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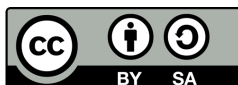

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Herodias' Story, *Her*story – Kazimiera Zawistowska's Poetry, Young Poland, and Female Decadence

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The contradictory currents that shaped Europe at the turn of the century were reflected in the literary production of the time. The Polish literature of the *fin de siècle* is an especially interesting case in point: Poland, which had disappeared from the map of Europe completely for 123 years (from 1795 to 1918), was partitioned at that time and its own literary past was blended with cultural influences from Habsburg Austria, the Kingdom of Prussia, and the Russian Empire. As a consequence, a distinctly new Polish literature emerged, one that captured the essence of cosmopolitanism.[1] Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska refers to the literature produced between 1890-1918 as 'Młoda Polska' [Young Poland] and chooses this term because of its neutrality that nevertheless captures the divergent tendencies within it, spanning Symbolism and Expressionism. In contrast to other scholars, Podraza-Kwiatkowska dismisses the terms 'Decadence' and 'Modernism' because they encompass broader phenomena than literature.[2]

These dynamics of blending were in tension with the lived realities of all Poles. Travelling from one partition to another was impossible without a passport and visa and the situation was even worse for women who needed their husbands' permission to travel. There was no exception to this rule, and it concerned even already well-known political figures such as the writer and women's rights activist Maria Konopnicka (pen name Jan Sawa). What united those travellers and travelling artists was the fact that they read the same literature: the Latin and Greek classics, French poetry, and German philosophy.[3] Thus, 'cosmopolitanism' meant speaking the same literary and cultural language and sharing the same texts and culture. Women writers all over Europe made particularly powerful contributions to the body of Decadent cultural production during that time, as translators, conversationalists, artists, and poets.[4]

In Czesław Miłosz's seminal *The History of Polish Literature* most individual chapters cover one century each, yet an entire chapter is devoted to 'Young Poland', which shows both its important position in the history of Polish literature and perhaps even European literature more broadly. What this also points to is its in-between status with regard to the literatures of Positivism and Realism, with which it partly overlapped historically, and the impossibility of fitting it into either category.

> Europe […] enjoyed both peace and prosperity, but underneath the buoyant expansion of capitalism, destructive forces were at work, and the more *sensitive minds* felt this. The *enigma* we have to cope with is the genesis of *a new approach to reality and art*, emerging simultaneously in various European countries despite their respective differences in economic and social development. Whether we speak of a *mutual 'contamination'* or of *a 'natural growth'* out of local conditions or simply refer to *an unidentifiable Zeitgeist*, the fact is that similar tendencies in France, Germany, Poland, and Russia sprang up more or less at the same time.[5]

In the following article, I will contextualize the 'agenda' of Young Poland and then turn to a neglected representative of the period, the poet and translator Kazimiera Zawistowska,[6] in order to initiate her into the company of the other overlooked European Decadent women writers treated in this issue of *Volupté*. I will briefly consider her Parnassian poems depicting the seasons before focusing on her sonnet 'Herodiada' (1903) of which I have provided the first translation into English. When situated in 'conversation' with Gustave Flaubert's *Hérodias* (1877), Zawistowska's text emerges as one in which the demonic Herodias is the speaking agency; it thus forms a contribution to '*her*story' and that of Decadent female writers in particular. It is also an example of a bi-textual text in Elaine Showalter's sense, reflecting 'a double-voiced discourse influenced by both the dominant masculine literary tradition and the muted feminine one.'[7] Through it, Zawistowska, who was a voracious reader and translator of French literature, establishes herself in cross-cultural dialogue with other Decadent female sonneteers, most strikingly Renée Vivien, whose 'Sonnet féminin' will also provide a foil to Zawistowska. In her poetry which is infused with and inspired by an enigmatic longing, Zawistowska not only writes on (about) the female body but lets that body write.

'Young Poland': The Context of Kazimiera Zawistowska's Writing

Until 1899, the writers and artists of the late nineteenth century were referred to as both Modernists and Decadents. They were rebels against the Establishment; they had no programme or agenda and were especially critical of Positivism, which in the view of the 'Young' had compromised itself with timid utilitarianism and faith in harmonious progress belied by the violence of social conflicts. The writers were fuelled by a deep sense of crisis, as Miłosz emphasizes, and were influenced by readings of Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer whose translations arrived in Poland at that time (the first book on Nietzsche's philosophy was written by Maria C. Przewóska, in 1894).[8] They were torn between a feeling of doom and the Romantic dream of national independence and revolution, reignited by the Russo-Japanese War, which shook the Russian Empire in 1905 and weakened the tsardom.

In the late nineteenth century, Kraków was a minor Galician town within the boundaries of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. While not the capital of Galicia – this was Lwów – Kraków, the royal capital of Poland until the sixteenth century, 'reinvented itself as the intellectual center of Polish Galician life and the ideological crucible of Polish Galician identity'.[9] It was a city that cherished its traditions and its Polishness and a place where two of the most important opinion-forming magazines, the daily *Czas* and the Jesuit magazine *Przegląd Powszechny*, were published. The Jagiellonian University was one of two Polish universities, apart from Lwów, where Polish was the language of instruction. By 1914, one third of all students were female.[10] The art scene in Kraków responded probably more swiftly than in other cities to the novelties imported by Polish artists returning from European metropolises such as Vienna, Munich, Paris, or Berlin. The city at the time was a sort of melting pot of anachronism, ornamentality, and the avant-garde.[11]

