

A Virgilian Descent into Gendered Old Age: London *katabasis* in Margaret Drabble's *The Seven Sisters*

DANIEL NISA CÁCERES
Universidad Pablo de Olavide
dniscac@upo.es

This article analyses the *katabasis* mytheme in Margaret Drabble's *The Seven Sisters* (2002), laying special emphasis on her contemporary revisionist reimagining of the *Aeneid*. A dialogue with Virgil's male-centred epic poem becomes both a starting point and a destination when death is just around the corner, intimated and sublimated as it is by London, a city that correlates to the Virgilian Underworld as a dark, damp *topos*, plagued by grotesque lost souls wandering about its liminal spaces. This close reading of the trope will not only provide a critical insight into Drabble's subversive reworking of Aeneas's descent to the Underworld from a female-centred perspective, but will also explore how the mythical resignification of the London urban landscape mediates an ongoing redefinition of women's old age and its tense power relations with the past, the present and the future.

Keywords: descent to the Underworld; Margaret Drabble; women's rewritings; old age; the grotesque; the *Aeneid*

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Un descenso virgiliano a la tercera edad con perspectiva de género: *katabasis* londinense en *The Seven Sisters*, de Margaret Drabble

Este artículo analiza el mitema de la *katabasis* en *The Seven Sisters* (2002), de Margaret Drabble, haciendo hincapié en su recreación revisionista contemporánea de la *Eneida*. Un diálogo con el poema épico androcéntrico de Virgilio es a la vez punto de partida y llegada cuando la muerte acecha, insinuada y sublimada en la representación de Londres, ciudad que guarda correlación con el húmedo y oscuro inframundo virgiliano como *topos* plagado

de grotescas almas en pena vagando por sus espacios liminales. De ahí que una lectura detenida de este motivo no solo permita ahondar críticamente en cómo Drabble lo subvierte al reescribir el descenso al inframundo de Eneas desde una perspectiva ginocéntrica, sino también explorar cómo la resignificación mítica del paisaje urbano londinense es transmisora de la redefinición en curso de la vejez femenina y sus tensas relaciones de poder con el pasado, presente y futuro.

Palabras clave: descenso al inframundo; Margaret Drabble; reescrituras de autoría femenina; vejez; lo grotesco; *Eneida*

I. A FOREORDAINED JOURNEY: INTRODUCTION

While motherhood and its “salvific possibilities” (Rowe 2005, 421) are central concerns in Drabble’s early novels, the abundance of female characters of advanced years that populate her late novels—*The Witch of Exmoor* (1996), *The Peppered Moth* (2001), *The Sea Lady* (2007) and *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016)—suggests a thematic shift towards a gendered reinterpretation of ageing and its redemptive potential. In *The Seven Sisters* ([2002] 2003), Candida Wilton is a disillusioned older divorcée who, after being ostracised as wife, mother and woman, takes to living in an unsafe London neighbourhood, a radical change from the tranquil rural Suffolk of her married life. There she joins adult evening classes alongside “an ageing group of students” (2003, 9) who become “Virgilians,” that is, people keen on the programmed “Virgil class” (12) until the College of Further Education where it is held is replaced by a Health Club. Candida feels attracted by the class’s anachronistic existence, sheer improbability and status as “a real lifeline” (10) or liminal symbol of “separateness and of union through communication” (Hennelly 1998, 199).

If historic writing—as Roland Barthes observed—does not differ from fictional narration (Doležel 2010, 16), this equation also applies to Candida’s new London life as recorded in diary form, which deconstructs and subsequently reconstructs and reframes women’s ageing alongside a classical text underpinned by male-centred beliefs. The elicitation of this dialectical, polyphonic process—or in Julia Kristeva’s critical idiom “destructive genesis”—in which writing “reads another writing, reads itself and constructs itself” (1980, 77) becomes a necessary critical procedure. Drabble appropriates and subverts monological epic poetry and its male-centric cultural discourse through a carnivalesque structure, a process aptly epitomised by a densely symbolic scene in which the reunited Virgil class are planning their journey “from Carthage to Naples, in the wake of Aeneas” (2003, 117), to see “the birdless realms of Avernus and the dark pit of Acheron [and] visit the Sibyl at Cumae” (69). The meeting takes place at Mrs Barclay’s, one of the Virgilians. An unexpected response is triggered by a carpet laid on the floor: “Trample upon it, please do, do please feel free, said Mr Barclay, with a flourish,” a doubly meaningful gesture, as it was “one of several

Tyrian carpets” he had bought in Tunis, all the more so considering that “Carthage was no more” and that “the Tyrian queen would not be there to greet [them]” (154). By literally being allowed to trample upon such an evocative artefact, so strongly reminiscent of Dido’s fate in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, these neo-Sibyls in late middle age are subtly granted freedom and agency to transcend it, to have a second chance in their lives, an unprecedented gendered perspective being woven into the patterns and motifs of the classical tradition.

London and all its katabatic associations provide Candida with new opportunities to engage with her transition to old age, which is ultimately projected onto her own untold future. In her diary, her London flat, its surroundings and the local residents are cannily resubstantiated into a soul-ridden Underworld riddled with portents, omens and “aquatic, arboreal, and floral necrotypes” (Smith 2001, 466) that enhance her benumbed vision and help her negotiate her multiple liminal circumstances and polyphonic voices. Eventually emerging an empowered older woman whose individual and gender identities are depicted “as an ongoing process, as variable, explorative, and multiple” (Nischik 2020, 262), she descends into her own story as a poet, like Virgil, and as a novelist, like Drabble. In her spatial and temporal transgressions, she not only impersonates one of her daughters and fabricates a fictionalised death, but also navigates the lives of Dido, Creusa, the Sibyl of Cumae and even a demythologised, elderly, female Aeneas who walks through an Underworld of her own.

