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A Feigned Emancipation

<http://mbmh.pl/development/ptjournal/index.php/ptj/article/view/34/49>



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I.

Bożena Umińska-Keff is a unique voice in the world of Polish intellectuals, artists and journalists. The sheer breadth of scope in her work is impressive. Keff has written strictly academic books (*Postać z cieniem. Portrety Żydówek w polskiej literaturze*, 2001 [*Figure with Shadow: Portraits of Jewish Women in Polish Literature*]), philosophical and educational works (*Antysemityzm. Niezamknięta historia*, 2013 [*Anti-Semitism: An Incomplete History*]) and criticism (*Barykady. Kroniki obsesyjne lat 2000–2006*, 2006 [*Barricades: Obsessive Chronicles 2000–2006*]), she is the co-author of Poland's first study of homophobia (*Homofobia po polsku*, 2004 [*Homophobia the Polish Way*]), a translator, a poet (*Nie jest gotowy*, 2000 [*He Isn't Ready*]) and is the author of the formally unique text *Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie* in 2008 [*A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland*], in which the monologue of the central female character is intertwined with dialogue and choral parts. All these areas of her work are thematically linked. Keff is interested in the relations between national identity and the cultural construction of gender, focusing primarily on the nexus of anti-Semitism and discrimination against women. Her research in this area – its scope, astuteness and clarity – is, in Poland, of a decidedly pioneering nature and has proved a source of both widespread recognition and controversy. Keff has twice been nominated for the Nike award, one of Poland's major literary prize. In 2009 *A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland* garnered her second NIKE nomination and a good deal of controversy in artistic circles, earning comparisons to the famous graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman.

The subject of *A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland* is the relationship between a mother (named Meter), who is a Polish Jew and sole survivor of the Holocaust in her family, and her daughter (named Kora, Korusia or Usia), whose biography and identity were determined by her mother's experiences. The daughter became the only audience for her mother's reminiscences and her steady stream of complaints. As someone who never experienced similar trauma, she is defined by absence and exclusion from history, from her family's genealogy, from the singular significant experience of her mother's life and from narrative space. It is an absence which forces the daughter to continually proffer herself as a sacrifice to her mother while at the same time making her almost inherently guilty of inadequate empathy and devotion. The daughter's attempts to assert her autonomy are based on refusal to listen, irony and derision, mounting accusations and creating her own counter-narrative based not

on history but on a mix of ancient, biblical and pop-culture mythologies which combine into an act of blasphemy. The iconoclastic dimension of her rebellion is reinforced within the context of Polish culture in which the Mother, much like the Fatherland, is a mythologized, idealised and almost sacrosanct figure. 'The Mother is a personal and patriotic ideal [...]. The Mother and the Fatherland are equally holy and represent a unity', wrote Janion and Filipiak in the afterword to *A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland*, writing Keff's text into Polish literary and cultural tradition.¹

To begin with, I would like to emphasise two aspects of Keff's text. First is the role of the anti-Semitism which both female characters experience in *A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland*. The fact that the tragedy of the female characters takes place in enemy territory² reinforces the walls of the prison but is also a source of reconciliation:

The mother [...], on seeing a resurgence of anti-Semitism in Poland, says: "Believe me, I know perhaps I said too much sometimes, but I think it's because I've lived through too much." At the first sign of regret from the mother, the daughter answers: "You are a decent human being, I'll give you that."³

According to Przemysław Czapliński the daughter in this way manages to conquer her hatred of the mother and attain her independence. Another key aspect is the personal or indeed even biographical dimension of the text. In numerous interviews about the text, the author did not conceal that her personal experiences and relationship with her own mother were her main impulse for writing it.⁴ Even if one were to read *A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland* without the context of Keff's biography, the text remains a record of the personal experience of Narrator-Korusia-Usia.

