

OLIVER AND AMAT: MYTH, GENDER AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

(Two Novels by Contemporary Women Writers)

Journalist, scriptwriter and translator Maria Antónia Oliver (1946 —), a prolific and significant member of the Mallorcan group, has published short stories, novels, literary criticism, travelogues and screen plays, many of which involve fantasy, mythical creatures or situations, magic, fairy-tale motifs, visions, dream sequences, hallucinations, or elements of science fiction. Metamorphosis, especially, appears as a significant repetitive myth, along with the search for identity. Known for her imaginative style, Oliver often interweaves the mythical or fantastic with utterly prosaic, everyday reality, which frequently constitutes the point of departure and reappears periodically in the course of the narrative. The quest for feminine self-realization or autonomy, characteristically a central concern for Oliver, may be treated psychologically, philosophically or allegorically. A blending of traditional fictional forms with others conservatively viewed as sub-literary typifies Oliver's writing, which includes borrowings from the fantastic, science fiction and detective sub-genres, but also the epic, the chronicle, the adolescent or apprenticeship novel, and the urban novel of quotidian realism.

Her once-somnolent, rural, native island, its history and magical heritage contribute significantly to the ambience and character of her works. Threats of environmental chaos posed by the tourist invasion, booming commercial development and population growth are background themes in Oliver's first two novels, *Cròniques d'un mig estiu* (1970; *Chronicles of a Half Summer*), and *Cròniques de la molt anomenada ciutat de Montcarrà* (1972; *Chronicles of the Oft-Named City of Montcarrà*).

The latter combines treatment of the encroaching destruction of the Mediterranean environment with a family chronicle. Realistic elements of the daily lives of three generations of a proletarian clan are interrupted and relieved via Oliver's incorporation of aspects of *rondalles* — fantastic Mallorcan folktales featuring giants, fairies, and various mythical creatures who (as in the novel discussed below) occasionally involve themselves in human affairs. Although these earlier works are to some extent novels of the interior of the island, Menorca's diminutive dimensions mean that the Mediterranean is never far away, a pervasive presence felt when not actually seen. In her third novel, however, Oliver goes far from shore, to the center (and depths) of the sea.

El vaixell d'iràs i no tornarà (Barcelona: Laia, 1976) begins with a single chapter set in unreal, mythic time, with atmosphere and vocabulary evoking both primitive cosmogonies and the fairy tale. In the manner of creation myths, this prologue — prefaced by a rhyming motif — relates how three mischievous, rather childish giants met at an extremely remote moment and place, constructing the "Ship that Sails and Never Returns" of the title. Oliver refrains from drawing any specific connection between this prefatory chapter and the remainder of the novel, set in the present aboard *En Falaguer*, a small Mediterranean steamer making overnight crossings between Mahon (Menorca) and Barcelona. *En Falaguer* possesses most of the accoutrements of larger trans-Atlantic luxury liners, on a smaller, less cosmopolitan scale, carries modern navigational and radio equipment, and accommodates a full crew plus more than 200 passengers, including the indispensable newlyweds and dowager with dog.

Following a routine departure from Mahon with calm sea, clear sky and full moon on a balmy, tranquil night, sometime before dawn space becomes elastic: *En Falaguer* continues to sail on course hour after hour without reaching Barcelona. As those on board begin to question the delay, the officers reassure them that all is normal, so the passengers seek ways to amuse themselves while the crew go about their assigned duties. But time likewise becomes elastic: days and nights last weeks, and most of those on board quickly forget the abnormality of their situation, becoming oblivious to past and future, enjoying the cruise and living for the moment. The ship, with its crew and passengers from varied backgrounds and social classes, constitutes a so-

cial microcosm, and the presence of intercalated philosophical monologues in counterpoint to the action moves the narrative emphatically beyond the realm of mere playful adventure or fantasy, despite the visibility of these elements.

