

DORA D'ISTRIA: MAPPING THE CULTURAL TRANSFER OF INTIMACY AT THE "FRINGES" OF EUROPE

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ABSTRACT. *Dora D'Istria: Mapping the Cultural Transfer of Intimacy at the "Fringes" of Europe.* The present paper examines two texts by Dora D'Istria dealing with women's emancipation and empowerment in the mid-nineteenth century. Thus, we shall analyze how women situated their experience against the discourses that regulated intimacy in the context of nation-building in that respective period.

Keywords: *intimacy, Dora D'Istria, women's emancipation, mid-nineteen century, modernity, discourse.*

REZUMAT. *Dora D'Istria: O cartografie a transferului cultural al intimității la "marginile" Europei.* Lucrarea de față analizează două texte ale Dorei D'Istria axate pe emanciparea și responsabilizarea feminină la mijlocul secolului al XIX-lea. Astfel, vom examina felul în care femeile și-au raportat experiența la retorica intimității, precum și modul în care aceasta din urmă era reglementată într-o epocă preocupată de construcția identității naționale.

Cuvinte cheie: *intimitate, Dora D'Istria, emancipare feminină, mijlocul secolului al XIX-lea, modernitate, discurs.*

Literary and cultural critics have been fascinated with the relationship between narrative and intimacy, in particular with the relationship between romantic and fiction on the one hand, and sexual transgression and "failed" relationships on the other. From the famous research of Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) and continuing with the more recent studies of Joan Landes (1988), Joan De Jean (1991), Erica Harth (1992), Suellen Diaconoff (2005), and so on, consistent research on women's prose reading and writing

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practices in the age of sentimentality up to the late nineteenth century has virtually created a new field in contemporary literary studies at the “core” of Europe. This body of research points out to the “*transformation of Intimacy*”, a process analysed by Anthony Giddens (1992) who discusses the larger context of the changes in gender relations during the nineteenth century in Western Europe. These changes were based on the evolution of modern capitalism and democratic societies. These studies have in common the discourses which testify to the empowerment related to women’s participation in the making of modern society.

What about the “*fringes*” or “*peripheries*”? What did the transformation of intimacy look like as we move away from the heart of Europe? What were women’s experiences and narratives of the intimate in the context of modernization? Did the religious background make any difference in how women adopted and propagated the age of the sentiment? Moreover, what role did women writers play in the “transformation of intimacy” at the peripheries/fringes of Europe? How was the intimacy topos reflected in women’s literature and what was its reception in this part of Europe? Is their contribution relevant to the making of modern societies here, as elsewhere?

In the attempt to investigate the above questions, in September 2016, together with Dr. Birgitta Johansson from the University of Gothenburg, we organized an exploratory workshop titled *Rethinking Intimacy. Representations, Scenes and Scenarios of Intimacy in Women’s Reading and Writing (1700-1900)* (<http://limbi-straine.ucdc.ro/doc/intimacy.pdf>). As the title suggests – the workshop aimed at investigating the issue of intimacy, its representations, scenes, and scenarios in women’s reading and writing between the 1700s and 1900s. The general objective was to highlight a body of works that has been frowned upon if not altogether neglected in the Romanian literary canon: nineteenth century Romanian women writers and their contribution to the literary tradition. Was there a particular genre these women authors translated and/or adapted, and why? Were they cultural mediators? If yes, what role did the adaptation of foreign texts play into the transfer process? And vice-versa, did their literary productions cross borders? What was the profile of their audience at home and elsewhere? Which were, at the time, the characteristics of their texts that enabled them to cross cultural borders? How is their later quasi-disappearance from canonical literary history to be explained?

Another target of the workshop was to help the research community identify possible areas of investigation of intimacy aspects related to women’s reading and writing practices, as well as modes of integrating the intimacy dimension into the research content for the participants’ own research areas. One major outcome of the concluding session was the idea that the intimacy

topos in women's writing and in the strategies of reading in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries **a)** can be incorporated in a cultural transformation of intimacy in the *fringes* of Europe and **b)** is relevant to genres of literature and other contemporary cultural expressions spanning both popular and highbrow circuits. Thus, the contours of a tradition started to emerge.

The present paper deals with the above-mentioned issues; it examines nineteenth century feminine authorship in Romania by means of a case study, through the framework of intimacy. My thesis is that nineteenth century Romanian women writers' marginalization is, no doubt, political and it needs to be urgently addressed² in order to unearth their experience of and contribution to the Romanian process of modernization.

