

## IN RESPONSE TO URSZULA ŚWIDERSKA-WŁODARCZYK'S LETTER

I will start my response to the charges presented by Urszula Świdierska-Włodarczyk with a brief introduction. The 'short note' to which she refers is our periodical's traditional form of expression, published over several dozen years; it differs from a standard review with the length, in the first place. A short note should not exceed one page, so it has to be concise. Every such note results from in-depth reading and analysis of the selected book(s), and hence often contains some evaluation. In spite of what Professor Świdierska-Włodarczyk suggests, these opinions are neither tendentious nor dishonest; what they do is present their author's assessment or evaluation of the book(s) concerned. Their authors are experienced researchers with competence in the given historical period.

As far as Professor Świdierska-Włodarczyk's specific remarks are concerned, let me show why I have evaluated her monograph on Polish-Lithuania's sixteenth-seventeenth-century model nobleman [*Homo nobilis. Wzorzec szlachcica w Rzeczypospolitej XVI-XVII wieku*] the way I have. In line with my competencies, I took a critical stance primarily towards the book's structural principles, research methodology, and reference literature. I assumed no position, for a change, with respect to the detailed arguments regarding a 'Polish mentality', role models, or nobility's axiology.

I thank the author for recommending me a piece of reading concerning literary sources. Yet, I cannot really tell how it should relate to my short note. I can only guess that touching upon this issue ensued from a not-too-attentive reading of my text and misunderstanding by the author of the English word 'literal' that does not have much to do with the adjective 'literary'. I did criticise her book for its literal treatment of the sources. The monograph authored by Professor Świdierska-Włodarczyk is founded on an extensive amount of sources. The author makes use of pretty diverse materials, including Old Polish *specula*, agricultural guides, and (not quite precisely defined) '*speculum*-like pieces' (p. 29). While this material is described in a fair amount of detail in the introductory chapter, we would not learn much about the circumstances in which the pieces were written, or about their authors – the information otherwise necessary for in-depth source criticism. The core of the book forms a smooth narrative richly embellished with source quotations, yet the text is but a neat summary, rather than deep analysis, of the historical sources, set against no international background or historiographic context whatsoever.

Albeit set in the monograph's title, the chronological framework is so broad that it would require being made more precise. The author approaches the period between 1500 and 1700 (for this is, apparently, what she has in mind when referring to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) as a homogeneous whole. The reader receives a static image, getting the impression that no major change ever occurred during the two-hundred years. The author unsatisfactorily analyses the deep religious transformations (the influences of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation on the shaping of role models, which was otherwise noticed by Janusz Tazbir, among others<sup>1</sup>) and socioeconomic transitions (the economic crisis enforced essential changes in manorial-serf economy). The readers encounters more problems with chronology than that. Professor Świdarska-Włodarczyk argues (on p. 149) that "the sixteenth century sees a new quality gradually enter the stage, in respect of transitions within European countries ... nation-states are getting consolidated: in the West, strongly centralised absolutist monarchies are emerging; in the East, the Muscovy is getting formed". The statement that 'nation-states' were getting consolidated and absolutist monarchies emerged already in the *sixteenth* century is quite daring but impossible to prove in the light of historical knowledge.

Before presenting the sources, the author formulates the basic assumptions and puts forth her research statement. As we read (on p. 12), "for the purposes of the present argument, the ascertainment shall suffice that long-time depreciation of the nobility has brought about the intended effect. A negative stereotype has been formed that has settled down for good in the consciousness ... such a way of thinking does not coincide with the historical facts and, even more so, with the noble system of values". This argument determines the whole narrative: the monograph under review is meant to show the good facet of the nobility and to solidify the conviction of the noblemen's industriousness and high morals. The author refers thereby to popular stereotypes rather than to the abundant Polish historiography where the opinions defended by her have long ago been dismissed.<sup>2</sup> While reading this book, one has the impression that it has been written as if regardless of any existing research. Its very basic foundation consists of historical records; the core part (chapters 1 to 5) offers rare and incidental references to the literature. This 240-page book evokes the name of Andrzej Wyczański merely four times (in the notes on pp. 125, 177, and 209), while Janusz Tazbir is only mentioned thrice (pp. 182, 201, and 210). This negligence of the

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<sup>1</sup> Janusz Tazbir, 'Wzorce osobowe szlachty polskiej w XVII w.', *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, 4 (1976), 784–97 (esp. 784–5).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Andrzej Wyczański, *Szlachta polska* (Warszawa, 2001); Jarema Maciszewski, *Szlachta polska i jej państwo* (Warszawa, 1986); Urszula Augustyniak, *Dwór i klientela Krzysztofa Radziwiłła (1585–1640). Mechanizmy patronatu* (Warszawa, 2001).

