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Ludwik Hieronim Morstin's Ancient Tetralogy

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Abstract: The article focuses on Ludwik Hieronim Morstin's series of plays known as the ancient tetralogy, which comprises *Panteja* [Panthea], *Obrona Ksantypy* [The Defence of Xanthippe], *Penelopa* [Penelope] and *Kleopatra* [Cleopatra]. When considered as a series, these plays could be seen as representatives of the drama of history and myth, realized through a reinterpretation of events, characters and their stories. An analysis of selected aspects of Morstin's plays aims to prove that Morstin creatively revised the original stories, discovering the dilemmas of his time in the roots of ancient culture. In the discussed works, the characters and motifs taken from ancient Greece are scrutinized as if from the inside, through the lens of everyday life. Morstin attempted to articulate what was new and to fill the gaps in the stories' message. He confronted the established tradition, thereby disputing myths and legends. As a result, he revealed the timeless and current meanings of historical and mythological narratives in the context of the 20th-century *hic et nunc*.

Keywords: Ludwik Hieronim Morstin, Polish drama in the 1st half of the 20th century, reception of antiquity

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Ludwika Hieronima Morstina tetralogia antyczna

Streszczenie: Artykuł jest poświęcony cyklowi dramatów Ludwika Hieronima Morstina, tzw. tetralogii antycznej, którą tworzą: *Panteja*, *Obrona Ksantypy*, *Penelopa* i *Kleopatra*. Sztuki te – potraktowane jako pewna całość – wpisują się w nurt dramatu historii i mitu, uobecniony drogą reinterpretacji wydarzeń, postaci i ich legendy. Analiza wybranych aspektów problematyki dramatów ma na celu wskazanie, że Morstin dokonywał kreatywnej rewizji pierwotnego modelu opowieści, w korzeniach kultury antycznej odnajdywał zakotwiczenie dla dylematów współczesnego świata. Postaci i motywy wysnute z dziedzictwa kultury helleńsko-latyńskiej prześwietlane są niejako od wewnątrz, przez pryzmat codzienności życia. Artysta próbował wypowiadać rzeczy nowe, dopełniające luki przekazu, przełamujące ustaloną tradycję, polemizujące z mitem i legendą, wydobywające ponadczasowe i aktualne sensy historyczno-mitologicznej narracji w kontekstach dwudziestowiecznego *hic et nunc*.

Słowa kluczowe: Ludwik Hieronim Morstin, dramat polski pierwszej połowy XX wieku, recepcja antyku

Ludwik Hieronim Morstin's ancient tetralogy

Ludwik Hieronim Morstin is mentioned in all major studies on the period when he was active as an artist. The oeuvre of this hard-working and prolific writer includes a few dozen volumes which contain plays, poetry, novels, short stories, essays, translations, memoirs as well as hundreds of theatre reviews, articles and other writings for the press. However, quite a while ago Morstin ceased to be the focus of intense research interest. One of the reasons might be his classical inclinations, which made him shy away from avant-garde movements¹. He wrote almost fifty plays and during his lifetime they were often performed in theatres as well as on television and radio. However, in the second half of the 1960s and with only a few exceptions, they virtually disappeared together with the death of their author. In this way, Morstin shared the fate of writers who were esteemed while active, but as time went by, he faded into artistic insignificance and became a writer who had functioned as if “in between” three eras.

As regards the year of his birth, 1886, he could be considered a representative of the late generation of artists of *Młoda Polska* (Young Poland). He grew up in the spirit of modernism and the Great Reform of Theatre. He witnessed the cultural upheavals and existential challenges of both World Wars and totalitarian regimes as well as the cultural and

¹ So far, the last major publication has been the three volumes of Morstin's selected plays edited by Jacek Popiel (vol. 1, 1987: *Lilije* [Lilies], *Rzeczpospolita poetów* [The Republic of Poets]; vol. 2, 1987: *Obrona Ksantypy* [The Defence of Xanthippe], *Kleopatra* [Cleopatra]; vol. 3, 1990: *Polacy nie geśi* [The Poles Are Not Geese], *Rycerze Antychrysta* [The Knights of Antichrist], *Jaskółka* [The Swallow]).

anthropological crisis sparked off in literature and theatre by the absurdist movement. He encountered various artistic trends and new phenomena in which he was keenly interested. However, he did not employ them in his works, remaining faithful to classical values and drawing on the cultural reservoir of tradition. He acquired a comprehensive humanities education in Poland (in 1905 he obtained his secondary school graduation certificate at the classical John III Sobieski Middle School in Cracow) and abroad in Munich, Berlin, Leipzig and Paris (1906–1910). He studied psychology, philosophy and classical philology as well as participated in literary and artistic life. From a very young age he grew up submerged in the unique atmosphere of Cracow theatres and was in close contact with works of Western European drama. He became familiar with the work of Richard Wagner and during his two-year stay in Berlin he attended every stage premiere of Max Reinhardt's works. He saw on stage the greatest actors of his time.

