

**“THE FANTASTIC UNDERWATER LIFE ALL AROUND ME:”
FEMALE WATER SPIRITS IN JEFFREY EUGENIDES’S *MIDDLESEX***

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I examine the use of three different literary models associated with female water spirits in Jeffrey Eugenides’s novel *Middlesex*. More specifically, I will read the protagonist’s struggle to understand his gender identity in the light of the following models: the Naiad, the Fiji Mermaid, and the Siren. I will show how the Naiad is used as a metaphor for an immature state in the development of a human being, allusions to the Fiji Mermaid are used to indicate the fulfillment of a human desire, and the Siren is used metonymically to refer to the gnoseological imperative of her song.

KEYWORDS

Middlesex, Eugenides, intersexuality, gender, Naiad, Siren, Odyssey, Fiji Mermaid.

**“THE FANTASTIC UNDERWATER LIFE ALL AROUND ME”: FIGURAS
FEMENINAS DE LAS AGUAS EN *MIDDLESEX*, DE JEFFREY EUGENIDES**

RESUMEN

En este artículo se examina el uso de tres modelos literarios diferentes relacionados con las figuras femeninas de las aguas en *Middlesex*, novela de Jeffrey Eugenides. Más específicamente, se analiza la lucha del protagonista para comprender su identidad de género a la luz de los siguientes modelos: la náyade, la sirena de Fiji y la sirena. Se mostrará que se utiliza la náyade como metáfora de un desarrollo inmaduro en el ser humano, las alusiones a la sirena de Fiji indican la realización de un deseo humano y la sirena se utiliza metonímicamente para referirse al imperativo gnoseológico de su canción.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Middlesex, Eugenides, intersexualidad, género, náyade, sirena, Odisea, sirena de Fiji.

1. INTRODUCTION

Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* is a family saga and a coming-of-age novel; the narrator and protagonist, Callie (later Cal) Stephanides, was born with a condition known as 5-alpha-reductase deficiency and various congenital anomalies of the genitals which give him apparent female characteristics. For this reason at birth he is mistaken for and raised as a girl. As a teenager, he comes to terms with his intersexuality and later on in his life he decides to assume a male identity.

Middlesex contains several allusions to Greek myths and authors: for instance, the incipit of the novel concludes with a parodic invocation of the muse;¹ in eighth grade the protagonist reads *The Iliad* (Eugenides 2003: 322) and in the school play of *Antigone* is given the role of Tiresias (331), the blind prophet of Thebes who lived seven years as a woman; one of the characters tells the story of Hermaphroditus (482), while another one summarizes parts of Plato's *Symposium*—the Aristophanes speech and the myth of the androgynous (489); the titles of three chapters refer to characters of myth ("Minotaurus," "Tiresias in Love," and "Hermaphroditus"), while one has a more generic mythic influence ("The Oracular Vulva").

Instead of relying on these overt mythical and classical intertextual and interdiscursive² references, which have mainly a "decorative" (Fraser 2000: 168) function, my purpose in this paper is to analyze the protagonist's struggle to understand his gender identity following a different and subtler "inferential walk," defined as the process by which we take a 'walk' outside the text, in order to gather intertextual support. Such walks are not arbitrary initiatives, but are elicited by discursive structures and foreseen by the whole textual strategy as indispensable components of the construction of the *fabula* (Eco 1979: 32). I will read the protagonist's life (Books Three and Four of the novel) in the light of three literary models connected with female water spirits: the Naiad, the Fiji Mermaid, and the Siren. As Philip Wheelwright clearly explains, "certain symbols, such as the sky father and earth mother, [...] recur

¹ "Sing now, O Muse, of the recessive mutation of my fifth chromosome! Sing how it bloomed two and a half centuries ago on the slopes of Mount Olympus, while the goats bleated and the olives dropped. Sing how it passed down through nine generations, gathering invisibly within the polluted pool of the Stephanides family. [...] Sorry if I get a little Homeric at times. That's genetic, too" (Eugenides 2003: 4).

² For the term 'interdiscursivity' (interdiscorsività), see Segre 1982: 15-28. According to Angelo Marchese, we speak of 'intertextuality' even when we are referring to the many relations that link a text to "explicit or implicit literary models" (Marchese 1978: 149; translation mine).

again and again in cultures so remote from one another in space and time that there is no likelihood of any historical influence and causal connection among them" (111). Considering their remote origins and the fact that they have been frequently used in literature and arts, the Naiad and the Siren might be considered universal symbols or archetypal images, and I will refer to them as archetypes (see also Frye 1971: 100ff.). The Fiji Mermaid, on the other hand, is a more recent artistic model and, though used both in literature and in other media (e.g., television series and movies), has not yet achieved the same status.

