



KYIV-MOHYLA  
HUMANITIES JOURNAL

KYIV-MOHYLA SCHOLARLY PEER-REVIEWED JOURNALS

## Anti-Colonial Discourse in Lesia Ukrainka's Dramas

*Author(s):* Vira Ageyeva

*Source:* Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal 8 (2021): 169–182

*Published by:* National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy

<http://kmhj.ukma.edu.ua/>

## Anti-Colonial Discourse in Lesia Ukrainka's Dramas

Vira Ageyeva

National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy,  
Department of Literature



It is quite obvious today that without Lesia Ukrainka's texts the formation of our national identity throughout the entire 20th century would have happened in a much slower and more difficult manner, because it was she who fully articulated the results of the titanic work of her generation, that had reoriented the national model from a rural one to a program of building a national state and a modern culture. This generation engaged in concrete practical activity, included Lesia Ukrainka's close friends and future leaders of the Ukrainian National Republic, who assumed the political leadership of the revolution.

The equation of peasantry/people/nation at the end of the 19th century was already becoming an archaic notion, modern principles were being established, and a transition from Ukrainophilism to Ukrainian identity was taking place. Oksana Zabuzhko interprets Lesia Ukrainka's statement "we are simply called Ukrainians, because we are that" (zveмос prosto ukraintsi, bo my takymy yesmo) in the following way: "Cossack descendants modernized the 'Cossack nation.'"<sup>1</sup> Reading Ukrainian dramas in the context of anti-imperial struggles reveals historiosophic depths unattainable without the tools of postcolonial criticism.

Attitudes toward the past are always determined by the needs of the present. Lesia Ukrainka emphasized the productivity, and even more so, the ultimate need for a break, a crisis, a renunciation of romantic Ukrainophile rhetoric. She herself paid tribute to that rhetoric, lamenting Ukraine as a "disadvantaged mother" (bezdolnaia matir), but only in her early poetry. Later, she would strongly distance herself from the legacy of her unesteemed fathers.

The most eloquent symbol of such a renunciation and rupture is the God-fighting gesture of Tirzah in the drama *On the Ruins*. Amid the groaning and moaning in a camp near the ruins of Jerusalem, also heard is "a faint strumming of strings and a timid voice." The prophetess sees a small, "shoddily put together" harp with its several rusty strings. And the musician himself cannot remember the famous songs once heard. The proposal to "not even remember (them)! Invent your own!" – causes unworldly fear. After all, the harp "has not a sliver of unholiness," Jeremiah had played on it, having taken it "from the house of David."

Jeremiah, leaving a Jerusalem under an iron yoke, threw down the musical instrument and smashed it against a ruined altar, thus marking the scale of the

---

1 Oksana Zabuzhko, *Notre Dame D'Ukraine: Ukrainka v konflikti mifolohii* [Notre Dame D'Ukraine: Ukrainka in a Conflict of Mythologies] (Kyiv: Komora, 2014), 388.

historical catastrophe and point of no return. After such a rupture, it was no longer possible to continue on the same straight path in that epoch. This was a moment of breakdown and transition. Instead, the weakened in captivity singer somehow finds in the ashes everything that “that was left.” He somehow straightens the curled, rusty strings, glues together the harp’s fragments, now having to rejoice in its weak and squeaky sound. As the song had reopened her wounds and reminded her of the shame and despair she had experienced, Tirzah immediately snatches the harp and throws it into the Jordan, there being no way to retrieve the instrument from the river. Although the girl is exposed to curses and terrifying threats, she herself considers her act as a liberating one, because the sound of the rusty strings has lost its “soul.” The singer does not create anything new, but only repeats what he had heard before. Loyalty to tradition turns into a death for art, “the holy ruin serving our shame.”

“Dead hands,” “bad lips,” a helpless moan – these characteristics of captivity are repeated in variation in many of Lesia Ukrainka’s texts. The prophetess Tirzah, walking through a camp of prisoners, wakes everyone to arise and work. Swords incapable of offering protection from the enemy should be forged into plows. It is necessary to weave and clothe children, build at least some shelter, and keep the hearth going on cold nights.

For the enemy will come and plow the land,  
sow the grain, and reap the harvest,  
and the bread shall feed the people,  
and will again conquer Palestine,  
now with no sword, with a glistening plow.

Thus “idlers have no native land. / Who has bread and labors – has the land.”