Morstin's contacts with artistic community sometimes evolved into creative projects. These included his cooperation with Ludwik Solski during the Cracow staging of Wyspiański's *Legion* [Legion] in 1911, and – in the same year – with Leon Schiller in regard to the project of building a grand amphitheatre on the slopes of the Wawel Castle. Together with Władysław Kościelski he established "Museion", a monthly literary and artistic journal whose editorial offices were located in Paris and Cracow, and which was published regularly from January 1911 to December 1913. In accordance with the maxim *sibi et amicis*, the profile of the journal supported the idea of manifesting "the widest possible love of classical beauty in the artistic culture of the nation" (*Kronika* 1911: 102)². Morstin was enchanted by the theatre (his first playwriting attempts began in 1906). He belonged to the generation of artists who drew on antiquity to tackle dilemmas of the world of his time. His work evolved from the conviction that "the clarity of the mind and perceptiveness of a writer connected to reality enables one to gain a deep insight into the distant period of antiquity and, conversely, the knowledge of antiquity gives a chance to better assess contemporary reality". Antiquity is the backbone of European culture, its spiritual capital, "the creative seed out of which grows the thought that seeks goodness, beauty, truth, justice and progress in the full development of all the powers of its nation" (Morstin 1955: 6). Morstin's references to the world of classical culture reflected his deeply felt spiritual and organic bond with it. As he reminisced in *Moje przygody teatralne* [My Theatrical Adventures], "[...] from a very early age, antiquity has fascinated me, and Greek art and poetry were especially close and dear to me. If I believed in pre-existence, I would also believe that at one time I used to live in Pericles' Athens or during the time of the Persian wars and this is how I could explain this love for ancient Greece" (1961: 10–11). In another place, he confessed:

Some overwhelming instinct drew me to the beauty of antiquity. I felt that my nature is mysteriously rooted in this civilization which stood at the cradle of our European culture and that by acquainting myself with it I discover things that I once knew and experienced. [...] since my earliest days, my spiritual organism has longed for Hellenic beauty (Morstin 1955: 5).

² The periodical had many distinguished contributors. It also published translations of ancient literature and of contemporary poets (e.g., Paul Claudel's *Pieśń o Polsce* [Song of Poland], translated by Stanisław Miłaszewski) as well as debuts of young writers who later became quite well-known. If not stated otherwise, all quotations have been translated by Łukasz Borowiec.

Morstin fulfilled his longing for the spirit of beauty and harmony in the world through plays, fiction, translations and essays. Apart from original dramatic works that dealt with topics taken from ancient history and culture, Morstin has been highly regarded by philologists for his translations of Sophocles' *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, Horace's odes, essay collections on Greek and Roman life (*W kraju Latynów* [In the Land of the Latins], *Dziwy kultury antycznej* [The Marvels of Ancient Culture]), Greek tales aimed at popularising ancient culture (*Przędziwo Arachny* [Arachne's Yarn]) as well as numerous articles and poems. The play *Rzeczpospolita poetów* [The Commonwealth of Poets] (1933), which refers to the famous literary symposia in Pławowice³, foreshadows the series of dramatic works inspired by ancient culture. Staged at Juliusz Słowacki Theatre in Cracow and directed by Juliusz Osterwa, this satirical comedy "is an illustration of Plato's conviction that politics and poetry cannot be reconciled, and that complete happiness and freedom of all humankind is an unrealistic dream" (Popiel 1987: 22). By interweaving a realistic and visionary world with socio-political issues of the time, the play clearly corresponds to Wyspiański's *Wesele* [The Wedding].

Morstin's fascination with the ancient world reaches its full expression in the so-called ancient tetralogy comprising the following works: *Panteja* [Panthea], which began to take form at the beginning of the 1930s, was published in 1937⁴, but has never been staged; *Obrona Ksantypy* [The Defence of Xanthippe], whose premiere in Teatr Polski in 1939⁵ became a well-known event; *Penelopa* [Penelope], written during the occupation years and staged in 1943 by Arnold Szyfman in the castle in Pławowice by an amateur underground theatre; and *Kleopatra* [Cleopatra], which was written in 1949 in Zakopane, was published in 1956 and four years later staged in Wilam Horzyca Theatre in Toruń.

When seen as a series⁶, these plays could be treated as representatives of the drama of history and myth, based on a reinterpretation of events, characters and their stories. Stanisław Stabryła observes that ancient themes function in contemporary literature as: revocation, i.e. repetition, imitation and reworking of themes, motifs and story elements derived from ancient literature, mythology, history, art or philosophy by means of bringing

³ After becoming the owner of his family estate in Pławowice in 1926, Morstin created an artistic and scientific salon of sorts, whose cultural significance was consolidated in 1928 and 1929 by two famous symposia, also called poetry rallies. In the period of divisions and ostracism among men of letters, the rallies were an exceptional event. The atmosphere of these meetings was depicted in numerous accounts of their participants, among whom were Paul Cazin, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Jan Lechoń, Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska, Antoni Słonimski, Leopold Staff, Julian Tuwim, Józef Wittlin, and Emil Zegadłowicz.

⁴ Before its appearance in book form, fragments of *Panteja* were published in "Pamiętnik Warszawski" 1931, no. 7/9, "Wiadomości Literackie" 1932, no. 7 and "Czas" 1934, no. 116 (in the supplement "Przegląd Teatralny" no. 16), which suggests that the first play from the series was written a few years earlier than it is generally assumed.

⁵ *Obrona Ksantypy* turned out to be a play which for a long time enjoyed lasting popularity on stage. It has been translated into a few dozen languages and staged abroad. The database of the archive of the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute documents 25 productions of Morstin's plays. They include three television theatre productions and one radio play, and they span the period from 10 February 1939 (the staging in Teatr Polski in Warsaw) to so far the last television broadcast in 1991. See: <https://encyklopediateatru.pl/sztuki/120/obrona-ksantypy> [20.10.2025].

