

JACEK BRZOZOWSKI

THE WORLD OF THINGS  
IN *PIERŚCIEN WIELKIEJ-DAMY*

1.

There are a lot of things in the play – that either “act” (props), or are only spoken of as important or meaningful: cigars, fireworks, incense, calendars (urban), diary, camphor, prayer book, books, flowers (artificial), lamp, letters (= invitations for the evening of charity), telescope, crumbs, chasubles, ring, pistol, glove, gloves, rosary, bra, ostrich feathers, gown (torn), brush, hairpin, wax candles, snuffbox, telegram, fans (from ostrich feathers), bank bill (bank ticket). Certainly, it would be an exaggeration to speak directly and literally about the world of things in *Pierścień Wielkiej-Damy*. Rich and diverse, they do not form a separate entity there. However, this “world of things” can be justified because both types of them (i.e. those present and only spoken of) are - like, generally, in all Norwid’s theatre plays - meaningful, no less than words and events. Kazimierz Braun wrote about it many years ago:

With the help of objects, by means of premeditated patterns of behaviour and theatrical situations Norwid showed the actions of characters and presented events both realistically (on the surface) and metaphorically – revealing deeper meanings, hidden motives and symbols<sup>1</sup>.

To the meanings listed by Braun, which the poet attained with the help of objects (= things), I would add evaluation of people and facts. For example, Durejko’s remarks about books in the fourth scene of the first act (DW VI, 125, 126, v. 231-249) unambiguously show the Judge as a self-righteous ignorant. Or the

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<sup>1</sup> K. BRAUN, *Cypriana Norwida teatr bez teatru*, Warszawa 1971, p. 197.

monologue discrediting the quarrel between Durejko and his wife, which Salome gives in the next scene of this act (DW VI, 135, 136, v. 387-399). The monologue is discrediting because she pronounces it *leaning on a broom* (showing a gap between her broom and the pseudo-scientific entanglement of the spouses' quarrel); and what's even worse: while arranging '*the rest of the books*' in the room of Mak-Yks, who was thrown out by Durejko, Salome ends her monologue with the sentence emphatically emphasizing the essence of his expulsion: '– Otóż – prawie że wszystko w porządku, / Jakby lokator umarł . . . . . .' (*Well, almost everything is fine, / As if the tenant died. . . . .*) (DW VI, 136, v. 400-401).

## 2.

All in all, however, I do not think that the multiple presence of things in *Pierścień Wielkiej-Damy*, adequately defined, on the one hand, by a theatre man: Kazimierz Braun, on the other hand, by Norwid's philologist and teatrologist: Sławomir Świontek<sup>2</sup>, concealed some particular mysteries and raised some fundamental interpretational problems. It is worth asking about a fragment of the world of things in this '*biała tragedia*' (*white tragedy*) - which directly concerns its title heroine.

It is obvious that the reasons for the decision that Maria made in the final act are not clear. The Countess's sudden change? Suddenly born love for Mak-Yks (whom, as it is commonly thought, the Countess did not notice earlier, and in the scenes explaining the disappearance of the ring drastically treated like an object three times)? Was it an escape from a scandal? Or, maybe, ambiguity intended by Norwid (harmonizing with his idea of „kobieta istotna i cała” / '*the substantial and the complete woman*')? The issue was seen differently<sup>3</sup>. Looking

<sup>2</sup> S. ŚWIONTEK, *Wstęp*, [in:] C. NORWID, *Pierścień Wielkiej-Damy*, DW VI, XLVII.

<sup>3</sup> An overview of attitudes regarding this issue was provided by Małgorzata Turczyn (cf. IDEM, *Z refleksji badawczej nad „Pierścieniem Wielkiej-Damy” Cypriana Norwida. O kreacji postaci*, [in:] *Szkice literackie i językoznawcze*, ed. D. Podlaska, T. Linkner, Słupsk 1999, pp. 147-152). The author discusses the works of: Kazimierz Wyka („*Pierścień Wielkiej Damy*” and Norwid's *Pierścień Wielkiej Damy. Program Teatru im. Juliusza Słowackiego w Krakowie*, [in:] *Cyprian Norwid. Studia, artykuły, recenzje*, Kraków 1989, pp. 224-227 and 275-284 - the Countess's actual transformation), Waław Borowy (*O „Pierścieniu Wielkiej Damy” Norwida*, [in:] *O Norwidzie. Rozprawy i notatki*, ed. Z. Stefanowska, scientific advisor S. Pigoń, Warszawa 1960, pp. 75-77 - unlikely transformation), Irena Sławińska (*O komediach Norwida*, Lublin 1953, pp. 37-38, 118-119, 130-137 - transformation likelihood), Juliusz W. Gomulicki (*Pierścień i zero, czyli o tragizmie „Pierścienia Wielkiej-Damy”*, [in:] *Zygzakiem. Szkice, wspomnienia, przekłady*, Warszawa 1981,

