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PHILOLOGICA 2/2022



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**ROMANCING THE ANCHORHOLD: ROMANCE MOTIFS  
IN *ANCRENE WISSE*, “GUIDE FOR ANCHORESSES”**

KLÁRA PETŘÍKOVÁ

**ABSTRACT**

Sweeping economic and social developments in the twelfth century gave rise to a series of intellectual and spiritual changes which laid emphasis on exploring and cultivating the self via personal experience and refining one's virtues, which became the pivot of the romance genre. In the religious sphere, such tendencies gave rise to the emergence of new forms of religious life. One of these was anchoritism, striving to replicate the *vita apostolica* of the first followers of Christ. *Ancrene Wisse* was composed to provide spiritual guidance originally to three sisters from one noble family who devoted their lives to God as anchoresses. The text of the guide typically uses secular imagery, including romance motifs, for spiritual ends. This article discusses which romance motifs can be discerned in the text of *Ancrene Wisse* and assesses their function. It concentrates on comparing the romance topos of the lady in the bower with the symbolic space of the anchorhold and considers the issue of permeability of its borders in terms of the genres of anchoritic guide and romance. It also comments on the active/passive role of the romance lady and the anchoress, on their roles as a receiver and an initiator of action.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** *Ancrene Wisse*; anchoresses; romance; love; castle; siege; suitor

When romances emerged from the splendour of the twelfth-century French and English courts, they were first intended for élite audiences whose values they reflected as well as helped to establish, telling stories of chivalric exploits, love and loyalty to one's lord and liege. Yet with their increasing popularity, they started to be reworked for new audiences in new cultural and geographical contexts, which resulted in a plethora of motivic and plot variations – this makes defining romance such a notoriously difficult feat (cf. Finlayson 1980, 45). The ability of romances to be “reshaped through rewriting” (Bruckner 2000, 13) meant that they often merged with other genres, which in turn stretched and reshaped their own genre boundaries.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This work has been supported by Charles University Research Centre programme no. UNCE/HUM/016.

<sup>2</sup> In medieval English literature, though, genre distinctions start to become acknowledged only in the fourteenth century in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, where it is often parody which helps to draw

One of the genres with which romances shared a close affinity was devotional writing. Such closeness is hardly surprising, as both are perhaps best perceived as mutually influencing and feeding off each other. Although the origins of courtly love, one of the pivotal concepts of romance, are elusive and unclear,<sup>3</sup> it has been argued that it arose “from the interaction between aristocracy and clergy in secular courts” (Kay 2000, 85). In the light of this point, the notion of love as an ennobling principle which has the power to perfect one’s soul and stands at the very heart of a romance plot can be seen as reinforced and influenced by the religious writings of the twelfth century where it is rife in the works of affective devotion,<sup>4</sup> most palpably in the works of Bernard of Clairvaux or the Cistercian authors.

In romances, numerous biblical motifs can be found, especially those linked with *The Song of Songs*, one of the most heavily commented on sources: e.g. the verse *vulnerasti cor meum in uno oculum tuorum*<sup>5</sup> evokes one of the crucial romance motifs of a look which has the power to pierce the heart with love; the image of an enclosed garden, *hortus conclusus* (*Song of Songs*, 4:12–16), can be seen as closely linked to the classical concept of *locus amoenus*, the ideal, paradise-like landscape suited for love (Hunt 1980, 189–90).<sup>6</sup> Some romances also have a Christian message directly embedded in them and therefore can be read as an exploration of what it means to be a good Christian. This is especially true of the works ascribed to Chrétien de Troyes and is perhaps most obvious in *La Queste del Saint Graal*, where the series of tests that the hero undertakes is aimed at proving that he is worthy of his noble, spiritual pursuit as well as at realising that “the only true, ennobling love is the love of God” (Quinn 1975, 179).

Just as Christian elements find their way into romances, so are romance motifs equally common in devotional texts. The tales of chivalry were used in sermons to the effect of making the spiritual message more palatable for the members of the audience prone to lukewarm response to the word of God: in this respect, MS Harley 7322 famously records that “one who is left unmoved by the story of Christ’s Passion read in the Gospel for Holy Week is stirred to tears when the *Tale of Guy of Warwick* is read aloud to him” (Owst 1933, 14). Romance features are likewise borrowed by legends or hagiographical works.<sup>7</sup> A good example of such a text is the action-packed *Life of Christina of Markyate* in which the eponymous nobleman’s daughter-turned-recluse, strongly reminiscent of a romance hero in need of proving himself, undergoes a series of tests which are to cement her spiritual resilience and determination to serve the Lord and thus confirm her identity as one of the chosen.

This closeness of romance and devotional literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is hardly surprising given that they both originate from the same intellectual

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attention to the motifs of the genre (Davenport 2004, 27). That medieval texts are usually mixed in terms of their genre was pointed out by the literary critic H. R. Jauss 1972, 108. For more on the inter-generic nature of romance see A. Butterfield 1990, 184–201.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of possible sources of courtly love see Boase 1977.

<sup>4</sup> I.e. the works which emphasise the loving relationship between man and God, stressing the necessity to repay with love the utmost sacrifice Christ willingly suffered for his great love of mankind.

<sup>5</sup> See *Song of Songs* 4:9: “you have taken away my heart, my sister, my bride [...] with one look you have taken it”.

<sup>6</sup> In medieval English romances, this garden is referred to as “the pleasure”.

<sup>7</sup> Some hagiographical texts also borrow from romance its typical form (especially in French romances): rhymed octosyllabic couplets.



background; they both share the same focus on exploring the self. The twelfth-century Renaissance, revolving around the Delphic maxim “Man, know thyself”, highlighted the importance of personal experience and introspection, which meant that religious as well as secular life was viewed as “seeking and journeying” (Southern 2007, 212), with emphasis placed on self-questioning and self-perfection.

Such focus on interiority and on a more personal approach to God also led to the exploration of new, genuine ways of religious devotion, which centred on a more personal type of religious life – one that would emulate the life of Christ and his apostles as well as his later followers, the monks and hermits in the Egyptian deserts of the Thebaid. Under this influence, the twelfth and especially the thirteenth century saw the rise of the anchoritic movement. Anchorites were semi-religious: never officially organised as a unified monastic community, they were only required to take the vows of chastity, obedience and stability of abode, which made them symbolic occupants of a liminal space between the sacred and the secular. Theirs was a life of seclusion, spent in prayers and holy meditations. Enclosed in their constricted anchorhold, they were meant to be dead to the world, yet they often found themselves at the very centre of a village or town. Their needs were tended to by the community for which the anchorites provided intercessory prayers and advice, taught children to read and in times of war might even offer their anchorhold, the safest space in town, as storage for treasures.<sup>8</sup>

Such a way of life was especially appealing to women; in the thirteenth century, there were three times more anchoresses than anchorites (Warren 1985, 20). This might be due to demographic reasons (the crusades caused imbalance in the ratio between the proportion of women and men) or due to necessity: in the thirteenth century, places for women in monasteries were scarce and only available to those who could secure a dowry (cf. Lawrence, 216). In contrast, life in an anchorage was open to anyone who was able to secure the stable support of a patron (or patrons). What is more, anchorage was considered more suitable for women, as they were deemed more fragile and dangerous than men by the ecclesiastical authorities and therefore much better “shut up in the house of stone”<sup>9</sup> than roaming about like hermits.

There were no official anchoritic rules, yet because some guidance was much needed to prevent indolence and various forms of misconduct in the anchorhold, unofficial rules were available, and it is one of these, the thirteenth-century text called *Ancrene Wisse* (“A Guide for Anchoresses”) that I would like to concentrate on here. This is a rich and spiritually nourishing work, meant to keep the mind and imagination busy in the austere, dim space of the anchorhold. It was written in the West Midlands by an unknown author, possibly a Dominican (Millett 1992). The text is quite lengthy, comprising eight parts which draw on a variety of sources ranging from the Church fathers to twelfth-century monastic writers, especially the Cistercians. In terms of its genre, it has a lot in common with the new type of university sermon which emerges in twelfth-century Paris: it is

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<sup>8</sup> Anchorholds (also anchorages or reclusoria) were dwellings of variable size most commonly built at the northern side of a church but could be also part of town fortifications or cemeteries. They were typically built for one anchoress, although pairs were not uncommon. For a concise overview of the phenomenon of recluses see Warren 1985, more recently Jones 2019.

<sup>9</sup> As noted by a certain monk in Canterbury, exasperated by Margery Kempe, a visionary notorious for her unbridled outbursts of emotional response to Christ’s suffering. See Windeatt 2000, 93.

clearly structured and draws heavily on the preaching and confessional aids which flourished in the thirteenth century, utilising exempla and rhetorical questions for dramatic effect as well as for eliciting the reader's active response. Importantly, it is not a monastic rule in the strict sense of the word; rather, it equips the audience with benevolent guidelines for anchoritic life, focusing on spiritual progress towards a pure and pious heart whose love then becomes the chief principle which has the power to unite man with God.

The original audience of this text were three sisters of noble birth who, while still young, renounced their worldly possessions to pursue a life of devotion, possibly sharing one anchorhold together.<sup>10</sup> Later, the text was reworked for a wider audience, both religious and lay, male and female. In the present article, though, focus will be placed on the female audience. The following section will concentrate on specific romance motifs in the light of how they were perceived by the anchoresses as well as what functions these motifs might have in the construction of the text's meaning.

No matter the background of the anchoress before she entered the cell, the act of enclosure elevated her above all the other women. She became the bride of the most supreme of all suitors and her task in the anchorage was to be constantly proving that she was worthy of such an honour. In romance, the lady who is the object of the knight's devotion is traditionally ascribed a rather passive role (she helps the knight discover his identity and fulfil his destiny, but she herself remains without much to do):<sup>11</sup> her role is that of a "public icon rather than a private agent" (Spearing 1994, 142). Women are often excluded from the knightly world of chivalry, which is predominantly a male affair. But when transplanted to a devotional context, it is true that the lady-anchoress is still portrayed as the object of love, yet being (or rather becoming) Christ's beloved means constant strife, which demands her active participation – in other words, to become the Lord's spouse is an active journey and an individual quest that the anchoress must prove to be able to undertake on her own.

In keeping with the traditional, passive role of women, the text not only describes the anchoress as the object of Christ's love and devotion, but also as the target of unwanted advances of unworthy, lustful suitors who are drawn to her by her appearance. Life in an anchorhold not only ennoble the woman from within but also endows her with attributes of nobility which are reflected in her physical appearance. The text ascribes to the anchoress physical features that reflect the then ideal of beauty which is also reiterated and reinforced in romances: because of the lack of sunlight, the anchoress is desirably fair-skinned and white-faced; her hands are beautiful because she does not have to do hard menial work.

Nu kimeth forth a feble mon, halt him thah ahelich yef he haveth a wid hod ant a loke cape,  
ant wule i-seon yunge ances, ant loki nede ase stan hu hire wlite him liki, the naveth nawt  
hire leor forbearnd i the sunne (AW, II, 82–85)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Most likely, each sister was allotted a separate cell (Warren 1985, 36).

<sup>11</sup> I am fully aware of the crude generalisation involved in such a statement. Alexander romances, as mentioned later, are a good example of strong, active female heroines.

<sup>12</sup> All extracts from *Ancrene Wisse* follow Robert Hasenfratz's edition (2000).

Now along comes a man who is weak, but thinks he deserves respect if he has a wide hood and a closed cloak, and wants to look at young anchoresses, and absolutely has to see how the beauty of a woman, whose face is not sunburnt, appeals to him. (Millett 2009, 22)

The text, in keeping with its moral, didactic message, reflects the fear and suspicion that the Church felt towards women – their outward beauty is considered a trap of sin ensnaring the wild beast of a man, who falls readily in and succumbs to the temptation.

...the put is hire feire neb, hire hwite swire, hire lichte echnen, hond, yef ha halt forth in his eche-sihthe. (AW, II, 102–103)

...the pit is her beautiful face, her white neck, her roving eyes, her hand, if she holds it out where [the man] can see it. (Millett 2009, 23)

Consequently, any concern for outward beauty should be suppressed, the stress ought to shift from the outer beauty to achieving a pure heart, which is the only thing that makes the anchoress attractive in the eyes of her heavenly suitor. For this reason, in an echo of *The Song of Song's* “nigra sum et formosa”, the anchoress is urged to imagine herself as scorched by the true sun – Christ himself. Yet perhaps the strongest rejection of fleeting, worldly and therefore insignificant beauty is suggested to her in the passage which forbids the anchoresses to admire their beautiful hands and urges them to think on the mortality of their own flesh instead:

Hire-seolf bihalden hire ahne hwite honden deth hearm moni ancre, the haveth ham to feire as theo the beoth for-idlet. Ha schulden schrapien euche dei the eorthe up of hare put the ha schulen rotien in. (AW, II, 813–16)

Admiring their own white hands is bad for many anchoresses who keep them too beautiful, such as those who have too little to do; they should scrape up the earth every day from the grave in which they will rot. (Millett 2009, 46)

The dim space of an austerely furnished anchorhold represents a fluid, highly symbolic space whose meanings shift and merge together: at one time it poses as a metaphorical prison, at another as Mary's womb, which the anchoress shares with Christ; its meaning oscillates between her grave and the place of spiritual rebirth as well as the symbolic wasteland of the Desert fathers. Importantly, the text repeatedly ascribes to the anchor house the role of a private, intimate space where the anchoress communes with her divine spouse. When she watches through her squint the priest taking communion during mass,<sup>13</sup> she is urged to:

...ther foryeoteth al the world, ther beoth al ut of bodi, ther i sperclinde luve bicluppeth ower loefmon, the into ower breostes bur is i-liht of heovene, ant haldeth him hete-veste athet he habbe i-yettet ow al thet ye eaver easkith. (AW, I, 203–206)

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<sup>13</sup> As mentioned above, anchorages were usually built next to a church and were equipped with a small opening, a squint, which allowed the recluses to observe the celebration of the mass.

...forget all the world, there be quite out of the body, there in burning love embrace your lover, who has descended from heaven into the chamber of your breast, and hold him tightly until he has granted you everything that you ask. (Millett 2009, 13)

The image of an enclosed space where lovers meet not only evokes *The Canticles* or Anselm's famous sentence in the *Proslogion*<sup>14</sup> which calls for a deeply intimate, emotional experience of faith, but is also strongly reminiscent of the romance space of the lady's bower – a space which is private, intimate and uniquely feminine in contrast to the masculine space of the hall reserved for feasts and courtly rituals (Spearing 1994, 140). In romance, entering the bower and engaging in an often highly ritualised courtly dalliance with the lady is seen as a knight's reward after undertaking a series of tests and perilous adventures. Yet here, the experience of a lovers' encounter is seen from the lady's perspective; it is presented as the anchoress's own emotional experience and a profound, deeply individual response to faith. In this respect, time spent in the anchorhold can be viewed as romanced in its "eroticization of waiting" (Wogan-Browne 2001, 35), highlighting the ecstatic moment when the soul is ravished and through love aspires to be united with Christ, its lover.

Feminist literary criticism has been prone to view such use of intimate romance imagery in *Ancrene Wisse* as belittling women's ability to form their relationship with God. Because women are in their nature emotional rather than intellectual, the *sponsa christi* motif is more fitting for them than some abstract terms of theology (Robertson 1990a, 72). Such a viewpoint seems to be echoing St. Anselm's claim that "women, above all, need a method of disciplining the heart rather than the mind" (Robertson 1990b, 173). While it is possible that women would perhaps more easily identify themselves with romance heroines, the promotion of affective response to faith in devotional literature should be perceived in a more positive and gender-neutral way. Using earthly experience (including earthly affections) as a stepping-stone to understanding spiritual, Divine love was common in the writings of the Church fathers as well as in the preaching practices of the time. One of the proponents of using concepts of earthly love as the means of attaining love which is pure and spiritual and thus leading to God was, most notably, Bernard of Clairvaux, who in *Sermo 20* from the *Canticles* claims:

I think that was the main cause why the invisible God wished to be seen in the flesh, and as man to converse with men: so as to draw all the affections of fleshly men, who could only love in a fleshly way, to the saving love of his flesh, and thus by stages to lead them to a spiritual life. (Morris 1991, 153)

In the text, the anchorhold, a sacred space reserved for the meeting with the lover Christ, also metaphorically merges with the anchoress's own body whose virginity needs to be cautiously guarded against ceaseless attacks of sin and temptation. Moral strife is thus typically construed in architectural terms as a castle of virtue under siege, with the body viewed as a "fortified enclosure of sealed and regulated entrances" (Whitehead 2003, 91). As already mentioned above, by assuming the role of its guardian and protector, the

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<sup>14</sup> "Enter into the chamber of your mind and exclude all else but God and those things which help you in finding him, close the door and seek him" (Williams 2007, 79).

woman adopts an active role in her spiritual quest, which makes her transgress into the male domain of feats of courage, usually reserved for the knight in the romances.

The motif of the soul as a besieged castle starts appearing with greater frequency in secular as well as theological texts in the thirteenth century, but its roots are much older: it features in Plato's *Timaeus*, the motif of a soul as a city falling because of moral weakness later appears in St. Augustine's *De civitate dei*, and the metaphor of the soul as a city besieged is also utilised in the writings of St. Gregory (cf. Hebron 1997, 137–39). The motif's dual attribution to secular as well as devotional tradition can be ascribed to the fact that "the castle of religious virtue begins to be elaborated by churchmen at almost precisely the same time that the castle of courtly love enters the repertoire of the French 12th century romance" (Whitehead 2003, 89–90). In both traditions, the castle is a metaphorical projection of the woman's body. Yet there is a significant difference. In the devotional, anchoritic literature, the emphasis lies in maintaining it safely enclosed at all costs, while in the romance tradition, "the castle can be taken and entered, with metaphor of temporary defence being present for erotic reasons" (Whitehead 2003, 89). Given that the medieval Church considered women weaker and more prone to failure in terms of succumbing to their desires, the text of *Ancrene Wisse* devotes considerable space to the theme of bridling one's senses, where the space of the anchorhold metaphorically merges with that of the castle which the devil keeps relentlessly attacking. To include just one example among many:

Sikerliche ure fa, the werreur of helle, he scheot, as ich wene, ma quarreus to an ancre thenne to seovene ant fifti lavedis i the worlde: the carneus of the castel beoth hire hus-thurles. (AW, II, 140–42) [Ne tote ha nawt ut at ham, leste ho the deoueles quarreus habbe amid te ehe, ear ho least wene; for he asailyes ai. Halde hire ehe inwith, for beo ho iblind earst, ho is eath-falle; ablinde the heorte, ho is eath to ouercumen and ibroht sone thurh sunne to grunde].<sup>15</sup>

Certainly our enemy, the warrior of hell, shoots (as I believe) more bolts at one anchoress than at seventy-seven ladies in the world. The embrasures of the castle are her house windows. She should not look out of them in case she gets the devil's bolts right in the eyes when she least expects it, since he is constantly attacking. She should not keep her eyes inside, because if she is blinded first, she is easily knocked down; if the heart is blinded, it is easy to overcome, and quickly brought down by sin. (Millett 2009, 24)

Depicting anchoresses as ladies in their own castle could have given them a sense of exclusiveness and a reason to construe their identity as that of high social standing. Those who entered the anchorhold from a noble background had their status confirmed, while those who came from a poorer family must have felt ennobled and socially elevated. This notion was grounded in the real circumstances of the life in an anchorhold which was, in effect, a "miniature female community" (Wogan-Browne 2001, 30) – the anchoress usually had two maids at hand who cared for her bodily needs while she, as their superior, looked after their spiritual development and made sure they would shun

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<sup>15</sup> The passage in brackets is present only in the Titus manuscript of *Ancrene Wisse* and is taken from Millett's edition (2005, 24).

sin. In this respect, *Ancrene Wisse* instructs the anchoress to read to her women from this guide, which is reminiscent of common readings in a monastery but also in a noble household. Moreover, becoming an anchoress itself meant a rise in social prestige, which is one of the great paradoxes of anchoritism. Having entered the anchorhold, anchorites were meant to be dead to the world, but they often found themselves at the very centre of their community: people revered them for their holiness, intermediary prayers as well as for their visions which cemented their status as mouthpieces of God (Holloway, Wright, Bechtold 1990, 3). Yet in keeping with its didactic tone, the text itself is well-aware of the danger of pride which such an elevated status might have ignited – it repeatedly and vehemently claims that an anchoress must never consider herself a great lady in the worldly sense:

Bihofde nawt thet swuch were leafdi of castel. Hoker ant hofles thing is, thet a smiret ancre ant ancre biburiet – for hwet is ancre-hus bute hire burinesse? (*AW*, II, 705–707)

It would not be proper for a woman like this to be the lady of the castle; it is a shameful and ridiculous thing for an anointed anchoress – and a buried anchoress, for what is her anchor-house but her grave? (Millett 2009, 43)

Instead, she needs to bear in mind that her elevated status results from the fact that God has chosen her for his beloved, and so to become an anchoress means to become a lady in his heavenly court.

Inside the anchorhold, in its silent and motionless contemplation, a fierce battle rages on, however. The devil's temptations which wage war on the anchoress's fortress are not only described in terms of weaponry, as shots and arrows, but they also take on the form of an actual person, a lecherous clergyman who approaches the anchor house to woo its occupant with sinister intent. In the following extract, the text describes this wooing and the tumultuous effect it has on the woman with a curiously keen psychological insight:

Yef ei wurtheth swa awed thet he warpe hond forth toward te thurl-clath, swiftliche anan-riht schutteth al thet thurl to, ant leoteth him i-wurthen. Alswa, sone se eaver eani feleth into ei luther speche thet falle toward ful luvē, sperreth the thurl anan-riht, ne ondsverie ye him na-wiht, ah wendeth awei with this vers, thet he hit mahe i-heren: *Declinate a me, maligni* ... Ant gath bivoren ower weoved with the *Miserere*. Ne chastie ye na swuch mon neaver on other wise, for inwith the chastiment he mahte ondsverie swa, ant blawen se litheliche, thet sum sperke mahte acwikien. Na wohlech nis se culvert as o pleinte wise, as hwa-se thus seide, “ich nalde, for-te tholie death, thenche fulthe toward te” – ant swereth deope athes – “ah thah ich hefde i-sworen hit, luvien ich mot te. Hwa is wurse then me? Moni slep hit binimeth me. Nu me is wa thet tu hit wast, ah foryef me nu thet ich habbe hit i-tald te. Thah ich schule wurthe wod, ne schalt tu neaver mare witen hu me stonde.” Ha hit foryeveth him, for he speketh se feire, speaketh thenne of other-hwet. Ah “eaver is the ehe to the wude lehe.” Eaver is the heorte i the earre speche. Yet, hwen he is forthe, ha went in hire thoht ofte swucche wordes, hwen ha schulde other-hwet yeornliche yemen. He eft secheth his point for-te breoke foreward, swereth he mot nede, ant swa waxeth thet wa se lengre se wurse. For na feondschipe nis se uvel, as is fals freondschipe. Feond the thuncheth freond is sweoke over alle. For-thi, mine leove sustren, ne yeove ye to swuch mon nan in-yong to speokene. (*AW*, II, 556–75; original emphasis)

If any man gets so carried away that he reaches out toward the window-curtain, quickly shut the window at once, and leave him alone. Similarly, as soon as any man starts on any indecent talk hinting about illicit love, close the window at once, and do not give him the slightest answer, but turn away with this verse, so that he can hear it, "Keep away from me, you wicked man..." and go up to your altar with Miserere. Never rebuke a man of this sort in any other way, and blow so gently, that some spark might be kindled. No advance is so underhand as when it comes in the form of a complaint, so someone might take this line, "I'd rather die than have lustful intentions towards you (and he swears great oaths), but even if I'd sworn not to, I can't help loving you. Can there be anyone in a worse state than me? I'm losing so much sleep over it. Now I'm sorry that you know about it; but forgive me for having told you about it. Even if it drives me mad, you'll never know what I'm feeling any more." She forgives him for it because he talks so persuasively. Then they change the subject; but *the eye still turns its gaze / towards the woodland ways*. The heart is always recalling what was said earlier. Even when he has gone, she often turns over this kind of talk in her mind, when she should be concentrating on something else. Later he looks for his moment to break the promise, swears he cannot help it, and so the damage gets steadily worse because no enmity is as bad as false friendship. An enemy who seems to be a friend is the worst traitor of all. And so, my dear sisters, do not give a man of this sort any opening to speak ... but respond to any overtures by turning away from him, just as I said above. There is no better way for you to save yourself or defeat him. (Millett 2009, 38–39; original emphasis)

To imagine a situation like this in which the anchoress is portrayed as a woman wooed and desired must have been considered pleasant for her.<sup>16</sup> It encouraged her to embrace and explore her worldly desires and elevate them by endowing them with a higher, spiritual meaning. In this way, the status of an anchoress was empowering in the sense that it gave her the power to reject unwanted, unworthy suitors and actively choose a suitor herself – the one Suitor which by far surpassed all men on earth. In this respect, the lady-anchoress bears comparison with famously bold ladies in Anglo-Norman or Alexander romances who are keen to choose their husbands themselves.<sup>17</sup>

The anchoress's privilege to actively participate in choosing her own spouse is clearly apparent in perhaps the most famous and most often quoted extract from *Ancrene Wisse*, namely the parable of the royal wooing, often used as the textbook example of the use of romance motifs in the text.

A leafdi wes mid hire fan biset al abuten, hire lond al destruet, ant heo al povre in-with an eorthe castell. A mihti kinges lufe wes thah biturnd upon hire swa unimete swithe, thet he for wohlech sende hire his sonden, an efter oðer, ofte somet monie, sende hire beawbelez bathe feole ant feire, sucurs of liveneth, help of his hehe hird to halden hire castell. Heo underfeng al as on unrecheles, ant swa wes heard i-heortet, thet hire lufe ne mahte he neaver beo the neorre. Hwet wult tu mare? He com him seolf on ende, schawde hire his feire neb, as thet he wes of alle men feherest to bihalden, spec se swithe swoteliche, ant wordes se murie, thet ha mahten deade arearen to live, wrahte feole wundres ant dude muchele meistries bivoren hire eh-sihthe, schawde hire his mihte, talde hire of his kinedom, bead to makien hire cwen of al thet he ahte. Al this ne heold nawt – nes this hoker wunder? For heo nes

<sup>16</sup> Whitehead mentions that to imagine the body as a citadel under siege was presumably a pleasurable project for the anchoress (2003: 89).

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of powerful women in Anglo-Norman romances see e.g. Weiss (1993).



neaver wurthe for-te beon his thuften, ah swa thurh his deboneirte luvē hefde overcumen him, thet he seide on ende, “Dame, thu art i-weorret ant thine van beoth se stronge thet tu ne maht nanēs-weis withute mi sucurs edfleon hare honden, thet ha ne don the to scheome death efter al thi weane. Ich chulle for the luvē of the neome thet feht up-o me ant arudde the of ham the thi death secheth. Ich wat thah to sothe thet ich schal bituhen ham neomen deathes wunde, ant ich hit wulle heorteliche for-te ofgan thin heorte. Nu thenne biseche ich the, for the luvē thet ich cuthe the, thet tu luvie me lanhure efter the ilke dede dead, hwen thu naldest lives.” Thes king dude al thus: arudde hire of alle hire van, ant wes him-seolf to wundre i-tuket ant i-slein on ende – thurh miracle aras thah from deathe to live. Nere theos ilke leafdi of uveles cunnes cunde, yef ha over alle thing ne luvēde him her-efter? Thes king is Jesu, Godes sune, thet al o thisse wise wohede ure sawle, the deofflen hefden biset. Ant he as noble wohere efter monie messagers ant feole god-deden com to pruvien his luvē ant schawde thurh cnihtschipe thet he wes luvē-wurthe, as weren sum-hwile cnihtes i-wunet to donne – dude him i turneiment ant hefde for his leoves luvē his scheld i feht as kene cniht on euche half i-thurlet. (AW, VII, 59–86)

A lady was completely surrounded by her enemies, her land laid waste, and she herself quite destitute, in a castle of earth. But a powerful king had fallen in love with her so passionately that he sent his messengers to woo her, one after another, often many together; he sent her many splendid presents of jewellery, provisions to support her, help from his noble army to hold her castle. She accepted everything as if it meant nothing to her, and was so hard-hearted that he could never come closer to winning her love. What more do you want? At last he came himself; showed her his handsome face, as the handsomest of all men in appearance; spoke so very tenderly, and with words so beguiling that they could raise the dead to life; did many amazing things and performed great feats before her eyes; demonstrated his power to her; told her about his kingdom; offered to make her queen of all he owned. All this had no effect. Wasn't this contempt extraordinary, since she was never fit to be his maidservant? But because of his gentle nature love had so overcome him that at last he said: “You are under attack, my lady, and your enemies are so strong that without my help there is no way that you can escape falling into their hands and being put to a shameful death after all your suffering. I am prepared to take on that fight for your love, and rescue you from those who are seeking your death. But I know for certain that in fighting them I will receive a mortal wound; and I am very willing to do it in order to win your heart. Now, therefore, I beg you, for the love I am showing towards you, to love me at least when this is done, after my death, although you refused to during my life.” This king did just as he had promised: he rescued her from all her enemies, and was himself shamefully ill-treated and at last put to death. But by a miracle he rose from death to life. Surely this lady would have a base nature if she did not love him after this above all things?

This king is Jesus, Son of God, who in this way wooed our soul, which devils had besieged. And he, like a noble suitor, after numerous messengers and many acts of kindness came to prove his love, and showed by feats of arms that he was worthy of love, as was the custom of knights once upon a time. He entered the tournament and, like a bold knight, had his shield pierced through and through in battle for love of his lady [...] (Millett 2009, 146–47)

The original story on which this exemplum is based, that of a king wooing a beggar maid, is ancient, common in the works of eastern patristic and monastic writers. In the western tradition, it gained popularity especially in the thirteenth century when it evolved, under the influence of the romance, into a story of a knight wanting to win the love of his lady



and eventually dying for her sake. In this form, it was often used in devotional texts as an exemplum, where it fully utilised its potential as a metaphor of Christ's self-sacrificial love of mankind and was able to place new emphasis on the personal, affective relationship between God and man.<sup>18</sup> Chivalric motifs present in this exemplum in *Ancrene Wisse* are clear and well established: a lady in distress is surrounded in her castle by her enemies; the enamoured knight-king first sends gifts and messengers to proclaim his love, then arrives himself to show her his fair face and woo her with amorous words, to ultimately prove his love when he gives his life to free the lady from her assailants. We do not learn much about the lady except for the fact that she, despite being unworthy of such a noble suitor, is reluctant to accept the king's advances.

This limited focus on the lady has led some scholars to suggest that the exemplum betrays a typically male-oriented approach in that it repeats the patterns of woman's dependence and passivity (Robertson 1990a, 70–76). Yet when understood in terms of what the parable was meant to convey to the anchoresses who read it, a different reading is possible which emphasises the need for the woman's active choice. *Ancrene Wisse* is a dramatic text, full of rhetorical questions aimed at eliciting response from its readers. It often utilises examples of misbehaving women (such as Dinah or Eve in Part II) to urge the anchoresses to repudiate such behaviour and have their moral superiority confirmed. The rhetorical question "Surely this lady would have a base nature if she did not love him after this above all things?" invites the anchoress to identify the lady as a soul haughty with sin and to feel shame and outrage at her coldness and reluctance. In doing so, she is invited to replace the lady in the parable with herself, to substitute her cold response for her own ardent love of Christ (Innes-Parker 1994, 517). It is no wonder that the parable is included in the part of text devoted to different kinds of love and is soon followed by a passage in which the whole text culminates – a passage which urges the heart, cleansed of sin, to burn with unquenchable love for the Lord to match his love of mankind, likened here to a formidable medieval incendiary weapon – Greek fire.<sup>19</sup>

This overview of romance motifs in *Ancrene Wisse* cannot but briefly address the pending question if or to what extent the anchoresses<sup>20</sup> were able to identify the romance motifs in their guide. It makes sense to assume that the original anchoresses for whom the text was written could have become acquainted with romances before entering the cell. As gentlewomen, they would have had access to some basic education: their knowledge of Latin was most likely rudimentary, just enough to be able to read their Psalter or

<sup>18</sup> For the development of the theme of Christ the lover-knight see Woolf (1986) and Robertson (1990a, 72).

<sup>19</sup> Rosemary Woolf in her discussion of the wooing knight theme stresses that this version of the exemplum is unusual in that it focuses on the king's wooing before the battle; usually the versions of this parable concentrate on the situation after the battle when the lady treasures the shirt of the dead knight as a loving memory of him (Woolf 1986, 105). I would like to suggest that the exemplum as used in *Ancrene Wisse* could be understood as an antithesis to the wooing of the lecherous clergyman mentioned above. The two episodes could be read as examples of the wooing of a bad suitor set against the wooing of the supreme suitor. This reading is supported by the fact that the text itself invites the readers to ponder its motifs carefully, to commit them to memory and constantly seek analogies between them. Moreover, both episodes involve the motif of fire: the lecherous cleric episode mentions the danger of kindling a spark of carnal love, the second extract leads to the passage which likens unquenchable love of Christ to Greek fire.

<sup>20</sup> The original three sisters or the group of twenty or more anchoresses mentioned in the manuscript *Corpus Christi* Cambridge 402.

The Book of Hours (Kline 2003, 16), but as *Ancrene Wisse* itself testifies, they were able to read and write in the vernacular and in French. Moreover, noble households were often equipped with manuscripts compiled for a family audience which often contained romances alongside saints' lives.<sup>21</sup> About the host of other anchoresses for whom the guide was intended we know nothing in terms of their social standing, reading abilities or experience. We can only assume that these would vary from person to person (Millett 1996, 88). However, even if they were not able to read romances themselves, they might have heard them read aloud or told, which would have equipped them with some knowledge of common romance motifs.<sup>22</sup>

To conclude, the more one reads the text of *Ancrene Wisse* the more it becomes evident that a life spent enclosed in an anchoritic cell should not be understood as a bleak and stern life-choice, but rather as an option women could have embraced to live a fulfilling life outside marriage. As J. Wogan-Browne points out, "virgin enclosure sounds more like a productive and busy life than a living death" (2001, 32). To cut oneself off from worldly impulses meant turning one's senses inward, to embark on an adventure and a quest for self-exploration and self-perfection. To spend life in a confined space of one's cell with nothing else to do but pray and meditate on achieving union with the best of all suitors meant that the imagination was mobilised and it needed to be fed with enough impulses. These often relied on worldly experience, but because the imagination needed to be bridled and steered in the right direction, the anchoresses were urged to use the worldly concepts as a stepping-stone to a spiritual experience. The romance motifs used and modified in *Ancrene Wisse* according to the devotional needs of the text empowered and ennobled the anchoress who was able to imagine herself as a highborn heroine in her own castle, in charge of her own destiny. Both as a lady desired and a knight triumphant. Yet her strife, unlike that of a knight, was not linear, following a series of tests and trials, but rather vertical, along the metaphorical line between heaven and earth.

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<sup>21</sup> A famous example of such a household book would be The Auchinleck manuscript (Wogan-Browne 1994, 85).

<sup>22</sup> Among these motifs are the attributes of beauty of a romance heroine, the knight saving the lady from a castle besieged by enemies, and amorous looks likened to arrows.

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**RÉSUMÉ:  
RYTÍŘSKÝ ROMÁN V SYMBOLICKÉM PROSTORU POUSTEVNÝ:  
MOTIVY RYTÍŘSKÉHO ROMÁNU V ANCRENE WISSE,  
„PRŮVODCI PRO POUSTEVNICE“**

Ve 12. století řada významných ekonomických a společenských změn podnítila intelektuální a duchovní obrodu, která kladla důraz na prozkoumávání a rozvoj individuality skrze osobní zkušenost a kultivaci ctností, což se stává také středobodem žánru rytířského románu. V náboženské sféře tyto tendence vedou ke vzniku nových forem duchovního života. Jednou z nich je i poustevnictví (anachorétství), jenž usiluje o nápodobu apoštolského života (*vita apostolica*) prvních následovníků Krista. *Ancrene Wisse* je duchovní příručkou sepsanou pro tři urozené sestry, jež zasvětily svůj život Bohu coby rekluzy. Pro text tohoto duchovního průvodce je typické použití světské obraznosti (včetně motivů převzatých z rytířského románu) za účelem duchovního poučení. Tento příspěvek rozebírá, jaké motivy z žánru rytířského románu se v textu průvodce objevují, a snaží se zhodnotit jejich smysl. V tomto směru a v kontextu žánrů rytířského románu a duchovního průvodce se soustředí na srovnání pro rytířský román typického toposu dámy v komnatě se symbolickým prostorem poustevny s ohledem na prostupnost jejich hranic. Zároveň zkoumá aktivní/pasivní roli dámy rytířského románu a poustevnice společně s jejich rolemi pasivního účastníka děje a jeho průvodce.

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**LOATHLY LADIES' LESSONS: NEGOTIATING  
STRUCTURES OF GENDER IN "THE TALE OF FLORENT",  
"THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE" AND "THE WEDDING  
OF SIR GAWAIN AND DAME RAGNELLE"**

HELENA ZNOJEMSKÁ

**ABSTRACT**

Gower's "Tale of Florent", Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale" and the anonymous romance "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle" are three late-medieval English texts that repeatedly confront their male protagonists with the problem of female desire, asking them, at each crucial stage of plot development, to acknowledge women's sovereignty in both the senses of "autonomy" and "power". It might seem that in so doing they express a critical view of established period ideas of appropriate gender roles. However, a closer look at the individual plot configurations in which the theme is explored in these texts shows a more complex set of attitudes at play; ultimately, they reveal the tensions among the various hierarchies of women's (and men's) positions which the culture sustains. At the same time, their account of a contestation of sovereignty between genders develops into a commentary on other kinds of social hierarchy, other concepts of control. Finally, the texts also negotiate the limits of the generic framework in which they operate and of the value system which it embodies.

