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Womanhood and/as Monstrosity:
A Cultural and Individual Biography of the “Beast”
in Anna Czerwińska-Rydel’s
Bałtycka syrena [The Baltic Siren]

As scholars point out, we are witnessing the rise of the biographical fiction in the field of children’s and young adults’ literature in Poland (see, e.g., Olszewska 2015; Czabanowska-Wróbel and Wądolny-Tatar 2016). However, in the majority of such books – as they are to be perceived to be based on facts and not on fantasy – there is a little to no place for classical mythical creatures, which are nonetheless widely present in other genres (see, e.g., Marciniak, Olechowska, Kłos, and Kucharski 2013). Having said this, at least one exception from the rule can be found. This is *Bałtycka syrena. Historia Konstancji Czirenberg* [The Baltic Siren: The Story of Constantia Zierenberg], a novel by Anna Czerwińska-Rydel (2014a), nominated for Book of the Year by the Polish Section of IBBY, the analysis of which is the subject of this chapter.

Introductory Remarks

Czerwińska-Rydel (born 1973 in Gdańsk), a Polish children’s writer, specializes in creating fictionalized biographies of distinguished men and women. Her work includes not only the most famous figures, but also ones who are perhaps less renowned but possibly worth knowing (Pajączkowski 2015, 175–176). According to Elżbieta Kruszyńska, a scholar in the field of children’s literature and education, her works are lively narratives, in which the language is not infantilized, yet the message of a particular book is adapted to the audience’s age and knowledge (2015, 153). Each of her stories presents the biographical material in a different manner: every time, the author has a unique idea for showing the life of the protagonist against the cultural background of a given era, in terms of the form and the content of the book. On this basis, she creates a one-of-a-kind micro-narrative (Wądolny-Tatar 2016, 106). In the case of *The Baltic Siren*, this idea is to intersperse the novel with references to many texts of culture depicting the sirens and the mermaids. What is more, Olaf Pajączkowski, a co-editor of a

volume dedicated to children's biographical fiction, observes that Czerwińska-Rydel generally "[...] devotes a lot of space for introducing her characters' fears, dreams, plans for the future, and thoughts" (2015, 176),¹ thereby creating stories of a more reflective nature rather than simple chains of dates and historical events. This harmonizes with the author's own words regarding her approach to making biographical fiction: "If I want to write a story about someone who lived years ago, [...] I must make friends with this person or, at least, get acquainted with him or her" (Czerwińska-Rydel 2015b, 20).

Among the most renowned works by Czerwińska-Rydel, a prominent place is occupied by the "Gdańsk [Danzig] Trilogy" – a series of novels illustrated by Agata Dudek, a famous artist of the youngest generation.² The volumes of this trilogy concern Jan Heweliusz [Johannes Hevelius], Daniel Fahrenheit, and Arthur Schopenhauer, respectively (Czerwińska-Rydel 2011a, 2011b, 2012). These biographical stories share a common feature: all of them are about famous male figures. *The Baltic Siren* is the second part of another "Gdańsk" series. The first book in the trilogy to which *The Baltic Siren* belongs depicts Elżbieta Heweliusz [Elisabeth Hevelius] (Czerwińska-Rydel 2014b), while the last one refers to Johanna Schopenhauer (Czerwińska-Rydel 2015a). This shift is particularly interesting in the context of Polish female biographies for children in general. Monika Graban-Pomirska, a scholar interested in both literature for the younger audience and feminist criticism, points out that the model of a strong, independent, emancipated, and outstanding woman was long hidden in this kind of fiction, "pressed into a corset" of imagined calmness and "subordination by nature" (2015, 95). In contemporary children's and young adults' biographical prose, however, the situation seems to be different. This type of juvenile literature in Poland can be characterized by, *inter alia*, a departure from the didactic, moralistic aspect of biographies of women, the appreciation for their achievements in various areas of life, and the idea of rewriting history from the female perspective (99).

