

THE REPRESENTATION OF OLD AGE IN EARLY MODERN BROADSIDE BALLADS

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Abstract

The study of old age in the early-modern period is an area that has received less attention than many others, though recent studies have helped fill the gap. Importantly, an awareness has emerged of how the different ways of defining old age, chronologically, functionally and culturally, have an impact on the understanding of ageing in the early-modern period. There are now many works covering the socio-economic history of old age, but few of these have contributed to our understanding of the popular perceptions of old age.

This study uses early modern broadside ballads as a source of 'popular' opinion on the subject of old age. Eighty-eight ballads from the late seventeenth-century were examined to identify any patterns in the representations of old age. Analysis was divided into three parts: an investigation of the narrative storylines associated with the old; a comparison of the characteristics of old age in ballads with those found in the conduct literature; and an analysis of the woodcut imagery of the old in the context of the ballad texts.

The study found that the old were represented in a limited number of ways and often negatively, especially in the groups of narratives that had similar, repetitive themes, here termed 'stock narratives'. The main thematic narrative groupings were the 'May-December marriage', the remarrying old woman, and parent-child conflicts. These stock narratives often involve 'stock' characters, such as the doting old man, the lusty widow and the old miser. There are also other, more specific narratives and characters that are not so restricted in their behaviour or characteristics, here termed 'non-stock', and these often represent the old more positively and are more likely to end happily. The images revealed a limited range of representations, especially for women, though a previous suggestion that all old women were represented as witches is questioned in this analysis. The study suggests that 'stock' woodcut images may have more to offer than previously thought, as a pattern in the use of one particular stock image has been identified. This study has used ballads to illuminate early-modern perceptions of age and has demonstrated the importance of further systematic analysis of ballads as a vital source of information about the early-modern period.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Research into old age in the early-modern period has seen an expansion relatively recently, and there have been many valuable and interesting contributions to the field, especially regarding the socio-economic situation of the old. This has resulted in a more accurate idea of how gender, social order and location could all be factors in the experiences of old age in early-modern England. However, these studies are not forthcoming on the subject of popular opinions of old age, and these opinions may have had an effect on how the old were treated by contemporaries and how they themselves approached ageing. For this kind of information, other sources must be found, and I have proposed to use early-modern broadside ballads as a source of 'popular' opinion on old age in the early-modern period.

Ballads as sources

As Bob Scribner observed, 'culture is...multivalent', and therefore approaching 'popular' culture requires investigation of as many sources as possible to bring a greater understanding of 'popular' ideas. Broadside ballads are increasingly being used as a means of accessing some of the 'popular' anxieties and ideas of the early-modern period – for as John Selden said in 1689, 'More solid things do not shew the Complexion of the Times, so well as Ballads'.¹ Ballads are useful for identifying ideas that reached throughout the social orders, for they were one of the most accessible forms of literature, costing ½d to 1d, and were pasted on the walls of alehouses, making them available to the poorest people who could not afford their own copies; while the gentry likewise collected them, and all social orders in between. Even

¹ Roy Palmer, *The Sound of History: Songs and Social Comment* (London: Pimlico, 1988), p. 1

illiteracy did not prevent access, since ballads were designed not for reading but for performance in street and alehouse, while their illustrations could be appreciated by everyone. Besides, it has been noted that literacy levels were much higher than has been thought; Margaret Spufford argues that assessing literacy levels on the ability to sign one's name is not representative of reading ability; it is quite likely that more people were able to read than write, since they are very different skills.² This extensive accessibility suggests that the ideas contained in the ballads had a potential influence on a large number of people, though whether they were genuinely 'popular' ideas created by the unlearned, or the downward mediation of 'elite' ideas, remains unclear.³

The distinction between 'popular' and 'elite' should not be thought of as a mutually exclusive dichotomy. It has been mooted by Peter Burke that 'popular' culture was open to all, elites included; he named it the 'little tradition', which overlapped with the 'great tradition' that was restricted to learned elites. Scribner likewise observed that 'popular' culture should be considered a 'total, unified culture' with shared mores, conventions and ideas for all members, elite and non-elite. Burke further extends the picture with 'cultural subgroups', likewise open to all, which affected individual appreciation of and participation in 'popular' culture.⁴

² Margaret Spufford, 'First steps in literacy: the reading and writing experiences of the humblest seventeenth-century autobiographers', *Social History* 4 (1979), pp. 407-35

³ Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 1; Bernard Capp, 'Popular Literature' in B. Reay, ed., *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 199-204; Natasha Würzbach, *The Rise of the English Street Ballad 1550-1650*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 13-27

⁴ Bob Scribner, 'Is a history of popular culture possible?', *History of European Ideas*, 10:2 (1989), pp. 179-182; Watt, *Cheap Print*, pp. 2-4

Cultural subgroups are difficult to identify, and ballads are not the medium with which to attempt this. However, there are questions regarding 'popular' culture which can be approached by studying ballads. While the models of 'popular' and 'elite' culture are useful, the question still remains as to who mediated the flow of ideas within the 'culture' and in which direction they travelled. This dissertation will, in part, attempt to identify where the representations of old age came from; whether they originated in elite literature and travelled downwards, or were mediated upwards from 'popular' culture and reified in elite texts.

This leads naturally to questions of audience reception and authorial intent, and these present further problems. Authorial identity, let alone intent, is often unknown – some ballads are signed but the majority are not, and their generic nature leaves no clue as to the composer. Without authorial identity, it is almost impossible to reconstruct authorial intentions and motivations; besides, it is uncertain how much the ideas presented in the ballads reflect the author's individual opinion. The intended audience is likewise obscured by the lack of knowledge of authorial socio-economic background and also by the fact that ballads were popular in the broadest sense of the word, with considerable transgression of social boundaries. The problems of identifying motivation have led some scholars to question the possibility of reconstructing popular culture at all, branding cheap print as merely 'forms of downward mediation by educational or literate elites'.⁵

However, though a knowledge of authorial identity and intended audience may help reconstruct the motivations of the ballad authors, the fact that ballads were so universal in nature suggests that influences may have come from any of the social

⁵ Watt, *Cheap Print*, p. 4

orders, especially if one accepts Roger Chartier's theory of cultural 'consumption', which suggests that the 'collective responses' of an audience can affect the material that is printed or reprinted. Therefore if a particular topic proves popular among 'consumers', this may result in the production of more material along similar lines; the frequent recurrence of topics might therefore suggest that the audience was involved in this process – which rejects the idea that ballad topics were entirely downward mediation.

One important consideration is that ballads were not examples of the written word but were songs; their true sense revealed only in the context of full performance. There are many examples of songs whose words appear to mean one thing but which in the context of the tune take on an entirely different meaning – an apparently sad set of lyrics set to a jolly tune, for instance, the tune twisting the original sense of the words into mockery. Unfortunately, many of the tunes for early-modern broadside ballads have been lost, and this can cause interpretative problems for the study of old age.

Defining early-modern 'old age'

Before attempting a study of ageing, the concept of 'old age' requires a definition, for it was a more complicated subject in early-modern England than it is today. The ages of sixty and sixty-five, the ages of retirement and eligibility for a state pension, are now symbolic of entry into 'old age'; however, these dates were only assigned in the late nineteenth century, and they bear little resemblance to past considerations of the ageing process.⁶ The concept of ageing was rather different in early-modern England,

⁶ Janet Roebuck, 'When does "Old Age" Begin? The Evolution of the English Definition', *Journal of Social History*, 12 (1979), pp. 420-422

and this study of ageing needs to be aware of how it was understood in this particular period.

Ageing in early-modern England was seen as a process of gradual decline from vigorous maturity to senile decrepitude. Various 'Ages of Man' schemes described old age as a progression involving a number of phases and ending inevitably in senectude, with various years considered to be 'climacteries', highly significant years in the process of ageing. Three-part, four-part, seven-part and twelve-part schemes the most common, and the models could differ wildly in their estimation of the beginning of old age, ranging from thirty-five to seventy-two.⁷ Old age itself could be divided into several stages, commonly two or three, named 'flourishing' or 'green', 'mature' and 'decrepit' old age. Entry into old age was thus perceived, not as a sudden change, but a gradual decline.⁸

Flourishing old age was the phase immediately after the 'constant' age – middle age, in modern parlance, which typified ideal manhood. Positive descriptions of this phase of ageing maintained that old men up to sixty or seventy were still of good use to the commonwealth, as they upheld the positive aspects of the 'constant' age and were thought to have increased in 'ripeness of judgment', making them excellent counsellors. Wisdom was often considered to be one of the advantages of old age, and was

7 Lynn Botelho, 'Old Age and Menopause', in Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane, eds., *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500*, (Harlow, 2001), p. 46; Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early-modern England*, (Oxford, 2003); Anthony Ellis, *Old Age, Masculinity and Early-modern Drama*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 1-11, Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 24; 55-62; Susannah Ottaway, *The Decline of Life*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 54-5

8 Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, pp. 55-7

connected with temperance, good judgment and piety.⁹ As age increased, various more negative characteristics became associated with ageing, which ended ultimately in senescence and 'second childhood'. Though it is unclear precisely how far down the social order these schemes penetrated, they can be found in early-modern drama, notably in Jacques' speech from Act 2 of 'As You Like It', as well as in some broadside ballads.¹⁰

Women were not often considered in these schemes, but when they were, their lives were divided into three stages, maid, wife and widow. Since these stages could happen at almost any age, a woman's life was not considered along chronological lines, but rather functionally or culturally. ¹¹ The significant chronological points came when she stopped being a maid, which would most likely be mid-twenties at the latest, and her entry into menopause and its accompanying loss of fertility, somewhere between forty and fifty.¹²

The 'Ages of Man' were linked with the Galenic four bodily humours, in which the health of the body depended on a balance between the four corporeal fluids. The balance of humours was connected with the stages in the life of a man; as the body aged, it was believed to become colder and drier, and maintaining the balance of the

⁹ Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, pp. 41-2

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 2. 7. 139-167; Pepys 2.32

¹¹ Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early-modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 41-2

¹² Botelho, 'Old Age and Menopause', pp. 48-58

humours became increasingly difficult, leading to physical and temperament changes.¹³

As is often the case, the advice regarding women was contradictory. In some lines of thought, women already suffered from an imbalance of the humours, and the greater dryness of age led to them becoming like men, stronger and healthier than in their pre-menopausal years.¹⁴ However, the cessation of menstruation was also thought to be dangerous, as it was believed to rid the body of excess blood; this blood, having no outlet, ran to the brain, causing it to overheat and leading women to grow silly with age.¹⁵

Functional and cultural approaches to age

It is clear that the early-modern approach to age was more fluid than a rigid chronological definition of ageing. While there was probably a higher familiarity with individual age than has been previously thought, there was still a flexible attitude to age depending upon the context or situation.¹⁶ For instance, Shepard has described men giving the same age in two different years, or two different ages in the same year, and sometimes increasing their age by more years than had passed since it was last recorded. She also observed a tendency towards approximating age, with such phrases as '50 or thereabouts' and '60 and above' appearing in official documents, and she noted that these 'approximate' ages tend to gravitate to fifty and sixty, a process

¹³ Ellis, *Old Age and Early-modern Drama*, pp. 17-18

¹⁴ Thane, *Old Age in English History*, p. 22

¹⁵ Wiesner, *Women and Gender*, p. 44

¹⁶ Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, pp. 215-7

called 'age-heaping', which suggests that these chronological points were conveniently symbolic of 'old age'.¹⁷ Clearly, therefore, there was an awareness of chronological age, and an association of certain chronological ages with 'old age'. However, in a world where only a few retired, chronological age was not as significant as it is today, and other factors determined whether a person was 'old'.

Many scholars have adopted a threefold set of definitions of 'old age'.¹⁸ The first is chronological old age, defined as reaching a specific calendar age regardless of physical or mental functional ability. The second and third definitions offer a closer insight into the understanding of old age in early-modern England. Functional old age is defined as the point at which one can no longer support oneself or participate fully in society, regardless of chronological old age – though there was presumably a chronological element, since an incident that left an individual unable to support themselves could occur at any age.¹⁹ Cultural old age is the most elusive of the three, best described as being old in 'many social senses' and involving the performance of the social functions and adoption of the recognised characteristics of an old person, regardless of chronological age or functional ability. It was often attributed by neighbours and friends rather than self-defined.²⁰

¹⁷ Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, pp. 216-17 and 218-220

¹⁸ Botelho, 'Old Age and Menopause', p. 44; Thane, *Old Age in English History*, pp. 4-6; Ottaway, *The Decline of Life*, pp. 18-53

¹⁹ Botelho, 'Old Age and Menopause', p. 44

²⁰ Botelho, 'Old Age and Menopause', p. 44; Peter Stearns, 'Old Women: Some Historical Observations', *Journal of Family History* 5 (1980), p. 46

The three definitions are by no means mutually exclusive; an individual could conform to any of them at different times. A man crippled in his thirties would not be thought of as old until he had passed a certain calendar age, though his functional ability had been impaired for much longer. Equally, the power of chronological age was understood and was used by individuals wishing to enhance their claim for support or to emphasise their inability to perform certain functions effectively; such as Adrian Barton, who excused himself from serving as a constable in London, 'in respect of his yeres beinge neere Threescore'.²¹ Even the 'Ages of Man' schemes did not take a purely chronological view of ageing, for despite using chronological ages for the stages of ageing, the descriptions of each stage included details of the functional effects of each stage, and sometimes described the temperamental changes associated with ageing. Furthermore, the overseers of the poor tended to treat the functionally impotent as a cohesive group, with more regard to functional incapacity than age, though chronological age did play a role, since the impotent old tended to receive more relief than their middle-aged or young fellow-sufferers.²²

Any or all of the three definitions could be used to define a person, or for a person to self-define, as 'old'. Thus quite a wide range of people could potentially be considered as 'old', complicated by those who had become functionally impotent despite not being 'old' in terms of years.

Experiences of old age: the physical effects

²¹ Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, p. 217 (the specific date of this quotation is not mentioned)

²² Paul Slack, *Poverty and policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Longman, 1988), pp. 78-80

In a semi-literate culture which relied considerably on iconography and images, visual markers were significant in determining entry into old age. The ubiquitous indicator of old age was grey hair, commonly used in descriptions of old people: in at least one ballad the old male protagonist is nicknamed 'Grey'.²³ However, the point at which physical ageing began occurred at different chronological points for men and women, with women suffering an earlier and more sudden entry into old age than men, whose decline tended to be more gradual. The cause of the difference in experiences was most likely the hormonal changes during the menopause, which caused obvious physical changes, from young to old, in just a few years.²⁴ Lynn Botelho observes that when living in similar conditions and eating the same diet, women suffered the physical changes associated with menopause at around the same age, estimated at around 50 for the village of Cratfield.²⁵ She suggests that women from the yeomanry were probably the least affected by the physical symptoms of menopause, particularly the osteoporotic effects, due to a good diet and sufficient exercise to prevent osteoporosis. Richer women were not required to do much physical exercise, so were at risk from osteoporosis, though as Pat Thane observes, their good diets and the judicious use of cosmetics could prevent their appearance from becoming aged until quite late in life. Poor women had the worst combination of poor diet and too much exercise, and became incapacitated by osteoporosis earlier and to a greater extent than their richer

²³ Pepys 5.294r

²⁴ Thane, *Old Age in English History*, p. 5

²⁵ Botelho, 'Old Age and Menopause', p. 52. The estimation of 50 years is presumably for the changes in appearance brought about by menopause, not the onset of menopause itself, which would probably have happened at an earlier age.

counterparts.²⁶ For them, the physical side of the menopause was the marker of old age, with wrinkles, toothlessness, hairy lips, stooped back and lame limbs prominent among the symptoms.²⁷

Men also suffered physically from ageing, but this generally did not become noticeable until a later age. Shepard notes that whereas female ageing was connected with the physical changes associated with menopause and its associated loss of reproductive ability, for men the physical symptoms of ageing were less significant than the effect those symptoms had on their ability to support themselves and their households. Male status depended on a man being able to fulfil certain social functions, principally maintaining an occupation and supporting his family, and the inability to do so resulted in a diminution of social status and restricted access to the full patriarchal dividend.²⁸

It has been suggested that it may have been easier for women to adapt to old age than men, for as Shepard notes, 'they enjoyed a greater degree of continuity with their earlier lives'.²⁹ Certainly, men had a good deal to lose in terms of their status and situation with advancing age. Older women, on the other hand, could enjoy greater

²⁶ Botelho. 'Old age and Menopause', pp. 51-8; Thane, *Old Age in English History*, p. 5

²⁷ Botelho, 'Old Age and Menopause', pp. 49-52

²⁸ Botelho, 'Old Age and Menopause', pp.51-8; Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, pp. 220-1

²⁹ Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood* p. 221

freedom and autonomy and could achieve relative financial security and a respect that they would not have been afforded as young women.³⁰

Experiences of old age: status

Older men were privileged about other men as witnesses in customary disputes, and references to 'former elders' or 'the ancients sort' were used to support witness statements. This was a male prerogative; women rarely appeared as witnesses.³¹ The knowledge of old men brought security and certainty, for they had learned from the old men before them, ensuring continuity down the generations. This was particularly the case on Rogationtide when the beating of the bounds took place, with the elders of the parish passing on their knowledge of the parish boundary to the younger generation.

