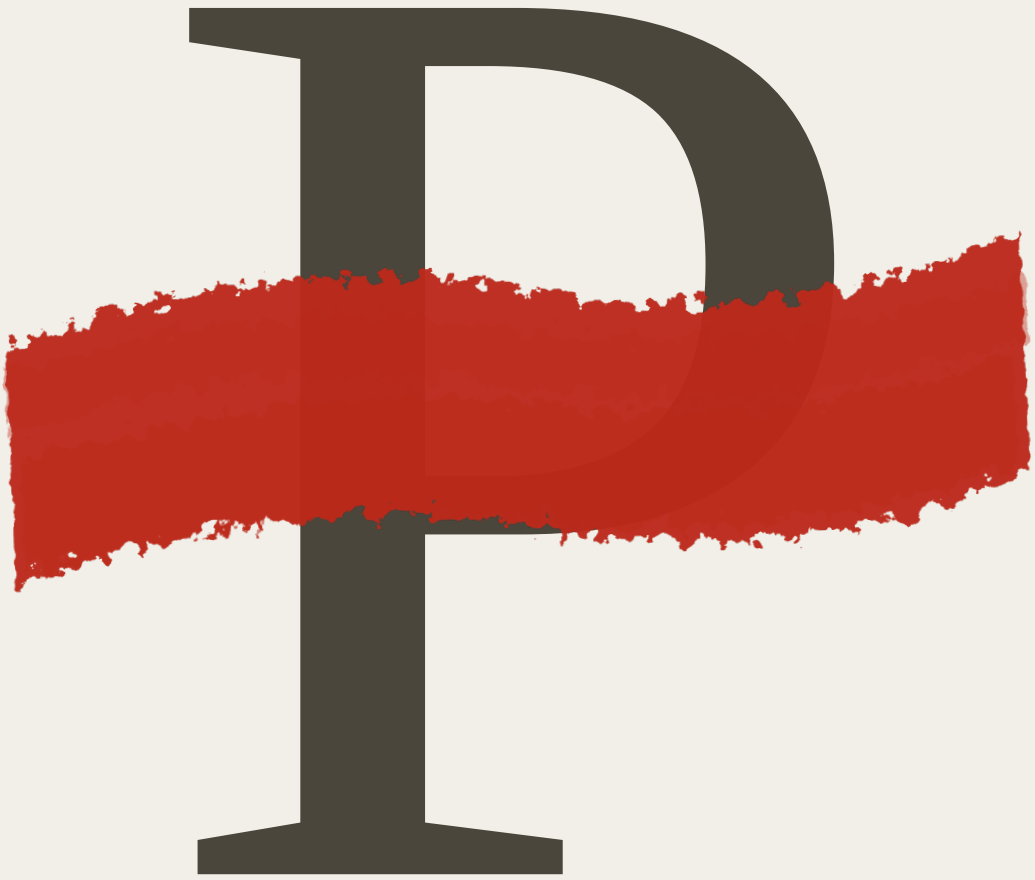
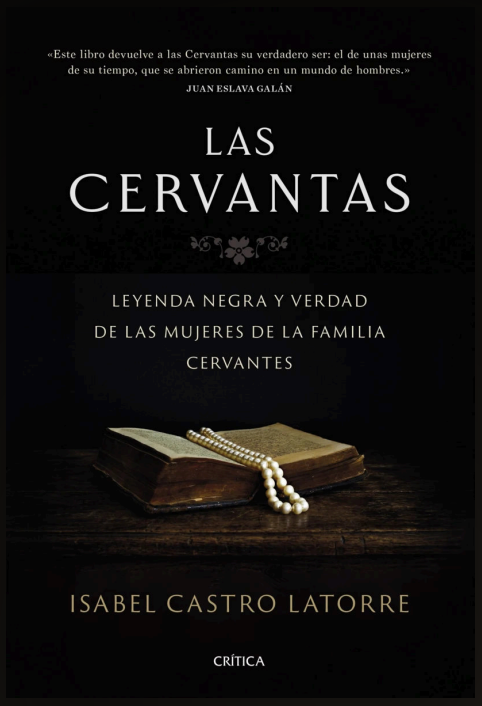


PRESS KIT



LAS CERVANTAS

THE BLACK LEGEND AND THE TRUTH ABOUT THE WOMEN OF THE CERVANTES FAMILY

ISABEL CASTRO LATORRE

"This book restores the Cervantas to their true selves: women of their own time, who made their way in a world of men."

