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New or Old Models of Ageing?

The Older-Woman Figure in Two Contemporary Catalan Soap Operas

Maricel Oró-Piqueras and Núria Casado-Gual

Grup Dedal-Lit, Universitat de Lleida

Abstract:

In her work on women and the soap opera, Christine Geraghty argues that precisely the extended form of this TV genre, both in time and consequent plots, has contributed to a wider representation of women in terms of their age, personality traits and social background, as well as personal and professional interests and concerns. Two recent Catalan soaps, *Ventdelplà* (2005-10) and *La Riera* (2010---) have started to broaden the spectrum of the older female characters that were present in the first Catalan soap operas, and which were mainly set within the role of the caring grandmother. In this article, a textual analysis of the evolution of the main two female characters of *Ventdelplà* and *La Riera*, Dora Parramon and Mercè Riera, and of their respective subplots, aims to show to what extent a new understanding of age and femininity is reflected in current productions of Catalan TV.

Keywords: older women, female ageing, disease, love in old age, soap operas.

Main text:

Introduction: Catalan Soap Operas as an Influential Popular Genre

The first Catalan soap opera, *Poblenou*, was aired in 1994 by TV3, the Catalan public TV channel. Resulting from a co-production between the Catalan channel and the producing

company Diagonal TV, its organization and planning was partly based on popular British soap operas, especially *Eastenders*, and, to a lesser extent, also inspired by the Latinamerican soaps that were very popular in Spanish channels at that time (Ortega 1999, 60). The combination of these two models with the realistic portrayal of low-middle-class local culture had immense popularity amongst Catalan audiences, and paved the way for the continuity of the genre in Catalan TV up to the present moment. The playwright Josep Maria Benet i Jornet, who, as the main script-writer of *Poblenou* and of the other Catalan soaps that followed its success, is often referred to as “the father of Catalan soap operas,” explains that his main aim in working on this genre was to introduce progressist values and make the [Catalan] audience more open-minded (Ortega 1999, 69). After forty-years of Franco’s dictatorship, Spain was a young democracy in which new freedoms and identities could be expressed. Within the Spanish context, the Catalan community in particular had suffered the prohibition of using its own language and of expressing and developing its own culture, not only under Franco’s regime, but also during the difficult period of transition toward democracy. According to Benet i Jornet, the new Catalan TV series would contribute to the opening up of Catalan society not only to new values, but also to a wider conception of the family and relationships (Ortega 1999, 69). In this respect, Joan Bas, the head of Diagonal TV and one of the three directors of *Poblenou*, stated in an interview that one of the main objectives of the first of the Catalan soap operas was to show a variety of conflicts generated by romantic and family relationships, as well as by socioeconomic and generational differences (Ortega 1999, 64). Likewise, Benet i Jornet claimed that in his first Catalan soap opera he precisely wanted to mirror a spectrum of society that was wider to that ‘allowed’ by the moral impositions of Franco’s regime (Ortega 1999, 70). Ultimately, the team of *Poblenou* attempted to target a broad sector of the Catalan population –that is, viewers of all ages from mostly working-class and middle-class backgrounds– with a locally-produced

series of quality, through which Catalan language and culture could be expressed and developed in an atmosphere of cultural normality and social freedom two decades after the end of the dictatorship.

Since *Poblenou* aired for the first time, and up until the present day, seven other Catalan soap operas have followed its popularity: *Secrets de Família* (in 1995); *Nissaga de Poder* (from 1996 to 1998, and with a sequel entitled *Nissaga: l'herència*, in 1999), *Laberint d'Ombres* (from 1998 to 2000), *El cor de la ciutat* (from 2000 to 2009), *Ventdelplà* (from 2005 to 2010); and *La Riera* (from 2010 to the present). Throughout the two decades of its existence in the public Catalan TV, the genre has evolved by combining the realistic basis of the first soap and its somehow sentimental portrayal of the working- and middle-classes, with more sophisticated characterizations for the protagonists (starting with those of the main characters in *Secrets de Família*), some features of detective fiction (as in the *Nissaga* series and also in *Laberint d'Ombres*), and a broader socioeconomic spectrum of the protagonists, with a certain focus on the upper-middle classes in some cases (especially in the two *Nissagas* and *La Riera*). The change of fictional space in the different series, with locations ranging from different areas of Barcelona to different places of Catalan geography, has not only consolidated the importance of this TV genre as a cultural product with which Catalan viewers of different socioeconomic backgrounds can identify, but has also guaranteed its idiosyncratic variety from a regional perspective. Despite all these variations, the most recent Catalan soap operas retain two basic elements that explain the success of their predecessors: the focus on family life and personal relationships, which is typical of the genre; and their willingness to offer a wide range of characters and stories that can reflect the complexity of contemporary Catalan society. These two characteristics render them ideal examples of popular culture in order to reflect upon their portrayal of inter-generational differences and, more particularly, their depiction of age-based identities.