**Keywords:** romance; fin amour; gender system; loathly lady; intertextuality, metafiction

Gower's "Tale of Florent", Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale" and the anonymous romance "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle" are three late-medieval English texts that repeatedly confront their male protagonists with the problem of female desire.<sup>1</sup> In the first instance, the men must find out what women most desire to save their own lives; in the second, they must comply with the demands of the "loathly lady" or hag who is willing to trade the answer she possesses for a promise of marital (and sexual) union; and finally, they must decline her offer which lets them shape her future destiny, and leave the matter in her hands if they are to achieve their happily-ever-after with the hag turned into a beauty. These respective steps in the men's quest – from realising the very *fact* of

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<sup>1</sup> The plot of the anonymous romance is retold, with some modifications, in the likewise anonymous ballad "The Marriage of Sir Gawain"; however, as this version was preserved with a number of substantial lacunae which preclude reliable enquiry of its take on the events, I have decided not to include it in the comparative analysis that follows.

female desire through its more or less enforced accommodation to the ultimate full and witting recognition – are highly appropriate in reflecting the answer to that initial “test question” of what women desire, namely sovereignty. At the same time, it is this insistent re-presenting and, more importantly still, the verbalisation of this proposition as a thesis in need of asserting, that is one of two key aspects differentiating the Middle English tales from Irish narratives featuring the hag-turned-beauty motif which are generally viewed as the zero point of its development (Aguirre, 275). There, the narrative is built solely around that middle incident: the hero has to venture well beyond his comfort zone and “act against both instinct and custom” (Aguirre, 276) in satisfying the hag’s demands for physical intimacy; by this, he proves himself worthy of kingship and is rewarded with the transformation of the hag – who represents the sovereignty, or rule of the land – into a lovely woman. This summary account also makes clear the other point of difference between the Middle English and the Irish tales: the shift in the application of the concept of sovereignty from the political to the domestic sphere, as well as the move from a clearly figurative to at least partly literal interpretation. In short, the Middle English narratives are much more directly concerned with who rules – or should or should not rule – whom in the relationships between men and women, in love and marriage alike. Despite the seal of approval which these texts apparently put on female sovereignty, a closer look at the individual plot configurations where this idea is explored shows a more complex set of attitudes at play, neither fully affirmative nor mere lip service which would produce a fiction of sovereignty for women in order to uphold existing gendered social structures. Ultimately, the texts reveal the tensions among the various ideologies of women’s (and men’s) positions which the culture sustains. However, there is yet another aspect that ought to be considered in the mapping of the Middle English tales’ approach to this issue: the degree to which their account of a contestation of sovereignty between genders develops into a commentary on other kinds of social hierarchy, other concepts of control. Such a translation may corroborate an impulse to deflect attention from the problems of gender, but also – paradoxically even in that very deflection – the centrality of gender as a conceptual tool in treating problems of power balance in general.

### **The Tale in the Setting: Narrators and Contexts**

In the case of Gower and Chaucer, the use and treatment of the concept of sovereignty – including its sphere(s) of reference and the value system(s) in which it is apparently or obliquely integrated – inevitably depends on the larger context of *Confessio Amantis* and *The Canterbury Tales* respectively. The most proximate – and obvious – level of mediation and positioning is naturally that of the narrator figure to whom the tale is given and who, in either case, presents it to support a specific point, as an exemplum or a *romance à thèse*. The flamboyant Wife of Bath’s ambiguous involvement with her tale is a fact notoriously noted and explored; the seemingly much more reliable figure of authority, Genius, the priest of Venus, who delivers the story in *Confessio*, might appear more neutral, with less of a personal investment in the narrative, but his double capacity as a priestly figure and as a speaker for Love also makes his exemplum charged with more meanings than that “obedience / Mai wel fortune a man to love / And sette him in his lust above” (CA, I, 1858–60).

This manoeuvring of Genius between matters of love and matters of morality then points to the next level of engagement with the theme of female sovereignty in *Confessio* and *The Canterbury Tales*: the discourses that, in their turn, shape the two narrator figures.

Gower introduces his fiction with a lengthy “Prologue” in which he offers several clues for the interpretation of his project; this initial outline, however, proves rather misleading, a proposition that must be checked and revised as the reader progresses through the text. Having first stipulated that the primary goal of writing is instruction, he admits nevertheless that “who that al of wisdom writ / It dulleth ofte a mannes wit” (CA, Prologus, 13–14) and proposes to pursue a middle course in writing “a bok between the tweie, / Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore” (18–19). The later specification sets up certain expectations as to how the focus on “lust” and “lore” is to be distributed: “this prologe is so assised / That it to wisdom al belongeth” (66–67), whereas “[w]han the prologe is so despended, / This bok schal afterward ben ended / Of love” (73–75). Yet even the remainder of the “Prologue” problematises this distinction and highlights the necessity to be wary of taking Gower’s terms at face value. It is emphatically love, more precisely *caritas*, or rather its absence, that represents the core theme of the following pessimistic survey of the current state of society (93–121): the members of individual estates each strive after their own interests, while the social love that used to bind them in pursuit of common profit has disappeared.

At the beginning of Book I, however, the narrator seems to proceed with the original plan. While the dichotomy wisdom / love proved a false lead, a new one appears with the shift from *caritas* to *naturatus amor*; the narrator pronounces the task of restoring social love by his poetry – as Arion was able to do (CA, Prologus, 1053–69) – too formidable for his abilities and proposes instead to turn to

[...] thing is noight so strange,  
Which every kinde hath upon honde,  
And wherupon the world mot stonde,  
And hath don sithen it began,  
And schal whil ther is any man;  
And that is love, of which I mene  
To trete, as after schal be sene.  
In which ther can noman him reule,  
For loves lawe is out of reule[.]  
(CA, I, 10–18)

With a profession of personal experience in the matter (no “order” in the “law of love”), the narrator assumes the persona of Amans (Lover), complaining to Venus and Cupid that his long service to his lady has brought him no reward. With that kind of formulation, we are firmly situated in the conceptual world of *fin amour*, with its privileging yet paradoxically reductive view of women. However, as suggested above, the entry of Venus’ priest, Genius, who is to guide Amans through his confession in preparation for the final intervention by Venus, destabilises and challenges that contextualisation once again. Three aspects come into play here: Genius’ own characterisation of his office and its actual execution, his literary pedigree, and finally the trajectory of the whole text. Although Genius claims to be versed primarily in matters of (heterosexual) love and to



possess only the minimal required expertise in his priestly function,<sup>2</sup> the way he guides Amans through his confession with illustrative exempla for each of the seven deadly sins – purportedly in the way they manifest in amorous matters – suggests otherwise. The greater number of his stories has general moral – or even political – relevance (Irvin, 95), with their application to the appropriate conduct in love often tenuous or left unexplained.<sup>3</sup> Thus the concern with social harmony (which transcends matters of gender, as far as the Prologue’s utter indifference to that aspect seems to suggest) overrides and incorporates the discussion of love in the narrow sense introduced at the beginning of Book I. Moreover, as Irvin argues, the same “double pull” is present in the literary background of the persona of Genius: the use of the figure in Jean de Meun’s continuation of the *Roman de la Rose* (presiding over sexual love) as opposed to that in Alain de Lille’s *De Planctu Naturae* (in effect subordinating natural to divine love) (Irvin, 80–84). Finally, the theme of self-control steadily gains importance in Genius’ narratives, building towards the climactic moment when Amans is cured of his infatuation and returns to reason.

All this suggests that the discourse of heterosexual love and, by extension, gender concerns are, if not circumscribed by, then at least confronted with other positions, whether we see this process, alongside Irvin, as an open dialogue constituted by a “paratactic” juxtaposition of clerical and what could, with a degree of caution, be labelled “courtly” perspectives and textual traditions, or whether we interpret it, with Yeager, as a special coding of social and political criticism. “The Tale of Florent” operates within this framework and the multiplicity of perspectives and points of concern outlined above shapes both its protagonist and the interplay of generic conventions which distinguishes Gower’s version of the story from the others.

The crucial factor that informs the reading of the tale presented by Alison of Bath is her ambiguous position – as a character – in relation to the bulk of antimatrimonial/misogynist textual tradition which she references and attacks in her “Prologue” – and which simultaneously produces her (Hansen, 26–57). The persistent problem that arises here is precisely the tension between the apparent “roundedness” of her character, the sense of a subject speaking in a distinct and unmistakably individual voice, and the equally evident fact that all this is in the last instance constructed from established textual material. If we privilege the former aspect, we can read her narrative as a realisation of the point which she has made in the “Prologue”, namely that

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<sup>2</sup> For I with love am al withholde,  
So that the lasse I am to wyte,  
Thogh I ne conne bot a lyte  
Of othre thynges that ben wise:  
I am noght tawht in such a wise;  
For it is noght my comun us  
To speke of vices and vertus,  
Bot al of love and of his lore (CA, I, 62–69)

See Irvin 2014, 90, for a detailed discussion of the implications of that statement for the interpretation of *Confessio*.

<sup>3</sup> Irvin argues otherwise in *The Poetic Voices of John Gower*: “Gower stresses the analogous relationship between tales of love and tales of politics, usually by Genius telling an exemplary tale that primarily concerns politics or ethics, and either Amans asking specifically for a tale in the “cause of love” or Genius stating directly that such a political or ethical story is analogous” (95). My point is that, while this is true, the precise nature of the analogy is often left unexpressed.



“if wommen hadde writen stories,  
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,  
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse  
Than all the mark of Adam may redresse.”  
 (“The Wife of Bath’s Prologue”, 693–96)

The tale would then represent a “turning of tables” on the dominant clerical discourse, constructed to vindicate the Wife’s position of resistance, with the individual characters in the story filling a pattern designed to legitimise female sovereignty in marriage which Alison claims for herself but for which she cannot find authoritative support in her “Prologue”. At the same time, such a perspective must accommodate the fact that the Wife’s “characteristic voice” apparently disappears precisely at that moment in the narrative which invests the powerful woman with indisputable moral authority – her “lecture” on true gentility (which also moves the argument of the tale beyond its otherwise heavily gendered focus). The match between the arguments advanced in that crucial passage and those voiced elsewhere by Chaucer in his authorial persona, as well as the appeal to authorities which he references in that capacity, might lead us to read this move as a strategic intervention from a superior level, a gesture endorsing Alison’s theses. Conversely, however, it may equally well produce the effect of an ironic distancing of the tale from its teller, signalling a mismatch between the Wife’s position as presented in the “Prologue” and the argument of “her” narrative, which would thus expose rather than justify her stance. Ultimately, then, it would underscore the character’s textual origins, its constructedness – with perhaps a concomitant deflating effect for the issue of female sovereignty.

“The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle” has no such context that would supply additional interpretive perspectives beyond those established by the tale itself; apparently, it constitutes its own value system. The complications it offers in this regard – complications that make it more appropriate to speak of value systems in the plural – consist in its regular referencing of the customary features of what could be called the universe of popular Arthurian romance (set scenes, type characters) and the slanting which it effects in the process. The other problematizing element, often in tension with the first, is its very vocal narrator (in itself an established aspect of popular romance) who supplies his own much-biased perspective; the problem being that the bias often clashes with what the plot presents. While the tale’s Arthur may come across as a rather incompetent, flawed character, the narrator insists that he is the paragon of chivalry. Rebecca A. Davis lists other, more structural “narratorial blunders”, arguing for an overall effect and status of the tale as a parody of romance along the lines of “The Tale of Sir Thopas”, with “an inept narratorial persona designed by the poet to create humor in the manner of Chaucer’s hapless and unreliable narrators” (Davis, 431 ff). She also proposes intertextual links between the “Wedding” and “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, reading the former not as a debased romance catering to its audience’s taste for crude humour but as a sophisticated literary game. This is an important insight which should be kept in mind when we compare the management of the plot in the “Wedding” with the more compact versions by Gower and Chaucer. At the same time, it would be inadequate to reduce the agenda of the “Wedding” to the comedic aspect only; within that framework, it negotiates serious issues with an arguably broader outlook than either Gower’s or Chaucer’s narratives.

## The Riddle of Women's Desire: Pattern of Crime and Punishment?

Perhaps because the tales, their differences notwithstanding, are still perceived as analogues, individual developments of one ancestral version, there is a tendency to reduce the string of incidents which they recount to a single symbolic pattern. We can see this in Mary Leech's assertion that the plot uniformly evolves from the male protagonist's offence and his consequent disempowerment: "Each of the knights has crossed the moral boundaries of society. To atone for this transgression, authority is taken away from the knight and put in the hands of another" (Leech, 217). The transfer of power also involves multiple inversions of established social hierarchies: a man has to submit to a woman, a sovereign to a subject, an aristocrat to a commoner (cf. Leech, 218). Though Leech focuses mostly on how this process manifests itself in the intervention of the loathly lady, it is clear that in the first instance it concerns the protagonist and the person who poses the riddle, which is apparently meant to be insoluble for the man.

Strictly speaking, this model only applies (with a minor but crucial reservation concerning the function of the riddle) to Chaucer's version of the tale. Unlike the other two texts, his narrative puts the protagonist's guilt beyond any doubt. Moreover, it is such that it makes his subsequent subjection to the will of women an especially apt reaction, introducing the theme of female sovereignty even before the test question is asked and identifying it as the central concern of the narrative (Bollard 1986, 55): "He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn, / Of whiche mayde anon, *maugree hir heed*, / By verray force he rafte hir maydenhed" ("The Wife of Bath's Tale", 886–88; emphasis mine). The formulation does not only identify the crime as rape, but expressly calls attention to the knight's disregard for the woman's own desires and her autonomy as a human being, which is one of the aspects of "sovereignty" (Thomas, 89) – a fact that could, but significantly does not, go without saying.

The culpable knight ends up in the jurisdiction of the Queen and her ladies; he is given the chance to avoid capital punishment if he can find an undisputed answer to what women most desire. Women determine the conditions for his survival, and this is made to depend on his ability to seriously consider not what he wants, but what they may want. Considering the act that has landed him in this situation, his chances of success would seem to be minimal, and the Queen's verdict would appear to merely make his penalty resound with a sense of poetic justice. However, it is introduced as a mitigation of the King's original strict judgment, which demanded immediate execution, in a scene that resonates with analogous cases of intervention by women in romance narratives, designed to temper justice by mercy:<sup>4</sup>

But that the queene and othere ladyes mo  
So longe preyeden the kyng of grace,  
Til he his lyf hym graunted in the place,  
And yaf hym to the queene al at hir wille,  
To chese, wheither she wolde hym save or spille.  
("The Wife of Bath's Tale", 894–98)

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<sup>4</sup> One representative example may be found in "The Knight's Tale", where the Queen and the ladies of the court plead for the lives of Palamon and Arcite, sentenced to death by Theseus (see 1742–61).

As we shall see, in the other versions the riddle is adopted as a substitute solution in circumstances which make the instant dispatching of the protagonist problematic. Here the Queen's strategy appears more ambiguous: it may admittedly be interpreted as a step which allows women in particular, not society in general, to avenge a wrong done to a woman; however, as numerous articles commenting on the matter attest,<sup>5</sup> it perhaps more likely aims at the disciplining of the rapist knight in a kind of rehabilitation programme.

In "The Wife of Bath's Tale" the riddle of women's desire is formulated in the central space of the royal court, showing its programmatic focus on the issue; in the other versions, it comes to be asked in the literal and/or symbolic margin. In the "Tale of Florent", it is the balancing of the central and the liminal features of the society at the marches of the Empire where the test is designed – together with the characterisation of the protagonist – that forms a part of its meaning in the larger context of Gower's text. Although Florent, emphatically the exemplary knight,<sup>6</sup> comes to the borderland territory "strange adventures forto seche" (CA, I, 1416), what he finds there is a community that knows and respects the values to which he himself adheres. However, that respect is clearly formal rather than genuine: the lord of the country does not hesitate to mount an attack on a single knight errant, capturing him and detaining him in his castle. What makes the protagonist's position precarious is the fact that, defending himself, he has killed the lord's son. Significantly, the narrative scrupulously exonerates Florent of any moral transgression: he has fought fair in an unfair fight. His opponents are torn between a savage desire for revenge and a recognition that its execution would be beyond the pale of chivalric behaviour. At this moment, the grandmother of the man killed, an old woman "the slyheste / Of alle that men knewe tho" (CA, I, 1442–43), comes to the rescue: she will turn Florent's exemplary chivalry and courtesy against him. In effect, she stages a perfect romance quest for him as a condition for his survival, confident that his regard for honour will make him accept the terms:

With that sche feigneth compaignie,  
 And seith: "Florent, on love it hongeth  
 Al that to myn axinge longeth:  
 What alle wommen most desire  
 This wole I axe, and in thempire  
 Wher as thou hast most knowlechinge  
 Tak conseil upon this axinge."  
 (CA, I, 1478–84)

Since the text makes clear that she relies on the effectivity of this stratagem to "bringe him inne, / That sche schal him to dethe winne" (CA, I, 1447–48), her referencing of the discourse of *fin amour* would seem to suggest an awareness – and a thematizing – of its

<sup>5</sup> Recently Paul Gaffney, "Controlling the Loathly Lady, or What Really Frees Dame Ragnelle", 154, or Elizabeth M. Biebel-Stanley, "Sovereignty through the Lady: *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and the Queenship of Anne of Bohemia", 76, both in S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter (eds), *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales*.

<sup>6</sup> Irvin classifies his characterisation – "Of armes he was desirous, / Chivalerous and amorous" (CA, I, 1413–414) – as "formulaic" (102).

schizophrenic positioning of women: ostensibly revered but ultimately objectified. In the end, Florent's performance in his quest will indicate whether the culture of the court, of which he is the representative, proves as instrumental and superficial in its approach to *courtoisie* and chivalric values as his opponents. In accordance with Gower's concerns in the *Confessio* at large, the issue of gender relationships thus metonymically reflects on problems of moral integrity in general.

If both Chaucer and Gower introduce the problem of female desire as a test that women pose to men, establishing the gender perspective as dominant from the start, the "Wedding" complicates matters by splitting both the "adventure" and the role of the protagonist between Arthur and Gawain. In the first part, Arthur, while hunting, is confronted by a man with a grudge: a knight (who, like so many antagonists in Arthurian romance, spans the insider/outsider categories in the strange mixture of savage and "civilised" behaviour, disregard of and respect for chivalric values which he exhibits; see Jost, 143–44) threatens to kill the unarmed king in revenge for what he presents as an unlawful dispossession, Arthur's abuse of the royal prerogative:

Thou hast me done wrong many a yere  
And wofully I shall quytte the here;  
I hold thy lyfe days nyghe done.  
Thou hast gevyn my landes in certayn  
With greatt wrong unto Sir Gawen.  
("The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle", 55–59)<sup>7</sup>

Apparently, the knight does not put much faith in Arthur's sense of honour, because he refuses the king's promise of redress; he does not trust the king to keep his word – rightly so, as the subsequent development makes clear. Though Arthur vows to keep their agreement secret, he needs little persuasion to confide in Gawain, implicating him in the adventure. The challenger-knight's own honour, nevertheless, proves a sufficient leverage in the king's ensuing negotiation with his opponent: Arthur manages to strike a compromise – his death warrant will be recalled if he finds the answer to the by now notorious question. This summary survey of the opening makes clear that in the case of the "Wedding", the scrutiny of existing structures of power and the society's ideas of itself does not initially entail issues of gender; what sense, then, can be made of the riddle of female sovereignty in this configuration? What makes the strange knight an authority on women's desire? Unless we dismiss this seemingly arbitrary connection as the result of an incompetent handling of the plot as it expands to incorporate the conventions of Arthurian romance, we may conclude, with Russell A. Peck, that "here women equate with the underprivileged, those dominated by patriarchal rule that abuses its privileges" (Peck, 123).

The gender perspective comes to the fore in the second part of the narrative; at its inception, however, the intended function of the riddle seems to be predicated on the understanding that Arthur will not see beyond the individual failure in his exercise of royal power (which he acknowledges) to the underlying problem. Arthur's performance

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<sup>7</sup> The implication of Gawain in the land dispute might indicate that the putative ancestral version of the tale, like Gower's and Chaucer's versions, could have featured a single protagonist; any speculations to that effect, however, must remain only tentative.

throughout the tale places an ironic overtone on the narrator's initial praise of the king as one who "Of alle kynges [...] berythe the flowyr, / And of alle knyghtod he bare away the honour, / Wheresoevere he went" ("Wedding", 7–9). While the protagonists of the other versions have to offer themselves to gain the answer to the riddle, Arthur has to offer Gawain. The pattern of transgression and disempowerment, detected by Leech, is limited to Arthur; as Gawain takes over, the narrative shifts to the model found in "The Tale of Florent", that of an exemplary representative of the society through whom the integrity of its values is tested.

### The Woman in Charge: The Loathly Ladies

The "Wife of Bath's Tale" continues its account of the disciplining of the culprit knight as he submits to the power of the mysterious "olde wyf" who offers to help him. The characterisation of this "loathly lady", together with several specific developments which distinguish Chaucer's version of the plot from both the other narratives, underscore this function of the protagonist's experience. What sets the "wyf" apart from her counterparts is, first and foremost, the reticence in the description of her appearance: "a fouler wight ther may no man devyse" ("The Wife of Bath's Tale", 999) is all the text has to say in that respect. The plot, of course, cannot do without the element of her ugliness. The absence of detail, however, has two concomitant effects: first, it brings into play the problem of perception and reality which resurfaces in the final transformation scene, and second, by refusing to engage with the grotesque, it introduces the woman as an essentially dignified character and – potentially at least – a figure of authority. Paradoxically, perhaps, her status is further reinforced by her unassuming, matter-of-fact behaviour – a quiet power.

At the same time, the theme of misleading appearances resonates in the way she orchestrates her offers and demands into a lesson for the knight. Unlike the other loathly ladies, she claims no preternatural knowledge of his plight; she lets him control the situation, decide whether he will confide in her. When she professes her willingness to share her knowledge with him, to give him a definitive answer to the riddle, she does not specify her condition but asks an unnamed boon: "The nexte thyng that I requere thee, / Thou shalt it do, if it lye in thy myght" ("The Wife of Bath's Tale", 1010–1012). It is only when the knight presents his answer before the court of ladies that she reveals her meaning – "Bifor the court thanne preye I thee, sir knyght, / Quod she, that thou me take unto thy wyf, / For wel thou woost that I have kept thy lyf" ("The Wife of Bath's Tale", 1054–56). Rather than testing his *courtoisie* – for there is little to be tested – she asserts her sovereignty over him and subjects him to what amounts to a complete role reversal in what could be seen as a "socially approved", institutionalized version of the initial scenario. "The hubris of the knight's act of rape invokes the nemesis by which his own flesh is surrendered to the humiliating role of sex object" (Carter 2003, 336–37). His reaction, "For Goddes love, as chees a newe requeste, / Taak al my good, and lat my body go!" ("The Wife of Bath's Tale", 1060–61), confirms that he understands the point. But he does not understand the lesson.

Gower and the "Wedding" alike place their emphases very differently from Chaucer. From the moment Gawain takes over from Arthur as the protagonist in the latter

text, these narratives agree in shaping the events that surround and follow the loathly lady's revelation of the riddle's solution as a test of the man's integrity. Nevertheless, they develop widely dissimilar strategies in approaching this task.

In contrast with the public and legal framing of Florent's initial "covenant" – the conditions of his "quest" (cf. Peck, 110–111) – his dealings with the "lothly wommannysch figure" (CA, I, 1530) are conducted strictly in private. This is a central innovation in Gower's version of the tale, allowing for a unique insight into the protagonist's thoughts in rapport with the confessional framework of the text. The terms of his agreement with the woman having been set in advance, the challenge for Florent is not just to see it through in outward conformity (his first impulse, to marry her as she demands but live separated from her, hoping for her early death), but to accept it as a set of obligations that he acknowledges internally: respect for both "thonour of wommanhiede" (CA, I, 1719) and "strengthe of matrimoine" (CA, I, 1777).

Interpreting the conceptual framework of the portrayal "of wommen [...] thunsem-lieste" (CA, I, 1625) and relating it to the substance of Florent's test is not easy. The text employs some clearly dehumanising expressions, such as "this foule grete coise" ["this foul great rump"] (CA, I, 1734); overall, however, the detailed description of the woman represents a variation on the conventional catalogue of female beauty employed in both romance and love lyric, with the individual features deformed by age. While Sarah Allison Miller has traced the connection in medieval discourses of the aged female body with ideas of monstrosity, which it embodies through its worrying dissolution of the perfectly ordered whole (Miller, 1–7), the point here seems to lie rather in the referencing of the process of idealising objectification of women in the abovementioned genres and in the discourse of *fin amour* in general. The old hag represents a challenge to that aspect of the value system which has produced Florent the perfect knight; he must resist the (unacknowledged) limitations of that system. An additional element which briefly surfaces in the description of Florent's wedding night is the switch into fabliau mode as the hag's playful behaviour replicates the derisive description of the January – May marriage (see "The Merchant's Tale", 1795–1841), a step which may be perceived as yet another way of problematising the romance framework of the tale.

Ragnelle's characterisation in the "Wedding" employs the same strategy which appears in "The Tale of Florent": her description likewise proceeds antithetically through the usual praise-list of a woman's features, but here the emphasis is placed on the animalistic and the plainly monstrous:

She had two tethe on every syde  
As borys tuskes, I wolle nott hyde,  
Of lengthe a large handfulle.  
The one tusk went up and the other doun.  
A mowthe fulle wyde and fowlle igrown,  
With grey herys many on.  
Her lyppes laye lumpryd on her chyn;  
Nek forsothe on her was none iseen –  
She was a lothly on!  
("Wedding", 548–56)

Leech relates her portrayal to the Bakhtinian concept of the grotesque, arguing that such representation marks Ragnelle as a challenge to the society's ideas of order (Leech, 214).<sup>8</sup> This interpretation agrees well with other aspects of her characterisation. Equipped as a lady, insisting on her status while behaving in an extremely unladylike fashion,<sup>9</sup> she is a "social monster" (Williams-Munger, 4), an embodied boundary-crossing. This is also confirmed by the narrator's critical and mocking comments – since, as we have seen, he regularly acts as the mouthpiece of unreflected convention, here he expresses Ragnelle's status as the source of social anxiety.

With respect to Gawain, the situation in the "Wedding" represents, in a sense, the obverse of what we find in Gower's narrative. The gender perspective here produces some very unexpected positionings. Due to Arthur's role in the tale, Gawain, in effect, enters an arranged marriage with Ragnelle (Donnelly, 328). Having been introduced as the perfect knight through his role in the homosocial structures of Arthur's court, he is now paradoxically feminised. Throughout the account of the organisation of the wedding, and then of the public spectacle of the marriage ceremony and feast, he is being disposed of – silent, obedient, obliging.<sup>10</sup> While we are made privy to everybody's feelings of disgust and unease – from Arthur through Guinevere and her ladies to the unnamed wedding guests – the only person whose thoughts are hidden from us is Gawain.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, his reticence attests to his supreme courtesy, his acting in "thonour of wommanhiede" no matter how repulsive the individual specimen; on the other, however, the role reversal to which he is subjected is clearly also a part of the test. As in Gower, this ambiguous and contradictory positioning of both characters reveals the conflicts inherent in the value system of romance discourse.

### Women's Sovereignty: The Resolutions

The protagonist's journey and its meaning – the thesis or lesson that each of the three tales presents – is completed in the scene which ends in the consummation of the marriage and its aftermath. The disciplining of the wilful knight in "The Wife of Bath's Tale", which he kept resisting for so long, has apparently proved successful; he has been made

<sup>8</sup> Her analysis of the implications of portraying Ragnelle as grotesque offers numerous points of contact with Miller's study of medieval ideas of monstrosity.

<sup>9</sup> Her failure to conform to the properly feminine behaviour manifests in two aspects: first, her overbearing assertiveness with which she orders everybody around, and second, her eating habits which reverse the topos of decorous table-manners as an integral part of a woman's erotic appeal, famously referenced in the portrait of the Prioress in the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*.

<sup>10</sup> Significantly, Ragnelle communicates in this matter with Arthur, not with Gawain:

"Arthoure, Kyng, lett fetche me Sir Gaweyn,  
Before the knyghtes, alle in hyng,  
That I may nowe be made sekyl.  
In welle and wo trowithe plyghte us togeder  
Before alle thy chyalry.  
This is your graunt; lett se, have done.

Sett forthe Sir Gawen, my love, anon [...]" (525–31)

<sup>11</sup> Again, a useful point of comparison here would be the "default" distribution of roles in Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale", with its focus on the knight January's desires and expectations, matched with May's silence and her role as an object acted upon; see ll. 1795–1841.



to see the error of his ways and has finally reformed. Florent and Gawain have stood the test of their courtesy and integrity and emerged the consummate specimens of virtue and chivalry they promised throughout to be. All reap their more or less well-earned reward. At the same time, this crucial moment rarely comes without an element of subversion which puts the respective lessons in question or which complicates their interpretation.

The “Tale of Florent” proves to be the least troubled in this sense. Step by step, the protagonist has subordinated his will to what he recognises as the consequences of both his pledge and (anachronistically, as the story is set in the time of Emperor Claudius) the sacrament of matrimony – till the ultimate moment of physical intimacy, which he still shuns. When his wife reminds him of his marriage vows, “he herde and understod the bond” (CA, I, 1798); he turns to face her, only to find his ugly old spouse transformed into a beautiful young lady. When – in a proper wifely manner – she respectfully wards off his embrace and announces that he has to choose between having her beautiful in the day or at night, he responds with

I not what ansuere I schal yive:  
Bot evere whil that I may live,  
I wol that ye be my maistresse [...]  
Ches for ous bothen, I you preie;  
And what as evere that ye seie,  
Riht as ye wole so wol I.  
(CA, I, 1823–31)

With that, the lady has been “mad [...] sovereign” (CA, I, 1834): not only in the sense given as the answer to the riddle of female desire (“alle wommen lievest wolde / Be sovereign of mannes love” (CA, I, 1608–1609), but also in being liberated from the constraint which her stepmother’s curse placed on her

[...] til I hadde wonne  
The love and sovereignete  
Of what knyht that in his degre  
Alle othre passeth of good name:  
And, as men sein, ye ben the same,  
The dede proeveth it is so;  
(CA, I, 1846–51)

The curse lifted, she fully regains her proper beautiful form. Gower thus brings the narrative to a close with all the plot elements integrated in a system of mutual support.<sup>12</sup> Florent’s aligning of his will with that of his “maistresse” concludes his test and qualifies him for the task of breaking her enchantment. The narrative also finally reconciles the potential tensions initially developed between “loves lawe” and Christian morality, as it

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<sup>12</sup> The ending even substantiates the explanation the loathly lady appends to her assertion of sovereignty in love as the universally valid goal of female desire:

“For what womman is so above,  
Sche hath, as who seith, al hire wille;  
And elles may sche noght fulfillle  
What thing hir were lievest have.” (CA, I, 1610–1613)



brings together obedience in love and obedience to “the reule of conscience” (CA, I, 1236) and – provisionally at least – integrates the ideals of Christian marriage and of *fin amour*, purged of the contradictions in their attitude to women.

The knight in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, meanwhile, continues an extremely intrac-table learner. He resents being trapped in a marriage with someone whom he sees as so repulsive, so much his inferior: “Thou art so loothly and so oold also / And therto comen of so lough a kynde, / That litel wonder is thogh I walwe and wynde” (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, 1100–1103). Although it may not be immediately clear whether his professed concern with his wife’s status is not more of a nominal grievance, added to give weight to the much more acutely felt problem of her physique, the presence of both the sensual and the “rational” objection is vital for the reading of the tale’s climactic scene. The wife states she could “amende al this” (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, 1106) – and proceeds to take apart the knight’s complaints one by one, starting precisely with that last “rational” argument of her insufficient “gentillesse”. “He is gentil that dooth gentil dedis” (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, 1170), she maintains: nobility proceeds from virtuous conduct, a thesis which she supports with a dazzling range of authorities, starting with the Gospel and ending with Dante. If the knight accepts her conclusions, she has not only “amended” her fault but proved herself superior to her husband; the same holds for his other objections, which are, moreover, in the last instance always related to the central idea of virtue.

Yet, after all this, the wife suddenly offers a contrary way of “amendment” – now she is willing to satisfy her husband’s “worldly appetyt” (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, 1218). The dilemma she poses to him relates back to her “lecture”, juxtaposing virtue with sensual pleasure. More importantly, though, she offers him control not only of her looks, but of her behaviour – going a step beyond the other versions in which the choice only concerns the lady’s appearance. This large concession seems the more generous given that, unlike Ragnelle and Florent’s lady, she is not subject to any magical disfigurement imposed from the outside; the woman’s form is entirely in her own power, which she now seems to be giving up. But there is a catch: it is either her looks or her behaviour that can be to the knight’s liking – he can choose to have her old and ugly but good and obliging, or young and fair, but beyond her husband’s control. Within the *romance à thèse* framework, the optimistic reading of what follows would have the knight realise the problematic nature of his “worldly appetyt” and, recognising his wife’s superior moral stature, pass the choice to her. In this last instance, his “rehabilitation programme”, not going very well up to this point, would switch into a test which proves the protagonist has finally been reformed by his wife’s lecture: he no longer wishes to impose his will on women (Passmore, 21–23); “Thanne have I gete of yow maistrie, quod she, / Syn I may chese and governe as me lest? / Ye, certes, wyf, quod he, I holde it best” (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, 1234–36).

His pass token is what feminist readings generally renounce – instead of punishment for the rape he committed, he reaps reward for merely the faintest suggestion of improvement:<sup>13</sup> “I wol be to yow bothe! / This is to seyn, ye, bothe fair and good” (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, 1240–41). Even if we read the wife’s obedience “in every thyng / That myghte

<sup>13</sup> See Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 129; Lynne Dickson, “Deflection in the Mirror: Feminine Discourse in *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*”, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 15 (1993): 89; Hansen, “The Wife of Bath and the Mark of Adam”, 33–34.

doon hym plesance or likyng” (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, 1255–56) as applying only to the moment when they consummate their marriage, the resolution of the tale still places his desire first, exactly where it was at the beginning. The Wife of Bath’s *thèse*, despite her apparent dissent in the Prologue, seems ultimately to endorse the patriarchal order. After all, she constructs her tale as a parallel to her account of her dealings with her last husband: there, too,

[...] with muchel care and wo,  
We fille acorded by us selven two. [...]  
And whan that I hadde geten unto me  
By maistrie, al the soveraynetee, [...]  
After that day we hadden never debaat.  
God help me so, I was to hym as kynde  
As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde”  
 (“The Wife of Bath’s Prologue”, 811–24)

The net result may then seem to be the co-opting of both Alison and her tale by the existing system.

There is, however, the conventional concluding prayer (a feature appearing, for example, in the “Wedding”) that instead of sealing that closure shows the Wife blithely ignoring both the moral dimension of her own tale and its resolution – the mutuality which ultimately reinstates masculine “sovereynete”:

And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende  
In parfit joye;-and Jesu Crist us sende  
Housbondes meeke, yonge, fressh abedde,  
And grace toverbyde hem that we wedde.  
 (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, 1257–60)

This epilogue ironically replays Alison’s manipulations of “auctoritee” in her Prologue and ultimately points to the impossibility of controlling the meaning of any text.

The climactic scene and its aftermath in the “Wedding” continues to work with the gender reversals and the confrontation of homosocial and heterosexual relationships introduced in the preceding section of the narrative. Gawain’s marriage to Ragnelle has been presented as his fulfilling of a pledge given not to her but to Arthur;<sup>14</sup> it is a commonly held view that, when it comes to the moment when Gawain should perform his marital duty, he only offers to do so when his wife reminds him of his obligation to his king (Caldwell, 247; Leech, 224): “[...] for Arthours sake kysse me att the leste; [...] Sir Gawen sayd, ‘I wolle do more / Then for to kysse, and God before!’” (“Wedding”, 637–39). Yet this is dubious, at the very least, for Ragnelle also appeals to Gawain’s respect for his marriage vows – and for her own wishes: “A, Sir Gawen, syn I have you wed, / Shewe me your cortesy in bed; / With ryghte itt may nott be denyed” (“Wedding”, 629–31) – “I pray you do this att my request” (“Wedding”, 636). The point seems to lie precisely in the juxtaposition of these two kinds of commitment, which at this moment are working towards

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<sup>14</sup> “Syr, I am redy of *that I you hyghte*, / Alle forwardes to fulfylle” (“Wedding”, 534–35; emphasis mine).

the same end but which will be placed in opposition in the dilemma that the lady poses to Gawain: he can have her beautiful during the day for everybody to see, or at night for his private enjoyment. The first option would make her “the perfect trophy wife” (Bugge 2004, 205), a currency in Gawain’s homosocial relations; the second prioritises the heterosexual liaison.

Of all the protagonists, Gawain goes the furthest in his respect for and deference to Ragnelle. Still playing the woman’s role in traditional marriage, he does not only acknowledge her sovereignty, but places himself entirely in her power: “Bothe body and goodes, hartt, and every dele, / Ys alle your oun, for to by and selle – / That make I God avowe!” (“Wedding”, 682–84). This breaks Ragnelle’s curse, and she fully recovers her true form. She also recovers her properly feminine attitude: no longer the bossy shrew, she publicly vows obedience to Gawain the following morning. He, in turn, promises her his love in what appears to be a secular version of the medieval marriage ceremony, with its different injunctions for the husband (“to love and to cherish” his spouse) and the wife (“to love, cherish, and to obey” hers) (“The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony” [from the *Sarum Missal*], 375). Such a resolution seems to leave no space for subversion; once evil has been defeated through Gawain’s exemplary chivalry, everybody settles comfortably into their proper gender roles and order is restored with congratulations and reconciliations on all sides, including the disgruntled knight, Ragnelle’s brother.

