

SHOWING OF LOVE OR THE BEGINNING OF FEMININE WRITING IN ENGLISH AND ROMANIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract: The present paper aims at being an excursion into the beginning of feminine writing in English literature in order to reveal its main expressions, out of which love stands at its main core. To illustrate my point I selected some representative women authors in Old and Middle Ages English literature, Julian of Norwich being a referential name in the title of my paper. The absence of women, literally and figuratively speaking, from literary history and from literary texts argued by H. Cixous, who introduced the concept of "écriture féminine" was a turning point for me in trying to bring feminine writing out of "the Dark Ages" in England and even to extend my approach to Romanian women writing though its beginning was registered later in the literary history.

Keywords: écriture féminine, love, English, Romanian, feminist

The place of women at the start of English writing should be looked at from two directions: the first refers to fictional female characters, focusing on women as the subject of writing and it may be located in very early periods even in Old English literature, while the latter is located in the Middle Ages and it concerns feminine literary practice.

In the Anglo-Saxon writings the average woman's life was not valued since they were not the subjects of chronicles, legend or public record. Only wealthy and high-ranking women prevail and they are present due to the relation to their lords. This kind of women appear as formidable creatures, 'mighty' women with enchanting powers, which can be closely associated with the power of queens nowadays.

Heroic poetry in particular is much concerned with the vulnerability of the woman cast in the role of *freoðuwebbe*, 'peace-weaver', where it is hoped that a peace-settlement between two hostile tribes or families may be made firmer by a marriage bond. The emphasis is on the isolation of such an individual in a society where the protection of her own family has been replaced by the dislike and distrust of those in her new environment.

Apart from being merely hinted at or presented in their relation to men, women have their own 'voices' in Old English lyric poetry. Although this poetry focused on the theme of heroism and loyalty one can find poems with more personal expression of loneliness, sorrow, love, joy. The 'laments' are not only expressions of men's sorrows like *Deor's Lament* or the *Husband's Message* but also love 'songs' of their women.

The Old English *Judith* is unique among other poems in the extant Old English poetic corpus in depicting a woman as the hero at the centre of the poem. Thus, while *Elene* and *Juliana* also feature women in their central characters, they are not necessarily portrayed as heroic. Elene embarks on a quest to retrieve True Cross, but there is no sense that she is performing an act of bravery. The image of Judith as reflected by the anonymous poet is that of a woman who can be a hero through her actions and her virtues, which are placed in a masculine setting without losing her essential femininity.

The Wife's Lament and *Wulf and Eadwacer* present the themes of loss, suffering and impermanence of human ties through a woman's voice. It is not surprising to find in *The Wife's Lament* a concern with exploring a psychology of a suffering woman.

In order to summarize, the literary image of the Anglo-Saxon woman is that of a highborn lady, prepared to accept a dynastic marriage and is characteristically seen as a focus of hospitality in a ceremonial male-centred society.

She is 'wise in words' as she appears in Old English epic poetry, which is a queenly attribute. Marriage is of central importance for her in life. The emotional side of her life offers rare glimpses in the Old English poetry and in such cases, even rarely the love triangle is not excluded.

For this kind of woman is touched only by superficial emotions, it is not taken seriously and it lacks any commitments. The woman is always wife not mistress. However in the Old of love will be treated with a more personal involvement in a number of important works appear. The shades of love do not develop a psychological language in order to express a subtle range of emotions, they are used in a simple expression of sadness and melancholy due to the absence of the beloved one. In the Post-Conquest literature the touch of Saxon poetry, the first blossoms of what 'Courtly love' will be in the medieval literature written by women writers.

In medieval literature, women are presented either as 'patient Griseldas' (self-sacrificial martyrs) or 'likeros' (lecherous, man-eating harpies) like the *Wife of Bath*, for example, a touchstone for feminist literary theory who observes the negative depiction of women in the literature of this period.

