Two hundred years of struggle to interpret a Czech medieval sacred farce

In memoriam Jaroslav Kolár

As far as Czech medieval drama is concerned, the *Mastičkář* is, without doubt, by far the most interesting text. To be more precise, these are the Museum *Mastičkář* and the Schlägel *Mastičkář*—fragments of the same farce about an apothecary who supplied the unguents that the Marys took to the sepulchre on the day of Christ’s resurrection. *Uguentarius, specionarius, mercator, marchans, espíciar, Kramer, Kaufmann, Artz*, as he is called in Latin, French or German, was the first, and for a long time, also the only secular figure appearing in a liturgical drama connected with the Easter celebration. This figure entered many plays in various forms and thus different names characterize the different roles that he assumed.¹ From 1823, when the first fragment was discovered, until the present time, the texts have been repeatedly published and interpreted in various ways. Jaroslav Kolár, a great scholar and expert on Czech medieval literature, once wrote that the history of Czech literature and culture is mirrored in the history of perception and examination of this relic.² This short survey attempts to examine Kolár’s statement. However, I will not deal with editing the fragments in relation to knowledge of old Czech language nor will I deal with notions of an ideal text which, nevertheless, always lead to a more accurate reading.


² KOLÁR 1991, 3.
The character of the apothecary appears mysteriously and without a word of explanation in the Gospels, where the Marys go to buy ointments for the dead body of Christ (Luke 23: 55-24: 1 and Mark 16: 1). In liturgical Eastern plays, the apothecary gets materialized since the unguents must be bought from a particular seller. Of almost 900 texts published by Walter Lipphardt in his six-volume Lateinische Osterfeiern und Osterspiele, only 16 texts were found in which the figure of the apothecary appears - whether it is merely indicated or acts directly. Half of the texts are connected with St. George’s Basilica at Prague Castle. The two fragments which are dealt with here (and that are not part of Lipphardt’s corpus since they are mostly written in the Czech language) are of sufficient length: the Museum fragment consists of 431 lines and is dated to the middle of the fourteenth century, but, is already a copy; the Schlägel fragment, also a copy, has 196 lines and originated between 1365 - 1385. In both fragments, there are several identical characters (Mastičkář, his servant Rubín and an accomplice Pusterpalk) and some identical lines; however, the overall concept probably differed immensely. In the Museum fragment, the connection to the liturgy is preserved (The Marys sing Omnipotens pater altissime, Amisimus enim solacium, they talk to Mastičkář who answers them in Latin Huc propius flentes accedite). In the Schlägel fragment, the act with the three Marys and the apothecary’s wife is not included, and the scene with Abraham and Isaac - a parody of Christ’s resurrection which distinguishes the Museum Mastičkář from other similar scenes in German and French medieval plays - is also missing. There is only a scene with a nameless Jew and his son; nevertheless, the scene is not elaborated further. Thus, the Schlägel fragment appears to have lost those parts from which the comicality stems: the tension and contrast between the high and low, the sacred and secular, the theatrical and liturgical. Particularly, the scene of Isaac’s resuscitation plays a crucial role in the interpretation of

VELTRUSKY 1985, 78.
the farce, as we shall see later on. Since the text of the Museum fragment is not well known, I will give a short summary of it.