The subject of Polish anti-Semitism and the emancipatory aspect of *A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland* meant that not only the text but also its stagings – by Marcin Liber in 2010 and Jan Klata in 2011 – were greeted with heated controversy. Although both productions were widely discussed, it was Klata's staging which had the stronger impact on Polish theatre and critical opinion. It was shown at festivals and received numerous awards, with the director's reputation no doubt a factor in the controversy surrounding the play. Klata is one of the most distinctive characters in Polish theatre. His first productions (*The Government Inspector*, 2003, for example, and *H.*, 2004, based on *Hamlet*) represented the keystone of Polish political theatre, which had an intensive expansion

1 Maria Janion, Izabela Filipiak, 'Zmagania z Matką i Ojczyzną', in Bożena Keff, *Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie* (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2008), pp. 81–98.

2 Janion and Filipiak, pp. 81–98.

3 Przemysław Czapliński, 'Mausoleum', *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 14 September 2008, <http://tygodnik.onet.pl/33,0,14430,mausoleum,artykul.html>, [accessed 1 September 2013].

4 Katarzyna Bielas, 'Nielegalny plik', an interview with Bożena Umińska-Keff, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 'Duży Format', 27 May 2008, http://wyborcza.pl/duzyformat/1,127291,5250183,Nielegalny_plik.html, [accessed 1 September 2013]; Justyna Daniluk, 'W Polsce nie jest łatwo', an interview with Bożena Umińska-Keff, *Dziennik Polski*, 5 July 2011, <http://wiadomosci.onet.pl/prasa/w-polsce-nie-jest-latwo/p52f7>, [accessed 1 September 2013]; Marta Bryś, 'Sztuka nie jest od sprawiedliwości', an interview with Bożena Umińska-Keff, *Didaskalia* 2011, 101, http://www.didaskalia.pl/101_brys.htm, [accessed 2 September 2013].

at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In his productions, Klata boldly confronted national mythology and history, Polish Catholicism, contemporary social and political reality. He did not shrink from using lurid and iconoclastic means of expression which, combined with his powerful pop-culture influences, meant that while achieving the status of icon of new Polish theatre – a laureate of the prestigious Passport award from *Polityka* magazine in 2006 – he was frequently accused of being gaudy, superficial and intellectually shallow. Klata received almost universal recognition and a shower of awards for his 2008 adaptation of *The Danton Case*, a production that brought the theme of the French Revolution together with reflections on the transformation of Poland since 1989 and universal deliberations on power and history. Although it is difficult to see that production as a radical departure from the director's established aesthetic, nevertheless from this time Klata has increasingly prioritised existential reflection over political statement, universalism over critique of the status quo. The culmination of his career to date has been his appointment as director of one of the most important theatres in Poland, The National Sary Theatre, in Kraków, which Klata took up in January 2012. As director of the Sary Theatre, he once again courted controversy, echoing the start of his directorial career.

Klata adapted *A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland* in 2011 as a director with an established reputation and as a mature artist. The fact that the production was greeted with almost universal plaudits might be treated with suspicion because of the iconoclastic nature of the text and the myth of the controversial director, in decline by that period yet still actively cultivated by journalists and by the artist. Only a handful of sceptical critics observed anything controversial in the production; Ewa Guderian-Czaplińska, for example, focused on the fact that Klata made significant changes to the tone and meaning of the text,⁵ and it is difficult to disagree with her view. What is more, it is in these changes that we should look for the source of the great success of the production. In his treatment of Keff's text, Klata decided to minimise or dispense with its fundamental motifs: the Jewish identity of the female characters, the Holocaust and Polish anti-Semitism. He also re-wrote all the dialogue for a choir of six actors, dispensing in this way with the highly personal tone of *A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland*. Although the production was perceived as pro-women, it contains a series of scenes and uses visual strategies that undermine, even parody, this position. All of these treatments result in eliminating the emancipatory and critical power of the text.

2.