JUAN ESLAVA GALÁN, FROM THE FOREWORD

CRÍTICA · ARES Y MARES
OCTOBER 2026
296 PAGES
www.lascervantas.com

IN BRIEF

Five reasons to talk about this book

For three centuries, the women of the Cervantes family were called «las Cervantas» and it was taken for granted that they lived off men. The documents say otherwise. This book lays them on the table.

1 It rights a historical injustice with documents, not with opinions

The image of them as "disreputable and grasping" comes from a neighbour's statement of 1605 and from what the nineteenth-century Cervantes scholars added on their own account. Against that, the book works with notarial records, lawsuits, wills, dowry deeds and inventories of seized goods, many of them barely explored.

2 It tells Cervantes from an angle that has never been told

This is not one more biography of the author of *Don Quixote*: it is the house from the inside. Cervantes shared his home with ten women of his family and published his entire work while surrounded by them, from the first poems of 1568 to the *Persiles*, which his widow brought into the light.

3 It recovers women in business at the height of the Golden Age

Andrea de Cervantes ran a whitework (fine linen needlework) workshop with a salaried apprentice at a time when guild rules reserved such control to widows, and she invoiced the Marquises of Villafranca. Her sister the nun was prioress three times.

4 It shows how a reputation is manufactured —and how long it lasts

The case is a textbook example of how a story is built: a piece of gossip, a learned conjecture and a national myth that it suited people to sustain. The legend reached the press of 1905 and of 1933 intact, and it is alive still.

5 It is written by an anthropologist, and it shows

Isabel Castro Latorre looks at what Cervantes scholarship dismissed as everyday: what furniture there was, how they dressed, what devotions they kept, what they brought in dowries and trousseaux. Biographical objects that turn out to be economic and social documents of the first order.

> *"The Cervantes women were the great forgotten figures of this story."*
>
> ISABEL CASTRO LATORRE

THE BOOK

Synopsis

For centuries, the women of Miguel de Cervantes's family have remained in the shadow of the most universal writer in our literature.

Their names barely appear in the margins of the Cervantes biographies and, when they do, they are usually wrapped in rumour, prejudice and suspicion. This book speaks of them: of the mothers, sisters, daughters, nieces and wives who held the Cervantes family together in times of hardship, and whom historiography unjustly turned into the protagonists of a black legend.

Drawing on notarial documents, lawsuits, wills, lists of dowries and barely explored archives, the anthropologist and researcher Isabel Castro Latorre reconstructs their lives and restores them to their true context. Far from the image of opportunists or kept women spread by some scholars, las Cervantas appear here as educated, hard-working, enterprising women, able to defend their rights in a society ruled by men.

Las Cervantas is a rigorous and revealing investigation into the daily life, the affections, the conflicts and the survival strategies of an exceptional family. A book that dismantles myths, rights a historical injustice and offers a new view of Cervantes's world through those who stood closest to him.

What the reader will find

A large family —Rodrigo and Leonor and seven children, five of them born in Alcalá de Henares— of the minor gentry, lettered and well connected, with books at home and every member able to read and write.

A wandering life through Alcalá, Córdoba, Sevilla, Valladolid and Madrid, with rents high and hard to come by, which gave these women an experience of the world denied to others.

And one fact that changes everything: when the father goes completely deaf and the two brothers are held captive in Argel, it is the women who keep the household standing, sign contracts, lend money, pawn jewels, go to law and halt seizures of goods in three cities.

> *"This study restores the Cervantas to their true selves: women of their own time, educated and industrious, who often had to make their way in a world of men."*
>
> JUAN ESLAVA GALÁN, FOREWORD

THE CAST

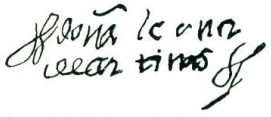
A clan of women

Cervantes shared his home with eleven women of his family. Of them all, historiography morally spared only three. Beneath each name, her signature: they could write in a society that was largely illiterate.

THE MOTHER

Leonor de Cortinas

She held the family up with a deaf husband and two sons held captive in Argel.



