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THE MENIPPEAN LETTER OR THE MENIPPEAN SATIRE IN THE FORM OF THE LETTER?

ABSTRACT. Szczot Monika, The Menippean Letter or the Menippean Epistolary Satire in the Form of the Letter? Remarks on Selected Enlightenment Letters.

This article focuses on the interpretation of the Menippean letters selected from the Polish literature of the Age of Enlightenment.

Keywords: letter; Menippean satire; Enlightenment.

The tradition of the Menippean letter, or to be more accurate, the Menippean satire composed in the form of a letter, dates back to the life and works of Cynic philosopher, Menippus of Gadara, who lived in the 3rd century BC. In his *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* Diogenes Laërtius credits Menippus as the author of *Letters Artificially Composed as if by the Gods*.¹ Lucian, living in 2nd century AD – who, together with Warron, was one of the most celebrated exponents of the Menippean satire – deployed the epistolary form in his dialogues *Saturnalia*, thus making complex its structure and ideas.² *Saturnalia* comprises a series of letters relating the theme of animosities between avaricious wealthy men and the poor characteristic of Lucian. The work's tone ranges from accusatory to satirical in its critique, or defence for that matter, of the wealthy. The letters show the complexity of this issue from different angles. Although nobody is perfect in this world, in showing the magical conciliatory power of *Saturnalia* – which has the master and slave, the rich and poor, the stately and humble meet on an equal footing – the work imitates the ideal world of Saturn (Kronos). The opening of Kronos' letter to his priest includes the following epistolographic in-words:

¹D. L. VI, 101.

²On the original aspects of Lucian's works and their links with the Menippean tradition, vide (selected works): Helm 1906, Holzman 1988; Holzman 1984, 163–85; Korus 1982; Korus 1991; Korus 1986, 29–38; Korus 2003; Korus 1990, 119–31; Madyda 1962, 507–36; Szczot 2008.

You have lost your wits if you so describe present affairs, asking me to apportion the goods. For this obligation is not mine, but the king's. I am astonished to learn that you should be the last to comprehend that I am long acquitted of my kingship, that I have delegated my power to my sons, and the matters you refer to are in the hands of Zeus. My occupation is playing dice, clapping, singing, drinking, yet for no longer than seven days. As regards the matters of higher importance, as you call them, namely, redressing inequality between people, that all people, be they rich or poor, should be treated alike, shall be judged by Zeus. And yet, should anyone be harmed during a feasting day, I shall adjudicate. Concerning these feasts, gold and raiment, I shall appeal to the wealthy to send you gifts in time of feasting. For it is just that they should do as you say, unless they are justified in doing otherwise.³

Saturnalia amply exemplifies the Manippean polyphony characteristic of the works of Lucian of Samosata. The multivocality of the work is reflected not only in the dialogic quality of the text, but it can also be detected in a conversation between the Priest and Kronos, in a register of laws and manners observed during the Saturnalia issued by Kronosolon, and most importantly in an exchange of letters between Kronos and the Priest as well as between Kronos and the wealthy. As such, this work can be classified as a literary text embedded in a series of letters, hardly unprecedented in the ancient literature. Otherwise, it may as well be classed as a literary work that employs an epistolary form to make more pronounced its dialogic structure. The intertextual quality of *Saturnalia*, which is typical for the Manippean poetics, is strengthened by the references to the familiar Homeric literary tradition, such as to *Odyssey*, which is quoted twice in the work. The epic themes deriving from Homer's seminal work serve to enrich the satirical dialogues as well as gentrify both the work and its readers: as reading a classical work was a marker of access to high culture.⁴ In the same fashion, Lucian employed the epistolary form to diversify the structure and content of *Nigrinos*. The epistolary form is a framework for the exchange of ideas between Lucian and his Companion, both of whom commend the Platonist Nigrinos for his dedication to philosophy, as well as rebuke the wealthy and their liggers for their excessive preoccupation with money. The tone of this exchange is satirical: irony and wit blend in with erudite forays into the ancient epic symptomatic of the classical and Hellenic tradition.⁵

For the present purposes it is worth referring to the tradition of the Cynic diatribe as a form that was intended to reduce the distance with the reader and in terms of structure consisted in poetic vignettes, quotations and aphorisms. Scholars maintain that the diatribe contributed to the shaping of the structure of the Manippean satires, which resisted predictable forms and solutions.⁶

³Lukian, *Dialogi*, 375–376.

