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Celebration of a military doctor. An unknown poem by Johannes Gregor Macer Szepsius (ca. 1530 – after 1579)

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Abstract

Johannes Gregor Macer Szepsius (ca. 1530 – after 1579) wrote an epigram in praise of his friend Anton Schneeberger (1530–1581) and a celebratory poem on his genealogy, both appearing in Schneeberger's most famous book, *De bona militum valetudine conservanda* [On the Good Health of Soldiers] in 1564. However, the poem praising Schneeberger's ancestry appears only in the printed version of the book; a surviving manuscript copy of the work in the Palace Library in Ansbach, Germany, features a paean in celebration of the military doctor instead. From a literary perspective, the poem does not surpass the standard level of occasional poetry of this period. Since it is a celebratory poem, the high regard for the doctor is expressed there and this stance contradicts the criticism of the status of the medical profession found in Macer's other works.

Keywords

Latin humanistic poetry; Gregor Macer Szepsius; image of a doctor

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1. Introduction

The lesser-known humanist poet Johannes Gregor Macer Szepsius (ca. 1530 – after 1579) is originally from the Slovak town of Moldava nad Bodvou. He adopted the Hungarian name of this town, Szepsi, as his byname. His works appear in bibliographies of old Polish and Hungarian prints,¹ but we learn very little about him in old Polish and Hungarian biographical dictionaries from 18th and 19th centuries,² the entry in a dictionary of humanistic authors connected with Slovakia published in XX. century is also very brief.³ Modern literature is found in the following text about the life and work of the author.

Macer studied at the University of Kraków (ca. 1553–1562), an important cultural centre in 16th century central Europe which attracted many Hungarian students. In his first poem from 1556, he described himself as a bachelor of the liberal arts⁴ and in 1562 as a *futurus licentiatu magisterii*,⁵ so it is therefore likely that he was awarded a master's degree. Although he occasionally styled himself as a *philosophus et medicus* and enjoyed a close relationship with doctors and the medical world, there is no evidence to suggest that he studied medicine. The fact that Macer is listed in a group of “professors” and not in the group of Krakow's doctor Anton Schneeberger friends from medical circles in Polish *Internetowy Polski słownik biograficzny*,⁶ nor in historical lists of Polish doctors⁷ could serve as an evidence of it.

Macer taught in Kraków after completing his studies, and a record of his teaching activities at the Faculty of Arts has been preserved.⁸ Apart from that, we don't know anything about his life after graduation. He certainly moved within the circles of renowned Kraków scholars and was acquainted with many important figures from this period of time. In addition to the afore-mentioned Schneeberger, he was an acquaintance of a Swiss doctor whose first wife was the daughter of the famous Kraków doctor Antoninus Cassoviensis, originally from Košice.⁹ Macer was also familiar with several individuals known for their inclination towards alchemy such as the nobleman and adventurer Olbracht Łaski (1536–1604) from Kežmarok and Georg Joachim Rheticus (1514–1574), a polyhistor and pupil of Copernicus.¹⁰ He was also connected through Schneeberger to the Swiss doctor's former teacher, Conrad Gessner (1516–1565). In the fifth volume of Gessner's work *Historia animalium*, edited by the German naturalist Jacob Carronus

1 Estreicher (1908: pp. 5–6); Szabó & Hellebrant (1896: p. 148).

2 Czwittinger (1711: p. 229); Juszyński (1820: p. 231).

3 Kuzmík (1976: pp. 428–429).

4 Macer (1556: p. Air).

5 Macer (1562a: p. Air).

6 Retrieved 12.03.2022 from <https://www.ipsb.nina.gov.pl/a/biografia/anton-schneeberger-1530-1581-lekarz-przyrodnik-humanista>.

7 Kościński (1883).

8 Wisłocki (1886: p. 448).

9 Kowalska (1985: pp. 63–64).

10 Prinke (2012).

(around 1600),¹¹ *poeta optimus* Macer is mentioned, who made a dissection of the snake with his own hand. The description of the dissection contained in this work comes from a letter, which Macer sent to the Zürich polyhistor.¹²

Kraków was considered one of the centres of alchemy at this time, and Macer himself is associated with alchemy through his publication of a Latin translation of Paracelsus' work *Archidoxae* for which he wrote an introduction.¹³

2. Macer's poetry

Macer's greatest literary work is his moralising poetic encomion to the glory of God *De vera gloria libellus* [On True Glory],¹⁴ the main idea of which is that true glory resides in God. In the poem, the author condemns the pursuit of wealth, pleasure, beauty and fame.¹⁵ As a typical humanistic author, he also wrote Latin occasional poetry, panegyrics to authors and congratulatory works on the conferring of academic degrees.