There is also another relevant difference between the Naiad on one hand and the Fiji Mermaid and the Siren on the other. The use of the Naiad as a literary model is suggested by the fact that it appears in the novel; it is, therefore, a literary model *in praesentia*. The Fiji Mermaid and the Siren, on the contrary, do not appear and can be considered in this sense literary models *in absentia*: their use in the current analysis is permitted only by a paraphrastic decision. My hypothesis is that the association between the Fiji Mermaid, the Siren, and two periods of time in the protagonist's life is, at least potentially, evoked by the text (see Eco 1992: 61-62). This analogical approach may delineate individual structural features and suggests motifs in the novel that otherwise might be left unnoticed (Vickery 1966: 243), such as water as a metaphor for the non fixity of gender identity, or the use of water creatures to identify the initial stages in the development of a human being. The role of these recurring images for our interpretative hypothesis is clearly pointed out by Maud Bodkin, who affirms: "we may identify themes having a particular form or pattern which persists amid variation from age to age, and which corresponds to a pattern or configuration of emotional tendencies in the minds of those who are stirred by the theme" (1958: 4).

In the novel, the protagonist's process of understanding his gender identity is described as a demanding and difficult journey, which at the same time is necessary and liberating. It is a gradual discovery and a real quest, with various different stages, which can be traced back to the basic pattern of Joseph Campbell's monomyth. According to my reading of the novel, the main concern of Books Three and Four of *Middlesex* is to focus on the stages of this quest and to show the protagonist's sexual, erotic or intellectual actions and reactions in relation to different situations, thanks to which he can reach a conclusion about himself.

I will use the analogies to female water spirits in order to shed light on these three ongoing and interrelated stages of the protagonist's struggle—from the private discovery of the aberrancy of his body, to the public display of his uniqueness, and to the final understanding of his role in the world and as part of a community. My belief is that the mythic patterns reinforce the

main point raised in the novel: in a process that we can read against Judith Butler's theorizing on sex and gender and Rosi Braidotti's analysis of binary distinctions, the protagonist rebels against and trespasses the boundary set by medical authorities and constructs his gender identity through practice, at the same time contesting the fixity of gender categories (Braidotti 2011: 66; Butler 1990: 33 and 1993: 8).

In the novel mythology is not used as a simple structuring device. *Middlesex* shares the characteristic postmodern ironic contesting of myth as master narrative: myths and archetypes are here abused and subverted, in a "critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society" (Hutcheon 1988: 4). As we will see, it is a "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (Hutcheon 1988: 26). In this sense, the stability and universality of gender, maybe attractive but illusory, become a 'modern myth' (or a socially constructed notion) that needs to be questioned and challenged by the protagonist as much as by the reader.

2. THE NAIAD

Naiads are inferior deities who presided over rivers, brooks, springs, and fountains. Their name is derived from *ναίω*, "to flow," as indicative of the gentle motion of water. They are generally represented as young and beautiful virgins, leaning upon an urn, from which a stream of water flows. They were held in great veneration among the ancients, and sacrifices of animals were offered them, with libations of wine, honey, and oil (Anthon 1872: 870).

In the novel *Middlesex*, preadolescent girls including Callie (who in this particular moment of his life is considered and thinks of himself as a girl) are often described in aquatic spaces, using water images, water-related metaphors or explicit comparisons to water creatures, especially amphibians. In a few occasions, this leads the narrator to use explicit or implicit comparisons to water nymphs and Naiads. When the Stephanides family moves to a new house in Grosse Point, Michigan, the most important space for the development of the story is the bathhouse in the garden; inside this bathhouse there is a bathing pool, which, according to the narrator, is "just warming up now, getting ready to play its part in my life" (Eugenides 2003: 261). Afterwards, Callie 'practices kissing' with Clementine, an eight-year-old neighbor: after this experience, the protagonist comments: "My heart, that amphibian, moving that moment between two elements: one excitement; the other, fear" (265). Callie and Clementine bathe together in the pool and their games in the water become Callie's first encounter with sexual arousal:

She hoots like a monkey and pulls me back onto a shelf in the tub. I fall between her legs, I fall on top of her, we sink... and then we are twirling, spinning in the water, me on top, then her, then me, and giggling, and making bird cries. Steam envelopes us, cloak us; light sparkles on the agitated water; and we keep spinning, so that at some point I'm not sure which hands are mine, which legs. We aren't kissing. This game is far less serious, more playful, free-style, but we're gripping each other, trying not to let the other's slippery body go, and our knees bump, our tummies slap, our hips slide back and forth (266).

