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COMMON WEALTH, COMMON GOOD

THE POLITICS OF VIRTUE IN EARLY
MODERN POLAND-LITHUANIA

BENEDICT WAGNER-RUNDELL

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*The Politics of Virtue in Early Modern
Poland-Lithuania*

BENEDICT WAGNER-RUNDELL

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In memoriam Florian Lipiński
(4 May 1922/3–29 December 1997)

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List of Abbreviations

AGAD	Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych [Central State Archive], Warsaw
APG	Archiwum Państwowe w Gdańsku [State Archive in Gdańsk]
APKr	Archiwum Państwowe w Krakowie [State Archive in Kraków]
Bibl. Czart.	Biblioteka Fundacji im. XX Czartoryskich [Library of the Princes Czartoryski Foundation], Kraków
Bibl. Ossol.	Biblioteka Zakładu Narodowego im. Ossolińskich / Ossolineum [Library of the Ossoliński National Foundation/ Ossolineum], Wrocław
Bibl. PAN Kórnik	Biblioteka Polskiej Akademii Nauk (PAN) w Kórniku [Library of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) in Kórnik]
Bibl. PAN Krak.	Biblioteka Polskiej Akademii Nauk (PAN) w Krakowie [Library of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) in Kraków]
BN	Biblioteka Narodowa [National Library], Warsaw
BUW	Biblioteka Uniwersyteku Warszawskiego [Warsaw University Library]
TP	Teki Pawińskiego [Collections of sejmik records assembled by Adolf Pawiński]
VL	Volumina Legum

Introduction

THE POLITICS OF VIRTUE

This study analyses the political culture of the early modern Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania, with a particular focus on the concept of virtue, and its role within Polish-Lithuanian political culture and discourse. Using the turbulent first two decades of the reign of King Augustus II (r. 1697–1733) as a case-study to explore wider trends, it will argue for two key propositions. First, that virtue was an indispensable part of Polish-Lithuanian political thought, and an indispensable intellectual tool for early modern Polish-Lithuanian political activists and commentators to understand and analyse the polity within which they lived and the challenges that the Commonwealth faced. Second, that adopting a moral rather than structural perspective, analysing the Commonwealth and its evident problems in terms of the moral failings of individuals rather than flaws in laws or institutions, was neither a substitute for nor a barrier to serious discussion of how to tackle the chronic dysfunction of the Commonwealth's government. On the contrary, the belief that public virtue had declined and needed to be revived could inspire substantial proposals for constitutional reform.

The Commonwealth's political culture was, as has been well documented by historians, overwhelmingly a noble culture, as a result of the almost complete domination of public life in Poland-Lithuania by its hereditary nobility, the *szlachta*. Proportionally and in absolute numbers one of the largest noble estates in early modern Europe, and notable for its religious, linguistic, and economic diversity, the *szlachta* considered themselves the Commonwealth's political nation: they described themselves as its citizens (*obywatele*), the 'democratic' component of the Commonwealth's government when analysed in Aristotelian terms.¹ The *szlachta* monopolized both public offices and the ownership of landed property; they even

¹ For a discussion of how contemporary political commentators used the Aristotelian *forma mixta* as a model to describe the Commonwealth's political system, see Chapter 1.

propagated a mythical history of their own origins—Sarmatism—that represented them as an entirely separate people from the Commonwealth's other inhabitants (peasants, burghers, and Jews), ruling the land by right of ancient conquest.² With the szlachta dominating public life in this way, the political discourse of the early modern Commonwealth was thus one created by nobles and for nobles. The sources that will be used here are therefore almost exclusively of szlachta origin, whether records of public councils such as the Commonwealth's central parliament, the Sejm, or local assemblies, the sejmiki, or political pamphlets or treatises, which were generally produced by szlachta writers and addressed to a szlachta audience. As the noble political arena was also, in theory at least, an exclusively male sphere—members of the szlachta routinely addressed one another as 'brother'—the political discourse that is being examined was also an almost entirely male one.³