To begin with, I am building on the assumption that women's literary contribution subversively challenged the private-feminine and public-masculine divide, namely the constraints of women's sexual agency and the heterosexual romance. I will be examining how women situated their experience against the discourses that regulated intimacy during the mid-nineteenth century period in the context of nation-building, which also constitutes my specific objective. The functioning of these earlier women authors, especially those active in-between languages – by definition on the fringes of the national literary fields – is often difficult for literary historians to study.

To better illustrate the above, as a case-study, I will refer to the prose published by Dora D'Istria (Elena Ghica) on the feminine agenda in the West and the East (Orient), in the second half of the nineteenth century: *Les femmes en Orient* (1860) and *Des femmes par une femme* (1865). These are her most relevant works focusing on the female relationships and attitudes towards intimacy as well as on the discourses that policed women's intimate behavior. *Des femmes par une femme* establishes the framework of the author's discourse on the feminine issue. It also brings forth an astute analysis of the different approaches and theories to women's status in society, especially the French ones. She further pursues her analysis of the Western European women, as counterpart to the first book *Les femmes en Orient*.

Elena Ghica's life lends itself to becoming writing material: a charismatic Romanian princess, she managed to charm the entire European high society through her wit, adventurous spirit, and striking intellect. She was born in a sophisticated and erudite aristocratic family as the niece of two Princes - Grigore Ghica and Alexandru Ghica. Her father was a prominent archeologist,

² For a relevant article in this respect, see: "Ce scriitoare ar trebui să fie prezente în canonul școlar și în programa pentru bacalaureat?" ("What Women Writers Should be Present in the School Canon and in the Baccalaureate Curriculum?"), debate in: *Observatorul Cultural* online journal, No. 917/2018, www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/ce-scriitoare-ar-trebuie-sa-fie-prezente-canonul-scolar-si-programa-pentru-bacalaureat. Accessed 20th November 2018.

and her mother a writer and translator of classical French literature. A prodigal child, by the age of fourteen she was literate in nine foreign languages, and able to translate Homer's *Iliad* into German, from classical Greek. At the age of 22 she married the Russian prince Alexander Koltov Massalsky whom she followed to St. Petersburg. They had a daughter (who later died), but the marriage itself turned to be a disaster. She never divorced her husband officially; following her outspoken admiration of the British and French culture at the time of the Crimean War, their separation was definitive after she was brutally "advised" to leave the Russian Empire. Consequently, she went into exile in Switzerland, and later on moved to Italy for life.

A keen traveler and a free spirit she was undoubtedly one of the greatest women writers of her time. No wonder today she is claimed by several cultures, starting with Romania (where she was born and raised for most of her young life), and finishing with Albania which has considered Dora D'Istria their uncrowned princess. Although referring to a later phase in the modern history of Romania (beginning of the twentieth century), the issues raised by the author of the fragment below also encapsulate the final decades of the nineteenth century, and most certainly, are symptomatic for Elena Ghica's biography:

Two historical particularities distinguish the Romanian case: the absence of a widespread feminist movement and the late modernization and urbanization, occurring concomitantly with the highly energetic nation-building processes [...]. The division between public masculinity and private femininity may have acquired less ideological force than in Western Europe, given the late emergence of the Romanian bourgeoisie. In the writings of Romanian women at the time, women enjoyed remarkable mobility and access to the city, their social circle, or even international travel, as well as sexual autonomy. (Năchescu 79)

The ethnological diversity she deals with in *Les Femmes en Orient* (*Women in the Orient*) is impressive (she gives accounts on the Romanians, the Bulgarians, the Dalmatians, the Montenegrins, the Turks, the Albanians, the Greeks, the Russians, the Siberians, the Kazaks, the Polish, the Latvians, the Georgians, the Armenians, the Kurds, the Ossetians, and eventually the Finno-Mongolians, with all the respective subdivisions), given how rigorously the text was elaborated. Subsequently, in *Des Femmes par Une Femme* (*On Women by a Woman*) she dealt with the Western women, whom she divides into the "Latin society" (French, Italian, Spanish) and the "Germanic society" (Germans, Saxons, Prussians, Austrians, Scandinavians, Anglo-Saxons, Belgians, Dutch).³

³ For the account of the ethnicities of the women analysed in the two studies of Dora D'Istria, see Bordaș 702.