THE SISTER WHO WAS A NUN

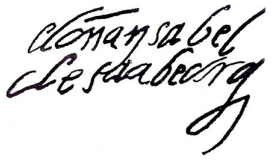
Luisa de Cervantes

A Discalced Carmelite in Alcalá, where she lived alongside Santa Teresa. Prioress three times.

THE DAUGHTER

Isabel de Saavedra

She lived as a Madrid bourgeoise, with a private oratory and relics much in demand.



THE TAVERN-KEEPER

Ana de Villafranca

Isabel's mother. No one noticed that she was the same age as Catalina when she fell pregnant.

THE ELDEST SISTER

Andrea de Cervantes

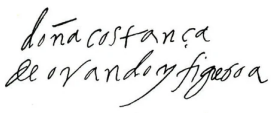
"The resolute and tireless Andrea", Concha Espina called her. Mistress of a workshop in the face of the Madrid textile guild.



THE NIECE

Constanza de Ovando

Raised in a home that was house and workshop at once; swept into the same bundle by the Cervantes scholars.



THE AUNT

María de Cervantes

Abandoned while pregnant by the bastard son of the Duke of the Infantado, she claimed her dowry deed.

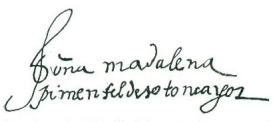


THE SISTER

Magdalena de Cervantes

She went to law against those who broke a promise of marriage. She signed with the two names she used in her life.





THE WIFE

Catalina de Salazar

She published *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda* a year after Cervantes died.



THE ARGUMENT

How a slander was manufactured

The ill fame of las Cervantas does not come from the documents. It is built in three stages, by accumulation.

I A neighbour, in Valladolid, 1605

The beata (lay religious woman) Isabel de Ayala testifies in the Ezpeleta case —a gentleman murdered almost at Cervantes's door— that they were "loose women" to whom nobody spoke, because men came and went there by night and by day. She did not know that the house was workshop and consulting room as well: the surgeon saw patients at home, Andrea sewed for her clients and Cervantes received his own. A commonplace thing in sixteenth-century Europe.

II The nineteenth-century Cervantes scholars

On top of that statement they added that the sisters, the daughter and the niece seduced rich men in order to wring a promise of marriage from them and denounce them afterwards. In truth those lawsuits were legal devices within reach of men and women alike to defend their honour when abandoned, and they required written proof, witnesses and public record of the relationship.

III The national myth

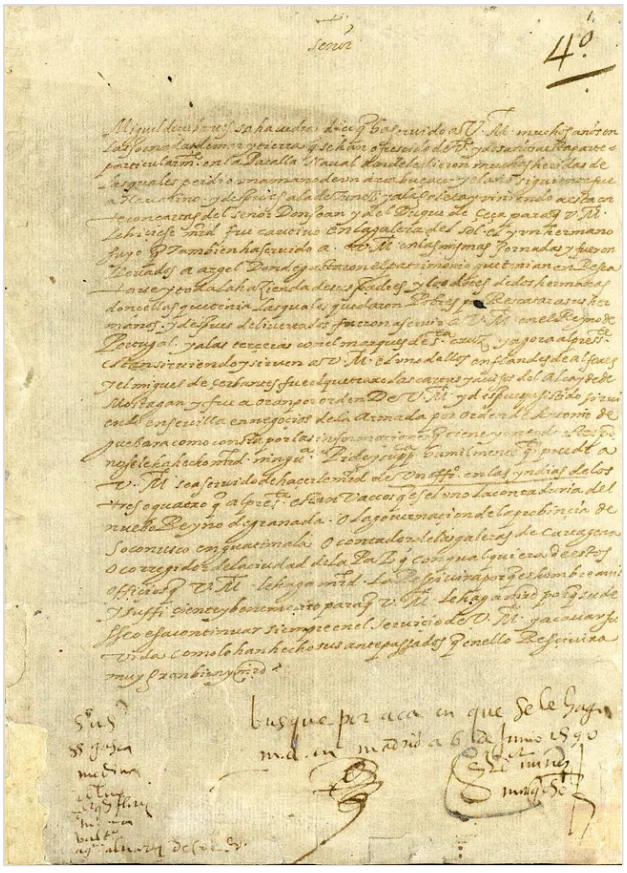
An exemplary Cervantes had to be built. The findings are concealed for a century; in the middle of the nineteenth it is invented that Isabel's mother was a Portuguese lady, and she is packed off as a Trinitarian nun. The story falls apart when her marriage articles and her two weddings come to light, but by then three generations of women have lost their names: they are known only as «las Cervantas».