Catalan Soap Operas and the Older Woman

The demographic and socio-cultural changes that have transformed Western societies into ageing and aged domains is reflected in the increasing visibility of older characters in various manifestations of contemporary popular culture, including soap operas. Considering the centrality of female figures in this popular genre (Geraghty 2006, 130), we believe that the analysis of the older female characters in the most recent of the Catalan soap operas can offer relevant insights into how ageing women are perceived today by a broad sector of Catalan society –especially if, in their willingness to offer realistic portrayals, Catalan soap operas are regarded as faithful narratives of the community they represent. At the same time, the overt intention of the producing teams of TV3 and Diagonal TV to use soap operas as a cultural product whereby open attitudes towards social diversity can be fostered, renders this analysis more significant. In fact, even aspects of the soap operas which are not given a central space become highly influential on the viewers, precisely because they prevail in the long duration of a soap opera in a more taken-for-granted way. As Barbara Czarniawska et al. remark, “the attitude-forming impact of messages of secondary importance to the plot may be as strong as those of primary importance, because they are not easily submitted to critical reflection” (2013, 268). This paper will offer a close reading of the representation of the older woman in *Ventdelplà* and *La Riera* through both a secondary figure and the central character of each series, respectively. Through a textual analysis of the characters’ creation and development, we intend to observe both unintentional and authorial visions of ageing women that have emerged from Catalan soaps in the last decade, and which can equally condition the perception of the older woman in present-day Catalan society -and, by extension, in other communities in which these cultural products may be sold. Underlying our analysis is the circular relationship between popular culture and identity formation, whereby soap operas, as

products of popular culture, not only reflect actual views but also “teach[-] practices,” “offer[-] interpretative templates” and, ultimately, “reinforce[-] certain desires and anxieties of [their] audience” (Czarniawska 2013, 268). For the present study, a full revision of the two soaps has been carried out, and a selection of the most significant episodes and sequences has been made in order to enable a close reading of the two characters. The analysis of the primary sources has been contrasted with other studies on the soap opera, and with current theories on cultural representations of ageing and of the older woman in particular.

Christine Geraghty argues that the soap opera has contributed to a wider representation of women in terms of their age, personality traits and social background, thanks to the extended form of the genre. Following media feminist critics such as Charlotte Bunsdon, Geraghty considers the soap opera as a “highly gendered cultural system” which allowed women to reflect on “what it felt to be female in the contemporary world” (2006, 130). This partly applies to Catalan soap operas, insofar as shows like *Poblenou* and most of the TV series that followed it up to 2000 had prominent older female figures in their fictional worlds. However, the role of mature and older women within the first Catalan soap operas was quite restricted, insofar as it mainly fell within the stereotype of the matriarch. This was especially manifested in the depiction of caring mothers and grandmothers who, if needed, were ready to surpass moral and legal boundaries in order to protect their families at all costs; or, albeit less frequently, through the figure of the single older woman who is a source of constant support to the family, and who also represents traditional family values. This is the case of aunty Victòria in *El cor de la ciutat*, for instance, who corresponds with the Catalan figure of the “tieta” or the single older aunt.¹ Both *Ventdelplà* and *La Riera* have started to broaden this restriction by expanding the dramatic possibilities of their older female characters. These two

¹ The popular Catalan singer Joan Manuel Serrat paid tribute to this stereotypical figure in one of the most famous songs of the beginnings of his career, “La tieta” (1967). In many ways reminiscent of the older aunts and maids in James Joyce’s fiction, Serrat depicted in this song the traditional and even repressive atmosphere in which older women lived in Spain, especially if they were single.

shows present important women characters in their early and mid-sixties –Dora Parramon as a secondary figure in *Ventdelplà*, and Mercè Riera, the central character of *La Riera*– who own their own business –the only grocer’s shop in a small village in the case of Dora, and an upper-class restaurant in a coastal town, in Mercè’s case– and who are also mothers of grown-up children. Both protagonists are presented as having strong personalities, while at the same time falling within somehow recognizable ageist and sexist cultural stereotypes. The textual analysis that follows explores to what extent both figures move beyond the *clichés* from which their characterizations depart or to which they refer in several phases of the series, and, in so doing, signal the beginning of a new era for the representation of the older woman in Catalan soaps.

Dora Parramon: The Older Woman Grows Up

In the first season of *Ventdelplà*, Dora Parramon, played by Imma Colomer,² is presented as one of the many secondary characters that live in the small Catalan village that gives name to the series. Following the combination of social realism and melodrama that Catalan soaps have used from their inception, the soap begins with the plight of a middle-aged doctor, Teresa Clarís, who leaves Barcelona with her two children in order to run away from her violent and manipulative husband, and who tries to start a new life in Ventdelplà, her uncle’s village. Ventdelplà is a fictional small town located somewhere between the regional capital city of Girona and the city of Barcelona³, and, in this way, it is representative of both traditional and modern expressions of Catalan identity. Ventdelplà not only offers Teresa and her children a new home, but also opens a new world of possibilities to all the characters in it

² As co-founder of the theatre company *Comediants* and *El Teatre Lliure*, both of them emblematic and representative of the resistance of Catalan culture during the years of the Spanish transition towards democracy; and through her important roles in the theatre and her career in the cinema and TV, Imma Colomer is one of the most reputed Catalan actresses of her generation. Her role as Dora Parramon followed her previous TV success as Mercè Josep, one of the main characters in the soap *Laberint d’ombres*. Six years later, Imma Colomer’s “Dora” remains a very popular figure in the memory of Catalan TV viewers.