2. CHTHONIC ENCOUNTERS BEYOND THE THRESHOLD: REVISIONING THE LITERARY PAST

In their contributions to a long-standing literary tradition, many contemporary women writers opt for overtly female-centred perspectives in their rewritings of classical texts. With the precedents of Emma Tennant’s “eagerness to expose the power of powerless females” (Losada Friend 2004, n.p.) in “Philomela” (1975) and Christa Wolf’s *Kassandra* (1983), most works are direct reimaginings, such as Elizabeth Cook’s *Achilles* (2001), Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005), Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Lavinia* (2008), Irene Vallejo’s *El silbido del arquero* (2015), Madeline Miller’s *The Song of Achilles* (2011) and *Circe* (2018), Natalie Haynes’ *A Thousand Ships* (2019) and *Stone Blind* (2022) and Pat Barker’s *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and *The Women of Troy* (2021). However, although less numerous, indirect retellings in present-day transpositions such as Michèle Roberts’ *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987), Joyce Carol Oates’ *The Tattooed Girl* (2003), A. S. Byatt’s “The Pink Ribbon” (2003) and Margaret Drabble’s “progressive” gerontological narrative (Hepworth 2005, 790) are also “part of a widespread revisioning of canonical male-authored texts, including the Ancient Classics and the Bible” (King 2005, 5).

Criticism has consequently turned to the rich cultural debate implicit in this fictionalisation of the classics that “expand[s] the boundaries” of translation and allows for the “creative expansion of the text” (Gentzler 2019, 279). Before Fiona Cox

(2018) investigated women's revisionings of Ovid, she had addressed the question of contemporary female-authored reworkings of Virgil (2011), devoting a specific chapter to Drabble while tracing the presence of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" in *The Seven Sisters*. Similarly, Benjamin Eldon Stevens (2016) explores Byatt's Virgilianism in *The Children's Book* (2009) and Daniel Nisa Cáceres and Rosario Moreno Soldevila (2020; 2022; 2023) analyse Le Guin's and Vallejo's imaginative rewritings of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and offer a critical overview of Trojan-themed retellings by women. Contemporary articulations of the descent to the Underworld also draw considerable critical attention. Building on her previous analysis of Salman Rushdie's reimaginings of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth (2001; 2004), Rachel Falconer (2005)—along with Madeleine Sherer and Rachel Falconer (2020) and Margaret Kean (2021)—looks at the growing prominence of katabatic narratives as formulated from several discursive types. Correspondingly, Agata Handley (2018) explores how the representations of memory and grief in Jane Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers* (2001) are situated within this same "enduring literary tradition" (2018, 18). It is also relevant to note that Michael Thurston (2009, 55-86) delves into how male poets use *katabasis* as a vehicle for cultural critique, while Cox observes that Drabble's characters resort to the Underworld "as a site for recovering their memories and evaluating their experiences" (2011, 116-17).

Ageing in Drabble's novels and other contemporary fictions is presented as a learning/liberating process of self-discovery and gendering by Şebnem Toplu (2009) and Sarah Falcus and Katsura Sako (2014), a premise manifest both in Varda Muhlbauer, Eleanor Pardess and Nava Haruvy's feminist redefinition of old age (2018) and in Ruth O. Saxton's comprehensive study of older women's narratives (2020). It is in light of these studies that enlarging the body of critical inquiry through a novel approach to interpreting the subversive convergence of women's old age with the *katabasis* trope in Drabble's novel becomes relevant. Focusing on the reconstruction of memory, voice and identity in *The Seven Sisters* reveals a challenging response to women's experiences enunciated by Drabble's aesthetic and rhetoric representation of London in conjunction with the book's eminently transitional, overlapping dynamics of temporal and spatial liminality.

3. VEERING TOWARDS THE INAPPROPRIATE

In its structural complexity and witty self-referentiality (Cox 2011, 132), *The Seven Sisters* invites analogies to James Joyce's *Ulysses* or Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, so deprecated by Drabble in her early Leavisian proclivities. Most of Candida's *katabasis* is rendered in the first, and largest, of four parts, an intradiegetic expository meditation on her roamings about London. This leads to part two's omniscient narrative of the Virgilians' journey and Candida's hinted at demise, followed in part three by Candida's impersonation of her daughter Ellen, or "pseudo-Ellen" (276), who reinterprets and fills in the gaps of the preceding autobiographical and travel writing modes, undermining

their reliability into the bargain. However, all these arguments are demolished in part four by Candida's unexpected return from the dead, a ruse on her own admission and an *anabasis*. This rebirth of a wiser hero(ine) with heightened mental alertness does not simply show how Drabble reconciles "the empiricist tradition of Bennett with the subjectivity, sensitivity and symbolism of Virginia Woolf" (Nagamatsu 2014, 388), but also serves as a consistent assertion of the constant rewriting and relocation of the epic poem on which the ongoing gendered redefinition of its narrator is inscribed.