> *"To grasping women of no standing, judges and notaries would never have allowed it."*
>
> ON THE SEIZURES OF GOODS THEY SETTLED, THE GUARDIANSHIPS THEY OBTAINED AND THE LAWSUITS THEY WON

THE EVIDENCE

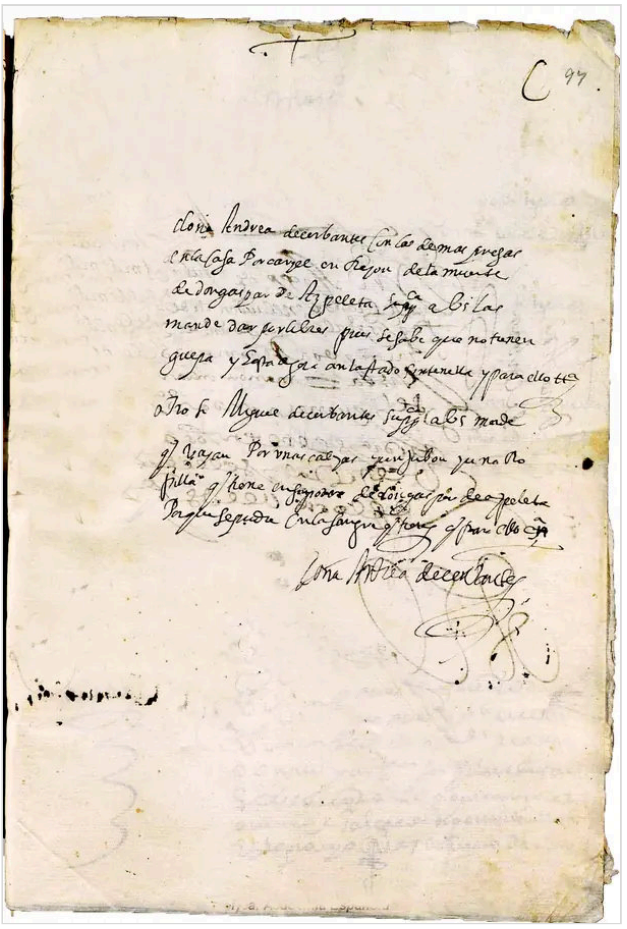
What the papers say

The book includes twenty-two transcribed documentary appendices. These are four of them.



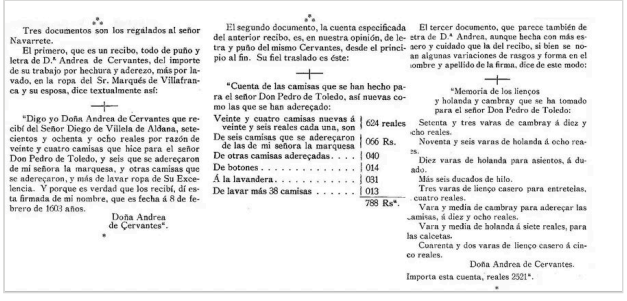
The only document in which Cervantes speaks of his sisters

Memorial to the Council of the Indies, Sevilla, 21 May 1590: they spent "the whole of their parents' estate and the dowries of two unmarried sisters they had, who were left poor in order to ransom their brothers". Archivo General de Indias.



Andrea asks for the prisoners to be freed

After Ezpeleta's death, the women are left with their own house for a prison. Andrea signs the petition: let them be released "since it is known that they are not to blame". Real Academia de la Historia.



Tres documentos son los regalados al señor Navarrete.

