

**UNIVERSITATEA „ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA” din IAȘI
FACULTATEA DE LITERE
ȘCOALA DOCTORALĂ DE STUDII FILOLOGICE**

**CARMEN SYLVA ÎN CONTEXTUL
LITERATURII DE CONSUM DIN SPAȚIUL GERMAN
AL SECOLULUI AL XIX-LEA**

**CARMEN SYLVA IN THE CONTEXT OF
THE GERMAN MASS LITERATURE
OF THE 19TH CENTURY**

- Summary of the Ph.D. thesis -

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**Iași
2013**

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The field and object of research. Theoretical and practical premises

The name of Carmen Sylva is more or less known in the culture nowadays; perhaps more famous is the historical character Elisabeth of Wied, the first Queen of Romania, who from the privileged position supported and promoted the Romanian culture in the German world and implicitly on the European cultural and literary scene of her time. It is nonetheless necessary to make a clear distinction between the historical character Elisabeth, Queen of Romania – genuine Maecenas for the culture of her new home country, in other words an agent between the Romanian literature and a mature European literature, on the one hand – and the writer Carmen Sylva – a literary pseudonym, which was not intended to hide the true person, but to suggest a spiritual link between her origin and her new home country.

The biography, as well as the thematic perspective upon the literary activity of the Queen have been widely analyzed in numerous articles and books, and pose a secondary interest for this research. Obviously the role of Carmen Sylva as mediator between the Romanian and the German culture has to be acknowledged, such as – which is probably more important from a cultural and historical point of view – her role in promoting the Romanian culture in contemporary Europe. As an author however, Carmen Sylva is nowadays from our perspective a paradox: writing in German, publishing her works in German-speaking publishing houses and much later in Romanian ones, the Queen aspired her entire life to literary appraisal and acknowledgement. Controversial in her epoch, Carmen Sylva constantly defined her personality in the context of a self-imposed mysticism and exotism. Despite a literary award from the

French Academy in the year 1888 for the aphorism volume *Les pensées d'une reine*, and despite the fact that the author had tried all literary genres, and despite of an effervescent literary activity during her lifetime, the value of the writing queen has been a controversial issue since her 1916 death and her works quickly disappeared from the attention of the reading public after the year 1916.

Towards the turbulent *Fin de siècle*, the cultural and historical context of the latter half of the 19th century was not favorable to the literary acknowledgement of the Queen, either in Germany, or in Romania. The literary turmoil of the cultural Europe under the sign of Decadence was not in accordance with the profile of a Romantic spirit like Carmen Sylva appeared to the world. More likely she could have found a place in the Romanian literature, which as a result of a completely justified tardiness from a historical perspective, witnessed in the 19th century an interesting intermixture between apparently antagonic literary movements, among which one could also notice a late Romanticism, as it was often named by literary historians. Nonetheless, the latter half of the 19th century in Romania was marked by a strong nationalist trend, the activity of the literary group “Junimea” from Iasi being illustrative in this respect. Furthermore, the Romanian literature of the time was dominated by male writers and the political – often anti-monarchic – ideas also had a decisive role in the delimitation of the Romanian literary scene of the time. Under these circumstances the Queen barely had a chance to attain the much desired literary acknowledgement within the Romanian culture.

Nonetheless, despite an unfavorable cultural context, the literary work of Carmen Sylva should be investigated, not only from a thematic point of view, but also from a comparatist perspective with other literary

production of the time. One should obviously start from the notion itself of „literature, as well as from the various sides this notion already began to have in the 19th century. The mass literature, as a literature written for a wide reading public, as opposed to a literature written only for the few initiated ones, already had strong roots in the latter half of the 19th century, thus being part of the European *Fin de siècle*.

Therefore, any attempt to present the literary personality of Carmen Sylva should be based first of all on an analysis of mass literature and its specific manifestation in that period. The mass literature of the 19th century no longer emphasized exclusively the axiological distinction between high literature (*hohe Literatur*) and low literature (*niedrige Literatur*), but rather the oscillating character of the literary spirit of the time: on the one hand, a classical line, which meant the observance of a literary tradition, on the other hand a rebellious spirit, which foresaw the Postmodernist spirit. Being a part of an almost self-imposed literary traditionalism, Carmen Sylva, as a genuine European romantic spirit, wanted to write for a wide reading public, unlike her Symbolist and future Expressionist contemporaries, who would write for a limited circle of intellectuals, often for themselves, indulging in their own revolt against the classical norms and order. But Carmen Sylva loved the attitude of a martyr, which she herself had imposed, and which passed to the Romantic spirit; moreover, her position of mediator between two cultures – which to a certain extent also contributed to the image of martyr – imposed an active participation in the public life of that epoch. Her literature was thus promoted, so as to become accessible to a wide reading public, without having the purpose of a programmatic literature.

