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Insularity, Travel, and the Encounter with Female Alterity in Cervantes's *Los Trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*

Abstract

The *Persiles* exploits a dialectic of centre and periphery to mark the difference between the known, Christian world and the strange, "other" spaces situated on the margins of the euro-centric map. This paper argues that Cervantes knowingly exploits the still largely unexplored Northern regions to situate the portrayal of the female other. Through the experience of travel, the two princes and their companions meet types of women that diverge from the model of the idealised lady, represented by Auristela: desiring women, evil ones and courageous others populate the universe of the Far North. Although some of these representations flow into the monstrous and suffer condemnation from the narrator, Cervantes does not aim to deprecate alterity; instead, he uses the Northern settings to illustrate the varied facets of the female subject.

1. *Geography and alterity*

When setting off on a maritime journey, the early modern traveller must expect to find otherness. Strange creatures inhabit the exotic lands situated on the farthest corners of the map: outside the known, familiar space delimited by the Pillars of Hercules lies the realm of the unknown, the place where the dividing line between the real and the imaginary, the possible and the impossible, wears thinner. Since Antiquity, unexplored territories have exalted the imagination: they reverse traditional expectations of familiarity and normativity to become places of difference, home to all that is unacceptable or "other" to the known world. Hence monsters, utopias, paradises, infernal creatures and all that is objectionable to Western society and to Christian doctrine does not disappear from the imaginary but is decentralised, moved to the margins of the map.

The estranging experience of the encounter with alterity acquires even more fascination when "the other" is a woman: in its often rebellious and disturbing representation, the female other, the antithesis of what is deemed "normative" or "acceptable", is also a stable and yet destabilising inhabitant of the places that can only be made sense of through the imagination. In Books I and II of Cervantes's last novel, *Los Trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*, the two hereditary princes and their travel companions meet, either through direct experience or indirect mediation, the female other: werewolves, witches and Amazon-like figures populate the frozen islands of the exotic Far North. At the margins of the known world, female alterity makes its uncanny appearance, contrasting the representations of normative and idealised femininity incarnated by characters such as Sigismunda and Sinforosa. While models of divergent femininity populate the whole constellation of the *Persiles*, it is in the first half of the text, when the heroes are thrust from island to island in the Northern hemisphere, that the female other reaches its most disturbing representation. Insularity, then, becomes indissolubly linked with the condition of alterity, and travel through these unknown spaces fosters the encounter with divergent images of femininity. Starting from these assumptions, this paper aims to read the *Persiles* from a new angle by linking the maritime voyage and insularity with the representation of different prototypes of women that are antithetical to the model of the good Christian wife and of the idealised lady of early modern literature. It argues that Cervantes consciously exploits the settings of the still largely uncharted Northern lands to situate portrayals of femininity that are non-conforming to early seventeenth-century models of exemplarity. The first part of this study will overview previous critical engagement with the text, while the second part will analyse the examples of divergent femininity in relation to the spaces in which they are represented.

To the likely surprise of many contemporary readers, Cervantes deemed the *Persiles*, not the *Quijote*, his best work.[1] Published posthumously in 1617 by his bride Catalina de Salazar, the *Persiles* is subtitled a "historia septentrional" for the vast importance that Northern regions acquire in the development of

1 In the dedicatory epistle to the Count of Lemos, in the second part of the *Quijote*, Cervantes declares that the *Persiles* "ha de ser o el más malo o el mejor [libro] que en nuestra lengua se haya compuesto...y digo que me arrepiento de haber dicho *el más malo*, porque, según la opinión de mis amigos, ha de llegar al extremo de la bondad posible" (*Don Quijote*, II, Dedicatoria al Conde de Lemos).

its plot. Indeed, the two protagonists, who throughout the whole length of the book assume the pseudonyms of Periandro and Auristela,[2] are the hereditary princes of the Northernmost provinces of the world, the kingdoms of Thule and Friesland. Sigismunda, whose beauty is more divine than human, is set to marry Magsimino, Persiles's older brother and king of Thule, to end the terrible war that is ravaging both countries. However, Persiles's mother Eustoquia, who knows that her younger son is being consumed by sorrow as he too is in love with Sigismunda, suggests that he and his beloved embark together on a voyage to Rome, which they will justify to Magsimino as a pilgrimage to achieve Catholic illumination.[3] The lovers, who had been separated by adverse fortune for a year, meet again on the Barbaric island – situated somewhere in the Northern hemisphere – at the opening of the text and, together with many other travel companions, embark on their long and perilous journey to the heart of Christendom, pretending to be brother and sister to protect their identities. The first two books that compose the text describe the heroes' journey through the frozen islands of Northern Europe, where thrilling encounters with pirates, cannibals and strange monsters abound. Books III and IV, instead, see the pilgrims disembark in Lisbon and continue their voyage to Rome via land, much to Sigismunda's contentment, who was tired of going "de puerto en puerto y de isla en isla, sujeta a la inconstancia del mar y a la movible voluntad de los vientos" (*Persiles*, 265).

The dynamic experience of travel across the whole span of the European map proves that Cervantes was not immune to the wave of fascination generated by the geographical discoveries, many of which occurred during his lifetime. Tales of faraway places bearing lush vegetation and populated by spectacular

2 Several studies have investigated the meaning of the protagonists' pseudonyms. Auristela, meaning "golden star", builds a symbolic correspondence with her role within the novel: like a star, she illuminates the hero's way through his journey. Periandro, from the prefix "peri", meaning "round", "wide" or "very much", seems to indicate a "very manly man" (Colahan 1994). The heroes' real names are also suggestive: if Persiles reminds of Perseo, the slayer of Medusa and, symbolically, of sexual temptation, Sigismunda may mean either "following the world" or "the hand of victory", with the second meaning establishing a connection between her and the figure of the Virgin. See Colahan (1994) for a more detailed analysis.

3 This plot reproduces the conventional structure of the Byzantine romance, a genre to which the *Persiles* is greatly indebted.

creatures filled the popular imagination as an infinity of maps, travel accounts and mythical narratives began to appear with increasing frequency in Europe. Places unknown or newly discovered acquired mystical attributes as legends and superstitions filled the gap created by the lack of empirical knowledge. To the early modern traveller, the blank spaces on the map represented new worlds that subverted the ordinary and hosted difference: what was impossible in the known world became acceptable once displaced further away, into spaces that felt less than real. Islands, in particular, were places in which reality could be reversed, and where the strange creatures that populate our imagination could have their abode. Lost in the immeasurable and impenetrable space of the sea, itself a site of dangerous encounters, since ancient times the island represents a place of mystery, one in which conventions are overturned and normativity leaves room for images of difference. Unsurprisingly, early modern islands are home to both utopias and alternative worlds: in Lancioni's words, the island is "l'ostentazione del limite e allo stesso tempo spazio della totale alterità, svincolato dalle leggi della terra ferma: punto archimedeo, fuori dello spazio e del tempo, da cui osservare e giudicare il mondo" (1991, 3). In these spaces, magical or inexplicable occurrences that would be unfathomable to European society become not only possible but plausible: tales of wizardry and monsters, which would offend Christian morality if set in Western society, become acceptable when taking place outside the Pillars of Hercules.