One thing, however, remains unreconciled: Gawain’s homosocial and heterosexual bonds. Even in his first confrontation with Arthur the morning after the wedding night, he displays a so far unprecedented independence. When the king bids him get up, he retorts: “[...] Sir Kyng, sicurly, / I wold be glad, and ye wold lett me be, / For I am fulle welle att eas” (“Wedding”, 733–35). This sets the key for his subsequent neglect of his knightly duties, when “as a coward” he stays at home with his wife and stops frequenting tournaments, which somewhat nettles Arthur. The ending thus problematises the possibility of harmonising individual aspects of both the romance discourse and the patriarchal order. Ultimately, this tension has to be violently eliminated by Ragnelle’s untimely death, summarily presented by the narrator in his role as the mouthpiece of conventional perspective (cf. Leech, 225–27).

In each of the three tales, the theme of female sovereignty initiates a complex exploration of society’s ideas of appropriate gender roles and of the social and conceptual orders into which they fit. Moreover, the narratives often use gender terms to comment on various concepts of hierarchy in general: in Chaucer, the contestation of power between genders occasions a discussion of the foundations of social rank and their validity; the splitting of the protagonist role and the quest in the “Wedding”, together with its thematising of the social marginalisation of the heroine, suggest that it uses women partly as a figure for the disempowered in general. The texts also negotiate the limits of the generic framework in which they operate and of the value system which it embodies. The “Wedding” parodies the conventions of popular romance, but it goes beyond just a literary game in the way it exposes the tensions between the constituent aspects of the concepts of chivalry and *courtoisie*. In his rendering of the tale, Gower allusively comments on the internal contradictions within the concept of *fin amour* so central to romance, its critique opening the way for an appeal to Christian morality as a superior system. Here,

at this early point in the *Confessio Amantis* project, *caritas* comes to the rescue of *amor* and romance is saved, though at a price. The lecture on true gentility in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” would seem to point to a similar concern with morality and a questioning of the romance genre on Chaucer’s part, but the inconsistencies in the narrative voice as well as in the narrator’s stance in what is ostensibly a vindication of her argument in the “Prologue” show that, exactly like the Prologue, the text brings to the fore the problems of representation and construction of meaning in general. Admittedly, each in its own way, the tales tend toward a closure that affirms existing social and discursive structures; however, what they ultimately show, in their various loose ends and/or more or less violent checks, is that such closure cannot really be sustained.

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**RÉSUMÉ:**

**DÁMY ŠEREDY A JEJICH PONAUCENÍ: ZKOUMÁNÍ GENDEROVÝCH STRUKTUR V „POVÍDCE O FLORENTOVI“, „POVÍDCE ŽENY Z BATHU“ A „SVATBĚ PANA GAWAINA A PANÍ RAGNELLE“**

Tři pozdně středověké anglické texty, Gowerova Povídka o Florentovi, Chaucerova Povídka ženy z Bathu a anonymní rytířský román Svatba pana Gawaina a paní Ragnelle, opakovaně konfrontují svého hrdinu s otázkou ženské touhy. V každém z ústředních bodů zápletky protagonista musí vzít na vědomí suverenitu žen, ve dvojnásobném významu autonomie a moci. Mohlo by se tedy zdát, že jejich smyslem je kritika ustáleného soudobého pojetí genderových rolí; bližší analýza toho, jak se téma rozvíjí v obměnách základní zápletky každého z textů, však ukazuje, že jejich postoj je komplexnější a odhaluje spíše napětí mezi různými modely postavení žen i mužů koexistujícími v dané kultuře. Zároveň popis boje o suverenitu mezi pohlavími slouží i k ohledávání jiných druhů sociální hierarchie a pojetí moci. Texty konečně zkoumají také hranice žánru, v jehož prostoru se pohybují, a jeho hodnotový systém.

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**“I NEVER LIK’D THEE HALF SO WELL IN PETTICOATS”:  
THE DISGUISE OF GENDER IN RESTORATION DRAMA**

SOŇA NOVÁKOVÁ

**ABSTRACT**

The arrival of actresses during the Restoration greatly affected the presentation of female characters, since the body of the woman on the stage was heavily sexualised. Actresses concretised the erotics of the Restoration playhouse and theatregoers took much pleasure in seeing actresses perform in roles that were fashioned to exploit the possibilities offered by the presence of women. Dramatists often put women in trousers, in what were known as “breeches roles”, as a way of displaying women’s bodies. Compared to the multi-layered functions of cross-dressing in Renaissance drama, such disguise became frequently a titillating device. However, there are several plays in this period that employ the cross-dressing motif to offer a more subversive critique of conventional attitudes toward female sexuality. This article will focus on Aphra Behn’s *The Widdow Ranter* (1690) and Thomas Southerne’s *Sir Anthony Love* (1691), plays which feature an androgynous central figure, a woman whose male dress is not a temporary disguise, a mask, but an expression of her character. *Sir Anthony Love/Lucia* uses the freedom of male dress to enjoy, express and enrich herself, and lay her own snares. An androgynous figure of a different type plays a prominent part in the comic plotline of Behn’s tragicomic *The Widdow Ranter*. *Ranter* swears, smokes a pipe, drinks punch and plans to fight a duel with her lover as a way of courting him. Such Amazon figures are often introduced in Restoration drama only to be ultimately subdued by men. As this article intends to prove, that is not the case in these two plays. However, subverting the double standard by ignoring it is possible only because of the plays’ settings: fantasy France and pastoral America.

**Keywords:** Restoration drama; Thomas Southerne; *Sir Anthony Love*; Aphra Behn; *The Widdow Ranter*; crossdressing; disguise; gender

On his restoration, Charles II not only hurried to re-open the stage, but he also took the unprecedented step of encouraging women publicly to play female roles. The whole process of integrating actresses was rapidly accomplished from the very first appearance of a woman on stage in early December 1660.<sup>1</sup> As Samuel Pepys claims in his diaries,

<sup>1</sup> At the age of fifteen, Margaret Hughes made theatre history by becoming the first woman to perform on an English stage. Her first performance was on 8 December 1660 when she played the role of Desdemona in a production by Thomas Killigrew’s new King’s Company.

replacing boy actors was a matter of a couple of months. Pepys saw Fletcher and Massinger's *The Beggar's Bush* at the end of November 1660 with an all-male cast, and again at the beginning of January 1661 with actresses. That January he also saw an actress in the title role of Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Scornful Lady* having seen it played by a man only a week previously. The entire process was finalised in 1662 by a royal warrant which decreed that women must replace the boys used for female roles on the Renaissance stage. Some roles, however, such as the witches in *Macbeth*, were performed by men until the late nineteenth century. Moreover, comic roles of old bawds, domineering wives and hags, such as the Nurse in Otway's adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, continued to be played by adult men dressed as women in costumes that emphasised the grotesqueness of their characters.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the arrival of actresses greatly affected the presentation of female characters across the board, since the body of the woman on the stage was heavily sexualised. Women performers were a major innovation of the post-1660 theatre in Britain, demonstrating the most obvious change from the practices of the early modern professional theatres of the Tudor and Stuart eras.

Restoration<sup>3</sup> theatre staged the spectacle of women and thus intensified the visual pleasure of the playhouse. Actresses concretised and enhanced the erotics of the theatre, and many contemporary accounts testify to the pleasure that spectators took in seeing actresses perform in roles that had up to that point been played by boys. Moreover, new roles were fashioned to exploit the possibilities offered by the presence of women on the stage. Playwrights often put women in trousers, in what were known as "breeches roles", as a way of better displaying the shapes of women's bodies.

This was indeed one of the most common theatrical devices in Restoration drama, occurring in dozens of plays. Elizabeth Howe claims that out of approximately 375 plays produced in London between 1660 and 1700, eighty-nine, that is nearly a quarter, contained one or more roles for women in male clothes (Howe 1992, 56–59). Most of these roles are at least to some degree motivated by the plot; however, many use the spectacle of women in excess of the narrative. Such disguise, therefore, has the potential to simultaneously support and subvert the gender status quo. It is crucial to note that few plays use breeches roles in genuinely subversive ways, frequently presenting rather an element of sexual titillation which invites a gaze on the new shapes the cross-dressed female body could take.

Although men's Restoration fashion did not reveal much of the female body (unlike the more close-fitting men's breeches of the eighteenth-century), in their impersonation of men, women could easily satirise the gaudy fashion of the court, where men sported

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<sup>2</sup> This tradition still survives in contemporary British pantomime. Panto is usually performed at Christmas. The leading male character (e.g. Prince Charming) is played by a young woman in male costume, but the pantomime dame (e.g. the hero's mother, or the evil stepmother in *Cinderella*) is played by a man in drag. She is typically a raucous, shrill and unrestrained parody of stereotypical femininity gone wild.

<sup>3</sup> Several literary critics have relatively recently discussed the relevance of the term Restoration in literary history. For example, Zwicker implies that it suggests a major break between the radical 1640s and 50s and the imaginative investments of the next generations (Zwicker 2006, 425–50). This essay will use "Restoration" as a label relevant and especially pertinent to the differences between pre- and post-1660 theatre history.



long periwigs, wore powdered make-up and enormous muffs, all bedecked with ribbons.<sup>4</sup> The sexual element of female attraction in this disguise is nevertheless present because the plays usually contained a revelation scene where the cross-dressed female character unpinned her hair and also frequently revealed her breasts. This is made clear, for example, in a rather crude form in William Wycherley's stage direction in his play *The Plain Dealer*. When Fidelia reveals herself to the villainous Vernish as "a very unfortunate woman", he "pulls off her Peruke, and feels her breasts" (IV.i; 949). In Dryden's *The Rival Ladies* two women, each of whom thinks the other is a man, simultaneously reveal their breasts as they unbutton their jackets ready to fight each other. It is obvious that these scenes were not much more than a sexualised objectification of the female actress.

The gender politics of the Restoration scene were very complex. Even the play which shall be analysed further in this article as one of the most subversive examples, *Sir Anthony Love* (1691) by Thomas Southerne, is concluded by an epilogue which suggests that it does not matter much if the play is dull, as long as the audience can glimpse the woman's legs:

You'll hear with Patience a dull Scene, to see  
In a contented lazy waggery,  
The female *Montford* bare above the knee.<sup>5</sup>  
(Epilogue, 14–16; Southerne 257)

In itself, such cross-dressing is as likely to pander to dominant patriarchal values as to challenge them. Compared to the multi-layered functions and effects of crossdressing in Renaissance drama, such disguise during the Restoration indeed worked often to further the objectification of women. One pertinent example appears in Wycherley's *The Country Wife*: when the jealous Mr. Pinchwife wants to protect his "country wife", Margery, against the gaze of men by passing her off as a man, his plan backfires rather badly, as it actually grants Horner and his friends more liberty with her when they kiss her as a form of greeting. Margery Pinchwife in male attire in Restoration comedy thus does not gain empowerment as the cross-dressed heroines of Elizabethan drama but rather becomes an object of competition among the men, in what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would call a homosocial transaction (Sedgwick, 51 and *passim*).

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<sup>4</sup> The paradox of the rather effeminate male costume and the extremities of female dress as worn at the court of Charles II (copying the court of Louis XIV, ladies wore very low necklines that sometimes fully exposed their breasts) and its relation to the gender politics of the time would require a more detailed analysis. Moreover, for most of the Restoration period, courtiers wore so-called rhinegraves, referred to also as petticoat breeches, which indeed resembled a short skirt.

<sup>5</sup> The Montford in question is the famous Susanna Mountford (later, after the death of her first husband, Susanna Verbroegen) who was noted precisely for her ability to impersonate men in breeches roles. She was immensely popular between 1681 and 1703. It is clear from his "Dedicatory Epistle" that Southerne wrote his play with this actress in mind:

And since I have this occasion of mentioning Mrs. Montford, I am pleased, by way of Thanks, to do her that public Justice in Print, which some of the best Judges of these Performances, have, in her Praise, already done her, in publick places; that they never saw any part more masterly play'd: *and as I made every Line for her*, she has mended every Word for me; and by a Gaiety and Air, particular to her Action, turn'd every thing [sic] into the Genius of the Character (Southerne, 171; emphasis mine).

The examples given above seem to prove a rather conservative attitude and promote Laura Mulvey's idea of the "visual pleasure" (Mulvey, 432 and *passim*) of women as a stage spectacle; the Restoration theatre could thus seem little different from other forms of cultural production like the fine arts, or modern photography or film. However, there are several plays of the Restoration period in which female characters are able to gain an unaccustomed freedom of action by the change of gendered costume.<sup>6</sup> In these plays, the cross-dressing motif is employed to offer a more radical critique of conventional attitudes towards female sexuality and towards the sanctioned inequality privileging one sex over another. While the following discussion shall not deal with issues of transgender identity enabled by change of costume, it intends to deal with relatively straightforward presentations of women's crossdressing in breeches roles on the Restoration stage. Therefore, it focuses on two prominent dramatists of the Restoration era and their plays that disrupt the conventional representations of gender by means of masks and disguise.

In Aphra Behn's *The Widdow Ranter, or, The History of Bacon in Virginia* (staged posthumously in November 1689, printed in 1690, but probably written in 1688; as such, therefore, the last play written by Behn) and Thomas Southerne's *Sir Anthony Love; or, The Rambling Lady* (produced in September or October 1690 and published in 1691), received notions of sexual identity are dramatically destabilised.<sup>7</sup> In both of these plays, the central character is a genuinely androgynous figure, a woman whose male dress is not just a temporary disguise, a mask, or a means to an end, but an expression of her character, with all its contradictions, enabling capacities and liberating feelings which under other circumstances would have remained hidden or suppressed.

In Southerne's play, Sir Anthony's real name is Lucia, but she is rarely referred to by that name. Even in the *dramatis personae*, she is listed among the men as Sir Anthony Love (Southerne 170), and she wears female clothing only in two brief scenes, and both times under yet another assumed identity. Neither her lover Valentine nor the wealthy fool Sir Gentle Golding – the "Keeper" who "bought" her from her aunt (I.i.505; Southerne 187) and kept her as his mistress, and from whom she escaped to France – recognise her in the male disguise by means of which, with complete success, she violates all the conventional rules governing women's conduct in society. Lucia/Sir Anthony is an expert swordsman and has acquired the "Reputation of a Whoremaster, as the errant Rake-hell of 'em all" (I.i.6–7; Southerne 175). Early in the play, in a conversation with the one man to whom she confides the secret of her identity, she is presented as combining the characteristics of both sexes and, by implication, as able to love and be loved by both men and women:

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<sup>6</sup> The article shall focus on plays that deal with women in breeches parts, i.e. women dressed to look like men. There are, of course, many other changes of costume that allow women liberty of action in order to fulfill their aims, such as successfully gaining the man they want. In Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1677), Hellena dresses up during Carnival time as a gypsy to acquire Willmore, the eponymous Rover. The masquerade enables the heroine to behave provocatively while, in her case, it is all rather innocent fun (Behn 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Other plays also employ the crossdressing motif to offer a radical critique of conventional attitudes towards female sexuality and the double standard. At least two, Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle's *Bell in Campo* (1662) and Thomas Shadwell's *The Woman-Captain* (1680), invite further attention.

WAITWELL: You're a pretty proficient indeed, and so perfectly act the Cavalier, that could you put on our Sex with your Breeches, o' my Conscience you would carry all the Women before you.

SIR ANTHONY: And drive all the Men before me; I am for Universal Empire, and would not be stinted to one Province; I would be fear'd, as well as lov'd:

As famous for my Action with the Men, as for my Passion for the Women.

(I.i.8–14; Southerne 175)

The polymorphous nature of sexual attraction as the play presents it is emphasised in scenes involving two religious hypocrites, a Pilgrim who, suspecting that Sir Anthony might be a woman, is willing to make love to her in “any Sex”, and a sodomite Abbé who abandons an attempted seduction of a beautiful youth, recoiling in comic horror when “Sir Anthony” reveals that she is a woman (III.i.110–15 and V.iv.43–113; Southerne 209–210, 243–44). Even after Sir Anthony reveals her female identity to the play's male hero, Valentine, she is willing to share him with another woman for the sake of the “Jest”. In this way she can continue to enjoy the satisfactions of male camaraderie, retaining the playful status of a wit and a rake only permitted her by her male costume. The more refined pleasures of “diverting [...] Roguery” (V.iii.8; Southerne 241), it is suggested, give her more delight than the physical “Enjoyment” of sexual consummation:

VALENTINE: 'Tis a whimsical Undertaking methinks, To support another Woman's Intrigue at your Expence –

SIR ANTHONY: There's no buying such a Frolick too dear.

VALENTINE: And to part with your Lover to oblige her!

SIR ANTHONY: So long! I can part with you; to provide with your pleasure as well as my own: Besides, 'tis a diverting piece of Roguery; and will be a Jest as long as we know one another.

(V.iii.3–9; Southerne 241)

The ending of the play, in which Sir Anthony's love of “Roguery” still predominates, is highly unconventional, since rather than yielding to marriage, Sir Anthony retains her liberty of action. Throughout the play, she is caustic at the expense of marriage and its confinements, injurious to both partners: “In all plays, one side must be the looser [sic]; / but Marriage is the only Game, where nobody can be the winner. / [...] There's nothing but cheating in Love” (IV.iv.110–111, 119; Southerne 236). In the characteristic manner of the libertine, she praises the challenge of an “Intrigue” where “the danger doubles [one's] delight”. Not all Sir Anthony says can be taken at face value, of course, since she is always playing a role, seeking to maintain her “Reputation” as a rake. But as wit and lover, male and female, Sir Anthony never departs from some kind of aggressive stance, expressing a Hobbesian ethos of competition:

Reputation must be had: And we young Men generally raise ours out of the Ruines [sic] of the Womens.

...

And we naturally covet, what we are forbid; for very often 'tis the bare pleasure of breaking the Commandment, that makes another Man's Wife more desirable than his own.

(IV.iv.32–33, 70–72; Southerne 234–35)

Consequently, at the end of the play, rather than marrying Valentine, the heroine arranges two prudential and loveless marriages of convenience: one between herself and the rather contemptible Sir Gentle Golding, who immediately agrees to pay “a Rent-charge of Five-hundred” pounds a year as a separation maintenance to be rid of her (V.vii.135; Southerne 253), and one between Valentine and her rival Floriante:

VALENTINE: You continue your Opinion of Marriage.

SIR ANTHONY: *Floriante*, I grant you, wou'd be a dangerous Rival in a Mistress –

VALENTINE: Nothing can Rival thee.

SIR ANTHONY: And you might linger out a long liking of her, To my uneasiness, and your own, but Matrimony, that's her security is mine: I can't apprehend her in a Wife.

(IV.ii.76–82; Southerne 226)

The play concludes with lines of breathtaking cynicism, as Sir Anthony recommends a fool as the ideal husband, and “sep'rate Maintenance”, an agreed separation involving a financial settlement, as a recipe for preserving matrimony, while Sir Gentle duly acknowledges his intellectual inferiority:

SIR ANTHONY: Thus Coxcombs always the best Husbands prove

When we are faulty, and begin to rove,

A sep'rate Maintenance supplies our Love.

SIR GENTLE: When we have Mistresses above our Sense,

We must redeem our Persons with our Pence.

(V.vii.143–47; Southerne 253)

Printed at the back of the 1691 quarto edition are three lyrics unassigned to any character. Of the three, that of the greatest interest to this reading of the play is the first, titled “Pursuing Beauty”. Although the quarto assigns it to Act II, this is probably an error. The song is obviously written to be sung by a woman and there is no scene in Act II that would require this. However, it seems to be a very appropriate accompaniment to the seduction scene in Act IV, scene ii. While a song is being performed in the background, Sir Anthony appears for the first time in woman's clothes. By that moment in the play, she and the rakish Valentine have become good friends. He as yet does not suspect that Sir Anthony is a woman, however. To divert Valentine's attention from Floriante, the woman who is very much in love with him, and also to amuse herself, Sir Anthony arranges for Valentine to meet a young Englishwoman, who is of course herself, in a bedchamber. When the song ends, she uncovers her face. Valentine is taken aback by the discovery that his former good friend is now his lover, though, perhaps surprisingly, their relationship continues in the easy spirit of camaraderie in much the same way as before and as the concluding scenes of the play also prove.

Parts of the song (the first, the second, and the last, fifth, stanza) were set to music by Henry Purcell. These contain a warning to women to guard their innocence and the final two lines anticipate the action of the rest of the scene about to unfold between Sir Anthony and Valentine:

Pursuing Beauty, Men descry  
The distant Shore, and long to prove  
(Still richer in Variety)  
The Treasures of the Land of Love.

We Women, like weak *Indians*, stand  
Inviting, from our Golden Coast,  
The wandering Rovers to our Land:  
But she, who trades with 'em, is lost.  
[...]

Be wise, be wise, and do not try  
How he can Court, or you be Won:  
For Love is but Discovery,  
When that is made, the Pleasure's done. (1–8, 17–20)

The opening stanza compares Valentine, gazing at the mysterious woman, to an ocean explorer, staring hungrily at a distant, unspoiled land. The next stanza takes Sir Anthony's point of view, featuring the conventional, gendered exotic references common at the time, but also highlighting the dangers of such amorous transactions. The teasing display of frail femininity is enhanced by the musical cadences and sighing motifs. The final stanza is then set to a more sprightly, livelier tune in which the greatest emphasis seems to be put simply the idea of pleasure.

These contrasts in the song reflect the contradictions in Sir Anthony's character. In his music Henry Purcell may have grasped the ironic role reversals of the protagonist. Rather than the more typical Restoration heroine, who is a chaste woman masquerading as a wild libertine (such as the aforementioned Hellena in Aphra Behn's play *The Rover*), she is a strong-willed, clever, and somehow even rapacious female rake. Or rather, to be more precise, not exactly a "female hero" but a self-constructed male hero – this is apparent from the very beginning of the play, when she explains how masculinity is actually constructed, citing social habits such as diet, custom, and exercise:

Why, 'tis only the Fashion of the World, that gives your Sex  
a better Title then [sic] we have, to the wearing a Sword; My Constant  
Exercise with my Fencing Master, And Conversation among men, who  
make little of the matter, have at last not only made me adroit, but  
despise the Danger of a quarrel too.  
(L.i.17–21; Southerne 175)

Sir Anthony Love uses the freedom of male dress to full capacity: to enjoy, express, and, as we must never forget, enrich herself and to lay her own snares. She is pleased with herself and her life as Sir Anthony. She has no wish to marry and is totally without jealousy. Once she has enjoyed Valentine, she even helps him to marry the virgin that is traditionally his due as the comedy's male hero.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Although her immediate predecessor is obviously Moll Cutpurse from *The Roaring Girl*, in her pursuit of sexual pleasure she is radically unlike the sexless tomboy figure of Middleton and Decker's play (1611).

Thus, in this play that appeared in the 1690s, we can clearly see how the double standard of gender is questioned. While traditional literary history would argue for a tendency towards a familial relationship between dramatic characters by the end of the Restoration period, i.e. a contrast between the 1670s and the 1690s in the idea of courtship leading towards marriage ultimately of love, no longer representing a relatively cynical and calculating contract, Southerne's play is rather refreshing in that it takes a new and surprisingly approving look at the female libertine. The sexuality of Southerne's comic heroine appears as confident and assertive just as male sexuality does in earlier Restoration comedy. The vitality of Southerne's heroine may have an aggressive component, yet in this play this is not presented as distasteful or morally abject. It can also be easily conjectured that such an approach should be linked with Southerne's admiration for the work of Aphra Behn.

Southerne used several of Behn's prose stories for his plays, the most important being the plot of *Oroonoko*.<sup>9</sup> Her work influenced his stage practice: the Floriante sub-plot in *Sir Anthony Love* was clearly borrowed from Behn's novel *The Lucky Mistake*. But a more important and positive influence from Behn comes out in Southerne's treatment of the promiscuous woman. Behn had written sympathetically about "courtezans" in both parts of *The Rover* and several other plays, including one that is perhaps the first British play to be localised in colonial America.

In this play, another androgynous figure, though of a very different type, plays a prominent role: it is Aphra Behn's tragicomedy *The Widdow Ranter, or, The History of Bacon in Virginia* (performed posthumously in 1690). The name Bacon refers to the historical Nathaniel Bacon, who led an unauthorised campaign against the Natives in Virginia in 1675, because he felt the local government was failing to protect the English settlers.<sup>10</sup> What became ultimately a rebellion is the source of the main tragic plot line. The main heroine in this part of the plot is the Native-American queen Semernia who has been forced to wed the Native king Cavernio. She, however, loves another man, and as drama would have it, it is no other than Nathaniel Bacon, the chief enemy of her nation. Bacon proceeds to kill Cavernio in battle and Semernia therefore feels it is her duty to avenge the death of her husband and kill Bacon. She puts on male disguise in order to fight but is instead killed by Bacon by mistake. While the major plotline is very intriguing, this article will focus on the eponymous Widow Ranter, the principal female figure in the comic sub-plot, who is contrasted throughout with the Native queen. Semernia dies for love with exquisite passivity, in elevated heroic language. Ranter, on the other hand, is a virago, a wild girl. If Semernia is a reluctant Amazon queen, Widow Ranter is one by choice.

Liberated from the usual expectations of demure womanly behaviour by the status of a widow and by virtue of her wealth – "we rich / Widdows are the best Commodity this Country affords" (I.iii.239–40) – Ranter violates all proprieties. She swears, smokes

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<sup>9</sup> Behn's novel *Oroonoko* was published in 1688, shortly before Behn's death. Southerne adapted it for the stage in 1695 and commented that "She had a great Command of the Stage; and I have often wonder'd that she would bury her Favourite Hero in a *Novel*, when she might have reviv'd him in the *Scene*. She thought either that no Actor could represent him; or she could not bear him represented" (Southerne, II, 102)

<sup>10</sup> An English settler in Virginia, Nathaniel Bacon rebelled against the government because it sold arms to the Indians rather than arming English settlers in the region. Bacon died of fever, not a heroic death in battle.

a pipe, and drinks punch. Like Sir Anthony, she prefers to wear trousers and loves a jest, and she courts the “mad Fellow [...] who has my heart and soul” (IV.ii.286–87) in an aggressive way, not simply by seizing the initiative but by engaging in physical combat:

RANTER: Pox on't no, why should I sigh and whine, and make myself an Ass, and him  
conceited, no, instead of snivelling I'm resolved –  
JENNY: What Madam?  
RANTER: Gad to beat the Rascal ...  
JENNY: Beat him Madam? What a Woman beat a Lieutenant General.  
RANTER: Hang 'em, they get a name in War, from command, not courage; how know I but  
I may fight, Gad I have known a Fellow kickt [sic] from one end of the Town  
to 'tother, believing himself a Coward, at last forc'd to fight, found he could, got  
a Reputation and bullyed all he met with, and got a name, and got a great Com-  
mission.  
JENNY: But if he should kill you Madam?  
RANTER: I'll take care to make it as Comical a Duel as the best of 'em, as much in Love as  
I am, I do not intend to dy it's [sic] Martyr.  
(IV.ii.289–301)

Just like Sir Anthony in the play by Thomas Southerne, Behn's *Widow Ranter* challenges the assumptions that physical courage is a masculine privilege. She fights with courage in a battle side by side with her lover, the forthright Daring. In the end, she is praised as “a fit Wife for a Souldier [sic]” (V.v.319). Theirs is a parodic scene of comic courtship, full of exchanged insults:

DARING: Gad I'd sooner marry a She Bear, unless for a Pennance for some horrid Sin,  
we should be eternally challenging one another to the Field,  
and ten to one she beats me there;  
or if I should escape there, she would kill me with Drinking.  
(IV.iii.292–95)

The scene, as comedy convention dictates, ends with an expression of mutual affection as they conclude with a proclamation of peace: “Give me thy hand Widow, I am thine – and so entirely, I will / never – be drunk out of my Company” (IV.iii.303–304). Less predictably, Daring suggests they marry while she remains dressed in trousers, suggesting that it was precisely those qualities “the Fashion of the World” considered masculine that attracted him to her in the first place:

DARING: Prithee let's in and bind the bargain.  
RANTER: Nay, faith, let's see the Wars at an end first.  
DARING: Nay, prithee, take me in the humour, while the Breeches are on – for I never lik'd  
thee half so well in Petticoats.  
RANTER: Lead on General, you give me good encouragement to wear them.  
(IV.iii.306–310)

The combative, courageous Amazon man-woman is a relatively common figure in Restoration drama, but usually she is introduced to rather conservative effect, presenting



fantasies of powerful women ultimately subdued by men, returning the heroine from her brave breeches to the petticoats of marriage. Even these relatively conservative plays nearly always allow at least a degree of discussion regarding gender roles and such issues as forced and arranged marriages. By contrast, in Behn's posthumous play *The Widdow Ranter*, with its compelling portrait of the drinking and smoking widow, and in Southerne's *Sir Anthony Love*, we get a confrontational cross-dresser who takes her man, literally, with her "breeches on".

Nevertheless, it is vital to sound a final point of caution: while the plays' subversion of the double standard regarding gender is effected by basically ignoring it, it is probably only made possible by the exotic settings. In the case of Thomas Southerne's play it is a fantasy Catholic France obviously inspired by the exotic locations of heroic Restoration dramas, including the plays of Aphra Behn; in the case of Behn's *The Widdow Ranter* it is a primitivist setting of a more or less pastoral North America, where characters dine, for example, on such exotic fare as buffalo steak. Nevertheless, this is not to say that the plays deal entirely with remote fairy-tale scenarios. Especially in the case of *The Widdow Ranter*, as is typical for all Behn's dramas, the play evidently also deals with contemporary political issues hotly debated in the years around the Glorious Revolution, such as the pros and cons of Parliamentary democracy and absolute monarchy. Yet, the settings and content are remote enough to accommodate, among other things, women for whom, as one might say, anything goes.

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**RÉSUMÉ:****„V SUKNI SES MI ANI Z POLOVINY TOLIK NELÍBILA“:  
PŘEVLEKÁNÍ GENDERU V DRAMATU RESTAURAČNÍHO OBDOBÍ**

Vzhledem k tomu, že v období Restaurace se na jevišti objevily herečky, změnilo se v té době i zpodobení ženských postav, protože ženské tělo začalo být velmi sexuálně zdůrazněno. Herečky zhmotnily erotičnost divadla restauračního období a diváci si velmi užívali pohled na herečky, jejichž role byly napsány tak, aby využily všech možností přítomnosti žen na jevišti. Autoři divadelních her oblékali své ženské postavy do kalhot v tzv. kalhotkových rolích, aby zdůraznili tvary ženského těla. Ve srovnání s mnohovrstevnatými významy převleků žen za mužské pohlaví v renesančním dramatu, zde tento kostým nabývá spíše lechtivý nádech. Nicméně z této doby pochází několik her, které tento motiv používají a přitom nabízejí víceméně podvratnou kritiku konvenčních postojů vůči ženské sexualitě. Tento článek se soustředí na analýzu dvou divadelních her, *Vdova Ranterová* (*The Widdow Ranter*, 1690) od Aphry Behn a *Sir Anthony Love* (1691), kterou napsal Thomas Southerne. V obou hrách vystupuje androgynní hlavní ženská postava, jejíž mužský převlek není jen krátkodobá maska, ale vyjádření podstaty její povahy. Sir Anthony Love/Lucia užívá volnosti mužského šatu, aby se obohatila a mohla klást vlastní nástrahy. Androgynní postavu jiného typu představuje protagonistka v komické zápletky tragikomedie Aphry Behn, *Vdova Ranterová*. Ta kleje, kouří dýmku, pije punč a chce si získat svého milence při souboji. Takové bojovné postavy se objevují v restauračních divadelních hrách jen proto, aby nakonec byly dominovány muži. Tento článek se pokusí dokázat, že v uvedených dvou hrách tomu tak není. Avšak ignorování a subverze dvojího standardu jsou v nich možné jen díky místu, kde se hry odehrávají: fantazijní Francie a pastorální Amerika.

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**PRAGA MAGICA: PRAGUE AS A PLACE  
OF MEMORY AND VISION IN GEORGE ELIOT,  
ANTHONY TROLLOPE AND GEORGE SAND**

ZDENĚK BERAN

**ABSTRACT**

George Eliot and Anthony Trollope made short visits to Prague in the mid-19th century and were fascinated by such places as the Jewish Quarter with its old synagogue or Charles Bridge with its Baroque statues. They used these motifs in some of their works: Eliot in *The Lifted Veil* and *Daniel Deronda* and Trollope in *Nina Balatka*. Their portrayal of Prague, however, is very much based on the image of *Praga magica*, the Prague of legends, mysteries and magic. This article argues that the shift of focus from the Jewish Prague to the statue of St John of Nepomuk, which appears in *The Lifted Veil* and in *Nina Balatka*, might have been motivated not only by their admiration of the bridge decorations which they saw during their visits but also by the semantically rich motif of the saint's statue in George Sand's *Consuelo*, a novel which was very popular in Britain at that time.

**Keywords:** George Eliot; Anthony Trollope; George Sand; *Praga magica*; Jewish Prague; St John of Nepomuk; legends

Two major Victorian writers visited Prague and incorporated Prague motifs into their writings: George Eliot and Anthony Trollope. Eliot came to Prague twice; first in 1858, at the outset of her novelist career (her first novel, *Adam Bede*, was to be completed by the end of that year), and then in 1870, at the peak of her fame when she was working on her masterpiece, *Middlemarch*. Trollope visited Prague in 1865. All these stays were brief.

Eliot first came to Prague during a journey across the German-speaking countries she made with her spouse, the critic and philosopher George Henry Lewes, who was intensely interested in German life and culture. This was by no means their first trip to the Continent; having met in the early 1850s, they went to Weimar and Berlin in 1854 after they had decided to live together; Lewes was researching his book on Goethe at the time. In 1858 their journey included Munich, Ischl, Linz, Vienna, Prague, and Dresden, where they stayed for six weeks, working and admiring the beauties of the city. They reached Prague on the morning of 16 July after a whole night on the train from Vienna and spent the day visiting different places including the Jewish Quarter and Prague Castle. George Eliot famously refers to these two locations in particular in her journal: "We saw a lovely dark-eyed Jewish child here, which we were glad to kiss in all its dirt. Then came the sombre old synagogue with its smoky groins, and lamp forever burning.

An intelligent Jew was our cicerone and read us some Hebrew out of the precious old book of the Law” (Cross, 41). They were equally impressed by the Old Jewish Cemetery, adjacent to the synagogue, which Eliot described as “unique – with a wild growth of grass and shrubs and trees, and a multitude of quaint tombs in all sorts of positions, looking like the fragments of a great building, or as if they had been shaken by an earthquake” (40–41). The journal entry reflecting their visit to Prague Castle later that day sounds more ambiguous, however:

After dinner we took a carriage and went across the wonderful bridge of St. Jean Nepomuck, with its avenue of statues, towards the Radschin – an ugly straight-lined building but grand in effect from its magnificent site, on the summit of an eminence crowded with old massive buildings. The view from this eminence is one of the most impressive in the world – perhaps as much from one’s associations with Prague as from its visible grandeur and antiquity. The cathedral close to the Radschin is a melancholy object on the outside – left with unfinished sides like scars. The interior is rich but sadly confused in its ornamentation, like so many of the grand old churches – hideous altars of bastard style disgracing exquisite Gothic columns. [...] Close in front of us sloping downwards was a pleasant orchard; then came the river with its long, long bridge and grand gateway; then the sober-coloured city with its surrounding plain and distant hills. In the evening we went to the theatre – a shabbily ugly building – and heard Spohr’s *Jessonda*. (41–42)

The difference between the way the two scenes are presented is striking: while Eliot basically exalts over the Jewish part of the city, which she finds alluringly picturesque, she is much more critical in her description of its Christian part. The architecture is disappointing; the palace of Hradčany (“Radschin” in her words) is “an ugly straight-lined building”, the unfinished cathedral is “a melancholy object on the outside” while its interior displays “hideous altars of bastard style”, and the theatre is described as “a shabbily ugly building”. The material objects, especially the buildings when studied closely, create negative emotions; on the other hand, the prospects a visitor can enjoy in Prague prove highly gratifying with their magnificence and pleasing aspect. Yet Eliot adds, in the same breath, that this is not only due to their grandeur but also “one’s associations with Prague”. What, then, were her associations with Prague?

We know little, and even less about their sources. Clearly, the couple did not regard Prague as a place to explore thoroughly, as the accounts in their correspondence show. Prague stands midway between two points of interest, Munich and Dresden. The couple stayed in Munich for almost three months and Eliot ended up facing health problems there, though she speaks of them lightly: “First, an attack of Cholera during our last week at Munich – which I reckon among my pleasures because I was nursed so tenderly” (*GE Letters* II, 471). Lewes is slightly more specific about these circumstances in his letter to John Chapman of 23 July: “Munich we left without any regret, unless it was to leave so many kind and illustrious friends. Polly [i.e. Mary Ann Evans], although very popular, did not enjoy Munich [...] Polly saw Strauss<sup>1</sup> the day before we left, and was much pleased with him. [...] She has not been well since we left, and in Munich was for one

<sup>1</sup> Eliot translated David Friedrich Strauss’s extremely long and ponderous *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*, the project she took over from Elizabeth Rebecca Brabant in 1844 and published, “Strauss-sick”, in 1846. (See Davies, 66, 88).

week in bed, but here at Dresden she seems in capital condition and will I trust continue so” (470–71). One reason for not staying longer in Prague could therefore be that Eliot was still convalescing and longed to get to Dresden, the final point of their Continental journey, as soon as possible. She indeed found Dresden a highly rewarding place, as she writes to her friend Sara Sophia Hennell: “Dresden is a proper climax, for all other art seems only a preparation for feeling the superiority of the Madonna di San Sisto the more” (471).