Drabble's postmodern demythologisation of the *Aeneid* and its Homeric forebears is primarily coded through the subversion of Aeneas—including his putative legitimisation of the power structures of Emperor Augustus—and his *katabasis*, a central stage in his journey. Drabble prioritises freedom and agency in the reconstruction of Creusa's and Dido's power relationships with Aeneas through Candida's description of her ex-husband, Andrew. Betrayed Candida feels hatred for Andrew, who "is good, good, good" (2003, 15); this triple perfection, considering that she is "superstitious about numbers" (20), is a rhetorical repetition that in fact highlights the converse by inscribing a modern equivalent of pious Aeneas. Andrew's hypocrisy and the "twinkle in his eyes" had driven her, she confesses, not only "to the shores of madness" (19–20), but to a figurative reading impairment and aphasia which affects her ability "to read him, [...] to speak of him" (160). In another ironic subversion of the ineffability of Virgil's poem involving a *détournement* or distortion of Aeneas, Candida gains the possibility to act of her own accord "through the agency of Anthea Richards" (20), Andrew's new partner. Anthea—a name that literally means blossomy or abloom in ancient Greek—is identifiable with the Greek goddess Hera, whose hatred of Aeneas encouraged her to make him stay with Dido in Carthage and thus prevent, though to little avail, his prophesied founding of Rome. By making female experience central to her narrative, Drabble gives "women back their place in history, not just as victims but as agents" (King 2005, 3). Significantly, it is the quasi-sacrificial drowning of Anthea's daughter, Jane, that informs Candida's decision to leave Suffolk. Candida meditates on how much the construction of the Health Club reminds her of the temple of Juno built by Queen Dido in Carthage (2003, 13), but unlike Dido, Candida is unable and unwilling to take her own life, misrecognising this old/new, fictional/real empowered self; she only does so later through a narrative subterfuge that grounds her fictionalised death in the found-manuscript tradition, a shift that points to the novel's self-conscious, metafictional nature.

Another demythologising strategy is laid bare by the densely conflated eschatological and scatological wordplay of Candida's musings:

He stepped whole and unharmed out of the flames of Troy and abandoned the dead and the enslaved and went on his ruthless glittering way. (Creusa, O Creusa.) Some of us disapproved of Aeneas, but there is a ruthlessness about him that appeals. Virgil calls him Pius/Pious, but you can't really translate the word. He was pious, perhaps, but he was also a shit [...]. He was a shit and he followed his destiny (135).

This conflict of incompatible emotions acquires transcendence when it is situated within the negotiation of her liminal identity, as the untranslatability of “Pius/Pious” partly derives from the fact that it carries the sense of sanctimonious and hypocritical, apart from highlighting the intrinsic oxymoron of being ruthless—lacking piety and devotion—and pious. “We liked that bit,” confesses Candida reminiscing about her evening classes, “when he arrives at Cumae and the priestess tells him to stop gaping at monuments like a tourist and to get on with his mission” (135).

Candida also reflects on Andrew’s cruel remark about a “Hungarian goulash” (84) that she had prepared at home for some guests, which made her aware of the intrinsic anomaly of their relationship, as well as leading her to the angry realisation that at “such moments, one dies a little” (85). Andrew’s humiliation of Candida and her own emphasis on the poor quality of the meat with its “yellowish gelatinous gristle or sinew” (84) combine to subvert Aeneas by ultimately suggesting a dysfunctional performance of his sacrificial rites in the *Aeneid*.

Yet another powerful appropriation of Aeneas is his fragmented transmutation into Candida and her neighbour Anaïs, “a respectable postmodern atheist of Maronite Christian descent” (154), who she had met in the Virgil class (102) and whose name is a happy phonetic cognate with Aeneas (Cox 2011, 126): “Anaïs is more than striking. She is spectacular” (2003, 66). Being “the most exotic and unlikely class member” (81), Anaïs becomes an aesthetic beacon early in their “Virgilian acquaintance” (67). She summons up “another self” for Candida (68), who takes a liking to doing “things for the first time” such as “eating in the street” or going into a pub on her own (77). Candida also works up the courage and enthusiasm to break rules and debunk Andrew’s piousness by buying a microwave in rebellion against his irrational refusal to install one (58-59) and, on an authorial level, by accumulating triads of sarcastic epithets in her diary: “that good man Andrew, the pillar of his community, the admired of all observers” (62). Despite not putting any of these external dictates before her own wishes, Candida also wonders if she had sunk into oblivion before leaving Suffolk, as instead of wearing a double scarlet letter, the adulterers, Andrew and Anthea, were “invited everywhere”: “Was I always a pariah, without my knowing it? Was this lofty solitude foreordained to be my destiny? A destiny stacked, laid, unalterably dealt?” (71). She does not compare to attractive Anthea, and remarks indicating her mortification ensue, stressing how her “Suffolk self was faded and wan, and the passivity of my self-pity made an ugly martyr of me” (72).

