

What was ridiculous for a Sarmatian, and what made him smile

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The word *Sarmatian* has been used here in two meanings – one for a group and one for an individual. We speak here of Polish gentry from XVII century. In looking for their roots, members of this group most frequently quoted the legendary *Sarmatian* nation that, accordingly to tradition, centuries ago lived on the Volga river area and during his wandering arrived to Poland over Vistula river. The idea of such roots of Polish nation (and especially of its noble part – the gentry) emerged some time in XIV century, but the status of official theory it obtained during Renaissance. Grounding of this theory was mainly based on: *Sarmatiae Europaeae descriptio* by Aleksander Gwagnin, (...) *Chronicles of Poland, Lithuania and all Russia* by Maciej Strykowski and *Annales, sive de origine et rebus gestis Polonorum et Lithuanorum, libri octo* by Stanisław Sarnicki. For the XVII century's gentry, the identification with Sarmatians was something obvious and this word started to mean old-Polish character.

This same we can say of Waclaw Potocki. He is a typical representative of these old-Polish characters and his writing creativity is a source for analyzing of the Sarmatian's comic. Potocki is today one of most highly rated authors from Polish baroque era, and he is reckoned as typical (though not without some share of individualism) gentleman of Sarmatian's credo. He reached this position only during the last century. In preceding time period his big – hundredths of thousands of lines – writer's heritage, was only known in small fraction as this either remained in handwriting, or it was erroneously attribution to other authors. By the way, his contemporaries issued probably only one (and not highly praised, too) work – *Poczet herbów szlachty Korony Polskiej i Wielkiego Księ-*

stwa Litewskiego (*The catalog of coats of arms of the noble in Poland and Grand Duchy of Lithuania*) printed in 1697 in Cracow.

This catalogue has not presented in full the capabilities of the author. There were two reasons: first – this work does not belong to his best achievements, second – before going to printers, probably pressed by censor, Potocki “edited” the work, removing large part of the text (about 16% in all from almost 29 thousands of verses). This part is known as *Odjemek od Herbów szlacheckich* (*The extract*). Literature historians found that between these reasons were also political deliberations. *The catalog* was antiaristocratic and pro-royal in tone. Author has removed these parts that weakened this tone (Kuchowicz 1957). Mostly still the poet softened the obscenity and excluded all frivolities and coarse texts. He confirmed this move, writing in the excluded part:

“J have excluded jokes from serious problems
As the ashes from rye, to unconnected pages”¹

It’s necessary to add, that he didn’t made it consequently, and this caused very critical remarks from moralistically thinking historians of literature and these remarks were directed against all the work. This lack of systematic approach is a reason for relating to both works in any description of comical sense that is connected with his description of heraldry symbols.

We have marked previously connections between obscenity and comicality. It would be, however, too narrow a view to limit the genesis in *The catalog* to obscenities. In our opinion the theory best explaining the character of comicality in catalog, is the theory of deviation from standards (from standards of decency, too). We can take this theory as a main one in comparison to others, like: negatives, degradation, contradictions (Dziemidok 1967: 15). It’s characteristic that between comicality theorists, assuming that main part of this aspect depends on “deviation from standard” is between others Jan Stanisław Bystron in his *Dzieje obyczajów w dawnej Polsce, wiek XVI-XVIII* (*History of customs in ancient Poland of XVI-XVIII age*) illustrated his own findings just with fragments of Potocki’s works.

1 All citations from “The extract” are quoted from: W. Potocki, *Odjemek od Herbów szlacheckich*. Z rękopisów: Biblioteki Kórnickiej, Biblioteki Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, Biblioteki Narodowej odczytali, wstępem i komentarzami opatrzyli M. Łukasiewicz i Z. Pentek, Poznań 1997. All citations from *The catalog* are quoted from: W. Potocki, *Poczet herbów szlachty Korony Polskiej i Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego*, Kraków 1696.

The theory quoted above is best related to satirical texts. It is important to note that in Potocki's works we have two sorts of comicality i. e. satirical and humorous. The first one is critical against reality and rather aggressive. He is negatively underlining all, that according to author's views should be thrown away (Gutowski 1973: 264). Potocki is reckoned as moralist, continuously trying to teach others of decency, sometimes even overdoing it, being most critical against all people, especially the Polish gentry. Some signs of degeneration of this social strata has been shown also in catalog, partially in texts that contain the word "joke". Such parts there are 14 (5 of them in *The catalog*). They mainly contain simple-though not aggressive-jokes, though in a printed book two works are decidedly aggressive. First one of them – headed *Joke to this one* (i. e. to the priest) the joke is definitely anticlerical. The main fault of this priest (whose heraldic symbol was a fork) is he doesn't care of his "sheep" and grabs instead everything around, pressing them to tears (Cat. 321). The next work, named *The joke to nobles* is addressed to one named Achingier (in his coat of arms there is a nut cracker animal) and contains a sarcastic remark to this symbol, that "his tail is very short" – this means as a metaphorical picture of longevity of one's ancestry – it suggests that the nobility has been obtained (possibly bought!) not so long ago. Such a new-born nobility was in author's eyes, discrediting. Such view is typical for Sarmatians mentality – very conservative one.

