

Ivan Kotliarevsky (1769-1838)

Born in Poltava, Kotliarevsky studied at the local seminary, after which he became a private tutor of the children of the affluent landowners in the vicinity. In that occupation he acquired familiarity with the manners and customs of the Ukrainian peasants, a fund of knowledge which later came of use to him in his literary work. For a time he was employed, as was his father, in the civil service, but left it to embark upon a military career. As an officer he took an active part in the campaigns against the Turks in Moldavia in 1806 and 1807. After his retirement as major, Kotliarevsky became the supervisor of a school for the children of impoverished landlords, but in 1812 returned temporarily to military life in order to organize a Cossack regiment against Napoleon. All his leisure moments Kotliarevsky spent collecting ethnographic material relative to the Poltava region, and in that pursuit was recognized as an authority by the St. Petersburg Commission dealing with that type of research in the Russian Empire.

The year 1798 was an epoch-creating one in the history of Ukrainian literature, for in it were published the first three parts of Kotliarevsky's travesty of Vergil's *Aeneid*. Written in pure vernacular, such as was then spoken in the Poltava region, it began a new, modern era in the realm of Ukrainian fine letters. Other parts of this extraordinarily significant parody (six in all) followed in due course. The whole exerted such an awakening impact on the minds of the Ukrainian people as could be compared only with that of Dante's *Divina Commedia* when rendered in the Florentine "dialect" in the early decades of the Quattrocento.

Although Kotliarevsky appropriated his subject matter from the Roman poem, he made his work original in that he applied its plot and action entirely to the life of his countrymen and to the prevailing social conditions. The Trojans in fact became the Ukrainian Cossacks, and the Olympian gods the powerful, ruthless landlords. The travesty, which at times lapsed into burlesque, thus presented a fairly faithful picture of Ukrainian life at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. To be sure, Kotliarevsky did not in so many words protest against the harsh social order obtaining in his day, but by exposing it in a comical vein he brought to the attention of his contemporaries the injustice and wrongs suffered by the peasantry under the harsh conditions of serfdom.

Kotliarevsky likewise laid the foundation for the modern Ukrainian theatre by

writing and producing, in 1819, *Natalka-Poltavka*, a melodramatic piece of the operetta type. However naive its plot, its sentimental appeal is felt even today.

Kotliarevsky's work reveals him as an idealistic realist, sympathetically attuned to the plight of his people. As such, he wielded great influence on the Ukrainian Romantic poets who followed in his wake, especially on the early Shevchenko.

From the Travestied AENEID

I

Aeneas was a lively fellow,
Lusty as any Cossack blade,
In every kind of mischief mellow,
The staunchest tramp to ply his trade.
But when the Greeks, with all their trouble,
Had burned down Troy and left it rubble,
Taking a knapsack, off he wheels,
Together with some reckless puffins—
Singed lads, who looked like ragamuffins—
And to old Troy he showed his heels.

He built in haste a few big dories
And launched them on the dark blue sea,
Filled to the brim with Trojan tories,
And sailed off blind and hastily.
But wicked Juno, spiteful hussy,
Came cackling like a pullet fussy:
Dark hatred smouldered in her mind!
For some time now her wish most evil
Had been to send him to the devil
Till not a smell was left behind.

She loathed Aeneas like a leper,
He irked her like unpleasant flavours,
More bitter than a dose of pepper
Because he never sought her favours.
But most of all the man she hated
Because his birth from Troy he dated,
And claimed fair Venus as his ma,
And since his Uncle Paris, judging
Divinest beauty, gave ungrudging
The apple to fair Venus' paw.

From heaven fair Juno looked in dudgeon
 At Pan¹ Aeneas and his crew—
 From Hebe, whispering curmudgeon,
 Had come the word, and fear she knew.
 She hitched a peacock to her sleigh,
 Under her kerchief hid away
 The braids of her untidy hair;
 Put on her skirt and corset straight;
 Set bread and salt² upon a plate;
 And buzzed to Aeolus through the air.

“Hello, dear kinsman, God of Breezes!”—
 She enters and disturbs his rest.—
 “How are you doing, lad?” she wheezes.
 “Are you expecting any guest?”
 She sets the bread and salt before
 Old Aeolus, so grim and hoar,
 And seats herself upon a bench.
 “Old friend of mine, do me a favour,”
 She teases with a plaintive quaver,
 “And make that dog Aeneas blench!