Notwithstanding storms and tempests that have seemingly strayed far from their accustomed latitudes and the absurdly plentiful supplies aboard a vessel that set sail for a voyage of only a few hours, the first half of the novel remains largely in the realm of realism. Up to this point, the narrative might constitute an innovative adaptation of the journey topos, a metaphor for life. Shipboard romances blossom, while the heroine Aina seems to be the only one to question the passive docility of other passengers. Most appear hypnotized, with progressively less and less memory or recollection of earlier events, along with decreasing questions concerning their present situation. At the height of a tempest, Aina witnesses what she interprets as an exchange of messages between the captain and powers of the deep. Her suspicions aroused, she begins to investigate and to attempt to awaken some awareness in other passengers. With considerable difficulty, she convinces a half-dozen that something has gone terribly awry. Nevertheless, time continues to pass while even those most persuaded that something should be done do very little. Aina herself becomes so involved in her passionate love affair with Bernat (also referred to as Gongylus) that an indefinite number of days and nights elapse.

The reader must at some point recall the "Ship of Fools" motif and question whether *En Falaguer* was conceived as a modern variant. Such is the monotony, the sameness of days with no real point of reference, that some readers may also wonder whether this is a ship of death — the living dead. But such a notion is belied by the lightness of the narrative tone, predominantly that of the oral story-teller or weaver of folktales addressed directly to a seemingly youthful group "vosaltres" which includes the reader. Authorial or narratorial interventions addressed to the reader/listeners function especially to convey explanations of how fantastic events occur (how time becomes elastic, how certain events are repeated over and over, how characters age visibly — from fright —, how it happens that there are seven days and seven nights of darkness, etc.). This same voice reflects on gender roles, humorously subverting traditional stereotypes, suggesting that the implied reader(s) or listeners include a female majority. Besides oralism, syne-

sthesia, and rhetorical questions, Oliver's style in this work features a characteristically light touch blending humor and fantasy with occasional intrusions of the violent and grotesque.

Approximately halfway of the novel, when monotony has become the norm, the ship's engines stop suddenly and without warning. Before anyone has had time to worry about drifting or becoming becalmed, *En Falaguer* metamorphoses into a three-masted sailing ship, continuing to sail, although no one has any longer any sense of direction or destination, and the instruments have ceased to function. Delighted with the change, most passengers accept it unquestioningly. Later, they discover that the ship has been occupied by a large number of "rose-colored men", whose purpose is unclear (they appear to be androids whose primary job is vigilance). While Aina and her small group of "aware" friends feel apprehensive of the rose-colored robots, most passengers either ignore or passively accept them. Unquestioning acceptance continues when a still more surprising metamorphosis occurs an indefinite time afterward: without warning, the ship comes to a stop, turning into an island, complete with Mediterranean village. The passengers convert their cabins to shops and restaurants, selling their luggage and bartering for foodstuffs, as reality finally intrudes in the form of scarcity of food. When further passage of time has exhausted all food, they find they no longer have appetites, and shortly after realize they they have also lost their sexual appetites: most people's organs atrophy, they turn uniformly gray, and only a few can tell one person from another or even distinguish male from female.

The fantastic "explanation" proffered involves certain playful giants (seen in the prefatory chapter), denizens of the ocean depths who awaken every seven years to amuse themselves — the inventors of the "Ship that Sails and Never Returns". Their simple-minded play apparently caused the storms, the metamorphoses of *En Falaguer*, and other anomalies. The captain and officers become unwitting accomplices of these beings upon deciding that certain knowledge should be concealed from the passengers. Subsequently, when the captain attempts to ascertain the giants' motives, they treat him as a toy; nevertheless, he reports to his officers that the giants have offered him treasures. The consistent pattern of deception by the shipboard authorities of both passengers and the rest of the crew leads to an atmosphere of mutual distrust. Implied aspects

