

# Feminism and International Relations: or Encounters with Wolves in the Woods

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We know that old European fairy tale about Little Red Riding Hood, a young, innocent, insouciant girl who meets up with a big, malevolent, and conniving wolf in the woods of life. “What big teeth you have,” she says wonderously. “The better to eat you with,” he responds most directly, lacking wonder. Transpose the action a bit and we have a perfect *mise en scene* for feminists confronting the academic field of international relations (IR). Little Red Riding Hood, we remember, cleverly survives the fictional wolf and so also feminists survive IR. But survival is only the basic necessity. More pertinent: how can feminism flourish in a setting of canonical IR that lets us be, more or less, but does not itself dress in the garb of any “girl?”

Feminism is one of the avant-gardes of IR, a bold chaser after innovative vision in a field that has little taste for visions avant-garde. It stands in many locations, draws many connections, looks for neglected spaces of the international and the many relations that have been overlooked in this core area of men’s studies, this area devoted to great states, military strategies and hardware, statesmen, presidents, tyrants, soldiers, interstate diplomacy – war, war, and a little peace. Feminism shines lights into corners, shows the conventional as the *fauve*, can turn a field upside down and back and forward. It can, and in IR does, also fall a bit short of itself, a bit on this side of the usual avant-gardist effort to advance into the fray as the first to break through.

Feminism comes in types, forms, and the question is what forms seem most suitable to the moment of relations international before us in the next millennium.<sup>1</sup> Up to now, feminist IR has basically engaged in two overlapping projects: to outline women in places of international politics where they have never been seen before, and to inline gender in the texts and practices of international politics and IR to see where and how evocations of “women” and “men” occur without any dark outlines being drawn.

When people like Cynthia Enloe find average and nonaverage women in diplomatic offices, vacationing on beaches abroad, working in textile factories for Benetton, or making a living as prostitutes around US military bases, she is engaged in an important outlining project.<sup>2</sup> She is finding and fitting women into those otherwise austere, Anselm Kiefer-type landscapes of the international painted by mainstream schools of the field. With the help of outliners, we see women for the first time – as though they were never around before –

in countries we might not always notice or territories between them, in departments of state and foreign ministries, in international organizations, in international political economy, and in development.<sup>3</sup> Outlining puts the hands of the woman arranging the papers and the conferences and the diplomatic evenings into the analytic picture. For those of us who have struggled to see these women where once they were seemingly homeless in international politics, the *longue duree* of IR's apparent autonomy from women is exposed.<sup>4</sup> We realize that we have been duped into the woods of thinking that there are no (or very, very few) women relating internationally. We realize we need to ask "what the discipline might look like if the central realities of women's day-to-day lives were included in its subject matter."<sup>5</sup> And we have been asking away.

Sometimes, though, only shadows of "women" appear out from under a plethora of heavy outlines already drawn as international politics. Women can be not quite visible, difficult to fathom, to hear and see in some accounts, implied or implicated only in discourses comprising the field. They can be sketched in watery ways in and among the many layers of assumptions that ooze out of crisp renderings, that spill forth from a written text, that suggest hidden roles that never get any attention. The Australian defense plan for the late twentieth century, for example, says very little directly about women. However, a great deal is inlined of them through the silences and the meager suggestion that women in Australia's military should be studied in order to assess their special problems and achievements. No suggestion is made that men be so studied or that studies be undertaken to measure the performance of sex and gender as regulatory norms that influence identity and task assignments.<sup>6</sup> Women are inlined instead of outlined in this gendered Australian White Paper. As another example of inlining, we know Jean Elshtain went looking for women and war more generally and ended up following war stories as narratives inlining what people called men and women could legitimately do, recount, remember about war.<sup>7</sup> In other cases, inliners find gender-relevant relations international in art museums, novels, and poetry.<sup>8</sup> In each case gender takes shape from the outlines of places and people accorded significance; it pops out of narratives that are ostensibly about something else.

Both approaches bring IR to a different visual acuity, a different opticality, and a different sense of who some of the actors really are in the relations of the international.<sup>9</sup> But wolves in the woods linger and persist in their ways of self-showcasing. How many mainstream North American and European and Australian journals of IR regularly offer their readers selections from feminist writings? By my count, only the British journal, *Review of International Studies*, puts in a half-way decent showing in this important area of representation. Some actually seem to bare big teeth to feminist IR – the US-based *International Studies Quarterly* leaps to mind.

As a new millennium dawns, feminists might consider adding to their outlining/inlining virtuosity the memory of early Westphalian era carnivals, when everyday people scoffed at deities and their high priests without dismissing the old for the new. Carnivals were serious venues for parodic revelation. They were vehicles for the poor, the lower classes, the usual voiceless ones to act out

of line, out of assigned character, and still survive. Laughter, the funny, became the key to their exposures and their safety.

