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## TRACKING GEORGE SAND'S WANDA: FEMINISM, POLISHNESS, AND ESOTERISM

**There are two French novels** written in the 1840s featuring a character named Wanda, after the legendary Polish princess; both works address the thread of esoteric societies and initiation. One of them is *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, written by George Sand around 1843; the other is Honoré de Balzac's *L'Initié* (part two of his *L'Envers de l'histoire contemporaine*), written four years later in Wierchownia [today, Verkhivnya in Ukraine]. The storyline of neither of them, at least when read for the first time, has much in common with the legend's invariant as known in Poland; still, they both do refer to it, even if the bond is disturbed and the French Wandas are contemporary characters (the latter is my argument). Balzac's as well as George Sand's connections with Poland are known and well examined, and hence the Polish clue is quite legitimate.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, knowing the complex relationship between the two popular French novelists<sup>2</sup>, one can assume, I should think, that Balzac's novel, which enters the (ironical) polemic with Polish

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance: S. de Korwin-Piotrowska, *Balzac et le monde slave. Madame Hanska et l'œuvre balzacienne*, Paris 1933; Z. Markiewicz, 'Mickiewicz i George Sand: dzieje przyjaźni i jej odbicie w literaturze', *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1961, no. 52/53, pp. 51–76; *idem*, 'George Sand et Mickiewicz. Leur correspondance', *Revue de Littérature Comparée* 1960, vol. 34, no. 108. On the reception of George Sand in Poland, see R. Bochenek-Franczakowa, *Présences de George Sand en Pologne*, Frankfurt am Main et al. 2017; C. Fournier Kiss, *Literatura, płęć i naród w XIX wieku. Germaine de Staël i George Sand w dialogu ze swymi polskimi siostrami*, Warszawa 2021; K. Nadana-Sokołowska, *George Sand – polskie spojrzenia*, Warszawa 2022.

<sup>2</sup> On the Sand–Balzac relationship, in relation to novel models, see, e.g.: D. Zanone, 'Romantiques ou romanesques? Situer les romans de George Sand', *Littérature* 2004, no. 134, 5–21; F. Rossum-Guyon, 'Sand, Balzac et le roman', in J. Goldin (ed.), *George Sand et l'écriture du roman, actes du XIe colloque international George Sand*, Montréal 1996, pp. 7–20; B. Díaz, 'Balzac, Sand: devenir romancier', in *ibidem*, pp. 23–37; I. Hoog Naginski, 'George Sand: ni maîtres, ni disciples', *Romantisme* 2003, no. 122, pp. 43–53. On Balzac's Wanda, see M. Siwiec,

national character, represents Wanda as, in a sense, a creature competitive to George Sand's Wanda. The Wanda of Balzac, *comtesse de Mergi*, a Pole on the distaff side, inherited from her ancestors the *plica polonica*—which, in a metaphorical sense, is a 'disease unto Polishness'. Sand's Wanda, Countess de Rudolstadt, Consuelo's mother-in-law, is not Polish, but only happens to travel through Poland. (That her ancestor Jan Žižka took part in the Battle of Grunwald on the Polish side is merely anecdotic; more importantly, perhaps, the line of succession is matriarchal in both novels). As it turns out, though, she does share some features with the Krakow princess. Like the Wanda in Balzac, she too suffers of a weird illness—she is namely subject to cataleptic trances. From this point onwards my focus will be on George Sand's novel.

Virtually all the categories mentioned in the title hereof with regard to *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* have already been addressed in research, but never in a combination like this. Let us begin with the last of the mentioned issues, being the most obvious one—that is, esoterism. The framework of esoteric initiation is crucial to the novel's narrative structure, featuring the subsequent fate of Consuelo. George Sand's *Consuelo* and *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* are both regarded as 'mystical novels'; in fact, Wanda is indirectly referred to in the diptych's first part, and her appearance *in persona sua* is announced. The diptych forms a multithread and multi-faceted whole, compared by some to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, regarded by Schlegel as the groundbreaking work of the modern age. A 1934 statement by Alain, frequently quoted by researchers, is worth quoting here: "George Sand est immortelle par *Consuelo*, œuvre pascale. C'est notre *Meister*, plus courant, plus attachant par l'aventure, et qui va au plus profond par la musique, comme fait l'autre par la poésie. J'y joins *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, car il faut suivre l'histoire du génie chanteur jusqu'à sa délivrance, où il chante enfin comme les oiseaux."<sup>3</sup>

The evolution unfolding through both novels has been aptly described as passing from the pattern of musical journey into the one of initiation journey, which in genre terms means the Gothic novel into the initiation

'Legenda o Wandzie i jej romantyczne reinterpretacje. Interferencje polsko-francuskie', *Rocznik Komparatystyczny* 2021, no. 12, pp. 51–70.