The omission of the personal experiences of Polish Jewish women, the fundamental element which bonds together all the layers of the text, takes place on many levels in this production: in the construction of the script⁶ and the characters and in the choice of themes. Klata has divided the dialogue of the mother and daughter between five female actors (Paulina Chapko, Dominika Figurska, Anna Ilczuk, Kinga Preis, Halina Rasiakówna) and one male actor in female costume (Wojciech

5 Ewa Guderian-Czaplińska, 'Próby utworu', *Didaskalia* 2011, 101, pp. 12–15.

6 Jan Klata, director's script of the production based on Bożena Keff's *Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie*, archive of Polski Theatre in Wrocław.

Ziemiański). The dialogue was divided in this way to give each of the actors an equal opportunity to enter the roles of Meter and Korusia. At the same time, the six characters did not form fixed pairs, while their parts were stripped of 'psychology'. The characters of mother and daughter were thereby radically universalised.

The meaning of the mother's experiences of the war was also distorted. Klata referenced the parts of the text devoted to this theme in a way that deprived them of cohesion and meaning. He edited out an entire section describing how the mother saved her life by escaping to the East. Two subsequent scenes, in which the mother describes how she left her family and how she learned of the shooting of her own mother from documents found in an archive, were separated by Klata and performed by four female actors. In addition, the staging placed emphasis not on the story, but on the process by which it was communicated and the resulting oppressiveness of the mother. The importance of the mother's experiences was also rendered questionable by caricaturing her character. Sitting in a wardrobe full of tacky artificial flowers, Meter (played by Kinga Preis) relates how she learned that her mother had been killed in a forest near Lviv, while she'd been reorganising archives of the Jewish Historical Institute. Her utterance was repeated a number of times with the same lilting melody, its rhythm slowed and later speeded up to an unnatural pace. At this point, Kinga Preis began to overact, waving a red shoe as if she intended to illustrate the story at the same time, and using exaggerated facial expressions. When Lara Croft (Dominika Figurska) appeared on stage and began to spin the wardrobe, Meter began to laugh and, struggling against the doors which began to close and obscure her from sight, continued to happily shout out the story of how her 'mother was killed in a forest near Lviv...' The scene was performed in the convention of grotesque, with irony and detachment. The mother's actual wartime experiences were deemphasised in this way and, perhaps, even rendered unreal. Her monologue became an amusing though dangerous tool for tormenting her daughter (Anna Ilczuk), which the bored daughter appeared to treat with absolute detachment.

Klata also very consistently omits numerous passages which address contemporary Polish anti-Semitism. The most characteristic treatment was the director's omission of the epilogue, *Pieśń z przychodni lekarskiej* [A Ballad from the Doctor's Surgery], in which this theme reaches its climax. The daughter, waiting in a queue to see her doctor, listened to anti-Semitic tirades of the patients. It is worth emphasising that this epilogue consisted almost entirely of anti-Semitic clichés taken from Polish public discourse and, although they comprised judgements and utterances that sounded absurd and terrifying, they are difficult to ignore and undermine by claiming that the author had invented or exaggerated them. Klata also omitted other fragments of the work directly concerned with this subject. He cut a scene about the resurgence of anti-Semitic sentiment in Poland, for example, to these sentences:

They don't deserve even one Jew / whatever their nationality, gender, sexual orientation or skin colour / And Usia replied: I am Persephone, I agree with you Hecate, / And I must say that you are a decent human being.⁷

⁷ Jan Klata, director's script based on Bożena Keff's *Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie*, archive of Polski Theatre in Wrocław, p. 23.

In this way the Jew became a generic symbol of the Other and the issue of forgiveness and understanding which arises between mother and daughter was separated from the question of their Jewish identity.

