Traditions of Patriotism, Questions of Gender: The Case of Poland

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It is impossible without reference to Christ to understand the history of the Polish nation.

— Pope John Paul II

After the unparalleled boldness in political imagination and praxis of the heroic Solidarity era, Poland is now busy re-defining the content of its national identity and restructuring the meaning of gender within it.¹ The postcommunist and post-Solidarity period is marked by competing symbolic politics in which pro-Western liberal forces are opposed by nationalistic factions (divided into Catholic and populist anti-Catholic) and all are confronted by an old communist and a new socialist Left.² In political discourse the issue of gender has been continuously in the foreground.

Though by fall 1993 Poland had its first woman prime minister,³ she had been one of the sponsors of the legislation to ban abortion in parliament.⁴ Since September 1990, public schools have been offering religious instruction, and grades for these courses count as much as those for any other subject on the students' transcript. On December 29, 1992, a Law on Radio and Television was passed which provides that public radio and television programs should "serve the development of culture, science and enlightenment with a special emphasis on the Polish intellectual and artistic heritage," demonstrate "respect for the Christian value system
taken as the basis for universal principles of ethics,” “serve to strengthen
the family,” and “help to obliterate social pathologies.”5 Polish writers
issued an open letter protesting the law as a prelude to and a legal basis
for a new institutionalization of censorship. Instead of a vague “return to
Europe,” a return to a repressive patriarchal “gender regime”6 is in the
making in Poland. Any resistance to this regime is complicated by the
very fact of its “native,” national legitimation in the form of traditional
patriotism heavily infused with Catholic piety and influenced by the
Church hierarchy.

To understand the tension between nationalisms and gender, one has
to bear in mind the traditional ethos of Polish patriotism and particularly
its confused relationship to gender as a complex and often internally
self-contradictory set of propositions, ideological pronouncements, and
beliefs. Analysis of several patriotic texts will bring these into view pref-
aced with some working definitions of the concepts to be employed. By
*gender*, I mean “the way the society organizes people into male and female
categories.”7 “Gender regimes,” as defined by Connell and elaborated for
socialist states by Verdery,8 are understood as consisting of a gendered
division of labor and structure of power (versions of which I will address
in this article) and a “structure of cathexis” or the “gender patterning of
emotional attachments.” The last of these is the subject of my analysis.
Sentimental attachment to the nation in the postsocialist state serves as
the major (if not the only) legitimation of new patriarchal power relations
and the new institutionalization of a gendered division of labor.9 My
analysis will explore the ways gender meanings are produced around the
category of national sentiment.

Ernest Gellner defines nationalism as a “political principle which holds
that the political and national unit should be congruent.”10 The violation
of this political principle is what arouses “nationalist sentiment,” a de-
mand for the fulfillment of this principle, the force that compels people
to willingly give their lives for the abstract idea of a nation. The nation,
in turn, is the objectively existing national culture and the subjective
realization of membership in, what Benedict Anderson calls, the “imag-
ined political community” – one that is “imagined as both inherently
limited and sovereign” – constituted by that culture.11

Typically for writing on nationalism, neither Gellner nor Anderson
mentions women within the national culture or imagined community.12
But Anderson alludes to gender while defining nationalism as closer to
“kinship and religion” than to the ideologies of the modern world. He then implicitly equates national and gender identity while discussing the belief that “everyone can, should, will ‘have’ a nationality, as he or she ‘has’ a gender,” even though the concrete manifestations are irremediably particular, such that, “by definition, ‘Greek’ nationality is sui generis.”

It is this unfinished parallel between nationalism and gender that I apply to the particular “patriotic” and antipatriotic Polish texts below. Thus, I perceive gender, like nationalism, not as a fixed or “natural” category but as a subject for negotiation, interpretation, and, in the final analysis, a cultural construction.

Anne McClintock points out that “theories of nationalism have tended to ignore gender as a category constitutive of nationalism itself.” A recently published book, Nationalisms and Sexualities, pluralizes George Mosse’s earlier Nationalism and Sexuality, both to acknowledge his pioneering work on these topics and to depart from it in rejecting his underlying assumption that one can speak of a generalized “nationalism” and “sexuality” divorced from their respective relational contexts. The authors propose instead a thesis that there is “no privileged narrative of the nation, no ‘nationalism in general.’” If we agree that there is no one abstract meaning to which the essence of nationalism could be reduced, this facilitates examining variant forms of nationalism and asking how one or another of them — whether dominant or resistant — seeks to claim a privileged narrative position. For Poland, we find that the authority of the new power holders’ nationalism derives legitimacy from the “natural” order of male domination strengthened by the sacred authority of the religious order. The new power holders are redefining both gender and nationalism, but their definitions are also being challenged; each side is actively engaged in a symbolic struggle of self-redefinition in the aftermath of revolutionary political change.

PADEREWSKI’S BURIAL

The Catholic church in Poland not only influences the writing of laws which enforce “Christian values,” it also provides the ritual for state ceremonies such as the May 3 Constitution Day (a national holiday during the Second Republic, forbidden during the communist period, now revived to replace the international communist holiday of May Day). By asserting a symbolic unity between state and Church, the Church
takes over all the dominant symbolism. It further enforces an equation between Polish men and Catholic knights and Polish women and the Mother of God. Careful examination of one of these ritual observances, which, on the surface, has nothing to do with women, feminism, or gender, will illustrate the subtle ways in which the ideological program of the Catholic nationalists, which is directed against women's equality, is being implemented and the extent of its (limited) success.

Self-consciously and with all pomp, today's Poland presents itself as a direct continuation of the Second Republic (1918–1939). Thus, at his inauguration, Lech Walesa chose to receive the insignia of presidential power from the Polish President-in-Exile, while General Jaruzelski, the last communist president, was not invited to the ceremony.

