

**Mapping a Female Mediterranean: Tracing a Fluid Cartography of
the Mediterranean in the Female Literary Imaginary**

Jasmine Bajada

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Abstract

This dissertation addresses the lack of critical discussion within Mediterranean studies that takes into account female voices in the construction of the Mediterranean imaginary. By tracing a connection between women and the Mediterranean waters, this dissertation tentatively maps a ‘female Mediterranean’, thereby presenting a counter-narrative to the phallogentric myth of Homer’s *Odyssey*. The first chapter tracks the changing perception of Mediterranean women from prehistory to classical times, with an emphasis on their association with fertility, nature, and monstrous otherness. A link between the fluidity of the abject female body and the fluid cartography of the Mediterranean is then established in the second chapter through a discussion of the mutually porous borders of woman’s body and the Mediterranean geography. In the last chapter, a female literary cartography of the Mediterranean is charted through a close analysis of Françoise Sagan’s *Bonjour Tristesse*, Assia Djebar’s *The Mischief*, Deborah Levy’s *Hot Milk*, and Elena Ferrante’s *The Lost Daughter*. These novels weave the experience of becoming a woman or being a mother with the Mediterranean seascape and configure this geography as a personal space where women encounter themselves and their otherness. Reflections on conceiving the Mediterranean as a female *oikos* bring this odyssey in the uncharted female Mediterranean to a close.

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Introduction:
Listening to Female Voices, Mapping a Female Mediterranean

‘Eurymedusa, the day must dawn when the songs of a woman
 Sound to the well-strung lyre, and are praised by the Delian Judges.’

–Robert Graves, *Homer’s Daughter*¹

‘And so when he listens to the Mediterranean concert, Western man should not only hear the voices which are familiar to him; there are other voices which he does not know, and the keyboard is meant for two hands.’

–Fernand Braudel, ‘The Mediterranean: Land, Sea, History’²

‘Now stop your ship and listen to our voices.

All those who pass this way hear honeyed song,

poured from our mouths.’

–Homer, *The Odyssey* (trans. by Emily Wilson)³

A place where sea meets land and nature meets culture.

A space that is at once physical and imaginary.

A vast repository of people, of stories.

A sea of many voices.

The Mediterranean has no beginning or end, no centre and periphery, and no point of departure or arrival, despite what the grand narrative of history and the discipline of geography claim. The Mediterranean is a hybrid space in a myriad of ways. It is a

¹ Robert Graves, *Homer’s Daughter* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 42.

² Fernand Braudel, ‘The Mediterranean: Land, Sea, History’, *The UNESCO Courier*, 12 (1985), 4–12 (p. 7).

³ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by Emily Wilson (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), XII. 185–87.

geographical composition of seas and lands, islands and peninsulas, cities and coasts. The human geography of the Mediterranean is just as diverse. The Mediterranean Sea crashes against the shores of three continents – Europe, Africa, and Asia – and as it retreats, the sea carries with it traces of various races, cultures, religions, histories, and languages that intermingle in the fluid space of the region and compose the complex mosaic that is collectively referred to as ‘the Mediterranean’. The Mediterranean is, above all, a sea of difference, a space where otherness comes into contact with different kinds of otherness on equal grounds. It is a place of encounter, exchange, conflict, and negotiation. ‘The Mediterranean “we” is a “we” full of others,’ Franco Cassano writes.⁴ Many Mediterranean thinkers assert that this rich heterogeneity is crucial to the composition and the spirit of the Mediterranean. Indeed, its prime historian Fernand Braudel, in his monumental work *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, famously characterises the Mediterranean as multi-voiced, which is reaffirmed by scholars in Braudel’s footsteps such as Cassano and Iain Chambers.

It is precisely this polyphonic heterogeneity that time and again has been threatened by totalising powers that attempt to conceptualise the Mediterranean as a homogeneous space by suppressing these other voices. A fundamental aspect that must be addressed in an understanding of the Mediterranean is the notion that it is not merely defined by its physical features, but it is also a mental, conceptual geography, whose boundaries overflow geographical coordinates. What we call ‘the Mediterranean’ is a *constructed* space, or in Chambers’s words, ‘a “reality” that is imaginatively constructed: the political and

⁴ Franco Cassano, ‘Preface to the English-language Edition’, in *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*, ed. and trans. by Norma Bouchard and Valerio Ferme (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), pp. xxvii–xxxix (p. xxix).

poetical articulation of a shifting, desired object and a perpetually repressed realization’.⁵ Even more crucially, rather than the subject of its own thought, the Mediterranean has by and large been the object of the Northern gaze. The notion of the gaze is one that cannot be overlooked since as Cassano persuasively argues, ‘[v]ery few things are more powerful than gazes; very few things naturalize and neutralize hierarchies more than they do.’⁶ The Northern gaze tends to privilege Eurocentric and Western views of the ‘Great Sea’ while silencing the multiplicity and otherness that are intrinsic to the Mediterranean. The product of this ‘essentialist discourse’ of ‘Mediterraneanism’, which, as Serenella Iovino writes, is a kind of Mediterranean Orientalism, is the construction of the Mediterranean as ‘a site of “origins” and “lost perfection,” often due to an idealization of its classical times’.⁷ The long-standing myth of the Mediterranean as the cradle of Western civilisation due to Greek and Roman antiquity privileges the North and the West and establishes these geographical directions as the central orientation of the Mediterranean world, in so doing creating a less privileged periphery – the South and the East. As Predrag Matvejević observes in *Mediterranean: A Cultural Landscape*, ‘Mediterranean discourse has suffered from Mediterranean discursiveness’, meaning that the tropes that saturate the image of the Mediterranean which is lodged in the Western imaginary, such as the vacationscape features of the sun and the sea, are repeated to such an extent that the ‘Mediterranean is inseparable from its discourse’.⁸ This ‘Mediterraneanist’ echo chamber has been composed over time by a series of cultural representations, not least through literature. It is important to ask *who* speaks this discourse and to de-essentialise it, so that from an object of thought, the Mediterranean becomes *a way of thinking*.

⁵ Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 10.

⁶ Franco Cassano, ‘Prologue: Parallels and Meridians’, in *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*, ed. and trans. by Bouchard and Ferme, pp. xxxiii–lv (p. xlv).

⁷ Serenella Iovino, ‘Mediterranean Ecocriticism’, *ISLE*, 24 (2017), 325–40 (p. 330).

⁸ Predrag Matvejević, *Mediterranean: A Cultural Landscape*, trans. by Michael Henry Heim (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 12.

Recently, in the field of Mediterranean studies, various significant attempts have been made not to think the Mediterranean, but to *think Mediterranean*, that is to deconstruct the over-codified South, to reform the gaze that bears upon the Mediterranean, and to reclaim its values. Patrick Crowley, Noreen Humble, and Silvia Ross have termed this as ‘the Mediterranean turn’, which incorporates the understanding of the Mediterranean as ‘a zone within which identities are encountered, constructed, and inscribed within relationships of Self and Other’, with a particular emphasis on ‘the Mediterranean as ‘a site of thought on the Other, on the non-European, and on what is understood by ‘European’’’.⁹ For instance, Cassano’s main aim in *Southern Thought* is ‘to interrupt the long historical sequence during which the South has been thought by others’ and to reconstruct the South from the point of view of a Southern gaze.¹⁰ In *Mediterranean Crossings*, Chambers likewise aims ‘[t]o query a particular framing of sense [...] but also to exhume what it has historically marginalized and culturally excluded’.¹¹ Chambers seeks to critique the European sense of progress and modernity while recovering Mediterranean alterity and multiplicity, which the Northern gaze excludes in its mapping:

There is the Mediterranean, the sea itself, not so much as a frontier or barrier between the North and the South, or the East and the West, as an intricate site of encounters and currents. It immediately invokes the movement of peoples, histories, and cultures that underlines the continual sense of historical transformation and cultural translation which makes it a site of perpetual transit.¹²

These reconstructions, amongst others, of the Mediterranean from the perspective of a Southern gaze take into account the repressed otherness of the Mediterranean and reveal what

⁹ Patrick Crowley, Noreen Humble, and Silvia Ross, ‘Introduction: The Mediterranean Turn’, *Mediterranean Travels: Writing Self and Other from the Ancient World to Contemporary Society*, ed. by Patrick Crowley, Noreen Humble, and Silvia Ross (New York: Legenda, 2011), pp. 1–13 (p. 1, 3).

¹⁰ Cassano, ‘Preface’, p. xxvii.

¹¹ Chambers, p. 8.

¹² Chambers, p. 32.

previous Eurocentric constructions systematically hid, that is they consider the inclusionary and exclusionary process of framing and mapping. Significantly, these reconstructions do not make a claim for conclusiveness or exhaustiveness, and what they present is a series of conflicting voices that cannot be fixed into a single, grand narrative. To re-think and rewrite the Mediterranean in its own terms is to acknowledge the necessarily inconclusive mapping that this act entails, as well as its resistance to univocality. The fluid nature of the sea suggests the mutability and dynamism of the physical geography but also of human identities and relations. Thus, the Mediterranean's heterogeneity is not a static collective, but a constant flow of currents and crosscurrents. The Mediterranean Sea has a porous geography and it erodes its human constructions.

The need to revise the way the Mediterranean has been thought and depicted has therefore arisen. Literature, as a medium that provides the opportunity to retell stories by giving voice to the silenced and by redirecting the narratorial gaze, plays a crucial role in revisionism. On revisionism through retelling, Chambers writes the following:

The postcolonial theme of rewriting and re-presenting the past to reconfigure the present is threatening to become a fashionable orthodox, yet in revealing the disquieting stubbornness of a yesterday that refuses to disappear into the stillness of the ordered archive, it remains imperative. [...] Encountering voices, bodies, and lives that exist beyond the official accounts supplied by both colonial and postcolonial power, we are drawn into dissonant narratives.¹³

Homer's *Odyssey* is one such Eurocentric account that may not be 'official' in a historical sense but that is definitely authoritative due to its central position in the Western literary canon; as a mythological account of what is often hailed as the most important Mediterranean voyage, it certainly has a strong influence in the construction of the Mediterranean imaginary.

¹³ Chambers, pp. 58–59.

Homer's *Odyssey* is the grand narrative of the Mediterranean and its hero Odysseus speaks with a monologic voice. To rethink the Mediterranean, the *Odyssey* must therefore be retold by listening to the dissonant voices which, to borrow Cassano's words, 'counter this quasi-unanimous chorus'.¹⁴

*

'Now stop your ship and listen to our voices,' the sirens imperatively demand Odysseus and his sailors.¹⁵ *Listen to the female voices that emerge from the Mediterranean*, their seductive yet ultimately powerless voices cry, before they are silenced. Although many notable attempts to reclaim Mediterranean otherness have been made, the sirens' plea has still by and large been overlooked within literary criticism and theory that aims to revise the Mediterranean. The voices of Mediterranean women have yet to be heard and acknowledged. The purpose of this dissertation is to address this current lack of a critical inquiry that takes into account the notion of gender in (re)constructions of the Mediterranean, as well as gendered experiences of the Mediterranean that are recorded in literary narratives, specifically those that are female. In his preface to *Southern Thought*, Cassano claims that 'to reintroduce our thinking to a multiplicity of perspectives', as befits the spirit of the Mediterranean, is 'to damage every monologue'.¹⁶ In this regard, the need to damage *man's* monologue by giving voice to female narratives that counter Odysseus's male-centred myth, which is often theorised as the most significant Mediterranean narrative, arises. Mary Beard, in 'The Public Voice of Women', states that the *Odyssey*, which is 'the beginning of the tradition of Western literature', recounts the 'first recorded example of a man telling a

¹⁴ Franco Cassano, *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*, ed. and trans. by Norma Bouchard and Valerio Ferme (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), p. 134.

¹⁵ *Odyssey*, trans. by Wilson, XII. 185.

¹⁶ Cassano, 'Preface', p. xxix.

woman to ‘shut up’; telling her that her voice was not to be heard in public’.¹⁷ Beard is specifically referring to Book I, when Telemachus tells his mother Penelope that ‘speech will be the business of men, all men, and of [him] most of all; for [his] is the power in this household.’¹⁸ In the context of contemporary literature, attempts have been made to retell Homer’s *Odyssey* from a female perspective, such as Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* and Madeline Miller’s *Circe*, who adopt Penelope’s and Circe’s point of view respectively. These are novels of literary and cultural value, but the attempt to revise the masculinist myth of the *Odyssey* that suppresses the multiplicity of the Mediterranean, including female otherness, must go beyond the retelling of Odysseus’s story. A literary cartography of the female Mediterranean must be mapped, one that is not definitive, but is rather open to constant revision in order to discover unknown territories from which other female voices emerge.

Throughout the years, male navigators, thinkers, and writers have constructed the Mediterranean using gendered discourse. In other words, gendered metaphors have been adopted to map the geography of the Mediterranean in terms of the female body, so that the Mediterranean has been conceived as a ‘feminine sea, like Helen of old, which everyone would possess’, an ‘unfaithful girl’, and ‘a mother’s bowels’.¹⁹ The Mediterranean for centuries has been thought of as a woman that can be captured, explored, conquered, and even married.²⁰ In the *Odyssey*, the Mediterranean Sea and its unknown perils are

¹⁷ Mary Beard, ‘The Public Voice of Women’, *London Review of Books*, 36.6 (2014) <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v36/n06/mary-beard/the-public-voice-of-women>> [accessed 20 April 2020] (para. 1 of 25).

¹⁸ Homer quoted in Beard, para. 1 of 25.

¹⁹ Emil Ludwig, *The Mediterranean: Saga of a Sea*, trans. by Barrows Mussey (New York: Whittlesey House, 1942), p. vii; Cassano, *Southern Thought*, p. 11; Vincenzo Consolo and Mario Nicolao, ‘Conversation between Vincenzo Consolo and Mario Nicolao’, trans. by Valerio Ferme, in *Reading and Writing the Mediterranean: Essays by Vincenzo Consolo*, ed. by Norma Bouchard and Massimo Lollini (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), pp. 51–75 (p. 58).

²⁰ Every year, the Venetians celebrate a symbolic marriage to the Adriatic Sea in the Festa della Sensa, a feast that commemorates Venice’s maritime power back when it was a republic and a superpower. Carl Schmitt recounts that the Ottoman sultan in 1500 told the Venetians, ‘Until now the sea was your bride, from now on, it is mine’. See Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, trans. by Simona Draghici (Washington: Plutarch Press, 1997), p. 9.

synonymous with the monstrous female creatures that inhabit it. The female Mediterranean, however, is not this *Mare Nostrum* that belongs to man and that serves male desire. It is not the dominant, public image of the Mediterranean that for a long time has been depicted as man's theatre of war and trade. The female Mediterranean lies elsewhere; it is an as yet uncharted, private space. The male Northern gaze has attempted to represent this intimate space in paintings like *The Turkish Bath* by Ingres and *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* by Delacroix, where the painter's voyeuristic eye objectifies Mediterranean women. The 'Mediterraneanising' look of the male Northern onlooker others these women both because of their gender and their southernness. Their intimate space, however, is denied to this privileged male gaze; it is up to women to map the female Mediterranean through their female voices.

This dissertation aims to navigate the uncharted waters of the female Mediterranean. In the first chapter, entitled 'Goddesses, Monsters, and Other Mediterranean Women', the masculinist conception of women in Greek mythology is deconstructed, with a particular emphasis on Homer's *Odyssey* since it plays a prominent role in the construction of the Mediterranean imaginary. It is argued that women were not always perceived as monstrous because of their association with nature and the body. Indeed, early Mediterranean societies bestowed upon the female body a particular importance due to its relationship with fertility and nurture. A female divinity known as the 'Mother Goddess' was worshipped in prehistoric times, whose power gradually declined when the Ancient Greek civilisation expanded its influence and established a patriarchal pantheon of Olympic gods. As the *Odyssey* illustrates, this led to woman's embodiment of the 'Other', as opposed to the male Self, as well as the distortion of female sexuality. The second chapter, 'A Porous Body, a Fluid Geography', continues to explore the way through which women are othered by

drawing on feminist theory, primarily Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, in which the female body is connected with abject fluidity and the porous borders of the self. This is followed by an exploration of borders and fluidity in relation to Mediterranean geography. The act of mapping the Mediterranean requires a cartography that accounts for its heterogeneity and its fluidity, a map that plots malleable coordinates of clash and connection rather than solid borderlines that cannot be trespassed. This chapter navigates the topic of borders, which is fundamental to both the Mediterranean and feminism, from various angles but primarily: bodily borders; the borders that constitute subjectivity by separating the Self from the Other; the geographical Mediterranean borders, and; the constructed borders of the 'Mediterranean' as a concept. A point of intersection between the Mediterranean and the female is crucially established through the notion of fluidity, enabling the possibility to think of gender and geography as symbiotic and co-constructive in the female Mediterranean. In the final chapter, 'The Female Mediterranean in the Literary Imaginary', four contemporary novels written by female writers that are set in Mediterranean seascapes are closely analysed to tentatively map the fluid, erotic geography of the female Mediterranean, where women connect with the sea. These novels weave the experience of womanhood – either as a sexual coming-of-age or as mothers – with the Mediterranean seascape. A comparative approach is adopted with the aim of representing various female voices emerging from the Mediterranean. This chapter is divided into two sections: in the first section, entitled 'Becoming a Woman in the Mediterranean', Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse*, Assia Djebar's *The Mischief*, and Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk* are discussed, while in the second section, 'Motherhood in the Mediterranean', Elena Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter* and Levy's *Hot Milk* are analysed. What ultimately emerges in this chapter is that the Mediterranean is not just a touristic space, nor merely man's public theatre where war, trade, exploration, and conquest are staged. In these female narratives, the Mediterranean is also configured as a private space where women's

personal lives unfold, a place that frees women in order to encounter themselves and their otherness.

‘All sea voyages have several beginnings and several ends; they are never complete,’ writes Matvejević.²¹ This is an incomplete odyssey in the waters of the female Mediterranean, which uncovers yet another layer to the Mediterranean’s rich multiplicity and the fluidity of being that its waves instil. Odysseus’s ship has been stopped; it is time to listen to the songs of the sirens.

²¹ Matvejević, p. 61.

Chapter 1: Goddesses, Monsters, and Other Mediterranean Women

Introduction

He stands tall and dark in the distance, a stiff towering figure in the Mediterranean landscape. His blue-black back is turned towards the painter's eye, a pillar of night against the overcast sky. A cloud seems to hang upon him. His longing to return home wrecks his heart with grief. *Odysseus*. She gazes at him over her shoulder, the woman who is Mediterranean by virtue of her body and her surroundings. Her flesh is almost fully exposed, her ivory skin a striking contrast to the hero cloaked in darkness. The cavernous void behind her is not a 'dark continent'. It is a Mediterranean wilderness. *Calypso*. She is the sea-nymph who keeps Odysseus captive on her island for seven years. In Arnold Böcklin's 1883 painting *Odysseus and Calypso*, the goddess' body signifies sexuality, and Ogygia's geography is erotic. The Mediterranean is a canvas, as it were, on which a masculinist sexual fantasy captured in the figure of Calypso is depicted. Despite the sensuousness of the sea-nymph's body, located in a suggestive landscape, she is denied her sexual power since Odysseus's gaze is not directed towards her but to 'the barren sea', as Homer often describes the Mediterranean.²² Odysseus desires Ithaca and what homecoming, or *nostos*, stands for – a return to heroism, law and order, culture, and uncontested male power in a patriarchal society. In Vincenzo Consolo's words, *nostos* is 'the duty to climb out, to leave again, to set foot onto the land of the fathers, of society, of history'.²³ Therefore, Böcklin's Odysseus looks away from Calypso to reassert his essentially male self and to reject the otherness which the Mediterranean exposes him to mostly in the shape of women. Meanwhile, Calypso looks at Odysseus because her presence

²² Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by Robert Fagles (London: Penguin Books, 1996), V. 95. All subsequent references to this translation will be parenthetically given in the text, using the abbreviation *O* and followed by the relevant book and line numbers.

²³ Consolo and Nicolao, p. 58.

in the *Odyssey* depends on his heroic narrative and she derives self-definition from his encounter with her. Otherwise, Calypso would be absent. The Homeric poet and the painter's patriarchal gaze instruct her where to look and dictate how she is presented to those who gaze upon her. The lyre resting on Calypso's thigh, propped with her left hand, remains silent. Calypso is not a silent figure but a *silenced* one, because what both Homer and Böcklin depict is the masculinist construction of woman in Greek mythology, and specifically the *Odyssey*, which is often hailed as the quintessential Mediterranean epic voyage and narrative.

