

Natalia Yakubova\*

## **Phantasies of Restored Innocence: Traces of the Actress Irena Solska (1875–1958) in the Dramas of Jerzy Żuławski (1874–1915)**

### **Abstract**

Psyche in *Eros and Psyche* (1904) by Jerzy Żuławski was one of the most important roles of Irena Solska (1875–1958), which she played for twenty years. The playwright confessed that he also had written *The Myrtle Wreath* (1903) and *Ijola* (1905) specifically for this actress. In spite of the fact that reviewers often criticized the texts and tried to “protect” Solska from being associated with the author’s intentions, she probably identified herself with them to a great extent. Given the lack of detailed accounts of Solska’s performance in the criticism, these texts become the most important source, although also a controversial one. They reveal some important impulses of Solska’s creativity. Her desire “to restore innocence” in her onstage creation was a way to overcome the repressive reality of her past and the burden accumulated through “the matrilineal heritage.”

### **Key words**

Irena Solska, Jerzy Żuławski, female creativity, matrilineal heritage, constructions of innocence, women’s autobiographical writing

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\* Institute of Art Studies, Moscow  
Email: natalia\_yakubova@mail.ru

In 1975 the famous writer Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz wrote about his visit to Fribourg, Switzerland.<sup>1</sup> The Cathedral of St. Nicholas in this town is decorated with the stained glass of the great Polish artist Józef Mehoffer (1869–1946). In his essay, Iwaszkiewicz writes that in the windows of the Swiss cathedral he recognized many well-known characters of the Cracow artistic community of the early 20th century, including Jerzy Żuławski, a famous writer, and Irena Solska, a theatre star of that time. “Jerzy Żuławski as Herod is sitting at the feast table [...] and, who is dancing before him as Salome? Solska herself, in a short tunic.”<sup>2</sup>

In fact, however, the Salome scene cannot be found on the windows of the Fribourg cathedral. Irena Solska is present as Helvetia on the stained-glass *Our Lady of Victory*. In this scene, Helvetia is thanking the Virgin Mary for victory in the battle of Morat (1476). The Virgin Mary is the central figure of the composition, while Helvetia is standing showing her back, her face turned right just enough to recognize Solska’s profile. Helvetia’s whole body is covered by an enormous decorative cloak.

Yet, Iwaszkiewicz had reason to write about Solska as Salome. In 1905, Jerzy Żuławski, who was not only a writer but also a theatre critic, wrote a lengthy essay on how Solska *could* play this role. Solska never did. What interests me, however, is a detailed account of how Żuławski interpreted Solska’s creative individuality, which will help me to understand what her impact on the creation of his plays could have been. I consider this task part of the work of reconstructing the complex dynamics of how the impulses of original female creativity are read, reinterpreted, and appropriated in the works of male authors and then re-appropriated by the actress in her performance.

Żuławski dedicated his essay to Irena Solska and refers to her throughout the whole text. He explains that she asked him to inform her should he encounter something interesting abroad. The impulse to write this essay was a performance of *Salome* seen in Munich. The title part was played by Lotte Sarrow, and while everybody was fascinated by her

<sup>1</sup> J. Iwaszkiewicz, “Kraków”, [in:] idem, *Podróże do Polski* [Travels to Poland], Warszawa 1977, pp. 49–64.

<sup>2</sup> In this text, I am citing from the Polish sources using my own translations. Iwaszkiewicz refers to the most powerful images of Solska that from the 1970s began to dominate how the actress was remembered: graphic *Sylwety* by St. Eliaasz-Radzikowski (Silhouettes 1908–1909) and the novel *622 upadki Bunga* by Witkacy (622 Downfalls of Bungo, 1910–1911, first published in 1972).

acting, the author of the essay was thinking that she was wrong in her interpretation, and that only Solska would be able to play Salome adequately.