Another reason, a more plausible one, is that neither Eliot nor Lewes had any friends or acquaintances in Prague. Nonetheless, crossing the territory of Bohemia provided, at least for Lewes, an exquisite aesthetic experience, as he writes from Dresden: “From Vienna we went to Prague – the most splendid city in Germany – where we stayed a day – and then came through the ‘Saxon Switzerland’ to this place, having had an intoxicating draught of beauty – lakes, mountains, and valleys such as will long live in the memory” (470). But Prague remained, inaccurately, no more than a “city in Germany” for him.

This indicates, as Susan Reynolds argues, that the Leweses (though not married Eliot signed her letters “Marian Lewes” and maintained that they were husband and wife in the eyes of God) were little aware of the Czech national movement and the turbulent events on the Czech cultural scene of the period, the infamous decade of “Bach’s absolutism”. Similarly, in her leading article “George Eliotová” for the January 1879 issue of *Ženská listy* (Women’s Magazine), Dora Hanušová regrets that none of the younger Czech intellectuals approached Eliot during her visits to show her around and explain the character of the current cultural and political activities (see Hanušová, 4). The Leweses made no contact with any notable figures representing Czech culture, philosophy or science and spent their time in Prague merely as tourists. In Eliot’s notes, Prague is curiously empty of people: she speaks about the “avenue of statues” on the bridge but not about people walking there or in the streets. Even the figures in the Jewish Quarter were introduced, one feels, as local colour and not as real-life beings. The Prague in George Eliot’s journal is the Prague of the past; her associations are those of legend and myth.

It seems Eliot attempted to recreate in her mind *Praga magica*, a city steeped in its own mysteries. Angelo Maria Ripellino characterises this specific attribute as follows: “when I seek another word for mystery, the only word I can find is Prague. She is dark and melancholy as a comet; her beauty is like the sensation of fire, winding and slanted as in the anamorphoses of the Mannerists, with a lugubrious aura of decay, a smirk of eternal disillusionment” (Ripellino, 7). In her notebook, Eliot draws a map of Prague transfigured into this picture when she focuses on three sites which play an important part in Ripellino’s account: the Jewish synagogue (whose loft was still believed to house the Golem), the eminence of Prague Castle with its compelling views, and the bridge (not yet called Charles Bridge) decorated with Baroque statues. That is, Jewish Prague, imperial Prague, Catholic Prague; the Prague of the Golem and Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, the Prague of Emperor Rudolf II, and the Prague of John of Nepomuk, martyr and saint. What seems significant in this context is the fact that Eliot calls the Prague bridge, then virtually nameless, the “bridge of St. Jean Nepomuck”, connecting it with the legend of his martyrdom.

The bridge and the statue of John then reappear in *The Lifted Veil*, a story Eliot could not resist writing in the spring of the following year, while she interrupted the work on

her second novel, *The Mill on the Floss*. Unlike anything in her literary oeuvre, it takes its formal inspiration from fantastic literature, Gothic fiction, the tales of Edgar Allan Poe, and with its valetudinarian protagonist/narrator, Latimer, anticipates the enfeebled and effeminate young male characters of the fin-de-siècle scene. As such, it has maintained an exceptional, and from the point of view of critical concern even somewhat marginal, position within Eliot's oeuvre from the outset. In her letter to the publisher, John Blackwood, the author refers to it as "a slight story of an outré kind – not a *jeu d'esprit*, but a *jeu du melancolie*, which I could send you in a few days for your acceptance or rejection as a brief magazine story – of one number only. I think nothing of it, but my private critic says it is very striking and original, and on the strength of that opinion, I mention it" (GEL III, 41). She finished the story on 26 April and sent it to Blackwood three days later, calling it "dismal" this time. She also noted in her journal that she had written it because "my head was too stupid for more important work" (60). Blackwood approved that it was "a very striking story, full of thought and most beautifully written" but he also expressed some reservations concerning certain motifs and postponed its publication for a month, adding "so we will have plenty of time to talk it over" (67). *The Lifted Veil* appeared anonymously in *Blackwood's Magazine* in July 1859, unedited.<sup>2</sup>

The story revolves around Latimer's peculiar gift of clairvoyance which grants him, in the first part, a fantastic vision of Prague and reveals, in the second part, his wife's intrigues threatening his life. It is not necessary to analyse the entire text here; this has been meticulously done by Ian Milner in his article "George Eliot's Prague Story" (PSE XV, 1973); suffice it to concentrate on its Prague motif. After studying in Geneva for three years, the nineteen-year-old Latimer falls severely ill and during his protracted convalescence his father suggests that he will take him home when he is "quite well enough to travel", going through the Tyrol and Austria and showing him many new places. He promises "to go together to Vienna, and back by Prague" (Eliot ME, 7–8). The sentence is left unfinished as the father is called away at that moment, but the last word produces an unprecedented vision in Latimer's mind:

... a new and wondrous scene was breaking upon me: a city under the broad sunshine, that seemed to me as if it were the summer sunshine of a long-past century arrested in its course – unrefreshed for ages by the dews of night, or the rushing rain cloud; scorching the dusty, weary, time-eaten grandeur of a people doomed to live on in the stale repetition of memories, like deposed and superannuated kings in their regal gold-inwoven tatters. The city looked so thirsty that the broad river seemed to me a sheet of metal; and the blackened statues, as I passed under their blank gaze, along the unending bridge, with their ancient garments and their saintly crowns, seemed to me the real inhabitants and owners of this

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<sup>2</sup> Even several years later Blackwood viewed the story as something irregular in Eliot's output and advised the author not to include it in the planned representative edition of her works. "I return 'Brother Jacob' and send with him 'The Lifted Veil.' They are both as clever as can be, but there is a painful want of light about them and my advice is against including them in the recognized series of your works. I remember the Lifted Veil was published when Adam Bede was in the full blaze of fame, and I thought it better not to accept Lewes's kind offer to put your name to it in the Magazine, which I believe no other editor of a periodical would have done. My opinion has not changed yet" (GE Letters IV, 322). His apprehension indicates that he did not think the story worthy of the reputation George Eliot had achieved by the mid-1860s.

place, while the busy, trivial men and women, hurrying to and fro, were a swarm of ephemeral visitants infesting it for a day. (8)

Latimer wonders what kind of experience this was, “minute in its distinctness down to a patch of rainbow light on the pavement, transmitted through a coloured lamp in the shade of a star” (8). He admits that he has never seen a picture of Prague: “it lay in my mind as a mere name, with vaguely remembered historical associations – ill-defined memories of imperial grandeur and religious wars” (9).

His vision is undoubtedly that of *Praga magica*, a locus in which a fantastic past is the only living entity while the present is a mere chimera. Milner, who pays much attention to the difference between Eliot’s journal entries recording her impressions and the image presented in the story, compares the scene with the “ephemeral visitants” hurrying across the Prague bridge and the Dantesque scene on London Bridge in the first part of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. What is also striking, however, is the fact that the depopulated Prague of George Eliot’s journal becomes inhabited by two kinds of beings here, the statues in which Latimer sees “the fathers of ancient children in those tanned time-fretted dwellings that crowd the steep before me” (8), i.e. the phenomena which define the multifarious meanings of *Praga magica*, and the chimeric present-day pedestrians “infesting” the place and bringing no meaning at all, and as such representing the semantic void of modern times. What Eliot meant by her “associations” becomes clearer here – they are the same as Latimer’s.

When the protagonist finally arrives in Prague, he is taken to the same places Eliot and Lewes visited: first to the Jewish Quarter to see the old synagogue and then to the bridge. The synagogue scene does not differ substantially from Eliot’s journal entry:

But, as I stood under the blackened, groined arches of that old synagogue, made dimly visible by the seven thin candles in the sacred lamp, while our Jewish cicerone reached down the Book of Law, and read to us in its ancient tongue – I felt a shuddering impression that this strange building, with its shrunken lights, this surviving withered remnant of mediaeval Judaism, was of a piece with my vision. Those darkened dusty Christian saints, with their loftier arches and their larger candles, needed the consolatory scorn with which they might point to a more shrivelled death-in-life than their own. (23)

The impression is, of course, modified to align with Latimer’s melancholy state of mind and supplemented by Christian-Judaic dualism which roughly corresponds to the dualism envisioned on the bridge.

The Jewish motif, however, only serves as prologue to the actual climax of Latimer’s Prague experience. After leaving the Jewish Quarter he feels “a sudden overpowering impulse to go on at once to the bridge”. Having persuaded his father to let him do as he wishes, he approaches the bridge accompanied by his servant Schmidt: “I had no sooner passed from under the archway of the grand old gate leading on to the bridge, than a trembling seized me, and I turned cold under the mid-day sun; yet went on; I was in search of something – a small detail which I remembered with special intensity as a part of my vision. There it was – the patch of rainbow light on the pavement transmitting through a lamp in the shape of a star” (23). The first part of the story culminates with this discovery proving the veracity of Latimer’s vision.

This light transmitted through a coloured lamp is closely connected to John of Nepomuk, as the lamp stands in front of the saint's statue, the oldest one decorating the parapets of Charles Bridge. The legend of John of Nepomuk played a significant role in the 17th and 18th centuries as one of the instruments of the Roman Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation, principally intended to suppress the popularity of the 15th-century reformer John Hus. In 1683, Jan Brokoff's bronze statue modelled on Matthias Rauchmüller's was erected, almost half a century before the martyr's canonisation. The legend of Nepomuk, the canon of the Prague Cathedral Chapter and Deacon of All Saints, recorded in Václav Hájek's *Bohemian Chronicle* (1541), describes him being thrown from the bridge into the waters of the Vltava in 1383 because he refused to reveal to the jealous King Wenceslas IV what Queen Johanna had told him in the confessional. When the body sank, a miraculous gleam appeared: "You would have seen countless bright lights, as if fire and water had made peace and were flowing together," quotes Ripellino from Hájek (195). Though highly improbable (the real cause of the torture and death of this ecclesiastical dignitary seems rather to have been the controversy between him and the king about the future abbot of Kladruby Monastery), the story of uncompromised loyalty and moral integrity became one of the main arguments for John's canonisation. When his tomb was opened in 1719, the surgeons claimed to have found something red in the mouth that looked like an undecomposed tongue.

The legend bears significantly upon the theme of *The Lifted Veil*. Latimer's desire to hurry onto the bridge predicts the plot of the second part of the story: shortly before his journey he had got acquainted with Bertha Grant, an orphaned young niece of his father's friends, the Filmores, whom his father planned to betroth to Latimer's elder brother Alfred. During the journey, however, Bertha showed more affection for Latimer and he fell in love with her; yet at one moment he experienced another vision in which he saw Bertha as his cruel wife who despised him and wished he would die. Shocked, he wants to see each detail of his vision of Prague in reality, to confirm whether his clairvoyant scenes are accurate and therefore true.

In this sense, the consistency of John of Nepomuk and his loyalty to the Queen makes a motivic contrast with the character of Latimer's and Bertha's unhappy marriage as we witness it in the second part of the story. But on a deeper, political level, the old legend resonates with the current condition of the Czech nation, tongue-tied by the strict measures taken after the March 1848 revolutionary events yet never losing hope, like the light of the lamp, the "rainbow light", symbolizing God's favour just as the miraculous gleam that had accompanied John's death. Considering this, it is doubtful that Eliot was entirely ignorant of the current political situation in this part of the Habsburg monarchy.

There is a moral dimension too onto which this meaning is projected: when Bertha's dying maid, Mrs Archer, wants to disclose her mistress' intention to get rid of her husband by poisoning him, she is silenced by Bertha's constant vigilant presence; but immediately after her death Latimer's friend, Charles Meunier, a surgeon, enlivens her temporarily by blood transfusion and at that moment she gasps out the truth. The dead tongue comes to life and speaks; this "miracle" of modern science, far-fetched and fantastic as it seems, is highly symbolic: truth and moral integrity must never die, they must never be hushed up. This symbolic meaning explains why in *The Lifted Veil* the Christian



aspect of *Praga magica*, *Praga Nepomucensis*, ultimately prevails over the Jewish aspect, *Praga Golemica*.

Eliot and Lewes's second visit to Prague in 1870 was also short, taking two days, this time en route from Berlin to Vienna. From the scanty notes in their correspondence and diaries we can surmise that the stay took place on Tuesday and Wednesday, 6–7 April. Seeing the synagogue again (cf. Haight, 425) might have inspired Eliot to include a Prague motif in her last novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1876). The short episode during which one of the characters, Mirah Lapidoth, endowed with an exceptional clarity of vision, faintly echoing Latimer's clairvoyance, manages to flee from her tyrannous father soon after they come to Prague, is presented in the following manner:

It was dark when we reached Prague, and though the strange bunches of lamps were lit it was difficult to distinguish faces as we drove along the street. My father chose to sit outside – he was always smoking now – and I watched everything in spite of the darkness. I do believe I could see better then than ever I did before: the strange clearness within seemed to have got outside me. It was not my habit to notice faces and figures much in the street; but this night I saw every one; and when we passed before a great hotel I caught sight only of a back that was passing in – the light of the great bunch of lamps a good way off fell on it. I knew it – before the face was turned, as it fell into shadow, I knew who it was. Help came to me. I feel sure help came to me. (Eliot *DD*, 168)

The passage recreates the atmosphere of Latimer's vision: Prague is again rendered as a semi-hallucinatory scene, a liminal space between the world of the living and the dead, the magical nature of which helps Mirah achieve freedom from oppressive tyranny. In her late novel Eliot does the same as she has done in her early story, transforming Prague into a specific psychological projection, a mental image of urban space where the present merges into the past, the real into the dreamy, the clear into the blurry – another memorable image of *Praga magica*.<sup>3</sup>

Compared to the sparse evidence from Eliot's two brief sojourns, we know virtually nothing about Anthony Trollope's 1865 visit to Prague. Nevertheless, what we can say is that his trips to the Continent prompted him to write two short novels, *Nina Balatka*, set in Prague, and *Linda Tressel*, set in Nuremberg. As N. John Hall explains: "In 1865 Trollope determined once again to try an experiment in anonymity. He feared he was overcrowding the fictional market; he also felt, he said, the injustice of praise heaped indiscriminately on well-known writers" (Hall, 285). With these two novels, so different from his other fiction, Trollope attempted to launch his "second identity" and test his market potential. He reflects on his strategies in *An Autobiography*: "I am sure that the two stories are good. Perhaps the first is somewhat the better, as being the less lachrymose. They were both written very quickly, but with a considerable amount of labour; and both were written immediately after visits to the towns in which the scenes are laid" (Trollope *Autobiography*, 205). *Nina Balatka* was begun on 3 November 1865 and finished on 31 December, which indicates that Trollope was in Prague sometime in the second half of that year. He

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<sup>3</sup> I have briefly outlined this story of Eliot's experience of Prague in my essay "An Unspeakable Journey: Czech and Slovak Reception of George Eliot" for *The Reception of George Eliot in Europe* (2016).

continues: “Of course I had endeavoured to change not only my manner of language, but my manner of story-telling also; and in this [...] I think that I was successful. English life in them there was none. There was more of romance proper than had been usual with me. And I made an attempt at local colouring, at descriptions of scenes and places, which has not been usual with me” (205–206). He concludes, seemingly unequivocally: “Prague is Prague and Nuremberg is Nuremberg” (206).

Trollope offered *Nina Balatka* to George Smith for anonymous publication, first to be serialised in *Cornhill* and then issued in book form, but Smith declined to accept his terms. The manuscript then went to John Blackwood, the publisher of George Eliot’s story. It seems that Blackwood was puzzled by it but also impressed, because he wrote to his London manager Joseph Munt Langford pointing out that Trollope had “thrown a perfectly foreign Prague atmosphere about all his characters so perfectly unEnglish that there is the sort of air of hardness about the story that one feels in reading a translation” (qtd. in Hall, 286). Despite his reservations concerning especially the character of Anton Trendellsohn, Blackwood serialised the novel in *Blackwood’s Magazine* from July 1866 to January 1867 and published it as a book later in 1867.

Not only was *Nina* issued by the same publisher as *The Lifted Veil*, it also holds the same marginal position among the novelist’s voluminous production. In his surviving correspondence, Blackwood does not mention Trollope’s interest in similar Prague locations which he has found in George Eliot, but he must have noticed it. The question is to what extent Trollope’s picture of Prague is authentic. A. O. J. Cockshut quotes his words that “Prague is Prague and Nuremberg is Nuremberg” just to oppose this unduly confident statement: “Perhaps they are, as far as physical accuracy goes. But just as he did not appreciate the depth of his own understanding of English culture, he did not realise his failure to understand other cultures. If he had comprehended his own best achievements, he would not have been satisfied with the superficial foreignness of these two minor works” (Cockshut, 144). James Pope Hennessy expresses his criticism even more bluntly: “The only interest in this dreary tale of bankruptcy and anti-Semitism is to be found in the fact that it was published anonymously. [...] The honest fad was not rewarded, as nobody was particularly interested in *Nina* and her Jewish lover” (Hennessy, 232–33). In the light of these words, it is no wonder that the novel has eluded substantial critical attention.

Its story is simple. *Nina*, the young and beautiful daughter of a bankrupt businessman, Josef Balatka, falls in love with Anton Trendellsohn, the son of Balatka’s former business partner Stephen. Because the Trendellsohns are Jews, the prospect of *Nina* and Anton’s marriage is opposed by Balatka’s rich relatives, the Zamenoy. Moreover, Sophia Zamenoy, *Nina*’s dead mother’s sister, intends to marry *Nina* to her own son Ziska, while Anton is pursued by a Jewish girl called Rebecca Loth. The situation is even more complicated by the fact that Stephen Trendellsohn, to help Josef, had bought all his houses in the Kleinseite (i.e. the Lesser Town, Malá Strana) and allowed him to stay in one of them, while the property documents, the title deeds, are mischievously kept by Karil Zamenoy, Josef’s rich brother-in-law.

The romance is thus set in the atmosphere of intrigues and anti-Semitic prejudice which is reported to be stronger in Prague than anywhere else. Anton “had heard of Jews in Vienna, in Paris, and in London who were as true to their religion as any Jew of Prague

but who did not live immured in a Jews' quarter, like lepers separate and alone in some loathed corner of a city otherwise clean. [...] In Prague a Jew was still a Pariah" (Trollope *NB*, 69). Prague is portrayed as a divided city, not only along the lines of religion but also of prosperity. This allows Trollope to create a specific spatial structure, a triangle the topography of whose apexes represents different social positions of the three families involved in the main conflict: Balatka and his daughter, we learn, occupy a house "in a small courtyard near to the river, but altogether hidden from it, somewhat to the right of the main street of the Kleinseite" (5), the Trendellsohns live in a "high-gabled house immediately behind the synagogue" (9), while the Zamenoy's own "a comfortable modern house in the New Town" (4), in Windberg-gasse (which is probably today's short lane called "Pod Větrovem"). It is notable that Balatka's and Trendellsohn's dwellings belong to the sites of *Praga magica*, while the Zamenoy's live on the outskirts of it.

Some easily recognisable attributes of *Praga magica* are employed to define the character of the places where each of the unfortunate lovers live. Over the house of Nina and her father the royal palace looms large:

Immediately over the little square stood the palace of the Hradschin, the wide-spreading residence of the old kings of Bohemia, now the habitation of an ex-emperor of the House of Hapsburg, who must surely find the thousand chambers of the royal mansion all too wide a retreat for the use of his old age. So immediately did the imperial hill tower over the spot on which Balatka lived, that it would seem at night, when the moon was shining as it shines only at Prague, that the colonnades of the palace were the upper storeys of some enormous edifice, of which the merchant's small courtyard formed a lower portion. (5)

In this image the magnificent royal palace merges with Balatka's house, as if growing out of it, just as the past of the old kings of Bohemia with all their might merges with the present of the powerless, dysfunctional Austrian ex-emperor Ferdinand. Political power is presented in this passage as being always semantically contentless, like the empty rooms of the palace: "Chamber after chamber, you shall pass through them by the score, and know by signs unconsciously recognised that there is not, and never has been, true habitation within them" (6). Faithful to the romance genre, it is love that triumphs over all kinds of power in this world.

The synagogue plays its part in Chapter VII where the son of the Zamenoy's, Ziska, decides to approach Anton at home. The Jewish Quarter is viewed as a secluded area where Christians feel out of place: "Strangers who come to Prague visit the Jews' quarter as a matter of course, and to such strangers the Jews of Prague are invariably courteous. But the Christians of the city seldom walk through the heart of the Jews' locality, or hang about the Jews' synagogue, or are seen among their houses unless they have special business. The Jews' quarter, though it is a banishment to the Jews from the fairer portions of the city, is also a separate and somewhat sacred castle in which they may live after their old fashion undisturbed" (80). The day being Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, Ziska finds Anton in the synagogue, the centrepiece of the Jewish Quarter:

Though this was the chief synagogue in Prague, and, as being the so-called oldest in Europe, is a building of some consequence in the Jewish world, it was very small. There was no ceiling, and the high-pitched roof, which has once probably been coloured, and the walls,

which had once certainly been white, were black with the dirt of ages. In the centre there was a cage, as it were, or iron grille, within which five or six old Jews were placed, who seemed to wail louder than the others. Round the walls there was a row of men inside stationary desks, and outside them another row, before each of whom there was a small movable standing desk, on which there was a portion of the law of Moses. (84)

Trollope describes the interior of the synagogue as if he himself were the visitor, which he certainly was during his stay in Prague. His strategy resembles that of George Eliot, as he also seems to alter his potential notes only slightly if at all. The synagogue does not appear to create any other impressions than those derived from mere observation. Both Eliot and Trollope's narrators are matter-of-fact; they let the image of the place, only briefly sketched, speak for itself. The *Praga magica* element here is once again its ancient character, the past which inhabits the present, its traditions as well as legends.

The novel employs a simple dynamic which organises the plot; it consists of the movement of all the characters from one of the three loci to another, making their visits for different reasons. As Balatka's house stands on the other side of the river than the other two places, they always cross the single bridge that connects the two banks. The crossing of the river, always on foot, can be understood as a kind of ritual; even the pompous Madame Zamenoy "walked on foot, thinking that her carriage and horses might be too conspicuous at the arched gate in the little square" (54). This gives the bridge its prominent position, with the presiding statue, once again, of John of Nepomuk. And it is this statue that, curiously enough, plays a crucial role in the story of love so despicably crossed by anti-Semitism and egoism.

John's statue is introduced quite early in the novel:

So she walked on again till she reached a spot on the bridge at which she almost always paused a moment to perform a little act of devotion. There, having a place in the long row of huge statues which adorn the bridge, is the figure of the martyr St. John Nepomucene, who at this spot was thrown into the river because he would not betray the secrets of a queen's confession, and was drowned, and who has ever been, from that period downwards, the favourite saint of Prague – and of bridges. On the balustrade, near the figure, there is a small plate inserted in the stone-work, and good Catholics, as they pass over the river, put their hands upon the plate, and then kiss their fingers. So shall they be saved from drowning and from all perils of the water – as far, at least, as the special transit of the river may be perilous. (16)

The almost automatic act which she has carried on from her childhood makes her think about the relevance of religion in her life, now that she is going to marry a Jew, and she, perplexed by her own situation, concludes: "Religion was much to her; the fear of the everlasting wrath of Heaven was much to her; but love was paramount!" (17). John acts here as a protecting presence, saving those who are in the peril of drowning. This is a different role from that revealed in the thematic plan of *The Lifted Veil*, where the saint symbolises loyalty and safeguarding of truth.

John's protective role materialises at the climactic moment of the novel. Nina, desperate that Anton has finally believed all the lies of the Zamenoy's and left her, and also frustrated by her father's recent death, resolves to commit suicide by jumping from the

bridge into the river. She goes there after dark and while trying to pluck courage for the deed, she approaches the statue of John.

The statue of St. John Nepomucene is a single figure, standing in melancholy weeping posture on the balustrade of the bridge, without any of that ponderous strength of widespread stone which belongs to the other groups. This St. John is always pictured to us as a thin, melancholy, half-starved saint, who has had all the life washed out of him by his long immersion. [...] He is a mild, meek saint, teaching one rather by his attitude how to bear with the malice of the waters, than offering any protection against their violence. But now, at this moment, his aid was the only aid to which Nina could look with any hope. (182)

The scene is highly ambiguous. Nina means to drown and yet she hopes that her favourite saint will save her; she even tries to recall whether John's protective power has ever saved a suicide. But what she unconsciously wishes for is to save her love. While she slowly prepares for her suicidal act, the old family servant Souchey and Rebecca Loth find her, crouching on the parapet, and take her back home. When Anton learns the truth, he marries Nina and they leave Prague to live elsewhere, in a more tolerant world. Though Trollope originally thought of a tragic ending to his Prague story, he reserved it for his following experiment in anonymity, *Linda Tressel*.

Though there is an obvious interest in the Jewish part of Prague in both Eliot's and Trollope's stories (not to speak about *Daniel Deronda*, inspired by George Eliot's study of European Judaism and her friendship with her teacher of Hebrew, Emanuel Deutsch, a German historian and specialist in Semitic cultures), it is the legend of John of Nepomuk, a Christian martyr and Catholic saint, that ultimately dominates them. It is highly probable that Trollope found some impetus for his novel in Eliot's story, though we have no direct evidence that he ever read it. The two writers became friends in the early 1860s, after Trollope had assisted in getting Lewes' son Charles Lee placed in the Post Office, and Trollope was often invited to dine with the Leweses at that time. He rarely corresponded with Eliot herself but a note in her journal of 30 June 1862 testifies to his interest in her work: "And this morning I had a delightful, generous letter from Mr. Anthony Trollope about *Romola*" (*GEL* IV, 45). As Trollope's autobiography shows, he was in fact a regular reader of Eliot's novels, so it is quite legitimate to suppose that he knew *The Lifted Veil*, too. The influence was never admitted, though.

A final question remains: what induced the two English Protestant writers to grant such a central position to the Czech Catholic martyr and his legend? Was it at all possible that George Eliot noticed his statue when she was passing it in her coach on the way to Prague Castle? And how did she learn about the saint's significance for the Czech nation? Moreover, why does she refer to the bridge as "his" in her journal? Further, was Trollope drawn to the statue of John thanks to Eliot's story or did he observe it with a particular interest of his own during his walks on the bridge? We can but speculate, yet one potential answer looms outside the context we have examined so far.

In his essay "The Death of the Author" Roland Barthes asserts that a text is "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (qtd. in Allen, 12). In this way he addresses the problem of textual autonomy; a text in his concept

should not be understood as an independent autonomous unit conveying its unique message (“a single ‘theological’ meaning”) but an assembly of echoes resulting from multiple intertextual relationships.

If we allow the existence of a hypotext (to use Gérard Genette’s term) after which the motif of John of Nepomuk was constructed in the two English stories, I venture to suggest that we should look for it in the work of George Sand. The French novelist was very popular in England in the mid-nineteenth century, especially with female readers, though not without an awareness of controversy. George Eliot had read Sand since the late 1830s,<sup>4</sup> and in her letter to Sara Sophia Hennell of 9 February 1849 she defends the qualities of the French author’s work against her friend’s criticism:

It is thus with G. Sand. I should never dream of going to her writings as a moral code or text-book. I don’t care whether I agree with her about marriage or not – whether I think the design of her plot correct or that she had no precise design at all but begun to write as the spirit moved her and trusted to Providence for the catastrophe, which I think the more probable case – it is sufficient for me as a reason for bowing before her in eternal gratitude to that ‘great power of God’ manifested in her – that I cannot read six pages of hers without feeling that it is given to her to delineate human passion and its results [...] with such truthfulness such nicety of discrimination such tragic power and withal such loving gentle humour that one might live a century with nothing but one’s own dull faculties and not know so much as those six pages will suggest. (*GEL* I, 277–78)

Linda M. Lewis, when writing on the influence of Sand on Eliot, seems to echo this passage but extends it: “Eliot not only admires her predecessor’s truthfulness, power, humor, moral instincts, and passion, but she also admires Sand’s strong, larger-than-life women, such as Lélia and Consuelo. For Eliot’s other great debt to Sand [...] is her monumental female characters” (Lewis, 142). Patricia Thomson helpfully provides a list of books Eliot read in the 1840s: “*Indiana*, *Mauprat*, *Consuelo*, *Lélia*, *Lettres d’un Voyager*, *Jacques*, *Spiridon*, *Le Meunier d’Angibault* – we know that Marian Evans read these works of George Sand, written before 1847, from actual references to them in her letters” (Thomson, 154). She continues to argue that *Consuelo* especially was strongly influential in the conception of George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, in which the heroine, Maggie Tulliver, seems to bear many features of the titular main character of Sand’s novel. *Consuelo* (originally published in French serially in 1842–43) was also one of the most popular of Sand’s novels in England, including even Queen Victoria among its broad reading public. “Most of its popularity was undoubtedly due to the character of the heroine, the small gipsy-like waif with the short thick black hair, who has a wonderful voice and eventually becomes a beautiful prima donna, whose singing and greatness of soul and sweetness of disposition win all hearts” (164).

We can assume that George Eliot wrote *The Mill on the Floss* with *Consuelo* on her mind, and we should recall that she wrote *The Lifted Veil* while interrupting her early work on this novel. This enables us to extrapolate an affinity between *Consuelo* and Eliot’s story in one specific scene. Towards the end of the novel, while taking a night

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<sup>4</sup> Alexandra K. Wettlaufer writes that “Eliot was first introduced to Sand’s oeuvre in 1839 and by 1847 was an avid reader of her novels” (Wettlaufer, 82).



journey through Prague, Consuelo's coach breaks and makes a stop in the middle of the bridge, just in front of the statue of St John of Nepomuk. The postilion sees this as an ill omen and exclaims: "my horse has stopped at the statue: that is a bad sign. Saint John Népomuck, aid me!"<sup>5</sup> Consuelo is, however, fascinated by the place and gets out to take a closer look at the scene. She immediately associates the saint's statue with the legend:

The Moldau whirled rapidly under the arches of the steep, heavy bridge, which had been the scene of so many events of Bohemian history. The reflection of the moon played around the brow of the venerated statue. Consuelo gazed at the statue of the venerated doctor, who looked apparently at the waves. The legend of Saint Népomuck is beautiful, and his name is venerated by all who love liberty and independence. A confessor of the Empress Jane, he refused to betray the confessions, and the drunken Wenceslaus, who wished to become possessed of a woman's secrets, unable to influence the doctor, had him drowned beneath the bridge of Prague. Tradition says, just as he sank beneath the waters, five stars floated on the water, as if he had left the crown of martyrdom behind. In memory of this, five stars have been incrustated on the balustrade, at the very spot he disappeared. (508)

Even at this time, the statue is surrounded by worshippers, and Consuelo, moved by the scene, "knelt amid the crowd of women, pilgrims, beggars, and zingari, children of the mandoline, who now did homage to the saint, and their piety was so great, that she could not but reach forth her hand to them. She gave them large alms, and recalled the time when she had been destitute as they were" (508).

Sand fills this brief episode with a number of meanings evoked by the statue and therefore concentrates various issues exposed in her novel into one moment. The bridge is given a historical significance. Yet this historical appeal immediately gives way to the scene's magical aspect with the moonlight mysteriously playing around the saint's brow, which allows the legend to step in. And, compared especially with Trollope's rendering, the legend endows John of Nepomuk with multiple roles in George Sand's version: the saint not only protects people from the dangers of drowning but guarantees political benefits ("liberty and independence") and becomes "the patron of all journeys, of persons in danger, and the protector of fair fame" ("le patron special des voyageurs, des gens en peril, et, par dessus-tout, le garant de la bonne renommée") (508). There are strong notes of piety and solidarity, but also politically subversive motifs presented with a good deal of irony. While the patron strengthens in his worshippers the awareness of national identity and political hopes, the Austrian sentinel marching mechanically from each gate to the statue and back again take the crowd's hymns to be sung in praise of the Austrian rulers. "They were not such good Latin scholars as the devout people of Prague, and fancied, perhaps, they heard a praise of Francis of Lorraine, the husband of Maria Theresa" ("un cantique a la louange de François de Lorraine, l'époux de Marie-Thérèse", though the English translation actually says here: "Maria Theresa or Francis de Lorraine, her husband") (508). This politically subversive note is intensified by the fact the people also take special delight in cursing the name of King Wenceslas, "this tyrant, the abhorred name of

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<sup>5</sup> George Sand, *Consuelo*, trans. Fayette Robinson (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson & Brothers, 1870), 507. The original French quotations are taken from the version of the novel available at Project Gutenberg, accessed 2 March 2022, [www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/13374/pg13374.html](http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/13374/pg13374.html).

imperator, synonymous to them with Stranger” (508). The whole range of meanings culminates in the final part of the episode, contrasting the saint’s integrity with the hypocrisy of those who appeal to him for deplorable reasons: “She [Consuelo] remembered that one evening she had heard the canoness invoke Saint Népomuck aloud, and Albert had said, ‘That, aunt, is well enough for you who have taken the precaution to assure your own salvation by an exemplary life, but I have often seen persons sullied by crime, invoke the aid of this saint, to conceal their hidden offences from man. Thus practical devotees put on the mantle of deceit, quite as often as innocence’” (509). The final note, then, is that of the moral ambivalence of contemporary life.

Neither George Eliot nor Anthony Trollope retained the semantic richness of Sand’s presentation of the John of Nepomuk motif. It is not even certain whether Trollope read *Consuelo*; we know, however, that his mother Frances was an avid reader and admirer of George Sand, albeit not without reservations: “Trollope would have known of his mother’s admiration for George Sand’s genius, qualified by regret that most of her books were unsuitable for family reading” (*Letters of AT*, 1024). He himself approved of the moral impeccability of Sand’s *L’Uscoque* (see Hall, 70). But it is possible that he took *The Lifted Veil* as the principal aesthetic filter for his image of the Nepomuk motif and the Sandean inspiration was mediated in this fashion. Nevertheless, the fact that Eliot uses the French form, St. Jean Nepomuck, when referring to the bridge, exactly the form used by Sand in *Consuelo*, indicates her own literary inspiration. And Trollope’s absurd decision to name the son of a Prague Catholic family Ziska, after the famous Hussite leader and one of the major figures of the Czech Protestant movement, in turn points to his vague knowledge of George Sand’s *Jean Ziska: Épisode de la guerre des Hussites*. These traces of George Sand’s influence may ultimately explain why the two English texts, in their attempt to recreate *Praga magica*, feature a rather curious shift from a Jewish locus to the symbol of the country’s 17<sup>th</sup>-century Counter-Reformation.

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#### RÉSUMÉ:

#### PRAGA MAGICA: PRAHA JAKO MÍSTO PAMĚTI A VIZE V DÍLE GEORGE ELIOTOVÉ, ANTHONYHO TROLLOPA A GEORGE SANDOVÉ

Jak George Eliotová, tak Anthony Trollope krátce navštívili Prahu v polovině 19. století a byli uchvá-  
ceni takovými místy jako židovská čtvrť s její Staronovou synagogou anebo Karlův most s barokními  
sochami. Tyto motivy se pak objevují i v jejich dílech: u Eliotové v novele *Zdvižený závoj* a románu  
*Daniel Deronda*, u Trollopa v románu *Nina Balatková*. Jejich obraz Prahy však vychází z představy Prahy  
magické, Prahy opředené legendami, tajemstvími a magií. Přítomná studie se pokouší ukázat, že přesun  
významového těžiště z židovské Prahy k soše svatého Jana Nepomuckého ve *Zdviženém závoji* a *Nině  
Balatkové* mohl být motivován nejen obdivem k výzdobě mostu, tak jak ji oba autoři zhlédli během svých  
návštěv, ale i sémanticky bohatým motivem světcovy sochy v románu George Sandové *Consuelo*, který  
byl v té době v Anglii velmi populární.

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**SPATIAL AND SONIC MONSTROSITIES  
IN WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON'S  
"THE WHISTLING ROOM"**

PETRA JOHANA PONCAROVÁ

**ABSTRACT**

The article focuses on the corpus of tales featuring “Carnacki, the Ghost-Finder” by the British author William Hope Hodgson, an influential figure in the history of horror, fantastic literature, and speculative fiction. Drawing both on classical works of criticism by Tzvetan Todorov and Dorothy Scarborough and on the rather scarce corpus of scholarship devoted to Hodgson himself, the essay analyses the employment of space and sound in “The Whistling Room”.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** William Hope Hodgson; Thomas Carnacki; space; sound; Tzvetan Todorov

Writing in 1963, Tzvetan Todorov remarked that “detective stories have in our time replaced ghost stories” (Todorov, 49). A number of authors in the early decades of the twentieth century, however, combined features of the ghost story, fantastic literature, and the detective tale with curious effects. The fictional sleuths who investigate both supernatural events and misdemeanours of earthly origins include Algernon Blackwood’s “psychic doctor” John Silence, Dyson and Phillips, a pair of gentlemen of leisure created by Arthur Machen, and not least Thomas Carnacki, the “ghost-finder” brought to life by William Hope Hodgson, an author whose own life would provide ample material for a string of adventure tales that challenge credibility.<sup>2</sup>

William Hope Hodgson (1877–1918), sailor, photographer, body builder, writer, and soldier, whose extraordinary career was cut short by his death at the Ypres salient, is chiefly known for his two novels that combine horror, fantasy, and speculative fiction, and which subsequently influenced several other writers of note.<sup>3</sup> He also published short

<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund project “Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World” (reg. no.: CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16\_019/0000734).

