

JULIUSZ SŁOWACKI



FOUR PLAYS

MARY STUART, KORDIAN,
BALLADYNA, HORSZTYŃSKI

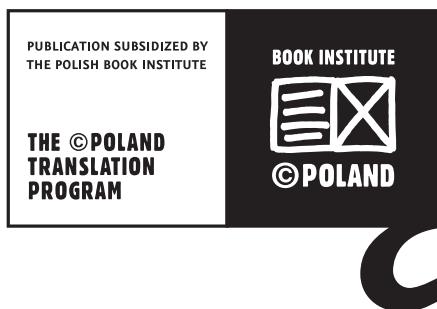
TRANSLATED BY
CHARLES S. KRASZEWSKI

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

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by Juliusz Słowacki

Translated from the Polish and introduced by
Charles S. Kraszewski

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JULIUSZ SŁOWACKI

1809 – 1849

INTRODUCTION: THE EARLY PLAYS OF JULIUSZ SŁOWACKI

As any younger son will testify, it's not easy being number two. The subtle rights of primogeniture are an ever-present burden. The accomplishments of the cadet are always being compared to those of the elder sibling, and rare it is that they ever surpass them.

It is worth considering what would be the position of Juliusz Słowacki (1809–1849) in Polish literature, had Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855) never been born. Considering the fact that Juliusz's father Euzebiusz, who died when the boy was six, was a fairly well known poet in his own right, and that his mother Salomea, who outlived her son by six years, kept a literary salon in the eastern marches of Poland, it is probable that he would have reached for the pen anyway. We would certainly not have had *Kordian* (1834), his crowning achievement. For that play is a riposte of sorts to Mickiewicz's *Dziady* [*Forefathers' Eve*] — to Part III of which, published in 1832, Słowacki took exception due to the way in which his stepfather, August Bécu, was portrayed. A Russian toady in Mickiewicz's play, inimical to Polish independence, he is struck down by a lightning bolt as a sign of divine judgement.

It is possible that we would not have the unfinished *Król-Duch* [*King-Spirit*, 1847] — for hadn't Mickiewicz shown the path toward the esoteric, mystical hagiography of Poland with his para-evangelical *Księgi narodu i pielgrzymstwa polskiego* [*Books of the Polish Nation and Polish Pilgrimage*] back in 1832? Would Słowacki have arrived at the curious etymology of the name Polska — Poland — as a derivative of the phrase “na ból skale” [“on the scale of pain”], had not Mickiewicz beat, and beat, and beat again the drum of “Poland as the Christ of Europe” before him?

Such hypotheses are as fruitless as they are entertaining. But even if Mickiewicz had not been around for the younger poet's emulation and rivalry, others would have drawn him from his father's neoclassicism toward the new Romantic trends bleeding into Poland from the West; he still would have read Antoni Malczewski's *Maria* (1825) and the poems of the slightly older

* *Król-Duch*, I.iii.316.

Józef Bohdan Zaleski (1802–1886) anyway.* More importantly, he would still have been captivated by Byron, and so his marvellously entertaining digressive epics *Podróż do ziemi świętej* [*Journey to the Holy Land*, 1836–1839] and *Beniowski* (1841) would still have been written. He would have still travelled to London — more of that later — and still have submerged himself in the pan-European enthusiasm for Shakespeare.” And this — especially his fondness for the great dramatist — would have assured him a prominent place in the history of Polish letters. For unlike the other “two bards” of the Polish tradition — Mickiewicz and Zygmunt Krasiński (1812–1859), Słowacki, eschewing the enormous stage of the monumental tradition — a stage so wide as to almost foreordain works like *Forefathers’ Eve* and *Irydion* (1836) to solitary reading as closet-dramas — Słowacki chose Shakespeare as his mentor and patron, and thus created, in works like *Mary Stuart*, *Horsztyński*, *Balladyna*, and others not included in this present volume, verse dramas that are made for acting.

The first of the plays included in our translation, *Mary Stuart*, was composed when Słowacki was just twenty-one. The play is remarkable to the degree in which it is not derivative. Surely Słowacki knew Schiller’s play, written three decades before his own. Yet the young Polish poet resisted the dramatic tension of Fotheringhay — the dynastic conflict Mary had with her cousin Elizabeth, the Catholic plottings to unseat the twice-illegitimate Tudor queen and replace her with Mary, the show trial (with its falsified evidence)*** and the execution — a prime opportunity for pathos if there ever was one. The whole topic of Mary’s execution — or judicial murder — is dramatically compelling. For better or worse, England, and the world, enters the modern age with this startling precedent of an anointed sovereign — of a foreign

* Out of fairness to Euzebiusz Słowacki, it is appropriate to note that, as Dorota Staszewska reminds us, “in the Literature Department [of the University of Vilnius ... Euzebiusz] Słowacki already knew and took into consideration the German theoreticians.” See her *O sonetach polskich romantyków* [*On the Sonnets of the Polish Romantics*] (Łódź: Acta Universitatis Lodzensis, 2005), “Folia Litteraria Polonica 7:240.

** As he wrote in an 1834 letter to his mother: *Szekspir i Dant są teraz moimi kochankami — i już tak jest od dwóch lat* [“I am now in love with Shakespeare and Dante — and have been now for two years.”] Cited by Alina Witkowska, *Literatura romantyzmu* (Warsaw: Państwowe wydawnictwo naukowe, 1986), p. 154.

*** The interested reader is referred to Stephen Alford’s *The Watchers. A Secret History of the Reign of Elizabeth I* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012). Chapter 14, “Sleights of Hand,” describes the falsification, by government agent Thomas Phelippes, of Anthony Babington’s “bloody letter,” which was used as the primary piece of evidence to prove Mary’s “guilt” at her questionable trial.

nation, to boot — subjected to common law and subsequently penalised capitally — a fate her grandson Charles was also to face. Instead of all that, Słowacki presents us with a young and vulnerable queen, at a crucial moment of her reign, when her devotion to the ancient faith was being challenged by the new currents of Protestantism favoured by her husband Darnley, and when the idea of a female sovereign with a male consort was new and rankling to some. Whether or not Mary is in love with the courtier Rizzio, the favour she shows him is more than enough to infuriate Henry, in an age when men didn't cotton much to playing second fiddle:

Now I'm slain!
The sharp words of a jester pierce my chest.
I am a king — I am no king — I stand
Amazed myself at how long I have suffered
This blot upon my honour. Now, enough!
Enough humiliation! Wherever I be
I hear the smallest children say, "O, look —
The husband of the queen!" Why not "the king?"
"The husband of the queen." Such is my fame?

The space given to questions of Mary's love interests — something we have no right *not* to expect — at times fleshes out her character nicely, and at times shades (but only just shades) into melodrama. But the core of the young Słowacki's dramatic genius is not so much his depiction of Mary as a woman, as it is his depiction of Mary as a person born to the ermine. Consider her interview with Rizzio, whom she is trying to save by banishing him to his native Italy:

Your Majesty! Repeat those words!
No — say them not again — I shall not heed,
Here on the very lip of the abyss,
Although I merit your anger thereby;
My death cannot dishonour you, indeed?
Nor sadden you? Your Majesty — Mary!
I shall remain! I seal this with an oath,
And nothing shall deflect me from my resolve.
Your words sentence me to a death more bitter —
Although your sweet lips spoke them; even though
Your voice trembled when shaping them — Mary,
Listen...!

MARY

Rizzio! Deign address the queen.

The words you spoke were formed for someone else.

Her reply is magnificent. Whatever she feels for him, as soon as he inches a bit too close, stepping within her pale, the lioness inside her rears and she reminds him, angrily, of the distance that necessarily separates her, a crowned head and public figure, a symbol erected for the veneration of the people, and him, a commoner who, ironically, enjoys more individual freedom.

Although he may overdo it a bit with Mary's sudden, and purple, admission of love to Bothwell following the fainting fit after Rizzio's murder, Słowacki toys with Mary's sexuality in a very mature, teasing way. Sexual innuendo abounds, from Nick's biting insinuation of Rizzio's "back [being] covered by [Mary's] royal robe," to the light, risky banter between Rizzio and Mary just before his murder. Rizzio, who is about to sail abroad at Mary's command, first asks for a flower from the garland that adorns her head, and then for her fan. It is a very gentle amorous dialogue; almost a strip-tease, in which Mary — at her ease for once in the play — participates happily:

RIZZIO

My lady! I am your page, and your page begs
You for your fan. For your fan's breath
Has such a sweetness in it, which recalls
The Scottish mountain air. When I'm abroad,
In some far country, it will bear the scent
Of roses, which surround you, to my nose.
Then, for a while, I shall close my eyes
And travel to your presence in a dream...

