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TWO STEREOTYPES OF THE BEGGAR IN POLISH FOLK TALES

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In this paper I examine different ways of depicting beggars in Polish folk tales. I argue that the vast variation of images originated from two basic stereotypes of the beggar. The first one is related to the traditional religious beliefs, in which beggars were treated as representatives of the deceased ancestors. The second has a source in modern secular conception of social utility, in which wealth is interpreted as a sign of God's blessing and poverty is seen as something suspicious and sinful.

Key words: folk tales, beggars, religion, stereotypes

One of the most interesting characters in Polish folk tales from the 19th and the first half of the 20th century is the beggar. In many narratives either the protagonist comes across a beggar or beggars become the main heroes of the plot. When we try to scrutinize this topic more carefully, it turns out that beggars are depicted in traditional oral narratives in various different ways. Actually, in Polish folk tales exist three different kinds of representations of beggars and – what seems to be important – such representations are correlated with the type of narrative.

The first way of depicting beggars is typical of fairy tales. We can observe similar representations in types like ATU 301 “The Three Kidnapped Princesses” or ATU 502 “The Wild Man” according to the international classification of folk tales (Uther 2011). A hero, who sets out in search of luck or is attempting to reach a specific goal, encounters a beggar, most often in the forest. He is often an old and strange-looking person, sometimes looks more like an animal than a human: for example has thick hair, long beard, is very short, but at the same time holds huge power. He can help the hero offering him magic items or useful tips for his further wandering. However his typical behaviour is to test the hero in different ways, for example by giving him difficult tasks, asking for help, food or alms, or even fighting with him. Only once the protagonist passes this peculiar exam, he can count on help and move on. Very often his older brothers or travel companions fail this test and suffer some nasty consequences. The beggar turns out to be an ambiguous person, who has magic powers and can be helpful but also dangerous.

The second way of portraying beggars is found in folk legends. Here they are presented as old, poor and foreign wanderers, but at the same time as religious and moral authorities who are people close to the sacred sphere. Their typical way of acting is to arrive at the home of Christians and ask them for help, e.g. accommodation, food or alms. The function of this motif in the narrative plot is to test the

mercy of the people who they encounter. As a consequence, good Christians are rewarded and those who refused help are in some way punished. It is worth pointing out that one of the most popular variants of those kinds of narratives contains a motif in which Jesus Christ travels around the world in the guise of a beggar. As a result the figure of beggar gains a special meaning here and he is seen as a proxy of God or other supernatural beings. In this context he is also an important figure in the Christian value system and social structure as a person who allows people to show their mercy and to do good deeds.

And finally, there are two groups of narratives which present a completely different picture of beggars. One of them are jokes, and the other can be referred to as narratives from everyday life that report events considered authentic. The latter are sometimes similar to contemporary urban legends recounting sensational and secret situations from the beggars' lives. In these two kinds of tales beggars are depicted as cheaters who avoid fair work and try to persuade Christians to give them generous alms. Under the guise of false godliness and pretended disability, they lead an immoral and comfortable life. Some of these narratives show that when people don't pay attention and don't observe beggars, the blind suddenly start to see, cripples start to dance, mutes start to speak and sing, others start to drink or fight about having a better place in front of a church and so on. Another popular motif concerns the wealth of beggars. There is a group of narratives which talk about an extremely clever or greedy beggar or company of beggars who are able to gather real treasures by cheating people or even stealing their property. The heroes, of course, keep their wealth in secret and sometimes only after their death the true extent of their wealth is revealed. It is interesting to note that from this perspective, beggars were not always openly condemned. The aim of some of the stories was to disclose the deceptive activity of beggars in a funny way. They are treated here as gullible, unintelligent people whose fraud is exposed and easily uncovered. In such situations we have to deal with a kind of parody in the description of beggars' activity which is more of a source of comedy than anything else and therefore – evokes neither indignation nor moral instruction. In other narratives of these kinds we can even observe a peculiar acceptance and admiration for cunning beggars who always are able to defeat their opponents.

The extremely diverse image of beggars in Polish folktales forces us to ask, what the cause of such a wide range of representations is. I want to suggest two explanations of this phenomenon according to different theoretical conceptions. However both approaches refer to the real position which beggars had in rural societies in 19th century.

First of all it is essential to recognise that in all these narratives beggars are usually referred to as *dziady*. It was a typical expression used formerly in Polish language for beggars, especially for the kind of beggars who wander from village to village, praying and singing special religious songs (Grochowski 2009). However the word *dziady* had a few other meanings. It could also mean grandfathers,

old people, or – in general – deceased ancestors. In some regions there were also a couple of folk customs and rituals called *dziady*. This convergence of names was not accidental, because both wandering beggars and all those rituals existed in close relation with traditional beliefs regarding ancestors. Beggars were seen as a kind of character who can connect living people with those who have already died. They were some kind of mediators between the living world and the world of the dead and therefore played an important role in the various practices associated with maintaining relationships with people's ancestors. For example, they were given food and thus, symbolically, dead people were fed. On the other hand, beggars were expected to pray for the souls of the deceased, which was believed to have been particularly effective (Michajłowa 2010).