However, this was the only area in which male status increased with age and only for long-standing members of the parish. According to Shepard, masculinity was derived principally from acting as provider, but also could be obtained from a man's occupation or by other means such as excess, strength and bravado. The latter were not achievements an older man could hope to maintain as his years advanced, for they were the province of youth, so his best hope at retaining access to the patriarchal dividends lay in continuing as a provider for as long as possible. Men who could afford to retire or who managed to keep providing for their families into their 'old age' preserved their masculine status for longer than those that did not, and some men worked well into their seventies, in their occupation but also for the council, district or

30 Amy M. Froide, 'Old maids: the lifecycle of single women in early-modern England' in Botelho & Thane (eds.) *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500* (London, 2001), pp. 94-9

31 Froide, 'Old Maids', p. 222

parish. However, many were forced to give up their original occupation in favour of lighter work; a blow, since occupation was a significant part of male identity. Those that could no longer support their family lost all their credit, another vital part of masculine identity, and a humiliating loss. Men had little recourse to other means of creating masculine identity, and thus had considerably more to lose as they aged than women, with age becoming their primary determinant.³²

Unlike men, a woman's status lay not in her abilities as a provider nor even as a mother, but was connected to the male figures in her life. Women were considered the property of the head of the family, usually her father or husband, and an individual identity was not possible for most women; autonomy only came if they were widowed or orphaned. For a young single woman, attempting to live an independent life was impossible, as suspicion was cast upon those 'living by their own hand' and they could be ejected from lodgings with accusations of prostitution. Women living alone were considered to be a danger not only to patriarchal male governance but to their own health, which was thought to suffer when they lived outside male guidance.³³

However, old women could live alone, and old maids and widows of reasonable means enjoyed one of the best combinations of freedom, financial security and respect of the older generation. For old maids in particular the situation improved greatly compared with their younger lives. By their later years they were free from the influence

³² Froide, 'Old Maids', p. 221

³³ Claire S. Schen, 'Strategies of poor aged women and widows in sixteenth-century London', in Botelho & Thane (eds.) *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500*, (London: Pearson Education Ltd., 2001), pp. 17-25, Froide, 'Old Maids', pp. 92-103; Charles Carlton, 'The Widow's Tale: Male Myths and Female Reality in 16th and 17th Century England', *Albion*, 10 (1978), pp. 121-126

of parents and not attached to any man, allowing them to create their own status. They were no longer stigmatised for being unmarried, had no children to hinder them and were no longer suspected of being prostitutes; 'living by their own hand' was no longer something suspicious, and they were free to take in lodgers or practice a trade. Respect came in terms of work for the parish or the church, and those in a sound financial situation were able to pay taxes and give donations to local causes; indeed were likely to do so, having no children to whom to leave their money. By the time an economically-independent unmarried woman reached the age of 40 the world opened up for her, just as it was closing in for men.³⁴

By contrast, poor old women, especially single women or widows, often struggled to support themselves and their families. Many were forced to take in lodgers, work menial tasks such as caring for the sick or elderly, act as 'moral overseers' watching the young unmarried women of the parish, as well as such tasks as knitting, spinning or sewing.³⁵

Experiences of old age: widowhood

The prospect of widowhood loomed for both ageing men and women, and the combination of loss of income and companionship could be hard. Widows suffered particularly badly, for not only did they suffer the hardships of widowed life, but they also had to contend with the stereotype of the 'lusty widow', a stock character ridiculed in theatre and ballads as lusty and highly sexed, a character thought to become silly through independence from male influence, and who remarried with indecent haste,

³⁴ Froide, 'Old Maids', pp. 94-9

³⁵ Schen, 'Strategies of poor aged women', pp. 17-25

often to younger men who saw them as a means of quickly accessing a large fortune.³⁶

The reality was often quite different. Though remarriage was quite common, Elizabeth Foyster has observed that women of the middling sorts were the most likely to remarry; rich women preferred to remain independent and had no financial need to remarry, while poor widows had little to offer a new husband.³⁷ Widowers were more likely to remarry than widows – Pelling has found that only five per cent of the elderly poor men of Norwich lived without women, and suggests that aged men had difficulty managing alone and relied upon the work of their wives, both domestically and in terms of extra income.³⁸ Pelling found that few old widows of Norwich remarried after the death of their husbands; she suggests these old women considered remarriage as ‘likely to add to their burdens’.³⁹

Carlton suggests that men vilified widows for a variety of reasons. One of those was that an independent woman represented a threat to patriarchal manhood, not to mention an unnatural and potentially disruptive element to society; her freedom to act as head of her household was a masculine privilege which she yielded upon remarrying. Widows may also have reminded men of their mortality, being living proof

36 Carlton, ‘The Widow’s Tale’, pp. 119-124

37 Carlton, ‘The Widow’s Tale’, p.112

38 Elizabeth Foyster, ‘Marrying the experienced widow in early modern England: the male perspective’, in Cavallo and Warner (eds.), *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 1999), pp. 108-9; Margaret Pelling, ‘Who most needs to marry? Ageing and inequality among women and men in early-modern Norwich’ in Botelho and Thane (eds.), *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 2001), pp. 34-38

39 Pelling, ‘Who most needs to marry?’, p. 38; Froide, ‘Old Maids’, pp. 95-6

of a man's death, and this led to fears of posthumous cuckoldry, for by allowing another man to have sexual contact with her, she was breaking the vow of marriage to her first husband, and cuckoldry was the ultimate effeminising experience for a man. Barbara Todd reports how women were encouraged to refrain from remarriage as part of their godly duty to their former husband, though widows that remained unmarried could also be cursed as bawds or witches.⁴⁰

As a result of the nuclear household structure, when the husband died the widow became the head of household, which made her difficult, for any intrusive means of regulation were impossible.⁴¹ Instead, humour and ridicule were employed to censure the widow's behaviour; hence the stereotype of the 'lusty widow'.⁴²

Experiences of old age: poverty

Physical decrepitude could make earning a living much harder in the later years of life, and while it had a significant effect on men in terms of status, for both sexes there was a close association between physical ageing and lifecycle poverty, causing many people to sink below the poverty line; even those who had never before received relief were forced to apply for it in their later years.⁴³ For this reason, the Elizabethan Poor

⁴⁰ Barbara Todd, 'The virtuous widow in Protestant England', in Cavallo and Warner (eds.), *Widowhood in Medieval and Early-modern Europe* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 1999), pp. 68-75; Carlton, 'The Widow's Tale', pp. 121-28; Foyster, 'Marrying the experienced widow', p. 109

⁴¹ The nuclear household was the most common household structure in early modern England and consisted of parents and children living in a family group with no extended family.

⁴² Todd, 'The virtuous widow', p. 66; Carlton, 'The Widow's Tale', pp. 118-9

⁴³ Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, pp. 78-80; Lynn Botelho, *Old Age and the English Poor Law, 1500-1700* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), pp. 75-6

Law Act of 1601 had a clause emphasising the family commitment to supporting one another in poverty:

The father and grandfather, mother and grandmother, and children of every poor, old, blind, lame and impotent person, of other poor person not able to work, being of sufficient ability, shall at their own charges relieve and maintain every such poor person, in that manner and according to that rate, as by the justices in the sessions shall be assessed: on pain of 20s. a month.⁴⁴

The implication is that this was to be taken seriously – the fine of 20s. was a heavy penalty. However, the parish and the overseers of the poor were closely involved with the support of the elderly poor, providing relief where necessary, as Paul Slack noted:

Generally speaking, it was the community not the family which supported the elderly in early-modern England, and, despite the letter of the 1601 Act, the machinery of poor relief reinforced the pattern.⁴⁵

Similarly, Susannah Ottaway observed that care of the old people of the parish was a matter of shared responsibility and negotiation between family, parish and community, with the parish acting as ‘the provider of a safety net for the elderly poor’.⁴⁶ While many have observed that kinship networks were significant in the support of the elderly poor, it was quite likely that children of the elderly poor were not always able to help.⁴⁷ For one thing, the late average age of marriage worked against old parents being supported by their children, for just as the parents were reaching the age where support became necessary, their children were often struggling with the burdens of a young

⁴⁴ Ottaway, *The Decline of Life*, p. 174

⁴⁵ Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, pp. 84-5

⁴⁶ Ottaway, *The Decline of Life*, p. 175

⁴⁷ Botelho, *Old Age and the English Poor Law*, pp. 75-6

family and were not in the financial position to support their parents.⁴⁸ To this end, neighbours and friendship networks could be employed to supply what children could not, while relief, though limited, was nonetheless available to those that needed it.⁴⁹

Relief was awarded by the home parish of the claimant, and the Act of Settlement entitled the justices to remove an individual from a 'foreign' parish. The impotent poor – those functionally incapable of work through age or infirmity – were the most closely protected group of recipients and were considered relatively uncontroversial.⁵⁰ There was no legal requirement for the child to house their aged parent, and the parents were often in their own house within the parish. Children of aged parents could only be forced to make a financial contribution to their parent's upkeep, and a justice of the peace could make the decision as to whether, and how much, the child should pay. Whether a child was required to pay depended upon the parents being not merely poor but destitute, and on the children themselves being able to afford a payment.⁵¹

Methodology

Ballads as sources allow us to access a wealth of information on all the aforementioned aspects of old age in the early-modern period. Their widespread and varied audience

⁴⁸ Richard Smith, 'Ageing and well-being in early-modern England: pension trends and gender preferences under the English Old Poor Law c. 1650-1800' in Johnson and Thane (eds.), *Old Age from Antiquity to Post-Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 64-5; Ottaway, *The Decline of Life*, p. 175; Paul Slack, *The English Poor Law, 1531-1782* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 47

⁴⁹ Schen, 'Strategies in Sixteenth Century London', p. 17

⁵⁰ Slack, *The English Poor Law*, pp. 5-6

⁵¹ Smith, 'Ageing and well-being', pp. 64-5; Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, p. 84

and repetitive nature make them an excellent vehicle for studying contemporary ideas about ageing, as long as they are approached in such a way as will yield profitable and reliable results. For this dissertation, this will involve a systematic analysis based on recurrent characteristics within ballads concerning old age. From this analysis I can identify the features of old age that were highlighted, compare them with more 'elite' views of ageing (as found for instance in the conduct literature that abounded in the seventeenth century, or the medical theory described above) and reveal the ideas about ageing that would have been known to a wide range of society, based on the wide distribution of ballad material.

This dissertation required a search the entire Roxburghe Collection of ballads and more than two hundred from Pepys' collection – all that could be accessed. From this were drawn eighty-eight ballads which involve representations of old age, mostly dating to the late seventeenth century, though some are earlier.⁵² The dissertation then takes a threefold approach to analysing the nature of old age in the ballads, firstly examining the narratives in which the old were situated and the outcomes thereof; secondly investigating the characteristics of old age and the ways in which the old are represented, and finally exploring how the woodcut images can further inform how old age was represented in this form of cheap print.

⁵² See Appendix 1 for a full table of the ballad sample.

Chapter 2: The narratives of old age

The situations in which the old were placed, the narratives in which they played a central role and the outcome of their stories, are of great interest, for they can tell us what the ballads felt were the most significant aspects of old age. This chapter examines the type of narratives in which old age played a significant role, and attempts to explain some of these narratives with reference to the contemporary situation for the old, the prescribed behaviour from conduct literature, sermons, medical theory and other forms of literature such as early-modern drama.

Not all ballads are narrative in style; some are advisory in nature, while others have no clear narrative arc. Forty-nine ballads in the sample were narrative ballads, and many of these concentrate on the dictation of appropriate conduct and the regulation of behaviour via the medium of moralistic tales or humour, whether this was behaviour within marriage, in their relationships with their children or in their lives alone. The focus is on aberrant behaviour, though there are one or two old people who set good examples, thrown into relief by misbehaviour on the part of the younger generation. The narratives often place the old in uncomfortable positions, and we frequently see areas of conflict in which age played a significant role. Indeed, positive representations of the elderly were rare, and out of forty-nine narrative ballads, only thirteen had positive outcomes. The narratives can be divided into 'stock' narratives, a large group of ballads which have broad thematic similarities and recurrent narrative patterns, and 'non-stock' narratives, which are individual ballads with no thematic

connection; some of these are borrowed from other literature.⁵³ The stock narratives fall into various broad types which share thematic similarities.

The largest group of thematically similar ballads are those which describe unequal marriages; marriages with one party significantly older than the other. A natural subdivision is to separate those that deal with older men and those that concern older women, and this suggestion is supported by a considerable difference in the style of these two types of ballad. There is a small group of ballads which concern parental interference in their children's love affairs, which of course overlap with the parent-child conflict ballads. I shall begin with the most commonly-occurring unequal marriage; the old man and young maid.

The 'May-December' marriage

If it is difficult to reconstruct the motivations of ballads, the ballads of unequal age are surely some of the clearest in their aims; unanimously they disapprove of and discourage unequal marriage, using the narratives to instruct and regulate by example. The narrative arcs of these ballads were broadly similar; the wealth of the old man was the main attraction for the young girl or, more commonly, her parents, but his physical incapacities and in some cases weakening control over his emotions, as a result of advanced age, were intolerable for the young woman and led to an unhappy marriage for both. In several cases the young girl had been forced to give up her true love to marry the old man, though some girls married of their own free will. Whether the union was forced or consensual, the narrative and outcome were still uniformly negative; the marriage of old men to young girls was not approved of in the ballads. The outcome of

⁵³ There are several bible stories, for instance, and two versions of King Lear: Pepys 1.488; 1.496; Roxb. Coll. III. 542; Roxb. Coll. III. 275

the ballads could range from complaints from both parties to threats of or actual cuckoldry, separation, suicide or murder.⁵⁴

The reason for this disapproval of unequal marriages is not hard to fathom. Marriage was a serious undertaking in early-modern England, for it was the principal building block of the commonwealth, the only way for a man to achieve full patriarchal manhood and for a woman to fulfil her vital reproductive role; and love was its binding force.⁵⁵ This much is clear from the conduct literature; as one manual said, 'the Husband that is not beloved of his wife, holdeth his goods in danger, his house in suspition[,] his credities in Ballance, and...his life in perill'.⁵⁶ Even ballads recommended love-matches; as it says in *The Forced Marriage*:

Let Parents provide [a true groom] for each Bride,
That nothing of loathing their loves may divide.⁵⁷

The ballads show that unequal marriages were the antithesis of this ideal partnership; the difference in age prevented mutuality, while love was seldom a feature of a marriage arranged against the young girl's will. This lack of love was a cause of great instability for the unequal couple, but according to the ballads it was an unfortunate inevitability.

⁵⁴ Roxb. Coll. II. 158; Roxb. Coll. III. 84; Pepys 5.326; 1.126

⁵⁵ Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, p. 74; Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain, 1470-1750* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 42

⁵⁶ from *A Godly Form of Householde Government*, quoted in Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, p.83; see also pp. 79-81

⁵⁷ Roxb. Coll. II. 158

The old man of the ballads is often a picture of aged decrepitude and shows little of the vigour and energy that characterised a man's middle age, the so-called 'constant' age. Physically he is often in bad shape: 'With Gout and Stone he lyes in Bed', 'his Hands with Palsie tremble', and he can have 'feeble impotent veins'.⁵⁸ His temperament is more irrational than the ideal of manly reason and self-control of the constant age: he is a 'fool' to 'dote in age', he can be 'jealous' and provoke his wife with 'doting suspition'.⁵⁹ Instead of simply being loving, the old men of the ballads tend towards over-fondness, another dangerously unmanly trait which encouraged doting jealousy, the antithesis of masculine self-control and often an incitement to cuckoldry.⁶⁰ These unmanly weaknesses reduced a man's claims to the dividends of patriarchal manhood, which depended upon his credit and worth, themselves dependent upon his behaviour towards his wife and others, not to mention making him a subject of mockery to neighbours and wife. ⁶¹

The inability to control himself was bad enough, but being unable to control his wife, particularly sexually, could render a man effeminate and expose him to ridicule and laughter.⁶² Sexual control was a vital aspect both of marital control and of patriarchal manhood, but several of the old men in the ballads were impotent or simply

⁵⁸ Pepys 4.8, 5.166

⁵⁹ For doting old men see: Pepys 1.178, 1.362, 1.412; for jealousy/suspicion: Pepys 1.412, 4.8

⁶⁰ Foyster, 'A Laughing Matter? Marital Discord and Gender Control in Seventeenth-Century England' *Rural History* 4:1 (1993), p. 17

⁶¹ Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, pp. 188-191

⁶² Foyster, 'Marrying the experienced widow', pp. 120-22

unwilling.⁶³ Such a ballad is *The Young Woman's Complaint*, in which the unfortunate wife asks:

What should a young woman do with this Old Man
But make him a cuckold, as soon as she can?⁶⁴

Cuckoldry was not just indicative of a woman's waywardness, but was a personal affront to the man himself, especially as the wife became her husband's property, and any sexual disloyalty on her part was therefore the equivalent of theft, not to mention a source of great embarrassment to the man, on account of his failure of patriarchal management.⁶⁵ However, the husband in *The Old Man's Complaint* says of his wife:

Then would I not care greatly, if horning were my lot;
So that she would carry it neatly, [if] my neighbours knew it not.⁶⁶

As Elizabeth Foyster has observed, it was not uncommon for the husband not to mind the unfaithfulness of his wife as long as his neighbours do not hear of it, as this would prove both his sexual inadequacy and his inability to control his wife, severely diminishing his credit among his neighbours and threatening his status and manhood.⁶⁷

Marrying old women

⁶³ Pepys 4.8; 4.122; 5.186; 5.187; Roxb. Coll. II. 158; Roxb. Coll. III. 196

⁶⁴ *Roxburghe Ballads* Vol. 8, pp. 679-81 (no collection number specified)

⁶⁵ Foyster, 'Marital Discord and Gender Control', p. 7

⁶⁶ Roxb. Coll. III. 196

⁶⁷ Foyster, 'Marital Discord and Gender Control', p. 9

While the marriage narratives were equally disapproving of marriages between old men and young girls and those between young men and old women, the language used for the two types of marriage differed considerably; instead of the tragic overtones and serious moralistic message of the former kind of ballad, the latter ballads employed ribald humour and ridicule to reject the acceptability of the marriage of old women and young men; of the eight ballads involving old women marrying young men, six have a definite comic intention while at least one of the remaining two could also have been comic – it is hard to tell from the words, and the music, which might assist in interpreting the intention, is unfortunately not available. The humour was not always directed at the old woman; the young men came in for their own share of criticism, mostly for carelessly spending the fortune they married; thus the ballads highlight the profligacy of youth as well as the silliness of the old, the characteristic behaviour from either side of ‘constant’ middle age.

