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A Cultural History Of Gesture

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

1991

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Bremmer, J. N., & Roodenburg, H. (1991). *A Cultural History Of Gesture*. s.n.

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Gesture, ritual, and social order in sixteenth- to eighteenth- century Poland

MARIA BOGUCA

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century a well developed ritual of gestures was an important part of the culture of the Polish gentry,¹ exhibiting a preference for oral creativity and a need to display social status by particular characteristics of behaviour.' Polish noblemen, who in the sixteenth century had just constructed their state, wanted to secure political power and social supremacy by clearly marking the distance between themselves and other groups. This resulted in an increasing taste for luxury and pomp in public as well as in private life. Sumptuousness became a requirement not only in dressing or the arrangement of homes, but also in manners which were codified in a complicated ritual of gestures. This ritual exhibited typical Polish traits despite being founded on a common European practice which derived from ancient Greek and Roman tradition, later enriched by Roman Catholic liturgy and the ceremonies displayed in the courts of feudal monarchs throughout medieval Europe.³

A knowledge of gestures was obligatory for every member of the noble class and served as proof of having been born and raised a noble. The lack of this knowledge would inevitably unmask a

plebeian.⁴ Foreigners visiting Poland in early modern times often described the manners of the gentry as 'theatrical' and noted that demonstrative gestures were used in abundance on every occasion. This phenomenon became evident especially in the seventeenth century. It is possible that the typically Baroque love for theatre and other shows inspired such artificial behaviour. Contemporaries were well aware of this extravagance. 'Human life is like a show', wrote a Polish writer in the second half of the seventeenth century, 'with people the actors and God the creator and manager of the stage . . . in short, *vita est scenae similis*' ('life is like a stage').'

Knowledge of how to move according to circumstances and position in society was indispensable for a noble. To this end, young men were trained within the family and in schools, especially in those of the Jesuits who enjoyed a reputation as great experts in 'gestural' *savoir vivre* which they used eagerly in their performances as preachers and leaders of religious ceremonies. A Polish writer of the eighteenth century recalls that young Jesuits were instructed 'how to make gestures, how to move, how to walk, in each body movement they were given special training.'

BODILY COMPORTMENT

Both manners and bodily comportment of a nobleman should be grave and full of dignity. Mikołaj Rej, a famous writer of noble origin, wrote in the middle of the seventeenth century:

You can tell the attitudes and inclinations of people from their comportment. . . . Because when a rustic or cowardly person wants to say something seriously, what do you see? He squirms, picks his fingers, strokes his beard, pulls faces, makes eyes and splits every word in three. A noble man, on the contrary, has a clear mind and a gentle posture; he has nothing to be ashamed of. Therefore, in appearance, in his words, and in comportment he is like an eagle which without any fear looks straight at the sun, or like a commander-in-chief who by his noble posture and proud bearing inspires his soldiers and subordinates to courageous acts.⁷

Indeed, the posture of a Polish nobleman, especially in Renaissance times, was full of pride and gravity. 'They walk

majestically, with a baton in one hand and a sword hanging from the belt,' observed a traveller in the seventeenth century.⁸ This manner of walking, slow and full of dignity, gave birth to a dance peculiar to the Polish gentry, variously called 'Polish dance', 'walking dance', or 'great dance', and often admired by foreign visitors. 'Old gentlemen and respectable ladies open this dance. At the beginning it seems to be a religious procession, and only later do the steps become quicker and more vivacious', wrote a Frenchman in the middle of the same century. Another Frenchman describing the Polish manner of dancing said:

The dance was led in a circle, executed mostly by two women and two men in pairs. After a first sweep around, composed of curtsying, the dancers advanced with fluent and rhythmical steps. From time to time the ladies leading the procession would leap ahead, pretending to flee from the gentlemen . . . I had never seen a dance more majestic, more moderate, yet at the same time more full of dignity.⁹

Such preference for gravity, even in amusements, resulted in contempt for vigorous sports, especially the ball games popular in Western countries: in Poland only horse riding and hunting were regarded as proper pastimes for the nobility. King Sigismund III Vasa was ridiculed by the gentry because of his fondness for football – judged childish for a man and a ruler.

The dignity and gentle behaviour of a nobleman resulted from his pride in being a member of the noble group. But within this group – in spite of the official principle of equality – some differences existed and were reflected in behaviour. Everyone was obliged to know his proper place according to gender, age, and rank. It was a duty to give way to older or more important persons – passing through doors, dancing, at table, or in processions. It was connected with the ceremonial bowings, curtsying and inviting gestures, which constituted an inevitable ritual for each meeting.

