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FROM EPAMINONDAS TO STANISŁAW KONARSKI. ANCIENT GREEK HERITAGE AND ASPIRATIONS FOR INDEPENDENCE IN THE POLISH-LITHUANIAN COMMONWEALTH IN THE MID-18TH CENTURY

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Epaminondas, written by Konarski in 1756, is a five-act tragedy set in ancient Thebes in the 4th century BC. The play centers on the historical Theban military leader Epaminondas and his internal dilemmas concerning fighting enemies, acquiring power, patriotism, and the conflict between the good of the homeland and adherence to strict laws.[1] Celebrated throughout the ancient Greek and Roman worlds, Epaminondas (c. 419/411–362 BC) was considered one of Greek history's most significant figures who transformed the city of Thebes from a weak state dependent on Sparta into a leading power in Greece. He defeated the Spartans at the Battle of Leuctra in 371 BC and liberated the Messenian helots. Against the backdrop of ancient times, Konarski critiques contemporary issues in the Rzeczpospolita, including paid treason, abuses of power, and an ineffective government system.

Stanisław Konarski (1700-1773) was a Polish priest, publicist, educator, and playwright. After graduating from school in 1715, he joined the Piarist order, began his novitiate, and was affiliated with the nationally famous and highly distinguished Piarist College in Podoliniec (present-day northern Slovakia) for seven years, specializing in the humanities. He became a teacher of syntax and

[1] This article is devoted to the work of Stanisław Konarski, *Epaminondas*, edited by Jacek Wójcicki, Warszawa 2023 (Biblioteka Pisarzy Polskiego Oświecenia [Library of Writers of the Polish Enlightenment], vol. 25). Thanks are due to Massimo Nafissi for his comments. On Konarski's biography, see: Konopczyński 1926; Rose 1929; Kurdybacha 1957; Mrozowska 2023.

poetry, and he engaged in catechetical work and philosophy. He also taught at the Collegium Resoviense in Rzeszów. After that, Konarski traveled to Italy, where he studied in Rome and worked as a teacher of rhetoric at the Collegium Nazarene. He subsequently went to Paris to study educational theories, where he became familiar with the writings of John Locke. In 1732, inspired by Józef Andrzej Załuski, Konarski began editing a vast collection of constitutions and Parliament (Sejm) laws titled *Volumina Legum*.[2] He established the renowned Collegium Nobilium in Warsaw (1740) and founded the first public reference library on the European mainland (1747). Konarski reformed Piarist education in Poland in accordance with his educational program, the *Ordinationes Visitationis Apostolicae* (1755). These reforms were a turning point in the 18th-century effort to improve the Polish education system. His political treatises, such as *On the Means of Effective Counsels* (*O skutecznym rad sposobie*, 1760-1763), are invaluable works engaging in efforts to save the Rzeczpospolita (Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) in the face of a looming collapse due to pressure from hostile neighbors (Prussia, Russia, and Austria).

In 2023, a new critical edition of Stanisław Konarski's tragedy titled *Epaminondas* was published, featuring a carefully edited text, detailed explanations, and commentaries.[3] This edition is based on a manuscript housed in the Vilnius Historical Archives. Earlier editions of the drama were published under the title *The Tragedy of Epaminondas* (*Tragedia Epaminondy*).[4]

The most important ancient source for Konarski's *Epaminondas* was the Latin biography of Epaminondas by Cornelius Nepos (1st century BC) from *De viris illustribus*. Konarski also drew upon the Latin *Memorable Deeds and Sayings* (*Factorum et dictorum memorabilium libri novem*) by Valerius Maximus (1st century AD) and the Greek *Sayings of Kings and Commanders* (*Basileon apophthegmata kai strategon*) by Plutarch (died c. 120 AD). His educational background, the availability of Plutarch's works, and the thematic overlap provide strong circumstantial evidence for the assumption that Konarski was familiar with Plutarch's *Life of Pelopidas* while writing *Epaminondas.* Pelopidas was a close friend of Epaminondas, and his *Life* contains a plethora of information about the latter.

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[2] Konarski 1732-1782.

[3] Wójcicki 2023. An international conference was held in commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the death of Stanisław Konarski dedicated to his legacy. It was organized by the Institute of History at Maria Curie-Sklodowska University in Lublin, the Institute of Literary Research at the Polish Academy of Sciences, and the Polish Province of the Piarist Order. During the conference, the Polish Classics Theater (directed by Jarosław Gajewski) performed Konarski's *Epaminondas*. After 264 years, Konarski's tragedy returned to the Collegium Nobilium Theater.

[4] The first critical edition of Konarski's work, released a century ago by Wacław Kloss, the director of the Warsaw Władysław IV Gymnasium, included both linguistic and historical explanations (Kloss 1923). See also Nowakowski 1882.

