



Agnieszka Gromkowska-Melosik, *Kobieta epoki wiktoriańskiej. Tożsamość, ciało i medykalizacja* [Victorian-era woman: identity, body, and medicalization], Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls, 2013, pp. 192

The development of historiography can be described as a process of searching for new research areas. Feminism has become such a field, triggering further development of historiography. Women's history is a relatively recent research domain, present in western historiography since 1970s. Interest in it was significantly aroused by the French methodological school – Annales.

Polish historiography, as compared to the western one, did not delve into this domain, considering it secondary for many years. Although the interest of historians in the question of women on the Polish territory in the 19th and 20th centuries has been on the increase, especially during the last two decades, investigations in this strand of research have not been published in a form of a book. The lack of “women's historiography” studies concerning general history, even as contributory material, was clearly visible. The book under review, without a doubt, will become a contribution, which the Polish historiography will benefit from.

The author, as the first Polish researcher of modern times, working with English language sources, dared to face a challenging and barely researched issue in the Polish historiography. Right at the outset of the review, I can state that A. Gromkowska-Melosik has performed outstandingly well.

The work under review, in accordance with historiographical research rules, constitutes both a description and explanation, and above all an independent and original interpretation of the issue of female identity and corporality in the Victorian England.

In the outstanding Introduction, the author clearly, competently and – most importantly – in a methodologically-aware fashion formulates the subject of her study, i.e. the subordination of Victorian-era female identity, body and lifestyle to both men and the then ideology of femininity, which is superbly “deciphered” in her work. The underlying theme, visible in the narration, is the asymmetrical and uneven cultural relationship between women and men as regards identity and body in the context of a variety of forms and domains of repressing the former group, especially by medicalization. At the same time, the author, in her Introduction, consciously re-

stricts her research and narration to higher social-class women, and leaves out the issue of rising emancipation and related new social practices. Moreover, the author rightly and in accordance with D. W. Howe's conviction that "Victorianism was a transatlantic culture" takes her research beyond Victorian-era England by including America and France, but also gives relevant examples from the ways of thinking and cultural practices in Poland. Therefore, I am of the opinion that the title of the work is adequate, well formulated, and thoroughly justified. Additionally, I am of the opinion that all the concepts mentioned in the title were meticulously defined.

The author of the research under review, out of a range of possible narrations, decided to write her work as an essay – a literary-cum-scientific genre. A genre, which might be considered the most difficult one, yet allows most freedom for the author's perspective and leaves space for one's own reflexivity. These possibilities have been aptly utilized in the author's narrations conducted from the Foucauldian perspective. At this point it is important to state that A. Gromkowska-Melosik is entirely independent and original in her interpretations by not "clinging" on to Michael Foucault's ideas slavishly. This reflects well on the maturity of her research. It is worth mentioning here that M. Foucault's views regarding the so-called truth and constructing historical knowledge have been present in the Polish methodology of history as well. In particular, similar views regarding, *inter alia*, the so-called objectivism in history and constructing history through narration have been present in the works of the most eminent Polish methodologist of history – Jerzy Topolski.

Having said that, I would like to give the author the confidence in view of her modesty voiced in her statement that her work is "not a typical history book," but rather a book from "the sociology of culture" (p. 3). With regard to contemporary trends, also present in the Polish methodology of history, and – above all – the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary shifts in research, her dilemma is not fundamental, not to say insignificant.

The empirical data used by the author is both rich in factual content and diverse. The sources referred to are English written texts encompassing *belles-lettres*, philosophical and moralising literature, medical, hygiene and *savoir-vivre* handbooks, journals as well as iconography. The number of collected and utilised sources might have been overwhelming for the researcher, resulting in meticulous adherence to the facts. However, this is not the case here; quite conversely, the author manages to handle them at ease, going beyond mere descriptions and providing explanations and interpretations. This ability also testifies to the research skills of the author. Superb exemplifications of the conducted narration are visible in the analyses of English paintings, which depict the status of women in the male world of science and culture, the female lifestyle, and the ideals of feminine fashion

and beauty as set out by the male world. The paintings included in the introduction, presenting the world of medicine, clearly situate and limit the role of women in the male world. These paintings, as the author points out, have been the inspiration for her narration.