Now turned into an Underworld *flâneuse*, on one particular day she takes one of her usual walks along the Grand Union Canal—not far from Kensal Green Cemetery—and resignedly joins “the other no-hopers, killing time before time kills them [...]. That’s my proper place. That’s my destiny” (140). Back in her Ladbrooke Grove flat, the rain outside “dripped down the brickwork with its crusted city tears of salt and nitrate and lime and droppings” (143), a reminder that her afterlife is spent in the Asphodel Meadows, or fields of ash, a location in Hades where most shades dwell. It

is just then that Candida receives an unexpected cheque for £120,000 from a long-forgotten pension scheme. She suddenly realises that the “markers were all pointing in that direction”; that is, her journey, like that of Virgil’s hero, “was foreordained” (143), but she is to be an active agent in—rather than “a passive victim” of—her “fate” (149). Indeed, Candida derives tangible freedom from financial security, which is, for her, “a bolt from the blue. Jove’s thunderbolt. The gods play games with us, but at least this game is an amusing one” (140); Candida is categorical about the potential import of this windfall to her friends, the Virgilians: “[u]nexpected money is intoxicating [...]. I felt powerful [...], ‘empowered’” (143). “We are of the third age. Our dependants have died or matured. For good and ill, we are free” (148). She is naturally excited “at the power [she] could exercise in bringing this disparate crew together” (150) as their generous leader, their hero.

Many are the rivers and lakes of the Underworld, and discernible is the significance of aquatic necrotypes that feed the ubiquitous death-and-rebirth archetype. While the Virgilians wait at Stansted, the third-person narrator points out with a retrospective emphasis on part one that “Candida herself, freed from her own whining monologue, is also aware that she has turned into another person, a multiple, polyphonic person, who need not pretend to be stupid” (172), in what might seem a subtle subversion of “the emphasis upon individualism, choice and agency” and the “makeover paradigm” that constitute some of the “core features of postfeminism” (Gill 2017, 607). This contrasts with the staticity and uneventfulness of the opening of part one, where Candida acknowledges that this

nothingness is significant. If I immerse myself in it, perhaps it will turn itself into something else. Into something terrible, into something transformed. I cast myself upon its waste of waters. It is not for myself alone that I do this. I hope I may discover some more general purpose as I write. I will have faith that something or someone is waiting for me on the far shore (2003, 3).

Not only is her leap of faith revealed through this aquatic imagery, but so too is the crucial significance of (re)writing as outer and inner exploration, of catering for her denied creative pulsion, of finding a language. Candida had “always liked walking by water” (17), an inherent characteristic of the shades in the Underworld. This metamorphosis through water is perceptible in London’s proverbial damp weather and her Mediterranean journey in the footsteps of Aeneas, both of which counteract her gradual spiritual and physical desiccation.

Consistent in this attitude, Candida thinks “much about drowning” (74), a motif that permeates the descent paradigm. Jane Richards drowned herself in the Lady Pond in Suffolk on Candida’s birthday, an incident she paradoxically brands as “a meaningless coincidence” (76) despite asserting that it had “strange consequences” (77) for her, as from “that death, Anthea and Andrew took life” (74). For Candida, “plain Jane [...] was

not unattractive, but she did have an unfortunate problem. She was partially sighted, and she had a very severe squint. One of her eyes seemed to roll sideways, and it stared, as it were, right out of the side of her head. It was very disconcerting” (75). Jane filled the pockets of her jacket “with stones” (75), an other-than-innocent association with Virginia Woolf, also detectable in Candida’s “bad period”—not long after her arrival in London—when she openly admits to having felt like jumping into the canal (301).

Candida had already given an account of this bout of depression in part one: feeling “like a prisoner, up there in [her Ladbroke Grove] tower” (126), she went out under the rain and though she looked insistently at her watch, “the hands did not move. They had stuck. Time had come to an end” (127). It was at this juncture of her sibylline *mortido*, *destrudo* or death instinct that she saw a plastic bag floating in a fountain in Regent’s Park and waded in the shallow water to grasp it, an action witnessed by an elderly black man with an expression of “unutterable dejection” (128); although they remained silent, unlike Aeneas and Anchises, who converse in the Underworld, she “felt that they were kindred spirits” (128). In a comparably similar scene, she notices along the canal that “some floating plastic bottles were nudging one another and circling one another gently as in some mating ritual” (166), a disturbingly grotesque image of subjectively perceived animation which subtly alludes to Jane’s drowning, as well as to Andrew and Anthea. Candida’s yearning for death and rebirth is, however, in competition with her urge to drop her wedding ring in the Health Club pool (129), a symbolic liberation from Andrew she accomplishes by letting the ring “sink to the bottom,” where it stays “drowned in the shallow deep,” as opposed to the “drowned bricks, corpse bricks, bagged in wet canvas” (162–63) she used to deftly rescue at swimming practice at St Anne’s, her old school, a macabre anticipation of the animate and inanimate souls she encounters wandering through the mire and litter of the city.

4. AN UNDERWORLD OF ONE’S OWN

Drabble’s London, apart from its “persistent flirtation with the dystopian, the anarchic and sometimes the apocalyptic” (Tso 2020, 2), evokes the traditional literary scenes of urban hells in William Hogarth, Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad and T.S. Eliot, reinstating their emphasis on a damp classical Underworld rather than the devils and flames of Christian Hell. Shaped by the more modern conceptualisation of a pre-mortem rather than post-mortem space, here hell is not simply a subjective territory of the inner mind or a “state of metaphysical anguish” (Cuddon 1984, 39) like those summoned up by James Thomson’s *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874), Franz Kafka’s novels, Leonora Carrington’s “different representation of the Self” (De la Parra Fernández 2021, 126) in *Down Below* (1944), Charles Watkins’ amnesia in Doris Lessing’s *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), or Mad Mado’s Alzheimer’s disease in Byatt’s “The Pink Ribbon” (2003). In *The Seven Sisters*, the complex psychogeography of gloomy London, a “foreign land of urban barbarians” (2003, 18), has a major emotional and cognitive

