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## Aemulatores Erasmi? “The Council of Women” in Polish Literature of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century\*

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### Abstract

This paper presents how the Polish renaissance authors creatively transformed and adapted one of Erasmus’ dialogues, *Senatulus sive Gynaikosynedrion*, to the native context. Erasmus exploited a popular motif of a meeting of women who debate on different issues. The work is based on one of Aristophanes’ comedies, as well as an episode from a biography of the Roman emperor, Elagabalus. *Senatulus* was very popular and was translated into a number of vernacular languages all over Europe. Erasmus, with his characteristic sense of humour and criticism, pointed to some of the vices of women, but this did not constitute his ultimate aim. He used the seemingly paradoxical formula of a women’s council to draw attention to the social and political problems of the time.

Early-modern Polish texts that used the theme in question can be read in the context of Polish parliamentarism, but their literary inspiration should also be taken into consideration. The first part of this paper focuses on problematic aspects of *Senatulus* and its somewhat provocative and ambiguous character, which probably attracted other authors to this particular text. Then two Polish dialogues that are linked to Erasmus’s work are examined. These are the anonymous *Senatulus to jest sjem niewieści* (*Senatulus, or the council of women*) from 1543 and *Sjem niewieści* (*The council of women*) written by Marcin Bielski in 1566/1567. Even a preliminary

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\* Polish text: J. A. Kowalik, “Aemulatores erasmi? «Sejmy niewieści» w polskiej kulturze literackiej XVI wieku,” *Terminus* 2/17 (2015), pp. 241–263.

comparison of these two works with Erasmus' *colloquium* indicates that the Polish texts are, in a sense, sequels to the Latin original and further develop its basic idea. References to Erasmus' work are present here on different levels. Similarity lays not only in the title and topics discussed by the characters, but also in the linguistic structure of the text. In both cases, the concept of the female parliament was used by the writers as a pretext to draw attention to the political, social, and economic problems Poland faced at that time and to suggest solutions.

**Keywords:** Erasmus of Rotterdam, satire, *Senatulus to jest sjem niewieści*, Marcin Bielski, "council of women", dialogue

When in his comedy *Lysistrata* Aristophanes ordered the title character to speak at a war congregation and in the *Congresswomen* he handed the power in Athens over to women, he created a literary precedent which was later imitated by many authors. This motif was also used by Erasmus of Rotterdam, who in the next volume of the *Colloquia familiaria* (1529) collection published the dialogue *Senatulus sive Gynaikosynedrion*, making women heroines who considered convening a female senate, or rather a "little senate" (*senatulus* is a diminutive of *senatus*—K. S.), in order to oppose the domination of men. In the literature on the subject, it is stressed that Erasmus could draw the idea of a women's congregation not only from Aristophanes, but also from the biography of Emperor Elagabalus, published in the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, which he published a few years before the dialogue under discussion.<sup>1</sup> The text undoubtedly contains ludic elements. Erasmus' idea questioned the traditional order, for example, by proposing a "backward world" in which roles are reversed. The only function of a superficially read *Senatulus* seems to be entertainment. However, an in-depth reading of the work indicates that the author had a veiled approach to topics that were also undertaken in

<sup>1</sup> See P. Eichel-Lojkine, "Colloquium, Concilium, Convicium. Pour une relecture du Senatulus d'Erasmus", *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 2/63 (2001), p. 291.

his other writings on women, including some of his treatises (*Encomium matrimonii*, *Institutio Christiani matrimonii*, *Vidua Christiana*) and dialogues (*Virgo μισόγαμος*, *Virgo poenitens*, *Proci et puellae*, *Coniugium*, *Adolescentis et scorti*, *Abbatis et eruditae*, *Puerpera*, *Άγαμος γάμος sive Coniugium impar*).

A summary of the text seems essential at this point.<sup>2</sup> In *Senatulus*, five women, most likely burgher women (Cornelia, Margaret, Perotta, Julia, and Catherine), talk with each other, although the verb “talk” seems rather exaggerated here because it is basically a monologue by one of the characters, Cornelia. In the first sentences, she lays a charge against her friends that they have completely forgotten about their dignity, which is why men treat them rather flippantly and meet at various types of men-only meetings to discuss their own affairs. The current women’s assembly convened by Cornelia is not a precedent because such meetings have a long tradition that dates back to antiquity (the speaker mentions the women’s senate held in the days of the Roman emperor Elagabalus) and must be re-established. Women should not remain silent since even Nature has given them eloquence and a voice louder than that of men, whose voices are hoarse and therefore correspond to the roars of donkeys. Encouraging her friends to take action to restore the women’s senate established by Roman history, Cornelia depreciates male congregations. For monarchs, theologians and bishops come together many times and cannot agree with each other in any way, arguing over their seats and the order in which they should speak. The men’s rule, as she seems to suggest, has made it impossible for there to be a consensus among citizens or neighbours. If power had passed into the hands of women, human affairs would have become more bearable.