It was Artur Górski, critic and co-editor of the Kraków-based journal *Życie*, who coined the term 'Young Poland' as analogous with Young Germany and Young Scandinavia, and in a series of polemical essays underlined the dark nature of this literature. While its representatives were indebted to the Romantics, God was accused and a peculiar Satanism was sometimes

celebrated. The writers' work was characterized by a desperate hedonism and poems were dedicated to Lady Death (the word for 'death' in Polish, *śmierć,* is grammatically feminine). Against this background, and because of the interest in orientalism and Buddhist philosophy among Young Poland writers, there was a preoccupation with the desire to ease the constant fear of the suffering soul tormented by the limitations of the mind. The 'future' was viewed an illusion.[12] The soul was regarded as a cipher, a vault containing unnameable secrets, an encounter with which would be the most violent and dramatic experience imaginable.[13] As Górski put it:

> Over all souls a terrible darkness is spreading in which even doubt is extinguished; nothing is certain but horror and pain; all the walls between the real and the incomprehensible are broken. There is nothing but a dust of souls tossed by fate and crashing against each other over the abysses. […] As disillusionment with the life of society and with its typical product, a modern philistine, grew, ties between the individual and that society loosened; disgust and protest against the banality and soulless existence of the organized mass increased. […] More *sensitive and profound minds*, after having lost their respect for the philistine and their sympathy with social movements, began to withdraw from life and look for its other, more durable values.[14]

One such sensitive mind was Kazimiera Zawistowska. In her introduction to the writer's collection of poems, the editor Agnieszka Baranowska, probably unwittingly, does what is often done to female writers. She writes: 'She died in Kraków at the end of February in 1902. She was thirty-two years old, she was beautiful.'[15] Only then, in fourth place, follows the information that she was a poet. Yet Baranowska's following observation is apt – Zawistowska has been largely forgotten[16] and it seems that both during and after her lifetime great care was taken to depict her life as a quiet one, certainly not one involving any kind of turmoil. Indeed, she was born in 1870 into a well-off family, studied in Switzerland, and travelled in Italy. One can place her in a similar context to that in which many English Victorian women were protectively brought up, fully coming into being at a somewhat late stage in their lives.

Some sources say that Zawistowska's marriage to her husband Stanisław was motivated by the necessity of solving her formerly wealthy parents' financial problems and that this caused her to sink into the depths of dullness, a conventional fate for many upper-middle class women at the time. French journals and the literature of Charles Baudelaire, Albert Samain, and Paul

Verlaine served as a refuge.[17] Embodying the Young Poland obsession with the lost soul, she writes in a letter to her friend Idalia Badowska:

> I search and search − always in vain. With my head I plunge into the waves of life but … perhaps I'm too good a swimmer, reason always takes me back to the shore and again entirely alone, and again all I have in front of me is the vast 'view' of life.[18]

In Kraków she became part of the Young Poland circle and from around 1897 she began publishing her first poems in the journals *Życie*, the exclusive *Krytyka*, and others.[19] Shortly before her death she asked Zenon Przesmycki (pseudonym 'Miriam') in a letter whether he thought the time was ripe for her to publish the poems she had written up to that point in a collection.[20] Prior to that, she had only shown them privately to friends, among them Stanisław Wyrzykowski, the now-forgotten translator of Edgar Allan Poe and Nietzsche.[21] It is not entirely clear if she actually committed suicide or fell ill. According to a neighbour, she was visiting her brother in Kraków, discovered his revolver, and may have accidently fired a bullet which directly hit her heart.[22] Both Baranowska's and Grażyna Różańska's references to Zawistowska's untimely death are written in a melodramatic vein, as if to echo the pathos often found in Young Poland literature.[23] Zawistowska herself referred to her work as being quite simple, like a naked soul adorned with flowers and jewels.[24]

Many critics praised her perfection of form, although an exception can be found in Maria Dąbrowska's account of Zawistowska's poetry in *Bluszcz* in 1923:

> there is a mysterious melancholia of a generation which was robbed of all weapons, we encounter the despair of a fiery and passionate woman, a spontaneous nature, straightforward and unconditional – who was forced to live only in half, or in a quarter, who couldn't find her way in the sluggishness of the Galician semi-freedom, in the tragedy of the cramminess emanating from other parts of Poland.[25]

I agree with Dąbrowska that there is an almost grotesque contrast between Zawistowska's repeated use of the sonnet form and the content she presents.[26] It should also be noted that her use of the form was not unusual in the context of the 'sonnet mania' among Young Poland writers.

An essentialist notion of 'femininity' in connection with Zawistowska's poetry is problematic: the journal *Krytyka* referred to her work as 'one of the deepest and most sincere expressions of femininity'.[27] Indeed, and this will also become obvious in my reading of 'Herodiada', one can observe forthright praise of female sexuality and eroticism that sometimes borders on the pornographic, mixed with a longing for death and a vague existentialism kept in check by a cool aestheticism. A defining feature of Zawistowska's work is thus the constant struggle between desire to break free from the sonnet scheme and at the same time to use it as a vehicle for powerful emotions.[28] Occasionally, her writing is pierced with outbursts of despair and agony and one can see how she was influenced by the reception of Schopenhauer and Eduard von Hartmann among Polish writers at the time.

