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The librettos of Moniuszko's operas and the European literary tradition: a comparative perspective on the opposition between serious drama and comedy

ABSTRACT: The aim of this study is to indicate several features of serious drama and comedy proper to Moniuszko's operatic output and to describe them within the context of European points of reference (Pierre de Beaumarchais, Alfred de Musset, Jane Austen, Italian librettists). The network of generic and intertextual relationships shows that an important feature of Moniuszko librettos is not their supposed closure within the circle of national inspiration, but on the contrary – a seemingly insatiable openness to the most valuable areas of foreign legacies. The consistent comparison of comic and serious works in a single study also reveals an affinity between the issues at the heart of Moniuszko's musical dramas, regardless of the tone of particular works. Moniuszko's oeuvre, both in its comical and serious aspects, reflects, in different ways, one of the themes that has recurred in Europe after cataclysms, such as the holy wars of the Renaissance, the French Revolution (or the Partitions of Poland during the same period) and the conflicts of the twentieth century. One issue at the core of Polish opera turns out to be the disintegration of the social order and the transition to its opposite – the sudden or gradual, but ineluctable movement from harmony to confusion and violence-filled chaos. *Halka* and *The Pariah* forge models of a community based on the exploitation of the weak by the strong. Highlighted are instances of individuals refusing to conform to the anti-order. In the comic variant of Moniuszko's output, meanwhile (*The Haunted Manor*, *The Countess*), the relationship between the order and its contradiction takes on the form of an unjustified renouncing of communal values. At the same time, the comparison between serious and comical works refutes the thesis that Moniuszko was an unequivocal eulogist of an ethics based on the unconditional belonging to a national community.

KEYWORDS: comedy, tragedy, romantic drama, opera libretto, Polish opera, communal values, politics in opera, intertextuality, otherness in opera, model of community in the opera, social inequality in opera

From the start of his career to the last years of his work for the theatre, Stanisław Moniuszko drew on foreign literary models (Puchalska & Borkowska-Rychlewska, 2006). One of his first works was the two-act comedy opera from

1842, *Karmaniol, albo Francuzi lubią żartować* [‘The Carmagnole, or the French like to joke’], a reworking of a French one-act play from the Théâtre des Variétés (Théaulon, Jaime, 1837), and his last opera was an adaptation of Casimir Delavigne’s tragedy *Le Paria* (1869). I propose to examine Moniuszko’s relations with European literature from the angle of the opposition between two types of drama: serious and comic.

Changes in theatrical literature during the Romantic era brought a reinterpretation of the earliest sources of drama (Cox, 1994, pp. 153–180; Skuczyński, 1993, pp. 10–18; Sławińska, 1953, pp. 9–23). Just as the Renaissance had broken with the mediaeval interpretation of Greek and Latin culture, so romanticism referred to the ancient heritage over the heads, as it were, of the Classics perpetuating the tradition of the French seventeenth century models (like Racine and Molière). The Romantics put forward their own interpretation of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristophanes and Seneca. They ascribed them a new place in the contemporary world. At the same time, nineteenth-century authors took up models elaborated during the previous century. Besides the dramas of Diderot, a crucial point of reference was the type of socially engaged tragedy introduced by Voltaire, branding abuses of political power, e.g. *Alzire* (1736) and *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet* (1741). It is essentially at the point of contact between those two sources of inspiration that nineteenth-century socially engaged theatre emerged, taking up political themes which were in some way thorny subjects for the collective awareness. This corresponds also to the concept of comedy which – according to Aristotle’s definition – aims to reveal human foibles. Still constituting supra-individual *loci communes* of literary output, nineteenth-century comedy and serious drama are open to the idiosyncrasies proper to the theory and practice of particular authors.

It was in a similar intellectual and artistic atmosphere that the career of Stanisław Moniuszko took shape. In nineteenth-century Polish theatrical culture, the opposition between his serious works (*Halka*, 1848 and 1858, to a book by Włodzimierz Wolski, and *The Pariah*, 1869, to a libretto by Jan Chęciński) and his humorous works (*The Haunted Manor*, 1865, lib. Chęciński; *The Countess*, 1860, lib. Wolski) may be discussed with reference to the tragedy–comedy dichotomy. The aim of this study will be to indicate several features of serious drama and comedy proper to Moniuszko’s operatic output and to describe them within the context of European points of reference. The four works invoked are related by a quite distinct generic profile and by their dimensions, since they are all full-length operas. (The aspect of genre is most debatable with regard to *Halka*, an opera combining elements of tragedy, pre-Romantic drama and Romantic drama. Despite this, *Halka* does not contain any comedy accents, so it can be seen as a definitely serious opera).

Only a joint reading of the serious dramas and comedies allows us to cleanse the image of Moniuszko of some of the stereotypes that have grown up around him and to indicate a new place for him in the eyes of contemporary audiences.¹

¹ In this text, I draw on two previous studies published in Polish (Bajer, 2014; Bajer, 2017).

1. On the side of serious drama: *Halka*

Halka, the story of a common lass seduced and abandoned by a young noble, after giving birth to his child, contains obvious references to *La sonnambula* by Romani and Bellini and to *La muette de Portici* by Scribe and Auber (to which it is linked by the glorification of national values). In terms of less obvious references to the tradition of European serious drama, I will discuss one short but crucial scene from Moniuszko's opera. The lonely heroine decides to exact revenge by burning down the church where her erstwhile seducer's marriage is taking place (Act 4, scene 8):

HALKA:

I'll wreak revenge!

I'll kill Jaško,

For I am the mother and I am your wife!

I'll tear out your heart,

I'll avenge the injustice.

Hey! Jaško! Master, can you hear me?

