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The Gender of Croatian Modernity: Marija Jurić Zagorka and Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić



Marija Jurić Zagorka



Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić

Over the course of the past ten to fifteen years, we have seen a surge of academic interest in women writers among Croatian literary scholars, due largely to the growing influence of feminist theory and cultural studies. This seems especially to be the case with early 20th-century women writers who were previously marginalized or largely invisible in the Croatian literary canon, which was the result of an attempt to conform to the Western canon privileges of modernist writing and “high” art over popular literature, as well as of male over female authors (Grgić 2009, 18).

Two women writers currently attracting the most academic attention are Marija Jurić Zagorka and Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić. Although regularly read and loved by a wide audience, they have largely remained relegated to the fringes of the literary canon – Zagorka as a writer of popular historical romances and Brlić-Mažuranić as an author of children’s literature.

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century or since the Croatian literary revival, so-called “newer” Croatian literature was characterized by a strong social and political function. This changed somewhat at the turn of the twentieth century, but mostly in theory, because in practice Croatian aestheticism was still firmly tied to realism and a duty to social critique. This is especially true in the case of the novel, which became more modern far more slowly than did poetry or the short story. According to Krešimir Nemeč’s complete history of the Croatian novel, the most productive novelists in the period of aestheticism were actually authors of popular novels (1998, 8). At the time, modernist and avant-garde tendencies in the novel were rare, weak or modest, a belief in the utilitarian function of literature was strongly upheld, and clear communication with the reader was also still seen as crucial (44).

Even though most of the novels written up until the end of the First World War were either popular or realist, and attempts at avant-garde aesthetic radicalism were modest in all genres, Croatian literary history, always striving to establish parallels with European and Western literature, focused on literary texts demonstrating at least some modernist characteristics and therefore disregarded the majority of novels written in that period. This process came under scrutiny only recently, when Croatian literary historians such as Krešimir Nemeč (1998) and Zoran Kravar (2005) became interested in modernism as a historical and cultural era, finally examining literary works beyond the limits of the modernist canon. Kristina Grgić, employing Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the literary field and drawing on Astradur Eysteinnsson's constructivist approach to the concept of modernism in her analysis of Marija Jurić Zagorka's position in Croatian literary history, explains that literary modernism should be understood as the dominant but by no means the only literary paradigm within the wider historical and cultural era (2009, 20). Grgić goes on to say that the dominant understanding of modernist literature, both in the Western and the Croatian literary canon, is the result of literary criticism's privileging of certain literary forms and techniques typical of "high" literature (20). In this way, other forms of literary production,

which were less interesting to literary historians concerned with "high" literature, were therefore omitted from the prevailing image of literary modernism, specifically popular and children's literature, as well as literary works continuing the realist and naturalist tradition (Grgić 2009, 20).

Only a complete history of Croatian literature or the Croatian novel, such as Krešimir Nemeč's, which endeavours to explore literary styles and texts beyond the official narrative of modernism's dominance in early 20th-century Croatian literature, can reveal the fact that Zagorka's popular historical romances were not an exception or a relic of an abandoned literary past, but were actually at the forefront of a very lively and widespread literary trend (1998, 13). According to Nemeč, popular historical novels flourished both in *fin de siècle* literature (66) and in the period 1914–1945 (86). The latter period is also defined by the emergence of an increasing number of published women authors, most of which are only now being (re)discovered (87).

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Again, Marija Jurić Zagorka and Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić are the most widely researched women writers within contemporary Croatian literary criticism, particularly owing to their respective positions in Croatian literary history, and their

differing but equally interesting attitudes towards women's creativity and the woman's place in culture and society.

Zagorka's literary texts, mostly novels but also plays, were regularly disparaged by her contemporary male critics, not only because they were popular and therefore inconsistent with the proclaimed cultural values of aestheticism and modernism, but also because they openly displayed their feminist politics (Jakobović Fribec 2008, 24). On the other hand, Brlić-Mažuranić's fairy tales were universally acclaimed (Zima 2019, 7-8), but these seemingly opposing attitudes towards the two writers were in fact the effect and result of the same dominant ideas of the feminine and femininity (Felski 1995).