³ The real location is Breda, a small village within the region of Girona, which is 51km away from Barcelona.

and, ultimately, to the viewers who follow their lives, as promised by the title of the show's main song, "Tu descobriràs" ("You Will Discover"). Even though the main storylines of the series usually evolve around middle-aged characters –including Teresa as a prominent figure– the soap presents a rich cast of figures that range from children to older men and women, and which, therefore, are coherent with the Catalan producers' intention to create shows for all the members of the family⁴. As a woman in her early sixties, Dora Parramon is part of the 'young old' members of the village, with the characters of Domingo or, particularly, Conxita, as clearly representing the community's elders. Precisely because Dora is only on the threshold of old age, and also due to her initial marginality in the soap as a secondary figure, she offers a very interesting case study in order to reflect upon general views of female ageing in the seven seasons of series, and to explore the development of those perspectives throughout her character arc.

In the first season of the series and for most of the first half of the second one, the basis of Dora's characterization is mostly social, and as such it contributes to the aesthetics of social realism which, with very few exceptions, shapes *Ventdelplà*.⁵ Thus, at the beginning of the series, Dora's screen time is reduced to one sequence per episode, including some episodes without any scene at all. Her initial characterization, therefore, presents her in an impressionistic way, and it mostly derives from generic, and therefore, frequently stereotyped features associated with both the rural world and the working-middle class to which the character belongs as the owner of a small grocer. Hence, in the first episodes she is often

⁴ In fact, *Ventdelplà* was the first Catalan soap to be scheduled in prime time and with two weekly 50-minute-long episodes, hence breaking with the formula of daytime soaps of shorter, daily episodes, and clearly opening up the spectrum of viewers of different ages. This also enabled the parallel screening of *Ventdelplà* with the soap that preceded its success, the extremely popular *El cor de la ciutat*, which continued to be the afternoon soap for Catalan viewers.

⁵ *Ventdelplà* follows the aesthetics of social realism in practically all its episodes, with only the last seasons presenting some more experimental approaches which are, nevertheless, justified within realistic parameters. In these few episodes, the script-writers of *Ventdelplà* temporarily abandon the realistic model of British series with which Catalan soaps started and seem to imitate, instead, the American model of more experimental shows like *Northern Exposure* or *Twin Peaks*.

involved in conversations regarding potential changes in the village, to which she offers resistance, thereby voicing, with other members of the community, the essence of Ventdelplà (episodes 6, 14, 76); and most frequently she expresses her concern towards her own business (episodes 8, 75, 76), all of which contributes to her representation of the conservative values of the small shop-owner that typically evoke Catalan working-middle-class culture. Actually, the sentence “el super és la meva vida” (“the store is my life”) is one of the most repeated ones in her dialogues throughout the series, and other characters like her daughter Berta or her son-in-law Paco also use it in the third person so as to explain the sacrifices Dora has made for the shop and for her daughter as a widowed mother. The episode in which Dora refuses a generous economic offer to sell the store (episode 76), confirms the symbolic value of the shop in the character’s construction, especially when she affirms that selling her business would entail changing her life.

The fusion between Dora and her store is enhanced further through the centrality of this space in her plot line, since it is the main fictional space of her sequences and, as shown by the earlier examples, a symbol of Dora’s identity. Beyond its private value, the store –in which Berta and Paco also work as assistants– is one of the main fictional spaces of the series, in which information discoveries are made but, as a reflection of the world of a small community, judgment is also passed. Interestingly enough, even though Berta and Paco also participate in the conversations with customers, it is Dora that is mainly accused of gossiping with customers, and, in Berta’s words, of “always exaggerating”, as she says in the second episode of the series. In this way, the store contributes to Dora’s social characterization through an ageist and sexist stereotype, namely, that of the older woman as an unreliable gossip. In line with this ageist vision, it is Conxita, the eldest character in the soap, and not

Dora, that is presented as the frequent malicious gossip in the store⁶ and as more clearly complying with the stereotype of the lonely older woman who, apparently devoid of a fulfilling private life, interferes with or comments on the lives of (frequently younger) others. However, the combination of Dora's age with her gender, her widowhood, and her occupation also singles her out as a somewhat intruding character to the eyes of other characters and, through them, to the viewers of the show. More specifically, Dora's propensity to meddle in her daughter's life connects her with another ageist and sexist *cliché* in many sequences, that is, that of the invasive mother/mother-in-law.

Thus, throughout most of the series and especially in the first seasons, the main objects of Dora's concern and, sometimes, of her intervention are, on the one hand, her daughter –an extremely good-natured woman who lacks her mother's self-confidence– and, more comically, her son-in-law Paco, a lazy yet also good-natured man who will eventually be replaced, as both son-in-law and victim of Dora's criticism, by Josep Montràs, Ventdelplà's most powerful businessman, and Berta's new husband in the third season. The connection between Dora's character-basis and the *cliché* of the intrusive mother-in-law is so strong that, in fact, it is manifested in most of the character's sequences in the first seasons of the soap. In those scenes, the series' creators exploit the talent of Imma Colomer, Jordi Martínez (as Paco) and, later, Pep Cruz (as Montràs) as comic actors in witty dialogues in which the characters substitute their names by their family (ex)relations and, hence, they refer to each other as “sogra” (mother-in-law), “gendre” (son-in-law), or “ex-sogra” and “ex-gendre”. Interestingly enough, Dora is normally given the punch line in these scenes.⁷ The motif of the interfering mother also affects many scenes in which Berta accuses Dora of meddling with her marriage.⁸

⁶ Dora's gossipy tendency has more to do with her curiosity about what is going on in Ventdelplà, and her genuine concern for its inhabitants. See, for example, episodes 4, 5, 35 or 36.

⁷ See, for instance, sequences in episodes 11, 19, 21, 22 or 82.

