

Teksty Drugie 2013, 1, s. 118-134
Special Issue – English Edition



Why I Do Not Want to Write about Old-Polish Male-Gedders: A Contribution to the “Archeology” of Gay Studies in Poland.

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Honi soit qui mal y pense

Feminist researchers tracing the signs of creativity and activity of women in past centuries often metaphorically refer to their predecessors as mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers. Wanting to write about homosexuality in historical Poland, I encounter from the start a terminological dilemma. What would I call the potential heroes of my article, those "Old Polish gays," my "ancestors"? After all, they cannot be fathers to me for the very use of this term would legitimize patriarchal discourse. Anyway, more often than not they have probably left no offspring. Perhaps I should provocatively address them as aunts and uncles?

In *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*,¹ John Boswell writes about the complex problem of terminology, arguing, however, for the use of the terms "lesbian" and "gay" even in reference to past epochs. Yet I will not follow that suggestion, because, especially in Poland, those are usually affirmative terms and one of the definitions of a gay man describes him as a homosexual who accepts and affirms his psychosexual identity. So I cannot write about lesbians and gays when referring to the times of oppression and repression. Old Polish did offer an assortment of different terms describing homosexuality, but since their use would legitimize the oppression, I will

¹ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, University of Chicago Press, 2005.

speak of homosexuals² or homosexual persons without even attempting to demystify the Old Polish *samcołożnik* [a male species who beds with other males, a “male-bedder”] to parallel the English “queer” or the German *Schwul*. For emancipatory reasons I will also use the Polish term *homoseksualność* [“homosexuality”] and not *homoseksualizm* [“homosexuality,” a term that does exist in the Polish vocabulary], because after all no one speaks of *seksualizm* and *heteroseksualizm* but about *heteroseksualność* and *seksualność*.

So what terms were used in the olden days? Historical texts use *samcołożnicy* [male-bedders] (in the translation of the *New Testament* by Leopolita, also in Gdaczusz); *plugawcy* [filthy ones]; (*psotliwi*) *sodomczycy* [(mischievous) sodomites], *sodomici*, *sodomieści*; *gomorczykowie* [“gomorrhans”]; *mężołożnicy* [those who bed with men]; *gamraci nieczyści* [unclean lovers]; *niewieściuchowie* [effeminates]. Homosexuality itself is called *paziolubstwo* [page-loving]; *mężczyńska psota* [male mischief]; *turecki niewstyd* [Turkish shamelessness]; *mężczyzny z mężczyzną brzydliwe bawienie się* [hideous play of man with man]; *paskudny wschodni narów* [filthy Eastern vice]; *sodomia* [sodomy]; *grzech sodomski* [the sin of sodomy]; *psota sodomska* [the mischief of sodomy], though it is difficult to tell what the last terms mean, as sodomy was the term used also in reference to anal intercourse with women and intercourse with animals – Old Polish “bestiality.”

Accounts about homosexual persons in Poland up until the 19th century unfortunately refer almost exclusively to men, thus confirming the fact of the double invisibility of lesbians both as women and as representatives of a minority. Zbigniew Kuchowicz draws an absurd conclusion: “Lesbian love did not find any adherents.”³ Most likely women were, as they are today, less visible and more discreet, less noticeable than men. One of the very few references is made to Elżbieta Petrosolinówna, the sister-senior in a Calvinist community in Chmielnik, who was accused of lesbian contacts and demanded to be burned at the stake in an attempt to lead to the closing of the Protestant church.⁴ On the other hand, the old press not only addressed such practices among men and women in Turkey, thus giving the Ottoman enemy bad PR, but also proposed death penalties for Polish “maidens joined in the Sodomite fashion.” Why would there be demands for penalties if such cases did not exist?

The “list” of Old Polish accounts of homosexuality mentioned in this article comes from the works related to Old Polish customs and erotic forms I found available; I did not undertake my own archival research in this field, and anyway such a task would require a whole research team. I draw primarily on the work by Zbigniew Kuchowicz

² The terms “homosexuality” and “homosexual” date back to the 19th century and since they are burdened with a variety of moral, medical, and psychological connotations characteristic of the epoch, they do seem to be anachronistic.

³ Zbigniew Kuchowicz, *Obyczaje staropolskie XVII-XVIII wieku*, Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, Łódź, 1975, 302.

⁴ Attacks on Petrosolinówna can also be explained by the fact that she belonged to the community of elders and therefore usurped a “male” position on the society. Patriarchal culture usually ignores the issue of social otherness and departure from the norms by women who have no power, but stigmatizes and punishes severely all such divergence in the case of the men in power.

(*Obyczaje staropolskie*, the chapter “Życie alkowiane,” and *Człowiek polskiego baroku*, the chapter “Czarny erotyzm”), and by Janusz Tazbir (“Dewiacje obyczajowe”).⁵ Already the quoted titles betray the attitude of the authors to the subject of homosexuality, which is usually referred to in their work as a deviation, perversion, degeneration, pathology, and pederasty (it is worth pointing out that the last term has an exceptionally pejorative and offensive meaning in contemporary Polish), while the almost simultaneously described phenomenon of the harems of girls and whores kept by the magnates does not inspire such pejorative associations in the authors, or does not inspire pejorative associations at all. What is more, homosexuality is often mentioned together with bestiality, sadism, masochism, incest, pedophilia, group sex, exhibitionism, transvestism, and masturbation, categories which are clearly kept separate by contemporary sexology. No wonder that in Kuchowicz’s *Miłość staropolska*⁶ [Love in Old Poland] published in 1982 homosexuality is mentioned in one sentence only. One need not search through *Staropolska miłość* [Old Polish Love] by Alojzy Sajkowski (1981) either. If even today the majority of the Polish society denies lesbians and gays the right to love, how could the situation be different 25 years ago in relation to “male-bedders”?

