

# MERMAIDS AND AMAZONS IN POLISH CULTURE

## *White Marriage* and *The Lure* as Contemporary References to Medieval Era Imaginaria

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**Abstract** – The text uses Tadeusz Różewicz’s drama *Białe małżeństwo* (White Marriage) and two films – the film adaptation of this drama by Magdalena Łazarkiewicz, 1992 and *Córki tańczą* (The Lure) by Agnieszka Smoczyńska, 2015 – as examples, along with several references to Polish contemporary literature written by women – to show the ways in which contemporary Polish culture is interested in the mythological creatures of mermaids/sirens. It posits the thesis that as a result of associations dating back to Polish medieval historiography relating to the legendary first Polish queen Wanda, on the one hand with Amazons and on the other with Mermaids (this association persisted in Sarmatian literature and took on various forms in Romanticism), today’s references to the mermaid bring to mind the Amazon warriors of legend. This association is particularly powerful, considering that the Polish capital Warsaw has taken the iconic image of an armed siren as its coat of arms. This mermaid/Amazon, as seen in the Warsaw coat of arms, used as part of the iconography referenced by the recent Black Protests (in the autumn of 2017 women in Poland organised mass protests against government moves to amend abortion legislation – as part of the protest mermaid sculptures around Warsaw had black sashes attached with the words “You are not alone”), evokes meanings rooted in Polish culture. On the one hand, these involve Amazons seen as courageous and autonomous original residents of Polish lands, and on the other the community of women injured by the patriarchy – women who committed suicide by drowning (sirens from Polish mythology).

**Keywords:** mermaids; Amazons; Warsaw coat of arms; women’s rights; Polish literature and culture.

## 1. Introduction

Tales relating to mermaids and sirens should be treated as records of archaic images, thanks to which our culture finds itself in the process of creating new meanings and reinterpretations of old. Sirens and Mermaids, as they appear in Greek mythology, Slavic legends, the writing of Hans Christian Andersen and Kafka’s miniatures, rise up from the depths, revealing various facets of our age. Visions of half-women and half-fish, women-snakes or women-birds, belong to the annals of our oldest cultures (Gimbutas 1974, 1991; *Shima* 2018;

Wieczorkiewicz 2009). The most important place in Polish folklore is occupied by the Warsaw mermaid, but she is not a unique phenomenon, for in many texts relating to folk culture we will find traces of water fairies, “drowned women”, Mamuns and other creatures which for centuries symbolised the dark aspects of femininity perceived as a threat to culture (Moszyński 1968). Contemporary interpretations, however, move clear of this age-old enslavement. For all new interpretations, the points of reference are still: the experience of death, the elemental forces of water, and the instability of certain shapes, though currently a greater accent is placed on a radical opening up to diverse experiences of becoming. Sirens are also more and more often seen as symbols of rites of passage, especially a reminder of the golden age of girlish friendship, which ends with puberty and the appearance of male suitors (Hayward 2017).

Magdalena Łazarkiewicz’s (1993) film *Białe małżeństwo* (White Marriage), which is a screen adaptation of a play by Tadeusz Różewicz (of the same title, written in 1973), and the film *Córki Dancingu* (The Lure) directed by Agnieszka Smoczyńska (2015) are very interesting examples of the use of siren/mermaid characters in contemporary Polish culture. In our essay we would like to precisely cover these two contemporary actualisations of the mermaid. When analysing Łazarkiewicz’s film, we will give some thought to the meaning of the figure of a mermaid in Różewicz’s drama itself and the modifications that the director made to it. We will attempt to show that both these films made by contemporary Polish female directors refer to an understanding of the mermaid/siren as being inherently connected in terms of meaning with the notion of Amazons in ways which are original and true to Polish culture. In the appropriate places of the text we will investigate this old sphere of associations, which emerged as early as medieval historiography, referring to times of antiquity and their reports about the oldest inhabitants of the lands we now call Poland<sup>1</sup> (Labuda 1999; Łowmiański 1963; Rudaś-Grodzka 2013, p. 239), and which is also actualised – as we will try to show – in other contemporary works and spheres of culture.

## 2. Sirens in *White Marriage*

In discussing Małgorzata Łazarkiewicz’s film, it is worth starting with the date of its creation – the year 1992 – and its big-screen premiere – 1993. These are times following the period of post-communist transformation

<sup>1</sup> Ancient sources, used by medieval chroniclers of the Polish nation, creating myths of its founding, were collected in the anthology *Słowiańszczyzna starożytna i średniowieczna* (Labuda 1999).

which took place in 1989, in which we see the birth of contemporary Polish feminism and gender studies, but alongside these we also witness a Polish “backlash”. It was in 1993 that Polish women were stripped of some of their human rights (the right to an abortion due to social causes), secured during the times of post-WWII communism. This surprising coincidence and the logic which follows on from it would be interpreted in subsequent years in the essays of Agnieszka Graff (2001, 2008). The year 1995 saw the publication of *Absolutna amnezja* (Absolute Amnesia) by Izabela Filipiak, a novel which analyses the patriarchal and nationalistic understandings of womanhood (making reference to Arachne, who is key in terms of feminist critique, as well as the myth of Iphigenia). Not long after, we also see the publication of transformative academic writings by Maria Janion (1996), Grażyna Borkowska (1996) and Sławomira Walczewska (1999), relating to the relationship between Polishness and womanhood. In 1992, however, Małgorzata Łazarkiewicz became a sort of pioneer in terms of such research, and so her film is of particular interest. Also noteworthy is the director’s decision to stage Różewicz’s drama, considering its troubling contents, in many ways an advance on the studies produced in the 1990s – his “feminist” message was noted mostly by critics publishing their analyses in the West (Blair 1985; Kucharski 1989).<sup>2</sup>