of censorship, information management or manipulation of public opinion and behavior suggest the "Ship of State" metaphor (while this is more commonly used in English, Oliver has translated works from English to Catalan—including texts of Virginia Woolf—and may well have encountered it elsewhere as well). In any case, several parallels suggest interpretation of the "Ship that Sails and Never Returns" as an allegory of the Franco regime, with the unexpectedly extended voyage and lengthy standing-still as metaphoric representations of the prolonged postwar period and long socio-economic stagnation. The rose-colored robots clearly represent authoritarian control and totalitarian restriction of individual liberties, characterizing the police state. Such hermeneutics may exceed Oliver's intention, but publication of the novel the year after Franco's death strengthens probabilities of a connection. The repeated preoccupation with environmental disaster and social destruction seen in earlier novels of Oliver enhances the likelihood of socio-political allegory. Significantly, the ship's occupants eventually manage to resume their journey by throwing the captain and top officers overboard, after which they begin to recuperate their normal appearances and appetites (a definitive change of command which puts an end to collective or social immobility, stagnation and apathy). *En Falaguer* again becomes a tall-masted sailing vessel, and eventually resumes its original form (perhaps representing the transition to democracy and return to something resembling the Republic). The ship's fuel having been exhausted long before, passengers resolve the crisis by using the lubricant from the robots' veins following a shipboard revolution in which the oppressors are overthrown and killed and their underlings removed from circulation.

Interwoven with the magical tale of the vessel, narrated by the omniscient voice of the oral teller of the tale, Oliver places a second story constituted by the largely stream-of-consciousness style meditations of Aina. Several of Oliver's works interweave two parallel stories, using a contrapuntal technique, with a broader social canvas and narrative of collective transition or impact forming one strand while the other features an individual protagonist with his/her subjectivity, thoughts, emotions and personal development. This basic pattern reappears in "The Ship that Sails and Never Returns", which also interweaves internal monologue with action passages in almost rhythmic regularity. Aina's awakening to love

and eroticism, her reflections on life, are interspersed with concern for the situation of the ship and her fellow passengers. If indeed there be a leader among the passengers, that leader is Aina, who constitutes the force which finally brings them again to port when most others had forgotten any life other than that of the ship. Oliver's translations of Woolf and that writer's acknowledged impact on Oliver's own feminist writing clearly contribute to her conception of the female protagonist, gender roles, and interpersonal relations. Male characters in the novel play decidedly secondary roles.

Unlike masculine novels of the sea, where focus is usually upon a struggle between the protagonist and Nature (whether the elements or denizens of the deep), Oliver's work does not make the sea an antagonist. Nevertheless, it constitutes a significant presence, of which readers are repeatedly reminded:

la mar sempre igual, el mateix paisatge com si no ens moguéssim de lloc, com si cada dia recomençàssim el viatge, on anàvem: ja ni ho record. ¿d'on veníem?, tampoc.... la mar sempre igual, tant com m'agradava l'he arribada a avorrir, abans era un camí obert, ara és un cercle blau í pla que qui sap qué amaga . . . (114)

Because the sea and ships have traditionally constituted a male domain par excellence, it seems particularly noteworthy that Oliver chooses this context as a frame for her strong, thoughtful, decisive heroine who handles multiple threats in low-key, matter-of-fact fashion. From the viewpoint of the feminist writer or critic, additional significance inheres in that fact that Oliver accomplishes this characterization without simplistically reversing gender roles to attribute heroic feats to the female.

The themes of individual and collective identities, the blend of genres transcending normal classifications for prose fiction, and aspects of the female protagonist suggest further appropriate comparisons from Oliver's own work. Her 1985 novel, *Crineres de foc*, likewise employs contrapuntal, parallel plot lines (individual and collective), incorporates aspects of the epic, science fiction and fantasy, the *bildungsroman* and the psychological novel, and features a thoughtfully conceived female protagonist with feminist characteristics. *Punt d'arros* (which is prefaced by a quotation from Virginia Woolf and seen as Oliver's most clearly feminist work) follows *El vaixell d'i-*

ràs i no tornaràs in order of publication, coinciding in its presentation of a woman's search for freedom. But *Punt d'arros*, Oliver's most decidedly urban and feminist novel, is her least Mediterranean work, and lacks the characteristic dual plot structure, fantasy elements, and blend of genres.

