

Reconstructing the Slavic World in Polish Slavic Fantasy: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Discourses

Aleksandra Mikinka

University of Lodz, Faculty of Philology, Institute of Polish Philology and Speech Therapy,
Department of Positivist and Young Poland Literature, Pomorska 171/173, 90-236 Łódź, Poland
www.orcid.org/0000-0002-6000-8157
aleksandra.mikinka@filologia.uni.lodz.pl

*This article analyzes selected works from the currently trending genre of popular literature known as “Slavic fantasy.” It examines how individual authors draw on Slavic mythology, demonology, legends, and folklore. The study focuses on the use of these elements, particularly in works rooted in Polish literature and historical realities. The settings of the analyzed works are often located in lands inhabited by Western Slavic tribes, which significantly influenced the formation of Polish nationality. The phenomenon of Slavic fantasy has been systematized through classifications, notably by Adam Mazurkiewicz, who proposes a division based on the adopted creative strategy: adaptation or reconstruction. The analysis considers representative novels across several subgenres: historical/parahistorical fantasy—*Wisznia ze słowiańskiej głuszy* (Cherry from the Slavic Wilderness) by Aleksandra Katarzyna Maludy and *Piast Mściciel* (Piast the Avenger) by Krzysztof Jagiełło; contemporary (folk) fantasy—the series *Kwiat paproci* (The Fern Flower) by Katarzyna Berenika Miszczuk; and alternative world construction—the trilogy *Wilcza Dolina* (Wolf Valley) by Marta Krajewska. The article also addresses whether it is possible to discuss contemporary issues, such as women’s rights and ethics, through a narrative world inspired by the Middle Ages. It contributes to the growing trend of research on the phenomenon of Slavic fantasy and the fascination with Slavic culture.*

Keywords: contemporary Polish literature / fantasy fiction / Slavic culture / Slavic mythology / feminism

Introduction

Back in 2009, in a collective volume on the origins of the fantasy genre, Elżbieta Żukowska wrote: “Typical Slavic fantasy is still scarce, but the distinctiveness of the style strongly distinguishes it from Polish fantasy” (Żukowska 207). It only took a decade for the situation to radically change. Today, dozens of debut Slavic fantasy books are published every year, being the subject of both literary and cultural studies and pop culture discourse. This phenomenon is part of a worldwide trend, also noticeable among Slavic peoples. Through literature, audio-visual arts, music, fashion, etc., the sources of national identity are sought in folklore, history, mythology, and pre-Christianization rituals. In this way, creators of the fantasy genre retell¹ the history of their countries from a “centrifugal perspective.” Maria Janion wrote: “The new narrative of the humanities can tell the history of our culture differently” (Janion 20). She also pointed out the dangers of doing so: any fascination with an ethnic myth, if it crosses a certain boundary, becomes fodder for nationalists (22). Those accused of sympathizing with these movements have long distanced themselves in Poland from creating narratives in the pagan/Slavic spirit. Today, however, there is a process in domestic literature of shedding such dependencies, breaking away from them, or perhaps proving that not only nationalists can be interested in the pagan roots of Polish identity. In the discussion of the phenomenon, the question is still being asked what Slavic fiction is supposed to be in the face of all this: a source of historical information, a propaganda tube, or entertainment?

So far, an attempt has been made to systematize the phenomenon of Slavic books² and organize the positions within this trend by means

¹ “Retelling” is a much broader term today, referring not only to history, legends, and mythology, but also to fairy tales and various cultural transmissions. To retell is the act of repeating a well-known work in such a way that it becomes a separate, independent work, drawing on anything that has become well-rooted in cultural transmission.