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<sup>2</sup> I use the following edition: Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus, “Senatulus sive Gynaikosynedrion”, in: *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, ord. I, vol. 3: *Colloquia*, ed. L. E. Halkin, F. Bierlaire, and R. Hoven, Amsterdam 1972, pp. 629–634 (hereinafter referred to as ASD; the numeration of lines follows this edition).

She then talks about determining the composition of the future senate and the agenda of the debates planned. Cornelia is constantly interrupted and protested against as the solutions she proposes seem unacceptable to the other women. She assumes that no maidens will be accepted at the meetings (because the matters discussed during such congregations may not be suitable for them), neither will prostitutes (no self-respecting matron will sit next to a woman of immoral conduct), women over seventy years of age (considered to be retired), or those who have been married three times. Next, the order of places will be determined by the origin and number of children. The main subject of the debates will be the issue of women's dignity, which is manifested mainly in... their attire. Here, a sharp satire on the clothes of noblewomen and burghers takes place; Cornelia repines over the latter that they wear dresses that only suit high-born ladies. The main criticism of the president of the women's meeting against contemporary costumes is that they do not constitute a criterion for distinguishing between high-born and plebeian women. Cornelia also complains about the blind followers of the aristocracy and the blurring of interstate differences, as well as touches on the important (especially in the context of other dialogues of Erasmus) subject of the proper choice of spouses.

Further provisions relate to an unspecified future: men must be left in all positions and concerned with warfare, and women may in time win the right to hold offices that do not require the use of weapons. The satire ends in a completely unexpected moment—Cornelia asks the other women to think about the issues to be discussed and plans to hold another meeting the next day, leaving the reader rather unsatisfied.

Evidently, Erasmus' accomplished the aim of pointing out the flaws of women.<sup>3</sup> The blade of the satire was directed mainly against the not

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<sup>3</sup> "In Senatulo traducturus eram vitia quedam mulierum, sed civiliter, ne quis expectet tale quippiam quale habet Iuvenalis" (Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus, *De utilitate Colloquiorum*, ASD, ord. I, vol. 3, p. 748).

very wise burgher women who were mainly fond of prinking. It is also worth noting that in laying the foundations for the functioning of the female senate Cornelia had to imitate the work of the meetings she had observed. These meetings often did not fulfil their objectives so it is difficult to expect the gatherings modelled after them to be very different. Using a slightly exaggerated image of a women’s meeting, Erasmus discredited all kinds of congregations, drawing attention to the shortcomings in how they function. *Senatulus* can also be read as a dialogue about the councils of men presented in a distorted mirror and a meta-discursive conversation, or more precisely, a statement about the way in which discussions are conducted. Just as in the *Synod of Grammmarians* published in 1529, which can be treated as the male equivalent of the *Senatulus*, Erasmus tried to ridicule both the participants in the dispute and their pointless polemics.

The provocative and utopian character of the work,<sup>4</sup> not easy to grasp, encouraged to elaborate on its theme, which can be shown by the popularity of the dialogue in Western Europe, where it was willingly translated and paraphrased. This formula was also used by sixteenth-century Polish writers who fought by means of pen for the repair of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (*Senatulus to jest sjem niewieści* of 1543, Marcin Bielski’s *Sjem niewieści* of 1566/1567) and authors of seventeenth-century anti-female satires (*Sejm białogłowski* and *Sejm panieński*, both written before 1617).

There are few direct references to the *Colloquia familiaria* collection in Polish Renaissance literature. There is no doubt, however, that they were read sedulously not only by the Cracow students of elegant Latin. Some of the borrowings have already been identified by scholars, others we can only surmise, always with great caution. As Janusz Tazbir stressed in his publication on the reception of the collection in Poland, not every author of satirical dialogues had to follow Erasmus because

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<sup>4</sup> See J. A. Kowalik, “Senatulus sive Gynaikosynedrion – utopia, inversus mundi, satyra na współczesność? Poglądy Erazma z Rotterdamu na rządy kobiet”, *Wielogłos* 3/21 (2014), pp. 51–59.

at that time it was a very popular form, which was willingly used by both libellers and (quite seriously) religious polemicists.<sup>5</sup> Rotterdamus was imitated by a nameless author of a lampoon for the marriage of Sigismund II Augustus to Barbara Radziwiłłówna, and Polish pamphlets of that period were also modelled on his *Dialogues*, including the famous satire on the Piotrków Sejm of 1536 entitled *Dialogus de Asiana diaeta*.<sup>6</sup> They inspired Mikołaj Rej,<sup>7</sup> Marcin Kromer, Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, and Stanisław Orzechowski. And although the characters in Polish dialogues often talk using “Erasmus’ words”, it is hard to find his name and literal quotations from individual works there.<sup>8</sup> It is similar in the case of many (often anonymous) old-Polish texts entitled “*sejm*” or “*sjem*”. What (if any) links can be observed between them and Erasmus’ “council” of women?

