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Reseñas / *Book reviews*

Understanding the Discourse of Aging: A Multifaceted Perspective, (Vicent Salvador & Agnese Sampietro (eds.)), Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2020, 359 pages. ISBN 1-5275-5785-5. £64.99. Reviewed by Juan Martínez Gil, Universitat Jaume I. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7712-7910>.

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Aging as part of the experience of life has been a subject that has attracted interest since antiquity, in works such as Cicero's *De senectute*. In this text, the Latin orator emphasises its ambiguous position as something to be coveted – as aging implies a life of some length – at the same time as something to be feared due to the implications of physical and emotional deterioration as a prelude to death. Although it is sometimes relegated to the background in the social sphere, aging concerns us all, either because we are all aging, or because we all know elderly people. Indeed, if we undertake the opposing analysis, it is apparent that there are countless discourses that create dichotomies between the elderly and the young.

The volume reviewed here, *Understanding the Discourse of Aging: A Multifaceted Perspective*, edited by Agnese Sampietro and Vicent Salvador of the Universitat Jaume I, adopts an interdisciplinary perspective to analyse the different discourses that address this stage of life, either as an event in itself or combined with other subjects (youth, sexual desire and the technological

world). Spain, where most of the contributions come from, is one of the European countries with the highest levels of life expectancy: this is a collective achievement (it implies improvement in the well-being of its citizens and in medical care) but it also entails new challenges for society. This volume defines the subject based on an analysis of the synchronic and diachronic discourses that have been created around old age, approaching it from perspectives as varied as anthropology, nursing, literary studies and gender studies.

The first part of the book highlights this diversity as regards the cultural images of aging. The chapter that begins the volume, “The socio-discursive construction of old age: Genres, images and conflicts” by Vicent Salvador (9–26), carries out a general analysis of the discursive images that are constructed based on old age, and how different values are assigned to it. Some of these values, such as wisdom, are positive, while others, such as sickness and decrepitude are negative, and the discursive conflicts that this creates is examined. This contribution provides an overview and acts as an introduction to the rest of the volume, and it is rightly included as the first

chapter. The next contribution, “What does it mean to be old? Some clinical definitions” by Maria Desamparados Bernat (27–40), takes us from discourse analysis to the biomedical perspective, with an interesting study from the clinical perspective on what is known as “prospective old age”. This concept describes how the limits of old age have changed at different times. The article provides the reader with critical tools to consider old age as a health and cultural phenomenon at the same time, while examining issues such as increasing life expectancy which can often lead to a poorer quality of life. Meanwhile, in “Elderly people, image and *authoritas*” (41–55), Esperanza Morales focuses on the figure of the elderly public man or woman, once again adopting the perspective of discourse analysis. Morales' contribution throws up some interesting conclusions, such as the fact that in the more reified professions (such as acting) aging leads to a loss of symbolic capital, while other professionals such as doctors or lawyers retain their *ethos* and their value as they enter old age. According to Morales, one of the key aspects in this process is the fact that the representations that these discursive images imply are not only created by others, but also by the subjects who experience old age themselves. The first part concludes on an anthropological note, with María Cátedra's chapter on “Growing old and dying in a rural society” (55–78) which highlights the importance of community in aging in rural settlements in the Spanish region of Asturias. The field work shows how elderly people are usually cared for by their heirs in the family, and the cultural and social relations that this situation creates. The contribution highlights the view that aging affects an entire community, providing us with a more in-depth understanding of the process. The second part of the volume addresses gender perspectives, and begins with the contribution by M. Àngels

Francés entitled “Images of elderly women in contemporary women's writing: An assertion of feminine memory” (81–106), in which she recovers the image of the old woman in narratives by female writers, and in this case those by Montserrat Roig and Ana Peyas. These authors aim to refine the view of older women, by granting them a place of honour that literary discourse has often failed to confer on them. Meanwhile, in “The ages of Phaedra: Literature and context” (107–139), Adolf Piquer considers the question of the mythological figure of Phaedra and how it has been rewritten. Phaedra is the prime example of an older woman who falls in love with a young man, contradicting the social image of aging as a time of passivity and an absence of sexual desire, especially among women. The social conflict involved in this kind of love/desire is carefully considered by means of contemporary rewritings of the myth, providing us with a marvellous overview of how these representations operate using concepts such as guilt and sin. The third contribution, “A spinster with a twist: The amateur sleuth and perspectives on aging and gender in Alexander McCall-Smith's *The Sunday Philosophy Club*” by Emma Domínguez-Rué (131–148) highlights the subject of female detectives, and the specific case of the character of Isabel Dalhousie. Despite the fact that these types of characters are usually depicted as single older women (as in the well-known case of Jessica Fletcher), Isabel Dalhousie challenges this imagery, as she is married to a younger man and becomes a mother after forty years of age, in a very interesting example of counternarrative.

The final study in this group is an analysis of the film *Truman* (2015), in “Masculinity, aging and illness in Cesc Gay's film *Truman* (2015)” by Antoni Maestre-Brotons (149–169). In this contribution, aging and vulnerability are analysed as a taboo subject in relation to men and masculinity, which are situated at the opposite extreme of the binomial construction of gender. The main

character in the film examined by Maestre-Brotons has to cope with the death of acquaintances and friends during his own aging process, thereby highlighting the conflicts associated with these experiences which are common during this period of life.

