

The Knight and the Lady: Performing Gender Identity in *Wiersze miłosne* by Jerzy Harasymowicz

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W*iersze miłosne* [*The Love Poems*], first published in 1979, belong to the most popular works in the *oeuvre* of the Polish poet Jerzy Harasymowicz (1933-1999).¹ From his debut in 1956 until his death in 1999, he published sixty-one books of poetry.² Discussing Harasymowicz's work, Czesław Miłosz argues that “dream and a fairy-tale world ... make up his realm, where no sober advice of logic interferes with his ‘liberated’ imagination” (481). In spite of the surreal nature of his work, most of Harasymowicz's poems have their roots in a specific area—the Subcarpathian region in south-eastern Poland. Like other volumes, *Wiersze miłosne* utilize Carpathian, especially Lemko, themes. But this is not the most important feature of the collection. Apart from the regional aspect, critics emphasize the poems' remarkable representation of femininity, formed by an amalgamation of the sensual and the spiritual. This unusual fusion of the corporeal and the immaterial has been considered the most significant feature of the volume and is construed not as a trivial profanation of theological senses, but as a spiritualization of the female body that lifts the main character to the level of the divine (Kaliszewski 195-96). Surprisingly, very little attention has been paid to exploring the construction of masculinity in Harasymowicz's love poetry. Nor have the reasons for portraying women through the prism of sanctity been satisfactorily explained.

My main aim in this article is to explore the problem of the performance of gender in selected texts by Harasymowicz. Of particular importance is how the conventions of the love poem assign gender roles and, consequently, how this impinges upon the speaker's performance of gender identity. Since the works to be analyzed in this study can be classified as examples of travel writing, I will also investigate the impact of travel and space on the way in which the poetic persona represents himself and, consequently, constructs the representation of the poem's female character. The poem “Jakie to przed-

wiośnie będzie” [“What This Early Spring Will Be Like”] will be analyzed in detail, while fragments of other works such as “W górach marzec” [“March in the Mountains”], “Przyjedzie mój miły” [“My Beloved Will Come”], and “Przyjazd w czasie świąt wielkanocnych” [“Easter Arrival”] will serve as additional sources, allowing for a discussion of the problem of gender performance.³

I claim that the process of gendering in these works is based on performance and performativity. I borrow both terms from Judith Butler’s influential study *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Here, performativity of gender is considered “something that one does,” not as a manifestation of what one is (34). Performance, on the other hand, viewed by Butler as a form of theatricality, refers to what Moya Lloyd describes as acts of “miming or hyperbolizing existing signifiers” (202). In this case, it is original gender identities that are parodied and hyperbolized.⁴ Moreover, since most of Harasymowicz’s love poems are set in the Polish Lemkivshchyna, part of the Subcarpathian region, the formation of gender identity is closely related to the process of travel. Eric J. Leed’s discussion of the reciprocity of travel and identity will therefore be an important theoretical component underpinning my argument (217-23). And finally, in order to further explore the role of the region in gender encounter, I will employ Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the contact zone (6).

“Jakie to przedwiośnie będzie”

Jakie to przedwiośnie będzie
Nie przywitają nas cerkwi dzwony
Góry czarnym popłyną łabędziem
Bez Twojej włosów korony

Przejdziemy się z zawilcami
I Ty powiesz – tak się stało
Między cerkwią wyżnią i niżnią
Pięć lat do mnie jechałeś

Pięć lat byłeś jak ikona
Święty Jerzy nad moim łóżkiem
Teraz przy stole stoję – żona
Szafę z łyżkami mam poduszkę

Za wiele gdzieś za morze
 Wyprawiałeś się w imię słowa
 Ja w tych gawronach brzożach
 Czekałam na swego herosa

I w ten mój płaszcz włosów
 Zawinięto mnie wreszcie całą
 Tu nikt nie słucha bożych głosów
 I gdzieś mnie komuś sprzedano

I co mi tam barok teraz tarok
 I nawet cerkiew za górą
 Wyprowadzono mi z życia miłość skrepowaną
 Sam jestem na świecie jak pióro