Collisions of strength/weakness, subordination/resistance become the subject of careful reflection in several works. Military defeat does not have to offer a verdict of spiritual and cultural decline. One’s own land should not lie fallow, it needs cultivation (the word “culture” is cognate with the meanings of “cultivate,” “cultivate the soil”). Such work in one’s own field becomes the only possible act of resistance to enemies. Accordingly, the cultivation of someone else’s field is recognized as collaboration. In this last point, Lesia Ukrainka is absolutely unyielding, and does not allow for any compromise. Moreover, the repayment of former debts is demanded.

The poem “And You Once Fought Like Israel,” which connects a biblical plot with national history, was written in 1904, as was *On the Ruins*. Ukraine had to constantly resist its enemies, “God himself has set / against you an inexorable force of blind fate.” It would not be until Bohdan Khmelnytskyi would overcome the forces of evil and win freedom for his land. However, the spirit would soon be betrayed again – and “once again there would be darkness, and terror, and strife,” “and Egyptian captivity would come again.” The wicked victor would use the “precious stones of Ukraine” as her jewelry and perform a crazed dance on a field of ashes. Questions with no answers remain:

And how long will the homeland be Egypt?  
When will the new Babylon perish?

The conquered will face double humiliation and insults, as they are forced to toil for the glorification of alien gods. This duality of oppression, the difference between those who endure suffering in their homeland and in captivity, is discussed in the dialogue "In the House of Work, in the Land of Captivity," that represents another of the many variations of the motifs of captivity and conquest. An Egyptian slave and a Jewish slave, both toiling in the vicinity of Memphis on the construction of the pyramids, cannot understand each other. The former knows that he is building a house for his gods. Although he would have done something differently of his own will, the work only strengthens his own faith: "The gods also need to have a home," "This is the house of Ra, the home of Osiris." The Jew, on the other hand, sees no sense in the meaning of the hard labor. And after hearing the names of foreign "idols" unknown to him, feels even more humiliated.

In two dramas, *The Noblewoman* and *The Orgy*, the same important motif unfolds in two variations. Lesia Ukrainka often "retold," explicated, or even paradoxically turned upside down her themes in similar, both in spirit, and problematic, works (Oksana Zabuzhko terms them "clusters"); thus *The Forest Song*, "Izolda Biloruka," and "Vila, the Sister" are thematically close to one another, as are *The Babylonian Captivity* and *On the Ruins*. *Boiarynia* acknowledges the final collapse of any hopes of preserving national and cultural identity in a political alliance with imperial Russia. (Naturally, in Soviet publications, even those that were termed "academic," such as the *Complete Works* published in the 1970s, censorship invariably forbade *Boiarynia*.) All passages related to a discussion of the national question and cultural resistance to the empire were excluded from Lesia Ukrainka's correspondence with the same scrutiny. The plot of the drama unfolds at, so to say, the point of no return, at the moment of bitter insight. It is not for naught that the characters of the drama in their pointed and uncompromising disputes go back two decades in history, to the day of the signing of the Pereiaslav Agreement, which defined Ukrainian-Russian relations for several centuries. Whether it was a political mistake of the "inebriated Bohdan" or the only correct decision of the wise hetman in a completely hopeless situation, one way or another everything resulted in innumerable national defeats and traumas. Lesia Ukrainka was more interested in cultural than in political history. She shared Volodymyr Antonovych's opinion that no revolution could change the situation without the accompaniment of intense and enduring cultural work.

In the drama *Boiarynia* there is constant stress on the cultural antagonisms of violently "twinned" peoples, this distinction consistently marked as a confrontation between a freedom-loving European community and Asian despotism (in her drama *Ivan Mazepa*, Liudmyla Starytska-Cherniakhivska also contrasts the Ukrainian hetman of the play and his entourage as a knightly community united by tradition and inviolable vows to the Russian tsar – an autocratic tyrant. In the play, the writer introduces a

supposition of Mazepa's suicide: he drinks a poison, uttering "For the destruction of Peter's yoke!" As we can see, the European orientations of the generation of the turn of century are manifested on many levels, determining almost the entire development of the artistic process of the time. The notion of a "psychological Europe," enthusiastically accepted by the Kyivan neoclassics and Mykola Khvylovyi in the 1920s, was already developing and establishing itself at the beginning of the century).

