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Out of the Glass Niche and into the Swimming Pool: the Transformation of the Sirena figure in Concha Méndez's Surtidor: Poesías

by

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Abstract

The present study is an exploration of revisionist mythmaking in Concha Méndez's *Surtidor: poesías* (1928), specifically of the Generation of 27 poet's appropriation and inscription of the androcentric myth of the siren/mermaid into female discourse, as seen through three poems: "Nadadora," "Natación," and "Bar". Through an analysis of these poems I show that Méndez dismantles the conventional "sirena" figure and revises her to suit a modern woman. In her appropriation of the "sirena," Méndez replaces the antiquated siren/mermaid of masculine hegemonic discourse with an athletic, capable, and liberated water woman who decides her own destiny. In presenting a woman who frees herself from the restrictions of male subjectivity, Concha Méndez proposes an alternative model for female iconography—a siren singing a song rarely listened to, a song of feminine freedom and self-determination that would set the poet apart from her contemporaries for many years.

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Out of the Glass Niche and into the Swimming Pool: the Transformation of the *Sirena* figure in Concha Méndez's *Surtidor: Poesías*

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In the prologue to Concha Méndez's *Vida a vida*, Juan Ramón Jiménez refers to the Generation of 27 poet as "la sirenita del mar que sonreía secreta a los mocitos en su nicho de cristal, acuario esmeraldino" (11). Jiménez's play on words invokes the woman poet's first name, Concha, with the word *nicho*, the etymological root of which being the Old Italian word for seashell. However, the secondary definition of *nicho* (sepulcher, tomb) provides insight on the space, or lack thereof, which Concha Méndez occupies in Spanish literary history. Indeed, the poetry of Concha Méndez has been virtually buried alongside that of her female contemporaries writing in the 20s and 30s, in the forgotten annals of Spanish literature, denied the canonical legitimacy awarded to the male members of her generation.

I contribute the present study in response to Catherine Bellver's assertion that "Spanish poetry written by women illustrates the lingering need for scholars to reenter the second phase of feminist criticism and to continue to focus part of their efforts on the recovery of forgotten writers...so that the tradition of [Spanish] female authorship can be validated" (12). It is an exploration of revisionist mythmaking in Concha Méndez's, *Surtidor: poesías*, (1928) specifically of the poet's appropriation and reinscription of the androcentric myth of the siren/mermaid (i.e. *sirena*), as seen through three poems: "Nadadora," "Natación" and "Bar." An analysis of these poems will show that Méndez dismantles the conventional "sirena" figure, effectively subverting the gender codes of

masculine hegemonic discourse. She replaces this antiquated mermaid with a modern woman of the water, one who frees herself from the restrictions of male subjectivity. In doing so, the poet proposes an alternative model for female iconography.

Before exploring the ways in which Concha Méndez rewrites the “sirena,” let us foreground the traditional version she would have encountered. In her provocative book, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise*, Dorothy Dinnerstein lays out the legend and its implications as follows: “The treacherous mermaid, seductive and impenetrable female representative of the dark and magic underwater world from which our life comes and in which we cannot live, lures voyagers to their doom” (5).

In “Nadadora,” an early poem from *Surtidor*, the poet carefully positions herself against this “sirena”:

Mis brazos:
los remos.

La quilla:
mi cuerpo.

Timón:
mi pensamiento.

(Si fuera sirena,
mis cantos
serían mis versos.)

(31)

The protagonist of the poem is a female swimmer, as was Méndez herself. Yet whereas in the introductory citation Juan Ramón Jiménez dubs this master of the water “the little mermaid,” the female poetic voice rejects identification with the conventional figure of the “sirena”. The swimmer establishes herself instead as a different inhabitant of the ocean, one more culturally neutral—a boat.

The speaker spotlights her own corporality, but it is not of the sexual variety traditionally associated with the siren. Her body is a formidable vessel that propels itself through the water; it is a vehicle for physical liberation, and for liberation from the trappings of the masculine configuration of the female icon. In a subversion of the fetishistic fragmentation of the female body often employed by male classical Spanish poets (ruby lips, ivory skin, golden hair, etc), Méndez divides the woman swimmer's being into arms, trunk, and, in the most radical deviation from the masculine norm, mind. Her primary instrument, the driving force behind the metaphorical navigation, is her thoughts. Significantly, this water woman's objective is not to seduce man and destroy him. In fact, her actions have nothing to do with man at all. She does not define herself in relation to him, but rather is an autonomous entity in herself; she moves freely and assuredly through the ocean, a sharp contrast from the typical *angel del hogar* figure of the previous period's literature.