The reinterment of Ignacy Jan Paderewski was another ritual performed to enact Poland's reclamation of its national history. Paderewski, a renounced pianist and composer, an international legend who was able to befriend heads of state in the early twentieth century, also represented the most conservative trend within Polish patriotic tradition and has a special significance for many Poles. During the Martial Law, a Solidarity activist in America lamented the fact that there was no contemporary Paderewski—both a celebrity and a charismatic politician-patriot, to succeed in the role of a political exile marshaling support and hope for his country. When Paderewski died in New York in 1941, Poland had been overrun by Hitler, the Polish military was fighting in the Battle of Britain, and America was about to enter the war. Roosevelt, in an unprecedented gesture, decided to have Paderewski's body temporarily interred at Arlington Cemetery until he could be reburied in a free Poland. That time had now come, and President Walesa arranged the second funeral of the great Pole. Held on July 5, 1992, Paderewski's state funeral was broadcast live, nonstop on the national television channel.

In light of popular romantic ideas of patriotic exile, the return to Poland of these remains had the potential to generate much positive patriotic and pro-state sentiment. The close and friendly relationship that Paderewski had enjoyed with the leading politicians of his time created an ideal model for new partnerships between the new Polish state and its representative (President Walesa) and the United States and its leader (President Bush). For this occasion, President Bush stopped in Warsaw (for less than five hours) on his way to Germany and a European summit meeting. The ceremony emphatically equated the two presidencies. The
Catholic Church, which dominated the television coverage, profited from the occasion to narrate the story of Polish nationalism, evoking in words and images all of its dominant traditions. What is remarkable is that the attempt seemed largely ineffectual.

The "crowd" at the ceremony was small and appeared apathetic. The event received little coverage in the Polish press. At no time did any reporter venture to ask a passer-by whether he knew who Paderewski was, or what this meant for him, or what he thought about the funeral. In the absence of any spontaneous response or reaction to the event, the unbelievably boring transmission was reminiscent of the Communist coverage of May Day parades in Warsaw. The Communists, however, used to take great pains to produce some appearance of spontaneous support, and, because of the requirement for spontaneity and live coverage, it was always an opportunity for a certain amount of dissent and subversive humor which kept at least some of the spectators intensely amused and engaged. No such gestures were possible at the funeral because it attracted so little notice.

There can be many explanations as to why such a prominent nationalistic figure was met with so little notice. One is certain that had Paderewski been reburied during the last years of communism, the crowds greeting his coffin would most likely have numbered in the hundreds of thousands—as it would have symbolized an opposition to communism, and pride in national ethos by subjected peoples. Free people seem to be more concerned with their everyday economic pursuits and troubles than engaged in supporting the nationalistic cause.

The new Polish Republic is, in its rituals, more exclusive of women than were the Communists. The only two women shown in the four-hour transmission were Barbara Bush and Danuta Walesa, two wives and mothers. The images of the funeral, the intimate voices of the male narrators, the level and type of discourse employed, and the dominant ex-cathedra voice of the Polish Primate, all created an oppressive atmosphere of rather clumsy masculine grandeur, both patriarchal and unsuccessful in its attempt to impose its authority on the spectators. The current Polish officialdom thus constructs a nationhood identified with Catholicism and determined—like the Party—to efface differences including gender.

As the presidents entered the Cathedral, the regular reporter signed off and two disembodied narrators using a special low voice related—and often read from prepared statements about—the events. "Today's
celebration has a special religious and national meaning. These two elements are so intertwined in Polish history that it is not possible to distinguish or separate them. It is remarkable that there are no national symbols that would not also be religious at the same time . . . we are now on the main track of national destiny” the voice says. The orchestra plays Polish and American anthems and the narrator’s voice fades. Behind the coffin draped in a Polish flag stand the presidents and a church full of invited guests and national celebrities.

The camera shows the main altar which, for this ceremony, is draped in white and red cloth suspended from the gothic ceiling. The cloth surrounds the female icon of Polish patriotism, the Black Madonna whose maternal presence sanctions these masculine rituals of Polish Catholic nationhood. From the distance one can only see the characteristic Byzantine golden halo over the Madonna and child.

The ceremony begins. The Primate of Poland, Jozef Cardinal Glemp, announces that this is the funeral mass for the peace of the soul of Ignacy Jan Paderewski, and, unlike at ordinary Catholic masses, welcomes President Bush, Walesa, the Papal Envoy and other “guests.” The blurring of church and state functions is most obvious to a Catholic spectator. Then, a young priest sings a hymn to Mary which begins, “You are the glory of our nation, blessed most from all women folks . . . and ends “so that God will see that you remain on the highest pedestal, for eternity.”

During his homily, Cardinal Glemp finally speaks of the deceased. Significantly, from among the hundreds of Paderewski’s ardent patriotic speeches delivered after his concerts in the United States, the Cardinal chooses the one in which he addressed the Polish American Roman Catholic Union convention of physicians in Philadelphia in 1917. He quotes from the speech in which Paderewski remarked that medical doctors are rarely true believers and that they should rely more on faith than on reason alone. He commends those doctors who have not left the Church.

The Cardinal continues with a seemingly unrelated statement defining “freedom” as either the freedom to be with Christ or freedom from Christ and calls on believers to choose the first, as Paderewski did. He states that the choice we make to be with Christ is the choice in and about “our families.” In case anyone has still missed the message, the Cardinal spells it out: the “choice” is either to be with Christ and life (against abortion) or against Christ and life (pro-choice). “These are two
paths that Europe is taking,” and he explicitly cites the Pope who has admonished Poles to take the morally correct path.

Soon after the homily, the voice of the priest-narrator re-iterates the basic message of this ceremony: “One cannot understand the history and destiny of the Polish nation without Christ—this great 1,000 year old community which defines each of us.” In these words, which are borrowed almost verbatim from the 1978 definition of Polishness offered by the Pope to his countrymen during a speech in Victory Square in Warsaw, the Church, through the prepared words of its spokesman, is asserting both the privileged position of Polish nationalism, claiming it for the religious political tradition in which religion gives depth to politics and in which the position of women is clearly defined and delimited. One of the clearest “religious” messages of Paderewski’s funeral is the denial of “choice” for women. This is, according to the Church, the path “with Christ and life” that Poland must take.