² The term “Slavic book” was coined by Wiktoria Korzeniewska, the promoter of literature inspired by Slavic beliefs and the creator of a blog who is also active on social media. Over the past few years, however, the term has gained considerable popularity and is now used not only by other participants in cultural life but even by scholars. It is intended to refer as broadly as possible to books connected with Slavic mythology, yet its semantic scope does not fully overlap with that of the term “Slavic fantastic literature” or “Slavic fantasy,” as it also encompasses genres that are thematically linked to the cultural heritage of the Slavs and have been gaining popularity, such as Slavic crime fiction, folk noir, bestiaries, herbal guides, books of spells and rituals, popular science works, and finally children’s literature, including educational works.

of several classifications. Adam Mazurkiewicz writes about the division according to the strategy adopted: adaptation or reconstruction (Mazurkiewicz 136–140). Novels based on the strategy of adaptation adapt popular and well-known plot patterns and characters of the depicted world to (pre)Slavic reality. They make use of monomyths, such as Campbell's hero's journey, or refer to universal patterns and topoi from Tolkien, from *bildungsroman*, etc. Their "Slavicness" is therefore a kind of costume, a staffage. Consequently, a swap for any other stylization would not significantly affect the plot of the novel itself.

On the other hand, the opposite is done by writers opting for the strategy of reconstruction. They shift the burden of attention from the plot to showing the realities of the depicted pagan world. The works come close to the assumptions of the historical novel, but supernatural characters and phenomena are an additional element.

Within this strategy, authors opt for several variants. One of them, the closest to the historical novel, is realized in works whose action takes place in lands inhabited by Western Slavic tribes, which significantly influenced the formation of Polish nationality. While maintaining attention to the description of the everyday life of the characters, elements of the supernatural world are subtly introduced into this parahistoric fantasy genre. This model of tale is based on scientific foundations, and their creation precedes the authors' acquisition of extensive knowledge of the slice of history in which the action takes place. Often, they also refer to the oldest Polish legends or the so-called tribal myths about Popiel, Wanda, the Wawel dragon, etc. The second variant of the plot strategy, only indirectly related to the reconstruction procedure, consists in situating the plot in a completely fictional, self-referential universe, which, after all, shows considerable similarities to the land of the ancient Slavs. It seems that such a strategy, which is opted for by a whole range of debuting authors of Slavic books, allows for greater flexibility inherent in the fantasy genre, for bolder plot concepts and the possible filling of "white spots" with original ideas. And these "white spots," related to the knowledge of Slavic tribes living in Central Europe, are plentiful (Rudolf 199–200). Knowledge of their culture, tribal structure, religion, rituals, and way of seeing the world, is scarce and drawn from sources written by people who Christianized the Slavs. Hence the idea, often realized in fantasy, of constructing a fictional universe, in which we find figures drawn from the Slavic *immaginarium communis*. What binds the thematically and compositionally distant plots together in such a strong way that we can still speak of one genre, is the "Slavicness" mentioned above, sometimes understood

very broadly, but most often present through references to mythology (cosmogony and theogony), demonology, or Slavic folklore. Anna Justyna Dragan writes: “The multifarious manifestation of Slavicness in the text is thus the generator of the origin of the name ‘Slavic fantasy.’ The planes it encompasses include the realities of an ancient era, the dualistic worldview and magical thinking of the Slavic ancestors, the characters of legendary and mythical heroes, perennials, and mythical narratives” (Dragan 56).

We will now try to take a closer look at how this “Slavicness” is realized in representative novels belonging to each genre variety. Due to the limitation of space in the article, we will omit the analysis of works that merely adapt plots and characters foreign to Slavic realities, and focus on historical/parahistorical fantasy, contemporary (folk) fantasy, and constructing an alternative world.

Variant one: A legendary past

The retelling procedure has a long tradition in Polish literature. Probably the most famous nineteenth-century novel about the beginnings of our statehood, Kraszewski’s *Stara Baśń* (*An Ancient Tale*), significantly influenced the formation of pop-cultural perceptions about Slavism that have survived to this day. At the same time, it retold legends familiar to us from medieval chronicles. Contemporary writers, who choose to situate the plot of their novels in the times before the reign of Mieszko I,³ primarily try to break the “idyllic” image of the Slav as a pacifist and harmless shepherd, which was initiated, among others, by Herder who wrote about “lovers of the countryside, who tilled the soil with relish, hated wars, and wanted to live in comfort” (Dragan 24–25). Noteworthy are two examples showing in an alternative way the same moment from the history of our country—the rise of the Piast dynasty. Aleksandra Katarzyna Maludy, for the time of the plot of *Wisznia ze słowiańskiej głuszy* (*Cherry from the Slavic Wilderness*), chooses the turbulent period of the formation of European states, when in the territories of Central Europe Eastern cultures and religions clashed, while tribes and clans merged into states or were conquered by stronger neighbors. The historical background for the adventures of the main character, Wisznia, is the reign of the legendary King Krak and the story of his