Łazarkiewicz’s film is constructed in layers: a contemporary frame wrapped round the film’s narrative, which takes place in a *fin de siècle* setting. Two modern girls, growing up in a home which bespeaks of the affluence of its residents (while also drawing parallels in style with gentrified architecture, seen as the quintessence of classic Polishness), are afflicted by worries related to the process of growing into adulthood. When the girls happen to see a film on TV showing Piłsudski’s Legionnaires, they recognise (or so they think) in some of the men on screen their friends, before entering into their world through their fantasies. The rest of the film switches to Różewicz’s narrative, hence in order to understand the interpretative steps taken by the director, we should briefly revisit the original drama itself, in particular examining the meanings that are brought to the work by the mermaid figure used in it.

### **2.1. Sirens and emancipation in Różewicz’s play**

Around the turn of the 20th century, in the period known as Young Poland, hybrid figures featuring female characteristics were often used in art, being above all a means of communicating misogynistic meanings, related to a fear

<sup>2</sup> The play was translated into English (Różewicz 1983) and in 1977 premiered in New York.

of women which was typical of the age (Podraza-Kwiatkowska 1975).<sup>3</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Różewicz makes use of a mermaid character very discreetly, in a way which is easy to overlook and is therefore yet to be analysed. This is evident in the interpretations of this drama by the likes of Zbigniew Majchrowski (1982), Halina Filipowicz (2000), Agnieszka Skolasińska (2000) and Lidia Wiśniewska (1999), in spite of the fact that the last researcher devoted half of her sizeable book to analysing this single play. The presence of mermaids seems merely incidental, if we can say so about a play penned by a remarkable modern poet, known for his uniquely conscious attitude to literary traditions, one capable of both re-interpretations and deconstructions (Burkot 2004; Drewnowski 2002; Gębala 1978; Skrendo 2013). This happens because the central protagonist's monologue, which comes at the end of the play, is mostly concerned with her desire to transform into a man (or else maybe, being treated as a non-woman) her husband's "brother", equal to him in terms of humanity. On the other hand, the words in the monologue in which Bianka declares that she is a mermaid come directly before words in which she reveals she is a chimera. As a result, even Zbigniew Majchrowski, the author of the best-known essay about *White Marriage*, presents the mermaid character as subservient to the character which follows, giving the impression of it being its extension, and so in itself insignificant, not worthy of interpretations.

Bianka, the main protagonist in the play, following her wedding night, during which she makes it impossible for her husband to consummate the marriage, the following day also refuses to attend a visit demanded by etiquette. In speaking her monologue, the girl torches her elegant female garb in a lit fireplace and cuts off her hair. Looking at her naked body in a mirror (while covering up her breasts), she says the words "Jestem" (Różewicz 1988, p. 171). She concludes this thought by turning to her new husband as he enters the room and saying: "Jestem, jestem... twoim bratem..." (I am, I am... your brother...). Siren, chimera, androgyne, transvestite, feminist, Amazon.<sup>4</sup> Różewicz brings to mind a whole range of references through

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly enough, in writing about the key and most popular symbols of Young Poland, the researcher almost completely fails to mention mermaids. Chimeras and sphinxes, as she notes, are much more often symbols of fear of femininity in Polish poetry of that period. Another researcher, Anna Czabanowska-Wróbel, noted many Young Poland poems with the motif of sirens from Greek myths or siren-like creatures from folk tales, such as *Syrena* (The Siren) by Leopold Staff, *Syrena* by Lucjan Rydel, *Rusalki* by Tadeusz Przerwa-Tetmajer and *Rusalki* by Bronisława Ostrowska (Czabanowska-Wróbel 2013, pp. 31-33).

<sup>4</sup> As an allusion to the figure of the Amazon we can consider the gesture of cutting off her hair, which here would be the equivalent of depriving a woman of an attribute that is linked with the idea of female sexual attraction as much as a breast (Bianka also covers her breasts in this

which we might understand “misfit identities”, such as the one represented by the central protagonist of the play. Equally meaningfully, in creating the character of Bianka, the poet used fragments of biographies, letters and literary works by two female Polish poets and writers, Narcyza Żmichowska and Maria Komornicka. These two apparent misfits, the Romantic Żmichowska and the Modernist Komornicka, are linked by the idea of emancipatory or rather self-accentuating womanhood, as well as presumably non-heterosexual biographies (Żmichowska, lesbian; Komornicka, transsexual).