Żuławski writes that Lotte Sarrow and almost all other performers see Salome as “an overindulged, capricious, hysterical and [...] spoiled child of the court.”<sup>3</sup> The correct reading of Salome – which, as he believed, only Solska could convey – would be based on the understanding that the foremost feature of Wilde’s heroine is her chastity.<sup>4</sup> Żuławski points out that her virginity is preserved despite the mores of Herod’s court. He also explains that “the most zealous guardians of their own chasteness are the most sensual people,”<sup>5</sup> and that it is especially true of women. However, he admits that a trace of Wildean perversity is also known to this character and it is the reason why she falls in love with Jokanaan. He concludes that there is something mystical in the nature of Salome’s desire.<sup>6</sup>

“I was a princess, and thou didst scorn me. I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste, and thou didst fill my veins with fire.”<sup>7</sup> Żuławski claims that these words are usually omitted in the theatre productions, but they represent a key to the character. According to the Polish author, the famous dance makes sense only when it is clear that Salome is sacrificing her chaste body. By demanding Jokanaan’s death she reclaims the price of this sacrifice.<sup>8</sup>

In his own plays, written for Solska, Żuławski created a specific tension between the heroine’s state of innocence and a quite radical manifestation of her desire. In *Wianek mirtowy* (The Myrtle Wreath, 1903), the plot is driven by the heroine’s anxiety around chastity. She is about to marry an older man who saved her family from financial ruin. Janka takes part in the marriage deal quite consciously. To manage her chastity as a market good means for her to enter the world of adults. In a sense, the situation is probably sexually arousing for her. Soon, however, chastity takes on a rather metaphysical value. Janka realizes that the “state of innocence” played an important role in her teenage love of Władek, a childhood friend. Once she is married, the unique chance to bring this

<sup>3</sup> J. Żuławski, “Z Monachium” [From Munich], [in:] idem, *Eseje* [Essays], Warszawa 1960, p. 244 (translation mine).

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 243.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 250.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 250–251.

<sup>7</sup> O. Wilde, *Salomé*, Boston 1996, p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> J. Żuławski, “Z Monachium”, op. cit., p. 255–259.

kind of relationship to its full gratification will be lost. So she decides to give her virginity to Władek right before her marriage to another man. In *Wianek mirtowy*, she visits him before going to the church. Her plan, however, fails, because it is completely unacceptable to Władek; thus, he prefers a suicide.

*Wianek mirtowy* was criticized for the incredibility of the female character. A critic in *Gazeta Lwowska* wondered if it was possible for a maiden to call for Władek's love as Janka did, and claimed that if read as "a character from life," the heroine was probably "a strumpet who boasted of the treasures lost long ago."<sup>9</sup> However, he concluded by suggesting that Żuławski surely didn't want the audience to understand the character as "a life type" but rather had created "the symbol of the power of demonic woman."<sup>10</sup> Other critics, who didn't go so far and preferred to think that Janka was designed as a realistic character, could not explain her behaviour except as a pathology or "demonic instincts."<sup>11</sup> In his response published in *Gazeta Lwowska*, Żuławski insisted on the credibility of the character and even claimed the plot was based on a true story.<sup>12</sup> He praised the critic of *Gazeta Lwowska* for coming closest to his concept, but at the same time confessed that he "had no intention to present the destroying power of the woman-demon": "Janka by no means is a demon – to my mind, she had to be a maiden truly innocent, truly confident about the fairness of her behaviour and unconscious of the fact that she, the weak one, destroys two male creatures that are actually strong."<sup>13</sup>

In his next play, *Eros i Psyche* (Eros and Psyche, 1904), this tension between "innocence" and "corruption" was explained by the plot of megalomania. Psyche, an Arcadian princess, is doomed by the god Eros to leave her idyllic homeland and to wander through radically different ages and different reincarnations. In pagan Alexandria she longs for Christ as the God of universal love. In a medieval convent she misses sun, joy and life. In her next reincarnation, that of a princess in the Italian Renaissance, she has had enough of the joy of life, too. In the time of the French

<sup>9</sup> A. Krechowicki, "Z teatru" [From the Theatre], *Gazeta Lwowska*, 1903, nr 202, p. 4 (translation mine).

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> [N.N.] "Z teatru" [From the Theatre], *Kurjer Lwowski*, 1903, nr 245, p. 6 (translation mine).

<sup>12</sup> J. Żuławski, "Głosy publiczne" [Public Voices], *Gazeta Lwowska*, 1903, nr 204, p. 4 (translation mine).

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 5.

