

ANNA STANISŁAWSKA

*Orphan Girl*

A Transaction, or an Account of the Entire  
Life of an Orphan Girl by way of Plaintful  
Threnodies in the Year 1685

*The Aesop Episode*



*Verse translation, introduction, and commentary by*

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## Introduction

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### *The Other Voice*

Writing years after the terrible events that colored her life forever, Anna Stanisławska (1651–1701) meticulously reconstructed in an autobiographical epic poem the episode of her forced marriage to a deviant who terrorized and humiliated her at every turn. It is a poetic account that represents a remarkable tale of triumph in the face of overwhelming domestic oppression. The manner by which Stanisławska wrested back control over her life was an unprecedented feat for a woman in the time in which she lived, for not only did she escape the clutches of a feared magnate family but managed to secure a divorce and marry “for love” soon afterwards. The poem is an unparalleled and compelling work in terms of its exploration of a woman’s situation in marriage and the stark choices posed by a coerced life in the seventeenth century. Long unknown to Polish letters, Anna Stanisławska may be rightfully hailed as one of the most important “other” and certainly “forgotten” voices of the Baroque era, grappling as she did with the dark truths and eternal hopes that underpinned so many women’s lives.

### *Awaiting Discovery*

In 1890, during the course of research in the archives of the Imperial Public Library of St. Petersburg, the Polish Slavic scholar, Aleksander Brückner, discovered the late seventeenth-century manuscript of a lengthy poem with the equally lengthy and rather shocking title: *Transakcyja albo opisanie życia jednej sieroty przez żalosne treny od tejże samej pisane roku 1685* [A Transaction, or an Account of the Life of an Orphan Girl by way of Plaintful Threnodies Written in the Year 1685]. The poem ran for 254 pages; contained 654 stanzas, was divided into 77 threnodies of differing length, and was bookended by opening and closing poems to the reader. The work also had brief margin notes on the left hand side of the pages (in this book, the margin notes are to be found on the right-hand side of the poem), which were placed beside certain stanzas. More curiously still, like a petition to the Holy Family to bless the endeavor, the top left-hand corner of the title page featured the names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

Three years after the discovery of the manuscript, in what was the first article devoted to the poem, Brückner revealed that the author was Anna Stanisławska, surnamed Warszycka by her first marriage, Oleśnicka by her second, and Zbąska by her third, and judged the work to be a vivid account of a momentous life

## 2 Introduction

lived in momentous times.<sup>1</sup> Some years later, however, the scholar would be less effusive. Describing the work as a life in verse intermingled with never-ending complaints about the workings of Fortune, Brückner asserted that the manuscript boasted “terrible poetry” [*wiersze marne*], but stated, in turn, that it was one of the most fascinating works to come out of seventeenth-century Poland.<sup>2</sup> His pronouncement perhaps unintentionally set the tone for the adverse judgments that followed. What is more, by referring to the poet throughout his article as Anna Stanisławska, Brückner also established a tradition whereby she would henceforth be referred to most often by her maiden name.

Decades of difficult negotiations with St. Petersburg, which after the Russian Revolution became Leningrad, meant that *Orphan Girl* (as the full title of Stanisławska’s *Transaction* is abbreviated in this volume) would not be read by the *fin de siècle* generation of Young Poland, or indeed the generation of post-World War I writers. In 1934, the manuscript was brought from Leningrad to the National Library of Warsaw as part of a larger exchange of manuscripts, and this exchange coincided with the publication of the entire manuscript, as edited by Ida Kotowa, who had made recourse to facsimiles of the poem.<sup>3</sup> Kotowa also included in her introduction a letter dated May 5, 1699, from Stanisławska to Franciszek Bieniecki, which is preserved in the Museo Correr of Venice. Although the letter is mostly dictated, the poet did extend her salutations in her own handwriting, and so revealed beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Anna Stanisławska-Zbąska of both letter and poem were one and the same person.

A review of *Orphan Girl* by Renaissance scholar, Tadeusz Sinko, in the Kraków broadsheet *Czas* [Time]<sup>4</sup> drew for the first time the attention of a wide number of potential readers to this literary pearl. However, the fact that Kotowa’s edition had a small print-run, and that it was aimed principally at a narrow group of Polish literary scholars, meant that Stanisławska would remain a largely unknown figure in Poland. Having been relegated at the outset by Brückner to the status of third rate, the case was rarely made forcibly enough that *Orphan Girl* was deserving of a celebrated place in the Polish canon, which would inevitably have won for the poem the kind of readership that comes with being an anthologized work.