Funny, feminists have not picked up on this mode of analysis (albeit they certainly laugh among themselves). Laughter, you see, is disallowed in rigorous academic work as fundamentally incompatible with making serious philosophical statements. It is too intellectually low and commonplace, too absent rationality to offer a guideline for better seeing in the world, for going ahead as an avant-garde. Irony, however, is allowed in some circles. The relative of laughter, irony juxtaposes seemingly incommensurable ideas in ways that make us smile. Kathy Ferguson maintains that irony “allows contending thematizations of subjectivity to negotiate a political relationship that does not depend upon unanimity, consensus, or even majority agreement to any particular configuration of identity, gender, or nature, or to any one metatheoretical stance.”<sup>10</sup> “To negotiate” suggests that there is contact between high priests jested about and those laughing, in which “competing claims for identity and desire undercut as well as enable one another and produce an enhanced appreciation of each.”<sup>11</sup> I have called this “enhanced appreciation” empathetic cooperation and have recommended it for the field.<sup>12</sup>

Feminists are willing to cooperate with IR more so than mainstream IR shows signs of donning much feminist clothing. But the cooperation is, perhaps, not yet as ironic as it could be, not sufficient to turn a deadly serious, deadly earnest field into a location of some earthiness that exposes high abstractions and narrow spatial scope as laughable. Indeed, feminists in IR do not even talk much about irony qua research method (albeit some of their writings are very ironic), let alone engage in the self-parodies that could raise capacities for empathy and allow others to laugh at us. In this realm of what medievals called *ridendo dicere verum* – to speak truth laughingly<sup>13</sup> – feminism can fall short of itself and impale on the wolves’ teeth. We present ourselves as earnestly authentic in an insufficiently authentic field, as avant-gardes tend to do. We have a love-hate thing with being on the outside – as undiscovered avant-gardes tend to do. We reason, we rail, we outline, we inline, we give forty-two and a half good reasons why feminism should be taken into consideration when investigating all issues of the international. Meanwhile the tragedy of IR limps on, keeps us trying to please, keeps us from irony.

Carnival is a method of raucous transgression. We can still help women survive by drawing their outlines in Mexican factories, in Indian textile mills, in Zimbabwean cooperatives and in trails of immigrants. We can still help unmask the strictures of scholastic gender by rereading the texts for inlined identity and place. We can also laugh more and go our own ways more, somewhat less concerned about praising our accomplishments as an avant-garde or with getting the mainstream audience to believe, believe, believe us.

Feminist carnivals might cultivate two irony-producing attitudes. First, I suggest we get our hands dirty more by doing concrete fieldwork in neglected locations of the international, in places IR says belong to area studies, to cultural studies, to women’s studies, any place other than to IR. Feminists in IR need the people or texts of another place than that inherited from IR. We must

not replicate the flights of abstract fancy to which much of IR is prone, particularly in its neorealist branch. We must pick up something of the world that IR refuses and thereby acquire some agility in moving in and between the low and common, where IR would rather not go because it is insufficiently heroic, and the high intellectual world of academia. "So what are you, really," I am often asked, "an Africanist or an IR person?" You're making me laugh! Go where the people and the evocations are in an ironic showing up of IR's canonical vacuities.

Second, feminists should explore oddities in that world delivered to us by academic IR – odd in the sense of hilariously miscast, hideously hidden. We could look at the ironies of peace conferences. The Bosnian peace: where rape has been a war-fighting strategy, where combat has been foisted upon women through bodily assault, where were those issues in the peace conference? Where were the outlines of everyday women in the deliberations to end a war, a war painted against the inlines of silent, bayonet-in-the-breast ghosts? Then there is the spectacle of self-congratulation over German unity while east Germans were colonized. A veritable carnival of everyday people walked laughingly through the Cold War's iron curtain. They changed the face of western history, while, ironically, the great powers that failed to break down the Cold War got the credit – or lately, the blame. If those at the center of a sea change in relations international are all but ignored in IR, then feminists must pick up on these hidden agents and let the carnival of exposures begin. Let the IR question in feminism come to the fore: instead of bringing feminism to IR, where it is trampled under foot by wolves with big teeth, bring IR and its newly outlined people, its inlined evocations of "women" out of place, to carnivalesque feminism. And bring it hither while bearing in mind that there is no one nation of feminism into which we must amalgamate all people or all of IR. Feminism must be too ironic for that type of universalist closure, too diffuse, too prone to spawn migrants and dissidents of/from our own.<sup>14</sup>

As we mark out neglected spaces of the international, we develop sight with our eyes, site as ability to locate, and cite as the necessity of giving recognition to people we are told by IR to ignore or else (be eaten alive by the wolves). In the spirit of avant-garde carnival, though, we must also cite those who would deny us sites and bring them into political conversations oriented toward diversity and the common, toward world – worlds – rather than self.<sup>15</sup> Little Red Riding Hood will flourish then in many gala costumes as s/he speaks, laughs, outlines, inlines and lines up stories about sex, gender and women relating to the international. S/he will not defeat the wolfish high priests, but that is not necessary when one travels with empathy and ironic laughter in one's entourage. Revealing taunts, disarming gleaming smiles, unmasking games and those injured and ignored by them, s/he skips down new paths to negotiations of all sorts. She laughs millennially without worrying whether her IR is acceptable to those who, most remarkably, may persist in being stodgily garbed and lacking wonder about worlds.

