

López Pulido, Alfonso

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Historical reality and literature: The ridicule of old age in Rome

Alfonso López-Pulido

(International University of La Rioja (UNIR))

Abstract

Literature is a magnificent way of knowing the reality of life, even when it presents a modified version through the use of fantasy, hyperbole, literary resources, and a host of different elements. Through literature, we can glimpse and therefore identify many aspects of what constituted daily life and the concerns, desires, and aspirations of the society of the time. These aspects make literature a valuable instrument for gaining an understanding, albeit indirectly, of historical reality as a whole, and of old age in this particular case; more specifically, the ridicule suffered by the elderly in ancient Rome and the respect they received.

Keywords

mockery; literary devices; reality; teasing; literature

1. Introduction

The Romans paid a lot of attention to the elderly according to literary testimonies,¹ although negative manifestations prevail.

To start with, we should focus on a certain positive attitude exemplified in the Latin language itself, which established the dignity of old age, showing special care in distinguishing human old age from that of animals and things: *senex* for people, *vetulus* for animals and plants and *vetus* for things. In this way, the distinction of the signifiers shows the dignity of the signified.²

However, it is not possible to establish the minimum age that a *senex* should have. It could be that it was sixty or sixty-five years,³ but, in addition to the biological aspect, we have political, economic and social issues that must be taken into account. For this reason, the word *senectus* can also refer to the physical and mental state and not only to age.⁴ This explains why some authors, such as Isidorus of Seville, indicate that the *senectus* begins at the age of 70, although in other passages it says that it begins at the age of 49 and that it is followed at 77 by the *senium*.⁵ Hence Parkin points out: «This twofold division of old age, active and decrepit, anticipates the modern sociological distinction between the “young-old” and the “old-old”.»⁶

The elderly played a notable role in everything related to cultural, political and social life, thanks to the privileges granted to them by Roman law, which in turn drew on models of Greek literature and philosophy.⁷ Indeed, the notion of the historian – *scriptor rerum* – is worth highlighting: since the time of Fabius Pictor, it had been thought that the Roman historian was one who, after a military and political career, devoted the leisure of his middle age and old age to instructing others with examples from the past.⁸ It was understood, therefore, that the years of old age were dedicated to research and intellectual output, reflecting to a degree the ideas of Plato; hence, the future age was that of the fecundity of the mind and spirit.⁹

Despite the above, we should not overlook the fact that the concept of old age in ancient Rome underwent a radical change over time, and issues of a biological and social nature gave way to political considerations. After the establishment of the Principate as a formula for the exercise of power, the highest authority no longer resided in the Senate

1 Parkin (2003: p. 8).

2 López Moreda (2003: pp. 67–84).

3 Finley (1981: p. 158) in Parkin (2003: p. 25).

4 Parkin (2003: pp. 25–26).

5 The elder defines *senium* as the condition of old age that generally implies decline or weakness, senility, stupor, long life, melancholy, sadness or hypochondria (Parkin 2003: pp. 228 and 407).

6 Parkin (2003: p. 18).

7 Minois (2001: p. 40).

8 André & Hus (2005: p. 91).

9 Bieler (1987: p. 110).

– originally constituted as a council of elders – but in the *princeps*, whose position was not determined by youth or old age.

2. Elders and Latin literature in the Republican period: ridicule

Old age had been held in high esteem since the earliest days of Roman history, given the power and authority exercised by the *patres*, and materialized in the highest political body, the Senate. It can be argued that the Roman Republic relied on aging rather than youth and, for this reason, during this period there were many leaders of considerable age who, in difficult situations, received full powers.¹⁰ Accordingly, we could consider the Republican era as the period of predominance of old age, since laws and social norms emanate from elderliness.¹¹ However, we must not allow ourselves to be excessively influenced by the value system and mentality of the senatorial group, since the scarcity of sources and the exclusion suffered by the elderly from disadvantaged strata of society cast doubt on the idea that the Republican era was the golden age of gerontocracy.¹² Indeed, the figure of the *pater familias*, the head of the family and the oldest male member, was quite often an old man holding absolute power over all his progeny. He was of such importance that his authority had no limits, and he could bring legal proceedings against family members, and even demand a death sentence. Typically, however, he did not exercise this right,¹³ due to the needs and realities of daily and social life,¹⁴ and the moral role played by mutual appreciation and *pietas*.¹⁵ Accordingly, it should be noted that these laws were not always rigorously applied and,¹⁶ moreover, that the *pater familias* was not necessarily an elderly man as many died before reaching old age.¹⁷