Callie and Clementine in the water re-enact the topos of the 'bathing nymphs' which is very common in the arts and, for instance, has been of inspiration to many painters in the last centuries.³ At the same time, Callie and Clementine re-enact in a playful and childish way a famous episode in which a nymph attempted to seduce a young man: the story of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IV, 274-388). In this modern retelling of the episode, Clementine has the role of Salmacis, the aggressive nymph who tried to violate Hermaphroditus, who is obviously played by Callie. According to the traditional account, Hermaphroditus and Salmacis had their bodies blended into one: an allusion to this fact is found in the previous quotation from the novel, when Callie cannot tell his own limbs from those of Clementine—"at some point I'm not sure which hands are mine, which legs" (Eugenides 2003: 266).

According to my reading of *Middlesex*, the interaction between Callie and Clementine is a turning point in the development of the novel, in that it uncovers the "relational status of identity;" in other words, it reveals the fact that identity should not be considered as an innate quality, but as the product of a practice that always "postulates *an other* as necessary" (Cavarero 2014: 24). It is in this moment of his life when the protagonist starts his journey and becomes a nomadic subject, if we understand nomadism as "an acute awareness of the nonfixity of boundaries" or as "the intense desire to go on trespassing, transgressing" (Braidotti 2011: 66).

The use of water nymph comparisons in order to convey a kind of feral beauty connected with the innocence and carefreeness of preadolescence

³ Palma Vecchio, *Bathing Nymphs* (c. 1527); Rembrandt Van Rijn, *Diana Bathing with her Nymphs with Actaeon and Callisto* (1634); Louis-Jean-François Lagrenée, *Venus and Nymphs Bathing* (1776); Francesco Hayez, *Bathing Nymphs* (1831); Paul Delvaux, *Nymphs Bathing* (1938).

continues in other descriptions. The protagonist remembers an episode during a summer camp near Port Huron, on Lake Huron:

I beheld the magnificence of Jenny S. The golden, late afternoon light intensified around her. Her patriotic swimsuit swelled in ways no one else's did. Muscles flexed in her long thighs. She ran to the end of the dock and plunged into the lake, where a throng of naiads (her friends from Cedar Rapids) swam over to meet her (282-283).

Another lake (Lake St. Clair) becomes an important setting in the story and is featured multiple times as a recurring background to many events concerning the characters. One of Callie's schoolmates, Carol Henkel, eventually drowns in the lake when her boyfriend loses control of their car (341).

When Callie's schoolmates reach puberty, they undergo a physical change as expected, while the protagonist, affected by the aforementioned condition, does not develop along female lines and becomes an unusual looking teenager. In this moment the function of the Naiad archetype in the novel is fully defined: the Naiad becomes a metaphor for the initial stages in the growth of a human being, a preliminary state leading to a different, more stable and mature form (adult male or adult female). This particular significance is probably permitted because Naiads are traditionally represented as "young and beautiful virgins" (Anthon 1872: 870) but also because they are associated with underwater life and it is common knowledge that life originated in the ocean and then eventually transitioned onto the dry land: the first stages of life on earth correspond then to the first stages of the life of a human being. This also explains why the Naiad motif alternates in the novel with water images, water-related metaphors and comparisons to water creatures, especially amphibians.

Callie's schoolmates leave their Naiad selves behind and become adult females or males. Callie, instead, retains the Naiad identity, not only because he is apparently refusing to become an adult, but especially because he is not developing according to either one of the two possible choices, male or female. The Naiad identity now shapes the way in which Callie looks at the world: he compares everyday experience to defamiliarizing underwater landscapes. For instance, he joins the school female field hockey team in seventh grade. This is the description of the locker rooms:

Moving through the humid air, I felt like a snorkeler. On I came, kicking my heavy, paddled legs and gapping through the goalie mask at the fantastic underwater life all around me. Sea anemones sprouted from between my classmates' legs. They came in all colors, black, brown, electric yellow, vivid

red. Higher up, their breasts bobbed like jellyfish, softly pulsing, tipped with stinging pink. Everything was waving in the current, feeding on microscopic plankton, growing bigger by the minute. The shy, plump girls were like sea lions, lurking in the depths (Eugenides 2003: 297).

There are also other brief similes with the same imagery—"My classmates were as unastonished by their extravagant traits as a blowfish is by its quills" (297)—which reinforce this complex "narrative isotopy" (Eco 1980: 147) related, as we have seen, to aquatic life, Naiads and, more ambiguously, to a water/earth divide. When Callie experiments with his sexual organs in the isolation of a basement bathroom, the description conveys the same semantic field: "primeval mud," "The faucets dripped," "the sound of dripping water, of the flushing of my toilet," (Eugenides 2003: 328-329). Later in the story, Callie falls in love with a girl and during the summer vacation the two of them engage in sexual intercourse. Callie's sexual organ (which is a penis, albeit affected by hypospadias and cryptorchidism) is described again using a metaphor related to underwater life, this time using a cetacean (another link between water and earth): "So the sleek dolphin rose, leapt through the ring of my legs, and disappeared again, leaving me bobbing, trying to keep my balance. Everything was wet down there" (386). Once again, gender identity is described as the product of performance and interrelation, focusing especially on the non fixity of the human condition.