The Croatian National Revival in the nineteenth century had enlisted the help of women in the fight to establish a national language and culture. Nevertheless, as Dunja Detoni Dujmić points out in her important book on women writers in Croatia, *Ljepša polovica književnosti* [The Lovelier Half of Literature], it soon became clear that women were only needed as patronesses of male artists and educators of children, and that this cooperation was largely pragmatic in nature and short-lived (1998, 16). Most women writers active at the beginning of the twentieth century alternated between teaching, humanitarian work, and writing.

According to Detoni Dujmić, they were torn between literature and pedagogy, between their demanding daily jobs as teachers (or wives and mothers) and their creative ambitions (22). They were encouraged to write didactic stories in the Croatian language for children and other women for the purpose of countering or overshadowing popular German-language novels, but were then – like Zagorka – undermined for doing so (Nemec 1998, 75). Didactic, popular, and children's literature were the only areas of the literary field women were welcomed into, precisely because these were not perceived as true art or as competition to works written by men.

Marija Jurić Zagorka and Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić were contemporaries (Dujjić 2011, 94), writing popular and children's literature in an era that was "historically complex and abounding in events, historiographically polyvalent, ideologically divergent, divided by class and gender, and multi-poetic in terms of culture and literature" (Zima 2019, 13). Although it might be easier to focus on the differences between the two authors and the contrasting reception of their work among contemporary critics and later literary historians, there are also many similarities between Zagorka and Brlić-Mažuranić (Dujjić 2011, 101).

Most of the biographical information on Marija Jurić Zagorka

has been gleaned from her own autobiographical texts as well as from her novel *Kamen na cesti* [A Stone in the Road], which is frequently read as based on her own life (Jakobović-Fribec 2008, 30). Only recently, Zagorka scholars such as Slavica Jakobović-Fribec and the team behind Marija Jurić Zagorka's Memorial Apartment in Zagreb have more strongly relied on historiographical research in an attempt to answer the remaining questions about Zagorka's life. One such question is the date of Zagorka's birth, which had been erroneously cited for decades until Jakobović-Fribec discovered and published the correct date, which was 2 March 1873 (2008, 16).

Zagorka was born into a middle-class family, and her father worked as a foreman at the estate of count Ivan Erdödy.¹ Her family soon moved to Baron Geza Rauch's estate, where she began her education. Later, she went to school in Varaždin and Zagreb. While in Zagreb, she started a school paper, wrote stories and a school play. When she was 17, her parents forced her to marry an older Hungarian railway clerk. Five years later she escaped the oppressive

marriage and returned to Zagreb.

In 1896, she succeeded in publishing her first political article in *Obzor* [The Horizon], a leading Croatian newspaper. Most of her early articles are pro-Croatian and anti-Hungarian in tone. She faced many hardships while working at *Obzor*, such as gender discrimination, contempt from colleagues, accusations of immoral behaviour, political persecution, and meagre wages, but through hard work and incredible persistence Zagorka became the first woman journalist in Croatia. She was also a feminist and a labour rights activist. She organized the first Croatian women workers union in 1897.

In 1903, during the period of people's revolt against the Hungarian ban Khuen Héderváry, Zagorka single-handedly edited *Obzor* for five months while her male colleagues were in jail, and even spent ten days in jail herself. She also organized a women's protest against ban Khuen.

Slavica Jakobović-Fribec interprets Zagorka's intense pride in ending up behind bars as a "feminist demand for equal political acknowledgement, even in criminal prosecution" (2008, 22). Zagorka's time in jail was seen as a "scandalous slipping out of gender roles" (Jakobović-Fribec 2008, 23). She gained international fame as a foreign correspondent reporting from the Croatian-Hungarian Par-

1 Zagorka's biography can be compiled from many different sources, but the most recent and up-to-date information is available at <http://zagorka.net/biografija/>, the official website of Marija Jurić Zagorka's Memorial Apartment in Zagreb, which also houses Croatia's Centre for Women's Studies. If not otherwise indicated, the data on Zagorka's life are taken from this valuable source.

liament in Budapest in 1906. A year later, her articles were published in a book called *Razvrgnute zaruke* [Broken Engagements]. In 1909, she also reported from Vienna on the so-called Friedjung Process.