THE POLISH MOTHER ETHOS

To better understand the symbolism of the Church’s antifeminist message, inherent in its sponsorship of Christian values within the tradition of conservative Polish nationalism, it is necessary to examine more closely the ethos of the “Polish Mother” and the way it has been recently employed. The ethos of the Polish Mother was a romantic creation.23 Let us look closer at the actual poem which originated its many artistic and discursive renditions.

The Polish national bard, Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), codified not one but two models of womanhood in poetic texts which have since become canonical for Polish patriots. The tradition he originated consists of a Romantic elaboration of the numerous political disasters that have befallen Poland since the end of the eighteenth century, especially the defeat of the 1831 November Insurrection against Russian political domination. Two of his poems—“To a Polish Mother” and “Emilia Plater”—bear specific relevance to gender differences within national identity. Although they present two strikingly different images of women (mother of hero-martyrs or a hero-martyr herself), in both poems Mickiewicz defines women’s place in society by contrasting, in a way that seems natural, womanhood and agency.
"To a Polish Mother"24

O Polish mother, if the radiant eyes
of genius kindle in thy darling's face
O Polish mother, ill must be his part!
Before the Mother of Our Sorrows kneel,
Gaze on the sword that cleaves her living heart —
Such is the craven blow thy breast shall feel!

Though peoples, powers, and schisms a truce declare,
And though the whole wide world in peace may bloom,
In battle — without glory — must he share;
In martyrdom — with an eternal tomb.25

A child in Nazareth, our Savior mild
Fondled the cross whereon he saved mankind:
O Polish mother, I would have thy child
Thus early learn what playthings he will find.

His young arms loaded with chains, his body frail
Full soon have harnessed to a barrow, so
Before the headsman's axe he shall not pale,
Nor at the swinging halter crimson grow.

This poem, the most somber that Mickiewicz wrote, concentrates on the nation's tragic fate. Written as "an appeal to an unspecified mother of a Polish freedom fighter,"26 it depicts her in terms of her passive emotional attachment to her son. Because of his fate, her fate is comparable to that of the Heavenly Mother. The son is implicitly compared to Christ. Not only did the Polish Mother not become a part of any patriotic action, she does not even take an active part in her son's life by warning him against the dangers of politics. All she can do is to accustom him to his inevitable fate. Whatever the concept of motherhood means for feminists in the West,27 this "Polish Mother" serves to support a religio-nationalistic patriarchy. Though this model of motherhood is the laughing stock of Western liberals as well as of the political Left in Poland, it remains a potent political symbol and a model for somber reinterpretations of modern Polish history within the patriotic tradition.

Janusz Zaorski's film Mother of Kings was one of the most influential films of the 1980s. The heroine is a simple, illiterate, Polish mother. The movie begins with her husband's death under the wheels of a streetcar as
she clutches her pregnant belly. She raises three sons (three “kings”) despite great economic and political adversity. She has a platonic male friend (not unlike the Holy Family) who, to add local color, is an alcoholic. During the war, she and her friend kill a German soldier who wanders into her apartment suspecting that one of the guests is a Jew. Her favorite son is a hero of the Polish underground, who is arrested and miraculously survives not only Gestapo tortures but Auschwitz. After the war he returns and becomes a Communist. He then is a victim of the Stalinist purges and is tortured by the Communists as he was by the Germans. He does not survive the Communists who are represented as being more brutal than the Nazis. The mother, basically apolitical, honest, hard-working, and Catholic, especially during the Communists’ anti-religious campaign, sacrifices her entire joyless life to the service of her sons and, through them, to her nation.

The tradition of the martyred Polish mother and her doomed sons is alive in contemporary Polish cinema. The film, like the poem “To a Polish Mother,” is not about her, but rather about her sons. Both Polish mothers, the nineteenth-century one and the twentieth-century film-rendition of the same image, were created by men in times when there was no independent Polish state. Both evoked the defensive, heroic patriotism so characteristic of nationalism under siege. For many Poles this film resonates with popular myths about national martyrdom and resilience, and the special role of women in supporting both.

The dominant image of women on Polish national television continues to evoke the Mother of God, the long-suffering producer of Polish martyrs. It is her image that Lech Walesa carries on his lapel and proudly displays to the cameras. During the particularly nasty presidential campaign of 1990, he ridiculed one of his opponents, an emigré married to a Peruvian “Indian” woman, by challenging him to compare Mrs. Walesa, who has borne six children, to the other woman, and decide which was best to fit the role of “Matka Polka” or the “Polish mother.” In so doing, he combined the traditions of Polish patriarchy and xenophobia to deliver a potent political blow.

VIRGIN-HERO EMILIA PLATER

Mickiewicz also wrote a strikingly different gender-defining poem, a part of the Polish school curriculum for the fifth grade even today.
“The Death of a Colonel”

In the depth of an ancient forest, a contingent of soldiers stopped by the hut of a forest ranger. At the door, the colonel’s guard is watching. Inside in a tiny room, their colonel is dying. Crowds of peasants came to inquire, a leader of great power and fame he must have been to raise so much sympathy from the simple folk, tears and well wishes.

He ordered his faithful horse to be saddled, he wanted to see it before death comes. And ordered it to be led into the room. He asked for his uniform, his sword and belt, a rifle and ammunition. Old warrior — he wants like Czarniecki Dying — to bid his armors farewell. Then they led out the horse, and a priest came in with the last rights. And the soldiers paled with sorrow while the peasants knelted outside the threshold. Even veterans who served with Kosciuszko, having spilled so much of their and other’s blood without a tear, now cried and repeated the prayers after the priest. In the morning dawn, the church bells rang; no soldiers were left about the hut, for the Muscovite was already in the vicinity — the folk came in to see the body of the knight.

On a shepherd’s cot he is laid out — in his hand a cross, by his head a saddle and belt, by his side, a sword and a rifle. But this warrior though in a soldier’s attire, what a beautiful, maiden’s face had he? What breasts? — Ah, this was a maiden, Lithuanian born, a maiden-hero, the leader of the uprising — Emilia Plater.

