

Respect or ridicule? The representation of old age in Cervantes's works

In the recent collection of articles, *Representations of Age in European Literatures*, Joy Charnley states: 'As far as literature is concerned, the process of physical ageing has been commented on and analysed by writers and critics across cultures and periods, evoking a range of emotions, from fear and rejection at the negative end of the spectrum to (more rarely) respect and veneration at the positive end'.¹ With this in mind, I intend to explore Cervantes's attitude towards old age as it emerges from the presentation of some of his characters and against the background of the traditions of his time. There have been some publications on Cervantes and old age, which I will briefly survey in the course of this article, but they are mainly focused on individual characters. I would like to provide a more wide-ranging view of Cervantes's presentation of old age and assess whether his attitude is ultimately one of respect or rather ridicule.

Old people are not necessarily prominent in his works but they are present in his stories as in normal society: we encounter older people invested with more authority like the local priest or senior clerics, people he meets on his journeys or in inns, or the parents of many of the protagonists of his love stories. In some of his stories, the older person is

¹ Joy Charnley, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 47 (2011), 121-25 (p. 122).

central to the plot, as in the obvious case of *Don Quijote* or in *El celoso extremeño* which I will discuss in greater detail.

It is interesting to note that Cervantes reached literary success in the last years of his life, when he was in his sixties. He was born in 1547, and after being a soldier for some years and having suffered captivity in Algiers, he returned to Spain and became a tax collector. His first published work, *La Galatea*, appeared in 1585. It was with the publication of the first part of *Don Quijote* (1605) that his literary talent started to be recognised. In 1613 he published his collection of short stories, *Las Novelas ejemplares*, which includes the story of *El celoso extremeño*, and in 1615 the second part of *Don Quijote* appeared in print. He was very aware of how close he was to death when he wrote the prologue to his posthumous novel *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*: ‘Adiós, regocijados amigos; que yo me voy muriendo’ [Adieu, my pleasant friends, for I am dying].² The dedication of the book to the Count of Lemos is dated 19 April 1616 and Cervantes died on 23 April at the age of sixty nine.

He wrote therefore from the standpoint of an older person who had experienced a life of hardship in very varied circumstances. Although it is always risky to mix biographical data with fiction, we should bear this fact in mind when we look at some of his characters as it can help to understand the sympathetic presentation we find of some of them. Cervantes actually describes himself in the prologue to his *Novelas ejemplares* as a person no longer young: ‘Las barbas de plata, que no ha veinte años que fueron de oro, [...] algo cargado de espaldas, y no muy ligero de pies’ [Silvery beard which not

² Miguel de Cervantes, *Los Trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda* (Madrid: Castalia, 1969), p. 49. The translation is from *The Wanderings of Persiles and Sigismunda*, translated by L. D. Stanley (London: Cundall, 1854), p. xvii.

twenty years ago was golden, [...] somewhat stooping and none too light on his feet].³ He tells us that: ‘Mi edad no está ya para burlarse con la otra vida, que al cincuenta y cinco de los años gano por nueve más y por la mano’ (I, 64) [At my time of life I cannot afford to mess around with the hereafter, for at fifty-five I might have nine years left, and I could still beat them to it].

In recent years, a vast bibliography on the topic of old age has been produced with a wide variety of approaches: looking at it from a sociological point of view, a legal, political, medical perspective, etc. From the perspective of literature, George Minois’s book continues to be a classic reference point from which to gain an insight into the way old age was represented in literature until the 17th century.⁴

It becomes clear from Minois and other studies that there is always a mixture of respect and scorn in describing old age.⁵ Depending on the period, there may have been more emphasis on one attitude or the other towards the aged. Nevertheless, the complexity of the representation of old age in a particular period cannot be summarised in a few words. Thus, for example, from the Hebraic world and in the books of the Bible, we see the concept of the old man as one who has acquired wisdom but not necessarily as the person with more years. In the Ancient Greek and Roman worlds one can see a range of views that go from Plato and Cicero offering a positive and almost idealised view of old age, to Aristotle who is harsh and offers no pity to the elderly. Some even advocate suicide as the best option for the aged. Equally, while Roman law endows the old man

³ Miguel de Cervantes, *Novelas ejemplares*, 3 vols (Madrid: Castalia, 1987), I, p. 62. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text, indicating the volume and page number. The translations are from *Exemplary Novels*, ed. by B.W. Ife, 4 vols (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1992), p. 3.