In old Poland the accusation of homosexual tendencies (real or imagined) was a weapon against ideological and political enemies, not necessarily live ones. The chronicler Długosz suggested the “page-loving” tendency of Władysław Warneńczyk (the punishment for it was to be the lost battle of Warna),⁷ and Bolesław Śmiały. Later, similar comments were made about Władysław IV Waza, Michał Korybut Wiśniowiecki, and Prince Jakub Sobieski, who “loved men to death.” Pamphlets mocked Sobieski claiming that his fortune will be “inherited by boys, by Wolscy, Kochanowscy, and Wyhowscy.” Henryk Waleza was also too effeminate for Polish tastes and enjoyed the same type of commentary (he had pierced ears, wore perfume, dressed elaborately, and was surrounded by a crowd of sweethearts with painted faces – *mignons*, whom “he did not spare abominable Italian practices”⁸).

⁵ Zbigniew Kuchowicz, *Obyczaje staropolskie*. . . ; and, by the same author, *Człowiek polskiego baroku*, Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, Łódź, 1992; Janusz Tazbir, “Dewiacje obyczajowe” in his *Studia nad kulturą staropolską, Selected Works*, vol. 4, ed. S. Grzybowski, Universitas, Cracow, 2001. To preserve the clarity of argument in my article I do not provide references to Old Polish texts and documents; the reader may find the bibliographical data in the abovementioned works. All quotations, unless marked otherwise, are from the above works.

⁶ Zbigniew Kuchowicz, *Miłość Staropolska, Wzory—uczuciowość—obyczaje erotyczne XVI–XVIII wieku*, Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, Łódź, 1982.

⁷ Echoes of this report can be heard in Niemcewicz’s *Śpiewy historyczne*: “Nie dał się zdrożnym chuciom powodować,/ Lecz, wzięwszy silną dłońią rządu wodze,/ Umiał panować” [He did not allow the unclean desires to control him,/ But, ruling with a strong hand,/ He knew how to govern.]

⁸ S. Grzybowski, *Henryk Walezy*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław, 1980, 9. Tazbir, *Henryk Walezy*, in: *Poczet królów i książąt polskich*, ed. A. Garlicki, Czytelnik, Warszawa, 1978, 348–9.

Catholic journalists attributed a weakness for men to Calvin, and Protestants attributed the same to Popes: to John XIII (“he was a dirty epicure, adulterer, fornicator, and sodomite”), to Alexander VI (“he was a fornicator and a profligate and lecherous sodomite, and a brother to the devils”), and also to Pius V and Julius III. Monks and priests were referred to as “sodomites and gomorrhites.” For Stanisław Orzechowski, *romanizare* meant the same as *gomorrhizare et sodomizare*. Catechism books and handbooks for priests advised them to ask about relations with men during confession (it is interesting why, if, as claimed by the journalists of those times and repeated after them by today’s historians, this tendency was to be all but absent in Poland?). Also, the protestant clergymen warned: “sodomy is a filthy disgrace...which angels flee, on seeing which devils close their eyes, and which men with men breed.”

A Calvinist author of sermons, Paweł Gilowski, wrote, however, that “some rich landowners keep young boys for that purpose,” and Waclaw Potocki reported with outrage in *Ogród fraszek*:

Przypatrzyć się, jako grzeszą mężczyźni szkaradzie,
Zazdroszą na oborze bykom, koniom w stadzie;
Wymyślają potrawy, proszki, mocne soki,
Mało im białej płci, paskudzą otroki,
Przeciw naturze rozum przywodząc, aż zgroza.

[Look how men sin hideously,/ They envy bulls in the barn and horses in the herd;/ They devise dishes, powders, strong juices,/ the fairer sex is not enough for them, they defile the servants,/ Fearfully bending reason against nature.]

Also, representatives of other religions, particularly Islam, have been accused of “sodomy.” Reports had it that the Turkish Sultan, “the student of the Muhammeds and successor to the throne,” apart from 300 concubines had the same number of “lovely boys for the purpose of the same ugly carnality.” The description of *The Turkish Monarchy* by Paul Ricaut, a member of the British Parliament, published in Polish in 1678, claimed that “Plato’s science of love found its place and followers in Turkish schools,” and criticized the practice of “the cursed and filthy addiction to sodomite profanity.” *Liber generationis plebeanorum* by Walerian Nekand Trepka, known later as *Liber Chamorum*, or the book of boors, which constitutes an extensive register of fake nobility and a collection of Old Polish gossip, also records that one Piotr Krzysztoporski had relations with his servant “*in posticum*, the Turkish way, and gave him the Venus’s curse.”

Slightly more is known about the private lives of the magnates. According to the chronicler Marcin Matuszewicz, Prince Janusz Aleksander Sanguszko of Dubno, a Lithuanian nobleman, “kept men for amorous purposes” (his wife, the beautiful Konstancja Denhoff, a heiress to a great fortune, returned to her parents “without receiving any marital proof from her husband except for one good morning at dawn and one good night in the evening”), and donated the town of Koźmin and seventeen villages to his lover, Karol Szydłowski. In the words of Father Kitowicz,

The object of his passions was some spirited youth, upon whom he bestowed almost all of his treasures: the youth ruled his heart, stripped him of his riches, his jewels and all else the youth

found to his liking. Nothing would stop this favorite from such plunder except for the fear that his luck may end for it is built on shaky foundations. But although he fell out of favor, he left with all the bounty. So anyone who found himself thus favored swiftly used his luck for as long as the favor was with him. Many of those favorites became recognized citizens and men of means. Only one Kazimierz Chyliński met the opposite fate: stripped of all his gains and shackled, he was sent to the Gdańsk prison where he did his penance for twelve years.⁹

The abduction and imprisonment of Chyliński was in fact the doing of the prince's father, who thus fruitlessly attempted to persuade his son to return to his wife and "harness his profligacy." The young prince, locked up in a room and threatened with a whipping, had to give his father "command in writing over the Dubno garrison and over the whole estate" and then the latter "invited Chyliński and did with him what is stated above." After this incident, until his father's death, Sanguszko

did not have an open and costly favorite as he did before he was threatened, only secret ones. But after his father's death he had them again, keeping them as he did the earlier ones, because his taste blinded him; with the exception of the tribunal whom he did not show his favorite, left in Dubno.¹⁰

One may infer, therefore, that Sanguszko had no trouble flaunting his lovers, even when holding public positions. Also Jerzy Marcin Lubomirski "had an eye for a little Cossack... paid him well, even made him rich; finally found a way to raise him to the noble status, for there was nothing one couldn't buy from Poniatowski."

