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The 1670 TV Show as Seen by a Historian of Old Polish Literature*

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ABSTRACT: The subject of reflection and analysis in the present sketch will consist in the 1670 TV show, and my aim will be to attempt to interpret selected plot points that are connected with the critical approach of the show's creators towards Sarmatian culture. The show 1670 should be interpreted as a pop cultural voice in discussion on noble Poland, and the ways it is presented from the perspective of contemporary disputes and discourses. The show's creators, by performing a kind of a deconstruction of national myths, use its most well-known elements (also stereotypically identified with the culture of the second half of the 17th century) such as antemurale, aversion to strangers, honor, economic backwardness, inscribing them into the tradition – modernity opposition.

KEYWORDS: 1670 (TV show), anti-Sarmatism, history of Poland, national myths

In his article on the subject of “Sarmatian hermeneutics”, Paweł Bohuszewicz demonstrated interpretative strategies dominating and governing thinking about the past. By referring to texts by the likes of Krzysztof Koehler and Jacek Kowalski, or citing, based on the principle of anti-thesis, Jan Sowa's *Fantomowe Ciało Króla* [*The King's Phantom Body*], he demonstrated how (to simplify it to the max) the subject of research, historical narration, is dependent on the hermeneutic interpreter, whose

goal is not [...] to “establish facts” which, as historical facts are wont to, would be situated outside the interpreter and the present in which he is

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located. The facts established by a Neo- or anti-Sarmatian hermeneutic reader are never treated as simply things of the past. To the contrary: hermeneutic readers of Sarmatia agree on the existence of a certain continuum between the present and the past, which makes it possible for them to treat the past as a part of individual identity (Bohuszewicz 2014: 106).

The scholar's remarks can be used in order to consider various representations of the past, which is increasingly the subject of interest not only for ranks of professional historians or literature studies scholars, but also for creators of audio-visual culture. The subject of reflection and analysis in the present sketch will consist in the *1670* TV show, produced in 2023 by Netflix, directed by Maciej Buchwald and Kordian Kądziela and based on the script by Jakub Rużyłło, and my aim will be to attempt to interpret selected plot points that not only seem important for the series' depiction of the Commonwealth of the second half of the 17th century, but are also connected with the critical approach of the show's creators towards Sarmatian culture.

It is worth stating here that *1670* is a Polish satirical comedy whose action takes place in the fictional village of Adamczycha. It tells the story of the nobleman Jan Paweł, who wants to become the most famous Pole, while dealing both with various family issues and with numerous conflicts with his neighbor or the peasantry. It is also worth adding that *1670* became a phenomenon in Poland, which led the producers to decide to continue the production (the second season is expected to be released in 2025, and the production of the third one has already been announced). This phenomenon results from the presentation of the Sarmatian world and its interpretation in the context of contemporary problems and discussions.

I will attempt to look at *1670* through the lens of a historian of Old Polish literature, while simultaneously being aware of the particular poetics of the TV production, its satirical and comical dimension, which resulted in numerous journalistic reviews and overviews, including left-wing (cautious) praise and right-wing, though not always, reproof. The reception of this series among a broader audience could constitute an interesting subject for analyses in con-

1 See e.g. „Zbiór memów i mało śmiesznych żartów opakowany w przyjemny dla oka krajobraz Polski szlacheckiej końca XVII wieku. Serial Netflixa *1670* okazał się do bólu zenujący, choć lewa strona internetu jest nim zachwycona. Dlaczego?” (Szczepańska 2023) [“A Collection of Memes and Unfunny Jokes Packaged into Eye-Pleasing Landscape of Noble Poland of the End of 17th century. The Netflix Series *1670* Turned Out to Be Painfully Embarrassing, but the Left Side of the Internet Is Delighted. Why?”]. For comparison, a definitely more reliable review: “In a wonderfully unpretentious way, looking at eras in the mirror fulfills historians' thesis on how Sarmatism shapes Polish modernity. The demons of right-wing historical politics, idealization of the past or increasing mechanization of work connect us, after all, with our on-screen ancestors. However, the Netflix crew has self-control: clever analogies are accompanied by humor that is stale in consciously overdone way, played with a wink, and, as a result – hilarious” (Krawczyk 2023).

nection with its functioning in social and cultural circulation: it may be interesting to show what levels of meaning are perceived by a Netflix user in 1670, what the reception of the creators' playing with historical events is – such issues could be a convenient starting point for questions concerning the reception and comprehension of the TV production under discussion, also in the sphere of social media as a basic territory for exchange of opinions and discussion today.