<sup>2</sup> David Barnett notes that the first in the line of occult detectives is likely Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s Dr Martin Hesselius. Barnett, “Thomas Carnacki, King of the Supernatural Detectives”, *The Guardian* (30 June 2010), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2010/jun/30/thomas-carnacki-supernatural-detective> (accessed 31 January 2022). The phenomenon of occult detection is also explored in the recent anthology *The Ghost Slayers* (British Library, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of Hodgson’s life and career, see Emily Alder, *William Hope Hodgson’s Borderlands:*

stories, essays, and poetry. As with a number of authors of popular speculative and horror fiction, research into Hodgson so far is not extensive, but the corpus has been growing recently.<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Carnacki is the protagonist of a series of five short stories published in *The Idler* magazine:<sup>5</sup> “The Gateway of the Monster” (January 1910), “The House among the Laurels” (February 1910), “The Whistling Room” (March 1910), “The Horse of the Invisible” (April 1910), and “The Searcher of the End House” (June 1910) (see Alder, 27). In 1913, these stories were printed together as *Carnacki, the Ghost-Finder*. Three more specimens were added to the 1948 edition: “The Haunted Jarvee”, released posthumously in *The Premier Magazine* in 1929; “The Hog”, which appeared in *Weird Tales* in 1947; and “The Find”, a previously unpublished story.<sup>6</sup>

Like Blackwood’s John Silence stories, the corpus is frustratingly small, and in the manner of Arthur Conan Doyle, Hodgson enjoys taunting his readers with such alluring suggestions as the “Silent Garden Business”, the “Yellow Finger Experiments”, and, perhaps most intriguingly, the “Case of Moving Fur”. Whether Hodgson was actually planning to pen some of them, or whether they were always supposed to remain unwritten mirages, like the giant rat of Sumatra, is tempting to consider, but it seems likely that the case of the “Grunting Man”, referred to in “The Whistling Room”, was later realised as “The Hog”, so one may speculate that Hodgson would have continued the series, were it not for the Great War, whose horrors first transcended his own terrifying literary visions, and ultimately ended his life.<sup>7</sup>

## The Carnacki Corpus

Hodgson’s Thomas Carnacki investigates cases of hauntings, which occasionally turn out to be the work of crafty humans, but often prove genuine. However, what he encounters are not ghosts in the traditional sense, as spirits of the deceased who seek vengeance,

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*Monstrosity, Other Worlds, and the Future at the Fin de Siècle*, doctoral diss. (Edinburgh: Napier University, 2009), 15–42.

<sup>4</sup> Hodgson’s work has been analysed in chapters in collective monographs and journal essays, often in combination with other authors, for instance H. G. Wells, A. Blackwood, and H. P. Lovecraft, with scholars focusing on his two novels, *The House on the Borderland* and *The Night Land*. For an overview of critical responses up to 2009, see Alder, 5–7, 30–42. Hodgson’s fiction is now republished more frequently, including *The Collected Fiction of William Hope Hodgson*, 5 vols (Night Shade Books, 2017–19) and his so far uncollected poems have been republished as *The Lost Poetry of William Hope Hodgson*, ed. Jane Frank (Tartarus Press, 2005). As is often the case in the realm of ghost, horror, and detective stories of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, useful information can be found on websites and in magazines run by enthusiasts, such as *Sargasso: The Journal of William Hope Hodgson Studies*, which has so far produced three volumes (2013, 2014, 2016), and the websites *William Hope Hodgson* ([williamhopehodgson.wordpress.com](http://williamhopehodgson.wordpress.com)), *Mystery and Imagination* ([gothictexts.wordpress.com](http://gothictexts.wordpress.com)), and *Forgotten Futures* ([forgottenfutures.com](http://forgottenfutures.com)).

<sup>5</sup> The full text, with the original illustrations by Florence Briscoe, can be accessed at: <http://www.forgottenfutures.com/game/ff4/whistle.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> So far, only the “Whistling Room” (“Hvizdající pokoj”) has been translated into Czech in the anthology *Přízraky, zázraky a spol.* (Prague: Albatros, 2007), and a partial Czech translation of “The Horse of the Invisible” has been included in a special ghost-story issue of the magazine *PLAV* (2/2022).

<sup>7</sup> Hodgson’s comment on how the horrors of WWI exceeded his own tales of terror is quoted in Gonzales, 1212.

reconciliation, or merely do not want to leave this world, but other forces seeking to interfere malignantly with human life, sometimes for reasons that are explained, yet in other cases, there seems to be no causal link between the manifestation and the afflicted person. This decision bereaves the tale of a powerful narrative moment when the mystery is explained but makes up for it in disquieting implications of coincidental supernatural terror that can attach itself to anyone, a horror of modern randomness and anonymity. In this way, Hodgson comes close to both Blackwood and Machen, creating tentacles of terror that reach far and wide.

Todorov defines the fantastic in literature as a phenomenon that occupies the duration of the uncertainty between a natural and a supernatural explanation of an event, and when one option is chosen, the narrative leaves the fantastic for “a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous” (25). In a sense, all the Carnacki stories dwell in the duration, for there are always various loopholes in the other explanations, as M. R. James famously put it, some smaller than others.

The tales set off as fantastic literature, with both Carnacki and the reader hesitating between natural and supernatural explanations, and either veering towards the first, branding it a detective tale, but still with a pronounced uncanny aftertaste, or towards the second, transforming it into full-on modern horror. “The Gateway of the Monster”, featuring a room haunted by an enormous spectral hand, would thus, according to Todorov’s typology, be a case of the “supernatural accepted” (Todorov, 42), and the “The House Among the Laurels”, where the events are revealed to be tricks deliberately performed by a criminal gang to scare off unwanted visitors from their place of operation, an example of the “supernatural explained” (Todorov 44). Carnacki himself does the choosing between the two explanations, both for his friends, the original audience, and for the reader, but they are left to ponder about the details, which are never explicated, and also about the objective of the events that have been described in the tale.

In his treatise, Todorov notes that the detective story focuses on the solution of the mystery, while texts linked to the uncanny, including fantastic literature, dwell more on the reactions which this mystery provokes (50). The Carnacki tales accommodate both. As will become evident in the following analysis, they emphasise the reactions, especially of Carnacki himself – both narrator and one of the characters – and the solutions, which however covers only a certain amount of ground, always leaving enough space for disquieting speculation.

According to Todorov, stories of the fantastic tend to feature a first-person narrator (82), and Carnacki is one of them, although his speeches are always framed by an introduction. The framing narrator, conspicuously named Dodgson, is one of four friends who are regularly summoned to Carnacki’s house to dine and to listen to a story about his exploits, but the tale itself is reproduced as related directly by Carnacki, in the first person. Thanks to the choice of focalisation, the readers gain insight into Carnacki’s feelings during the cases, as he recounts his thoughts and physical sensations in detail, and frequently addresses his audience, encouraging them to imagine what it must have been like, showing at the same time a desire to share and connect, and the inability to convey his experiences and impressions fully. Carnacki’s reliability is never questioned, and it is not once implied that he could be deceived, although he frequently doubts himself and stresses his humanity and fallibility. As a person, Carnacki is a mysterious blank –

nothing is mentioned about his private life and there is no explanation as to his surname which suggests family roots outside the British Isles.

In terms of investigation techniques, Carnacki relies on his courage and experience from previous cases, and his usual method is to first explore the whole haunted place meticulously and then spend a night there, with appropriate protection, to determine the nature of the phenomenon. The tales feature a curious mixture of modern technology and more traditional “techniques”. Carnacki arrives armed with a camera with flashlight, and photographs often play an important role in several of his cases, as do microphones and recording equipment, but he also uses formulas and chants from occult rituals, information from ancient manuscripts, the sign of the pentacle, garlic, and holy water. This intriguing blend of the old and the new reflects the thematic elements of the stories too and is most tellingly manifested in Carnacki’s signature protective device, the “electric pentacle”.

The stories centre markedly on manliness and masculinity. Carnacki has male clients and male companions and collaborators – women are largely absent and if they appear in the stories at all, they remain passive. There is a notable focus on (manly) pluck, which is suggested by the mere frequency with which the word appears, and it is a quality that Carnacki appreciates in others and in himself. However, there is also a great deal of manly fear and the attempts to overcome it, “pluck” going hand in hand with sheer “funk” and cold sweat. In each story, there is a point where Carnacki becomes genuinely terrified, and the reader is invited to join the sensation. The detective openly and in detail describes his dread and the physical manifestations of anxiety, in some cases even runs away from the haunted space in terror when his instinct encourages him to do so, but ultimately recovers his courage to conclude the business, so the narratives at the same time emphasise and undermine his masculine authority.

Among features related to genre and gender, the Carnacki corpus is remarkable for the inventive employment of space and sound, which contributes to the effectiveness and attraction of the stories. This article focuses on “The Whistling Room”, giving it minute attention that has so far been rarely afforded to individual short stories by Hodgson. “The Whistling Room” is one of the most effective and popular contributions to the series, which presents radical ideas about the possible impacts of evil and violence and is marked by nauseatingly inventive brutality.<sup>8</sup>

### **“The Whistling Room”**

In this story, Carnacki relates a case he was invited to investigate in Ireland. Tassoc, an American businessman, has recently become the owner of an old manor house. He is soon to marry a local beauty, Miss Donnehue, thus provoking the jealousy of the local

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<sup>8</sup> According to the William Hope Hodgson Website, it has been “reprinted at least 23 times in English and several times in foreign languages and was also adapted for television in 1954 as an episode of *The Pepsi-Cola Playhouse* featuring Alan Napier as Carnacki. [Sam Gafford]”. “Carnacki #3: ‘The Whistling Room’”, published 28 November 2012, <https://williamhopehodgson.wordpress.com/2012/11/28/carnacki-3-the-whistling-room/>, (accessed 31 January 2022). The teleplay by Howard Green, directed by Axel Gruenberg, significantly alters both the plot and the outcome, which is not surprising given the outrageous nature of the tale – a convincing and faithful adaptation could be imagined from the Hodgson fan Guillermo del Toro.

men, who would not be sorry to see him leave. His happiness is marred by a strange whistling in one of the rooms in his new home. Unsure whether it is the work of disappointed former suitors of his bride-to-be, or something more sinister, he engages Carnacki's services. What initially gives the impression of being one of the lighter Carnacki stories that works with stereotypes about Ireland and the Irish and plays with the possibility of a hoax and the setting of a haunted Irish mansion, turns out to be one of the most gruesome and disquieting tales in the collection.<sup>9</sup>

### Sonic Monstrosities

Dorothy Scarborough comments on the employment of sound in literature of the supernatural, from the early ghosts with their eloquent silence and apparitions that retain the ability of verbal communication, to ghostly music and even song. She also mentions the introduction of "new sounds in modern ghostly tale", including specific sounds indicating movement and activity, or completely odd ones, such as the peculiar hissing in Blackwood's "A Nemesis of Fire" (Scarborough, 97–99). The disconcerting dissociation of sensual experience can also be used to much effect, such as hearing without having the corresponding visual impression, and vice versa.

The Carnacki stories rely heavily on the aural, such as spectral neighing and galloping in "The Horse of the Invisible", rapping on the banister in "The Searcher of the End House", the blood drip in "The House Among the Laurels", grunting in "The Hog", and door-banging in "The Gateway of the Monster". Even in "The Thing Invisible", which is less aurally focused than the others, sound plays an important role during the moments of greatest tension. Especially "The Whistling Room", "The Hog", and "The Horse of the Invisible" employ unusual sounds to momentous effect.

"The Whistling Room" advertises sound in its very title. The combination of the adjective and the noun arouses the reader's attention as the connection is deliberately odd, immediately provoking speculations. It suggests the chamber itself produces the sound, which seems impossible, and like the characters in the story, the reader starts to consider human intervention, a clever device, or some trick of ancient architecture that might produce the effect, and the idea of whistling indicates a rather innocent phenomenon. The mention of whistling cannot but bring to mind the spook-story enthusiast M.R. James and his story "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad", where the focus is more on the instrument and that which it summons rather than on the sound. F. Marion Crawford's story "Man Overboard," as Scarborough notes in her above-mentioned commentary, features a ghost that incessantly whistles his former tune, but Hodgson comes up with a more startling concept yet.

Carnacki arrives in Ireland and hears the whistling with his own ears:

Tom and I were in the library, when we heard an awfully queer whistling, coming along the East Corridor – The room is in the East Wing, you know.

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<sup>9</sup> In childhood, Hodgson spent some time in Ardahan, co. Galway, with his family, and he used it as a location for his novel *The House on the Borderland* (1908) and also for the Carnacki story "The House Among the Laurels".

“That’s that blessed ghost!” I said to Tom, and we collared the lamps off the table, and went up to have a look. I tell you, even as we dug along the corridor, it took me a bit in the throat, it was so beastly queer. It was a sort of tune, in a way; but more as if a devil or some rotten thing were laughing at you, and going to get ’round at your back. That’s how it makes you feel. When we got to the door, we didn’t wait; but rushed it open; and then I tell you the sound of the thing fairly hit me in the face. (74)

Even here, it is implied that there might be a melody, but for some time, the descriptions focus on other aspects of the phenomenon. As Carnacki stays at the castle, he encounters the whistling several times, and attempts to give his listeners a more accurate idea: “an extraordinary hooning whistle, monstrous and inhuman” (75), “grotesque parody of human whistling, too gigantic to be human” (78), “as if some monstrous giant had been holding mad carnival with itself” (79), “for all the meditative lowness of the note, the horrible, gargantuan quality was distinct – a mighty parody of the human, as if I stood there and listened to the whistling from the lips of a monster with a man’s soul” (83).

The curious adjective “hooning” is employed several times. In contemporary usage, it is associated with irresponsible and reckless driving,<sup>10</sup> but the older entries for “hoon” as a noun include “a lout, a rough; a crazy person, a ‘clot’; a ponce”.<sup>11</sup> The designation may thus suggest a combination of lunacy, obscenity, and criminal intentions. These strange and disjointed, and ultimately inadequate, descriptions of the weird phenomena upset the reader by providing them with a glimpse and making them eager to know more but leaving them unable to get a distinct idea.

The depictions stress several aspects: the vastness and immensity of the sound, its monstrosity, suggesting a human origin transformed into something obscene, the sense of perverse, mocking amusement on part of the originating force, and, importantly, the ability of the room to move. The sound is deeply expressive and suggests both intelligence and agency:

As the door flew open, the sound beat out at us, with an effect impossible to explain to one who has not heard it – with a certain, horrible personal note in it, as if there in the darkness you could picture the room rocking and creaking in a mad, vile glee to its own filthy piping and whistling and honing. To stand there and listen was to be stunned by Realisation. It was as if someone showed you the mouth of a vast pit suddenly, and said: That’s Hell. And you knew that they had spoken the truth. (75)

Scarborough notes the efficiency of “the awful effect of a sudden silence after supernatural sounds” (98), and Hodgson makes full use of this device. In the descriptions, sound and silence and contrasted several times: “the hooning whistling of the Room, coming down strangely through the stillness of the night [...] low and constant, queerly meditative”. When Carnacki enters the room, he finds it “full of an abominable silence [...] sort of purposeful silence, just as sickening as any of the filthy noises the Things have power to make [...] this room had just that same *malevolent* silence – the beastly quietness of a thing that is looking at you and not seeable itself, and thinks that it has got you” (77).

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<sup>10</sup> “Hoon, v.” *OED Online*, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/269054](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/269054) (accessed 24 January 2022).

<sup>11</sup> “Hoon, n.” *OED Online*, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/88314](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/88314) (accessed 24 January 2022).



Upon another examination, “a constant, meditative, hooning whistling” is heard from the room, which abruptly ceases and “the silence seemed worse; for there is such a sense of hidden mischief in a silence” (78). The silence in the room becomes imbued with the same qualities as the whistling. The unpredictability and the sudden changes between sound and silence stress the agency of the phenomenon and its twisted playfulness, ruling out the possibility of a passive sonic imprint that is repeated always in the same manner.

According to his usual method, Carnacki proceeds to examine the room and later the entire house inch by inch, employing as usual a curious mixture of modern technology and traditional protection. He places a loop of garlic around his neck, plugs his ears with garlic and tries to amplify the whistling to record it:

I tried to get a phonographic record of the whistling; but it simply produced no impression on the wax at all. That is one of the things that has made me feel queer, I can tell you. Another extraordinary thing is that the microphone will not magnify the sound – will not even transmit it; seems to take no account of it, and acts as if it were non-existent. (82)

Together with Carnacki’s ingenious methods of sealing the room with human hair to prove that no one enters it, his technical examination finally rules out earthly meddling as the cause, and it becomes evident there are more sinister forces at play, that this is “a genuine case of what is popularly termed ‘haunting’” (80). Satisfactorily for the reader who prefers supernatural thrill to prosaic explanations, the room is indeed established as the agent of the whistling, and Carnacki finds out that the curious aural phenomena are caused by just as remarkable spatial manifestations.

### **Spatial Abominations**

The idea of the haunted room or house, of a supernatural phenomenon connected to a particular place, goes back to Walter Scott’s “The Tapestry Chamber” and much further (see Scarborough 105–106). Traumatic events or crimes are imagined leaving their mark on the place – from full-fledged active ghosts to passive repetitions. Hodgson takes this notion further. When Carnacki looks into the room from a window, using a ladder, he sees that

The floor in the middle of the huge, empty room, was puckered upward in the centre into a strange soft-looking mound, parted at the top into an ever changing hole, that pulsed to that great, gentle hooning. At times, as I watched, I saw the heaving of the indented mound, gap across with a queer, inward suction, as with the drawing of an enormous breath; then the thing would dilate and pout once more to the incredible melody. And suddenly, as I stared, dumb, it came to me that the thing was living. I was looking at two enormous, blackened lips, blistered and brutal, there in the pale moonlight.... [...] Abruptly, they bulged out to a vast, pouting mound of force and sound, stiffened and swollen, and hugely massive and clean-cut in the moon-beams. And a great sweat lay heavy on the vast upper-lip. In the same moment of time, the whistling had burst into a mad screaming note, that seemed to stun me, even where I stood, outside of the window. And then, the following moment, I was staring blankly at the solid, undisturbed floor of the room – smooth, polished stone flooring, from wall to wall; and there was an absolute silence. (83)

The haunted room becomes the actual physical manifestation of the trauma, where the person who haunts it merges with the physical space, creating a monstrous sentient chamber. The room lures Carnacki in by pretending to call for help in the voice of Tassoc, confirming the malevolent agency and intelligence of the phenomenon and also its awareness of the inhabitants of the house, their character and mutual relations. When Carnacki enters, he finds that “the end wall had bellied in” toward him, with “a pair of gargantuan lips, black and utterly monstrous”, within a yard of his face (84). He is miraculously saved by someone or something else in the room whispering the “Unknown Last Line of the Saaamaaa ritual” (84) and he ends up jumping out of the window.

In the 1900s and 1910s, various writers of the fantastic were interested in space and materiality, in the ideas of moving, fluid space, and in concepts like the Outer Space and the Fourth Dimension (Scarborough, 259). This interest is clearly manifest in Hodgson’s work in general. Todorov mentions the persistence of the theme of metamorphosis in gothic and fantastic fiction (Todorov, 109; Scarborough, 30–31). Often, these transformations would involve people turning into animals or one person becoming another, but almost always a reshaping of one into another individual being. What is innovative about Hodgson’s idea is the notion of a man merging physically with a room, exemplifying Todorov’s observation that in some fantastic texts “the transition from mind to matter has become possible” (Todorov, 114), in a very literal manner. Kelly Hurley, writing about Hodgson’s novel *The Night Land*, mentions the “representations of an admixed, fluctuable, even chaotic human body”, which is a pertinent point also for “The Whistling Room” (Hurley, 129).

According to Todorov, the whole fantastic narrative usually leads to one incident or a culminating point, going back to Edgar Allan Poe’s observation that the “tale is characterized by the existence of a single effect, located at the end, and by the obligation all the elements within the tale are under to contribute to this effect” (qtd in Todorov, 87). In this case, it is the revelation that it is the room itself that whistles and that it is a living organism with a malicious will and an intelligence of its own, suggesting the possibility of merging a person with a chamber made of stone and wood. All the other descriptions and incidents in the story have been preparing the ground for the moment when Carnacki looks in through the window and enters the room.

Immediately after his lucky escape, Carnacki concludes that the chamber needs to be destroyed, not only purged or exorcised: “the room would have to come down, and every fragment of it burned in a blast-furnace, erected within a pentacle” (84). When it is being torn down, the cause of the haunting is revealed: “there was let into the masonry a scroll-work of stone, with on it an old inscription, in ancient Celtic, that here in this room was burned Dian Tiansay, Jester of King Alzof, who made the Song of Foolishness upon King Ernore of the Seventh Castle” (85). An old manuscript which recounts the legend in detail is readily procured by Tassoc.

The widespread appeal of the jester’s satirical song leads to war between the two ancient kings. Alzof is burned together with his castle, and the jester is captured by Ernore, who takes his wife for himself.<sup>12</sup> Ernore also has Tiansay’s tongue torn out, to

<sup>12</sup> As in other Carnacki stories, women in “The Whistling Room” are causes or victims of the events, passive and mostly silent. In this case, nothing is indicated about the wife – what was her relationship with the jester, whether she died willingly by his hand to prevent further exploitation by the king, or

prevent him from repeating the song. The jester is imprisoned in the room around which the whole story evolves but manages to escape and is found cradling his dead wife in his arms, and whistling the Song of Foolishness, since he is physically unable to sing it. In revenge, Tiansay is roasted alive in a great fireplace in the same room, yet he defiantly continues whistling the song. It is revealed that the Iastrae Castle, Tassoc's new residence, incorporates the old remains of the ancient Seventh Castle, and the whistling room is identified as the place of the ancient jester's imprisonment and violent death. According to the parchment found in the walls, the whistling started immediately after the event, with a strange power emanating from the room.

Hodgson manages to make the idea of a haunted room original on several levels. Were "The Whistling Room" a more traditional ghost story, the spirit of the tortured jester would be haunting the room where he died, whistling the fateful song, and trying to enact his revenge. Here, the situation is different. Carnacki defines the incident as "one of those cases of continuity of thought producing a positive action upon the immediate surrounding material [...] a living spiritual fungus, which involves the very structure of the aether-fiber itself, and, of course, in so doing, acquires an essential control over the 'material substance' involved in it" (86). The reader witnesses the result of a transformation of matter by which the jester's traumatised soul came to possess the material surroundings of his execution, becoming them, and turning them alive to the extent that the room transforms, moves, and produces the whistling sound in order to exact Tiansay's revenge.

Vengeance is indeed the aim of the monstrous room, as it is revealed that Miss Donnehue is supposed to be descended from King Ernore and her presence and upcoming marriage have supposedly awoken the room to life. As Scarborough notes, the revenge ghost in modern fiction frequently manifests itself as "mutilated or dismembered, each disfigurement of the mortal body showing itself in a relentless immortality and adding to the horror of the haunting" (91). The mutilation of the jester's body is emphasised and only the monstrous, burned and blistered lips appear, recalling the most singular moments of the tragedy.

The brutality and nature of the punishment provide the second culminating point of Hodgson's story, after the revelation of the sentient room. Todorov discusses the frequent employment of cruelty in fantastic literature and its functions, noting that in many cases the violence is merely documented and does not actually occur within the universe of the tale (132–35). Here, the event of the mutilation and the burning is not described as happening within the tale, but neither is it purely "verbal violence": it is implied as having actually occurred in real history, with the tangible proof of the manuscript and the suggestive presence of the enormous fireplace.

The fantastic narrative and even more the detective story, Todorov notes, emphasise the "process of uttering" and also the time of reading, as "surprise is only a particular case of irreversible temporality" (89–90). "The Whistling Room" is distinguished by clever foreshadowing, with seeds of future terror deftly sown from the beginning, such as when Carnacki first notices the above-mentioned fireplace in the otherwise empty room: "huge affair, and has a queer gallows-iron, I think they are called" (78). The narrative also

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whether she did not actually prefer her new lover. Miss Donnehue is only referred to and there is no mention of her actions.

employs subtle pacing. It is told over two meetings at Carnacki's, and the first session ends with the prospect that the whole business will be revealed as the handiwork of spurned Irish would-be suitors of Miss Donnehue. Carnacki leaves for Ireland again, creating an intermission which highlights the tension and gives the readers the opportunity to consider the obvious natural explanation. When he returns, he relates the rest of the case to his audience. Another manifestation is the triple, escalating punishment of the jester: first his tongue is torn out, then his wife is taken, presumably to be kept as a sex slave by the king, and finally he is roasted alive. The terrible surprises of a first reading cannot be repeated, but there remains plenty to disquiet and occupy the reader upon returning to the story, such as the minute descriptions of the sensations and the physical and philosophical implications.

### **“Out You Go!”: Final Remarks**

The dinner gatherings at Carnacki's residence in Chelsea are always concluded with the host sending his friends home with the above-mentioned phrase, leaving them – and the readers – to ponder the inferences of what they have just listened to, “in the dark” and without Carnacki's reassuring presence. “The Whistling Room” is arguably one of the tales which create the most disturbing aftertaste, thanks to the remarkable engagement with space and sound, clever pacing and foreshadowing, thoroughly described sensory experiences, inventive employment of various genre tropes, and unsettling suggestions about the lasting impact of violence and trauma. Here, the remnant of individual consciousness merges with the physical environment of the room, the connection forged by the force of suffering. The most disquieting fact is perhaps not the ancient atrocity but rather the hinted-at theory about spiritual fungus.

In a striking move, Hodgson uses whistling, a spectre of the fatal song which neither the reader nor the characters hear sung with full voice and lyrics, only whistled, marking the absence of the tongue necessary for pronunciation. The melody is never described, leaving everything to imagination. Were “The Whistling Room” a more traditional tale, resolution could be achieved by the discovery of the manuscript and the destruction of the fireplace, or perhaps by a reiteration of the ill-fated satirical song. One of the horrible ironies of the story is the fact that the evil manifestation in this case is the soul of the jester, a person whose role was to provide amusement and diversion, that grows rotten with hatred, seeking revenge on an innocent female descendant of his killer.

What makes these tales of male courage and companionship remarkable in terms of depicting gender roles and also more relatable to a contemporary audience is the curious openness and detail in which Carnacki's own fears and doubts are depicted, and the noticeably high concentration of “pluck” is balanced by the similarly conspicuous ubiquity of “funk”.

Like other representatives of weird fiction, Hodgson takes on board established conventions of the ghost-story genre and radically transforms them. The tale also presents a very different spiritual landscape. Like the whole Carnacki corpus, “The Whistling Room” involves references to a specific occult system, complete with arcane terminology, suggesting the existence of various malevolent powers and manifestations that seek

to interfere with human life for their own purposes, which are however never explained. In the Carnacki stories, physical suffering and death are not indicated as the ultimate threat. At the culminating moment in “The Whistling Room”, before the unknown power whispers the saving line of the Saaamaaa ritual, Carnacki is prepared to shoot himself rather than wait to see what the room “does” to him. The exact nature of the threat is not specified and neither is the origin of the last-minute miraculous deliverance, suggesting that both evil and good forces are random, capricious, and ultimately obscure. This modern bleakness, together with the relatable character of a ghost buster who regularly gets as spooked as his readers, is likely one of the reasons that account for the continuing and growing popularity of the Carnacki tales.

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#### RÉSUMÉ:

#### ZVUKOVÁ A PROSTOROVÁ MONSTROSITA V POVÍDCE WILLIAMA HOPEA HODGSONA „THE WHISTLING ROOM“

Článek se zaměřuje na sérii povídek z pera britského spisovatele Williama Hopea Hodgsona, jejichž hlavní postavou je „okultní detektiv“ Thomas Carnacki. Hodgson sehrál významnou roli ve vývoji hororové, fantastické a spekulativní literatury. Práce vychází z klasických kritických děl (Tzvetan Todorov, Dorothy Scarborough) i z nevelkého korpusu odborných statí věnovaných přímo Hodgsonovi a zkoumá využití prostoru a zvuku v povídce „The Whistling Room“.

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**“THE MOVING HORIZON OF CLASSLESS HARMONIES”  
IN DARKO SUVIN’S POETRY**

PAVLA VESELÁ

**ABSTRACT**

The article discusses selected poetry by Darko Suvin against the background of his theoretical writings about science fiction, utopia and poetry. It argues that Suvin’s poetry estranges the ideological view of the present and history as an inevitable reproduction of injustice and alienation. The focus is on several poems included in the collections *The Long March: Notes on the Way 1981–1984* (1987) and *Defined by a Hollow: Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction, and Political Epistemology* (2010), as well as in “Three Long Poems 2000–2016” (2016) and “Poems of Old Age (2002–17)” (2017) available on the author’s website.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** utopia; science fiction; poetry; communism; Darko Suvin

the poems are the best me  
& the best i can say for myself is  
i kept the faith comrades  
In this sad & wondrous time.  
(Suvin, “Autobiography 2004: De Darci Natura”)

As founding editor (together with R. D. Mullen) of the journal *Science-Fiction Studies* and author of various articles and monographs, from the critically-acclaimed *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (1979) to the recent *Disputing the Deluge: Collected 21st-century Writings on Utopia, Narration, and Survival* (2021), Darko Suvin is frequently cited for his definition of science fiction as literature of cognitive estrangement, and appreciated for his criticism of Anglophone, Francophone and Russian science fiction and utopia. In addition, he has contributed to theatre studies, philosophy and political theory, with subjects that extend from Bertolt Brecht’s dramaturgy to the history of former Yugoslavia. What is perhaps less known is

<sup>1</sup> The article emerged from a revised presentation delivered at the symposium of the Leverhulme International Research Network “Imaginaries of the Future” that took place in 2016 at the University of Regensburg, Germany. I hereby thank the organisers for accepting my contribution and for their continual support. Special thanks to Darko Suvin for his suggestions and comments on earlier versions. “The moving horizon of classless harmonies” is a quotation from the poem “A Letter to My Friend, Disenchanted After 1968”.

that Suvin is also a poet. He has published poetry in Croatoserbian as well as English, in journals ranging from the Croatian *Novi Plamen* and the Japanese *Abiko Quarterly* to several Anglophone journals including *Foundation*, *Femspec*, *Frogpond*, and *Socialism and Democracy*. His verse has appeared in his critical monographs, such as *Lessons of Japan* (1996) and *For Lack of Knowledge: On the Epistemology of Politics as Salvation* (2001), and in two stand-alone collections, *The Long March: Notes on the Way 1981–1984* (1987) and *Armirana Arkadija [An Armoured Arcadia]* (1990).<sup>2</sup> Suvin's view of poetry has remained sympathetic: already in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, he discussed the poems of William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley, and over two decades later he commended poetry (and art in general) for example in his essay to Marc Angenot in the following way:

In poetry's (art's) utopian glimmer, probe, & epitome, alternatives for humanity can be – cheaply! – rehearsed. It is at its best, in its horizons, a perennial playful childhood of human kind. [...] Poetry (artistic production) is then potentially a privileged form for conveying & constituting cognition, for humanizing it by means of figures & events recalling but also modifying the life-world, & for understanding what cognition is & may be. [...] We need to realize that there is no poetry without communism, & no communism without poetry. (2004, 308–309)

Despite Suvin's appreciative view of poetry, and despite his own poetic output, there is relatively little criticism; with exceptions such as a recent article in *Utopian Studies* by Zorica Đergović-Joksimović, an essay in Italian by Daniela Marcheschi about the poem “You, Giacomo Leopardi” and Tom Moylan's discussion of the journey from denunciation to annunciation in “Growing Old Without Yugoslavia”, there are Phillip E. Wegner's forewords in *Darko Suvin: A Life in Letters* (2011) and *Defined by a Hollow: Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction, and Political Epistemology* (2010), which describe Suvin's poetry as “a deeply affective, self-reflective counterpoint to the essay's more analytic turns, while underscoring the emotional shifts and swerves that are a crucial part of the essays' context” (Wegner 2010, xxiv). My objective in the following pages is to contribute to these studies by first reviewing some of Suvin's thoughts about poetry, science fiction and utopia, and subsequently to discuss several poems. In the next section, I briefly recall the notions of cognitive estrangement and the novum as introduced in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* but also in Suvin's later works, specifically the essays “Locus, Horizon, and Orientation: The Concept of Possible Worlds as a Key to Utopian Studies” (1990), “Parables and Uses of a Stumbling Stone” (2017) and “On Communism, Science Fiction and Utopia: The Blagoevgrad Theses” (2019). The critic's reflections about poetry in his monograph *Communism, Poetry: Communicating Vessels (Insubordinate Writings 1999–2018)* (2020) constitute departure points for my subsequent discussion of his poems. These are chosen thematically rather than chronologically, as despite the development of Suvin's writings from prevalently sensuous, lyrical poetry, through angrier and more disillusioned verse of the 1990s, to the tentatively hopeful texts of the past two decades,<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> A selection of Suvin's writing is available at <http://www.darkosuvn.com>.

<sup>3</sup> Commenting on his writing in *Defined by a Hollow*, Suvin observed “a break in time, and perhaps even more in tone” (2010, 2) that came after 1989 and the NATO bombing of Belgrade in the 1990s. His early poetry, “while facing the personal price to be paid by an émigré, still held to the larger framework of Blochian hope, which indeed culminated in the utopian ‘soft primitivism’ of ‘Visions off Yamada’



his poetry has been underwritten by what is also a central focus of this essay: a concern with disalienation, justice and “classless harmonies”.

As Carl Freedman wrote in a review of *Defined by a Hollow*, “[t]o read Suvin seriously is to appreciate that the various genres he has mastered are for him ultimately means towards a single end that is manifest in nearly everything he writes: namely, the project of fully facing the horrors of the world we inhabit while imagining – and striving to attain – a world radically more humane, a world more fit for human life” (2011, 110). His poetry, as the following pages propose, insists on a historical movement (orientation) towards a classless world of justice and disalienation (horizon), with utopia as a spacio-temporally bordered moment (locus) of critically hopeful estrangement from the horrors of history and a reminder of its utopian horizon. Specifically, there is a recurrent motif of rivers, seas and oceans, which are linked with the movement of history: sublime, terrible, overwhelming, “[m]uttering [and] overflowing” (Suvin 2017, “Ah! God...”) yet also streamed with warm currents of resistance, hope and affection. Utopia appears in the poems as a challenging enclosure akin to Fredric Jameson’s conceptualisation of it in *Archeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005) as “an imaginary enclave within real social space”, “an aberrant by-product [whose] possibility is dependent on the momentary formation of a kind of eddy or self-contained backwater within the general differentiation process and its seemingly irreversible forward momentum” (2005, 15), which may be destroyed like former Yugoslavia but not without surviving and affecting history’s movement towards the utopian horizon.

### **(Suvin) On Science Fiction, Utopia and Poetry**

Organised or articulated communism can be a locus,  
an orientation for a movement,  
and a horizon.  
(Suvin, *Communism, Poetry*)

Although delving deeper into the notions of cognitive estrangement and the novum, instrumental for Suvin’s consideration of science fiction and utopia, is outside the scope of this article, to set the grounds for the following discussion of his thoughts about poetry, it is good to emphasise that crucial for the definition of cognitive estrangement and the novum is the distinction between what Suvin has called “critical” and “mythical” (or “nihilist”) estrangement, and between a liberating, life-dealing novum and a fake, death-dealing one. While the difference between “critical” and “mythical” estrangement may appear only implicit in the 1972 article “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre”, where drawing on lectures he gave in the late 1960s and early 1970s Suvin introduced the concept of cognitive estrangement in his definition of science fiction, later he criticised for example Lee Baxandall’s work on happenings as nihilist estrangement centred on

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and other similar poems of a more intimate nature”, whereas the poems written during and after the disintegration of Yugoslavia “culminate to [his] mind in the cosmic desolation of ‘Imagine a Fish’, a hyperbole for the dystopian period [he] grappled with after the mid-1990s” (Suvin 2010a, 2–3). Nevertheless, in his more recent poems “the horizon of a history that has no end is not forgotten, it lives [...] as the value stance from which all is judged and at times even surfaces” (Suvin 2010a, 3).

a mere “renewal of sensual perception without cognitive values”, as Sezgin Boynik put it (2015, 30). Likewise, in “Parables and Uses of a Stumbling Stone”, Suvin emphasised that “estrangement as a formal device which doubts the present norms is ideologico-politically ambiguous: in the Brecht or Marxist wing it is ‘critical’, but in other hands it may be ‘mythical’: Hamsun, Jünger, Pound, and the Iranian *Ta’ziyeh* play use it with a lay or religious proto-fascist horizon” (2017, 271).

“Mythical/nihilist” estrangement therefore differs from cognitive estrangement even though both are critical of the status quo (Ezra Pound’s rejection of “usury” in *The Cantos* is one of Suvin’s examples). In places, the distinction seems to be conceptualised in terms of the doctrinal closure of “mythical/nihilist” estrangement (for example in a doctrinal belief in the superiority of one nation, patriarchy, racism and Social Darwinism), but an even clearer difference is the horizon and the locus from which the present world and its continuum are estranged. The orienting horizon in Suvin’s work is the communist horizon: “the future Earthly Paradise of a classless society, a society of equals: possessing equal right to define and participate in common collective projects for well-being and happiness” (Suvin 2020, 20). “[O]rienting, often inspiring, and always unattainable” (Suvin 2020, 20), this horizon is not a doctrine; nevertheless, it is not empty and differs from a proto-fascist horizon of injustice, racism and ethnic bigotry.

Although “Locus, Horizon and Orientation” mentions abstract blueprints and utopian programmes as instances of utopian horizons, it is through concrete utopian loci that the difference between “critical” and “mythical/nihilist” estrangement may be elucidated. While many texts represent a locus, a science-fiction text represents a locus in which the novum is hegemonic (“*SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional novum (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic*” [Suvin 1979, 79; original emphasis]) and a utopian (or eutopian) text represents a locus in which the novum is envisioned by the author as “more perfect”. Suvin’s now classic definitions therefore represent utopia as “the *sociopolitical subgenre of science fiction*” (1979, 61; original emphasis), a Blochian “imaginative experiment or ‘a methodical organ for the New’” (1979, 66; cf. Bloch 1996, 157), and “the verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms, and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author’s community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis” (1979, 49). Through distinguishing between a “fake” novum and a “radically liberating”<sup>4</sup> one, or through a later addition to the above definition of utopia as constructed by “discontented social classes interested in otherness and change” (2010b, 383),<sup>5</sup> Suvin

<sup>4</sup> “Radically liberating” in the sense that it stands “in critical opposition to degrading relationships between people as well as to the commodification of human and surrounding nature, and in fertile relation to memories of a humanized past [...] I mean also a novelty enabling us to understand whence comes the rising tide of racism and fascism 2.0, and crucially that it is fed by central commandment of capitalism: profit now, more and more profit, and let the straggling hundreds of millions be eaten by wolves” (Suvin 2019, 146).