Lady Sarah Cowper, in 1704, was scathing about the idea of women over childbearing age marrying, whether they be maid or widow, saying critically of an acquaintance that his new wife, a ‘lady old’, had married him to ‘serve a beastly end’; namely sexual gratification.⁶⁸ This disapproval was held by conduct literature and ballads alike.⁶⁹ The behaviour of old female newlyweds in the ballads was anything but sober. In *Age Renewed by Wedlock*, a ballad set to a mocking tune, the old maid’s introduction to sex is grotesquely described:

68 Anne Kugler, ‘‘I feel myself decay apace’’: Old age in the diary of Lady Sarah Cowper (1644-1720)’ in Botelho and Thane (eds.), *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 2001), p. 72

69 Foyster, ‘Marrying the experienced widow’, pp. 109-112; Todd, ‘The virtuous widow in Protestant England’, pp. 66-68

Tho' I'm old enough to be a Sow,
Yet I squeak'd like any Pigg.⁷⁰

The humour seems intended to revolt, the apparent horror at the idea of an old woman as a sexual being perhaps revealing anxieties about growing old on the part of author, or playing upon those fears among the ballad audience. The woman also mentions that she 'may be with child'; this was of course the primary function of women within marriage and was felt by some to be the only reason for a widow to remarry. The old woman's claims to pregnancy sound like a mock-justification for her sexual activity, and the same can be said for the remarried widow in *The West-Country Wonder* who was pregnant by her young husband despite being sixty-six years old!⁷¹ Both these ballads use this device to place sexual old women in a deviant position, outside the bounds of the norm.

The ballads, like much early-modern drama, portray young men marrying for the sake of the widow's wealth; a challenge to the ideal of marriage based on mutual affection.⁷² Additionally, in many of the widow ballads the widow is portrayed as silly or naive with money and willing to hand it over in return for sex; for example, in *The Husband who Met his Match*, a selection of increasingly unattractive wives give their entire (and considerable) wealth to their new husband in order to persuade him to come to bed.⁷³

70 Pepys 5.159

71 Pepys 5.235

72 Carlton, 'The Widow's Tale', p. 120

73 Roxb. Coll. I. 508

However, in reality remarriage was quite common, and the ballads are accurate in that their remarrying widows are well-off rather than poor, for as Foyster observes, most remarriages occurred among the middling-sorts; wealthy widows were often reluctant to relinquish their independence, while poor widows were perhaps seen as a burden by potential husbands.⁷⁴ For many widows, having previously been *femme couverte*, the property of her husband, the freedom she gained on becoming *femme sole*, that class of woman who lived legitimately independent of man's control, may have been more important to her than the companionship of remarriage.

This dangerous female independence threatened patriarchal manhood, and probably contributed to the very negative representation of widows in these ballads. Old widows had an extra dimension to them, as they were reminders of one's own mortality, as well as dangerously subversive creatures. The ballads use vitriolic humour as a form of social control but also as a method of deflecting fear, especially those felt by men to whom widows were women out of their control, both sexually and economically.⁷⁵ The negative message of these remarriage ballads is reinforced by the fact that almost all of these wealthy widows die not long after they are remarried.

It has been observed that remarriage seems to have been more common among widowers, who needed someone to keep house for them and their children and could thus be, to quote Pelling, 'desperate to marry'.⁷⁶ This only occurs once in the

⁷⁴ Foyster, 'Marrying the experienced widow', p. 112

⁷⁵ Chris Powell, 'Humour as a form of Social Control: A Deviance Approach' in Anthony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot (eds.), *It's a Funny Thing, Humour*, (Oxford: Pergamon, 1977), pp. 53-56

⁷⁶ Pelling, 'Who most needs to marry?', p. 35

ballads, in *The Cunning Age*, where an old man tricks a woman into marrying him without telling her of his five children.⁷⁷ Given the tenor of the ballads concerning female remarriage, the lack of censure in this ballad and its isolated nature suggest that behaviour of this kind did not meet with much disapproval.

Parent-child conflict

Ballads censuring the behaviour of parents were rare; perhaps the ballad-writers were concerned about the risk of unsettling the social order. However, *The father hath beguil'd the son* is just such a narrative, showing an old father acting as *senex amans*, a lusty old man, conduct not fitting for the old.⁷⁸ The father of the title falls in love with and woos his son's fiancée, offering her money instead of youth. She is swayed and marries him, whereupon the son kills himself in despair; she repents and pines away and the father goes mad with grief. The tune used is *Drive the cold winter away* and leaves us in no doubt that this was supposed to be a sad song.

The language used to describe the father throughout is a clear indication of what the listener is supposed to think of him, and phrases such as 'old fox', 'the old doting churle', 'an old knave with one foot in the grave' and 'the unnatural dad' indicate the grave nature of his misconduct. The conduct literature required men to maintain self-control at all times in order for them to receive their full share of patriarchal dividends.⁷⁹ Old men were less likely to receive these dividends anyway, due to their age, and thus needed to act even more circumspectly and with more temperance than

⁷⁷ Pepys 1.412

⁷⁸ Pepys 1.362; Ellis, *Old Age, Masculinity and Early Modern Drama*, p. 41

⁷⁹ Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, p. 23

younger, married men, and they were expected not to give in to lusts and foolishness in order to be dignified with the respect accorded to the 'constant manhood'. Alongside that, excessive love was considered to be a dangerous and intemperate matter, contrasting and defying the cool reason associated with manhood. This 'unnatural dad' acts entirely from the heart and behaves in a manner completely at odds with that recommended by the conduct literature, both doting and lustful, exposing himself to the ridicule of neighbours and simultaneously losing any access to the patriarchal dividend that once he had.

However, despite the above example, conflicts between parents and children tended to cast the child in the negative role and the parent more positively, and these conflicts frequently concerned money. In 1688, Richard Steele commented that though all old people were 'despised', those with money were treated far more kindly than those without.⁸⁰ The ballads use this lack of respect for elders as the subject of several ballads, with the emphasis on castigating youth for its lack of deference. A number of the ballads concern prodigal children, but there are several that deal with even greater challenges to the social order; for instance, there are two ballads in the Pepys collection, *Meat to Loathsome Toads*, and *The Mercer's Son of Midhurst/The Old Man's Complaint Against His Wretched Son*, which highlight the risks of an old parent giving his children their inheritance before his death.⁸¹ In both, the sons are early recipients of their fathers' wealth; in the former, this is to save him from debtor's prison, while in the latter, it enables him to marry the woman of his choice. In both cases, the father is left penniless; in *The Mercer's Son*, the old man begs,

⁸⁰ Richard Steele, *Discourse Concerning Old Age* (1688), p. 171

⁸¹ Pepys 1.42; Pepys 1.540/ Pepys 1.137

My dearest son,
Thou must be good to me...
...Think on thy father's love
And deal well with me.⁸²

Unfortunately for the old man, this request is denied, and the old man is treated like a servant in his son's house, while in *Meat to Loathsome Toads*, the father is literally excluded from his son's house when he goes to him to beg for relief, having bankrupted himself to rescue his son. In both cases, no respect is given to the fathers, for their worth to their sons was bound up in their wealth and credit, rather than in love or affection, and it represents an alarming breakdown of order and deference; an early-modern nightmare.

Another ballad which reflects this breakdown of social order is *The Old Man and His Wife*, though this ballad also concerns poverty and poor relief in old age. Old age was a point in the life-cycle where poverty frequently became a reality for many people, even those that had never before dropped below the poverty line, since increasing physical incapacity lowered productivity and reduced the amount a man could earn.⁸³ *The Old Man and His Wife* deals with the reality of this situation: the old man and his wife travel a long way to seek relief from their son, who turns them away saying that he is overcharged with children and cannot help them.⁸⁴ The son himself is represented as ungracious and the general tenor of the ballad suggests that the opinion held was that he should have helped his parents, as he is reportedly a rich man.

⁸² Pepys 1.540

⁸³ Botelho, *Old Age and the English Poor Law*, p. 75

⁸⁴ Pepys 1.137; Pepys 1.43

However, the ballad accurately reflects the contemporary situation. As mentioned in the introduction, although the Poor Law Act had a clause requiring parents and children to support each other, children frequently could not support their parents, and were only forced to make a financial contribution to their upkeep if the parents were not merely poor but destitute, and then only if the children themselves could afford it. The late average age of marriage in the early modern period meant that just as parents were arriving at an age where support became necessary, their children were generally struggling with the burdens of a young family of their own and often were not in the financial position to support their aged parents.⁸⁵

The old man and his wife do appear destitute, but the son observes that his 'charge of children likewise is great...the best that I can do will hardly them maintain.' While it is impossible to judge whether the son is telling the truth or fobbing his parents off with a story, especially as he was described as 'wealthy' earlier in the ballad, the story rings true: this was a time of high inflation, so even if he were wealthy he might not have had enough to support his parents, especially as he has many children, for being overburdened with children was another point of lifecycle poverty.⁸⁶

Relief was always given by the parish into which the individual had settled, which could result in men and women who had travelled to other places being whipped back to their original parish, so that their home parish might take the burden of relieving them. The parents in the ballad travelled one hundred miles from their parish, incidentally showing that the ballad assumes that kin are geographically dispersed, and

⁸⁵ Botelho, *Old Age and the English Poor Law*, pp. 18-25; Thane, *Old Age in English History*, pp. 118-124; Smith, 'Ageing and well-being', pp. 64-5; Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, pp. 80-85

⁸⁶ Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, p. 84

were legally obliged to return home before seeking official relief; so there no question of staying in barn nearby as they requested, and the son was perfectly correct, if unhelpful, to point out that if they remained, 'The stockes and the whipping poast will fall unto your share'

In all three of these ballads, there is a disturbing challenge to the social order. In this ballad the father is shown making reverence to his own son, a deferential approach better suited for the son to be making towards his father as the patriarch of the family. Here the roles of father and son have been reversed, with the father adopting a deferential attitude towards his son, when originally and more appropriately it should have been the other way round. Likewise in *Meat to Loathsome Toads*, the father comes begging to his son's door and is not permitted to enter, while in *The Old Man's Complaint* the son is treating his father as a servant. These dangerous acts of inversion presented a risk to the stability of the social order and would have been recognised as such by the audience. They are also in direct contravention of the Commandment to, 'Honour thy father and mother', showing a worrying breakdown in patriarchal order.

However, the father has lost any access to the patriarchal privilege that he once had, as his age has rendered him incapable of maintaining himself through work, and in the case of two of them, giving away all his money to his son has rendered him worthless, both financially for his own support, and for his son's financial welfare. The son in each case has set up as patriarch of his own household, in which there is little room for an old man or parents who cannot support themselves – which seems to confirm Richard Steele's point, quoted at the beginning of this section.

Non-stock narratives

Of the eighty-eight ballads in the sample, only nineteen were 'non-stock' narratives, but despite their limited numbers they were much more thematically varied than the stock narratives, in terms of plotlines, outcomes and the actions available to the old within them. These narratives had a higher proportion of positive outcomes than the average for the old-age ballads: the percentage of positive outcomes across the sample of eighty-eight ballads was just seventeen per cent, but forty-three per cent of the non-stock narratives ended happily for their old characters, even those that misbehaved. The narratives are less didactic or regulatory than the stock narratives, though some act as humorous cautionary tales, such as *The Lusty Miller's Recreation*, which is a light-hearted warning against curiosity.⁸⁷ However, the motivation behind most of these non-stock narratives is hard to reconstruct, as they have no template or obvious object. Some seem to be amusing tales designed merely to entertain and divert; still others are apparently real-life stories, or certainly have a ring of truth about them, and again seem to be written to entertain, in the manner of the 'Real-Life' stories found in magazines today. One ballad of this kind is *A Mad Marriage*, which involves a woman disguising herself as a man to marry another young woman and provide her with a marriage certificate.⁸⁸ The Roxburghe volume editors wrote of this ballad, 'These fraudulent unions of two girls may have been frequent in London' and cited several other ballads on the same subject. Whether or not it was a true-to-life story, the 'everyday' nature of the narrative gave them an immediate relevance.

Non-stock narratives give the old characters freedom to act as ordinary people, outside of any prescribed set of boundaries such as they have in the stock narratives. It

⁸⁷ Roxb. Coll. II. 329

⁸⁸ Roxb. Coll. II. 360

seems the intention of these ballads is not moralistic, nor do they establish rules of conduct for the old; the characters are taking part in a wider narrative and thus behave much as they would in the real world. Since the characters themselves also have much to offer when analysing non-stock narratives, a deeper assessment of both non-stock characters and narratives will be given as part of the next chapter of this dissertation, where I shall be examining the characteristics of old age and discussing the difference between stock and non-stock characters. I shall need to include narratives in the analysis of non-stock characters as separating the two would diminish the quality of the analysis, for unlike stock characters and narratives they have no stock motifs and cannot be accurately analysed out of context.

Conclusion

Many of these ballads concerning the elderly show challenges to the natural order of things. The tone is didactic, the arguments made either by moral or by humour. Many of the narratives attempt to regulate behaviour among the old by depicting it as deviant. The disapproving message was driven home by the almost universally negative outcomes of those deviating from the norm, especially for remarrying widows who inevitably died shortly after remarriage. By contrast, there are several ballads that give the old a favourable representation, contrasting their good qualities with the fecklessness of youth. The subject of children being disrespectful to ageing parents was a theme that particularly exercised the ballad-writers, as it threatened the natural order of deference and upset the social order.

The non-stock narratives were more varied, and had a much higher proportion of positive outcomes, than the rest of the ballads. However, they cannot be analysed in

any great depth without a simultaneous exploration of their characters, so they await a more thorough examination in chapter three.

Chapter 3: Characteristics of old age

In his *De Senectute*, Cicero idealised old age as a time of constancy, moderation, exquisite judgment, wisdom, and virtuous contemplation.⁸⁹ The ballads, however, tell a different story; old age appears to have been a time not of moderation but of excess, not of exquisite judgment but of foolish dotage, not of virtuous contemplation but of miserliness, sexual infidelity and physical exhaustion. However, not every old person received such a negative characterisation, and this chapter will examine the ways in which old men and women were depicted in the ballads compared with their representation in conduct and other literature, and will identify the most common perceptions of the character of old age.

Ideal old age

The ballad *The Old Man's Wish* has the refrain,

May I govern my passion with an absolute sway,
And grow wiser and better, as my strength wears away.⁹⁰

These words correspond with the virtuous characteristics of old age found in the conduct literature, which idealised old age as a time of temperance, gravity and godly piety, a contrast to the excesses of youth. The old were advised to spend their declining years in pious contemplation, an advantage of old age that was believed to be unavailable to the younger generations. The old were believed to be free of the impetuosity of youth and therefore did not have to exercise as much self-control as their

⁸⁹ Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, p. 40

⁹⁰ Pepys 4.370

younger counterparts, but they were nonetheless expected to act with gravity and sobriety, and those that did not jeopardised their access to the respect due to the aged. Their dress should not attempt to imitate that of younger people, but should be plain, for the old ought not to compete with the young in any way. It became especially serious when the elderly set themselves up in sexual competition with the young, for this upset the natural order of things; besides, the old were supposed to be lust-less and any lusty behaviour in them was considered both unhealthy and a subject for ridicule.⁹¹ Old age was in many ways felt to be a time of acquiescence, not through effort, but inevitability.

That the conduct literature assumes that there would be leisure time available in which to contemplate suggests that it was aimed at people of some substance, rather than the poor. However, judging by the ballads examined in the previous chapter, some of the ideas from the conduct literature seem to have penetrated society to quite a deep level, for many of the ballad characters act outside of their prescribed rules for old age and are subsequently punished, particularly those who had been involved in sexual misdemeanours.