⁴Cf. chapters 23 and 32 of *Saturnalia*. References to the ancient poets who are alive in the popular memory were not uncommon in the Manippean satire, vide Courtney 1962, 86–100.

⁵*Nigrinos* references the works of Homer, Thucydides, Eupolis and Aratus.

⁶For further information on the Stoic–Cynic diatribe, vide: Sinko 1916; Sinko 1974, 16–23; Podbielski 2005, 790–2; Kupis 2000a; Kupis 2000b.

During the Polish Enlightenment, the Menippean epistolary forms were deployed by Ignacy Krasicki, who was inspired by Lucian of Samosata⁷ and employed the latter's *prosimetrum* in his travel letters.⁸ Krasicki's epistolary travel writings are amongst the finest examples of the Menippean form. They open his famous collection of 41 poems, *Verses in prose*, probably composed between 1782–1787.⁹ In *Zbiór potrzebniejszych wiadomości* [*A Collection of the Most Important Things One Needs to Know*] Krasicki defines the Menippean satire as a form that intends to ridicule human vices: "The Menippea is a form of satire which employs both prose and verse to ridicule human defects and vices. It is so called after the Cynic philosopher, Menippus, who first used this form in writing."¹⁰ Krasicki is indebted to the French literature for the renaissance of the Menippean form in his works. Critical here is Voltaire, who in his masterful *Lettres en vers et en prose* employed the form of *prosimetrum*.¹¹ There are, however, significant differences between the authors' works. Compared to the author of *Candid*, Krasicki's critical tone is more subdued as a result of his Horatian moderation and nationalistic sentiments.¹²

Krasicki's two Menippean letters relate the poet's journey home in 1782, during which he was accompanied by his brother Karol, a canon from Warmia, Józef Boznański's burgrave of Lidzbark Warmiński, and a personal secretary to Joachim Kalnassy. The first letter, *Podróż z Warszawy do Biłgoraja* [*Description of a Journey from Warsaw to Biłgoraj*], was published the same year – available for sale on the seventh of December – and garnered vast readership.¹³ The other letter, *Powrót do Warszawy* [*The return to Warsaw*], which as the title implies describes the return, was probably composed after October 1783.¹⁴ The letters in question contain descriptions of over 30 towns and cities. Although the accounts of these two journeys vary, there are also common points, such as the prosometric form of the Menippean letter, a mixture of solemn and satirical

⁷Not only did Krasicki translate the works of Lucian, but he also composed thirty dialogues for the dead inspired by Lucian, vide: Krasicki, *Rozmowy zmarłych*.

⁸On the links between Krasicki and Lucian, vide: Mandybur 1891; Leśnodorski 1933, 28–60; Szczot 2010.

⁹Vide the introduction: Gomulicki 1976, 315. For an analysis of Krasicki's Menippean satire vide Kostkiewiczowa 2002.

¹⁰Krasicki, *Zbiór potrzebniejszych wiadomości ...*, 137–8.

¹¹For further information on Voltaire's influence on the works of Krasicki, vide Matuszewska 1980; Smolarski, 1918, 118–32.

¹²Cf. Smolarski 1918, 131–3.

¹³The positive reception of *Description of a Journey from Warsaw to Biłgoraj* can be attested by the publication of this work in three editions of bulletins between 1782 and 1783 without the author's permission, based on the copy obtained from the recipient of Stanisław Poniatowski's letter. Vide Pusz 1985, 3.