Before I proceed to interpret selected plot points, it is worth giving the floor to the show's creators as they explain their goals connected with the making of 1670. In one of the interviews with Maciej Buchwald and Kordian Kądziała we read that:

A huge advantage of the script lay in the fact that it is, above all, a story about people, about characters, based in a certain historical reality, although not entirely rooted within it. It is something akin to a fantasy. [...] Above all, it is a comedy. An imaginary version of these times, rather than strict one to one model of them (Duch 2023).

This statement, which does not call for a comment (although for a competent interpreter the utilized categories of fantasy and imaginarium may refer to a broad spectrum of meanings connected, most generally, with psychoanalysis) points to the very manner the TV narration is constructed. The world presented in 1670 should be understood as an imaginary version of the past, dependent on the very convention or perspective in/from which the story is told.

Buchwald's and Kądziała's statement was expanded upon in an interview given by the screenwriter – Jakub Rużyłło. He admits that due to reading Jan Sowa's *Fantomowe ciało króla* and books connected with the so-called folk turn, he started consciously thinking about the past:

We have definitely benefited from the folk turn in literature. *Fantomowe ciało króla* was [published] in advance of interest in peasant history, and I wrote the script to 1670 concurrently to the publication of subsequent books on this subject. These were very helpful sources. We all have noble myths and stories in our cultural code, but due to the folk turn the way this social stratum is perceived has changed, we left behind the 1990s paradigm. On this ground was born the need to laugh at our noble past. And this is when we appeared with our TV show (Marzec 2024).

Thus, Rużyłło reveals to the reader his own perspective of viewing the past as filtrated by Sowa's narration, which had overthrown common opinions on the noble Commonwealth and, let us add, encouraged many to further explorations, both based on interdisciplinary approach of studies into the past and making use of various theoretical languages: e.g. Lacanian psychoanalysis, Gramsci's and Laclau's concept of hegemony, or the postcolonial discourse (Sowa 2011).

The screenwriter also mentions the need to distance oneself from the noble tradition; the convention of satire and comedy is supposed to serve this goal. Disarming the past with the use of a frequently coarse or blunt joke becomes the driving force of the TV series, which reveals noble and national myths we know from our school education.

While taking a look at the visual representations of the noble world in the TV show's sequences from the perspective of a literature studies scholar, it is impossible not to succumb to the temptation of interpretation, based on perhaps far-fetched associations, resulting from many years of working with old texts and overviews concerning Old Polish literature. Thus, having confessed my never-weakening wish for interpretation, maybe too far-fetched, I would like to begin my argument with mentioning the scene appearing in the first episode of the series, when the camera registers mud. Indeed, mud seems to fill the world of Adamczycha. For a historian of literature, it evokes associations with a swamp, quagmire, which Krzysztof Koehler wrote about in the first fragments of his *Paulus sarmatica*. Let us remind here that Koehler encouraged one to enter the Sarmatian swampy world, in the "living substance of existence", the space of dialogue between the past and the present:

Because we had, in our rich history, such an era, in which it was possible for us... – and here we already have a problem, am I allowed to use the "us" pronoun, or should I, rather, say "them", as "us" assumes a community, and "them" seems more adequate, as it points out there used to be "them" and there are "us", and between us, there is a considerable chasm, illuminated (or blinded) by the strong light of the Enlightenment's little lamp [...] so it was possible [...] to create a very interesting culture, an intriguing political system, and civilization aware of its goals (Koehler 2016: 6–7).