MARY

Smiling.

The queen forgives her page. But Rizzio
Would never dare direct such words at her.
Page! Would you take the very crown from me?
It's well you don't demand this robe of purple;
It's well that you content yourself with fans.

This is all high quality dramatic writing. It is interesting that Słowacki, given his nationality and the times into which he was born, should launch his dramatic career not with a Polish theme, but rather with a story from the world's historical heritage; a story which appeals to all in its universality. Here

too Słowacki is imitating his Shakespeare, and very skilfully indeed. In the introductory letter to *Balladyna*, addressed to his friend Zygmunt Krasiński, Słowacki makes reference to his early years in Krzemieniec, gazing wistfully at the castle up on Bona Hill:

[...] However many times I would gaze up at the old castle, the ruins of which crown the hill in my hometown, I would dream of someday spilling spectres, spirits, knights into its jagged wreath of battlements; that I would reconstruct the grand halls and illuminate them with the fire of a night filled with lightning, and that I would make the vaults ring with the echoes of ancient Sophocles' "Alas!"

The vividness of his childhood imagination gave birth in his young adulthood to dramatic characters of brilliant tangibility. Nick, Darnley's jester, is a witty clown who would fit perfectly amongst the company of the Bard's best comic creations:

NICK

Besides the clothes, will Nick get anything?

Poor Nick is poor...

HENRY

What would you have besides?

NICK

Thinks.

Give me, my sire, a portrait of the queen.

HENRY

I'll give you mine.

NICK

I don't want yours! A shilling!

For there she's pictured in her crown. Not you —

Your face is on no shilling.

The old Astrologer, — like Marlowe's Faust, sick of a lifetime of study that threatens to result only in despair — is another character that throbs with life. He is present in three scenes only, in the same act, as a secondary motor for the revenge tragedy that will culminate in the killing of Rizzio. And yet he is so well drawn by Słowacki that, despite his rather meagre time on stage,

he *exists* in a real way. He is one of those characters that so grabs the spectator or reader, that even when he is off stage, one has the sense of his continued existence — pottering around back in his lab amongst his alchemical goblets and telescopes, while the stage is occupied by others. His scene with Nick is especially vibrant:

NICK

Greetings, Father.

ASTROLOGER

Father? Whence our consanguinity?

NICK

Wisdom is sired by foolishness, and in turn,
Wisdom sires madness. Thus I am your son,
And all these books, my sisters, sired by you.

[...]

NICK

Looking through a telescope the wrong way round.
Aha!

ASTROLOGER

What do you see?

NICK

The earth.

ASTROLOGER

And there?

NICK

Nothing.

ASTROLOGER

But you must have seen me, is that not so?

NICK

Yes, but far off — like a speck of dust.
Look not aloft — you'll lose yourself amongst

Immensity. Look to the earth, but look
The wrong way round. How small they seem! Fame! Learning!
The best of lenses make distances greater.
Thus the king's clown sets forth his Q.E.D.s.
The king's wiseman...

ASTROLOGER

Lets the king's clown prate as he please.

Characters like Nick and the Astrologer come close to stealing the show. But they never succeed in this, for Słowacki, as young as he is, always keeps the tragic figure of Mary front and centre, before our eyes. This is Mary's tragedy. As often happens with the tragedies of Sophocles, referenced earlier by the poet, this tragedy does not need to end with the heroine's death. Indeed, Alina Witkowska perceives political stalemate as the motor of this play:

This story of a palace revolution is actually the tale of the impossibility of carrying out a revolution, whether that be the seizure of power by Mary's adversaries, or Mary's consolidation of power despite her adversaries, and over the dead body of her husband. In this drama of court intrigue [we have...] the disease of the incomplete act, the act not carried through to the end.'

That's one way of looking at the play. As far as the character of the queen is concerned, there are many facets to the tragedy of Mary's young life in Słowacki's telling. They range from her emotional troubles as a wife in a highly problematical marriage to a man who both despises and desperately worships her, a desirable woman who cannot help but attract the attentions of Rizzio, Bothwell, and even her young Page, as a flower attracts bees, and a woman with so outraged a sense of justice at the murder of Rizzio that she herself resorts to murder, while never losing her tragic — yet maybe salvific? — grip on her faith.

Above all, though, as we have noted earlier, Mary's tragedy is that of a woman forced into the office of sole sovereign, years before it was common, if feasible. Perhaps nowhere do we feel more strongly for Mary than we do in situations such as her frustrated dealings with Douglas, who outrages our sense of propriety by not tendering Mary the respect she merits, as head of state:

* Witkowska, p. 147.

MARY

Douglas, a moment's not passed since I spied
Morton down by the palace gate. Quickly,
Take this command to him, for it requires
The seal of the chancellor.

Douglas takes the paper from the queen, looks it over, and waits.

What's this?

The virtue of a knight is blind obedience —
Do you deny this to a woman? A queen?

DOUGLAS

A queen? O, no — there's not a treacherous fibre
In all of Douglas' frame. But — you'll forgive me;
What's on this paper, ma'am, was writ in haste,
At such a sudden moment, and it lacks
The name of Henry, and his title, King —
Whom all the people hold in holy awe;
Whose name was always paired with yours. Perhaps —
Forgive my boldness — you might deign correct
The oversight?

MARY

The queen overlooks nothing
When she commands!

DOUGLAS

With contempt.

And so, from the queen's lips
I'd be commanded, and dismissed.

MARY

Do it!

Whatever we think of the Tudor cousin who was to lop off her head, this is not some imperious Elizabeth fulminating from the throne. It is rather a young woman placed in a position of power that is — still — too unwieldy to her hands; a ruler cognisant of what is owed her, and shocked when that is unjustly withheld. It is a person new to the *métier*, grappling with large problems, learning on the job. In short, it is an image of the young dramatist

Słowacki, who, unlike his tragic heroine, even at this early stage of his career mastered the tasks at hand.

Speaking of queens, there is none in the royal pantheon of Polish literature who equals *Balladyna*, the fantastic creation of Słowacki's imagination, conjured from the mists of Slavic pre-history. The play, composed in 1834, is entirely the work of Słowacki's fertile pen. The elements of Polish legend that the play contains — enchanted Lake Gopło and the cruel ruler Popiel, reigning from the first capital of the Polish nation, Gniezno, some forty miles to the west of the lake — are meagre. Słowacki completely passes over the legend of Popiel being devoured by mice in his castle tower; in fact, Popiel doesn't appear on stage at all.* As in a Greek tragedy, his death at the hands of the hero Kirkor is related to us by a messenger. Instead, Słowacki artfully ransacks the tragedies and fantasies of Shakespeare for his characters and themes, which he then blends, from truly disparate sources, into a tragicomedy that is both gloomy and charming.

Goplana, the pagan spring deity of the lake, and her imps Skierka and Chochlik, emerge as if from the pages of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Rake ("Grabiec" in the original Polish, whose name we modify in order to approximate the punning that goes on in Słowacki's play) is the Polish Bottom. These characters provide us with some lighthearted scenes — especially Rake's first speech to his "subjects" when, transformed into the King of Diamonds, he assumes rule over the flora and fauna of the lake region:

Oyez, oyez, give hear and memorise
The codex of the king — eternise it
Within the rotting bark of some old willow.
From now on, we shall draft into our ranks
Bison and rabbit, boar and all the elk,
Who proudly bear their halberds on their brows.
Henceforth, should flowers wish to dip their leaves
Into the dew, let them pay per the ounce;
The Jews are hereby granted letters patent
Over the usufruct of dew. Starlings
Are hereby strictly forbidden to think
While they are chattering. We too forbid
The swallow senate free association
To discuss politics among the reeds.

* The cruel Popiel of legend, that is. The Hermit, who plays a central role to the story, is also a Popiel. In fact, he is the true king of Poland, who was deposed by his evil brother, banished to the woods after the slaughter of his family.

The House of Sparrows is henceforth abolished.
 Judgement and hanging and the distribution
 Of favour shall be centred in our hands.
 The swallows are forbidden to leave our borders
 Without a passport, such as which includes
 A nice description of beak, claw, and wing,
 As well as tail and characteristic marks.
 No bird shall dare henceforth enrol his chicks
 In German institutions, where parrots
 Are headmaster and beadle — we except
 From this law magpies, who enrich thereby
 Our native tongue.