In the old literature, there are paraphrases of Sejm debates, or more precisely, the Sejm diary, in which the agenda of deputies’ speeches was recorded. Two different comic genres emerged from the travesty of this diary: the *sejm* and the *votum*.<sup>9</sup> In the literature on the subject, it is stressed that the “council of women” could have been created independently of literary models as one of the manifestations of old-Polish parliamentarianism.<sup>10</sup> The fiction describing the women’s parliament in the work of Aristophanes, which was popular in Western Europe, was probably very little known in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as almost nothing was known about this great comic writer,

<sup>5</sup> J. Tazbir, “Polska recepcja *Rozmów potocznych* Erazma z Rotterdamu”, *Przełom Humanistyczny* 27/5 (1983), p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> See M. Cytowska, “W cieniu wielkiego Erazma. Pamflet na małżeństwo Zygmunta Augusta z Barbarą Radziwiłłówną”, *Meander* 4(6) (1959), pp. 291–299; Tazbir, “Polska”, p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> This was convincingly demonstrated by Zofia Szymdtowa (Z. Szymdtowa, “Rej wobec Erazma”, in: Z. Szymdtowa, *O Erazmie i Reju*, Warsaw 1972, pp. 181–234).

<sup>8</sup> Tazbir, “Polska”, pp. 30–31.

<sup>9</sup> J. Nowak-Dłużewski, *Okolicznościowa poezja polityczna w Polsce*, vol. 6: *Dwaj królowie rodacy*, Warsaw 1980, pp. 251–252.

<sup>10</sup> W. Wojtowicz, *Między literaturą a kulturą. Studia o „literaturze mieszczańskie” przełomu XVI i XVII wieku*, Szczecin 2010, p. 325.

he was not translated, and was condemned for moral reasons (until the second half of the nineteenth century).<sup>11</sup> His situation in Poland was, therefore, quite different from that in France, England, Italy, and Germany, where he enjoyed considerable recognition.<sup>12</sup> He was recommended to students by Erasmus, who particularly valued him for his beautiful language.<sup>13</sup> If not the *Congresswomen* of Aristophanes, then perhaps Erasmus’ *Senatulus* could have inspired Polish artists?

We will be particularly interested in two texts created not too far apart. One is *Senatulus to jest sjem niewieści* (*Senatulus, or the senate of women*) by an anonymous author (although sometimes attributed to Andrzej Glaber of Kobylin), published in 1543, and the other one is the *Sjem niewieści* (*The council of women*) by Marcin and Joachim Bielski, most probably written at the turn of 1566/1567.<sup>14</sup> We will try to show how their authors have undertaken the theme in question, creatively transformed it and adapted it to local conditions.

The content of the sixteenth-century “female councils” revolves around the issues of the state and the improvement of customs, that is topics addressed by the most powerful minds of early-modern Poland. It also has quite a lot in common with their works. Considering the rather weak position of women in the Polish-Lithuanian

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<sup>11</sup> On the reception of Aristophanes’ works in Poland see, among others, the following: T. Sinko, *Literatura grecka*, vol. 1, part 2: *Literatura klasyczna w V–IV przed Chr.*, Cracow 1932, pp. 430–432; J. Starnawski, “Bibliografia Arystofanesa w Polsce”, in: *Arystofanes. Materiały Sesji Naukowej Komitetu Nauk o Kulturze Antycznej PAN*, Wrocław 1957, pp. 264–307; J. Starnawski, “O dziejach Arystofanesa w Polsce”, in: J. Starnawski, M. Wichowa, and J. Obrębski, *Antyk w Polsce*, part 1, Łódź 1992, pp. 41–69.

<sup>12</sup> J. Łanowski, “Wstęp”, in: Arystofanes, *Trzy komedie: Lizystrata, Sejm kobiet, Plutos*, transl. J. Ławińska-Tyszkowska, Wrocław 1981, pp. LXIX–LXXX.

<sup>13</sup> Sinko, *Literatura*, p. 432.

<sup>14</sup> I use the following editions: [Andrzej Glaber from Kobylin?], *Senatulus to jest sjem niewieści, który nigdy w Rzymie dzierżan był od trzech stanów ich, od małżonek, wdów i (panien)*, Cracow, wdowa Unglerowa, 1543, 8-o. (ark. B and C); M. Bielski, “Sjem niewieści”, in: M. Bielski and J. Bielski, *Komedyja Justyna i Konstancyjej; Sjem niewieści*, oprac. J. Starnawski, Cracow 2001.