Mickiewicz had been fascinated with “patriotic, heroic women,” with women bearing arms; in several of his early, romantic ballads, and narrative poems he re-tells or perhaps sometimes re-invents an active role for women in the Polish nationalist ethos. In this warrior’s tale, the woman who took on male attributes becomes a military hero herself and amazes...
the "simple folk" with the postmortem revelation of her sex. Significantly, in this poem, there is no image of Mary: only the priest administering last rights to a warrior and the cross that is placed in the warrior's hand. The woman, taking up arms, is treated here with all military honors and complete disregard for her sex. The only possible exception is that as a charismatic woman-leader of men, the love she inspires may be especially sentimental. A woman impersonating an officer and a woman-hero is depicted as an exception which is treated as a man would have been treated. In order for her to gain recognition as a public figure she had to abandon her gender and become culturally male.

Though the poem was learned by heart by all schoolchildren (it was a part of the core curriculum throughout the Communist period) there are no close artistic renditions of this theme as Mother of Kings is for the "Polish Mother" theme. The story of Emilia Plater has been retold in a fifth grade textbook. The text of the poem is immediately followed by a short prose reading of her "real life." From this story, the 11-year-old pupils learn that Emilia Plater from early childhood had been attracted to boys' play. Her father abandoned her and her mother and she grew up playing with her male cousins. She learned how to fight and did very well in fencing. Her room was adorned with reproductions of portraits of Jeanne d'Arc, Tadeusz Kosciuszko, and Prince Józef Poniatowski (both recent military heroes) and a copy made by herself of a woman hero, a seventeenth-century defender of the fortress in Trembowla, Anna Dorota Chrzanowska.

Upon learning about an insurrection against the Russian domination, she cut her hair, got an insurgent's uniform, and — together with her friend Maria Proszyńska — set off to gather a battalion in her native Lithuanian province to attack the Russian occupants. When during one of their first direct combats her companion was wounded, another woman, Maria Raszanowicz, took her place at Emilia's side. Raszanowicz remained at Plater's side until the latter's death following the defeat of the uprising. The women's comradeship in arms has a suggestion of lesbianism for the Western reader; in Poland it has been read asexually and, if anything, lends more propriety to the anomalous gender situation in which Emilia was found. The fact that her foreign-sounding name is never mentioned is also significant. The controversy over Mickiewicz's own Jewish origins as well as those of the Plater family cannot be developed here. Only the fact that the undisputed heroine's possibly "foreign"
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origin is not mentioned in “real life” testifies to the inclusiveness of the romantic canon of Polish patriotism.

These two poems have long been memorized by all Polish schoolchildren. The poem “Emilia Plater” was especially propagated in the school curriculum during the Communist period despite the anti-Russian content. Since the collapse of communism and the onset of the family-oriented Catholic nationalist campaign, its imagery is largely absent from public discourse, which has been taken over by the Polish Mother ethos.

Bozena Choluj, who significantly ignores the existence of the other myth of a cross-dressing woman-hero (as it is absent from the post-Communist nationalist discourse), explains instead that, in today’s Poland the equation of Heavenly and Polish Mother continues as a model of double service for women to follow. This double service entails service to her family and, through the family, to Poland. Fulfilling this double service guarantees the woman a “double satisfaction” which she can obtain within the “domestic” sphere to which the Heavenly Servant-Mother of God destined her. Only through this service can a Polish woman attain an equivalent, though subordinate rank with the Polish male patriot. The Polish woman becomes the model of female patriotism though her role as a mother and by a systematic denial of her sexuality.

PATRIOTIC EXILE OR ESCAPE

The canon of Polish patriotism created by Mickiewicz not only defined ideal roles for generations of women as Polish Mothers but also elaborated the gendered history of Poland and outlined the meaning of the Polish patriotic diaspora in the “gospel of the Polish emigré,” a small booklet called Books of the Polish Nation and the Polish Pilgrimage. The Polish nation (narod) and personified Poland (Polska) were both conceived as holy. Because the nation was a democracy (of the nobles) and somehow free from sin (like the Virgin), it became a threat to the increasingly evil and tyrannical neighboring states. So the evil rulers of the neighboring states decided to murder both Poland and Freedom. The satanic trinity of Russia, Prussia, and Austria, with France playing the role of Pilate, completed its conspiracy: the Polish nation, like Christ, was crucified, but:

The Polish nation did not die: its body lies in the grave, but its soul has descended from the earth, that is, the public life, to the abyss, that is, to the domestic life of
nations. . . . But on the third day the soul shall return to the body and the nation shall rise and free all the peoples of Europe from slavery.\(^{31}\)

Denied a public sphere, the Polish nation retreated to domesticity. It was in the "abyss" of domesticity that Poland appears feminized, and assumed the female body form. Artistic renditions of the imagery of Poland (by Artur Grottger and others) were female throughout the nineteenth century. By implication, it is from this feminine form that Poland must be liberated or resurrected into a full masculine public life.

THE ANTIPATRIOTIC TRADITION

Witold Gombrowicz (1900–1967), a modern Polish emigré writer, outlined with irony in his literary diary the creation of the national ethos:

Because we had lost our independence and were weak, he [Mickiewicz] decorated our weakness with plumes of Romanticism, he turned Poland into the Christ of nations, he opposed our Christian virtue to the lawlessness of the partitioners and sang the praises of our beauteous landscapes.\(^{32}\)

Elsewhere in his diary he directs his wit against himself as well as the Polish national tradition:

In a way, I feel like Moses. Yes, this is an amusing characteristic of my nature: to exaggerate on my own behalf. . . . Ha, ha, why, you ask, do I feel like Moses? A hundred years ago, a Lithuanian poet forged the shape of the Polish spirit and today I, like Moses, am leading the Poles out of the slavery of that form. I am leading the Pole out of himself.\(^{33}\)

Gombrowicz, the "New Moses" of Polish literature, has now become a part of the Polish canon mainly because he was an emigré whom the Communist critics hated and the censors banned, though he spoke more against the canons of traditional Catholic morality than of communism. His ridiculing as absurd the patriotic proposition that an individual should feel compelled to sacrifice his life for the idea of the fatherland is now repeated especially within elite circles. It is characteristic that his departure from the compulsions of the nationalistic tradition was also expressed in terms of gender, generational, and sexual difference.