But this is neither the carefree bucolic playground that might be painted by a Fragonard or a Watteau, nor the humorous cavorting of Shakespeare's romance. The smell of blood, introduced at the very outset of the play, with the Hermit's tale of the butchering of his daughters by Popiel the usurper, taints the air in Słowacki's enchanted forest. "The forest smells of carrion," declares Kirkor at a key moment in the play. It is delightful when Goplana, frustrated at Rake's fixation with a human girl, decides to teach him a lesson and transforms him, drunk, into a weeping willow. But the mood changes dramatically when Rake, still quite conscious as a human, though his outward form is changed, must witness the brutal murder of Alina by Balladyna, which takes place at his feet. Literally rooted to the ground, he is unable to do anything but watch the crime unfold, and express his horror by whispering "Jesus and Mary!"

The other Shakespearean inspirations come from *Macbeth*, obviously, through the bloody and conniving character of Balladyna, and *King Lear*, whose howls are borrowed here by the widow, Balladyna and Alina's sorely tried old mother.

Is Słowacki overreaching here? Does he ask us, in these two characters, to swallow more than we can handle? Who kills a girl over a jar of raspberries — even in the context of a competition, the winner of which gets a ticket out of rural poverty to the nearby ducal estate? Well, Balladyna does, as do — let's admit it — other people we read about in the newspapers, who end the lives of their brothers and sisters over trivial matters. And Słowacki does provide a backstory, if in shorthand, that prepares us for Balladyna's actions. When Rake admits to Goplana, at the start of the play, that he is in love with Balladyna, Goplana is taken aback in surprise. How can he be in love with a girl who has an evil heart? And so (despite Rake's humorous, and how predictable, for a man!, objection that a girl with such pretty legs must have a pretty heart, too), there were, in Balladyna's case, warning signs.

What we are not quite prepared for, perhaps, is the way this village girl suddenly blooms into an eloquent, capable lady, as if she had been to the manor born. Upon returning from the Hermit's cottage, where she had sought in vain a concoction to wipe the stain of guilt from her brow ("out, out, damned spot!"), this girl, from a village in the middle of the Polish woods, who, considering the time period, would probably have been illiterate, starts speaking like Hamlet:

Perhaps by now he's forgotten it all,
And it's but I, who needlessly rehearse
These thoughts which no more through his mind revolve?
For who am I that others should regard,
And spy upon, and seek to ruin? Hell!
Why can't the pressure of one thousand words
Squeeze out the life of these mere two: "He knows?"
What drove me to his cell to speak with him?
What Satan took me by the hand and led
Me there to speak with the hermit of the woods?
If I am ruined, 'tis I that ruined me;
And just think — if not for that sick visit,
He'd be no different from the million souls
Throughout the world whom I have never met!
To think, this present hour so full of fright
Would have been like the calm of yesterday,
And even calmer, maybe... Hours pass,
And with each hour more of this my secret
Is rubbed by silence, till it's near erased —
And now the scab is torn from off the wound
Which shows itself more horrid, for having been
So close to healing! How I envy her,
The she that I was just this morning past!

And a little later on, in her tent while Kostryń and her troops are about to do battle with Kirkor, she speaks with a "stomach" that sounds like Richard III... It may be for this reason that, in the Epilogue, the Public accost the chronicler Wawel with the question, "where does she come from?" Because it sure can't be some unnamed hamlet in the middle of ninth century Poland...

But drama doesn't have to be naturalistic, and the best drama often isn't. It would be nitpicking to call Słowacki to task for his lack verisimilitude. To paraphrase Eliot, Słowacki "is not Zola, nor was he meant to be." *Bal-ladyna* is, above all, a fairy story, and holds to the conventions of the fairy

story — narrative shorthand, suspension of disbelief in deference to the moral, etc. It is great literature because it is a fairy tale that doesn't fully satisfy our sense of justice. It is true that the bloody queen gets her comeuppance at the end. Forced by custom of law to pass sentence as a judge upon the complainants who come before her — the last one being her blind mother charging her unnatural daughter with cruelty and neglect — Balladyna must pass a verdict of death “in absentia,” after which she is immediately scorched by a lightning bolt. It is a fairy-tale ending which we saw coming, just as we watched “all the clouds of heaven” gather above the cupola beneath which she is sitting. As Eugeniusz Sawrymowicz puts it:

When, after having achieved her goal, Balladyna determines to have done with her criminal past and swears “herself, to be righteous in the eyes of God,” the poet has us understand that this is quite improbable. Balladyna might only remain in power by remaining a criminal; as a righteous queen, she must die, pronouncing a sentence of death against herself.

Of course we saw this coming. It had to end like that: are there any fairy tales, happy or sad, which are not predictable? Yet that being the case, why must it be that, if justice triumphs in this one case, it fails in all the others? For *Balladyna* ends bloodily for everybody. First of all, Alina falls victim to Balladyna's jealous rage. The Hermit, and authentic inheritor of the “crown of Lech,” is murdered by Fon Kostryń before the battle to restore him to his throne even begins. The just Kirkor, who is literally fighting the good fight, dies in the battle won by that repulsive pair — the “son of the hanged man,” Fon Kostryń, and his adulterous paramour Balladyna. Good old Rake, who in his tipling is just as much Falstaff as he is Bottom, is murdered in his bed just like Duncan in *Macbeth*;* in an extreme display of motherly devotion, the Widow is put to torture for refusing to reveal the name of her impious daughter, and dies on the rack; even Goplana is “exiled to the land of pines

* Eugeniusz Sawrymowicz, *Juliusz Słowacki* (Warsaw: Wiedza powszechna, 1973), p. 147.

** In her interesting article, “*Balladyna*, czyli o próbie karnawalizacji literatury romantycznej” [*Balladyna*, or Concerning an Attempt at the Carnivalisation of Romantic Literature”] (Łódź: Acta Universitatis Lodzianis, 2015), “Folia litteraria polinica” 1:72, Anna Kurska describes the character of Rake as created along the lines of the vigorous, potently erotic and “meaty” character type of carnival literature, exactly so as to have that familiar character type undermined. For virility, which usually guarantees health and safety, stands for nothing in this case.

and snow” for her role in setting all the tragedies afoot by mixing in where she doesn’t belong: among the fates of humans.

In *Balladyna*, Słowacki raises more questions than he answers. Why, for example, did Balladyna not recognise her old boyfriend, Rake, when he arrived at her castle for the feast, disguised in wild kingly garb? Just because of his beard? And when she searches for the crown in the darkness of his tower room, after she has killed him, and runs her hands over “that table top with the features of a man’s face,” surely her fingers, which (we assume) stroked that face in the darkness of the aspen copse more than once, would recognise its familiar contours? Yet they don’t — and this fatal mistake, or decision, would have made for an engaging Sophoclean reflexion on fate and tragic flaws. In this aspect of *Balladyna*, Słowacki shows himself, consciously or not, more a student of Christopher Marlowe than William Shakespeare. For, like Marlowe, that poet of experience and testing, who doesn’t preach to us as much as he confronts us with problems intended to shock us out of our complacent devotion to assumptions and a priori statements, Słowacki doesn’t teach us anything about justice in his play. Rather, he portrays injustice as well as justice, tossing them both on the table like the tangled horse’s manes that Chochlik enjoys plaiting, and has us do battle with the strands ourselves.

One thing that does stand out in *Balladyna*, and it is a characteristic of most, if not all, of the plays included in our volume, is that desire to break with the past, mentioned by Sawrymowicz above. He is referring to the first part of Balladyna’s speech upon assuming the throne, in which the protagonist suggests that what went before has no significance for what is to come:

A life that’s filled with labour has been split
In two halves by the crown. My past age falls
Away as viper’s venom from a blade
Half smeared therewith — when it divides an apple,
One half remains whole, healthy, while the other
Blackens and rots. None of you knew me such
As I have been — let not my people seek
To delve into my history. You know
What I have told you. For the rest, the priest
Who shall absolve me of my sins shall hear,
And no one else.

In the unfinished play *Horsztyński*, the character of Felix (Szczęsny in the original), one of Słowacki’s vacillating Hamlets (Kordian is another), hovers between obeying his harsh father’s will, thus engaging in a *rokosz* (aristocratic uprising) that will set him on the Polish throne, and enjoying the peaceful

life of a philosopher. When word arrives that all of Poland has erupted in a popular uprising proclaimed in Kraków by Tadeusz Kościuszko, he is roused from his melancholy torpor:

Warsaw, Vilnius, all of Poland, the nation — Me — A procession of gigantic events is passing before my eyes. How can I mix in with them? How can I stand to? And where? What am I to become? What will my father become? O! I will cast myself at his feet and weep like an infant, begging him on behalf of the poor people thrashing about in the great net of events. I seem to hear the revolutionary cries of rubble and stone coming to life. Great God! I haven't prayed to You in quite a while, but right now, I can feel my heart crying out from the depths to You: Have mercy upon us!... Upon us? What am I? I did not rise in rebellion...! I am crying out here, safe within these walls, while others are dying in silence... I will look upon the battling people as if upon a gladiatorial slaughter! In the name of God, I go to perish!

