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New Writings in Feminist and Women's Studies

Winning and Short-listed Entries from the 2011 Feminist and Women's Studies Association's Annual Student Essay Competition

By Trishima Mitra-Kahn¹ and Maud Perrier²

In this special issue of the *Journal of International Women's Studies* (JIWS), the Feminist and Women's Studies Association UK & Ireland (FWSA) is delighted to present the winner and the shortlisted entries of its annual student essay competition. The FWSA was founded in 1987 as a network of scholars with research interests in feminist and women's studies. Today we are a national association with over 300 members and our members' scholarship range from the social and health sciences to the arts and the humanities. The FWSA's principal mission is to promote feminist research and teaching, whilst providing support for productive collaborations among both scholars and students. To this end, we run an annual small grants competition which funds collaborative postgraduate research events, an annual book prize which rewards ingenuity and scholarship in the fields of feminism, gender and women's studies, alongside our biennial international conference, workshops, and seminars.

This year marks the seventh anniversary of the FWSA's collaboration with the JIWS. In 2004, JIWS published a special issue showcasing the winner and shortlisted entries from the FWSA's very first student essay competition. JIWS's dedication to providing 'a forum for scholars, activists, and students to explore the relationship between feminist theory and various forms of organizing' ensured that our collaboration was not a one-off phenomenon and laid the ground work for the publication of an annual special issue. The journal's advancement of interdisciplinary scholarship and promotion of cross-cultural perspectives has always been underpinned by an unwavering commitment to research accessibility, as evidenced by its open-access policy. It is for these reasons that publishing an annual special issue in the JIWS is so important to the FWSA, since it provides students in the UK and Ireland with an incomparable opportunity to locate themselves within wider feminist debates and discussions through which international networks and partnerships can develop.

In recognising student scholarship, JIWS continues to facilitate the FWSA in supporting students in what is an increasingly challenging academic environment. We would like to give our sincere thanks to the JIWS for its sustained interest in encouraging, promoting, and celebrating a new generation of feminist scholarship. To all those who submitted entries and to our judges Drs Nazneen Ahmed, Ruth Lewis, and Maud Perrier, we extend our sincere thanks.

The Essays

Each year, the FWSA student essay competition attracts thought-provoking work that aims to develop and push the boundaries of feminist theory and women's studies through

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debate, discussion, and analysis. The essays published in this issue particularly highlight the reach of feminist perspectives across disciplines as diverse as Sociology, Economics, History, Literature and Linguistics, and Law.

This year's shortlist of essays is also marked by its critical analysis of gender across a range of cultural and historical contexts. Two of the essays in this issue consider the relationship between war and gender and highlight the ways in which both war and anti-war activities are important sites for the reproduction and renegotiation of masculinity and femininity. Both Say Burgin and Nancy Martin pay close attention to the ways in which gender can be simultaneously upheld and contested thus giving us a complex account of gendered contradictions in the US' anti Vietnam war movement and the First World War's western front. A common theme linking Kathryn Telling and Emily Henderson's contributions is the attention both authors have paid to the struggles and successes of feminist knowledge production. Whereas Telling provides a re-reading of Mary Daly's work as an example of how the boundaries of feminist studies are patrolled, Henderson's analysis of an economics lecture demonstrates the simultaneous success and failure of feminist positions in the Economics discipline. Similarly, Semele Assinder's essay on the development of Modern Greek studies in the nineteenth century highlights how issues of academic legitimacy have long been a challenge that women scholars have taken up as a political endeavour. Finally, in looking at the politics of the UK Gender Recognition Act (2004) through Judith Butler's poststructuralist lens, Alex Harris' essay critiques the exercise of biopolitical power in the English legal system's treatment of transgendered subjects.

The winning entry by Nancy Martin titled 'The Rose of No Man's Land [?]: Femininity, Female Identity, and Women on the Western Front' provides an alternative reading of literary texts written by and about women on the western front during World War One. Though women's roles were circumscribed by caring pursuits such as nursing and VADs, Martin shows how femininity had to be constructed and negotiated differently in the chaos and trauma of war. This essay particularly retained our attention because of its detailed and fascinating analysis of the ways in which the categories of femininity and masculinity were troubled and blurred during this period of acute social change. The competing versions of femininity Martin highlights illustrate how gender is troubled in this period of dramatic social upheaval: 'while some women articulated their nursing of wounded soldiers in maternal terms, others, in stark contrast, describe a sexual coming of age.' The embodied experience of war is an important theme in the essay; female sexuality was so heavily policed on the western front partly because these women's work placed them in such physical proximity and intimacy with the bodies of wounded men. Importantly, Martin goes further than suggesting femininity is troubled: her moving discussion of men and women's relationships during this time shows that the destruction of war and the experience of physical suffering at times eliminate the categories of gender and sexual difference.

Say Burgin's essay 'Understanding anti-war activism as a gendering activity: a look at the U.S.'s anti-Vietnam War movement' argues that gender-related anxieties and problems of the time were worked out via anti-war activism. Her thought provoking analysis of 'the burial of traditional womanhood' in 1969 shows how women activists fought against the re-inscription of normative definitions of wartime femininity. In the second part of the essay Burgin discusses how traditional notions of masculinity were at turns taken for granted, emphasised and challenged. She highlights the March on the pentagon in October 1967 as significant in enabling a re-conception of the connections between masculinity and militarism. Yet attempts to reconceive masculinity were incomplete, as male protesters continued to understand their masculinity as tied to their ability to protect their female counterparts. Burgin makes an important contribution to gender and war scholarship arguing that we need to interpret anti-war activities not only as gendered activities but as gendering

experiences, and pay attention to the ways gender is simultaneously contested and reproduced in this context.