<sup>5</sup> In an interview with Boynik, Suvin explained that the initial definition lacked the social anchoring in “discontented class” and that “[i]t is not enough to say simply a discontented group, then you can have reactionary utopias as well. I read a number of them by Russian White émigrés, for they too can be discontented. It must be a sufficiently important social class to produce a viable ideology. In other words if we accept a socio-formalist vocabulary, I lacked the social part in first definition” (Boynik and Suvin 2015, 35).

differentiates between specific utopian loci while also keeping in mind that a locus (of any political orientation) becomes dogmatic and static without a horizon. A dynamic, open utopian text represents a spacio-temporal arrangement oriented towards a horizon; it is characterised by “*the dominance of Horizon over Locus*” (1990, 79; original emphasis).

In the next three sections, Suvin’s poems are selected to illustrate how the estranging utopian locus emerges under the moving horizon of justice and disalienation. Poetry, according to Suvin, can open ideological closures via estrangement from the prevailing worldview and its continuum. In *Communism, Poetry*, Suvin argues that verse enables counter-hegemonic cognition as it is “not only in strong opposition to the stifling superficial babbling of the reigning, totally ideologised doxa of the capitalist media or brain-washed common sense, but its main reason for existing is to be a ‘stumbling block’ for the hegemonic babble” (2020, 69). Referring to Franco Fortini’s observation that “the literary use of language may lead the writer and reader to a knowledge of relationships between people different from the knowledge brought by a practical or scientific use of language” (Fortini 2003, 1796; qtd in Suvin 2020, 199), Suvin points out that in poetry where the subject and the addressee are present and presupposed, rational discourse is “never sundered from possibly discreet or hardboiled but always strong emotion” (2020, 70). However, even though the critic links all poetry here to communism, considering the two as communicating vessels, what transpires from his above-mentioned essays about science fiction and utopia is that poetic novums may induce “critical” as well as “mythical/nihilist” estrangements, and that only certain poetry could be considered science fiction, as “no doubt, each and every poetic metaphor is a novum [and] valid SF has deep affinities with poetry but its [SF’s] novelty is ‘totalizing’ in the sense that it entails a change of the whole universe of the tale, or at least of crucially important aspects thereof” (Suvin 1979, 64), and that only certain poetry presents open-ended, life-dealing utopias.

Let me now turn to several poems from the collections *The Long March* and *Defined by a Hollow* (which includes a selection of poetry written between 1983 and 2008) as well as two compilations available on Suvin’s website: “Three Long Poems 2000–2016” (2016) and “Poems of Old Age (2002–17)” (2017). I propose that through water imagery Suvin’s poems create a fictional world that moves under the sign of the communist “horizon of classless harmonies”. While some of these texts present a utopian locus, a specific “counter-project” (to use Suvin’s expression), it remains dynamic in that it “constantly tends toward and yet never fuses with horizon” (Suvin 1990, 82).

### **Rivers, Seas and Oceans**

Still, the poetry of knowledge remains my joy:  
And I would not want to be like a tree  
Mirroring one’s leaves in the river’s fluid flow  
In vegetable love year after mindless year.  
(Suvin, “Counter-Projects [in Han-Shan’s style]”)

As Wegner wrote, “[i]t is in its myriad forms of border crossings – and in its openness to diverse perspectives, the connections it draws across various fields, disciplines, and cultures, and the depth of its political commitments – that the real importance of



Yet there is also hope for scorched lands and polluted waters, in the form of streams of “[c]lear water [...] heard in the rustle of leaves” (2016, “Ode in the Guise”). Oceans, seas and rivers remain historical and sublime; they are associated with cruelty, horror, destruction and waste beyond human understanding yet also with streams of resistance, hope and care which affect the movement towards the utopian horizon. This association of the planet’s moving waters with resistance, both past and present, is evident especially in *The Long March* collection in poems such as “The Present Past” (1987), dedicated to Walter Benjamin, in which the dead “are what shatters us as a shockwave flood”, or in “Be Still in Peace: A Valedictory Forbidding Mourning (Third Anniversary)” (1987), where the ocean is described as an unfathomable reservoir of the planet’s past: “the bitter tears (I see now) / contain the same salts as the Pacific / In the last million years people have spilt several Pacifics”. In several other poems, the speaker finds comfort in a retreat into oceanic depths; in “A Self Enlightened (In the Manner of Ching Shen-tan)” (1987), for example, he likens books to whales “on whose back [he] may cross the wide ocean of history”.

Water bodies as reservoirs of resistance are featured in more recent poetry as well. In “The Return of the Ancestors (End of March)” (2010), drought and stultifying, polluted waters parallel clogged veins of rulers who live in mansions on hills, who kill and “extort blood in peacetime”. The dead return, and in the final stanza they reproach their sons and grandchildren thus:

O sons, O grandchildren, look how fat you are,  
 Look how hard your women must work, where’s  
 Your powerful sisterhood & brotherhood? Pay  
 Your ingent debts, to us, to yourselves, flow  
 Over the banks: unclog your veins, have pity  
 On us, on yourselves.

The ancestors, met at the outset with a lit fire and lit lanterns, dampen the fire and make the lanterns gutter. In the dystopian world of their successors, as their dams collapse, the only hope is in tides of sisterhood and brotherhood. In “Le Ceneri di Tito (Berlin Day, End of C20)” (2010), as blood silts up rivers and oceans, the speaker “burrow[s] into sleep quietly on morning islands / At the bottom of the ocean”, along with the ashes of Tito, “peasants [...] burned out of their villages / City people bombed out of their homes”, and “[o]ne million & three quarters dead in the partizan war”. Never becoming calm entombments of the past, rivers, seas and oceans continue to subvert the shore; in “I’m Into Your World” (2010), alienated from “the coil of writhing serpentine lies” and “[h]issing with laid-on charm from TV & PC monitors”, the speaker awaits “the dove / Of a differing Flood”, and in the aforementioned “Thus Spake the Bitter Muse”, it is suggested that unless people change, “fires and floods [will rise] against them”.

While there is a redemptive dimension in the history conveyed through water imagery, there is no denial or acceptance of its horrors. On the contrary, the dystopian world in Suvin’s poems is unrelentingly depicted as disturbing, unjust and alienating, albeit streamed with resistance and affection – for instance, the “warm Kuroshio current” (“A Self Enlightened”) offers “permanent warm / Currents, a permanently creative revo-

lution” (2010, “Shipwreck in Pannonia: A Sonnet with a Tail”), and “the water of life” is equated with “[t]he water of pleasure” (2010, “Pillaging the Gnostics”). The movement is oriented towards a utopian horizon on which the horrors of the past and the present would not be perpetuated. Before moving on to suggesting how this orienting horizon emerges, let us consider several of the poems’ utopian loci.

### **Bridges, Boats and Islands**

Once, enfolded lovingly in the fastness of our arms,  
I thought the river had stopped still.  
(Suvin, “To Her Hasty Lover [Ballad of Mo-Chou’s Daughter]”)

Zorica Đergović-Joksimović asks in her article on the poetics of estrangement “whether Suvin’s own definition of utopia is applicable to his own poetry” (2017, 47), and draws attention to the critic’s frequent references to the tradition of utopian thought, specific authors of utopias (such as William Morris, H. G. Wells and Ursula K. Le Guin) and utopian locations from both Western and Eastern cultures. She argues that “the appropriation of ancient, foreign, or exotic utopian forms, along with a whole catalog of references to various utopian authors, thinkers, philosophers, revolutionaries, and concepts/topoi, is not what makes any given poetry collection a truly utopian one” but “it does help create the necessary intertextual background to Suvin’s poems, which casts a new – and critical, at that – light upon the utopian tradition” (2017, 51). This seems right and perhaps one need not see the utopian references as mere background but rather as a fictional world of utopian verbal constructions, a literary and philosophical counter-history, or, to put it more lightly, a school of book whales that may be glossed and read “aright for the blessed classless future, / For the great creativity, in order to survive, surely” (“A Self Enlightened”).

Yet keeping in mind Suvin’s own definition of utopia, only a handful of his poems could be included in this (sub)genre. Many quite realistically convey and condemn the horrors of the world we live in and estrange the reader from the ideological view of reality. Some poems gesture towards, rather than depict in detail, an alternative or oppositional locus. For example, the very first poem in *The Long March*, “Crossing on the Left (Sonnet in Southern Sung Manner)” (1987), opens with the following lines:

This flimsy hanging bridge frightens me badly.  
I wish there were any other way out of the petrified desert.  
If it founders, I will surely drown; yet without it,  
The raging river would have closed over us already.

In the remainder of the poem, this uncertain bridge represents the alternative space to carry the speaker and others over the watery abyss with stony grounds below. A similar theme appears in “A Matter of Life and Death” (1987), which depicts the relationship of the party and the people as that of ice and water. Several other poems from *The Long March* mention more modest, personal spaces, which are nevertheless equally uncertain and temporary. In “A la Recherche du Temps Perdu: In Tsao’s style” from the sequence

“Seven Songs of Our Times in Classical Chinese Styles” (1987), as “a flute locks emptiness into [the] room”, the utopian vision “fades in the gloom”. Similarly, in “Metacommentaries (Han-Shan style)” (1987), a wanderer, who momentarily finds peace afloat in a river, must return to the reality of the land:

Wonderfully afloat on the smooth clear river,  
Delighted I forget how late it grows.  
Beneath the evening wind, sitting in my boat,  
Associations come and go in endless streams.  
My mind is like the small full Moon of Autumn  
Letting a shining ladder down to a midnight sea.  
What am I doing here? Why don't I go home?  
I am bound by the evergreen cinnamon trees!

Boats, islands, oases, and bridges figure as momentary utopian spaces also in several later poems, from the aforementioned crowded fishing boat in which the speaker remembers crossing the narrow sea “from occupation / To liberation” (“Autobiography 2004”) to a longed-for “oasis, a caravanserai for the weary” where the speaker of “Thus Spake the Bitter Muse” might “cultivate a little garden / & not be afraid”.

Two 1980s poems present more detailed accounts of communities “organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author’s community” and “based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis” (Suvín 1979, 49). The first of these, “Eo Rus, with a Catch” (1987), depicts a sunny village – perhaps Mediterranean, Caribbean or Malayan – inhabited by straightforward and silent people who live in hamlets and small stone houses, grow vegetables and cultivate fruit trees, stroll, meet and read “rare writings”. Peaceful and affirmative, the vision nevertheless wavers in the last lines, in a similar manner as it does in the above poems “Seven Songs” and “Metacommentaries”:

Alas! all of this presupposes the great millenary operation  
Shifting of the Golden Age from past to palpable future,  
The Revolution righting the reversed, topsy-turvy world:  
But I shall not live to taste the tea-scented ocean.

Another detailed utopian community appears also in “Visions Off Yamada” (2010), a sequence that Suvín himself considered representative of his mid-eighties’ utopianism. It begins with the motif of building a bridge. Here is the opening stanza of “In Praise of a Wonderful Sight”, the first poem of the sequence:

Come see this bridge.  
How can we build it?  
Cross it this way & that?  
Get there, across the bridge?

Further on, before the reader glimpses the utopian community of spacious houses designed and built by skilled carpenters, before s/he sees the Hall of the Commune, the acid-free springs, and the rosy-cheeked children, s/he passes through gates and doors:



Come see this main gate.  
It is made of solid red wood  
It is an auspicious wide gate

Push open the doors, look:  
What a wonderful age,  
There, behind the straight gate!

I wish i could come  
See & push open the gate,  
Enter the wonderful age.

According to Đergović-Joksimović, one utopian model detectable in Suvin's poetry is "a Rousseauian escapist withdrawal from our high-tech civilization into more secluded, rural landscapes" (2017, 52); "Eo Rus" and "Visions off Yamada" then in her view demonstrate "[t]he Rousseauian drive to escape into the peaceful, simple, and natural life of rural communities" (2017, 52). Nevertheless, as Đergović-Joksimović herself emphasises, "to claim that this kind of Suvin's utopia is plainly pastoral would be partially misleading" (2017, 56). Both poems envision spaces in which people live simply, in harmony with nature and with one another, but the novum from the perspective of which the status quo is estranged here is not based on any mythical belief in the purity of nature and the superiority of one race, ethnicity or gender (Đergović-Joksimović aptly draws attention to the intercultural setting of both poems, for example). Nor is the novum here a doctrine: as Đergović-Joksimović also points out, one of the foundations of "Visions off Yamada" is a Japanese chimera. In addition, the unreachability of this poem's utopian vision is underscored by the opening lines concerning the necessity of bridge-building and door-opening, which indicate in terms of space the same gap that the concluding lines of "Eo Rus" indicate in terms of time. In both poems, the reader is reminded, the vision is fiction – an oriented but not doctrinal utopian "verbal construction" of a harmonious, classless locus from which the present is estranged.

### **In Conclusion, Moving Horizons**

Study the familiar to penetrate the sublime.  
(Suvin, "Seven Songs of Our Times in Classical Chinese Styles")

The previous section has considered different spaces – some depicted in more detail, others in less – from which the present-day historical continuum is critiqued: the bridge of organised political survival and resistance in "Crossing on the Left" and "A Matter of Life and Death", more private and erotic visions in "Seven Songs" and "Metacommentaries", the refugee boat in "Autobiography 2004", and the eco-settlements of "Eo Rus" and "Visions off Yamada". It has been suggested that these spacio-temporal loci are temporary, which, however, does not mean that they become ends in themselves but rather that they are situated as utopian spaces in the historical movement that develops under the dominance of the horizon of justice, disalienation and happiness.



As has we saw in “Rivers, Seas and Ocean”, attentive to the horrors of our world, Suvin’s poems address alienation, defeat and loss as well as resistance and affection. While utopian loci may be shaky and temporary, the orienting horizon persists, and the poetry strives to embody the plea of the speaker of “A Letter to My Friend, Disenchanted After 1968” (2010), who warns that although it is crucial to recognise and accept the limitations of one’s ideals and the envisioned “more perfect” horizons, “[i]t is equally perilous to know one’s misery & forget / The moving horizon of classless harmonies”. Before 1989 and the bloodshed in former Yugoslavia, in the more tender and sensuous verses of *The Long March*, disappointment is countered with hope in poems such as “Counter-Projects”, the fourth part of which depicts a dying landscape: not a single man of “the Great Revolution” survives, peach blossoms are blown away, morning flowers fade and fall, “[t]heir shadow trembles under the hand that picks them”. Yet, the poem goes on, “[t]his huge monotone desert of whirling sand / In times gone by was a sea of haunting azure” and “in times to come mighty green waters / Will again murmur through fields, turn the joyous water-wheel, / Peaches bloom once more, pollen spread / Intoxicating waves through expanse of poppy and wheat”. This horizon of “the blessed classless time” gives hope to the poem’s “you and me, love, briefer than the turtle”, caught in the desolate landscape of the lost utopian locus. More recent works such as “Le Ceneri di Tito” and “Shipwreck in Pannonia”, in which “comrades of my / Generation are dying out one by one”, lament the trajectory and destruction of socialist potentialities in Russia and Eastern Europe, while other poems on a similar theme, such as “In the Ruins of Leningrad: A Medieval Allegory” (2010), gesture towards the possibility of renewal: “What Hope had built, cruel Greed has spilled [...] But what Greed’s unbuilt, Hope can rebuild”.

That the renewal and rebuilding are not nostalgic returns to a glorified or idealised past is evident, for example, in “Ah! God...”, a poem which begins in the following manner:

Ah! god of the ocean-going rivers  
 Enlighten me  
 Into the wisdom of the flow  
 Its little vortices & eddies  
     Its central calm current  
 Which will get there somehow  
 Muttering overflowing  
     finally  
 One with the banks  
 The Earth gave it.  
 To the gods indeed belongs  
 The end, O Alcman. People are not  
 Yet fit.

Here the movement of history – its flow, little vortices and eddies, the central current – appears beyond human power; it remains “one with the banks” and in the hands and heads of the “gods”. The second and third parts then introduce Calliope, the “sweet silken Muse of many songs”, who sings of the happiness that comes from remembrance “without too much unneeded regret”, from sweet desire and love offered and received, and the realisation that “the gods give us all this brief stay together / This now this here this moment”.

These lines suggest that in “this moment we may call / History [...] something of one / May live on in other flesh or stone, or / Die utterly, born in vain”, forgotten in the history books written by the winners, lost in the “strident strife”. The fourth part mentions the heart-breaking disintegration of former Yugoslavia “swallowed by the gargantuan throat of Greed” and “gone the way of Atlantis”. What until now may have seemed like a lyric poem about a destroyed counter space of intimacy acquires another dimension, as the speaker is located not only in personal relations but also in social ones, in the “[s]hining moment, tolerant cradle of many tongues, / Where Law was a-building, & Justice had a chance, / & Peace ruled, three sisters nourished at the same breast”. This, however, is too torn apart in combat, “not loving & giving” but “hating & taking, perverse & sterile”.

In the fifth and final part, the specific locus of love and Yugoslavia seems to have vanished altogether and the only hope appears in withdrawal from the misery of history’s whirlwinds and hurricanes:

Better to have been a bird  
Who wings it on the flower of the wave, with halcyons,  
From the heart, holy bird purple-coloured as the sea  
Wounding itself but no others...

Nevertheless, there is a change at the end of the poem. Even though the active, annunciatory turn towards “the Islands of the Blessed / From whom the gods keep insoluble worries away” where “[h]oney-voiced may approve of me the sister Muses”, may initially seem like an escapist fantasy, through the tradition of utopianism it references and particularly the final repetition of “[s]oon, soon” and “[t]here, there”, which echoes the previous repetitions of “happy”, “peace of love” and “for a time, for a time”, the ending evokes an earthly utopian horizon that emerges through but also transcends the actual intimate and social locus recalled earlier in the poem. Just as “Counter-Projects”, “In the Ruins of Leningrad”, and also “Growing Old Without Yugoslavia”, as discussed by Tom Moylan (2021, 100–103), “Ah! God...” denounces injustice and greed while announcing the harmonious horizon.

Perhaps echoing Suvin’s own description of his poetry as “a bridge to a blessed land” (1987, 106), Wegner wrote that “Suvin’s work becomes a bridge, resonant of Benjamin’s lightning arc, linking the legacies of a past utopian radicalism with what still remains the world ‘always coming’” (2010, xxx–xxx). Through past, present and future oppositional and alternative loci – contingent “Floating Islands” (to use the title of a poem in the sequence “You, Giacomo Leopardi” [2016]) that may shake “like a baby carriage” and “perish in the end” – the horizon continues to survive, motivating humans to act. As Suvin put it in “Locus, Horizon, and Orientation”,

we should hold a steadfast orientation toward the open ocean of possibility that surrounds the actual and that is so immeasurably larger than the actuality. True, terrors lurk in that ocean: but those terrors are primarily and centrally not (as the utopophobes want to persuade us) the terrors of the not-yet-existing, but on the contrary simple extrapolations of the existing actuality of war, hunger, degradation, and exploitation of people and planets. On the other hand, “there exists a process and we people are at the advanced front-line of this world-process; it is given unto our hands to nurture the possibilities already pending. ... The

seventh day of creation is still before us, the seventh day of which Augustine said: “dies septima ipsi erimus, we ourselves shall be the seventh day...” (1990, 82; quoting Bloch 1980, 63)

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**RESUMÉ:**

**„HYBNÝ OBZOR BEZTŘÍDNÍCH HARMONIÍ“ V POEZII DARKO SUVINA**

Článek se věnuje vybrané poezii Darko Suvina na pozadí jeho teorií o vědecké fantastice, utopii a poezii. Ukazuje, jak Suvinova poezie kriticky ozvláštňuje ideologické pojetí přítomnosti a dějin jako nevyhnutelné reprodukce nespravedlnosti a odcizení. Zaobírá se několika básněmi ze sbírky *The Long March: Notes on the Way 1981–1984* (1987) z knihy *Defined by a Hollow: Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction, and Political Epistemology* (2010). Dále vychází ze dvou básnických publikací na webových stránkách autora: „Three Long Poems 2000–2016“ (2016) a „Poems of Old Age (2002–17)“ (2017).

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## THE STATE AT PLAY: IAIN M. BANKS'S GAMING GALACTIC EMPIRES

MIRKA HOROVÁ

### ABSTRACT

This article sets out to explore the dynamics of play in three selected science-fiction novels by the contemporary Scottish author Iain M. Banks. Drawing on the typology of literary play designed by the German theoretician Wolfgang Iser, the article focuses particularly on Banks's second novel from the Culture series, *The Player of Games* (1988), concentrating on the ludic dynamics that inform and form these texts in narrative, discursive and thematic terms. Highlighting the author's complex conceptual critique of empire and civilisation and their contested relationship with the individual, the article is especially interested in uncovering the intricacies of power paradigms in the context of Banks's bespoke, ever-ambivalent vision of a cosmic utopia and its counterparts, where the interconnectedness of being and playing is performed on key levels.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Iain M. Banks, the Culture, science fiction, play theory, Wolfgang Iser, *The Player of Games*, empire, utopia, games

The late Iain Banks (1954–2013) was a prolific Scottish author of both mainstream and speculative fiction, as well as one of the major proponents of the so-called “space opera” variety of science fiction, vast intergalactic canvas narratives encompassing a multiplicity of worlds and creeds, with ample space for the exploration of a variety of topics ranging from the adaptability of the human and the potentiality of the posthuman to polemics about the ubiquity of warfare and the (im)possibilities of peaceable power structures on a cosmic scale. His science fiction was published under the name Iain M. Banks (featuring his adopted middle name Menzies) and comprises thirteen novels and a collection of short stories. The science-fiction novels set in the Culture, a powerful intergalactic enclave of different species, including a successfully space-evolved humankind and advanced forms of sentient AI, present a spectacular feat of imagination which, despite the futuristic intricacies, reflect in many ways the geopolitical and ethical issues of our own planet, in the tradition of science-fiction classics by Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury,

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Philip K. Dick and Ursula Le Guin. However, Banks's own science-fiction inspiration is rather more playfully inclined, as he cited in an interview with Calum Waddell for the *SFX* magazine in July 2012, recalling writers as diverse as the author, editor and anthologist of British post-war science fiction, Brian Aldiss, and the American master-satirist of classic science-fiction authors such as Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke, John Sladek. Unsurprisingly, given the bonanza of satire and irony that largely defines his style, Banks also cites as profoundly inspirational for his speculative and science fiction the subversive comedy of the Monty Python group (Waddell, n.p.).

Between 1987 and 2012, Banks published nine Culture novels – *Consider Phlebas* (1987), *The Player of Games* (1988), *Use of Weapons* (1990), *Excession* (1996), *Inversions* (1998), *Look to Windward* (2000), *Matter* (2008), *Surface Detail* (2010), and *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012) – and a collection of short stories based in the Culture titled *The State of the Art* (1991). Games and game-playing remain at the helm of many Banks's texts across the board, and his Culture science-fiction series is an arena for a boldly playful yet profound exploration of ethics, the meaning of humanity and the (in)humane, and a sharp probing of many delusive notions of what is and is not civilised. Dichotomies of othering and exclusion that have and still to a large extent do plague current geopolitical discourse are put to scrutiny in Banks's works, writ large on a cosmic scale, and wholesale questioning of authoritative discourses remains a major formative and qualitative element therein. In a retrospective piece for the *Guardian* published in 2017, commemorating thirty years since the publication of Banks's first Culture novel, *Consider Phlebas*, Damien Walter summarises the enduring appeal of Banks's science fiction as follows:

But for all his mastery of high-octane action sequences, and the sheer invention [...], Banks's science fiction [...] has lasted because [of] his deft balance of galactic scope with human-scale stories. Stories of loss, grief, rebirth and self-discovery are the core of the best Culture novels. He did not write sci-fi and literary novels – he was a master of storytelling that combined both. (Walter, n.p.)

We might add to Walter's appraisal of Banks's imaginative and narrative virtuosity his expert hand at playing multi-layered textual games, be it intra-, inter-, para- or metatextual, as well as his trademark mischievous sense of humour. While the multivalent role of levity in Banks's texts would solicit an in-depth study of its own, some of the extracts that follow will no doubt showcase this extraordinary quality of his writing, at least in localised glimpses. This article will address the ludic dynamics in three selected Culture novels – the first two, *Consider Phlebas* and *The Player of Games*, and the fourth, *Excession* – drawing on examples from these texts to discuss the multi-layered ethos of play and the strategies of game-playing that largely define them on the narrative, discursive and thematic level.

In general terms, given their intense engagement in diverse polemics yielding searing, often satirical, critique of cultural, racial, gender and political commonplaces, Iain M. Banks's science-fiction novels are essentially ludic, performing a wide variety of textual games that accentuate the dialogic nature of these works. Textual play facilitates sustained negotiation between open-endedness and closure. According to one of the most insightful and consistent theoreticians of literary play, Wolfgang Iser, textual play is defined by

a continual oscillation between denotation and figuration, and between accommodation and assimilation. This oscillation, or to-and-fro movement, is basic to play, and it permits the coexistence of the mutually exclusive. It also turns the texts into a generative matrix for the production of something new. (Iser 1989, 255)

Displaying distinctly ludic qualities, Banks's Culture novels represent an operatic space that naturally lends itself to the exploration of the strategies of play. The four strategies of play that were identified by the French anthropologist Roger Callois' study of play, *Les jeux et les hommes* (1958), building on the pioneering work of the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga titled *Homo ludens* (1938), were later adapted for literary studies by the German theoretician Wolfgang Iser. They are *agon* (struggle or contest), *alea* (chance), *ilinx* (vertigo or chaos) and *mimicry* (masking or make-believe) – and their intricate combinations pervade Banks's texts on distinct levels, as we shall see.

For Iser, the four categories of play are best understood as “strategies of play” – they “generally mix” in literary works, comprising “the constitutive elements of a text game” (Iser 1993, 263). In brief, Iser defines the four strategies of play as a set of distinctive dynamics: *agon* “is undoubtedly one of the basic games” that must “be played towards a result” (Iser 1993, 260), signifying “a fight or a contest” (Iser 1989, 256). *Alea* “is a pattern of play based on change and the unforeseeable” (Iser 1989, 256) – given free reign, *alea* aims to “intensify difference”, “reduc[ing] all play to mere chance” (Iser 1993, 261). *Mimicry* “aims to make difference disappear” and signifies “illusion” as well as transformation and “imitation” (Iser 1993, 262). The last of Iser's play strategies – *ilinx* – constitutes his most radical recasting of Callois' original that simply denoted a vertigo-inducing play activity. Iser invests this play strategy with “an anarchic tendency” (Iser 1993, 262), whose potential rests in subverting any given structure. These four strategies of play intersperse in intricate ways within Banks's Culture novels, and are at their most radical, perhaps, and certainly at their most pronounced in the novel whose very title explicitly suggests so, namely *The Player of Games*.

Before delving into the detail of this particular text, we need to briefly contextualise Banks's fictional world of the Culture to facilitate the more precise points to be made regarding the strategies of play in *The Player of Games*. In general, the intricate play of simulations and the overt and covert gaming strategies of government and culture which constitute various forms of civilisation are key themes connecting all Banks's science-fiction novels, playing the odds and extremes against one another – be it between the Culture and other interstellar civilisations (often confrontationally called “barbaric”) or exploring the elaborate tensions within the Culture itself. The Culture is a borderless, egalitarian, post-scarcity interstellar civilisation essentially managed by autonomous sentient AI called “Minds”. Some of these Minds are responsible for entire orbital worlds or intergalactic spacecraft, capable of transporting and caring for billions of inhabitants, while others are former masters of exponentially complex cosmic warfare (some Minds are long retired war veterans in charge of civic transport or diplomatic missions). In addition to these advanced AI entities, the Culture comprises a plethora of humanoid species, including genetically enhanced humans. While the vision of a comfortable existence of humanity in a system run by AI may have seemed truly speculative at the time of publication, it feels much closer to home now that thirty-five years have passed



and we find ourselves increasingly more intertwined with a world of algorithms on a daily basis.

The Culture is fully in control of and expertly advancing the process of evolution of both its biological and machine citizens. Patricia Kerslake reflects on the Culture in her book on the concepts and critiques of empire in science fiction as follows, highlighting this utopian society's "absence of elitism" and "ability to change rapidly in response to immediate needs":

This flexibility is yet another difference between a centralised imperium and a decentralised meta-empire: the former is rigid and constrained, bound by visibly hierarchical methodologies and paradigms, the latter is loosely connected both physically and philosophically, so more able to adapt and thus survive. (Kerslake, 186)

While this readiness to encounter rather than counter change and adapt accordingly is shown as a winning strategy overall, Kerslake's intriguing argument – describing Banks's Culture as a meta-empire, distinct from and superior to the obsolete imperial paradigms of human history – comes perilously close to a wholly utopian estimation. While Banks certainly entertains the reader's imagination eager to transcend both the hackneyed rigmaroles of late capitalism and the bleak auguries of a post-capitalist world order, "offer[ing] us a wholly new form of society", Kerslake claims that he "has also opened a new door into critical literary theory because there is now something beyond the extant, something to inform our thinking in a forward rather than a backward direction" (Kerslake, 187). Similarly, Stefano Gualeni concludes his discussion of fictional games and utopia in *The Player of Games* by upholding the Culture's "capability to continue to change", granting it "therefore the possibility to remain utopian" (Gualeni, 203). One of the classic pragmatic uses of play is the ancillary function of an imaginative "trial run", testing the limits of new ideas or systems in the hope of perfecting the model before implementation in the so-called "real" world. Yet Banks is no social engineer – and neither is he a bona fide utopian.

Alan Jacobs's outline in his article on the ambiguities of utopia in Banks proves instrumental here: "[t]he Culture has no laws, and nothing that we would call a government. All power remains in the hands of the omnipotent and omnibenevolent Minds" (Jacobs, 48). However, this largely symbiotic coexistence of the "omnipotent" and ostensibly "omnibenevolent" AI entities and genetically upgraded humans (as well as other organic life forms that make up the Culture) is a utopian premise that is repeatedly put under scrutiny in moments of crisis, as we shall see. One such snag is the question whether omnipotent entities can remain unreservedly benevolent, or whether there may be limits to omnibenevolence written into this utopian cosmic contract.

We might enquire further still, alongside Gavin Miller in his chapter on play ethic in the Culture novels, as to the implicit critique of this utopianism on Banks's part: "Given that the Culture can stand up to most threats, Banks's science fiction must turn to a central puzzle for Marxist historical models: what exactly does everyone do once the state has withered away? According to Banks, they *play*" (Miller, 56; original emphasis). This playing involves all sorts of possibilities – both the immediately obvious, such as the unlimited pursuit of leisure activities, and the less obvious, such as the play strategies of interstellar



diplomacy, highlighting more serious aspects of play. This creative post-scarcity model, then, incites questions as to the legitimacy of its superior ethos as well as its sustainability, not least because the cosmic plenty the Culture provides is sometimes registered to produce a profound sense of boredom in both its human and AI citizens. As Simone Caroti contends in her book-length critical introduction to Banks's Culture series, "[b]ecause the Culture has made life safe and pleasurable on every possible level, the point of both living and gaming is lost; without tangible risk, one loses its flavor because the other does" (77). In the form of an implied critical commentary, Banks's post-scarcity cosmic utopia thus also hearkens back to other, less advanced forms of society, including those that make up our own contemporary world.

The superior ethos of the Culture as an ideal form of civilised society, a highly technologised interstellar utopia, is variously undermined in the series of novels from the very start – the immensely destructive war against the alien Idiran Empire in Banks's first science-fiction novel, *Consider Phlebas* (1987), later resurfaces in critical reminiscence, posing a threat to the Culture eight hundred years later in the plot of *Look to Windward* (2000). The loosely sequential quality of these two novels tenuously related by the events of the Idiran-Culture war and their fateful repercussions is highlighted by the allusive symmetry of the titles, both citing the fourth part of *The Waste Land*, "Death by Water". The Culture's superior ethos, represented by its intellectually and technologically most advanced members, the AI Minds, is perhaps most intricately undermined in *Excession* (1996). The status of the Culture as the consummate apex of socio-political and technological evolution is challenged and ultimately subverted by the enigmatic appearance of a passive, sentient, planet-size "perfect black-body sphere", sparking a concentrated Culture reaction aimed at solving and analysing this "Outside Context Problem" (Banks 1996, 67, 71). Banks imagined the concept of an "Outside Context Problem" as a fateful encounter of technologically mismatched civilisations, on a par with the so-called discovery of the "New World" by the armoured, sword- and harquebus-wielding conquistadors in the late fifteenth century. As Caroti explains: "The description of the nature of an OCP was inspired by the long hours Banks spent playing *Civilisation* on his computer" (Caroti, 136), which shows not only the author's own gaming habit but also his preoccupation with games and playing as constitutive elements of novel writing, on both the narrative and the thematic level. In the novel, "The Excession" is later revealed to be a test emissary from an unknown, far-superior civilisation that judges the Culture not sufficiently advanced to benefit from the enlightenment it has come to offer. As the alien envoy's own log explains in the epilogue to the novel:

it is my opinion that the reaction to my presence indicates a fundamental unreadiness as yet for such a signal honour lastly in recognition of the foregoing i wish now to be known hereafter as *the excession* (Banks 1996, 464).

A prime example of a Banksian conclusion, the ending offers an explanation with a twist – the identity of the baffling black sphere is at last revealed, but only in a sketch, and, as it is often the case in Banks's science fiction, the epilogue pursues a neat intratextual game of its own, bouncing off the body of the novel we have just read – here, the infinitely superi-

or technological entity decides to adopt the name it has been given by the “fundamentally unready” Culture Minds.

We find another subversive epilogue in Banks’s first Culture novel, *Consider Phlebas*. Here, a ship Mind which has been the object of a complex pursuit throughout the novel reappears in a future context and the final exchange we are privy to counters the conclusion of the novel as well as the additional information supplied in the form of several other paratexts which immediately precede the epilogue, not least a Culture history log which claims this Mind does not remember anything from the pointed finale of the original plot. We now learn the ship Mind has nonetheless adopted the main character’s name and is able to relate the “long story” of how things came to pass. The finale thus unfolds in a satisfying *da capo al fine*:

“I’m sorry, we haven’t been introduced,” she said as she disembarked from the module [...]. She was talking to a remote drone which was helping her with her baggage. “I’m Foug. What are you called?”

“I am the *Bora Horza Gobuchul*,” the ship said, through the drone.

“That’s a weird name. How did you end up calling yourself that?”

The remote drone dipped one front corner slightly, its equivalent of a shrug. “It’s a long story ...”

Gimishin Foug shrugged;

“I like long stories.” (Banks 1987, 471)

These subversive epilogues are just one key hallmark of Banks’s many ludic narrative strategies. The passage above also exemplifies Banks’s deftness at making the Minds, their drones, avatars and other AI come across as relatable to as characters on a human level, simultaneously always marking their essential non-humanness, while also taking time to denote what communication between a human and a drone might look like. The mutual shrug at the end adds to the poignancy of this epilogue encounter, and after the nearly five hundred pages of the novel, we arrive at the hermeneutic moment so well versified by T.S. Eliot in “Little Gidding”: “And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.”

### **The State of Play in *The Player of Games***

As Paul Kincaid explains in his recent book on Iain M. Banks, the second Culture novel, *The Player of Games*, “engages far more with the ambiguity of the Culture” than the first, which “introduced the Culture through the lens of its enemy”, the non-human Idirans (Kincaid, 32). The agonistic basis of what the Culture deems “primitive” or “barbaric” civilisations is rather ingeniously represented by the game-based galactic Empire of Azad and its humanoid inhabitants in *The Player of Games*. The plot revolves around an immensely complex game that constitutes the system of rule in the Empire which had adopted the name of the game, Azad, for its own. The person who wins this elaborate game, played every six years, becomes the Azadian Emperor. The rules are set in such a way that only the privileged can compete at its highest levels, but it is, at least in

theory, open to everyone, though we quickly learn about the many barriers, social and gender specifically, which the Azadian players have to negotiate but in effect can only accommodate. The Azadian society is a eugenically engineered, xenophobic colossus of rigid power structures, topped by the military and the ecclesiastical-scholastic factions. While the element of chance is introduced into the system with every season of the game, potentially facilitating change, access to quality education and game-training is restricted to ensure only the privileged proceed to the higher levels – the social hierarchy thus remains effectively unchanged. Intriguing and intimidating in equal measure, the game and the Empire are thus one.

Banks's protagonist, the Culture's most famous professional game player and scholar, Jernau Gurgeh (whose middle name, Morat, translates in the Culture's artificial language, "Marain", as "game player"), is bored of success, finding it difficult to relate to life in any meaningful manner – in the shielded comfort of Culture life, little excites or interests him anymore. This abruptly changes when he is challenged to a public match by a young female Culture player who proceeds to almost beat him at a celebrated game in which no one, including Gurgeh, has excelled at the highest possible level of perfection. With stakes high and his public status as an invincible player in jeopardy, Gurgeh agrees to illicit help from an impish drone associate to ensure yet another victory. Predictably, this isolated lapse of moral judgement backfires badly. Threatening to reveal this unfair win, the drone blackmails him into cooperation with "Special Circumstances", a secret branch of "Contact", the Culture's intelligence agency for interstellar affairs: he is to travel to the distant Empire of Azad to play the most complex game he has ever encountered, on a diplomatic recon mission with covert political consequences.

