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Sternean Writing in *Wiadomości Brukowe* (1816–22)

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Abstract: *Wiadomości Brukowe* [News from the Gutter] was a Polish-language periodical appearing in Vilnius between 1816 and 1822. The announcement of the paper's aims and objectives invokes Laurence Sterne, in a manner that has been identified in recent criticism as a form of branding: Sterne becomes a name tag that vaguely defines the 'nature' of the writing. Several entries in particular may be considered as belonging to the transnational phenomenon of *Sterneana*, creatively responding to *A Sentimental Journey* and *Tristram Shandy*. This note reads these works in the broader context of Sterne's reception in Poland at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The Polish reception of Laurence Sterne in the long eighteenth century can be divided into two phases, with all the reservations that must inevitably accompany such a clear-cut arrangement. The first phase was dominated by what might be termed passive reception: Sterne's work found its place in the private collections of the nobility, the royal circle included, and was read, appreciated, and promoted.¹ The second phase, taking place in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, saw more creative engagements with the author of *A Sentimental Journey*. While it is possible to locate pieces of Sternean writing earlier, as documented by the writings of Izabela Czartoryska and one political pamphlet by Franciszek Salezy Jezierski, the most successful and fully-fledged examples of *sternizm* came out later, and include Maria Wirtemberska's 1816 novel *Malvina* and travelogue *Niektóre zdarzenia, myśli i uczucia doznane za granicą* [Certain events, thoughts and feelings experienced abroad] as well as Fryderyk Skarbek's *Pan Antoni* [Mr Antoni, 1824] and *Podróż bez celu* [A journey without a purpose, 1824–25].² This was also the time when the first translation of *A Sentimental Journey* was published: the 1817 version by Stanisław Kostka Kłokocki, based on the French one by Frenais.³ All these would have had a strong impact on the first generation of Polish Romantics, including Adam Mickiewicz: it is reported that Mickiewicz and his fellow students at Vilnius University, making up the secret society of the Philomaths, would call each other

‘Sterneans’.⁴ Meanwhile, English-language education at this university was one of the priorities, and this allowed the Philomaths and others to go beyond French-mediated Sterne and read the originals. At the same time, a literary-satirical weekly titled *Wiadomości Brukowe* [*News from the Gutter*] was gaining—considerable readership in Vilnius, including the Philomaths, and one of them —Tomasz Zan, known in the society as ‘Vice-Sterne’ — would eventually write for the paper.⁵ This note evaluates the ‘Sterne-saturation’ of *Wiadomości Brukowe*, moving from the announcement of the paper’s aims and objectives, in which Sterne’s name appears, to the Sternean writing of editors Michał Baliński, Jędrzej Śniadecki, and Zan.⁶

When the first number of *Wiadomości Brukowe* appeared in Vilnius in August 1816, it was not planned as a very long series of issues. The weekly was meant as a response to the troubling mesmerist fashion that was gathering momentum at the time, and the early numbers are idiosyncratic pieces of satire against this phenomenon. The popularity of these ephemeral prints encouraged a seasoned publisher of periodicals, Kazimierz Kontrym, to pursue this new project. At the same time, the so-called Towarzystwo Szubrawców [*Society of Rascals*] was established. The society’s aim, as expressed in its ‘codex’ published in *Tygodnik Wileński* [*Vilnius Weekly*], was to ridicule ‘those vices and addictions that cannot be punished by law’, such as ‘vanity, gambling, drunkenness, narrow-mindedness, nationalism’, and more.⁷ *Wiadomości Brukowe* was meant to serve as the society’s chief publication project. Its programme, aims, and objectives are laid out in the fifth number. What was, in fact, a result of the uncertainties regarding the paper and its future — whether it would be continued or not — is here presented as a pre-planned formal trick derived from Laurence Sterne:

A new periodical is being released: *News from the Gutter*. — What? how come? some will say, announcing a paper after publishing several numbers, which we have already read? isn’t that unheard of? — Ah, dear Readers, our benevolent Idlers! You will probably know Lorenz Stern, an English writer of true wit, a great original — Once, being in a peculiar mood, he placed the preface to his work at the end of the second volume; this peculiarly confounded his fellow authors and was so appreciated by his readers that his book was promptly sold out.⁸

