Literary studies is one of those fields of research in the humanities where the issue of homosexuality may appear especially visible. On the one hand, there are queer theory specialists who deal with camp or queer elements in texts; on the other, the issue appears in the study of the authors’ biographies. While scholars may choose whether or not to discuss the camp element of a text or do a queer reading, an objective presentation of an author’s biography (should such a presentation constitute a part of the scholarly study) is a duty which goes beyond discussion.

Even a cursory glance at anthologies or studies in the history of English literature proves that scholars take a variety of approaches to this duty when homosexual or homoerotic elements appear in the presented biographies of writers. Even those scholars who feel perfectly free to describe the sexual promiscuity of writers become silent when such activities concern people of the same sex. We may also find contrary examples when scholars use the opportunity to present their own views on the subject, occasionally going so far as to make even remotely possible homosexual behavior the focal point of their biographical studies and literary analyses. Such authors seem to forget Jacob Stockinger’s warning that “ignoring historical, social, and artistic realities, this kind of minority criticism ends up being evaluative rather than cognitive and risks turning first-rate authors into second-rate ideologues or vice-versa” (Crew 135). As the following study demonstrates, this danger does not seem too imminent for Polish scholars.

The purpose of the present study is to analyze the image of homosexuality in English literature as presented in thirteen existing works on English literature and its history published in Poland (including one translation). The selected
works are general studies in or anthologies of English literature which include biographical information.

Quite obviously, this does not mean that these Polish studies have been used as the only teaching materials available. To point out the schizophrenia caused (though probably not realized by most lecturers) by the usage of Polish and American or British handbooks Polish versions shall be contrasted with foreign ones in discussion of specific biographies, wherever the discrepancies are especially glaring. The two most popular and generally available *Oxford* and *Norton Anthology of English Literature* shall provide a point of reference here.

The study shall begin with a general presentation of each of the works discussed, the importance of the biographical element in each book, its underlying assumptions, and reception. This part shall be complemented with specific examples taken from the biographies of ten British authors whose alleged or actual homosexuality is most often discussed. A remark should be made at this point that the number of references does not necessarily reflect the interest of Polish scholars in the life of a given author as the works in question differ greatly in the time span they cover.

Another necessary remark is that the English authors selected for this study are all men. The initial idea was to use as examples an equal number of men and women As it turned out, however, the presented studies seem to echo the anecdote about queen Victoria who allegedly personally ordered lesbian sex to be removed from the list of sexual activities criminalized by the Contagious Disease Act. Among the works discussed below the only source to mention the existence of such writers as Radclyffe Hall, Virginia Woolf or Jeanette Winterson is Sikorska 1996. Otherwise, sex between women does not seem to exist in English literature as seen by Polish academics.

The present study attempts to reconstruct the image of homosexuality a student or a reader interested in literature may arrive at after reading the discussed books. The study may also serve as an attempt to reconstruct the changes in attitudes towards homosexuality held among English literature scholars in Poland over the presented period. It does not attempt to answer the question whether the discussed authors actually were homosexual, gay or bisexual (however anachronistic all the terms actually are in reference to people living before the 19th century when these terms were formulated), we shall follow here Diana Fuss’s suggestion “we cannot know—surely or definitely. . . if one is gay” (Fuss 6). Metaphorically speaking, we discuss here the mirrors and the, quite probably, distorted image they offer, not the objects they reflect.
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* * *

The list of works under discussion starts with the two volume selection of *Specimens of English Poetry and Prose* edited by Stanisław Helsztyński (1954) reprinted nine times until 1986. The book was by far the most popular English literature handbook in Poland until the late 1980s when English and American anthologies became more widely available. Its introductory notes seldom exceed one page of which the biography usually takes up one or two paragraphs. The sources consulted were, in most cases, published before World War II, which partly explains the absolute chastity of this work.

The second work under discussion is Margaret Schlauch’s *English Medieval Literature and Its Social Foundations* published in 1956. Although usually quite well informed in matters of the personal lives of the writers, this work does not include any information on the authors’ homosexuality or any other sexual behaviour.

