

Representation of Land and the Female Body in Polish Dramatic Literature

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy in Theater Arts

Title: Representation of Land and the Female Body in Polish Dramatic Literature

In this dissertation, I map how the authors of canonical Polish dramas from Romanticism to the present construct and solidify the ideals of womanhood and its connection to land and nature. I analyze how the use of the female body as a metaphor or personification of the nation-state, commonly used since the early eighteenth century in Polish art and literature, has created silence around the actual experiences of Polish women, who have suffered gendered violence during moments of turmoil in Polish history. I also expose how theatre has been participating in interweaving the national narratives with Catholic mythoi. These narratives have participated in creating and maintaining a national identity and have often fueled the Polish will to fight against foreign aggressors. However, in times of Polish independence and national freedom these narratives have often served to define what belonging to a national community of Polish people means and therefore have enabled exclusion of various people who do not fit neatly into these narratives' narrowly defined boundaries. My study exposes this narrative underpinning much of the current regressive political rhetoric in Poland. By examining this collective Polish imaginary, I call attention to the ways that contemporary Polish theatre-makers are attempting to subvert these old narratives.

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DEDICATION

For my family, near and far...especially Kuba and Maya who provided daily inspiration and motivation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Historian Norman Davies describes Poland as a “disputed bride, forever condemned to lie in between the rival embraces of two rapacious suitors.”¹ The poetic image describes much more than a precarious geopolitical position of a country whose land has been historically claimed by its powerful neighbors, Russia, and Germany. Davies' assertion captures a deeply engraved visage in Polish imagination of the motherland represented as a woman. The identification of a female body with land rests at the heart of this study. In this dissertation I map how the authors of the canonical Polish dramas from Romanticism to the present construct and solidify the ideals of womanhood and its connection to land and nature. I analyze how the use of female body as a metaphor or personification of the nation-state commonly used since 1700 in Polish art and literature has created silence around the actual experiences of Polish women who often suffered gendered violence during the moments of turmoil in Polish history. I also expose how theatre has been participating in interweaving the national narratives with the Catholic mythos. Those rock-solid narratives participated in creating and maintaining national identity and fuel the will to fight the foreign aggressors. However, in the time of independence and national freedom those narratives serve to define what it means to belong to the national community of Polish people and exclude those who do not fit neatly in those narrowly defined borders. My study exposes the narrative that forms the underpinnings of current regressive political rhetoric in Poland. By examining this collective Polish imaginary, I

¹ Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland in Two Volumes, Volume I*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, 23.

call attention to the ways that contemporary Polish theatre-makers are attempting to subvert those old narratives.

Historic Contestations Over Land and Bodies

The first borders of Poland were drawn in 966 CE when a leader of the Polanie tribe received baptism and entered the community of the universal, Catholic Europe. Since that time the borders swelled and shrunk many times. Poland has been often represented as Polonia, a suffering, violently captured, and dishonored woman who called upon generations of her sons to fight and die in the name of her freedom. The image of a suffering Polonia was solidified after the partition of 1795 when Polish land and population were partitioned between Prussia, Russia, and Germany and the country disappeared from the maps of Europe for over a century. During that time dramatic literature became the vehicle of Polish identity and aspiration to maintain spiritual and cultural autonomy. The twentieth century, although it brought restoration of Polish statehood, also ushered much more suffering to Polonia whose territory became one of the major battlegrounds of two world wars. After World War II the fate of Poland was decided when Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin shook hands in agreement that, as a part of the newly established world order, Polish territory would return under the wing of the Soviet Union, the incarnation of Russia. The Communist regime provided Polish people with sundry opportunities to protest, organize, sabotage, and fight back. In the 1990s The Solidarity movement organized by the workers became an emblem of yet another rise against the oppressive foreign power in the name of national independence. The year 1989 brought the desired by the Poles change of power. Poland became a free country setting its trajectory

toward the West. A short version of the most dramatic parts of the country's history often ends here. And yet Polish streets continue to host protests, marches, and demonstrations.

Since the transformation of the socio-political system from communism to the open market in 1990, Poland has been moving towards the rule of an ultra-conservative agenda. The void left by centuries of historical turmoil was filled with populist narratives fueled by the ideological underpinning of the Catholic Church. After the communist rule, Poland turned toward the Catholic Church which was considered an important supporting force in the ideological and physical fight against the USSR. The Polish Pope, John Paul II, became a significant moral authority and a spiritual father of free Poland. The leading politicians aimed to "restore the natural order" of Polish social life. Religion became an obligatory subject at schools. Over 40% of childcare facilities were shut down. In 1993 abortion became illegal. The restoration of the "natural", "God-given" order of things predominantly affected women. In free Poland, they were to stay at home, have children, and focus on supporting their men who were laboring to build a new, capitalist country.²

The stories of the bravery of the Polish spirit combined with the promise of a better future were supposed to cast a spell over the hardship of everyday life and make it palatable. The new economic system presented to Poles as a new chance gifted by the West became the source of many tragedies. Society was divided between those who are resourceful and resilient enough to find or create a job on the open market and those who fell through the cracks of the capitalistic system and slipped into the poverty caused by unemployment. The race to catch up

² Redakcja, „Graff: Chcę upolitycznić kobiety, które mają małe dzieci i są wściekłe,” Krytyka Polityczna, August 20, 2014, <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/graff-chce-upolitycznic-kobiety-ktore-maja-male-dzieci-i-sa-wsciekle/>

with the West intensified when Poland faced the possibility of entering the European Union. Rapid industrialization, and the sharpening of the cutthroat open market deepened the social and economic disparities.

Since 2015 when *Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc* (Law and Order) party came to power, Poland took a sharp far-right turn which intensified the regulations of women's bodies. In September 2016 Polish women organized an All-Poland Protest where approximately 200,000 women marched on the streets of many cities and towns against tightening already strict abortion rules. The big protest gained international recognition and was compared to the large women's protest in Iceland in 1975. The rigid abortion ruling did not pass until October 22 of 2020. During the severe wave of the coronavirus, the Polish Constitutional Court implemented an amendment to the already rigid "pro-life" law. Currently, women in Poland will not be able to terminate their pregnancy even in cases of deadly fetal complications. Ultra-conservative politicians, following the dictates of the Catholic Church, emphasized the moral obligation to protect the unborn above the choice of women to decide about high-risk pregnancies according to their conviction. The new ruling is not only invasive from the women's rights stance but creates a serious concern for the doctors who may face legal consequences if their medical decisions will be rendered harmful to the fetus by the law. The movement collects voices of radical pro-choice activists, but also of many mothers of handicapped children, nuns who dedicate their lives toward work with the disabled, as well as many women who identify themselves as Catholics and see abortion as an action with significant moral implications and yet they speak against the strict ruling as a dangerous and harmful for the women.

Women's rights issues sparked the biggest protests in recent years, yet many Polish people have been organizing around another issue: the failure of the Polish government to prioritize environmental concerns in the face of an impending ecological crisis. Polish politicians who in 2017 ordered intervention into the "virgin forests", declared that they did it to protect the trees from the bark beetles which destroy the "health of the forest." According to them, radical intervention was necessary to protect *Puszcza Białowieska* (Białowieska Wilderness). The radical intervention into the oldest parts of Polish forests, as well as the large-scale continuous urbanization of Poland to meet consumer demands, is creating a dire ecological situation. Large parts of Poland are at high risk of severe drought. The air quality ranks as one of the most alarming within the European Union³. Yet the Polish government openly questions the validity of climate change and refuses to formulate an ecological plan to join the global community in the fight against the nearing climate crisis.

One of the largest and most well-known protests was organized by groups of women who occupied several logging sites. In 2017 Polish Minister of Environment reversed the law which regulated the logging of trees, the permits to cut trees were no longer needed. The change of law resulted in the mass cutting of trees, even in the most unique and ecologically vital forests. Women who participated in the protests gathered with their children at the sites of mass logging. The images of "Polish Mothers in logging sites" breastfeeding their infants became a symbol of the new wave of the environmental movement led by women. The environmental activists linked the glorified image of a nursing mother so well-known from

³ [Stan środowiska w Polsce](https://www.gios.gov.pl/images/dokumenty/pms/raporty/GIOS_Sygnaly_2016.pdf) (The Environmental Situation of Poland Report https://www.gios.gov.pl/images/dokumenty/pms/raporty/GIOS_Sygnaly_2016.pdf). Accessed April 15, 2023

various depictions including Mary and baby Jesus and used this iconic image to make a statement against the mistreatment of nature. Women have been leading social movements and organizing against the government which usurps their rights to control both female bodies as well as nature. They shed light on the hypocritical assertions of the government which claims to protect the unborn from their mothers while carelessly mismanaging the essence of Poland: its land.

In the chapters that follow, I ask, what stories has theatre woven into the Polish psyche during the crucial years discussed above? In chapters two and three I ask of the most canonical texts of Polish dramatic literature, 'What stories do they tell about the land and nature?'⁴ "What stories do they convey regarding women and the female body?' In many instances, my reading is "against the text" in order to find female and non-human subjects⁵ in the plays that often concern men, or are written by and for men. My analysis focuses on two frames of inquiry: metaphorical and material. I trace when the land and female body served as a metaphor to convey a different meaning and which part of the texts provides an opportunity for the interpretation of the material representation. In the fourth chapter, I analyze several performances centered around environmental issues through which artists attempt to resist the notion of uniquely Polish challenges and locate themselves in a wider, global community. I analyze these theatrical events with the same tools: I ask whether they deal with nature and the female body in a material or metaphorical way.

⁴ Theresa J. May, *Earth Matters On Stage: Ecology and Environment in American Theater*, (London: Routledge, 2021), 5.

⁵ Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theater*, (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1988), 6.

Unraveling the Metaphor: Methodologies of Feminism and Ecodramaturgy

This project is woven with two theoretical threads: feminism and ecodramaturgy. The two critical frames function analogously to each other in that they both explore how the literature of the past expresses and supports the cultural and ideological concepts regarding gender and the non-human world.⁶ In my analysis of two canonical texts of Polish dramatic literature, *The Forefather's Eve* by Adam Mickiewicz and *The Wedding* by Stanislaw Wyspiański, feminism and ecodramaturgy exist in parallel, intertwine with each other and, at times, merge into one thread of ecofeminist criticism. Ecofeminism is concerned not only with the situation of women and nature and the connection between the two but also recognizes that the same oppressive systems rest upon racism, classism, and colonialism.⁷ One of the literary and performative devices problematized by ecodramaturgy and feminist theories is the use of metaphor.

Literary critic and scholar Denis Donoghue describes that “The force of a good metaphor is to give something a different life, a new life.”⁸ This search for a new life of a familiar entity like land or a woman results in silencing and omitting the actual experiences of both. In her article ““There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake”: Toward an Ecological Theater”, theatre scholar Una Chaudhuri describes the danger of turning lands and landscapes into metaphors. Chaudhuri writes,

the metaphorical use of ecology can sometimes misrepresent the actual ecological issues at hand...To use ecology as a metaphor is to block the theater's approach to the

⁶Wendy Aarons, Theresa J. May, eds., *Readings in Performance and Ecology*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 4.

⁷ Greta Gaard, Patrick D. Murphy, eds. *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 3.

⁸ Denis Donoghue, *Metaphor*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 2.

deeply vexed problem of classification that lies at the heart of ecological philosophy: are we human beings and our activities, such as theater-an integral part of nature, or are we somehow radically separate from it?⁹

Theatre has not been participating in the discussion about the connection between humans and the non-human world, in part, as Chaudhuri argues, because of the long tradition of using nature as a metaphor for human concerns. Similarly to Chaudhuri's assessment, many feminists have been addressing the problems of using female bodies as metaphors. Their outcry could be expressed in the words of Ann Marie MacDonald, a Scottish-Canadian playwright, "Good going, boys, but get your fucking metaphors off of my body!" Her words quoted by Ric Knowles in his article "The Hearts of Its Women: Rape, (Residential Schools), and Re-membering," exemplify the stand of many Indigenous women against the use of their bodies as a metaphor for land, and rape as an emblem for invasion. Knowles continues that if semiotic theory according to which "the sign marks the absence of its material referent," rings true then "the use of rape in scenes that symbolize the colonial project and its impact on Native culture risks replacing and effacing both its lived, the material reality for the women who are its victims, and the actuality of its gendered and raced practice, both historical and contemporary."¹⁰ MacDonald, Knowles, and Chaudhuri note the danger of redirecting the audience's attention while seeing nature, land, or the female body and assigning a different meaning to that experience.

The representation of the female body in Poland or *Polonia* has a long tradition in Polish art and literature. Maria Janion points out that in the Polish imaginary Poland was presented

⁹ Una Chaudhuri, "'There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake': Toward an Ecological Theater." *Theater* (New Haven, Conn.) 25, no. 1 (1994), 27.

¹⁰ Ric Knowles "The Hearts of Its Women: Rape, (Residential Schools), and Re-membering." In S.E. Wilmer, ed., *Native American Performance, and Representation*, (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2009), 141.

"as an allegory, a symbol, a myth." Janion notes that her body was often presented as a suffering, tormented, wounded body. The figure of *Polonia*, a nation-state represented as a mother pushed out the possibility of capturing the experiences of the actual women whose stories remain untold. Although women appear often on stage and on the pages of dramatic literature, they are frequently used to silence, not tell the stories of women of that time. Similar is the case of land and nature.

Although Romantics turned toward nature as a major inspiration and an object of their focus, nature is used either as a backdrop for the journey of the male protagonist or becomes a metaphor for that journey. Ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood calls this process 'backgrounding.' Plumwood asserts, "one of the most common forms of denial of women and nature is what I will term *backgrounding*, their treatment as providing the background to a dominant, foreground sphere of recognized achievement or causation."¹¹ Plumwood observes these processes in the social and economic aspects of life. I transpose this notion into the analysis of the world of the plays described in this volume. The idea of background is especially relevant while discussing Polish Romanticism. Both women and nature/land have been placed at the center of the protagonists' journey. Yet in many cases, they serve as passive and silent objects of fascination or their actions and intentions are defined by the male protagonist.

Ecodramaturgy¹² and Platiality

One of the foundational texts for my study is Una Chaudhuri's work *Staging Place: Geography of Modern Drama* which theorizes special and platial aspects of theatrical

¹¹ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 21.

¹² The term was coined by Theresa May who used it for the first time in her article "Kneading Marie Clements' Burning Vision." *Canadian theatre review* 144, no. 1 (2010): 5–12.

performances as well as the ways “plays stage place.” Chaudhuri defines platiality as “a recognition of the signifying power and political potential of *specific places*.”¹³ The dramatic texts that are the subject of my study were written when the fight for land was at the forefront of their creators’ minds. I begin my work by analyzing the specific locations where the authors set their plays. Chaudhuri’s work became a vital text for Christy Stanlake who creates a framework for reading Native American dramaturgy. In her book *Native American Drama*, Stanlake builds upon Chaudhuri’s theory of place and applies it to Native American dramaturgy. Stanlake notes that platial theory is centered around the metaphor of home.¹⁴ She concludes that the difference between the Native and non-Native theories of place rests in “figurative and literal connections between people and homelands.”¹⁵ According to Stanlake, it is the material connection to the place rather than its metaphorical understanding that sets the Native American dramaturgy apart from its Western counterpart. In my work, I analyze two of the most canonical Polish dramas which were written when Poland did not exist on the maps of Europe after Prussia, Russia, and Austria partitioned its land and population in 1795. Both playwrights (as well as most of their contemporaries) were concerned with the loss of the independent country and the fate of its future. The place, the homeland, was at the center of their attention and affection in their creative work. I analyze their treatment of the space and place in their dramas.

¹³ Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, 9Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 5.

¹⁴Christy Stanlake, *Native American Drama : a Critical Perspective*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 41.

¹⁵ Christy Stanlake, *Native American Drama*, 41.

I explore the connection between space, place, land, landscape, and body. Stanlake builds upon Edward Casey's notion of emplacement. Casey writes,

Body and landscape present themselves as coeval epicenters around which particular places pivot and radiate. They are, at the very least, the bounds of places...Between the two boundaries [of body and land]—and very much as a function of their differential interplay—implacement occurs (Emplacement?)¹⁶. The place is what takes place between body and landscape.¹⁷

I analyze how playwrights whose focus is directed at specific land, often the object of their longing, stage the specific elements of that land as well as the connection of human bodies with those elements of the landscape. In the last part of this project, I analyze some of the site-specific contemporary environmental performances which, according to Casey, transform the specific landscape into place by endowing it with meaning through their interactions with bodies. The process of assigning value and meaning to specific places is another aspect of Native American drama. Stanlake asserts that a distinguishing aspect of Native dramaturgy is "the notion that places, specific landscapes, are endowed with value, which can only be fully realized through a physical interaction with the land." This endowment in the Polish context often results in portraying nature as a symbol of national identity and resistance. The idea of uniquely "Polish Nature" described by Polish scholar Jacek Kolbuszewski suggests that rivers are not free-flowing ecosystems but rather guardians of the borders; that forests serve as hiding places for the patriots fighting the oppressors during the uprisings; and that birds appear as symbols of the future liberation rather than unique beings. This endowment of the land with

¹⁶ My suggestion of the correct word.

¹⁷ Christy Stanlake, *Native American Drama*, 41.

the nationalistic meaning divorces the human experience of nature and replaces it with a metaphorical one that forwards the project of the state.

The notion of the National Nature combined with the Romantic concept of the sublime wilderness conceals the materiality of the portrayed nature. Yet the authors of the volume titled *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature* point out the material aspect of the sublime. Oerlemans Onno and Katherine Neilson Rankin assert,

The material sublime is in this instance not just a sense of awe and fear (those 'horrid moods') but a sudden recognition that it is possible to see at once how thought and existence are estranged from a clear awareness of the physical world, and that they are yet inexplicably rooted in it. It is also, of course, a yearning to recover that rootedness.¹⁸ The idea of that recovery informs my reading of these canonical plays. I attempt to find the material connection of the human protagonists with the non-human world.

The key methodological frame for my work is ecodramaturgy which names that material connection. According to May, “ecodramaturgy” is a methodology that includes both theatre practice and scholarship (history and theory). Beyond “ecodrama” (theatre with an environmental theme), ecodramaturgy includes theater scholarship that foregrounds the material-ecological given circumstances represented in a play or performance in order to expose explicit and/or implicit environmental (and environmental justice) meanings and messages. This, according to May, includes historiography and criticism that analyzes theatrical representation in light of historic and ongoing patterns of environmental degradation and environmental injustice; and that examines how the artistic work propagates and/or intervenes

¹⁸ Oerlemans, Onno, and Katharine Neilson Rankin, *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature*, University of Toronto Press, 2002), 4.

in environmental debates¹⁹. In this work, I search for the elements of the stories included in the plays I analyze which convey this reciprocal connection between the human and non-human world. I center my analysis around the following questions: 'What is the history of the land we are representing on stage? How was the idea of nature and environment understood in the historical moment represented in the play?'²⁰ I also conduct a similar exploration regarding the representation of women on stage by those two playwrights. I analyze the connection (or lack of connection) between the representation of women and the way these two playwrights view nature.²¹

In order to understand the mythos informing the Polish imaginary, it is crucial to understand the country's history with its many dramatic shifts from greatness to near annihilation. Below I provide the reader with a brief overview of the key moments and important facts from Polish history relevant to this study.

Polish History

In AD 966 Mieszko I, the chief of *Polanie* (Polanians), one of the numerous Slavic tribes, was baptized into the Christian faith. That event marked the beginning of the nation-state of Poland and its entrance into the larger community of Roman Catholic Europe.²² This political decision set a new country on the trajectory of expansion of power and land. The consecutive kings expanded the territories of Poland and made significant changes to the social system. One

¹⁹ Theresa J. May, *Earth Matters on Stage: Ecology and Environment in American Theatre*, New York: Routledge, 2021), 4-5.

²⁰ Theresa J. May, *Earth Matters on Stage: Ecology and Environment in American Theatre*, New York: Routledge, 2021), 5. These questions are also come from Theresa May's "Green Questions to Ask a Play" included in her article "Beyond Bambi: Toward a Dangerous Ecocriticism", *Theatre Topics* 17:2 (2007): 95-110.

²¹ May, *Earth Matters*, 4.

²² Norman Davis, *God's Playground: a History of Poland*, vol. I, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 4.

notable example is the reform implemented by Kazimierz Odnowiciel (the Restorer; 1034- 1058) who distributed the land-owning rights to knights and the church.²³

Along with the acquisition of new lands, the population of Poland diversified significantly including Jews, Orthodox Christian, and the Armenian Church.²⁴ The seasons of growth were affected by the inside fights of the royal families and attacks of the hostile neighbors and the powerful Asian attackers, the Mongols. Among many external dangers threatening Polish security were the Teutonic Knights. In 1384 Polish throne was bestowed to a young woman (at that time a 10-year-old girl) Jadwiga.²⁵ Two years later the young monarch married a Lithuanian king who, on account of the union, converted to Christianity and changed his name to its Slavic version, Władysław Jagiełło. ²⁶ Lithuania, at that time, was the second largest country in medieval Europe stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea so the Polish-Lithuanian country quickly became an important actor on the international scene capable of defeating fierce enemies including the Teutonic Knights.²⁷ Over the next centuries Poland-Lithuania, later the Commonwealth of Both Nations, Poland, and Lithuanian, grew in significance culturally, economically, and politically. The Renaissance period produced many valuable works of art, literature, and science; the most commonly known as Copernicus, a student of the Jagiellonian University.²⁸ In the years 1648-1667 the country came under the devastating invasion referred to as Swedish Deluge.²⁹ The invasion of the northern neighbor devastated the country. The

²³ Patrice M. Dabrowski, *Poland: The First Thousand Years*, (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014), 19-20.

²⁴ In 1370 Poland expanded to the south-east and annexed the Ruthenian land)

²⁵ Patrice M. Dabrowski, *Poland*, 46.

²⁶ Dabrowski, *Poland*, 53.

²⁷ Dabrowski, *Poland*, 54.

²⁸ Dabrowski, *Poland*, 93.

²⁹ Dabrowski, *Poland*, 211.

Swedish occupation, the "black death" of 1651, and the flooding of *Wisła* (The Vistula River) wrecked Poland and sent it into a steady economic, social, and political decline. The governing system privileged nobility and limited the king's power. The bright idea of more democratic ruling did not serve the country well, the nobility could not agree on the important matters affecting the country. Additionally, the shadows of the foreign attacks started to loom again. On May 3, 1791, the Polish constitution was signed. This radical document, often compared to the US Constitution, was signed as a means of reforming the country. The Constitution divided the power into three organs, reestablished the inheritance of the throne (rather than election), and placed the peasants under the rule of law which meant limiting the harshness of serfdom. Yet this best effort could not stop the appetite of the neighbors who moved forward with their plans against Poland. Prussia, Russia, and Austria partitioned Polish land and its population in 1795. Poland disappeared from the maps of Europe for 123 years. Initially, the divided population considered the option of recognizing the common roots with the Russians and giving into the pan-Slavic identity. The sentiments dissipated when it became clear that Tsar was ready to oppose any expressions of separate, Polish identity. The occupied population aimed to regain their independence with two failed insurrections which led to the loss of many lives, harsh consequences of imprisonment, exile to Siberia, and mass emigration. The largest center of the Poles who emigrated was in France. The partition was a backdrop for Polish Romanticism which created some of the most important works of literature. As a result of the Treaty of Versailles, in 1918 Poland was re-established as a country and recovered some of its lands, including access to the Baltic Sea. The country slowly started to rebuild all aspects of its statehood: its cultural life, social and political structures, military, education, etc... The

independence lasted only till September 1939 when Russia and Germany invaded Poland. The Nazis set up concentration camps on Polish land to systemically murder over three million Jews. Furthermore, the war claimed around two million Polish lives. The country lost nearly 15 % of its population to the Nazi regime and the entire social class was wiped out (the Jews who were mostly urban merchants). After the war, upon the Yalta agreement of 1945 Poland fell under the influence of the Soviet Union and its communist rule. Poles once again protested and fought for their freedom which became a reality in June of 1989 when in the partially free election the Solidarity party won over the Communist one. The peaceful transition of power opened the window to western Europe and the U.S. The last three decades have been marked by a rapid (and from the economic point of view very successful) switch to the open market economy. Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 which affected not only the attacked country but also its neighbors, Poland ranked as the 23rd economy worldwide, and the 6th one in European Union. Only recently have Polish scholars and artists begun to analyze the human cost of living in the post-iron-curtain reality with the 16% unemployment and growing poverty among those who struggled to meet the demands of the cut-throat entrepreneurial reality.

The tumultuous history wove many stories and narratives, shaped mental maps, and created mythos deeply engraved in the Polish imaginary. Before I analyze how theatre has been participating in shaping or attempting to unravel those mythoi, I will introduce some of the most prolific ones.

***Matka Polka* (The Polish Mother)**

Matka Polka, Polish Mother is one of the key constructs of the Polish imaginary. It describes a woman, a mother who skillfully faces the challenges of domestic life regardless of their magnitude. During a time of peace, she supports her husband, cares for the children, and keeps a spotless house. In a time of war, she ensures that her children are submerged in the Polish language, culture, and Catholic faith. When her husband is away fighting the enemy, she supports him by sewing Polish flags and emblems which embody the spirit of the fight. The mythos of a Polish Mother is so prolific that historians include them in their work describing the history of Poland. In her book *Poland*, Patrice Dabrowski explains that after the failed uprising against the partitioning powers in the 1800s, the fight shifted from the battlefield to the domestic sphere. Women's role became recognized as significant in maintaining the continuity of the national identity. The ideal of *Matka Polka* on one hand recognized the role of women in the national cause through their domestic labor. However, on the other hand, it solidified the notion of women's role as caregivers and supporters whose voice is omitted in the political discourse and decision-making. The figure of *Matka Polka* is prolific and well-recognized, yet the names of the individual women rarely appear on the pages of history books.

Maria Janion notes the parallel between the figure of a Mother, the imaginary of Poland as a mother, and Mary, the Mother of God. Polish feminist scholarship recognizes that the relegation of motherhood to the symbolic role has a tangible effect on the lived experiences of Polish women. While women worked in their homes to maintain the national identity, their sons and husbands sacrificed their lives for the motherland, *Polonia*.