Some scholars have located feminist literary practice in actual medieval women like Christine de Pizan, one of Europe's first professional women of letters. Daughter of an Italian astrologer at the French court, this brilliant writer wrote books counseling kings, nobles, queens and ordinary women how to conduct their lives. Widowed at the age of twenty-four, Christine turned to writing to support her young family. Writing was a very rare career choice for a woman living at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Even more unusual was Christine's willingness to use her writing to challenge the misogynistic tradition. Her *Book of the City of Ladies* is a feminist version of Dante's *Commedia* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, where Christine is guided by the Sybil into the knowledge of all things. Christine de Pizan recasts Greco-Roman mythology from a female standpoint in the *Epistle of Othea*.

Out of the pilgrimages those of medieval women stand apart: even if they imitate earlier women like Saints Helen and Paula, their writings, especially those of Kempe in her 'Book' stand for an original approach because her performance has been called the first autobiography in English, yet it is written in the third person and by a priest who took down her words because she was illiterate. *The Book of Margery Kempe* is an account of the spiritual and social life of a middle class woman in the early fifteenth century. Speaking about it Mathew Boyd Goldie ((2009, *The Medieval British Literature Handbook*, ch. Case Studies in Reading: key primary Literary Texts, pp.94) suggests that we should read the text by envisaging the concept of *performative* in order to help us to think the issues related to Kempe's spirituality, which gives us a very authentic and vivid picture of The Medieval Age. In this sense he designs a kind of a 'geography' of her performance in such territories as: gender, Latinity, social status, spirituality.

In point of gender the literary critic asserts that:” We can think of the expectations that confronted a middle-class medieval woman in England. She was expected not only to marry, manage a household with children and often look out for her husband’s business affairs but also to generate income independently of him.”(pp 95)

As Latinity concerns women used to exist in a social and spiritual hierarchy and she should be a subject to her husband and men in general.” A religious woman was also the object of Latinity formulations [...] a woman could not really contribute to a discussion about religion, gender or a woman’s place in society.(pp 109)” Moreover “if she were to live a religious life, she would be expected to be decorous, quiet and preferably enclosed or isolated from women community (an anchoress)”(pp 95).An *anchoress*, as the word was used in medieval Latin and English literature was a woman who lived in solitude, often in a single room, usually beside a church in its graveyard. These women used to write in this period and among the most noticeable ones are: Walter Hilton with ‘Ladder of Perfection’, Julian of Norwich with ‘Showing of Love’.

Such powerful forces make her negotiate constantly between the norms of a middle class wife and female religious.”Kempe’s, around the year 1860 spiritual life is also performative in the sense that it helps her to change the structure of the society around her.”(pp.97)

“Her intense spirituality is also performative in the sense that it not only changes herself, it is also very public and transforms the spaces around her. Overall her words and actions are performative that they alter people around her as well as her own subjectivity.”(98)

An anchoress of St. Julian’s Church in Norwich, Julian of Norwich wrote different versions of the *Showing of Love*, which survive in various manuscripts now at Westminster Abbey, Paris’ Bibliotheque Nationale, and the British Library. She translates directly from the Hebrew Bible into ME, before the King James Bible, and it is possible that Adam Easton, who effected Birgitta of Sweden’s canonization as a saint and who had taught Hebrew of Oxford, may have been her editor. All versions present the contemplation of the Virgin and the vision of the hazelnut in the palm of Julian’s hand: ‘And so in this sight I saw that he is everything that is good as to my understanding. And in this he showed me a little thing the quantity of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand as it seemed, and it was as round as any ball. I looked on it with the eye of my understanding, and I thought, “What may this be?” And it was answered generally thus, “It is all that is made” (Reynolds and Holloway 2001).

Margery Kempe’s Book and *Julian’s Showings* are not the only representations of women’s writing in Medieval English. Early in the history of feminist literary theory Hope Emily Allen proposed that Margery should be understood in the context of such Continental holy women as St. Birgitta of Sweden, Marie of Oignies and St. Catherine of Siena, among others. The writings of many of these women circulated in Medieval English translations. Moreover there is a resonance of voices that show on increasing awareness of the internationalism of Middle English literature.