Revolution, Psyche feels that love for the people could finally replace the outdated love for a man. Then, in contemporary society – which is profiting from the benefits of the bourgeois revolution – she awakens to the fact that her role has been reduced to that of the mistress of a cynical rich man. In every epoch, Psyche always looks for the eternal god Eros but her partner is always Blaks, who personifies inert matter and is doomed to go through reincarnations as well. Whoever she happens to be, at a certain point the heroine reminds herself about the existence of a different definition for “love,” which somehow she has forgotten and wants now to reanimate. From this perspective, “Eros” and “Arcadia” in the first scene can be understood as something like paradise before the fall, where “love” didn’t (or, wouldn’t) contaminate “innocence.” Since Psyche has rejected, one after another, every “contaminated,” partial version of love, in the finale of the play she is given the chance to restore Arcadia – and by doing so, to save the world.

The next play Żuławski wrote for Solska didn’t rely on a myth, but easily could fit the format of one of the scenes from *Eros i Psyche*. In *Ijola* (1905) the tension between the “innocent” and “corrupted” versions of the same woman is the result of the fact that the heroine is a lunatic, and doesn’t even know that every night she visits an artist who believes her to be a vision of ultimate purity. So he makes a statue of the Virgin Mary to look precisely like his night guest Ijola. Unfortunately, the woman happens to be the wife of an old knight (the whole plot takes place in medieval ages), and this knight was careless enough to leave his wife alone in the castle for a long time. His return makes Maruna (for this is Ijola’s true name) face the rumours about her strange night behaviour. She insists that she was faithful (besides the fact that she doesn’t love her spouse and, when with her nurse, admits to dreams of love and passion completely different from her experience with her husband). Some other strange things happen. A traveller, who used to know Maruna as a young girl called Jagna, comes to her to claim the passion she allegedly had for him some time ago, but she proudly denies that anything like this existed between them at all. Denounced by her husband (and his tribunal) as a witch, Maruna-Ijola declares that she is fully happy that she was loved by the artist and offers herself to him as a loving woman, not as an image of the Virgin Mary. She is already imprisoned, so she hardly can hope for a gratification of her feelings. But the fact that the artist rejects her as a witch can but deeply disenchant her, of course. When the artist changes his mind and comes to liberate her, she, in turn, rejects his offer, claiming that true love exists only in a dream.

*Eros i Psyche* was a success throughout 20 years, but *Ijola* only had several performances. In spite of this difference, not only *Ijola*, but *Psyche* as well, were hardly described in detail in contemporary criticism. In both plays Solska was praised for the stylish performance, her appearance referencing abundant associations with the visual arts (Pre-Raphaelite artists generally, or specifically Burn-Jones, or Rops). This praise of the visual side of the performance, however, either silently or overtly admitted the lack of dramatic force.

To get the idea of both performances, however, it is important to understand that most probably the audience wouldn't agree with the critics' judgments. As for *Ijola*, Solska herself wrote about this fact in a letter to Zofia Hanicka. After Ludwik Solski became the head of the Cracow municipal theatre some critics constantly attacked the new team in general, and *Ijola* (re-staged in Cracow after the Lvov premier) became their prey as well. Solska writes about the fact that in Cracow the audience's appreciation was even higher than in Lvov, but the bad reviews could have influenced the public.<sup>14</sup>

As for *Eros i Psyche*, the unusually long run of the play can attest to the appreciation of the theatre-goers. But we can read about the split between the audience's opinion and that of the critics in many reviews that accompanied renewals or guest performances of the play. Just a year after the opening night, when the Lvov production was transferred to Cracow, critics expressed their surprise with its persistent success. This surprise only grew through the years, culminating in 1921 when the famous critic Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński proclaimed that the success of the play was in

<sup>14</sup> *Listy Ireny Solskiej* [Letters of Irena Solska], red. L. Kuchtówna, Warszawa 1984, p. 63. She also wrote about the issue to Zofia Hanicka in her letter 7.XII.1905. Zofia Hanicka was her only friend whom Solska made her confidant in the love affair with Żuławski. So, Solska often asked her to contact Żuławski in the issues which she somehow had failed to explain to him herself. From this letter it is clear that Żuławski was irritated that *Ijola* announced for the Tuesday performance 5.XII had been cancelled and was suspicious that this decision had been influenced by the bad reviews. Solska explained to Hanicka that the reason was her illness, and wrote extensively about how sick she and her child were. Then she writes: "probably you have [his] address, please, write [to him] that it was not because of the reviews that the play was cancelled – but because of my illness[.] – On Sunday, if I am better, I will play, because the reviewers and the public are two camps – at this moment opposite ones[;] – on Tuesday the theatre would have been full as well – so, if I am able to move and if my cough ceases, I will play." (Jerzy Żuławski Papers in Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature, Warszawa, inv. nr 1892, v. 4, p. 71, translation mine).

