
Of Penelopes, Mermaids and Flying Women: Celia de Fréine's Tropes of Mobility

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Abstract. In 2010, Celia de Fréine published the Gaelic translation of “Penelope”, a poem by the Galician poet Xohana Torres which challenges the passive role ascribed to women by Western literary tradition and claims for the unknown seas as the space into which women must venture. In 2011, De Fréine published a revised version of her previous Gaelic rendering and added an English translation, a signal of her attraction towards the symbolic figuration of this alternative Penelope the navigator. Along a similar line, De Fréine’s 2010 poetry collection *imram: odyssey*, framed by the Gaelic genre of the *imram* about the voyage and its challenges, sheds light on women’s long-repressed wanderlust and yearning for adventure. This article enquires into the intersection of gender and mobility through the analysis of a number of De Fréine’s symbolic figurations of women’s mobility: navigators, mermaids, and flying women. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti’s trope of the “nomadic subject” and her thesis regarding the transformative capacity of metaphorical language (1994: 4), I will pay special attention to those empowering tropes which engender alternative forms of agency. Nonetheless, utopian discourses on women’s mobility also need to be scrutinised in light of Judith Butler’s warning about the death of the sovereign subject, her vulnerability and her dependence on the Other (2005).

Key Words. Celia de Fréine, Irish Poetry, Xohana Torres, Mobility, Women’s Studies, Penelope, Mermaid, Flying Woman

Resumen. En 2010 Celia de Fréine publicó su traducción al gaélico de “Penélope”, un poema de la poeta gallega Xohana Torres que cuestiona el papel pasivo atribuido a las mujeres por la tradición literaria occidental y que reclama los mares ignotos como espacio en el que se deben aventurar las mujeres. En 2011 De Fréine publicó una versión revisada de dicha traducción gaélica, añadiendo una traducción inglesa, lo cual evidencia su atracción por la figuración simbólica de esta Penélope navegante alternativa. En esta línea, el poemario *imram: odyssey* que De Fréine publicó en 2010 se enmarca en el género gaélico del *imram* sobre el viaje y sus vicisitudes, aportando luz a la pasión viajera de las mujeres y sus ansias de aventura tanto tiempo reprimidas. Este artículo indaga sobre la intersección de género y movilidad a través del análisis de varias figuraciones simbólicas de la movilidad de las mujeres: navegantes, sirenas y mujeres voladoras. Partiendo del tropo del sujeto nómada de Rosi Braidotti y de su

tesis sobre la capacidad transformadora del lenguaje metafórico (1994: 4), prestaré especial atención a aquellos tropos de empoderamiento que generan formas alternativas de agencialidad. Sin embargo, los discursos utópicos sobre la movilidad de la mujer han de ser examinados teniendo también en cuenta la advertencia de Judith Butler sobre la muerte del sujeto soberano, su vulnerabilidad y su dependencia del Otro (2005).

Palabras clave. Celia de Fréine, Poesía irlandesa, Xohana Torres, Movilidad, Estudios de la Mujer, Penélope, Sirena, Mujer voladora

Symbolic Figurations of Female Mobility

In 2010, the Irish poet Celia de Fréine participated in *To the Winds Our Sails*, an anthology of contemporary Galician women poets translated, into English and Gaelic, by Irish poets (O'Donnell and Palacios 2010). De Fréine's long-lasting commitment to the Gaelic language and her consolidated position in the world of Irish letters found a perfect match in the writing career of the doyenne of Galician poetry, Xohana Torres (1931-), whose writing has inspired successive generations of Galician poets, especially women. The Galician poet contributed five poems to this anthology, among them one of her most influential texts "Penélope" (Torres 2004: 251). In this poem, an anonymous oracle encourages Penelope to go out to sea and navigate westward, at the time of the grape harvest, to a place that can be recognised as Galicia, a semi-autonomous community in north-western Spain. In spite of the ominous signals that prefigure danger ("dusk", "a sea of dead"),¹ the oracle, with its ambiguous blend of advice and injunction, states that the navigator will remain fearless. The oracle continues to predict that a moderate wind and "voiceless" sirens will help the female sailor to reach the desired coast and drink the harvest wine. Encouraged by the oracle, Penelope complains about the weariness of continuous weaving, demands her share in the world of magic, and finally states her resolution to sail: "EU TAMÉN NAVEGAR" ["TO SAIL I TOO"]. This last line has been enormously influential on Galician literature and has been taken up by younger poets in an enduring dialogue with their predecessor. Penelope's determination to sail not only subverts the Homeric myth of the faithful wife who stays at home waiting for her husband's return, but also expresses a woman's desire to explore other spaces beyond the domestic one and to participate in the public sphere. In literary fields, such as the Galician and the Irish, which have been largely patriarchal until the impressive incorporation of women writers in the 1980s, Penelope's cry also gives voice to these female authors' intention to enter and transform their respective literary systems. It is for this reason that Xohana Torres chose that particular line "Eu tamén navegar" as the title of her speech when she was nominated as the second woman member of a predominantly male Royal Galician Academy (2001).