³ Mieszko I ruled Poland from 960 to 992, and the Piast dynasty ruled from 960 to 1370.

daughter Wanda. As in the case of other parahistorical Slavic fantasy, realism is mixed here with fantasy, and facts with Maluda's authorial ideas. At the same time, *Wisznia ze słowiańskiej głuszy* is difficult to definitively assign to fantasy due to the ambiguity of the "miraculous" and supernatural phenomena appearing on the pages of the novel. The author seeks to make legendary, mythical events plausible, to give them a mark of authenticity, and in this way to trace the origin of the oldest "Polish" legends. Thus, she explains the victory over the Wawel dragon by killing a cruel Avar leader bearing the nickname Dragon.⁴ Not coincidentally, she makes one of the heroines of her story Wanda, whose motif has been used many times in the debate related to women's rule. This is because Maludy is clearly trying to insert her novel into the feminist discourse and the consideration of the role of women in history. Also, the story of Wisznia herself, the "Slavic Amazon," is to become a pretext for taking up reflections on the justice and equality between the sexes. The book features more characters derived from national chronicles: Piast Kołodziej, Rzepicha, Prince Popiel, Lech, Czech, and Rus. Each time, the author tries to make legendary versions of events plausible, placing them in historical context.

The second of the aforementioned novels is Krzysztof Jagiełło's *Piast Mściciel* (*Piast the Avenger*). Although set in the same historical moment as *Wisznia*, it presents a completely different—masculinist—perspective. The protagonists of the novel are not women but men—Piast Kołodziej and his friend Ścibor. This has various plot consequences. In *Wisznia*, the author devotes a lot of space to describing the daily life, beliefs, and customs of the Slavs. We learn how housewives cooked and baked, how they prepared beer, what the settlements, cottages, and chambers looked like at the time. This does not mean, however, that Maludy makes the domain of women only the private sphere of life. On the contrary, her heroines actively participate in armed skirmishes and are an important voice in the political affairs of the settlement. Eventually, they take over the rule of the Szelig stronghold, driving out the men in revenge for their mistreatment. With all this, however, the book devotes a lot of space to "women's issues," such as pregnancy, childbirth, and infant care. What strikes one above all in *Piast Mściciel*, is the almost complete absence of this "private," domestic sphere of life. The story of the main character Ścibor is a flashback to the events of

⁴ This is not Maludy's own conception, but the position of some scholars of the history of that period, which she claims to have taken from the work of Jacek Banaszkiewicz. The dragon would have been Ejderha, the leader of the Avars, whose traces of existence from the sixth century AD were found in the vicinity of Krakow (Zieliński 150).

decades ago that led to the overthrow of Prince Popiel and the rise to power of Piast. The storyline is dominated by extensive, detailed images of battles, armed skirmishes, tribal rallies, and warrior training.

