

## Female house tyrants? The literary images of Aniela Dulaska and Serkele Dansker

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyse and compare the eponymous characters from two plays: Solomon Ettinger's *Serkele, or, In Mourning for a Brother* and Gabriela Zapolska's *The Morality of Mrs. Dulaska. A petty-bourgeois tragic-farce*. Both characters have become the embodiments of a terrifying female in Yiddish and Polish cultures respectively. The plays are briefly summarised, then compared and, finally, a new interpretation of the main characters is proposed. According to this new interpretation, they can be seen as women who disagreed with their position according to tradition and society and therefore tried to break free of the mould.

**Keywords:** *Yiddish drama, Polish drama, theatre history, Zapolska, Ettinger, women*

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In the 1830s Solomon Ettinger wrote his play *Serkele, or, In Mourning for a Brother*<sup>1</sup> a Yiddish *comédie larmoyante* – a tearful comedy in which an impending tragedy is usually avoided and the characters reconcile amidst a flood of tears. This drama is widely regarded as one of the first examples of serious Yiddish dramaturgy. Almost seventy years later, in 1906, Gabriela Zapolska published *The Morality of Mrs. Dulaska, or: a Petty-bourgeoise Tragic-farce*,<sup>2</sup> one of the most famous Polish naturalistic plays. Apart from being milestones in Yiddish and Polish literature, respectively, those two dramas have more in common. Even though their genre is different, they actually have quite a similar construction as well: in the first act, the characters are introduced. Then the main, titular character is confronted with a scandal that threatens the integrity of the entire household and proves to be too difficult for her to solve. In the end, the crisis is averted. But the main aspect that these two dramas have in common are the two main personas. Both authors have created characters that have become in a way archetypal in both the Yiddish and Polish culture. *Serkele* Dansker and Aniela Dulaska became nearly synonymous of women who are household tyrants, bad parents, immoral and cunning, almost evil.<sup>3</sup>

## 1 “Here I am and off I go!”<sup>4</sup> – Introduction

As mentioned above, *Serkele* and Mrs. Dulaska are somewhat archetypal characters in their respective cultures. That is, however, not all they have in common. Another interesting feature that shall be discussed below is their relation to the traditional models of womanhood that existed in the authors’ cultures. *Serkele* and Dulaska are unquestionably the heads of their households. Both have husbands who are stereotypically henpecked. Both are convinced of their own cunning. However, the characters will be reinterpreted and reread in a feminist perspective. The aim of the article is to show that, when read nowadays, the perception to the main characters in the plays may

<sup>1</sup> S. Ettinger, *Serkele, or: In mourning for a Brother*, p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> G. Zapolska, *The Morality of Mrs. Dulaska. A petty-bourgeois tragic-farce*, translated and introduced by T. Murjas (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Of course a case can be made that *The Morality of Mrs. Dulaska* would better be compared with a Gordin drama such as, for instance *Khashe di yesoyme* [*Khashe the Orphan Girl*], since the latter also deals with the hypocrisy of the petty bourgeoisie. Yet the main purpose of this paper is to focus on the similarities of the two characters mentioned previously rather than on the similarities of the plays’ tone.

<sup>4</sup> *The Morality of Mrs. Dulaska*, Act I, Scene 5.



be dramatically different from the original one, perhaps even different from the perception intended by the authors themselves. After a short summary of both plays the first aspect that shall be analysed is the role that the two females play in their families. Additionally, their views on what they consider “good behaviour” shall be compared. Then, their reactions when faced with a crisis are to be correlated, and finally, their attitude towards their respective cultures. Another feature that shall be included will be the women’s attitude to money and belongings.

Serkele Dansker and Aniela Dulaska fit into a literary canon that seems prevalent in the history of literature. Many female characters who were portrayed in literature as positive and as a role model were obedient, delicate and ancillary to men. At the same time, those who tried to step out of this traditional framework, i.e. be successful, achieve their goals or make their mark were perceived as negative and usually doomed to be defeated by their female nature, or, to be precise, by those features which were traditionally ascribed to their gender. Those women who were ambitious and had no possibility to achieve their ambitions sometimes shifted them onto their families, children or husbands as was, for example, the case with the two Jewish matriarchs: Sarah and Rebecca. In general devoted women, subordinated to her husband and family or fiancé or love interest is a prevailing trait in literature and culture. It can be argued that tradition hindered the creation of a modern female character since the number of patterns available for them was very limited. While a man could be a knight, a poet, an artist or a king, a woman was mostly only a wife, lover, mother, sister or daughter. Of course, there are notable exceptions of the characters briefly described above. They can be found in Yiddish drama, especially characters created by Abraham Goldfaden or Jacob Gordin, e.g.: Dina in *Bar-Kochba; or, The Last Days of Jerusalem* (A. Goldfaden, 1883) who chose to kill herself in order to incite a revolt against the Romans, or the titular character of *Mirele Efros* (J. Gordin, 1898) – a powerful matriarch who re-established her late husband’s business. Nevertheless, the woman dependant on a man is a recurring pattern that can be found in literature and culture<sup>5</sup> and this paper shall briefly describe and reinterpret two characters of this kind.