When Celia de Fréine received Xohana Torres' Galician poems for translation — together with the literal English translations provided by Minia Bongiorno— the Irish poet remarked on the *strangeness* of Torres's verse, which she compared to Medbh McGuckian's.² The peculiar grammar of the oracular voice, its puzzling symbols, and Penelope's similarly unruly register have posed a challenge to De Fréine in her subsequent published translations of this poem. However, the difficulty of translation must have been accompanied by a deep attraction to this female navigator because, of the five poems selected by Torres for *To the Winds Our Sails* (2010), De Fréine chose "Penélope" for further refinement in her 2011 collection *Aibítir Aoise: Alphabet of an Age*. Until present, De Fréine has written two Gaelic versions (published respectively in O'Donnell and Palacios 2010: 59 and De Fréine 2011: 82), with some notable divergences between them, and one English version (in De Fréine 2011: 83) of Torres's poem. This might be seen as just a passing interest in De Fréine's literary

career if it were not for the Irish writer's bilingual —Gaelic / English— collection *imram: odyssey* (2010b), where the author re-writes the epic tradition of the voyage and brings the genre home by enriching it with the *imram*, a Gaelic literary form which recounts a voyage to another world.

An analysis of De Fréine's poetic production reveals the importance of a number of symbolic figurations which, like Penelope, inquire into the intersection of gender and mobility, and these are the tropes which I would like to scrutinize in this article. Sociologists and literary critics have called our attention to the pressing need to study the role of women in migration and to take heed of gendered constructions of mobility (Gray 2004; Stout 1998; McWilliams 2013; Lawrence 1994). To this, I would add the potential of symbolic figurations to conceive alternative worlds that interrogate our norms and conventions. Poetry, in particular, as a genre hardly determined by realist expectations, can function as a laboratory where the author conjures up new empowering roles for women that take issue with immobilizing, sedentary roles. I borrow the notion of "symbolic figuration" from Rosi Braidotti's seminal study *Nomadic Subjects*, the title of which already makes use of a trope that aims to provide "a politically informed account of an alternative subjectivity" (1994: 1). Braidotti's figurations encompass a pragmatic political objective to implement necessary epistemological and social changes with a "belief in the potency and relevance of the imagination, of myth-making" (1994: 4) to bring about such philosophical and political alternatives. By using figurations of the mobile woman such as Penelope the navigator, I intend to tackle some of the questions posed by Karen R. Lawrence in her study *Penelope Voyages* regarding the kinds of discourses, maps and figures used in a woman's journey, her charting of itineraries, and the fashioning of an alternative feminine subjectivity when a woman's "relation to the domestic is radically altered" (1994: x). In this article, I will begin by analysing De Freine's collection *imram: odyssey* (2010) because of its full-length exploration of the voyage and the female navigator. Next, I will trace and discuss two more tropes of female mobility, the mermaid and the flying woman, in other poetry books by De Freine which may be more heterogeneous in their scope but which also propose relevant symbolic figurations.

Luz Mar González Arias has analysed the figure of Penelope in the poetry of the Irish writers Eva Bourke and Anne Le Marquand Hartigan. Although these figures reject the sexual and emotional paralysis to which they are constrained, and though they yearn for agency, González Arias suggests that their figurations are actually contained by the myth they try to remodel (2008: 78-83). Since mobility often entails agency —except in cases of forced migration— these Penelopes, in spite of their self-awareness about their entrapment, fail to take steps to liberate themselves. In this respect, we need to pay attention to the cultural motifs or vehicles that are available to writers, since they may limit the transformative potential of their figurations. Xohana Torres's Penelope not only has the capacity to speak and be critical with her situation, but also has ambitions of her own: "Magic is abroad and can belong to anyone" (in De Freine 2011: 83). Furthermore, the Galician writer's Penelope finally decides to go out to sea. There are limits to her agency, however, since it is the oracle that pushes her to action, charts her itinerary, and conjures favourable conditions for her navigation.