Saying welcome and goodbye in the sixteenth century had already turned into a ritual of ceremonies with a very large and complicated protocol of activities. Among these were several kinds of bowing, handshaking, kissing, knee-bending, and hand-kissing – even hugging the knees or legs of aged persons or persons of

higher social rank (parents, patrons, dignitaries). Welcome greetings were organized with special care. In many manors a servant would sit on the roof or in a large tree constantly watching the road; his duty was to announce the approaching visitors well in advance to enable the whole household to be prepared for such a happy occasion. The welcome ritual consisted of deep bowings and mutual embraces in front of the doors. Later the guests were ushered into the house; the host ceremoniously leading the male visitor, his wife the female. Crossing thresholds and taking seats in the room gave occasion to more fussing and mutual ceding of the best places. As a diarist noted, 'it was not without paying compliments, without ceremonies at the door or while taking seats. Next the host would rise asking the guest to give up his sword, which after long teasing would be done and the weapon would be placed carefully in a corner of the room. At this moment a servant would enter with several bottles and a glass on a tray; the glass . . . was emptied amidst more hugging and kissing.'" A visit was regarded as a very happy event and the entire household would be occupied with entertaining the guest, according to his age and social position, at banquets or hunts for many weeks. It was easy to come for a visit, but very difficult to leave. The host would protest and try to delay his visitor's departure, sometimes detaining the visitor's horses or taking the wheels off his carriage in order to prolong the visit. Such exaggerated hospitality, typical of the provincial gentry, may be explained by the deadly boredom of living in a small manor, with plenty of time to spare and almost no distractions except visits.

The use of headgear was connected with special rituals, both in public and private life. Cordial greetings, or those due to a person placed higher on the social ladder, were accentuated by doffing the hat or cap and by bowings just deep enough to sweep the floor with the hat. On several occasions, however, the hat would be only slightly touched or tipped. Taking off the hat was regarded as a sign of special respect with the first to doff the hat being either a younger person, someone of lower standing or a person obliged in some way to those whose presence he was in. Two gentlemen of the same social standing would be expected to take off their hats simultaneously. The hat would also be doffed while reading a letter from a person of high social standing or even when a well respected

name – of the King or the Pope – was mentioned.¹¹ When Bonifacius Vanozzi described his meeting with the famous Polish magnate Hetman, the Great Chancellor Jan Zamoyski in 1596, he recorded that Zamoyski doffed his hat while reading Vanozzi's credentials; he also doffed his hat at every mention of the Polish king or of the Pope. Another Italian diplomat, Giovanni Paulo Mucante, wrote in the same year that the Pope's envoy to Poland, whilst attending a royal banquet in Warsaw, doffed his cap every time King Sigismund Vasa drank to somebody's health; this behaviour, however, was criticized by the clergymen present.¹²

Renaissance manners, so full of pride and dignity, began to change towards the end of the sixteenth century. The Baroque inclination to exaggerate soon resulted in the gentry affecting an even more effusive demeanour which, however, was always subject to constant fluctuations of fashion. 'What I do remember of different fashions of garments, of hats, of boots, of swords, of saddles, of weapons, of home arrangements, even of hairdress, of gestures, of gait, of greetings – good Lord, I am not able to describe it all,' wrote Jan Chryzostom Pasek in his diary in the seventeenth century." Along with the growing dependence of the Polish gentry on magnates, gestures of adulation became more frequent and more drastic. Not only would the hand of a powerful patron be kissed on every occasion, but also his chest, his stomach, his knees, and his feet. 'Two people of the same social standing would embrace and kiss each other on the shoulders; subordinates are expected to kiss the knees, calves or feet of their superiors,' wrote a Frenchman visiting Poland in the second half of the seventeenth century." A client's prostration on the floor before the patron became commonplace – a custom unheard of in the sixteenth century.¹⁵ Also growing in importance was the custom of kissing publicly, which in the sixteenth century had still been regarded as a plebeian habit, peculiar to the eastern parts of the country and connected with bad taste. 'Today to kiss is not a Polish habit. / Only in plebeian Ruthenia / Do they like to greet each other by embraces',¹⁶ wrote the poet Jan Protasowicz."

With the growth of eastern influences on Polish culture as well as with the establishment of demonstrative Baroque ways of behaviour, a kiss became an indispensable element of social contacts. 'Usually Poles are accustomed to greet each other with

embraces, something which is not the practice in other countries even among relatives and family members. It is in this superficial manner that they try to show each other their mutual friendly affection,' wrote S. Starowolski around 1650 in his book *The Reformation of the Polish Customs*.¹⁸ At the meeting of two equals, however, it was usually a kiss on the shoulder. A very popular gesture among equals was also to kiss one's own fingers and to throw the kiss in the air. Such a symbolic kiss allowed the show of affection without really touching. Venzoni, who visited Jan Zamoyski in 1596 recalls how the Great Chancellor introduced him to his wife and other Polish ladies. The wife of the Chancellor shook hands with the Italian visitor, her female companions curtsied and kissed their own fingers by way of greeting. It is worth noting that Venzoni himself used such gestures while greeting Zamoyski's courtiers.¹⁹

