Sailors' Register in Jane Austen's Writing

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Jane Austen probably first saw the sea at the age of seven when her boarding-school run by Mrs Cawley moved from Oxford to Southampton in the summer of 1783. Her first impressions of it could not have been favourable as the girls, including Jane, her elder sister Cassandra and their cousin Jane Cooper, contracted putrid fever which nearly killed them. Several years later Jane could still remember "the smelly fish of Southampton" (Grosvenor Myer 1999: 148). Between 1785 and 87 the three girls attended the Abbey School in Reading, and then were privately educated at home by their father, elder brothers and non-resident paid tutors (e.g. in drawing). When Jane was ten, her twelve-year old brother Francis-William, whom she had always affectionately called Frank, entered the Royal Naval Academy in Portsmouth. After two and a half years' instruction, he sailed to the East Indies on His Majesty's frigate called *Perseverance*. In 1791 Frank became a midshipman, and that year his (and Jane's) younger brother Charles-John, aged twelve, followed him to the same Naval Academy in Portsmouth.

When Republican France declared war on Great Britain in February 1793, Francis Austen had already been promoted to the rank of lieutenant, still serving in the Far East, while Charles was completing his second year at the Academy. Details of their long and brilliant service in the Royal Navy can be found in the 19th century naval biographies (e.g. by Marshall 1831 and O'Byrne 1849) as well as in the family testimony supplied by Admiral Francis Austen's grandson and great granddaughter, J. and E. Hubback. Obviously, Jane Austen's own correspondence constitutes a more personal record of her sailor brothers' careers. Even though Frank and Charles went to the navy very early, they had always remained spiritually close and emotionally dear to both Jane and Cassandra. Their actions at sea, plans and ambitions as well as apprehensions are frequently dwelt upon in the liberal extant

correspondence that begins in January 1796. It shows that the discussed writer was kept informed on the general progress of naval operations in the French war, that she learned the names of her brothers' ships and their commanders, including admirals of the respective fleets, expressing at the same time deep concern about their safety and well-being (cf. Błaszak 2002).

Jane Austen's growing interest in and familiarity with naval matters is reflected on the level of her language style, especially vocabulary. Her letters feature all types and classes of sailing vessels from small sloops, through schooners and frigates to line-of-battle ships, His Majesty's men-of-war as well as transports and packet-boats, pirates and privateers. In each case the authoress knows exactly what kind of ships they are, laughing at one point at an aunt who can not tell a sloop from a frigate (Austen 1996: 93). She makes knowing remarks on the fire-power and duties of the respective ships, their navigation and assembly and anchorage points. When she says, for example, that she has "looked into the 74" (151), it means that she has examined a large warship armed with 74 guns. She further writes of "fitting out expeditions" and "forming squadrons", "cruising" and "taking prizes" [i.e. capturing enemy ships – M. Błaszak], "being becalmed" as well as "having a rough passage" and "suffering from sea sickness", "coming into the port", "taking provisions" and "refitting" (23, 39, 52, 58, 80, 89, 169, 239, 240). Jane Austen's use of nautical register is not limited to simple enumeration as the above examples might suggest – indeed different contexts and phrasings in which she uses them demonstrate that she is in full control of the sailors' dialect (scholars call it "the language of the sea", "sailors' English", "a special dialect of one register", or "sea jargon", cf. Turner 1973: 166 and 179, and Lind 1982). She thus distinguishes between "sailing in a ship" and "sailing a ship" (23); her brother "taking a prize", his being "guiltless of prizes" as well as "receiving Ł 30 [of prize money] for his share of the privateer" and "the *Endymion* [his ship] has not been plagued with any more prizes" (52, 80, 91, 169); "making" or "having a passage" and "giving a passage to [a passenger]" (80, 239); "writing a packet [i.e. of letters] to go by ship" and "writing to Charles by the next packet" [i.e. the 'post' ship] (23, 106). Not many landsmen among Austen readers would probably know where to look for the navigation landmarks and anchorage points for ships which she mentions in her correspondence, such as the Start (79) on the coast of Devon, or the Downs (36) – areas of the English Channel off Ramsgate and Deal. The authoress also manifests her familiarity with naval ranks and the policy of promotions, starting from the First Lord of the Admiralty, through admirals, vice- and rear-admirals, captains, commanders, lieutenants, down to midshipmen and common seamen. She calls the last ones just

