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Maciej Wirzbięta's *O słachetności a zacności płci niewieściej* (1575) and the Erasmian Tradition of *Declamatio*¹

O słachetności a zacności płci niewieściej is a faithful translation of *De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus* (Antwerp, 1529) by Henrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535).² The work was carried out by Maciej Wirzbięta (1523?–before June 17, 1605), a Cracovian typographer who also printed the book in 1575.³ After two French and two Italian, as well as German and English versions, Wirzbięta's translation was the last sixteenth-century attempt to render Agrippa's work in a vernacular language, and at the same time a testimony to the special popularity of this relatively short text.⁴ Scholars trace the origin of the Latin source of *O słachetności* to the author's stay in Dole and his series of lectures on Johannes "Capnio" Reuchlin's *De verbo mirifico*. Agrippa opened the series with a speech praising Archduchess Margaret of Austria, daughter of the German king and Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I.⁵ While the text of the encomium did not survive, it

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² A detailed comparative analysis of both texts can be found in M. Wojtkowska-Maksymik, *Źródła i sposób ujęcia kwestii kobiecej godności w "O słachetności a zacności płci niewieściej" Macieja Wirzbięty* (Warszawa 2017).

³ The only surviving copy of the work, kept in the National Library in Warsaw (no. BN. XVI.O.908), served as a basis for the 1891 edition: *O słachetności a zacności płci niewieściej. Przekład Macieja Wirzbięty 1575*, ed. S. Tomkowicz (Kraków, 1891). All quotations from Wirzbięta in the present article come from the latter version.

⁴ For a discussion of the translations, see A. Rabil, Jr., "Agrippa and the Feminist Tradition," in H.C. Agrippa, *Declamation on the Dignity and Preeminence of the Female Sex*, trans. and ed. A. Rabil, Jr. (Chicago, 1996), pp. 27–28. Vernacular versions of *De nobilitate*, created before 1575, are discussed in Wojtkowska-Maksymik, *Źródła i sposób ujęcia*, pp. 43–76.

⁵ See also: Ch. Nauert, Jr., *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought* (Urbana, 1955), pp. 25–27; R. Antonioli, preface to *De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus. Edition critique d'après le texte d'Anvers 1529*, by H.C. Agrippa, ed. R. Antonioli, trans. Mme O. Sauvage (Genève,

was received enthusiastically⁶—as noted by Heinrich Cornelius in a letter to Maximilian von Sevenborgen (Transilvanus), dated April 16, 1529—and became the germ of *De nobilitate* that was published two decades later. The princess, who was appointed regent of the Habsburg Netherlands in 1507, played an important role both in the text's conception and its publication. When Agrippa's hope for a career at the court of Louise of Savoy in Lyon ultimately faded in 1527, he decided to seek a new position, finally securing the post of archivist and historiographer at Margaret's court in 1529. This is also when the previously mentioned edition of the text appeared. Alongside the letter to Transilvanus and an undated letter to the governor of the Netherlands, this publication aimed at earning the favor and goodwill of the advisor and secretary to Charles V (nephew and ward of the Habsburg princess) and of the princess herself.

While it is relatively easy to trace the history of *De nobilitate*'s origin and publication, the question of its generic identification may raise some doubts. Their resolution is further hampered by the state of scholarship on Agrippa's literary heritage,⁷ dominated by research focused on *De occulta philosophia libri tres* (first book: 1531, first complete edition: 1532) and *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum et artium, atque excellentia Verbi Dei declamatio invectiva* (1530). Comparisons of these works invited the question why the philosopher wrote such dissimilar and even contradictory texts. The perception of Agrippa as an author of works which negate each other, oscillating between praise and rebuke, has been reinforced by the scholarship on modern laudations of matters undeserving distinction (due to their insignificance, ugliness, etc.), often referred to—especially in the English and French subject literature—as epistemological paradoxes or mock-praise.⁸

1990), pp. 11–12; M. Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian and His Declamation* (Leiden, 1997), pp. 18–19, 185–186.

⁶ Cf. H.C. Agrippa, “Clarissimo viro domino Maximiliano Transsilvano...” in *De nobilitate*, ed. R. Antonioli, p. 46. All quotations from Agrippa come from this edition.

⁷ Discussed by P. Zambelli, “Agrippa von Nettesheim in den neueren kritischen Studien und in den Handschriften,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 51/1 (1969), pp. 246–295.

⁸ Key works on the subject include: A.S. Pease, “Things without Honor,” *Classical Philology*, 21/1 (1926), pp. 28–29; H.K. Miller, “The Paradoxical Encomium with Special Reference to Its Vogue in England, 1600–1800,” *Modern Philology*, 53/3 (1956), pp. 145–178; R.L. Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica. The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton, 1966); B.C. Bowen, *The Age of Bluff. Paradox and Ambiguity in Rabelais and Montaigne* (Urbana, 1972); J.-C. Margolin, “Le paradoxe. Pierre de Touche des ‘Jocoseria’ humanistes,” in M.T. Jones-Davies (ed.), *Le paradoxe au temps de la Renaissance* (Paris, 1982), pp. 59–79; J. Lebeau, “Le paradoxe chez Erasme, Luther et Sebastian Franck,” in M.T. Jones-Davies (ed.), *Le paradoxe*, pp. 143–154; H. Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric. A Foundation for Literary Study*, trans. M.T. Bliss, A. Jansen, and D.E. Orton (Leiden, 1998), p. 104. In this article I will be referring to epistemological paradoxes or mock-praise, even though the Polish literature on the subject talks rather about adoxography, having adopted the term via Pease's “Things without.” See: R. Krzywy, “Broda – dwuznaczna adoksografia,” in *Sztuka wyborów i dar inwencji. Studium o strukturze gatunkowej*