The Baltic Siren is obviously a part of this change, but the book also discusses the older mode of writing children's stories about women's lives. The novel is a fictionalized biography of Konstancja Czirenberg [Constantia Zierenberg], an exceptional artist born in 1605 in Gdańsk on the Baltic Sea. She was the daughter of Mayor Jan Czirenberg [Johannes Zierenberg], an avid lover of culture and art himself, who ensured that his child received a comprehensive education. Katarzyna Grochowska, a specialist in history of music, writes that "[t]he biographical references to Johannes Czirenberg almost always include information about his daughter [...], but these references, even when taken together, are rather uninformative" (2002, [n.p.]). The scholar finds more details in

¹ In every case, citations from Polish texts are given in our own working translation.

² For an analysis of Agata Dudek's illustrations accompanying the "Gdańsk Trilogy", see Wincencjusz-Patyna (2016, 109–112).

two seventeenth-century sources: a page-long dedication from the Milanese publisher Filippo Lomazzo to Konstancja, preceding a motet anthology *Flores praestantissimorum virorum a Philippo Lomatio Bibliopola delibati* (1626), and a travel diary by Charles Ogier, a member of a French legation himself (Grochowska 2002, [n.p.]). Grochowska writes of Lomazzo, who probably never met the woman:

He compares her to a range of Greek figures and goddesses [...], yet he seldom provides solid biographical facts. We learn from the dedication that Czirenberg was a nexus of all virtues [...], that she was gifted with a most learned hand [...], most skilful fingers [...] and with the throat of a nightingale [...]. (ibid.)

What is more, the publisher mentions that she “was also an accomplished organ player, and a proud owner of the organs installed in her house” (ibid.). Ogier, on the other hand, writes about Konstancja’s beautiful voice and dazzling appearance (ibid.). On the basis of his diary, Grochowska indicates that “[i]n addition to the excellent musical education which Czirenberg undoubtedly received, she was not a bad painter, and she was fluent in six languages: German, Polish, French, Italian, Swedish, and Latin” (ibid.). All of this caused Konstancja to be shrouded in an aura of secrecy, strangeness, and otherness, especially in her own lifetime, and therefore she came to be called the “Baltic Siren”.³ After the death of her husband Zygmunt [Sigmund] Kerschenstein, as well as two daughters out of three children, Konstancja stopped singing. She died of the plague in 1653 (Czerwińska-Rydel 2014a, 92).

In this paper, we would like to discuss two issues which appear to be particularly interesting in Czerwińska-Rydel’s book. First of all, the image of the siren, as a literary ploy to mythologize the heroine’s biography, will be presented, with a particular focus on the author’s strategy of intertextuality. Next, we will examine the elements of cultural narratives about so-called “human monsters” as a tool to tell a story about a woman as the Other. We find these issues to be of a great significance. This is because they seem to deal with some of the most important, and sometimes intertwined, themes of both contemporary children’s and young adults’ books and poststructuralist thought: the ideas of retelling or re-writing history and well-known stories from a female perspective, and of redefining the concept of “humanity” – ideas which are often discussed in the context of classical mythology (Moula 2012).

³ See Grochowska (2002): “Czirenberg must have possessed a truly extraordinary personality, since the Milanese publisher Lomazzo was not the only one to make a dedication to her. Indeed, Czirenberg’s foremost admirer, Charles Ogier, not only mentions her frequently in his diary, but also dedicated a poem to her entitled *Sireni Balthicae Constantiae Sirenbergiae*. J. J. Moeresius, also a poet, composed a series of poems in Constantia’s honor”. See also Czerwińska-Rydel (2014a, 92).

Mythologizing Konstancja's Biography: The Image of the Siren
and Czerwińska-Rydel's Strategy of Intertextuality

As we know, in Greek mythology the sirens were marine creatures, half woman and half bird. Leo Ruickbie, a scientist who specializes in the history of religion and magic, states that they were “[...] first mentioned in Homer’s *Odyssey*, [...] but undoubtedly based on an older oral tradition” (2016b, 184). According to Ovid (*Met.* 5.512–562; see Grimal 2008, 330), they were initially ordinary girls who were Persephone’s companions, but when Persephone was abducted by Pluto, Demeter gave the girls wings, so that they could search for her over the land and the sea. In other accounts and in Roman mythology, the siren was also depicted as a fish with the head of a woman, or as half woman and half fish, similar to the mermaids that appeared in the folklore of many regions of the world. What is more, the sirens and the mermaids were presented similarly in later medieval bestiaries. David Badke, a scholar who launched a database dedicated to animals in the Middle Ages, points out that:

Siren illustrations are varied, and can often be confused with the mermaid. Sirens are always female, and usually have wings. Some are depicted as having a fish body from the waist down; others have a bird body. Some illustrations show the uncertainty of whether sirens are part fish or part bird by giving them attributes of both [...]. (2011, [n.p.])