"men" (75) – as they have always been on board the man-of-war. When her elder brother was promoted to the rank of commander in 1798, Jane wrote Cassandra briefly "Frank is made" (32), adding later that "the Expedition were going to him" (102), i.e. he was assuming command of that ship. In the meantime the younger brother, now a lieutenant, was obliged "to take his turn in the Scorpion" (28), a small craft, yearning for a more active service in a frigate. This wish was soon gratified and he was signed on aboard the *Endymion*, which prompted Jane to speculate that in due course "Charles may perhaps become 1st of the *Endymion*" (75), i.e. the first officer (1st lieutenant) of the frigate. Later on, when Charles himself rose to the post of captain, he acted as the protector of one Thomas Kendall. Jane Austen hinted at some difficulty this young midshipman encountered in the service, resorting to a sailor's phrase quoted after her brother: "When he [i.e. Kendall] first joined the *Namur*, my brother did not find him forward enough to be what they call put in the office [i.e. confident about performing his duties], and therefore placed him under the schoolmaster" (241). It rests to add that the latter was an officer on board in charge of midshipmen whom he instructed, among others, in navigation. The writer also makes a reference to the Austens' old acquaintance and distant relative, Captain Sir Thomas Williams (married to their cousin Jane Cooper), who lost his ship when his admiral "took a fancy to the *Neptune*, and having only a worn-out 74 to offer in lieu of it, Sir Thomas declined such a command, and is come home passenger" (172). During the long French war, Frank and Charles occasionally called home – on one of such unexpected visits Jane expressed joy at "Frank's return, which happens in the true sailor way, just after our being told not to expect him for some weeks" (136). On another occasion – of a family reunion that was frustrated – Jane Austen made a shrewd observation on the unpredictable and largely inscrutable nature of the sea, becoming to a true sailor: "There is no being up to the tricks of the sea" (207).

Perhaps the most interesting usage of nautical register in the authoress's correspondence occurs outside its natural context when she writes of everyday matters using phrases inspired by the sea, navigation and shipping, and the like. She remarks, for instance, that the theatres are "at a low ebb at present", or ponders on "the full tide of human existence" (Austen 1996: 230, 250); and in a series of letters addressed to a niece, Anna Austen who wanted to try her luck as a writer, Jane Austen encouraged her to go on working, claiming she herself had much "latitude" even for "desultory novels"; furthermore, she could not see that her niece's "language sinks" (269), but advised her not to plunge her hero into "a vortex of dissipation" (276) to conclude one of the letters with: "I shall be very happy to receive

more of your work, if more is ready; and you write so fast, that I have great hopes Mr Digweed [a tenant of the Steventon manor-house] will come freighted back with such a cargo as not all his hops or his sheep could equal the value of" (277). Even a trivial remark on the weather can occasionally assume in Jane Austen's correspondence a curiously nautical character, as when she observes that "the wind has been more N.E. than N.W." (167), which looks more like an entry in a ship's log-book than a remark made in a lady's private letter. Such use of language points to Smollett's memorable novel (*Peregrine* Pickle, 1751) featuring a great comic figure, Commodore Hawser Trunnion, who is a retired naval officer profusely using sailors' jargon on land. If Jane Austen really did not read Smollett, as literary critics suggest (e.g. Gillie 65), and the lack of any reference or hint to him in her letters seems to confirm, the effect she achieved appears the more original.