Commonwealth, the fiction of the *quasi*-parliament of women might have seemed rather surprising to the readers.

The authors of such works used the concept of a women's gathering, previously unknown to Polish literature, in order to draw attention to the topical problems of social and political life. Of course, political and economic questions are only some of the numerous meanings that each of these texts offers, but they seem to be the most important.

In the beginning, it should be noted that both texts can be regarded as a continuation of the dialogue of Erasmus and development of the idea borrowed from him. In Erasmus' work, women gather to debate the female senate that is yet to be formed, while in the Polish counterparts they deliberate in a way that is an imitation of the Polish parliamentary system: the nobility gathered at a *sejmik* (a local assembly of nobility where participants agreed on their stand at Sejm—K. S.) and adopted instructions for deputies (articles) that they were to present to the general Sejm. So is the women's *sejmik*: "And therefore we present these articles recommended by all the women and request that you be so kind as to accept them" (*Senatulus, to jest sjem niewieści*, f. B2r).

The mysterious *Senatulus to jest sjem niewieści*, which survived to our times only in fragments, was published in 1543, a year that was important in the history of old-Polish literature. The author of this monograph has not yet been established. The first publisher of the dialogue, Karol Badecki, attributed it to Andrzej Glaber of Kobylin, professor at the University of Cracow, translator, populariser of knowledge, and defender of burghers' rights.<sup>15</sup> This position,

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<sup>15</sup> K. Badecki, *Z badań nad literaturą mieszczańsko-ludową XVI–XVII wieku. Senatulus (Sjem niewieści)*. *Franc*, Wrocław 1953, pp. 21–22. The dialogue in question, based on Badecki's edition, was reprinted by Julian Krzyżanowski ("Senatulus to jest sjem niewieści, który niegdy w Rzymie dzierżan był od trzech stanów ich, od małżonek, wdów i panien" [Andrzej Glaber of Kobylin], in: *Polska proza wczesnego renesansu (1510–1550)*, ed. J. Krzyżanowski, Warsaw 1954, pp. 337–350).



although not without reservations, has been accepted in the literature on the subject.<sup>16</sup>

There are three “debating estates” in the Polish *Senatulus*: maids, married women, and widows, and two of the women are known by name, i.e. Anna (who speaks only one sentence) and Lukrecja, who represents wives and speaks three times. It is not, therefore, a dialogue of specific persons but rather a collection of speeches by “female deputies” who report their articles (ten from each estate) submitted to the upcoming council of women. Lukrecja’s speeches are a kind of interlude as she speaks before maidens and widows. The content of the speeches is influenced by the social status of the speaker. It can be assumed that they represent the townswomen, but regardless of the literary model (assumingly, Erasmus’ work), the topics they address are, with all reservations, a reflection of the contemporary reality outside the text. The work printed in the year of the publication of *Krótka rozprawa* (A short discourse) by Mikołaj Rej or the first speech by Philaretus Perypathetician (in Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski’s work) is the result of the same trend to consider Polish affairs and their reform critically. As Henryk Barycz stressed, the value of *Senatulus* is enhanced by the unprecedented defence of the economic interests of the burghers and, in particular, by the attempt to challenge the political and social restrictions imposed on this estate by the nobility.<sup>17</sup> Following in the footsteps of Barycz, well-respected for his contribution to the research into the culture of the past, one can go even further and presume that the text was probably created out of the need for a specific political situation, as we are convinced by the analysis of the content of *Senatulus*. After all, in 1543 at the Cracow

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<sup>16</sup> While scholars from the 1950s agree with Badecki’s opinion (e.g. H. Barycz, “Glaber Andrzej”, in: *Polski słownik biograficzny*, vol. 8, ed. K. Lepszy, Wrocław 1959–1960, pp. 28–30), the authors of later works are cautious about this subject or do not touch upon it at all. Linguistic research may give us some hints as to the authorship (see J. Migdał, *O języku Andrzeja Glabera z Kobyłina. Studium polszczyzny wczesnorennesansowej*, Poznań 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Barycz, “Glaber Andrzej”, p. 30.

Seym, pressed by the nobility, King Sigismund the Old undertook to implement the provisions of the Constitution of the Piotrków Seym of 1538, which prohibited townspeople from purchasing rural property and ordered them to sell any such properties they already possessed within four years.<sup>18</sup>

