

# Ludwika Szczerbicka-Ślęk

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"W kręgu Klio i Kalliope. Staropolska epika historyczna", Ludwika Szczerbicka-Ślęk, Wrocław 1973 : [recenzja]

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Ludwika Szczerbicka-Ślęk, **W kręgu Klio i Kalliope. Staropolska epika historyczna (Clio and Calliope: Polish Historical Epic in the Middle Ages, Renaissance and Baroque)**, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1973.

Polish medieval literature—unlike other European literatures of the Middle Ages—did not hand down to the later culture the heroic epic. Its existence in the past was not even suspected by the Renaissance people. But a large part of the 16th-century writing expressed the conviction that the earlier generations had known heroic songs about their contemporaries, which had been transmitted orally, though not much of this tradition was remembered.

The Middle Ages did, however, bequeath to the Renaissance many chronicles, which, though they started to appear in print as late as at the beginning of the 17th century, were widely read in manuscripts and known through schools as well as through new, 16th-century chronicles making use of the medieval experience in this field.

Both heroic songs on contemporaries and the medieval chronicles were an important link in the epic tradition in the Renaissance and determined the shape of new works appearing in this period.

The development of the heroic poetry started with songs of praise, which began to be written in the early Renaissance and were cultivated throughout the Baroque period. This poetry was of the occasional character and its main forms were the triumphant ode and epicedium; in these genres there met the tradition of Statius (as the author of *Silvae*) and that of the Homeric-Virgilian epic.

Parallel to the development of the occasional verse about the contemporaries was the appearance of longer epic forms, and one of the first works of that kind was the Latin poem by Jan of Wiślica (c. 1485–1520), *Bellum Prutenum* (1516), influenced as much by the poetics of the occasional laudatory verse as by the Antique epic tradition and native chronicles.

Similar resources of tradition were used in the eposes written during the reign of king Stefan Batory and the victorious wars with Moscow. But though the Renaissance, with its most outstanding poet, the maker of Polish modern lyrical poetry, Jan Kochanowski (1530–1584), dreamed of a national epos, there appeared no great work which would bear upon the later literature.

A crucial change took place in the Baroque period. The classicist theory of the epos, formulated by Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski (1595 – 1640) referred to the Homeric-Virgilian model, though adapting it to the postulates of the post-Trent culture (*De perfecta poesi sive Vergilius et Homerus*, written before 1626). This theory, however, was discordant to the literary practice of the time, in which the key tradition was that of the late-Antique epic, represented by Lucanus (as the author of *Pharsalia*) and Statius (as the author of *Thebais* and unfinished *Achilleis*), since that model fully accorded with earlier literary practice and its connections with the tradition of chronicles. The most outstanding works of that kind were *Władysław IV, król polski i szwedzki* (*Władysław IV, the Polish and Swedish King*) by Samuel Twardowski (c. 1600 – 1660) and *Wojna chocimska* (*The Chocim War*) by Wacław Potocki (1621 – 1696), the latter, although twice prepared for the press (1670, 1675), never printed in the author's lifetime. At the end of the 17th century the Lucanusque model of the epic was officially glorified: „in Latin heroic, or serious, poetry the most beautiful of all [...]—Lucanus”, wrote Stanisław Herakliusz Lubomirski in his *Rozmowy Artaxessa i Ewandra* (*Dialogues between Artaxess and Ewander*), 1683.

The development of the Baroque epos was preceded by the translations of two masterpieces of Italian literature, Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* and Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, both by Piotr Kochanowski (1566 – 1620), nephew of the Renaissance lyrical poet, Jan Kochanowski. It was, however, only *Goffred, albo Jeruzalem wyzwolona* (*Goffred, or Jerusalem Liberated*), as Kochanowski entitled his translation, which had an important bearing on the Baroque epic. Studies of this translation (among which those of Roman Pollak and Wiktor Weintraub are especially worth-mentioning) have shown that the translator—departing from the original—put the main emphasis on the heroic, shifting to the background the romance and the fantastic. It was this heroic thread which was taken up by Polish epic poetry of the Baroque, whereas the fantastic and love motifs of the work were imitated by the authors of verse romances. The nearest approach to the Tasso type of epos was the anonymous poem, written in the 2nd half of the 17th century, *Oblężenie Jasnej Góry Częstochowskiej* (*The Siege to the Church of Our Lady in Częstochowa*), describing the defence of the Paulite monastery on Jasna

Góra against the Swedish invasion, the event which was then considered to be the turning point in the war with the Swedes.