The medieval text "The Husband's Message" (2016) also makes reference to a woman whom her exiled husband entreats to go to sea in order to join him. M. Amelia Fraga Fuentes (2008) contrasts this poem with other Anglo-Saxon elegiac poems contained in the same Exeter Book, such as "The Wife's Lament" and "Wulf and Eadwacer" in which navigating is a male prerogative while women are confined to the home and to the role, as Roland Barthes suggests, of giving shape to male absence (2007: 419). Although "The Husband's Message" envisages the possibility of a female navigator while her husband awaits her arrival, in what

seems like a reversal of the Homeric plot, there are a number of elements that, in my opinion, limit the wife's agency: it is the husband who charts her itinerary, as she must go to join him; she must only take heed of her husband's entreaty and turn deaf ears to any dissuading voices; finally, she is repeatedly reminded of the couple's past sealed vows of mutual love, so fidelity and obedience are implicitly presented as her moral obligation to him.

When I say that mobility often entails agency, I do not of course mean that a domestic role lacks it. In her discussion of Penelope's role in *The Odyssey*, Mireille Courrént argues that five female characters in this epic poem —Penelope, Calypso, Helen, Arete, and Circe— control Ulysses' and Telemachus' movements. Of Penelope, in particular, she says: "D'un bout à l'autre du poème, Pénélope tisse le voyage d'Ulysse vers elle" (2006: 238).³ However, although Courrént construes Penelope as a figuration of empowerment and valorizes her domestic role, she nonetheless remarks on Penelope's paralysis ("immobilisme" 237), on the way she remains fixed in the past ("bloquée dans le passé" 230), and on the fact that, by undoing her day's weaving, she projects herself and her memory of Ulysses outside the course of time. I would add that, if Penelope's power resides, as Courrént argues, in bringing the hero home, she is actually functioning as an immobilizing agent, thus adding to her own immobility that of others. A comparable case of a woman's force of attraction of the male towards the domestic space can be found in John Donne's poem "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning", where the husband excuses his departure and consoles his wife by having recourse to the trope of the compass: "Thy firmness draws my circle just, / And makes me end, where I began" (1958: 34).

imram: odyssey

The discussion above aims to provide a theoretical and critical framework for Celia de Fréine's symbolic figurations of female mobility. Questions of agency, empowerment, free choice, autonomy, liberation, and public space will need to be addressed alongside those regarding domesticity and dependency. Similarly, the political project to conceive alternative feminine subjectivities needs to be examined in light of the cultural vehicles and linguistic devices that writers have at their disposal.

A voyager undertakes a type of exploration not unlike that engaged in by the writer with her poetry. Celia de Fréine was working on her bilingual collection *imram: odyssey* during a one-month writers' residency in Slovenia in 2006. Significantly, the residency was part of the "Literature across Frontiers" programme.⁴ Travel has been traditionally connected with writing and with travellers' need to share their perceptions of otherness. Indeed, Walter Benjamin has written that the first narrators were travellers who, on their return to their country, started to tell about what they had seen and heard during their journey (2006: 363). Travel, then, inspires writing, as do past literary accounts of voyages. However, although both the *Odyssey* and the Gaelic form of the *imram* are important references in De Fréine's literary venture, literary tradition can cause anxiety, especially in its configuration of disempowered female characters, hence the need to also depart from it and adapt it to a modern worldview that provides emancipatory roles for women.

De Fréine's *imram: odyssey* (2010b) has, as mentioned above, an important autobiographical component, as it gives an account of the poet's travels in the Balkan region, her experience of repeatedly crossing the newly created frontiers after the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, the process to apprehend the new social, cultural and political reality, and her struggle to put all this in writing. The autobiographical quality of the account rests on the ubiquitous presence of the lyrical "I" in the collection. Unlike epic poetry that presents the adventures of a heroic figure in the third person, De Fréine's *imram: odyssey* displays the protagonist's spatial and literary explorations in the first person, which contributes to the

identification of author and lyrical voice, and to our perception of the lyrical subject as a female figure in spite of the fact that the English version of the poems is often characterized by grammatical gender-blindness. This identification of author and speaking voice may certainly not be a prudent reading strategy, but I vindicate its viability in this particular case because De Fréine's autobiographical experience regarding her travel and her writing project in Slovenia underlies the whole collection. As in Xohana Torres's recourse to the figure of a navigating Penelope both for her poem and her speech on joining the Academy, the female voyager in De Fréine's *imram: odyssey* is charting new experiential and artistic itineraries.