From the end of the sixteenth century the hand-kiss became an obligatory gesture towards every older or more important person. Peasants kissed the hands of their lords and of members of their lords' families, children included. A petty noble in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries customarily kissed a magnate's hand – a gesture unheard of a century earlier. Women's hands were also kissed on each social occasion – the hands of young unmarried girls as well as those of matrons. Girls were trained on how to extend the hand for a kiss. The gauntlet should be removed first – it was regarded as impolite to present the hand covered – and then the hand should be extended just high enough to give a man the possibility to raise it slightly to his lips. Albrecht St. Radziwiłł recalls that in 1644 King Ladislaus IV Vasa, displeased with Cracow's burghers when they came to greet him, extended a covered hand for their welcome kiss. One of the representatives of the city, very much confused by the pose of the King, bent his knee three times in front of the throne, thinking the King's gesture a mistake. Finally, he gave up and decided to kiss the gloved hand, but the King removed the gauntlet at the last moment. A similar small incident happened at the beginning of 1646, when a Pomeranian dignitary, Gerhard Denhoff, met Queen Louise Mary Gonzaga at the Polish border. She extended her gloved hand to be kissed from inside the carriage; Denhoff, very much confused and unhappy, was obliged to kiss her glove.²⁰ The habit of kissing

women's hands, rather amazing to foreigners, was preserved in Poland well into this century. The last traces of the old ceremonies still live on today among older gentlemen who greet a lady with: 'I kiss your hands', or even 'I fall at your feet'.

Not only were gestures used as expressions of respect in social life, they also served to indicate contempt in a variety of ways: the refusal to shake hands, the thumbing of one's nose, the slap in the face, or striking with the flat of one's sword. Anger would be shown by gnashing the teeth, rolling the eyes, biting one's moustache, or hurling one's cap on the floor. When pleased, a noble would twirl up his moustache and/or rub his hands."

Feasts and banquets – a significant part of the Polish gentry's social life – had their own ritual of gestures. The diners were seated around the table according to their age and social rank." At the royal court, as late as the middle of the seventeenth century, the sexes were not mixed during feasts – the only exception being the Queen. Women were usually seated around a special table. Albrycht St. Radziwiłł notes in his diary that before the banquet, on the occasion of the coronation ceremony of Ladislaus IV in February 1633, 'it was considered whether the sister of the King should be invited. Finally the King summoned her. At once a table was arranged for the ladies of the court as well as for dignitaries' and royal clerks' wives.' The King's sister, however, sat at the royal table. One year later (September 1637), on the occasion of the King's marriage to Cécile Renate Habsburg, the table for the women happened to be too small and some ladies had to be seated at the table of the King's officials; this broke the taboo on mixing the sexes.²³

Anyone not satisfied with his place at the table or with his neighbours would immediately show his dissatisfaction by leaving the room or cutting the tablecloth in front of him." It was in this way that the symbolic community of the table was destroyed. The reaction of the Papal envoy, who left the royal castle in Warsaw in July 1633 through dissatisfaction with his place at the table, shows the importance of the place given at the table."

Headgear was removed only whilst drinking someone's health. There also was a custom of standing up while proposin,^o a toast, according to the old saying: 'the host at the head of table gives the sign – everybody who is drinking someone's health should stand

up and remove his cap!" Foreigners attending Polish banquets usually felt very much annoyed by this custom and complained that such a constant jumping up and sitting down was a great nuisance during a meal."

The most important toasts were each drunk from a different cup – therefore the host usually had a whole collection of cups and glasses in different sizes, shapes, and colours.²⁸ After proposing a toast he would let the selected cup circulate round the table. The women were only allowed to put the glass to their lips and had to pass it on without drinking. Very often, after the toast had been drunk, the empty glass would be thrown to the floor and broken in pieces in order to prevent future use. From time to time an over-eager or drunk noble would break the glass on his own head to show a special respect for the toasted person. A feast held in the town of Tolloczyn in 1611 became very famous after just such an event. The commander-in-chief Chodkiewicz broke the cup given to him by King Sigismund III on his head. 'When I smashed the cup on my skull,' Chodkiewicz wrote later to his wife, 'the King said: "My dear lord, don't hurt your precious brain, we have great need of it"'.²⁹

In general, however, comportment at the table had to be polite and civilized. Before the meal, water and towels were distributed to wash and dry the hands. The table had to be covered with a clean white cloth, often embroidered or even trimmed with pearls. The inventories of magnates' and burghers' households mention silver or even gold forks by the end of the sixteenth century, but the petty noble, on the other hand, used only spoons and knives well into the next century. The difference in table manners, more than anything else, reflected the scale of social degree in Polish society. The general trend among nobles and burghers, however, was to distinguish themselves from peasants by using their fingers less, by not eating from the common bowl, and by forbidding spitting, spilling beer, or taking too much food into one's mouth. Several books on good table manners were popular among the gentry as well as among burghers. Only peasants were supposed not to be able to control themselves when eating and they were despised because of their 'animal-like' habits. Foreigners, as well as some Polish writers, complain about disorders arising during feasts and banquets: insolent servants, messy tables, and the quarrelling

of drunken diners. The gap between theoretical requirements and daily practice in this sphere of life was especially large.

