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ALEKSOTA BY SEWERYNA PRUSZAKOWA AND STANISŁAW MONIUSZKO – A REDISCOVERED LINK?

This article is an English translation of the Polish original: 'Aleksota Seweryny Pruszkowej i Stanisława Moniuszki – odnalezienie ogniwo?', in *Studia Chopinowskie* 2023 vol. 1, 4–27, for which it was accepted through a double-blind review process.

Along with the social and national renaissance of the turn of the 1850s and 60s, the most spectacular manifestation of which was the wave of peaceful demonstrations in Warsaw that with time spilled over into the whole of the country, an opportunity arose to stimulate and organise independent cultural life. That included theatre, of course, in its different varieties. In Józef Unger's *Kalendarz Warszawski* for the 'ordinary year 1863', Karol Estreicher, a well-known bibliographer who was also a critic, published an article in which he wore both those professional 'hats'. Having described the state of Polish theatres and assembled information from many writers about recent works, he postulated consolidating their efforts:

So wishing to refresh the repertoire, that is, to reintroduce into it native tragedies, we must unite the pens of dramatists from all parts of the land and investigate what new works have been produced and where.¹

After that, 'for entrepreneurs with good intentions and even better will', he compiled 'a list of stage works written since 1860', noting that 'there are here both bad works and good'. Yet when reason was applied to the selection of the finest, the result would be, as he wrote, 'excellent repertoire comprising native works alone'.² The lengthy list of plays mentioned by Estreicher included two written as librettos for Stanisław Moniuszko. The first of them served him for the composition of the much-publicised *Haunted Manor*, while the other – after some attempts at imparting to it a musical form – was abandoned by the composer and all but entirely forgotten by history. Worse than that, it also possessed the curious property of concealing itself not just from the eyes of Moniuszko scholars, but also from archivists, now emerging among other manuscripts, now sinking down into library holdings for many long years and resisting attempts to find it. It was only the systematic digitisation conducted in recent years as part of the Polish Music Heritage in Open Access project that revealed its repository. Consequently, the document – which people knew existed somewhere, but not exactly where – ended up first on the Internet, in a rather mechanical way, and then in the hands

1
Karol Estreicher, 'Teatr i repertuar' [Theatre and repertoire], in Józefa Ungra *Kalendarz Warszawski Popularno-Naukowy Ilustrowany* [Józef Unger's illustrated popular-scientific Warsaw calendar] (Warsaw, 1863), 115.

2
Ibid.

of scholars who had been seeking it for years. Hence the work in question – the legendary play *Aleksota*, by Seweryna Pruszkowa (later Duchńska), née Żochowska – can once again be subjected to research, beginning by checking the basic information about the manuscript, the circumstances surrounding the writing of the work and its sources.

The last two mentions of *Aleksota* in scholarship date from 1948 and 1961, more than 75 and 60 years ago. The earlier of the two, published in the *Kwartalnik Muzyczny* under the title ‘Niezrealizowane projekty operowe Moniuszki’ [Moniuszko’s unrealised opera projects], was written by Włodzimierz Poźniak,³ while the latter was a single page in the Moniuszko monograph (numbering more than a thousand pages) by Witold Rudziński⁴. Moreover, Rudziński made no reference to the findings of his predecessor, who maintained a more objective, critical approach to the sources and reached interesting conclusions. Later scholars, if they have shown any interest at all in Moniuszko and Pruszkowa’s joint plan, have tended to draw on Rudziński⁵ rather than Poźniak⁶.

The manuscript of *Aleksota* is held at the Warsaw Music Society Library under the shelf mark *R 1257 M*. It is a fair copy written by the author in blue ink. The text, written on both sides of the white, wide-ruled paper, takes up 44 leaves, the last of which is blank on the *verso*, as is the whole of the following leaf. The work thus covers 85 pages, which are numbered in a foreign hand (in pencil). At the top of page 1 we find the title, written and underlined in black ink, then again in blue pencil, beneath that the date 1862, and above the title a centred Roman numeral II; this seems to suggest that the manuscript originally belonged to another group of documents.

The few corrections in the text, addenda in the margins facilitating the reading experience and underlinings in blue ink in the stage directions and some other places⁷ show that the work was checked and revised by the author. It is not known when or for what purpose she did this. The manuscript of the drama is preceded by a ten-page commentary entitled ‘Kilka słów o wspólnych pracach moich ze Stanisławem Moniuszką’ [A few words on my joint projects with Stanisław Moniuszko], written solely on the *recto* sides in a darker blue ink, in a different, less refined hand, on wide-ruled paper with a machine-printed red margin. It is likely that this belonged to the person acting as the author’s secretary at the time she sent her play to the Society. That introduction is preceded by a letter written by the 87-year-old author, dated ‘Paris, 30 April 1903, 84. Rue de Passy 16^o’, in the same hand and the same ink, on the same paper, though of a smaller size, without margins. Half-way down the third page, we find Seweryna Duchńska’s signature, written in a shaky hand; a similar signature, slightly more rounded, but pale, appears beneath the commentary, preceding a footnote with the date Paris, February 1903. All three manuscripts – the letter, the introduction and the play itself – were sewn together in

3 Włodzimierz Poźniak, ‘Niezrealizowane projekty operowe Moniuszki’ [Moniuszko’s unrealised opera projects], *Kwartalnik Muzyczny*, 1948/21–22, 234–251.

4 Witold Rudziński, *Stanisław Moniuszko*, pt II (Kraków, 1961), 358.

5 See e.g. Anna Wypych-Gawrońska, ‘Literature and writers in the life and works of Stanisław Moniuszko’, *Edukacja Muzyczna*, 14 (2019), 90, doi: <https://doi.org/10.16926/em.2019.14.04>.

6 Grzegorz Zieziula made excellent use of Poźniak’s findings in his work *Nurt kosmopolityczny w polskiej twórczości operowej drugiej połowy XIX wieku* [The cosmopolitan strand in Polish operatic output of the second half of the nineteenth century] (Warsaw, 2020), 204–210.

7 The role of the underlinings in this manuscript (in lead pencil, coloured pencil and pen) is a separate question that will have to be considered by the editor of *Aleksota* if the work is one day published.

Warsaw and bound in board covers overlain with claret oilcloth with the same dimensions as the whole block, 19 x 15 cm.⁸ Pasted onto the cover was a label carrying information written there by the President of the Stanisław Moniuszko Section of Warsaw Music Society, Władysław Zahorowski, who owned the composer's memorabilia at that time.⁹

Aleksota
opera libretto, for Moniuszko
prepared in 1862
by Seweryna Duchińska (née Pruszk)¹⁰
with a letter and commentary by Mrs Duchińska
written in Paris in 1903.

Zahorowski repeated this information, in a slightly different formula and arrangement, on the endpaper, which consequently serves as the title page.¹¹ Inside the source, on the letter, beneath the date and place it was written, he entered the date of acquisition,¹² and in the margin of the first page of the commentary he added an acquisition entry¹³ and a note about thanks being sent to Duchińska.¹⁴

A letter appended to the source, addressed directly to Zahorowski, and indirectly to the Society, and also the February date beneath the introduction to the play reveal that he had been in touch with the author for some time. Previously, he had sent her a portrait of Moniuszko, which she reflected on as follows:

The beautiful portrait of Moniuszko reminded me of the time when, guided by the maestro, following his advice, I was working [...] on a lyric poem for an opera he was intending to write. The remarks which the maestro gave me emboldened me to present that work to the Society, which is so ardently collecting mementoes of our brilliant composer.¹⁵

Duchińska had no doubt heard earlier of the Moniuszko section, established more than ten years before, which aroused her keen interest. On the other hand, the Society's 'emissaries' appear to have sought to receive from the poetess both recollections and also documents linked to the composer. Hence those 'Few words' were written down in February 1903 and were ultimately sent, together with the libretto, two months later, as a result of more earnest efforts. For reasons that we can only guess, Duchińska was not enthusiastic about making the gift. Hence she had to be persuaded that she was putting her work in a safe place, albeit in a country under Russian rule, and in responsible hands, in which it would not be the subject of any critical caprices. Certainly helpful was the invoking of Moniuszko's authority by means of the portrait. It was remembrance of the composer's advice and comments, as well as the need to preserve them for posterity and the conviction that

8
Włodzimierz Pożniak included an exact description of the source in his article, 'Niezrealizowane projekty', 244.

9
The label is torn almost entirely across, and creased from the bottom, but with no permanent damage.

10
Zahorowski is not the only one to make the mistake of replacing the writer's maiden name with the surname of her first husband. Anna Wypych-Gawrońska recently did the same in her article cited above

11
'Memento from Mrs Seweryna Duchińska (née Pruszk). The libretto (with commentary) to the opera *Aleksota* prepared for Moniuszko in 1862 (manuscript)'.