Halka runs around in distraction, gathers brushwood and straw lying around the square, pulls off a few willow twigs and lights them from a lamp in front of the church.

CHORUS:

Almighty God, holy God,

Have mercy on your people!

For Your hand's all-powerful!

Ah, have mercy upon us!

And through the Passion of Your Son

Allay this woeful misery,

Stem our tears and ease our pain,

Almighty God, have mercy!

Almighty God, have mercy!

Ah, have mercy

And stem our tears, ease our pain,

God, give us your blessing!

HALKA:

Hurls the lit bunch of twigs into the river, where it hisses as the flame is quenched, and she falls to her knees, weeping.

Almighty God, have mercy!

Thank You, God!

How could I kill you, my darling,

My Jaško and my master,

O forgive me! Forgive your poor girl her tears,

The death of our child.

O live happily,

Live, although not for me,

With that beautiful lady

Be glad!

Only pray for me now and again,

I'm dying, I bless you!

Only pray for me now and again,

I'm dying, I bless, I bless you! (Wolski, 1858, pp. 63–66; transl. John Comber)

The heroine is just a step away from committing a crime that will strike at the order of her familiar world – burning the church and the assembled congregation. At the last minute, however, she withdraws, proclaiming the idea of forgiveness and of sacrifice. The latter leads directly to her suicide.

a. Temple, torch, Erinys: from *Medea* to *Gabriella di Vergy*

The situation of an abandoned woman coming to her ex-lover's wedding echoes all the versions of the story of Medea, from Euripides to Giovanni Simon Mayr (*Medea in Corinto*, 1813) and Giovanni Pacini (*Medea*, 1843), while the image of a woman armed with a torch is a reworking of the cultural myth of the goddesses of revenge, the Erinyes, together with the transformation of the furies – in accordance with the logic of the Greek tale – into the goddesses of forgiveness, the Eumenides. Yet the literary references go much further than that.

A fundamental linguistic and psychological gesture of the eighth scene of Act 4 in *Halka* is hesitation. This kind of rhetorical-dramatical construction to a theatrical text has a long tradition in tragedy. We find it, first of all, in those tellings of the myth of Medea where the heroine considers committing infanticide.² Referring to ancient tragedy and linking it to influences from Jesuit didactic tragedy, Pierre Corneille presented in *Cynna* (1641) an elaborate scene of vacillation ending with imperial forgiveness. Subsequently, the sequence of hesitation followed by the decision to carry out an act of violence or to forgive became almost a stereotype in serious drama, and its popularity was sealed by the success of Pietro Metastasio's *La clemenza di Tito* (1734). In the Romantic era, scenes of hesitation and decision recur in *Norma*³ and in operas about Queen Elizabeth⁴. We also find a sequence of hesitation and forgiveness in Donizetti's *Gemma di Vergy*, to a libretto by Emanuele Bidera (1834) based on Alexandre Dumas's tragedy *Charles VII chez ses grands vassaux* (1831). The stormy, romantic style of this work corresponds somewhat to the atmosphere of *Halka*. In the Italian opera, the heroine is also listening intently to the sounds coming from a church, where her husband is marrying another woman. Gemma also concocts a fantasy about destroying the temple:

Ma già cessano
i cantici divini: ora si geme
sommessa prece, e noi preghiamo insieme.
Da quel tempio fuggite,
angioli tutti, voi! Terra, spalanca

² Euripides, *Medea*, Epeisodion V, lines 1020–1080; Seneca, *Medea*, Act 5, lines 910–960, and numerous modern-era reworkings.

³ Infanticide occurs in Alexandre Soumet's original (1831), but not in Bellini and Romani (1831).

⁴ In this tradition, one may mention Felice Romani's libretto to Saveria Mercadante's *Il conte di Essex* (1833) and *Roberto Devereux* by Salvatore Cammarano and Gaetano Donizetti (1837). The both refer to Jacques-François Ancelot's *Elisabeth, la reine d'Angleterre* (1829), which in turn was preceded by seventeenth-century plays by Thomas Corneille, Gauthier de Coste La Calprenède and Claude Boyer.

le voragini tue: questi empi inghiotti,
 e l'intero castello, e me con essi.
 Ciel, se tu non parteggi
 con chi mi spenge, la mia prece ascolta (Bidera, 1848, p. 46).

And one final analogy: Gemma also ultimately forgives her husband, even if – unlike in *Halka* – the forgiveness proves in vain.

The popularity of the situational model under discussion was so great that the forgiveness scene was eventually treated to a parody (e.g. in Offenbach's *Périchole*, 1868). Yet what broader consequences ensue from comparing Moniuszko's works with this dramaturgical scheme?

In terms of the treatment of the theme, comparing *Halka* with tragic scenes of hesitation and clemency reveals the multi-faceted workings of Romantic adaptive procedures. The actual transferral of the tragic dilemmas of rulers to the world of common folk ought not to surprise us during this era, particularly since similar postulates (inspired, no doubt, by the theories of Diderot) were advanced in Polish literature already in the eighteenth century. This is all the more visible in that the simple highland lass's replication of the gesture made by Emperor Augustus, Queen Elizabeth and Countess Gemma di Vergy brings also a significant change on the level of the poetical language, marked – again in accordance with the theoretical postulates of some Romantics – by the abandonment of the ostentatiously rhetorical stylisation of classical texts in favour of simplicity. That simplicity takes its models partly from everyday prose and partly from traditional folk output. Yet preserved in *Halka*'s mechanical and crooked complaint (as in the words in which she refers to the loneliness of her child: 'Its mother's here, its father's there!', IV:8) is the bipolarity, characteristic of the great tragic dilemmas, in which the protagonist is faced with two alternatives.

