

The Penelopes Left Behind: Griselda Gambaro's *El mar que nos trajo* (2001)

E. Helena Houvenaghel

To cite this article: E. Helena Houvenaghel (2021) The Penelopes Left Behind: Griselda Gambaro's *El mar que nos trajo* (2001), *Romance Studies*, 39:1, 35-47, DOI: [10.1080/02639904.2021.1923969](https://doi.org/10.1080/02639904.2021.1923969)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02639904.2021.1923969>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 16 Jun 2021.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 581



[View related articles](#)




[View Crossmark data](#)



OPEN ACCESS



The Penelopes Left Behind: Griselda Gambaro's *El mar que nos trajo* (2001)

E. Helena Houvenaghel 

Utrecht University, Utrecht, ICON Institute for Cultural Inquiry

ABSTRACT

The novel *El mar que nos trajo* (*The Sea that brought us*, 2001), by playwright Griselda Gambaro (Argentina °1928), daughter of Italian immigrants, treats migration from a women-centred perspective. The novel is set both in Italy and Argentina during the late 19th and early 20th-century wave of Italian and Spanish labour migration to Argentina. Gambaro brings together depictions of three Italian and Italian-Argentinian women who are left behind by their husband, lover, father, respectively. She thus shifts the focus away from those who migrate to those who stay behind. This study connects the novel with the *Heroides*, or *Letters of Heroines*, in which Ovid gives voice to Penelope and other Greek and Roman women, such as Medea, Dido, or Ariadne, all of whom were abandoned by their husband or lover. Reading Gambaro's novel in dialogue with Ovid's *Heroides* illuminates the novel's gender dimension and dramatic structure. The spectrum of abandoned women depicted by Gambaro differs from the series of female portraits included in the *Heroides* in that it comprises two generations of women who cope with abandonment in different ways. The first generation is similar to Ovid's heroines who struggle, at a turning point in their lives, with their feelings of love, anxiety, and uncertainty about what may have kept their beloved from returning. The second generation, however, develops practices more similar to Penelope's plan to regain control, or even to Medea's cruel revenge intentions. This generation works out strategies to put an end to their situation of dependence and abandonment.

RESUMEN


La novela *El mar que nos trajo* (2001), de la dramaturga Griselda Gambaro (Argentina °1928), hija de inmigrantes italianos, adopta una perspectiva femenina sobre la migración. La acción de la novela se desarrolla en Italia y Argentina, durante la ola de migración laboral de finales del siglo XIX y principios del siglo XX. Gambaro combina representaciones de tres mujeres italianas e italo-argentinas abandonadas por su marido, amante o padre, respectivamente. De esa manera, Gambaro desplaza el acento de quienes emigran a quienes quedan atrás. El estudio vincula la novela con la recopilación *las Heroidas*, o *Cartas de las heroínas*, en la cual Ovidio les da voz a Penélope y otras heroínas griegas y romanas, abandonadas por sus respectivos maridos y amantes. La lectura de la novela en diálogo con *las Heroidas* ilumina la dimensión de

KEYWORDS

Griselda Gambaro; intratextuality; *Heroides*; myth rewriting; dramatic conflict; migration; gender

PALABRAS CLAVE

Griselda Gambaro; Intratextualidad; *las Heroidas*; reescritura de mitos; migración; género

CONTACT E. Helena Houvenaghel  e.m.h.houvenaghel@uu.nl

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

género y la vertiente dramática de la novela. La serie de mujeres abandonadas retratadas por Gambaro difiere de la serie de retratos femeninos incluidos en *Las Heroídas* en que incluye dos generaciones de mujeres que hacen frente al abandono en maneras diferentes. La primera generación se parece a las heroínas de Ovidio que luchan con sus emociones de amor, ansiedad e incertidumbre. La segunda generación, al contrario, desarrolla prácticas más similares al plan de Penélope para recuperar el control. Esta generación diseña estrategias para poner fin a su situación de dependencia y de abandono.

1. The Other Side of Immigration: Literary Portraits of Those Who are Left Behind

Much has been written about the experiences and stress of those who emigrate and leave their home and family behind to start a new life and to make a better living in a different country. By contrast, little attention has been paid to the experiences of those who stay behind. Gambaro sheds light on their side of the migration story. The novel¹ *El mar que nos trajo* (2001) is set both in Italy and Argentina during the late 19th and early 20th-century wave of Italian and Spanish labour migration to Argentina. The novel brings together three Italian and Italian-Argentinian protagonists and foregrounds their experiences of abandonment when their respective husband, lover, father leaves. The focus is thus shifted away from the men who migrate to the women who stay behind.