12
4/V1903

13
'From Mrs Seweryna Duchińska (née Pruszk) in Paris, a gift for the Moniuszko section received in 1903, Zahorowski'.

14
'thanked on 28/IV 1903 n^o 445'.
Another comment from Zahorowski appears in the same margin, with the intriguing date 19/ II 1903.

15
Letter from Seweryna Duchińska to Władysław Zahorowski of 30 April 1903, in Seweryna Duchińska, 'Aleksota', ms at the WTM, shelf mark R 1257 M, pp. 1–2.

16

Duchińska used this word twice: in the letter on p. 2 and in the introduction on p. 1.

17

Seweryna Duchińska, 'Kilka słów o wspólnych pracach moich ze Stanisławem Moniuszką' [A few words about my projects with Stanisław Moniuszko], in 'Aleksota', 1 [5].

18

Maria Berkan-Jabłońska, *Weredyczki, sawantki, marzycielki, damy... W kręgu kobiecego romantyzmu. Studia i szkice z kultury literackiej kobiet okresu międzypowstaniowego* [Free-spoken women, savantes, dreamers and ladies... Women in the Romantic era: studies and sketches on the literary culture of women from the period between the November and January uprisings] (Łódź, 2019), 90–98. See also Maria Berkan-Jabłońska, 'Edukacyjny projekt Seweryny Duchińskiej, wiernej uczennicy Hoffmanowej. O „Rozrywkach dla Młodocianego Wieku” z lat 1856–1863 (rekonesansy)' [The educational project of Seweryna Duchińska, a faithful pupil of [Klementyna] Hoffmanowa: on *Rozrywki dla Młodocianego Wieku* between 1856 and 1863], in Jacek Brzozowski, Marek Skrzypczyk and Mirosław Stanisław (eds), *Stolice i prowincje kultury. Księga Pamiątkowa ofiarowana Pani Profesor Alinie Kowalczykowej* [Capitals and provinces of culture: festschrift for Professor Alina Kowalczykowa] (Warsaw, 2012); Teoduz Bujnicki, '„Wieszczka” Seweryna Duchińska' [The 'female bard' Seweryna Duchińska], in *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Prace Historycznoliterackie*, 1998/92–93; Barbara Konarska-Pabiniak, 'Seweryna Duchińska – literatka i patriotka' [Seweryna Duchińska: literary figure and patriot], *Notatki Płockie*, 2015/2.

19

At that time still Pruszkowa, although she had been estranged from her first husband, Tadeusz Pruszk, for 15 years. After his death, in 1864, she remarried – to Franciszek Duchiński.

20

Lucjan Siemieński, 'Znaczenie kobiet w literaturze i poemata pani Pruszkowej' [The significance of women in literature and the poems of Mrs Pruszkowa], in *Kilka rysów z literatury i społeczeństwa od roku 1848–1858* [A few sketches on literature and society from the years 1848–1858] (Warsaw, 1859), i:260, 262.

21

Duchińska, 'Kilka słów', 2 [6].

her *Aleksota* was essentially a record of his conceptual work, that 'emboldened'¹⁶ Duchińska to entrust the manuscripts to the Society. Yet the idea was not only to keep them in an archive, but also – as the author mentions in her introduction to the work – for them to appear in print;¹⁷ so she must have reached some agreement with the Society in that regard.

Both the presumed hesitation and the final decision betray the consistent attitude of an author who saw her role as subservient to the nation, in which she saw no cause of discredit, but rather of praise. Although for many years her distinguished work as a writer and social activist, a remarkably brave carer for the families of individuals persecuted and imprisoned during the uprising and, consequently, a post-insurrectionary emigrant were completely forgotten, Pruszkowa-Duchińska has been attracting increasing attention. Maria Berkan-Jabłońska recently devoted a separate sketch to the writer in her collection of studies and sketches on the literary culture of women from the period between the November and January uprisings.¹⁸

At the beginning of the 1860s, when Pruszkowa began working with Moniuszko,¹⁹ she was among the most active female literary figures in Warsaw, publishing a great deal in verse and prose, working with the prestigious *Biblioteka Warszawska* and editing *Rozrywka dla Młodzieży* for several years. On friendly terms with Kazimierz Wóycicki and his wife Anna (née Magnuszewska), she regularly attended the famous gatherings of the Warsaw cultural milieu held at their home and from the mid-50s had been hosting her own literary salon every Thursday. She was a well-known writer. In 1859 Lucjan Siemieński, although critical of her poetry, did not omit to write: 'The most outstanding rhymers among us at the present time is unerringly Mrs Seweryna Pruszkowa.'²⁰ He called her poems 'charming', noting her 'enviable facility of diction'. It was perhaps her characteristic ability to write for a broader public, and above all that 'not inconsiderable gift of rhyme', no doubt betokening an excellent ear and sense of rhythm, that prompted Moniuszko to seek her out. Of course, the recommendation of Jan Chęciński was also a significant factor.²¹

Duchińska begins her account of the composer's first visit, which he paid at a rather inappropriate hour, in journalistic fashion:

It was the year 1862, one day, at 10 a.m., a guest called with whom I was barely acquainted.

– I am Moniuszko, he declares, I have come at an inappropriate time, but this is not a visit, rather business – a request even.

– Please speak, I shall do everything in my power.

– Four days hence, a memorial service will be held for Syrokomla at the Holy Cross church; I have been asked for a choir, I have prepared some music, but alas I do not yet have the stanzas to complete the composition.²²

It is easy to calculate that this meeting occurred on 15 December 1862, given that the memorial service for Ludwik Kondratowicz (pseud. Syrokomla), who had died in Vilnius three months before, was held on 19 December. The composer apparently gave the poetess one day to write three stanzas to his melody and called again the next morning for the finished text. Like many others, the composer was not disappointed by Pruszkowa's scrupulousness, ear and talent.²³

In the wake of the success of that venture, Moniuszko – according to Pruszkowa – called again a few days later to thank her and then three months later to ask if she would work with him on an opera he had devised, based around the union between Poland and Lithuania,²⁴ with a plot filled with fantastical-legendary events. Rudziński draws from Pruszkowa's account information mainly about 'Moniuszko's attitude towards the dramatic material of his operas and the way he worked with librettists'. He considers this information to be extremely valuable, despite the fact that the story told 40 years later by Duchńska 'may have been slightly embellished, exaggerated or inaccurate'.²⁵ Speaking about aspects of technique, the search for a theme and the composer's rejection of strictly historical material,²⁶ the poetess is unlikely to have significantly distorted his opinions and recommendations, but in relation to the chronology, political context and literary inspirations of the work, she erred completely. *Nota bene* the suspicion that her introduction is not entirely factual is suggested by its literary form (more dialogue than narrative), clearly fuelled by a need to render her recollections more belletristic. According to the order of events as presented in the introduction, the librettist and the composer could not have begun work until March 1863.