Gestures in the small family group reflected gestures used at a higher level of social life. Every family event, such as courting, proposing, marrying, burying, saying farewell to parents or guardians by young noblemen leaving for school, going abroad or to war, was accompanied by the sacred ritual of bending one's knee, hugging, and kissing. A very popular farewell gesture was to hug the head of the departing person as he kneeled before his parents or guardians. Such a hug was also popular outside the family, and on many social occasions it was given as a sign of special affection by a person of higher social standing to one of lower standing; the King used to hug the head of his beloved courtier; a bishop or monk would hug the head of a lay person.³⁰ Kissing parents' feet was regarded as the duty of children on such occasions as leaving or returning home; so was asking permission in vital questions such as marrying, choosing monastic life, or undertaking a pilgrimage. It was common practice to bend the knee to one's parents: 'One knee the son, both the daughter / bend down to their mother,' the Polish poet J. Kochowski wrote in the seventeenth century.³¹

The existence of scores of formulas concerning behaviour on such occasions as funerals, weddings, or even simply calling on neighbours proves the fact that Polish family life was highly ritualized during the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. In many manors, family books (the so-called *silva rerum*, a kind of memory book with carefully copied prescriptions, copies of letters, public orations, poems, anecdotes, etc.) displayed large compilations of letters received on different occasions: invitations to a dance or a hunt, condolences on someone's death, congratulations on the birth of a son or a daughter, on a happy marriage, or a safe return home. It seems that a formula was prepared for each family and social occasion, and a gentleman or lady had only to follow the patterns of established behaviour. To follow this code was proof of noble origin, good manners, and of belonging to the refined group of well-bred gentry. Such attitudes, however, did not mean stiffness or coldness in contacts between people. On the contrary, outbreaks of temperament seem to be included in the general pattern of comportment thought to be proper for a gentleman.

M. Matuszewicz presents a juicy example of this kind in his diary when he pictures the farewell ceremony in a Mazovian manor in 1740. A certain Miss Szamowska saying goodbye to a young gentleman called Tollohub offered him, as was customary, a glass of wine. Tollohub was already sitting on his horse, ready to ride off. He drank the wine, put the empty glass between the ears of his horse, broke it with one shot of his pistol, dismounted, prostrated himself, and asked the girl to marry him.³²

Polish people were emotional and felt no need to hide their feelings. Indeed, gesticulating served to display one's honour and noble attitudes. It was deemed proper even for adult males to shed tears in public, to show their patriotism, their grief at someone's death, or their joy on a happy occasion. The Great Chancellor Jan Zamoyski wept openly on many occasions to express his grief.³³ A little later Pasek writes that King John Casimir burst into tears at hearing the news of a military victory: 'And tears as big as peas poured down his cheeks.'³⁴ Radziwiłł relates that after the King's son had died he 'wept and sighed loudly'.³⁵ In his diary he mentions numerous instances of the King, dignitaries, or noblemen shedding tears. A squire could cry in public without being called weak or effeminate. According to custom one had to weep, even if one did not feel too much pain. In 1570 Stanisław Czarnkowski wrote, perhaps sarcastically, to Sofia Jagiellon, the Duchess of Braunschweig, that King Sigismund August had managed to weep hot tears at the death of his wife, Catharina of Habsburg, though she had been sent away by him and had died in exile.³⁶

GESTURES AND OFFICIAL OCCASIONS

It was not only at private but also at public occasions that gestures were important. Here we can also distinguish a change of meaning in some seventeenth- and eighteenth-century gestures compared to those of the previous century. In the middle of the sixteenth century it was still thought highly unusual that the members of the Sejm beseeched King Sigismund August on their knees to give up his unpopular marriage to the beautiful widow Barbara Radziwiłł.³⁷ A century and a half later nobody would have been surprised at such a sight: to kneel or even prostrate oneself on the floor had

become a common habit in Polish public life." Every official event was now marked by ceremony and a whole ritual of gestures.

The opening and closing ceremonies of the General Diet were particularly imposing performances with the procession of deputies coming to kiss the King's hand." To be excluded from this ceremony meant banishment from the symbolic community of the Polish gentry. This was the fate of the Polish Arians who in 1658, just before they were expelled from the country, were not allowed to kiss the King's hand. Each public speech in the Diet had to be accompanied by theatrical movements of the hands and the whole body; the Swedish envoy to Poland, who in 1632 spoke to the deputies *plicatisque brachiis*, was judged a boor.⁴⁰ The relationship between the Polish Commonwealth and Sweden was rather unfriendly at this time so it is quite likely that this gesture of folding the arms was interpreted as being particularly impolite and arrogant.

