

CANTILLO, MAYRON E., trans. and ed.: *Relatos travestidos: escritoras victorianas en voz masculina*, Valencia, JPM Ediciones, 2020, ISBN-13: 978-8415499541, 134 pp.

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In *Relatos Travestidos*, Dr. Mayron E. Cantillo provides the translation of seven short stories written by – somewhat forgotten – female authors in the late nineteenth century. Besides the feminine authorship behind them, these stories also share two other aspects: firstly, they offer a study of the male psychology in the form of narratological transvestism; secondly, most of the short stories in this anthology show the male’s obsession over the feminine.

The volume opens with “Amour Dure: fragmentos del diario de Spiridion Trepka” (“Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka”) by Vernon Lee – probably the most well-known writer in this anthology. Written in diary format, as the title already anticipates, this is the (fragmented) story of how young Polish historian Spiridion Trepka ends up obsessively infatuated with a long-dead noblewoman, Medea Da Carpi, after seeing her portrait. As it is no coincidence, Lee brings back the infamous Medea from her ancient tomb, however transformed. This new Medea, compared by Spiridion with Lucrecia Borgia, shows traits proper to her original husband, Jason, while retaining her supernatural, almost witchy, character. Despite Spiridion’s seemingly true affection, he foreseeably meets a tragic end as, after all, his beloved is already dead.

Edith Nesbit’s “El marco de ébano” (“The Ebony Frame”) follows. In relation to Lee’s short story, Nesbit’s male narrator also falls in love with a deceased woman, who is bound to return from the dead as far as her picture remains in its demonic ebony frame. Even though their love seems to transcend time in its predestination, it is bound to end in disgrace. Yet, calamity does not stop the narrator’s obsession with this ghostly lady, who met her death for seeking knowledge in unholy places.

George Egerton, penname for Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright, is the author of the third story in the anthology: “Una obra maestra perdida: un sentir urbano” (A Lost Masterpiece: A City Mood”). In it, the male narrator – a writer, for all we know – wanders the British capital while immersed in decadent creative thoughts. Such thoughts are suddenly interrupted when he sees a woman walking resolutely, owning the streets she steps on. His intense obsession with the unknown lady causes the loss of his creative train of thought, preventing the narrator from writing the best story ever written.

Next in the volume is “Teodora: un fragmento” (“Theodora, a Fragment”), written by Victoria Cross, penname for Annie Sophie Cory. This story focuses on a man sexually obsessed with Teodora, a rather androgynous woman. Teodora is portrayed as a strong, independent woman – both economically and emotionally – that externalises, to some extent, her sexuality. In this sexually charged narrative, there seems to be no calamity following the male narrator’s infatuation. However, the narrator’s subjugation to his desire for this woman – likened to Aphrodite – undermines his will power, which can in turn be considered catastrophically castrating for him.

Ada Levenson’s “En búsqueda de la tristeza” (“The Quest of Sorrow”) seems to depart from the axiom of the narrator’s calamitous obsession for a woman that exists in the previous stories. Nevertheless, this statement is arguable. Certainly, Levenson’s young, dandy narrator is not infatuated with a woman made of flesh, but he is sickly in love with sadness, which can be effectively associated with the feminine, and which he strives to find. Ultimately, his quest does not bring disaster upon himself, but it nearly brings sorrow and despair to the people closest to him.

The sixth story is “La máscara de la muerte” (“The Death Mask”) by Ella D’Arcy. As opposed to the stories preceding it, D’Arcy’s short story focuses on depicting men’s duality and not the sickness of some love passions. Reminiscent of Dorian Gray’s picture, the Death Mask of a recently deceased poet shows both the public and repressed sides of humanity: the good and evil, the beauty and monstrosity, that people harbour within themselves.

Dr. Cantillo closes his compilatory volume with Frances E. Huntley’s “Lucille”. Being one of the shortest stories in the volume, it seems to retake the love leitmotif abandoned by its two predecessors. Like most of the other compiled narratives, Huntly shows a narrator deeply in love with a woman that, despite her unwomanly features or attributes, becomes the centre of his attention and of his sexual desire. Contrary to the other stories, however, he sees his affection truncated not by external forces, but by his own inaction.

Thus, five of the seven stories portray male narrators who are profoundly and unavoidably attracted to women who are not stereotypically feminine, who even transgress their gender by possessing attributes traditionally deemed masculine, such as possessing strong, domineering personalities, showing sexual confidence or, at a physical level, having a moustache or big feet. By making of such women the object of affection for their male narrators, all seven authors may not only be portraying and promoting the image of the “new woman” proper of the time, but they may also be vindicating the fact that women are equally (if not more) desirable even when they do not fit in the social stereotyping of their gender.

Nevertheless, the fact that some of those women are also portrayed as demonic and as harbingers of disaster is fairly contrasting with those vindications. Interestingly, presented even as temptresses in some instances, the women in the stories are also the victims of objectification. They are in the first place the object of the narrators' love or, rather, obsession; they are objects of commodification; they are also the means for the narrator's personal purpose and the source of economical fortune; they are carers who will submit to abuse by the men in their lives; and they are the scapegoat for the narrator's failure or inaction. By blaming women for all their failures, the male narrators in these stories are ultimately portrayed as weak, cowardly, indecisive creatures, contrasting clearly with the strong, independent, new-woman portrayal of the female characters.

Overall, all seven stories translated in this volume are clear representatives of the fin-de-siècle short story written by women. Their sensuality, their focus on the characters' psychology and the choice of scandalous topics such as women's sexual empowerment are clear examples of the freedom that short stories gave female writers to express themselves. Although much has been achieved on women's rights, thanks to our nineteenth-century ancestors, these stories are still resonant nowadays because of the persistent gender stereotypes and social inequality between genders.

Doubtlessly, Dr. Cantillo brings up an interesting proposal with the translation of such set of short stories. By translating these stories into one of the most spoken languages in the world, Dr. Cantillo has increased their dissemination scope, widening the potential for undertaking research on the texts or their authors in Spanish speaking countries.