Narcyza Żmichowska is known as the founder of a group called *Entuzjastki* (Enthusiastic Women), bringing together women in the 1840s who hoped to find personal development and fulfilment through the group by choosing roles other than those of “wife” and “mother” – such as writers, journalists, artists, teachers and civic activists. Żmichowska was also a charismatic tutor of girls, helping them cross boundaries set up by the patriarchal culture they had been born into (Borkowska 1996). Maria Komornicka in turn was a talented poet and literary critic, who has until recently played a marginal role in literary history, as she was perceived to have been mentally unwell, something apparently evidenced by a legendary event in a hotel in Poznań in the year 1907. According to her family, Komornicka burnt her woman’s clothing in a fireplace, dressing in men’s garb, cutting her hair and ordering her mother to refer to her as a man named Piotr Włast (a name taken from their family’s protoplast). This was how Komornicka went on to sign her writings, which from this point on were not taken seriously by anyone. Her legacy only came to be taken more seriously in the 1970s, but to this day she remains representative of the contemporary feminist and queer movement in Poland (Iwasiów 2010; Nadana-Sokołowska 2018).

The central protagonists in the play are two girl-cousin-friends, who at the cusp of adulthood explore their sexualities. In secret, they read books about human physiology, which helps them better understand the hidden layers of life in the manor house they live in, as well as their own budding sexualities. This awareness demystifies one of the most important myths in Polish culture: the exemplary way the Polish gentry live in their familial nests. Bianka begins to understand how unhappy her mother is in her marriage to her father. She begins to realise why he chases after the serving maids and female cooks. She also begins to detest him for his masculine virility and ruthlessness, aspects that define the way in which he treats the

scene). Self-mutilation is also a symbolic transition to masculinity as a denial of feminine “weakness” in the sense of being closed in her corporeality and her reproductive functions.

women around him. On the other hand, Paulina learns a great deal about their lecherous grandfather's secrets and the immoral suggestions he makes to her.

Each girl takes up a different attitude in relation to their discoveries. Paulina realises that the world she will come to live in denies her the right to be fully human, but she is more amused than terrified of these discoveries. She adopts the cynical strategy of using the influence young beautiful women have over men, while Bianka is more and more terrified of what she is coming to discover. She writes poems imbued with erotic power and has a fiancé named Benjamin, but in conversations with him she begins to develop a white marriage project, dreaming of eroticism without penetration. Treated by her father as if she were a boy, the son he actually wanted, she rather fails to feel feminine. Meanwhile, the relationship between the female protagonists is charged with eroticism, which brings to mind the union of mermaids, but also Bianka's lesbianism. In the interviews which accompanied the publication of this drama, Różewicz himself suggested the idea that it refers to the "impossible" love between Narcyza Żmichowska and Paulina Zbyszewska, which he claimed was presented in her novel *Poganka* (The Heathen), written in 1846 (Keler 1975).

In the scene showing her wedding night, Bianka refuses to allow Benjamin to consummate their marriage. Benjamin, tired after the wedding party, seems at the time to be not very interested in her declarations and falls asleep straight away, so that Bianka's monologue is just for herself. This is when she says she is a Siren, and asks Benjamin if he can hear her sisters the Mermaids hailing her:

Nogi zrosły mi się... od stóp aż do pępka pokrywa mnie zimna rybia łuska...  
Ben... twoja oblubienica ma rybi ogon zamiast nóg... wiesz? Jestem syreną...  
ożeniłeś się z syreną... z chimera. Spójrz! Mam głowę lwicy, kadłub kozy i  
ogon węzowy... Słyszysz, jak moje siostry syreny wabią mnie, nawołują. [...] nie dotykaj mnie... (Różewicz 1988, p. 169)

My legs have fused together... from the feet to the bellybutton I am covered in fish scales... Ben... your bride has a fish tail instead of legs... did you know? I am a siren... you married a siren... a chimera. Look! I have the head of a lioness, the torso of a goat and the tail of a snake... Can you hear my sisters mermaids hailing me, calling me along. [...] do not touch me... (Translated by Marek Kazmierski)

How can we understand this layering of meanings related to mermaids and changes in genders in Różewicz's writings? Superficially speaking, they belong to two completely separate orders. Let us, however, note that, in the light of the thesis about certain affinities between Mermaids and Amazons, to which we will return shortly, they seem completely understandable. Being a siren, having a fish tail, means for Bianka protection from penetration, which

involves going beyond the role marked out for her by the nature of her gender. This would also lead to a regress, a withdrawal from life, as well as involving a desire to go beyond the condition related to gender. Let us note that Różewicz holds back from stating definitively whether we are dealing here with biology or culture (sex or gender). Perhaps his drama is subject to the culture of *fin de siècle* fatalism; this culture understood the biological features of a woman's fate as something determinant and inescapable, unless this escape is towards a regression of madness or suicide (see Skolasińska 2000). In spite of this, we can assign Bianka the desire to be treated differently to the way women had been treated up until that point, meaning a progressive desire for cultural change, female empowerment, on the condition, however, that femininity/fleshiness was negated, and so a tragic choice (see Skolasińska 2000). Bianka therefore turns out to be the sister of various desperate drowned women, as well as a female rebel, demanding for herself the chance to live a different life, other than the one assigned to women of the time. Różewicz uses the fish tail in his bricolage in order to express the notion of transgressing the female condition, but Bianka's mermaid/chimeric aspect also demystifies the modernist siren in the role of symbol of the mystery of female sexuality that threatens men. Womanhood, Różewicz seems to suggest, contains no mystery other than the desire to be treated as a human being, "brother", meaning a being equal in terms of rights with men. This is then the humanistic and at the same time feminist message of the play, perhaps not by chance aligned with key works of European humanism, such as *Fruen fra havet* (The Lady from the Sea) by Henrik Ibsen, published in 1888, in which the equivalent of Mermaids, the figure of Woman-Seal, also expresses the woman's desire for autonomy, her right to her own world.