Gombrowicz wrote the ultimate antinationalistic novel, *Trans-Atlantic*, during World War II, while himself choosing an Argentine exile from the European continent. Rebelling against the "bad poetry" by Mickiewicz
that styled Poland — for Poles and for the West — as the eternal victim, he felt “somewhat responsible” for this fateful “Polish legend,” writing *Trans-Atlantic* as an attempt to rectify the false and tainted relationship that the ‘Polish’ nation and its legend had with the West.\(^{34}\) He intended it as the greatest provocation and compared it to “laughter at a funeral,” when a Requiem mass was expected. His “program” began with an “unceremonious treatment of the sacrosanct Polish tradition.” The novel is a parody of Adam Mickiewicz’s national verse epic, *Pan Tadeusz*, written in exile as an assertion of the Polish spirit and inspired by the poet’s nostalgia. Gombrowicz too wrote *Trans-Atlantic* in exile, but instead of verse, it is in a grotesque, archaic Baroque prose. Instead of depicting the heroic, sentimentally beautiful and fulfilling past, it presents “sublimation in reverse.” There are strikingly similar details: the hunting scene — but without hares; a duel — but with empty pistols; and, there is a polonaise — without Poland.

Gombrowicz summarized the novel’s “plot” (adding: “for me plots are not very important, they are only a pretext”) in his *A Kind of Testament*:

I, Gombrowicz, make the acquaintance of a *puto* (a Queer) who is in love with a young Pole, and circumstances make me arbiter of the situation: I can throw the young man into the queer’s arms or make him stay with his father, a very honorable, dignified and old-fashioned Polish major.

To throw him into the *puto*’s arms is to deliver him up to vice, to set him on roads which lead nowhere, into the troubled waters of the abnormal, of limitless liberty, of an uncontrollable future.

To wrench him away from the queer and make him return to his father is to keep him within the confines of the honest Polish tradition.

What should I choose? Fidelity to the past . . . or the freedom to create oneself as one will? Shut him into his atavistic form . . . or open the cage, let him fly away and do what he likes! Let him create himself! In the novel the dilemma leads up to a general burst of laughter, which sweeps away the dilemma.\(^{35}\)

It is the author’s most public statement about his attitude toward and understanding of the national traditions of patriotism and the fatherland in which the liberation from this tradition is represented in terms of a struggle between the “atavistic form” of the “honest” (heterosexual) Polish tradition and the “freedom to create oneself” in a different (homosexual) engagement.

It is in this novel that the narrator as well as the young object of desire repeatedly ask the question, “Why should there be a ‘fatherland,’ why not
a ‘son-land?’ And as for the “martyred Poland”: surely no Polish writer ever dared to bid farewell to his homeland as Gombrowicz did in this Baroque flight:

Drift, drift towards your country! Your holy and accursed country! Drift towards that Obscure Monstrous-Saint who has been dying for centuries but cannot give up! Drift towards this holy crank, cursed by nature, for ever being born, newborn for ever. Drift, drift, so that it will neither let you live nor die, and will keep you suspended for ever between Being and Not-Being! Drift towards your Raving Lunatic... so that its lunacy can torture you, your wife and your children, so that it can condemn and assassinate you in its agony, by his agony!36

When we first saw the book, in a Warsaw dormitory, a copy smuggled in from Paris, we staged a group reading and it was this passage that made the biggest impression on us, members of the postwar generation and all of us locked forever into the “Polish tradition.” It was the evocation of a stifling oppression, of neither death nor life, that seemed so realistic in his rendition of the Polish fate. We felt that even if, by some miracle, the whole absurdity of the Communist regime would disappear, we would still be left with this “tradition” which would continue to condemn and assassinate us with and by its own agony. But at the time, I missed the fuller force of Gombrowicz’s subversion of this tradition. Though confronted with the text, reading it with great attention, we still did not see that one of the problems of “our” tradition had to do with the “seemingly natural” compulsion of love and sacrifice for Poland, embedded in the language and iconography of an exclusively respectable heterosexual love. We knew that it was this “tradition” and this respectability that was keeping our spirit down but we were still unable to leap from the rejection of patriotic clichés to the acceptance of other possibilities.

POST-COMMUNIST AND POST-SOLIDARITY POLITICAL CABARET

The Communist period introduced a distortion to the patriotic—antipatriotic dialogue in the Polish nationalist debate. At first, it took an antinationalist stand which was complemented with a proclamation of gender equality. The latter was expressed by the proverbial image of a woman on a tractor as well as a woman-soldier. Imposed from abroad and accompanied with very clear signs of another Russian (Soviet) national oppression of Poles, this image had no chance for acceptance within traditional Polish society. In today’s Poland, the interstices of nationalism
and the subjugation of women have been explored and staged, rather, through satirical political theatre. This takes several forms—on stage, in spontaneous, amateur street performances, and mediated through the camera and projected on the screen. In these popular performances, multifaceted Polish nationalism, embedded in the gender language and iconography of official culture, is now under attack. It is this dialogue between nationalistic ritual oratory (which, by definition, precludes any spontaneous response) on the one hand, and the staged travesty of it, on the other, that allows for a certain level of acceptance of nationalistic-religious ceremony and for reinforcing popular resistance to the imposed sanctity of national ritual.

It appears that the traditional nationalistic signifiers are becoming meaningless and through their ridicule the nation may finally be leaving them behind. Their meaninglessness originates in the current attempt by the ideologues of the Catholic church and their conservative allies in politics to formulate a new Polish patriotism, reclaiming the heritage of the dominant traditions, through a nationalism that clearly denies the agency of women. But although this reformulated nationalism has free access to cameras and loudspeakers, it seems to lack an audience. Instead, this would-be popular nationalist ideology finds itself engaged in an unwilling tango with the leftist and antinationalistic insurgency, an insurgency that attempts, at last, to complete Gombrowicz's injunction to "take the Pole out of himself"—or herself—the new satirists seem to add.

In Poland, one unquestionable advantage attending the end of Communist rule has been the considerable freedom of expression that now exists. (Let us hope that the Law on Radio and Television, with its provisions on Christian Values, will not be implemented.) Even state-run television, along with broadcasts of official rituals like the one just described, continues broadcasting also marvelous parodies of such ceremonies. The Party, in its search for legitimacy, also permitted certain forms of political satire, but the object of satire today has shifted from the "reds" to the "blacks," from the Communists to the clerics.