## Notes

1. "Relations international" as a preferred term to international relations is discussed in Christine Sylvester, *Feminist Theory and International Relations in a Postmodern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), last chapter.

2. Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Bases, and Beaches: Making Feminist Sense of International Relations* (London: Pandora, 1989), and *The Morning After: Sexual Politics in the Post-Cold War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

3. E.g., Jan Pettman, *Living in the Margins: Racism, Sexism and Feminism in Australia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992); Simona Sharoni, "Middle East Politics Through Feminist Lenses: Toward Theorizing International Relations from Women's Struggles" *Alternatives: Social Transformation and Humane Governance*, 18, 1, 1993:5-28; Rudo Gaidzanwa, "Citizenship, Nationality, Gender, and Class in Southern Africa" *Alternatives: Social Transformation and Humane Governance*, 18, 1, 1993:39-60; Nancy McGlen and Meredith Sarkees, *Women in Foreign Policy: The Insiders* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Catherine Hoskyns, "Gender Issues in International Relations: The Case of the European Community" *Review of International Studies*, 20, 3, 1994:225-239; Carol Miller, "Women in International Relations? The Debate in Inter-War Britain" in Rebecca Grant and Kathleen Newland, eds., *Gender and International Relations* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991):64-82; Sandra Whitworth, *Feminism and International Relations: Towards a Political Economy of Gender in Interstate and Non-governmental Organizations* (London: Macmillan, 1994); Christina Gabriel and Laura McDonald, "NAFTA, Women and Organising in Canada and Mexico: Forging a 'Feminist Internationality'" *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 23, 3, 1994: 535-562; E. Koffman and Gillian Youngs, eds., *Globalization: Theory and Practice* (London: Pinter, 1996); Marianne Marchand and Janę Parpart, eds., *Feminism/Postmodernism/Development* (New York: Routledge, 1995); and special issue of *Women's Studi-*

*es International Forum* on Links Across Differences: Gender, Ethnicity, and Nationalism, 19, 1/2, 1996.

4. See discussion in Christine Sylvester, "Homeless in International Relations? 'Women's' Place in Canonical Texts and in Feminist Reimaginings" in Marjorie Martin and Adam Lerner, eds., *Reimagining the Nation* (London: Open University Press, 1993).

5. Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. xi.

6. Christine Sylvester, "The White Paper Trailing" in Graeme Cheeseman and Robert Bruce, eds., *Discourses of Danger and Dread Frontiers: Australian Defence and Security Thinking After the Cold War* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1995):134-149.

7. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

8. See Christine Sylvester, "Picturing the Cold War: An Art Graft/Eye Graft" *Alternatives: Social Transformation and Humane Governance*, 21, 4, 1996: 393-418; "Masculinity, Femininity, and International Relations: Or, Who Goes to the Moon with Bonaparte and the Adder" in Marysia Zalewski and Jane Parpart, eds., *Feminisms, Masculinity, and Power in International Relations: Theory and Practice* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997); "Riding the Hyphens of Feminism, Peace, and Place in Four-(Or More) Part Cacophony" *Alternatives: Social Transformation and Humane Governance*, 18, 1, 1993:109-118.

9. For further discussion of feminist outlining and inlining, see Christine Sylvester, "The Contributions of Feminist Theory to International Relations" in Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski, eds., *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996):254-278.

10. Kathy Ferguson, *The Man Question: Visions of Subjectivity in Feminist Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 157.

11. Ferguson, *The Man Question*, p. 157.

12. See Christine Sylvester, "Empathetic Cooperation: A Feminist Method for IR"

*Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 23, 2, 1994: 315-34.

13. See discussion in Michael Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebian Culture and The Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York: Methuen, 1985).

14. Ien Ang warns against recruiting for a nation of feminism that can be seen as the "natural" political destination for all women, no matter how multicultural." See her "I'm a Feminist But... 'Other' Women and

Postnational Feminism," in Barbara Caine and Rosemary Pringle, eds., *Transitions: New Australian Feminisms* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1995), p. 57.

15. See discussion in Wendy Brown, "Feminist Hesitations, Postmodern Exposures" *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 3, 1, 1991, p. 80.