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POD REDAKCJĄ:

EWY GRACZYK

ELWIRY KAMOLI

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Spis treści

Przedmowa	7
Magdalena Bulińska Sexing the magic, genre and gender in magical realism	9
Anja Lange Are there women, really? How, when, and under what circumstances and with what strategies did women authors in Ukraine join the privileged and the recognized	19
Anna Gaidash Age awareness in modern (non)canonical US women drama	28
Maryna Zuyenko Women writers and the English baroque literature: Katherine Philips and her prophency	36
Katarzyna Nadana-Sokołowska George Sand: kanonizacja, dekanonizacja i rekanonizacja w literaturze francuskiej a wizerunek pisarki w kulturze polskiej	41
Maja Garlińska Wyjść z cienia. Rzecz o dwóch zapomnianych damach XIX wieku: Zofii Klimańskiej i Ludwice Śniadeckiej	49
Magda Cierieszko Co z tą Zapolską? Niepewny status autorki <i>Kaśki Kariatydy</i>	58
Elwira Kamola Dlaczego warto pamiętać o dokonaniach Emmy Dmochowskiej?	65
Ewa Iglewska Wyliminowana ze względu na płeć? Genialna czy obłąkana? Portret Marii Komornickiej vel Piotra Odmieńca Własta	74
Aleksandra Majak (Współ)odczuwanie Virginii. <i>A room of one's own</i> a teoria afektywna	83
Joanna Baum Zjawisko Cherubiny de Gabriak na tle feministycznych idei epoki srebrnego wieku	93

Anna Gaidash

Age awareness in modern (non)canonical US women drama

The present paper aims at defining the role of plays by American women dramatists in the US theatrical mainstream. Though there are pleiades of women playwrights in the 20 century with a group of indeed talented and prolific authors, their names seem to be little known for public. One of the reasons explaining such exclusion can be competition-based Western values and specificity of theatrical experience as mechanisms which provoke it. Seemingly both realities are interdependent. In terms of the first assumption (competition-oriented Western society) it is relevant to refer to Marsha Norman's 2009 article that shares statistics in its prologue:

According to a report issued seven years ago (2002) by the New York State Council on the Arts, 83 percent of produced plays are written by men – a statistic that, by all indications, remains unchanged. This past season (2008–2009), theatres around the country did six plays by men for every one by a woman, and a lot of theatres did no work by women at all, and haven't for years.¹

Norman's prognosis is far from optimistic – the playwright believes that "If it goes on like this, women will either quit writing plays, all start using pseudonyms, or move to musicals and TV, where the bias against women's work is not so pervasive"².

Bias is at guilty, Marsha says, for literary managers and artistic directors have an anxiety of choosing plays by women taking into account income, funders, and patrons. The financial domain is directly connected with the place and role of theatre in the last century. Western culture in the field of entertainment saw a number of innovations within that span of time ambiguously influencing the theatrical well-being. As a result, critics mention such a state of vexation of play-going as the "high prices of tickets"³ or "hot pursuit of dollars"⁴. Not impartial about American theatre Robert Brustein argues: "With the new technology, we

¹ M. Norman, *Not there yet. What will it take to achieve equality for women in the theatre* TCG.org. November 2009, <http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/nov09/women.cfm> [accessed 25.05.2015].

² *Ibidem*.

³ R. Brustein, *Who needs theatre: dramatic opinions*, New York 1987, p. 1.

⁴ G. Rogoff, *Vanishing acts. Theatre since the sixties*, New Haven 2000, p. 274.

are told, our living rooms will have the capacity to transform into multiple entertainment parlors, wired to bring films, literature, games, sports events, even our banking and shopping transactions onto a gigantic home screen"⁵. Despite his self-fulfilling prophecy Brustein believes in immediacy of theatre as its single advantage over film and television⁶. Confirming drama's ability to re-invent itself Gordon Rogoff regards theatrical reviewing as risky because of its corruption: "The old complaint was that reviewing took special pleasure in denunciation"⁷. Similarly, Rogoff's assumption echoes Brustein's considerations of critics and reviewers who "represent the major failure of contemporary American theatre"⁸. In terms of responsibility of (re)creating canon in Melpomene's art both analysts attach importance to those who evaluate plays and performances. However Brustein treats this subject cautiously: "[...] only history will be able to measure how much responsibility they [critics and reviewers – A.G.] bear for the lapses and failings of the art they continually belabor"⁹.