During parliamentary sessions deputies did not remove their headgear or their weapons. Discontent was very often shown by waving swords and banging batons. Enthusiastic support would be demonstrated by throwing hats and caps into the air. On the other hand, deputies sometimes physically trampled on or chopped up unpopular bills." With the disintegration of the parliamentary system from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards the extensive use of gestures became a necessity for understanding speakers in the general turmoil. The reforms of the eighteenth century put an end to this riotous behaviour, but the tragic years of 1772–95 again witnessed dramatic gestures in the Diet. In 1772 a deputy from the Novogrod district, a certain Tadeusz Rejtan, protested against the legalization of the first partition of Poland by throwing himself on the floor and baring his chest, asking to be killed first. Almost twenty years later, in 1791, a deputy from the Kalisz district, Jan Suchozewski, who had tried to fight the reform of the Polish state, prostrated himself on the floor, begging the Sejm to postpone voting on the famous Constitution of 3 May.

Gestures were especially important on diplomatic missions, as the dignity of the King and the whole nation depended on them. In the royal instruction to Polish diplomats issued in 1601 we read:

Your gestures should be manly and solemn according to the occasion – not womanly, not childish, not fearful, not shameful, not irritable, not frivolous . . . Being received in audience you should stand solidly like a tree, keeping a straight face, looking straight ahead. Look at the person to whom you are sent, without any movement, without looking sideways, without shaking the head. Hands should be quiet, without any trembling, not tugging at the beard. You should abstain from coughing, spitting, blowing the nose, and scratching the head or other parts of the body. Do not pick your nose or teeth or bite your lips.

The King's instruction of 30 May 1667 to Polish diplomats sent to Moscovy told them 'to behave according to ancient custom without removing headgear' as well as 'to bow to the Czar according to Polish habit', meaning without knocking their heads on the floor as was Russian custom. The long dispute which followed in Moscow was only ended when the Poles were permitted to enter the room where the Czar was sitting with their heads covered; subsequently they had to remove their hats and caps, 'in conspecturn of the Czar sitting in maiestate', for a short while because, it was explained, to remain bareheaded would be against both the dignity of the Polish king and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Yet it did not hurt the Polish envoy's sense of pride to kiss the hands of the Czar and his son."⁴³

In the Saxon period (the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century) the courtiers of the king, dressed by now according to German fashion, hastily covered their great wigs when a Turkish envoy wearing a turban was received in audience.") Indeed, Polish noblemen were most touchy on the subject of doffing or tipping the hat. After the famous battle near Vienna in 1683, King John III Sobieski and his men were deeply hurt when the Emperor Leopold did not doff his hat either before Sobieski's son or his colonels.⁴⁴ The Emperor soon learned that he had made a mistake. In order to make amends 'he not only doffed his hat but almost threw it before our soldiers at every meeting' a Polish diarist observed.⁴⁵

Here we touch upon the vital question of military gesture. It is worth noting that the old Polish army did not have a special military drill for the nobles, who considered it beneath their

dignity to be dressed and trained as common soldiers. Only foreign mercenary troops and private armies of magnates had their own uniforms and special training. Nevertheless, on some military occasions a particular ritual had developed which was patterned upon general European models. For example, it was obligatory to take off hats before military banners. After a victory it was normal to throw the captured insignia and banners on the floor before the commander-in-chief or the King – a custom observed not only in Poland but also in the rest of Europe and connected with ancient Roman tradition. Polish parades were also modelled on common European military usage. According to Pasek, in the middle of the seventeenth century the famous Czarniecki's troops observed 'German manners': when passing a city or during a parade officers would ride ahead of their corps with lifted swords, noblemen with lifted pistols, and common soldiers with lifted guns.⁴⁶ The so-called 'round circle', a meeting of military troops usually summoned by the commander-in-chief to discuss important matters and to appoint the military deputies for the Sejm, was another ceremony peculiar to the Poles. Participants stood around a roped circle which they were forbidden to enter; before the meeting Holy Mass was celebrated, the ceremony being concluded by a military parade with a banquet following to which the ladies were invited."

The importance of gesture in religious life is well-known to historians. In Poland the expressivity of the Baroque Catholic Church was increased by strong orthodox and Greek Catholic influences, the latter being an important denomination within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Foreign visitors were amazed at the exotic practices of the local church, especially during prayer. Charles Ogier, writing in 1636, gives us an insight into the nature of these practices:

Everywhere there was sighing and crying for the Poles are very tender-hearted. When listening to the sermon, they start to groan audibly at the mention of the name of Christ, of the Blessed Virgin or at any other pious word or sentence. During Mass, when the Body of the Lord is elevated, they violently beat their faces, foreheads, cheeks and chests, and bang their heads against the earth.