For example, the siren illustrated in the twelfth-century *Bestiaire* by an Anglo-Norman poet, Philippe de Thaon, “[...] has a fish tail and stands on bird’s feet” ([Badke] 2011). As Ruickbie writes, the “[c]iting of the creature [...] in works of natural history continued into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but the avian characteristics disappeared to be replaced by aquatic ones” (2016b, 186).

The specific trait of the sirens is their unparalleled musicality and, especially, their beautiful singing. Pseudo-Apollodorus (*Bibliotheca: Epitome* 7.18; see Grimal 2008, 330) presents an image of these creatures in which one of them is singing, the second one is playing a lyre, and the third one is playing a flute. According to the oldest myths, the sirens resided on one of the Mediterranean islands. They lured sailors with their music; when the sailors were engrossed by the sounds, they would allow their ships to sail too close to the coastline, so that they crashed on the shore, and the sirens would then devour their prey. Moreover, as Marina Warner puts it:

Some say they have “hungry”, even “starving” faces as they wait for their prey, but this may have passed from folklore about Harpies. They can no longer fly, however, because the Muses stole their pinions for their own crowns. But this must be a later legend, as on a famous Greek pot in the British Museum the sirens

appear plummeting and swimming around Odysseus' galley, like ospreys after fish [...]. (1994, 400)

The various mythological and literary references to the sirens constitute the material from which Czerwińska-Rydel weaves the biography of Konstancja Czi-
renberg. It should be stressed here that the Polish word *syrena* refers to two creatures: the siren and the mermaid. Thus, the Polish language does not differentiate between the winged creature from Greek mythology and, for instance, the protagonist of Hans Christian Andersen's well-known tale, *The Little Mermaid*. Also Czerwińska-Rydel's book in the materials of IBBY Poland is presented as *The Baltic Mermaid*. In the present chapter, the version *The Baltic Siren* was chosen, *inter alia*, because of its ancient connotations with music. However, this apparently problematic impossibility to make a linguistic distinction between the two fantastic creatures allowed the author in question to enrich her story with a greater literary context by referring to both the mythical half woman/half bird and the half woman/half fish. Czerwińska-Rydel purposefully plays upon the ambiguity of the Polish term *syrena* and builds her narrative from various literary allusions that suggest Konstancja's mysterious affiliation with the community of the sirens, the phenomenally beautiful creatures that were said to enchant strangers with their singing and to bring misfortune to those whom they love. These decisions created a mythologized biography that is full of intriguing implicit statements and associations, which intensifies the aura of otherness surrounding the main character, Konstancja, who has perhaps earned the title of the "Baltic Siren" not only because of her otherworldly voice and beauty, but also because of the events in her life.

As Graham Allen points out, "[...] intertextuality reminds us that all texts are potentially plural, reversible, open to the reader's own presuppositions, lacking in clear and defined boundaries, and always involved in the expression or repression of the dialogic 'voices' which exist within society" (2000, 209). Czerwińska-Rydel's literary strategy is based on constructing an intertextual narrative which has all of the above-mentioned features. The tale about the "Baltic Siren", both indirectly and directly, refers to numerous texts and becomes a text which is – as discussed by Roland Barthes in his classic concept – "[...] a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (1977, 146). At the same time, it should be emphasized that, in this case, the literary narrative is accompanied by the visual one, created by Marta Ignerska, an award-winning Polish artist and the illustrator of the two other books in this "female trilogy". The first part of *The Baltic Siren* comprises only illustrations – intriguing, ambiguous, and difficult in their reception – drawn in one of Konstancja's favourite colours, red.⁴ Anita Wincencjusz-Patyna, an expert in picture books

