

Introduction

The seven related articles in this volume of *Indiana Slavic Studies* doubly counter the dominant focus in Polish Studies scholarship on “Literature penned by Great Men.” Other scholars have complemented the vast criticism devoted to canonized -ewicz’s (Mickiewicz, Sienkiewicz, Różewicz) with analyses of women’s writing; such works as Grażyna Borkowska’s monograph *Alienated Women: A Study of Polish Women’s Fiction, 1845–1918* (2001) and the collection *Women in Polish Society* (1992), edited by Rudolf Jaworski and Bianka Pietrow-Ennker, exemplify this important contribution.¹ The recent volume *Gender and Sexuality in Ethical Context: Ten Essays on Polish Prose* (2005), edited by Knut Andreas Grimstad and Ursula Phillips, combines studies of female and male artists, although, as its subtitle makes clear, all of its essays train on verbal texts.² Our anthology turns the spotlight elsewhere—on the careers, works, and reception of Polish women in the visual and performing arts. The subject of our collection, in both senses, is the Polish woman who has stolen the show—on stage, screen, canvas, and in the media.

In chronological coverage, our essays span the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Beth Holmgren’s historical analysis of the public/professional lives of Polish stage actresses (Helena Modjeska, Maria Wisnowska, Gabriela Zapolska) in the late nineteenth century to Andrea Lanoux’s critical review of the diverse Polish-language women’s magazines that proliferated in Poland during the 1990s. Between these endpoints, Bożena Shallcross limns the innovative psychologized portraiture of painter Olga Boznańska (1865–1940); Elżbieta Ostrowska

¹ Grażyna Borkowska, *Alienated Women: A Study of Polish Women’s Fiction, 1845–1918*, trans. Ursula Phillips (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2001); Rudolf Jaworski and Bianka Pietrow-Ennker, eds., *Women in Polish Society* (Boulder, CO and New York: East European Monographs, Columbia University Press, 1992).

² Knut Andreas Grimstad and Ursula Phillips, eds., *Gender and Sexuality in Ethical Context: Ten Essays on Polish Prose*, *Slavica Bergensia* 5 (Bergen, Sweden: Department of Russian Studies, University of Bergen, 2005).

examines the provocative cinematic career of Poland's premier screen star, Krystyna Janda (b. 1952); Maria Makowiecka delineates the transgressive multimedia art of the award-winning postmodernist Ewa Kuryluk (b. 1946); and Helena Goscilo fathoms the anti-diva self-fashioning and currency of the operatic contralto Ewa Podleś (b. 1952). Halina Filipowicz's essay-afterword to the collection advocates and theoretically elaborates what the preceding entries effectively deploy—a "particularist" methodology that evaluates Polish women's works within the context of their historical experience, cultural traditions, and sociopolitical pressures.

All of the essays necessarily problematize gender and address female creativity from its perspective while examining the nexus of complex issues confronted by highly visible female professionals in an unavoidably politicized context: namely, the devaluation or diffusion of gender politics in a "minor" country obsessed with national oppression; and the consequent professional allure and commercial peril of international models and opportunities for training, exhibition, performance, and promotion.

Nation before Gender

As Filipowicz argues, we cannot presume women's universal subordination even in nineteenth-century Polish society. The public reputation of such heroic women as Emilia Plater, a soldier in the national cause, surely coexisted with the pervasive archetype of the good Polish mother (*matka polka*), the pinnacle of virtuous self-sacrificing womanhood. Yet, as several essays in this volume inexorably demonstrate, social sanction for a Polish woman's rebelliousness and enterprise depended on her patriotic service and applied to specific sorts of public action. The struggle for national solidarity and sovereignty dominated Polish life and sociopolitical thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—throughout the partitions (1795–1918), when the country was more or less occupied by the imperial powers of Russia, Prussia, and Austria-Hungary, and in the postwar era of the People's Republic of Poland, when the nation remained under Soviet control. This struggle empowered women to expressly serve the nation—as teachers, writers, activists, and, in some exceptional cases, soldiers.

