WOMEN'SWRITINGONLINE
ISSN 1798-3835

A FEMINIST OVERVIEW OF ADAM MICKIEWICZ AND BOLESŁAW PRUS

URSULA PHILLIPS

The object of this paper is to examine how two well-known "canonical" Polish writers approached the "women's question," understood here as the nineteenth-century debate about female rights and social and political emancipation, and what attitude to women—not merely to the debate about female emancipation, but to women *as such*—emerges from their statements or from their portrayals of female figures in literary works. By "canon" I mean here the body of works established by over 100 years of analysis by literary historians, mostly male, regarded as being those most representative of Polish literary excellence (according to criteria that are not directly made clear) and therefore the texts that should be privileged in school and university syllabuses and by the general reading public. Whilst the early 1990s saw an absorption of western theory by Polish feminist scholars and its application to works by Polish women, alongside a rediscovery of marginalized and neglected writers, whether or not we might speak of this as a "tradition" or "a literature of their own" in Showalter's sense (Showalter 1977), Polish male writers have not been systematically subjected to feminist or gender-sensitive examination.

There have, of course, been attempts to do this, such as the analyses by Maria Janion (1996) of Mickiewicz (78-99, 130-34) and Józef Ignacy Kraszewski (50-76), Inga Iwasiów of Włodzimierz Odojewski (1994) and Leopold Tyrmand (2000), German Ritz of Iwaszkiewicz, Gombrowicz and others (1996, 1999, 2002), Krystyna Kłosińska of Stefan Grabiński and Prus (2004), Bożena Chołuj of Stanisław Przybyszewski (2001), or the articles on Przybyszewski, Żeromski, Brzozowski, Berent, Gombrowicz, Choromański and others by various authors in Part III (Głos męski) of *Krytyka feministyczna* (223-349); as well as parts of certain monographs,

such as those by Sławomira Walczewska (1999) and Kazimiera Szczuka (2001). There have likewise been articles by western scholars, among the most important being those by Megan Dixon (1997) and Halina Filipowicz (1996, 2002). In her recent book *The Reader as a Woman* (*Czytelnik jako kobieta,* 2007), Ewa Kraskowska discusses Zofia Nałkowska's reactions to Prus's novel *The Doll* (*Lalka*, 1890), as well as her own reception of contemporary writer Tadeusz Konwicki (28-30, 42-45). The majority of feminist work on Polish literature, however, has concentrated on women authors, while the male "canon", especially of the nineteenth century, has not been subjected to a similar level of scrutiny.

Such an omission is no doubt connected to the long-held perception that in Poland the supposedly more overriding issue of national emancipation, of Polish political freedom and sovereignty had to be solved first, a view held in the early 1980s even by Janion (Kraskowska 2007, 39-42). Janion returned to this very theme in her speech to the Polish Women's Congress in June 2009 and expressed her disappointment that despite the political changes of 1989 the situation of women had not improved:

> I believed that freedom would first be attained for the whole of society and that we would then concern ourselves, together and calmly, with improving the condition of women. To my astonishment it has transpired that in a free Poland a woman has to be a "family being" (istota rodzinna) who is supposed to occupy herself not with politics but with the home (2009, 1).

The very fact that a thoroughgoing investigation of the male canon has not taken place since 1990, however, suggests that this neglect is *not* primarily determined by the geo-political status of Poland but by other more timeless, universal—not to say *fundamental*—factors operating not only in Polish society but in other societies as well. Despite the lack of any democratic political rights for men or women at the time he was writing, Bolesław Prus himself never made the women's question dependent on any specifically Polish national factors; he saw it in European and in socio-cultural terms and closely followed the emancipation and suffragette

movements in other countries, especially Britain. Adam Mickiewicz initially linked the two: Polish patriotic discourse and female "liberation." Though he is more commonly identified with the discourse of the stereotypical Polish Mother, because of the poem he wrote in 1830 "To a Polish Mother" ("Do Matki Polki"), Halina Filipowicz (1996) examines an additional patriotic discursive strand in Mickiewicz that stems from his portrayal in the 1832 poem "The Colonel's Death" ("Śmierć pułkownika") of the idealized figure of the virgin knight Emilia Plater (34-45). I agree that it is this model, i.e. female chastity and warriorship, rather than any special emphasis on motherhood, that is carried forward into Mickiewicz's later pronouncements. My intention here is to stress that Mickiewicz goes beyond these models, advocating entire equality of rights for women, in a context that transcends the Polish.

The completion of the epic poem *Pan Tadeusz* in 1834 has conventionally been regarded as the zenith and close of Mickiewicz's work as a poet, yet he lived another twenty years and never ceased to be a prolific utterer of "the word." Although he never stopped being concerned with the fate of Poland, he became in the 1840s, in the words of the historian of Polish thought Andrzej Walicki, "a universal Francophile, every inch a European thinker" (11-12). His ceasing to produce what is traditionally understood as "poetry" has had the effect that his later utterances have been treated far less seriously by literary historians, with the further effect that even a recently published literary historian, Jarosław Ławski (2003), highly sensitive to the female dimension to Mickiewicz's work, has also used *Pan Tadeusz* as his cut-off point; in my view this is quite artificial. Ławski identifies an overriding and consistent search for a feminine principle in Mickiewicz's poetic work, similar in its essentials to Goethe's "das Ewig-Weibliche" and in part inspired by it (20, 85-90). This messianic vision finds its logical apotheosis in Mickiewicz's letter to the American feminist Margaret Fuller (February 1847), where he identifies her as a future liberator-saviour of women in France, America and Poland, yet links her to the discourse of female celibacy (16:415-417), a model that also dominates Fuller's own

thinking on powerful womanhood in her 1845 work *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*; in my recent article (2009) I demonstrate how Mickiewicz must have read and perhaps even been influenced by this work (Phillips 2009, 28-31).[1] Interestingly, he even comes to question the efficacy of such self-imposed virginity as though, to use Showalter's words, "He was telling her that in repressing her erotic energies she was denying herself her full power, and thus limiting her usefulness as a leader of women" (Showalter 2001, 55).