The marginalisation of the themes of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism was served by another treatment: rewriting the text to fit the realm of Polish identity, and transcribing the experiences of a Polish Jewess into the figure of the Polish 'Mother in Mourning'. This treatment was carried out in both the visual and the situational structure of the scenes. All of the characters wore black dresses, which to many reviewers appeared to resemble updated versions of female costumes from works of Polish Romantic painter Artur Grottger⁸ (the black dress expressed the nation's mourning in his series of paintings and graphics devoted to the history of Poland in the nineteenth century, mainly its national uprisings). The question of Polish identity was also introduced in the production in the mime scenes added to Keff's text. In one, the female actor who had portrayed the mother (Halina Rasiakówna) performed a dance with a Polish flag. The scene showed the process by which an individual is trained and absorbed into the national structure and its patriotic rituals. It also became a metaphor for the function that women must serve within the confines of national community. The character was not given a voice, and her dance was somewhat reminiscent of a cheerleading display. A woman is therefore to serve merely as a silent ornament. To drill this role into her, conditioning must be applied to both mind and body, with the corresponding character written into a mourning outfit and a precisely learned choreographic sequence. While this scene may have appeared to give an acute diagnosis of cultural processes, it in no way related to the Jewish mother, who does not willingly submit herself, and is not co-opted by the national community, into Polish national mythology and patriotic rituals. In Keff's text the problem of the mother and daughter in the fatherland is not that they are appropriated and trained but that they are derided and marginalised.

I believe the universalisation carried out in Klata's production, undermining the autobiographical dimension of Keff's text, led to the appropriation of individual experience written from the perspective of the Other (Polish Jewish women), claiming its dissenting voice and its appropriation into the voice of the majority (Polish mothers and their daughters). This is more so because of the director's other instance of appropriating the experience of the Other in his production, this time linked to race. The female actors appeared with hair in dreadlocks, with face paint and African instruments, automatically suggesting the idiom of 'woman as the nigger of the world'⁹. We should remember, nevertheless, that comparisons between situations of white women and slaves have been treated by black feminists as a way of marginalising specific circumstances of the black experience. This comparison completely ignored the different status of black women subject to discrimination

8 For example, in Aneta Kyzioł, 'Córczyzna', *Polityka*, 4 (January 2011), <http://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/teatr/1512216,1,recenzja-spektaklu-utworomatce-i-ojczyznie-rez-jan-klata.read>, [accessed 24 August 2015].

9 The translated title of John Lennon's song became popularized and functions as a slogan quoted in public debates, journalistic texts, on blogs and Internet forums, both in the feminist and misogynistic contexts.

from both black and white men, as well as from white women.¹⁰ It is of course possible that on this issue Klata merely followed the author, who in her text compared the enslavement of the daughter to the enslavement of black people. But there is a difference between the idiomatic nature of a single instance, and its generalisation. The motif of slavery used in the text is a direct reference to the relationship between a specific mother and daughter. It is therefore a description of the oppression of one woman by another, referencing to some extent the fact that this discrimination takes place within the confines of a single gender, contingent upon their position and the extent of the power of the individuals. When Klata conjured the metaphor of the 'woman as the nigger of the world' and extended it to the female characters in the play, treated as a collective entity, he was guilty of a far-reaching generalisation and universalisation.

Reviews of the production are testimony to dangerous consequences of this type of treatment. They were dominated by a sense of relief that we are ultimately all the same – damaged, pitiful and poor. The fate of Polish Jews was in this sense no different from the fate of all Poles. At the same time, the attack on Poles was not so much concerned with anti-Semitism as with martyrdom. Jews could be accused of the same thing, which would consequently absolve anti-Semitism of culpability, joining into a culpability common to Poles and Jews.¹¹ Typical reviews appeared to be those utilising a discussion of Klata to make an indirect attack on Keff, as with texts by Krzysztof Kucharski¹² and Andrzej Horubała.¹³ The two writers suggested that anti-Semitism is a Jewish fabrication and a tool for discrimination against Poles, while also accusing Keff of being unpatriotic. Both texts led to the conclusion that Klata's adaptation is more interesting than Keff's text. In analysing these reviews it is possible to conclude that the director staged Keff's work as a form of parody or to distance himself from it. Horubała wrote: 'Klata has turned the lament of an ageing woman, born just after the war, into a fascinating and colourful production'.¹⁴ From this point of view, the suffering which Keff describes is quite casually diagnosed as the frustration or even hysteria of an elderly woman. The 'ageing' Keff holds no value as a woman on the 'market of male desire' which, in the patriarchal culture represented by Horubała, makes her worthless and pitiful. The author set up the priorities of this male culture in the following sentence: 'The taxi driver who took me to the theatre asked me what I would call

10 For example, bell hooks, 'Racism and Feminism: The Issue of Accountability', in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism Pages*, Revised version (London, New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 119–157.