¹⁴For the sources confirming that *The Return to Warsaw* was probably composed after October 1783, vide Goliński 1976, 336–7.

themes characteristic of travel writing, as well as allusions and intertextuality. It is in the deployment of such features that the letters complement each other.

These travelogues are a venue for a conscious and engaged assessment of the Polish reality. A valuation of historical sites intermingles with the writer's memories of people and events dearest to him; the writer's affections go hand in hand with metaliterary references. The Menippean nature of the letters is reflected in the prosimetrum, an interlacing of the solemn and satirical tone, irony and parody, as well as their topicality. The category of *spoudogéloion* (hybrid forms)¹⁵ takes on board the aspects of bitter comedy and moralism in the vein of Cynic–Stoical diatribe orientated to reduce the distance with the reader, who acts as a virtual fellow traveller. Tedious as it may appear in Krasicki's retelling, the journey flourishes when inflected by the literary aesthetic interventions.¹⁶ Both of these letters contain literary allusions and intertextual references to Krasicki's own and other works.¹⁷ An interplay of epistolary, travel and Menippean¹⁸ forms together with proverbs and aphorisms serves to widen the gap between the author and his work. In Krasicki's unique letters the satire mingles with an impulse to subdue emotions, characteristic of a classical poet who aspires to objectivity.¹⁹ The combination of (self)irony, parody, satire, and rhetoric assures the dialogic effects of the text. In these works the past, its history, literature, culture, manners, fuses with the present. Seen in this light, travel writing operates on two levels: one engages with the present; the other transports the reader to a fictional world, to an intertextual dialogue with the literary tradition.²⁰ The changing themes follow the rhythms of the journey, both literal and literary one. The styles employed in the work vary from scholarly (as in a history lecture) to informal (proverbs, sayings).²¹ The Menippean influences are also traced in the blend of journalistic and poetic styles, in a “deflection of an authentic style of travel writing”,²² altered by fictional, autobiographical, moralistic elements intended to mirror the objective reality. The open Menippean structure of the

¹⁵On the concept of *spoudogéloion* and its importance in the context of an analysis of hybrid forms, vide Giangrande 1972.

¹⁶In Krasicki's letters on his homecoming the author complains that the journey was “utterly boring, roads torturous, and his health poor.” Vide: *Korespondencja Ignacego Krasickiego ...*, 139, 141.

¹⁷On allusion and parody as defining characteristics of the Menippean satire, vide Courtney 1962, 86–100.

¹⁸For further reference on generic indeterminacy of Krasicki's epistolary travel writing, vide Krzywy 2004. For an analysis of Krasicki's letters, vide Piszczkowski 1969, 468–76; Goliński 1979, 348–52; Magryś 2001; Szczot 2013, 244–68.

¹⁹Vide Kostkiewiczowa 1975, 137–8.

²⁰For a more detailed study of the intertextuality of Krasicki's travel letters, vide Szczot 2013, 244–68.

²¹For an analysis of style and rhetoric in Krasicki's works, vide Kostkiewiczowa 1980.

²²Vide Niedzielski 1966, 36; Krzywy 2004, 67 for information on a deflection of style of travel writing in *Description of a Journey from Warsaw to Bilgoraj*.

works allows for multiple interpretations of the quasi-diary,²³ which may be read as a satire on traveling,²⁴ a “sentimental journey” in the vein of Lawrence Sterne,²⁵ educational journey, or a literary journey inspired by real-life events, experiences and reflections.²⁶ The autobiographical references mingle with the history of Partition of Poland; national history meets the singular life of an individual. The use of *spoudogéloion* in the work disturbs the consistency of styles. In *The Return to Warsaw* the elegiac pathos of a valediction is undercut by a humorous remark in prose:

Bieżąc w zapędy ze szczęściem mniemanym,
Powziąwszy korzyść, gdy się dał los spieszyć,
Stać się bez winy cudzym i wygnanym
I przeszlą tylko pomyślnością cieszyć.