impact on Candida, who struggles to accommodate its multifarious environmental and demographic impressions. This labyrinth necrotype strikingly contrasts with part two, where the Tunisian streets make Candida wonder: “[How] can the denizens of the Goldbourne Road bear to live in exile? [...] How can anyone bear to live in the dark streets of London, beneath an evil sky?” (195). Most of her neighbours are “foreigners. We don’t even look at one another as we pass on the stairs or in the communal hallway. We avoid eye contact, as though we were all criminals” (112); yet for her there is “something liberating about this total indifference. I think it must be intended to set me free. But free for what?” (112).

In this emancipatory quest, Candida even considers accepting “a truly and debasing and menial job,” amazed at the Sisyphean urban endeavours of an old worker “trying to remove the blobs of chewing gum that bespatter the streets of our city. The stones of London are impregnated with dark blotches of gum. They lie thick like tears [...]. The stains remain” (96-97). These solidly grounded liquid vestiges justly mirror London’s denizens, shades like herself: “Out of my depth, that’s what I am. Though the pool isn’t very deep” (5). This coming-of-age theme, amalgamated with a deconstruction of old age as “a means to critique ageism” (Sandberg 2008, 118), is also made explicit in Candida’s express admission that she had not joined the Health Club, where “the age ratio had been reversed,” to “consort with the young”; and with yet another water idiom, she owns up to not having plunged “into that blue pool as into a fountain of eternal youth” (9).

If the literary representations of poverty, squalor and slumming (Koven 2004) in Victorian London combined morbidity with social concerns, Candida is simultaneously repelled and attracted by London. Despite being quite out of tune with the sordidness of her surroundings, swamped as it is with all sorts of rubbish and ghosts of urban living, especially a Christmas tree that had “weathered two winters” and perennial “pools of standing water” (55), she finds in it, like Byatt’s James Ennis in “The Pink Ribbon”, “a tale of strangeness [...], an aesthetic horror [...] that was pleasing” (2003, 42). The grotesque, with its “aptitude for challenging borders and hierarchies” (Duggan 2013, 3), is a ubiquitous urban experience that Candida tends to meet with equally grotesque responses; sometimes they build on the sheer contiguousness of two deceptively naïve remarks on dietary habits, rape and murder—e.g., “[m]y man complained about the meatballs [...]. He is thinking of pretending to become a vegetarian” (8); and “[h]e and a gang of his friends raped a woman and drowned her in the Grand Union Canal” (8).

Nowhere perhaps is Drabble’s articulation of the grotesque more sharply delimited than when Candida ludicrously recounts her “near-death sauna experience” within a heavy underworldly mist. In noticing that the sand of the quarter-hour glass had “stood still,” she momentarily believes that she “had passed from life to death and into eternal time,” but then concludes that it “was the hourglass that had suffered a stroke,” not her (108-109). This correlates with how the turbulence and electric storm the Virgil group experienced on the plane made Candida quietly resign “herself to death” (178), whether

real or feigned. Disconcerted, unable to discern reality from fiction, readers are trapped in a bewildering position between the horror of Candida's simulated drownings and her resurrections, a conflict that goes some way to outlining the dual, unresolved potency of the grotesque. This pattern of opposites that saturates the novel is also signalled rhetorically and stylistically. Candida consciously problematises her own creative status by using two contrasting styles—the neutral, colloquial diary entries and the formal, archaic inserts, but the result, in its apparent naivety, is far from coherent, eventually reinforcing her also sought-after sense of subversive incongruity.

Grotesque imagery is interwoven with Candida's benumbed perceptions, while at the same time enhancing them. By virtue of the grotesque, Candida starts looking at things “with a new eye” (132), an inverted projection onto an elderly character/narrator of the palliative technique Dickens (Hollington [1984] 2015, 193) used with children to enhance their—and readers'—critical sense and imaginative vision. On her way to an expensive butcher's that has “a cosmopolitan clientele” who do not speak the confusing “tongues of the Goldbourne Road,” Candida notices that “a red dahlia looked at [her] in an inquiring manner through ornamental railings” (2003, 113). The flower's human traits with their Dickensian resonances and its red colour are later transmuted into the dance of death of the meat hanging on hooks, especially the “crown of lamb” (114) she buys—a bloody simulacrum of a regal artefact. All this chthonic craving for sacrificial blood reinforces the same “diffuse sense of fear, anxiety, and hostility that laces urban experience with its increasing domestic and intercultural frictions” which is hinted at by the “violence and the threat of mutilation” in Drabble's *The Middle Ground* (Rubenstein 1984, 11). Likewise, the grotesque sea urchins the Virgilians sample in Tunis act as mirror-responses to these and other Underworld necrotypes; Anaïs “is horrified and disgusted by the spiky little monsters,” being the first to “notice the appalling behaviour” (200) of their empty shells: “*They climb up on to their spikes, and they walk away from the scene of their own destruction,*” staggering “although they are no longer alive, although their bodies and brains have been eaten up by the English ladies” (200; italics in the original). When she draws everyone's attention to this “strange fruit,” it produces consternation, “but the consternation is mixed with mirth” (201), two irreconcilable reactions further extended by the “dry, bright, mirthless little laugh” (205) of Julia, Candida's childhood friend, while she professes to see a disquieting, tragic analogy: ““Don't you think”, she asks Candida, “we're a bit like those poor creatures?”” (205). Candida counteracts this with cautious optimism in the ensuing debate about the “ageing process” (207), indeed a departure from her previously pessimistic critique of old women's “long afterlife” (89) in care homes, thus prefiguring Francesca Stubbs' view of ageing in *The Dark Flood Rises* as “a fascinating journey into the unknown” (2016, 20) despite people habitually crossing the threshold “senseless, incontinent, demented, medicated into amnesia, aphasia, [and] indignity” (29).