While the editors make clear that imitation is not their objective — ‘God forbid we should imitate,’ they write — the paper consistently

displays the familiar textual features that we have come to consider Sternean.⁹ Importantly, as suggested by the announcement quoted, their primary point of reference was *Tristram Shandy*, most probably read in English, as it had not yet been translated into Polish (the first Polish translation, by Krystyna Tarnowska, came out in 1958). In the 1810s, let us recall, the popularity of *A Sentimental Journey* was in its heyday. What would have appealed to the editors of *Wiadomości Brukowe*, however, was the satirical tradition of which *Tristram Shandy* was, in their eyes, a part. They express their indebtedness to Jonathan Swift's work, publishing a treatise on a machine for the corporal punishment of the peasants, which reveals affinities with *A Modest Proposal*, and several instalments of what they label 'Gulliver's Rambles', a piece of Gulliveriana adapting the realities of Swift's Laputa to the editors' own context of Vilnius society. They refer to Rabelais and Cervantes, as well as invoking the satirical spirit of Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World*. Situating themselves in this transnational tradition of satire, they are nevertheless the most appreciative of the English-language authors, whom they identify as fellow 'rascals': 'We have run through the rascal literature of all nations and centuries, but nowhere have we seen in as developed as in England'.¹⁰ Accordingly, the Society, as they point out, is modelled on eighteenth-century English clubs, such as the Humdrum Club, Street Club, Beefsteak Club, Punning Club, and others.¹¹

The first relatively extensive piece of Sterneana in the paper was Michał Baliński's *Zdarzenia i myśli Panfila ze Żmudzi* [*Thoughts and experiences of Panfil from Samogitia*], which was published in instalments in 1818 and 1820. Baliński studied philosophy at Vilnius University and actively contributed to local periodicals. The title of his Sternean narrative is reminiscent of Maria Wirtemberska's travelogue written in 1816.¹² The travelogue was not published until 1978 and Baliński could only have familiarised himself with the manuscript version. I have not identified any other work in the period using the 'Zdarzenia i myśli' ['Thoughts and experiences'] title, so Baliński would have been inspired by or alluded to this unpublished piece of Sterneana by Wirtemberska. As mentioned, however, Baliński's work refers (and explicitly so) to *Tristram Shandy* (alongside *Gulliver's Travels* and *Don Quixote*) rather than *A Sentimental Journey*, which was the model for Wirtemberska's travelogue, so the allusion would have been a way of establishing a network of common literary background rather than a suggestion of Wirtemberska's inspiration.

Thoughts and experiences of Panfil from Samogitia begins with a preface explaining that its fragmentation is due to damage that the manuscript suffered and Baliński later taunts the reader with references to chapters

missing. Nevertheless, the subsequent chapters, despite achronological ordering (XXI, CXXXV, XXV, XXIII, XXXIX), at first display a non-Sternean regularity, both in terms of page design and narrative. Chapter XXI is a rather straightforward narrative of the visit the protagonist pays to his aunt, to whom, for financial reasons, he attempts to endear himself. The piece is a satire on landed gentry and their obsession with heritage, as rendered by Panfil's prolonged reading of his aunt's genealogy.¹³ The next chapter, numbered CXXXV, is a humorous discussion of the protagonist's wedding the previous day, of which he has no recollection. It preserves the spirit of satire against the demoralised gentry: we learn about the Panfil's major losses through gambling and being fooled into marriage. The whole is again a simple narrative, recycling familiar misogynist clichés.¹⁴ Chapter XXV is a mock-heroic battle of philosophers at a tavern, while Chapter XXIII is a parody of a funeral speech, becoming yet another piece of satire against the gentry.¹⁵ The final instalment, Chapter XXXIX (Figure 1), is a satire against academia with Panfil declaring that his professorial post at Vilnius University entitles him to teach things of which he has no knowledge, and, to his surprise, to see them appear in print. Baliński probably gets the most Shandean here, first discussing the lengthy title of his academic publication, and then recounting his