⁶ The first edition of *Trylogia antyczna* [Ancient Trilogy] from 1955 consisted of *Penelopa*, *Obrona Ksantypy* and *Kleopatra*. In a questionnaire for the "Meander" magazine, Morstin pointed to these three plays as representative of his attitude to antiquity (Morstin 1955: 3). *Panteja*, which is stylistically different from the other three plays, became part of *Tetralogia antyczna* [Ancient Tetralogy] when it came out in 1959 and this publication is the source of all the quotes in this paper.

them up to date; reinterpretation, which involves a fundamental transformation of the original sense or motif from ancient culture by disputing or negating it, or by creating new, frequently unexpected meanings; prefiguration, in which the relation to the myth or other ancient motifs manifests itself through certain analogies in the fate of the characters or the construction of the depicted world; inlay, that is a set of embellishments – metaphors, allusions, comparisons and associations – which are part of a given work's style (see Stabryła 1983: 23–25; Stabryła 1996: 8–9). Morstin's strategy could be classified as a reinterpretation which he employed to present his individual creative revision of the original stories.

The first play from the ancient series, *Panteja*⁷, is close to the convention of Greek tragedy. It begins with a solemn Homeric-like prologue in the form of an invocation for inspiration. Homer's *Odyssey* begins with the words: "Tell me, O muse, of that ingenious hero who travelled far and wide [...]" (Homer 2009) and Morstin's drama as follows: "O muse, of the love of heroes sing to your listeners, who fled the life of greyness and boredom; make them, o muse, cry over the queen's fate" (1959: 359). It seems that the essence of theatre, which is the moment when the spectators are directly exposed to the drama taking place in front of them, remained unchanged, and thus Morstin maintained continuity of culture from antiquity to the present times. The audience, "burdened with the weight of working days", comes "from shops and offices" (Morstin 1959: 359) to listen to the Hellenic song of love and death. In this way, the spectators participate, like during Dionysian festivities, in a unique act of social and religious communion by co-experiencing the celebrations and co-empathizing with the tragic fates of the heroes on stage.

There is, however, one crucial detail which refers to the foundations of Greek tragedy, to the roots of relations between theatre and the drama of human condition. Among the members of the audience of "today's mad Europe" one can find those who "can summon no thought from their brain nor flame from their hearts where only wood chips glow" (Morstin 1959: 359). Morstin reminds "dead people" of the Hellenic "living song", which "can suffer more gracefully than we ourselves can suffer" (Morstin 1959: 359) and thus aims to evoke similar emotions in today's spiritually crippled civilization. "Suffer to understand" / "Men shall learn wisdom, by affliction schooled" (Aeschylus 2009) – this key truth from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* provides the path to full knowledge. Going more deeply into the prologue, which on its surface is clearly a realization of a certain convention, one reaches the cathartic core of the theatre, in which suffering is perceived as positive and is reached thanks to experiences provided by tragedy. The meaning of suffering, however, has been powerfully questioned by today's world, since "one of the important [...]" aspects of our civilization is a complete withdrawal from the faith in the value of suffering" (Kořakowski 2003: 90). Morstin's concept of ancient drama aimed to restore the stage as the site for revealing universal truths. This might stem from the precarious state of the Polish theatre in the early 1930s. At that time, the deepening crisis was linked to a number of socio-political phenomena, including the fall of artistic ideals and chaos in the world of values both in drama and theatre (see Popiel 1995: 61–62).

⁷ Considering the chronology of Morstin's plays, it is worth noticing his later decision to place *Panteja* at the tetralogy's end. This play's notable structural features include invocation in the prologue, elevated style and lyrical language as well as the choir of priests, who sing and dance during the supplication rite (act VI).

As some insightful researchers point out, when read through the lens of the concept of poetic theatre, Morstin's play seems to offer more than a manifestation of artsy mannerisms of Young Poland, overstated inner struggles, artificial pathos and loftiness as well as banal metaphysical deliberations (Rowiński 1962: 119–120). In Stabryła's view, *Panteja* is a play of powerful passions, anger, love and hate, which brings it close to the classical model of French drama in the style of Racine (1966: 352). Heroism and stiltedness of the characters, poetic rhetoric and lyrical loftiness of action which gets stuck in garrulousness (incidentally, Morstin's dramatic art suffered from deficiencies in constructing action) are a result of combining "romanticism" and "Greekness" in the *dramatis personae*. The former can be noticed in their ability to link love and dreams, to sacrifice themselves voluntarily and in their renouncing private happiness; the latter is shown through emotions and passions which are greater than in Morstin's contemporaries. That is why, as the author concludes, "if I wanted to write a play about love and death, the two powers which exert the greatest influence on the history and fate of the human soul [...], I had to reach for the repository of legends and ideas left by the marvellous Greek civilization"⁸.

These premises lie behind the nature of transforming the literary original, which is the motif of the faithful love of Panthea and Abradatas from Xenophon's *The Education of Cyrus* (*Kýrou paideía*). This motif became an inspiration for the creators of Hellenistic romance (cf. Awianowicz 2000: 55–69). The dramatic conflict revolves around the circumstances which condition the characters' choices and strong passions: marital love and the unfulfilled love of Cyrus, Persian king, towards the captive wife of Abradatas, king of Susa (by contrast, in the original story it is not Cyrus, but his young hetman Araspas who falls in love with the wife). The foreshadowing of the tragic entanglement in "love cursed by gods from its very start" (Morstin 1959: 436) becomes evident from the moment when Cyrus meets the queen of Susa. All this is accompanied by the premonition of the interlocking of love and death ("Kill me, because when the flame of my eyes invades your heart, you will die yourself" [Morstin 1959: 367]). This interlocking completes itself in the drama of unfulfilment ("[...] what unfortunate fate embroiled my fate in your life, oh, hero and conqueror of kings") as well as recognition and voluntary sacrifice ("[...] the sin belongs to us both and, though born to suffer, we are both guilty of wanting to live in happiness, which is gods' and not our domain" [Morstin 1959: 407, 410, 436]). Panthea sacrifices her own life ("With my happiness I should pay the vengeful Furies for the suffering that burns your soul" [Morstin 1959: 427]), which makes her similar to such heroines as Euripides' Alcestis or Evadne from his *The Suppliants*: „By my husband's side, I wanted to take part in the war" (Morstin 1959: 373). In ancient tradition, Abradatas' wife is a paragon of loyalty and honour as well as personification of victorious love, which even death cannot conquer.