But this struggle also prescribed local loyalty and a compliant "off-stage" behavior that particularly handicapped exhibiting and performing female artists. Shallcross notes that even women painters in

nineteenth-century Paris were restricted in terms of their subjects and engagement with human models. Yet the Polish artist Boznańska faced further prohibitions at home in a socially conservative Kraków, where the reigning master of the fine arts, the historical muralist Jan Matejko, privileged national subjects over all others. The Poles' obsession with preserving national culture during their respective occupations narrowed their artists' thematic scope and, to some extent, their stylistic experimentation. To learn the most about their craft, to gain a worldly vantage point on subjects, techniques, and influences, aspiring Polish artists such as Boznańska or Zapolska or Kuryluk necessarily traveled to those world capitals (Paris, New York) that attracted and enabled a cosmopolitan community of their professional peers.

Abiding Polish social prejudices against women's private "improper" behavior—their assertiveness, rebelliousness, ambition, free expression, and sexual liberty—especially plagued female performers. If the transgressiveness of the heroic woman warrior Plater worried relatives and observers, then such actresses as Zapolska and Wisnowska, who played provocative parts offstage as well as on, coped with daunting social censure. As Holmgren surmises in her essay on stage actresses, Modjeska, the greatest star of her day and an ardent patriot, abandoned the Polish stage in good part to escape a society that relished her past scandals and ridiculed her dependent husband. In the fishbowl of an overwhelmingly Catholic, class-stratified, nation-preoccupied Poland, even the most fêted public woman was expected to act virtuous, modest, self-sacrificing, and devoted to home and family.

These expectations, surprisingly enough, endured with relatively little change through Poland's Soviet era, when the state's official guarantee of women's professional equality did not translate into lived reality. Lanoux's brief history of the popular postwar women's magazine *Przyjaciółka* points out its increasingly national focus and harmonious coverage of women's "domestic life, social life, and party loyalty"; on its pages the good woman and the good socialist inevitably coincided. In her analysis of Janda's career, Ostrowska highlights a recurring opposition between the actress's onscreen roles, emblemized by her shift from the driven, rebellious, ambitious, ostensibly "masculinized" Agnieszka-the-documentary-filmmaker in her breakthrough film, *Man of Marble*, and the calm, gentle, supportive Polish mother Agnieszka she plays in the sequel, *Man of Iron*. Once again we view an instance of the warrior maiden summoned contingently to

serve the national cause, in this case to unmask and overcome Stalinist-era oppression. But the good Polish mother is scripted to succeed her at home and over the long haul. Although Janda has managed to juggle a variety of role types in her long successful career, chagrined feminist fans have read her portrayals of the good Polish woman as familiar regression; they plaintively and pointedly wonder whether “the model of an active, thinking, and engaged woman is no longer needed.”

Traversing National Boundaries

It is predictable, then, that Polish women in the visual and performing arts often looked beyond national borders to sate an “unpatriotic” artistic ambition and to win a wider, more cosmopolitan audience. Quite remarkably, especially in light of Poland’s marginalization, the successful careers of Modjeska, Boznańska, Kuryluk, Janda, and Podleś all inestimably benefit(ed) from exportation to Western Europe and the United States. While retaining strong ties with Poland, all five achieved renown beyond its borders, and in some cases (Modjeska and Podleś) realized their professional dreams, however imperfectly, on foreign terrain. Unlike the now universally admired Russian painter Zinaida Serebriakova (1884–1967), who during her prolonged and arduous sojourn in Paris (from 1924 until her death) failed to establish herself solidly as an artist, Boznańska as a resident of that city won countless commissions, invitations to exhibit, and international accolades, including official recognition in the form of prizes, medals, and so forth during her lifetime.

The United States as the New World of opportunity and, in recent years, as the increasingly unpopular but economically most influential super-power, likewise vouchsafed worldwide success for the other four women, starting with the formidable Modjeska, who in a skillful balancing act managed to tailor her self-advertisements to the contrasting gender conventions/expectations on home territory and across the Atlantic. As Makowiecka illustrates, Kuryluk’s fame partially resulted from her being in the right place at the right time: Her stay in the United States coincided with America’s embrace of feminism and simultaneously its fascination with postmodernism, and the portability of Kuryluk’s art, as well as her ability to write her feminist po-novel, *Century 21*, in English (1992; published in Polish four years later

as *Wiek XXI*), rendered her an “exotic” yet accessible “voice from Eastern Europe” ideal for inclusion under two Western -isms.