Both novels are assigned to the genre of Slavic fantasy, although supernatural themes are treated in them residually. They do not constitute an important element of the plot but are rather inscribed in the construction of the psyche of the main characters. In order to draw a successful and credible portrait of the Slavs in that time, it is impossible to ignore the deep belief in the supernatural world inherent in our ancestors. In both books, Slavic gods and demons do not appear as independent characters, but the main characters invoke their faith in them in moments of trepidation or elation, and sometimes interpret various natural phenomena as signs from them. It is up to the reader to make the final decision whether to believe in the veracity of these omens or treat them as coincidences. A sign of the care that the goddess Mokosh, according to Yaga, exerted over Wisznia was supposed to be the girl's miraculous rescue from wild animals when, as an infant, she spent the night in the forest under a sacred oak tree (Maludy, *Wisznia* 36). Ścibor, on the other hand, interprets the sparks flying from the bonfire as a sign from Perun at the time of the uttering the oath of warriors (Jagiello 25). In both novels, the heroes also believe in the power of amulets to protect them from evil, and fear creatures that have Slavic origins—rusalkas, vampires, Leshy, Baba Yaga. Members of the settlement also take part in lavish celebrations of festivals associated with the agrarian calendar of the old Slavs.

The two narratives, though presenting such extreme perspectives in places, cohere when attempting to portray the brutality of the times in which the action takes place. Both Maludy and Jagiello draw detailed and convincing descriptions of the cruelty of the perpetrators, depicting the hardships of the characters' lives and the severity of the customs of the time. Both stories begin with the burning of the heroes' native settlement. In Maludy's novel, Wisznia ends up in Avar captivity, where she faces humiliation, rape, and a grueling journey of many months through the wilderness towards Krakow. In Jagiello's novel, Ścibor and Piast become witnesses to the dishonor and killing of their mothers and sisters; however, they escape from the settlement, thanks to which they do not get enslaved. The fate of the slaves is depicted similarly in both novels. The drastic scenes are primarily intended to emphasize the brutality of the era in which the action is set. The authors simultaneously deal with two lingering myths: the myth of the "gentle Slav" and the myth of the opposition between the Haves and the Outsiders.

While in the beginning Wisznia is kidnapped and raped by the Avars, an invading, “alien” people who came from the depths of Asia in the middle of the sixth century, later her torturers become other Slavs. Eventually, the women come to the conclusion that their enemies are men, and their derivation is of secondary importance. In *Piast Mściciel*, the betrayal of other Slavs is mentioned in the beginning. In the face of constant fratricidal fighting, it is the hero who is the first to attempt to unite the Polanian tribe. At the same time, both of the leading characters—Wisznia and Piast—behave in a morally ambivalent manner. The women of the Szelig stronghold have no reluctance to abandon unwanted newborns in the forest, while Piast sells prisoners at the slave market to purchase war equipment. Maludy stresses, however, that we must not judge the motivations and deeds of people living at that time through the prism of today’s moral standards. On the other hand, the romantic theme present in both books is meant to prove that regardless of the brutality of the times in which the characters live, certain behaviors remain universal to humans, such as the need for happiness, love, living in peace, security, etc. These needs drive Wisznia and Piast, giving them strength in their struggle, despite their loss of dignity. This also represents, in a sense, a response to the question about the meaning of the creation of “parahistorical” fantasy: on the one hand, its authors want to bring us closer to the realities of that era, and on the other hand, they want to make certain human experiences universal, belonging to all times. In one of the interviews, Maludy said: “We rarely realize that we are children of history, that our way of thinking, the conditions we live in, our customs—all of these are the result of events that took place in the past” (Maludy, “Jesteśmy”). In turn, in the epilogue of *Piast Mściciel*, the author puts a metatextual statement in the mouth of one of the monks, which can be read as a kind of manifesto or an attempt to define his motivations for writing: “It seems that the Slavs can boast stories as worthy of song as those of Odysseus, Aeneas, Beowulf, or Cuchulainn. You know the fate of the wars of the people of Israel and can gawk for hours about the victories of Roman Caesar. Meanwhile, the tribes inhabiting these lands before the conquest of the Franks would probably have just as many heroic deeds to immortalize” (Jagiello 334–335).

Jagiello is strictly interested in the history of heroic war deeds of Slavic tribes. It is no accident that he refers to the most famous epics of our cultural circle. He wants to write his novel into the long tradition of narrative affirming the heroism of the “fathers of the nation.” However, Piast differs from the “brave men” derived from epic poems in that he,

as a hero, is not subject to the process of idealization. This is even more interesting—and contrasts with previous convention—because the figure of the legendary protoplast of the Piast dynasty has long remained in literature as a symbol of the righteous and virtuous king Pole.