11 For example, in Joanna Derkaczew, 'Jana Klaty wyzwalenie z polskosci', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 7 January 2011, http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,8918023,Jana_Klaty_wyzwalanie_z_polskosci.html, [accessed 24 August 2015]; in Magda Piekarska, 'Jan Klata wypędza w Teatrze Polskim demony z szafy', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Wrocław online, 11 January 2011, http://m.wroclaw.wyborcza.pl/wroclaw/1,106542,8928526,Jan_Klata_wypedza_w_Teatrze_Polskim_demony_z_szafy.html, [accessed 24 August 2015]; in Jacek Cieślak, 'Horror polskiej wojny domowej', *Rzeczpospolita*, 10 January 2011, <http://www.rp.pl/artykul/591382.html?print=tak>, [accessed 24 August 2015].

12 Krzysztof Kucharski, 'Ja ciągle na klęczkach – po premierze „Utworu o Matce i Ojczyźnie”' *Polska Gazeta Wroclawska* online, 10 January 2011, <http://www.e-teatr.pl/pl/artykuly/108865.html>, [accessed 28 June 2013].

13 Andrzej Horubała, 'Śpiewogra o traumie', *Uważam Rze*, 3 (February 2011), <http://www.e-teatr.pl/pl/artykuly/111569.html>, [accessed 28 June 2013].

14 Ibidem.

a man's question: "theatre or brothel?"¹⁵ This reference to a brothel, which came right after classifying the author as an 'ageing' woman, while seemingly a casual remark, effectively set up a clear juxtaposition. In the subtext Keff, who is now 'useless' as a woman, can only write rage-filled plays for theatre.

In this short phrase, the author removed Keff from her historical context, invalidated the influence of her post-Holocaust trauma and the experience of anti-Semitism passed onto her by her mother. On the other hand, he nominated Klata as an ally by claiming that in a duel with an angry, aged, frustrated writer 'Art is victorious, theatre is victorious. [...] Art triumphs. But as a result this tale of trauma has no punch line'.¹⁶ What is more, Horubała turned Klata into a perceptive protector of the author, who changed the impact of the text to protect Keff from herself:

Klata consciously abandoned the finale [...] perhaps because he could see that this concept of a finale would represent a glaring indictment of the author who, in spite of herself, showed that the road to reconciliation with a toxic mother is the pursuit of anti-Semitism.¹⁷

3.

In this context, I would like to tackle an issue raised above, namely the question of the feminist connotation of the production. Every so often there is talk of Klata's feminism and the transgressive dimension of the female characters in his productions.¹⁸ Such opinions also came out of reviews of *A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland*.¹⁹ I would agree that the play powerfully demonstrates the cultural construction of gender and the roles of mother and daughter, as well as the process by which women internalise patriarchal principles. The performance concludes with a very serious, melancholy rendition of *By the Waters of Babylon* – a song that speaks of the need for liberation. Nevertheless, the position towards women and feminism demonstrated by *A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland* is hardly obvious. The problems begin with the casting and styling of the actresses, who represent variations on a somewhat typical form of female beauty: they are attractive, with blonde hair or blonde wigs, light complexions and pleasing figures. Klata used a uniform styling for the female characters which further served to strip them of their

