

A Song of Futile Heroism

The Modern Poland Foundation presents a podcast titled: *A Song of Futile Heroism*.

There are literary forms that readers expect to be boring. The panegyric is certainly one of those. Wikipedia defines it as “formal public speech, or (in later use) written verse, delivered in high praise of a person or thing”. It would seem that such text is not fitted to contain anything interesting. There are exceptions, though. One of them is *Song I on Fridrusz, killed in Sokal by Tatars Anno Domini 1519*. It was written by Mikołaj Sęp-Szarzyński, a poet of a transient period – classified as renaissance or baroque, depending on the expert, and mostly known for his religious sonnets.

How does an author make his panegyric interesting? The poem can take a stance in a specific, clearly visible conflict. However, what could possibly be controversial when a soldier dies in a battle defending his country’s territory? Especially in the times when such occurrences were common?

Fridrusz was a real person: a standard-bearer of Lviv called Fryderyk Herbut, married to Anna Siennieńska and a father to five children. His death fit a propaganda narrative excellently: he died voluntarily in 1519 in the battle of Sokal, where Poles fought the Tatars not in order to win, but to be able to retreat. It’s also telling that the song was written a few dozen years after his death. Thanks to Fridrusz, Sokal wouldn’t be associated just with a slaughter and a not-s-glorious retreat from the battlefield.

It’s important to understand that our ancestors also had conflicted views on politics of memory. The distances between now and the events that seemed current enough to argue about them were also similar to how we see it today: Sęp-Szarzyński wrote the song 50-60 years after the battle took place. It wasn’t the first literary text describing it. Jan Kochanowski wrote an epigram titled *On Sokal graves* that gives a voice to the fallen men:

We have fought bravely for our homeland dear,
and at the end our throats had been slit here.
Your tears, dear guest, on us should not be spent,
- You should pay dearly to meet such an end.

(translated by Pawel Koziol)

The Universal Chronicle by Marcin Bielski (first published in 1551) emphasises that a different battle strategy could have been used: the Polish army was outnumbered; instead of getting through the Bug river against the Tatars, the Poles should have attacked the Tatar army while they were crossing the river. That was the hetman Konstanty Ostrogski’s plan, but his subordinates were eager to fight. In the chronicler’s opinion:

The failure was due to youth’s stubbornness and not listening to older people; Frydrusz Herbort was, among others, at fault. He had a great heart and was curiously zealous to fight; Even though he saw our defeat, he was not afraid. Not caring for his life at all, he said: God! Don’t let me keep my throat among my brethren. He raced his horse, jumped, voluntarily [...] rushed into battle with his lance, and fought as long as he could; there the Tatars cut him to death.

It's evident that the *Song on Fridrusz* was a part of an ongoing dispute – the subject had been controversial for years. It's also important to mention the emotions surrounding the Tatar menace. The Tatars were considered inferior in civilisation terms – it was embarrassing how they plundered South-East of mighty Kingdom of Poland time after time. Such discomfort is visible in Kochanowski's *Song on devastation of Podole*:

Savages (alas) – savages we fight,
They don't build villages nor any towns;
They sit in fields inside their tents,
Ah, feral people eat us alive!

It's evident now what the stakes are in the poem: the opinion on Fridrusz is controversial and the song tries to set it right. All parts of the poem: highly moralistic introduction, description of situation after the battle, Fridrusz's speech, finally his death and author's commentary – all of this serves to persuade the reader.

Hence, it's important to know that Sęp's poem whitewashes Fridrusz – compared to Bielski's chronicle. The character only leaps alone into the battle against Tatars after saving his subordinates:

In Sokal, where he guided all that remained
of the miserable army assaulted by cruel
pagans, freely he gave out his brave
heart, speaking out these memorable words:

Here “freely” probably means that he has performed his duty first.

This manipulation is quite simple here. But there are more subtle things in the poem, too. Already in the first verse we can notice something curious. The poet mentions a *disciplined mind*, which refers to ideal personality in Greek stoicism. The school of philosophy claims that the correct approach to life is through the ability to react calmly both to positive and negative stimuli. Such attitude would make people happy, according to stoics. They also advocated coming to terms with inevitable mortality.

However, the next lines suggest that the introduction is off-topic. The author cherry-picks just the lack of fear of death from a wide variety of stoic traits. He knows that his character would not fit the other criteria of stoicism. Besides, Fridrusz is not supposed to be a model stoic – he's one of “a thousand examples” that show the fear of death can be overcome.

Degradation of stoicism is also implied by syntax in the poem. Sęp-Szarzyński arranged the word order meticulously and often used it to suggest a certain meaning to the reader, only to prove it incorrect after having read a few words more. The same is true here: in the first line, the “mind disciplined and true to virtues” seems to be the subject of the sentence, but it's revealed to be an object in the second line.