In his lecture at the Collège de France, in his then capacity as Professor of Slavic Literature, on 17 June 1842, Mickiewicz directly spoke of women's emancipation, declaring that "the great question of women's liberation is significantly more advanced in Poland than in any other country" (1993-2006, 9:385-386). His "ideal Polish woman" here is Antoni Malczewski's heroine Maria, of the eponymous narrative poem of 1826:

> [...] she is more respected [than elsewhere], feels herself to be more man's companion. Not by insisting on women's rights, not by proclaiming delusive (urojone) theories[2] will women achieve importance in society, but by sacrifice (ofiara) [...] a daughter bound to her father, a wife ready to follow her husband into the fire (9: 385-386).

As Janion observes, the cornerstone of "liberation" here is patriotic self-sacrifice, this is how a woman gains her "liberation," by fighting alongside men in the male world (1996, 96), although we should remember that "sacrifice" was something that Mickiewicz also demanded of men.

This view, expressed in 1842, is considerably modified however by the time of Mickiewicz's friendship with Fuller, not only through her possible influence or that of other progressive women whom Mickiewicz encountered in Paris, such as George Sand or Pauline Roland (a feminist who would later be a member of the editorial board of his socialist newspaper "La Tribune des Peuples") but perhaps more

[1] As I discuss Mickiewicz and his views on women in some depth in my article, the emphasis in the current piece will be on Prus.
[2] I am most grateful to Halina Filipowicz for recently suggesting to me this translation of "urojone teorie." All translations from Polish into English are otherwise my own.

ISSN 1798-3835

importantly through his involvement with the mystical sect of Andrzej Towiański (1799-1878), to which Mickiewicz converted in July 1841. However else we may regard this unconventional religious movement, it was one which treated equally the spiritual potential of women, while certain women played powerful roles in its administration (though it would be a misrepresentation to say the movement as a whole was publicly emancipationist); Mickiewicz had close contact with several of them, and was sexually involved with one (Kossak 1996, Rutkowski 1999, Koropeckyj 2008). There is no space to discuss this fully here, but suffice it to say that in the Towianist circles, Mickiewicz developed and expressed radical views on the potential of women, declaring his support for women priests and noting women's potential for political and governmental roles (13:271-277, 278-284, Phillips 2009, 20-24). The fact that he had been persuaded of women's equality with men in all roles is evidenced by his correspondence with Fuller (February 1847-September 1849) and not least by paragraph 11 of the List of Principles of the Polish Legion that Mickiewicz established in Italy in 1848: "To the companion of life, woman, brotherhood [sic] and citizenship, equal right in all things" (12:10-11).

Mickiewicz's grand declarations, however, were not accompanied by any practical assistance on his part to advance the cause of women's emancipation, they remain gestures. But it would be wrong to dismiss them as mere rhetoric, because of the attitude they embody towards actual women. Mickiewicz by the mid-1840s was convinced of the intellectual, spiritual, moral and political equality of women with men. There is no evidence that he wished to denigrate women, or felt the need to represent them as stupid, infantile, immature, flippant, superficial, hysterical—or possessing any other negative qualities as a direct consequence of their gender. This is perhaps reflected in the perception of gender expressed by Mickiewicz in one of his key "sermons:" "Women are called to equality; spirits do not have a gender" (13:283). We can argue as to whether the human spirit or soul can be without gender, and I am *not* implying that this is how all Polish Romantics regarded women, but my suggestion would be that Mickiewicz's way of thinking stems from the Romantic

focus on the individual subject. Irrespective of the subject's bodily gender, Mickiewicz regarded embodied individuals, male and female, as having spirits that were beyond a binary gender divide, where he thought in terms more of a feminine principle. Meanwhile he could respect the individual qualities of an individual woman, just as he could those of a man. Positivism, however, in which I obviously include Bolesław Prus, shifted the focus from individuals to social phenomena, and thus to women as a group or class. Ironically, the apparently more liberal or socially concerned cultural movement in fact, in Prus's hands, turns up more stereotypical—and generally negative—portraits of women than we find anywhere in Mickiewicz. On the contrary, Mickiewicz's texts suggest that he perceived, and also objected to, the potential of women being suppressed and marginalized.

The text by Prus on which I shall focus here is his 1894 four-volume novel *The Emancipated Women* (*Emancypantki*), but I shall also deal briefly with perceptions of his earlier novel *The Doll*. There have been various assessments—though not very many, when compared to the critical interest from the contemporary to the present day in Prus's other works, most of it highly deferential towards Prus—of what is actually going on in this novel. There is the view for example that although Prus presents a negative assessment of contemporary demands for female emancipation, he is not anti-feminist as such (Gawin 2007, 138), even that he admires women (he is certainly hyperconscious of normative standards of beauty and ugliness). There is a widely accepted view that Prus contrasts misguided models of emancipation (Klara Howard the "apostle of emancipation" (apostołka emancypacji), Eufemia, Helena Norska, Malinowska and so on) with that of his heroine, eighteen-year-old Madzia Brzeska, thus exemplifying in the self-effacing Madzia what true womanhood should be, i.e. the "genius of feeling," though the latter has also been regarded as flawed by certain established critics (Szweykowski 248-288).