The historical context of Konarski's play is essential. The state of Thebes fights to regain its independence against Sparta and the domination of mighty Persia. Konarski perfectly understands these circumstances, introducing a crucial Persian envoy into the tragedy. In 371 BC, the Thebans, led by Epaminondas, defeated the Spartans at Leuctra. It is with the recollection of this victory that the tragedy begins. In Thebes, the oligarchic, pro-Spartan faction clashes with the democratic party, which supports independence and Epaminondas's efforts. The plot revolves around accusations against the victorious commander of unlawfully extending the term of command over the army, which Epaminondas justifies as necessary to maximize the advantage over Sparta. His opponents use this as a reason for the unconditional application of the death penalty, as provided for in the law. Not all details correspond to historical reality, but Konarski brilliantly captures the events in Thebes as an allegory of the situation in Poland around the 1750s.

The main character does not appear on stage until Act II. He refuses to attend any celebrations in his honor, recognizing every citizen's achievements as merely a duty and repayment of a debt incurred to his homeland. In addition, he rejects attempts at bribery by the Persian envoy Diomedon (Dyjomedon), citing the binding laws of Thebes. Act III is characterized by an escalation in tension, marked by the Persian envoy's obstinate attempt to bribe Epaminondas. In response, Epaminondas vehemently rejects the offer, asserting that no amount of wealth can bribe him. Act IV depicts the city torn apart by rebellion. Epaminondas is taken to prison. Act V includes, above all, a trial of Epaminondas by the city authorities, which is paradoxical because the accused demands that a death sentence be passed on him, while the polemarchs, who are his friends but must uphold the law, try to avoid such a verdict. Epaminondas's unyielding stance as a defender of the principle of *dura lex, sed lex* remains unchanged, even with the arrival of Pelopidas with good news about the pacification of the rebellious city. Epaminondas dictates to the judges the text of the epitaph he wants for himself, which is actually a list of his own merits for his homeland. After such an apology, Epaminondas does not hear the death sentence, but the sounds of general enthusiasm and the announcement that he will be honored by grateful Thebes. The finale of the drama brings the account of witnesses to the suppression of the revolt; the crowd kills the rebellious son of Pelopidas. The dialogues condemn the corrupters of youth and call for revenge against them. However, Epaminondas once again shows noble magnanimity, and thanks to his intervention, the main oligarchic reactionary who survived the riots is sentenced only to banishment. The work culminates in a scene of a triumphant procession, which, in a joyful mood, solemnly dances onto the stage around the bronze statue of Epaminondas.

In his drama, Konarski highlights the contentious role of laws codified by the state. The law of Thebes threatened the death penalty for the greatest commander in the city's history. Similar cases occurred during the Peloponnesian War in Athens.

Konarski alludes to the laws in Poland, with which he was very familiar. After many years of work, Konarski compiled a large corpus of statutes enacted in Poland over several centuries. These laws contained outstanding government solutions and some poorly functioning regulations; Konarski used his tragedy to encourage political discussions in Poland and draw consequences regarding improved regulations.

The indication of politicians being corrupted by foreign ambassadors is unusually evident, a problem that was particularly pronounced in 18th-century Poland when many dignitaries were corrupt traitors serving the interests of powerful neighbors, including Prussia, Russia, and Austria. Konarski could not write about it openly, but the power of the allusion is compelling. The character of the Persian ambassador, who attempts to bribe Epaminondas, plays a vital role in the tragedy.

An important question has been overlooked in modern scholarly studies. Why did Konarski choose Epaminondas, arguably the most outstanding commander in ancient Greece, as his central figure? Epaminondas was successful in many campaigns and implemented innovative military tactics that revolutionized Greek and Macedonian warfare. Young Philip, who would later become king of Macedonia and father of Alexander the Great, spent a few years in Thebes as a hostage, closely observing the military reforms of Pelopidas and Epaminondas. He would later apply these solutions in Macedonia. Konarski longed for a strong ruler or commander who could liberate Poland from the corrupting influence of foreign powers. Poland had great potential, including robust military capabilities, but its hostile neighbors consistently and violently limited its economic growth and political stability. With adequate state organization, Poland could have created a strong army to deter enemies. However, the neighboring powers did not allow the army to be enlarged. These motives and inspirations, in the face of overwhelming enemy forces, come to the fore in this passage, which is all the more significant given the circumstances:

Epaminondas, Act I, l. 15-20:

> There you see those proud and stern Spartans,
> who forged chains for Greece and Thebes:
> a numerous and valiant army, as if certain of their loot,
> for ours were not there, not even a third of us.
> Courage—perhaps, but the sides were uneven:
> for every five Spartans, there was barely one of ours.[5]

Epaminondas's deeds are briefly described in some ancient works. However, Epaminondas's life is missing from the most famous collection of ancient biographies, Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. Plutarch of Chaeronea (c. 45-120 AD) was one

[5] 'Tu pyszne one widzisz i harde Spartany / co kuli na Grecyją i Teby kajdany: / liczne i bitne wojsko jak na pewny leci / łup, bo naszych nie było i części tam trzeci<ej>. / Serca - może, lecz strony nierówne obiedwie: / na piąciu Spartańczyków nasz był jeden ledwie.'