Variant two: Modern Slavic culture

Authors of Slavic fantasy are inspired by native beliefs in a variety of ways. While authors of parahistorical narratives use studies of ancient Slavs, in novels set in modern times, Slavic rituals resemble the actually organized and pompously celebrated festivals of today's native believers. Katarzyna Berenika Miszczuk, while writing her series *Kwiat paproci* (*The Fern Flower*), in which Poland officially remains a pagan country, conducted extensive queries and participated in native believer gatherings and rituals to later describe them in the books (Miszczuk 415).

The first novel from Miszczuk's series, *Szeptucha* (*The Whisperer*), tells the story of the young doctor Gosława Brzózka who moves out of Warsaw and into the countryside, to Bieliny, to do her mandatory one-year internship with a whisperer (*szeptucha*). After all, herbalists are held in the same high esteem there as medics. The rural space in which the author places the action of the novel is also not without significance. The province is a place where the Slavic gods are much stronger than in the cities, and ancient traditions are still alive. In the cities, not only demons and monsters but also religious holidays and rituals are objects of derision, and society is secularizing: "I grew up in Warsaw. There, no one cared about either gods or superstitions. Everyone treated religion as a charm or folklore and an opportunity to have a day off from work in case of holidays" (Miszczuk 99). The titular whisperer, Jarogniewa, is a modern variation of Baba Yaga, a character so firmly established in Slavic folklore that she is one of the most important sources of inspiration for the creators of the genre in question. In one way or another, the witch, the whisperer, the witch doctor, and Baba Yaga appear in most of the works discussed here. In the case of Miszczuk's prose, Baba Yaga is a character that is as important as she is caricatured. She is supposed to be a grotesque, exaggerated version of the notion of a village witch, which is why she pretends to be limp and shortsighted, hunchbacks unnaturally when walking, ties a kerchief on her head and puts a golden veneer in her mouth, but she does this only for show, in front of customers: "It is not enough to be a good whisperer. In these parts, you

still have to look proper” (46). Her character may be, in its own way, an ironic commentary on the contemporary fascination with Slavic folklore, which as a trend tends to be superficial, shallow, and not very insightful. However, it is important that Jarogniewa, although she pretends to be a grandmother from a cottage on a chicken leg, does not pretend about the skills she possesses. She passes on her knowledge of herbs, spells and fighting monsters to her chosen apprentice, Goślawa. Goślawa, despite her initial reluctance, eventually accepts her destiny as the new whisperer in Bieliny. Miszczuk alludes to a longstanding folk tradition, according to which a village quack keeps the arcana of her healing art a secret and only in old age chooses a successor for herself.

Slavic mythology and folklore are very important parts of the plot in Miszczuk’s work. Here, in contrast to the world created in *Wisznia* and *Piast Mściciel*, the gods are not only undoubtedly as real as humans, but also ready to constantly and actively interfere in the affairs of this world. The main character, before she arrives in Bieliny and becomes embroiled in divine intrigues, seems to doubt their existence, or at least to question any possibility of communication with them. The gradual metamorphosis of the main character thus becomes a path from negation to acceptance, from ignorance to knowledge, that is, to being a witch, a whisperer. Emphasizing her uniqueness is to be served by the fact that she is born as a “chosen one,” a “seer.” Gradually, Goślawa discovers more closely guarded family secrets about her father’s divine origin (in this case, the author used a model known more from Greek mythology), about having two souls and being a shearer (this inspiration comes from Slavic folklore), and about being destined to restore the balance by killing a god and giving birth to him again (this myth reflects the universal account of a goddess giving birth to a sun god every year, known from many religions).

