

On Franciszek Ksawery Dmochowski's *The Art of Rhyming*

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Franciszek Ksawery Dmochowski's *The Art of Rhyming* was published in 1788 by the Warsaw Piarists.¹ Already in the same year, a second edition was prepared, whose popularity would continue unabated until the early nineteenth century.² The work was intended to serve as a textbook for the pupils of Piarist colleges, but although it was prepared with educational purposes in mind, the range of its influence turned out to be much broader. Dmochowski's synthesis of his perspectives as a literary theorist, codifier, and critic made it possible for him to present the totality of poetic experience of his era.³ An ambitious teacher and lecturer at colleges in Radom, Łomża and Warsaw, and the author of an unusually modern ethics textbook relying on a secular hierarchy of values, Dmochowski followed the newest developments and tendencies in literature, and presented them in his didactic poem.⁴ He inscribed his work within the tradition, going back to antiquity, of the *ars poetica* genre. In the dedication to the king that precedes the work and stands as a kind of programmatic declaration, he refers to the sets of rules and poetic art forms written by Aristotle, Horace, Marco Girolamo Vida, Alexander Pope, and Nicolas Boileau. The author of *The Art of Rhyming* took the views of his predecessors into account as he laid out the program of eighteenth-century Polish classicism.⁵ The plan of his poem was clearly indebted to Boileau's "L'art poétique," which was likewise constructed

¹ W Drukarni J.K. Mci i Rzeczypospolitej u Księży Scholarum Piarum.

² It was published a third time in Wilno (today Vilnius) in 1820, and a fourth edition revised based on authorial instructions was prepared by Franciszek Salezy Dmochowski, as part of the collection of his father's Selected Writings which he prepared (Warszawa 1826). *Oświeceni o literaturze* (Enlightenment Authors on Literature), ed. T. Kostkiewiczowa and Z. Goliński, vol. 1, Warszawa 1993, p. 357. The most illuminating critical edition – using the version developed by Stanisław Pietraszka in the Biblioteka Narodowa series in 1956 r. – is the text prepared by T. Kostkiewiczowa and Z. Goliński in the book *Oświeceni o literaturze*, pp. 358-430. All quotations of the poem in this article are taken from that edition; song and line numbers are provided in parentheses in the main body text.

³ M. Klimowicz, *Oświecenie* (The Enlightenment), Warszawa 1998, p. 283; T. Kostkiewiczowa, "Franciszek Ksawery Dmochowski," in: *Pisarze polskiego oświecenia* (Polish Writers of the Enlightenment), ed. T. Kostkiewiczowa and Z. Goliński, vol. 2, Warszawa 1994, p. 259.

⁴ T. Kostkiewiczowa, "Franciszek Ksawery Dmochowski," p. 256.

⁵ S. Pietraszko, *Doktryna literacka polskiego klasycyzmu* (The Literary Doctrine of Polish Classicism), Wrocław 1966.

out of four cantos and combined poetic guidelines with literary criticism directed at other French authors.⁶ But one would hardly call Dmochowski's poem a translation or paraphrase of Boileau's work. The Polish poem was written over a hundred years later, and its author was affected by changes in the perception of literature that took place in the intervening period. He also used Polish examples and discussed many works relevant to the context of Polish literary history, thus providing a foundation for modern literary criticism in Poland.

The poem, divided into four cantos, not only discusses general principles of poetic art, but also deals with questions of translation and literary criticism; it presents models of various genres and analyzes their most accomplished Polish incarnations. Its composition, focused on genre organization, places emphasis on the rank of the literary genre, claiming it to be an integral part of the essence of poetry itself.⁷ The first song presents the basic rules of the art of rhyming and contains a survey of the accomplishments of Polish literature, in which superior status is accorded the works of Jan Kochanowski, Adam Naruszewicz and Ignacy Krasicki. It is they who have reached the heights of literary Parnassus, the author claims, though he adds that one can expect equally outstanding artists to appear under the enlightened rule of King Stanisław August Poniatowski, a great patron of the arts. The poets who preceded Kochanowski, an early humanist in the medieval period, did not find renown in Dmochowski's eyes. Their intonational verse and end-stopped lines, viewed in terms of classical criteria, struck him as disorderly, and medieval consonance did not meet the criteria elaborated and imposed by Kochanowski.

For long our mother tongue was held in low regard
 As unfit to write in. But happily a bard
 Inspired with genius, came and illuminated
 The path: Jan Kochanowski, for greatness fated,
 Opened the nation's eyes with his verse creations,
 Perfected rhymes deathless, his own fabrications.
 He tuned the Slavic lute's strings, that it might now speak
 And convey the great classics of Latin and Greek,
 He filled the harps of David with resonant sound,
 In smart braids the Sarmatian Muses' hair he bound.

