

## Pan Czorliński And Odysseus

In his poem, O panu Czorlińscim co do Pucka po sece jechał, Hieronim Derdowski takes the reader on a boisterous journey through the entire countryside of 19<sup>th</sup> century Kashubia.<sup>1</sup> Derdowski's lovable, trouble-prone hero, Pan Czorliński, gets into one scrape after another. Literary comedy typically is based on exaggerated, foolish behavior, and in Derdowski's poem, the narrator even warns us about the lies about to be told in the story. In the end, comedies leave the reader with a reaffirmation of the inherent goodness of people. This is exactly what Derdowski achieves in his poem. The plot conflict develops as the minor noble Czorliński travels to Puck to buy fishnets and runs into one catastrophe after another -- all because he is wearing a cursed hat with a tiny monster sewn into it by his enemy, the evil furrier, Szmul. Pan Czorliński finally finds his way home with the assistance of his wife. While Derdowski has regaled the reader with the foibles of 19<sup>th</sup> century Kashubians, he has also revealed them to be a lovable people with echoes of greatness from a previous era.

Derdowski's razor-sharp wit generated many levels of humor in the poem: the characterization of the befuddled hero and his outspoken wife, the zany events on the road throughout Kashubia, the never-ending jokes. However, his contemporaries did not appreciate his descriptions of Kashubians involved in the unfortunate adventures endured by the bumbling fisherman on his way to buy fishnets. That Kashubians did not find his comedy to their taste disappointed Derdowski. In an article published by Józef Watra-Przewłocki, Derdowski's reaction is quoted: "In Kashubia no one understood me. My poetry was taken for a mockery of the Kashubian dialect, precisely in Kashubia—and all I wanted was to feel next to me rejoicing Kashubian hearts."<sup>2</sup>

If Derdowski's contemporaries had recognized that he had written a mock epic, that is to say, a parody of epic poems such as The Odyssey, then they might not have taken the satiric presentation of the characters in O Panu Czorlińscim as a direct attack on the Kashubian people and their language. The Odyssey, as a typical heroic epic, is a poetic narration in elevated style of the superhuman exploits of a noble leader who ultimately triumphs and brings peace and stability. This virtuous hero, who defeats the dark forces that threaten him, exemplifies the values of an entire culture or national identity of a people. Derdowski turned all of these essential elements of the epic into comedy.

When one views the poem through the prism of a mock epic, then all of the humorous elements come into focus. Derdowski is not describing humorous characters in order to present a critical vision of blundering Kashubians. To the contrary, he uses the form of the mock epic with all its humor and exaggeration ultimately to honor the Kashubian culture; and its foibles and superstitions are part and parcel of its value. The following analysis examines how Derdowski comically mimics the major elements of Homer's great heroic epic, The Odyssey, including narration, characterization, and plot conflict.

Derdowski's use of the narrator parodies the elevated style of narration in The Odyssey. In the opening lines of the Odyssey, Homer famously invokes the Muse to inspire him to tell the story of the great hero. Derdowski's narrator describes how Pan Czorliński sets out on

his sleigh pulled by a team of his horses from the lake-side village of Chmielno to go to the town of Puck, 40 miles away, to buy fishing nets. The point of view of the narrator is that of a fellow villager who is watching Czorliński depart:

I still see him, as in his long winter coat, he harnesses the horses  
As, leaning down from his seat on the sleigh, he kisses his wife on the lips. Stay with God, my lady, no time to waste longer. Ice on the marshes, no nets for the lakes, time to head out into the world (1)!ii

In the very first line of the poem, Derdowski's narrator informally addresses his readers as comrades (druche) and mentions his "urge to compose for you a whole book of fibs (1)." Odysseus formally recounts his adventures with the unforgettable mythical creatures such as the Lotus-Eaters, the Cyclops, Circe, and the Sirens. In a humorous contrast, Derdowski's presentation of the adventures of Pan Czorliński first takes the form of letter sent from the hero to his wife. And at the end of the poem, Derdowski's narrator reveals that the source of his information came from Czorliński and that he is merely repeating Czorliński's lies.

