



The possibilities of the vine

Text: Encarna Sant-Celoni i Verger / Illustration: Ana Amesti

There was once a young lady
From the nineteenth century
She loved to paint and write.
But married she would not be.

Separated and divorced
She earned her daily bread
With the sweat of her brow
And the brain in her head.

And among the things that
She confidently stated
Was that before the twentieth century's out
Housework will be overrated

Men and women will have equal rights
And for doing the same day's work
Will receive the same pay
All year round
And with some holidays.

Oh how they mocked her
How they laughed
Because it seems that for each
Her kind of nineteenth century intellect
Was not yet within their reach.

E. Sant-Celoni
(lines inspired by the poem *Similar Cases*,
by Charlotte Perkins Gilman)

*“Those who too patiently serve as props
sometimes underrate the possibilities of the vine.”*

“It’s easier to write about Socrates than about a young lady or a cook” I read somewhere, written by Anton Chekhov who was born in 1860 like me, but on the other side of the world. And I’m not quite sure what to think about that. “What’s that feminist sticking her nose into now?” That is the question the same people who call me a “denaturalised mother” and a “divorcee” will be asking. But if wanting the best for the child you have given birth to makes you a bad mother, then I am a bad mother; if choosing to separate from your husband because you would rather be a human than a woman makes you a bad wife, then I am a bad wife. You asked for it! It’s your fault! Accept it and face the consequences! You’re useless, you are no good for anything – neither as a mother or a wife! That’s what I told myself over and over until I was a bundle of nerves. No! No and no! If the vine can regrow, then so can I. Leave your husband, leave your mother, leave your daughter... and I did. Here you have a new woman, running with no chains, angelical halos or crowns. A woman who is living!

The first duty you have is to find the job you want to do and do it, whatever it takes, and to do that you have to be free. My job is writing, putting in my tuppence-worth to try to show that it is possible to change a society that I think is unfair. And that’s that! If you don’t like it then you can stuff it! Anyway, going back to Chekhov, I would to say that I completely agree with him. It is very easy to write about Socrates, Plato or Aristotle, for example. But it is really difficult to write about what your eyes cannot see in this androcentric world, or what does not exist according to the parameters dictated by the canon. It makes no difference whether you’re talking about young ladies, cooks or writers.

“There is no female mind. The brain is not an organ of sex, or might as well speak of a female liver.”

“Men are made of gold and women are made of cloth” sing the little Cambodian children from the time they are born. “Chickens and women, they’re good when you wring their necks” as the Catalan saying goes. “*Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time... Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours’ intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live*”¹, is what the neurologists prescribe women who do not want to be “*the angel in the house*”, with a view to curing their “nervous states”, as well as interminable rest cures, leaving them isolated and able to do absolutely nothing. I have been there and I know what it is like. I do not understand why they don’t realise that forcing anyone to bed – man or woman – makes whatever they are trying to cure ten times worse, like the feeling of guilt when you think you are not looking after your husband, home or children as you should be: *a house does not need a wife any more than it needs a husband.*

When I say that the traditional division of social roles by sex is not natural but cultural, or when, in my novels, I design models of society that are very different from the ones we have to suffer, with the intention of pulling apart this patriarchal civilisation, they laugh at me and call me utopian. I would hesitantly agree, if by *utopia* you understand the “imaginary conception of an ideal society” then it is an accolade that I am willing to accept and would happily share with Christine de Pizan and her *City of Ladies*, for example. But I completely disagree if what you understand is the “conception of an impossible idea”, because in my view wanting something as logical and fair as real equality between men and women is not “impossible”, but feasible. If you want it enough you can do it. And we would come out winning...us and the earth.

“I came here to live with Delle... Mother is with me also, and Katharine, of course. The pleasure in the new relation is that I now have someone to love me, and whom I love. It is a Home.”

If I had to highlight something about my own character, it would be that I am an eminently practical and rational person; someone who tends to do what has to be done, let’s face it. It must run in the family, but from my father’s side – specifically from three great aunts who

¹ Instructions that the neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell gave Charlotte Perkins Gilman, following a six-week rest cure to recover from serious post-natal depression when she was 26 years old.

were suffragists, feminists and abolitionists. I have always been like that, with a single exception which lasted ten years, when I fell passionately in love with a woman, Delle.

That's why – being eminently practical and rational – if I ever made a mistake, sooner or later I would fix it. Getting married, separating, writing, looking after my mother and daughter, writing, getting divorced, writing, sending the girl to live with her father and my best friend, writing, getting married again, writing...and now, after seventy-five years, now that everything has been said or written down I know that the only thing left is a slow and horrible death – suicide.

“I have preferred chloroform to cancer.”

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (Hartford, 1860 - Pasadena, 1935), was the author of nine novels and 186 short stories, three volumes of poetry, seven plays and monologues and an infinite number of essays and other works of non-fiction, an editor, sociologist, lecturer...and a prominent American feminist and a tireless activist and reformer for whom solidarity and cooperation among women (sisterhood, in a word) was the key to changing society once and for all.

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