⁴ See Wincencjusz-Patyna (2016, 112–113): "Ignerska [...] has applied one colour only for each of the three stories: yellow for Elisabeth, red for Constantia, and bright pink

and illustrations, writes that “[...] the repeating motif of the visual compositions is a multiplication of forms: a school of fish, a tangle of people’s arms, girls’ legs in synchronized swimming, sea waves, sandcastles, bones, teardrops, and many other” (2016, 113). Each centrefold illustration includes a quotation.⁵ Some of these come directly from the literary part of the book, while others come from the texts of several other authors who have written about the sirens in their works. Each quote is taken out of its original context, and the context is probably unknown to the potential reader, for none of the quoted sentences is attributed to its author. Since the source of the quoted words and their meaning are unknown, the reader can possibly experience an aura of mystery, created by the pieces of the literary narrative and the equally mysterious images. It is also worth mentioning that, as Wincencjusz-Patyna indicates, “Ignerska puts a lot of modern accessories into these historic stories. [...] The simplified figure of Konstancja and her plain, rather modern, dress also make her story timeless. The young woman who lived in the 17th century sings to a microphone, and plays the electric guitar” (113–114). Basing on this intertextual mosaic, which additionally refers to different time periods, the reader may try to guess the progression, logic, and meaning of the story that he or she will be told in the strictly literary part. Therefore, the first part constitutes a prelude to the second part, in which the other features of the tale are revealed.

In the actual story of the birth, life, and death of this unusual “Baltic Siren”, the phrases quoted in the first part (accompanying the illustrations) reappear. Because these have already acted on the reader’s consciousness, they will guide his or her reading and interpretation of the text, and will suggest mythological tropes. New intertexts will also appear, as each chapter is accompanied by a quote from one of the numerous works addressing the sirens. Czerwińska-Rydel refers to various texts, such as Homer’s *Odyssey*, Pliny’s *Natural History*,

for Johanna. The three energetic colours, for which Ignerska has a strong predilection, judging from her other book graphic layout concepts, are spread on black and white backgrounds, or they create the background for the most primary graphic contrast of black and white. [...] This narrow choice of colours also indicates the time of the story: day or night, and accentuates the most important or symbolic events. For instance, Constantia’s mother’s labour, or even the gossip wheeling around the mysterious birth, are depicted by a plain red surface and a small speech bubble in the bottom right corner”.

⁵ See Wincencjusz-Patyna (2016, 114): “Ignerska has decided on a solution well known from a traditional approach to illustrations which accompanied novels, when a certain picture is underwritten by a line from the original text. It was often present in the 19th century editions and classical publications of fiction in the following decades of the next century as the illustrations used to be placed on inserts, in some cases far away from the depicted scene. As a result, in Ignerska’s designs we have a double page spread even more resembling a comic because the majority of the lines are placed in speech bubbles [...]”.

Christopher Columbus' writings, or Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*. However, what is important is that each quote does not appear until the end of a given chapter.

Such a ploy, firstly, gives the potential recipient the freedom to form their own interpretations; while reading a chapter, the reader, having the phrases and suggestions from the first part of the book in mind, is supposed to reconstruct the meaning of each element of the biography and decipher the identified allusions on his or her own. Secondly, the quotation closing a chapter constitutes what can be referred to as a particular intertextual flashback, and this may stimulate the reader to reflect upon their previous interpretation and, at the same time, still leaves an opportunity for him or her to develop personal associations and hypotheses. For example, a quotation from Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, "they had beautiful voices – more beautiful than any human being" (2016, 391), closes the chapter that describes the impression which young Konstancja's performance made on the regulars at the salons of Gdańsk. As Christine Wilkie-Stibbs puts it in her study "Intertextuality and the Child Reader":

[...] the theory of intertextuality is dynamic and dialogic, located in theories of writing, reader-response theory, the social production of meaning, and intersubjectivity (the "I" who is reading is a network of citations). It is also a theory of language because the reading subject, the text and the world are not only situated in language, they are also constructed by it. So, not only do we have a notion of all texts being intertextual, they become so because they are dialectically related to, and are themselves the products of, linguistic, cultural and literary codes and practices; and so too are readers, writers, illustrators and viewers. (2006, 170)

In a way, Czerwińska-Rydel creates a metafictional tale of intertextual relations between various texts of culture. In fact, every possible narrative is related to other narratives and, to a certain extent, influenced and conditioned by some other narratives. The literary biography of Konstancja Czirenbeg discussed here is not the only one that refers to variety of myths and tales, for rumours that had been circulating since Konstancja appeared to be an exceptionally talented girl were an intertextual narrative of this kind as well. Such a poststructuralist concept of global intertextuality seems to be of a particular importance with respect to texts written for children's audience. As Wilkie-Stibbs indicates:

The theory of intertextuality of children's literature is a rich field in which to engage young people's awareness of the importance of the activity of making intertextual links in the interpretive process. It brings them to a gradual understanding of how they are being (and have been) textually constructed in and by this intertextual playground. (177)

Thus, the author of *The Baltic Siren* proves that all stories, including stories of people's lives, change their meaning depending on the teller, listener/reader, and historical-cultural context of telling and listening/reading.

