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THE DISMISSAL OF THE GREEK ENVOYS
—A FORGOTTEN TRAJECTORY
WITHIN THE WEB OF EUROPEAN
RENAISSANCE



In Saint-Pierre le Jeune church in Strasbourg there is a late medieval fresco showing a procession of European nations heading toward a mountain with a cross on which “Ave spec unica” is inscribed. The fresco presents figures on horseback or on foot with Poland followed by Lithuania and the Orient, coming at the very end of the cavalcade (Jaromska 2000, 316). Obviously, Poland and Lithuania, both of them christened, the former in 966 and the latter in 1385, must have been considered as part of the great medieval family of the Christian countries of Europe.

Likewise, studying Polish Renaissance, in its originality and recognizability, conviviality and seriousness, one seems to find himself/herself within the best of European tradition, balanced so well that disregarding some linguistic ambushes (not unduly significant as a huge bulk of Polish Renaissance literature still used Latin) there seems to be little to no difficulty in further studies. The same holds true for Jan Kochanowski (1530-1584), the most brilliant creative talent, to hastily add—one of quite a number of great poets of his time in Poland. Generations of Polish Renaissance scholars considered Kochanowski an indispensable topic in their studies. Thus, taking into account the scholarship past and present, it comes as a considerable shock to observe both the poet and Polish Renaissance literature virtually non-existent within

a wider European context¹ (the complaint recently voiced by Koehler 2007, XXXVIII). Though the list of notable exceptions may lessen the unease felt, it is probably the Barańczak-Heaney duo translating Kochanowski's *Laments* that recently rekindled some passing interest. And yet, one cannot help but wonder who reads poetry nowadays, who needs it, who would pick it up from among various entertainments modern world blatantly offers in abundance?

Professor Bill Johnston, who translated Kochanowski's only tragedy *The Dismissal of Greek Envoys*, was the first recipient of the award for translators from Polish.² Yet, the above translation has been overlooked in the Internet accounts of his achievements. In 2008 when he became the first recipient of the aforementioned award it was in appreciation of his translation of Stanisław Różewicz's poetry. With no intention of diminishing the achievement of translating Różewicz, an outstanding contemporary poet, it is symptomatic how the present seems to effectively oust the past from the collective memory of otherwise worthy institutions and endeavours.

Kochanowski seems to meet almost all Renaissance standards, set in his contemporary world and recognized today. Educated in the best universities of Cracow and Königsberg, in Padua and Paris, where he spent four years, he also traveled through France and Italy. His activities at home seem to fit the pattern of many a European Renaissance poet. He was a poet and a courtier, later a country gentleman who withdrew from the public scene to the private, to his country house and family life, both beautifully and excruciatingly rendered in several works.

The present paper mainly deals with his only dramatic piece, which may serve as a testing ground to indicate where Kochanowski's poetic/intellectual/patriotic loyalties were placed and how/whether they converged with the Renaissance Zeitgeist. Besides, several issues of utmost importance to the main objectives of this volume will, hopefully, be annotated, for it appears a lot of further studies should be conducted to give justice to the phenomena of the by-passed (inter)national phenomena that may make the map of Renaissance Europe satisfactorily complete.

In pursuit of organizing data and compartmentalizing facts, Kochanowski's *oeuvre* has been customarily divided into Latin and Polish periods, due to the languages and conventions the poet employed. Yet, in his case, such division

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¹ The complaint has recently been voiced by Koehler (2007, XXXVIII).

² "Found in translation" (Awards cf. Johnson 2008).

would be most deceptive, as, on examination, he remained bilingual and multi-conventional almost throughout his life. Moreover, what Joannes Cochanius wrote stood in sharp contrast with what Jan Kochanowski did. And it did not concern marginal or insignificant finger pieces. Kochanowski's Latin poetry was more heavily convention-bound as for its form, overtly ironic and sceptical, at moments unbelievably salient, bordering on the unacceptable. Taking a stand on social, moral, and political matters, the poet must have been aware of the duality of his vision and most probably enjoying the split, and deliberately employing it.³ His points of reference could be identified as humanism, and classical requirements for discipline, clarity and balance (Karpiński 2007, 100).