Polonia: Poland as a Woman

In 1795, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth lost its independence and the population and land of modern Poland were divided between three world powers: the Habsburg Monarchy, the Russian Empire, and the Kingdom of Prussia. Many Polish artists and poets attempted to describe these tragic events using the motif of *Polonia*, a young woman captured and violated by her foreign oppressors. One of the examples is the personification of Poland as an abused and violated woman is Ary Sheffer's *Polonia*, created in 1831. Shaffer intensified the violence enacted against Poland: On the dead body of a wounded eagle rests a woman, barely alive, pinned to the ground by the hoof of a horse. The intruder aims his lance at the lower parts of the woman's body to pierce her; to metaphorically penetrate her. The painting captures what has become the two iconic depictions of Poland: an eagle, and a female. Through the use of metaphor, it is not an actual woman who is suffering, but the Polish body politic itself that is suffering from the violence of foreign oppressors. Another famous example of such depictions is Jan Matejko's *Polonia*, created in 1863. In Matejko's painting, Poland is a young woman whose hands are being forced into shackles by a Russian soldier. Another soldier looks down at her while standing in a sexual pose.³⁰ *Polonia's* ripped dress fell off her shoulders. Next to *Polonia* is the body of a partially exposed woman, Lithuania, laying in a pool of blood.

The use of metaphor during the Romantic period to describe a country is not unique to Poland, yet unlike many other European countries, the Polish imagination and way of processing its past have not divorced the identity of Poland from these artistic frames. In her book *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna*, Maria Janion traces the evolution of the motif of *Polonia*

³⁰ Maria Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna: Fantazmaty Literatury*, (Kraków:Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006), 286.

depicted as a woman. One of the contemporary examples provided by Janion is *Bombowniczka* by Anna Baumgart created in 2005. The artist explains that the figure of a half-naked, pregnant woman with a pig mask symbolizes *Polonia* who no longer is oppressed and suffering, but rather is “a warrior”, “a rebel”, and “a terrorist.”³¹ *Polonia* as a woman exists not only in the imagination of artists but also in the minds of scholars. In the introduction to the anthology of Polish drama in English translation, Krystyna Duniec and Joanna Krakowska, the editors, write about Poland as a “beautiful, proud, and unhappy” woman.³² Krakowska and Duniec draw attention to the homogenization of the national identity encapsulated in the figure of *Polonia*, and point out that after 1989 *Polonia* attempts to assert herself as “(A)pollonia, Transpollonia, Postpollonia, etc.”³³ Duniec and Krakowska play with the tradition of portraying Poland as a woman, yet they do not discuss the risk involved in the identification of the nation-state with a female body. The image of *Polonia* who looks, behaves, and acts like a woman also permeates the mass culture. The rock band Obywatel G.C. in 1988 released a popular song titled *Nie pytaj mnie o Polskę*³⁴ in which the male singer describes his complicated relationship with a “tired and drunk” woman whom he is not able to leave.³⁵ The long tradition of identification of female body with land has been so prolific that even historians use the metaphor to express the

³¹ Maria Janion, *Niesamowita*, 291.

³² Krystyna Duniec, Joanna Klass, and Joanna Krakowska, *(A)pollonia: Twentieth-First Century Polish Drama and Texts for the Stage*, (London: Seagull Books, 2014), XIV.

³³ Duniec, Klass, Krakowska, , *(A)pollonia*, XIV.

³⁴ Obywatel G.C., *Do not ask about Poland*

³⁵ “Taka zmeczona

I pijana wciąż

Dlatego nie pytaj mnie...dlaczego jestem z nia” see: [\(3\) Obywatel G.C. - Nie pytaj o Polskę \(oryginalny teledysk\) - YouTube](#)

difficult geographical position of the country including Norman Davies' whose quote opens up this chapter.

The most explicit use of the female body as a personification of Poland/ *Polonia* in theatre, can be found in one of Wyspiański lesser known, short plays titled *Królowa Polskiej Korony* (*The Queen of Polish Crown*). Set in 1656, a year after the attack of Sweden on Poland known as Swedish Deluge, Wyspiański uses the image of a dying woman to capture the fate of Poland. The play takes place in Lwów (Lviv)³⁶ in the cathedral where Polish king Jan Kazimierz declared Mary the Queen of Poland a few days prior to the events of the play. The historic, religious event was intended to renew the fighting spirit among all Poles, (including the peasants to whom he promised protection from the harsh reality of serfdom which I discuss in chapter 2). The performative ceremony emphasized that the invasion has not only a national dimension but also a religious one because protestant Swedes aimed to destroy the Polish Catholic legacy. Wyspiański imagined the character of the king having a vision of a woman carried by the crowd, which he describes as disheveled hair falling on her naked shoulders; her royal cloak ripped drags behind her. The stage is filled by the lamentation of the people, her subjects. The king feels overwhelmed by the emotions:

KRÓL

...serce pęknąć chce z bólu.

Twarz znana mi, tak bliska,

że jakby matka moja

jakby moja kochana

ubrana

³⁶ At that time Lviv was a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

w czarną żałobną suknię
leci, wichry ją wioną;
kolana
lud ujmuje, podtrzymuje...
Polska to nasza niesiona
Polska to nasza sterana
Polska to nasza shańbiona. —³⁷

[KING
...my heart wants to burst with pain.
A face familiar to me, so close
like my mother
like my darling
dressed
in a black mourning gown
she flies, the winds blow her;
knees
people take hold...
Poland is ours carried
Poland is our jaded
Poland is our shambles. —]³⁸

The poem uses the trope of Polonia, a wounded woman. Her pale arms indicate violence, potentially sexual assault which is another popular metaphorical representation of the foreign invasion.

³⁷ Stanisław Wyspiański, *Królowa Polskiej Korony*, (Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie, 1958),

³⁸ My translation.

Polish Martyrdom: Poland as Christ Among the Nations

Romanticism remains one of the most important periods in Polish history and literature. Marlon B Ross asserts that, "the Romantics believe that power is constituted by *ideas*-- whether the knowledge is scientific, historical, political, philosophical, or narrowly technological."³⁹ Polish Romantics search for the idea and its expression in the context of the fate of the nation; they look for an idea that would ignite the hearts and minds of their fellow Poles to do what seemed impossible, to take back their country from under the yolk of the foreign aggressors. This quest for a new idea resulted in the formulation of the messianic idea that Poland is "Christ among the nations."

Adam Mickiewicz, one of three key bards of partitioned Poland gave the foundation of this national vision in his *The Books of the Nation and the Polish Pilgrimage*:

And finally, Poland said: "Whosoever will come to me shall be free and equal, for I am FREEDOM." But the kings when they heard of this were terrified in their hearts and said: "We drove out freedom from the earth, and behold it returneth in the person of a just nation that doth not bow down to our idols! Come, let us slay this nation." And they plotted treachery among themselves. [. . .] And they martyred the Polish Nation and laid it in the grave, and the kings cried out: "We have slain and we have buried Freedom." But they cried out foolishly [. . .] For the Polish, Nation did not die: its body lieth in the grave, but its soul hath descended from the earth, that is from public life to the abyss, that is to the private life of people who suffer slavery in their country, that it may see their sufferings. But on the third day, the soul shall return to the body, and the Nation shall rise and free all the peoples of Europe from Slavery. [. . .] And as after the

³⁹ Marlon B. Ross, "Romantic Quest and Conquest: Troping Masculine Power in the Crisis Poetic Identity" in Anne K. Mellor, ed., *Romanticism and Feminism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 31.

resurrection of Christ blood sacrifices ceased in all the world, so after the resurrection of the Polish, Nation wars shall cease in all Christendom. (1944, pp.379– 380)⁴⁰

Mickiewicz's vision uplifted not only the hearts of his contemporaries but also gave a frame of understanding of the whole national history which has been informing the Polish throughout its difficult past and presence.

Sarmatians

The martyrdom of Poland was linked to both its suffering as well as its greatness. The construction of the glorious past rested on the story of origin predating the creation of the state. The story goes as follows:

A long time ago there were three brothers: Lech, Czech, and Rus. They were the leaders of their tribes which grew rapidly and needed a new place to settle. The brothers embarked on the journey to find new homes for their people. Czech traveled south, and after finding the right place he finally built a dwelling for his people. That is how the nation of Czechs was born. Rus traveled east and that is where Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Russians found their land. Lech, the leader of the Polanie people, followed a white eagle that led him up north to a majestic, tall tree. The man eager to scope the surrounding land climbed the tree. He gazed around and laid his eyes on the diverse and rich land: an ocean in the north, fertile plains in the east, a mountain in the south, and the west was covered in thick forest. The eagle wove a nest on the tree. Lech took the bird's action as a confirmation that this land was meant to become his home. He settled a town Gniezno which through its name honored the eagle's guidance for gniazdo in Polish means a nest. This is how Poland was born. The white eagle with its wings outstretched remains n emblem of Poland until today.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Gerard Bouchard, *National Myths: Constructed Pasts, Contested Presents*, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 113.

⁴¹ Dabrowski, *Poland*, 7.

Although powerful, this foundational myth was incomplete according to the early chroniclers of the first Polish kings. There was a need to describe the origin of Lech and Polans. In his *Chronica Polonorum*, Wincenty Kadlubek who wrote circa 1200 described the origin of the Lech's ancestors who came from the brave tribe of Sarmatians. The tribe was famous for its fierce and honorable warriors who fought and conquered violent enemies. Sarmatians were organized in a democratic way and created a just society. The descendants of the Sarmatian warriors were Polish knights who then formed the nobility. The myth of the Sarmatians' origins was revived and emphasized in the XVI century when the nobility was in power. The bravery of the prehistoric ancestors became embodied in their descendants' willingness to fight the pagan enemies and secure Poland's role as a bulwark of Christendom. The myth of a Polish nobleman, a Catholic resonates in today's Poland where Catholicism is, by many, perceived as an integral part of the national identity. The focal positionality of Sarmatism was used to solidify, establish, and reinforce the social order of the time: the system of serfdom. The economic system depended on the labor of most of the population living on the land: peasants. The history written nearly entirely by the nobility had full control of the image of peasants in the national historic narrative which often resulted in omission and exclusion.

In a 2018 publication on Polish literature directed to the Anglo-American reader, Jan Sowa explains that Sarmatism can be understood by those who watched Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012). Sowa defines Sarmatism as "a culture of slave owners who built their social and political universe around a revamped relic of Medieval Europe: the manorial

agricultural plantation (Pol. Folwark)''⁴² The grandiose myth of remarkable origin fueled the nobility's usurpation of the right to both land and the labor of the peasants. Sowa along with other scholars has been challenging this continuously perpetuated and retold narrative that to be Polish means to be of nobility while in reality, 80% of society's ancestors were peasants many of whom lived in slave-like conditions for generations. This new scholarship opens up a discussion about the implications of the *real* roots of majority of Poles and provides new perspectives on the canonical texts which informs the final chapter of this study.

Adam Mickiewicz and Stanisław Wyspiański

The two central texts of this study are Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady* (*The Forefather's Eve*) and Stanisław Wyspiański's *Wesele* (*The Wedding*). It is impossible to overestimate the importance of those two play in Polish theatre, culture, education, and even politics.

Adam Mickiewicz, (1798-1855) an exceptional poet, translator, and playwright remains the most important and iconic author of Polish literature. His work is continuously studied by all school children in Poland. His four-part dramatic cycle *Dziady* is still being staged by professional and amateur theatres all over the country. Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907), a painter, architect, playwright, and director became popular after his drama *Wesele* (*The Wedding*) premiered in Krakow in 1901. The same year, Wyspiański directed the very first production of Mickiewicz's *Dziady*. The success of the production paired with the excitement around his own play secured Wyspiański's place among the most canonical playwrights of Poland.

⁴² Jan Sowa, „Spectres of Sarmatism”, in Tamata Trojanowska, Joanna Niżyńska, Przemysław Czapliński ,with the assistance of Agnieszka Polakowska, eds. *Being Poland: A New History of Polish Literature and Culture since 1918*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 30.

In 1824 Mickiewicz was forced to leave his motherland as a punishment for his anti-Russian rhetoric and patriotic desires to free the nation from the Russian occupation. After the annexation of Polish land and its population in 1795, Russian powers understood that exile is a more powerful punitive measure than imprisonment. Breaking the ties with the land of the people determined to fight for its independence became an effective and relatively easy tactic of controlling anti-Russian activities. Mickiewicz left behind the familiar landscape of his childhood and youth, but he also was forced to separate from the woman he loved. He was assigned various teaching positions in several towns and cities in Russia and was forbidden from returning to his homeland. The sense of longing informed most of the work he created while traveling around Russia and later around Western Europe. In 1890 Wyspiański attended a ceremony of moving Mickiewicz's remains to Wawel castle, the symbolic burial place of Polish kings. The event impacted young Wyspiański, he felt compelled to continue Mickiewicz's legacy of constructing and maintain national identity of the stateless Poles through poetry and drama.

Mickiewicz's and Wyspiański's contribution were not limited to the patriotic importance of their work. Both artists traveled around Europe and were familiar with the newest trends of art, music, literature, and drama. Mickiewicz met Pushkin, Chopin, and Goethe. Wyspiański, during one of his trips to Munich, became familiar with Richard Wagner's musical drama. Wyspiański transposed the idea of synthesis of arts like dance, music, painting, acting, and signing combined in one performative artform (Gesamtkunstwerk). Both playwrights implemented experimental form in their plays and their bold artistic choices impacted generations of Polish playwrights and directors like Gombrowicz, Witkacy, Kantor, Grotowski, just to name a few.

Dziady (The Forefather's Eve)

In the newest English translation, Charles Kraszewski asserts (after Steiner), “The greatness of a book can also be measured by how often a mature culture returns to it, re-reads it, reinterprets it, and itself, in its light.”⁴³ Polish theatre makers and their audiences apply *Dziady* as a filter to observe themselves, they often “think with *Dziady*.” The new productions of the well-known play are not merely faithful recreations of *Dziady*, but rather they become a creative space in which artists interact with the text, find new meanings, and interweave their own voices within the fabric of Mickiewicz's text. The drama becomes a cognitive tool often applied by contemporary Poles to analyze the world around them, express their situation, and anchor themselves in the continuity of history.

Dziady is a four-part dramatic cycle written in the span of ten years (1822-1832). The title *Dziady* shares the name with a pre-Christian Slavic ritual of encounter with the dead ancestors. The ritual evolved into All Saint's Day celebrated on November 1st as a Catholic holiday of visiting the graves of the late relatives to remember and honor them. The four parts of *Dziady* were not written or published in chronological order. Part I is an incomplete draft of the Praeludium to Part II. It depicts a crowd of peasants carrying food and drinks to the chapel where they will celebrate the ritual of *dziady* which is staged in Part II. Part I is rarely staged or engaged with critically, and I also omit it in my analysis. Part II portrays the ritual itself. The living summon their dead and the uncanny feast takes part on the stage. Part III tells the story of a group of young political prisoners who describe and embody the martyrology of the Polish nation. The main character, one of the prisoners Gustav undergoes a great transformation from

⁴³ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather's Eve*, 6.

a romantic lover to a fighter for his nation named Konrad. The protagonist becomes a spiritual leader in the messianic journey of the whole nation. Part IV is an expression of tragic, unfulfilled love. The character of Gustav returns from afterlife to tell his sorrowful story. The motif of tragic love and links the whole cycle together.

Józef Zaleski, Mickiewicz's friend, read *Dziady* part III around the time of its release in Paris in 1833. Zaleski, a poet himself, was so struck by the form, content, and quality of this new work that he declared:

Forefathers' Eve will be a gigantic, original, and national poem, something akin to our *Divina Comedia*. An enormous edifice that will embrace the death throes of the Polish nation and all the worlds of poetry and philosophy. . . . The heroes of the poem are God and the poet himself. I read . . . the poem on my knees.⁴⁴

Although *Dziady* hold a unique place in Polish theatre, politics, education, and even church, as literary work, its value is recognized by scholars and artist beyond Polish borders. Many scholars include Mickiewicz in the pantheon of "great Europeans" next to Goethe, Dante, Eliot, or Shakespeare.⁴⁵ *Dziady* remain one of the most frequently staged plays produced by the national, community, even school theatres.

Wesele (The Wedding)

The play depicts the authentic event of the wedding ceremony between Lucjan Rydel and Jadwiga Mikołajczykówna which took place in November of 1901. Rydel, a popular artist from Kraków married a peasant woman from the village of Bronowice. Their wedding became a scandalous event. Wyspiański served as a witness at the church part of the ceremony and

⁴⁴ Roman Koropecy, *Adam Mickiewicz: The Life of a Romantic*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 192.

⁴⁵ Charles S. Kraszewski, "Introduction" in Adam Mickiewicz's, *Forefathers Eve*, 6.

participated in the festive celebration which took place in the village house of the bride's sister and her husband. The traditional, folk wedding became a subject of Wyspiański's play *Wesele* (*The Wedding*) which premiered only six months after the actual event. The play was a success and the audience enjoyed seeing popular figures depicted on stage. There were however those who found it deeply offensive, especially those who saw on stage caricatures of themselves.

In the play, the realistic portrayal of the actual event becomes a deeply symbolic drama. At the end of the first act, Rachel, a Jewish young woman shares a poetic spell with a straw-man which protects a rose-bush from the harshness of Polish winter. The straw-man comes alive and transforms the wedding into an event shared with the supernatural dramatis personae like Ghost of a dead fiancé of Marysia, one of the women attending the wedding; Vernyhora, a "legendary 18th century Ukrainian bard and seer who foretold the destruction and resurrection of Poland." There are also historic people who return from some of the most important parts of Polish history and join the wedding: Stańczyk, "a court jester of King Zygmunt the Elder (1467-1548); Hetman "Ksavery Branicki" leader of a treacherous group of Polish nobles, in league with Russian Czarina Catherine 2nd. Their conspiracy to do away with the liberal Polish Constitution of May 3rd, 1791 was a prelude to Poland's total loss of sovereignty and partition by Russia, Prussia, and Austria, from 1795-1918;" Black Knight, "Polish hero of the Battle of Grunwald (1410), in which Poles and Lithuanians defeated the Teutonic Knights of the Cross" and Spectre "Jakub Szela, leader of the 1846 Polish peasant uprising in the Austrian "partition" against the property-owning gentry." ⁴⁶ The key moments of Polish history embodied by specific characters

⁴⁶ Stanisław Wyspiański, *The Wedding*, (London:Oberon Books,1998), 18.

invade the wedding hut and bring the words of caution or inspiration to awake from the slumber of inaction toward regaining the national independence.

Going Back Home

After fifteen years of living in the U.S. I continue referring to the experience of visiting Poland *as going back home*. The work on this study included two summer research trips *back home* funded by the Center for the Study of Women in Society (CSWS) and the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Oregon. I conducted the bulk of my research in Kraków (Cracow) where Stanisław Wyspiański lived and wrote his canonical play over a century ago and where both playwrights are buried. I visited Rydlówka, a place where the wedding described in *Wesele* took place. The house is preserved as a museum and includes many historic artefacts like wedding outfits, household items described in the play like chess, tables, candelabras, etc... Bronowice, the village where the famous wedding took place is currently a part of Kraków. It is also the place of my childhood.

The fact that much of this study was created and conceptualized *back home* will at times become apparent for the reader as I weave my own experiences in my analysis, especially in the fourth chapter focused on the contemporary performances. I am convinced that my perspective as a Polish national, as well as my experience of living *far away from home* enhances this study and uniquely positions it in the field of Polish drama scholarship.

Chapter Summary

In the second chapter, I examine Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady* part II (*The Forefathers' Eve Part II*) and Stanisław Wyspiański's *Wesele* (*The Wedding*) in light of the representation of peasants. In my comparative analysis, I reveal that Wyspiański's drama solidified the position of

a feminine “nature” in relation to a masculine national identity while Mickiewicz avoided perpetuating this binary thinking by setting aside the nationalistic perspective and focusing on the lived experience of his protagonists.

In the third chapter, I analyze female characters in *Dziady* and *Wesele*. My study reveals that both playwrights divorce the lived experiences of women and shape their female characters into metaphorical enhancements of the male protagonists’ journeys. I also emphasize how both dramas solidified the creation of mythos of Polish Mother as well as subscribe the notion of metaphysical connection of women and nature.

The fourth chapter is a leap from the historic study to the analysis of two contemporary plays presented in one of the most important Polish theatres, Teatr Powszechny. The two plays *Jak Ocalić Świat* (*How to Save the World*) and *Martwa Natura* (*Still Nature*) are centered around environmental concerns and channel the experience of eco grief. I conclude, however, that in spite of the artistic intention, both plays perpetuate the old narratives solidified by Mickiewicz and Wyspiański in their representation both of women and land. I reveal how those two performances showcase that centuries of metaphorical understanding of female bodies and national nature remain subconscious even in the work of the artists who want to address the material danger of the climate catastrophe.

Chapter 2: Imagined Community: Addressing Social Injustice in *Dziady* by Adam Mickiewicz
and *Wesele* by Stanisław Wyspiański

1901 was an important year for Polish theatre. In March the national theatre in Kraków staged *Wesele (The Wedding)* by Stanisław Wyspiański and in October, the same theatre hosted a premier of Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady (The Forefathers' Eve)*. Wyspiański's drama documented the scandalous wedding between a renowned artist and a peasant woman which happened just a few months before the premiere. Mickiewicz's four-part dramatic cycle aimed at charting a pathway for the uniquely Slavic drama rooted in the pre-Christian ritual of ancestor worship, *dziady*, after which the playwright named his work. Both plays were quickly acclaimed as canonical. The success of *The Wedding* gained Wyspiański the respect necessary for an artist entrusted with directing Mickiewicz's work. The two plays, however, had yet another point of connection. Both playwrights invited their audiences to ask *Who are we?* Who are the people living on the lands partitioned between Russia, Prussia, and Austria in 1795 previously known as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth? Decades of foreign, oppressive rule between 1795 and 1918 created an urgent need for a collective Polish identity. The *we* began to signify a Polish nation. Both *Wesele* and *Dziady* told stories about the history of Polish nation and as such gained titles of *national* dramas and both actively participated in shaping Polish nationalism.

In his work *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson paraphrases Ernest Gellner's proposition that "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *imagines*

nations where they do not exist.”⁴⁷ Anderson amends Gellner’s notion of *inventing* nations by replacing it with a verb that expresses a more creative act-- *imagining*. Anderson defines nation-ness and nationalism as “cultural artifacts of a particular kind.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, he asserts that this creation of imagination must be visualized as a community. What better place for that complex process to take place than the theatre? The collective nature of live performance where the invisible thread connects the audience with the performance, the past with the presence, the actors with the playwright, in the Polish context, became a fertile ground on which the story of *us* was imagined, verbalized, and embodied.

Yet theatre has many limitations. Despite the aspiration to be the most democratic art form, the idea of community and equality is often challenged by the political landscape. The shaping of the *we* that takes place in theatre unfolds collectively because of the subtle interactions between the theatre artists and the audience but it also omits the voices of those who are absent in that community. Theatre as well as political and historical narratives have been constructed by the intellectual elites. Pre-partitioned Poland was *Rzeczpospolita Szlachecka*, a Republic of Nobility governed by the feudal system.⁴⁹ The peasants⁵⁰ worked the land mostly owned by the nobility and often endured harsh treatment and poverty. Their stories were omitted in grand national narratives. Peasants also did not attend the theatrical

⁴⁷ Gellner uses the term *invent* nations in his work *Through and Change*, p 169. Anderson amends this idea by replacing the work of invention with a more creative notion of *creating* or *imagining*.

⁴⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983), 4.

⁴⁹ Stanisław Eile, *Literature and Nationalism in Partitioned Poland, 1795-1918*, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 3.

⁵⁰The term peasant in Polish means *wieśniak*, a word that literally translates as the person who lives in a village (*wieś*). *Wieśniak* until recently was used as a derogatory term suggesting that someone is uneducated, simplistic, and narrowminded (similarly to *redneck* in American English). The social campaigns of the people who are from the villages (even though at times they may live, work or obtain education in big cities) led to reclaiming the term and identity of *wieśniak*, people who live in villages, and are ancestors of the feudal peasants.

performances, nor did they participate in their creation. Both Mickiewicz and Wyspiański recognized this absence and uplifted the subject of peasantry in their dramas. Both plays that I analyze in this chapter contributed to the rise of a Polish imaginary that held up the peasant ideal, even as this class continued to live impoverished lives.

In what follows, I analyze how both playwrights depicted the lives of the underrepresented and underprivileged class in their dramas. Both Mickiewicz's *Dziady* and Wyspiański's *Wesele*, reflected what at the time was called "peasantmania," and both plays were understood as calls for a sense of Polishness rooted in the land itself. I argue that, while the plays over-sexualize women as stand-ins for the land, they also present interesting counterpoints to the rising nationalism that resisted both the oppression of the peasant class and the non-human elements of the land. In this chapter, I examine Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady* Part II and Stanisław Wyspiański's *Wesele* in light of the representation of peasants. In my comparative analysis, I reveal that Wyspiański's drama solidified the position of a feminine "nature" in relation to a masculine national identity while Mickiewicz avoided perpetuating this binary thinking by setting aside the nationalistic perspective and focusing on the materially-felt experience of his protagonists.

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of Mickiewicz's and Wyspiański's role in Polish culture. Their plays were groundbreaking in the dramatic form which became a foundation for the long tradition of the experimental theatre of Poland informing the works of many artists including Witkacy, Kantor, and Grotowski. To their contemporaries as well as for the future generations they became the spiritual leaders who guided the efforts of maintaining national identity in the face of foreign oppression during the partition of 1772-1918, two world

wars, and communist rule in the second half of the twentieth century. Up to this day, their plays serve as vital tools through which artists rethink the current Polish reality.

Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady*

Dziady, The Forefather's Eve is a four-part dramatic cycle written in the span of ten years, beginning in 1820. All the parts vastly differ from each other.⁵¹ Part II focuses on the pagan, pre-Christian ritual of celebration of the ancestors; Part III documents the martyrology of the Polish youth from the hand of the Russian occupying powers; Part IV tells the story of an unfortunate lover who returns from the afterlife to work through his suffering. All parts are connected through the main character who undergoes a transformation from a romantic lover to a fighter for national independence.

Mickiewicz started writing *Dziady* in 1820 when he was merely twenty years old. One year earlier, he graduated from the University of Wilno (Vilnius) where he was involved in an underground peer group called Filareci (the Filaret Association) which studied and created literature and discussed the issues of the lost national independence. Mickiewicz was also an exceptional translator.⁵² His poetic talent and knowledge of world literature inspired in him a conviction that uniquely Polish modern drama can be created by turning toward folklore, culture, and spiritual traditions, rather than by imitation of foreign influences. This idea was unique considering the theatrical trends in 19th century Europe where similar versions of melodramas were presented on stages all across the continent. The classicists and the

⁵¹ Part I is unfinished and serves as a prelude to the part II. It is often omitted in the analysis and performances.