However, it was clearly not a favourable time for such projects, particularly since Pruszkowa, involved in conspiratorial activities, was not supposed to take up any obligations or perform the slightest movements that

22
Ibid.

23
That work was widely acknowledged. See e.g. a diary entry, published online, made by Ambroży Grabowski, who attended the service, which contains, besides the lyrics of the work and a description of the circumstances surrounding its performance, expressions of the highest praise for the author ('Notatka Ambrożego Grabowskiego dotycząca żałobnego nabożeństwa za duszę Syrokomli' [Ambroży Grabowski's note on the memorial service for Syrokomla], MS held in the Grabowski Collection at the National Archive in Kraków, shelf mark; <https://archiwalneopowiesci.ank.gov.pl/wystawa/romantycy-polscy-w-zasobie-archiwum-narodowego-w-krakowie/tworczosc-krajowa/wladyslaw-syrokomla/>, accessed 23 Aug. 2024). Pruszkowa, according to her own account, collected money during the service for Kondratowicz's widow and orphaned children.

Moniuszko's composition with Pruszkowa's lyrics dedicated to the memory of Syrokomla was published by Gebethner & Wolff in 1863 under the title *Wieczny pokój lirnikowi* [Eternal rest to a bard].

24

'– What is the work to be about – I asked anxiously.

– Poland's union with Lithuania – replied Moniuszko' (Duchńska, 'Kilka słów', 5 [9]).

According to Franciszek Ziejka, interest in the union and the intensification of commemorations of its anniversary was greatly increased by the publication, in 1855–1856, of Karol Szajnoch's 'historical tale' *Jadwiga i Jagiełło* [Jadwiga and Jagiełło] (F. Ziejka, „Przy lackim orle, przy koniu Kiejstuta, Archanioł Rusi na proporcach błysł!”. Tradycje unii horodelskiej w życiu narodowym czasów niewoli' ['With the Polish eagle and Kęstutis's horse, the archangel of Rus on the pennants refulgent!']. The traditions of the Union of Horodło in the life of the nation during the times of enslavement], *Niepodległość i Pamięć*, 2013/3–4, 54 ff.).

25

Witold Rudziński, *Stanisław Moniuszko*, pt 2 (Kraków, 1961), 358.

26

Pruszkowa considered suggesting the best-known motifs to Moniuszko: the marriages between Jagiełło and Jadwiga and 'Prince Janusz I and the daughter of Kęstutis and sister of Vytautas' (Duchńska, 'Kilka słów', 6 [10]).

27

Seweryna Duchńska, *Pisma. Pamiętnik. Poezje* [Writings. Diary. Verse] (Lviv, 1893), 129.

28

Kurier Warszawski, 6 (18) November 1862, 1.

29

Rudziński, *Stanisław Moniuszko*, pt 2, p. 357.

30

This is where Napoleon's army crossed the river in 1812. The events in November 1861 were described in some detail by Boleśław Limanowski, who drew on the account of an eye-witness and also conveyed the exaltation that accompanied the events: 'Lasses [...] walked onto the bridge and on the last planks before the water knelt down. The procession from the Kingdom, to the sound of bells in Kaunas, also entered the bridge and sang the hymn "Boże coś Polskę" [God, Thou who Poland]. "We are answered – writes one of the participants – by 3000 Lithuanians, the air rumbles from those combined sounds, the earth trembles, they are accompanied by heartfelt sobbing, both sides of the Niemen cry copious tears, which flow into its waters, mingling with them, while at the same time troops lean towards one another from both sides, priests give their blessings from both sides with crosses and aspergilla, the people fall to their knees, the girls from the endmost boards of the bridge bow to one another, Lithuania throws bouquets and wreaths to Poland, Poland the same to Lithuania; and the Niemen lifts up the wreaths and bouquets and mixes them up, thereby uniting them like the hearts of Poland and Lithuania, long since joined as one, beat at this moment towards one another"' (*Historia ruchu narodowego od 1861 do 1864 r.* [History of the national movement from 1861 to 1864], i (Lviv, 1882), 107–108. On the pre-uprising non-violence movement, including processions, see e.g. Maciej Kozłowski, *Krajobrazy przed bitwą* [Pre-battle landscapes] (Kraków, 1985).

31

Duchńska, 'Aleksota', 2 [16].

might attract excessive interest on the part of third parties, especially the police. So one could hardly imagine her wishing to acquire Moniuszko as a frequent guest at her home on Nowy Świat, between Świętokrzyska and Warecka streets,²⁷ and to sit with him over a work about the Polish–Lithuanian union among books brought in packages when all intellectual activity was associated with plotting and the very words Poland and Lithuania triggered the authorities' alertness, particularly when used together. Would it have been worth running the risk of being unmasked or ruining the 'system of care' over the loved ones of insurgents? Certainly not. The maxim *inter arma silent musae* applies here unconditionally.

So *Aleksota* must have been written before the outbreak of the uprising. The year 1862 placed on the title page of the manuscript will not arouse any doubts if the fallibility of human memory is contrasted with the incontrovertibility of certain facts. The *Kalendarz Warszawski*, which thanks to Estreicher's efforts singled out *Aleksota* among the latest dramatic achievements, was published no later than mid-November 1862. A favourable opinion of its reliable and meticulous approach, together with encouragement to purchase it, was printed, for example, in the *Kurier Warszawski* of Tuesday 18 November that year.²⁸ Since Estreicher gained information on current productions by means of questionnaires sent by mail, we must also discount the time spent in gathering and describing its results, and also for the calendar's production, so at least a month. Hence *Aleksota* could not have been finished later than at the beginning of October 1862. So when was it completed?

That question can only be answered by means of speculation, albeit speculation that is highly persuasive. Witold Rudziński stated that a role in the hatching of the idea for the work was certainly played by 'anniversaries of the union between Poland and Lithuania, commemorated on several occasions around that time'.²⁹ One of the most spectacular events was a demonstration in Krewa on 12 August 1861 commemorating the union, when two patriotic processions met on the banks of the Niemen [Lit. Nemunas], which separated Kaunas, then in the Russian Empire, from Aleksota [Lit. Aleksotas], situated on a hill on the other side of the river, which belonged to the Kingdom of Poland.³⁰ It was *Aleksota* that Pruszkowa and Moniuszko clearly indicated as the setting for the work, while at the same time fixing the time of the drama at the years when Lithuania developed a relationship with Poland, prior to the union in Krewa: 'The action is set in Aleksota, near Kaunas, at the start of the reign of Władysław Jagiełło'.³¹

So the work by Pruszkowa and Moniuszko was to commemorate the advent of the Commonwealth of Poland–

Lithuania, like the recent anniversary events. It was to do so while ingeniously concealing their true intentions beneath a historical-mythological cloak, so that the official authorities would not notice anything disloyal in the opera. Why would they not allow the staging of a play about the distant past and with a decidedly Christian message? Meanwhile, Poles and Lithuanians would understand one another over the heads of the censors and reaffirm their shared values and emotions.

