

Title: Variety of Form and Critical Reception of Polish Interwar “Women’s Drama”

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During the 1930’s Polish theater experienced a fertile explosion of feminist drama that elicited a flurry of critical commentary. The focus of the paper will be a heterogeneous selection of plays created by Polish women during this period. These include well known figures, such as Maria Jasnorzewska and Zofia Nałkowska, as well as a number of plays by writers completely forgotten today but much-discussed at the time, as, for example, Maria Morozowicz-Szczepkowska, Marcelina Grabowska, and Zofia Rylska.

The critical reception of these works ranged from positive, through positive but strongly patronizing, to savage. The hypothesis of this paper is that the negative critical reception was often not a response to any radical feminist ideology. Rather the reception was, on the one hand, the result of the theatrical context in inter-war Poland. On the other, it was a direct response to the form of a given work. Discussions occurring around theater and drama and the theatrical repertoire of the period reveal that the inter-war theatrical context consisted of a romantic ideology embedded in a realistic form. This cultural situation had a direct impact on the reception of theatrical performances. As has been suggested, it is normal for the dominant genre to be read, or received “conventionally,” with certain pre-conceived expectations (Belsey 1985, Kraskowska 1999). This dominant inter-war mixture of romantic ideology within a realistic form led to expectations that female characters would fulfill to some degree the role of Mother-Pole, that social norms would be upheld, and that, in a manner typical of the more popular forms of realistic drama, all the problems would be resolved by the end of the work. This dominant response to works of art impacted upon the reception of both realistic plays and of experimental ones. An experimental work like Jasnorzewska’s *Baba-Dziwo* would focus the attention of recipients on innovative form to such a degree that a radical feminist message might go unnoticed. Concurrently, a realistic form would elicit strong opposition to shocking superficial elements, even when the overall worldview of the work was quite conservative.

Belsey, Catherine. “Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text.” *Feminist Criticism and Social Change, Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture*. Ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York: Methuen, 1985) 51-55.

Kraskowska, Ewa. *Piórem niewieścim. Z problemów prozy kobiecej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu imienia Adama Mickiewicza, 1999) 23.