Texts of this type were identified as a ceremonial or demonstrative kind of expression where the recipient plays an important role as the judge of the artistic value of the oration and the fluency of the speaker. This active role of the audience, as well as other main functions of epideictic rhetoric—an over-aestheticized kind of writing or speaking (often attributable to heavy use of *ornatus*)—were emphasized by the ancient theoreticians of oratory art.⁹ Aristotle noted that the encomium finds its dialectic equivalent in the reproach.¹⁰ This is why works belonging to *genus laudativum* may evoke both “admiring love and loathing hatred or contempt,”¹¹ and are easily transformed—from praise to rebuke and the other way around—which in turn results in them being viewed as ambiguous genres, whose “weaker levels of defensibility place high demands upon rhetorical technique.”¹² Heinrich Lausberg points to one more property of *genus demonstrativum*, namely the fact that it creates the opportunity to freely display one’s mastery based on the command of its principles. Lausberg notes also the “didactic” character of epideictic speeches that were used in ancient schools of rhetoric for the practice of style, teaching argumentation, composition, and so on, and which were especially popular in the Second Sophistic. Another period of their extreme popularity came between the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century. Rosalie L. Colie argues that around that time praise of things or matters unworthy of approval transformed into *serio ludere*—works not only meant to display the virtue and skill of their authors but also exercising the wit of the sophisticated reader.¹³ Colie identifies Erasmus’s *Moriae encomium* and Agrippa’s *De incertitudine* as the most frequently imitated paradoxes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In her opinion on Agrippa, she does not diverge from the readings proposed by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers, and she finds confirmation of his status among the authors of literary laudations in the inclusion of *De incertitudine* in Caspar Dornavius’s *Amphitheatrum sapientiae Socraticae*

poematów Jana Kochanowskiego (Warszawa, 2008), pp. 46–48; R. Krzywy, *Poezja staropolska wobec teorii genologicznej. Wprowadzenie do problematyki* (Warszawa, 2014), pp. 100–118.

⁹ The views of the ancient rhetoricians and theoreticians on the art of oration are discussed, among others, by Lausberg, *Literary Rhetoric*, pp. 102–111; T.C. Burgess, *Epideictic Literature* (Chicago, 1902), pp. 89–261; Pease, “Things without,” pp. 27–42; and in more recent subject literature by V. Buchheit, *Untersuchungen zur Theorie des Genos Epideiktikon von Gorgias bis Aristoteles* (München, 1960); S. Matuschek, “Epideiktische Beredsamkeit,” in G. Ueding et al. (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, vol. 1 (Tübingen, 1994), pp. 1257–1267; S. Zajonz, *Isokrates’ Enkomion auf Helena. Ein Kommentar* (Göttingen, 2002), pp. 35–57. The tripartite division characterizing the Renaissance rhetorical tradition was discussed by G. Mathieu-Castellani, “La notion de genre,” in G. Demerson (ed.), *La notion de genre à la Renaissance* (Genève, 1984), pp. 17–33.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1368a.

¹¹ Lausberg, *Literary Rhetoric*, p. 104.

¹² Lausberg, *Literary Rhetoric*, p. 38.

¹³ See Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica*, pp. 4–5.

joco-seriae (1619).¹⁴ This image of Heinrich Cornelius was so successfully reinforced by the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century translations of *De incertitudine* and *De nobilitate* into national languages that it seeped into the nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship, which commonly presents him as an author of paradoxical, ironic diatribes or frivolous, light literary games and witticisms.¹⁵ Such reception strongly influenced the interpretation of *De nobilitate*; in fact, Eugene Korkowski views it as “mock-praise,” which relies on “fanciful etymology, strange glosses on legend and mythology, puns, and ludicrous twists of logic,” aimed not as much at defending women as at emulating the entire throng of “satirical paradoxers.”¹⁶

An interesting and convincing positioning of *De nobilitate* within the sixteenth-century rhetorical tradition and practice was proposed by Marc Van der Poel, who notes that both in the title of *De incertitudine*, and in the titles of some of the works published in 1529 (*De nobilitate*, *De originali peccato disputabilis opinionis*, *De sacramento matrimonii*) Agrippa used the word *declamatio*. This occurred, without a doubt, after 1518, that is, after his definite return to the north of Europe.¹⁷ It was a turning point in the scholar’s life as it was then that he joined the discussions on theological issues dear to the reformers and humanists of the era, especially to Erasmus of Rotterdam.¹⁸ Around that time Heinrich Cornelius began to mention in his letters the name and the works of the “prince of humanists,” and to express his admiration for the Dutchman. It is definitely of significance that by 1518 Desiderius had already published *Encomium moriae declamatio* (1509) and *Encomium matrimonii declamatio* (1518), two works which may have prompted Agrippa to add the word *declamatio*¹⁹ to the titles of his earlier works. Erasmus classified also his other works as declamations, including: *Querimonia pacis undique profligatae*, *Consolatoria de morte filii*, *Encomium artis medicae cum caeteris adiectis*, published in Leuven in 1518 as a part of *Declamationes aliquot Erasmi Roterodami*. However, Erasmus used the term not only in the sense popularized by the ancient rhetorical tradition, which viewed it as a preliminary exercise, a fictional kind of speech used for practice before the actual one is produced,²⁰ and he

¹⁴ See Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa*, pp. 163–164.