In establishing the distinction between canonical and noncanonical works (as hegemonic and antihegemonic values) John Guillory presumes that they are "by definition mutually exclusive"¹⁰ in his fundamental book *Cultural Capital: the problem of literary canon formation*. Putting into question the following propositions (1) canonical texts are repositories of cultural values; (2) the selection of texts is the selection of values; (3) value must be either intrinsic or extrinsic to the work, Guillory says that if "[...] judgments cannot be reconciled under a universal norm or value" it is school in broad meaning that is liable for justifying "the institutionalization of different canons – canons of the uncanonical"¹¹. This statement spurred the study of the issue of age awareness that seems to be a meaningful element in a number of plays of US women dramatists, among them Pulitzer-prize winners. The goal is to trace down the similarity in patterns of ageing dynamics, portrayals of the elderly in plays and poetics of the literary representations of later life as apparent canonicity of the discourse of ageing. Although there are some more female writers for stage whose works abound in old age characters, the aim of this paper is to study the attitude towards age awareness and particularly ageing in two works of the turn of the century – a noncanonical (less acceptable and less recognized) and a canonical (approved and authoritative). Therefore the materials for analysis include Marsha Norman's *The laundromat* (1978) and Margaret Edson's *W;t* (1995) correspondingly.

⁵ R. Brustein, *Who needs theatre...*, p. 1.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

⁷ G. Rogoff, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

⁸ R. Brustein, *Reimagining American theatre*, New York 1991, p. 14.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ J. Guillory, *Cultural capital: the problem of literary canon formation*, Chicago 1994, p. 20.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

Famous for her *'night, Mother* (1983) and *Getting out* (1977) Norman is the representative of the powerful generation of women playwrights of the 1980-1990s alongside Beth Henley, Wendy Wasserstein and others. Such renowned critics as Ch. Bigsby, L.G. Brown, R. Brustein, and K. Burkman extensively study Norman's works not to mention an array of young researchers. Apart from frequent references to Norman's rebellious article concerning the contemporary meaning of the canon there is one more Norman's quote explaining the absence of female authors among the writers who are claimed to be great, outstanding and important: "Women's plays are boring, people say. They have too much talk and there's no event. They choose "soft" subjects and aren't aggressive enough about promoting themselves and their work"¹².

An author of a range of plays, Marsha Norman is best known for the received awards. The dramatist asks: "Are those other seven plays of mine worse than *Getting out* and *'night, Mother*? Well, how would you know? You haven't seen them. They are perceived to be »girl plays«, concerned with loss and death, love and betrayal, friendship and family. But no guns"¹³. Norman's one-act play *The laundromat* fits perfectly this description, introducing loss and death, love and betrayal, friendship and family with no guns. The action takes place in a self-served laundry or laundromat in the middle of the night in the late 1970s. Alberta, a reserved woman in her late 50s, is the protagonist. The woman comes to the public space so late demonstrating that she wants to be alone. Alberta doesn't wake the sleeping attendant being obviously prepared for her night adventure. In stark contrast to the late adult, Deedee, a wreck of a 20-year-old woman, suddenly appears. The further subject line is built upon a situation wherein the younger character as a catalyst undermines older woman's self-restrained manner and lets Alberta's release her grief and bereavement for her deceased husband out. Deprived of grandparenthood, Alberta experiences her widowhood even more bitterly. As gerontologists observe, "Widowhood marks a key life transition in the lives of many people, particularly women who have a longer life expectancy than men. As such, the experience of widowhood is an important health and psychological issue for older women"¹⁴.

It is the feeling of loneliness which Alberta tries to overcome. One of the ways is to set the mirror in front of oneself while watching TV, another one is to travel to a faraway laundromat – to feel the presence of other (though absent) living beings. In fact, Alberta refuses to accept the loss of her life-time partner telling about him in present tenses, first mentioning to Deedee that he is out of town.