“giving the audience an opportunity just to stare through four hours while giving them an illusion of thinking and even that of thinking philosophically.”<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the same critics who expressed their dissatisfaction with the quality of Żuławski’s writing wanted to underline that Solska’s creation should be judged – and praised – regardless of it.

Somewhat more varied press opinions can be found about the first play Żuławski wrote for Solska, *Wianek mirtowy*. In this case, the critics tried to situate themselves vis-a-vis controversial moral questions raised by the text and this determined their attitude towards Solska’s acting as well. Even then, however, the critics judged Solska’s acting *against* the whole content of the play. Their evaluations were so different, that it is impossible to reconstruct from their comments *how* Solska played Janka. Some critics escaped from the discussion of Janka’s conscious managing of her sexuality into the claim of unrealistic monstrosity of this character. These reviewers made the statement that Solska, by her intelligent acting, her personal charm and harmony in her means of expression elevated this character, made it nobler and acceptable at least to a certain extent. At the same time other critics explicitly denied this harmony and even personal charm, for example in such words: “First of all she lacked essential feminine charm, that powerful weapon in the hands of this kind of maiden-demon. Mrs. Solska was a hysteric only, who sometimes was abject, never charming; she was a sick woman, and not a symbol of the maiden perversity.”<sup>16</sup>

Although critics tried to “protect” Solska from being associated with the author’s intentions, most probably she herself identified with them to a great extent. In 1904–1906 the actress and the playwright were in a secret romantic relationship, evidenced by their extensive correspondence.<sup>17</sup> In her letters Solska constantly addressed Żuławski’s writing as their common concern.

In 1912, some six years after their definite romantic split, in the preface to the 3rd edition of *Ijola*, Żuławski acknowledged Solska’s impact on his plays, referring to such roles as Janka, Psyche and Ijola: “[Y]ou passed before my eyes as a girl with the myrtle wreath, monstrous in her innocence and perverse in her simplicity – you followed my thoughts

<sup>15</sup> Boy, “Z teatru” [From the Theatre], *Czas*, 1921, nr 140, p. 2 (translation mine).

<sup>16</sup> A. Krechowiecki, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> About 150 letters in Jerzy Żuławski Papers in Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature, inv. nr 1892, v. 1–4. 29 letters are published in: *Listy Ireny Solskiej...*, op. cit.

as a Soul that longed after the ultimate love [...] at last, you embodied my dream about Jagna – Ijola – Maruna which is now written down in awkward words in this book.”<sup>18</sup> This phrase is by no means a gallant exaggeration.

So, in the situation where, in regards to Solska’s three very important roles, I cannot rely on any evidence available in theatre criticism, what I can try to find the traces of the actress in those “awkward words” that are written down.

Solska’s letters and her autobiography written after the Second World War will help me to understand such characters as Janka, Psyche and Ijola. They will also help me to question the line of interpretation that is prompted by the influential book *Actresses on the Victorian Stage: Feminine Performance and the Galatea Myth* by Gail Marshall, although some of my examples – *Eros i Psyche* and *Ijola* – seem to fit Marshall’s concept almost ideally.

Gail Marshall argues that “much of the professional and personal history of the Victorian actress is defined by her negotiation with the imposition upon her of the contractual dimensions inherent in the sculpture metaphor; and that this metaphor is essentially authorised, and its dimensions determined, by the popular Ovid myth of Pygmalion and Galatea.”<sup>19</sup> In what Marshall labels as “the Galatea-aesthetic,” the bodily presence of the women onstage tends to be converted into “eternal beauty,” by “giving ‘chaste permission’ to desire.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, by surrendering to the “sculptural metaphor,” an actress of the Victorian stage gained social respectability but constrained her creativity to a great extent. She is much praised when she preserves the integrity of a statue (who displays minimal movement, let alone dramatic passion); her heroines should patiently wait for the animating gesture of a male creative power. Marshall gives numerous examples of how the Victorian critics highlighted the “personal charm” of the English actresses, which, as she argues, suggests that their performances rather lacked dramatic tension. Although Marshall contrasts these opinions to those written about French actresses who seemed to engage much more with the dramatic material rather than being comparable to antique statues, in fact, I think, the “sculpture

<sup>18</sup> J. Żuławski, *Ijola*, 3rd edition, Lwów 1912, pp. V-VI (translation mine).