The conflict in the drama concerns the confrontation of various conceptions of life not only on a psychological level, but first of all in relation to the laws that govern the world. Panthea surpasses Cyrus due to her affirmative perception of existence governed by vicissitudes of fate. She is ready to "listen to gods' warnings and signs" and "often knows their hidden intentions" (Morstin 1959: 409, 430). In her discussions with the Persian king, she clearly defines the limits of human power ("You are the world's conqueror, but

⁸ Morstin's commentary on the fragment of the play's second act published in "Wiadomości Literackie" (cf. Morstin 1932: 2).

gods' servant"). When the king is on the verge of rebelling, he notices the possibility of choice: "Should I yield to their will or show to the world that I'm its ruler?". Eventually, he rationalizes the vertical order of things, because the one "who declares, 'I trust my gods,' will escape death and won't be overcome by evil" (Morstin 1959: 368, 409, 431). Morstin's exegesis of antiquity touches a human being's true drama: the struggle with one's own vision of life and the fate (or plan) made for him by God (or gods).

"I do not know if it's going to be better there with the dead, [...] but I know that I need to go; I am a stranger to earth" (Morstin 1959: 437) – these words show that by following her husband, Panthea respects the superhuman dimension of the world order. The awareness of not belonging to earthly life refers not only to moving from life to death but also reveals her deeper ontological status. Her oft-mentioned close connection to the world of gods is confirmed by the etymology of her name, which comes from the Greek words *πᾶν* ("complete", "total") and *θεία* ("divine"). Therefore, as the one who is "completely divine", Panthea becomes a personification of the ideal of virtue and heroism. The poetic rendering of this ancient motif transforms a concrete story of love into a dramatic synthesis of human condition. It opens up a range of reflections on universal issues of political, moral and metaphysical nature as well as constantly relevant questions about meaning in the world of "confusion, crime and love" (Morstin 1959: 402).

Theatre critics and researchers have paid scant attention to *Panteja*. This, however, has not been the case with the later plays, especially with *Obrona Ksantypy*, which is considered one of his best. This drama has been not only popular on stage but was also the focus of insightful studies and commentaries by philologists and historians⁹. While writing the play about the notorious wife of Socrates, Morstin – as an accomplished philologist and an expert in ancient Greek literature – must have derived knowledge about her from such historical sources as accounts of Socrates' disciples, Plato's *Phaedo* and Xenophon's *Memorabilia*. Brief mentions in all these sources could provide some idea of Xanthippe's life, although they did not confirm the apparent negative character traits of Socrates' wife. The anecdotal legend of the famous shrew was created by the later accounts of Socrates' married life which were written in the cynic and stoic vein (see Mróz 2016: 123–127, Marchewka 2018: 75–86). In addition, Morstin most probably knew modern attempts at rehabilitating Socrates' wife by breaking the stereotypical image of the quarrelsome and quick-tempered woman. They were undertaken, among others, by one of the leading representatives of the German Enlightenment Christoph Martin Wieland (*Xantippe*), who brought to the fore the figure of a benevolent, foreseeing and caring wife and mother in contrast to her rake husband. Certainly, Morstin's conception was closest to the 19th-century historical-theological studies by Eduard Zeller (*Zur Ehrenrettung der Xanthippe*, 1865), who tried to maintain a reasonable distance while assessing the relations between the famous couple by presenting them from Xanthippe's perspective (see Marchewka 2023: 247–249). Another source for Morstin may have been Stefan Pawlicki's *Obrona Xantippy* [The Defence of Xanthippe] (1868). Pawlicki was an ethicist and clergyman and in his work he made Xanthippe stand before the court and defend her case herself. As it has been noticed by Tomasz Mróz

⁹ More recently, *Obrona Ksantypy* appeared in the articles by Anna Marchewka and Tomasz Mróz. There, the image of Socrates' wife is presented in the context of its intertextual relations with ancient sources and modern literary reinterpretations. However, both authors neither account for *Obrona Ksantypy* in the light of Morstin's tetralogy nor analyze the play from the theatrical perspective.

(2016: 135–136), also Morstin’s relation with Pawlicki may have been of significance in this context. Pawlicki’s charisma as a scholar and teacher exerted an inspirational influence on the sensitivity of Morstin as a young enthusiast of antiquity (Morstin 1957: 32).

Morstin’s dramatic concept is based on confronting two images of Socrates’ wife: in acts one and two, she is a “lovely, but slightly impulsive” young, unusually attractive and hot-tempered woman who has been married for about a year, while ten years later, in act three, she becomes bitter, neglected and distressed by everyday life. This confrontation remains coherent due to the aesthetic and ethical appraisal of Xanthippe as a good wife, which takes place through harmonizing her outside beauty with marital faithfulness, foresight, diligence and prudence. In this way she fulfils the ancient role model as opposed to the later culturally-fixed anti-ideal associated with her name. As Charmides, her young admirer, praises her, “For ages to come, the world will remember that you managed to be a good wife to a man like Socrates” (Morstin 1959: 173).