The dialogue between the Marys and Mastičkář is interrupted before the conversation can develop further. As the rubric, i.e. stage direction, *Deinde Abraham procedit portans filium cum Rubino* portrays, a man called Abraham with Mastičkář’s servant are bringing Isaac’s lifeless body. Abraham asks Mastičkář to command Isaac to *rise from the dead*. In return, Mastičkář wants three silver hryvnas and Abraham’s daughter Meča. Then he proceeds with the act. At first, he summons Jesus (*Pomahaj mi, Boží synu* [Help me, Son of God]) and then, in accordance with the rubric *Quo finito fundunt ei feces super culum*, he performs the corresponding ritual. And, indeed, Isaac rises from the dead (*surgens*) and comments in a harsh manner on this act (vv. 309-318):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Auvech, auvech, avech, ach!</th>
<th>Alas, alack, alas, ah!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Kak to, mistře, dosti spách.</em></td>
<td>How very long, master, I have slept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>avšak jako z mrtvých vstach,</em></td>
<td>BUT I HAVE RISEN AS FROM THE DEAD;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>k tomu se bezmál neosrach.</em></td>
<td>Also, I nearly befouled myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Děkuji tobě, mistře, z toho,</td>
<td>I thank you, master for this,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ež mi učinil cti příliš mnoho.</td>
<td>That you have done me too much honor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiní mistři po svém právu maží svými mastmi hlavu;</td>
<td>Other masters, according to their rule,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ale tys mi, mistři, dobře zhodil,</td>
<td>Use their ointment to anoint the head;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ež mi všechnu říť mastů oblil.</td>
<td>But you, master, have suited me well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>By pouring ointment all over my backside.⁴</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perhaps, no further comments are necessary and the reader will come to the same conclusion as G. M. Cummins: There is nothing in fourteenth–century European literature - not in Chaucer, nor anywhere in the ribald liturgical burlesques from France and Germany (where

⁴ The translation was taken from the bilingual publication of J. Veltrusky. The brutal comicality is underlined by the no less brutal and onomatopoeic rhyme (*ach- spách-vstach- neosrách*) which was, however, lost in the translation.
blasphemy and obscenity were common) – to surpass the scandalous and witty scene in the Old Czech *Mastičkář*.

**THE RECEPTION**

In the times of the first publication of the *Mastičkář*, the image of old Czech literature was being established. In his six volumes of *Ancient Compositions* published between 1817 and 1823, Václav Hanka included mainly works from the fourteenth century. However, far greater attention was paid to the forgeries that were allegedly older and that fulfilled people’s desire for great Czech epics and lyrics, the so called *Rukopis zelenohorský a královédvorský* [the Zelenohorský and the Královédvorský Manuscript]. They were connected with the *Mastičkář* through the person of Václav Hanka who supposedly discovered them (although according to some other sources it was K.A. Dundr). Thus, it was not surprising that doubts regarding the authenticity of the *Mastičkář* followed shortly afterwards. They were first expressed by Vojtěch Šembera in the fourth publication of his *Dějiny literatury české* [History of Czech Literature]. However, his objections were successfully disproved by Jan Gebauer and the dispute was closed by Adolf Patera who found the other fragment of the *Mastičkář* in Schlägel Monastery in Austria 9 years later. It is not clear whether there is some genetic correspondence (i.e. the author of the Schlägel fragment drew inspiration from the Museum fragment) or whether these are two different manuscripts drawing from some other source, however, one

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5 CUMMINS 1986, 589.  
6 The Czechs were also struck by a cult of ancient national epics that produced not only publishing of Slavic national heroic epics but also forgeries (*Ossian: Fragments of Ancient Poetry* was immensely popular). The *Rukopis Královédvorský*, allegedly found in 1817, contained 6 heroic poems, 2 epic-lyrical poems and 6 lyrical songs. The *Rukopis zelenohorský* was discovered a year later and it allegedly contained a poem from 10th Century. The poems of both manuscripts had great influence on the development of Czech literature later on.  
7 ŠEMBERA 1878, 158-160.  
8 GEBAUER 1880.  
9 PATERA 1889.
fact remains: the connection between the texts is suggested by about 16% of same lines. Quite understandably, the *Mastičkář* never reached the same popularity as the Manuscripts, since its burlesque nature did not fit the romantic ideal of Czech ancient history, regardless the fact that the text and the discussion it stirred up supported the attempts of the national revival to document the existence of Czech culture that would be comparable to that of other European cultures (particularly the Slavic ones).