at things related to Maria Harrys, I will try to consider this problem from yet a different angle.

3.

In the sixth scene of the first act, Salome responds to Szeliga's question about Mary's piety („– *A Hrabina przecież nabożna jest / I musi znać ojca Prowincjała?...*”; DW VI, 138, v. 443-444):

Gdzieżby święto Przenajświętszej Panny  
Było obchodzonym z takim blaskiem  
Woskowych świec – *dużych* jak Jegomość!  
(Że tu pana Hrabiego przepraszę...)

Z zapalem

Gdzieżby tyle kwiatów! robionych róż!  
Lilii z liśćmi srebrnymi –  
Drogich kadzeń i ornatów, które  
Jako blachy złota tak łamią się;  
Gdzieżby było tyle, w *Boże-Ciało*,  
Strusich piór kłoniących się jak dusze  
Przed Utajonego-sakramentem...  
– Gdyby równych w świetle zbrakło hrabin!

Głęboko

Alić COŚ należy *dać*... i niebu –  
Choćby dymu wonnego obłoczek...  
Jeżeli nic dać z siebie nie może człek,  
Wszystko, *jakby pożyczone* mając!

(DW VI, 139)

Salome – an old caretaker – perfectly lists everything what both holidays (not coincidentally: one Mary's nameday and the other one Corpus Christi) owe to selfless, and above all, natural and profound piety of the Countess.

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pp. 299-306 - transformation is an appearance), Sławomir Świontek (*Norwidowski świat teatru*, Łódź 1983, pp. 177-181 - neither unambiguous nor fully explained), Kazimierz Braun (*Cypriana Norwida teatr bez teatru*, Warszawa 1971, pp. 88-105, 128-131 - ambiguity; mystery), Mieczysław Ingot (*Dramatyczna funkcja pojęcia „całość” w utworach scenicznych Norwida [„Tyrtej-Za kulisami”, Kleopatra i Cezar, Pierścień Wielkiej-Damy]*, [in:] *'Całość' w twórczości Norwida*, ed. J. Puzynina, E. Teleżyńska, Warszawa 1992, i.a., pp. 91-100 - spiritual change, humanity), Józef Fert (*Poeta sumienia. rzecz o twórczości Norwida*, Lublin 1993, pp. 22-23, 165-167 - positive change).

## 4.

The beginning of the second act starts from the middle of a conversation between Maria and Magdalena; The Countess speaks to her friend, whom, as you can imagine, she handed down written arrangements for the planned evening:

... Wiesz zatem nieledwie że wszystko.  
 Lubo, nadto zostawiam i *notę*  
 Numerami uporządkowaną,  
 Tak jak mąż mój niegdyś to czynił  
 Ze zapomnień mych się uśmiechając –  
 Gdy porządku uczył mię jak dziecię...  
 – Dwie go rzeczy szczególnie bawiły:  
 To jest – moja *pozorna* niepamięć  
 I moja *pozorna* zabobonność.  
 – Tamtą i tę pozornymi zowie  
 (Lub tak nazywać je sobie życze) –  
 Co do drugiej, jednakże, nadmienię,  
 Że sprawdzającemu się przeczuciu  
 Nie dać wiary – jest niepodobieństwem!  
 (DW VI, 151, v. 1-14)

Then, as a matter of course, she adds (v. 15-30) that her ring ('ten pierścień' / 'this ring' – indefiniteness is a consequence of entering conversation *in the medias res*) has no value, as a 'sensual thing', for her. Instead, she values it for its mysterious and inscrutable relation to intuitions; she wisely stresses that she is aware that the coincidence ("chance event") cannot be identified with the cause, but it is significant that the ring was just lost when the storm destroyed the acacia and, at the same moment, when a telegram came.

