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## What is Kraszewski's Mermaid Silent about?\*

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O czym milczy syrena Kraszewskiego?

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**Abstract.** The article is dedicated to a novel by Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, originally published under the title *Syrena* [*The Mermaid*] in the Warsaw paper *Gazeta Codzienna* [*The Everyday Daily*] in 1859, then as a book under the title *Piękna pani* [*The Beautiful Lady*] in Lviv in 1871. The novel was appraised negatively by literary critics, mainly due to the role played in it by a strong demonic female figure threatening the male world, which for the reviewers was difficult to accept. Taking into account the contexts of Kraszewski's other novels (e.g. the novel *Orbeka*, 1867) which presented the image of the *femme fatale* and feminocentric mythological themes, the article proposes a reading of this work as an open, ambiguous, controversial text, and thus one creatively recorded in the history of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature and criticism. The mermaid's silence mentioned in the title becomes a metaphor for what is not said directly in the novel and what is connected to the experience of femininity – an experience that is disturbing, difficult, painful – the metaphor also translating into the Polish collective experience.

**Keywords:** *femme fatale*, Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, mythological themes, novel, mermaid

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**Abstrakt.** Artykuł dotyczy powieści Józefa Ignacego Kraszewskiego, opublikowanej pierwotnie pod tytułem *Syrena* w warszawskiej „Gazecie Codziennej” z 1859 roku, a następnie w wersji książkowej pod tytułem *Piękna pani* we Lwowie w 1871 roku. Powieść została negatywnie oceniona przez krytykę literacką, co miało związek przede wszystkim z trudną do zaakceptowania przez recenzentów rolą, jaką odgrywała w powieści silna, demoniczna postać kobieca zagrażająca światu męskiemu. Biorąc pod uwagę konteksty innych powieści Kraszewskiego (np. powieść *Orbeka*, 1867), prezentujących wizerunek *femme fatale* oraz feminocentryczne wątki mitologiczne, w artykule przedstawiono propozycję lektury tego utworu jako dzieła otwartego, wieloznacznego, wywołującego kontrowersje, a tym samym twórczo zapisanego w historii literatury i krytyki XIX wieku. Tytułowe milczenie syreny staje się metaforą tego, co w powieści nie zostało wypowiedziane wprost, a co wiąże się z doświadczeniem kobiecości – niepokojącym, trudnym, bolesnym, przekładającą się również na polskie doświadczenie zbiorowe.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *femme fatale*, Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, wątki mitologiczne, powieść, syrena

#### “A MILITANT AND TEMPTING EMBLEM”

“Next Tuesday I’ll start printing *The Mermaid*” [“W przyszły wtorek rozpoczynam druk *Syreny*”] (Kraszewski and Kronenberg, 1929, p. 32), announced Józef Ignacy Kraszewski in a letter to Leopold Kronenberg dated 30 November 1859. The work, which so far has remained rather beyond the scope of the interest of researchers of issues pertaining to women in Kraszewski’s work (Burkot, 1996; Skucha, 2014), originally subtitled *Powiastrka* [A Fairy Tale] which indicated the “tendentious” inclinations of the genre of the novel, was published in instalments in the Warsaw paper *Gazeta Codzienna* [The Everyday Daily] in 1859 (issues 323–335). In the book edition by Gubryniewicz and Schmidt, published as part of the series “Biblioteka Najciekawszych Romansów i Powieści” [“A Library of the Most Interesting Romances and Novels”]; this version of the novel also being included in a collected edition of Kraszewski’s novels published by Michał Glücksberg in 1883), the titular *Syrena* [The Mermaid] turned into *Piękna pani* [The Beautiful Lady], with the subtitle *Powieść-studium* [A Study Novel] which confirms the “research” disposition of the novel as a genre, and it acquired its motto (“a mouldy proverb”): *Mulieri ne credas ne mortuae quidem*, that is, in the version recorded by Jan Mączyński in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Latin dictionary, “Do not believe a woman, even if she is dead” (Partyka, 2004, p. 55). Referring to the saying attributed to Diogenianus of Heraclea as a “mouldy proverb,” even though the epithet “mouldy” is, in this usage, phraseologically formulaic, indicates a certain distance from the message of the Latin maxim which is an expression of a specific feminophobia of the era, its suspicion of the female expression violating the androcentric fields of reference.

