

REVIEW

of Dr. Valentina Milchova Mitkova's scholarly activities in connection with the competition for associate professor in Professional Field 3.5 Public Communications and Information Sciences (Book Studies, Library Studies, Bibliography – History of the Book), announced by Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in State Gazette no. 92 of 18.11.2022.

By Prof. Dr. Daniela Koleva, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski",
member of the scientific jury

General characteristics of the scholarly production submitted for the competition

Dr. Valentina Mitkova has applied for the position of Associate Professor with a monograph (habilitation thesis) titled "Gender, Periodicals and Modernization in Bulgaria (from the end of the 19th century to the 1940s)", published by St. Kliment Ohridski University Press (2022). In addition to the monograph, the candidate has submitted three studies and nine articles in Bulgarian and English. One of the studies and six articles have been published in reputable international journals of women's history, indexed in the world databases of scientific information Scopus and Web of Science.

The scholarly production submitted for the competition is in full compliance with the specificity of the professional field 3.5 and with the specific topic of the competition – History of the Book. All required documents are present, correctly and completely filled in. As evidenced in the application package, Dr. Mitkova meets the minimal state requirements for the academic position of "associate professor".

Teaching

Dr. Valentina Mitkova has five years of experience as a senior assistant professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, degree programme in Library and Information Sciences Sofia University. Her teaching activities include classes in mandatory subjects such as

“History of the Book”, “Manuscript Traditions in the History of Books and Reading”, “Printed Books and Reading (15-20th centuries)”, which are basic in the professional field and in the more specific thematic field of the advertised position. In addition, the candidate has offered innovative lecture courses at the MA level based on her research: “Gender hierarchies in the field of intellectual activities: women and the literary canon” and “Gender and popular culture in comparative perspective: Eastern Europe and the West”. Both courses are also offered in English. The first of these has been established as a mandatory course for the European MA programme “Matilda: History of Women and Gender”, which is a recognition of the quality of the course, the experience already gained and the potential of the lecturer.

Apart from Dr. Mitkova's own teaching activities, I would like to mention her activities in providing educational resources, namely her participation in the digital library project "Library and Information Science", as well as the translation of most of the texts in volume 2 of the anthology on the history of the book, published by the University of St. Kliment Ohridski (2021).

Research activity

The candidate's research is mainly concentrated in two thematic areas, which she manages to combine in a fruitful and original way: history of the book and women's history. The mutual enrichment of the two thematic fields is already present in Valentina Mitkova's doctoral dissertation on “Authorship and Canon in Bulgarian Literature (1878-1944): Women Authors” (2014). In recent years, Dr. Mitkova has been developing some under-researched aspects of Bulgarian modernization in the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century, namely women's periodicals as a form of modern publicity (which is the topic of her habilitation thesis and most of her articles) in the context of the broader theme of female authorship. Thanks to her feminist-informed approach, Dr. Mitkova manages to convincingly reveal and analyze the intellectual gender hierarchy, its preconditions and mechanisms.

Before focusing on a more detailed examination of these main contributions of the candidate, I would like to mention her participation in several research projects on contemporary cultural institutions in Bulgaria (libraries, museums, archives) on a regional and a national scale. The projects have both analytical and applied relevance.

Evaluation of the contributions in the habilitation thesis

Thematically, Dr. Mitkova's habilitation thesis fits into the fields of women's history and the history of book publishing (esp. periodicals), situated in the broader context of the social history of modernization in Bulgaria. Mitkova situates her research in the interdisciplinary field delineated by women's history and the history of books and printing, thus 'opening' the two fields to each other and filling some gaps in them. I find particularly successful the way in which the author constructs her object of research: she chooses to apply a research optics borrowed from feminist studies to highlight an under-researched aspect of national civilizational efforts, namely the emancipatory and modernizing role of women's periodicals as an "alternative public sphere", or "subaltern counter publics" (Nancy Fraser), which simultaneously appears to be an "instrument of civilizational catch-up" (p. 11). Thus, Mitkova succeeds in rethinking the more traditional problematics of women's history through new perspectives that capture the social and cultural conditioning of key categories such as 'gender', 'woman', etc.

The first chapter sets the conceptual framework of the study. The author examines the concept of gender tutelage in the androcentric literary tradition, i.e., the understanding of women as marginal, secondary, as muses or helpmates to male geniuses, and the resulting gender censorship (p. 25). To this tradition she contrasts feminist literary criticism, mainly of the English-language school, but also its development and adaptation in the Bulgarian context by authors such as M. Kirova, M. Nikolchina, B. Kurtasheva and others. This conceptualization makes it possible for Mitkova to successfully analyze women's writing in Bulgaria with its inherent tension between its civilizing effort and its marginality/subordination ensuing from the authors' gender. She comes to the compelling conclusion that despite the modernizing thrust of the time, the canon "reaffirms the patriarchal concept of male power and authority, tracing literary history as constructed on gender and genre hierarchies" (p. 47). In this regard, I would like to note the author's very good theoretical awareness, as well as her ability to select precisely those perspectives that are applicable to the specificity of the research conducted. She approaches the heterogeneous feminist publicity of the late 19th and early 20th century with the conceptual toolkit developed by Karen Offen, distinguishing between two types of women's periodicals:

‘individualistic’ and ‘relational’ feminist. The former constructed modern female identity through active participation in public and political life and thus explicitly stated its emancipatory agenda. The latter, the so-called “household” publications, eschewed politicization and sought to modernize the female world in its traditional dimensions (home, family, everyday life). The author’s thesis is that, regardless of the type and the respective editorial policy, women’s periodicals worked to turn women into active participants in the construction of the modern image of the country, transforming public attitudes towards the “woman’s question” and emancipating women. Placed in the context of Bulgarian modernization, both types of periodicals have been interpreted as “tools for formulating alternative interpretations of women’s identity, for constructing women’s own narratives in the framework of the dominant androcentric publicity, and – more generally – for expanding the public discursive field in the direction of a historically marginalized social group such as women” (p. 66).

