

2013

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Repository Citation

Pache, C. (2013). Woman trouble: True love and homecoming in Pedro Almodóvar's *Volver*. In M. S. Cyrino (Ed.), *Screening love and sex in the ancient world* (pp. 55-67). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

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CHAPTER 4



WOMAN TROUBLE

TRUE LOVE AND HOMECOMING IN
PEDRO ALMODÓVAR'S *VOLVER* (2006)

Corinne Pache

A meditation on the notion of return, Pedro Almodóvar's 2006 *Volver* focuses on the modern experience of love, memory, and identity in a manner that is at once indebted to the past and resolutely contemporary. Some films represent the ancient world directly, drawing on historical or literary sources, but many that focus on contemporary narratives can be shown to be inspired—directly or not—by ancient myths whose history is so influential that they pervade many of our notions about the human experience. In particular, insofar as Homer's poem is the foundational text in Western culture of the very idea of homecoming—or *nostos*, to use the ancient Greek term—the treatment of the homecoming theme in Almodóvar's film parallels, and significantly diverges from, that of the *Odyssey*. Like the *Odyssey*, *Volver* places love and family at the center of its narrative, but, unlike its ancient predecessor, which tells the story of a husband's return to his wife after a long separation, Almodóvar's vision of *nostos* privileges family ties over romantic love and presents the bond between husbands and wives as an obstacle to the characters' homecoming. *Volver* thus offers a resolutely original and feminist perspective on love and homecoming that centers on the relationships between mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends.¹

To raise the phenomenon of return is to start a conversation with Homer's *Odyssey*, which is, in our tradition, the home to which all

narratives of homecoming must themselves return.² The story of Odysseus's twenty-year absence and his adventures on his long way back to Ithaca thus exerts a powerful and abiding intertextual influence on the film. There are, as I will show, many thematic and structural parallels between *Volver* and the *Odyssey*. But first, let us consider the Spanish *volver*, which has several connotations: to return, to turn, to do again, and, in the phrase *volver en sí*, "to come back to oneself, to regain consciousness," a connotation also central to the Greek concept of *nostos*, whose semantic range includes "homecoming," "return from darkness," and "return from death."³ Odysseus, the homecoming hero of the *Odyssey*, is also described as the man "of many turns" in the first line of the poem with the epithet *polytropos*, which alludes to both the many turns taken on his journey home and the twists and turns of his clever mind that are so crucial to his *nostos*.⁴

Volver, like the *Odyssey*, explores *nostos* in many of its forms: homecoming, return of the past, return of the dead, the repetitive patterns that define human lives, and the link between homecoming and self-knowledge. Several characters experience an emotional and psychological form of *nostos* in *Volver*, the most important being the return of the mother, Irene, who may or may not be a ghost, and the return of her daughter, Raimunda. Irene comes back from the dead, while Raimunda's homecoming has to do with coming to terms with her own past. The film, like the *Odyssey*, is also highly attentive to the power of art in our lives: songs, stories, old photographs, and movies shape the characters' lives and their self-understanding. Where *Volver* differs the most from the ancient poem is in its emphasis on homecoming as a female experience.⁵ In the world of the *Odyssey*, women are confined to the domestic realm and their perspectives are secondary to the narrative of the hero's return. Although Penelope's loyalty is crucially important to Odysseus's homecoming, the poet's focus is always on the male protagonist.

Like the *Odyssey*, *Volver* begins *in medias res*, with an adolescent whose imminent adulthood upsets the status quo. The plot revolves around the lives of women: Raimunda (Penélope Cruz), a cleaner; her 14-year-old daughter, Paula (Yohana Cobo); and Raimunda's sister, Sole (Lola Dueña). Both sisters live in Madrid but often return to the village where they grew up, Alcanfor de las Infantas, to visit an elderly aunt, Paula (Chus Lampreave), and to take care of their parents' tomb. A close friend of the sisters, Agustina (Blanca Portillo), helps to care for their aunt. The friends' close bond is reinforced by a shared experience of loss: Agustina's mother disappeared on the same day Raimunda's and Sole's parents died in a mysterious fire. Almodóvar's

film shifts its attention between Raimunda, Sole, Agustina, and the past that unites and later threatens to separate them.