We should therefore place the dialogue of the anonymous author alongside the famous *Mowa Prawdomówcy Perypatetyka* (A speech of Peripatetic the Truth-teller) by Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, published in print in 1545 but created two years earlier, which is a peculiar commentary on the decisions of the Piotrków Seym. The beginning of the work, where Modrzewski explains the reason for convening the gathering, seems important: “Etsi nobis potestas sententiae in senatu dicendae non est, tamen in senatulo hoc nostro [emphasis—J. A. K. P.], ut de rebus humanis omnibus, ita etiam de senatus consultis in hoc conuentu reipublicae factis puto licere nobis disputare”.<sup>19</sup> Noteworthy is the clear opposition between the Senate of the Commonwealth and the group of scholars, mostly of plebeian origin, whom Modrzewski describes with the diminutive *senatulus* (“Oratio Philaethis Peripatetici in senatulo hominum scholasticorum”). They gather to submit the unfair acts that restrain the political and economic freedom of burghers to criticism. Therefore, as Jerzy Ziomek rightly points out, the *Senatulus* is the organ of thought, not a legislature, expressing the ideals of early humanism, in which the slogan “to rule by means of pen was both the principle and the hope behind these actions”.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in the dialogue we are interested in, the content of most of the articles proposed by women is maintained in a general, didactic-moral

<sup>18</sup> See A. Dembińska, *Zygmunt I. Zarys dziejów wewnętrznopolitycznych (1540–1548)*, Poznań 1948.

<sup>19</sup> A. Frycz Modrzewski, “Oratio Philaethis Peripatetici in senatulo hominum scholasticorum de decreto conventus, quo pagi civibus adimi permittuntur, habita MDXXXIII Calend. Aprilis”, in: A. Frycz Modrzewski, *Orationes*, ed. K. Kumaniecki, Warsaw 1954, p. 155.

<sup>20</sup> J. Ziomek, *Renesans*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, Warsaw 1995, pp. 173–174.

tone, reinforced by the “wishful thinking” form of individual paragraphs.

The women gathered at the meeting speak in a strictly defined order: the maids are to speak about “conventual and Christian governance”, followed by widows deliberating about virtuous life, and finally, wives speaking about a good household and defence (these fragments have not survived). The reason for convening the council is the difficult situation of women that forces them to organise a convention for the first time in forever and to debate their own fate, which gives their meeting an interventional dimension. From the content of the articles that survived it can be deduced that the work was primarily of didactic and social-moral character, pointing out and condemning especially the defects of women in the “unfortunate times”, including the excess in clothes.

The author often refers to the Holy Scriptures as a source of moral improvement. Via the mouths of the ladies, he speaks out against religious novelty, warning that “in the Christian faith, there was no change even though the Church law is very old” (f. B2v) and that no one should discuss matters of faith at “secular feasts” (f. B2v). In the articles postulated by young women, the faults of those days included also “lecherous songs that spoil virtues in people”, “shameless dances”, making vows in vain, intensification of theft, disrespecting justice, or punishing “lawless killers”. In the latter case, the anonymous author agrees with Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski (let us recall that in the same year he wrote the first of his famous speeches, *Lascius, sive de poena homicidii*, against the unjust law that favoured nobility). Both authors argue that the punishment should be the same as the result of the crime, regardless of the origin of the killer and the victim. They also oppose the practice of buying out one’s freedom, which was quite common among the mighty. For the sake of comparison, let us put together the appropriate fragments:

Here, for God’s sake, we demand that all lawless killers should be punished by cutting their throats, not paying money, according to the laws of civic order. For we cannot name the price or value of the life of any Christian,

even the poorest one, for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was tortured to death (*Senatulus, to jest sjem niewieści*, f. B3v).

Does it really seem to us that this [financial—J. A. K. P.] penalty will compensate for the loss of human life? [The life of] a man who was brought up thanks to such great care, such great efforts, whom God considered his son, Christ considered his brother, whom nature equipped and adorned with so many blessings, who was pinned with so many and such great hopes of undertaking noble deeds? . . . What punishment can be more appropriate than taking the life of all the killers?<sup>21</sup>

Widows try to eliminate other bad customs, criticising excessive drunkenness and intemperance in eating, as well as widespread adultery and usury. They also touch upon the important issue of women's clothing, especially dresses. It was the favourite topic of satire writers who expostulated the extravagance of women in this regard at every opportunity. The anonymous author of *Senatulus* is, therefore, part of a long list of artists—from Clemens Ianicius and Mikołaj Rej to Waław Potocki and Krzysztof Opaliński—who condemned changeability in costumes as a national vice. The author orders those townswomen who like splendour and expensive clothes to limit themselves to just a few dresses, allowing luxury only in the aristocracy. Women propose to make the number of costumes dependent on the social position. Although a voivode's wife "is to have as many robes as she pleases", a castellan's or *starosta's* wife, who are inferior to her, may "only" have eight, a noblewoman from the gentry and a wife of a councillor—six, a merchant's wife five, a craftswoman four: "two festive, and two daily" (f. C2v).