<sup>3</sup> Alain (É.-A. Chartier), *Propos de littérature*, Paris 1934, p. 135. See, for example: L. Cellier, L. Guichard, *Introduction*, in: G. Sand, *Consuelo – La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, Paris 1959, pp. XXIX–XXX; K. Wiedemann, *Les alliés des Invisibles: Consuelo – La Comtesse de Rudolstadt et ses lecteurs en Allemagne*, in Michèle Hecquet and Christine Planté (eds.), *Lectures de Consuelo – La comtesse de Rudolstadt de George Sand*, Lyon 2004, p. 441.

novel.<sup>4</sup> *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* features historical figures such as Frederick of Prussia and Voltaire, along with those shrouded by mystery, to name Count de Saint-Germain (known from Jan Potocki's *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*) and Trismegistos. Of importance are the direct references to the thought of Jakob Böhme and Emanuel Swedenborg. An essential part of the novel—with the plot situated at the Prussian court in Berlin and then at a castle in Czechia (Poland is a setting in passing), the background context being the persecutions of the Hussites—is marked by the protagonist's initiation into The Invisibles society which makes use of the forms and structures of freemasonic and Rosicrucian movements, and those of illuminism, the current that proved popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Gérard de Nerval regarded *le Mapah* [i.e. Simon Ganneau] as its exponent, along with Andrzej Towiański and Adam Mickiewicz).<sup>5</sup> Unquestionable is the importance of the concept and organisation method of the community of Pierre Leroux, who was particularly close to the author.

In what ways, though, the central esoteric current gets combined with Polish as well as feminist threads? I will try to demonstrate that they are combined, like in a lens, in the figure of Wanda, who acts as a priestess, or the mistress, of The Invisibles. The feminist, or perhaps, emancipation-oriented dimension of the writer's artistic activities is well known (just to mention Nancy K. Miller's findings)<sup>6</sup>, though usually the emphasis is on a 'moderate' and/or 'realistic facet of this feminism—given Sand's addresses from 1848.<sup>7</sup> In *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, it is doubtlessly visible in the way the protagonist is created as well as in the figure of Wanda, who advocated the ideas (previously expressed in *Indiana*) that women have the right to enter relationships based on love and to oppose marriage as a form

<sup>4</sup> See R. Bochenek-Franczakowa, 'Du voyage musical au voyage initiatique: *Consuelo* et *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* de George Sand', *Acta Universitatis Lodzianis. Folia Litteraria* 1994, no. 35, pp. 41–53 (also, see *eadem*, *George Sand*, Krakow 1981 pp. 15–7); I. Hoog Naginski, *George Sand. L'écriture ou la vie*, trans. N. Dormoy, Paris 1999, chap. VIII: '„Consuelo” et la „Comtesse de Rudolstadt”: du roman gothique au roman initiatique', pp. 221–55.

<sup>5</sup> See G. de Nerval, *Les Illuminés*, in *idem*, *Œuvres*, texte établi, présenté et annoté par A. Béguin et J. Richer, vol. II, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Paris: Gallimard – Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1978.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, N.K. Miller, 'The Arachnologies: the Woman, the Text and the Critic', in *eadem* (ed.), *The Poetics of Gender*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 270–88; F. Massardier-Kenney, *Gender in the Fiction of George Sand*, Brill 1999, pp. 15–52.

<sup>7</sup> See M.R. Renard 'Féminisme et religion dans l'oeuvre de George Sand', *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie religieuses* 2004, no. 2, pp. 168–9.

of bondage. Thus, Wanda is a figure of metaphysical and religious quest as well as social emancipative movements, the women's strife for self-assertion and self-determination. Considerations on the relations between diverse forms of religiosity and feminism, on the position of religious ideas in the emancipation of women, have already been embarked on in the analyses of George Sand's 'mystical' novels.<sup>8</sup>

Polish tropes in Sand's works have already been investigated.<sup>9</sup> Leaving aside her relationship with Chopin, let me only remark that in 1838 saw the publication of Sand's important comparative essay on fantastic drama, discussing Goethe's *Faust*, Byron's *Manfred*, and Mickiewicz's *Dziady (Forefathers' Eve), Part III*. The early 1840s, as she worked on *Consuelo* and *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, were marked by her intense collaboration with Mickiewicz on the texts published in *Revue Indépendante* on the latter's Collège de France lectures (including the one on Zygmunt Krasiński's *Nie-Boska komedia (The Un-divine Comedy)*), several of which she had attended. Based on her memoirs and letters, she attentively observed the Polish poet, expecting to process these observations into a 'Polish' novel.<sup>10</sup> *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* is, in a sense, a 'Polish' novel. The Polish émigré milieu was perceived as prone to religious and patriotic exaltation not only by Sand but likewise by Balzac, as attested by his *L'Initié*.<sup>11</sup> Scholars opine that her fascination with Mickiewicz manifested itself primarily in the character of Wanda's son Albert de Rudolstadt.<sup>12</sup> That he is modelled after the Polish bard, whom Sand considered to be a 'great ecstatician', is apparently testified by Albert's enthusiastic attitude, improvisational and prophetic skills, inclination to ecstasy, and specific religiosity.<sup>13</sup> Lithuanian and Chopinian threads have also been pointed to (the mention of Professor Ignatius Joseph

<sup>8</sup> See M.R. Renard, 'Féminisme et religion', pp. 163–78; M. Watrelot, 'Femmes et sociétés secrètes: de la maçonnerie des héroïnes dans *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*', in Hecquet and Planté (eds.), *Lectures de Consuelo*, pp. 387–400.

