



"Portrait with a mask" of the last king of Poland, Stanisław August Poniatowski, wearing a Venetian carnival outfit (J.C. Lampl)

MUZEUM NARODOWE W WARSZAWIE

## CONVERSATION, GAMES OR INTRIGUES?

The epistolary novel genre evolved from the art of letter writing, as well as from the 18th-century fashion of witty salon conversations centered around games, intrigue, understatement, quips and emotional manipulation. Does the Polish literature and history of the period reflect these conventions?



**Dr. Agata Ročko**

works as an assistant professor at the Department of Renaissance Literature at the PAS Institute of Literary Research. She specializes in 18th-century diaries, letters, and documents. [agata.rocko@ibl.waw.pl](mailto:agata.rocko@ibl.waw.pl)

**Dr. Agata Roćko**

Department of Renaissance Literature  
 Institute of Literary Research  
 Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw

**D**e Laclos' novel *Dangerous Liaisons*, adapted for the silver screen several times, became a best-seller upon its publication in Paris in 1782. The book remains just as fascinating today, with the epistolary format shedding much light on the behind-the-scenes realities of the correspondence and conversations held at aristocratic salons of the day. This discourse, focusing around games, intrigue, understatements, compliments and bon mots, is exposed through the narrative device of letter-writing. This familiar, centuries-old format leaves the reader with the impression that they

are reading real letters rather than a work of fiction. France was well-versed in the theory of epistolary discourse, which likely contributed to the blossoming of the prose style of using sharp-witted exchanges to express subtle emotions experienced by the participants.

Poland, too, had its very own letter-writing conventions. Attempts were made to formulate a model of correspondence able to express love and emotions as early as in the first half of the 18th century. Polish authors writing at the time, publishing notes and templates for letters and memoirs, include Aleksander Paweł Zatorski and Stanisław Szymański. Without these notes, letters or snippets of poems scribbled on serviettes during salon conversations we would lack an important source of insight into the real world experienced by the 18th-century elites. Salon conversations were a source of pleasure, but also rife with guises and ploys. European masters of scintillating conversation were celebrated at courts and in salons and adored by ladies who relished in the linguistic dueling and playful discourse. The conversations often continued beyond the salons via letter-exchanges, as the authors carried on their thoughts and ideas. We can find such echoes of salon conversations and Roco games in Antonina Niemiryczowa's "Polish Poems" and later texts by Wojciech Mier, Stanisław Wodzicki, Stanisław Kostka Potocki, Stanisław Trembecki and Tomasz Kajetan Węgiński. The atmosphere of the

Polish salons was captured by diarists, in particular foreigners travelling in Poland. Friedrich Schulz, the German author and professor of history at Mitau, wrote that Warsaw society enjoyed conversation, games, dance, masked balls and picnics. He stressed the importance of foreign languages and conversations being held in French, Italian and German, as well as commenting on the loosening social conventions. He also noted the ease with which men and women related to each other; the language they used to play flirtatious games was exclusively French. Polish missives from the period, in particular love letters, are coy in expressing feelings openly and are dominated by shy expressions, a sense of guilt and worry about revealing and expressing emotions.

So does Polish history also feature the kind of "dangerous liaisons" that were to be found elsewhere during the 18th century? Studies of period documents do indeed reveal three famous romances on par with the finest epistolary novels: those between Stanisław August Poniatowski and Catherine the Great of Russia, between duc de Lauzun (Armand-Louis de Gontaut de Biron) and Izabela Czartoryska, and between Stanisław Szczęśny Potocki and Zofia Witt.

Izabela Czartoryska  
 née Fleming



PRINCES CZARTORYSKI FOUNDATION

As already mentioned, the language of romances and letters was exclusively French, and the atmospheres of the liaisons – at least to onlookers – appeared as unconfirmed, almost fictitious gossip, meaning they were shrouded in a veil of scandal. All such relationships ended with a tragic parting, with at least one party suffering and recording their pain in memoirs or letters. Of course it would be impossible to know whether the tone of such diaries might have been influenced by popular romance novels, or perhaps vice versa. Trying to elucidate the relationship between 18th-century novels, memoirs and letters is a tremendous intellectual puzzle for contemporary readers.