⁴ George Minois, *History of Old Age, from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, trans. by Sarah Hanbury Tenison (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

⁵ See also *The Long History of Old Age*, ed. by Pat Thane (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005) and *Old Age from Antiquity to Post-Modernity*, ed. by Paul Johnson and Pat Thane (London: Routledge, 1998).

with the authority of the *pater familias*, we see that this is compatible with cruel jokes and mockery in the literary works of Plautus, Terence or Juvenal. There is, therefore, a fundamental ambiguity in old age: ‘So nobly tragic and derisorily comic, so mean in all its faults and so sublime in its qualities’.⁶ As I hope to demonstrate in this article, Cervantes captures this fundamental ambiguity of old age in his writings as well.

The Middle Ages developed a great deal of symbolism around the different ages of man defining again the true age as human wisdom and not the actual age a person may be.⁷ Minois explains that after the century of the Black Death (1350-1450) there was a strengthening of the role of old people in society as many were spared by the plague and more old people survived than did young ones. As a reaction to this period of certain dominance of the older generation, the following century, that of Cervantes, is characterised by an influx of young and demanding people, a younger generation claiming more presence and influence in society.⁸ Printing was a factor to take into account because it stripped the old of their role as the community’s memory in this age of the Renaissance which exalted youth and beauty above all. Humanists and courtiers condemned old age in their writings. Thus, *The Book of the Courtier* of Balthazar Castiglione and *The Praise of Folly* of Erasmus of Rotterdam offer a very unsympathetic and negative image of old age, both for men and women, which is representative of the time: ‘The most savage detractor of old women was also the prince of humanists: Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly* is quite merciless’.⁹ Erasmus stated that Folly was the true remedy for old age. Erasmus’s influence on Cervantes has been widely explored and it is

⁶ Minois, p. 112.

⁷ J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

⁸ Minois, p. 248.

⁹ Minois, p. 255.

quite certain that Cervantes was familiar with Erasmus's ideas because they were commonly known in mid-sixteenth century Spain, as well as the treatise of Castiglione.¹⁰ Therefore, Cervantes wrote against this backdrop of general disdain for old age and idealisation of youth:

For Renaissance man, both the humanist and the courtier, old age remained the sign of the ultimate failure of their attempts to create superman. For old age makes us lose all the virtues of ideal man: beauty, strength, the capacity for decision and intellectual growth. It robs us of love and the worldly pleasures. It brings suffering and frailty.¹¹

Nevertheless, a certain element of ambiguity existed because in real life, older people still played an important role in society: 'The theoretical attitude of the humanists and the courtiers towards old age was no more than a front, striking because of its exponents' talent, but concealing their real attitude towards the old, which was one of sympathy rather than sarcasm'.¹²

I would like to turn to Cervantes now to see how this representation of old age is manifested in his works. His most well known character is Don Quijote, a mature *hidalgo*, bordering fifty: 'Frisaba la edad de nuestro hidalgo con los cincuenta años' [Our gentleman was verging on fifty].¹³ Don Alonso Quijano was known as *el Bueno* for his good judgement, and was well respected in his village. However, due to excessive

¹⁰ See the section 'El erasmismo de Cervantes' in Marcel Bataillon, *Erasmus y España* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1966), pp. 777-801.

¹¹ Minois, p. 287.

¹² Minois, p. 301.

¹³ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, 2 vols (Madrid: Cátedra, 1990), I, p. 98. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text, indicating the volume and page number. The translations are from *Don Quixote*, translated by J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 31.

reading of books of chivalry he lost his wits. Thus, his respected old age became the object of merriment and even cruel laughter throughout the numerous chapters of the novel.