In Italian and Argentine 20th-century narrative on the Italian migratory experience to Argentina, a change of perspective had taken place by the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s, when several authors started to adopt a female view (Cannavacciuolo 2012a, 2012b; Regazzoni 2013). Critics consider that Gambaro's novel fits in with this gendering trend and contributes to showing the womanly face of Italian immigration in Argentina (Cannavacciuolo 2012a, 2012b; Mauro Castellarín 2008; Peña 2015; Regazzoni 2013; Rocco 2013; Scarabelli 2016).²

Centuries ago, Ovid made a similar gendering change of perspective on experiences of displacement in the *Heroides*,³ by giving voice to Penelope and fourteen other Greek and Roman women. In Homer's *Odyssey* and in Greek and Roman mythology, the focus on the epic journeys, warfare, and adventures of the men, far away from home, is so strong that it overshadows the viewpoint of the women left behind. Ovid's *Heroides*, on the contrary, highlights the women's anxieties and conflicts during the wait. The emphasis is, in Ovid's work, on Penelope's experience of waiting for Odysseus, on Ariadne's loneliness when abandoned by Theseus, on Dido's emotions when left behind by Aeneas, or on Medea's despair when deserted by Jason.

Besides this gendered perspective, the *Heroides* and *El mar que nos trajo* have also in common a hypertextual connection. Ovid based the *Heroides* explicitly on a range of mythological, epic, and tragic sources in which classical heroines, such as Ariadne, Dido, Briseis, Phaedra, Penelope or Medea play a (secondary or, in exceptional cases, primary) role. Gambaro's novel does not explicitly refer to these hypotexts but connects with two of these classical figures, namely Penelope as described in Homer's *Odyssey* (Book 19) and the figure of Medea as portrayed by Euripides in his play *Medea*. This becomes evident in

the construction of the youngest of the novel's three female protagonists, the Italian-Argentinian second-generation migrant⁴ Natalia.

In the development and the actions of Natalia's character, the reader recognizes echoes of the classical figures of Penelope and Medea. These classical abandoned women both reverse their gender roles by adopting an active, dominant role when left behind⁵. Both Euripides' Medea and Homer's Penelope are portrayed as women developing a rational plan and as initiators of effective actions. Hence, they dissociate themselves from the stereotype of the helpless, emotional and passive abandoned wife.

The reader connects Natalia's absorbed sewing to the weaving strategy (Homer's *Odyssey*, Book 19, 137–158) which Penelope uses to regain control over the situation during her long wait for Ulysses. It is indeed through the development of her outstanding skills as a seamstress that Natalia becomes financially independent and takes her life into her own hands after being abandoned. Natalia is typically depicted, in Gambaro's novel, as sewing in a very focused way for many hours. Natalia's character also induces reminiscences of the classical sorceress Medea portrayed by Euripides. Medea's pride, strong will, strangeness, magical powers and violent actions of vengeance when Jason deserts her are all echoed in the novel's character Natalia. Natalia is depicted as a strange, extremely proud and autonomous woman who can be frightening, knows how to exercise power over the people surrounding her, and tries to kill both the man who abandoned her, and the child he has with another woman, in circumstances connected with magic.

Still, both in Ovid's *Heroides* and in Gambaro's novel, the strong and autonomous reaction to abandonment showed by Penelope/Medea/Natalia is rather exceptional. The majority of the abandoned women portrayed in both works react very differently and their reactions vary greatly from one woman to another. Starting from such divergence, my reading of Gambaro's novel in dialogue with Ovid's *Heroides* focuses on intratextuality.

Intratextuality (Genette 1992), the internal relation that is established between the different entities (texts or stories) within one work, is the principal guiding element in my reading. As Sharrock explains, 'a text's meaning grows not only out of the readings of its parts and wholes, but also out of the relationship between these parts' (2000, 6–7). Hence, intratextuality refers to the internal relations within a work of literature, to the 'whole, the parts, and the holes' (Sharrock 2000, 6). In the particular cases of Gambaro's novel and Ovid's *Heroides*, these internal relations within the work concern the way various individual women's experiences with abandonment relate to one another and the way these different stories produce meaning together.

Combining intratextuality and drama, I propose that the dramatic climaxes of the three female protagonist's stories included in *El mar que nos trajo*, offer an interesting lens for my intratextual approach. Dramatic tension is very present in both Ovid's and Gambaro's work, even if neither of the authors has chosen the dramatic genre to give shape to the women's experiences of abandonment. The fictional letters included in the *Heroides* are considered the ancestors of the dramatic monologue.⁶ The key dramatic characteristic of the *Heroides* is that the women reveal their feelings and thoughts at a turning point in their lives. The emphasis on a moment of high tension is a crucial feature of the dramatic monologue which captures the character at a moment of crisis, a moment 'of self-analysis or sudden understanding or revelation' (Pound quoted by Langbaum 1957, 76) when the suspense in his/her life reaches a peak. In the *Heroides* and in *El mar que nos trajo*, all of the

abandoned women are tortured by the questions of why their beloved has left them, and what will become of them without their husband or lover. A dramatic climax is reached when they find or imagine the answer and reconsider their identity.