It is worth noting that the ending of the novel in the first edition printed in the press is different, more laconic, a little bit Biedermeier-esque in tone, narratively

closed. For *Syrena* ends with the image of the grave of the protagonist whose unhappy love for the beautiful savant countess led to his death: "Today, you can see his grave, covered with green turf, in Powązki, and the countess at the theatre, more beautiful, cheerful, more splendid than ever. It is said that her translation of Dante will soon be published" ["Dziś grób jego, zieloną okryty darniną, widzieć możecie na Powązkach, a hrabinę w teatrze, piękniejszą, weselszą, świetniejszą niż kiedy. Słysząc, że tłumaczenie jej Danta wkrótce się na świat ukaże"] (Kraszewski, 1859, p. 3). The book version ends with a more extensive, pessimistic description of the physical and moral suffering of the man who, deprived of illusions, nevertheless persists in them like a drug addict in his habit. Wojtek's vegetating is presented by the narrator of *Piękna pani* [*The Beautiful Lady*] as "an interesting and rare phenomenon of the splitting of a man's soul, a passion that understands itself, despises itself, and cannot be conquered by anything" ["ciekawą a rzadki fenomen rozdzielenia człowieka w duszy, namiętności pojmującej się, gardzącej sobą i niedającej się niczym zwyciężyć"] (Kraszewski, 1871, p. 142).<sup>1</sup>

In this perspective, the new title, *Piękna pani*, is better suited to a de-mythologised, de-toponymised interpretation of the novel which changes from a "fairy tale" into a "study." The change of the title is also significant at another level. *Syrena* refers directly to the Greek myth, and on the next level alludes to an 1855 sculpture by Konstanty Hegel, the ornament of the Warsaw fountain situated among the stalls of the Old Town – to this day, the mermaid symbolises the city "which survived its own death" ["które przeżyło własną śmierć"] (Pessel, 2015, p. 79). The figure of a half-woman, half-fish combines in the emblem that stimulates the imagination a "militant" and a "tempting" force, the experience of urbanity with carnality and the "dirty" everyday life among the market stalls, as well as love and passion with death. *Piękna pani*, feminising this coil of experiences and making it concrete, does not lose those ambivalences but transfers them to a different plane of reflection focused primarily on the history of human passion, in which numerous sculptures and statues participate as well, silently, yet expressively, among them the beautiful and merciless lady – Countess Laura with her "calm, marble face, on which there was no trace of worries, disappointments, nor a rather unpleasant social situation" ["spokojną, marmurową twarzą, na której śladu nie było ani zmartwień, ani zawodów, ani dosyć przykrego położenia towarzyskiego"] (p. 7) – *nota bene*, her image fits well with the tradition of representing the *femme fatale*, which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century seemed to be under the patronage of John Keats's *La Belle Dame sans Merci*.

<sup>1</sup> All quotations come from the 1871 edition of the novel and will continue to be indicated in the main text only by the page number, given in parentheses.

However, the very juxtaposition of the titles under which Kraszewski's novel was published gives an idea of something that might be more difficult to grasp if each of those titles are considered separately – without the surplus stemming from the clash of meanings. Kraszewski's novel juxtaposes, are not entirely transparent emotional equations, the passionate love for a woman, leading to the total moral defeat of the protagonist, with the experience of collective passions symbolised by the mermaid's shield and sword and suggested by the perspective of "death in an abyss."

The myth of the mermaid in Kraszewski's work is therefore accompanied by ambiguity. It is written on the pages of memory going back to the narrator's childhood, as he recalls his first impression of the "strangeness" associated with the "militant and tempting" symbol of the capital:

I remember that for the first time in my life I was lucky enough to see the Mermaid, on a shoe brought from Warsaw, and there, in the background, with a shield on her arm and a sword in her hand, this militant and tempting emblem of the capital city, half-woman, half-fish seemed to me extremely strange. I was a little boy at the time, but I was extremely curious about the meaning of everything that was new to me, and this Mermaid intrigued me greatly. I couldn't understand why she was dressed for a fight, arming herself with a sword and a shield, having this charming voice and singing magically because of which old Ulysses plugged his ears so as not to give in to its power. In the fairy tale about the Sirens, which I had to study from my mythology book because of this shoe, I was not quite aware of this passionate persecution of poor deck-hands whom these sea creatures led to their death in the abyss with their singing and temptation. It is so difficult for a youth to understand the wish to do harm, and feelings that are not love but emanate hate and betrayal! It was enough that this Warsaw Mermaid was a mystery to me for a long time, and it was only at an older age that I discovered the mysterious meaning of this myth, in the creation of which a great part must have been played by beautiful girls bathing on the shore of Sorrentum, from the happy land of the great Greece. (pp. 5–6)<sup>2</sup>

The narrator evokes a childhood memory of a drawing depicting the Warsaw Mermaid. The drawing – according to the old ideas of *disegno* – mediating between