⁸ An example of this is shown in episode 21, when Berta threatens Dora to leave her alone in the store if she does not stop criticizing Paco.

This type of conflict is often used as a narrative strategy that releases the dramatic tension created by other storylines in the series and, in a way, it empowers Dora through her domestic triumphs; yet, at the same time, it underscores stereotypical models of ageing femininity which, as Rosie White contends, “inhabit the margins of mainstream [TV] programming” and often represent older women, both in soaps and in television comedy, as “gossipy, asexual spinsters or as battle-axe figures ...” (Whelehan 2014, 155).

More positively, Dora’s relationship with her daughter is presented, at the same time, as extremely intimate and based on mutual trust. Numerous episodes show Berta revealing her news to her mother before anyone else learns about them, including her pregnancies. At the same time, Dora often states that, to her, her daughter has always been her priority, as reflected when, after learning that her grandson is allergic to lactose, she is willing to transform the grocer into a completely different business (episode 75); or when, overhearing a fierce argument between Berta and Paco, she seriously considers selling the store as an attempt to help them save their marriage (episode 76-78). The depiction of Dora as an ever-caring mother who is willing to sacrifice herself for her daughter and her family, together with the symbolic use of the grocer’s shop as a projection of her own self in her motherly sacrifice, relies, once again, on a stereotypical characterization of the (ageing) matriarch. In this case, this *cliché* is sometimes melodramatically underscored through the use of sentimental background music, particularly in some sequences in which mother and daughter support each other or reconcile after a fight. Nonetheless, the delicate ‘love story’ that is developed throughout the entire series between Dora and Berta also constructs the older woman as strong, loyal, sensitive, wise and extremely generous, in contrast with her fragile, dependent and insecure daughter. The combination of physical, mental, emotional and moral fortitude that Dora epitomizes in her role as an adult mother is also contained in the sentence “la Dora

és molta Dora”, through which Berta and other characters frequently refer to her strong personality in an affectionate way.

Whilst in the first eighty episodes of the series and throughout seasons one and two, both positive and negative *clichés* of ageing femininity converge in Dora’s characterization, and construct her as a solid and emblematic secondary figure in *Ventdelplà*, the introduction of a new character in episode 89 brings with it a narrative twist that gradually transforms Dora into a more complex individual and, therefore, into a more central character in the series. This important change is translated into a narrative of romance that has Dora and Llibert, an exiled Republican, as protagonists: from episode 92 onwards, their love story constitutes the new centre of Dora’s plotline for the following 145 episodes, it increases her screen time considerably in each episode, and it remains part of her character arc until the end of the series. The effect of Llibert (and of late-life love) on Dora is essential to understand the character’s shift towards a different representation of female ageing. Thus, Dora’s conservative image –which, up to that moment, had been conveyed not only through the traditional domestic and social roles she performs, but also through her discreet, even prudish physical characterization– is substituted by a much more attractive and modern version of the character, as connoted by her more frequent changes in hairstyle and her new resort to colourful clothes. Even more significantly, Dora’s character conception becomes more complete through verbal and non-verbal references to her sexualized self in several scenes: after some initial doubts, Dora completely opens up to this invisible dimension of her Self through the unexpected later-life relationship that emerges between her and Llibert. Even though the decorum of both daytime and primetime entertainment TV, in combination with the typical desexualisation of older characters in soaps (Harrington 2010, 21), can explain why, in contrast with many couples formed by young and middle-aged characters, Dora and Llibert do not have any sex-scene in the series, their need for sexual and affectionate intimacy

is signalled through many sequences that finish with a kiss or an embrace between both figures. Interestingly enough, Dora's relationship with Llibert also transforms her in other ways. Hence, Dora's interest in the community of Ventdelplà becomes more political as she, through Llibert, also becomes involved in the recovery of the collective memory of those who were killed by Franco's regime during and after the Spanish Civil War and were buried in common graves; and, for the first time in twenty-two years, she is willing to leave the store in the hands of her daughter and son-in-law in order to travel with Llibert and gain more time for herself. One could say that, paradoxically, Dora's emancipation is generated by the presence of a man in her life and that, therefore, the new model of ageing femininity that this figure represents is, in fact, attached to patriarchal values. Yet, ironically, Dora's love for her sense of independence is precisely enhanced after Llibert's appearance: hence, even though he proposes her to move in together on two occasions, she refuses to do so each time, claiming that she does not want to lose her freedom. As a result, the two characters develop a sentimental relationship which, albeit more "practical" than "modern", in Dora's words, (episode 174) is truly based on equality, independence, and a tender sense of camaraderie.

In this respect, the characterization of Dora at this stage of the soap aligns with recent calls to include broader representations of older women in manifestations of popular culture, as defended by critics such as Josephine Dolan and Estelle Tincknell (2012) or Lynne Segal (2014), for example. More generally, the fact that romance –the most predominant narrative in the soap-opera genre and, in Harrington's words, its current "*raison d'être*" (2010, 21)– also encompasses Dora and a man who is older than her, not only triggers Dora's transformation as an older woman, but also the series' representation of old age at large. In particular, it does so by counteracting the ageist tendencies of the genre in this respect. As Harrington and Brothers affirm, (mostly heterosexual) romance is "a narrative priority" of soap operas that "distorts representations of the full life course" insofar as it tends to focus on