¹⁵ See Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa*, pp. 164–166.

¹⁶ See E. Korkowski, “Agrippa as Ironist,” *Neophilologus* 1 (1976), pp. 604–605, 595.

¹⁷ See Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa*, pp. 154–156.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the connections between Agrippa and Erasmus, see Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa*, pp. 154–160; M. Van der Poel, “Was Agrippa von Nettesheim an Erasmian Humanist?” in A. Moss et al. (ed.), *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Hafniensis. Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Neo-Latin Studies, Copenhagen, 12 August to 17 August 1991* (Binghamton, 1994), pp. 969–977.

¹⁹ Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa*, pp. 157–158.

²⁰ J. Domański rightly observes that the works classified by Erasmus as declamations were in fact “diverse in terms of both theme and tone,” as well as genre. J. Domański, “Erasm z Rotterdamu,” in *Powszechna Encyklopedia Filozofii*, vol. 3 (Lublin, 2002), p. 204. The classical

explicated his notion of *declamatio* and its functions in *Encomium matrimonii* apologies published between 1519 and 1532.²¹ To ensure a correct interpretation of this work and to protect his name, Desiderius mentions several issues: the meaning of *suasoria* and *declamatio*, and the role of rhetoric in the process of moral upbringing. He notes that *Encomium matrimonii* was planned as *declamatio in genere suasorio de laude matrimonii* (the actual title of the first two editions), in other words, that it was meant as a collection of rules and principles written in the form of a letter to a specific addressee in a specific situation. This is why *declamatio* does not offer doctrinal certitude but rather a set of arguments based on dialectic reasoning, a confrontation of statements “for” and “against.” Such form of discourse is most likely to invite reflection, and as a consequence, lead to morally right decisions—Erasmus believed that rhetoric should be approached as a discipline offering intellectual exercise that completes proper education. He also noted the similarities between such an understanding of *declamatio* and the theological *disputationes* allowing a free debate of *pro* and *contra* with the use of dialectic techniques.²²

As pointed out by Marc Van der Poel,²³ Agrippa was a careful reader of Erasmian apologies of marriage and he created his own theory of *declamatio*, based on Desiderius's explications, which was elucidated in *Apologia adversus calumnias propter declamationem de vanitate scientiarum et excellentia Verbi Dei, sibi per aliquos Lovanienses theologistas intentatas* from 1533. The work was a reply to the accusations against *De vanitate* leveled by the Leuven University theologians²⁴—Agrippa discusses the goals of the declamation and its reading in the first²⁵ and penultimate (42) chapters of the

theory of *declamatio* and its sources are discussed, e.g., by P.L. Schmidt, “Declamationes,” in H. Cancik, H. Schneider (eds), *Der neue Pauly. Enzyklopädie der Antike*, vol. 3 (Stuttgart, 1997), pp. 350–351.

²¹ For a broader discussion of *Encomium matrimonii* and Erasmus's definition of *declamatio* see: J.-C. Margolin, “Signification psychologique, valeur théologique et partée historique de l'*Encomium matrimonii*,” in Erasmus, *Opera omnia*, vol. 1, bk 5, ed. J.-C. Margolin (Amsterdam, 1975), pp. 367–381; M. Van der Poel, “Erasmus, Rhetoric and Theology: the *Encomium matrimonii*,” in D. Sacré and G. Tournoy (eds), *Myrica. Essays on Neo-Latin Literature in Memory of Jozef Ijsewin* (Leuven, 2000), pp. 221–228. Erasmus's role in the shaping of the humanist theory of *declamatio* is discussed by M. Van der Poel, “The Latin Declamatio in Renaissance Humanism,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 20/3 (1989), pp. 471–478. For a commentary on Erasmus's *apologia* and its sources see: G. Bedouelle, “Introduction,” in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 83, ed. G. Bedouelle (Toronto, 1998), pp. xi–xiii.

²² Van der Poel, *Erasmus*, p. 225.

²³ Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa*, pp. 119–152.

²⁴ For a broader discussion of *De vanitate*, see B.C. Bowen, “Cornelius Agrippa's *De vanitate*: Polemic or Paradox,” *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 34/2 (1972), pp. 249–256; see also Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa*, pp. 119–152.