The second chapter narrows the focus on women’s press in the context of Bulgarian modernization. The argument begins with the “literary feminism” of 19th-century authors such as P. Slaveykov and L. Karavelov, who – albeit with traditionalist arguments (in Slaveykov’s case) – justified the need for women’s education “as a key element of the national modernization project” (p. 69). In addition, Mitkova emphasizes the agency of 19th-century women writers as a tool for expanding gender roles. Their social activism manifested itself in the spheres of girls’ education, philanthropic and moral-reformist activities; sponsorships, libraries, lectures, etc. This chapter also traces gender asymmetries in the nation-state in the areas of women’s education, professional advancement, and political citizenship. It examines the emergence of modern feminism as a reaction to women’s exclusion from public life and full citizenship; the formation of the Bulgarian Women's Union and its splits; the neo-traditionalist discourses and the contradictory processes of emancipation and re-actualisation of patriarchal values in the interwar period.

As a transition to the next chapter, this second chapter concludes with a mapping of the media landscape in Bulgaria in the late 19th and early 20th century in terms of its political orientations, causes, communicative strategies, etc. The overall finding is that the educational and enlightenment thrust of the 19th-century nation-formation processes was largely preserved. Alongside this, as a new trend, commercial news

publications similar to the European ones emerged, combining serious and entertainment topics.

The final third chapter, which is the longest and central one, applies the accepted typology of women's periodicals to actual empirical material, examining several periodicals of each type in terms of their strategies for emancipating and modernizing Bulgarian women. Mitkova convincingly unpacks the alternative publicity created by these publications, in which women were authors and readers, political subjects and everyday actors in the construction of the country's modern European image. Here, the author offers a careful and insightful discussion of individual periodicals and their editorial teams. She makes grounded connections between the professional and social profiles of the publisher(s) and the focus of their publications, their main themes, causes, tasks, and messages to their imagined readership. The first part examines several explicitly feminist publications (the first type according to K. Offen, the individualistic ones) that appear to portray women as social and political subjects in the public sphere. Their causes are women's political representation and professional advancement; their topics include girls' education, suffrage, the international women's movement, peacekeeping, and so on. The dividing lines between different feminisms informed by their own feminist or social democratic positions are evident here. As the author notes, however, class demands and sensitivity to economic injustices coexisted with a classless (pan-feminist) intransigence against gender discrimination.

The second part of this chapter focuses on "household" (relational feminist) publications that cultivate a new "women's habitus" (p. 156) in the private sphere. Noting their oscillation between essentializing and emancipatory attitudes, Mitkova refines her analysis to demonstrate their role for the personal emancipation of Bulgarian women, for their becoming active participants in the construction of the country's modern image, and in tangibly transforming public attitudes on the so-called woman's question. I see these findings as a significant contribution to the delineated field of intersection between the history of the book/reading and women's history. The author convincingly demonstrates how the emergence of new authorities (other than the family), the cultivation of certain personal qualities, and the expansion of knowledge on health, domestic, pedagogical, and other topics actually contributed to the readers' awareness of themselves as modern women, and hence to their emancipation.

Particularly valuable in this regard is her astute observation of the changes in the content and topics of some publications, such as the magazine *Bulgarka* (Bulgarian Woman), 1896-1904, influenced by the activation of the women's movement. Wolfgang Iser's thesis of the implicit reader has provided a basis for Mitkova's reflection on the readership constructed by the periodicals (which is particularly valuable in the absence of reception studies), and more generally on reading as a modern cultural practice, which has its gendered specificities. This is a topic that undoubtedly deserves attention and further elaboration.

The monograph achieves yet another objective, which is not central, but is valuable in that it opens up comparative perspectives: the tracing of cultural influences between the Bulgarian national context and those of the neighbouring countries, the explication of intertwined histories, the parallel processes of modernization and cultural exchange.

In conclusion, the habilitation thesis is very well structured, written in good academic style and language, with adherence to the chosen perspective, consistently developed argumentation and convincing interpretations of the empirical material. Along with the other publications submitted for the competition, it develops a new and promising research direction for Bulgarian humanities.

Critical comments and suggestions for future research

Given the merits of the monograph, it is disappointing that there is no proper conclusion to summarize the main theses and contributions of this valuable work, to evaluate the application of the chosen conceptual framework to the specific empirical material, and to correlate the results of this study with those of other similar projects referred to in the text. Instead, the author goes beyond the outlined temporal parameters by extending her research to publications from the communist period – a different and in this case redundant task.

The author's approach to present women's periodicals not only with their main themes but also through the personalities of their editors-in-chief/publishers is well chosen and convincing. However, it is not explicitly outlined and defended as research methodology in terms of e.g. the role of personalities and hence the importance of biographical methods for the study of women's history. I am raising this question to

point to a prospect for future work rather than to a deficit of the habilitation thesis.

Conclusion

Dr. Mitkova's teaching and research activities, as well as her scholarly work overall, and in particular her habilitation thesis, give me a solid reason to support her application for Associate Professor in Professional field 3.5. Public Communications and Information Sciences (Book Science, Library Science, Bibliography – History of the Book).

I declare that I have no co-authored publications with the applicant, I have no conflict of interest and I have found no plagiarism in her work.

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