In 1967, George Sampson’s *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* was published in the Polish translation by Piotr Graff. The Polish title, *Historia literatury angielskiej w zarysie: Podręcznik*, clearly indicated that this publication was meant as a handbook for Polish students of English literature, a claim which was further supported by an introduction by Margaret Schlauch. First published in 1941 and updated slightly for the 1961 edition, this book presents an extremely prudish approach to biographical matters. The author’s attitude is apparent in the chapter on Burns: “A history of literature is not concerned with the private lives of poets, unless the lives offer elucidations of the poems” (595). Although Sampson’s goal of achieving objectivity deserves praise (especially but not exclusively as far as homosexuality is concerned), he assumes that the reader does not need to be informed about the author’s life at all. The turbulent emotional life of Robert Burns which so greatly influenced his work therefore deserves only half a sentence: “Everywhere he found companions of his own sex with whom he joined in clubs for debating, as well as friends of the other sex about whom he wrote verses” (Sampson, *The Concise* 596).

The next two books under discussion supplemented the selection provided by Stanisław Helsztyński which ends with high Victorian literature. *English Poetry of the Twentieth Century* (1979) by Wanda Rulewicz and *English Poetry of the Nineteenth Century* (1980) by Wanda Krajewska both include comprehensive biographical notes (two to three pages each) which are further supplemented by critical commentaries on specific works. Even though the biographies include rather detailed descriptions of the poets’ love lives, for instance of Wordsworth’s French affair (Krajewska 29), the presence of the homosexual element is limited to one or two allusions in each of the works.
“Literatura angielska” (English Literature), a chapter written in 1982 by Henryk Zbierski for the second volume of Władysław Floryan’s *Dzieje literatur europejskich*, was the first originally Polish comprehensive study of the history of English Literature. Zbierski presents biographical notes of very different length and usually omits any allusions to sexual behaviour.

*Powieść angielska XX wieku* (English Novel of the 20th Century) by Bronisława Bałutowa, a study in the development of the English novel published in 1983, presents quite lengthy biographical notes which abound in very personal information about the novelists. However, the overtly homosexual writers are treated with an attitude bordering on homophobia, which is especially visible in the case of Christopher Isherwood (118-120).

*Historia literatury angielskiej: Zarys* (History of English Literature: An Outline) by Przemysław Mroczkowski (1986) is characterised by a mellifluous and highly ornamental style, but the biographical materials included in this study seldom touch upon the more delicate aspects of writers’ biographies regardless of their sexual preferences.

The very personal selection of poetic translations by Stanisław Barańczak in *Od Chaucera do Larkina: 400 nieśmiertelnych wierszy 125 poetów anglojęzycznych z 8 stuleci* (From Chaucer to Larkin: 400 Immortal Poems of 125 English-Language Poets from 8 Centuries) (1993) was supplemented by short biographical notes including general descriptions of the literary style and achievement of a given author. They do not allude to any non-normative sexual preferences of the poets.

*An Outline History of English Literature* by Liliana Sikorska (1996), includes biographical notes of unequal length, ranging from a few lines or dates to essays consisting of several pages. The author is by far the most courageous in presenting the writers’ homosexuality and discusses numerous literary works of homoerotic character.

In 1997, Zbigniew Mazur and Teresa Bela published *The College Anthology of English Literature* which, as the title suggest, is primarily a selection of texts intended for students of teacher training colleges. Introductory notes supplement every chapter presenting the major works of a given literary epoch. Specific information about the discussed authors consists mostly of dates of birth and death, in some cases the notes include the titles of their most important works and short descriptions of their literary achievement.