²⁵ Cf. “Est nanque declamationis proprium, in ficto themate, exercendorum studiorum gratia, citra veritatis statuendae regulam, abrogata fide laborare. Qui enim declamationem scribere se profitetur, hoc ipso sibi fidem abrogat, nec quicquam asserit, non etiam ea quae vera et notoria sunt, et quibus alias extra declamationem credere et assentiri teneretur, et de quibus ambigere

apologia.²⁶ On the one hand, he believes that it is not the aim of *declamatio* to formulate a dogmatic position but to discuss arguments using dialectic techniques and, consequently, to introduce into the text an element of freedom and tolerance, changing its character to that of an open and free but not facetious or mocking dispute, one where the opposing sides of an argument can present their often contradictory views.²⁷ On the other hand, *declamatio*'s goal is to engage intelligent readers so that they can judge the discussed subject and the work's value themselves. Agrippa's declamations deal with matters unresolved by the Holy Scripture or—through dogmas—by the authority of the Church, and combine the problems of faith with those of morals in an attempt to engender a debate among scholars and, at the same time, to stir individual minds, therefore giving the reader a chance to become a better man (who follows the dictates of morality) and a better Christian (who follows evangelical principles).²⁸

When discussing *De nobilitate* one should bear in mind that Agrippa conceived it as *oratio in laudem* for the princess and only later added to the title the word *declamatio*, which is invoked only before the main part of the text and does not appear in the letters to Transilvanus and the Regent, where the author relies on other terms, such as *opera*, *libellus*, *oratio in laudem*. Additionally, in the dedication to Maximilian, Heinrich Cornelius warns the reader that the work is short and has been composed rather inelegantly.²⁹ But what he has in mind is not the unclear or incorrect language but rather the fact that the text has not been stylistically adorned with countless oratory devices. Similar remarks can be found in his letter to Margaret where the author mentions lofty matters discussed in a humble

nefas est. Unde non puto tam iniquos fore theologos, ut omnium illorum quae declamando diximus, aut scripsimus, rationes ad theologorum rigorem exigere velint." H.C. Agrippa von Nettesheim, *Apologia adversus calumnias propter declamationem de vanitate scientiarum et excellentia verbi Dei sibi per aliquos Louanienses theologistas intentatas* (Coloniae, 1533), f. C₁v.

²⁶ Cf. "Proinde declamatio non iudicat, non dogmatizat, sed quae declamationis conditiones sunt, alia ioco, alia seria, alia salse, alia severe dicit; aliquando mea, aliquando aliorum sententia loquitur, quaedam vera, quaedam falsa, quaedam dubia pronuntiat, alicubi disputat, alicubi admonet, non ubique improbat, aut docet aut asserit, nec omni loco animi mei sententiam declarat, multa invalida argumenta adducit, ut habeatur, quod improbet, quodque solvat declamaturus partem diversam, quae quum nesciat hic articulator discernere, nullam de illis nisi stultam poterit ferre sententiam." Agrippa, *Apologia*, f. I_v.

²⁷ For a broader discussion of the analogies between *declamatio* and *disputatio*, see A.R. Larsen, "Paradox and the Praise of Women: From Ortensio Lando and Charles Estienne to Marie de Romieu," *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 28/3 (1997), pp. 759–744.

²⁸ This is also why Van der Poel stresses that Agrippa's *declamationes* were addressed both to the professional theologians and to a broad circle of educated readers, see Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa*, p. 184.

²⁹ Cf. "Quod si nunc tua prudentia hoc meum consilium non improbauerit, faciam vt libellus iste cum plerisque aliis meis progrediatur in publicum, etiam si videam res haec quam sit exigua, et qua nulla elegantia dicendi reddita." Agrippa, "Clarissimo viro domino Maximiliano Transilvano," pp. 46–47.

form.³⁰ This explanation seems especially relevant considering the fact that incongruence between *res* and *verba* was held to be one of the most serious offences against properness.³¹ But Agrippa's breaking of *decorum* was justified also by the way he supported the thesis about the superiority of women over men, using biblical arguments as well as reasoning found in historical and theological texts, and in both laws.³² All of this provided irrefutable evidence of women's excellence and legitimized *De nobilitate*, a speech that originated from the intent to express deserved praise—not from the need to play with form or convention. Furthermore, the dedications to Transilvanus and Margaret allow to discern the text's preferred target audience, one consisting not only of theologians and scholars but of educated and moral men endowed with natural curiosity, an open mind, and courage, as these were the features ensuring proper judgment of *De nobilitate*'s artistic value, as well as the kind reception of the work and its right interpretation. Finally, the immediate goals which the author hoped to achieve practically excluded a playful character of the work, while the essentially Erasmian nature of *declamatio* meant that the book became an important voice in the *querelle des femmes*.³³

Although, as previously mentioned, Maciej Wirzbięta's work was an attempt to faithfully render the content of the original,³⁴ his title lacks the Polish equivalent of *declamatio* ("deklamacyja"), which may have been caused by the contemporary meaning of the word. Usage examples found in *Słownik polszczyzny XVI wieku*³⁵—taken from Jan Mączyński's 1564 *Lexicon Latino-Polonicum* and Modrzewski's 1577 *De republica emendanda* translated into Polish by Cyprian Bazylik—reveal that "deklamacyja" was a term referring to speeches "invented" for the exercise of "mind and language."³⁶ Meanwhile, neither the author of the source text nor the translator had this particular didactic purpose in mind. Firstly, Wirzbięta described his

³⁰ Cf. "Annunciabo itaque gloriam mulieris, et honestatem eius non abscondam, tantumque abest quod me assumpti argumenti pudeat, quandoque si foeminas viris praeferam, ob id me vituperandum putem esse, vt vix me excusatum iri fidam, qui rem adeo sublimem humiliori quam par est dicendi forma complexus sum, nisi me cum temporis angustia et rei difficultas, tum causae aequitas tuerentur, tum quia nullo adulandi assentandiue studio hanc operam aggressus sum." H.C. Agrippa, "Diuae Margaretae..." in *De nobilitate*, ed. R. Antonioli, p. 48.

