

# Shakespeare's Chair and the Romantic Journey of Isabel Czartoryska

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In June 1790 Princess Isabel Czartoryska (Fig 1), accompanied by her son Adam George and her friend Richard D'Oraison, famous for his daring voyage round the world with Captain Bougainville, arrived in England. The itinerary of their tour had been planned with meticulous care before they left Poland and visits were to be made to castles and royal palaces, to parks and gardens, as well as to other more utilitarian places, such as factories and mines, which were considered important for the education of the young prince.

The little party was to engage on a journey similar to others undertaken by Polish aristocrats to England in the late eighteenth century. However, there was a difference; the princess kept a day-by-day diary of her journey.<sup>1</sup> As she pointed out:

I do not write this for literary fame, nor does my self-esteem or my self-love make me believe that my diary may prove instructive and useful. . . . I write this for my own pleasure and to record experiences I should not wish to forget. At the twilight hour of a lovely day, it is so pleasurable to recall its events—as it were to relive the past.

The princess's journey to England had another and unexpected consequence as well; it served as the source of inspiration for a great Polish collection; and it contributed also to the Polish patriotic and romantic movement.

The character of the princess's mind can be gauged from her reactions to one of the most impressive and romantic settings in England. After visiting London, Windsor and Oxford, the tourists arrived at Salisbury. Their destination was significant: it was Stonehenge. The princess wrote:

Not far from Salisbury, a town lying in the English county of Wiltshire, lost in a wilderness upon which one sees nothing but heather, here and there covered by sand,



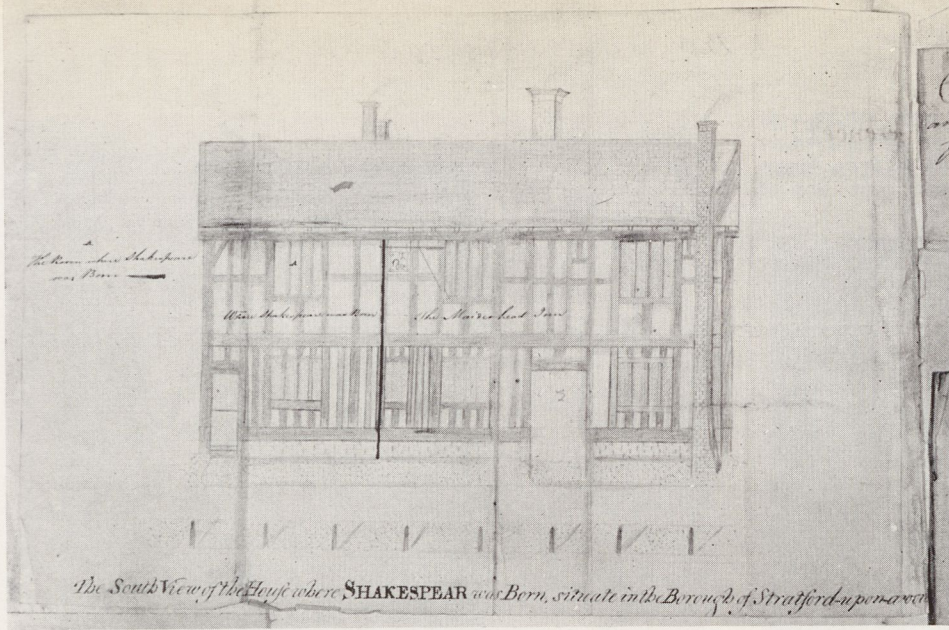
**1.** *Portrait of Princess Isabel Czartoryska* by Maria Hadfield Cosway (1759–1838). Oil on canvas 83×42 cm. Isabel Czartoryska (1746–1835) played an active part in social, diplomatic and political circles in Poland, was the author of several books and founded, at Pulawy, the first Polish historical museum

All the works illustrated here are in the National Museum, Cracow, and are in either the Czartoryski Collection or the Czartoryski Library