of ancient Greece's most prolific writers, particularly celebrated for his biographical works that paired Greek and Roman figures to illustrate moral virtues and character traits. In the *Life of Agesilaus* (28), Plutarch mentions discussing portents and prodigies in his *Life of Epaminondas*, indicating its existence (see also *Life of Pelopidas,* 27.4). These and other sources suggest that the *Life of Epaminondas* existed, but it is lost.[6] Based on historical evidence, it appears that Plutarch indeed composed a *Life of Epaminondas* as part of his renowned *Parallel Lives* series. However, this work has not survived to the present day.[7] Plutarch included Epaminondas as a character in his dialogue, *De Genio* (*On the Genius of Socrates*). Epaminondas, a secondary but symbolically important character, participates in the conspiracy to liberate Thebes, contributes to the philosophical discussions that mask the plot, and embodies the virtues of restraint, wisdom, and civic duty.[8]

Overall, the new edition of the tragedy Epaminondas has initiated discussions about Konarski's role in Polish history and literature, the vibrant presence of ancient Greek cultural traditions in Poland, and the character of Epaminondas. Konarski's *Epaminondas* fits perfectly into the tradition of great Greek tragedy. He portrayed Epaminondas's dilemma between the good of his homeland, which was achieved by defeating enemies, and another good: the legal order. For Konarski, these allusions pertained to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It is astonishing how relevant this dilemma remains today when numerous voices say that adequate and balanced politics require reference to Greek tragedy. In his new book, American political writer Robert Kaplan puts it this way: 'As the Greeks defined it, tragedy is not the triumph of evil over good but the triumph of one good over another good that causes suffering.'[9] For contemporary writers, this

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[6] Wilamowitz advanced the view that Pausanias (9.13.1-15.6) is a simple epitome of Plutarch's lost biography of Epaminondas. Peper elaborated this concept. See Wilamowitz 1874; Peper 1912. Tuplin (1984) argues that the Wilamowitz / Peper hypothesis, in its pure form, cannot be sustained. He calls for a more nuanced understanding of Pausanias' sources and methods when recounting the *Life of Epaminondas.* By analogy, it is worth noting that Pausanias relied on Plutarch's *Life of Philopoimen* in his excursus on that politician (Nafissi 2025). Cf. Frakes 2017.

[7] Geiger 2019. Epaminondas's accomplishments would have made him an ideal subject for Plutarch's biographical examinations of virtue, character, and leadership. The apparent pairing of Epaminondas with Scipio Africanus, the Roman general who defeated Hannibal, aligns with Plutarch's method of comparing Greek and Roman figures who demonstrated similar qualities.

[8] Pelling 2008.

[9] Kaplan 2023, XIV. Kaplan considers the lessons for foreign policy making to be drawn from classical Greek and Shakespearean tragedies to offer a view that US policymakers must 'think tragically to avoid tragedy'. Unfortunately, this perspective is often associated with realist theory or similar concepts, which are unlikely to produce the desired lasting solutions, and tends to overemphasize military factors and options. For aspects of realist theory, see M.J. Olbrycht, 'Parthian History: Research Approaches and Methodological Problems' in this volume. Kaplan (2023, 8) claims that 'tragedy is about bravely trying to fix the world, but only within limits'.

is an almost unsolvable dilemma formulated pessimistically, without a clear metaphysical perspective. For Konarski, however, the tragic dilemma was crowned by Epaminondas's willingness to sacrifice himself for the good of his homeland. And this attitude prevailed.

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Abstract

Epaminondas, written by Konarski in 1756, is a five-act tragedy set in ancient Thebes in the 4th century BC. The play centers on the historical Theban military leader Epaminondas and his internal dilemma concerning the balance between fighting enemies, acquiring power, patriotism, and the conflict between the good of the homeland and adherence to strict laws. Such dilemmas remain valid today, as numerous voices argue that adequate and balanced politics require reference to Greek tragedy. In one of his new books, American political writer Robert Kaplan claims that

He and other writers seek a hidden grammar of the modern era in Greek tragedy, at least for the Anglo-Saxon world, which is experiencing a cultural and religious crisis. Kaplan fails to appreciate a key factor in Greek tragedy—hubris—which significantly alters the validity of his approach.

'as the Greeks defined it, tragedy is not the triumph of evil over good but the triumph of one good over another good that causes suffering.' For Konarski, the tragic dilemma was crowned by Epaminondas's willingness to sacrifice himself for the good of his homeland. The new edition of the tragedy *Epaminondas* has initiated discussions about Konarski's role in Polish history and literature, the vibrant presence of ancient Greek cultural heritage in Poland, and the character of Epaminondas. Konarski brilliantly captures the events in Thebes as an allegory of the situation in Poland around the 1750s. The indication of politicians being corrupted by foreign ambassadors is unusually evident, a problem that was particularly pronounced in 18th-century Poland: many dignitaries were corrupt traitors serving the interests of powerful neighbors, including Prussia, Russia, and Austria. Konarski longed for a strong ruler or commander who could liberate Poland from the corrupting influence of foreign powers.