

# Performing a Poland Beyond Partitions: Legitimizing the Cultural Imaginary in Eighteenth- Century Central Europe

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The issue of what constitutes nationality, the shared cultural identity of a people, has historically necessitated an attempt to define imaginary boundaries of statehood and selfhood. Simultaneously, theatrical representation, the historical locus of the imaginary, has often provided one of the means by which nationality has been constructed and contested. Using theatrical representation as a site of cultural formation, artists, scholars, and statesmen have used the theatrical imaginary as a legitimizing force to define a real that is itself imagined. At the end of the eighteenth century, in the case of the Polish-Lithuanian Republic, conflicting efforts to retain or reconstitute a coherent cultural identity gained paramount importance as the political borders of the state were erased through its partitioning between Austria, Prussia, and Russia. What becomes visible through the theatre of the time are multiple and differing efforts to change the imaginary identity of the nobility, by challenging the nobility's own perception of that identity, and later, by creating a new model for Polish identity.

When Stanislaw August Poniatowski, Poland's last king, sought to implement political reform in the second half of the eighteenth century, he and his supporters were forced to combat an already strongly defined cultural imaginary—the cultural and political myth known as Sarmatism. This term is used to describe the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century identification of the Polish nobility, or *szlachta*, with an ancient warrior tribe, the Sarmatians, who supposedly ruled the territory north of the Black Sea and conquered the Polish territories. Believing themselves to be the direct descendents of this tribe, the *szlachta* associated Sarmatism with their "golden freedom" (*zlota wolnosc*), the virtually anarchic political system that maintained the domination of the immensely rich and powerful magnates, paralyzed the efficacious functioning of the Diet, or *Sejm*, reduced the King's position to that of a figurehead, denied representation to the towns, and kept the peasants at the level of serfdom. Politically, the Sarmatian *szlachta* identified with Ancient Rome. Culturally, their distinct clothing, weaponry, and hairstyles fused European and Turkish elements, allowing them to

portray themselves as the eastern warriors from whom they claimed descent. Soldiering and the fundamentals of a Latin education were considered sufficient for a Sarmatian, who also saw himself as a staunch defender of agrarian, rather than urban, values, and as the hereditary defender of the Roman Catholic Church. At his worst, the Sarmatian was an ignorant, indolent, and intolerant defender of the status quo, whether in arts, education, or politics—a follower of the famous Saxon motto "Eat, drink, and loosen your belts."

Given the sometimes xenophobic attitudes of the Sarmatian *szlachta*, those who sought to implement reform in the political arena (in the hopes of reducing the oligarchical stranglehold of the magnates) were required to combat the entrenched conservative perceptions of what constituted Polish nationality. Despite the various ethnic origins of the *szlachta* (Lithuanian, Ukranian, or even Irish), through Sarmatism, nobility was associated with Polish nationality. To be a member of the *szlachta* was to be a Pole; to be a Pole meant one was of the *szlachta*, a member of the *narod slachecki* (the noble nation). What the king and his supporters were attempting to implement through their political, educational, and cultural reform platforms was the creation of a new identity, "re-forming" what it meant to be Polish. In order to separate "Polishness" from an association with Sarmatism, the ideal Polish noble needed to be reimagined as someone whose education included a familiarity with the latest philosophical and political thought under discussion in the rest of Europe, and who felt a duty to serve his government and country at all times (rather than merely in times of war). The parochial and obscurantist Sarmatian needed to be replaced with a enlightened, politically progressive, civic-minded figure. In the cultural arena, attempts to implement these new values began early in, and continued throughout, the king's reign through the satirization of the Sarmatian ideal, in the press, in pamphlets, and through the theatre.

Two prime examples of theatrical satirization can be found in Franciszek Zablocki's play *Sarmatism*, written in 1784, and Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz's delightful play *The Return of the Deputy*, written as a political pamphlet in 1790 and staged in Warsaw in 1791. Both writers (who were also famous for their lampoons) present the Sarmatian *szlachta* as boorish, backward, unbearably prolix, and quarrelsome (the main characters of Zablocki's play argue not only over the boundaries of their land but also over their wives' seating in church), but Niemcewicz's play, referred to by some as the first Polish political comedy, goes further by introducing a positive model, that of the young deputy, Valery. The character of Valery, a participant in the Four Year Sejm and supporter of the Constitution of the Third of May, represents the new Pole that Stanislaw August and his supporters were attempting to construct.