Two events precipitate the action: one evening, Raimunda comes home to find that her husband, Paco, has tried to rape her daughter, Paula, who killed him in self-defense. At the same time, Raimunda's and Sole's aunt has died in Alcanfor. Because Raimunda is busy trying to hide Paco's body, Sole (unaware of the true reason for Raimunda's refusal to accompany her) is forced to go to the village alone, where she hears about sightings of the ghost of her mother. After she goes back to Madrid, Sole discovers Irene (Carmen Maura), very much alive, in the trunk of her car. Meanwhile, Raimunda's neighbor has given her the key to his restaurant so she can show it to potential buyers while he is away, a serendipitous event that allows Raimunda to temporarily hide Paco's body in the restaurant's freezer. When a film crew arrives in the area looking for someone to provide meals, Raimunda sees a good opportunity and opens the restaurant with the help of neighbors. While Sole reconnects with her mother in secret, hiding her from Raimunda, Raimunda reconnects with her past: she admits to Paula that Paco was in fact not her father, and in one crucial scene discussed in more detail below, she reconnects with her love of singing. By the end of the film, mysteries are solved, and the women—mothers, daughters, sisters, friends—are all reunited once more in Alcanfor.

The film is a return for Almodóvar in several respects. It is an opportunity to come together with two actresses, Carmen Maura and Penélope Cruz, with whom he has collaborated throughout his career and who in many ways have come to personify his idiosyncratic vision. The brittle Carmen Maura of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) here reappears as a remorseful ghostly mother, while the young Penélope Cruz who was pregnant and died in childbirth in *All About My Mother* (1999) becomes the embodiment of flourishing motherhood.

There is yet another return in the film on the level of plot, which refers obliquely to *The Flower of My Secret* (1995). In the earlier film, a successful writer of romance novels, Leo Macías, becomes disenchanted with her life and yearns, among other things, to write in a different genre. She delivers a manuscript to her editor, Alicia, for a series entitled "True Love," but instead of the expected romance, she has written a gory tale of incest and murder. Leo's new book, *The Cold Storage Room*, to her editor's dismay, is about a woman who has the abject job of emptying hospital bedpans. Her son is a junkie, and her daughter, as in *Volver*, kills her father after he attempts to rape her. To prevent discovery, the mother hides the body in the cold storage

room of a neighbor's restaurant. When her editor points out that the absence of a love story, Leo answers that there is romance in the subplot, based on a true story of a man who finds himself so desperately in love with his ex-wife that he hires a hit man to kill her mother so he can go the funeral and convince her to come back to him.

When Leo defends her novel as being about reality, Alicia responds, "reality should be banned." For Alicia, novels should "give the illusion of living" to people who lead despairing lives. Leo instead rejects the formulaic romances she is supposed to write and looks for true love in the experience of more realistic characters. In the end, *The Cold Storage Room* is about a mother who is ready to do anything to save her daughter. Leo and Alicia's argument about the role of novels is also an argument about the nature of art: should it reflect the truth of our daily lives or embellish reality with the veneer of fantasy? This question is reflected in Almodóvar's own evolution as a director, from his early rocambolesque films of the 1980s to the more emotionally complex narratives he started directing in the 1990s. The fantasy flavor of the earlier films, such as *Women on the Verge of A Nervous Breakdown*, gives place to affecting meditations on the nature of love between friends, parents, and children, as in *All About My Mother*, and between couples, as in *Talk to Her* (2002) and *Broken Embraces* (2009).⁶

There is also a homecoming in *The Flower of My Secret* that foreshadows *Volter*. After her husband leaves her, Leo takes refuge in her mother's village, Almagro (the village where Almodóvar grew up). Her mother explains that the village is the place where women go when they lose a husband "because he's died or left with another woman, it's the same. We have to return to the place where we were born." In Almagro, Leo spends her time sitting with the village's elderly women who gather to embroider lace while telling stories and singing. Homecoming for Leo thus involves a literal return to the maternal village where women gather together to weave their lives.