On Consolo's use of the Odyssean figure in his Mediterranean writing, Norma Bouchard and Massimo Lollini write that '[g]iven the centrality of this myth in the Mediterranean imaginary [...] Consolo's revisiting ought not surprise the reader.'²⁴ In Mediterranean studies, revisiting the *Odyssey* is indeed a recurrent strategy since Odysseus, or Ulysses, is conceived as the archetypal Mediterranean man who enables scholars to discuss aspects of the Mediterranean. For instance, Ulysses for Cassano represents the 'tension between land and sea', the 'emergence of the individual', as well as the intelligence of sea-faring people.²⁵ Consolo similarly thinks of Ulysses as a man of modernity, but also undergoing a 'penitential voyage' for creating the Trojan horse, which stands for modern technology and war.²⁶ In an interview with Consolo, Mario Nicolao draws on Odysseus's reply to Polyphemus and states that 'if [Odysseus] is nobody, he must be everyone', a somewhat generalising conclusion.²⁷ In fact, in *Mediterranean Crossings*, Chambers invokes Odysseus not to hail him as a universal man, but to uncover his rejection of Mediterranean multiplicity and otherness since Chambers interprets 'nobody' as a way of 'overcoming the

²⁴ Norma Bouchard and Massimo Lollini, 'Introduction: Vincenzo Consolo and His Mediterranean Paradigm', in *Reading and Writing the Mediterranean*, ed. by Bouchard and Lollini, pp. 3–48 (p. 19).

²⁵ Cassano, *Southern Thought*, p. 34, 110, 131.

²⁶ Vincenzo Consolo, 'Olive and Wild Olive', trans. by John P. Welle, in *Reading and Writing the Mediterranean*, ed. by Bouchard and Lollini, pp. 76–80 (p. 78).

²⁷ Consolo and Nicolao, p. 56.

challenge of a worldly heterogeneity'.²⁸ The Greek hero suppresses difference, Chambers rightly observes, and implicit in his argument is Odysseus's suppression of *gender difference*. It is this implicit observation which must be made explicit in the mapping of a literary cartography of the female Mediterranean.

Despite the high amount of women – from mortals to goddesses, to sea-nymphs and monsters – that inhabit the *Odyssey's* Mediterranean, women are the absent presence in the epic and, indeed, also in Mediterranean studies. These mythological Mediterranean women are hardly ever presented as representatives of Mediterraneanity. They are merely creatures that Odysseus encounters in the 'wild', rather than the civilised, Mediterranean; they are incidents within the grand narrative of the hero. It is telling that the ancient Greek hero Jason, who like Odysseus undertakes a voyage in the Mediterranean in the *Argonautica*, is not treated with the same reverence and critical attention as Odysseus. This is partly because in his quest for the Golden Fleece, Jason is not portrayed as extraordinarily heroic like Odysseus. The sorceress Medea, who hails from the periphery of the Mediterranean, eclipses the Argonauts' exploits and plays a decisive role in Jason's capture of the Golden Fleece. Conversely, the *Odyssey*, which is the most influential text in the mythologisation of the Mediterranean, boasts a masculinist hero who suppresses the siren song of Mediterranean heterogeneity and triumphantly re-establishes patriarchal order in Ithaca. Filtered through the male gaze, women have been constructed as creatures to be feared and repressed for their monstrous sexual power and their closeness to nature, both of which have led them to be conceived as 'other' in the Mediterranean imaginary. It is precisely for this reason that the *Odyssey* and Greek mythology more broadly must be revisited in this attempt to critique the male gaze and present a counternarrative that salvages these Mediterranean women who have been suppressed into silence.

²⁸ Chambers, p. 33.

The Mother Goddess

In prehistoric times, the idea of reclaiming the absent presence of the feminine in the Mediterranean would have been unheard of. The ‘female Mediterranean’ was a *lived* concept because of the very present presence of a female divinity in the lives of prehistoric Mediterranean people across various civilisations, broadly referred to as ‘Mother Goddess’. The Mother Goddess is the *genius loci* of the Mediterranean. As Bella Vivante notes, ‘[a]rchaeological and early historical records worldwide reveal that the first deities human beings worshipped were female’.²⁹ The nature and extent of the prehistoric belief in an omnipotent Mother Goddess and, in turn, the question of whether these archaeological and historical sources rightfully suggest that the early Mediterranean was matriarchal, have divided scholars into those who support the Mother Goddess theory and those who are sceptical of it. However, while these debates remain unsolved, what is certain is that primitive Mediterranean societies gave a significant measure of importance to female deities. Why else, as Sarah B. Pomeroy asks, would there be ‘more than four times as many Neolithic female figurines as male ones’?³⁰

The way these female figures are represented leave little doubt as to the role these goddesses played in primitive cultures, as well as the reason why *female* rather than male deities were predominantly depicted or worshipped. Vivante observes that the nude female figures dating back to the Palaeolithic period, known as the ‘Venus figures’, ‘epitomize the concept of the fertile female—rotund figures with full breasts, belly, and buttocks that exemplify a body-centered focus on female fecundity’.³¹ The tendency to portray women

²⁹ Bella Vivante, *Daughters of Gaia: Women in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), p. 1.

³⁰ Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995) p. 15.

³¹ Vivante, p. 1.

with emphasised fertility-connoting body parts can also be seen in the remains of the Neolithic period.³² Unarguably, fertility was a fundamental concern to early Mediterranean societies, both in terms of human reproduction and agriculture. These early goddesses are assumed to represent a 'Mother' or 'Earth' goddess precisely for this reason, leading to what Vivante and Pomeroy both refer to as the primacy of female divinity in the ancient Mediterranean. While men have reproductive capabilities too, women's bodies manifest their procreative powers more visually, which is why so many of these statues are specifically gendered as female. The curvaceous body of a pregnant woman as well as women's ability to nurse led prehistoric people to believe that the deity enabling the fruitfulness of life in both the natural and the human dimension was female. The Mother Goddess figures reveal that woman's body has been pregnant with socially constructed meaning since prehistoric times. In the early Mediterranean, the female body was invested with a social function – that of acting as a visual representation of the intangible concept of life and abundance. This social function turned woman's body into a significant part of the public sphere of everyday life, particularly during worship. Crucially, the nudity of the prehistoric figurines accentuates the fact that woman's body was to be celebrated for its fertility, not clothed, hidden, or kept private, because the Mediterranean woman and her body signified an affirmative, life-giving force. Indeed, in prehistoric times, the connection between woman, body, sexuality, and nature (as opposed to man, mind, and culture) was considered as sacred. Mapping the female Mediterranean partly entails reclaiming this connection from abject otherness.

Interestingly, there is more to the Mother Goddess and the primacy of female deities than archaeological evidence and theoretical interpretations. The Greek poet Hesiod

³² For instance, Malta's Fat Lady statuettes, which are characterised by large hips, emerge this prehistoric period.

chronicled creation myths in his *Theogony*, which presents a predominantly female first generation:

Chasm it was, in truth, who was the very first; she soon
Was followed by broad-breasted Earth, the eternal ground of all
The deathless ones, who on Olympos's snowy summits dwell, [...]³³

The epithet adopted to describe Gaia, 'broad-breasted', immediately links her with the female fertility figures of the prehistoric Mediterranean. Gaia is established as the primary goddess of Hesiod's mythological universe, giving birth to Ouranos the sky, Pontos the sea, the Nymphs, and a myriad of gods and goddesses. Thus, according to Hesiod, creation is the result of a feminine earth goddess and this is not surprising judging by how already closely connected fertility and women were by antiquity. Hesiod's is an especially powerful depiction of female divinity because as Catherine M. Schlegel observes, '[t]he very first generation needs no father, no male, and the earth, Gaia, gives birth on her own'.³⁴ In the beginning, therefore, reproductive power was the sole prerogative of a goddess. Schlegel argues that it is precisely this 'power that women potentially hold' that instilled a 'concomitant male fear'.³⁵ Gaia, after all, is the one who instigates Kronos to castrate his father Ouranos. In *Theogony*, the undertone of menace in this incident is amplified further on when Zeus creates the first mortal woman as a punishment for man following Prometheus's trick on Zeus. Women are described as men's 'grievous bane', who like Gaia 'conspire to bring men pain'.³⁶ In this way, masculinist thought starts gaining ground, undercutting female power in order to reflect the ever-changing social fabric of the Mediterranean.

³³ Hesiod, *Theogony*, in *Theogony and Works and Days*, trans. by Catherine M. Schlegel and Henry Weinfield (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006; repr. 2010), pp. 21–54, ll. 116–18..

³⁴ Catherine M. Schlegel, 'Introduction to Hesiod', in Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*, trans. by Schlegel and Weinfield, pp. 1–10 (p. 7).

³⁵ Schlegel, p. 7.

³⁶ Hesiod, l. 590, 601.

Hesiod's *Theogony* narrates a significant transition that occurred as the ancient Greek civilisation became significantly influential in the Mediterranean: the transition from a matriarchal society presided by the Earth Goddess to the establishment of patriarchy under the male-dominated Olympians. Indeed, the climax of Hesiod's *Theogony* occurs when Zeus usurps his father Kronos and founds a patriarchal pantheon of gods, undermining female power to restore cosmic order. This misogynist fear of uncontrolled female power is what eventually turned the female body into a locus of threat and terror rather than sacredness. One of the most striking changes in the transition from the Titans' to the Olympians' rule is the nature of fertility. Fertility, which was regarded as that aspect of woman's body and social life that gave her an exclusive significance, was also seized by Zeus. In Pomeroy's words, Zeus 'denies power to females, even taking away their sole claim to consideration as bearers of children when he gives birth to Athena through his head and to Dionysus from his thigh'.³⁷ This does not mean that Zeus takes over the protection of the sphere of fertility; it is still in the care of lesser goddesses like Demeter. However, Zeus constantly exhibits his virility and his sexual prowess by raping various women, such as Europa and Io, thereby tainting the nature of fertility and sexuality through male violence.

The decline of religious belief in the Mother Goddess and other female fertility divinities due to the rise of male deities corrupted the way women in society were viewed, effectively entrenching misogyny through mythologisation in the Mediterranean imaginary and the Western world. The social attitude towards women and their connection to their body, fertility, and nature changed, and this can be noted in Greek girls' performance of transition rites, which marked their progress from childhood to adolescence and then to adulthood. Vivante writes that 'the ancient Greeks ritually sanctified what they perceived as pivotal developmental stages in a girl's life', including puberty and marriage, and that they created

³⁷ Pomeroy, p. 2.

‘elaborate rites of transitions for girls unparalleled in the ancient Mediterranean’.³⁸ The purpose of these rites was to formally prepare them for their bodily changes but also as a form of gradual introduction to their submissive role in society as wives and mothers. Indeed, Vivante claims that these sacred rites ‘functioned to embed the girls within the patriarchal social structure that framed their lives’.³⁹ While these rites also affirmed the fundamental role of women in society, the masculinist perception of women, as can be seen in Greek mythology, suggests that underlying these rites is partly the need to suppress or control a possible source of power – female sexuality and fertility. ‘The very potential in a young, unmarried women’s sexuality and fertility rendered a *parthenos* [an adolescent girl] dangerous,’ Vivante explains, because she is ‘not yet transformed into the controlled, productive fertility of a *gyne*, a married woman.’⁴⁰ However, woman is feared even when she is a controlled *gyne*. In fact, Pomeroy points out that from a masculinist perspective, woman is also seen as ‘a devouring, seductive, and castrating mother, evoking retributive hostility in the child’.⁴¹ The fear that the mother instils in the subject-in-process will be elaborated in the next chapter, which focuses on Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection in *Powers of Horror*. ‘Fear of the archaic mother,’ Kristeva writes, ‘turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power.’⁴² It is for this reason, Kristeva further argues, that pollution rituals were created in patriarchal societies which ‘by means of purification, [sought] a support against excessive matrilineality’.⁴³ Thus, female fertility eventually became ambiguous: a source of life but also anxiety for the subject because of the threat of castrating female sexuality.

³⁸ Vivante, p. 37.

³⁹ Vivante, p. 37.

⁴⁰ Vivante, p. 39.

⁴¹ Pomeroy, p. 14.

⁴² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 77.

⁴³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 77.

Greek Fertility Goddesses

As mentioned earlier, Zeus's patriarchal rule over the gods and the universe did not exclude the presence of female divinities and demi-goddesses. The goddesses that replaced the primal mother Gaia in the second generation each inherited some of her female powers. What this implies is that there was no longer a goddess that encompassed within her all the facets of femaleness, but these different female qualities and domains were instead divided among a number of goddesses. Although some goddesses' spheres of influence converge, conflicting portrayals of womanhood, particularly with regard to sexuality, arise. At this point, Pomeroy's reminder that these inflections of femininity are 'archetypal images of human females, as envisioned by males' is key since this explains why women in Greek mythology are often portrayed either as submissive beings adhering to patriarchal law or highly sexualised, unruly creatures that are dangerous to men.⁴⁴ What gradually emerges is that 'Woman' in the imagination of the ancient Greeks is a paradox, spoken of in oxymoronic terms. The Mediterranean woman is a terrible beauty, to be desired but also feared.

Although most goddesses are associated with the sacred protection of fertility in ancient Greek women's lives, perhaps the closest one to the primal Mother Goddess is Demeter, the goddess of both natural and female fertility. Artemis's claim to the role of a fertility goddess, on the other hand, is specifically related to childbirth, nurturing children, and female maturation rites. Both of these fertility goddesses are not openly sexual, confirming Vivante's observation that sexuality and fertility were no longer symbiotically present within the same divinity in classical antiquity. In fact, it is somewhat ironic that Artemis is both a fertility goddess and sworn to chastity. Hera is also at times referred to as a fertility goddess but her role as Zeus's wife eclipses the former. She primarily oversees

⁴⁴ Pomeroy, p. 8.

marriage and is often portrayed as a jealous wife due to her husband's numerous sexual exploits. Meanwhile, Odysseus's proctress Athena, who is seen as the most powerful goddess of the Olympians, is not only disassociated from fertility but she is often described as 'the archetype of the masculine woman who finds success in what is essentially a man's world by denying her own femininity and sexuality'.⁴⁵

While the sphere of fertility is shared among a few goddesses, only one female deity immediately stands out as both a fertility goddess and a goddess of sexuality, eroticism, and beauty. Hesiod recounts that when Kronos castrated Ouranos, his genitalia fell into the sea and out of the foam that formed around the flesh, 'a girl was born': Aphrodite.⁴⁶ Robert Graves paraphrases her birth in this manner:

Aphrodite, Goddess of Desire, rose naked from the foam of the sea and, riding on a scallop shell, stepped ashore first on the island of Cythera; but finding this only a small island, passed on to the Peloponnese, and eventually took up residence at Paphos, in Cyprus, still the principal seat of her worship.⁴⁷

In both Graves's and Hesiod's accounts of Aphrodite's birth, she journeys from Cythera to Cyprus on a shell that serves her as a vessel. This is a fascinating detail because Aphrodite's journey is possibly the first mythological Mediterranean voyage in Greek mythology.

Moreover, although the god of the sea Poseidon is male, many female figures help sailors navigate the Mediterranean Sea, like Leucothea in the *Odyssey* and Thetis with her Nereid Maidens in the *Argonautica*. Aphrodite was hailed by the epithet *Euploia*, meaning fair voyage, and Jason and his crew are told that without the 'Kyprian goddess'' help and

⁴⁵ Pomeroy, p. 4. The decapitated head of the Gorgon Medusa on Athena's shield visually speaks of her rejection of her female identity. It perpetuates the idea of the monstrous feminine, which will be discussed in further detail in this chapter, and it condones male violence on women in order to deny them their power.

⁴⁶ Hesiod, l. 192.

⁴⁷ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 2 vols (London: Folio Society, 2005), I, p. 54.

cunning, they would not be able to navigate the sea.⁴⁸ All of these mythological episodes speak of a strong bond between woman and the sea. Significantly, through Aphrodite's birth, woman and the sea also converge with sexuality and fertility because as Pomeroy argues, '[h]er origin in sexual organs and the sea' is 'suggestive of amniotic fluid'.⁴⁹ Aphrodite's emergence from water is a significant mythical event in the mapping of the female Mediterranean because it binds together femaleness, fertility, and fluidity in a tripartite interrelationship. Aphrodite's birth is perhaps the first intimate connection between women and the sea, and it takes place in the fluid, erotic space of the Mediterranean Sea.

In his essay 'Women of the Mediterranean', Lawrence Durrell highlights the significance of Aphrodite in connection with the Mediterranean woman as she is constructed in the Mediterranean imaginary: 'The Mediterranean woman has never subconsciously forgotten that, by origin, she is descended from her foam-born prototype Aphrodite.'⁵⁰ Durrell pinpoints Aphrodite's combination of 'freedom and sensuality in equal parts' as those qualities that this goddess has passed on to her descendants, the women of the Mediterranean, and that distinguish them from women of a northern constitution.⁵¹ For Durrell, the Mediterranean woman is the quintessence of femininity due to her inclination for openness, particularly in relation to her sexuality, and her connection with the marine landscape from which their ancestress emerged: 'They are all children of this mysterious sea, occupying its landscapes in human forms'.⁵² What Durrell fails to see is that the same qualities that in his view make the Mediterranean woman distinct and alluring have inspired people, not least writers, since Homer and Hesiod's time to think of Mediterranean women as dangerous

⁴⁸ Bettany Hughes explains that shrines dedicated to Aphrodite are usually found in port towns close to the sea, like Pompeii, and that she protected the fleets. See Bettany Hughes, *Venus and Aphrodite: A History of a Goddess* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2019), pp. 56–57.

⁴⁹ Pomeroy, p. 6.

⁵⁰ Lawrence Durrell, 'Women of the Mediterranean', *Spirit of Place: Mediterranean Writings* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), pp. 369–77 (p. 369).

⁵¹ Durrell, p. 369.

⁵² Durrell, p. 369.

creatures. ‘This mysterious sea’ has also bred female monsters in the Mediterranean psyche, monsters which Odysseus and other Greek heroes encounter and subdue in their epic voyages. This fear of women emerging from water may originate from the myth of Aphrodite, whose birth after all results from emasculation. The archetype of feminine sexual desire is also, therefore, a powerful figure that is a threat to male sexuality. It is not surprising, then, that one of Aphrodite’s epithets is *Androphonos*, meaning man-slayer, and that the danger of female sexuality was so embedded in the ancient Mediterranean mind.⁵³ In the context of increasing misogyny in Greek antiquity, Vivante explains that there was ‘discomfort with open celebrations of female sexuality’ in artistic depictions of Aphrodite, the same aspect of the goddess that Durrell so fervently lauds.⁵⁴ In ancient Greek sculpture, neither mortal women nor goddesses were usually portrayed fully or partially nude, thereby constructing a sense of shame around the image of the female nude.⁵⁵ In Aphrodite’s case, some artistic representations of the goddess, particularly those modelled on the ‘Aphrodite of Knidos’, exhibit her body almost fully naked apart from her attempt to cover her breasts or her genitalia using either her hands or an item of clothing. This is the pose that Sandro Botticelli immortalised in his Renaissance painting *The Birth of Venus*. As Shelby Brown comments, ‘females’ nudity generally showed vulnerability and implied titillation’, thereby creating a strong sense of voyeurism.⁵⁶ Thus, in ancient Greek artistic representation as well as later reconfigurations of the classical ideals, Aphrodite no longer stands for the concept of desire itself but is turned into the object desired. In this way, the goddess’ sexuality loses its female power and her body becomes merely the product of masculinist sexual fantasy.

⁵³ Hughes, p. 85.

⁵⁴ Vivante, p. 19.

⁵⁵ The ancient Greeks’ artistic depiction of the female body contrasts sharply with the prehistoric representation of the female body. As the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods transitioned to the Bronze Age, the female body in prehistoric art and artefacts became more and more accentuated to signify fertility. The Greek suppression of the female body eventually led to its complete censorship in Christian art, in which the Virgin Mary is depicted as fully clothed to signify chastity.

⁵⁶ Shelby Brown, ‘Artistic Representation: Survival of the Classical Ideal’, in *A Cultural History of Women in Antiquity*, ed. by Janet H. Tulloc, The Cultural History Series: Women, 6 vols (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), I, pp. 169–94 (p. 178).