It is also important to note that szlachta political discourse was primarily a practical one, in the sense that it was a discourse of political practitioners not one produced by writers or commentators observing the Commonwealth's political life from the sidelines. In principle, every adult male *szlachcic* (nobleman, member of the szlachta) was entitled to participate in the Commonwealth's public affairs, either in local fora such as the sejmiki or through central institutions such as the Sejm.⁴ Szlachta

² On the Sarmatian myth and the ideas and culture it supported, see Maria Bogucka, *The Lost World of the "Sarmatians": Custom as the Regulator of Polish Social Life in Early Modern Times* (Warsaw, 1996), Stanisław Cynarski, 'The Shape of Sarmatian Ideology in Poland', *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 19 (1968), pp. 5–17 (p. 5), Cynarski, 'Sarmatyzm: ideologia i styl życia', in Janusz Tazbir (ed.), *Polska XVII wieku: Państwo, społeczeństwo, kultura* (Warsaw, 1969), pp. 220–43, and Tazbir, *Kultura szlachecka w Polsce: rozkwit, upadek, relikty* (Poznań, 1998). Note also that szlachta commentators often glossed over exceptions to their monopoly on political participation, such as the right of the Royal Prussian sejmik (Landtag) to send envoys to the Sejm.

³ This is not, of course, to deny that individual women could—and did—play influential roles in the Commonwealth's political life: examples of women wielding significant influence would include King Jan III Sobieski's queen Maria Kazimiera (1641–1716), or Elżbieta Sieniawska (née Lubomirska) (1669–1729), the wife of Crown Grand Hetman Adam Sieniawski (1666–1726) and her daughter Maria Zofia (1698–1771), who was the wife first of Lithuanian Field Hetman Stanisław Denhoff (1673–1728) and later of August Czartoryski (1697–1782), head of the Czartoryski 'family'. Their influence, however, was almost entirely kept behind the scenes as women were strictly excluded from the Commonwealth's public institutions. As will be discussed in Chapter 1, 'private' influence of this sort was the object of profound suspicion among many szlachta commentators, and the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries saw several complaints against the alleged 'private' role in public life of women, in particular the queen Maria Sobieska (see Chapter 3).

⁴ There were some legal barriers to participation: for example, in theory only szlachta owning property in a given region could attend that region's sejmik, which in principle disenfranchised both those whose property was elsewhere in the Commonwealth and the entirely landless. In practice, however, propertyless szlachta were rarely excluded from the sejmiki. More actively enforced was the gradual exclusion of members of the Commonwealth's

political discourse was thus created inside the Commonwealth's political institutions, and this is reflected in the types of sources that remain, with records of the proceedings of assemblies such as Sejms and sejmiki and polemical tracts on particular debates or controversies by far predominating over abstract treatises on the theory or philosophy of politics and government. To misquote a later eighteenth-century foreign observer of the Commonwealth, the *szlachta* did not need to spend time discussing in the abstract what should be done: they had the ability to act, or at least to try to.

In some ways, therefore, analysing *szlachta* political culture is more of an anthropological task than one of political philosophy: the historian must attempt to use the records created by the practice of politics in the early modern Commonwealth to uncover the assumptions and values shared by its practitioners. This includes, perhaps most importantly, those assumptions and values that were so completely and uncontestedly shared that they were not, indeed needed not be, openly debated or analysed: the 'universe of the undiscussed'.

This study will argue that one central value in *szlachta* political culture was that of public virtue. The meaning and historical roots (in particular in classical Greek and Roman political thought) of this concept will be discussed in Chapter 1. But virtue as a political value can be summarized as the belief that each individual citizen is required at all times to subordinate his personal, private interests to the demands of the common good of the political community. It is important to emphasize that this concept of virtue was a political one, relating to the public sphere and the conduct of public affairs, rather than to the personal morality or conduct of citizens in their private lives. Indeed, given the central role of virtue in the Commonwealth's political discourse, it is remarkable how little discussion there was of the relationship between public and private virtue, for example of how a virtuous citizen should dispose of his private property, or behave towards his family. In *szlachta* public discourse, discussion of virtue concentrated almost exclusively on the political sphere.⁵

religious minorities from public life, with for example the last non-Catholic envoy ejected from the Sejm in 1718, and non-Catholics formally barred from the Sejm and from serving as judges on the Tribunal in 1733.

