

Review / Reseña

Horan, Elizabeth. *Mistral. Una vida. Solo me halla quien me ama, 1889-1922*. Santiago: Lumen, 2022. 469 pp.

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What would any literature scholar do if presented with two tons of previously unknown Mistralian materials? How could anyone other than Elizabeth Horan, a world-class Mistralian critic, provide us with such a digestible biography of the first Chilean Nobel Prize winner? In the first volume of a three-book series, Horan immerses us in the details pertaining to the first half of Gabriela Mistral's life, closing at the age of thirty-three—somehow in a wink to the age of Christ at the time of His death and resurrection.

Horan's work is certainly a breath of fresh air when we think about the image of Mistral that had been built and imposed upon us for decades, which I am not sure the poet herself would have approved of or cared too much about. *Mistral. Una vida* is an honest book, a window into the life of a multifaceted woman poet, someone whose life has taken us too long to discover. Even more, this book is the epitome of a phenomenon that has been years in the making: the rescue of Mistral's legacy as a poet who cherished her indigenous origins, her life as a queer author, and her cunning diplomatic tactics. Elizabeth Horan is one of the protagonists of this phenomenon thanks to her lifelong scholarship on Mistral's life and works.

Certainly, writing Gabriela Mistral's life has taken another lifetime to write: Horan's. Any reader can perceive how involved Horan is when retelling the details of the Nobel Prize awardee's life. At times, it seems she is sharing them in overwhelming detail. While this is a welcome approach to getting to know the Chilean poet, it can become somewhat arid for a reader who is not very well versed in her life and works

from prior knowledge. The book is divided into six chapters that immerse the reader in Mistral's adventures, misfortunes, and epistolary relationships with members of the cultural elite, educators, and politicians who would also become her friends, mentors, and benefactors.

After a prologue in which she describes how she gained access to the vast amount of material necessary to compose this volume, Horan starts by dismantling previous monoliths built around Mistral as a figure representing and embodying a certain type of "Chileanness." Not only is this a bold move, but it is also a necessary one. For Horan, the "mestiza" identity that Mistral developed and expressed throughout her life should be celebrated and brought to light. This is an aspect that is central to the whole book.

At the beginning of Chapter 1, "Biografía de sí misma", readers do not find a chronological depiction of the poet's life, but rather a potpourri of relevant information that is necessary to approach the rest of the book. Horan installs Mistral in the midst of the most important historical events that took place in the first half of the twentieth century and highlights "el carácter de testigo directo y bien informado que tuvo Gabriela Mistral, enfrentada como estuvo a tres guerras internacionalmente significativas, con conocimientos y perspectivas obtenidos desde el interior de los conflictos" (32). The wars in question were the two World Wars and the Spanish Civil War. Horan also tells us of the fact-checking process she has gone through by carefully selecting letters and other archival materials to demonstrate that certain events in Mistral's life were actually true. After reminding readers that Gabriela Mistral is a pseudonym for Lucila Godoy Alcayaga—which originated in the combination of two other previous writers' names, Frédéric Mistral and Gabriele D'Annunzio—Horan leads her readers to the Chilean poet's childhood and family genealogy.

Chapter 2, "Algunas cursilerías de Lucila", delves into the young Mistral acknowledging herself as an odd teenager who writes for others just like her. This is the first hint at a queer Mistral who is trying to find herself. By 1907, Horan explains, Mistral writes intimate letters addressed at "un destinatario gramaticalmente femenino, una persona amada pero nunca identificable" (105). At the same time, young Mistral was creating a persona who would later be mistakenly consolidated as a chaste and conservative figure. Horan emphasizes that this was a "pantalla", or a cover, to hide her lesbian interests and remain unapproachable by men. This all took place while the emerging poet was becoming an educator, a path that was not devoid of obstacles and difficulties. In what I would call a proto-feminist move, Lucila Godoy writes an essay where she establishes that economic independence is fundamental for women's development and tears down the belief that marriage protects women

economically. This could have caused quite the stir in a conservative society such as Chile's. Moreover, the writer showed care for the working conditions of the poor and how to ensure their children were granted an education. While working at the girls' school in La Serena in 1907, Mistral secretly enrolled some underprivileged students and faced the school director's rage when this was discovered. Horan makes sure readers are aware that Mistral expressed concerns that were both ideological and political, bringing the poet's political affiliations closer to socialism.