The demonstrators had met on the bridge at Aleksota even though the day before it had been largely destroyed by the partitioning powers, in order to separate the Polish and Lithuanian representatives. As Rudziński wrote, that demonstration almost resulted in armed conflict.³² Yet a more crucial circumstance of that event is the fact that the Russian soldiers, not for the first time in that memorable year, were so moved by the solemn atmosphere of the commemorations that they knelt and joined in the prayers.³³ So it should be borne in mind that the word Aleksota, already known earlier as the name of a boundary point, became a suggestive and poignant word – a symbol of unity between Lithuania and Poland. Moniuszko was aware of this meaning, as Pruszkowa no doubt was as well, having taken ‘deep-felt part in the two-year demonstrations that preceded the outbreak of the armed insurrection’³⁴ and in the whole Movement, as it was called at the time. It seems unlikely that Moniuszko would have approached Pruszkowa with an idea not yet fleshed out or that the mythological figure of Aleksota would then have been chosen by her as the titular heroine of her libretto – as the poetess recalled years later – purely by chance. We should rather assume a different course to events. After all, Moniuszko, as she writes elsewhere, supposedly said: ‘The idea for a new opera has been going round my head for quite some time; I want to get started, but first I need a lyric poem.’³⁵ That poem was to dress the idea of the union in images that were neither historical nor, all the more so, current, political; not just on account of the composer’s creative predilections,³⁶ but also due to censorship. Aleksota as a goddess could have withstood any wrestling with Russian imperial officials, and the ingenuity of Pruszkowa and Moniuszko would determine what elements of the original idea – clearly suggested by the title – could be included in the show. For society, for the potential audience, it would be obvious what Aleksota symbolised. Anyone familiar with events, such as those who had perused Orgelbrand’s encyclopaedia (the first volume was published in 1859),³⁷ would also know that Aleksotas on the Nemunas and Aleksota the goddess were strictly connected to one another. So if the work could be staged in August 1862, on the anniversary of the events, its success would be guaranteed, and the enemy confounded.

The exceptional scope and atmosphere of the 1861 demonstration pressed Moniuszko to realise the idea that had been dogging him for years. The problem for the composer and his librettist was not so

32 Rudziński, *Stanisław Moniuszko*, 297.

33 See e.g. Limanowski, *Historia*, i:107: ‘Before stepping onto the bridge, the people were again cut off by the Cossacks. Pushed and shoved, beaten with whips, they knelt and struck up a song. This had a huge effect on the Cossacks: they doffed their caps and started to cross themselves; finally, they withdrew’.

34 Duchńska, *Pisma*, 128.

35 Duchńska, ‘Kilka słów’, 5 [9].

36 Duchńska recalled that Moniuszko had asked her to look for a folk legend devoted to one of three watershed events in the history of the two nations: the Christianisation of Lithuania, Jagiełło’s victory over the Teutonic Knights or ‘the union of two once enemy peoples’ (Duchńska, ‘Kilka słów’, 6 [10]). It initially seemed that such a legend would be impossible find. It is hard to believe the author’s recollections.

37 A. P. [Aleksander Połujański], ‘Alexota’, in *Encyklopedia powszechna [Universal encyclopaedia]*, i (Warsaw, 1859), 428.

much finding a legend expressive of the idea of the union as seeking or creating the desired story with Aleksota in the leading role. Close to Moniuszko's heart was a romantic vision of Lithuanian mythology and knowledge about it, compiled from various sources, and largely created by Teodor Narbutt in the first volume of his *Dzieje starożytne narodu litewskiego* [Ancient history of the Lithuanian nation] (1835), then reinforced by Józef Ignacy Kraszewski in *Litwa* [Lithuania] and poetically rendered in his epic cycle *Anafielas*, especially in *Witolorauda*. Narbutt, having created Milda, the Lithuanian Venus, stated briefly that she was otherwise known as 'Alexota'. He mentioned research into the remnants of her cult, 'where that goddess was clearly more particularly worshipped'.³⁸ In later literature, the image of the linden forests that according to the historiographer grew around Kaunas was also associated with a mount over the Niemen dedicated to Milda; more than one nineteenth-century author saw – or wanted to see – its remains. Kraszewski, although not mentioning Aleksota by name, links Kaunas with veneration for Milda, and he alludes to the Aleksota linden forests in the *Anafielas* trilogy, extolling the Kaunas mead. The cantata *Milda*, the libretto of which was adapted by Moniuszko and Edward Chłopicki from *Witolorauda*, clearly situates the action on the banks of the Niemen, near Kaunas, so nowhere other than in Aleksota:

U brzegu Niemna jest gaj poświęcony,
Stary jak Litwa, jak Litwinów bogi;
Niemen sinymi objął go ramiony,
Zielone łąki padły mu pod nogi,
Wzgórzem się ciągnie i ku niebu wspina;
A na wierzchołku w pośród lip zielonych
[...]
Jest ołtarz z darnia i dzikich kamieni,
Na którym rzadko płomyk ofiar błysnie:
Bo w gajach Litwy, w puszczech u strumieni
Wiele jest świątyń ku czci Mildy pani.
[...]
Raz w rok tu z Kowna tłoczy się lud mnogi,
Gdy kwiaty z wiosną w nowe szaty stroją,
Łąki zielenią i bieleją głogi....
Gdy cała Litwa czci tu Mildę swoją.
Nuć naówczas po gajach modlitwy
Ptaki litewskie i wszystkich lud Litwy.³⁹

(On the banks of the Niemen stands a sacred grove,
As old as Lithuania, as the Lithuanian gods;
The Niemen embraces it with its shimmering arms,
Green meadows spread out at its feet,
Upwards it stretches, to heaven it climbs;
And right at the top, amid the green lindens

38
Teodor Narbutt, *Dzieje starożytne narodu litewskiego* [Ancient history of the Lithuanian nation], i: *Mitologia litewska* [Lithuanian mythology] (Vilnius, 1835), 61. On twentieth-century traces in Kaunas of romantic faith in the existence of Aleksota, see Justyna Prusinowska, *Mitonimia międzywojennego Kowna* [Mythonymy of Kaunas between the wars], *Acta Balto-Slavica*, 46 (2022), 5.

39
Milda: kantata mitologiczna. Z poematu „Witolorauda” J.I. Kraszewskiego [Milda: a mythological cantata. From the poem Witolorauda by J.I. Kraszewski] (Warsaw, 1859), 3–4; in the first edition, from 1848, the location is emphasised in the foreword.

[...]

Stands an altar of turf and wild, uncut stones,
On which the sacrificial flame rarely shines:
For in Lithuanian groves, in woods, by the streams,
There are many temples dedicated to Milda.

[...]

Once a year a great host throngs here from Kaunas,
When the flowers with the spring their new robes assume,
The meadows turn green and the hawthorns white...
When the whole of Lithuania gives praise to its Milda.
Then the native birds and all the folk of the land
Hum prayers to the goddess in the sacred groves.)

During the 1840s, Józefina Osipowska's novel *Wajdelotka* popularised the notion of the goddess that she had conceived while reading Narbutt, strongly embellishing it. Her quite lengthy commentaries consist largely of extracts from the latter's multi-volume history of old Lithuania.⁴⁰

Moniuszko, turning to the poetess with a request that she write a mythological drama in the form of a libretto, invoked – as if he needed further recommendation – Kazimierz Władysław Wóycicki, who for many years was Pruszkowa's teacher, even mentor.⁴¹ The Wóycickis' salon, where she met leading novelists and historians, was also hugely significant for her intellectual formation. Waław Aleksander Maciejowski, the doyen of Polish historians, who also attended the Wóycickis' salon, published with Pruszkowa (almost a quarter of a century his junior) a quite singular translation of Frédéric Gustave Eichhoff's *Histoire de la langue et de la littérature des Slaves, Russes, Serbes, Bohèmes, Polonais et Lettons*, with adaptations and comments.⁴² So it was known in that milieu that the question of the literatures of northern peoples was not alien to Pruszkowa. *Nota bene* Maciejowski himself was also interested in Lithuanian history: in 1841 he published in *Biblioteka Warszawska* a critical analysis of Kraszewski's *Witolorausda*.⁴³ Wóycicki, who stood at the centre of that society and was best informed about the academic and literary projects of its members, was certainly also among Moniuszko's closest society. In May 1858 the composer mentions him in a letter written to his wife from Kraków as one mentions a familiar acquaintance: 'also with us was Wóycicki, with whom [we are going] to Lucjan Siemieński's today'.⁴⁴

In her introduction to the play, Pruszkowa maintains that around May 1863, together with a whole bundle of newly received books, she came into possession of 'Aleksandrowicz's *Leśnictwo w Augustowskiem* [Forestry in the Augustów region]', in which – as if placed there by some miraculous hand – she found the legend she had been looking for. Jerzy Aleksandrowicz, a professor of botany in Warsaw colleges, left a number of works, but one seeks in vain the publication mentioned by Pruszkowa in digital and analogue

40

Józefina O. [J. Osipowska], *Wajdelotka, czyli Dolina Axeloty. Powieść z pierwszej połowy trzynastego wieku, oparta na podaniach z kronik litewskich* [Wajdelotka, or the Valley of Axelota. A novel from the first half of the thirteenth century, based on tales from Lithuanian chronicles] (Warsaw, 1844), 113 ff.