The collection starts with the poem "Hope" (2010b: 15), which expresses the speaker's wanderlust and curiosity about the world, as she finds a boat that will steer her throughout the rest of the poems. No oracle encourages or gives counsel and protection to the sailor, the latter being the only one responsible for her decision. The glass bottom of the boat allows a submarine vision rich in literary overtones. In her speech "Eu tamén navegar", Torres maintains that poetry must drag the sea bottom, precisely there where light does not reach (2001: 13). Similarly, Adrienne Rich's poem "Diving into the Wreck" (1973) in the homonymous collection elaborates on the writer's and reader's shared underwater immersion to find the significance of lived experience.⁵ This submarine world also recalls Virginia Woolf's underwater imagery in her early story "The Mark on the Wall": "grazing the stems of the water-lilies" (1944: 47). The English writer identifies this underwater world as the realm of fancy, which is the genuine repository of poetic imagination. Fancy is indeed where De Fréine's sailor immerses herself as she contemplates "the people who live / on the ocean bed". Roland Barthes has opposed Jules Verne's Nautilus to Rimbaud's "bateau ivre", the former allowing Captain Nemo to inspect and dominate the submarine world while he remains safely protected by the glass wall. Rimbaud's poem, however, does without the sailor and leaves the boat on its own: "il devient oeil voyageur, frôleur d'infinis" (Barthes 1991: 77).⁶ Rather than impede friendly communication with the sea creatures, the glass-bottom of the boat in De Fréine's poem stimulates it: "... before I can listen to their tittle-/tattle, or ask them to sing a sea shanty ... " (2010b: 15). De Fréine's boat resembles the "bateau ivre" in that it "welcomes me on board and steers me on my journey", which might be seen as diminishing the sailor's agency, although it is actually a question of shared agency. Rather than a domineering and totalitarian subjectivity, like Captain Nemo's, De Fréine proposes an alternative one of collaboration, shared tasks and shared fate. As the Bora rises, the boat and its single passenger—the "I" becomes a "we" at the end—are flung against the coast, which constitutes an early warning that this voyage is bound to put to the test both the sailor's determination to sail and the writer's literary vocation.

Contrary to any teleological expectations about the voyage as unchecked progression, De Fréine elaborates on the exposure, frustration, homesickness and disorientation experienced during the journey, as she portrays a split subject who has to negotiate her determination to continue her trip and the moments of weakness when she is inclined to give up. This divided subjectivity appears already in the second poem "yeast", where the nostalgia for the security of home is humorously condensed in the following domestic metonymies: "... its Chubb / lock and bolts, its fire extinguisher by the door" (2010b: 17). Interestingly enough, in this case, it is the body that yearns for diversity and appreciates the variety of food, the "relief from the cuisine of uniformity" (2010b: 17). Kristi Siegel has warned about the "lack of embodiment" in women's travel writing and the resulting impression that the voyage may just be a spiritual or intellectual experience (2004: 9). This embarrassment about the body has in part its origin in religious and moral injunctions about the *lower passions* and the *weakness of the flesh*, especially so in the case of women, whose chastity is the only guarantee of men's certainty about their progeny. The literary treatment of the body has also diverged substantially depending on whether the body described is male or female. For all these

reasons, it is important to pay attention to the intersection between travel, gender and the body. An account of a journey will certainly seem slanted and incomplete if the body is omitted from it.