³¹ Lausberg, *Literary Rhetoric*, pp. 117–118.

³² Cf. "Ideoque non tam studium fuit rhetoricis figmentis officiosisque mendaciis verba in laudes ornare, quam rem ipsam ratione, autoritate, exemplis, ipsisque sacrarum litterarum, et vtriusque iuris testimoniis monstrare." Agrippa, "Diuae Margaretae," p. 48.

³³ As confirmed by the 16th-century reception of the work. See also: Wojtkowska-Maksymik, *Źródła i sposób ujęcia*, pp. 43–76.

³⁴ M. Wirzbięta replaced the letters to Transilvanus and Margaret of Austria with a dedication to Krystyna Chodkiewiczowa, followed by "A short address to all honorable women and every reader." Wirzbięta, *O słachetności*, pp. 9–13.

³⁵ See *Słownik polszczyzny XVI wieku*, vol. 4 (Wrocław, 1969) s.vv. "deklamacyja," "deklamować."

³⁶ I. Mączyński, *Lexicon Latino-Polonicum. Regiomonti 1564*, ed. R. Olesch (Köln, 1973), p. 110.

translation as a book or books, as declared on the opening page, which reads: *O ślachtetności a zacności płci niewieściej książki od Henryka Korneliusza lacińskim językiem napisane, teraz nowo na polski język wyłożone* (Books on the dignity and preeminence of the female sex, written originally in Latin by Henrich Cornelius and now presented anew in Polish). Such a formulation of the title emphasizes the fact that the reader receives a recently created vernacular version of a text written originally in a different language.³⁷ Secondly, the translator chose to use terms such as “rozprawa” (discourse), which appear after the dedication to Krystyna Chodkiewicz and the foreword to the reader, and before the actual text introduced as *O ślachtetności i zacności pogłowia niewieściego rozprawa śliczna a podziwienią godna* (An ingenious and laudable discourse on the dignity and preeminence of the female sex); and he also mentions “obrona” (defense) of the female sex³⁸ in “Przemowa ... ku wszem cnym białymgłowam i ku każdemu czytelnikowi” (An address to all honorable women and every reader). It is noteworthy that the first pair: book/books corresponds to Agrippa’s *libellus*. The term “rozprawa” in sixteenth-century Polish was synonymous with “speaking,” “utterance,” “discussion,” “a written deliberation,” and “a text containing religious and scientific deliberations”³⁹—it appears in this sense for instance in *Rozprawa cudna o usługowaniu słowem Bożym w kościele jego świętym ... przeciwko dziwnym opiniom ludzi dzisiejszych czasów* (Excellent discourse on using the word of God in His Holy Church ... against the strange opinions of today’s people), which opens Mikołaj Rej’s 1571 edition of *Postylla* that was printed by Wirzbięta.⁴⁰ Among the synonyms of “rozprawa,” Jan Mączyński’s dictionary lists also *disceptatio* (“recognition,” “disquisition,” “arbitration”).⁴¹ Consequently, one could assume that the “discourse on the dignity and preeminence of the female sex” stands simply for a written statement of a polemic nature similar to religious deliberations, of which the translator reminds us when he refers to the biblical history of man’s creation, fall, and salvation at the beginning of the address.⁴² Finally, “rozprawa” was a word for: “resolution of a dispute or uncertainty.” Also the second term, “obrona” (defense), was used in the sixteenth century in the sense of refuting accusations—in Wirzbięta’s work, those leveled against women—or arguing for the legitimacy and validity of a thesis—of women’s dignity and preeminence, in this case.

³⁷ As suggested by the adverb “nowo” [newly] used in the sense of “recently,” “just.” Such usage is noted by *Słownik polszczyzny XVI wieku*, vol. 18 (Wrocław, 1988), pp. 532–534.

³⁸ Wirzbięta, *O ślachtetności*, p. 12.

³⁹ See *Słownik polszczyzny XVI wieku*, vol. 36 (Warszawa, 2012), s.v. “rozprawa.”

⁴⁰ The text is found on pages b₃v–c₄r of that edition.

⁴¹ Mączyński, *Lexicon*, p. 179; *Słownik polszczyzny XVI wieku* lists also other Latin synonyms, such as *discussio* and *disputatio*.

⁴² Wirzbięta, *O ślachtetności*, pp. 11–12.

The *Lexicon Latino-Polonicum* lists “obrona,” thus conceived, as synonymous with *apologia*.⁴³ Clearly, even though Wirzbięta did not call *O słachetności* a “declamation,” he referred to it in terms that—according to sixteenth-century linguistic practice—pointed to its specific functions, which were analogous to those attributed by both Erasmus and Agrippa to texts described as *declamatio*. Their role, of course, was to debate matters unresolved (due to various difficulties) and to deliver apologetic contents.