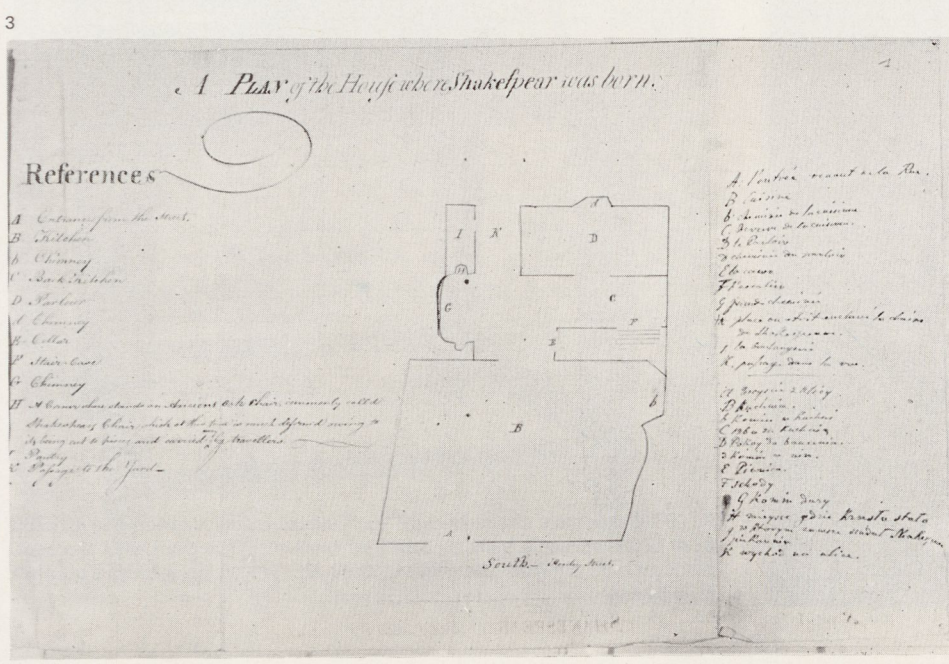
**2.** View of house where Shakespeare was born, made in 1790. Pencil drawing, 24×38 cm.

**3.** Plan of house where Shakespeare was born, drawn by Isabel Czartoryska (1746–1835). Ink drawing, 24×38 cm. H marks the spot where Shakespeare's chair stood

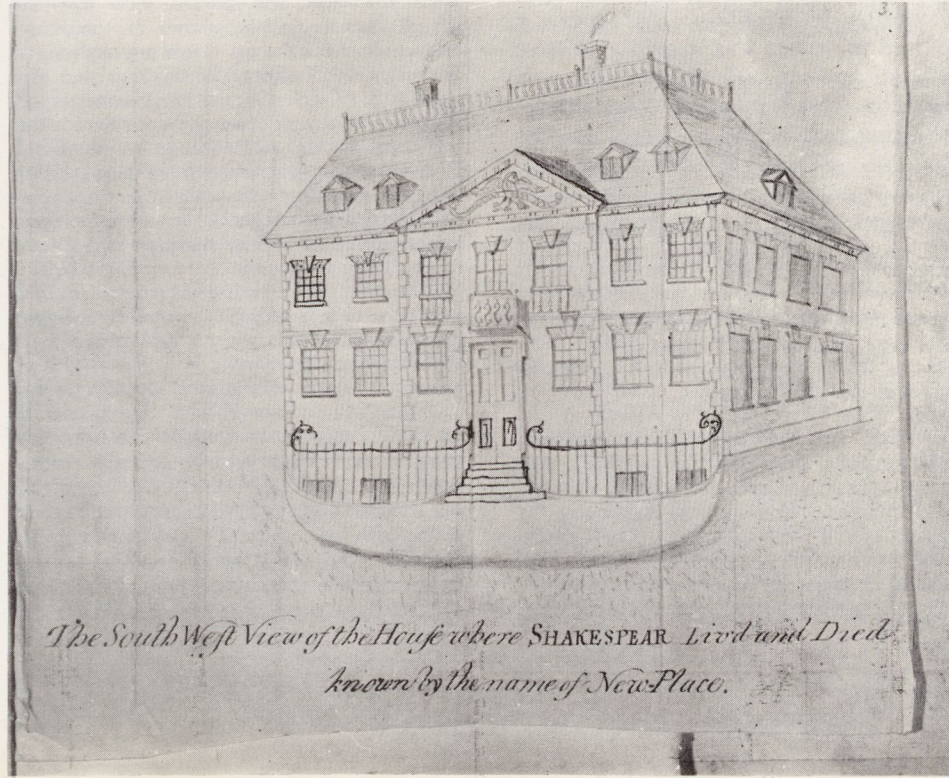
**4.** View of house where Shakespeare died, known as New Place, made in 1790. Pencil drawing, 21.7×27 cm.



