



**Wojciech Śmieja, *After Manliness*. Warsaw 2024:
Wydawnictwo Czarne, pp. 516**

In 2016, “Pamiętnik Literacki” published an article with a telling title: *Notes on the Still Unwritten History of Masculinity in Poland* (Tomasik, 2016). In this text, the author recalled Michael Kimmel’s observation from 1996 that “American men have no history” thus pointing to the absence of adequate scholarly research on masculinity in the United States. Tomasz Tomasik emphasized that in Poland “the humanities and social sciences [...] face a similar challenge”. Whereas the American sociologist’s book *Manhood in America. A Cultural History* (1996) addressed this research gap in the U.S. context, the function of such a pioneering work in Poland may be attributed to Wojciech Śmieja’s *After Manliness*.

Published in 2024, the book is one of the very few works attempting to reconstruct the historical variability of masculinity models in Poland. At the same time, it is not an attempt at a comprehensive treatment of the subject, since—as the author notes—the scope of such an undertaking exceeds the capacities of a single researcher and is rendered impossible by the breadth of the topic itself. Śmieja repeatedly stresses that the meanings attributed to masculinity remain subject to ongoing social negotiation, making each subsequent redefinition an illustration of a world in constant transformation. For this reason, *After Manliness* offers a discussion of the semantic evolution of the concept within a specific historical framework. Although in the introduction Śmieja reaches back to earlier periods, referring for instance to sarmatian masculinity, the three extensive chapters focus on the twentieth century, beginning with the interwar period. By giving distinct yet parallel titles to each chapter (Chapter 1: *Dominant Fiction: Honor*; Chapter 2: *Dominant Fiction: Advancement*; Chapter 3: *Dominant Fiction: Fame*), the author underscores the conventional and constructed nature of socially sanctioned masculinity models. Thus, the three chapters not only present different imaginings of masculinity, but also constitute a critical engagement with the stereotypes that shaped its perception respectively in: the interwar period (e.g. cavalry or legionary masculinity), the post-war and communist era (including working-class masculinity), and the period following systemic transformation, during the early phase of capitalism in Poland (success-oriented masculinity). Śmieja highlights that the relevance of particular constructs diminished as social and geopolitical circumstances shifted—circumstances that simultaneously marked historical turning points emphasized throughout the book. In this way, Śmieja articulates the conviction that the so-called crisis of masculinity, which became a popular category in discussions of men in the early 1990s, was in fact merely one of many transitions

in the understanding of masculinity that had repeatedly occurred across different historical moments. Despite the mutability of cultural patterns, the author draws attention to androcentrism as a persistent component of masculinity's various constructs. In an interview with Patryk Zakrzewski, Śmieja reaffirms this position, recalling Agnieszka Graff's argument that recent decades are characterized by a "strong patriarchy of weak men" (Śmieja, 2025). These are men who often can no longer bear the social pressure associated with fulfilling all the conditions upon which their manhood is expected to depend. Under such constraints, hegemonic masculinity becomes a double-edged sword—its blade directed also against those men who fail to meet the roles embedded in entrenched stereotypes.

Although Śmieja is a literary scholar (a professor at the University of Silesia) and frequently highlights in the book the role of cultural texts in shaping masculinity models (without limiting himself to literary sources), he does not shy away from historical, cultural, and anthropological perspectives. Equally present in *After Manliness* are gender-theoretical approaches, including references to works by Raewyn Connell, Elisabeth Badinter, Eric Anderson, and Michael Kimmel, under whose supervision Śmieja studied as a visiting scholar at the Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities in the United States. While the author draws on concepts of masculinity originating in Western scholarship, the central focus of the book is not Australian, American, or French men, but specifically Polish men. It is precisely this "local," yet academically underexplored, dimension that constitutes the uniqueness of Śmieja's work.

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