To merely indicate how the poet's literary horizons were expanding during his years of traveling and studying, an imposing list of the people he met, however incomplete it may/must of necessity be can be made. Charles Utenhove of Gaunt helped him meet Ronsard whose Pleiades advocated, among others, writing in the vernacular. He also met Hungarian writers, among whom Peter Bornemisza is considered as a potential link with Kochanowski's dramatic work (Karpiński 2007, 103-106) due to the Hungarian having authored a play distantly comparable to his own. He also came across several influential figures of Polish Renaissance, with Jan Łaski (or Jan á Lasco). Łaski and Utenhove traveled together in Europe and Utenhove visited Poland. The trajectory Erasmus—Utenhove—Łaski testifies to pan-European links. Erasmus corresponded with the Polish king, Sigismund I the Old. He accepted gifts and money from his Polish "fans", dedicated his books to them, was translated and adapted, his ideas permeated Polish Renaissance thought (Łempicki 1952). Kochanowski also met other Polish figures, such as Łukasz Górnicki, his lifelong friend, who adapted Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* as *Dworzanin Polski* ["Polish Courtier"] (1566) thus setting standards for an ideal Polish courtier (Libera 1989, 88).

Kochanowski's earlier stay in Königsberg must have brought him in touch with the reformation, as the place was its stronghold (Popławska 2009, 28). Kochanowski also sought contacts/protection with the Prussian Prince Albert and his court, which makes him a likely supporter or at least a sympathizer with the reformation movement. His brothers also went to study in Königsberg (Libera 1989). If the dates of his stay there be correct, Kochanowski must have missed the translation of Erasmus's work published there in 1558. Not that there were any language barrier to have made Erasmus unreadable.

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³ For a detailed discussion see Weintraub (1978).

His formidable learnedness was soon employed in his translation of *Psalms* (as *David's Psalms*) for which he studied several works including Septuaginta, and such writers as Buchanan and Campensis. Rej, another Polish poet and his close predecessor and gave his works a distinct classic shape looking back to Horace (Karpiński 2007, 113-116). Horatian inspirations could be seen in his later collection of *Songs* (Karpiński 2007, 105, 117-122). His poetry also testifies to the Horatian “docere et delectare” [“teach and delight”] maxim (Libera 1989, 96). In Padua, Kochanowski studied Greek, Latin and Italian literatures, read Homer in the original and later set out to translate the *Iliad* (Libera 1989, 91).

Back in Poland, Kochanowski joined the court of the Cracow bishop Piotr Myszkowski, later hetman Jan Tarnowski, and, for a time, was secretary to King Sigismund II Augustus. It was the same king whom Jan Łaski was in vain trying to convert to Protestantism. Jan Zamojski, who the play was dedicated to, was a convert himself but from Calvinism to Catholicism (in Padua!) and married a protestant, Krystyna Radziwiłł. Kochanowski offered the magnate *The Dismissal of the Greek Envoys* that was performed as a typical occasional play—to celebrate Zamojski’s wedding ceremony (it is revealed in Kochanowski’s letter to Jan Zamojski; cf. *Dismissal* 2007, 1-5).

The poet actively participated in political events of the time. His poetry enthusiastically greeted and then disapproved of Henri de Valois who, elected Polish king in 1573, stayed in Warsaw for nine months only to make a clandestine escape to France when the opportunity to become Henri III of France presented itself.