<sup>19</sup> G. Marshall, *Actresses on the Victorian Stage: Feminine Performance and the Galatea Myth*, Cambridge 1998, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> As she writes in connection with Helen Faucit, *ibidem*, pp. 51–55.



metaphor” and “Galatea-aesthetic” was present in all European theatre of that time, although probably it was not necessarily always connected with the sculptural ideal of classical Greece.

As for Żuławski, it seems that at least in *Eros i Psyche* and *Ijola*, he created for Solska precisely such roles in which she could display her decorativeness, to show off her “charm” in a maximum of “live pictures.” These dramas don’t lack “sculptural metaphors.” Psyche is an innocent female creature – additionally an “ancient” one – so moulding her after the patterns of Greek sculpture seems to be inevitable. In a sense, she is animated by the male god Eros when he awakens in her the joys of love. Subsequently, it is Eros who somehow “prescribes” her new forms in which she is reincarnated in the different historic epochs. It is also he who finally liberates her from all these historical costumes and allows her to return to the eternal beauty of the original Psyche. As for *Ijola*, this heroine appears before the religious medieval artist already as a live sculpture. During her trial he tells about the love he felt toward the night apparition, and these are the words that animate Maruna with love which she never knew before. In both texts the central character is understood as a vessel for the timeless feminine ideal which needs a creative male power to be unlocked and, in a way, to awaken from the state of unconscious dreaming of the “untrue” versions of mundane women.

It seems that Żuławski superimposes what Marshall calls “the sculptural metaphor” upon Solska and constrains her within the patriarchal story of a “Galatean myth.” And in fact, the reviews of the plays concentrate precisely on the “charm” or visual values of Solska’s performance and by and large ignore dramatic episodes in which the heroine appears assertive. Was Solska’s cooperation with Żuławski just a story of surrender to a “Galatean myth?”

What follows is an attempt to read what hypothetically Solska could load “the charm” with. What could her Psyche fascinate with, even in the 1920s?

I would like to argue, that if the critics and audience were not always (if at all) able to explain in words what was especially intriguing about Solska’s performance and fell back on such formulaic reasoning as “her personal charm,” this doesn’t mean that her stage presence could not offer more than pleasing good looks. After all, who said that it was *conforming* charm and not *disturbing* charm?

Writing her autobiography was a major concern for Solska in the 1920s–1930s (this version of the text was unfortunately lost during WWII), and then in the after-war period of her life. As I argue elsewhere,

she felt an urgent need to reaffirm the type of creativity which she considered muted under the dominance of the director-centred theatre paradigm.<sup>21</sup>

Solska refused to conform to the aesthetic norms of the period, which insisted on the dissociation of women's creativity from their body and sexuality. In her writing, however, she never addresses these issues directly in connection to her stage creations, but rather reaffirms these values with what can be called "embodied writing."

For example, in order to transmit the impulsiveness which one used to create a role in her time (i.e., at the turn of the century), she writes in terse, energetic phrases. But also when she refers to the offstage events, the ability to get emotionally involved with everything that happens around her becomes one of the main characteristics of her personality. This, in turn, is connected to understanding acting as a means to channel sensibility into creativity. "Unbelievably lively, impulsive, I had to have an illusion of life – which would be far from the bitter reality."<sup>22</sup> This phrase refers to the suicide of her fiancé, which took place when she was sixteen. The desired "illusion of life" is, of course, theatre, which begins to draw the heroine after this tragic event in her life. In fact, the autobiography refers to numerous aspects of "the bitter reality" and the author's extra-sensibility reveals its dark side.

Particularly, Solska writes about a fear of madness that accompanied her from her childhood. She was afraid of inheriting a psychological disease from her grandmother, and even attempted suicide to escape a similar fate.<sup>23</sup> This fear most probably resulted for Solska in the constant attempt to constrain her expression of emotions, by hiding passions under a mask of aesthetics, or behind a pose which could express a resigned sacrifice. In her autobiography Solska often recalls events in which she was extremely involved but was able to hide her engagement from others, sometimes at the cost of a subsequent emotional breakdown.