There are much fewer reports concerning the lower classes. An exceptional case is described by Jan Kracik and Michał Rożek in *Hultaje, złoczyńcy, wszetecznicze w dawnym Krakowie*:

In 1561 Wojciech from Poznań who for ten years "wore woman's clothes" faced the court in Kazimierz. He had married Sebastian Słodownik in Cracow and lived with him for two years in Poznań. There he allowed Sebastian to be with a woman and lived with a woman himself. When he returned to Cracow, he got married in Kazimierz again, this time with Wawrzyniec Włoszek. In public opinion he was considered a woman. For crimes against nature he was burned.¹¹

Already this short description demonstrates how difficult and useless it would be to assign Wojciech from Poznań to modern categories: homosexual, bisexual, transsexual, transvestite? And what is one to think about Sebastian Słodownik and Wawrzyniec Włoszek who agreed to these, after all sacramental, unions?

In a recently published book by Małgorzata Pilaszek, *Procesy o czary w Polsce w wiekach XVI-XVIII*, I also found an interesting passage:

⁹ J. Kitowicz, *Pamiętniki czyli Historia Polska*, ed. and introduction P. Matuszewska, commentary Z. Lewinówna, PIW, Warsaw, 2005, 63-4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 64-5.

¹¹ Jan Kracik, Michał Rożek, *Hultaje, złoczyńcy, wszetecznicze w dawnym Krakowie. O marginesie społecznym XVI-XVIII w.*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków-Wrocław, 1986, 173.

It is not often that court books described magic related to homosexual love. Such practices were undertaken by one Lenkowa, who washed the young Stanisław Skrzypczak three times in herbs making his master, Mikołaj Turkowiecki, fall deeply in love with him. Turkowiecki's life with his wife then fell apart and he began to hate his mother-in-law. He demanded therefore that the magic be withdrawn, so that he could live without the boy again (1608).¹²

Magdeburg Law was merciless to homosexual persons:

If anyone is found to have business against nature with an animal, or man with man, those are to be sentenced to death and according to custom burned with fire, without any compassion, for it is an ignominious and disgraceful sin and is to be punished.

The basis for discriminating against homosexuality was obviously provided by the Bible, especially the description of the destruction of Sodom (as a matter of fact linked to the phenomenon of homosexuality only in late Judaism, in the writings of Philo). Contemporary exegetes, however, entirely depart from such an interpretation.¹³ Those who called upon the authority of the Scripture entirely ignored the words of David which perhaps contain a reference to love between men and which are often paraphrased in medieval homoerotic poetry:

I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan:
very pleasant hast thou been unto me:
thy love to me was wonderful,
passing the love of women.

(2 Samuel 1, 26)¹⁴

We can find this much (or this little) information on Old Polish “deviations” in available scholarship. Kuchowicz notices additionally that accounts of Old Polish homosexuality “should not be demonized” because “one gets the sense that this perversion was truly rare and inspired authentic, with time growing, aversion.”¹⁵ He subsequently refers to Father Kitowicz who writes with disgust about the customs of the Cossacks from Zaporishian Sich, thus drawing on the Sarmatian tradition of juxtaposing Poland with the wild East and the corrupt West. Finally, as a confirmation of his hypotheses, Kuchowicz refers to the 18th century opinion of a German doctor, Kausch: “As far as pederasty is concerned, which is so popular with Poland's neighbors, one has to say to the credit of Poles that it is quite unknown here and almost as strongly despised as in England.”¹⁶

¹² Małgorzata Pilaszek, *Procesy o czary w Polsce w wiekach XVI-XVIII*, Universitas, Cracow, 2008, 411.

¹³ A discussion of homosexuality in Old and New Testament, with suggestions for further reading, may be found in John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*..., 95-159; in R.P. Woods OP, *On Love that Dared not Speak Its Name*, Montgomery Hide, 1970; Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, 2000.

¹⁴ [The author quotes the passage in several other translations into Polish, trans.]

¹⁵ Z. Kuchowicz, *Człowiek polskiego baroku*, 320.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Another traveler reported that in Poland “sodomy, which in the neighboring states is quite frequently practiced, they do not know and find repulsive, which is praiseworthy.” One can hardly resist the feeling that echoes of Old Polish “sexual xenophobia” can be heard also in today’s texts by right-wing journalists.

These are strange theses considering the fact that homosexual orientation is calculated to pertain to 2-7 percent of human population and this number does not change, irrespective the place, epoch, and existing social norms. 2-7 percent of homosexual people: to realize what that number entails it is worth realizing that in Old Poland the nobility is estimated at 10 percent... In the years 1566-1620 the tribunal of the Inquisition in Barcelona, Valencia, and Saragossa passed judgment on 371 persons suspected of homosexual contacts; 53 were burned at the stake.¹⁷ In The Netherlands in the years 1730-1732, at the turn of the Enlightenment era, numerous, widely branched out “associations” of homosexual persons were discovered, who socialized together, visited each other, and engaged in lively correspondence.¹⁸ One should not, however, apply contemporary standards to The Netherlands of those times, which were predominantly Calvinist. 300 men were sentenced to jail and around 70 to tortures and death. But if such men were to be found in The Netherlands, most likely there were some also in Poland, even if less visible, less self-aware, and less well-organized and, paradoxically, much luckier because of all of the above. Most likely the infrequency of the occurrence of homosexuality in Poland means only that it had been rarely mentioned in sources.