Since it was the first election to the Polish throne, a real life lesson in democracy and an expected political solution after the death of the last Jagiellonian king who died heirless, Kochanowski’s interest should not be surprising. Weintraub maintains that Kochanowski’s interest in the matter was exceptional, “no political event in Poland caused such frequent references as the said election” (Weintraub 1978, 158). Kochanowski further engaged in the matter of the ridiculous monarch when the king’s courtier Philippe Desportes wrote a slanderous account attacking Poles and Poland. Kochanowski’s answered with an ironic poem entitled “Gallo crocitanti” showing Henri as a vain cock, who was trying to impress the Poles with his crowing but evoked such “storm of laughter” that frightened he flew out of the window. Likewise Henri de Valois, who detested the regulations on religious tolerance, but who was obliged to sign a document guarding religious freedoms for all denominations. Poles, in

turn, detested, among others, his lack of hygiene for which the French court was renowned (Weintraub 1978, 158-161). The poet's engagement in political matters continued throughout his life, allowing for yet another regrouping of his works, by defining some of them, including *The Envoys* into the category of "civic—duty writings" (Karpinski 2007, 107).

Kochanowski's engagement in politics, in quasi-protestant activities (cf. his translation of *Psalms*) and parallel success of his early hymn "Czego chcesz od nas Panie za Twe hojne dary" ["Lord, what do you want from us for your generous gifts?"]—still sung in Catholic churches in Poland for the last five hundred years, made him a far better poet than a successful political commentator (to use a modern word for his activities). Kochanowski did not make mistakes in poetry, but he did misplace his political sympathies, incidentally very much like his patron, Jan Zamojski. The latter prided himself that he first openly backed Henri de Valois and then Stefan Batory, the next elected monarch, formerly Prince of Transylvania, during the subsequent election and he prided himself for being for and against "the Piast king" (Besala 2010, 98). "Piast" was the first Polish royal house that also ended when the last king of this dynasty, Casimir the Great, died leaving no male heir in 1370. Neither of the two elects was any "Piast king" but Zamojski obviously was a clever strategist who convincingly, if underhandedly, toyed with national sentiments.

However, the abortive election of Henri de Valois had one forgotten non-political consequence of extensive cultural significance. Henri de Valois entered his native land's and the world's culinary history as the man who invented a table fork. The truth is that tri-pronged forks were evidenced in Sigismund II Augustus' utensils, and appeared in France after Henri's return from Poland. In 1535 the abbot of Mogila, near Cracow, presented Erasmus with a knife and a fork to challenge Erasmus's treatise *De civilitate* in which forks did not figure at all but merely knives and spoons, while they were commonly used at the courts of the last Jagiellonian monarchs.⁴

Naturally, a panorama of events shaping Polish Renaissance intellectually and politically was much more extensive. Having escaped religious wars and insisting on religious tolerance, which the king had to guarantee, the country did not escape political upheavals, but still enjoyed several democratic prerogatives. Affluence brought about civilizational progress in various areas of human activity. Kochanowski and his contemporary statesmen and poets were well

⁴ They might have come to Poland from the East as they can be found with medieval excavations (Selwa 2002).

acquainted with material and spiritual foundations of European Renaissance and made them both their own and universal.

Likewise, Polish drama and theatre from its medieval beginnings revealed striking similarities concerning the stages of its development, but they also presented unmistakable local colouring and considerable shifts in time and conditions. Yet, Renaissance saw several dramatic works employing earlier dialogic conventions such as Rej's morality play *Kupiec* ["The Merchant"] inspired by Thomas Mercator or *Żywot Józefa z pokolenia żydowskiego, syna Jakubowego* ["The Life of Joseph, Jacob's Son from the Jewish Race"] partly based on Cornelius Crocus's play (Karpiński 2007, 55-57). Incidentally, religious affiliations seemed independent of humanist heritage, contemporary inspirations and the significance in Polish literary history. As a matter of interest, Mikołaj Rej (1505-1569), rightly considered instrumental in advocating using Polish instead of Latin, was a Calvinist himself (Karpiński) while Crocus was a Jesuit. Religious denominations seemed to have mattered, but little in Renaissance Poland.