historiographic findings is so consistent that Professor Świdarska-Włodarczyk, the author of several articles on nobility models, never refers to any of her own studies.<sup>3</sup> A very scarce use of the literature is also visible in the publication's theoretical layer, although the author recurrently emphasises an interdisciplinary character of the proposed research problem and an innovative quality of her own research. Theoretical inspirations are discussed in a sketchy manner; basically, publications from years ago are mentioned. Some of them – such as Bożena Krzywobłocka's *Socjalistyczne wzorce osobowe* [The Socialist Role Models] (Warszawa, 1975), referred to on p. 16 – seem not to have much in common with the monograph's subject-matter; the said book certainly did not provide much inspiration translating into an innovative character of the book on noble models. The reader may legitimately presume that the rich bibliography attached at the end (over 100 items – all in Polish, except for one) is, as if, a reading list related to the topic, without much association with the study's argument.

I obviously agree with the author's opinion that a synthetic study must comprise generalisations and conclusions. This particular monograph, however, puts forth conclusions based on overly general initial assumptions that, with their level of verbalisation, should never have appeared in an academic study, I believe. Let me quote an excerpt from the introductory section: "For we are all, to a degree, inheritors of the noble values" (p. 17). Further on, the author argues that we reside "in homesteads kept in the architectural convention of the noble manor, with its characteristic façade, porch, and columns" (p. 17); we celebrate name days (rather than birthdays) in a noble fashion, and address one another 'sir' or 'madam' [*pan/pani*] – the noble way, which makes us different from 'most of the nations' (p. 17); "although politically or economically, the nobility was not a monolithic group; intra-estate contradictions that gnawed the noblemen never affected the axiology" (p. 25). The use of broad quantifiers such as 'all'/'everybody' and unambiguous labels such as 'never', the nobility being described as a cohesive homogeneous group – of males, to

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<sup>3</sup> Urszula Świdarska-Włodarczyk, 'Wzorec dyplomaty przełomu XVI i XVII w. w świetle staropolskich poradników poselskich', *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Prace Historyczne*, 143, 3 (2016), 537–55; *ead.*, 'O staropolskim wzorcu gospodarza raz jeszcze z punktu widzenia historyka (w świetle poradników rolniczych z XVI i XVII w.)', *Studia Europaea Gnesnensia*, 12 (2015), 99–115; *eadem*, 'Szlachecki wzorec żołnierza Rzeczypospolitej XVI-XVII wieku (w świetle nowej definicji pisanej na użytek badań historycznych)', *Kultura i Historia*, 29 (2016), 128–51; *eadem*, 'Wzorec czy antywzorec dworzanina w Polsce przełomu średniowiecza i czasów nowożytnych', *Perspectiva. Legnickie Studia Teologiczno-Historyczne*, xiv (2015), 153–63; *eadem*, 'Wzorec osobowy czy wzorce postępowania? Przyczynek do nowej definicji formułowanej z punktu widzenia historyka na przełomie średniowiecza i czasów nowożytnych', *In Gremium. Studia nad Historią, Kulturą i Polityką*, 9 (2015), 141–50.

be sure; as the author argues, “nobleness is handed down from father to son” (p. 52), whilst the nobility’s patriarchal system of values only concerned the sons (p. 193) – all make the conclusions generalised.

It is a pity that most of the terms and notions used in this monograph have not been conceptualised. The author explains her reluctance toward definitions in terms of a limited space or no such need appearing: “such a procedure is not substantively justifiable” (p. 91). This is a rather astonishing view, certainly contrary to the basic requirements of a scholarly work. In contrast to popular books, academic studies require precise presentation of terms/notions/ideas and their operationalisation.

The core text uses modern terms that are not matched with the realities of early modern period, just to quote a ‘national *raison d’état*’ (pp. 140, 209), or ‘national and particular interest’ (p. 145), ‘ethos of labour’ (p. 97), or ‘civil society’ (p. 192). The use of descriptions such as ‘Poland’/‘Pole’ (p. 206) with respect to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, part of which was the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, is an obvious simplification and is erroneous. Moreover, one would not find a definition of what the ‘nobility’ should actually mean. Making this term more precise would be substantively legitimate, particularly in the context of differentiation between the nobility [*szlachta*] and the magnates/aristocracy [*magnateria*]; impreciseness in this respect leads to a chaos. For instance, “the establishment of a moral system oppositional to [that of] the magnates” (p. 93) would point to the latter group’s separation from the noblemen. The subsequent chapter (pp. 124–40) deals with senators (where a rather unclear categories of senators holding a ‘central’ versus ‘particular’ office are used, by the way; cf. p. 131), a good deal of whom were magnates/members of the aristocracy, according to earlier research.

In sum, these critical remarks, most of whom concern the general character of the monograph in question, the main terms/notions remaining undefined and no reliable references to the existing historiography, confirm, in my view, the opinion that Professor Urszula Świdarska-Włodarczyk’s monograph is a popular-science publication.

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