**J. M. Schottky** was one of the first to react to the new discovery. He called the unknown author of the *Mastičkář* the „böhmische Aristophanes.“ However, it was actually the study of **V. B. Nebeský**, a poet, a translator and an excellent comparatist, who drew attention to the *Mastičkář*. In 1847, he published a paper in which he attempted to place the *Mastičkář* in the context of the development of the history of the European theatre and he was the first to formulate the question of connection between the Museum fragment and German Easter plays. Since he knew three similar plays and he knew that these preserved texts were younger than the *Mastičkář*, he concluded the Czech text was the original one which German authors would derive from. His opinion *(As far as the literary investigation is concerned, we shall claim and appropriate these kinds of Compositions, such as the Mastičkář, as being Czech rather than German. However, it is not a prize worthy of appraisal; for the Composition, no matter how witty and skilful, is exceedingly impudent, even blasphemous and immodest)* opened an extensive discussion regarding the origin of the *Mastičkář* and its comparison to other similar texts. This *we shall claim and appropriate [...] as being Czech rather than German* was entirely in the spirit of the national revival tendencies. As Vl. Macura put it, “freeing the arising Czech culture from the strong German culture is underway, paradoxically, through the German one”. Favouring Czech versions over the German ones was perceived as a crucial moment in the process of emancipation of Czech culture.

10 SCHOTTKY 1827, 399.
11 NEBESKÝ 1847, 335.
12 MACURA 1985, 41.
Thanks to the thorough and diligent work of researchers it was soon discovered that the text itself, the transcript, cannot be used as proof since a very long time could have passed between its creation and its transcription. Furthermore, the use of some German words in the Czech text (Rubine, wo pist du, asks the Czech Mastičkář) and some Czech words in the German text (the German Lasterbalk greets Dobroytra – which is 'Good morning' in Czech) cannot prove anything but a regard for nothing more than a charming "language Exchange" reflecting a long tradition of using a foreign language for characterization and comic effects. It is rather difficult to establish some sort of stemma: are Czech plays based on the German ones or vice versa, do Czech and German plays derive from some other older text of Latin, Latin – German, German or even Latin – French origin?13 Does it help to claim that the author of German plays came somewhere from the German-Czech boarders, from northern Bohemia, Silesia or northern Austria even though it is impossible to verify it? Nevertheless, a desire to place the Czech text above all does appear from time to time. Moreover, that the play is Czech is still regarded as a fact in general awareness since the Mastičkář is presented as a purely Czech play, although there are 18 lines in Latin in the scene with the Marys, 4 lines in Macaronic and of course all the rubrics are in Latin in the Museum fragment. The desire of the national revival has endured: in the publications for schools from the second half of the twentieth century, the whole text is translated into Czech without any explanation or warning, and thus the wrong notion the play is completely Czech is still spreading.

Similarly, the aversion to vulgarisms is increasing. Even reputable academic editions replace inappropriate words with dots. Apart from the relatively open attitude of V. B. NEBESKÝ who knows that even an objector must "admit a certain unrestrained vigour and exuberant power of his humour (salvo conceptu aestheticorum) in the intertwining with the sacred" 14, -other researchers express their moral indignation. Šembera writes that "the content is in some places so impudent and immodest that the play could not have been played in the Czech country,

13 See one of the attempts in SCHMIDT 1957.
14 NEBESKÝ 1847, 335-6.
not in the thirteenth century, not in any other, and if so, it must have been perhaps only at the beginning of the fifteenth century to undermine the clergy.”  

15 Josef Truhlář claims, in his otherwise excellent study, that “the episode of the resurrection of Abraham’s son ... stands out by its filth and vileness ... exceeding all measure of decency.”

16 Fortunately, there are also other opinions. According to Jan Jakubec, the audience in the time of Mastičkář was “tolerant towards the naturalistic expressions and jests in the same way as was the Greek audience towards Aristophanes’s farces”.  

17 However, the prevailing negative opinions that regard the scene of Isaac’s resuscitation as unacceptable support the notion that the scene with the Marys and their Latin songs is inserted inorganically in the farce. Truhlář, Nejedlý i Máchal all agree about this.

NEW ATTEMPT OF INTERPRETATION

There is only one step remaining towards suggesting the alternative – as Václav Černý declared with confidence almost 50 years after Máchal – which aims to “solve the issue as a whole: the perpetual and seemingly only obstacle in the matter of the origin and authenticity of the Czech text would be removed and the issue resolved once and for all”.  

19 It is quite simple: the apothecary scenes were an original creation of the medieval jongleurs who were most active in the thirteenth century. The Czech Mastičkář was inserted into liturgical play artificially and later. However, this is not an entirely new idea; the same notion was declared by Creizenach who thought the character of the apothecary, merchant or doctor (i.e. figures presented as charlatans in medieval literature) was created by German jongleurs even before it entered the ecclesiastical plays in the fourteenth century.  