b. A broken *ethos*

The connection between *Halka* and other forgiving heroes and heroines involves also a specific ethical situation. According to the interpretation of Florence Dupont, Medea is a heroine of disturbed (or even crushed) socio-political belonging. Deprived of her importance, she rebuilds her dominant moral profile in an order of anti-values, committing a crime in the category *scelus nefas*.⁵ The idea of a similar total crime, disturbing the order of the world, appears in *Halka* in the intention to deliberately burn down the church during a service. An ethical crisis links Medea to Gemma di Vergy, an aristocrat whose infertility deprives her of her former place in the feudal order, and to Norma, breaking her druidic vows. An identity crisis is also visible in the case of the couple of royal protagonists in the above-mentioned texts: Augustus from Pierre Corneille's tragedy wishes to abdicate, and Elizabeth Tudor, in the last scene of the play, does indeed stand

⁵ *Halka*, like Medea, genuinely considers turning herself into a moral monster (Dupont, 2011, pp. 69–72).

down. Radical vacillation, the temptation of cruelty and the effort of clemency form an environment conducive to a momentary or lasting fracture of the protagonists' ethos, a weakening of their identification.

The disintegration of identity that is powerfully present in *Halka* assumes the form – avant-garde, in its way, and certainly condemned to a long life in nineteenth-century history of ideas – of a crisis of social identification. Although *Halka* does yield, at the end of the opera, to the impulse leading her towards Christian mercy, she speaks of it in terms of her own subordinacy in the social and metaphysical hierarchy of existence: 'How could I kill you, my darling, / My Jaśko and my master? / O forgive me, forgive your poor girl her tears, / The death of our child' (IV:8). This couplet is based on the counter-intuitive use of the rhetorical topos of consequence: *Halka*'s request for the merciful forgiveness of the sins she committed out of suffering is addressed to the one who caused that pain, who is thereby detached from his own actions and as if extracted from the principle of responsibility that applies to ordinary folk. This is somewhat reminiscent of the procedure of theodicy, here applied in relation to man. Just before her death, the heroine confirms the order that kills her, even referring to that which gives it strength: the identification of the social with the metaphysical hierarchy. By the same stroke, she gets to the heart of the condition which is both her own and also that of the world in which she lives, transforming herself from an eccentric into a holy fool; as in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, an Erinyes gives life to a Eumenis.

c. Illusion and cognitive dissonance

Here too, finale of *Halka* reveals its important aspect, which is its internally conflictual character. The consecration of the feudal hierarchy effectuated in the last scene of the opera certainly does not equate to its acceptance. In the closing apostrophe ('my master!'), *Halka* – now in good faith – repeats a phrase which she had just used in a deliberately perverse way ('I'll tear out your heart, / I'll avenge the injustice. / Hey! Jaśko! Master, do you hear me?'). This transition from a scornful to a sincere address of her feudal patron constitutes a turning point in the structure of the last part of the opera. The predatory *Halka*-murderer would tend to express (in a drastic form: in the order of a macabre play or a literary Pitaval) ideological-social aspirations comprehensible to the audience, but the *Halka* hallowing the existing order moves the audience with her resignation from the pursuit of justice and from her 'worldly' rights, which in the context of nineteenth-century intellectual life become increasingly obvious. This second moment may be regarded as the point where *Wolski* enters the order of caustic social criticism: it begins where his heroine ceases to be critical. Unlike the magnanimity of Augustus from *Cynna* and his tragic successors, *Halka*'s forgiveness is not only futile, but is also, in a way, contaminated by the moral evil of the unjust social system that it sanctions. Ultimately, therefore, the reference to tragedy shows its dimension of transgression and distantiation. The tragic schema of the protagonist's magnanimity is respected as a source of profound

emotions, but undermined as an element of a real and profound vision of man and the world. The blessing bestowed by Halka on her torturer does not become – as in the case of typical melodramatic lines of a predominantly exalted character, especially complaints – a plane of unconditional identification on the part of the audience with the suffering character. On the contrary: its understanding makes the audience aware of the irreducible difference between its own categories of thinking and those applied by the heroine.

This message is confirmed by the last words of the Vilnius version of the opera (1848), provocatively annulling the drama that is being played out. After Halka's death, her seducer's courtier enters the stage, calling on the distraught witnesses to the misfortune to joyously greet the newlyweds returning from the church:

MAJOR-DOMO: Now the time has come
To greet the couple merrily
And sing a song together.

CHORUS: Let's sing it merrily! (II:3⁶).

Such a finale brings a bold contradiction of the typical nineteenth-century operatic model in which the chorus – programming the audience's emotions, as if *expressis verbis* – supplies an empathetic commentary to the suffering of the protagonists.⁷ The use and reworking of patterns from both tragedy and melodrama entails a revision of the way in which communication is made with the audience. For a brief – but overwhelming – moment, the established structure of the transmission of emotions beyond the limit of the floodlights is altered.

In classical theories of theatrical reception – irrespective of whether we are considering classicist 'constant' illusion or the 'islands of illusion' postulated by Stendhal⁸ – the viewer ought to be completely and utterly subjected to the energy flowing from the stage. Remaining under the influence of illusion is described in monadic terms as a wholly integral experience. This is strongly suggested by the traditional metaphor of immersion as the *full* immersion in the fictive world. The viewer experiences a short-lived suppression of the critical voice of reason in order to yield entirely – succumbing to surges of imagination – to the power of theatre. That does not happen in the finale of the opera by Moniuszko and Wolski. As I have tried to show, the last words of this work create the impression of a cognitive dissonance arising between the viewer's empathetic and rational take on the situation. They break up the cohesion of the process of reception. The monadically understood – and so harmonious, in a way – immersion in the fictive world gives way to a sensation of rending and discord.