Even though she had already written two social novels and many plays, mostly satirical or historical, she started writing popular fiction in 1910. This is the year she published the first Croatian crime novel, *Kneginja iz Petrinjske ulice* [The Countess of Petrinjska Street]. Her first popular historical romance, *Tajna Krvavog mosta* [Secret of the Bloody Bridge], was published in 1911 and would later become part of her most famous novel in seven volumes, *Grička vještica* [The Witch of Grič]. Zagorka was also the author of the first Croatian science fiction novel, *Crveni ocean* [The Red Ocean], published in 1918.

As a journalist and author of fiction, Zagorka consistently championed Croatian political independence, fought against German and Hungarian imperialism, advocated women's and workers' rights and promoted social justice (Nemec 1998, 77). Her popular historical fiction was, as Ivo Hergešić described it, "a great school of activism" (quoted in Nemec 1998, 66), but unlike the majority of popular novels in the first half of the twentieth century, Zagorka's romances were not moralistic and pious, but were politically subversive. This is accomplished through the construc-

tion of active heroines, who participate not only in the romance plot but in significant historical events as well. The public activity of her heroines transforms the popular love story into a feminist narrative – largely utopian, of course – about the active role of women in Croatian history (Grdešić 2008, 372).

Zagorka's novels also represent a formal departure from other popular fiction published in Croatia at the same time. Stanko Lasić, in his 1986 monograph on Zagorka, was the first to point out that Zagorka abandoned the traditional, realist nineteenth-century model of historical fiction, and replaced it with what he calls the "freedom principle", which manifests itself in the radical infinity of the narrative structure of her popular novels (1986, 93). A case in point is her novel *Gordana*, comprising 12 volumes and almost 9,000 pages. It is the longest novel written in the Croatian language and one of the longest in the world.

Zagorka also continued pursuing a journalistic career. She was the founder and editor of two of Croatia's earliest women's magazines, *Ženski list* [Woman's Paper, 1925-1938] and *Hrvatica* [Croatian Woman, 1938-1941]. Finally, she published her significant overtly feminist novel *Kamen na cesti* [A Stone in the Road, 1932-1934], about a woman trying to live and work independently in the patriarchal society, as well as several

autobiographical essays cataloguing the many prejudices and injustices she was forced to endure as a woman in the public realm. Marija Jurić Zagorka died in 1957. According to Nemeč, she remains the most popular Croatian writer (1998, 74).

At first glance, it seems Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić's life story could not be more different than Zagorka's.² Her upper middle-class family was one of the most respected in Croatia. Her grandfather was Ivan Mažuranić, Croatia's first "ban commoner", her father Vladimir was a lawyer and politician, and her grandmother Aleksandra was the sister of the poet Dimitrija Demeter (Zima 2001, 13-15). She was born in 1874 in Ogulin, but her family moved to Zagreb in 1882. She mostly had private tutors and started writing poetry in Croatian and French very early, as well as keeping a diary (15-17).

Respecting her family's wishes, she married Vatroslav Brlić, a lawyer from another renowned Croatian intellectual family, when she was 18 years old (17). She moved

2 Dubravka Zima is the most prominent Croatian expert on the life and work of Brlić-Mažuranić. Her books *Ivana Brlić Mažuranić* and *Praksa svijeta. Biografija Ivane Brlić-Mažuranić* [The Practice of the World. A Biography of Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić] should be used as principal references in all discussions on Brlić-Mažuranić. The website of the museum in Ogulin dedicated to Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić's fairy tales, Ivana's House of Fairy Tales, is also a valuable source of information: <http://baza.ivaninakucabajke.hr/hr/o-bajkama>.

to the countryside, to Slavonski Brod, with her husband and they had six children in ten years, two of whom died (19). Fifteen years later, she gave birth to another daughter (25). She struggled with postpartum depression and depression for most of her life, and in the end committed suicide at the age of 64 (Zima 2019, 375).