Macer regularly contributed poetry to works of his friend Schneeberger.¹⁶ Two of his poems, an epigram in praise of Schneeberger and a celebratory poem on his genealogy, appeared in Schneeberger's most famous book, *De bona militum valetudine conservanda* [On the Good Health of Soldiers],¹⁷ one of the earliest textbooks on military hygiene. The treatise deals with the health aspects of military life, air, diet, work, exhaustion, rest. However, the poem praising Schneeberger's ancestry appears for unknown reasons only in the printed version of the book; a surviving manuscript copy of the work in the Palace Library in Ansbach, Germany, features a paean in celebration of the military doctor instead.¹⁸ The paean is written in a different hand than the rest of the manuscript which is otherwise consistent with the text of the printed version, differing in only a few minor details. The authors of the manuscript description date the manuscript to the period "around 1564", i. e. to the year of the printed edition of the work.¹⁹ The paean to Apollo concludes Schneeberger's work with the following challenge: *Sed nunc milites paeanem Apollini, qui sanitatem eos conservare docuit, cantent. Nos his expositis quiescemus.*²⁰ As the book is a treatise on the hygiene of soldiers, a poem celebrating the doctor who is responsible for their welfare is an appropriate ending to the work. The poem opens with a description of its meter and the instruction that it should be recited to the sound

11 Gessner (1587: p. 2v).

12 Šimon (2019).

13 Paracelsus (1569); Šimon (2018a).

14 Macer (1562b).

15 Šimon (2018b).

16 Šimon (2018c); for more information on Schneeberger see Hryniewiczcki (1938), Sucharski (2011).

17 Schneeberger (1564), Polish translation Schneeberger (2008).

18 Schneeberger, Staatliche Bibliothek Ansbach. Ms. lat. 165.

19 Schmolinsky & Keller (2001: pp. 254–255).

20 Schneeberger (1564: p. 101).

of a whistle; it ends with drawings of the musical instruments which are intended to accompany the paean and the initials of its author: IGMS. The ode is written in the *tetra-colos tetra-strophos* meter, and the poem thus has four stanzas each of which features four different types of meters, an arrangement which the author himself created as is attested by the words *noviter inventa*. Regarding the variety of meters, which is typical for Pindaric odes, Macer confirms Ijsewijn's statement that "From the late sixteenth century onwards one can find Pindaric poets almost everywhere in Europe and as far away as Poland."²¹

Macer's paean has the attributes of a paean as we know them from ancient Greek literature, a celebration of Apollo, a celebration of a mortal physician, a battle song of soldiers, an apotropaic function of poems.²²

Paeon militaris

*Dubia gravis Mavors*²³ *saepius agitans perimit et adimit vitam,*
faciens bella ferox ardua, nec patitur inertia miseris
pectora vulneribus adhuc posse diutius animae
languentis ferre diem.

Miserius est multo militibus in aeris, et in aquae, et in victus
fera discrimina plerumque venire, mala nec esse ope miseris
qui medica len<i>et. Adeo res miseranda penitus est,
*Gradivi*²⁴ *castra sequi.*

*Quia medicum Phoebus iam modo Clarius*²⁵ *tribuit, ideo nunc paean*
mediis personet in militibus, celebret Apollinea bona haec,
patritius quae agit animi viribus impiger et opem
aegris fert militibus.

Agite citi fortes viribus, animo pariter ut aquila immoti,
glomeratote simul huc celeres. Superior hostibus erit en
vestra manus velut et aves accipiter superat, ita
victores vos eritis.

"A Military Song. Too often does furious and terrible Mars torment man with perils, is the cause of gruelling wars, takes lives, and gives bodies weakened by dreadful wounds no chance to prolong the life of the spent soul. / Worse still when soldiers undergo hard trials at the whims of weather, water and food; when there is no-one to ease the misery

21 Ijsewijn (1998: p. 92).

22 Rutherford (2001: pp. 14–36).

23 Mavors is poetic name for the god of war, Mars, *gravis Mavors*, cf. Verg. A. 10,755.

24 *Gradivus*, the surname of the god Mars, who pulls into battle (Lat. *gradior* walk).