At the end of this first section dominated by the Naiad archetype, Callie is visited by a proper doctor who easily understands his complex condition, and suggests that Callie see an expert in the field of sexual disorder and gender identity. The intern working with the doctor is shocked by Callie's genitals, and "rather unprofessionally, raised one hand to her throat and then pretended to fix her collar" (396). This last quotation, connected with the idea of fear and loathing, interrupts the isotopy that we have followed so far and initiates the settlement of the second model used in the present analysis of the novel: Callie is no longer a Naiad and becomes a particular kind of Mermaid.

3. THE FIJI MERMAID

The Fiji Mermaid was the dried up, mummified body of a monkey, skillfully sewn onto the tail of a fish and covered in papier-mâché (Streissguth 2009: 48). It was a feature of sideshows and was advertised as the mummified body of a real mermaid. The original exhibit was discovered and popularized around the 1840s by showman and businessman P. T. Barnum, famous for the hoaxes and human curiosities promoted in his attractions. The Fiji Mermaid, which Barnum considered a "work of art" (Barnum 1855: 234), was a

"diminutive specimen, about three feet long. Its mouth was open, its tail turned over, and its arms thrown up, giving it the appearance of having died in great agony" (234-235). Many clients who saw the Fiji Mermaid were disappointed, since the withered monstrosity on display looked very different from the beautiful mermaid engravings that Barnum used to advertise the show (236-239).

My understanding of the Fiji Mermaid as a literary model is connected first with the category of the monster, and then more specifically with the idea of a man-made chimera created to fulfill human desire: for Barnum, it was a lucrative need but also the need to satisfy the public's urge to admire a legendary creature. I will read a portion of Eugenides's novel according to these different features of the complex Fiji Mermaid model: first as monster and then as man-made chimera, both in its lucrative and desire-fulfilling aspects.

In the novel this model as monster is very pervasive, especially when the protagonist finds out about his congenital condition, but it is a lingering presence from the very beginning of his life: in the chapter "Home Movies," the narrator says: "Baby pictures of the infant Calliope show a variety of features on the freakish side" (Eugenides 2003: 218); later, commenting on his own appearance, Callie says:

To paraphrase Nietzsche, there are two types of Greek: the Apollonian and the Dionysian. I'd been born Apollonian, a sun-kissed girl with a face ringed with curls. But as I approached thirteen a Dionysian element stole over my features. My nose, at first delicately, then not so delicately, began to arch. My eyebrows, growing shaggier, arched, too. Something sinister, wily, literally 'satirical' entered my expression (294).

In the chapter "Looking Myself Up In Webster" the monster accumulation endures: at fourteen, after meeting Dr. Luce, founder of The Sexual Disorders and Gender Identity Clinic, the protagonist enters the New York Public Library and search on the Webster's Dictionary for one of the terms used by the doctor to describe his genitals: *hypospadias*. The term cross-refers to eunuch, which in turn cross-refers to hermaphrodite:

hermaphrodite —1. One having the sex organs and many of the secondary sex characteristics of both male and female. 2. Anything comprised of a combination of diverse or contradictory elements. See synonyms at MONSTER (430).

In order to reinforce the category of the monster, the protagonist compares himself to Bigfoot and to the Loch Ness Monster (431). As soon as the monster literally enters the page, there is immediately a concurring

revelation: Dr. Luce has been evaluating Callie's condition and he is not satisfied with simply assessing Callie's gender identity; he needs Callie (who in his eyes is a girl) to prove his point in medical research. According to Dr. Luce, gender is not only determined by chromosomes, hormones or genital structures: it is most importantly determined by the sex of rearing (410-11). Furthermore, Dr. Luce feels that parents are not able to cope with an ambiguous gender assignment (413): for this reason it is mandatory for him to determine whether Callie is to be considered male or female. Dr. Luce subjects Callie to a very long and tiresome psychological evaluation, at a certain point turning to the use of pornography as a diagnostic tool. While watching with Callie a pornographic film, Dr. Luce asks a straightforward and simplistic question: "Which one turns you on? The woman or the man?" (419).

Callie is too scared to express his feelings, while Dr. Luce is unable to conceive the existence of someone who is neither male nor female: he comes to the conclusion that in Callie's case "chromosomal status has been completely overridden by rearing" and that "there is no preordained correspondence between genetic and genital structure, or between masculine or feminine behavior and chromosomal status" (421 and 435). His solution to correct Callie's condition is simple:

First, hormone injections. Second, cosmetic surgery. The hormone treatments will initiate breast development and enhance her female secondary sex characteristics. The surgery will make Callie look exactly like the girl she feels herself to be. In fact, she will be that girl. Her outside and inside will conform. She will look like a *normal* girl (428; emphasis added).