<sup>5</sup> This topic has been described in a more detailed manner in the author’s MA thesis entitled *Solomon Ettinger’s “Serkele, or, In Mourning for a Brother” and Gabriela Zapolska’s “The Morality of Mrs. Dulaska. A petty-bourgeois tragic-farce” – a comparative analysis and contemporary reading*, Heidelberg, 2012.



## 2 “It surely will not be too long”<sup>6</sup> – Summaries

The story of *Serkele, or, In Mourning for a Brother* takes place on the fourth anniversary of the death of Dovid Gutherz,<sup>7</sup> a merchant who was declared dead four years prior to the events in *Serkele* following news that his ship had sunk. Before departing, he had left his only daughter Hinde in the care of his sister, Serkele, and her husband, Reb Moyshe Dansker. Serkele, however, not only mistreats Hinde terribly, but she has also faked her brother's will so that she is the only heir of his fortune. Serkele makes a match between her own daughter, Freyde-Altele, a naive pseudo-maskil, and Reb Gavriel, a fraudulent merchant who is only after Freyde's money to clear his debts.<sup>8</sup> However, after Mrs Dansker declares that the wedding will take place only after the future husband has paid back everything that he owes, Reb Gavriel steals Serkele's jewels<sup>9</sup> and puts the blame on Hinde's sweetheart, the educated maskil Markus Redlekh.<sup>10</sup> The furious Serkele discovers the scheme<sup>11</sup> and gets both Hinde and Markus arrested. Just as the situation seems hopeless for the young couple, Dovid Gutherz returns miraculously and saves the day: he frees the youngsters, leads to the arrest of Reb Gavriel, and makes Serkele regret her wrongdoings.<sup>12</sup> The blocking of the drama is not very extensive, and the *dramatis personae* are introduced to the reader by the usage of dialogues and soliloquies. The humour is also quite specific: it is often based on verbal tics, dialects or stuttering. Many of its puns get unfortunately lost in the translation, since much of it relies on linguistic differences and play on words. However, much of it is also physical humour, which can hardly be called subtle. To the modern reader, this type of farce seems a bit forced and sometimes uncomfortable, but it should be remembered that as scary or cruel as Serkele sometimes appears (and she does indeed!), it is all meant to be for the purposes of comedy.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Serkele*, Prologue.

<sup>7</sup> Gutherz is a positive character and this is emphasised by his surname that literally means “goodheart”. The same is the case with the other enlightened character, Marcus Redlekh, whose surname translates as “honest”.

<sup>8</sup> *Serkele*, Act II, Scene 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, Act III, Scene 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, Act III, Scene 10.

<sup>11</sup> Serkele is so quick to believe Redlekh to be guilty because of their cultural differences: she is a traditional and observant Jewess, while he is an enlightened student. It is notable that this difference did not stop her from trying to seduce him earlier in the play.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, Act V, Scene 9.

<sup>13</sup> It should be also mentioned that in maskilic writings the reversion of traditional gender roles (as it is the case in *Serkele*) was quite an often literal measure to induce humour, for



*The Morality of Mrs. Dulaska* takes place in Lviv, more specifically, in the living room of the Dulskis. Aniela Dulaska is the unquestioned ruler of her household. She is the wife of Felicjan Dulski and the mother of Zbyszko and two younger girls, Hesja and Mela. Mrs Dulaska employs a servant, a girl named Hanka, and a cook, Anna. The day starts like any other day in the Dulskis' household with the head of the family running around, giving orders, preparing her daughters to go to school, her husband to go to work and grumbling about Zbyszko, who has not returned home for the night.<sup>14</sup> During the conversations we learn that Zbyszko has an affair with the servant Hanka, which Dulaska is fully aware of. However, despite Hanka's complaints, Dulaska refuses to do anything about it, since she hopes that the affair will keep Zbyszko at home. Dulaska's relative, Juliasiewiczowa, notices the romance as well and warns her aunt, yet Dulaska dismisses the warnings.<sup>15</sup> Suddenly it turns out that Hanka is pregnant. In a sudden outburst Zbyszko offers to marry her, which shocks his mother to the core. Deeply shaken, she is unable to react; it is therefore up to Juliasiewiczowa to step up and avert the crisis. Zbyszko agrees not to marry the servant and Hanka is paid the sum she demanded and leaves. In the final scene everything seems to be back to normal. Unlike the Yiddish playwright, who only added quite unspecific blocking to his work, Zapolska paid a lot of attention to the importance of the stage background, gesture and facial expressions and provided the play with detailed blocking with which she specifies the characters' wardrobe, tone and their surroundings. This was a significant element of how the author created a character, as is usually the case in a naturalistic play. Since Zapolska was a representative of naturalism, the setting and performance of the play is supposed to be real, not theatrical. The characters are presented to the audience by their surroundings and dialogues. The play features many comic and grotesque elements, yet its final undertone is extremely pessimistic and critical.