If the Cumean Sibyl is, as a liminal figure, neither here nor there, Candida's London reads as a testimony to a progressively delimitised culture; but contrary

to expectations, London social life provides Candida with rituals of gradual self-discovery aplenty, which take place in transitional spaces and under the auspices of liminal symbols or sacra. Set adrift from her moorings, she feels a peculiar fascination with her London flat in Ladbroke Grove despite it being a “dark, dirty, menacing area” (41), perhaps because it glows “in the darkness” (43), throwing into relief her own irrevocably intertwined associations with the Golden Bough used by Aeneas and the Sibyl to gain admission to Hades in the *Aeneid*: “Suddenly the idea of being central and colourful rather than marginal and marginalized seemed to me to be infinitely luminous and numinous” (45). As evoked by the divine or spiritual connection denoted by “numinous,” in London she becomes a vates or seer, both a poet and a priestess, just like Le Guin’s Lavinia; simultaneously intersecting the myths of the Sibyl, Aeneas and Orpheus and Eurydice in search of poetic inspiration, Candida descends from her flat, her innermost sacrum, in a recursive loop which defines itself through repetition. Not only does Candida show tremendous zeal in preventing others, especially her irritating friend Sally—who “wants to inspect [her] misfortune” (40)—from desecrating her sacred London dwelling, but also in looking after her laptop. This is one of her Penates or “*household gods*,” which she compares to her childhood mascots for good luck or to “ward off the Evil Eye” (52; italics in the original). They comprised a green plastic horse with Trojan reverberations and a Turkish bracelet with “turquoise glass beads [...] in the middle of each bead was a little white glass circle with a black dot in it, like the pupil of an eye”; although the bracelet was apparently not very valuable, “it had a magic to it” (53).

Candida avails herself of an elevated vantage point, namely her flat, which is “high up on the third floor” (45) of a late-Victorian building and has “a spectacular cityscape view,” from where she “can see the constellations” (46), whose rotary, seasonal recurrence adumbrates the note of hope the novel ends on, presaging further sailings and new experiences. Women’s classical rewritings frequently resort to *teichoscopia*, as elevated vantage points are emancipatory chronotopes (Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila 2020, 351): “by night I watched from my window” (2003, 13) and “from my eyrie I could see the new building rise up,” “eyrie” signalling the nest of a bird of prey or a hard-to-reach place. Candida associates the “Health Club, lofty and proud” (12) with Dido’s “strips of a stretched oxhide” (13) and pictures herself scanning the horizons of her new Carthage, just like Valeria, their driver and guide from Parnassus Tours. Candida does indeed like her Virgilian/Dantean iridescences and “classical name” (157), denoting courage, strength and health, three positively empowering qualities. Valeria is awaiting the Virgilians at Tunis airport, “faithfully like a tall sentinel on the far shore. Queen Dido gazes from her battlements across the centuries for their approach, for she knows that they remember her [...]. They keep their tryst” (167-68), thus echoing Candida’s words “far shore” (3) in part one and her vantage position.

When the Virgil class closed, Candida and her aged Virgilian friends “were made homeless, and turned out to wander their ways” (12), just like Aeneas and his fellow

Trojans, which did not, however, prevent her returning after the Further Education College had become the new Health Club, “an amazing new world” only accessible through the threshold of the “old world of Virgil” (14) and, more prosaically, a half-price membership. However, despite this tragic exile, “there was a fascination in watching the transformation of the old building into the new,” how they “kept the façade and gutted it inside” (12), just like removing the entrails of a sacrificed animal. The new Health Club is a topsy-turvy, fluvial, liminal, organic location where “young shameless naked female bodies assault” her ageing eyes and bodily self-consciousness after not seeing her daughters’ bodies “for years” (9), a rapid succession of Rabelaisian regressions multiplied by mirrors.

Given the centrality of blindness in the novel, the experience of seeing is logically rendered as empowering. Candida observes arboreal, ocular and ornithological necrotypes from her window. While she is watching a grotesquely-shaped “silvery-grey tree in the blue night” whose “branches end abruptly, like amputated limbs,” she sees “the strangest bird in the world alighted upon it,” “as large as an egret,” a “pale bird” whose real colour was undistinguishable in the London “twilight” of the Underworld (61). She wonders if it has come from the Suffolk marshes and “if it was an omen,” (61) as they symbolise determination and self-reliance. With a neck stretching “like a snake’s, [its] shape seemed to shift and change and alter before my eyes” (61). Yet, she realises it is really “an iridescent dove-grey pigeon,” an optical illusion caused by “a flaw in the glass of the windowpane” (62); she rejoices at her newly acquired power, her empowerment through habitual sittings “for what seems like hours” to make “the outer world shift, marginally, at my will,” which prompts a wish “to visit the birdless lake of Avernus. Where no birds sing” (62).

