

Women writers in the Polish culture of the 16th and 17th centuries

Educated Wife

JOANNA PARTYKA

Institute of Literary Research, Warszawa
Polish Academy of Sciences
partyka@ibl.waw.pl

Circumstances conducive to the emergence of a literary culture that allowed women to participate arose in Poland only as late as in the 1650s, following the appearance of two Frenchwomen on the Polish throne, namely Marie-Louise Gonzaga and Marie-Casimire

There was no women's literature in the Polish Commonwealth before the 18th-century. No women's style of writing developed in old Polish literature, and no theoretical reflection aroused. Women here began to author literary works later than women in such countries as France, Italy and Spain, or those in Germany, England and the Netherlands. Yet the social status of women in all these countries was comparable, and so

were the educational opportunities open to them. How then can this delay be explained?

In the French salons

In the 16th and 17th century, many eminent women writers who not only wrote but also published their works appeared in Western and Southern Europe. Some of them expressed their feminine identity more or less openly, and even dared to criticize the social order that was not favorable for them, as can be exemplified by Teresa of Ávila (16th century), Vittoria Colonna (16th century), or a number of eminent 17th-century female writers, such as Mme de Sévigné from France, Mary Chudleigh from England or María de Zayas y Sotomayor from Spain.

In Western Europe, the climate most conducive to the emergence of women's writing was to be found in literary salons. In France they were the domain of reigning "ladies", who not only gathered together groups of literary authors, but also began to write themselves. An educated woman from a fashionable salon, a so-called French *femme savante*, had to be eloquent, well-read in many fields, including moral philosophy and had to be able to



The Polish "educated wife" wrote letters, diaries and household books but no literary works, which arose in Poland as late as in the mid- 17th century

express her thoughts easily and in a beautiful way, in speech as well as in writing. There is much to suggest that it was such French salons that led to a breakthrough in men's consciousness and opinions on the intellectual abilities of women. The culture of the French salons, which held the feminine style of writing in high regard (previously women writers had only copied male models and erudition) and partly did away with the traditional division into societal roles, next proliferated across all of Europe. This kind of women's erudition came to Poland as late as in the 1650s, following the appearance of two Frenchwomen on the Polish throne.

"Dabbling with the pen"

We should bear in mind that before that time, women's writing had long been perceived across Europe as something inappropriate, including from a moral standpoint. The standing of women in society may have undergone changes, but the notion of their innate frailty and inferiority was still persistent, influencing prevalent concepts about women's education and views on women engaging in activities unrelated to housework or child-rearing. One such activity that overstepped the social roles ascribed to women was "dabbling with the pen."

Women's education programs were aimed mainly at developing their ability to perform household chores, providing them with basic knowledge about child-rearing, strengthening their religious beliefs, and keeping them convinced that they had to be submissive and obedient to their husbands. Learning how to read did not go beyond such objectives, as it was considered useful, mainly for "studying" prayer books. Writing, on the other hand, was not included in the programs, nor did it necessarily go hand in hand with reading, as writing skills were usually perceived as useless and sometimes even harmful for a "lady of the house." Satires served as a popular means of jeering at women who had managed to obtain a basic education.

The "educated wife" that is scathingly criticized in one 17th-century Polish literary work is a cunning and unfaithful woman who torments her husband by expressing her views. The author compares such a woman to a spider:

"Once [your wife] learns how to read, and grows fond of it, then she'll gather up poison like a spider, and spin a web for you, as for a fly."

At the same time, we should bear in mind that teaching women how to read and write did not lead directly to the emergence of women's literature. What is crucial here is not literacy, but rather the appearance of a climate conducive to culture where women could also participate. In other words: women could not begin to produce literature without access to knowledge, without the opportunity and ability to engage in discussions and

to exchange views, or finally, without mastering the rudiments of literary technique.

In the Polish manor homes

Admittedly, "writing women" were indeed present in Poland at that time. They wrote diaries and household books, practiced the arts of epistolography, developed family genealogies, jotted down miscellaneous household notes, and sometimes even composed small poems or kept chronicles in nunneries. Nonetheless, they left behind no lasting legacy in the form of literary works.

This lack of women-authored literature was clearly a cause for concern among 19th-century researchers of Polish literature. They consequently searched for women writers in the early Polish period - and in fact found them, even by means of forcing the facts fit to the theory.

We can identify the reasons for this state of affairs if we analyze the characteristic culture of the old Polish nobility. Only in the 18th century did the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth develop such cultural institutions as the public library or the literary academy

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(while in Spain and Italy such academies had been present since as early as the 15th century). Neither was the institution of patronage as well-developed as in other western European countries. In the 17th century Poland there were no literary salons comparable to those in France, where women took the lead.

Early Polish literature prior to the 18th century, mainly manuscript-based, boasts a number of eminent male writers. The absence of women among them was to a great extent connected with a deeply-rooted conviction in old Polish society, maintaining that women should not take part in public life, not even in meetings with neighbors. This peculiarity of old Polish culture came as a surprise to foreign travelers in Poland. One of them wrote: "It is usual that women [in the Polish Commonwealth] take care of homes which they very rarely leave. Polish ladies usually occupy themselves with embroidering." At the same time as the French *femmes savantes* were amusing themselves with conversations in salons, exchanging letters, and composing poems, their Polish contemporaries still had their hands full with manual craftwork. ■

Further reading:

Partyka J. (2004). *Educated wife*. [In Polish]. *Kobieta pisząca w kulturze XVI i XVII wieku*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN.

Timmermans L. (1993). *L'Accès des femmes à la culture (1598-1715)*. Paris.