"In *The catalog* (...) we can find more evidences that the problem of nobility, of infiltration of the noble state by *low grade* people was one of Potocki's nightmares. His hate, he expressed against *fresh nobles* – bourgeois and foreigners was expressed in words that mostly are non printable. He even thought (as said to it) that differences between gentlemen and "lowborn" is obvious even in their external appearance"(Gruchala 1992: LXIII).

Both of examples above have been chosen purposefully. Author's irony was frequently directed against these "fresh nobles" and the clergy living in not decent style. The main reason of this choice is a fact that the sense of irony is based on the symbols in coat of arms, and this relates to all works, both in a *The catalog* and in *The extract*. The symbol or words of device are for the author a good basis for the world, he builds. This fact, that we have here numerous variations on the theme of heraldic symbols, caused some monotony, that is unavoidable when one reads so large a work without pause. It's possible that author didn't himself plan such a style of reading. Description of heraldic symbols gave only the pretexts to sad, though comical, opinions. They were based on certainty and faith of author, that virtues traditionally connected with knighthood are falling below reasonable level what itself causes the loss of territory of the country, grabbed by Poland's neighbours. No wonder that between derogatory types, one of

main ones is so called “house-bound” man, being a typical symbol of conveniently living country gentleman. Such a man has gone far away from standards put by fighting, brave knights from times passed long ago. The myth of gentle ancestors is very frequently used by the author. Here, author followed the Cicero in his: “The orator’s aim is to cause listeners to smile (...) as the joke makes enemy’s life difficult, caused him to get afraid, weakens him” (*De oratore*, II 58), so author tried here to use comicality as a form of persuasion. His method of humiliating the enemy is demonstrated against the *Jelita* (*Guts*) gentleman, saying that he has “all his guts in his ass”, he can only “sit and pierce his seat with gut’s gases” (Ext. 93). The next one *Namiot* – with *tent* symbol received a *good advice* to make a night jar from his helmet (Ext. 106). For the *Korwin* (*Corvus* – the crow) that used the symbol of black crow, author suggests that the owner should exchange this Noah’s messenger and replace it with ordinary hen. If one remembers that dignity and honour were cornerstones of nobility, one can appreciate the force with which author assaults his victims, trying to made them ridiculous and to press them to return to old style of ascetic fighter.

It’s one of permanent features in such a literature that political and economical status of the country is connected with level of morality of his people. This level is usually criticized as a reason of bad relations in the country. Potocki here is quite similar to other Polish writers. No wonder that he derogated all deviations from accepted decency. There was the avarice, in comparison with Sarmatian accepted “spend your all possessions but show the style” (a bit like Indian potlach). More frequently author criticized alcoholism. We feel that known opinions about the affinity to alcohol in baroque are exaggerated (and some take here also the beer, that in Poland wasn’t an alcohol, rather a basic drink (Kuchowicz 1975: 61) but it’s futile to deny that between Polish gentry the strong head (alcohol-resistant) was highly appreciated. The *table sessions* were one of basic *duties* and forms of social activity. The end of such a *sessions* was rather mundane and inaesthetic.

“Most of participants lied flat under tables, those remaining made a lot of loud cries, broke glasses, dumped candles, used swords to beat servants, duelled, cut noses, ears – even killed companions” (Kuchowicz 1975: 94).

For Potocki one of reasons to assault such people, come from economics. The costs of Hungarian wine caused many to overspend their money, and all this ended in a loss of position. Author warned a gentleman *Leliwa* (the half moon and star) that when he will drink-over everything, his moon will rise no more (Cat. 65). He insisted that fully drunk gentleman has nothing in common with Sarmatians (allegedly Sarmatians drank water only). Most acutely author describes the

man that used *Suche komnaty* (*Dry rooms*) symbol as when he got drunk, nothing is dry around, everything covered by vomit, and a head full of mud (Cat. 560). Between over 10 texts about alcohol only 2-3 are humorous without humiliation. An example is the *Korwin*, where Potocki makes his name as coming from *heart* (lat. *cor*) and *wine* so – *heart full of wine*. Similarly it's with *Bibersztejn* – author suggests, the owner of the name should rather choose *Weinsztejn*. Most simple is here the genesis of the symbol *Doliwa* (in Polish this means – *re-fill*) – three roses: when the owner died, roses have fallen, so Potocki prays to Lord to give the died gentleman a full lot of wine. By the way, if someone didn't drink at all, it was, in author's opinion, nothing better.