By Chapter 3, "La maestra del Liceo de Niñas de Antofagasta", it is becoming clearer that Mistral understands her own pioneering discursive vocation. First, we find that while the poet was stationed in Antofagasta as a History and Geography teacher, she was the only woman who happened to be published at *El Mercurio de Antofagasta* newspaper. At the same time, Horan reminds us of the poet's spiritual journey. Mistral was not interested in theosophy for general knowledge; she was adamant in incorporating some of its perspectives into her own literature and her educational endeavours. Despite being known as a devout Catholic, Mistral acknowledges the influence of theosophy thinkers such as Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant. As a young woman who was finding her own voice and place in the world, Mistral must have been delighted to read other women's great works. According to Horan, "la libertad de interpretación que proponía la teosofía encendió la imaginación de Gabriela Mistral [...]. Su mescolanza de escritos de viajes, orientalismo y filosofía pasada por el cedazo personal, con una pizca del ritualismo masónico" (176). This combination generated a great foundation for the Chilean poet in her search for the divine in a way that was beyond the teachings of the Catholic church or the Judeo-Christian Bible.

In Chapter 4, "El hermano Gabriela en Los Andes: Tejiendo redes, trazando caminos", we encounter a twenty-one-year-old Mistral who is consolidating herself as a poet after winning the Juegos Florales poetry prize in December for her production "Los sonetos de la muerte". At the same time, a more mature Mistral wishes to leave a legacy in the field of education. As Horan wisely quotes Mistral in conversation with her friend, the Chilean literary critic Alone, "no he dado hijos, pero educo a los ajenos" (188). In this chapter, Horan also shows her readers other facets of Mistral. For example, when referring to her as "esta poeta-dominatrix" (207) for the way she relates with one of her male friends certainly challenges any moderate views imposed on her. Horan provides evidence from countless letters between Mistral and her friends which "desafía[n] las nociones del género binario" (217), emphasising that this aspect of Mistral's life could have been purposely neglected or left out in the past by previous scholars. Horan presents rather explicit remarks from the Chilean poet's

epistles. Regarding the chapter's provocative title, Horan explains it with a moment when Mistral receives a letter from a Masonic lodge member who refers to her as "querido hermano", suggesting an honorary title for her in the mostly masculine world of the masonry. Chapter 4 is certainly one that explores Mistral's queerness further than the previous two, but it is also one that suggests that her nomadic nature would take her many places during her life.

Chapter 5, "La directora en Punta Arenas: 1918-1920", is a challenging piece. Even though there is an emphasis on Gabriela Mistral's relationship with her secretary-turned-artist Laura Rodig, the text jumps very quickly between 1918 and 1948. This zigzag path can be rather confusing for some readers, so this chapter should be read slowly. All the information in Chapter 5, despite the jumps in time, is extremely relevant, so it is understandable that Horan decided to leave it all there. I would wonder if this chapter was more challenging to write than the others so far. In Punta Arenas, Mistral embraces her role as "indigenista" and she shows concern for "los pueblos originarios, muy reducidos" (281), to the point of rendering them invisible. In terms of her educational purpose, she developed a school for adults, meaning that the impact of her plans was deeper and wider in society. Literacy for adults was central to the immediacy of civic life in Chile in the same way that educating all children ensured a better future. Another important milestone during those years in Punta Arenas was the creation of *Mireya*, a journal where Mistral, Rodig, and other thinkers had "una oportunidad de explorar nuevas avenidas intelectuales y artísticas" (308). The jump between 1918 and 1948 is centered on Laura Rodig's return to Punta Arenas. There she reminisces about her two years as Mistral's private secretary between 1918 and 1920 and some of the tensions that emerged between them over the years. The most important one being Mistral's fury when she was informed that Rodig had been commissioned to make a sculpture of her for the Vicuña central square around the time she received the Nobel Prize, in 1945.