Probably this anxiety of psychological unreliability was a reason for her dependence on a paternalistic figure, as her first husband Ludwik Solski (1855–1954) was in her life for quite a long time. He was twenty

<sup>21</sup> N. Yakubova, "Reclaiming the Actress's Authority over Theatre Creation. Autobiography of Polish Actress Irena Solska", *Aspasia*, The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History, 2008, No. 2, pp. 120–138.

<sup>22</sup> I. Solska, *Pamiętnik* [Memoirs], Warszawa 1987, p. 50 (translation mine).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 25–26.

years her elder, and at the time of their marriage she was a beginner while he was an acknowledged theatre star. While there are many accounts of how Solski could be rude and unjust to his wife, whom he treated as an apprentice, it is also true that with him Irena could remain a child and live her role of the quiet victim, even when in fact her life with her husband was full of minor and major rebellions.

In her letters to Żuławski written during their love affair, Solska often addresses the issue of her victimhood. It is important for her to underline that true love had remained unknown to her before her meeting with Żuławski, but the tough conditions of her life could not prevent her from keeping her soul chaste for this real love. At the same time these letters are full of overtly expressed sexual desire, put in words with ease and poetry.

The notion of another, secret self is very strong in Solska's writings. Onstage, she often made her heroines appear to be lunatics or day-dreamers. The critics mention them as spirits, phantoms, or fairy-tale creations, even when the texts of the plays don't presuppose this fantastic or mystical interpretation. Absent-minded, abandoned day-dreamers or lunatics waiting to be awakened – this became one of the most popular types of roles for her at the turn of the century.

At the same time her heroines were able – just like Salome – to demand quite cruel sacrifices from those whom they found guilty in their inner torments and irresolvable dilemmas, or, to put it the other way, who dared to reveal the heroine's "other self," or make them conscious of this secret self.

No review of Solska's acting prior to her encounter with Żuławski can attest that it is in this vein that she played Viola in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, or Olga in Stanislaw Przybyszewski's *Dla szczęścia* (For Happiness), but why not? Nothing attests that it could not be the case, for detailed accounts of most of her roles simply don't exist. After all, it is absolutely unknown in what roles beside his own plays Żuławski could actually see Solska, but surely he could deduct the above mentioned psychological complex from her offstage persona.

As for Żuławski's plays, Solska's impact can be observed most clearly in the text of *Ijola*, since the actress' letters from the period when it was created and performed are also available.

To begin with, the title heroine has multiple names and one of them, the title Ijola, corresponds to Solska's family pet name Lola, which was turned into Jola by her niece. This niece notably was named Marunia

– and Żuławski's heroine is similarly named Maruna. This playful usage of childish nicknames reveals the game which intertwined the life and art of the artist-lovers. In Solska's letter of September 1904 (still some three months before the text of *Ijola* was finished) she writes about the drama, as it is already known to her, and asks about next roles in such words: "I am asking you about it as a child asks for a fairy-tale, and you are giving me these 'fairy-tales' and will give me them, and I will be telling them to people, to the entire world."<sup>24</sup> She often signs her letters of this period as Lola or Jola.

However, what is surely more important is Solska's impact on how the heroine's sexuality is self-articulated – which probably was without a precedent in the Polish dramaturgy. This issue was, not surprisingly, ignored by critics of the text. In the dialog with her nurse the heroine confesses the repulsion and disgust she feels towards the sexual desire of her husband, for whom she nevertheless maintains respect and loyalty during his absence. However, her idea of the true love which, she admits, she never knew, and for which she has been longing since her childhood, undoubtedly includes sexuality. As an obstacle to the fulfilment of this dream she mentions that "everybody pulled some dirty hands to me"<sup>25</sup> – similar phrases could be easily found in Solska's correspondence to Żuławski.

Paradoxically, Maruna uses her marriage to restore her innocence in the belief in ideal love, since her husband left her alone for a long time. Her other self, Ijola, in whose image she appears to the artist, is precisely the culmination of such restoration, since precisely this "apparition" inspires the sculptor to make the statue of the Virgin Mary.