The image of homosexual persons produced by the research on Old Poland customs is obviously very dark, with sources in court registers, sermons and slanderous pamphlets, lamentations of moralists, and police files. It is an image of criminals, moral degenerates, and sinners. It could not be otherwise, but to speculate on the basis of these sources about the accuracy and comprehensiveness of that image would be like – and I am using the parallel fully aware of its implications – determining the shape of male-female relations in Old Poland on the basis of several reports about “meretricious whores,” and information that “the Venus’s curse was brought to Poland by one woman from Rome who frequented the church fair.”

There are many things that I can only infer, but those fantasies are hardly optimistic. Thus I imagine, or reconstruct (aware full well that what I am producing is “literature”) the stories of boys forced by threats and whippings into marriage; of mocked village freaks; of bitter old bachelors over the glass of spirits and, even more, the husbands evading their marital duties and frigid wives; family quarrels and women’s tears. I see unruly girl-tomboys insisting on riding the horse the man’s way; eyes hidden behind the fan, which do not look at voivodes and pantlers; nuns, who long and passionately contemplate the image of some female saint. And also tears streaming down his cheeks when the study in the Jesuit or Piarist seminar came to an end and it was time to part

¹⁷ See eg. D. Łukaszewicz, “Niemieckie psy” i “polskie świnię” oraz inne eseje z historii kultury, Ureus, Gdynia, 1997, 205.

¹⁸ See eg. S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, Collins, London, 1987, 601-6.

with HIM. The studies of homosexuality of past epochs discuss “homosexual behaviors” or, even worse, “acts of sodomy,”¹⁹ thus depriving those who demonstrate “homosexual behaviors” of all individuality. What is consistently forgotten (or consciously denied) is that homosexuality is not just sexual desire but also (and perhaps above all) psychological and emotional attachment. I fantasize about being able to look at their fate from a different perspective. For I do not believe that because they lived in a different epoch and had a different (un)awareness of their sexual identity, they could not fall in love and love, however sentimental that may sound. I absolutely do not want to project my perception of contemporary gays and lesbians onto historical data or apply the ahistorical category of “sexual orientation” to historical figures, I only wish to return to their “acts” and behaviors the right to love which traditional Polish scientific discourse ignores or calls a deviation or perversion.

Of course, such “acts” and “sodomite practices” did occur, as they do today (according to Kinsey’s report, almost 40 percent of men and 20 percent of women had homosexual experiences in their adult lives), according to the rule that people sometimes derive satisfaction from intercourse itself without necessarily considering the sex of the partner. I can hardly agree with the thesis proposed by Foucault that only in the 19th century the homosexual acquired an identity and that “homosexuality appears as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.”²⁰ For what Foucault has in mind is a social identity and a separate medical classification of the homosexual²¹ and not a psychological and emotional character.

But even in the past doubtlessly there existed individuals aware of their difference, their oddity, their alternative psychosexual orientation, who were not indifferent to whom they “copulate” with. Perhaps they did not always have the language to name that difference, but surely they had intuition which led them to forbidden and secluded places where they could meet “their own,” and which also explained the faster heartbeat and their difference in spirit. Wanting to define themselves, they could only refer to the Biblical David, to Plato, to Hadrian and Antinous, to the Ganymede myth and to other “damned

¹⁹ R. Shephard, “Sexual Rumours in English Politics: the Case of Elizabeth I and James I,” in: *Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Pre-Modern West*, ed. J. Murray, K. Eisenbichler, University of Toronto Press, Toronto-Buffalo, 1996.

²⁰ Foucault, Michel, *History of Sexuality: Volume I*, trans. Robert Hurley, NY: Pantheon, 1978, 43.

²¹ “[T]he condition of the buttocks, a relaxed sphincter, an anus shaped like a funnel or adapted to accommodate an object the shape and size of a penis – those were the unmistakable signs belonging to the recently identified species. Similarly ‘a twisted mouth’ along with ‘very short teeth and thick, curled, deformed lips’ indicated familiarity with the practice of fellatio. In short, the pederast was a new kind of monster, an animal.” in: *History of Private Life, Volume IV: From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*, ed. Michelle Perrot, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994, 640.

Greeks” (very much present in old homoerotic literature), provided, of course, that they had a proper education. They could also write about shepherds, about fraternity on the battlefield (homosocial relations are often a repressed representation of homosexuality), or imitate heterosexual models (as many contemporary gays do).

In *Figuring Sex between Men from Shakespeare to Rochester*, Paul Hammond describes for example the story of two 17th century scholars, Sir John Finch and Sir Thomas Baines, inseparable since they shared a room at Christ’s College in Cambridge, accepted and considered a couple by their families (which is documented by the surviving correspondence), and also memorialized by a common statue (which alludes to graveyard sculptures of married couples), where Henry More has written: “Cor erat unum, unaq. anima” (“they were of one heart and one soul”).²² In 1681, Finch wrote to Baines:

‘Tis now thirty-six years since I began the happinesse of a uninterrupted friendship which the world never did equal, nor I believe will ever parallel . . . Of the twenty-six years wee spent together since we first left England wee never bin separated two moneths from each other unless it were in the exercising some act of kindnesse.²³

But let us return to Old Poland. If no one would dream of using terms such as “heterosexual behavior” or “proof of acts of copulation” in reference to *Listy do Marysieńki* [King Jan Sobieski’s letters to his beloved], or to Zygmunt August following Barbara’s coffin on foot from Cracow to Vilnius,²⁴ why should I apply a different measure and doubt the hearts of two young lords gone hunting and riding together stirrup by stirrup; or the embracing harvesters, who have dropped their scythes and lain under a tree; or maidenly letters hidden in a chest’s drawer in the alcove; or kissed ribbons from “her” braid; or the secret exchange of glances at the tavern which leads to a hasty kiss around the corner. . . I would like to know more about Janusz Aleksander Sanguszko and Karol Szydłowski who “possessed his heart”; about Chyliński jailed in the Gdańsk prison (and whether Sanguszko suffered after his loss); about Jerzy Marcin Lubomirski and his little Cossack for whom he purchased nobility from the king. . .