In *Volter*, Almodóvar revisits the plot imagined by one of his own characters in the earlier film and makes female homecoming the center of his narrative. Like Leo in *The Flower of My Secret*, Almodóvar experiments with genre: the film veers between melodrama and comedy, without completely yielding to either one. But *Volter* retains little of the darkness of Leo's plot. Despite the bleak circumstances, the colors are bright and cheerful; the tone is lively and full of humor. The film is nevertheless deeply serious about the humanity of its characters and their emotions. There is sadness to be sure (illness, loss, death), and there is violence (rape, incest, murder), but the focus is always on the characters' resilience and, especially, the bond between mothers and

daughters. Almodóvar's playful blend of different genres is in itself epic: *Volver* describes the world in different modes—tragedy, comedy, lyric, romance—that can be found in the narrative of the *Odyssey*.

Like the *Odyssey*, *Volver* has much to say about homecoming as a process of memory and loss. In the publicity materials accompanying the film's release, Almodóvar explains that "[*Volver*] is a movie about the culture of death in my native region, La Mancha. My folks there live it in astonishing simplicity. The way in which the dead are still present in their lives, the richness and humanity of their rites makes it possible for the dead to never really die."⁷ In the interview accompanying the DVD of *Volver*, Almodóvar comes back to the notion that the film deals with death, more precisely with "[t]he female universe in relation with death." In La Mancha, as in ancient Greece, women take care of the bodies of the dead and the rituals of mourning that follow death.⁸ The opening scene makes clear the intricate connection between past and present and establishes death, and women's relation with death's rituals, as central themes. The film begins with music over a black screen. Joyful women's voices soon join the music in an old-fashioned song, simultaneously with a tracking shot of a cemetery filled with women who fight against strong winds to clean tombs. The title, *Volver*, suddenly appears in bright red letters on a grey background, as if inscribed on one of the tombstones we were just watching.

The contrast between the solemn task at hand and the joyful singing in the background is striking. The song, "Las Espigadoras" ("the Gleaners"), is drawn from a 1930 *zarzuela* (a Spanish form of popular opera), *La Rosa del Azafrán*. Almodóvar describes how he remembered this song from his own childhood. Accompanying his mother to the river to do the laundry, he heard the women sing "a song about gleaners who welcomed the dawn as they worked in the fields and sang as if they were merry little birds."⁹ In the song, the gleaners celebrate their work, "standing and stooping all day long in the wind and the sun," picking up whatever grain the male harvesters leave behind. At the end of the song, not included in *Volver*, a male chorus joins in and the harvesters reassure the women that they will not pick up all the grain and "wait till you come to hear talk of love." The song thus celebrates women's work in the traditional framework of a harvest festival, with its potential for romance.¹⁰

By juxtaposing the beginning of "Las Espigadoras" with the opening of *Volver*, Almodóvar highlights important themes: women's work, the mixing of high and low art, and the ways in which art, and more particularly songs, inform our lives. The women of "Las Espigadoras,"

like Raimunda, lead difficult lives centering on hard work, yet they find beauty and happiness in their humble surroundings. Almodóvar's use of the gleaners' song is also reminiscent of the *Odyssey's* fondness for depicting singers and songs.¹¹ Such embedded songs—and there will be another very important song in *Volver*—add layers of meaning by interacting with the outer narrative.

The next shot shows a close up of a grave decorated with two photographs, a woman and a man. The camera then zooms out to include Raimunda, Sole, and Paula in the frame as they dust and polish their parents' grave. When Paula wonders about the number of widows in the village, Sole explains that women live longer than men in the village, with the painful exception of her and Raimunda's own mother. As they brush off pine needles from the gravestone, Raimunda and Sole reminisce about the death of their parents. The wind blowing dead pine needles recalls Glaucon's famous simile in the *Iliad* comparing the generations of human lives to autumnal leaves that fall each season as they leave their place for new ones (Homer, *Iliad* 6.146–49). The brown pine needles also suggest that the dead keep intruding in the lives of the living, and the ever-present wind is depicted as a quasisupernatural force that, according to Raimunda, drives the village's inhabitants insane.