Eduardo Urbina was the first critic to focus attention on the issue of age in *Don Quijote*. He found an example of an old knight in the book *Tristán de Leonís*, and drew a number of parallels with Don Quijote.¹⁴ Traditionally, the old man in the epic poems is an object of contempt because he has lost his strength and capabilities to fight.¹⁵ In *Tristán de Leonís*, some characters do not take the elderly knight seriously and they laugh at him because of his age. Nevertheless, there are moments when he shows his wisdom and therefore the satire is moderate and the character earns some respect. In a way, this is also applicable to Don Quijote. He is the subject of laughter often but there are other instances where his wisdom is recognised. He is not a simple stereotype of the useless old man:

Por ello, y a pesar de la desproporción y anacronismo que suponen su edad y condición, es con frecuencia apreciado incluso por aquellos que en un principio se burlan de él. Don Quijote, en este sentido, asemeja y encarna burlescamente la figura del caballero anciano, incorporando en su mundo caballeresco esa eficaz mezcla de admiración y asombro que justifica su existencia a lo largo de la parodia que ejecuta y de la narración que origina.¹⁶

¹⁴ Eduardo Urbina, 'El caballero anciano en *Tristán de Leonís* y don Quijote, caballero cincuentón', *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica*, 29 (1980), 164-72.

¹⁵ Thane, *The Long History of Old Age*, p. 103.

¹⁶ Urbina, 'El caballero anciano', p. 171.

A few years later, Carroll B. Johnson published *Madness and Lust*, which offers an analysis of *Don Quijote* from a psychoanalytical point of view.¹⁷ Although this is probably the most extensive work referring to age in *Don Quijote*, his conclusions did not encounter much support. Johnson argued that *Don Quijote* was undergoing a mid-life crisis due to not having experienced a successful love relationship. Therefore, the cause of his madness was the result of the tension produced by the strong incestuous attraction he felt for his young niece, which drove him away from the family home. More recently, in a posthumous article published in the *Cervantes* journal, Johnson reiterated his theories and provided other examples of authors who, according to his interpretation, read *Don Quijote* in the same way, including Galdós and Nabokov:

I hope to have amassed enough examples to suggest that many writers, from different ages, different linguistic and cultural traditions, have absorbed, consciously or not, and repeated the basic plot and underlying psychosexual dynamic that Cervantes offers in *Don Quijote*.¹⁸

More convincing in my view and closer to textual evidence is Urbina's second article on the topic of age, 'Don Quijote, *puer-senex*: un tópico y su transformación paródica en el *Quijote*': the topic of the youth with the maturity of an old man comes from Apuleyo and medieval tradition (St. Augustine).¹⁹ Urbina suggests that *Don Quijote* is a parodic inversion of this topic because our protagonist is an old man behaving like a

¹⁷ Carrol B. Johnson, *Madness and Lust: A Psychoanalytical Approach to Don Quijote* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

¹⁸ Carrol B. Johnson, 'Don Quijote Turned 400. Did Anybody Notice?', *Cervantes*, 30 (2010), 15-32 (p. 26).

¹⁹ Eduardo Urbina, *Journal of Hispanic Philology*, 12 (1988), 127-38.

child, a *senex-puer*, as a result of his madness. Nevertheless, in the course of the novel, Don Quijote undergoes a transformation, becoming disillusioned with the world of chivalry due to his defeats and above all, due to the failure to release his beloved Dulcinea from the enchantment she is subjected to. At the end of the novel, Don Quijote changes and becomes a real *puer-senex*. ‘Una historia que representa el proceso mismo de crecimiento por el cual don Quijote, sin dejar de ser loco, *senex-puer*, se convierte en nueva expresión del tópico del *puer-senex*’.²⁰ His madness makes him behave like a child. He is mad and therefore naïve and gullible like a child but he acquires some experience and maturity. Eventually, Don Quijote overcomes his madness and ends the parody by dying in his right mind. The old man appears as a human being with weaknesses, but as one who is undergoing a process of maturity and self-improvement.