The son of established but progressive *szlachta*, Valery is well-educated, polite, and, most importantly, has a strong sense of his civic duty, as demonstrated by his exchange with his friend, the slavishly fashionable Szarmancki (Mr. Charming). Mr. Charming, whose father has forced him to participate in the civic, judicial, and military duties of his class, has found such occupations tedious and, after the death of his father, has spent the year traveling in France and England. Valery rhapsodizes about the fact that Mr. Charming has not only had the opportunity to witness firsthand the valiant efforts of the French to "throw off the fetters of tyranny" but also has been able to observe the famous parliamentary government of England in action. (The audience reportedly responded to Valery's support of the French revolutionary struggle with enthusiastic applause.) Mr. Charming responds that the events in France have created a dull place where it is impossible to find amusing entertainments (or meet girls) and where merchants and artisans are serving in the militia (rather than catering to his sartorial needs). He adds that England is only good for horse-racing and souvenir-shopping.

Here Valery gently admonishes his friend, telling him that now that he is a little older, he should "remember that he is a citizen, a Pole" and that his services belong first and foremost to his homeland, adding that although others may bow to him, he will only gain their respect if he "works honestly and helps the human race" (Mikos 349). Valery, as the ideal of the re-formed Polish noble, sees as his responsibility the attempt to restructure the government of the Republic vis-à-vis the political models of the French and English, thus demonstrating a sense of responsibility to the Polish nation and all its inhabitants, whether enfranchised or not. These views were nothing new in themselves. As stated, they had been propagated in poems and periodicals, and on the floor of the Sejm itself. The power of theatrical representation, however, is that it makes theoretical arguments a material possibility through their embodiment onstage. The threatening nature of such an embodiment, of a presentation of reform views not just elaborated in a text but made physical reality through the actor playing Valery, is illustrated by the conservative deputy Suchorzewski's call (during a meeting of the Sejm) for the confiscation of the comedy and for the punishment of Niemcewicz. Fortunately for the author, this attack only served to highlight the similarities between Suchorzewski and the blustering Pan Gadulski (Mr. Chatterbox), the satirized Sarmatian Pole in *Return of the Deputy*.

That Suchorzewski also called for the desubsidization of the theatre at which *The Return of the Deputy* was staged, the National Theatre in Warsaw, is hardly surprising, as this theatre had been linked to the king's reform policies since its founding in 1765. Among Stanislaw August's contributions to the Polish theatre was his establishment of the first professional troupe of Polish actors, as well as

his initiation of a competition for original Polish plays. These acts are significant in that they attempted to create a Polish theatrical culture distinct from either that of classical antiquity or that of the French neoclassical model. As seen in *The Return of the Deputy*, however, theatre as a reform platform provided a site in which the question of Polish character was explored not only through new dramatic forms and themes but also through the theatrical representation of new Polish types. At the end of the eighteenth century, during the last days of the Republic, the survival of the state appeared to call for an even more radical envisioning of Polish identity—one that went beyond the deconstruction of the Sarmatian ideal to the construction of a new figure, a Pole who was both a patriot and a member of the peasant class.

One of the best examples of how form and characterization combined to question the makeup of the Polish national identity is provided by the comic opera *Cud Mniemy czyli Krakowiaczy i Gorale* (*The Supposed Miracle or The Krakovians and the Highlanders*). This text was written and directed by one of the most important figures of the National Theatre, Wojciech Boguslawski (1757-1829), the playwright, actor, and director whom many call "the father of the Polish theatre." *Krakowiaczy i Gorale* is a comic "rustic opera," a relatively new genre that had become immensely popular by the end of the 1780s. The story of the play is set in a village near Krakow and involves the quarrel between the villagers and a group of *gorale* (the highlanders of the Carpathian mountains) which erupts when the miller's daughter rejects the *goral* suitor who has been imposed on her. The quarrel is subsequently inflamed by the vengeful cattle-stealing of the *gorale*. The play is filled with music and dances from each of the groups, and despite the conflict that threatens to escalate into violence with scythes and axes, all is resolved happily.

The revolutionary nature of this text is not immediately apparent to modern readers or audiences, who may see only an amusing folk opera with colorful rustic characters. When one considers, however, that the play was staged on the first of March in 1794, its choice of material and the representation thereof take on a heightened importance. Placing the play within its context, the premiere of *Krakowiaczy i Gorale* took place one year after the second partition of Poland, three weeks before the official proclamation of the Insurrection, and one month before Kosciuszko's defeat of the Russian army at Raclawice with the aid of peasants armed with scythes.