41

Duchińska, *Pisma*, 124–125; Berkan-Jabłońska, *Weredyczki*, 91.

42

See Katarzyna Westermarck, 'Wawaw Aleksander Maciejowski jako komparatysta. O uzupełnieniach do rozprawy „Obraz literatury średniowiekowych ludów, a mianowicie Słowian i Niemców” Frédérica Gustava Eichhoffa' [Wawaw Aleksander Maciejowski as a comparative scholar. On his addenda to Frédéric Gustave Eichhoff's *Histoire de la langue et de la littérature des Slaves, Russes, Serbes, Bohèmes, Polonais et Lettons*], *Tekstualia*, 2022/1; Lucjan Siemieński, 'Literatury północne. Eichhoff, Maciejowski i P. Pruszkowa' [Northern literatures: Eichhoff, Maciejowski and Pruszkowa], in *Kilka rysów*, ii 2.

43

Kazimierz Władysław Wóycicki, '„Witolorausda” J.I. Kraszewskiego pod względem historycznym' [J.I. Kraszewski's *Witolorausda* from an historical perspective], *Biblioteka Warszawska*, 1841/2, 170–185.

44

Stanisław Moniuszko to his wife, Aleksandra. Letter of 13 May 1858, in Stanisław Moniuszko, *Listy zebrane* [Collected letters], ed. Witold Rudziński and Magdalena Stokowska (Kraków, 1969), 306.

libraries, specialist and regionalist compendia, encyclopaedic and biographical entries. In addition, it is doubtful whether one of the botanist's books, of a strictly scientific character, would have included a literary summary of a folk legend. On this point, too, Duchńska's memory failed her, and she unwittingly condemned scholars to rather fruitless searches. Yet there is a grain of truth in her erroneous account. There really does exist a book containing the story of Aleksota, but it is not Aleksandrowicz's work, which the writer so firmly indicated, only a somewhat related work by Aleksander Połujański, *Wędrowki po guberni augustowskiej w celu naukowym odbyte* [Travels around the Augustów governorate undertaken for scientific purposes], published in Warsaw in 1859. Połujański, a forester and encyclopaedist hailing from the Vilnius area, combined topography with mythography, and writing about Aleksota he linked certain features of that hill near Kaunas, as was customary, with the legend of a goddess. He began, of course, by describing the site:

Aleksota is neither a village nor a town, but a *settlement*; it has one long winding street and two or even three little alleyways; in between the wooden cottages one sees a few storeyed stone houses and one wooden house with a decorative front belonging to an Israelite.

Taken altogether, with its two patisseries, several minor factories and craftsmen's signboards, a village might arise, where it not for the lack of a church, and it might justly call itself a suburb of Kaunas if the Niemen did not form a boundary here between the Augustów and Kaunas governorates.⁴⁵

After this touristic introduction, the time comes for other layers of meaning:

Aleksota does not end with this constructed settlement; her name has been known for centuries as the goddess of beauty and love, while her temple was the whole of the mount attached to the settlement from the south and south-west, once covered with sacred lindens, the young, but no longer so numerous, generations of which still today possess this charming eminence; for her, in a valley beautifully situated in a mountain range, *tender songs were sung*, flowers bloomed, the scent of burnt amber wafted around, and the Niemen, flowing at the foot of this temple, would be covered, in honour of this deity, with a host of floating scented votive wreaths; the lindens, as representatives of this goddess's retinue, wrapped around with beautiful ribbons, received the tributes of hearts on behalf of the deity, to whom no statue was erected, *leaving the forming of the fair goddess's image to the imagination*. And that is why everyone extolled the beauty of Aleksota, because no one depicted her in painting or in sculpture.⁴⁶

45
Aleksander Połujański, *Wędrowki po guberni augustowskiej w celu naukowym odbyte* [Travels around Augustów governorate undertaken for scientific purposes] (Warsaw, 1959), 346–347; emphasis added.

46
Ibid., 347.

Pruszkowa certainly drew knowledge about pre-Christian Lithuania from a range of sources, and some notions about it had already become common property, thanks in part to Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*. In a note to Book IV, the poet explained that the famous oak Baublis, mentioned in the poem, 'in pagan times had been worshipped as an object of veneration'.⁴⁷ It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the librettist of *Aleksota*, when setting the (very sparing) scene of the drama, begins with this image:

The theatre depicts a sacred mount. Beneath an oak, on a stone altar, burns a Candle held by *Wajdelotki*. A cloud rolls ever closer. Now and then, thunder is heard. Lightning appears.⁴⁸

Thus she draws the viewer and listener into the heart of the pagan world, in which the greatest adoration is reserved for Perkun (Lit. Perkūnas), mentioned by the *Wajdelotki* (female bards or druids; sing. *Wajdelotka*). Yet it is the lindens – trees dedicated to Aleksota – that are mentioned most often in the play, and they (as ensues from the stage directions and from the lines of various characters in the play) that form the main element in the scenography of Act I. A linden grove grows around the holy mount crowned with Perkun's tree, and the cult of the foreboding god is complemented by the cult of the gentle goddess. The landscape of *Aleksota*, as mentioned by nineteenth-century authors, preserves the memory of her; that is, of love, confirming her victory.

In his suggestive reconstruction of the cult of Aleksota, Połujański seems to encourage readers to artistically revive scenes from the past, to 'create' their own image of the goddess in their imagination, and even to embellish it with 'tender songs'. Moreover, he himself lends her a more tangible, human form, speaking of Milda as the incarnation of Aleksota:

The embodiment of Aleksota was the fair Milda, daughter of Prince Erdziwiłł, whose charms upset the envious Gertruda, a Polish captive and then third wife of that prince, particularly since Dangeruthas, a tender and seductive *burtynikas* [soothsayer], sang more for Milda, towards whom, from a sense of shared nationality and out of love, he felt more attracted than to the foreign woman. Gertruda found it hard to stifle the flame that burned in Dangeruthas's heart and so resolved to deprive Milda of that which she herself could not get. When Dangeruthas, to the call of war, left with his compatriots to fight against the Christians, Gertruda persuaded loyal servants to hang a wooden cross on his neck as he slept, which, once accomplished, linked him in the people's eyes to the Christians and to betrayal of the country; for this, the bound culprit was sacrificed to the Candle, to propitiate the anger of the gods. When the victim, led to Mount *Praurima*, now known as *Wesola*, was placed in the care of the *wajdelotka* Milda, she recognised her beloved and, in collusion with Oskar the

47
Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz, or The Last Foray in Lithuania*, tr. Bill Johnston (New York, 2018), 438.

48
Duchińska, 'Aleksota', 3 [16] (ed.).

Norwegian, supposedly a *signota* [member of one of the priestly castes], secretly freed him from his bonds and placed him in the care of that *signota*. Yet Milda's enjoyment of her service was short-lived: once, when, as was her wont, she ventured deep into the mount through a thicket of lindens in order to spend sweet moments with her lover, the Candle, left unattended, went out, and the *wajdelotka*, for violating her priesthood and neglecting her duties, was sentenced, together with her discovered lover, to burning.