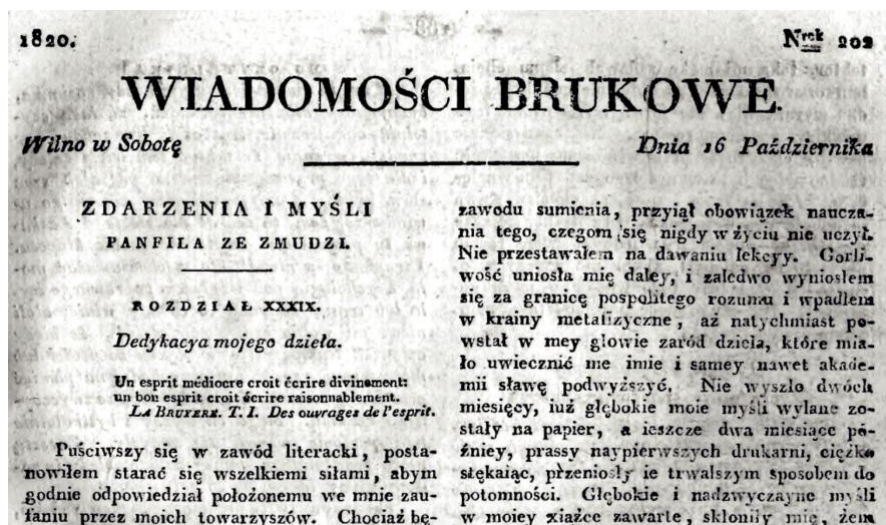


Figure 1 Michał Baliński, an instalment of *Zdarzenia i Myśli Panfila ze Żmudzi*, *Wiadomości Brukowe* 202, 16 October 1820. Wielkopolska Biblioteka Cyfrowa

struggles with dedication writing, including such interruptions as his companion entering the room and throwing the manuscript draft onto the fire.¹⁶ The 1820 instalments of Baliński's work manifest greater textual consciousness than the 1818 ones, which are only nominally indebted to Sterne and are, in fact, rather straightforward narrative episodes.

The most extensive piece of Sterneana in *Wiadomości Brukowe* is Jędrzej Śniadecki's *Próżniacko-filozoficzna podróż po bruku* [*A philosophically-idle journey along the gutter*]. Śniadecki was a professor of chemistry at Vilnius University, a key figure in the Society of Rascals, and editor-in-chief of *Wiadomości Brukowe* from 1819; he would also become Michał Baliński's father-in-law. His *Philosophically-idle journey* is Sternean in as much as it imitates *A Sentimental Journey*'s loose organisation, impressionistic vignettes, and what travel writing studies have identified as vertical rather than horizontal journeying — that is, emphasis is placed on the reflective dimension of movement. Śniadecki's episodes also feature familiar textual solutions (fragmentation, non-standard punctuation), though with moderate frequency, as well as the Shandean attentiveness to gesture and facial expression, at times leading to moments of pictorial stasis. For example, the first ramble is largely constituted of the narrator's attempts at physiognomy, whereby he is trying to read and classify faces, gestures, and expressions. This is cut short by the following address to the reader: 'You might ask, my beloved reader, how this excursion ends. Where did it take me this time? ...

Nowhere, I say, for I got lost in my philosophically-idle remarks, and as it started pouring with rain, I was forced to return home.'¹⁷

At the same time, *A philosophically-idle journey* establishes clear links with Samuel Johnson's periodicals (*The Idler* and *The Rambler*) and *The Spectator*'s mode of writing from an observer's point of view. Sterne is an obvious point of reference for Śniadecki, but so are other representatives of 'rascal literature'. For example, the praise of idling opening the narrative is modelled closely on an analogical opener, highlighting class privilege, in Johnson's *The Idler*. As Śniadecki has it, 'There is nothing more pleasurable in life, nothing more appropriate, for a well-born and handsomely bred man than idling: hence the proverb that *a peasant is made for labour*. It goes without saying that *a gentleman is made for rest*.'¹⁸ The persona of the flaneur-like philosopher-idler-rambler has arguably more in common with Mr Spectator than with Yorick. What is more, it seems that the type of sentimental traveller that Yorick was meant to exemplify is given a satirical treatment, as visible in two episodes that may be read as more direct responses to *A Sentimental Journey*: an

encounter with a beggar and an excursion to the country.¹⁹ Śniadecki ridicules both alms giving and the pastoral clichés codified by ‘great writers’: no grace awaits the idler who is soaked to the skin and barely makes it home.