the search for love from adolescence through middle-adulthood (2010, 21). Contrary to this inclination, *Ventdelplà* accomplishes one of the pedagogical objectives of the Catalan soap operas in their attempt to reflect current social issues and generate, at the same time, more tolerant attitudes towards diversity, including the diversity created by (old) age. As a matter of fact, at the beginning of Dora and Llibert's love story Berta and, in particular, Paco, mirror the ageist attitudes of a broad sector of society that regards older people as deprived of a private life. Thus, Llibert and, especially, Dora, become the focus of amused looks (episode 93), and are compared to "adolescents" in ageist jokes (episodes 92, 94). Ageist ideology is even internalized by Dora and Llibert themselves, particularly when, at the beginning of their relationship, and under the social pressure of certain culturally-constructed age norms, they both use their age as an excuse to disregard the feelings they have for each other with sentences such as "we are the age we are," or "we are too old to be dragged by this sudden affection" (episode 107). Nevertheless, the love they feel for each other overcomes their own self-inflicted discrimination, and their relationship becomes consolidated when Dora tells Llibert, very ironically, that their feelings are, indeed, "a very serious problem" (episode 107). In the following episode, Dora claims that, at their age, they do not have to justify their decisions to anyone (episode 108); from that moment onwards, and until the end of the series, Dora and Llibert gradually become accepted as a couple by the rest of the community. More than that, through their stable relationship, based on their constant support, mutual respect, a healthy sense of humour, and a preserved sense of freedom, they both become a model of ageing for the younger generations. This is especially true for Berta, who has a more unstable sentimental life but, significantly enough, it also applies to Isona, Teresa's eldest daughter and one of the youngest characters in the soap, who opens the fifth season of the series by writing in her diary that she "would like to grow older like [Dora and Llibert]" (episode 216).

Indeed, the narrative of romance that transforms Dora's character creation re-presents a positive view of her ageing femininity to both the inhabitants of Ventdelplà and the show's viewers. However, a new narrative twist in the character's storyline prevents Dora's characterization from falling within the one-sided discourse of "successful ageing" to which her narrative of romance could tend, and situates her, instead, closer to the opposite and more commonly-sustained view of ageing as a process of decline. This narrative twist is generated by the introduction of the narrative of dementia in Dora's character arc. Up to that point, and with the exception of an episode of intoxication (episode 23), Dora had been presented as a healthy older woman. In fact, she was even shown 'performing' her 'old age' when it was convenient for her, as when she pretended to be going hard of hearing so as not to have to listen to Conxita in the store (episode 190). Nonetheless, in the second half of the fifth season, she starts to show signs of dementia by leaving the store open and not remembering having attended a customer (episode 234) and, more clearly, by getting lost in the village (episode 235). A few episodes later, she is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, much to her own surprise and to Llibert's shock, since he considers she is too "young" for this illness (episode 41). With Dora's Alzheimer's, *Ventdelplà* contributes to the pedagogical approach that the series takes towards several illnesses, such as AIDS or cancer, as well as towards physical disability. But, more than that, it renders its representation of ageing and, in particular, of ageing femininity, even more complex, and, far from reducing Dora again to a stereotype of old age, it makes her character grow further when the possibility of growth was –again, at that stage of her life– totally unexpected.

To start with, Dora refuses to be infantilized or treated as a patient (episode 242), and so she soon takes action against her diagnosed deterioration: not only does she sell the store to her ex-son-in-law Paco with dignity and joy (episodes 254 and 255), but continues to help in it, as well as in Berta's new boutique (episode 314, 316, 322), and also remains active as a

devoted grandmother, and as a member of the community as either an activist for causes that defend the village (episode 289), or even as eventual carer of vulnerable strangers in their last days (episode 279-280). Moreover, she occupies part of her free time by participating in clinical tests (episodes 291-294), and tries to keep her mild but increasing memory loss at bay by learning poems by heart and joining the new theatre group of Ventdelplà (episode 260), where she starts to make her illness public; by recording herself telling a story to her grandchildren (episode 281); and by creating an album for her with the photographs and names of her dear ones, and taking pictures of all the members of the community (episode 365). Dora's insistent and positive struggle against her dementia is sustained until the very last episode of the series, and it is frequently tinged with touches of humour in which Dora herself either laughs at her condition or questions other character's prejudices about old age and dementia (episodes 256, 279, 294, 311), thereby completing the didactic approach that the soap takes towards Alzheimer's disease. In this respect, Ventdelplà also shows the possibility of the soap-opera genre "of including utopian elements and practically an obligation ... to follow [and, we could add, to foster] social changes" (Czarniawska 2013, 279). Hence, despite several moments of desperation and visible fragility (episodes 349, 353) it is the character's resilience and inner strength that the show underlines, thereby avoiding melodramatic portrayals of dementia, and, with them, the stereotypical discourse of decline. Interestingly enough, the series shows the more difficult phases of the illness that are likely to await Dora through Maria, a neurologist with Alzheimer's that Dora befriends in Barcelona at the ACE Foundation, the institute of neuroscientific research where she follows an experimental programme.⁹ Little by little, Maria becomes Dora's "other" (episodes 295, 303,

⁹ Part of the show's realism lies in its frequent use of real-life medical institutions. ACE is one of them, just as other episodes use the Guttman Institute when one of the younger characters suffers from a severe spinal injury after a car accident. The presence of the ACE Foundation in Ventdelplà is clearly part of its pedagogical approach towards Alzheimer's disease, and it transmits a hopeful view of the illness by showing the efforts that are put in its research and in improving the quality of life of those who suffer it.

