

Title: “Dialogues with Iconic Female Figures in Nineteenth-century Life Writing in Poland”

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Abstract:

Our presentation will focus on women writers' engagement with iconic female figures in various genres of women's life writing in nineteenth-century partitioned Poland: letters, diaries, memoirs, and albums. These personal documents offer a plethora of materials for reflecting on how the women authors perceived their role models, such as George Sand and/or Madame de Staël, as authorities on writing style, self-definition, and presentation of self, as well as on evaluating the impact that famous women writers and public figures of the day had on the formation of gendered and authorial identities of many women writing diverse personal narratives.

We will first discuss the phenomenon of George Sand's reception in Poland, using the example of letters written in the so-called Enthusiasts circle – a group of women led by a charismatic Polish writer and activist who promoted women's issues, Narcyza Żmichowska. The Enthusiasts' letter confirm that Sand's novels had been widely known since the 1830s and had been read as important works of European Romanticism, despite and perhaps because of the writer's status of a scandalist. These novels presented early feminist criticism of the institution of marriage and often portrayed female protagonists as emancipated women. Even though Polish women discussed her cautiously in the public sphere, because being associated with a figure like Sand could threaten their good name, their letters show that at the same time they were fascinated with Sand as a phenomenon – her independence was an object of their aspirations. We will try to answer the question whether such a pattern of Sand's reception was a worldwide phenomenon, or perhaps it was specifically Polish, strengthened by Sand's contrast to the ideal of “Polish Mother,” which gave women the right to be active in the public sphere (as patriots), but required opposition to the ideas of women's moral and sexual emancipation.

In the second part of the presentation we will focus on Polish nineteenth-century salon culture and one of its artifacts – the album – which first served as a centerpiece of the salon and a useful “prop” of a salonnieres, who collected inscriptions and signatures of “the rich and the famous,” which could then be responded to by other salon attendees. Salon albums first became popular in Poland and among Polish émigrés as a western fashion, patterned upon the customs of French and German salons of the age of Enlightenment and Romanticism; later albums trickled down across social strata and eventually became a phenomenon of mass culture. Hybrid, collage-like albums allowed their owners, who were usually women, to collect verbal and pictorial materials, as well as material objects, in order to display them as a kind of trophy, but they also allowed women to engage with literature in a non-threatening domestic setting by writing poems, aphorisms, and prose pieces, to discuss new socio-political ideas, and to create idiosyncratic cultural objects. Thus albums frequently became a form of life writing, complete with texts written, copied, and/or collected by women. We can define and situate the album as a hybrid literary genre at the nexus of private and public realms, which allowed women to join the newly created public sphere, as Habermas has argued. In this context ubiquitous references to iconic female figures, such as Madame de Staël, which we see in albums, point to the women's interest in same-gender role models and literary

predecessors who could enable women to transgress cultural norms and forge their gendered and authorial identities.