1. Aleksander Brückner, “Wiersze zbieranej drużyny: Pierwsza autorka polska i jej autobiografia wierszem,” *Biblioteka Warszawska* 4 (1893), 424–29. Translations of Polish titles are given in the Bibliography.

2. Brückner *Dzieje literatury polskiej w zarysie*, vol. 1 (Warsaw: Gebethner i Wolff, 1908), 366.

3. The edition of Ida Kotowa, with her introduction and notes: *Transakcja albo opisanie całego życia jednej sieroty przez żalosne treny od tejże samej pisane roku 1685* (Kraków: Polska Akademia Umiejętności, 1935). Kotowa discusses this manuscript exchange from Leningrad to Warsaw in the introduction, 18, for which see also Dariusz Rott, *Kobieta z przemalowanego portretu* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2004), 32–33.

4. Tadeusz Sinko, “Trzy małżeństwa jednej sieroty,” *Czas* 109 (1935): 5.

If prospects for the work's reception remained slight in the 1930s, World War II proved even more injurious to Stanisławska's legacy, as the precious manuscript was destroyed in the conflagration of the Warsaw Uprising. Happily, over the past two decades a growing number of academics have written of the power and value of *Orphan Girl* as a literary and historical work. That said, scholarship has its limitations when it comes to popularizing seventeenth-century poems, and Anna Stanisławska's unique contribution to the literary life of her homeland is still unknown to many.

### *The Historical Backdrop*

As we shall see in this brief historical overview, Anna Stanisławska and her contemporaries lived in exceptionally challenging times.<sup>5</sup> The long reign of Swedish-born Zygmunt III Waza from 1587 to 1632 saw the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth obtain dizzy heights in terms of its military and political reach. However, overconfident of his position, Zygmunt made injudicious claims on the throne of Sweden and attempted disastrous conquests of Moscow and Moldavia. Zygmunt's legacy would hinge on his foreign policy in respect of Sweden and Russia. He had been crowned king of Sweden in 1594, but the regency council distrusted his Catholic bias, insisting that he recognize Lutheranism as Sweden's state religion. It was also demanded of Zygmunt that his uncle hold the reins of power in his absence. In 1598, in an ill-considered move designed to wrest back control of Sweden, the Polish king staged a naval invasion, which soon descended into farce. Captured and dethroned, Zygmunt had to barter for his own life by denouncing his own Swedish supporters, who were subsequently executed.<sup>6</sup> The two countries would also clash over Poland-Lithuania's claim to Livonia, which was held by Sweden. This led to a protracted war with Sweden, which, with minor intervals, lasted until 1629.

Zygmunt was mistrusted amongst the Polish gentry for both his marital alliance with the Hapsburg family and for his attempts at political reform designed to weaken the power of the nobility. Matters came to a head in the middle of his reign, when in 1607, during a parliamentary session, nobleman Mikołaj Zebrzydowski accused the king of attempting to destroy the Polish constitution. Though Catholic, Zebrzydowski was supported by Protestant nobles who had not been appointed to high positions. Soon, righteous anger led to outright revolt, which was put down at Guzów on July 7, 1607. But although Zygmunt effectively

5. The best accounts of this era in English are Daniel Stone's *The Polish-Lithuanian State, 1386-1795* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 129-244, and Norman Davies' *God's Playground: A History of Poland, vol. 1: The Origins to 1795* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 327-53.

6. See Stone, *The Polish-Lithuanian State*, 140.

won the day and accepted the apologies of the insurrectionists, for the remainder of his reign he had to contend with a more oppositional Diet.

