

Michał Krzykowski, Zuzanna Szatanik

Gender Studies in French

Romanica Silesiana 8/1, 22-30

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

MICHAŁ KRZYKAWSKI, ZUZANNA SZATANIK
University of Silesia

Gender Studies in French

They are seen as *black* therefore they *are* black;
they are seen as *women*, therefore, they *are*
women. But before being *seen* that way, they
first had to be *made* that way.

Monique WITTIG 12

Within Anglo-American academia, gender studies and feminist theory are recognized to be creditable, fully institutionalized fields of knowledge. In France, however, their standing appears to be considerably lower. One could risk the statement that while in Anglo-American academic world, gender studies have developed into a valid and independent critical theory, the French academe is wary of any discourse that subverts traditional universalism and humanism. A notable example of this suspiciousness is the fact that Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and a Subversion of Identity*, whose publication in 1990 marked a breakthrough moment for the development of both gender studies and feminist theory, was not translated into French until 2005.

On the one hand, therefore, it seems that in this respect not much has changed in French literary studies since 1981, when Jean d'Ormesson welcomed the first woman, Marguerite Yourcenar, to the French Academy with a speech which stressed that the Academy "was not changing with the times, redefining itself in the light of the forces of feminism. Yourcenar just *happened to be* a woman" (BEASLEY 2, my italics). On the other hand, however, feminine gender nouns such as "écrivaine," "auteure" or "professeure" have become popular in Quebec, Switzerland, Belgium as well as France, regardless of the rigorous dictates of the French Academy. In fact, it appears that the Academy's fight for linguistic purity is as futile as Don Quixote's fight with windmills: quite recently *Le Monde* titled an article devoted to the new member of the Academy "L'écrivaine Dominique Bona élue à l'Académie française" ("Woman-Writer Dominique Bona Elected to

the French Academy”). The authors of the text clearly ignored the Academy’s warnings against “authoritarian and systematic feminization which might lead to a variety of linguistic incongruities.”¹

We do realize, obviously, that the complexities inscribed within gender studies do not boil down to a linguistic problem (although it is language that the discipline construes as an important instrument of domination, or, to quote Foucault, as a dispositive of power). At the same time, this linguistic dispute does point to a set of issues (institutional, cultural, political, and historical) that one trying to pursue gender studies in French is bound to face. For instance, the gender studies that were developed in the United States under the Third Wave Feminism were inspired by the French Theory, and their primary goal was to subvert essentialism inherent in the French Feminism. Regardless of the national designation, however, the terms “French Theory” and “French Feminism” have never had their equivalents in French.

The French Theory, as Judith BUTLER claims in her introduction to the second edition of *Gender Trouble* (1999), is a strange American construct (29). Prior to its emergence, a number of texts in French were “imported” to the USA and read as a coherent whole, rather than a haphazard combination of — sometimes strikingly different — perspectives. Moreover, the peak of popularity of French theorists in the States occurred when in France they were associated with “la pensée des sixties” (“the thinking of the 1960s”) and hence considered out of date. It was in Anglophone Western cultures that the French Theory gave rise to gender studies, women’s studies, postcolonial studies and cultural studies. Texts by Foucault or Derrida provided a theoretical background for a new discourse which was politically and socially oriented and inscribed within Reagan’s concept of “America’s back.” Concurrently, these very authors were largely ignored in France which celebrated the neo-humanistic tendencies characteristic for the republican discourse. In his *Démon de la théorie* Antoine Compagnon rightly asserted that theory in France had become institutionalized; what needs to be stressed, however, is that this institutionalization accompanied the turning away from the “ruinous effects of anti-humanism”² (FERRY and RENAUT 36) which occurred in France of the 1980s.

As much as “French Theory” is a convenient albeit simplifying construct, “French Feminism” is, to quote Christine DELPHY, “pure invention” (19). Delphy was the first to protest against the illusory “Frenchness” of “French Theory” apparently embodied by its “Holy Trinity” — Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray (whereas the first two of these authors, in fact, refuse to participate in debates on feminism or call themselves “feminists”). The broad and unifying label of

¹ “[...] la féminisation autoritaire et systématique [qui] pourrait aboutir à de nombreuses incohérences linguistiques.”

² “[...] des effets ruineux de l’anti-humanisme.”