Just as death entails rebirth, jail and confinement imagery paradoxically entails liberation. London and its frequented chronotopes are built upon a central paradox: “In this trap is my freedom. Here I shall remake my body and soul” (19). This underlies an interspersed imagery of antagonistic surroundings, such as the horrible pub called “the Frog and the Firkin”, where Candida takes shelter during a downpour (78), and the “tall six-storey red-brick penitentiary of the college,” now her Health Club; most shops are “all boxed in with this sinister grillwork. Like prisons. Like Wormwood Scrubs” (59), which she visits “to see the murderous rapists” (101), especially her “man,” a euphemism for a convicted “murderer” (8), a chthonic “lost soul” (9) whose “gang tormented and drowned that poor woman,” but who “speaks as though it was somebody else that did it” (161).

Candida’s past sins, nevertheless, are “of omission” (77). Her regretful emotional blockage prevents her from connecting with people around her, friends and acquaintances alike (11; 24). Virgil uses the phrase “candida Dido” in the *Aeneid* (Mynors 1969, 5, 571), denoting white, but far from being an *anima candida* or pure soul, she is rudely unwilling to make new friends and show herself vulnerable, as opposed to her Wormwood Scrubs inmate, a spiritual transaction that yields a “satisfactorily uneven

relationship” in which she wields “the power” (2003, 12). Candida is curious about the health of Jenny, “the girl with the lipoma,” while admitting that “curiosity has nothing to do with caring” (110). However, her constipated emotions are grotesquely released through her ebrious attempt at rescuing the Christmas tree that lies in the liminal space under one of the two bridges that are on her way to the Health Club, a Scroogean too-little-too-late change of heart “*in search of salvation*” (301; italics in the original), prompted by the “revelation” that her “lonely comrade” at the Health Club had died of “some kind of malignant tumour” (304). This disclosure had been preceded by the fact that “one of the large oval mirrors fell off the wall,” splintering into “many small shining silver shards. It seemed a bad omen,” a double premonition in fact as Jenny’s surname was “Argent” (302-303).

Candida’s preposterously naïve, existential thoughts on “how many Health Club members die *per annum*, on average,” and whether the Health Club sends “wreaths to their funerals” (303)—just like they send birthday cards and a free gift—, show not only how long her empathetic capabilities have been jeopardised but also her memory and perceptive and cognitive functions, all of which are linked to her chthonic condition. After having her “bag snatched” near her flat, she declares herself unable to “tell the muggers from the mad” (21), let alone able to come to terms with the multicultural and multiracial identity of the city. For a soul in the Underworld, who will forget once she drinks from the waters of the river Lethe prior to her return to the living, keeping a diary seems a pragmatic choice, and telling “secrets” (32) the stuff of each and every writer. She also notices that, sometimes when she swipes her Health Club Pass, they pronounce her name “a little oddly,” making her “sound more like an illness than a woman” (22); however, despite this malapropism she finds some relief in being reminded of her name, a glimpse of rebirth, along the lines of Virgil’s recognition that “memory even presupposes forgetting and even depends upon it” (Most 2001, 149). She is prone to experiencing dissonances like the “bewildering moment” in the changing room when she forgets where her locker is, overwhelmed by mirrors and hairdryers, “an endlessly multiplying refraction of alleys of them,” a *mise en abyme* image or image-forming catoptric necrotype, just like “Hansel and Gretel lost in the dark wood” (2003, 11), an allusion that demonstrates that in Drabble’s fiction “fairy tales reassure female protagonists rather than frighten them with negative examples” (Fiander 2004, 53).

It is precisely these borderline chronotopes and dissonant scenarios that Candida must come to terms with in order to negotiate the obstacles and illusions around her if her “eye” is to adjust “gradually [t]o the dark life of the city” (2003, 8), her old age, her subtly-assumed sibylline role and cave-like flat, a symbolic threshold into the pitch-black darkness of the London Underworld. Significantly, Candida gives a two-pound coin to “the elegant young man with dreadlocks who lives under the bridge” (64) near some dogs—or “howling monsters rattling their chains” (80). These are two imaginative reimaginings of boatman Charon, who carries deceased souls across the river Acheron, and three-headed Cerberus, who is given some honey on bread and

sleep-inducing drugs by the Sibyl accompanying Aeneas, as the beast prevents the admission of the living and egression of the dead and their prospective crossing of the Styx. Not limited to the visual, Candida's adjustments also apply to other senses that regulate her communicative skills. The changing room and pool in the Health Club are chronotopes where overhearing conversations (4) and "eavesdropping" (6) assume a liberating dimension as a "process of acquiring secret information about self and other" (Gaylin 2004, 1). Nevertheless, Candida's interlinguistic impairment is made manifest in the italicised inserts "*She first hears them speaking in unknown tongues*" (57) and "*She does not understand the messages,*" a prelude to the tape Mrs Barclay lends her, its otherworldly, unintelligible, distorted sounds reminding her of the Underworld (114). However, rather than only being contemporary versions of the "Sibyl's unfathomable messages" (Cox 2011, 123)—which, as a neo-Sibyl, she should be able to decode—they constitute a snapshot testimony of Candida's steep learning curve amidst an ongoing transformation.