What is striking in the *Kwiat paproci* series above all, is the total lack of trust, even dislike for the deities that are worshipped. Paradoxically, some demons and supernatural beings, such as the drowning Dareczek or the mermaid Slava, show the heroine more sympathy than the gods. And the aforementioned demons are plentiful in Miszczuk’s novels: from the ghoul Ote, Goślawa’s main antagonist, to vampires, impoverished creatures, scorchers, and even Leszy, who roams the woods. Some pose a real threat, which the whisperer Jarogniewa and her young apprentice must face, while Leszy, for example, is called diminutively “Mr. Leszek” what situates him rather within the humorous threads of the saga.

The place of power of most demons is the forest (similarly in *Okrutnik* by Aleksandra Rozmus and *Zmorojewo* by Jakub Żulczyk).

The forest as *locus horridus* has a long tradition in Slavic folklore. As Katarzyna Grabias-Banaszewska writes: “Since the earliest times, the forest at the same time as being a host for man has filled him with dread. Folk beliefs populated the terrain of primeval forests, woods, and thickets on almost all continents. In beliefs from the Polish territory, the forest was inhabited by demonic beings of various types” (Grabias-Banaszewska 43).

The space of the village and the forest is a link between the modern and the ancient. The further away from civilization, the more demons and various supernatural beings in the novel. Instead, in the heart of the Bielany forest, not far from Łysa Góra (famous witch mountain), there is an entrance to Nawia, the Slavic underworld, guarded by the god of the underworld, Weles. Today, we know very little about this place. Our perceptions of the Slavic underworld overlap the Christian vision with the Greek Hades (Gołuński 28–29). Perhaps that is why the author of *Kwiat paproci* avoids an in-depth description of this land, telling the heroine to stop at its gates, protected by Weles.

The novel *Szeptucha* is an example of literature aimed at young people. Although the world of Slavic mythology is the dominant feature of the work, it is difficult to classify it as ambitious literature. It is worth remembering that the book was primarily intended to remain a “Slavic romance” and was advertised as such on the publishing market. In this case, rather than a desire to familiarize readers with the customs and rituals of the ancient Slavs, it may be more about a desire to entertain them. Anna Justyna Dragan calls this “a primordial turn to pleasure” of reading (Dragan 6), which makes Slavic fantasy a typically postmodern genre. Nevertheless, *Szeptucha* and the entire *Kwiat paproci* saga meet the expectations of today’s audiences and are an important example of Slavic fantasy—not least because the novel launched the immense popularity of Slavic fantasy aimed at women, and its success contributed to the growth of general interest in Slavic themes.

Variant three: Slavic fantasy *universum*

The last of the varieties discussed in this article probably most fully deserves the title of fantasy because in it all the determinants of the genre resound, additionally equipped with a “Slavic” stencil. An interesting example is Marta Krajewska’s trilogy *Wilcza Dolina* (*Wolf Valley*), nominated for the Janusz A. Zajdel Award by the Polish science fiction and fantasy fandom.

The world of Wolf Valley, which is the main place of action, is clearly inspired by the land of the ancient Slavs. All the cultural ideas about how our ancestors lived, which have been growing for decades, are concentrated here as if in a lens. An additional, typically fantastic element are characters of unclear ontological status from the traditional bestiary of the Slavs. On the other hand, far less is said about the gods. Characters mention them during oaths or curses, call upon them during holiday celebrations and ask for their protection during illness, but do not interact with them directly. Some of the residents of Wolf Valley question their existence: “Gods. You have so many of them. How do you know they all want the same thing for you? After all, you don’t even see them. Maybe they do not exist” (Krajewska 246). However, they do not face any punishment for this.