Aware of the appeal that faraway spaces had on the popular imagination, Cervantes chose to develop the adventures of Periandro and Auristela[4] in the most exotic of these spaces: the North. Starting from the once utopian *ultima Thule* and the less-than-real Friesland,[5] the heroes travel through about fifteen islands, some of which are identifiable with real places, such as Hibernia (Ire-

4 From this moment onwards, I will be referring to the protagonists by using their pseudonyms, since those are the names that they adopt for the vast majority of the narrative.

5 Thule and Friesland are liminal spaces that used to appear on Renaissance maps in different locations depending on the cartographer who drew them: sometimes, Thule was identified with Iceland, but for many authors, it represented a different island located elsewhere. Knight (2003) argues that because Cervantes's characters expressly identify Thule with Iceland, Periandro is to be recognised as a European prince. Conversely, Lozano Renieblas (1998) reading the passage in which Seráfido links the mythical island with Iceland (*Persiles,* 446-7 and 451), argues that the phrasing is purposely confused to preserve the ambiguity of the island's location and, with that, the legendary connotations that the Far North possesses.

land), and imaginary ones, like the Barbarian Island or the Island of the Hermits. As Lozano Renieblas (1998) notes, among other scholars,[6] in the early seventeenth century the still largely uncharted Northern hemisphere exercised a particular fascination among readers and armchair travellers, taking the role of spaces of wonder that the Orient and America had covered in the past. Indeed, while these other continents had been explored more extensively, the North still resisted full empirical knowledge and thus became the depositary of the legendary monsters and populations that had previously been situated in the other corners of the world. Travel accounts, *isolarios* and geographical maps – all materials that Cervantes consulted extensively while writing the *Persiles*[7] – contributed to establishing the North as a place in which the wonders that had disappeared from Western Europe could be localised.[8] Images of difference, from simple variations of the norm to full incarnations of the monstrous, were thought to populate the frozen lands of these unknown territories. By situating the adventures of the two royal princes in this still vastly mythological region, Cervantes manages to write a story of magic and miracles without breaking the principle of verisimilitude to which he was so dearly attached.[9] Geographical

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6 Since the early years of the 20th century, scholarly interest in the geographical spaces of the *Persiles* has been vast. For a fairly exhaustive list, see Garrido Ardila (2016).

7 Among Cervantes's sources for the writing of the *Persiles* figure the *Carta Marina* (1539) by Olaus Magnus as well as his *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (1555), from which he derived some of the legends and myths that appear in the text (such as the fisíter, the serpentine monster that attacks Periandro's ship in his dream). Other geographical sources include the *Jardín de flores curiosas* (1570) by Antonio de Torquemada, the *isolario* by Tommaso Porcacchi, *L'Isole più famose del Mondo* (1572) and that by Alonso de Santa Cruz, *Islario general* (1539). See Lozano Renieblas (1998), Díaz de Alda Heikkilä (2001), Garrido Ardila (2016) for the main sources and Rouane Soupault (2004) and Hutchinson (2019) for the remarks on the *isolario*.

8 Lycanthropy is one of such wonders: since Antiquity, werewolves have been localised in the North. Olaus Magnus discusses this in his *Historia*, and the issue reappears in Pliny's *Natural History*, which was translated by Jerónimo de Huerta in 1599, who nevertheless lists lycanthropy as a medical condition. See Lozano Renieblas (1998, 27-31; 167-71) and Andrès (1995; 2018).

9 Heliodorus's *Ethiopics,* Lozano Renieblas (1998) explains, were praised by El Pinciano for their verisimilitude even though they incorporated tales of magic and miracles. However, because these were set in the remote margins of the world, they were considered credible. Cervantes adopts the same strategy: by setting inexplicable occurrences in the Northern

space thus overlaps with the ideological one: by exploiting the North's location at the margins of the map and on the brink between reality and the imagination, the author subtly suggests that the peculiar inhabitants of such lands may really exist, but only outside of the familiar boundaries of the known world. Thus, female alterity, when situated at the edge of reality, becomes an uncanny and yet acceptable possibility. By choosing the Far North, Cervantes makes the female other a possible alternative, though one that is only representable in the space of the unknown and at the antipodes of Christendom.

2. *The* Persiles *as a "split text"*

The rupture in geographical space that occurs at the end of book II lays the basis for a construction of a world of alterity that is opposed to that of normativity. Critical engagement with the *Persiles* has found consensus in regarding it as a "split" text, divided into an "idealistic" first half and a "realistic" second half (Navarro González in De Armas Wilson 1991, 81). Though more recent research, such as the work of Lozano Renieblas (1998) has attempted to amend the common critique that the *Persiles* lacks thematic unity by arguing for aesthetic homogeneity as opposed to division into two parts, the fissure between books II and III remains a crucial point for critical interpretation. Scholars who read the *Persiles* as a serious and edifying work recounting the spiritual purification of two perfect Christian lovers (Forcione, 1972) or their allegorical journey to Christian illumination (Avalle-Arce, 1990), have taken the change in geographical settings to signal the passage from vice to virtue, a "camino de perfección" (Arellano 2018, 13) through which the heroes leave behind the barbaric North to enter the Christian universe.[10] The arrival on landmass is made to correspond with the triumph over lascivious desires: when the story moves to the Mediterranean provinces, readers' expectations change as the new space suggests a greater alignment with spiritual devotion.

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islands, he manages to keep his story plausible, thus maintaining the principle of verisimilitude that was crucial to him also in the *Quijote*. Díaz de Alda Heikkilä considers that Cervantes exploits the Northern regions "[para] recrear un ambiente verosímil, pero que se mantenga en los presupuestos de la novela de aventuras fantástica" (2001, 882).

10 Forcione (1972) actually rejected the theory of the "split text"; however, his Christian interpretation is still built on the idea of progressive purification that occurs as the heroes get closer to Rome, the heart of Christendom.

Though devilish temptations accompany the pair all the way to their consecration in the illuminated city, they diminish consistently once they abandon the "distopías de las tierras nórdicas" (Martí 1995, 689). As opposed to Rome, the centre of Christendom -from which temptation, however, is not exempt[11] – the antipodal insular settings of the North are spaces of danger and deceit, in which the profane mixes with the barbaric and the uncanny. The shift in geographical spaces thus supposes a movement from different to similar, from "other" to "same" which is made explicit in the passage from lay to sacred that occurs as the heroes set foot in Southern Europe.[12] The contrast between part I and part II constructs a series of Aristotelian binaries that come to identify the isolated Far North with darkness, desire, paganism and barbarism, while the South is associated with light, rationality, religion and civilisation. If the maritime journey sees the heroes fighting pirates and running away from cannibalistic barbarians, in the land travel, now a pilgrimage, the lovers visit progressively more sacred sites, many of which are connected to the image of the Virgin Mary (González Rovira in Knight 2003, 28, note 2), until they reach the holy city of Rome.[13] Travel and the experience of difference therefore break the text into two halves, tracing an itinerary that takes the heroes from the unknown and unfamiliar to the world of consciousness.[14]

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11 Giving proof of his great concern for verisimilitude and compliance with historical reality, Cervantes depicts Rome as having a double identity: it is both the centre of religious faith and a place where prostitution thrived. Indeed, in Rome Periandro encounters the lascivious Hipólita, whose evil designs to seduce him will take her as far as to contract a Jewish sorceress to spoil Auristela of her divine beauty through a life-threatening illness.