In addition to sensorial impressions such as seeing and hearing, which are after all predictable in travel writing, hunger and eating feature prominently in De Fréine's *imram: odyssey*. The poem "eat the orange", for instance, revealingly connects the process of choice- and decision-making with the motif of food, while simultaneously relating them to the experience of travel: "This morning as I wonder whether to go or stay, / an orange rolls into my wardrobe ..." (2010b: 35). Both the orange and the journey evoke here those chance opportunities in life that you should grasp and not let pass. Rather than give the solution to the dilemma, however, De Fréine prefers to linger at the moment of doubt, when options are carefully weighed, and when pros and cons are conscientiously studied. Journey, body and tea ritual reach a felicitous entente in the poem "dear friend" (2010b: 61), where the experience of a close friend's illness is shared and lived through in a succession of cups of tea. The uncertainty of life is aptly rendered in travel imagery of misleading direction signs, packing and unpacking. Travel and illness reveal here a profound ontological instability and suggest the need to embrace contingency not merely with resignation but, as Judith Butler suggests, as an ethical resource, because the recognition of our own vulnerability draws us to the Other and establishes the bond of reciprocity (2005: 100). The speaker in the poem tells her friend that we only know who we are and where we are going "... when / we reach there and are enveloped // by the strangeness of what we never knew". These lines recall Julia Kristeva's identification of the stranger outside with the stranger within us: "à partir de l'autre je me réconcilie avec ma propre alterité-étrangeté" (1991, 1988: 269).⁷ Travel, De Fréine seems to suggest, brings us face to face with strangeness and provokes the recognition of that *otherness* which is inside us waiting to be accepted. Illness and travel are then circumstances that facilitate the recognition of our own alterity and vulnerability, questioning the illusion of the autonomous sovereign subject and making us truly human.⁸

De Fréine's concern with the stranger within us and its concomitant split subject is also aptly illustrated with her trope of the shadow. Celia de Fréine deploys it in the poem "shade", where the lyrical subject's indecision about continuing her journey or staying is deftly rendered in terms of the differences she maintains with her own shadow. While the poetic persona decides to keep on going, her shadow "grabs hold of the hotel door, growing / thinner and more morose as I continue on" (2010b: 27). Far from any expectations of anxiety and confrontation, the split of the self is presented here in a humorous way, thus highlighting two features that are central to De Fréine's writing: a sophisticated, and sometimes irreverent, sense of humour and a powerful visual imagination. This type of humour is deeply inscribed in the tradition of Gaelic-language poetry and often recalls certain comic traits in Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's writing. The latter, coincidentally, has also written her version of an *imram*, which consists of fourteen poems published in *The Astrakhan Cloak* (1992). A healthy sense of humour and a capacity for detachment from the surrounding circumstances are no doubt good assets to face the setbacks suffered in any journey. Humour also has a sobering effect on illusions of transcendence, so these poets' recourse to mockery and comedy could be read as a female demotion of certain master narratives about adventurous travel.

Travel and migration are not exclusive patterns of human behaviour and, in fact, Celia de Fréine's poetry abounds in natural tropes that reinforce the notion of unfailing mobility: wind, clouds, birds, etc. Actually, the etymology of the word *diaspora* —*dia-spora*, to sow through— directs us to the natural world, the scattering of seeds, and the fertility of dissemination. Some of these natural elements appear in her poem "no man's land" which is, as the poet informed me in private correspondence, about the border between Slovenia and Italy, since she often travelled to Trieste during her writer's residency in Slovenia. In what

may constitute an ecological insight, this poem takes issue with political and administrative frontiers that take no notice of ecoregions: "... birds have been known to carry / twigs and pieces of earth from one country to the other?" (2010b: 23). Borders also trigger the desire to trespass, as De Fréine suggests in the same poem, where the memory of the frontier between Northern Ireland and the Republic when she was a child also recalls the experience of smuggling food and consumer goods. Interest in the motif of seed dispersion, though this time attentive to the interaction of human beings and nature, is prominent in the poem "bag" about a sycamore seed that falls inside the lyrical subject's bag, thereby upsetting the natural order of reproduction. De Fréine's poem presents the bag as a hospitable receptacle that adapts to the needs of the seed: "... the greenness of the nylon / cossetting it ..." (2010b: 43). As for the seed, it is surprisingly purveyed with agency to choose where to go and land: it "balked at the fertile ground ... opting instead for the synthesis ..." (43) and it finally "nestles between the stockings" (43). The bag becomes, then, an inviting feminine vessel that unexpectedly harmonizes what is natural with what is artificial and manufactured.