Biographical criticism is a risky thing. However, it may not be too farfetched to suggest that, like Felix here, and *Balladyna* earlier, Słowacki himself saw his life fall into two distinct halves, split by a regret. In his case, the decisive event was the eruption of the November Uprising of 1830, which he witnessed at first hand in Warsaw — but from the sidelines, due to the endemic poor health that was to eventually take his life before he'd quite turned forty. His “orientation to the active struggle,” as Sawrymowicz puts it,

was manifested above all in poetic terms: he published a few poems, in which he took the side of the insurrectionists with enthusiasm, and in which he described his position in regards to the battle being waged between the [insurrectionary] government and the democratic opposition.

Yet Słowacki's great twentieth-century biographer and editor does not entirely dismiss the possibility that there might be emotional or mental reasons, rather than physical problems, at the bottom of his decision not to take up arms. Discussing the poet's flight abroad, as the doomed insurrection was tending toward its eventual defeat, Sawrymowicz notes:

There seem to have been several causes for this unexpected decision. One of them was the still as yet unconsolidated [*nie okrzepły jeszcze*] character of the youth raised in the hothouse environment of his childhood hearth, where all unpleasant things were kept from him,

above all on account of his weak constitution. From this there resulted the sense of his own physical incapacities, which certainly elicited a fear of putting himself at risk of difficulties and dangers.’

Is it this guilty conscience — which was to result later in his unsuccessful attempt to actively join another Polish insurrection shortly before his death in 1848 — that is at the bottom of Balladyna’s determination, and Felix’s Hamletism? It may certainly be at the bottom of young Kordian’s anxieties, expressed after listening to the war stories — both glorious and horrifying — of his old faithful servant Grzegorz, who had been a Napoleonic soldier:

Dear God, how that old man has grown
Into a giant! But I... lack belief...
Where men respire freely, I cannot breathe.
From men’s sublime thoughts my mocking eye brings
Me back down the path to the muddied springs —
I shall not overstep the barricades
Set up on the roads by superstition...
Now is the time for youth to seize its mission,
To figure out: To live? Or not to live?
And I? am helpless. I’m not made to strive
Against the Sphinxes like killer Oedipus,
Unravelling their riddling speech, because
Today they’re many — the Sphinxes have multiplied.
Time was, with threefold riddle they mystified
Their prey; now, like weeds their riddles expand —
Riddles as numerous as grains of sand.
Everywhere, mystery. The world has not been stretched
Any wider, but it has grown in depth.

Hamlet? For sure, right down to the “To live? or not to live?” allusion. But his wavering is not that of the indecisive. What Kordian expresses here is, in the first instance, a jealous regret at not being a man of action, proving himself on some battlefield, and then... in the second instance, a self-serving rationalisation of the world having become more complicated, suggesting thereby that, had he lived in the good old days, say, twenty years previous to the present moment, he would have found it easy to join the ranks along with Grzegorz, whereas today, the “Sphinxes” have so multiplied, that even Grzegorz would not be able to “breathe freely” if push came to shove.

* Sawrymowicz, pp. 72; 78-79.

Yet of course he knows, at the bottom of his heart, that he *could* act if he wanted to. That the fault lies within him is at the bottom of his failed suicide attempt — something which also motivates the decision of that other vacillator, Felix, in the concluding scenes of *Horsztyński*, when he decides to remain in his dead father's castle as the vengeful crowd approaches, to be blown skyward by the load of powder he has stockpiled so that the castle should not be taken.

Słowacki is, as we have mentioned, a disciple of Byron as well as Shakespeare. Yet the marks that his characters bear on their foreheads — Balladyna's raspberry stain, and the scar left on Kordian's brow by the bullet which failed to kill him — are more than just "marks of Cain." As both these characters are literally ashamed of these all too visible signs of villainy and weakness, is it not possible that Słowacki himself was ashamed — whether he had reason to be, or not — of his abandonment of Poland after the uprising, in which he took only tangential part?

Not everyone is cut out for soldiering — that's certainly true of the writer of these lines (so let no one assume that I am pointing fingers) — Witold Gombrowicz, who left Poland for Argentina just before the outbreak of World War II, counted himself among the number of Poles like Mickiewicz and Chopin, who lived afar from their nation at its time of trial, not out of cowardice, as much as from the conviction that, as artists, they could do more for the cause of Poland by living, than by dying uselessly on a battlefield.* This is also considered by Słowacki's biographer:

Another [reason for leaving Poland] was his deep-seated conviction of his poetic vocation as his only true path, which led him to seek out those conditions that would foster the development of that path."

Kordian is, however, a complex play. On the one hand, it acknowledges the value of active individual engagement with the problems of the world, such as oppression and injustice. "So I set out — and this shall be my task: / To fell all wood gone rotten, with my axe." Sure, he makes this statement before his

* See Witold Gombrowicz, *Dziennik I* (Paris: Instytut literacki, 1957), I: 169. Gombrowicz acutally says that these "patriots" were motivated by a desire "not to make fools of themselves" [*nie chcieli się zblażnić*]. For historical accuracy, we should point out that Mickiewicz took part in the mustering of legions for armed battle against the Russian Empire, dying in Turkey while doing just that, and Słowacki himself travelled back to Wrocław in 1848, in an unsuccessful attempt to join the active struggle in the Prussian Partition.

** Sawrymowicz, p. 79.

parodied by Słowacki in the opening scenes of the play, was of the same opinion.* Yet it would be misguided to suggest that the younger poet was motivated by feelings of vengeance. *Kordian* was published anonymously. It is so stylistically similar to *Forefathers' Eve*, that the Poles who first read the work assumed it to be the fruit of Mickiewicz's pen — something that, as the poet wrote to his mother on April 27, 1834, *nie jest mi niemiłą* [...] *pomyłką* ["is not for me an unpleasant /.../ error"].** That Słowacki was perhaps aiming at this "not unpleasant error" might be divined from the very name of his protagonist, as *Kordian* is an approximate anagram of Mickiewicz's *Konrad*.

But the stories of the two characters are quite different. *Kordian* is not possessed of a megalomania that has him do battle with God himself; he does not wish to deprive men of their free will (as *Konrad* suggests in his raving Great Improvisation); both during the soliloquy on Mont Blanc and in the crypts of St John's he expresses his desire to convince his fellows to "entrust themselves into his hands," not to force them to his will. *Kordian*, unlike *Konrad*, is not possessed. Although frightened and tempted by devils, he is, above all, someone punching above his weight. Słowacki, who earlier expressed the desire to be involved in real, significant, individual action, now, at a distance, shows the futility of such desires. An individual man cannot — as Mickiewicz suggests in his play — overturn thrones by the power of his will. As he traipses the corridors of the silent palace toward the Tsar's bedroom, at the threshold of which he will faint into unconsciousness, short of his murderous goal, *Kordian* is plagued by the bugbears of his own mind (as most normal people would be):

KORDIAN

Moving forward with his carbine.

Let me go! Let me go! I'm the murderer of Tsars;
I go to kill... Who restrains me, by a hair?

IMAGINATION

Listen! I can see what's there!

FEAR

Listen! My voice — the beating of your heart!

* See his 1831 brochure *Nowosilcow w Wilnie* [*Novosiltsov in Vilnius*], cited by Sawrymowicz, p. 78.

** Juliusz Słowacki, *Korespondencja* ed. Eugeniusz Sawrymowicz (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1962), Vol. I, p. 239.

KORDIAN

No one is there;
I hear some gibbering.

IMAGINATION

Don't look at me — look where I'm fingering!

KORDIAN

I cannot see your finger, but my sight falls
There, where you're pointing. I can see faces,
Arabesques, painted on the walls.

FEAR

Look closer! see? Those are the traces
Of reptiles! See them scurry? Disgusting!
Each snake has a sting of fire...

Although he does his best to bravely soldier on toward the act, despite the ever more horrifying images conjured up by his Imagination and his Fear, they will overcome him in the end. There are certain tasks that men are simply not made for.

This is similar to the lesson taught us by Mickiewicz in part III of his monumental drama. Konrad cannot “create a happier Poland” by the mere force of his individual will, fixing the poor, botched job of God Himself [*sic!*], any more than he can actually “stop the cranes in flight” with the power of his eye — another claim he puts forward in his frenzy. At the end, as he is being led off to Siberian exile, Konrad presents Fr Piotr with his ring to sell, directing him to spend the proceeds in charity. It is a simple, small act — but a significant one; one that cannot change the entire world, but one that can make it somewhat better.