Urbina’s article provides a testimony of the character development experienced by Don Quijote through the angle of old age, confirming what is considered one of the defining features of the modern novel: the emergence of in-depth characterisation. Through Cervantes’s stories we begin to see characters changing and developing as real human beings and they cease to become the fixed types that could be found in the romance tradition. Don Quijote and his squire Sancho are the prototype of this new characterisation which will determine the birth of the novel as we understand it today:

Don Quixote’s behaviour and his relations with Sancho are so full of subtle twists and turns that they preclude coherent symbolization. Indeed, it is this idiosyncrasy which

²⁰ Urbina, ‘Don Quijote, *puer-senex*’, p. 128.

carries the narrative beyond neat symbolic antinomies towards a form of characterization that heralds the modern novel.²¹

More should be made of the fact that the parody of the books of chivalry is based on age: Don Quijote is ridiculous as a knight because he is old, in contrast with the young Amadís de Gaula. Everything related to Don Quijote is incongruous because of his age: the aspiration to love the young and beautiful Dulcinea, the use of his old horse Rocinante and the old broken armour he finds in the house. From the first episodes of the book, we witness the same anachronism: his encounter with Maritornes in the inn is equally funny because it is ludicrous to think that she would be attracted to him and yet this is what he believes. The same occurs in a much later episode, when he thinks Altisidora loves him: ‘¡Que tengo de ser tan desdichado andante, que no ha de haber doncella que me mire que de mí no se enamore!’ (II, 357) [What an unhappy errant I am, that there is no maiden sets eyes on me but is enamoured!].

We cannot forget that what we could now find distasteful in the way an old man is treated, was a source of laughter in the society of the sixteenth century and early seventeenth century. Humanists like Erasmus considered the old as fools and a source of fun. The older the man the more foolish he would be: ‘Erasmus was merciless in this respect, and the old man held an eminent place in his gallery of fools’.²² Russell recalled this attitude when he reminded critics that, initially, Don Quijote was intended as a funny

²¹ For a study of the emergence of character in the modern novel see Edwin Williamson, *The Halfway-House of Fiction: ‘Don Quixote’ and Arthurian Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 211.

²² Minois, p. 259.

book, and this was the way it was interpreted in his time. Only in later centuries, it received interpretations that were more serious.²³

Taking all this into account I would like to see if in this context, there are any signs of respect shown towards old age and towards Don Quijote in particular. *Don Quijote* can be a cruel book at times but it offers more than just a parody of books of chivalry. Cervantes presents Don Quijote as a human character and that makes him endearing and loved by others, including the reader. There are instances of respect towards Don Quijote, starting with his close family and friends who truly love him and want to help and protect him. The housekeeper and his niece show constant signs of concern towards him and they are upset when they see him hurt and out of his mind. It is significant, for example, that at the end of his first sally, one of the people of the village finds Don Quijote badly injured on the road. Nevertheless, he decides to wait until it is dark to enter the village with Don Quijote, to avoid ridicule and humiliation: ‘Pero el Labrador aguardó a que fuese algo más de noche, porque no viesen al molido hidalgo tan mal caballero’ (I, 126) [But the labourer waited till was rather darker, so that no one should see the battered gentleman on so shameful a mount]. In some episodes in the novel, other characters express admiration for Don Quijote in his lucid intervals when he displays signs of great wisdom. For example, after the speeches on the ‘Golden Age’ or the ‘Arms and Letters’, people feel pity towards him and they do not laugh at him.

In the second part of *Don Quijote*, we meet a gentleman of the same age as Don Quijote, who shows the measure and good manners which one would normally associate with an older person of some rank or education: ‘La edad mostraba ser de cincuenta años,

²³ P.E. Russell, ‘Don Quixote as a funny book’, *Modern Language Review*, 64 (1969), 312-26. For a study of a different reception and varying interpretations of *Don Quijote*, see Anthony Close, *The Romantic Approach to ‘Don Quixote’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

las canas, pocas, el rostro, aguileño, la vista, entre alegre y grave; finalmente, en el traje y apostura daba a entender ser hombre de buenas prendas' (II, 138) [His age appeared to be about fifty; his grey hairs few; his face aquiline; his expression between cheerful and grave – in short, from his dress and appearance he gave the impression of a man of good parts]. The *caballero del Verde Gabán* [The Knight of the Green Coat], Don Diego de Miranda, treats Don Quijote with great deference and invites him to his house where he stays for four days. Thus, Cervantes gives us here an example of a model older person who has earned the respect of others. Don Diego explains who he is and what he does and Sancho concludes that he is a saint: 'Déjenme besar –respondió Sancho– ; porque me parece vuesa merced el primer santo a la jineta que he visto en todos los días de mi vida' (II, 141) [Let me kiss you, answered Sancho, for I think your worship's the first saint I've ever seen riding with short stirrups in all the days of my life]. Don Diego de Miranda has been identified by some critics as an embodiment of the Erasmian ideal of a Christian lay gentleman.²⁴