<sup>9</sup> See, esp., Z. Markiewicz, „Mickiewicz i George Sand”.

<sup>10</sup> As mentioned in Marie d'Agoult's and George Sand's correspondence; after Z. Markiewicz, 'Mickiewicz i George Sand', p. 74.

<sup>11</sup> See R. Forycki, 'Balzac i medycyna: fizjognomiczny portret Wandy, in A. Warakomska, A. Górąjek, M. Jamiołkowski, and Anna Damińska-Wójcik (eds.), *Dialog kultur: studia nad literaturą, kulturą i historią. Prace ofiarowane Profesorowi Tomaszowi G. Pszczółkowskiemu z okazji 65. urodzin*, Warszawa 2016, pp. 747–58.

<sup>12</sup> See R. Bochenek-Franczakowa, *George Sand*, p. 17. As Marie-Reine Renard argues, also the Sand novels termed 'mystical' or esoteric, one of them being, in her view, *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, were influenced by Mickiewicz, among others; see M.R. Renard, 'Féminisme et religion', pp. 166–7.

<sup>13</sup> See Z. Markiewicz, 'Mickiewicz i George Sand', pp. 71–4.

Martinowicz, professor of Physics at the University of Lemberg; Albert as a virtuoso musician). Therefore, Polish threads or tropes in this novel have hitherto basically been referred to Mickiewicz the man, rather than the poet, this ensuing from the personal acquaintance between the two writers.

Following Polish tracks in the period's French literature, it can be stated—as a rough simplification—that Polishness, or things Polish, were associated, indeed, with the 'Polish cause' related to the independence movement, the types of the brave (male) and the beautiful (female) Polander<sup>14</sup>, but more particularly with the liking for music linked to the sphere of transcendency and leading to ecstasis, as well as well-developed imagination (in Stendhal's opinion, it rendered Polish women different from 'cold' Frenchwomen) and tendency for religious and patriotic exaltation. The feministic threads have basically not been referred to the Polish ones, whilst both have been seen as related to religiosity. The Mickiewiczian traces are not my actual focus herein, albeit it would be worthwhile to compare the ideas advocated by the poet/professor at the Collège de France against those described in *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* (one of them being the 'eternal man' concept).

As I have mentioned, central to my present considerations is the character of Wanda as a creation combining feminism, Polishness, and esoterism. For such reading to be enabled, several contexts have to be set in motion. So first, the name of Wanda: in itself, perhaps, it is too little to address a Polish thread, though it should be borne in mind that Master Vincentius (nicknamed 'Kadłubek'), the mediaeval chronicler, first introduced it as the name of a Krakow princess, and thus it is strictly associated with the Polish legend. When Alfred de Vigny requested Countess Kosakovskaya to quote to him a few Polish poetical names, Wanda is one of those that come to the duchess's mind (she is Polish from her mother's side); thus, Wanda became the heroine of Vigny's poem subtitled 'A Russian story'.<sup>15</sup>

The Wanda legend was well known to the French since the sixteenth century, though this in a version somewhat, and increasingly, diverting from the one deemed canonical in Poland. As noticed by François Rosset, the legendary story contained a few elements that the French found particularly hard to accept (actually, not only them, as the rich Polish and Polish Latin literature).<sup>16</sup> Those were full political power wielded by a woman, her re-

<sup>14</sup> See F. Rosset, *L'Arbre de Cracovie: Le Mythe polonais dans la littérature française*, Paris 1996, part II: *Figurae*.

<sup>15</sup> See V.B. Bikoulitch and A.D. Nikolski, 'Une correspondance de Vigny avec la comtesse Kossakovskaïa', *Europe* 1978, no. 589, pp. 20–8.

<sup>16</sup> See F. Rosset, 'Wanda, du mythe au roman', *Dix-Huitième Siècle* 1995, no. 27, pp. 453–65.

luctance toward marriage and her suicidal death. The romances familiarising the reading public with the story of Wanda gained particular popularity in nineteenth-century France, including the anonymous novel from 1705 (reissued several times) entitled *Venda, reine de Pologne ou l'histoire galante et curieuse de ce qui s'est passé de plus mémorable en ce temps-là*, and the historical romance *Vanda ou la superstition* by Helena Ponińska, published in 1834.<sup>17</sup> As scholars believe, the latter could have inspired the *Wanda* by Vigny, even if his poem is much distant, in plot terms, from the novel that must have been well known at his time.<sup>18</sup> For my reading of *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* the context is formed of these two novelised French-language versions of the Krakow legend. My focus is not to track down the influences but rather, to see the movement of contextualisation which can reveal certain unobvious senses and/or meanings.