Notwithstanding the above, the elderly played a hugely consequential role in the social fabric. However, this predominance was the basis of genuine resentment towards them, since as they got older and their number of descendants and wealth increased, their authority grew and continued until their death. This situation could give rise to powerful generational conflict,¹⁸ since the children were subjects of their elderly father well into maturity – forty, fifty years old – and considered minors until the death of their father. However, such cases are rare, because a considerable share of parents died when their

10 Plu. *Cam.* 37, 1–43, 2.

11 Minois (2001: p. 40).

12 Brandt (2002: pp. 150–156).

13 Saller (1999: p. 182); Cantarella (2003: p. 287).

14 Parkin (1998: pp. 24–26).

15 Saller (1994: pp. 130–132); Cantarella (2003: p. 286).

16 Plescia (1976: pp. 143–179); Wagner-Hasel (2012: p. 132).

17 Saller (1991: p. 37).

18 Cantarella (2003: p. 298); Isayev (2007: p. 4) downplays this conflict and indicates that the vision we have of youth is the one conveyed to us by the elderly (p. 8).

children were still young.¹⁹ On the other hand, some researchers indicate that the generational conflict had a marked political character.²⁰

Roman comedy became a vehicle of expression for these confrontations,²¹ mercilessly reflecting behaviour that entered the realm of the grotesque, and criticizing the elderly who held absolute power and dominated their families through terror.²² It was generally an evocative plot for the spectators: the unpleasant old man mocked by his children, who were angry at having to obey their old, despotic father and who found in mockery and lies their only relief, a type of secret, hidden revenge, since any attempts to openly oppose the *pater familias* were in vain.

According to certain scholars, it can thus be understood that this imitation of customs, ideas and uses falls within the notion of parody,²³ referring to any imitation, in writing, related to the ridicule of either the literary texts themselves or ways of expression, gestures, ceremonies, opinions or customs.²⁴ On the other hand, it cannot be considered *vituperatio*, although some of the underlying elements are similar; for example, one purpose is to encourage the audience to feel contempt and hatred towards the object of mockery.²⁵ Sometimes the defects of the old man are exaggerated and amplified, relying on an audience that shares the author's values. Indeed, this is where the serious or humorous rebuke of the elderly may arise, which some researchers confuse with satire.²⁶

In light of these elements, we can see that the stage representation shows the repression suffered at the hands of the *pater familias*. A detailed investigation of the relationships of the elderly with the young in Roman comedies can thus help us understand Romans' perspective on old age,²⁷ since the criticisms framed within satire were inspired by the daily events of Roman life,²⁸ sometimes making use of distortions and burlesque imitation. The literature of the Republican period, especially that produced around the second century BC, contains a considerable body of works in which a central theme is the tyrannical elder who is ridiculed.²⁹ This is because *ridiculum*, despite its similarity to caricature, must be understood as something broader than the joke. Thus, by using *similitudo denigratoria*, that is, the comparison with the most abject, the audience's attention is quickly drawn to the defects and vices of the protagonist;³⁰ in this case, the old man.

19 Saller (1991: p. 37).

20 Eyben (1972: pp. 44–69); Eyben (1993: pp. 51–69).

21 Hunter (1985: pp. 149–153).

22 Wagner-Hasel (2012: p. 128).

23 Cortés Tovar (1986: p. 115).

24 Cèbe (1966: p. 11); Meinhold (1977: p. 16), in Cortés Tovar (1986: p. 115). Bieler (1987: p. 68).

25 Cortés Tovar (1986: p. 44).

26 Cortés Tovar (1986: pp. 45, 71, 120, 289).

27 Sutton (1993: p. 59); Minois (2001: p. 59).

28 Cortés Tovar (1986: p. 284).

29 Sutton (1993: p. 57); Brandt (2002: pp. 133–136).

30 Cortés Tovar (1986: p. 55).

The comedic writer Plautus is possibly the one who best expressed the criticisms against old men. Indeed, most of his plays feature a comedic character type: the severe, dissolute, feared, but mocked father.³¹ The public sees an easily recognizable³² figure: the obstructive father who stands in the way of his children's freedom, and who is known to eventually be defeated.³³