If the scholar performs an apology or apotheosis of the Sarmatian world (based on the principle of longevity, as an inalienable element of modern identity)², then the 1670 creators perform – against the author of *Paulus sarmatica* – its radical re-evaluation. Indeed, they are accompanied by, to put in Koehler's terms, "the Enlightenment's little lamp" (in the shape of both Sowa's *Fantomowe ciato króla* and prominent scholars of the folk turn in studies on historiography). Mud will no longer constitute "the living substance of existence", but a remainder of the past world, plunged into symbolic deep, removed from the rational order or rational acting, as well as marked by ugliness and inhuman or anti-human treatment of one's subjects. It should be added that the "intriguing political system" which Koehler wrote about so emphatically is represented in the series by the image of Jan Paweł, transported by peasants on

2 For more on this subject, see Bohuszewicz's interesting text revealing Krzysztof Koehler's interpretative strategies (Bohuszewicz 2011: 99–117).

a cart that resembles a litter. He says, significantly: “I’m lucky to have been born into nobility here in Poland, which is the most powerful country in the world” (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023c). These words open sequences of meanings connected with phrases that make light of familiar myths: “We, Sarmatians, are the chosen people. Thanks to the Almighty’s indisputable will, we were bestowed with the greatest minds, hearts... and phalluses” (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023c). The use of the word phallus is, on the one hand, seemingly out of place and results in laughter, or maybe guffaws (perhaps even unconsciously Sarmatian on the part of the audience), while, on the other, it can denote symbolic authority, vitality and power that Polish nobility has at their disposal. Let us add here that the sexual organ raised to the rank of a mythical phallus may also point towards fear of castration, ceaseless sense of danger and reversal of the slogans one propagates (it should be added here that a dispute about the *kutas* (tassel) and honor, oscillating between literality and unsophisticated metonymy appears in the sixth episode). It is worth emphasizing that perhaps we are dealing here with a distant echo of Sowa’s analyses, based on Lacanian and Freudian concepts, among which reflection about the significance of the phallus plays a considerable role.

The 1670 protagonist has the sense of phantasmic power: he wants to become the most famous Jan Paweł, his Adamczycha appears as the center of the world, and it is from its perspective – the perspective of his own manor farm, family nest – that he watches and experiences the world, according to certain mental patterns that make it impossible to discover the world’s complexity and difference from the assumed preconceptions³. According to Jan Paweł, life follows an order established by nature, it is organized based on the changing seasons, the sense of the natural domination of nobility over the peasants (“I didn’t get a free ride, you know. I inherited all this myself” (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023c), projected and assumed superiority over women, and eternally established social roles, and, finally, antipathy towards the other – in the show it is, for instance, a neighbor, the owner of half of Adamczycha. These initial sequences present in the first episode of the series show a phantasmic order based on familial unity. It is referenced as a bookend closing the first season. While Jan Paweł’s family has their portrait taken – bringing to mind Dutch paintings of the 17th century – the protagonist says the following while talking to his wife: “That’s why we need a strong foundation that we can lean on, so we don’t go mad. And that foundation can only be nation, community, and family. Am I right, Zofia? What? I was asking if I was right. I wasn’t really listening, my lord, but I’m sure you are” (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023d). It could be said that Jan Paweł succumbed to fantasy liberated from the demands of reality. He appears to be an exemplification of the Sarmatian myth, as if taken straight out of Sowa’s *Fantomowe ciało króla* (Sowa 2011: 259–273). The protagonist

3 See e.g. an interesting analysis of the noble world from an anthropological and cultural perspective (Kowalski 2000). See also Świdarska-Włodarczyk 2017.

lives according to phantasmagories and imaginings. He perceives reality in an illusory order, imbuing it with certain meaning.

As has already been mentioned, the struggle for symbolic power takes place in episode six, where the nobility argues about who has the longest tassel⁴ (*kutas*)⁵. Indeed, as it is known – “being well-hung is a direct extension of a Sarmatian’s honor” (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023b). From the perspective of a historian of literature, the on-screen joke (which is not terribly lofty) evokes associations with analyses concerning the meaning of honor in noble society. It is worth quoting here a longer fragment by Pierre Bourdieu, providing a considerably more developed and theoretical outlook on the phenomenon of honor than works by professional historians:

the point of honour, that particular form of the sense of the game that is acquired through prolonged submission to the regularities and rules of the economy of symbolic goods, is the principle of the system of reproduction strategies [available to men]. [...] Women are excluded from all the public spaces, such as the assembly or the market, where the games ordinarily considered the most serious ones of human existence, such as the games of honour, are played out. [...] Being a man, in the sense of *vir*, implies an ought-to-be, a *virtus*, which imposes itself in the mode of self-evidence, the taken-for-granted. Like nobility, honour – which is inscribed in the body in the form of a set of seemingly natural dispositions, often visible in a particular way of sitting and standing, a tilt of the head, a bearing, a gait, bound up with a way of thinking and acting, an ethos, a belief, etc. – [...] directs (in both senses) his thoughts and practices like a force [...], but without constraining him mechanically [...]; it guides his action like a logical necessity. [...] Nobility, or the point of honour [...] is the product of a social labour of nomination and inculcation at the end of which [there emerges] a social identity instituted by one of the “invisible demarcation lines” laid down by the social world and known and recognized by all (Bourdieu 2001: 48–50).