She took up writing again after her children were born. Her most famous works are the children's novel *Čudnovate zgode šegrta Hlapića* [The Marvelous Adventures of Hlapić the Apprentice] and *Priče iz davnina* [Croatian Tales of Long Ago] a collection of original fairy tales inspired by Slavic mythology and informed by a Christian worldview, which was first published in 1916 and translated into English as early as 1924 (Zima 2001, 22-25). The *Tales* were translated into ten languages in the 1920s and 1930s and earned their author the nickname of "the Croatian Hans Christian Andersen" (25-27).

During the 1930s, she was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature four times (Zima 2019, 349). She was also the first woman to become a corresponding member of the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts in 1937 (351-52).

The reactions of Zagorka's and Brlić-Mažuranić's contemporaries to their work, and consequently their respective positions in Croatian literary history, could not

have been more different. During her lifetime, Zagorka endured many hateful and violent attacks from her male critics, who called her writing “*Schundliteratur* [trash] for peasant women” (Lasić 1986, 101), and also from her political enemies, who labelled her a “disgusting man-woman” because of her non-conforming appearance and attitude in terms of gender (76). Conversely, but originating from the same patriarchal ideal of femininity, Brlić-Mažuranić was described by Ulderiko Donadini as “a true Croatian aristocrat – a mother, an honourable lady”, and her writing an expression of “such heartfelt, feminine charm and elegance; a soul that one senses as a silk handkerchief in the breeze” (quoted in Detoni Dujmić 1998, 39), precisely because she seemed to conform to the same gender expectations. According to Dubravka Zima, Brlić-Mažuranić seemed to “accept, symbolically and explicitly, the class and representational expectations of 19th-century public and private gender politics” (2019, 8). Zagorka, on the other hand, is nowadays seen as the “petite Amazon of Croatian feminism” (Sklevicky, 1996). Brlić-Mažuranić’s class position, higher social standing, acceptance of the role of wife and mother, but also the projection of her maternal duties onto her writing, all help explain her stronger and more stable place (compared to Zagorka) in the Croatian literary canon.

Dunja Detoni Dujmić describes Brlić-Mažuranić’s feminism as “mystical-utopian” and contrasts it with Zagorka’s brand of increasingly politically committed feminism (1998, 209). But even though their concepts of feminism and activism diverge, what connects these two superbly talented women writers is the way their will to write was suppressed as inappropriate for a woman: it was proclaimed unnatural and monstrous in Zagorka’s case (Jakobović-Fribec 2008, 24), and in Ivana’s case interpreted as an extension of her maternal duties (Zima 2019, 249). It is for this reason that Zagorka consistently claimed that she had made no significant contribution to Croatian literature. Her feminine “anxiety of authorship”, as Gilbert and Gubar termed this condition (2000, 7), manifested itself in publicly downplaying her literary accomplishments. For instance, she writes in one of her autobiographies: “I have told my audience from the stage that I am not and never will be a writer, nor have I tried to be one. My profession is journalism. I have written novels only as propaganda against German novels” (Jurić Zagorka 1997, 487).

On the other hand, as Dubravka Zima explains, Ivana’s upbringing instilled in her an “essentialist understanding of a woman’s social and personal duty”, which led her to “neglect and subvert the need to write” (2019, 249). Zima regards Ivana’s firm belief in “women’s du-

ties” and her strong Christian morality epitomized in humility and modesty as two key reasons for suppressing her own will to write (250). In her 1916 autobiography, simply called *Autobiografija*, Brlić-Mažuranić writes:

My great wish that anything I wrote would sometime be published was repressed from a young age by another strong feeling: early in life my reasoning led me to the conclusion that writing did not agree with the duties of a woman. Until fifteen years ago, this struggle between a strong desire to write and this (right or wrong) feeling of duty had completely contained my public literary work. (Brlić-Mažuranić 1997, 524)