Te były myśli wyjeżdżając. Zwróciłem oczy tracąc luby widok i przymusiłem się drugi raz oczu nie zwracać, a teraz przymuszam się trzeci raz, żeby mnie zapęd rymotwórstwa nie zarwał. Jaka by tu albowiem była sposobność do elegii, gdybym się chciała rozpostrzeć nad pożegnaniem.

Gór, pagórków i gaików,
Lasów, źródeł i strumyków.²⁷

[Travelling with glee for a doubtful companion / Taking advantage of the passing time / Unfairly exiled to the foreign land / Fed on the memories of better times gone by / These were my thoughts upon leaving. When I lost the pleasing sight of my homeland, I took pains not to look back again, and again, to refrain from writing verses. For no elegy is likely to be inspired by valediction. / Of mountains, hills and groves / of woods, brooks and springs.]

Krasicki's letters inspired other travel writers who employed the Menippean form. Amongst the most notable followers of this form was Franciszek Karpiński, an author of *Travelling to Krakow*. Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz in his turn used the Menippean epistolary form in his letters to XBW (Krasicki's penname). Since the Menippean form was regarded as a marker of literary sophistication, it was widely used by the Enlightenment men of letters of the post-Stanisław-II-Augustus times.²⁸ The Menippean form was also used by the men of letters associated with Alojzy Feliński, Michał Wyszkowski and Konstanty Tyminiecki. One of Wyszkowski's letters seems to confirm that the imitators of the style felt themselves inferior to the master of the form:

²³This term was put forward by Chachulski (2006, 165).

²⁴The importance of traveling was often discussed in the Enlightenment literature, vide Niedzielski 1966, 35–36; Kostkiewiczowa 1997, 9–10.

²⁵On the influence of Lawrence Stern on Krasicki, vide Kott 1991, 178. About Sterne in the Enlightenment literature vide Sinko 1961, 180–98.

²⁶Krasicki's journey contains literary references, such as that the author visited places associated with Jan Kochanowski, vide Chachulski 2006, 166–72.

²⁷I. Krasicki, *Pisma poetyckie...*, 26.

²⁸For an illuminating study of the Menippean epistolography as a prosometric form, vide Pusz 1985.

Com widział, chcę ci opisać. Podobne opisy mogą być zabawne; przebacz, jeśli mój takim nie będzie. Mam przykład Krasickiego, ale dowcipu jego nie masz.²⁹

[Let me tell you what I saw. If such accounts may in general be amusing, you may find mine lacking in humour. I hereby allude to Krasicki; for you know not his wit.]

Notable amongst the Enlightenment Menippean letters is a prosometric letter by Kajetan Węgierski in which the author dedicates his *Organy* [*The Organs*] to Ignacy Krasicki. Węgierski's heroicomic poem was inspired by Boileau's *Pulpit* as well as, presumably, *Myszeida*. And, in turn, it inspired Krasicki's *Monachomachia*.³⁰ Dated back to January 22nd 1777, the dedicatory letter, which depends on the "complex [...] play with conventions",³¹ satirises poetic graphomania. Satire is, along with prosimetrum, a defining characteristic of the Mannipean form. Considering that, as emphasised by scholars, the dedicatory letter was a part of common speech in the Enlightenment,³² Węgierski attempted to transgress the convention by employing Menippean elements. The letter was conceived to help the author win Krasicki's favour, thus assuring a readability and approval of the poem by those less versed in literature:

Pomyślne zdanie W. Ks. Mości wiele do sławy wierszom moim pomoże. Mało jest takich, co by przez siebie sędzić potrafili: rozsądek ich za cudzą znajomością jest zawsze na powodzie, chwałą lub ganią dzieło nie dlatego, że złe lub dobre, ale dlatego że się temu księciu lub panu podobało, i między nawąłem wierszy, którymi na nieszczęście zarzuceni jesteśmy, ledwie kilka osób rozeznac może przez siebie, że ich bardzo mało dobrych.³³

[A word of favour from Your Grace will ensure a wide acclaim of my poems. Few can judge them by themselves; many follow others in opinion. They praise or libel works not by virtue of their merit, but because this or that poem was approved by a prince or lord. Amidst the spate of poems with which we are so unfortunately inundated, not many a reader will be in power to acknowledge their mediocrity.]