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stands one of the oldest monuments erected by the hand of man: the place is called Stonehenge. There is no chronicle, no trace of anything to explain the origin of this surprising remnant of the past. It consists of a group of tremendously large stones standing erect in a close circle. One of the openings in the circle is considerably larger than the others and probably served as the entrance into the temple. The stones, in the manner of pillars, support rocks as large as themselves, which, lying across them, form a sort of cornice, and by means of their weight, seem to unite and consolidate the elements of this striking piece of architecture. Built by the hand of man, it has been preserved for many centuries and stands there without any foundation or support. In the centre, opposite the supposed entrance, there lies a large but low stone upon which the offerings were probably burnt. A great many dissertations and investigations have misled rather than enlightened those desirous of learning some facts about this strange monument. I think it is most probable that centuries ago this was a Druid temple. Presumably the forest, which usually hid such places, was destroyed in the course of many years, and only these huge and roughly hewn rocks withstood the ravages of time. The site on which all this stands is far from the sea and offers nothing to the gaze but an empty space, devoid of any trace of rock or stone, and so those who gaze at this work made by human hands are even more surprised and filled with wonder by an undertaking which must have required unlimited exertion and the overcoming of a thousand difficulties. And if the Creator in His kindness is willing to receive the offerings of sincere and simple-hearted people, then He would be pleased by this work. These enormous and quite unchanged stones, still just as they were at the beginning of the world, without art, were probably chosen because there was nothing else comparable to them in size. Besides, the simple hearts who had erected them were confident, I think, that they would last into eternity, representing the Deity by their size and the Druids' gratitude by their durability.<sup>[3]</sup>

These comments are all the more interesting because the princess was brought up in a generation which was fascinated by ancient Greek and Roman culture. The advanced study of old Gaelic, English, German and Slavonic cultures was to come in the nineteenth century.

A small fragment of the Stonehenge architecture was taken by the princess and included among the curiosities of the museum founded by her at Pulawy, near Lublin.

On 26 June the princess visited Stratford on Avon. She was one of the first devoted admirers in Poland of Shakespeare and, together with her husband, the Prince Adam Casimir, she largely contributed to the popularity of the poet in her native land.<sup>3</sup> She wrote:

Shakespeare's genius, so fiery, powerful and fecund, so full of supreme thoughts, and which harnesses the imagination or moderates the zeal which sometimes took him too far, may often shock the delicacy of taste

**5 and 6.** Certificate authenticating Shakespeare's chair, which was bought by Isabel Czartoryska in 1790. This document was signed on 17 January, 1791, by John Jordan, Amanuensis to Mr. Malone, Austin Warrilow, Orthographer, John Warrilow and Thomas Hart, one of Shakespeare's heirs

We whose Names are here Underwritten  
and subscribed do Certify that Major Onulski bought  
for Princess Czartoryska on Sunday the 28<sup>th</sup>  
of November 1790 a Chair of the same Part of  
Stratford upon Avon in the County of Warwick  
for the Sum of 200 Guineas of lawful Money  
of Great Britain - And for farther - 11 -  
Satisfaction we do assert that according  
to the most authentic Tradition that it  
the said Chair was antiently the property  
of William Shakespeare whose Father  
was High Sheriff of Stratford upon Avon  
and resided in the said Manse upon  
the Year 1558 to 1601 after his Death the  
Premises devolved to his Eldest son -  
William who died on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April 1616  
and left the said Premises to Susanna  
his Eldest Daughter then the Wife of  
Dr. John Hall and to the ~~Heirs~~ Heirs  
Heirs of the Body lawfully Issuing to the  
Sixth seventh third fourth fifth sixth and  
seventh Sons and in default of such Male  
Issue then to the several Sons of his said  
Daughter Susanna Hall and for default  
of such Issue then to the Heirs of his Daughter  
Judith and the descendants of her Body