Before she set to work on her three mature novels in 1811, the discussed authoress had had a good opportunity to get closer to the sea and deepen her familiarity with maritime affairs. In 1801, on the retirement of the Reverend George Austen (Jane's father), the family moved to Bath where they lived until 1806, visiting a number of seaside places from Lyme, Charmouth, Dawlish and probably Teignmouth on the coast of Dorset and Devon, to Ramsgate in Kent and probably Tenby in South Wales. Naval officers met in Bath, together with the picturesque seascapes of Lyme and Charmouth, plus a walk taken on the famous Cobb (pier), were to find their way a decade later into *Persuasion*. Following the death of their father, Jane, her sister Cassandra and their widowed mother took up quarters in Southampton in a tiny house of Captain Francis Austen who was frequently away, taking part in naval operations against Napoleonic France (the younger brother Charles was in the meantime serving in the Royal Navy on the North American station). In their new place the Austen ladies were able to follow more closely the progress of the war and became acquainted with a wide circle of naval officers and their families; Jane also had a chance to explore the nearby port of Portsmouth, described so minutely in *Mansfield Park*. In 1809 Mrs Austen and her daughters eventually settled at Chawton, a village near the town of Alton in Hampshire, away from the sea, though one of their new neighbours on the spot happened to be Capt. Benjamin Clement of the Royal Navy. It was in the Chawton Cottage that Jane entered on a fresh stage in her literary activity, planning and completing her three 'mature' novels: *Mansfield Park* (conceived in 1811, published in 1814), *Emma* (commenced in 1814, publ. in 1815) and *Persuasion* (started in 1815, finished in 1816, publ. posthumously in 1817).

It would be impossible to discuss or even survey all nautical references in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*; therefore, our analysis must be confined to those instances in which seamen's register is used. The heroine of the first novel, Fanny Price, has two sailor brothers and a parent who is an ex-lieutenant of marines. Of the two brothers, one serves on board of an "Indiaman" (Austen 1978: 375), i.e. an armed ship of the East India Company, while the other is introduced as a midshipman in the King's service. He is Fanny's beloved brother William, modelled on Jane Austen's own dearest relations, who went to sea being slightly more than 11 years of age. Fanny keeps a sketch of his ship hung on the wall of her room at Mansfield Park, "with H.M.S. *Antwerp* at the bottom, in letters as tall as the main-mast" (174). In chapter 24 of the novel, "a few hurried happy lines" from William reach Fanny, "written as the ship came up Channel, and sent into Portsmouth, with the first boat that left the *Antwerp*, at anchor, in Spithead" (241). Spithead must be here identified with the traditional naval anchorage area in the east Solent between the ports of Portsmouth on the coast of Hampshire and Ryde on the Isle of Wight. A few pages later Midshipman William Price calls in person at his uncle's manor-house to give the family an account of his naval engagements and shipwrecks during the 7-year long service in the Mediterranean and the West Indies (i.e. between about 1802 and 1810). They also learn of hardships which fall to every sailor's share – like bad weather and hard living, and Fanny privately hears from William that he is just a "poor scrubby midshipman" disdained by "the Portsmouth girls [who] turn up their noses at any body who has not a commission" (256), i.e. an officer's position and the authority that goes with it. This leads his sister to hope that uncle Thomas, their noble protector, will do every thing in his power "to get you made" (257), i.e. promoted to officer's rank. Quite unexpectedly, though, William's promotion is secured through the recommendation of Admiral Crawford, at the request of Henry Crawford, his rich nephew, now courting Fanny. Thus, not before too long, His Lordship the First Lord of the Admiralty kindly signs William Price's commission as second lieutenant of H.M. sloop the *Thrush*, so that all he must do now is "to fit up his cabin" (308).

Towards the end of the novel the action moves to Portsmouth where Fanny is sent on a visit to her parents and siblings prolonged to three months. Here she carries out the famous inspection of the local port and dock-yard, examining, among others, "a vessel in the stocks" (Austen 1978: 396), i.e. placed on a wooden structure in which ships are held while they are being built, and catching a glimpse of the fleet lying in the road-stead. Her two male companions, including her own father and Henry Crawford, the latter supposedly arrived in Portsmouth to meet the local

post-admiral or commissioner, eagerly discuss "the last naval regulations, or settle the number of three deckers now in commission" (395), i.e. three-deck warships armed and seaworthy. Meanwhile William Price extols the *Thrush* as the finest sloop in the service, making "conjectures how she would be employed, [devising] schemes for an action with some superior force, which (supposing the first lieutenant out of the way [i.e. killed in action] – and William was not very merciful to the first lieutenant) was to give himself the next step [i.e. promotion] as soon as possible, or [indulging in] speculations about prize money" (396).