Zawistowska's choice of the sonnet form situates her in conversation with another Decadent woman author, the Anglo-French poet Renée Vivien. As Tama Lea Engelking has argued, Vivien's use of the sonnet (to which I return below) was certainly striking, 'not only because of the sonnet's exalted position in a male-dominated French literary tradition where it is perhaps the most respected and enduring of poetic forms, but also because of its inherent difficulty'.[29] In France, the sonnet became popular again for a brief period at the turn of the century, a renaissance associated with Sainte-Beuve;[30] several studies on the form were published at the same time.[31] This connection to the French literary context is helpful because for Zawistowska, it was the primary point of reference and reading French authors helped her overcome the feeling of boredom experienced in her home village of Supranówka (in present-day Ukraine).[32]

Zawistowska's Parnassian Poetry

Among Zawistowska's many sonnets, there are four depicting the seasons that I have grouped together – 'Lato' ['Summer'], 'Jesienią' ['In Autumn'], 'Spadłe Liście' ['Fallen Leaves'], and 'Śnieg' ['Snow'].[33] Notably, there is no sonnet about spring, adding a bleak dimension to such an

imagining of the seasonal cycle. 'In Autumn' presents itself as the most conventional and sentimental poem: the speaker is closed in by a longing for different times. Yet from the second poem onwards, in which the sky is described as a blue rag (blue from being beaten; the Polish word here, 'siny', is not a homonym for the colour blue as in English), the tone changes. In the third and fourth sonnets especially, one detects a distinctly Parnassian skill that conveys detachment and dark mysticism. While all the poems express a sense of longing and loss, the well-known reassuring sonnet form clashes with the increasingly bleak, Schopenhauerian vision: the autumn sonnet especially seems almost obsessively concerned with decay and rot and repeatedly invokes an apocalyptic vision of a bleeding world:

Spadłe Liście[34]

Na srebrne stawu zwierciadło lecą
I świecą złotem, i miedzią świecą,
I lecą trwożne jak błędne duchy,
Jak serc porwanych krwawe okruchy.

Wiatrem rzucone serc krwawych strzępy
Między pobrzeżne szuwarów kępy,
Jakby łzy lecą, jakby krew kwiatów,
Jak pocałunki słane z zaświatów.

Więc lecą... lecą – a gdy na fali
Pierścień się mglistych świateł rozpali,
To się w tej smętnej płonią jasności.

Niby korowód cmentarnych gości,
I w mętne stawu zwierciadło lecą,
I świecą złotem**,** i jak krew świecą...

Fallen Leaves

Onto the silvery mirror of the pond they are falling
And they shimmer like gold, and like bronze they shimmer,
And they fall like erring ghosts
Like the bloody crumbs of abducted hearts.

The rags of the bleeding hearts tossed by the wind
Amidst clumps of nettle rushes,
As if tears were flowing, as if it was the flowers' blood
Like kisses sent from the beyond.

So they are falling…falling – and when on the wave
A ring of foggy lights starts to burn,
They drown in this dull brightness.

Like a parade of graveyard visitors,
And into the dim mirror of the pond they are falling
And they shimmer like gold, and like blood they shimmer...

The original sonnet follows the rather atypical rhyme scheme of aabb ccdd eef faa, with the words 'lecą' [falling] and 'świecą' [shimmer] both starting and ending the poem. Yet the lines between the beginning and end take up the role of a macabre alchemist, as the shimmering object is turned from bronze into fresh blood, a twisting effect that is reinforced by the chiasm employed in lines 2 and 14. Autumn, as the season anticipating winter, death, and infertility, is conflated with a very raw image of life and birth and thus femininity: instead of being dry, the leaves are given bloody attire. This poem articulates one of the greatest fears surrounding

women as the Other – the ability to create, to give birth even in the face of death. This fear of otherness, however, is based on a concept of woman's 'nature' that is created by men and from which they profit, as Simone de Beauvoir has shown.[35] One could argue, at least at first glance, that Zawistowska's poem precisely accepts this 'feminine essence' ascribed to all women and by taking it up only perpetuates the self/other, man/woman binary oppositions so familiar to Western culture. I would suggest, however, that there is more to it. Most importantly, the primary site of experience is shifted from an abstract notion of nature to the very specific location of the body. Zawistowska gives the female body an even greater agency than the mind can allow, a notion that will become clearer when analyzing her sonnet 'Herodiada'.

Gustave Flaubert's ***Hérodias***

The image of blood functions as a gateway into the biblical gloom of the story of Herodias. In brief, Herodias, the wife of the tetrarch Herod Antipas, commands the beheading of John the Baptist after her daughter Salome has enchanted the king to such a degree that he wants to grant her every wish. Gustave Flaubert's tale *Hérodias* (1877) is told from the perspective of the King Herod, who is torn between the threats of the Arabs, the Roman claims to power, the prejudices of the Jews and the attempt to regain the love of his wife. As C. H. Wake points out,

> Hérodias gives her name to the story, not because she is its 'heroine', since Antipas is in fact the central character, but because she incarnates the dream, the illusion of which Antipas, like all Flaubert's heroes, is victim. Although his dream has grown sterile, he finds he cannot discard it, partly because he is too weak-willed to do so, and partly because, secretly […] he prefers not to.[36]

From the beginning, a sense of disappointment and despair pervades the story – yet it is not only the King's but also Herodias' disillusionment and fear of abandonment by her husband:

> Elle songeait aussi que le Tétrarque, cédant à l'opinion, s'aviserait peut-être de la répudier. Alors tout serait perdu! Depuis son enfance, elle nourrissait le rêve d'un grand empire. C'était pour y atteindre que, délaissant son premier époux, elle s'était jointe à celui-là, qui l'avait dupée, pensait-elle. […] *Hérodias sentit bouillonner dans ses veines le sang des prêtres et des rois ses aïeux.*

> [She was wondering too whether the Tetrarch, yielding to public opinion, might not decide to put her away. Then all would be lost! Since she was a child she had nourished dreams of a great empire. It was in her furtherance of that ambition that she had left her first husband and joined this one, who had made a fool of her, as she now thought. […] *Herodias felt the ancestral blood of priests and kings boil in her veins*.][37]

Even at the moment of great despair and fear, the image of 'boiling blood' hints at the topos of the powerful woman that originates in attempts within medieval and Renaissance literature to expose conflicting ideas about dominant gender roles and thus, according to Susan L. Smith, is not merely a manifestation of medieval antifeminism. It was typically

