



Home

Editorial

Authors' Responses

Guidelines For Reviewers

About Us

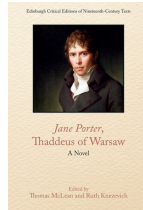
Masthead

Feedback

Search Every Field

Search

## THADDEUS OF WARSAW. A NOVEL, Ed. Thomas McLean and Ruth Knezevich



By **Jane Porter**  
(Edinburgh, 2019) xxv + 414 pp.  
Reviewed by **Joanna Rostek** on 2020-04-02.

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A modern scholarly edition of an historical literary text can be appraised by means of two criteria: the quality of the editorial work and the text's relevance for contemporary readers and academic enquiry. This edition of a novel first published in 1803 succeeds on both counts. As part of a series, Edinburgh Critical Editions of Nineteenth-Century Texts, it skillfully revives a narrative that deserves to be rescued from oblivion. McLean brings substantial expertise to the project: he is the author of *The Other East and Nineteenth-Century British Literature: Imagining Poland and the Russian Empire* (2012) and has written articles on the Porter family. Ruth Knezevich's research interests include women writers of the long eighteenth century and cultural identity in British literature.

In four volumes of some one hundred pages each (in this edition), *Thaddeus of Warsaw* charts an eventful year in the life of its roughly twenty-year-old hero, Count Thaddeus Sobieski. The volumes present several settings and themes and gesture towards different generic conventions. The first volume, which sharply differs from the other three, contains elements of an historical novel *avant la lettre*. Set in Poland of the 1790s, it includes such actual Polish figures as King Stanisław August Poniatowski and the valiant military leader Tadeusz Kościuszko, by whose side the fictional hero fights. The novel also tracks Thaddeus's courageous involvement in the Polish-Russian war, culminating in the final partition of the country in 1795 and the protagonist's consequent loss of his family, fortune, home, and motherland.

According to Porter's Preface, Volumes II to IV are "totally confined to domestic events" (4). This is not entirely accurate. Some of the scenes in Volumes II and III, for example, are set in an urban milieu and anticipate social novels of the mid-nineteenth century. They follow the protagonist to London, where the exiled Count suffers a dramatic decline in his socio-economic status: once revered, powerful, and prosperous, he finds himself impoverished, alienated, at the mercy of strangers, and at a later point even imprisoned in Newgate. But thanks to his impeccable character and chance meetings (with which Porter's narrative abounds to the point of implausibility), he encounters respected London families.

In depicting his interactions with these families, who treat him with feelings ranging from benevolence and esteem to contempt, Volumes III and IV combine elements of sentimental romance and a novel of manners with social satire. The model hero becomes the love interest of three young women, but reciprocates only the feelings of one: the equally virtuous, principled, and good-looking Miss Beaufort. In Volume IV, which moves the setting to estates in Lincolnshire, all misunderstandings and entanglements between the characters are eventually resolved and Thaddeus regains his previous status, if on English ground and terms. After he turns out to be not only a member of the English nobility but also related to his benefactors, the fortune of his future wife, Miss Beaufort, "empower[s] his munificent spirit to exert itself in the disposal of an almost princely fortune" (389).

McLean and Knezevich's editing is illuminating and thoughtful, without being obtrusive. Besides offering a text of the novel that is free of typographical and orthographical errors, the editors furnish an introduction, a note on the text, footnotes, and an appendix. What is missing but would have been instructive for further research is a bibliography of Porter's writings and of key secondary literature.

McLean's very readable introduction surveys a number of topics: the turbulent history of Poland in the 1790s, the life of Jane Porter, her sources and literary references, the genres of her novel, and its afterlife. McLean shows how much the novel fascinated readers in both Britain and the United States, where three North American towns each named themselves after *Thaddeus* (xiii). In the note on the text, McLean and Knezevich mention that the first edition of the novel was followed by twelve further editions in Porter's lifetime. But they give neither the date of the novel's most recent edition nor specific details about its international circulation. They don't mention, for example, the German translation by one Constantia von B., published in 1825 as *Thaddäus Constantin Graf von Sobieski*. Also, while McLean reports that two representatives of the Polish government in exile visited Jane Porter to express their gratitude for her work (xxii), the editors do not otherwise discuss the Polish reception of her novel.