⁶ The Vilnius version.

⁷ See e.g. 'Grâce pour notre crime! / Grand Dieu, protège-nous! / Et que cette victime / Suffise à ton courroux!' (Eugène Scribe, *La muette de Portici*). Halka's alienation can be compared perhaps only with the situation of Rigoletto – the hero of another subversive bel canto opera (besides *La muette*) – who, in Act II, seeking Gilda, abducted by the prince, meets with the courtiers' indifference.

⁸ 'It seems to me that these moments of *complete illusion* are more frequent than is generally supposed [...]. But these moments are of infinitely brief duration – for example, a half-second or a quarter-second' (Stendhal, 1962, pp. 23–24).

2. On the side of comedy: *The Haunted Manor*

In its most general outline, *The Haunted Manor* is the story of two young men who renounce all thoughts of marriage, but change their mind after meeting two exceptional women. Moniuszko referred here to the comedy tradition in two of its guises: Romantic and Enlightenment.

a. The ensemble and the moment of agreement: the tradition of Romantic comedy

We find numerous inspirations from European Romantic drama in the nocturnal third act of this work. The two male protagonists are being observed by the young women hidden behind two ancestor's portraits. This unusual situation (Stefan and Zbigniew do not know that they are being observed) leads to an ephemeral moment of intimacy. The quartet beginning with the words 'Not to share both joy and grief' (III:5) presents a schema – frequent, but at the same time significant, in opera of this period – in which the same text is given to multiple characters. In *The Haunted Manor*, its starting point comes with the words of Stefan, who – like the prince in *Rigoletto* – introduces the musical theme of this number in the score. Unlike in the Verdi, the tenor utters a text that is taken up by the other characters as well:

Not to share both joy and grief
 With a soul that's sensitive,
 Not have a heart that brings relief
 With loving care and tenderness,
 And in old age no kin or wife
 To endow and blessings give,
 Is that a normal course of life?
 Is that what you call happiness? (Chęciński, 2019, p. 73)

Such a dilemma seems trifling within the context of the traditional history of literature, yet dramaturgical analysis bids us enquire who in the fictive world is actually the author of that reflection linking all the characters together. The opera's musical construction would suggest that Stefan is speaking these words to Zbigniew, who repeats them like an echo, and the same is done by the woman, hidden behind the paintings. A reading of the printed version of the libretto revises that assumption, showing the more complicated communicational structure of this section. We learn that the men say their lines first, 'between themselves'⁹, and the women take up their content, but separately – 'each one aside'. One notes here probably a care to ensure the realism of the depicted situation. Whereas Stefan and Zbigniew can speak out loud, Hanna and Jadwiga have to remain

⁹ The wording 'between themselves' is used also in other parts of the libretto where the protagonists utter the same lines.

silent. Hence the former utter their reflections out loud, while the phrases given to the latter are a conventional representation of their thoughts.

The construction of the text suggests that the female protagonists, formulating their reflections in their hearts instead of sharing them with one another, are withdrawn within themselves. Their utterances are classic asides. The lines spoken between Stefan and Zbigniew, meanwhile, would exemplify the specific form of theatrical communication in which the characters' subjectivity is momentarily effaced during an intimate exchange of views leading to a full understanding and a common mind and feelings. In classical drama, one example of such a situation is the evening scene between Rodrigue and Chimène, in which the rhetorical-tragic agon is suspended for a moment in the space of a painful understanding:

DON RODRIGUE: O miracle d'amour!

CHIMÈNE: O comble de misères! etc. (Corneille, 1963, p. 232)

The protagonists' words appear here like an echo. The same thing occurs in the nocturnal scene from *The Haunted Manor*.

Such a creation of a communication situation seems to be one of the major tropes of nineteenth-century drama, in both its operatic and its 'spoken' variants. One example of this construction, placed in a similar plot, comes in the first act of Gioachino Rossini's *La pietra del paragone* (1812). The entrance of the prima donna is written out here in a way that departs from the convention of those times. The heroine, alone, utters single lines, the ends of which are taken up by count Asdrubale, concealed offstage, which produces an echo effect:

CLARICE: Quel dirmi, oh dio! non t'amo...

CONTE: T'amo.

CLARICE: Pietà di te non sento...

CONTE: Sento. (Romanelli, 1822, p. 15)

The author used this formal solution in order to show a complex dramatic situation in which the characters simultaneously both seek contact and flee from it. As Stendhal writes in *Life of Rossini*: 'While Clarice is still singing, the count, who happens to be close at hand, concealed in a neighbouring glade, has a fancy to play the echo; the plan is crazy, and quite at variance with all his previous careful scheming; but in the end, the temptation is too strong' (Stendhal, 1957, p. 89). Stendhal goes on to write enthusiastically about the situation 'so admirably suited to the characteristic requirements of opera' (Stendhal, 1957, p. 89), discerning in it a theatrical depth with revolutionary potential: 'We are not concerned here with the old, platitudinous story of a love thwarted by some prosaic, external obstacle – a father, or a guardian, as the case may be – but with the analysis of a love thrown into despair by the anguished torments of *fear*. Clarice's fear is that, in the eyes of her lover, she shall appear to possess nothing but a base and mercenary soul' (Stendhal, 1957, p. 89). Stendhal is referring to the plot showing Asdrubale as a rich man being wooed by numerous women interested solely in his estate. Clarice is the only one who truly loves him, which only complicates the situation: 'Indeed – continues Stendhal – who else is there for poor Clarice

to confide in? In circumstances like these could any truly noble lover bear the vulgar consolations of “talking it over” with a friend? If she had turned to her companions, one and all would certainly have urged her: *Marry, marry quick, no matter how, and let love come later, if God wills it so!* (Stendhal, 1957, p. 89). The tensions identified by Stendhal revolve around the theatrical construction of a scene based on the formula of an overheard monologue (Aubignac, 2001, pp. 369–370).