12 Knight notes that in the passage from book II to book III, Periandro and Auristela also evolve "from adventurers to pilgrims" (2003, 28), which testifies to the devotional mission they embark on in the second half of the text.

13 The contrast between light and darkness is emphasised in particular at the very beginning, when the heroes travel through the first islands. Expressions such as "la noche oscura y tenebrosa" or "la noche oscura y temerosa" abound in the initial episodes, and they diverge from the description of the light that characterises Rome in book IV. See Andrés (1990) for an analysis of this light/darkness contrast in relation to the Barbaric island and chapter 1 of Forcione (1972) for a reading of this contrast within his Christian interpretation.

14 Lozano Renieblas contends that Cervantes consciously collocates the journey in the Far North to mark the passage from the unknown to the known: "Cervantes eligió el escenario septentrional por una razón esencialmente estética. Dicho en terminología bajtiniana, se dio cuenta del rendimiento estético de la extraposición, esto es, de las inmensas posibilidades de la tensión cognitiva que podía crear entre lo conocido y lo desconocido" (1998, 89).

Feminist criticism, more or less consciously, also took the "split" in the middle of the narrative as a crucial point to structure critical discussions. If the edifying interpretation recognised a movement from vice to virtue, some scholars concerned with the female characters of the *Persiles* similarly differentiated between the honest women ("mujeres dignas") and the dishonest ones ("indignas") that appear throughout the text. For instance, Sánchez Tallafigo (1999) proposes a taxonomy of women which divides them between exemplary characters, independent ones and the more lascivious others.[15] Similarly, Esteva de Llobet (2019) – following Avalle-Arce's contention that the novel is, among other things, an allegory of the Great Chain of Being[16] – differentiates between women who aim high in the Chain and those who, having forgotten the Platonic Idea of Good, give themselves to less spiritual pleasures. The main criteria of separation for the different categories of women seems to be that of their attitude towards sexuality: although Sánchez Tallafigo also recognises strong women to make up a category of their own, the greatest mark of difference is that which separates virtuous and chaste characters such as Auristela and Sinforosa from their lascivious counterparts, the old Rosamunda and Cenotia, for example. Liberated sexuality and strong-mindedness are, therefore, the first defining traits that separate the divergent women from the "ideal" ones; in other words, these traits mark the first lines of demarcation between "the norm" and "alterity". This division between chaste and honest women and sexualised, or "deviant" others (Laskier Martín, 2008), reproduces a majorly unnuanced attitude towards femininity at the time. In the early modern age, women still oscillated between the moralising views of scholastics, who deemed them inferior to men and sinful, and their idealisation as virtuous entities by far superior to man. As Cruz comments, Golden Age literature still had a tendency to view women as irremediably different: "Ya sea de condición diabólica o mala, o naturalmente angelical y pura, a la mujer se la con-

15 The categories she identifies are: 1) honest and exemplary women; 2) women freely giving themselves to their desires; 3) strong-willed women; 4) strong women. These prototypes are then linked to different forms of love, under the assumption that love is the backbone of the narrative of the *Persiles*.

16 To Avalle-Arce (1990), the *Persiles* is fore and foremost a Christian allegory. Though it is composed by many allegorical figures, the most prominent ones are the Great Chain of Being and the topic of the *peregrinatio vitae.* The journey goes from representations of "lower" beings, starting from the Barbarians, to higher ones, to culminate in Rome with Auristela kissing the feet of the pontiff.

sideraba "otra" – una criatura superior o inferior al hombre, pero nunca su igual" (1990, 255). While Petrarchan poetry and humanist philosophy elevated women to idealised and angelic standards, and saw them in their erotic quality as objects of desire, Christian moralising treatises advocated for women's subordination to their husbands and defined feminine virtue in terms of chastity or loyalty, meekness, silence and obedience.[17] From these considerations, the assumption that female otherness in the *Persiles* equals rebellion from patriarchal authority is a logical conclusion. On this line of argument, Patsy Boyer stated that "a guiding principle in the definition of the female character in this text is the need to bring her under, to subordinate her to, the patriarchal order; consequently "other" in this context refers to the unsubordinated, or the insubordinate, female character" (1990, 60). This contention, however, is somewhat contradicted by her previous claim that "in this work all women are perceived as different, as 'other'" (Ibid.). As previously stated, Auristela and Sinforosa represent exemplary femininity as they possess the spiritual qualities of the "ideal woman" to early modern moralistic standards. Auristela, in particular, incarnates the female ideal of meekness as she lacks a will of her own. When Queen Eustoquia tries to persuade her to embark on a voyage with Periandro and to choose him over her older son Magsimino, she obeys without expressing preferences:

> Sigismunda, muchacha, sola y persuadida, lo que respondió fue que ella no tenía voluntad alguna ni tenía otra consejera que la aconsejase sino a su misma honestidad que, como esta se guardase, dispusiesen a su voluntad de ella. (*Persiles*, 449)

17 Although the idealisation of woman and her constraint into a Christian frame of purity and devotion were part of the literary panorama of the Spanish Golden Age, they by no means represented the sole model for female characterisation. The period is filled with portrayals of women of different kinds and social standings, from wealthy aristocrats to prostitutes, from nuns to gypsies, and so on. Genre played a distinctive role in modelling these character-types: the picaresque, for example, contributed to expanding the social panorama as it depicted women of low social standings in their role as thieves. The chivalric and pastoral romance also created prototypes of women that stirred away from Christian morality as they portrayed high-born ladies overcome by their desires. To Hall Zetrouer (1994), these literary models provided Cervantes with examples to create female characters that do not necessarily fit in the paradigm of woman as a weaker creature or in that of the idealised beloved of Petrarchan poetry. Indeed, Cervantes's literary universe presents an encyclopaedic variety of female characters, many of which, such as the duchess in *Don Quijote* or the iconic Dulcinea del Toboso, stir away from dogmatic representations of femininity.