A Swedish noblewoman, Birgitta of Sweden was governess to King Magnus and the mother of eight children. On her husband’s death, following their pilgrimages together to and from Compostela, Birgitta established a monastery in the King’s Castle of Vasdena, then journeyed to Rome during the year of the Black Death. She worked with ecclesiasts in

Sweden and in Italy, producing the *Revelationes*, which she sent to the Kings of England and France and to other heads of state pleading for peace in Europe. Birgitta's *Revelationes* were widely influential. Julian of Norwich's *Showing of Love* quotes Birgitta of Sweden's *Revelationes*. Margery Kempe had Birgitta's *Revelations* read to her, and she later imitated Birgitta's pilgrimages and literary activities.

Marguerite Porete first had her book burned at Valenciennes, and then she herself was burned at the stake in Paris in 1310 for it. Nevertheless, this book of contemplative Pseudo-Dyonisian theology, originally written in Old French, was preserved in ME translations in three manuscripts.

The concept of *écriture féminine* developed by H. Cixous, a representative of the feminist literary theory in Europe, applies best in her case because it means not only feminine writing, but feminine speech and feminine body as well. ('Women must write through their bodies', Cixous 1976, 886). She urges women to make their voices heard and use their bodies in order to support their voices. Just like a woman's voice, her flesh, her body, her womb are alternative means of expression. The critic argues that every part of a woman's body is a vibrant form of liberation from the oppressions around her and it also offers unlimited possibilities of self expression because a woman speaks and writes with her body.

Thus, the concept that Cixous uses can be associated with the medieval English woman writer whose book and body were both burned and thus both responded to persecution.

*But if women had written books,
I know for certain that things would be otherwise.¹*

And things were otherwise but very late, at the end of The Victorian Age, in the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth, almost at the same time with the first records of feminine writing in Romania.

The birth of the lyrical conscience is located, for the Romanian women poets, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, around the year 1860 and it is mostly determined by the existence of an erotic one that sees love as an 'illness 'of the soul, and their poetic universe becomes' a hospital of love'. (Eugen Simion, *Dimineata poetilor*, pp.67). Expressions of love as an 'illness' of the soul are felt in warm manifestations of lyrics such as: meditations, elegies, the poetry of diaries, the eroticism of crisis, or the escapism into the world of ideas, in the poetry of Elena Văcărescu, Carmen Sylva, Matilda Cugler Poni, Veronica Micle. For these women love represents the very symbolism of life. *Showing of love* in Old and Middle Ages English poetry becomes *illness of love* in the Romanian poetry in the nineteenth century.

Elena Văcărescu, for example, manifests a preference for exotics and symbolism, but also for exploring the national element, the Romanian folklore, whose motifs have been visibly stylized.

This tendency cuts the main difference between the Romanian women poets and the European ones at the time. While in the Romanian poetry women writers are reluctant to embrace and cultivate the literary species of classicism, in the European literature they use the prosody of early classicism, its literary genres and species with their specific rhyme schemes.

¹ Christine de Pizan, *Book of the Cities of Ladies*, 2000, 4-5

Devoid of any touch of what the early classicism means, the first women's voices that raise in the Romanian poetry in the XIX century don't use the eleven – syllable verse, or the classical iambic pentameter, or the *versus adonicus* in the manner of the first women-poet of the world, Sappho. The prosody of the sonnet also appears very late in the Romanian poetry as compared to the British one in which the first manifestations are traced back in the XVIII century, being cultivated at its best by Elizabeth Barrett Browning at the beginning of the XIX century.

Despite the manner in which the first women poets in Romania choose to express their thoughts, feelings and ideas they have some characteristics in common regarding their origin and life: they belong to noble families with aristocratic and even poetic spirit, they are highly educated and even related to each other through their lives and origins.

Elena Văcărescu or Héléne Văcăresco, by her French name, was a Romanian aristocratic writer, twice a laureate of the Académie française. Through her father she descended from a long live of Romanian noble peasantry, called boyars of Vallachia, including a famous one, Ienăchiță Văcărescu, also a poet who wrote the first Romanian grammar, and she was also a grand daughter of the famous Romanian poet Iancu Văcărescu. Elena got acquainted with the English literature when she was young, through her governess. She studied French literature in Paris. She attended courses of philosophy, aesthetics and history, and also studied poetry under the guidance of Sully Prudhomme.

