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## **On Women, Intimacy and Spatiality**

*Women Writing Intimate Spaces: The Long Nineteenth Century at the Fringes of Europe*. Eds. Birgitta Lindh Estelle, Carmen Beatrice Duțu, and Viola Parente-Čapková. Brill Academic Pub: 2022, 223 pages, ISBN-10: 9004518509, ISBN-13: 978-9004518506.

The collection *Women Writing Intimate Spaces: The Long Nineteenth Century at the Fringes of Europe* was published at the very end of 2022. It is the fifth volume in the series *The Women Writers in History*, conducted by the women scholars gathered around the eponymous, multi-year international project.<sup>1</sup> The editors of this volume, Birgitta Lindh Estelle, Viola Parente-Čapková and Carmen Beatrice Duțu, specify in an informative foreword that “[F]irst drafts of the chapters assembled here were presented at the online workshop *Rethinking Intimacy in Women’s Reading and Writing at the Peripheries of Europe*, which was arranged at the Department of Literature, History of Ideas and Religion at the University of Gothenburg in October 2020”.<sup>2</sup> Like the previous ones, this collection is a result of the continuous collaboration of women scholars guided by gynocritic and feminist motives who deal with the authorship, production, and reception of women writers in different parts of Europe, primarily on the so-called euro-fringes.<sup>3</sup>

In this particular case, as the title suggests, the keywords that firmly connect all chapters are *intimacy* and *spatiality*: intimate spaces, spaces of intimacy, but also intimacy as the process of overcoming spatiality,

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://brill.com/display/serial/WWIH> (19 October 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Lindh Estelle, Parente-Čapková and Duțu 2022: pp. 3–4.

<sup>3</sup> “The background of this collaboration is the Women Writers’ Networks / NEWW network with its annual conferences, from which there originated a cost Action, Women Writers in History (2009–2013). The Women Writers in History network now continues as a DARIAH-EU Working Group with the same name (since 2016), and has an open access database, a Virtual Research Environment NEWW Women Writers”. Lindh Estelle, Parente-Čapková and Duțu 2022: p. 4.

delineating and crossing (gender and national) boundaries via impressions, affects, emotions, relations, and co-operations. These phenomena are viewed from a feminist perspective precisely to shed light on the inter-dynamics of gender politics, intimist discourses, and the politics of intimacy and intimism in the diverse literary practices and mobilities of female authors in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries on the “edges” of Europe, including Finland, Romania, Scandinavia, Spain and Central Europe (the former Austria-Hungary), as well as more prominent cultural “centers” of Europe such as Paris, France. Furthermore, the pronounced coherence of volume results from both carefully selected theoretical approaches, privileged today at the “global” level (for instance: affect theory in literary studies, transnational turn in the discipline), and the consistent application of the method of close reading when dealing with prose (novels, short stories), and, to a lesser extent, drama and poetry by the researched women authors.

Thanks to the methodological-theoretical framework thus set, the collection represents a certain array of the most diverse discursive shaping and (de)coding of concepts and categories such as *sex, gender, woman, privacy, public, love, passion, freedom, friendship, emancipation*, to mention just a few, in more or less mutually distant areas of Europe in the era of early modernism. In this era, with the disintegration of the realistic formation and positivist worldviews, (literary) subjectivity was otherwise significantly (re)constituted, the modalities of authorship were largely perplexed, and in parallel, modern nation-states/nations were rapidly (re)built. Insisting on the transnational communicative potential of literature, and following the policy of the entire *Women Writers in History* series/project, the editors and authors of this collection often prefer recent concepts such as nomadic/nomadism, *travel, exile, (non-) belonging, bilingualism, biculturality*. Applying such an intersectional prism to the written legacy of women who, more than a century ago, crossed gender and national borders themselves in various ways, the authors of papers at the same time opt for the lesser known or recognized among them, to additionally approach marginality understood as resistance to normativism, phallogocentrism, and binarism. As the editors conclude, “[A]fter all, the