Too young to have a will of her own and too obedient to disappoint the desire of her queen, Auristela accepts the pilgrimage on condition that her honesty, which she will later call "la mejor dote que puede llevar la mujer principal" (*Persiles*, 400), will not be offended. Whether this raises doubts about her desire to be with Periandro at all should be left to the reader's judgement;[18] what is important here is that Auristela, with her divine beauty, her devout chastity and great temperance, only once hindered by jealousy, represents an idealised, though realistic, image of femininity.[19] She is "la encarnación de la pureza amorosa, la honestidad, la prudencia, la cortesía y la piedad cristiana" (Sánchez Tallafigo 1999, 258), and "un ejemplo de representación de figura femenina que se relaciona con la filosofía humanista" (Marigno 2021, 304). "Otherness", then, cannot be a quality attributed to all the women in the text but only to those who contrast this portrayal of the ideal woman, who is either the divine-like lady of humanist-Petrarchan tradition or the devout Christian wife of moralising treatises. Our definition of otherness, then, comes nearer to that which Patsy Boyer had employed for the female characters in Zayas's short stories: "the "other" woman in this context is a female character [...] whose behaviour flagrantly transgresses socially accepted – patriarchal – values and literary conventions" (1990, 60). Thus, if moralising constructions of femininity relied on Aristotelian binaries to argue that women should be chaste, meek, loyal and silent, the "other woman" will be her sexually liberated, bold, brave and outspoken counterpart. And this counterpart is precisely that found in the remote islands of the North. The old and lascivious Rosamunda, the witch Cenotia, the seductive she-wolf in Norway and the new Amazons Sulpicia and Transilia are the incarnations of this alterity and the real opposites to the chaste heroine. The double liminality of the space of the island and that of the Far North represents the only setting in which this alterity can be safely expressed. By

18 Oddly, at the end of the text, when the pilgrims have finally reached Rome, Auristela suddenly expresses the wish to remain chaste and leave Periandro for a life in the convent. Her decision, later abandoned, comes at a curious time in the novel since the two heroes have finally completed their pilgrimage and face almost no more obstacles to be joined in marriage.

19 The episode of Auristela's jealousy occurs on Policarpo's island when the beautiful Sinforosa confesses her love for Periandro, whom she thinks is Auristela's brother. Her bitter jealousy spoils the allure of perfection that had characterised her up until that point, making her a more life-like character since she proves not to be above human weaknesses.

situating them in places that escape full comprehension, Cervantes knowingly exploits the relationship between remoteness, insularity and alterity to illustrate a model of femininity that would be unacceptable if placed in a more familiar part of the world.

3. *Female alterity*

The *Persiles*, we just reiterated, is a text that emphasises difference using traditional dichotomies, and in which the split between two halves is fundamental for the appreciation of the overarching argument. The experience of space as distinct into North and South becomes crucial to the experience of femininity within it; in this sense, Massey's contention that "geography matters to the construction of gender" (1994, 2) may be expanded to argue that geography also matters to the construction of the specificities of gender. The leading voices in Cervantine feminist scholarship, however, have attempted to show that the *Persiles* bridges the very difference that it creates by reconciling, first and foremost, one of the greatest binaries of all: that of masculinity and femininity. For instance, El Saffar (1979; 1984) views the heroes' travel from unfamiliar to familiar spaces (which reverses the traditional scheme of narratives of discovery, in which heroes venture from continental Europe into the unknown) as a process of awakening from the unconscious to consciousness. To her, the earlier part of the text, in which the heroes travel through the unconscious, is associated with the feminine, whereas books III and IV – the "conscious" half – link to the masculine.[20] Exploiting the Aristotelian dichotomies discussed earlier, El Saffar links the divided structure of the text with the division between genders, and argues that the *Persiles* strives for a reconciliation of the two. This argument precedes the more elaborate one proposed a few years later by De Armas Wilson. In her largely acclaimed study *Allegories of Love*, Wilson calls the *Persiles* an "early poetics of sexual difference" (1991, xiii); this sexual difference is settled under the overarching figure of the

20 This distinction mirrors earlier discussions on the contrasts between light and darkness and reason and superstition that are implicit in Cervantes's construction of the Southern and Northern hemispheres. These associations point to the importance that gender has for the novel, since they reflect accepted distinctions between masculinity and femininity.

Platonic androgyne, which is the leading metaphor of the text.[21] Like El Saffar (1979; 1984), Wilson sees in the *Persiles* a search for unity of the genders, which is achieved in Periandro's incorporation of "feminine" qualities that turn him into a "muy varonil" hero (Colahan 1994, 32). Similarly, female characters that diverge from the norm in that they own language and sexual agency (such as Transila), reject normative femininity as they integrate masculine traits. For Wilson, as Hildner summarises, "the structuring allegorical theme of the *Persiles* is the recognition and mediation of Difference in the Other" (1995, 458). Furthermore, the text's quest for a "recovery of the feminine" (El Saffar 1984), both scholars agree, begins in genre: the *Persiles*'s declared imitation of the Greek novel, a genre in which women characters gain great agency and that was presumably much enjoyed by female readers, dismantles hierarchical differences between the genders by placing them on an equal axis.[22] Ultimately, Wilson and El Saffar contend for a poetics of the text that bridges the concept of gender by creating individuals who possess feminine and masculine traits alike. Sexual difference thus speaks mostly for the break between male and female; for Wilson, it also expands to alterity within a gender, when the subject, like those of the interpolated tales, defies expectations of feminine normativity by integrating traits of the opposite gender. Their views also echo the language of contemporary feminist geographers such as Massey (1994) or Shands (1999), who argue for a reconciliation of gendered spatial metaphors

21 De Armas Wilson contends that Cervantes extrapolated the metaphor of the Platonic androgyne from Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi d'amore* (1535) and used it "to hypothesize a kind of mutual, or nondominant, sexual difference that would displace hierarchy" (1991, 79).

22 Again, genre plays a role in the definition of gender. The Greek novel features different prototype of female characters, which include a heroine and other supporting secondary characters, such as a female antagonist and a female friend or confessor. Moreover, in the chivalric romance, the male hero is the true protagonist – the slayer of monsters and adventurous paladin – whereas the beloved lady merely sits in his shadow as a reward for his deeds. The titles of such romances, only featuring male names (such as *Amadís de Gaula, Palmerín de Inglaterra*, etc.) confirm the hero's primacy in the text and the gender hierarchy. This is different, however, in the Greek novel, in which the lady normally travels through the Mediterranean with her lover and appears as an equal in the title of the text (some examples include *Callimachus and Chrysorrhoe* and *Libystrus and Rhodamne*). Cervantes, using the same structure, makes Sigismunda experience the same travails as her lover and includes her as an equal in the title. See Egger (1990) and Haynes (2003) for female characterisation in the Greek novel and De Armas Wilson (1990) for the comparison with the chivalric romances.

– such as the coding of space as feminine and static and time as masculine, dynamic and superior (Massey) and the spaces of the home (and of rest) as feminine and negative as opposed to the positive dynamism and movement associated to the male (Shands) – in favour of a new definition of space that bridges dichotomous differences.