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instance in Mendele Mocher Sforim's *The travels of Benjamin the Third*.

<sup>14</sup> *The Morality of Mrs. Dulaska*, Act I, Scene 14

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, Act I, Scene 14.



### 3 “Birds of a feather flock together”<sup>16</sup> – Comparisons

Both ladies value control. Dulaska truly reigns over her family. The other characters disobey her only in minor activities: Felicjan steals cigars,<sup>17</sup> Zbyszko carouses at night; Hesia gossips with the cook and flirts with students. Even Mela warms herself at the stove when her mother is not watching.<sup>18</sup> But generally, everybody follows the order she has imposed on them, it is perceptible also when she herself is not present. Serkele uses psychological blackmailing in order to gain and maintain control. She constantly complains about her fading health<sup>19</sup> and even though everybody sees through her charade, they play along. But the characters in *Serkele* obey her only when she is watching. As soon as she leaves the stage almost all members of the household are cheating, scheming and plotting in order to achieve their own goals.

A very important value for both Dulaska and Serkele and a source of their power is money. And the issue of money is connected to the women's attitude to their surroundings. But again there are some minor yet important differences in their attitude towards it: for Serkele, money is all she needs in order to get what she wants. She could not care less about other people's opinions since she is sure that money grants her a strong and untouchable position. Therefore, she lets Hinde get arrested without a second thought, knowing that it will not affect her own status – true enough, since even though everyone gossips about Serke behind her back, no one dares to oppose her directly. Dulaska's system of values is different; her good name is even more important for her than money. She is ready to pay in order to avoid a scandal that could make people gossip about her family. She is, however, also greedy – or parsimonious, to be precise. She denies herself and her family any luxuries in order to save money: they do not bathe in hot water, they rarely frequent theatres. Serke, as previously mentioned, cares less about the opinion of the people in her nearest milieu – money gives her immunity. It is her family that she needs to deceive by constantly complaining about her health.<sup>20</sup> Dulaska's

<sup>16</sup> *Serkele*, Act V, Scene 7.

<sup>17</sup> *The Morality of Mrs. Dulaska*, Act II, Scene 1.

<sup>18</sup> See: *Ibidem*, Act I, Scene 3.

<sup>19</sup> See: *Serkele*, Act I, Scene 2.

<sup>20</sup> Her catchphrase is: “Oy, mayne koyches!”, translated by Berkowitz and Dauber as “Oy, I feel faint!”



approach is quite the opposite: at home she is absolutely herself, dresses in shabby clothes and reigns with an iron fist. But the opinion of the others is crucial to her.

The two females speak of morality<sup>21</sup> and appear to have an almost identical view on it, but in fact, their actions might be viewed as hypocritical even in their own understanding of the term “moral”. While they are very eager to point out everyone else’s flaws or weaknesses, they refuse to acknowledge their own. Dulska wants to be perceived as the guardian of morality in her household even though the reader knows already that she is not guided by morality in her actions. Serkele has robbed her niece of her fortune, yet she is outraged when someone else manages to become rich. This also shows in how Mrs Dansker and Mrs Dulska treat their servants. They call them names and push them around. An additional common feature is that Chava as well as Hanka are molested by Reb Gavriel and Zbyszko respectively; yet neither Serkele nor Dulska react. Serkele does not even believe Chava, and Dulska goes as far as to perfidiously use Hanka to keep Zbyszko at home.<sup>22</sup> However, when Hanka falls pregnant Dulska has no qualms about throwing her out of the house.

Apparently, the two families are also following the same pattern. Both have one strong girl who is similar to her mother: In *The Morality of Mrs. Dulska* it is Hesia, in *Serkele* it is Freyde-Altele. The two girls are selfish – Freyde-Altele does not want to give her cologne when her mother (presumably) fainted.<sup>23</sup> When Zbyszko decides to marry Hanka, Hesia is furious that this misalliance will ruin her chances of finding a proper husband herself.<sup>24</sup> The girls’ similarity to their mothers also manifests in their treatment of the servants; they are disrespectful, offensive and rude.<sup>25</sup> What they also inherited is dishonesty: they deceive their mothers at every step towards reaching their goals. Mela and Hinde are also somewhat similar, although not entirely so. These two characters are victims, especially Hinde since Serkele stole her money and treats her terribly. Mela’s character traits do not allow her to function in the depraved household of the Dulski family but she does not quite realise it, although it clearly affects her physical condition. Both are the only ones who treat the servants with kindness. Hinde and Chava are even close

<sup>21</sup> See: *The Morality of Mrs. Dulska* Act I, Scene 9 and *Serkele*, Act II, Scene 4.