Readers of *Boiarynia* find themselves in a time when all continuities and traditions were beginning to lose hold, when the capillary network of Ukrainian culture was collapsing. Once in Moscow, the Ukrainian Oksana feels abandoned in a completely foreign, hostile territory. For a time, the newlyweds believe that their sincere love will overcome all odds, that they will set up a reminder of Ukraine, even "in Moscow." However, reality is quick to destroy their illusions. The mantra of "one faith" and a common destiny is merely an ideological cliché. A political agreement cannot bridge a civilizational gap. Oksana finds herself in an environment where a very different system of values is present. First of all, the myth of a common faith is dispelled. Although the churches in Moscow are Orthodox, Oksana is struck by the lack of sincere piety present there. Parishioners in the church gossip and are judgmental in a non-Christian way. The heroine of the drama has many reasons to comment on the differences between Russian and Ukrainian Orthodoxy:

And then... I'll go to church – God forgive me!  
I won't recognize the service there:  
They do things, who knows in what way...

According to a contemporary researcher, "relations with the Muscovites were very difficult due to the isolation of Moscovite Orthodoxy. In fact, the Moscovite church did not recognize the Orthodox population of the Polish Commonwealth as truly Orthodox. It accorded Ukrainian Orthodoxy a place alongside Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Uniates, demanding that those Ukrainian Orthodox who wanted to be admitted to the Moscow Orthodox Church, be rebaptized... Moscovite Orthodoxy was convinced that it alone was the only true faith in all of its breadth, in a unified Orthodox, that is, truly Christian, world. Church leaders emphasized the importance of simplicity as the main way to please God, and therefore categorically rejected Ukrainian influences, the use of Latin, and the 'study of philosophy.'"<sup>2</sup> In the Moscovite church, a Ukrainian parishioner felt like a stranger, an other.

In the same way, Oksana does not want to and cannot accept the humiliating situation of her beloved husband. Stepan, a descendant of the Ukrainian Cossack

---

2 Zenon Kohut, "Pytannia rossiisko-ukrainskoi yednosti ta ukrainskoi okremishnosti v ukrainskii dumtsi i kulturi ranniomodernoho chasu [Issues of Russian and Ukrainian Unity and Ukrainian Individuality in the Ukrainian Thought of the Early Modern Age]," in *Korinnia identychnosti. Studii z ranniomodernoi ta modernoi istorii Ukrainy* by Zenon Kohut (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2004), 153–54.

nobility (Oksana too is a daughter of a “significant Cossack nobleman”), in the white-stone capital finds himself in the status of a slave, a royal clown. He is forced to tell his wife about his humiliation:

You double over  
in disgust when some old man  
touches your lips, and when I have to  
call myself “serf Stopka”  
and kiss his hands like a slave,  
that’s okay?

The tsar does not shy away from the exotic:

He sometimes likes  
To listen to “*Cherkas*” songs, and jokes,  
and all sorts of tales, not without  
having you dance the *tropak*.

Such is the role of a humble and dependent “lackey” (interestingly, the tradition proved to be enduring. Stalin also liked to listen to Ukrainian songs and forced Nikita Khrushchev to dance the *hopak* at Kremlin receptions).

The enslaved status of women is specially emphasized, in fact, their treatment is the most decisive factor for the characterization of Russia as Asian despotism. Learning that, according to local custom, her face should be covered, Oksana indignantly asks: “Are we Turks?” The clothing, way of life, relationships – everything reminds her of “infidel” traditions. In the arrangement of the house, which always represents certain symbolic cultural models, the subordination of the second sex is also consistently marked. The woman is placed in the home so as to make it as difficult as possible for her to go outside. The daughter-in-law, sympathizing with her sick mother-in-law, who already finds it difficult to climb a staircase to the *terem* (attic), advises her to move her bed to the ground floor, but this is strictly forbidden. A woman cannot live on the ground floor (*na doli*), nor should she engage in conversation with guests. Thus, when strangers approach, it is necessary to “run away as from the Tatars.”

It is even more strictly forbidden to be in the public space of the city. Stepan’s sister was betrothed in absentia to a tsar’s rifleman, and cannot see him anywhere before the wedding. She cannot even “sit alone in the garden.” But the girl only dreams of at least getting a glimpse of the groom, with whom she has never spoken a word. Again, the very arrangement of the house guarantees the inviolability of patriarchal prohibition: “I am in the attic, and he is there in the room.” When Oksana recalls how she went out to talk to her beloved every night, Anna is horrified and asks if her mother cursed her for such a crime.