In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Aphrodite is described as 'laughter loving', or 'genial', because Ouranos's castrated genitalia cause her birth; it is this threat to the phallus that triggers the patriarchal artist to silence her subversive laughter by sculpting her into a mute statue.⁵⁷ Increasingly, the Mediterranean woman starts to be conceived as a dangerous castrating figure to be suppressed rather than a fertile force to be worshipped. The myth of Aphrodite's origin establishes a lasting link between emasculation and female sexuality. Crucially, this link is forged in the Mediterranean Sea, thereby creating a strong connection between the Mediterranean waters and women. In the space of the Mediterranean Sea, the female body, fertility, nature, and sexuality converge. This enduring bond between the Mediterranean Sea and the female is especially present and strengthened in Homer's *Odyssey*, bringing together the two main factors that delayed Odysseus's return to patriarchal Ithaca: tempestuous seas and bewitching women.

Women in Homer's *Odyssey*

In *The Great Sea*, the historian David Abulafia writes that the fall of Troy in Homer's *Iliad* marked 'the moment when Greeks set out to wander the Mediterranean and beyond; it was a time when sailors grappled with the dangers of the open seas'.⁵⁸ In a way, the adventures recorded in the *Odyssey* mirrored the Greek sailors' exploration of places and seas beyond the Aegean, fuelled by their commercial interests and their desire to conquer new lands. The Mediterranean Sea, however, was still by and large an unknown expanse. 'The storm-tossed seas recorded in Homer's *Odyssey*,' Abulafia continues, '[...] remained places of great

⁵⁷ Hesiod, l. 200.

⁵⁸ David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 85.

uncertainty, whose physical limits were only vaguely described.⁵⁹ Faced with the dangers and mystique of the Mediterranean and its unknown peripheries, the Greeks expressed their fear of unspeakable horrors by giving them a female form. Chambers astutely observes that in Turner's painting *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus—Homer's Odyssey*, the Mediterranean is evoked as 'the site simultaneously of antique civilizations and the sublime excesses of an untamed nature'.⁶⁰ Civilisation and nature – one of the many inflections of the self-other Western dualism – are indeed often in direct conflict in the *Odyssey* and in Odysseus himself. In some of the most significant episodes of the epic, what Chambers calls 'the sublime excesses of an untamed nature' are symbolised through the women that inhabit the Mediterranean islands. The Mediterranean Sea is a womb, as it were, in which dangerous females are conceived and born. They lurk in forsaken shores, waiting and hoping that sailors endangered by tempestuous waters are lured into their sheltered coves by their seductive beauty or their voices. Some women, like Calypso and Circe, are feared and desired in equal measure. Other female creatures like Scylla and Charybdis can hardly be called women due to their monstrosity; and yet, they are gendered as female.

The *Odyssey* opens with the conventional invocation to the Muse, swiftly followed by the revelation that the Greek soldiers who survived the Trojan War arrived safely back home apart from Odysseus, who was detained by Calypso on her island: 'the bewitching nymph, the lustrous goddess, held him back, | deep in her arching caverns, craving him for a husband' (*O*, I. 17–18). Calypso is a goddess that resides in Ogygia, where she keeps the grief-stricken Odysseus hostage for seven years. The adjectives that are used to describe her are telling since her seductiveness is repeatedly emphasised. She is 'bewitching' (*O*, I. 17) and attempts to 'spellbind [Odysseus's] heart with suave, seductive words' (*O*, I. 67). Her

⁵⁹ Abulafia, p. 85.

⁶⁰ Chambers, p. 33.

enchantment is produced by her ‘breathtaking voice’ (*O*, V. 69) as well as her beautiful appearance; Calypso is described as a ‘lustrous goddess’ (*O*, I. 17) and is often referred to as ‘the nymph with lovely braids’ (*O*, V. 63). However, her physical qualities are only partly responsible to Calypso’s bewitching power. The most explicit reference to her sexual power is preceded by a detailed description of the goddess’ natural abode:

Thick, luxuriant woods grew round the cave,
 alders and black poplars, pungent cypress too,
 and there birds roosted, folding their long wings,
 owls and hawks and the spread-beaked ravens of the sea,
 black skimmers who make their living off the waves.
 And round the mouth of the cavern trailed a vine
 laden with clusters, bursting with ripe grapes.
 Four springs in a row, bubbling clear and cold,
 running side-by-side, took channels left and right.
 Soft meadows spreading round were starred with violets,
 lush with beds of parsley. Why, even a deathless god
 who came upon that place would gaze in wonder,
 heart entranced with pleasure. (*O*, V. 71–83)

Ripeness, softness, lushness – this is the fecund geography of Calypso’s island, which attains an erotic texture once the goddess assumes her position as the female figure in the Mediterranean landscape. Her sensuousness and enchantment seem to increase with every added suggestion of Ogygia’s natural fertility. Calypso is so intimately connected with nature because she is a nymph. In *Greek Nymphs*, Jennifer Larson outlines the main traits that characterise nymphs, one of which is their ‘sensual, sexual aura shared by none of the Olympian goddesses except Aphrodite.’⁶¹ Like Aphrodite, Larson elaborates, nymphs are closely tied to natural landscapes, especially gardens, places where water is present, and other natural settings that exhibit as well as connote fertility. Larson adds that enclosed spaces like

⁶¹ Jennifer Larson, *Greek Nymphs: Myth, Cult, Lore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 10.

caves are also imbued with an ‘erotic significance’ and ‘Odysseus’ sexual captivity in the cave and garden of Kalypso’ is a prime example of this recurrent trope.⁶² The Mediterranean itself can be seen as one such enclosed space where an erotic geography and erogenous zones converge with female sexuality. Nymphs are considered as subversive beings because like Aphrodite, they are free and sensuous. While women in antiquity like Odysseus’s wife Penelope were mostly restricted to domestic spaces, nymphs are depicted as creatures that inhabit outdoor spaces, implying their sexual promiscuity. Because of what Pomeroy calls their ‘sexual magic’, nymphs are known for luring men to their doom by instilling erotic desire in their male victim.⁶³ This is the fate of Hylas in the *Argonautica*, who gets seduced by the nymph of the Pegai spring; ‘[h]e fell into the eddying water’, never to return.⁶⁴ Nymphs are therefore often portrayed as potentially destructive to men. Odysseus describes Calypso to King Alcinous and the Phaeacians as dangerous despite her warm hospitality for this reason. He mistrusts her even when she releases him and offers him a safe return journey after being pressured by the Olympians.

Another sublimely dangerous woman that Odysseus encounters in his voyage is Circe, the witch of Aeaea. Like Calypso, Circe is referred to as a ‘nymph with lovely braids’ (*O*, X. 149) and a ‘spellbinding voice’ (*O*, X. 243). However, Circe’s power is bewitching in a more literal rather than sexual sense since she is a sorceress; she concocts magic drugs and turns men into pigs with her wand.⁶⁵ Yet again, female power results in male disempowerment and this is why Circe is also a sinister female figure. Homer recounts that Circe invited Odysseus’s men into her house and

⁶² Larson, p. 16.

⁶³ Pomeroy, p. 10.

⁶⁴ Apollonius of Rhodes, *Jason and the Golden Fleece (The Argonautica)*, trans. by Richard Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; repr. 2009), p. 31.

⁶⁵ Circe and Medea, who are both portrayed as powerful sorceresses in Greek mythology, are priestesses of the goddess of witchcraft Hecate. Notably, Hecate is the only divinity whose power Zeus could not suppress.

then she mixed them a potion—cheese, barley
 and pale honey mulled in Pramnian wine —
 but into the brew she stirred her wicked drugs
 to wipe from their memories any thought of home. (*O*, X. 257–60)

Sexuality is not a concern in this extract as much as the tension between the memories of civilised Ithaca and the oblivion that Circe's concoction induces. Helped by Hermes's advice, Odysseus is not bewitched by Circe and retains his human form. Odysseus counters Circe's power with male violence and echoes of rape and phallic metaphors come through when he narrates this episode: 'I drew my sharp sword sheathed at my hip | and rushed her fast as if to run her through' (*O*, X. 357–58). His strong assertion of his male strength is perhaps partly a reaction to Hermes's warning that Circe might try to 'unman' (*O*, X. 334) him. Yet again, the threat presented by women boils down to emasculation. Once he subdues her, Odysseus allows Circe to take him to her bed. Like Calypso, Circe manages to detain him on her island, but only for one year.

Before releasing Odysseus and his companions, Circe warns them of the dangers that reside in the Mediterranean Sea and gives them instructions on how to overcome them. Apart from the cyclops Polyphemus, the Mediterranean monsters that threaten Odysseus and his crew with death are all gendered as female. The epic therefore explicitly fuses the dangers of femininity and the dangers of the sea. The first monstrous females that the sailing Greeks encounter are the Sirens, whose otherness is clearly exhibited by their half bird half woman bodies. They are 'creatures who [can] spellbind any man alive' (*O*, XII. 45). The Sirens' power lies in their voices: 'The high, thrilling song of the Sirens will transfix him' (*O*, X. 50). While in the *Argonautica*, Orpheus renders the Sirens' 'pure liquid song' powerless by silencing it with his own music, Odysseus asks his crewmates to tie him to a mast while filling their ears with beeswax, so that he could hear their seductive, deadly song without

being physically lured.⁶⁶ In H. J. Draper's painting *Ulysses and the Sirens*, the sirens' dangerous monstrosity is tamed to fulfil male sexual fantasies of the Mediterranean woman since they are depicted as sexualised, naked mermaids. Not all female monsters are depicted as sexually desirable, such as Scylla and Charybdis, who are geographically linked to the Strait of Messina. Scylla is a 'grisly monster' (*O*, XII. 96) with a horrific appearance:

She has twelve legs, all writhing, dangling down
and six long swaying necks, a hideous head on each,
each head barbed with a triple row of fangs, thickset,
packed tight—and armed to the hilt with black death! (*O*, XII. 99–102)

She devours some sailors from each ship that passes by and in fact, Odysseus loses six men to her. Meanwhile, Charybdis has an even more literal connection with the sea since she is presumably a whirlpool that swallows water and men. In the case of Scylla and Charybdis, the sense of the monstrous feminine is amplified into a horror like no other in the *Odyssey*, if not in Greek mythology more broadly. Desire no longer coexists with the fear that the Mediterranean woman instils in man, except the desire to vanquish her.

Conclusion

Susan Bassnett writes that the feminist geographer Gillian Rose's understanding of 'patriarchal geography' consists of 'the belief that everything is knowable and mappable'.⁶⁷ This explains why the unknown instilled so much fear in male explorers. Meanwhile, feminist geography departs from the premise that both spaces and bodies are constructed, rather than natural, and this is what feminist geographers like Rose seek to foreground. In

⁶⁶ Apollonius of Rhodes, p. 120.

⁶⁷ Susan Bassnett, 'Travel Writing and Gender', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 225–41 (p. 230).

other words, space, gender, and power are intricately related and construct each other. The otherness of nature, particularly the sea, and the otherness of women were indeed constructed as threats to the masculine self and his patriarchal ideologies in the *Odyssey*. Crucially, a dualism that patriarchal geography helped to foster is the division between the public space of men and the private space of women, one of the many Western binaries that has existed since antiquity.

The *Odyssey* constructs the Mediterranean Sea as an expansive, dangerous unknown to be conquered. It is at once a public space for the display of male heroism and a series of private spaces where women like Calypso dwell. The hero Odysseus longs to go back home and reinstate himself in his position of power in the patriarchal society of Ithaca. However, he is obliged to earn his return to civilisation by first traversing the unknown geography of the Mediterranean, overcoming its monstrous inhabitants, and ultimately rejecting what he encounters in favour of home. The Mediterranean is thus turned from an unknown territory into a public theatre where man proves himself and his power in order to earn his title as a hero. Interestingly, there is another lesser but still telling small-scale odyssey in this epic – under the instruction and guidance of Athena, Telemachus surreptitiously sets off with a ship manned by twenty sailors to seek news of his father. From this angle, a Mediterranean voyage undertaken by man is less of a journey to expiate one's sins, as Cassano believes, than a hero's journey confirming masculinist ideals and values or marking a young prince's initiation into manhood – manning up in the Mediterranean by taming its wild nature. It is a necessary journey for Odysseus and Telemachus to undertake with the purpose of dramatising the confirmation of order, rationality, and patriarchal law after Odysseus's encounter with the destructiveness that sexual love for a woman can cause and Telemachus's observation of the suitors' surrender to their passions in the form of gluttony and pleasure.

As this chapter sought to outline, there is a counternarrative to the experience of manning up in the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean Sea is not navigable by women; woman's space is the shore of the Mediterranean, rather than the turbulent sea where men encounter opportunities to show their heroism or experience a coming-of-age. However, despite how men seem to position women outside of the Mediterranean waters' borders, women have a profound connection to the sea, especially through fluidity, which defies strict, patriarchal borders. The counternarrative to manning up in the Mediterranean and its construction of land-locking borders is the female emergence out of the Mediterranean Sea, symbolised by Aphrodite's marine birth. To revisit the Mediterranean and direct the critical gaze onto Calypso, together with other marginalised females, is not only to retrieve the denied female presence in the Mediterranean, but it is also to believe that the sea does not have margins or borders. The otherness of fluidity is the very essence of the Mediterranean Sea.

Chapter Two: A Porous Body, a Fluid Geography

Introduction

The witch sits on her chair, her chin raised and her arms outstretched, one of them holding a long thin wand above her head, the other one offering a cup filled with a deep red liquid. A ‘beaker full of the warm South’.⁶⁸ John William Waterhouse’s pre-Raphaelite painting entitled *Circe Offering the Cup to Ulysses* captures the moment in the *Odyssey* when Circe is at the height of her power, just before Odysseus overpowers her. In this painting, Waterhouse accentuates Circe’s sexual attractiveness. The consequence of depicting Circe in a hypersexualised manner is that the true danger that Circe’s magic poses to Odysseus – metamorphosis – is undermined. However, the threat of Circe’s metamorphic spell is still present in the painting through the two boars in the background, one of them lying at her feet and the other one lurking behind her chair on the left, an ominous presence blending with the darkness. Odysseus, as well as the viewers, are well aware that those swine were once sailors, possibly even Odysseus’s own crewmen. The threat that Circe’s power presents to Odysseus is that of unmanning him not just by taking away his masculinity but also his humanity through her metamorphic power. It is this possibility of questioning the stability of the self, of collapsing the border between the civilised human and the ‘wild’ non-human that metamorphosis brings about and that frightens Odysseus. Metamorphosis renders all borders fluid, and in the act of transformation, the Self turns out to be not so distinct from the Other. Indeed, the *Odyssey* is an epic that stages a set of trials where Odysseus must reassert himself as a member of Ithaca’s society as well as his heroic masculinity, extending further his

⁶⁸ John Keats, ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, in *Poems*, ed. by J. E. Morpurgo (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1953; repr. 1985), pp. 173–75, l. 15.

distance from otherness in the form of women and nature. The bodily transformation of man into pig in Aeaëa is only the most literal of examples where the physical borders of the Self dissolve to assume the form of the Other. The waters of the Mediterranean Sea constantly test Odysseus by threatening to show him how unstable the borders of selfhood are. It only takes a tempestuous voyage for these borders to erode, or at least to be revealed as constructs and therefore potentially dissolvable.

Are dissolved borders as inherently negative as Odysseus implies? They are indeed a threat to the Greek hero, but Odysseus is not Mediterranean in thought or spirit. Fluidity is in the very nature of the Mediterranean and the sea breaks the boundary between the Self and the Other, allowing them to flow into connection with one another. After all, as Cassano observes, ‘the Other has always been present’ in the Mediterranean because the relative smallness of the sea meant that ‘the Other was never a huge distance away, beyond the gap of the Oceans, but could be reached in few days of navigation’.⁶⁹ For Cassano, ‘[t]he adjective *Mediterranean*’ refers to ‘a *communal sea*’ which is ‘allergic to all fundamentalisms’.⁷⁰ In other words, the Mediterranean is a heterogeneous space. The solidity of boundaries are hard to impose on a sea of different peoples, cultures, religions, histories, and languages that interact with and influence each other. Crucially, Cassano broadens the definition of the term ‘fundamentalism’ beyond its religious sense and extends it to refer to ‘when the diversity of others is no longer something deformed and imperfect to keep at bay, but becomes, through its self-same existence, a danger to one’s identity’.⁷¹ This description reminds one of Odysseus, who recognises the Mediterranean as a dangerous, hybrid territory. What Odysseus tries to suppress during his journey in the Mediterranean is the very otherness and multiplicity that the Mediterranean is synonymous with.

⁶⁹ Cassano, *Southern Thought*, p. 147.

⁷⁰ Cassano, *Southern Thought*, p. 142.

⁷¹ Cassano, *Southern Thought*, p. 143.

Mapping the Mediterranean therefore requires a type of cartography that accounts for its heterogeneity and its fluidity, a map that plots malleable coordinates of connection rather than solid borderlines. This chapter navigates the topic of borders, which is so fundamental to both Mediterranean and gender studies, from various angles: bodily borders; the borders that constitute subjectivity by separating the Self from the Other; the geographical Mediterranean borders and; the borders of the constructed 'Mediterranean' as a concept in Mediterranean studies as well as the Mediterranean imaginary. The nature of borders is also explored, especially in relation to the binary between solidity and fluidity as well as division and unification. In so doing, a point of intersection between the Mediterranean and women beyond the anthropological and mythological is established through the notion of fluidity. In this chapter, theoretical thought on borders and fluidity with regard to femaleness and the Mediterranean converge, enabling us to perceive gender and geography as symbiotic and co-constructive in the female Mediterranean.

The Porosity of the Female Body

In Ancient Greece, girls underwent sacred fertility rituals at different stages of their lives to mark their maturation. In a way, girls' bodily changes can be perceived as acts of metamorphosis that turned a girl into a reproductive, sexual being, then a wife, and lastly a mother. These changes inspired male anxiety and misogyny, especially upon the girl's initiation into fertility through menstruation. From a masculinist perspective, this important event in a girl's transition to womanhood was perceived as a dangerous time period. In the Greek patriarchal society, menstruation was not just seen as a threat due to its implication of female sexual power, but it was also thought to contaminate. Vivante, in fact, notes that

‘concepts of pollution’ were produced in this masculinist society that feared the menstruating female body:

These attitudes that attributed concepts of impurity to menstruating women and the customs that developed from them dramatize how patriarchal ideologies distorted women’s basic biological functions, essential for their fundamental societal role, into the key instrument for demonizing her.⁷²

It is not surprising, then, that Circe’s cup which she offers to Odysseus in Waterhouse’s artistic imagination contains a *red* liquid, figuratively signifying sexuality and unbridled passion but also, more literally, menstrual blood. The menstruating woman, leaking blood from her body, is a monstrous figure in the Western imagination and her body is conceived as a transgressive object that must be socially controlled. Indeed, Allison Grazebook and Nicola Mellor explain that in menstruation as well as during birth, women were thought to transgress the body’s boundaries, which were so carefully preserved by males:

She experiences the birth of a child, bringing forth new life by violating the boundary of her own body. Her association with transitions and her lack of control over even the boundaries of her own body made her a polluted body.⁷³

Woman’s fertile processes were perceived as contaminating because of their mystique (read: danger of the unknown) and due to the Greeks’ belief that women had excessive sexual appetites. In the Mediterranean imaginary, the male body embodies the order, solidity, and perfection of the Self, which is captured in the solidity of the phallus; on the other hand, the female body in its borderlessness and its porosity embodies the dangerous Other. In Kristeva’s terminology, the female body is abject, particularly in the shape of the menstruating girl and the lactating mother.

⁷² Vivante, p. 54.

⁷³ Allison Glazebook and Nicola Mellor, ‘Bodies and Sexuality’, in *A Cultural History of Women in Antiquity*, ed. by Tulloc, pp. 33–55 (p. 36). The socially constructed nature of the woman’s body as polluted is evident because man also expels bodily fluid, but rather than bodily fluid, it is the solid phallus that stands for the male gender. In fact, a binary relationship between solidity and fluidity has also been noticed by Luce Irigaray.