The cemetery scene thus looks both back and forward to death. The cleaning ritual centers on the memory of the dead, but it also brings to mind the mortality of the villagers. Raimunda explains to Paula that villagers all buy a plot for themselves and take care of it during their lifetime, preparing for their own death and treating their grave as "a second home." Widows and orphans remember and care for their dead, though it soon becomes obvious that Raimunda herself has ambivalent feelings toward her dead mother. There is anger in her strong gestures and in her remark to Sole that their mother was "lucky" because "she died in Dad's arms, and she loved him more than anyone in the world."

The film continues to move back and forth between the two worlds of the village of Alcanfor and the city of Madrid. Almodóvar shot the film in his childhood village, Almagro, but gave it the fictional name of Alcanfor de las Infantas. Translated literally, the name means the "camphor of the princesses" and evokes the embalming qualities of camphor and the dream state of the village, a fairy tale place outside of the everyday world, where stories are told and the dead are remembered. The area between Madrid and Alcanfor is shown as a no man's land filled with the wind turbines that have succeeded the famous windmills of Don Quixote. The modern machines take advantage of the winds that wreak havoc on the region and its inhabitants' psyches

and signify the transitions between the modern world of Madrid and the village steeped in the past and tradition.

All heroic journeys include a journey to the world of the dead, and Alcanfor is portrayed as a kind of Underworld: the village is full of ghosts, and all activities revolve around death. Elderly women, dressed in black, spend their time caring for the dead: washing their bodies, mourning them at home and in funeral processions, and taking care of their graves. The only young person in the village is Agustina, who is dying of cancer. Alcanfor also becomes the final resting place for Raimunda's dead husband, Paco, whose body she buries by the river near the village. The film begins and ends with Alcanfor, and each trip to Alcanfor, like Odysseus's descent to the Underworld, is accompanied by an encounter with death.

One striking image in *Volter* stresses the porous boundary between the living and the dead. When Raimunda finds Paco dead in her kitchen, her first instinct is to wipe the blood off the floor. The camera next zooms in on a paper towel as it slowly absorbs Paco's blood. The image becomes almost abstract as red slowly overcomes white, highlighting the lacelike pattern of the towel, which Almodóvar describes in his DVD commentary as "bloody embroidery." The blood-drenched towel becomes fluidly metaphorical: death overpowers life, but life in turn overpowers death. When Raimunda's cleaning is interrupted by a neighbor, she goes to open the door with some of Paco's blood smeared on her neck. After Emilio points to the stain and asks her if she's hurt, Raimunda without hesitation reassures him with the phrase "women's troubles." The phrase evokes blood as menstruation, but also everything that menstruation entails: puberty, sex, children, and death. Paco's blood thus becomes a symbol of women's troubles writ large.

The motif of lace also goes back to *The Flower of My Secret*. I have already mentioned the importance of women gathering in their village to embroider and tell stories. Almodóvar shoots one scene through hanging lace, starting with a close-up of the delicate flowery motifs and slowly shifting the focus so we can see, through the lace, Leo's mother entering the room where Leo is recovering when she returns home. The traditional lacy flowers literally shape the scene and underline the beauty of the village's traditions, handed down from mother to daughter. Women's work transforms women's troubles into beautiful patterns. The "bloody embroidery" of *Volter* is just another variation on the motif of traditional lace that also evokes the weaving of Penelope in the *Odyssey* as a way of controlling events in her life.