Liliana Sikorska and Jacek Fabiszak published *An Anthology of English Literature. From Beowulf to John Milton* in 1998. Their concise biographical notes apart from absolutely basic data provide only titles of works and dates of their creation or publication. The second volumes *From the Restoration Age through Romanticism* by Gerard Nawrocki was published in 1999. The two volumes include more detailed notes (on the average one page).
The list of English writers whose actual or alleged homosexuality is subject to discussion in a study of literature must begin with the still debatable case of William Shakespeare. Any suggestions concerning the alleged homosexuality of Shakespeare (a married man with three children) are based exclusively upon the descriptions of his tender feelings toward an anonymous young man in *The Sonnets* and the volume’s mysterious dedication. The first to mention the issue was George Sampson who dealt with the question very briefly and unhesitatingly: “Neither dedication nor commentary has any real importance for the lover of poetry. They appeal to the wrong kind of curiosity” (*The Concise* 271).

Polish sources, though quite numerous, generally omit the issue. Henryk Zbierski in his chapter “Literatura angielska” only hints at certain psychological truth of the experience presented in the collection: “It is especially important that the subject of psychological analyses in *The Sonnets* is no longer a fictitious character but an authentic person and a poet—William Shakespeare himself” (“Literatura angielska” 386). It was only six years later that Zbierski faced the allegations in his monographic study about William Shakespeare and rejected them as follows:

> If we exclude from our analyses Shakespeare’s alleged homosexuality, as we are entitled to do not only due to a complete lack of any extra-literary proofs or circumstances but also because of the poet’s own conscious rejection of any such accusations (Sonnet XX), the only possible explanation is the fact that the love towards a young man expressed in so many different ways is ‘the heavenly love’ described by Plato in his *Symposium*. (*William Shakespeare* 552-553)

Sikorska echoes these statements (though she clearly takes sides in the dispute concerning the name of the addressee of the collection), arguing that:

> the sonnets are not the celebration of ideal love for a woman; rather they render the affection of an older man towards a young man. The supposed homosexual love between Shakespeare and Herbert has never been truly proved. It is rather a clear reference to the classical Platonic love between two men. (86)

The biography of Christopher Marlowe provides much more data concerning his homosexuality. Polish scholars, however, prefer not to discuss the issue, as did Helszyński writing that of Marlowe’s “life after he left the University almost nothing is known” (249). Mroczkowski only adds that “the uncontrollable Christopher mingled with free-thinkers of greatly provocative opinions” (150).

Zbierski does not provide a longer biographical note for Marlowe. However, he comments (mainly upon *Edward II* and the allusion becomes clear only to
readers familiar with the text of the play) that “the difference between Marlowe and Shakespeare as well as Kyd and other Elizabethan playwrights is his lyrical engagement which makes his tragedies largely a projection of his personality” (Literatura angielska 350).

Fabiszak is the most open of the critics whose studies include presentations of the works and life of Christopher Marlowe. However, he also prefers a roundabout way of bringing up the delicate subject: “Marlowe’s early and untimely death was a result of his notorious and adventurous conduct which did not go unnoticed. . . . After his death various charges were brought against him by, amongst others, his friends: Thomas Kyd and Richard Baines. Marlowe was accused of blasphemy, atheism and homosexuality” (Sikorska 273 and 358—the same note).

George Gordon Noel Lord Byron was characterised by Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling as follows:

A virtual synonym for the greatest of lovers, he was passive towards women, sodomistic, sado-masochistic, fundamentally homosexual, and early disgusted with all sexual experience anyway. Outcast for his incest with his half-sister, he nevertheless seems to have gotten beyond narcissistic self-regard only in relation to her, yet she was in no way remarkable. . . . [In Greece] he found a last bitter, frustrated homosexual passion for his page boy Loukas, and his final verses and letters betray profound self-disgust. (285-286)

The Norton Anthology of English Literature edited by M. H. Abrams is much less direct suggesting only that “Byron seems to have had one attribute in common with the Byronic hero—a compulsion to try forbidden experience (including, as we now know, homosexual love affairs) joined with a tendency to court his own destruction” (505). Most Polish authors prefer not to mention these elements of his biography at all. Sampson, however, in his typically prudish way writes about the reasons of Byron’s exile from Great Britain: “A history of literature is no place for the succulent discussion of scandal. Lady Byron herself accused him of nothing but insanity” (The Concise 627). This somehow does not stop him from supplying further the essentials of this unfortunate affair.