Notably, Xanthippe exists on two levels: in her own times and beyond them, as if in a further perspective, since she clearly creates her own biography with the awareness of the links between tradition and her literary image. From the very beginning, Morstin’s heroine has her own line of defence against biting comments on her life with the old and ugly husband: “So I tell you all, who examine my case though never asked to do so, that I am a faithful wife and feel no inclination for sinful affairs. That I love Socrates for his mind and the nobility of his soul” (Morstin 1959: 129). Provoked by Xanthippe, the philosopher confirms that “no one in Athens is as confident of the faithfulness of his wife as a certain Socrates, son of Sophroniscus” (Morstin 1959: 182). He fully appreciates and praises her diligence and love for order, while other women are fond of perfumes, dresses and lovers. What also deserves attention is the visual arrangement of this scene, which takes place while Xanthippe is spinning on the loom and Charmides is sitting at her feet, trying to tempt her into a different life. Socrates goes on, “[...] you have to understand, Xanthippe that you are as much keen on housekeeping as I am keen on philosophy, poetry and art. We are like lovers who look in different directions.” And later: “I would like to make you happy, but I can’t. I don’t know why, Xanthippe” (Morstin 1959: 185, 192). The confrontation of contradictory views is the main focus of *Obrona Ksantypy*. Xanthippe’s unfulfilled female need of true gentleness and love is contrasted with Socrates’ aim – the persistent struggle to reveal the meaning of the world and devote oneself to the paideutic mission. Unable to understand her husband’s great wisdom, Xanthippe strives to apply to him the criteria from the practical sphere of life and expects that he will provide for the household, take care of the children and show more active interest in her needs.

The discrepancy between Xanthippe’s and Socrates’ aspirations is also manifested in the way both characters function on stage. From the first scene, Xanthippe reveals herself through action and expressing emotions. “I am tired, exhausted and sad”, “I have to endure humiliation from his friends. And there is no food nor money in the house. This is my life” (Morstin 1959: 120, 126) – all this shows her perspective. By contrast, the sublime image of Socrates is built upon the authority of “a great sage”, “the wisest of all people”, “a creator of unearthly delights”, and one who “is considered the wisest man in Athens”, “who teaches wisdom to people”. His actual presence on stage is reduced to three instances: his silent appearance in act one; the discussion in act two; and the end of act three, in which Xanthippe refrains from the planned confrontation with her husband. The sight of

Xanthippe, who comes to Agathon's house after the famous feast, awakens Socrates "from the beautiful dream to the sad reality" (Morstin: 1959: 237). However, Xanthippe quietly leaves, thus giving up her intention to publicly humiliate Socrates as a neglectful husband and father.

Morstin's plays are deservedly accused of being overloaded with characterization and information in lieu of actual dialogue. At the same time, his works are known for their theatrical qualities, lyricism and visual components, all of which clearly show an affinity between Morstin's writing craft and that of Wyspiański (see Okońska 1965: 113–116; Popiel 1987: 34–35). An example of how Morstin demonstrates his potential directing skills in *Obrona Ksantypy* can be found in the scene in which Socrates silently reacts to signs of domestic disorder:

Helios is fading over Athens. In the glow of the setting sun, Socrates is standing, barefoot, in a threadbare coat. He walks inside into further rooms. After a short while, he comes back. He shrugs his shoulders, thus indicating surprise. He sits on the bench. After a moment, he stands up, takes a mug from the table and reaches inside the bucket, which is empty. He puts the mug back, sits down again and takes off his coat. He stretches his arms. He approaches the window, looks at Athens, comes back, lies down on the bench, covers himself with the coat. He is going to fall asleep.

The night is full of sounds of flutes which play the same melody as the one that Xanthippe hummed to Charmides (Morstin 1959: 153).

This poetic image correlates with the heroine's abandonment of her pragmatism. One time in her life, she decides to do what she really desires and she frees herself from household duties to surrender herself to the sensual experience of life, which is expressed by the metaphor of violet dusk and the air that smells of narcissus and thyme. Her world revolves around the monotony of her lonely struggle with poverty and deepening frustration. This is expressed through her dynamic and angry reactions to the servants' idleness, the visits of her female friend who boasts about her clothes and affairs, intrusions of Socrates' acquaintances or disputes with the Athenian magistrate.

They say that I'm evil, a shrew. And what does Socrates think about me? The same. He tries to get to know and study everyone inside out, but has never tried to do this with his wife. Because it's not worth it; I'm like a utensil; and you don't ask what a utensil is like; it's there, and it's enough (Morstin 1959: 173).

Xanthippe's words do not only express her regret at being wrongfully perceived as a wife who is a shrew, but also a deeply felt complaint of a loving, devoted woman who carries within her an unfulfilled desire to be accompanied in her heroic everyday perseverance. Despite the verdict that posterity passed upon her, she makes an attempt at challenging it and consciously resigns from the illusory vision of a happier life with the young and rich admirer. The symbol of her faithful devotion and care is Socrates' coat, which on stage becomes a prop and a sign of his presence. At the end of the drama, after ten years of married life, Xanthippe accepts her role in the theatre of life. She does not only reject her demanding and rebellious stance, but also manifests full recognition of her husband's priorities. She looks at Socrates' teachings through the eyes of his disciples, through their experience of

a kind of *metanoia*: “from now on, we are new people, as if reborn, not to live on earth, but to live eternally” (Morstin 1959: 236–237). Her understanding acceptance of Socrates’ words: “I will stay here for a while, I need to talk to my friends” (Morstin 1959: 238), is a reference to the lovers’ farewell scene known from Plato’s *Phaedo* (see Marchewka 2023: 254).