⁵ One partial exception to this was religion, where Catholic piety was often acknowledged as necessary for virtue, while the coming of Christianity was often identified as key to the origins of *szlachta* virtue and liberty in *szlachta* writers' accounts of the Commonwealth's early history. Anna Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Regina Libertas: Wolność w polskiej myśli politycznej XVIII wieku* (Gdańsk, 2006), pp. 260–4. Jerzy Lukowski, 'The *Szlachta* and their Ancestors in the Eighteenth Century', *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, 111, 3 (2004), pp. 161–82, and *Disorderly Liberty: The Political Culture of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 2010).

LIBERTY AND VIRTUE

Virtue was intimately connected to another key value in szlachta political thought, namely liberty. The szlachta concept of liberty, and the institutions it underpinned, in particular the *liberum veto* and the elective monarchy, have generally been the focus of historians' analysis of the Commonwealth's political culture in the early modern period. Arguably the most important figure in modern scholarship on szlachta liberty was Władysław Konopczyński, who was active during the first half of the twentieth century.

Konopczyński presented szlachta liberty as less a single political concept and more an assortment of individual privileges, political, social, and economic, including the freedom from arbitrary arrest, freedom from taxation, and the szlachta's monopoly on public office and the ownership of land. Together, these various privileges sustained the szlachta's position of social and economic predominance in Poland-Lithuania, leaving the szlachta free to lord it over the Commonwealth's peasants, townspeople, and Jews. According to Konopczyński, the capstone of this edifice of individual privileges (described by szlachta writers as their 'golden liberty') was the *liberum veto*, the right of a single *szlachcic* to bar a decision of a local sejmik or of a single envoy to the central Sejm to block legislation and even to disrupt an entire parliamentary session. The *liberum veto* equipped the szlachta to resist any challenge to its privileges, and was passionately defended throughout the early modern period by all but a handful of reformists. However, Konopczyński argued that the *liberum veto* also fatally undermined the effectiveness of the Commonwealth's central government, ultimately leaving it powerless to resist partition at the hands of its neighbours (Russia, Prussia, and the Habsburg monarchy, states more centralized and capable of mobilizing military resources than the Commonwealth) at the end of the eighteenth century.⁶

Konopczyński thus portrayed the szlachta's defence of its 'golden liberty' and the *liberum veto* as a triumph of the szlachta's particular interest over the common interest of Poland-Lithuania in maintaining its independence. In this, Konopczyński echoed the historians of the nineteenth-century 'Kraków School', who argued that the Commonwealth was doomed to partition by its internal weaknesses and the szlachta's selfish preservation of its

⁶ Władysław Konopczyński, *Liberum veto: studium porównawczo-historyczne* (Kraków, 1918, 2nd edition Kraków, 2002) and *Dzieje Polski Nowożytnej* (2nd edition, Warsaw, 1986). See also Konopczyński, *Polska a Szwecja: od pokoju Oliwskiego do upadku Rzeczypospolitej 1660–1795* (Warsaw, 1924).

privileges.⁷ Ironically, both Konopczyński and the 'Kraków School' historians were themselves echoing the moralizing claims of eighteenth-century szlachta politicians and commentators who, as discussed in Chapter 2, frequently attributed the disorder and dysfunction in the Commonwealth's government to the failure of individuals to act virtuously and put aside their 'private' interests in favour of the common good.⁸

Following Konopczyński, historians such as Juliusz Bardach, Władysław Czapliński, Henryk Olszewski, and Jerzy Lukowski have analysed szlachta political thought primarily in terms of the szlachta's ultimately self-destructive attachment to its 'golden liberty' and have focused on attempting to understand why the various attempts to reform the Commonwealth, including attempts to abolish the *liberum veto*, proved unsuccessful until the very end of the eighteenth century, by which point it was too late to preserve the Commonwealth's independence.