This conversation gives rise to Don Quijote reminding the reader that parents should look after and educate their children so that later, they can look after their parents in their old age: 'A los padres toca el encaminarlos desde pequeños por los pasos de la virtud, de la buena crianza y de las buenas y cristianas costumbres, para que cuando grandes, sean báculo de la vejez de sus padres y gloria de su posteridad' (II, 142) [It is the parents' duty to guide them from childhood along the paths of virtue, of good breeding, and of good and Christian manners, so that when they are grown up, they may be the staff of their parents' old age and a glory to their posterity].

²⁴ Bataillon, p. 792-3.

At the very end of *Don Quijote*, we witness the recovery of Alonso Quijano's sanity and his subsequent death. Cervantes presents a respectable old man who is putting his life in order and who makes amends for his life before he dies. From the point of view of the principles of the time, Don Quijote's death is exemplary:

En fin, llegó el ultimo día de Don Quijote, después de recibidos todos los sacramentos y después de haber abominado con muchas y eficaces razones de los libros de caballerías. Hallóse el escribano presente, y dijo que nunca había leído en ningún libro de caballerías que algún caballero andante hubiese muerto en su lecho tan sosegadamente y tan cristiano como Don Quijote. (II, 576-7) [At last Don Quixote's end came, after he had received all the sacraments and expressed his horror of books of chivalry in strong and moving terms. The clerk, who happened to be present, said that he had never read in any book of chivalries of a knight errant dying in his bed in so clam and Christian manner as Don Quixote]

Thus, we see that there are humane and respectful references to old age (although not completely devoid of some irony) in *Don Quijote*, more in line with what one would hope to find in ordinary life. In this respect one can see that Cervantes offers a more sympathetic view of old age than the one provided by humanists and courtiers of the time in their writings.

I would like to turn now to another character in the *Novelas ejemplares*, who is also old, and the protagonist of the short story *El celoso extremeño*: Felipe de Carrizales. He travelled to the New World at the age of forty eight and one would expect that he

acquired experience and wisdom in the twenty years he was there: ‘La edad que tenía Felipo cuando pasó a las Indias sería de cuarenta y ocho años, y en veinte que en ellas estuvo [...] alcanzó a tener más de ciento y cincuenta mil pesos ensayados’ (II, 177) [When he sailed to the Indies Felipo was forty-eight years of age, and in the twenty years that he spent there, [...] he managed to amass a fortune worth more than one hundred and fifty thousand solid-gold *pesos*]. However, when he decides to marry a young girl, his jealousy transforms him into a ridiculous old man. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, the old man who was embarking in a new venture was considered inappropriate: ‘The height of the ridiculous consisted in throwing oneself into long-drawn-out enterprises’.²⁵ Besides, the idea of marrying a young woman, was generally condemned. The Italian *Commedia dell’Arte*, for example, exploited the tradition of the old lover in the characters of Pantaloon and Doctor.²⁶

In a similar way to Don Quijote therefore, Carrizales can be seen as another inversion of the *puer-senex* topic who becomes a *senex-puer*: an old man who behaves like a child. It is wrong for the old man to act as a younger person. Carrizales thinks in his naivety that he can override his wife’s freedom by physically locking her up in a house. With his behavior, Carrizales does not deserve the respect of his wife and others and he becomes an object of ridicule and an obstacle to be challenged. As a result, Loaysa, a young man in the area, decides enter the house, determined to seduce Carrizales’s wife, Leonora: ‘Todo lo cual le encendió el deseo de ver si sería posible expugnar, por fuerza o por industria, fortaleza tan guardada’ (II, 185) [All of which

²⁵ Minois, p.265.

²⁶ Minois, p. 252 and Thane, *The Long History of Old Age*, p. 131.

served to inflame his desire to find out if it might be possible to take such a secure fortress either by force or by craft].