Magda Gawin's study of Prus's attitude to women's demand for emancipation based not only on *Emancypantki*[3] but also on his *Chronicles* (*Kroniki*), published regularly in various newspapers between 1874 and 1911, aligns Prus with nineteenth-century European liberalism, which was sceptical of what it saw as the unwelcome consequences of certain utopian trends in cultural modernism and social modernization, and therefore took a conservative stance towards such "risks" (137). Prus, for example, declared his own war on what he perceived as women's obsession with fashion, made evident by the new range of popular women's magazines and the recent boom in mass production of clothes and beauty products, believing this to be reflective of women's limited intellectual horizons and of the petty, morally irresponsible level on which they would behave once they had acquired greater freedoms (129). Gawin interprets Prus's position as one which is committed to expanding women's education, but which believes that any further "rights" should be dependent on a broader education having been acquired; otherwise the results would be grotesque, a view he illustrates abundantly in *Emancypantki*. Interpreting him in the light of nineteenth-century "conservative" liberalism, Gawin does not see Prus as "anti-feminist" or as misogynistic:

> In contrast to the traditionalists he supported reforms in girls' education, and he regarded the civil law, which was humiliating to women, as a source of moral shame. His works reveal an empathy for the fate of women alongside a bitingly satirical criticism of the activities of the first feminists, who were demanding voting rights. In this strategy, the contradiction is only apparent. The demand for women's emancipation, wherever it appeared in Europe, created the mechanism of a vicious circle—in the sense that the social reformers and chief players in the debate universally sensed that "social (obyczajowy) and intellectual equality depended on political equality, but political equality was dangerous without social and intellectual equality." [...] In this civilizational, European dispute about women's equal rights, Prus was decidedly in favour of the limited version—the equality of women in civil rights and access to a genuine education. Prus, let us make it quite clear, was not an advocate of giving women political rights and he certainly regarded the idea that they should be given political rights as a group as bad. His position did not stem from anti-feminism, ignorance and ill-will [...] but from the nature of nineteenth-century liberalism [...] (137).[4]

[3] I shall refer henceforth to the novel by its Polish title as it is shorter and less cumbersome than *The Emancipated Women.*

[4] The sentence quoted by Gawin is from Himmelfarb 1995, 94.

The separation of the emancipation question from the matter of Prus's alleged sympathy for women springs from the fact that he did support women's demands in certain areas: greater educational opportunities for both sexes of all classes were a strong element of the Positivists' agenda, but he thought that not until women were sufficiently educated would they be in a position to vote or participate in political life. He likewise supported vocational opportunities for single women who had to earn a living—but not for all women according to their choice—and he supported fair settlements for women following divorce or separation. On other issues he was conservative, such as his opposition to the entry of women into professional guilds (cechy) or trade unions (Gawin 131-132; Prus 1994, 333-344).

Gawin identifies the focal point of Prus's thinking about the role of women in society as motherhood (Gawin 2007, 135-136), where "motherhood" is understood not only as the crucial element in private life but also as the "common binding agent in public life" (135), and she again sets this in the context of the contemporary European, especially British, debates. I will return to "motherhood" below in a fuller consideration of its portrayal in *Emancypantki*.

Another recent, and quite detailed study of the female world in Prus's novel presents a similarly neutral response with regard to his feminism or anti-feminism, which is striking given the prominence of the polemical, and I would say misogynistic, elements in the novel (Wierzchołowska 2001); this descriptive rather than critical study draws almost exclusively on established male interpreters (Zygmunt Szweykowski, Edward Pieścikowski, Henryk Markiewicz, Stanisław Eile and Michał Głowiński). The interwar feminist Irena Krzywicka took a more critical line, demonstrating how even the actions of the idealized Madzia, intended to bring about good to others, are shown to have negative consequences (Krzywicka 2007, 188-195). In her essay on the novel, originally published in 1932, Krzywicka enthusiastically asserts—contrary to the prevailing view of contemporary critics and educators—that the under-appreciated *Emancypantki* ("I am entirely under its spell," 189) rather than the highly appraised *The Doll* is a more relevant book for young

people to study as part of the school syllabus; it is more accessible to youth than the "grim unpleasant history of Wokulski" (188) since it is about school life and deals with the "pains, disappointments, issues and meditations" that affect all fifteen- to eighteen-year-olds, namely those that contribute to establishing their own identity and moral being: "religious doubts, the first frosty waves of scepticism, struggling with the issue of God and immortality" (189). Krzywicka's approach to Prus's heroine, however, is double-edged:

> Madzia is the sister of the mermaid in the fairy tale, the angel living among men [...]. But despite that I would never dare to say that Madzia is improbable. I myself know a woman who constantly emanates no less the sweet poetry of goodness and a truly unearthly separation from everything that is small, trivial and ugly, though she no longer has, as Madzia does, those naive and rather stupid eighteen years. Such women exist and they will always exist; their wandering on earth is sad and their activity, unfortunately, not always as salutary as it ought to be, for in the daily struggle for existence goodness can also be destructive (189-190).

On the one hand, Krzywicka appears to accept the idealized image of angelic goodness, insisting that such women do really exist, yet at the same time she finds Prus's heroine childish and exasperating. Perhaps more importantly, Krzywicka sees the contrast between this archetypal "sublimation of altruistic femininity" (190) and its destructive effects:

> In Dickens goodness is almost always beneficial, in Prus it is often destructive. The fatal goodness of Mrs Latter towards her children leads to catastrophe. On another level the same thing repeats itself with Madzia. Her exaggerated delicacy and loyalty assist the downfall of her superior [Mrs Latter]; her friendship towards men breaks their hearts; she contributes to destroying the marriage of Femcia, as her friend withers away in old-maidenhood; she becomes a drama for her parents, and almost deprives the poor schoolteacher and his family of their daily bread. Madzia, terrified by the results of her own actions, flees from the provincial town. Strange results for an apology on behalf of goodness (193).

Krzywicka does not explore, however, what inspires Prus to emphasize precisely this aspect of his two chief female protagonists, the headmistress Mrs Latter and her protégée Madzia. What is it about the "heroism of goodness, often harmful, and always out of step with the world" (193) that makes Madzia so different from the

other women portrayed in the novel? Why is "goodness" shown to be so destructive in the hands of a young woman who acts on her own instincts and initiative? And is it really the "excellent" Mrs Latter's own "fatal goodness" that leads her to an impasse? In Madzia's attempts to act independently, by responding to her inborn "goodness", even though she acts "naturally" and not according to acquired theories (in contrast to the "emancipated" secondary characters, uniformly portrayed negatively: Klara Howard, Helena Norska, Eufemia), she provokes chaos, conflict and unhappiness.