Once again echoing the language of early modern szlachta commentators, a running theme in this historiography has been an emphasis on the 'demoralization' of the szlachta during the heyday of the 'golden liberty'. One particular period identified as one of szlachta selfishness and resulting political chaos in the Commonwealth is that of the reigns of Kings Augustus II (r. 1697–1733) and his son Augustus III (r. 1733–63) of the Saxon Wettin dynasty, the so-called 'Saxon period'. The szlachta's defence of their particular privileges at the expense of the Commonwealth's general interest in effective government and independence from foreign domination has thus been identified not just as an isolated failing, but as part of a general moral decline among the szlachta, especially during the Saxon period. In a sense, these historians have remained within the discourse of virtue and its loss as the cause of the Commonwealth's decline, rather than engaging critically with it.⁹

⁷ See, for example, Michał Bobrzyński, *Dzieje Polski w zarysie* (Kraków, 1879), or Józef Szujewski, *Dzieje Polski według ostatnich badań* (Lwów, 1866) and *Historii polskiej treściwie opowiedzanej książką dwanaście* (Kraków, 1880).

⁸ The continuity between eighteenth-century polemics and the arguments of the 'Kraków School' may at least in part be explained by the historical context in which historians such as Bobrzyński were writing. Following the Partitions of Poland, and the failed uprisings of 1830–1 and 1863–4 against the partitioning powers, inevitably Polish historians were drawn to the questions of 'what went wrong?' and 'who was to blame?' Lukowski has commented that the 'course of history turned [nineteenth-century historians] . . . into moralists'. Lukowski, *Disorderly Liberty*, vii.

⁹ See for example Juliusz Bardach (ed.), *Historia państwa i prawa Polski*; vol. 2, Zdzisław Kaczmarczyk and Bogusław Leśnodorski (eds.), *Od połowy XV wieku do r. 1795* (Warsaw, 1966), Władysław Czapliński, *O Polsce siedemnastowiecznej: Problemy i sprawy* (Warsaw, 1966), Henryk Olszewski, *Sejm Rzeczypospolitej epoki oligarchii 1652–1763: Prawo Praktyka Teoria Programy* (Poznań, 1966), Lukowski, *Liberty's Folly: The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1991). In his more recent work, however, Lukowski has engaged critically with eighteenth-century szlachta rhetoric of virtue and

This negative analysis of szlachta liberty has, however, been challenged by some revisionist historians, most notably Andrzej Sulima Kamiński. Kamiński has argued that the szlachta's elaborate structure of shared political rights, along with the myth of their shared Sarmatian origins, allowed a religiously pluralist, multilingual noble estate whose members were geographically widely dispersed, to forge a common identity. The Commonwealth's decentralized system of government and tradition of decision-making by consensus, enshrined in the *liberum veto*, ensured that the views of all parts of the szlachta state were heard, with no individual region or special interest group being able to impose its will upon the rest. This sense of common identity and equal rights to participate in government were, Kamiński has argued, crucial to ensuring that the vast and diverse Commonwealth held together for as long as it did, despite the various centrifugal pressures that it faced.¹⁰ In a similar vein, Andrzej Walicki and Robert Frost have emphasized that the practice of decision-making by unanimity and the *liberum veto* created powerful incentives for different interest groups to compromise with each other in order to reach consensus.¹¹

Another group of revisionists, led by Jacek Staszewski, has challenged Konopczyński's claim that the szlachta's 'golden liberty', including the *liberum veto*, condemned the Commonwealth's central government to dysfunction and ineffectiveness. Staszewski and his followers have emphasized the freedom of action enjoyed by the Commonwealth's kings and their ministers, in particular during the Saxon period when Augustus II

corruption, as will be discussed below. Perhaps the most striking example of the tendency to connect szlachta conservatism with stupidity and moral degeneracy is Zamoyski's description of the young Karol Radziwiłł, later head of one of the Commonwealth's most powerful magnate families and a leader of the conservative Confederation of Bar, as a teenage alcoholic who was only taught to read by having metal letters hung in trees as targets for pistol practice. Adam Zamoyski, *The Last King of Poland* (London, 1992), p. 21.