lawfully Issuing) - Now this is the real Cause  
Susanna had Issue a daughter named Elizabeth  
she was married first to The March Countess and  
after his decease she married to Sir John  
Barnard of Abington near Northampton -  
Knight. She left by her Will and Testament  
which was proved in the Prerogative Court  
the 4<sup>th</sup> Day of March 1669 the said  
Issue in the County of Stratford upon Avon  
to the Heirs of her Body lawfully Issuing  
Thomas Hart and the Heirs of his Body  
lawfully Issuing and in default of such  
Issue then to George Hart the other Son  
of the said Thomas Hart and to the Heirs  
of his Body lawfully Issuing and to him  
and his Heirs for ever. The said George  
Hart had Issue a daughter named by the  
said George Hart and George Hart who was the Grand  
Father of Thomas Hart who now resides in  
the same House where the Poet was born  
Witness our Hands this 17<sup>th</sup> of January 1791  
John Jordan Amanuensis  
Austin Warrilow Orthographer  
Thomas Hart

**7.** 'Shakespeare's chair', bought by Princess Isabel Czartoryska in 1790 from Shakespeare's heirs in Stratford on Avon. The back and the seat, made of oak, are from the original chair and are set on a bronze stool of Empire style

which seems to be a characteristic of our age, but which in his times was rather ignored. It is true that he did not take much cognizance of the accepted rules and principles. The beauty of his work lies solely in striking and true ideas, in an excellent knowledge of the human heart, in his burning and ever-fresh imagination, as well as in the images which he alone was able to evoke; shapeliness of the structure or superficial charms are not part of it. Here is a kind of uneffacable beauty, not subject to any change or alteration, independent of time and fashion, but applicable to every age and to every country. These are not mere flashes of imagination, so often produced by wit and soon turning stale, but are rather images which are so beautiful, so real and so varied that one easily excuses some shaplessness of the frame or some blemishes observed here and there. On reading Shakespeare one may see that everything contained in nature, from the boundless heavenly vault to the smallest flower lost in a wilderness, receives from him life, form and the love it deserves.<sup>[1]</sup>

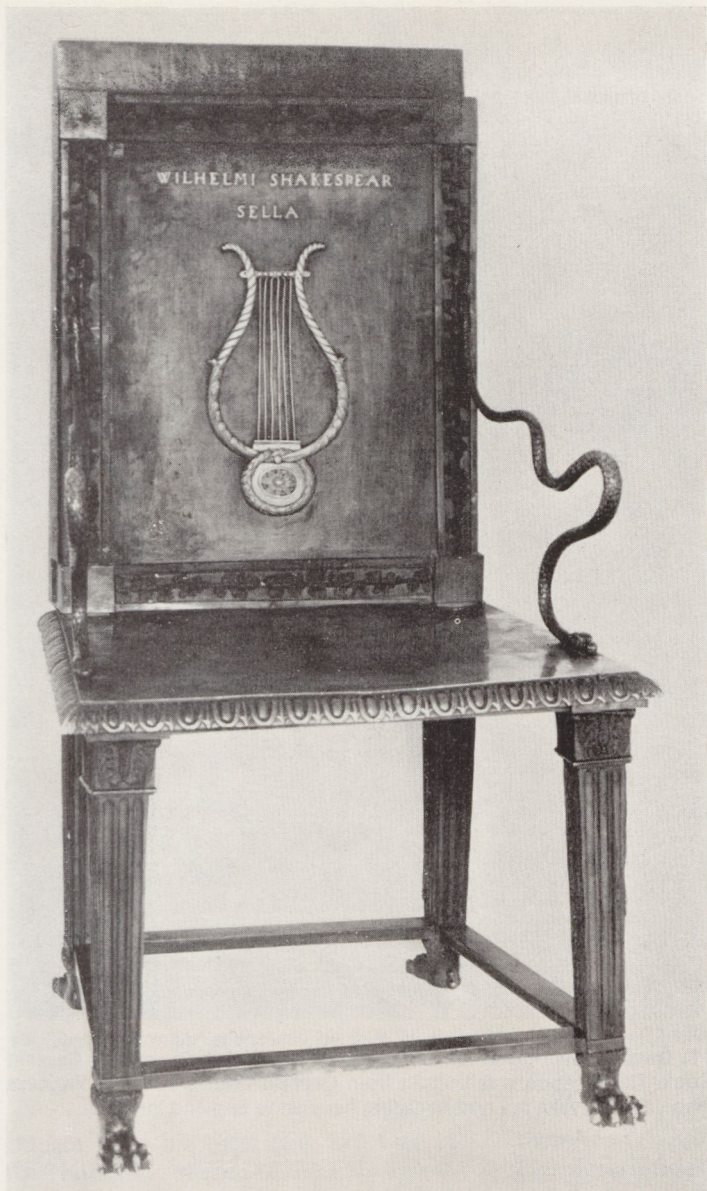
The princess, deeply stirred, visited the poet's native town. She was particularly interested in the house where