These imagined stories of mine probably usually ended badly, for they had to end badly. What is more, I will probably never read about them. For their protagonists had neither the means nor the language to express their feelings; they could not write about their love as did Ludwika Biebrzyńska, torn by the equally forbidden, for incestuous, passion: “I cannot destroy my love, nor do I want to. Oh, he knows how to speak to my heart, how to master it and tear it away from everything else!”²⁵ They could not protest like the girl sent by her mother to the monastery:

²² Paul Hammond, *Figuring Sex between Men from Shakespeare to Rochester*, Oxford University Press, 2002, 29-32.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Numerous and moving examples of Old Polish feelings and passions, of mesalliances inspired by love – obviously heterosexual – may be found in Z. Kuchowicz’s *Staropolska Miłość* (chapter “Rola serca i charakteru”).

²⁵ This is how she described her feelings to her own nephew. Ibid., 269.

Wnidę na chór, spojrzę na dół, ujrzę miłego,
A dajże mi, mocny Boże, skoczyć do niego.

[I'll climb the choir, look down, see my beloved,
Oh let me, strong God, jump to join him.]²⁶

Repressed, excluded, they were not only deprived of the right to love, but also of the means and language to speak about it.

The only, quite improbable, trace, is the strange legend about two Polish knights living on Madeira, one of whom was identified as Warneńczyk who survived on the battlefield and who, as Długosz claims, was the lover of “male pleasures and disgraceful passions” and who supposedly spent the night before battle with his page. The story could serve as material for the 19th century Polish historical writer Antoni Kremer, brother of Antonia Domańska, nee Kremer, author of *Paziowie króla Zygmunta*, *Kryśia bezimienna*, and *Historia żółtej cizemki* – if only he existed, like Shakespeare’s sister.

“The common feature of contemporary gender and gay studies seems to be discovering in old texts the confirmation of contemporary sensibility, which sometimes leads even to the negation (or, perhaps, neglect) of the historical context of these texts and to finding there answers to questions about contemporary gay identity,”²⁷ writes Piotr Urbański in “Zakazana przyjaźń,” an article which is in fact a philological critique of *gender studies*. The author mentions also the work of Bruce R. Smith, whose political aim is “the creation of a gay community in both a contemporary and a historical sense.”²⁸ I do not understand why I should not do that, nor search through old writings for the “proto-gay tradition,” to use Stewart’s term,²⁹ those minute and faint traces which build a fragile bridge between my sensibility and experience and the experience of the “Old Polish homosexual persons.” This is not even history, it is more of an archeology, a patient seeking of my traces in the layers of culture as a researcher digging in the ground suddenly notices a layer of a different color and realizes that a wooden pole was buried there. If old love poetry is often treated without a second thought as a record of authentic experience and feeling, why is it that when the so-called “male friendship” occasionally appears in literature, ex-cathedra arguments appear from all sides that the reference is no more than an imitation of the ancients, a literary emanation, spiritual friendship, commonality of souls, Platonic idea, a convention. Critics discuss the identity of Laura, Kasia, and Anusia but reject *a priori* the subtle discourse

²⁶ Cz. Hernas, *W kalinowym lesie*, vol. 2, *Antologia polskiej pieśni ludowej ze zbiorów polskich XVIII w.*, PIW, Warszawa, 1965, 24.

²⁷ Piotr Urbański, “Zakazana przyjaźń w poezji nowolacińskiej,” in *Ciało pleć literatura. Prace ofiarowane profesorowi Germanowi Ritzowi w pięćdziesiątą rocznicę urodzin*, Wiedza Powszechna, Warsaw, 2001, 554-5.

²⁸ Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare’s England: A Cultural Poetics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London, 1991, 27.

²⁹ A. Stewart, *Close Readers, Humanism and Sodomy in Early Modern England*, Princeton University Press, Princeton-New Jersey, 1997.

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of desire appearing between the lines in the letters and poetry of the humanists: for example, Erasmus of Rotterdam.³⁰

Here is another example, taken from English literature, for lack of Polish sources:

Place doeth not sunder, or divide
Our hearts, but makes them more wide.
Our passions, which before did lie in prison,
Now abroad doe file.
The breadth of place
Gives fancie space,
And sets our soules at liberty.

And all the Winde twixt us and Thee
Is but a puffing Agonie
Of sighs and Blasts which doe expire
From the vast depth of our Desire
And this is Winde
Of such a kinde
As onely blows, not cooles the fire.³¹

These are lines from a poem by Nicholas Oldisworth (1611-1645) “To His Friend beyond the Sea,” dedicated to Richard Bacon, with whom the author went to school in Westminster and then separated: Oldisworth studied in Oxford and Bacon in Cambridge, to then move to Douai and die there at the age of 18. In the work of Oldisworth a dozen or so poems are dedicated to Bacon: touching in their awkwardness, describing longing, and praising the bodily and spiritual qualities of his friend. In the preserved manuscript, one page contains only the title of a poem that was never written: “On the Death of his Deare Friend Mr. Richard Bacon.” The rest of the page is empty, as if the author hopelessly tried and failed to address the subject. As Hammond observes, in the lines quoted above, the physical separation between men is perceived as the liberation of their souls which are thus to achieve spiritual union; yet then he asks: “But is ‘spiritual’ the right word?”³² Would the word “spirituality,” I ask, even cross our minds had the addressee of Oldisworth’s poem was, for example, Miss Elisabeth Bacon?