Eventually, Loaysa manages to get into the house and whether or not he succeeds in seducing Leonora, Carrizales thinks that he has. Although Carrizales is an old fool, Cervantes's presentation of the old man unexpectedly gives rise to some pathos at the very end. Carrizales is defeated but he is deeply hurt and does not react with anger. He recognises his mistake calmly and tries to rectify some of his wrongdoing:

La venganza que pienso tomar de esta afrenta no es ni ha de ser de las que ordinariamente suelen tomarse, pues quiero que, así como yo fui extremado en lo que hice, así sea la venganza que tomaré, tomándola de mí mismo como del más culpado de este delito. (II, 218) [The vengeance which I intend to take for this affront neither is nor should be of the usual sort, for I want my vengeance to be out of the ordinary, just as my behaviour was, taking it on myself as the one principally to blame for this offence]

He makes a generous will and asks Leonora to marry Loaysa when he dies. Thus, Carrizales gains some respect in the final moments of his life and once more, Cervantes offers a sympathetic view of an old man.

There is another version of the story in the short play or *entremés* *El viejo celoso*. Urbina explains that two topics are dealt with in this story: the popular tradition of the jealous husband and also the issue of the old man marrying a young girl. The behaviour of the old man is judged more harshly in the play as it comes close to being an incestuous

relationship, and therefore, there is no sympathy towards the old man.²⁷ However, the comic nature of this genre allows for a less serious treatment of the subject even if it is equally condemned. Cañizares in the *entremés* is a burlesque caricature of Carrizales: ‘The old man is a stereotype, with no developed sympathetic qualities, and so the audience feels no guilt despite laughing at what is a flagrant breach of social order’.²⁸ We see, in this case, a different treatment of old age as Cervantes adapts himself to the conventions of a particular genre. In both stories, though, Cervantes does not approve of the marriage between an old man and a young girl as it was characteristic of the period.

Up to now, we can see that although Cervantes uses the traditions of the time in his portrayal of old people, in some specific cases, he adds his personal touch, providing some understanding and respect towards his old characters. However, when dealing with women, it is harder to find a respectful treatment of old age. This is not surprising as this was another feature of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Old age has an earlier and more devastating effect on women. Therefore, after childbearing age, the once idealised and beautiful young woman became not only ugly, but often considered an agent of evil. This representation is commonly found in art and literature, explained by the theory of the four humours, which was still prevalent in those times:

As they aged and dried, old women became harder and more ‘male’ in their physical selves. Consequently they were considered capable of more reason and level-headedness,

²⁷ Eduardo Urbina, ‘Hacia *El viejo celoso* de Cervantes’, *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica*, 38 (1990), 733-42.

²⁸ *Exemplary Novels*, ed. by Michael and Jonathan Thacker and others, 4 vols (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1992), III, p. 1.

and thus due more respect. On the other hand, they were thought to grow increasingly evil and dangerous as menopause set in.²⁹

Spain was not exception to this view and there is therefore, a strong tradition of *viejas* in Spanish literature: ‘The negative portrayal of the *vieja* has a long tradition in the literary corpus of the Iberian Peninsula from the thirteenth century *cantigas d’escarnho*, to the seventeenth-century satirical poetry and prose’.³⁰

Many of Cervantes’s women characters are young and idealised heroines who are the protagonists of his love stories. Some are more developed in character than others, and they range from Dulcinea who is a figment of Don Quijote’s imagination, to a very down-to earth Marcela, who embodies feminine freedom, in *Don Quijote*, the idealised and loyal Auristela in the *Persiles* and many others in the *Novelas ejemplares*. It is in the *Novelas* that we find a few examples of the stereotyped old woman of horrible appearance who is associated with vice and corruption; ‘At this juncture the world of women and witches combines, contributing to the rash of witch hunts and crazes’.³¹

In *Rinconete y Cortadillo* we encounter, among the dubious characters of the community of Monipodio, the pious old woman Pipota. She sells candles and asks for prayers while she is an active member of the thieving brotherhood. In this short story the other members, who give her alms to pay for her candles and prayers, treat the old woman affectionately, but it is all part of the ironic presentation of the picaresque underworld of Seville. The best example of this stereotype is the old witch in *El coloquio*

²⁹ Thane, *The Long History of Old Age*, p. 127.