“His name as knave could not be stronger,
 As madcap and as cutthroat too,
 If he is left in freedom longer,
 His deeds mankind are sure to rue.
 Heap on him then some great disaster,
 And let the rogues who call him master
 Be drowned with him in death assured.
 A dark-eyed beauty, sweet and active,
 Delicious, shapely and attractive,
 Is your reward, I pledge my word!”

“My gracious! Had I known this sooner!”
 Said Aeolus, and starts to grieve.
 “For beauty I’m an eager swooner,
 But all my winds are now on leave:
 For Boreas a drunk is shedding,
 Notus has gone to see a wedding,

¹See p. 30, fn. 2.

²Bread and salt, symbols of hospitality and good-will.

While Zephyrus, the seasoned rake,
Is dallying with some fair maiden;
Eurus with common toil is laden;
What can I do, for heaven's sake?

"But since it is for you, I vow
To slap Aeneas down to hell;
I shall delay no longer now
But knock him for a fare-you-well.
Good-bye, old girl, and mindful be
Of your almighty vow to me.
If you forget, don't come again!
You needn't hope to lie or wheedle
Or give this poor old guy the needle—
You'll get the bum's rush for your pain."

Now Dido was in such great sorrow
All day she neither drank nor ate,
No peace at all she sought to borrow
But wept and bellowed at her fate.
She beat about like one possessed,
Or stood with panic in her breast
And bit her dainty finger-nails.
At last she sank down in constraint
For the poor lady feels so faint
That every sorry muscle fails.

She called her sister to console her
And told her of her passion's smart
Through foul Aeneas, quick to roll her,
And somewhat thus relieved her heart.
"Annie, my dear, my precious darling,
Save me from passions that come snarling!
My hapless life must end its span!
For by Aeneas I'm forsaken
Like any wretch some rake has taken . . .
He is a serpent, not a man.

"My heart is utterly unable
To cause me to forget our love.
Where can I flee this life unstable?
Only the grave my peace can prove.

For him I've lost my heart and station,
 Neglected friends and reputation,
 Ye gods! for him forgotten you!
 Where can I find a drowsy potion
 To rid my soul of its emotion
 And for a while its woes undo?

"On earth no voice of peace is hearkened,
 Yet from my eyes no teardrops flow;
 For me the sun's fair light is darkened;
 Apart from him no light I know.
 Ah, Cupid, impish brat of anguish,
 Take pleasure now to see me languish—
 Would you had died and saved these aches!
 Take heed, all housewives trim and smart,
 All wenchers have Aeneas' heart—
 The devil seize all perjured rakes!"

Thus Dido, racked with pain uncanny,
 Poured out her grief and cursed her fate
 And all the aid of Sister Annie
 Could not her suffering abate,
 Though with Queen Dido grieved her sister
 And patted her and gently kissed her
 And to a storm of sobs gave vent.
 Then Dido hushed, and to deceive her
 Asked Annie suddenly to leave her
 To sorrow to her heart's content.

Long did she grieve, then sought her palace,
 Lay on her bed and sighed full sore;
 Then in a mood beyond all malice
 She leaped down nimbly to the floor.
 Picking up flints from by the stove
 And wads of tow, she softly strove
 Into her garden plot to creep.
 That season of the night she found
 When it was peaceful all around
 And all good Christians were asleep.

A pile of reeds for winter kindling
 Was heaped up near the garden wall,—
 Why were they hoarded there, undwinding?
 The steppe-lands had no wood at all.

The reed-pile met her eye discerning,
 All powder-dry and ripe for burning,
 For it was meant to start the fire.
 With steel and flint and tow she set
 A spark beneath, its flame to whet
 And spread into a blazing pyre.

She stripped herself of all her clothing
 (When she had thus achieved her aims);
 Then pitched them in the blaze with loathing
 And stretched herself amid the flames.
 The conflagration blazed around her
 And in the ash no inquest found her—
 She vanished into fumes and smoke.
 She loved Aeneas so, that she
 Could die in flaming agony;
 Her soul in Limbo's shades awoke.

