

Cetera-Włodarczyk, Anna; Pożar, Przemysław

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Polish Translations of Restoration Comedy in Early Communist Period: The Cross-Section of Ideology and Academy

Anna Cetera-Włodarczyk and Przemysław Pożar

Abstract

The article sets out to explore the ideological complexity of the Polish reception of English Restoration Drama in the early Communist period, i.e. in the 1950s and beyond. With the relatively early influx of Shakespeare's repertoire popularized by strolling companies as early as the 16th century, the subsequent decades saw a steady decline of this cultural trend, leaving English Restoration drama entirely outside Polish theatrical experience for three centuries. However, the postwar period saw a surprising development of academic interest in Restoration comedy and even more so in the social processes which these plays were said to expose.

Steeped in heavy Marxist jargon, the studies of English Restoration comedies foregrounded the analysis of the newly emergent capitalist relations, the hypocrisy and moral decay of the ruling elites, and the relevance of the new approach to the historical reading of literature. While the enterprise failed on theatrical grounds, the emergent translations can be said to exemplify an interesting case of ideological patronage which brought to light works entirely dismissed by previous ages and allowed them to sustain the initial propagandistic pressure.

Keywords

Restoration drama, Marxist criticism, Communist ideology, drama translation, Grzegorz Sinko

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“Poetrias ineditas | scribam tibi, si meditas,” cites famously André Lefevere while introducing the concept of patronage as a control factor shaping the practices of literary rewriting (LEFEVERE 1992: 11). Typically for this author, his argument twists and turns to sketch as wide as possible cultural perspective, including the example of “the reconstitution of the canons of various national literatures after the socialist revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union” (LEFEVERE 1992: 19). The ideologically motivated approach to the canon tends to differ depending on a temporal gap. The names in the new canons are aggressively negotiated: the living authors eulogized or erased.

Yet the further back one goes in time, the more the lists overlap. The works of literature canonized will be the same, but the rewritings by means of which they are presented to the audience differ, sometimes radically. It is quite common for the classics to be presented as suited to different ideologies and poetics as they succeed each other, indeed to be pressed into the service thereof. *Works of literature written long enough ago can therefore “boast” a whole concatenation of contradictory rewritings.* (LEFEVERE 1992: 19–20; *emphasis added*)

A quarter of a century later, Edwin Gentzler rehearses the strength of Lefevere’s arguments, and confirms the relevance of the categories invented to measure “shifts in rewriting” (GENTZLER 2017: 121):

all three categories – patronage, poetics and ideology – are intertwined so that the translator never produces “true” translation, but rather “images” of the original that were often more powerful than the originals themselves. (GENTZLER 2017: 122)

The Polish reception of English Restoration comedy in many ways reflects the shaping pressure of ideology which invites and appropriates foreign literature to confirm the legitimacy and truth of current domestic values. However, in this case the extent of cultural manipulation goes much beyond reaffirming past canons. In fact, the Restoration comedy could not be reaffirmed since it had never been introduced to the Polish culture before. These works were rather reclaimed from the English canon to serve the cause of Marxist criticism by showcasing the decline of past elites, and therefore justifying the inevitable reform of the society. Whether willingly or not, the Restoration playwrights became chroniclers of the rise of the bourgeoisie, duly reporting on the discontents with the forefathers of capitalism. What makes the case of the Polish reception of Restoration drama particularly interesting is the strongly academic profile of the enterprise, entirely independent of theater practice and with little bearing on the repertoires to come. The rewriting of Restoration comedy in the Stalinist period was effected almost exclusively in the realm of critical discourse whereas the translations in principle did not transgress on the semantic content of original texts. On the contrary, notwithstanding the conspicuously propagandistic rhetoric of the proposed interpretative insights, the translations aimed at philological accuracy and were tinted with archaization to foreground the seventeenth-century provenance of source texts. In this sense the project was a form of restoration itself: an effort to regressively revive the

missing import of seventeenth-century English drama. Over time the resulting translations came to occupy a bizarre position in the Polish literary landscape. Stripped of the ideological costume, they have become a fossil of sorts, and an eccentric metatranslational exercise of a self-aware (and eventually reformed) rewriter.