Śłowacki's point is similar, but not identical. He also shows the inevitable failure of all Manfred-like or Faustian overreaching, one man putting his shoulder to the world and nudging it into a more positive groove. In one of the most Konradian passages of his Mont Blanc soliloquy, Kordian muses:

And can we not, like God Himself, when He
Created the world, with this one hand of ours
Toss in one mighty sweep myriads of stars
And so mark out the paths of destiny
That never should these poor vessels of clay
Err in their navigation, mistake their way

And shatter on the infinite deep?
I can — I shall! I go, to jar,
To wake the slumbering people from their sleep!

The answer is, no, “we” can’t. But whereas Mickiewicz shows us what we *can* do with Konrad’s touching donation on behalf of the suffering souls in Purgatory, and the poor among us, Kordian offers us only bitterness. He moves — justly? — from the impotence of the “great souled individual” such as Kordian to the impotence of the nation, doomed to failure in its armed uprising. He does this near the final scenes of the play when Kordian, sentenced to death for his attempt on the Tsar’s life, is led out onto the Saski Square and, given a horse by Grand Prince Constantine, is encouraged to gallop towards a high picket of bayonets and leap over the impossible barricade, in exchange for his life. It is of no small significance that he only agrees to do it after the Tsar has countermanded the Grand Prince’s offer and has assured Kordian that, even if he clears the hurdle, he will be shot. In this way, it becomes a disinterested act, and an empty one:

GRAND PRINCE

O, let him make it! I want him to win out!
The Tsar will recognise by what great heights
My soldiers overtop his Muscovites!
Look! Here he comes — he stops... He turns his glance
Upon the people... who wait in silence,
Black, muddy...
Frowns like a tiger.

O, I do not like this folk —
They toss their hats and hankies... Any hope,
Kuruta?

KURUTA

If you say so, Your Excellency.

GRAND PRINCE

Violently.
Look! What a cloud of dust he kicks up! Ah —
I can’t see... Come on, boy! He made it!

SOLDIERS

Hurrah!

PEOPLE
From afar.
He lives!

So he makes it, against all probability. Along with the “heroic” Polish soldiers, none of whom were brave enough to take the challenge for a hefty reward when it seemed as if Kordian was going to refuse it, we cry “hurrah!” relieved that horse and rider are safe — perhaps more relieved that the poor horse, who had no choice in the matter, cleared the deadly barricade without having his belly torn open. Yet however “brave” or “heroic” Kordian’s jump seems, in reality, it is silly, frivolous. A mad stunt signifying nothing. And this symbolises, for Słowacki, the November Uprising.

It is a curious, cynical, and perhaps none too justified ending for a serious dramatic work based on recent history, a recent national tragedy. Of course, we do not know how Słowacki intended to continue the story. The play ends with Kordian standing at the wall, facing the firing squad, with a rider bearing a pardon rushing in... Will the adjutant get there in time, or not? That the poet intended to continue the story is made clear by his signifying the work as “Part I.” Unlike other Romantic mystifications, *Kordian* truly is a “magnificent torso.” We know that a Part II was written by the poet, and then destroyed by his own hand. And so we are left hanging in this uncertainty.

We began our brief discussion with a reflection on Słowacki as a younger brother of sorts to Mickiewicz, constantly in his shadow. Mickiewicz was first interred amongst the crowned heads of Poland in the royal crypts of Wawel Cathedral. Early in the twentieth century, a petition was circulated in support of transferring Słowacki’s remains from the Montmartre Cemetery in Paris to that same crypt. Not only was he first refused the honour by the Archbishop, but two decades later, it took an edict from the Polish strongman Marshal Piłsudski to effect the transferral. While the two bards lie side by side in the crypt (and not, as in the case of Mary and Elizabeth Tudor in Westminster Abbey, with the latter triumphantly on top of the former), it is somewhat ironic that even the boat that carried Słowacki’s coffin down the Vistula to Kraków was christened the “Mickiewicz...”

But Słowacki should not be considered a second-rank poet. For Polish literature, he is an important cardinal figure. On the one hand, he would not have been the poet he is, were it not for a youthful enthusiasm for his fellow Lithuanian, Adam Mickiewicz. His early verse is strongly imitative of the father of Polish Romanticism, eleven years his elder, and a frequent visitor to the Wilno salons hosted by his beloved mother, Salomea. On the other hand, Słowacki was not afraid to take issue with Mickiewicz. The great example of this is his play *Kordian*, which we have just discussed. It was not

purely a personal grudge that determined the composition of Słowacki's most famous play. It is a critical comment on the political and philosophical thrust of Mickiewicz's work.

Just as Mickiewicz leads to Słowacki, so Słowacki leads to later epigones of Romanticism, such as Stanisław Wyspiański. For Słowacki not only confirms the importance of Mickiewicz to the poets who come after him, he also encourages them not to accept his directives blindly. If it were not for Mickiewicz, we would not have Słowacki; we certainly would not have the *same* Słowacki, and of course, we would not have *Kordian*. If not for Słowacki, we would not have had Wyspiański's *Wyzwolenie* [*Deliverance*], *Legion*, or *Noc listopadowa* [*November Night*].

If, in a statement often quoted without context, Mickiewicz said of Słowacki's poetry that it was a *piękny kościół, w którym nie ma Boga* ["a beautiful church, in which there is no God,"] it is worth noting that Słowacki answered for himself, and all the Polish poets who were to come after him, when he described himself and Mickiewicz as *dwa na słońcach swych przeciwnych — Bogi* ["two, on their own suns in opposition — Gods"]. It is with this demand for respect, on his own terms, that we leave the reader, encouraging him and her to consider the four plays included in our translation for what they are: fine pieces of poetry, the well-chiselled cornerstones of the modern tradition of Polish drama, which could have arisen from none other than the Shakespearean genius of Juliusz Słowacki.

*

As always, I would like to thank Ksenia Papazova and everyone at Glagoslav for their continued support of Polish literature.

Także, jak zawsze, pragnę wyrazić swoją wdzięczność swojej ukochanej żonie, Oli. Jej tę książkę poświęcam — tak jak zresztą wszystko, co piszę, co robię.

20 June 2018

Kraków

MARY STUART

a historical drama in five acts

PERSONS:

Mary Stuart, *Queen of Scotland*

Henry Darnley, *her Husband*

Morton, *Chancellor*

Rizzio

Bothwell, *Mary's lover*

Douglas

Lindsay

Mary's Page

Nick, Henry's jester

Astrologer

ACT I

SCENE I

A hall in Holy Rood Palace

PAGE

Running in.

Alas, I bear you more bad news, my queen.

The fickle people of the town insult you

Again, as they have done so many times.

Today I witnessed a new travesty

Flung at your royal chapel. Early this morning

I watched, beyond the garden wall, a troupe

Of jolly maskers — Robin and his train

Of morris dancers; Friar Tuck in's cowl,

The bowmen, Little John, Maid Marian,

Pale as if cut from ivory, the gay lass,

And with the crowd, I followed them, until

They halted — all the jangling bells fell silent —
And there we watched some strange man, threatening,
Haranguing, until he went into a house
Where, at a high window, as if at pulpit,
He once again appeared, to preach his treason
Against you, sovereign Lady.

RIZZIO

From what's been said,

I recognise the preacher. Knox, my lady,
Who day and night rails from that corner window,
The while the crowd below listens and prays,
Sucking in every word that falls from's lips,
Expecting miracles. O, it's Christian doctrine!
One time he pointed here and cried aloud:
“Destroy the nest, and watch the crows fly off!”
As if the Pope himself, he thundered out
Anathemas from that window, and the mob —
They bow before him like he were a saint.

PAGE

The bolder ones, my Queen, thirsty for crime,
Rushed in your chapel, shrieking wildly,
“O pit of papal vipers!” tearing down
The holy images, the candles; setting fire
To all their hands despoiled. And then, dressed up
In priestly robes, that clown of Darnley's stood
Upon the altar, preaching blasphemy.
The people joined in sinful antiphony,
The while the jester stripped the church of gold.
I drew my sword, despairing and enraged,
And threw myself upon him. That put paid
To his bells' tinkle! Did I spill his blood?
I don't know. For soon I was surrounded,
And, pressed against the wall, made to submit.
If not for Bothwell, and the royal guardsmen
Who came to my aid — your page had been no more.

MARY

You hear that, Rizzio? On this lonely throne,
By all abandoned, I'm hated by my people,

The while this Knox insults a woman's crown,
And boldly! Have I now fallen so low?
He curses me, he jibes — it tears my heart!
Even today I offered prayers for them;
Does my faith differ so from theirs? O, Scotland!