The satirical aspect of Węgierski's letter mingles with a poetic witticism composed in a prosometric form. The very mediocrity of poets is criticised in the 13-syllable rhymed quatrain, cunningly interwoven with prose. The result is two-fold: not only does the author criticise the literary output of his day, but he also laments the contempt for prose. The dedication ironically weighs up the values of poetry and prose: both of which play specific roles and complement the chosen Menippean form:

²⁹ Quoted after Pusz 1984, 44.

³⁰ On inspirations for K. Węgierski's poem, vide Gomulicki 1956, 66–78. Vide also Stasiewicz 2012, 163.

³¹ Kaczyński 2001, 70. Compare reflections on the interpretation of Węgierski's dedicatory letter in chapter 2, "Rozumne przymówki."

³² Cf. Węgierski, *Organy*..., 53.

³³ Węgierski, *Organy*..., 8.

Szczęśliwy W. Ks. Mość jesteś, że od tych parnaskich bredni wolne masz uszy; my nimi zupełnie przywaleni jesteśmy.

To szaleństwo już wszystkie ogarnęło stany,
Poważne nawet piszą wiersze kasztelany,
U których jako dawna przypowieść nam niesła,

Ani głowa do rady, ani tył do krzesła.

Co byś w. Ks. Mość rzekł, gdybym mu powiedział, że na sejmach nawet wierszami gadają? Jeżeli Opatrzność Boska nad polskim ludem zmiłować się nie raczy, proza z potocznej nawet rozmowy wypędzona będzie.³⁴

[You are fortunate, Your Grace, to be spared from hearing all this Parnassian balderdash; For we are completely inundated with it / This madness has spread to all corners / Chatelains spin solemn verses / Which remind us of the old saying / The head can find no words of wisdom, nor can the bottom find its chair to rest on. / What would be your advice, Your Grace, if I told you that they speak in verses in the parliament? Unless God shows his mercy on the Polish nation, prose shall be banished even from popular speech.]

The reference to the classical work, Horace's *Epistle to the Pisos*,³⁵ adds to the Menippean tenor of the work. In his reading the classical poet, Horace, is presented not only as a theorist of poetry, but an eminent poet, an author of *Sermones*. Not without reason was Horace credited by some ancient scholars as an author of the heroicomic poem *Batrachomyomachia*. The intertextual quality of the Menippean literature makes considerable demands on the reader, and in so doing it brings to mind all the defining characteristics of Horace's works: "Wzięliśmy w ręce Horacjusza i najpierw na te napadliśmy prawidło: «Mediocribus non licet esse poetis.»"³⁶ ["As we undertook to read Horace, we chanced upon the following precept: «Mediocribus non licet esse poetis»"].

The 19th century theorists defined the genre of Menippean letter as a variety of epistolary poetry. The popularity of epistolary poems in the Enlightenment can be put down to their didacticism and satire associated with epistolary poetic forms.³⁷ The Menippean letter (or satire) allowed its author to play with genres and rhetorical styles: ranging from declamation, persuasion and conversational modes (as in Krasicki's travel writings canvassed above), as well as opened up the space for a variety of themes in a single poem, be they formal or casual. The letter form employed direct forms of address and invectives, none of which the Old Polish or Enlightenment conventions would permit. Far from it, Polish poets were careful not to make personal satirical remarks as a matter of principle. In *Sztuka rymotwórcza* [*The Art of Composing Rhymes*] Franciszek Ksawery Dmochowski expounds thus:

³⁴ Węgiński, *Organy...*, 8.