Among naval officers appearing in the novel, it is Fanny's father, a secondary character indeed, whose profession and mentality are best individualised through the sailors' dialect that he uses. The narrator tells us that he did not lack abilities, but had no curiosity beyond his profession, studying only "the navy-list" (Austen 1978: 382), i.e. specifications of the King's ships, including their tonnage, armament and crews (cf. Lloyd 1968: 31), and talking only of maritime affairs. He was also fond of grog and swore. Mr Price appears to be genuinely impressed by the sight of William's ship going out of harbour, telling him excitedly about her preparations for a westward cruise and spicing his nautical jabber with exclamations ("Ha!") and blasphemies (the recurrent "By G – "):

> G – , you lost a fine sight by not being here in the morning to see the *Thrush* go out of harbour. I would not have been out of the way for a thousand pounds. Old Scholey ran in at breakfast time, to say she had slipped her moorings and was coming out. I jumped up, and made but two steps to the platform. If ever there was a perfect beauty afloat, she is one; and there she lies at Spithead, and anybody in England would take her for an eight-and-twenty [i.e. a larger ship like a frigate]. I was upon the platform two hours this afternoon, looking at her.. She lay close to the *Endymion*, between her and the *Cleopatra*, just to the eastward of the sheer hulk" [i.e. the steeply rising huge hulk of the *Endymion*].
>
> "Ha!" cried William, "that's just where I should have put her myself. It's the best berth [i.e. anchorage point] at Spithead.
>
> (Austen 1978: 373-4)

The next moment Mr Price is obliged to pacify his two younger sons, stomping heavily and screaming wildly in the passage, with the characteristic seaman's abuses and nautical comparisons: "Devil take those young dogs! How they are singing out! [i.e. how loudly they are shouting] Ay, Sam's voice louder than all the rest! That boy is fit for a boatswain. Holla – you there – Sam – stop your confounded pipe [here: loud high voice related to boatswain's pipe], or I shall be after you" (Austen 1978: 376). And when Mr Price learns of Maria Bertram's betrayal of

her husband and her elopement with Henry Crawford, he bursts out angrily: "by G – if she belonged to me, I'd give her the rope's end as long as I could stand over her. A little flogging for man and woman too, would be the best way of preventing such things" (428). We will add that flogging in the navy was never formally abolished – it was suspended in peacetime only in 1871, and in wartime eight years later (cf. Lloyd 1968: 273).

The good Sir Thomas Bertram, master of Mansfield Park, undertakes earlier in the novel a long and perilous voyage across the Atlantic to attend to his West Indian property in Antigua. On his safe return home, he has something to say about "waiting for the packet", i.e. packet-boat that carried mail and passengers, "making his passage", "the alarm of a French privateer" and "a week's calm in the Atlantic" (Austen 1978: 195-6, 236). Mary Crawford who acts in the book as a worldly young lady boasts at one point of her familiarity with "admirals and their flags" [as flag-officers they flew their pendants], assuring Fanny and Edmund she has seen "enough of Rears and Vices" [here: both rear- and vice-admirals as well as human vices] (91). In this way the nautical contraction creates a linguistic pun that well alludes to her depraved morality and vicious disposition. On a later occasion she tells Fanny of her friend, one Flora Ross, who became unhappy in life having "jilted a very nice young man in the Blues, for the sake of that horrid Lord Stornaway" (357), the blue colour indicating 3rd-class seniority of the officer's squadron. This knowing remark must have been the effect of Mary's intercourse with her uncle Admiral Crawford and his company.

The long war against Republican and then Napoleonic France finally came to an end in July 1815. Wellington's final victory over the French Emperor and his Grand Army was made possible thanks to a succession of sea battles won by the British Navy, making its best-known officer, Admiral Nelson, "a fixed star of bravery and endurance", and confirming the English in their conviction that "the safety of the country depended on the navy" (Plumb 1963: 207-8). About two months after Waterloo, Jane Austen began writing *Persuasion*, introducing into her new novel a greater number of naval officers who play the leading roles, and reflecting in it the growing public respect for the naval profession that embodied the idea of promotion by merit at the expense of the declining repute of the landed gentry, embodying the outworn system of class-distinction and privileges based on birth.