⁵² One of his professors commented on Mickiewicz's translation of Voltaire's poem: "Anyone," he noted, "who could translate such a poem into our native language with ease . . . must possess a bit of that creative fire which burned in the author of the original.", Roman Koropeczyk, *Adam Mickiewicz*, 17.

romantics vigorously debated whether dramatic literature should follow the Greeks or turn toward the Shakespearean style of writing. Mickiewicz's view was that the brilliance and timeless quality of the Greek drama rests in the fact that its creators honored their contemporary, local rituals and allowed them to shape the worlds of their plays. Mickiewicz insisted that national Polish drama must stem from the old Slavic rituals and traditions. This exploration led him to a pre-Christian ritual of *dziady*, forefather's eve which became a subject matter and a title for his canonical play. As previously mentioned, the four-part dramatic cycle was written in the span of over a decade. Parts I, II, and IV were created by a young, post-college playwright eager to capture the old Slavic rituals and allow them to shape a quintessentially Polish drama. Those parts of the cycle also center the notion of a tragic, romantic love which causes the main character to suffer while alive and even after his death. Mickiewicz's leaning into the deep roots of Slavic spirituality and traditions incited ten years later his creation of *Dziady* part III which is considered the most significant piece of dramatic writing in Polish literature. Part III is no longer set in the countryside, but in a church turned into a prison holding political, patriotic activists. Although part III predominately focuses on Polish martyrology and includes strong autobiographical elements, it also depicts supernatural beings which creates its own ritual of the forefather's eve. In this chapter, I focus on Part II of the larger dramatic cycle.

The ritual of *dziady* is a pre-Christian celebration of the dead ones. For centuries the living gathered in preparation for the feast abundant in food and drinks ready for the arrival of their ancestors. During the ritual, the living established a connection with their late ancestors who, for various reasons, remained restless in the afterlife. In the preface to *Dziady* Part II,

Mickiewicz explains that *dziady* is a name given to the solemnity celebrated by many of the local, Slavic peoples. He writes that “the beginnings of this ritual stretch back to pagan times, and it was once known as the *uczta kozła* or “goat’s feast.”⁵³ Mickiewicz notes that the ceremony of feasts dedicated to the dead is a common practice among all the pre-Christian peoples, yet what distinguished the banquet described by him is that in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Poland, these ancient ceremonies were “intermixed with notions borrowed from the Christian religion, especially as the feast of All Souls, falls roughly at the same time as *Dziady* are celebrated.”⁵⁴ The whole ceremony was so inspiring to Mickiewicz that he used the name of the traditional ritual as the title of his epic play. Furthermore, in Part II Mickiewicz recreated the version of the *dziady* ritual on stage.

The practice of the two coexisting spiritual traditions among the peasants was opposed by the Polish nobility whose identity was tightly interwoven with Catholicism. They had no tolerance for any expressions of the pre-Christian rituals. The ceremony of *dziady* became an act of resistance for the common people; a means of asserting spiritual and cultural agency in a world tightly controlled by the narrow group who claims the right to reign over the commoners in physical and spiritual ways. Furthermore, these elites subscribed to the ideals of Enlightenment, and in their view, religion was useful solely as a political force. Mickiewicz, in contrast, subscribed to the ideas and values of Romanticism (1822-1864). His worldview is encapsulated in the opening quote borrowed from Shakespeare.” There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”⁵⁵ The famous quote becomes a

⁵³ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather’s Eve*, 148.

⁵⁴ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather’s Eve*, 148.

⁵⁵ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather’s Eve*, 149.

thesis of *Dziady* Part II but also expresses the wider argument of Romanticism against the reductionist vision of the world introduced by the Enlightenment. In the time when “the enlightened clergy and landowners have striven to uproot a custom connected with superstitious and, at times, blameworthy practices...,”⁵⁶ In Part III of *Dziady*, Mickiewicz’s drama describes the oppression of the foreign aggressor on Polish peoples; in Part II he signals oppression embodied in the social structures of serfdom order.

Setting of *Dziady* Part II

At the beginning of Part II, the master of the ceremony, Guślarz summons restless souls from the afterlife. First arrivals are characters named Little Angels, small children whose earthly lives were void of worries and trouble. They explain that they cannot directly access heaven because they must taste the bitterness in purgatory before the eternal rest. The second group of the souls is a Chorus of Nocturnal Birds led by the Raven and the Owl who torment Ghost, a cruel landowner. The Ghost must face both the truth of his cruelty as well as eternal hunger and thirst as a punishment for his sins. The last soul is a young girl, whose frivolity and lack of commitment to the serious obligations of life (like marriage) cause restlessness in the afterlife. The play ends with a mysterious, silent Spectre appearing and approaching a village woman who wears a black, “mourning” dress. The ending is unsettling as it foreshadows the setting of Part IV during which the same Spectre returns to his hometown to tell the story of his tragic, unfulfilled love.

The permeability of graves and realities of the living and the dead weaves the world of the play in which the coexistence of the spiritual and material, the living, and their ancestors is

⁵⁶ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather’s Eve*, 148.

not a metaphor or the expression of the artistic trends of the neogothic aesthetics. In the preface to *Dziady* Part II, Mickiewicz describes how the stories he heard about the visitations of the dead ancestors, the rituals of their invocations, and "the lonely places where the ceremonies took place" sparked his imagination. It is a representation of the deeply complex and far-reaching nature of the religious beliefs and practices performed by the local communities. In the introduction to his 2016 translation of *Dziady*, Charles S Kraszewski describes,

The entirety of the segment is played out in the deserted chapel, during the "Mass" on behalf of the departed souls: the aim of the rituals is hinged on that idea of the permeable "membrane" of the grave."⁵⁷

Mickiewicz set the second part of his drama in a small, cemetery chapel. The stage becomes a place of a ritual.

The setting of the play is a small cemetery chapel hosting a ceremony becomes a liminal space which Victor Turner defines as a state between states, "a betwixt-and-between, a neither-this-nor-that."⁵⁸ Turner's coinages of the various stages of a rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation help us understand the dramatic elements of *Dziady*.⁵⁹ Separation "demarcates sacred space and time from profane or secular space and time." During transition "the ritual subjects pass through a period and area of ambiguity"⁶⁰ In this area of ambiguity, the liminal space "the profane social relations may be discontinued, former rights and obligations are suspended..."⁶¹ In *Dziady*, Part II the social order is similarly disrupted: the

⁵⁷ Charles S. Kraszewski, "Introduction" in Adam Mickiewicz's *Forefather's Eve*, 33.

⁵⁸ Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: the Human Seriousness of Play*, (New York: PAJ Publication, 1982), 41.

⁵⁹ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 24.

⁶⁰ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 24.

⁶¹ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 25.

children teach a lesson to the adults, the peasants gain a voice against the oppressive master, and even the birds begin to speak -- an important element which I will discuss later. The ritual is meant to aid departed souls by providing food, drinks, and space for the visitors to tell their stories, the village people hope to alleviate their unrest. Yet the souls bring moral life lessons and warnings so the people can better themselves and spend their time on earth in a way that would secure eternal rest in heaven. In this way, the chapel becomes a space for the expression of reciprocity and kinship. The clergy disapprove of ritual and lose control of the space. Yet at the moment of ritual the space becomes a place for an encounter between the living and their ancestors. The peasants reclaim the chapel as their own. The specific place, the small chapel also allows the participants of the ritual to travel back in time to meet not only with the dead who join them that evening but also link them with the ancestors who used to engage in such rituals prior to the arrival of the Catholic order.

The ritual of *dziady* attracts the four groups of souls. In my analysis, I focus on the character of Ghosts and the Chorus of Nocturnal Birds. I argue that those characters serve as important agents of addressing social injustice as well as hold the potential for new interpretations of *Dziady*.

The Nocturnal Birds as a Subversion of the Animality of the Peasant Class

In his preface to the *Forefather's* translation of 1968⁶², Wiktor Weintraub asserts that Mickiewicz wrote Part II of his work while still "on his way to romantic Damascus."⁶³

Mickiewicz searched for a new formula of uniquely Polish drama that would both encapsulate

⁶²Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefathers*, Count Potocki of Montalk, trans., (London: The Polish Cultural Foundation, 1968).

⁶³ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefathers*, ix.

the national spirit as well as become an expression of the aspirations of Romanticism. The key to that drama was to focus on the Slavic folklore. Weintraub, however, notes that Mickiewicz's gaze at the peasants was distanced and filled with amusement, "a total involvement, the identification with the world of folk beliefs was still lacking in him."⁶⁴ Weintraub asserts that this light approach gets set aside in the central scene of Part II when the Chorus of the Nocturnal Birds challenge their former lord about his cruelty and mistreatment of them as peasants. Over the last decade, the motif of the social injustice captured in Mickiewicz's work has been brought to light in Polish public debate due to the discussion about the omitted part of Polish history that is feudalism and the oppression of the peasant class by the nobility.⁶⁵ In what follows, I analyze the scene from *Dziady* Part II between the evil landowner and his victims who arrive as the Chorus of Nocturnal Birds. I argue that by staging the intersection of the human and the non-human worlds Mickiewicz elevates environmental injustice as a central theme of the play. In my reading of *Dziady* Part II, I build on the ecofeminist assertion that "there are important connections between how one treats women, people of color, and the underclass on one hand and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other."⁶⁶ I propose that when Mickiewicz imagined Polish nation "where it did not exist," he saw a sovereign country free from the deeply embedded injustice. In my reading, Mickiewicz's addressing of the violence of serfdom was equally important as the nationalistic ideals of Part III discussed in the next chapter.

⁶⁴ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefathers*, ix.

⁶⁵ Kamil Janicki, *Pańszczyzna: Prawdziwa Historia Polskiego Niewolnictwa*, (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2021); Michał Rauszer, *Bękart pańszczyzny: Historia Buntów Chłopskich*, (Warszawa: RM, 2020); Adam Leszczyński, *Ludowa Historia Polski: Historia wyzysku i oporu. Mitologia panowania*, Warszawa: WAB, 2020); Kacper Pobłocki, *Chamstow*, (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2021).

⁶⁶ Karen Warren, ed. *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), xi.

In feudal Poland, peasant women were entirely helpless against the violence of the nobility. The landowners could sue another landowner when "his" peasant was raped which was perceived as damage to his property. The court documents from seventeen and eighteen hundreds reveal that some of the peasants attempted to seek legal justice when their daughters or wives were either raped or taken by their landlords, yet their claims were dismissed without any justice being served. Some primary documents disturbingly testify that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, some of the landowners saw sexual violence on peasant women as a favor, as "improving their race."⁶⁷ This narrative, however, was troubled by the existence of children born out of those relations. One of the members of a famous (even to this day) noble family, Waclaw Potocki referred to his sons and daughters born to their peasant mothers as "mongrels" who are better off being drowned in infancy.⁶⁸

The feudal system placed peasants in the position of sub-human. Over the last decade, many Polish scholars focused on the issue of serfdom deeming the narratives included in the history books incomplete. The visions of the idyllic existence of the village people, their closeness to nature, and the protection of the nobility were a mythical fabrication. Various documents exposed the systemic violence and cruelty which governed the social order of many communities. Historian Kamil Janicki quotes several sources that reveal that serf peasants were perceived as animals in the eyes of the noblemen who authored the bulk of the writing that for centuries constituted national history. One such source describes human-like beings unable to

⁶⁷ Kamil Janicki, *Pańszczyzna: Prawdziwa Historia Polskiego Niewolnictwa*, (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2021), 184.

⁶⁸ Kamil Janicki, *Pańszczyzna*, 184.

think or feel, who, at first glance, resemble animals rather than people.⁶⁹ According to this narrative, the peasants had to work the land of their masters, deliver the fruit of the land, and pay taxes. Their labor was not voluntary, the landowners had total power over them, corporal punishment was a common practice, and there were no legal repercussions for the masters who killed “their” peasants.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Janicki notes that the people were often described with the use of animal names like cows, cattle, pigs, etc... Janicki emphasizes that the language was not only meant to be derogatory but also reflected that people were dehumanized and treated like animals exploited by their “owners.”

The discoveries of the recent scholarship about the cruelty of the serfdom system shed new light on the importance of Mickiewicz’s scene included in *Dziady* Part II. As the other souls arrive and confess their own sins, the birds arrive with accusations against their evil master, Ghost. The Chorus of Nocturnal Birds follows Ghost to torment him. Ghost, when alive, was a cruel landowner who mistreated those dependent on him peasants. Now, in the afterlife, he suffers from unquenchable thirst and hunger. When he is about to satisfy his needs, the birds grab the food and water prolonging his suffering. The stories told by the characters embodied as Nocturnal Birds testify to the common practice of violent treatment and injustice of the elites over the common people. The Ghost must pay penance for claiming the right to “fruit of the field” as well as the labor of the people who worked in those fields. Raven is a soul of a

⁶⁹ The description comes from Stanisław Staszic, a key publicist of the Polish Enlightenment, priest, philosopher, writer, and translator. Kamil Janicki, *Pańszczyzna: Prawdziwa Historia Polskiego Niewolnictwa*, (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2021), 16.

⁷⁰ Michał Rauszer, *Bękart pańszczyzny: Historia Buntów Chłopskich*, (Warszawa: RM, 2020), 8.

man who died because of the severe punishment ordered by the evil landlord. Raven responds to Ghost's pleas:

You're hungry? Oh— a thousand pardons!
And yet— remember that one Fall
When I crept in your orchard-garden?
The pears were ripe, the apples red—
For three day I had gone unfed!

(...)

They hauled me off to face a trial
And over what? Some apples, pears...
Fruits of the field, like water, fire,
Which God intended Man to share!
And yet my lord cried out in ire
“Make an example out of him!”⁷¹

Raven describes in detail the harsh treatment of being tied to a plow, and violently whipped causing “each bone threshed from living meat”⁷² in front of other members of the community. The gory description of the one man's suffering testifies to a larger, systemic oppression of many peasants whose stories remained untold for centuries.

After Raven shares his story, the Owl charges Ghost with memories of cruelty from his hand. She recalls arriving at his door on Christmas Eve with a small child:

You're hungry? Hunger makes you grieve?
Do you recall that Christmas Eve
So thick the snow, the wind so wild
I begged at your gate, with child,
“Lord, mercy!” through my bitter tears,

⁷¹ Mickiewicz, *Forefather's Eve*, 158.

⁷² Mickiewicz, *Forefather's Eve*, 158.

“have pity on the tender years
Of this poor orphan at your door.
My man—his father—is no more;
My mother lies abed, weak, ill;
My daughter taken-- by your will
To serve you; here I weep, distressed
With this frail infant stull at breast!⁷³

She recalls that her pleas fell on the deaf ears of the lord who ordered to throw her and her child into the snow where they both froze to death. Owl’s monologue reveals not only her own hardship but also tells the fate of her daughter taken by the evil lord into his house as a servant. The privileged man usurped the ownership of the fruits of the land, the labor of peasants dependent on him and he also claimed his right to the bodies of girls and women.

Mickiewicz emphasizes the stories of peasants by portraying them in bodies of nocturnal birds, wild animals immune to the oppressive system of feudalism. By doing so, he accents the deeply embedded injustice of serfdom which privileges a narrow group of people and gives them unlimited power over other human beings. Unlike the farm animals that were also the victims of the exploitative system, the nocturnal birds remained free. The oppressed peasants return to earth as free birds, as therefore regain agency taken away from them during their human existence. The characters of Owl and Raven disrupt the notion of the idyllic vision of Polish village.

Mickiewicz saw in folklore traditions the necessary roots of Polishness vital for creating and maintaining national identity. According to Mickiewicz, a free nation needs literature that

⁷³ Mickiewicz, *Forefather’s Eve*, 159.

would express and capture its unique cultural and spiritual traditions. His ambition was to formulate the characteristic of Slavic dramatic literature encompassing all the elements of the national drama which "faithfully and diversely" reveals all of its elements including the folklore songs and spirituality. In this new type of drama, the village folk were integral characters because they embodied those significant elements. They sang traditional songs, kept the elements of the old, pre-Christian traditions and rituals, they carried the wisdom of their ancestors unaltered by the newest fads of the European elites. Mickiewicz centered *Dziady* part II around them as a methodology of this search for the Polish drama. Yet his turn toward Polish village revealed deeply embedded systemic oppression which stood in a way of the nationalistic project. This intervention is crucial because Polish history has been written by, about, and for a narrow group of nobility. The same group has been attributed with creating culture, maintained the language and religion throughout the turmoil of Polish history. Yet Mickiewicz pointed out that the quintessential Polish soul was found in folklore. The peasants, their stories and traditions, were the cultural well of Poland and yet they were abused, mistreated, and exploited by those who called themselves patriots willing to fight and die for the independent Poland. This hypocrisy so skillfully portrayed by Mickiewicz is often overlooked in the discussion of the importance of *Dziady* for Polish national identity. I argue that addressing class injustice was as important as portraying the oppression of Russian government of patriotic youth. The imagined community of Poles could not include humans brutally ruling over their fellow humans. The peasants depicted as Owl and Raven become central characters in *Dziady*, yet most directors struggle to stage them in a way that would honor how the playwright intended them. Although Mickiewicz did not include specific

descriptions of the characters of birds, he does envision them as nocturnal birds who represent peasants which distinguished them from other characters, the souls returning from afterlife in their human form.

The Problem of Staging the Birds

The first production of *Dziady* directed by Wyspiański in 1901 received a great deal of criticism for too many cuts and omission of Mickiewicz's stage directions. Jozef Trietiak, a theatre critic who attended an opening night noted that the scene between the Ghost and the birds lacked entirely "its bird character" intended by the poet.⁷⁴ However, another critic, Feliks Koneczny praised Wyspiański for his artistic choice. In his review, Koneczny attempts to imagine another solution for the troubling scene with the birds. Since the use of puppets would be grotesque and funny thus counterproductive in accomplishing the atmosphere of fear and dread intended by Mickiewicz, Koneczny considered staging the scene outside of the chapel and the interactions of Ghost with the birds would have been heard and partially seen only through the open window at the back of the set. He dismissed his own suggestions by stating that the audience would not be able to sustain their attention during this long scene if they could not fully see all of the characters. He concludes that there was no other choice but to omit the poet's directions stage the characters of peasants as humans and disregard their portrayal of the birds. In a production of *Dziady* (1931), thirty years later, Leon Schiller removed the characters of the birds entirely. In fact, all of the ghosts and souls were staged only with the use of light, shadows, and sound. The birds did not appear on stage at all. In my

⁷⁴ Józef Trietiak, „'Dziady' na Scenie Krakowskiej,” *„Dziady” od Wyspiańskiego do Grzegorzewskiego*, Tadeusz Kornaś, Grzegorz Niziołek, eds., (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1999), 19.

research, I did not come across any production that would attempt to stage the birds in a way that would convey the characters' identity *as* birds. In what follows, I propose the reading of *Dziady* Part II which could serve as a helpful tool in what Downing Cless calls eco-directing which "catches the conscience of a contemporary audience."⁷⁵ I suggest methodological framework that could connect *Dziady* Part II with current trends of contemporary theatre described in the fourth chapter of this study.

The potential production of *Dziady* that would focus on the characters of Owl and Raven *as* birds carries a possibility of transforming Mickiewicz's play into a "theatre of species" which Una Chaudhuri defines as a performance practice that "reminds us that we humans are one species among multitudes, all equally contingent and threatened."⁷⁶ Raven and Owl, although free themselves, contend for the liberation of other species, in that case, the humans. This inter-species act of solidarity also opens up an ecodramaturgical interpretation of *Dziady* as a drama that places ecological community and reciprocity at its center. The audience of *Dziady* Part II witnesses various communities: the living and the dead, the peasants united in a ritual, the community of performers and their audience, and the community of the oppressed human and nonhuman world. The nocturnal birds facilitate yet another community of the free and the enslaved.

Owl and Raven could possibly connect the historic oppression of the peasants with the contemporary struggle for natural resources like trees and clean rivers which unfolds daily in

⁷⁵ Downing Cless, *Ecology and Environment in European Drama*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 12.

⁷⁶ Wendy Aarons, Theresa J. May, eds., *Readings in Performance and Ecology*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 50.

today's Poland. The wild birds in Mickiewicz's times remained safe from the greedy system which exploited people and domesticated animals. Feudalism's cruelty got replaced with the capitalist endless appetite for material gain. Technological advancement and progress expedited the destruction of the natural resources which turned many forests into battlegrounds between environmentalists and loggers employed by corporations or even government. Polish owls and ravens are losing their homes at an unprecedented rate. The unlimited logging creates a risk to the wellbeing of the people affected by the pollution and lack of clean air. In the eco-production of *Dziady*, Mickiewicz's characters could potentially reach out from the past and speak on behalf of contemporary birds, animals, and humans vulnerable in the face of a system that values money and prosperity over everything else.

The idea of eco-directing *Dziady* calls for new formal solutions of staging the birds in a way that would avoid the risk of turning them into a metaphor or symbol. In her work on this animal representation on stage, Una Chaudhuri identifies a key obstacle for those wishing to stage animals:

Even the most powerful animal presence on stage has a hard time resisting the urge of their interpreters (whether spectators or playwrights, directors or critics, actors or dramaturg) to recast them as symbols of human behavior and allegories for human preoccupations."⁷⁷

The metaphorical understanding of the nonhuman world presented on stage renders it subservient to the human protagonists and conveys the wider truth that animals' existence has meaning only if they are useful to people. The search for artistic solutions to stage the presence of an animal requires creative and novel approach. One such examples is a University

⁷⁷ Una Chaudhuri, *The Stage Lives of Animals: Zoosis and Performance*, (London: Routledge, 2017), 3.

of Oregon production of *Sila* by Chantal Bilodeau. Theresa May describes her experience of grappling with the representation of a polar bear in her 2014 production of *Sila*. A character of a polar bear familiar to the audience from either Coca-Cola commercials or National Geographic poster of global warming and the shrinkage of icecaps was challenging to stage without perpetuation of those images. May followed Matthew Calarco's caution that "any genuine encounter with what we call animals will occur only from within the space of surrender."⁷⁸ In her work with the actors, May focused on the physical community they created: the community of bodies that all exchange oxygen and carbon molecules, and "otherwise carry on their aliveness."⁷⁹ Their work led to finding a solution of staging the body of the bear by six actors using contact improvisation. The actors surrendered their individuality of their bodies and together created both the being of the bear as well the community we all create with all inhabitants of our ecosystem. Another example of staging an animal was Royal National Theatre's 2007 production of *War Horse*. The animals forced to participate in the horrors of WWI were portrayed as mechanical, life-size puppets operated by humans/actors. The impossibility of telling the story in which a protagonist is a horse, led to creation of a puppet that did not intend to trick the audience to be a *real* animal. The metal construction was visible rather than covered with faux animal fur. The bodies and facial expressions of the actors operating the horse were also visible and became a part of the animal. Similarly to May's concept, the actors yield their bodies to capture the essence of the portrayed animal. Today's technology holds the potential to discover new solutions allowing to portray the animals on

⁷⁸ Theresa J. May, *Earth Matters*, 258.

⁷⁹ Theresa J. May, *Earth Matters*, 258.

stage. Projections, holograms, drones... provide various possibilities of opening the space where the presence of the animal can be materialized.

Dziady part II holds an invitation to search for new ways to stage the Chorus of the Nocturnal Birds. The theatrically challenging scene creates an opportunity to perform the connection between the past oppression of the feudal system with the current ecological crisis which affects both humans and the birds. The Raven and Owl can be placed front and center *as birds* and offer the “gift of radical otherness, their ultimate unknowability.”⁸⁰ The realization of *Dziady’s* ecodramaturgical potential could become a meaning contribution to the countless productions of the canonical play. The challenge of staging the birds holds an invitation of searching for new artistic solutions which is compatible with the tradition originated by Mickiewicz of experimental playwriting and theatre-making.

Stanisław Wyspiański’s *Wesele* (*The Wedding*)

In November of 1901, Stanisław Wyspiański attended a wedding ceremony and celebration of one of his close friends, Lucjan Rydel. Rydel, a well-known painter married one of his models, a peasant girl named Jadwiga Mikołajczykówna. The couple met during one of Rydel’s many trips to Bronowice, a nearby village often visited by students of the Art School who were fascinated with the ideals of countryside living, landscape, and people. Rydel informed his friends that he had no intentions of turning “such village beauty into an urban majesty”⁸¹ and that he planned to move out of Kraków to Bronowice. Even before the wedding, Krakow’s artistic circles were filled with rumors of Rydel running barefoot on the crops,

⁸⁰ Una Chaudhuri, Holly Hughes, eds., *Animal Acts: Performing Species Today*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2014), 8.

⁸¹ Gawęł, Łukasz, *Stanisław Wyspiański : Na Chęciach Mi Nie Braknie* (Kraków: Muzeum Narodowe, 2017), 228.

harvesting potatoes, and tying sheaves of hay, all while expressing an admiration for his beloved.⁸² The wedding celebration was hosted by the bride's older sister and her husband, Zofia, and Kazimierz Tetmajer, a couple that had begun an inter-class marriage trend.

Reportedly, Wyspiański spent the whole wedding standing in one place observing the festivities, where he overheard conversations and observed interactions that inspired the plot of the first act of his play *Wesele (The Wedding)*. The first act of the play became a kind of documentary of the uncomfortable in *Wesele* interactions between two social groups that rarely attend the same social gatherings. The play premiered on March 16, 1901, only five months after the actual wedding ceremony, and evoked a lively response among the inhabitants of Krakow and Bronowice. Wyspiański's creative retelling captured the event and poked fun at the new pretentious fad of city men finding their true selves in the countryside, often in the embrace of the local beauties. *Wesele* became one of the most important dramas shaping and conveying the national identity at the beginning of the 20th century. Since Poland had existed as a non-state since its partition between Russia, Prussia, and Austria in 1795 the need for the voices that would guide Poles toward the ideals of freedom was becoming urgent. Scholar Łukasz Gaweł describes *Wesele* as

“jeden z najważniejszych utworów dramatycznych w dziejach polskiej literatury, narodowe misterium mające największy chyba spośród dwudziestowiecznych utworów wpływ na kształtowanie się polskiej świadomości narodowej.”⁸³

⁸² Gaweł, Łukasz, *Stanisław Wyspiański*, 228.