¹² M. Norman, *Not there yet...*

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ S. Feldman, H. Radermacher, F. Lorains, T. Haines, *A research-based community theater performance to promote ageing: is it more than just a show?* „Educational Gerontology” 2011, no. 37, p. 889.

Intergenerational contact between older and younger women initiated at the beginning of their conversation often refers to age awareness. When Deedee finds out Alberta's occupation, young woman becomes embarrassed:

DEEDEE: Why did you quit... teaching.

ALBERTA: Age.

DEEDEE: You don't look old enough to retire.

ALBERTA: Not my age. Theirs.

DEEDEE: Mine, you mean.¹⁵

Taking into account the *Age discrimination act* (1967) prohibiting "the firing of employees because of their age before they reach the mandatory retirement age"¹⁶, Alberta allegedly adjusts positively to her role of retiree in spite of the death of her husband. This character of older adult can be an example of "successful ageing"¹⁷ prototype whose mental health breaks ageists' stereotypes of the later life as "too rigid or feeble-minded [...] senile or boring"¹⁸.

Getting back to the stress of loss which can be singled out as a marker of the process of ageing, two stories both retold by Alberta, are worth mentioning, which illustrate her attitude towards death in *The laundromat*. The first one narrates about passing away of Alberta's mother:

ALBERTA: It was a blessing, really. There was quite a lot of pain at the end.

DEEDEE: For her maybe, but what about you?

ALBERTA: She was the one with the pain.

DEEDEE: Sounds like she was lucky to have you there, nursing her and all.¹⁹

"Not too long ago", Robert S. Feldman writes, "talk of death was taboo"²⁰. That's why older woman is reluctant to display her emotions to her younger counterpart. In this short exchange of lines one can observe the constructing or modeling of what there may be "at the end": pain or blessing.

The second story is another sort of Alberta's memories:

¹⁵ M. Norman, *The laundromat / Third and oak / Four plays*, New York 1988, p. 65.

¹⁶ J.W. Santrock, *Lifespan development*, New York 1999, p. 515.

¹⁷ Although the concept of successful ageing remains controversial and elusive even today, there is in fact a huge amount of literature on how it should be defined and measured since its first conceptual definition by Havighurst (1961) as a condition of older people experiencing maximum life satisfaction without being a costly burden to society (M. Tam, *Understanding and theorizing the role of culture in the conceptualization of successful aging and lifelong learning*, „Educational Gerontology" 2014).

¹⁸ J.W. Santrock, *op. cit.*, p. 528.

¹⁹ M. Norman, *The laundromat...*, p. 66.

²⁰ R.S. Feldman, *Understanding psychology*, New York 1999, p. 466.

ALBERTA: I had an Aunt Dora, who had a rabbit... who died. I cried then. I cried for weeks... I helped her bury him... in the next few weeks, Aunt Dora got quieter and quieter till finally she wasn't talking at all and Mother put her in a nursing home. DEEDEE: Where she died.

ALBERTA: Yes.²¹

It is noteworthy that both reminiscences finish with the act of nursing which links passing away with birth thus completing the life cycle. These two stories reflect Alberta's contemplation of a fearful topic, inevitable for every living being. "Yet", according to R.S. Feldman, "awareness of its [death's – A.G.] psychological aspects and consequences can make its inevitable arrival less anxiety-producing and perhaps more understandable"²².

The poetics of ageing is encoded in the play's chronotope: the night time is symbolically associated with the last phase of human life-span and organically with death. As for the self-served laundry, supposedly public space, it becomes a kind of mirrored heterotopia in Foucauldian²³ meaning, where privacy of rather intimate procedure is under the question because of established hierarchy and code of behavior²⁴. Deedee is a distorted mirror reflection of Alberta: on the one hand, both of them have the same surname Johnson and no children; on the other hand, they are antithetical to each other in terms of age, education and temper. This binary opposition of older and younger characters is one of the most productive in the discourse of ageing observed in a number of other plays of women dramatists.