2. Intratextuality and Drama

In Gambaro's novel, the stories of three abandoned women are intertwined. First, there is Adele, a young Italian woman, who was married to the fisherman Agostino in a small fishing village near Genoa just a few weeks before Agostino got a job on the shipping line Genoa-Buenos Aires. She waited for him to come back for four years. In the meantime, in Buenos Aires, Agostino met the Italian newcomer Luisa to whom he did not disclose that he had left his wife in Italy. Together, they had a daughter. After four years, Adele's brothers took the ship Genoa-Buenos Aires and forced Agostino to go back to his wife in Italy. Luisa was thus the second woman who was left behind by Agostino. Third, at the same time, their four year old daughter Natalia was abandoned by her father and grew up in Buenos Aires without ever hearing again from her father.

The spotlight is successively on each of these three women at the moment when the conflict caused by their abandonment reaches a climax. First, Luisa's story's suspense reaches a peak when, after her lover's sudden disappearance, she desperately searches for Agostino in the seaport of Buenos Aires and concludes that he has left her for another woman. Second, the tension in Adele's story increases and reaches its height when she provokes her returned husband to reveal the reason why he abandoned her. Finally, Natalia's conflict peaks when her bitterness leads her to take revenge on her father, by trying to drown his son, and on other fathers whom she considers untrustworthy, by punishing them. Let us now take an intratextual look at each of the conflicts of these three abandoned women and focus on the way these dramatic climaxes construct meaning together.

2.1. Luisa's Desperate Search

The (unresolved) issue of the reason for the lover's absence is tormenting most of the heroines in the *Heroides*. Some of the Greek and Roman women⁷ know for a fact that their lover has left them for another woman or conclude that another woman is the only reasonable explanation for their lovers' absence. Still, many of these heroines suffer because of the uncertainty and imagine the dangers, obstacles, and adventures that may hinder their return. They either try to gather information or use their imagination in search of possible answers.

Penelope, for example, is constantly trying to obtain information about her husband. Any wanderer, visitor, foreigner, or merchant must come to the palace and answer her questions about the whereabouts and safety of her husband (Lindheim 2003, 37). Penelope is not successful in gaining information and therefore has to use her imagination to find the answers to her questions. She spends much time inventing potential dangers faced by her husband ('whatever dangers the water, whatever dangers the earth holds, I suspect that they are the causes of such a long delay', *Heroides* 1, 73–74). In Penelope's case, and also in the cases of other heroines, imagination is a way to find excuses for the lover's absence. Phyllis, for example, emphasizes the many obstacles that

may have prevented her lover's swift return and observes how ingenious she has become in finding excuses for her lover. Still, Penelope does not delude herself in the way Phyllis does. Beyond considering war, dangers, and obstacles, she also thinks of his possible adventures with women. She imagines a spellbinding love may hinder his return and wonders about the character of this other woman (*Heroides* 1, 75–78, 77–78).

In *El mar que nos trajo*, the abandoned women's attitudes differ in their search for answers. The novel opposes Adele's fantasy to Natalia's realism. Adele, first, is ingenious in imagining excuses which might explain her husband's delay. During many long hours she imagined the possible answers, hereby underscoring the immense amount of time she has devoted to thinking about him. Natalia, on the contrary, who was only four when abandoned by her father is convinced that the reason why her father left her is his devious nature which reflects, in her view, all men's untrustworthiness. Starting from this principle, she neither tries to get information on her father's whereabouts, nor spends time creating fantasies.

In Luisa's case, the search for answers forms the dramatic climax of her story. Luisa does not delude herself by means of fantasies and adopts a realistic attitude. Luisa searches anxiously for information and inquires about her absent lover.⁸ By leaving the house by night alone, by turning to strangers in a non-safe environment, by speaking falteringly in Spanish -, she shows courage and pushes her boundaries. At the same time, this rising action creates suspense in the narrative. In spite of Luisa's desperate, humiliating, and long search, she fails to uncover Agostino's whereabouts. Her lack of beauty, her poverty, immigrant background, and unmarried status are cruelly pointed out to her during her inquiries. The Argentine men she speaks to during her search cannot elucidate Agostino's whereabouts but they succeed in answering the question of why Agostino left her. Luisa therefore does not seek a way out of the situation by recourse to fantasy: she concludes very soon that Agostino has abandoned her for another (more attractive) woman and will never return. Luisa's loneliness is dramatically elaborated when she comes home alone after her search (Gambaro 2001 in Gambaro 2015, 185).⁹

The resolution of Luisa's story is tragic. After several years of loneliness, there seems to come an end to Luisa's suffering when another man, also an Italian immigrant, starts courting her. So, there is hope that Luisa will escape, finally, from loneliness. However, this man turns out to be deceitful and a burden rather than a benefit. Instead of resolving her problem, her relationship with this man increases her loneliness and leads to her death.

2.2. Adele's Painful Discovery

In the *Heroides* men are deceitful and untruthful characters, agents of duplicity and falsehood. All women in the *Heroides* feel betrayed by their unfaithful and untruthful husbands or lovers. Although this is the base line of the *Heroides*, the abandoned heroines vary in that they take different approaches to their husbands' and lovers' untruthfulness and deceitful promises. Some heroines are willing to forgive and would happily accept secondary positions to be reunited with their lovers. Other heroines, such as Dido who does not accept Aeneas' excuses,¹⁰ make reproaches and accusations. Phyllis' and Dido's letters even make allusion to how they want their husbands and lovers to be publicly punished for abandoning and betraying them. They hereby stress the immorality of their lovers' actions and especially the falseness of their lovers' words. Other heroines, such as

Medea, highlight how they helped their lovers and husbands in the past to achieve important goals, and claim that they therefore deserve loyalty and gratitude in return.

