

Review of e-book:

Ana González-Rivas Fernández,
El mundo clásico desde la mirada femenina: Margaret Fuller, Mary Shelley y George Eliot.
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No-one would deny the major nature of the influence of Greco-Roman culture on the nineteenth-century literature of Great Britain and the United States - the textual imprint of what Edgar Allan Poe, in his poem "To Helen", famously called "the glory that was Greece / And the grandeur that was Rome". The classical world has impacted on literature in English throughout its history, from the evocation of the Trojan war which opens *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to the re-creation of the Orpheus-Eurydice myth in Salman Rushdie's novel *The Ground Beneath her Feet*. For the nineteenth century, the classical heritage has a highly specific weight in view of the importance laid on it in the British and American educational systems of the period, as a vital part of the moulding of a gentleman. In this context, and in view of the exclusion from higher education of women, the slow and painful correction of which was later to be portrayed by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, it has not been frequent for scholars to pay attention to the female face of the *classicisation* of Anglophone culture - that is, the presence of themes, allusions and archetypes from Greek and Latin literature in the works of nineteenth-century British or American women writers.

The e-book under review, by Ana González-Rivas Fernández (Universidad Complutense de Madrid) - *El mundo clásico desde la mirada femenina: Margaret Fuller, Mary Shelley y George Eliot (A woman's perspective on the classical world: Margaret Fuller, Mary Shelley and George Eliot)* - aims to study that classical presence in three representative works of nineteenth-century women's writing, two of them novels from England and the third an American work of non-fiction. The texts chosen are: *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818) by Mary Shelley; *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* by Margaret Fuller (1845); and *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot (1860). The study consists of a substantial introduction outlining scope and methodology, one long chapter each on the three works analysed, general conclusions, and a full bibliography (which, imaginatively and usefully, includes a separate section listing the classical works cited in the text, in both the originals and the Spanish translations used). The works of the three authors are quoted in English, with footnoted Spanish translations; the same practice is followed for the Greek and Latin quotations.

The main purpose of the study is to show how the reception and transformation of classical motifs by women writers (who, as women, were not and could not be part of the academic system as such) led to a transmission of knowledge by alternative, non-academic routes, thus bringing about modifications in the nature of the textual canon taken as a starting-point. The author examines both the specific approaches to the classical world deployed by each of the three writers and the shared women's consciousness that ultimately unites them as pioneers of

modern-day women's writing. Stress is laid on the vanguard positions and feminist orientations of all three (Mary Shelley was, after all, Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter), and also on the exceptional circumstances in terms of family and life-history which enabled each to educate herself (not forgetting the classics) and achieve a cultural level that went far beyond the normative female confines of the era. Thus, for instance, we are told how Mary Shelley's father, William Godwin, "le permitía ... el acceso a su biblioteca personal, donde empezó a conocer a autores como Tácito, Virgilio y Ovidio" ("allowed her ... access to his private library, where she made the acquaintance of such writers as Tacitus, Virgil and Ovid" - 58-59).

Rather than adhering to chronology, the author chooses to begin with Margaret Fuller, thus giving priority to the discursive space constituted by feminist ideas, as eloquently expounded by the American writer. Fuller, a leading adept alongside Emerson and Thoreau of the philosophical school known as Transcendentalism and the wife of an Italian aristocrat, has a profile differing from that of Mary Shelley or George Eliot, insofar as her best-known work is an openly feminist manifesto, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. In this context, Ana González-Rivas states that "Fuller muestra una clara intencionalidad en su uso de la mitología clásica" ("Fuller's use of classical mythology is highly intentional" - 24). She argues that Fuller's aim is to create a *women's rhetoric*, starting out from classical rhetoric but pursuing very different ends, since the desired end-product is a *feminisation of discourse*. At the same time, Fuller's work is viewed as exhibiting a constant concern to reconfigure the female personalities of classical mythology, as in the case of "Miranda, un personaje imaginario que representa a la propia Fuller [que] llama a Ifigenia y a Antígona 'hermanas'" ("Miranda, an invented character representing Fuller herself, [who] calls Iphigenia and Antigone her 'sisters'" - 27).

Next examined is the case of Mary Shelley, whose celebrated novel *Frankenstein* here represents a genre often undervalued and misunderstood, namely Gothic fiction – which, as Ana González-Rivas takes pains to stress, proves on examination to have surprisingly deep connections with the Greco-Roman world. Her analysis of *Frankenstein* points up the many cases in which Mary Shelley takes up and reinterprets classical archetypes – the Prometheus of her subtitle (an analogy never made explicit in the text itself, yet ever-latent and placing its author in an implied dialogue with Aeschylus), of course, but also figures such as Oedipus (Sophocles) and Medea (Euripides). In this way, Mary Shelley's Gothic novel becomes a nineteenth-century rereading and rewriting of Greek tragedy, interrogated from a women's vantage point. Ana González-Rivas concludes that "esta reacomodación ha generado una fusión de géneros, donde se sigue manteniendo con éxito la esencia de los clásicos" ("this readjustment has led to a fusion of genres, in which the essence of the classics is successfully maintained"), resulting in "una nueva tragedia griega, pero escrita por una mujer inglesa del siglo XIX" ("a new Greek tragedy, but written by a nineteenth-century Englishwoman" - 87).

George Eliot (as the writer born Mary Anne Evans is universally known) appears in representation of the Victorian novel (an appellation which, in spite of everything, derives from the name of a woman, symbol of the British nation in the epoch of all-conquering capitalism). The discussion focuses on her third work of fiction, the much-loved *The Mill on the Floss*. In her analysis of this text, Ana González-Rivas stresses the presence of multiple classical allusions (often semi-parodic, as in the ironic comparison of the suitor Stephen Guest to Hercules, or even verging on the Gothic, as when the heroine Maggie Tulliver's locks are likened to the Medusa's), while also pointing up Eliot's insistent questioning of the educational values of her time. Maggie's brother Tom is obliged, as part and parcel of his

gentleman's education, to learn Latin, a subject he finds totally alien, yet it is his sister who finds, in the classical culture officially closed to her, a source of fascination around which coalesces her entire intellectual potential as a woman - a potential still denied by the Victorian orthodoxy against which George Eliot's life and work stand in monumental opposition. In Ana González-Rivas' words, "Eliot pone en evidencia la falta de fundamento de los prejuicios que existían en el siglo XIX sobre la incapacidad de la mujer para los estudios, y concretamente para las lenguas clásicas" ("Eliot exposes as unjustified the nineteenth-century prejudices concerning women's unsuitedness to study, and above all to the study of the classical languages" - 121).

The author concludes from her detailed examination of the three works that the triad of nineteenth-century writers create, each in her own way, a remodelled "mundo clásico en el que se subrayan las características femeninas" ("classical world that stresses female characteristics"), in a form that entails "cierto alejamiento de los ámbitos académicos ..., de modo que el mundo clásico se acerca a un público más amplio, y con una mayor presencia femenina" ("a certain distancing from the academic milieu ..., bringing the classical world closer to a broader public including a larger number of women" - 155). Thus, the *feminisation* of the classics brings in its wake their *democratisation*. From this perspective and in the context of the educational challenges of the present day, this study offers an eloquent and committed justification of the continued value of classical studies for our times, while also making a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate on the nature and social and cultural function of literature and its teaching.