Therefore, the category of honor is not something neutral; rather, it is inscribed into particular relations of domination, authority, lifestyles manifesting through one’s behavior and body. Let us remind the reader that since his youth, a nobleman was obliged to protect the coat of arms from offense, to take care of the family, to defend the Commonwealth and the Catholic faith, as well to defend himself from infamy. Thus, in the world of the TV show, Jan Paweł wants to erase slander, fulfill the established order. In the scenario he imagines, in which he is, obviously, victorious, he also wants to prepare a short speech or a poem

4 To remind the reader: a tassel is an adornment, a brush made out of threads or strings at the end of a rope pinned to the belt, decorative in character.

5 In contemporary Polish, the word *kutas* is commonly used as slang for “penis” (translator’s note).

that would confirm his status as a perfect knight and competent speaker⁶. To the surprise of the all-male group that participates in the duel, in the final scene the protagonist's daughter Aniela shows up; thanks to her, or, actually, thanks to his own deceitful arguments, Jan Paweł cleverly avoids the confrontation. He gives the axe to a peasant who unapologetically and violently, in a way that has nothing to do with the logic of the duel, simply kills Jeremi. In accordance with the rule stated by the person in charge of the duel, "God – honor – homeland: the three most common causes of death", Jan Paweł's opponent dies, and the nobility pays him posthumous respects.

The killing of Jeremi can also be treated as a temporary fulfillment of the wish for revenge on the oppressive social system as carried out by the representative of the oppressed peasants. The risen organ of the peasant (who dreams about rebellion against the oppressors – [Buchwald, Kądziela 2023a]), quickly hidden behind the axe, points towards a temporary gaining of power, which, however, soon succumbs to the sense of shame.

Due to the comical situations that show the discordance between the propagated slogans and the lived practice of the show's characters, the cult of honor, connected with the cult of valor, patriotism and manliness are made fun of in various ways on the show. To put it in the most general terms, military manliness does not find approval on the part of the show's creators. Let us remind the reader that, according to Tomasz Tomasiak,

a Sarmatian man experienced liberty not in claustrophobic space of a library or lecture hall, but in the open territory of a battlefield. He did not self-identify with intellectual values, but, rather, with land-owning and military ones. Moreover, the idea of wartime manliness was inscribed into the sacralizing context of Christian ethics and historiosophy, especially given the influence of post-Trident Jesuit ideology (Tomasik 2016: 11).

Thus, this model becomes undermined, for example in the image of Bogdan, whose shoulders are adorned not by Hussar wings as much as their remainders. Fighting is Bogdan's natural element: he says that he took part in all battles that Poles lost. He is the one to spew anti-Jewish, anti-German, anti-Swedish, and anti-peasant (among others) slogans, but in the end, under the influence of narcotic drugs, sees himself in the role of the leader of the Sultan empire (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023a), as if he subconsciously wished to be the one situated on the opposite side of *antemurale christianitas*.

Grotesque and exaggerated images of Sarmatian world are connected with never ending manifestations of superiority not only over the peasants, which is obvious, but also over the townsfolk class. In the third episode, there appears a town man – a merchant, Ciesław Ryczyński, with his wife from Wilanów,

6 Allusions to Cicero and oratory art appear in the first episode of the series under discussion. On the importance of speeches in the Old Polish era, see e.g. Ciszewska 2016.

whose daughter Jan Paweł's son Stanisław wants to marry. This plot becomes a pretext for showing the antipathy of representatives of nobility towards townfolk. A cultural and mental glance towards the town situated it in opposition to the gentry's way of life, the virtues and traditions practiced by nobility. This is why the nobility "was increasingly convinced that every town person was an enemy and a mountebank, practicing speculation, a parasite out to destroy the country" (Bogucka 2009: 11). The show's creators make Jan Paweł's wife utter a phrase known from works of literature or sermons, presenting the town as a place of debauchery and disgrace. Ciesław does not gain Jan Paweł's approval, for he comes from "another" world, based on different cultural models; what is more, he carries a saber, which he treats as something "in vogue", "a fashion accessory". Jan Paweł states emphatically that "a saber is the accessory of a nobleman, of a warrior. We use it to defend the Commonwealth", "a saber isn't 'in vogue', it's practically an extension of my [Sarmatian] arm" (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023e).