In *El mar que nos trajo*, the women's attitudes towards the untruthfulness of men strongly differ. Luisa neither forgives her lover nor makes reproaches, although she could have argued that she was instrumental in Agostino's life when he arrived as a newcomer in Buenos Aires. Luisa's daughter Natalia, on the contrary, does make strong moral judgements. By highlighting the deceitful character of her father's words and promises of love and care, Natalia judges not only her father's failings, but also the lies of other fathers and husbands who surround her and whose attitude echoes Agostino's untrustworthiness.

Adele's main conflict evolves around the unfaithfulness of her husband. Adele does not usually speak about her doubts, but when her husband is back home, in the intimacy of the night, she dares to raise the pressing question 'that during all these years she kept as a secret for herself: 'What hindered your return?'' (Gambaro 2001 in Gambaro 2015, 228).¹¹ Her attitude is forgiving: the centre of her world is Agostino and, in contrast with her brothers, who consider Agostino's behaviour immoral, Adele does not pass judgement. In her voice, 'there is no reproach, only the sadness of the days and nights of the long wait' (Gambaro 2001 in Gambaro 2015, 228).¹² When Agostino does not answer, she wants to make it easy for him and tries to help him by suggesting reasons which may explain his absence. Agostino does not speak but silently gets out of bed and puts a small photograph of his daughter Natalia on the mantelpiece. Suspense is created in the narrative when Adele searches in the dark for Agostino's answer and, by candlelight, finds the tiny portrait of his four year old daughter. A climax in the story is created when Adele understands that this image is Agostino's 'confession'. The graceful girl represented in the portrait is the reason why Adele faded into oblivion and was abandoned (Gambaro 2001 in Gambaro 2015, 249). The image of this beautiful and smiling girl hurts Adele deeply. Still, she occupies a subordinate position with respect to her husband and does not dare to ask him to take the portrait away.

The solution of Adele's internal conflict is peaceful. It consists of growing closer to the girl's portrait. Over time, Adele stops seeing the little girl as a rival for the love of Agostino and starts feeling more and more compassion and warmth for this girl who had to grow up and live without a father. Many years later, the night Adele dies, she imagines that Natalia is a part of the family, together with her son, and pictures herself and Agostino happily looking at both their daughter Natalia and their son, whose photographs are put side by side on the mantelpiece.

2.3. Natalia's Powerful Revenge

All women of the *Heroides* express and act upon the strong and opposed emotions they feel, among which hope and despair stand out. Tears are frequently shed in the *Heroides* (Baca 1971). These tears are not presented as an expression of despair but rather as an expression of hope and as a persuasive strategy. The heroines who describe their tears put their trust in them to bring their husband or lover back. The persuasive power attributed to Briseis' tears is illustrative in this respect: Briseis reiterates that 'her tears can sway Achilles, even if she remains silent' (*Heroides* 3, 314). The intensity and frequency of the tears distinguish between the heroines' self-portraits. Phaedra, Oenone, and Sappho, who

refer to their tears more than once, or Briseis and Ariadne, whose tears are endless. Despair is another frequent emotion in Ovid's *Heroides*. Some of the heroines, such as Dido,¹³ are so desperate that they intend to commit suicide, especially if they don't expect their beloved to come back to them or if they know that their love is impossible or illicit.

El mar que nos trajo mirrors this variation between the emotions of hope and despair. Adele sheds tears during her abandonment and long wait as an expression of her hopes to regain her identity as Agostino's wife. She cries when Agostino leaves, during his absence, and when he returns (Gambaro 2001 in Gambaro 2015, 30, 149, 196). Luisa, for her part, never cries but was led by despair. She chose self-destruction and death as a way to deal with the situation. The endless and tenacious hours of labour, far too hard for her frail body and poor health, would eventually kill her.

While some heroines have to rely on their tears to bring their husbands or lovers back, and others feel that there is no way out other than to put an end to their lives, quite a few of the Greek and Roman heroines, such as Medea, Oenone, Deianira, Laodamia, and Hypsipyle, use their magical powers. Mostly led by anger, they use their power to destroy others or to take revenge on the persons who wronged them. Hypsipyle or Medea, are not easily brought to tears nor aim at destroying themselves. Hypsipyle, for example, uses her magical powers to throw a spell on her rival Medea. Oenone's story shows her vindictive denial of aid. When her unfaithful lover Paris is wounded by a poisoned arrow, she refuses to use her divinely granted curative powers to help him. Deianira uses a magical potion in an attempt to gain back her husband's love but she fails and because of its poisonous character, her unfaithful husband dies. Medea, finally, aims at injuring Jason's new wife, Jason's father, and her children: her action against others 'will go wherever her anger takes her' (*Heroides* 12, 208).