In contrast with the Homeric world in which men play the active role while women weave inside the house, in Almodóvar's odyssey,

the Homeric paradigm becomes inverted, and women take center stage. Men become obstacles that must yield in the face of the female-defined trajectory of the narrative. And as the film proceeds to get rid of men entirely (those who do not die get out of town), women start to thrive. The men we encounter, with a few exceptions, are repulsive. Raimunda's husband, Paco, is a beer-swilling brute who is only interested in satisfying his own desires. He cares little for his wife's feelings, and when she declines sex because she is upset about the state in which she found her aunt Paula, he masturbates at her side rather than comfort her. The next day, lust overcomes him and he tries to rape his 14-year old daughter, arguing that he is not her biological father, a fact that hardly justifies assaulting her in the kitchen. Another man who plays an important role in Raimunda's past is her father, whose photograph is seen briefly on the grave in the first scene. Agustina's observation that Paula has her grand-father's eyes hints at the identity of Paula's real father, and in time we learn that Raimunda's father, like Paco, was unable to resist the urge to rape his daughter, and that young Paula is both Raimunda's daughter and sister.

While sex precipitates major turning points, *Volter* gives a dark perspective on the relations between women and men. In the *Odyssey*, the Homeric *nostos* finds both its source and culmination in the deep and long-lasting connection between Odysseus and Penelope. Penelope weaves and unweaves her tapestry, deceiving her suitors in order to remain loyal to Odysseus. In the Homeric perspective, Odysseus's infidelities during his long voyage back are of little account, and his love for Penelope is never in question. As he describes it to the Phaeacian princess, Nausicaa, a good marriage consists of two individuals who share "a similar way of thinking" (*Odyssey* 6.683). Husband and wife also have a secret sign, centering on the rooted bed that symbolizes their marriage and their common-mindedness, which allows them to recognize and to reconnect with one another after a twenty-year separation.

The perfect harmony between Odysseus and Penelope is nowhere to be found in *Volter*, where marital love is absent, and sex is always depicted as perverted. Husbands are faithless, and fathers rape (or attempt to rape) their daughters. Husbands and wives in *Volter* are closer to the paradigm of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, the couple Odysseus and Penelope are constantly contrasted with in the *Odyssey*. When Agamemnon returns home from Troy, he is murdered by his wife's lover.¹² In *Volter*, there is love to be sure, but *never* between husbands and wives. Raimunda ultimately seems untroubled by Paco's death at her daughter's hand, while Irene, enraged when she

realizes that her husband raped their daughter, decides to kill him and his lover. Husbands, in *Volter*, are by definition bad—and fathers are even worse.

It is between women that love and like-mindedness thrive: mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends love and nurture one another. Homecoming thus takes place in the realm of women. To nurture means to feed or nourish, and food features prominently in *Volter* as a means of creating a home and expressing love. This connects the narrative to the *Odyssey*, where food is symbol of civilization, and feeding guests is a crucial component of the institutionalized friendships formed through hospitality known as *xenia* (“guest-host friendship”). Food in ancient epics helps to form multigenerational bonds, establishes and nurtures civilization, and is also a way of communicating between the dead and the living. When Odysseus goes to the Underworld, he feeds blood to the ghosts of the dead to give them momentary consciousness. In *Volter*, Irene secretly makes her daughters’ favorite foods while she is hiding at Aunt Paula’s. Raimunda and Sole are puzzled by the abundance of plastic containers they find, carefully labeled with their names, that contain complicated delights that are far too work-intensive for the elderly and frail Paula to have prepared. The mystery food is a way for Irene to be in contact with her daughters and to continue nourishing them from beyond, as it were, the grave.

Just as good hospitality in the *Odyssey* is a symbol of civilization, inappropriate eating, such as cannibalism, signals barbarism and figures as a recurrent danger that threatens to impede or terminate Odysseus’s homecoming. In the first half hour of *Volter*, Almodóvar hints at the possibility that Raimunda might get rid of Paco’s body by turning him into food, and the film gently threatens to descend into a gory, *Sweeney Todd*-style horror story. The next day, after she hides Paco’s corpse in the large freezer of her neighbor’s restaurant, Raimunda agrees to provide lunch for a film crew of 30 people and proceeds to go grocery shopping. Each of Raimunda’s moves encourages the viewer to think of Paco’s body as potential food. And there is nothing reassuring about the meat-heavy menu inscribed on the blackboard when Raimunda begins to serve lunch: “omelet and blood sausage, pork salad.” Raimunda’s repeated questions, as she moves swiftly among her customers replenishing their plates, take on an ominous tenor: “Who’d like some pork? It’s delicious.” Is the film crew unwittingly devouring Paco the pig? But the joke is on us. Raimunda would never feed her customers human meat, as befits a heroine who, like Odysseus, is always civilized about food.