Maciej Wirzbięta also aptly recognized Agrippa's argumentative strategy, whose praise of women's virtues and deeds was based on the evidence found in historical texts and in the Scripture.⁴⁴ The authority of God's Word served as the ultimate confirmation of women's eminence and facilitated both a “białychłów przeciw ich obmowcom a nieprzyjacielom“ (defense of women against their slanderers and adversaries)⁴⁵ and the related praise of those who “ony w swym rodzaju nie mniej są godny prawdziwego oślachcienia a ozdoby, jako i mężowie” (in their kind are no less than men worthy of true honor).⁴⁶ On the other hand, the translator did predict that the subject and goal of the work may appear too scandalous and controversial. In the opening of the address “to all honorable women” he warns that

bez wątpienia nie jednego to obruszy, gdy przeczyta tytuł ten nowy książek tych: *O słachetności a zacności pogłowia niewieściego*. Ale gdy dobrze zrozumieją przyczynę przedsięwzięcia naszego, wierzę, że im to rzecz znośniejsza będzie, i mam nadzieję, że podanie tych książek między ludzi pochwała.⁴⁷

This is also why Wirzbięta mentions other works discussing matters considered either trifle or contentious, arguing that the value of a literary text depends not on its subject but on its purpose and use:

Potym, jeźliże się godziło onym ludziom zacnym a uczonym wychwalać kwartannę febrę, a drugiemu Erazmusowi Roterodamowi zalecenie błazeństwa dosyć dostatecznie, czemuż się tego słuszniej uczynić nie godziło Korneliusowi Agrippie, który strofuje zbytnie obmowce a szacunkarze białychłów i jawnie to ukazuje, że słusznie a jednako mają być zalecone i wychwalane jako i mężowie.⁴⁸

⁴³ Mączyński, *Lexicon*, p. 24. The lexicographer defines *apologia* as: “a reply to an accusation, or a response, excuse or defense.” Cf. *Słownik polszczyzny XVI wieku*, vol. 19 (Wrocław, 1990), s.v. “obrona.” Other Latin synonyms listed by *Słownik polszczyzny* include: *narratio*, *excusatio*, *apologismus*, *causae dictio*, *dicaelogia*, *dissolutio*, *expurgatio*, *satisfactio*.

⁴⁴ Wirzbięta, *O słachetności*, pp. 9, 14.

⁴⁵ Wirzbięta, *O słachetności*, p. 12.

⁴⁶ Wirzbięta, *O słachetności*, p. 12.

⁴⁷ “Without a doubt many will be indignant about the title of the present books: *On the Dignity and Preeminence of the Female Sex*. But once they properly grasp the rationale behind our endeavor, I believe they will more gladly accept the matter and, hopefully, approve of introducing these books to the people.” Wirzbięta, *O słachetności*, p. 11.

⁴⁸ “If learned and honest men were allowed praise of quartan fever while Erasmus of Rotterdam at length extolled folly, why would it not be even more proper for Cornelius Agrippa to rebuke

In the above passage the translator recalls not only Erasmus's *Encomium moriae* but also the praise of fever attributed to Favorinus of Arelate (c. 85–c. 150) and alludes to a section of Erasmus's declamation—in a letter to Thomas Moore, Desiderius tried to defend his work from too harsh and rather incompetent critics and maligners:

Let any, however, who are offended by the lightness and foolery of my argument remember, I beg, that mine is not the first example, but that the same thing was often practised by great authors. Homer, all those ages ago, made sport with a battle of frogs and mice; Virgil, with a gnat, and a salad; Ovid, with a nut. Polycrates eulogized Busiris; and Isocrates, though a castigatōr of Polycrates, did the same; Glaucon argued in praise of injustice; Favorinus, of Thersites and of the quartan fever; Synesius, of baldness; Lucian, of the fly and of the parasite. Seneca sported with an Apotheosis of the Emperor Claudius; Plutarch, in dialogue between Gryllus and Ulysses; Lucian and Apuleius, with an ass; and someone whom I do not know, with the last will and testament of Grunius Corocotta, a hog. Saint Jerome makes mention of this last.⁴⁹

In the dedication to his friend, Erasmus envisions also the *declamatio's* ideal reader, someone who is more than a passive recipient, although—importantly—an informed reading of such works required a certain degree of experience and the willingness to learn. Only then “a reader who is not altogether a fathead may garner more of profit from them than from the bristling and pompous arguments,”⁵⁰ as there is nothing more pleasant than “to handle light subjects in such a way that you seem to have been anything but trifling.”⁵¹ Similarly, Wirzbięta mentions an “attentive reader” capable of appreciating “the orator's practice and skill,”⁵² and extracting from the text wisdom whose gist is revealed in the rhymed epilogue—human life inevitably ends in death, and the opening eschatological perspective (as well as the related salvation or damnation) will reveal whether our choices in life were right or wrong, which is something to be aware of as we make them.⁵³ It seems that Wirzbięta's translation may be treated as a guideline in that regard: it instructs men not to criticize women, and women not to act

immoderate critics and slanderers of the female sex and clearly indicate that women are to be praised and rightfully extolled just as men are.” Wirzbięta, *O ślachtetności*, p. 12.