Tomasz Zan was one of the key Philomaths and a multi-genre author with a well-documented influence on Adam Mickiewicz, who would call Zan ‘Vice-Sterne’. His best known and most thoroughly studied pieces of Sterneana are letters written in the form of what he labelled ‘Rozdziałki’ [‘Little chapters’], based on the fragmented narrative of *A Sentimental Journey*.²⁰ Alongside his activities in the Society of the Philomaths, Zan was also a member of the Society of Rascals and contributed to *Wiadomości Brukowe*. Four 1822 numbers of the paper (266, 267, 278, and 279) feature passages titled *Świat i miłość; czyli Życie i dzieło moje* [*The world and love; or, The life and work of myself*]. The first entry establishes its Shandean provenance, not only through the use of familiar features of print (punctuation, dashes) and composition (missing chapters — or, in fact, ‘Little chapters’ [Rozdziałki]) but also through its focus on the conceptual merger of living and writing: ‘my work will be like a green purse, with my life, my soul inside; though I wish it were money!’²¹ It also frequently inserts the word ‘sextern’ (also spelled as ‘sekstern’), which in nineteenth-century Polish stood for a book without binding, but uses it in a manner that plays with the literal and phonetic form of the word, as in the scene where his library is being swept out and shows numerous ‘sexterna and sexterniczki’, with ‘no margins, no bindings, uncut, dispersed, dirty’ but, nevertheless, ‘advancing the mind, correcting the heart ... for pleasurable and instructive entertain-ment’.²² Zan’s ironic persona, however, is no homage giver, and he is adamant that all these ‘sexterns’ are swept out. One piece is an exception, though: it is the author’s own ‘sekstern’, his autobiography, that opens with his father’s ancestral line going back to the first man. When he is reminded that the title suggests writings about love, he promises to publish a register of his lovers in due course. But he quickly changes his mind and decides to publish the register of his garments. Later, in the third part, he considers the empty ‘Little chapter’ VII (Figure 2) the most reasonable and follows it with a discussion on ‘Whose empty chapter was more reasonable, Sterne’s or mine’, the focus of which is, in fact, Sterne’s blank page.²³

The final instalment is advertised as a ‘Treatise on szpekuchy’ (a traditional dumpling) but is interrupted by loose and incongruent dialogues. When Zan is about to resume his discourse on szpekuchy, the narrative closes with an innuendo bringing to mind the conclusion

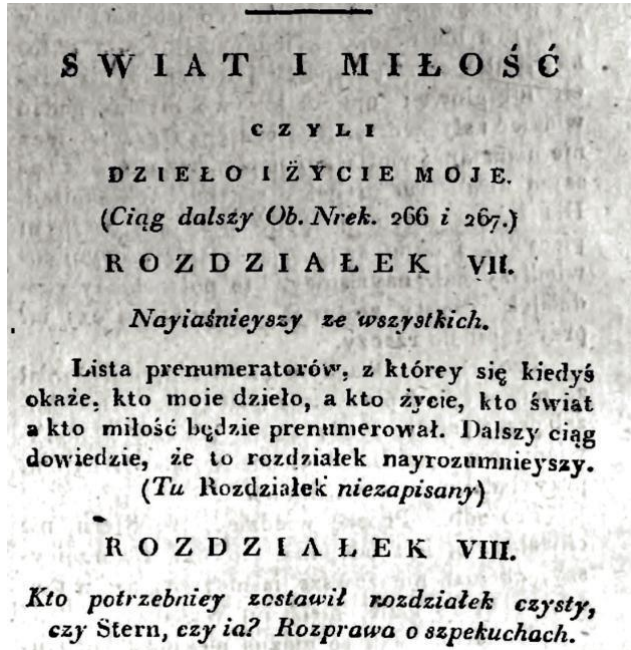


Figure 2 Tomasz Zan, an instalment of *Świat i Miłość*, *Wiadomości Brukowe* 278, 1 April 1822. Wielkopolska Biblioteka Cyfrowa

of *A Sentimental Journey*: ‘—Szpekuchy are ... (the candle into the bottle dr....)’.²⁴

The *sternizm* of *News from the Gutter* would have been aptly and forcefully reasserted, especially from a present-day perspective, if Tomasz Zan had managed to publish a piece that Adam Mickiewicz had written for the periodical. In Mickiewicz’s letter to Zan from December 1820, the poet asks his friend to publish, preferably under Zan’s own name, a fragmented narrative beginning *in medias res* about a sleigh crash — ‘Przypadek na gościńcu między W. i K.’ [‘An adventure on the road between W. and K.’] — including a dialogue between the parties involved, very meticulous in its rendering of gestures, couched in a dynamically convoluted style, and rapidly interrupted.²⁵ But even without Mickiewicz’s contribution, the *Rascals* magazine demonstrates an exceptional ‘Sterne² saturation, with forms of responding to Sterne ranging from conceptual branding and scattered name tagging to creative and more developed literary pieces spanning various issues.²⁶ As such, it is an example that went beyond the conventional Anglophilia of the early Polish Romantics,

one manifestation of which were the Sternean fashions with a several-decades-long history. At the same time, it must be borne in mind that *News from the Gutter* offered a wide-ranging engagement with ‘rascal literature’. The included pieces of Gulliveriana, the numerous allusions to Addison, Johnson, Goldsmith, and others, remind us of the potential of the literary magazine to serve as a networking platform, integrating various authorial traditions and their afterlives. The choice of Sterne as a patron saint of such a project seems a particularly well-informed decision.