Beyond the ephemeral literary acknowledgement, which could have been caused also by her social position, the literature of Carmen Sylva may be considered an atypical mass literature: one may speak of a new type of mass literature that in our opinion surpasses the German notion of *Trivialliteratur* (trivial literature), which even in its name suggests the features of an „inferior literature”. Even though the literature of Carmen Sylva may not be considered an expression of the Modernist tendencies of contemporary Europe, or of the Romanian national spirit, it was still omitted from literary studies, also as a result of an unfavorable historical context. Placing the writing queen among the mass literature authors is therefore an imperative.

Objectives of the research

In the evidence of the aspects exposed above, one may state that main objective of this paper is to explore the German mass literature of the latter half of the 19th century illustrated by Carmen Sylva. For this purpose we intended to answer some fundamental questions:

- How did Carmen Sylva, even though a representative of mass literature, manage to be of interest to a certain category of readers?
- What category of public, which may be defined from a social point of view in the latter half of the 19th century, read with interest the literature of Carmen Sylva?
- To what extent does the classical concept of „mass literature” (in German we made here the distinction between *Massenliteratur*, *Unterhaltungsliteratur* and *Trivialliteratur*) apply to the literature of Carmen Sylva?

- How may one consider that the epigonal Romanticism of the end of the 19th century generated the mass literature?

This paper is therefore at the same time one of literary theory and history, since it reconstructs, by means of Carmen Sylva's literature, a certain type of mass literature, addressed to a specific public, which may be socially and culturally defined in the second half of the 19th century. Thus the paper explores thematic models, narrative schemes so as to define a proximal genre; in other words the theme of the research also imposed the aspect of the historization of the concept of mass literature, which even though has certain a-temporal features, should be analyzed according to the social and cultural particularities of each epoch, as well as according to the distribution means.

The research field and the personal contribution

Even though a monographic focus of the research (the life and literary work of Carmen Sylva) was not of major interest for this research, one could not however ignore certain aspects that make the specific of the Queen's personality, the exotism of her existence in a landscape, whose exotism she herself exploited in writing. The paper implied therefore a quantitative research, i.e. an analysis of the way in which the mass literature from the latter half of the 19th century is illustrated by Carmen Sylva, as well as a qualitative research, which intended the examination of the causes of the literary „popularity” of the author under consideration.

The importance of this study for the field of German Studies lies first of all in the placement of Carmen Sylva among the German literature of the

latter half of the 19th century. Furthermore, the idea of exploring a parallel literature is a courageous attempt, given the preconceptions of literary circles. But in such a case, as well, one may apply a complex set of instruments, formed of precise narrative schemes and predilect literary species. The attention so far has been almost exclusively on a theoretical analysis of the phenomenon, not only from a diachronic, but also from a synchronic point of view, but these theoretical paradigms have not applied to a certain writer. This study attempts therefore to contribute to the clarification of the notion of “mass literature” from the second half of the 19th century, by presenting the literary work of a representative author.

We also considered necessary to propose the term *Parakanon* (parallel literary canon of the mass literature), in order to emphasize the fact that the literary productions which may be categorized as mass literature should be assessed according to different aesthetic norms, thus intending to diminish the critical perspective, according to which mass literature is considered exclusively under the sign of inferiority compared to the canonized literature. Moreover we considered that delimiting such a parallel literary canon would facilitate the classification of a certain category of writers.

The structure of the paper

According to the objectives of the research, the paper is made up of four chapters, besides the introduction and the conclusions.

The first chapter presents the introduction, the current state of the research and the purpose of the study, as well as the personal contribution to the research field.

The second chapter intended a schematic presentation of the literary scene of the 19th century and the turn of the century, emphasizing the literary, cultural, social, technological and scientific particularities of that period. The nervousness as modern malady, generating creative isolation, which is specific to the modern spirit, may be opposed to the desire of the popular writer to reach and educate the wide public; thus one may notice a discrepancy between two distinct yet contemporary categories of writers.