Looking closer at the three novels—the early eighteenth-century French one; the ‘Polish’ novel that was written in French, for use of French readers, by Duchess Ponińska, an important figure in Lwów’s cultural life in the former half of the nineteenth century; and, lastly, the work by George Sand, one can see how the legend’s reception evolved. While the anonymous author tries to accommodate and alleviate the story of Wanda by successfully resolving the conflicts and removing the tragic dimension from the queen’s history, Ponińska deliberately displays this very dimension whilst calling into question the sense of sacrifice (suggestive is the title mentioning the superstition that victimises the queen). George Sand steers clear from easy and happy solutions, finding however in the history of Wanda—no more identical with, just similar to, the legendary figure—a constructive and liberating aspect.

Who is George Sand’s Wanda, and what is it that enables her to converge upon her legendary Polish prototype? She is not the main protagonist, and she only appears at the novel’s end.<sup>19</sup> Apart from her name, the convergence

<sup>17</sup> *Venda, reine de Pologne ou l'histoire galante et curieuse de ce qui s'est passé de plus mémorable en ce temps-là*, La Haye [The Hague] 1705; H. Ponińska, *Vanda ou la superstition. Roman historique*, 2 vols., Paris 1834. The work was very soon translated into Polish and published as *Wanda, czyli zabobon. Romans historyczny*, trans. K.M. Grabowski, Wrocław 1834.

<sup>18</sup> W.T. Malinowski, J. Styczyński, *Polska i Polacy w literaturze francuskiej (XIV-XIX w.)*, Poznań 2016, pp. 320–1.

<sup>19</sup> For a monographic article on the figure of Wanda, see I. Hoog Naginski, ‘La nouvelle sibylle chez les Invisibles: discours et délire sacrés’, in Hecquet and Planté (eds.), *Lectures de Consuelo*, pp. 349–65; also, see *eadem*, *George Sand mythographe*, Clermont Ferrand 2007, chap. VIII: ‘L’épopée hétéroclite de George Sand: Wanda de Prachalitz, la première Comtesse de Rudolstadt’, pp. 215–42.

is primarily allowed by her position, which is otherwise usually taken by men: a featured position giving her power, along with the issue of marriage and freedom to choose a partner. Both earlier novels which depict the princess's story include plot twists which will also be used by Sand in reference to her non-legendary Wanda—primarily, the motif of Wanda's apparent death and her return to the world of the living, absent in the legend's earlier versions. *Venda, reine de Pologne* opens with Wanda jumping into the Vistula: shown as an offering to gods, this gesture is actually meant to save her from the unwanted marriage with Sisifroy. As it turns out, the queen gets saved: lifted by a priest out of the water, she finds shelter in a temple where, in a twist of fate, Premislas [Przemysław], the man she is in love with, soon turns up. Convinced of her death, he wants to commit suicide out of despair, like Shakespeare's Romeo; hearing her voice, he believes it must be a ghost. Finally, the lovers come across each other in the dungeon; their story comes to a happy end, contrary to the legend's 'canonical' version. In Ponińska's novel, for a change, the queen nearly dies in flames; Premislas eventually delivers her from the peril, but finally both lovers kill themselves. Wanda de Rudolstadt also seemingly dies (like in *Venda, reine de Pologne*) as she falls into a lethargy, is thought to be dead and gets buried. Marcus, her beloved one, takes her out of the coffin, which marks a start of her new life: like Premislas from the anonymous novel, he also believes she is dead; immersed in despair, he desires to embalm her body and bury her in a metal coffin, so that he would keep her.<sup>20</sup> And, like in the anonymous eighteenth-century novel, she is also taken for a ghost, a revenant who keeps vigil from the afterworld over his son Albert, who can see her in his ecstasies (when inspired, Albert considers himself at times to be Jan Žižka and identifies Wanda the mother with another Wanda, Jan's persecuted sister, or with Consuelo). During a meeting at The Invisibles' residence, Consuelo asks Wanda de Rudolstadt, constantly suspended between life and death, to the likeness of Persephone returning from the underworld, "Êtes-vous donc un spectre?"<sup>21</sup>

These storyline devices enable us to trace the other similarities between *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* and the earlier French works dealing with the Polish legend. The eighteenth-century novel's Wanda flees away of the pos-

<sup>20</sup> It is worth remarking that King Popiel of Julisz Słowacki's poem *Król-Duch* similarly fantasises on Wanda, as he also can at times encounter the ghost of his Beloved One.

<sup>21</sup> G. Sand, *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, Paris 1864, p. 108; English version: "Are you a ghost then?", in *eadem*, *The Countess von Rudolstadt*, trans. G. van Slyke, Philadelphia 2008, p. 288.

sessive and incestuous love of her brothers; Sand's Wanda escapes her unloved husband. The legendary queen in *Venda, reine de Pologne* and in Ponińska's novel venerates Slavonic gods; both works feature scenes of sacrifice and divination, and initiation scenes with certain religious aspects, with a young woman as an entrant. Scenes of a girl's initiation and prophesying are present in Sand's novel as well: Wanda finally assumes the role of a sybil (I will resume this thread below). In all the works concerned, of importance is Wanda's involvement in the combat against tyranny and in charity activities—supporting the sick and the harmed. The other shared motifs include those of the masked lover hiding his identity (in Sand, Albert assumes the identity of Livrani; Ponińska's Rytgier dresses up as Alexis, a Greek, both hide their faces from their beloved ones), music, images of internment, a faithful dog, a companion bird, the *hortus conclusus* topos, and more.