In addition to the mixture in *El vaixell d'iràs i no tornaràs* of fantasy and realism (with the ocean depths as realm of fantastic creatures and the sea as a place of strange and marvelous happenings), the maritime journey involving motifs of ship, storms and peril, the prolonged wandering, delays and despair before eventual arrival in port must inevitably recall the *Odyssey* as ultimate intertextual referent, with the conventional literary associations and connotations attached thereto. One of the latter, while never specifically enunciated by Oliver, is exile — appropriately evoked since the end of the dictatorship marked the end of the long exile of so many. As epic of exile and wandering, the *Aeneid* constitutes a slightly more distant intertextual echo. Allegorical implications logically deriving from associations with the *Odyssey* also evoke the extended route travelled by Spanish women whose rights — briefly attained under the Republic — were revoked and abolished by the Franco dictatorship, turning back the clock (happenings possibly symbolized by the change of the steamship to a sailing vessel, the near-stoppage of time, and the prolonged immobility). Oliver's novel lacks any specific indication that it targets an audience of female adolescents, but seems particularly appropriate for that group in its provision of a positive feminine role model at the same time that it contributes to remedying a traditional absence or silence in areas of myth and history where only the male voice has been heard, only masculine viewpoints recorded.

Núria Amat, born in Barcelona in 1950, belongs chronologically to the same generation of novelists of transition and democracy as Oliver, but years of expatriation (during which she resided in Paris, Berlin, Bahía Solano [Colombia] and Pittsburgh) seem to have negatively affected her identification with Catalan language and culture. Despite her Barcelona background and Catalan name, she apparently has not written in that language, while Oliver has avoided Castilian. Also unlike Oliver, Amat has developed a specific association with erotic fiction, and her style is characterized as sensual. Her writings are less extensive (I know of only one other, the novel-

ette *Pan de boda* 1979). Failure to write in Catalan would have eliminated her from consideration by the Catalan public with which Oliver has been so successful, and Amat's works have been less noted by critics than Oliver's. Nevertheless, both writers treat feminist themes such as the "liberated" female, feminine sexuality (portrayed with greater specificity by Amat), gender roles and revision of gender stereotypes. Mythological allusions occupy a prominent position in the motivation of Amat's *Narciso y Armonía*, narrated from the viewpoint of the female protagonist, Armonía (who has no intention of resigning herself to the role of Echo).

While Armonía qualifies as a "nymph" in several aspects, not the least of which is her appearance of eternal — or indefinitely prolonged — youth, neither her personality or mythical attributes suggest Echo. Armonía belongs to the class of water nymphs, perhaps the Naiads, but more probably the Oceanids, as seen in her extraordinary love of the Mediterranean, her psychological fusion with the sea and its moods. Even her mother's death in a boating accident (apparently caused by Armonía as a child) does not lessen her love of the water. Once she acquires some degree of independence, she chooses to live alone in her family's seaside summer home in a coastal village while her father remains in Barcelona. Armonía often imagines herself a siren or mermaid, and she swims year round regardless of the weather. The protagonist, a semi-professional dancer — self-taught and intuitive, talented but undisciplined — exhibits a love of ballet second only to her love of the sea. She occasionally performs with a professional troupe, and her associates come largely from the semi-bohemian ambient of the theater. In her thirties when the novel's action commences, Armonía has decided to have herself sterilized. Unmarried, and uninterested in matrimony or motherhood after many minor romances, she views the operation as a guarantee of freedom which will allow her to devote herself fully to dancing and to the sea.