Dr. Luce is so committed to his own conclusions that he is not interested in the possible negative effects of the surgery; furthermore, his ideas of 'happiness' and 'normality' reveal an unexpected narrow-mindedness which urges him to put Callie into a set of categories:

To leave the genitals as they are today would expose her to all manner of humiliation. Though it is possible that the surgery may result in partial or total loss of erotosexual sensation, sexual pleasure is only one factor in a happy life. The ability to marry and pass as a *normal* woman in society are also important goals [...] (437; emphasis added).

Interestingly, Daniel Punday explains that "literary monsters serve to challenge the homogeneity of society by revealing its tensions, inconsistencies, and gaps". According to him, the use of the monster leads to the revealing of social disunity through bodily multiplicity (Punday 2002: 803). In this particular instance, the 'monster' serves also to challenge the

supposed open-mindedness of a doctor by revealing his excessive desire to obtain fame and success. As P. T. Barnum created the Fiji Mermaid in order to fulfill the public's desire to admire a legendary creature, Dr. Luce wants to re-create Callie and transform him into a girl, in this way confirming his theory on gender development and consolidating his fame among his colleagues. As he is, Callie is unclassifiable for Dr. Luce because "the available and legitimated systems of classification are insufficient and are not able to contain the complex diversity and multiplicity of the world, since they obey above all the principles of similarity" (Maciel 2006: 47). Luce's binary vision of gender as male vs. female prevents him from fully understanding Callie's complex and fluid identity which, in this particular moment of his life, is intersexual in gender and gynephilic in orientation. In the eyes of Dr. Luce, what is known is normal and, conversely, what is unknown is abnormal. This character shows in his mind-set two of the most enduring and persistent binarisms that hinder the process of understanding sexuality, be it heterosexual or homosexual: knowledge vs. ignorance and natural vs. unnatural (Sedgwick 1994: 91-97). Callie's opinion of the doctor, of course, is bitter and hopeless:

I had miscalculated with Luce. I thought that after talking to me he would decide that I was normal and leave me alone. But I was beginning to understand something about normality. Normality wasn't normal. It couldn't be. If normality were normal, everybody could leave it alone. They could sit back and let normality manifest itself. But people—and especially doctors—had doubts about normality. They weren't sure normality was up to the job. And so they felt inclined to give it a boost (Eugenides 2003: 446).

As Sandy Stone provocatively affirms, "the highest purpose of the transsexual is to erase him/herself, to fade into the 'normal' population as soon as possible" (2006: 230). This act has however a relevant consequence: "what is gained is acceptability in society. What is lost is the ability to authentically represent the complexities and ambiguities of lived experience" (230). The protagonist of the novel thus re-enacts Stone's inconceivable request against diagnostic normalization: "to forgo passing,⁴ to be consciously 'read,' to read oneself aloud—and by this troubling and productive reading, to begin to *write oneself* into the discourse by which one has been written" (232). The protagonist decides to run away from the Clinic and from his

⁴ According to Stone, "passing" means "to live successfully in the gender of choice, to be accepted as a 'natural' member of that gender" (2006: 231).

parents and, assuming the new identity of Cal, ends up in San Francisco. In the Fog City, the model of the Fiji Mermaid is still active, both as monster and as man-made chimera. Cal is mistaken for a girl by two homeless men who try to rape him. When they take off his trousers and inspect his genitals, they react very violently: "it's a fucking freak" (476) one says to the other, then they beat him up and leave him bruised on the floor of Golden Gate Park.

Cal then meets Bob Presto, "an exploiter, a porn dog, a sex pig" (483), owner of the Sixty-Niners, a raunchy strip club. Presto, always looking for unusual performers, understands that Cal could be a gold mine for him—"I could use a kid like you. Whatever you are" (463). Presto enrolls him in his 'Octopussy's Garden,' an exotic strip show in a separated area of the club where Cal and two other intersexual youngsters perform for the more curious customers. In this particular moment the model of the Fiji Mermaid is then completed, recovering that original lucrative connotation that so far had been missing from this contemporary incarnation. In Presto's Octopussy's Garden, Cal begins to discover himself, his real identity and the seductive power that he has towards the customers of the club. He gradually leaves behind the model of the Fiji Mermaid and takes on a new one.