<sup>22</sup> See: *The Morality of Mrs. Dulska* Act I, Scene 14 and *Serkele*, Act II, Scene 7.

<sup>23</sup> *Serkele*, Act II, Scene 9.

<sup>24</sup> *The Morality of Mrs. Dulska*, Act III, Scene 2.

<sup>25</sup> See: *The Morality of Mrs. Dulska*, Act I, Scene 8 and *Serkele*, Act II, Scene 11.





friends; Mela is the only one from the family to whom Hanka bids farewell when leaving.<sup>26</sup>

A common character in both plays is of course the feeble husband. Felicjan Dulski and Moyshe Dansker are subordinated to their wives and play only a secondary role in their own households. Moyshe often condemns his wife for her wrongdoings, but he does not have the courage to react; he only talks. Additionally, even though he feels remorse, he seems to put all the blame for faking David Gutherz's testament on his wife. Yet he protests at least orally while Dulski has even given up on that, he stopped speaking. He does not seem to feel guilty in any way like Mr. Dansker and he totally surrendered. He just tries to avoid his wife and therefore leaves the house whenever he can, spending the evenings in a patisserie. In fact he speaks only once, when he is angered that someone disturbed his peace.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly both Dulska and Serke use the family father's authority in a conflict at least once, even though they have him completely under control.<sup>28</sup> It is striking that the two women still turn to the stereotype of the respected man who is responsible for the punishment of misbehaviour, even though it is obviously they whose reprimand is feared more.

In both plays the main characters face crisis. For Dulska it is the scandal which seems on the verge of exploding when Zbyszek wants to marry the servant Hanka after making her pregnant.<sup>29</sup> For Serkele it is the theft of her jewellery.<sup>30</sup> While both women are in a state of shock they deal with the situation differently, even though they lose their ability to think rationally. Mrs Dulska is completely changed; she is apathetic and powerless and cannot deal with the situation. She tries to be her old self but cannot. In the end, she does not see any other option than to ask Juliasiewiczowa for help, and she manages to avoid the scandal.<sup>31</sup> Serkele seems to be losing her mind first when she notices the missing jewels, but she quickly comes to her senses. She remembers that Reb Gavriel had already suggested that Markus Redlekh might be a thief and now, since there really has been a stealing, she clings to the idea of accusing Redlekh and Hinde. She tries to make them confess; when they do not, Serke's anger reaches its peak. She screams madly,

<sup>26</sup> *The Morality of Mrs. Dulska* Act III, Scene 14.

<sup>27</sup> He yells: "The devil take the lot of you!!!" (*The Morality of Mrs. Dulska*, Act II, Scene 14).

<sup>28</sup> See: *The Morality of Mrs. Dulska*, Act I, Scene 6 and *Serkele*, Act I, Scene 2.

<sup>29</sup> See: *Ibidem*, Act II, Scene 15.

<sup>30</sup> See: *Ibidem*, Act III, Scene 14.

<sup>31</sup> See: *Ibidem*, Act III, Scene 12.





threatens the youngsters and allows them to be led to prison immediately.<sup>32</sup> However, even though she does not realise it, she is being played by Reb Gavriel, the real thief. He skilfully used Serke's anger on the youngsters to make her believe their guilt.

Both authors put their characters through tests that reveal their real characters. Dulaska turned out to be weaker than she seemed; someone had to replace her in taking decisions. Serkele seems unchanged, yet she is blinded by her anger and greed, therefore an easy prey for the sly Reb Gavriel.<sup>33</sup> The largest difference between the two dramas is certainly the ending. In *Serkele* the ending is as happy as it could be. Dovid Gutherz returns like a *deus otiosus* to set everything back in order.<sup>34</sup> He saves Redlekh and promises him Hinde's hand in marriage. He also leads to the arrest of Reb Gavriel and, since he was Freyde's fiancé, Gutherz makes a match between Freyde and Reb Shmelke the innkeeper. Moyshe Dansker shows his regret and is forgiven. Surprisingly enough, so is Serkele. She shows genuine remorse, cries and throws herself at her brother's feet. This act is commented by her husband: "Now that's nice. That's the way it should be. You see, Serke, that makes me happy!"<sup>35</sup> Serkele is not only forgiven but also put back in her place. Until now she was the one even taking financial decisions in the house (as was actually common in traditional Jewish households). Yet in the modern period, the Enlightenment, women were pushed back into the realm of the home and children.<sup>36</sup> Reb Shmelke asks her mockingly: "Will you have some nice flour ready for Shabbes?"<sup>37</sup> since Serkele will now have to go back to working as a grain

<sup>32</sup> See: *The Morality of Mrs. Dulaska*, Act IV, Scene 10.