On Mount Praurima, near to the Candle, there were national grave-mounds, where Lithuanians would visit several times a year and hold *chautury* [funeral or memorial banquets]; to perpetuate the memory of loved ones or famous people, when passing by, they would usually throw a twig onto the barrow; the accumulation of those twigs formed high mounds, known as *lomy*, or *lauže* in Lithuania. Beneath one such *lauže*, Oskar, the pretend *signota*, dug out a cave with a secret entrance and set up a Christian altar there, where the newly baptised had a safe hiding place. Dangeruthas and Milda, on learning of the sentence issued by the people, at Oskar's prompting, vowed to secretly adopt the Christian faith, as long as he would save them from death. Somehow, the *signota*, in carrying out the people's will, arranged both the bound victims on the *lauže*, or pyre, beneath which the Christian cave had been made, and when the fire was lit, which the people were not allowed to approach, the victims fell through the *lom* into the cave with no injury. Meanwhile, from the valley, the people gazing at the burning pyre imagined that the sacrifice had been well received by the gods and the shade of Milda was worshipped under the name of Aleksota, whose feast day was solemnly celebrated by the people in April.⁴⁹

This quite long account, which the forester took – as he discreetly forewarned – from his imagination, and not from chronicles or folk tales, could well have served as a synopsis of Pruszkowa's libretto. The fact that it features Aleksota instead of Milda results from two factors. First, Moniuszko had already used the name Milda in his cantata, which he regarded as so alien to the tastes of Polish audiences that he was decidedly against its performance in Warsaw. Secondly, as already mentioned, he was anxious to use the word Aleksota. And he was firm in his decisions.

There is one other puzzle, or rather incoherence, in Pruszkowa's account. She writes that the version of the legend which she had discovered had a tragic conclusion, which was altered at the distinct request of the composer, as thus expressed:

Do you think [...], that I would allow the priestess of the Candle and the bard to be burned on a pyre? I'll introduce here a converted high priest who will dig beneath the mound with a handful of Christians; the victims will fall into the earth; in the final scene, I'll show Aleksota with the bard kneeling at the foot of the altar, and the high priest, in the robe of a Christian bishop, joining their hands with his stole.⁵⁰

49
Połujański, *Wędrowki*,
347–350.

50
Duchińska, 'Kilka słów',
8–9 [12–13].

Yet it was precisely Połujański who suggested to the librettist and the composer the positive ending they craved: the image of the burning sacrificial pyre, key to the dramatic structure of the planned opera. As it disintegrates, it reveals a small Christian temple below, into which the victims fall, saved from the fire.

Perhaps Moniuszko discussed both versions of the ending with Pruszkowa, choosing the optimistic one not used in the literature. Prioritising that version enabled them to highlight the conversion to Christianity as the main motif of the opera, unfolding in the monumental, exalted final scene. That Moniuszko and his librettist could have considered such a reorganising of the message of Połujański's original is suggested by the alternative title, *Jordan czyli Krzyż na Litwie* [Jordan, or the Cross in Lithuania], written into a second copy of the libretto. This copy was used by Moniuszko, while the first remained in the hands of Pruszkowa, who took it with her to Paris.⁵¹

Shifting the accent towards the religious question to some extent moves *Aleksota* away from the earlier cantatas *Milda* and *Nijoła*, based on romantic-mythological literary themes.⁵² Both of the cantatas retained the pagan setting and the highlighted – after the fashion of Greek mythology – personal, highly dramatic adventures of deities. Yet in *Aleksota* the mythological machinery remains idle in the background, since all the protagonists of the drama are mortal beings. Admittedly, the gods do interfere with the action in several places, but only in a symbolic way, for instance by the intermediary of a sudden gust of wind or swoosh of trees. This reduction of the pagan supernatural aspect is totally understandable from the perspective of the victory of the Christian worldview, since one could hardly expect, in an opera from the mid-nineteenth century, that the Christian god would wish to wrestle directly with representatives of the Lithuanian pantheon, having been placed on the same plane as them.

By relegating the mythological element to the background, Pruszkowa risked her work losing *couleur locale*, but at the same time she created a capacious frame for a work in the *grand opéra* genre which would speak through its hieratic form and impress an audience with such elements as its magnificent setting and large forces. Is that the kind of opera Moniuszko was looking for?

The writer assures us that her contribution was limited to writing verse for the composer's conception, which brought with it a set of 'effects' drawn from his own 'rampant fantasy'.⁵³ The composer also supposedly provided the division of the text into acts and scenes. It seems unlikely that Pruszkowa, who at the time had no experience in adapting a play for the needs of the opera stage, would have ventured to make such a division herself.⁵⁴ So assuming that it was indeed the work of Moniuszko, we can also read the composer's intentions. He was aiming to create an arrangement of scenes that corresponded to the conventional structure of

51

Just after the Second World War, an incomplete manuscript, containing only the first act of the libretto, entitled *Jordan, czyli Krzyż na Litwie*, was examined by Włodzimierz Pożniak in the above-mentioned article 'Niezrealizowane projekt'.

52

The text of *Nijoła*, based on *Witolorauda*, was prepared by the poet himself – Kraszewski.

53

Duchińska, 'Kilka słów', 2 [6].

54

In the near future, she would draw on the skills acquired from Moniuszko when preparing the libretto to Ignacy Feliks Dobrzyński's opera *Monbar, czyli Flibustierowie* [Monbar, or the filibusters].

an operatic work; that is, leading the action in such a way as to produce a logical arrangement of arias, ensembles and choruses, juxtaposed according to the principle of contrast (more important elements are announced by generic terms in the text: ‘duet’, ‘song’, ‘aria’, ‘chorus’). The action is driven so as to create the conditions for the appearance of arias scored for male and female voices, low and high, contrasting heroic and lyrical elements, and to frame larger segments with ensemble scenes, particularly in the finales of the acts, in which a larger number of characters appear alongside a chorus.

Composers also took operatic effects from the store of typical solutions in romantic *grand opéra*, introducing spectacular, often monumental, elements. In *Aleksota*, the people or the army appear in large numbers in numerous ensemble scenes. There is only a lack of space for the ballet scenes that were so important in Romantic opera, although they could have occurred naturally in the sections illustrating a religious procession. One would also search in vain in the form of the libretto transmitted by Pruszkowa any influences from the concepts of Wagner, theoretical knowledge of which was evinced by Moniuszko much earlier, in a letter to Kraszewski of 1854 concerning the cantata *Milda*;⁵⁵ both the formal scheme, with a division into acts and scenes, and the disposition of the text correspond to earlier models.

We recognise specific borrowings from the Romantic repertoire already in the first scene of Act I, which features the *Wajdelotki* watching over the sacred Candle. As we read in the stage directions, a storm is brewing, and thunder can be heard in the distance; lightning is also visible. The chorus of characters on stage interpret this as a bad omen, foreshadowing the loss of Lithuania, for which the Teutonic Knights are waiting, but as long as the Candle burns in the temple under the oak on the holy mount, the country is safe. In the next two scenes, a melodramatic conflict arises: the leader of the *Wajdelotki*, Aleksota, daughter of that Prince Erdziwiłł, turns out to be the object of the secret love of the bard Trójdán. He in turn is the heartthrob of the prince’s wife, Surjata, whose brother, Wigunt, is also in love with Aleksota. The siblings make a secret pact and decide to support one another, but they are immediately divided by a moral conflict, when Surjata demands that her brother kill Trójdán. The fourth scene of Act I presents the group of *Wajdelotki* dispersing, in order to make a wreath for their mistress. Aleksota is to remain alone to guard the Candle. She is gripped by growing fear: ‘A storm is coming, the forest murmurs’⁵⁶... In the next scene, Aleksota, standing alone by the altar, reveals her dilemma, torn between service of the temple and earthly love.