The greatest humiliation for the new Muscovite noblewoman is the duty to entertain guests, which she considers to constitute sexual violence. It is then that Oksana, “horrified,” finally realizes the hopelessness of her situation: “This is a sort of infidel slavery.”

Homi Bhabha emphasizes the need for a deconstructive analysis of the language of colonized nations and the language of subjugated women:

The postcolonial perspective forces us to rethink the profound limitations of a consensual and collusive “liberal” sense of cultural community. It insists that cultural and political identity are constructed through a process of alterity. Questions of race and cultural difference overlay issues of sexuality and gender and overdetermine the social alliances of class and democratic socialism. The time for “assimilating” minorities to holistic and organic notions of cultural value has dramatically passed. The very language of cultural community needs to be rethought from a postcolonial perspective, in a move similar to the profound shift in the language of sexuality, the self and cultural community, effected by feminists in the 1970s and the gay community in the 1980s.<sup>3</sup>

The similarity of language and discourse of the subordinated sex and the subjugated nation is specially emphasized by Lesia Ukrainka in *Boiarynia*. The husband’s mother and sister come to beg Oksana to receive a guest – the deacon, who has the privilege of kissing her on the lips. The young woman does not agree to tolerate this sexual abuse. We have a completely transparent gender inversion of language parties and behavioral roles. It is the boyar Stepan who embodies supposedly feminine traits and experiences – humility, fear, and subordination. He has already internalized the language of “serf Stopka,” an unprotected and voiceless servant of the tsar. The disgusting kiss does not seem to Stepan something extraordinary and shameful: “It’s as things are, there’s nothing wrong with it – / it’s just a custom.” This is the norm of a foreign cultural community, and a Ukrainian in Muscovite service is ready to recognize and legitimize it. Accepting the custom, the Ukrainian nobleman adopts the entire code of imperial society. Yielding the dignity of his wife, he at the same time yields the dignity of his nation. Oksana has not come to adopt such “customs” or moral hierarchies. In this conversation with her husband, she embodies chivalrous pride, intransigence, and a condescending contempt for her culturally inferior oppressors. All this is usually expected from the “stronger sex.” Stepan, his mother, and his sister speak the same phrases, while Oksana “cuts with words” and does not want to learn the language of subordination. The Ukrainian noblewoman is unable to adapt to the customs of the

---

3 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 174.

colonizers. Her strength only more clearly highlights Stepan's weakness and "lack of manhood."

The female voice in cultural dialogue, both in *Boiarynia* and in many other Ukrainka dramas, is more authoritative, stronger, and powerful than the male voice. Marrying her intended, the girl was happy that he, unlike the armed Cossacks, had unbloodied hands. Ukraine is torn apart by a fratricidal war: "If only you knew how that blood weighs on me!" Stepan is contrasted with Oksana's brother Ivan as to their different views on what choice would be best in the catastrophe of national defeat. A sharp dispute between them breaks out at their first meeting. In response to accusations of cowardice and adaptation, the Moscow guest formulates his cultural program, an ideal of spiritual, not armed service, because the word must have more power than "a musket and sword." Ivan right away "proudly" identifies the grounds for his beliefs: "It is in Kyiv that monks teach such things!" A representative of the intellectual elite, a graduate of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Stepan is one of those who goes "to Moscow" (*na Moskvu*), believing in the success of his mission of enlightenment more than remaining in a Ukraine that has fallen into a foreign yoke, considering it possible to combine Ukrainian and imperial loyalties. The Pereiaslav Agreement united two states with very different levels of development. From the beginning of the 18th century, Kyiv hierarchs were developing a plan for the incubation of culture and education in the vast neighboring lands of the same faith. Legions of high church officials went to Moscow to carry out this mission. Culture and religion were then considered almost synonymous. Kyiv, the City of God, was to carry the light, to affirm true Christianity. A common faith fundamentally meant brotherhood and mutual support.

The failure of this project becomes a personal catastrophe for Stepan. His wife blames the both of them: fearing bloodshed and violence, but not thinking about the price of peace. What seems peaceful to her husband, Oksana perceives as a hopeless defeat and collapse:

Are things calm? Our will is broken,  
Ukraine has fallen at Moscow's feet,  
The resulting ruin – is that peace for you?

