

# Zofia Sinko

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## "Powiastka w oświeceniu stanisławowskim", Zofia Sinko, Wrocław 1982 : [recenzja]

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# Book Reviews

## Comptes rendus de livres

Zofia Sinko, *Powiastrka w oświeceni u stanisławowskim (The Tale in the Polish Enlightenment)*, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1982, 332 pp.

The present study investigates more than a hundred tales which functioned in Polish literature in the second half of the 18th century. They are mainly translations from French, a smaller number comes from English or German, while some are original compositions by Polish authors. The tales appeared mainly in periodicals, in various, miscellaneous collections and anthologies, sometimes they were published as separate pamphlets or collected editions of several volumes.

Apart from the investigation of the particulars of the reception of foreign tales in Poland and of their native production, the main procedure which proves necessary in order to deal with the multifarious material is to establish the typology of the genre. In the present study it is done according to the categories of didactic function, of the philosophical and cognitive content, the kind of purely entertaining element and, on the other hand, of the construction of plots. Reception of the Western European tale in the Polish Enlightenment being ample and representative (with the single exception of *conte galant* and *licentieux*), it appeared possible to use the corpus of translated tales as the basis for typological divisions which may be treated as valid for the genre as evolved in the 18th century.

Chapter I of the study serves as a general introduction. It gives a brief historical outline of the development of the French *conte* in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (most of the tales in the literature of the Polish Enlightenment came from France) and reconstructs the historical poetics of the genre mainly according to French critical opinions. Polish opinions on the subject were but few and referred only to one type of tale—the Oriental one. The poetics of the *conte* as formulated by French critics and writers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is then confronted with the present-day view of the main structural characteristics of the genre. Global definitions and all-embracing generalizations are not gi-

ven as they prove both impossible and inadvisable on account of the high degree of differentiation within the limits of the notion of *conte*.

Eighteenth-century pronouncements on the *conte* prove that no strict normative rules were applied to the genre and that the contemporaries were aware of its mobile and changing form. The story could be based on evidently improbable or openly miraculous events (as in fairy tales, or tales approaching the apologue), but it also could reflect the observation of reality while paying respect to a certain verisimilitude of events (as in tales dealing with contemporary customs and manners). There was also considerable freedom in story construction: what was postulated was unity of action, but no unity of time and place. The same principle is accepted to-day as one of the features of the genre. Plots could concentrate around one single event or grow more complicated, but in accordance with the entry *conte* in Diderot's *Encyclopédie* the progress of events had to be compact and had to possess a unity of purpose. 18th-century pronouncements on the tale contain almost no remarks on its heroes which proves that events were considered to play a more important part than characters. The latter are often no more than puppets that are manipulated by the narrator according to the philosophical idea or didactic tendency of the text. The person of narrator thus acquires a very important status although its importance is not reflected in 18<sup>th</sup> century critical opinions on the tale. As to the contents, 18<sup>th</sup> century criticism admitted a very wide range of subjects as a result of the various ways in which the tale was expected to affect its readers. Much attention was paid to style which was prescribed as "lively," "delicate," and "witty". This very requirement was, however, often neglected. Many of the tales translated in the Polish Enlightenment are characterized either by high-flown sententiousness or by downright colloquial style.

Chapter II discusses the structure of the *contes de fées* (as represented by Fénelon, Mme Le Prince de Beaumont, Paradis de Moncrif and a few anonymous authors) which appeared in Polish versions. They make use of the *tópoi* perpetuated in French folklore as well as in the *contes* of Perrault, but the difference is that they stress the role of *fées* as mentors and teachers and make the moral of the story more sharply outlined on account of its destination for young readers. Chapter III deals with the different kinds of tales and fairy tales included in *Les Mille et une nuits* — a collection of Galland that was extremely

popular in Poland and the translation of which had eight editions in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (I ed. 1768), not to speak of numerous publications of separate tales. Another collection of Oriental fables and tales which was published in Poland both in French and in Polish was *Les Fables politiques et morales de Pilpai, philosophe indien*. It consists of short fables and tales which are full of maxims and proverbial sayings. Chapter IV is wholly devoted to the Polish version of Cazotte's *conte fantastique* entitled *Le Diable amoureux* contrasting the type of fantastic world as presented here with the kind of the miraculous which is to be found in fairy tales. The *conte galant* and *conte licentieux* which were so popular in France are only poorly represented by Polish translations. They are dealt with in chapter V in which special attention is given to *Aline, reine de Golconde* by Boufflers and to *Le Congrès de Cythère* by Algarotti. Chapter VI discusses the *contes philosophiques* of Voltaire in Polish versions (*Zadig, Candide, Babouc, L'Ingénu* and a few shorter *contes*), dealing with their structure and their critical and philosophical message.