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<sup>2</sup> "Pamiętam, że pierwszy raz w życiu miałem szczęście oglądać Syrenę, na trzewiku przywiezionym z Warszawy, w głębi którego z tarczą w rękę i mieczem w dłoni, to bojowniczo-kuszące godło stolicy, pół kobiety, pół ryby, nadzwyczaj mi się dziwnym wydało. Byłem naówczas małym chłopięciem, ale niezmiernie ciekawym znaczenia każdej nowej dla mnie rzeczy, i Syrena ta mocno mię zaintrygowała. Nie mogłem zrozumieć, dlaczego się tak przybrała do boju, uzbrowiwszy w miecz i tarczę, mając ten głos uroczy i śpiew czarodziejski, od którego stary Ulisses uszy sobie zatykał, aby siłę jego nie ulec. W samej też bajce o Syrenach, którą z powodu tego trzewika studiować musiałem w podręcznej mitologii, nie bardzo sobie zdawał sprawę z tego namiętnego prześladowania biednych majtków, których śpiewem i pokusą morskie owe bóstwa wiodły na śmierć w otchłanie. Młodemu tak trudno pojąć chęć szkodzenia, i uczucia, które nie są miłością, a tchną nienawiścią i zdradą! Dość, że ta Syrena warszawska na długo była dla mnie zagadką, i wiek dopiero późniejszy odkrył mi tajemnicze znaczenie tego mitu, w którego utworzeniu wielki udział mieć musiały kąpiące się u brzegów Sorrentum piękne dziewczęta, z szczęśliwej krainy wielkiej Grecji."

an idea and its graphic sign, makes the act of looking a creative process (Konik, 2013, pp. 21–222). Thus, so many various emotional traces can be identified in the contours of the drawn representation of the mermaid: tenderness, passion, fear, amazement, and longing.

As a side note, let us recall that a similar ambiguity is an experience recorded in the *Dedykacja* [*Dedication*, 1866] to Cyprian Norwid's drama *Za kulisami* [*Behind the Scenes*]. In the invocation to Warsaw, the "deceptive" coat of arms of the city is mentioned:

No, girl, you – no! – Matron!  
 – The deceptive mermaid is your crest,  
 But I traversed the oceans,  
 And I remembered your face,  
 Lonely like you – forgotten! (Norwid, 1968, p. 232)<sup>3</sup>

In both Kraszewski's and Norwid's case, one can see a secret connection between the man and the city – in Kraszewski's case, this would be an attitude of ambivalent but passionate observation, in Norwid's case – bitter identification. The "strange-haired Parthenopes" mentioned later in the poem written by the author of *Vade-mecum* bring to mind the story of a Siren of that name who was in love with Odysseus and who, unable to deal with her intense feelings, committed suicide. Of course, Kraszewski knew the legend of Naples coming into being and the associated myth of Parthenope; as he wrote in *Kartki z podróży* [*Cards from Travels*]: "Here, Ulysses meets three sirens, Ligeia, Leucosia, and Parthenope who, in despair, because she failed to seduce him, perishes forever in the depths of the sea" ["Ulises spotyka tu trzy syreny, Ligeę, Leukozję i Parthenope, która z rozpaczy, że go pociągnąć nie zdołała, na wieki ginie w morza głębinach"] (Kraszewski, 1874, p. 23). In the same work, Kraszewski quotes a poem by the Italian poet of the Renaissance era, Jacopo Sannazaro, who says goodbye to Naples-a Siren with the words: "Parthenope, dear Siren, be well! Be well, gardens, the dwelling place of the Hesperides" ["Parthenope, droga Syreno, bądź zdrowa! bądźcie zdrowe ogrody, hesperyd mieszkanie"] (Kraszewski, 1874, p. 42).

Kraszewski left Warsaw four years after writing *The Mermaid* to become Bogdan Bolesławita, the author of *Dziecię Starego Miasta* [*The Child of the Old Town*], a novel that was again about Warsaw but drastically different. From today's perspective, one can also see in *The Mermaid* a certain Warsaw *requiem*, a farewell to a certain passion evoked by the city's coat of arms.

<sup>3</sup> "Nie dziewczeczko, Ty – nie! – Matrono! / – Syrena herbem twym zwodnicza, / Lecz ja zmierzyłem ocean, / A pamiętałem cię z oblicza, / Jak ty samotny – zapomniany!"