Although

15 ŠEMBERA 1868, 159.
16 TRUHLÁŘ 1891, 33.
17 JAKUBEC 1929, 125 actually follows Schottky’s characteristics.
18 Černý’s text was originally a lecture delivered at university in 1948; it was published 7 years later.
19 ČERNÝ 1985, 37.
20 CREIZENACH I, 121.
Francophile Černý perceives medieval jongleurs as a phenomenon spreading throughout the whole of Europe, he thinks the inspiration grew mainly from the French dramatic monologues. He particularly mentions the famous act of Rustebuef ("Ci mommence La Diz de l´Erberie ou Ci commence L´Erberie Rustebuef") which he identifies as the oldest core, the original form of the farce about the apothecary. The influence of French culture in Luxembourg Bohemia is undeniable (it was actually Nejedlý who identified a French influence in the Marys songs even before this)\(^\text{21}\). Nevertheless, there is - fortunately, for the last time in the history of the *Mastičkář*’s reception - a hint of the national revival once again, this time in the form of an attempt to prove why nothing “Czech” can be of German origin. The emphasis on the profane origin of the apothecary scene and on the theatrical aspects of the text (i.e. who performed such text and how) are the most significant aspects and contributions of Černý’s study.

Černý’s work differed from all that had been written about the *Mastičkář* before and it provoked two reactions: that those of Pavel Trost and R. Jakobson. Trost’s article is brief and dense; the study of R. Jakobson probably follows in the steps of his long standing interest in the subject manifested during his work at the university in Brno.\(^\text{22}\) Both Trost’s and Jakobson’s opinions are very close in some respects which probably stems from their shared interest and activity in the Prague linguistic circle. They both point out the same aspects: in medieval Easter plays, the religious seriousness and the blasphemous grotesque merge, since there is a natural conjunction of Christian and pagan aspects. Jakobson explores the parallels of (according to Černý) secular or jongleur components with the traces of pre-Christian cults, namely rituals that reflect the connection with death and rebirth and rituals

\(^{21}\) On the French influence see VELTRUSKY103-106.

\(^{22}\) R. Jakobson was a professor of Russian philology at the university in Brno between 1930-1939, he was made an assistant professor - in 1933, and appointed a professor in 1934. He mentioned the Mastičkář in his famous letter to J. Voskovec and Werich about noetic and semantics of fun (10 let Osobozeného divadla, Praha 1937), reprinted in Roman Jacobson, Studies in Verbal Art. Ann Arbor 1971. G. M. Cummins pointed our in his review on J. Veltrusky’s book that according to J. Hrabák’s testimony, Jakobson’s lecture on the Mastičkář in 1936 was „dangerously bold“.
ensuring fertility. Some of the pre-Christian manifestations were absorbed by the Church, only to be later altered to serve its purposes (see *risus paschalis*). According to Jakobson, the medieval viewer did not see any blasphemy in the farcical mysteries since the *ioca seriis miscere* method was characteristic for the medieval concept of dramatic art and the comical effect was invoked by putting deliberate emphasis on contrasts. The rich use of vulgarisms on the background of refined citations of Czech poetry from that time (*Alexandreis, The Legend of St. Procop*) or a reference to the melody of Visitatio in Rubin’s macaronic song support this view. Whether Jakobson refers to the research of Bogatyrev or Propp, or partially to Stumpf’s theories does not matter; he operates in an entirely different world than Černý. Černý responded to Jakobson’s and Trost’s polemics in a somewhat vague way in his following work where he presents more proofs supporting his theories. Although he admits that the scene with Isaac is a parody of Christ’s resurrection, he does not regard it as important enough; according to him, since it contains only 42 lines which is less than 10 % of the text it cannot influence the overall character of the play in a significant way.