¹⁰ Andrzej Sulima Kamiński, *Historia Rzeczypospolitej wielu Narodów 1505–1795: Obywatele, ich państwa, społeczeństwo, kultura* (Lublin, 2000) and *Republic vs Autocracy: Poland-Lithuania and Russia 1686–1697* (Cambridge, MA, 1993).

¹¹ Frost has compared the effect of the *liberum veto* in the Commonwealth to that of national vetoes in international institutions such as the European Union, where requirements to reach consensus can help protect smaller member states against bullying by more powerful partners, albeit at some cost to the institution's ability to make rapid decisions. Robert Frost, 'The Nobility of Poland-Lithuania, 1569–1795', in Hamish Scott (ed.), *The European Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (2 vols., London, 1995), vol. 2 (*Northern, Central and Eastern Europe*), pp. 183–222. See also Frost, "Liberty without License?" 'The Failure of Polish Democratic Thought in the Seventeenth Century', in Mieczysław Biskupski and James Pula (eds.), *Polish Democratic Thought from the Renaissance to the Great Emigration: Essays and Documents* (New York, 1990), pp. 29–54, Andrzej Walicki, *The Three Traditions in Polish Patriotism and their Contemporary Relevance* (Bloomington, IN, 1988) and *The Enlightenment and the Birth of Modern Nationhood: Polish Political Thought from Noble Republicanism to Tadeusz Kościuszko* (Notre Dame, IN, 1989).

and Augustus III were able to draw on the financial, military, and diplomatic resources of their Electorate of Saxony.¹² In his studies of the Swedish Vasa dynasty (Kings Zygmunt III (r. 1587–1632), Władysław IV (r. 1632–48), and Jan Kazimierz (r. 1648–68)), Frost has similarly emphasized the power of the monarchy and its independence from institutions such as the Sejm, while noting how close the Vasa kings came in the middle of the seventeenth century to breaking free of the legal restrictions on the crown and laying the foundations for a strong hereditary monarchy.¹³

Against Konopczyński's view of *szlachta* liberty as no more than a collection of privileges, Edward Opaliński and especially Anna Grześkowiak-Krwawicz have argued that a single, coherent concept of liberty did exist in *szlachta* political thought, based on a concept of 'republican liberty'. Drawing on the work of J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, Grześkowiak-Krwawicz has argued that in *szlachta* political culture, liberty was understood above all as independence from the will of a ruler. This concept encapsulated both the *szlachta*'s freedom from interference from government, such as freedom of speech or freedom from arbitrary arrest, and the *szlachta*'s extensive rights to participate in government, for example at *sejmiki*, Sejms, and royal elections. According to Grześkowiak-Krwawicz's reading of *szlachta* liberty, it was by their participation in government that the *szlachta* ensured that their liberty did not depend upon the continued favour of a king with the power to revoke it if he pleased. Liberty was thus a collective pursuit that required that sovereignty in the Commonwealth belong not to the king alone, but be shared with the *szlachta* citizenry.¹⁴

Grześkowiak-Krwawicz has also highlighted the close connection in *szlachta* political thought between this 'republican' concept of liberty and virtue. In particular, she has noted the distinction drawn by *szlachta* commentators between virtuous 'liberty' (*wolność*) and sinful 'licence'

¹² Jacek Staszewski, *August II Mocny* (Wrocław, 1998) and *August III Sas* (Wrocław, 1989). See also Adam Perłakowski, *Jan Jerzy Przebendowski jako podskarbi wielki koronny (1703–1729): Studium funkcjonowania ministerium* (Kraków, 2004).