(I, 271-280)

Here Dmochowski uses the metaphor of hair care to illustrate his praise for Kochanowski's poetic craft, in which he equalled the poets of antiquity, and by which he brought Polish literature to heights unreached since the ancient Greeks and Romans. Thanks to Kochanowski, the Polish muses do not imitate Greek or Roman women, and are not adorned with delicate weaves or Greek-style chignons. They wear hairstyles typical of Polish daily life, in keeping with Polish customs, but also full of harmony, symmetry, and decorum. A poetic genius who is the equal of Horace does not blindly imitate antique meters, but replaces them with equal-

⁶ Z. Libera, *Rozważania o wieku tolerancji, rozumie i gustu. Szkice o XVIII stuleciu* (Thoughts on the Age of Tolerance, Reason, and Taste. Sketches on the Eighteenth Century), Warszawa 1994, p. 230.

⁷ Z. Libera, *Rozważania o wieku tolerancji, rozumie i gustu*, Warszawa 1994, p. 233.

ly harmonious constructions that form naturally within the grammar and sound system of the Polish language. Among Kochanowski's successors—not flawless poets, but undoubtedly talented and worthy of attention—Dmochowski named Piotr Kochanowski, the translator of Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, Wespazjan Kochowski, the author of *Niepróżnujące próżnowania ojczystym rymem na liryka i epigramata polskie rozdzielonym i wydany*, Samuel Twardowski, an esteemed epic poet, referred to as the Sarmatian Maron, Wojciech Chróściński, author of heroic long poems, Walerian Otwinowski, translator of the works of Virgil, Waclaw Potocki, praised in the poem for his successful adaptations of neo-Latin romances, and Szymon Szymonowic and Szymon Zimorowic, authors of idylls.

In Dmochowski's poem, reflections on literature are accompanied by remarks on linguistic culture and literary criticism. The Polish language of the Enlightenment era, proficient in literary texts, made increasingly bold use of scientific discourse, and intensively developed its lexical resources as they became enriched by borrowings and neologisms. The author of *The Art of Rhyming* argued against resorting too freely to inventing new words, and advised using the existing repertoire. "Do not create new words, as long as the old are suitable," he writes in the poem (I, 360). He also expressed quite modern views on literary criticism. Among other things, he warned against flatterers, while enjoining his readers to listen to constructive, friendly criticism. A writer, he taught, must retain a vigilant, distanced attitude toward his own work. Popularity, plentiful praise, and multiple editions are not the measure of a work's quality:

The shoddiest work will find many believers,
It will find printers everywhere, and find readers,
Rare is he who weighs a work in the right scales.
The dumb will find a dumber one, riding's coattails.
(I, 449-452)

The next (second and third) cantos of *The Art of Rhyming* present a survey of various genre conventions. Following in Virgil's footsteps, Dmochowski first discusses works written in the low and middle styles: the idyll and elegy. Not finding a satisfactory example of the latter in Polish lyric poetry, Dmochowski cites Kochanowski's *Lamentations* as a work which masterfully gives voice to the "devastation to which human life / is constantly exposed" (II, 100-101). Dmochowski describes particular genres based on an analysis of selected examples, observing that the rules he presents need not be slavishly adhered to. He was conscious of the fact that artistic innovation is necessary in order for masterpieces, which cannot be imitative with regard to existing literary forms, to be created.

Among the conventions taken from ancient literature—together with the song, the ode and the epigram—a special place is set aside in Dmochowski's argument for satire, an important phenomenon in the culture of the Polish enlightenment. Unlike the poets of antiquity and French classicism, Polish poets of the eighteenth century took to writing anonymous satirical criticism, condemning the flaws and shortcomings of society, but avoiding personal attacks. In the passages concerning satire, *The Art of Rhyming* shifts from a normative to a descriptive poetics. Citing the views of Ignacy Krasicki and Adam Naruszewicz, expressed by those poets in their satires "Do króla" (To the King) and "Szlachetność" (Nobility)—Dmochowski writes:

Satire does not attack particular fellows;
 It bows to persons, but at customs it bellows.
 Satire speaks truth, without fear or favor,
 Loves the office, honors kings, judges behavior.
 Satire, keeping close friendship with virtue,
 Reproaches your sins, but will never hurt you.
 This true spirit of satire is crucial to its plan
 To mock foibles, scold errors, and spare the man.