Anger is in Natalia's story the peak of the conflict. Natalia is not helpless. She actually has powers at her disposal that enable her to take revenge. Natalia's anger, not only with her father but with men whom she considers, in general, deceitful, leads her to take revenge, both in Argentina and in Italy (Gambaro 2001 in Gambaro 2015, 538–540). Her rage is associated with a heavy thunderstorm during which her actions are set in two countries. In Argentina, she throws her mother's second lover out of the house, because he lies, drinks, and spends money without giving anything in return. In Italy, using magical powers, Natalia aims at taking revenge on Agostino by bringing about the death of his son, whom she considers the cause of the abandonment. She causes Agostino's boat to shipwreck but her attempt fails: Agostino and his son survive (Gambaro 2001 in Gambaro 2015, 568–9).¹⁴

The resolution of Natalia's conflict takes place many years later when Agostino's son visits Natalia in Buenos Aires and tells her about the photograph which stood on the mantelpiece as a token of her father's love for her (Gambaro 2001 in Gambaro 2015, 1420). The fact that Agostino never forgot her and always kept her image in a central place of the house changes Natalia's view on both her father and his son. In her eyes, her father ceases to be a deceitful person, her half-brother ceases to be a rival. When they look together at the sea, Natalia imagines how her life could have been alongside her father Agostino.

3. Intratextuality and Gender

The lens of intratextuality reveals, both in the *Heroides* and in Gambaro's novel, the difference between the women who construct an independent self and the ones who give themselves a subordinate role. Briseis, for example, considers herself 'a satellite to her master' while relishing 'her servile attachment to him' (Lindheim 2003, 58). Some heroines, such as Phyllis, find that their (excessive) love for their partner is the most important cause of their dependence. The heroines who plan to commit suicide, finally, link their existence in an inextricable way to their role as a wife or a lover.

Other heroines still develop a self-image centred around their husband/lover but they show more sense of initiative by opposing their rivals. Hypsipyle curses her rival Medea. Oenone puts her rival Helena in an unfavourable light and especially represents the mistress (Helena) as an illusion while she herself is, as Paris' wife, a reality. Deianira, finally, stands up against her rival and at the same time ingeniously reverses the power relations between men and women. She claims that her rival Iole has conquered her husband Hercules completely. According to Deianira, it is thus fair to say that Iole is stronger than Hercules and that to Iole belong all the merits of Hercules.

Finally, Penelope, whose letter opens the *Heroides*, develops a more independent self and uses her wit and her skills not to oppose her (imagined) rivals but to regain control over the situation. By weaving a burial shroud for Odysseus' elderly father, she places herself and her skills at the centre and imposes her own timeframe on her suitors.

In the *Heroides*, these different attitudes crisscross the work, while in *El mar que nos trajo*, a line from dependence towards independence is developed across the two generations of abandoned women. Throughout her entire story, all Adele's thoughts and actions underscore the disparity she constructs between Agostino and herself. Adele imagines herself in various ways as subordinate to Agostino, and to other men in the family, namely her father and her brothers). Luisa's position is somewhere in between. She depends heavily on her husband, both emotionally and with respect to social relations and communication (as she does not speak the Spanish language well). Her love for Agostino is presented as unconditional and intense. Still, she is not financially dependent as she consistently contributes to the maintenance of the family with her own money, including during the period Agostino is with her. Once abandoned by Agostino, she struggles to keep her head above water as the only breadwinner but she manages to support her daughter in an independent way.

Natalia, in contrast, consistently places herself in a dominant position and does not depend on men, neither economically nor emotionally. Natalia uses her skills to gain control over her own life. A Spanish immigrant woman's craftsmanship as a seamstress will help Natalia to discover and develop her skills to sew. As Natalia is very talented, she manages to acquire her own Singer machine. She works for long hours in a very concentrated manner on her sewing. In this way, she earns money and does not depend financially on anyone else. When she is sewing, she transforms into a powerful, frightening and fearsome version of herself.

Natalia also takes control emotionally: she marries a man she doesn't love and she refuses to be with the love of her life, the Italian immigrant Nino.¹⁵ Natalia takes the decision to refuse her only chance of happiness because she does not want Nino to

abandon his wife and two daughters back in Italy. Natalia thus very consciously breaks the chain of abandonment. She chooses to make a bond with Nino's wife and her young daughters on the other side of the ocean rather than acting against them by becoming their rival.

4. 'The Parts, the Whole, and the Holes'

This study has explored the relationship between 'the parts, the whole, and the holes' (Sharrock 2000) within Gambaro's text, drawing attention to issues of unity, to interactions between disparate parts of texts, to symmetries and asymmetries, to narrated parts and tacit parts, and to other structural matters.

The meaning of *El mar que nos trajo* as a 'whole' becomes clear when put in dialogue with the *Heroides*. In Ovid's text, tension exists between a repeated pattern, namely that all fifteen women are abandoned by their unfaithful husbands or lovers, and a diversified response, as the women react differently. Hence, the apparent uniformity of plot in the *Heroides* does not create a stereotype of the aggrieved classical woman. It rather gives rise to the literary depiction of a wide variety of individual women's reactions that range from forgiveness to revenge and from hope to despair. These responses interact and, together, shed light on the female response to the state of abandonment.