“French Feminism” “prevents French feminists from referring to themselves as French feminists” and offers them “an image that is profoundly irritating” (DELPHY 16). Delphy, a materialist feminist herself, complains that the so-called French Feminism does not exist outside of the debate taking place in the USA, whose sole aim is to critique its own essentialist principles (that masculinity and femininity are universal qualities and exist independently of cultures; that one can differentiate between feminine and masculine features of character; that psyche precedes culture and thus is independent of society; and that sexual difference is the only significant difference among people because it determines any physical or psychological differences).

All in all, “French Feminism” seems to be a highly ambivalent term which originates in commentaries on French or non-French authors (Freud, Lacan, Derrida) written within Anglo-American universities. Ambivalent or not, however, “French Feminism” brought serious changes to Anglo-American academia: through the rejection of its premises, gender studies theorists were able to re-read French theory and establish their own theoretical principles.

For this reason, speaking of gender in the French context leads to confusion, as well as a feeling of slight embarrassment. Why would anyone discuss gender now, when it has already lost its subversive power? Doing *études de genre* now may actually seem like a step backwards, whose aim can only be to re-vision French feminist texts that inspired the development of the field. Yet, when one bears in mind that these texts have often been neglected by the French academia — with its humanities departments focusing mostly on the history of literature — *études de genre* can also be perceived as a chance: they allow for a better understanding of their origin which is, to quote Derrida, always already different.

While conceiving the original call for papers for the present issue of *Romanica Silesiana*, our main goal had been to put a special stress on the intellectual phenomenon described by Edward SAID as “travelling theories” (226). In fact, as the editors originating from two different intellectual backgrounds and currently working in the same Department of Canadian Studies and Literary Translation, we have always been struck by the effects of the circulation of texts and ideas between France and the USA, which clearly shows that speaking of texts by the same author is not necessarily speaking of the same texts. At the same time, we were wondering whether the renewal of gender studies in France went hand in hand with a similar phenomenon in other Romance countries, that is Italy and Spain. Judging upon a great number of submissions to the 8th issue of *Romanica Silesiana*, we are certainly contented that gender studies out of English-speaking academes have become a subject of a heated discussion. For the first time in history, in fact, the articles will be published in two volumes. The present, first volume of *Gendered Constructions* comprises texts in English and French and is divided into six chapters, whereas the second volume (to be published shortly) consists of essays in Spanish and Italian.

Chapter one of the first volume, titled “From Gender to Genre. France and Its Institutions” is composed of four articles. The opening paper, Patrick Farges and Anne Isabelle François’s “L’institutionnalisation des *Gender Studies* en France : un processus à plusieurs niveaux” is concerned with the problematic transfer of gender studies to France, which goes beyond the academia and is implicated in the political and ideological context. The focus of the paper is on the discussion which arose in France once the concept of “gender” was introduced to school textbooks in 2011, in compliance with a new STV (biology and geology) program published by the Ministry of National Education.

Controversies associated with the reception of gender studies in France are also the subject of Anne-Charlotte Husson’s “‘Théorie du genre’ et controverses d’égalité en France.” Her semantic and lexical analysis shows that the word “gender” has often been used in debates on gay marriages, in result of which the neologism “gender ideology” and its variety “gender theory” formed an ideological construct used for political aims.

In “REGINE or ‘Gender Goes Legal in France’” Mathias Möschel claims that whereas social sciences and humanities seem more open to gender studies, French legal academy has been particularly resistant to changes. The author expresses hope that the situation might shift together with the implementation of a new project called REGINE.

The last paper in this chapter, Tymon Adamczewski’s “Selective Import: French Feminist Theory and Anglophone Critical Discourses” discusses the representations of French Feminism in Anglo-American theoretical discourses. In line with this introduction, Adamczewski first situates French Feminism within the field of French Theory — a notion created outside of France and limited to works by Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray — and then comments on how more contemporary approaches go beyond this reductive label.

Chapter two of our collection, entitled “Sexual Bodies,” comprises articles by Tomasz Swoboda, Arnaud Genon, and Audrey Dobrenn. Swoboda’s “Constructions de la subjectivité dans la littérature érotique féminine” is devoted to ways of construing femininity in women’s erotic/pornographic literature. Contemporary women’s pornography, as the author asserts, is simultaneously anti- and pro-pornographic, which allows it to transgress the borderlines of feminist discourse. Ultimately, its goal is to create a new image of femininity which parasitizes on a stereotypical pornographic image.