Food and sex also link *Volter* with another ancient Greek text that focuses on the story of a mother and her daughter. The *Homeric*

Hymn to Demeter tells the story of the goddess Demeter's despair when her daughter is abducted by the god of the Underworld, Hades. Demeter mourns the loss of Persephone and withdraws, with disastrous consequences for both men and gods, who are deprived of the fruit of agriculture and the means of sacrifice. Demeter ultimately obtains her daughter's return, but because Persephone has tasted of the pomegranate given to her by Hades (a fruit with sexual and fertility connections), she has to stay in the Underworld for a part of each year. Persephone's annual return thus signals the return of vegetation and life each spring. The *Hymn to Demeter* ends with Demeter ordering the inhabitants of Eleusis to establish mysteries in her honor.

Mary-Louise Lord has shown how the *Hymn to Demeter* shares the same narrative pattern of withdrawal and return also found in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in which the hero's or heroine's withdrawal has dire consequences for the community until order is restored on his or her return. These same elements—withdrawal, long absence, hospitality, disguise, return, and reunion—are found in all three narratives, though they can vary in their emphasis and order.¹³ The *Hymn to Demeter* thus provides a feminine alternative to the male-dominated Homeric *nostos* and is unique in ancient Greek literature in privileging a female perspective and in focusing on the relationship between mother and daughter. Like *Volter*, the *Hymn* begins with a girl who is on the cusp of becoming an adult, and the narrative can be understood as a feminized *nostos*. But while the *Hymn* exists within the confines of a patriarchal and divine world, *Volter* upends gender conventions and comes to a very different resolution.

In the *Hymn to Demeter*, Demeter and Persephone are periodically reunited, but only because they both accept the terms given to them by Zeus, the ruler of the gods, and Hades, the ruler of the dead. The pomegranate eaten by Persephone signals her transition to womanhood and her union with Hades.¹⁴ Demeter accepts the separation and, implicitly, the rules of the patriarchal game: daughters get married and leave their mothers. In *Volter*, there are two mother-daughter pairs. Some 14 years before the action of the film, Raimunda was raped by her father and withdrew from her mother. Paula, like Persephone and Raimunda, becomes the object of desire of an older male and almost becomes a rape victim, but she kills her attacker and does not separate from her mother. In both instances, mothers are ready to do anything to help their daughters: Irene avenges her daughter's rape by killing her husband, while Raimunda takes on the burden of hiding Paco's body.

The radical feminization of the *nostos* narrative can be seen most dramatically through the lens of a defining moment, about halfway through the film, when Raimunda sings the song “Volver” while, unbeknownst to her, her mother has returned—literally from the dead—and is listening to her from inside Sole’s car. The scene takes place at the restaurant Raimunda has opened for the film crew, when she hears a guitar’s melody during a festive evening and starts humming:

I can see the twinkling of the lights in the distance
That are marking my return.

Raimunda suddenly realizes that her daughter, Paula, has never heard her sing, and decides to sing for her. Longing and sorrow overtake Raimunda as she sings of the fear of “the encounter with the past” and memory as a way of returning:

Coming back
With a wrinkled forehead
And the snow of time
Silvering my brow
Feeling that life is an instant
That twenty years is nothing

The lyrics express the bittersweetness of years gone by and the grief of returning to one’s first love. “Volver” is a love song, but Raimunda



Figure 4.1 Raimunda (Penélope Cruz) sings a song of homecoming in *Volver* (2006). Sony Pictures Classics.

sings it in a context that contrasts with the lyrics and complicates their meaning. At the song's center is the idea that time escapes us and that "twenty years is nothing," but for Raimunda of course the last twenty years are everything. She learned the song long ago for a children's singing contest, yet it is only now that she can genuinely understand it. As a tearful Raimunda sings "but the fleeing traveler sooner or later must come to a halt," the camera switches over to Irene weeping in the car. While Raimunda is not yet aware that her mother is back, she seems to sense her presence, and the song affects daughter and mother in similar ways.