On a straightforward level, Boguslawski's play contains elements that can be immediately read as revolutionary. For example, the action of the play takes place near the burial mound of Queen Wanda, the legendary Polish queen who according to legend sacrificed herself to keep a foreign army from invading Polish

lands. Additionally, the large choruses added by Boguslawski and his collaborators (an anomaly in this form of opera) added a mass of people to the stage, whose similarity to an uprising was strengthened by the martial nature of at least one of their songs. Audiences also apparently had no trouble reading a political message into the lyrics of both arias and choruses, which included such lines as "The more we are harassed by fate / the more manly should be our stance," and "The sharper are the thistles / the sweeter the success." Reportedly a few of the actors changed some of the choruses to make them even more pointed, and these, after the victory at Raclawice, were taken up by the Warsaw population and sung in the streets. At any rate, although the opera was greatly enjoyed by Russian officers in the front row (who apparently missed the subversiveness of the performance), more insightful Russian officials shut down the production after three days.

What is arguably more interesting than these overtly political elements, however, is the manner in which Boguslawski's text offers a reenvisioning of Polish identity through his unique representation of the Polish peasant. Although this is not the first time that the Polish peasant was portrayed onstage, the peasants in Boguslawski's comedy display a sense of agency and self-sufficiency that is absent from earlier works that place a peasant's sense of well-being in direct relation to the good or bad stewardship of his lord. In *Krakowiaczy i Gorale*, no lord is present onstage or even mentioned by the peasants, whose quarrel is resolved by a curious figure who is both impoverished student and bard (and the source of the supposed miracle vis-à-vis an electric fence). The peasants are clearly responsible for their own welfare and prepared to muster their own defense; they resemble neither the Renaissance model of pastoral swain nor the comic yokel established through many generations of Polish literature. Neither are they the pitiful, oppressed peasant of eighteenth-century texts meant to arouse sympathy for the unenviable situation of the majority of Polish peasants. In Boguslawski's play, the *szlachta* and their distinct Sarmatian costumes have been removed from the stage, and in their stead we have a new figure—a peasant in native dress, celebrating through folk song and dance, speaking a constructed rustic dialect that encapsulated many regions of the Republic, and, most importantly, a man prepared to defend his lands and property from invaders.

*Krakowiaczy i Gorale* is revolutionary not only in its hidden (or not so hidden) political undertones but in the fact that the repeated theme throughout the play of taking up arms against a foreigner is embodied through Polish peasantry, rather than through those who traditionally held the duty of defenders of the state, the *szlachta*. Again, the power of theatrical representation is that it makes visible that which can be conceptualized. To make an idea visible, to represent it, means that

it enters the realm of the possible. Traditionally, in theatre history, there have been those things that cannot be shown, not even to be attacked, because to represent them means that they exist. Savaging the Sarmatian by parodying him onstage is a significantly less revolutionary act—the Sarmatian Pole is already an established figure, even if his values have come under attack. The onstage representation of what could be called a patriotic peasant, however, represents the staging of a concept that has heretofore never been able to be imagined. It demands the reimagining of what it means to be a patriot, opening the possibility for the establishment of a new Polish identity that crossed class borders. Due to the play's novelty and timing, the work can be seen as a last-ditch effort to remodel the idea of Polish national identity, by removing from the stage the Sarmatian Pole (and indeed any *szlachta* figure whatsoever), and placing in his stead the Polish peasant. The staging of *Krakowiaczy i Gorale* at this particular moment in time seems to suggest that if the state is going to survive, it must be seen no longer as a nation of nobles, but as a nation of Poles from all levels of society, unified through the folk songs and popular culture available to all classes and willing to rise *en masse*, as a nation, against foreign occupiers.

The success of Boguslawski's new imaginary would not, of course, become immediately apparent at the end of the eighteenth century. In 1795, a year after Boguslawski's play, the Polish state would be officially removed from the map of Europe. Rather, the work of Boguslawski and his contemporaries, who engaged in a reenvisioning of Polish identity through the folklore of the Polish peasantry, would become apparent in the nineteenth century (and beyond) when these popular reimaginings of Polish cultural identity would sustain an idea of Poland (transcending political borders) through the characters, songs, and stories of the eighteenth-century Polish theatre that survived to be reworked and restaged. Through the material representation of a new Polish culture, the stage would provide legitimation for a Poland that, despite its partitioning, had not yet perished.

## Works Cited

Mikoć, Michael J. *Polish Baroque and Enlightenment Literature: An Anthology*. Columbus, Ohio: Slavica, 1996.