RIZZIO

They'll stop insulting you, my queen, and soon.
A well-deservéd punishment will fall
Upon those criminals. Allow me, ma'am
To write a rescript. Let the guilty pay
With loss of freedom — or loss of their head.
Take pen in hand, page, write out the command —

The Page sits down with pen and parchment.

Unworthy are they all of clemency;
I'd burn them all to ash upon one pyre.

MARY

You'd slaughter all the people? What wild vengeance!
The people have betrayed me...

PAGE

Writing.

To your name,
Is it your wish I add that of your husband?
Henry? And add to that the title King?

MARY

Yes, as you've always done — our names together.
No, wait! What am I doing? Perhaps the people
Have acted in accord with his command?
For, after all, you said his jester led
The mob in their blasphemous rioting?
Set down no King! I, Queen, am sole monarch!
But, Rizzio, what's your thought? Will he grow wroth,
Insulted with this first sally against him?
The missing title will envenom life
Between us — for I granted him that title

In happier days, and, more than once, the crown
Was placed upon his brow with my own hands.

RIZZIO

My queen! You have an angel's face, and heart!
Why do you sow blooms in so rank a soil?
In Rome, I've watched the sun sink in the Tiber,
Casting its last glance on a cross of gold...
Now, you are like that sun. Your crown now sinks
In the dark waves of this misguided nation,
And only you behold the light of faith.
My lady, crime cries out for punishment
Deserved — as eclipsed virtue: champions —
The sun that sets today, rises tomorrow.

MARY

Faith's rule is to forgive.

RIZZIO

'Tis God's to punish;
But you, enthroned, must punish in God's name.
Indifference smears your name with infamy.
Arouse your lazy ire! The nation looks
To you and sees a lamp no longer burning.
Re-ignite in its heart an ardent flame —
Let it shine forth, and blaze!

To the Page, who has finished writing, and has arisen.

Page, are you finished?
Who leads the watch tonight? Go, call him here.

Exit Page.

Now, let the nation read your verdict plain,
And let the angry thunderbolt of vengeance
Strike down upon the traitors; like the plume
That bobs here on my hat, let them all bow
Before your feet in meek obedience!

SCENE 2

MARY

Douglas, a moment's not passed since I spied
Morton down by the palace gate. Quickly,
Take this command to him, for it requires
The seal of the chancellor.

Douglas takes the paper from the queen, looks it over, and waits.

What's this?

The virtue of a knight is blind obedience —
Do you deny this to a woman? A queen?

DOUGLAS

A queen? O, no — there's not a treacherous fibre
In all of Douglas' frame. But — you'll forgive me;
What's on this paper, ma'am, was writ in haste,
At such a sudden moment, and it lacks
The name of Henry, and his title, King —
Whom all the people hold in holy awe;
Whose name was always paired with yours. Perhaps —
Forgive my boldness — you might deign correct
The oversight?

MARY

The queen overlooks nothing
When she commands!

DOUGLAS

With contempt.

And so, from the queen's lips
I'd be commanded, and dismissed.

MARY

Do it!

DOUGLAS

Ardently.

For God's sake, please, your Majesty! Recall
This bloody order! Will you have a stream
Of blood lead, like a carpet, to your throne?

A woman's throne? Who was it set alight
The torch of discord in the palace walls?
Some hidden enemy? Or does the wind
Blow pestilence from France beyond the sea?
This verdict — comes it from some barcarolle
That's crooned in Venice? Or a Papal hymn
So loud it's heard in Scotland? Thirst for blood!
What's to be done? The chancellor — give way,
Remain...

MARY

Enough! Remember this well, Douglas!
I am unharmed by your insulting words,
But you've set out on unchivalrous paths.
Look that you not lose spurs or velvet sash.
Should Morton's trembling hand let fall the seal,
Then that shall lift it, that shakes the commonweal.
I am the queen!

DOUGLAS

Am I to lose my spurs?
You'd merely scrape the gold from them; the iron
Beneath will shine more brightly. They were not
Won by deceit, nor harping, nor by song;
Nor did I find them at this royal footstool.
The fields of Albion can tell you how
I came by them — in clashes, through sleepless nights,
Both mine, and those of noble ancestors —
A long and noble line, and every sword
Of theirs — like mine — served Stuart faithfully.

RIZZIO

Sometimes the sword, and sometimes... the stiletto...

DOUGLAS

You speak, wretch? You'll declare how Douglas repays
An insult? My spurned ancestors avenged
Themselves upon the Stuarts, upon the court!
Upon whom shall I wreak revenge? Come, puppet, coward,
With all your ringlets and your powdered cheeks;
Here, boy — I toss my gauntlet.

Throws down his glove.

Now, pick it up, indeed, if you've the strength.

RIZZIO

Picking up the glove.

I do, and so I repay you in kind.

Picks up some flowers lying on the table near the queen, and throws them at Douglas's feet.

Pick up the blooms — if you like flowers, sir.

Only such weapons ought to be unsheathed

Before the queen...

MARY

To Rizzio.

Set now his glove aside!

That is an order.

RIZZIO

Gladly. I've no sword,

And I find iron heavy for my hand...

Lend me your fan, my lady.

DOUGLAS

Furious

Yet again

He insults me, tossing my glove aside?

Your Majesty — though he may hide beneath

The shadow of your throne, still I shall find him!

He shall not sleep beneath a roof in flames!

I'll harry him, I swear. He will not fight?

Then I'll become a vulgar murderer,

But he'll be murdered! Always shall I chase,

And never cast the line until the kill

Which shall come sure as sunrise.

He will find me in the palace where he dared

To spread treason; he'll find me at the gates,

And in the courtyard; he'll find me in church;

He'll find me at the French court, the Papal throne,

Though he spread flowers before his feet, as now,

And cringe upon them, I shall seize his neck

And lift him up — I swear, a knightly oath...!

Coldly, with contempt.

Some day, your Majesty, when you are encircled
By courtiers, all at ease, the bitterness
Of rule set by for a moment's relaxation;
Some day when you are smiling — you'll behold me,
And, smiling like a flirty courtesan,
I shall present you with these blooms — dipped in his blood!

MARY

Rizzio! Get you from this room! Retire!
Douglas, behold: I am of Stuart blood
And know how to contemn.

She exits, Rizzio following. After a moment, Rizzio returns.

RIZIO

Tomorrow, Douglas.
I will await you in the gardens — there
Where the cool pantries stand — and by the sword
You'll lose your life, or gain your satisfaction.
He runs off after the queen.

SCENE 3

DOUGLAS

Tomorrow! Thank you! — for now wiping clean
The foul stains of the insult you'd just smudged there.
Tomorrow! — you will rest in a still grave...
Who would have thought he'd such courage in him?
He seemed so cowardly! His very hand
Trembled, throwing down the flowers before me...
Was that contempt? It cannot be, for him
To hold a Douglas in contempt! He knows
I threaten him with sure death...
In thought, then, more calmly.

Does he know
The swordsman's art? That base strummer of harps?
I couldn't make myself strike a naked chest...
I'll give him a well-tested sword, one longer
Than mine... I can defend my honour with
A shorter blade... O that the night would fall!

I'd like to sleep — the hours fly by in sleep...
When I awake, the heavens will be bright.

SCENE 4

Enter Morton.

DOUGLAS

Greetings, Grand Chancellor — I was just looking for you;
Come see how conjugal love develops
When a harp's sweet voice resounds.

He shows him the command.

Your seal, please.

MORTON

Looks at the document.

But where is Henry? There's no mention of him?
And I'm to seal this? But if I refuse,
The queen will say...

DOUGLAS

The queen has said already:
"Should Morton's trembling hand let fall the seal,
Then that shall lift it, that shakes the commonweal."

MORTON

She said that? In your presence?

DOUGLAS

I heard her
With my own ears.

MORTON

Her Majesty said that?

DOUGLAS

Ha, ha! I see the chasm that now yawns
Beneath your feet! You'd better seal it, then.

MORTON

But when the king finds out? What will he say?

DOUGLAS

That isn't hard to guess:

“The seal that from Morton's hand, trembling, fell
Is picked up by that hand, jangling with bells.”

Laughing, he exits.

MORTON

Wait, Douglas, wait! This news — so frightening!
Should I go to the queen? No — to the king!

Exits.

SCENE 5

Henry Darnley's apartments.

NICK

Reward me, Sire.

HENRY

For what?

NICK

For, like a knight

Returning from the fray without his arms,
So I return from battle sans my bells.

HENRY

Laughing.

O, what a loss!