El mar que nos trajo creates a similar intratextual tension between the repeated event of abandonment, and the variety of female reactions. The novel's portrayal of the interaction between the women's responses differ from the *Heroides*' interaction for several reasons, among which the novel's transgenerational dynamics stand out. The novel places the women's reactions in a transgenerational sequence and thus traces a line of development from dependence towards emancipation. The women belonging to the first generation formulate varying responses to the abandonment but have in common their dependent and subordinate roles in their relations with men. Their reactions to the abandonment are similar to those abandoned Greek and Roman heroines who struggle with emotions of hope and despair, and who, above all, try to find an answer to the question about what may have kept their beloved from returning. The second generation, however, develops skills and practices more similar to Penelope's and Medea's actions to regain control of their own lives. This generation develops strategies to put an end to their situation of dependence.

Concerning the 'holes' or 'tacit parts' in the story, Gambaro's novel does not tell the story of the fourth woman, Nino's wife, who is left behind in Italy by her husband when he departs to Argentina. The reader imagines, through the interaction between the other women's experiences of abandonment, her incertitude, anxieties, and her joy when her beloved husband comes back to her. This 'hole' or 'tacit part' in the story causes a significant asymmetry. The first generation of abandoned women represented in the novel includes two women, one in Italy and one in Argentina. Natalia, in contrast, is the only woman belonging to the second generation whose story is included. Nino's wife's side of the story is not narrated explicitly but has a strong impact on the development of the novel. Natalia chooses to make a bond with Nino's wife rather than with Nino, in spite of her love for him. Hence, she puts an end to both the cycle of abandonment and to the cycle of female rivalry and hostility. Indeed, Natalia's strong will succeeds in decentralizing men and in prioritizing the bond among women. The first-generation character Adele, in

contrast, could only generate this bond the night she died, by giving up her view of Natalia as a rival for her husband's love. Natalia's attitude questions the idea that abandonment is inevitable and cyclical. She proposes that a different female self-image and the forging of alliances among women enable them to bring about change in this pattern. Hence, this change is given a structural shape in the novel by means of the 'hole' or the absence of the fourth woman's story.

Another 'hole' in *El mar que nos trajo* is the lack of information on the following generation, the generation of Natalia's children. Still, on the last page of the novel, when the narrator of the story is revealed, the reader catches a glimpse of what the following generation will bring. In the book's final sentences, the character of an Italian-Argentinian girl with wavy hair, the youngest daughter of Natalia's younger sister, decides to write down the story of her late aunt Natalia and her late grandmother Luisa. This small girl hears the story of Luisa's and Natalia's lives during one of the family gatherings, when all (Italian and Italian-Argentinian) family members sit around the table and when the memory of previous generations is passed on to the next generation. The story of this girl is not included in the novel. Still, as the reader closes the book, she/he imagines this third-generation migrant girl who is able to write down the life experiences of her ancestors while her aunt and grandmother could neither read nor write. The first generation of women migrants, represented by Adele and Luisa, hardly ever speaks out. Adele's silence symbolizes her dependence and submission. Luisa's lack of knowledge of the host country's language symbolizes her isolation. The second generation of women migrants, represented by Natalia, masters the oral word but is still hampered by illiteracy. Natalia's husband, for example, intends to take advantage of this weakness and tries (unsuccessfully) to deceive his wife. The allusion to the young girl-narrator of the story in the book's final page adds another layer to the women's transgenerational path towards autonomy. The third-generation girl is able to assert herself¹⁶ and, even more: she constructs a bond with the previous generations of women migrants and speaks for the 'us' mentioned in the novel's title, including herself, her aunt, her grandmother. This progress in terms of verbal expression and self-consciousness, as an individual and as a community, is given a structural shape in the novel by means of the 'implicit story' of the girl-narrator.

In conclusion, several novel insights can be gained from an intratextual analysis that considers Gambaro's novel as a collection of units, or a 'whole', whose 'narrated parts' and 'tacit parts' are connected in different meaningful ways. This approach enhances Gambaro's focus on the struggle, across three different generations of women (descendants of) migrants, to stand up for themselves and to gain more autonomy. This process is two-fold and develops both the individual 'I' (on the basis of growing self-confidence, pride, and independence) and the 'us' (on the basis of transnational and transgenerational alliances, the creation of a sense of belonging, and the forging of a community identity).

Notes

1. In this study, we use the 2015 edition.
2. *Gente conmigo* (1962), by the Italian Argentine author Syria Poletti, works as a catalyst that initiates a major change in course in the immigration novel of the end of the twentieth century (Regazzoni, Cannavacciuolo). Novels that illustrate this women-centred representation of the Italian Argentinian migration literature are: *Oscuramente fuerte es la vida* (1990) by

Antonio Dal Masetto, *Santo oficio de la memoria* (1991) by Mempo Giardinelli, *Cuando digo Magdalena* (1992) by Alicia Steimberg, *El libro de los recuerdos* (1994) by Ana María Schua, *Diario de ilusiones y naufragios* (1996) by María Angélica Scotti y *Si hubiéramos vivido aquí* (1998) by Roberto Vicente Raschella.