This is a theme that occupies much of the novel's space and thereby conveys to the reader the clear message that a woman should not act—in the opinion of the narrator—according to her own ideas (natural, instinctive or acquired) and that in her immaturity and inexperience of the world, she needs to be correctly guided; the results of her unguided, independent activity are portrayed as grotesque. Mrs Latter is not exactly motherly, kind or excellent: although an independent and hard-working widow (potentially, therefore, a positive female type—or could be in a different context or interpretation), the headmistress's motives and actions are driven by gross delusions about her son's character and abilities, which seem to be fed by her own vanity and social ambition; she is in fact, more of a social climber than a committed educationalist, willing to reduce herself in her desperate need to secure financial loans to ensnaring an unscrupulous moneylender and gossip-monger. At the same time she wishes to make a well-connected match for her daughter, not out of any consideration for Helena but so as to finance the son's career, which is of much more concern to the ambitious mother than the daughter's happiness, and also to save her school, which she treats primarily as a business, from bankruptcy; when Helena fails to marry Solski she is rejected by her mother as a selfish failure (Kłosińska 2004, 74-75). So we might ask: do the personalities and actions of these protagonists, and especially the main heroine Madzia, serve a misogynistic purpose? What is the narrator suggesting here about any independent female action?

Krzywicka's sense that something does not quite add up is also identified by Krystyna Kłosińska in her sophisticated analysis of Madzia's personality and of Prus's purposes with it. In fact, Kłosińska presents "two mutually exclusive interpretations," one of which is relatively sympathetic to Madzia's "goodness" and Prus's treatment of it and explores the reasons for its "failure," and a second which demonstrates how Madzia herself is an agent of Prus's misogyny, i.e. a woman protagonist who herself promotes, through her reactions and behaviour, an anti-woman agenda. Despite Kłosińska's initial claim, that the two interpretations are "contradictory, mutually exclusive alternatives" (81) and reflect two points of view (82), she does in fact make her choice: "The second is my point of view" (82). This second interpretation, which identifies Madzia as an agent of the narrator's misogyny is based not only on Kłosińska's analysis of Madzia as a "male" voice, constantly denying and denigrating her own female identity, but also on the fact that this convincing analysis itself reveals the social and psychological mechanisms that cause—in the first interpretation—the selfless Madzia to always sow chaos. Kłosińska's two approaches to the text are therefore linked in their most essential discovery, the second providing the insights necessary for understanding why Madzia's "goodness" cannot be acceptable or effective in the prevailing cultural norms.

In the first analysis, Kłosińska discusses Madzia's instinctive desire, almost compulsion, to help others in the context of the theory of the "gift"—understood in broad terms as equivalent to the Christian *agape*—and of the tension between the "gift" and the economy of exchange (59-70; she refers to Derrida, Cixous, Lacan; Mireille Chabal, Dominique Temple). She shows, however, that Madzia's "gift" cannot function in a society governed by stereotypical notions that exclude women's independent activity from public life. Because of these norms, Madzia's behaviour becomes the subject of public "gossip" (plotka), where her initiatives are misinterpreted as an especially brazen form of sexual self-advertisement, in other words: as her way of attracting a husband that is all the more shocking when she

rejects the offers; her actions are therefore interpreted by the "gossip" within the conventional economy of exchange (70-80). In fact, as Kłosińska points out, the only possible outlet for women to do good in a public context is within the institutional control of the convent (80); only in that specific environment will their actions be regarded as "saintly." Madzia becomes the "sacrificial goat" of such gossip (76-79). In *Emancypantki* conventional, misogynist women are its chief perpetrators and Madzia's own mother the one who believes most unquestioningly in the infallibility of its judgments, to such an extent she rejects Madzia as an object of shame and embarrassment and demands she change her family name (73-74).

Kłosińska connects here with Luce Irigaray's "dream" that women should free themselves from the economy of exchange: in order to do so they must "think of themselves as subjects who realize not the "femininity" (kobiecość) cast on them from outside, but that which is womanly (to, co kobiece)" (80). Kłosińska is tempted to link Madzia with Hélène Cixous's "principle of motherhood" understood here as a "principle of mutuality" rather than of exchange in the conventional sense, *if it were not for the fact that* Prus "burdens his heroine with his own misogyny. [...] But that is the subject for another interpretation of Madzia" (70). Indeed, this is the rub: Madzia's efforts to bring help and happiness to others are socially unacceptable because they are the work of a style of womanliness that does not fit the traditional stereotype of public passivity, and reinforces the conventional, mutually exclusive role of saintly nun—where women's actions are institutionalized and controlled—or wife/harlot—where any initiative or individuality is interpreted within the category of sexual forwardness, especially when it leads anywhere other than to conventional marriage. The fact that Madzia's misogyny, imposed upon her by her author, acts against herself—i.e. against her better instincts—is the reason for the contradiction sensed but not fully articulated by Krzywicka.

The specific forms taken by Madzia's misogyny, by her "masculine mission" (męska misja, 92), which make her the narrator's ideological ally as well as her own worst enemy, fall into two main areas, according to Kłosinska's analysis. First she

demonstrates, drawing on psychoanalytic theory (Adler and Freud) the effects of Madzia's own low evaluation of herself, interpreted here, I think convincingly, as her chief characteristic: she is driven by an enormous inferiority complex and impulse to self-denigration, which Kłosińska interprets as a "phantasm"—i.e. as an imagined reality that distorts the actual reality surrounding her. This feeling of inferiority, of total worthlessness, distorts not only Madzia's own estimation of herself—she always regards herself as "stupid" (bez rozumu), a mere "speck of dust" (mały pyłek), unimportant in the greater scheme of things—but also the way she imagines others see her. For example, she cannot accept Ada Solska's friendship as sincere—or indeed the marriage proposal of Stefan Solski–because she is obsessed by the difference in their social backgrounds and believes that both sister and brother are determined to humiliate her (102-105). Her eventual withdrawal to the convent is accompanied by a book that justifies her in her humiliation and need of comfort to alleviate the feeling that she has got what she deserves: Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*. The "genius of feeling" is duly chastised for her forward behaviour, a punishment she willingly accepts, thus becoming the ideal model of the narrator's misogyny (109-110).