The meeting that changed her life was with Elizabeth of Weid, Queen of Romania, and wife of King Carol I, a writer herself. The Queen invited her to palace in 1888 because she was interested in Elena Văcărescu as a poet. The Queen encouraged her in a romance with Ferdinand of Hohenzollern, the King's nephew adopted in order to become King of Romania. The result of the affair was that the Queen was exiled to Paris for life. There she was the substitute delegate to the League of Nations, from 1922 to 1924, the only women to serve with the rank of ambassador in the History of the League of Nations.

In 1925 she was welcomed as a Member of the Romanian Academy. She translated the works of famous Romanian poets into French, she also wrote a few novels, she published many volumes of lyrical verse: 1886: *Dawn Songs* for which she was awarded the prize of the French Academy, 1896: *The Serene Soul*, 1903: *Gleams and Flames*, 1928: *In the Gold of the Evening*, 1908: *The Garden*, 1914: *The Dormouse Passionate*, 1945: *Memorial on the Minor Wide Awakened*.

From the perspective of our approach, what stands apart from her life and literary career, is the relationship of the two women of letters, Queen Elizabeth of Romania and Elena Văcărescu who collaborated in publishing a collection of poems, *The Bard of Dâmbovitza*, an English translation of Elena Văcărescu's collection of Romanian folk songs. They were of great impact on the English speaking world especially due to the British origin of Queen Elizabeth of Romania.

Spiritually twinned their lyrical self forms a unity that explodes in poetry of elevated Romanian spirituality written in the tradition of a refined Classicism, still not devoid of any profound Romantic vibrations.

Elizabeth of Weid was the Queen Consort of King Carol of Romania, known by her literary name of Carmen Sylva, as she calls herself in order to express her love for poetry and the Romanian woods. Distinguished by her excellence as a pianist, organist and singer, she also showed considerable ability in painting and illuminating. But a lively poetic imagination

and a certain Romantic touch of her life led her to the path of literature, and more especially to poetry, folk-lore and ballads. Her interest and love for the Romanian peasantry with their lives, traditions and legends give particular notes to her lyrics. In writing her works she is associated not only with Elena Văcărescu but also with Mite Kremnitz, one of her maids of honour. It seems that early women's voices in the Romanian poetry raised to the rhythms of a dance of muses, which paralleling the ancient Greek or Roman tradition, turned into the specific Romanian 'hora'.

Feelings of womanhood sprang up in a common feminine conscience, which made the women writers became more powerful in a world governed by men. This kind of poetic association was culture specific for Romania at that time. Did they feel more secure for public exposure in a male dominated world or was it an option for sharing their lyrical self due to a dominating maternal instinct? Or maybe they didn't want to leave their souls bare and alone before us!

In one of her poems Queen Elizabeth expresses the possibility of antagonistic feelings as part of a divided Romantic self:

'From myself another self I turned', the division is made under the power of contradictory forces, which make her 'freeze or burned', 'float or sink', 'be high or low'.

In another poem she is trying to reconcile with the 'ugly half' of her mind.

'Fierce flames of Passion's self' are to be found in women's hearts. *Storms*, *Sturme* in German is a volume dedicated to her fellow women captures the dominant note of its four narrative poems in a peculiar warm, homely and fanciful German tone expressing a tempestuous Byronic, fervent glowing' soul hidden under a 'light and warm' woman's face.

The book contains four narrative poems of unequal merit, the best is *Sappho*, which, though it shows evidence of immaturity, is original in form and treatment. The Sappho whom she puts before us, is one who desires to be nothing but a mother, who lives with her daughters and companions in a fabled castle, which for all its Greek name must have stood somewhere in German lands, a Sappho who has never existed. The same maternal feeling fed the Romanian women spirits at the beginning of the 19th century when they preferred a kind of association in writing their poems. Despite it her lyrics is charming in striving to blend the classic pentameter with the Old German alliterative rhyme, betraying her education in Germany. The Queen has caught the peculiar warm that has distinguished German lyricism from that of other nations. Also the Queen's strong leaning toward the Romantic school is felt interspersed with the lyrical afflux of the folk-lore of her Romanian land.