NICK

Should Morton chance upon them,
He'll take them for his own, and my daily bread, too.

So how will you repay me for my loss?

All that I know of you is in those bells —

Just like old Midas' secret, in the earth:

'Thou shalt no longer laugh, Nick — mirth is dead!'

After a moment's thought.

* In Polish: Śmiać się nie będziesz, wesołość zabiłem. “You shall not laugh, I have killed gaiety,” with the subject of the second clause unclear.

Take the biretta off of Knox's head,
And Douglas' helmet from his. Let there be
No difference between men. This I ask.

HENRY

Ha, ha! What will you not dream up! Let Knox
Forever preach from pulpit in his cap,
And Douglas — let him defend the fatherland
Armed cap-à-pie. I'll have some new bells made;
You'll soon be prancing in new livery.

NICK

Besides the clothes, will Nick get anything?
Poor Nick is poor...

HENRY

What would you have besides?

NICK

Thinks.

Give me, my sire, a portrait of the queen.

HENRY

I'll give you mine.

NICK

I don't want yours! A shilling!

For there she's pictured in her crown. Not you —
Your face is on no shilling.

HENRY

Now I'm slain!

The sharp words of a jester pierce my chest.
I am a king — I am no king — I stand
Amazed myself at how long I have suffered
This blot upon my honour. Now, enough!
Enough humiliation! Wherever I be
I hear the smallest children say, "O, look —
The husband of the queen!" Why not "the king?"
"The husband of the queen." Such is my fame?
Falls to musing.

NICK

As if to himself.

He gave me no coin... I can take no more!
I'll find somebody else. This time, no miser.
I'm Henry's servant, Rizzio serves Mary,
And which is better off? When I arrived
Here at the court, unknown, with a sealed bag
Of laughter, I was given a motley suit,
A stick with a two-faced head for a knob,
A cap-and-bells, a belt, pendant therefrom
Two empty purses — empty still today,
And hanging at the same now threadbare waist.
At the same time as I, that Roman came —
His travelling bags — like mine — were filled with wind;
Two-faced himself (like my wand), on his back
A poor thin coat — thin as his purse was poor,
And now? He's brilliant in the finest velvet;
He's a plume at his cap and spurs at heel;
His purse is bulging with coins from which Mary
Sends him her constant smile of amity;
His back is covered by her royal robe —
If only he'd a jester like me, why
There'd be no telling between him and... that king.

He nods at Henry with a malicious grin.

His mind's a-slumber. Come, let's wake him up.
Your Majesty, is that a harp I hear?

HENRY

Where?

NICK

In the throne room...?

HENRY

You're a devil, Nick!

I hear it, and it torments me, that harp!
O, let the castle crumble into ruin,
And bury throne and harp...! Where can I rest?

I hear it in my sleep! I wake unrested,
And hear it at my rising! What's to do?

NICK

Put on my cap-a-bells. They'll drown it out.

HENRY

I'll slice those harp-strings with my own stiletto!

SCENE 6

Enter Morton.

MORTON

I've urgent news, your royal Majesty,
Important news... I'm well-disposed, you know,
Noble...

HENRY

Who doubts it?

MORTON

O hear me out, my prince!

HENRY

Prince?

MORTON

King! Hear me out! I cannot find the words...
This rescript — here — my seal is demanded...

HENRY

Looks it over.

What is this? Where's my name? On whose command?
No, there's been some mistake...

MORTON

Smiling.

For sure! The king's
Been left out by mistake...

HENRY

You doubt it, age?

I'll go and see the queen — It all shall change!

I'll go, and lash her for unfaithfulness...

No, I'll beseech her... Living long apart,

Our feelings had to shift; our disaccord

Is — almost my fault. Empty jealousy

Tore us apart, and then deceitful minds

Betrayed us — but the queen loved me once,

And still she does. Where is Queen Mary now?

MORTON

In her apartments, with Rizzio at her side,

Urging her, certainly, to change the order.

HENRY

With violence.

Rizzio! Rizzio! Has he risen so high

As now to snatch my crown? Who will deliver me

From Rizzio?

MORTON

Sire, I'm capable of that...

I offer myself. Accuse him of some crime.

You be the prosecutor, I'll defend him,

And he shall die.

HENRY

You wretch! That's your advice?

You want to seem guiltless in the queen's eyes —

As white as snow, your hands washed clean of blood!

I am to go to court? In purple? Crowned?

I, Henry, in some vulgar suit with Rizzio?

That vile Italian might just win acquittal

And have all the more license to insult me!

No! I will stain these hands of mine with blood —

His blood, which shall provide me a fat harvest:

Peace in my home, again... Yes, let me think...

What good is thinking? I've thought overmuch.

And my thought is as clear and bright as heaven,

As black as hell. I've pondered long, and coldly —

Today I'll act upon my thought, and boldly!
Furiously! Before the day is through
The grave that's dug today will have its due.

NICK

Spying Morton's joy, which he cannot conceal.
What is it, Morton? You've not found my bells?
For you were witty, now you're jubilant;
Give back my bells — be chancellor again.

SCENE 7

Enter Lindsay.

LINDSAY

My king, today I've got another king —
The king of birds! A young Norwegian falcon!
His mail and beams all silver — When he soars,
The eye can't spy him, on the roads of heaven!

HENRY

What? is he handsomer than my own falcon?

LINDSAY

Ha, ha! There's no comparison. He's lighter,
A trifle smaller — a toy for a woman's hand.
Once, Lady Hamilton, hunting by the Clyde,
Bore him upon her wrist; he hunted well —
Never returning without prey, his claws
Gilded with blood, like the spurs of a knight.
Come hunt today!

MORTON

The king is occupied.

HENRY

Indeed, my friend. I'm after other game
Today — and I must hold my quarry's scent.
Lindsay, the crown has fallen from my brow!
I am a woman's toy, a laughingstock!

I am denied both rule and ancestry;
I am a hollow king! Can you believe it?

LINDSAY

Such being the case, be off then to fierce vengeance.
Let someone thus insult my hunting skills,
And he would pay!

HENRY

Before this day's sun sets,
Help me, my Lindsay, to set out my nets.
You know the traitor's name? It's Rizzio!
That wretched foreigner! Tonight the moon
Will shine upon his fresh grave. He arrived
A vagrant, as a criminal he dies.
Will you aid me?

LINDSAY

With all my heart, I will.
'Twas he forbade me hunt in my own brakes!
I'll have my own revenge.

HENRY

And a reward —
His deer parks, for your hunting pleasure.

SCENE 8

Enter Douglas.

LINDSAY

To Douglas.
How is it Rizzio so cheated death?
The echo of your quarrel carried wide.
I heard...

DOUGLAS

You may have heard. But lest you bruit
The matter further — mind: a bell grows mute
When its tongue is torn out...

LINDSAY

Then join with us!

Today stilettos; today fresh revenge
Removes the enemy that's stained your honour!

DOUGLAS

Who dares entrust his honour to other blades?
I warn you — I desire that Rizzio live.
Tomorrow I'll hand you your vengeance; today
Is his to live. Today the breast of Douglas
Repulses your stilettos from his own!
If blood's to flow today, it shall be yours.
I don't suppose you itch to fight me, Morton?
And I'm no stag for you to aim at, Lindsay!
And you, Henry, would do well to remember
That your crown is of thinner metal forged
Than Douglas' sword! Put off until tomorrow
All thought of vengeance. He who does not do,
Is Douglas' enemy.

Exit.

SCENE 9

LINDSAY

What was that? Has Douglas gone mad from despair?

MORTON

Let not his threats cause you to waver, sire!

HENRY

No — But still, let's leave it till tomorrow.
I'm satisfied our anger should mature.
The hasty-blooming flower wilts too soon.
My knights, let no fear make you start your covert;
We hold our victim's life safe in our grip.
To Nick.

And you, my little clown, run to consult
The star-gazer about our bloody plans.

[END OF ACT I]

ACT II

*The apartments of the Astrologer. In the centre, a table piled with books.
At the windows, telescopes point toward the skies.*

SCENE I

ASTROLOGER

Solus.

All science is vain. Its fruit is bitterness!
To teach, to delve — and then to disbelieve,
In constant torment to expand the range
Of dreams — but ah, to read the constellations!
The stars, O, are they not the book of fate?
Predestination... madness to fight against it;
You who wring your bloodied hands — lift up
Your pale brows — curse your fate, if you so please,
But cease tormenting yourself with your conscience.
The stars are guilty of the blood you shed!
Your cradle rocked a murderer to sleep;
Your mother's milk was spiced with bitterness!
And you, O virtuous one, will die a wretch,
But cease your wailing. That merit was not your own.
If only, in your final agony,
You realise the vanity of virtue:
Virtue without one freely willing it —
What? All your life long you struggled... for nothing!
Thus it is to be lonely on the earth.
And can there be another world?