To highlight these defects, antithesis is usually used, which is one of the open techniques of *ridiculum*, since the elements that are dealt with do not require any type of interpretation but rather are plain to see. This technique of *ridiculum* directly seeks to highlight the defects while encouraging the audience to focus on the skill of literary artifice, so that the criticism does not generate displeasure.³⁴ The satirical intention is to attack human vices, ridiculing them, and subjecting them to harsh criticism.³⁵ An interesting aspect is worth highlighting in relation to this criticism of the elderly. Cicero³⁶ claimed that Plautus had written two of his popular comedies, *Pseudolus* and *Truculentus*, performed in 191 BC, when he was already more than 60 years old: he is thus a *senex* ridiculing other old men. However, we must not forget that Plautus knew how to comically incorporate into his works the rudeness and joviality that suited the taste of his audience, which allowed him to make any such type of criticism.³⁷

We can cite some examples here. In *Casina*, the plot centres on the son who must submit to his elderly father, Lysidamus,³⁸ who is in love with a young slave girl. Lysidamus is mocked by his wife,³⁹ Cleustrata, while his slaves also make fun of him.⁴⁰ *Aulularia* depicts the vicissitudes of a greedy old man, Euclio, who finds a treasure and due to his fear of losing it ends up actually losing it. Greed, considered another of the paradigmatic defects of old age,⁴¹ is criticized and the *pater familias*, as the sole holder of family wealth, is reproached for managing it autocratically and not providing his children with any amount to satisfy their own needs,⁴² especially in anything related to love affairs.⁴³ In *Mostellaria*, the old man Theopropides is deceived by his slave Tranio,⁴⁴ who is attempting to hide the extravagant spending and love affairs of Theopropides' son, the young Philolaches. The son even dreams of his father's death, which would allow him to spend his father's

31 Mauron (1998: pp. 59–60), in Romero Velasco (2021: p. 205).

32 Frye (1991: pp. 216–218), in Romero Velasco (2021: p. 214).

33 Grote (1983: p. 36), in Romero Velasco (2021: p. 216).

34 Bergson (2002: p. 33).

35 Highet (1962: pp. 120 and 207); Hodgart (1969: pp. 34–37), in Cortés Tovar (1986: p. 77).

36 Cic. *de Sen.* XIV, 50.

37 Baehr (1879: p. 37).

38 Wagner-Hasel (2012: p. 129).

39 Dutsch (2008: p. 17).

40 Plaut. *Cas.* 239–247, 939–960.

41 Cokayne (2003: p. 83); Arist. *Rh.* II, 14–15, 1389 a; Ter. *Ad.* 832–836.

42 Cantarella (2003: p. 289).

43 González-Haba (2000: p. 36); Cantarella (2003: p. 293).

44 Konstan (1983: p. 49).

money with his mistress.⁴⁵ This amusing farce maintains a focus on the comedy of the actions and the dialogue. Theopropides is led to believe that his house is haunted and the deception also involves his neighbour, Simon, another old man. In *Epidicus* – Plautus’ most complicated play, full of intrigue as well as being one of his rudest and most libertine – it is worth highlighting that the comedy stems from the ridicule of two old men: Periphanes, father of the young protagonist, and his friend, Apocides. This comedy is reinforced by the constant efforts of the slave Epidicus to deceive not only his master, Periphanes (whom he mocks in the role of father), but also his master’s friend, Apocides.