⁸³ Gaweł, Łukasz, *Stanisław Wyspiański*, 231.

["One of the most important dramatic works in the history of Polish literature, a national mystery play that had probably the greatest influence on the formation of Polish national consciousness among twentieth-century works."]

Wyspiański's play shaped the public imaginary that guided the new twentieth century generation of Polish patriots. The gendered dynamic of the wedding between peasant bride and city, cultured groom expressed and reinforced the gender positionality of the national identity, echoes of which can be seen and heard in today's Poland.

Peasant-mania in a Polish village at the End of the 19th Century

In the last decade of the 19th century, many Polish artists traveled around Europe in search of artistic inspiration and encountered the extravagant life of the elites. Some of them observed the accelerated change of pace and quality of life. Decades of industrial progress and the urbanization of life left many Europeans in deep unrest which escalated around the turn of the century. Polish artists would return home and set their trajectories to the nearby countryside where they would seek a simpler more tranquil life. Engaging with village life served as an antidote to the indulgence of the decadent life of fin de siècle Europe fraught with anxieties caused by the irrevocable damage brought by man-made progress and industrialization. The fascination often started as an artistic exploration of painting or writing poetry about the beauty of the countryside and its people. Sometimes, however, this simple fascination led to marriage between the city men and village women – unions that were looked down upon as a misalliance. This new trend in the Polish context was called *chłopomania* (peasant-mania).

The Polish artistic elite's romantic fascination quickly became synonymous with the political agenda of proponents for the national fight against the partitioning powers. Poles

interested in rekindling the spirit of the fight against the foreign oppressing powers understood that they must convince peasants to participate in the cause. After analyzing the three failed uprisings: The November Uprising of 1830 (Powstanie listopadowe) , the Cracow Uprising of 1846 (Powstanie krakowskie), and January Uprising of 1863 (Powstanie Styczniowe) the nationalists concluded that the past failures are bound to be repeated without mobilizing the majority of the society: the peasants. They set their efforts on educating the villagers to raise their patriotic awareness.

The situation of the peasants in the territories annexed by Russia improved after 1864 when the system of serfdom was banned. On the lands ruled by Austria, the legal shift took place in 1848. The peasants understood that it was not their fellow Poles who contributed to bettering their situation, but rather the Austrian and Russian governments. The patriotic visions of a free country were not convincing for the people whose help came from the hand of the supposed foreign oppressor. The governing powers did not banish serfdom out of the goodness of their hearts. The free labor did not benefit them directly and instead strengthened the nobility who potentially could use the goods to organize yet another uprising. For the villagers such nuance did not matter, they could finally own their land and were no longer forced to provide their labor. Over the next decades, the peasants gained more agency and their life improved significantly so when the city artists arrived at their doorsteps in search of new artistic inspiration, they found a colorful and robust communities.

Setting of *Wesele*

Wyspiański set his play in a small hut in the village of Bronowice.⁸⁴ The hometown of the peasant bride gathers local friends and family as well as the guests of the Groom, and the city people. Wyspiański unsettles the social order by portraying the more privileged class as strangers who do not belong in the place where the play is set. It is the peasants who own the space, are familiar with it, and know the rules of social interactions. This dynamic allows to display of the city people's flaws and ridicules their perception of the village. In the wedding cottage, it is they who are backward.

The wedding takes place in a traditional, typical Polish farmhouse. In the set description, Wyspiański writes, “ear and eyes are ceaselessly attracted by the Polish melody...a dance of swirling colours glimpsed by the half-light of kitchen lamps -- the multicoloured ribbons, peacock plumes, embroidered capes and the colorful coats, jackets and jerkins of rural fashion in Poland of the time.”⁸⁵ The translator Noel Clark omitted the expression of pride that the playwright included in that passage. After the description of all the colorful, traditional elements of the dancing crowd’s attires, he sums up “nasza dzisiejsza wiejska Polska” which means “*our*⁸⁶ present-day rural Poland.”⁸⁷ That *our* is important because it indicates the sense of ownership and a sense of community that the playwright wanted to emphasize.

Much like *Dziady*, *the Wedding* captures an important traditional ritual: the wedding. This important event is a celebration of establishing a new community of the wife and the

⁸⁴ The place still exists and currently serves as a museum.

⁸⁵ Stanisław Wyspiański, *The Wedding*, Noel Clark, transl., (London: Oberon Books Ltd., 1998), 19.

⁸⁶ My emphasis

⁸⁷ Stanisław Wyspiański, *Wesele*, (Kraków: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1973), 3.

husband, their families, and social circles. New familial ties are being forged and new connections are shaped. Similar to *Dziady*, the place is being transformed into a community with those who passed away or come from the fictional lands. The small village wedding hut is visited by supernatural characters who symbolize the important aspects of Polish history. The character of Wernyhora, a mythical wise man who carries a mysterious knowledge about the Polish past and its future, arrives to unite the Poles and inspire them to link arms in the fight against the foreign aggressors. Meanwhile, the ghost of Jakub Szela, a peasant who carried out a massacre against Polish nobility, returns hoping he will be able to wash away his sins and join the festivities. The village household becomes an important space of encounter during which the living have a chance to reestablish and redefine their identity.

Nature/Culture, Groom/Bride

In nineteenth century, since Poland did not yet exist as a country, but rather as an identity held in memory of a once great country, Polish intelligentsia traveled to the countryside and claimed it as the quintessentially Polish space one that preserved Polish tradition, culture, and people, as “theirs own.” Many city men went to the countryside in search of new adventures, land, and women. Through the character of Groom, Wyspiański pokes fun at the new fashion of peasantmania. Groom is pretentiously outspoken about his enthusiasm for the freshly discovered land and its people:

What I feel is what I hear—
the quiet, peaceful atmosphere:
orchard, thatch, green grove and mead,
furrows, harvest, rain and seed,
Up to now mu life’s been spent

Crabbed by mouldy walls, cement:
There, everything was old and drab --
Here, suddenly, all's young and bright.
For me, life's charm has come to light:
Youth I breathe by day and night!
I look around, my eyes devour
This lovely, colorful array
Of sprightly, robust folk at play,
Though crude and clumsy in their way
(...)
Four week, since I wore shoes and I
Have never felt so fit day long—
Much free-er since I took a chance
And gave up wearing underpants! ⁸⁸

Groom, like an explorer, encounters a new land ripe for his discovery and transformation. This new world of the countryside appears to him as youthful, vibrant with vitality, and energizing. The landscape, like the orchard and green grove, coexist with the people who, in his eyes, melt into the environment. The people of that land, just like the land itself, rejuvenate and fascinate him, even though he finds it necessary to note their crudeness. Groom becomes a caricature of the contemporary trend of peasant-mania. He also represents the rapacious appetite for possessing, claiming, exploiting, and consuming freshly discovered resources. This rapaciousness had several layers. One of them is composed of the artistic hunger for new subjects, experiences, and inspiration. Another one was a desire to get away from city life scarred by the seemingly uncontrollable progress of industrialization. Some of the city

⁸⁸ Wyspiański, *The Wedding*, 38.

newcomers sought romantic and erotic partners who were radically different from those they met in cities of Europe. In the Polish context, however, the turn toward the countryside had another objective: finding and mobilizing new fighters for the national cause.

In the scene between Bride and Groom, the fresh husband cannot keep his eyes, hands, and lips off of his new wife. He confesses that in his past life the ladies "didn't give him a moment's rest."⁸⁹ This remark carries a biographical allusion because Rydel was known for being a very active beau, especially during his international voyages.⁹⁰ Groom ensures Bride that he is tired of this playful lovemaking, and he wants to love his bride in a different way, "our way." His expectation regarding the new life reaches beyond running bare feet and breathing fresh air while admiring the wealth of nature; he is also hoping that the peasant lover will provide him with a local, uniquely Polish love-making experience.⁹¹ In his confession of love, Groom declares, "For ever, you can count on me./You're all I crave-my wheat, my sun!"⁹² In this outburst of erotic desire for his new wife and the euphoria about being in the rejuvenating countryside, Groom admits that he craves the body of his wife as much as he desires connection with various elements of the natural world. Grasping attitude of Groom mirrors the nationalistic assertion that peasant women, like the fertile fields, will bear fruit of the nation. The bride is attractive to Groom because she is different from other women he has been with, but she also because she is connected to the landscape he finds irresistible.

⁸⁹ Wyspiański, *The Wedding*, 27.

⁹⁰ Monika Śliwińska, *Panny z Wesela: Siostry Mikołajczykówny i Ich Świat*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2021),

⁹¹ This part in the English translation of Noel Clark goes as follows: we are self-taught, as it were;/others showed me how to play./You, I'll love my own sweet way -- / our way, that is..." It does not express the Polish text which could be translated as "I made love in various ways/but I want to love you my way/our way.

⁹² Wyspiański *The wedding* 27 In the translation by Gerard T. Kapolka the Groom says, "Now I'll have no one but you, How I long for grain and sun! p 37

Urban artists like Groom often found countryside "rough" and "crude" but unique and attractive alluring folk culture. Just like Wyspiański noted in the initial set description of the colorful present of the countryside, Groom also describes the folklore embodied by his wife.

You, with golden heart aglow,
child-wife, you could hardly guess
how I feel heart's hammer-blow,
seeing you in wedding-dress --
tinsel gleaming on your crown.
Vest embroidered, like a doll
Fresh-unpacked and taken down
From the showcase. What a sight!
Petticoats and frilly lace,
Pigtails bound in ribbons bright!
To think you're mine, my very own,
With such a smile to light your face!⁹³

In this speech, Groom compares Bride to a common doll Krakowianka (Cracow girl) sold on the Main Market square as a souvenir. Peasant-mania of Wyspiański's time represented peasant women into dolls that foreign visitors or wealthy people of Cracow could purchase and keep in their homes. This tradition continues today. The tourist artefacts further normalized the notion of city men marrying village women. Like dolls, some of the new wives moved to their husbands' city dwellings. In the cities peasant women were often treated with disdain and contempt for not being familiar with the urban customs and ways of life. Wyspiański describing Groom's attitude toward his wife understood the cost Bride would have to pay. The playwright's wife, Teodora, moved for her husband from a small village of Konary to Kraków

⁹³ Stanisław Wyspiański, *The Wedding*, 31.

where she often had to endure paternalistic remarks and cruel gossip. The objectification of peasant women, their customs, and the land they lived on had (and continues to have) significant social and cultural ramifications.

Wyspiański allows Groom to explicitly express those desires and passion for owning his bride and the land she lives on in order to mock the popular trend of peasant-mania. Although this satirical tendency was skillfully embedded in the fabric of the drama in order to reveal the appetite of the city men, Wyspiański's text also participated in the perpetuation of the harmful stereotypes. *Wesele* became an "instant classic."⁹⁴ Wyspiański's characters replaced the people on whom they were modeled. The premiere attracted large crowds of mostly city theatre-goers who laughed at Groom's naïve passion and pretentious following of the new trend of peasant-mania. However, they also were amused by Bride's way of talking, and her inadequacy in conversation with the cultured city guests.

The majority of the theatre's audience were unfamiliar with the peasants portrayed in the play. They were able, however, to recognize the city guests, especially the well-known artists, in the characters of *Wesele*. The play was recognized as a documentation of the popular artist's wedding. The peasant woman, Jadwida Mikołajczykówna became Bride for her contemporaries as well as for future audiences and readers of *The Wedding*. In that way, Wyspiański engaged in epistemic domination by representing an actual person as a caricature in his play. The real woman hidden under the character of Bride remained voiceless until 2021 when a scholar of Wyspiański work, Monika Śliwińska wrote a book dedicated to Jadwiga and

⁹⁴ Jerzy Peterkiewicz, „The Straw-man at the Wedding,” in Stanisław Wyspiański, *The Wedding*, Noel Clark, trans., (London: Oberon Books, 1998), 7.

her sisters. Śliwińska recovered the silenced voice of the real Bride and told her story which, at times, described the harsh reality of becoming a laughingstock. For example, she notes that Jadwiga experienced harassment from the city people during the times when her husband and she lived in the city. She also notes that while living in the village of Bronowice, Rydel was so eager to publicly express his adoration for her that he unwittingly humiliated his wife by trying to carry buckets of water for her. What for him was a display of chivalry, for Jadwiga was an act that undermined her role and capability as an equal partner in running the household.⁹⁵

Wyspiański both revealed and participated in the creation of images of what a country woman and a countryside should look like and act like, but also how they both were perceived as ripe grounds for the erotic and territorial expeditions of the city men for the sake of their artistic fantasies. This gendered dynamic conflated with patriotic aspirations solidified the notion of masculine nationalism which holds the right to dominate and exploit for its own benefit feminine nature.

Limits of Agency

Unlike Mickiewicz, Wyspiański, in his play, places the peasants solely in the national context. The author of *Wesele*, curates the image of the country's people and suggests limits on their agency. Those restrictions become apparent in the scene 15, act II. The senior of the family, Grandad described as an "elderly peasant" encounters the visitation of Spectre, the ghost of Jakub Szela. Szela was one of the leaders of the Galicia massacre of 1846 during which peasants murdered over a thousand members of nobility. Szela is considered a traitor and an Austrian agent working against the efforts to regain Polish independence.

⁹⁵ Monika Śliwińska, *Panny z Wesela*,

In the Polish master-narrative, Jakub Szela is an embodiment of all the worst peasant attributes: violence, obstinance, pettiness, drunkenness, and stupidity. The history of what happened in Galicia in 1846 has been written based on the stories told by the relatives of the victims. Although it is likely that Szela displayed a proclivity to some or all of those vices, his stories exemplify the long tradition of one-sided telling of history by the nobility who had control over the narratives describing the past. In his book *Jakub Szela*, Krzysztof Traciński attempts to recover a more complete image of Szela. Traciński's research reveals that Szela was an industrious peasant whose situation initially was better than most of his fellow villagers. Because of his outspoken criticism of the lords who did not respect the regulations of the serfdom inscribed by the Austrian monarchy, Szela became the leader of his community. He attempted to seek legal justice against the owners of the Smarżowa village where he lived, the Bogusz family. Boguszs were known for their cruel treatment of their serfs. The family in power used a whole gamete of violence starting from emotional and psychological abuse to torture. Violent, at times even sadistic treatment included imprisonment in the flooded basement causing the legs of the peasant by the name of Michał Bartusiak to rot and become infected (that was a punishment for a delay in the delivery of flour from another town).⁹⁶ It was common for peasants to be whipped even to death was quite a common occurrence. The examples of cruelty were accompanied by the overworking peasants and general disregard for their well-being. In the years leading to the massacre, severe floods caused hunger of whole villagers leading to an even more dire situation for the peasants. The extreme situation of the

⁹⁶ Krzysztof R Traciński, *Jakub Szela*, (Puławy: Warszawska Firma Wydawnicza s.c, 2011), 59-60.

peasants combined with the Austrian agitation against the nobility plotting the new uprising, sparked the massacre of the land owners by the peasants. Over five hundred households were attacked and over a thousand people died. For nationalists, the massacre took on symbolic meaning: the peasants' brutality and lack of understanding of the foreign power's anti-Polish propaganda. No historians argue against the violence or even involvement of the Austrian political leaders. Several voices however call for recognizing the severe situation of the peasants and attempting to look at the bigger picture which would include not only the violence perpetrated by the peasants but also the violence aimed against them. Polish scholars undertaking the subject of serfdom ask questions, such as when is violence justified? Why do we praise those who fought and killed in the name of a free country while demonizing those who fought against the oppression within the same nation?⁹⁷ Why some acts of armed resistance are called heroic uprisings and others revolts or massacres?

Wyspiański does not engage this complicated history; instead he creates a dichotomy in which a "bad peasant" represented by Spectre, the ghost of Jakub Szela, is unwelcomed by a "good" peasant, the Host of the wedding.

SZELA

No call to yell at me that way--
We're brother peasants after all;
I'm Szela -- come to join the ball!
In forty-six, we slew their dads –
Now, our daughters woo their lads!
All togged out in Sunday bets!

⁹⁷ The idea of nation and peasants as citizens was a very late concept. Until the XX century, peasants did not have any privileges of citizens.

Fetch a bowl of water, please—
Give me face and hands a sluice,
You won't know me, one I'm spruce.
I love these here festivities --
Drinking, dancing, cutting loose –
It's just this mark upon my brow...⁹⁸

The ghost of Jakub Szela becomes a symbol of the violent retribution of the peasant and the landowners. When Wyspiański wrote his work, the memory of the peasant rebellions were still vivid, even among some of the wedding guests who perhaps feared that including the peasants in the conversation of the national fight against the foreign powers could potentially bring a repetition of the difficult past. The fact the Host, a peasant himself does not allow Spectre to symbolically wash away his past and redress himself in the “good peasant” clothes is meant to ease the reservation experienced by other guests and potentially some of the audience members.

Wyspiański, as well as many of his contemporaries, failed to recognize the violence experienced by the peasants at the hands of the landowners. The vision of the new community was limited by the demand that the peasants will continue to play their roles of progressive villagers eager to distance themselves from the past of their ancestors. Just like the peasants were expected to play their role of peaceful people, also the countryside itself was to provide the city visitors quaint and calm haven from the urban stresses. In the gendered relationship between the feminized countryside subservient to masculine nationalism, there is no space for the complexities of a long and messy history. The stories of the past oppression experienced by

⁹⁸ Wyspiański, *The Wedding*, 15.

the peasants at the hands of their countrymen had to be removed from the stage for the sake of casting a new vision of a united nation restoring its lost greatness. This selective and carefully constructed image of the countryside and countryside people created a century-long silence that recent scholars of the people's history of Poland have been attempting to break.

Both *Wesele* and *Dziady* are regarded as uniquely Polish dramas. Written in the 1820s and early 1900 for the stateless people hungry for their own national identity, they both charted Polish imaginary for decades. As today's Poland becomes an increasingly suffocating place for women, where leaders push the control over female bodies beyond the limits of safety and health, as forests and rivers become sites of protests against progressive destruction dictated by greed, it is necessary to revisit those two canonical texts and ask of them what they tell us about who *we* are and what is our responsibility toward the land our ancestors so desperately desired to call *our* homeland.

In the next chapter I continue to examine *Dziady* and *Wesele*. I analyze how the two playwrights conflated the ideals of womanhood and nature by creating metaphorical representation of both. I argue that this deeply embedded tradition continues to affect the way in which both women and nature are treated in Poland today.

Chapter 3: The Recovery Narrative in Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady (The Forefather's Eve)* and
Stanisław Wyspiański's *Wesele (The Wedding)*

In the previous chapter, I described feminization of the Polish countryside which serves the national, masculine narrative. This gendered depiction of peasants and their lands played an important role in creating national discourse. The selective portrayal created a centuries-long silence about the oppression many peasants experienced not from the hands of the foreign aggressors, but from their fellow countrymen who held certain power over them granted to them by the feudal system. The echo of that oppression can be heard in the inequalities of today's society as well as the exploitative attitude toward Polish land. In what follows, I analyze Wyspiański's and Mickiewicz's female characters, their identification with nature and land, and the lessons encoded in those stories.

In her book *Reinventing Eden*, Carolyn Merchant notes that the narrative of the Recovery of Eden rests at the forefront of Western culture. According to the biblical story, the Earth was created as a bountiful, lush garden given to people to cultivate. Because of the original sin of Eve who ate the forbidden fruit, paradise was lost. Humanity was exiled, and the gates of Eden were shut close. Nature fell along with the first parents. From then on, humanity is caught in an upward story of recovery through progress, science, and capitalism. Merchant asserts that the story places blame on Eve as well as connects her to the natural world. As a result, "fallen Eve becomes the nature that must be tamed into submission."⁹⁹ Nature as Eve is imagined in three forms: original Eve as a virgin, fallen Eve as a disorderly whore, and redeemed Eve, as a mother.

⁹⁹ Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: the Fate of Nature in Western Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 22.

In what follows, I continue my comparative analysis of Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady* (*The Forefather's Eve*) and Stanisław Wyspiański *Wesele* (*The Wedding*). I interrogate how both playwrights construct conflated images of nature and womanhood. I draw my analysis on Merchant's notion of the gendered Western Recovery Narrative, yet I transpose it to Polish ground. The mainstream Western narrative must be amendments to fully capture the Polish reality of partition and foreign oppression. Quoted in the previous chapter Benedict Anderson asserts that, "... in Western Europe the eighteenth century marks not only the dawn of the age of nationalism but the dusk of religious modes of thought."¹⁰⁰ Although in Western European societies nationalistic narratives were replacing the religious ideals, in Poland nationalism stemmed out of Catholicism. The intertwined vine of religion and nationalism continues to grow strong in today's Poland informing many aspects of social and political spheres.

Polish retelling of the biblically rooted story of humanity is centered around the figure of Christ. In the first chapter, I describe the messianic vision of history according to which Poland is a Christ among the nations. Polish suffering, death, and resurrection open the door back to Eden -- a free, sovereign country. In this messianic narrative, a virgin becomes a mother. The conflation of those two forms of Eve brings forth a figure of Mary, the Mother of Christ who models an ideal motherhood marked by sacrifice and suffering. This central for Polish Catholicism figure inspired the ideal of uniquely Polish motherhood -- *Matka Polka* (Polish Mother), also introduced in the first chapter. According to Merchant, Adam is an agent of recovery, he works, invents, and transforms the land to recreate Eden lost to Eve's proclivity to

¹⁰⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 11.

sin. In Polish understanding of the narrative, all women who do not support his efforts or even distract him from his mission are associated with the Fallen Eve.

In my analysis, I interrogate how this central narrative is intertwined with the demands of the national story of the state-less nation yearning for independence. I highlight the progression of this nationalistic depiction of nature and womanhood between the two analyzed texts. *Dziady* was written in the span of a decade starting in the 1820s. Mickiewicz responded to the need for meaning of the precarious situation of Poland and the suffering of the people. His mystical ideals of Polish messianism provided spiritual guidance. Wyspiański wrote his play in 1901 after two failed uprisings (1830-31 and 1863-64), as the vision of independence was becoming dimmer, the need for a stronger national narrative was necessitated. As a result, in *Wesele* Wyspiański creates two versions of womanhood: local (captured in the character of the Bride) and foreign (depicted as Rachel, an uninvited guest).

Paradise Lost

Before I begin analysis of the two central texts of my project, I will briefly recall two other texts by Adam Mickiewicz in order to reveal how the notion of the lost land was conceptualized in the Polish narrative. One of them is titled *Pan Tadeusz* (full title: *Sir Thaddeus, or the Last Foray in Lithuania: A Nobility's Tale of the Years 1811–1812, in Twelve Books of Verse*). It is hard to overestimate the importance of this epic poem published in 1834. The poem is referred to as a national epic that documents the life of Polish nobility during the Russian occupation under the partition of 1795-1918. *Pan Tadeusz* celebrates traditions of nobility, praises the land, as well as depicts staging an open revolt against Russia. Mickiewicz wrote it while in exile and the opening paragraph reflects the magnitude of loss and longing for the land:

LITHUANIA¹⁰¹, my country, thou art like health; how much thou shouldst be prized only he can learn who has lost thee. Today thy beauty in all its splendour I see and describe, for I yearn for thee. Holy Virgin, who protectest bright Czenstochowa and shinest above the Ostra Gate in Wilno! Thou who dost shelter the castle of Nowogrodek with its faithful folk! As by miracle thou didst restore me to health in my childhood—when, offered by my weeping mother to thy protection, I raised my dead eyelids, and could straightway walk to the threshold of thy shrine to thank God for the life returned me—so by miracle thou wilt return us to the bosom of our country. Meanwhile bear my grief-stricken soul to those wooded hills, to those green meadows stretched far and wide along the blue Niemen; to those fields painted with various grain, gilded with wheat, silvered with rye; where grows the amber mustard, the buckwheat white as snow, where the clover glows with a maiden's blush, where all is girdled as with a ribbon by a strip of green turf on which here and there rest quiet pear-trees.

The canonical monologue which many children are still required to memorize depicts the yearning of the exiled poet whose memory holds the beauty of the landscape. The country, however, was a place of not only splendor but also a land of miracles. The special protection of the deity, Mary, the Holy Virgin, spread its aegis over the country and the lyrical subject alike.¹⁰² The richness of the landscape combined with the divine presence signifies Eden. The original Eve, the virgin, splendid, and bountiful remains at the forefront of the poet's imagination, longing, and narrative. However, that place was lost, and the long road of Recovery through poetry and drama became Mickiewicz's pursuit which can be observed in my analysis below.

Another text depicting the story of a loss is *Świtezia*. The ballad tells the origin story of a lake that is located within the borders of current Belarus, but prior to the partition of 1795, it

¹⁰¹ The poet addresses Lithuania because prior to partition Poland was a Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

¹⁰² The motif of supernatural healing was an autobiographical motif from Mickiewicz's life.

was a part of Lithuania.¹⁰³ According to the ballad, the mysterious lake was full of strange sounds and occurrences. Intrigued people from the nearby village fish out a woman out of the bottom of the lake. She tells them her story of how the lake came to be. The lake was created as a response to the prayers of women, children, and elderly who were left in the town of *Świtez* when all the men fought against the Russian invasion of Lithuania. Vulnerable women asked God to take their lives rather than allow them to be dishonored by ruthless enemies. As a result, the town was turned into a lake, and its inhabitants into wildflowers and plants. Since then, all who attempt to swim and fish on the lake or collect the rare flowers die by drowning. The woman, however, allows the group of men to be on the lake and hear her story because it pertains to their forefather's land.

According to that vision, the homeland's nature is sacred, holds mysteries of the past, and as such must be respected, protected and ought to remain untouched *unless* it can serve a national cause. It is a place of supernatural activity and protection. It is also guarded by a divine woman. The two stories shape the narrative of a paradise where life is harmonious and filled with a divine presence. The memory of the past magnifies the longing and fuels the desire to take back the lost land. The female deities residing in those spaces, although powerful, cannot fully protect the land against foreign invasion. The lost paradise must be restored by Adam whose innovative work will regain Eden (an independent country).