meaning of the word *fringe* is also ‘not part of the mainstream, unconventional’”.<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, special attention is paid to *space* and *spatiality* as concepts inseparable from *intimacy* (as *proximity*), (self-)searching, building personal and/or political contacts, and literary and interpretive communities and networks. One of the key dichotomies in the entire feminist thought – *public* vs. *private* – is seen in conjunction with other main binary oppositions (*male-female*, *masculine-feminine*, *nature-culture*, etc.), but also with the corresponding trans/national contexts. The close reading of the plethora of texts points to the genre, stylistic, formal, and thematic variations, (re)significations of these concepts, and (dis)integration of the dichotomies is (comparatively) analyzed throughout the collection. The *movement* of women authors – symbolic as well as literal – is seen as the process of re/intimacy, testing the boundaries of patriarchal (bourgeois/class/nationalist) norms, a utopian search for a home, an aim of problematizing gender oppression and sexual violence, while the journey or search for a *home* is read as more or less successful attempts at sexual and gender liberation and/or solidarity. Different “figurations of intimacy”<sup>5</sup> are brought to light without simplistic prejudices or conclusions of the authors of the papers; thus, the great complexity of the same figurations is both preciously preserved and indicated.

As the editors themselves remark, “[d]ealing with literary works by women, our task [was] to analyze the meaning of various cultural, social, and, in the broadest sense, political constructions of intimacy as present in women’s texts and lives”.<sup>6</sup> This task resulted in numerous analogies, parallels, and similarities in otherwise distant, culturally differentiated, and mutually independent corpora of women’s texts and aspects of women’s lives and lived experiences. One of the most significant contributions of this collection could therefore be characterized as gynocritic, and it is plausible to talk about it on at least two levels. On the one hand, there are obsessive themes and motives concerning (unhappy) marriage, nuclear family, absence or presence of intimacy in marital and/or extramarital relationships, adultery and affairs, (unsuccessful) search for self and fulfillment of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.: p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.: p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.: p. 4.

existence through heterosexual relationships, etc. Feelings of entrapment, confinement, being silenced or subordinated are recognized as dominant in women's writing at the fin de siècle, alongside the common genre affinities (women's bildungsroman, confessional genres, autobiographical modes, and discourses...). Among other things, the coupling of the intimate and erotic/carnal, erotica as trauma or the locus of overcoming trauma, the politics of (female) friendship, intimacy in connection with spirituality, melancholy as a state of grief, but also the possibility of resistance to an unsatisfactory world and environment, are consistently and repeatedly considered from a feminist standpoint. To put it briefly and more freely, intimacy is approached both as a "cage" and as the key to the freedom of women (writers).

On the other hand, analogies are visible not only in fiction but also in the extra-textual sphere, in the politics of the respective literary fields. For example, the problem of pseudonyms is emphasized, models of synchronous reception of the works of certain female authors are highlighted (often marked by characteristic accusations of frivolity, melodramatics, and sentimentalism),<sup>7</sup> correspondences with colleagues and editors, micro-communities of authors such as literary salons, certain publishing policies are briefly reconstructed. In general, each of the authors first outlines the local/national context from a historiographical perspective – "mainstream" as well as "marginal" – and then moves on to a critical discourse analysis or close reading of particular works by the selected women authors. Thus, the collection really communicates *across the borders* – with readers who otherwise have little or no knowledge about the phenomena and cultural fields represented in it, and it appears to be one of its greatest qualities.

The *space of intimacy* and its constructions is also located in literary circles created by women themselves – transgenerationally, transnationally, and transculturally. In this regard, the last contribution in the collection is marked by the highest degree of meta- and auto-referentiality. The search for "foremothers", which figures as one of the leitmotifs of the collection, is presented here, in the paper "Intimacy and Influence between Women Authors", from a double perspective: of a scholar (Suzan van Dijk) in search

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<sup>7</sup> See: Felski 1995.

of a neglected writer (Isabelle de Charrière) and a contemporary writer (Josephine Rombouts) who finds her literary predecessor in the same neglected woman author. With this kind of gesture, the conventions of traditional research are out of the ordinary, it opens up *space* for/of *intimate* experiences of contemporary women who write fiction themselves, and additionally deepens and layers the publication which is itself dedicated to a distinctly multi-layered concept such as intimacy. Just as the question of the (boundaries of) *home* is repeatedly raised in various papers, for example, the sub-chapter ‘Intimacy and Charrière's Influence on Me as a Writer by Josephine Rombouts’, as well as the entire paper it belongs to, refers in an interesting way to the series *Women Writers in History* and its fifth volume as a common women’s network marked by gender auto/reflexivity and shared knowledge production.