Shakespeare was born (Figs 2, 3). At that time the building, then the Maidenhead Inn, still belonged to the poet's heirs. According to tradition Shakespeare's beloved fire-place was in a large alcove with an ancient oak chair which was walled-in. This immediately excited the collecting zeal of the princess, and she was able to fulfil her wish. She wrote:

I must admit that, when I first set eyes on Shakespeare's chair, I promised myself that I would get it by some means or other and transfer it to the Gothic-House Museum. It is true that my first request was categorically refused. The owner of the house, who was a member of the family and not very rich, told us that besides her devotion to this souvenir she derived great profit from it, since everybody who came to visit her house paid well for the tiniest fragments and splinters cleft from the chair, which they later set in rings and medallions. After a long dispute twenty guineas overcame the difficulties and the fond widow forgot everything, for now she was joyful over the conversion of the chair into money. As it was rather deeply immured, we had to call in a

mason lest it be damaged during the removal. Here I must not forget to mention the young girl, by whose strange ardour we were surprised and moved. She was the grand-daughter of the owner of the house and chair. Brought up in an atmosphere of adoration of Shakespeare she regarded him as a sort of deity, or at least some super-human creature, and so she considered herself most fortunate to be a relation of his. Proud of the glory which in her opinion Shakespeare's fame bestowed upon her also, she devoted her entire being to his memory, to the exclusion of everything else. She knew most of his works by heart, and read them all the time, discovering ever new beauties in them. In a word, Shakespeare's memory provided her with a source of joy and happiness. But then this young girl, after suffering a terrible attack of smallpox a year ago, lost both hearing and speech and, though moved by an undiminished ardour, could now only read Shakespeare to herself, being unable to hear or to speak of him. For this reason all my deliberations held with her grandmother were quite lost on her. Quietly sitting in the room she did not guess what was about to happen. When the mason entered the room she asked, by signs to her grandmother, what

8. *Portrait of 'Lady Pembrock'*, attributed to Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641). Oil on canvas, 39×22 cm. This picture was purchased by Princess Isabel Czartoryska in London during her visit to England in 1790



he was going to do and, when she began to understand, she jumped onto the chair and with great passion she tried to hold it, first with her arms and legs and finally even with her teeth. She moaned strangely and despairingly. Finally blood issued from her mouth and nose and she fell, limp and unconscious, by the chair. When she came to herself again, with the deepest sorrow she began by signs to reproach her grandmother for preferring money to what ought to have been dearest to her, and, still holding on to the chair, she showed that she would as soon give it away as her life. As we were unable to calm this loving soul or to succeed in diminishing her touching ardour, we had to resort to the help of the local minister, who tried to impress on her that, with the help of this money, her poor grandmother would enjoy a better living and health. After a long struggle, overwrought and exhausted, she eventually gave her consent to our request, with the provision, however, that at least the legs of the chair would remain as her property. Agreeing to this, I counted the money, took the chair and left the legs to this loving young lady, whom, I think, I shall never forget. The chair is presumably made of oakwood and it is evident that it

was much used and for a long time. The part adorning the Gothic-House consists of two pieces, that is the seat and the back, and both have been set in a bronze stool, upon which the name SHAKESPEAR appears in gilded letters.<sup>[9]</sup>