Matilda Cugler Poni is considered for good reasons a forerunner of feminine lyricism in the Romanian poetry at the end of the 19th century, a representative of an elevated classicism.

The volume entitled "Poems" issued in 1925 and literary manuscripts certified her as a representative of a refined Classicism imbued with Romantic vibrations. Her origin was in Austria according to the ennobling certificate of the Cugler family signed by Empress Maria Tereze in 1744. Like her predecessors she was noble, educated, patriotic and very sensitive, which made her verses reveal an authentic poetic self carrying all the ingredients of the lyrical expressions of the Romanian poetry at the beginning of the nineteenth century, one totally subject to eroticism. More than her predecessors Matilda Cugler Poni envelops her poetry in a sense of love, deeper and more penetrating than that expressed by Elena Văcărescu and Queen

Elizabeth of Romania. The motifs of unshared love, her quest for certainties, the erotic passion placed in a symphony of seasons, out of which autumn is the most celebrated one due to its association with death are remarkable for the profoundness of feelings and passions. Sometimes their expressions surpass some European models of the feminine lyricism. Her example stands for the idea that the condition for the existence of poetry doesn't consist in the conceptualization of ideas but in the configuration of its expressions through suggestions and symbols, leaving the doors of perception opened to mystery.

The beginnings of the Romanian feminine lyrics are entirely dominated by this phenomenon. The prevailing themes of love and passion associated with the ideas of nothingness, dissolution and death leave a Romantic atmosphere in 'the hospital of love'. The poetess has one 'Last wish'. Out of 'the past years' with their grieving memories of a 'dream of love', the only thing that remains is pain enveloped into a deserted soul. Nature ('The Willow Tree') is the witness of past love, a background which will be later transfigured in the love poetry of her successor Veronica Micle. The spleen provoked by the loss of love turns into a living experience for Matilda Cugler Poni, whose 'Last Wish' was to be buried in a deep forest, the beating heart of the nature around, also a tomb to dig her love into, her poetry becoming a mourning song.

More vibrant and profound reflections of love and its ranging tones are to be found in the poetry of Veronica Micle, known for her love relation with one of the greatest Romanian poets, Mihai Eminescu.

"If her poetry turned into a human being, then this new spirit would be a passionate Romantic, a Byronic self indulged into grieving and suffering" says Lucian Chișu, a Romanian critic. "Her verses are permeable to three instances of the lyrical self – love, anguish, passion". From this perspective she is the closest to 'the hospital of love'. Ill due to love, her soul is torn apart, tormented by passion, crawling to meet her twin-soul, her lover poet. Still, her love, even if shared will remain unaccomplished, which triggers suffering, pain and Romantic pathos. More or less the same spirit dominates the poetry of the first Romanian women poets.

Speaking of the beginnings of women writing in England it can be concluded that there are no striking dissimilarities between the spirit of their artistic manifestations but more regarding the spirit of the age due to the huge differences of time and culture: in The Middle Ages period in England particular attention was attracted by queens and saints, not always in Anglo-Saxon society distinguishable, while in Romania, very far from them historically speaking, in the nineteenth century, they belong to noble families with aristocratic and even poetic spirit, they are highly educated and even related to each other through their lives and origins. More or less even remote in time from each other their presence has the same background. In point of their artistic manifestations they expressed themselves both in poetry and prose, the first being more dominant than the latter. From the point of view of the feminist movement theorists we may acclaim that *écriture féminine* in the light of the concept introduced by Cixous applies more to feminine writing in England in The Middle Ages, out of the same reason of the distance in time- a time when women were more oppressed and silenced. Apart from these they have one thing in common: love, even if it may be only *shown* by some of them or expressed by others. It doesn't matter who!

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