Apart from locating the de-construction of the opposition between public and private in the works of the (“minor”) women authors – most often through the motif of marriage and critique of the bourgeois institution of the nuclear family, full of hypocrisy and double moral standards, the topics of divorce, (single) motherhood, prostitution, oppressive heterosexual structures – the authors of the papers often insist on corresponding histories of ideas, policies of the so-called Woman Question, the ideologies of the “new woman”, the legacy of Darwinism, Nietzsche, Ibsen or Bergson in the early modernism, to mention only some of the key reference names and points. In that aspect, one can also find one of the most important reasons for the apparent coherence of the volume, for prominent analogies that unite the otherwise dispersive research corpus, as well as for the relevance of this publication not only within the respective national fields whose revisions are offered but also in a comparative vision that goes beyond the limits of the collection itself. For example, it does not include the region of Southeast Europe, where almost all of the mentioned tendencies are also noticeable and have been already researched in a strikingly similar manner.<sup>8</sup>

Besides, some remarks or recommendations could be useful for further research conducted in a similar manner/domain. For instance, the comparative perspective is privileged only in particular cases (especially in the paper of Katja Mihurko Poniž, who writes about the short stories of four

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance: Бараћ 2015; Kolarić 2017; Милинковић 2022; Милинковић, Свирчев, eds. 2021; Свирчев 2018.

women authors from different backgrounds – Zofka Kveder, Grete Meisel-Hess, Adela Milčinić, Ružena Svobodová), and it seems that the further situating of strictly literary (genre, themes, motif) parallels in marginal, but mutually different parts of Europe, including Southeast Europe, would be especially valuable and thought-provoking. The same applies to the more direct connection of certain micro-historical/national contexts from the long 19<sup>th</sup> century with today's. Such a link, for example, is made by Elena Lindholm; in the paper named "Intimate Spaces and Sexual Violence in Two Novels by Carmen de Burgos", she explicitly considers her research topic in the light of contemporary #metoo and #cuéntalo movements and thus encourages us to think about how similar initiatives appeared in the past in different forms, i.e. how the protean character of patriarchy (again and again) provokes and redirects resistance to sexism in the public spheres.

Overall, a certain amount of "separatism" is noticeable here, which is otherwise a characteristic danger in gynocritic revisions of the canon. The even broader picture of the corresponding literary field, era, and basic features of the entire literary production would help readers to better understand the position of female authors in them, i.e. the specific dynamics of "tradition and the individual talent". In other words, the collection is somewhat more thorough and convincing when it comes to its theoretical than the historical aspect. Since this is understandable in light of the transnational turn in literary studies and the cosmopolitan aspirations of the editors, this cannot be a substantial critical judgment. But some more detailed considerations would additionally shed light on the importance of the micro-context and the fluid connotations of *feminine/female/feminist* in them, as well as the literary practice of the women authors. Nevertheless, this edition is precious since it leads us, for example, to think about more precise genre definitions of fiction abounding in autobiographical or confessional impulses (diary novels, diary-memoirs, epistolary genres), about its socioeconomic aspects or broader conditions, then about eroticism and erotic relations at the level of the literary field itself (beyond the limits of the women's author's fiction); about possible sociological categories or concepts that would serve as an optimal framework for reading the position of women authors in the literary field transnationally – as evoked by the very interesting idea of "posture" Roxana Patras and Lucreția Pascariu reach for in their co-authored paper; about the problem of power relations, i.e.

vertical and horizontal distribution of influence in literary communities. Also, the observations about the “green world” as a frequent motif of women’s writing more than a century ago, made for instance by Ulla Åkerström, are also inspiring and open for further comparative perspectives and readings.

The editors and authors, to conclude, provide the readers of the collection with an awareness of the complexity and delicate nuances of the selected topics which connote numerous common gender-based phenomena in intellectual and literary history across Europe, and of the importance of a context-based approach to women’s authorship in different *cultural and/as intimate* spaces at the same time, pleading for a more inclusive understanding of literary history, one that has potentials to transgress national paradigms and canons. It could be said that precisely this functions as the basic, most valuable, and most inspiring quality of this collective endeavor.

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## **О женама, интимности и простору**