15 Ibidem.

16 Ibidem.

17 Ibidem.

18 I promoted this line of thinking for a while. See Monika Kwaśniewska: 'Polska jest kobietą', *Didaskalia*, 91 (June 2009), pp. 44–46; 'Destrukcja zamiast dekonstrukcji', *Dwutygodnik* 2009, 13, <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artikul/462-destrukcja-zamiast-dekonstrukcji.html>, [accessed 24 August 2015]; 'Po premierze', *Didaskalia* 2011, 101, pp. 15–16. There were several reviews on this subject, for example: Joanna Derkaczew, 'Ziemia niespełnionych obietnic', *Gazeta Wyborcza* online (14 September 2009), http://wyborcza.pl/1,75475,7033165,Ziemia_niespelnionych_obietnic.html, [accessed 24 August 2015]; Jakub Papuczys, 'Miłosny kapitalizm', *Nowa Siła Krytyczna* (16 September 2009), <http://www.e-teatr.pl/pl/artykuly/78858.html>, [accessed 24 August 2015]; Łukasz Drewniak, 'Żądza pieniądza', *Przekrój* 2009, 37, <http://www.dziennikteatralny.pl/artykuly/zadza-pieniadza.html>, [accessed 24 August 2015].

19 For example, Jacek Wakar, 'Klata jest kobietą', *Przegląd* 2011, 2, <http://www.teatrpolski.wroc.pl/media-o-nas/recenzje/klata-jest-kobieta>, [accessed 24 August 2015]; Jolanta Kowalska, 'Czarne jest piękne!', *Teatr* 2011, 3, <http://www.teatr-pismo.pl/archiwalna/index.php?sub=archiwum&f=pokaz&nr=1454&pnr=64>, [accessed 24 August 2015]; Monika Kwaśniewska, *Po premierze*, *ibid.*

individuality. The attractiveness of their styling was also noteworthy: the actresses' hair was styled in an African fashion. As mentioned above, their dresses referenced artworks of Grottger, but in so far as the women in those images were dressed in long, heavy dresses with high necklines, shrouding the entire figure, the costumes in Klata's production had short hems or reached half-way up the thigh, strikingly accentuating the actresses' figures and, in the instance of the two most slender actresses – Paulina Chapko and Dominika Figurska – they were very tight and showed plenty of cleavage. The costumes therefore represented a fusion of a nineteenth-century gown with the 'little black dress' of the twentieth century. They were complemented with 'classic' red stiletto shoes. One might suspect that Klata intentionally selected and emphasised the attractiveness of the female actors, combining 'national' symbolism with a highly stereotypical vision of female beauty which he coloured with African exoticism. The portrayal of women in his production was therefore to a great extent a reflection of the male gaze on the female body. Of course this 'classical' beauty could be seen as Klata's commentary on the role of women in culture. But the scene which directly addressed the process of forcing the female body to conform to established cultural norms points to women as a source of oppression. In the scene the oldest of the women placed a set of bathroom scales centre stage, climbed onto them and proceeded to force the other characters to join her, carefully manipulating the reading on the scales. The scene was scored with march music to emphasise the solemnity of the situation. What's more it was framed in a comic convention. The characters, by pulling exaggerated faces, expressed their dissatisfaction with the reading on the scales: before climbing for a second time on the scales (the sequence was repeated twice to emphasise the ritual nature of the procedure and the fact that the bodies of women are constantly subjected to this form of regulation), Kinga Preis removed her shoes and, when this failed to yield the desired effect, stood on one leg with a pained expression. This action triggered an element of rivalry – as soon as she spotted what Preis's character was doing, Halina Rasiak, who was supervising the weighing, placed her own foot on the scales. A moment later, seeing the delight of the character played by the dainty Paulina Chapko, she took the scales from under her feet to prevent her from enjoying the last reading for a second time. It is worth observing that the entire scene was added to Keff's text and it does not involve the production's sole male actor, Wojciech Ziemiański. In so far as his presence in the choir of mothers and daughters might indicate the cultural construction of gender, his exclusion from this scene is a clear signal contradicting that notion. Ziemiański may have been dressed as a woman and played the role of a woman, but he was excused from this 'typically feminine' ritual and did not join in the rivalry between 'real' women.