4. THE SIREN

In *Odyssey* (XII, 166-200), Odysseus comes near the island where the Sirens are dwelling and, following Circe's advice, he stuffs the ears of his companions with wax and ties himself to the mast of his vessel, until he can no longer hear their enchanting song.⁵ While Homer says nothing of their number, later writers mention both their names and number; some state that they were two—Aglaopheme (*Clear-voice*) and Thelxiepeia (*Magic-speech*)—and others, that they were three: one was said to play the lyre, another the pipes, and the third to sing. They are called daughters of Phorcus (a sea-deity), of Achelous (a river god) and Sterope, of Terpsichore (the Muse of choral song and dancing), of Melpomene (the Muse of tragedy), of Calliope (the Muse of epic poetry), or of Gaea (the earth) (Smith 1849: 840 and 1005; Smith 1850: 498, 530 and 660; Anthon 1872: 10 and 1242). Later poets represent them as provided with wings which they are said to have received at their own request, or as a punishment

⁵ The Sirens are also traditionally associated with the legends about the Argonauts (the song of Orpheus ends their enchantment and for this reason they fling themselves into the sea, where they are changed into rocks) and about the rape of Persephone (Smith 1849: 840; Anthon 1872: 1242).

(Smith 1949: 840). Eventually, artists furnished them with feathers, feet, wings, and tails of birds (Anthon 1872: 1242).

Before analyzing the use of the Siren archetype in *Middlesex*, it is fundamental to determine whether, given their complex genealogy and their physical representation, Sirens can be considered female *water* spirits. According to Wilfred P. Mustard, they can. In *Odyssey* XII, Sirens are vaguely described as creatures that sit in an island-meadow and enchant men with their song. In Euripides, *Helena*, 172, they are "winged maidens;" in various other classical writers and regularly in ancient Greek and Roman art, they are part woman, part bird (Mustard 1908: 21). However, in English literature from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and then in the Renaissance, the Siren is regularly a Mermaid (21), even though a few authors return to classical authority (22). The shift of meaning from 'part woman, part bird' to 'half woman, half fish' is sometimes explained as being due to uniting the classical myth of the Sirens with the Teutonic and Northern superstition of the Mermaid. However, in French, Italian, and Spanish literature the Siren seems to have always been part fish (22). According to Mustard's extensive research, then, we have the ancient tradition as to the form of the Sirens as late as the seventh century, while as early as the tenth century we find an innovative tradition which sees them described as part fish (22). In confirmation of this pervasive representation, we have to remember that in various modern languages there is one single word to refer both to the Siren and to the Mermaid (for instance, French *sirène*, Italian and Spanish *sirena*, Polish *syrenka*, Portuguese *sereia* and Romanian *sirenă*). My reading of the Siren archetype is thus connected with the figures of beautiful water nymphs who had the power of enchanting men with their song (Smith 1850: 819). In the novel the Siren maintains the characteristic of the "temptress," but it is a joyful temptation that, obviously, does not lead to physical death. We could say that it is a debased version of the archetype that is used to promote the novel's critique of sexual normality. It is a subtle and ironic contesting that I see as a typical postmodern characteristic.

As we have seen, in Bob Presto's club Cal works with two other intersexual performers, Carmen and Zora. Their job consists in climbing down a ladder into a tank full of water: from various booths the clients look directly into the tank and 'enjoy the show.' Cal, Carmen, and Zora represent in the novel a modern incarnation of the Sirens. The traditional complex origins and genealogy of the Sirens that I have illustrated above are translated into this modern adaptation as the complexity of their gender identities (each one is different from the other) and as the diversity of their performances in the tank: Carmen is a pre-operated male-to-female transexual; using the

pseudonym 'Ellie and her Electrifying Eel,' she plunges into the pool and dances in the water until her 'eel' (the penis) becomes erect. Zora has androgen insensitivity: her body is immune to male hormones and though genetically a male, she has developed along female lines. Using the stage name 'Melanie the Mermaid,' she dons a mermaid costume that comes up to her waist and simply fluctuates in the water. Cal, whose gender identity has already been discussed, performs in the tank using the pseudonym 'the God Hermaphroditus.' Even the ancient tradition as to the form of the Sirens (part woman, part bird) is somehow preserved, since the three modern Sirens think of themselves as creatures of the air:

The surface of the sea is a mirror, reflecting divergent evolutionary paths. Up above, the creatures of air; down below, those of water. One planet containing two worlds. The customers were the sea creatures; Zora, Carmen, and I remained essentially creatures of air (Eugenides 2003: 484).

In the novel the Sirens as a symbol are used metonymically to evoke one of the most fascinating elements traditionally connected with their myth: their song. According to Jane Harrison, in Homer's account the Sirens' song contains a gnoseological yearning: the desire to know and to be as the gods; however, it is a fatal desire: "the end of that song is death" (Harrison 1908: 198-199). The exact manner of the Sirens' victims' death is not indicated: do they forget to steer and are then shipwrecked? Or do they waste away because they are unable to break the spell of the song? (de Jong 2001: 298). Either way, the Siren song has two prominent aspects: the desire to know and the forgetfulness that leads to death. These two aspects are carried on into this modern incarnation of the Sirens and create the last pattern that I will follow in the analysis of the novel.