Hands, clean of blood, are covered with rust instead. This rust becomes a symbol for national betrayal, because the fear of bloodshed has turned into passivity, weakness, and ideological disorientation. Stepan does little in his voluntary exile, except to entertain the tsar with Ukrainian songs. Oksana, it seems, reprimands her boyar, not even for his reluctance to take up arms. The prophetess Tirzah called for the reforging of swords that could not defend the native land, into plows for plowing and sowing, because "who has the bread and labor, has the land." "Pen and word," on which Stepan stakes so much, should better serve for change in Ukraine, not in Moscow. The only salvation is to "flee this captivity." Oksana characterizes the middling path of



compromise with the words “neither for oneself nor for the people.” Compromise implies total helplessness, the loss of oneself. Rust covers the souls and hands of those who have renounced both struggle and toil, falling asleep in vain expectation that everything will somehow get better by itself. Even love turns into mutual pity. The dream of a private paradise, a Ukrainian retreat abroad, is unfounded.

The depressing finale of *Boiarynia* summarizes the tragic result of Ukraine’s hopes for an alliance with neighboring fellow believers. The tragedy must become a historical lesson, to finally shed naive illusions. Work in an alien field does not enrich the native land and does not add dignity or honor. Oksana is aware of the “invisible shackles” worn by her beloved. Her stoic decision is “having to die,” because that is the only way to regain lost dignity. Oksana asks Stepan to help the wounded, those who will repair their weapons after the defeat. The German doctor diagnoses her illness as nostalgia. But she does not want to return to her homeland because she is exhausted under the weight of tragic guilt for her wrong choice.

The issues of resistance and collaboration determine the unfolding of many acute collisions in the drama *The Orgy*. It is really surprising that it remained in the Soviet canon, quoting Lesia Ukrainka, “only due to the lack of education” of the censors. The direct impetus for writing the drama has been debated. Volodymyr Vynnychenko, a fashionable and recognized author in the northern capital, once took offense at the lack of attention from his compatriots and threatened to completely switch over to Russian literature. In a letter to Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi he complained that he would not heed the reproaches of hypocritical Ukrainian criticism, and thus saw the only solution for himself to be a change of language and identity (the writer did not fulfill his promise. Moreover, in the novel *Khochu!* (I Desire!), Vynnychenko told the story of the conversion of a Russified “maloros” (“Little Russian”) to Ukrainian identity, thus confirming that a change of language and identity for him would be unbearably traumatic and painful, especially concerning a transition to the camp of the oppressor.) Lesia Ukrainka admired his flamboyant debut, and wrote a very favorable article – thus indicating that she was even more upset, obviously, by the duplicity of someone who, as Anteus bitterly says in *The Orgy*, “In talent... he far surpassed the others.”<sup>4</sup>

In *The Orgy*, the status of a subordinate artist, a representative of a colonized culture, is clearly defined as slavish and hopelessly humiliating. The Greek singer, who arrives to serve the Roman Maecenas, no longer obeys his muse and Apollo, but his master. In the drama *The Babylonian Captivity*, the community in the end justifies the singer Eleazar because he entertains the invaders – the Babylonians, with song, earning his daily bread, but does not sing “songs of the Babylonian glory and might,”<sup>5</sup> that is, in modern terms, does not work as a “political technologist” expecting dividends from

---

4 Hereinafter the English translation of excerpts from the dramas *The Orgy* and *Cassandra* are cited from: Lesya Ukrainka, *Selected Works*, translated by Vera Rich (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968).

5 The excerpt from the drama *The Babylonian Captivity* translated into English by Sophia Volska is cited from: *Five Russian Plays with One from the Ukrainian*, edited by Carl Eric Bechhofer (New York: K. P. Dutton & Company, 1916).

the oppressor. In *The Orgy*, the motif of glory varies repeatedly. When glory can be obtained only from the hands of enemies, it is better to be satisfied with “home laurels” (this representing a direct answer to Vynnychenko; Lesia Ukrainka wrote in private letters that she would never threaten anyone with a transition, because a transition would carry too heavy a price for herself.) The Corinthian singer Anteus is proud of his imperial recognition, stating that “Rome went to school in Greece”:

Who, then, stepped  
Upon us, as upon a bridge to reach  
The temple of the universal glory  
Whom did we, from barbarity's abyss  
Bear to the height? Did we not lay ourselves  
As cornerstone for our conqueror's mausoleum...