<sup>33</sup> This slightly recalls the portrayal of some of the women in the Greek mythology: in the end they lose to their women's weaknesses, like Pandora and Atalanta. In Greek mythology, Pandora's curiosity led to releasing all the evils on humanity, and Atalanta lost a footrace despite being faster because her opponent, Hippomenes, dropped golden apples on the way and Atalanta could not resist the beautiful fruit. See: Hesiod, *Works and Days*, verse 80, in: *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica with an English Translation by Hugh G. Evelyn-White*, [www 01] and Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 10, verses 560–651, [www 02].

<sup>34</sup> See: *Serkele*, Act V.

<sup>35</sup> *Serkele*, Act V, Scene 7.

<sup>36</sup> In the following, compare: R. M. Herweg, *Die Jüdische Mutter. Das verborgene Matriarchat*, p. 150.

<sup>37</sup> Yid: *Serkele! Vet ir zikh hobn epesh sayn mel afn shabes?* *Serkele*, ibidem. Note Reb Shmelke's different way of speaking – he is a Litvak and therefore speaks with a characteristic accent. Ettinger paid great attention to language while creating the characters. The language is not only a means of inducing humour but also of character differentiation. Hence the "good" characters who are maskilim, speak high, Germanised Yiddish, while the rest speak a collo-



dealer. The decisions will be taken by her husband from now on. Meanwhile, in *The Morality of Mrs. Dulaska* a chance to change for the better was wasted; after the crisis is averted, everything goes back to how it was. Dulaska has not changed; she does not even for a moment consider that she was jointly responsible for the whole situation. The thought that she mistreated Hanka also does not cross her mind. She haughtily says to Juliasiewiczowa: “What is it that I’m to be taught, and by whom? I myself always know, thank God, precisely what is required.”<sup>38</sup> Then she is relieved and goes back to her old self, energetically giving orders. Only Mela is shocked and feels disturbed.

Another thing that the plays have in common is how the characters do not meet the idealised image of a mother and a wife, a figure that was developed in both the Polish and the Ashkenazi Jewish tradition.<sup>39</sup> Dulaska, for instance, tries to follow the archetype of the ideal Polish mother<sup>40</sup> and sacrifices herself for her children. Everything she did was to help them and to protect the family: she sent her daughters to school since she knew that education would enable them to find a better husband, thus securing their future. And even though she does not realise that it is the home’s atmosphere that makes Mela sick, she is genuinely concerned about her. She is worried about Zbyszko’s health when he is spending the nights out. She also does the best she can in order to teach her offspring a way of life she deems best for them. In her opinion, she shows them how to live life in the most comfortable way, avoiding trouble and unnecessarily spending money. Dulaska also feels abandoned as a parent by her husband: when she asks him to help her punish their son, Dulski shrugs and walks away. Because of the effort Dulaska put into caring for her son, it is no surprise that she is shocked and feels betrayed when Zbyszko wants to marry Hanka. She does not understand what she has done for her son to treat her so.

The situation is similar in the case of Serkele. After all, in the traditional Jewish household it is the mother who not only brings up the children and takes care of the household, but is directly involved in earning a living as well since the husband’s life is dedicated to studying the Torah. The rabbinic liter-

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qual and realistic Yiddish. For instance Freyde-Altele, who clumsily attempts being a maskil, speaks such a gibberish *Daytshmerish* when attempting German that even Dovid Gutherz has to ask for a translation into Yiddish.

<sup>38</sup> *The Morality of Mrs. Dulaska*, Act III, Scene 14.

<sup>39</sup> This idealisation meant of course viewing the woman only in association with her home, husband and children, disregarding her needs and aims.

<sup>40</sup> *Matka Polka* in Polish.



ature created the image of the blessed mother who is the guardian of home.<sup>41</sup> Serkele is therefore really proud of her Freyde-Alte, whom she believes to be truly enlightened and well-educated. She looks after her, as a proper *yiddishe mame* would. Serkele also wishes for her daughter to find a rich husband which would ensure her stability in her future life. In her opinion she cares about her daughter as well as she can, yet she is unaware of how Freyde is plotting behind her back.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, Serke focuses only on her daughter, giving her so much attention that she shuns her niece, Hinde, whom she is supposed to look after. What is more, Hinde is an orphan, and mistreating an orphan is considered particularly loathsome and is specifically forbidden in the Torah.<sup>43</sup> Serke also feels abandoned by her husband, who blames her for everything in spite of having participated in the forgery of the will. It is interesting that Reb Moyshe does not have even one conversation with his own daughter. He also does not want to participate in her matchmaking – everything is left to Serkele.