The third chapter presents the mass literature from a diachronic, as well as synchronic perspective. The diachronic perspective focuses on the historical evolution of mass literature, starting from the 18th century, considered to be the birth of mass literature, passing through the 19th century, as a moment of flourish and diversification of mass literature and up to the 20th century, when the mass culture becomes under the influence of technologization and the decomposition of the religious spirit, according to the German philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, a cultural industry as a way of deceiving the masses. The synchronic perspective explores some essential facts and elements of mass literature, among which a terminological analysis given the fact that the German language has a wide range of more or less synonymous notions to define this type of literature. Also worth mentioning would be a subchapter analyzing the psychological and social profile of the prototype of reader of mass literature, which plays an important role in determining the social-communicative function and the aesthetic function of mass literature. Following the short analysis of the relationship between writer and reader, the latter being presented as the supreme instance, we consider necessary to propose the notion *Parakanon* („parallel literary canon”). This imperative intends on the one hand to contribute to the reassessment of mass literature

and on the other hand to facilitate the classification of mass literature authors.

In the end of this chapter we considered necessary a brief presentation of some successful writers of the 19th century, thus trying to emphasize the “success literary recipe” of popular authors from the 19th century. The choice of these writers, who we consider representative for mass literature, i.e. Viktor Scheffel, Moritz Graf von Strachwitz and Paul Heyse, is justified by the declared affinity of Carmen Sylva for their literature. The emphasis of elements of epigonal Romanticism in the case of these writers supports our thesis, according to which the epigonal Romanticism of the latter half of the 19th century would generate the mass literature.

Under the sign of Romanticism, *the fourth chapter* contains a presentation of the historical and literary personality of Carmen Sylva, the emphasis being placed not on the biographical data, but on the artistic elements that approach the writing queen to the analyzed mass literature, since the biography and the exotism of the queen are in fact an instrument in proving the main thesis.

In this chapter we analyzed the literary work of Carmen Sylva, emphasizing the elements of epigonal Romanticism; since a full analysis of the opus of the queen was not the main objective of this paper, we selected the most important writings of Carmen Sylva, which we included in three main themes:

- the prototype and perspectives of the femininity, especially the presentation of Carmen Sylva’s female ideal. We analyzed here female characters not only from poems, but also from prose works and theater plays;

- the new home country of the queen, thus emphasizing the pro-monarchic character of the literature of Carmen Sylva. We analyzed here the volume of stories *Pelesch Märchen*, presenting the stereotypical ways in which the kingdom of Romania appears in the vision of Carmen Sylva. The literature as a means of monarchic propaganda was also illustrated in the short analysis of the essay *Rheintochters Donaufahrt* and of the drama *Meister Manole*;
- the natural landscape of the childhood and youth of the author, as an expression of the home-sickness. Illustrative for this theme is the poetry volume *Mein Rhein*, which suggests even in the title an autobiographic and subjective perspective upon the natural landscape of the Rhein region.

The fifth chapter analyses the contemporary classification of the writer Carmen Sylva and implicitly her ephemeral popularity. Due to her existence between two cultures, a distinct analysis of her classification was necessary – in the Romanian culture and in the German culture, respectively. Thus one selected and commented the most significant critical opinions, also emphasizing the instrumentalization of literature and culture from the period of the Communist regime. Moreover in this chapter we placed the author on the right coordinates of literary history, without mystifying her, as it was the case in even the most recent studies. It is therefore necessary to determine the rightful place of Carmen Sylva and emphasize the particularities of her spiritual creation.

The sixth chapter exposes the conclusions of this research and also proposes future possible approaches. A sociological and psychological

reconstruction of the prototype of royal literature would thus imply a more ample interdisciplinary research.

Critical approaches and methods

In order to give the paper a solid referential system we first had to study the primary literature, which means not only the opus of the author Carmen Sylva, but also some significant texts of the three mass literature authors mentioned above.

The delimitation of the concepts was the first step of this study, the terminological disambiguation and the precise statement of the limits of interpretation being thus necessary. We then applied a hermeneutical approach, combining text analysis with an extensive study on the possibilities of text reception. Last but not least we tried to open the opportunity of a comparatist analysis between texts belonging to various authors of the same time, mainly emphasizing stylistic similarities, thus entitling us to consider these writers belonging to the same category. Based on this conclusion, we also attempted to suggest a classification for the main author under consideration, namely Carmen Sylva.

Conclusions

This research intended to analyze an often ignored literary phenomenon, which still represented a major social force in the 19th century and which paradoxically was generated but also contributed to the

culturalization of the wide masses of readers, nonetheless understanding this “culturalization” phenomenon as alphabetization.

Along this research we tried to demonstrate the fact that the mass literature of the 19th century was generated by an epigonal Romanticism. As an example thereof we briefly presented some successful authors of the time. The purpose of this thesis was to suggest a place for the writer Carmen Sylva, who due to historical and cultural particularities, was bereft of a rightful classification, oscillating in fact between two extremes: either the exaggerated vision of a genius, or the amateur writing queen.

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