The third part of the volume focuses on aging in the history of literature, and begins with the Valencian author Joan Roís de Corella, one of the leading exponents of medieval literature in the Catalan language, in the contribution by Jordi Oviedo entitled “Old age and aging in medieval literature: The case of Joan Roís de Corella” (173–198). We see how old age is associated with both honesty and deception, and furthermore, it is connected with both the physical and the psychological spheres, as an emotional state. After this thought-provoking discussion comes Vicent Montalt's contribution “Aging bodies and minds in Shakespeare” (199–216) which studies aging in Shakespeare's plays. Interestingly, Shakespeare considers old age to begin at forty years old, which shows how the perception of old age has changed socially with the passing of time. As Montalt explains, Shakespeare presents more or less prototypical representations of this process, and questions stereotypes of fragility and inaction in his various characters. Maria Miquel-Baldellou in “‘Now, I was that old man’: Images of aging and the mirror of old age in Susan Hill's *The Mist in the Mirror*” (217–232) explores how *The Mist in the Mirror* examines how age is characterised through the mirror: the different ages are presented in this story metaphorically, without any separation, blurred, providing a completely different perspective through the image of the reflection. Finally, the study by Nuria Casado Gual “Staging the 'crisis of aging': Old age as the new apocalypse in *The Children*, and *Escaped Alone*” (233–255) presents very different images of old age

in two contemporary works, including some rebellious depictions that differ from the prototypical figure of the older person, such as a person who pays great attention to their appearance. Casado Gual concludes that this rebellion often does not imply empowerment, since their discourses are not heard, which would be a central feature in the role that their voices play in public debate.

The fourth and final part of the book focuses on popular culture and digital culture, which are highly contemporary genres that also include audiovisual material. The first two chapters address online dating, but from very different perspectives. First, in “Online dating as a tool to avoid social isolation of the elderly” (259–272), Marcos Bote and Juan Antonio Clemente-Soler use sociology to discuss how these pages operate, and the discourses reproduced in them. In these cybernetic spaces, the authors highlight the ambiguity in that on one hand, stereotypes of the elderly are denied (such as the belief that they suffer from technophobia or the assumption that they are no longer sexually active), while these counter-narrative discourses remind us that adopting them implies that these stereotypes continue to represent a prevailing social belief. Second, “A ‘sexy oldie’ surfing for a ‘zipless fuck’: Representations of online dating in Erica Jong's *Fear of Dying*” by Ieva Stončikaitė (273–290) deals with the same theme but from a literary point of view, focusing on Erica Jong's novel *Fear of Dying*. Stončikaitė uses the protagonist to analyse the discourse of old age. She is an older person who is nevertheless very active in using new technologies and in her sex life, and as such the character deconstructs stereotypes related to older people, such as those that Bote and Clemene-Soler highlight in their contribution. The chapter by Olga García-Defez entitled “Age denial: The films of Paco Martínez Soria in the late Francoist period” (291–306) takes us to the world of the mass media, and specifically

to the analysis of Paco Martínez Soria's films in the later years of the Franco dictatorship. In this contribution, the author shows how the discrepancies between the actor's age and the character's age are managed, and analyses aging in the socio-historical period she discusses. The films studied show the conflict that arises from the confrontation between the old man as a very active person in the public sphere and his resistance to the demands of younger people seeking empowerment and wishing to be heard in the public sphere.

The final part continues with the contribution by Martí Domínguez and Tatiana Pina entitled "Aging through cartoons: The unbearable lightness of old people stereotypes" (307–324). They continue in this field, but focus on caricatures and how they use a particularly accentuated form of exaggeration and parody to represent older people, emphasising the loss of social libido, technophobia, forgetfulness, bad moods and physical decline. These manifestations reinforce social stereotypes, although as the authors point out, in the Spanish context a substantial part of this representation also includes the figure of the elderly person as caring for children. Meanwhile, an artist from Jordan focuses on satirising/criticising matrimonial relationships between very young women and older men, and as such it is an issue that is very much defined by its geographical and cultural contexts. The contribution uses a wide variety of visual displays that help the reader to obtain an overview of the analysis. Finally, Lucía Abarrategui Amado, Susana Villas-Boas and Sergio Pascual Espinilla in "How do adolescents see their grandparents and older people? A discursive approach to gender and age stereotypes by means of the radio editorial" (325–339) looks at adolescents and their images and stereotypes of the elderly, and throws up results that are quite surprising: while the collective imagination tends to assume

that adolescents have a stereotyped image of the elderly, the study argues precisely the opposite. The field work carried out shows that when adolescents have close relationships with their grandparents, they are more likely to attribute more positive characteristics to them. A personal view creates a vision that is more human than the perspective of abstract groups ("the grandparent" versus "the elderly"). The adolescents create a more positive discourse for their grandparents, which is better than that concerning the older population in general (although this is not negative either). The article correctly points out that there is a gender bias inasmuch as "grandmothers" are subject to a more favourable assessment, which is partially explained by the duties of care that they usually perform within the family.

The gender gap, the differences between the physical and the mental, and the representation of others compared to elderly people themselves are some of the virtues of the volume in its analysis. Likewise, the variety of periods covered provides some idea of a very broad temporal landscape, with changes and repetitions. Although gender perspectives are explicitly covered in the second section, most of the chapters address this perspective to the same extent. In our opinion this is one of the most applauding aspects of the edition, as already suggested on its excellent cover by Cristina Duran. This volume is part of a consolidated line of work on critical discourse analysis. One of its editors, Vicent Salvador, has edited a very interesting collection of studies of the discourse of death, which is a very good complement to this study, entitled *Discourses on the Edges of Life*, which he co-edited with Adéla Koťátková and Ignasi Clemente. *Understanding the Discourse of Aging: A Multifaceted Perspective* is undoubtedly an essential reference work for all those interested in analysing the discourse on aging from multiple perspectives and different periods. Returning to the cover illustration, one

final conclusion could be drawn: aging continues to be a fascinating subject for contemporary studies, and Celestina's revealing gaze at that adolescents have a stereotyped image of the elderly, the study argues precisely the opposite. The field work carried out Melibea still permeates representations and discourses today.