Queen Wanda is perceived by some as “the first Polish feminist”<sup>22</sup>. Such a concept obviously aims at showing her, beginning with mediaeval chronicles and Renaissance poems, as an independent ruler fighting for sovereignty of her land and for her own autonomy; this was in itself meant to stress the significant role of woman in the shaping of her own and her community's fate. In the case of the legendary heroine shown in line with the mediaeval perfect ruler model, such an approach seems to be relatively justifiable. Relatively—because there is a number of literary versions of the legend in question, not all of them highlighting Wanda's autonomy or even treating her as a positive protagonist.

The French novels that came before *Consuelo*, the legend's potential emancipative dimension is completely blurred. In *Venda, reine de Pologne*, the authority held by Wanda comes as an additional feature making her an object of desire, along with her beauty, while adding her no value. In the eighteenth-century novel, the queen is—in accordance with the requirements of the *histoire galante et curieuse* genre (this genological description being the novel's subtitle)—is a woman of the type desired by all men. Whereas Polish chronicles present her as a warrior and autonomous ruler, the French works have her transformed into an emotional character (this is true also for Polish nineteenth-century works related to Wanda) and render her entirely dependent on men, including the king-and-father; the brothers who offer her their passionate incestuous love; the commander of her troops; and, the numerous potential husbands. Her beauty and attractiveness are her curse—she must repeatedly flee from the male characters who perse-

<sup>22</sup> See K. Marciniak, ‘Królowna Wanda – pierwsza polska „feministka”?’ in I. Maciejewska, K. Stasiewicz (eds.), *Kobieta epok dawnych w literaturze, kulturze i społeczeństwie*, Olsztyn 2008, pp. 89–98.



cute her with their affections. She sees love as oppressive, but she only can be liberated by choosing one of her admirers. A happy ending is only possible through marriage; the latter turns Premislas into a king, thereby de facto depriving Wanda of power and authority—a solution that is not a wonder in an early eighteenth-century novel.

Although the Ponińska novel, in turn, has a tragical ending, its presentation of the protagonists doesn't divert from an image of typical romance heroine. The fates of Wanda and Rytygier are intertwined based on their first-sight love, yet it is cruel fate, the oath of her dying mother, Slavonic gods, and the scheming of a jealous voivode lead to both lovers' dying a suicidal death. It is worth noticing that none of the French versions emphasise the alien background of Wanda's beloved man—the motif of utmost importance in Polish reception of the legend. For a change, Ponińska introduces the thread, so important with Polish authors, of collision between the pagan and the Christian religion, suggesting that Wanda, the victim of a superstition, is paying the highest price for her loyalty to her gods. The novel even has a scene of a failed attempt of converting her to Christianity by an Italian missionary. On this occasion, a significant phase is used: Wanda is namely described as a “priestess of an imaginary goddess”, who, renouncing the assumed path, might become a wife and a mother.<sup>23</sup> Let us remind, in this context, that the religion of The Invisibles in George Sand's novel is eclectic and based on the republican values, it also opposes the oppressive Catholic practices superimposed on Albert by his father.

As far as Polish nineteenth-century works are concerned—i.e., those by Tekla Łubieńska, Zygmunt Krasiński, Juliusz Słowacki, or even Cyprian Norwid—one may pose a generalising statement that Wanda's problem, as shown by those authors, is not really the defence of her autonomy but rather, the unfulfilled desire to tie the knot with her beloved, the leader of a hostile country.<sup>24</sup> George Sand's perspective differs from that of Polish Romanticist authors; moreover, the figure she creates departs from the inertia of the Wandas of the French novels, radically deepening the protagonist's profile and presenting her incentives. She challenges the reifying/objectifying—or, to use Julia Kristeva's phrase, fetishising image of femininity typi-

<sup>23</sup> “Alors la vierge d'une dées imaginaire deviendra heureuse épouse et mère d'une génération illustre [...]”, H. Ponińska, *Vanda*, vol. 2, pp. 245–6.

<sup>24</sup> On the Wanda legend in Polish 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature, see, for example, D. Rajtaczak, ‘Wanda w świątyni dziejów’, *Studia Polonistyczne* 1980, vol. VIII, pp. 103–17; J. Maślanka, *Literatura a dzieje bajeczne*, Warszawa 1999; M. Rudaś-Grodzka, ‘Wanda’, in *eadem*, K. Nadana-Sokołowska, B. Smoleń et. al. (eds.), *...czterdzieści i cztery. Figury kobiece. Nowy kanon*, Warszawa 2016, pp. 628–42.

cal of the earlier French versions of the legend and, otherwise, strongly present in Romanticist novels (just to recall Esmeralda from Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*). Consuelo is also, to an extent, a type of woman desired by everyone, except that her subjectivity is much more powerful, her autonomy undisputable.