## **2.2. Sirens in Łazarkiewicz's film. Regress or catharsis?**

If Różewicz's Bianka remains a modernist mermaid, suggestive of meanings such as regress, connection with death, otherness, threat to men, lesbianism, and also the dream of emancipation, then in the screen adaptation by Magdalena Łazarkiewicz she much more distinctly becomes both Siren and Amazon: a creature capable of destroying the world it find themselves in, and thus really a threat to the patriarchal world order. This screen adaptation of Różewicz's play can be of interest to us precisely because the director brought to the fore Różewicz's faintly mentioned siren motif, turning it into a key way of understanding the female protagonist in which Bianka's mermaidism is in her connoted not through the words of her monologue, but through a series of visual allusions.

In the opening of the film, we contemplate Bianka's face framed with long, flowing hair and hear her girlish laughter in which we can recognise the

modulations of feminine seductiveness as well as a note of wildness. In one of the opening scenes, Bianka tells Paulina about a dream in which she drowns in a well, and the whole film ends with a scene in which Bianka commits suicide by diving into it. The motif of Bianka's aquatic nightmares is present in the drama, but without the ending Łazarkiewicz comes up with it is difficult to comprehend, connoting rather the central protagonist's sexual frigidity or else her regressive desires.<sup>5</sup> Thanks to the solution invented by the director, it also makes Bianka's self-representation in her words to her husband clearer. Both her mermaidism and the suicide, latent in the play, are brought more to the fore thanks to her interpretative insightfulness. In this way, Łazarkiewicz connects with the tradition of presenting female suicides as mermaids, and even imagining a community of wronged and hurt women, which was present already in Mickiewicz's romantic ballad *Rybka* (Little Fish), well known to the Polish public (1822).

The title little fish is for Mickiewicz also a mermaid, a peasant woman who, having been seduced and abandoned with a child, commits suicide and turns into a mermaid. Interestingly enough, after death she miraculously switches between the forms of fish or mermaid, but the latter in order to nurse her child with her own breast milk, the babe brought down to the river by a friendly farmer, and so the siren has mothering instincts. And yet, when her unfaithful lordly lover appears on the shore, the fish-siren entices him into the watery depths and causes him to die, along with his recently married wife (this incredible version of events is presented in the ballad as something thought up by the aforementioned farmer). Based on the example of Mickiewicz's ballad, we can talk about a feminist accent contained in this referencing of the Siren/Mermaid figure which makes her wholly human, and dangerous only ever to her oppressors. She uses magic powers in order to extract justice from a man who, in seducing her, did so using his privileged social position, as well as religious reasoning which lay the blame and punishment on the woman-victim.

The ballad also contains the motif of a mermaid community, as we can imagine, the sisterhood of Watermaids (*Świtezianki* from another Mickiewicz ballad) the wronged girl calls upon to aid her as she throws herself into the depths are other drowned women, also desperate victims of a patriarchal social world order. It is obvious that a similar point is made in creating a sense of belonging to the siren community of "rabid" women. This, as we might suspect, means the permanently wronged, enraged and pained females

<sup>5</sup> Bianka's "attribute" (cold feet) returns in this function in Julia Fiedorczuk's novel (2011) *Biała Ofelia* (White Ophelia) which is also connected to Różewicz's play by the motif of dreams of non-genital sex, here lesbian, being a sort of experience of bodies dissolving and being mutually permeable, and so referring to the elemental properties of water (see Fiedorczuk 2011, p. 130).

in Anna Świrszczyńska's poem *Wyją z bólu* (Howling hurt), which was published in the famous poetry collection (1972), and which is very important for Polish feminism, *Jestem baba* (I Am Wench).<sup>6</sup> It is short and relevant enough for us to quote it here in its entirety:

*Wyją z bólu*  
Pod moje okno  
Podpływają nocami syreny  
Chore na wściekliznę.  
I wyją z bólu  
Do nieuleczalnego księżyca.

Budzę się.  
A ty  
Zatrzaszczasz okno.

*Howling hurt*  
Beneath my window  
Sirens swim past at nights  
Rabid  
Howling hurt  
At an incurable moon.

I wake.  
While you  
Slam the window shut.  
(Translated by Marek Kazmierski)

The first meaning mermaids represent in the drama and the film involves showing the force of nature that is water as connected with both destructive and self-destructive tendencies. But the second would relate to a vision of a community of drowned-women, who continue to lead a mysterious, beautiful life in underwater worlds about, their sisterhood and resistance.

Not unlike in *Rybka*, which allows the sirens to take revenge against an adulterous lover, Łazarkiewicz's film shows *Bianka-Siren* as a character who threatens a world founded on masculine domination. *Bianka*, leaving the manor house at night, causes it to catch fire (lace curtains moved by a breeze touch a lit candle). In this way, her suicide is followed by the end of the world she decided to abandon through her act of transgression-rebellion. This state can be associated with Polishness itself: the film after all was shot in the same mansion as the renowned *Panny z Wilka* (The Maids of Wilko), based on a short story by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz from 1933 and brought to the big screen by Andrzej Wajda in 1979. Many of its visual allusions – for example

<sup>6</sup> A very interesting fact considering the biographical connection between Różewicz and Świrszczyńska occurring just before he wrote his play.

the mushroom picking scene – also refer to the idyllic vision of Polishness emerging from the national epic written in 1834 by Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz albo ostatni zajazd na Litwie* (Pan Tadeusz or the Last Foray in Lithuania). The contemporary framing device stresses the present-day relevance of the models of Polishness analysed in the play and the film, casting judgement upon the experiences of women contemporary to the director.