3. I refer to the so-called 'single' *Heroides*, a collection of fifteen epistolary poems written between 25 and 16 BC, in which the Roman lyric poet Ovid gives voice to the abandoned women, among whom the mythical heroines Penelope, Dido, Ariadne, and Medea stand out. I. Penelope (writing to Odysseus); II. Phyllis (writing to Demophoon); III. Briseis (writing to Achilles); IV. Phaedra (writing to Hippolytus); V. Oenone (writing to Paris); VI. Hypsipyle (writing to Jason); VII. Dido (to Aeneas); VIII. Hermione (to Orestes); IX. Deianeira (to Hercules); X. Ariadne (to Theseus); XI. Canace (to Macareus); XII. Medea (to Jason); XIII. Laodamia (to Proesilaus); XIV. Hypermestra (to Lynceus); XV. Sappho (to Phaon). In addition to these fifteen 'single' letters (without reply by the heroic lovers), the collection contains three letters where the women receive replies. I will not examine these 'double' letters included in the *Heroides* because what is interesting in the 'single' *Heroides* is, precisely, the partial (female) view. For a general analysis of Ovid's *Heroides*, see Jacobson (1974). Verducci (1985) and Lindheim (2003) focus, in their approaches to the *Heroides*, on Ovid's interest in female psychology. Farrell (1998) and Fulkerson (2005) highlight female authorship in Ovid's *Heroides*. The diverse expressions of the abandoned women's various emotions (the women's tears, Baca 1971; images of their loneliness, Bolton 1994; their irony Casall 1995), finally, are also explored by the critics.
4. For a transgenerational approach exile and migration, see Houvenaghel 2016a, 7–16.
5. For an approach to the reversal of gender roles and myth in the work by second generation women migrant authors, see Houvenaghel 2016b.
6. The dramatic monologue is introduced by Robert Browning as a mixture of drama and poetry under the term dramatic lyrics (Drappier 1972, 3). For further description of the genre and its development, see Howe (1996) and Byron (2003). An important feature of the dramatic monologue, and in fact its entire purpose, is to offer a partial view of the story. The dramatic monologue shows the situation through the eyes of one character. This one-sided approach gives the reader a better insight into the main character's experience and leads the reader to sympathize with this main character.
7. Such as Hypsipyle, Oenone, Deianira and Medea.
8. Luisa hereby extends the limits of her own possibilities as, under normal circumstances, she would never have entered public places alone nor would have talked to strangers in Spanish, a language she doesn't speak well.
9. Her solitude is exacerbated by her situation — living in a foreign country and lacking fluency in its language. The way she tries to replace Agostino's body in the empty bed further emphasizes Adele's desolate situation of complete loneliness and despair. The image of the cold and deserted bed is also used in Ovid's *Heroides*, for example in Penelope's story. Ariadne's text also introduces this image. Ariadne returns to her bed in disbelief that her lover, who was there the night before, is now no longer present. The bed can only show her the imprint of the absent lover.
10. Dido, in Ovid's *Heroides*, is an illustrative example in this sense because she does not accept Aeneas' explanation (according to which the princess Creusa took him with her and therefore she is to blame for his departure). Dido makes the case that he is himself responsible of leaving her.
11. All translations of Gambaro's novel are mine. 'Una noche de viento y lluvia, y en la intimidad después del amor', [...] Adele, 'acariciándole el rostro se atrevió por fin a formular la pregunta que durante esos años había guardado para sí como un secreto: ¿qué impidió su retorno?'
12. 'No había reproche en su voz, solo la tristeza de los días y noches en la larga espera.'
13. Other heroines who plan to commit suicide are, for example, Canace, Hypsipyle, Phyllis, and Deianira.

14. It is the metaphor of the boat that makes it possible for Natalia to take revenge in Argentina and in Italy simultaneously. The fisherman Agostino associates Natalia with his boat on which he goes fishing with his son.
15. Nino is a common Italian name and could be the abbreviation of all names on — ino or — tino. It can be read as a reference to Natalia's father's name, Agostino, and as a suggestion that the cycle of abandonment is repeating itself.
16. In Ovid's *Heroides*, the abandoned Greek and Roman women are presented as self-conscious writers. See Farrell (1998), who problematizes female authorship in Ovid's *Heroides* and Fulkerson (2005), who portrays the women of the *Heroides* as a community of authors.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

E. Helena Houvenaghel holds the Chair of Spanish and Spanish American Literature at Utrecht University. Houvenaghel focuses on two lines of research: Exile and Migration (1) and Myth and History Rewriting (2). See her research site: <https://helenahouvenaghel.site>. She is founder and current director of the interdisciplinary **Fenix Network for Research on Female Refugees** (<https://fenix.sites.uu.nl>) which brings together different perspectives Gender, History, Literature & Culture, Philosophy, Ethics, Migration, Geography) on the work and experiences of women refugees who fled their countries of origin during the 20th century. Among the most recent **Fenix projects** stand out the following Special Issues coordinated by Houvenaghel:

- *Agency and Transnationalism: Spanish Refugee Women in Transit in France*. Special Issue in *Impossibilia*, 2020 (Open Access via <https://impossibilia.org>)
- *Jewish Mexican Second Generation Refugee Angelina Muñoz-Huberman, a voice of non-conformism*, Special Issue in *INTI*, 2021 (Open Access via <https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/inti>)
- *Women's Networks and Routes: the Spanish Exile in Argentina*, Special Issue in *Anales de Literatura Hispanoamericana*, 2022 (Open Access via <https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/ALHI>)

ORCID

E. Helena Houvenaghel  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7877-2065>

References

- Baca, A. 1971. "The Themes of Querela and Lacrimae in Ovid's *Heroides*." *Emerita* 39 (195): 195–201.
- Bolton, M. C. 1994. "The Isolating Effect of Sola in *Heroides* 10." *Phoenix* 48 (1): 42–50. doi:10.2307/1192505.
- Byron, G. 2003. *Dramatic Monologue*. New York: Routledge.
- Cannavacciuolo, M. 2012a. "El viaje imposible: *El mar que nos trajo* de Griselda Gambaro." *Oltreoceano* 6: 121–129.
- Cannavacciuolo, M. 2012b. "Viajes y tramas simbólicas. *El mar que nos trajo* de Griselda Gambaro." *Revolución y Cultura* 2 (época 5): 23–30.
- Casall, S. 1995. "Tragic Irony in Ovid, *Heroides* 9 and 11." *The Classical Quarterly* 45 (2): 505–511. doi:10.1017/S0009838800043573.
- Drappier, D. 1972. *Robert Browning. The Dramatic Monologue. A Status Quaestionis*. Leuven: Leuven UP.

- Farrell, J. 1998. "Reading and Writing the *Heroides*." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 98: 307–338. doi:10.2307/311346.
- Fulkerson, L. 2005. *The Ovidian Heroine as Author*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gambaro, G. 2001. *El mar que nos trajo*. Belacqua.
- Gambaro, G. 2015. *El mar que nos trajo*. Alfaguara.
- Genette, G. 1992. *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré*. Paris: Seuil.
- Houvenaghel, E.H. 2016a. "Tres aproximaciones al discurso identitario de las escritoras españolas en el exilio mexicano." In *Escritoras españolas en el exilio mexicano* edited by E.H. Houvenaghel, 7–16. Mexico: Porrúa. Boston: Twayne Publishers.
- Houvenaghel, E.H. 2016b. "La mujer escritora en el ensayo de Angelina Muñoz-Huberman." In *Escritoras españolas en el exilio mexicano* edited by E.H. Houvenaghel, 175–186. Mexico: Porrúa. Boston: Twayne Publishers.
- Howe, E. 1996. *The Dramatic Monologue*. Boston: Twayne Publishers.
- Jacobson, H. 1974. *Ovid's Heroids*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Langbaum, R. 1957. *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*. New York: Random House.
- Lindheim, S. 2003. *Mail and Female: Epistolary Narrative and Desire in Ovid's Heroides*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Mauro Castellari, T. 2008. "Viajeros y emigrantes en la literatura argentina de fin de siglo: *El mar que nos trajo* de Griselda Gambaro y *Lejos de aquí* de Roberto Cossa y Mauricio Kartun." In *El viaje en la literatura hispanoamericana: El espíritu precolombino. VII Congreso Internacional de la AELH*, edited by S. Mattalia, P. Celma, and P. Alonso, 967–982. Madrid-Frankfurt am Main: Iberoamericana-Vervuert.
- Peña, M. 2015. "El mar que nos trajo: Cuando el viaje del destierro no es añoranza sino carencia." In *La mirada femenina desde la diversidad cultural: Voces del destierro*, edited by L. Febres, 867–888. Tomo III, Caracas: Universidad Metropolitana.
- Regazzoni, S. 2013. "La diáspora de los italianos en el viaje a Argentina: *El mar que nos trajo* de Griselda Gambaro." *Rassegna Iberistica* 97: 91–102.
- Rocco, F. 2013. "Il tempo delle immigrate italiane in Argentina: El mar que nos trajo di Griselda Gambaro e Puertas adentro di Lilia Lardone." In *Donne, politica e istituzioni: Il tempo delle donne*, edited by Silvana Serafin e Marina Brollo, 107–117. Udine: Editrice Universitaria Udinese.
- Scarabelli, L. 2016. "*El mar que nos trajo* de Griselda Gambaro Una lectura transgeneracional." *Gramma* 27 (56): 137–150.
- Sharrock, A. 2000. "Intratextuality: Texts, Parts, and (W)holes in Theory." In *Intratextuality: Greek and Roman Textual Relations*, edited by S. Alison and H. Morales, 1–39. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Verducci, F. 1985. *Ovid's Toyshop of the Heart: Epistulae Heroidum*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.