Significantly, in reference to Czerwińska-Rydel's tale of Konstancja Czirenborg's life, three different perspectives on intertextuality could be considered. Firstly, *The Baltic Siren* exists and functions in the endless network of stories. Secondly, *The Baltic Siren* itself is such a network. And, thirdly, every intertext functioning in *The Baltic Siren* refers to other intertexts. For example, as Warner points out, "Andersen elaborated his disturbing story [...] from varied strands of oral and written tales in Eastern as well as Western tradition, about undines and selkies, nixies, Loreleis, and Mélusines, in which the fairy creature appears on earth and stays with a mortal as his bride only on certain conditions" (1994, 396). Moreover, Konstancja herself, as a literary heroine, appears to be a meaningful "text", a live myth constructed from various stories, various intertexts. Therefore, it could be argued that even the real Konstancja was a "construction". Initially, this "construction" was created by the society of seventeenth-century Gdańsk; today, it is created by Czerwińska-Rydel and readers of *The Baltic Siren*.

In Czerwińska-Rydel's work, the quoted phrases, every now and then, act to remind us that the life of Konstancja Czirenborg mysteriously reflects the existence of the mythological creatures, but the references also show the reversible nature of Czerwińska-Rydel's text itself. The tale of the "Baltic Siren" is woven from references to various recognizable culture-based texts; and at the same time, it constitutes a new literary creation. Therefore, the boundaries of the intertexts become blurred, as they are blended into this new tale. According to the statement from Laurent Jenny, "[i]ntertextuality speaks a language whose vocabulary is the sum of all existing texts" (1982, 45, quoted in Allen 2000, 114). However, in this case, the "sum of texts" creates an entirely new quality. It gives Konstancja's biography a unique meaning, while at the same time, the intertexts themselves gain new meanings. This phenomenon appears interesting especially when we consider the hypothetical skills of the child reader of *The Baltic Siren*. Wilkie-Stibbs argues that "[c]hildren's intertextual experience is peculiarly achronological, so the question about what sense children make of a given text when the intertextual experience cannot be assumed, is important" (2006, 171). Presumably, by reading the tale of Konstancja's life, a child will create his or her concept of the texts quoted – and thus of the siren as a mythological creature – *through* this particular tale. Therefore, on one hand, the story of the "Baltic Siren" is the mythologized biography, while on the other hand, it participates in creation of the myth of the siren.

Konstancja and “Human Monsters”: A Woman as the Other

Yet another of the afore-mentioned features of intertextuality is the clash between the dialogic social voices which exist within a given text. In the case of the tale by Czerwińska-Rydel, this can be explained in the following way: just as the author juxtaposes excerpts from various works, each person’s comments about Konstancja enter into a shared dialogue, and these comments refer both to positive and to pejorative associations with the mythological sirens. This is because such beings – both the ones with wings and the ones with fish tails – are supposed to be ambiguous and somehow monstrous creatures. They are beautiful and fascinating, but also dangerous and, sometimes, deadly. With their physical appearance and the said inclinations, the sirens seem to be beyond the anthropocentric idea of “normality”. In a way, they resemble so-called “human curiosities”, “oddities”, “beasts”, which appear in medieval and later sources from all over Europe, and even beyond, but the idea of which has its roots in Antiquity (Wieczorkiewicz 2009, 20–25). It is worth noting that some “human monsters” (both the “real” and the “fake” ones) were called “sirens” or “mermaids” – one can mention the famous FeeJee Mermaid, described by Ruickbie as “[a] supposed mermaid from Fiji, which was once exhibited by the indubitable P. T. Barnum [...]” (2016a, 131) in his American Museum. Interestingly, Bernard Duhamel, a specialist in paediatric surgery, even suggests that “[i]f the mermaid legend evokes more of mythology than of pathology, its origin very probably lies in ancient observations of certain types of human monstrosities. Human sirens are not as rare as is sometimes thought [...]” (1961, 152).

