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Halina Filipowicz

“Am I That Name?” Feminism, Feminist Criticism, and Gender Studies

This article takes up three overlapping sets of issues. The first set brings into sharper relief current debates about work–family balance and persistent gender inequality. The second set traces the emergence of women’s studies as a scholarly discipline, examines a shift from women’s studies to gender studies, and considers the reception of Western feminist discourse in Poland. The final set builds on the first two by addressing assumptions about the history of Polish women and their supposedly benighted sisters in the West, by questioning the presupposition that archives are passive depositories, and by exploring prospects for future work.

In 1988, the British poet-philosopher Denise Riley published a brilliant, ground-breaking, but now forgotten book, “Am I That Name?” Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History.¹ In it, she draws on the existentialist understanding of what a human being is to offer an alternative to contemporary theories that make a clear-cut distinction between biological sex and a social construction known as gender.² The sex/gender distinction was enormously useful in the 1970s and 1980s as a bulwark against biological determinism, but has developed a life of its own and generated pseudo-problems.³ So how do we extricate ourselves?

Riley’s argument is as follows:

1. The quotation embedded in the title of Riley’s book comes from Shakespeare’s Othello, 4.2.1622. It is a question that Desdemona asks in a scene with Iago.
2. In the words of Joan W. Scott, gender is “a social category imposed on a sexed body.” Scott, Gender and the Politics of History, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 32.
3. The distinction between sex and gender is at times attributed to Judith Butler. In fact, it was first formulated by Robert Stoller in the 1960s and developed for feminist theory by Gayle Rubin in the 1970s. For a history of the sex/gender distinction, see Toril Moi, “What Is a Woman? Sex,
[The category] “women” is historically, discursively constructed, and always relatively to other categories which themselves change; “women” is a volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned, so that the apparent continuity of the subject of “women” isn’t to be relied on; “women” is both synchronically and diachronically erratic as a collectivity, while for the individual, “being a woman” is also inconstant, and can’t provide an ontological foundation. . . . That “women” is indeterminate and impossible is no cause for lament. It is what makes feminism. . . . On such shifting sands feminism must stand and sway.¹

To put these points somewhat differently, history and contingency count. “Being female” is not a fixed category, constant across time and space, but a process, subject to both natural laws and the human production of meaning in concrete historical situations. Accordingly, Riley’s discussion is based on a flexible but rigorously argued concept of identity as relational. From her perspective, therefore, it is vital to acknowledge women’s diversity, rather than define the category “women” by referring to the biological characteristics of sex. Riley does not press the point, but the conclusion seems inescapable that a conception of women as a community or “sisterhood” of like-minded individuals exaggerates the degree to which women are united by common interests, whereas in fact they have been divided by class, racial, ethnic, religious, and ideological barriers.

In invoking Riley’s book, my purpose is twofold. Now overshadowed by theorists like Judith Butler, Riley’s work merits closer attention. Here, within the brief compass of this introductory essay on cross-cultural approaches to debates about gender and feminism in Polish culture, I want to restore to view Riley’s ideas that have received scant acknowledgment in scholarship even after feminist discourse began to move away from the notion that women speak “in a different voice” (to quote the title of Carol Gilligan’s study) or the voice of care and compassion, that they are practitioners of tenderness in an otherwise heartless world, and that their communitarian ethos offers a badly needed alternative to competitive individualism, cutthroat rivalry, militarism, and environmentally destructive technologies.² My primary interest, however, is in situating this special issue of The Polish Review within a broader discursive framework, which Riley’s ideas help to illuminate.

One of my aims in what follows is also to contextualize the special issue for scholars outside the field of gender and women’s studies, as well as to address issues of concern to specialists. This introductory essay, then, is a story about stories, about


5. See Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
versions of evidence and fragments of information that circle around the categories “women” and “men,” “East” and “West.” The essay begins with a recent American debate about working mothers and work-family balance, takes a look at the concept of “having it all,” attempts to hack its way through the thickets of feminist theory, spills over into the reception of Western feminist discourse in Poland, detours through the realm of Polish misapprehensions about the history of women in the West, and ventures into an area cautiously tiptoed around by many commentators. Along the way, it reveals disagreements over the meaning of feminist criticism and gender studies, exposes a variety of doubts and anxieties, and raises questions of evidence and verification, credulity and credibility, national myth-making, and the elusiveness of historical narratives.