The creativity of the defeated Hellenes “Brings glory not to Hellas nor to you. / But to rich Rome that gathered all the treasures / From all lands, by the hands of Maecenas.”

The lexeme *katsapy* was thoroughly expunged from Lesia Ukrainka's letters, at that, her contemptuous and disdainful attitude towards Ukraine's thieving neighbor was not a slip or a “mistake” (as Soviet editors vaguely tried to convince us), but an unchanging position. She knew that Russia's claims to the role of the “elder brother” in the Slavic family were completely unfounded, and as she puts it bluntly: “It is time to get to the point where “fraternal peoples” are just neighbors, connected, of course, by one yoke, but at the core of the matter do not have identical interests and therefore it is better for them to live side by side, but each on their own, without interfering with neighboring ‘internal politics.’”<sup>6</sup>

Being thoroughly familiar with European literature, and knowing the texts first hand, Lesia Ukrainka easily got rid of a poisonous respect for the uniqueness of the “Russian genius,” with which generations of Ukrainians were fed. The role of intellectuals, poets, and singers is even the more important because in the cultural phase of the formation of a modern nation, literature always plays a key role. Writers do the most to create the messianic mythology that unites a community. The gods of war betray, temples are destroyed, but – “Out of all the gods / Only Apollo has not ceased to love / Hellas.” His comrades, students, and wife try to convince Anteus that creativity and artistic recognition are irrelevant for patriotism, it does not matter from whose hands laurel wreaths are received. Otherwise, Hellas will remain completely deprived of glory.

In your opinion, it would be the best  
If all our works of arts were lost in corners,  
If artists lost their skill and power through hunger...

---

6 Lesia Ukrianka, *Lysty. 1903–1913* [*Letters. 1903–1913*] (Kyiv: Komora, 2018), 44.

Unfortunately, there is much truth in such reproaches. And this is also a consequence of colonial status: “In Hellas, now, he, only he is famous / who is praised by Rome.” For Anteus, it is equally shameful to sell himself either for money or for fame, he prefers to live without bread and popularity, but not without honor.

However, the issue does not concern only honor and dignity, but also the ultimate need for creative freedom for full-fledged artistic expression. The history of art offers a multiplicity of answers to this difficult question. For example, conflicts between the Vatican and artists of the Italian Renaissance were sometimes resolved very dramatically. At the same time, even commissioned odes and eulogies could become masterpieces. But when the patron is a representative of the metropolis, his desires will inevitably contradict the intentions of those who want to assert the values of their own community. It seems that literature cannot be independent of the national and cultural identity of the writer. Winners and losers have different traditions, differing historical memory – and they will never be able to come to a common understanding, or rather fully agree, in their assessments of the past. Some wrongs can be forgiven, but you can't start insulting those glorified until recently. Anteus reminds us of historical responsibility, self-sacrifice, and the impossibility of escaping the past:

So, Phaeton, since Hellas herself has no  
Glory, Hellenes are obliged to bury  
Deep in their hearts their yearning after glory.

The history of 19th century Ukrainian literature can serve as commentary to claims like those of Vynnychenko, and as a response to a desire to earn laurels in Moscow or St. Petersburg. It was then that it suffered incalculable losses related to the status of a colonized community. The problem does not only lie in bans and censorship. The nation does not live a full-fledged life, it loses its aristocratic, educated class. And it is forced to embrace a writing only for domestic use, because protective hermeticism is seen (or at least seems) as a guarantee of endurance, as a salvation from assimilation. In addition, the empire becomes a mediator between the colony and the outside world, as much as possible hiding everything created by the “younger brother.”

Through the example of Anteus's wife, Nerissa, we can see the boundaries within which colonized culture functions. Subordinates are always feminized, even men are represented as weak, degraded, and feminine (such a stereotype, for example, existed in British texts about India and Hindus). The author of *The Orgy* demonstrates this feminine subordination, imposed on Ukraine/Little Russia through the metaphor of patriarchal marriage. It should be remembered that the institution of marriage in several of Lesia Ukrainka's works, such as “The Portrait of a Woman,” is interpreted as subjugation and inequality. Maecenas would like the most prominent Corinthian singer to come sing a wedding epithalamium in his house: “... Imagine in this house takes place / The nuptial feast of Hellas and of Rome.” Hellas woman is personified by the same Nerissa.