In her seminal book *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*, Kristeva theorised her influential notion of abjection, which relates to self and otherness, bodily borders, fluidity, and the monstrous feminine. Abjection is a process in subjectivity where the 'I' takes its shape as a stable and autonomous being by erecting borders that divide the Self from what threatens it – the Other. In the opening chapter of *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva explains that abjection is often experienced at a basic level in relation to impropriety and uncleanness, which can take the form of repulsion to food, excrement, refuse, vomit, and a corpse. However, Kristeva emphasises that it is 'not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.'⁷⁴ These values that the abject threatens are usually associated with the Self (hence, masculinity), while otherness is aligned with the female. Ultimately, the abject is what exposes the fragility of patriarchal law. It is a repressed yet constant reminder that what seems solid is constantly at risk of being destabilised, as are the borders we build between the self and the abject. The abject problematises the subject's belief that once otherness has been denied, it cannot threaten and disrupt the self. As Noëlle McAfee writes, the abject 'hovers at the periphery of one's existence, constantly challenging one's own tenuous borders of selfhood'.⁷⁵

Kristeva crucially links abjection to another significant dichotomy: the patriarchal symbolic as opposed to the maternal semiotic. Kristeva's theorisation of the abject redresses Lacan's notion of the mirror stage, which is the moment when the infant sees their image reflected in the mirror and recognises that image to be themselves, thereby beginning to

⁷⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.

⁷⁵ Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 46. Moreover, the abject is ambiguous in nature. For instance, sex and murder, which according to Kristeva are coded as animalistic, may also exert an attraction upon the subject. Repulsion and desire can be intermingled, just like Homer's and Odysseus's attitude towards the females of the Mediterranean.

establish borders between their self and the other. While Kristeva acknowledges that Lacan's mirror stage is indeed influential in the formation of a subject, she believes that the infant starts to develop borders at an earlier stage through abjection. Abjection has a particular relationship with the maternal because the child first experiences this process in the rejection of the mother's body: 'Abjection is a way of denying the primal narcissistic identification with the mother, almost.'⁷⁶ The child finds themselves in a difficult position since in order to become a subject, the same mother that sustains them must be rejected. At this stage, the maternal body, especially the maternal inside or what Kristeva calls the semiotic *chora*, is significant to her argument. The semiotic *chora* refers to the pre-symbolic stage in a child's development, that is before the child acquires language and linguistic signs, where the child is one with the maternal body and its erotic, heterogeneous drives. In her essay 'Stabat Mater', Kristeva comments that when the child is still in the semiotic or imaginary realm, the connection between the baby and the mother is one of 'overflowing laughter where one senses the collapse of some ringing, subtle, fluid identity or other, softly buoyed by the waves'.⁷⁷ This is a telling observation since by linking amniotic fluid with fluidity of being, a connection between the metaphor of fluidity and the feminine semiotic is established. While the semiotic is a fluid, heterogeneous space, the father's symbolic realm is one of borders, limits, and confines. As Kelly Oliver puts it, the symbolic is 'the order of borders, discrimination and difference', which 'can maintain itself only by maintaining its borders'.⁷⁸

The child in the process of becoming a self perceives the maternal body as a threat precisely because paternal borders assure them of autonomous development, while maternal fluidity challenges this safe, bordered existence. The child must therefore renounce

⁷⁶ Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 60.

⁷⁷ Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', trans. by Leon S. Roudiez, in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 160–86 (pp. 179–80).

⁷⁸ Oliver, p. 56.

their identification with the mother in order to gain a sense of self. This separation is staged in the birth of the child through the cutting of the umbilical cord. The bond between mother and child, however, remains through motherly milk. Kristeva describes milk as a ‘flow that mingles two identities and connotes the bond between the one and the other’.⁷⁹ Milk, which is both a literal and conceptual fluid, becomes abject for this reason. It is not milk as a staple food that is abject, but rather milk ‘according to cultural culinary fancy, which sets up an abnormal bond between mother and child’.⁸⁰ The semiotic relationship between mother and child thus becomes an ‘abnormal bond’ that the child seeks to break by entering into the symbolic order, where the ‘good breast’ of the mother is substituted by the ‘language’ of the father.⁸¹ Remaining attached to the mother would hinder the child from developing as an autonomous subject with their own bodily borders and entering the father’s symbolic realm, which is a troubling prospect for the child. The ‘abject or demoniacal potential of the feminine’ lies precisely in its threat to the child’s development of their clean and proper self, which is needed for entry into the symbolic realm and the adoption of patriarchal values – order, law, selfhood.⁸² Thus, the symbolic order protects the subject’s developing self from the unsettling, maternal abject. It is not surprising, then, that pollution and defilement rituals were numerous among Mediterranean societies that sought to limit and subdue the maternal influence. Rituals, such as purification rites, both created and strengthened the borders of the symbolic while controlling the maternal abject.

Kristeva has been critiqued for essentialising the maternal in *Powers of Horror*, in so doing presenting the mother as the prime, universal experience of feminine otherness in relation to the abject. However, her focus on the maternal abject results from her discussion

⁷⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 105.

⁸⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 105.

⁸¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 105, 45.

⁸² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 65.

of the primal semiotic relationship with the mother in order to discuss the construction of the bordered self. The feminine abject more broadly is still present and implied in her argument. Firstly, the process of abjection which entails the self's separation from the other immediately recalls Western dualisms that align maleness to the Self and femaleness to the Other. Moreover, the abject is often gendered as female. The feminist geographer Robyn Longhurst confirms this by arguing that 'the messiness of bodies is often conceptualised as feminised and as such is Othered'.⁸³ The feminine abject in Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* is also manifested in references to the female semiotic, a vital notion throughout Kristeva's oeuvre which goes beyond woman's reproductive ability. It is true that Kristeva pinpoints the maternal body as being 'immeasurable, unconfined', and hence abject due to the inexistence of borders; however, the female body and its heterogeneous drives more broadly are also constructed as transgressive, spilling over borders.⁸⁴ Crucially, this heterogeneity is expressed in terms of fluidity. Woman's bodily borders are porous because her body leaks abject fluid, most notably menstrual blood and maternal milk, but also because it is shaped by the currents of its choral drives.

This connection between bodily fluids and female fluidity also emerges in the work of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. Irigaray opens her essay 'The "Mechanics" of Fluids' by declaring the need for 'a "theory" of fluids'.⁸⁵ According to Irigaray, fluidity has been historically neglected by science and philosophical discourse on being because critical and scientific attention is given to solidity. Indeed, Irigaray exposes the hierarchical binary of solidity-fluidity, which corresponds to the masculine-feminine and the rationality-corporeality dualisms, as she later argues. Irigaray claims that solidity is attributed to the

⁸³ Robyn Longhurst, *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 23.

⁸⁴ Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', p. 177.

⁸⁵ Luce Irigaray, 'The "Mechanics" of Fluids', in *The Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 106–18 (p. 106).

phallus, a mechanism of ideal functioning, while woman is aligned with fluidity because of her feminine corporeal fluids. The female body is ‘continuous, compressible, dilatible, viscous, conductible, diffusible [...] unending’ and therefore a threat to masculine solidity.⁸⁶ In this way, Irigaray crucially reminds us that the female body and fluidity are not inherently other but are actually *systematically othered* and suppressed by phallogentric society, which assigns power to masculinity, rationality, and solidity. Irigaray’s observations are congruent with Kristeva’s notion of the abject because both address the way in which female bodily fluidity is constructed as a danger to the masculine self, who tries to safeguard his selfhood through solidity and borders. Interestingly, in the same essay, Irigaray claims that woman ‘speaks “fluid”’: ‘What she emits is flowing, fluctuating’.⁸⁷ A year after Irigaray’s ‘The “Mechanics” of Fluids’ was published in *L’Arc*, Cixous’s seminal feminist essay ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ was published in the same journal. Irigaray anticipates Cixous’s focus on woman’s voice and her use of the fluidity metaphor, which Cixous especially employs in relation to female sexuality. In her essay, Cixous issues a powerful call for women to reclaim their feminine bodies, specifically their fluids, by giving them a voice and proclaiming:

I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst [...].⁸⁸

Cixous’s ‘infinite woman’, whose *jouissance* takes the fluid shape of ‘these waves, these floods, these outbursts’ emerging from the semiotic *chora*, is an unconfined, heterogenous, and erogenous being.⁸⁹ Cixous encourages women to inscribe these uncontrollable masses of transgressive waters in the feminine text because her newly liberated voice has the power to burst through the man-made borders of conventional writing, giving rise to *écriture féminine*.

⁸⁶ Irigaray, p. 111.

⁸⁷ Irigaray, p. 111, 112.

⁸⁸ Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, *Signs*, 1 (1976), 875–93 (p. 876).

⁸⁹ Cixous, p. 876.

The ink she writes in, Cixous adds, is the ‘white ink’ of her ‘good mother’s milk’ inside her.⁹⁰ The mother’s milk is therefore reclaimed from abjectness by Cixous as a liquid that nourishes the feminine voice. The mythological female monster Medusa, whom Cixous invokes, for centuries has stood for the danger of transforming man’s body into a lifeless corpse, the ultimate abject. Indeed, for Freud, the Gorgon’s head symbolises the genitals of the mother, that could devour and castrate man. Cixous, however, redresses the Medusan myth by turning her into a beautiful, laughing figure, a feminine force who unleashes the repressed waters of feminine sexuality.

Two opposing conceptions of the body have been mapped: the solid, bordered body of the masculine self and the fluid, porous body of the feminine other. What emerges is that although the body is a tangible entity that has anatomical limits, the body is also a construct, taking on various positive or negative connotations, and unearthing anxieties about subjectivity as well as sexuality. In Elizabeth Grosz’s feminist study on the corporeal entitled *Volatile Bodies*, she claims that ‘while there must lie some kinds of biological limit or constraint, these constraints are perpetually capable of being superseded, overcome, through the human body’s capacity to open itself up’ to prostheses and its environment.⁹¹ Bodily fluids especially redraw the borders of the body and expose their instability since fluids problematise the idea of bodily borders and the distinction between the body’s inside and outside. They cause anxiety, according to Grosz, because they attest to ‘a horror of the unknown or the unspecifiable that permeates, lurks, lingers, and at times leaks out of the body’, thereby proving a challenge to the demarcating process of selfhood and exposing the instability of bodily borders.⁹² In a masculinist context, these bodily fluids are therefore perceived as dangerous because they expose the autonomous self as a construct that is

⁹⁰ Cixous, p. 881.

⁹¹ Grosz, p. 187–88.

⁹² Grosz, p. 194.

constantly challenged by the repressed other or abject. Meanwhile, the female body is marked by its porosity due to its association with sexuality, menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation. The porous body of the female other is transgressive precisely because it is heterogeneous, unstable, and fluid. Rather than emphasising the border between the self and the other, woman's corporeality transforms the body into a porous space of interconnection.

The Fluid Geography of the Mediterranean

'When speaking of the Mediterranean lake, what are we naming?' Jacques Derrida asks in 'The Other Heading'.⁹³ Naming a place entails drawing borders around a particular territory, demarcating its boundaries. In the preface to *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Braudel writes that '[t]he question of boundaries is the first to be encountered; from it all others flow.'⁹⁴ It is not surprising that in the first attempt to encapsulate the vast topic of the Mediterranean, Braudel thinks of boundaries. As his monumental two-volume work suggests, the Mediterranean and its multiple landscapes, seascapes, peoples, cultures, civilisations, and histories challenge limits and provoke us to rethink the nature of geographic borders. Are the geographic borders of the Mediterranean as natural and definite as they seem? 'To draw a boundary around anything,' Braudel notably continues, 'is to define, analyse, and reconstruct it'.⁹⁵ His use of the verb 'reconstruct' is interesting and significant because it suggests that borders, even geographic borders, contain an element of construction, of building a frame that moulds the place as much as the place shapes the frame. Drawing a cartography of the Mediterranean geography is therefore not simply a case of marking pre-existing, uncontested borders; the process of mapping is not an

⁹³ Jacques Derrida, 'The Other Heading: Memories, Responses, and Responsibilities', in *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 4–83 (p. 35).

⁹⁴ Fernand Braudel, 'Preface to the First Edition', in *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Volume I, trans. by Siân Reynolds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 17–22 (p. 18).

⁹⁵ Braudel, 'Preface to the First Edition', p. 18.

innocent process but a political act. Chambers underscores this in *Mediterranean Crossings* when he points out that until the second half of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire, which was considered as a Mediterranean superpower, made part of the Mediterranean, but modern-day Turkey has to renegotiate its claim to the Mediterranean identity.⁹⁶ Indeed, the feminist geographer Linda McDowell claims that the traditional understanding of ‘place as a set of coordinates on a map that fix a defined and bounded piece of territory’ can no longer hold; in McDowell’s words, ‘places are contested, fluid and uncertain’.⁹⁷ Geographies cannot be perceived as given anymore, but as the products of the intersections between individuals, society, space, and power. ‘It is socio-spatial practices,’ McDowell further explains, ‘that define places and these practices result in overlapping and intersecting places with multiple and changing boundaries, constituted and maintained by social relations of power and exclusion’.⁹⁸ Thus, to answer Derrida’s question, it does not suffice to simply give the coordinates of the boundaries of the Mediterranean, not least because the ‘Mediterranean’ is not just a geographical region but also a concept, an identity marker, a frame of mind.

Polyphemus, the one-eyed Cyclops that Odysseus tricks and blinds, is a child of the sea – his father is the God of the Sea Poseidon and his mother is Thoosa, a sea-nymph. His name means ‘many voices’, a phrase that resonates in the Mediterranean imaginary especially after Braudel’s often quoted claim that ‘[t]he Mediterranean speaks with many voices’.⁹⁹ It is a crucial phrase because it encapsulates the pluralism of the Mediterranean, which is why several Mediterranean thinkers paraphrase his statement in their work to acknowledge its centrality in one’s understanding of the region. For instance, Cassano describes the Mediterranean as ‘an irreducible pluriverse that does not allow itself to be

⁹⁶ Chambers, p. 12.

⁹⁷ Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 4.

⁹⁸ McDowell, p. 4.

⁹⁹ Fernand Braudel, ‘Preface to the English Edition’, in *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Volume I, trans. by Reynolds, pp. 13–14 (p. 13).

reduced to a single verse.’¹⁰⁰ Cassano continues that it is ‘this irreducible multiplicity of voices, none able to smother the others’ that gives the Mediterranean its ‘value’.¹⁰¹ The Mediterranean’s heterogeneity must be emphasised because it is precisely this rich multiplicity that has been threatened or repressed throughout history. Norma Bouchard and Valerio Ferme in fact write that ‘various groups have sought to impose their unifying and totalizing vision on cultural, religious, ethnic, and economic plurality’, that have sought to suppress what Cassano among other scholars attempt to retrieve – ‘the Mediterranean heritage of networks, hybridities, and shared spaces’.¹⁰² In the Mediterranean, alterity has taken the shape of many regions, together with their inhabitants, who have been repressed by hegemonic powers with the aim of conquering the Mediterranean and reducing its many voices into a monologue. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, while fundamentalism is usually used in a religious context, Cassano extends its definition to refer to all powers that have sought to suppress the Mediterranean’s diversity. Eurocentrism, a worldview that values the North and the West over the South and the East, is one of the most embedded and dominant fundamentalisms in the Mediterranean imaginary. This manifests itself in various sub-categories of dualisms, such as the modern and economically prosperous North as opposed to the backward and lazy South. These are precisely the dualisms that contemporary scholars of the Mediterranean who give voice to the subaltern, like Cassano and Chambers, seek to deconstruct. Cassano describes his fundamental concept of ‘Southern thought’ as an attempt to give back the South its denied value by making it its own subject of thought, ensuring that the South is not judged by Northern ideals and found wanting. Meanwhile, Chambers’s aim in *Mediterranean Crossings* is to unearth the ‘archive of the negated and the denied’ and ‘to recover the hidden dependency of Occidental modernity on what remains in

¹⁰⁰ Cassano, ‘Prologue’, p. xlvi.

¹⁰¹ Cassano, ‘Prologue’ p. xlvi.

¹⁰² Norma Bouchard and Valerio Ferme, ‘Translators’ Introduction: On Franco Cassano’s *Southern Thought*’, in Franco Cassano, *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*, ed. and trans. by Bouchard and Ferme, pp. ix–xxvi (p. xviii).

the dark'.¹⁰³ Both, therefore, seek to preserve the otherness and plurality of the Mediterranean.

The role of geography in the creation and suppression of minority groups in the Mediterranean cannot be overlooked. Eurocentrism constructs centres (North and West) and margins (South and East) despite the resistance of the heterogeneous Mediterranean to such an exclusionary mapping. Crucially, scholars of the Mediterranean highlight the way the Mediterranean Sea counters such notions of geographic dualism due to its fluidity. The sea becomes a metaphor for the coexistence of multiple currents of difference. This entails the conceptualisation of the Mediterranean in contemporary criticism and theory as a 'border sea', in Cassano's words, which 'allows us to deconstruct any fundamentalism claim'.¹⁰⁴ A 'liquid border' seems to be a contradiction in terms because borders are often conceived as solid, linear, unmalleable, and, most importantly, divisive. Borders are indeed perceived in this way from a patriarchal point of view, as analysed in the previous section, and from the perspective of traditional mapping as shall be discussed further on. At this point, it is important to add that Cassano links monologic oppressors to '*land*-based fundamentalisms' (emphasis added).¹⁰⁵ Borders as they are traditionally understood indeed help to preserve these land-based fundamentalisms from the challenge that fluid otherness presents to them. The Mediterranean Sea, however, turns borders' solidity into fluid sites of connection, where differences intersect. As Chambers puts it, the Mediterranean Sea is 'not so much as a frontier or barrier between the North and the South, or the East and the West, as an intricate site of encounters and currents'.¹⁰⁶ This does not mean that these relations that the fluidity of the sea promotes are plain sailing. In Cassano's words, the tempestuous sea 'unites and

¹⁰³ Chambers, p. 9, 8.

¹⁰⁴ Cassano, *Southern Thought*, p. 147.

¹⁰⁵ Cassano, *Southern Thought*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁶ Chambers, p. 32.

divides’; it is a ‘line of division and contact between people and civilizations’.¹⁰⁷ However, the possibility of accepting difference, connection, and the coexistence of many voices promotes the intrinsic multiplicity of the Mediterranean while rejecting hegemonic forces. Fluid borders undercut the Eurocentric dualisms between centre and margin, North and South, East and West. Consequently, fluid borders enable the mapping of a sea of otherness, the mapping of a fluid Mediterranean geography.

What gradually emerges, then, is the idea that the fluidity of the sea, like the female body, also stands for the challenge against constructed borders, specifically the seemingly solid borders that are based on binaries. Chambers incisively comments that ‘the sea, as the site of multiple mediations and memories, [...] delivers us over to a fluid geography that ontologically challenges the very being and becoming European and modern’.¹⁰⁸ The Mediterranean waters present a perpetual challenge to Eurocentric constructions of the Mediterranean since they destabilise stable notions of being and identity. For Chambers, ‘the metaphorical force of the sea, with its waves, winds, currents, tides, and storms’ enables us to detect ‘the unstable location of historical knowledge’ and to question it.¹⁰⁹ His comment can be extended to all knowledge, and all fundamentalisms. The fluidity of the sea as Chambers theorises it exposes a flaw within traditional geography, which feminist geographers like Rose describe as a kind of mapping that incorporates patriarchal practices and a patriarchal understanding of the world. Masculine geography professes to be exhaustive and its key belief is that ‘the world can be fully known and understood’.¹¹⁰ It seeks to uncover and conquer *terra incognita*, to define, confine, and solidify. This goes against the spirit of the Mediterranean, whose tempestuous waters transform its geography

¹⁰⁷ Cassano, *Southern Thought*, p. 142; Cassano, ‘Prologue’, p. xlvi.

¹⁰⁸ Chambers, p. 131.

¹⁰⁹ Chambers, p. 27.