The figure of a “human monster” long served as a tool to interpret births of “peculiar” children within society (Wieczorkiewicz 2009, 11), the children that today would be probably considered the victims of various congenital disorders. “Human monsters” were thought to be, for instance, omens of God’s anger, the consequences of sin and magic, or even perceived as the offspring of supernatural beings.⁶ During the Age of Curiosity (Pomian 1990, 45–64), “human oddities” were sometimes collected and presented in encyclopaedic cabinets of curiosities, as they – just like the other elements of these collections according to the Polish historian Krzysztof Pomian (69–78) – were believed to represent the macrocosm. This tradition leads us to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century freak shows (Bogdan 1988; Durbach 2010; Garland-Thomson 1996), in which people with too many (and, sometimes, not enough) hands or legs, so-called “giants” and “dwarfs”, women with beards, and excessively hairy children were displayed for the delight of the crowd (Wieczorkiewicz 2009, 235). Anna Wieczorkiewicz, a researcher in the field of anthropology of the body, forms a hypothesis that such beings:

⁶ For the examples, the history, and the theory of the figure of a “human monster”, see, for instance, Bates (2005); Wieczorkiewicz (2009); Wright (2013).

[...] cannot be removed from the human world. Mastered and subdued, thrown out from the rational world as an aberration or a superstition, as a disease or fiction, they will return to us through the back door. Eventually, we will always see them – what is more, we will search for them, as their nature intrigues and attracts us. [...] It is like monsters would like to prove we need them for something, like they would tell us that, without them, we would be unable to determine our own nature and to understand the world we want to organize and explain. (2009, 6)

Czerwińska-Rydel cleverly exploits the sirens' resemblance to such "monsters", making the elements of cultural narratives about these individuals a tool with which she can spin Konstancja's story. Wieczorkiewicz indicates that so-called "human beasts" always trigger rumours about their origins:

A strange creature is born: a baby with two heads or without any limbs, or a one whose sex cannot be determined. Such a birth makes a gap in the order of life, it breaks certain norms – it evokes fear, stupefaction, curiosity, reflections on the nature of the world... How to explain it? [...] Why the baby was born at all? (11)

In *The Baltic Siren*, the protagonist's birth is a subject to ponder too, a problem that has to be interpreted, because it is shrouded in an aura of mystery, as Konstancja is born two months after her mother's first labour pains. Additionally, the woman, contrary to her husband, is pleasantly surprised when – after a nightmare in which a siren appears – she gives a birth to a girl instead of a boy (which she had expected before the dream, by basing on her physician's opinion). All of these become a subject of gossip. Some peddlers and women from the help think that the newborn is an abandoned child of a sailor and a siren, as these creatures were said to be seen on the sea – and one of them, according to the rumours, looked exactly like little Konstancja. The most talkative peddler even suggests that such hybrid children are not able to live neither in the sea nor on land, and bring misery to their protectors. Nevertheless, even in her infancy, the heroine is praised for her beauty, the temper, and the angelic voice: "We have to admit the girl is a miracle!" (Czerwińska-Rydel 2014a, 54) – says Klara, one of the Czirenbergs' servants. Therefore, the appreciation for Konstancja accompanies the anxiety resulting from her mysterious birth.

This is developed in the following parts of Czerwińska-Rydel's book. When the protagonist is an adolescent, and her talents begin to blossom, she becomes an attraction at social gatherings. But appreciation for her abilities is interwoven with recurring rumours about her "monster" identity. She is also exposed to prying eyes, as many "human oddities" were too. Wieczorkiewicz writes that "[t]he fear of a human monster can be mixed with excitement, but it is hard not to watch" (2009, 11). The issue of "watching" becomes particularly important when Konstancja puts on a heavy ball gown embroidered with jewels and lace. It is more of a disguise than just clothes, for the girl must look astonishing and

attract glances in order to find a future husband. She seems to be a carnivalesque attraction; not a human being, but rather a “creature”, or a curious gadget, just like the exoticized or aggrandized “human oddities” presented in freak shows (Bogdan 1988, 94–118). Additionally, a member of the help realizes that the girl with this dress on looks exactly like a siren. She is constantly being looked at, which corresponds with Wiczorkiewicz’s words on the births of “human oddities”. The scholar writes that such beings have “[...] some features of the miracle, and the miracle brings a spectacle to life [...]” (2009, 5), just like in the case of Czerwińska-Rydel’s heroine, who is being exposed to viewers during specific “spectacles”.