307, 323, 345), and even though this inevitably entails some dramatic scenes in which Dora is upset because she regards her friend's deterioration as a prelude to her own, Maria's also resilient personality inspires Dora to spend her last years in a more meaningful, fulfilling way. In the same way that Llibert emphasizes Dora's love for personal freedom, Maria triggers her '*joie de vivre*', with or without memory, while at the same time giving rise to some of the most beautiful and ambivalent moments of Dora's self-affirmation. For example, right after Maria does not recognize herself in the mirror, Dora looks at her own face in solitude and mutters "how lucky, you are still here" (episode 345); when she records herself for her grandchildren, she 'performs' an idealized vision of herself by wearing a very elegant white blouse and speaking confidently to the camera, saying: "This is who I am. This" (episode 281); and when, admitting her increasing dependency, she accepts Llibert's wish to move in with her, she unites the narrative of romance with the narrative of dementia in a bitter-sweet 'happy ending' that underlines Dora's vulnerability and joy at this phase of her life (episode 259).

Ventdelplà finishes with a moving episode that underscores the unstoppable cycle of life in the village –reminiscent, at the same time, of the sense of endlessness that characterizes soaps. In it, the death of Jaume, a farmer and one of the most emblematic members of the community, is edited in contrast with the birth of a new member during the village's summer festival. Right before this happens, Dora is shown taking pictures of the village's celebrations, including a photo of Jaume who, already in his last hours, smiles at her from a distance. The soap closes with a cyclical structure by showing Teresa and her new family looking at *Ventdelplà* from a distant point, one year after Jaume's death; but, significantly, Dora is the central character of the penultimate sequence of the series. Coherent with the evolution of her character arc, Dora's initially marginal position in the soap is replaced by a clearly prominent role at the end of it: through her final sequence, Dora encompasses the entire group of

characters –and, again, the “essence” of *Ventdelplà*– while she is shown looking at all the pictures she took at the festival in Llibert’s company. Likewise, the composite portrayal of ageing that Dora’s characterization entails is reflected in the last minutes of the soap through her affectionate and cheerful recognition of all the members of the village she photographed and, at the same time, through her wondering, when looking at the picture of Jaume, the last photograph, who that man is. Minutes before the vivid memory of Dora Parramon fades away before the viewers’ eyes, the creators of the series fuse all the aspects of her characterization into an “affirmative model of ageing”, to use Linn Sandberg’s term (2013), in that they enable the character to grow and be transformed by including fragility and dementia in her ultimate celebration of life.

Mercè Riera: Growing Old Gracefully?

In a way similar to Dora Parramon, Mercè Riera –played by Mercè Sampietro¹⁰– is also a matriarch and one of the protagonists of *La Riera*, the soap that is currently aired in Catalan public TV on a daily basis and that, following the success of *Ventdelplà*, resituated the Catalan soap to daytime programming. *La Riera* revolves around the intrigues that unfold in and around the restaurant of the same name, and Mercè is one of its main characters. Contrarily to Dora, the first two seasons of the series initially presented Mercè as a central character, together with her four children. Even though she remains an important figure in the soap, Mercè’s screen time has been reduced progressively, and her presence has been less continuous in the last four seasons. The very first sequence of the series quickly portrays the close connection between Mercè’s professional and personal worlds: it opens with a close-up of the restaurant, which soon zooms out to show Mercè’s house. Actually, the series starts

¹⁰ Mercè Sampietro started her career as a theatre actress in 1970, and moved to the screen a few years afterwards. She is a well-known actress for her versatility as well as for a long and ongoing career, whose talent and *savoir-faire* have been recognized in Catalonia and throughout Spain. She was a member of the Spanish Academy of Arts and Cinematographic Sciences between 2003 and 2006.

showing Mercè at her restaurant and, later, telling her staff she will be leaving early in order to prepare dinner for the celebration of the 40th birthday of her third son, Lluís. In the next sequence, Mercè is getting food ready in her kitchen, while members of her family are either in the living room or getting into the house. In most of the 1.344 episodes aired until the moment, the combination between the restaurant and Mercè's house as main locations for this character is constantly repeated, and she is very rarely shown outside this dual professional-and-domestic context. The confluence between the two domains is underscored by the fact that three of Mercè's children work in the restaurant as co-director (David Selvas as Ernest), barman (Jordi Cadellans as Lluís) and chef (Jordi Planas as Sergi). In this respect, the restaurant La Riera is an extension of Mercè's domestic context, in which she makes sure everyone is well-fed and, more significantly, behaves according to what is expected for their high-middle class status and professional reputation.

Another important aspect of Mercè's characterization that stands out from the very first scene is the figure's refined and stylish presentation, no matter the context in which she is shown. Thus, Mercè wears trendy blouses and shawls even in the kitchen sequences, and usually wears dark make-up around her eyes that emphasizes her reddish hair. Her physical characterization as a permanently attractive woman underlines her active and also empowering presentation as the matriarch of her house and head of her family business, while at the same time suggesting that, in her sixties, she feels at ease with her body and age. In this respect, Mercè's characterisation in the first episodes of the series seems to contravene the general tendency that Mirna Hant and Leni Marshall observe in popular representations of older women who, as these authors put it, are rarely depicted as "intellectually vital, sexually active, productive members of society ..." (Hant 2007, 10).