Leaving aside socio-related issues (cf. Copeland and McMaster 1997: ch. 7-8), our analysis focuses again on the nautical register that contributes to the novel's realism on the level of the world presented, endowing Jane Austen's protagonists with both typical and some individual characteristics as well as enriching the gen-

eral style of composition with a specific sense of humour. The role of Capt. Frederick Wentworth in the novel is to give credibility to its plot and its temporal setting. Finding his proposal for the hand of Anne Elliot turned down on the grounds that he has no fortune, the young officer, newly "made commander in consequence of the action off St Domingo" in 1806, leaves the country for an 8-year long naval warfare, gradually making a handsome fortune by "successive captures" and getting "posted into the *Laconia*", i.e. being promoted to the rank of post-captain and entrusted with a larger warship (Austen 1987: 55, 58, 248). During his absence, his beloved is able to follow the progress of his career studying the familiar "navy-lists", and refuses in the interim a local squire - as if expecting Capt. Wentworth to renew his offer of marriage at the conclusion of the war. Indeed, the original suitor, much desired by the lady herself, reappears with a fortune estimated at Ł 25.000 to successfully claim her from her haughty but now reduced baronet of a father. Naturally Capt. Wentworth takes the opportunity to satisfy the curiosity of the stay-at-home provincial gentry, since "There was a very general ignorance of all naval matters throughout the party; and he was very much questioned, [...] as to the manner of living on board, daily regulations, food, hours, etc." (89). He gives them an outline of his service, starting from his first command, a sloop called the *Asp*, "Quite worn out and broken up. [...] Hardly fit for service" (89). What strikes the reader in his account is the characteristic identification of the sailor with his ship: "Ah! she was a dear old *Asp* to me. She did all that I wanted. I knew that we should either go to the bottom together, or that she would be the making of me" (90). Two decades after the publication of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, a distinguished naval officer and a classic of the sea novel, Capt. Frederick Marryat, undertook to explain the nature of this extraordinarily intimate relationship highly charged with emotion:

> [...] a sailor loves his ship. His ship is his wife, is a very common saying with us; and then, [...] a vessel is almost a thing of life, in appearance; she sits like a duck on the water, and when it is calm she rolls to and fro like a lazy person; make sail on her, and she flies through the water as if she were a porpoise or a dolphin; press her with too much canvas, and she complains; and when buffeted by the tempest, she groans like one who suffers. So that being to us sailors a sort of living thing, and we being fond of her, we call her she; I suppose, because a man gets fonder of a woman than any other thing that's living.
>
> (Marryat 1928: 332)

To come back to Capt. Wentworth's account of his service, it is seasoned with the usual "cruises" and "taking privateers", "falling in with the French frigate" and

"bringing her into Plymouth", "days of foul weather" and "a gale coming on in the Sound", rates and classes of sailing vessels, and so on (Austen 1987: 90-1).

Capt. Harville is one of the secondary characters in the discussed novel and draws our attention by using sailors' dialect outside its usual context. On the death of his friend's beloved, he can not even imagine acting as a messenger of the bad news, claiming he "would as soon have been run up to the yard-arm" (Austen 1987: 128), i.e. choose to be hanged rather than deliver it. Later on, he tells Anne Elliot he can see a true analogy between man's bodily and mental frames – "as our bodies are the strongest, so are our feelings; capable of bearing most rough usage, and riding out the heaviest weather" (236). Sitting close and talking to this attractive young lady at an inn, he describes his situation as being "in very good anchorage here" and in "No hurry for a signal [i.e. to move] at all" (237). Such language gives him the quality of a distinctive professional type.

Admiral Croft belongs to the protagonists of the novel and is related to Capt. Wentworth as his sister's husband. He is no doubt the most graceful and charming naval officer – "a very hale, hearty, well-looking man, a little weather-beaten, to be sure, but not much; and quite the gentleman in all his notions and behaviour" (Austen 1987: 51). He is introduced as "rear admiral of the white" [i.e. of the 2nd order of seniority, the first being the red] who took part in the memorable "Trafalgar action" and then was "stationed" for several years in the East Indies (51). On first meeting the pompous and conceited Sir Walter Elliot, he neatly sums him up as "The baronet [who] will never set the Thames on fire" (60). The admiral captures our sympathy for his ingenuous conduct and straightforward manners reflected in his speech – he uses a number of dialectal interjections like "Ay! Ha! Phoo! Nay! Lord!" and contractions like "How d'ye do", together with colloquialisms like "poor soul", "queer" or "shabby fellows", "sure to have plenty of chat", and the like (90, 179-181, 258). When Anne meets him one day standing at a print-shop window (he greets he asking "where are you bound?"), he shows her the picture of a boat looking as "a shapeless old cockshell" in which he "would not venture over a horsepond" (179-180). His laughter at the incompetence of the painter is here meant to point not only to the admiral's simple-heartedness and nautical sense of humour, but also to the authoress's conviction that art must not distort reality (cf. also Gillie 157).