If one can debate whether it is Alberta or Deedee who is the protagonist in *The laundromat*, there are no doubts about the leading role of Vivian in a highly rated drama *W;t* by M. Edson. Vivian, bearing similarity to Alberta is an educated woman, moreover she is a Ph.D., professor of 17th century poetry, specializing in the *Holy sonnets* of John Donne. Aged only 50 Vivian cannot be categorized as a representative of late adulthood, which begins in the sixties²⁵; she is rather in the last phase of her middle years. Built in the manner of "play-within-the play" *W;t* reveals Vivian as a narrator and as a main character. The dramatic action revolves around Vivian's struggle against her terminal disease in which she eventually becomes defeated. The Pulitzer-prize winning play which was adapted into a television film, is the subject of a number of studies by scholars and medical practition-

²¹ M. Norman, *The laundromat...*, p. 74–75.

²² R.S. Feldman, *op. cit.*, p. 467.

²³ M. Foucault, *Of other spaces* (1967), trans. J. Miskoviec, "Diacritics", Spring 1986, p. 22–27.

²⁴ K. D'Costa, *Spin cycle. The social realm of the laundromat* <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/anthropology-in-practice/2013/01/21/spin-cycle-the-social-realm-of-the-laundromat/> [accessed 25. 05.2015].

²⁵ J.W. Santrock, *op. cit.*, p. 485.

ers. The latter ones report that "[...] the realistic and emotive experience of drama facilitated their learning experience of end-of-life care in the production of *W;t*"²⁶. In terms of the discourse of ageing it is relevant to consider the relationship of the protagonist with her mentor – octogenarian E.M. Ashford, doctor of philosophy, who influenced Vivian's life to a great extent. It was E.M. Ashford's way of learning and teaching that became dominant for Vivian's career: "And I know for a fact that I am tough. A demanding professor. Uncompromising. Never one to turn from a challenge. That is why I chose, while a student of the great E.M. Ashford, to study Donne"²⁷.

Vivian's mentor appears twice in the play – the first encounter flashes back to the times when the protagonist is still young and eager to imitate then middle-aged Ashford. At the end of their conversation, that is mostly a critique of young student's endeavors to analyze John Donne's sonnet, Ashford tenderly says: "Vivian. You're a bright young woman. Use your intelligence. Don't go back to the library. Go out. Enjoy yourself with your friends. Hmm?"²⁸. Nevertheless, this so unexpected piece of advice remains ignored.

The second time the doctor of philosophy, now aged 80, enters Vivian's holo-tropic mind being obviously visible only to the protagonist. In constructing the image of an octogenarian, the playwright uses rather grand/motherly overtones conflicting with the ones Ashford possessed in her middle age – sophisticated, domineering, distance-keeping, and superior.

The new image of the mentor is a reflection of transformations which Vivian has experienced herself. After all her sufferings and lack of humanity from her ex-student Jason being her doctor at the moment, Vivian is no longer a tough uncompromising Ashford-like professor she used to be. In the penultimate scene Vivian's mentor is there to soothe and nurse her student. The octogenarian takes out a children's book, puts her arm around Vivian and reads aloud the tale of *The Runaway Bunny*: "A little allegory of the soul. No matter where it hides, God will find it"²⁹. Ashford penetrates Vivian's consciousness before the patient dies. Calling Vivian by her first name, the old professor gives her final lesson of compassion, friendship and kindheartedness. Ashford's portrayal is rather ambiguous whereas she is the model to follow for the protagonist and we always perceive the character of old professor through Vivian's eyes. Not discussed overtly, age awareness is implied in Vivian's pursuit to act like her teacher. Beside protagonist's relationship with her mentor there are two strong binary oppositions of Vivian with Jason who is her younger counterpart and Vivian with Susie – her primary nurse which strikingly resemble ties of Alberta with Deedee in *The laundromat*. Opposed to her sophisticated patient Susie is young, simple, without university

²⁶ S. Feldman et al., *op. cit.*, p. 887.