The tenth article, in which the widows draw attention to the need to support national branches of the economy, is also important. The anonymous author represents the burghers' view that money should not be exported abroad and that all goods can be produced at home

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<sup>21</sup> A. Frycz Modrzewski, "Łaski, czyli o karze za mężobójstwo. Mowa pierwsza", in: A. Frycz Modrzewski, *Mowy*, transl. E. Jędrkiewicz, Warsaw 1954, p. 50.

without being imported from countries that feather their nests in this way:

Firstly, in some regions of our country, the wool on our sheep is as delicate and fine as that from England, from which Italian clothes are made, and our spinners can spin a thread as fine as the French do. The dye can be obtained more easily because they import cochineals from us, so in our opinion, all clothes produced here may be exactly the same as those imported here by our neighbours (f. C4v).

This fragment can also be considered as a criticism of the agricultural-oriented economic policy of the nobility. It is the townspeople who recognise that the welfare of the state should not be built on the basis of a single branch of the economy and that crafts and trade should also be developed. Otherwise, as one of the fragments of the *Senatulus* says, there may be a rise in prices and food shortages, as the widows complain in the first article.

Even a brief summary of the contents of the Polish "women's parliament" allows us to discern the relations between this work and Erasmus' dialogue. In fact, there are not many of them. The similarity between the two is based mainly on taking over the title and concept, and the issues raised in both texts are, to some extent, parallel. They include moderate complaining about men who disregard women, which forces them to debate their issues, discussion about women's attire, and a longing for vaguely identifiable old times when different customs and intra-estate divisions were in force.

In the anonymous work, the borrowing of the concept of gathering women from Rotterdamus resulted in a creative development of the idea with a clear advantage of the native element. *Senatulus to jest sjem niewieści* is not actually a dialogue as the speeches delivered at the meeting are not clearly individualised, and the collective utterances of the ladies, widows and (perhaps) married women are far from a conversation. Characteristic are the postulates put forward by women. They are not only an echo of old-Polish parliamentarianism, but also typical (as can be seen in other examples) of the genre of *sejm*.

If we do not consider as satirical the discussion about women's clothes and the consumption of food depending on social status, there is almost no satirical content, which is the essence of Erasmus' *colloquium*. In the Polish text, the opposite is true: the moralistic tone prevails.

It seems that the actual connection with Erasmus *Senatulus* lies in the fact that the two authors treated a women's gathering as a pretext. This concept is used by Erasmus to present the congregations of men in a distorted mirror and by the anonymous Polish author to critically examine religious, social, and finally economic issues in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the first half of the sixteenth century. Against the backdrop of various statements of a reformist nature, *Senatulus to jest sjem niewieści* stands out not only for its unprecedented defence of burghers' rights, but also for the new type of character employed. It is difficult to determine whether the women speaking at an imaginary council had, according to the author, more persuasive power than the interlocutors in *Krótką rozprawą* of Mikołaj Rej or the Peripatetic from Frycz Modrzewski's text, to mention only characters from works published in the same year. It was not necessary to know the principles of ancient rhetoric in order to know that the person of the speaker has a big influence on the credibility of the message. Therefore, an artist who decided to choose female characters certainly sought something out of the ordinary. The element of surprise must be taken into account: even women, who allegedly only talk about silly things, draw attention to the inadequacies in the functioning of society and the state. What is more, they do not display the quarrelsomeness typical of their sex, evident in the text of the original. On the contrary, they speak in a well-defined order determined at the beginning of the meeting; they do not argue, nor do they object to the proposed articles. So this is a meeting presented as a model and intended to ridicule—however, not women, but men. Thus eventually, the Polish work seems to be related to Erasmus' dialogue in a manner invisible when read superficially, which in turn may well prove the erudition of its author and the deepened interpretation of the *Senatulus*.

The links between the next of the works we are interested in and Erasmus’s dialogue have long been noticed in the literature on the subject.<sup>22</sup> Bielski partially preserved the structure of the original text, that is a council, although he engaged not five but seven women: Katarzyna, Beata, Ludomiła, Konstancyja, Potencyjana, Eufemija and Poliksena—each of whom has a chance to express her opinion. The meeting is also attended by unidentified maidens, married women and widows, who appear unexpectedly later in the poem. As you can see, only the name Katarzyna (Catarina) is consistent with the original. Erasmus’ Perotta is resembled by Konstancyja, who represents the opposition in Bielski’s work, strongly objecting to any actions aimed at men. No woman, however, plays such a leading role as Cornelia does in *Senatulus*. Bielski divided the latter’s monologue among the individual “persons” of the poem, putting into their mouths utterances that were often literal translations of Erasmus’ dialogue. Let us, for example, compare some of the corresponding Latin and Polish statements.

Speaking out at the beginning of Erasmus’ text, Cornelia reproaches the gathered women for being put to the distaff and having completely forgotten their own affairs, which is why men, who meet frequently to debate their affairs, do not take women seriously and almost deny their human status: “Scitis, opinor, omnes, quantum hinc commodis nostris decesserit, quod quum viri quotidianis conuentibus suum agant negotium, nos colo telaeque assidentes causam nostram deserimus . . . vixque hominis vocabulo dignentur” (*Senatulus*, ll. 6–10).

