

# TRANSLATING FEMINISM

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## ABSTRACT

### **Translating feminism**

Pointing to manifold and long-lasting connections between feminism and translation, the article first presents a selection of multilingual writers (Narcyza Żmichowska and Deborah Vogel), translators (Zofi a Żeleńska and Kazimiera Hłakowiczówna) and translation commentators (Joanna Lisek and Karolina Szymaniak) to ask why the work of early Polish feminists is neglected. It seems that one of the causes might be the current colonization of Polish feminist discourse by English. For ethical reasons it would be advisable to recommend a certain sensitivity to locality in feminist translation studies and a recognition of regionalism in cultural studies. The theoretical considerations include two issues: the potential hermaphroditism of the Polish language when its users are women and the “scandal of ‘another’s speech’,” a polyphony and a constitutive lack of autonomy (a feminist discussion of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory). From this vantage point it becomes clear that linguistic choices made by the translator are always individual one-off solutions which resist homogenization, paradigms or (theoretical) generalizations.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Polish feminist discourse, the English language, sensitivity as a category, regionalism in cultural studies, politics of translation, rhetoric of nondifferentiation, interlingual transgression, Narcyza Żmichowska, Zofi a Żeleńska, Debora Vogel, Kazimiera Hłakowiczówna

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Thinking about the canon of feminist texts is problematic because feminist literary strategies clearly demonstrate that feminist writers position their own writing on the periphery and emphasize their rebellion against academic discourse templates and against academic hierarchies. Nevertheless, the increasingly close relationships between the institutional knowledge and feminist criticism force the writers to compromise and assume conformist positions. Yet, the most inspiring aspects of feminist criticism can be found on the fringe: in forgotten archives, at readings, in daring criticism, in novels and poetry volumes which repossess national and identity

myths. Through careful reading one can become increasingly convinced that it is worth gathering courage to think differently from others in order not to repeat the necessary – according to the academic standards – set of footnotes, to imagine other historical, literary and philosophical narratives. As it is easy to stray from a narrow path onto the main tract, it is perhaps advisable to look for a female guide.

For over a century, the works and biography of Narcyza Żmichowska have not been included in the literary canon. For many scholars Żmichowska is only the author of *Poganka (The Heathen)* which is mostly interpreted in the context of a sex scandal.<sup>1</sup> Her passionate search for scientific foundations of morality; her discussions with friends about the books of Taine, Buckle, Darwin, Renan, Comte, Mill; her programme of self-education which included geography, physics and chemistry; her advocacy of the positivist movement in the times of the flourishing Romantic thought in Poland did not have followers for decades:

At that time in Poland Żmichowska was unique, almost monstrous. Moreover, she was too self-sufficient, too independent, she did not know how to become subservient to any camp. For the white she was red, for the red – white; for some too much of a poet, for others too much of a positivist, a male head with a female heart who was in advance of her epoch in literary terms and who offered concentrated thought in new forms (Boy-Żeleński 2007: 15–16; trans. A.M.).

These mutually exclusive juxtapositions indicate the accusations which are often levelled against the emancipation movement: feminists are too liberal and progressive, too much engaged in left-wing activities; they write in an incomprehensible way, confuse hierarchies and overstep the boundaries of genres, disciplines and decency. A suffragette is a monster who consists of incompatible parts, does not fit the framework and is dangerous. This comparison, used by Boy-Żeleński with a well-meaning distance, foregrounds the danger which awaits those ahead of their own epoch: first they are rejected and then forgotten. The metaphor of the silence of women in the public sphere can be confronted, to my mind, with the vision of the culture which is deaf to the voice of women. Those carefully attended to and considered serious discussants are not the ones with unconventional ideas and knowledge, but the ones supported by power, authority, positions or institutions. The misogynist repository contains nu-

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<sup>1</sup> For more details about the reduction of Żmichowska's works to one text which, as a matter of fact, hardly refers to her literary programme, see Ritz 2005: 44–59.

merous examples that prove how irritating women's opinions are: nagging wives, boorish mothers-in-law, women with venomous tongues, shrews and gossips are well-known stereotypes in literature, art and film (Gilmore 2001). The rudimentary assumption that only the position of power guarantees the essential value of expressed opinions contributed to the fact that women chose pseudonyms or hid their own identity under their husband's name. If women wanted to participate in serious debates, they had to persist in soliciting the attention of a friendly and heedful society. The postulate addressed to women that they should finally voice their opinions can be added to the postulate that we should learn to listen to the excluded, although their statements may often sound irritating.

Paradoxically, the reception of Żmichowska is rather scanty due to the excess of her interests, which she would describe in her correspondence, rather than due to the excess of materials. For years the exchange of letters was for her a substitute of scholarly debates, lectures and polemics. Her political activity and banishment from Warsaw prevented the author of *Czy to powieść?* (Is This a Novel?) from participating in creative discussions and meetings with her friends, her "family by choice." Ultimately, cut off from those with whom she could share her scientific passions, she suffered from depression and her creative writing was hindered (Winklowska 2004). What she left us are only a few unfinished novels, but we do have several hundred pages of letters. Her philosophy of dialogue, the ceaseless confrontation of her own judgements with opinions and knowledge of others, cannot be classified as any specific school of literature or art movement, also because to Żmichowska knowledge did not constitute information, but a thought process, ceaseless restructuring of principles and one's own outlook on life. Her priority was never to stop, never to adopt a defensive position and surround herself with a wall which would cancel out any doubts.

In *Narcyza Żmichowska: feminizm i religia* (Narcyza Żmichowska: Feminism and Religion) Ursula Phillips makes Polish readers aware of the great significance of Żmichowska's knowledge of English, which allowed her to join the main currents of the European thought – the context which helps to understand her works. Therefore, it is not surprising that the author of *Książka pamiątek* (The Book of Memorabilia) constantly encouraged her students to learn English, also due to the valuable "stories written by women." Phillips explains in detail the activities of the Enthusiast Women Association and emphasizes their interest in French and English ideas rather than in conspiracy and patriotism. Żmichowska's good knowledge