Theatre historians find it difficult to date, recover and verify fragmented evidence (Okoń 1971, Raszewski 1990), yet in spite of the remaining gaps it is certain that Poland did have its own drama from probably thirteenth century and morality play stayed popular well into Renaissance and longer (Okoń 1971). Besides, the very fact of performing Kochanowski's tragedy at the wedding ceremony, as already mentioned, testifies to a common practice known all over Renaissance Europe.

Before embarking on the play itself two issues should be addressed: the option the translator chose to follow and the persistent dispute on whether the play was political or not—whatever the term "political" may signify. Bill Johnston, associate professor in Second Language Studies and Comparative Literature Department at Indiana University and Director of Indiana University's Polish Center, supplied a note describing his translating strategies. Eloquently arguing for the use of contemporary English because the language of Kochanowski's play was not archaic to his contemporaries, but insisting that he never slips into colloquial language, he also describes insurmountable difficulties he encountered due to several dissimilarities in rendering Polish verse metre (11 and 13 syllable lines) into English iambic pentameter, as other options were impossible in English. Other changes introduced were minor and served to avoid confusion such as the substitution of Paris for Alexander (in Polish). The translator also added some stage directions which, in his own words "are placed

in contemporary editions of the play” (Johnston 2007, XLII). In reality those added directions were limited to mere “Enter Paris” or “Exit Chorus” which makes them unobtrusive.

However, the modernized version with its shortened title *The Envoys* on the claim that the full title would be confusing, is indicative of the approach favoured by such outstanding American scholars of the past as John Gassner; he modernized English medieval and Tudor drama (1968). Whatever the reasons given, modernizing the original text adheres to postmodern (slightly) unscrupulous treatment of literary heritage, offering not quite “the real thing” but its modern(ized) copy. Yet, the translation reads very well and one can only admire the translator’s skill and ingenuity.

The other issue relates to traditional labelling the play as a political drama. Koehler regards such traditional labelling on three counts, assumed polonizing strategies, occasional character of the play, and historical context of the first performance (Koehler 2007, XVIII). Questioning all three makes it necessary to find alternative meanings. Thus, he insists, the play was written a few years before the event in the late fifties or sixties, while it was performed in 1578). The subject needed no polonizing touches, though they are there according to another critic, (cf. Popławska 2009, 34) as its context was topical enough in view of political realities in a republican system of governing. Koehler’s reservations seem to overlook the play’s possible wider references. The attempt at de-politicizing the play seems futile considering all arguments to the contrary that look like the famous structuralist rabbit/duck drawing where the same thing is either/or when looked at from two opposite perspectives.

Besides, it has been a common practice that the context is of secondary importance to artistic aims. The purpose, then, to briefly summarize Koehler, was the poet’s dialogue with the world of values, ancient and contemporaneous, two-dimensional perspective of political (that is, to turn national for the *polis*) and individual tragedy, decisions making, virtues and weaknesses that condition them, and, last but not least, emphasizing the political and the rational at the expense of the metaphysical. The play also conducted a dialogue with the roles ascribed to the characters within the tradition handed down from the antiquity. It also negotiated common values that could not be relativized (Koehler 2007, XIX-XLIII). Both Koehler and Karpiński stress artistic mastery, originality and inventiveness of the play. In addition they draw attention to its a linguistic/poetic experiment: the choice of the particular event from which the tragedy originates was far from common.

Within the bounds of Aristotelian definition of the tragedy's scope, the play depicted the arrival of the Greek envoys who demanded that Helen be returned, continued to show how the request/demand was rejected, exposing machinations and arguments of those involved, touched upon the weakness of the ruler and dishonesty of his advisors (criticism of democracy), to end with the envoys leaving and the war reportedly beginning. That episode, rather obscure, has never been favourite with generations of creative writers. To make an *avant la lettre* comment, Kochanowski as if adheres to the Medieval, Renaissance and ... post-modern practice according to which the originality of the topic is inessential, but its presentation is. As a corollary to this, a seemingly "postmodern" strategy lies in the very choice of a comparatively insignificant event and makes it central. After all, history of Troy has been one of the best known literary motifs in European literature (Benson 1980), and audiences knew both the main story and its episodic developments better than we do nowadays. In consequence, the quality of yet another work based on the same story must have been measured by the ingenuity of the given presentation and not the uniqueness of the topic.