Albeit, contrary to her legendary namesake, Wanda de Rudolstad is not a queen but just a countess, she acts as the spiritual leader of The Invisibles. As Isabelle Hoog Naginski puts it, "Wanda est dotée d'une voix politique; elle assume pleinement son rôle publique", and becomes a "sublime vieillard".<sup>25</sup> It has already been observed that religion—which in its modern form was basically supportive of patriarchy—could in its archaic matriarchal forms favour the reinforcement of the social position of women.<sup>26</sup> The legend in itself is sometimes interpreted today in the context of Slavic beliefs, with Wanda appearing as a chthonic or aquatic deity (known to Renaissance poets, this thread was most fully developed in the literary soil by Stanisław Wyspiański). In the anonymous French novel, Wanda offers herself to the god of the Vistula and is fished out by a priest who instructs her how to proceed. The priest, who is a man (and thus has the double upper hand over the heroine, by means of his role and gender) gives Wanda advice, persuading her to support Premislas as a hero.

In Ponińska, along with the priests, a prophetess appears with whom Rytygier seeks a way out of the trap of the oath sworn to the gods by Wanda's mother, sacrificing her virginity to them in exchange for the throne and as a compensation for the burning of a holy forest. The prophetess, however, has no importance or power to decide about anything, and her divination would not prevent the tragedy. Importantly, Wanda herself, since she was sacrificed to the goddess Ziewonia (Dzewana) in the course of the most recent battle, is treated as her priestess, which makes Rytygier's troops reluctant to fight. In George Sand, Wanda definitely exercises priestly duties; she teaches Consuelo on her own, takes a high position at the temple, and is finally named a sybil.<sup>27</sup> This woman exercises a role previously attributed to men and, importantly, she is a woman fighting for women's freedom. This marks the first serious turn as versus the earlier versions.

<sup>25</sup> I. Hoog Naginski, 'La nouvelle sibylle', p. 353.

<sup>26</sup> See M.R. Renard, 'Féminisme et religion', pp. 173–4. Also, see M. Rudaś-Grodzka, 'Wanda', pp. 628, 636–9; J. Banaszkiwicz, *Polskie dzieje bajeczne Mistrza Wincentego Kadłubka*, ser. Monografie FNP, Wrocław 2002, pp. 63–149.

<sup>27</sup> In Ponińska's novel, the voice of the mother sending her daughter a letter from beyond the grave is compared to a mysterious voice of the sombre Sybil; see H. Ponińska, *Vanda*, vol. 2, p. 189.

The turn, or the change of roles, the assumption of what was culturally a male role—the role of powerfulness, attributed to men—is presented literally. The Wanda by George Sand appears at the meeting with Consuelo as a masked old man who wears a male-face mask with an attached beard. He calls himself a spiritual father of the girl who, in turn, is convinced she is talking to a man, a master to whom she entrusts her innermost secrets. The narrator would not tell, for quite a while, who that mysterious interlocutor is. Let us remark that the male costume, her father's armour, is donned also by Wanda of the *Ponińska* novel, however the gesture, in this particular case, is meant to reinforce her position and convince the people that she is capable of defending them. Sand resorts to cross-dressing not only in this particular moment, yet now the sexual transgression is problematised by the female protagonist. The point is not merely about demonstration of equal rights, though it is taken into account as well: Wanda's social authority as a priest (she consistently holds the male role—the religion as such being virtually unimportant) and master of a secret society is irrefutable. Removal of the mask and making it apparent to Consuelo that the master is female does not lower the rank of the functions to be decided by wisdom and degree of initiation, rather than sex or gender. Wanda becomes a *femme publique*. George Sand destroys stereotypes; in her approach, the gender related to function and mask gains on a performative character. Of importance to Wanda's identity is her oscillation between the public and the private spheres. She acts as a priest (one of the seven) carrying out the initiation of entrants—as well as the test Consuelo is earlier subjected—in a male disguise; speaking on behalf of the secret society, she uses plural forms. It is a mask in a strict sense, which does not stand, in this case, for lack of authenticity but adds its wearer an institutional dignity and repute. The teachings she delivers in this capacity are mainly about the double nature of human knowledge and religion, which feature a superficial layer combined with a latent, mystery-related and elitist one.

Consuelo's subsequent meeting with Wanda—a 'spiritual father' in whom this protagonist is, as she confesses, absolutely confident—is intimate: it is a confession that becomes reciprocal as it unfolds. Wanda puts her mask off and thus says of herself, revealing her identity, "cet être accablé et souffrant, dont la voix éteinte n'a plus de sexe, est une femme brisée par la douleur, les maladies et les inquiétudes, plus que par l'âge".<sup>28</sup> So, on the

<sup>28</sup> G. Sand, *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, p. 104; English version: "this overburdened, suffering creature whose feeble voice no longer has a sex is a woman broken by pain, illness and worry more than age.", in *eadem*, *The Countess von Rudolstadt*, p. 286.