On Good Friday, in the city of Gdańsk, Ogier witnessed a procession of flagellants behaving according to medieval custom now forgotten in Western countries:

Towards the evening, when we had returned to our Dominicans, I witnessed a spectacle which I had not seen before. Around seven o'clock a procession of penitents dressed in red garments assembled and after walking round the church while singing in Polish they prostrated themselves before the Body of the Lord; there they beat themselves with whips. I had thought that they did this very gently for outward appearances, but they whipped themselves so cruelly that it could have been the skin of an enemy. When after 100 strokes or more their prefect . . . gave a nod, they stopped and remained prostrated. I thought that it had ended. But immediately when the prefect began to beat the measure they renewed most violently the bloody game . . . Many of the prominent Polish nobles are said to chastise themselves in this way . . . during Holy Week publicly or privately. The penitents have covered their faces and cannot be recognized, unless by chance from their gait or posture.⁴⁸

A century later Kitowicz described the same custom in detail; it must therefore be authentically Polish and not a foreign invention."⁴⁹

In Polish churches dramatic gestures were in common usage: prostration to show penitence, lifting a sword to show one's readiness to defend the faith against the Turks, standing for hours with arms spread in the shape of a crucifix, or attending Holy Mass in full armour.⁵⁰ Gesture also played an extremely important role in Corpus Christi processions and in services dedicated to the Birth and Passion of Christ as they were accompanied by mimes performed by actors playing the roles of Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Roman soldiers, and King Herod. 'The actor playing Christ', wrote Kitowicz, 'would fall under the weight of his wooden cross; the soldiers would beat him and rattle his chains.'⁵¹ Such shows, eagerly attended by all layers of society, contributed to a uniform piety and a reduction of the gap between the elite and popular culture. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century the Polish church became a sort of national stage, with performers being both clergy and laity. Its significance was not purely religious. The

Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was tormented by heretics and pagans, just as Christ was by his persecutors: that was the message conveyed to both the gentry and the common people in the gestures of the archimimes. Messianic ideas – an important part of the gentry's culture – were thus spread among the lower classes.

The theatrical character of Polish mourning was regarded with astonishment by foreign visitors. A noble of moderate wealth would do his utmost to provide his parents with the kind of funeral accorded in Western countries only to princes of royal blood. The mourning chapel (*Castrum Doloris*), which was decorated with heraldic and symbolic signs and emblems, was built by the best architects available. The beginning of the funeral ceremony was announced by the ringing of church-bells and the firing of guns. At the funerals of kings, magnates, and other dignitaries the archimimus rode into the church on horseback and let himself fall next to the catafalque, thus symbolically representing the fate of the deceased. According to social rank, weapons and batons were broken with a loud clatter and seals and flag-staffs were smashed.** Hundreds of priests and monks prayed for days around the catafalque. A Frenchman visiting Poland in the middle of the seventeenth century wrote:

In Poland funerals are celebrated with great pomp, as festivities for the living rather than the dead. The corpse in the highly ornate coffin is put on a bier, drawn by six horses in black cloth. The coffin is covered by a large velvet pall adorned with a cross of red satin. Six or more servants, dressed in deep mourning, hold the edges of the pall. The bier is preceded by priests, monks, and other people carrying burning wax candles. Three riders on large black horses carry the weapons of the deceased: his sword, his lance, his spear. The procession proceeds very slowly and arrives at the church only after many hours. After the liturgical ceremony the horsemen ride into the church to break the weapons of the deceased on his coffin. Afterwards the participants at the funeral are invited to a rich banquet at which wine flows freely; as a result, even the clergy become drunk.**

CONCLUSION

All our examples indicate the importance of gesture in the culture of the Polish gentry, the use of which clearly increased during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On the one hand this process was a consequence of oriental influences on Polish noble society and the establishment of a Baroque style of life; on the other hand, of the gradual decline and disintegration of Polish political and social life, the predominance of magnates, the demoralization of much of the nobility, and the decline of the parliamentary system. This elaborate ritual of gestures, with its 'sacred' order and repetitions, saved the nobility from any encroachment and helped to strengthen their self-confidence and pride rather than maintain the Polish social order. By this specific ritual of gestures the gentry demonstrated their superior position at every public and private occasion. The life of a nobleman, from birth to death, was established with the help of this special code of behaviour. The gestures symbolized, and at the same time guarded, the dignity of noblemen, dignitaries, the King, and even the whole Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was also the most convenient way of expressing one's emotional state, both in public and private.

To what extent was the ritual of gestures as elaborated by the gentry also adopted by members of other social groups? – or did these rather develop their own language of gesture? Recent studies have shown that noble culture was very attractive to those rich burghers who wanted to diminish the gap between themselves and the more privileged layers of society.⁵⁴ 'Ennoblement', by adopting the comportment, gait, and manners of a gentleman, was very common in the Polish Commonwealth. Even rich peasants tried to imitate, when possible, the gestures and behaviour of their lords. The gentry struggled to prevent such dangerous encroachment by unmasking impostors. After many years of studying the genealogy of hundreds of families from Great and Little Poland, Walerian Trepka published his famous book *Liber charnorum* in the first decades of the seventeenth century.⁵⁵ Trepka, a typical member of the Polish gentry, was convinced that virtue and good manners resulted exclusively from noble birth. He analysed in detail the comportment of hundreds of persons, which led him to infer their