All the same, the apparently solid presentation of Mercè as the perfect mother and wife, as well as a diligent businesswoman presents some cracks when her husband Ignasi, to

whom she has been married for forty-four years, tells her that he intends to run their new restaurant in Madrid in person and, hence, leave for good. From that moment up until the end of season one (composed of 131 episodes), Mercè infringes all kinds of moral boundaries, including manipulating her husband and her children, in order to keep Ignasi by her side. As part of this manipulation, Mercè capitalises on the fact that Ignasi has a heart condition and needs to undergo serious surgery and a long period of recovery in order to persuade him that he cannot actually live without her. Although many of Mercè's plots and manipulations are questionable, the extended format of the TV series and its associated psychological portrayal of the characters allows the reader to partly understand Mercè's desperation. This is even more the case for female characters. As Geraghty argues, in TV series, "even when women are wrong, they are transparent and understandable, an unusual characteristic for women in a culture in which they are deemed most desirable when they are most opaque and enigmatic" (2006, 50). In this respect, Mercè declares her unconditional love for Ignasi both to the town's priest, who becomes her confidant mainly in season one and season two, and to her own children. Hence, in a conversation with her youngest son she justifies one of the tricks she has used to keep Ignasi by her side by saying, "You would do anything to be happy, wouldn't you?" At the same time, Mercè is presented as an unscrupulous woman in the same sequence when her son replies, showing a superior moral stance: "Yes, but there are limits" (episode 131). Thus, on the one hand, the audience is compelled to understand Mercè, especially through the scenes in which she opens up about how she feels about Ignasi and her life in general. On the other hand, the very last episode of season explains Mercè's obsession with Ignasi from a different perspective. In it, a series of flashbacks show how Mercè was offered a grant when she was in her mid-thirties in order to improve her painting technique, an innate talent she has been practicing all her life, and how she renounced that opportunity when Ignasi asked her to stay in Sant Climent, their hometown, with their family and the restaurant.

Through Mercè's confidences to her priest and children, then, and the flashbacks that close the first season, the audience can partly empathize with Mercè's refusal to be abandoned by Ignasi, even when this entails putting his life at risk – as when she provokes a domestic accident that makes Ignasi sprain his ankle.

In the seasons that follow, the dark side of the character is enhanced further. To give an example, in season five Mercè administers sedatives to her youngest son's ex-wife in secret in order to make sure her son can obtain the custody of the baby they have in common. Even though Mercè's action could be somehow justified through the neglect that Cristina, her ex-daughter-in-law, had shown towards her baby during her depression, it is presented as excessive and cruel. In this respect, Mercè falls again within the stereotype of the intrusive mother, but, in contrast with Dora in *Ventdelplà*, the presence of this cliché in her characterization is not the source of comedy, but of drama and suspense. Whereas, following the classification of motherly roles that Elizabeth Markson distinguished in her study of older women in films and TV, Dora represents the “motherly mother” in a funny way, Mercè rather corresponds with the “stylish” version of “bad mothers”, in other words, “malign mothers ... [presented like] wolves in sheep's clothing” (2003: 88), as well as with the “painfully invasive mothers” that, according to Myrna Hant, abound in contemporary TV series, with Livia Soprano as an emblematic case (2007, 10). In this respect, Mercè has a tendency to adopt this role with both her children and grandchildren, always within a stylish and elegant appearance and an apparently motherly discourse. Yet, when she suspects that danger may be near or that her offspring are not taking the right decisions, Mercè moves all the strings possible in order to protect them, either from others or from themselves, and often with devastating effects. Her inclination to manipulate her family also springs from an excessive identification of her children and grandchildren with her own self, which prevents Mercè's children from actually having a sense of independence and control over their own lives. To

give an example, in season six, Maribel, the new wife of Mercè's youngest son and a well-known chef who is at the top of her career, discovers she is pregnant. Remembering her sacrificed artistic career, Mercè advises Maribel to have an abortion and pursue her career. Maribel, who is quite confused at the time, decides to have the abortion without telling her husband. Mercè's son finally finds out and, astonished, reprimands his mother for always interfering with their lives: "Mum, you always do the same. You ignore us, you underestimate us. You interfere in our lives without us asking you to" (episode 1319).

The different aspects of Mercè's characterization that have been mentioned so far constitute a powerful –though not necessarily positive– representation of the older woman, either through its caring and attractive signs, or its intrusive and domineering tendencies. However, as has been pointed out, the extended format of the TV series as well as the focus on women's voices that soap operas present as one of their main features, enable other dimensions of the character to unfold. Thus, Mercè is also depicted as having moments of solitude and reflection, together with periods in which, following Ignasi's death, she falls in love again and rediscovers her sexuality. As with the presentation of Dora's sexuality in *Ventdelplà*, Mercè's sexual re-birth is also represented within the confines of daytime TV decorum, which is visibly more limiting for older characters, as has been said. However, her physical attitude towards her new lovers and other elements of dialogue clearly evoke her sense of passion. In other scenes with a romantic tone, the directors also resource to "heightened mise-en-scène and music to express what could not be spoken" (2006, 131), technical resources that Geraghty identifies as part of soap operas's emphasis on women's voices and which are also used in *Ventdelplà*. Hence, when Mercè feels melancholic, she is usually presented in her living room, with background piano music, and a close-up shot that reveals her emotions through her eyes and facial expression, as in similar shots of Dora.