III

And now Aeneas marched to Hell
 And entered quite a different world;
 All bleached and pale those regions dwell;
 The rays of moon and stars were furled . . .
 There far and wide the mist spread paling,
 And shrieks were heard of woeful wailing,
 The pangs of sinners were immense.
 Aeneas and the Sibyl, gazing
 Upon their torments, found amazing
 The range of hellish truculence.

The pitch in that Inferno bubbled;
 In gurgling cauldrons loud and hot,
 Oil, resin, brimstone ever troubled
 The roaring flames that seared the spot.
 In molten tar the sinners sat
 And crackled loud like frying fat,
 Each suffering his just desert . . .
 No mortal pen could hope to picture
 In fiction beyond utter stricture
 The torments that each soul begirt.

The lords of earth were tortured there
 And roasted on all sides because
 For poor folk they had shown no care
 Nor treated them by kindly laws.
 Therefore for wood they had to tramp
 And reap the reed-beds in the swamp
 And carry them to hell for fuel.
 The fiends kept watch on all these sods
 And goaded them with iron rods
 When lagging in their labour cruel.

The devils slashed with burning scourges
 The backs and breasts of those whose hands
 Had slain themselves through fearful urges
 To see no more earth's friendly lands.
 Hot grease on them was poured, all smoking,
 And sharp knives in their sides kept poking,
 For having dared their lives to take.
 Still other tricks engage these quarters—
 Like crushing hands in mighty mortars
 For venturing life's span to break.

Into the mouths of stingy misers
 White molten silver poured from cans;
 While lying friends and false advisers
 Were forced to lick hot frying-pans.
 Those who wed not their children's mothers
 But lived as parasites on others
 Were left to dangle on a hook
 Fixed firmly in that erring member
 In which had flamed lust's fiery ember
 That Satan now had brought to book.

All false officials, high and low,
 Peers, lordlings, and their mercenaries,
 Were flogged in hell with many a blow
 Like cats that pilfer in the dairies.
 One finds here all unfaithful pastors,
 Both aldermen and burgomasters,
 Judges and jurymen and clerks,
 Who with stark justice mix no honey
 But plunder the accused of money,
 Dark favours for still darker works.

But wise philosophers here crawl,
 Who learned on earth to play the fox;
 The monks and clerics, great and small,
 Who did not care to teach their flocks,
 But only sought for gold and houses
 And had a good time with their spouses,
 Neglecting duties that impel;
 Priests who go whinnying for wenches,
 Astrologers whom graft intrenches,
 These throng the lowest pit of Hell.

Some did not keep their wives in check
 But gave them liberty to stray
 Regardless of their virtue's wreck
 At parties, feasts and weddings gay,
 Dancing till midnight to rehearse
 Foul ribaldry and things far worse,—
 These husbands caps of folly bore
 With many a large and twisted horn;
 Their eyes were sealed, they crouched forlorn
 In pots where blazing brimstones roar.

Parents who did not train their sons
 But petted them and spoiled them badly,
 And humoured every pampered dunce,
 In vats of oil now simmer sadly.
 Through such neglect their lads became
 Bold rogues and knaves and sons of shame,
 And later beat their silly sires,
 And wished the old folks soon would die
 And leave them all the property
 To sate their infamous desires.

Now hell was also full of lechers
 Who crept into young women's graces,
 Softly up ladders came these stretchers
 At evening to their sleeping-places;
 False vows to marry them they used,
 They flattered them, deceived, seduced,
 And worked on them their wicked will;
 Until the maidens, swollen great,
 Came to the church in such a state
 That their disgrace was black and ill.

Slick merchants, too, made loud their wails;
 They had frequented all the fairs
 And with their false, deceitful scales
 Had duped the women with their wares.
 Here, too, sly swindlers had been slung,
 And smart contrivers, glib of tongue;
 Cheats, taverners and trading Jews
 Who selling worthless gauds would stand
 Or carted kegs of contrabrand,
 The devils boiled in bubbling stews.

All infidels, some Christians too,
 Landlord and peasant had their place,
 Nobles and burghers one might view,
 The young and aged of the race;
 The poor, the wealthy likewise came,
 The straight of body and the lame,
 The blind man and the clear of sight,
 The soldier and the potentate
 Serfs of the lords and of the state,
 Laymen and priests, were there by right.