Arnaud Genon’s “Pudeur et impudeur comme modalités de construction d’un corps politique chez Hervé Guibert” focuses on representation of the body in Hervé Guibert’s writings. This body — exposed and desiring, or emaciated and suffering from AIDS — is presented in two modalities: modesty and immodesty. In Genon’s interpretation, however, the body is also political and rejects all heterosexual and homosexual models, seeking sexualities and sensualities which go beyond the cliché identity markers.

The last paper in the second chapter, “L’objectif homonormatif de Virginie Despentes. *Bye Bye Blondie*, du texte à l’écran” by Audrey Dobrenn, analyses the movie adaptation of Virginie Despentes’s *Bye, Bye Blondie*. The film, directed by the writer herself, transforms the heroes of the novel, Eric and Gloria, into Frances and Gloria — a lesbian couple. In showing lesbian desire, Despentes goes beyond the heteronormative code, and experiments with new possibilities which may mark the beginning of a new aesthetic or genre.

The third chapter in the collection, entitled “Playing with Gender,” is composed of five articles, the first three of which use queer theory in order to subvert the fixed definitions of gender and sexuality. The opening paper, “Hushed Bodies, Screaming Narratives: The Construction of Trans-Identity in 19th- and 20th-Century French Literature” by C.J. Gomolka, discusses the works of five French authors, spanning the 19th and 20th centuries. Gomolka’s starting point is a conviction that the question of queer or trans-identities has been overlooked in French literary studies. In an attempt to fill in this gap, Gomolka proposes an analysis of French literature in communication with contemporary queer theory.

François-Ronan Dubois’s “Pertinences et apories d’une lecture féministe de *La Princesse de Clèves* au regard de la théorie *queer*” is devoted to Madame de La Fayette’s most famous novel. The author uses queer theory to examine the dynamic relation between power and eroticism. In his analysis, the heroine of the story ceases to be a victim of the patriarchal society, and becomes an active agent in heterosexual matrix, who participates in the construction of the figure of her oppressor, Monsieur de Nemour.

The third article in this chapter, Iwona Janicka’s “Homosocial Bonds and Narrative Strategies in Adolphe Belot’s *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme* (1870),” is built on the assumption that the narrator’s — Adrien’s — narrative is influenced by homosocial bonds with the implied readers of the text (the male reading public). The paper shows how, through the choice of specific narrative tools, the anti-lesbian message of the text is subverted, and construes the narrator as a male lesbian playing the role of the 19th-century husband.

In “Constructions du genre dans le roman policier «anti-norme» de Fred Vargas” Andrea Hynynen analyzes the representations of femininity and masculinity in Fred Vargas’s criminal novels. The author believes that Vargas, on the one hand, plays with the rules of the genre, and on the other, creates characters which subvert the stereotypical gender roles. In a similar vein, Agata Tęcza’s “The Professional versus the Amateur. A Case Study on Spanish Female Detectives and Their Role in the Masculine and *Machista* Organizations on the Examples of Selected Texts” investigates two Spanish detective novels — Arturo Pérez Reverte’s *The Flanders Panel* and Alicia Giménez Bartlett’s *Serpientes en el paraíso*. Tęcza focuses on two different representations of femininity (“the amateur” versus “the professional”) and discusses them in the context of the masculine world of detectives and police officers.

The fourth chapter of the collection, titled “Gender and Feminist Discourses,” begins with Buata B. Malela’s “Discours littéraire et pensée féministe. De Simone de Beauvoir à Simone Schwarz-Bart.” Malela draws the reader’s attention to the relationship between the Guadeloupien writer’s perception of the social relations between the sexes, and the feminist thought represented here by Simone de Beauvoir, Suzanne Lilar and Monique Wittig. The relationship is particularly interesting when one considers Schwarz-Bart’s complex identity — of a woman, an Antillean, a French, and a feminist.