In Różewicz, therefore, as in – even more forcefully – Łazarkiewicz’s film, we find ourselves dealing with a presentation of male “lustiness” and female sexual trauma as a “night-time truth” about Polishness. Masculine sexuality is here presented as a biological drive, the foundation of social order, necessitating the impossibility of female individuality (women are subservient to men in the sexual act, biologically determined to constantly being pregnant, as Bianka’s mother defines empathically when describing her own condition). Let us note, however, that the fire which destroys the archetypical Polish homestead (manor house) in the film might suggest not only destruction, but also cleansing, catharsis, and so also announce a rebirth of the world on new terms. This feminist and emancipatory motif was almost completely absent in the play, in which Bianka seemed to present a threat merely to her husband, denying him the pleasure of physical possession, while at the same time trying to dominate and also lead towards regression (according to Zbigniew Majchrowski’s interpretation, this was the function of the chimera figure in the play). In her film, Łazarkiewicz shows how any woman refusing sexual advances becomes a threat to the whole culture constructed upon the dominant position of one gender over another, because she questions her subordinate position and the ideology that supports it.

It is also worth comparing the scene of Bianka’s transformation in front of the mirror as shown in the film and the play. Łazarkiewicz not only has her heroine cut her hair and exposed herself, setting fire to her clothing, but she also bandages her body in an attempt to make her gender invisible. We can perceive this scene as a stronger one than Różewicz’s reference to the motif of the Amazon as a woman who maims her own breasts, which happen to be one of the most fetishised feminine attributes. Heading towards the well, the bandaged Bianka walks slowly, with effort, as if on a tail and not legs. This scene also helps to highlight her otherness, non-humanness, “mermaidness”, as well as referencing Andersen’s little mermaid: although his mermaid suffered of her own volition, walking on legs, in Łazarkiewicz’s film women transformed into sirens suffer (her fish tail might suggest being shut up in the myth of “mystery of womanhood” and at the same time in biology and cultural gender condemning her in marriage to be limited to basically reproductive functions).

In this way, the mermaid in Łazarkiewicz's film represents a tension between her regressive meanings (withdrawing from life) also present in Różewicz's play, and the progressive meanings, much more discreetly present in his creation, postulating cultural change in a way which makes it possible for women to be empowered. By departing dramatically from the original play's narrative, Łazarkiewicz manages to enhance its central message.

### 3. Agnieszka Smoczyńska's *The Lure*

Let us now take a look at the functions the mermaid motif serves in the film *The Lure*. This seemingly purely entertaining and light film, which is shot in the convention of a musical and presents the world of show business and Warsaw's shadowy underworld in the time of communism (the 1980s), in a self-aware sense toys with all the cultural associations related to mermaids.<sup>7</sup> It creates a tension between the idealized, non-threatening legend of the mermaid rising from the waves in Warsaw to become its coat of arms and the typical perception we have of the siren as a creature representing femininity which is wild and dangerous, but also with the Mermaid from Andersen's fairy tale, ready to sacrifice herself in the name of love to a man. The film, however, also makes reference to meanings associated with Sirens and Amazons, showing them as independent creatures, existing outside of patriarchal systems, powerful and ready to avenge any harm done to them.

The heroines of the movie are two mermaids – apart from the fact that they live in water and are animals (predators in fact, for at times they need to rip men apart and devour them), in all aspects they appear to seem like young women, desiring intensive, adventure-filled lives. Bored with their lives on the coast of the Black Sea, they decide to swim down rivers to the Baltic Sea, and then on to the ocean, in order to reach New York and there have fun. Unlike traditional mermaids, Gold and Silver (these are their names) are able to change into human beings, though the transformation is not complete, since this human form leaves them stripped of sexual organs. In this fetishistic aspect, representative of today's youthful subcultures, we might also see a symbol of how they remain inaccessible to men because of their autonomy. The sirens are aware that falling in love with men represents a threat to them: they can choose to turn into women in all respects, but then

<sup>7</sup> Previous interpretations of the film have tended to focus on its camp poetic, corresponding to the lesbian subtexts of the plot, as well as pointing to its hybrid nature, meaning the original combination of the conventions of musicals, fairy tales and horror. Since they also discuss the corporeality of mermaids in the context of male desire and disgust (see Jagielski 2017), this aspect is omitted in our interpretation.

they will lose the ability to turn back into semi-animal form (obviously, this characteristic of theirs is an allusion to Andersen's fairy tale). Wanting to appear nice and offer a sacrifice, they thus become vulnerable, for surrendered to the mercy of a world which can still refuse them humanity and use this as justification for causing them pain.