Soon, it turns out that Maria gave Magdalena not a note about the ceremony, but that telegram; they are talking among other things about Szeliga (they consider one should not reaffirm his hopes) and then about the fate of Mak-Yks (the Countess very adequately judges the cousin-loner). After which they return to the invitation letters for the planned evening. Magdalena jokingly states that she will look through these letters to check whether Mary has not included accidentally 'czego innej treści' / 'something of other content in them' (v.140). To which, the Countess answers (v. 141-154):

Winisz mnie o błahe nieuwagi –  
 A jednak, może i jest niewiele  
 Kobiet mojego położenia – które  
 Byłyby w stanie tak dużo rzeczy

Różnorodnych zgodzić i prowadzić.  
 To – że w mojej *Biblii*, na rycinie,  
 Znalazłaś raz, miasto przezroczonego  
 Papieru, *bankowy-bilet*, z tego  
 Wyprowadzasz bezzasadne wnioski!...  
 Fraszki zapomnieć mogą – nie celu:  
 Są dni, których godziny wszystkie  
 Mam rozrachowane jak zegarek  
 I spisane rzędem w wilię wieczór.  
 Teraz!... jadę na *Zbór-Miłosierny*...

(DW VI, 159, 160, v. 141-154)

Then, as stage directions go: ‘*Porywa się – zawadza, i rozdziera suknię – – –*’ (*she rushes forward, stumbles and tears the dress*). To which Magdalena responds as follows (v. 155-157): ‘*Gdzie... w sukni rozdartej niepodobna / Brać głosu o biednych bez poddasza, / Bo to wyglądałoby na komedię...*’ (*Where ... you cannot in a torn dress / Speak about the poor without a roof over their head, / Because it would look like a comedy*)

Maria belittles the thing (v. 158): ‘*To przypadek jest... i bez znaczenia*’ (*This is a coincidence ... and irrelevant*), but she calls the servant and commands (v. 159): ‘*Napędce proszę fioletowy stanik*’ (*A purple bra, quickly, please*). Then she hurries up [Servant giving the bra to the Countess: ‘– Pani Hrabino, nieco powolniej...’ (*My Lady, I beg you... a bit slower ..*) v. 161]. But she did not hesitate to turn to the Old Servant to let Mak-Yks enter, ‘*jeżeli jest w potrzebie*’ (*if he is in need*, v. 162). To which Magdalena replied (v. 163-164): ‘*Ten młodzieniec wchodził – lecz gdy zobaczył, / Że dopełniasz ubrania, cofnął się*’ (*The young man came in - but when he saw that you were dressing up, he stepped back*). Maria answered (v. 165): ‘*Wina jego – a może jest w potrzebie?*’ (*His guilt - or maybe he is in need?*). Magdalena asks at this moment (v. 166): ‘*Mogłażbyś ubierać się przy ludziach?...*’ (*Could you dress accompanied by people?*) The countess responds (v. 167): ‘*To nie są ludzie – daj, proszę, szpilkę*’ (*These are not people - give me a pin, please*). After which, decidedly, very bravely and honestly, she apologizes to Mak-Yks, who had heard this sentence and gave a sarcastic monologue (v. 186-188): ‘*Mak-Yks! ile zraniłam, przepraszam: / Uczyniła wyrazów pośpieszność / Sens, którego ani pomyślałam! –*’ (*Mak-Yks! If I hurt you, I am sorry: / Expressions made in hastiness did that/ I did not mean that!*)

When, after exchanging a few questions, Mak-Yks left, Maria asks Magdalena (v. 212): ‘*Podaj mi kamforę i zegarek...*’ (*Give me camphor and a watch ...*) (apparently wants to have a sober sense of reality and a precise sense of time). Then, listening impatiently to Magdalena’s comments on the whole situation, she springs out and leaves, but returns immediately (v. 227-229):

– Jeszcze coś... (*One more thing*)  
 – Zapomniałam mej książki (*I've forgotten my prayerbook*)  
 Do nabożeństwa – biorąc w zamian (*Instead taking*)  
 Zeszłoroczny miejski kalendarzyk! (*the last year's city calendar!*)

Magdalena gives a book: ‘*Oto książka Twoja – do widzenia*’ (*Here is your book, goodbye*, v. 230). The Countess exits.