In occasional laudatory poems the subject of the poetic treatment was „the history of our days”, i. e. the events both the author and his first readers could have witnessed. The version of contemporary events presented in those poems greatly differed, however, from the ways the present was treated in other literary forms. Here the present was undergoing a transformation into a time marked by positive value: the present historical reality was becoming the epic past. Mikhail Bakhtin connects the mechanism of this ennoblement of the present with the appropriate selection of events, which find their way to a work „exclusively in their hierarchically higher strata” and are „treated at a distance because of their very place in the reality.” An author excludes, as it were, his characters and their deeds from the present and assigns to them „the level of those values which mark the past.” This was possible in a specific cultural context and, according to Bakhtin, the role of such a context was played by the epos which had preceded the development of poetry on the heroic exploits of the contemporaries. In Polish culture, where the epos presenting the ancient times was not known, the role of this context was played by the myth of knightly ancestors. In the consciousness of the 16th- and 17th-century people there was still cherished the conviction that the social vocation of the nobility, inherited from its progenitors, was military service. At the end of the 16th century those progenitors were identified with the Sarmatians (a tribe known to the ancient chronicles) who were said to have come to the territory of Poland from southern Europe in the remote, though indefinite, past. This myth was a rationalization of the belief in the privileged position of the nobility in the hierarchy of social classes, but it did not correspond to the reality, in which the role of the nobility was that of landowners, of the gentry. According to the myth, the nobility’s ancestors were characterized by prowess and courage, but also by austerity and contempt for the life of luxury (in literature this style of life was called “*żywot pieszczony*”, which may be crudely rendered as “the life of delights”). The idealized heroic epoch, this indefinite past when the knightly ancestors were supposed to have lived and performed their glorious feats, may be called—according to the typology proposed by the history of culture—“crude” primitivism.

“The history of our days” was also — most frequently — the epic substance of the 16th- and 17th-century heroic poetry and, like in triumphant odes and epicedia, it was transformed into the epic past. Sometimes, however, writers chose to deal with events which took place several generations before. This was the case of *Bellum Prutenum* by Jan of Wiślica: it was centred, as its title indicates, on a past event, namely on the battle of Grunwald, 1410, generally acknowledged to be the turning point in the history of wars with the Teutonic Order; songs about the battle, transmitted by the oral tradition, were still known in the 17th century. The event is presented, however, as an achievement of the dynastic progenitor of king Sigismund I, during whose reign the work was written. It is Sigismund I to whom the poem is addressed and on whose account the deeds of his grandfather are called to remembrance. We can recognize here the established pattern of a chronicle of kings’ and princes’ deeds. It is clear that of the three most frequently found variants of this pattern: a chronicle of the progenitor’s exploits; of the rulers linking the progenitor with the king during whose reign the chronicle is written; presentation of the deeds of the king ruling at the time of the chronicler, Jan of Wiślica chose the first one.

Also Waclaw Potocki in his *Wojna chocimska* deals with the past (the battle of Chocim, with the Turks, took place in 1621). But Potocki’s poem is not a tale about the war exploits of kings; it is an attempt at a “tale of the nobility.” The story of the battle is frequently interrupted by digressions, in which the past is confronted with the present, the former being identified with the epoch of flourish, the latter with decline. The past is here an indefinite time of myth, of the beginning and meridian, when the first and the best lived, and within this past the events connected with the battle of Chocim are included.

In the medieval chronicles, depicting the deeds of kings and princes, the heroes were presented according to conventions worked out either in the Classical or the Christian tradition. Comparative originality marks the figures of the pre-Christian rulers as presented by Wincenty Kadłubek (1160–1223); it was most likely due to the historical legends that had come down to the 12th century, transmitted through the oral tradition.

The body of conventions elaborated in the medieval chronicles had become the point of departure for the heroic poetry of the

16th and 17th century, in which three basic types of the heroic figure were formed, each of them gravitating towards a different interpretation of the epic motif of *fortitudo et sapientia*:

1. Combination of battle-field abilities with moral virtues, the primary importance attached to the latter; this was then heroism of the Virgilian Aeneas' type. But both the battle-field abilities and the moral virtues could be variously interpreted. What was meant by the former was either individual valour shown in direct confrontation with an enemy or mastery of the command of a great army (both are characteristic of e.g. the figure of Władysław Jagiełło in Jan of Wiślica's *Bellum Prutenum*). Moral virtues in turn were understood either as Christian piety (this was a characteristic of Władysław Jagiełło as presented by Jan Of Wiślica) or as self-control, which was usually associated with humane treatment of the enemy (this marks e.g. Stefan Batory in Jan Kochanowski's *Panu dzięki oddawajmy* (*Let Us Give Our Thanks To the Lord*)).