> the representational practice of bringing together at least two, but usually more, well-known figures from the Bible, ancient history, or romance to exemplify a cluster of interrelated themes that include the wiles of women, the power of love, and the trials of marriage.[38]

In the context of the Herodias story, not only the title but also the invocation of boiling blood immediately create intrigue and fascination. Fascination, as Sibylle Baumbach points out, is seductive:

> It captures and occupies the senses and directs the attention of readers or viewers to people or objects, which absorb their full responsiveness in a liminal state of desire and dread. […] fascination, at least until the twentieth century, is also highly gendered. As a result, narratives of fascination often revolve around an archetype of dangerous female seduction […] the *femme fatale*. Representations of the *femme fatale* are often used as pervasive and powerful images to create narratives of seduction, that is, narratives which are deeply invested in preserving the elicited yet essentially unfulfilled desire of beholding, conquering or overpowering the fatal woman, which is played out in favour of the (poetic) artifact.[39]

The reader of Flaubert's story is fascinated with someone who initially exists only 'behind the scenes'. One has to wait until Zawistowska's poem for a more explicit vision of Salome because in line with the more pervasive fascination with Salome as the *femme fatale* representing, according to Baumbach, 'an amalgamation of allurement, sensuality and violence in a dangerous mixture of evil and beauty, responding to one of the greatest anxieties in nineteenth-century society and challenging established value systems',[40] Flaubert's tale leads to her dance as the climax in which she mesmerizes the King:

> Mais il arriva du fond de la salle un bourdonnement de surprise et d'admiration. Une jeune fille venait d'entrer. Sous un voile bleuâtre lui cachant la poitrine et la tête, on

> distinguait les arcs de ses yeux, les calcédoines de ses oreilles, la blancheur de sa peau. […] *C'était Hérodias, comme autrefois dans sa jeunesse***.** Puis, elle se mit à danser. Ses pieds passaient l'un devant l'autre, au rythme de la flûte et d'une paire de crotales. Ses bras arrondis appelaient quelqu'un, qui s'enfuyait toujours. Elle le poursuivait, plus légère qu'un papillon, comme une Psyché curieuse, comme une âme vagabonde, et semblait prête à s'envoler.
>
> [But coming from the far end of the hall could be heard a buzz of surprise and admiration. A young girl had just come in. Under a bluish veil which concealed her head and chest, one could make out the arches of her eyes, the chalcedony stones in her ears, the whiteness of her skin. […] *It was Herodias, as she used to look in her youth.* Then she began to dance. Her feet slipped back and forth, to the rhythm of the flute and a pair of castanets. Her arms curved round in invitation to someone who always eluded her. She pursued him, lighter than a butterfly, like some curious Psyche, like a wandering spirit, and seemed on the point of flying away.][41]

Even though this is the moment when Salome enters the scene, we are not given her name here. It was Herodias, the text says, confusing us for a moment as to who is actually being presented. In the ensuing sensual description of her body (her feet, her arms, and the lightness with which she dances) one seems to be looking at Herodias, embodied by the young form of her daughter and by her own. This oscillating between mother-daughter and past-present keeps the reader in a thrall that overlaps with the King's mesmerized state after the dance is over. He exclaims:

> *Viens! viens!'* […] Mais le Tétrarque criait plus fort: *'Viens! viens*! Tu auras Capharnaüm! la plaine de Tibérias! mes citadelles! la moitié de mon royaume!' […] *Un claquement de doigts se fit dans la tribune*. Elle y monta, reparut; et, *en zézayant un peu*, prononça ces mots, d'un air enfantin: — 'Je veux que tu me donnes dans un plat ... la tête ...' Elle avait oublié le nom, mais reprit en souriant: 'La tête de Iaokanann!'
>
> ['*Come! Come!*' […] But the Tetrarch cried louder still: '*Come! Come!* You can have Capernaum! The plain of Tiberias! My citadels! Half my kingdom!' […] *Someone in the gallery snapped their fingers*. She went up, reappeared; and *lisping slightly* pronounced these words, with a childlike expression: 'I want you to give me on a dish ... the head ...' She had forgotten the name, but then went on with a smile: 'Iaokanann's head!'][42]

Zawistowska's 'Herodiada' as a Key to the Story

What remains elusive and shadowy – a clicking of fingers, a certain incantation by the woman simultaneously on stage and backstage which turns her daughter into a proxy and leaves her lisping and forgetting the name of the man who will be beheaded a moment later according to 'her' wish – is made explicit in Zawistowska's poem. One should note that she presented an

entire gallery of *femmes fatales* including Eve, Cleopatra, Madame Pompadour, and Mary Magdalene in her poetic cycle *Dusze* [*Souls*].[43] There was a general fascination with hedonistic women in the context of Young Poland literature and women were portrayed in such a way as to free them of their unnatural asexuality as erotic and sensual agents.[44] Zawistowska's poem is noteworthy because it adopts one of the most opaque (hitherto silent) *femmes fatales* in Western culture and lets her speak for fourteen lines[45] – indeed, she *is* only because of the consequences of her command:

Herodiada[46]	**Herodias**
Czy wiesz, co rozkosz? Czy Cię nie poruszy Szept bladych kwiatów w takie noce parne? Pójdź!… ja Ci włosy me rozplotę czarne, Wężem pożądań wejdę do Twej duszy!	Do you know what pleasure is? Or will you be unmoved By the whisper of pale flowers in those sultry nights? Go!… For you I will untangle my dark hair, I'll be the snake of desire that enters your soul!
Płomiennym szeptem odemknę Twe uszy, Podam Ci usta drżące i ofiarne I ust tych ogniem ciało Twe ogarnę, Aż pieszczot moich fala Cię ogłuszy!…	My fiery whisper will unclasp your ears I will offer you my trembling and willing lips And with the fire of these lips I will wrap your body Until you're numbed by the wave of my caresses!…
Pójdź!… ja rozkoszą ścmię Tobie Jehowę… Zapomnisz, twarzą padłszy na me łono, Pijąc źrenice me błyskawicowe…	Go!… my sweetness will make you forget Jehovah… You'll forget, when you cradle your face in my bosom, Drinking my flashing pupils…
Lecz pójdź!… bo czasem w oczach mi czerwono I z piekielnymi zmagam się widmami, I wiem, że dłonie krew mi Twoja splami.	But go!… because sometimes my vision is red And I wrestle with devilish phantoms, And I know my hands will be soiled with your blood.