Motherhood as a Way Back to Eden

The biblical narrative of the Fall depicts God cursing the serpent for encouraging Eve to break the commandment of not eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. A

¹⁰³ Lithuania was a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

part of the serpent's punishment is enmity between him and the woman. God declares that the woman's offspring will crush the serpent's head and strike his heel. Eve's punishment is painful childbearing.¹⁰⁴ The fallen Eve's penance is arduous labor, yet her redemption will come from the one she will birth. Eve's and the serpent's curse contain the vision of Christ's birth as an ultimate recovery from the original sin. The biblical story transposed to the Polish narrative gave root to the ideal of motherhood which is marked by self-sacrifice and suffering. The notion of *Matka Polka* (Polish Mother) is a social and cultural construct solidified through artistic depictions that continue to impact women in Poland. The ideal of motherhood was shaped during the foreign invasion and partition of Poland (1795-1918), especially during and after the two uprisings (1830 and 1864) when thousands of young men were lost to a much stronger Russian army. Elevating the prolific experience of Polish women to the magnitude of a holy calling perfectly fulfilled by Mary, Christ's mother, renders women useful only in the context of motherhood and devalues their worth outside of this role. Adam Mickiewicz significantly contributed to creating the ideal of *Matka Polka*.

As discussed in the previous chapter, *Dziady* Part II depicts a ritual of dziady (the forefathers' eve) during which souls arrive at a small chapel where a group of peasants summon the restless in the afterlife beings. One of them is the soul of a young woman whose sin was a careless existence and lack of commitment toward the traditional obligations of a wife and a mother. As a result, she cannot enter heaven because she "whose feet have never touched the ground/ Will never tread His promised land."¹⁰⁵ In the character of a young peasant woman,

¹⁰⁴ Genesis 3:15-16, NIV.

¹⁰⁵ Adam Mickiewicz, *The Forefather's Eve*, 165.

Mickiewicz gave an expression of the social norms and expectations according to which women's most valuable calling is to become a wife and a mother. In the Recovery Narrative, the fallen Eve was yet to become a mother. The first children are born outside of Eden, the descendant of fallen Eve will bring her and the entire human race a salvation, a way back to the lost paradise. The rejection of stepping into the role of a mother becomes a repetition of the initial sin.

After the Russian military violently extinguished the November Uprising (1830-1831), Mickiewicz wrote a poem *To a Polish Mother* which is a prophetic vision of the suffering which rests ahead of the Mother's son. The lyrical subject describes the fight that will not bring him glory but rather will lead him to great suffering in the Siberian mines. Mickiewicz makes a connection between the suffering of a Polish Mother and Mary, the mother of Christ.

O Polish mother, ill must be his part!
Before the Mother of Our Sorrows kneel,
Gaze on the sword that cleaves her living heart-
Such is the cruel blow thy breast shall feel!¹⁰⁶

The connection between the religious figure and the responsibility of motherhood in the national discourse places the role of women as not only a social obligation but also as religious one. The notion of holiness is conflated with the ideals of bringing children to the world which will call upon them to lay their lives on the alter of the national freedom.

In *Dziady* Part III, Mickiewicz further developed the idea of foreign oppression as a messianic destination of the whole nation according to which Poland, like Christ, must die, but

¹⁰⁶ Adam, Mickiewicz Jewell Parish, and George Rapall Noyes. "To a Polish Mother." *The Slavonic Review* 3, no. 7 (1924): 68–69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4201814>.

will surely be resurrected, and both Polish death will bring victory to the Polish people as well as other nations. If the young, Polish men become the embodiment of Poland as Christ, then their mothers must step into the role of Mary, the suffering mother of Christ. The faithful witnessing of the innocent son's torment and death became a sacred mission of the many Polish women at that time. Just like many men were cast in the role of a "collective Christ" suffering on behalf of the nation, Polish mothers become a collective Mary, the Mother of Christ who silently weeps and laments the unjust death of her child. In Polish Recovery Narrative, the individual stories become collectivized and used to support the grand narrative of Poland being the chosen nation. Mickiewicz depicts the fate of the suffering mother in the character of Mrs. Rollinson. The body of an agonizing mother became a personification of the oppression of the nation-state. The character of Rollinson's mother can be interpreted as an allegory for Poland which relies on her sons to suffer and win the final battle for her. In that way the lived experience of mothers, in the national discourse, becomes invisible and replaced by the symbolic, collective figure of the nation-state.

Dziady part III traces the transformation of the main character, Gustaw, from a Romantic lover to Konrad, a Christ-like figure burdened by the suffering of the oppressed nation. The majority of the play takes place in the prison cell and depicts biographical elements of Mickiewicz's and his colleagues' imprisonment as a punishment for spreading patriotic ideas. The eighth scene takes place in a building where the interrogation chamber shares a hallway with the apartment of the Senator. This character is based on the historical figure of Senator Novosiltsov who moved to Wilno where Mickiewicz lived. In the preface to the *Dziady* Part III, Mickiewicz described him: "He was the first to understand the instinctive and beastly hatred of

the Russian government towards Poles as something salvific, as eminently good politics, and thus he took it as the basis of his actions and set as his goal the destruction of Polish nationhood."¹⁰⁷ The Senator especially targeted Polish students who worked toward maintaining the Polish language and culture. Novosiltsov was responsible for the mass imprisonment of many young men who had no chance at a fair process. Mickiewicz adds, "Novosiltsov, empowered by Tsarevich Constantine with ultimate authority, was prosecutor, judge, and hangman."¹⁰⁸ This historic person became an emblem of the oppressive villain in the tale of Polish martyrdom.

In the scene, the Senator reveals that a young man, named Rollison, has refused to speak, and discusses his resultant torture. A woman, whom the audience understands as the prisoner's mother enters to beg for her son's life. The interaction of the man's mother, Mrs. Rollison with the Senator is painful. The woman describes the suffering of her only son. Even though she is blind she is able to provide many details based just on hearing the cruel interrogation session. When the Senator questions her accuracy, she responds,

You think that I can't recognize my child's
Voice when he calls? Lord, even in the wilds
The mother ewe picks out her bleating lamb
Among so many sounds-- among thousands
In the same flock! And what a voice
It was, you Grace-- and that it was my boy's!
Had you heard it, you wouldn't sleep for day!¹⁰⁹

The woman cites her animal-like instinct to ensure that she is not mistaken when it comes to

¹⁰⁷ Adam Mickiewicz, *The Forefather's Eve*, 172.

¹⁰⁸ Adam Mickiewicz, *The Forefather's Eve*, 172.

¹⁰⁹ Adam Mickiewicz, *The Forefather's Eve*, 269.

the cry of her son. She also details how her days are spent collecting more information about her child, including his near-to-death torture. The character of Mrs. Rollinson epitomizes the experience of many Polish women during the difficult times in Polish history in which women played crucial roles in maintaining the national and cultural identity of their children. While men fought for independence and used their sabers to overcome the oppressors, mothers fought against the enemy by making sure that their children spoke the language, were familiar with the literature and history, and, if they were boys, understood their duty to bear arms and actively fight for Poland. This vital responsibility resulted in the creation of a trope of Matka Polka (Polish Mother), which till today is a subject of Polish feminists' discourse who try to break out of that rock-solid mold established during Romanticism. The character of Mrs. Rollinson represents Poland herself, the Motherland: weak and blind, yet persistent and unbroken, she bravely faces the ruthless man.

The codification of the female body has been clear for Mickiewicz's audience throughout its production history. One of the reviewers of the 1934 Warsaw production of *Dziady*, remarked how great was the performance of Stanisława Wysocka in the role of Ms. Rollinson. The critic recognized that the masterfully portrayed role depicted :not only a mourning mother but also a great symbol of the martyrology of the nation."¹¹⁰ The suffering of a mother became a story of a tormented nation. The body of a woman communicates to the audience not a story of an individual person or even a collective narrative of motherhood in the partitioned country, but rather she becomes a stand-in for Poland herself who laments her suffering for freedom

¹¹⁰ Michał Bujanowicz, „Inscenizacje *Dziadów* Adama Mickiewicza” *Cultura.pl*, April 2004, accessed: October 2023, Inscenizacje "Dziadów" Adama Mickiewicza | Artykuł | Culture.pl

sons. The audience witnesses not only her emotions but also her physically difficult condition.

This character exemplifies the suffering female body which in the 1800 and 1900 was a common motif. Feminist and scholar Maria Janion describes this phenomenon:

W ciągu ostatnich dwustu lat panowania romantyzmu przedstaiono Polskę-kobietę jako alegorię, symbol, mit. Ciało ojczyzny to przeważnie było ciało cierpiące, udręczone, nieszczęśliwe; skuwane łańcuchem, zakuwane w dyby, spychane do grobu, nawet krzyżowane. Umierała na naszych oczach, wiadomo było jednak, że zmartwychwstanie. Wysyłała synów na śmierć w imię swego zmartwychwstania, a oni się na to godzili.”¹¹¹

[During the last two hundred years of the reign of Romanticism, Poland-woman was presented as an allegory, a symbol, a myth. The body of the homeland was mostly a body suffering, tormented, unhappy; chained, shackled in stocks, pushed to the grave, even crossed. She was dying before our eyes, but it was known that she would be resurrected. She sent her sons to their deaths in the name of her resurrection, and they agreed to it.]

The ideal of motherhood of Polish women is projected onto the state. The country portrayed as a mother depends on the sacrifice of her sons. The stories of women who often suffered gendered violence during the wartime, partitions, and military uprisings become invisible because their bodies were used as symbols of the nation-state. The figure of *Matka Polka* proves the verity of Chaudhuri's suggestion that universalization and metaphorization of nature “misrepresents the actual ecological issues at hand.”¹¹² The material reality of women's experiences portrayed as suffering mothers become replaced with the nationalistic meaning.

¹¹¹ Maria Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna*, 316.

¹¹² Una Chaudhuri, “‘There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake’: Toward an Ecological Theater.” *Theater (New Haven, Conn.)* 25, no. 1 (1994), 27.

Women and nature are devalued as *themselves*, but become useful in the nationalistic discourse as stand-in for the project of the nation-state. The conflation of female body and land as well as encapsulation of both in a form of a metaphor for nation renders Ric Knowle's observation that, "the sign marks the absence of its material referent"¹¹³ accurate. Furthermore, this deeply engraved conviction that motherhood remains the highest expression of womanhood as well as a patriotic obligation legitimizes policing women's bodies, at times in extreme forms.

Fallen Eve in *Dziady* Part II

According to the Recovery Narrative, the fallen humanity marches toward redemption and reconstruction of Eden which, in its Polish version, includes reappearance of the independent Poland on the maps of Europe. This upward narrative is a story of men leading their communities, nations, and humanity through their resourcefulness, ingenuity, and industriousness. The God-given dominion over all living things includes spiritual superiority. Eve who caused the fall remains in need of spiritual guidance. She is powerful enough to sin again, yet too weak to lift herself up from her fallen condition. In what follows, I analyze how the male protagonist Gustav from *Dziady* part IV functions in the world of the play as Adam in the Recovery Narrative, and how the female character, Maryla becomes the fallen Eve. In Mickiewicz's text, the story of the protagonist is centered around the woman, yet she exists only in and through the story of Gustav. She is absent and fully imagined by the male protagonist whose story has the power to elevate her to the status of an angelic being or condemn her as sinful and weak.

¹¹³ Ric Knowles "The Hearts of Its Women: Rape, (Residential Schools), and Re-membering." In S.E. Wilmer, ed., *Native American Performance, and Representation*, (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2009), 141.

Dziady part IV tells the story of Gustav who in the previous two parts remained a mysterious character of the drama. In a way, Mickiewicz used the character of Gustav to sustain the audience's attention and curiosity. He appears at the end of *Dziady* part II as a silent ghost, in the third part of the dramatic cycle, he is a protagonist who dies as a lover and is reborn as Konrad, the fighter for national independence. In part IV he returns as Hermit to the small cottage of a Priest and his children. He arrives disheveled and his pale, ghostly look scares the children. He shares the story of his tragic love for a woman who chose another man. During the conversation, the Priest recognizes Gustav as one of his former students whom he cared for after the boy's father passed away. The final monologue of Gustav ties back the cycle to the ritual of *dziady*, the forefather's eve which is a coexistence of the living with the wondering souls who, for various reasons, cannot enter the eternal rest. The play ends with the theological dispute between the Priest and Gustav who uses his own situation as validation for the ritual of *dziady* and the dismissed by clergy notion of the eternal life of souls on earth and human obligation toward them. Gustav explicitly states that he is a ghost who returns from the afterlife. Although the religious message ties the whole dramatic cycle, it is the tragic, romantic love that is centered in Gustav's story.¹¹⁴

The story of a disappointed, suffering lover contains a strong autobiographical motive. Young Mickiewicz experienced heartbreak when his feelings toward a young woman, Maria

¹¹⁴ As I describe in the introduction, Mickiewicz was forced by the Russian government to leave Poland in 1824 for his patriotic activism. He also left behind a woman he loved, Maria (Maryla) Puttkamer nee Wereszczak. The longing for a woman married to another man informed many of the writer's literary works including *Dziady* part IV written on the exile, first in Russia, and later in various European countries. Mickiewicz's biographer, Roman Koropeckyj, notes that the Crimean landscape and Alpine sublime evoked in the poet nostalgia for both land and Maria which he irrevocably lost and "could only be possessed — and, like the nature around him, reimagined—in the subjunctive space of poetry." Out of this subjective space came the creation of the character of Maria from *Dziady* part IV.

(Maryla)¹¹⁵ Wereszczakówna could not be reciprocated and fully realized. Before Mickiewicz met Maria, he wrote to his friend Jan Czeczot, "Mam jakiś ideal kochanki, dziwny, że nie powiem, dziwaczny..."¹¹⁶ (I have a weird ideal of a lover, not to say, bizarre...). Mickiewicz found this ideal in Maria. The woman came from a privileged family, was well educated, and expressed unusual for women her age interests in literature and music which was highly alluring for Mickiewicz. The two fell in love, but Maria followed the trajectory set before her by her parents and married an older, wealthy man leaving Mickiewicz in torment which he transformed into a figure of a lover in the fourth part of his drama.

Mickiewicz, like many other Romantics, put idealized love at the forefront of their mind and their artistic creation which projects an illusion of the centrality of the female characters. In their poetry and drama, however, women rarely become fully developed, multidimensional characters. The playwright, through his male protagonist, constructs the image of a woman for the audience which cannot be verified because she never appears before them. Gustav weaves his narrative about the great suffering caused by Maryla, her mysterious disappearance from his life. She describes her with the use of poetic images. He recalls seeing her for the last time, when "she came running like the western breeze."¹¹⁷ Their love was as if, "soul melts in soul... Earth and heaven confound/ This our passion oceanic that over us sounds!"¹¹⁸ He explains that during their last goodbye, she gave him a small cypress seedling which he planted and watered with his tears. The plant grew into a "thickly leaved sublimity." He tore the branch out of the

¹¹⁵ People in Poland often have several versions of their first names, Maria and Maryla were used interchangeably.

¹¹⁶ Danuta Jastrzębska-Golonkova, „Kobieta Fatalna w twórczości Adama Mickiewicza i Juliusza Słowackiego,” *Zeszyty Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej w Bydgoszczy*, Studia Filologiczne z. 30/32, 1991 (12/13), 47.

¹¹⁷ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather's Eve*, 359.

¹¹⁸ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather's Eve*, 360.

tree and carries it around like a talisman which reminds him of Maryla for its bark resembles the color of her hair.¹¹⁹ He calls her, “ a superhuman fairy.”¹²⁰ The multiplication of the nature imaginary connects the woman to the natural world. When she is absent, Gustav seeks solace in nature which reminds him of her. Like the woman from lake Świtez, Maryla exists between the human world and the realm of wilderness inaccessible to most people. She evokes in the tragic lover a sense of awe and wonder, to him she is a half-woman, half-supernatural being. Yet in the world of the play, she is absent. Maryla does not appear before the audience. Gustav like God creates her with his story. The creative power of his words places him above Maryla whose fate and even existence (in the story and in the world of the play) depends on Gustav's narrative.

Like Mickiewicz in the letter to his friend, Gustav admits that before he met the woman he fell in love with, he already created her in his imagination,

I dreamt a lover glimpsed only in a dream,
And her I longed for, holding in despite
All earthly creatures, all of the common rout;
I searched, ah! Where did I not seek her out,
That love divine, found not beneath this sun
But only on the sea-foam of my imagination!¹²¹

Although, supposedly Maryla became the fulfillment of that imagination, yet, in the world of Mickiewicz's play she remains solely a projection of Gustav's desires and ideals. Gustav has the power to shape how his listeners perceive her, and how they imagine her based on his

¹¹⁹ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather's Eve*, 357.

¹²⁰ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather's Eve*, 394.

¹²¹ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather's Eve*, 353.

narrative. In his story, she is a majestic, supernatural human, but he also claims the right to pass the moral judgment of Maryla.

Gustav like Adam, although cannot fully separate himself from the sinful woman, has a deeper understanding of the moral reality. He can name the sin and is familiar with its gravity and due punishment. Although on the fallen Earth, the sin of Maryla/Eve affects him greatly, in the afterlife he will be compensation for her wrongdoing:

But you, with heart now frigid, and indifferent brow

(...)

You murdered me, seductress! But you shall pay --

Heaven hotly pursues those who betray,

And I will not be unavenged;

(...)

You female degenerate!¹²²

Gustav not only passes his own judgment and expresses anger toward the woman, he also claims the right to declare eternal punishment for her sin which was a rejection of his feelings. Furthermore, his speech expands on all women when he exclaims, "Woman! Thing of fluff! You flighty revel!"¹²³ According to Gustav, the fickle nature of a woman, her inability to perceive the gravity of her actions in the earthly and eternal realms places her as an inferior being, even though she may possess beauty found only in nature. Like Eve, Maryla's weak judgment causes him suffering. She is morally inadequate, yet she still holds the power to destroy the set order. In Gustav's story, it is the life he imagines with her. She rejects it and chooses another man which, according to Gustav, is sinful and will be punished.

¹²² Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather's Eve*, 389.

¹²³ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather's Eve*, 388.

Man's Helpers

Carolyn Merchant notes that the biblical story of Genesis, "the conflation of animals with women as helpmates is...explicit."¹²⁴ According to the Biblical narrative, God observes Adam and recognizes that the animals surrounding the man are not sufficient companions for him. When God creates Eve, he declares that she is a suitable help for him. This creation story reinscribes an order according to which Eve and animals are created to support Adam. Mickiewicz established the male/female and the non-human hierarchy in the world of his play. Gustav holds the power over the story of the woman, he determines her eternal punishment. Maryla, like Eve, is condemned for her failure of responsibility toward Gustav. She rejects becoming his wife and shuts down the possibility of redemption which rests in motherhood. Gustav holds a similar power over the non-human characters of the play which, like Maryla, exist in his story but remain absent on stage.

When Priest's children see Gustav, he startles them and they describe him as a dead man, ghost, vampire, or a "wild man from a fairytale." Gustav describes his internal torment, but he also recalls curious interactions with the non-human world. He places himself in opposition to the Priest who is puzzled by the reports of Gustav's interactions with insects. Gustav reprimands the old man that, "nature, like man, has mysteries/Which she hides not only from the vulgar rout,/ But never betrays to wise men or to priests!"¹²⁵ Gustav is proud that he is able to connect with the elements of the non-human world which testifies to his sensibility and ability to look beyond what's visible to the human eye. The insects described by him are a part

¹²⁴ Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden*, 12.

¹²⁵ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather's Eve*, 377.

of the natural world that cannot be domesticated and tamed. They might be insignificant and easily overlooked or even destroyed by humans, but in the world of Mickiewicz's play, they are as significant as any other part of nature because they are filled with the spirit like humans, oceans, trees, and lakes. Gustav remembers how he talked to a firefly who described her tragic circumstances where the most unique and beautiful part of her¹²⁶ also exposes her to the dangers of the surroundings and makes her vulnerable. That testimony allowed Gustav to understand and accept the fire that is burning inside him not by his choice, but by the very reality of who he is and how he exists in the world, just like the firefly cannot distinguish the light inside her.¹²⁷ The story inspires the children to pay attention to the sounds around them. Suddenly they notice the tapping on the table. Gustav explains that it is a beetle trying to draw the attention of the humans so they can pray for him. Gustav recognizes in him an incarnated soul of a man who was a miser in his previous life. Although he "scratched himself a mound of treasure,"¹²⁸ he never helped those around him who needed help the most. He described that the evil man destroyed the house of a widow and mercilessly treated her kids leaving them homeless and penniless. The story resembles the fate of the peasant woman who returned as an Owl to torment the oppressive master portrayed in Part II. Yet, in the case of the beetle, Gustav serves as a medium, he understands, translates, and explains the non-human world to the children and their father, the Priest. His ability to hear and respond to the soul trapped in

¹²⁶ In the Polish original, the firefly is referred to as a male.

¹²⁷ Scholars who provided a scientific analysis of the bugs and insects in Mickiewicz's works conclude that Hermit talked to the female firefly hence I refer to the fly by using the female pronoun.

Grzegorz Igliński Z Mickiewiczowskiego bestiariusza Owady i robaki w „Dziadach” (Uniwersytet Warmińsko-Mazurski w Olsztynie), Wiek XIX. Rocznik Towarzystwa Literackiego im. Adama Mickiewicza rok IX (LI) 2016 DOI: 10.18318/WIEKXIX.2016.1, p 16.

¹²⁸ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather's Eve*, 374.

the body of the bug may become a deciding factor in whether the incarnated soul will remain suspended in penance or move on to a different realm. In the world of the play, Gustav holds ultimate power over the stories of the woman he loves as well as the non-human world. He possesses the ability to pass moral judgment on the objects of his stories. Romanticism called for subjective storytelling. The complex protagonist undergoes a lone journey and from the depth of his experience and perception, he narrates and arranges the world of the play. Yet, in the Polish context, women and the representatives of the non-human world remain morally subservient in relation to the protagonist, even if while alive they were separated from him or even posed a certain danger to him. The upward story encoded in *Dziady*, Part II is a journey of an Adam who is working toward regaining the agency and power to set the world right, to rebuild the garden. His agency rests in his spiritual power which fuels his actions. In that sense, Gustav's exercising his right to pass moral judgment on Maryla or serving as a medium is his way of mending the disordered word, regaining his God-given dominium, and becoming a more God-like figure himself.

Rebirth of Adam

Marchant's reading of the Genesis story reveals that Adam, like Eve, has three forms. Adam, an image of God, the Creator; Fallen Adam is "the agent of earthly transformation"¹²⁹; and Father Adam is a God patriarch, a "model of kingdom and state."¹³⁰ In the Polish context, Adam transforms himself. Fallen Adam in the form of Gustav, the tragic lover, becomes Adam,

¹²⁹ Carolyn Marchant, *Reinventing Eden*, 22.

¹³⁰ Carolyn Marchant, *Reinventing Eden*, 22.

God patriarch depicted in the character of Konrad. His transformation is portrayed in the first scene of the third part of the dramatic cycle *Dziady*.

In the opening scene of the play, the Guardian Angel stands by the sleeping man and recalls leading the man's soul to various places during his sleep.¹³¹ The Angel describes his service to Gustav since he was a child. The prisoner, Gustav, grapples with the news of being freed from the prison cell and relocated to Russia as a sentence for his patriotic actions. He understands that "they'll free me from these fetters and rank mews./And then, by exile, wrap chains around my soul!"¹³² The vision of being away from his fatherland becomes unbearable.¹³³ The man stands up and with a piece of coal writes on the wall in Latin that Gustav died on November 1st, 1823, and Konrad was born the same day.¹³⁴ The scene symbolically marks the death of the Romantic lover and birth of the fighter for the national cause. The protagonist leaves behind the distractions of pursuing love and shifts his attention and his devotion toward his country. The transformation increases man's abilities. Observing him Spirit¹³⁵ exclaims, " Ah mortal! If though only knew thy power!"¹³⁶ As previously mentioned Gustav carried certain spiritual power, yet his shedding of earthly worries and preoccupations like love allows him to access greater dimensions of power.

¹³¹ This idea of soul travel during sleep is congruent with the teachings of Spiritism defined by Allan Kardec in 1857.

¹³² Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather's Eve*, 179.

¹³³ The motif echoes Mickiewicz's own life events and the anguish that the exiled caused because the poet was separated from the woman he loved as well as from his country.

¹³⁴ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather's Eve*, 179.

¹³⁵ The character of the Spirit might also be interpreted as an expression of the inner part of the protagonist portrayed as a separate entity.

¹³⁶ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather's Eve*, 180.

In the famous monologue titled Great Improvisation¹³⁷, Konrad addresses God and Nature, “Thou God, Thou Nature! I would have you hear --/ Such a song as mine is worthy of Your ear./ A master, I!¹³⁸ He places himself as a being worth God’s attention. He proclaims that he sings a Song-Creation, “This song is strength – causality -- /Such song is immortality! He petitions God to give him his power over people (“Give me souls'-rule!”)¹³⁹ Konrad accuses God of not loving the Polish nation the way he does:

Now my nation is incarnate in my soul:
My body’s swallowed her spirit whole –
I and the Fatherland am the same.
My name is Million, for the millions’ dole
I love as my own pain.
I look upon my Fatherland
As a son sees his father strapped to the wheel.
I feel the suffering of my land
As a pregnant mother her child’s woe must feel
I suffer...¹⁴⁰

Konrad proclaims a total identification with the suffering nation. He hears and feels the pain not only of other prisoners like himself but also the pain of the land. His body reacts to the spiritual and material condition of all living beings including the non-human world. In this version of the Recovery Narrative, Adam becomes an ultimate hero who can challenge even God for the sake of his land and its people. As Gustav, a Fallen Adam, he had the power to pass moral judgment on all living things, as Konrad he claims right to the reign over all souls. This notion of spiritual

¹³⁷ The monologue is as popular and canonical as “To be or not to be.”

¹³⁸ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather’s Eve*, 206.

¹³⁹ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather’s Eve*, 210.

¹⁴⁰ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefather’s Eve*, 214.

dominance continues to unfold in today's Poland where women and land are controlled in the name of the spiritual and religious order that they must be subdued to regardless of their own convictions and beliefs.

Fallen Eve as an Outsider

In my reading of *Wesele* through the lens of Recovery Narrative, I distinguish two visions of womanhood/ nature identification. One is captured in the character of the Bride which, as I described in the previous chapter, is available to be claimed, educated, cultured, married, and become a wife and a future mother. She represents the countryside landscape, the fertile fields, the rolling hills, the warmth of the sun, and the gold of the wheat which city men, the representatives of the intellectual and artistic elites were eager to explore as the source of their fresh inspiration. The peasants and their lands became crucial elements in the national recovery program of the political elites who realized that no fight for independence will be successful if it will include only the elites. The second one is depicted in the character of Rachel, a Jewish woman, who appears at the wedding celebration uninvited. She is mysterious, she blurs the lines between traditional ideals of masculinity and femininity – she comfortably describes her sexual appetites, she asserts herself in the domain of men, the poetry, yet she remains desirable as a woman for those who talk to her. She represents the dark, destructive forces of nature, powerful, yet unpredictable. She is hard to tame, fallen Eve.