Although romantic relationships also become an important aspect of Mercè's character arc from season two onwards and, therefore, part and parcel of the character's particular representation of ageing, the narrative of late-life romance that is presented through Mercè is, however, very different. Thus, in season two Mercè falls in love with Toni, a new neighbour and successful lawyer who happens to be married. Mercè confesses how she feels for Toni before he actually divorces his wife, and Toni also confesses Mercè that he "wasn't expecting this at this stage of [his] life" (episode 287). Toni and Mercè have a passionate relationship that ends dramatically while Toni is suffering from one of his psychotic attacks (he suffers from schizophrenia). Later on, in season four, Mercè befriends an intellectual man who owns a small publisher house, Rafel. Little by little, their friendship, based on trust and mutual intellectual and cultural interests, grows into a love relationship. However, it finishes when Rafel realizes that he feels more for Mercè than what she feels for him. These two relationships complete Mercè's portrayal as a self-confident older woman who is willing to embrace feelings of passion and love. At the same time, they also underline Mercè's priorities –namely, her family and her restaurant– and controlling personality, which partly explains why, especially in the second relationship, they are not totally successful. Thus, both Toni and Rafel feel they are not the real centre of Mercè's life at different points of their relationship with her. In a way, Mercè's narrative of romance reinforces her role as a domineering mother and matriarch who needs to control and defend both her family and her business to feel totally at ease. As with Dora's case, the romantic components of Mercè's narrative arc do not diminish the character's sense of independence; yet, contrary to Dora, Mercè's particular way of understanding her individual freedom and strong sense of self cannot be integrated within her new sentimental relationships.

A narrative twist that, in contrast to the features presented so far, shows Mercè's potential fragility as a woman in her sixties in the last two seasons of the series, brings the

character closer to Dora's composite portrayal of female ageing. Although Mercè's case is not connected with a disease that the audience can easily associate with old age, the implication of Mercè's physical and mental demise is related to her age. Both her children and doctor relate the two episodes of disease through which Mercè is portrayed as a direct consequence of states of deep stress and distress which an ageing body may find difficult to endure. Nevertheless, Mercè's case presents, again, important differences, since her character evolution is not connected with a disease that the audience can easily recognize and that easily associate with old age, but with another kind of condition that suggests some form of cognitive disorder. The first signs of this condition are manifested in season five, when Mercè has a seizure while fighting to get a Michelin star for her restaurant. Even though she does not spend much time in hospital, it takes her a few months to recover with the help of a specialized carer. It is in the last season, season six, when Mercè is finally diagnosed with a dissociative mental disease, which explains why she mixes the past with the present and forgets about recent events, and for which she is advised to leave her job. According to Mercè's doctor, the main catalysts of this disorder have been her stress and an accumulation of emotional shocks, such as the fact that one of her granddaughters, Ona, is brutally killed. Through this new condition, the characterization of Mercè as a strong, energetic and resolute woman, starts to give way to a more vulnerable version of her ageing femininity.

In a way similar to the second turning point in Dora's character arc, *La Riera* also seems to conform to the stereotype of 'the infirm older woman', a *cliché* that, following her analysis of "more than six decades of feature films", Markson considers as one of the recognizable roles of the older woman (2003, 80). Although Mercè continues to keep her elegant and stylish appearance, and gets into her children's lives and decisions in the same persistent manner, illness is now one of the features that define the character in the series. Whether her mental disease is the result of her twisted mind or the result of her ageing body,

will probably be determined in the next season, which the producers have already agreed to do. In any case, Mercè's process of ageing seems to be taking a more negative turn with her illness and the threat of dependency threatening the character. It remains to be seen whether the diagnosed disorder will pose, as with Dora's Alzheimer's disease, an opportunity to create a more complex portrayal of the character, or, on the contrary, it will give script-writers the chance to disempower the domineering, overprotective matriarch through the narrative of decline.

Concluding Thoughts: New or Old Models of Ageing?

As has been shown, the textual analysis of Dora Parramon's and Mercè Riera's characterizations and narrative arcs demonstrates that the development of the older-woman figure in contemporary Catalan soap operas has adapted, in many ways, to the more complex reality of ageing and the (gendered) identities derived from it. In this way, both characters continue to serve the social and pedagogic ideals that Benet i Jornet envisioned for the creation of the Catalan soap, even though they do so in different ways. Both female figures depart from ageist and sexist stereotypes that restrict the conceptualization of the older woman but, especially in the case of Dora, the characters' development throughout the extension of the two soaps also entails a combination of generic and individual features in the characters' arc which surprise the viewer and lead to a re-consideration of age- and gender-based identities. This re-conceptualization of ageing femininities is positive in the case of Dora insofar as it embraces frailty without renouncing to the features of "successful ageing" that the character accumulates throughout her narrative of late-life romance. With regard to Mercè, the future development of *La Riera* is yet to reveal if her cognitive vulnerability, which has humanized the character to a great extent, can surpass the limitations of a *cliché* which can jeopardize, once again, the emancipation of the older woman as a rich central

character in soap operas. What is certain is that through the popularity of these two figures and the credibility of their plotlines –which is as indebted to their character conceptions as to the reputation and talent of the two actresses that interpret them– the older woman has gained a new status in the history of Catalan soaps. Through it, viewers of all ages can find “interpretative templates,” to use Czarniawska et al.’s terms again, (2013: 268) through which limiting views of gender and ageing can be overcome or, at least, submitted to criticism, and, consequently, other forms of growing older can be imagined.

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