Krajewska commenting upon Byron’s choice of self-exile adds only that “he was also suspected of homosexuality” (118). Barańczak remarks upon his “rampant and rather risky sexual life (including an affair with his half-sister)” (291) while Mazur and Bela quite atypically for their otherwise extremely concise presentation note that: “Byron and Shelley held unorthodox views on religion and morality, expressed both in their poetry and in their lives, which many of their contemporaries found shocking and unacceptable” (367). Neither editor clarifies what specifically was so shocking about Byron’s views upon
morality as his attitude towards religion was quite orthodox and the poet was himself shocked by the atheist free-thinking expressed by Shelley (Bloom 285).

Alfred Lord Tennyson’s emotional life was, according to majority of his biographers, extremely dull. In 1830, he fell in love with Emily Sellwood, they became engaged in 1838, but the poet “could not marry, because of poverty, until 1850” (Abrams 1094). They lived happily ever after and Mrs Tennyson bore him two sons Hallam and Lionel.

Quite a different and rather surprising approach to Tennyson’s life can be found in Bloom and Trilling:

[Tennyson] entered Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1827, where he fell in love with Arthur Henry Hallam. . . . The friendship between the two was the most important experience of Tennyson’s life, and if it had a repressed sexual element, neither Tennyson nor Hallam (nor anyone else) seems ever to have been aware of this. (1180)

Polish scholars do not follow this rather muddled presentation: a love or friendship—with an uncertain repressed sexual element—which went unnoticed by the two gentlemen supposedly involved as well as by everyone else. Nevertheless, quite a few authors felt a need to comment upon the feeling which is overtly called love in the collection In Memoriam. The approach is unequivocal: the feeling must have actually been friendship and consequently Helsztyński informs us that Tennyson “formed close friendship with Arthur Henry Hallam” (275), Krajewska states that of the poet’s life’s tragedies “the greatest was the early and sudden death of his best friend Hallam” (52) while Zbierski notices that In Memoriam was written “on the occasion of the death of a very close friend of the poet, A. H. Hallam” (“Literatura angielska” 500).

Gerard Manley Hopkins’ homosexuality is generally seldom mentioned. Therefore, it does not seem surprising that only one Polish source mentions the fact in passing. Sikorska suggests that “some of [Hopkins’] obscurity might have to do with his homosexual orientation, which seems to underlie his most personal poems” (236-237) which is presented in much closer detail in The Oxford Anthology:

Hopkins underwent a [religious] crisis, which came in March 1865 and resulted from meeting an enthusiastic, very young, and beautiful religious poet, Digby Dolben, who was to drown in June 1867 at the age of nineteen. That Hopkins fell in love with Dolben is quite likely, and it is also possible that his subsequent ascetic revulsion away from the world was, on an unconscious level, a revulsion away from his own desires. (1466)

The question of homosexuality so profoundly influenced the life of Oscar Wilde that it seems absolutely impossible to omit it even in the shortest presentation of
his biography. Sampson rather peevishly speaks about Wilde’s tragic overthrow of which “The Ballad of Reading Gaol (1898) and the unconvincing De Profundis (1905) are the product” (The Concise 845) but he fails to clarify what caused such a tragic end of the career.

All other sources are much more explicit about Wilde’s tragic end. Zbierski presents the affair rather briefly: “Queensbury caused the downfall of Wilde [provoking the trial] as an effect of which Wilde was sentenced to two years hard labour for practising homosexuality” (“Literatura angielska” 519), concluding further that as a result of “his downfall—demeaning in the eyes of almost all the contemporary society—the rules he preached were, at least for a time, brought into disrepute. Wilde was therefore a disputable ally for modernity and the ‘modern’” (“Literatura angielska” 520).

Bałutowa mentions Wilde only in her introduction in a similar vein, explaining predominance of realistic traits in the twentieth century English novel as follows: “Aestheticism in England was soon gone (mainly due to the scandalous trial of Oscar Wilde who was considered a typical product of the epoch)” (13).