Before these unfortunate events unfold, Gurgeh is first shown the game board of Azad in his home by a Special Circumstances drone sent to enlist him for the mission, which he originally refuses. He is sworn to secrecy and cannot discuss the mission or even the very existence of Azad and its elaborate game with anyone – this clearly points to the significance of the Empire of Azad for the Culture, and establishes the sense that the Empire, albeit not sufficiently evolved and situated far away in a different part of the galaxy, still poses a potential threat to the Culture, and so it must be studied at best or reckoned with at worst. Even the holographic representation projected into Gurgeh's living room leaves the professional player baffled as to the unprecedented scale and intricacy of the game. Afterwards, forced to accept the mission, he has several years to learn the principles of Azad, tutored by the ship Mind while en route to the distant Empire. As Gualeni notes, "the links between a civilisation, its languages and its games are of particular interest to Gurgeh, whose scholarly work is motivated by a fascination with 'the way a society's games revealed so much about its ethos, its philosophy, its very soul'" (Gualeni, 196 quoting Banks 1995, 30). The game of Azad is played with biotech cards, which ultimately makes it a game of world-making, on three boards suggestively named "The Board of Origin", "The Board of Form" and "The Board of Becoming" – a neat mythopoeic trinity. The name of the Empire, adopted from the eponymous game, translates in the Azadian language as "system" or "entity" of a technological or biological kind, hence rendering the game of Azad an ontological game, where the Empire and the life of its citizens are one with the game. As the ship Mind explains: "Azad is so complex, so subtle, so flexible and so demanding that it is as precise and comprehensive a model of life as it is possible to

construct. Whoever succeeds at the game succeeds in life; the same qualities are required in each to ensure dominance” (Banks 1995, 76).

More and more absorbed by the game and thrilled to find himself compelled and excited at last, Gurgeh succeeds far beyond the expectations of the Azadians – who try bribes and blackmail to discourage him from making further progress and eventually stage an attempt on his life – and seemingly also beyond the expectations of the Culture coordinators of the mission. As Christopher Palmer remarks, “[Gurgeh] advances victoriously through the levels of the game in the aggressive empire in which he is an alien, which lives by that game as if the whole civilization had been planned by malign disciples of J.H. Huizinga or Clifford Geertz” (Palmer, 85). Palmer’s appraisal is worth mentioning here for his apt inclusion of the anthropological angle, pinpointing the agonistic bias of both theoreticians’ take on play. Gurgeh reaches the very finale of the game and is eventually poised to play against the Emperor-Regent, who is set to defend and secure his position. What seems like the ultimate game is merely the beginning of uncovering another, far more dangerous game, however, and through its enigmatic narrator, the novel cleverly manipulates the reader alongside the main character, Gurgeh, making the reading experience an elaborate game in its own right. The narrator’s mischievous playfulness, or rather unchecked sophistry, is distinct from the very first words of the novel:

This is the story of a man who went far away for a long time, just to play a game. The man is a game-player called “Gurgeh”. The story starts with a battle that is not a battle, and ends with a game that is not a game.

Me? I’ll tell you about me later.

This is how the story begins. (Banks 1995, 3)

The reader immediately senses that the enigmatic narrator has absolute control over the unfolding narrative, deliberately withholding their identity, while the riddle of implied ironies in the novel’s opening clearly highlights the parabolic nature of the story – a kind of cautionary tale, where the meaning of key concepts such as “game” and “battle” is likely to be recast or subverted multiple times. As Gualeni remarks, “*The Player of Games* stands out from the other Culture novels because it addresses, with self-reflexive irony, the limitations and contradictions of utopian thinking in space operas” (Gualeni, 194).

Gurgeh’s involvement in the game of Azad is problematised from within and without in equal measure – his very appearance is the subject of persistent Azadian othering, since he is a tall black middle-aged male in a genetically uniform society, and the Azadian media are increasingly keen to lampoon his alienness to the point of calumny. It is crucial to note that Gurgeh’s specific physicality is a personal choice as well as genetic heritage, since the Culture enables individuals to freely alter their appearance as well as their gender and other attributes, something we learn Gurgeh has not partaken in, beyond the inclusion of various drug-producing glands to further his game-playing. This marks him out as oddly old-hat and out of sync with the free dynamic diversity of the Culture. Thus, in the context of the Culture, “Gurgeh is a throwback, a barbarian of sorts” (Caroti, 78). He stands apart in much sharper contrast yet in the Azadian society, however, which not only has three genders but which objectifies both the female (reduced to sexual and material possession) and the male (soldiers and retainers) in favour of the third sex, fittingly

called the apex – this third gender combines both male and female reproductive organs and seals the individual's socio-political superiority. Unlike the Culture's egalitarian free-for-all, Azad is built on strictly defined gender-social roles, the ranking of which is in turn conscripted to the game. The Empire thus represents, in essence, the dynamics of *agon*, exercising control in all respects, which in turn manifests itself as a key element of the game of Azad. Contest aside, the game also introduces the element of *alea* to the Empire's socio-political structures every six years of the game cycle – however, the more we learn about the actual functioning of the game via Gurgeh, the more we see the corrupt background power-mongering of the elite, who manipulate the game and media coverage for their own gain. As Gurgeh keeps on winning against all odds, this becomes an unprecedented problem for the Empire elite, whose power rests in the citizens' belief that the game is sacred and therefore incorruptible. It follows, for the Azadians, that no foreigner could ever succeed in playing a game so intricate and sacrosanct.

Gurgeh's immersion in the game is initially curtailed by the extreme brutality embraced by the Azadian society, the brunt of which is borne by its weakest members – be it ruthless, motiveless violence on the streets of the Azadian capital, which Gurgeh witnesses on his secret prow through the city on the eve of a particularly important match, or the decadent perversity exhibited by the ruling class. Through Gurgeh, we witness a private party on a paradise island where the musicians play on prized instruments such as a flute made of “a female's femur removed without anaesthetic” or a string instrument whose eight strings have each been used to strangle someone (Banks 1995, 222); more disturbingly still, the Culture drone who accompanies Gurgeh on the mission shows him a series of classified adult TV channels, access to which corresponds directly to the Azadian hierarchy – ranging from porn featuring sex with other species, prohibited by the Azadian eugenic law, to unwatchable scenes of live snuff involving children and pregnant females. Distressingly, this revelatory episode is later shown to have been part of the Culture's strategy to convince Gurgeh to pursue his current match against a high-ranking Azadian judge which involved a physical wager, another brutal particular of the game of Azad (in this case castration without anaesthetic). Having witnessed the atrocities broadcast by the restricted media, Gurgeh defeats the judge without further qualms about the brutality of the physical forfeit. Once this ethical threshold is crossed, both Gurgeh and the readers are in uncharted waters. As Kincaid notes, the “ambiguous sense that the preservation of civilization necessitates uncivilized behavior is something that recurs throughout Banks's work” (Kincaid, 34). Yet Banks does not treat these apparent “necessities” lightly – the ethos of the novel repeatedly interrogates such truisms, displaying the darker intent of the Culture's diplomatic missions.

Gurgeh trumps all expectations, and in his concerted obsession with the game, proceeds further than anticipated by either the Empire or the Culture's diplomatic Minds, or so we are led to think. In the process, Banks gives us a thrilling portrait of a gamer wholly possessed by the game and fundamentally changed by it. Because the Empire of Azad and the eponymous game are one, Gurgeh starts speaking and thinking exclusively in the Azadian language, “Eächic”, a natural language which differs from the Culture's artificial language, “Marain”, in that it is less refined and therefore channels more emotion and so potentially more violence. This marks a shift in the game-player's personality – exposed to the agonistic brutality of the Azadian system, whose ethics Gurgeh

abhors yet needs must embrace to continue playing, we see him become a more ruthless player, obsessed with vanquishing his opponents and caring increasingly less for the consequences. As the Culture drone observes in free indirect speech: “There was a callousness in his play that was new”; “A comparatively innocent and sensitive soul like Gurgeh was bound to pick up some of its underlying ethical framework if he spoke it all the time” (Banks 1996, 246, 247). Winning the game of Azad becomes his sole purpose, and so it seems that the dynamics of *agon*, in line with the politics of any empire – to conquer, divide and rule – will prevail as the leading play strategy overall. The novel, however, has other games in store for Gurgeh and the reader alike.

The final stages of the game are in essence a duel, a game of pure *agon*, with Gurgeh facing the finest local player, Nicosar, the Azadian Emperor-Regent. This, however, is no longer reported in the Azadian media – Gurgeh’s continued success cannot be allowed to be broadcast to the Azadian population for political reasons, as veiled threats of civil unrest brew in the capital Groasnachek and elsewhere in the Empire – grudgingly, Gurgeh agrees to take part in a short propaganda interview in which he relinquishes the game, citing his inadequacy and his awe of the game’s complexity and the Empire’s might. While fake games are being staged and broadcast to the Azadian people, the endgame between Gurgeh and Nicosar unfolds as a semi-private spectacle for a limited audience of the highest echelons of the Azadian elite and security detail. As if the stakes were not high enough, the finale is played on a planet where the “fire season” is shortly due. This adds yet another layer of acute agonism to the proceedings – the Empire’s value system is based on pomp and circumstance, and the players’ prowess is tested against the highest of odds – from physical mutilation to death.

Crucially, the game takes over both players – Gurgeh feels “saturated with the one encompassing idea, like a fever; win, dominate, control: a set of angles defining one desire, the single absolute determination”, rendering “everything outside [...] just a setting and a background for the game” (Banks 1995, 272). The game of Azad plays its players – it possesses them, continuing with an awe-inspiring momentum of its own: “what was in front of him was like a single huge organism; the pieces seemed to move with a will that was neither his nor the emperor’s, but something dictated finally by the game itself, an ultimate expression of its essence” (Banks 1995, 272). The finale of the game thus becomes an endgame between the Culture and the Empire and all they stand for: Gurgeh’s game may be an ingenious combination of both, in his opinion, a work of supremely elaborate *techne*, but his moves betray his subtler Culture background just as the emperor’s fierce play betrays his unforgiving, agonistic Azadian mentality. Gurgeh’s eventual win enrages the emperor not because he realises he has been beaten, but because to him the way Gurgeh has played subverts and desecrates the “holy” principle of the game, namely *agon*:

“Your blind, insipid morality can’t even account for your own success here, and you treat this battle-game like some filthy dance. It is there to be fought and struggled against, and you’ve attempted to seduce it. You’ve perverted it;” (Banks 1995, 281)

This confrontation ultimately comes down to an irreconcilable clash of playing strategies rooted in an incompatible understanding of the game: the emperor’s fierce game of real-life *agon* is pitched against its subtler, though equally engaged counterpart of game-



for-game's sake. Gurgeh is playing the game to the full and is possessed by it, but, being a citizen of the Culture, it is ultimately only a game to him, while the emperor is playing in deadly earnest, his game the manifestation of Azad at its most ferocious.

The emperor seemingly has no more cards to play, and Gurgeh plans his return home. However, in a livid attempt to outdo Gurgeh's endgame, revealing the sheer agonistic essence of Nicosar, manifest in his sense of entitlement to control the fate of everyone present, the Emperor-Regent sets the gameboard on fire using strategic cards and orders everyone in the room to be killed by his personal security detail. Gurgeh's drone is momentarily incapacitated and Nicosar attacks Gurgeh with a sword, only for the Culture drone to reveal its covert military range, neutralising Nicosar and saving Gurgeh in its protective field, while the fire planet's spectacular flames burn everything in their path. Gurgeh wakes up injured and clueless in the charred remains of the game premises.

The crucial twist in this final game of Azad is, symptomatically for almost all Culture novels, revealed only post festum, when a Culture ship is about to rescue Gurgeh and the drone from the singed fire planet and the crumbling empire, suddenly devoid of both its elite and its emperor. The drone's revelation shifts the Culture player's sympathies back towards the emperor, as he is finally made privy to the clandestine diplomatic game the Culture had been playing all along: the night before the game finale, the Culture drone told the emperor that Gurgeh was playing for the Culture in a very real sense and if the emperor lost, the Culture would take military action against the Empire and take it over. This threat of raising the stakes from an Azad-contained reality-game to a Culture-controlled reality threatening to overthrow the Empire is, however, yet another cleverly subversive step in the Culture's play strategy to make sure the emperor abandons the rules and discredits the game, thereby ensuring the destruction of the empire from within, without the need for any military Culture action. The Culture's Contact policy is therefore revealed to have been an elaborate game all along, an intervention solely facilitated by, literally, playing and defeating the Empire of Azad at its own existence-defining, sacred game. Combining all four strategies of play, the Culture has tackled the Empire using its best game-player, Gurgeh, in an expert game of *agon*, but while doing so, it has also been playing numerous covert games in the background, employing elaborate *mimicry* schemes to mask its true motives and its true agents (the drone playing the part of the puppeteer, controlling Gurgeh, the front-line pawn), and adding the key element of *ilinx* at crucial points to subvert and shape the power stratagems within the game to make sure it ultimately turned in the favour of the Culture. Such expert manipulation did require Gurgeh's help, but, crucially, could only have been effective without his knowledge. While the Azadian elite have been fixing the games by manipulating *alea*, the element of chance, to beat Gurgeh, and employing various unsavoury strategies of *mimicry* (masking its true motives) and *ilinx* (ferocious subversion) to disqualify him by other means (attempted sex-tape blackmail, media defamation, bribery, and two attempts at assassination) – familiar echoes of political shams and illicit methods of coercion in our own world – the bigger picture ultimately reveals a much more labyrinthine set of games competing on all four levels of play, though overly revealing only the most obvious one, namely the sustained violence of agonistic contest.

Having won the entire season of Azad, Gurgeh finally realises the futility of his efforts and masterful gamesmanship, when it transpires that he has been a mere pawn in a great-

er Culture game all along – the Culture sought a premise for active involvement in the Empire’s politics, ultimately seeking to destroy the game that perpetuates its brutal ruling system and thus, through the ingenious play of the unwitting Gurgeh, aiming at the destruction of the Empire itself. Though the Culture’s motives may seem ethical on the surface, and the sheer brutality of Azad seems to play straight into the Culture’s hand, we are aware that a more clandestine set of principles is at stake here, namely the unrivalled intergalactic hegemony of the Culture. As a proleptic conversation between Gurgeh and the Culture drone demonstrates earlier: “It’s a mean old Empire, isn’t it, drone?’ ‘Mean enough .... But if it ever tries to fuck with the Culture it’ll find out what mean really is” (Banks 1995, 236).

In the epilogic twist, the Culture drone which accompanied Gurgeh to Azad reveals itself to be the original blackmailer drone and, more importantly still, also the enigmatic narrator of the novel. The ultimate strategy of play overthrowing the authenticity of Gurgeh’s story, a masterful stroke of narrative *ilinx*, subverting what we have heretofore taken for granted, is thus revealed at the very end, as is the wont of Banks’s subversive conclusions. The mischievous drone writes:

This is a true story. I was there. When I wasn’t, and when I didn’t know exactly what was going on – inside Gurgeh’s mind, for example – I admit that I have not hesitated to make it up.

But it’s still a true story.

Would I lie to you? (Banks 1995, 309)

Meanwhile, Gurgeh never discovers the true identity of the drone – the preceding final chapter of the novel is aptly titled “The Passed Pawn”. The drone itself is and is not the chief manipulator – though directly manipulate Gurgeh and his story he certainly does – he is also acting on Special Circumstances orders, which are forever beyond our purview. The consequences of the drone’s poetic licence which mars the authenticity of Gurgeh’s story are perhaps less interesting than the implications of a covert “overlord” strategy of play in place throughout the novel, a strategy manipulating the scope of the narrative, ultimately superseding Gurgeh’s and our own working understanding of the Culture and its motives, rendering them somewhat sinister. As an old friend who used to work for Special Circumstances warns Gurgeh at the outset, these Minds are “tricky. Devious. They’re gamblers, too, and used to winning”; “Any time I’ve ever been involved with them they’ve got things done” (Banks 1995, 22). This old friend is also a drone – evidencing that Banks’s critique of the Culture is voiced by both his human and AI characters, but also highlighting the Culture’s AI’s autonomous self-reflexivity.

As Gurgeh’s reflection on his final game of Azad against the Emperor suggests, “[t]he Culture had become the Empire, the Empire the barbarians” (Banks 1995, 276). The imperial model of rule, barely intelligible to Gurgeh’s egalitarian Culture mindset, is explained early in the novel by the Special Circumstances drone as being “in short [...] all about dominance” (Banks 1995, 74). As Dalene Labuschagne explains in her 2011 article on utopia and irony in *The Player of Games*, throughout the novel, and especially at the end, we are certain of the originally only “dawning realisation that the autonomy offered by such a utopian scheme as offered by the Culture is an illusion – Gurgeh



[merely] imagines that he is in control of events” (Labuschagne, 67), while he is being played all along. The dominant player here has been the Culture, cleverly facilitating Gurgeh’s “illusion” of freedom and autonomy. The Empire of Azad may be barbaric in its cruel, corrupt system, rendering it morally unjustifiable, yet from the game-player’s perspective, the Culture’s intervention plan is not based on fair play either, unmasking its Contact policy as an unethical game of means justifying ends. The unsettling anti-climax of the Culture’s elaborate strategy is reported at the end of the novel, as Gurgeh talks to his friends: “You know [...] I asked the ship yesterday exactly what they did do about the Empire in the end; how they went in to sort it out. It said they didn’t even bother. Fell apart all on its own” (Banks 1995, 305). This nonchalant note is chilling, because it implicitly confirms the Azadian Emperor’s critique of the Culture and illustrates how Culture principles might be regarded as “perverse” from an external perspective: the Culture was only interested in bringing the Empire down, not in conquering it, thus subverting the traditional principles of an imperial agonistic strategy. While this clearly confirms Kerlake’s point that the Culture does not behave like a traditional empire, transcending the pitfalls of pointless warmongering and opting rather for a less invasive method of achieving its security goals, it nonetheless remains rather problematic that the Culture “didn’t even bother” to see it through, which questions whether this elaborate clandestine play of intervention can in the end be justified as part of the Culture’s famous “good works”, that is, helping less advanced and less privileged civilisations get on the “right” track. As a disgruntled narrator-protagonist notes in “A Gift from the Culture”, one of the short stories in *The State of the Art* (1991): “Oh the self-satisfied Culture: its imperialism of smugness” (Banks 1991, 13; qtd in Kincaid, 38).

A worrying set of questions remains, then, as it is almost universally the case with Banks’s Culture novels:<sup>2</sup> firstly, whether the true motive for the Culture’s seemingly selfless intervention in the Empire of Azad was rather to justify the Culture’s existence as an impartial upholder of ethics and justice; secondly, whether this “machina ex machina” (Banks 1995, 229) intervention benefited the Azadians in any real sense, and, finally, given this elaborate but potentially futile game of justice, to what extent is the Culture merely another gaming empire, vindicating its elevated existence by playing god to less technologically advanced civilisations?

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<sup>2</sup> For analogies of the Culture’s problematic motives see for instance the “Appendices to the Idiran-Culture War” in *Consider Phlebas* which provide a summary of both sides’ respective reasons for the war (Banks 1987, 447–67).

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#### RÉSUMÉ:

#### STÁT VE HŘE: HAZARD GALAKTICKÝCH IMPÉRIÍ V DÍLE IAINA M. BANKSE

Tento článek se zabývá dynamikou hry ve třech vybraných vědeckofantastických románech současného skotského spisovatele Iaina M. Bankse. Na základě typologie literární hry německého teoretika Wolfganga Isera článek zkoumá především Banksův druhý román z cyklu *Kultura*, *The Player of Games* (1988)<sup>3</sup> a zaměřuje se na dynamiku hry, která tyto texty spoluutváří jak na úrovni vyprávění, tak na rovině diskursivní a tematické. Zdůrazňuje rovněž autorovu komplexní kritiku impéria a civilizace a jejich sporný vztah k jednotlivci a nastiňuje komplexní mocenská paradigmatu v kontextu Banksovy specifické, navýsost ambivalentní vize kosmické utopie a jejich protějšků, kde se bytí a hra významným způsobem navzájem prolínají.

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<sup>3</sup> *Hráč* u nás vyšel poprvé v překladu Pavla Bakiče v r. 2019.

**STORIES WE TELL ABOUT OURSELVES  
AND OTHERS: IDENTITY AND NARRATION  
IN JULIAN BARNES'S OEUVRE**

LADISLAV NAGY

**ABSTRACT**

Julian Barnes's second to last book to date, *The Man in the Red Coat* (2019), is a work of non-fiction, devoted to the life of the renowned Parisian surgeon Samuel Jean de Pozzi. It is, however, a special kind of non-fiction – in fact, the book illuminates in many ways the narrative practices in Barnes's work in general. At the same time, it touches on a theme that permeates all of Barnes's fictional work, namely the construction of identity through the stories we tell about ourselves and that others tell about us. Storytelling thus emerges as a fundamental human trait: it is our responsibility to narrate, for it is only in telling stories that we can grasp the world around us.

**Keywords:** fiction; contemporary British literature; narration

For twenty years, since the publication of his first book, *Metroland* (1980), Julian Barnes's books have been remarkably consistent in quality. At the same time, they form an impressively compact whole, in which several themes (love, death, memory, the veracity of what we tell), interests (visual art, music, France) and genres (Barnes's fiction straddles the line between prose and essay) are interwoven. The author's oeuvre today comprises thirteen prose works, three short story collections, nine books of essays, memoirs and reminiscences, and also four books written under the pen name Dan Kavanagh.

One topic, however, stands out – the topic of identity and its relation to narrative, in particular the stories we tell about ourselves and those that others tell about us and, consequently, our personal histories and history at large. Both histories, personal and general, consist of random events that can be given meaning only by a narrative. The question that Barnes asks is whether such narration is indeed possible. Whereas in the case of general history, his answer seems to be sceptical, in the case of personal histories he seems to see a certain chance, however slight.

The author's second most recent book, *The Man in the Red Coat*, published in 2019, is a perfect illustration of this attitude. *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) showed that our lives and identities are mosaics of stories we create for ourselves in retrospect to justify ourselves, to weave memories through a chain of causality, and to die with the peace of mind that our lives had meaning. In *The Man in the Red Coat*, Barnes shows to what extent our

identities are created by stories supplemented by the fragmented memories of others and how often these identities are multiple.

*The Man in the Red Coat*, whose central figure is the eminent French gynaecologist and surgeon Samuel Pozzi, owes its origins to a chance encounter. The doctor's portrait, entitled *Dr Pozzi at Home*, painted by the American painter John S. Sargent in 1881, was first seen by Julian Barnes in 2015. That was when the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles loaned it to London's National Gallery. For the English writer, the fascination with the painting had two dimensions: the first was the visual impression, where Pozzi's personality managed to overwhelm the mesmerising red colour of his coat (or perhaps his dressing gown); the second was what Barnes learned about Pozzi when, under the influence of a powerful visual experience, he began to gather information about the physician.

Julian Barnes is widely known for his close relationship with France and his excellent knowledge of its culture – in fact, he made his first major success with a book inspired by Gustave Flaubert's life and work, *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984). Yet encountering Samuel Pozzi was a surprise for him. Barnes began to find out details about his life and in doing so discovered that this doctor – a pioneer of many modern medical practices, especially abdominal surgery, surgical hygiene and gynaecology – was actually at the very centre of the social and cultural life of Paris at the time. He knew practically everyone, whether directly as their doctor, the doctor of their partners, or simply as a friend: Pozzi was a celebrity in Paris at the time. It is no coincidence, after all, that he also appeared on the cards that accompanied Félix Potin's chocolates – in fact, these were similar to today's popular athletes' cards, but with the difference that they depicted not only athletes but also prominent writers, artists and other celebrities of the society of the time. These portrait cards, called *Celebrités contemporaines*, were published in three series between 1898 and 1922 and can now serve as an interesting document of the period. Barnes makes extensive use of them in the book, and the portrait photographs from the cards accompany us throughout the book. In fact, they form its axis.

Samuel Pozzi came from a Protestant pastor's family of Italian-Swiss origin. He lost his mother at the age of ten and his father remarried an Englishwoman, making Pozzi bilingual from a relatively early age, and his close relation to the English-speaking world marked his career significantly: he pioneered the adoption of new scientific knowledge in medicine from England and the United States, where he himself travelled to lecture. After studying medicine in Paris, Pozzi quickly established himself professionally and socially. He became a sought-after physician and, because of his attractive appearance and refined manners, a popular companion of the Parisian elite.

Six years after his graduation, in 1879, Pozzi married a wealthy heiress, Thérèse Loth-Cazalis, with whom he had three children, but the marriage was not a happy one and lasted only formally for many years. In the meantime, Pozzi reportedly seduced one of his patients after another and had a number of extended love affairs, most notably with Emma Sedelmeyer Fischhof, with whom he made scandalous public appearances. Nonetheless, because of his discretion, these affairs remain shrouded in secrecy.

As Barnes's account proceeds, Pozzi's mature years are marked by a series of successes. He is a wealthy man who can devote himself to collecting art, befriending leading artists and writers such as Marcel Proust, and becoming a senator for Bergerac. At the same time, he becomes involved in the Dreyfus affair and stands firmly on the side of the

wrongly accused officer. When Dreyfus is shot by a deranged journalist after his acquittal, Pozzi rushes to treat him. “Chauvinism is one of the forms of ignorance” (Barnes 2019, 142), Barnes quotes Pozzi himself, and it is at this time that Pozzi appears most sympathetic. His tumultuous love affairs and a certain vanity recede into the background, while his education and insight come to the fore. For Barnes, Samuel Pozzi becomes the prototype of the European, the kind of man the author’s fellow citizens rejected in the UK referendum – and yes, *The Man in the Red Coat* is also a Brexit book.

Yet Barnes is not trying to write Pozzi’s biography. After all, Claude Vanderpooten wrote a fairly comprehensive one in 1992. The key question remains: how does the text relate to Pozzi? Barnes has written several texts inspired by the lives of real people: the most successful of them all being *Flaubert’s Parrot*, and more recently, *The Noise of Time* (2016), about Dmitri Shostakovich. But these are texts in which he combines factual bits and pieces with fictional narratives. “The traditional, academic approach to biography – the search for documentation, the sifting of evidence, the balancing of contradictory opinions, the cautious hypothesis, the modestly tentative conclusion – has run itself into the ground; the method has calcified” (Barnes 1982, n.p.), as Barnes explains in his review of the English translation of Sartre’s *The Family Idiot*, implying that it is fiction which expands life, gives it a real meaning, which is something he himself accomplished in *Flaubert’s Parrot*. In *The Man in the Red Coat*, he offers yet another perspective: “Biography is a collection of holes tied together with string, and nowhere more so than with the sexual and amatory life. For some, there is nothing easier than understanding the sex life of someone you’ve never met, and easier still when they’re conveniently dead; or in posthumously adding another conquest to the dance card of a known Don Juan. Others simplify things by maintaining that human sexual habits have always been more or less the same, the only variables being the degree of hypocrisy and cover-up” (Barnes 2019, 112).

It is true that Barnes writes almost nothing about Pozzi’s love life because the famous gynaecologist was extremely discreet. And we do not actually learn much of his life either, but the gaps that would otherwise be filled by a fictional narrative are now – since this is a work of non-fiction – acknowledged. Throughout the book, Barnes reiterates countless times that he knows nothing about most of Pozzi’s life. He only has access to what has survived in the recollections of his (not very reliable) contemporaries, or what official historical documents have preserved. For such a famous and influential figure, there is surprisingly little extant. What is even more interesting, the blanks in the information about Pozzi’s life constitute a multiplicity. By acknowledging that he knows very little, that this information comes from many unreliable sources and is sometimes contradictory, Barnes presents us with many Pozzis, not just one. On a superficial level, these identities may seem mutually exclusive; on a deeper level, they point to the fact that there is no such thing as “identity”: the identity of a person as such which is the same as himself/herself is never there at the present moment. It is always in retrospect that these identities are constructed. In a way, this book of non-fiction provides a rather unique key to the best of Barnes’s novels, such as the above-mentioned *Sense of an Ending*, in which an unreliable narrator retrospectively reconstructs his life, to give his life meaning that would reconcile him with the coming of old age and eventual death.

We meet Samuel Pozzi at the beginning of the book as one of a trio of French dandies who arrived in London in 1885 to make purchases of an “intellectual and decorative

nature” (Barnes 2019, 21). The other two are Prince Edmond de Polignac and Count Robert de Montesquiou-Fézensac. Count Montesquiou in particular is a remarkable figure through whom Barnes’s book transcends into the realm of literature. Also, he is the case in point as far as multiple identities are concerned, for he is present several times in the text – as himself (although the information is almost as scarce as in the case of Pozzi), but mainly in the form of his fictional images. The eccentric dandy served as a model to Marcel Proust for the character of Baron de Charles, to J.K. Huysmans for the character of Des Esseintes, to Edmund Rostand for the character of Chantecler, and finally to Jean Lorrain for the character of M. de Phocas (Barnes wittily remarks that the English pronunciation of this name shows an allusion to the Count’s homosexuality). With this multiplication, Montesquiou, a descendant of d’Artagnan, takes on truly gargantuan proportions and it is a testament to Barnes’s stylistic skill that he does not let it completely take over the book. Unlike Pozzi, neither of his contemporaries are professionals in any field but are simply men of leisure. Pozzi is the only one who can navigate the snobbish echelons of high society, but he is also an excellent scholar and a man behind an extraordinary amount of often ground-breaking scientific work.

While Barnes admits that “we may speculate, as long as we also admit that our speculations are novelistic, and that the novel has almost as many forms as there are forms of love and sex” (21), there is not much of this sort of speculation in the book. “We cannot know” is a phrase that appears most frequently in the text. Nor are speculations needed, because Pozzi’s life really serves more as a kind of skeleton structure. At times, the reader feels as if he or she is in the salon where Pozzi’s friends come and go. The author will make a remark about this or that, or switch into an essayistic mode when he does not have enough information. Sometimes he will present some cultural reflection, mainly on the differences between the French and the British:

The British are thought to be pragmatic, the French emotional. Yet in matters of the heart, this order was often reversed. The British believed in love and marriage – that love led to and survived marriage, that sentimentality was an expression of true feeling, and that Queen Victoria’s loving marriage and loyal widowhood were a national example. The French had the more pragmatic approach: you married for social position, for money or property, for the perpetuation of family, but not for love. Love rarely survived marriage, and it was a foolish hypocrisy to pretend that it might. Marriage was merely a base camp from which the adventurous heart sallied forth. (42)

Sometimes he comes up with a *bon mot* that is in tune with the times: “Nothing dates like excess” (103).

It is, however, remarkable – and perhaps telling – that in a text which quotes so many French authors, the principal one, Michel de Montaigne, is absent. The meandering structure of the book, not even divided into chapters, is stylistically closest to a work of a brilliant essayist. The absence of Montaigne in a book which may serve as a key to Barnes’s oeuvre is all the more conspicuous. Indeed, Barnes owes much to Montaigne, both stylistically and in his approach to life and the past.

Alongside the picture of French literature – Huysmans and Proust featuring most prominently here – the book also offers a picture of society. And it is by no means a flattering one. Barnes certainly does not idealise the Belle Époque, quite on the contrary. He

might depict the period, which he believes was mercifully ended by the First World War, too bleakly – as a harbinger of our own time. It is a time of disruption when society is convulsed by irrational passions (the Dreyfus affair being the best example), and rife with violence in the form of duels (“According to one conservative estimate, there were at least one hundred and fifty duels in Paris between 1895 and 1905 – and that was in the fields of politics, journalism and literature alone”, 48), but also assassinations. And it was also, of course, a time of rising nationalism across Europe.

This multi-layered book, depicting individual fates but also relations between two nations, ends in a tragic finale. It is a book that may be read in many ways: as a portrait of the age, as an essay on French literature, as a Brexit book, or as a book on the impossibility of biography and the ubiquity of gossip and hearsay. It is also a valuable contribution to discussions on history and our possibilities to know it. Having given the reader various, often contradictory accounts of people and events, Barnes states: “On the other hand, none of this means that truth is negotiable. Wilde once declared that ‘between two truths, the falser is truer’. But this is mere sophistry posing as paradoxical wisdom” (114).

For Barnes, identity is never present but always constructed as historical – with all the ambiguity this implies. Again, this is best exemplified by the above-mentioned *Sense of an Ending*, but we will find it already in his novelistic debut *Metroland*. Identity, thus constructed, is closely related to general history and serves as something that establishes community, belonging, and order. On the other hand, one must always be aware of the fact that this order, often created out of despair, is something that is not natural but made. In *Levels of Life*, commenting on the grief he experienced after the loss of his wife, Barnes writes:

Perhaps grief, which destroys all patterns, destroys even more: the belief that any pattern exists. But we cannot, I think, survive without such belief. So each of us must be prepared to find, or re-erect, a pattern. Writers believe in the patterns their words make, which they hope and trust add up to their ideas, to stories, to truths. This is always their salvation, whether griefless or griefstruck. (Barnes 2013, 86–87)

This sentence seems to echo ideas presented in the rather eccentric, and very ambitious, 1989 book *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, namely the 1/2 chapter which is not a chapter at all and is called “Parenthesis”.

That chapter does not seem to even belong in the book. The varied mosaic of stories from human history, presented in different styles and narratives, is suddenly complemented by a personal, rather intimate confession, which differs from the rest of the book mainly by the absence of irony. The author seems to remove the mask – but does he really remove it? Can the sudden change of tone be trusted? – and moves to a personal level. The latter claims a more “authentic” status, as if he wants to speak the “truth”, although we know from previous stories how tricky truth is, especially historical truth. In the book, Barnes returns to questions that resonate strongly already in *Flaubert’s Parrot* and that will haunt him for the rest of his writing career: how can one write about the past? Can we know history? And the truth? The “parenthesis” is meant to somehow bring the texts fragmented across a variety of genres and themes together and make a whole out of a set of seemingly disparate narrative units. By suppressing irony and switching to a personal



mode, it appropriates history and gives it “its” meaning. In a later novel, *The Sense of an Ending*, the protagonist says:

Someone once said that his favourite times in history were when things were collapsing, because that meant something new was being born. Does this make any sense if we apply it to our individual lives? To die when something new is being born – even if that something new is our very own self? Because just as all political and historical change sooner or later disappoints, so does adulthood. So does life. Sometimes I think the purpose of life is to reconcile us to its eventual loss by wearing us down, by proving, however long it takes, that life isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. (Barnes 2011, 105)

The “Parenthesis” seems out of place not only by virtue of its style but also in the ambivalence or paradox it contains. The sub-chapters present world history in accordance with the view we have come to label “postmodern”. The picture of history is necessarily idiosyncratic, fragmentary, ignoring the “big history” and focusing instead on marginal episodes. Yet it depicts these in such a way that their meaning is highly problematic. The theme of violence, of the division between the pure and the impure, the chosen and the damned, constantly emerges and winds its way through history like a red line. History as a whole is incomprehensible and makes no sense. The only meaning available is a personal history, which in turn is highly purposeful. One of the book’s many characters dreams of a “personal history of the world”. Such a history is necessarily non-objective but rather subjective in the strongest sense of the word, where emotion must be an integral part of the story. It is no coincidence, after all, that couples feature so strongly in the ten and a half chapters of *A History of the World* – even personal histories are meaningful only if they are in relation to the other. Historical solipsism is not recognised by Barnes. But with this message, the “half-chapter” goes against the rest of the book by – it seems – bringing liberal humanism back into play.

Salman Rushdie criticised the “Parenthesis”, claiming that Barnes the essayist should make way for Barnes the fully-fledged novelist, and that instead of talking about love, he presented the thing itself (Guignery, 64). Such criticism, however, is a misunderstanding of Barnes’s book, which is best viewed from the perspective of the aforementioned *Levels of Life*. Barnes is faithful to his role model and mentor Montaigne, and the essayistic dimension of the text is crucial to him. Rushdie can be argued against precisely because Barnes takes one position of contemporary writing to the extreme by his radical approach to the genre of the text (simplistically, a novel is, in his view, whatever he declares to be a novel). The personal, essayistic dimension is thus necessary, for at the level of the genre (or at least “genre” as we are accustomed to perceiving it) it exemplifies what is claimed in the text. Let it be immediately added that, as an author, Barnes is most convincing precisely in those texts that defy clear classification and slip into the plane of the essay; by contrast, his “full-blooded” novels of the *Arthur & George* (2005) type are much weaker.

It is the relation to another person, the intimate connection, the stepping out of oneself and the motif of survival – or the relationship to death, if you like – that establishes Barnes’s relationship to history. “That’s one of the central problems of history, isn’t it, sir? The question of subjective versus objective interpretation, the fact that we need to know the history of the historian in order to understand the version that is being put in front of us” (Barnes 2011, 12), says the precocious Adrian, one of the characters in *The Sense*



of an Ending. In *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, this is also a major topic. In the book, history is viewed from various subversive positions, for example, the very opening story of Noah's Ark is told by a woodworm that has infiltrated the Ark as a stowaway. Thus, world history breaks down into disparate and often conflicting narratives, until the reader is left with the impression that history is in effect just a haphazard collection of subjectively motivated narratives, so that the "Parenthesis" necessarily comes with a question calling for objectivity, for truth. Barnes perceives this in close connection with love, although his conception is not – as it might seem – Christian, but rather atheistic and pragmatic. Love is the guarantor of truth, and belief in truth, some truth, intersubjective, if not objective truth, is necessary for survival. Love is our only hope, as the narrator says. We all know, continues the narrator, that objective truth is unattainable, that when an event occurs, a number of subjective truths emerge before us, which we somehow evaluate and then fabricate into history, into some God's-eye version of what "really" happened. But this top-down version is false – it is a charming but impossible fake, says the narrator. He then adds that, despite the above, we must believe in the attainability of objective truth. And if not, we must at least believe in its 99 percent attainability. And if we cannot believe even that, we have to believe that 43 percent objective truth is better than 41 percent. We have no choice, or else we are lost, falling victim to deceptive relativity, valuing one liar's version as much as another liar's, giving up in the face of the intricacy of it all, admitting that the victor has a stake not only in the spoils but also in the truth.