plebeian origin. A rustic will always betray himself, according to Trepka, by his posture, speech, gait, and gestures. For example, a certain Walenty Szymborski was 'plebeus, because both his looks and his manners are not becoming to a nobleman'. A certain Storc from Silesia was said to be a peasant because of his manners and was thus spurned by a noble girl whom he was courting. Another young man was said to be a rustic because of his coarse behaviour. The members of Zarczynski's family 'were giving away their plebeian, boorish background by hiding in corners and by being unable to make polite gestures or to converse with noblemen.'⁵⁶ Trepka mentions thousands of such examples and his book confirms our assumption that to belong to the Polish gentry from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries meant behaving in accordance with a special code. Posture, gait, indeed every movement of the body, was full of social significance.

The members of other social groups tried to adopt the behaviour of the gentry in order to enhance their social standing. Such attitudes were popular among the richer strata of society, the wealthy burghers and, exceptionally, rich peasants who could hope for upward social mobility. The members of the lower classes had no such hopes. As a result they rejected the imitative attitudes which were typical of the rich and ambitious 'plebeians' and created their own, autonomous world of gestures. How autonomous, however, is a subject for further research.

NOTES

- 1 See P. Mrozowski, 'Kłęczenie w kulturze Zachodu średniowiecznego: gest ekspiacji-postawa modlitewna (Kneeling in medieval western European culture: expiatory gesture-prayer gesture)', *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, 40 (1968), pp. 37-60; M. Bogucka, 'Le geste dans la vie religieuse, familiale, sociale, publique et politique de la noblesse polonaise aux XVIe, XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 30 (1983), pp. 4-19
- 2 See H. Dziechcinska (ed.), *Kultura żywego słowa w dawnej Polsce [Oval Culture in Old Poland]* (Warsaw, 1989), *passim*.
- 3 See R. Brilliant, *Gesture and Rank in Roman Art* (New Haven, 1963);

- A. Alföldi, *Die monarchische Repräsentation im römischen Kaiserreich* (Darmstadt, 1970); J. le Goff, *Pour un autre Moyen Age* (Paris, 1977), pp. 349–420; R. Schmidt-Wigand, 'Gebardensprache im mittelalterlichen Recht', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 16 (1982), pp. 363–79.
- 4 For characteristic examples see the Polish nobleman Walerian Nckanda Trepka who at the beginning of the seventeenth century collected evidence on false nobility in his *Liber Chamorum*, ed. W. Dworzaczek et al. (Wrocław, 1958), especially vol. I, no. 8, 101, 151, 181, 336, 468, 567, 641, 1144, 1874, 2098, 2327, 2465. See also pp. 205–6 in this chapter.
- 5 K. J. Wojsznarowicz, *Orator polityczny [The Political Orator]* (Cracow, 1677), p. 61.
- 6 J. Kitowicz, *Opis obyczajów za panowania Augusta III [Customs under the Rule of King August III]*, ed. R. Pollak (Wrocław, 1970), p. 110.
- 7 M. Rej, *Zwierciadło [The Mirror]*, eds J. C. Czubek and J. Los (Cracow, 1913), vol. I, pp. 75–6.
- 8 Bogucka, 'Le geste', p. 7.
- 9 *Cudzoziemcy o Polsce. Relacje i opinie [Foreign Visitors on Poland. Reports and Opinions]*, ed. J. Gintel (Cracow, 1971), vol. I, pp. 257, 325.
- 10 Cited after J. Bystron, *Dzieje obyczajów w dawnej Polsce [A History of Customs in Old Poland]* (Warsaw, 1976), vol. II, p. 162.
- 11 Bogucka, 'Le geste', p. 9.
- 12 *Cudzoziemcy o Polsce*, vol. I, p. 202 (Vanozzi), 195 (Mucante).
- 13 J. Ch. Pasek, *Pamiętnik [Memoirs]*, ed. W. Czaplinski (Wrocław, 1968), p. 93.
- 14 *Cudzoziemcy o Polsce*, vol. I, p. 297.
- 15 Bogucka, 'Le geste', p. 9.
- 16 In those times Ruthenia was part of the Polish Commonwealth.
- 17 Cited after Bystron *Dzieje obyczajów dawnej Polsce*, vol. II, p. 166.
- 18 Cited after Bystron, *Dzieje obyczajów w dawnej Polsce*, vol. II, pp. 166–8.
- 19 *Cudzoziemcy o Polsce*, vol. I, p. 205.
- 20 A. S. Radziwiłł, *Pamiętnik [Memoirs]*, eds A. Przybos and R. Zelewski (Warsaw, 1980), vol. II, pp. 409 (1644) and 472 (1646).
- 21 Bogucka, 'Le geste', pp. 10–11.
- 22 See Pasek, *Pamiętnik*, p. 15, and J. Ossolinski, *Pamiętnik [Memoirs]*, ed. W. Czaplinski (Warsaw, 1976), p. 48.
- 23 Radziwiłł, *Pamiętnik*, vol. II, pp. 48, 282, (1636); vol. I, p. 321 (1637).
- 24 Bystron, *Dzieje obyczajów w dawnej Polsce*, vol. II, pp. 180–1.