In 2012, the Atlantic published a cover story that broke readership records for the magazine. Titled “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” it was written by Anne-Marie Slaughter, the first female director of policy planning at the State Department. In the article, she describes her experience as a working mother during her two years in Washington and explains why she has chosen to leave her high-powered position at the State Department and return to her former life as a professor at Princeton University. At the same time, however, she addresses a larger problem in hopes of launching a public debate about it. This problem—persistence of inequality between men and women—is exemplified by “an empirical fact: having a family is a career barrier for women in a way that is not for men.” Slaughter acknowledges the success of the women who have made it to the top, but points out that “the success of the few cannot be the answer to the problems of the many.” Although women have made “tremendous progress . . ., thanks to generations of feminist women and men, we need another round of deep social, economic, political, and cultural change to achieve real equality and to be able to draw on the full talents of both halves of our society.” Slaughter explicitly identifies what has to change in American society if Americans truly believe in equal opportunity for all women.

In Poland, the media have reported on Slaughter’s article, but commentaries about it have been replete with heavy-handed moralizing on both sides of the political divide. For example, a leading feminist journalist has disregarded a complex of social and political proposals put forth in the article and instead reduced Slaughter’s multilayered argument to a mix of self-reproach and self-sacrifice: “[A]n important female director in the State Department of the United

8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
States moved from her prestigious and well-paid position to academic lecturing in order to have more time to raise her children."\textsuperscript{10}

In the United States, Slaughter’s article unleashed a flood of controversy. Thousands of readers responded online and via more traditional media with comments on issues such as work–family practices and policies, the lack of support for women’s lifecycle choices, the vast wage gap between men and women, gendered division of domestic labor, privilege, role models, and feminism. Many of the readers shared Slaughter’s concern about the social realities that still block women’s paths and make gender equality elusive. They argued that the United States needs a workplace culture that would not “treat all employees as if they were ‘men’ in a historic sense, with wives at home taking care of their lives.”\textsuperscript{11} At the same time, however, even sympathetic readers were quick to throw vitriol at Slaughter for using the phrase “having it all.” The dispute over this phrase has revealed how little many Americans know about feminism. In feminist discourse, the idea of “having it all” refers to a scenario in which women have the same choices as men do when it comes to balancing professional and family duties. But most of Slaughter’s readers understood the phrase “having it all” literally, as a synonym of “having everything you want.”

This misunderstanding suggests that it has become standard practice to equate feminism with the narcissistic pursuit of individual self-fulfillment. As the feminist activist Ruth Rosen argues in her commentary on Slaughter’s article, the media, along with self-help publications, have played a major role in distorting the goals of feminism.\textsuperscript{12} The feminist movement sought to create gender equality at home and at the workplace and thus to improve the lives of all women. In the 1970s, however, the media began to misrepresent feminism by recasting it into a training program for superwomen. This misrepresentation was reinforced by self-help publications such as Helen Gurley Brown’s best-selling \textit{Having It All} (1982) that

tried to teach every woman how to achieve everything she wanted in life. . . . Millions of women first heard of the [feminist] movement when they read about the different clothes they needed to buy in order to look like a superwoman and the therapy they needed to become a confident and competent superwoman. Self-help books and magazines ignored the economic and social conditions women faced and instead emphasized the way in which each individual woman, if only she thought positively about herself, could achieve self-realization and emancipation.\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{thebibliography}
\item 13. Ibid.
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This kind of advice, as Rebecca Traister points out in her response to Slaugher's article, is a “booby trap” because it “sets an impossible bar for female success and then ensures that when women fail to clear it, it’s feminism—as opposed to persistent gender inequality—that’s to blame.”

