

Book Reviews

Couch, R. (trans.) (2008) *Madwomen: The Locas Mujeres Poems of Gabriela Mistral*, University of Chicago Press (Chicago, IL and London), ix + 160 pp. \$25.00 hbk.

There has been something of revival of interest in Gabriela Mistral in recent years, and not before time, because this major Latin American poet is barely known in the English-speaking world. Born in a poor rural area of Northern Chile in 1889, Mistral made her own way as a teacher, moving eventually into cultural politics and then into diplomacy, serving for a time as Chilean consul to Italy and to the United States. Her poetry, her commitment to education for the poor and her feminism made her one of Chile's most revered figures, and when she died in 1954 half a million people lined the streets of Santiago to see her coffin pass. She was the first Latin American writer ever to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, which she won in 1945.

Her extraordinary life-story has tended to dominate critical appraisals of her writing, a point that Randall Couch seeks to redress. In this bilingual collection, his primary concern is to focus on the poetry itself, and *Madwomen* represents a fine editing job, bringing together 26 works from different sources, including some uncollected material that Couch argues represents some of her best writing. The introduction provides basic information about Mistral's career, followed by a useful short essay on her style and the dominant themes of her later work. The book also has good notes on the poems, details of the editor's sources and a select bibliography. All in all, this is a good addition to the scant number of books on Mistral in English.

But will readers unfamiliar with Mistral's poetry have much sense of the greatness of her writing from these translations? That is more doubtful. Couch has certainly tried, and offers an explanation of his technique of using speech stresses in order to convey something of Mistral's sense of rhythm. He is well aware of the difficulties of translating a gendered language into a non-gendered one, particularly where the poet is deliberately playing with gender, and he is also well aware of the technical subversions that Mistral used to give her poetry the illusion of simplicity.

There are moments when Couch manages to convey something of what is there in the Spanish, principally in the dramatic monologues of Clytemnestra and Cassandra, where he manages occasionally to avoid the literalness that dogs most of his translations. For the trouble with this very worthy collection is that most of the poems read badly in English, largely because he has followed the Spanish far too closely, without taking into account the fact that foregrounding patterns differ between languages, as do games played with tenses, pronouns, repetition, and countless other stylistic or syntactical features. So, for example, while Spanish poetry may accommodate a string of lines that begin with a conjunction or a preposition, English cannot, for the result of starting line after line with 'and' or 'but' or 'of' is to weaken the structure and create an impression of childish lack of skill. The first verse of 'La granjera' ('The Farm Woman') illustrates the problem of staying too close to the source language syntax:

Para nadie planta la lila
o poda las azaleas
y carga el agua para nadie
en baldes que la espejan.

Book Reviews

For nobody she plants lilac
or prunes the azaleas
and carries water for nobody
in her looking-glass pails.

Only in the last line is there any attempt to reshape the structures in English, and the result is overkill: the simplicity of the image is awkwardly rendered by an adjectival phrase, which comes after three literally rendered lines. This kind of writing recurs throughout the collection and obstructs our access to Mistral's greatness.

Couch tries to justify that awkwardness by claiming to be following Lawrence Venuti's theory of 'foreignising' the text, that is, retaining elements of otherness that serve to remind readers that what they are reading was written in another language. He would have done better had he followed the theory of poet and translator, Octavio Paz, who sees the role of the translator as the inverse of that of the poet: while it is the task of the poet to fix the signs of the poem in as perfect and immutable shape as he or she can, it is the task of the translator to liberate those signs and recreate them in another language.

Couch has done a good job of drawing attention to these marvellous poems by an unjustly neglected woman poet and his editing deserves praise. But the poetry of this great Chilean writer is still waiting for the translator who can set the works free from 'translationese' and give us English versions that will convey some sense of her magnificent simplicity.

Susan Bassnett
University of Warwick