⁴⁹ Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, trans. H. Hopewell Hudson (Princeton, 2015), p. 2.

⁵⁰ Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, p. 3.

⁵¹ Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, p.3.

⁵² Wirzbięta, *O ślachtetności*, p.13.

⁵³ He writes in “Zamknienie” [epilogue] “Bowiem widzę, iż ludzie w ty nieszczęsne lata, / Radszej się wołą bawić, co jest wedle świata, / Niż rzeczami, które nam wieczny żywot niosą, / Acz nas ztąd prętko spłoszy śmierć, gdy przyjdzie z kosą. / A tam więc oglądamy, jeśliśmy wygrali, / Żeśmy się światu temu za nos wodzić dali” [“For I see that people spend their given time / more eagerly on trifles that the world supplies / than on things which bring us an eternal life / But Death's swift scythe will sweep us all away/ To a place from which, if we had deserved, / We will see how the world tries to lead us astray.”]. Wirzbięta, *O ślachtetności*, p. 56, lines 17–22.

superior to men, as both sexes are God's creation brought to life to "spread and multiply the glory of God's name," and are endowed with "wisdom, reason, and other divine graces."⁵⁴ Consequently, mutual disrespect not only damages the unity sanctioned by the Supreme Being but also offends "our Lord Creator."⁵⁵

To discuss the generic classification of *De nobilitate* and *O ślachtetności*, one must start by noting that we are dealing with a speech divided structurally into four parts.⁵⁶ The first part is an introduction presenting the subject of the work and aiming to capture the reader's attention. This is achieved by placing the audience *in medias res*: Agrippa and Wirzbięta declare that equality of "both sexes" results from God's decision to create men and women in his own image.⁵⁷ The *exordium* is followed by *narratio* (presenting facts to be proven later in *argumentatio*) informing us that the "female generation" not only equals in its dignity "the coarse male nation" but also "surpasses it almost immeasurably,"⁵⁸ which properly outlines the subject matter. The *narratio* concludes with a declaration that the arguments supporting the validity of the author's position will be derived not from the "tortuous discourse of swellheads" (i.e. fools) but "from certain authors' testimonies and from everyday matters described in certain histories as well as in both Testaments of the Holy Scripture."⁵⁹ The central part of the speech (*argumentatio*) elaborates on the meaning of Eve's name (*a nomine*), the order of creation (*ab ordine*), the place of creation (*a loco*), the substance that forms man and woman (*a materia*), *dignitas super virum* with regard to the physical appearance, physiology, and virtue as revealed through various activities undertaken by women, the enumeration of which provides further evidence, supported by examples of brave and pious women (from the Holy Writ and history) or references to laws favorable to women or elevating them.⁶⁰ Among the arguments for the eminence of the female sex, one can clearly distinguish also particular characteristics which are praiseworthy in a person. Their most complete catalogue was presented in Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* (3.7), which lists the attributes and accomplishments to be

⁵⁴ Wirzbięta, *O ślachtetności*, p. 11.

⁵⁵ Wirzbięta, *O ślachtetności*, p. 11.

⁵⁶ For more on the division, number, and function of particular parts of a speech in the rhetorical tradition, see Lausberg, *Literary Rhetoric*, pp. 120–123.

⁵⁷ See Agrippa, *De nobilitate*, p. 49; Wirzbięta, *O ślachtetności*, p. 13.

⁵⁸ Wirzbięta, *O ślachtetności*, p. 14. Cf. "In iis muliebris inclyta stirps durum virorum genus in infinitum pene excellit." Agrippa, *De nobilitate*, p. 49.

⁵⁹ Wirzbięta, *O ślachtetności*, p. 14. Cf. "Quod idipsum (et quod institutum nostrum est) non adulterinis fucatisue sermonibus, neque etiam logicis tendiculis, quibus multi sophistae homines illaqueare solent, sed cum optimorum authorum patrociniis, rerumque gestarum veridicis historiis, ac apertis rationibus, tum sacrarum literarum testimoniis, et vtriusque iuris sanctionibus ostensum est." Agrippa, *De nobilitate*, p. 49.

⁶⁰ See Agrippa, *De nobilitate*, pp. 50–88, 14–54.

invoked while writing a panegyric. They include, among others, a person's character, distinguished birth, external circumstances, various virtues and endowments, and their glorious deeds; Marcus Fabius also suggests praise of physical beauty.⁶¹ Both *O słachetności a zacności płci niewieściej* and *De nobilitate* end with an epilogue containing a short summary of the presented enumeration and an address to the audience where—through the topos of humility—Agrippa and Wirzbięta emphasize that their work stemmed not from the pursuit of profit or empty flattery, but from devotion to the truth. On the other hand, both authors concede—this is yet another way of securing the audience's favor—that the subject has not been exhausted and acknowledge the possibility of further discussion to improve the work and strengthen its argument.⁶²