We have, here, an extremely suggestive, detailed (also and above all) very real image of a woman who is preparing to go out (in an important cause); a woman who is frivolous in trivial things (a bank ticket as a bookmark in the Bible is virtually no problem for a true believer) and who does not attach much importance to the appearance, but who simultaneously, when changing her dress, fully concentrates on it. If she, then, answers a question, she does it either inattentively or with a large mental shortcut. This is how the phrase: “They are not people,” referring to Mak-Yks, Maria’s cousin, can be understood. Thus ‘*not people*’ in the sense of ‘not foreigners, not strangers’. Yet, Maria will remember this moment; she will remember this hasty, inattentive, drastically stinging (pin!) phrase, and - when Mak-Yks finishes his indirect answer to the question whether he has ever loved her by saying: ‘*Tych, co kochają tak, lub nie ma dziś, / Lub nie z tego są świata...*’ (*Those who love so, either are not today / or are not of this world*) (DW VI, 237, v. 676-677) – she will definitely and firmly close this statement abandoned by her cousin in the middle of the line: ‘*– Nie!... oni, / Właśnie oni są ludźmi...*’ (*No! They, it is they who are people*, v. 677-678)<sup>4</sup>.

5.

At the end of the third scene of the second act, the finale of a heartfelt conversation between Magdalena and Szeliga, when they, as the stage directions say, “are shaking hands”, the Countess suddenly enters and stops at the doorstep (DW VI, 172).

Scene four begins with the Countess’s cold apology for her *inapt entry* (v. 366). At the same time, seeing all the ineptitude of this apologetic supposition, Mary excuses herself (v. 367-371):

Ja to powiedziałam z tej przyczyny  
 I dla tego powiedziałam to...

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<sup>4</sup> All caps in the second verse just mean that we should refer to what is said in the earlier sentence, ‘*They are not people*’.

Że Magdalena mnie zastępuje;  
Więc powinna byłam się anonsować,  
Nie będąc *na teraz* Panią domu. –

Agitated by her unfortunate come-in, she ‘*rzuca różaniec, książkę i rękawice*’ (*throws a rosary, a book and gloves*) (how true it is emotionally), says that she was late for the charity meeting, gives to Szeliga her fingertips, mentions: ‘*Nieczytelny telegram ze Smyrny*’ (*An illegible telegram from Smyrna*), and says indicating Magdalena: ‘*Ona dopiero mnie wyczytała...*’ (*She has just read me ...*).

Further, the conversation concerns the two-year’s absence of Szeliga in the country. At some point the Countess asks (v. 390-392): ‘*a czemu / Jerozalemskiego Pan różańca / Nie przywozi?*’ (*And why haven’t you brought Jerusalem rosary?*) ‘*i, widzę, nie nosi?*’ (*and as I can see you are not wearing it*). To which Szeliga “bitterly” responds (vs. 393-398):

– Z leż jeden, gdy mnie wpadł w *Martwe-Morze*,  
Zapewne przypadkiem!... (*zamyśleniem*  
*O odległych*) – przemienił się cały  
W opalowe ziarna... krystaliczne...  
Niesłuchanie twarde...  
– jasne!... jak lód.  
– I – odtąd różańców zaniechałem!

And Magdalena, ‘taking up the content’, adds (399-401): ‘*Zniechęcić się można do wszystkiego... / Gdy usuwa się nam z rąk fatalnie, / I to może nasze wielkie szczęście!!*’ (*You can be discouraged from all / When something is being taken away from our hands / And that might be our great happiness !!*) The Countess definitely (“strongly” - as the stage directions say) confirms the accuracy of this thought, according to her own intentions, i.e. not getting Szeliga’s real hopes up (v. 402-404): ‘*Najzupelniej Twój jest zdania’: / ‘Z rzeczy ziemskich cokolwiek traci się, / Daje w zamian więcej rezygnacji...’* [*I’m totally of your opinion / From earthly things, whatever is lost / it gives more resignation in return ....*] After a while she adds (v. 405-406): ‘*Lecz – czy różaniec ziemską jest rzeczą?’ / ‘Lub nie? ... popytać się o to muszę...* [*But - is the rosary an earthly thing? / Or not? ... I need to ask about it ...*]. At the same time, trying very wisely and sensibly to definitely finish talking about the rosary, she: – „*Notuje w książeczce podręcznej*’ [*Notes it down in the handbook*]. Here, in all this scene you can see how the Countess can find herself in a drastically awkward situation.