The second element of Madzia's misogyny is her disgust when confronted by the bodily, by the physical functions of the female body, by sexual contact (she recoils once her repressed feelings for Kazimierz Norski take the external form of a kiss), by sickness, and perhaps above all by the physical reality of pregnancy and motherhood, as evinced by her attitude to the fates of Joasia and Stella. There is a striking contradiction here with the ideological role ascribed to motherhood in the novel by Professor Dębicki—and here Kłosińska draws on Kristeva's theory of the abject and its interpretation by Paweł Leszkowicz (118-133). Madzia's lack of physicality, as the narrator's spiritual ideal, makes her a powerful critic of her own sex and like Dębicki and Solski, a porte-parole of his misogyny:

ISSN 1798-3835

> Two women: Madzia and Stella—the "femininity" of the one, like a phantom, shadow, cultural ideal, is confronted by a second "femininity," which is the material, bodily abject of culture. Both are necessary to Prus. The more acutely he lowers the second, the more he can elevate the first (133).

Both the interwar critic Krzywicka and the recent analysis by Kłosińska concentrate on the central heroine Madzia Brzeska, as we have seen, but there are many other personalities in the novel whose manner of portrayal also indicates to the critical reader much about Prus's narrator's attitude not only to issues of emancipation but also to women *per se*, as human beings. In fact there are no positive portrayals of women in this novel, unless of course we collude with Prus's narrator and see a single exception in the heroine Madzia herself and her disapproval of her own sex, thereby also colluding in the view that complete self-abnegation is a positive attribute of womanliness. Yet this is not a reason not to read the novel; it is a fascinating witness to one author's response to the growing public visibility of women in contemporary European society. I would not put it on par with Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character* (1903), but it reflects a similar sense of threat about women's increasing presence in public life.

Prus is a master at storytelling, and we should remember that the novel is not journalism but fiction: it is not a reflection of *reality,* but a selective representation of elements of that reality filtered through the author's fears and prejudices and served up with a specific agenda. Given the tendentious position Prus voices in his own name in his *Chronicles*, it seems reasonable to assume that his narrator in *Emancypantki* indeed reflects Prus's own views, especially as the narrator's manner towards most female characters is distanced, ironic and sarcastic, and as no other narrative voice is included. What I wish to emphasize here is that this is not just a question of participating in the debates surrounding emancipation and coming to an opposing position, but of Prus's critical portrayal of the women themselves as people, and the use of these portrayals to denigrate their cause; he attacks not just their ideas, which he is free to debate of course—though he does little of this, in fact, he just portrays them as phoney—but the women's human qualities, associating them

with negative qualities such as lying, deceit, manipulation, hypocrisy, pretentiousness, bad judgement, petty jealousy and rivalry, even cruelty, not to mention sexual forwardness; he makes the women grotesque, objects of fun.

A good example is the women's meeting held in a dressmaker's workshop. Here the women's tone of speechifying, their histrionics, the issues they discuss and Klara Howard's dictatorial chairing of the meeting are parodied as absurd caricatures significantly juxtaposed with the lifeless mannequins standing around them (Prus 1998, 2:149-163). Some of the attendees possess satirical names that emphasize their imitative, rote repetition of received ideas: Papuzińska, derived from "papuga" meaning "parrot," or Kanarkiewiczowa, derived from "kanarek" meaning "canary," a twittering argumentative type who had learned Orgelbrand's encyclopaedia by heart, an action signalled here as a substitute for real learning (Gawin 2007, 134). One telling factor is the frequent reference to "hysteria"—a condition that Professor Dębicki associates at various points in the novel with women who affect to be self-sufficient (and make a lot of noise about it) but who do not, in his perception, have the mental, emotional or moral capacity to manage the serious responsibilities of public life. Howard and her followers are portrayed not only as over-excited and unpalatably nervous, but as flawed in their general judgments of reality. Mrs Latter likewise describes Howard, following their argument, as "histeryczka" (1:23). Dębicki and Latter voice the cultural prejudices of the narrator and of Prus himself. Prus's portrayals of modern women predate psychoanalysis by several years, yet they appear not only to accept the general cultural assumption that "hysteria"—linked since classical times with the womb—is a condition that affects only women, but also to view it as a psychological malady associated with cultural degeneration (Showalter 1987, 14-20, 81-99). One is prompted to ask: what fundamental dislike of females, fear or complex, prompted so many critical portraits?

Furthermore there is no clear formulation in the novel of what is meant by "emancipation." The borderline between an "emancipated" and non-emancipated woman is likewise unclear: is the "lioness" Helena Norska, or the seduced

schoolteacher Joasia, or the poor actress Stella, to be considered on a par with the more "theoretical" or pretentious: Klara Howard, Malinowska or Eufemia? It would seem there are no separate conclusions voiced in the novel to distinguish different conceptions of emancipation—all are lumped together and equally condemned; sympathy is shown only to the two "misogynist" women who deny anyway that they are emancipationists: Madzia and Mrs Latter. Or is the overall implication even more stark? Is the moral, i.e. sexual degeneration of Helena, Joasia and Stella, and even of Eufemia, itself portrayed as the logical result of misguided "theories"? In other words, is the narrator implying that theories of emancipation when misunderstood and misapplied—or applied at all—bring about sexual behaviours in women that threaten the moral status quo, i.e. lead to the cultural degeneration of a society?

Prus's narrator is critical of all independent female initiative. He provides grotesque satirical portraits of female figures who adopt fashionable modern theories, revealing them to be nothing more than frustrated, on-the-shelf schemers concerned primarily with finding a husband (Howard, Eufemia). Yet he also seems to classify as "emancipationists" women who merely act on their own initiative—even though they deny being "emancipationists," Madzia herself being the best example. At the same time he puts into the mouth of Stefan Solski the standard Modernist notion of the war and incompatibility of the sexes, of the destructive potential to men of sexual-emotional involvement with the inferior sex:

> Females (samicy) are weaker than males, whom as a result they have to constantly exploit through a variety of manoeuvres... Some pose as angels, others as demons... according to their needs (1998, 2:89);
>
> Poets have aptly called women ivy which, in order that it can grow and bloom, has to fasten onto the tree and suck... suck... suck! (2:121).