Since Aleksota is alone, the possibility arises of introducing a lovers’ duet; Trójdán approaches. The bard declares his love to his sweetheart, but she has scruples. Naturally, they are caught in their tryst by the old priest Bojtomir, who promises to help them,

55
Stanisław Moniuszko to
Józef Ignacy Kraszewski,
letter dated Vilnius, 27
July 1854, in Moniuszko,
Listy zebrane, 198.

56
Duchińska, ‘Aleksota’,
16 [23].

launching into a monologue in praise of love and youth, ideally suited to a grand bass aria. Aleksota replies by declaring her guilt, since she has sinned in her thoughts, exposing Lithuania to the vengeance of the gods.

At that point, as if on cue, the Wajdelotki enter the scene ‘with confusion and fear’, announcing that the enemy – the army of Teutonic Knights – is ‘at the gates of Kaunas’.⁵⁷ A crowd also appears, to learn of Trójdán’s prophetic vision. That vision is truly operatic: plenty of corpses, fires and dread for Lithuania. At the end of this section, the bard spectacularly takes the head of the crowd and grabs a weapon. The scene ends with singing of a military character; after the fashion of many operatic finales, particular strophes are performed by soloists (Trójdán, Wigunt) and the chorus. Then the curtain falls.

In the first scene of Act II, we hear ‘the clamour of fighting and the cry of war’.⁵⁸ From the part of a newly-introduced character – the Teutonic prisoner-of-war Jordan, a Pole – we learn that Kaunas has been defending itself bravely for four days and nights. That is because it has been taken into the care of the god of the Christians, in whom Jordan has faith (the text includes phrases about the cross and giving the world the rule of love). Jordan intones a lyrical song expressing his yearning for the ‘green cottage’ of home, lying amid ‘fields on the banks of the Vistula’. In the following dialogue, Jordan and Bojtomir strike up the opera’s next motif – the old priest’s conversion to the Christian faith. The dialogue ends with the evocative scene of them praying together. Meanwhile, news arrives that the heroic bard who led the Lithuanians into battle with his song has fallen in battle. Bojtomir and Surjata sing the strophes of a mournful threnody in alteration with the chorus. The unconscious bard is brought in, and it turns out that he is only wounded. That does not mean he is safe from death, as his fate still hangs in the balance. Surjata, burning with the desire to avenge her unrequited love, accuses Trójdán of supporting the Christians and incites the people to throw him into gaol. The chorus echoes: ‘Let’s cast him into a dark cave’. The last strophe issues the sentence: ‘Woe to thee, bard! To the pyre, to the pyre!’.⁵⁹ Trójdán regains consciousness at the appropriate moment and hears both the sentence and Bojtomir’s consolatory prophecy: when the pyre is set alight, an Angel will come and extinguish it with its wings.

The continuation of the action, in Act III, is the start of the fulfilment of that prophecy. This act begins with a change of scene: we are inside the temple, by the altar with the burning Candle, guarded by Aleksota alone. A brief recitative is followed by a song about the ‘mysterious power’ that holds her in the sole service of the altar and prevents her from giving herself up to earthly feelings. Surjata approaches with the good news that the Teutonic Knights have been repulsed. She predicts better times, when the Lithuanians will be able to ‘forge plough shares’.⁶⁰ At the same time, she alludes

57
Ibid., 22 [26].

58
Ibid., 27 [28].

59
Ibid., 38–39 [34].

60
Ibid., 42–43 [36].

to threats to the faith of the forefathers, but Aleksota dismisses the danger – her faith is capable of protecting the Candle. Surjata avails herself of that faith to entrust the priestess – in the ensuing duet – with the mission of issuing the sentence on a traitor. Aleksota, not knowing who the condemned person is, agrees, although not without trepidation; after all, ‘a person’s blood will fall upon me’.⁶¹ In the next scene (the third), the bound Trójdán is brought to the temple. The secret emerges that he is loved by Aleksota, who defends his good name. Trójdán accuses the Lithuanians of ignoring the services he has rendered the nation. Left alone (scene four), Aleksota challenges the Candle: if it fails to protect the innocent man, may it fall. At that moment, a peal of thunder rings out and the Candle’s flame wanes. ‘The moment of sepulchral darkness is nigh’,⁶² sings Aleksota. As darkness falls, the curtain falls too. Aleksota flees the scene in alarm.

The beginning of Act IV brings a ‘Shakespearean’ switch: from the milieu of the Lithuanian elite, we are transported among the lowest social strata. The first scene of this act is played out in the prison, into which Aleksota has also been thrown for allowing the Candle to go out. The guards are arguing over whose side to take: perhaps the side of ‘the one who pays us’?⁶³ The guards’ duet is written partly in verse with masculine rhymes, emphasising the brutal nature of their speech. Wigunt appears in the prison, wishing to see Aleksota. A moment later, Surjata also enters. The two of them escape through a secret passage at the moment when Bojtomir and Jordan enter the prison asking to see the two prisoners. A conversation is struck up that leads to a climax, which is the declaration by Bojtomir, Trójdán and Aleksota that they will adopt the faith of the cross. When the pyre is lit, ‘He’ll sweep you up with a miraculous arm / From Him flows the eternal spring of grace’,⁶⁴ sing the four characters on stage. The act ends with a choral adoration of the new god.

The final act brings a happy conclusion to the action. The *Wajdeloci* (bards, druids; sing. *Wajdelota*) raise the sacrificial pyre on the summit of the sacred mount. This view pleases Surjata, standing in the window of her chambers. ‘Soon the faithless will burn on that pyre’⁶⁵ – those words begin her showstopping aria. The execution takes place at the break of dawn. The *Wajdeloci* bring in the condemned prisoners. The procession lasts long enough for the chorus to once again describe their crime. Surjata aside admires the courage of Trójdán and Aleksota. At a predictable moment, when the victims enter the pyre, a Christian counter-procession appears, led by Jordan, who – breaking the laws of operatic dramaturgy – announces that no one will be hurt. And indeed, when the flames begin to engulf the victims, they fall down inside the pyre. ‘A miracle of the gods’, cry the *Wajdeloci*, but Jordan corrects them that ‘the Christian god is coming to their aid’.⁶⁶ At this point, trumpets resound; Lithuanian knights approach, led by Wigunt, who declares to them that he has converted and curses the

⁶¹
Ibid., 46 [38].

⁶²
Ibid., 52 [31].

⁶³
Ibid., 53 [41].

⁶⁴
Ibid., 65 [47].

⁶⁵
Ibid., 11 [50].

⁶⁶
Ibid., 77 [53].

old Lithuanian gods. Surjata makes a final attempt to talk the crown round, but the people reject her and declare themselves to be on the side of the transformed heroes. Surjata is run through with a sword. The distant sound of trumpets is heard once again: Jordan is approaching with a regiment of Polish knights, who have answered his call to defend Lithuania and the cross. At a sign from Jordan, the sacrificial pyre parts. Beneath it appears a stone chapel. By its altar, Bojtomir raises his hands over Trójdán and Aleksota, explaining that it was he who saved them in the name of the Lord. He rips open his shirt, revealing a gold cross hung around his neck. The cry rings out: ‘Lithuanians, on your knees!’⁶⁷ Everyone falls to their knees, taking up the prayer intoned by Wigunt to the God who has redeemed the world with love.

The gesture of falling to one’s knees was also characteristic of moral revolution, as captured, for example, on Artur Grottger’s cartoon ‘Lud na cmentarzu’ [The people at the cemetery], from the cycle *Warszawa II* [Warsaw II], and it represents a sort of station along the way, or ‘in the process of “the fellowship of states and nations”’.⁶⁸ In Kaunas, the people trying to get onto the bridge: ‘Pushed and shoved, beaten with whips, they knelt and struck up a song’.⁶⁹ People knelt and sung in other patriotic demonstrations, too, as in *Aleksota*, at the end of Act IV. The Pole Jordan addresses Trójdán and Aleksota:

A teraz dziatki z miłością i wiarą
Panu Zastępów oddajmy hołd żywy,
Klękniemy razem – o znam ja pieśń starą,
Którą brzmią nasze nadwiślańskie niwy.
Ona w niedoli, gdy siły nie starczą,
Jedyną wiernych obroną i tarczą.