After being transported to Poland, 'Shakespeare's chair' (Fig 7) was placed in the Pantheon of historic souvenirs in the princess's museum. At first it stood in the 'Sibyl's Temple' (Fig 13), a round peripteral structure copied after the famous Roman temple at Tivoli and also, perhaps, after the romantic copies of this temple which the princess saw in the English parks of Kew and Stow-on-the-Wold. After 1809 the chair was exhibited in the Gothic-House, a new museum building and an example of the Polish version of the Gothic Revival. It is now in the Czartoryski Museum in Cracow, and it still arouses mixed feelings and a certain amount of scepticism, especially as it is hidden in the bronze stool, which is of Empire

style. But there seems little doubt that the Polish princess took the oak chair from Shakespeare's house in 1790 and brought it to Poland for Shakespeare's greater glory here.<sup>6</sup>

England inspired Princess Isabel to very sincere enthusiasm, and her artistic taste was developed by the works of art she came across there. However, the most important result of her journey was the purchase of a number of items for the future museum, and many of those early acquisitions and the documents connected with them have survived in Cracow.

Some objects were acquired in London at the William Rawle sale. Among them were King Henry VIII's carved powder-horn<sup>7</sup> (Figs 10, 12) and the death-mask of Oliver Cromwell along with his buff-coat and his mother's ivory stick and embroidered bonnet. Souvenirs of Captain Cook were



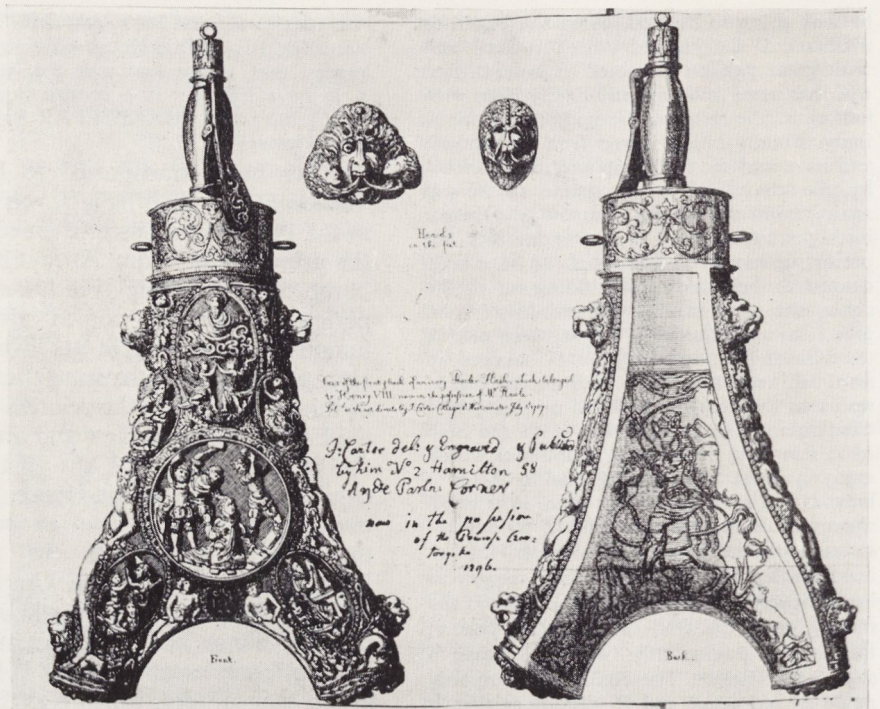
9. *Portrait of Mary Stuart*, attributed to François Quesnel (1543–1619). Oil on panel, 22 x 17 cm. This portrait was purchased from a member of the Hamilton family by Princess Isabel Czartoryska in London during her visit to England in 1790

10. Powder-horn originally belonging to Henry VIII. This was bought by Princess Isabel Czartoryska at the William Rawle sale in London during her visit to England in 1790



11. Detail showing the hilt of the falchion which belonged to Captain Cook. The weapon was bought from Captain Cook's sister by Princess Isabel Czartoryska in London during her visit to England in 1790

12. Certificate authenticating Henry VIII's powder-horn, illustrated in Figure 10





13. 'Sibyl's Temple' at Pulawy by J. P. Norblin de la Gourdain (1745–1830). Drawing, 19.3×30.8 cm.