She has an artistic gift that she does not want to waste. Raised in a family of slaves, the young woman, even after being redeemed by Anteus, longs for her former state of sweet bondage. She could not recognize humiliation for what it was as a child, and the caresses of men who were fascinated by her dancing did not seem degrading to her. After all, she never knew any other attitude toward herself, dignity and self-sufficiency not having instilled in her a sense of dignity and self-sufficiency. A captive, who enjoys her slave harem status, thus becomes a symbol for Little Russia. The connotations of sexual and political violence are especially pronounced in the final episodes of the drama. Anteus forbids his wife to go to a Roman orgy and himself is forced to accept Maecenas's invitation in order to protect Nerissa from temptation. But she spontaneously appears at the feast. And then the essence of the marriage of conquered Greece with Rome is demonstrated in all of its brutality. The woman is forced to change her Greek custom to Roman custom and show her face. She dances in defiance of her husband's disapproval, and the enthusiastic Maecenas immediately wants to buy her affection, despite the presence of Anteus: "He takes from the box a diamond necklace, and holds it high with both hands, enticing Nerissa to him." Leering remarks of the Procurator and the Prefect follow: "The pretty little thing!" "This muse most certainly won't die of hunger." The dancer is not offended or halted by this, she herself tries to seduce the wealthy noble: "Nerissa approaches Maecenas and kneels before him on one knee, leaning back as if ready to collapse with weariness, but a delightful and coquettish smile plays on her lips. The procurator rushes to support her, but Maecenas forestalls him, putting the necklace on her neck and supporting her in the same movement." The grateful woman tries to kiss the hand that bestowed her with a gift, but Maecenas kisses her on the lips instead, while the Prefect moves up a little on the couch and offers her to lie down beside him: "Come here, Bacchante, rest beside the tiger!" And Nerissa goes to him. The limits set by the vanquished are evident here: their art exists only to entertain the victors, who also put it on a pedestal, and the graces of the masters can be earned only at the cost of losing one's dignity, voluntarily recognizing the victors' right to judge and evaluate.

Agnieszka Matusiak describes Nerissa as an image of "Ukraine as a colonial dancer":

Thus Nerissa in dance is a "live" metaphor for the relationship between colonized / subordinate / Ukraine and the colonizer / dominant / Russian empire (which is represented in the drama by Maecenas). A dance that demonstrates sexually emancipated corporeality correlates with an eroticization of culture and nation: the body of Nerissa equates to the body of colonized Ukraine. The writer – in the vein of Michel Foucault's views – realizes that gender and the subordinate body as sources of

meaning are purely political tools, key spaces for the exercise of power.<sup>7</sup>

The “colonial dancer” appears as a grateful, servile, humble representative of art, which does not appeal to the intellect, but only brings sensual pleasure (it should be added that year after year we saw folk ensembles, folk choirs, girls in *plakhty* and corsets on Soviet stages. It was impossible to aspire to anything more modern. By the same logic, the Ems Ukaz of 1876 forbade translations from foreign languages into Ukrainian: in order to access the high culture of other nations, one must speak the imperial, as the ideologues of the Soviet era put it, “language of inter-ethnic communication.” As for feminized colonial culture, its demands and limits are to be determined by a male authority, a representative of the “center”).

Thus, armed conquest and political enslavement mean, among other things, sexual violence. The tragic finale of *The Orgy* leaves little room for cathartic cleansing. Anteus does not want to live in disgrace, he kills Nerissa by striking her with a heavy lyre, and strangles himself with a string, addressing the audience with the message: “Friends, I’m showing you a good example.” More frightening is the fact that a musical instrument becomes an implement of murder, reminding us of the sinfulness of the kind of art that kills the human spirit. Questions of the limits and price of conformism, of the readiness for assimilation, and thus of the guilt of Nerissa and the other Greeks present at the Roman orgy, cannot be avoided here. Triumphal wreaths received from the hands of enemies do not bring acclaim or glory, they more often kill. The modest laurel leaves back home with which his sister adorns Anteus’s head are incomparably dearer, inspiration, not being dependent on the height of a pedestal. Shame and creativity cannot be combined. Anteus’s “good example” is a lesson in dignity, honor, and self-respect, without which a gift from God cannot be realized.