The issue of female beauty and attractiveness was also raised in the finale, which had the female characters of the production enter the stage and voice a protest against fathers who, absent from family life, leave their children as prey to their destructive mothers. They were dressed in courtly style in colourful ballgowns, referencing the theme of oppression to which the female body is subjected by culture. But Klata did not reach for contemporary examples, instead looking to a past when the female figure was formed by corsets and whalebone stays. The key rebellious act in this scene was a display of unshaved armpits which referenced

women's protests during the second wave of feminism, focused on the problem of the terror of beauty in patriarchal culture. The most characteristic manifestation was in 1968 with the boycott of the Miss America pageant.²⁰ This is why second-wave feminism became the source of a stereotype of the feminist as a woman who does not wear a bra and does not shave her legs or armpits.²¹ It is also worth adding that from the outset many feminists saw this radical movement as oppressive towards women. In their opinion women's relationship with beauty and the body is not solely the domain of patriarchal culture but can have a highly individual, intimate and sensual dimension.²² Klata was therefore directly referencing the oppression of women by others of their gender under the auspices of the radical feminist movement. On the other hand, he summons a highly stereotypical image of emancipation, frequently used as a reason to deride and deprecate feminism. In referencing this most radical form of feminism and linking it to a group demonstration that involved the female actors raising their arms in protest (a gesture in which Horubała saw overtones of the Nazi 'Heil Hitler' salute) seems to directly state that the women's liberation movement is radical and therefore dangerous and ridiculous at the same time. The rebellious gesture, combined with their overly colourful dresses and unnaturally bountiful body hair, is rendered artificial and, indeed, comical. The scene can be understood as saying that feminism, while seemingly dangerous, is actually pathetic, as it operates using arguments that cannot be treated seriously, and if it is capable of inflicting any damage it is mainly to women themselves. It is worth asking if in this context the protest against fathers in the finale of the production is not merely the confirmation of another stereotype of the feminist as the man-hating woman.

Also deserving closer examination is the staging of the scene containing the long monologue by the daughter which in Keff's text is entitled *Są to matki patriarchalne* [These Are Patriarchal Mothers]. It was reminiscent of a parody of a feminist lecture or the meeting of some radical collective. In the middle of the stage, facing the audience, the director seated the character portrayed by Anna Ilczuk. She sat with her legs crossed and leaned forward towards the audience. She explained the issue of mothers, who she claimed were the victims of both the patriarchy and its supporters and beneficiaries. Ilczuk appeared to be parodying a slightly casual yet precise lecture style. She exaggerated her intonation and gestures, her spoken delivery was mannered in the extreme, as if its form was intended to cover up shortcomings in its content. One might have had the impression that the lecture was a parody of a pseudo-academic style. It was a manifestation of the incompatibility of form and content, as if any scientific conceptualisation of relations between mother and daughter was somehow inadequate.

The other characters were listening to this lecture. Three of them, leaned on metal lockers, looking like security guards. Figurska's character, who in this scene wore a metal 'sleeve' on her hand reminiscent

20 Agnieszka Graff, *Świat bez kobiet: płęć w polskim życiu publicznym*, (Warsaw: W.A.B., 2008), pp. 188-244, (pp. 193-195).

21 Graff writes about such a stereotype of a feminist in her chapter 'Dlaczego nikt nie lubi feministek?' in: *Świat bez kobiet: płęć w polskim życiu publicznym*, pp. 220-244.