Concurrent with the Zebrzydowski revolt was the Dmitry episode, where influential Jesuits, filled with the zeal of the Counter-Reformational spirit, egged on Lithuanian magnates to accept the story spun by a shadowy émigré named Dmitry, whereby he claimed to be son and heir to Ivan I, who had died in 1584. Dmitry's undertaking to convert to Catholicism convinced his newfound supporters that with his help they could secure a strong foothold to the east, and that mass conversion would follow on the heels of conquest. After the death of Tsar Boris Godunov in 1605, Dmitry led an invasion of Russia, supported by highly trained regiments, and as he progressed towards Moscow he was joined by Cossacks and the famine-stricken peasantry. Having taken Moscow, he was crowned Tsar, but the presence of Polish and Lithuanian advisors soon soured relations with his people and he was overthrown in a popular uprising. A second Dmitry would emerge a number of years later, and this time he involved Sweden in his attempts to secure the Russian crown.<sup>7</sup> Zygmunt's own son, Władysław, was proposed as a compromise candidate, which would see the young man converting to Russian Orthodoxy and returning to Russia western lands which had been annexed in recent conquests. However, Zygmunt had no wish to countenance such an agreement, claiming both the crown for himself and voicing his intention to annex western Russia. In the face of such a declaration, together with competing Swedish claims, Russian nobles recaptured Moscow and killed the second Dmitry. With the Russians embroiled in a war with Sweden, Władysław, with the aid of Hetman (Commander) Jan Karol Chodkiewicz and an army of Cossacks, was able to retain his power-base in western Russia and uphold his claim to the Russian throne.<sup>8</sup> Though Livonia was the principal flashpoint between Poland and Sweden, it was the decision of the Swedish king, Gustavus Adolphus, in 1626, to attack Royal Prussia that exposed Poland's tentative control of its borders to the west and northwest. By 1629, Poland had lost most of its coastline to the Swedes, who also went on to seize control of a demilitarized and weakened Gdańsk. The scene for a national disaster was set.

On the death of Zygmunt in 1632, the throne was awarded unopposed to his son, Władysław, but the new king failed to address the internal threat from the emerging power of the Cossacks, who had spent decades defending the Commonwealth's southern border from the slave raids of the Tartars. Having also provided a disciplined militia for Polish noblemen annexing vast tracts of land in

7. This episode was recounted by Hetman Stanisław Żółkiewski (1547–1620) in his memoir *Początek i progres wojny moskiewskiej* (Warsaw: Gebethner i Wolff, 1920). Żółkiewski led Polish troops into Moscow following his victory over combined Swedish and Russian forces in the Battle of Klushino.

8. See Leszek Podhorecki, *Jan Karol Chodkiewicz, 1560–1621* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, 1982), 238–43.

the Ukraine, the Cossacks began to demand more than simply mercenary status. This discontent was compounded by the grievances of the Orthodox population, who resented their poor treatment at the hands of the prejudiced and arrogant Polish magnates. The failure to tackle these festering issues came home to roost under the reign of his stepbrother, Jan II Kazimierz Waza (1648–1668), when a Cossack uprising broke out, led by Bohdan Chmielnicki. Aided by mercenary Turks and Tartars, who relished the opportunity to rape and plunder, the Cossacks ran amok and carried out the reduction of the peasant and Jewish populations in the Polish Ukraine. Although the Cossack rebellion was eventually put down, the Polish state was so weakened that it was unable to fend off Swedish armies that swept through the country as far as Kraków in the years 1655 to 1656, pillaging and wreaking destruction as they went. A reversal in Poland's fortunes occurred at the monastery of Jasna Góra in Częstochowa, where a small number of monks and local gentry withstood a month-long siege by the Swedes. Their success was accredited to the divine intervention of Mary, the Mother of God, and this perceived miracle gave rise to an enduring veneration of the Black Madonna image held in the monastery's main chapel. The small Swedish force would end up beating a hasty retreat northward, but came under constant attack from armed peasant militias. However, this war of attrition would continue for four more years and leave the country utterly devastated, with more than half the population dead. As a result of plague and wholesale slaughter, the cities were almost emptied, and bourgeois culture almost disappeared.<sup>9</sup> What is more, the vast tracts of land left empty were appropriated by corrupt and increasingly dissolute magnates and nobles, many of whom had gone over to the Swedish army but had then deftly re-switched loyalties when the tide had turned. Looking to deflect culpability, Poland's nobles made scapegoats out of the members of the Arian church, who in 1657 were given the choice of either conversion to Catholicism or banishment. To add to their litany of outrages, the magnates found a way of paralyzing the political system by their appropriation of the *Liberum Veto*, which upheld the tradition of unanimity at central and local assemblies.<sup>10</sup> Such was the chaotic nature of rule in the country at the time that bemused foreign powers observing from without soon labelled the governance of Poland as "The Anarchy," a term encapsulating a

9. As Czesław Miłosz notes, "The depressed condition of urban areas remained a constant factor in determining the direction of Polish cultural history for the next two centuries. The date 1655–1656 marked the end of bourgeois literature." *The History of Polish Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 114.

10. As Norman Davies writes, "The Sejm, the dietines, and the Royal elections were all governed by the principle of unanimity. It seems incredible to the modern observer that such an ideal should have been taken seriously. But it was, and it formed the basis of all their proceedings. No proposal could become law, and no decision was binding, unless it received the full assent of all those persons who were competent to consider it. A single voice of dissent was equivalent to total rejection." *God's Playground*, 1:259.