As I describe in the second chapter, Wyspiański wrote his play to challenge the fin-de-siècle, bohemian notion of art for art's sake and employ artistic expression in the national cause. The playwright wanted to draw attention that *all* people—intellectual elites and peasants alike-- living on the land that formerly existed as a free country of the Polish-

Lithuanian Commonwealth must unite and together wake up from the sleep of inaction and acceptance of the foreign oppression. As a setting for his play, Wyspiański used the wedding of his friend, Lucjan Rydel with a peasant woman, Jadwiga Mikołajczykówna. The village hut transforms into a space where supernatural beings and ghosts return from the past to meet the wedding guests and give them important wisdom about the fate of their country. The premise of Wyspiański's play resembles Mickiewicz's *Dziady* Part II in that it stages a coexistence of the living with the dead ones. Interestingly, in *Wesele* it is a woman named Rachel who transforms the world of the play from the realistic one to the supernatural.

The character of Rachel is based on a fifteen-year-old Jewish girl by the name of Pepa (Józefa) Singer who attended Rydel's wedding. Although Wyspiański used many details from his own life, he also altered many elements of the event. Unlike Pepa who wore a modest white shirt and navy blue skirt, Wyspiański's Rachel is dressed in a long, black dress and a large, red shawl on her neck. She stands out in the colorful crowd. She is the only woman in the play, who appreciates the poetry. She is familiar with the newest artistic trends influencing the creative elites. Her father describes her as a woman who knows "all of Przybyszewki." (Stanisław Przybyszewski was another popular writer from Wyspiański's social circles who issued a modernist manifest according to which art was a value in and of itself and did not have to carry any obligations to educate or moralize.) Rachel embodies those modernist ideas wholeheartedly and honestly which on one hand is mocked by Wyspiański, but on the other hand, there is something in her that causes her to transcend beyond the bombastic mannerism and transforms the social gathering into the space of supernatural encounters. She is commonly referred to as Muza *Wesela* "the muse of *the Wedding*." In her conversation with Poet (a

character based on one of the most recognizable poets of turn of the century Krakow, Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer), she tells him, "what I feel is what you write" while naming flowers, apple-trees /Clouds and sun or frogs and snakes -- /Blooming orchards/ tranquil lakes."¹⁴¹ Rachel emphasizes that her relationship with the non-human world is affective and spiritual rather than intellectual. As Eva Plach observes, "As a lover of poetry, Rachel knows how to leave herself open to fantastic possibilities; as a Jewish woman, Rachel is "naturally" predisposed to encounter and mediate mystical phenomena"¹⁴² Plach notes that the knowledge and experience of Jewish spirituality allow Rachel to access the supernatural realm.¹⁴³ Another scholar of Wyspiański's work, Maria Januszewicz asserts that this Jewish woman possesses the ability to accomplish a "mystical union" with nature.¹⁴⁴ In Mickiewicz's *Dziady* part II it is Guslarz, the warlock who summons the ghosts to visit the chapel. In *Wesele* Rachel, while leaving the wedding ceremony, she invites into the hut the garden's straw-man which protects the rose from the cold of winter. The straw-man becomes alive and transforms the wedding into a supernatural event.¹⁴⁵

Rachel holds much more agency than any of Mickiewicz's female characters. She not only evokes a non-realistic realm, but she also asserts herself as a sexual being. When Poet asks her,

¹⁴¹ Stanisław Wyspiański, *The Wedding*, 40.

¹⁴² Eva Plach, "'Botticelli Woman': Rachel Singer and the Jewish Theme in Stanisław Wyspiański's 'the Wedding.'" *The Polish Review* 41 (3): 1996, 317.

¹⁴³ Eva Plach, "Botticelli Woman," 317.

¹⁴⁴ Maria, Januszewicz, *Malowany Dramat : O Związkach Literatury Z Malarstwem W "Weselu" Stanisława Wyspiańskiego*, (Zielona Góra: Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna im. Tadeusza Kotarbińskiego, 1994), 17.

¹⁴⁵ *Wesele* is a symbolist drama. The straw-man symbolizes the state of the nation which numbs and keeps dormant a beautiful rose, a spirit of fighting for independence.

POET

What is it you're really after?

RACHEL

Pleasure, honey, joy and laughter,
Sweets of love and passion's bliss,
Happiness--

POET

Free love, as well?

RACHEL

I dream about free love so often!¹⁴⁶

Her interactions with Poet are sensual. She does not shy away from saying things that, according to the social rules of her time, would be considered scandalizing when heard from a woman's mouth. Poet responds to her charm, beauty, and intellect and recognizes those qualities as rare. Like Gustav, Poet observes the woman and is equally enchanted and suffering. The desire he feels combined with the lack of ability to possess the woman feels like torture.

I'll observe you -- tortured --
Wandering through the dreary orchard,
Like some soul astray in love --
Half-maid, half-angel, as you rub
Against a straw protected shrub,¹⁴⁷

Rachel is associated with the mysterious elements of nature and its spiritual aspect of the non-human world. She serves as a medium between what's human and what is spiritual. She declares to Poet that she will invite to the peasants' hut, "all wonders, flowers, shrubs, and trees, /the crash of thunder, melodies"¹⁴⁸ which marks significant progress in the creation of female characters in Polish dramatic literature. Yet it is her agency, her strength, and self-

¹⁴⁶ Stanisław Wyspiański, *The Wedding*, 40.

¹⁴⁷ Stanisław Wyspiański, *The Wedding*, 59.

¹⁴⁸ Stanisław Wyspiański, *The Wedding*, 60.

assertion in the traditionally male-dominated spheres of life combined with her religious identity that makes her an outsider, a foreigner.

Wyspiański's highly poetic and symbolic drama served as a political manifesto and diagnosis of the Polish nation which remains inactive and must wake up if the country is to become independent again. Wyspiański places Rachel outside of this community. She arrives at the wedding without an invitation. She briefly visits the festivities because while passing by the colorful, lively hut lured her with its vibrancy like "an ark in some enchanted dream"¹⁴⁹ For a short time, Rachel becomes a central figure at the wedding and she reshapes the world of the play, but she is not a part of it. To use biblical language, she exits in that world, but she is not of it. Rachel is an outsider and in order to become a part of the wider community, she would have to conform to its rules. Her separation is deeply connected with the fact that she is Jewish. Even though culturally she is much closer to the city guests than the peasants who are her neighbors, yet religiously she remains separate. Wyspiański's choice to set Rachel apart, perhaps, was a historically accurate depiction of the Jewish community of that time, but it also draws the lines of the national identity rooted in Catholicism. Rachel remained on the outside of that construct. In the recovery narrative centered around the messianic figure of Christ, Rachel's Jewishness as an expression of refusal to convert to Catholicism must be excluded. Her ability to connect with nature fades in comparison to Bride's *belonging* to the land which will bring a fruit of motherhood and motherland. In the nationalistic recovery narrative, Rachel as well as the nature she is associated with is rendered useless and thus must be excluded. In the hatching nationalism, there was no room for diverse expressions of spirituality, womanhood, or

¹⁴⁹ Stanisław Wyspiański, *The Wedding*, 37.

understanding of the non-human world. This centralization of expression and sense of authority over the world, both material and spiritual, has been growing since the early 1900s when Wyspiański wrote his drama. What felt necessary and important for the stateless nation, in the free country of today becomes a narrow and suffocating nationalistic narrative dictating who has a right to belong or who must be excluded from this imagined community.

The biblical Recover Narrative conflated with the project of nation-state places women in precarious suspension between the Fallen Eve and Eve, the Mother who regains her way back to Eden through marked by pain and suffering motherhood. The story of losing Eden of the independent country relapses in Polish history. After the country's transformation from the atheist communism to free -marketplace economy, the politicians started to restore the God-ordained order. Women were to leave the factories and stay home and focus on their families. Agnieszka Graff, Polish feminist scholar, notes that women's reproductive rights were exchanged for the Catholic Church's lack of opposition toward the country's entrance to the European Union.¹⁵⁰ Poland regained independence and continues its steady march toward prosperity and progress. The Fallen Eve is continuously tamed by increasingly restrictive limitations of women's rights and boundless extractions of natural resources. In the next chapter, I analyze how contemporary artists perpetuate and subvert the old narratives of identification of women's bodies with nature in their performances focused on the environmental crisis.

¹⁵⁰ Graff, *Swiat bez Kobiet*,. The decision of joining the EU was based on the referendum conducted in 2003. Catholic church has the power to shape people's opinion therefor the politicians had to gain clergy's support. As the bargaining card they offered reproductive rights. Abortion became illegal.

Chapter 4: Eco-grief in Contemporary Polish Theatre

In the previous two chapters, I analyzed the canonical Polish plays written and performed as an expression of the longing for an independent country during the times of partition by Prussia, Russia, and Austria (1795-1918). The idea of sovereign ownership of the land which evoked national meaning fueled theatre makers and organized the worlds of their plays in the hierarchical order where, personified as the female visage of Polonia as she reigns over any narratives and characters. As a result, the canon of Polish dramatic literature treats both women and nature as important metaphors and symbols for the stories of protagonists on their patriotic journey. In this chapter, I analyze two *contemporary* performances produced by one of the most prolific Polish theatres, works that several critics describe as examples of *ekoteatr* (eco-theatre). I examine these performances through the lens of Polish mythos regarding the national nature established during the Romantic period (1822- 1863)¹⁵¹ and perpetuated for over centuries. I also analyze the representation of women in those performances and how that reflects the tradition of using the female body as a metaphor or allegory for the land. In my analysis of *Jak Ocalić Świat (How to Save the World)* and *Martwa Natura (Still Nature)*, I focus on the central motif of both theatrical events: mourning and grief.¹⁵² Both performances were produced by Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw, a theatre identifying itself as “a theatre that gets in the way” which expresses the aspiration to facilitate, shape, and disrupt the most current public debate. In her work “Climate Change as the Work of

¹⁵¹ Polish Romanticism is dated from 1822, the first publication of Adam Mickiewicz’s poems, to 1863, the January uprising against the Russia’s rule.

¹⁵² I saw one of the performances, *Jak Ocalić świat (How to save the world)* in person.¹⁵² The second performance *Martwa Natura (Still Nature)* I view through Teatr Powszechny’s streaming service because the performance had a virtual premiere due to the pandemic of COVID-19.

Mourning”, Ashlee Cunsolo builds upon Judith Butler’s notion of “unequal allocation of grievability”.¹⁵³ Butler asserts that in the Western mindset certain ethnic, religious, sexual, and socio-economic minorities are assigned lesser values, their deaths are normalized and thus not worthy of grieving. Cunsolo includes in that group non-human beings. Cunsolo contends that in order to recognize the grievability of the non-human bodies and places that have or may perish or become extinct altogether as a result of climate change, we must engage in the process of mourning. In her article on the connection between environmental mourning and religious ritual, Nancy Menning asserts that “adequate mourning presupposes adequate connection and both are necessary to sustain environmental activism.”¹⁵⁴ In this chapter, I ask how the creators of the two performances construct the notion of environmental grief and how they portray the concept of kinship between the human and the non-human world. I experienced those performances as an audience member. In what follows, I lean on those experiences, I put them in conversation with the theoretical analysis of the described theatrical events.

Jak Ocalić Świat: Away from a National Nature, Toward a Global Catastrophe

Jak Ocalić Świat premiered in 2018 on the small stage of Teatr Powszechny in 2018¹⁵⁵. The theatre’s website describes the performance, “Osobiste historie ojców z Polsk, Ukrainy i Afryki są kanwa przedstawienia o nadciągającej katastrofie ekologicznej, głodzie i przyszłości planety.”¹⁵⁶ [“The personal stories of fathers from Poland, Ukraine, and Africa are the basis for a performance about the impending ecological catastrophe, hunger, and the future of the

¹⁵³ “Climate Change as the Work of Mourning”, Ashlee Cunsolo in *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*, Ashlee Cunsolo, Karen Landman, eds., (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), 170.

¹⁵⁴ Ashlee Cunsolo, *Mourning Nature*, 41.

¹⁵⁵ I saw the performance on September 10th, 2022.

¹⁵⁶ Teatr powszechny. <https://www.powszechny.com/spektakle/jak-ocalic-swiat-na-malej-scenie,s1533.html>, accessed May, 15, 2023.

planet."]) The drama was devised by Paweł Łysak, the director and Paweł Szarbowski who used the stories and narratives of the actors, Annaluczk, Artem Manuilov and Mamadou Góo Bâ, as well as Łysak's. These artists have used in their creative process their memories, journal entries, and their respective families' documents, like memoirs, academic papers or newspaper articles. In one of the interviews, Łysak, the director describes the privilege of being able to publicly share the stories about their fathers. He notes, however, that the intended message for the audience is centered around ecology. Those stories are meant to tell how the fathers, who wanted to do good and to have a meaningful contribution to the communities around them, became a part of the system which leads to the catastrophic end of the world.¹⁵⁷ This message of human causation was reverberated through the apocalyptic scenography by Janek Simon. The stage is covered with piles of plastic bags filled with trash. A messy desk covered with papers and books surrounding an old computer, an old couch haunts the stage. The blue ripped tarp serves as a backdrop and the projection screen.

The performance opens with a dance-like performance by a robust figure with a thick mustache playing with an Earth-shaped inflatable ball/balloon. He is a parody of Goethe's Faust, who toys with the planet to satisfy his drive for expansion and discovery. He sold his soul to the devil in order to break the limits of progress and pursue knowledge. But in *Jak Ocalić Świat* the devil is progress itself, conceptualized by the creators as the unquenchable desire to see instant improvements bringing the promise of a better life for the next generations tragically leads to the demise of its supposed beneficiaries—the protagonists of the performance, but

¹⁵⁷ Czytaj Rzeszów – Portal Informacji i Opinii, „Jak Ocalić Świat na Małej Scenie?” Interview with Paweł Łysak, Dec 1, 2019, 3:17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qH0shZ_XkmM.

also us, the audience members. This appetite for growth and development has been a driving force for many men in human history. The creators of the performance tell the stories of the three of them: the actual fathers of the performers.

After Faust disappears from the stage, the three men appear and introduce themselves. Artem Manuilov and Mamadou Góo Bâ, explain that they will tell the stories of their fathers. The third man, Andrzej Kłak also introduces himself but he notes that he portrays Paweł Łysak, the director of the play, telling the story of his father. Manuilov is from Donbas, Ukraine, his father was a coal miner. Góo Bâ is from Senegal, he shares about his father who was a ship mechanic traveling back and forth between his country and France with the transportation of peanuts. Łysak's father was an agriculture engineer who worked in Nigeria on modernization of the farming practices. Both Mamadou Góo Bâ, Senegalese actor and musician, and Ukrainian Artem Manuilov speak their native languages as well as Polish. The actors, at times, struggle to correctly pronounce the tongue-twisting Polish phrases. The multitude of languages, accents, and stories contribute to the diversity of the world of the play. Yet the stories told on stage, although vastly different, recall similar memories: of fathers modeling the ideals of masculinity for their sons. All three men recall the important moments of initiation when they were called upon to prove themselves as real men. For Łysak it was being brave while skiing on the steep slope; for Mauilov overcoming his physical limitations in his basement gym, and for Góo Bâ, undergoing the ritual of circumcision.

Although all protagonists recall looking at their fathers with awe, admiration, and fear, their stories reveal that masculine conditioning, including their fathers' pursuit of progress have contributed to the approaching catastrophe, the central theme of the performance.

Performance's dramaturg, Paweł Sztarbowski, explains the aspiration of the production:

Przekroczenie „piątej ściany teatru” i odnalezienie głosu z góry, głosu Ziemi, ale nie w sensie metafizycznych czy magicznych poszukiwań, ale po prostu przełamania antropocentrycznego spojrzenia, stało się kluczowym elementem, dzięki któremu z osobistej historii Jana Łysaka wyłoniła się idea spektaklu *Jak ocalić świat na małej scenie?*¹⁵⁸

[Breaking the "fifth wall of the theatre" and finding the voice from above, the voice of the Earth, but not in the sense of metaphysical or magical searches, but simply breaking the anthropocentric gaze, became a key element due to which the idea of the performance *Jak Ocalić Świat* emerged from the personal story of Jan Łysak.]¹⁵⁹

Sztarbowski and Łysak borrowed the idea of the fifth wall from Una Chaudhuri's essay "The Fifth Wall: Climate Change Dramaturgy." The creators of *Jak Ocalić Świat* were compelled by Chaudhuri's notion of "redrawing the boundaries and expanding the frame within which human meaning is created."¹⁶⁰ The writers of the play follow Chaudhuri's call to look up and beyond national borders and recognize the border all countries share: the border with the atmosphere.¹⁶¹ As a result, they shift their attention away from the notion of localized nature by emphasizing the interweaving of the stories of people and communities from distant parts of the world and their impact on the environment. The three fathers, although geographically far removed from each other, pursue similar ideas of resource extraction and significant intervention in the natural ecosystem. The Donbas miner participates in the excitement of the

¹⁵⁸ Paweł Sztarbowski, *Przeciw wielkim misjom cywilizacyjnym: o pracy nad spektaklem „Jak ocalić świat na małej scenie,”* *Didaskalia 162*, published: april 2021, [Przeciw wielkim misjom cywilizacyjnym | Didaskalia 162 | Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna.](#)

¹⁵⁹ My translation.

¹⁶⁰ Una Chaudhuri, "The Fifth Wall: Climate Change Dramaturgy", *HowlRounds Theatre Commons*, April 17, 2016, [The Fifth Wall | HowlRound Theatre Commons](#)

¹⁶¹ Una Chaudhuri, "The Fifth Wall."

Promethean breakthrough of lifting its region from poverty by extracting large coal deposits. The Senegalese ship mechanic ensures the success of the large-scale transports of peanuts harvested from artificially created crops. An agricultural engineer from Poland argues for harvesting green grains and breaking the cycle of wheat maturity by gathering unripe produce. The three stories told from the perspectives of the sons who looked at the fathers with equal measures of fear and admiration highlight the tragic condition of the past generations who attempted to work toward a better future for their descendants and yet their efforts result in their participation of the greater patriarchal system directly connected to the impending catastrophe.

Especially striking is the scene in which Mamadou Goo Ba tells the story of the ship his father worked on. The actor reveals that the same ship in the past served to transport enslaved people. His verbal narration becomes a physical performance. His body of a storyteller becomes the body of the captured human restricted with invisible chains. The audience witnesses the striking connection between humans and resources commodified and exploited in the name of the progress of a dominating country.

The Female Body as a Site of Catastrophe

In *Jak Ocalić Świat*, there is only one actress Anna Ilczuk who portrays several roles. In an interview, Ilczuk recalls meeting with Paweł Łysak, the director, and Paweł Sztarbowski, the co-writer of the text, who pitched the idea of the performance to her. After describing their concept of telling the stories of three fathers whose actions contribute to the catastrophic ending of the world, they said, "...and you will save that world because it will be women who will save the world." Ilczuk quoted her response which included four repetitions of a word *nie*

(no), ended with “why would I”? She countered the proposition with her own idea of becoming the catastrophe.¹⁶² Ilczuk resists being cast as the savior of the world, which for centuries remained under the dominion of men chasing the vision of progress. Instead, she argues for embodying the destructive forces leading to the apocalypse. In one of the last scenes, she portrays the desire for more knowledge and greater advancement by dancing with the character of Faust. Her seductive gesture transmutes into one of undressing him and putting on a pajama to say that his time has ended, and he will finish his life like many other mortals, sick and incapable of pursuing his grandiose dreams. In another scene, he drags onto the stage yet another bag of trash. In another incarnation, she resembles Harper from *Angels in America* and voices her concern about the destruction of the world seemingly invisible to the men caught up with their own stories. In a different role, she becomes a lecturer (or as some reviewers interpret it, a tv host)¹⁶³ who leads an interactive lesson about the fate of a certain cell. She encourages us to imagine ourselves as scientists observing a cell that consumes all of its resources and rapidly reproduces itself without realizing that in minutes it will perish due to the lack of additional reserves. The lesson is clear: we are not the scientists in this example, we are the cell. In yet another scene, she marches through the stage pregnant. The collision of the apocalyptic landscape and the presence of the pregnant body materialize the future of trying to sustain life in the destroyed, hostile environment. At the end of the performance, the actress delivers a moving monologue as herself. She starts

¹⁶² Czytaj Rzeszów – Portal Informacji i Opinii, „Jak Ocalić Świat na Małej Scenie?” Interview with Anna Ilczuk, Dec 1, 2019, 3:17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qH0shZ_XkmM.

¹⁶³ Dominik Gac, „Apokalipsa? No i nic, no i cześć!” Teatralny.pl. November 2019, <https://teatralny.pl/recenzje/apokalipsa-no-i-nic-no-i-czesc,2597.html>.

Nie wiem czego sie bardziej bać...wojny, katastrofy klimatycznej, czy pandemii...

[I don't know what to fear more... the war, the climate catastrophe, or the pandemic...]¹⁶⁴

This voice of confusion resonated strongly with me and presumably with other audience members. It sums up the layering of potentially apocalyptic events and the final equation feels unbearable. Ilczuk tells us that she ought an air purifier so her daughter could breathe fresh air and while setting up the appliance, she considered its mass carbon footprint. The irony of the action of securing healthy air for her child turns her into a consumer of goods whose production has dangerous environmental implications, including air pollution. The story repeats itself. As she rejects the role of female savior, refusing to play the assigned idealized role of Polonia, Anna Ilczuk's story becomes another chapter of the tales of three fathers. We do not know what the end of the world will look like, but it may feel very much like an overwhelming multiplication of trauma of war, environmental catastrophe, and health crisis. The tipping point may result in numbness, yet Ilczuk gives into the emotions of that experience and allows her tears to flow freely. She takes long pauses to compose herself and keeps going. As an audience member, I was no longer solely bearing witness to her struggle: rather, I shared her feelings. This scene could potentially become a collective cry that, rather than giving into numbness, was the most meaningful experience offered by this performance. Not a big call to activism, not another litany of facts and names of the vanishing species, but the collective acknowledgment of the fragility and vulnerability of our current condition in which we are daily hit with waves of bad news. Through Ilczuk's performance, the theatre could become a place of respite for the

¹⁶⁴ My translation.

audience who must carry on with their lives while the world seemingly is falling apart. This experience was especially meaningful because the performance included Ukrainian subtitles projected on the screen for those who, in a way, already live in the postapocalyptic world where what they knew was destroyed by the Russian bombs falling on their homes in Ukraine since February 2022.¹⁶⁵

Ilczuk's closing monologue created a powerfully meaningful moment. Yet it was not its environmental impact that resonated with me. In a way, her speech proves that the most powerful force we all experience is fear. The anthropocentric fear of the fact that our future looks grim and tragic is certainly a valid point of consideration, and in *Jak Ocalic Świat* the audience has a chance to collectively experience its intensity. In that sense the performance is a powerful interrogation of fear of ecological catastrophe, but it does not open up the possibility of engaging in the environmental mourning work. It is the quality of human life that is grievable and its loss evokes paralyzing fear. Neither does the performance fully recognize the agency of nature, nor highlight the void of our -- the audience's -- kinship with the non-human world necessary to usher in the work of mourning of what has been lost in the world. Perhaps attention given to the lack of kinship, which then make grieving impossible, would have allowed the audience to recognize that without mourning all we have is erratic, overwhelming fear so well performed by Ilczuk.

Although Ilczuk's performance added meaningful commentary to the stories of the protagonists, she serves as an additional voice emphasizing the parts of the stories told by the

¹⁶⁵ On February 24, 2022 Russia launched a full scale invasion on Ukraine.

men. She is not a multidimensional character herself. Grzegorz Kondrasiuk, theatre critic and scholar notes,

To zapewne nieodłączna przypadłość ekoteatru – nie może się uwolnić od synekdochy: aktorowi-mężczyźnie, choćby znanemu z imienia i nazwiska, przyznaje się brzemień znaku całej ludzkości, tej, która zniszczyła swoją planetę, albo patriarchalnego systemu obwinianego za to zniszczenie. Aktorka-kobieta może oznaczać ofiarę albo nadzieję. Natomiast warstwa dyskursywna została ograniczona do podania gotowej diagnozy sytuacji (nadciąga katastrofa) i zaprezentowania afektywnej reakcji.¹⁶⁶

[This is probably an inseparable ailment of the ecotheater – it cannot free itself from synecdoche: the male actor, even if known by name, is given the burden of the sign of all humanity, the one who destroyed the planet, or the patriarchal system blamed for this destruction. A female actress can mean sacrifice or hope. On the other hand, the discursive layer was limited to providing a ready-made diagnosis of the situation (a catastrophe is approaching) and presenting an affective reaction.]¹⁶⁷

Kondrasiuk's assessment of male characters serving as synecdoche in *Jak Ocalić Świat* ignores the fact that the two actors and the director were able to share their complex stories and, although they wove them into a larger narrative, the audience got to know those three men. However, Kondrasiuk's observation regarding the female character is accurate and poignant. Ilczuk's many roles serve to provide a commentary and pass the knowledge while her male counterparts have the opportunity to share deeply about their memories and relationship with their fathers. The multitude of Ilczuk's roles serve as the affective aspect of the climate catastrophe, while the men perform their individual identities. *Jak Ocalić Świat* perpetuates the centuries long tradition of using female body to convey grand narratives, while male

¹⁶⁶ Grzegorz Kondrasiuk, „Ekoteatr po naturze”, *Teatr* 5/2022 [Ekoteatr po naturze - Miesięcznik Teatr \(teatr-pismo.pl\)](https://www.teatr-pismo.pl)

¹⁶⁷ My translation.

protagonists weave their stories and express their individual journeys. Ilczuk's character(s) could be read as Polonia, yet this time it is not the foreign aggressors, but rather the creators and participants of the patriarchal system who exploit her lands in the name of uncontrollable progress and greed. Ilczuk's creation has also potential to evoke religious imaginary. A pregnant woman vulnerably wondering through the post-apocalyptic landscape could echo the journey of Mary, Mother of Jesus, a central persona of Polish Catholicism. For the Biblical Madonna there was no place in the Bethlehem's inns where she could safely deliver her child, the messiah; for sorrowful Madonna from the performance there might not be a safe and livable place to give birth to her child on the entire earth. In *Jak Ocalić Świat*, there is no savior, no hope, no divine intervention. Betrayed Polonia and grieving Madonna enter the stage not to inspire the fight and faith in resurrection, but to bear witness to and usher the final explosion of grief. The creators of the performance divorce their work from the concept of national nature and the use of the female body as a metaphor for Poland, yet even in their transnational vision of the world as a system of the interconnected web of stories, the woman remains anonymous. Her body and voice serve the larger narrative rather than allowing the space on stage to tell her personal story. Alternatively, she becomes an embodiment of a collective savior, a nameless female character who will clean up the mess created over centuries which suggests the relegation of the responsibility on women.