Unsurprisingly, she yearns to see the ruins of Carthage and, at Cumae, hear the words of the hanging "wizened remains of the deathless Sibyl" (2003, 13), who wishes to die. Candida misread the Oracle of Delphi's warnings when she visited it with her ex-husband in the past. Now, like a present-day Sibyl or priestess, Candida struggles to inscribe her proclivity to see ahead and anticipate profoundly conflicted insights into the future by re-examining her former selves. In this sense, Adriana Madej-Stang concludes that although they may "appear abandoned and resigned," modern women writers choose these classical predecessors of the witch for "they are still mysterious and powerful" (2015, 23). Ironically, Candida regrets that she "was considered blameless by all but [her] three alienated and disaffected daughters" (2003, 43). In contrast to the traditionally "lucky number" of seven—Valeria becomes the official seventh "traveller" (156) in their sibylline sorority—, Candida's life tends "to go in threesomes" (204), such as Andrew's questionable triple pioussness (15; 62), Julia's three marriages and Candida's three triads of negative response to Sally's annoying habits—"*ber yack yack yack nose nose nose sniff sniff sniff*" (40; italics in the original). Candida is also fascinated by solitaire and the freedom of her "electronic version" of the game, to the extent of believing that cards, like her, "have not yet decided what they are to be" (36), an appreciation that projects itself onto Candida's ageing process and fluid authorial decisions.

This game or ritual is indeed a source of prophetic innuendo and "keen anticipation" (60) of an unknown posterity, lending itself to being read as a "good omen" (98); yet, it is not an isolated example, as suggested by the insert "*She meets a divine stranger in the terrible shop and ponders on his question*" (122; italics in the original). Just like the Greeks fleeing from Aeneas in the Underworld, "[in] London people do not speak to one another much"; however, to her surprise, this numinous stranger—an ageing "unkempt Belmondo roué look"—speaks to her in French, projecting a shared nostalgia for her younger selves (122-23). Astounded, she believes she had been appropriately "energized by Mrs Barclay. [The divine stranger] must have seen something new in my face. A ghost of my other self," her insistence on it not being

her “former self,” but rather her “other self” (117) being important. Then, she remembers an article about a “threatened species of flora,” a “ghost orchid” (123) that “disappears and reappears without warning or reason. Its ghostly pallor glimmers in the depths,” which she consistently compares to Aeneas seeing Dido in the Underworld (124). Londoners are “aliens to each other, passing by like ghosts,” with Candida explicitly likening herself to “the ghost orchid that she occasionally glimpses through the murk,” a passage evoking both the Golden Bough “hidden in obscurity” and Dido’s shade (Cox 2011, 124). Candida goes on to describe the botanical necrotype par excellence:

Across the canal, in the trees that grow in the great grounds of the Victorian cemetery, I have fancied that I have seen great clumps of mistletoe hanging. Suspended, like the Sibyl in her wicker basket.

The mistletoe, like the ghost orchid, is magical, although it is not rare. It does not grow from the ground. It takes its green blood from a strange host. It is a humble plant with a mystic glamour. It protects against witchcraft and Evil Eye (2003, 125).

The mistletoe’s yellow-white berries, whose “pallor is of the other world,” and its leaves turning “bright gold in death” leave little room for doubt: “The doves of Venus perched upon the mistletoe. It is the Golden Bough that leads us safely to the Underworld. These strange plants are plants, and no plants, and they live between the species. They are life, and they are death. I neither live nor die” (125).

5. HEARING HER ENDLESS FATE: CONCLUSION

Pleased and “glad to have an evening to herself” in her new life where her “social calendar is full”, Candida listens to Berlioz’s *The Trojans*, an opera that ends with Dido’s suicide (296); but deaths in *The Seven Sisters*, as has been consistently expounded, in fact imply the opposite. Candida’s coming-of-age ritual coincides with a biological/chronological turning point in her life, marked by her transition from late middle-age to senescence; in this descent, a new, gendered self is paradoxically reborn despite the intrusive or lost memories that haunt or elude the present. Her diary converts “ever-changing” London, “a place of continuous metamorphosis” (Groes 2011, 167), into a holistic cocoon by tapping into its inexhaustible metaphoric and symbolic potential. Unhindered by the dictates of originality or the cultural assumptions and mediations of intertextuality, Drabble’s novel unashamedly conveys overlapping planes in which mythical/literary time interacts narratively with the past, the present and the future.

Swimming against the current of ageism, ageing-related decline and her own quirks and prejudices, Candida ends up under a sky “streaked with blood above the dying city,” but a sky which is also “filled with expectation” (2003, 307) after her psychogeographical pilgrimage through her London Underworld and beyond. Her

Virgilian *katabasis* is a compelling construct which serves a legitimate purpose insofar as it is understood as process-oriented, open-ended, unfinished; wiser, Candida returns to “the same old story,” she admits, after descending, wandering and emerging, trapped in a loop that echoes the novel’s biblical epigraph: “Looking through the same flaw in the same glass at the same constellations [...], I try, but I can’t escape. [...] I am one of those small, insignificant, unfinished people” (275).

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Daniel Nisa Cáceres holds a PhD in English Literature from the University of Seville. He is currently a full-time English Lecturer in the Department of Philology and Translation at Pablo de Olavide University. His research interests and latest publications focus on contemporary women's rewritings of the classical tradition and female-authored speculative fiction, as well as literary translation and reception studies.