This is what happens in the film. One of the mermaids falls in love with a handsome singer of a band, and in the name of love's fulfilment sacrifices herself by undergoing permanent change. The scenes showing a medical operation in which Silver has the lower half of a dead woman's body attached to her upper body are both comical and macabre, convincingly showing mutilation, or rather death, as a condition of fulfilling her love. The girl also thus surrenders her wild, semi-animalistic nature. This is seen in the scene in which she refuses to take revenge upon her lover, when he – bored and filled with disgust for her still bleeding body – cheats on her with a “normal woman”. This magnanimity is inevitably paid for by Silver with her own life: in line with the logic of movie narratives, the mermaid, unhappily in love with a human being, dies, turning into watery foam. This is of course a reference to the tragic ending of Andersen's fairy tale, but the director in this way also creates a simultaneously expressive symbol of so-called “female weakness”: the foam's amorphousness in the film becomes the equivalent of popular terms such as “lacking character”.

Gold in turn takes revenge for her friend Silver, killing her beloved: her belligerence makes it clear that she is not just a mermaid, but an Amazon too. But she will have to suffer a painful loss too, for her “sister” at first betrays their shared plans and abandons her true identity in the name of a project involving a union with a man, and then – in dying – leaves her abandoned to solitude.

The film's feminist message, in combining the figures of mermaid and Amazon, is clear. In spite of patriarchal anathemas, it shows the necessity of “wild”, “animalistic” elements in women's psyches as the basis of their ability to feel pleasure on the one hand, and to correctly judge risk and be able to defend themselves on the other.

### **3.1. *The Mermaid of Warsaw and the Amazons***

Smoczyńska eclectically combines various versions of the myth of the mermaid, which are also characteristic of pop culture. The community of girls/mermaids is one of its motifs as well as the reference to Andersen's fairy tale about the mermaid's love for a man leading to self-sacrifice; the director also makes amusing use of the motif of a siren/mermaid beauty and her tempting singing, showing the career of both mermaids as stars of a nightclub in Warsaw. For the Polish audience, it is also obvious why the

mermaids are coming ashore right here. It is a reference to the founding legend of the city, according to which one day a fisherman found a mermaid in his nets, fell in love with her and after many adventures made her his wife. However, the film refers only to the beginning of the story: Silver falls in love here with a Warsaw rock musician, hearing him sing and play the guitar on the bank of the Vistula River, and this makes her stay in the city. These references to mythology were obvious to film reviewers. But why did the film mermaids come to Warsaw from the Black Sea? And why are there two, instead of one, and why is it a characterological contrast, even though they both have such noble names, worthy of princess? These seemingly random and fairy-tale choices of the director seem, consciously or not, to refer to very old Polish versions of the myth of the Amazon and mermaid.

According to one of them, passed down by Jordanes in *Getica* (Mierow 1915) which is still referenced by today's amateur historians (<http://szlakksiazat.pl/czy-kiedys-na-mazowszu-zyly-amazonki/>), the name Mazovia, the geographical land where Warsaw is situated, comes from the ancient Scythian Amazons.<sup>8</sup> In 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries Poland, Amazons, Scythians and Sarmatians were considered to be pre-Slavonic peoples. In the wider circles of Polish nobility for many centuries it was thought that Slavs came from Sarmatian roots, and Poles especially so. All the more so when it came to the gentry in Poland (Niedźwiedź 2015). In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the name "Sarmatia" almost completely replaced the name "Poland" (Sulimirski 1970).

Like the Amazons and other monsters, the Scythians were to settle in the distant lands to the east and north of *oikumene* (civilized world or inhabited world). In times of antiquity, it was imagined that the place where the Amazons lived was important, located, as a result of their alienness, on the edges of the civilized world. The Greeks felt that this nation of warring and wild women was reminiscent of a dangerous monster, constantly poised for attack, one it was necessary to defend oneself from. Along with the shifting borders of the Greek-Roman empire and the development of historical-geographical knowledge, the location of the Amazons' kingdom kept on shifting. We find it in Asia Minor, in Thrace, Colchis, in Boeotia, Ethiopia and Libya, or in the area of the Sea of Azov, north-east of Tanais. All barbarian tribes, especially during Roman times, were called "Scythians", but the original Scythians were a nomadic tribe originating in Iran. Between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC they emigrated from central Asia and settled on the steppes of the Black Sea, where they established a mighty empire. They later reached central Europe.

<sup>8</sup> Linguists believe that the name derives from a patronym (as indicated by the -ow- suffix) or from a word that means mud/clay ("gunk" in Polish "maź").

Contemporary Warsaw's coat of arms shows a mermaid armed like an Amazon: with a sword and shield. In the first archived version of it (from the early 15<sup>th</sup> century) there is a siren, a woman-bird, who only in the 18<sup>th</sup> century finally takes on the present-day form of the woman-fish (along the way, most often taking on the shape of a woman-snake, with two tails at times). And yet the hybrid in the capital city's coat of arms is always armed, which must have had magical meaning in medieval times. The monster had the power to ward off evil (Fudala, Mrozowski 2017). The preserved associations between the mermaid and the Amazon in the city's coat of arms are perhaps linked to images of the kinship between mermaids and Amazons, and also Scythians/Sauromats/Slavs, which we can find as early as in Herodotus' *Histories* (Herodotus 2013). According to his writings, the mother of Scythians was the twin-shaped Echidna, half-woman, half-snake. What else connects the Mazovian mermaid with Amazons? Above all the ease with which they kill their enemies. Amazons are a symbol of women who refuse to be completely subjugated to the world of men. In cultural narratives, they were seen, like mermaids, as alien, and represented a threat to the established social order (Vidal-Naquet 1986). In his *Prometheus*, Aeschylus called them "Amazons, who loathe all men" (Aeschylus 1926, vv. 720-730). For the Greeks of antiquity, women represented untamed nature, which will not allow itself to be directed and can threaten central masculine institutions. Alongside Amazons we see the appearance of monsters, beasts which can destroy men with a single glance or utterance, like sirens and gorgons.