The English Restoration comedy began to flourish at the time when Polish cultural traffic with the Isles rapidly decreased. The impressive Baltic commercial networks established in the previous centuries disintegrated, weakened and devastated by wars and religious conflicts which put an end to the Hanseatic League. The once thriving merchant communities of the Pomeranian region became insecure and impoverished, and altogether less hospitable and receptive to strolling players who used to be the vehicle of the dissemination of English drama, first in the Elizabethan and then in the Jacobean period. The few surviving traces of interest in the Restoration comedy come from the 18th century and only confirm the overall absence of these plays in Polish lands.¹

It was no sooner than the early 20th century that English Restoration drama started being mentioned in survey courses aimed at students of the newly established English faculties, however during this time there was no extensive analysis or translations. The change came in the early 1950s when Grzegorz Sinko, then an aspiring young scholar, offered a fully fledged introduction to Restoration drama followed by his translations of three comedies. The swift career of Sinko in the 1950s (MA in 1948, PhD in 1950, and habilitation in 1955) testified to high appreciation of his research, including its ideological plausibility. However, the death of Stalin, and the ensuing thaw, relaxed the Communist Party's grip over academic life and allowed more air into research. Contrary to his earlier publications, Sinko's *The Restoration Comedy* (1962) was a well-balanced historical manual of the period, largely pruned of Marxist jargon. It comprised of Sinko's translations of Congreve (*The Way of the World*), Etherege (*She Would if She Could*) and Wycherley (*The Country Wife*), and a brief explanation of the adopted translation strategy. The academic efforts of Sinko had little effect on the stage: out of the three translations only one (*The Country Wife*) was staged in Warsaw in 1966.² In the subsequent decades, Sinko's academic career steadily progressed, whereas his scholarly interests veered towards semiotics of drama and performance, clearly privileging stage codes over ideologies.³

1 In 1774, Prince Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski, a well-travelled statesman and writer, mentioned good "character designs" in English comedy. In 1777, a German translation of William Congreve's *The Mourning Bride* (*Die Brant Trauer*) was printed in Gdańsk and in the 1780s, one German company performed William Congreve's *Love for Love* in Rydzyna aristocratic residence and, presumably, William Wycherley's *Country Wife* in Warsaw (SINKO: 1953). Subsequent researchers have failed to extend this conspicuously short list.

2 The production was directed by Jan Skotnicki and staged in Teatr Klasyczny. Interestingly, in 1957, Teatr Polski in Warsaw staged George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (*Oficer werbunkowy*) directed by Janusz Warnecki and translated by Barbara Witek-Swinarska, both names hinting at the high-profile of the production. There have been no other productions of English Restoration comedy in Poland afterwards.

3 Politics continued to exercise pressure on Sinko's professional life and forced him, in 1971, to leave the University of Warsaw (where he was the Head of the English Institute) and join the Polish Academy of Sciences and then the Warsaw Theatre Academy.

And yet Grzegorz Sinko's early publications constitute a list of original academic interests and a concern for the under-represented periods of English literature. Before arriving at and subsequently translating Restoration dramatists, Sinko's scholarly attention was directed at Samuel Foote and eighteenth-century literature at large witnessing the birth of the novel. Prone to disbelief in the intrinsic value of literature, Sinko was eager to explore the social circumstances that accompanied the production of the written works. Consequently, this mode of analysis gave rise to his analytical idiosyncrasy. Sinko redeemed the legacy of the pre-war scholars (himself the son of a renowned classicist) and bridged the gap between a figure of a conscientious intellectual and an adherent of obligatory Marxist theory. *Samuel Foote, the Satirist of Rising Capitalism* (1950) marks the point of entry into a larger research project encompassing the late early modern period and two ensuing centuries. The title of that book, moreover, reveals Sinko's method of enquiry, which not only met the expectations of the regime authorities, but also corresponded to the scholar's field of unforced expertise.

The investigation of eighteenth-century literature brought Sinko closer to the Restoration period which he soon plunged into while still employing the sonorous voice of the revisionary student of the past. The dissertation was closely followed by an introductory volume *Drama and the Stage of the Restoration Period and of the 18th century* (1953) which spanned across his present interests and anticipated not so much a shift as an unrelenting occupation with the literature of English Enlightenment and its harbingers. The knowledge Sinko derived from putting together these two publications furnished him with the capability essential for the task the scholar concentrated on a decade later, namely the translation of three Restoration comedies by Etherege, Wycherley and Congreve compiled in *The Restoration Comedy* (1962) volume.