W przeciwną stronę rozchodzą się góry
 Jej suknia nie odzywa się słowem
 Na wietrze loki jak baranki skaczą
 Niczego nieświadome

“What This Early Spring Will Be Like”

What this early spring will be like
 The bells of *cerkiew* will not greet us
 Mountains will flow like a black swan
 Without the crown of your hair

We will walk with the windflowers
 And you'll say—it happened
 Between the high and the low *cerkiew*
 You traveled for five years to me

For five years you were like an icon
 Saint George above my bed
 And now I stand by the table—a wife
 I have got a cupboard of cutlery and a pillow

Too many times beyond the sea
 You went away in the name of the word
 And in these rooks—birches

I waited for my hero
 And in this coat of hair
 I was wrapped whole
 Here no one listens to the god-like voices
 And I was sold to someone somewhere

I don't need the baroque—*tarok* now
 Nor the *cerkiew* behind the mountain
 My love was taken away from my life, hampered
 I am all alone like a pen

The mountains split in opposite directions
 Her dress says no word
 Her locks fly in the wind like little lambs
 Unaware of anything⁵

On the most literal level, the poem's theme can be described as a possible or imagined meeting between two lovers who have not seen each other for five years, during which time the woman has married. The man is the speaker who relates the events. He also "gives voice" to the woman and quotes her words. The female character describes the pain of waiting and of long-term separation, as well as her forced marriage to someone else. The male persona closes her narrative with a cry of loneliness and acknowledges the end of the relationship by comparing himself and his lover to splitting mountains.

Lemkivshchyna is the setting in which the dramatic situation takes place. The inherent features of its landscape and culture—for example, Greek-Catholic churches, the hills of the Beskid Mountains, and icons—identify this particular area of Poland. The poet also invokes a specific place. By mentioning "the high and low *cerkiew*" (135), he is referring to the Lemko village Mochnaczka, located in the western part of the Beskid Sądecki Mountains. The village consists of two parts: Mochnaczka Wyżna and Mochnaczka Niżna. Despite this administrative division, however, it has only one *cerkiew*. Thus, the mention of two churches is a metonymic description of Mochnaczka itself. Some may argue that the phrase does not necessarily refer to this particular place, since there are other hamlets in the Subcarpathian region that replicate this toponymy: for example, Krużłowa Niżna and Krużłowa Wyżna, Moszczenica Niżna and Moszczenica Wyżna, or the former Tarnawa Wyżna and Tarnawa

Niżna. Both Krużłowa and Moszczenica have, however, always been Roman Catholic villages, whereas Tarnawa, despite its historically large Greek-Catholic population, never appeared in Harasymowicz's *Wiersze miłosne*. Mochnaczka, on the other hand, is the most important village in the topography of this volume. It is the place of anticipation, arrivals, returns, and farewells. Other examples of such uses of its space in *Wiersze miłosne* can be found in the cycle *Mochnaczka przyjazd* [*Mochnaczka. Arrival*] and the poem "Pejzaż z Mochnaczki" ["Mochnaczka's Landscape"].

The Spermatic Journey through Lemkivshchyna⁶

The performativity and performance of the poetic persona's identity develop throughout the poem by means of its retrospective narrative. Unlike traditional travel narratives that start with departure and progress towards arrival, the poem begins with an arrival scene and moves backward in time to earlier events. The performativity of the speaker, or the poetic representation of "what he does," is based on three distinctive acts: the act of arriving, the act of traveling (*jechał*), and the act of setting out on a journey (*nyprawiał się*). The arrival is presented in the first stanza, while the two remaining activities are embedded in the subsequent narration of the woman. The opening stanza not only delivers the first marker of performativity, but is also the point at which the performance of identity commences. Although invoked by negation, the bells of the *cerkiew* and the crown of the woman's hair are the first signs of performance. Along with the "black swan of the mountains" and the windflowers, they set the scene of arrival and delineate Lemkivshchyna as the theatre of events.