Going back to the question of generic identification, it should be stressed once again that the purpose of *De nobilitate* and *O słachetności* was to prove the validity and to defend the thesis about the eminence of the female sex. In order to achieve this, the authors reached for argumentation that was also appropriate for praising women—though indirectly. This was undoubtedly associated with Agrippa's and Wirzbięta's personal situation: the former was seeking the support of an eminent princess and her nephew, the latter addressed his text to Krystyna Chodkiewicz (née Zborowska), perhaps similarly motivated to win her favor and the goodwill of her husband, a powerful Lithuanian magnate Jan (Hieronimowicz) Chodkiewicz, to whom he had earlier (in 1562 and 1574) dedicated two editions of Mikołaj Rej's *Zwierzyniec*.⁶³ Just as princess Margaret in Agrippa's dedication, the Polish mother of the future Great Hetman was considered a paragon of all virtue and a living example of female eminence, able to convince the skeptics that the model promoted in the text is not just an idea or a figment of the author's vivid imagination.⁶⁴

⁶¹ A discussion of Quintilian's classification can be found in Lausberg, *Literary Rhetoric*, pp. 105–108.

⁶² See Agrippa, *De nobilitate*, pp. 88–89; M. Wirzbięta, *O słachetności*, pp. 54–55.

⁶³ The custom of dedicating texts to women as an effective way to win the husbands' favor is discussed by R. Ociecek, "Sławorodne wizerunki." *O wierszowanych listach dedykacyjnych z XVII wieku* (Katowice, 1982), p. 88. Both dedications to Jan Hieronimowicz Chodkiewicz can be found in M. Rej, *Zwierzyniec* (Kraków: W. Bruchnalski, 1895) on pages 3–4 (dedication from the 1562 edition) and pages 284–286 (dedication from the 1574 edition). Wirzbięta mentions the latter in a letter to Krystyna Chodkiewicz (from June 27, 1575): "A iżem roku przeszłego pod sławnym tytułem jaśnie wielmożnego pana, pana małżonka Waszej pańskiej miłości, mego miłościwego pana, Zwierzyniec z drukarniej swojej wydał, starałem się też o to z wielką pilnością, abych pracą swoją mógł ku wiecznej sławie Waszej pańskiej Miłości mojej miłościwej paniej jakokolwiek też posłużyć" ["And since last year I printed Rej's *Zwierzyniec* and dedicated it to my gracious lord, Your Grace's great and honorable husband, I have now tried with all diligence to ensure that this work can in some manner contribute also to Your Grace's eternal glory."]. Wirzbięta, *O słachetności*, p. 10.

⁶⁴ Compare with the dedication to Krystyna Chodkiewicz: "A iżem ty wszystkie przymioty i sławne dzielności tych zacnych białychgłów, które się w tych książkach przypominają w W. W.

Agrippa and Wirzbięta viewed their books as serious works on fundamental though divisive matters, the resolution of which required the authority of God's Word as well as legal, historical, and theological writing. It may also be worth noting that both texts were addressed to two types of audience: to implacable adversaries of the female sex and to women themselves, which is why they aimed to, respectively, rebuff the attacks and convince the doubters, or to give advice and show the right way to act. Therefore, it seems that *De nobilitate* and *O słachetności* should be classified as *genus mixtum*. While both texts contain elements typical of *apologia*—which itself belongs to the broader category of *genus iudiciale*—because of their heterogeneous target audience and range of goals, they make use of laudatory and advisory devices, warranted by the tradition of *declamatio*, understood in the classical sense as an exercise in speech-giving, proper to each of the three types of oration. Agrippa, and later Wirzbięta borrowed from the Erasmian concept of declamation the notion of a special function that the text was supposed to serve in the reader's life. After all, it was the work's reception and its practical application that ultimately confirmed its value or lack of it. The text should not only encourage the judgment of the author's skill but also, if not predominantly, give rise to reflection—though this was emphasized more by the Polish translator in the rhymed epilogue—that would result in virtuous conduct and, consequently, in salvation that comes with leading a proper—that is, good and righteous—life.

Translated by Anna Warso

pewnie być wyrozumiał, gdyż świątobliwością żywota, obyczajami wspaniałymi, Bogu i ludziom przyjemni, zawołaniem domu przesławnego, tak z strony małżeństwa świętego, jako i z rodziców, i inszemi zacnymi dzielnościami W. W. wszystkiej żeńskiej płci prawie wieku dzisiejszego przykładnie raczysz świecić, przeto książki ty W. W. ... ofiaruję i przypisuję." ["And since all virtues and the celebrated gifts of those honest women listed in my books find a reflection in Your Grace's pious life, virtuous disposition dear to God and beloved by folk, honorable descent—through marriage and parentage—and Your many other illustrious endowments by which You generously set a bright example to nearly all living women of our day ... I humbly offer and dedicate these books to You."]. Wirzbięta, *O słachetności*, p. 10. More on the dedication in: M. Wojtkowska-Maksymik, "Tłumacz, dzieło, czytelnik (na podstawie listu dedykacyjnego Macieja Wirzbięty do Krystyny ze Zborowa i przedmowy 'Ku wszem cnym białymgłowom i ku każdemu czytelnikowi,'" in P. Borek and M. Olma (eds), *Epistolografia w dawnej Rzeczypospolitej*, vol. 1: *Stulecia XV–XVII* (Kraków, 2011), pp. 254–262. See also Margaret's praise in Agrippa's dedication, Agrippa, *De nobilitate*, p. 48.