Through her friend Angel, another dancer and a homosexual, she meets Narciso, an extraordinarily beautiful composer and concert pianist who is also homosexual. With profound shock, Armonía recognizes his face as one from a recurrent dream where, in an underwater grotto, she encountered her masculine alter ego reflected in a mirror:

seguía estando sola y, con seguridad absoluta, seguía siendo la misma. Y en cambio... el espejo reflejaba otra forma, iba desvelando otra figura humana distinta a la suya y al propio tiempo idéntica. Opuesta y semejante. A trazos ... se dibujaba la copia exacta de lo que Armonía no era ni llegaría a ser nunca. Se revelaba un hombre, bello como ella, igual a Armonía en todo, sólo que destacando en varonil la naturaleza femenina de Armonía. (38)

In Armonía's recurring dream, love between herself and the beautiful stranger was instantaneous and absolute. Narciso is Armonía's opposite, her "negative reflection", for she is likewise narcissistic. For her, the Mediterranean is, among other things, "gigantesco espejo"(48). And Armonía's beauty is comparably extraordinary, of mythical proportions: "El problema de Armonía residía en su extrema belleza" (48).

Narciso, unquestionably modeled in accord with the mythic archetype, flirts with Armonía from their first meeting at her seaside home, and despite his succession of male companions, the strong mutual attraction between him and the female protagonist grows progressively more intense. A large number of their encounters involve swimming on the beach, with all of the Freudian connotations of water implicitly present. Two-thirds of the novel chronicles their mutual seduction, consummated after prolonged delays and dalliance when Armonía accepts Narciso's invitation to visit his island home in Formentor, attending the premier of his new composition. Overcoming some hesitation, she journeys across the Mediterranean from Barcelona to the Balearic Islands (so tracing in reverse the planned trajectory of *En Falaguer*). Abundant and specific erotic details in Amat's work move sections of the narrative dangerously close to the realm of soft-core pornography, although the focal interest resides in the "conversion" of the lovers to at least temporary acceptance of the notion of commitment and possibly marriage — and in Narciso's case, to heterosexuality, while Armonía also briefly contemplates a possibly homosexual relationship for herself.

Armonía's visit to Narciso's home, planned down to the smallest detail, is intended to be gastronomically, aesthetically, artistically and erotically superb. Unexpectedly, however, once she has conquered him, Armonía finds herself dismayed at Narciso's dependence, frightened by his loss of joy

and liberty. Mirror imagery at this juncture communicates the submersion of his ego in hers: "Narciso, entonces, ¿ más que espejo de sí mismo es reflejo de la persona que ama?" (269). As a mere passive shadow of herself, Narciso no longer interests Armonía, who returns him to the waiting arms of his former lover, Alfonso. As was true of their early encounters, the scenes of their definitive separation likewise feature a seaside setting with walks along the dunes backed by the waters of the Mediterranean. While the sea's role remains largely passive ("gigantesco espejo"), it is the object of Armonía's abiding devotion, to which she returns with the ambivalence and fading of her brief, tempestuous passion for Narciso. Repetitive mirror images throughout the novel underscore the narcissism of both protagonists, tying in the mythological intertexts. Development of the mythological dimension occurs somewhat at the expense of the characters' "humanity", but the device conveys their passions with special clarity and intensity.

Certainly, one major thrust of Amat's novel must be deemed aesthetic. Another, however, clearly involves subversion of sexual stereotypes, archetypal gender roles, and stereotypical erotic relationships. Both protagonists' androgynous characteristics and behavior include transgression of gender roles and types, most flagrantly in Narciso's openly-flaunted homosexuality, but also in Armonía's rejection of the traditional passive, chaste, dependent, domestic and/or maternal feminine model promulgated by the Franco regime. Armonía dares to play the sexual aggressor, and Narciso (having presumably renounced his homosexuality during the passionate commitment to Armonía) nevertheless feels secure enough to garb himself as a transvestite to entertain his guest:

Una mujer bellísima (sí, Armonía, atrévete a decirlo), de una mujer fastuosa, impresionante...No podía dar crédito a sus ojos. Sencillamente, la misma inefable visión no se lo permitía No podía creerlo. Estaba sobreexcitada, caliente, como diría un hombre. Abrumada Armonía quería tocar a esa maravilla. Hombre o mujer; lo que fuera. (233)