The situation from the nocturnal scene in *The Haunted Manor* differs, of course, from the overheard monologue from the opera by Romanelli and Rossini. At the same time, however, we may state that Chęciński had assimilated what Stendhal termed the *novum* in Italian opera: the fact that a typically comic ‘obstacle’ that makes it impossible to speak openly about feelings is situated not externally, but in the characters’ minds – in the restriction that the young knights impose on themselves. Stefan and Zbigniew renounce marriage, seeing in it an obstacle to their military action. For nineteenth-century audiences, this represented a clear allusion to the activities designed to secure the restoration of Poland’s independence after the Partitions in 1795. In the terms used by Stendhal, this feature makes *The Haunted Manor* a comedy in keeping with the spirit of the nineteenth century.

That would inscribe this scene from *The Haunted Manor* within the context of other works from that period. One of its reference points might be Alfred de Musset’s 1830 miniature *La nuit vénitienne*. Its protagonists also meet in a complicated erotic situation, the framework for which – as in *Pietra del paragone* and *The Haunted Manor* – is delineated by the unusual *parti pris* of an eccentric. Prince Eysenach has resolved to ‘overturn this uniform way of proceeding’ (Musset, 1853, p. 381), telling the woman to first render up her soul (so that which is most valuable) and only then her body (of lesser worth). So he first decides to marry *per procura* Loretta, the ward of the Marquis Della Ronda and former lover of the Venetian Razetta, and only then win her love. Over the course of the first meeting between Loretta and the prince, the drawing-room conversation turns into an amorous dialogue (Musset, 1853, pp. 379–380). As the Musset scholar Simon Jeune writes, comparing this one-act piece with works by Victor Hugo, this is ‘amorous jousting between two young spouses, the man seeking to convince, to kiss, then to carry off his lover. And one has to admit that, with regard to this conquest, the flamboyant lyricism of *Hernani* does not possess the efficacy of the prince’s insinuating ease, so much so that Musset’s scene unfolds in a discreetly ironic counterpoint to the great drama’ (Jeune, 1987, p. 262). We recognise here the characteristic structure in which a fear of intimacy (proper to the sensitive souls of the nineteenth century) gives way to understanding. In Polish Romantic drama, a communicational situation that is similar in certain respects is shown at the end of Norwid’s *Noc tysięcznej drugiej* [‘The thousand and second night’] from 1850 (Zach-Błońska, 1993, pp. 59–65).

The fleeting and unexpected moment when the young protagonists of *The Haunted Manor* become attuned to each other, introduced by an emblematic series of asides, constitutes a reworking of the dramaturgical strategies employed by Romanelli/Rossini, Musset and Norwid. The modernity of this scene resides in

the placing of a typically nineteenth-century concentration on one's own feelings, the open declaration of which is not yet possible, at the centre of a dramatic situation. In fulfilling a key role both in the overall outline of the plot and also on the plan of the characterisation of the protagonists, the construction of Act III proves that Chęciński could be a subtle interpreter of the comedy conventions of his times.

b. From suspicions to openness: the tradition of classicist comedy

The most important event in the finale of *The Haunted Manor* is the Sword-Bearer's deconstruction of the false mystery signalled at the start of the opera and spread in the form of a rumour, namely, the supposed curse hanging over the manor. The owner explains that the epithet 'haunted' was given to the manor by neighbours who were envious of the happy marriages concluded by the women who were born there:

Thus mothers and kin,
Their heads in a spin,
[...]
The manor they'd blame,
And so dubbed it 'haunted'! (IV, 8)

The established English translation of *Straszny dwór* as *The Haunted Manor* may be deemed not entirely fitting. In the Polish version, the manor is not haunted, but 'frightful', in the sense that it arouses fear among the young maidens living in the area that they might end up on the shelf.

The enigma of the 'haunted' manor is also closely entangled with another rumour, relating to the alleged cowardice of Stefan and Zbigniew, which is spread by characters wishing to prevent the knights from becoming close to the Sword-Bearer's daughters, Hanna and Jadwiga. In accordance with the rules of a well-crafted play, the two rumours are consistently intertwined throughout the whole opera, as if echoing one another. To begin with, the authors and key distributors of both the false pieces of information are the same characters (the scheming Damazy and the well-intended Chamberlain's Wife). Secondly, there are clear analogies between the ways in which the two themes are incorporated into the plot.

Those analogies are informed by the paradoxical words 'but the cowards have no fear!' (III:6) uttered by Damazy, who triggers further situations designed to provoke fear in the protagonists. This phrase of Damazy's provides the most insightful description of the situation. Contrary to the logic of the suspicions, the knights' belligerent physiognomies by no means conceal cowardice; rather, they correspond to the essence of their characters. That surface appearances turns out – unexpectedly – to reflect the deepest truth. The complete lack of the much-trumpeted secret proves rather comical. This mechanism refers not only to the people, but also to the place. After all the speculation surrounding it, the secret of the manor's 'frightful' nature proves to be that which we saw on first beholding it: on the raising of the curtain in Act II, our glance falls on the Sword-Bearer's daughters, surrounded by 'house guests and neighbours' (II:1). The atmosphere

of secrecy again proves to be merely a smoke-screen. The casting of aspersions, just like the peeping and eavesdropping, is compromised.