In “Femmes et francophones. Pour un dépassement des marginalités dans les constructions genrées,” Hélène Barthelmebs analyses literary constructions of femininity in the works of three francophone women writers: Assia Djebar, Alice Rivaz and Anne Hébert. On the basis of theoretical texts by Irigaray, Cixous, and Chodorow, the author contends that to be a (doubly marginalized) francophone woman writer is in itself a transgressive act. Literary space becomes a conquered space in which women’s identities are constructed.

Christina Brassard’s “*Folle* de Nelly Arcan (2004): les ‘déterminations biologiques’ dans la construction identitaire masculine” discusses a heteronormative, masculine identity on the basis of the analysis of a masculine character’s discourse as presented by a female narrator in Nelly Arcan’s *Folle*. Brassard compares the discourse of biological determinism (represented by Nancy Houston) to the discourse of gender, in which gender is viewed as a result of a “stylized repetition of actions” (Judith Butler).

An opening paper of the fifth chapter titled “Gender in Culture and Society” is Adeline Gargam’s “Les âges de l’intelligence féminine dans les textes scientifiques et littéraires du XVIII^e siècle français : éléments d’une théorie androcentrique.” The paper examines scientific texts of the Enlightenment, as well as their influence on philosophical and literary works of the period. The examination shows how these discourses helped in creating the androcentric vision of women’s intellect which is dependent on their ontogenesis. Voltaire or Marivaux do not deny women the reasoning capability, but make it a fully masculine disposition.

Tomasz Wysłobocki’s “Quelle femme pour la République? Le théâtre révolutionnaire et les représentations de la féminité” discusses representations of femininity in the French theatre during the Reign of Terror (1793—1794). The theatre at that time aimed to popularize new morality shaped by Jacobean politics, which is why the images of a woman it promoted served this specific ideology. Apart from the cult of marriage and family life, the theatrical plays also dealt with the matter of divorce, which can, as Wysłobocki asserts, be interpreted as a step towards women’s liberation from patriarchal power.

The last article in this chapter, Anne-Marie Dionne’s “La féminité dans la littérature de jeunesse de langue française au Canada. Une analyse de l’incomparable Mademoiselle Charlotte” analyses young adult literature of Que-

bec. Gender roles promoted by this kind of writing serve, as the author claims, to shape a child's sexual identity. By means of scrutinizing Dominique Demers's figure of mademoiselle Charlotte, Dionee shows that novel models of gender roles help one to go beyond sexist stereotypes still very much present in the literature of the genre.

The last chapter in the collection, "Literary Representations of Gender," comprises eight articles. Magdalena Zdrada-Cok's "*Syngué sabour et Maudit soit Dostoïevski* d'Atiq Rahimi: le féminin et le masculin dans le monde intégriste" examines gender relations in the society dominated by religious fundamentalism in two novels by Atiq Rahimi. The analysis connects the construction of femininity and masculinity in the novels with the political, social, moral and spiritual reflection on Afganistan troubled by internal war.

In "*Kamouraska* d'Anne Hébert et *Une si longue lettre* de Mariama Bâ. Un même 'discours' féministe?" Mbaye Diouf stresses the similarities between two novels: Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska* and Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*. Although the author compares very different cultures — Quebecois and Senegalese — gender relations presented in the two works are strikingly congruent.

Transgression of cultural norms and rebellion against domination which accompany the writing process are a subject of Anna Ledwina's "Les états de femme et la construction de la féminité dans la fiction durassienne." The paper discusses three novels by Marguerite Duras: *Un Barage contre le Pacifique*, *Moderato contabile* and *L'Amant*, whose heroines, as Ledwina suggests, are the author's alter egos. Their femininity is constructed through a conscious process of subverting the existing power relations.

Richard J. Gray II's "Sexual Politics: Mapping the Body in Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant*" discusses the representations of Vietnamese landscape in Duras's novel which, as the author claims, is a sexual "coming of age" story. Gray asserts that different locations represent various stages in the protagonist's development. The analysis is built on the assumption that the geographical places illustrate the sexual politics of the novel.

"Cela's Men and Woman: Multiple Masculinities versus One Femininity in *Mazurka for Two Dead Men*" by Anna Pilińska discusses the constructions of femininity and masculinity in Camilo José Cela's novel. Whereas representations of masculinity in the story vary, femininity is associated primarily with sexuality and promiscuity. Through erotic encounters depicted in the novel, different facets of masculinity come to the fore.