Notwithstanding the reductive view of the goals of feminism, propagated by the media and self-help publications, the 1970s marked an era in feminist thought. The feminist movement that reemerged in the West in the late 1960s galvanized scholars in several disciplines to question widely established disciplinary assumptions about gender-neutral methodologies and to develop methodological approaches and analytical procedures that incorporate feminist concerns. Their research concentrated on uncovering women's activities and experiences, examining discriminatory discourses and practices, and investigating how and to what ends societies conceptualized the signs of sexual difference. For scholars who studied and taught literature, the feminist project involved “exposing the sexual stereotyping of women” in both literature and literary criticism, “demonstrating the inadequacy of established critical schools and methods to deal fairly or sensitively with works written by women,” subjecting works by male writers to a feminist scrutiny, recovering “previously lost or otherwise ignored works by women writers,” and reconsidering established canons. For example, in her 1981 study of a narrative by an eighteenth century American author who used the pseudonym Abraham Panther, Annette Kolodny detailed two areas that are of particular interest to the feminist scholar working on literary and cultural history: “(1) How do contemporary women’s lives, women’s concerns, or concerns about women constitute part of the historical context for this work? and (2) What is the symbolic significance of gender in this text?”

The pioneering work of scholars such as Kolodny, Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Elaine Showalter laid the foundations for a new academic discipline, women’s studies, that won, however grudgingly, institutional recognition and support in the 1970s and 1980s.

Using a wide array of material, feminist scholars have documented women’s lives and achievements that seemed to have vanished from the culture’s radar. They have also revealed how representations of women have been infused and informed by contemporary assumptions about the proper relations between men and women and about the (allegedly) intrinsic nature of women or their (supposedly) typical female traits; the representations have thus served as metaphors for the inequitable...
social and political order they have meant to justify. But the discipline of women's studies does not stand still; its boundaries are continually in debate and flux. Some of the most dramatic changes occurred during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when African American scholars and poststructuralist theorists burst onto the feminist stage. The former demonstrated how inextricably interwoven questions of race and gender are; the latter performed revisionist interventions into the conceptual framework of feminist discourse. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity has proved to be particularly influential; her books now function for many feminist scholars as both a philosophical buttress and a formal model. Butler's argument is “that there need not be a 'doer behind the deed,' but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed.”

It follows from this that “what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment”; that is, the so-called gender identity is created through a series of sustained social performances “compelled by social sanction and taboo.” Playing on the double sense of the word performance, she concludes that instead of being understood as a role being acted out, gender must be understood as an act that constructs the reality of gender entirely through its performances, as in a performative speech act. Butler's primary target, however, is the dependence of feminist identity politics on the idea of “normative” binary heterosexuality, which she deconstructs by deploying her concept of performativity. She argues that “normative” binary heterosexuality is not innate but an illusion, a fiction, a “phantasmic construction.” She thus suggests that sexual identity itself is a kind of performance in its own right.

Butler's performativity theory has sparked vigorous polemics and wide-ranging discussions among feminist scholars. For example, Nancy Fraser argues that Butler overestimates the emancipatory potential of gender-bending performative possibilities in everyday life and underestimates the ease with which the concept of gender performativity can be depoliticized. In other words, if gender identity is just a self-invention or a form of performance, why is it so difficult to overcome gender discrimination and inequality in societies? Toril Moi points out that Butler's analysis brilliantly obscures the fact “that a sexed human being (man or woman) is more than sex and gender, and that race, age, class, sexual orientation, nationality, and idiosyncratic personal experience are other categories that always shape the experience of being of one sex or another.” And J. Hillis Miller, in a Derridean

critique of the philosophical underpinnings of Butler’s theory, exposes its cavalier misapprehensions and conceptual slippages, although he acknowledges that her book, *Gender Trouble*, “has done much good in the world” by “making a space for gay and lesbian sexuality and gender.”