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NOTES

- 1 For more on Sterne in eighteenth-century Poland, see, for example, Grażyna Bystydzińska and Wojciech Nowicki, ‘Sterne in Poland’, in *The Reception of Laurence Sterne in Europe*, eds. Peter de Voogd and John Neubauer (London: Continuum, 2004), 154–56; Natalia Rezmer-Mrówczyńska, ‘Sterne in Poland in the Age of the Enlightenment’, *The Shandean* 24 (2013): 117–26; Jakub Lipski, ‘Poland’s Finest Sternean: Izabela Czartoryska (1746–1835) as Reader and Promoter of Sterne’, *The Shandean* 27 (2016): 9–25.
- 2 See Lipski, ‘Poland’s Finest Sternean’; Wojciech Nowicki, ‘An Anachronistic Hoax’, *The Shandean* 13 (2002): 106–109; Kazimierz Bartoszyński, ‘Sternizm’, in *Słownik literatury polskiego oświecenia*, ed. Teresa Kostkiewiczowa (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1977), 677–85.
- 3 See Grażyna Bystydzińska, ‘Wawrzyniec Sterne: A *Sentimental Journey* in 19th-Century Poland’, *The Shandean* 13 (2002): 47–53.
- 4 Waclaw Borowy, ‘Mickiewicz w szkole klasycznej’, *Pamiętnik Literacki* 38 (1948): 26–27.

- 5 Danuta Zawadzka, 'Z listownika filomatów', in *Sztuka pisania. O liście polskim w wieku XIX*, ed. Jolanta Sztachelska i Elżbieta Dąbrowicz (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2000), 36–37.
- 6 The classic scholarly edition of *Wiadomości Brukowe* in Polish pays little attention to the Sternean element, only briefly acknowledging Sterne's influence. Zdzisław Skwarczyński, ed., *Wiadomości Brukowe: Wybór artykułów* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1962). A recent reading of the uses of satire and absurd in the magazine glosses over Sternean satire: Tomasz Chachulski, "'Wiadomości Brukowe" (1816–1822) – od satyry do absurdu. Kilka uwag', *Tekstualia* 73.2 (2023): 23–36.
- 7 'Zamiarem towarzystwa jest wyświecać szpetność przywar i nałogów, które z natury swojej nie mogą być prawem powściągane, są jednak dla społeczeństwa bardzo szkodliwe, a u nas z dawna pospolite. Do nałogów tych należą: używanie nałogowe mocnych napojów, gra w karty, pieniactwo, chlubienie się tytułami ojców, fałszywe mniemanie, jakoby można być obywatelem światłym nie zajmując się nigdy w życiu książką czytaniem.' Quoted in Mariusz Gizowski and Krzysztof Knyżewski, "'Towarzystwo Szubrawców" jako asumpt w procesie kształtowania myśli filozoficzno-pedagogicznej XIX wieku', *Paideia* 3 (2021): 125. All the quotations in English from Polish-language sources are my translations.
- 8 'Zaczyna wychodzić nowe pismo peryodyczne pod tytułem: *Wiadomości Brukowe*. — Cóż to jest? jak to? powie ktoś, ogłoszenie pisma po wydaniu pierwszych jego numerów, któreśmy już czytali? gdzież to słyszano? — Ach mili Czytelnicy, przezacni Próźniacy! Znaiomy jest wam zapewne *Lorenz Sterne*, bardzo krotofilny pisarz angielski, wielki oryginał — On, wpadłszy raz w osobliwszy humor, przedmowę do dzieła swojego położył aż na końcu drugiego tomu; co tak wszystkich, osobliwie z professyi autorów, zadziwiło, tak się wszystkim podobało, że zaraz książkę jego rozkupili.' *Wiadomości Brukowe* 5, 10 January 1817, 15, <https://www.wbc.poznan.pl/publication/128369>
- 9 'choway Boże! Abyśmy naśladowali', *Wiadomości Brukowe* 5, 10 January 1817, 15. For the broader picture of Sterneana in newspapers and magazines, see M-C. Newbould, *Adaptations of Laurence Sterne's Fiction: Sterneana, 1760–1840* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 44–45; 81–86; and the work done in the *Networks of Reception in Eighteenth-Century Newspapers and Magazines: Laurence Sterne* project at <https://www.ukw.edu.pl/jednostka/sternews>. For a model case study, see Paul Goring,

