MACIEJ KAZIMIERZ SARBIENSKI AND
ENGLISH DISSENTING POETS OF THE EARLY 18TH CENTURY: A STUDY IN RECEPTION OF NEO-LATIN POETRY IN GREAT BRITAIN

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Summary

The article presents historical, literary, religious and political context in which interest in the poetry of the Baroque Neo-Latin poet Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski (1595–1640) appeared in the first half of the 18th century among English dissenters and non-conformists. The article concentrates on the best known and most prolific of the six dissenting translators of Sarbiewski: Isaac Watts (1674–1748) and his pupil and biographer Thomas Gibbons (1720–1785). The article includes a brief presentation of the translated poems of Sarbiewski and their translators.

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia historyczny, literacki, religijny i polityczny kontekst zainteresowania, jakim cieszyła się twórczość Macieja Kazimierza Sarbiewskiego (1595–1640) wśród dysydentów i nonkonformistów w Anglii w I poł. XVIII w. Autor skupia się na najbardziej znanych i płodnych spośród sześciu dysydenckich tłumaczy Sarbiewskiego: Isaaku Wattsie (1674–1748) oraz jego wychowanku i biografiście Thomasie Gibbonsie (1720–1785). Artykuł zawiera krótkie omówienie przekładów wierszy Sarbiewskiego oraz sylwetek tłumaczy.
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The interest in the works of Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski (1595–1640)\(^1\), the Polish Neo-Latin poet known in the British Isles since the early 17th century, was an important element of British literary life during almost two centuries. The most lasting testimony to Sarbiewski’s popularity are numerous translations of his poems (at least 150 such translations are known) and his presence in studies in history of literature and literary criticism of the period\(^2\). This popularity was not a constant element, it would be more precise to describe it as recurrent; it returned every time when the subject matter of Sarbiewski’s poetry became more current for British authors. It is possible to indicate six waves of such interest in Sarbiewski’s works\(^3\), the

\(^{1}\) Sarbiewski was generally known under the Latin name of Matthias Casimir Sarbievius, in the British Isles he was usually referred to as Casimir or Casimire.

\(^{2}\) Piotr Urbański presents some of them in *Theologia fabulosa. Commentationes Sarbievianae*, Szczecin 2000, pp. 196–204.

\(^{3}\) The first such wave took place during the Civil War and immediately afterwards – 1640–1660. The second one coincided with the final decades of the Restoration period – 1680–1700. The third wave took place in the early 18th century, mostly among religious dissenters, the fourth one comprises the latter part of the Augustan Age. The fifth wave coincided with the early Romanticism – 1790–1815, while the sixth one spans the end of the Romanticism and the early Victorian Age. A more detailed presentation of these ways is included in the preface to K. Fordoński and P. Urbański, *Casimir Britannicus. English Translations, Paraphrases, and Emulations of the Poetry of Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski*. The
subject of the present study is the third of them which took place in the first half of the 18th century when such English religious dissenters as Isaac Watts (1674–1748) and Thomas Gibbons (1720–1785) discovered and started to translate Sarbiewski’s poems.

After the turbulent 17th century, in the early years of the 18th century the situation of English religious non-conformists was still rather difficult although far more safe and stable than during the previous five decades. The extreme Protestant churches lost the influence upon state politics they had enjoyed during the Wars of Three Kingdoms and in the Commonwealth period, however, with the Glorious Revolution the period of persecutions which followed the Restoration also ended to a large extent. The changes introduced after the Glorious Revolution divided members of various Christian churches in England (the situation in Scotland was quite different, yet its description exceeds the scope of the present study) into the following three groups. The first, the most numerous, were members of the Church of England, personally headed by the current monarch. The second group consisted of representatives of numerous and quite various Protestant churches, usually more extreme in their religious views, which refused to conform to the official line represented by the Church of England. The third and smallest group consisted of Roman Catholics.

Inasmuch as for representatives of the first group all career paths were open, members of the two other groups faced certain limitations. It is quite obvious that they could not seek employment in the Church of England, their presence in public life was often frowned upon, also academic education was not available to them. The range of these limitations was not identical for both groups. Members of the independent Protestant churches could hold post in the state administration, however, their participation in the parliament depended on the taking of oath of allegiance to the monarch which many preferred to avoid. Roman Catholics not only faced limitations in their ability to practice their religion, choose political activity or employment, but also in their choice of place of residence. They were forbidden to settle down in cities, especially London, and, although their situation slowly improved, last such laws were abolished only in 1829.

Second Enlarged and Corrected Edition, London 2010, pp. 22–25. The volume includes also the texts of all the translations from Sarbiewski mentioned in the present study.

4 These regulations were rather seldom enforced, however, the Roman Catholic poet Alexander Pope chose to settle down in Twickenham rather than in London to avoid possible persecution.
Interestingly enough, many of these regulations did not apply to the aristocracy. Roman Catholic peers kept their seats on the House of Lords and many of them held various state offices. It is important to point out here that a large part of the abovementioned regulations was soon abandoned and forgotten even though they were not immediately revoked. The wars and revolutions of the 17th century gave the English a painful lesson which was apparently learned and successfully limited the more extreme actions directed against the non-conformists.

This legal situation of the religious minorities led to the creation of independent religious structures which began to flourish in the period immediately following the Glorious Revolution. On the one hand, a network of dissenting congregations was created which offered spiritual support for the believers and employment for priests. The more extreme Protestants (such as Presbyterians) rejected the structure which the Church of England had inherited from the Roman Catholic Church. They were especially against the institutions of bishops and dioceses. They were opposed to the idea of appointment of priests by owners of the living confirmed by bishops, choosing elections instead. Their congregations needed preachers. In the early days they could count on dissenting priests rejecting Church of England, as well as graduates of Cambridge and Oxford who joined the congregations or left the Church of England with them, refusing to take the oath required by the Act of Conformity from 1662.

This situation, however, could not last forever and soon new solutions had to be implemented. As early as in the last quarter of the 17th century, the first dissenting academies were established, aimed at educating candidates for priesthood. Gradually, the network of dissenting education system expanded and elementary schools were established by congregations for their children. The schools served a double purpose, providing also employment for graduates of the academies. It was fairly common for preachers to combine the duties of a priest and a teacher, it was so in the cases of Watts and Gibbons.

The level of the education offered by the academies was very high, sometimes even higher than that offered by the universities, for which

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5 The following description is, quite obviously, rather simplified. It is difficult to provide a more detailed overview as the dissenting milieu was hardly coherent and often torn apart by new divisions leading to the creation of new, usually smaller, congregations.