The early 1990s, moreover, saw the emergence of gender studies as an academic discipline. Many scholars have welcomed it as an opportune expansion of the field of inquiry. From their standpoint, merely reading for representations of women is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for practicing feminist criticism in ways that would challenge entrenched collective presumptions about the sexes. Because gender studies recognizes that men have historically held themselves to ideas of masculinity as unrealistic and coercive as anything they have imposed on women, this discipline, its supporters have argued, is indispensable to the efforts to understand more completely how and why gender continues to be constructed in ways that perpetuate patriarchy and homophobia. Other scholars have been skeptical about “the lure” of gender studies. Despite major strides forward, as they point out, the deck is still stacked against women outside the “charmed world” of the academy, hence it is crucial to preserve the discipline of women's studies that maintains a focus on women's experiences and concerns. Still others find that the discourse of gender studies is “less critical” than feminist scholarship in addressing persistent inequality between men and women. To compound the problem, the current realities of the American academic marketplace are such that graduate students and junior faculty rarely profess feminist sympathies, if they want to survive in the profession and perhaps even to attain academic prestige. While critical studies that contain words such as “gender,” “body,” and “sexuality” in their titles are welcome, the term “feminism” is not.

In postwar Poland, feminist discourse and activism met with little interest until the early 1990s. Although Gabriela Mycielska and Maria Leśniewska’s Polish translation of Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist classic, *Le Deuxième sexe* (The Second Sex,
1949) had been published in 1972 and Teresa Hołówka’s cutting-edge anthology of Western feminist scholarship, *Nikt nie rodzi się kobietą* (One Is Not Born a Woman), in 1982, both publications fell on the deafest of deaf ears. In the 1990s, by contrast, the pace of feminist inquiry became fast and furious. The intensity of this inquiry can be gauged by the fact that the scholarly journal *Teksty Drugie* (*The Other Texts*) published a triple issue on feminist literary criticism in 1993 and a double issue on the same topic in 1995; both issues were edited by Anna Nasiłowska. Urszula Chowaniec, among others, attributes the explosion of interest in feminist theory and activism in post-1989 Poland, on the one hand, to the “disappointment with the new Polish democracy,” haunted and hampered by patriarchal habits, and, on the other, to certain freedoms, notably of expression, assembly, and association, made possible by the fall of communism. At the same time, she makes an intriguing point that when Polish academics and activists turned to Western feminist theory in the early 1990s, they were initially “somewhat intimidated by the long western feminist tradition.” One would have thought that the last thing one would find in the Polish reception of Western feminism would be a sense of insecurity, but that was not the case.

Over the past twenty years, programs in women’s and gender studies have sprung up at a number of Polish universities, and the vigorous scholarly activity in these disciplines has been decisive in recovering neglected or forgotten writers, works, and aesthetics, as well as opening established classics to more complex analysis and richer appreciation. Admittedly, nonbelievers in feminism—as well as many agnostics, fence-straddlers, and soft-core dabblers—have been quick to brand this body of scholarship as (among other things) reductive, essentialist, superficial, positivistic, deterministic, caught in the trap of dogma, and insulting. Judging by the flood of scholarly books, journal articles, research projects, and conferences devoted to questions of gender and sexuality, however, the rich gamut of hostile responses has not been particularly effective. In Polish literary studies, gender and sexuality are now among the hottest topics. Some sixty years ago, a typical scholarly article might be titled “Class Struggle in Zygmunt Krasinski’s *Nie-Boska komedia* (*The Un-Divine Comedy*).” Thirty years later, “Window Imagery in the Later Stefan Żeromski” was a more predictable topic. By the turn of the century, articles with titles like “Engendering Henryk Sienkiewicz” and “Queering Maria Dąbrowska” arrived on the scene. Passions once invested in the images of the urban poor in Bolesław Prus or the question of line-endings in Adam Mickiewicz have been gradually transferred to women’s and gender studies.

27. Ibid., 13.
28. For an overview of scholarship on women and gender in global Polish studies (i.e., both in Poland and outside it), see Urszula Chowaniec, Ursula Phillips, and Marja Rytkönen, eds., *Masquerade and Femininity: Essays on Russian and Polish Women Writers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 16–27.
In the early 1990s, I joined the Polish project in feminist literary criticism by contributing articles to the special issues of Teksty Drugie and other publications. Then and now, my transnational perspective has involved a good deal of questioning and reenvisioning of “our established canons, our aesthetic criteria, our interpretive strategies, our reading habits, and, most of all, ourselves as critics and as teachers.”