I appreciate numerous references, mostly English, to the work of contemporary researchers devoted to the main subject of the book. In general, the work under review is rooted in English sources, which in the case of Polish historiography – concentrated on native history – is not a frequent practice. This, among other things, makes A. Gromkowska-Melosik's book unique and inspirational in the context of our historiography.

The narration present in the essays revolves around M. Foucault's theories of knowledge and power, here represented by the androcentric, male element. All discourses surrounding femininity, i.e. concerning women's corporality, sexuality, and intellect portray women as maximally subordinate and obedient to the male world (better, more intelligent, stronger, composed, powerful, etc.). All deviations from the male vision of the world were pathologised and considered for treatment and medicalization. The conducted analysis of the subject literature – written sources and iconographic materials – points to a clear division into a male world symbolising culture and science, and the opposing female world symbolising nature and sexuality.

The author puts forward a thesis that the development of biology and medicine in the Victorian era, contributed to the subordination of women to the male world in the domains of female identity, corporality, and sexuality. Medicine was a male preserve which appropriated nearly all aspects of a woman's life – their birth, pregnancy, labour, child-rearing, disease treatment, attire, nutrition, conduct, and dependence. Medicalisation of women's life was rooted in the conviction that a woman is diseased by the very nature of things, and a disease was inscribed in the upper-class woman's body and psyche. Hence the special interest in hysteria, as a nervous disorder rooted in sexual drive, as well as depression and green sickness.

Peculiarities of the Victorian-England femininity are analogous to the conception of female (life) roles or the identity of women from a broader cultural background, be it European or Anglo-Saxon, including women from the 19th century Polish territories (naturally from the upper-class). The author expresses this by reaching for Polish press sources or handbooks, which thematically or in terms of outlook are convergent with those from England. It is yet another comparative value of the work in question.

The presented picture of the Victorian-era English woman was created – as argued by the author – by men and also depended on them. It closely resembles the image of women and their obligations constructed in the Polish-language press, literature or handbooks – especially conservative traditional and opposing the emancipation movement. Also here, societal

and medical norms of femininity were intrinsically connected with motherhood and marriage. Any indication of female activity in domains of social life so far reserved only for men was criticised as threatening the traditional model of family. Women's objective – both in Victorian England and in the entire 19th century world, irrespective of the geographical context – was to carry out the naturally determined task producing healthy offspring. Motherhood was meant to ensure the reproduction of upper-class dominance. Reproductive functions and childbearing determined a women's social status, hence consigning them to family life and motivating their denial to public and scientific life and to serving in capacities and social roles other than familial ones. Therefore, apart from being a mother, a woman in order to be recognised as worthy, healthy and normal, should be a wife. Single women were deprived of the essence of femininity, i.e. having a man at their side and in consequence producing offspring.

In the undertaken discussion on life space and the roles of women and men, the author clearly points to two separate spheres of life, i.e. private and public. The former was definitely a female preserve, while the latter a male one (although the second group had the right to move between the two spheres seamlessly).

Adducing biological ideas of physiological differences between the sexes, the author accounts for the then conviction of women's social status as subordinated to men as a natural consequence of biological factors. Female body – smaller and more fragile, weaker than a male body – was also more sensitive and susceptible to neurosis. Views adopted in societies influenced the socialisation of women and men, which was determined by the output of research in the then popular biology. All deviations from the assumed norm were pathologised. It is no surprise, then, that women were assigned to familial life and motherhood, and not to pursuing professional careers, education and active participation in social life. Therefore, all premises on which the 19th century women's emancipation movement was founded stood in contrast with the male-centred assumptions on what was natural and consistent with women's biology and duties. The mere drive for knowledge and education for women meant the loss of reproductive function in women – according to the then people. Biological and medical trends, then, corroborated and reproduced the societal dominance of well-educated men over “mentally disabled” women (i.e. constructed as such).