The characteristics of old age in conduct literature and ballads

As mentioned in the introduction, old age could be divided into several stages, and there was a general understanding that old age was not a rapid descent into decrepitude but a slow and gradual process. For men, the ten or so years immediately following the 'constant' age were considered to be fruitful years, when they upheld most of the positive aspects of the 'constant' age, and indeed were thought to have increased in 'ripeness of judgment', making them excellent counsellors. Wisdom was

⁹¹ Thane, *Old Age in English History*, p. 56

often considered to be one of the few advantages of old age, and was connected with temperance, good judgment and pious conduct.⁹²

Old women were not accorded the same respect that older men were in the conduct literature – wisdom and good judgment were the preserve of old men. However, although the ballads presented some fiercely misogynistic representations of old women, many had much more diverse representations. Even in the small number of ballads I have considered, women are accorded more respect than implied in the conduct books and are given more varied roles. Several ballads have wise old women, and still others have women acting outside of their prescribed gender characteristics.

To investigate the nature of the aged in the ballads, a qualitative count of the individual characteristics may prove useful. Shepard collected various characteristics attributed to old men in her book *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England*, and it proves interesting to compare this list with those characteristics represented in the ballad material.

Positive characteristics

Figure 2.1 shows the positive personal characteristics of old age collected by Shepard and how often these occurred in the ballad sample.

⁹² Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, pp. 41-2

Fig.2.1: The frequency of occurrence of the positive characteristics of old age in the ballad sample

Characteristic	Frequency of reference to old men	Frequency of reference to old women
Wisdom	16	9
Grave, sober	15	8
Just and upright dealing	14	9
Ripe in judgment	15	7
Patient	14	7
Temperance	11	6
Righteous	10	6
Piety	9	5
Charitable	8	3

Considering how the old are given a negative representation in the ballads, a surprisingly wide range of positive character traits occur quite frequently and, strikingly, there are more specific positive character traits shown in the ballads than there are negative. The most common positive characteristic of age is wisdom; unsurprising since this was one of the few ways in which old men could maintain their standing

within the patriarchy. Charity, righteousness and piety were considered to be the occupation of old age – at least for those with time and money enough to enjoy them – and are similarly common, while temperance was another feature essential both for maintaining patriarchal status and also to entitle an old man to some claim for relief; as has been noted, relief was often awarded on the basis of moral character as well as need, and constancy and temperance, not just in old age but throughout one's life, were necessary for trust and to obtain relief. Many of the characters in the ballads show combinations of these characteristics, especially wisdom, piety and charity.

Both men and women show their wisdom and experience both within narrative-style ballads and in the advisory-style ballads, such as *The Old Man's Sayings* or *The Old Man's Advice*.⁹³ The advisory ballads take a declamatory approach to dispensing wisdom, which often incorporates exhortations to charity and piety, bound together as one 'wise' approach to life. Most of these advisory ballads have a 'godly' flavour to them, and unsurprisingly echo the conduct literature in the behaviour they extol. The narrative ballads show by example and moral, rather than direct instruction; *The Bountiful Knight of Sommersetshire* is an example ballad which shows the difference between the old bountiful knight and his prodigal son, describing how the old knight was 'continually good to the poor', and 'blessings from Heaven replenish'd his store'. His son, by contrast, forgot his charitable duties and ended up in poverty, all thanks to 'neglecting to do as his Father had done'.⁹⁴ *The Kentish Wonder* takes a moral-based approach, teaching the lesson of a miser who tried 'enriching his Coffers, and starving

93 Pepys 4.301; 4.104

94 Pepys 2.57

the Poor'; the corn that he hoarded turned bad and was refused even by the hogs.⁹⁵ Hoarding of grain was a serious problem, especially in the early seventeenth century, so it is unsurprising to find the subject being used to highlight the importance of charity.⁹⁶

Negative characteristics

Figure 2.2 shows the positive personal characteristics of old age collected by Shepard and how often these occurred in the ballad sample.

Figure 2.2: The frequency of occurrence of the negative characteristics of old age in the ballad sample

Characteristic	Frequency of reference to old men	Frequency of reference to old women
Covetous	15	6
Suspicious, distrustful	15	8
Jealous	6	2
Burdened by grudges	4	1
Meek, timid	3	1
Fearful	2	0
Crazed	2	0
Gloomy	1	1
Pettish	1	0
Over-talkative, prattling	0	0

⁹⁵ Pepys 2.189

⁹⁶ Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 181-4

Suspicion and jealousy are connected, unsurprisingly, and both occur frequently in the ballads about unequal marriages discussed in the previous chapter, in both men and women; they also occur in ballads concerning old misers. Meanwhile the most commonly occurring negative characteristic in men, covetousness, was a common feature of old age in conduct literature and medical tracts as well as in ballads; even those that wrote in support of old age often included covetousness as a trait.⁹⁷ It was mostly, but not always, described as a negative characteristic in conduct literature though it was sometimes considered an excusable fault. One could even call it a positive trait at times, for by means of thrift (a more positive term for covetousness) a man was able to save up money for his children's inheritance, and this was after all the principal aim of a father. Indeed, several of the 'old misers' in the ballads are willing and happy to hand their money over to their children, occasionally with disastrous consequences. Of all the negative characteristics given in the conduct literature, only over-talkativeness does not appear in the ballad sample; unusual, since garrulous old men are common elsewhere in the canon of early-modern literature. Presumably there was no great anxiety surrounding over-talkativeness compared with the concern engendered by some other features of ageing.

The negative characteristics of the old people in ballads are largely defined by their role within the narratives. Old husbands are suspicious of their young wives, perhaps aware that their ability to keep control of a young woman is more limited now than in their youth. Old wives are likewise jealous, for they know that, though their wealth has won their young husband, once the wealth belongs to him their fading beauty will not be enough to keep him from straying. The positive characteristics are

⁹⁷ Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, p. 44

similarly character-driven, of course, and tend to be the qualities of characters playing the 'good' or 'pious' role who is set up in obvious contrast to a negatively portrayed 'bad' character.

One commonly occurring aspect of old age in the ballads is 'doting', rather surprisingly not mentioned by Shepard in *Meanings of Manhood* but certainly a well-known trait of old age, (which was of course known as 'dotage'). It is certainly one of the most common features of ageing in the ballads, occurring frequently in old husbands, and closely associated with jealousy; in many ways, doting could be seen as an increasingly senile mental state which leads to such character traits as jealousy and suspicion, especially since it was a term linked with the 'second childhood' of decrepit old age.

Stock characters

The ballads divide their old characters roughly into two types, those that grow old gracefully, in accordance with the conduct literature, and those that do not act suitably for their age. Being formulaic in nature, the ballads tend to have a number of 'stock' characters; recurrent characters that regularly appear in similar narratives. Many of these are instantly recognisable; they are characters that appear in early modern drama as well as ballads and were simplistic and stereotypical in nature. The majority of the characters fall into these stock groups, but there are a small number that only appear in one ballad, and who should prove interesting to examine in their isolation.

The depictions of old women could be grotesque and unpleasant, echoing Shepard's comments on the portrayal of old women in print, which 'scaled misogynist heights that were not offset by the redeeming features of wisdom and gravity typically

extended to old men'.⁹⁸ However, it is interesting that some decrepit men suffered a similarly cruel treatment in the way they were depicted. It appears that old age was a time when gender boundaries were blurred and this venomous, malicious writing could be applied to men and women equally. Possibly, these unpleasant mockeries of old men were the result of deep-seated anxieties regarding growing old on the part of the ballad authors, whom research suggests were almost invariably male.⁹⁹

Male stock characters

The dotting fool

The dotting old fool is one of the most common male stock characters and is often associated with the unequal marriage narrative. He is a character that embodies the contradictions in the conduct literature, for he acts emotionally and therefore contrary to the idealised portrait of 'constant' manhood and of temperate old age, while simultaneously behaving just as the old were expected. 'Silliness', especially in the very old, was anticipated as part of the approach to senility, and dotting was seen as part of this process; as the woman in *The Old Miser Slighted* says, 'the aged snowy head is often filled with jealousy'.¹⁰⁰ Old men are called 'doating fool' and 'old doating churle',

⁹⁸ Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, p. 39

⁹⁹ Foyster, 'Marital Discord and Gender Control', p. 8

¹⁰⁰ Pepys 4.8

and the ballad *A Foole's Bolt is soon Shot* describes how 'an Old-man for to dote in age' is a fool.¹⁰¹

It is reasonable to assume that jealousy, accepted cuckoldry or obsessive suspicion in an old man counts as doting, as it is indicated that this is the case in the conduct literature – a man is considered to un-man himself if he acts jealously or with too much love, as it is unbecoming to masculine dignity, signified by temperance and reason. It could also be difficult to live with, and thus became the cause of marital strife; as the wife of one old man says in the ballads, 'this doting suspicion no woman can brooke'.¹⁰²

The miser

Doting did not merely mean doting love or jealousy, but could include miserly behaviour; in *The Extravagant Youth*, the son says that his father 'on his old Angels was wont to dote'.¹⁰³ Prodigal sons were the bane of the old miser, squandering the fortune in a few short years, as in *The Extravagant Youth* and *The Prodigal's Resolution*.¹⁰⁴ The miser is often the same individual as the doting old fool, for many of the old husbands are also described as miserly. They are often associated with sexual misdemeanours and are frequently fooled out of their money by wily prostitutes or bawdy women, as happened to *The Frolicksome Bricklayer of Mile-End Town* who was robbed of 'forty broadpieces and forty score guineas' by two prostitutes, or the

¹⁰¹ Pepys 4.8; 1.362; 1.178

¹⁰² Pepys 1.412

¹⁰³ Pepys 2.92

¹⁰⁴ Pepys 2.92; Roxb. Coll. IV, 82

miser from *The Miser mump'd of his Gold*, who lost 'sevenscore pound' to a 'lady of pleasure'.¹⁰⁵ This loss of money is the usual form of suffering, perhaps punishment for his lechery.

The aged lecher or senex amans

The aged lecher is another character type that is connected with both the doting fool and the old miser; in fact many individual characters are combinations of two of these three stereotypes. According to conduct literature, the old were supposed to be lustless, but this is not always the case, and for those in the ballads that dared to give into their lusts, there was usually an unfortunate outcome. The lecherous Elders of Babylon in *The Constancy of Susanna* were killed for attempting to rape Susanna, the eponymous friar of *The Lusty Friar of Dublin* was gelded and the *Frolicksome Bricklayer* had his money stolen by two prostitutes – which was, as mentioned, the common fate of lusty misers.¹⁰⁶

Wise old men

The last male category is the wise old man, the one positive male stock character, and there are a significant number of old wise men in the ballads. Some are the subjects of what I have termed 'advisory ballads', while others show their wisdom by example rather than words, most often in charitable deeds and piety. Some ballads focussed on

¹⁰⁵ Pepys 5.166; 4.360

¹⁰⁶ Pepys 1.496; 3.43; 5.166

one area to give advice, such as marriage (*The Fathers wholesome Admonition*), while others gave more general advice, (*Wit bought at a Dear Rate; The Old Man's Sayings*).¹⁰⁷ Wisdom was one source of patriarchal manhood available to the old, especially the functionally old who were physically incapacitated but mentally sound. The word of an old man was given special value by virtue of his age, particularly in cases of tradition and customary disputes.¹⁰⁸

Female stock characters

Wise old women

Just like old men, old women could play the role of counsellor in the ballads, using the benefit of her years of experience to advise the younger audience. Some played their wise role within the narrative of the ballad; others addressed the reader directly. For instance, of the eponymous *Merry Old Woman* it is said that, 'her counsell is good...for she doth wish ill to no man'; she goes on to give advice on marriage, honour, good conduct for men and women, and how to advance oneself.¹⁰⁹ Like men, old women could also teach godly piety, as shown in *An Hundred Godly Lessons* where a dying old woman gives counsel to her children and the ballad readers on almost all aspects of life: charity, godliness, righteousness – in fact, all of the qualities described in the conduct literature and listed in Figure 2.1.¹¹⁰

The grotesque female

¹⁰⁷ Pepys 2.83; 4.259; 4.301

¹⁰⁸ Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, pp. 221-230

¹⁰⁹ Roxb. Coll. I. 268-9

¹¹⁰ Pepys 2.16

Despite the positive representation of wise old women, representations of women were not always kind. Though there were some unpleasant representations of old men in the ballads, there were none that scaled the same heights of grotesquerie as some of the depictions of old women. In *The Olde Bride* a widow remarrying for the eighth time is described in viciously misogynistic manner:

Her swarthy dry Westphalia lips
Are sunke to mu[m]my in her skin;
Whose gums are empty, and her lips
Like eye-lids hairy, and as thin

Meanwhile the future husband is advised that he need not fear being made cuckold, for 'none will use such charity'.¹¹¹

The Old Pudding-Pye Woman is another that uses disparaging language to describe a single woman. The ballad describes how:

Her Beetle-brow forehead
Hangs quite over her eyes

and most concerning for her customers was perhaps the statement that:

Her hands she doth wash
But twice three times in a year.¹¹²

Male fear of the *femme sole* can be seen in the use of ridicule and grotesquerie to depict women who were either living by their own hand or indulging in behaviour

¹¹¹ Roxb. Coll. I. 336

¹¹² Pepys 3.212

suitable only for men. *Shameless Joan of Finsbury* is an example of the latter; Joan of the title wins a bet made in an alehouse by crawling through London backwards with a burning candle placed in her anus, startling the Watchman on duty, who thought he had seen Satan but instead found,

this Devil prov'd to be,
Old drunken Joan of Finsbury.¹¹³

This ballad is portraying a woman out of control, but her actions are much like the acts of excess and bravado seen in young men who were trying to access patriarchal manhood before they were old enough; certainly not something to be expected in a woman.¹¹⁴

Lusty widows

The lusty widow has been discussed in detail in the introduction and second chapter, but some points are worth reiterating here. Widows that remarried, and old never-married women who married young men, were the objects of ridicule along similar lines to the above grotesque ballads, and the unpleasant nature of these ballads suggests that to some, at least, such marriages/remarriages were unnatural and undesirable. The level of vicious misogyny present in some of the ballads, particularly *The Rich Widdowes Wooing*, *The Wiving Age*, *The Olde Bride* and *The Husband Who Met His Match*, is quite striking.¹¹⁵ There are several others that are less directly cruel but which are still inclined to disparage remarriage. Of the ballads involving the remarriage

¹¹³ Pepys 5.423

¹¹⁴ Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, pp. 93-4

¹¹⁵ Pepys 1.284; 1.384; Roxb. Coll. I. 336; Roxb. Coll. I. 508

of widows, only one, *The Cunning Age*, is sympathetic towards the plight of an old widow that has married a young man (assuming the lyrics were intended to be read straight, for they are somewhat ambiguous and without a tune one cannot be certain of the intention).¹¹⁶

The lusty widow was a stock character within early modern drama, in particular, and was almost always mocked in comic representation. She was stereotyped as lusty and highly sexed, thought to become silly due to her independence from a male influence. It was often suggested that young men saw widows as a promising prospect for their advancement, since they were so rich and foolish, and that widows remarried with indecent haste.¹¹⁷

As explained in the introduction, there were many possible reasons for this vilification of widows. Fear, of uncontrollable women upsetting the social order, or of male mortality, brought into sharp relief by the very existence of the widow, seems to have played a large part in this denigration of widows, and ballads are only one place in which such hatred was poured out.

Non-stock narratives and characters

As mentioned in the previous chapter, there are several ballads which stand distinct from the rest of the sample, which have been termed 'non-stock' narratives. The purpose of these ballads was at variance with the didactic nature of the other 'stock' narratives examined in the second chapter of this dissertation; instead, they appear to have been designed to entertain or divert audiences, rather than to teach moral or

¹¹⁶ Pepys 1.412

¹¹⁷ Carlton, 'The Widow's Tale', pp. 119-124

social lessons. They are diverse in topic and equally diverse in character, for most non-stock narratives involve non-stock characters, who are able to play relatively unrestricted roles within those narratives. The following discussion analyses some of them, and demonstrates that these ballads have great potential for investigation as sources of the more ambiguous aspects of behaviour among the elderly.

In the analysis of stock characters, it is just as interesting to see what characters are omitted, as well as those that were included. One character who is underrepresented in the ballads is the 'old bawd', a character that appears elsewhere in the literary canon and whom one would expect to find as a stock character given the negative and misogynistic representations of women that appear quite regularly in all kinds of literature, especially early-modern drama. However, there is only one woman in the sample of old age ballads who is directly called an 'old bawd' (besides another who plays a similar role, acting as a go-between for a young man and a deceiving girl, but who is never directly called 'bawd').

The 'old Bawd' in *The Trappan'd Taylor* acts much as expected; she entices a young girl from the streets and uses her to get money out of the eponymous tailor, as well as other men. She is a 'cunning old Craft' and 'subtle', but receives no punishment for her immoral actions. The ballad was, therefore, probably a cautionary tale against trusting innocent-looking girls, since it was the tailor that suffered the punishment.¹¹⁸ It is interesting that such an obvious target for misogyny was ignored, not merely in this ballad but throughout the ballad collection. It is possible that by sampling the ballads for references to age, I have overlooked ballads about bawdy women whose age is not mentioned.

118 Roxb. Coll. II. 204

However, even sampling for age does not explain the lack of ballads concerning witchcraft in the Pepys and Roxburghe collections. There is, perhaps surprisingly, just one ballad, *Damnable Practices*, that directly concerns witches and witchcraft. This ballad does involve an old witch, as well as two younger witches, and all three are poor and receive relief from Beaver Castle; one, Margaret, is brought to live there. On the withdrawal of that relief, due to the misbehaviour of all three (Margaret stealing from the Castle, her sister Phillip being a 'Strumpet lewd' and their mother being 'a swearing and blaspheming wretch' who gave her neighbours 'malitious signes'), the three performed witchcraft upon the Earl of Rutland's family, and being found out, died either by hanging or by the hand of God.¹¹⁹

The story of the witches closely follows the reports from witch trials from the period. The old woman seems to be the principal witch, who was already suspected before anything happened to the earl's family, while her daughters were uncontrolled women who committed crimes before they became witches like their mother.