Armonía's previously secure sexual identity may not be permanently threatened, but despite doubting that the beauty before her is, in fact, Narciso, she experiences a strong erotic attraction: "No era un travestí. No, no lo era en modo alguno. Era una

mujer, una mujer exótica, y al propio tiempo era Narciso. ¿O el pecado? Sí; el pecado mismo disfrazado de maravilla" (234). Amat further subverts the Victorian gender models for women in postwar Spain when Armonía's passion overcomes her socialization and she throws herself upon the apparition, still unsure whether the other is male or female: "Se echaron sobre el suelo, rodaron y dispusieron sus cuerpos de tal forma que fueran ellos quienes se cuidaran de descubrir la verdad debajo de tanta ropa" (238). Later, although now sure that the lover was Narciso, Armonía dreams that he is not male, but "la misma Lauren Baccall disfrazada de hombre. Fue un sueño divertido" (239). Obviously, Amat's work is not only more erotic and subversive than Oliver's, but less likely to be proffering a positive feminine role model. Despite her beauty and her having achieved some evident sexual liberation, Armonía is not an entirely sympathetic character: she too is narcissistic, sometimes egotistical and not a little spoiled, self-indulgent and slightly frivolous. Hedonism and aesthetics are the dominants in her personal philosophy, and while probably in part the consequence of a general rejection of "committed" art and literature in the generation before, Armonía possesses much greater potential to alienate. The fact that her lifestyle apparently does not succeed in making her happy, and that her self-love compels her to break with Narciso ("su amor de toda la vida" 279) because she intuits that she might lose control of the relationship, increases the probability that she is not intended as a positive feminine role model.

As a logical extrapolation of the Narcissus myth, Amat's prevalent mirror imagery serves several purposes, aiding characterization, serving as alternative or indirect description, and advancing the action. Several contemporary Spanish women writers who employ such imagery make it a metaphor of the feminine condition as they focus upon pregnancy, aging and decadence, alienation, frustration and despair, and forms of evasion ranging from madness to death, drugs and alcoholism. Reworking traditional associations of the mirror with feminine vanity, some women writers adapt it subversively to depict masculine vanity, effeminacy or other weaknesses, and aspects of the foregoing appear in *Narciso y Armonía*. Mirror images also serve to reflect the process of gender formation, to provoke self-encounter or provide a vehicle to epiphany, and insofar as the sea is a mirror, it fulfills several of these functions for

Amat. Contrast between dreams and reality, whether across time or at a specific moment, is also facilitated by mirrors, which also function as a device to juxtapose past and present or as a mechanism of temporal transition. Inseparability of the mirror image from the Narcissus myth gives this device enhanced visibility in *Narciso y Armonía*. Oliver makes extensive use of mirror images, although they do not play a significant role in *El vaixell d'iràs i no tornarà*s (see, for example, her *Muller qui cerca espill* [Woman in Search of a Mirror; 1978-79], a screenplay published together with another feminist drama by Oliver, *Vegetal*). Oliver and Amat coincide in using the mirror with specific reference to narcissism, although narcissistic characteristics are much more fully developed by Amat (in what is also a much more extensive narrative). Both authors recognize the presence of self-love in both sexes, and neither portrays the woman simply as passive reflector or victim.

Although they write in different languages, Oliver and Amat belong to the same generation of women writers and display many characteristics of what might be termed a "second wave" of feminists, no longer primarily concerned with basic legal rights for women and children, women's access to education and the workplace, enclosure and certain social legislation, but now preoccupied with feminine self-realization, a deeper, personal equality in intimate relationships, and subtler aspects of psychological as opposed to legal liberation. Their writings also differ—in quantity and quality, stylistically and ideologically—but the novels examined coincide in the special roles accorded the Mediterranean, the heightened visibility of myth, and the subversive manipulation by both of sex and gender stereotypes. And in that particular aspect, they give new meaning to the Spanish phrase, *descubrir el Mediterráneo*.

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