³⁰ Encarnación Juárez-Almendros, ‘Aging Women and Disability in Early Modern Spanish Literature’, in *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations*, ed. by Joshua R. Eyler (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 197-208 (p. 198).

³¹ Thane, *The Long History of Old Age*, p. 127.

de los perros. The first sight of the witch Cañizares is that of a caring old woman who is searching for the lost children of her friend Montiela. However, her own description shows the malice and deceit of her character from the beginning:

Quisiera yo, hijo, apartarme de este pecado, y para ello he hecho mis diligencias: heme acogido a ser hospitalera; curo a los pobres, y algunos se mueren que me dan a mí la vida con lo que me mandan o con lo se les queda entre los remiendos, por el cuidado que yo tengo de espulgarlos los vestidos; rezo poco, y en público; murmuro mucho, y en secreto; vame mejor con ser hipócrita que con ser pecadora declarada. (III, 296) [Son, I should like to give up these sinful ways, and with this in mind I have done several things: I have become a hospitaler, and I look after the poor, whose death quite often provides a living for me either because of what they leave me or leave hidden amongst their ragged clothes which I make sure I pick clean; I say few prayers and in public; I gossip a great deal and in secret; I do better by being a hypocrite than a declared sinner]

She is clever but she is only motivated by her own pleasure which determines her will to do evil, as she herself admits: ‘Todo lo veo y todo lo entiendo, y como el deleite me tiene echados grillos a la voluntad, siempre he sido y seré mala’ (III, 299) [I see and understand all this, but as pleasure has gripped my will, I am and will always be evil]. Later in the story, Cañizares anoints herself in front of the dog Berganza who is the narrator and he gives a detailed description of her naked body: a revolting sight, which only inspires fear and disgust. There is no sign of respect or any feeling of sympathy towards her. Unlike with male characters, it is hard to find any redeeming features in the

witch Cañizares: ‘¿Quién hizo a esta mala vieja tan discreta y tan mala? (III, 301) [Who made this old woman so discreet and so evil?].

The other type of old female character than Cervantes adopts in his works is that of the *dueña*: ‘The stigmatization and marginalization in literature of old women takes other variants. A fruitful one is the duenna, who is often described as a widow, with an empty social function, since she is not any more a mother, spouse, let alone, a maid’.³²

In *El celoso extremeño*, the Dueña Marialonso is wicked and she is responsible for the downfall of Leonora. She allows the rogue Loaysa to come into the house and leaves the young wife Leonora alone in the room with Loaysa. She is punished and condemned in the story for her actions, because she acts with a wicked intention. The stereotype is confirmed in the statement of the narrator: ‘Oh, dueñas, nacidas y usadas en el mundo para perdición de mil recatadas y buenas intenciones’ (II, 212) [Oh duennas, born and nurtured in this world to effect the ruin of a thousand virtuous and honest intentions!].

In *Don Quijote*, we find some *dueñas* who are a great source of laughter and ridicule. The Dueña Dolorida is an invention of the Duke and Duchess to laugh at the expense of Don Quijote and it gives the opportunity to repeat the topics of the period about *dueñas* as Sancho expresses: ‘Que donde interviniesen dueñas no podía suceder cosa buena’ (II, 308) [Where waiting-women meddled no good could come of it]. The sight of the Dueña Dolorida (a male servant in disguise) and his companions with long beards is really farcical. However, there is an exception in the comical treatment of the *dueñas* in the case of Doña Rodríguez: ‘Cervantes creates in his novel *Don Quixote* the most famous portrait of the worthless higher class duenna in the figure of Donna

³² Juárez-Almendros, p. 202.