The theatrical aspects of the play were explored in a great detail by František Svejkovský. He regards the two versions of the *Mastičkář* as two different records from a series of actual theatrical realisations of the text that originated in different environment with different concepts. He claims the Museum version was created in the climate of young disciples’ work with an omnipresent connection to the context of Easter plays. Tension is created by putting deliberate emphasis on confrontation of the secular and religious, serious and humorous, which is mirrored in the story, in the characters and in the distinctive humour, where sophisticated references merge with plebeian vulgarity. Its unity is characteristic for the Schlägel version; the story is developed as a secular play lacking any kind of emphasis on the relationship to the liturgical. The figure of the apothecary recedes from the main plot; all typical aspects of his actions are transferred to the actions of servants whose impertinence and vulgar speech is even further augmented.

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24 ČERNÝ 1962.
However, according to Svejkovský, this fragment refers rather to the jongleur tradition. As he claims, even despite the use of improvisation, their creative process had its distinctive system that influenced their work with the text and formulated requirements for the theatrical realisations”.  

It is obvious that František Svejkovský does not accept Černý’s theories and approaches them with a certain amount of caution. He claims, that “the original religious play served as a key principle in the process of integration of the secular into the context of Easter plays, therefore in the concept of the play as a whole.” He is rather reserved even towards Jakobson’s theories; however, he highlights the fact that the principle which is applied to the parody of the Resurrection is also applied to the act with the old woman (antiqua vetula) in the Play from Melk – a parody of Mary Magdalene’s penance.

In a book called *A Sacred Farce from Medieval Bohemia*, Jarmila Veltrusky further developed the existing research on the *Mastičkář* with consideration to the development of the medieval theatre. Her interpretation can be appreciated by all readers since the book is concluded with the texts of both fragments of the *Mastičkář* with English translations and comments. One cannot but agree with R. Pynsent, who wrote in his review that “Jarmila Veltrusky’s study is the most serious piece of work ever to have been written on Czech fourteenth-century drama.” The study covering more than three hundred pages derives from a detailed introduction to the medieval theatre, establishing a context for the subsequent philological and structural semantic analysis of the text of the *Mastičkář*. Obviously, attention is directed towards those plays that are closer to the *Mastičkář* (the Innsbruck, Vienna and Erlau Easter Plays. On the other hand, placing Czech plays in the European context is an important contribution to the history of Central Europe drama (i.e. Bavarian, Thuringian, Austrian, Czech). Veltrusky does not follow Černý’s concept; she inclines to rather favour Jakobson’s study, as we can see from the chapters of the second volume of her book - Staging (121-158),

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25 SVEJKOVSKÝ 1962, 487.
27 SVEJKOVSKÝ 1967.
Characterization (159-187), Formal organization (188-230), Heterogenity and the unity of meaning (231-237), Language as a game (238-249), Semantic organization (250-282). Rather than praising individual passages of this „exhaustive Jakobsonian literary analysis“ , which, however, surpasses Jakobson mainly in the focus on the theatrical aspects of the farce, it is worth quoting the whole last paragraph:

„The Mastičkář brings together a remarkable variety of elements – musical and literary as well as religious parody, social satire, verbal absurdity and nonsense, violence and obscenity in both words and actions and, at the same time, lyrical expressions of religious devotion in both sung Latin and spoken Czech, and solemn exchanges between the Marys and the Merchant, also in both Latin and spoken Czech – and transmutes them all into a work of dramatic art which has its own undeniable unity, though it is at the same time destined to be part of larger whole. It is a unity arising from complex balance of tensions between sharply contrasted components, procedures and points of view. The overall effect is grotesquely comic and in that respect congruent with the spirit that characterized the medieval popular festivities and celebrations. More particularly, it accords with the tradition of the risus paschalis which, whatever its origins, by the fourteenth century allowed the uproarious laughter whereby it saluted Easter to be perceived not as a compromise with paganism but as a Christian tradition of its own right."

In my opinion, the book of Jarmila Veltrusky closes the discussion lasting more than two hundred years in a non-prejudicial way that allows succeeding researchers to further develop interpretations of this unique play. Obviously, Jauss’s horizons of expectations that allow us to perceive the meaning and form of a literary work in the frame of historical development are different in every generation. However, it seems that other works have already been inspired by Veltrusky’s approach. If they transcend it in any way, it is rather because of a new rhetoric (gender, minorities etc.).

28 BAŽIL, SCHMARC, STEHLÍKOVÁ.

29 THOMAS.
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