



Review of the publication: Monica M. Gardner, *The Anonymous Poet of Poland. Zygmunt Krasiński*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2015, ISBN 978-1107461048

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*The Anonymous Poet of Poland* was first published in 1919. In itself it was part of a larger series of studies written by Gardner on the lives and works of great Polish writers. Her other works included publications on Adam Mickiewicz (*Adam Mickiewicz: the National Poet of Poland*) and Henryk Sienkiewicz (*The Patriot Novelist of Poland: Henryk Sienkiewicz*).

This work was recently reprinted by Cambridge University Press as a part of its "Paperback Reissue" series that include other interwar reprints such as Balzac's *Five Short Stories* (originally from 1921) and *Giacomo Leopardi: Canti. Selected Poems* (first published in 1937). Taking into account limited interest in Polish literature, and the lack of any recent studies in Polish Romanticism published in English, it seems that this work by Monica Gardner might not attract too much attention.

Literary scholars and historians may look at this work with some interest. Gardner's work remains as innovative for English speaking readers today as it was a century ago. At the same time, the reprint may offer a unique opportunity for Polish scholars to look at non-Polish interpretations of Krasiński's life and works. However, unlike the recently published edition of Stanisław Tarnowski's study,[1] *The Anonymous Poet of Poland* lacks any proper introduction setting the book in historical, ideological and literary context of the period. Even the understanding of the title itself (that refers to Krasiński's determination to publish his works anonymously) can be difficult, since the author mentions that factor only in passing.

Publishing decisions aside, what can be said about the book itself? As the author suggests in the preface, her idea was "to give the English reader some idea of Zygmunt Krasiński as the poet, the patriot, the mystic... to draw English attention to a poetry and a line of thought" (p. v). It is, indeed, important to remember that "[w]riting for an audience unfamiliar with the authors under discussion, she did not aspire to scholarly analysis".[2] What Gardner really offers to the reader is a type of old-fashioned biography that is, at the same time, a very detailed analysis of the main works written by Krasiński (if written today, the title of the book would be *Zygmunt Krasiński: A Very Short Introduction*).

Zygmunt Krasiński (1812-1859) was a son of Walerian Krasiński, Napoleonic general and "above all a soldier" (p. 2). It was his father's figure, particularly after Krasiński's mother's death in 1822, that overshadowed the whole life of the poet. In many respects Walerian Krasiński, who after the fall of Napoleon and the creation of the Kingdom of Poland in 1815 became a faithful subject of the Russian Empire, epitomised everything that young Zygmunt despised. By the end of the 1820s, "both father and son were equally something like renegades to the Polish cause" (p. 16) – the former because of his political decisions, the latter because of his inability to oppose his father's orders. This domestic drama and conflict between a conservative father and a more liberal, patriotic son was the central element of Zygmunt Krasiński's life. The outcome of all disagreements was always the same, whether it was a matter of returning to Poland at the time of the November Uprising, or the problem of marriage (the poet was made to marry Elżbieta Branicka in 1843 "with death in his soul, with no pretence of love", p. 247). The older Krasiński, on whom Zygmunt remained financially dependent throughout his life, was always victorious.

It was, therefore, hardly surprising that the poet, unable to take an active part in the Polish fight for independence, turned his attention to poetry in a clear attempt to find a safe (and anonymous) way of expressing his patriotic zeal. For Gardner it was, indeed, Krasiński's poetry that defined him as a man, a poet and "one of the three supreme singers in the magnificent literature of Poland" (p. 1). Interestingly, however, before turning to a very detailed analysis of his major dramatic works (*The Undivine Comedy* and *Irydion*) Gardner presents a very interesting and detailed picture of Krasiński's youth, particularly after his "first exile" to Switzerland, shortly before the outbreak of the November Uprising (1830). Her use of the poet's correspondence with Henry Reeve ("the only person to whom he could then speak freely", p. 59) reveals a lot about Krasiński's suffering during and after the Uprising.

The main part of the book, however, discusses not Krasiński's life, but his works, particularly *The Undivine Comedy* and *Iridion*. Of these two dramatic works written in the early 1830s, Gardner pays more attention to the former, "the drama of a perishing world" (p. 92). In two long chapters the author discusses two main layers of the work. Perhaps the most valuable element of these parts of the book (as well as those devoted to *Iridion*) are long excerpts from the plays translated by Gardner. The author does not stop at simply outlining the plot of the plays. She offers interesting observations and interpretations, for example, suggesting that the main protagonists of *The Undivine Comedy*, when they finally confront each other, doubt in their own cases (p. 126).[3]

Both dramas were written by Krasiński at a relatively young age, but to this day they are considered his most significant works. Having finished *Iridion*, Krasiński was not only "wandering in doubt and darkness" (p. 169), but, what appeared far more important, all his inspiration left him (p. 172). Even after he met Delfina Potocka in 1839, the spiritual wandering of the poet did not come to an end, and, as Gardner argues, until 1842 Krasiński "was still in doubt and transition" (p. 198). The writing of *Dawn* put an end of this transitory period. The poem, dedicated to Delfina Potocka (though written shortly before Krasiński's marriage with Elżbieta Branicka), was the fullest expression of the author's messianic idea in which "love and self-sacrifice are the condition of life" (p. 234).

Poetical and ideological developments that followed Krasiński's marriage were expressed in *Psalms of the Future*. This work made the poet "the only one [of three great Polish mystics of the era] who brought the national mysticism down to a lucidity that any mind could grasp" (p. 253). Indeed, the late works of Krasiński, though less known than *The Undivine Comedy* and *Iridion*, are the works of much greater maturity and well-developed ideology.

One of the main arguments presented in the book is that "with scarcely an exception Krasiński's work... is the organ of a great idea to which he regarded art as subservient" (p. 1). However, Gardner's attempts to present Krasiński's life in the context of contemporary Polish history, and to analyse his main works in the context of his own life choices leaves very little space for any detailed evaluation or argument that would support her initial claim. As in the case of Krasiński's anonymity, we are left with only a handful of references to that interesting idea championed by the poet on the pages of his works.

This seems to be the result of the descriptive rather than analytical character of the whole work. In order to make her book accessible to the British audience, Gardner had to make Krasiński's poems and dramas known to the readers. Because it required a lot of translations from Polish to English (something that she did with a remarkable skill), as well as a careful outline of Krasiński's life, it is hardly surprising that the book does not offer any careful and detailed analysis (though where it does the author offers really interesting views and observations).

*The Anonymous Poet of Poland*, as well as other studies by Gardner, was undoubtedly a pioneering work when it was first published. Today the decision to reprint this book may appear a little odd, but let us hope that it may initiate a greater interest in Polish Romantic writing, both in Poland and abroad.

[1] Stanisław Tarnowski, *Zygmunt Krasiński* (Warszawa, 2014).

[2] Gerald Stone, 'Gardner, Monica Mary (1873–1941)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/39409>, accessed 26 April 2016]

[3] An interpretation that appears to be more accurate than the one offered by Tomasz Macios in the 'Afterword' to 2008 edition of *The Undivine Comedy and Iridion*. See T. Macios, 'Postówie' in Z. Krasiński, *Nie-Boska komedia. Irydion* (Warszawa, 2008), pp. 237-251.