However, stoicism stays on our mind influencing the interpretation. It also makes the reader suspicious when the main character is described as volatile and angry. This fact is mentioned in *The Song on Fridrusz* quite a few times.

Fridrusz's speech is also curious. It doesn't seem credible at first glance. While we believe Fridrusz's impulsive decision to suicidally charge into battle, it looks grotesque when he yells randomly about

how heroic he's about to be. How are we supposed to believe that a person just returning from battle and who is soon going to die in battle frenzy, finds enough time in between to give a speech?

The explanation to that mystery is purely literary. In the ancient Caesar biographies, medieval chronicles and fantasy novels, a speech is always a part of battle description. The commander would spur his subordinates into action or a warrior would explain what is worth dying for. It's not realism; it's literary convention – and a useful one too, if our main topic is explaining character's motivation.

Let's look at what Fridrusz says. First, there's a description of a disaster that makes one literally struggle to talk. The sentence: "Tint of Bug river, I saw; the blood of ours – has changed the water" is one of the most radical examples of word order inversion. It's supposed to mean: "I saw our blood change the colour of Bug's water". Next, we have a rhetorical question: "Who – alas – took me back to safety?" Fridrusz feels that his place is back in the lost battle, among the fallen. There is only one thing he can do with such thoughts.

However, there's something suspicious about his reasoning:

Wretched fear does not enter my heart,
But if my life is helpful – it's a waste to die,
Still, that place calls me and an honest soul
Wants to buy glory – with blood, bones, steel.

The trade is still on

The subsequent sentences of his speech start with contrastive conjunctions. Hence, we can assume that "it's a waste to die" contrasts and negates the previous sentence. That reasoning gives us the following logical sequence: (1) I'm not afraid to die, (2) but it's wasteful to die if I can still be useful, (3) but on the other hand, the battle calls for heroic deeds that can cost one their life.

Now, dear listeners, let's treat "buying glory" and the "trade" that appear in the poem seriously, not just as a figure of speech. The "trade" proved problematic for many analyses of the poem. Julian Krzyżanowski, a prominent expert on Polish literature before 18th century, claims that the "trade" means hesitation. Should the character stay in the castle or go back to the battle – to certain death? However, all the previous contrastive syntax in Fridrusz's speech expresses hesitation. If we accept that interpretation, it means that our character says: "Open the gates, because I'm still hesitating". That doesn't make much sense. Or maybe it's "Open the gates so I can stop hesitating?" That's still wrong – the poem is not about convincing oneself to choose sacrifice.

The poem is about literal trading. Kochanowski, in his previously mentioned epigram *On Sokal graves*, wrote: "You should pay dearly to meet such an end". He only generally referred to the value of dying for homeland. Sęp-Szarzyński makes his character treat his death like a transaction – the battle is a peculiar marketplace. A soul that wants to buy glory with "blood, bones, steel" is a trader. By attacking the Tatars, Fridrusz makes them pay for disgraceful retreat of the Poles. His calculation goes the following way: I pay with my blood and my life, but I buy glory. The Tatars pay for my shame stemming from the fact that I had to escape them. That's what "trade" stands for – the transactions, buying and selling.

So, to recap: in Szarzyński's poem, the trade becomes a metaphor for the battle. Fridrusz charges back into fight and dies. The way he charges is quite dynamic and picturesque: he's compared to a cannon ball or a furious tigress. Such images are evocative of battle frenzy. Let's recall what the introduction praised, though: "a mind disciplined and true to virtues". A cannon ball and a tigress are indisputably not disciplined. It's evident that the author holds Fridrusz in high regard, but not for the qualities he outlined in the first verse.

It seems that Szarzyński didn't value much the myth of heroic death in battle. He goes out of his way to make it seem incoherent with stoicism he commends in the first verse of his song. While he praises Fridrusz's personal qualities, he criticises the character's actions, since his grand gesture is useless for the homeland. It's surprising, by the way, that the country is mentioned only once in the poem – in a prayer-like passage by the end of the song:

With better fortune for Homeland, dear Lord,
assign to me a death equally swift.

The chivalric ethics of Fridrusz prove to be purely individualistic and incompatible with the moral code that the poet lauds. Szarzyński defies the syntactic rules again – he puts the "better future for Homeland" to the front, because he finds it the most important. Fridrusz, however, mostly cares about glory. The author also finds heroic death in battle glorious. He emphasises that the character is "afire with noble wrath" and possesses a "fearless heart". He also agrees that his sacrifice diminishes the shame of defeat.

There is a significant difference between personal qualities or actions, such as courage, battle frenzy or death, and those qualities or actions that benefit the homeland. Paradoxically, a knight sacrificing his life acts as an egoist in this poem and his deed is questioned – all while not breaking out of the panegyric convention, which makes the author praise the character.

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