The sudden transition from dark suspicion to openness is a comedy device with a long European tradition. In the second scene of Act I of Molière's *Les femmes savants* [*The Learned Ladies*] (1672), the erudite Armande is confronted with her erstwhile wooer, whose suit she had once rebuffed. Instead of succumbing to bitterness, Clitandre had then transferred his affections to his former beloved's younger sister, the ingenuous Henriette. In a humorous dialogue, Henriette insists that Clitandre admit to what her sister regards as his hidden secret – that he still cherishes his former feelings: 'Pour me tirer d'un doute où me jette ma soeur, / Entre elle et moi, Clitandre, expliquez votre coeur' (lines 121–122). When matters are laid out so starkly, Armande condescendingly discharges Clitandre from making a candid admission, thereby aspiring to prolonging the life of the alleged secret:

Non, non, je ne veux point à votre passion
Imposer la rigueur d'une explication:
Je ménage les gens, et sais comme embarrasse
Le contraignant effort de ces aveux en face (125–128).

Clitandre's reply thwarts her efforts in a matter-of-fact way:

Non, madame, mon cœur qui dissimule peu,
Ne sent nulle contrainte à faire un libre aveu.
Dans aucun embarras un tel pas ne me jette;
Et j'avouerais tout haut, d'une âme franche et nette,
Que les tendres liens où je suis arrêté
Montrant Henriette
Mon amour et mes vœux, sont tous de ce côté (Molière, 1962, p. 602)

The imagined depths suddenly give way to a disarmingly one-dimensional truth, and it is this abrupt transition that has eminently comical overtones. The projection of romantic nuances onto the mundane nature of the everyday life of the seventeenth-century bourgeoisie is discredited as a misunderstanding of reality. Clitandre's words act like an exorcism. They disperse the pseudo-literary vapours, revealing the simplicity which after all (on a par with depth) sometimes constitutes the essence of life. At the climax of the comical conversation revolving around the secret, its unceremonious refutation arises – something that may be defined as a 'non-secret'. A similar phenomenon occurs in the Act II finale of *The Marriage of Figaro*, when the suspicious Almaviva, storming into the count's study, does not find Cherubino there (Caron de Beaumarchais, 1809, p.148). Seeking proof of betrayal, he proclaims his wife's innocence to all and sundry. Earlier still, a similar comical logic – replaying the old farcical motif of the cheated cheat – knocked the weapon out of the plotters' hands in *The Barber of Seville*. In accordance with the work's subtitle, they fall victim to the 'useless precaution'. The strategy and rhetoric of subterfuge lose out to the biblical 'yes, yes; no, no' (Mt, 5:37) of (comical) good healthy nature.

In *The Haunted Manor* – as in the case of the unfettered Almaviva and the erotically driven Armande – an overly penetrating eye is compromised, in keeping with the comical logic of the dissonance between imagination and reality

(Dandrey, 2002, p. 96). The opera ends with the dispelling of suspicions through the triumphant revelation of what I called a non-secret. At the same time, the proposed comparison shows that – contrary to some interpretations – the opera's finale cannot be reduced solely to the xenophobic glorification of the national myth of Sarmatian Poland.¹⁰ In essence, it constitutes a far more complicated reworking of the wisdom of the European comedy tradition, particularly its classicist and Enlightenment strands.

c. Parody of an uncanny novel: *Il trovatore*, *Udolpho*,
Northanger Abbey

The Haunted Manor shows a denial of tales containing supernatural elements. That links it to many European works from the first half of the nineteenth century (including *La sonnambula*, *L'elisir d'amore* and *La dame blanche*). This strand is also based on a literary tradition. Here we can discern a parody of uncanny tales, in both their Enlightenment, Gothic guise and also their Romantic form.

Among phenomena of this type, we can include, for example, an analogy between the tales of the curse hanging over the Sword-Bearer's manor and Ferrando's opening narrative in Salvatore Cammarano's *Il trovatore*, from 1853 – the text of which was translated for the opera's Warsaw premiere by Chęciński, who wrote the libretto for *The Haunted Manor* (Borkowska-Rychlewska, 2005, p. 91, Borkowska-Rychlewska & Nowicka, 2016, pp. 7–30). In both cases, we are dealing with the story of a place and a report on the tragic events that occurred there. The prime analogy lies in the function of the two statements: both Ferrando and the Chamberlain's Wife wish to arouse fear in their listeners with their words, although Chęciński alters the tone from serious to comedy. Compared to *Il trovatore*, the tale about the haunted manor may even come across as a form of parody of the famous sequence from the Italian opera. Such is suggested by the appearance of similar elements of uncanny stage design, and above all the adoption of the same convention or rhetorical strategy. In both instances, we are dealing with a tale designed to arouse anxiety in the listeners:

Far from the village in forest green,
Where tawny owls how in the coomb,
Along the banks of a murmuring stream,
Perched on a hill stands a manor in gloom.
A long time ago its ill-fated host
Was damned at the Lord's behest.
Now in its rooms dwells an evil ghost.
Hence the manor is called possessed.
(Chęciński, 2019)

È credenza che dimori ancor
nel mondo l'anima perduta
dell'empia strega,
e quando il ciel è nero
in varie forme altrui si mostri.
Sull'orlo dei tetti
alcun l'ha veduta!
In upupa o strige talora si muta!
In corvo tal'altra; più spesso in civetta,
sull'alba fuggente al par di saetta!
(Cammarano, 1853, p. 7)

¹⁰ Some of the old Polish nobility saw their roots in the tradition of the Sarmatian people.

Here again we find the theme of a curse, a nocturnal landscape, phantoms and owls. The tale recounted by the Chamberlain's Wife resembles a witty evocation of an outdated fashion for Biedermeier uncanniness.

