

BOOK REVIEW: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Femeile și economicul. Tărâmul-ei. Tapetul galben*. Traducere de Amelia Precup. Florești: Limes, 2017, 359p.

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2018 seems to have started off with a really big bang. As the first African American woman to be given one the most important awards (Cecil B. DeMille) in the entertainment industry, Oprah Winfrey delivered a wonderfully inspirational speech to (young) people everywhere, touching not only on racial but also on gender inequality: “a new day is on the horizon! And when that new day finally dawns, it will be because of a lot of magnificent women [...] and some pretty phenomenal men, fighting hard to make sure that they become the leaders who take us to the time when nobody ever has to say ‘Me too’ again.” (*CNN Entertainment* 2018)

Similarly to Winfrey’s stance, another American literary and cultural icon – writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman – followed in the footsteps of other brave women like the British Mary Wollstonecraft or the French Olympe de Gouges (author of the 18th century *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*) and ‘spoke out’ about the plight of women in the nineteenth century not just in the United States of America but all over the Western world. Paraphrasing Winfrey’s closing line quoted above, Gilman’s purpose was much along the same lines: to change the society’s patriarchal mentality, aiming to improve women’s situation for ever so that no woman would have to think ‘me too’ again while reading Gilman’s fiction.

The book subject to this review is structured into three main parts dedicated to the translation of three corresponding texts written by Gilman: *Femeile și economicul* (*Women and Economics*), *Tărâmul ei* (*Herland*), and *The Yellow Wallpaper* (*Tapetul galben*). The book opens with a preface signed by the translator herself and closes with an afterword entitled “Charlotte Perkins Gilman: glose alternative” signed by Mihaela Mudure, an academic with a

keen interest in gender studies. Connected by such themes as the raising of children and the marital contract, the three texts offer a vivid picture of what life was like for middle- and upper-class women in the nineteenth-century Western world.

Summarising each text and providing a few comments for their importance to the American and universal feminist writing, the translator's preface introduces Romanian readers to Gilman's feminism, as part of first-wave feminism. Thus, the first text – *Femeile și economicul* (*Women and Economics*) – is a non-fiction piece, presenting the nineteenth century woman's economic enslavement to man as a result of the overdevelopment of woman's sexual characteristics. Using a series of unexpected analogies (such as the one based on cows and their milk on the one hand, and on women and their housework on the other; or the one between women and horses), Gilman highlights the fact that, although essential, women's work has been trivialized from an economic point of view when, instead, it should be valorised as an economic exchange factor. Deconstructing several stereotypes of femininity and labelling them as artificial and inconsistent, Gilman suggests that woman's identity can only be defined if she steps out of the immediate domestic environment, as both men and women have suffered from the latter's marginalization and confinement. The solution proposed is a change in the mentality of the entire society.

The Romanian translation – the first one of this text – is only partly successful, often untidy, with many typos and grammatical disagreements (e.g. “creșterea copiii lor” (p.27), “aceleași păcate și aceleași suferințele” (p.60), “joaca neobosită al umorului” (p.94), “abilitățile intelectuală” (p.96), “departe de a fi aceeași lucru” (p.128), “îndeplinirea îndatoririle casnice” (p.138), “va dezvlănțui” (p.180), and many more – all of which put strain on the reader, taking away from the pleasure of following the writer's well-structured argument.

The second text – *Tărâmul ei* (*Herland*) – resumes and develops some of Gilman's ideas postulated in the first text, all the while creating a fictional universe, where the exclusively female population has managed to build an alternative to the already familiar patriarchal society. Gilman's utopia actually represents a feminist-socialist recreation of paradise – a *pays des dames* (to paraphrase Christine de Pizan's seminal work) – where reproduction is done through parthenogenesis, and where none of the three men who invade it succeed in finding their place. Centred on a cultural clash, the novella tells the story of three men, who join forces in exploring an uncharted land which is allegedly inhabited by women only. Each of the men represents a different attitude to women: whereas Jeff is gallant and overprotective, Terry is passionate and impulsive, while Van – the narrator – is the most humane and companionable.

It is perhaps his eagerness to learn and live by the principles these women uphold that earns him a loyal wife who follows him to the outer, patriarchal world.

By comparison to the first text, the translation of *Herland* flows smoothly and naturally, with no hiccups, reflecting not just Gilman's good writing but also the translator's skill, allowing the Romanian reader to easily follow the plotline and understand the underlying message.

The third text, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (*Tapetul galben*), rediscovered by critics in the early 1970s, focuses on a new approach to femininity, dealing particularly with aspects related to maternity and married life, even though some critics have also read the short story as an illustration of the Gothic and a variation on "the mad woman in the attic" motif. The unnamed female protagonist is driven to madness and becomes "damaged" as a result of having been prescribed the "rest cure" by her doctor-husband, following her giving birth. With no mental stimulation and nothing to keep her mind off her post-partum depression, the protagonist becomes obsessed with the yellow wallpaper of the highest room (symbolic of masculine reason) of the rented house to which she has been confined. The ending – in which she crawls along the walls even over the body of her fainted husband – has been hailed by some feminist critics as the assertion of woman's agency in an entrapping marriage (cf. Hochman 2002) and, more generally, as her triumph over patriarchy and the linear masculine teleological reasoning.

The (in)famous "rest cure" or "bed rest" originated with American doctor Weir Mitchell (also mentioned in the short story by the protagonist's husband), who prescribed it to Gilman herself. Driven close to madness, the author is said to have written the piece based on her personal experience with the purpose of dissuading the doctor from using the same treatment on other women. According to Gary Scharnhorst (1985:15-19), Mitchell is said to have confessed to a friend that he had changed his way of treating hysteria after reading Gilman's story.

A previous translation of this short story appeared in an anthology of feminist texts, entitled *Femei în țara bărbaților*, published by Univers publishing house in 2008. The translator, Parmena Zirină, most likely worked against a deadline and was too reliant on the source text, thus losing naturalness in Romanian; the result is a translation that seems awkward and rather unpolished. By comparison, Amelia Precup's translation manages to capture with natural linguistic ease the protagonist's (linguistic) descent into insanity.

Finally, Mihaela Mudure's closing section emphasizes Charlotte Perkins Gilman's place among (feminist) writers, drawing attention to the unduly inadequate coverage of Gilman's texts in the Romanian academic research and underlining the absence of previous translations

of the author's work. Mudure's section also reviews several other important texts (*Crux*, *Unpunished*, *The Unnatural Mother*, *The Girl in the Pink Hat*, *An Honest Woman*, or *The Widow's Might*), which – I strongly hope – will soon find their way to a translator's desk. It is my firm opinion that Romanians in general – and not just researchers or students in gender studies – do need to become acquainted with such works as Gilman's to empower all women and help them step out of the victim positions they are still relegated to by the Romanian patriarchal culture.

To conclude, I would like to come full circle to my introductory paragraph and to paraphrase another idea of Oprah Winfrey's speech: all women – irrespective of our professional, social or marital status – should feel "proud and inspired by all the women who have felt strong enough and empowered enough to speak out [as well as write down] and share their personal stories." Also, I might add, it is also because of such other strong, courageous and empowered women as Amelia Precup and Mihaela Mudure that Romanians can read and immerse themselves in some core feminist texts in translation.

References:

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