(And now, children, with love and faith
Let us pay tribute to the Lord of Hosts,
Let us kneel together – I know an old song
That resounds in our meadows and fields.
At times of misfortune, when all our strength fails,
'Tis the flock's only shield and protection.)

After which, ‘everyone kneels’ and the chorus intones the song:

Kto się w opiekę odda Panu swemu
A całym sercem szczerze ufa Jemu [...].⁷⁰

(He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High
shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.)

Thereafter, the words of the libretto depart from the well-known text, becoming a paraphrase of a paraphrase, but these

67
Ibid., 84 [57].

68
See Mariusz Bryl, *Cykle Artura Grottgera. Poetyka i recepcja* [The cycles of Artur Grottger: poetics and reception] (Poznań, 1994), 172; this cartoon clearly refers to the funeral of the Fallen Five (‘Pięciu Poległych’) – civilians killed in Warsaw by Russian soldiers during a patriotic demonstration on 27 February 1861. The funeral cortège, which on 2 March 1861 left the Holy Cross church for Powązki Cemetery in Warsaw, turned into a peaceful mass political-social demonstration against the partitioning powers in the Kingdom of Poland.

69
Limanowski, *Historia*, 107.

70
Duchińska, ‘Aleksota’, 68 [49].

two quoted lines suffice for the reader to recognise Psalm 91 in the form imparted to it by Jan Kochanowski. One may assume that Moniuszko's music would also have paraphrased the melody to which that prayer was commonly sung. A mid-nineteenth-century opera-goer would have been moved to hear this prayer, just as many a listener still today would know what that 'old song' was. But at the beginning of the 1860s it had another meaning besides, as it was redolent not so much of the past, as of the present, echoing more recent events. The psalm 'Kto się w opiekę' was sung during patriotic solemnities and demonstrations, including at Horodło on 10 October 1861, when a crowd of many thousands from the east and west of the Commonwealth commemorated and renewed the act of the union from 1415.⁷¹ In *Aleksota*, this song served as a musical seal on the close bond between this ostensibly historical work and the present day. Although the story depicted in the intentionally ahistorical drama has virtually nothing in common with the realities of the late fourteenth century, it is more than solely a redressing of the present day, which could just as well have been shown in different attire. According to the composer's concept, it speaks of the Christian faith, introduced in Lithuania through the intermediary of Poland, as a fundamental value that should be defended and which inhabitants of both countries defend like the sources of other values, such as genuine freedom and devoted love. Introduced without violence, it brings out in the heroes that which their hearts have already sensed. Already in the first act, the bard Trójdán sings:

Wiem, że ten ogień, co w mej duszy płonie,
Stokroć od Znicza świętszym tleje żarem,⁷²

(I know that this fire which burns in my soul
Burns with flame a hundred times more sacred than the Candle),

and he is backed by the priestess Aleksota:

Tu żar co w sercu tak potężnie tleje,
Czyżby ta miłość i moje nadzieje
Świętszym od Znicza miały być płomieniem?⁷³

(The flame that flickers so strongly in my heart,
Could this love and my hope
Be a more sacred flame than the Candle?)

– before a moment later confirming the truth of those words in a duet. Jordan shows them the true meaning of those presentiments: in the cross. And in the closing scene of the drama, he proclaims its salutary strength to all Lithuanians, who raise a choral prayer to the 'God of love', asking the cross to enfold them in its arms and

⁷¹ Ziejka, 'Przy lackim orle', 60.

⁷² Duchinińska, 'Aleksota', 18 [24].

⁷³ Ibid., 19 [24].

save them from the ‘madness of the night’,⁷⁴ the night of imperial enslavement, which – we may infer – destroys reason and violates human dignity.

This linking of hope for freedom with the cross was motivated not just by Moniuszko’s profound faith, but also – and more importantly for the idea behind the work – by the symbolism of aspirations for liberty in Lithuania during the pre-uprising period. Under the impression of the demonstrations held in Warsaw in 1861, during which the Russians went as far as dishonouring the cross and profaning churches, people put up posters and distributed fliers depicting a broken cross and calling for the true faith to be defended against its enemies, the Russians;⁷⁵ their equivalents in *Aleksota* are the false Christians resorting to violence, that is, the Teutonic Knights. The co-organiser of the solemnities in Kaunas and Aleksota, the poet, freedom fighter and insurgent Mikalojus Akelaitis [Mikołaj Akielewicz], designed a well-known image of the coats-of-arms of Poland and Lithuania beneath a crown with a broken wooden cross. Beneath the image appears the date, 12 August [1861], and a ribbon bearing the inscription ‘United forever’. In light of this, the other title of the libretto, *Jordan, czyli krzyż na Litwie*,⁷⁶ refers both to the beginnings of the Christian faith in Lithuania and to its current defence. It brings out the work’s Christian dimension and radicalises like a poster. Similarly to *Aleksota*, therefore, it plays with meanings referring both to the past and to the present. However, it loses the ambiguity of that title, which includes the idea of love that joins the pagan and Christian worlds, attaining a higher form in the latter, but not annihilating the former, as its essence is a transformational, not destructive, force.

Włodzimierz Poźniak, who was the last person before Witold Rudziński to have in his hands part of the manuscript of *Jordan* with Moniuszko’s corrections, notes and compositional instructions, noted that the composer passed smoothly from *Aleksota* to *The Pariah*, in which he made use of whole sections of the earlier work, obviously with the assistance of Jan Chęciński, who at the same time wrote his new libretto and transformed Pruszkowa’s old book. In *The Pariah*, set in India, Moniuszko also drew on fragments from *Milda*. So given the quite widespread conviction during the Romantic era of the Indian origins of the Lithuanians and their beliefs, expounded, for example, by Adam Mickiewicz in his lectures on Slavic literature, should we not attempt to interpret *The Pariah* as another Moniuszko work devoted to Lithuania?

tr. John Comber

74
Ibid., 85 [57].

75
cf. Aldona Prašmantaitė, *Perlaužto kryžiaus kodas. Lietuviški 1862 metų plakatai* [The code of the broken cross: Lithuanian posters from 1862] (Vilnius, 2019).

76
Poźniak, *Niezrealizowane projekty*, 244, 247–250.

ABSTRACT

Held among the Moniuszko papers in the Warsaw Music Society archives is the libretto to the planned – but ultimately not written – opera *Aleksota*, penned by Seweryna Pruszkowa, which since 2023 has also been available in digital form on the website Polish Music Heritage in Open Access. It combines motifs taken from romantic Lithuanian mythology with fictional episodes from the history of the country's Christianisation. The libretto was discussed and analysed by Włodzimierz Pożniak, but since he published the results of his research (1948), crucial new questions have arisen, which the authors of this article attempt to answer. They concern above all the origins of Moniuszko's idea for a 'Lithuanian opera' and specific circumstances behind the project. They seem to be directly linked to the wave of patriotic, democratic and solidarity demonstrations which – having swept the lands of the former Commonwealth of Poland–Lithuania over the course of the year 1861 – on 12 August reached Kaunas and nearby Aleksota and came together on a bridge over the river Niemen. The authors go on to indicate the literary sources for the libretto, and especially a work by Aleksander Potujański which they came across, attempting to answer the question as to the musical concept behind the opera, which Moniuszko elaborated with Pruszkowa before the outbreak of the January Uprising and her subsequent departure for Paris.

KEYWORDS

Stanisław Moniuszko, Seweryna Pruszkowa, Polish opera in the nineteenth century, opera librettos, the Union of Poland and Lithuania, the patriotic movement in Polish lands

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