I would like to finish my analysis of Celia de Fréine's *imram: odyssey* with a discussion of the last poem of the collection, "welcome", since it gathers several of the motifs and figurations deployed throughout the book which are relevant to my study of female mobility. In this poem, travel is again entwined with writing, and poetic inspiration is drawn from dreams, thereby connecting contemporary poetry with the traditional form of the dream-poem with roots in medieval literature. The recourse to dreams also reveals an interest in the workings of the unconscious, which has a rich tradition in Gaelic poetry and is of special interest for Celia de Fréine. In her poem "welcome", dreaming is presented as the act of being "transported" to other "mansions" and requires that we put our "trust in strangers" (2010b: 79). Bonnie Honig poses one central question in her book *Democracy and the Foreigner*: what do we need the foreigner for? Rather than viewing the foreigner as a problem that needs to be solved, Honig suggests that we ask ourselves what problems foreignness may solve for us (2001: 4). Though Honig's inquiry pertains to the field of political theory, she interestingly provides examples from popular culture, such as the films *The Wizard of Oz*, *Strictly Ballroom*, and *Shane*, and finds inspiration in Salman Rushdie's discussion of the eager émigrée (1992). Salman Rushdie has also delved into the beneficial influence of foreignness in his short story "Christopher Columbus & Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate Their Relationship" where a chorus voice affirms that foreigners are "a warning against complacency, their existence in our midst reminding us that there are quarters in which (hard as it is to accept) we ourselves could be considered foreign, too" (1995: 108). The "strangers" in De Fréine's poem, are also propitious, among other reasons because they provide the necessary inspiration for literary creation although, in order to achieve this, the poetic persona compels us to "welcome" and incorporate them into our minds: "... put my trust in / the strangers who had set up house in my head" (De Fréine 2010b: 79). Writing, then, results from the writer's voyage out but also from a converse voyage in, that of the strange and irrational dreams that disembark at the author's imagination.

In her poem "welcome", De Fréine additionally reverses the Homeric myth by making the sea-nymphs' songs a necessary stage before the return journey can be envisaged. Instead of the perilous distraction of the bird-woman's song, as in Homer's *Odyssey*, the mermaids' songs in De Fréine's poem and their apparently inconsequential "gossip of other people" become an imperative: "Only then will I be able to find a boat / that will steer me on my journey home" (De Fréine 2010b: 79). While Xohana Torres conjures up "voiceless" sirens to imply a safe trip, De Fréine maintains the sea-nymphs' voices, though she valorizes the talk and songs of a female Other and thus turns these expressions into important sources of poetic inspiration. The sea-nymph's hybrid figuration, with her changing iconography as either a

bird-woman —as in the siren— or a fish-woman —as in the mermaid— will be the object of my analysis in the following two sections on mermaids and flying women.

Mermaids: The Transgression of Boundaries

The figurations of mermaids and flying women can somehow be considered as variations of the trope of the navigating Penelope. Whether marine or air creatures, they suggest alternative subjectivities that allow us to test the tensions between autonomy and interdependence. Mermaids, themselves powerful symbolic figurations of female mobility and boundary-crossing, feature frequently in Irish poetry. On the publication of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* (2007), Adam Phillips wrote that Ireland has “a long history of men and women forced out of their element, forced to make unwilling concessions, forced into a self-denying forgetfulness and translation” (2008). Phillips' words lay stress on the experiences of dispossession and dislocation in Irish history, but the trope of the mermaid also has positive and appealing overtones that Celia de Fréine knows how to use to advantage. Since her first poetry collection in 2001, she has been exploring the sundry possibilities of this figuration, as proves the poem “Seal dá Saol”, from *Faoi Chabáistí is Ríonacha* (2001: 71), which was later translated into English as “A time in her life” and was included in her 2005 collection *Scarecrows at Newtownards*. The poem tells us about a mermaid who is “attracted to the land” and its social life, although the sea-world is equally beautiful. The inhabitants of the land “made her welcome” in what constitutes a model of acceptance and integration of the foreigner, but they also realise she should be free to leave any time she wants to, and they never try to restrict her mobility. The mermaid retains all her capacity to choose and decide when to go or stay under no pressure from any circumstances or persons. As in the folk tales where many of these figurations originate, there is a magic element that facilitates the crossing of boundaries: “she could always leave / as long as she had her mantle. / And who'd want to destroy a gift?” (De Fréine 2005: 72). The mermaid, then, is a figuration of hybridity which, in this poem, brings together the best of the two worlds. Her motivation to cross the sea-land boundary seems to be curiosity about the unknown, an attitude that is reciprocated by the land people who welcome her. This is a conflict-free poem that might sound exceedingly idealistic if it were not for the implied dangers and risks that are either effectively averted or possibly deferred: “no one tried to take [her cloak] from her”, “... who'd want to destroy a gift?” (De Fréine 2005: 72).