On the other hand, those who question the existence of demons perish, as shown by the story of Winny, a young boy who taunted Leshy, after which he was found dead in the forest near the settlement. Demons in Krajewska’s novels are not dreamlike specters meant to illustrate universal fears or sins but pose real threat. They can impersonate people, like the innkeeper’s son Irke who, as a drowning man, tries to seduce the main character, or Lendav, the kite-flyer, brought in response to prayer during a storm. They can also appear in the protagonists’ dreams, leading them to their doom, like *strzygoń* Ollen, haunting his mother Stalka during nightmares. Wolf’s Valley is an alternative world born out of the ancient Slavs’ ideas of what our world would be like if supernatural beings existed. Sometimes the author makes some creative shifts, enriching the source message with her own imagination, but she always tries to faithfully reflect the cultural ideas about a particular demon or Slavic festival that have been ingrained in us. The interferences Krajewska makes in the historical message she has at her disposal and to which she refers have a specific purpose on plot grounds each time. The most important authorial idea is the introduction of the figure of the guardian/caretaker into the village community. The main character, Venda, is the adopted daughter of the guardian, and after his death she takes over his function. The guardian, as the reader learns in the course of the plot, has the task of guarding the inhabitants from demons, casting charms, fighting diseases, and upholding ancient customs related to the worship of deities. Thus, in this profession we can find connotations with both the figure of the whisperer (herbs, healing, curing) and the priestess (performing rituals). The protective nature of the guardian’s function is emphasized by the words of the solemn oath: “Let everything evil strike me” (Krajewska 230).

The opposition to the guardian is the witch Atra. The first abhors magic, does not like to use it, and her job is to help victims of spells. The second—a young disciple of the old hag from under the rock—will learn the arcana of the magical arts. Krajewska shows two extreme types of femininity. Venda is modest, altruistic, and has close relations with all members of the community. She delivers babies, performs funeral ceremonies, heals and comforts the sick. She uses her knowledge for the benefit of others. Atra, on the other hand, was created from the beginning as a *femme fatale*. She is entangled in a love affair with demons residing in the Cemetery of the Outcasts, she is cold, alienated, distanced from the other villagers, and at the same time endowed with exceptional beauty. In both cases, the women become bearers of the qualities with which the witch/herbalist has been endowed by folk religiosity: above-average knowledge and skills, contact with supernatural beings (in Venda's case, these are supposed to be gods, in Atra's case—demons, her lovers), a sacred, mysterious relationship with both life (delivering babies) and death (helping in miscarriage). Atra, like every *femme fatale* and witch in popular culture, “plays with fire”: she fraternizes with demons and engages in a dangerous love affair with the “other side”; she is fascinated by otherness, evil, darkness. Her figure is a peculiar conglomerate of Slavic traits and European ideas about witches, dating from—after all, several hundred years later—the time of the stakes. On the other hand, the old witch from under the rock, who is Atra's teacher, refers to the figure of Baba Yaga in the form in which tales and legends have taken over and transformed her from folklore messages.

The influence of fairy tales is also highlighted in the spatial constructions. The daily life of the residents of the Wolf Valley is described with great meticulousness and attention to detail. The interiors of the residents' cottages, inns, and the village's main square transport the reader to an early medieval Slavic settlement. Field work or farming activities are described just as faithfully. But there are also spaces in the novel with a distinctly fairytale provenance, such as the neglected hut of the witch from under the rock, the castle of the goddess of winter (Marzanna, a character derived from Slavic mythology, but here reminiscent of Andersen's Snow Queen), or the ruins of the Wolf's Castle, near which a treasure is supposed to be hidden. This turns our attention again to the phenomenon of retelling. In this case, the strategy chosen by the author serves to loosely interweave inspirations derived from world literature and native ones. As a result, the depicted world becomes a conglomerate of themes, motifs, intertexts, and references mixing together but forming a coherent whole within the system.

Krajewska assumes the position of a “storyteller,” entertaining the listener with tales that he or she has heard somewhere before, but now gain a completely new face.

Conclusion

After analyzing representative novels situated within the genre of Slavic fantasy several conclusions arise related to the attempt to answer the question of the reason for their growing popularity. Moreover, what determines such a high attractiveness of retelling strategies in the eyes of readers? Anna Justyna Dragan concludes that behind this is the age-old need to search for the sacred, spirituality, and mysticism, which resonates particularly strongly in modern man: having rejected Christianity, he turns to that in which he wishes to find himself (the teachings of his ancestors). This is undoubtedly one of the religious motivations of native believers, while looking for it in literature raises some doubts. Slavic fantasy as offered to the reader will not satisfy his spiritual needs, as its main (sometimes only) function remains entertainment. However, it seems important to note a general trend related to the fashion for “Slavicism.” This is because it testifies to the world-view transformation that is slowly taking place among Polish consumers of culture—from the initial rejection of their own identity to the affirmation of localness as a differentiating criterion, positively valorized in the culture of niches.