SCENE 2

Enter Nick.

NICK

Greetings, Father.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

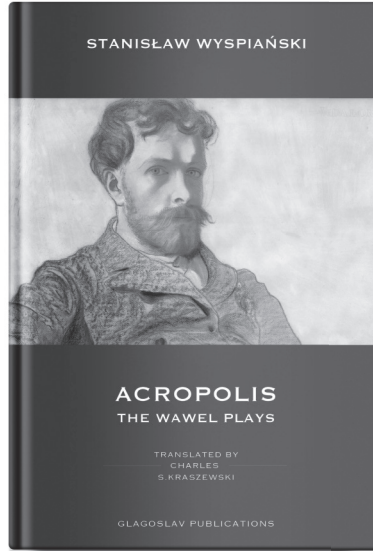
Juliusz Słowacki (1809–1849) is universally recognised as the father of modern Polish drama. His twenty-five plays, many of them inspired by the works of Shakespeare, are the only important dramatic works of the romantic period to be written expressly for the stage. Besides his plays, Słowacki is the author of digressive epics in the style of Lord Byron, prose works of a mystical bent, and some of the most beautiful lyric poems in the Polish language. He travelled to London in 1831 as a courier for the insurrectionist government during the November Uprising against Russia, and elected to remain in exile thereafter, returning to Poland only once, near the end of his life in 1848, to take part in the revolutionary activities of the “Spring of the Peoples.” Considered along with Mickiewicz and his friend Zygmunt Krasiński to be one of the “three bards” of Polish Romanticism, Słowacki achieved a great popularity in the early part of the twentieth century, which has only grown with succeeding years.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Charles S. Kraszewski (b. 1962) is a poet and translator. He is the author of three volumes of original verse (*Diet of Nails; Beast; Chanameed*). Several of his translations of Polish and Czech literature have been published by Glagoslav, among which may be found: Adam Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve* (2016) and *Sonnets* (2018), Zygmunt Krasiński's *Dramatic Works* (2018) and Stanisław Wyspiański's *Acropolis: the Wawel Plays* (2017). His translations of the poetry of T.S. Eliot, Robinson Jeffers, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti into Polish have appeared in the Wrocław monthly *Odra*. He is a member of the Union of Polish Writers Abroad (London) and of the Association of Polish Writers (Kraków).

Acropolis – The Wavel Plays

by Stanisław Wyspiański

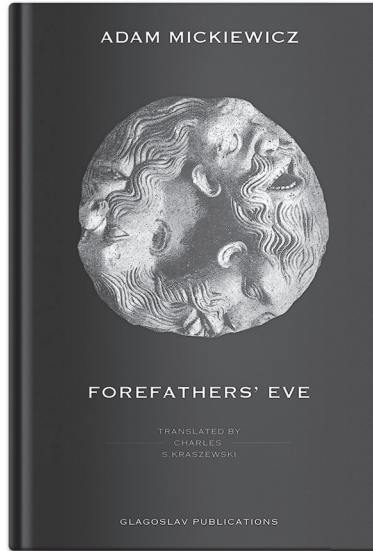


Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907) achieved worldwide fame, both as a painter, and Poland's greatest dramatist of the first half of the twentieth century. *Acropolis: the Wavel Plays*, brings together four of Wyspiański's most important dramatic works in a new English translation by Charles S. Kraszewski. All of the plays centre on Wawel Hill: the legendary seat of royal and ecclesiastical power in the poet's native city, the ancient capital of Poland. In these plays, Wyspiański explores the foundational myths of his nation: that of the self-sacrificial Wanda, and the struggle between King Bolesław the Bold and Bishop Stanisław Szczepanowski. In the eponymous play which brings the cycle to an end, Wyspiański carefully considers the value of myth to a nation without political autonomy, soaring in thought into an apocalyptic vision of the future. Richly illustrated with the poet's artwork, *Acropolis: the Wavel Plays* also contains Wyspiański's architectural proposal for the renovation of Wawel Hill, and a detailed critical introduction by the translator. In its plaited presentation of *Bolesław the Bold* and *Skalka*, the translation offers, for the first time, the two plays in the unified, composite format that the poet intended, but was prevented from carrying out by his untimely death.

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Forefathers' Eve

by Adam Mickiewicz

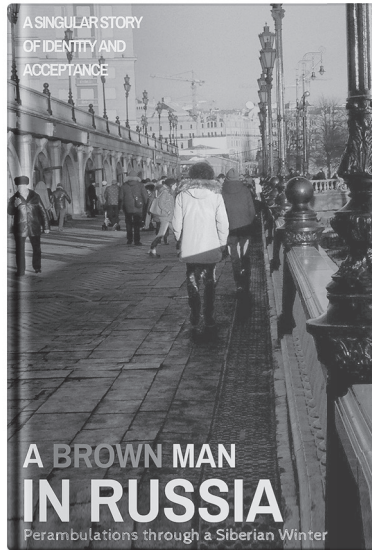


Forefathers' Eve [*Dziady*] is a four-part dramatic work begun circa 1820 and completed in 1832 – with Part I published only after the poet's death, in 1860. The drama's title refers to *Dziady*, an ancient Slavic and Lithuanian feast commemorating the dead. This is the grand work of Polish literature, and it is one that elevates Mickiewicz to a position among the “great Europeans” such as Dante and Goethe.

With its Christian background of the Communion of the Saints, revenant spirits, and the interpenetration of the worlds of time and eternity, *Forefathers' Eve* speaks to men and women of all times and places. While it is a truly Polish work – Polish actors covet the role of Gustaw/Konrad in the same way that Anglophone actors covet that of Hamlet – it is one of the most universal works of literature written during the nineteenth century. It has been compared to Goethe's *Faust* – and rightfully so...

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**A Brown Man in Russia -
Perambulations Through A Siberian Winter**
by Vijay Menon



A Brown Man in Russia describes the fantastical travels of a young, colored American traveler as he backpacks across Russia in the middle of winter via the Trans-Siberian. The book is a hybrid between the curmudgeonly travelogues of Paul Theroux and the philosophical works of Robert Pirsig. Styled in the vein of Hofstadter, the author lays out a series of absurd, but true stories followed by a deeper rumination on what they mean and why they matter. Each chapter presents a vivid anecdote from the perspective of the fumbling traveler and concludes with a deeper lesson to be gleaned. For those who recognize the discordant nature of our world in a time ripe for demagoguery and for those who want to make it better, the book is an all too welcome antidote. It explores the current global climate of despair over differences and outputs a very different message – one of hope and shared understanding. At times surreal, at times inappropriate, at times hilarious, and at times deeply human, A Brown Man in Russia is a reminder to those who feel marginalized, hopeless, or endlessly divided that harmony is achievable even in the most unlikely of places.

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More coming soon...

The crypt of Wawel Cathedral in Kraków is the Polish nation's greatest pantheon. Here lie the earthly remains of its storied kings and queens, and two of its greatest poets, Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki. At the conclusion of his speech at Słowacki's reburial in 1927, Marshal Józef Piłsudski commanded the guard of honour: "In the name of the Republic, I direct you, gentlemen, to carry this sarcophagus into the royal crypt, for he who rests within was no less a king." Słowacki, who once described himself and Mickiewicz as "two gods, on their own, opposing, suns" has rested alongside his great rival now for over ninety years. Although generally regarded as an eternal second to the national bard Mickiewicz, Słowacki is a great poet in his own right. Had Mickiewicz, who undoubtedly influenced him, never existed, Juliusz Słowacki would still have become an important European poet — especially as far as drama is concerned. The recognised creator of the modern traditions of Polish playwriting, Słowacki holds a position second to none in the creation of original plays in the style of Shakespeare — that darling of the European Romantics — whom many poets of Europe emulated and imitated, while never reaching the facility with the Shakespearean idiom achieved by Słowacki. What is even more striking is the fact that Słowacki achieved this high level of quality at a very early age. The dramas in Glagoslav's edition of *Four Plays* include some of the poet's greatest dramatic works, all written before age twenty-five: *Mary Stuart*, *Balladyna* and *Horsztyński* weave carefully crafted motifs from *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in astoundingly original works, and *Kordian* — Słowacki's riposte to Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve*, constitutes the final word in the revolutionary period of Polish Romanticism. Translated into English by Charles S. Kraszewski, the *Four Plays of Juliusz Słowacki* will be of interest to aficionados of Polish Romanticism, Shakespeare, and theatre in general.