There is one more area that was widely and strictly regulated – the erotism. In Potocki's works this theme is frequently used, mostly with more or less obscene allusions. His raw humour doesn't mean acceptance for every possible sexual behaviour. Some subjects crossed permitted limits (mostly based religion but also by health reasons) especially between aristocracy. Sexual diseases caused not only bad health but also unnatural biological behaviour or degeneration – even in all members of families (Kuchowicz 1992: 122). Such a problem one could find also in a family of Sobieski – heirs of so highly praised by author, Polish king Johannes III. In the catalog such persons were described as victims of *court smallpox*. *Court* because for simple country gentleman, the court was a place of everything wrong and abomination. Author stress that such *victims* have unpleasant appearance, especially ruined complexion. Picking the gentleman of *Dria* symbol, author ironically suggests that to three stones (gems) in his coat of arms he added a hundred new ones on his forehead and that he now “needs a gem expert on his ass” (Ext. 140). It's true that author didn't expose the ethical side though one has to remember that in XVII century still it was requested from a warrior that he should be of noble appearance (Ossowska 1986: 71).

There is another side of erotism that makes the author anger: Potocki was a moralist, a defender of traditional style of matrimony, with the husband a bit older than a wife. If there was too large distance of age between partners (old men marrying girls or young men marrying old women) Potocki suggests that such partners were bound with money. E.g. young *Pilawa* (means *wood-cutter*) married *old branch* for her *golden wood powder* (Ext. 9). These opinions are dangerously close to bad-tasted but it's only author's anger. We take as exemplum two works. First – *Korwin* married old woman because crows love old fallen victims (Cat. 148). The second remained in handwriting because of very sharp-drastic sense. A young boy married very old miss with *Panna z trąbami* (*Young lady with tubes*), that during the day barks like bitch and during the night changes to

uncontrollable pig (Ext. 43). What is strange – in the system that requests the respect for older people – there is a lot of works that show these older in depreciating light. Not the advanced age is here a reason, but the choice of partner that was incompatible with standards, not only in age but in riches or social strata.

The *house-bound* man, drunkard, victim of *court smallpox*, incompatible marriages make main *heroes* of satirical works. The joke was not only for smile. It was a method of engaging people into moral and social problems. To make such ones ridiculous, was no obstacle against humor. Potocki repeated Aristotle's rule that the difference between an animal and a human is ability to smile. So he did his best to supply opportunities for smile. He knew that theme should be well known to reader, so a big part of humor he connected with family feasts.

In the times of baroque *familiar poetry* was already well founded and was always present during newborn's feasts, name-giving, weddings and – of course – funerals (Ślękowa 1991). The catalog contains also such poetry, though author does not necessarily keeps strict order in the type of work. If in the head of a poem the theme is quoted, then it's only a basis for writing a work for entertainment. Of course, this does not work in the case of epitaphs. The tradition of joking epitaphs was then well known (Koehler 1998: 61) – author used it in other works, but in *The catalog* all epitaphs are serious and grave enough. The name-giving (christening of newborn) and wedding give opportunity to express humorous approach. It's "underground" meaning are often obscene, and these "family life" poems frequently touch the sexual life. No doubt, this sort of humour was very popular between Sarmatians. They officially often assaulted such side of life, but they were not ascetic and such – no doubt inelegant – remarks were always welcome. Trying to entertain his readers, author concentrates on events of *first night* in wedding ceremony, and on passing by the new-married bride from the status of girl to wife. He, of course, again alludes here the heraldic symbols. Such obscene subjects are more frequent in *The extract* than in *The catalog*. Potocki was no purist, anyway, but in official edition he *flattened* too rough opinions. It's, possibly, connected with the role of heraldic catalog generally, as such edition should be addressed to girl with the crayfish (crab) in coat of arms. Author states that the girl does not behave as crab, she does not *keep her legs crossed* but also *does not try to wound the finger* (Ext. 53). A bit of roughness one can find also in a joke addressed to gentleman with *Wieniawa* symbol (the head of a bison). Author describes him as a "horn animal, whose horn more often hangs down than stands up" (Ext. 32). It's interesting to note that especially in erotic works, there are shades of Petrarca, whose poetry was not close to old-Polish traits at all. It's typical in works contained in "The extract" that description