Morstin’s attempt at rehabilitating Xanthippe gains credibility thanks to acknowledging the impossibility of judging Socrates as an unequivocally good husband and Xanthippe as an unambiguously bad wife. And it was this balance in judgement that was considered as the most significant by Tadeusz Zieliński in his review of the premiere at Teatr Polski in Warsaw: “[...] the play is truly ‘a defence of Xanthippe’, but not at Socrates’ cost” (Zieliński 1939; Zieliński 1958: 16)¹⁰. In contrast to Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, who (in his review in “Kurier Poranny” from February 16) considered the play a poetic jest, Waclaw Syruczek (in “Tygodnik Ilustrowany”, no. 9, dated 26 February) highlighted the drama’s numerous strengths: “Deep inside, one can feel the foundation of the ancient Christian culture, while on the surface the anxiety of modern times comes to the fore. [...] It’s not a jest, as it represents the writer’s intense emotions while searching for the key to the antinomy of the world” (Syruczek 1939: 172). As a critic focused on the relations between art, audience and reality, Boy considered the stage as a site for the observation of reality and for the dialogue with current issues. He was endowed with sensitivity that allowed him to discern social facts and patterns in conflicts presented on stage. That is why, he was interested in deeper motivations of *dramatis personae* as well as the confrontation between Socrates and Xanthippe. In his view, Morstin skilfully refrains from focusing on these aspects of his drama and diverts the viewer’s attention by introducing and developing comic elements, such as the character of the smart servant (Żeleński 1939: 3–4). These features of Morstin’s drama qualified it as a „comedy” and this label can be found in postwar theatre programmes and on posters. Perhaps, this was also a conscious advertising strategy for the play, which nevertheless did not diminish its artistic value. In his comment on *Obrona Ksantypy* staged at Teatr Miejski in Lublin in 1948, Juliusz Kleiner noted that apart from *The Morality of Mrs. Dulka* by Gabriela Zapolska Morstin’s drama is the best Polish comedy of the 20th century and one of the most timely in world literature¹¹.

Based on Homer’s *Odyssey*, *Penelopa* highlights the mythical story’s universality and multifaceted nature. The author’s depiction of Odysseus and Penelope fluctuates between presenting them as contemporary people and as very “Homeric” characters. In this way, these two realities are to become interconnected in the world of illusion, which actually is the universe of art, or in other words a theatre of poetry (Morstin: 1946: 51). The theme of a husband’s return to his home after years of conflicts and wandering gained in relevance due to the reality of World War II and thanks to the play’s staging during the war period¹². The

¹⁰ The authority of Tadeusz Zieliński, eminent expert and researcher of ancient culture, was a significant support for the favourable reception of *Obrona Ksantypy*. Morstin dedicated to him the print version of the play (Gebethner and Wolff 1939, and later editions).

¹¹ Program Teatru Miejskiego w Lublinie, nr 1, sezon 1948/1949 [Theatre Programme of Teatr Miejski in Lublin, no. 1, season 1948/1949], https://encyklopediateatru.pl/repository/performance_file/2013_10/49239_obrona_ksantypy__teatr_miejeki_lublin_1948.pdf [20.10.2025].

¹² For the first time, *Penelopa* was performed by an amateur youth theatre group on 23 January 1943 in Morstins’ palace in Pławowice, and on 15 June 1945 it was directed by Karol Frycz and staged at Juliusz Słowacki Theatre in Cracow.

mythological heroine exemplifies the fate and voice of women waiting for their husbands to come back home:

The most pitiful war victims are us, abandoned wives. What do men risk by going to war? They risk death, which is not much, as no god promised us immortality; but we are condemned to long suffering, to the loss of everything that was our peace and happiness, that was our right to live. [...] my life has snapped off from its anchor and is now floating on waves like a rudderless ship. [...] There is no way of knowing now what to do, who to love, what to long for... (Morstin 1959: 22).

Morstin depicts Penelope in accordance with the ancient tradition. As a faithful wife, she has not given her hand to any of the suitors, kept the throne of Ithaca for her husband, and as a diligent and prudent spouse she protected his goods. She announces to old Laertes, "All this is for Odysseus, your son; I'm in charge of his property merely as a substitute" (Morstin 1959: 16). She does this, although with each passing day her husband's return becomes disturbingly less certain. What is more, she more and more often hears about Odysseus' love conquests. "Why should waiting be necessarily boring and sad?" "You have to live as if he was never to come back," (Morstin 1959: 9, 22) suggests the queen's young and coquettish lady-in-waiting, who represents a completely different view on the constancy of feelings. Just like Xanthippe, Penelope is not free from feeling temptation, as underscored by Homer's original: "[...] all the principal men of Ithaca itself, are eating up my house under the pretext of paying their court to my mother, who will neither point blank say that she will not marry, nor yet bring matters to an end" (Homer 2009). In Greek tradition, Penelope was presented not as the one who hesitates between the memory of her husband and a new marriage, but as a perfect and devoted wife who fights a lonely battle to preserve the legacy and persist in resisting her suitors. However, in *Odyssey* itself there are numerous examples of her ambiguous behaviour, for example, when she appears among the feasting suitors and skilfully plays for time by declining to avoid final decisions and cleverly concealing her intentions beneath apparent passivity and lack of resourcefulness (Biezuńska-Malowitz 1993: 33–35).