As Engelking has noted with regard to Renée Vivien, '[p]erfecting the sonnet form may have been one step more toward earning the "gloire" she sought as a serious poet, who relied on her skills as a writer to compensate for the perceived weakness of her sex'.[47] Here, Zawistowska takes up the slightly altered form of the Italian sonnet rhyme scheme, abba abba cdc dee. Her sonnet is unsettling in several regards. First of all, it is daringly explicit, almost pornographic. The first three stanzas depict a seduction and the verbalization of a sexual act ('łono' means both bosom in a figurative sense and pubic hair) and the metaphor of the snake transforms female agency into the typical act of male penetration. More importantly, it contaminates the 'soul' – one of the central concepts of Young Poland literature – robbing it of its transcendental quality

and tearing down the barrier upholding a soul/body duality. Without mentioning the context or the mythical inspiration for the poem, Różańska reads it as the story of two lovers in which the soul is the connective tissue between the two. 'The snake of desire' is the symbol of sinful, passionate love, to which the soul opens its gates.[48]

But the text gives us more than this, and raises several questions: The female agency is powerful, threatening, and at the same time the playfully 'willing' victim. And who exactly is the speaker? This remains rather elusive. The line 'my sweetness will make you forget Jehovah' would suggest an attempted seduction of John the Baptist, yet this does not correspond with the biblical story. We know that Salome is the famous seductress, yet the poem is titled 'Herodiada'. Linking this to my previous observation that Salome becomes a kind of proxy for her mother, I argue that the speaking agency here is a hybrid of mother and daughter. Herodias is the puppeteer directing Salome and is at the same time pulled back by a current in the opposite direction – it seems that the speaker warns herself and her 'victim' (who could be both John the Baptist and King Herod) against herself, commanding him three times to go away. After the third warning (and the somewhat belated volta in the middle of the final sestet) an explanation for the warnings follows: the puppeteer herself is pulled by demons.

The image of blood on Herodias' hands connects her to another complex literary canonical female character typically also reduced to a mere *femme fatale* figure: Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth. After conspiring to kill the reigning monarch Duncan with her husband, she loses her mind, despairs of the 'damned spot' and asks whether her hands will 'never be clean' again.[49] In Zawistowska's poem, the moment of empowerment lasts for three stanzas only to be crushed in the final one. The anticipation of death (John the Baptist's, but also King Herod's moral corruption) is imminent; as Mikhail Bakhtin articulates,

> death, as is always the case with the Romantics and the Symbolists, ceases to be an aspect of life itself and becomes again a phenomenon on the border between my life here-and-now and a potential other kind of life. The whole problematic is concentrated within the limits of the *individual* and *sealed-off* progression of a single life.[50]

Death is a liminal phenomenon. Zawistowska, I would argue, presents the female body in a similar vein, as being located neither here nor there, both dead and alive, both the mother and the daughter. It is both everything and nothing and it desires everything and nothing. There is an echo of Charles Baudelaire's 'Femmes damnées' that Zawistowska translated as 'Potępione' in the journal *Chimera* in 1902: the female soul is described as a text that has a demonic quality. This is not criticized by the lyrical subject, however, but praised for what it entails: woman, too, is characterized by both an insatiable thirst, a despairing longing, and the power to love,[51] there is a constitutive and productive friction between her 'duchowość' (literally inwardness, but more aptly translated as 'soulness') and 'cielesność' (corporeality, or 'bodyness').[52] As Luce Irigaray has demonstrated in her rewriting of Freud's and Lacan's paradigm, woman's sexuality is not a lack but 'always at least double, [it] goes even further: it is *plural* [...] [*W*]*oman has sex organs more or less everywhere*. She finds pleasure almost anywhere.'[53] She continues:

> Thus what they desire is precisely nothing, and at the same time everything. Always something more and something else besides that *one* – sexual organ, for example – that you give them, attribute to them. Their desire is often interpreted, and feared, as a sort of insatiable hunger, a voracity that will swallow you whole. Whereas it really involves a different economy more than anything else, one that upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of a desire, diffuses the polarization toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse . . .[54]

What is described here is the utter irony of how the female body has been subjugated to a rigid categorization, pressed into a corset of patriarchal, linear (hi)story-telling even though it is irrevocably connected to the striving towards an all-encompassing desire, towards *becoming*. While the potentially essentialist portrayal of sexual difference in Irigaray's work and its use of the female sexual organ as a starting point from which to define female desire can be regarded as a troubling one, it is more helpful to approach her theory without this concern over essentialism.[55] Her approach is precisely one in which the (female) body cannot be inscribed upon because the language available is now invalid, unfeasible for this purpose. What Irigaray suggests is that female sexuality 'can be translated into a language which might seem to operate in a nonlinear, *antilogical* way'.[56] The female imaginary is excluded from the dominant male imaginary, relegated

to the margins and destined not to become but to be.[57] Seemingly incomplete, the female body must struggle for a conceptual space to articulate her striving, her desire.[58]

What can be observed in 'Herodiada' is precisely an articulation of this desire and of the pleasure and guilt it entails. The first three stanzas present both the 'everything' woman is able to desire and enjoy and the fact that this yearning has been interpreted as audacious. Yet the speaker's perspective is omniscient, aware of both the position of the interpreter and the subjugation of the interpreted. The 'devilish phantoms' in the final stanza could be both the (masculine) 'subjects' ascribing 'woman' a fixed set of attributes, and – with regard to the biblical story – those phantoms haunting the version of Herodias that is passed on throughout history. In both cases, femininity speaks up; not as a linear entity, but as fragmented and struggling, defying logic and seemingly puzzling (to) itself – we now understand the 'en zézayant un peu' [lisping slightly] in Flaubert's text.