³⁵ Gomulicki (1976, 126) claims that the quotation of Horace is inaccurate. As indicated in *De arte poetica*: "mediocribus esse poetis / Non homines, non Di, non concessere columnae" (v. 372–373).

³⁶ Węgiński, *Organy...*, 9.

³⁷ Cf. Matuszewska 2002.

Satyra w ścisłej z cnotą zostając przyjaźni,
 Błędy ludzkie wytyka, lecz ludzi nie drażni.
 Ten prawdziwy duch satyr, ta pierwszej treść próby:
 Szydzić wad, karcieć błędy, oszczędzać osoby.³⁸

[The satire is virtue's faithful ally / although it despises human faults, people find no fault in it / The true spirit of the satire, its foremost task / To scorn the vice, yet to save the person who commits it.]

A combination of the epistolary form with the Menippean satire helps supersede this defining characteristic of the Polish satire. This aberration enables the poet to chide, openly or covertly, high profile political and cultural figures. A model example of the imbrication of the epistolary, satirical and Menippean modes is the letter attributed to Marcin Molski, *Młodzież (vel: Młodzież narodowa) do dobrych Polek* [*Young Men to Good Polish Ladies*] (1792).³⁹ The author, Marcin Molski (1751/52–1822), came from the Poznań Voivodeship and had a career in the military: since 1786 he served as a captain, during the Kosciuszko Uprising he became a major, and in 1809 a colonel.⁴⁰ One of his celebrated poems was *Stanislaida* – a pean on Stanislas II Augustus. On top of this, as an author of occasional poems he was widely known as a “fierce satirist.”⁴¹ Composed in the prosometric form, *List młodzieży narodowej do dobrych Polek* [*The Letter of The Polish Youth to the Good Polish Ladies*], penned in the time of the Targowica Confederation, castigated the Polish noblewomen for their sympathies with the Russian invaders, which he deemed immoral. As this moral decline amongst the upper classes was commonplace, middle–noblemen and the urban poor were only too eager to chastise such acts of betrayal.⁴²

The work addressing the issue of the Polish ladies consorting with the Russians is a sort of epistolary satire that resorts to the use of invectives. The structure of this work is of interest here for many reasons. What binds the pasquinade and satire together is their topicality. Both are pieces “of political journalism of their day.”⁴³ Molski's work explores the possibilities of the political pamphlet to expose, deride and criticise people's attitudes. The pasquinade employs the hyperbole and expressive rhetoric calculated to defame and ridicule those it addresses. As is customary for a satire, the pasquinade depends on a dynamic discourse that is full of direct, often confrontational, forms of address and hostile

³⁸Dmochowski 1956, 50 (lines 193–196).

³⁹Roman Kaleta dates the work to 1792, whereas Jan Nowak–Dłużewski proposes late 1792 or early 1793, vide Maksimowicz 2008, 188.

⁴⁰For further information about M. Molski's life, vide Pusz 1996, 505–11.

⁴¹A term proposed by Pusz (1996, 508).

⁴²Scholarly interpretations of Molski's work focus on the ideological aspects of the satire rather than its links with the Menippean tradition, vide Kaleta 1950, 947–52; Aleksandrowska 1993, 40–46; Aleksandrowska 1995, 115–131; Maksimowicz 2010.

⁴³A term coined by Kristeva (1988, 411).

remarks. The author refers to the characters covertly. Although the misbehaving ladies are not named, the reader is no stranger to their identity. So constructed, the letter is an exact record of the events of its day.