of women – in Petrarca style – is placed in the beginning of the poem, to be later negated by rough style, elements of sexuality (quite non-Platonic). Such “breaking” of rules of Petrarca’s poetry appears not only in Sarmatian part of literature, but it’s worth of note to demonstrate how strong was the influence of *Sonnets to Laura* author on baroque poetry. Potocki uses it in the poem addressed to a lady with *Przyjaciół* (*Friend*) symbol (the heat pierced by arrow). Author begins with descriptions from the cruelty of this beautiful girl, but ends with a promise: “J will put the blind bolt in the hole” (Ext. 49). Similar method of building of text one can find in a work describing as a gentleman signed *Korczak*, puts his sadness on a lady signed *Gwiazda* (*Star*), telling, she must be Canicula (Sirius) as she makes men to burn in heat, makes them being mad. The only healing he finds in putting on his head of a black hen dead (one can expell the demon this way) and he will then repay with a “cock that all the night signs and sits on eggs”. (Ext. 97). Examples quoted above are not typical for most erotic texts. Usually, obscene allusions were placed by author in texts in random style, when the text was addressed to girl, wife or widow. There was no critics against women (rather against not too eager husbands), but only the reason for healthy smile. Words in jokes are a play – baroque remembers of Hippocrate’s smile therapy. It’s to note that, when these “family life” obscene poems were in the lesser degree based on the contrasts between life and decency, the last of poem’s group described here is a typical one. We say here of poems addressed to bald-headed persons. The bald head – lack of hairs – was for Potocki a feature that made all the difference between bald one and others – something of an anomaly. Such motifs are so frequent that one has to take conclusions that – first: in XVII century in Poland, there were more bald ones than *hairy* ones, second: that the *polished* bald head becomes an obsession for the author. Seriously, he plays again and although jokes are sometimes aggressive, most important is to enjoy the game. One can find this in a poem addressed to a gentleman signed *Prus* (in a coat of arms there was a hunter’s trap). Author says, there is quite a good reason for such a symbol, as the owner can this way to hunt and catch flies that slide down his head, to the thick beard, he owns (Cat. 354). Also ridiculous (though not especially pleasant) comment earned the gentleman signed *Okno* (*Window*) – reputedly when he stood in a open window some by-passer begun to throw stones on his head, suspecting that the unlucky gentleman demonstrates in a window his ass (Ext. 46). It’s not especially sublime, but typical as a Sarmatian style of culture was not very representative between members of this age’s élite. This way author can tell us so much of the life of average gentry’s member in baroque’s Poland.

The comicality of Potocki's catalog reflects medieval mentality of XVIIth century gentry. It's a form of comicality that is engaged in social problems, attacking indecent social behaviour, criticizing everything that didn't agree with traditional values. Nonetheless (not with standing many opinions against "overdoing the enjoys of life") one can find here also texts containing pure humour and very close to the "full of niceties table" way of life of Polish XVII century gentry.

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Co śmieszyło Sarmatów

Artykuł traktuje o typie komizmu charakterystycznego dla kultury sarmackiej, czyli kultury średniozamożnej szlachty polskiej żyjącej w XVII w. Egzemplifikacje owego komizmu pochodzą z twórczości uznawanego za typowego Sarmatę, Wacława Potockiego, a konkretnie z jedyne go wydanego za życia pod jego nazwiskiem dzieła, tzn. z *Pocztu herbów szlachty Korony Polskiej i Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego* (Kraków 1697) oraz z *Odjemka od Herbów szlacheckich*, na który złożyły się teksty usunięte przez autora z oficjalnej edycji.

Obecność komizmu w obu zbiorach jest bardzo widoczna, a najlepiej go charakteryzuje teoria odchylenia od normy. Odnosi się ona zwłaszcza do tych tekstów, w których dominuje satyra skierowana przeciw wszelkim przejawom odchodzenia od tradycji. Stąd krytyka „domatorów”, czyli szlachty unikającej służenia krajowi

mieczem, stąd ataki na „świeżo upieczoną” brać szlachecką, na pijaków (ale też całkowitych abstynentów), w końcu - na rozpustników zapadłych na „dworską chorobę” i niedobrane (zwłaszcza wiekowo) pary małżeńskie. Erotyzm to zresztą podstawowe źródło komizmu w herbarzach Potockiego. Właśnie w tekstach obscenicznym pojawia się inny, nie wynikający już głównie z chęci moralizowania typ komizmu, tzn. komizm humorystyczny, dobroduszny. Tu chodzi o rozbawienie odbiorcy, o bez troski śmiech wywołany czytelnymi aluzjami do cielesności.

Inną grupą utworów mających za zadanie bawić są te, których bohaterem jest łysy (Potocki traktuje ową przypadłość jako anomalię). Żarty z pozbawionych włosów szlachciców nie są wysublimowane, lecz dotyczy to całej twórczości autora obu zbiorów, pełnej sarmackiej rubasności. Za kolejną cechę wspólną dla zawierających pierwiastek komicznych wierszy z *Pocztu* i *Odjemka* uznać trzeba wreszcie umiejętne stosowanie gier słownych nawiązujących do wyglądu herbu lub do jego proklamy (np. nadużywającemu alkoholu przedstawicielowi rodu Biberszteinów radził Potocki zmianę nazwy na Weinsztein).