This is an appropriate point, then, to consider the prospects for future work and to suggest at least some areas that call for sensitive and open-minded debate.

As might be expected, a great deal of cross-cultural work still needs to be done, but this enterprise seems to have reached an impasse. For almost two decades, Polish gender and women’s studies was characterized by a strong pro-Western orientation, as scholars in Poland were eager to catch up with Western scholarship. The reception of Western feminist traditions was enthusiastic but indifferent to the political, social, and cultural contexts in which they arose and uninterested in the disagreements, polemics, and debates that have been part and parcel of women’s and gender studies in the West. Instead, the diversity of conceptual and analytical frameworks in Western feminist criticism was buried under the deceptively attractive notion of women’s and gender studies as either a coherent system or a unified set of methodologies. Recently, the tide has turned, and it has become fashionable to raise one’s voice against the hegemony of Western, and particularly American, feminist discourse.

The call to resist this alleged hegemony is motivated by the imperative to respect local specificity and to study gender, or the social understandings and conventions surrounding sexual difference, within particular historical and cultural contexts. Undeniably, gender does not exist as an isolated category, but must be considered in relation to the strains and stresses of local time and circumstance. However, the project of countering universalism with local difference often reflects a lack of familiarity with local specificity elsewhere. For example, for many feminists outside the United States it comes as a surprise to find that the American women’s movement...
was born out of resistance to racism, war, and male chauvinism, in that order. It was antislavery activism that was crucial to the rise of the women’s movement in the United States. For Lucretia Mott (1793–1880), a Quaker and the foremost white female abolitionist in nineteenth-century America, the two reforms—abolitionism and feminism—were inextricably related, part of the same impulse to liberate the individual from the bonds of tradition, custom, and organized religion. Both her abolitionism and her feminism grew out of her conception of liberty, in which women’s rights were part of a larger struggle for human rights.32

The call to resist the hegemony of American feminism also raises the question: which American feminism? In other words, this call collapses the broad diversity of feminist discourse in the United States into one convenient monolith, even though the imperative of respecting group specificity has been central to American feminism since the 1960s. Some groups within American feminism have sought to resist liberal universalism by asserting their group’s specificity and exposing the universal ideal as fragmented and fluid, an assemblage of particulars. These groups have struggled no longer simply to incorporate the marginalized, but to alter the terms of inclusion itself. Other groups have struggled to balance separatist and integrationist modalities.

Something else, more fundamental, is also at issue. The East-versus-West claim is based on a perception that history has made us acutely conscious of what divides us rather than what we share in common in feminism. It should not be particularly surprising, then, that some essentializing assumptions have crept into Polish gender and women studies. Admittedly, it would be merely an error to fail to notice that Polish women did far more than wait and weep while their men fought unjust regimes in the past. Although expected to be docile and submissive, they not only kept things running on the home front, but also assumed many responsibilities in the struggle for national liberation—as fundraisers, nurses, couriers, gunrunners, and soldiers. However, it is a myth to claim that the fight against foreign oppression broke down the barrier between separate “spheres”—a public sphere for men and a private one for women—in Poland, or to suggest that patriarchy fell apart after the 1863 uprising because with equal danger came equal opportunity.33 In truth, women


in Poland, as elsewhere, lived in a society where the concept of gender difference was firmly established and gender inequality was the norm. Yet the fantasy that Polish men and women were equal partners at a time when other societies continued to maintain the public/private divide and to shield women from the hurly-burly of public life has taken deep root in Polish gender and women’s studies because it conveniently casts Polish women as foil to their (supposedly) benighted sisters in the West. The seductive appeal of this fantasy has not been lost on Polish women. Recalling her coming of age in communist Poland during the 1970s, Eva Stachniak remarks, “Our mothers kept reminding us that Polish women were always heroic, reliable partners of their men . . . . Our role was sacred . . . . We felt powerful, worshiped, and we never looked behind the myths.”