A Victorian English woman, subordinated to his man in all spheres of her life, had to be attractive. The essence of the female gender, according to the conception and theories originated by men, was in her fragility, beauty, and elegance. Fashion ideals detailed women's appearance, figure, attire or hairstyle, emphasising – at the same time – their social status. A well-groomed and beautiful woman was an ornament to her man and it was the corset that sym-

bolised her constraining and serfdom to the male world. This piece of clothing was the cause of numerous deformations and diseases; it also pointed to the social status through severely hindering women's chances of undertaking physical labour. At the same time, the corset modelled a woman's body in a shape of an hourglass, i.e. in such a way as to emphasise her reproductive potential – her breasts and hips. It fulfilled yet another function: should a woman be overweight, it made her body look more aesthetic.

The female body was supposed to serve the needs of her man – to provide him with pleasure and offspring. Female sexuality was marginalised and it was very often treated as a cause of mental illnesses. Girls were supposed to be reared to be chaste, adhere to moral conduct, and be faithful and committed to their husbands. All measures were taken in order to suppress the dangerous and sinful fulfilment sexual needs in women. Innocence and chastity was expected of women; moreover, they had to be shielded from potential depravity. This ambiguity of female nature becomes the discursive axis on the female sexuality. Women who had the awareness of their sexual needs, were considered to be nymphomaniacs, while nymphomania was yet another aspect of medicalization of the female body and identity (along with sexual surgery – women had their ovaries, uteri, and clitorises removed in order to prevent promiscuity).

The issue that demonstrates the Victorian medical intervention into a person's body and identity is that of masturbation. The means of prevention and treatment invented by doctors and moralists were unusually rich and often drastic – this concerned not only women but also men. These themes have been summarised by the author, which renders the then outlook and the state of social awareness well. Thanks to exploring discourses, this seems to be the author's achievement.

It is vital to notice that when analysing handbooks on medicine, health, and hygiene published on Polish territories in 19th century, prescriptions similar to those present in the Victorian England can be found. These regarded health concerns with reference to upper-class women, deviation, sexual disorders and neuroses (e.g. green sickness or hysteria), care for proper nutrition and maintaining appropriate figure by women. Some of the handbooks used by the author were reprinted in Polish, and the biological theories that she adduces were not foreign to the Polish scientific milieu – the dissertations and handbooks published by them testify to this fact. This observation goes hand in hand with A. Gromkowska-Melosik's statement that the Polish culture "was not detached from the Anglo-Saxon culture (and the French one)" (p. 6).

In the sixth, concluding chapter, which seems to be provocatively entitled "The historical truth" ("Prawda historyczna"), we are presented not only with closing remarks, but – above all – with in-depth explanations and interpretations.

Once again, I would like to underline the factual and cognitive uniqueness and the ability of the author to fill in the niche in the Polish “women’s historiography.” The work under review draws on often-unknown English language sources and freely engages in a discussion with the English-language researchers. What merits attention is also the originality, not only narration-wise, with regard to contemporary history as well as the interdisciplinary approach to the subject of study.

Taking everything into account, I am pleased and honoured to recommend the work under review. The additional value of the book is the beautiful typesetting and meticulous layout. I am of the opinion that A. Gromkowska-Melosik’s is one of the most beautiful publications, both form- and content-wise. It is also a most interesting showcase for the publisher – Impuls – that has made invaluable contributions to Polish culture, science and education. Therefore, I would like to congratulate the author on this valuable and original publishing endeavour, which will serve well to all those with interest in women’s history and the study of women. I am sure it will also constitute an inspiration for further research and be conducive to deepening our knowledge in the area of historical and pedagogical, cultural studies as well as comparative research into the history of women.

Krzysztof Jakubiak
University of Gdańsk (Poland)