In the new edition of her book *Świat Bez Kobiet*, Polish feminist scholar Agnieszka Graff asserts that in the nationalistic narrative the role of a man becomes a metonym while women obtain a metaphorical, symbolic role.¹⁶⁸ According to Graff, the Polish nationalistic identity is

¹⁶⁸ Agnieszka Graff, *Świat bez Kobiet: Płeć w Polskim Życiu Publicznym*, (Warszawa: Marginesy, 2021), 257.

centered around the male-dominated worldview in which women (and their bodies) become the carrier of symbolic meanings. Graff asserts that "symbolic function relates to two layers: the role of women as carriers of the national identity (through traditional outfits, dedications to keeping the traditions, etc...), and through the fact that the nation is represented in the form of a woman."¹⁶⁹ In the context of a performance or a theatrical event, this public discourse of a plural male subject that becomes an "every-man" (an "every-Polish-citizen") creates a distance between the audience and the female characters, which become the elements to be interpreted. The audience does not explore and witness the fate of the female characters but rather seeks to identify their meaning and the related implications for the protagonist (always male and multi-dimensional) on *his* journey.

Aestheticizing the End of the World

At the end of the performance, the stage is bathed in smoke, rusty-colored lights look like fire, the temperature of the room increases, and the actors join in a dramatic chant. The audience is made to not only hear about climate change but also feel its effect. The authors of the performance seem to employ the Artaudian technique of subjecting the audience to the intensity of the theatrical experience rather than allowing them to remain passive spectators. The direct address to the audience through the speech of the actors are meant to demonstrate the collective nature of the issue at hand. The pursuit of the Chaudhuri's concept of fifth wall leads the actors to breaking the fourth wall dividing the audience and the actors. We are all in it together. As audience members we share the increasingly warmer space of the theatre with the actors which exemplifies the condition of all of humanity and the planet we live on.

¹⁶⁹ Agnieszka Graff, *Świat bez Kobiet*, 257.

In his review, Dominik Gac expresses his concern that the theatre makers aestheticize the catastrophe. The critic writes

Jeśli się spoćę, to zrozumieć grozę położenia? A może przejmująca pieśń wywoła metafizyczne drżenie? Prędkiej się spodoba. Jesteśmy o krok od adoracji końca, aż chce się zawołać: niech płonie świat!¹⁷⁰

[If I get sweaty, will I understand the horror of the situation? Will the poignant song evoke a metaphysical tremor? It is more likely that we will like it. We are one step away from adoring the end, we may want to cry out: let the world burn!]¹⁷¹

According to Gac, the performance is not only ineffective in its call to action but also creates a risk of turning the simulation of the prospective cataclysm into an aesthetically pleasing event. Aestheticizing the human-made devastation of the Earth is one of the major pitfalls of dystopian-type narratives that strive to represent or theatricalize the so-called apocalypse. The character of Góo Bâ declares "The whole nature is a great gift and nature knows what is most needed by people. This harmony was fractured." *Jak Ocalić Świat* effectively guides the audience through the release of the collective experience of fear and disorientation connected with the layers of apocalyptic catastrophes. It fails, however, to facilitate a meaningful experience of loss of the non-human world or even the consideration of our lack of connection to the environment, and further reinscribes Polonia, but this time as a betrayed and sorrowing Madonna. The dichotomy between intellectual knowledge about rapid disappearance of various species and the fact that this massive loss does not affect us directly could have been a meaningful aspect of the performance. For the audience of *Jak Ocalić Świat*, there is no way

¹⁷⁰ Dominik Gac, „Apokalipsa? No i nic, no i cześć!” Teatralny.pl. November 2019, <https://teatralny.pl/recenzje/apokalipsa-no-i-nic-no-i-czesc,2597.html>.

¹⁷¹ My translation.

forward. All we have is the beautiful and excruciating end of the world where, like Ilczuk, we do not even though what we should fear the most.

Two years after the premier of *Jak Ocalić Świat*, the same stage hosted another performance focused on the environmental crisis. *Martwa Natura* premiered in November of 2020. The world was experiencing a historic lock down due to the pandemic Covid-19. Death, fear, grief, and sense of irrevocable catastrophe was much more perceptive. In what follows, I analyze how theatre artists centered the motif of grief and mourning in their work presented to the audience for whom the impending crisis became very palpable.

Martwa Natura (Still Nature)

Martwa Natura also premiered in Teatr Powszechny in November 2020. The title of the performance, *Martwa Natura*, translates as “still nature”, a term used in art to describe the inanimate subject matter. Yet in Polish, the term includes world *martwa* which translates as dead. The authors of the script, Agnieszka Jakimiak and Matuesz Atman, build on the literal meaning of this common phrase and portray the dead nature. The performance was directed by Jakimiak. Its creators describe it is as “a collection of elegies” that make an “awareness of lack and absence” palpable. In the description of the performance, the artists suggest:

Być może świat, który znamy, zaczyna odchodzić w niepamięć, ale stworzenie nowego porządku – społecznego, instytucjonalnego, artystycznego – będzie trudne do przeprowadzenia, jeśli nie będziemy wiedzieć, z kim i z czym musimy się pożegnać.¹⁷²

¹⁷² Teatr Powszechny Website: <https://www.powszechny.com/spektakle/martwa-natura,s1737.html>

[Perhaps the world as we know it begins to fade into oblivion, and creation of the new order- social, institutional, artistic- will be difficult to accomplish if we do not know to whom and what must we say goodbye.]¹⁷³

The artists also hope that through their performance, the audience will open themselves up to a world where our old habits are replaced with “a lack of habits and openness to change.” The major aspiration of the creators is to dismantle the division between “art and society, art and non-art, and art and nature.”¹⁷⁴ The artists involved in creation of the performances want to imagine a more just and fairer world where the non-human world is not subservient toward the human one. Congruent with the Cunsolo’s proposition of searching for “new environmental thought and action premised on the work and labours of mourning.”¹⁷⁵ , according to the artists, those aspirations are to be ushered through the collective participation in the ceremony of a funeral wake for some of the species already lost to climate change.

Scenography of the Apocalypse

The creators of *Martwa Natura* attempt to create a theatrical event that centers on the non-human world and makes the audience realize the scope of loss we are all already experiencing. The set, as well as the text of the performance, was inspired by the artistic/direct action of Joseph Beuys, a German artist who in 1982 started planting seven thousand trees in the town named Kessel. Yet, the performance fails to depart from “the anthropocentric grammar of the “normal.”¹⁷⁶ Like *Jak Ocalić Świat*, in *Martwa Natura* apocalyptic scenography evokes a visage of death: the stage and audience areas are full of burnt trees, and the audience

¹⁷³ My translation.

¹⁷⁴ Teatr Powszechny Website: <https://www.powszechny.com/spektakle/martwa-natura,s1737.html>.

¹⁷⁵ Ashlee Cunsolo, *Mourning Nature*, 6.

¹⁷⁶ Una Chaudhuri, *Animals and Performance in The Stage Lives of Animals: Zoosis and Performance*, 1.

sits among them; here are bodies of animals preserved as taxidermy dispersed all over the stage. The air is filled with the smell of burnt wood. Nature that once was vibrant and alive, is imagined and materialized as still-in-death. The set begs the question formulated by Steve Baker in his book *Picturing the Best: Animals, Identity, and Representation*—where are real animals, animals themselves, living animal in this kind of representation of the non-human world.¹⁷⁷ It is necessary to consider the intentionality behind in the post-conflagration landscape the taxidermy animals like a deer head with large antlers, a common hunting trophy or a body of a fox arranged in a human-like pose sitting at the table smoking a pipe. Like Baker, I find it crucial to “consider what such representation might reveal about attitudes both to animals and to other humans: in other words to inquire into the consequences of their apparent inconsequentiality.”¹⁷⁸ For me, the presence of the dead bodies on stage, created a cognitive dissonance and I struggled to find the meaning of the creators’ use of them since the animals never became the key actors of the performance.

The character of Beuys declares while describing one of his most popular actions of planting seven thousand trees in 1982 that, “to nie był symbol ani metafora” [It was not a symbol or a metaphor]. Beuys’ declaration speaks to his evolution as an artist aiming to engage with environmental themes. Certainly, the planting of trees had material implications and constituted a response to deforestation of Polish forests and the loss of green spaces to urbanization. Beuys as one of the characters of *Martwa Natura* also emphasizes the intention of the creators: the environmental catastrophe has already begun, the burnt trees are not a

¹⁷⁷ Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity, and Representation*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 10.

¹⁷⁸ Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast*, 3.

metaphor, you (the audience member) can touch and smell them here in theatre. Mateusz Atman, the set designer as well as a co-author of the play, expressed that he wanted the audience to smell and feel the freshly burnt trees since they are so familiar with them from the many tv news reports.¹⁷⁹ The connection between the theatrical event and Beuys direct action was clear. The taxidermy bodies of animals, however, seems inspired by another event created by the German artist.

Nearly two decades prior to the tree planting action Beuys organized a happening titled *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*. On November 26, 1965, at the private art gallery in Dusseldorf, Beuys appeared with his face covered with honey and a gold leaf. He carried in his arms a dead hare and stretched its paw toward various paintings.¹⁸⁰ The happening¹⁸¹ illustrates Beuys' concept of art in which he envisions himself as a shaman constructing and navigating through the reality composed of symbols and signs. He explains that the presence of the hare was vital to emphasize the problem of language, and human and animal consciousness.¹⁸² Beuys notes,

the hare incarnates himself into the earth, which is what we humans can only achieve with our thinking: he rubs, pushes, digs himself into materia (earth); finally penetrates (rabbit) its laws, and through this work, his thinking is sharpened, then transformed, and become revolutionary.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹Atman, https://www.powszechny.com/aktualnosci/tworcy-o-spektaklu-martwa-natura.html?ref_page=controller,index,action,szukaj,szukaj,martwa%20natura

¹⁸⁰ Gunter Berghaus "Happenings in Europe: Trends, Events, and Leading Figures", in *Happening and Other Acts*, Mariellen R. Sandford, ed., (London ;: Routledge, 1995), 330.

¹⁸¹ Term happening was first used by Alan Kaprow. In his book *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life: Expanded Edition*, Kaprow describes happening as artistic events which form is fluid and open-ended, typically take place only once, and are staged in a unique, non-theatrical space.

Kaprow, Allan, and Jeff Kelley, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 16-17.

¹⁸² Gunter Berghaus, "Happenings in Europe: Trends, Events, and Leading Figures", 330.

¹⁸³ Gunter Berghaus, "Happenings in Europe: Trends, Events, and Leading Figures", 330.

In his performance, Beuys normalized the use of the hare's body. The animal's death is not shocking. It is obvious that living hare would never choose to find himself in a scary and foreign for him environment like an art gallery full of people. The wild animal would flee from the embrace of any human. The dead hare served as an instrument of Beuys happening like a trumpet or a brush or any other *object* of an artistic expression. The puzzling choice of taxidermy included as a set of *Martwa Natura* exemplifies "unequal allocation of grievability." In this light, animals are worth grieving when they become extinct or at least are included in the lists of endangered species. When they are a part of a common species, often seen in a local forest or in a house of a hunter exhibited as a trophy, they are not worth being included in an elegy. The funeral ritual performed by the actors excluded the fox and the deer whose bodies were present in the space. This dichotomy reassures my conviction that theatre's limitations in meaningful engagement in the conversation of "saving the world" or "preserving nature" is arrested due to the lack of a deeper ¹⁸⁴spiritual context of possible connections with the non-human world. This dichotomy also holds the answers to Baker's question regarding the "consequences of the apparent inconsequentiality." The representation of animals in *Martwa Natura* reveals to me the human inability to truly grieve the loss of the non-human life because the animal death is normalized and ubiquitous. That realization became much more powerful and arresting to me than the knowledge of the increasingly growing list of the disappearing species presented by the actors. The fox with the pipe silently spoke to me about our collective "impoverishment of the imagination and the loss of a meaningful symbolic relation to the

¹⁸⁴ Nancy Menning, "Environmental Mourning and the Religious Imagination," 39.

animal”¹⁸⁵ and thus annulled the creators’ attempt to stage the grieving ceremony of *any* animals. The consequences of their inconsequentiality evoked my own eco grief, the grief over lack of connection to the non-human world.

Ceremonies of Eco-grief on Stage

In her article “Environmental Mourning and the Religious Imagination,” Nancy Menning describes the importance of ritual and practices to mourn people, places, things, and ideas that we have lost. She recognizes lack of appropriate rituals to mourn the ecological losses. Menning asserts that, “by drawing careful analogies from human deaths to ecological losses, we can employ the religious imagination to guide our creation and implementation of effective mourning practices.”¹⁸⁶ This proposition inspired me to analyze my personal experience with the ritual of mourning during the traditional Polish funeral and compare it to the aspirations of the creators of *Martwa Natura* who aimed to recreate the elements of that ritual on stage.

In the southern parts of Poland (where I grew up), especially in its remote areas, the ceremony of the wake remains an important practice after the death of a loved one. On the day of the funeral, the grieving family gathers around the open coffin containing the body of their loved one. For the last time, the relative who passed on is present in their family home. I remember the wake of my grandfather. As an eight-year-old girl, I awaited the “encounter” with him/his body with anticipation and fear. When my Mother finally asked if I wanted to say goodbye to my Dziadzius (Grandpa) I agreed reluctantly. Looking at his calm face, his lifeless body set in a fixed position filled me with emotions I could not possibly conceptualize at that

¹⁸⁵ Steve Baker, *Picturing the Best*, 14.

¹⁸⁶ Nancy Menning, “Environmental Mourning and the Religious Imagination,” 44.

age. The dichotomy of him being so familiar, yet so strange in this "new" condition; his material presence testified to his absence. I recall staring at his shut eyes with the hope that he would once again open them and work through the vision loss to distinguish which one of his children wants to ask him a question. The spiral of conflicting emotions overwhelmed me but witnessing the material reality of the forever shut eyes, the closing of the coffin, lowering the wooden box into the ground, and seeing it disappear under the dirt precipitated an experience of catharsis. We returned home to feast, which for me and other children meant special playtime with all the cousins from distant parts of Poland. Our grief shifted to another form of celebration and "caring for him" by bringing fresh flowers to his gravesite daily for years to come.

It was the deep connection to my grandfather that made the ceremony of wake and his funeral one of the most memorable events of my childhood. I knew that his death had deep implications for my life. He carried out roles that were uniquely his. I understood that we would have to go without all the sweet moments only he created. In the opening paragraph of her book, *The Anatomy of Grief*, Dorothy P. Holinger reflects, "Grief is inextricably bound to love. It looms as large as the loved one we lost, and it is the price we pay for love."¹⁸⁷¹⁸⁸ Freud describes the notion of the "work of mourning" which aims at breaking the attachment with the late loved one in order to overcome the impact of their passing.¹⁸⁹ The condition of truthful, intense grief is the depth of the relationship with the lost loved one. My grandfather's life and mine were deeply intertwined on many levels and that connection informed my grief and the experience of realizing the magnitude of loss.

¹⁸⁷ Dorothy P. Holinger, *The Anatomy of Grief*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), xix.

¹⁸⁸ The phrase became well known after the Queen of England used it in her address of condolence after the 9/11.

¹⁸⁹ Jessica Marion Barr "Auguries of Elegy: the Art and Ethics of Ecological Grieving, in *Mourning Nature*, 192.

As an audience member of *Martwa Natura*, I could not shake the feeling that I was participating in the funeral ritual for strangers I never knew and whose existence was entirely divorced from mine. The actors attempt to first introduce their audience to the endangered or vanished species, their elegies, however, served functioned more like an awareness-raising campaign rather than a meaningful ritual of grief and remembrance. One speech included the description of a specific kind of stingray that disappeared from the Baltic Sea due to its pollution and temperature rise. The facts about suffocating in its own home became a hostile environment were indeed moving to me as an audience member. Yet, because the stingray is a being divorced from my daily life (in contrast to my grandfather) and presumably the lives of most of the audience members, I could not find any connection beyond intellectual concern about the facts that were presented to me. I could not pull a story, an image, or a memory that would allow me to experience real grief. In his essay, "Mourning Ourselves and/as Our Relatives: Environment as Kinship," Sebastian F. Braun suggests that mourning for environmental losses is not an emotional response stemming from the morality "we no longer hold on to."¹⁹⁰ It is rather, Braun asserts, "an expression of culturally defined kinship obligation."¹⁹¹ The idea of kinship between humans and the non-human world in the Western worldview is often perceived as a purely metaphoric concept.¹⁹² The creators of *Martwa Natura* attempted to stage the ceremony of mourning the ecological loss, yet they failed to consider the lack of kinship, or relationality, between those who participated in the ritual and

¹⁹⁰ Sebastian F. Braun, "Mourning Ourselves and/as Our Relatives: Environment as Kinship," in *Mourning Nature*, 71.

¹⁹¹ Sebastian F. Braun, "Mourning Ourselves," 71.

¹⁹² Sebastian F. Braun, "Mourning Ourselves," 66.

the non-human world which were the subject of mourning. The lack of congruity became apparent in the treatment of the animals. On one hand the content of the performance was woven with many elegies to the loss or nearly extinct species, on the other hand, however, the stage was filled with the taxidermized bodies of the familiar and common in Poland animals.

In her review, Magdalena Figzał-Janikowska claims that in the performance “nature (even if dead) regains its voice.”¹⁹³ According to the reviewer, “the dead foxes, deer, and pheasants participate in a ritual of mourning performed by five actors...”¹⁹⁴ She also notes that the elements of the set and the symbolic props like parts of animal bodies and their fur become “visual emblems of the catastrophe.” She declares that nature’s voice can be heard in the stories told by actors as they nostalgically recall the lost connection with nature they once had in their childhood. Unlike Figzał-Janikowska, I do not read the display of taxidermy as the expression of the non-human world's agency! The use of the actual bodies of animals as parts of the set established a clear hierarchy of the system presented in the world of the play. It is not nature that regains voice, but, similarly to the previous performance, it is the sound of terrified humanity that realizes that life as we know it is nearing its conclusion, and that fact will require us to change in ways we have not imagined.¹⁹⁵ The bodies of the dead animals, like trees, serve

¹⁹³ Magdalena Figzał-Janikowska, „Rytuał Żałobny”, *Teatralny.pl*, February, 2021, https://teatralny.pl/recenzje/rytual-zalobny,3228.html?fbclid=IwAR0tbFymtrdRLjygyDY6bGfhNRPbx4IhqZ1Ct2EotcQWO_XHGcxybBMFecc

¹⁹⁴ Rytuał żałobny

Martwa natura, reż. Agnieszka Jakimiak, Teatr Powszechny im. Zygmunta Hübnera w Warszawie *Teatralny.pl* 19.02.2021 https://teatralny.pl/recenzje/rytual-zalobny,3228.html?fbclid=IwAR0tbFymtrdRLjygyDY6bGfhNRPbx4IhqZ1Ct2EotcQWO_XHGcxybBMFecc

¹⁹⁵ Przede wszystkim natura (choć martwa) zyskuje tu głos. Z jednej strony komunikuje się ona z odbiorcami za pomocą elementów scenografii, symbolicznych rekwizytów, wizualnych emblematów katastrofy. Z drugiej strony dramat przyrody wyrażany jest poprzez choreograficzne gesty aktorów, ich muzyczne elegie oraz osobiste opowieści/wspomnienia z dzieciństwa, przywołujące i gloryfikujące utraconą relację z naturą.

as a background and as such reinscribed what Val Plumwood names as backgrounding described by me in the first chapter.

Story and Relationships in Crisis

In light of my overarching project concerning the tradition of representation of women and land in Polish theatre, the analysis of contemporary performances explored in this chapter reveal how powerful are deeply embedded are old narratives instilled in Polish zeitgeist by Mickiewicz and Wyspiański. These contemporary Polish eco-performances have, to borrow from Theresa J. May, demonstrated that the environmental and climate crisis is a “crisis of relationship and a crisis of story.”¹⁹⁶ What is our story? Whose story it is? What do the stories we tell on stage teach us about the world around us?, May asks. It is vital that Polish artists continue to ask those questions while both reaching for old, canonical plays, or creating new performances.

In *Jak Ocalić Świat* one woman is cast in the multitude of roles which serve as expression of male characters’ fears; only for a short moment an actress receives a platform to share her own, lived experience. In *Martwa Natura* women are absent all together. Although the cast included two women (Karolina Adamczak and Aleksandra Bożek) they were dressed in suits and ties, as were their male counterparts. Presumably the intention behind that choice was to blend all the actors together as one, non-gendered “humanity,” emphasizing the collective nature of the ritual as well as the experience of ecological loss. Val Plumwood names such treatment of women as radical exclusion and incorporation, echoing de Beauvoir, Plumwood reminds that in the dualistically constructed world, “humanity is male and man defines woman

¹⁹⁶ Theresa J. May, *The Earth Matters on Stage*, 267.

not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being(...)"¹⁹⁷ In the contemporary theatre artists continue to struggle to create a meaningful space of equality where women could weave their narratives and be included in the collective understanding of humanity, rather than as solely a feminist discourse. The story the Polish theatre voices remains incomplete and reductive. Our, Polish story is a story in crisis, and it will require much more than bold theatrical, formal solutions.

The failed attempts to mourn shrinking nature testify to the crisis of relationship with the non-human world. Perhaps the creators of the described performances as well as audience members feel that the endless stream of news of the unfolding catastrophes and ongoing equation of death and loss should result in our collective ability to grieve. But it does not. The missing central element of kinship with the disappearing animals and places arrests the process of mourning in its infancy. We are not able to move on and the layering of bad news creates fear and depression¹⁹⁸ which escalate to grief over what *we* may lose rather than over *what and who* is being lost. The centuries of framing nature as uniquely Polish and recognizing the land as worth-defending because it contains national identity generated a crisis of recognizing relationship with land and nature beyond nationalistic narrative of ownership.

Hope of Transformation of the Forefathers' Story

In the second chapter I described how Adam Mickiewicz desired to create a uniquely Slavic drama which includes the coexistence on stage humans with the supernatural characters, ghosts and spirits. Obviously, Mickiewicz opus magnum is centered around the ritual of the

¹⁹⁷ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 52.

¹⁹⁸ In his description of the creative process, Atman explains that he suffers from the "climate depression" and his work on *Martwa Natura* was therapeutic.

forefather's eve. Both contemporary plays described here continue this tradition. In *Jak Ocalić Świat* the three men weave stories of their fathers whose presence is marked through the spoken word, the power of memory, but also through the bodies of actors who temporarily embody the fathers. The stage becomes its own Forefathers ritual. In *Martwa Natura* the funeral ceremony is visited by the late Beuys coming from the past. The visitor from the future, a bryophyte, brings the message from the post-human reality when beings like him populate the earth. The stage becomes a site of coexistence of humans and spiritual beings who exchange knowledge. The contemporary theatre artists continue the tradition of Mickiewicz and Wyspiański in their dedication toward the supernatural elements included in the world of their plays.

It is worth noting that the contemporary artists not only continue the old traditions but they also attempt to transform *how* theatre is currently created. The history of Polish theatre is often presented through the litany of the names of the greatest Polish playwrights and directors often referred as "fathers of Polish theatre." This list includes truly brilliant artists whose legacy informs many generations of theatre makers in Poland. That list however also makes invisible labor and creative input of dozens of artists. The creators of both analyzed here performances attempted to engage in a collective creative process. *Jak Ocalić Świat* was created as a devised piece by several actors, *Martwa Natura* was written by a creative duo. I recognize this trend to break the tendency of a theatrical events labeled by the name of one author as a promise of a transformation of the way stories are being told in Polish theatre. Perhaps the focus of collective, relationship-oriented theatre making will open possibilities of recovering from the crisis of story in which Polish theatre remains captive.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggest that well-established metaphors are not solely a matter of intellect, but rather they govern our everyday life. Those deeply embedded metaphors “play a central role in defining our everyday realities.”¹⁹⁹ The most ubiquitous metaphors shaped by the canonical Polish plays discussed in this study are visible in Poland today. For example, as I have discussed in the preceding chapters, the idea of sacred motherhood encapsulated in the visage of Polonia and Matka Polka (Polish Mother) can be observed in Poland today. The draconian anti-abortion law already claimed several lives of women who required premature termination of pregnancy, yet their doctors followed the law and refused to perform necessary procedures. Some women who experienced miscarriages were interrogated and were treated like criminals. All while women who seek reproductive assistance (like invitro or surrogacy) are stigmatized because of the “unnaturalness” of their condition. The notion of sacred motherhood governed by the state places Polish women in a precarious position. Similarly, aspects of Poland’s natural environment such as rivers and forests – long seen as signifiers of Polish national identity – are now treated under governmental policy as mere resources of the state to be utilized.

Throughout this study I have analyzed how two canonical Polish playwrights depicted and constructed conflated images of idealized womanhood and land. Furthermore, I interrogated how those deeply rooted mythoi continue to inform the ways in which Polish contemporary artists think about nature and women. I have argued that Polish theatre

¹⁹⁹ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

struggles to move beyond the old narratives and find a new language to address the challenges of today. In this concluding chapter I will bring the mythos of Polonia into the current political and climate crisis moment in an analysis of Cecylia Malik's work, showing how the feminine visage might be efficaciously deployed as environmental activism. I also posit an uncertain future for Polish ecodrama in light of current, more pressing, global conflicts. I do this in part as a Polish national for whom contemporary fears and threats to both the environment and women's rights are palpable. Lastly, I finish this study with an open question and an invitation to Polish artists and scholars to imagine new stories and new ways of telling them.

