageing became a fruitful stage for du Maurier's writing persona.

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