It can also be argued that in the traditional household, the children's achievements speak volumes about their parents – in the case of the plays we are dealing with, the mothers especially. This may be another reason why Serke brags about Freyde's talents – they are proof of her being a good mother. Dulska is so concerned about Zbyszko's actions because she seems not to understand where she might have made a mistake in his upbringing. His behaviour shows that she failed as a parent. Another point is worth underlining: as mentioned, Mrs Dansker and Mrs Dulska use their families as tools in fulfilling their ambitions. In this case, this ambition is creating a family that would meet a certain model – the archetype of an ideal family in that everything runs smoothly according to the rules of the matriarch.

<sup>41</sup> In the beginning of the Haskalah (i.e. the time of Solomon Ettinger) this picture of the ideal Jewish mother began to change. The first maskilic writers started to describe the distant and cold-hearted mother from the poor shtetl. Because of poverty the mother constantly works and worries about the family's survival, while the husband either learns the Torah or also tries (often unsuccessfully) to earn a living. Many authors describe the relationship with an emaciated mother who is cold and heartless and always on the verge of a breakdown, sick from worrying about food and money. For more, see: Herweg, pp. 157–159

<sup>42</sup> Mirosława Bułat sees Serkele as a blind mother, i.e. a mother so infatuated with her child that she is not seeing his or her flaws and who is harming an orphan or half-orphan for the good of her child. See: M. Bułat, "Es git nit beser in der welt...a jidisze mame" *Postać matki w wybranych utworach Abrahama Goldfadena, Józefa Latejnera, Izzydora Zoltarewskiego i Jakuba Gordina*, pp. 337–366.

<sup>43</sup> See: Exodus 22:21–3, Deuteronomy 26:12 for the laws on treating orphans.



#### 4 *Yiddishe mame* and *Matka Polka?* – a contemporary reading

It is striking how similar the two characters are, despite differences in the literary form of the two dramas and of the historical and cultural backgrounds of the two authors, while the the difference in gender should also be noted. It is tempting to consider why in both dramas the main, negative character is female. One could see the reason being the fear of a dominating woman, but in the case of Zapolska both her gender and her biography make this interpretation doubtful. Yet, perhaps even in her eyes a household ruled by a woman is something which just cannot function? It is known that regardless of the role that Zapolska played in the history of women's emancipation in Poland, she did not consider herself emancipated. In two of her sketches published in the 1880s she criticises emancipation using the term "female nature", which prevents women from intellectual work.<sup>44</sup> In the case of Ettinger's play, Serkele can possibly be read more as a caricature of the traditional Jewish mother, the one who is in charge of the household during the husband's absence. Ettinger grew up in a traditional home; he was married at a very young age and was seemingly very unhappy. It is interesting that in the end, Serkele's temper is suppressed: she weeps and begs for forgiveness and when she is forgiven – she gently expresses gratitude. Maybe this too stems from the concept of the idealisation of the mother? Even though Serkele was described as a negative character, she is still a mother and the idea of punishing a mother so severely might seem too cruel to the audience.

The way in which the women are depicted in the plays consolidates the stereotype of the woman who can only be fulfilled or happy within her role as a wife and a mother. Serkele and Dulaska are definitely unhappy but they do not realise that they themselves are the source of this unhappiness – they keep looking for the reasons around them and blame everyone else but themselves. They are also miserable because they do not recognise the wrong they are doing and that is the reason why they actually appear pitiful. This may also be what Ettinger and Zapolska are trying to say – if their personas surrendered to their traditional roles of the subordinated wife and mother, they could achieve happiness. Yet, not only are they unhappy and make everyone

<sup>44</sup> These are: *W sprawie emancypacji* and *Paniom emancypantkom...odpowiedź* [in:] Jadwiga Czachowska, *Gabriela Zapolska, Publicystyka*, Cz. 1, quoted in: Agata Chałupnik, *Niemoralność Pani Dulskiej*, p. 359.



else miserable, they also appear almost grotesque both in appearance and in character. This is because as long as they are the figures of authority, they are not viewed as “truly” female and human – they seem almost monstrous.

Despite the widespread interpretation of Mrs Dulaska and Serkele, a modern reader could understand these women quite differently. After they were created, both characters quickly became personifications of all the negatively perceived females in their cultures. As mentioned, an attitude similar to Dulaska’s is until now called *dulszczyzna* in Polish, what roughly translates in *Dulaska-ness*. It is also known that the play *Serkele* was very famous in Yiddish theatres even after World War II.<sup>45</sup> The negative interpretation of Aniela Dulaska seems also to be consistent with Zapolska’s intention. In a letter she wrote to Wilhelm Feldman, a critic of a newspaper in Cracow:

In this petty-bourgeois tragic-farce I wanted to show the bourgeois meanness. When this girl [Mela] screams in the end: “it is like someone was murdered!” – this is exactly it. The human soul was murdered here. Pay attention to this, you will feel it! You will understand it!<sup>46</sup>

Yet nowadays the readers could view those characters in another way.<sup>47</sup> They could interpret them as strong women who tried their best to actually exist in a society which did not treat them as full members. This is not such a new concept, since in 1869 John Stuart Mill already wrote that a woman had practically no other ways to realise herself outside of marriage, so she is forced to realise her talents and dreams within the family and also through it. The danger here, however, Mill argues, is that such women can turn despotic by wanting to fulfil their vision of an ideal family at all costs. Often they do not even see that this is happening at the expenses of the family members.<sup>48</sup> Maybe this is the way in which we could interpret Dulaska and Serkele as well? Both of those characters were very ambitious, yet their surroundings and cultures made it impossible for them as women to reach the gratification they wanted. They have visions of an ideal family that they are trying to meet at all costs. It also seems that the role of the submissive wife did not suit them,

<sup>45</sup> See: N. Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater*, pp. 358–362.