We can assume that Ijola's dream corresponds to what art meant for the actress: a "fairy-tale" through which she herself restored her childish innocence and went back to that point in her life from which she could claim her new love to be actually the first true love of hers, as it was in the case of her love to Żuławski. Before the Cracow premier, she wrote to the author: "In two weeks we are to play *Ijola*, on November 4. I don't like this day, I want to forget it and that's why I have chosen *Ijola* for that day."<sup>26</sup> It was on that day that her marriage to Ludwik Solski took place in 1899. Thus, the actress expects a therapeutic effect from playing *Ijola*: it can cancel the day of her unhappy marriage and help her restore her

<sup>24</sup> Jerzy Żuławski Papers, inv. nr 1892, v. 1, p. 94.

<sup>25</sup> J. Żuławski, *Ijola*, op. cit., p. 75.

<sup>26</sup> *Listy Ireny Solskiej...*, op. cit., p. 60.

other, secret self. Before the Christmas of 1905, summing up the year, she writes about her “dream-like happiness,” putting these words in quotation marks.<sup>27</sup> Though this is not a precise quotation from *Ijola*, it paraphrases the words of the heroine who pervasively uses similar phraseology.

In the play, however, Maruna is deeply deceived by the object of her ideal love, since even he is inclined to believe her to be a witch. In the final act of the play her beloved appears before Maruna in her prison with the decision to pay with his soul for her love. The heroine rejects such love, together with the rescue plan. Once again, the phraseology of the longing for love (Maruna describes to her beloved what he lost by denying her at the court) is very close to what Solska wrote to Żuławski, especially at the moments of their ruptures.

Żuławski’s text is a peculiar document, and analysis of the presence of Solska’s personality it contains can be but a risky experiment. Anyway, it concerns not only the written text, but also a visual level, as well as a more profound psychological – or even psychoanalytical – one. Żuławski processed Solska’s psychological complexes through dichotomies that she rather rejected. *Ijola* reaffirms the dichotomy of spiritual and corporeal. The poetic and the mundane are neatly separated in Żuławski’s writing. In what Solska ever wrote – and especially what she wrote to Żuławski – she quite stubbornly mixed the matters of spiritual closeness, artistic collaboration and, let’s say, preoccupation with materiality and corporeality. It is highly characteristic that after *Ijola* she expects Żuławski to write the role of Phryne for her.<sup>28</sup> Phryne was a hetaira, a lover of Praxiteles, who was the model for Aphrodite of Knidos; in the context of *Ijola* the task sounds rather challenging.

What is even more important is that, like in *Wianek mirtowy*, *Eros i Psyche*, and in the later novel *Powrót* (The Return, 1914), for whose heroine Solska was also the prototype, in *Ijola* the female character is defined as a woman completely absorbed with her emotional life, without any other occupation. It is suggested that creative activity can belong only to the man, while the woman can be but inspiration.

In her autobiography, Solska writes in detail about neither *Wianek mirtowy* or *Ijola*, and assigns only one passage to her famous Psyche. Although she often mentions Żuławski among the playwrights who supported the theatre she is dedicated to, when she writes about her private

<sup>27</sup> Jerzy Żuławski Papers, inv. nr 1892, v. 2, pp. 116–117.

<sup>28</sup> Jerzy Żuławski Papers, inv. nr 1892, v. 1, p. 94.

life, in an innate response to the gossips about her promiscuity, she uses precisely his example to draw attention to the double moral standard for men and women:

Here is an example: J.Ż., who is a playwright and a married man, falls in love with the performer of a role, that is truly beautiful. [Here Solska refers to Żuławski's romance with Jadwiga Mrozowska who played Psyche in Cracow in 1904] From Cracow he arrives to Lvov where he begins to disturb another performer [...] Next he gets divorced, marries for the second time and has three sons [in 1907 Żuławski married Kazimiera Hanicka, their sons were born 1908, 1910 and 1916]. Does such an attitude to life and adventures deserve the name of 'love'?<sup>29</sup>

However, in a sense, the shadow of Ijola-Maruna returns to the pages of Solska's autobiography, when she writes about a role which became her major success in the 1920s. In 1923 Solska played the main character in *Anne Pedersdotter* by Wiers-Jenssen, retitled in Polish *Czarownica* (The Witch). The story is based on events which took place in 1590 in Bergen where the widow of Lutheran priest was accused of witchcraft and burnt alive. In the play, Anne Pedersdotter is a young wife of an old pastor. She falls in love with her son-in-law when he suddenly returns to the town. At the same time, she gets to know the sad story of her mother, who was thought to be a witch but escaped punishment. Trying to understand what this supposed witchcraft could be, Anne discovers that she probably inherited a kind of power from her mother, because her son-in-law, in spite of all her apparent indifference, confesses his love to her, thus answering her deepest desire.