Mroczkowski presents the affair in a few words but this sparks a rather long presentation of a very personal, hardly justified and quite ridiculous approach to the writer and his influence upon modern morals in general:

Perhaps it was the instinct [of self-preservation] that Wilde lacked when his close friendship with Lord Alfred Douglas changed into a homosexual affair. . . . It is not clear whether more fuss was made by the circles in England of those days which condemned Wilde’s (a married man’s) behaviour or those circles which castigated the persecutors. The law of action and reaction is evidently at work here. The contemporary elimination of sense of responsibility in sexual matters which is on the increase and the general indulgence in the West in all kinds of behaviour seem to be the final stage of evolution which began in those days by affairs such as that of Wilde. All this does not change another aspect of the whole affair: the pitiless attitude of the society towards a person found as sinful or lost, a person well known for his kind heart.” (485-486)

Sikorska initially seems to pinpoint boredom as the reason for Wilde’s homosexuality: “Wilde married. . . had two sons, and after three years, got bored and started having affairs with men” (240). In her commentary upon The Picture of Dorian Gray she further reflects that the novel “contains hints of the homosexual relationship between Dorian and his friend, the painter Basil Hallward, yet nothing is ever expressly voiced in the book” (241). The conclusions of the chapter, however, are more serious and may be among the best informed passages concerning the homosexuality of an English writer in Polish scholarly works:
Homosexual eros is implicit in the nature of Wilde’s exploration of the relationship between body and mind as the route to self-knowledge revealed in the early poetry (Behrendt 1991:12). In 1866, the Contagious Disease Act was passed; it was a political act that threatened prostitution as well as homosexuality as diseases. Up till that point homosexuality was connected with sodomy and felony (in 1533 it was a capital offence punishable by death). Wilde himself was imprisoned for homosexuality. When in jail, he wrote a long letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, in which he revealed the nature of their relationships and chronicled the effect prison had on him. (242-243)

Bronisława Bałutowa’s comments upon Edward Morgan Forster end with the conclusion that “the posthumously published early novel of Foster, *Maurice* (1971) was an interesting work for Forster’s biographers, mainly due to the fact that it clearly confirms what had not been a mystery—Forster’s homosexuality” (81). Forster’s homosexuality actually was a mystery even for most of his critics, as can be seen from reviews of *Maurice* while the novel was, in fact, Forster’s penultimate work followed and overshadowed by *A Passage to India*. From this revealing statement Bałutowa moves on, however, to more general conclusions drawn from the fact of the writer’s homosexuality which:

decidedly influenced certain motifs present in his works: love between a man and a woman is usually presented rather blandly, unconvincingly; the young women are most often not too agreeable, they are presented from an ironical distance, while older women—as Ruth Wilcox in *Howards End* and Mrs Moore in *A Passage to India* are idealised symbols of maternal fondness, human love, wisdom of the heart. Forster depicts most vividly the subtleties of friendship among men; this is especially visible in the relationship (kept within the boundaries of pure friendship) of Aziz and Fielding. (81-82)

Sikorska echoes only the first part of Bałutowa’s evaluation, stating that: “Forster’s last novel, published posthumously in 1971 is *Maurice*. It is a rather negligible work but for certain allusions which clearly prove Forster’s homosexuality” (288). Other sources do not mention either the fact of Forster’s homosexuality or the existence of *Maurice*.

Wystan Hugh Auden’s homosexuality seems the most difficult to swallow for Polish scholars. Auden’s friend Christopher Isherwood is mentioned only in two sources, both of which take very similar stand towards his post-war, overtly homosexual works. The camp element present in his earlier works, especially in *Goodbye to Berlin*, which Isherwood himself discussed in his 1976 memoir *Christopher and His Kind*, clearly escaped critical attention, as did Isherwood’s later memoirs. Bronisława Bałutowa concentrates on praising his pre-war works, suggesting he was “intellectually more subtle than Graham Greene” (120), but in her opinion Isherwood “unlike Green, could not adapt to the changing times
with their contemporary problems. . . . His post-war work . . . echoes the moods and view of the thirties. Modernity is only superficially sketched by the introduction of drastic sexual descriptions or the propagation of homosexuality as an appropriate kind of rebellion against bourgeois morality” (120).