Although the figure of the androgyne succeeds in disrupting gender hierarchies and bringing the feminine to the fore, alterity subsists in the varied universe of the *Persiles.* While the ideal woman, Auristela, stands by Periandro's side as a double and a complementary part of his personality, the female other must be discovered, found at the edges of the map and of human comprehension. Situated on the island, itself a liminal space, alterity escapes full rationalisation and remains suspended in the buoyant states of ambiguity and doubt. Hence this encounter is often mediated, either through third-person narration as opposed to direct experience – which is the case for the tale of the she-wolf, told by Rutilio and that of Sulpicia, told by Periandro – or through other cognitive devices, as happens with Periandro's "isla soñada". In this episode, which perhaps best exposes the break between gender normativity and difference, the female other is found in a space of complete liminality, as she inhabits an island that exists only in Periandro's sleeping mind. The dream, which features Periandro's encounter with the personifications of sensuality and of chastity on a lavishly beautiful island, allegorises the struggle between purity and erotic desire by presenting sensuality as the antagonistic "other". Emerging from a rock, "SENSUALIDAD" makes her appearance in the shape of a "hermosísima dama" sitting on a cart pulled by twelve vigorous apes, "animales lascivos" (*Persiles*, 231). While she reproaches Periandro for being her enemy and her damsels snatch seven or eight mariners to lead them back into the rock, another vision occurs: this time it is Auristela, followed by two ladies symbolically named Continence and Modesty ("Continencia y Pudicia"), who inform Periandro that Chastity has decided to "disguise herself" as his sister.

The juxtaposition of the figures of sensuality personified and of Auristela as the bodily incarnation of chastity polarise the representation of femininity according to the traditional binary of Virgin/whore. Such distinction is supported by the geographical settings, which hark back to a tradition of literary imitation. Besides the obvious image of the Petrarchan *locus amoenus*, the idyllic island-garden recalls the sensual abodes of the evil enchantresses of epic poetry, in which their excessive sexuality extends to the garden imagery by vir-

tue of the age-long association of gardens with female bodies.[23] In particular, the eternal spring of Cervantes's island, in which the grass is green as emeralds, the flowing rivers are "de líquidos diamantes formados" and the cherries "parecían granos de rubíes" (*Persiles* 230), reminds of Armida's evergreen garden in Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, in which precious stones adorn the enchantress's palace and where lascivious pleasures are always readily available. Like the epic garden, the Dream Island delights the senses and intrigues the sailors with its seemingly unquestionable appearance as an idyllic space. Nevertheless, the presence of a sensual lady, or, like here, of sensuality herself, destabilises the tranquillity of the garden: as De Armas Wilson (1991, 70) notes, lapidary iconography constellates the episode, conferring an uncanny tone to the paradisiacal island. Sensuality is thus connected to images of death and peril, and, to an extent, also of monstrosity: indeed, Periandro and his companions have landed on the island following an attack from a serpentine sea monster, the *náufrago* (the mythological *fisíter*), whose image reappears in the garden with the analogy of its crystal-clear streams with "sierpes de cristal" (*Persiles*, 230). Like in epic poetry, the images that surround the lascivious lady are ambivalent: her garden both entices and threatens, and the voice of Sensuality, "entre airada y suave" (232), both allures and repels the hero.

The construction of the sexual other occurs alongside that of the normative and decorous woman. As chastity takes the shape of the already prudish Auristela, the heroine's ties with the figure of the Virgin Mary are reinforced. Although her affinity with the saint is already attested by her pseudonym – meaning "Golden Star", which echoes the Virgin's title as the "empress of the stars" and the *stella maris*[24] – Auristela's appearance in the garden consolidates that bond. In fact, since early Catholicism and before becoming associated with the temptress and her untamed sexuality, the garden, in its representation

23 Since the biblical *Song of Solomon,* the analogy of the female body with nature has expanded to an association of the female body with the garden; gardens become an extension of women's bodies. See Augspach (2004) for an exhaustive analysis of this correlation in Medieval literature and Giamatti (1969) for the trope of the evil enchantress in the garden in epic poetry.

24 Colahan (1994) notes the connection between the "Golden star" and the Virgin, who is Queen of Heaven. A shining star guiding sailors across their journeys, the Virgin is also known by the name *Stella Maris*; Auristela, who is repeatedly associated to the holy figure and who guides Periandro through his maritime journey, can be said to cover the same role.

as a *hortus conclusus*, was paired with the figure of the Virgin (Augspach 2004). Though the dreamed episode occurs in a garden that reflects the characteristics of the epic realm of the temptress, Auristela's incarnation of Christian chastity and her appearance in the garden alongside other personifications of virtue links her to the holy figure, and consequently dramatises her antithesis with the other, less holy dweller of the garden. Sensuality and Chastity are found inhabiting the same dream, one representing the temptations that the sleeping hero must overcome and the other functioning as a reminder of his beloved. The Dream Island thus creates a space that problematises the dichotomy between ideal femininity, chaste and devout, and the desiring woman, the "whore" of early modern culture. If the episode can be understood as the triumph of chastity over temptation, as Colahan (1994) read it, it also features the terrifying encounter with sexual difference, with the powerful and mysterious other who, in early 16th-century epic poetry, is confined to the remote shores of unreal islands. Though the experience is only imaginary, and it occurs after all the main encounters with female alterity have already taken place, it effectively counterposes the two main polarisations of the representation of the female subject. If Auristela will inhabit the space of reality once the hero wakes up, the temptress, dangerous and enticing at the same time, will remain confined to the dimension of the dream.

4. *Dangerous others: witches and seductresses*

Although the sensual lady of Periandro's dream remains a figment of his imagination, direct encounters with lascivious images of alterity appear in the text in the form of historical characters, witches, and creatures at the margins of the natural order. Thus Rosamunda, the legendary lover of King Henry II of England, the Moorish witch Cenotia and the mysterious she-wolf make their appearance as models of otherness that astonish for their sexual appetite. Nonetheless, these characters, who suffer criticism from the other travellers as well as from the narrator and eventually incur a regrettable death, are not reproached for being desiring subjects but for their disregard of honesty, "honestidad", which is so great to get associated to the diabolic. Their boldness and revengefulness when their unchaste desires are not satisfied establish them as disruptive models of femininity who, instead of being guided by honest desires, are led by baser passions.

Like the malignant Clodio, who represents unexemplary masculinity, these lascivious women present yet another face of femininity, a more dishonest and reproachable one. Of these characters, Cenotia is perhaps the most compelling. The encounter with her occurs on the telling space of Policarpo's island, where, like in Atlante's castle in *Orlando Furioso*, everyone chases unsuccessfully the chimera of their objects of desire. This ideal republic, in which only the most virtuous men are allowed to rule, crumbles over the uncontrollable desires of its inhabitants: in there, "todos deseaban pero a ninguno se les cumplían sus deseos, condición de la naturaleza humana" (*Persiles*, 168). Even the incorruptible old monarch is swept by a passion for the much younger Auristela, who, in turn, is consumed by jealousy for the fair Sinforosa, as she too is in love with Periandro. Ironically, the virtuous backdrop of Policarpo's city – the only urban setting that the heroes encounter in the first part of the text – becomes the theatre for the greatest manifestation of love and desire, placing itself as antithetical to the Island of the Hermits, in which spiritual devotion wins over passion. The island thus conceals a double nature as both a space of virtue and rationality and one in which uncontrollable desires become manifest. In this ephemeral space, men and women participate alike in this dance between love, desire and delusion: both are equally swept by their honest or dishonest passions.