It is interesting that neither 'old bawds' nor old witches feature regularly in the ballad collections. Both were obvious targets for misogyny, just as the remarrying widows were, and were yet never treated to such cruel descriptions within the text itself. Even in *Damnable Practices* the witches are not given a detailed physical description such as the *Olde Bride* receives, though the image that accompanies their ballad is much more physically unpleasant than that of the *Olde Bride*. This incongruity will be further examined in the following chapter which concerns imagery.

¹¹⁹ The spelling of 'Beaver', for 'Belvoir' Castle and the young witch's name of 'Phillip' are taken directly from the ballad text.

Some non-stock narratives place the old in unusual situations, and allow them to get away with much more than the conduct literature and the more didactic ballads would. *Robin Hood and the Bishop* is just such a ballad, depicting an old woman acting entirely outside of the gender and age boundaries recommended in the conduct literature and receiving no condemnation for it; nor is her behaviour represented as anything other than natural, although she protects Robin Hood by swapping clothes with him and allowing herself to be captured in his place by the bishop pursuing him.¹²⁰ She is a poor old woman, for she mentions how Robin brought her new clothes some days before, but she is neither stupid, nor a weakling, for she fools the bishop and then stands up to him and mocks him for his foolishness in mistaking her for Robin. She also gets away with cross-dressing without any real censure and is given a role of heroine almost equal to that of Robin. The use of an old woman to play this role adds an extra element of entertainment to the narrative, because of its inherent contradiction; one would not expect an old woman to behave in such a manner, especially when she reveals her true identity to the bishop with the words,

I am a woman, thou Cuckoldy Bishop,
Lift up my leg and see!

The fact that she is not censured for any of her behaviour confirms that this ballad was not didactic in nature, but designed to cause amusement; its subject matter likewise gives it a wide appeal.

The Blind Beggar's Daughter is another ballad designed to divert rather than educate, though this one has marriage for love, and marriage across social boundaries,

120 Pepys 2.109

as its primary concerns.¹²¹ The beggar's daughter goes to seek a husband and attracts the attention of several squires and knights, but when she tells them of her beggar father, most reject her; only one knight wishes to marry her still, for love. They go to meet her father who says that he will lay out his own fortune for her wedding, and it turns out to be greater than that of the knight. Though many people still mock the knight on account of his future father-in-law, the marriage goes ahead, and it is revealed that the 'beggar' is in fact a nobleman of high renown who was injured in battle and forced to become a beggar; this twist in the tale fortunately prevents any inversion of social order arising from the marriage of a beggar to a knight. The old man is described as 'a silly old man' by his daughter, though he proves to be a good and loving man, though his principal role is to make an unequal marriage acceptable.

Non-stock narratives could also have positive, 'godly' messages. *The old man's life renewed*, for instance, describes how an old parson suffering from a great many physical infirmities finds himself recovering almost overnight, thanks to his godly piety and patience, both virtues from Shepard's list. Despite the efforts of his neighbours to evict him from his living, he prays and immediately finds that:

God in mercy hath restor'd
Him to his former strength again.¹²²

The parson is recorded as being 'a hundred and sixteen years' old, so despite the claims of it being 'a strange, yet true, revelation', it is clearly a fictional but moral tale about pious faith in God.

¹²¹ Pepys 1.490

¹²² Roxb. Coll. I. 548

In summary, the non-stock narratives and characters do give a more varied picture of old age in the ballad material than the stock material does, allowing characters to act more independently. There is not sufficient space here, however, to carry out a thorough analysis of these ballads, and so the findings must remain provisional. Nonetheless, this is certainly an area which would benefit from further analysis and research.

Conclusion

The ballads in our sample give a fuller account of men's lives than they do of women's, who tend to be restricted to lusty widows, comic characters or poor old women (either long-suffering due to husbands, or poverty-stricken). There is a distinct difference between how stock and non-stock characters were able to act in their narratives, with stock characters limited both in representation and outcome. The ballads have a narrow range of characters, just as they have a limited range of narratives, as observed in the previous chapter. Clearly this small range does not accurately reflect the varied situation of the old in early modern England; old age has therefore been essentialised, distilled into a small range of representations. This reification of old age may have been a result of the function of ballads about old age. Throughout this dissertation it has become clear that ballads served a didactic purpose. As the previous chapter observed, many of the old suffered negative outcomes to their narratives, and an examination of the ballads shows that these negative outcomes were likely to happen if the old person stepped outside of their prescribed age boundaries and acted contrary to the recommended behaviour; this is further reinforced by the fact that the well-behaved old were sometimes (though not always) rewarded, and also that punished

misbehaviour was often reformed. The regulation of behaviour was clearly a prime function of the ballads.

All of which leaves a fundamental question: were the elderly perceived as acting outside of the norm, or were the ballads simply representing the world as the ballad-writers found it; and if the latter, why were certain aspects of the characterisation of old age omitted? For instance, although plenty of evidence has been found in other sources for widows living alone, not one ballad covers this aspect of widowed life.¹²³ It may be that the authors preferred to focus on the sex lives of widows, expecting the salacious material to sell more copies. Alternatively, ballad writers may have felt it dangerous to depict widows or single women living independently of men and in reasonable circumstances, due to the challenges such a situation presented to the social order.¹²⁴

¹²³ Pelling, 'Who most needs to marry?', p. 38; Todd, 'The virtuous widow', pp. 66-7; Foyster, 'Marrying the experienced widow', pp. 108-9

¹²⁴ Froide, 'Old maids', pp. 89-110

Chapter 4: Images of old age

Examining the broadside ballads as textual sources is certainly a profitable exercise. However, ballads were not merely printed words, but were connected with image and tune forming a composite whole in which all three aspects played important parts. Inspecting the words in isolation can certainly be useful, but risks missing important aspects of meaning in these troublesome sources. This chapter will investigate ballads as sources of imagery, to further elucidate the portrayal of old age within this widespread form of literature, and will also explore image and words together in context.

The purpose of illustrating the ballads with woodcuts is difficult to identify. In an age of widespread but not universal literacy, printed images gave the written ballads pasted on alehouse walls increased accessibility, and likewise enhanced the printed copy for all viewers. However, the reasons for using certain images, and the frequent recycling of some images apparently regardless of context, are harder to comprehend. As noted in the third chapter of this dissertation, the ballad writers tended to rely heavily on stock characters and stereotypes that were frequently reused, and the same is true, to a much greater extent, of the images. It has also been observed elsewhere that the images attached sometimes had little to do with the ballad they were illustrating.¹²⁵ This is not always the rule, however, and some possible motives behind using both stock and ballad-specific images shall be considered in this chapter.

¹²⁵ Lynn Botelho, 'Images of old age', in Susannah Ottaway, L.A. Botelho and Katharine Kittredge (eds.), *Power and Poverty: Old Age in the Pre-Industrial Past*, (London: Greenwood Press), p. 227

Lynn Botelho has written a comprehensive article on woodcut images of old people, and she has made many useful and valid observations about the physical appearance of ageing, so the following discussion shall briefly summarise her findings before exploring their implications in greater detail.¹²⁶ In particular it will criticise one specific aspect of her argument, and will explore the ways in which both functional and cultural old age are represented. Finally, it will examine some of the images in the context of the ballads they illustrate, to explore how the image and ballad work together to create the overall effect, and will speculate about some of the reasons for the recycling of images.

The gendered appearance of ageing

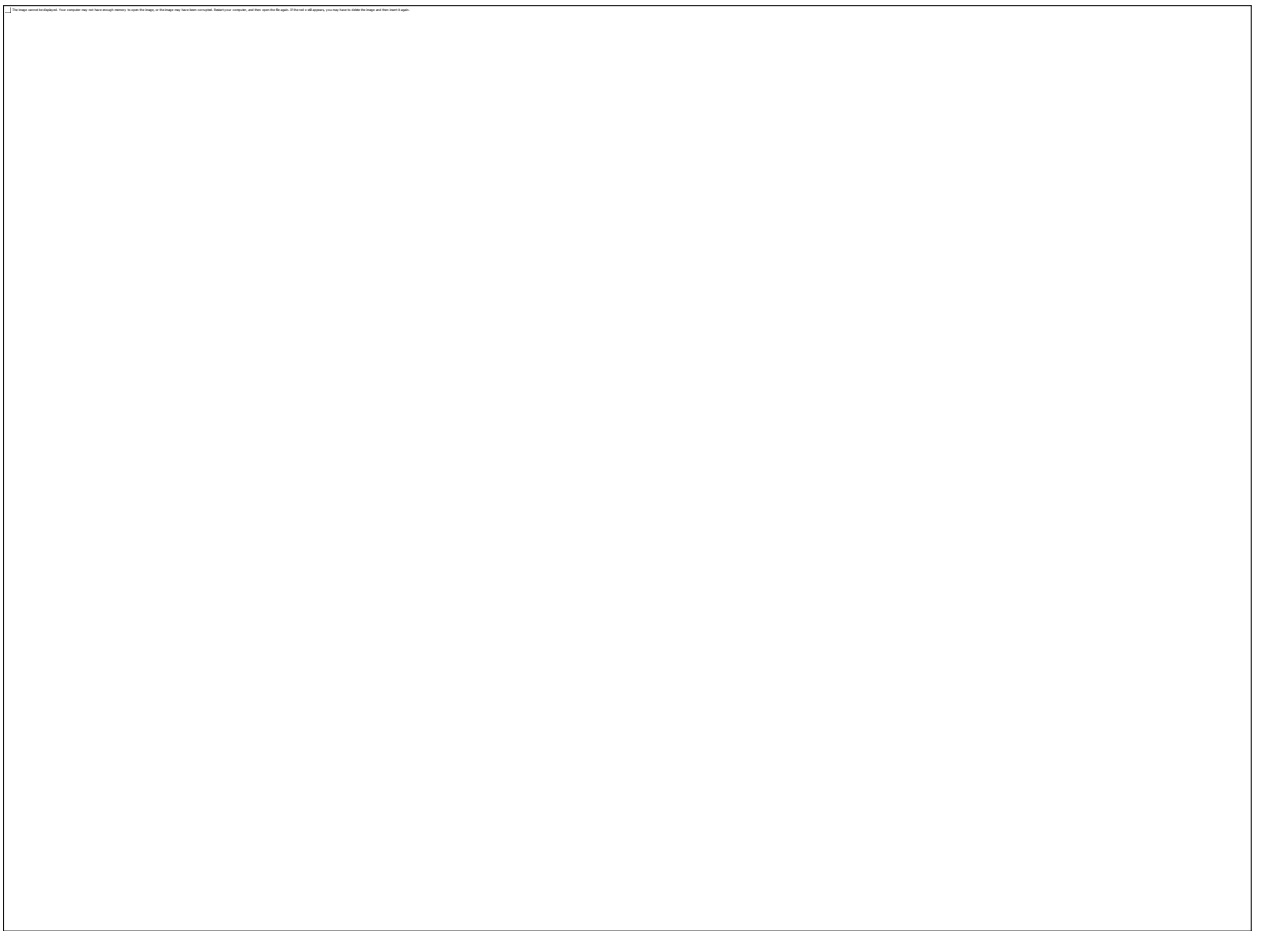
Botelho identified her sample of old age images by physical appearance and has observed that the vast majority of images are of old men, with only a few depicting old women.¹²⁷ Identifying old age in the images is fraught with complications, and the obvious physical symptoms are indicative of 'decrepit' old age, limiting us to a narrow selection of old age which can be analysed via this kind of imagery. Old men can be recognised by their beards, stooped shoulders, and clothing; several also carry sticks. There was a wide range of representations of old men, with few overtly negative

¹²⁶ It should be noted that Botelho does not include the actual images within her articles, though she does give references for them.

¹²⁷ Botelho, 'Images of old age', p. 229

depictions, and their wealth ranged from poverty to riches. Overall, there is a clear impression of the slow and varied nature of male ageing.

Fig. 3.1: The progress of a man's ageing, from The Age and Life of Man



The degrees of male ageing are highlighted by the image attached to the ballad *The Age and Life of Man*, depicting man's ageing from the cradle to the age of seventy,

with thirty-five marked as the peak of life and a noticeable decline at forty-nine.¹²⁸ This image shows not only functional ageing but also the cultural changes; activities, dress, and behaviour. The young man is depicted as lusty and vigorous, playing games, drinking and working in the fields, while entry into old age is marked by a sudden change of dress, from hose to robes, and the appearance of a bag of money clutched in one hand, emphasising the covetousness of male old age. The physical posture does not change until sixty-three, where the man appears with a stick, while the seventy-year old is stooped and shuffling. The images of youth are full of vitality, apparent even in a woodcut image, while the images from forty-nine onwards become static and much less lively.

There is no female equivalent of this ballad, just as there are no female equivalents of the Ages of Man life-cycle schemes; however, despite the limited range of female imagery, the three phases of 'maid, mother and widow' into which a woman's life was divided can be observed in the ballad images. In contrast with the wide range of male images, the female images present a fairly homogeneous impression of female old age. Botelho identified old women by their large noses and chins, indicating toothlessness; some have wrinkles and others carry sticks, while many are stooped over.¹²⁹ Old women are also recognisable through their dress, usually plain and dark, and for most the clothing suggests they are either poor or of middling wealth rather than rich or gentrified.

¹²⁸ Pepys 2.32; image reproduced from <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20655/image>

¹²⁹ Botelho, 'Old Age and Menopause', p. 55

Botelho argues that the fact that old women were depicted in this uniform manner is evidence for a universal stereotype of old women as witches. Though suggestive, this is arguably too great a generalisation, for not only are there several images that do not fit into her female stereotype, but some of the images she has included in her 'witch-like' group are almost certainly inappropriate. Botelho may in fact have anticipated finding such a stereotype and thus may have somewhat over-enthusiastically classified certain more ambiguous images as witch-like.

Functional/Cultural old age

The woodcut images discussed above portray physical decrepitude; the very end of life. However there are other images that reveal not functional, but cultural ageing, that elusive definition of ageing by which people fulfil a socially-aged role without necessarily being functionally impotent. Clothing and beards could be used to identify old men, but there are other signs of cultural old age; for example, the moneybags clutched by the ageing men in *The Age and Life of Man*, or hat styles, or the posture and general appearance of a character within a scene. The difference between functional and cultural old age is significant, as it raises important questions about the interpretation of the images. As discussed in the introduction, old age was not confined to the end of life and functional incapacity, but was a slow and subtle process with a

great degree of flexibility of definition.¹³⁰ The ageing processes of men and women differed quite considerably, especially in 'green' old age, for the male decline into old age was gradual, whereas at around fifty, the menopause caused a more immediate change for women of most social orders, with rather dramatic physical effects, and the decline which subsequently took place followed a common path for most women.¹³¹ The common physical appearance of ageing women could result in a much more homogeneous representation of aged women within imagery, particularly the simple woodcuts appended to ballads.

However, the change for women was not immediate, and by using woodcut images we can miss the subtleties of ageing. For example, in the ballad *The Cunning Age* there is a stock image of a stout, matronly woman who possibly has a lined face (Fig. 3.2).¹³² It is hard to judge whether she should be classed as 'old' or not, as she has none of the physical indicators of old age identified by Botelho. However, she presents a contrast to more obviously young women, as identified by dress, hairstyle and posture. Her dress is sober and she wears a cap rather than a frilled bonnet as the young women do, and her thick waist contrasts with the tiny waist of the young corseted figure next to her; all of which surely indicates a difference in age between the two. The context of the ballad would support this suggestion, but of course, that is no guarantee. A similarly ambiguous image is attached to *The Nine Maidens Fury* (Fig. 3.2); she likewise has a thick waist and a plain dress, and her lips are protruding,

¹³⁰ cf. Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, pp. 216-220 for changeable ages and old men excusing themselves on account of age; Pelling, 'Who most needs to marry?', pp. 36-8 for working into old age

¹³¹ Botelho, 'Old Age and Menopause', pp. 44-57

¹³² Pepys 1.412, image repr. <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20194/image>

perhaps indicating toothlessness.¹³³ A number of other images, both male and female, present a similar problem of ambiguity.