Chapter 6, "Camarada y activista en campaña", opens with a memorable event in Chilean literary history: "Un adolescente delgado vio a 'una señora alta, en vestidos muy largos y zapatos de taco bajo' por las calles de Temuco" (329). The young man in question, as we can guess, is future Chilean Nobel Prize awardee Pablo Neruda. Readers also find out that Mistral, once more, had changed her city of residence in Chile. Her mission was like her previous ones, to be principal of the Liceo de Niñas. In Temuco, Horan explains, Mistral was building yet again a different but important profile for herself in order to "representa[r] la vulnerabilidad maternal y la abyección subyacente a asuntos como el de los hijos nacidos fuera del matrimonio y la violencia contra las mujeres" (343). Mistral was turning herself into a saint for

multiple causes. The poet's latest works written in Temuco, "Poemas de la madre", presented a first-person speaker who was sharing the female experience of motherhood in both a sensual and collective way—in which one woman can be all women. Interestingly, Horan insists that "Gabriela Mistral rehúsa marcar el género del hablante" (348), and this is certainly true about a great part of her production, generating ambiguity and discussions among scholars until these days. Surely this poetic gesture goes hand in hand with Mistral's trait of not putting herself under any labels. In other words, Mistral would not abide being subjected to anything or anyone else, as Horan's text has clearly taught us thus far.

Chapter 6 also shows readers how Mistral used her connections to receive invitations to other cities or countries. A novice Mistral enthusiast would have some prior knowledge of the Chilean poet's close relation with Mexico, so from her brief time in Temuco, Mistral was already conceiving more trips and perhaps a life abroad. As Horan rather poetically put it, "Ni su querido valle ni la apacible ciudad colonial de La Serena podían contener ni parar las fuerzas tectónicas de su talento y ambiciones" (367). At the same time, Mistral took a stance in favour of Mexico, a country which had already had its revolution quite recently. By criticising the United States and luring different diplomats and thinkers to support her visit to this country, she got what she wanted. On her way to Mexico by ship on the *Orcoma*, Horan closes the volume with Mistral's note on her stop in La Habana. In a letter to Eduardo Barrios, Mistral complained: "Cuba hierve de escritores de tercer orden y de segundo [...]. Los yankees les manejan la vida. Es cosa que da pena" (389). We now wait for Horan's second volume to discover what it was like for Mistral to land in Mexico, witness the beginning of her international career, and her global consolidation as one of the major voices of poetry ever written in Spanish.

Regarding a general commentary on this book, Horan's precision in telling her readers intricate details of Gabriela Mistral's life indicates that there are, I dare say, no suggestions for missed or further readings. This volume is a much welcomed contribution to Chilean and world literary history. While reviewing books such as this, one may feel inclined to offer the author some ideas that seemed left out or that could have been expanded more. Not in this case. My only criticism is that the signposting does not work too well in all cases; there are significant repetitions, although these do not diminish the gigantic relevance of this volume as a whole. Dealing with different versions of the same story, anecdote, or experience was certainly what Horan had to deal with during the many years she researched Mistral's life and works. Some repetitions in signposting generate a feeling of *déjà vu*. Other than that, this is a flawless piece of some of the most rigorous research work one can encounter these days.

Horan's work is also a masterclass on how to reduce an ocean of information into a readable text, and a believable one. Would we need another Mistral biography in the future? Not for the time being. And as the title indicates: *Solo me halla quien me ama*. That is precisely what we find in Horan's text, a book written generously, where we learn more about Mistral as a poet, as a person. Here also we get to feel all the love and dedication Horan poured into the great enterprise that was the composition of this detailed biography.