Morstin achieved this also by confronting the past and both spouses' faithfulness through the lens of psychological drama. "This earth of mine will be the same and different at the same time," Odysseus notes. The motif of him returning in a beggar's disguise is linked with his fear of the truth he might discover in his home and which could belittle his image of a legendary warrior: "I only fear one thing: being ridiculed by posterity" (Morstin 1959: 36, 38). The process of "humanizing" Odysseus is powerfully depicted in his words to Penelope: "The person standing in front of you is neither a king nor a leader nor a hero, but a human being. And he wants to know the whole truth" (Morstin 1959: 99). The question is whether he is actually ready to accept any blemish on his wife's impeccable image. She, however, after sharing her life with a man who "feels disgust at peace and quiet of everyday life," makes a sound judgement of his love conquests, is aware of his weakness for "excessive boastfulness about them" and puts him to the test (Morstin 1959: 20, 99). She does not want to come down in history only as a wife that awaited her husband's return, since there is no point in being with "Odysseus who loves another and forcefully breaks himself free from her embrace" (Morstin 1959: 64). For Penelope, love and faithfulness cannot exist

without trust, which cements the feeling connecting two people “who have been through a lot together and understand each other’s mistakes and falls” (Morstin 1959: 71–72). If there is no proof of betrayal, one can either believe in love or continue living in uncertainty and fear¹³.

In the play, the conflict is resolved and everything ends happily. The tension is released and suspicions seem to be dispelled and forgotten. However, underneath the marital relation there can still be a potential unresolved grudge, just like in August Strindberg’s *The Father*, modelled after a Greek tragedy, in which uncertainty leads to a family catastrophe. Using Homer’s plot, Morstin interpreted the myth of Odysseus in opposition to Wyspiański’s expressionistic and tragic vision (Kruk 2020: 33). Morstin’s *Penelopa* is closer to the convention of psychological realism of European and American drama of the 1930s, which we can find in ancient plays by Jean Giraudoux (*Amphitryon 38*, *The Trojan War will not Take Place*) (see Stabryła 1966: 356–357).

The play’s mythological disguise creates distance, and thus may serve as a mirror to contemporary reality. Morstin divested his characters of loftiness and instead showed their traits and motivations in everyday contexts. Penelope is resourceful, aware of her needs and takes care of her thriving household. Odysseus’ renown and heroic deeds are demythologized by emphasizing his faults such as vanity, indolence, impulsiveness and enviousness. The same demythologization takes place with regard to the Trojan war and its commanders. As Laertes bluntly comments:

Priam is an old hand, he did a good job with strengthening the walls, and Hector is a great commander. All our leaders, however – may our gods protect them – are not worth much altogether: Achilles is a braggart, Nestor is infantile, Ajax stutters, Menelaus can’t even cope with his own wife, not to mention our good-for-nothing chief commander. We shouldn’t have started this war (Morstin 1959: 14).

This contradiction between appearances and reality is weakened by the shortcomings in conversational exchanges on which the play’s action is built. This is also discernible in the reduction of dramatic force of the recognition scene – one of key moments in Greek tragedy. Since it is quite artificially introduced, from the very start it reveals Odysseus’ identity and the details of his meeting with Penelope. As a result, no emotional tension is created, also with regard to the deftly resolved catastrophe. Written during the period of World War II, this drama about a return from the war avoids fully-fledged confrontation which could undermine the concept of the happy resolution of marital disagreements in the spirit of comedy of errors or *pièce à thèse*.

The last part of the ancient series is *Kleopatra* [Cleopatra], in which, similarly to *Obrona Ksantypy*, Morstin attempted to rehabilitate a woman unfavourably presented by literature. Stefan Kruk (2020: 35, 37) stresses that it is a courageous act to present the phenomenon of the queen of Egypt and her turbulent biography after Shakespeare’s *Anthony and Cleopatra* and Norwid’s *Kleopatra i Cezar* [Cleopatra and Caesar], thus creating a creative dialogue with Morstin’s grand predecessors. It should also be added that Morstin’s play is a polemic with G.B. Shaw’s *Caesar and Cleopatra*. Morstin’s *Kleopatra* is not only a psychological study,

¹³ “He [Odysseus] will feel bad everywhere he goes, because the love of family land is the rock he has been attached to,” says Penelope (Morstin 1959: 59).

but also a historical drama which presents a political confrontation between the collapsing civilisation of the Ptolemaic Kingdom and the military power of Rome (Popiel 1987: 27). In this way, the play is the finalization of Morstin's project to depict the three stages of Greek civilisation. Therefore, *Penelopa* is the dawn of this culture, *Ksantypa* is its peak and *Kleopatra* (significantly subtitled *Monstrum egipskie* [Egyptian monstrosity]) – its twilight (Morstin: 1966: 3).

Morstin's Cleopatra is a woman of extraordinary intelligence, energy and political ambitions. She is also a versatile polyglot open to humanistic knowledge: "What is the world, Archibias? What is a human? I want to know about everything!" To this the old mentor and advisor responds: "The world is an ever-living fire which burns as needed, and you, my queen, are this fire's bright flame". "With your whole life and thoughts, you have to join this spectacle, this fire of omni-creation and self-destruction" (Morstin 1959: 251). In the context of the play's poetic reality, the flame and fire evoke the symbolism of transformation, revival and transcendence (cf. Cirlot 2001: 105, 108). Destruction becomes a condition for renewal and an aspect of the active and creative attitude which is reflected in Cleopatra's aspirations. After the picturesque first scene in which Cleopatra cheerfully plays ball with her maidservants, the queen's first conflict is shown. It is the rivalry between her and Ptolemy XIV, her younger brother, who is also her husband and co-ruler. Cleopatra says, "Gods must have punished me, as I have to rule Egypt together with children at the moment when the fate of the kingdom is at stake" (Morstin 1959: 262). Soundly assessing the military capabilities of Egypt, she refuses to begin a preventive war against the Roman fleet which came to Cyprus. As a consequence, she is dethroned and banished from Alexandria.

