

Summary of doctoral dissertation of

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*Obraz kobiety na katedrze: Maria Skłodowska-Curie
w przekazach (auto)biograficznych i publicystycznych*

*(Image of a woman at the university chair: Maria Skłodowska-Curie in
(auto)biographical and journalistic accounts)*

At the time, when such an outstanding personality as Maria Curie passed away, it is impossible to be satisfied only by recalling how humanity had been enriched with the fruit of her works. Moral values of such eminent personalities are probably of greater significance for a given generation and the history course than their intellectual achievements. Besides, the latter depend, more than it may seem, on the greatness of the person¹.

Key words: Maria Skłodowska-Curie, image of a woman-scientist, autobiography, biography, mythologisation.

The literary study is culture-oriented and discusses the person of Maria Skłodowska-Curie, a professor at the Sorbonne, the winner of two Nobel Prizes in physics and chemistry, the discoverer of two elements: polonium and radium, the winner of many prestigious scientific awards as well as the holder of more than twenty doctor *honoris causa* titles granted by a great number of universities in Poland and abroad, including: University of Warsaw (1909), Poznan University (1922), Jagiellonian University (1924), Warsaw University of Technology (1926), Geneva (1909), Birmingham (1913), Yale University, the University of Columbia, Smith College, Wellesley College, the Northwestern University, the universities in Chicago, Pennsylvania and Pittsburg (all in 1921), the Glasgow University (1929) and the one granted by the University of St. Lawrence (1929). All these impressive achievements resulted in a decision taken by the Polish Parliament to dedicate the year of 2011 to Maria Skłodowska-Curie, which in turn inspired the adoption of research on the image of this woman-scientist, the re-interpretation of her biography and her place in the history of science – in terms of how the science was influenced by her and how she personally was impacted by the experiments. Based on the (auto)biographical and popular science accounts, an unusual image of this person emerged, which has constantly been fascinating and evolving, and due to its popularity and versatility, it has been continuously affecting the imagination of new generations. :

The thesis has been subdivided into the five following chapters: *Factors shaping the personality of Maria Skłodowska-Curie; The aspect of her exceptionality; Direct sources*

¹L. Lemire, *Maria Skłodowska-Curie*, translated by G. and J. Schirmer, Świat Książki, Warszawa 2011, p. 136–137.

concerning the life of Maria Skłodowska-Curie; The image of Maria Skłodowska-Curie presented in the direct sources and in the American press.

In the first chapter of the presented structure the author aims at displaying the components, which have affected the perception and thus the image of Maria Skłodowska-Curie. For this purpose, the author tried to answer the questions whether, and if so, how greatly the scientist was affected both by the times during which she was raised in Poland and by the fact that she was being brought up only by her father, as well as whether the humiliation of the earliest years had an impact on her future life and how significant was the role of Pierre Curie in Maria's life?

The second chapter discusses the constituent elements, which – according to the author – are regarded to have affected the above average image of Maria Skłodowska-Curie. This part of the thesis presents the history of women's scholarship and the image of an emancipating gender, which got the right to pursue the process of education and the knowledge transfer, as well as the mythologisation process of the image, which emerged from the narrative describing her life and professional achievements. It was made possible by using the direct and indirect sources related to the life of Maria Skłodowska-Curie.

The third and fourth chapters are dedicated to the characteristics of autobiography and numerous biographies, which, when being analysed, defined the methodological syncretism in various fields of science (history, sociology, psychology and pedagogy), which subsequently entailed the application of key concepts (such as myth, legend, hagiography) according to the established cultural and social tradition of them being used in social and human sciences.

In order to illustrate these forms of literature, the autobiography and biographies are discussed with the approach treating them as very significant forms of writing, the understanding of which appears to be crucial to fully understand the image of a scientist. The image uses numerous fields of meaning within itself, that have been based on latest biographies, which in broader context describe her life and concurrently attribute different meanings to her life's moments. The image of this woman-scientist is redefined and reconstructed. Her person is not only associated with the issues of chemistry and physics, the political matter, education, the laboratory work dedication and the generally acclaimed success of a woman-scientist. Today, Maria Skłodowska-Curie is perceived in new categories, including the fight for gender equality, femininity and even sexuality.

The fifth chapter raises the question of visits, Maria Skłodowska-Curie paid to the United States. The chapter discusses the reasons for such a decision, the impact of the visits (especially the first one) on how the scientist was being perceived, but above all the results triggered by the decision itself. The overseas visits have changed the narrative concerning Maria Skłodowska-Curie: up to that moment her life was inscribed in the structure of myths, and today she has been perceived more as an international celebrity. In less than 85 years since the death of the Noble Prize winner, the image of hers, due to a great number of works, has been greatly modified, especially by the biographers, trying to present the scientist against different ideological currents, while exposing their own ideological principles.