Fig. 3.2: The matronly figures from The Cunning Age, left, and The Nine Maidens Fury, right



The difficulties in identifying the degrees of old age in images leave us restricted to the obviously old for a sample – Botelho’s old women and old men were clearly aged. However, if we were to widen the definition of ‘old’ to encompass cultural , as well as functional old age, the sample of ‘old’ women might be widened to include these matronly figures that occasionally appear, including women perhaps just pre- or post-menopause who are filling an ‘old’ role, having come to the end of their reproductive life. However, it is impossible to be certain whether these matronly women are old or young, and this is the problem, for by restricting ourselves to the physically decrepit, we become rooted in a world of chronological/functional ageing, which is not the best

¹³³ Pepys 3.276, image repr. <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/21289/image>

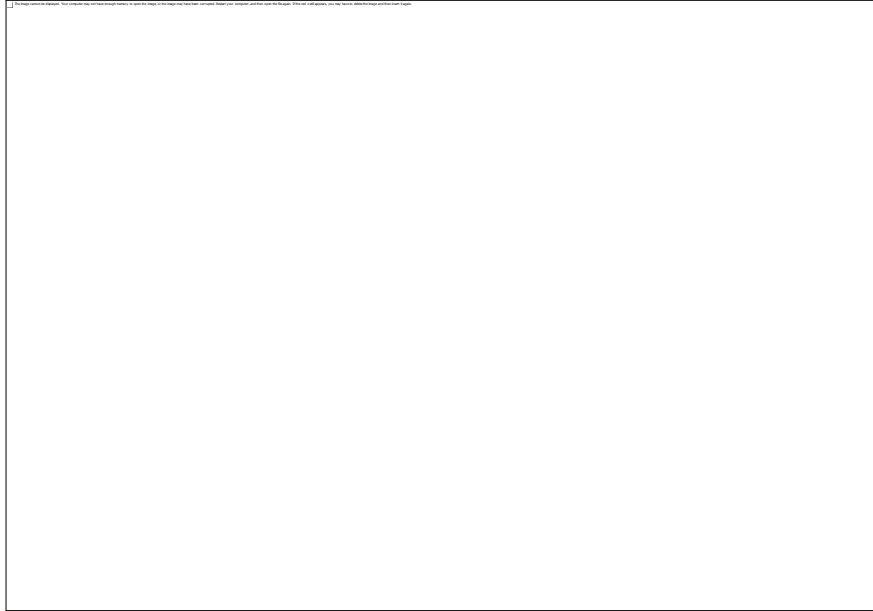
approach to analysing early-modern old age. Other studies of ageing have shown that old age was a multi-faceted time and much less limited than some sources might suggest, with people 'ageing' both early and late. It is vital to bear this in mind when carrying out any analysis of old age, especially when using woodcut images.

Though the patriarchal iconographic tradition presents a limited view of ageing, it ensures a considerably wider range of male figures than female, whose ages are frequently polarised between old and young with few ambiguous figures. The ageing process in men can be identified by fairly obvious functional and cultural symbols, while for women we must look more closely to identify a similar range of ageing. However, these few ambiguous figures have an impact on the study of female ageing in the iconography, contradicting Botelho's idea of a uniform stereotype of old women.¹³⁴

Witch-like old women

Fig. 3.3: The three witches from Damnable Practices

¹³⁴ Botelho, 'Images of old age', p. 229



Botelho wrote in her article of 'the virtually myopic stereotype that portrays old women as witches or witchlike'.¹³⁵ She describes how the woodcuts of old women overwhelmingly represented them as witches, with similar physical features, often including a hat and a stick, the latter being a particularly potent symbol of male authority.¹³⁶ Botelho's suggestion that witches were represented as old women is supported by the fact that in *Damnable Practices*, the single ballad to concern witchcraft, the witches described in the ballad are an old mother and two young daughters but the image that accompanies the ballad is of three old women – the middle figure clearly old, with stooped shoulders and walking sticks, and the daughters flanking her, though less decrepit, have wrinkled faces (Fig. 3.3).¹³⁷ However, witches being represented as old women is not the same thing as all old women being represented as witches. Some old women were clearly not 'witch-like', such as the old

¹³⁵ Botelho, 'Images of old age', pp. 238-9

¹³⁶ Botelho, 'Images of old age', pp. 229-232

¹³⁷ Pepys 1.132, image repr. <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20058/image>

woman depicted in the ballad *Robin Hood and the Bishop*; she may be toothless, but she is otherwise a perfectly normal old woman, standing upright and holding her distaff (Fig. 3.4).¹³⁸ Other old women that looked ‘witch-like’ may merely have been old and not intended to represent witches at all. Furthermore, the distinct absence of ballads about witches suggests that anxiety about witches was perhaps not as great as has been supposed.

Fig. 3.4: The old woman from Robin Hood and the Bishop

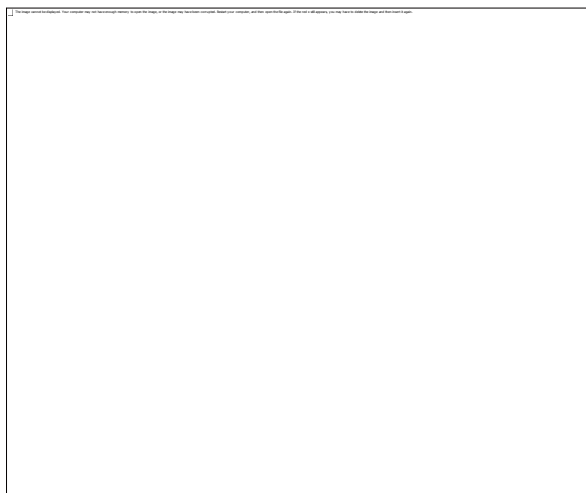


There is, of course, the additional risk of viewing the images with a modern, Western eye rather than as early-modern contemporaries would have seen them. The imagery of witchcraft has a long history in the Western world and the stereotypical image with which we are presented is much as Botelho describes; big nose and chin, wrinkled face, pointed hat and a broomstick, and dressed in a black dress. The modern

¹³⁸ Pepys 2.109, image repr. <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20731/image>

eye is attuned to seeing an old, haggard, black-clad woman as a witch. This is, however, a fairly typical physical appearance of an early-modern old woman wearing plain and simple clothing; the latter is unsurprising as the old were expected to act with sobriety and gravity, which was outwardly visible in their deportment and clothing. For instance, if a modern Western viewer looked at the image of the old woman in the ballad *The Bashfull-Maidens no, no, no* they may well identify her as a witch, thanks to her bent nose, pointed chin and tall tapering hat (Fig. 3.5). However, she could equally be an ordinary old woman enjoying a chat with her neighbour. There is little to indicate that she is a witch – certainly she does not appear with any of the usual symbols of witchcraft that accompanied images of ‘real’ witches such as a broomstick or familiar.¹³⁹ Since Botelho has restricted her images to those that are obviously old, it is unsurprising that the women appear as old crones. This does not make them witches, merely unsurprisingly ugly old women; in that, the woodcut images may have been cruelly accurate.

Fig. 3.5: A ‘witch-like’ old woman? From The Bashfull-Maiden’s No, no, no.

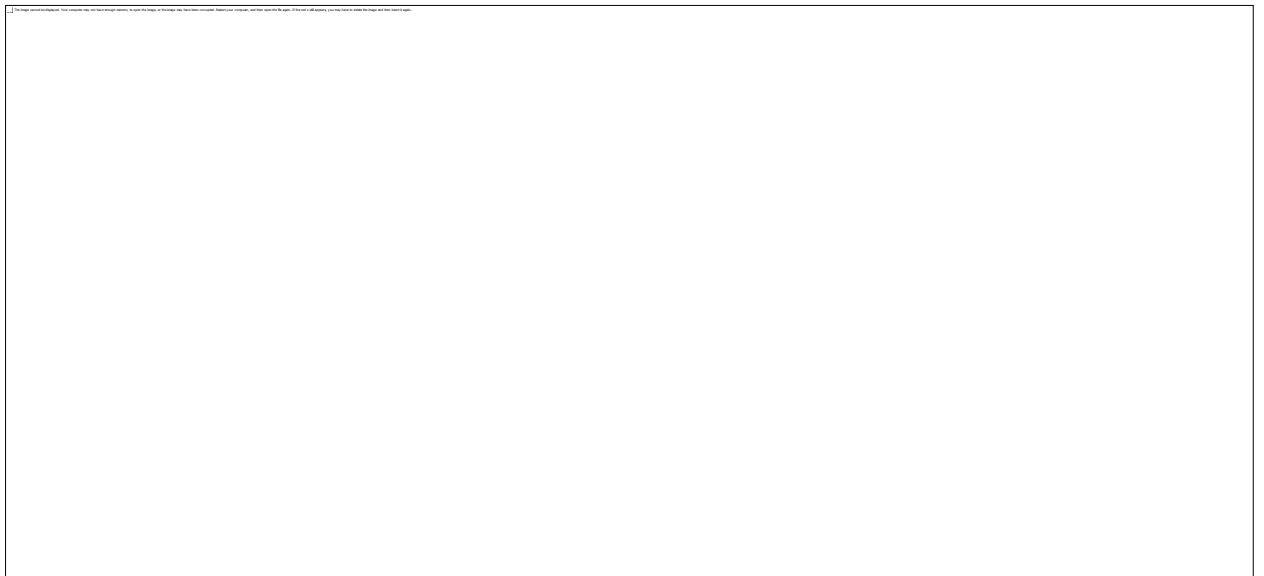


¹³⁹ Pepys 3.183, image repr. <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/21196/image>

Images in context

Botelho did not examine the ballad images in the context of the ballad, arguing, as has Natasha Würzbach, that the frequent incongruity of image and ballad meant that images could be usefully examined in isolation. However, it is arguably appropriate to analyse content and image together, especially if the image is clearly intended to illustrate that particular ballad. As suggested in the introduction to this chapter, an analysis of a ballad separate from its tune or image does not allow for a full interpretation, as tune and images can lend clarity to ambiguous prose and vice versa. By examining both in context, the analysis can be much more effective.

Fig. 3.6: The Shepherd and the King



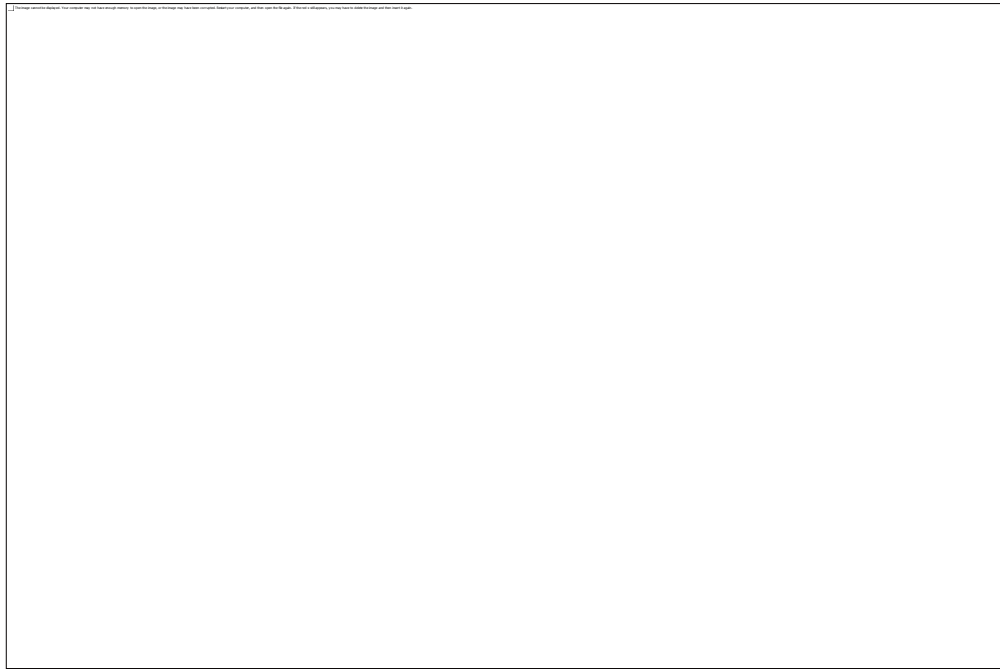
For example, the ballad *The Shepherd and the King* explores the differences between male and female ageing using both imagery and text (Fig. 3.6).¹⁴⁰ The storyline is not principally concerned with ageing, but with the differences between

¹⁴⁰ Pepys 1.76, image repr. <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20272/image>

gentlefolk and the country people. In the ballad King Alfred meets the shepherd who becomes, briefly, his master; a man described as being a 'swain of lusty limbes', who is able to fight with King Alfred for four hours, prompting the latter to say, 'a studier fellow than thyself lives not within this Land'. By contrast, when the shepherd takes him home it is to 'Gillian, my old wife', who is described as 'as good a toothlesse Dame as mumbleth on browne Bread', and who is described throughout the ballad as 'old'. It seems unlikely that this couple are an unequal match; more probably they were of a fairly equal age, but Gillian has reached functional old age, (presumably not long past fifty but post-menopausal, as she has lost her teeth), and has become known as 'old Gillian', presumably due to her appearance, while her similarly-aged husband is still a lusty fellow, still fully functional and able to continue in his occupation.¹⁴¹ The fact that this is not a ballad about ageing makes these observations all the more striking, as they can be seen as not stereotypical but as a much more realistic representation of ageing at the time of the ballad. The image is likewise not one of decrepit old age; indeed, going by the physical criteria set out above the old man looks older than the woman, for he has a beard and is in a posture more suited to an old rather than a young man, while his wife shows no lines on her face, though she does possess the thickened waist of the older women discussed above and her clothes are simple and plain.

¹⁴¹ see Botelho, 'Old Age and Menopause', pp. 52-6

Fig 3.7: The Prodigal Son Sifted

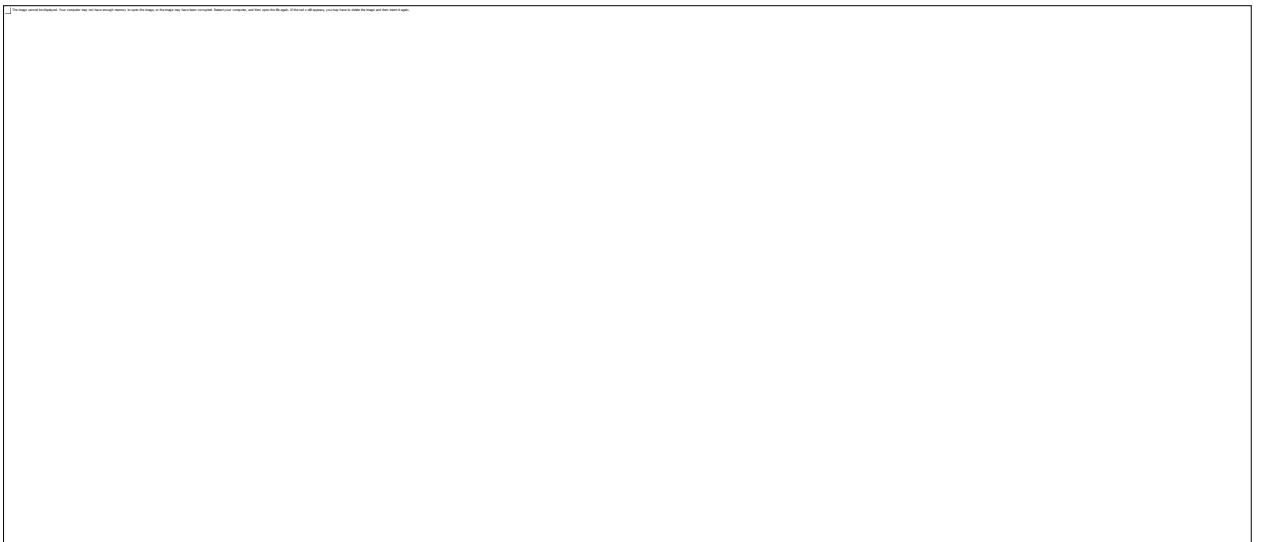


The difference between functional and cultural old age can also be seen in *The Prodigal Son Sifted* (Fig. 3.7).¹⁴² This ballad involves a man and his wife 'sifting' their son to find how he had spent his money, and includes an image clearly made for the ballad, showing two people holding a young man in a sieve. The parents are described several times in the ballad text as 'old' but the image, while it shows the old man as having a wrinkled face, does not portray the 'old' mother as a witch-like woman but a perfectly respectable-looking dame. Like Gillian, she is not obviously 'old', in that

¹⁴² Pepys 2.72; image repr. <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20696/image>

besides her plain dress she has none of the features described previously in the chapter.