Besides the fact that *Les femmes en Orient* and *Des femmes par une femme* are the writings dedicated to feminine emancipation, these are also Elena Ghica's most mature works from the intellectual point of view. For instance, when referring to the situation of Turkish women in harems, she appreciates that: "[...] *sex is reduced to the most dreadful, the most degrading form of slavery*", which requires urgent "*equitable and liberal laws which could repair, at least partially, the damaging effects caused by violence and despotism*". (1876, 107)⁴

She addresses the issue of feminine emancipation in response to Jules Michelet's *Du prêtre, de la femme et de l'humanité* (1845), *Les Femmes de la Révolution* (1854) and *La femme* (1854): no doubt appreciative of Michelet's efforts to promote women in society, she objects to his positioning of women as inferior citizens. According to Michelet, the ultimate reason for women's existence was getting married and procreating; consequently, he vehemently rejects the institution of divorce, bringing arguments to support his claim from the Bible and the Christian tradition. At odds with Michelet and other liberal thinkers, Elena Ghica militates for the idea of full equality between men and women, supporting the institution of divorce as well as women's independence:

Anybody knows that, if family has remained - in the West - a truly vivacious institution, this must be attributed not to the catholic peoples, who gladly treat it as a mockery [...], but to the protestant nations. (1876, 71)

She herself was a free spirit, claiming the sort of right to intimacy and independence. She is a keen militant for legalizing divorce, which places her at the forefront of the fight for women's emancipation in her time. In the nineteenth century divorce was still widely rejected as a private life practice; however, Elena Ghica boldly debates the issue in her writings, bringing pertinent arguments to counteract the general public opinion condemning divorce. One of the most pervasive objections was (and still is!) that the children are deeply affected by the breaking up of a family through divorce, thus losing the stability of their home. To this general belief Elena Ghica answers that the concept of family doesn't necessarily imply a mother and a father, a traditional couple; she is asking rhetorically if one can call a home such a place which is:

[...] a place of jealousy, of disunion, of irreconcilable hatred, of the most terrible passions which torment the human heart? Do you believe that a young woman should be brought up in such a manner, or that a son

⁴ All the quotations from Dora D'Istria were translated by Carmen Duțu from the Romanian translation of Dora D'Istria's works by Peretz.

should find himself disputed by the most irreconcilable contraries [...], not knowing which of the two, his mother or his father, is more despicable? (1876, 72-73)

The majority of her writings deals with women's emancipation issues, contesting the widely spread discriminatory and humiliating practices women were subjected to throughout cultures. Consequently, her voice was definitely heard, but her opinions were regarded as dangerous by the Tsarist court in Sankt Petersburg, as well by the conservative circles in Western Europe.

Elena Ghica managed to map the intimate within the cultural particularities of the - what at the time was regarded as "oriental" societies. Recently, researchers have analyzed the content of these texts from a scientific position and concluded that:

Although she dedicated a lot of time and numerous writings to the Orient and ethnology, Dora D'Istria may not be considered an orientalist proper or an ethnologist in the academic sense of the word. (Bordaș 702)

However, for the purpose of this paper we have considered the essence of her work ethnological in spirit as it deals with the cultural particularities of the Balkan and the South-Eastern European societies, in a historical context which regarded the "Orient" as a monolithic Other. To the subjective, essentialist, and stereotypical view on the Orient, most frequently stemming from ignorance, Dora D'Istria opposes an analytic spirit, filtered through the Christian-Orthodox doctrine and her personal experiences as a traveller. She talks about the intimacy of hospitality in private spaces whereby gender becomes bound up with political emancipation. Thus she argues that the unconditioned obedience of women towards men is a mere prejudice, a misinterpretation of the Biblical text and the church doctrine also due to the historical context. In Dora D'Istria's view, women had an active role in the making of the modern South-Eastern European states.

Elena Ghica was a pan-European intellectual, an active militant for women's rights, deeply involved in the political and social agenda of her time. She left behind an impressive body of work on essential cultural issues such as individual freedom. Such issues raised by the new modern paradigm were brought to the South-Eastern Europe through cultural transfer from the French culture; an astute and profound intellectual, Elena Ghica argues that individual freedom can only exist if the entire society goes through a political and cultural metamorphosis. Moreover, this has to include, or better yet, starts from the metamorphosis of the private space, of the intimate, otherwise it is not a genuine transformation.

In view of building-up a society based on freedom, overcoming slavery, tyranny, and the subjection of the individual, all aspects of public life must address the intimate and the private as well. Elena Ghica's feminist works explored the contemporary discourses on intimacy dealing with love, motherhood, the pure vs. impure dichotomy, feminine hysteria, menstruation, physical inferiority and beauty stereotypes, and so on. Her studies position her undoubtedly in the line with the Romanian intellectuals who triggered the shift to the modern paradigm.

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CARMEN DUȚU

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