A variation of this trope of the mobile woman who crosses the sea-land border can be found in the poem “Maiden's hair”, from *Aibítir Aoise: Alphabet of an Age*, although this latter text delves into the notions of conflict, intolerance, and the need to escape. “Maiden's hair” tells the story of a woman from the main land who falls in love with a male marine creature. Their relationship consists in learning about each other's worlds: “she learned / to hold her breath”, “He learned to inhale the air of here” (De Fréine 2011: 51). This curiosity about the Other, the disposition to learn from the stranger, and the willingness to put oneself in the Other's place so as to chart together “... the topography / of hope ...” (51) are countered by the land-people's dogmatic rejection of miscegenation. Pursued by her own people, “who clasped her by her hair ...” (51), the woman runs away into the sea, leaving behind just the green seaweed that her hair has turned into. The voluntary and two-way crossing of boundaries propitiated by love is eventually transformed into a story of forced exile due to people's xenophobia and fear of the Other.

The Flying Woman

I would like to turn my attention now to another trope of female mobility and empowerment which features in several poetry collections by Celia de Fréine: the symbolic figuration of the flying woman. The myth of Icarus is often rendered as that of a young man who aspired to fly so high and close to the sun that the wax of his wings melted and, as a consequence, he fell into the sea. It is mainly an account of male ambition, pride, and punishment which has had multifarious artistic and literary recreations, among which one could mention the allusions in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses* and, for a different treatment in the field of poetry, W.H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts".⁹ I have been wondering about any possible examples of a female Icarus or any alternative female-centred variations of this myth. Certainly, flying witches and fairies abound in Western folklore and there are cases of levitating mystics too, but the reader is especially captivated by Celia de Fréine's portrayal of ordinary women who unexpectedly choose to fly. This is the case of the poem "Ar mhuin an albatrais" [Ascending the Albatross], from *Faoi Chabáistí is Ríonacha* (2001: 26), about a woman sailor who, one day, saw an albatross approaching her ship and, while the rest of the seamen feared the ominous creature and wanted to kill it, she actually rode it and "together they soared towards the sun".¹⁰ This story partially recalls that of Coleridge's spiritual odyssey "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", an account of "sin, repentance, grace and expiation" (Brett and Jones 1991: xxii). If Coleridge's protagonist does not reach self-awareness before enduring penitence for having killed the albatross, the female sailor in De Fréine's poem dismisses the other sailors' fears, approaches the bird only to notice the latter's complicity, and "Throwing her leg over creamy plumes, / she nestled her knees deep within / its quills, and felt its heart beat / as they soared towards the sun" (De Fréine 2001). We find that this poem features a number of alternative and empowering characteristics through the symbolic figuration of the flying woman: she is courageous and ignores her mates' fearful superstitions, she makes her independent choices and decisions, she embraces foreignness and the unknown, she crosses boundaries by venturing into a new, unexplored space, and she shares her enterprise in close complicity with the albatross.

There are some moments when the phrasing of De Fréine's poem also recalls W.B. Yeats's "Leda and the Swan", the story of Zeus's metamorphosis into a swan so as to have sexual intercourse with Leda. De Fréine's female sailor "... shade[s] her eyes from / its golden aura ..." (2001), which suggests the woman's initial awe at this fabulous creature's presence, not unlike Yeats's "staggering girl" (Yeats 1990: 241), although De Fréine does not infantilize her protagonist. Similarly, Yeats's Leda feels "the strange heart beating" (1990: 241) and De Fréine's protagonist "felt its heart beat" (2001), but the close contact of the bodies is presented in two very different situations. While Zeus is raping Leda, De Fréine's protagonist is voluntarily and knowingly riding the albatross. Also, Yeats's rhetoric of violence ("helpless breast", "terrified fingers", "caught up", "'mastered by'" – Yeats 1990: 241) contrasts with De Fréine's friendly rapport between the bird and the woman ("... a flicker in the left eye – / either that or a wink" – De Fréine 2001). Finally, the last verb of movement in each poem significantly points in the opposite direction and while Yeats's swan lets the woman "drop", De Fréine's albatross "soars" with the woman towards the sun. Rather than a story about male abuse of women, De Fréine tells us a fable of complicity and mutual support between the woman and the bird, thereby contriving a liberating and empowering narrative that gives expression to women's wanderlust.