¹¹⁰ Gillian Rose, *Feminism & Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 7.

into a space that is always in flux, constantly resisting a stable identity, solid borders, and hegemony. The sea generates and implies the constant movement of peoples, languages, cultures, religions, beliefs. As Chambers puts it, the sea ‘underlines the continual sense of historical transformation and cultural translation which makes it a site of perpetual transit’.¹¹¹ Implied, then, is not only the idea that Mediterranean fluidity resists and erodes man-made borders, but also the sense that it gnaws at the concept of ‘the Mediterranean’ itself, a concept with its own constructed, often land-based borders. It is the sea itself that invites us to question what we call ‘the Mediterranean’. Indeed, the act of querying the borders of ‘the Mediterranean’ entails the interrogation of how what is referred to as ‘the Mediterranean’ has been constructed in history, literature, and other spaces of textual as well as cultural representation. Recognising that the process of imagining and conceptualising ‘the Mediterranean’ involves the erection of borders foregrounds the frame’s exclusion of the subaltern. This means that Mediterranean thinkers have the duty to re-map a cartography of the Mediterranean that accounts for its diversity through the inclusion of alterity, which is made possible through the fluidity of the sea. In fact, Chambers takes the ‘fluid space’ of the Mediterranean as an opportunity to question and distrust a facile and seemingly self-evident mapping of the Mediterranean in order ‘to reassess who defines the Mediterranean, how and why, and the languages in which it is figured’.¹¹² This argument that Chambers puts forward is of vital importance particularly to this dissertation, which critiques the critical and theoretical borders of ‘the Mediterranean’ from a feminist perspective. Thus, the fluidity of the Mediterranean stands for the need to constantly question and adapt the borders of ‘the Mediterranean’ as a concept so as to faithfully capture its heterogeneity. However, as Chambers astutely observes, although ‘[t]he forgotten [...] query the frame, the pattern, the construction and advance what the previous representation failed to register’, they ‘do not

¹¹¹ Chambers, p. 32.

¹¹² Chambers, p. 148.

complete the picture'.¹¹³ To think that a new cartography of the Mediterranean that incorporates the excluded is complete is to yet again transform into solidity the intrinsic fluidity of the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean calls for a *fluid cartography*, a map of constant drawing and redrawing of porous borders and spaces of encounter. Only if the Mediterranean is configured as a sea that cannot be fully known can its many voices both unite in harmony and simultaneously diverge in dissonance, letting otherness emerge and destabilise seemingly solid boundaries.

Conclusion

Liquidity threatens and erodes solidity. As argued in this chapter, this accounts for both bodily borders and geographic borders. In both cases, borders preserve selfhood from otherness, but these are the same borders that are transgressed and made porous by the feminine and the Mediterranean. The fluid bodies of women and the body of the Mediterranean Sea, interestingly converge in the way both have been suppressed by the masculinist worldview due to their threatening heterogeneity. They also relate in the way their liquidity transgresses the borders imposed upon them, and both indeed strive towards multiplicity and encounter. Like the abject milk of the mother, the Mediterranean Sea 'does not separate but binds'.¹¹⁴ The notion of fluid otherness enables the emergence of a deeply intimate relationship between woman and the sea within the context of Mediterranean criticism and theory that goes beyond early and ancient Mediterranean mythology, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Interestingly, in Cassano's Mediterranean writing, gender and geography occasionally intersect in a kind of 'corpogeography' – a geography in bodily terms, a

¹¹³ Chambers, p. 59.

¹¹⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 105.

geography that is in a symbiotic relationship with the body – through which the Mediterranean female and the Mediterranean Sea are co-constructed. Cassano, for instance, speaks of the Mediterranean seascape in feminine terms:

On the open beaches, the sea gives itself freely to all, like an easy and unfaithful *girl*, even when a voracious stupidity tries to imprison, marry, lock it away, and give it the paranoid fixity of ownership.¹¹⁵ (emphasis added)

The reference to the ‘girl’ rather than a woman is reminiscent of the Greek *parthenos*, suggesting ripeness and sexuality. The sensuality of the sea and the girl are intimately bound. What Cassano seeks to depict is a vision of the Mediterranean seascape as an unfettered body of a Mediterranean girl, both of which are figured as public spaces, open to freedom yet threatened by a patriarchal order that seeks to restrict and change them into private spaces. Further on, Cassano calls for a bodily connection to the Mediterranean Sea:

We know little of ourselves if we have not felt our skin’s eagerness to enter the sea, its slow reconciliation with water, its consent to be owned by it and, letting go, float on it. Our body discovers a world when it accepts to entrust itself without fear to the flow of the surf, when gazing at the sky, lying flat on the sea, we listen to the sound of *its resonant womb*, accepting to belong to it with filial trust.¹¹⁶ (emphasis added)

The metaphor of the girl matures into the possibility of motherhood, which Cassano does not code as abject but as an enriching bond with the maternal semiotic *chora*, as can be intimated from the reference to the womb. This is a complete divergence from the Odyssean myth, which Consolo describes as ‘the need to sink deeply into a mother’s bowels’ followed by ‘the duty to climb out, to leave again, to set foot onto the land of the *fathers*, of society, of history’ (emphasis added).¹¹⁷ Cassano’s gendering of geography does not aim to conquer and oppress both space and woman, which is usually the purpose of gendered geographical discourse that

¹¹⁵ Cassano, *Southern Thought*, p. 11–12.

¹¹⁶ Cassano, *Southern Thought*, p. 12.

¹¹⁷ Consolo and Nicolao, p. 58.

often makes use of metaphors of rape. The Mediterranean is positively gendered as female because of its openness, its borderlessness, and its otherness among various other values that it nurtures. This incorporation of gender in Mediterranean studies through reflections on the porous female body as well as female narratives enables even further the mapping of a fluid cartography of the Mediterranean that takes into account its heterogeneity, a map that frees its fluid otherness from landlocking, man-made borders. Conversely, the Mediterranean seascape allows the experience of becoming and being a woman in the Mediterranean to (re)surface from an unexplored place that for centuries has been marked as *terra incognita*.

Chapter Three: The Female Mediterranean in the Literary Imaginary

Introduction

In his essay ‘The European Mind’, Paul Valéry conceives of the Mediterranean Sea as the cradle of Western civilisation, primarily owing to Ancient Greek and Roman as well as Christian influence. From its multitude of shores, Valéry writes, diverse Mediterranean people have ‘exchanged merchandise and blows’ and ‘founded ports and colonies’.¹¹⁸ This is how the Mediterranean is often mapped in history: the inland sea that served men as a theatre for war, trade, exploration, and colonisation. Mediterranean waves tossed Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Venetians, and Genoese, among others, from shore to shore together with their cargo, booty, and slaves. Valéry reminds us that the Mediterranean people have also traded ‘beliefs, languages, customs, and technical achievements’, but the grand narrative of history foregrounds the sea as a space of connection and conflict mostly in terms of political and commercial interests. Since the Mediterranean Sea functioned as a space where either man’s wars were waged or commerce flourished, it acquired the topography of a public space. Thus, for centuries, the Mediterranean Sea has been constructed in the spatial imagination as a public territory, a stage where the public sphere of life unfolded, which was traversed and shaped by men to the marked exclusion of women. In binaristic topographical thinking, the public domain, as opposed to the private, is navigable by men but inaccessible to women. For a long time, this was particularly the case with regard to travel and the exploration of the unknown, both of which were ventures that were by and large exclusive to men. A heightened sense of geographic binarism emerges when this public space is gendered

¹¹⁸ Paul Valéry, ‘The European Mind’, in *History and Politics*, trans. by Denise Folliot and Jackson Mathews (New York: Pantheon Books, 1962), pp. 307–23 (p. 312).

as female, such as when Emil Ludwig describes the Mediterranean Sea as ‘the Helen among oceans; like her it was desired by all that saw it, and captured by the boldest.’¹¹⁹ This implies that the Mediterranean, like women, is often perceived as a space to be conquered by men.

Valéry also writes that the Mediterranean Sea, ‘this admirably shaped basin’, is ‘the object of the world’s desire and the site of the greatest human activity’.¹²⁰ He claims that many have been deeply moved by ‘the enchantment of that noblest of seas’, as if the Mediterranean’s power to enrapture and instil desire can only be matched by the magic of one of his inhabitants, Circe.¹²¹ Many writers and scholars who have written about the Mediterranean feel the need, almost the duty, to eulogise this ‘Great Sea’ and to acknowledge that, as Ludwig effusively professes, ‘the Mediterranean is the loveliest of all seas, favored by situation, shape, and climate above all others’.¹²² But what is so irresistibly desirable, so deeply enchanting about the Mediterranean? It is precisely because the Mediterranean is presumed to be what Valéry calls ‘a masterpiece of temperament, combining all the conditions favorable to man’ that eventually, people started crossing its waters simply to indulge in and appreciate its natural, cultural, and historical richness: the birth of Mediterranean tourism.¹²³ By the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the tradition of the Grand Tour was in its golden age and popularised in literature, most notably by Lord Byron. Young British noblemen travelled to the Mediterranean not with commercial, religious, or political interests but with the aim of concluding their university education by following a preset itinerary that mostly led them to Greek and Roman art, artefacts, and sites. As means of transportation developed, modern tourism emerged, opening the Mediterranean to the less privileged class and, significantly, to more women. The increasing accessibility of travel led

¹¹⁹ Ludwig, p. 11.

¹²⁰ Valéry, p. 312–13.

¹²¹ Valéry, p. 312.

¹²² Ludwig, p. 11.

¹²³ Valéry, p. 315.

to the construction of the touristic postcard image of the Mediterranean that still persists today: a sun-drenched sandy beach and an inviting blue sea. The much desired Mediterranean in turn inspires desire. The sun and the sea compel the tourist to expose the flesh, to let passion triumph over reason, to drink Bacchic wine and lead a hedonistic life, if only for the brief spell of one memorable Mediterranean summer. This ‘gaudy holiday image’, Paul Fussell argues, ‘constitut[es] one of the main presiding myths of the desirable for the modern urban and suburban middle proletariat’, especially the inhabitants of the so-called ‘cold North’.¹²⁴ It is this ‘irresistible tropism’, as Valéry calls it, of the ‘warm South’ that is lodged in the northern conception of the Mediterranean.¹²⁵

If the ‘public Mediterranean’ is the Mediterranean of commerce and politics, the touristic construction of the Mediterranean can perhaps be aligned with what can be referred to as the ‘private Mediterranean’, since touristic leisure pertains to the private domain of life. However, this Mediterranean postcard saturated with tropes is hardly a private or personal vision of the Mediterranean. It is a *communal myth* consumed by masses of tourists, which serves to satisfy their fantasy of the Mediterranean as an enchanted geography. In other words, the touristic Mediterranean may initially give the impression that it provides a glimpse into a private world, but the ‘private Mediterranean’ does not seem to be located within this consumerist vacationscape. In this chapter, the construction of the Mediterranean in the female literary imaginary will be analysed, suggesting that enclosed within the public space of the Mediterranean lies a private space, where significant events in the private lives of women unfold. In the Mediterranean seascape, where land meets sea, these women encounter themselves and their otherness. These novels dramatise the female characters’ exploration of their own sexuality and desire, rather than distant lands; the Mediterranean littoral zone leads

¹²⁴ Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 135.

¹²⁵ Valéry, p. 312.

these women to *self*-discovery. There is value in exploring the private space of the Mediterranean, this inland sea within the Inland Sea, not only because it is often overlooked, but also because within and through this othered space, women come to terms with their own otherness in different stages of their lives, allowing them to become the subject of their own life and their desires.

Becoming a Woman in the Mediterranean

In an article entitled ‘The 20 Top Reasons to Visit the Côte d’Azur’ published in *Harper’s Bazaar*, the fifth reason to visit the French Riviera is an evocation of the literary Mediterranean:

Bonjour Tristesse, the 1954 novel by precocious 18-year-old writer Françoise Sagan about the bitter coming-of-age of 17-year-old Cécile over one summer of sea, sun and older men, couldn’t have been set anywhere else but the Riviera.¹²⁶

The novel ‘couldn’t have been set anywhere but the Riviera’; in other words, the Mediterranean seascape is not just adequate to Sagan’s *Bonjour Tristesse*, but also crucial. This article also suggests that the setting of Sagan’s novel is the touristic Mediterranean, the Mediterranean that hardly needs twenty reasons to lure the reader to the warm South through its siren call. To reduce Sagan’s Mediterranean to merely the mythical, consumable version of it would be a mistake. The three novels discussed in the first part of this chapter – Sagan’s *Bonjour Tristesse*, Assia Djébar’s *The Mischief*, and Deborah Levy’s *Hot Milk* – stage the act of coming-of-age as a woman in the Mediterranean. By mapping a private space where life-changing experiences occur for these female literary characters within the public space of the

¹²⁶ Lydia Bell and Catherine Fairweather, ‘The 20 Top Reasons to Visit the Côte d’Azur’, *Harper’s Bazaar*, July 2008, 147–54 (p. 150).

Mediterranean, these narratives escape the touristic and redeem the Mediterranean summer seascape from depthless tropism. What is usually perceived as heat-induced hedonism is turned, in these Mediterranean female narratives, into a sexual awakening charged with meaning since it is a significant moment of self-discovery and part of a girl's maturation process. These narratives reclaim the erotic geography of Calypso and other nymphs' seascapes by depicting the Mediterranean as a space where femininity is unconfined and can be explored in its fluid otherness.

The textual mapping of the Mediterranean setting in these female narratives abounds with descriptions of the sun, the sea, the sand, and especially, the heat. They are physical features that are so fundamental to the Mediterranean seascape that they have also become prominent tropes in the Mediterranean imaginary. In *Bonjour Tristesse*, the first-person narrator Cécile constantly observes that the weather is 'oppressively hot' and that everyone is 'overwhelmed by the heat'.¹²⁷ Similarly, the first-person narrator of *The Mischief* Nadia, who is a twenty-year-old French-Algerian that spends her summer in coastal Algeria, notes that '[t]he whole summer was stiflingly hot' because of the 'oppressive air' that abates only in the evening.¹²⁸ Meanwhile, *Hot Milk* is also a sun-drenched coming-of-age novel. It is narrated by twenty-five-year-old Sofia, who is half British half Greek, and it is set in Almería, which Sofia describes as a 'semi-desert [in] southern Spain'.¹²⁹ The effect that the warm temperatures of the Mediterranean climate have on people is so recurrent in literature that it is almost a cliché. However, these novels move beyond any notions of superficiality and the protagonists consciously distance themselves from the typical tourist. Sofia travels to

¹²⁷ Françoise Sagan, *Bonjour Tristesse*, trans. by Heather Lloyd (London: Penguin Books, 2013), p. 10, 6. All subsequent references to this novel will be parenthetically given in the text, using the abbreviation *BT* and followed by the relevant page number.

¹²⁸ Assia Djebar, *The Mischief*, trans. by Frances Frenaye (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958), p. 3. All subsequent references to this novel will be parenthetically given in the text, using the abbreviation *TM* and followed by the relevant page number.

¹²⁹ Deborah Levy, *Hot Milk* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), p. 11. All subsequent references to this novel will be parenthetically given in the text, using the abbreviation *HM* and followed by the relevant page number.

Almería not for leisure but to find a cure for her mother's illness. Meanwhile, both Cécile and Nadia escape from the city – Paris and Algiers respectively – to spend the summer close to the sea. When Cécile visits the French Riviera one fateful summer with her widowed father Raymond and his mistress Elisa, she is very aware that being a tourist entails a role-playing of sorts: 'I thought I was being decadent and I liked the idea. But this game-playing wasn't enough to delude me: I was sad and disoriented' (*BT*, p. 49). Nadia also dissociates herself from other tourists that populate the beach resort. In fact, the novel opens with her 'indifferen[ce] to the dazzling sunshine of M— and its usual summer visitors' (*TM*, p. 1).

Cécile and Nadia present themselves as somewhat bored women under the influence of 'the golden sloth' (*TM*, p. 34), the *dolce far niente*, that the Mediterranean summer induces. However, both seem to suggest that there is more to their despondency than mere touristic languor. In *Bonjour Tristesse*, Cécile spends hours lying on the sand, sunbathing and thinking how 'it was pleasant having facile thoughts' (*BT*, p. 6). She wonders if her plan to stop her father from marrying his new lover Anne, is a sign that she is 'merely a selfish, spoilt little girl' (*BT*, p. 45) with simply nothing better to do. On the other hand, Cécile's apparent languor is contrasted with the 'heightened awareness both of other people and of [her]self' (*BT*, p. 45), which she gradually acquires. In fact, she does not hesitate in her recollection of that summer at any point throughout the novel. Eventually, it emerges that Cécile's plan causes Anne's death, and it is this tragic outcome which instils in her a feeling that at the very beginning she refers to as a 'sweet languor' that she is 'reluctant to dignify [...] with the fine, solemn name of 'sadness'' (*BT*, p. 5). Crucially, by the end of the novel, Cécile realises that she can no longer describe this profound melancholic feeling as simply languor: 'Then something stirs within me that, with eyes closed, I greet by its name, sadness: Bonjour tristesse' (*BT*, p. 100). In *The Mischief*, Nadia similarly spends hours at the beach, but unlike Cécile, she is sure that her interference with her friend Jedla and her husband Ali's

relationship, which also results in death, is a ‘game in order to satisfy [her] vanity and fill [her] idle time’ (*TM*, p. 61). However, Nadia’s languor is symptomatic of her sadness, her loneliness, and the ‘acid torpor of [her] own existence’ (*TM*, p. 3). The lethargy that both Cécile and Nadia feel at the cusp of coming-of-age is almost existential and it is heightened by the Mediterranean summer.

Crucially, Cécile recounts that ‘the most important things’ were ‘the ever-present sea with its incessant rhythm, and the sun’ (*BT*, p. 14). Indeed, in *Bonjour Tristesse*, the Mediterranean background is constantly in the foreground, making its presence felt. What these female characters implicitly suggest is that neither are they typical tourists nor is the Mediterranean geography that serves as a setting to their narratives passively touristic. The Mediterranean is charged with significance and consequence. Crucially, the Mediterranean setting seems to be suffused with a hint of sensuality, such as when Sofia in *Hot Milk* says that ‘[t]he sun lashed [her] shoulders’ (*HM*, p. 201). The sensual effect of the climate on people is yet again another entrenched trope in the collective myth of the Mediterranean. The heat and the sea demand tourists to expose their flesh and to give in to what Fussell calls the ‘unmanning [of] the intellect’.¹³⁰ As Fussell’s comment implies, this abandonment to sensuality that the ‘warm South’ induces is perceived by the Northerner as a potential threat or evil. On the other hand, Cassano, who in *Southern Thought* argues that the values of the South must not be judged against those of the North, counters this Northern belief by claiming that for the Southerner, the sensuality that the Mediterranean inspires implies a sense of harmony between world and body. In the South, Cassano writes, one experiences ‘the body and its senses as beginning, as strong knowledge of the world’.¹³¹ The three female characters in the novels discussed position themselves as anti-touristic also in the way they

¹³⁰ Fussell, p. 130.

¹³¹ Cassano, *Southern Thought*, p. 120.

respond to the sensuality of the warm South. For them, the knowledge of the world acquired through the body significantly paves the way to *self*-knowledge, especially in terms of awareness of their body and sexuality. In the private space that they carve out for themselves in the Mediterranean seascape, their sexual awakening occurs. Most importantly, it is the ever-present Mediterranean and its erotic geography that enables their self-knowledge to happen. As outlined in the previous two chapters, there is a deep bond between female sexuality and the sea, which Cécile, Nadia, and Sofia acknowledge and tap into in order to come of age as women in the Mediterranean. Notably, the sea is not just a metaphor that symbolises woman's path to sexual freedom and independence. As Clarisse Zimra writes in her analysis of Djébar's critique of gendered space, 'space defines the female body's awareness as well as the way the body, in turn, defines itself and moves through such space'.¹³² This is precisely what occurs in these narratives through the *physical* interaction between space and woman. It is through the physical connection with the Mediterranean that these three female protagonists discover their own bodies and their fluid borders, which enable them to metamorphose, as it were, from girl into woman.