one hand, she claims that sex or gender is of no relevance (which is reminiscent of Carrambé, the transgender deity coined by Aurora Dudevant in her childhood, mostly appearing to her in a female form, though); on the other, her femininity becomes the focal point of that meeting, so to put it. Wanda reveals herself as a woman, finding a common destiny with Consuelo: destroyed by incomplete love, she is eager to protect the girl against such fate. Teaching her independence, she assumes the role, as she herself says, not of a father now but a mother, one that the other protagonist never had. The author thereby exhibits a female community based on similar experiences. Remaining a woman, Wanda is constantly a teacher who communicates wisdom and truth. The difference between the two characters is generational as well; highlighting this aspect will prevent Consuelo from repeating the mistakes of her mother-in-law—also because Wanda, taking advantage of her position and capacity, can now decide her fate by changing the game and breaking down the principles of the patriarchal world.

Following the initiation tests Consuelo is subjected to, Wanda is reintroduced wearing the female attire of a sybil (a white robe and a veil), this being a public function, but—importantly—not a male one anymore. A proximity between this figure and the mythical Demeter has been emphasised.<sup>29</sup> A sacrificial discourse is associated with the Wanda legend, as the protagonists of both earlier novels take the view that one's personal happiness is less important than the community's happiness (this being more strongly expressed in *Ponińska*). This is an important indicator of the protagonists' Polishness. All of them submit to the will of an external instance; in *Ponińska's* novel, the vows taken by the mother who is the guardian of the patriarchy are binding and, eventually, fatal and disastrous to her daughter. In George Sand, Wanda is married off contrary to what her heart desires—to save the family, of which she thinks in terms of a sacrifice. Though she is finally fleeing the destiny, she will not find full happiness with her beloved, as scruples make her renounce him (the scruples being a common feature with the nineteenth-century Wanda) and thus pushes Marcus to marry another; she would like to save Consuelo from such a dilemma. This might be seen as a revisited motif of unhappy love and quitting one's personal happiness in the name of a 'greater good' determined by the oppressive social requirements, as present in Polish versions of the legend. What is more, the Wanda de Rudolstadt–Consuelo relationship becomes a negative of the ill relationship of *Ponińska's* Wanda with her mother: the latter defended the laws and rights set up by the male-ruled world, thereby condemning her daugh-

<sup>29</sup> See H. Bonnet, 'Triompher de la mort dans *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt?*', in *Lectures de Consuelo*, pp. 335–48; also, M.R. Renard, 'Féminisme et religion', p. 173.

ter to misfortune and unhappiness; the former appears to be a genuine defender of a young woman against the wrongful laws and rights. The countess will feel satisfied and fulfilled not through the desired relationship with her beloved man but through quietness and maturity she finally attains. George Sand affirms female senility—Wanda evaluates it higher than a man's old age, which for biological reasons is less radical—which furnishes the woman with communicable and transferable wisdom.

Most importantly, in her education of Consuelo, the countess defends the independence and autonomy of woman—not anymore in a male disguise but straightforwardly as a woman. The marriage imposed by Wanda on diverse grounds is the motif that reappears in all the versions of the legend. The *Wanda of Venda, reine de Pologne* and of Ponińska's version not so much resist marriage as such but runs away from unwanted suitors. In Sand, again, the freedom of choice of the partner is quite essential, and Wanda's voice is a manifesto of woman's independence. Wanda de Rudolstadt speaks not against matrimony in itself but against a relationship enforced by social restrictions she has fallen victim to. She simply names giving herself to a man against her will a bondage and compares such situation to prostitution:

[Dieu] t'a-t-il autorisée à abjurer ton sexe, à prononcer dans le mariage le vœu de virginité, ou celui plus affreux et plus dégradant encore du servage? La passivité de l'esclavage a quelque chose qui ressemble à ta froideur et à l'abrutissement de la prostitution. Est-il dans les desseins de Dieu qu'un être tel que toi soit dégradé à ce point?<sup>30</sup>

Wanda speaks in similarly negative terms of the virginity oath superimposed on women, seeing it as an unhuman and antisocial practice; in Ponińska's novel, Wanda's mother's oath that her daughter shall remain chaste in exchange for the throne finally cause a tragedy. Wanda de Rudolstadt renders Consuelo aware of her rights and feelings. Her own level of initiation and understanding of human nature is more advanced now, allowing her to proclaim the most vital truths concerning freedom, liberty

<sup>30</sup> G. Sand, *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, 102-3; English version: "Did he [i.e. God] authorize you to forswear your sex, to pronounce in marriage the vow of virginity or the still more hideous and degrading vow of servitude? Slavery's passivity has something of the coldness, the brutishness of prostitution. Is it part of God's design that a being such as you should be so degraded?", in *eadem*, *The Countess von Rudolstadt*, p. 285.