When Mickiewicz and Wyspiański wrote the plays that have been the subject of my analysis, Poland's national stature was measured by its people's willingness to fight for its independence, today GDP dictates the nation's worth and position in the international arena. By critiquing the idealized constructs like National Nature or Matka Polka (Polish Mother), I do not propose that artists should avoid using the female body or elements of nature in ways different than literal. Following Una Chaudhuri's voice, I caution, however, that metaphorical overuse of visages of women or nature creates a void of possibility to tell the stories of actual women and their difficult situations which often occur in historical turmoil like war or foreign invasion. Deploying female bodies and nature as metaphors also creates an illusion that they hold a special position in society, yet the political and social actions of far-right Poland demonstrates otherwise. Those concepts built as a reaction to foreign aggression, in time of peace, prove to be empty and even harmful.

The most striking example of silence created by the metaphorical as well as idealized notions of womanhood and motherhood is the representation of foreign invasion as an act of

rape. The long tradition of portraying Poland as a captured and violated woman combined with the trope of motherhood which obliges women to silently support the fighting men had tragic consequences for thousands of Polish women. Sexual violence experienced by Polish women has only recently become the focal point of scholarly studies. In 2020 Agnieszka Cubała published her work *Kobiety '44* where she dedicates the whole chapter titled "Porwane Sukienki" ("Ripped Dresses") to personal stories of women who described the horrors of the post-uprising reality.²⁰⁰ She emphasizes that rape, often brutal and sadistic, was quite common during and after World War II. Cubała argues that this collective trauma has been often omitted from scholarly study because "... a ripped dress is not a subject on which you can build a legend. There is no pathos, heroism, or grandeur. No one will build a monument for a raped girl. She cannot become someone to boast about. Her death is not pretty."²⁰¹ Yet, Cubała collected many stories and her data reveals that the overwhelming majority of women in Poland, girls (as young as three years old) as well as elderly women suffered unimaginable trauma and those who survived dealt with immense shame, guilt, and silence.

Another recent publication, *Przemilczane: Seksualna Praca Przymusowa w Czasie II Wojny Światowej* (*Covered in Silence: Forced Sexual Labor During Second World War*), by Joanna Ostrowska, argues that women who were forced to provide sexual labor should be included in the group of workers exploited by the Nazi regime.²⁰² She concludes that sexual violence was widespread and present in various forms: from rapes to forced brothel work for Nazi soldiers and

²⁰⁰ Agnieszka Cubała, *Kobiety '44 : Prawdziwe Historie Kobiet W Powstańczej Warszawie*, (Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka, 2020), 142.

²⁰¹ Agnieszka Cubała, *Kobiety '44*, 142.

²⁰² Joanna Ostrowska, *Przemilczane : Seksualna Praca Przymusowa W Czasie Ii Wojny Światowej*, (Warszawa: Marginesy, 2018),

officers, and even prisoners (i.e. brothels in concentration camps). Ostrowska calls this systematic distribution of sexual labor a "well-organized rape."²⁰³ The subject of sexual violence during WWII is not a new area of scholarship, as there are many volumes dedicated to this part of the war experience, yet in much of the Polish memory, sexual trauma has been absent and suppressed.²⁰⁴ Therefore, volumes like Ostrowska's and Cubatá's researched and written in Poland (and in Polish) are significant because they address and restore the erased and omitted history of trauma. They shift the experience of rape from the metaphorical sphere to the material and physical of many women.

As I argued in the fourth chapter, theatre remains unable to step beyond the reductive narratives of the conflation of the female body with nature. The old and new catastrophes are unfolding daily and we desperately need a new way of telling the stories in which we can see ourselves and relate to each other and to the world. My diagnosis of the ineffectiveness of the contemporary Polish "eco-theatre" is that it cannot add anything more beyond what we see and hear on the news daily because it first must recognize and advise its audience that we do not know what we are losing. Theatre must once again become a place of honesty, where the truth, that many of its audiences (often urban upper middle class) does not really care about what is being lost, can be communicated. I write as a Polish national when I say that we are scared for ourselves, for the quality of life we are about to lose. Poles remember the scarcity of communism, the power shortages, the food rations, the empty store displays and they do not want to go back. Rivers, fish, birds, butterflies... even those rare and endangered are just

²⁰³ Joanna Ostrowska, *Przemilczane*, 37.

²⁰⁴ i.e. Dagmar Herzog, *Brutality and Desire: War Sexuality in Europe*, Doris L. Bergen, *Sexual Violence in the Holocaust: Unique and Typical?*, Patricia Szobar, *Prosecution of Jewish-Gentile Sex in the Race Defilement Trials*.

another item on the “concern agenda,” but in and of themselves do not mean much to us. Reckoning with that truth could be much more useful than staging a funeral ritual for species only a few hear about.

My discovery of the collective helplessness of theatre artists against the old stories at times felt impossible to overcome in a country with a rich tradition of experimental theatre where seemingly “everything has been said and done before.” Yet in my research, I came across an artist and an activist whose work is worth noting even though she does not fit under the wide umbrella of “theatre.” Her name is Cecylia Malik and she is an environmental activist who uses public performance to build a collective understanding and awareness of the natural wealth that Poland poses and must protect.

The Performative Activism of Cecylia Malik

Cecylia Malik is a painter, a performer, and an activist. She uses her work to draw attention to the degradation of Polish forests, rivers, and green spaces. Her work is significant from the perspective of this study because she uses deeply rooted tropes and ideals and recycles them in her work. As a result, ideals like Matka Polka or National Nature become the tools for repurposing the deeply rooted metaphorical understanding of women and nature. To exemplify this process, I will describe two of her actions: one centered around trees, and the other dedicated to protecting the rivers.

Malik’s first public action, which started in September of 2009 and lasted a full year, was *365 drzew (365 trees)*. For 365 days Malik climbed one tree a day and posted a photo of her on the tree on her Facebook page. The majority of the trees climbed by Malik were in Cracow, the second-largest city in Poland. Malik drew attention to the trees so familiar that they can often

be invisible to Cracowians. In the introduction to an album containing the documentation of Malik's *365 drzew* project, she describes how physical contact with trees changed her perception. She describes

Byłam na drzewach w gęstą listopadową mgłę. Pnie wtedy były śliskie i mokre. Byłam zimą, kiedy gałęzie okrywała szadź...Czułam zapach i smak śniegu, jak drobinki szronu sypią się za koszulę i jak trzeszczą pod nogami oblodzone gałęzie.²⁰⁵

[I was in the trees during thick November fog. The trunks were slippery and wet then. I was there in the winter when the branches were covered with rime ice...I experienced the smell and the taste of the snow, how the particles of frost fell under the shirt, and how the icy branches crackled under my feet.]²⁰⁶

The physical contact with various trees allowed Malik to become familiar with the previously strange trees and develop affection toward them. Because she documented her process and posted photos on her social media of herself nestled among the leaves, climbing the trees daringly high, and in some cases, creating a temporary assemblage with specific trees, her audience could also become familiar not only with her artistic idea but also with the trees. Those observing Malik's project could share with an artist a sense of intimacy with the natural world, develop an appreciation for the trees which have been blending into the city landscape as its integral part and thus become invisible and disposable. This playful action informed a much more serious one performed eight years later.

On April 7th, 2017, the Guardian published an article titled "Polish Law Change Unleashes 'Massacre' of Trees." The article described the effects of a new law introduced by

²⁰⁵ Cecylia Malik, *365 Drzew*, (Warszawa: Fundacja Nowej Kultury Bęc Zmiana, 2011), 9.

²⁰⁶ My translation.

Jan Szyszko, the Polish environment minister. The new statute allowed private landowners to cut down trees on their property without obtaining any official permission, a practice that had been previously barred by Polish environmental law. Soon after the law passed, the sound of chain saws could be heard all over the nation. The Guardian reported, “Szyszko attracted widespread criticism last year for his decision to sanction large-scale logging in the Białowieża forest, some of Europe’s last remaining primeval woodland.” In defense of the move, Szyszko cited a passage from the Biblical book of Genesis, wherein God exhorts mankind to “replenish the earth,” but to also “subdue it.”²⁰⁷ Szyszko created his political agenda according to his understanding of the Biblical mandate rather than the recognition of the dire environmental situation of Poland which testifies to the long-lasting interweaving of the national and religious narratives described in the previous chapters of this work.

Many trees previously photographed by Malik during her artistic project *365 drzew* were cut. Malik felt compelled to respond to the mass loggings unleashed by this new law with another performance project. For several days, she took a photograph of herself while sitting on various tree stumps in the freshly logged areas and posted it to her social media accounts. In most of the photographs, Malik is seen breastfeeding her infant son, Ignacy. The project sparked interest among her friends and people who followed her online. Many women started sending Malik photos of themselves breastfeeding their babies while also sitting on tree stumps

²⁰⁷ Christian Davies, “Polish law change unleashes 'massacre' of trees,” The Guardian, Fri 7 Apr 2017, [Polish law change unleashes 'massacre' of trees | Trees and forests | The Guardian](#).

from various logging sites in the country. In March 2017, Malik invited several of these women to join her in a group protest.

Women from all over Poland joined Malik and her fellow “Polish Mothers on the Tree Stumps” by posting photos on social media from their various protests using #matkipolkinawyrebie (#polishmothersononthetreestumps) hashtag. These photos all included recently cut tree stumps and breastfeeding mothers. The images of women nurturing their new babies stand in stark contrast to the brown landscape around them of the logged trees. Malik’s action quickly gained national and international recognition and inspired many groups set to protect old trees from senseless logging which remain much needed because Polish government refuses to pass the law that would protect trees and forests.

In *365 drzew* Malik placed her colorfully-clothed body in playful positions in various trees in order to direct the viewers’ attention to the nature around them that can sometimes be overlooked in day-to-day activity. In her protest action over logging, Malik was much less playful, instead making the focus of her images the freshly-cut trees juxtaposed to freshly-born babies nursing at their mothers' breasts. Malik is a visual artist interested in organizing happenings that can be turned into images of protest. The painting-like images of absent trees are replaced by solemn women looking at their babies or straight into the eye of the camera (thus straight into the eyes of the viewer). The image resembles so well known in Poland the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus. The women name themselves Matki Polki, they recycle the old trope and by doing so, they connect the present moment of mass devastation of trees with the past historical trauma. The women employ the deeply embedded metaphors and renew them by performing the well-known visage of a suffering mother. In their time and place specific

depiction, however, it is not the foreign oppression that causes their hurt, but rather the government that does not recognize the value of trees in a country with a high air pollution. The nationalistic narrative that so often reached for a figure of idealized motherhood to emphasize the scale of injustice caused by an invasion, partition, or occupation, now must face mothers worried for the future of their children in the treeless country. Their bodies, their children, and the stumps of the trees are real and yet they have the potential to trigger the historical reality of the necessary fight for the land. The collective of women staged the grief over the trees in a very effective way. The mourning was palpable because the loss was apparent and remained the focus of the action.

Another performance protest in which Malik grapples with the well-established ideals of identification of female bodies with nature can be seen in the series of performances by the collective Siostry Rzeki (The Rivers Sisters) dedicated to the protection of Polish rivers, especially the most important one Wisła. To fully appreciate the importance of the river, it is necessary to name a few facts.

The Queen of All Rivers

Wisła (The Vistula) is often referred to as “the queen of Polish rivers. It is the longest river in Poland, extending 651 miles from its source in the Silesian Beskids to the Baltic Sea. The entire river flows within the territory of Poland. Still today Wisła is referred to by Poles as the queen of Polish rivers," a river of special significance for Poland and Poles; it is one of the symbols of the country and its history-- it is even mentioned in the national anthem."²⁰⁸ The

²⁰⁸ Angiel, Joanna, and Piotr Jan Angiel. "Perception of River Value in Education for Sustainable Development (The Vistula River, Poland)." *Sustainable Development (Bradford, West Yorkshire, England)* 23, no. 3 (2015): 191.

river had a crucial role during the process of colonization and formation of the Polish country from 966 to the end of the 13th century.²⁰⁹ Many cities, including past and current capitals of Poland, were established along the rivers. Between the 14th and 18th centuries, the Vistula significantly contributed to the economic development of Poland by providing trade and means of transportation.²¹⁰ During the partition of Poland by Russia, Prussia, and Germany, the river was cut by national borders, and although it lost its economic significance, it gained a symbolic meaning.²¹¹ It became a symbol of Polishness and resilience in the face of the occupying powers. This sentiment remains prevalent and can be found in a common patriotic song known by most Polish people of all ages.

Płynie Wisła, płynie po polskiej krainie.

Po polskiej krainie

A dopóki płynie Polska nie zaginie!

A dopóki płynie Polska nie zaginie!

[The Vistula flows through the Polish land

Through the Polish land

And as long as it flows, Poland shall remain

And as long as it flows, Poland shall remain] ²¹²

This patriotic song familiar to and frequently sung by many Poles describes Wisła as the essence of Polishness immune to the turmoil of history and political shifts. The authorship of the song is attributed to Kazimierz Hoffman, a Polish poet born in 1928. The song perfectly exemplifies the notion of Natural Nature which endows elements of nature with nationalistic meaning and

²⁰⁹ Joanna Angiel, Piotr Jan Angiel, "Perception of River."

²¹⁰ Joanna Angiel, Piotr Jan Angiel, "Perception of River."

²¹¹ Joanna Angiel, Piotr Jan Angiel, "Perception of River."

²¹² My translation.

functions. Despite the unique value of Wisła in Polish history, the current government decided to build a new dam on the river in the town of Siarzewo. The project was a continuation of the communist party's plan to make Wisła suitable for coal transportation. The initial aspiration included building eight dams. Fortunately, the Polish economy could not support the scale of the undertaking. Only one dam was built in the 1950s in Włocławek and this intervention resulted in the disappearance of migrating fish like salmon and sturgeon. Yet Poland was too poor to fully destroy the river. As a result, Wisła has long stretches of free-flowing, wild, clean water. In 2018 the rapidly growing economy encouraged the leading party to continue with the plans and build another dam in Siarzewo. Cecylia Malik, as a response to the announcement, created an artistic-activist collective *Siostry Rzeki* (The Rivers Sisters). In one of their actions, Malik along with her collective, attempt to swim up Wisła through the entirety of Poland, documenting their journey. The resulting film, *Siostry Rzeki (The Rivers Sisters)*, is a testament to both the beauty of the river as well as the danger of its over management.

Along the way, the collective staged river-themed performances in various cities and towns. In one such performance, a woman stands in the river and declares "I am Wisła!" She calls out to her sisters, her tributaries, by name, and requests for them to join her. Those whose names are called enter the water and join her in chanting out their respective names. The performances as well as the projection of the movie were a part of the larger campaign against the building of several dams on Wisła.

One of the most striking scenes was performed by a woman who represented a vanished river. A woman dressed in a blue outfit holds a plate with a river's name. She says "I am the Myśla River. My riverbed dried up at the source. Only two years ago there was water

here.” The woman speaks on behalf of a river that no longer exists. The dried-up bottom of the river, the no longer needed bridge marks the absent body of water that disappeared. Yet Myśła becomes present through the body of the performer who lands her own voice on the lost river. The performance evokes a palpable and visible sense of loss and grief.

Siostry Rzeki (the movie) also reveals the contrast between the clear water of Wisła in the parts where the river can run freely with the muddy, dirty pools around the dam. *Siostry Rzeki* cannot continue their journey, they must hire a crane and a truck to transport their boat through the dam. The women expose that the idealized, nationalized notion that "as long as the river flows, Poland will remain" is empty in a time of peace and prosperity. Once perceived as the national treasure, today Wisła is a commodity available for exploitation. Malik revealed the material reality of the river, not its symbolic significance. In her speeches, Malik appeals also to the national pride of Poland, pointing out that long stretches of free-flowing rivers are unique on the hydrological map of Europe. Most western, wealthier countries could afford over-management of their rivers. Poland's sparse resources preserved clean, wild sweet water rivers, a commodity whose value increases daily in the face of climate change and alarming drought. The beautiful, healthy river, declares Malik, is a national treasure; not as an idea, a symbol, but as a material body of water with its rich ecosystem. One of the activists in the film concludes, “We can only save ourselves if we stand up to defend animals and nature.”²¹³

Malik’s performances and happenings are appealing, compelling, and effective. Her actions mobilized and inspired Poles to realize that they can speak up against the

²¹³ Cecylia Malik, *Siostry Rzeki*, Polska, 2021, 57 min, The River Sisters film <https://vod.greenfestival.pl/v/siostry-rzeki,274.html>

mismanagement of natural resources that belong to all of us rather than a narrow group of politicians. Siostry Rzeki linked hands with other environmental groups and together they created Kolacja ratujemy rzeki (Rescue for the Rivers Coalition). In 2018 the organization appealed the decision of building the dam. As of 2023 the final decision has not been made and the construction of the dam is still on hold. Malik's initiatives also play significant role in facilitating the connection between her audiences and the elements of nature. Every year Malik organizes in Kraków an event called Wodna Masa Krytyczna (The Water Critical Mass). During the event, she encourages people to play in the river, build floaties, and reclaim the river as a place of fun, entertainment, and socializing. In 2016 Malik swam on a float that looked like a sturgeon to remind people that before the first dam was built on Wisła, large fish like sturgeon used to swim through the Polish cities. Malik emphasizes the importance of *material* rather than symbolic perception of nature, and skillfully uses the old narratives to subvert the rock-solid mindset of exploitive attitude toward nature. Yet while conducting my research in Poland, I discussed environmentally oriented theatre and performance with several artists and scholars, none of whom would include Malik in those categories.

Mickiewicz's Sister

In her book *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf imagines a figure of Shakespeare's Sister. A woman of equal talent and aspirations as the acclaimed playwright, in Woolf's opinion, would have to commit suicide out of the impossibility of realizing her genius. Woolf concludes that the cultural and social reality of sixteenth and seventeenth-century England would not allow a brilliant woman to create a canonical work of art. The absence of brilliant books, poems, and dramas written by women is not a testament to women's inherent inferiority and

lack of talent, but rather societal structures that do not facilitate space for their voices and their work to be created and appreciated.²¹⁴

Imagining a figure of Mickiewicz's Sister might lead to a similar conclusion. In the stateless nation where the main focus rested on the need to fight and die for independence, the voice of a woman would be considered unnecessary, at best, and possibly even harmful, especially if she wanted to speak about peace and preservation of human life, not to mention all the potential talent among peasants lost to the oppression of the feudal system. The absence of work created by women not only creates a void of representation, it also places all responsibility on the texts we *do* have written by men. After a close study of Mickiewicz's and Wyspiański's works, I find certain unfairness in arguments and analyses like mine. Both playwrights' biographies reveal that they were not sexist and classist power-hungry men who wanted to exploit the land they lived on. On the contrary, they were both highly sensitive men who observed the world around them and aimed to challenge its many injustices. Yet because their works rose above all others and have been used and recycled to fit the agendas of generations to come in advancing their cause, those canonical plays became the tools for projecting narratives. The absence of female voices which would sound differently than Mickiewicz's and Wyspiański's and could enter the conversation with *Dziady* or *Wesele* is harmful not only for silenced and omitted women but also for men. Among the wide spectrum of feminisms, I subscribe to the one that recognizes that a patriarchal, sexist system is harmful

²¹⁴ The life and work of Elizabeth Cary (1585-1639) proves Woolf's assertions that the societal norms made impossible for a woman to thrive as a writer. Cary struggled with financial difficulties, was disinherited by her father, and was placed in a precarious situation when her husband attempted to divorce her and limit her access to their children.

for both men and women because it silences and excludes women while placing the entire responsibility of resource-management on men.

Screw Mickiewiczes?

One of the Warsaw theatres is currently working on the adaptation of *Heksy* by Agnieszka Szpila. The novel published in 2021 became an ecofeminist manifesto. This “postporn, ecosexual tale of the new, feminine and intimate, not institutionalized, religion”²¹⁵ aims to amplify the voices of women who are fed up with functioning as a literary and social figure created by a few powerful men. Szpila breaks the centuries-long silence with the loud call:

Rypmy tych, którzy uważają, że nasze miejsce jest na porodówce, w kościele, czy w kuchni. Rypmy „Słowackich”, „Norwidów” i „Mickiewiczów” wszystkich narodów, za to, że miast zobaczyć w nas sprawczą siłę i Moc, woleli szprycować nas w soich tekstach właściwościami wprost przeciwnymi-- uległością, łagodnością i słabością. Wolelo do nas wzdychać i popełniać samobójstwa z rozczarowania, miast szanować Nas za naszą płodność, kreatywność, inteligencję, organizację pracy, zaradność i siłę. Rozszarpmy na strzępy wszystkich tych, którzy żądają od kobiet matek poświęcenia, fundując im potem pomnik Matki Polki. My, traktowane przez całe wieki jak bure suki, zrywamy się właśnie ze smyczy. Spalimy na proch Ojczyznę, której symbolem jest Orzeł Biały. Już nigdy żaden ptak, synonim chuja, nie będzie symbolem naszego plemienia.”²¹⁶

Screw those who think that our place is in the delivery room, in a church, or in a kitchen. Screw “Słowackis,”²¹⁷ “Norwids,” and “Mickiewiczes” of all nations, because instead of

²¹⁵ Info Sheet of *Heksy*, Agency Deborah Druba,

https://www.agencedeborahdruba.com/_files/ugd/09e6b6_f3b5e091c4e843a69e5b6d1fb630697c.pdf?index=true

²¹⁶ Agnieszka Szpila, *Heksy*, (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo WAB, 2021),408-409.

²¹⁷ Juliusz Słowacki (1809-1849) and Cyprian Norwid (1821-1883) were Polish poets and playwrights. They both were important figures of Polish Romanticism.

seeing agency, strength, and power in Us, they preferred to inject us in their texts with exactly the opposite qualities – submissiveness, gentleness, and weakness. They preferred to sigh at us and commit suicide out of disappointment, instead of respecting Us for our fertility, creativity, intelligence, work organization, resourcefulness, and strength. Let us tear into pieces all those who demand sacrifice from women-mothers while erecting for them a monument to Matka Polka (the Polish Mother). We, who have been treated like dirty bitches for centuries, are now breaking off the leash. We will burn to ashes the Fatherland whose symbol is the White Eagle. No bird, a synonym for a dick, will ever again be a symbol of our tribe.²¹⁸

This short excerpt conveys many of the central arguments of my work: the use of womanhood as a symbol; the danger of the idealized motherhood encapsulated as the mythos of *Matka Polka*; the illusionary centrality of women in the works of the Romantics that turned women into sexualized, objectified beings responsible for the male/ Adam's suffering. Szpila's voice echoes Ann Marie MacDonald's evocative comment, "Good going, boys, but get your fucking metaphors off of my body" recalled in the first chapter.²¹⁹ Both women recognize the danger of the metaphors drew upon the female bodies to express the historic turmoil of foreign oppression.

Szpila's novel which is being currently adapted to a playscript provided a new dimension of discussion. Szpila opened a window of historic silence and released the voices of women who for centuries remained omitted and excluded. Although *Heksy* is an important book, it, most likely, will not secure its place in the canon of Polish literature. The book is a manifesto of many Polish women who refuse to be silent or speak softly about their desire for change. In my opinion, however, *Heksy* lacks quality of timeless literature which could last beyond the current

²¹⁸ My translation.

²¹⁹ Ric Knowels, "The Hearts of its Women", 141.

cultural and political moment in Polish history. Furthermore, Szpila has two severely handicapped daughters and is outspoken about the hypocrisy of the government that claims to be uncompromisingly pro-life while neglecting its most vulnerable citizens. Her voice is invaluable and has the power to shake the system and bring a long-lasting change. Szpila intertwines her writing with her socially-involved work, and this entanglement, I argue is a disservice to both spheres of her work. The same problem can be seen in theatre's possibility to become a significant voice in today's society.

If Polish theatre is to play a role that would allow it to remain relevant and be an agent of necessary change, it must find a new language. Theatre is unnecessary if it sounds like news outlets or an activist's speech. Podcasts, numerous social platforms, even film, or artists and activists like Cecylia Malik can do it much better. Theater needs to distinguish itself in its form as well as the content. Theatre artists must cease treating the stage as a megaphone to which they will recite their call-to-action statements. Those are much more effective when done on the riverbanks or on the logging site. Theatre can once again become a space for the unobvious telling of the story we would rather not hear, reliving events we would rather avoid or forget. Until then, Polish theatre must put on hold raising a middle finger to "Mickiewiczs".

Certainly, theatre artists could dismiss my proposition with simple "easier said than done." To which I would first agree, and then recall numerous plays and performances (including the two I analyze in the previous chapters) which in their times provided their audiences with necessary language that captured their collective experience. Because they were formative for our grandparents, their impact remains unquestionable for us, today. One such example is the play *Card Index* by Tadeusz Różewicz. In the play, the protagonist rests in

bed unable to perform the role he was assigned, a role of a surviving witness of Nazi atrocities. The scenes unfold like disorganized cards of an index, some of them tell the stories of his childhood, some of sexual awakening, some of the experience of war. The disappointed “chorus of elders” comments on the events lamenting that the “trash hero” cannot meet the demands of the important events he must portray. The play captures the distortion of the human psyche caused by the trauma of war. Yet there are no bombastic speeches, no lecture-like monologues, no pathos, no didactics instead there is laughter and the deeply dark realization that we all live in a society of people whose lives resemble a mixed card index with many missing pages. I offer Różewicz’s play as an example of theatre’s ability to step beyond other forms of discourse to *show* rather than *tell* the unfathomable events of WWII. Others like Mrożek, Witkacy, Gombrowicz, Kantor, and Grotowski could also serve as inspiration and examples for the search for a new kind of theatre.

Polish theatre needs new tools, new language, and new forms that would allow it to take off its activist and political hat and find the lost hat of an artist able to create powerful work that will touch, affect, and reshape the exploitive political landscape. Today, in public discourse, the word *romantic* is used like a curse. The popular commentators declare that Poles must disengage from its long tradition of Romanticism and embrace the hard facts of life. In this realist vision of life Polish women must birth more children to avoid the demographic collapse; trees and rivers should be utilized as needed to enhance various branches of domestic industry; the army must become a priority; only refugees that look and sound like us and can be useful to our economy should be allowed. The dominant discourse mocks the naïve romantic mindset and also seems to exclaim “screw Mickiewicz.” Yet the vision painted by the realists seems

suffocating and poisonous. Theatre and theatre scholars must engage in *dziady*, the forefathers' and foremother's eve, summon its ghosts, be with the ancestors to recover their voices, free from the hijacking of the political parties, and reclaim the wisdom of Mickiewicz's sisters.

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