Cécile's relationship with the Mediterranean Sea in *Bonjour Tristesse* is perhaps the least complex in the three novels analysed, yet it is still a powerful and evocative connection. Like Sofia in *Hot Milk*, Cécile writes of the Mediterranean summer's overpowering influence in a way that imbues the setting with sensuality and with a particular emphasis on the climate's effect on her body: 'The strength of that summer heat kept me pinioned to the sand, with arms that felt heavy and a dry mouth' (*BT*, p. 10). As expected from a northern teenager that has travelled to the South, Cécile feels she has 'completely lost [her] compass' (*BT*, p. 95), that is her rationality. However, she seems to refer to her plan to

¹³² Clarisse Zimra, 'Afterword', in Assia Djébar, *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), pp. 159–211 (p. 202).

remove Anne from her father's life rather than her personal life, more specifically her sexuality. Besides, early on in the novel, Cécile declares that she has had decadent leanings long before her trip to the French Riviera due to her father's myriad love affairs: 'Ideally I envisaged a life of baseness and moral turpitude' (*BT*, p. 16). Reluctant to stay in the rented villa to study Kant and Bergson for her *baccalaureate* examination, Cécile spends most of her time at the beach. When a good-looking and charming law student, Cyril, enters the sun-drenched scene, her summer romance begins. In Cécile's eyes, Cyril is almost like a latter-day Odysseus: 'He was hugging the coast in a little sailing boat and he capsized at the mouth of our inlet' (*BT*, p. 6). Their attraction is mutual and soon they embark on a love affair. This suits Cécile, who confesses that she likes the idea of intense yet short-lived love affairs. In her view, she is too young to think of loyalty, but she is eager to explore this as yet undeveloped side of herself. Cécile's sexual awakening occurs because of Cyril's presence, but the Mediterranean setting is interestingly a prominent constant in their most intimate moments. 'There was the scent of the pines, the sound of the sea, the feel of his body ...' (*BT*, p. 89), Cécile recounts, almost always situating the body of her lover as well as her own in the seascape of the French Riviera that permeates with a sense of eroticism.

Cécile and Cyril often climb onto his boat, sail out, and give in to their desire as they drift in the open sea. On other occasions, the pine wood close to the sea or the beach serve as settings to their love affair. The way Cécile narrates these amorous encounters suggests that their bodies, their desire, the sea, and the sun merge to create an erotic human and physical geography. For instance, she remembers

the taste of those breathless, inept kisses and the sound of Cyril's heart beating against [hers] in rhythm with the breaking of the waves on the sand ... One, two, three, four heartbeats and the gentle sound on the sand; [...] (*BT*, p. 36).

Significantly, Cécile writes of her own pleasure in terms of either the Mediterranean seascape or else a sort of surreal experience of it:

The sun was becoming detached from the sky. It was bursting open and falling on me. Where was I? It was as if I were at the bottom of the ocean, I was lost in time, I was in extremes of pleasure ... (*BT*, p. 74).

As Cécile experiences sexual pleasure, she seems to be transported from the Mediterranean seascape to the private domain of her erotic, bodily drives, which she imagines as an ocean. In other words, her sexual experience in the Inland Sea awakens her to her body and she is taken to the boundless sea of her newly discovered desire. This displacement is perhaps so seamless because both woman's sexual desire and the sea are conceived as fluid and infinitely rich. In fact, in 'The Laugh of the Medusa', Cixous uses sea metaphors in order to give voice to the uncontainable fluidity of female sexuality, as discussed in the previous chapter. Notably, Cécile uses a sea metaphor to relate her first experience of desire towards Cyril, while also partly blaming the Mediterranean climate: '[...] all it took was that heat and my drowsiness and his clumsy movement for something within me to come gently adrift' (*BT*, p. 11). It is not surprising, then, that while experiencing sexual pleasure, 'the sound of the sea' in Cécile's ear is seamlessly replaced by 'the rushing, relentless patter of [her] own blood' (*BT*, p. 36). In the summer that *Bonjour Tristesse* records, Cécile realises that she is what Cixous calls an 'ebullient, infinite woman', who discovers her 'luminous torrents' through the waters of the Mediterranean.¹³³

'[W]ith that long, blond, wet hair you look like a ... siren,' (*TM*, p. 9) Nadia's lover Hussein tells her in *The Mischief*. 'I said a siren, didn't I?' he continues, 'But you're really more like a sorceress—a charming sorceress, naturally' (*TM*, p. 9). Nadia is an attractive, young woman whom Hussein likens to Circe because in his view, she has the

¹³³ Cixous, p. 876.

potential to enchant, to seduce, but also perhaps because she seems so attuned to the Mediterranean seascape. Having just broken off an engagement and travelled away from city life in Algiers to a beach resort, Nadia feels free and at home surrounded by the Mediterranean sun, sand, and sea. To fill her ‘uneventful, superficial and empty’ (*TM*, p. 3) life, she spends most of her time either swimming out for long hours or driving her car in the cool evening. Similarly to Cécile, Nadia feels sexually charged due to the hot temperatures of the South and her proximity to a man’s body:

All summer I had been stimulated by an excess of sun, by the road, which pointed the way to escape, by the inebriating speed of the car, and finally by Hussein’s lips and warm body. (*TM*, p. 83)

Interestingly, however, there are instances in *The Mischief* where Nadia seems not to need Hussein for her sexual self-discovery. For instance, at one point in the novel, her friend Jedla, whom Nadia admired since they were young, tells her that she looks great in a bathing suit and Nadia indeed notices that men observe her body at the beach. As she plunges into the sea and swims, the sensuousness of the Mediterranean Sea and Nadia’s experience of the erogenous zones of her fluid body are woven together as she shuts out the world and the people who inhabit it:

I swam far out, rejoicing in the leg muscles that propelled me through the transparent, blue water. Forgetful of everything, I rolled over onto my back in order to feel the waves lap voluptuously around my hips while my eyes were drowned in sky. (*TM*, p. 30–31)

Through the Mediterranean Sea that envelops her, Nadia learns the contours of her body, and she relishes in the act of swimming because in her words, ‘the sensations of [her] own body’ are heightened ‘when [she] plunge[s] it into an inlet of the sea, whose red-pebbled shore added to its air of wild isolation’ (*TM*, p. 3). This intense pleasure that Nadia experiences while swimming is purely autoerotic because it translates to self-directed pleasure in her

sexual awakening and her exploration of her body. Zimra notes that in Djébar's early novels such as *The Mischief*, the female protagonist 'must seek wholeness alone, in a boundless natural space, through an autoerotic dream where man has no place'.¹³⁴ The sensuous and sensual Mediterranean setting of *The Mischief* precisely gives Nadia this opportunity to encounter herself and her womanhood, especially her body and her desire. As Nadia very well knows, this is a feat for a woman living in conservative Algeria in the late 1950s. It is telling that despite her myriad maritime encounters with her own body, Nadia feels she has become a woman – 'At last I was a woman' (*TM*, p. 110) – only when she accepts Hussein's marriage proposal. In this scene, the reader realises how subversive Nadia's autoerotic connection with the Mediterranean Sea truly is.

It is significant to note that Nadia's bond with the sea extends beyond her gradual bodily self-knowledge that the sea enables. Nadia feels strongly connected to the sea also because its essential fluidity reflects other fluid aspects of her identity: her nationality and her sexual orientation. 'With your mixed blood,' Hussein tells Nadia, 'you're on the border line between two civilizations' (*TM*, p. 17). Nadia is very conscious of her liminality as a half French half Algerian woman and she is also aware of how complex this renders her relationship with her womanhood since the Northern and the Southern constructions of woman clash. At the beginning of the novel, she claims that her father 'had brought [her] up in Western style' (*TM*, p. 6), which means that Nadia, a twenty-year-old who makes men frown because she smokes cigarettes and wears trousers, does not fit in the masculinist and predominantly Muslim society of Algeria. Since Nadia embraces the foreign habits of European women, it is not surprising, then, that Hussein calls her a siren and a witch, as if she were monstrous in the eyes of the Algerian patriarchy. What is even more subversive,

¹³⁴ Clarisse Zimra, 'In Her Own Write: The Circular Structures of Linguistic Alienation in Assia Djébar's Early Novels', *Research in African Literatures*, 11 (1980), 206–23 (p. 212).

perhaps, is Nadia's wish to be gender fluid – 'I wished I could be a man, a real "pal"' (*TM*, p. 13) – as well as her sexual attraction to Jedla. It is Jedla, rather than Hussein, that truly stirs Nadia's passion and because of Jedla's death, which Nadia partly caused, that tragic summer remains imprinted in her mind: 'I tell myself that I have buried the past. And yet, [...] the name of Jedla floats to the surface and spreads out like a water lily' (*TM*, p. 111).

Out of these three female narratives, *Hot Milk* is perhaps the novel which most richly and deeply interweaves the concept of fluidity, female sexuality, and the Mediterranean Sea throughout. Its epigraph – 'It's up to you to break the old circuits' – is taken from Cixous's 'The Laugh of the Medusa', which immediately frames *Hot Milk* within the context of *écriture féminine*, that is Cixous's notion of 'feminine writing'. It indicates that one of Levy's aims in the novel is to express female sexuality and to reclaim the monstrous feminine. Indeed, the Medusan figure remains a recurrent motif in the novel through the presence of jellyfish – *medusas* in Spanish – that seem to have invaded the Andalusian sea in which Sofia swims. Sofia is older than Cécile and Nadia because she is in her mid-twenties, yet she feels just as lost, having paused her doctorate in Anthropology mostly because she needs to attend to her mother, Rose. Her mother suffers from a mysterious illness that has brought Rose and Sofia to southern Spain in search for a diagnosis and, hopefully, a cure.

When Sofia is not at the Gómez Clinic with Rose, she is often at the beach. This is the space where Sofia feels distant from her mother's overpowering influence, and it is where she wishes that 'the rolling waves' (*HM*, p. 38) of the Mediterranean would carry away her past life so that she could start afresh. Sofia therefore sees the sea as a source of freedom, of possibility. Gradually, through the medusas, the sea also becomes an invitation to discover her sexuality. At the beginning of the novel, Sofia recalls how she was stung by a jellyfish, which 'left a fierce purple whiplash welt on [her] left upper arm' (*HM*, p. 2). Despite the

ointment that the student working at the injury hut, Juan, puts on Sofia's arm, she feels that the medusan sting has triggered a latent poison inside her, although at first, she is unaware of what kind of venom it is. Throughout the novel, Sofia is repeatedly stung by the jellyfish and gradually, both Sofia and the reader realise that her sexual awakening is brought about by the medusas of the Mediterranean:

Something weird was happening because I wanted to pull [Juan] down to the floor and make love to him. I had been stung into desire. An abundance of desire. I was turning into someone I did not recognize. I was terrifying myself. (*HM*, p. 72)

Sofia's body is newly charged with the power of female sexuality that was latent in her body, perhaps even repressed, until the poison of the jellyfish awakened this yet untapped power. At first, Sofia is frightened by this profusion of desire; she feels as if the Gorgon herself has marked Sofia with the Medusan abjectness of the monstrous feminine. In fact, when she visits her father in Greece, Sofia claims she is in 'the birthplace of Medusa, who left the scars of her venom and rage on [Sofia's] body' (*HM*, p. 138). However, as the novel progresses, Sofia reclaims the monstrous feminine embodied by the mythological figure of Medusa and recognises that what lies repressed inside her should not remain hidden, as Cixous urges in her seminal essay. Sofia indeed expresses herself in Cixousian terms since she uses the metaphor of unhindered fluidity to claim that she is brimming with desire: 'I am overflowing like coffee leaking from a paper cup. I wonder, shall I make myself smaller?' (*HM*, p. 202). As can be intimated from this question that immediately counters Sofia's Cixousian confession, social expectations require her to bridle her passions, to stem the flow of her sexuality. However, Sofia becomes increasingly bolder and empowered by her female monstrosity. She starts feeling at ease among the 'delicate and dangerous' (*HM*, p. 71) medusas. From feeling 'like being skinned alive as [she] was stung over and over again' (*HM*, p. 71), by the end of the novel, Sofia shrugs the painful lashings off as '[not] the worst

thing that had ever happened to [her]' (*HM*, p. 204). Rather, Sofia feels 'alive and roaring' (*HM*, p. 201) in proximity to the dangerous, desire-inducing Andalusian sea and its monstrous creatures. It is expected, then, that Sofia's most sexually charged moments with Juan and her friend Ingrid occur close to the Mediterranean seascape.

Interestingly, the transformative touch of the medusas that triggers Sofia's sexual awakening causes a quasi-physical metamorphosis. Ingrid, who is one of the objects of Sofia's desire, often either tells her that she looks like a frightening sea monster or directly calls her a monster. At one point, Sofia herself notices that she looks 'like some sort of sea monster rising from the shells and starfish' (*HM*, p. 80). This is significant because it foregrounds the fluid boundaries of Sofia's female body, which manifests itself in her identity as a half British half Greek woman but also, more importantly, in her sexuality. While this bodily fluidity is perceived as abject especially by Ingrid, who has not come to terms with her own 'monstrous' desire for another woman, for Sofia it is liberating. 'I am pulsating with shifting sexualities,' (*HM*, p. 146) Sofia claims. As an anthropologist, Sofia reflects that she need not travel to some far-flung land like Margaret Mead to analyse sexuality; Sofia thinks that her troubling sexuality can be her case study. She is frustrated by the clear-cut division between the masculine and the feminine as well as the prescription of each gender's role in society. Sofia's Medusan body is a challenge to both female submissiveness and normative heterosexuality. In the heterogeneous space of her desire, Ingrid and Juan are not as distinct as they may initially seem because of their gender: 'He is masculine and she is feminine but, like a deep perfume, the notes cut into each other and mingle' (*HM*, p. 107). Her Medusan transformation results in self-knowledge regarding her sexuality and her ontological fluidity: 'It wasn't clarity I was after. I wanted things to be less clear' (*HM*, p. 96). It is this fluidity of being that Sofia acquires through the Mediterranean sea creatures that evoke the monstrous

feminine. Conversely, through Sofia's coming-of-age, the Mediterranean monstrous feminine is redeemed from abjectness and constructed, in the end, as an empowering force.

Sagan, Djébar, and Levy chart a private space within the Mediterranean seascape that enables female characters to discover their womanhood. In so doing, they reposition the mythological figure of the sea-nymph at the centre of the Mediterranean narrative as well as the Mediterranean seascape. In the classical imagination, nymphs like Circe and Calypso embodied the fantasy of open female sexuality that was denied to most Greek women, who were confined to the domestic space. According to Larson, the nymphs' 'sexual vulnerability' was 'associated with their "outdoor" status' and it is for this reason that in epics like the *Odyssey*, the Mediterranean nature that surrounds these nymphs is conceived as lush, with undertones of eroticism.¹³⁵ The female narratives discussed in this section reclaim the Mediterranean setting as an (auto)erotic geography, where not only nymphs but even mortal women can recover and uncover their female sexuality. Crucially, while the nymphs' sexuality ultimately serves to satisfy male desire, these female narratives project an intimate bond between seascape and women that does not serve male desire but their own. Thus, the Mediterranean seascape allows these nymph-like girls to encounter their fluidity, their sexuality, and their womanhood and to not only come to terms with their otherness, but also to feel empowered by their heterogeneity.

Motherhood in the Mediterranean

In the Mediterranean, Durrell writes, 'nothing is stronger than the mother and the cult of the mother'.¹³⁶ The strong presence of the maternal in the Mediterranean is undeniable and it has

¹³⁵ Larson, p. 42.

¹³⁶ Durrell, p. 370.

its roots in prehistory through the figure of the primal goddess of many names – the Mother Goddess, Gaia the Earth Goddess, the White Goddess. As Durrell implies in his essay ‘Women of the Mediterranean’, the maternal feminine is still deeply entrenched in the lives of Mediterranean women today, perhaps because of the age-old perception of the divinity of the maternal function, which turned this *cultural* importance of the maternal into a *natural* destiny for women. Underplaying the role of patriarchal society in making the maternal woman synonymous with her socially prescribed role, for Durrell, ‘the bondage [to motherhood] of the Mediterranean female’ is ‘a willing and a self-created one’.¹³⁷ A significant aspect of this stereotype, Durrell adds, is that she is particularly tied to her male child, whom ‘the Mediterranean mother has crowned [...] the king of her life’.¹³⁸ In fact, the mother-son dyad is prevalent in cultural representations of filial relationships, such as the incestuous relationship between Oedipus and Jocasta in Sophocles’s play, the relationship between Penelope and Telemachus in the *Odyssey*, and the representation of the Madonna and Child in Christian iconography. As Adrienne Rich puts it in her seminal text on motherhood *Of Woman Born*, ‘[w]hether in theological doctrine or art or sociology or psychoanalytic theory, it is the mother and son who appear as the eternal, determinative dyad.’¹³⁹

In these mother-son bonds, the mother is not just submissive to her son, but she must also be rejected by him in order to gain his place in society and fulfil his destiny, thereby recalling Kristeva’s notion of abjection. Interestingly, Elena Ferrante observes that in Elsa Morante’s depiction of a Southern mother-son dyad in *The Andalusian Shawl*, the Southern male’s denial of the mother results in the loss of the shape of her body: ‘those

¹³⁷ Durrell, p. 374.

¹³⁸ Durrell, p. 374.

¹³⁹ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976), p. 185.

severe Sicilians, men of honor' believed that the mother's clothes should be 'shapeless, since no one, starting with the mother's dressmaker, must think that a mother has a woman's body.'¹⁴⁰ This disintegration of the mother's body into shapelessness is a culmination of the gradual dematerialisation of the maternal bodily figure in the Mediterranean artistic imagination. Indeed, the heavily robed and practically figureless Virgin Mary is the visual opposite of the voluptuous prehistoric figurines that symbolise fertility. While the female physical body stands for fertility and nurture, it can also signify autoeroticism. This is perhaps the reason why the male gaze dissociated fertility from the sensual body in later artistic representations of woman. A disembodied woman implies that her body no longer belongs to herself but serves, instead, its societal function of reproduction and maternity. Thus, the mother in the Mediterranean imaginary is not only defined by her relationship with her son, but she is also separated from her female body.

The female Mediterranean novels analysed in this part – Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter* and Levy's *Hot Milk* – present women that are not 'content with their role as procreators' as Durrell writes.¹⁴¹ Rather, these novels depict women who are troubled by motherhood and societal expectations of the 'perfect mother'. Consequently, their personalities and experiences depart from those of the stereotypical Mediterranean mother. The narrated lives of Leda and Rose in *The Lost Daughter* and *Hot Milk* respectively offer a stark contrast to the narratives of the young, nymph-like girls discussed in the previous part, who are still in the process of becoming women and that therefore have the opportunity to discover their own bodies and sexuality. Shackled by what Rich calls 'the patriarchal institution of motherhood', mothers do not seem to be able to exploit feminine fluidity as

¹⁴⁰ Elsa Morante, quoted in Elena Ferrante, 'Mothers' Dressmakers', in *Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey*, trans. by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2016), pp. 16–20 (p. 17).

¹⁴¹ Durrell, p. 370.

easily.¹⁴² These women's lives show what happens when their sexual liberation is suppressed, that is when women are 'transformed into the controlled productive fertility of a *gyne*, a married woman', as Vivante argues.¹⁴³ Interestingly, in *The Lost Daughter* and *Hot Milk*, it is suggested that mothers can tap into the fluidity of woman through their filial bond with their daughters. Rich suggests that there is a strong connection between a mother and a daughter, a bond formed partly through the amniotic fluid of the womb:

Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other.¹⁴⁴

The prevalence of the mother-son dyad in literature has led feminist scholars to claim that the mother-daughter relationship is 'the great unwritten story', in Rich's words.¹⁴⁵ The mother-daughter bond is a significant relationship to reclaim because by recovering it, the mother's body is also reclaimed from the abyss of shapelessness and abjectness. In these novels, Leda and Rose encounter their motherhood and the fluidity of their bodies through their connection with their daughters, bringing about self-revelation against the background of the Mediterranean seascape.

Hot Milk's maternal character Rose is a sixty-four-year-old woman who suffers from a bone disease that hinders her from walking – or so she believes. The nature of her disability is mysterious; although Rose claims that she is unable to walk, sometimes she does without any difficulty. Sofia reveals that back in England, they had sought the medical advice of many professionals, who were perplexed by Rose's illness and had no explanation to offer. The mother and daughter undergo 'a pilgrimage of sorts' (*HM*, p. 14), as Sofia describes it, to

¹⁴² Rich, p. 15.

¹⁴³ Vivante, p. 39.

¹⁴⁴ Rich, p. 226.

¹⁴⁵ Rich, p. 185.

southern Spain in order to consult one last doctor, Dr Gómez. In an interview, Levy claims that she is ‘struck by the way writers like Henry James and E. M. Forster take their characters out of Britain and America and put them in Europe, in an unfamiliar place’, which has a destabilising effect on the characters.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, from the very beginning of the novel, there is a suggestion that the Mediterranean seascape is where things are brought to a crisis and, possibly, a resolution, which might not have occurred if the characters were not displaced to a Mediterranean setting: ‘This had to be the final journey and I think my mother knew that, too’ (*HM*, p. 14). While Sofia’s coming of age as a woman is a significant aspect of the novel’s plot, Rose and her relationship with her daughter Sofia are crucial not only because they travel to the Mediterranean due to Rose’s strange illness, but also because as her mother, Rose plays an important role in Sofia’s process of becoming a woman.