Professor Dębicki does not share Solski's antagonism, but he expresses uncompromising views on the role of women that hinge on the fundamental

importance of motherhood, emphasizing how in this one natural domain women's powers should be free to develop in order that society might benefit (2:310-312):

> A woman must first and foremost be a mother. If she wants to be anything else: a know-all with a rustling silk train, a reformer with bare arms [note how the narrator makes these sexual allusions, as he does throughout the novel—U.P.] [...] then she is stepping outside of her role and will end in monstrosity or buffoonery. Only when she performs her role as a mother, or even aims for this goal, will a woman be equal to man and even superior to us (2:310-311).

And yet all the portrayals of motherhood in the novel are themselves negative (Szweykowski 1972, 264; Gawin 2007, 134; Kłosińska 2004, 118-133): from the over-ambitious mother-love of the headmistress Mrs Latter for her spoiled exploitative son—the basic factor that leads to her debts, the bankruptcy of her school and her own death—to the small-town pretensions of Eufemia's mother, expressed—among other things—by her affected pronunciation of vowels, to the gross misconceptions about women's education of certain social-climbing, over-fed bourgeois mothers in Warsaw, such as Korkowiczowa.

The narrator also expresses a standard assumption, or prejudice, about emancipation and feminism: namely that they set out deliberately to replace one regime of power with the other, to replace the masculine patriarchal order with a female one, rather than seeing the real aim as women's full emancipation into humanity on an equal footing with men. Hence Prus shows in the novel the grotesque results of feminine dominance: Krukowski, a forty-five-year-old bachelor, is shown to be totally emasculated by the whims of his tyrannical sister, an invalid in a wheelchair with imaginary fears and unreasonable demands which require her brother's constant attention, but because she has money left to her by a deceased husband and he has no money, the gross results of this lack of masculine independence are made very clear by the narrator; especially as the sister's illness itself is shown to be psychosomatic or even bogus (in a moment of heightened emotion she leaps out of her chair, after which the narrator constantly refers to her sarcastically as "eks-paralityczka").

Klara Howard, the "apostle of emancipation," is shown to imagine things that are not true. Prus's narrator constantly emphasizes her overreactions when she sees supposed injustice to other women, her hysterical shouting, her over-excitement, her face red with anger, putting into her lips clichés she has taken from propagandist pamphlets, thus making these appear ridiculous through the use of hyperbole. Her German forename and English surname emphasize the notion that emancipation is a foreign import, not relevant on Polish soil. He shows how her words fall on deaf ears when she lectures to her pupils, thereby indicating that "normal" women are indifferent to questions of feminism. Meanwhile Malinowska, the teacher who takes over the girls' school after the death of Mrs Latter, is shown, in contrast, to be the epitome of calculated rigour and efficiency: again, Prus's narrator portrays this by reference to her personal, physical attributes: her unfeeling—though meticulously fair—manner towards Madzia, her steely eyes, her iron will and the strict soulless routine of the new establishment (2:9-19). Prus suggests thereby that emancipation is unfeeling and humourless.

In a similar way, he associates ugliness with brains. Perhaps the most sympathetic female character in the book to the feminist gaze is Ada Solska who, although she is a rich aristocrat, turns her back on fashionable society and devotes herself to scientific research in her private laboratory. She is obsessed, however, as is the narrator, with her physical ugliness, thus reinforcing the standard prejudice that intelligence is not compatible with sex appeal. In fact, the only time she feels able to deal with her own ugliness is when she attends the women's meeting, where the majority of women are neither dazzlingly beautiful nor well-dressed, which reinforces yet another stereotypical perception: feminists are physically unattractive (2:150). She also gives away parts of her fortune to charitable endeavours, for which Dębicki calls her "a saint" (święta), another standard feature of an approved style of femininity, although at the same time, her botanical work—her tender nurturing of her mosses and lichens (2:129)—is shown to be a substitute for her real vocation:

motherhood, thereby devaluing this woman's scientific achievements as significant in themselves.

The other side of the "saint" binary is the over-sexualized, capricious "demon," epitomized in the novel by Mrs Latter's daughter Helena Norska, a young woman who demands the same rights for women as men in the sexual game, a "lioness" (lwica) in the contemporary jargon. However, by showing Helena to be a fickle, selfish prodigal, who consumes her mother's fortune and has no love or pity for her, Prus's narrator distracts from the actual demands that Helena makes (2:85)—though to a feminist reader they read not unlike like the demand for the abolition of double standards in sexual behaviour made by Zofia Nałkowska at the Polish Women's Congress in 1907.

I could go on, but for me the most convincing moment in revealing Prus's narrator's true position comes at the beginning of the second volume, when Madzia is compared with her friend Eufemia in her provincial home setting. Why does Prus choose this name? For she too is revealed as a manipulative, affected and unfeeling hypocrite, whose interest in Schopenhauer and other fashionable thinkers is entirely bogus and whose claims for emancipation are skin-deep, her main interest being, as a twenty-seven-year-old, to secure a husband—even one she doesn't love; the narrator notes, for example, the yellowing skin on her neck (1:304) and her frequent, deliberate exposure of her provocatively booted lower leg. She is called Femcia for short, an abbreviation that provides Prus with a convenient, unusual and therefore striking intimate form that emphasizes precisely "Fem." As Madzia lies passive on a couch recovering from her illness, she is exposed to the gaze of two male admirers (Krukowski and Miętlewicz): "Madonna... a true Madonna!" sighs Krukowski, but in the very next line of text the reference to Raphael's Madonna is juxtaposed in Miętlewicz's response with "Femcia"—the first mention at all of Eufemia in the novel—"You're a flirt Ludwik... I shall tell Femcia" (1:297). Prus was too skilled a writer for this juxtaposition to be a mere accident: in contrasting Madzia with Femcia, the narrator makes his preference clear.