2. Combination of abilities and virtues of the warrior with the humanistic education and the cult of art (this type of the lover of Mars and Muses was presented by Samuel Twardowski in the title hero of his biographical poem *Władysław IV, król polski i szwedzki*).

3. The hero is a man chosen by God to fulfil the special mission: that of defending the Christian world against the infidels. His individual virtues and abilities revealed in the war operations decided about his being entrusted by Providence with the mission rather than the result of the battle, since the latter is in fact the act of God (this is how e. g. Wespazjan Kochowski, 1633–1700, interprets the heroism of Jan III Sobieski in his *Dzielo boskie albo pieśni Wiednia wybawionego – The Act of God or Songs of Vienna Delivered*, 1684). It is this concept of heroism which is represented by the Paulite Fathers in the anonymous poem *Oblężenie Jasnej Góry Częstochowskiej*: the bravery of the friars is of the spiritual, inner nature, since it consists in their putting their trust in God, who in His divine ways will decide the fate of the battle, exempting them, in fact, from any direct action. The wisdom of the heroes manifests in their overcoming the temptations of Satan who acts through their enemies, the dissenters, persuading the defenders to surrender.

The type of the knight-warrior, formed according to the above-presented patterns, performed the role of the postulated model of the life of the nobility and, starting with the end of the 16th century, it appeared also in non-heroic poetry. As a positive value it was contrasted with two other models: that of the gentry and that of the court, this opposition overlapping the opposition: the ancestors—the contemporaries. Its popularity was supported in the sphere of social ideas, by the myth of the Sarmatian ancestors, inconsistent as it was with the reality, where the nobleman attended to his country estate. To this myth burial rites of the nobility were subordinated, with their verbal and non-verbal forms which served to transform, as it were, the deceased into a warrior-ancestor. The forms connected with this custom were frequently subject to parody in that kind of literature which can be called, to borrow Bakhtin's term, "carnivalized" and which in Polish scholarship has been labeled "literatura sowizdrzalska."\*

In medieval chronicles the narrator identified himself with the role of the recorder who for his knowledge of the events he describes is indebted to persons that are significant in the social hierarchy (usually prelates). It was not until the beginning of the Renaissance that a chronicler—Jan Długosz (1415–1480) in his *Annales seu cronicae inclyti regni Poloniae*—presented himself as a scholar who had acquired his knowledge through source studies or witnessed the events he describes himself.

In occasional heroic poetry of the Renaissance and Baroque the narrator identified himself with the orator, inspired either by the Antique divinities (Apollo and Muses) or by the Christian God and saints. In the epos the role of the praising speaker (usually connected with the fact that the person to whom the poem was addressed—as often as not it was the then ruling king—was present in the text) intersected with the epic narrator. He revealed his presence in the invocation (which indicated the subject and repeated—in various meanings—the motif of the Muse) and in narrative references. The Lucanusesque character of this epic which did not operate with the internally motivated sequence of events required

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\* See p. 162, footnote 2.

continuous comment on the side of the narrator, who could signal his manipulations, such as time inversions, introduction of digressions, all kinds of reticencies and cuts made in the chronicle.

The invocation defined also the role of the narrator: he identified himself with the poet who acquired his knowledge through inspiration (understood according to either the Antique or Christian tradition) or through mastery of the poetic craftsmanship and source studies. Comparatively seldom did the narrator present himself in the role of the rhapsodist, i.e. of the one who describes the events known to his public and regarded by it to be true.

To the heroes of the presented events the author kept his distance, as if intimidated by the greatness and brilliance of their exploits (this found its expression in making use of the motif of the Muse in apostrophies to the hero). Towards the reader who generally was an element of the poem (he was directly addressed) the narrator assumed the pose of the mentor: he pointed out the defects of the contemporaries, attacking them in a serious manner, characteristic of Juvenal's satire, i. e. without any intention of ridiculing, and he exhorted to imitating the heroes, whom he treated as the knightly ancestors, as "models of the Old-Polish virtue."

Sum. by the author

Transl. by *Maria-Bożenna Fedewicz*

Janina Abramowska, **Ład i Fortuna. O tragedii renesansowej w Polsce (L'Ordre et la Fortune. De la tragédie Renaissance en Pologne)**, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1974, *Studia Staropolskie*, T. XL.

Le XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle n'est pas une période particulièrement riche dans l'histoire du drame polonais. Le nombre de textes conservés est peu élevé et leur valeur littéraire et théâtrale mérite rarement le qualificatif de remarquable. Ce matériau est cependant intéressant pour le chercheur pour une raison tout autre: au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle justement se décide le sort et se constitue la forme moderne du drame et du théâtre. Nous y retrouvons les indices de voies évolutives parfois abandonnées dans l'avenir, plus souvent cependant poursuivies. Les