Barnes touches on a number of further interesting questions here. The first is the subjectivity of historical narrative, hence the relationship between historical truth (whatever we mean by that) and fiction or even falsehood; the second is the question of history and its connection to human finitude or ending as such.

The problem of the fictive nature of historiography, or the notion of history as a construct in the creation of which the author (historian) uses the same linguistic and narrative tools as the author of a fictional work, is one of the most debated in contemporary historiographical theory. The questioning of historiography's automatic claim to historical truth is a legacy of the 1960s and 1970s. It stems mainly from the cogent studies of Hayden White, but other interesting perspectives have been offered by Paul Veyne, Roger Chartier, and Paul Ricoeur. While the sceptical charge of these theories was characterised by its punch and impact, difficulties began to emerge when the authors in question wanted – if they indeed wanted – to step beyond scepticism. Are historiography and fiction any different? The problem, it seems, has no formal solution. Purely formally, it is impossible to establish criteria at the level of the text that would distinguish a text of a fictional nature from a historiographical text. Hayden White does not even attempt to do so; Chartier and Ricoeur come up with intriguing solutions, but these are ultimately based on their religious faith.

In *History and Truth*, Paul Ricoeur presents some interesting reflections that are close to the way Julian Barnes works with history. Ricoeur speaks of a subjectivity that is yet to be constituted by history. "We expect history to be the history of man, and that this history of man will help the reader, instructed by the history of historians, to construct a subjectivity of a higher order, a subjectivity not of self but of man", the French philosopher writes, before noting the following:

But this concern, this expectation of a passage – through history – from self to man is no longer, strictly speaking, epistemological but philosophical: For we expect from the reading and mediation of historical works a subjectivity of thought: but this interest no longer concerns the historian writing history, but the reader, especially the philosophical reader, in whom every book and every work is completed – at his risk and peril. (Ricoeur, 24)

In the essay, Ricoeur goes on to say that to consider the subjectivity of the historian is to ask about the way in which this subjectivity is constituted by the historical fabric (28).

The problem outlined by Ricoeur turns out to be extremely relevant to Barnes and, at the same time, it can be used as a major criticism against the theory presented by Hayden White. White's theoretical model is based on the premise that there is a subjective historian (historiographer) and a "chronicle" (sequence of events). The historian takes these events and constructs a narrative from them, which, White says, he or she exposes in a chosen mode: he or she may portray the events tragically, ironically, or as a farce. If we read Ricoeur's essay carefully, especially the passage on historical material, we realise how much more prescient he is than White. For White uncritically assumes the isolation and neutrality of historical material: in his construction, the historian works with hard facts, which he somehow assembles into a sequence and uses linguistic tropes to create a story out of them. But is this not too much of an abstraction?

The model put forward by Hayden White is highly reductive. It assumes the existence of some set of facts that are unencumbered by narrative in their facticity. But local history has shown very clearly how problematic such an abstraction is. In writing local history, historians often find that they have no choice but to use rumour, hearsay, or legends as historical material. On a theoretical level, White's theory is then challenged by David Carr, who points out that the "historical record" is not just documents, dates, names and events, but also narratives (Mayer, 66).

We have come full circle back to Barnes. What may at first glance appear to be a "sentimental" excursus or an evasive manoeuvre from novel to essay is a key component that ties the book together and gives it its essential idea. One cannot write about history without thinking about subjectivity. A purely formalist point of view will never allow one to distinguish between truth and falsehood, between historiography and fiction. Historiography and fiction, Barnes suggests, are located very close to one another, yet they are two distinct fields. One can certainly enrich the other, yet they remain separate.

History without a personal dimension does not exist for Barnes. But this does not simply mean mere relativity. It is only from a personal perspective that one can speak about history, and not only for the sake of a subjective perspective and for stepping out of oneself. The personal dimension is still framed by its finitude. Reflections on history and its depiction in the text are thus linked in Barnes to two other themes: the aforementioned love and death, or, better still, the relation to death and one's own finitude. Without this limitation, history as such is impossible. It is impossible to talk about it. Only finitude and the relationship to it establish the perspective from which the past can be viewed.

For Barnes, history is always personal, and the relationship to finitude establishes its meaning. *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* is just one of many histories (as the indefinite article suggests); it is a history that is necessarily fragmentary, yet these fragments have a coherence – and at the same time they have meaning in themselves. They are not stages on some long journey, simply because for the agnostic Barnes, universal

history is impossible. Any attempt to capture the great history of the world is doomed to failure in advance: in the end, it is an attempt to grasp eternity, which is, of course, something beyond where the rational Barnes refuses to go.

Barnes concentrates entirely on life here and now, which he wants to capture in its historical perspective. As a writer, he is interested in looking back at life and in the essentially human effort to somehow capture one's own life, to give it meaning, which in turn means to write one's story on the basis of a selective choice of events. We find this moment already in the author's debut, *Metroland* (1980). This is a "Bildungsroman" that does not take itself entirely seriously. The narrator views his youth and his fascination with French culture and existentialist philosophy in retrospect and with considerable irony. He plays off against each other a stereotypical image of metropolitan Paris and suburban London ("Metroland"), which are seen from two temporally distinct perspectives, with the former treated with a certain condescension. In the past, suburban England stands out as limited, backward and repulsive, while Paris is portrayed as an unassailable model, a symbol of metropolitan culture and progress. In retrospect, however, the perspective changes. It is as if the disillusionment with the radical politics of the 1960s is being echoed here: the reaction to the events of 1968 leads to the separation of the two protagonists. As young men, they looked back on French existentialism and their opposition to everything that symbolises or remotely resembles bourgeois values.

Chris, the main protagonist, sees his Parisian period as a youthful infatuation and his turn to suburban life as a sobering experience that gives his life its proper order, while Toni sees his former fascination with existentialism as formative for his later life and the start of his career as a committed left-wing freelance writer. As readers, we are in no position to make an impartial judgement, as the story is narrated by Chris, who understandably sees the difference from his perspective and fits it into his conservative framework. However, another thing is yet more interesting: Chris needs his life to make sense, and so he must write his "history", and it is obvious that this history must culminate in the present state, i.e. life in the suburbs. Chris's history is thus the apotheosis of settled suburban life. Barnes, however, is too subtle an author to let the novel sound black and white. Authorial irony seeps into Chris's narrative, especially at moments when it is clear that the narrator wants to justify his own choices and life above all else – for example, when he repeatedly assures the reader of how cultured he is and that he can quote Mallarmé even while mowing the lawn. It is obvious that history, as he gives it to us, is very personal and very purposeful – with some exaggeration one could say that it is a means of survival.

A very similar motif can be found in *The Sense of an Ending*. Here, finality is already present in the title and the book further develops the basic ideas or themes of Barnes's work overall: history, human life and its finitude. Barnes's peers have recently taken up the same theme: Martin Amis conceived of this looking back in the form of a farce, a look at a time in his life that once seemed like an open future, only now the hourglass has turned and the narrator cannot identify with what he once was. Similarly, in his remarkable prose *The Sea*, John Banville presents his readers with a sombre meditation on the passage of time and the indifference of the world, or nature. Barnes is much more playful, however. His narrator, Toni, a man in his sixties, is viewed with the same irony and is as unreliable as all the author's previous narrators: very little can be trusted, and the impression gradually grows in the reader that all the seemingly pro-

found reflections on the unreliability of memory are ultimately supremely ironic (on the author's part) rather than being a kind of self-defence against the insight that he has not actually lived his life at all. In a roundabout way, we have returned to *Metroland* and the same narrative strategy. The narrator appropriates history as a means of self-preservation. He creates meaning in order to survive.

Where do these other takes on the meaning of history and storytelling leave *The Man in the Red Coat*, though? Samuel Pozzi, as captured by Barnes, has no stories to tell, and the same applies to his companions, especially Montesquiou-Fézensac. Their lives, or to be more precise, the narratives of their lives, are told by others. These narratives are often contradictory, elusive, yet they are told and as such, they constitute their identities. The implication, in my view, is clear: while we can hardly speak of an identity that is not a narrative, we must also speak of a responsibility that man has to narrate. For it is only in narration that we make sense of the world and of ourselves.

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#### RÉSUMÉ: PŘÍBĚHY, KTERÉ VYPRÁVÍME O SOBĚ A DRUHÝCH: IDENTITA A VYPRÁVĚNÍ V DÍLE JULIANA BARNESE

Poslední kniha Juliana Barnese *Muž v červeném kabátě* je non-fikce, věnovaná dílu pařížského lékaře Pozziho. Je to nicméně zvláštní literatura faktu – kniha totiž v mnohém osvětluje vypravěčské postupy v Barnesově díle obecně. Zároveň se dotýká tématu, který prostupuje celým Barnesovým fiktivním dílem, totiž konstrukce identity prostřednictvím příběhů, které vyprávíme o sobě a které o nás vyprávějí druzí. Vyprávění příběhů se tak jeví jako zásadní lidská vlastnost: je naší odpovědností vyprávět, neboť jen ve vyprávění dokážeme uchopit svět kolem nás.

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## “IF ONLY THEY’D STOP WAITING”: STAGING WESTERN CANADIAN DRAMA IN CENTRAL EUROPE

KLÁRA KOLINSKÁ

### ABSTRACT

The best of contemporary theatre in Western Canada presents stories of the historical, cultural, and ethnic diversity of the region while taking a critical stand against the traditional stereotypes of “prairie realism and cowboy iconography” which contributed to the creation of its social, as well as artistic awareness. Western Canadian playwrights reflect in their works the wide multicultural spectrum of their region, without writing mere “ethnic theatre” with limited readability and appeal. This is documented by several instances of producing Western Canadian drama “out of its context” – specifically in Central Europe. In the Czech Republic, it was the productions of Brad Fraser’s *Kill Me Now* by theatres in Ostrava and Mladá Boleslav in 2017 and 2019, respectively, and the production of Vern Thiessen’s play *Lenin’s Embalmers* by a Liberec theatre which premiered in December 2017. The article discusses the productions of Western Canadian plays by Czech theatres, with special focus on the dramaturgical decisions and theatrical presentations concerned, as well as on the critical and audience response the productions have received, with the aim to demonstrate that Western Canadian drama presents not only a valuable source for cultural and theatrological study, but also inspiring material for meaningful stage productions in Czech – and potentially European – theatres.

**Keywords:** Canadian drama and theatre; regionalism; Western Canadian theatre; theatre dramaturgy; Vern Thiessen; Brad Fraser

### The development of regionalist discourse in Canada

It has been noted by numerous theorists, as well as cultural practitioners, that “Regionalism, in its cultural, economic and political aspects, is at once one of the most common and contentious terms that Canadians use to characterize their country” (Keefer, n.p.). In many senses of the word, Canada has been defined by strong and distinct regional identities, often at the expense of the sense of clearly recognisable national unity. Consequently,

Regionalism, since it reflects not just geographic but also economic differences, is a powerfully political factor in Canadian life, and accordingly, a lively sense of regional awareness

goes hand in hand with pressure for political justice, particularly in the “have-not” regions of the country. Moreover, in Canada the autonomy and vitality, or dependence and depression, of individual regions are seen to have a crucial bearing on the country’s very survival as a nation, and this realization has had a significant influence on the prominence and fortunes of regionalism as a literary phenomenon. (Keefer, n.p.)

The history of regionalist discourse in Canadian literature is long and complex. In the decades following the foundation of the Confederation in 1867, practically all the scarce literary production in the country was embraced and interpreted as simply Canadian, in view of the need to support the agenda of the newly emergent community striving to articulate and justify its desired unity, and little or no attention was paid to possible regional characteristics, despite the claim made later by Northrop Frye in his *Essays on the Canadian Imagination* that “[w]hat affects the writer’s imagination ... is an environment rather than a nation. Regionalism and literary maturity seem to grow together” (xxii; qtd. in Ricou, n.p.).

The debate concerning the interplay of regionalism and national identity has evolved in relation to the situation of the country and its community at the given moment, and in view of cultural influences from the outside world. As Craig S. Walker noted in one of the most influential books on Canadian drama:

For most of Canada’s history as a nation, its citizens have been unable to articulate a clear sense of place through their culture. There has been no shortage of nationalist sentiment about the matter; but, as Frye implied, the country is too vast and differentiated to lend itself to the sort of clear and ready formulations that those of a nationalistic bent have often sought. (Walker, 5)

The reasons for the persisting and dominant presence of the regionalist imaginary in Canadian cultural discourse are both geographical and historical. As a political structure, modern Canada emerged from a set of individual mutually unrelated colonies, most of which had longer histories as independent units than as parts of a larger state-forming project. As the geographer J. Wreford Watson explains:

Separation has been more long-standing than togetherness; difference has had a longer sway than unity. In a sense unity grew from without rather than from within. Fear of absorption into the United States and impatience at dependence on Britain did as much to bring regions together as the need for trade between the colonies, the opportunity of forging transcontinental communication links, or the fact of sharing the same environment. Whenever the United States tried to induce Canadians to join with them they aroused a sense of national distinctness in Canada that dispelled any idea of continental fusion... But when the fear of absorption by America finally abated, and when the need to be free of Britain was acknowledged, then the pressures that made the Canadian colonies unite were greatly relaxed, and the old, underlying regional differences sprang up again. (Watson, 21)

Despite its prominent position in Canada, regionalism did not always receive sustained and serious attention in theoretical and critical discourse. It was only towards the end of the last century when the situation changed; Herb Wylie, one of the most prominent Canadian literary scholars, notes:

With the cohesion of many Western nation states being gradually undermined by economic globalization and the growing influence of transnational corporate culture on the one hand and the growing antientric pressures and a decline in nationalist sentiment on the other, regionalism is starting to receive more sustained scrutiny. At the same time, debates within the field of postcolonial inquiry have suggested the need to develop more nuanced and less totalizing conceptions of postcolonialism and postcolonial literatures, and that shift of emphasis from cohesion and unity to diversity and differentiation suggests, especially in the case of Canada, the possibility of an intensified interest in regionalism as an important element in constructing a more heterogeneous model of postcolonial writing. (Wylie, 139)

While in the past Canadian scholarship in the field mostly tended to examining regionalism in the context of national literatures and cultures, recently it has consistently attempted “to consider regionalism in transnational, hemispheric, or even global contexts” (Freitag, 199). The transnational approach to regionalism and its cultural manifestations corresponds effectually to the current developments in the field, including the apparent need of redefining the concept of region as such:

Transnational regionalism reads, and re-reads, regional texts from new perspectives while also adding new, previously marginalized texts to the debate. Thus, it enriches and diversifies the imaginary reservoir of a given region, destabilizing and deterritorializing received myths about and unified concepts of North American regions without necessarily doing away with the concept of region as such. (Freitag and Sandrock, n.p.)

### **The Case of Alberta**

For geographical as well as historical reasons, the Canadian West, and its prairie landscape, has formed one of the country’s most obviously distinct and at the same time internally complex regions, producing an authentic and peculiar culture that resists simple and general characterisation. In their work focusing on the literary production of Alberta, the country’s second youngest province, Donna Coates and George Melnyk characterise the cultural dilemmas of the province, as experienced by its artists, as follows:

Writers themselves prefer various terms of self-identification that suit their interests, with “Albertan” not high on the list. Likewise, their works of art are always open to numerous overlapping labels, depending on what aspect literary critics are keen on. In an era when poststructuralist, post-modern, and postcolonial thinking continues to be in vogue, though its influence is beginning to wane, the term “Alberta” may seem irrelevant to mainstream criticism. But it is, we would argue, no less “irrelevant” than terms such as “Canadian” and “Prairie” or even “Quebec” literature. Each of these terms needs to be understood as a general context framing numerous cultural grammars and influences that inform a writer’s identity. Alberta’s contemporary literary house is as dependent on global literary trends, the evolving political economy of the province, and the formative influences of linguistic change and developing critical theories as is any Canadian literature. (Coates and Melnyk, x)

Alberta is famous not only for the breathtaking immensity of its landscape and its wealth in terms of natural resources, but also for its controversial tradition of political



conservatism, ethnic diversity of its population, as well as for its rich and varied culture, namely in literary and performance arts. Aritha van Herk, one of the most accomplished writers from Alberta, speaks about the literary culture of her home province with uncoiled pride and keen insight into its intricacies:

Attempts to essentialize Alberta's literary tradition are about as permanent as snow before a chinook. The writing aligned with Alberta (whether by accident or location) is a chiaroscuro, swatches of light and shade that dazzle and surprise, conceal and reveal. We're identified as young, unformed, the literary school (well, kindergarten) without a tradition or an encapsulating definition. Not for us the solemn blessing of Ontario Gothic or hip Toronto urbanism. Not for us the racy stripes of Montreal translative transgression... The books that erupt from Alberta are too unpredictable, too wide-ranging and varied to be summarized and contained. Alberta writing is a mystery, a tangent, a shock, unexpected and vigorous. (Van Herk, 1)

Van Herk's observations concerning the literary scene in Alberta are equally valid, perhaps even more illustratively, for the development of the tradition of performance arts in the province, and in the Canadian West at large.

### **Contemporary Drama and Theatre of the Canadian West**

The best of contemporary theatre in Western Canada presents stories of the historical, cultural, and ethnic diversity of the region while taking a critical stand against the traditional stereotypes of "prairie realism and cowboy iconography" (Nothof, 61) which contributed to the creation of its social as well as artistic awareness. The most prominent among contemporary Western Canadian playwrights portray in their works the rich multicultural gamut of their region, without writing mere "ethnic theatre" with limited readability and appeal. Their regional belonging and ethnicity are not delimitative and declarative, but constitute a firm, if unobvious and variable foundation for their perspectives on the wide and intertwined scale of current issues and conflicts, many of which concern not only members of specific closed communities but people of the whole region, if not Canada at large – and, on certain conditions, even people beyond the country's borders.<sup>1</sup> As theatre historian Anne Nothof put it in her discussion of contemporary theatre in Alberta:

Alberta playwrights reflect a wide multicultural spectrum, but their focus is rarely on a reification or validation of specific ethnic communities; they are not compelled to dramatize their distinctiveness, although their family and community histories inform the complex moral and cultural dynamics of their works. Their ethnicity is integral to their consideration of a broad range of subjects: from Canadian immigration history, to the dialogic structure of Baroque music, to the tragic consequences of the political exploitation of science. (Nothof, 61)

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard, it is of note that Edmonton, the capital city of the province, hosts the largest and longest-running international Fringe Festival in North America, which testifies to the richness and creative responsiveness of the performance culture of the region.



This is why the works by leading authors of this “provincial” dramatic literature are produced not only by community and ethnic theatres but, in equal measure, by leading theatre companies in the West aiming at general Canadian and potentially other audiences, such as *Workshop West Theatre* in Edmonton, *Alberta Theatre Projects* in Calgary, *Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity*, or *Prairie Theatre Exchange* in Winnipeg. Through their stage productions they reach theatres outside the Western provinces and thus contribute to the creation of the larger picture of Canadian cultural identity as a whole. Their success serves as evidence of the long-known but not always fully realised fact that specific ethnic, cultural, and national identity is typically formed in an intricate performative process which is influenced by a number of internal as well as external factors, and which is subject to an endless series of – sometimes “dramatic” – changes. After all, as has been noted – and, more importantly, experienced – regionalism does not need to be:

regarded, as it often is, as narrow, limited, parochial, backward, out-dated or isolationist. In its positive sense regionalism means rooted, indigenous, shaped by a specific social, cultural and physical milieu. It reflects the past as well as the present and at its best absorbs innumerable influences from beyond its borders, particularly as these have bearing on the informing regional perspective. (Bessai, 1)

Due to the complexity of this process, and to the historical, geographical and cultural specifics of the formation of Canada as a country, the articulation of the concept of Canadian national culture remains, after all, indefinite – and open to repeated re-interpretations. In relation specifically to drama and theatre culture in Canada, Diane Bessai matter-of-factly pointed out in 1980 that “[n]either modern Canadian theatre nor modern Canadian dramatic literature is so well-established that one can pronounce on them absolutely at this stage of development” (Bessai, 1), and continued by contending that

There is still no *national* theatre movement per se – at least not one to which we can point as our own special equivalent to Broadway, the West End, or other such models of artistic or commercial success. We do have a National Arts Centre in Ottawa, but from the national point of view this functions only as a theatrical crossroads, insofar as it hosts successful productions mounted in Canadian theatres elsewhere. While the NAC’s recently inaugurated policy of country-wide tours of its own permanent companies has been heralded by some as the long overdue beginning of a genuine national theatre, this is to ignore the real dynamic of theatre growth in this country. (Bessai, 1)

More than two decades after the publication of Diane Bessai’s analysis, Erin Hurley noted that not much has changed – rather, on the contrary:

The category nation is no longer as foundational to cultural production and identity structures as it was even twenty years ago... In short, globalization revalues the role of the nation state, dissociates culture from nation, and restructures national identities. Characterized by neo-liberal economic, political, and social policies which facilitate the flow of capital between networked, metropolitan and/or regional archipelagos of economic activity, globalization’s most pervasive effect has been to diminish the boundary-function and signifying power of national borders. (Hurley, 174–75)

Moreover, this appears to be true not only for the specific case of Canada: “As globalization decouples nation and culture and limits the import of the nation to identity, nation-states lose their hold on the tools through which they represent themselves to the world” (Hurley, 175).

### Western Canadian Drama Abroad

This situation proves to be beneficial, if not necessarily for Canadian drama as a whole (loose as the definition of the content of the notion may be), then for individual dramatic texts written by Canadian playwrights and nominated for productions outside their place of origin. It can be documented by several recent instances of producing Western Canadian – that is, regional – drama “out of its context” – specifically in Central Europe. Focusing in the discussion on the Czech Republic (as an epitome of a profoundly diverse dramatic and theatre culture with a long and sustained tradition) in the new millennium, several rare examples deserve closer scrutiny: the 2002 and 2007 productions of Edmonton-based playwright Brad Fraser’s play *Unidentified Human Remains and The True Nature of Love* (1989)<sup>2</sup> in Ostrava and Prague, the theatre productions of the “black comedy” *Kill Me Now* (2014)<sup>3</sup> by the same author in Ostrava and Mladá Boleslav in 2017 and 2019, respectively, and the production of another Edmonton-based author, Vern Thiessen’s play *Lenin’s Embalmers* (2010) by the F. X. Šalda Theatre in Liberec, which premiered in December 2017.

When examining the dramaturgical process of choosing dramatic texts for foreign productions, and for their subsequent realisations, several considerations emerge: firstly, it is the notion of *adaptability*, or *transferability*, of the content and the format of the dramatic text into a different historical, social and cultural context. Secondly, it is the linguistic *translatability* of the text, the possibility of rendering all its explicit as well as implicit meanings and aesthetic and emotional functions in a different linguistic medium. And thirdly, it is the technical, formal *feasibility* of transforming the translation of a formally static text into a dynamic stage production in the new theatre framework and performance practice. All these three aspects are closely interrelated and represent variations of an extremely complex and mutable process of multifaceted cultural transfer, or, in the broadest sense, translation.

### Adaptability in Theatre Dramaturgy

As far as the first aspect indicated above, that of cultural *adaptability*, is concerned, relevant decisions are, theoretically, in the competence of theatre dramaturges; the real practice, however, is typically less rigid and formalised. In the cases under discussion, the dramaturgical decisions were motivated by anything but the alleged “Canadianness”

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<sup>2</sup> The play was also adapted into a film, directed by Denys Arcand, one of the most prominent Canadian Francophone film directors. It was released in 1993 as *Love and Human Remains*.

<sup>3</sup> Two independent film adaptations of *Kill Me Now* are currently in development, in Canada and South Korea respectively. This seems to prove the universal appeal of Fraser’s “region-based” dramatic work.

of Fraser's and Thiessen's plays, or the desire to use them as representative examples of Canadian national culture – about which there is, after all, very little awareness in the Czech theatre community. The programme for the production of *Lenin's Embalmers* innocently concedes: "Let's admit that we know next to nothing about Canadian drama, which is relatively rich. Our view towards the Western horizon is obstructed by British, Irish and American authors. Bilingual Canada and its relatively close connection to Europe remains in the shadow for us – and it is a shame."<sup>4</sup>

The motivation to mount *Lenin's Embalmers*, a dark, farcical comedy based on the true story of Boris Zbarsky and Vladimir Voroblyov, the two scientists who were commissioned to embalm Lenin's body in 1924, was something very specifically local, and deeply symbolic of the traditional resonance of theatre as a discursive platform in Czech culture, including the love of (self)irony and subversion. The programme distributed to the audience tells a great, half-serious, half-ironic story about it, explaining that when working on the dramaturgical plan for 2017 early in the year, the theatre company suddenly realised that they did not have a play which would commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution. This inspired an entertaining but also chilling reminiscing of the "good old days" when theatre directors were obliged to report to the authorities about how their companies were planning to celebrate whichever communist anniversary, including various subversive strategies to avoid the unwanted duty, and repercussions in the case of its insufficient or inappropriate fulfilment. The tone of these musings is interestingly, and perhaps symbolically, very much in line with the humour of Vern Thiessen's play itself, which was then chosen for the theatre's repertoire, with an irresistible subversive twist. Thiessen's humour is incredibly apt and accurate, and fully resonates with the illicit cultural discourse during communist times – including the gallows humour of the political jokes, which, indeed, bring back many unwanted but pertinent memories for generations of Central European viewers. This is given by Thiessen's family background and sensitive cultural memory that he has always articulated in his works.<sup>5</sup> Thiessen attended the premiere of the Czech production of his play, and – hopefully not just out of typical Canadian politeness – expressed his commendation for what he saw, confessing:

If someone in a foreign country was writing a play about Canadian historical events (and a black comedy at that) I would be highly suspicious and perhaps even offended. So I think this was probably a very big risk for the company, and I appreciate that. There is a real tension in this production that you would never feel in North America. This era of communism and socialism is obviously still in the blood of some of the actors. You can really feel that. I know that must have been very difficult for some of the actors in the show. I appreciated the actors taking on roles that may have brought up complicated memories for them.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Printed programme for the production of Vern Thiessen's *Lenin's Embalmers*, published by the F.X. Šalda Theatre in Liberec, Czech Republic, in 2017; translation mine.

<sup>5</sup> Thiessen's parents immigrated to Canada from Ukraine, then under the Soviet regime.

<sup>6</sup> Vern Thiessen in private email communication, 20 July 2019; translation mine.

The play was recommended for production to the Liberec theatre by the young director Šimon Dominik, who, quite independently from the author, made a very similar comment about his motivation for the choice, and about his appreciation of the text:

I chose the play because [the author] knows very well what he is talking about, because his is not a distant view into an anthill, because he can see all the minute details and the story is not a mere rhetorical exercise for him [...]. The Western authors' perspective, simply speaking, of totalitarian subject matter which they only know from books, is often superficial and too academic. On the other hand, if I were to write a play about the American Civil War, I would not do any better, unless I buried myself in books for years. And not even then would I be sure about the result; the cultural distance might simply prove to be insurmountable. But for Vern it wasn't. And that is why we could mount his play, because it is believable for us and for our audience, for whom Lenin is not just an image from books. Sure, he is an image as well, but not from textbooks, but from facades, marches, public spaces, shop windows, statues on squares, slogans on bulletin boards in classrooms. And that is different.<sup>7</sup>

Šimon Dominik's comment inadvertently touches upon several relevant issues which, I believe, have been discussed much more widely and openly in Canada than elsewhere – those of cultural appropriation and its implications, and, arguably, also the fact that what makes Canadian culture what it is, is its inner diversity, inclusiveness, and absence of one common point of reference and authority.

In the case of Brad Fraser's play *Kill Me Now*, a deeply touching family drama addressing difficult and controversial issues such as the social and emotional impact of disability, sexual assistance services for the disabled, terminal disease and the right to die, the dramaturgical choice made by the two Czech theatres was not motivated by the Canadian background of the text and its author either. The text was discovered by the prominent translator Pavel Dominik, who coincidentally came across a review of its production in London. The translator described the genesis of transferring the play into the Czech context as follows:

I was attracted by the unusually original theme and was curious about how the author dealt with it. When I read the play, I was enthused by the virtuosity with which Brad Fraser moves within the genre of some sort of black comedy which, however, is not only black but, more importantly, deeply human and very, very moving, without being cheap or sentimental. I translated the text and offered it to [the Ostrava theatre director] Janusz Klimsza, who was immediately drawn to – since he likes this type of dramatic text – the situation of people whose emotions are subjected to extreme pressure, and thus exposed to their very core.<sup>8</sup>

Considering what Thiessen's and Fraser's plays and their Czech productions possibly have in common – which may or may not be purely coincidental – one arrives at the presence in them of dark, bold humour which often tests the established boundaries of what is regarded ethically and emotionally tolerable, expressed in the genre of black comedy. Brad Fraser, who, in the words of Ostrava dramaturge Pavla Bergmannová, “belongs to the most important and concurrently the most provocative representatives of Canadian

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<sup>7</sup> Šimon Dominik in private email communication, 13 August 2019; translation mine.

<sup>8</sup> Pavel Dominik in private email communication, July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019; translation mine.

drama of the last thirty years”<sup>9</sup> formulated his position among his playwriting colleagues as follows:

There was a time when “black humour” was considered a Canadian trademark, particularly when I was growing up and in my early writing years. These days it seems to have gone the way most humour has, being shunned by academics and a generation of people who are now obsessed with “being nice”. However, my work has always had a strong presence of “dark humour” and continues to do so today. I don’t know a lot of other Canadian playwrights who are willing to go as dark as I do.<sup>10</sup>

This quality is precisely what always has a good chance to appeal to Czech audiences and be accepted by them with acute understanding, given the Czech people’s “national character” shaped by historical experience. As a British lady married to a Czech man testified after years of first-hand encounters:

Czechs have known for centuries [that] humour is often the only recourse when caught up in an unwieldy bureaucratic system that praises conformity and rules above individuality and free-thinking. Using humour to “air out” the unpleasant facts of life is as second-nature to most Czechs as the nightly ritual of opening the windows to air a stuffy bedroom. (Prucha, n.p.)

Besides the attractiveness of the subject matter of the play, it is precisely this kind of sensibility that led the Czech directors to choose Fraser’s text. In Czech reviews, the play was repeatedly described as a “masterpiece” (Senohrábek, n.p.), as a “remarkably courageous play” (Širmer, n.p.), or as a “cleverly non-verbatim but perfectly transparent and compact text” (Senohrábek). Petr Mikeska, director of the production in Mladá Boleslav, who, as Senohrábek put it, “is said to be afraid of big emotions, used this handicap to great advantage: he did not allow the actors to sell this excellent, sensitively constructed text in the wrapping of heart-rending kitsch.” This effect was facilitated by the black humour of the text which “holds the sorely tested family in the play together like a life-giving sealant” (Senohrábek). And as the humour connects the characters of the play, so it creates a possible connection of understanding and appreciation between two at first sight distant cultural and theatre contexts.

### Cultural Translatability in Theatre

As for the *translatability* of the two plays in question, both cases are demonstrative of the implications inherent in the act of translating for theatre in general. As Susan Bassnett-McGuire, a leading theoretician of translation, put it: “A theatre text exists in a dialectical relationship with the performance of that text. The two texts – written and

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<sup>9</sup> “Společenská tabu odkrývá provokativní hra Teď mě zabij”, *Týden.cz.*, 24 May 2017; translation mine. [https://www.tyden.cz/rubriky/kultura/divadlo/spolecenska-tabu-odkrývá-provokativni-hra-ted-me-zabij\\_431154.html](https://www.tyden.cz/rubriky/kultura/divadlo/spolecenska-tabu-odkrývá-provokativni-hra-ted-me-zabij_431154.html)

<sup>10</sup> Brad Fraser in private email communication, 24 July 2019; translation mine.

performed – are coexistent and inseparable, and it is in this relationship that the paradox for the translator lies” (Bassnett, 87).

From the two dramatic texts discussed here, it was certainly Fraser’s *Kill Me Now* that challenged the translator’s inventiveness; the main character of the play is a seventeen-year old boy suffering from cerebral palsy, which severely affects his speech. He is thus a character whose ability to communicate is limited, but at the same time what he says is essential for the meaning and message of the story, so it must be understood by the audiences on a certain level. The Czech translator Pavel Dominik explains:

My biggest problem in translating this text was the fact that I had to graphically capture a speech defect while not preventing the understanding of the content, meaning that the spectators must, at – almost – every moment have an idea about what the character is saying. I spent quite some time reading medical books and studying various speech defects [...] and then I realised that I must approach it completely differently. For one thing, a speech defect can manifest itself very differently in different speakers [...] and, more importantly, an exact copy of reality does not work on stage. The point was to create an “illusion of a defect” – so I wrote to the director in the sense: I defined a defect, indicated in which way it should be performed, and suggested cooperation with a speech therapist. And that is what happened.<sup>11</sup>

The validity of this approach was proven by the author himself, who pointed out: “Communication is a key issue in the play and while Joey’s lines sound like gibberish they are actually a consistent language I created based on listening to the speaking patterns of people with disabilities. I hope it’s what’s made producers in other countries interested.”<sup>12</sup> In both the Czech productions of the play, the author’s hope proved well-grounded, and was fully met, thanks to the translator as well as to the directorial guidance and acting performances. Actor Robert Finta, who played the part of the “unspeakable” character of Joey, was nominated for the Thalia award, the most prestigious theatre award in the country.

### **From Text to Speech: Speaking in Another’s Tongue on Stage**

Pavel Dominik’s comment cited above proves that a translation is never a finite product, and much less so in the case of theatre. The text enters a context of the stage and undergoes another *transformation*, this time from the written into a spoken and acted form. In the case of the Czech production of *Lenin’s Embalmers*, the directorial solution was found in hyperbole, stylisation, vigour and accented visuality. The director explains:

We chose a highly stylised key, which seemed to us appropriate in view of the content of the text, and well as its hyperbolic character, grotesqueness, and some (potentially) voiceband passages [...] This approach proved to me quite effective in directing some other political

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<sup>11</sup> Pavel Dominik in private email communication, 21 July 2019; translation mine.

<sup>12</sup> Brad Fraser in private email communication, 24 July 2019; translation mine.

plays in the past [...] The grotesque, surprising stylisation can wash away the rust from notoriously known stories, turn the interest of the audience in an unexpected direction, reawaken their interest in what they have always known, and attack their emotions from unanticipated angles.<sup>13</sup>

Compared to the production of *Lenin's Embalmers*, the stage production of *Kill Me Now* was, as indicated above, very understated, and realistic, almost verbatim in terms of visual representation. Both productions were very successful – which is interesting in the context of this discussion, given the fact that they were mounted by small, regional theatres in the country, and which may serve the argument that Canadian regional drama and theatre is culturally translatable, since it manages to find an optimal balance between the national, local, and international agenda while remaining true to telling strong and engaging stories in an individually innovative and authentic voice. As Diane Bessai concluded:

Regional historical detail can be animated by a gifted dramatic imagination. The universals of personality or individuality are surely best contained within the fabric of a specifically realized time and place. The imagination must soar if that is its gift, but the best chance for its success lies in its continuing reinforcement of that rootedness which makes flight possible. (Bessai, 13)

The success of the two Czech regional productions of the two contemporary Canadian regional dramas, if at first sight – symptomatically – limited in scope and impact, testifies to the correctness of Bessai's conclusion, as well as to the fact that regional, or local, art does not automatically bring about limited, parochial and non-transferable expressions. On the contrary, in its most intellectually and aesthetically accomplished manifestations, it transcends the boundaries of its place of origin, comes into communication with different contexts and creates new points of contact and new meanings. After all, all art comes from a certain place, and is informed by it – and the best of it has learned, instead of denying it, to use the potential of its localisation to the maximum. Bessai's reasoning for the Canadian case of regional drama thus appears generally applicable and valid:

The truly important considerations about contemporary Canadian regional drama are that, first, regional drama establishes the validity of a specific milieu as the subject for dramatic interpretation; second that it draws its strength from the audience interest it thereby generates; and third and equally important, that it feels free to experiment in styles and stagings in order to communicate its particular vision in its own particular way. (Bessai, 12)

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<sup>13</sup> Šimon Dominik in private email communication, 13 August 2019; translation mine.



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**RÉSUMÉ: „KDYBY JEN PŘESTALI ČEKAT“:  
INSCENACE ZÁPADOKANADSKÉ DRAMATIKY  
VE STŘEDNÍ EVROPĚ**

Nejvýznamnější současná díla dramatu vznikajícího v západní Kanadě reprezentují historickou, kulturní a etnickou diverzitu tohoto regionu a zároveň se kriticky vymezují proti tradičním stereotypům „prérijního realismu a kovbojské ikonografie“, které se historicky podílely na vytváření jeho sociálního a uměleckého sebeuvědomění. Dramatici v západní Kanadě ve svých dílech reflektují široké multikulturní spektrum svého regionu, aniž by psali pouhé „etnické drama“ s omezenou čitelností a dosahem. Tuto skutečnost dokládá několik příkladů nedávných inscenací dramatu pocházejícího ze západní Kanady „mimo kontext“, konkrétně ve Střední Evropě. V České republice šlo o inscenace hry Brada Frasera *Teď mě zabij* v divadlech v Ostravě a v Mladé Boleslavi v letech 2017 a 2019 a o inscenaci hry Verna Thiessena *Leninovi balzamovači* v divadle v Liberci, která měla premiéru v prosinci 2017. Tento článek analyzuje zmíněné inscenace těchto dvou kanadských dramát se zřetelem jednak k dramaturgickým úvahám a konkrétním inscenačním řešením a jednak s ohledem na kritické a divácké reakce, s nimiž se tyto inscenace setkaly. Cílem je doložit, že současné drama západní Kanady představuje nejen cenný zdroj pro kulturní a teatrologické bádání, ale také inspirující materiál pro objevné a smysluplné jevištní realizace v českých – a potencionálně evropských – divadlech.

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