Conclusions

In this article, I have been concerned with Celia de Fréine's symbolic figurations of mobile women and have examined the extent to which they design alternative subjectivities that provide women with agency, empowerment and autonomy. One first conclusion is that De Fréine's female protagonists do not achieve mobility and independence at the cost of a repressed or oppressed Other. On the contrary, numerous examples evince the need to embrace strangeness and incorporate it into one's body and mind in order to pursue the journey and reach some tentative self-awareness. Learning from the stranger and putting themselves in the place of the Other are two possible ways in which De Fréine's characters "chart the topography of hope" (2011: 51).

The desire to explore worlds beyond the domestic one and to participate in the public sphere entails an important emancipation from many traditional patriarchal restrictions, but De Fréine is not intent on creating the illusion of an autarchic sovereign subject with total control over her life and circumstances. The symbolic figurations of female navigators, mermaids and flying women that I have analysed in this article often reveal their split subjectivities with, on the one hand, their wanderlust, curiosity about the world, lack of prejudice, capacity to choose and decide, and courage but, on the other hand, the poet also likes to linger on their moments of doubt, disorientation, weakness and homesickness.

Being more than spiritual or intellectual journeys, De Fréine's travels affect their protagonists' bodies, as the motifs of hunger and illness manifest. The body lays bare the uncertainty and contingency of life, which elicits a more accurate perception of the self than that conjured up by the sovereign subject. The poet's reflections on nature and the relationships which humans hold with it highlight the need for respectful mutual collaboration and interdependence.

Celia de Fréine draws inspiration from the classical and Irish literary traditions of odysseys and voyages to other worlds, but often infuses her texts with humour and self-mockery thereby demoting the transcendental tone of much male-centred travel writing. The poet also rewrites these traditions by making women the protagonists of the travels and by bestowing on them a high sense of responsibility as they chart their itineraries. Both the journey and its literary account become explorations of the limits of life and art and, as the true artist she is, Celia de Fréine knows that her role consists in pushing and crossing experiential and literary boundaries.

Notes

¹ The English translations of Xohana Torres' "Penélope" quoted in this article are by Celia de Fréine (in *Aibítir Aoise*, 2011: 83). This research has been funded by the Spanish *Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad*, the ERDF and the research group Discourse & Identity (FFI2012-35872, FEM2015-66937-P, Xunta de Galicia GRC2015/002 GI-1924). I would like to thank Dr Luz Mar González Arias and Dr Lucy Collins for their invaluable feedback in the preparation of this article.

² De Fréine's comment was made to the author of this article in private correspondence. This and other private comments are reproduced here with Celia de Fréine's permission.

³ "From one end of the poem to the other, Penelope weaves Ulysses' voyage towards her" (My translation).

⁴ Literature across Frontiers (LAF) is a European project that aims to promote literary exchange and the translation of lesser-translated literatures. See <http://www.lit-across-frontiers.org/about/>.

⁵ I am indebted to Dr Luz Mar González Arias for this reference to Adrienne Rich.

⁶ "it becomes a travelling eye, which comes close to the infinite". Trans. Annette Lavers (Barthes 1991, 1957: 67).

⁷ "on the basis of the other, I become reconciled with my own otherness-foreignness". Trans. Leon S. Roudiez (Kristeva 1991: 182).

⁸ Celia de Fréine's collection *Fiacha Fola* (2004), however, deserves separate attention for its different and particular treatment of the tropes of mobility. The poems in this book revolve around the topic of infection by

Hepatitis C in the 1970s. In this collection, De Fréine predominantly uses imagery of entrapment and immobility for the ill woman, while she has recourse to tropes of mobility to suggest the spread of the infection.

⁹ While James Joyce turns to the myth of Icarus to delve into the tensions between father and son, as well as to illustrate the theme of pride and punishment, W.H. Auden highlights Pieter Brueghel's treatment of social indifference to a particular individual's ordeal.

¹⁰ For the analysis of "Ar mhuin an albatrais" [Ascending the Albatross] from *Faoi Chabáistí is Ríonacha* (2001), I am using an unpublished English-language version by Celia de Fréine which she has kindly provided to the author of this article.

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