A similarly constructed arrival scene appears in the poem "W górach marzec." Just as in "Jakie to przedwiośnie będzie," the importance of the moment of arrival is stressed by the evocation of elements connected to the landscape of Lemkivshchyna. In the case of "W górach marzec," the icon is the main marker that defines the region. The lovers' sight is compared to the eyes of the icon: "I przyjechał – patrzyli z ikon siłą."⁷ By assigning the "iconic look" to the man and the woman, the poet alludes to the hypnotic eyes of icons that light the faces of saints and constitute the metaphor of their presence. In this way, the arrival scene becomes a powerful meeting of the lovers who, despite their corporeal form, are attributed with facets of sanctity.

Hyperbolism, which is typical of performance, appears as the

narrative of “Jakie to przedwiośnie będzie” progresses. The persona’s peregrination between the high and the low *cerkiew* lasted five years. On the one hand, these five years symbolize the magnitude of separation; on the other, they amplify the man’s freedom and mobility. His earlier departure becomes hyperbolized in a similar manner. Not only does this departure begin the journey beyond the sea, but it is undertaken “in the name of the word.” The journey, thus, can be interpreted either as a religious mission, which aims to spread the word of God, or as the venture of a poet spreading his own word or searching for *the* word. The implied importance of the journey is matched by the prominence of the poetic persona. The woman describes him with the Polish word “*heros*,” which bears the meaning of both “hero” and “Heros.” This link is further strengthened by the simile “byłeś jak ikona” [“you were like an icon”] (135) and the reference to Saint George.

The icon of Saint George embodies connotations that allow Harasymowicz to construct a versatile image of the lover/traveler. The story of Saint George is so complex that some have argued that such a figure never existed, or that legends about him are Christianized versions of a pagan myth (Attwater and John 219). He was one of the most well-known Christian martyrs and the center of his cult was located in modern-day Lydda in Palestine. It is likely that this is also where he was martyred at the end of the third or the beginning of the fourth century. Saint George became increasingly popular in medieval times, owing to Jacobus da Varagine’s *Golden Legend* (1260). According to one of the legends, the knight slays a dragon that was terrorizing the city of Silene and saves the princess who had been chosen as its next victim. In return, the grateful citizens abandon paganism and convert to Christianity. The legend also influenced Christian iconography, particularly that of the Orthodox Church. Saint George is depicted in icons as a rider on a white horse who slays the dragon and saves the city. The princess usually stands by the city gates while her parents hold the keys to the city and watch the battle from a window or balcony. Meanwhile, the warrior is blessed by *Manus Dei*, visible in one of the top corners of the icon.

The poetic persona in “Jakie to przedwiośnie będzie” is granted all the virtues that the image of Saint George embodies. First, he is associated with knightliness; second, with sanctity; and third, he is credited with more general features, such as masculinity, independence, mobility, and physical strength. This demonstrates that the

identity of the poetic persona is in fact an artificial and theatrical construct, which consists of elements that, outside a work of art, would be seen as mutually exclusive: the poetic persona is simultaneously a hero and Heros, a traveler, a lover, a saint, and a poet. Above all, the poetic persona is also a performer who acts out his identity and brings to life the identity of the woman. While the latter will be examined in the course of this analysis, I will first place the self-representation of the speaker in the context of the tradition of travel writing since, as stated above, the linear acts of arrival, travel, and departure are important components of the performative dimension of his identity.

Leed claims that identity is often forged through the activity of travel. By examining the cultural determinants of travel, he raises questions about the process of gendering in patriarchal cultures. Leed argues that throughout most of history the “representative traveler ... has worn masculine persona” (219). Travel was, thus, considered to be man’s destiny and an agency imparting eminence and recognition (219-220). The identity of the speaker in the poem “Jakie to przedwiośnie będzie” conveys similar senses and is delineated according to the rules set by phallocratic and phallocentric cultures. The act of traveling allows the poetic persona to acquire a masculine identity that is best expressed by the roles he performs—the role of knight, lover, poet and, paradoxically, also the role of saint. This stereotypical conception of “complete masculine” identity allows the spermatic journey to continue towards its final aim—sowing the seed. Harasymowicz’s representation of the lover corresponds with Leed’s conclusions about the mobility of men in travel literature, which is “powerfully charged by the reigning images of masculinity, whether of the wandering knight or the wandering holy man, the shaman or the actor” (220). The poet employs all these powerful associations while constructing the speaker’s portrait. Moreover, Harasymowicz uses the images of Lemkivshchyna in order to strengthen this representation.