In annotating the novel, the editors clarify references without overly interrupting the text. For the most part, the relatively compact footnotes identify Porter's intertextual borrowings and literary allusions, explain geographical locations as well as events and personages from Polish history, and elucidate a few unclear passages. It is noteworthy that Polish names are spelled correctly throughout, which is not always the case in English texts.

As a particularly valuable resource for further research, the appendix includes Porter's revised ending of *Thaddeus* from its third edition of 1805, several reviews of the novel from the 1800s and 1830s, and selected correspondence between Jane Porter and her younger sister Anna Maria, who seems to have advised Jane both astutely and pragmatically on the business of publishing. The appendix additionally contains lyrical pieces on the valor of Kościuszko penned by such eminent Romantics as Coleridge, Keats, and Byron. This reminds contemporary readers that Kościuszko, who today is probably little known in Britain but occupies a prominent place in Polish collective memory, palpably impressed the literary imagination of English writers.

What about the quality of the novel itself? Judged by the yardstick of craftsmanship, I do not think that it qualifies as a forgotten masterpiece. Its settings and subplots are not sufficiently held together by a narrative arch, it relies too much on miraculous encounters and fortuity, it is sometimes redundant, and the characters lack psychological depth. But this is a contemporary assessment, and the editors persuasively promote the modern edition on different grounds. The laudatory reviews in the appendix show that this novel was well-received in its own day, and the many editions testify to its popularity. For that reason, this edition is a most welcome contribution to literary history and enlarges our understanding of the Romantic literary scene and nineteenth-century reading tastes.

A major asset of McLean and Knezevich's edition is that it is apt to resonate beyond narrow, specialized circles, because scholars with diverse research interests will find much to explore in *Thaddeus*. As a contribution to literary history, the edition widens the presently expanding corpus of accessible texts by Romantic women writers. Porter especially highlights the power dynamics between the male protagonist and the many women who variously assist, adore, or abase him. The novel also foregrounds money and property. Together with the narrator's contrasting of virtuous and laughable characters and the ironic portrayal of female rivalries, this sometimes gives the novel an Austenesque ring. Furthermore, while Dorothy McMillan doubts that Porter could have influenced Scott, *Thaddeus* pre-dates the Waverley novels, so McLean may be right to claim that it "deserves a place in any account of the British historical novel" (xvii).

*Thaddeus* invites three more lines of inquiry related to my own research interests and my Polish provenance. As McLean points out in his introduction, it speaks to twenty-first-century Britain. Since 2004, Poles have become the most numerous group of foreign nationals in the UK, and as we know from other sources, the figure of the Polish migrant has slowly entered twenty-first-century British literary imagination. John Lanchester's London-set novel *Capital* (2012), for instance, includes among its major characters a Polish builder named Bogdan. Importantly, this edition of *Thaddeus* reveals that migration from Poland is not an entirely new subject in British literature. But it also raises the question of how widespread the presence of Polish migrants was in Britain around 1800. Hitherto, Polish migration to the UK is thought to have occurred in two major waves -- the first after World War II and the second after Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004. Porter's novel implies that the Polish partitions of the late eighteenth century drove some Poles to England. Was this actually true? Has anyone estimated how many Poles lived in England at that time? Unfortunately, the introduction does not answer these questions.

Nevertheless, by reviving an English novel of 1803 about a Pole who moves to London, this edition undoubtedly enriches research on contemporary literature by and about Polish migrants to the UK. A brief comparison between Porter's Thaddeus and Lanchester's Bogdan, for example, reveals that although these "Polish Londoners" were imagined two centuries apart, they share certain remarkable parallels. In both cases, their stay in England means socio-economic progress; both experience poverty; both escape it through hard work and moral integrity; both adopt different names upon arriving in England (if for different reasons); both begin a relationship; and both uphold a strong emotional bond to their home country and their Polish family.