The intricate tactics of such works are based on the comic antithesis.⁴⁴ They were conceived to expose female immorality by contrasting those modern dissolute ladies with the virtuous maidens of the bygone era. When commendation gives way to reprimand, the style and language change accordingly. The letter dramatizes the collective moral descent: those who had hitherto lamented the loss of motherland are now exposed as a bunch of dissolute revellers, patriots–turned–traitors, maidens–turned–harlots. This game of oppositions was to create an illusion of the world turned upside–down, characterised by the carnivalesque imbrication of laughter and gravity, patriotism and treason, wisdom and recklessness, courage and cowardice, grandiosity and demise, pride and subjugation. The masterfully structured tragicomic, carnivalesque charade exposes real–life damsels:

Jedna honory balu robiła
 U wodza morderstw i jęku,
 Druga za zimnym trzpiotem gonila
 Przez wzgląd na młodość bez wdzięku,
 Trzecia z tą zwykłych bab krupnych miną
 Arystyda imię plami,
 Wie, że ją zyski męża ominą,
 Wziętymi pyszna chustkami.
 Czwarta, co nucąc Mojżesza pienia,
 Konsula łożę już dzieli,
 A jeśli braknie jej doświadczenia,
 Konfidentka ją ośmieli.⁴⁵

[The first, at the ball, did the honours to / the master of murder and pain / The second chased the coxcomb / for his graceless youth / The third, with her face all dull, / brings shame on Aristides / With an eye on her husband's riches / she prides herself on the purloined handkerchief / The fourth sings the songs of Moses / in the Consul's bed / If she be coy / she will seek the Informer's counsel.]

As befits a carnivalesque work, nothing is sacred for the pasquinade. But the “carnavalesque ambivalence” has its limits. At this point, the pungent farce makes room for a morality tale intended to expose the misbehaving ladies to the reader. The first one was to be Izabela Ogińska, House of Lasocki, wife of sword–bearer of Lithuania, who organised a ball at Kochowski's; the second, Marianna Potocka, House of Lubomirski, married to Antoni Protazy, known as Prot, had an affair with General Zubow; third, Patronela Antonia Małachowska, House

⁴⁴Passi (1980, 155–206) considered the following aspects of “the phenomenology of laughter”: the body, costume, character, antithesis, portmanteaux, misunderstanding, ambiguity, repetition.

⁴⁵Molski, *List...*, 186.

of Rzewuski, was unfaithful to her husband, Chancellor Jacek Małachowski; fourth, Szweykowska, wife of Chamberlain, was Bulgakov's mistress; fifth Włodkowa, wife of Chamberlain, "lived off pimping."⁴⁶ It could be reasonably argued that the letter lapses into journalism in an attempt to address pressing social and political issues from the point of view of a Polish patriot who resents when his compatriots ingratiate themselves with the enemy. Since the invective has no respect for national boundaries or hierarchies, in the Menippean satire the distinction between the high and low collapses: the custodians of high values deserve nothing but contempt; the noblemen are likened to slaves.

Nie może jednak wasz przykład, Polki cnotliwe, pociągnąć za sobą serc, długim nałogiem podłości zepsuty; są na ziemi naszej bezczelne niewiasty, na wstyd płci waszej wychowane, które, zapomniawszy świętej uczciwości prawideł, zapomniawszy, że się urodziły obywatelkami zdrajcy ojczyzny swojej i jej napastnikom przystępne. Mniemają się być przeznaczone na los tych niewolnic, których wdzięki nierządnym zmysłom tyрана służą, nie odbierając podchlebnego delikatności i uczciwego czucia, hołdu;⁴⁷

[Your good example, honourable Polish ladies, fails to inspire wretched hearts. For there are in our land shameless women that bring shame to your fair sex. Heedless of the principles of fairness and decency, disrespectful to their motherland, they give themselves to the traitors and intruders of our nation. They are certain to share the fate of those slave women, whose attributes are at the service of the tyrant's lust, to the disgrace of the natural feeling and delicacy of the fair sex.]

To counterbalance the scathing criticism of those indecent ladies, the author ventures to praise patriotic women, as if to expose a positive agenda of the satirical letter in doing so. The work is strewn with oppositions: praise–condemnation, approval–negation, sacred–profane. The following verses, the first and last stanza of the closing satirical poem of Molski's Menippean letter, can be interpreted as an execration, curse or libel (*ἄρα* in Greek, *dirae* in Latin):

Odrodne, podle matrony,
Idźcie frymarczyć uczciwość,
Idźcie bez wstydu zasłony
Wzgardę odbierać za tkliwość.