This Subcarpathian region of Poland—Lemkivshchyna—is the space in which the spermatic journey and the formation of masculinity take place. The five-year-long ride between the high and the low *cerkiew* and the icon of Saint George are the most important elements of Harasymowicz’s imagery, signifying Lemkivshchyna and simultaneously contributing to the process of gendering. The act of setting out beyond the sea that begins the journey, however, also has important implications for the representation of space. It not only forms an important stage in the identity-shaping process, but raises questions

which she is wrapped by those who sold her, is described as “*plaszcz włosów*” [“the coat of hair”]. The imagery, as well as the metaphor “the coat of hair,” brings with it associations with *plaszczanica*, an iconic representation of Christ, covered in a shroud and placed in the tomb after his death. The *plaszczanica* is unveiled to worshipers on Good Friday. Andrzej Kaliszewski interprets such representations in Harasymowicz’s poetry as an attempt to transgress female sexuality. He fails, however, to explain the reasons for such profanation or, as he views it, sacralization of the female body (196). I argue that the woman’s inability to act independently often results in sublimity—a move that can be traced to the traditional patriarchal and Catholic paradigm of Polish culture in which women have rarely been envisaged as independent agents. Instead of action, thus, as a form of sublimation they were associated with sanctity. Such an association would not only exclude them from the decision-making process, but leave activity in the hands of men. Agnieszka Graff demonstrates that such perceptions of femininity have been present also in Polish public life and history. She claims that sublimation often meant the dismissal, and eventually forgetting, of the actual role of women in history (26-27).

The analysis of the above stanza reveals the most important pair of binary oppositions used in this poem in order to construct the identity of both the man and the woman. The lover/traveler is free and mobile, whereas the woman is sessile and bound. He travels, she waits; he rides, she is hampered and sold: activity versus passivity, freedom versus enslavement, and presence versus absence. Similar opposites can be found in other love poems by Harasymowicz. In “*Przyjazd w czasie świąt wielkanocnych*,” for instance, the woman is waiting for the man by the window for the entire winter. She “draws her sadness with the stylus of frost,” while checking if Saint George is approaching on “the horse of blizzard” (121). Moreover, the opening of the poem “*Przyjedzie mój miły*” portrays a similar scene, in which the female character is saying with hope: “*przyjedzie mój miły / Jak śniegi z mitry ikon zejdą*” (118).¹²

Another pair of binaries can be recognized in the image of woman as an ordinary wife and its contrast with the portrait of man as the poet on his quest for the word. The wife is rooted in the poetic of the everyday, surrounded by her dowry—a cupboard of spoons and a pillow—while the poet explores new lands and fulfills an important mission. This binary values the space to which each of them is as-

signed. The woman is associated with the local, homely, native, and the natural, while the man is seen as part of the outside, foreign, and intellectual spheres. The binaries of travel and waiting, absence and presence, and nature and “civilization” are well summarized by Leed’s argument of gendering. According to Leed, gendering “is a dialectical process that proceeds through the creation of opposites out of differences. There is no free and mobile man without the un-free and sessile female, no knight without the lady, no father without the mother” (221). If there were no woman in opposition to whom the speaker could define himself, his performance of masculinity would have no means of existence. It is the othering, therefore, that puts into motion the poetic persona’s performance of identity.