## DESIRE

In *Syrena* (in *Piękna pani*), the narrator juxtaposes the strangeness of a militant, yet young and beautiful mermaid with the mystery of the passion that women inflame in men:

I confess that much later, when I already understood the Mermaid, for I had met many a Mermaid around the world, although none led me astray towards Scylla and Charybdis, I still could not always explain to myself why the one from Warsaw was so armed; I came up with the idea that she must have been a hoarse-voiced old woman whose embrace no one would accept voluntarily. Meanwhile, I did not notice that those emblems added to Warsaw Mermaid, young and beautiful, as we see on the Old Town fountain, had, and still have a deep meaning. They portray this passion that is strange, inconceivable, greedy for tribute and reverence, desiring sacrifice and torment, which would be inconceivable in women if we did not encounter it day by day. (p. 6)<sup>4</sup>

As an aside, it can be added that the mythological half-woman, half-fish as the embodiment of male desires also acquired its nearly grotesque version in the interpretation of Ludwik Szyrmer who, in a work chronologically close to Kraszewski's novel, *Noc bezsenna* [*A Sleepless Night*, 1859] through the words/voice of Apolinary Tarabankiewicz told the story of an affair with a mermaid who "poisoned me several times, sent bandits to attack me, whose dwarf threw a venomous tarantula on my neck, who ordered my house to be set on fire, etc. etc., however, none of those things harmed me" ["[k]ilka razy mnie truła, wysyłała na mnie bandytów, jej karzełek rzucił mi na szyję jadowitą tarantulę, kazała mój dom podpalić itd. itd., wszakże nic mi z tego nie zaszkodziło"] (Szyrmer, 1858, p. 2).<sup>5</sup> The "strangeness" of Szyrmer's grotesque and ludic Mermaid is different from the "strangeness" of Kraszewski's statue of the Mermaid, but it confirms the intuition of Ewa Owczarz about the kinship of the authors' imaginations (Owczarz, 2009, pp. 9–10).

Returning to Kraszewski's novel – over the course of the story, the unfortunate admirer of Countess Laura goes through all the circles of hell of unrequited love. Interesting is the fragment stating that what attracted Wojtek to his chosen one was the "originality of this woman-mermaid" ["oryginalność tej kobiety-syreny"]

<sup>4</sup> "Wyznaję, że znacznie później, gdym już Syrenę zrozumiał, bom się po świecie spotkał z jedną, choć żadna mię na Scyllę i Charybdę nie zawiodła, nie mogłem jednak zawsze wytłumaczyć sobie, dlaczego warszawska tak była uzbrojona; wpadałem na myśl, że to musiała być staruszka zachrypla, której uścisku nikt by dobrowolnie nie przyjął. Tymczasem nie dostrzegłem, że te godła dodatkowe warszawskiej Syrenie, młodej i pięknej, jak widzimy na wodotrysku Starego Miasta, miały i mają głębokie znaczenie. Malują one tę namiętność dziwną, niepojętą, chciwą hołdu i czci, pragnącą ofiar i męczarni, która by była niepojętą w kobietach, gdybyśmy się z nią dzień w dzień nie spotykali."

<sup>5</sup> I thank Professor Tadeusz Budrewicz for reminding me about this work.

(p. 16), a kind of otherness, the power of the *femme fatale* in the novel, endowed with the voice of a “witch-mermaid” [“czarownicy-syreny”] (p. 17), a free and educated woman. In the “lover’s discourse fragments” recreated from the novel we find many passages about jealousy, suffering, longing, humiliation, and self-destruction towards which the protagonist is heading. Wojtek’s first-person narrative – so different from the distanced third-person introduction which evokes, from the perspective of the first storyteller, the recollection of a mermaid “on a shoe brought from Warsaw” [“na trzewiku przywiezionym z Warszawy”] – is a collection of redundant, paradoxical sentences circling a constant experience of ambivalence and ephemerality, testifying to the failure of language, the limits of expression that the loving subject reaches: “Could I not have gone mad? Admittedly, I never said a word about myself and my feeling, but did it need translation and speech to be expressed?” [“Mógłżem nie oszaleć? Wprawdzie nigdy słowa o sobie i o uczuciu moim nie wyrzekłem, ale potrzebowałoż tłumaczenia i mowy, by się wyrazić?”] (p. 55). Passion and desire, which become the whole of Wojtek’s life, are incomprehensible in their essence for him: “I was like a thirsty man to whom they give a fragrant drink, saying that there is poison in it; who knows that if he drinks it, he will die, and yet cannot hold back and does drink” [“Byłem jak człowiek spragniony, któremu wonny podają napój, mówiąc, że w nim jest trucizna; który wie, że wypiuwszy go, umrze, a wstrzymać się nie umie i pije”] (p. 41).