Another area that merits careful and open-minded discussion is the massive investment of Polish gender and women’s studies in explorations of the modern period. As a result, the gender dynamics of Polish literature and culture prior to the nineteenth century remains largely uncharted territory in scholarship, apart from publications documenting either misogynist attitudes or the gender-bending achievements of elite women who attained affluence and power. At a time when the Enlightenment continues to be “one of the most debated themes of contemporary intellectual discourse,” a reductive and misleading dichotomy—a conventional opposition of an Enlightenment of unoriginality, emotional restraint, and decorum versus a Romanticism of aesthetic daring, sublime emotionality, heroic individualism, and edgy, threshold-crossing subjects—dominates the thinking about Polish culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nowadays the meaning of the Polish Enlightenment has shrunk and narrowed so much that its cultural history appears uncontroversial, unproblematic, even boring. It is not particularly surprising, then, that the Enlightenment has become one of the most neglected periods in

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Polish gender and women’s studies. This neglect is unfortunate. For example, the fixation with the rationality of the Enlightenment misrepresents trends in eighteenth-century moral philosophy that resorted to the sway of the passions, the language of sentiment and feelings, and the heightened appreciation of sensibility. Moreover, although masculinity and femininity were key categories of Enlightenment thought, we know surprisingly little about the Polish Enlightenment’s debate about gender.

It is time to return to Riley’s book with which I began this essay. One way of summarizing her argument would be to say that restoring the visibility of women throughout history is not enough because the very category “women” ought to be historicized, that is, treated as an object of historical study. Riley’s approach has not always been welcome because it refuses to regard the category “being female” as static and monolithic. Instead, her argument is that this category is precarious and porous rather than self-contained and stable, that there is no singular or essential identity, and that supposedly fixed identities are in fact always in flux. This argument opens in turn a series of questions for which I have no ready answers. How do we talk about identity without either resorting to the biological determinism of essentialist paradigms or sidelong the experiences of those who continue to feel the social effects of identity through gender-based discriminatory practices? Does all discovery of women’s achievements need to be linked to biology and anatomy or predicated on sexual difference? Has the celebratory focus on a few exceptional women not occluded discriminatory practices in societies, while feeding into nationalist myths and self-congratulatory fictions? How do we resist the temptation of linear readings between the biological sex and/or the sexual orientation of the author and his or her work? Is the misappropriation or superficial acceptance of the vocabulary of feminist theory not in fact a strategy, however unintentional, in the service of its domestication aimed at canceling out the potentially disruptive effects of feminist critique?

Feminist and queer theories have, if nothing else, taught us to be suspicious of the deterministic connections between the author’s biological sex or sexual orientation and the constructions of gender in texts. A case in point is Coleridge’s poem, “Christabel” (left unfinished and first published in 1816), long one of the most celebrated English Romantic poems. The poem’s central incident is the seduction of its eponymous heroine by a lamia-like older woman—a slithy sorceress called Geraldine. And yet the lesbian element in this poem by a male author has remained invisible for almost two hundred years. As Terry Castle has asked, “How could one not talk about such a poem as a sapphic fantasy, and an ultra-bizarre one at that? Yet only very recently has it ever been examined as such, as if for two centuries nobody took note of, thought worthy of comment, or even saw, what now seems to be (in the ubiquitous phrase) that large pachydermous entity staring us in the face, the elephant in the room.”

In Polish literature, such elephants staring us in the face in works by straight writers are legion, yet they continue to be overlooked. One can only hope that a later generation of readers, born into some critically altered social and perceptual world, will be ready to see those elephants, to recover them from an unconscious collective limbo, and, as it were, to “catch up” with the secret life of literature itself.

Meanwhile, I hope that this special issue of the journal will help to aid, abet, and document the growing interest within Polish studies in gender issues in general, and feminist concerns in particular. The articles that follow do not progress forward to tell a sequential story. They offer, rather, a series of perspectives on the heterogeneity of critical perspectives in gender and women’s studies. Perhaps it is not too much to hope that the special issue will inaugurate a new stage in the debate about gender and feminism in Polish culture.