Another – more distant – point of reference for the parody of an uncanny tale shown in the Polish opera may be Jane Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey* (1817), where we find an analogous theme of irrational associations triggered in a similar setting. At the same time, as in *The Haunted Manor*, drawing on a Romantic *imaginarium*, *Northanger Abbey* derives its denouement from Enlightenment comedy. Catherine Morland, well acquainted with the works of Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe, visits her new friends, the siblings Henry and Eleanor Tilney. During her stay at the ancient abbey inhabited by the Tilneys, the heroine, blessed with a rampant imagination, creates a scenario modelled on the plot of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Catherine starts to look for traces of the supposed presence of an imprisoned woman. When her suspicions come to light, the protagonist draws on herself the reproof of Henry Tilney, coloured by bitterness:

'If I understand you rightly, you had formed a surmise of such horror as I have hardly words to—Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing, where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?' (Austen, 1993, p. 128)

Although Henry Tilney's language is completely different to the style of the Sword-Bearer explaining the story of the 'frightful' manor, there are common features: fundamental categories used by nineteenth-century man to define his place in society. Such aspects as religion, upbringing, belonging to a particular nation, an understanding of the spirit of the times, a concern for reputation and omnipresent neighbourly vigilance appear as universal elements regulating the relationships within a community. Chęciński and Moniuszko, like Jane Austen, lead their protagonists to the verge of doubting in the benefits of civilisation, in order to ultimately appeal to their 'sense of reality'. Like Henry Tilney, the Sword-Bearer could have spoken to one of the authors of the calumnious rumours, the Chamberlain's Wife, in the words: 'Consult [...] your own observation of what is passing around you.' Irrespective of the precise indication of the time and place of the action, in the finale of *The Haunted Manor*, its protagonists speak in the idiom of Polishness understood as belonging to Western civilisation. In Kalinów, as in *Northanger*, civilisation casts frightfulness beyond the domestic space thanks to a strict network of social bonds. After all, the nineteenth-century world is a place where 'roads and newspapers lay everything open'.

3. Opera and physical violence

This revision of the ancient legacy in Romantic reflection justifies the evocation of the Greek concept of tragedy as the representation of physical violence in the chapter XIX of Aristotle's *Poetics* (Aristotle, 1997, p. 68). This question assumes an obvious form in operas related to serious drama. In *Halka*, the representation of suffering is expressed in the protagonist's suicide (IV:8), staged with a greater or lesser dose of naturalism, depending on the adopted theatrical convention. This real and shocking act of self-aggression constitutes the culmination of the tension inscribed in the opera's central conflict – built up over a long period of time. In the domain of theatrical speech and imagination, it is accompanied by the above-described virtual image of violence aimed at a body of people (the burning of the church). The violence in word slightly precedes the violence shown on the stage, reinforcing the linear construction of the opera, in which everything moves inexorably towards the finale.

We find a similar dual dramaturgical representation of violence in *The Pariah*, although there the image of cruelty in words and in gestures is distributed across completely different points in the drama's structure. The intention of killing Dżares as an intruder in the sacred grove – unequivocally expressed, but not carried out – is formulated in the prologue:

Death to him, death! [...]
 May a storm of shots and stones
 Turn this place red with his blood! (Chęciński, 1869, p. 10 – trans. John Comber)

Although the words are not put into action, the violence is manifest here in a forceful form through the words that are chosen. Blood is actually spilled – with the killing of Idamor – in the opera's finale (III:3). Incidentally, this phenomenon shows the development of dramatic structure in Moniuszko's operas, which with time achieve a far greater degree of complexity compared to the structure tried out in *Halka*. On each occasion, a more powerful – scenic – form of brutal acts is preceded by their appearance in words.

A separate mention is due to the question of the representation of violence in Moniuszko's comedies. Does the composer at all use images of aggression in his lighter works to forge the dramatic structure, as he does in *Halka* and *The Pariah*? It seems that he does, although one must note the obvious softening of the brutality of the acts in the world of comedy compared to serious drama.

In terms of the representation of violence and suffering, comic drama has a tradition just as crucial as tragedy. On one hand, Aristotle defines the comic mask as an image of ugliness that does not trigger pain in the person afflicted by it (Aristote, 197, pp. 62–63); on the other, one tradition of *commedia dell'arte* – partially adopted by other types of drama – was the *bastonada* (beating with sticks). In *The Haunted Manor*, the physical violence first enters the stage at a crucial point in the plot, shortly before the finale, in the form of a veiled threat. Just before the two pairs of protagonists get together, the question of the possible pretensions of the scheming Damazy is posed. Manipulated into a situation

requiring a clear declaration, Damazy twice begins, but does not conclude, his declaration, cowed by the threats of Stefan and Zbigniew:

DAMAZY:
to the Sword-Bearer
 Beyond belief! Prove it to me!
assuming a formal demeanour
 Grant me the alpha and omega,
 Of my dreams, I be sincere
 For the hand...

ZBIGNIEW:
in a quiet tone, approaching Damazy from the other side
 I hope not of Jadwiga,
 Or I'll cut off both your ears!

DAMAZY:
momentarily frightened, covers his ears, then resumes his previous demeanour
 No! No! I desire like heavenly manna
 And humbly beg as lowly slave
 For the hand...

STEFAN:
approaching Damazy in a similar manner to Zbigniew
 Surely not of Hanna,
 Or I'll send you to your grave!

SWORD-BEARER and CHORUS:
 Whose hand are you asking for?