As a young woman who is still trying to understand and experience what it means to be a woman, Sofia finds Rose’s presence and her influence overbearing, even in a physical manner. In fact, Sofia confesses that at times, she feels as if her mother’s disability haunts her, causing her healthy body to succumb to an inherited disability, as it were: ‘Sometimes, I find myself limping. It’s as if my body remembers the way I walk with my mother’ (*HM*, p. 26). This extension of Rose’s somatic suffering to Sofia is often unsettling. For instance, when Dr Gómez holds out his hand to Rose in their first meeting, Rose ‘lean[s] forward as if to shake it but then suddenly decide[s] not to’ (*HM*, p. 17). Sofia’s reaction is to shake the doctor’s hand ‘on behalf of [her] mother’ (*HM*, p. 17). At first, this simple gesture may seem like an effort to redress her mother’s rudeness. However, Sofia implies that there is more to it than that. ‘Her arm is my arm’ (*HM*, p. 17), Sofia narrates, meaning that the borders between her mother’s body and hers are porous. Indeed, Sofia reiterates this sense of a shared

¹⁴⁶Deborah Levy, quoted in Wendy Smith, ‘Strangers in a Strange Land: Deborah Levy’, *Publishers Weekly*, 13 May 2016 <<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/profiles/article/70347-strangers-in-a-strange-land-deborah-levy.html>> [accessed 25 March 2020].

belonging of their bodies in parallel-structured sentences throughout the novel: ‘She is my mother. Her legs are my legs. Her pains are my pains’ (*HM*, p. 181). This is reminiscent of Carl Jung’s essay ‘The Psychological Aspects of the Kore’, in which he discusses the representation of the female figure known as ‘Kore’ in ancient Greek sculpture. According to Jung, the Kore stands for both ‘a mother’ and ‘a maiden’.¹⁴⁷ He develops his reflections on this sculpture by arguing that there is a bond that is ‘pre-existent to consciousness’ which connects the mother’s psyche to the daughter’s.¹⁴⁸ ‘We could therefore say,’ Jung concludes, ‘that every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother, and that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter.’¹⁴⁹ It is interesting that Jung refers to that stage that is ‘pre-existent to consciousness’ because it is suggestive of Kristeva’s notion of a pre-oedipal, semiotic connection between mother and child, which she explores in *Powers of Horror*. The increasing impression in *Hot Milk* is that the mother and the daughter’s bodies have fluid boundaries and are therefore indistinguishable.

As discussed earlier, in *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva expands on the idea of woman’s fluid bodily borders, particularly that of the mother, and the abjection of the mother. In her struggle to discover her identity, Sofia feels the need to reject her mother in order to gain her autonomy and freedom. This is partly because Dr Gómez instructs her to free herself from her mother. Upon meeting Sofia, Dr Gómez soon realises that Sofia is also a patient in need of a diagnosis, but not of a medical kind. He notices that although Sofia is still young, she is neither independent nor strong, and he blames her mother’s influence: ‘Sometimes you limp, as if you have picked up on your mother’s emotional weather’ (*HM*, p. 58). Sofia listens

¹⁴⁷ C. G. Jung, ‘The Psychological Aspects of the Kore’, in C. G. Jung and C. Kerenyi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*, ed. by R. F. C. Hull (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969; repr. 1993), pp. 156–77 (p. 158).

¹⁴⁸ Jung, p. 162.

¹⁴⁹ Jung, p. 162.

to the doctor's advice and attempts to be bolder by stealing a fish but also, more significantly, by attempting to free herself from her mother's paralysing influence. To attain maturity, Sofia believes, she must reject Rose as a maternal Other – her (m)other – against which she defines herself as a subject. Interestingly, the Medusan motif in *Hot Milk*, discussed in the previous section, does not only stand for the unleashing of female sexuality but it also symbolises female monstrosity in the figure of the mother, who does not let her daughter construct her independent self. Rose explicitly expresses this connection between the Medusa and the mother only at the very end of the novel: 'We know our gaze is powerful so we pretend not to look' (*HM*, p. 218). According to the Medusan myth, the gaze of the Gorgon turns life into the ultimate abject, death, and it is this destructive power that threatens the daughter. Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner, in their discussion of the Medusan mother, assert that '[t]he fear of all the daughters is that in looking at the mother they will also see themselves and turn to stone.'¹⁵⁰ In other words, mothers pose a threat to their daughters because the former seem to transmit to the latter a maternal destiny written by patriarchal society that must be fulfilled, which extinguishes the fluidity of the young, sexually liberated woman. In fact, Sofia seems to want to escape not only from her mother, but also from the burden of the female genealogy, that is the matrilineal inheritance of pain suffered by women as mothers through years of female submission to man. Sofia recognises the plight of generations of women in Rose's illness, which may not be a physical illness as much as a testament to her suffering as an abandoned wife and a mother. She is aware that Rose struggled when she married Sofia's Greek father, whose 'civilization [...] saw her as a vessel to impregnate' (*HM*, p. 129), only to be abandoned with a child to raise by herself. The seemingly paralysed body of the mother that symbolises maternal suffering in a male world does not inspire empathy in Sofia as much as fear that one day, she 'might end up with a reduced life like hers' (*HM*, p. 128). According

¹⁵⁰ Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner, *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980), p. 190.

to Sofia, this is the reason why she was doing her best to find a diagnosis for her mother's illness.

'What is her body supposed to want and who is it supposed to please and is it ugly or is it something else?' (*HM*, p. 61). Sofia contemplates her mother's body and is struck by the ambiguity of the maternal figure. In Sofia's eyes, the 'milky marble' (*HM*, p. 211) of the Gómez Clinic that is shaped like a maternal breast reminds her of a lighthouse, which helps to direct sailors to safety. Sofia is perplexed by this because she feels that 'for much of [her] life it had been [her] mother who was the hazard' (*HM*, p. 211). It is this paradox of the nurturing yet destructive power of the mother that Sofia has to come to terms with in order to grow into a woman, although she does not understand this until towards the end. Part of the female sexual liberation, Cixous suggests in 'The Laugh of the Medusa', is the daughter's use of the 'mother's milk', which lies within her, as 'white ink' to write with.¹⁵¹ This white ink is the 'hot milk' of the novel's title, whose prominence in the title signposts the significance of reclaiming this abject fluid that the mother's body dispels, and, by extension, the importance of reclaiming the mother from abject otherness. What Sofia journeys towards in *Hot Milk* is the realisation that as Karen Elias-Button argues, a daughter 'does not require rejection of the primary identification with the mother' and that 'the [maternal Medusan] powers she has feared are really her own'.¹⁵² Rose, Sofia recounts, has 'a lot of contempt for her body' (*HM*, p. 63) to the point that she asks for her legs to be amputated. Although Rose does not reclaim her own body, Sofia reclaims it for her by recognising it as partly her own body. However, Rose experiences at least one moment of bodily self-recovery when she feels unhindered by her illness and, by extension, her suffering as a mother. This moment significantly occurs by the Mediterranean Sea:

¹⁵¹ Cixous, p. 881.

¹⁵² Karen Elias-Button, 'The Muse as Medusa', in *The Lost Tradition*, ed. by Davidson and Broner, pp. 193–206 (p. 197); Elias-Button, p. 204.

When I eventually turned round to face the shore, Rose Papastergiadis was still walking. A woman in early old age in a pretty dress and a hat taking a stroll barefoot in the sand. (*HM*, p. 204)

Unlike in the previous section, scenes where the mother is in direct contact with the Mediterranean setting are limited in *Hot Milk*, which is partly due to Rose's presumed disability. This is a telling observation despite the nature of Rose's illness since it foregrounds the question of the mother's freedom of movement, or rather the lack of it. The Mediterranean seascape, with its potential for self-revelation and liberation, can be so close yet so unreachable for the Mediterranean mother. Moulded to fit the patriarchal conception of motherhood, the mother has limited opportunity to escape to the sea; the only option the mother has of escaping momentarily her constricting social role is through her daughter by tapping into the fluidity of the boundaries between them. This is why Rose hopes, towards the end, that Sofia pursues her studies and makes a life of her own. Apart from this, there is another crucial reason why Rose has limited access to the sea: a narratorial limitation. In *The Mother-Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch argues that most twentieth-century literary narratives that project mother-daughter relationships are predominantly told from the perspective of the daughter, thereby positioning the mother as 'the object in her child's process of subject-formation'.¹⁵³ In this way, the mother is denied a voice. This is what occurs in *Hot Milk*, where the novel is narrated from Sofia's perspective and the emphasis is therefore put on Sofia's connection to the sea. It is Sofia, rather than Rose, who often experiences the sea and resonates with its fluidity. This raises questions regarding the narratorial point of view in relation to woman's textual access to the Mediterranean. The narrator occupies a position of power within the text she narrates, and it is this position which

¹⁵³ Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother-Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 12.

grants her access to an intimate space within the Mediterranean seascape for introspection and self-knowledge.

In *The Lost Daughter*, Ferrante redresses this narratorial imbalance that Hirsch points out by placing Leda, a divorced scholar in her mid-forties, at the centre of this Mediterranean narrative. In Ferrante's words, Leda 'is in the middle of a complicated, modern question of maternity'.¹⁵⁴ She is the mother of two daughters in their twenties that live in Canada with their father. Towards the end of July, Leda drives to the Ionian coast, where she plans on spending a month as a summer holiday. Unlike the stereotypical Mediterranean mother, Leda arrives in this Ionian seascape feeling 'free and without guilt at [her] freedom' because she is unconstrained by family life.¹⁵⁵ Perhaps it is this very freedom that gives Leda the opportunity to connect with the Mediterranean seascape, which she often visits through her daily trips to the beach. The reader soon learns, however, that Leda is not entirely free as she believes. The Mediterranean seascape does not allow Leda freedom from her past; it triggers her memories of her childhood, particularly those of her mother. '[A]s a child,' Leda recounts, 'I spent summers on beaches not yet completely eaten away by the concrete of the Camorra' (*TLD*, p. 15). The increasing sense of anxiety that Leda feels results from the fear of the sea that her mother instilled in her when she was young:

When I was a child, my mother had frightened me, saying, Leda, you must never go swimming if you see a red flag: it means the sea is rough and you might drown. That fear endured through the years, and even now, although the water was a sheet of translucent paper stretching to the horizon, I didn't dare go in: I was anxious. [...] Only at intervals my mother appeared at the top of the dunes and shouted to me as if I were still a child: Leda, what are you doing, don't you see the red flag? (*TLD*, p. 9)

¹⁵⁴ Elena Ferrante, 'The Temperature that Can Ignite the Reader: A Conversation with the Listeners of *Fahrenheit*', in *Frantumaglia*, trans. by Goldstein, pp. 203–17 (p. 206).

¹⁵⁵ Elena Ferrante, *The Lost Daughter*, trans. by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2008; repr. 2018), p. 12. All subsequent references to this novel will be parenthetically given in the text, using the abbreviation *TLD* followed by the relevant page number.

Leda's recollection of her mother, which is induced by the sea, as well as her voyeuristic observation of a mother and daughter playing with a doll on the beach, bring to the surface Leda's anxieties on motherhood. The young mother Nina and her small girl Elena form part of a larger Neapolitan family, but in Leda's eyes, the mother and daughter seem to be immersed in their own mother-daughter microcosm. Leda soon starts to obsessively study them as they play with Nani, the ugly doll which turns the mother-daughter dyad into a nuclear family of females. This fixation betrays Leda's feelings of inadequacy as a mother, particularly her abandonment of her two daughters when Bianca and Marta were just six and four years old respectively. As Leslie Elwell notes, 'mothering "gone wrong"' – 'sexualized mothers, aggressive mothers, failing and flailing mothers, even mothers who forsake their offspring' – is a crucial theme in Ferrante's oeuvre, which incorporates the demystification of the idea that the Mediterranean mother is happily enslaved to motherhood.¹⁵⁶ Reminded of her childhood fear of being abandoned by her mother, who often threatened to leave, as well as her own failure to fulfil her social role as 'a good mother' (*TLD*, p. 47), Leda sees in Nina a performance of serene and perfect motherhood, which unearths her disquiet regarding her own troubled identity as a mother, as well as her need to come to terms with the haunting figure of her mother. Leda's summer trip to the Ionian coast does not turn out to be a relaxing vacation of reading and swimming as she intended, but a painful resurfacing of memory and an unsettling encounter with the complex nature of motherhood mediated through Nina, Elena, and Nani.

The turning point of *The Lost Daughter* occurs when Leda steals Nani the doll, an act which she describes as 'a gesture of [hers] that made no sense' (*TLD*, p. 10) but which, as Leda knows, has grave repercussions. Nani plays a central role in the narrative not only

¹⁵⁶ Leslie Elwell, 'Breaking Bonds: Refiguring Maternity in Elena Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter*', in *The Works of Elena Ferrante: Reconfiguring the Margins*, ed. by Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie V. Love (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 237–69 (p. 237).

because her disappearance causes the falling apart of Nina and Elena's idyllic relationship, but also because in her plastic body shaped like a girl's converge different aspects and roles that the female identity comprises. Doll-like figurines were significant cultural artefacts in Greek antiquity, although scholars are still undecided whether to interpret these female-shaped statuettes as toys or 'votives dedicated by the girls to help ensure sexual maturation', as Larson writes.¹⁵⁷ Larson argues that these dolls might have served both purposes, and indeed, both dolls and votives have 'a socializing function': paving the way for girls' maturation into women as mothers, whether through play or prayer.¹⁵⁸ In *The Lost Daughter*, Leda observes little Elena playing with the doll and notices with repugnancy that 'all [Elena's] ancestors [were already] compressed into her flesh' (*TLD*, p. 37), thereby acknowledging dolls' role in transmitting the inheritance of matrilineality to daughters at a very young age. Crucially, Leda is unsettled by how Nina and Elena simultaneously and interchangeably perform both motherhood and daughterhood through Nani:

Now [Nina and Elena] gave [Nani] words in turn, now together, superimposing the adult's fake-child voice and the child's fake-adult voice. They imagined it was the same, single voice coming from the same throat of a thing in reality mute. But evidently I couldn't enter into their illusion, I felt a growing repulsion for that double voice. [...] I felt an unease as if faced with a thing done badly, as if a part of me were insisting, absurdly, that they should make up their minds, give the doll a stable, constant voice, either that of the mother or that of the daughter, and stop pretending that they were the same. (*TLD*, p. 22–23)

The doll foregrounds the fluidity of female roles, where the mother is also a daughter while the daughter has the potential to become a mother. There is a subversive element to Nina and Elena's use of the doll at the Mediterranean beach to explore the interchangeability of female roles. By suppressing the stability of female socialisation which Leda deems right, Nina and Elena highlight the fluidity between the bodily and identity boundaries of mothers and daughters. The fluidity of female roles is ultimately most evident in the title of the novel

¹⁵⁷ Larson, p. 101.

¹⁵⁸ Larson, p. 107.

since ‘the lost daughter’ may refer to all the main female characters in the novel, including the doll. Although the act of stealing the doll is inexplicable to Leda, she still understands that Nani was a symbol of Nina and Elena’s ‘bond, their reciprocal passion’ and ‘the shining testimony of perfect motherhood’ (*TLD*, p. 62). What is clear is that by stealing the doll, the bond between Nina and Elena is lost. The child constantly cries for her ‘lost daughter’ and she becomes difficult for Nina to take care of. As a result, Nina escapes the burden of motherhood through her affair with Gino, thereby paralleling Leda’s past. Meanwhile, Leda forms a strong yet strange attachment to Nani. In an attempt to express her painful recollections of being pregnant with Marta, Leda projects unto Nani the horrors of pregnancy by expelling the fluid that Elena put inside the doll to make her resemble her pregnant aunt. Leda recounts this scene in such a way that it almost reads like she is performing an abortion on Nani:

I parted her lips, with one finger held her mouth open, ran some water inside her and then shook her hard to wash out the murky cavity of her trunk, her belly, to finally get the baby out that Elena had put inside her. (*TLD*, p. 124)

This female fluidity that makes Leda anxious becomes significant for her because it is this very interchangeability that troubles her which helps Leda project onto Nina both her feelings regarding her imperfect motherhood as well as her complex feelings towards her mother. ‘In her relationship with her daughter,’ Hirsch writes, ‘a mother works out her unresolved relationship to her own mother’.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, Nina plays the roles of surrogate daughter and mother for Leda in order to come to terms with her past. Elwell observes that Nina’s body also serves as ‘the body through which Leda recollects her own desire’, referring to how Nina’s flirtation with Gino reminds Leda of her own affair as well as her childhood

¹⁵⁹ Marianne Hirsch, ‘Mothers and Daughters’, *Signs*, 7 (1981), 200–22 (p. 206).

fantasies of her mother's secret meeting with lovers.¹⁶⁰ The sense of the erotic, however, interestingly comes out stronger in the female relationships of *The Lost Daughter*, rather than male-female relations. Leda notices an 'erotic power' (*TLD*, p. 93) between the doll and Elena, as well as an intimate bodily connection between mother and daughter: 'They laughed together, enjoying the feeling of body against body, touching noses, spitting out streams of water, kissing each other.' (*TLD*, p. 19). It is interesting that Leda does not grow fond of Nina just as a way of reconciling with her own past or merely to serve as a mirror through whom Leda recollects her past desire. Leda feels a quasi-erotic impulse towards Nina grounded in female companionship and understanding, which she imagines in terms of a Mediterranean experience: 'Unfold two beach chairs, look at the sea together, describe in tranquility my experience, our hands touching every so often.' (*TLD*, p. 79). In her thoughts, Leda imagines the Mediterranean seascape as a place for female connection among women, free from their social role and in touch, once again, with the sensuality and fluidity of their bodies.

In Rachel Cusk's autofictional novel *Outline*, the protagonist Faye, like Leda, is a divorced mother of two children, who travels to Greece in order to give creative writing classes. Away from her sons and her ex-husband, Faye swims in the Aegean Sea and feels 'a desire for freedom' as well as a pull towards movement, which she interprets as 'a desire to escape from what [she] had'.¹⁶¹ '[T]his desire to be free, was still compelling to me,' Faye narrates; 'I still, somehow, believed in it, despite having proved that everything about it was illusory'.¹⁶² In *Hot Milk* and *The Lost Daughter*, the moments of direct connection between the maternal woman and the Mediterranean seascape are fleeting, but in these brief moments – when Rose walks on the shore and when Leda dreams of companionship with another woman by the sea – the reader is given a glimpse into the private world of the mother as a

¹⁶⁰ Elwell, p. 256.

¹⁶¹ Rachel Cusk, *Outline* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014), pp. 73–74.

¹⁶² Cusk, p. 74.

woman who sees the Mediterranean seascape as a space for freedom, a mental space where she can indulge in her dreams, and a space for connection with other women as well as their bodies through their daughters. Medea, the prime example of the ‘unnatural mother’ (TLD, p. 139) in Greek mythology laments in Euripides’s eponymous play that women must accept their husband as ‘[p]ossessor of [their] body’.¹⁶³ Dispossessed of their bodies to fulfil their social roles, the mothers in these narratives reconnect with the semiotic fluidity of their bodies through the porousness of female identity roles. The Mediterranean seascape allows these mothers to come to terms with their abject otherness and their troubled relationship with maternity in order to become subjects in their own lives and, in Leda’s case, in their textual narrative too. Their bodies are displaced from the restrictive domestic home to the Mediterranean seascape, which they transform into an intimate space by imbuing it with their desire for freedom and by getting in touch, once again, with the fluidity of their female body in its multitude of female forms.

Conclusion

It is significant to note that while the female novels discussed in this chapter are presented as literary texts that provide valuable insight into the Mediterranean as a private space, they have often been regarded as middlebrow fiction, or ‘beach reads’. Sagan’s *Bonjour Tristesse* and Djébar’s *The Mischief* in particular, which were published at a time of political strife in both France and Algeria, were considered by critics as novels that have literary merit but which do not deserve critical attention because they disregard the political context. What readers who regard these novels as apolitical and not serious enough overlook is the strong sense of the politics of space and gender, which intersect in the textual Mediterranean seascape of these novels. To rephrase a well-known feminist dictum, *the personal*

¹⁶³ Euripides, *Medea*, in *Medea and Other Plays*, trans. by Philip Vellacott (London: Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 17–61, l. 231.