The choice of the Greek tragedy necessitated the following to be observed: three unities, one-plot action, five epeisodia (if we count carefully) with a prologue and an epilogue linked or divided (as you will) with the chorus parts (stasima). Epeisodia develop the action, with the *Vorgeschichte* sketched in the prologue and the final disaster in the epilogue (*Nachgeschichte*). For obvious reasons the latter concentrates on the premonition of destruction to adhere to the time limits of the tragedy. Kochanowski could also have followed the Senecan pattern of tragedy (Rusnak, 2008).

To divagate upon the employment of the Greek model would be stating the obvious considering Kochanowski's education and poetic affiliations, even more so if the tragedy were composed soon after his extended studies and travels abroad. The lure of the Antiquity was strong all over Europe. As his biography and other works revealed, Kochanowski was also engaged in the politics of his time, as a secretary to various officials, including the king. As sketched above, Polish turbulent history could have fitted beautifully into the context of the play already composed. Besides, it seems impossible for him not to be acquainted with *The Prince* (written 1513, publ. posthumously 1532), or *The Praise of Folly* (1509). Incidentally, in his essay on governmentality Foucault extensively discusses the ideas contained in *The Prince* and their far reaching consequences, its critics coming from both Catholic and protestant critics as such (Foucault, 1991, 88-89).

According to Foucault, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the idea of government began to emerge. He describes it as follows:

To put it schematically, in the late sixteenth and seventeenth century, the art of the government finds its first form of crystallization, organized around the theme of reason of state, understood not in the negative and pejorative sense we give it today (as that which infringes on the principles of law, equity and humanity in the sole interest of the state), but in a full and positive sense: the state is governed according to the rational principles which are intrinsic to it and which cannot be derived solely from natural or divine laws or the principles of wisdom and prudence; the state, like nature, has its own proper form of rationality, albeit of a different sort. Conversely, the art of government, instead of seeking to found itself in transcendental rules, a cosmological model or a philosophico-moral ideal, must find the principles of its rationality in that which constitutes the specific reality of the state. But, we can say here that, right until the early eighteenth century, this form of “reason of state” acted as sort of obstacle to the development of the art of government. (Foucault 1991, 96-97)

Surprisingly enough, the political reality of the sixteenth century Poland responds to some elements of the above historical assessment. The government was to become more and more important with the elected monarchs who were not to establish a dynasty, chosen in the so called free election in which the gentry and aristocracy could take part with the famous “*liberum veto*” principle that could overthrow any majority in the name of sound objection or one vote against whether bought, manipulated, fair or foul. The diminishing power of the king reversed the situation entirely. It was the elected monarch who had to agree to certain principles, not so much the people. The divine rights of the king no longer operated. The nation agreed to be governed by an elected monarch as long as he conforms to certain rational terms of agreement. Unfortunately, Polish history soon showed that there were several trappings in such arrangement which finally led to the loss of independence in 1795.

In the play the reason of the state either clashes or conforms to particular views on politics, morals, rationality and recklessness. Corruption, that downside of parliamentary democracy, comes in the very first lines spoken by Antenor, a Trojan lord. Paris sends gifts and mobilizes his allies in order to secure a favourable voting to keep Helen in Troy. Trying to win over Antenor, Paris strikes another alluring tune, namely friendship. If a friend asks for a favor it must not be denied, to which Antenor replies that it holds

when the request is honourable. In turn, Paris accuses him of taking gifts from Greeks, perhaps finding his are not generous enough, which certainly angers Antenor. The Chorus of Trojan maidens sums up the scene offering some universally known and commonsensical views on youth and wisdom, as diverging and ultimately leading to loss of health, wealth and even one's own country. On its second appearance, the chorus would utter the best known and most powerful lines on the nature of the government, its obligations and responsibilities.