[...] Będziecie palcem wytknięte
I hańbą polskiej krainy
I plemię od was poczęte
Będą kajdan godne syny.⁴⁸

[Unveiled by shame degenerate vile old women / you sell your decency / you trade affection for condemnation. [...] You shall be named and shamed / as a disgrace of the Polish land / Your offspring / shall be worth nothing but fetters.]

⁴⁶ Cf. Maksimowicz 2008, 186.

⁴⁷ Molski, *List...*, 185–186.

⁴⁸ Molski, *List...*, 187–188.

It is worth inspecting the rhetorical devices, including the ancient and modern *exempla*, such as the story of Coriolanus or Roderick, the last Visigoth king. The satirist concludes that “the history of the world has shown many times how one woman’s shame has saved and transformed the fate of nations.”⁴⁹

The poem also strongly depends on the use of hyperbole, deprecations and crude invectives meted out to the selfish, pleasure-loving and unfeeling women in question. Furthermore, the rich and varied system of versification informs the formal construction of the letter, which combines octosyllabic couplets with decasyllabic, or even eleven and thirteen-syllable verses. The irregular metre makes possible a free play of intonation, which helps diversify dialogues and render them more persuasive.⁵⁰ The passages dedicated to the praise of women take a longer metre, whereas the critical parts containing the elements of the pasquinade are usually composed of eight syllables. It should be mentioned that octosyllabic verses, considered low-brow, were employed in satirical and picaresque works.

To conclude, this paper has attempted to analyse four literary works of the Polish Enlightenment that deploy Menippean epistolary forms: Krasicki’s two travel letters, Węgiński’s dedication and Molski’s *The Letter of The Polish Youth to the Good Polish Ladies*. Although Krasicki’s letter-poems paved the way for the rich Menippean epistolary tradition that followed, none of the followers was on a par with their forerunner. The latter appeared to lose touch with the classical conventions of the genre. Dominated by personal or sentimental elements, the Menippean epistolary form was used in informal letters, bereft of satirical elements or “polyphonic” structure. The use of prosimetrum was a marker of literary sophistication.

The few who remained faithful to the classical tradition of the genre were Krasicki, an admirer and imitator of Lucian, Tomasz K. Węgiński and Marcin Molski, who employed the Menippea for satirical purposes. The former used it as a means of literary criticism to satirise his contemporaries; the latter to expound on the issue of national treason. The letters under consideration in all their formal variety (a travel letter, dedication, satirical poem) combine prose with poetry and contain the elements of satire and irony in varying degrees. With this in mind, it would be justified to refer to these works as the Menippea in the letter form instead of a Menippean letter, as the latter term appears to narrow down the thematic scope of these works, thus reducing them, in the context of the Polish Enlightenment after Stanislas Augustus II, to a prosometric form.⁵¹

⁴⁹Molski, *List...*, 184.

⁵⁰For further reference on the Enlightenment system of versification cf. Pszczołowska 1998, 145–176.

⁵¹Cf. Pusz 1984, 33–79.

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THE MENIPPEAN LETTER OR THE MENIPPEAN SATIRE IN THE FORM
OF THE LETTER? REMARKS ON SELECTED ENLIGHTENMENT LETTERS

Summary

This article focuses on the interpretation of the Menippean letters selected from the Polish literature of the Age of Enlightenment. The following letters have been analysed in the article: two letters written by Ignacy Krasicki from his voyages, a letter of dedication by Tomasz K. Węgierski from the poem entitled *Organy* [*The organs*] and the letter entitled *List młodzieży do dobrych Polek* [*The Letter of the Polish Youth to the Good Polish Ladies*] by Marcin Molski. In the Age of Enlightenment the writers applied the prosometric form of the letter to express the satirical contents, to critically review the literature and to seriously reflect upon the situation of the country.