Had Janda launched her career in Hollywood, she doubtless would have become a mega-star, but even with her screen roles confined to Polish cinema, the success of Andrzej Wajda’s “man of” films (1977 and 1981, both starring Janda) and the West’s politically-fueled promotion of them vouchsafed her international renown. Similarly, while the belatedness of Podleś’s engagement by the Metropolitan Opera delayed international recognition of her formidable vocal and dramatic talents, her frequent concerts in the United States and Europe, as well as her recordings, have assured her a permanent name in the European and American opera’s fickle pantheon. Furthermore, the Internet has facilitated the “globalization” of Eastern European artists, and the current status of both Janda and Podleś may be deduced from their personal Web sites, which anyone in the world with access to an Internet connection can visit.

To varying degrees, Modjeska, Janda, and Podleś also (have) had to navigate the commercial perils of Western or Western-style success, either through their choice of repertoire or management of their public image. Both Modjeska in America and Janda in post-Soviet Poland were forced to tailor their roles to the tastes of a popular audience, often at the cost of innovative serious repertoire and their own artistic development; unlike Podleś, they play(ed) the parts or types that reliably attracted the public. Both actresses prove(d) to be deft improvisers of their public personae in a commercial market (perhaps the real key to their enduring success), with Modjeska adroitly blending “womanly” charm with a projected European gentility, and Janda cleverly alternating between conventional feminine and masculine behaviors in her interviews and Web blog. Podleś, however, has opted for the career of a serious “non-diva” conducted on her own domestic and temperamental terms. Gosciolo details how the contralto’s down-to-earth persona, impeccable professional behavior, and contented family life occlude a glamorous, scandalous reputation and more flashy renown. In all three cases, these very public women (have) protected their private lives and relations through close control of their public face.

Whereas “the abroad” has consolidated and reoriented the careers and reputations of exported individual female talent from the most Western of Eastern European countries, reversing direction—that is, Poland’s importation of Western models, as well as the infusion of

Western funds into Poland's production of print—largely accounts for the transformations and increase in Polish women's magazines. Not only feminist publications such as *Zadra* [Splinter], but also commercial glossies bear the unmistakable marks of Western influence, and (in such cases as *Vogue* and *Marie Claire*) direct adoption of Western values, practices, and images. Yet here, too, Western imports have prompted careful and critical handling. *Zadra's* pointed coverage of world news, contemporary women's issues, and such specialized topics as comparative parenting are designed to counteract a perceived Western overemphasis on professional success, relentless self-cultivation, and conspicuous consumption transplanted in such spin-off publications as *Twój Styl*. Ultimately, the careers of all five women and the diversity of women's magazines since the 1990s illustrate the gains, as well as the potential perils, of "leaving home" to enter world culture while retaining a strong sense of the imperatives cemented into home and *Heimat*. It is no coincidence that Filipowicz's final cautionary "word" in our volume centers on yet another West-East tension for Polish women as subject—the tension between the assumptions and generalizations of Western-oriented "global" feminist analysis and a specialist respect for Polish women's historical and contextual particulars. Both women in modern Polish culture and their historians and critics have had to work wary of undue Western influence.

Acknowledgments

This volume's interconnected foci on Polish women as agent and icon, performer and spectacle took shape gradually, and we are grateful to our contributors for their gallant pursuit of adventurous topics, as well as their cooperation and patience. We are especially indebted to Bożena Shallcross, who helped launch this project with characteristic initiative, industry, and generosity, and to the Russian and East European Studies Center at the University of Pittsburgh for underwriting some of the illustrations. Thanks also to Henry Cooper, George Fowler, Vicki Polansky, and the staff at *Indiana Slavic Studies* for their support and fine execution of the final product. *Slavica* and its serial publications have been critical in maintaining the truly Slavic profile of our field. It is our hope that this anthology will be of interest and use to instructors and students in a wide array of disciplines: Polish history and culture; women's studies; art history; theater history; performing arts studies; film studies. The star subjects of *Poles Apart*

deserve an “academic” tour that crosses regional and disciplinary boundaries with impunity.

Helena Goscilo
Beth Holmgren