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<sup>22</sup> See I. Chrzanowski, *Marcin Bielski. Studium literackie*, Warsaw 1906, pp. 207–213; A. Gorzkowski, “Słowo wstępne”, in: M. Bielski and J. Bielski, *Komedia Justyna i Konstancyjej; Sjem niewieści*, oprac. J. Starnawski, Cracow 2001, p. 6; I. Sarnowska-Gieffing, “Spotkania satyry polskiej z europejską. Bielski i Erazm z Rotterdamu”, in: I. Sarnowska-Gieffing, *Od onimu do gatunku tekstu. Nazewnictwo w satyrze polskiej do 1820 roku*, Poznań 2003, pp. 123–131; T. Sinko, “Marcin Bielski i Erazm z Rotterdamu”, *Przegląd Polski* 39 (1905), pp. 10–18. See also: M. Szczot, “Literacka satyra obyczajowa czy polityczny program reform? Staropolskie «sejmy» kobiet i ich antyczne wzorce”, in: *Płeć i władza w kontekstach historycznych i współczesnych*, ed. M. A. Kubiacyk and F. Kubiacyk, Gniezno 2014, pp. 147–157.

In Bielski's *Sejm niewieści*, the debating women also complain that they are disregarded by their husbands, which would be a meaningful testimony of the terms men use in relation to women:

Let us try to make things better on our part,  
Although they call us petticoats, spinners.

They call us "wifmann" to insult us even more,  
Each day, they would like to marry a new wife (ll. 5–8).<sup>23</sup>

They can call their wives wifmenn,  
But they also lack in brains (ll. 29–30).

The women's assembly from the time of Emperor Elagabalus is mentioned here by Beata and Ludomiła, but they only refer to the very fact that such a congregation was convened, without giving any more detailed historical data:

I have heard about it long ago and it was recorded in chronicles that women  
were also elected for council.  
And the Empresses sat there as well,  
Taking care of their common affairs and rights (ll. 51–54).

Later, Ludomiła, like Cornelia, stresses the unprecedented nature of the event and the reaction of the men:

The Roman Emperor organised it in Rome,  
He convened a separate female senate so that the affairs of the other sex  
were debated there,  
And their honest advice was treated with the utmost respect (ll. 58–61).

Then perfidious people soon changed it,  
Driven by envy, they called the Senate a Senatulus (ll. 69–70).

Is igitur Heliogabalus instituit, ut quemadmodum Imperator cum suis  
habebat senatum, in quo de rebus communibus consultaret, ita haberet et

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<sup>23</sup> The numeration of the lines follows the publisher—see Bielski, "Sjem".



mater ilius Augusta senatum suum, in quo de foemineae gentis negociis tractaretur . . . (ll. 30–33).

. . . quem viri vel iocandi vel discernendi gratia senatum vocabant (ll. 33).

The reference to the women’s senate from the times of Emperor Elagabalus in Bielski’s work has the same function as in the *Senatulus* of Erasmus—it serves to legitimise the present-day feminine gathering because, as Eufemija stresses after Cornelia (“Neque nouum est quod facimus, vetus exemplum reuocamus”, l. 20): “There is nothing new in what we are doing here, / Such things common in the old times”, (ll. 133–134).

The way in which the women in the Polish text justify the meeting of the senate is also reminiscent of Cornelia’s argumentation. This time Bielski put her words in Ludomiła’s mouth:

Why, God gave us tongues to speak,  
To use our head and reason, and to debate,  
In this respect, he equipped us with  
His great gifts just as he did men (ll. 221–224).

Priests have their gatherings, monks have their chapters,  
And a thief on the loose guards his properties (ll. 227–228).

Only we, women, because of our sex,  
Do not have our assemblies to attend (ll. 229–230).

. . . in quem vsum natura dedit nobis et linguas non minus expeditas quam sunt virorum et vocem non minus sonoram? (ll. 37–39)

. . .

Habent episcopi suas synodos, habent monachorum greges sua conciliabula, habent milites suas stationes, habent fures sua conuenticula (ll. 14–16).

Solae omnium animantium mulieres nunquam coimus (ll. 17).

Perhaps some trace of Cornelia’s words about men who cannot come to an agreement are to be found in the lines if by Kataryna and Ludomiła:

They care more for seriousness and polished language  
Than they do about things that would actually be beneficial (ll. 13–14).

Ruling—this is what they are busy with during their general *sejms*,  
They make attempts at great things but never really touch them (ll. 75–76).