Johnston's modernized translation almost liquidates the time span between then and now, making the text distinctly identifiable with the commonly shared sentiments that regularly appeared in "politically" oriented literature till the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, for instance with Kipling or war poets, as far as the sense of duty, obligation and responsibility were concerned. Such a risky comparison is only to illustrate the universality and recurrence of certain motifs in literature.

You with the Republic under your command,
Who carry human justice in your hand—
Yes, you to whom the human flock's consigned,
Whose job is to ensure it's safe and sound—

Always remember this for all you're worth:
You are God's representative on earth.
You're more than your own affairs to keep in mind:
You must look after all of humankind.

You rule all those beneath you; yet you too
Possess a Lord, a ruler over you.
One day his final judgment must be faced—
And woe betide those who have been unjust!

This Lord does not take gifts, nor does he care
Whether a man's a peasant or a peer.
Whether he's clad in rags or cloth-of-gold—
If he's done wrong, he'll find himself engaoled.

We small folk, when we sin, we are risking less—
It's only ourselves we lose in wickedness.
Our leaders' crimes, though, bring whole cities down,
And cause great emperors to lose their crown. (*The Envoy*s, 25-27)

Public figures are responsible to God who is incorruptible and his judgment fair. One should not overlook the final touch of irony of the Chorus's song, as it cleverly concludes that the sins committed by private individuals endanger only the sinners while public figures will have to account for their doings in the public sphere.

The next scene illustrates the Chorus's lines. Conforming to the rules of ancient theatre that allowed no group scenes with several speakers, Messenger has to relate the debate of the king's Council to Helen. The debate exemplifies how reasons clashed, how arguments smashed counterarguments, how opinions were manipulated with and final aims achieved. King Priam begins reminding the Council that he does not remember doing anything without asking for their advice and puts forward the essential question concerning Helen's fate: "Should she be given up to them or not?" (*The Envoys*, 31). Paris, the first speaker, recalls his famous judgment in the consequence of which Venus promised him the most beautiful woman on earth that was Helen, the wife to King Menelaus. Paris insists he was in no position to refuse the goddess, more so bearing in mind the history of Medea that shows how treacherous the Greeks had been in the past. Taking Helen hardly balances the former doings of the Greeks.

The next speaker, Antenor, tries to abolish Paris's arguments by giving some very good reasons for returning Helen. Stealing the wife of his host, Paris humiliated Priam. The Greeks will soon claim her not by sending envoys but waging a war. He ironically states that Paris's marriage should not have been so excessively expensive as to bring about bloodshed and the downfall of the country. Besides, former injustices of the Greeks do not validate similar behaviour of the Trojans. The next speaker, Eneas, Paris's brother and other speakers use highly emotional arguments: "Then what—whichever tune the Greeks will play, / We have to dance to it?" and later: "Right now they're forcing us / To give back Helen; but it won't be long/ Before they're asking for our wives and children. / Greed never puts a limit on its power" (*The Envoys*, 41). Continuing the same line of reasoning Ikeaton paints a horrifying picture of the events to follow and the nation enslaved, which justifies his appeal to support Paris. Then emotions run so high that no further arguments can be presented and voting is demanded.