According to Zima, “Ivana decided to publish her work only after she recognized it as part of her duties as a mother, i.e. when she wanted to provide her children with suitable literature” (Zima 2013). However, it is interesting to note that in her autobiography she states that her favourite work up until 1916 was *Slike* [Images], a collection of poems for adults. Zima interprets this as a “departure from [...] principle” and an “admission that her desire to write overpowers the guilt caused by her dismissal of ‘women’s duties’” (2013). It seems that Brlić-Mažuranić found herself in a contradictory position typical for women artists in the modern era, torn between her feminine

social role and her own creative impulses, always thinking of her maternal duty, strongly believing it “brings peace to the soul” (Zima 2019, 373), while at the same time realizing that it “was impossible to attain or hold onto this peace believing in the same ideas she had acquainted herself with in the bygone 1880s” (375).

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Contemporary academic research reveals that the life and work of both Marija Jurić Zagorka and Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić is a great deal more complex and contradictory than dated stereotypes of femininity suggest. In recent years, many academic papers and a number of books and edited volumes have been published on both writers, and both authors now have museums dedicated to preserving their legacy: the museum dedicated to Zagorka is located in her Zagreb apartment, and also houses the Croatian Centre for Women’s Studies; Brlić-Mažuranić’s work is celebrated in Ivana’s House of Fairy Tales in Ogulin.

This new research has certainly led to Zagorka’s and Brlić-Mažuranić’s more central position in the Croatian literary canon; however, these changes have also raised more general questions about the place of women writers in the canon. In writing her (already mentioned) book on Croatian women authors, Dunja Detoni

Dujmić aims to establish their contribution to Croatian literature as a whole and does not mean to separate and segregate their work. But it still remains to be seen whether this list of women authors will create a distinct “feminine canon”, or whether it will simply be added to the existing masculine canon as a kind of “appendix”, as Lada Čale Feldman described it (1999, 151), or whether it will actually be integrated into the history of Croatian literature.

The crucial question now seems to be: is it even possible to integrate women writers into the Croatian literary canon without reforming it or doing away with it altogether? And if the value system underlying the canon is annulled, is the concept of the canon still sustainable? Every national literature has authors, both male and female, who cannot be conveniently included in a specific literary period. Indeed, when it comes to Croatian literature, this seems to be the case with the majority of authors since the nineteenth century. Due to specific social, political, and aesthetic reasons, “newer” Croatian literature is continually out of step with European literature. The problem becomes even more complex when we attempt to bring women authors into the fold because, as Gilbert and Gubar have claimed, the chronology of women authors “is not always quite the same as men’s” (2000, xxix), and the similarities between texts

by women writers “cross national as well as temporal boundaries” (xxi). Finally, the question whether the canon can be expanded to accommodate popular literature and children’s literature, which often do not follow the aesthetic tendencies of “high” literature at all, brings us to a standstill. As Kristina Grgić states, simply adding Zagorka’s name to the modernist literary canon would not significantly change her marginal position in Croatian literary history (2009, 32). On the other hand, precisely because of their marginality, her texts have the potential to encourage a critical rethinking of prevailing ideas of modernism and the canon (32).

Although the canon can still be a useful and practical tool, it is necessary to challenge the aesthetic and ideological values underlying its formation and transformation. Rita Felski does precisely this in her seminal book *The Gender of Modernity* when she analyses the different myths of modernity. She tries to see what would happen to our conventional understanding of modernity if we looked at it from the perspective of women writers and women readers, and if we focused on texts by women and about women. Now “those dimensions of culture either ignored, trivialized, or seen as regressive rather than authentically modern – feelings, romantic novels, shopping, motherhood, fashion – gain dramatically in importance”, she

claims (1995, 22). Felski maintains that the “equation of masculinity with modernity and femininity with tradition is only one of various possible stories about the nature and meaning of the modern era” (2).

In the same way, a different story about the gender of Croatian modernity can be told if we choose to highlight popular and children’s authors like Marija Jurić Zagorka and Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić. We might even come to realize that Croatian modern literature is dominantly popular and feminine.

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