Of all kinds of *contes* the most widespread in Polish reception was the didactic tale. The number of respective items is so large and so diversified that they had to be treated in two divisions: exemplary tales and moral tales. The first group, treated in chapter VII, includes mainly allegorical tales, tales in the antique setting and Oriental tales. All of them deal with ethical problems such as man's attitude to eternal and temporal life, or his duties towards his fellow-creatures, they also include warnings against common faults and vices. The tales often use the device of dream, of vision, or of a voyage to allegorical countries (as in Addison's famous *Vision of Mirza*). Sometimes the tale consists of a series of events in the life of a virtuous hero (as in the tales of Fénelon), sometimes it presents the hero's progress from vice to virtue (as in Mrs. Sheridan *Nourjahad*), or the tales concentrate upon one important event in the hero's life in which he is able to prove his virtue. Thus all the exemplary tales can be fitted into a few sharply outlined schemes of plots. Apart from the above-mentioned names the list of authors who were translated into Polish includes Levesque, Saint-Lambert, Mercier, Florian, Baculard d'Arnaud, Addison, Johnson, and Hawkesworth. A considerable number of authors could not be identified.

Two chapters (VIII and IX) are devoted to the moral tale:

the former exclusively to the works of Marmontel whose famous *Contes moraux* enjoyed a great popularity in Polish translations, while the latter chapter deals with the stories by Marmontel's imitators. The *contes* of Marmontel are divided into humourous, serious and sentimental ones while attention is being paid to their plots, moral reflections and their narrative art. The chapter devoted to moral tales by other authors is preceded by a discussion of the relation between the *conte* and the *nouvelle*: it proves impossible to draw a clear line of division between moral tales presenting contemporary customs and manners and didactic novelettes of manners. That is why the principle of selection in the chapter is to include for discussion only texts in which the plot evidently aims at presenting a general moral principle or a moral lesson in specific circumstances, as is the case of Marmontel and with exemplary tales. The stories usually consist of a few happenings with one suggestively outlined central event which is often presented with pathos as a tearful moving scene. One of the masters of such effects was Baculard d'Arnaud of whose *Délassement de l'homme sensible* there appeared a fair-sized selection in Polish translation. Both Marmontel and other authors are mainly interested in family relations—the right choice of spouse, or the relations between parents and children. Some tales (like *La Sympathie* of Mercier) centre on the motif of friendship, others praise and propagate the virtue of mercy and benevolence while still others present patterns of happy existence based on family love and virtue practised in simple rural life (e.g. *Sara Th\*\*\** by Saint-Lambert, or *L'Heureuse famille* by Lezay-Marnezia). Also some tales dealing with noble savages or *ingénus* were translated into Polish with Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *La Chaumière indienne* at their head.

In contrast with the ample and diversified reception in Poland of the Western European tale, our own production of this kind was rather small. It is presented in chapter X in which the first place goes to Ignacy Krasicki, the author of 19 tales mainly in Oriental setting published between 1786–1803. Their narration is concise, their plots rather simple and their moral point strongly emphasized. The 7 Oriental tales by Jan Potocki (published in French in his *Voyages* in 1788–1792 and soon translated into Polish) testify to their author's genuine interest in the literature and

civilization of the East. Potocki's tales present sceptical reflections on the condition of man and on man's attitude to happiness which brings them closer to the type of *conte philosophique*. Finally, two openly didactic tales were written by Franciszek Karpiński while two allegorical tales (one of them by Krasicki) allude to the dramatic events in Poland between 1792 and 1794 at the moment of its defeat and loss of independence.

The final chapter of the study brings the conclusion that the genre of the 18th century tale cannot be covered by a single definition or reduced to a unified description. As to the tendency of the tales, one may observe that the exemplary and moral tales propagated social and family virtues which were meant to ensure the happiness of the individual and of the entire society. Particular importance was attached to benevolence—the cardinal virtue of the moral code of the Enlightenment. Many tales expressed their authors' optimistic view about man's innate goodness, or at least about his ability of being improved and perfected by experience, by rational persuasion or by an appeal to the feelings of pity and to emotional sensibility with which nature has endowed any individual. The model of life as propagated by the tales was usually based on the idea of *aurea mediocritas* to be realized in simple rural life in the family circle, in joyful labour or in well-merited repose, far away from the corruption and luxury of towns and courts. It should not be forgotten that rustic myth made its impact not only in the sphere of belles-lettres, that its ideological and social motivations were complicated and manifold, finally that it underwent certain modifications mainly owing to the inspirations by Rousseau.

The rustic and idyllic motives in the 18th century tale corresponded with the tradition of the Polish way of life as reflected in literature in which the pleasures and advantages of country life had been praised as a source of happiness already in the period of the Renaissance. Apart from coinciding with Polish tradition the tales served the actual needs of the country by dealing with the most essential social and moral problems of the age of Enlightenment, by supporting the belief in man's ability of improving himself and his society, as well as by stressing the value of good examples and of good education.

Sum. by the author