According to Herodotus (2013), Echidna was the mother-in-law for Amazons. At one point, the Scythians decided to send their young men to the warrior women, for they wanted to have children born of Amazons. In the end, they combined their camps and set up home together. The women learnt their language. Later on, they wanted to take the women back to their homes, but the Amazons, wanting to be true to their own laws and traditions, refused this request. Herodotus writes that the Amazons eventually convinced the Sarmatians to go with them to Tanais and, following a six-day-long journey, they arrived in the land which became their home. Subsequent generations born of Sarmatian women retained their autonomy and old way of life.

The story about the Amazons appears also in Cassiodorus and Jordanes (Mierow 1915). Key characters here are the queens, Martesia and Lampeto, who split their armies in two. Soon enough, they became famous and powerful, in turn waging wars or defending the borders of their native lands. They conquered most of Europe and occupied certain Asian countries and claimed to have been the daughters of Ares. According to Mierow (1915), the history of the Amazon queens is an echo of the history of the Goths who, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, having travelled throughout northern Europe from the shores of the Baltic Sea (the Vistula mouth), reached the Black Sea. They spread out

slowly: gradually, in the first two centuries of the modern era they occupied almost the whole of Pomerania and northern Greater Poland. Over the next two hundred years they came to dominate Mazovia, Podlasie, Polesie, western sections of Volhynia and Podole. By studying burial sites, we know women's social standing in these regions was very high, and that they served leadership roles; we can surmise that they took part in battles the same as men.

The time of their rule was short, but memories of their presence probably survived up to the medieval *Chronica boemorum* (Czech Chronicle) (Kosmas 1968), which talks about a settlement of women warriors and Slavic Amazons called Devin, as well as medieval Polish legends about Wanda, a valorous queen who defeated the Germans. Both medieval chronicles, by the Polish Kadłubek and the Czech Kosmas, talk about a government of women who were courageous, wise and beautiful. This is incredible, because we know that in Slavonic communities women were completely subjugated to their husbands and fathers.

In these legends, Wanda is the daughter of Krak, and Libusza the daughter of Krok. In some variations of the legends, Krak and Krok were one and the same, while Libusza and Wanda were sisters. The 18<sup>th</sup> century historian Adam Naruszewicz wrote in his *Historia Polski* (History of Poland) that in times when Krakus ruled over Poland and Bohemia, these lands saw the rebirth of the "ancient breed of Scythian Amazons" (Naruszewicz 1836, p. 100). Kosmas in his *Chronica boemorum* bestows many bardic skills upon Libusza. The founder of the town of Luboszyn was said to have been a remarkable woman. Her people nominated her as their judge, and so she was appointed to the highest administrative, judicial and military rank. Nevertheless, Libusza loses her power because of the men's rebellion, no longer wanting to be subjected to female rule and women's courts. Although Libusza surrenders to the will of the people and accepts the superiority of the husband she chooses for herself, the chronicler describes the still long wars between men and women who want to maintain their independence, stating that since the times of that war and Libusza's death women have been subject to men's rule.

Polish historians and poets agree in stressing that, unlike Libusza, Wanda was not subject to male domination. Thanks to the mysterious power contained in virginity, she retained her autonomy and position throughout her life. These two queens are related, however, and complete one another in outlines. They appear in times when the female element proved to be dominant among the Slavonic peoples. Some, such as the 19<sup>th</sup> century writer Deotyma (Jadwiga Łuszczewska), thought that Wanda and Libusza, the daughters of Krak-Krok, are one and the same, and having split into two ideals diversely shaped the Polish and Czech national imaginations. One is

pressured into getting married, while the second chooses death over entering into a marriage contract. It seems justified to discern allusions to this mythological pair of women-queens and their two different attitudes and fates in Smoczyńska's film.

#### 4. Conclusion: Princess Wanda, the Mermaid-Amazon of Warsaw and women's rights

In his *Kronika polska* (vol. I, chap. 7), Kadłubek presents Wanda simultaneously as a heroine, goddess and priestess (Kadłubek, 1992). Loved and respected by her subjects, she was said to have surpassed everyone in her beauty, wisdom and courage. In order to defend her kingdom, Wanda leads her armies into battle to defend her people. As stressed by Kadłubek, Wanda never did marry until her dying days, putting her virginity above the institution of marriage. In other medieval chronicles, especially the likes of Jan Długosz's *Roczniki, czyli kroniki sławnego Królestwa Polskiego* (Annals, the chronicles of the famed Polish Kingdom) recorded in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Wanda leaps into the Vistula in order to avoid being married off to the Aleman chieftain, and in this way ensured that her country remained independent (Samsonowicz 1984). Her leap leads us to think of the connection between water and siren mermaids. It is clear to us that her decision did not fit any rite or Christian ritual. We are dealing here not only with an act of willpower, but also with a manifestation of political sovereignty. (We may find a similar meaning in the return of Gold to the Vistula River in Smoczyńska's film). This act held in our memory to this very day a subversive character.