- 25 Radziwiłł, *Pamiętnik*, vol. I, p. 321.
- 26 W. Lozinski, *Zycie polskie w dawnych wiekach [Polish Life in Old Times]* (Cracow, 1958), p. 209.
- 27 *Cudzoziemcy o Polsce*, vol. I, p. 92.
- 28 See Z. Wojcik (ed.), *Eryka Lassoty i Wilhelma Beauplana opisy Ukrainy [The Descriptions of the Ukraine by Eric Lassota and Willem Beauplan]* (Warsaw, 1972), p. 174.
- 29 H. Malewska (ed.), *Listy staropolskie z epoki Wazów [Old Polish Letters from the Time of the Vasas]* (Warsaw, 1959), p. 110.
- 30 See Pasek, *Pamiętnik*, pp. 25, 103, 243f, 251, 297; *Cudzoziemcy o Polsce*, vol. I, p. 201.
- 31 Cited after Bysrron, *Dzieje obyczajów w dawnej Polsce*, vol. II, p. 168.
- 32 M. Matuszewicz, *Diariusz życia mego [Diary of My Life]*, ed. B. Królikowski (Warsaw, 1986), vol. I, p. 148.
- 33 See J. Piotrowski, *Dziennik wyprawy St. Bntorego pod Pskdw [Diary of King Stephen Batory's Campaign nt Psków]*, cd. A. Czuczyński (Cracow, 1894), p. 36; A. Śliwiński, *Jan Zamoyski, kanclerz i hetman wielki koronny [Jan Zamoyski, Great Chancellor and Commander-in-Chief]* (Warsaw, 1947), p. 96.
- 34 Pasek, *Pamiętnik*, pp 25, 366.
- 35 Radziwiłł, *Pamiętnik*, vol. I, p. 400.
- 36 Cited after Bogucka, *Anna Jagiellonka* (Warsaw, 1964), p. 100.
- 37 J. Szujski (ed.), *Diariusz sejmu piotrkowskiego w r. 1548 [Diary of the Sejm held in the City of Piotrków in the year 1548]* (Cracow, 1872), pp. 178–207.
- 38 See Bogucka, 'Le geste', p. 9.
- 39 See J. Michalski (cd.), *Historia sejmu polskiego [History of the Polish Sejm]* (2 vols, Warsaw, 1984), vol. I, pp. 258–9.
- 40 W. Czaplinski (ed.), *Caroli Ogerii Ephemerides sive iter Danicum, Suecicum, Polonicum* (Gdansk, 1950), vol. II, pp. 127–9.
- 41 See *Historia sejmu polskiego*, pp. 250ff; Radziwiłł, *Pamiętnik*, vol. II, p. 358.
- 42 Cited after A. Przybos and R. Żelewski (eds), *Dyplomaci w dawnych czasach. Relacje staropolskie z 16–18 w. [Diplomats in Ancient Times. Old Polish Reports from the 16th–18th Century]* (Cracow, 1958), pp. 170–1, (1601), 339–40 (1667), 345 (Polish envoy).
- 43 Bystron, *Dzieje obyczajów w dawnej Polsce*, vol. II, pp. 165–6.
- 44 See J. Sobieski, *Listy do Marysienki [Letters of Jan Sobieski to his wife 'Marysienka']*, ed. L. Kukulski (Warsaw, 1962), p. 527.
- 45 Cited after Bystron, *Dzieje obyczajów w dawnej Polsce*, vol. II, p. 165.
- 46 Pasek, *Pamiętnik*, p. 14.

- 47 For an exhaustive description see Matuszewicz, *Diariusz życia mego*, vol. I, pp. 691ff.
- 48 *Caroli Ogierii Ephemerides* vol. II, pp. 74, 70 respectively.
- 49 Kitowicz, *Opis obyczajów za panowania Augusta III*, pp. 43ff.
- 50 See Bogucka, *Obyczaje staropolskie [Old Polish Customs]*, forthcoming.
- 51 Kitowicz, *Opis obyczajów za panowania Augusta III*, p. 45.
- 52 J. Chróścicki, *Pompa funebris* (Warsaw, 1974), passim.
- 53 *Cudzoziemcy o Polsce*, vol. I, p. 326.
- 54 See Bogucka, 'L'attrait de la culture nobiliaire? Sarmatisation de la bourgeoisie polonaise au XVIIIe siècle', *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 33 (1976), pp. 23–42.
- 55 See note 4.
- 56 For these examples see the *Liber Chamorum*, vol. I, pp. 472, 514, 645, respectively.