Admiral Croft's language becomes the wittiest when he refers to Capt. Wentworth's courtship of Anne Elliot wholly in terms of sailors' dialect. He first tells his brother-in-law that no young fellow can "do ashore for half a year together" without a wife, in which case "he soon wants to be afloat again" (Austen 1987: 90).

Indeed, the admiral seems to be disappointed at Wentworth courting so long, which "comes of the peace"; he recollects in this context his own short suit for the hand of his wife in time of war, advising the younger officer "to spread a little more canvas" (113-4). Jane Austen as the narrator, apparently encouraged by his manner of speaking, coins a neat sailor's phrase on seeing the admiral in the company of his old friends and saying they "form[ed] into a little knot of the navy" (179). Mrs Sophy Croft, the admiral's wife, provides a well-attuned complement to him, also in terms of her nautical speaking habit. She is a healthy-looking, agreeable woman of easy manners who has been "almost as much at sea as her husband" (74). She has "crossed the Atlantic four times" and seen the East Indies, though has not yet sailed "beyond the Streights" [probably the Straits of Magellan leading into the Pacific]. She identifies herself with the seafaring kind rather than landsfolk like Mrs Musgrove whom she tells emphatically: "We do not call Bermuda or Bahama, you know, the West Indies". And she is accustomed to the hardships of life on board and land alike, not expecting "to be in smooth water all our days" (quotations in the last three sentences 94).

Jane Austen's use of nautical motives and sailors' register in her novels was inspired by the personal experience of her closest relations who served in the Royal Navy in its glorious days of Nelson and Trafalgar. She partook in those experiences and excitement, to some extent, by means of ample correspondence with her two beloved sailor brothers. She learned a great deal about the navy, its officers and men, acquiring practice in describing them minutely in letters to her elder sister Cassandra who was often staying away from the family home with brother Edward at Godmersham Park in Kent. Jane Austen's letters illuminate her novels, especially the mature ones, as the earliest two (*Elinor and Marianne*, later converted into *Sense and Sensibility*, and *First Impressions*, later *Pride and Prejudice*) had been conceived before her extant correspondence begins in 1796. The present article is meant to demonstrate the writer's competent use of the sailors' language in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, which authenticates them on a few planes and especially enriches her art of characterization. Jane Austen had always respected the criterion of reality and even within its province managed to present "gentlemen of the navy" (Austen 1987: 47) as a unique species not to be found in any other human milieu.

Concluding the article, it seems interesting to add that the authoress's competence in sailors' register is not always knowingly rendered in translation. The Polish edition of her *Selected Letters* features such blunders as "a frigate of 32 masts" (!), where the number following the ship's name indicates the number of guns she

carried, in this case the frigate of 32 guns (Austen 1998: 28). On the following page the reader must inevitably be puzzled to learn of "Frank's nomination as commander of the *Captain John Gore*, a vessel subordinate to the *Triton*", where in the original letter Jane Austen uses a playful anacoluthon and the sentence should be properly interpreted as: "Frank's appointment to the *Triton*, commanded by Captain John Gore" (27). Obviously the question of foreign translations of Jane Austen's texts with a view to their nautical accuracy would provide sufficient material for a separate study.

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Gwara marynarzy w dziełach Jane Austen

Artykuł stanowi analizę gwary marynarzy w listach i wybranych powieściach Jane Austen. Pisarka ta, uchodząca za mistrzynię prowincjonalnej powieści obyczajowej osadzonej na przełomie 18 i 19 wieku, prowadziła ożywioną krespondencję z braćmi – marynarzami, którzy służyli w marynarce wojennej podczas ponad 20-letniej wojny brytyjsko-francuskiej (1793-1815). Wyjaśnia to jej rosnące zainteresowanie środowiskiem marynarzy i sprawami morskimi, co znajduje odzwierciedlenie w świecie przedstawionym i języku jej dojrzałych powieści.