<sup>46</sup> L-2-s.235, quoted in: Józef Rurawski, *Gabriela Zapolska*, p. 345 (translation by Magdalena Wójcik).

<sup>47</sup> A fascinating case of reinterpreting *Serkele* is the article by A. P. Quint, *The Currency of Yiddish: Ettinger’s “Serkele” and the Reinvention of Shylock*, p. 99–115.

<sup>48</sup> J. S. Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, [www 03].



so they both achieved a position of power in the household, though by different strategies. Because of her dominative character, it is Dulska who is the leader for her family. No one even pretends that Dulska has something to say. Interestingly enough, this is not the case in Serkele's household. Serkele tries to maintain the appearance of being a victim, even though – as mentioned before – nobody trusts her schemes. She became a good merchant as soon as she entered the male world of harsh business rivalry, abandoned any moral moderation and was prepared to do anything in order to earn money. Yet she cannot openly disregard her femininity to keep up appearances for society; therefore she has to maintain her image as a weak woman who is constantly worrying about her health. Serkele and Dulska used different strategies but they achieved the same effect: they reached a position of power by taking on traditionally male functions and roles. Because of this they also, as mentioned before, care so much about money. It is (among others) their greed which is condemned by their creators, the authors. But maybe the women's avarice is simply a way in which they decided to show (or even establish) their worth. Since these women were living in societies which valued money and possessions, it is their wealth that gives them value. After all, it works: even though the two characters are disliked by the others, they are respected. Serkele used to be poor – or at least, less wealthy. She knows the modest life. She and her husband both worked in a mill and there were no perspectives for Reb Moyshe to earn more and to provide his ambitious wife with the resources demanded by the lifestyle that she desired. Mrs. Dansker decided to take care of her family as well. It is indisputably wrong that she robbed her own brother, yet considering the circumstances she lived under, she had no other choice; therefore, she uses moral relativism to explain her wrongdoings. She learned that hard work does not guarantee success, and so when an opportunity presented itself, Serkele did not hesitate. However, the possibility that Serkele too feels guilty for her wrongdoings through the entire play can also not be totally excluded – after all, she quickly shows sincere remorse in the final act. She is obviously disappointed with her husband, and even goes as far as trying to seduce the young Markus Redlekh.<sup>49</sup> It could be assumed that Reb Moyshe failed to satisfy his wife, which is even more evident when it becomes clear that he is almost disgusted by her. But maybe Serkele's attempted affair is also the result of her need for appreciation? Perhaps she desires a young man who would value and admire her? Probably

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<sup>49</sup> See: *Serkele*, Act I, Scene II.





because of her dissatisfaction with Reb Moyshe, Serkele wants her daughter to marry someone rich. She wants to spare her the hardships she herself had experienced; nonetheless, she also uses Freyde-Altele to fulfil her own ambitions and plans for her to marry a candidate whom she, the mother, considers ideal. It is also no wonder that she does not believe in marriage out of love, if her own husband hates her; disillusioned, she considers money a more powerful binder.

Aniela Dulaska also cares a great deal about money. However, it could be argued that she has to, since both her husband and her son appear not to be very thrifty. She takes care of the expenses of the house and gives Felicjan some spending money.<sup>50</sup> Her son did not accord with this and accumulated debts. Therefore, she too can be looked upon in a different way. For instance, the usual interpretation of the famous scene where Dulaska talks with the tenant and reveals her moral hypocrisy and insensitivity when faced with a personal tragedy. Mrs Dulaska just evicted the tenant after the latter had tried to commit suicide. Despite the tenant's difficult situation – she is divorcing her husband for cheating on her with a servant – Dulaska insists that she moves out. Her real reason is quickly revealed: the tenant's suicide attempt is perceived by her as scandalous and, as such, threatening to her reputation.<sup>51</sup> Yet it also can be seen as a confrontation between two women with different outlooks: one who is completely and absolutely dependent on her husband and whose life completely falls apart when she learns of his betrayal, and one who chooses to depend only on herself. Similarly, Dulaska's dialogue with her son can be reread. She criticises him for spending his time with courtesans while she is renting a flat in her tenement building to one herself, as pointed out by Zbyszko. However, does this not actually seem like Zbyszko's attempt to justify himself? Sleeping with a cocotte and renting a flat to one is not the same thing by far, especially since the tenant seems to be quite considerate: she pays her rent regularly and her customers never stop in front of the building in order to avoid scandals. Also, does Dulaska's concern about her son's well-being seem not so far-fetched: he comes home looking literally green.<sup>52</sup> In this perspective, it seems logical that Dulaska prefers Zbyszko to stay at home. It is undeniable that she chooses the wrong means, but her reasoning can be understood.