Today, Polish satire can finally afford to assume the antinationalistic tradition of Grombrowicz and to target the sacred Polish nationalist tradition itself. In the past, because the Party would have welcomed such attacks, satirists rarely parodied this tradition and never did so in any substantial way. At that time, the preferred targets, of course, were the
Russians, the absurdities of Soviet rule, and the "geo-political situation"38 of Poland. One of the most watched programs on Polish television today39 is a monthly prime-time event: the satirical political cabaret of Olga Lipinska's theatre.30 Her sophisticated one-hour-long uninterrupted performances are based on a shared knowledge of the canon of Polish national literature and theatre. Parts of nationalistic songs (such as "To a Polish Mother"), allusions to recent and historical events, restaging of national dramas (Mickiewicz's, Krasinski's, Wyspianski's, etc.) all create a new antinationalist tradition. Lipinska's theatre targets the Catholic clergy,41 though not the faith itself; the cabaret combines parody and ridicule with occasional gestures more serious in tone.

Thus, one of her most controversial pieces was a musical new prayer to God — performed by one of the actresses dressed in a black dress. The woman asserts her faith in Him, while complaining about and rejecting the viciousness of the treatment she receives from "His bureaucrats," the Church priests and hierarchy. Lipinska was almost put off the air because of this song. Her staging adapts the Polish tradition that represents a suffering woman's endurance of injustice as a criticism of the state. By doing so, she intertwines and implicates the abuses of the old Communist authorities and bureaucracy with the newly empowered oppressive hierarchy of the Church and its officers, thereby exposing and subverting their attempts to enforce submission to their icons and themselves as the sole legitimate representatives of the nation. Lipinska costumizes her actors as the clichéd icons of the tragic Polish past and has them perform absurd and funny parodies of national dramas and national dances (polonaise, mazurkas, etc.). The targets of her satires are the new rulers, who are often represented as new faces in old places; the much-touted liberation of Poland is described as this season's new fashion color, black will be worn instead of red, as the officers of the Church replace Party officials as abusers of authority.

Overall, the political message is leftist: while the actors sing that "Of course capitalism must be," one actor pleads from the wings for "exploitation with a human face," an obvious parody of the 1960s reform Communists who called for "socialism with a human face." The songs often portray unemployment among women (textile workers in Lodz as well as workers in heavy industry factories). It is the voices of women workers who bitterly denounce the injustice of having fought for liberation and now having to pay most of the costs of the change while
con-men and former functionaries get rich. In one of her programs, a revolutionary song from the Stalinist era was sung with bitter self-irony as the words call not only for slowing down privatization but also for “taking over the factories.”

The women who play leading roles are interchangeably dressed in the national costumes, in the garb of workers, or in the Western cabaret tradition of provocative sexuality with, for example, topless short dresses veiled in red. In all her programs there are direct attacks on the Church’s anti-abortion campaign: that it is the main issue before the parliament is ridiculed as is the advanced median age of the almost exclusively male Senate. There are frequent sketches and jokes about poor peasant women wondering where the money will come from to feed all the children that “they” (the clergy) are now “making” them bear. In one sketch, the part of the woman is played by a man dressed as a peasant’s wife and the mother of a grown son.

The language of direct and threatening songs, such as the one I translate below, continues to be embedded in the sexual language of nationalistic romance. But this time Poland appears as a beautiful and aristocratic woman who is dangerous, while the “nation” itself figures as masculine and threatened. This song is presented by the actor in the troop who always plays the “boss” costumed in the coat of an eighteenth-century gentry-man and in a wig that makes him look remarkably like well-known pictures of Paderewski, addresses President Walesa, the most prominent nationalist spokesman. Walesa’s romance with Poland is portrayed as highly romantic: she was devoted to him and he embodied a symbol of a great cause for her. But that was prior to their holy matrimony, after which the sublime romance becomes tawdry farce. Walesa is depicted as an unfortunate suitor who has married a difficult woman who is above him. The church wedding is to blame for this romance going sour. The whimsical lady, true to her class, humiliates her husband the way she would not dare treat her lover. She will also call upon him to keep the promises he made her and may lead a rebellion of the narod (nation), angry and drunk— with wedding booze— against her master. The upper-class bride is easily identified as the intelligentsia or Poland (both of the gentry ethos). The singer’s tone menaces Walesa as he describes the anger of the “bride” and the fury that threatens to finish Walesa unless he takes special, traditionally masculine, measures to curtail this rebellion.
To take a bride not from your own sphere
is an act of courage or a foolhardiness . . .
She will remind you of your plebeian origin,
show you her tin ring with her crest of arms . . .

Let's stop the belated complaints —
you brought this upon yourself,
You had her love, respect, devotion,
She was ready to lie at your feet,
You were a symbol of a great cause for her
Before the holy sacrament united you two.

And now, she will blame you for her own failures,
Doubt the existence of any of your virtues,
Hold up to you your pre-nuptial promises,
and, lets face it, you gave her a bunch of those.

The nation, drunk from the wedding booze,
Wakes up hung over and has mad eyes;
You've promised 100 million per capita,
Better deliver it before the nation destroys you.

What has happened cannot be undone,
And, one has to admit, you have two bad choices:
Either to take up your bride on a short leash, or
Receive her punches in humility.

(my translation of fragments of the song — EH)

The complex overdeterminations and deflations of the codes of gender
and state politics in this piece leave little in the romantic traditions of
Polish nationalism that has not been evoked or subverted. The first stanza
alludes to the cross-class alliance between Walesa, a worker, and the
upper-class ethos of the intelligentsia or Poland. She behaves as a whimsi-
cal princess-bride of a commoner who will remind him of his humble
origin by pointing to her crest of arms (even if it were made out of
tin — an allusion to the impoverished economic state of the Polish upper
classes). The female Poland is here not a mother of martyrs, a virgin-hero,
or any sort of victim. She is a powerful agent who is a menacing (though
unequal) partner of her brute but impotent husband. It is the sanctifica-
tion of their union that had caused the problem in this alliance in the first
place. Had they consummated their romance without benefit of the holy
sacrament, the union might have been a happy one. The obvious allusion
to Walesa's ascendancy to the Presidency, which cost him his following among the intelligentsia and the masses, is the downfall of the union.