The related story of the protagonist, that offers glimpses into his inner self over and over again, does not reveal too much of the heroine’s heart: “from the very first days on, a twofold feeling battled in me: at times I saw only a flighty seductress in her, other times an unhappy victim looking for someone to trust” [“od pierwszych dni dwojakie uczucie walczyło we mnie: chwilami widziałem w niej tylko płochą zalotnicę, to znowu nieszczęśliwą, szukającą komu by zaufać mogła, ofiarę”] (p. 58). Many a time, the narrator notices something lacking in his *femme fatale*, some defect, enticing but impossible to discover: “she was a strange, inconstant one, she could never honestly, deeply love; I saw it, her impairment and her monstrousness, and yet I loved her fervently” [“była wietrznicą dziwną, co nigdy szczerze, głęboko nic ukochać nie potrafiła; widziałem to, jej kalectwo i poczwarność, a mimo to wszystko kochałem ją zapamiętałem”] (pp. 104–105, emphasis – M.R.) Here, it is difficult to refrain from making a connection with Dorothy Dinnerstein’s book which says that as men and women we are Mermaids or Minotaurs and that the purely human condition applies to us only in part, whereas intuitively we are aware of our monstrosity (Dinnerstein, 1999, p. 77).

As noted by Leonard Neuger, whose article *Co nam szepcze Syrena Czechowa?* [*What Is Chekhov’s Siren Whispering to Us?*] inspired me to formulate the title of my essay, in Polish and Russian there is no distinction between what the words



*mermaid* (“a mythological creature”) and *siren* (“a real, existing animal as well as a mythological creature”) mean in English (Neuger, 2011, p. 200). The researcher observes:

Chekhov’s Siren at this stage in our reading is Heidegger’s “idle talk,” translated into a kitschy phantasm of male masturbatory pleasure. But another explanation is also possible: it is idle talk that reveals how consummation is possible only within and via itself, that is within and via precisely idle talk. (Neuger, 2011, p. 201)<sup>6</sup>

Despite the interpretative incompatibility of the works of Chekhov (*The Siren*, 1887) and Kraszewski (apart from using the same mythological motif), it can be noticed that in Kraszewski’s novel the same “idle talk,” passionately practised by the main character, which so repulsed Aleksander Świętochowski as a reviewer of the novel (more about this later), is the only form of satisfying the male desire that is reaching the limits of expression. Recalling other 19<sup>th</sup>-century realisations of the myth of the mermaid, it must be said after Michael Maar that while Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid* is characterised by an inability to express “the anguish that one would want to shake out of one’s heart if the witch did not cut off one’s tongue” [“udręki, którą chciałoby się wytrząsnąć z serca, gdyby czarownica nie obcięła nam języka”] (Maar, 1999, p. 9), in the case of Kraszewski, language, although physically left to the protagonists, is unable to express their inner self.

The protagonist of *Syrena/Piękna pani*, while observing Countess Laura, notices at some point: “one necessarily had to guess that some lack in life, some hunger of the heart were the reason for developing such strange desires. I understood only that she is not happy, that she longs, that there is still some empty corner left in her heart” [“trzeba się było domyśleć koniecznie, że jakiś brak w życiu, jakaś czczość w sercu były powodem do rozwinięcia tak dziwnych pragnień. Ja pojąłem tylko, że nie jest szczęśliwą, że tęskni, że w sercu jej pozostał dotąd jakiś kątek niezajęty”] (pp. 23–24). A short self-presentation of the heroine leads in a similar direction: “»There are such unhappy beings«, added the Countess at once, »who are not satisfied with the common measure of affection, activity, and suffering given to them by God; even I«, she whispered more quietly, »I may be among them«” [“»Są tak nieszczęśliwe istoty«, – dodała hrabina zaraz, – »którym nie wystarcza popopolita dana przez Boga człowiekowi miara uczuć, zajęć, cierpień; nawet ja«, – szepnęła ciszej, – »ja może do nich należą«”] (p. 24). It is a foreshadowing of her falling

<sup>6</sup> “Czechowowska Syrena to na tym etapie lektury Heideggerowska gadanina, przełożona na kiczowaty fantazmat męskich onanistycznych rozkoszy. Ale możliwa jest też inna wykładnia: jest to gadanina ujawniająca, że spełnienie możliwe jest już tylko w niej samej, i przez nią samą, gadaninę właśnie.”