Responding to and building upon recent trends in feminist historiography that query the transmission of histories of feminism, Kathryn Telling's essay 'Quite contrary: Mary Daly within and without women's studies' offers a compelling (re)reading of Mary Daly's body of work and that of the charges levelled against her. Telling complicates received wisdom on Daly which has frequently characterized her work as being ethnocentric, exclusionary, insular, self-indulgent, and '*outside the dialogue* of contemporary women's studies debate'. While Telling takes on board these criticisms and interrogates them, her main interest lies in demonstrating that these operate at the level of policing the disciplinary boundaries of women's studies and reinforce the exclusion of Daly's work from a particular understanding of women's studies; 'as a site of common, indeed sisterly, intellectual endeavour'. In addition, Daly's own efforts to position herself as an outsider obfuscate both the heterogeneity and complexity of the field of women's studies. These exclusions (and indeed Daly's self-exclusion) work together to produce her writings as 'the site for bad feminism'. Telling argues that this all too neat characterization needs to be reread without losing sight of the 'problematic aspects' of Daly's theories and writings. Such a rereading is possible when we account for the complex, institutional, and historic struggles women's studies have had to wage whilst attempting to gain legitimacy as an academic discipline.

In her essay 'A key area of knowledge delivered by someone knowledgeable': Feminist Expectations and Explorations of a One-off Economics Lecture on Gender', Emily Henderson presents an innovative analysis of attending an Economics lecture and uses her reception of the lecture as the foundation for a broader discussion on academic power, embodied identity, pedagogy, and student expectations. Attending the lecture on gender equality and economic development impels Henderson to ask: should a lecturer 'be considered a representative of feminist academic work if she does not declare herself as such'? For Henderson, the lecturer's lack of an avowedly feminist stance can be seen as both a success and a failure of feminism within the discipline of Economics. As Henderson states, women economists' 'infiltration' of what is historically a male-centric academic field, their struggles to ensure that women are viewed as legitimate subjects of research, and the creation of women-centred economic research methodologies are all definitive successes of feminism. Yet this infiltration has changed feminist questions within the discipline into seemingly neutral and 'depoliticised' gender questions and 'gender awareness at times misses steps that a more overtly feminist stance would necessarily include'; at times this awareness also serves to dismiss feminist questions and perspectives as irrelevant. The simultaneity of what Henderson reads as both success and failure bears witness to the complexity of feminist positions in the discipline and the contradictions of women's academic identity construction within it.

In Semele Assinder's essay 'To say the same thing in different words: politics and poetics in late Victorian translation from Modern Greek' we find an elegant exposition of the development of the discipline of Modern Greek studies set against the backdrop of academic gender politics in Victorian Britain. Assinder finds that patriarchal views on women writers and academics coupled with the inaccessibility of Classical Greek studies to British women led many women to become involved with Modern Greek studies. This played a part in the establishment of Modern Greek as a legitimate academic discipline which was hitherto viewed by male academics as an 'ugly compromise'. Assinder states that British women writers and linguists, already academic pariahs, took to translating Modern Greek literature and folk poetry and in so doing constructed Greece as 'an intellectually independent space'. Such a construction, a bold political endeavour, gave British women writers an agentic voice. Women translators were '*not saying the same thing in different words*', indeed as Assinder

notes, 'they were writing liberties and freedoms unimaginable to British women'. Given the recurring theme of Greek female warriors in English translations which became quite a literary motif in British women's writing in this period, Assinder suggests that we read women translators themselves through this trope of the female warrior – 'the Amazon codified within the text'.

In 'Non-binary gender concepts and the evolving legal treatment of UK transsexed individuals' Alex Harris demonstrates the political applicability of Judith Butler's thought by making an insightful contribution to debates about the legal treatment of transsexuals in the UK. The critical review of court cases shows how the debates have moved from early essentialist assumptions about gender to the 2004 Gender Recognition act which medicalizes transsexualism and makes transsexual subjects choose one gender in accordance with the binary system. Harris makes an important suggestion for future conceptualisation of transsexuals in legal treatment: 'The question is whether temporality can be a suitable framework for UK law, rather than the current structuralist framework of binary gender categories.' His careful analysis of the Gender Recognition Act as a form of biopolitical power which reproduces the heteronormative binary order, is an excellent example of theoretically informed and empirically rich feminist scholarship. Furthermore, the essay directly confronts those who see Butler's work as lacking any political applicability whilst genuinely engaging with the challenges that applying Butlerian concepts as a way to structure social change raises.

We hope you enjoy reading this year's competition winner and short-listed entries and join us in congratulating the essayists on their success in this competition and on their stimulating work. We hope that these essays will go on to inspire students to submit their own work for consideration for next year's competition. For more information about the FWSA and its initiatives, including the next round of our essay competition, please visit www.fwsa.org.uk