

Anna Cetera-Włodarczyk*

Professor Henryk Zbierski (1925–1995)

A Scholar from Behind the Curtain

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/LC.2025.009>



Henryk Zbierski

Family archives, all photos by courtesy of Dr. Anna Zbierska-Sawala

99

1–2(51) 2025

LITTERARIA COPERNICANA

ISSNp 1899-315X

ss. 99–105

* She teaches English literature at the University of Warsaw. Her scholarly interests include Shakespeare Studies and literary translation.

E-mail: a.cetera@uw.edu.pl | ORCID: 0000-0001-5711-4867.



The year 2025 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the death of Professor Henryk Zbierski, an eminent Shakespeare scholar and remarkable teacher. His long academic career, spanning from 1950 to 1995, revolved around Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. However, the lifelong affiliation with a single university – now known for its thriving Faculty of English – tells us very little about the gravity of historical circumstances which shaped Zbierski's academic life. How can we understand what it took to become, and even more so, to be a Shakespeare scholar in post-WWII Eastern Europe? Perhaps to retrace Zbierski's academic path one would have to dissect the history of Socialist Poland into decades, or even years, and thereby reimagine the *form and pressure* of the times he lived in. This reconstruction would necessarily have to account for the joy of seeing the war coming to an end but also for the scary uncertainties of the times which followed and the dismaying sense of disorientation, a sense most difficult to comprehend when the past is examined with hindsight wisdom.

The understanding of the choices made by our mentors comes with time as we – by way of living our own lives – approach their age, the age when we parted. Thus, year by year, the temporal gap diminishes, and one becomes more sensitive to the nature and origin of things at first taken for granted. This renewed perceptiveness cannot compensate for the sense of loss and the absence of answers to questions which could not be asked then and there, and therefore shall remain unanswered or half-guessed by recourse to our own experience. With mentorship hardly a stable construct, it is this sense of lasting companionship which seems to be an ample measure of academic influence: the missing exchanges of thought not really compensated by new acquaintances. We live in conversation with those who have taught us most, filling the pauses with recollections and informed silences.

In 1939, Henryk Zbierski had just graduated from primary school when the war broke out, forcing him to seek shelter in a now non-existent village in the woodlands of Greater Poland. This rural setting would often be recalled by him in the mode of a distorted pastoral: a nature paradise, the Arden forest of his own, in the shadow of the Third Reich.¹ In 1946, Zbierski graduated from a high school for adults and enrolled at the University of Poznań. At this point, a rare window of opportunity opened for him. The Polish academic centers of English Studies (most of them established in the early 1920s) were devastated and there was little hope for revival given the ideological shifts and tremendous personal losses: Professor Andrzej Tretiak (Warsaw) was shot dead by the Nazis in 1944, Professor Roman Dybowski (Cracow) died suddenly in 1945, and Professor Władysław Tarnawski (Lviv) perished in a Stalinist prison in 1951. However, the situation in Poznań was somewhat different. With the English Seminar established in 1921, the studies in Poznań were expertly led by Professor Bernard W.A. Massey (1884–1960), a graduate of Cambridge University, a translator and a soldier, who after WWI settled in Poznań. Massey lived in Britain during the war, but he returned to Poznań

¹ See the poem "Marzelewo, Marzelewo/ Wielopole mojego życia" in Zbierski 2009: 27.

in 1946 and reassumed his post at the university. The renewal of the course was short-lived, just enough to tutor Zbierski. In 1948, the authorities made their first attempt to sack Massey from the university, but he managed to continue lecturing till 1950 when he also employed Zbierski, still a student, as a stand-in junior assistant. In 1952, the English seminar was ultimately dissolved, and Zbierski was transferred to the Chair of Polish Literature where he would guard the integrity of the English book collection and teach language courses. In 1957, given the death of Stalin and the ensuing thaw, the Chair of English Philology in Poznań was reopened, and Zbierski became its only staff member till 1966. What prospects could he see in this stubborn adherence to his juvenile choices?

It was during the turbulent decade of the 1950s that Zbierski worked on his doctoral dissertation, somewhat in stages, taking advantage of the tiny pockets of expertise and literature which survived amidst Stalinist revolutions. With his interest in “the war of the theatres” dating back to his undergraduate studies, he gradually unveiled his understanding of the phenomenon, replacing the idea of a mere “battle of wits” involving Ben Jonson, John Marston and Thomas Dekker, and possibly William Shakespeare, with a radically widened interpretation where on-stage ridicule and malice were but echoes of a larger conflict of private and public theaters developing on ideological and economic grounds. The idea was first introduced in a short essay in 1952, and then outlined in an unpublished Polish thesis subsequently replaced with the English version – *Shakespeare and the “War of the Theatres.” A Reinterpretation* – printed in 1957.² Set aside the novel approach to Elizabethan theater, the book itself was a token of the young scholar’s frantic struggle for a voice in circumstances most hostile to his pursuits. In fact, Zbierski wrote his doctorate twice, with his second approach boldly challenging the British Shakespearean orthodoxies which he neither knew nor could assume to get ever acquainted with. And yet the year 1956 saw the condemnation of Stalinist practices, and with it, a reactivation of some of the ties with Western culture. When in 1957 Zbierski enrolled for the courses at the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon, the fame of his book had preceded him, which he duly (and no doubt, proudly) reported in his diary, describing how Professor Allardyce Nicoll exemplified at the reception the richness of the resources of the Shakespeare Institute: “I think you can’t find our friend’s, Mr. Zbierski’s, book in the British Library but it is here”! Could one think of a better welcome at the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon?³