ISSN 1798-3835

Having examined *Emancypantki*, one is left wondering about Prus's purpose in the earlier *The Doll*, published only four years before. Here the portrayal by Prus's narrator of the female protagonists, and in particular Izabela Łęcka, is not so obviously misogynistic—and is heavily overlaid by the many different strands of plot and subject matter encompassed by the novel. The figure of Izabela, however, has been the butt of feminist criticism. Zofia Nałkowska, for instance, expressed her disgust at Prus's contempt for his central female character and his condemnation of her treatment of the hero Wokulski:

> [Izabela] is evil and empty, she is worth nothing. The author looks at her with Wokulski's eyes, from the point of view of his wounded feelings. This solidarity of the author with the hero is sometimes quite revolting (quoted in Wójcik 2001, 191; Kraskowska 2007, 30).

Nałkowska observes the absence of female perspective or value in the novel: all the women are seen through Wokulski's eyes. Other women too, who do take a fancy to him, are likewise "absent" because he does not see their reality or value them, something that Prus's narrator does nothing to compensate for. Kraskowska wonders whether the female reader's perspective is necessary for this omission to be made visible (31). Kazimiera Szczuka also observes this lack in the novel's space:

> For its seems quite probable that a realistic or psychological, or even structural understanding of the identity of the central heroine *does not in fact exist*, that she is nothing but an empty space, gathering into itself only male desire" (109) [my emphases—U.P.].

Does the black hole identified by Szczuka in *The Doll* also inhabit *Emancypantki*? The female protagonists, I would argue, the main heroine as well as all the other women, likewise constitute focal points of negativity *as women,* as a consequence specifically of their gender; women ("emancipated" or not) are a negative presence, a void, as their own perspective or reality is not shown. I said earlier I would not put Prus on a par with Weininger—but such evidence brings it uncomfortably close.

Here I should mention Olga Tokarczuk's study *The Doll and the Pearl* (*Lalka i perła*, 2001), which does not claim to be a feminist interpretation but which confirms the "emptiness" of Izabela, albeit from a different angle. Tokarczuk examines Wokulski from a psychological perspective, suggesting that it is not Izabela, or any woman, that he is seeking, but his own self, part of which has been lost in another, timeless existence. Izabela may serve as his opposite or represent some forgotten part of himself, and hence his instant recognition of her as someone he has met before (Tokarczuk 2001, 40). Tokarczuk considers David Welsh's suggestion that Izabela is the Jungian *anima,* a possibility that is persuasive, except that Prus diminishes her function as a substantial female presence (she is no Beatrice leading the hero to greater things) by emphasizing her passivity. In Wokulski's journey to discover who he really is and what he really wants:

> She does not manifest herself as active help or even as a support. She is barely a sign, an untouchable flag, she marks a place in Wokulski's spiritual landscape and in this way indicates the directions. She has nothing to offer Wokulski other than herself, but she herself is constantly unclear, undefined, internally void (pusta w środku) (41).

Tokarczuk even suggests that Izabela is not a human being but, as in certain eastern traditions, a being from another reality sent to show the way:

> Izabela is a thing. A dummy. A doll (kukiełka), empty inside and serving only to attract. A scarecrow that stands by the roadside like a signpost", and furthermore that the more important question is not "who is Izabela?" but "what lies behind her?" (42-43).

Tokarczuk also observes, albeit with a purpose slightly different from that of Kłosińska in *Emancypantki*, that the "cosmos" of *The Doll* is one without women, in that no women are of interest for their own sake. Likewise, she notes the lack of positive models of motherhood [an exception perhaps is Stawska?—U.P.], in fact its total absence in relation to the chief characters (Izabela, Wokulski, Rzecki, Ochocki, all of whom do not have mothers). The male universe that Tokarczuk identifies in

The Doll, with its negative portrayals of individual women, is equally applicable to *Emancypantki*:

> Women do exist in Prus's novel, for sure. In relation to men, however, they seem to lack a certain dimension. Either they are incredibly idealized like Stawska or Zasławska, or they are portrayed as caricatures like Baroness Krzeszkowska or Małgorzata Pfeiffer, Wokulski's wife. Both the one and the other cause *The Doll* to be a novel about men, despite the leading demonic figure of Izabela. Because of its one-sidedness in its perception of women and its "promotion of the domain of the fathers" (ojcowizm), the world of *The Doll* stands on one leg (67).

The only counterbalance that Tokarczuk finds to represent the Kingdom of Mothers (Królestwo Matek, 67) is the idyllic portrayal of Zasławska's estate, where not only peasants and animals are treated kindly, but women visitors, notably Wąsowska, are allowed to roam freely and do as they please; it is a world, however, as Tokarczuk notes, that is of no interest to men (Ochocki is bored stiff) although, paradoxically, it is the place where Wokulski is able to draw closer to Izabela (67-68).

For a collection of 1904 about "contemporary woman," Prus wrote a short introduction entitled "She" ("Ona"):

> The value of man distinguishes itself in extraordinary works, in the struggle with the mighty forces of nature, in fathoming its secrets, in having power over millions of intelligent beings. [...] But the genius of woman is constantly made manifest all about us, in everyday life, of which she is the creator and director, the comfort and adornment (1).

These sentiments echo the position of Dębicki in *Emancypantki*: "Woman and man are two different worlds, like Venus and Mars, who see one other, lean heavily towards each other, but will never fathom each other" (2:311-312).

Both Prus and his porte-parole Dębicki endorse the conventional cultural division of the sexes, which became acute in its representation during the Modernist *fin de siècle,* where gender specific and complementary qualities were regarded as essential and "natural," and where conflict and not harmony between the sexes was regarded as inevitable. Since this is a model that does not *on the surface* claim to place women

in an inferior position (women's destiny might be seen as equally important to that of man, but it is confined to a certain domain, namely motherhood—but motherhood as defined by men, not as experienced by women), it is possible to see why Prus's novel might be interpreted as "not anti-feminist." However, this "equality" in the treatment of women is *not* supported by the grotesque caricatures of almost all the female characters in the novel; the narrator's attitude to all women is patronizing and misogynistic. A woman who defies her "natural" role is subjected to a syndrome of self-abnegation leading eventually to chastisement and withdrawal from the world, or she is lampooned not only as "unnatural" but as a non-presence, a void. "Emancipation" is almost by definition an impossibility—and perhaps that is why Prus's narrator does not specify exactly what he understands by it.