Szeliga does not give up and talks about his only rosary - the rosary from his own tears, the Countess, however, does not hide her boredom, and she leads the

conversation so as, by inviting him out in the evening, to leave as soon as possible (and stop the irritating situation).

## 6.

Norwid perfectly showed the title character of *Pierścień Wielkiej-Damy*. She is, not to repeat, very true, authentic, very self-proclaimed and very brave in everything that she does and what happens to her. She is – ‘substantial and complete’, both in what is good and in what we would be inclined to regard as bad or doubtful. It is evident - in what and why she does with things.

And exactly being such she agrees to marry Mak-Yks. Not ideal, not statue-like, but just ‘substantial and complete’, which also means: aware that it is our duty to undertake (always intrinsically) risky attempts to realize what is perfect (what is ‘high’) in everyday life. She also says that *threateningly* (I would add: risking everything with her words) to Mak-Yks who has some doubts (DW VI, 234, v. 642-648):

– Słuchaj! – mężczyzny to jest rzeczą  
Zamieniać doraźne wzniosłe chwile  
W potoczysty i równy ciąg życia.  
Lecz jeżeli ty zbyt słabym jesteś –  
Mężczyzną jeżeli jesteś nie dość,  
By takowy podjąć obowiązek,  
Ja – go – spełnię.

Great courage and true wisdom, I will also add - using Norwid’s expression - ‘great serio’ stand at the source of these words. Courage and wisdom, courage and deep sincerity, which Maria has not lacked before.

If, at the end, I was to answer one of the questions listed at the beginning about the reasons for the Countess’s decision, I would not see the possibility of answering any of them. I suppose that what they concern was not within the scope of Norwid’s intentions. He was mainly interested in correcting this lack of ‘*substantial and complete women*’ in the literature, about which he wrote in the final paragraphs of the Introduction (this is how Sławomir Świontek saw it). And the poet removed the lack: he created a truly important and comprehensive portrait of the title Great Lady. Great-Lady<sup>5</sup> intentionally: great and at the same time true in the use of ordinary objects, ordinary things. And being very far from overestimat-

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<sup>5</sup> And he could have given the play the title: *Countess Harrys, that is: ex-machina-Durejko* or: *Maria [Harrys], that is: ex-machina-Durejko*.



ing these things, excessive allegorizing, celebration; very far from what is done with these things by the male characters of the play.

*Translated by Anna Maria Gernand*

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## ŚWIAT RZECZY W PIERŚCIENIU WIELKIEJ-DAMY

### S t r e s z c z e n i e

Zasadniczym przedmiotem artykułu jest analiza stosunku tytułowej bohaterki *Pierścienia Wielkiej-Damy* do przedmiotów, do (potocznie rozumianych) rzeczy. Analiza ta pozwala sformułować hipotezę, iż intencją Norwida było przedstawienie protagonistki jako „kobiety istotnej i zupełnej”, jako postaci w pełnym i w głębokim tego znaczeniu pozytywnej (w norwidologii na ogół przyjęło się widzieć Hrabinę Harrys inaczej).

**Słowa kluczowe:** Norwid; *Pierścień Wielkiej-Damy*; przedmiot; kobieta; pierścień; dramat.

THE WORLD OF THINGS IN *PIERŚCIEŃ WIELKIEJ-DAMY*

S u m m a r y

The article focuses on the analysis of the relationship of the title character of *Pierścień Wielkiej-Damy* [The Ring of a Great Lady] to objects or (commonly understood) things. This analysis allows to formulate the hypothesis that Norwid's intention was to present the protagonist as a "substantial and complete woman", as an entirely positive character (in Norwid Studies, the general view on Countess Harrys is rather different).

**Key words:** Norwid; *Pierścień Wielkiej-Damy* [The Ring of a Great Lady]; object; woman; ring; drama.

*Summary translated by Rafał Augustyn*

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