<sup>50</sup> See: *The Morality of Mrs. Dulaska*, Act II, Scene 1.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, Act I, Scene 9.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, Act I, Scene 5.





Knowing how dress code influences perception, Zapolska described Dul-ska's appearance in a very detailed manner, undoubtedly in order to strengthen the spectator's aversion and disgust towards the character according to the saying "clothes make the man". What if Dul-ska appeared on stage dressed elegantly and neatly? That way she could probably be seen as a rational businesswoman than a greedy nouveau-riche.<sup>53</sup> Especially considering the current world economic crisis, such an interpretation would make sense. Since most people save money every way they can, Dul-ska's behaviour would no longer appear greedy but reasonable. In this way her refusal to rent her niece Juliasiewiczowa a flat<sup>54</sup> can be seen not as cruel, but actually as judicious. After all, Dul-ska knows that Juliasiewiczowa and her husband live beyond their means. Juliasiewiczowa even airily confirms this herself: "My husband doesn't know how to save and neither do I."<sup>55</sup> Therefore, it actually seems plausible to not rent a flat to someone who will probably be a difficult tenant, even if the tenant is family.

Consequently, the roles of the husbands can be reevaluated as well. They are presented by the authors as men who had to surrender to their wives' despotic characters. However, maybe they simply chose the easier way of life? Their strong wives took all the responsibility for the family (and even for themselves) away from them. Dul-ski simply cut himself away from the family and the household and does not feel responsible for it. He stopped speaking completely and only communicates with his family with gestures. Reb Moyshe criticises his wife constantly for being evil and worthless but this is as far as he goes. It seems that he is trying to ease his conscience, since if he really was so bothered by his wife's behaviour why did he not speak up in the very beginning? Some might say that since Reb Dansker went to *shul* and not to the patisserie like Dul-ski, he is less of a negative character. This may well be true. Nevertheless, he carried out the plan to fake the will and he has also benefited from it. Yet he then puts all the blame onto his wife. All he does is talk, when Sekele's jewels are stolen; he does not help her. He just says: "Ay, I always knew it would end this way. I always said, 'Serke, that money won't bring you any blessings.'"<sup>56</sup> In one of the final scenes he

<sup>53</sup> This manner was used in Agnieszka Glińska's staging of *The Morality of Mrs. Dul-ska* in the Teatr Współczesny in Warsaw (premiere: 19 November 2011). In this interpretation Dul-ska is a coherent woman who is running her home and tenement building the best she can.

<sup>54</sup> *The Morality of Mrs. Dul-ska*, Act I, Scene 11.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>56</sup> *Serkele*, Act IV, Scene 7.



saves Hinde from being beaten;<sup>57</sup> Yet, the reader could ask, why only now? He witnessed how Serkele had already been mistreating her niece for four years yet he kept silent.

## 5 “At last we can resume our godly way of life”<sup>58</sup> – Conclusion

Yiddish and Polish theatre history rarely seems to be analysed comparatively but this does not seem surprising. Yiddish drama only began to develop in the 19th century during the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, and Yiddish professional theatre was only established in 1876.<sup>59</sup> In this time, the Polish dramaturgy of Romanticism had just produced some of its most prominent representatives like Adam Mickiewicz or Juliusz Słowacki. However, it is tempting to ponder how much influences these two cultures had on each other, especially considering that they flourished on the same piece of land. Of course, it is highly unlikely, almost impossible to assume that Zapolska had been influenced by Ettinger’s *Serkele* while creating her *Morality of Mrs. Dulska*, and by no means does this paper try to prove it. It can certainly be seen as a generalisation, but because of some common cultural background that the two authors most probably shared and since Ettinger and Zapolska were both people of culture, it does not seem too far-fetched to assume that they were familiar with the basic literary canon. In light of this, the similarities of the created personas are not as remarkable. What is noteworthy, however, is the fact that these female characters were described as negative mainly because they wielded too much power. Nevertheless, it can be argued that these characters were strong women who wanted to fulfil their ambitions and dreams – maybe despite even the authors’ intentions.

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem, Act IV, Scene 10.

<sup>58</sup> *The Morality of Mrs. Dulska*, Act III, Scene 14.

<sup>59</sup> By Avram Goldfadn, who founded a professional Yiddish theatre troupe in that year in Iași, Romania.



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