While the sublime heroic feats of Odysseus are sung in the epic, the adventures of Pan Czorliński only rise to mundane comedy. The obvious parallels in the story elements of the two poems enhance the comedy of O Panu Czorlińsci. Derdowski is inviting the reader to enjoy the comic contrasts between the epic hero Odysseus and the comic hero Czorliński.

Odysseus spent ten years on his way back to his kingdom after the Greek victory over Troy. During this journey home, he has to outwit many fearsome mythical creatures who possess supernatural powers, and his entire crew perishes. The divine nymph Calypso holds Odysseus captive for seven years until Zeus sends Hermes to ask for his release. Circe turns some of the men of Odysseus into swine until he wins their release from the spell. Polyphemus, the Cyclops, eats members of his crew until Odysseus puts out his eye. Scylla, the monster with six heads, eats six of the crew, while on the opposite shore Charybdis threatened Odysseus with drowning in the whirlpool that it created. Odysseus finally returns home in disguise and kills the suitors who have been plaguing his wife and plotting against him.

Pan Czorliński, on the other hand, leaves home to buy fish nets in Puck and spends eight weeks in what should have been a journey of days. The monster that curses his journey is the little bug sewn into his new hat by the furrier Szmul. Pan Czorliński does not sail the sea, he rides through Kashubia on a sleigh. Instead of a loyal crew, the people aboard his sleigh are the Jews who have hired him to detour from his road to Puck in order to transfer their trade goods. Pan Czorliński's loyalty to his clients is short-lived, as he abandons them when they are imprisoned. While the Greek god of the sea, Poseidon, sends difficulties to impede the return of Odysseus, it is the evil furrier Szmul who curses Pan Czorliński's journey by means of a bug sown into his hat. Instead of shipwrecks at sea, Pan Czorliński loses his sleigh when his horse bolts and falls through the ice with the sleigh. Pan Czorliński's encounter with a wolf ends with the wolf eating his hat (14). A sorceress sent by the devil forces Czorliński to detour to Kartuzy (12). And when Czorliński is chased by devils in the woods, he catches a Kashubian devil from Zęblewo with the belt of St. Francis and later sells him for a monkey (153). Czorliński's only moment in battle is when he punches a German gendarme in the face while being arrested (46). Derdowski's hero, only makes it home with the

assistance of his wife who had set out to find him. And it is not evil suitors, but only his out-of-work fishing crew that Czorlińsci has to deal with (100).

However, it is important to emphasize that Derdowski is not ridiculing Czorlińsci and contemporary Kashubians. The poem is a comedy that features a lovable, comically-flawed character who works himself into one difficulty after another, but all ends well when the hero's wife arrives to bring him home. Derdowski has led the reader, town by town, throughout Kashubia and has presented a vision of its people with all their virtues and foibles. The reader sees a hard-working religious people with strong community and family values, but still influenced by old superstitions. Prussian oppression is evident, but Czorlińsci's audacity indicates that Kashubia will remain faithful to its culture and language until the oppression is defeated.

Derdowski has made a wise choice of genre to express his sympathetic perspective of Kashubia. An epic Kashubian hero that arises to do battle with the Prussians and liberates Kashubia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century simply would not be credible. However, a mock-epic poem, a comedy, can manifest the values and the strengths of the Kashubian culture and people as effectively as an epic poem. Later generations recognized and honored this artistic accomplishment of Derdowski.

If there is any doubt regarding the power of comedy to present a positive image of a people, the following example should encourage the reader to look beyond the skepticism. Pan Czorlińsci happens upon an old gray cavalry horse that was ridden in battle by the Noble Miroślawski. Czorlińsci asked the horse if he would like to march again to the sound of the Kashubian March and gets a nod from the horse. At this point, Czorlińsci sings the words Derdowski has composed and keeps time with his hooves. Kashubians have since seized upon the lyrics as their Kashubian anthem. The old war horse is transformed into a symbol of the fierce courage and tenacity inherent in Kashubians. The mock-heroic comedy serves to honor the values and strengths of the Kashubian people.

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Citations refer to the English translation, An 1880 Journey through Kashub, Poland, by Fr. Aloysius Rekowski.

<sup>2</sup> Józef Watra-Przewłocki [J.W.P., pseud.], "Życie i prace Hieronima Derdowskiego," *Latarnia Morska*, April 22, 1934, 5.