In Plautus’ works we can find many more examples, but for the sake of brevity we will end with just a few examples. *Asinaria* features the elderly, lascivious father, Demaenetus,⁴⁶ who tries to seduce the lover of his son, Argyrippus,⁴⁷ as well as his domineering wife, Artemona.⁴⁸ In *Mercator*, the old men Demipho and Lysimachus compete for their sons’ loves but fail when Dorippa, Lysimachus’ elderly wife, intervenes. In *Trinummus*, there are twice as many old characters as young ones and the plot of play again features the prodigal son and the rich father. We also have the humorous scenes with Nicobulus and Philoxenus in *Bacchides*; or the contentment of Periplectomenus in *Miles gloriosus*, in which, interestingly, this old man represents the antithesis of the common *senex*, which Plautus once again acrimoniously reviled. Finally, there is a line from one of his plays: “Agility leaves me, I am furrowed by old age, my body folds under the weight of the years”.⁴⁹ This leads us on to Varro, who, drawing on a common theme in Latin literature, especially when comparing the decline of old age with the freshness of youth, tells us: “The one you saw as beautiful as a child, now, in old age, you see him deformed.”⁵⁰

Some researchers argue that these archetypal stories have a demographic explanation, given that at the time there were twice as many men as women over the age of 60, mainly due to deaths in childbirth.⁵¹ However, we should bear in mind that the data on which these estimates are based are, to say the least, incomplete and are subject to the luck of archaeological finds, so we are not dealing with incontrovertible truths. Although it is in no way definitive, the available demographic information does suggest a possible reason for the scarcity of elderly female characters in literature and the presence of widowers. In turn, this could arguably be why a considerable part of Latin comedy is based on the literary stereotype of the lewd old man in love with the same woman as his son, or that of the old man married to a young woman who cheats on him with her lovers.⁵² Thus, in contrast to the positive qualities inherent to old age, such as wisdom and dignity, other negative characteristics of the elderly man can be cited, such as the readiness to fall in

45 Cantarella (2003: p. 293).

46 Konstan (1983: p. 47); Wagner-Hasel (2012: p. 88).

47 Dutsch (2008: p. 3).

48 Plaut. *Asin.* 850–868, 937–942.

49 Plaut. *Men.* 757.

50 Varro *ling.* V, 3.

51 Minois (2001: p. 39).

52 Minois (2001: p. 39); Wagner-Hasel (2012: p. 88).

love with a young woman who ends up dominating him and making him a source of derision. Old age is always opposed to the youthful beauty of the beloved, who has no other option, given her misfortunate circumstances, than to opt for the lie.⁵³

This abundance of elderly characters in this literature can be seen as reflecting the relevance of the social conflict represented by old age in the first decades of the 2nd century BC, with this hatred towards the elderly *pater familias* being translated into the idea of wishing for his death, as it would mean long-awaited liberation for all.⁵⁴ A clear example of this can be seen in two works by Terence, *Heauton Timorumenos* and *Adelphoe*. However, both the overall approach and the treatment of the characters are different from those in the Plautine comedies. This relates to the fact that Terence was carefully educated⁵⁵ in a cultured environment, which is where he directed his comedies. His plays are much more affectionate and moving but also more sobering. In these cases, *ridiculum* gives rise to a distancing that allows the viewer the possibility of rational reflections on the work.⁵⁶ Old age is shown in a different way, since the parents are more benevolent, there are fewer old characters and they are also ridiculed much less, which is not to say that these works do not question the social reality of the absolute power of elderly fathers and their greed.⁵⁷

As the social and political crisis of the 1st century BC developed, old age began to lose its preeminent role, since both the Senate and the *pater familias* were increasingly questioned and their powers diminished.⁵⁸

Social and political upheavals drove some writers to exaltation, while others, out of sensitivity or disappointment, focused on the uncertainties of fortune, the shortness of human life, the importance of the inner self, and persistent unease about the ephemeral condition of love and youth. As a result, poets' complaints about their own fate and that of their lovers, always subject to the inexorable passage of time, replaced the criticisms that had been poured into the comedy directed against the elderly. Under these circumstances, History seemed to accelerate, heightening the perception of the passing of time that leads to the dreaded old age.⁵⁹ Against this backdrop, the path marked by Plautus and Terence was now to be followed by those Cicero called the *poetae novi* or neoterics, admirers of the Alexandrian poets,⁶⁰ who drew on pessimistic Greek feelings about old age and death.⁶¹ Thus, when the works of Catullus,⁶² Helvius Cinna, Licinius Calvus