Female Sonneteers: To Conclude, Renée Vivien Strums her Lyre

As I initially stated, Zawistowska took inspiration from the French literature. Vivien started publishing her poetry in 1901, so there would have been one year of overlap before Zawistowska's death; but Vivien only published a few short pieces in reviews and paid to have her first books published in small print runs.[59] Thus, while it cannot be determined exactly whether Zawistowska was familiar with Vivien's work, it is illuminating to use her aforementioned 'Sonnet féminin' to illustrate how these two Decadent poets were both articulating a vision of female embodiment through and as language: in Zawistowska's case by reworking a biblical myth and in Vivien's by playing with that foundation of all discourse that produces binary oppositions and grammar. Just like Zawistowska, who lets the silenced *femme fatale* Herodias speak for fourteen lines, Vivien hands the lyre over to the 'sonnet' itself (or rather herself).

Sonnet féminin[60]

Ta voix a la langueur des lyres lesbiennes,
L'anxiété des chants et des odes sapphiques,
Et tu sais le secret d'accablantes musiques
Où pleure le soupir d'unions anciennes.

Les Aèdes fervents et les Musiciennes
T'enseignèrent l'ampleur des strophes érotiques
Et la gravité des lapidaires distiques.
Jadis, tu contemplas les nudités païennes.

Tu sembles écouter l'écho des harmonies
Mortes; bleus de ce bleu des clartés infinies,
Tes yeux ont le reflet du ciel de Mytilène.

Les fleurs ont parfumé tes étranges mains creuses;
De ton corps monte, ainsi qu'une légère haleine,
La blanche volupté des vierges amoureuses.

Sonnet/woman

Your voice holds the laziness of lesbian lyres,
The anxiety of Sapphic songs and odes,
And you know the secret of oppressive music
Where the sighs of ancient unions despair.

The fervent minstrels and the musicians
Will teach you the opulence of erotic verses
And the gravity of succinct couplets.
Before that, you only saw pagan nudities.

You seem to listen to the echo of harmonies,
Dead; the blue from the blue of infinite light,
Your eyes reflecting the sky over Mytilène.

The flowers have perfumed your strange creased hands;
What arises from your body, like a light breath,
Is the white pleasure of amorous virgins.

French grammatical gender is a central metalinguistic element in this poem that cannot be translated into English. As Engelking shows in her beautiful reading of the poem, it is 'woman-centred' from the beginning in several regards: it is loaded 'with a disproportionate number of grammatically feminine words'[61] (each line ends with a feminine noun, for instance); the opening line speaks of 'lyres lesbiennes', with 'lyres' being a homophone of 'lire' (to read) and thus an appeal to its/her readers; and 'ta voix' could be either 'the voice of the poet, the person reading the poem, or the voice of the sonnet personified'.[62] In the course of the sonnet, this voice is built up towards a fully formed sound; it is as if speaking in the feminine would make it/her come to terms with her (the voice's) femininity in an empowered way. After embedding it/her in and endowing it/her with its/her cultural heritage in the first and second stanzas, from the third stanza onwards she is given the ability to feel: her senses allow her to hear ('écouter'), see, smell, and touch – the sense of touch could refer both to the poet having hands and the female body coming to terms with its sensuality and sexuality.[63]

The struggle that Vivien imagines here between the masculine and the feminine, later the battlefield of feminists such as Hélène Cixous,[64] Irigaray, or Monique Wittig, is swiftly carried out on the page, with no actual blood spilled. Wittig's remark on how gender is 'the linguistic index

of political opposition between the sexes and of the domination of women',[65] ties in well with Vivien's sonnet which seeks to establish a rearrangement of the sexual hierarchy of women's disadvantage through a rearrangement of language.[66]

In 'Herodiada', Zawistowska, too, rearranges: not only the male/female active/passive binary (Who is the victim? Who is the perpetrator?), but also the role that has been given to the biblical figure of Salome's mother. The Flaubertian intertext, the most well-known literary adaptation of this story,[67] is subtly taken up but she skillfully weaves her story into the final scene in Flaubert's tale: each 'Viens!' [Come!] uttered by Herod to Salome in Flaubert's text is countered with a 'Pójdź' [Go!] uttered by Herodias/Salome to the King. The fact that Herodias and Salome are given a voice means that they can articulate refusal or at least elaborate the history that is constructed around them: they can refuse to become merely ciphers for bestial femininity. In that sense, Zawistowska's poem does not turn Herodias into either a dangerous enigma or a silenced shadow, nor does she lose her mind – in the final line we see that she *knows* what awaits her and what is most important, it is still *she* who is speaking.