El primero, que es un recibo, todo de puño y letra de D.ª Andrea de Cervantes, del importe de su trabajo por hechura y aderezo, más por lavado, en la ropa del Sr. Marqués de Villafranca y su esposa, dice textualmente así:

"Digo yo Doña Andrea de Cervantes que recibí del Señor Diego de Villela de Aldana, setecientos y ochenta y ocho reales por razón de veinte y cuatro camisas que hice para el señor Don Pedro de Toledo, y seis que se adereçaron de mi señora la marquesa, y otras camisas que se adereçaron, y más de lavar ropa de Su Excelencia. Y porque es verdad que los recibí, dí esta firmada de mi nombre, que es fecha á 8 de febrero de 1603 años.

Doña Andrea
de Çervantes".

El segundo documento, la cuenta especificada del anterior recibo, es, en nuestra opinión, de letra y puño del mismo Cervantes, desde el principio al fin. Su fiel traslado es éste:

"Cuenta de las camisas que se han hecho para el señor Don Pedro de Toledo, así nuevas como las que se han adereçado:

Veinte y cuatro camisas nuevas á veinte y seis reales cada una, son	624 reales
De seis camisas que se adereçaron de las de mi señora la marquesa	066 Rs.
De otras camisas adereçadas. . . .	040
De botones	014
A la lavandera.	031
De lavar más 38 camisas	013
	788 Rs°.

El tercer documento, que parece también de letra de D.ª Andrea, aunque hecha con más esmero y cuidado que la del recibo, si bien se notan algunas variaciones de rasgos y forma en el nombre y apellido de la firma, dice de este modo:

"Memoria de los lienços
y holanda y cambray que se ha tomado para el señor Don Pedro de Toledo:

Setenta y tres varas de cambray á diez y ocho reales.

Noventa y seis varas de holanda á ocho reales.

Diez varas de holanda para asientos, á dudado.

Más seis ducados de hilo.

Tres varas de lienço casero para entretelas, cuatro reales.

Vara y media de cambray para adereçar las camisas, á diez y ocho reales.

Vara y media de holanda á siete reales, para las calçetas.

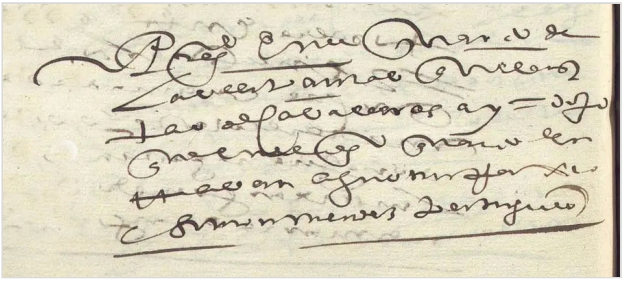
Cuarenta y dos varas de lienço casero á cinco reales.

Doña Andrea de Cervantes.

Importa esta cuenta, reales 2521°.

A businesswoman who issues invoices

An itemised bill for Andrea's needlework for the Marquises of Villafranca: she could read, write, reckon and manage.



The word that turned into a nickname

«Cervanta», in the inquiries into the Ezpeleta case. From there it passed into historiography and ended up replacing their names.

> The originals come from the Archivo General de Indias, the Archivo General de Simancas, the Archivo Histórico de Protocolos de Madrid, the Archivo de la Real Chancillería de Valladolid, the Archivo del Reino de Valencia and the Real Academia de la Historia. Permission to reproduce them in the press must be requested from each institution.

THE AUTHOR

Isabel Castro Latorre



Anthropologist and researcher. Her interest in the Cervantes family began as a domestic commission: to research her husband's novel about a murder committed in 1605 at the door of Cervantes's house.

There she found a family that was fascinating and systematically shut out of the writer's life. That injustice —a historiography that called the family disreputable and grasping, and his sisters, daughter and niece prostitutes in all but name— is what led her to write this book.

Her training explains the method. Against the account of great events, anthropology asks about what is inherited, what is sewn, what is pawned and what is bequeathed: what furniture there was in the house, what clothes were worn, what devotions sustained a family and what each member brought on entering it. Applied to the Cervantes family, that approach brings to light a domestic archive that scholarship had dismissed as triviality and that turns out to be the best evidence of what these women did with their lives.

She has also studied the seventeenth-century process of authenticating the relics of the Martyrs of Arjona, where she was struck by the part played by the women: among them, a gentlewoman who won a lawsuit for seduction and breach of promise of marriage and then gave it up after fourteen years of appeals before the Chancillería de Granada, "for the time taken up and the money spent".

