Towards the end of 1988, an 80-year-old Bette Davis, after seeing the first week’s rushes of her scenes for Larry Cohen’s *Wicked Stepmother*, was so shocked by her frail appearance that she withdrew from the project.¹ Emaciated and ravaged by time and illness (including breast cancer, a stroke and a broken hip), Davis quit, fearing that – as she later reported to Nina Easton of the *Los Angeles Times* – ‘it could seriously be the end of anybody ever hiring me again’ (Easton, 1988: 6). As it turned out this was the end, but it was actually a wonder that she was hired for this film in the first place. As Easton noted in her article, ‘Bette Davis Smoking Over Stepmother’, most studios were reluctant to hire actors with health problems due to the high cost of obtaining insurance to cover losses if she died or fell ill during production. In this instance, Larco Productions had acquired (no doubt, costly) insurance for Davis and the insurance company duly paid out to the tune of a million dollars when the aged star withdrew, enabling 44-year-old Barbara Carrera to be hired as a replacement.² Consequently, the film was completed and released (on video rather than in cinemas) in 1989. This, Bette Davis’ final film, makes for painful viewing as she limps and stumbles through her scenes. Although struggling to move and deliver her lines, she does manage occasionally to glare malevolently with those celebrated eyes of hers, while puffing incessantly on a cigarette. Nevertheless, this was a sad end to a long and illustrious film career.

Bette Davis made 89 movies from 1931 to 1988. Despite her small stature, strikingly large eyes and a face that photographed well when sympathetically lit, she was rarely considered a beauty. Her appeal lay in her fiercely independent spirit, her unconventionality and rebelliousness (Shingler, 2008: 271). Through a combination of hard work, determination and courage, Davis became an acclaimed screen performer who
favoured challenging roles, particularly feisty heroines, tragic victims and unscrupulous bitches in romantic dramas known as ‘weepies’. Success at the box office from 1935 to 1945, combined with the support of the New York film critics and the jury of the Motion Picture Academy, made her a powerful person in studio era Hollywood. Indeed, by 1939 Davis was an intimidating figure, a challenging colleague and a defiant employee (Shingler, 1996: 127–128). Davis frequently defied convention, including shocking her public and critics with unusual portrayals and performances, with extreme characterisations, including larger-than-life and unsympathetic characters, realised through excessive costume and make-up combined with a performance style judged to be mannered, even ‘hammy’ (Shingler, 1999: 56). Notable examples include *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (Curtiz, 1939), *The Little Foxes* (Wyler, 1941), *Mr. Skeffington* (Sherman, 1944), *All About Eve* (Mankiewicz, 1950), *The Star* (Heisler, 1952) and *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Aldrich, 1962).

Having proven herself adept at realism and restraint with subdued roles in *The Petrified Forest* (Archie Mayo, 1936), *The Letter* (Wyler, 1940) and *Watch on the Rhine* (Shumlin, 1943), Davis relished opportunities to embrace excess and even the grotesque, courting controversy and dividing critical and popular opinion (Shingler, 2013: 31–32). One of the ways in which she did so was with her portrayals of old age. Hollywood, of course, is widely recognised as an industry relentlessly unforgiving of ageing among its women stars. In such a professional context, Davis' willingness to play older women rather than shy away from the fact of ageing, and her determination not to be ousted but to keep working as she aged, spoke to a career marked, as noted, by ‘unusual performances’ and bolstered a persona that embodied resilience and boldness even in her younger years.

Davis often aged beyond her years, for instance as the 60-year-old Queen Elizabeth I in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* when the actress was just 31. For the next 50 years, ageing and old age played a major role in her career. Playing older women in her 30s enabled the star to enhance her credentials as an actor, proving that she was adept at portraying women very different from herself. In her 40s, Davis strove to convince film executives of the viability of films centred upon women of her own age when most studios were producing movies for adolescent and young adult audiences. In her 50s and 60s, Davis produced some astonishing versions of mature femininity, creating a gallery of female grotesques (see Brooks, 1999, and Morey, 2011). Meanwhile, in her 70s and 80s, Davis fought against infirmity and ill health to go on acting in films, occasionally producing some remarkably poignant depictions of old age.