However, literature, though rich, is only a part of the process of turning towards tradition, roots, and heritage, which can be observed in culture today. The “fashion for folklore,” noticeable on many levels, makes Slavic fantasy perfectly accepted on its native soil, fitting in with the tastes of readers. This is because it represents an original, postmodern combination of two opposite poles—the old and the new, fresh, experimental. Playing with tradition, recalling old stories heard in childhood but placing them in a contemporary context (for example, feminist or postcolonial) revives old legends, builds national identity, and draws the reader into playing with plot, form, and convention. Satisfied that he or she has found an intertextual clue, the reader of the work wants to return to the pleasure of reading. What’s more, modern fantasy authors are in constant contact with their fans, allowing them, in a way, to “influence” the plot, cocreate it, modify it. For example, the name of the main character of Mieszczuk’s *Kwiat paproci* saga, Mieszko, was suggested to the author by one of her readers.

Krajewska, on the other hand, organizes virtual meetings with fans, where she discusses with them the latest, as yet unpublished volume of *Wilcza Dolina* trilogy. The exchange of ideas is lively, inspiring, and mutually rewarding. In this way, readers become cocreators of Slavic fantasy, what undoubtedly builds the popularity of the genre. It is also that the readership stems precisely from the purely entertainment function, not educational. Even in parahistorical novels, the ludic aspect prevails over informational aspect. This leads to the conclusion that, so far, Slavic fantasy has not managed to leave the domain of entertainment literature and become what it sometimes aspires to be—a source of thorough knowledge about our ancestors, and not just postmodern “fun.” Nevertheless, reaching for it may trigger in the reader the desire to further explore the subject of ancient Slavs by seeking reliable studies—and for this reason alone it should not be ignored.

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Rekonstrukcija slovanskega sveta v poljski slovanski fantastiji: zgodovinski konteksti in sodobni diskurzi

Ključne besede: sodobna poljska književnost / fantazijska literatura / slovanska kultura / slovanska mitologija / feminizem

Razprava analizira izbrana dela iz trenutno priljubljenega žanra popularne literature, znanega kot »slovanska fantastija«. Preučuje, kako posamezni avtorji črpajo iz slovanske mitologije, demonologije, legend in ljudskega izročila. Študija se osredotoča na uporabo teh elementov, zlasti v delih, ki temeljijo na poljski literaturi in zgodovinskih realnostih. Prizorišča analiziranih del so pogosto postavljena v dežele, kjer so živel zahodna slovanska plemena, kar je pomembno vplivalo na oblikovanje poljske narodnosti. Fenomen slovanske fantastije je bil sistematiziran s klasifikacijami, predvsem s strani Adama Mazurkiewicza, ki predlaga delitev na podlagi ustvarjalne strategije: adaptacija ali rekonstrukcija. Analiza obravnava reprezentativne romane v več podžanrih: zgodovinska/parazgodovinska fantastija – *Wisznia ze słowiańskiej głuszy* (Češnja iz slovanske divjine) Aleksandre Katarzyne Maludy in *Piast Mściciel* (Piast maščevalec) Krzysztofa Jagiełły; sodobna (ljudska) fantastija – serija *Kwiat paproci* (Cvet praproti) Katarzyne Berenike Miszczuk; in gradnja alternativnega sveta – trilogija *Wilcza Dolina* (Volčja dolina) Marte Krajewske. Članek obravnava tudi, ali je mogoče razpravljati o sodobnih vprašanjih, kot so pravice žensk in etika, skozi pripovedni svet, ki ga je navdihnil srednji vek. Tako prispeva k naraščajočemu trendu raziskovanja fenomena slovanske fantastije in fascinacije s slovansko kulturo.

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