¹³ Robert Frost, *After the Deluge: Poland-Lithuania and the Second Northern War 1655–1660* (Cambridge, 1993).

¹⁴ Edward Opaliński, *Kultura polityczna szlachty polskiej w latach 1587–1652: system parlamentarny a społeczeństwo obywatelskie* (Warsaw, 1995) and 'Civic Humanism and Republican Citizenship in the Polish Renaissance', in Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage* (2 vols., Cambridge, 2002), vol. 1 (*Republicanism and Constitutionalism in Early Modern Europe*), pp. 147–66. Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Regina Libertas*, 'Quentin Skinner i teoria wolności republikańskiej', *Archiwum historii filozofii i myśli społecznej*, 45 (2000), pp. 165–74, and 'Deux libertés, l'ancienne et la nouvelle, dans la pensée politique polonaise du XVIIIe siècle', in Grześkowiak-Krwawicz and Izabella Zatorska (eds.), *Liberté: Héritage du Passé ou Idée des Lumières?* (Kraków, 2003), pp. 44–59.

(*swawola*). Liberty was understood as more than just an individual's freedom to act according to his own will, but rather required its practitioners to act in accordance with the common good, that is virtuously.¹⁵ This moral component of liberty was highlighted in the sixteenth century by the cleric, humanist, and political writer Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, who denied that the freedom to act viciously could be considered true liberty, arguing that 'no one thinks that God is a stranger to liberty, just because He cannot sin'.¹⁶

In contrast to virtuous liberty, licence (*swawola*) was the freedom to act purely in the pursuit of private interests. Private interests were assumed to be automatically opposed to the common good (see Chapter 1), and hence vicious. Licentious behaviour was to be condemned as harmful to the common interest as well as to the moral nature of the actor. Modrzewski compared licence to the freedom enjoyed by an unbridled horse, which thrashes around wildly in its stable, injuring both itself and others.¹⁷ In the early eighteenth century, the term *swawolnie* (and occasionally the Latin equivalent *licentier*) was frequently used to condemn injuries inflicted on the szlachta, or violations of their legal rights, in particular by troops levying 'contributions' on szlachta property during and after the Commonwealth's involvement in the Great Northern War (see Chapters 5 and 6).

Thus Grześkowiak-Krwawicz has noted that virtue was indispensable to szlachta liberty. At the same time, liberty was in turn necessary to virtue: the preservation of liberty and the free Commonwealth (above all against encroachments by the monarchy) was regarded as the highest common good. Virtue therefore demanded the defence of liberty. Szlachta writers also claimed that only those living in a state of liberty had the capacity to discern and pursue the common good, whereas those who were dependent upon a master could work only for their master's interests.¹⁸ Thus only those who enjoyed liberty could attain virtue. Virtue and liberty were inextricably linked.¹⁹

¹⁵ Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Regina Libertas*, pp. 252–3. See also Frost, "Liberty without License?".

¹⁶ 'Nemo Deum existimet libertatis esse expertem, propterea quod peccare non possit', Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, *De Republica Emendanda* (1551–9), in *Andreae Fricii Modrevii Opera Omnia* (ed. Kazimierz Kumaniecki, 3 vols., Warsaw, 1953), vol. 2, p. 166.

¹⁷ Modrzewski, *De Republica Emendanda*, vol. 2, p. 167.

¹⁸ Here Grześkowiak-Krwawicz builds in particular on Skinner's argument that seventeenth-century English republicans held that the lack of freedom resulted in individuals becoming 'dis-couraged', 'dis-heartened', and 'dis-spirited', and hence diminished as human beings. Skinner, 'A Third Concept of Liberty', Berlin Lecture to the British Academy 2001, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 117 (2002), pp. 237–68 (pp. 258–60).

¹⁹ Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Regina Libertas*, pp. 249–92. Grześkowiak-Krwawicz has also argued that the importance of virtue to the early modern szlachta concept of liberty