DAMAZY:
alarmed
 This is torture! I was sure!
 I wish this lady's hand,
 But my rivals make a stand! (Chęciński, 2019)

As in the church scene in *Halka*, a substantial role is played here by pantomime. And as in that scene and in the prologue of *The Pariah*, we are dealing only with a scenario of possible or suggested violence. As in serious operas, however, the virtual act brings the resolution of the action, eliminating one of the obstacles standing in the protagonists' way. On a somewhat deeper level, this brief situation brings to a close the theme of a rumour that is important to the whole drama. Damazy, having earlier accused the knights of cowardice, himself displays a lack of courage. This brings the aforementioned transition from secrecy to openness, characteristic of comedy. In *The Countess*, the reckless tearing of part of a dress with a spur, an accident leading to lovers splitting up – apart from any possible psychoanalytical connotations of that gesture – may be read as an analogy of the catastrophe in a serious drama. Such is suggested by a bon mot uttered by the nineteenth-century critic Józef Sikorski (1813–1896), describing *The Countess* as 'the tragedy of a split skirt' (Rudziński, 1978, p. 167). This discreet variation on the theme of the representation of violence on stage is also placed at an impor-

tant point in the action – a climax bringing a definitive change in the relations between the characters.

Comparison of Moniuszko's comedies and serious operas reveals the existence of common features in the shaping of the structure of the works belonging to the two different types, geared towards triggering different emotional reactions from the audience. Regardless of the genre, Moniuszko perceives opera in relation to the oldest sources of drama, with its interest in the boundaries between various manifestations of violence: violence exerted within the framework of accepted social conventions¹¹, violence in the form of a threat or a plan of action, and violence manifested on stage by means of real gestures of murder and suicide. Various brutal acts integrate dramatic forms. They also allow for the creation of situations which are often burdened with a considerable surplus of reflection. An interest in violence adheres to Moniuszko's fascination with the way in which human collectivities function, helping to forge his personal version of nineteenth-century opera engaged in dialogue with social reality.

4. Conclusion: two masks

The network of generic and intertextual relationships shows that an important feature of Moniuszko librettos is not their supposed closure within the circle of national inspiration, but on the contrary – a seemingly insatiable openness to the most valuable areas of foreign legacies. This is complemented by ongoing research into Moniuszko's relations with the tradition of Polish literature.¹² For his first audiences, au fait with foreign models, cosmopolitanism was inscribed in the very essence of his operatic output. *Halka* and *The Haunted Manor* were evidently perceived as a combination of borrowed schemata and a successful attempt to communicate them through a Polish idiom.

The consistent comparison of comic and serious works in a single study also reveals an affinity between the issues at the heart of Moniuszko's musical dramas, regardless of the tone of particular works. Moniuszko with a smile and Moniuszko with a grimace of pain reflects, in different ways, one of the themes that has recurred in Europe after cataclysms, such as the holy wars of the Renaissance, the French Revolution (or the Partitions of Poland during the same period) and the conflicts of the twentieth century. One issue at the core of Polish music turns out to be the disintegration of the social order and the transition to its opposite – the sudden or gradual, but ineluctable movement from harmony to confusion and violence-filled chaos. *Halka* and *The Pariah* forge models of a community based on the exploitation of the weak by the strong. Highlighted are

¹¹ e.g. Halka's ejection from the manor (II:5), the planned murder of the pariah hidden in the sacred grove (Prologue, scene 2), Dżares's banishment in the finale of *The Pariah* (III:3).

¹² Elżbieta Nowicka shows the intertextual links between *The Haunted Manor* and Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve* (Nowicka, 2014, p. 125), while in *The Countess* she sees a reflection of the attitude of disappointment that is characteristic of literature from the second half of the century (Nowicka, 2014, pp. 136–137).

instances of individuals refusing to conform to the anti-order. In the comic variant of Moniuszko's output, meanwhile, the relationship between the order and its contradiction takes on the form of an unjustified renouncing of communal values.

A comparison of the serious and the comic Moniuszko enables us, it would seem, to revise somewhat the traditional interpretation of the political content inscribed in the composer's work. The message ensuing from the works close to Romantic tragedy clarifies the message proper to comedy, enhancing it with new shades. Comparison between *Halka* and *The Haunted Manor* or *The Pariah* and *The Countess* refutes the thesis that Moniuszko was an unequivocal eulogist of an ethics based on the unconditional belonging to a national community (although such a tone appears frequently in works devoted to the composer). The class-related violence in *Halka* shows that the homes of the Sword-Bearer in *The Haunted Manor* and Flag-Bearer [Choraży] in *The Countess* are not a synecdoche of the whole aristocratic world, but a poetical variation on the theme of that which is most valuable within it. In taking up reflection on the legacy of pre-Partition Poland and, more widely, the deepest principles of those governing in a group (in *The Pariah*), Moniuszko creates not one, but fundamentally two models of the same order based on an opposition between 'ours' and 'theirs': one (in the tragic variant) shows the oppressiveness it contains, the other (in the comedy variant) veers towards idealisation. Referring to the duality – inscribed in European theatre – of images of the world designed to elicit laughter or tears, Moniuszko separates comedy and serious drama only in order to show a fuller panorama of the whole of the human world. By making the dark aspects of the ethics of belonging the driving force of serious works, he demonstrates that, far from the nationalistic idealisation of Polishness that is sometimes ascribed to him, Moniuszko perceives a large collectivity as a phenomenon that is by nature ambivalent. The comedies signal the existence of spaces extracted from under the criticism effected in serious drama; the serious dramas, meanwhile, makes us realise that hothouse oases of aristocratic conservatism also have their price.

In order to understand Moniuszko, we must superpose his two masks elaborated within the long European tradition: the one with a grimace of pain and the one twisted into a smile.

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