It is crucial to acknowledge that during the first decades of the postwar Polish People's Republic an intense discussion ensued among the people of letters about the (propagandist) responsibilities of literature towards the state. The significance of this debate echoed within the walls of universities too as the new ideologically stained curriculum emerged and found its fresh reservoir in up-to-date publications. The flaws of schematism so prevalent in the early stages of socialist realism were to be eliminated primarily from contemporary Polish literature and arts, but importantly the academia was affected by the same strife (FIJAŁOWSKA 1985: 77–78). The old historiography proved one of the fertile grounds to deliberate about different concepts of realism. Its heterogeneity provided an excess of opportunities to rewrite the chronicles, find the core of capitalist forces, trace its arteries and ultimately interrupt the hazardous influx. Many a scholar took the effort to capture the moments of turmoil in the cultural legacy of Western civilisation in order to showcase the scenarios that necessitated the revolution (FIK 1991: 188).

The way we look at Sinko's examination of the English Restoration is without question affected by the political picture of the period. Surely, the purpose of the 1953 volume was to introduce students and future scholars to the topic, while underscoring the Marxist interpretation of recurrent class struggles. At the very beginning the striving towards a Marxist history of theatre had to feed on provisional surveys as the process

of producing the desired type of scholars and scholarship was only about to begin. Sinko's effort marked one of the many new beginnings for English studies in Poland, a beginning related to the politics of the Communist regime. In order to debunk the capitalist narrative, the scholars of every age and provenance were to unite under the banner of the Six-Year Plan and discard the old bourgeoisie methodologies while at the same time drawing upon the accomplishments of Soviet scholarship (FIK 1991: 183, 187). The editors' preface to Sinko's 1953 volume on Restoration drama left the reader with little room for doubt:

At the current stage of development of Polish theatre studies we still cannot afford to compile a fully satisfactory Marxist textbook on the history of the theatre that would cover everything of importance. The following work is but a survey of sources put together by a collective body of scholars who took into account the results of the considerably more advanced Soviet theatre studies. (SINKO 1953: 3)⁴

This formula was embedded into at least fourteen carefully composed handbooks written at the time of roaring Stalinism with topics ranging from the theatre of ancient Greece and Rome to the history of modern French, German and Italian drama. What we might gather from this dutiful statement, however, beside the tentativeness of the effort and its imposed necessity, is its *pro forma* character. Sinko did not acknowledge any debts incurred to Soviet scholarship in his work.

Sinko certainly did not seem a scholar whose method was purposefully fashioned to such an indoctrinatory endeavour. Rather, the fashion of the regime provided a tremendous incentive for Sinko's leftist temper, inherited possibly from his working-class predecessors. His surveys of different periods in the history of English literature were skilfully composed images of the society and its inner struggles, and his study of English Restoration was no exception in that regard. The ambition to portray the latter part of seventeenth-century English theatre accordingly was then somewhat caught in between that commitment and the compulsory homage to Stalinist ideology. But although impartiality may seem today like a lost cause when considering the scholarship of the Polish People's Republic, it would be a stretch to deny some intellectuals their ardent belief in the Marxist school of thought along with its perks when applied to various domains of literary studies. The ethos of an academic sensitive to the day-to-day strife of the common man might have been part and parcel of Sinko's identity during these first post-war decades. Taking that into consideration, his propagandist jargon is somewhat debilitated and instead we witness the rebuke of a scholar who, with genuine interest, juxtaposes English Restoration period with materialist dialectics and is more than eager to speculate on the outcome:

The ideological struggle [between the King and the gentry] stemmed from the religious quarrels of the Reformation. What really mattered, however, was the principle of capitalist

4 All the translations are ours unless indicated otherwise.

private property with which one took stand against the monopolies privileged by the crown and subjugated by the clique of the court – which in their turn hindered and held off the development of capitalism. The goal for the leaders of the revolution was to win over the plebeian radicalism, contain it in due course and finally form an alliance with the king on favourable terms. (SINKO 1953: 4)⁵