### "Do not make me king, but do call for me"

The relationship between Poniatowski and Catherine the Great is revealed in the *Memoirs of King Stanisław August*. Their romance was a major sensation at the time, and in fact became legendary. Poniatowski had worked as a secretary at the British embassy in St. Petersburg between 1755 and 1756 and again 1757 and 1758. The romance was so passionate, Poland's future king was said to be so overwhelmed by their first intimate encounter to have "forgotten that Siberia exists." Poniatowski sent letters and notes, and recalled his lover fondly in his memoirs, describing her as a goddess with black hair, rosy cheeks, slim waist, huge, expressive blue eyes, long black eyelashes, Greek nose and lips that "called to be kissed." Catherine gave birth to their daughter, Anna Petrovna, although the relationship was short-lived and Poniatowski was recalled from his post. The lovers didn't see each other again for almost 30 years, and the meeting was a great mutual disappointment. They maintained fond correspondence until Catherine ascended to the throne, when she became increasingly aloof and refused to meet Poniatowski, ignoring his appeals to summon him to St. Petersburg. Perhaps nothing expresses Poniatowski's great love for Catherine better than the plea upon hearing the news that he might become king: "Do not make me king, but do call for me".

### "Although reason is a constant presence, love does my bidding"

The relationship between duc de Lauzun and Izabela Czartoryska is described by Lauzun himself in his "Memoires du duc de Lauzun (1747-1783)" (Paris 1858). The affair started during Czartoryska's trip to England in 1772 with Prince Repnin, her lover at the time. When she met de Lauzun in London, he was

already an infamous philanderer, while Czartoryska herself had moved on from an affair with Poniatowski to one with Repnin. To begin with, neither Czartoryska's husband nor Repnin had anything against her contact with the duke. They took a trip to Spa in present-day Belgium and after Repnin's departure, Czartoryska professed her love for the duke. The lovers became especially close in Paris on 5 November 1773, although the following day remorse drove Czartoryska to attempt to poison herself – fortunately without success. It was then that she uttered the words, "Although reason is a constant presence, love does my bidding." They continued their relationship in Paris, with Czartoryska eventually rejecting Repnin. She finally returned to Poland in April 1774.

The lovers maintained the relationship through correspondence; on 28 October 1774, at her residence in Warsaw, Czartoryska gave birth to a son, Konstanty Adam, with duc de Lauzun – the boy's father – witnessing the event hidden in a wardrobe behind the bed. Unfortunately this almost fairytale relationship didn't survive another parting. The lovers stopped corresponding in 1775, and Czartoryska's husband accepted their son as his own.

### "There is no creature on earth happier than I"

Zofia Witt wrote those very words to her lover Stanisław Szczęsny Potocki in 1795, when their relationship was already advanced and she had borne him three children. Before his marriage to Józefina Mniszech was annulled, the lovers exchanged loving correspondence. In spite of Zofia's commoner background, she enjoyed a certain popularity across Europe's salons and she conversed skillfully with her beloved, calling him pet names. Her letters, written in French (Zofia was Greek and did not speak Polish) were filled with nuanced elegance intertwined with subtle seduction and sophisticated compliments, maintaining one of the most famous romances of the time. And it was no easy task, since her aim was to marry one of the wealthiest and most powerful magnates in Poland.

Zofia's letter from 28 December 1795 is a masterpiece of Polish love epistolography of the late 18th century: "...there is no creature on earth happier than I, and that is your doing, my darling. I long to live with you in whichever way I can – as your lover, your wife, your mistress, your slave – I care not, as long as I am something that belongs to you and that which you can use as you please; as a creature who adores you and who can only find her own happiness in the happiness of her idol."

And that's the true story of the real "dangerous liaisons" of 18th-century Poland. ■

#### Further reading:

Ročko A., Polski „Wielki świat warszawski” oczami Inflantczyka [The Polish "Great World of Warsaw" as Seen by a Livonian], in: *Codziennosc i niecodziennosc oswieconych* [The Ordinary and Extraordinary Lives of the Enlightened], v. 2., ed. B. Mazurkowska with M. Marcinkowska and Sz.P. Dąbrowski, pp. 11–26.

<http://rdc.pl/publikacja/historie-z-szuflady-warszawski-wielki-swiat/>

Ryba J., Rozkosze swiatowców: konwersacja [The Delights of the Worldly: A Conversation], in: *Przyjemność w kulturze epoki rozumu* [Pleasure in the Culture of the Age of Reason], ed. T. Kostkiewiczowa, pp. 45–52.