Heigh-ho! The truth may not be hid,
 A lie will surely cause more harm:
 Scribblers of verse had there been bid,
 Bad poets in a tasteless swarm;
 Each bard in torment might be found,
 His right hand had been tightly bound
 As if a Tartar captor treed him.
 Such is the fate of each poor wretch
 Who writes so slovenly a sketch
 That even devils cannot read him.

. . . .

They hastened to the palace gate
 That graced the subterranean Tsar.
 No straw, no dust befouled its state
 As pure as radiance from a star;
 Upholstered walls with studs were bright,
 The frames and sills were meerschaum light;

The halls with gilded steel were floored,
 Hangings of copper sparkled free
 And every room showed lavishly—
 It seemed the mansion of a lord.

Aeneas, with the Sibyl, gazed
 At all those marvels of surprise;
 At every sight they stood amazed
 And stared about with bulging eyes;
 At times a mutual glance they bent
 And smiled in sheer astonishment,
 Aeneas clicked his tongue and whistled.
 Those who on earth lived righteously
 In such a place rejoiced to be;
 With perfect saintliness it bristled.

These souls sat here, untouched by gripes,
 And basked in endless holiday.
 Lying at ease, they smoked their pipes
 Or sipped their brandy bowl for aye,
 Which with no taint of froth was filled,
 Thrice purified and well distilled,
 Infused with herbs surpassing sweet
 Spiced admirably and to their need
 With galingale and aniseed
 And saffron's tinge, for heaven meet.

They spent their time in eating cates,
 Sweetmeats and all confections rare;
 White wheaten dumplings filled their plates
 And puffy rolls with caviare;
 Garlic and borsch and sauerkraut,
 Mushrooms and berries joined the rout,
 Hard eggs with tasty kvass were here,
 And a delicious omelet
 By foreign chefs one's zest to whet,
 And all this food they drowned in beer.

Here ease and freedom were the lot
 Of him whose life was just and pure,
 (Just as the sinner and the sot
 Eternal torment must endure).

Whatever each of them desired
 He now enjoyed till he perspired,
 A round of pleasure without labour:
 Rest, sleep or eat or drink or prance,
 Shout, or be still, or sing or dance.
 You'd like a fight?—Why, here's a sabre!

They made no boast, they sought no praise,
 And no man here philosophized,
 Nay, God forbid! Why should one raise
 A laugh of scorn at one despised?
 They showed no wrath, took no offense,
 Nor beat each other void of sense
 But lived together full of peace,
 And he who wants to fall in love
 Coos freely like a turtle-dove,
 The joys of heaven never cease.

Here cold and hot days never come,
 But right ones, like a woollen suit,
 Pleasant and never wearisome,
 Like Easter Sunday's absolute;
 Each thing desired in that place
 Came promptly, as a heavenly grace,
 Thus did the good know great content.
 Aeneas marvelled at the sight,
 And asked the Sibyl erudite
 What blessed souls had here been sent.

“Think not they were officials bold,”
 The ancient Sibyl answered pat,
 “Nor those whose chests were full of gold,
 Nor those who flaunted bellies fat,
 Nor those who donned rich crimson suits
 And coloured cloaks and fancy boots,
 Nor yet your idle, bookish clowns,
 Not knights nor highwaymen here perch,
 Not hypocrites who chant in church,
 Nor those who wear their golden crowns.

“Nay, these were beggars, simple-minded,
 Considered fools in life on earth,
 Decrepit, lame, from childhood blinded,
 Whom people scorned at in their mirth;

Who roamed unfed by paths and sedges,
And starving lay beside the hedges,
On whom men's ruthless dogs were set;
These always begged for food in vain;
And driven from all doors in pain,
With blood their hapless backs were wet.

“These were the widows, poor and potless,
Shut out from shelter in the dirt;
These were the virgins, upright, spotless,
Who even lacked a decent skirt;
These were the babes of homes bereft
And destitute as orphans left,
Who therefore died of some disease;
These though but poor, in humble den,
Were glad to help their fellowmen,
And skinned no back with usuries.

“Some honest lords are also there—
For there are always lords and lords;
That prodigy is somewhat rare,
For little good their trade affords;
Soldiers and ensigns here you'll find,
Mace-bearers, captains just and kind,
Who led a life of righteousness;
Men of all sorts and all conditions,
Who upright lived and scorned ambitions
Have gained this bliss and heaven bless.”