Fig. 3.8: The Old Man and His Wife

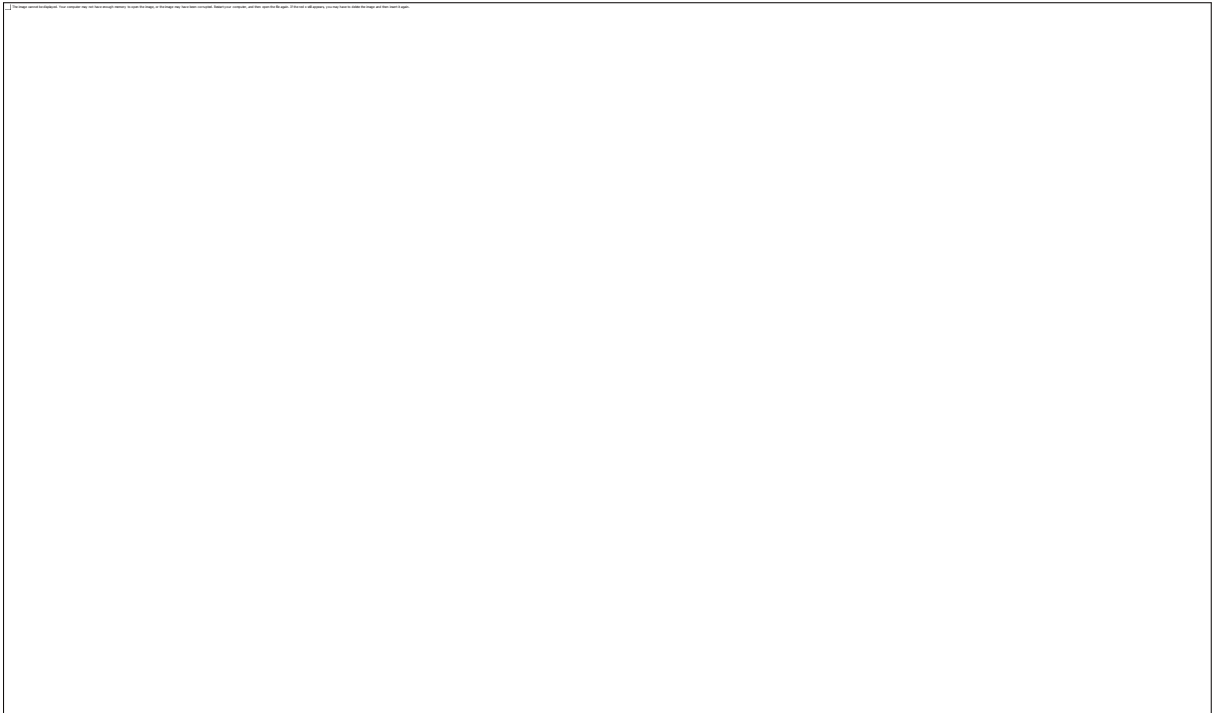


There are several other ballads that merit a similar examination. For instance, the ballad *The Old Man and his Wife* has an elaborate image which was clearly designed specifically for this ballad (Fig. 3.8).¹⁴³ In the image, the old man of the title is clearly in a deferential pose, hat in hand, and his wife is wringing her hands, exactly

¹⁴³ Pepys 1.43; image repr. <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20028/image>

as described in the ballad. The image is one of unnerving deference from an older to a younger man, echoing the ballad narrative. The use of a specifically designed image, and one of such complexity, perhaps suggests the strength of feeling the writer expected the ballad to cause, or that he felt himself about the subject.

Fig. 3.9: The magistrates court, from Meat to Loathsome Toads



The same can be said of *Meat to Loathsome Toads*, which has another image of a deferential father, this time a stock image of a magistrates' court used here to represent the father coming cap-in-hand to his son's table, as described in the last few stanzas of the ballad (Fig 3.9).¹⁴⁴ Both these images bring the full impact of the text to life – the begging, the deference from father to son, the literal exclusion of the father from his son's house, the reluctance of the families to ask for help and their desperation which leads them to abase themselves before their sons – in a way that the words alone cannot manage.

Recycling images

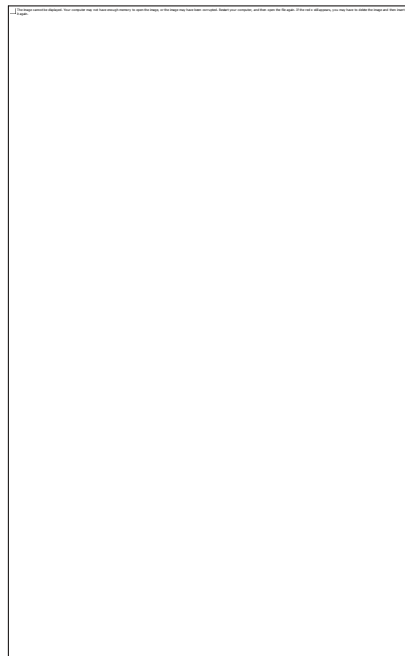
Ballad and image could therefore be united to form a more satisfying whole, a conclusion which is supported by concentrating mainly on those images that were designed specifically for the ballad which they illustrated. However, these were not common, and there were many more 'stock' images which were used repeatedly and often incongruously to illustrate a wide variety of ballads. This was a feature of cheap print from the early-modern period, and to understand the reasons for recycling imagery requires a clearer picture of the motivations behind the ballads; and of the attitudes of author, printer and audience.

Unfortunately, such motivations are almost impossible to reconstruct. Sadly, very little is known about the woodcut trade as scant evidence for it survives. The woodcut blocks could be used thousands of times, which would explain the frequent recurrence of images; however, why specific images were chosen is hard to say, and it is unclear whether the images were the choice of the author, the printer or selected by

¹⁴⁴ Pepys 2.180; image repr. <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20797/image>

some other means.¹⁴⁵ However, it is not impossible to analyse the stock images and make suggestions as to their use; and indeed it is valuable to do so within the context of the ballad they illustrate. The nature of the ballad may help identify certain features which led to one image being more frequently chosen than others to illustrate particular scenarios.

Fig. 3.10: The 'old stooped man'



¹⁴⁵ Watts, *Cheap Print*, pp. 140-2

One such image is of a stooped old man who illustrates a large number of ballads (Fig. 3.10).¹⁴⁶ This image is attached, for instance, to the ballad *The Old Miser Slighted*, which is an unequal marriage ballad that describes some of the more unpleasant aspects of male ageing.¹⁴⁷ The image is certainly one of physical decrepitude; the old man is stooped over and uses a stick, and he has the large nose and pronounced chin which Botelho suggests indicates toothlessness. In fact, this image is one of the most negative depictions of male ageing of all. It is surprising, then, that though he illustrates a number of ballads, only two of these involve old people, the aforementioned *The Old Miser Slighted*, and *The Unhappy Marriage*.¹⁴⁸

Considering that this is an image of the archetypal decrepit old man, it is interesting that he seldom appears on ballads about the unpleasant side of ageing. Instead, he illustrates a number of ballads about forsaken love between two young people, and the despair of one or both parties. Indeed, it is conceivable that his image was used in these instances not to represent old age, but as a symbol of the lovers' despair. His frequent appearances on ballads about troublesome poverty strengthen this suggestion. Whether the despair was over a lost love or an inability to support oneself, the image of the 'old' man, with his stooped posture and sunken face, may have been the physical representation of this despair, possibly growing familiar with the audience as symbolic of the nature of the ballad he illustrated. The bent posture and sad facial expression lend the image to the illustration of unhappy ballad subjects.

¹⁴⁶ He appears in various ballads, such as Pepys 2.82; 2.88; 2.91; 2.295; 3.347; 3.350; 3.363; 3.370; 3.375; 4.8; 4.139; 4.224; 4.275; 4.307; 4.332; image repr. <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20711/image>

¹⁴⁷ Pepys 4.8

¹⁴⁸ Pepys 4.8; 3.350

Fig 3.11: The three images from The Unhappy Marriage



It is even possible that the connection with two ballads concerning old age might be coincidental; for though the old man is clearly intended to represent the old miser in *The Old Miser Slighted* (his image is strikingly in contrast to that of the ‘young Gallant’ who is mentioned in the ballad and whose image graces the second page), it is less clear whom he represents in *The Unhappy Marriage* (Fig. 3.11).¹⁴⁹ While he could potentially be the old miser whom ‘Rosinda’, the young woman, is forced to marry instead of ‘Almander’, there is no second, younger, man who represents ‘Almander’, though there is an image of a young woman, depicted as killing herself as ‘Rosinda’ does in the ballad text. Furthermore, between the two is an image of ships, reflecting the ship upon which ‘Almander’ died in the text. Not only does this ballad show how stock images could be used to reflect the text of a ballad, it is possible that the old man

¹⁴⁹ Image repr. <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/21365/image>

is once more being used as a symbol of the despairing lover, rather than of 'Rosinda's' old husband.¹⁵⁰

Further to this, *The Dispairing Lovers Address to Charon* (Fig. 3.12) demonstrates how stock images could be connected together to illustrate the ballad narrative.¹⁵¹ The ballad is addressed to Charon by a young man, dying of love and begging to be ferried to 'Elizium' [*sic*]. The three images that adorn it are the old stooped man, a romancing couple being rowed in a boat and a young woman looking into a coffin. The images are all stock images, and suggesting that whoever chose the woodcuts selected them to reflect the sentiments of the ballad. The rowing boat is not quite appropriate for Charon's boat, as it contains a happy couple, but presumably it was the stock boat scene that best fitted this ballad's scenario. The old stooped man was perhaps being used as the symbol of the despairing lover, while the woman looking into the coffin clearly reflects the last line,

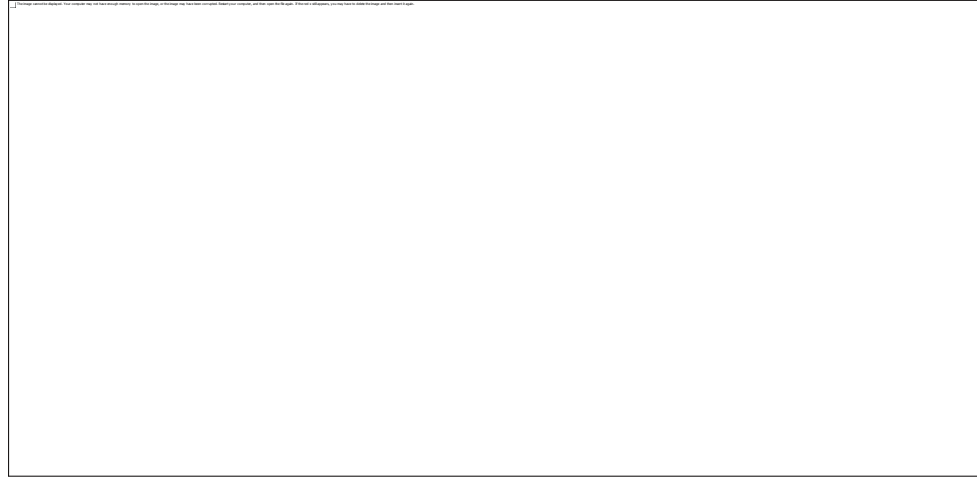
When your Unkindness has seal'd my fate,

O then you will wish me alive again.

Fig. 3.12: The three stock images used in The Dispairing Lover's Address to Charon

¹⁵⁰ Pepys, 3.350

¹⁵¹ Pepys 3.375; image repr. <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/21391/image>



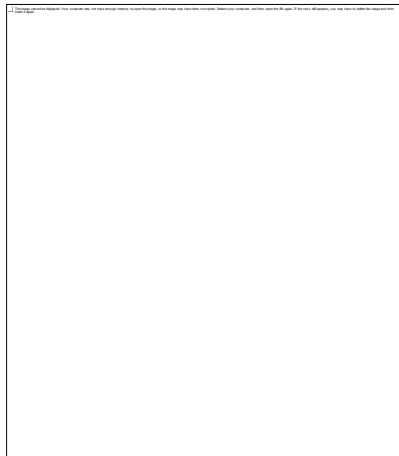
These examples suggest evidence of stock images being carefully selected to represent the ballad illustrated. While many images were randomly chosen, as with the ballad cited by Botelho, we must refrain from writing off all stock images as entirely unconnected to the ballads they illustrate, and we should certainly be cautious in assigning meanings to images without examining the context in which they are situated; despite being stock images, they may have another level of meaning assigned to them within the context of the whole ballad.¹⁵²

¹⁵² Botelho, 'Images of Old Age', p. 227

Conclusion

Botelho has already shown that images can be a useful means of analysing representations of old age, but her suggestion of a 'myopic stereotype' of old women as witches is rather an over-generalisation. This chapter has demonstrated that there are many other aspects of female old age recorded in the ballad images, particularly if the images are used in the context of the ballad texts, rather than in isolation, identified only by the features of decrepit old age that are immediately apparent in some of these images. Images designed for the ballads they illustrate can be very informative and certainly provide further interest for the viewer of the printed copy. Even stock images can prove useful when analysed in context with the text. Overall, despite their limited quantity and nature, especially of female old age, the images nonetheless reveal a varied and multi-faceted picture of old age.

Fig. 3.13: A genuinely witch-like image: From The Injured Children



However, there are also many examples of instances when certain stock images were not used to illustrate a ballad, even where the addition would enhance the overall effect of the ballad itself. For example, it is odd that there were some malicious

ballads about old women which did not make use of a woodcut, especially a witch-like one to enhance the malevolent nature of old women. The witch-like image found on the ballad *The Injured Children* (Fig. 3.13) would have been a good choice for illustrating *The Olde Bride*, for instance, especially the line 'her nose and mouth most lovingly do meet', and there are several other unpleasant descriptions of old women which would have been made even more amusing by the addition of such an image.¹⁵³ Similarly there are some rather brutal descriptions of old men which likewise remain entirely unillustrated. Why miss the opportunity of emphasising the point of the repulsiveness of old age? Perhaps it was a question of authorship, with certain authors or printers more likely to select images than others, or it could have been due to the availability of woodcuts, or perhaps in some cases the image was considered unimportant while in others it was treated as more significant. This dissertation cannot offer a definitive answer to this question; this is certainly an area that would benefit from further study. This chapter has almost certainly raised more questions than it has answered, Even so, it can be seen that ballad images are a potentially very fruitful area for research, and there is a vast amount that can be gained from their examination.

¹⁵³ Pepys, 2.193; Roxb. Coll. I. 336; image repr.
<http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20808/image>

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The representations of old age throughout this ballad sample make one thing clear: old age was a time to behave oneself, to act with temperance, moderation and piety and above all, to remain aware of one's advanced years and conduct oneself accordingly. For youth to indulge in prodigal spending and bad behaviour was one thing, for that was merely the excesses of youth, disapproved of but not heavily censured; but for an old person to behave with similar rashness and impulsiveness was entirely inappropriate and generally ended badly.

The narratives of ageing can be loosely grouped into 'stock' and 'non-stock' narratives, and those ballads in the sample that are stock narratives can, thanks to their repetitive nature, be further sub-divided into thematic groups based on the principal theme of each ballad. The unequal marriages of both old men and old women were heavily censured in the ballads; the behaviour was outside of what was considered appropriate for the old, and they were likewise reproved for involving the young in this impropriety. The way in which old men were criticized was different from the approach taken with women; the narratives concerning old men used the plight of the young wife to highlight the unsuitability of such marriages, describing them in tragic terms, while the narratives of old women were altogether more harsh, using humour in the form of ridicule and derision to condemn particularly the idea of old women, past childbearing age, having sex.

Conflicts between parents and children tend to represent the old in a more positive light, contrasting the gravity of old age with the profligacy of youth. The narratives still tend to have negative outcomes for the old, though the sense is less of

punishment, as it was with the marriage narratives, but of unfortunate inevitability; the perils of growing old.

The stock narratives tend to involve stock characters, of which there were a number available to ballad-writers, and these characters were repeatedly used in ballads of similar narratives and had analogous roles within them. The list of stock characters shows some similarity to the characters used in early-modern dramas – the lusty widow and the *senex amans* are two prime examples of this.¹⁵⁴ The majority of stock characters are negatively portrayed, despite the fact that there are many instances of the positive characteristics of old age shown in the ballads.

The non-stock narratives can give an insight into the more commonplace situations of old age; they cannot be classified as easily as the stock narratives and generally do not have the same didactic functions, and seldom involve stock characters. Instead they show a much wider range of narratives in which the elderly were situated, and their intention is principally to entertain, though not at the expense of someone breaking gender or age boundaries as in the stock narratives. Humour is still employed, but it is bawdier and less focussed on regulation of behaviour. The non-stock narratives also tend to use non-stock characters who do not act in the prescribed ways of the stock characters but can behave more diversely and ambiguously. The non-stock characters thus exhibit more 'human' tendencies – they act in a more ordinary, less constrained way, which can reveal the more realistic aspects of old age, especially when the character's old age is not of central importance to the narrative. This is true in real life, of course, for in any situation, age may be central to the issue at hand or it may be of lesser importance compared with gender or social status.

¹⁵⁴ Carlton, 'The Widow's Tale', pp. 118-9; Ellis, *Old Age and Masculinity*, p. 30

In some ways the analysis of the images has proved more illuminating than that of ballad texts or narratives, as it has produced some fascinating suggestions for further research. In examining the images of old age, Lynn Botelho's suggestion that old women were portrayed in cheap print as witches or witch-like has been questioned, for though this idea is persuasive there is enough evidence to suggest that her thesis is an over-generalisation. Many images of old women show them as ordinary old women, with almost no witch-like features at all, and furthermore there are several images that represent the earlier stages of ageing, 'green' old age, which not only contradict Botelho's thesis but also demonstrate the difficulties of working using images in which only decrepit old age is truly obvious, omitting the cultural aspects of ageing and bypassing the earlier stages of old age altogether. A more thorough analysis than has been undertaken here may well reveal some more of these 'culturally old' characters.

Implications

It has been established in the course of this dissertation that the ballads were reflective of the realities of ageing, though only within certain limits. They dealt with the issues of poverty in old age, with the question of remarriage, with the relationships between old parents and their growing children (particularly their sons), with the place of the elderly in society as wise counsellors and as washed-up relics with nothing useful left to give. The ballads joked about the old, sympathised with them, supported them and ridiculed them; there was a tendency to treat the old to mockery, almost as though they were offending merely by still being alive – at least until another character came along with greater reason to be vilified, at which point the old became innocent victims in the hands of the ballad writers.