into silence, dissembling, and finally the prolonged silence that fills the pages of the novel. Although my essay does not have the ambition of a comparative study, it is possible, while being aware of the extent of the “mermaid” theme in literature and culture (Szturc, 2011, p. 103), to note, as an aside, the puzzling coincidence between Kraszewski’s work and the message of Franz Kafka’s *Silence of the Sirens* [*Das Schweigen der Sirenen*, 1917] which refers to the addictive power not of a siren song but of silence – after all, often absence is more desirable than presence. In his essay *Le chant des sirènes* (1959) (Blanchot, 1959; Dziub, 2019, pp. 83–84), Maurice Blanchot wrote convincingly about the impossibility of satisfying longing and the irreversible loss evoked by a siren song. Moreover, referring to Blanchot’s terminology, let us note that *Syrena/Piękna pani*, combining elements of a *roman* (the narration of the first narrator) and a *récit* (the narration of the second narrator – Wojtek), brings out the motif of the mermaid’s silence in the “imaginative simultaneity of different temporal ecstasies” [“imaginatywnej jednoczesności różnych ekstaz czasowych”] (Markiewicz, 1995, p. 450), making passion understood in the perspective of an eternal return to the theme of this work. Not wishing to multiply these associations any longer, for the purposes of my essay it is enough to say that this is also what is experienced by Kraszewski’s protagonist: an endless, never satisfied longing for what is hidden by the silence of the mermaid, a permanent nostalgia for what will never be revealed.

## REPULSION

*Syrena*, or rather, *Piękna pani* in the 1871 book version, was harshly reviewed in *Przegląd Tygodniowy* [*The Weekly Review*] by Świętochowski. Teodor Jeske-Choiński aptly wrote: “*Przegląd Tygodniowy* already in 1871 spared no one its rebuke. It threw it around like sand; it cut down everyone who happened to be nearby” [“*Przegląd Tygodniowy* nie szczędził już w r. 1871 nikomu nagany. Rzucił ją naokoło siebie jak piaskiem; ciął każdego, kto mu się pod rękę nawinął”] (Jeske-Choiński, 1885, p. 17), and it was precisely Świętochowski who was a particularly ruthless critic – Choiński quoted an excerpt from a review of *Piękna Pani*, in which the author of *Liberum veto* reduced Kraszewski’s work to “good-natured idle talk” [“pocziwej gadaniny”] (Jeske-Choiński, 1885, p. 17) – let us recall that Wojtek’s first-person narrative reflects the state of his increasingly confused senses focused on the object of his love.

The heroine of the novel, Laura – as the positivist columnist describes her, “passionate, skilful, cruel, timid, sensitive” [“namiętna, zręczna, okrutna, płocha, wrażliwa”] – is one of “those bloodthirsty women who draw everything they may encounter in their lives into the circle of their flirtatiousness” [“z tych krwiożerczych

kobiet, które wciągają w koło swej zalotności wszystko, co tylko na drodze życia spotkać mogą”] (Świętochowski, 1871, p. 276). The publicist of *Przegląd Tygodniowy* quotes the confession of Laura’s victim, considering it to be a “moral photograph” of the protagonist related to the hero of Kraszewski’s earlier novel, *Orbeka* (1867), which in its time also aroused the distaste of critics due to the clearly submissive position of the man towards the *femme fatale*. He is a “slave, and he remained in this role to the end” [“niewolnikiem i w tej roli dotrwał do końca”] (Kaszewski, 1869, p. 132) – Kazimierz Kaszewski wrote with distaste about the title character of *Orbeka* in 1869.

In his review of *The Beautiful Lady*, Świętochowski’s indignation is elicited by a sentence uttered by the protagonist-narrator, who the critic quotes with horror: “she allowed me to enjoy the happiness of seeing her, of hearing her voice. Admittedly, I share it with the good doctor, with the old judge, with the baron, with cousin Gustaw” [“dozwołała mi napawać się szczęściem widzenia jej, słyszenia głosu. Wprawdzie podzielam je z poczciwym doktorem, ze starsuzkiem sędzią, z baronem, z kuzynem Gustawem”] (Kaszewski, 1869, p. 132). Świętochowski does not hide his “repulsion” when he is to summarise the story of *Wojtek* which consists of

[...] the constant degradation of a man whose hard life in the teaching profession should have given him the strength of character, this long series of images of male debasement, this ugly submersion of dignity in the mud of slavish servitude, this intrusive feeling is taken to the extremes of derangement, this ultimate stubborn love that turns to folly gives the impression of a dog licking the leg that tyrannically kicks and pushes this dog away. (Świętochowski, 1871, p. 277)<sup>7</sup>

In Kraszewski’s further specification of the genre of the novel by means of the term “study,” the columnist sees the “pathological study” recognised in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which the writer-researcher-doctor presents “the history of the formation of the ulcer, the spread of gangrene, or the emergence of some horrible growth” [“dzieje formowania się wrzodu, szerzenia gangreny lub wytwarzania się jakiej potwornej narośli”] (Świętochowski, 1871, p. 277). The work prompts Świętochowski to make a longer argument about what a novel should not be, that is: a record of the symptoms of illnesses and “moral deviations,” a description of “isolated phenomena,” “abnormal characters.” The publicist recalls the character of Quasimodo from Victor Hugo’s novel as one of the characters “hatched in a head intoxicated by a violent tide