According to Victor Turner's (Turner 1995) conception, which can be seen as an extension of the earlier theory developed by Arnold Van Gennep (Gennep 2010), we can say that the extraordinary function of beggars stems from their liminal position. They were strangers, who did not belong to local social structures. They also did not take part in typical rural activities. Sometimes they were very old, disabled, even mentally ill or seemed to be so. For these reasons, beggars were treated by former peasants as mythical "others" and – as any other liminal phenomena – they were associated with the sacred sphere and the other world inhabited by various non-human beings and supernatural powers. Consequently there was also a widespread belief that they held special powers, which could be both helpful and dangerous depending on how they had been treated by the people encountering them.

Such a complex range of ideas resulted in the emergence of a specific, ambiguous and widespread attitude toward beggars in which four aspects had a crucial importance, namely; fascination, respect, fear and aversion. It seems that these ambiguous attitudes were the base of two stereotypes that were commonly used to perceive and create social images of beggars.

The first stereotype shows beggars as powerful, mysterious and unpredictable characters who should be respected and evoke fear. In Polish folk tales we can observe two different varieties of this stereotype. In fairy tales we have to deal with the variety which could be called pre-Christian and perceived as primordial. Here – as has been previously mentioned – beggars are seen as almost non-human, similar to animals or demonic characters that have enormous power and literally inhabit the border of our world, therefore they indeed are a kind of mediator, messenger or representative of the other world acting as a gatekeeper, magic helper or a guide (Propp 1987). In legends, this original, archaic picture has been subjected to the process of Christianisation. As was noted above, here beggars are considered as moral authorities, religious specialists, holy pilgrims and messengers who represent God and do his will. Consequently, it is very important and favourable to receive them as guests, show mercy, and give alms, because God is not indifferent to how people treat his envoys. This unique relationship with God is the reason that,

in this stereotype, a special trait of beggars is their effectiveness in prayer but also their ability to bring disaster to sinful individuals and even to whole local communities which violate the Christian principle of mercy (Michajłowa 2010: 116–117).

This leads us to the second stereotype which can be found in jokes and narratives about everyday life. In this case – as it has been demonstrated before – beggars are accused of a number of offences. Their main features are greed, laziness, dishonesty, impertinence and in particular, a cynicism which consists of the idea that they feed off Christian rules but, at the same time, don't follow them. Similar to the first stereotype, the second one also exists in two variants. Beggars can be seen as individuals who are clever, smart, intelligent, even in some way ingenious and, as a consequence, dangerous. However at the same time they are depicted as naive fools who can be easily exposed, ridiculed, cheated and exploited.

Such a differentiation allows us to formulate two explanations of the function of this stereotype. On one hand we can interpret this unflattering picture of beggars as an attempt at counteracting, domesticating or dealing with such mysterious, unpredictable and dangerous wanderers who were linked to the other world and supernatural powers. In this respect the negative stereotype of the beggar has something to do with a group of narratives about a stupid and deceived devil which were very popular in Polish folklore. In these tales, it usually turns out that gullible devil may be easily betrayed and exploited, so he no longer appears to be terrible or dangerous anymore, instead he becomes rather ridiculous (Ługowska 1993: 162–166). In this context it may be argued that when it comes to the social imagination associated with beggars we have to deal with two parallel images. The second stereotype is complementary to the first one and can be considered as the other side of the coin. The strong opposition between them results from the aforementioned liminal position typical of beggars in former rural societies, which was associated with sacrum and evokes ambiguous emotions. According to the conception developed by Rudolf Otto (Otto 1917), in archaic, traditional religions we can observe a peculiar attitude toward sacrum which evokes both fascination and fear (*tremendum et fascinatum*) and seems to be both appealing and repulsive at the same time. So, a crucial factor in shaping the two different stereotypes of beggars may be the complex range of religious beliefs in which they functioned and were perceived as mythical strangers (Benedyktowicz 2000: 160–177).

On the other hand we can also try to comprehend the hostile picture of beggars as a consequence of the gradual disintegration of traditional beliefs and vanishing previously held rural customs, which led to the disappearance of the first stereotype and the development of the second one. The process of modernisation and secularisation has a strong impact on social structures and common religious beliefs. It may be observed that the sacred sphere has been reduced and in some way replaced by secular institutions like the educational system, labour market or humanitarian organisations. In this context beggars were not treated as holy pilgrims or useful religious professionals anymore. They started to be perceived as a social problem,

as useless people, who are not able to work or contribute to the common good or, even worse, are simply unwilling to do so (Maludzińska 2014).