- 'The Evolution of "A Sentimental Journey, by a Lady" in *The Lady's Magazine*', *The Shandean* 31 (2020): 67–100.
- 10 'Przebiegając literaturę szubrawską wszystkich krajów i wieków, znajdujemy, że w jednej tylko Anglii tak wygórowała, że żaden naród zrównać jej nie może'. *Wiadomości Brukowe* 61, 2 February 1818, 17-
 - 11 *Wiadomości Brukowe* 54, 15 December 1817, 227-
 - 12 Maria Wirtemberska, *Niektóre zdarzenia, myśli i uczucia doznane za granicą*, ed. Alina Aleksandrowicz (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1978).
 - 13 *Wiadomości Brukowe* 72, 20 April 1818, 61–64-
 - 14 *Wiadomości Brukowe* 94, 21 September 1818, 149–52.
 - 15 *Wiadomości Brukowe* 106, 14 December 1818, 199–202; *Wiadomości Brukowe* 172, 20 March 1820, 45–48.
 - 16 *Wiadomości Brukowe* 202, 16 October 1820, 167–69.
 - 17 'Ale spytasz się może, kochany czytelniku, na czym się ta wyprawa skończy? Gdzie tam razą zaszedł?...Nigdzie, odpowiem: bom zabrnął w próżniacko-filozoficzne uwagi, a tymczasem deszcz lunął i musiałem wrócić do domu.' *Wiadomości Brukowe* 99, 26 October 1818, 174.
 - 18 'Nic nie masz przyjemniejszego, nic właściwszego, dla dobrze urodzonego i przystoynie wychowanego człowieka, and próżniactwo: zkaąd i przysłowie urosło, że *chłop stworzony do pracy*. Dorozumieć się należy: *Pan do odpoczynku*.' *Wiadomości Brukowe* 97, 12 October 1818, 162. See Samuel Johnson's essay on 'The Idler's character': 'Every mode of life has its conveniencies. The Idler, who habituates himself to be satisfied with what he can most easily obtain, not only escapes labours which are often fruitless, but sometimes succeeds better than those who despise all that is within their reach, and think every thing more valuable as it is harder to be acquired.' *The Idler* 1, 15 April 1758, *Samuel Johnson's*

Essays – Republished 260 Years Later, <https://www.johnsonessays.com/the-idler/no-1-the-idlers-character/>.

- 19 *Wiadomości Brukowe* 242, 25 July 1821, 123–24; *Wiadomości Brukowe* 235, 4 June 1821, 93–96.
- 20 See Martyna Olejniczak, ‘„Ja” epistolarne – „ja” fragmentaryczne: Tożsamość narracyjna w filomackiej korespondencji Tomasza Zana’, *Ruch literacki* LXIV.1 (2023): 29–30, doi: 10.24425/rl.2023.146693.
- 21 *Wiadomości Brukowe* 266, 7 January 1822, 3-
- 22 ‘sexterna i sexterniczki bez marginesów, bez okładek, niezszyte, nieobrzynane, rozrzucone, zabrudzone’; ‘przez które rozwinąć umysł, sprostować serce, i nauczyć się obowiązków stanu można, z dodatkiem dzieł do przyjemney i pożyteczney zabawy służących’, *Wiadomości Brukowe* 266, 7 January 1822, 3.
- 23 ‘Kto potrzebniey zostawił rozdziałek czysty, czy Stern, czy ia?’, *Wiadomości Brukowe* 278, 1 April 1822, 51.
- 24 ‘—Szpekuchy są to ... (świeca do butelki wp....’, *Wiadomości Brukowe* 279, 8 April 1822, 55.
- 25 Adam Mickiewicz, ‘Do Tomasza Zana’, December 1820, in *Dziela wszystkie Adama Mickiewicza. Tom X: Listy i przemówienia*, ed. Marian Reyter (Lwów: Nakład Księgarni H. Altenberga, [1912]), 96–97.
- 26 For ‘Brand Sterne’ and the uses of the name tag to create a particular impression of status, identity, and virtual literary community, see M-C. Newbould, “[It] Were Wisdome It Selfe, to Read All Authors, as *Anonymo*’s”: Anonymity, Virtual Communities, and Sterneana’, *1650–1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era* 28 (2023): 163–80.