The reaction of one of the clients, Mr. Go, when observing for the first time Cal's naked body in the tank can be considered a parodic parallel of the classical encounter between the hero and the Sirens:

There is a splash from above. The water in the pool goes white, then pink. Only inches away on the other side of the porthole's glass is a body, a living body. Mr. Go looks. He squints. He presses his face right up to the porthole. He has never seen anything like what he is seeing now. Not in all his years of visiting the Dark Room. He isn't sure he likes what he sees. But the sight makes him feel strange, light-headed, weightless, and somehow younger (Eugenides 2003: 482).

The forgetfulness that leads to death is replaced by a more debased sensation of uncertainty towards what one is observing: the three Sirens in

the club are 'forbidden fruits' that the customers can take pleasure from in the anonymity of their booths. Instead of perishing, Bob Presto's customers' only risk is to enjoy something that they should not enjoy, that is out of the ordinary: these three modern Sirens undermine the customers' heterosexuality. The only thing at risk in hearing these Sirens' song is the customers' "heteronormativity" (Castro Varela *et al.* 2012: 11-16). This parody of a canonical topos is a typical postmodern mode of "appropriating and reformulating—with significant change—the dominant white, male, middle-class, heterosexual" culture (Hutcheon 1988: 130).

As we have seen, the second facet of the Sirens' song is related to knowledge: "the attractions of the Sirens were primarily intellectual" (Stanford 1954: 77-78). According to Jane Harrison, the Sirens are "mantic creatures like the Sphinx with whom they have much in common, knowing both the past and the future" (Harrison 1908: 199). Zora and Carmen, who have worked much longer in the club and for this reason are 'expert' Sirens, know very well themselves and their place in the world. From an early age Carmen had felt that she had been born in the wrong body and she is working in the club to save enough money to undergo sex reassignment surgery (Eugenides 2003: 487). Zora, on the other hand, prefers to identify herself as a hermaphrodite and refers to herself using the term 'intersexual.' Her main activity consists in gathering knowledge; the narrator comments: "Mainly, her politics consisted of studying and writing. And, during the months I lived with her, in educating me, in bringing me out of what she saw as my great midwestern darkness" (488). Zora and Cal study the role of the hermaphrodites in the history of the world, and how for centuries in various societies they were not only accepted but revered as important individuals: shamans, healers, or artists. Furthermore, Cal comes in contact with the works of famous writers, such as proto-feminist Kate Chopin, polyamorous Jane Bowles, and Gary Snyder. Cal, performing at this time both as sender and receiver of the Siren song, is persuaded by its gnoseological imperative: "In my last weeks in San Francisco I read everything Zora gave me, trying to educate myself" (494).

According to Debra Shostak, Eugenides's novel demonstrates the virtual impossibility of creating a 'third space' in which intersex people can live, except as a utopian fantasy. Relying on the metaphor of hybridity, she writes, the novel seems to founder: "Rather than representing the fulfillment of a socially legitimized hybridity [...], *Middlesex* exposes impasses in the politics of gendered and cultural identity that, in turn, highlight the distance between theory and practice" (Shostak 2008: 385-7). Reading the novel under the metaphor of hybridity is suggested by the author in an interview with

Jonathan Safran Foer (Eugenides 2002: 76), but it is not necessarily the most appropriate trope and, all things considered, can also be misleading. Following a different 'walk' outside the text (the Siren archetype), my conclusions are different: intersex people have their own space in which they can live and potentially influence the lives of the others.

What Judith Butler writes about the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities can be applied to the performers in Presto's Octopussy's Garden: "we are [...] in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance [...]. [Drag] reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence" (1990: 137). In the novel, the three Sirens' erotic performance "is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (Butler 1993: 125). Presto's intersex performers undermine and destabilize gender binaries and gendered behavior; this can happen not so much because the performance is a parody of the dominant norms, but rather because it is a "site of a certain ambivalence" (Butler 1993: 125). Such destabilization not only legitimizes the fluid identity of many intersex people, but can also have an effect on the rest of the population: "The loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: 'man' and 'woman.'" (Butler 1990: 146). The patrons of the club, intrigued by the Octopussy's Garden, after an "initial fascination with the exotic (Stone 2006: 229) might leave the show with the feeling that "heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations" (Butler 1993: 125). An indication of this can be found in the fact that the heterosexual patrons of the club have been constantly attending the show for six months (Eugenides 2003: 484). Another indication is Mr. Go's reaction when the screen of his booth slides shut: "Without hesitation Mr. Go drops another token in the slot" (Eugenides 2003: 482). There is also another important indication of this in the fact that the 'Octopussy's Garden' has become a site of a certain ambivalence not only for heterosexual customers, but for all of them (Eugenides 2003: 486).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Thanks to this "therapeutic" (Eugenides 2002: 494) process of self-education and physical exposure, Cal gradually overcomes the insecurities