One significant finding of this dissertation is the difference between the stock depictions of old age and the non-stock representations, particularly in terms of the narrow range of representations given in the stock narratives and the more varied depictions shown in non-stock ballads. The differences between stock and non-stock depictions of old age lead one to question the usefulness of the stock ballads, for their limited range cannot effectively express the complexity of early-modern old age. However, the repeated patterns set in these stock depictions can help to highlight which were the pressing contemporary concerns surrounding ageing, or at least those which were felt by ballad-writers, printers or indeed the audience to be the most comic or saleable aspects. Indeed, the differences between the two types of representation suggest different motivations on the parts of the ballad authors or the printers, though precisely why the different styles were employed is harder to reconstruct.

There are striking similarities between the idealised behaviour of old age in the conduct literature and that of the ballads. The characters in the ballads either fit the pious, venerable and wise ideal of old age, ripe in judgment and lacking in passion, or they acted with age-inappropriate rashness, impulsivity or, worst of all, attempted to imitate or compete with the young. The former were held up to be the proponents of excellent godly wisdom, or were shown through comparison with badly-behaved characters to be the better individuals. The misbehaving characters were mocked and ridiculed, or were made an example of within the narrative, often suffering unfortunate fates.

This suggests that though the conduct literature was aimed at the godly householder, people of some substance, the ideas purveyed in these books reached at least as far as the ballad writers and through them to their varied audience, however

poor or rich. The unremitting negativity of the narratives of misbehaving elders and their own individual unpleasant characteristics suggest that the writers knew precisely what the conduct literature idealised in the old and what was considered to be inappropriate, and wrote the ballads accordingly to shock or amuse. This familiarity with conduct literature could be seen as evidence about the social background of the authors or the printers. A man from the lowest social order would most likely not have been able to afford a book of conduct literature, but a man of the middling-sorts could have done. It seems quite possible that some of the ideas expressed in the ballads on the subject of ageing were not necessarily of 'popular' origin, but were mediated downwards by those that had read the conduct literature aimed at the (usually godly) middling-rich.

On the other hand, it is similarly possible that the ideas expressed in the conduct literature derived in part from 'popular' beliefs already in existence and accessed by the writers of the conduct literature; for as explained in the introduction to this dissertation, 'popular' culture was that part of culture accessible to almost all members of society and whose ideas permeated furthest, certainly much further than 'elite' ideas would have reached. The assimilation of ideas from 'popular' culture and their integration and formalisation in the form of conduct literature is just as possible as the adoption of ideas in the opposite direction. It is impossible to tell from this research in which direction the ideas were mediated, or if there was a mingling of 'popular' and 'elite' ideas. However, another study might investigate which of these suggestions is more likely; there is plenty of potential for further investigation into this aspect of 'popular' literature.

The didacticism of the ballads lends weight to the suggestion that ballads were the product of downward mediation by elites. The ballads, particularly the stock

narratives and characters, are frequently seen to be regulating the behaviour of the real-life equivalents of the protagonists by means of humour, moralistic tales, examples, direct instructions, unfortunate outcomes and grotesque depictions. There was a considerable emphasis on the castigation of misbehaviour, rather than the support of good behaviour. The chastisement was in many ways a more effective lesson, since well-behaved old people cannot be used as an example as easily as misbehaving ones can; the lesson is more firmly reinforced with an example of punishment rather than reward. The ballads that did rely on good examples tended to be the godly ballads, and these went out of fashion as their godly purveyors found more effective ways of purveying their message.¹⁵⁵ There was certainly considerable use made of humour to regulate and define acceptable behaviour, and it was used, unsystematically but habitually, to define and perpetuate the social order and to identify, isolate, and ultimately invalidate the unconventional and deviant, thus reinforcing the widely accepted social norm.

Humour was not only a feature of the content of ballad narratives but could also have been part of the performance of ballads. For one thing, the experience of collective laughter, as would likely have been the case at a humorous ballad performance, reinforces group identity and cohesion among the audience, by disparaging the 'out-group'; the deviant members of society, here the old. However, it could also have been an opportunity for 'decommitment' or dissociation on the part of the ballad-monger, to distance himself from any harmful intent with the ballads he was singing, and likewise it was possibly a method of social probing, to explore the interest

¹⁵⁵ Watt, *Cheap Print*, p. 55

and dynamics of the audience group in order to target his ballad sales to accurately exploit the group's interests.

The question of who wrote the ballads is of course central to how the audience appreciated what they listened to and sang themselves. If the opinions expressed in the ballad material were not generally held ones, is it likely that an audience would have continued to buy them? Possibly, especially as, although we discuss 'popular' culture as though it were one homogeneous entity, it would of course have been divided into numerous 'subgroups' or subcultures according to the social status of the individual, where they dwelled, their occupation and pastimes (if they were free to have pastimes), religious views, gender, age and so on. Once again, these subcultures would not have been mutually exclusive and would not have held a monopoly on any particular point of view, but membership of such a subculture may have altered the individual's take on the views expressed in any form of literature, and especially those in the cheap print, for each subculture would have had its own specific priorities. Therefore, while the majority may have enjoyed ballads about unequal marriages, there may have been some for whom this was not unusual or unpleasant, perhaps those that were planning to do the same to their own daughters. Similarly, there may have been a significant minority of subcultures that purchased ballads about one subject, and thus encouraged further production of such a type of ballad; the godly ballads studied by Watt are just such an example, for she charts the waning interest in ballads among the godly elite as coinciding with a decline in the production of such ballads.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Watt, *Cheap Print*, p. 55

Future research

The scale of this dissertation has inevitably limited the possibilities for analysis, and there are several angles that might be explored further. For example, the vast majority of characters are rich or middling-sort, rather than poor or marginal, and there are few ballads that deal explicitly with poverty in old age, which may be indicative of the expected audience of the ballads. Thirty-three of the ballads depict old people who are rich or middling-sorts, while just ten concern the poor. Considering how common poverty was, especially for the aged, it is intriguing that there are not more ballads concerning the poverty of old age, whether virtuous poor, or the unruly and undeserving. There are no narratives with a prosperous or virtuous widow or old maid as the principal character; instead, the ballads focus on misconduct in old women, censuring their misbehaviour. A study focussing on the socio-economic situation of the individuals in the ballads may prove very informative, for there is a substantial range of wealth and it may prove useful to explore the ways in which poor, middling and rich were represented. The implications of this may even lend assistance in identifying the socio-economic background of the ballad authors, assuming they aimed their ballads at people of roughly the same socio-economic status.

Furthermore, it may be possible to glean more information from the 'stock' images than previously thought. It has long been thought that these 'stock' images were seldom relevant to the ballad they illustrated, but an examination of one figure, the 'stooped old man', suggests that it may in fact be possible to find connections between image and ballad if one considers the context of the ballad when analysing the use of imagery. It would be interesting to conduct a more thorough study of ballad imagery and its connection to the ballad texts, the better to understand how cheap print was

viewed and impacted upon its audience. Similarly, it has been difficult to thoroughly analyse the non-stock material in the space allowed by this dissertation, but preliminary discussion indicates the potential of this material. The contrast between this non-standard representation of age and the stock nature of the other ballads could reveal more detail about the ordinary behaviour of the elderly, when they were not indulging in age-defying conduct, as in the stock ballads.

The categories adopted to group together the narratives could probably be refined, and the stock characters merit comparison with those present in other forms of early-modern literature, such as drama, together with an investigation into the socio-economic position of the audience for these various forms of literature. Old age ballads could also be compared with other forms of cheap print such as chapbooks. Examination of the tunes or other performative aspects of the ballads would also be profitable for a thorough understanding of the intentions of each individual ballad. Furthermore, it is often forgotten is that ballads were not merely intended for the poorest in society but had a wider audience; a more in-depth analysis of the ballads in their socio-economic contexts may shed light on the origins of some of the ideas expressed in them; for as has become clear, the prevalence of the ideals of conduct literature in the ballads of old age suggest a familiarity with such works not expected of lower order individuals, such as the ballad-writers are supposed to be.

Unsurprisingly, it is impossible to prove conclusively where the ideas and morals of the ballads originate. The debate over whether 'popular' culture is merely a downward mediation of ideas from elite groups, or a collaborative effort between writer and audience (with the audience selecting preferred material from the writer and the writer responding to that demand), still rages. Although this analysis of ballads has

produced some insights into the nature and dynamics of these processes, and has suggested some possible origins of the ideas expressed in the ballads, it is not conclusive. Nevertheless, the results of the examination carried out in this dissertation suggest that ballads are a source much in need of further systematic investigation.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - The full sample of ballads relevant to old age used in this dissertation.

Pepys/Roxburghe ballad number	Ballad Title	Date (where known)
Pepys ballads:		
1.42	<i>Meat to loathesome toads</i>	
1.43	<i>The Ballad of the Old Man and his Wife</i>	
1.76-7	<i>The Sheppard and the King</i>	
1.126-7	<i>The Lamentation of Master Pages wife</i>	
1.132-3	<i>Damnabale practices</i>	1619
1.137	<i>The old man's complaint against his wretched son</i>	
1.178-9	<i>A Fooles Bolt is soone shot</i>	
1.230-1	<i>A new song of a Young Man's Opinion</i>	
1.284-5	<i>A merry new song of a rich Widdows wooing</i>	
1.360-1	<i>A cruell Cornish murder</i>	
1.362-3	<i>The father hath beguiled the sonne</i>	
1.384-5	<i>The wiving age</i>	
1.412-3	<i>The cunning age</i>	
1.444-5	<i>A Mad Crue</i>	
1.465	<i>A pleasant Song made by a Souldier</i>	
1.486-7	<i>The woeful Lamentation of Mistress Jane Shore</i>	
1.488-9	<i>A Pleasant New ballad of Tobias</i>	
1.490-1	<i>The Blind Beggar's daughter</i>	
1.492-3	<i>A Worthy Example of a Vertuous Wife</i>	
1.496-7	<i>The Constancy of Susanna</i>	
2.16-7	<i>An Hundred Godly Lessons</i>	
2.22	<i>A Caveat for Young Men</i>	
2.32	<i>The Age and Life of Man</i>	
2.36	<i>A Caveat for Young Men</i>	
2.44	<i>The Dying Man's Good Counsel</i>	
2.57	<i>The Bountiful Knight of Sommersetshire</i>	
2.72	<i>The Prodigal Son Sifted</i>	
2.83	<i>The Father's Wholesome Admonition</i>	
2.92	<i>The Extravagant Youth</i>	
2.109	<i>Robin Hood and the Bishop</i>	
2.189	<i>The Kentish Wonder</i>	

2.211	<i>Old vs New Courtier</i>	
2.348	<i>The Low-Country Soldier</i>	
3.43	<i>The Lusty Friar of Dublin</i>	
3.121	<i>The Old Pudding-Pye Woman</i>	
3.150	<i>The Old Maids Wish</i>	
3.341	<i>The Country Damosels Lamentation for her Love</i>	
3.388	<i>The Undutiful Daughter of Devonshire</i>	
4.8	<i>The Old Miser Slighted</i>	
4.104	<i>The Old Mans Advice</i>	
4.122	<i>The London Cuckold</i>	
4.142	<i>The Cloath-Worker caught in a Trap</i>	
4.249	<i>The Extravagant Gallants Resolution</i>	
4.259	<i>Wit bought at a Dear Rate</i>	
4.301	<i>The Old Mans Sayings</i>	
4.360	<i>The Miser mump'd of his Gold</i>	
5.159	<i>Age renewed by Wedlock</i>	1693
5.166	<i>The Frolicksome Bricklayer of Mile-End Town</i>	1693
5.186	<i>The Old Man's Wish</i>	1691
5.187	<i>An Answer to the Old Man's Wish</i>	
5.235	<i>The West-Country Wonder</i>	
5.256	<i>The Cuckold's Calamity</i>	
5.293	<i>The Contriving Lover</i>	1690
5.294r	<i>The Covetous-minded Parents</i>	
5.326	<i>The Unkind Parents</i>	
5.399	<i>The Young Woman's Complaint for Pressing the Old</i>	
5.414	<i>The Old Woman's Legacy to her Cat</i>	1695
5.417	<i>The Female Doctress</i>	
5.423	<i>Shameless Joan</i>	
Roxburghe ballads:		
Coll. I. 17	<i>The Seaman's Complaint / The Young Woman's</i>	1694
Coll. I. 190	<i>An Answer to the Forced Marriage</i>	1679
Coll. I. 152-3	<i>Half a Dozen of good Wives</i>	
Coll. I. 268-9	<i>The Merry Old Woman</i>	
Coll. I. 336-7	<i>The Olde Bride</i>	
Coll. I. 398-9	<i>Take Time while Time is</i>	James I
Coll. I. 44-5	<i>The Life of Man</i>	
Coll. I. 508-9	<i>The Husband who Met with his Match</i>	
Coll. I. 548	<i>The old man's life renewed</i>	
Coll. I. 64-5	<i>Clod's Carroll</i>	
Coll. I. 70-1	<i>A Discourse of Man's Life</i>	Charles I

Coll. II. 103	<i>Death's Uncontrollable Summons</i>	1685
Coll. II. 158	<i>The Forced Marriage</i>	1677
Coll. II. 166	<i>The Father's good Counsel</i>	1675
Coll. II. 204	<i>The Trappan'd Taylor</i>	1674
Coll. II. 329	<i>The Lusty Miller's Recreation</i>	1672
Coll. II. 360	<i>A Mad Marriage</i>	1684
Coll. II. 386	<i>The Old Man's Wish</i>	1684
Coll. III. 196	<i>The Old Man's Complaint</i>	1650
Coll. III. 275	<i>Tragical History of King Lear</i>	1620
Coll. III. 542	<i>King Leare and his Three Daughters</i>	1670
Coll. III. 686	<i>The Covetous Old Mother</i>	1686
Coll. III. 84	<i>The Jealous Old Dotard</i>	1674
Coll. III. 762	<i>The Famous Flower of Serving Men</i>	1657
Coll. IV. 82	<i>The Prodigal's Resolution</i>	1672
Roxburghe vol. 8, pp. 679-81 (no collection number)	<i>The Young Woman's Complaint</i>	1665
no number	<i>The Deaf Miller</i>	

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Pepys ballads:		
1.126	<i>The Lamentation of Master Pages wife</i>	
1.132	<i>Damnabie practices</i>	1619
1.137	<i>The old man's complaint against his wretched son</i>	
1.178	<i>A Fooles Bolt is soone shot</i>	
1.284	<i>A merry new song of a rich Widdows wooing</i>	
1.362	<i>The father hath beguiled the sonne</i>	
1.384	<i>The wiving age</i>	
1.412	<i>The cunning age</i>	
1.42	<i>Meat to loathesome toads</i>	
1.43	<i>The Ballad of the Old Man and his Wife</i>	
1.496	<i>The Constancy of Susanna</i>	
1.76	<i>The Shepeard and the King</i>	
2.16	<i>An Hundred Godly Lessons</i>	
2.109	<i>Robin Hood and the bishop</i>	
2.189	<i>The Kentish Wonder</i>	
2.193	<i>The Injured Children</i>	
2.295	<i>The Rambling Roman Catholick</i>	
2.32	<i>The Age and Life of Man</i>	
2.57	<i>The Bountiful Knight of Sommersetshire</i>	
2.72	<i>The Prodigal Son Sifted</i>	
2.82	<i>The True Protestants Contemplation</i>	
2.83	<i>The Father's Wholesome Admonition</i>	
2.88	<i>Poor Man's Complaint</i>	
2.91	<i>The Farmers Reformation</i>	
2.92	<i>The Extravagant Youth</i>	
3.183	<i>The Bashfull-Maidens No, no, no</i>	
3.212	<i>The Old Pudding-Pye Woman</i>	
3.341	<i>The Country Damosels Lamentation for her Love</i>	
3.347	<i>The Woful Complaint, and Lamentable Death of a forsaken lover</i>	
3.363	<i>The Two Unfortunate Lovers</i>	
3.375	<i>The Dispairing Lovers Address to Charon</i>	
3.43	<i>The Lusty Friar of Dublin</i>	
4.104	<i>The Old Man's Advice</i>	

4.122	<i>The London Cuckold</i>	
4.139	<i>The Country Cuckold</i>	
4.224	<i>The Young Seaman's Misfortune</i>	
4.259	<i>Wit bought at a Dear Rate</i>	
4.275	<i>The French King's Vision</i>	
4.301	<i>The Old Man's Sayings</i>	
4.307	<i>Conscience by Scruples</i>	
4.332	<i>The New and True Touch of the Times</i>	
4.370	<i>The Old Man's Wish</i>	
4.8	<i>The Old Miser Slighted</i>	
5.159	<i>Age renewed by Wedlock</i>	1693
5.166	<i>The Frolicksome Bricklayer of Mile-End Town</i>	1693
5.186	<i>The Old Man's Wish</i>	1691
5.187	<i>An Answer to the Old Man's Wish</i>	
5.235	<i>The West-Country Wonder</i>	
5.326	<i>The Unkind Parents</i>	
5.423	<i>Shameless Joan</i>	
1.490	<i>The Blind Beggar's daughter</i>	
1.540	<i>The Mercer's Son of Midhurst</i>	
3.350	<i>The Unhappy Marriage</i>	
3.370	<i>Answer to the Maiden's Tragedy</i>	
4.360	<i>The Miser mump'd of his Gold</i>	
4.370	<i>The Old Man's Wish</i>	
5.294r	<i>The Covetous-minded Parents</i>	
Roxburghe Ballads:		
Coll. I. 268-9	<i>The Merry Old Woman</i>	
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