Besides the importance for the development of events, Messenger's seemingly historical account reveals some characteristics of Polish parliamentary traditions (Popławska 2009, 18). There are sitting and standing members, the

speaker, and casting vote by going to one side (Paris's) or the other. The result is predictable and the majority call for the king to obey the law and respect the opinion of the majority. Without delay, Priam is reported to proclaim:

I'd have preferred
To witness concord; since that cannot be
I must needs imitate the greatest part.
Them may what's good become the chosen way.
Let Helen stay in Troy, and let the Greeks
Make compensation to us for Medea. (*The Envoys*, 45)

Juxtaposing Priam's silence throughout the debate and his eagerness to accept the majority vote as his verdict shows him weak if not a cowardly ruler who chooses an easy way out bypassing rational arguments and promoting emotional and prejudiced ones. Does it follow that the king is a hostage of his family interests or, worse, unaware of the manipulations (bribery, persuasion) before the voting took place? Whatever the historical context proper, the position of the king must have looked familiar to those in power in the sixteenth century Poland. In case of doubt, the next character, Ulysses (one of the Greek envoys) criticizes Trojan anarchy (corruption, bribery, disregard for the law and the truth) and the young generation's life style (drunken revels, overspending, setting a bad example to others, love of luxury, idleness) that must end in disaster for they will be unable to defend the country in case of need. Ulysses ends saying that he would always want to have such (weak, ineffectual) men as his enemies.

Subsequently, the Chorus takes up the motif of the coming war as the events begin to accelerate. Antenor warns the king that preparations for the war should be undertaken immediately, which the king brushes off accusing him of cowardice "as if the enemy stood here before you" (*The Envoys*, 57). Antenor gives the monarch another piece of wisdom advocating prudence: "Fear/ Makes one more provident and well-prepared" (*The Envoys*, 59). The atmosphere of approaching calamity permeates Cassandra's prophetic vision. She predicts all stages of the war, concentrating on the horse, not to be taken inside but rather burnt. Unrestrained manslaughter, bloodshed, savagery and terrible grief will follow (*The Envoys*, 65). Besides being a famous figure in her own right, Cassandra reminds of Old and New Testament prophets whose prophecies were disregarded. In her case, as the legend had it, Cassandra's prophecies were to be ignored, so Priam did not take them seriously in spite of Antenor's pleadings and his own memories of a nightmare his wife had before giving birth to Paris

that she bore a burning torch. Antenor supplements that there was a prophecy a child would bring about the destruction of Troy (*The Envoys*, 67). The arrival of the Captain with a Greek hostage confirms all fears and prophecies for the warfare have already begun. In view of that Priam announces that the first thing to do next morning (not immediately!) is calling the council to plan defense, to which Antenor replies that the war must be planned and not mere defence: “Let’s fight, instead of waiting to be struck” (*The Envoys*, 71).

The above synopsis is to present the political context of the play. Stepping away from the immediate context another outline is possible that intensifies the topic’s universality. For any ruler’s son may commit a disgraceful deed of dire consequences. It is in the interest of the state to make amends to avoid grave them. The ruler’s son seeks for support of the council by persuasion, gifts, flattery and slander. As an able speaker he sways the council to his favour regardless the danger of accelerating the conflict and endangering the state, his family and fellow countrymen. Even stripped from cultural connotations, be they from the original story or from its Polish context, the play’s message is timeless and easily decipherable.

The government fails when the reasons of the state give way to self-interest in spite of various warnings and appeals for prudence. However, before the inevitable happens there occurs an interplay of arguments that reveals complex relations between those in power and the individuals. The latter, Antenor, the Chorus, Cassandra and Ulysses set a dialogue with the king trying to sway his judgment. They are all heard but not listened to. The king’s verdict testifies to the “blood is thicker than water” proverb. It also adheres to “an eye for an eye” maxim, which is immediately contradicted. One bad deed cannot be justified by another one committed in the past (*The Envoys*, 39). A chain of violence and injustice will never bring reconciliation.