connected with his body: "Traumas of the locker room were being released. Shame over having a body unlike other bodies was passing away. The monster feeling was fading" (494). Cal does not feel like a monster (the Fiji Mermaid) anymore, he is no longer a Siren (Presto's club is raided by the police and shut down), and, having psychologically matured, he abandons the Naiad archetype. Meanwhile, in Detroit, Cal's mother, who has not seen her 'daughter' for months, has the sensation that the signals coming over her "spiritual umbilical cord" have stopped: she becomes convinced that Callie must be dead (493). In a certain sense Cal has actually died: abandoning all archetypes and literary models, he has managed to mature and is now reborn as a brand new individual. When Cal and his mother meet again, the woman simply cannot deny the obvious: "Not a daughter at all anymore but, at least by the looks, a son" (519).

As mentioned in the Introduction, in the novel there are various allusions to Greek myths and authors, but they are almost exclusively "a sophisticated decoration" (Albertazzi 2003: 16) and do not provide the coherence needed for the process of interpretation of the text. On the contrary, as I wanted to show, the literary models supplied by the Naiad, the Fiji Mermaid, and the Siren are "latent elements, which [...] possess the force that vitalizes the manifest pattern" (Vickery 1966: ix) and permit to take at least three different "inferential walks" (Eco 1979: 31) outside the text. Reading the protagonist's struggle to understand his gender identity in the light of these three models connected with female water spirits has allowed to find a way to disambiguate various elements in the story and reach a uniform reading of the diegetic events.

The mythic patterns supplied by the Naiad, the Fiji Mermaid, and the Siren contribute to reinforce the main idea underneath the novel, and guide us in a process of discovery that is reminiscent of Judith Butler's problematization of gender identity: gender is "real only to the extent that it is performed" (Butler 1988: 527), and for this reason the protagonist needs to perform sexually, erotically and even intellectually not in an attempt to approximate an ideal but in order to obtain answers about his own gender identity. The protagonist, rebelling against the boundaries set by medical authorities, constructs his gender identity through autonomous, consecutive and tentative acts, reaching by the end of Book Four a provisional self-definition which is not intended to be taken as a definitive or fixed status. Moreover, the hybrid and transformative character of these literary models functions as a mirror for the fluid and ambivalent identity of the protagonist. However, the protagonist does not necessarily position himself specifically as part of a third gender, being more interested in the process than in the

outcome. Most importantly, from the very beginning of the narration he certainly sees himself in a position "which is nowhere, which is outside the binary oppositions of gendered discourse" (Stone 2006: 230).

In this sense, the protagonist of the novel is also a "subject-in-becoming" or a "nomadic subject" (Braidotti 2011: 114). According to Rosi Braidotti, the crucial thing about nomadic subjects is that they are post-identitarian: they map out multiple transformations and multiple ways of belonging, each depending on where their particular location is (2010: 16). The protagonist's journey to understand his gender shows the necessity of rethinking the idea of identity, in a process that dis-identify altogether with the concept of sovereignty (Braidotti 2011: 33) and with the idea of unitary subjects (Braidotti 2010: 16). Living his life across sexes and genders, the protagonist of *Middlesex* learns how to govern contradictions, interpreting "interconnectedness as the way of being" (Braidotti 2011: 120).

Furthermore, the fact that the protagonist's process of understanding his gender identity is conducted through hybrid and transformative models (the female water spirits) has a relevant consequence: this path of self-discovery, involving literary archetypes that are at the same time one thing and another, becomes metaphorically a persistent challenge and an opposition to steady identities. It can be considered as an anti-teleological choice, both an affirmative deconstruction of the dominant subject-position and the first step in the direction of a complex and open-ended process of de-personalization of the subject (Braidotti 2002: 119). I consider these 'inhuman' archetypes as the necessary threshold in the creation and in the sense-making of more flexible and multiple identities (Braidotti 2013: 181).

As early as 1976, K. K. Ruthven affirmed that one of the principal characteristics of Myth Criticism was to "turn attention away from the local specificities of a particular book toward some myth which is held to be older and grander and therefore better than the book one is actually talking about" (75); in conclusion, Ruthven added that, as a critical approach, Myth Criticism aimed solely at the creation of "a system of reductive monism for the reintegration of the Many into the One" (75). More recently, in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, "Myth Criticism" is briefly covered in an entry concluding that it "has been widely dismissed as a form of reductionism that neglects cultural and historical differences, as well as the specific properties of literary works" (Baldick 2008: 218). What I wanted to prove in this analysis is that the analogical approach, one of the most relevant feature of Myth Criticism, focusing on the various possible correspondences with a certain myth, is not a way to underestimate the specificities of a text, but is potentially the only way to discover (or uncover) the structural tenet underneath a

literary work, which may otherwise risk to appear incoherent and loosely put together.

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