²⁷ M. Edson, *W;t*, New York 1999, p. 12.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 80.

degree but humane, mild, and sympathetic. Just as Deedee young nurse becomes a catalyst for older woman's renewal in *W;t*. Referring once again to Marsha Norman's essay, I'd like to highlight her statement that "A theatre that is missing the work of women is missing half the story, half the canon, half the life of our time"³⁰. This argument inspires to suggest that there is a need for a more favorable canon for women dramatists which can be implemented via "a gender-blind process for discovering and discussing new work"³¹. From the standpoint of ageing studies analyzed dramas demonstrate overt and covert types of age awareness, elaborated portrayals of the elderly and shed light upon such characteristics of late style as coping with the loss of a partner, intergenerational relations, nursing, attitude to death, and ability to change.

Among strategies which could join women authors to the selected realm of the privileged and the recognized, the role of university and school promoted by John Guillory immediately comes to mind. Since the notion of canon becomes the subject of concern and there is a need for its re-definition, the faculty has the most luxurious opportunity to promote those female writers who used to be in oblivion. That is how the idea to publish a textbook *Reading and translating US women playwrights* developed for the first-year students of Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University who study English philology and translation³². The textbook (which was recommended and stamped by Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine in 2014) offers 6 plays written by 6 extraordinary women dramatists – Anna Cora Mowatt, Alice Gerstenberg, Wakako Yamauchi, Tina Howe, Margaret Edson and Wendy Wasserstein – who are now canonical in terms of (so far) one Ukrainian university, widely read by students, analyzed for the term, bachelor and master papers, waiting for their time to be staged in Ukrainian theatres. To conclude the paper, it is relevant once again to refer to Norman's appeal to academia: "We need more women critics, and we need them to write without the expectation that a woman's work will be less significant than that of a man"³³.

Streszczenie

Niniejszemu artykułowi przyświecają dwa cele. Pierwszym jest analiza kategorii starości jako ważnego elementu we współczesnym amerykańskim dramacie kobiecym w kontekście (nie)kanoniczności tekstów. Drugim celem jest odnalezienie wspólnych mianowników w przedstawieniach starości, świadomości wieku i przemijania, obrazach ludzi starych w omawianych utworach. Analizie poddano dwa teksty z przełomu wieków – niekanoniczny *Laundromat* Marshy Norman oraz kanoniczny *W;t* Margaret Edson. Metodologia zakłada użycie zarówno analizy historycznej, jak i podejścia interdyscyplinarnego z wyko-

³⁰ M. Norman, *Not there yet...*

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² A.B. Gaidash, *Reading and translating US women drama*, Kyiv 2015.

³³ M. Norman, *Not there yet...*

rzystaniem literackiej i społecznej gerontologii oraz psychologii. W stosunku do *analizy* amerykańskiego dramatu podejście interdyscyplinarne jest całkowitą nowością. *Rezultaty* tego procesu badawczego mogą zostać wykorzystane na zajęciach z amerykańskiego dramatu lub gerontologii literackiej.

Analiza tekstów wykazuje, że w rozmowach międzypokoleniowych prowadzonych w omawianym dramatach zagadnienie wieku, starości pojawia się bardzo często. W dramacie kobiecym napięcie pomiędzy bohaterami i bohaterkami w różnym wieku jest zogniskowane właśnie na kwestii wieku. Problem opieki, też często podejmowany w obu dramatach, jest manifestacją cyklu życia, gdyż łączy okres niemowlęcy z okresem odchodzenia. Poetyka starości oddana jest w chronotopii dramatów, których akcja toczy się w nocy lub w warunkach holitropicznych i podkreśla tradycyjne ujęcie starości jako schyłku ludzkiego życia. Z perspektywy gerontologii literackiej, omawiane dramaty ukazują bezpośrednio i pośrednio problem starości, są dogłębnymi obrazami człowieka starego, który musi stawiać czoła takim wyzwaniom wieku, jak strata partnera, relacje międzypokoleniowe, opieka, stosunek do zachodzących zmian i śmierci. Kanoniczność tekstów zaś idzie w parze ze współczesnym jej rozumieniem w filozofii (w szkole i na uniwersytecie).