What is more, the spiritual communion, the theory of emulation, and “Greek models” are usually called upon to discredit a homosexual reading when we are dealing with the description of a relationship between an older man and a younger one. Are the – so frequent in patriarchal culture – relationships between older men and younger women any less heterosexual because of the age difference? In Plato we even find a distinction between men desiring other men and those desiring boys. And the term “boy” may in fact be misleading. A contemporary gay man will not hesitate to use it in reference to his fifty-year-old partner; Saint Elred used the term to refer to his lover of his own age (he

³⁰ See for example *Medieval Latin Poems of Male Love and Friendship*, trans. T. Stehling, Garland Pub., New York – London, 1984.

³¹ Quoted after: Hammond, *Figuring Sex between Men...*, 33.

³² Ibid.

even referred to him as “son”!); Marbod, Bishop of Rennes referred to himself in this way in the letter to his lover.³³

Old sources and research based on those sources uses terms such as “homosexual behaviors” and “acts of sodomy” dictated by the official ideological attitude of the epoch in which they were written. We would look in vain for descriptions of feelings, but that does not mean that those feelings did not exist! In western Europe, the feelings even found fitting descriptions. To the skeptics I dedicate the words from Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II* (1594) – in the opening lines of the play Gaveston is reading the letter from the king:

My father is deceased. Come, Gaveston,
And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend!
Ah! words that make me surfeit with delight:
What greater bliss can hap to Gaveston
Than live and be the favourite of a king!
Sweet prince, I come! these, these thy amorous lines
Might have enforced me to have swam from France,
And, like Leander gasped upon the sand,
So thou wouldst smile, and take me in thine arms.³⁴

The only example of Old Polish literature I know describing a homosexual (perhaps?) experience is the song by Andrzej Krzyczki *Ad Dantiscum de amore suo*:

Heu mihi, quam miser est parili qui fervet amore
Et tamen hic fructu semper amoris eget,
Sed miseri sortem superat qui solus amabit
Et sua spernuntur munera, forma, preces.
Perditus, infelix horumque miserrimus ille est,
Qui tacet et tacito cogitur igne mori.
Ultima sors haec est nostri, Dantisce, furoris,
Nam taceo et tacito cogor in igne mori.³⁵

[Woe to me, how wretched is the one who loves with equal love/ But lacks the fruit of love/ Yet more wretched he who loves alone/ And spurned are his gifts, his pleas and form./ But lost, cursed and more wretched/ Is he who is silent and dying in silent fire./ This last fate, Dantisce, is that of my folly,/ For I am silent and dying in silent fire.]

Here is how Piotr Urbański speculates about the meaning of the above lines:

Could the reference to the fruitless (childless) – even if required – love be related to the weakness for boys ascribed to the future primate? This confession is preceded by a passage which

³³ See J. Boswell, *Christianity, Sexual Tolerance, and Homosexuality...*, 39-41. See Boswell for more examples and bibliographical data.

³⁴ Christopher Marlowe, *Edward II*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2009, 11.

³⁵ Quoted after: I. Lewandowski, *Antologia poezji łacińskiej w Polsce, Renesans*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań, 1996, 128. I am not referring to Krzyczki’s other homoerotic Latin poems because of their uncertain authorship.

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seems a paraphrase of the famous anacreontic verse devoted to the suffering due to unrequited love (l. 3-4), next there appears a mention of an even greater suffering, about love which has to remain hidden, unarticulated, which dare not speak its name.³⁶

I found two poems which invite a queer/gay reading in “*Płodny jest świat występku.*” *Antologia libertyńskiej poezji erotycznej XVIII wieku.* These are, however, of a very different register. The first of the poems is an anonymous complaint: “Uskarżanie się wydane za mąż damy a w swoim żądaniu omylonym, czyli Desperacja” [A Complaint by a Lady Given Away in Marriage, or Desperation]:

Ej, jakże się nie frasować, kiedym oszukana.
Dopiero widzę, co to w mym mężu za odmiana:
Nic nie umie, nic nie ruszy, leży jak przy gnoju.
Aż on widzę armafrodyt. Baba w męskim stroju.
Parobeczek od prześlICY. Darmo mnie nim zwiedli;
Dziurę dziurą chcą zatkać, nie kata-ż bo zjedli.
Poszłam ci ja po niewoli od ojca za niego;
Będę krzyżeć, będę wołać niech mi co poradzą,
Albo z dobrym moderunkiem chłopca mi dodadzą.

[Ay, how am I not to fret, when I've been deceived./ Only now I see that my husband is different/ Doesn't know anything, doesn't do anything, lies next to me as if next to a pile of manure/ Then I see he's a hermaphrodite. A lady in man's clothing./ A servant for the spinning wheel/ They want to stop a hole with a hole/ My father made me marry him against my will/ I will scream, I will call, I will plead, maybe they will help me/ Or give me another boy who's better endowed.]³⁷

Was this “hermaphrodite” an effeminate, impotent man or was he really a biological hermaphrodite? Or perhaps he was not “endowed” well enough to satisfy the woman's appetite? Or is this simply a roundabout way of saying that the man preferred his own sex? Similar doubts arise after reading “*Trafność spowiednika*” [“The Confessor's Apt Guess”] by Marcin Molski (1752-1822). A young man confesses that he has sinned with a girl, but “languorous with drink he can't remember from which end.” The priest asks:

“Powiedz mi tylko, jeśli wielką rozkosz czuleś,
Gdy tym jadem piekielnym duszę twoję truleś?”
“Pierwszy raz, ojczy, na moje sumienie,
Tak wielkie zmysłem czulem poruszenie.”
Tu karmelita właśnie jakby ożył,
“Ach, już wiem! – rzecze – z tyłuś ją chędożył.”

[“Tell me only if you felt great delight,/ When you were poisoning your soul with that venom?”/ “It is the first time, to my conscience, father,/ that I felt such rapture of my senses.”/ At that moment the Carmelite became very animated,/ “Oh, I know now, you had her from the back.”]³⁸

³⁶ P. Urbański, “Zakazana przyjaźń...,” 559.