Rodríguez'.³³ She is foolish to the extent that she believes that Don Quijote is a knight and he can actually help her and her daughter, who has been deceived by a young man. Nevertheless, we cannot find in her character the malice normally associated with *dueñas*. Doña Rodríguez tries to defend *dueñas* and states that they can be virtuous. She gets upset when she recounts her life, and inspires some pity. Don Quijote treats her with respect and affection too, although their dialogue is very humorous due to the incongruous situation: 'Cervantes's representation of Donna Rodríguez is the gentlest among the many found in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century works written by males'.³⁴

In the end, though, Doña Rodríguez, despite some of the milder qualities she is given, is not spared the vice of gossiping: 'La general costumbre que todas las dueñas tienen de ser chismosas' (II, 400) [For fear of failing in the waiting-woman's custom of tale-bearing]. This is the cause of her downfall as she reveals to Don Quijote some of the Duchess's personal secrets and the Duchess therefore takes revenge by giving her a good beating. Doña Rodríguez behaves as if she were mad, like Don Quijote, believing in the world of chivalry. She dresses up like the Dueña Dolorida and asks Don Quijote for justice for her daughter: 'No sabían en qué había de parar la sandez y desenvoltura de Doña Rodríguez' (II, 420) [They could not imagine where the folly and presumption of Doña Rodríguez and her unfortunate daughter would stop]. She is an unusual example of *dueña* because she has more complex character traits than the set features normally found in the stereotype: rather than wicked, Doña Rodríguez is naïve and there is an underlying goodness in her. Ultimately, however, she is also a source of laughter and she ends up

³³ Juárez-Almendros, p. 202.

³⁴ Juárez-Almendros, p. 203.

happy with the likely marriage of her daughter, which is what she wished. It is a happy ending to the episode after all but not a particularly flattering reflection of Doña Rodríguez's character, who is daft and ridiculous.

We encounter a number of other older characters in Cervantes's works that are not the main protagonists, for example, the parents of some of the heroes and heroines in love stories. They often appear because they have a role to play in the decision of the marriage of their children. In general, Cervantes defends freedom of choice in marriage but he does not openly defy the opinion of parents. This can be seen, for example, in *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*. Persiles and Sigismunda are actually running away from a marriage arranged by the parents. They will succeed in getting married by choice, but the brother Magsimino, who represents the will of the parents, will eventually accept the marriage just before he dies. There are many examples of the relationship between parents and children with regards to choosing a partner for marriage in the *Novelas ejemplares*, from *La gitanilla* to even *El celoso extremeño*. Although Cervantes follows literary conventions of a particular genre, he normally appears reluctant to contradict authority and the will of parents or older relatives and guardians prevail in some way in all cases.³⁵

Having looked at a variety of characters from Cervantes's works, one can see that the theme of old age provides material to explore its ambivalent nature and to see how Cervantes exploits it. On the one hand, Cervantes follows the traditions of his time and gives a negative view of old age, presenting characters who are ridiculous because of their age. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, there was a generally negative

³⁵ For more on this topic see Idoya Puig, "Relationships in *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*: parental authority and freedom of choice", *Anuario de Estudios Cervantinos*, 7 (2011), 211-22.

and hostile representation of old age in art and literature: ““There’s no fool like an old fool” was axiomatic in the 17th century’.³⁶ Thus, Cervantes can laugh at middle-aged Don Quijote setting out into adventures not fitting for his age or can mock the old Carrizales for his presumption at marrying the young Leonora. Equally, old women will be wicked witches and silly *dueñas*.

Nevertheless, Cervantes, as usual, goes beyond the stereotype and destroys some of the moulds. Cervantes presents some old characters, starting with Don Quijote, who inspire some respect. Cervantes introduces more nuances of character, a more realistic portrayal of people. This results in a deeper characterisation, which is a defining feature of the emerging modern novel: Don Quijote, despite his mad behavior, unworthy of an older man, dies with dignity; we meet the well-respected *Caballero del Verde Gabán*; even old Carrizales inspires some sympathy when he recognises his mistake. This is not so clear, however, in the case of women. There are fewer examples of older women in Cervantes and they are treated harshly, no respect is shown towards them, following the prevalent trend of the time. They are mainly witches, ugly and dangerous. Doña Rodríguez is the only example where we see a less stereotypical and therefore, more human presentation of an old woman, and even then, she does not get much sympathy.

Thus, we can conclude that Cervantes’s presentation of old age ranges from ridicule to respect, using the literary traditions of that period but going beyond them: Cervantes reworks some of the prevalent stereotypes providing a more human, sensitive and complex presentation of some older characters.

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³⁶ Thane, *The Long History of Old Age*, p. 133.