The Foucauldian notion of governmentality as specified in his seminal essay, of the same title already quoted, helps to make a list of disparities rather than, less numerous, similarities. To recall his own summing up:

The ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security. The tendency which, over a long period of time and throughout the West, has steadily led towards the pre-eminence over all other forms (sovereignty, discipline, etc.) of this type of power which may be termed government, resulting on the one hand, in the

formation of a whole series of specific governmental apparatuses, and, on the other, in the development of a whole complex of *savoir*. The process or rather the result of the process, through which the state of justice of the Middle Ages, transformed into the administrative state during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, gradually becomes “governmentalized”. (Foucault 1991, 102-3)

The Envoys may be hardly expected to conform of the above in detail. The very idea of “governmentality” materialized in the eighteenth century (Foucault 1991, 103). Thus the term may be used not only *avant la lettre* to conveniently name certain general tendencies discernable. In the play the state’s obligation is to secure its citizens’ wellbeing. The king is held personally responsible and liable to the power of God above him. But the doctrine of the king’s divine rights is absent, as it must have already been eroding. Priam fails to assess the situation of the country and lacks necessary (expected) prudence. Besides recalling the Polish of the time, the play’s power structure visualizes the forces responsible for the country’s actual politics. To say that it opts for a more modern approach in which individual opinions are considered and such public sins as corruption and folly exposed may look like an echo of Erasmus’s in *The Praise of Folly*. To substantiate, there are obvious instances in the play such as Paris’ speech before the Council full of self praise and the addresses of his supporters. As the audience already know how he has won support, perhaps there is a possible link with Machivellian traits as described in *The Prince* concerning the ruler’s manipulative abilities. Delivering the harshest criticism possible, his opponents also place themselves within typical (if veiled) Renaissance concerns.

The king’s Council must be regarded as an institution because the king states he has never failed to ask their opinion in difficult matters. Besides, the similarity of the ancient polis and Renaissance governments with a monarch and a parliament bypassing Middle Ages (are we right to consider medieval idea of monarchy different?) forming yet another similarity with the Antiquity.

The Envoys bears a distinctly secular character. It seems devoid of all recognizable forms of religiousness. Ancient gods seem of little consequence or hardly serious (the competition of three goddesses) but influential and vengeful all the same. Morality bears no traces of religious denomination. To act ethically the characters have to rely on commonly recognized principles such as honesty, straightforwardness, prudence, hospitality, unselfishness, etc. Such principles are drawn from socially acceptable norms (the law of hospitality Paris violated), from the past (historical events), and observation of the state of affairs (abominable behaviour and self-centeredness of the young). Besides, making right

decisions also depends on trying to learn from both rational (as already stated) and the irrational that is considering various prophesies such as men obtain in dreams (Priam's wife) or from such visionaries as Cassandra.

"It was the work of remarkable originality in our Renaissance literature but it found no followers", says Libera (1989, 101) summing up the discussion on the play, the work of unmatched poetic qualities (its linguistic intricacies of necessity lost in translation) spanning several traditions and the poet's original talent. They were the awareness of literary traditions of the Antiquity filtered through Kochanowski's poetic temperament and the qualities of the vernacular placed against the background of European Renaissance as studied during his university years and public service, the latter having provided a distinct local colouring due to the political upheavals of his time. However, both *The Envoys* and Kochanowski's poetry were innovative enough to pave the way to Classicism (Karpiński, 2007, 107).

Becoming the major poet of Polish Renaissance was achieved at a cost for his contemporaries who continued to write in Latin widely circulated in Europe. Kochanowski absorbed the best of European Renaissance conventions and thought enframed in local tradition and individual creativeness. By a strange coincidence Kochanowski's play shared yet another universal Renaissance characteristic (concerning book production) having been the first book printed in Warsaw in 1578.

Tracing links and correspondences within European Renaissance by studying translations (Erasmus) and adaptations (Goślicki, Dwornicki, Rej, Kochanowski), letters (Kallimach, Jan á Lasco), political treatises (Modrzewski), morality plays (Rej, Nicholas of Wilkowiecko), poetry (Janicki, Rej, Kochanowski, Sęp Szarzyński, Klonowic, Szymonowicz) seems a formidable, if captivating task. Only then a balanced view of how Renaissance ideologies operated on the "peripheries" may be reached and Polish Renaissance put back on the cultural map of Europe.