Such popular cabaret suggests significant progress toward freeing the national form from the national cage. As for the author of *Trans-Atlantic*, the point is not to cease being Polish but to allow for an alteration in the terms by which that identity is conceived. As Gombrowicz wrote:

Some of my compatriots regard me as an exceptionally Polish author — and I may well be both very anti-Polish and very Polish — or perhaps Polish because anti-Polish; because the Pole comes to life in me spontaneously, freely, to the extent in which he becomes stronger than I...

I wouldn't be at all surprised if the black humor of *Trans-Atlantic* were an almost involuntary expression of Polish pride and liberty.32

The major tradition in Polish nationalism views itself as the nationalism of an oppressed nation, without a political state but with a strong aspiration for one. As such, this tradition developed a space for women in the ranks of the warriors for the national cause. In the heroic phase of the national movement, women, as well as other minorities (such as assimilated Jews) were welcomed into the ranks of the nation and the role of women was not limited to producing warriors but instead included a part in the fight. With the transformation from aspiring and defensive nationalism to the celebration of independence, the structural position of minorities and women changed dramatically. It is this phase of nationalism — with unrestricted freedom and among a cacophony of contending voices — that the patriarchal hierarchy once again is attempting to dominate the stage and to direct the staging of the national drama.

The "political community" is now being defined in a rigid and exclusive manner by the pragmatic nationalists of the Christian National Democratic tradition, mobilizing and manipulating images from all the "patriotic" traditions of Poland's past as long as they do not contradict the necessity to keep women in their rightful place. Against this model a new political community is beginning to imagine itself in opposition to the stifling air around the national icons. In this antinationalistic insurgency, women are both well represented and crucial to its construction. Just as Gombrowicz saw himself as a Moses leading the human (male) Pole out of the confines of Mickiewicz's male patriotic ethos, getting the Pole out of the Pole, so it is the female-centered satire of Olga Lipinska's theatre that is aiming to liberate a sexual Polish woman out of her familial self, the Polish Mother, into which the same poet had cast her.
The age of television is just coming to Poland. The official boredom of the Communist vision of the nation has been supplemented by the tedium of the televised spectacles of the new conservatives. The Polish public is as indifferent to these new rites as they were to the May Day parades of the previous regime. What seems most alive on Polish television are the popular satirical cabarets, like Olga Lipinska, and the avant-garde daring of Gombrowicz's revived plays. Both speak a widely understood language of the absurd and both refuse to engage in the narcissistic adoration of Poland's wounded history. Czeslaw Milosz once stated that martial law had a disastrous effect on Polish literature, not because of the repressions and strict censorship but because it forced Polish writers (again) into untenable positions of holiness. It had a similar effect on the cinema (see *Mother of Kings*) and on general popular culture. In Gombrowicz's words, it forced the Pole back into his rigid form. The advent of international electronic culture, together with and through local political satire and theatre, may finally contribute to a liberation of Poles from themselves and — specifically and separately — Polish women out of and away from the ethos of the Polish Mother.

**NOTES**

1. The first draft of this essay was presented at the Susan B. Anthony Center for Women's Studies at the University of Rochester. I wish to thank Rosemary Kegl and John Michael as well as all my discussants for their comments. I also thank Katherine Verdery and Mira Marody for their reading and helpful suggestions.

2. This classification follows a scheme presented by a Jagiellonian University sociologist, Jacek Wasilewski, during a lecture delivered at the University of Rochester on April 14, 1993.

   In this essay I primarily discuss the symbolic politics of Catholic nationalists and anti-Catholic nationalists. The New Left combining the post-Communist Social Democrats with a left faction of post-Solidarity such as the Labor Union, are staying away from an exclusive ethno-nationalism, proclaiming instead inclusive ideas of citizenship within a nation state. No party or political orientation in Poland, including the nascent feminism represented by a parliamentarian Barbara Labuda, is either explicitly or implicitly antinationalist.

3. Following the September 19, 1993, parliamentary election which toppled the last post-Solidarity openly pro-Catholic government of Hanna Suchocka, the
post-Communist parties, including the atheistic Social Democrats and post-
Communist Peasant Party (which is conciliatory toward the Church), now
have the majority in parliament and were able to form a government with a
peasant prime minister, Waldemar Pawlak. The new government however
maintains a good working relationship with the Church and is willing to
submit for ratification vote the new Concordat with the Vatican. A vocal
opposition from anti-Church forces claims that the proposed Concordat
grants the Catholic religion a privileged position within the state and that it
is an international agreement which is binding on the state prior to the
passing of a new constitution.

4. I refer here to “Ustawa z dnia 7 stycznia 1993 r. o planowaniu rodziny,
ochronie plodu ludzkiego i warunkach dopuszczalności przerywania ciazy”
(Law of January 7, 1993, on family planning, protection of human fetus and
conditions for allowing termination of pregnancy) Dziennik Ustaw Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 17, no. 78, Warszawa, dnia 1 marca 1993 (The Journal of Law of
the Polish Republic, 17, no. 78, Warsaw, March 1, 1993).

5. Citations from Chapter 4, Article 21, section 2, points 5, 6, 7, and 8 of the
“Ustawa z dnia 29 grudnia 1992 r. o radiofonii i telewizji,” Dziennik Ustaw
Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 7, no. 33, Warszawa, 29 stycznia 1993 r. (Law of

Society 19 (1990): 507-44; a University of Warsaw philosopher, Magda Sroda
comments on the meaning of the “return”: “[d]e-communization and the
return to Christian values appears inevitably to point to the inescapable de-
emancipation [of women — EH, also my translation]” in “Kobieta: wychowa-
nie, rola, tozsamosc,” an article published recently in a collection Glos maja
Kobiety: Teksty Feministyczne (Women are Speaking: Feminist Texts), ed. Sla-

7. Faye Ginsburg and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “Introduction” to Uncertain
Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990),
2.