Cenotia's episode of the failed seduction of Antonio *mozo* occurs while he is resting in his chamber: after a long premise on her magical arts and her offer of a great sum of money as reward for his services, the witch attempts to seduce the young barbarian with rather deadly results. In fact, Antonio, "lleno de confusión, como si fuera la más retirada doncella del mundo y como si enemigos combatieran el castillo de su honestidad" (*Persiles*, 194-5) – a comparison that temporarily evokes Wilson's Platonic androgyne – responds by firing an arrow at her. Though he misses his target, the arrow plunges into the tongue of the maleficent Clodio, who had just stepped into the room, forever shutting his slanderous mouth. Like Rosamunda, who had also attempted to seduce Antonio with no less tragic outcomes, Cenotia personifies sexual desire and lasciviousness in the aged woman.[25] A fifty-year-old *dama*, "si en tantos

25 A 50-year-old lady, Cenotia would have been considered an old woman at the time. Sexual desire in old women became an object of ridicule in Golden Age comedies and burlesque poetry, and so did the parody of the female body, once desirable and later turned repellent by age.

años de edad es justo se le dé este nombre" (*Persiles*, 192) willing to seduce a young and inexperienced *mozo*, her attempt at sensuality is met with ridicule and outrage, and her humiliation by the enraged youth does not win much compassion from the narrator. As she approaches the unaware Antonio, she attempts to gain his trust by convincing him of her familiarity:

> No te desvíes, sosiégate y no te alborotes, que no está hablando contigo algún monstruo ni persona que quiera decirte ni aconsejarte cosas que vayan fuera de la naturaleza humana; mira que te hablo español, que es la lengua que tú sabes, cuya conformidad suele engendrar amistad entre los que no se conocen. (*Persiles*, 192)

Cenotia's attempt to establish herself as Antonio's kin has the contrary effect of exposing her own otherness. Though she presents herself as a native Spaniard and addresses the *mozo* in Castilian, she soon confesses to being of Arab descendance: "mi estirpe es agarena; mis ejercicios, los de Zoroastes" (192). Her attempt to appear as a Spanish lady to Antonio's eyes – a citizen of the known world who should inspire no fear in a barbarian such as he – is defied by the revelation that she is really a Moorish witch, descending from a family of "encantadoras o magas".[26] As Schmidt (2013) notes, her claim that she exercises Zoroastes's arts links her to necromancy and the occult; her powers to agitate the seas or to alter the course of the winds are, therefore, the outcome of devilish abilities. By attempting to construct an image of familiarity that the perplexed boy can trust, Cenotia actually succeeds in situating herself as a marginal figure to Catholic Spain: as a Moorish enchantress endowed with potentially diabolic powers, she has no space in the designation of the familiar world and is in fact displaced to the margins, on the mysterious universe of the North where she got exiled by the Spanish Inquisition. As a liminal subject characterised by a strong libido, she may even border the line between the normative and the monstrous. In fact, as Gasior (2001) explains, the "monstrous feminine" often horrifies because of her sexuality: "as with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, [the monster] is defined in terms of her sexuality" (29). Cervantes, then, was aware of "el muy antiguo vínculo que se establece entre la

26 Schmidt (2013) studies Cenotia's claim that she is not a "hechicera", as she is sometimes called, but an "encantadora". As opposed to the more feminine and domestic *hechicerías*, she appropriates the masculine practices of alchemy and astrology, thus associating herself to a kind of magic that was reversed to men of high social standing.

hechichería y la sexualidad, más concretamente la frustración libidinosa" (Andrès 1995, 74). Her libidinal offerings, her affiliation with diabolic arts and her own hint at monsters and other agents outside of nature confirm that Cenotia, far from being a part of the familiar world and an agent of normativity, is a dangerous agent of alterity.

Although she claims to have lived chastely during her last four years on the island, Antonio's arrival has awakened her dormant sexual desire. The last part of her speech, in which she makes her attempt at seduction explicit, lists a series of promises to the beloved that remind, if not of Petrarchan conventions, at least of traditional love language: "para tus servicio sacaré las perlas que encubren las conchas del mar, rendiré y traeré a tus manos las aves que rompen el aire, haré que te ofrezcan sus frutos las plantas de la tierra, haré que brote del abismo lo más precioso que en él se encierra..." (*Persiles*, 194). The reward she asks for these miraculous services, presumably to be achieved through her occult art, is not for him to make her his wife but his slave, "que, para ser tu esclava, no es menester que me tengas voluntad como para ser esposa" (Ibid.). In a parodic reversal of Petrarchan tropes, Cenotia uses love language to claim sexual favours instead of marital devotion. Like the courtesan Hipólita who attempts to seduce Periandro in Rome, she places pleasure above the bond of marriage and seeks revenge when her will is humiliated, thus perverting the natural order. But if Hipólita's motives are guided by lust and jealousy and she eventually repents, asking the Jewish witch to annul the spell that is killing both Auristela and Periandro, Cenotia behaves mischievously because her own nature inclines her to evil: "Pero, como la naturaleza parece que nos inclina antes al mal que al bien, no podemos tener tan a la raya los deseos que no se deslicen a procurar el mal ajeno" (193). The same evil disposition is what leads Rosamunda to communicate her illicit proposal to Antonio: as she admits moments before her death, "Yo desde el punto que tuve uso de razón, no la tuve, porque siempre fui mala" (139). Cenotia and Rosamunda suffer recrimination for being evil and dishonest; if Hipólita's sexuality places her on the unfortunate side of the claustrophobic binary of virgin/whore, Cenotia's old age and demonic powers make her a more uncanny "other", less likely to fit in the tight space of the dichotomy. Exposing her decadent allure and her dishonest erotic desire, the enchantress becomes antithetical not only to the young and pure Auristela, but also to Catholic images of female decorum.

If Cenotia and Rosamunda represent lust in its most decaying form, the "mujer-loba" who flies Rutilio to Norway is a more direct incarnation of the dangers of erotic desire. As Rutilio is incarcerated for running away with his dance student, he is visited by a *hechicera*, who promises to free him on the word that he will then take her as his wife. Having no other choice, he accepts, and at night she leads him out of prison and accommodates him on a magical carpet, on which they fly all the way to a "tierra no conocida" (*Persiles*, 87). Once there, the witch begins to hug Rutilio "no muy honestamente"; as he pulls her away, he finds that her face is no longer that of a woman but of a wolf. Panic-stricken, Rutilio stabs her and as she collapses on the ground, she regains her original human shape.