To some extent, the parallels between Thaddeus and Bogdan typify many narratives of migration. This points to another major benefit of this edition of *Thaddeus*: for specialists in migration studies, it offers a fruitful addition to migration literature as well as an early nineteenth-century fictional perspective on exile (albeit from the perspective of the host country). By contemporary standards, Porter's novel is unlikely to rank as a particularly nuanced take on exile, for Thaddeus's surprising mastery of the English language and his willing assimilation into British society at the end of the novel are too smooth and unconvincing. At the same time, as McLean stresses in his introduction, some of the fictional Londoners whom Thaddeus meets upon his arrival voice sentiments that sound uncomfortably familiar to contemporary ears. "It is our duty to befriend the unfortunate," says one character; "but charity begins at home [...] you know, the people of Poland have no claims upon us" (108). Another, mistaking Thaddeus for a post-Revolutionary French exile, exclaims: "An emigrant! O, ho! [...] Good Lord! how this town is over-run by these fellows! [...] I meant no offence, [...] but really, when we see the bread that should feed our children, and our own poor, eaten up by a parcel of lazy French drones; who have covered our land, and destroyed its produce, like a swarm of filthy locusts, we should be fools not to murmur" (114-5). Notably, Porter's narrator quickly brands the second speaker a dislikeable, "hard-hearted man" (115). In its take on exile, then, *Thaddeus* is relevant as a historical document, but also throws light on the longevity of certain attitudes that recur in debates on migration up to this day.

Finally, this edition should interest scholars of Polish Romanticism -- in the UK, but perhaps even more so in Poland. The literature of Polish Romanticism, which flourished from 1822 to 1863, deploys tropes that also inform *Thaddeus*: the trauma of partition, opposition to the partitioning powers, nationalism, nostalgia, male heroism, valor, sacrifice, suffering, nobility, distressed mothers, and the figure of the Polish exile. In fact, the most revered Polish Romantic writers -- Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, and Zygmunt Krasiński -- composed their works as émigrés, though in France rather than Britain. In 1834, Mickiewicz, the central literary figure of Polish Romanticism, published what subsequently became Poland's national epic: the epic poem *Master Thaddeus (Pan Tadeusz)*. Like most Polish children, I had to learn the first stanzas by heart at school, just as my parents had.

What does all this suggest for the possible reception of Porter's novel in twenty-first-century Poland? As Mirosława Modrzewska and Grażyna B. Tomaszewska have recently noted, "[i]n Polish education and Polish culture, the canon of Romanticism is perceived as central. Almost all Polish contemporary literature expresses some sort of attitude towards the Romantic canon. Its position in education means that Romantic language has a relevance and intellectual power unlike any other discourse in institutional culture" (*The Politics of Romanticism* 155). Because Romantic writings and their tropes continue to provide a collective point of reference, Porter's *Thaddeus* will probably have special resonance with Polish readers and scholars of literature, especially since the protagonist of this English novel is descended from one of the most illustrious Polish kings (a Polish Henry V, one might say), fights alongside well-known Polish national heroes (Polish Lord

Nelsons, as it were), and lives through a major national trauma comparable, perhaps, to World War I from an English perspective. (The equivalents are not perfect, not only because of their historical asynchronicity, but also because English history lacks a trauma comparable to that of the partitions, which deprived Poland of national sovereignty for the whole of the long nineteenth century.) Polish scholars, then, are likely to approach *Thaddeus* from within a different historical, literary, and affective framework.

The relatively high price of the book (£95.00 in hardcover) might impede its wide circulation. But since a cheaper e-book option is available, I hope that this valuable modern edition of *Thaddeus* travels beyond the Anglosphere and reaches the home country of the novel's protagonist.

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