22 Graff, pp. 188-206.

of armour, led Rasiak from upstage as an example of the type of mother addressed in the lecture. She held her very tightly and emphatically by the hands and chin. When Ilczuk gave the signal, Figurska pushed Rasiak towards the lockers while the other characters manipulated them so the mother bounced off each locker in sequence. In the end, she was locked into one of them. When Ilczuk started to agonisingly recite Aristotle, as if straining to recall the words, the other characters stared at her with exaggerated concentration, desperate to grasp the words of the philosopher, while the mother peeked out of the locker with a smile and mouthed words to spur on the . This scene went further to undermine the theoretical foundations of feminist theory. The feminist characters repeat sentences written by a male philosopher without understanding them because as women, we are to understand, they are too limited to take them in. Next, the characters removed their costumes, the mother emerged from her locker, they all met in the centre and with foolish but determined expressions they shook hands in thanks for the meeting. After last words they began a tribal warrior dance, as if they had overturned an obsolete theory. The scene therefore shows feminists as a fanatical, aggressive, hierarchal, pseudo-scientific grouping comprised of self-assertive but stupid women. It came across as an almost archetypal strategy for negating the work of feminism, which Agnieszka Graff describes, giving numerous examples from public life:

The woman question has always been neutralised with derision, referring to the conviction that the existing division of roles is the only one possible (because it is natural) and every attempt to change it will result in a reversal of roles. [...] This would be terrible and at the same time funny because a woman – even one wearing trousers, or in a ‘masculine role’ – will in the end always be a woman, a creature incapable of wielding any form of power.²³

Klata has a strong inclination towards this type of thinking. Woman as a security guard (female security guard?), woman as an academic lecturer (female academic lecturer?) prove quite comical. In effect, his characters are inept at acting out a miscast role, betraying their lack of ability and having finally removed their uncomfortable costumes (part of their armour), they next free the ‘primal energy’ that had been suppressed by their social role, through a ritual dance. It is also hard to rule out that the subtext of casting Wojciech Ziemiański in a female role was a similar ‘joke’.

In the context of this scene of lecture, which deliberately mocked feminists, we should consider whether widespread conviction among critics of the production’s feminist overtones, and such ready agreement with its messages, was not the result of the fact that it drew the notion from Keff’s text – then rendered it universal – that women persecute themselves, and it creates a picture of discrimination without men, who in this situation can enjoy complete impunity. It would appear that by stripping the text of its idiom, Klata extended the vision of the matriarchy portrayed in Keff’s text to cover the whole of society, suggesting to some extent that it is the ultimate aim of feminism. Perhaps the subtext of the play is therefore essentially misogynistic.

In this light, the conviction of Klata’s feminism, expressed by people of various intellectual backgrounds seem rather to reveal a

23 Graff, p. 97.

pseudo-feminist tendency that aims to maintain the social status quo under the auspices of political correctness and theatrical openness.

4.

Klata was certainly within his directorial rights to omit the text's autobiographical elements, issues of Jewish identity or anti-Semitism, and to impose his own metaphors and frameworks on Keff's text. After all, *A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland* is a literary creation. The appropriation of experiences of the Other, specifically Jewish women in Poland, transcribing these onto the experience of all Polish women and extending the condition of slaves (blacks, in the choice of his production) to the condition of all women, nevertheless sidetracks the issue of the influence of nationality (and race) on the experience and biography of individuals, which is also a very important element of Keff's text. It is hard to accept that in referencing the issue of the place of women in (Polish) culture and creating a certain space for feminist interpretations, the director appears in many places to mock both women and feminism and preserves stereotypical, unfavourable images. These treatments are disconcerting because the text itself was a cause of significant controversy. By staging it, Klata neutralised those subversive elements of the content which many found hard to swallow, and at the same time deprived the text of its emancipatory and critical impact. What is more, this appropriation of the voice of the Other took place in a social space and not merely an artistic one. On reading the predominantly positive reviews of the production, one might conclude that Klata's *A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland* not only negates the need for dissent and the emancipation of national minorities and women, but also points to their insignificance in social life. And only this reading of the production – which takes its reception into account – can reveal a certain (perhaps intentional) critical dimension of the project.

The paper was part of a larger project financed by the National Science Centre directed by Prof. Grzegorz Niziołek of the Jagiellonian University. Early drafts of research for the paper were published as 'The Soft Ground of Universalism' in *Opcje* in 2012, 1 (86).

Translated by Aleksandra Sakowska

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