The lyre, which Maecenas offers Anteus to play, becomes a symbol for the presence of imperial culture, meaning the painful conflict between imperial and actual national identity and the loss of the culture of the metropolis. Maecenas buys artists and art treasures everywhere. As for the purchased lyre:

Its horns from bison the German forests,  
The Africa elephant gave ivory,  
For inlay and Arabia’s sent gold,  
The wood from the mysterious Indian jungle,  
And the mosaic from the land of Sinai,  
The strings, the finest in the world – Italian,  
And mounted in bright silver brought from Britain.

---

7 Agnieszka Matusiak, “Ukraina yak kolonialna tantsivnytsia (‘Orhiiia’ Lesi Ukrainky) [Ukraine as a Colonial Dancer (Lesia Ukrainka’s ‘Orgy’)],” in Lesia Ukrainka, *Dramy ta interpretatsii*, ed. Vira Aheieva (Kyiv: Knyha, 2011), 882.

Anteus sadly remarks: "Only it seems there's nothing Greek in it." But there is little Roman in it as well. When a culturally higher nation is conquered, as happened in Russia's relations with Ukraine or Poland, this has a powerful influence on the less developed neighbor. The Russians were aware of the Ukrainian "loans" and used their educators from Kyiv willingly. But they also complained, for example, about Hohol, who allegedly prevented Russian literature from following the path paved by Pushkin. So, in order for a "Roman" song to sound at an orgy, it can't be realized without the help of Arabia, India, and the British... The exhaustion of the art of the "donors" in such situations is also inevitable (echoes of these conflicts and disputes can be heard even in the current problems with the definition of Russian identity. The forced distinction between "Russians" (*russkie*) as an ethnic group and "Russians" (*rossiane*) as citizens of an entire state, the threat of turning Moscow into a metropolis with a huge percentage of Muslims – these are all symptoms of a dangerous imperial disease. It does not promote national art as a way of self-expression and self-identification). The "gift to the entire world" (moreover, bought or stolen) remains something that has not been assimilated by and not specific to the culture of the conquerors.

Anteus is depressed that there is nothing Hellenic in the "world" lyre. All of the victories and achievements of the defeated are disgraced, the winners anew telling stories about the past. After all, even ancient philosophers knew that those who tell stories hold power in their hands. Adapting to the masters of the situation requires the renunciation of one's own cultural memory, moreover, stimuli to forget are continually facilitated.

In the finale of *Cassandra*, yet another drama about conquest and ruin, the reader finds out that a change of identity and serving the enemy are possible for those who can quickly forget yesterday's insults, injuries and losses. The prophetess Cassandra is disliked because, as it seems to her compatriots, she "poisons with memory." Instead, her sister Polyxena wants to be happy, erasing memory about the fact that her husband killed the elder brother of the Trojan princesses. Clytemnestra does not remember her sacrificed daughter Iphigenia, Andromache easily forgets the Trojan Hector and becomes the wife of his enemy.

In order to play the role of a slave and a clown well for the victorious tsar, one must forget one's own noble origin and the spiritual heritage received from one's parents. Lesia Ukrainka chooses stories about captivity, exile, subordination, and humility time and again, from the early *Iphigenia in Tauris* to the *The Orgy*, completed in the last year of her life. Their exotic entourages are not a hindrance, especially considering the textual integrity of the motifs present, to understanding that it is all about the Ukrainian struggle with the empire. For the formation of a modern nation and a modern Ukrainian nationalism, it became absolutely necessary to shed the Little Russian model of coexistence with the metropolis, and all of the compromises involved in double loyalties and dependencies.



**Vira Ageyeva** is a literary critic and professor at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. She is a recipient of the Taras Shevchenko National Prize. Professor Ageyeva is the author of the books *Oleksa Slisarenko* (1991), *Ukrainian Impressionist Prose* (1994), *A Poetess at the Turn of Centuries: Lesia Ukrainka's Writings in Postmodern Interpretation* (1999; 2000), *Female Space: The Feminist Discourse of Ukrainian Modernism* (2003; 2008), *The Poetics of Paradox: Viktor Petrov-Domontovych's Intellectual Prose* (2006), *The Apology of Modernism: An Outline of the Twentieth Century* (2011), *The Art of Balance: Maksym Rylsky Against the Background of His Age* (2012), *Roads and Crossroads* (2016), *Pattern on Stone. Mykola Bazhan: A Biography of a (Non)-Soviet Poet* (2018), *The Empire's Backstage: Essays on Ukrainian-Russian Cultural Relations* (2021).