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[1] The same holds true for the art produced at that time. See Irena Kossowska and Łukasz Kossowski, 'Manifesty Symbolizmu – mlodopolski Krakow', in *Malarstwo Polskie – Symbolizm i Mloda Polska* (Warszawa: Widawnictwo Arkady, 2010), pp. 24-47.
[2] Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska, *Symbolizm i Symbolika w Poezji Młodej Polski. Teoria i Praktyka* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1975), pp. 8-9.
[3] Czesław Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, 2nd edn. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 322.
[4] See, for instance, Elaine Showalter, ed., *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1993), and Adrianna Paliyenko, *Genius Envy, Women Shaping French Poetic History, 1801-1900* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016).
[5] Miłosz, *Polish Literature*, p. 322. My emphasis.
[6] The only two studies on Zawistowska's work are an edited collection of a selection of her poetry by Agnieszka Baranowska – *Kazimiera Zawistowska. Wybór Poezji* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1981). Baranowska relies heavily, yet in a self-reflexive and critical manner, on excerpts from Stanisław Wyrzykowski's accounts and diaries (he was supposedly Zawistowska's lover) and Grażyna Rózańska's *Wężem Pożądań Wejdę do Twej Duszy… O Kazimierze Zawistowskiej* (Krawów: Dante, 2017). Mateusz Skucha has recently included her among the most important female poets of Young Poland literature and provides thorough readings of her work in *Niesytość Pragnienia. W kręgu młodopolskiej liryki kobiet* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2016).
[7] Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own. British Women Writers, from Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing*, revised and expanded edition (London: Virago, 2014), p. xv.
[8] Miłosz, *Polish Literature*, p. 325.
[9] Larry Wolff, 'After the Revolution: The Rise of *Czas* and the Advent of Franz Joseph', in The *Idea of Galicia. History and Fantasy in Habsburg Political Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 188-230 (p. 194).

[10] See Krystyna Kulig-Janarek, 'Krakow in the Period of Young Poland', in *Zawsze Młoda! Polska Sztuka około 1900 – Forever Young! Poland and Its Art around 1900*, Exhibition at the National Museum in Kraków, September 2012 – September 2013 (Kraków: Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie, 2012), pp. 24-39 (pp. 26, 27).
[11] Marta Wyka, 'Kraków literacki na przełomie wieków', in *Kraków Przed Stu Lat. Materiały Sesji Naukowej Odbytej 1 Marca 1997* (1998), 50-51.
[12] Grażyna Rózanska, '"Moja Dusza Jest Łąką Chaotycznych Kwieci". Pejzaż Wewnętrzny "Ja" Lirycznego.', in *Antropologiczno-Językowe Wizerunki Duszy w Perspektywie Międzykulturowej*, ed. by Tom Drugi, Świat Oczyma Duszy Magdalena Kapełuś, Ewa Masłowska, Dorota Pazio-Wlazłowska (Warszawa: Instytut Slawistyki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2016), pp. 115-128 (p. 116).
[13] Marian Stala, *Pejzaż Człowieka* (Kraków: Znak, 1994), p. 101.
[14] Artur Górski, in Miłosz, *Polish Literature*, p. 327. My emphasis.
[15] Baranowska, *Kazimiera Zawistowska,* p. 5. My translation.
[16] Puzzlingly enough, in her *Alienated Women. A Study on Polish Women's Fiction 1845-1918* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001)*,* Grażyna Borkowska calls Zawistowska 'one of the best female poets of Young Poland' (p. 296), but only writes a couple of sentences about her love affair with the poet and writer Stanisław Wyrzykowski and her suicide. Apart from that, she only mentions her twice in passing (admittedly, the focus of Borkowska's study is on women's fiction but such a treatment nevertheless seems ironic). At least in Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska's important study on *Symbolizm i Symbolika w Poezji Młodej Polski* (1975) there are several references to Zawistowska's writings.
[17] Her first publication was a translation of a poem by Ferdinand Pradel which was published in *Życie* in 1897. Other translations and poems were published in *Głos Narodu, Nowe Słowo, Ruch Katolicki, Ilustracja Polska, Krytyka, Chimera,* and *Błuszcz.* See Grażyna Różańska, *Wężem Pożądań Wejdę do Twej Duszy… O Kazimierze Zawistowskiej* (Kraków: Dante, 2017), p. 33.
[18] Zawistowska to Idalia Badowska, in Baranowska, *Kazimiera Zawistowska*, pp. 6-7. My translation.
[19] Ibid., p. 7.
[20] Baranowska, *Kazimiera Zawistowska,* p. 12. My translation.
The tone of the letter is extremely humble – she writes that her brother has encouraged her to ask this question and she is doubtful whether it would be advisable to go forward with the project of such a 'little volume' at all (she uses the diminutive 'tomik' instead of 'tom', underlining the insignificance of her poetry from her point of view). She is unsure whether it would not be best for her to stick to translating texts rather than produce something that may be original but 'very weak' (again, she uses a diminutive here, the word 'słabiutkie' instead of 'słabe', weak).
[21] Ibid., p. 11.
[22] Rózanska, 'Moja Dusza', p. 126.
[23] The same holds true for Podraza-Kwiatkowska's reference to it, albeit she groups her together with other (male) Young Poland writers who committed suicide and suggests they suffered from depression. See *Symbolizm i Symbolika w Poezji Młodej Polski*, p. 141.
[24] Krystyna Niklewiczówna, 'Zawistowska A Ówczesna Moda Literacka', in *Pamietnik Literacki: Czasopismo Kwartalne Poświęcone Historii i Krytyce Literatury Polskiej*, 37 (1947), 218-26 (p. 218).
[25] Baranowska, *Kazimiera Zawistowska*, p. 23. My translation.
[26] Indeed, she tried to break out of the rigid scheme of the sonnet but kept returning to it. This struggle contributes to their palpable energy, which makes it impossible to speak about them 'in a calm and cold manner. In them we find the power of a feeling forever captured, such a dose of honesty, such an immediate freshness of poetic expression, that they belong to the most authentic gems of Polish sonnets.' Władysław Folkierski, *Sonet Polski. Wybór Tekstów. Wstępem i Objaśnieniami Zaopatrzył W. Folkierski* (Kraków 1925) in Baranowska, p. 13. My translation.
[27] Quoted in Baranowska, *Kazimiera Zawiszowska*, p. 19.
[28] See Folkierski, *Sonet Polski,* p. xv.
[29] Tama Lea Engelking, 'Genre and the Mark of Gender: Renée Vivien's "Sonnet féminin"', *Modern Language Studies*, 23.4 (1993), 79-92 (p. 79).
[30] See Paliyenko, *Genius Envy,* pp. 100-01. The studies were H. Vaganay, *Le Sonnet en Italie et en France au XVIe Siècle* (Lyon, 1902-03); Max Jasinski, *Histoire du sonnet en France* (Douai, 1903); J. Viancy, 'Les Origines du sonnet regulier', *Revue de la renaissance* (Aux bureaux de la Revue, 1903), 74-93.
[31] See Paliyenko, *Genius Envy,* pp. 100-01. The studies were H. Vaganay, *Le Sonnet en Italie et en France au XVIe Siècle* (Lyon, 1902-03); Max Jasinski, *Histoire du sonnet en France* (Douai, 1903); J. Viancy, 'Les Origines du sonnet regulier', *Revue de la renaissance* (Aux bureaux de la Revue, 1903), 74-93.
[32] For an overview of the sonnet in Poland at that time see Folkierski, *Sonet Polski.*
[33] All these sonnets are in Baranowska, *Kazimiera Zawistowska*, in the order mentioned here: pp. 55; 34; 35; 53. They are also all available online: https://poezja.org/wz/Zawistowska_Kazimiera/
[34] Ibid., p. 35. My translation.
[35] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. xxix.