(II, 189-196)

The principle of anonymity in satirical criticism played a very important role in shaping the Enlightenment approach to the genre. Other poets of the Polish Enlightenment who spoke out in its favor included Wacław Rzewuski, Filip Neriusz Golański, Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski and—earlier, in the baroque era—Krzysztof Opaliński. An opposing position was taken only by Franciszek Zabłocki, who spoke out against the strictures of *The Art of Rhyming* shortly after its publication, although he had previously made a scrupulous effort to remove all references to particular persons from Boileau's satires while working on translating them into Polish.⁸

Dmochowski enthusiastically emphasized the originality of Polish literature, highlighted its specific features and assiduously described all of the achievements that made it exceptional among European accomplishments. In the third canto of *The Art of Rhyming*, he deals with two genres cherished in every national literature, the drama and the epic poem. Here he showed himself to be a partisan of classical drama, preserving the principle of decorum, built on rapid, straightforward action and providing "an outlet for the soul" (the equivalent of Aristotelian catharsis) (III, 301). The Old Polish drama and theater tradition did not meet with approval from this adherent of Enlightenment classicism, who wrote with typical severity that "for many years our theater remained shabby" (III, 175), who criticized medieval dialogues, school dramas, mystery plays, and from whose harsh judgment even Kochanowski's play *Odprawie posłów greckich* (The Dismissal of the Greek Envoys) was not exempted. Despite the great admiration he felt for Kochanowski's oeuvre, Dmochowski did not understand his dramatized history of the "bawdy kingdom," reading it as a mere replica of ancient drama, an adaptation of a fragment from an immortal epic poem. The timeless character of the work and the universal message of its story escaped him, and he was likewise oblivious to the playwright's innovative attempts to introduce metric verse into the Polish language. Dmochowski tops off his complaint with a reference to the letter from Kochanowski to Jan Zamojski included in the first edition of *Odprawy*: "One thing only redeemed the work from vainglory, / that the virtuous man confessed it was hoary" (III, 193-194). The phrase Dmochowski refers to in Kochanowski's letter, the statement that the play is fit to be eaten by moths or used as an ear-trumpet, is not, however, an instance of self-criticism by the great poet of Czarnolas, but rather an exordial topos of modesty and a counterpoint to the praise of the chorus's third song, which, in the author's words, "holds its own beside the Greek chorus"—he claims it to equal the stasimons of the Greek tragedians. Dmochowski failed to grasp these subtleties

⁸ J.T. Pokrzywniak, "Wstęp" (Introduction) , in: I. Krasicki, *Satyry* (Satires), Wrocław 1999, 3rd ed., pp. IV-V.

and stated regretfully that “in tragic art we small in stature were” (III, 217), though he was unstinting in his praise for Polish comedians, who were true to the Enlightenment principle of combining instruction and amusement.

The Art of Rhyming devotes considerable energy to discussions of the heroic epic poem. Dmochowski had studied the conventions of the genre thoroughly, as he completed the first Polish translation of Homer’s *Iliad*. He replaced Homer’s hexameter with rhyming 13-syllable lines, and made the Achaeans the “Greek nations,” instilling in Polish culture for centuries to come the belief that the war was fought between Greeks and Trojans. The twentieth-century Polish translation by K. Jeżewska maintained this tradition, though it also describes the anger of Achilles in the invocation as “bringing perdition and innumerable disasters to the Achaeans.”⁹ Many theoretical pronouncements on literature from Dmochowski’s era discuss the question of the proper form for an eighteenth-century epic poem,¹⁰ expressing the unfulfilled longing of Dmochowski’s contemporaries. The Polish language of the Enlightenment era had reached a complex enough stage of development to cope with the conventions of the heroic epic poem—the king of the various epic genres—and thereby confirm that in its artistic possibilities, it was the peer of the Latin and Greek languages. At the same time, the attempt to create a heroic epic poem met with increasing difficulties because it appeared impossible, in an age of rationalism and sensualism, to develop a suspension of disbelief and acceptance of the fantastic that would correspond to the ancient world of the Olympian gods and goddesses.

Dmochowski’s prescription for introducing the plane of the fantastic into the modern epic was to replace ancient myths with Christian stories, and the pagan gods with spirits of hell, since to portray heavenly forces engaged in earthly conflicts struck him as unseemly. On the other hand, he saw that ancient tradition could be useful for creating allegories and enriching the poetic language with various phraseologies and figures of speech. The hero of a modern Polish heroic epic poem would be a great man—wise, religious, great of heart, courageous, and trusting in God. As models for the depiction of such a type, Dmochowski cited not only the works of Homer, but also Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, both of which built fantastic worlds based on Christian myth. There were no true heroic epics in Polish literature yet,¹¹ but Dmochowski mentioned Krasicki’s comic-heroic epic *Myszeida* and placed its author within the ranks of epic poets.