> *"I believe the best tribute that can be paid to Cervantes is to give the women of his family the place they deserve. Women he loved and to whom he was grateful."*
>
> ISABEL CASTRO LATORRE

FOR THE INTERVIEW

Twelve subjects to ask about

The author is available for interviews, features and broadcast appearances. These are the subjects the book offers.

01	Who decided that these women were suspect, and whom did it suit?
02	A woman at the head of a workshop in the Madrid of Felipe II: how Andrea managed it and what she risked.
03	Knowing how to sign your name in 1550: what it really meant, and why the women around Lope and Shakespeare could not.
04	The ransom from Argel: what it costs to bring two sons out of captivity, and who pays.
05	Dowries, trousseaux and the women’s estrado: reading a Golden Age household the way you read a balance sheet.
06	Lawsuits over a promise of marriage: a swindle of the heart, or the only legal remedy available?
07	The Ezpeleta case, a murder at the front door and the statement that twisted everything.
08	Isabel de Saavedra, the daughter: from a character in French theatre to a woman with a codicil and two weddings.
09	What is lost when three generations of women are called by a collective nickname.
10	Cervantes and women: he wrote his entire work living among them. Does it show?
11	How an anthropologist works in an archive of notarial records: the method, step by step.
12	What is left today of the black legend, and why black legends last so long.

ANNIVERSARIES AND NEWS PEGS

Publication in October 2026, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of Crítica. Key Cervantine dates: 23 April (World Book Day and the death of Cervantes) and 8 March, given the subject of the book. Cities with a direct link for the local press: Alcalá de Henares, Valladolid, Madrid, Sevilla, Córdoba, Esquivias and Arjona.

QUOTABLE MATERIAL

Quotations and facts

All quotations are verbatim and attributed. The facts come from the documentation gathered in the book.

From the author

> *"This injustice led me to write this book, which is not about the life of Cervantes or about his work, but about the life of his family."*

> *"Cervantes lived surrounded by women: he shared his home with ten women of his family, without counting his mother-in-law."*

> *"Las Cervantas never had that easy life of idle seductresses that has been attributed to them."*

From the foreword

> *"A hasty judgement based on insufficient testimony has led people to hold that las Cervantas were women of doubtful morals."*
>
> JUAN ESLAVA GALÁN

Facts for a headline

Eleven women of the family shared a home with Cervantes; only three escaped the moral judgement of historiography.

Seven children were born to Rodrigo de Cervantes and Leonor de Cortinas; five of them in Alcalá de Henares.

Doña: a form of address reserved for a social minority, and the notaries gave it to them.

A salaried apprentice, with board and bed, in Andrea's workshop, when the guild admitted only widows as mistresses.

Three times prioress was Luisa, the sister who was a nun, among the Discalced Carmelites of Alcalá.

Twenty-two appendices of transcribed documents close the volume, besides notes and bibliography.

1933: the press was still repeating that Cervantes's daughter kept vigil over her father's body behind the grille of the Trinitarian convent.

For fact-checking, the author can supply the archive reference of every document cited.

DETAILS

Book details and contacts

TITLE	Las Cervantas
SUBTITLE	The black legend and the truth about the women of the Cervantes family
AUTHOR	Isabel Castro Latorre
FOREWORD	Juan Eslava Galán
PUBLISHER	Crítica · Ares y Mares series
PUBLICATION	First edition, October 2026
PAGES	296
ISBN	978-84-9199-930-0
SUBJECT	History · Biography · Women's history · Cervantes studies
CONTENTS	18 chapters, 22 documentary appendices, notes and bibliography

Press · Publisher

Crítica, an imprint of Editorial Planeta
Av. Diagonal, 662-664 · 08034 Barcelona
editorial@ed-critica.es · www.ed-critica.es

The author's representation

Silvia Bastos, S.L. Agencia Literaria

Interviews and launch events

Interview requests, press copies and invitations to launch events, through the publisher.

IMAGES AVAILABLE

Front and back cover in high resolution, a portrait of the author, the signatures of the women of the family and facsimiles of the documents cited. Archive documents require authorisation from the institution that holds them.

FURTHER MATERIAL

The original documents, the signatures of the ten women and the twenty-two appendices of the book, on view at

www.lascervantas.com