This pre-Slavonic myth recorded by Wincenty Kadłubek, a Polish chronicler, for ages provided poets, writers and historians with inspiration, for in it they found many different narratives and meanings (Mortkowiczówna 1927). Patriotic readings of Wanda made her into a Christian martyr, an example of virtue and virginity, a patron of a mournful nation. She was Antigone and a pagan queen, the founder of a Slavonic community, maintaining racial purity. And yet, in spite of nationalistic commandments and templates, she appears in our culture to be a devotee of idols, a mysterious lunar priestess of Artemis and Bendis, a river goddess, a drowned woman, and also an Amazon (Rudaś-Grodzka 2016).

In August 2017 we witnessed the grand return of the Warsaw Siren, its symbolic meanings harnessed by women protesting against attempts by Poland's right-wing government to further limit already radically restrictive abortion laws. The mermaid from the Warsaw's coat of arms became the emblem of female resistance and the fight for reproductive rights. One night,

as part of a feminist campaign, all the Warsaw mermaids were decorated with a sash stating “You are not alone”.<sup>9</sup>

Relating to this action, a punk music band called *Miraż* composed a song titled *Syrenka* (Mermaid), which contains comparisons between the siren/mermaid and the Amazons, and also an association with Wanda. The heroines in this song – contemporary Polish women anarchists – also want to drown themselves in despair in the Vistula, but just so they can then rise to the surface bearing arms, just like the mermaid which is the symbol of Warsaw:

już dość podejmowania za nas decyzji  
już dość narzucania nam waszej wizji  
a kiedy do mnie mówisz, że nie mogę tak myśleć,  
no chyba się popłaczę, utopię się w wiśle  
a później wyskoczę jak syrenka z zimnej wody  
gotowa do walki o prawo do swobody.

(<https://mirazgirls.bandcamp.com/track/syrenka>)

enough of making decisions for us,  
enough of imposing your vision on us,  
and when you tell me that I cannot think like that,  
I think I'm gonna cry, I'll drown myself in the Vistula  
and then I'll jump off like a mermaid from cold water,  
ready to fight back for my right to freedom.

The connection between the courageous queen Wanda and the Warsaw mermaid bearing arms had already been made in 2013 in a show titled *Wanda* staged by Paweł Passini at the Stry Theatre in Krakow, based on a drama written by Sylwia Chutnik and Patrycja Dołowa. The show aimed to revisit the myth of Wanda in Polish culture. Its heroine, Ophelia-like, cannot find her place in history and the collective imagination. Being unaccepted in the role of a misfit, Woman-King, she also rejects the role of a married woman. After all, in planning her suicide, she dreams of transforming herself into the mermaid of the Warsaw coat of arms:

Mam sen. Śni mi się. Nie potrafię wyjść na brzeg. Znalazłam się w nurcie.  
Wróciłam do wód. Urodzę się tylko uzbrojona. Jeśli kiedyś przestanę być  
mazią. Wyjdę z tych wód. Zaplątana w zgniły wianek, w sieć wodorostów,  
które przetną sterylnymi nożyczkami. Zmierzą mnie, zważą, dadzą tarczę do  
mojego skromnego ekwipunku. Stworzę miasto dziewczki. A żeby nie było, że  
to jakieś nierównouprawienie, będę jednak wciąż na wpół tą mazią, błotem,  
odmętem, córką swego ojca pokrytego łuskami i matki meluzyny zanurzonej

<sup>9</sup> There are nine monuments or reliefs featuring the mermaid as Warsaw's coat of arms situated around the capital city. Two of these are the best known: the mermaid sculpture in Powiśle by Świętokrzyski Bridge and a second such monument in the Old Town Square.

w mule. Ale pierś wypnę dumnie. I nie dam jej osłonić. (Chutnik, Dołowy 2013, unpublished script, accessed for research purposes, provided by Teatr Stary w Krakowie)

I am dreaming. I dream. I cannot go onto the shore. I have been caught up by a current. I returned to the waters. I will only be born armed. If I ever manage to stop being all that sludge. I will leave these waters. Wrapped in a rotting garland, in a web of seaweed, which they will cut with sterilised scissors. They will measure, weigh me, then give me a shield to add to my humble arsenal. I will create a city of girls. And so as not to seem like this will be some kind of unequal opportunity, I will still be half that mud, that silt, sludge, mud, chaos, the daughter of my father covered in scales, of my mother Melusina submerged in the silt. But I will stick my chest out proudly. I will not allow it to be covered up.

As these examples show, references to mermaid/siren types in contemporary Polish culture will automatically activate associations with the legendary tribe of Amazon warrior women. This sphere of association, emerging from medieval historiography – legends about princess Wanda, who had about her something of the Amazon and the Mermaid – also returns today in images and fantasies connected with the Warsaw coat of arms.

Chutnik and Dołowy's Wanda, just like Różewicz's Bianka, still hesitates strongly between regressive desires (withdrawal from life) and emancipatory desires (fight against oppression). Łazarkiewicz's more revolutionary expression of a mermaid was apparently considerably softened by Smoczyńska in keeping with the conventions of a mainstream musical. However, the pessimistic ending of her film shows that today the woman/mermaid sacrifice has lost its sanctified meaning. The wild aspect of mermaid-Amazon women ready to fight against patriarchal oppression is present in both films, but returns most distinctly in the performances staged to coincide with Black Friday.

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