In the episode under analysis one can notice an easily grasped archetypal opposition between that which is familiar and known, and that which is other. A merchant is a sign of otherness, a carrier of culture alien to Poles. He is the one who comes from the outside, undermines native habits and traditions. He comes into conflict with the encountered rules of life and perception of the world. Let us remind the reader that a merchant was an ambiguous figure back in the Middle Ages: a merchant's existence escaped the sacred time, and the course of his life was inseparable from increasing his wealth, it was based on the profitability of economic calculation (Le Goff 1988: 331–355). Finally, merchants played a significant role in the dissemination of ideas of the reformation, and their religiosity was more open and critical than in the case of inhabitants of closed communities, existing in a uniform symbolic and cultural territory (Tenenti 2001: 224). A merchant is an other, belonging to a world based on movement and change, while the political system of nobility is a sign of immutability, stability and hierarchy⁷.

The lack of understanding for the complexity of the world pertains also to the bodily sphere, which appears as repressed and stifled, and which recurs in the least expected moments. Zofia, dressed in black, prone to lying prostrate on the floor, characterized by emotional frigidity, begins a passionate affair with Ciesław's wife. The men, including the merchant, remain entirely in the dark, do not know about the relationship between their wives, nor even entertain such a possibility; they also know little about female anatomy. The case is similar when it comes to basic hygiene. Episode five introduces the motif of *vanitas*, characteristic for Baroque. A conversation with the theater troupe actors concerning the Black Death epidemic causes Jan Paweł to consider mournfully his own children's mortality. Finally, he wants to check if he

7 Jan Paweł and his son reminisce that they have left the family's estate to watch serfs being hanged. The plot of hanging a serf appears in one of W. Potocki's texts. See Śnieżko 2019: 265–276.

does not carry the mortal illness. During an examination, the doctor says that Jan Paweł “is becoming obese”, to which he replies “thank you” (Buchwald, Kądziała 2023a). The scene resembles remarks on the Sarmatian body made by e.g. Tadeusz Chrzanowski, who notes:

The representatives of other nations had, above all, chests, arms, broad shoulders, muscular calves and thighs. They also had genitals, and their abdomens played an indirect, subordinate role. Among the Sarmatians, there happened something akin to autonomization of the abdomen, it took on an important function, becoming a carrier of dignity in a metaphorical sense, due to its majestic appearance, and in literal sense, as the place where the belt was tied and the saber – the nobility’s attribute – was hanged (Chrzanowski 1977: 63)⁸.

A saber, garments such as a *żupan* and a *kontusz*, finally, an abdomen are visible attributes of a nobleman, strongly emphasized in the show. They point towards what is a direct association with the Sarmatian culture.

The world created in the show brings to mind threads undertaken in works by scholars of literary studies, historians, or found in Sowa’s book. They are adjusted to jokes within the series: we see the embodiment of the phantasm of a Sarmatian and a nobleman in the figure of Jan Paweł, there are also references to the myth of Poland – a granary of the nations, aversion to modernizing the countryside or modern technologies, which Jan Paweł mentions directly in the second episode of the Netflix production under discussion.

The show *1670* should be interpreted as a pop cultural voice in discussion on noble Poland, and the ways it is presented from the perspective of contemporary disputes and discourses. The show’s creators, by performing a kind of a deconstruction of national myths, use its most well-known elements (also stereotypically identified with the culture of the second half of the 17th century) such as *antemurale*, aversion to strangers, honor, economic backwardness, inscribing them into the tradition – modernity opposition. Comedy and humor, and, above all, a satirical outlook on the past situate the show under discussion on the opposite side of Neo-Sarmatian identifications, for which noble past would be living tradition conditioning contemporary identity.

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8 See also Obremski 2015: 140–160.

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