Restat ut de consessu ordine statuatur, ne nobis eveniat, quod frequenter  
usu venit regum, principum ac pontificum oratoribus, qui in concillis totos  
tres menses litigant, antequam possint considerare (ll. 81–83).

The issue of clothes occupies an important place in the deliberations. Just as in the dialogue of Erasmus (and in the Polish work *Senatulus to jest sjem niewieści*), the postulate is brought forward that particular estates should be distinguished by means of clothing. What is more, Bielski introduces a change of roles, manifested by way of attire: women are to wear knightly armour, leaving draped and ornate robes to implicitly effeminate men, as to those who do not deal with war, so they can afford sophisticated attires. This proposal may seem a tad perverse but it is in accordance with ideas on the education noblewomen expressed elsewhere.

The fundamental element that distinguishes the native *Sejm niewieści* from *Senatulus* of Erasmus is the criticism of men expressed in Bielski's work—overt yet skillfully woven into the text. Let us recall that in Erasmus' dialogue it is also present but veiled. The women's meeting was used by Bielski to formulate his own political programme and criticise the loss of the knightly spirit and the relaxation of military discipline. He, therefore, postulates that the Prussian nobility be burdened with the same taxes as the rest of the Crown and that Princely Prussia be incorporated into Poland. Bielski rightly links the military reform with the execution of the royal property: for the army's sake, the nationalised land should be entrusted to women who will take over the defence of the country instead of the men, who are inefficient in knightly affairs.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The political programme of Bielski was discussed in detail by J. Nowak-Dłużewski, *Okolicznościowa poezja polityczna w Polsce*, vol. 2: *Czasy zygmuntofskie*, Warsaw 1966, pp. 292–298.

The matter that requires at least a brief discussion is the dependency of both discussed sixteenth-century *sejms* from each other. Could Marcin Bielski have known the *Senatulus to jest sjem niewieści* from 1543? Perhaps so, especially as the texts were written shortly after one another. *Sejm niewieści* shows not only a clear resemblance to Erasmus's dialogue, but also to the anonymous Polish work. The main thing that the Polish *sejms* have in common is the presence of three female estates that speak out according to strictly defined rules and regulations in force in the Polish parliamentary system. Both authors treat the issue of excessive consumption of alcoholic beverages in a similar way, repudiating drunkenness and approving moderate consumption of alcohol by housewives (for its medicinal effect, as it were), who guard the home reserves. The anonymous author and Bielski also object to the ubiquitous increase in prices and excessive exports, which are ruining the country's economy, taking the view that Polish food or Polish products are not inferior to foreign ones. The convergence of views between the two writers is also evident in their criticism of the unjust law, which favours the mighty.

Erasmus' text, which gives room for interpretation and continuation, has proved to be an attractive literary model imitated by other artists. The authors of the sixteenth-century *sejms* gave their works a unique character, which may give an inkling of how they understood and interpreted the original. An important feature of the works discussed is the modification, or more precisely, the update of the original text so that it became topical in the times of their authors. Władysław Stanisław Jeżowski, author of *Konsultacje przezacnych matron koronnych*, a work created in the late 1630s, did the same with Bielski's poem. Jeżowski used someone else's text to draw attention to the problems of the then state and society. It is not a coincidence that both the women's *Senatulus* of Erasmus and Aristophanes' comedies with female protagonists were also created out of the need that arose from the current political situation.

Other common features of the analysed texts include an easily recognisable aesthetic code. Judging by the title page that said "women's senate", the reader could expect a specific type of work. Its constitutive

determinant is the presentation of law-making. Although, as has already been pointed out in the previous analysis, the assembly seems to be more of an advisory rather than a legislative body, a characteristic feature of the works in question is the presence of “articles”, which, after all, are the final result of the work of the parliament.

However, an important determinant is also the way in which the characters’ lines are formulated: they are both political and didactic, critical, but also serve as a basis for positive proposals. The central thesis is put into the mouth of women who, while observing the Polish reality, stood outside it because of their inability to participate actively in political life. An analogous situation can be observed in the case of Jan Kochanowski’s *Satyr albo Dziki mąż* (A satyr, or a savage man). In this monologue, the principal thesis is delivered by a mythological figure or personification from another world. Thanks to this, both Satyr and Proteus, as well as the female characters of the *sejms*, maintain the distance necessary to make a relatively objective, yet ideologically engaged diagnosis.

The time that elapsed between the creation of the two *sejms* was too short for them to capture any radical changes in the way of viewing the problems of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of that period. The analysis of both works allows us to observe the community of thoughts of writers whose programmes are connected with the postulates formulated by other members of the Polish *respublica litteraria*. Not only Polish, by the way. Through subtle, more or less clear references, old-Polish literature is connected with the literary output of Erasmus of Rotterdam, one of the most eminent representatives of sixteenth-century European thought.

*Translated from Polish by Kaja Szymańska*

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