The description of the role in Solska's autobiography is quite exceptional. Through the whole text she hardly acknowledged such a degree of identification with any other character:

One wandered through the foreign countries, one lived in a town called Bergen, being the daughter of a possessed woman and inheriting the burden of extraordinariness which at a certain moment of life echoed in the most innocent way and predetermined my existence. Yes, my existence, as Anne Peters [actually Pedersdotter].<sup>30</sup>

Solska describes the performance in Lvov as a unique case when her emotional involvement was so strong that she attests it as "an attack of hysteria" which expanded over the whole female audience.<sup>31</sup> In an inter-

<sup>29</sup> I. Solska, *Pamiętnik*, op. cit., p. 112.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 144.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem.

view, Solska said that this role had the effect of “calling onto the stage one of my former incarnations, a memory from the past.”<sup>32</sup> It is interesting, that of all possible ways to describe the role, in her autobiography she chooses to narrate it from the point of view of matrilineal heritage which the heroine discovers in herself (while in the play the character of mother is actually absent).

The presence of mother figure, however, is very strong in the Solska’s text, and it is also strong in her correspondence to Żuławski, although Solska’s mother had died a couple of years before their relationship began. This makes me think that Żuławski was aware of Solska’s specific complex of the “burden of extraordinariness” as her matrilineal heritage<sup>33</sup> and he reflected it in the construction of his *Ijola-Maruna*. When Maruna confesses to her former nurse that she has dreams about love and happiness, the nurse decides to tell her about the curse that was cast on her by the abandoned lover of her mother: Maruna is doomed to inflict love in many men but she will never receive gratification but in a dream; her love will always be destructive. It is this inherited “curse” that makes this heroine confess to witchcraft as well as it is the case with the “witchcraft” of Anne Pedersdotter. In both cases it is clear that “the curse” begins to be fulfilled once the heroines get to know about its existence. As Maruna puts it: “[t]he names, which are given to people, / create in them what they mean.”<sup>34</sup>

What a difference, however, in the interpretation of the “burden of extraordinariness” between Żuławski’s *Ijola* and Solska’s autobiography! Quite early in her text Solska describes the suicide attempt she undertook out of fear that she was doomed to become mad as her grandmother. Then, after having saved her, her mother tells her only one thing: ‘Work and don’t think about it.’<sup>35</sup> Given the fact that Solska always describes her mother as an artist of inexhaustible energy and efficiency, this advice seems to echo the authentic experience of escaping madness by converting it (or its threat) into art. Solska highly identifies with this concept.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in: L. Kuchtówna, *Irena Solska*, Warszawa 1980, p. 195.

<sup>33</sup> Surely, such phrases in her letters as “I am from the family of melancholics and awful neurasthenics” (Jerzy Żuławski Papers, inv. nr 1892, v. 1, k. 10) also refer to the same complex. As it can be judged from what she wrote on the same issue in the autobiography, “the family” means here rather her mother and grandmother, than any other relative.

<sup>34</sup> J. Żuławski, *Ijola*, op. cit., p. 221.

<sup>35</sup> I. Solska, *Pamiętnik*, op. cit., p. 30.



To sum up, in his plays written for Solska Żuławski got insight into what can be defined as the deepest impulse of her creativity, but actually at the same time he denied the female creative power that can result from “the burden of extraordinariness.” Żuławski came very close to Solska’s psychological and even psychosomatic experience, but in the relevant female characters tended to highlight what could be potentially destructive in such experiences. He totally overlooked that women could have their own ways in the world besides being related to men whom they either inspire or ruin.

All this, however, doesn’t mean that Solska, in her performance, could not restore the complex plethora of meaning that initially served Żuławski as inspiration, but of which he could convey only a part. It is doubtful, however, that we will ever find any plausible documentation of how she could have done it. All we have are textual shadows, “awkward words.” These shadows, however, are still important as the inspiration for further research.

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