We find the "sirena" framed within the parentheses that close the poem, and these qualifying marks keep the siren at a distance. If the poetic voice were that of a siren, her songs would be her verses. The use of the subjunctive denotes impossibility; the female swimmer is not a "sirena", despite Jiménez's attempt to restrict Méndez as such. And yet we do have her verses, and they do comprise a song of sorts. However it is not a siren's song, or if it is, it is that of a revised siren figure. If man is to be threatened by "Nadadora"'s "sirena", a siren/mermaid read against the grain, it is because the athletic and intellectual prowess with which Méndez has endowed the female protagonist, is a challenge to her male counterpart.

The decidedly modern atmosphere of “Natación” provides for a more elaborate subversion of the mermaid icon.

(Ni sirenas.
Ni tritones.)

En alto, los trampolines.
Y el agua, bañándose en la piscina
blanca
--un baño de transparencias --.

En las graderías,
expectación, rumores.
Y el portavoz olímpico
disparando palabras:

“¡Salto de pie a la luna con impulso!”

Formas ágiles vuelan
perfilándose en el azul espacioso.

Emoción ahogada en
voces, voces, voces.

La multitud
--jerseys policromados--.
Y el músculo
en contracciones deportivas.

Ritmo; ritmo de brazos y hélices.
Ya,
el vencedor, los vencedores
--laureles sin laureles--.

Y los corazones anónimos
Tirando ¿jabalinas? a la tarde excelsa.
(101-2)

While the title of this poem is similar to that of the one previously discussed (“Nadadora”), the difference lies in the gender neutrality of “Natación”. The opening lines contribute to an equalization of the playing field: “(Ni sirenas. / Ni tritones)”(ll.1-2). Once again mermaids find themselves enclosed in a qualified statement; the parentheses prevent the mermaids from intruding into the main portion of the poem. There will be no

place for them here, no place for traditionally restrictive female iconography in Méndez's poetic landscape. Yet also framed within the same space and equally unwelcome are the "tritones". While we are well familiar with the continual romanticization and mythification of the half-female half-fish, the presence of the male version is less commonly felt, and placing the two together results in a type of demythification. When we do hear the word "Triton", it is usually in reference to the mighty Greek god of the sea, son of Poseidon. Yet in making Triton plural, Méndez strips him of his power, reminding us that he is only one of many similar male monsters rumored to inhabit the deep. In addition, placing the negatively connoted sirens along side the more neutral mermen contributes to formers' demythification, for the juxtaposition of the man-fish with the woman-fish throws into relief the absurdity of the mermaid as well.

The poem depicts a modern-day swim meet, a primary reason for the exclusion of the antiquated "sirena" figure. Méndez's pool is white, a blank slate on which to rewrite the myth of the mermaid. As far as sex is concerned, it is safe to assume the swimmers of this poem to be both male and female, for the parentheses suggest that while mermaids and mermen will not participate in the competition, women and men will. The pool is a "bath of transparencies" (l.6). It is clear and uncontaminated, not obfuscated by the cultural baggage of androcentric legends. Furthermore, the "transparencias" will record the triumph of the female, and male, swimmers for future generations, as will the poem itself. The public is an important additional witness and testament to the swimmers' athletic feats, and it has come to see both the men and women participate.

Aside from presenting us the possibility that we are actually witnessing an Olympic swimming competition, the "Olympic megaphone" (l.9) also provides for a

reinscription of Greek mythology. A reference to the residence of the Gods, it takes us back to the myth of the “sirena” as posited by Homer, the Siren as object formulated by masculine desire and fear. Méndez in turn proposes a contemporary Olympus, a space in which a new myth is constructed, that of the athlete where woman plays the part of protagonist as well as the man.

As in the earlier poem, Méndez foregrounds the physicality of the swimmers carving out space for themselves, now “formas ágiles” (l.12) and “músculo[s] en contracciones deportivas” (ll.18-19). Margaret Persin confirms the important role of female athletics in Concha Méndez’s poetry: “The sporting life that she presents in her poetic texts [] calls into question the normative patriarchal hierarchy that relegates women to a passive non-assertive presence, whose function remains inscribed upon a text created for them by men, whether within the confines of domesticity or as the passive muse of male artistic endeavors” (197). Testament to female independence and autonomy is the additional echo of “Nadadora” that we find in the mechanical rhythm of the swimmers’ arms as propellers.