<sup>7</sup> “[...] ciągłe upadanie się człowieka, którego twarde życie nauczycielskiego zawodu powinno opatrzyć mocą charakteru, ten długi szereg obrazów znikczemnienia męskiego, te szkaradne nurzanie godności w błocie niewolniczego służalstwa, to natrętne uczucie posunięte aż do obłędu, ta na koniec uparta miłość przechodząca w głupotę daje wrażenie z widoku psa liżącego nogę, która go tyrańsko kopie i odrzuca.”

of blood, drawn up in the company of skulls and a vessel with water for cooling the feet” [“wylęgłych w głowie odurzonej gwałtownym przyplywem krwi, kreślonych w towarzystwie trupich czaszek i naczyń z wodą oziębiającego nogi”], who satisfy only a “fragmentary taste.” A longer argument about the tasks of art follows:

Art, however, is neither a menagerie of wild animals nor Praüscher's cabinet of curiosities. Monstrous embryos are well suited to jars, morbid growths to wax products, but neither of them is suited to appear in works of sculpture. Similarly, observations of diseases are suitable for medical diaries but not for the novel. The novel should reflect human relationships in their truth and their universal, not exceptional, form. Biographies of madmen, idiots, and all moral deviants can be introduced into it perhaps as a fragment, as a detailed background, and never as the main image. (Świętochowski, 1871, p. 277)<sup>8</sup>

Świętochowski wondered how the author could have better presented his character: “if he had at least let him grow stalwart, harden for a moment, if he had not completely stripped him of his dignity, in a word, if his character had the rights of people in their right mind” [“gdyby mu chociaż na chwilę pozwolił skrzepnąć, stwardnieć, gdyby go tak nie odarł zupełnie z uczucia godności, słowem, gdyby jego bohater miał prawa ludzi o zdrowych zmysłach”] (Świętochowski, 1871, p. 277).

Is this a novel? – the reviewer asked, suggesting a negative answer to the reader: *The Beautiful Lady* is not a novel because there is no purpose, no “tendency” in it unless it is to “convince the world that there was once some acrimonious and unhappy lover who only needed to become a plenipotentiary of his ideal to be now completely satisfied with the sharing of the love with the doctor, the baron, etc.” [“przekonać świat o tym, że istniał jakiś zajadły i nieszczęśliwy kochanek, któremu potrzeba było tylko zostać plenipotentem swego ideału, ażeby już być zupełnie zadowolonym z podziału miłości z doktorem, baronem itd.”] (Świętochowski, 1871, p. 277). However, there is a hidden contradiction in the consistent argument of the publicist, which proves a certain helplessness that *Piękna pani* produced in the reviewer; on the one hand, he notes “the repulsion we feel while reading this novel,” on the other – the fatigue caused by “the admixture of this large dose of the good-natured idle talk which is so characteristic of this author” [“przymieszka tej znacznej dozy pocziwej gadaniny, która temu autorowi jest tak właściwą”] (Świętochowski, 1871, p. 277).

<sup>8</sup> “Sztuka jednak nie jest ani menażerią dzikich zwierząt, ani gabinetem Prauschera. Potworne embryony dobre są w słojach, chorobliwe narosty w wyrobach z wosku, ale ani jedno, ani drugie w utworach rzeźby. Tak samo obserwacje chorób dobre są w pamiętnikach lekarskich, ale nie w powieści. Powieść powinna odbijać stosunki ludzkie w ich prawdzie i formie powszechnej, a nie wyjątkowej. Biografie wariatów, idiotów i wszelkich kalek moralnych mogą być do niej wprowadzone chyba jako fragment, jak tło szczegółowe, a nigdy jako obraz główny.”

## THE “MERMAID” AND THE “STORM”

The “repulsion” spoken about by Świętochowski is a characteristic expression of the Positivist restraint in expressing violent feelings and passions, coinciding in tone with the condemnation of manifestations of “immorality” and “prostitution,” slogans which brought about many a debate in the press at that time. In the review by the Truth’s Apostle, one can feel a reserve against the physiological and biological nature of some aspects of the protagonist’s story which is full of “morbidity” and “monstrosity.” And yet, it is the very same thing that the protagonist and second narrator accuses himself of in *Syrena* which, under the title *Piękna pani*, transfers the dilemmas of expressiveness characteristic of the turn of the 1850s and 1860s into the 1870s.