bought from his sister (Fig 11). One of the Hamiltons offered to the Polish princess a splendid portrait of Mary Stuart, painted presumably by François Quesnel (Fig 9),<sup>8</sup> and Lord Fitzwilliam offered her 'the sceptre of King Richard II', which was, in fact, a mace of the fifteenth century. An excellent painting attributed to Van Dyck was also purchased in London. A later inscription suggested it might be a portrait of 'Lady Pembroke' (Fig 8); in its style it is very close to the portrait of Beatrice de Cusance at Windsor Castle.<sup>9</sup> Inspired by the sentimental fashion of that time, the princess also collected small souvenirs: fragments of ancient costumes and textiles, pieces of old sculptures and prehistoric urns, as well as flowers, leaves and shells. She wanted these as reminders of her visit.

The princess was very sensitive to the beauty of nature, and she had a romantic vision, which had been formed by reading. This was not disillusioned by the reality which confronted her on her travels. She visited Celtic and Roman ruins and she listened to the songs of Highlanders and discovered in

them the relics of the ballads of Ossian. Her descriptions of the Scottish castles and parks had the freshness of personal and sincere experience. Here are her impressions of Dunkeld:

After lunch we visited the loveliest park I have ever seen. It lies on a hill amongst jagged rocks through which the Tay winds its way. By crossing the river one can get to the hermitage and thence to a round building, a kind of hall built of pieces of stone set upon rocks and surrounded by a thick wood and with the sound of invisible water. Deep inside the hall is a large picture depicting Ossian lamenting his misfortunes to young girls. But whilst one is admiring the picture it disappears and another hall appears which is wonderfully painted with arabesque design. The entrance is faced with a large window through which is seen a nobly shaped rock and the river flowing down it. It is difficult to describe the feeling aroused by this apparently magical display. The amount of water amassed is considerable and the noise is very great. All this is shown in a really marvellous way and it is reflected in a thousand ways in the mirrors of a small hall standing at the top of the rock, immersed on all sides in water. . . . Ossian's inscriptions are seen cut into the rock. . . .<sup>10</sup>

As a result of her tour the princess introduced into Poland a new style in landscape architecture: the English or

romantic style. She also wrote an outstanding book on parks and gardens which was published in Wroclaw in 1805.<sup>11</sup>

The princess often referred to the British Isles in her conversation and later memoirs and letters. It was the country where she had found beauty and inspiration and had met many true friends.

Passages from the diary have been translated by Marianna Abrahamowiczowa.

<sup>1</sup> Czartoryski Library, Cracow, MS XVII/607. The diary and the problems attached to it were discussed exhaustively in Z. Zygułski, 'Dzieje Zbiorów Pulawskich' (A History of Czartoryski Museum at Pulawy), *Rozprawy i Sprawozdania Muzeum Narodowego w Krakowie*, VII, 1962.

<sup>2</sup> Czartoryski Library, Cracow, MS. 2917/III, p. 649.

<sup>3</sup> L. Bernacki, *Shakespeare w Polsce do końca XVIII w.* (Shakespeare in Poland up to the end of the Eighteenth Century), 1914. This is an outline of the Shakespeare cult in Poland. The part played in this by the Czartoryski family is also discussed, but the author did not know of the diary.

<sup>4</sup> Czartoryski Library, Cracow, MS. 2917/II, p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, III, p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> Czartoryski Library, Cracow, MS. XVII/3131, item 17.

<sup>7</sup> C. Blair, *European and American Arms*, 1962, item 114a.

<sup>8</sup> I. Grabowska, 'Francuskie portrety renesansowe w Zbiorach Czartoryskich w Krakowie' (French Renaissance Portraits in the Czartoryski Collection in Cracow), *Rozprawy i Sprawozdania Muzeum Narodowego w Krakowie*, III, 1957, p. 102.

<sup>9</sup> J. Białostocki i M. Walicki, *Malarstwo europejskie w Zbiorach polskich* (European Painting in the Polish Collections), 1955, item 200.

<sup>10</sup> Czartoryski Library, Cracow, MS. VII/607.

<sup>11</sup> I. Czartoryska, *Mysli różne o sposobie zakładania ogrodów* (Some Ideas on the Art of Garden Planning), Wroclaw, 1805.