Not surprisingly, Balutowa fails to mention in her study of Graham Greene (106-113) his collection of erotic and also homoerotic short stories May We Borrow Your Husband, Poppy? Sikorska generally echoes these evaluations (choosing the same novel by Isherwood as her example) stating that “His post-war writing, like Meeting by the River (1967) shows an interest in Hindu philosophy but is not as ingenious as his pre-war pieces” (295). It is remarkable that the title of the most important post-war novel by Christopher Isherwood A Single Man (1964) is not mentioned in any Polish commentaries.

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The choice of quotations chosen for this study may seem biased. To avoid such accusations I have attempted to include all references to the sexuality of the selected authors that can be found in the discussed anthologies, even when actual connection of such references with homosexuality may be disputable. The resulting impression may thus seem exaggerated but this is mainly because without quoting extensively it is impossible to demonstrate what a small part of the notes in question these opinions form. Similarly, a more detailed comparison between the discussion of “straight” emotional lives of writers and their gay counterparts would require too much space. I can only hope that the small number of quotations found on thousands of pages speaks for itself.

Naturally, the list of discussed names could be expanded but this would not significantly alter the conclusions of the present article. Neither of the presented Polish scholars ever mentions the sexual preferences of A. E. Housman, Wilfred Owen, Charles Algernon Swinburne, Thom Gunn or Philip Larkin, who could also classify as “alleged or actual homosexuals.”

These examples indicate that from the 1950s to the 1970s the question of homosexuality was not raised in Polish anthologies of English literature. The first shifts in attitude can be traced to the early 1980s, when scholars no longer felt bound to remain silent but neither were yet bound by political correctness to refrain from expressing more or less veiled homophobic evaluations. Recent studies tend to discuss the issue more thoroughly though sexuality still seems much less interesting than other aspects of private lives of the writers.

Oddly enough, from the quotations provided above it becomes apparent that Polish literary critics are much more open to issues of sexuality when they write in English, which means that their works are addressed quite exclusively to
University students. None of the Polish language works (with the rather notorious exception of Bałutowa) which are intended for a wider audience risks any allusions to homosexuality. The only departure from the general rule is the treatment of Oscar Wilde, whose homosexuality is more freely discussed by scholars, perhaps because they consider this to be absolutely necessary.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her *Epistemology of the Closet* presented a sequence of eight dismissals which are usually offered as answers to any doubts concerning the sexuality of authors (when answers such as “Don’t ask” or “You shouldn’t know” are no longer sufficient). Polish scholars (at least in the works addressed to students or the general public rather than to fellow scholars) do not resort to all the strategies of dismissal yet their attitudes coincide with the range of approaches presented by Segdwick, especially with the three final options:

6. The author under discussion is certified or rumoured to have had an attachment to someone of the other sex—so their feelings about people of their own sex must have been completely meaningless. Or (under a perhaps somewhat different rule of admissible evidence)

7. There is no actual proof of homosexuality, such as sperm taken from the body of another man or a nude photograph with another woman—so the author may be assumed to have been ardently and exclusively heterosexual. Or (as a last resort)

8. The author or the author’s important attachments may very well have been homosexual—but it would be provincial to let so insignificant a fact make any difference at all to our understanding of any serious project of life, writing, or thought. (52-53)

Their application in Poland chronologically follows the pattern proposed by Segdwick. The attitude changed from using all available counter-arguments to reject any possibility of an author’s homosexuality to (prevailing at the moment) unwilling acceptance of the fact (at least whenever it is impossible to deny it). Such an acceptance, however, is not followed by ascribing to the fact any importance whatsoever. It is curious enough that as it can be seen from the quotations provided earlier on, the critics often seem obliged to “excuse” the discussed authors for who they were and what they did.