Ewa Drab's "Femininity in the Position of the Oppressed in Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*. A Comparison to Nelly Arcan's *Putain* in Canadian and Quebec Literary Portrayals of Contemporary Womanhood" analyses representations of femininity in the novels by Ricci and Arcan. The characters of the mother (Ricci) and Cynthia (Arcan) are related in that they both are oppressed by their social environments and the patriarchal order.

Alice Le Trionnaire-Bolterauer's "L'image de la 'belle Gitane' dans la littérature romantique allemande et française" focuses on the figure of the Other embodied by the character of a beautiful gypsy woman in the texts by Mérimée, Hugo, Brentano, and von Arnim. The author shows this representation as a construct of a Eurocentric, masculine mind which allows the Romantic authors to project their dreams and fears on the exotic woman. Fascinating and terrifying, the beautiful gypsy is an epitome of femme fatale.

The last article in the collection is Magdalena Cebula's "'Le mythe du supermâle': entre la France et le Maghreb dans *La vie sexuelle d'un islamiste à Paris* de Leïla Marouane." The paper is devoted to Marouane's novel, in which Maghreb's sexual code is confronted with representations of masculinity in the discourses of the West. The protagonist, struggling with his identity, searches — in vain — for eternal masculinity.

The articles collected here approach gendered constructions differently. Theory-centered papers, discussing gender in social and institutional contexts, are accompanied by literary analyses mainly focused on different ways of shaping and transgressing gendered identities. They all show that gender studies, notwithstanding the loss of its momentum as a distinct field of research within the American academia, still offer a wide range of stimulating tools in literary and cultural studies³.

³ In September 2012, when we were perfecting our CFP for the present volume, we could not have had any idea that the term "gender" would soon make an astonishing "career" in the Polish public discourse. At that time, the word was hardly ever used outside of academe, and within academe, it seemed a safe enough concept which had long lost its air of controversy. We were, therefore, quite disoriented when in the last months of 2013, the Polish Catholic church, together with some of the most ardent representatives of the political Right, started to refer to "gender ideology" whose aim was to destroy "the family" through the "promotion" of homosexuality, abortion, and "the culture of death." Now that this collection is about to be published, a new Parliamentary Committee "Stop Gender Ideology" has already started tracking "gender" down in all areas of the public sphere, and hardly a day goes by without a politician or journalist producing new "facts" about gender.

Admittedly, the difference between the academic discourse of gender — which this book represents — and the one which fertilizes the political show is quite large. We have made the decision to avoid mucking around the pool of cynicism and bad faith which permeates the present debate. We do believe we have other fish to fry rather than involve in the media overkill which keeps descending into madness. At the same time, we do realize that gender has always had a political dimension and we are still willing to assume it, even though it has become more difficult these days, when the term has been appropriated by far-right politicians.

Works cited

- BEASLEY, Faith E., 2006: *Salons, History, and the Creation of 17th Century France. Mastering Memory*. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2.
- BUTLER, Judith, 2005 : *Trouble dans le genre*. Traduit de l'anglais (États-Unis) par Cynthia KRAUS. Paris, La Découverte.
- COMPAGNON, Antoine, 1998 : *Démon de la théorie*. Paris, Seuil.
- DELPHY, Christine, 1995 : « L'invention du 'French Feminism': une démarche essentielle ». *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*. Vol. 17, N° 1, 15—57.
- FERRY, Luc, RENAUT, Alain, 1988 : *La Pensée 68. Essai sur l'anti-humanisme contemporain*. Paris, Gallimard.
- SAID, Edward, 1983 : "Traveling Theory." In: *The World, the Text and the Critic*. Harvard University Press, 226—237.
- WITTIG, Monique, 1992: "One Is Not Born a Woman". In: *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Websites

- <www.academie-francaise.fr/reponse-au-discours-de-reception-de-mme-marguerite-yourcenar>. Accessed 15 September 2013.
- <http://www.academie-francaise.fr/la-langue-francaise/questions-de-langue#38_strong-em-fminisation-des-noms-de-mtier-de-titres-etc-em-strong>.
- <http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2013/04/18/l-ecrivaine-dominique-bona-elue-a-l-academie-francaise_3162500_3246.html>.