The twenty-year absence in "Volver" echoes the twenty-year absence of Odysseus. This extraordinary moment is in fact a *nostos* for both mother and daughter. Irene has returned "with a wrinkled brow," and, like Odysseus listening to Demodokos singing about his role in the Trojan War in *Odyssey* 8, she completely breaks down when she hears Raimunda singing. At the precise moment Raimunda sings that "twenty years is nothing," we see her coming fully into herself as daughter, sister, and mother of a grown daughter. The women's homecoming has not literally lasted twenty years as in the *Odyssey*, but Raimunda completes her *nostos* at the same moment when her mother returns and her daughter reaches adulthood. The mother figure returns—as if from the dead in the case of Irene—and the fundamental reunion is not between a father and his wife and son, but between mothers and daughters. Like Odysseus who tells his own story to the Phaeacians, Raimunda sings her own song. In Almodóvar's revision of the epic, the mother returns, not as a hero but—explicitly—as a heroine, and insofar as she succeeds in finding what is beautiful and orderly in the messiness of family life, the mother emerges as a heroine who nods toward her ancient male predecessors but looks as well toward the future.

Modern works of art, whether consciously or not, must repeat (*volver*) the same gestures as ancient works. This to some degree is a consequence of our limited repertoire as human beings: we have parents and a home, we are born, we grow, we suffer, we love, we die; and at some point in our lives, we return, in imagination or in actuality, to our origin. But the source of this pattern, in imagination and in fact, is also a matter of literary history: like all tales of return, *Volver* must reckon with Homer's precedent. When we analyze the film in terms of its Homeric precursor, we see the radical novelty of Almodóvar's feminization of the *nostos* narrative. The *Odyssey*, to the dismay of some modern readers, ends not with the loving reunion of Odysseus and Penelope in Book 23, but with the reunion of Odysseus and his father,

Laertes. Book 24 emphasizes the close relationship between fathers and sons, and Odysseus reconnects with his father by remembering the names of the trees Laertes gave him when he was still a child. The epic ends with three generations of men—Laertes, Odysseus, and Telemachus—back in control of the palace and island. *Volter* by contrast presents homecoming as women's work. The film ends, fittingly for a narrative of return, where it started, in the small village in Alcanfor where the living encounter the dead, and where three generations of women—mothers, sisters, daughters—safeguard each other's *nostos* and tell the stories that keep the dead alive.

NOTES

1. This chapter is a development of my ideas in Pache (2010). I want to thank Madeleine Goh, Adele Hafit, Justin Isenhardt, Tom Jenkins, and Jordan Zinovich for their comments on this essay.
2. For the deep affinities between ancient literature and the cinema, see Winkler (2009b). On the modern reception of the *Odyssey*, see Hall (2008), and Graziosi and Greenwood (2007).
3. For *nostos* as "return from death and darkness," and the connections between *nostos* (return) and *noos* (mind), see Frame (2009) 28, 38–39.
4. On *polytropos*, see Pucci (1987) 16–17.
5. For other versions of the *Odyssey* that privilege the female perspective, see e.g. Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* (2005); see also Pache (2008) on Louise Glück's *Meadowlands* (1996).
6. See Mendelsohn (2007) on how *The Flower of my Secret* represents an important turning point in the director's career.
7. Almodóvar (2006).
8. On ancient and modern mourning in Greece, see Alexiou (2002).
9. Almodóvar (2006).
10. *La Rose del Azafraan*, music by Jacinto Guerrero, libretto by G. F. Shaw and F. Romero. The lyrics are quoted from the English subtitles of the production by the Jarvis Conservatory in Napa, California.
11. See Segal (1994), especially 113–83.
12. For the different versions of the story, see Olson (1990).
13. See Lord (1994) 181–82.
14. See Foley (1994) 130.