Interestingly, among all the stories of marvellous encounters that are told in the novel, this is the only one that is met with scepticism from the other characters: Rutilio himself casts doubt on the witch's transformation by saying that he stuck a knife into the chest of "la que *pensé* ser loba" (87, my emphasis). Later, Mauricio further discredits his account by explaining, in line with Huerta's translation of Pliny's *Natural History*, that lycanthropy is a medical condition and that the fact that Rutilio saw the witch turn into a wolf was probably just the product of a diabolic illusion: "la fuerza de los hechizos de los maléficos y encantadores, que los hay, nos hace ver una cosa por otra; y quede desde aquí asentado que no hay gente alguna que mude en otra su primer naturaleza" (128). Whether the witch turned herself into an animal figure or whether she appeared in that shape only to Rutilio's eyes is a matter of open debate; in any case, her uncanny metamorphosis makes the dishonestly lascivious witch once again associated with the devil. The whole episode is codified in religious language: Rutilio first takes his saviour not to be a witch, but "[un] ángel que enviaba el cielo para mi remedio" (86). But as she murmurs "unas razones que yo no pude entender" and he finds himself flying above the ground, praying to the saints although she orders him to stop, Rutilio realises that his liberator is far from being angelic. Constructed on the axis of religious faith and devilish art, the episode makes explicit once again the rupture between familiar and unknown space through the characters' magical flight. Indeed, while the rescue occurs in Italy, the supposed transformation takes place on a *terra incognita* of the North, which Rutilio later finds out to be Norway. Though she gains the unaware prisoner's trust with the chaste promise of marriage, as soon as they reach Norway – a place in which "todo el género humano no podrá

ofenderte" (87) – she loses her semblance to embody, literally or figuratively, the shape of erotic desire. The depths of erotic longing are exposed through the veiled symbolism of the scene, through "la animalidad devoradora, la sexualidad femenina amenazadora y castradora, la bruja caníbala, la noche infernal y la muerte aniquiladora" (Andrès 1995, 173). Sexual desire becomes dangerously personified in a wolf-figure ready to swallow Rutilio in the dark Norwegian night. Whether the episode is a representation of feminine lust or masculine desire displaced onto a female agent,[27] the personification of dishonest sexual desire, of an excessive and very much non-Christian carnal urge significantly needs the mysterious settings of the North and the body of a female character to be explicitly expressed. Instead of uniting, this episode contributes to separating spaces and emphasising dichotomies: only far away from the centre of the Christian world can the uncanny female, the monstrously desiring woman or the incarnation of the men's lascivious desire be collocated without destabilising norms.

5. *New Amazons: Transila and Sulpicia*

If Cenotia, Rosamunda and the she-wolf are defined by their explicit sexuality and dishonest desires, thus forming a group of "sexual others", the dynamic characters of Transila and Sulpicia transcend even more the binary of virgin/whore and stand in a fascinatingly liminal place: although they represent positive models that are endorsed by both the narrator and their travel compan-

27 There is some ambiguity in the witch's transformation into a wolf. De Armas Wilson notes that Rutilio first claimed that the witch initially metamorphosed into a "figura de lobo", which presumes that she turned into a masculine wolf, but when he stabs her, he recognises her as a "loba". From this, she deduces that Rutilio displaces his own lust on the witch, therefore turning her from male to female. Later, an Italian-speaking inhabitant of Norway informs Rutilio that in those countries there are many witches turning themselves into wolves: "Puedes, buen hombre, dar infinitas gracias al cielo por haberte librado del poder destas maléficas hecicheras, de las cuales hay mucha abundancia en estas septentrionales partes. Cuéntase dellas que se convierten en lobos, así machos como hembras, porque de entrambos géneros hay maléficos y encantadores" (*Persiles*, 87). The sentence remains ambiguous on whether it is witches turning into male and female wolves or enchanters of both genders changing their shapes. In any case, the importance of gender in the allegorisation of lust is asserted: extreme desire affects both men and women.

ions, they give voice to instincts and violent passions that sit uncomfortably with Christian virtues. Moved by anger and revenge, they both stand against patriarchal customs and abuses of power, defending their honour to the point that they turn into threatening warriors and female assassins. Sulpicia's episode constitutes one of the most disturbing moments in the narrative: as Periandro and his crew step on her boat, they are welcomed by the hellish sight of the bodies of forty hanged men fluttering in the air. Severed limbs and broken skulls swim in the horrifying mixture of blood, wine and vomit that covers the deck, on which food remains roll together with body parts. Past this gruesome vision, twelve beautiful women standing magnificently at the back of the boat and captained by princess Sulpicia of Bituania (Lithuania) claim responsibility for the nightmarish massacre, which they executed as revenge for the sailors' vile murder of Suplicia's newly-wed husband and their attempted rape. Though considerably less brutal, Transila's tale is no less astonishing: a native of an island near Hibernia, she is subjected to the barbarian custom of her land, the *ius primae noctis*, which allows all the male relatives and friends of the groom to in turn force themselves over the bride on the night of her wedding.[28] As the first man enters her room to start the raping ritual, Transila comes out holding a spear and bravely threatens all her offenders; eventually, she escapes on a boat and is later sold to pirates, for whom she will work as an interpreter until her liberation on the Barbaric island.

To De Armas Wilson (1991), Transila, and, to a lesser extent, Sulpicia, represent the fusion of masculine qualities with femininity as they incarnate the image of the *virago*. Praised for her "varoníl brío" as she escapes the barbarians, Transila's strength and bravery come as incorporations of masculine traits, which make her "a gendered, even a cross-gendered, subject" (De Armas Wilson 1991, 184) which diverges significantly from the meek Auristela. Sulpicia, draped as a modern Amazon, with a light armour covering her immaculate white vest, holding a lance adorned with precious stones that will reappear in the subsequent episode of the Dream Island (Ibid.: 180), compares to Transila for the great fury with which she executes her gruesome carnage. To Wilson, the image of the *virago* serves Cervantes to preserve verisimilitude: to make

28 Schevill and Bonilla (1914) identified the likely sources for the *ius primae noctis* in the *Comentarios Reales* by the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (1609) and possibly in Cieza de León's *Crónica del Perú* (1553). See Lozano Renieblas (1998, 141, n. 49).

the tale plausible, he "had to create a tough heroine, one who could physically defend the proprietary rights to her own body. The solution was to represent Transila as a virago" (Ibid.: 185). The same occurs with Sulpicia and her squad of warrior women, who take down forty men alone, only with the help of four sailors who took their side. Other interpretations have read Transila and Sulpicia as models of exemplary chastity: Sulpicia's episode, often compared to that of the Dream Island, has been taken by Colahan (2004) as, again, a triumph of chastity over lust modelled on Petrarch's *Trionfi*.