³⁷ “*Płodny jest świat występku.*” *Antologia libertyńskiej poezji erotycznej XVIII wieku*, ed. W. Nawrocki, Wydawnictwo WSP w Kielcach, Piotrków Trybunalski. 1996, 27.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 60.

An inquisitive reader could ask: why does the confessor become so animated all of a sudden? And wherefrom his knowledge of the pleasures drawn from a non-missionary position? In the same anthology references appear to Sodomy, but those are an allusion to sin against a broadly understood Sixth Commandment.³⁹ If the world is “heavy with sin” is that sin almost exclusively heterosexual? Neither will we find descriptions of the male body in Old Polish literature. If men are shown it is in the role of the knight-hero (*virtus*) or – very often –parading their crudeness and vulgarity: “Służyły wiernie, póki pański długi / kuś porzebował ich pilnej usługi” [They served loyally as long as the master’s long/ cock needed their urgent service”]⁴⁰; Trembecki, an example of Enlightenment, describes a “knight-fornicator” who had “a curly hair up his ass.”⁴¹ I will spare the Reader more drastic examples. For contrast I will again quote Oldisworth writing about Bacon:

Tell us, ô tell us, yee that had the grace
So pure an Angel daily to embrace,
Tell us the Heav’nlynesse of those Delights
Wherewith hee fed your Heerings, & your Sights.⁴²

One could quote hundreds of similar examples from the western cultural sphere, suffice it to reach for any of a number of thematic anthologies.⁴³

How many of such texts, however, did not survive because they were resolutely destroyed, and even more so, how many were never written because of self-censorship? How many of those were disguised by the authors themselves and how many were falsified later? In the English translation of Cornelius Nepos the sentence: “Laudi in Creta ducitur adulescentulis quam plurimos habuisse amatores” (“On Crete it is considered laudable for a young man to have many [male] lovers”) was conveyed as: “On Crete it is considered laudable when young men engage in many romances.” It is worth recalling that in the literature of the Middle Ages Alcibiades was usually represented as Socrates’ female companion; the son of Michelangelo’s nephew changed the pronoun’s in Michelangelo’s poems; and even in the 20th century Hafez’s ghazals were transcribed in a heterosexual fashion.⁴⁴ One could quote many such examples.

I would like to mention a category with is entirely unscientific and subjective, but which has an enormous impact on the strategies of homosexual reading of old texts: namely, intuition and instinct that I like to call a “textual gaydar.”⁴⁵ I believe that a gay reader may

³⁹ Ibid., 164, “Skarga na księży do J.W. księdza biskupa Sierakowskiego.

⁴⁰ J.A.Morsztyn, *Paszport kurwom z Zamościa*. The poem is about the fate of girls from the harem of Jan “Sobiepan” Zamoyski after the dignitary’s wedding.

⁴¹ S. Trembecki, “Oda do Priapa,” quoted after: *Plodny jest świat w występku...*, 69.

⁴² Quoted after: P. Hammond, *Figuring Sex between Men...*, 34.

⁴³ See for example: *The Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse*, ed. S. Coote, A. Lane, London, 1983.

⁴⁴ See J. Boswell, *Christianity, Sexual Tolerance, and Homosexuality...*, 29-31.

⁴⁵ The combination of the words “gay” and “radar” is used in the lesbian and gay community to refer to the intuitive ability to identify lesbians and gays.

have the ability to sense textual tensions and be able to remove textual masks, to reveal passages written in invisible ink, to read between the lines,⁴⁶ be sensitive to traces of his own experience, though wrong decodings and overinterpretation are a genuine risk here. I'm afraid that a heterosexual reader cannot fully notice those details, subtleties, and tensions; he simply lacks the experience of oppression and the experience of hiding his sexuality known so well by lesbians and gays, lacks the sensitivity to sexual codes and secret signs hidden in the texts. Usually he also does not know that manifestations of extreme aggression toward homosexuality often conceal the writer's own repressed and hidden desires.

Obviously this type of intuition cannot serve as an interpretative tool,⁴⁷ but it can be an important indication where to search, where to dig deeper, if not always. Many old texts play with the reader, vacillating between explicit statement and mere suggestion, engaging with instability of meanings, all of which strategies may serve as a safe way of expressing homosexual desire. One can see it clearly in Shakespeare's sonnet XX:

Till Nature, as she wrought thee, fell a-doting,
And by addition me of thee defeated,
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.
But since she prick'd thee out for women's pleasure,
Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure.⁴⁸

Apparently all is clear: the "one thing" added by nature is to the speaker's "purpose nothing." The interpretation becomes more complicated, however, when we realize that in Elizabethan English "nothing" was also a colloquial term for female genitalia.⁴⁹ In this sense the "one thing added" which nature endowed the young man with, or penis, would serve the subject the same purpose as female organs (producing pleasure). Is this a wink to the reader? A concept? The problem is that literary allusions and rhetorical figures will in no way translate into the image of historical and social reality. They will not tell us what the non-literary motivation behind the sonnets was, nor whether Oldisworth was in love with Bacon. German Ritz's repeatedly voiced the postulate that we study the poetics of homosexual texts and the construction of their authors on the basis of the works themselves,⁵⁰ with the omission of the writers' biographies and of the genesis of

⁴⁶ A whole register of camouflaged expressions of homosexual desire is quoted by B. Smith in *Homosexual Desire...* Many examples are also quoted by P. Hammond in *Figuring Sex between Men...*, 5-61.

⁴⁷ An example of a particularly controversial reading of an Old Polish text is the idea by Marian Pankowski (a writer sensitive to homosexual matters) to treat Jan Kochanowski's "Gadka" as "a portrait of a male homosexual's body" (!), when the real solution to the puzzle is "musket." See M. Pankowski, "Polska poezja nieokrzesana (próbą określenia zjawiska)," *Teksty*, 1978, no 4(40), 45.

⁴⁸ William Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, Henry Pordes, London, 1983, 1201.