The image of homosexuality in English literature that a student or admirer of the literature can get from the discussed sources may be quite difficult to reconstruct. Some readers may not be able to reconstruct any image at all. The selection provided above is the result of a close reading of thirteen sources. Many of the allusions in the excerpts provided above reveal their meaning only after one reads the works referred to, which are seldom included in reading lists and are difficult to obtain either in English or in Polish translation. The realistic conclusion is therefore that students of English literature who limit their studies to Polish sources would not notice any role or even presence of homosexuality
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in English literature but for the notorious exception of Oscar Wilde. Polish readers forced by the lack of a working knowledge of English to limit themselves to Polish language studies and translations of literary works, would inevitably come to the same conclusion.

Is an almost graphic openness such as that presented in *Oxford Anthology of English Literature* the most advisable solution? A reasonable middle way should probably be advised for future authors of academic handbooks of English literature who would choose to include biographical studies in their work. They should be aware of the fact that the subject is no longer truly touchy and deserves a complete and objective presentation even from scholars who disapprove of homosexuality on moral grounds.

When scholars decide to introduce homosexual issues in their field of study they should nevertheless take into consideration Jakob Stockinger’s commentaries given in his article “Homotextuality: A Proposal”:

> [there is a] kind of bias in criticism [which] is a blend of commendable intentions and questionable methods. Certain critics, amateurs and professionals alike, focus on minority sexuality in literature from the viewpoint of the author, not the text. The notion of the “biographical phallacy” proved long ago that an easy and self-evident proportion cannot necessarily be established between a writer and his writings. There are of course intimate and casual ties between the two, but they are much more subtle and intricate than it is usually suggested by critics who treat fiction as merely literary transpositions of biographical facts. This approach can be valuable in that at least it opens up the issue of minority sexuality to critical enquiry; but it fails to the degree it falls into the very traps set out by formalists to demonstrate the textual impertinency of minority criticism. Applied judiciously, the approach certainly merits a place in critical methods—authors like Gide and Genet, who readily admit a close relationship between their works and themselves, seem particularly suited to minimizing the errors of the technique—but even in the most favourable cases, its use must remain as limited as its results. (Crew 137)

If any prescription should stem from the present study, which was clearly conceived as a case study with little prescriptive purpose, it must be based upon the fundamental question whether an awareness of an author’s biography is essential, necessary or at least advisable for the study of literature. To put it in other words—we need to ask ourselves whether Sampson’s approach is completely erroneous. Should the answer to this basic question be affirmative, it seems obvious that the treatment of any element of biography must not be influenced either by the scholar’s personal approach or by fear of “tackling a touchy subject” or abusing some vaguely defined moral standards. Studies of literature offer a wide of range of approaches which exclude the author completely from the field of critical interest. The choice to examine a writer’s
biography or to leave it out is therefore free but once a critic decides to select for his or her studies an author whose life may be treated by some as a touchy subject, he or she ought to follow one general policy—that of honesty.

Notes

1. The quotations given in the text of this article are taken from the English original, specifically from the 1961 edition which was used for Polish translation. In all other cases English translations of quotations provided in the text are by the present author.
3. Originally published in 1978 in two volumes as Zarys historii literatury angielskiej. The 1986 edition used for the present study combined the two volumes the text of which was slightly extended. It was reprinted at least once in the 1990s.
4. An enlarged and corrected edition appeared in 2002. The quotations in this article were taken from the original edition.
5. Zbierski thus joins a long line of scholars who use Shakespeare’s Sonnet XX as a proof of his homo- or heterosexuality. For a presentation of this debate see: Woods 1998: 104-106.
6. The Polish translator preferred to soften this statement by putting the word “insane” in inverted commas (Historia literatury 696).
8. See: Gardner 433-489.
9. Only in the case of Shakespeare (as it can be seen from the quotations from Zbierski and Sikorska provided above) and to a lesser extent in the case of Marlowe can we find instances of dismissal: “Passionate language of same-sex attraction was extremely common during whatever period is under discussion—and therefore must have been completely meaningless” (Sedgwick 52).

Works Cited