The fact that Dmochowski cites *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* as the most accomplished examples of the epic genre, and values ancient Greek literature over the Roman classics, unlike Boileau (who preferred Virgil), shows his critical attitudes to be progressive, in tune with the late eighteenth-century tendency. Dmochowski deviated in many aspects from the guidelines laid

⁹ Homer, *Iliada* (The Iliad), trans. K. Jeżewska, ed. J. Łanowski, Warszawa 2005, p. 17.

¹⁰The following texts are particularly important in this regard: *O wymowie i poezji* (On Pronunciation and Poetry) by Filip Neriusz Golański (1786), *Sztuka rymotwórcza* (The Art of Rhyming) by Franciszek Ksawery Dmochowski (1788), *O rymotwórstwie i rymotwórcach* (On Rhyming and Rhymers) by Ignacy Krasicki (written 1790-1799), *Wybór różnych gatunków poezji z rymotwórców polskich* (A Selection of Various Genres of Poetry from Polish Rhymers) by Onufry Górski (1806-1807), *O poezji w ogólności* (On Poetry in General) by Tomasz Euzebiusz Słowacki (1826) and *Wykład literatury porównawczej* (Lecture on Comparative Literature) by Ludwik Osiński (1818-1830).

¹¹Krasicki’s unsuccessful attempt at an epic poem, *Wojna chocimska* (The Khotyn War) is not mentioned in *The Art of Rhyming*.

out by Boileau, and deliberately followed current and new trends in his poem. He did, to be sure, borrow such concepts as taste, genius, wit (*esprit* and *bel esprit*) and nature from French classicism, but made some modifications to their meaning: he portrayed genius as a creative force with the power to undermine norms and defy conventions. Because he believed in the supremacy of artistic values over disciplined observance of rules and was aware of the changes taking place in literature in his time, Dmochowski warned against the petrification of genres and placed a high premium on poetic innovation, and its ability to infuse new blood into poetry.¹² In addition to this view of genius, Dmochowski's selection of literary exemplars also reveals a modern, even pre-Romantic aspect to his thought. His placement of Milton's dark poem beside the well-established epics of antiquity and his references to Young's elegies as examples (together with Kochanowski's *Lamentations*) of lyric poetry that elicits powerful emotions indicate the advanced tastes of the author of *The Art of Rhyming*.¹³ In the second canto, a survey of particular subgenres of lyric poetry, Dmochowski leaves out any discussion of such important forms as the sonnet, the madrigal, the rondeau, which had a prominent place in the French literary tradition and in Boileau's verse treatise. Instead, he devotes attention to forms rooted in the Polish literary tradition: the *frasque* (viewed as a type of epigram) and the fable. In *The Art of Rhyming*, Dmochowski managed to present a coherent poetic system, a feat most authors of similar works had striven in vain to accomplish. By limiting the poem's scope to the subject of rhyming, he succeeded in producing a tightly-constructed argument, reflecting the actual state of the art of versification and dealing with its dominant tendencies. His didactic poem went considerably beyond the bounds of its design, becoming both a rhyming literary theory treatise and a testimony to the modern view of literary creation. Dmochowski's poem played a huge role in popularizing this modern approach to literature and its tasks, anticipating the manifestoes of modern times.¹⁴

¹²M. Klimowicz, *Oświecenie*, p. 280.

¹³The works of Milton and Young were used by the Polish clergy in its battle against deism. See M. Klimowicz, *Oświecenie*, p. 278.

¹⁴Z. Libera, *Rozważania o wieku tolerancji, rozumu i gustu*, Warszawa 1994, p. 231.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

art of rhyming

ars poetica

literary criticism

ABSTRACT:

Franciszek Ksawery Dmochowski's *Art of Rhyming* presents a summary of the poetic developments of its era. The author inscribed his work within the tradition, dating to antiquity, of the genre of the *ars poetica*, and referred to classical poetics while presenting a complete picture of Polish literature and its reigning tendencies. The poem, divided into four cantos, not only discusses general rules of poetic art, but also touches on issues of translation and literary criticism, indicates models of various genres and analyses the most outstanding Polish efforts in each of them. The first canto presents the basic rules of prosody and contains a survey of the achievements of Polish literature. The second and third cantos of Dmochowski's poem present a survey of genre conventions. Particular attention is given to the song, the ode, the epigram, the satire, and the heroic epic poem. The article shows the modern nature of Dmochowski's reflections, whose approach to and views on literature took into account its newest tendencies.

genre

CLASSICISM

satire

heroic epic poem

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