The last two stanzas of “Jakie to przedwiośnie będzie” confirm the above conclusion. Once the binary oppositions have been broken and the illusion built on the cultural scenario of “the knight and the lady” has been confronted with reality, the carefully performed identity of the knight shatters. The hero has not completed his spermatocidal journey, since the seed has not been spread. Nor has he prevented his woman from being sold. As a result of being excluded from this exchange of possession, he fails to prove his masculinity. This is indicated by the use of the passive voice, previously characteristic only of the woman. “*Wyprowadzono mi z życia miłość skrępowaną* [emphasis mine],” he admits (136).¹³ This statement of hopelessness, followed by the expression of solitude and the image of splitting mountains, signifies a general crisis of identity. For the poetic persona there is no masculinity without femininity, just like baroque, *tarok*, and *cerkiew* cease to mean anything when love is taken away.¹⁴

Conclusion

In this article, I explored the interdependence of identity, travel, and gender, focusing chiefly on one of Harasymowicz’s love poems, “Jakie to przedwiośnie będzie.” I argued that the performance of the poetic persona’s identity is constructed through the process of othering—the defining of oneself in opposition to another. In the case of this poem, it is the identity of the male persona that is constructed in distinction to the identity of the female character. By drawing on Butler’s concepts of performativity and performance, the stereotypical character of such categorizations can be seen as rooted in phallogocentric cultural norms. Leed’s discussion of travel writing allows for Harasymowicz’s interpretations of masculinity and femininity to be

studied as patriarchal allegories of mobility and sessility, while Pratt's concept of the contact zone sheds new light on the intersection of space and gender identity. An analysis of "Jakie to przedwiośnie będzie" reveals that the constructs of the masculine and the feminine, as presented by Harasymowicz, are based on reciprocity and cannot exist separately. Moreover, the spermatoc journey, which aims to broadcast the seed, cannot be completed without the woman. Thus, the collapse of the male-female binary at the close of the poem results in a masculinity crisis—one that not only reflects the state of the poet's gender consciousness, but also the Polish/Catholic heteronormative paradigm in which woman is viewed as a requisite supplement to man.

Notes

1. It was followed by two additional editions. The second edition was published in 1982 and the third, revised under the title *Wiesz wszystko. Wiersze miłosne* [*You Know it All. The Love Poems*] in 1986. This article is based on the last edition.
2. This number includes poems and reprints but not anthologies and translations.
3. The abovementioned poems are part of *Wiersze miłosne*.
4. The performance of identity is mainly associated by Butler with parodies of original gender identities "within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing and ... butch / femme identities" (187). Here I omit the problem of trans-gendered identities and utilize other distinctive features of the term, such as theatricality, imitation, exaggeration, and hyperbolism.
5. All translations are mine. The word *tarok*, which describes a card game or a set of cards used in fortunetelling, functions in Harasymowicz's poem exclusively as a component of the internal rhyme: "I co mi tam *barok* teraz *tarok* [emphasis mine]" (136). The word *cerkiew*, meaning an Orthodox or Greek-Catholic church, is kept in its original form. It is one of the most important words in Harasymowicz's *Wiersze miłosne* and a significant element of Lemkivshchyna's cultural landscape.
6. The title *Spermatoc Journey* comes from Eric J. Leed's book entitled *The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism* (1991) and refers to the hero's patriarchal quest to spread his seed.
7. ["and he came—they looked with the strength of icon's eyes"]
8. Pratt borrows the term "contact" from linguistics, where the idea of "contact language" refers to "improvised languages that develop among speakers of different native languages who need to communicate with each other consistently" (6).
9. ["And I was sold to someone somewhere ... "]

10. Moya Lloyd stresses the importance of repetition and re-citation in Butler's concept of performativity: "Repetition is central to performativity" (197).
11. ["And in this coat of hair / I was wrapped whole / Here no-one listens to the god-like voices / And I was sold to someone somewhere"]
12. ["My beloved will arrive / as soon as the snow comes down off the icons' miter"]
13. ["My love *was taken away* from my life, hampered"]
14. "Baroque" may be interpreted here as a poetic metonymy. By the 1979, when the first edition of *Wiersze miłosne* came out, Harasymowicz had published several volumes on the Polish seventeenth and eighteenth-century history and the Sarmatian culture of the Polish gentry. They have been described by critics as "the baroque poems." Thus, this auto-thematic use of the word "baroque" indicates that not only has the speaker's gender identity disintegrated, but his identity as a poet as well.

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