[36] C. H. Wake, 'Symbolism in Flaubert's "Hérodias": An Interpretation', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 4.4 (1968), 322-29 (p. 322).
[37] Gustave Flaubert, 'Hérodias', in *Trois Contes* (Barcelona: Folioplus, 2017), pp. 101-150 (p. 111) / Gustave Flaubert, 'Herodias', in *Three Tales*, trans. by A. J. Krailsheimer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 71-105 (pp. 77-78). My emphasis.
[38] Susan L. Smith, *The Power of Women. A 'Topos' in Medieval Art and Literature* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), p. 2.
[39] Sibylle Baumbach, *Literature and Fascination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 114.
[40] Baumbach, *Fascination*, p. 202.
[41] Flaubert, 'Hérodias', pp. 144-45 / Flaubert, 'Herodias', p. 101. My emphasis.
[42] Flaubert, 'Hérodias', p. 147 / Flaubert, 'Herodias', pp. 102-03. My emphasis.
[43] Skucha, '"Święte kurtyzany": O dwóch cyklach poetyckich Kazimiery Zawistowskiej', in *Niesytość Pragnienia* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2016), pp. 105-28 (p. 109).
[44] Wiktor Czernianin, *Młodopolski Erotyk Hedonistyczny: Problemy Poetyki* (Wrocław: TArt, 2000), p. 138.
[45] As Skucha elaborates, the name Salome is not mentioned in the Bible which is why Salome is occasionally also referred to by her mother's name ('Święte kurtyzany', p. 117). According to this logic, this poem would be about Salome. As my interpretation and interweaving with Flaubert's tale shows, however, it is more illuminating to think of the poem's subject as the mother – which does not exclude the notion, of course, that a conflation between mother and daughter occurs.
[46] Zawistowska, 'Herodiada', in Baranowska, *Kazimiera Zawistoska*, p. 79. My translation.
[47] Engelking, 'Genre and the Mark of Gender', p. 82.
[48] Różańska, 'Moja Dusza', p. 121.
[49] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.1, ll. 34-41 (Surrey: Arden Shakespeare, 1997).
[50] Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays,* trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 84-258 (p. 200).
[51] Skucha, 'Święte kurtyzany', p. 105.
[52] Ibid., p. 108.
[53] Luce Irigaray, 'This Sex Which Is Not One', in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 23-33 (p. 28). Emphasis in original.
[54] Irigaray, 'This Sex', pp. 29-30, emphasis in original.
[55] See Helen Fielding, 'Questioning Nature: Irigaray, Heidegger and the potentiality of matter', *Continental Philosophy Review*, 36 (2003), 1-26.
[56] Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury, eds, 'Introduction', in *Writing on the Body. Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 10-12 (p. 10). My emphasis.
[57] There is a struggle between 'becoming' and 'being' at the core of woman's existence. The lack, or castration of the ability to strive towards something, is reflected semantically when 'come' (which suggests movement and energy) is removed from the verb 'become' creating a state of stasis.
[58] Irigaray, 'This Sex', pp. 253-54.
[59] I am grateful to Melanie Hawthorne for her insight on Vivien's publishing history.
[60] Renée Vivien, 'Sonnet féminin', in *Oeuvre poétique complète de Renée Vivien: 1877–1909*, ed. by Jean-Paul Goujon (Paris: Régine Deforges, 1986), p. 87. My translation.
[61] Engelking, 'Genre and the Mark of Gender', p. 86.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid., p. 87.
[64] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1.4 (1976), 875-93.
[65] Monique Wittig, 'The Mark of Gender', in *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. by Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 63-73 (p. 64).
[66] Engelking, 'Genre and the Mark of Gender', p. 83. My emphasis.
[67] Other crucial contexts here are Stéphane Mallarmé's (unfinished) poetic fragment *Hérodiade* that he started writing in 1864 and Oscar Wilde's *Salome* (1891 in French, 1894 in English). For a discussion of the latter see Petra Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).