The call to radicalise and give no quarter to the royalist cause resonates in Sinko's portrayal of the intricacies of the conflict between King Charles I and the English gentry. Bearing in mind that the concept of politically engaged university was still at its initial stage in the Polish People's Republic, Sinko may have wished to "doubly redouble" with his tirade the partisan discourse and as a result set new standards for future studies. But perhaps between these lines we find as well the reason Sinko delved into the period so eagerly. The brisk examination of seventeenth-century England encouraged the scholar to confront Marxism with English literature, thus ushering in a new analytical paradigm:

This ideological programme was an invaluable weapon of the bourgeoisie in its struggle to achieve power as a social class and, in accordance with this power, respect in society. Temperance, thrift and piety which made the ledger equally important as the Bible, and stern conjugal loyalty which shielded one from opprobrium as well as from any excessive spending – all these cherished virtues were to serve as much the attainment of heaven as the proper lining of one's pockets on earth. This was an apt worldview for the fathers of capitalism. (SINKO 1953: 42)

Sinko's Marxist approach gave him an opportunity to undermine the authority of English historiography, an outcome the Soviet regime certainly aimed at. However, this image of the Restoration period infused Sinko's work with a tint of unorthodoxy soon to be of great value to the field of literary studies. By establishing a materialist framework of analysis, Sinko may perhaps be seen as an involuntary harbinger of New Historicism with its insistence on the reconstruction of power relations. Exploring English theatre, and the Restoration in particular, Sinko delineated the intellectual history of the period by thinking of the theatre in close connection with societal dynamics⁶. This

5 See also Sinko's introduction to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (SHAKESPEARE 1953: 5–31), in which the Marxist methodology has also been employed. Kuźnicka (2012) claims: "Writing during the Stalinist period Sinko takes into thorough consideration the economic, social and political conditions of Shakespeare's life and from the 'contradictions of emerging capitalism' the scholar derives one of the causes why the Danish prince loathes the world. In Sinko's line of reasoning there is rather the expertise of a historicist and English philologist than of a persuasive propagandist. It seems that in the end he approved of the Marxist view of the base and the superstructure" (KUŹNICKA 2012: 214).

6 Several decades later Sinko's approach inspired Przemysław Mroczkowski (1999[1986]), who cautiously praised Sinko's method (i.e. Marxist dialectics) in the introduction to the section on Restoration Comedy in *History of English Literature*: "The sociological explanation of the literary phenomena is generally valid only with regard to its external aspects, perchance its themes too, and fails otherwise, but in this particular case it reveals a great many things – not only the plot, but the preferred way of looking at it, the order of moral codes are a reflection of a particular social group in a particular time. The acknowledgement of

interdependence becomes especially vivid in the following quotation where the theatre is conceived by Sinko as the space where the alliance of ruling classes is maintained:

The forthcoming times turned out not to be a period of struggle between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, but a period of their alliance. Having shed his black puritan garments, the bourgeoisie upstart would go to the theatre in a frog-fastened motley doublet prepared to sneer snobbishly and in harmony with the laughter of the “well-born”, hence denying the tradition of his shopkeeping ancestors. (SINKO 1953: 43)

What will be crucial for New Historicism is the potentiality of past literature to speak for contemporary issues and facilitate an all-embracing tangible reflection. Such is also the nature of Sinko’s depiction of the social background of the Restoration theatre. His studies were meant to expose the criticism of the newly emergent capitalist relations, the hypocrisy and moral decay of the ruling elites, and remained in tune with the overall ideological course of the country.

The briefly discussed fragments of Sinko’s introductory surveys may offer a significant context for the reception of his subsequent translations of Congreve, Wycherley and Etherege. Although the translations were separated by almost a decade from the surveys, the earliest reception of English Restoration drama in Poland as such cannot be studied without at least minor consideration for these ideologically dubious writings. Under the fabric of the translations of the great three Restoration dramatists there pulsates the determination of a young scholar in a complex relationship with the Communist patronage and its commanding presence.