53 Belda Navarro (1995: pp. 99–100).

54 Minois (2001: p. 56).

55 Baehr (1879: p. 37); Bieler (1987: p. 72).

56 Cortés Tovar (1986: p. 46).

57 Ter. *Ad.* 832–836; Pociña (1986: p. 45); Cokayne (2003: p. 83); Wagner-Hasel (2012: p. 131).

58 Minois (2001: p. 47).

59 Levi (1951: pp. 209–216); Goldschmidt (2006: p. 27); Oaklander (2008: pp. 271–272).

60 Baehr (1879: p. 86); Bieler (1987: p. 165).

61 Arcaz Pozo & Cristóbal López (2000: p. 12).

62 Brandt (2002: p. 176).

and Quintus Cornificius dealt with old age, the treatment was cruel and mocking, with the elderly represented as a source of moral censure and an example of incapacity for pleasure and love.⁶³ Indeed, Catullus is a clear example of the use of expletive in his poetic compositions, some of which are a fertile source of powerfully vulgar, lubricious vocabulary.⁶⁴

It is true that we are only dealing with a few fragments (in fact the only work that seems to be preserved in its entirety is that of Catullus) of the poetic output of a small group primarily composed of wealthy individuals. Even though most of them participated in public life, their poetry sought to express their personal concerns, to an extent prefiguring the incipient new order in which tranquillity and personal security would be chosen over freedom. Calvus and Cornificius acted as lawyers; Catullus and Calvus wrote political diatribes against the first Triumvirate; Cornificius and Helvius participated in politics supporting Caesar. Their erudition⁶⁵ and the elegant, formal artistic treatment of their most insignificant experiences stand out, a theme that dominates the act of creation.⁶⁶ Thus, given the scarcity of sources, we have only limited data to support these arguments, meaning we have only a partial view of people's perception of the elderly in this historical period.

3. Elders and Latin literature in the imperial era: ridicule

Although all this was fully developed by the time of the Principate, in its early days we can appreciate a certain contradiction when it came to the treatment the elderly. Indeed, it was Virgil who best embodied this dichotomy:⁶⁷ on the one hand, he was the emissary of Augustus' political message – the restoration of the *mores maiorum* – and in the *Aeneis* he presented the figure of Anchises, the elderly father, honoured and respected by his son Aeneas;⁶⁸ on the other hand, he highlighted the bodily weakness of old age, reiterated the miserable nature of old age and ranked old age among the worst misfortunes.⁶⁹

Horace showed similar ambivalence, treating the elderly⁷⁰ kindly but later becoming more virulent in his attacks on old age.⁷¹ Examples of this can be found in his *Carmina*⁷² and, especially in his *Epodi*,⁷³ while in other works he considers the elderly as greedy,

63 Catull. *carm.* 5, 1–2; 16, 11; 17, 9–12 and 14–24.

64 Bieler (1987: p. 170); Wagner-Hasel (2012: p. 88).

65 Baehr (1879: p. 56).

66 Bieler (1987: pp. 121 and 165–166).

67 Brandt (2002: pp. 183–184).

68 López Moreda (2003: p. 81).

69 Verg. *Aen.* V, 395–398; VI, 273–277.

70 Hor. *carm. saec.* 46–47.

71 Brandt (2002: p. 186).

72 Hor. *C.* I IX, 15–16; II XIV, 2–5; Bertman (1989: p. 164).

73 Clemeau Esler (1989: p. 173).

timorous and feeble-minded.⁷⁴ Horatian compositions merely reflect the attitudes of his contemporaries.⁷⁵

Tibullus, for his part, was worried about an old age that he would never in fact be able to experience.⁷⁶ This obsession with the evils that afflict old age prompted him to manifest in his works his intention to enjoy life during youth,⁷⁷ as it would be too late to do so as an old man.⁷⁸

Ovid was the one who levelled the greatest criticism against old age, due to his understanding of how he should go through life.⁷⁹ All his work is a hymn to taking pleasure in the joys of the here and now, and of the sweetness of love. Conversely, he spoke of old age as the greatest evil, especially for those who reached old age without having any descendants.⁸⁰