² This account is offered by Zbierski in the preface to the English edition of the book where he also stresses substantial revisions of the structure of his argument necessitated by the change of the target readership. Initially Zbierski must have written an elaborate Polish introduction which he deleted from the English version. He also acknowledges the encouragement of Dr. Irena Dobrzycka and the reviewer, Professor Stanisław Helsztyński, to write again in English.

³ The Diary of Henryk Zbierski, from 7 October 1957. Zbierski also stresses that at that point he had not been introduced to Professor Nicole and, therefore, the latter could not have been aware of his presence among the audience. The doctoral degree was finally awarded in 1960, which hints at some additional controversy at home. I thank Dr. A. Zbierska-Sawala for sharing with me some fragments of the unpublished Diary.



**Henryk Zbierski in front of the Shakespeare Institute
in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1964**

What did Zbierski learn in Stratford? By way of an anecdote he would share his disappointment when one of the courses he was offered turned out to be an introduction to Elizabethan paleography, a precious skill and yet hardly useful for a scholar based in Poland. However, it was the powerful scholarship of Allardyce Nicoll which had the most impact on Zbierski. Nicoll was the unquestionable authority in the field, the author of the monumental *History of English Drama, 1660–1900*, and, in the years 1951–1961, the director of the Shakespeare Institute. His concept of literature, the abyss separating drama and theater and the budding film industry, became the cornerstone of Zbierski's own methodological and pedagogical approach, consistently rehearsed with generations of students made to remember that drama – as a work of literature and as opposed to theater – *is immutably fashioned*. Following his stay in Stratford in the years 1956–1958, Zbierski would never venture into archival research. But Stratford remained for him a shrine-like center of Shakespeare criticism: he would regularly attend the biannual Shakespeare International Conference and judge the relevance and value of research projects by Stratfordian standards.⁴

⁴ The records kept at the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon are incomplete and occasionally "members of the conference," i.e. scholars invited to the conference (it is a by-invitation only conference), were not present at the event. This granted, Zbierski attended the conference in 1974, 1978 (presenting a short paper on "Cordelia and the Overall Design of *King Lear*"), 1980, 1982, 1984, 1986, 1990, 1992 and 1994. I thank Dr. John Jowett for the initial survey of records in the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford, mail correspondence as of 8 October 2024. Based on family records, Zbierski visited Stratford in the 1960s too.

It was also in Stratford that Zbierski's paths would cross with those of Jan Kott.⁵ It must have been a weird meeting ground for them, now coming from the two sides of the Iron Curtain, and yet sharing the memory of the same, pivotal decade in Poland. Zbierski hardly ever dealt with Kott's essays, and he was acutely aware of the ideological complexities which had produced the paradigm of contemporary Shakespeare. The two casual notes left in Zbierski's archive just hint at the way he saw Kott's contribution. One of them sketched a paradoxical trajectory of thought by observing that Kott had absorbed the influence of Słowacki and Wyspiański, and that it is this transfer which was first embraced by the world's Shakespeare Studies and which is now gladly welcomed at home.⁶ On another occasion, he would fall back on his favorite methodological position, drawing a sharp division between drama in its historical context and contemporary wisdom:

Notwithstanding all our efforts, at the end of the day, we are bound to interpret literature from the vantage point of "here and now" though there is nothing more limiting and estranging than our contemporary reality.⁷

In fact, Zbierski hardly ever opted for the study of contemporary theater. On the contrary, the 1960s saw him struggling with a different type of material and tackling questions suspended between the history of criticism, the formal analysis of a dramatic text and metaphysics. Written in Polish, Zbierski's post-doctoral dissertation dealt with the concept of tragedy and the tragic hero, based on the example of *Romeo and Juliet* (*Droga do Werony. Studium historycznoliterackie „Romeo i Julia” Szekspira*, 1966). Heavy with references to critical literature, the book was, as it were, an extensive court trial of all characters, with a meticulous examination of guilt and an equally scrupulous analysis of possible excuses. In his search for Shakespeare's concept of tragedy, Zbierski read back and forth the idea of the tragic flaw, taking special interest in the dramatic representations of the errors of judgment, fatal and irrevocable, and yet arising on grounds other than inborn wickedness or voluntarily chosen evil, least of all propelled by determinism.