Who are the winners of the competition? “El vencedor, los vencedores” (l.22). While “el vencedor” is the abstract word, *victor*, it is also male-gendered. With the subsequent qualification, “los vencedores”, however, Méndez creates space for the inclusion of female victors, for while the Spanish plural of *victor* is masculine as well, “vencedores” may be comprised of both men and women.

The trophy the swimmers earn (“laureles sin laureles” (l.23)) is suggestive, and its implications for traditional gender models merit further attention. At this point, Méndez again resorts to Greek mythology in order to dismantle and reconstruct it. Through her

allusion to the classical legend of Daphne and Apollo the poet furthers her project of revisionist mythmaking, and a brief exploration of the Greek myth is appropriate here. While Apollo is the mythological god heralded for his rational (i.e. “masculine”) thought, as well as god of artistic creation, Daphne, an unfortunate water nymph (and in this sense reminiscent of the mermaid), is the reluctant object of Apollo’s affection, rendered forever immobile when she is transformed into a laurel tree in attempt to evade masculine desire. Even as a laurel Daphne is ultimately unable to escape her predator, for she endures permanent objectification as Apollo dons her branches in the form of a wreath around his head. The laurel wreath, long the traditional prize for poets, thus carries in it a history of female objectification.

Is it possible to earn “laurels without laurels”? Is it possible to be recognized as a master of poetry without being a male? Without resorting to the traditional objectification of women? In “Natación”, Méndez posits an alternative model. The woman here is not a water nymph; she is not a mermaid. Méndez takes masculine desire out of the equation, as she does in “Nadadora”. The female swimmer, unconstrained in the water, competes equally alongside the male, successfully evading his sexual gaze. She is not the trophy, as was Apollo’s Daphne. Rather, the female swimmer is among those who earn the trophy; Méndez has transformed the feminine object into subject.

A poem in which the problematic female sexuality of the siren does enter the scene is “Bar”. In this poem Méndez resists the traditional femme fatale figure while proposing an inversion of gender stereotypes:

Bar en el Puerto.
Voces de yodo. Humo de pipa.
Linterna mágica de lejanías...
El marinero del traje blanco
reparte naipes.

Falsas sirenas
juegan a: caza de navegantes...

--Bar en el puerto.--

Brisa de alcoholes.

(El marinero del traje blanco
deja los naipes
y marcha al barco.)

(51)

While Méndez established the white pool in “Natación” as a gender-neutral space from which to rewrite the feminine subject, a bar at the port can hardly be thought of as such a thing, for it is strongly connected with the masculine. Nevertheless, the color white returns to the poetic landscape. While white is normally associated with idealized femininity (purity, virginity, innocence, etc.), in this case Méndez has dressed the male sailor in white. In this way the poet sets the scene for a subversion of patriarchal hegemony, and the male’s story will be rewritten as well. The sailor will not be picking up women at this particular bar; he will not be the source of agency. Though the sailor deals the cards, he is not the one playing the game.

The characters in control of the scene are the “sirenas,” again qualified, this time as “falsas” (l.6), and, in a reversal of the traditional gaze, their eyes are focused on the man. Although it may seem that with the women predators Méndez is reinforcing the stereotype of the evil temptress that female sexuality is perceived as, we must keep in mind that the women only “play at : mariner hunting” (l.7). They are pretending. Real mortal women do not fatally seduce and destroy mortal men, as do the sirens of the myth. The women at the bar are “false sirens” after all. Why are they false? One reason is that sirens do not exist in real life; they are an artfully constructed figment of androcentric imagination. Still, made uncomfortable with the uncharacteristic boldness displayed by

the women, the sailor is scared away. Unable to deal with assertive female sexuality, the sailor leaves the poem. Méndez renders him but an afterthought in parentheses, the central characters of this drama being the “sirenas falsas,” as implied by their positionality in the center of the poem’s lines. In the end the sailor retreats back to the safety of his ship. Yet the women have successfully intruded on masculine space, thus overturning the traditional gender hierarchy reinforced by male myth.

The “sirena” of these three poems from *Surtidor: poesías* is not the dainty demure one whom Juan Ramón Jiménez, and male hegemonic discourse in general, has trapped in a glass coffin in the prologue to *Vida a vida*. Nor is she the condemned lethal seductress of ancient Greek legend. Concha Méndez opts out of the restrictive traditional female iconography and its implicit gender encoding, perhaps at the same time inadvertently ensuring her exclusion from the canon. The poet rewrites the myth of the mermaid/siren to suit a modern woman. In her reappropriation of the “sirena” figure she presents us with a powerful, athletic, and liberated water woman, one who does not define herself through her relation to the masculine, one who determines her own destiny.

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