Both Transila's and Sulpicia's tales reverse expectations of normativity as they feature them in the roles of female warriors, comparable to the heroines of epic poetry. Far from holding charitable sentiments or from responding to the virtue of temperance, the two women are led by the desire for vengeance and by uncontrollable rage to rise against their offenders. In Sulpicia's case, fury flows into a murderous instinct, which, she claims, would have given her the strength to slay even more men if necessary: "cuarenta son los ahorcados, y si fueran cuarenta mil, también murieran porque su poca o ninguna defensa, y nuestra cólera, a toda esta crueldad, si por ventura lo es, se extendía" (*Persiles*, 226). There is no sign of Christian repentance in their words as they narrate their stories: in Transila's case, the same wrath she experienced at the time of the attempted rape glares in her eyes as she interrupts her father to tell her own tale. The defence of virtue occurs following a code of honour rather than Christian principles: uncontrollable instincts emerge in the moment of danger, in a manner that markedly differs from the traditional tales on the offence of women's purity. In fact, as De Armas Wilson (1991) notes, Sulpicia's and Transila's tales reverse the popular narrative, derived from the Roman myth of Lucretia, that suicide is a preferable option to the loss of honour: instead of seeking self-destruction after submitting themselves to the carnal offence, they fight and kill, threaten and embark on a lonely escape. Very differently from Auristela, who, dressed as a man on the Barbaric island, prefers to face death rather than revealing herself as a woman and therefore exposing herself to the danger of deflowering, Sulpicia and Transila courageously confront their offenders. Their act of self-defence does not throw them in"un papel que en principio no le corresponde, ya que se niega a ser una víctima sumisa", as Arellano-Torres had argued for Transila's case (2022, 23); instead, it revindicates their position as divergent, yet still valid, models of femininity. Hence, to allegorise the episode as simply a triumph of chastity over lust is to endow the

two women with a Christian significance that does not characterise them and to dismiss their agency in taking their own defence.

Although their rebellions have drastic outcomes, especially in Sulpicia's case, the raging heroines suffer no condemnation from the narrator or from their travel companions; instead, Sulpicia is praised for her good "razones" and Transila is later called an "ejemplo claro de honestidad" (155). The honest defence of their bodies and their uprising against men's lascivious desires are judged as more important than the fact that they were overcome by a murderous frenzy or a raging desire for vengeance. This way, the two heroines are presented as models of femininity that, though entirely divergent from the accepted norm, are deserving of high praise. Sulpicia and Transila break the Aristotelian binary that sees women as passive and submissive by proposing an image of femininity as active, rebellious and courageous; thus, they situate themselves outside of traditional representations of women to allineate with that of the female warrior, which subverts conventions and hierarchies. Their characterisation, then, becomes more complex than the model of the *virago*: by breaking ideological barriers and traditional conventions, Transila and Sulpicia demonstrate that women, like men, can be overcome by their most violent instincts. Rather than reducing divergent femininity to the incorporation of masculine traits, Cervantes exalts the female other in its most menacing form.

6. *Conclusions*

To describe the great variety of female characters presented in the *Persiles*, Esteva de Llobet has called the text a "great mosaic": "Cervantes nos ofrece, en el gran mosaico del *Persiles*, múltiples casos y situaciones diversas del mundo femenino" (2019, 126). This article has attempted to show that this astonishing variety of female characters is not complete without full recognition of women as other. Contrary to the strand of Cervantine feminist criticism, mainly represented by De Armas Wilson and El Saffar, and to theories by feminist geographers, this article has argued that the *Persiles* is built on a poetics of difference that, instead of uniting opposites, polarises them to fully recognise their diversity. The representation of otherness, which by definition presupposes a rupture of the norm, is expressed in the text through the rips and fissures that constitute its entire structure. Alterity thus exists in the dichotomies and

splits between the two parts: instead of joining them, the text exposes their difference in order to make the female other a visible and intelligible subject. The blunt division between North and South thus serves to create a space of representation that accommodates the displaced other; through the maritime voyage, the two worlds are temporarily brought together in an encounter that reveals but doesn't attempt to annul difference.

In the ephemeral space of the islands of the North, the female other can find representation and become a possible reality: outside the limits of empirical knowledge, woman can express herself as a subject who, in the same way as man, can be overwhelmed by passions and instincts and even be driven by evil intentions. The *Persiles,* then, is far from representing the division between the genders according to traditionally codified lines, as Arellano-Torres (2022) argued;[29] instead, femininity is explored as a full category of knowledge and represented in its various nuances. Difference is not to be circumvented but articulated and exposed: this recognition of various experiences of femininity earns Cervantes the same title he holds for the *Quijote*, that of a truly modern writer. Indeed, Cervantes's aim is not to judge but to show the different facets of the feminine world: characters such as Cenotia, who is reproachable for her lack of honesty and diabolic designs, nevertheless retain a human dimension as she trembles in the face of the older Antonio's threats. This way, the author does not mean to tell us that "Cenotia es, ante todo, una mujer como cualquier otra, y en su comportamiento amoroso criticable se pueden admitir atenuantes" (Andrès 1995, 174), but that her actions are part of the constellation of feminine human behaviour.

The "gradations of difference from the desired Catholic ideal" (Sawhney 2009, 1) displayed by the inhabitants of the Northern hemisphere raise a question regarding the overall interpretation of the text. Is the *Persiles* really a Christian romance? Does the fissure in the text sustain a negative evaluation of the Northern hemisphere as opposed to a positive one of Southern Europe? What is certain is that the construction of difference noticeable in the first half of the

29 Arellano-Torres observes that secondary male characters such as Arnaldo are characterised by their dynamism and their quest for adventure; female characters, instead, are placed in a hierarchical division according to their physical beauty. Taurisia's misadventure confirms the weaker place of women, since "el carácter subsidiario y pasivo de su aventura queda subrayado además por su condición de mujer" (2022, 18). With this division, the critic seems to adhere to a characterisation that respects traditional dichotomies.

text creates characters that are marginal to Christian standards, and as such become "amalgams of [non]conformist attitudes that could find no place in sixteenth-century Spain and Europe" (Ibid.: 2). The division between North and South brings to the fore the characterisation of divergent women based on a criterion that challenges Christian values. The constant appearance of the female other may be taken either as the overcoming of temptations as the heroes approach the unifying Catholic centre, or as a reminder that not all the experiences of subjectivity can fit into an idealistic frame. This study has clearly leaned for the second option. The portrayals of Sensuality and the she-wolf are explicit representations of lust and desire, both female- and male- originated; Cenotia and Rosamunda incarnate the devilish arts and evil desires, while Sulpicia and Transila embody the ideals of courage and fury in their desire for revenge or freedom. With these characters, Cervantes expands the horizon of femininity exposed by Auristela and her candid counterpart Sinforosa. The experience of the journey, therefore, becomes a fundamental tool for the discovery and integration of these forms of femininity that can only be represented at the antipodes of the Christian world. Through it, Auristela and Periandro meet characters that contrast them but that do not necessarily function as "reflections of their higher and lower selves" (El Saffar 1984, 128). Instead of being merely an antithetical reflection of the heroine, as was the case in the Greek novel (Egger 1990), the female other is detached from the image of the ideal woman to represent another facet of femininity. Without any attempt to "bring [the female character] under" or to "subordinate her to the patriarchal order", as Patsy Boyer claimed (1990, 60), Cervantes attempts to represent the multisided nature of the gender. In the kaleidoscopic universe of the *Persiles*, femininity is represented in every facet.

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