25 *Phoebus Clarius*, Apollo of Klaros, the place in present-day Turkey where the sanctuary of Apollo was located, cf. Ov. *Met.* 11,413.

of these poor souls with medical care. A wretched thing it is to march off to war. / But Apollo Clarius has now endowed the soldier with the doctor; so let the song be heard among those that praise the Apollonian blessing of the noble, tireless, military doctor who, armed with the power of the mind, brings succour to those who suffer. / Brave and strong soldiers, steadfast with the spirit of an eagle, advance, stay close and fast; your ranks will overwhelm the enemy, and like a falcon tearing through the lesser birds, you too shall prevail.”

3. How did the manuscript get to Ansbach?

We are not able to sufficiently explain how the manuscript appeared to be in the library in Ansbach. The manuscript mentions a donor, probably a son of Dr. Georg Seyfried (ca. 1502–1545), personal physician of Georg the Pious (1484–1543), margrave of Brandenburg-Ansbach.²⁶ The connecting person between the author of the work Anton Schneeberger and the manuscript donor Georg Seyfried was probably Austrian mathematician, astronomer and physician Georg Rheticus. He lived in Krakow at the time the treatise was published and knew both scholars. Together with Schneeberger, he likely attended Gessner’s lectures in Zürich and was in contact with him during his stay in Krakow.²⁷ Seyfried was a calendar maker and had acquaintances with people around Rheticus. Although Burmeister does not know the direct relationship between him and Rheticus in his work on Rheticus’ friends, he nevertheless mentions him among the persons with whom he came in contact or to whom he was related.²⁸ Macer Szepsius was probably Rheticus’ friend during his stay in Krakow as well. Although Burmeister does not mention him in his work, Macer, like Rheticus, belonged to Schneeberger’s circle of friends, and they both dealt with Paracelsus. In addition, Macer names Rheticus in an alchemical work *Lilium de spinis evulsum*, for the publication of which Macer was responsible. The work was attributed to Guillelm Tecenensis, a Dominican monk from Provence who lived in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, but the work is of earlier date, and therefore wrongly attributed to him.²⁹ The treatise was published twice in the fourth volume of the well-known collection of alchemical writings *Theatrum chemicum* in 1613 and 1659.³⁰ Macer apparently transcribed this file from one of the most preserved manuscripts in Europe.³¹ There is a colophon at the end of the work:

26 Matthäus (2017: pp. 26–35).

27 Burmeister (2015: pp. 531–532).

28 Burmeister (2015: pp. 554–556).

29 Quetif (1721: p. 754).

30 Tecenensis (1613; 1659).

31 Thorndike (1958: p. 154).

*Explicit Lilium de spinis evulsum. 13. die Februarii. Anno Domini 1557. Transcribente Gregorio Macro Szepsio Pannone, virtium ingenuorum Bacchalaureo, Cracoviae in gratiam Eximii D. Georgii Ioachimi Rhetici, Facultatis medicae et mathematicae Doctoris.*³²

4. Image of physician

Since it is a celebratory poem, the high regard for the doctor is expressed there and this stance contradicts the criticism of the status of the medical profession found in Macer's other works. In his mentioned poetical work *De vera gloria*, the author states that doctors who refuse to help the sick were not begot by nature but rather by *indocta iactantia malo fastu mentis*.³³ Even the poem in praise of Schneeberger's ancestry which appears in the printed text in place of the paean criticises a doctor who is *perfidus, non candidus aegro* and who cannot *tacere arcana*. In contrast, the doctor in the paean is *patritius* and *impiger animi viribus*. This positive evaluation is likely due to the fact that the doctor being praised is the author of the treatise on military hygiene, Macer's friend Anton Schneeberger. He is a good doctor, Macer claims in his poem on Schneeberger's genealogy, because he has *techné* and *tyché*, both of which appear on his coat of arms, qualities which no great doctor should be without.

5. Conclusion

From a literary perspective, the work does not surpass the standard level of occasional poetry from this period. While it can be safely assumed that Macer himself could play a role in the preparation of the manuscript version of the book, we are unable to explain why a different poem by Macer appeared in the printed form of the text. This minor discrepancy between the planned paean and the celebration of Schneeberger's ancestry in the printed version has previously gone unnoticed, and the paean is found neither in the Polish nor in the Hungarian bibliography of old prints.³⁴

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³² Tecenensis (1613: p. 1027; 1659: pp. 911–912).

³³ Macer (1562b: s.p.); Šimon & Magyar (2016).

³⁴ Estreicher (1908: pp. 5–6); Szabó & Hellebrant (1896: p. 148).

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