However, Zbierski's key contributions to the field came with two other books, both meant for a wide Polish readership and both requiring enormous research. In 1982, Zbierski published his history of English literature (*Literatura angielska*) and in 1988, a monograph entitled *William Shakespeare*. By deciding to work on these two projects, Zbierski positioned himself in-between worlds and critical traditions, willingly accepting the unrewarding task of mediation. Spanning his narratives, he acted as a well-informed guide and a connoisseur, drawing relentless parallels with Polish literature to facilitate readers' understanding of foreign material. This comparative effort was genuinely innovative and, at the same time, embedded so well into the structure of the book that it could be seen as an obvious feature of the companion, and not the fruit of laborious analytical work. Zbierski's take on

⁵ Jan Kott attended the conference in 1972, 1978, 1980, 1986 and in 1988. In 1986 he is mentioned among the invited members but missing from the report from the conference.

⁶ Compare the original: "Kott pisał o Szekspirze pod wpływem Słowackiego i Wyspiańskiego, a raczej ich modyfikacji, co weszło do szekspirologii światowej, z której u nas chętnie przyjmujemy," a note written by H. Zbierski, private archive. All translation from Polish by me.

⁷ Compare the original "Choćbyśmy nie wiem jak starali się uniknąć, będziemy w ostatecznym rozrachunku interpretowali literaturę z pozycji "here and now," bo nic tak nas nie ogranicza i nie odgranicza, jak współczesność," a note written by H. Zbierski, private archive.

Shakespeare was all-embracing and highly erudite, refusing to simply educate the reader in plots and sources. Instead, his analyses would position each play against the whole canon, only to proceed to more sophisticated discussions where historical reconstructions went hand-in-hand with new critical approaches. With all its didactic value, Zbierski's work was a tough challenge for his students: triggering curiosity, amazement but also intellectual uneasiness. Could anyone prepare well enough to pick up on all Zbierski's insights, drawing freely on the whole of English Renaissance literature and beyond? Scattered over the chronologically arranged narratives, were some interpretative jewels, the brilliant shortcuts which could easily serve as a starting point for new and engaging essays. This was certainly the case of *Hamlet*, a dramatic monograph of *homo sapiens*, a play Zbierski (1982: 379) saw as central to Shakespeare's thought and an excellent account of the birth of early modern agnosticism.

The academic position occupied by Zbierski was a precarious one. He was a scholar from behind a curtain whatever side he was looked upon. His commitment to Polish readership devoured most of his time, limiting the opportunities for systematic engagement in foreign projects. And yet his scholarship remained firmly founded in Stratfordian criticism, which he graciously shared and elucidated. Above all, however, Zbierski lived his life as a Shakespeare scholar which he understood as partaking in the grand humanistic reflection touching upon the sense and essence of existence. The reflective aspect of his mentorship transpired in his attitude to young scholars whom he would recommend attainable targets and efficiency and yet he would not curb their intellectual unrest and curiosity which, in the long run, would prove the true driving forces of academic endeavors. Pedagogical ethos also underlines Zbierski's poems, published posthumously in 2009. The university landscapes portrayed in his verse appear very familiar to anybody dealing with *the pottery wheel of academic routine*.⁸ The poems abound in recurring images of painful, self-imposed isolation, an inevitable and heavy price paid for the many hours writing. They also record some more cheerful sensations such as the strange illusion of one's own youth nourished by the decades in the company of students, the power of family love, or the positivistic trust in the value of basic work:

We are like corals of the mind:
 turning our great ideas
 to quasi intellectual sediment of long forgotten thoughts
 thoughts the world can do without in its inexorable march to destruction
 the tiring hours in the world's libraries
 spent when others simply go on living
 eating their daily bread
 and munching uncoordinated thoughts
 with no pretensions to posterity
 can for all we know be just a slightly nobler waste of time
 if no one's spirit really becomes richer
 if no hearts are uplifted

⁸ See the poem "Etiuda pedagogiczna" in Zbierski 2009: 31.

if no evil dies
 we are like corals of the mind
 slowly sinking under the waves of deserved oblivion
 (Providence, R.I., 1988)⁹

When asked about the beginning of his interest in Shakespeare, Jerzy Limon, one of Zbierski's first doctoral students, would recall Poznań and the seminars he attended: "Everything began during my studies in Poznań. Professor Henryk Zbierski was my teacher and mentor there [...]. Attending his seminar I was impressed by his expertise and his absolute commitment to academia, which made me follow in his footsteps."¹⁰ There are many students of English literature whose hearts and spirits have been likewise enriched by Zbierski. Can there be better proof of a scholarly life lived and shared to the full?

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⁹ The poem originally written in English by H. Zbierski, private archive.

¹⁰ Compare the original: „wszystko zaczęło się w czasie moich studiów w Poznaniu. Tam moim nauczycielem i mistrzem był prof. Henryk Zbierski [...]. Kiedy uczęszczałem na jego seminarium, jego wiedza, która mi imponowała i jego absolutne poświęcenie nauce sprawiły, że w tym kierunku poszedłem,” Limon, online.