Bibliography

Borkowska, Grażyna and Lidia Sikorska, eds. 2000. *Krytyka feministyczna. Siostra teorii i historii literatury*. Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN.

Chołuj, Bożena. 2001. "Gdyby nie ta miłość... Rzecz o utopii Stanisława Przybyszewskiego." In *Ciało, płeć, literatura. Festschrift für German Ritz*, edited by Magdalena Hornung, Marcin Jędrzejak, Tadeusz Korsak, 119-131. Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna.

Dixon, Megan. 1997. "Maria Beyond Marriage in Zygmunt Krasiński's *Nie-Boska komedia*." *Slavic and East European Journal* 3:442-457.

Filipowicz, Halina. 1996. "The Daughters of Emilia Plater." In *Engendering Slavic Literatures*, edited by Pamela Chester and Sibelan Forrester, 34-57. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

—. 2005. "Othering the Kościuszko Uprising: Women as Problem in Polish Insurgent Discourse." In *Studies in Language, Literature and Cultural Mythology*

in Poland: Investigating "The Other,*"* edited by Elwira M. Grossman, 55-83. Lewiston: Mellen Press.

Gawin, Magda. 2007. "Równouprawnienie kobiet i ryzyko modernizacyjne według Bolesława Prusa." *Kronos* 4:27-138.

Himmelfarb, Gertrude. 1995. *The De-moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*, New York: Knopf.

Iwasiów, Inga. 1994. *Kresy w twórczości Włodzimierza Odojewskiego. Próba feministyczna.* Szczecin: Wydawnictwa W.A.B.

—. 2000. *Opowieść i milczenie. O prozie Leopolda Tyrmanda.* Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego.

Janion, Maria. 1996. *Kobiety i duch inności*. Warsaw: Sic!.

—. 2009. "Solidarność – wielki zbiorowy obowiązek kobiet. Wykład inaugurujący Kongres Kobiet Polskich 20-21 czerwca w Warszawie." http://www.kongreskobiet.pl/readarticle.php?article_id=27. Also published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* 27-28 June (149).

Kłosińska, Krystyna. 2004. *Fantazmaty. Grabiński—Prus—Zapolska*. Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski.

Koropeckyj, Roman. 2008. *Adam Mickiewicz: The Life of a Romantic.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Kossak, Ewa K. 1996. *Boskie diabły*. Warsaw: Czytelnik.

Kraskowska, Ewa. 2007. *Czytelnik jako kobieta*. Poznań: Wyd. Naukowe Uniwersytetu Adama Mickiewicza.

Krzywicka, Irena. 2008. "'Emancypantki' dzisiaj." In *Kontrola współczesności. Wybór międzywojennej publicystyki społecznej i literackiej z lat 1924-1939*, edited by Agata Zawiszewska, 188-195. Warsaw: Feminoteka.

Ławski, Jarosław. 2003. *Marie romantyków. Metafizyczne wizje kobiecości. Mickiewicz—Malczewski—Krasiński*. Białystok: Instytut Filologii Polskiej Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku.

ISSN 1798-3835

Mickiewicz, Adam. 1993-2006. *Dzieła. Wydanie rocznicowe 1798-1998*. 17 vols. Warsaw: Czytelnik.

Phillips, Ursula. 2009. "Apocalyptic Feminism: Adam Mickiewicz and Margaret Fuller." *Slavonic and East European Review* 87(1):1-38.

Prus, Bolesław. 1990. *Emancypantki*. 4 volumes in 2. Warsaw: Prószyński i S-ka, 1998. [Reprint of Bolesław Prus. 1990. *Pisma wybrane*, edited by Maria Dąbrowska. Vol. 5. Warsaw: PIW].

—. 1994. *Kroniki. Wybór*. 1994. Edited by Józef Bachórz. Wrocław: Ossolineum.

—. 1904. "Ona." *Kobieta współczesna. Książka zbiorowa,* 1-2. Warsaw: Nakład Tygodnika "Bluszcz."

Ritz, German. 1999. *Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz. Pogranicza nowoczesności,* translated [from German] by Andrzej Kopacki. Kraków: Universitas.

—. 2002. *Nić w labiryncie pożądania. Gender i płeć w literaturze polskiej od romantyzmu do postmodernizmu.* Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna.

Rutkowski, Krzysztof. 1999. *Braterstwo albo śmierć. Zabijanie Mickiewicza w Kole Sprawy Bożej*. 3rd ed. Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria.

Showalter, Elaine. 1987. *Hystories: Hysterial Epidemics and Modern Culture*. London: Picador.

—. 2001. *Inventing Herself: Claiming a Feminist Intellectual Heritage*. London: Picador.

—. 1977. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Szczuka, Kazimiera. 2001. *Kopiuszek, Frankenstein i inne*. Kraków: eFKa.

Szweykowski, Zygmunt. 1972. *Twórczość Bolesława Prusa*. 2nd ed. Warsaw: PIW.

Tokarczuk, Olga. 2001. *Lalka i perła*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.

Walczewska, Sławomira. 1999. *Damy, ryczerze i feministki. Kobiecy dyskurs emancypacyjny w Polsce*. Kraków: eFKa.

Walicki, Andrzej. 2006. Mesjanizm Adama Mickiewicza w perspektywie porównawczej. Warsaw: IFiS PAN.

Wierzchołowska, Danuta. 2001. *Świat kobiecy w 'Emancypantkach' Bolesława Prusa*. Zielona Góra: Wydawnictwo WSP.

Wójcik, Włodzimierz. 2001. "Nałkowska, feminizm i feministki." In *Modernizm i feminizm. Postacie kobiece w literaturze polskiej i obcej*, edited by Eugenia Loch, 185-193. Lublin: UMCS.