8. Connell, “The State, Gender, and Sexual Politics,” and Katherine Verdery,
“From Parent-State to Family Patriarchs: Gender and Nation in Contempo-
rary Eastern Europe,” forthcoming in East European Politics and Societies
(1994).

9. The new regime is supporting the “family wage” policy which has gained the
endorsement of Solidarity leadership. Only the feminists oppose it, suggesting
an equal access to labor opportunities. See Ewa Hauser, Barbara Heyns, and
Jane Mansbridge, “Feminism in the Interstices of Politics and Culture: Po-
land in Transition,” in Gender Politics and Post-Communism, ed. Nanette Funk

10. Ernest Gellner, Nations and Nationalism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,
1993), 1.


17. It is important to note that even the antinationalists’ challengers, such as the political cabaret of Lipinska (see below in this text), still are operating within the nationalist script even while attempting to create a re-inscription of national sentiments and to rework the traditional terms of this script.

18. For an excellent overview of the Church-state dialogue prior to 1989, see Adam Michnik, *The Church and the Left* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1993, and especially David Ost’s “Introduction” to this book. Under the Marxist-Leninist regime, the Church provided a safe heaven for the opposition while being satisfied with the role of an “eschatological opposition,” without any claims on the political sphere. It is the current shift from the apolitical moral authority into the realms of political authority, represented by the Church’s demands for a repeal of the constitutional separation of Church and state, and the representation of resistance to these demands that I am focusing on in this essay.

19. In fact, in his memoirs, Paderewski describes his problems with a boycott of his concerts in the United States by Jewish organizations because of the alleged support (which he does not fully disclaim) of the nationalist and openly anti-Semitic Polish National Democrats led by Roman Dmowski.


21. The only full page devoted to the event was the advertisement placed and signed by the U.S. Embassy in Warsaw. It featured a picture of Presidents Walesa and Bush in a garden with Polish and American flags and read: “Requiem Mass for Ignacy Paderewski. Meeting of Presidents Lech Walesa and George Bush with the citizens of Warsaw.” Under the picture it listed the place and time, and the information that the mass would be transmitted through loudspeakers to the Castle Square (Gazeta Wyborcza, July 4–5, 1992). The note about the event was about 500 words. The headlines the following day read: “President Bush in Warsaw: America with Poland.” The article mentioned the crowds which came to see the U.S. President, and that they became enthusiastic when the President left the bullet-proof cage and shook some hands after the speeches. The journalist assessed the crowd as “about
20,000" people (Gazeta Wyborcza, July 6, 1992, pp. 1–2). The most important issue mentioned by both Gazeta Wyborcza and Zycie Warszawy (The Warsaw Voice) was the fact that President Bush's promises for economic help were limited. “Bush is 'giving' the Poles only what they have already gotten from the USA, namely these same $200 million, a part of the stabilization fund for Polish currency.” (Ryszard Bankowicz, “George Bush: America Is with You,” Zycie Warszawy [July 1992], 3.)

22. In December 1991, the physicians' association in Poland passed a new code of ethics which prohibited doctors from performing abortions (which were legal until February 1993) under penalty of losing their license to practice medicine. When, soon after its entering into force, this code was challenged as illegal before the Tribunal of State by the Governmental Civil Rights Spokesman, Jozef Cardinal Glemp called for his resignation or removal.

23. I will examine this in terms of the poem's contemporary cultural context and not in terms of its nineteenth-century literary nationalist tradition. My focus here is on gender politics of the 1990s, and ventures to the past are made only when absolutely necessary in order to understand the present. For the same reason I quote only excerpts of the long poem; it is not the full artistic effect of the self-consciously tragic poem that I try to convey to the reader but only the essential ingredients of the living myth it originated.


25. That is, without the hope of resurrection — E.H.


29. This story is a shortened version of a book Dioniza Wawrzykowska-Wiercikowska, Sercem i orezem Ojczyznie slużyły (With their hearts and arms they served the Fatherland), about Polish women military heroes.

30. In an article by Bozena Choluj, “Matka Polka i zmysły,” Nowa Republica 3 (December 1992): 51, a bold feminist reading of the ethos argues that for Polish women, nationalism has been projected as a substitute for sexuality. The translation of the Polish Matka Boska (an adjectival form of God's or Heavenly Mother) and its equation with Matka Polka (the adjectival form of Polish Mother) is read as a semantic equation of the two and, in fact, functions on the same semantic level in which the Polish Mother appears as a secular-national equivalent of the Heavenly Mother.
33. Ibid., 36.
38. For example, in 1981, prior to the declaration of Martial Law, during the Gdansk Festival of Forbidden Songs, one of the songs ridiculed the association between Soviet and Polish astronauts who, in space, walked into each other’s arms and kissed. This song, aimed against the subservient position of Poland vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, has a clearly homophobic message.
39. When Polish television celebrated its forty years on the air, Olga Lipinska’s cabaret was listed as one of the three best programs in the forty years of its history in the national viewers’ survey, Donosy, October 26, 1992.
40. Olga Lipinska is a veteran satirist, who started in the 1960s in the famous Warsaw Studencki Satyryczny (Student Satirical Satire), a writer, performer, director, and producer of a new media theatre on TV. She had been criticized for her continuous involvement with the TV stage even during the actors’ boycott of official TV during the Martial Law following the crushing of Solidarity in 1981.
41. Lipinska’s cabaret is under constant attack by the Christian National Party. One of its leaders, a member of Sejm (Parliament) Stefan Niesiolowki, when asked what the defense of Christian values meant regarding national television, stated for Gazeta Wyborcza: “For instance, it would mean taking off the air such programs as Olga Lipinska’s or Polish ZOO [another satirical cabaret]. If Mrs. Olga Lipinska produced her programs among the Muslims and insulted their religious feelings, they would have long since slit her throat. Here, we Catholics are tolerant and will restrain ourselves from slitting Mrs. Lipinska’s throat.” Quoted in a Polish-language E-mail daily, Donosy, October 19, 1992 (translation mine).
42. Gombrowicz, A Kind of Testament, 105.
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