On G. Sand's views of marriage, in comparison with Balzac's approach, A. Michel, 'Structures romanesques et problèmes du mariage chez George Sand, d'*Indiana* à *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*', *Romantisme* 1977, no. 16: *Autour de l'âge d'or*, pp. 34-45 (for Consuelo's situation, see pp. 36-45).

and egalitarianism. All in all, it is not a man who tells Consuelo about the condition of woman, since: “Un homme n’eût pu vous dire quels sont dans l’amour les droits sacrés et les véritables devoirs de la femme. Ils ont fait leurs lois et leurs idées sans nous consulter [...]”<sup>31</sup>. To make these words powerful, not a distant old sage in a priestly attire but a close and afflicted woman, experienced by suffering. Wanda has the power to offer Consuelo to divorce Albert, which she grants her on the community’s behalf, as a sybil. At the remarrying ceremony, she repeats the truths she expressed earlier on, in an emotional way, during an intimate meeting, now imbuing them with universal appeal. Growing prophetically enthusiastic, she anchors individual freedom in the divine laws, as the foundation of love. Hence, three roles of Wanda can be discerned, linking three dialectic levels of existence, knowledge and initiation. She appears as a woman buffeted by life (thesis); a mistress/master speaking on behalf of her community (at this point, contradiction/denial, or rather, gender transgression comes to the fore: antithesis); and, lastly, a sybil who combines a public function with personal experience as a woman (synthesis) and leads to a theophany.

I have sought hereinabove to demonstrate that George Sand’s novelistic character by the name of a legendary queen is, in certain respects, similar to—and, simultaneously, different from—the Wandas from the French fictionalised and dramatized versions of the Polish legend. This protagonist has certain features whose constellation can be regarded as distinctive to Polishness as perceived by the French reader; a Polishness that is not infrequently fascinating as it is incomprehensible. These features include the leadership role of woman and its related sense of mission, as combined with the need to make sacrifices, self-sacrifice and sublimity, tragic personal fate, unrequited love, entanglement in plots related to struggle for power and autonomy. Yet, there is no doubt that by making use of the motifs and threads present in the earlier works on Wanda, the French writer detaches them from the legend and their Polish context (as I have remarked, *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* is not a ‘Polish’ novel in terms of plot and storyline, though it can be ‘Polish’ in a metaphorical sense) and brings out of the legendary potential specific feministic and emancipatory aspects, as otherwise absent in her other contemporary authors addressing the subject. Sand would not completely neglect or negate the adverse aspects of the legendary Wan-

<sup>31</sup> G. Sand, *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, 105. English version: “A man wouldn’t have been able to tell you a woman’s sacred rights and true duties in the domain of love. Man have made their laws and formed their ideas without consulting us [...]”, G. Sand, *La Countess von Rudolstadt*, 287.

da's personal history, but rather overcomes them. Once a miserable victimised sufferer, Wanda de Rudolstadt turns into a sybil, a woman who is mature and aware of her convictions, one who would not leave the public sphere for an intimate sphere. Conversely, she finds in the public activity the rationale behind her existence, after the failure of her personal life.

In all the earlier versions, the fate of princess Wanda breaks off in her youth years, owing to either a tragic death or, as in *Venda, reine de Pologne*, a salutary marriage. In George Sand's and Balzac's novels, the Wandas live longer, though it is a sort of afterlife; not young anymore, they appear physically and psychically damaged, displaying hysterical and mystical inclinations, affected by a mysterious illness. These protagonists are drained and exhausted, literally and metaphorically, for the Wanda legend canon is getting exhausted and the novels' characters are drifting further and further away from their legendary predecessor. It is, perhaps, also a sign of deconstruction of the legend getting decomposed into no-more-matching particles, unidentifiable in isolation. Such deconstruction dialectically leads toward problems that prove to be modern rather than historical. Balzac plays with the metaphor of Wanda's sickness in order to enter an ironical polemic with the idea of Polishness (the same metaphor, not ironical at all, is played with by Norwid in his *Wanda*). George Sand, for a change, exploits the elements associated in her time with Polishness, but her novel keep Polishness hidden—to the benefit of a combined feministic and esoteric dimension. Consequently, Sand only makes use of shreds of the narratives of yore, and shifts the emphasis from the symbolic into an existential sphere, creating Wanda as a heroine who struggles for female subjectivity and empowerment.



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#### ABSTRACT

The following is a proposed reading of George Sand's *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, focused on the character named Wanda de Rudolstadt, mistress of a secret society of 'The Invisibles'. Named after the legendary Polish princess, Wanda combines feminism, Polishness, and esoterism. The context is formed of two romance novels popular at the time in France, which rendered the reader familiar with the Wanda legend: *Venda, reine de Pologne ou l'histoire galante et curieuse de ce qui s'est passé de plus mémorable en ce temps-là*, published anonymously in 1705, and *Vanda ou la superstition* by Helena Ponińska, 1834. The point is not to propose an insight into the influences; the focus is, instead, on the movement of contextualisation which

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reveals unobvious senses or meanings, basically boiling down to expiration of the legend narrative that leads to its fragmentation and reformulation. Consequently, highlighted is the modern problem of struggle for female subjectivity and empowerment in George Sand's novel, one that only makes use of shreds of the narratives of yore.

K E Y W O R D S

George Sand, Helena Ponińska, feminism, Polish legends (Wanda),  
novel