Significantly, Sinko’s translations of Restoration comedies grew out of his critical efforts and survived in a niche they were originally aimed to fill. With little interest on the part of the theatre, these translations were never staged, but they were also never superseded by retranslations as nobody ever commissioned a new Polish rendering of these plays. Viewed as a reading material, Sinko’s translations belong to several epochs at the same time. Produced in the 1950s or early 1960s, the texts feature modern spelling and (to a lesser degree) syntax, but their register and style was supposed to emulate the language of the epoch when these renditions – claimed Sinko – should have appeared first, i.e. in the late 18th century. The strategy of foregrounding the historical distance was meant to mollify the vulgarity and obscenity of language and acts, whereas exposing culture-specific references (honorific titles and offices) to do justice to historical circumstances, be that in England or in Poland in the parallel time. The latter curious critical tactics served to construct a treasure trove of historical idiom necessarily appended with erudite footnotes on obsolete register and manners. Today these witty commentaries produce a somewhat postmodern effect of a double-level

the dramatists’ social background helps showcasing this relationship: well-nigh all the acclaimed authors represented the gentry and aristocracy” (MROCZKOWSKI 1999[1986]: 233). Earlier, in 1982, Sinko’s studies of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century drama are emphatically praised and recommended to Polish readership by Henryk Zbierski in his *English Literature* published in the prestigious state-funded series of the histories of the world’s literatures (ZBIERSKI 1982: 647).

discourse, with the mischievous translator-commentator competing for the readers' attention. The translation strategy pursued by Sinko clearly transgresses the limits of the so-called philological translation: Sinko experiments with language, blends registers and styles, and freely juggles cultural references, fearing no actor complaining about the obscurity of the text.

The case of the Polish reception of Restoration comedy initiated in the Stalinist period exemplifies the paradoxes of those grim times. The inquiries into eighteenth-century literature (perceived as critical of social relations, rational, and occasionally anti-religious) appeared a relatively safe ground, easily adopted for indoctrinating discourse. These interests became also a natural agenda for scholars with prewar leftist sympathies or sincere communists. Similar principles ruled the choice of foreign authors explored by the Polish Academy of the time. Hence the postwar reception of English Restoration comedy exemplifies an interesting case of ideological patronage which revives and showcases works ignored by critics and audiences of previous ages. The overall strategy of appropriating these works called for moulding them to adhere to contemporary ideological agenda. With time, however, Sinko shook off the Marxist straightjacket and freely indulged with the wit and ironies, and misogyny of translated texts. The elaborate picture of the immorality of the English (early capitalist) society evolved into a more universal diagnosis of human nature, independent of time and politics. Paradoxically enough, the resulting broad representation of English Restoration drama was possible due to the financial security of the enterprise, independent of theatrical commissions or readership. Appended with extensive paratexts, Sinko's translations of 1962 appear to be a fairly comprehensive companion to Restoration comedy, and yet another example of literature outwitting Communism.

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Anna Cetera-Włodarczyk

Institute of English Studies,
 University of Warsaw,
 ul. Hoża 69, 00-681 Warsaw, Poland
 a.cetera@uw.edu.pl
 ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5711-4867>

Przemysław Pożar

Doctoral School of Humanities,
 University of Warsaw,
 Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28, 00-927, Warsaw, Poland
 p.pozar@student.uw.edu.pl

Anna Cetera-Włodarczyk is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Warsaw. Her publications include several monographs centered on Shakespeare in theatrical context (*Enter Lear. The Translator's Part in Performance*, 2008) or within Polish cultural history (*Smak morwy*, 2009, *Polskie przekłady Shakespeare'a w XIX wieku*, 2019) and a number of essays on drama criticism and literary translation appearing in journals and thematic volumes (CUP, Palgrave, Routledge, UDP). In 2016 she began a state-funded project aimed at establishing the e-repository of the Polish 19th century Shakespeare translations, extended in 2018 to include the 20th and 21st century (available online at <http://polskiszekspir.uw.edu.pl>).

Przemysław Pożar is a PhD student in Literary Studies at the Doctoral School of Humanities at the University of Warsaw. His doctoral thesis focuses on the translations and translators of Shakespeare canon in the Polish People's Republic. Since 2018 he has been working as a co-investigator in the state-funded project *The e-Repository of the 20th and 21st Century Polish Translations of Shakespeare: Resources, Strategies and Reception* supervised by Anna Cetera-Włodarczyk.



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