In *Tristia*, written when he was around 55 years old, Ovid laments the signs on his body that are already silently marking his impending old age.⁸¹ It is a fragment showing undeniable influences of darkly accentuated archaic Greek poetry, specifically that of Sappho and Anacreon.⁸²

An interesting change in traditional values can be appreciated, with the opposition of the concepts of youth and old age now being imposed, as values attributed singular importance. Thus, the youth of the founder of the new regime, Augustus, replaced the omnipresent old man of the previous era. This symbolized the ideal composition of the new political order, in an attempt to forget the turbulent actions and rivalries that brought him to power.⁸³ It should be noted that the Principate meant a reversal of the condition of senescence, in which the elderly became the incarnation of suffering, decrepitude, pain and physical weakness, ugliness, and loneliness.⁸⁴

At the same time, the gradual and sustained decline in the power of the Senate diminished the political and social influence of the elderly, especially relating to the functions exercised by the *pater familias*, many of which became the domain of civil law. This meant the elderly's loss of their institutional power.

The milestones that mark this loss of predominance are clear. Thus, the *patria potestas* was diluted during the High Empire, since the members of the family could denounce the abuses of the *pater* before the magistrate. The right to life and death over the children was legally regulated, such that the father could be forced to emancipate the son

74 Hor. *ars*. II, 310–320; Parkin (2003: p. 17).

75 Baehr (1879: p. 75); Brandt (2002: p. 184).

76 Cizek (1982: pp. 214–215); Brandt (2002: pp. 178–179).

77 Bieler (1987: p. 238).

78 Tib. I, 8, 40–47.

79 Baehr (1879: p. 57); Brandt (2002: p. 180).

80 Ov. *ars* II, 272–273.

81 De Luce (1989: p. 196).

82 Ov. *trist.* IV, 8, 1–5.

83 Belda Navarro (1995: p. 62).

84 Plin. *epist.* IV 2, 4–7.

if he punished him without good reason. Moreover, the father could not force his son to marry against his will. Likewise, children acquired legal personality, allowing them to independently possess wealth other than that of their father, to become owners, to take on contractual obligations and to act judicially. Later, during the Late Roman period, the *patria potestas* entirely lost its public nature and became something strictly private: the father could no longer prosecute his son and nor was he able to abandon him, a circumstance that had been in existence since the second century, when the obligation of the father to feed members of his family was established. In parallel, the importance of mothers grew, with them being able to act as guardians of their children and make them heirs to their assets.⁸⁵

In any case, this did not mean that the elderly lost their political role altogether, since many of them individually held positions of great importance, starting with the emperors, who continued to rely on the skills and knowledge of the old politicians.⁸⁶

As we have seen, the literature confirms these changes: by the time of the Empire, the opposition between parents and children had already started to become something of an exception. We also see the gradual disappearance of social criticism aimed at senescence and, the lewd, greedy and all-powerful old man of the Plautus and Terence comedies. He was replaced by the decrepit, horrendous old man of Martial and Juvenal, since, as he no longer generated fear, his physical defects give rise to derision.⁸⁷

An example of this is an epigram by Martial, which shows both great ingenuity and critical animosity. By means of impressive parody and magnificent literary artifice,⁸⁸ he attributes a human way of acting to fever. He addresses an old man, Letinus, who suffers from the ailments of fever and whom he humorously ridicules with great satirical acuity to create a comically irreverent caricature.⁸⁹

However, we also find Seneca's criticisms of the elderly who use makeup to rejuvenate their appearance,⁹⁰ those who are not able to adapt to their new situation⁹¹ or those who believe that they have matured simply through the accumulation of years.⁹²

Juvenal is possibly the last author who consciously and deliberately criticizes the senex and ridicules his possible defects and lack of attractiveness.⁹³ These verses by Juvenal are among the last preserved in which old age is bitterly despised.⁹⁴ However, he does not use *ridiculum* as a satirical method, but rather uses satire to represent reality from his personal emotional perspective of it. He wants readers to appreciate that reality and