It should be added here that the piece heralds the decadent figures of burnt-out men and *femme fatales* who populate the novels of Young Poland. Between them – let us add as an aside – Michał Bałucki appears with his *Syrena* [*The Siren*; 1868], setting, as he describes it himself, “an idyll amidst the storm” [“sielankę wśród burzy”] during the January Uprising – about which Tadeusz Budrewicz reminds us in his article on Kraszewski’s and Bałucki’s novels written during difficult times before and after the national uprising – according to the metaphors of that time, “before the storm” [“przed burzą”] and “after the storm” [“po burzy”] (Budrewicz, 2004, p. 166). As Beata K. Obsulewicz notes, Bałucki’s heroine is “a pure embodiment of the *femme fatale*” (Obsulewicz, 2014, p. 168). The comparison of these two works certainly deserves an article their own.

Kraszewski’s work, however, suggests a disturbing question of whether his *femme fatale* is just a woman or a broader idea that leads to destruction, death and perdition. And yet, as the primary narrator noted, the power that is within her and that attracts feverish young men stems from the fact that Laura is young and beautiful – like the mermaid from the sculpture on the fountain in the Warsaw Old Town. “In this senseless blindness there was something for the researcher that made her worthy of respect – belief in a better man, in an ideal on earth, invincible, undefeated, stubborn – I would say, almost heroic” [“W tej ślepcocie bezrozumnej było dla badacza coś, co ją poszanowania godną czyniło – to wiara w lepszego człowieka, w ideał na ziemi, niepokonana, niezwalczona, uparta – rzekłbym, niemal heroiczna”] (p. 142), says the narrator opening and closing the frame of this story-within-a-story about human passions. The demonic Laura, often directly referred to as the “mermaid” in *Syrena/Piękna pani*, juxtaposed with the Warsaw sculpture depicting a mythical half-woman, half-fish guarding the capital, provokes one to notice urban and civilisational meanings in the interpretation of this metaphor beyond the order of the sex and the body.

The eponymous “Mermaid” of 1859 or the “beautiful lady” of 1871 – is inscrutable, carries within her unspeakable mysteries that can barely be sensed by the man who is in love with her and who loses his mind because of her. As Laura says about her non-verbalised suffering, when it exceeds its measure: “Then, like the Count’s favourite mount who bites his trough when he runs out of oats, we bite wood and stones” [“Naówczas, jak ulubiony wierzchowiec hrabiego, który gdy mu zabraknie owsa, żłób swój wygryza, my gryziemy drzewo i kamienie”] (p. 24). Biting “wood and stones,” Laura is silent about her misfortune, the cause of which we can only guess at, but the figure of her husband the count certainly appears on the horizon of the culprits.

It is difficult for me to refrain from quoting a fragment of the poem *Partenopa* [*Parthenope*] by Anna Nasiłowska who, in a poetic shortcut, captures the tragedy of the myth of the siren song as an expression of the desire to stop Ulysses:

rejection hurts more  
 if there have been confessions  
 silence can be covered  
 with a mask  
 of mud and rubbish  
 love, once sung,  
 exposes the throat  
 lungs and tissue  
 of passion  
 the divine harmony of a siren song  
 should seduce effectively  
 soften even the rocks

if not  
 death in the water had several advantages  
 quenched the passion at once  
 linked to another element  
 restored to the mother-water  
 without leaving halfway  
 half of a poisoned body  
 a bleeding mass of meat  
 the only unpleasantness was the sight of the drowned woman  
 gnawed at by fish (Nasiłowska, 2020, p. 458)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “odrzućcie bardziej boli / jeśli doszło do wyznań / milczenie można pokryć / maską / z błota i śmieci / wyśpiewana miłość / odsłania gardło / płuca i tkankę / namiętności / boska harmonia śpiewu syren / powinna uwodzić skutecznie / zmiękczać nawet skały / jeśli nie / śmierć w wodzie miała kilka zalet / gasiła namiętność od razu / wiązała z innym żywiołem / przywracała pramatce wodzie / nie zostawiając w pół drogi / pół otrutego ciała / wykrwawionej masy mięsa / nieprzyjemny był tylko wygląd topielicy / objęzionej przez ryby.”

It is noteworthy that Kraszewski, shielding himself with the feminophobic motto of his novel, allows the reader of *Syrena/Piękna pani* to look at the heroine from a different perspective as well – as a silent mermaid who no longer sings but remains silent, full of anger and despair. Can silence, as an expression of the demonic nature of the heroine – a *femme fatale* – be a signal of the fatality of all passions, including the one symbolised by the Warsaw mermaid and all the “storms” she has to survive? That we do not know, but Kraszewski, by introducing this fascinating ambiguity, allows us to reflect on it.

*Translated into English: Lingua Lab*



Figure 1. The Mermaid in Warsaw's Old Town, drawing by Tadeusz Cieślewski, 1929  
(Source: Public domain, Polona)

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