Mediterranean is political. Just as ‘the domestic is not addressed as the Other of public space’ in the field of geography, as the feminist geographer Rose points out, likewise, this private dimension of the Mediterranean is not adequately addressed as the Other of the public Mediterranean in literary criticism and theory.¹⁶⁴

The female narratives discussed project a Mediterranean that is not just saturated by tropes. The Mediterranean constructed in the female literary imagination is an intensely personal Mediterranean, whose waters act as mirrors that reflect back woman’s ever-changing, introspective images. These are images whose solidity is constantly broken by waves and ripples that defy the stability of being. In their novels, Sagan, Djébar, Levy, and Ferrante gesture towards conceiving the Mediterranean as a feminine geography, in which female sexuality and otherness are discovered, explored, and reclaimed. A new understanding of ‘gendered geography’ is therefore proposed through these female narratives, whereby the Mediterranean is constructed as a textual space through female, rather than male, discourse. Rather than navigating the perilous seas like men, the female characters in these novels undergo a voyage to the Mediterranean shore, and in this space where land meets sea, these women encounter themselves and redeem their otherness.

¹⁶⁴ Rose, p. 40.

Conclusion:
A Female *Oikos*

‘She is a spirit of place and not simply ‘a woman’.’
– Lawrence Durrell, ‘Women of the Mediterranean’¹⁶⁵

‘Remember you are half water.’
– Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad*¹⁶⁶

‘At a time when gender has become the focus of so much historical debate, one might ask: how male is the Mediterranean?’¹⁶⁷ After surveying the human history of the Mediterranean from 22000 BC until the present time, Abulafia asks this provocative question in his conclusion to *The Great Sea* while observing that ‘[t]hose individuals who transformed the Mediterranean world [...] always seem to be men.’¹⁶⁸ The exclusion of women in the grand narrative of Mediterranean history foregrounds women’s lack of movement and independence as well as their submission to men, who made history by navigating the Mediterranean and turning it into a ‘Great Sea’. However, not all women stayed at home. Some accompanied their husbands, while others travelled as pilgrims to the Holy Land or as prostitutes to provide sexual services to the armies. Abulafia points out that women do feature, every now and then, in the annals of the Mediterranean; ‘one group of women,’ he writes, ‘has a particular importance for the history of the Mediterranean: female slaves’.¹⁶⁹ The fact that women’s most significant participation in Mediterranean history lies in how they played the part of the traded rather than the traders, the merchandise rather than the merchants, shows that history favours the heroic exploits of men and casts women in passive

¹⁶⁵ Durrell, p. 376.

¹⁶⁶ Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2005), p. 43.

¹⁶⁷ Abulafia, p. 643.

¹⁶⁸ Abulafia, p. 643.

¹⁶⁹ Abulafia, p. 644.

roles. Many ‘herstories’ did not survive either because they were not recorded by male-authored history, or simply because there were not many to recount in the first place. As women’s access to travel and education increased, travel accounts written by women started emerging, which according to Bassnett, differed from ‘the more public discourse of male travellers’ in their tendency to focus ‘on the personal and on relationships in general’.¹⁷⁰ As this odyssey through the literary and cultural waters of the female Mediterranean has sought to show, by exploring this denied shore of the Mediterranean, which women have been constructing since their early travelogues, a personal Mediterranean is recovered.

The purpose of uncovering a female Mediterranean is not to privilege the female over the male, the personal over the public, because turning this hierarchical power dynamic on its head is incongruous with Mediterranean thinking. Rather, rethinking and reconstructing the Mediterranean from a female perspective unearths values and other aspects of the Mediterranean that may have been overlooked. As has been argued in the previous chapter, women’s literary experience of the Mediterranean highlights that the same Inland Sea that over the ages has been constructed as a public space can also be a deeply intimate and personal space. Especially in the coming-of-age novels discussed, the personal dimension of the Mediterranean is brought out in the way that the potential for self-discovery comes to fruition through an intimate connection between the female body and the Mediterranean seascape, in particular the sea. However, the sense of the personal in the female Mediterranean should not be equated with individualistic egocentrism; it is *an expression of difference* and it speaks of the Mediterranean’s rich heterogeneity. ‘The Mediterranean speaks with many voices; it is a sum of *individual histories*’, writes Braudel, suggesting that what we call ‘the Mediterranean’ is actually a compendium of many personal

¹⁷⁰ Bassnett, p. 227.

‘Mediterraneans’, as it were.¹⁷¹ Through its emphasis on personal and individual herstories, the female Mediterranean effectively foregrounds this space as a plurality of individuals. On the other hand, the use of the adjective ‘female’ in the conceptualisation of the ‘female Mediterranean’ does not generalise and universalise through gender, as it may seem, but in its synonymousness with the Other and fluidity, it ultimately stresses difference and a unity in this experience of difference. The ‘female Mediterranean’ is not a contradiction in terms but rather *a strengthening of the core values of the Mediterranean*.

One of these fundamental values of the Mediterranean and how it has been perceived over the ages is the possibility it offers to encounter the Other, since the sea has often been described by Chambers among other scholars as ‘an intricate site of encounters and currents’.¹⁷² This contact with the Other, which is at the heart of Mediterranean thinking, seems to be lost in the construction of the Mediterranean as a personal space; a contact of this nature requires the reaching out of oneself to meet the Other in a public space that is negotiated and co-mapped during the encounter. Although this seems to foreground one of the limitations of conceiving the Mediterranean as a personal space, the female narratives analysed suggest that rethinking the Mediterranean in this way invites reflection on an equally significant and indirectly related aspect of the Mediterranean: the question of Mediterranean identity. Reconfiguring the Mediterranean as a personal space still results in an encounter but *one meets oneself*, not the Other, and comes to terms with the otherness within. By connecting with the Mediterranean seascape, the female characters in the novels discussed explore the otherness within themselves and the fluidity of being while destabilising the sense of a stable identity. Mediterranean identity is fluid; in other words, it is unstable, multi-faceted and always in negotiation. ‘Anyone, regardless of place of birth or

¹⁷¹ Braudel, ‘Preface to the English Edition’, p. 13 (emphasis added).

¹⁷² Chambers, p. 32.

residence,' Matvejević writes, 'can become a Mediterranean. Mediterraneity is acquired, not inherited; it is a decision, not a privilege.'¹⁷³ What Matvejević suggests is that Mediterranean identity is not geographically determined or the outcome of external forces only. It is an internal process since one *decides to become* Mediterranean. Perhaps, it is through experiencing this inner otherness that the openness of the self is honed to traverse the borders of personal space and meet the Other in the public site of the encounter. It is this Mediterranean fluidity that enables the transition between the private and the public domain and enables contact with the Other. If the fluidity of the female body and the sea is so essential to the concept of the female Mediterranean, perhaps the borders between the public and the private domain are ultimately rendered porous too. Does not the public site where one meets the Other have the potential to become a private space too in how a personal relationship based on mutual understanding and acceptance can be formed?

The gender binary – the border between male and female – is also eroded within the context of the female Mediterranean. Through their queer sexuality, Sofia in *Hot Milk* and Nadia in *The Mischief* suggest that the fluidity of the female body coupled with that of the Mediterranean seascape has the potential to dissolve the gender binary and sexual norms that are imposed by society too. A question that arises is whether this fluidity that the female Mediterranean foregrounds as an intrinsic yet repressed value of the Mediterranean can also be experienced by men, and whether they can access the personal Mediterranean too. Just like Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine* and Kristeva's notion of semiotic writing, the female Mediterranean and its personal geography is not exclusive to female writers, nor do female writers necessarily depict the Mediterranean in this way. The female Mediterranean is not determined by the gender of the writer as much as it is an attitude and an outlook that is

¹⁷³ Matvejević, p. 93.

antithetical to male constructions of the Mediterranean as well as phallogocentric writing.¹⁷⁴ What constitutes the female Mediterranean is the emphasis on the fluidity of being, identity, and the body. This fluidity is not exclusive to women but as seen in Chapter Two, it is predominantly associated with femaleness and it is therefore mostly reclaimed from abjectness by women. This is why although the *Odyssey* has been described as a private and somewhat female epic as opposed to the public and masculine narrative of the *Iliad*, the former Homeric poem does not truly chart a female Mediterranean. While the stage where the *Iliad* is set is the public theatre of war, which is predominantly occupied by men, the *Odyssey*, as its name suggests, follows only one man's return journey through various locations in the Mediterranean, which gives the impression that it is a personal narrative. The *Odyssey*'s Mediterranean world is strikingly populated by many women who play significant roles, so much so that Samuel Butler was convinced that the epic was composed by a woman. In *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, Butler writes that in the *Odyssey* there is 'a preponderance of female interest, and a fuller knowledge of those things which a woman generally has to deal with'.¹⁷⁵ Butler agrees with Gladstone that while the *Iliad*'s preoccupation with the public life of men at war leaves little space for the domestic, 'in the *Odyssey* the family life supplies the tissue into which is woven the thread of the poem'.¹⁷⁶ This is confirmed in Book II: when the assembly asks Telemachus if he has news of 'an army on the march' (*O.* II. 30) or 'some other public matter' (*O.* II. 32), the young man replies that the grievous news is a personal one since it concerns his family and his private dwelling – 'my house' (*O.* II. 48). Telemachus is referring to the loss of his father as well as the suitors' invasion of his father's palace. The domestic space of Odysseus's household in Ithaca therefore becomes the wandering hero's much sought for destination as well as courtship's battleground. The

¹⁷⁴ This shall be seen further on in a brief discussion of a film adaptation of the *Odyssey* directed by a male director that brings to the fore aspects of the female Mediterranean.

¹⁷⁵ Samuel Butler, *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1925), p. 109.

¹⁷⁶ Gladstone quoted in Butler, p. 110.

increasing impression, however, is that this domestic space is policed by men and is the locus of male desire and power, which is especially evident in the way Penelope is treated by her husband, her son, and the suitors. Although the epic recounts a hero's personal voyage in the Mediterranean, Odysseus fails to connect on an intimate level with its geography and inhabitants, and utilises, instead, his male power and violence to make his way back to order and civilisation. While the *Odyssey* has the makings of a private narrative, it is only superficially 'personal'. The hero's contact with the Mediterranean and its peoples highlight his inability to let Mediterranean difference and heterogeneity transform him from within, since his encounters with otherness serve him as an opportunity to confirm his individualistic sense of self, rather than to question the stability of the ego. The centripetal force of the epic subsumes the female herstories into the grand narrative of Odysseus, and what could have potentially between a private narrative becomes a public show of male heroism. While the *Odyssey* is personal in the sense that it follows a man's return journey to his grief-stricken household, the epic's claim to the 'female Mediterranean', as Butler believed, must be challenged in light of Odysseus's male distortion of the private spaces that the Mediterranean offers into spaces of abject wilderness.

'Where I live as woman is to men a wilderness. But to me it is home.'¹⁷⁷ Ursula K. Le Guin's words could have easily been thought or uttered by Calypso, Circe, and other women that inhabit the Mediterranean. For them, the Mediterranean is their home, their *oikos*. The fact that *oikos*, the Greek word for home, and ecology have the same root suggest that home is not simply a specific geographical location as much as a dynamic relationship between organisms and their physical environment. The Mediterranean is a geography of the mind, over-codified and endlessly (re)constructed, but it is also a material reality. In the

¹⁷⁷ Ursula K. Le Guin, 'Woman/Wilderness', in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), pp. 161–64 (p. 162).

examples of female Mediterranean literature discussed, there is a strong emphasis on the relationship between the organic world of the Mediterranean and the female bodies that inhabit it, and this symbiosis between the human and the more-than-human Mediterranean world is perhaps another significant aspect of the female Mediterranean that is brought to the fore when the female body comes into contact with the Mediterranean body of water. Crucially, this encounter becomes possible by acknowledging the fluidity of the body and its potential for interconnection since, as Astrida Neimanis observes in *Bodies of Water*, '[f]or us humans, the flow and flush of waters sustain our own bodies, but also connect them to other bodies, to other worlds beyond our human selves.'¹⁷⁸ These interrelationships between human and nonhuman bodies serve to challenge the idea of impermeable bodily borders as well as individualism and self-sufficiency. Neimanis writes, 'we require other bodies of other waters [...] to bathe us into being'.¹⁷⁹ This is precisely what occurs in the coming-of-age novels analysed in Chapter Three, where the amphibious female protagonists metamorphose from girls into women in the Mediterranean seascape. There are no borders between the female body and the body of water of the Mediterranean; in the corpogeography, as termed in Chapter Two, of the personal Mediterranean, the human and the nonhuman flow into each other. The female connection with fluidity yet again is what allows women, more than men, to be shaped by the Mediterranean as much as they shape it. What is implied is the notion that to fully interact with the physical Mediterranean, the female body must be reclaimed from abject otherness. As Rich argues in 'Notes toward a Politics of Location', to explore the complex configurations of place, one must begin 'not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closest in—the body.'¹⁸⁰ Later on in the essay, she qualifies this statement by highlighting the necessity to reclaim the particularity of each individual

¹⁷⁸ Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 2.

¹⁷⁹ Neimanis, p. 3.

¹⁸⁰ Adrienne Rich, 'Notes toward a Politics of Location', in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), pp. 210–31 (p. 212).

body: ‘When I write “the body,” I see nothing in particular. To write “my body” plunges me into lived experience, particularity’.¹⁸¹ Writing ‘my body’ brings out the various personal intersections of identity that converge in the geography of the body. Writing ‘my body’ also underscores difference. To chart the map of a personal Mediterranean – ‘my Mediterranean’ – one must also start from ‘my body’, its porous borders, and its fluid identity. The female Mediterranean emerges as both *a bodily and natural geography* out of this intersection between the particularity of the female body and this body’s situatedness within the Mediterranean as one of the myriad of watery bodies that compose the Mediterranean *oikos*. Home, for Mediterranean women, is not the palace in Ithaca, nor any other man-made building, but the physical Mediterranean geography, through which they reclaim their othered bodies and their female identity.

*

The *Odyssey* is a story about homecoming – *nostos*. At the heart of Odysseus’s epic voyage in the Mediterranean is the desire for home, for civilisation, for arrival and closure, which are deferred for twenty years. Emily Wilson questions whether in the end, the hero Odysseus manages to reach his home. ‘Coming home means more than simply reaching a particular spatial or geographical location,’ Wilson observes.¹⁸² Home, Wilson suggests, is the intersection of two geographies: physical and mental. Although Odysseus physically returns to Ithaca, perhaps his mind wanders still. As Tiresias prophesises in Book XI, although Odysseus will return safely to Ithaca, another journey awaits him, a journey that will take him to the underworld. His death will come ‘far from the sea’ (*O. XI. 154*), Tiresias tells him, and yet Odysseus spends his voyage distrusting the Mediterranean waters, unaware that the same sea that threatens to drown him is the one that can take him home. In Dante’s *Hell*, Ulysses

¹⁸¹ Rich, ‘Politics of Location’, p. 215.

¹⁸² Emily Wilson, ‘Introduction’, in Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. by Wilson, pp. 1–79 (p. 71).

meets his end when in his masculine ambition '[t]o venture the uncharted distances', he sails past the Pillars of Hercules, the Western boundary of the Mediterranean.¹⁸³ Perhaps Odysseus's flaw is that he never realises that the Mediterranean is his home, or at least he refuses to mentally inhabit this space by clinging to his patriarchal, un-Mediterranean traits. Odysseus is mentally exiled from the Mediterranean and in Dante's version of the myth, he meets his end when he physically exiles himself from the home that he rejects, despite having a twenty-year opportunity to dissolve his stable self and connect with the Mediterranean as his *oikos*.

Franco Piavoli, in his film *Nostos: The Return*, revisits the Odyssean myth and navigates the female Mediterranean in his retelling of Odysseus's homecoming as a return journey to his original home: the mother.¹⁸⁴ If as Rich claims the closest geography is that of the body, then our first home is the mother's womb – the matrix. 'Begin,' Rich writes, '[...] with the material, with matter, *mma*, *madre*'.¹⁸⁵ Piavoli's gaze mainly captures Odysseus at the mercy of the Mediterranean Sea and the hero's struggle to survive. The camera emphasises the unknowability of the nonhuman body of the Mediterranean Sea, which constantly changes colour and force, alternating between docile waves and tempestuous swells. The ambiguity of the sea is highlighted; the same sea that imperils Odysseus delivers him to Calypso's island and, ultimately, Ithaca. Indeed, the relationship between man and nature in *Nostos* is characterised by both harmony and conflict, but even more significant is the way the physical and human geography of the Mediterranean are ecologically interconnected in Piavoli's vision. The various voices of human beings, whose unintelligible speech is reminiscent of primitive Mediterranean languages, encounter and mingle with the sounds of the physical Mediterranean to compose the aural tapestry of the film. This effect is

¹⁸³ Dante, *The Divine Comedy I: Hell*, trans. by Dorothy L. Sayers (London: Penguin Books, 1949), XXVI. 109.

¹⁸⁴ *Nostos: Il Ritorno*, dir. by Franco Piavoli (Zefiro Film and Immaginazione, 1989).

¹⁸⁵ Rich, 'Politics of Location', p. 213 (emphasis added).

also produced through the visual emphasis on texture. Often, the camera closely captures Odysseus's body in touch with his physical surroundings, whether he is covered in sand on the shore of Calypso's island, swallowing and spitting water when lost at sea, or sensuously running his hand down the bark of a tree in Ithaca. The Mediterranean clings to his body, shapes his destiny, and crucially, it also acts as a balm to his war wounds. Piavoli's Odysseus is not a self-assured hero; he is visually and aurally traumatised by the Trojan War. Voyaging through the Mediterranean helps him expiate his sins and delivers him from man's world of brutal violence to the domestic bliss of Ithaca, where Penelope awaits him. Significantly, there is another home that Odysseus travels to, where the personal space of the female Mediterranean is glimpsed. In *Nostos*, only two words can be recognised: *mater* and *oikos*. Odysseus utters the first word, '*mater*', when he invokes Anticlea in a dark, cavernous space, which recalls Odysseus's journey to Hades in Book XI. Later on, when he is lost at sea without a raft and hallucinating about war, Odysseus says '*oikos*'. This is followed by a scene where Odysseus swims towards the reflection of the moon in the sea. As Piavoli explains in an interview, Odysseus recreates the journey of a sperm towards the egg, the journey of the beginning of life, which visually represents the desire to return to the womb of the mother.¹⁸⁶ Piavoli therefore interprets *nostos*, or homecoming, in light of these two words, *mater* and *oikos*. *Nostos* is a return to the maternal home, which stands for both the underworld and the womb, death and life. This vision of the Mediterranean can indeed be described as a female vision, where the binaries between human and nonhuman, and life and death are tossed by the waves and dissolved in the sea. In *Nostos*, Odysseus undertakes a return journey to a female *oikos*, which is simultaneously the mother and the Mediterranean. He manages to arrive to Ithaca partly because he allows the Mediterranean to transform his journey into a personal voyage of redemption.

¹⁸⁶ Tom Wilson, *Franco Piavoli Interview - Nostos: The Return (Eng Subs)*, online video recording, YouTube, 15 May 2019, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZI4JBpgauXw>> [accessed 4 May 2020].

Abulafia claims that ‘the relative maleness of the traversed Mediterranean’ leads him to believe that ‘the Italians seem to be right to say *il mare*, as opposed to the French *la mer*’.¹⁸⁷ The historian seems to forget, however, that in geographical discourse, the physical geography of the Mediterranean is conceived as a female space to be traversed by male heroes, travellers, and traders.¹⁸⁸ In French, the words for ‘sea’ and ‘mother’ are homonyms – *la mer* and *la mère* – suggesting the overlap of the female and the Mediterranean both through sound and through the waters of the sea and amniotic fluid. Rethinking the Mediterranean from a female perspective is to reimagine the Mediterranean as a female *oikos*, a home inhabited by bodies of water and bodily waters mixing and shaping each other. The female Mediterranean is also a corpogeographical odyssey that traces a return journey to the core aspects of the Mediterranean – its polyphony, its fluidity, its heterogeneity, its infinite richness in difference. To navigate the female Mediterranean is to accept its invitation to *become Mediterranean* both in body and in thought so as to experience this recovered richness.

¹⁸⁷ Abulafia, p. 644.

¹⁸⁸ For instance, the Mediterranean is a ‘feminine sea, like Helen of old,’ Ludwig writes, ‘that everyone would possess, so that it passes from one master to another’ (Ludwig, p. vii).

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