85 Plin. *epist.* IV, 2, 2; Minois (2001: p. 42).

86 Cizek (1982: pp. 214–215).

87 Bieler (1987: p. 275); Minois (2001: p. 43).

88 Fernández Valverde (2001: p. X).

89 Mart. XII, 17.

90 Sen. *de brevitate vitae* 11.

91 Sen. *epist.* XXVII.

92 Sen. *epist.* XCIII.

93 Iuv. X, 188–256.

94 Parkin (2003: pp. 7 and 81).

be outraged by it.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, it should also be noted that his criticisms tend to get carried away by the rhetorical fashions and customs of his time,⁹⁶ meaning his caricatures are sometimes grossly exaggerated⁹⁷ and may undermine his own opinion.⁹⁸ When evaluating his descriptions, we should be cautious of interpreting them as totally true, since he does not focus on real cases, but generalizes. As such, his victims, even if they are based on authentic characters, belong to past times.⁹⁹ We have a clear example of this when he generalizes about the senility of the elderly, particularly considering that some of his satires could have been written when he was seventy years old.¹⁰⁰

The available information indicates a lesser presence of the elderly in the literature from this time on, since their power has declined. It is true that in some late works, such as the *Elegiae* of Maximianus,¹⁰¹ we find clear examples of the treatment of old age, but it plays a less relevant role.

4. Conclusions

Human history can be recreated through any type of written document, whether letters, autobiographical texts offered in literary versions, philosophical reflections or works of artistic creation such as novels, plays and poems. They may faithfully recreate reality or incorporate modifications reflecting the authors' perceptions. Despite this, they provide an important indirect source of information.

One of the drawbacks of the use of written sources for this period is their fragmentary nature. The source of the information represents a limitation, as it comes from a minority segment of the population rather than the popular masses. Our research thus observes the feelings and beliefs that shaped social and political life, and the spiritual factors that reflected a specific situation. It does so from a limited perspective that offers us a vision of old age in the past, where the elderly were a minority group made up of those had been able to avoid the many dangers of life and reach a period of their life that was not considered an age *per se*. From a social perspective, Romans did not consider being old as an age but rather as a simple extension of maturity.

These literary testimonies show that the Romans were aware of the fundamental aporia of old age, combining qualities and defects and being able to arouse lofty passions and prompt mockery. The clearest exponent we have of this is *De senectute* Cicero's, the first complete apologetic treatise on old age. It was based on specific examples but

95 Bellandi (1973: pp. 53–94).

96 Cortés Tovar & Balasch (2001: pp. 20–21).

97 Baehr (1879: p. 80).

98 Brandt (2002: p. 189).

99 Griffith (1969: p. 137); Bieler (1987: pp. 270–277).

100 Cokayne (2003: pp. 72, 79, 104).

101 Ramírez de Verger (1984: pp. 149–156; 1986: pp. 185–194).

without actually constituting a compendium on old age itself, in line with other authors who criticized certain characters but not old age *per se*, thereby preserving these profound contradictions. This ridicule was not effected through Menippean satire, with its criticism of human attitudes from a general point of view, since the Romans tended to avoid generalizations.¹⁰²

We must emphasize that contempt for the elderly is not exclusively a modern attitude, but rather has always been present as it reflects the impetus of the younger generations who want to attain a social, political or economic power monopolized by the senex. It also reveals a critical attitude towards the presumption of what experience implies, which is why, since Antiquity, youth has always been appreciated over old age, especially in those societies that had a reverence for beauty or physical strength in any of their facets or forms. Lastly, we should point out that, in the same society and in the same historical context, the economic factor was of major importance, as it was the elderly who had resources and social recognition that were in the most favourable position.

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102 Ramage & Sigsbee & Fredericks (1974: pp. 55 and 63–66); Knoche (1975: p. 54), in Cortés Tovar (1986: p. 14).

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Alfonso López-Pulido, PhD / alfonso.lopezpulido@unir.net

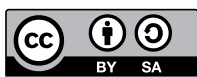
ORCID: 0000-0003-2365-1108

Department of Didactics and School Organization

International Academic Development Area

Education Faculty

International University of La Rioja, Spain



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