⁴⁹ After P. Hammond, *Figuring Sex between Men...*, 16; see also the following edition of Shakespeare's sonnets: *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. K. Duncan-Jones, London, 1997, 151.

⁵⁰ German Ritz, *Nić w labiryncie pożądania*, trans. B. Drag, A. Kopacki, M. Łukaszewicz, Wiedza Powszechna, Warsaw, 2002, 54.

their works, is of little help to me, for the archeology of gay studies is interested primarily in what Ritz wants to exclude.

Writing the history of homosexuality based on old texts often means groping in the dark. There exists a slight possibility, however, that the meager “cannon” of Old Polish homosexual behaviors sketched out at the beginning of this article is highly incomplete. And anyway, old history of homosexuality is above all a history of silence or speaking with somebody else’s voice. Then again, perhaps the scholars of Old Polish culture, beginning with Brückner and ending with Tazbir did not search carefully enough, did not attend to the texts with a queer sensitivity (because they could not, would not, or did not know how). In the end, they only found the most blatant things and threw them in the category of “black erotics and deviation”: “the man had relations with him ‘*in posticum*, and gave him the Venus’s curse *in postico*.” In no way do I want to question the authority of the brilliant scholars whose work I continue to draw on as a student of old culture, but I want to suggest that it is worth looking from a different historical and ideological perspective at the phenomena they are describing.

Another obstacle in such research is the fact that specialists in old literature and culture often tend to be conservative, patriarchal, and deeply traditionalist in their views and consequently show a much greater tendency toward homophobia. There are exceptions, of course. I personally know scholars of Old Polish culture who are lesbian and gay, and the level of openness, tolerance, and sensitivity to the problem of homosexuality among many of my Old Polish scholar friends could be the source of envy to many a poststructuralist. The writing of old epochs is, however, deeply rooted in religion and as such often interests individuals who find in it a reflection of their own, often orthodox, opinions and philosophy.⁵¹

It has been said often enough that in the contemporary Polish right-wing nationalist discourse, the place of the pre-war Jew is taken by lesbians and gays. This way of thinking is deeply rooted in history. As Boswell observes,

the fate of Jews and gay people has been almost identical throughout European history, from early Christian hostility to extermination in concentration camps...the same periods of European history which could not make room for Jewish distinctiveness reacted violently against sexual nonconformity; the same countries which insisted on religious uniformity imposed majority standards of sexual conduct.⁵²

There is one difference, however; in the case of homosexual persons, there are,

no gay grandparents who remember the pogroms, no gay exile literature, to remind the living of the fate of the dead, no liturgical commemorations of times of crisis and suffering. *Relatively*

⁵¹ Recently attempts have been made to look at Old Polish culture from a different perspective, for example: D. Śnieżko, “Jak czytało staropolskie ciało. Somatyczne doświadczenia lektury,” *Teksty Drugie*, 2006, no 6 (102); and M. Wilk, “Camp w literaturze staropolskiej,” Kampania. *Zjawisko campu we współczesnej kulturze*, ed. P. Oczko, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa, 2008.

⁵² J. Boswell, *Christianity, Sexual Tolerance, and Homosexuality*..., 15–6.

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*few gay people today are aware of the great variety of positions in which time has placed their kind, and in previous societies almost none seem to have had such awareness.*⁵³

The history of (the traces of) homosexual persons in Poland, or even more modestly, the history of their representation, is still waiting to be researched and written.⁵⁴ We are still waiting for the history of groups who were marginalized, repressed, oppressed, and excluded from the dominant discourse (history from below).⁵⁵ I will not be surprised to hear I am advocating “writing history from the back” (after all, in Poland we have already heard the use of the term “menstrual literature”); and I will not be surprised to hear nothing. Excellent texts on the subject exist elsewhere in the world,⁵⁶ and those could serve us as a model. While this gap is slowly being filled in relation to 19th century and contemporary Polish culture,⁵⁷ the Old Polish period is still *terra incognita*. Obviously, this is a project that would require more than one researcher: one would need to perform a queer re-reading of letters, journals, court documents, folk sources, and home chronicles of the nobility. One would also need to look at ways in which homosexuality was inscribed in the general – if not uniform and historically varied – models of Old Polish affect, in the crude knightly sensuality and sexuality, and in historical conceptions of gender roles in Poland.⁵⁸ This is the naïve research proposal I wish to make here and to declare my willingness to participate in it.

Translation: Krystyna Mazur

⁵³ Ibid., 17., italics mine.

⁵⁴ Only one laconic text is available on this subject: a few pages long essay by A. Selerowicz, “Leksykon kochających inaczej. Fakty, daty, zjawiska,” *Softpress*, Poznań, 1994, 13-18.

⁵⁵ I am paraphrasing Ewa Domańska’s “Historiografia insurekcyjna,” *Literatura na świecie*, 2008, no 1-2, 360.

⁵⁶ I will mention but a few: J. Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*, Villard Books, New York 1994; G. Hekma, *Homoseksualiteit in Nederland van 1730 tot de moderne tijd*, Meulenhoff, Amsterdam 2004; *The Pursuit of Sodomy. Male Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe*, ed. by G. Kent, G. Hekma, Harrington, Park Press, New York, 1989; A. Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995; *Hidden From History*, ed. by M.B. Duberman, M. Vicinus, G. Chauncey, New American Library, New York 1989. A comprehensive bibliography may be found at: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/gayhistbib.html>

⁵⁷ See for example, K. Tomasik, *Homobiografie. Pisarki i pisarze polscy XIX I XX wieku*, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa, 2008.

⁵⁸ See, for example, the quoted works by Z. Kuchowicz; T. Chrzanowski, “Ciało sarmackie,” *Teksty*, 1997, no 2; A. Wolan, “Sarmacki eros,” *Dziś. Przegląd społeczny*. 1993, no 8; W. Nawrocki, “Libertyńska prowokacja moralna: poezja ostrych kodów erotycznych, in: *Płodny jest świat występku...*, 7-24.