Cleopatra's next battle is her meeting with Caesar, who is captivated by her astounding beauty, intelligence and expertise in military matters. She consciously combines all these skills in her tactical game in scene 2 of act I, when disguised as an Egyptian girl she fights for the respect for royal dignity. The emperor wins the verbal argument with his spouse and their roles are defined anew: "Who gives orders today in this palace, and who is the visitor?" (Morstin 1959: 276). Cleopatra's move to the position of power is demonstrated by the gesture of revealing her identity and casting away the previously concealed poisoned dagger. She dreams of ruling a great empire based on the union of Egypt and Rome, "protected by the shields of Roman legions," where science and art will evolve from the achievements of the Ptolemaic Kingdom (see Morstin 1959: 319). However, while realizing her plan step by step, Cleopatra does not foresee that Caesar will be assassinated and that according to his will, his successor will be not their child, but Gaius Octavius, the son of his niece. An accident destroys the whole intrigue and sheds full light on the queen's real intentions as well as her understanding of patriotic obligations:

I gave away my virginity to him to save Egypt; I was his lover to save the throne for my son;
I wanted to become his wife to rule the world.
I never loved him.
[...]
I played a great game for something more precious than life and I knew that I can never rest,
as this would mean my failure.
[...] One more time, I have to take up the fight for Egypt, the throne and my son
(Morstin 1959: 340–342).

The assassination of Caesar, who was bound by fate with the Egyptian queen, is just a conclusion of one stage of the world's history. In fact, the fight is not over. The dramatic tension rises as the bloodthirsty crowd is waiting in front of the queen's palace to pass the sentence on her. This moment is concluded in the scene when Mark Anthony enters and announces: "No, this is worse than death – it's love" (Morstin 1959: 353). Notably, the action stops at the moment which is the starting point for Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, focused on the final period of Cleopatra's rule. Thus, the woman's premonition may be treated as a kind of intertextual allusion to the beginning of Shakespeare's drama: „If it be love indeed, tell me how much" (Shakespeare, act I, scene 1). The play ends with Archibias' question: "What are you pondering, my queen?" and Cleopatra's answer: "I'm pondering the vicissitudes of fate, the power of destiny and human lot." Her words correspond to her future protector's statement: "Usually, the one who makes history is not the one who writes it" (Morstin 1959: 310, 355).

"Only gods always see things clearly, while mortals become blind, often wandering and searching ...," states Odysseus, concluding his dispute with Penelope (Morstin 1959: 109). Cleopatra's fate reflects the recurrence of the existential situation – as she says – between the disappearance of the day and the coming of the night, defeat and victory, life and death. She sententiously remarks: "People die, but nations live on", expressing the bitter truth that the fate of the country is decided as if by throwing a die, without her participation. She emphasizes the message of the play expressing her awareness of her country being a plaything of history: "Dreadful things will happen here, but my eyes, filled with the fire of centuries, will endure the sight of every atrocity when the cruel fate makes them look" (Morstin 1959: 339). Significantly, this drama of changeability of fate, the last one in the series, contains Morstin's annotation on the place and time of the play's creation: „Zakopane, Kasprusie, 1949 r."¹⁴

All ancient characters on the stages of Morstin's plays find themselves in a specific order of *theatrum mundi*. They are scrutinized as if from the inside, through the lens of hum-drum existence, while their legend is made ordinary. Morstin does this with the conviction that "[...] contemporary reality can be better understood thanks to intellectual maturity that is achieved through exploring the works of Greek thought and beauty" (Morstin: 1955: 6). By taking ancient characters and motifs from the legacy of Greek culture, Morstin strived to present new elements, fill in the gaps and thus break away from the established tradition and challenge myths and legends. He aimed at touching the everyday life and presenting ordinary existence of his *dramatis personae*. In this way, he unravelled the timeless and current meanings of historical and mythological narratives in the context of the 20th-century *hic et nunc*.

Morstin's ancient legacy is submerged in antithetical existential dilemmas which evolve from the collision of old values with new reality, characterized by the profound cultural crisis and the fall of the European civilization. In his works, Morstin uncovered fundamental truths about humans who are constantly confronted with the disintegration of humanistic values as well as the limitations and precariousness of the human condition; who tried to

¹⁴ When World War II broke out, the Morstins continued living in Pławowice, where they gave shelter to writers and artists who were displaced or had to run away. After the war, the reforms made them lose their family property and they left for Cracow. Next, they moved to Zakopane, where they lived in the villa of Kozica (Kasprusie Street 54), and from 1960 they resided in Warsaw. They never came back to Pławowice.

tame the chaos of the world; and who strived to penetrate the nature of fate. The heroines of the ancient tetralogy – Panthea, Penelope, Xanthippe and Cleopatra – depict numerous aspects of remaining faithful to one's values. Faced with various manifestations of death, they preserve the faith in the indestructibility of their desires and in the interrelations between the godly and earthly reality. In order to show all this, Morstin did not resort to negativity or absurdity, but attempted to salvage the equilibrium among the confusion of the world.

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