However the problem with this explanation is that, in Polish folk tales from the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, two stereotypes of beggars occur simultaneously. A statistical comparison does not allow us to draw a conclusion that in this period of time the scope of the first stereotype was decreasing and the second one was gaining in popularity. So, the way of depicting beggars in oral narratives seems to confirm that both the first and the second stereotype are rooted in traditional religious imagination and reflect the ambiguous attitude toward sacrum.

Nevertheless, the situation starts to look slightly different when we turn our attention to what happened next with the two stereotypes of beggars and how beggars are perceived and treated today. First of all it should be highlighted that the stereotypes of beggars are no longer transmitted in the form of folk tales anymore. Of course, in Poland folk tales are published and read, mainly for children, but they do not function as a genre of oral literature which is used spontaneously in unofficial communication (Wróblewska 2014: 7–19). It doesn't mean that the stereotypes of beggars no longer exist in Polish society. On the contrary, they still play an important role. However, the way of using them has changed significantly. In particular it is worth noting two aspects of this modification.

Firstly, beggars in Poland are not referred to as *dziady* anymore. An ordinary Polish native speaker probably will hardly associate the word *dziady* with beggars, because nowadays the only word used for defining a beggar in common language is *żebrak*. This fact indicates that currently beggars are not perceived as representatives of deceased ancestors or people associated with other world. So no special power is attributed to them, which results from the close relation to the sacrum.

Secondly, and more interestingly, the word *dziad* has not disappeared. On the contrary, in some sense it has developed, broadened its meaning and gained in popularity. In contemporary Polish language there are even a couple of derivatives of this word, such as the adjective *dziadowski* and the noun *dziadostwo*. All these word forms are used to describe things or people considered as poor, worthless, useless, malfunctioning, misbehaving and so on. All these words also express an extremely negative attitude and strong emotions toward the objects or people described. It is worth mentioning, that one of the most famous political scandals in recent years in Poland was related to the use of the word *dziad*. The phrase *spieprzaj dziadu* was directed after an election meeting by Lech Kaczyński – later the Polish president – to a passer-by trying to ask him aggressive and rude questions. Although the first word – which can be translated as “fuck off” – has a crucial meaning in this phrase, the second one is also relevant. Through the use of this phrase, the politician has classified his opponent as a person belonging to the other, lower category of people, who do not deserve to be taken seriously or treated with respect.

This impolite and emotional utterance from Lech Kaczyński sparked a row. Many people commented on his behaviour judging it as dismissive and inappropriate.

ate for a presidential candidate. However, the consequence of this event was that the phrase *spieprzaj dziadu* became extremely popular. Poles – especially those, who had negative attitude to Kaczyński – started to use these words in many different forms and contexts. Interestingly, it was not just about ridiculing Kaczyński or destroying his reputation. We can say that thanks to the unfortunate incident the word *dziad* was in some sense revived and has gained a second life.

The case of *spieprzaj dziadu* allows us to illustrate, that to some extent the stereotypes of beggars are still present and understandable in Polish language, although they usually exist at an unconscious level, and many people are not aware, that the word *dziad* has something to do with beggar. What seems to be most significant is that in contemporary Polish culture there are no longer two parallel stereotypes. The first stereotype showing beggars as a kind of saintly people does not function in common social imaginations. This representation is only sometimes recalled in special situations, like artistic performances, music workshops or works of literature (Grochowski 2016: 174–176). The second stereotype depicting beggars as immoral, troublesome and useless people is doing well. The reason for such a situation is rather obvious and can be connected with the change in religious beliefs and social values, which is based on the fact that we have replaced the traditional conception of the others as representatives of the sacred world or supernatural powers with the modern conception of others as annoying people who do not want to follow our way of living.

The disappearance of the first stereotype sheds a new light of the ambiguous picture of beggars in Polish folk tales. If the discussed stereotypes are rooted in the different social and religious conceptions, it seems reasonable to assume, that folk tales from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries represent a special evidence of the conflict between two competing worldviews and two ways of understanding beggars. We can conclude that the nineteenth and early twentieth century was a period of progressive change in traditional beliefs. This process had to influence folklore and popular narratives, in which we can find numerous traces of different ideas and values that were often inconsistent and contradictory. The erratic picture of beggars in folk tales is one of the most interesting examples, because it concerns not only the narrow world of folk tales, but also a wide social phenomenon, which is partially still current and shapes our contemporary imagination.

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