Siren-oriented rumours and comparisons return in the book again and again. They can be interpreted as referring not to Konstancja herself, but to the society in which she lives. Sometimes they are signs of admiration but, in other cases, of fear, jealousy, and morbid curiosity. The protagonist is aware of them, as she finds it hard to fit into the world and constantly asks herself: “Who am I?”. At the end of the story, the woman seems to believe that she is a siren, as she says on her deathbed: “There is no cure for it [the disease]. I go back where I came from” (Czerwińska-Rydel 2014a, 91). Or perhaps she is ironically ridiculing people’s beliefs? One may ask why Konstancja is constantly perceived as an “oddity”, as she seems to be just an ordinary, albeit multitalented woman. But herein lies the cause of all the gossip and comparisons: she is a woman and she is multitalented. In her contemporaries’ imagination, singing, painting, and any other fields of art were not associated with females. Konstancja’s father says that “[...] she is not a normal child” (58), and her music teacher agrees with him, calling her “a creature” (59), “a sea siren” (59), and “a wonder of wonders” (59), but not a girl or simply a person. According to the protagonist’s mother, Konstancja should not sing and paint, as girls ought to be raised to make humble, God-fearing wives and mothers. Mrs. Czirenberg thinks that it is a feminine “nature” that makes women not act the same way men do. As we can see, the main character is the Other because she sings and paints beautifully, and because she is not a male.

In cultural narratives about “human monsters”, the source of the otherness was, *inter alia*, an excess of particular features (Wiczorkiewicz 2009, 11). Czerwińska-Rydel uses this element of such stories: Konstancja is characterized by an excess, too, but in this case it is an excess of skills. In fact, the protagonist’s questions about her own identity are also questions about the position of women in society. The girl cannot understand why she is not supposed to do the same things men do, but for her contemporaries, such a woman as Konstancja is a danger. She stands outside their gender-conditioned views on the world and, therefore, she should be marked as a “curiosity”. They let her perform, but it is only to remind others that this is a carnivalesque exception, not “normal” enough to be a legitimized part of everyday life.

Conclusion

All this considered, it could be argued that Konstancja's biography is a mythologized "herstory". Initiated in the 1970s, the concept of "herstory" has been rooted in feminist criticism. According to Barbara Yost:

The word "herstory" was coined to indicate a fresh approach to history that would encompass the lives of women as well as men. Though it was rejected as frivolous and unscholarly by some, others found it useful for emphasizing the need to tell history from female perspective. (2000, 1004)⁷

Referring to the first wave of feminism, Ivana Milojević indicates that:

Feminists critiqued women's exclusion from the public sphere and they critiqued women's exclusion from the dominant approach to history. They critiqued the interpretation of history in which men became recognised as "subjects" of history while woman was delegated to an ahistorical, biological sphere. This meant that each female was thus seen as a universal "woman", in terms of her ahistorical universal "nature" and in terms of her ahistorical universal role of a wife and a mother. Thus as poetically expressed by Adele Aldridge: "His story [became] History [and] My [women's] story [remained] Mystery". (2008, 336)

A detailed analysis of diverse ideas related to the notion of "herstory", as well as a description of critical voices referring to this notion (Morgan 1992), are not the subject of this chapter. Yet we apply this term as a key word to understand the very nature of Czerwińska-Rydel's work: we can call the mythologized biography of Konstancja "herstory" (as well as "mystery"), as it tells the story of the woman's life by revealing and deconstructing many of gender stereotypes, widely present in many older female biographies for children. Within her own society, the protagonist is considered strange, mysterious, and monstrous, because she is a woman, yet living and behaving in an untypical way.

However, we should add that Konstancja's "herstory" is a perplexing one. Interestingly, there are only a few direct statements made by the protagonist of *The Baltic Siren*. The reader may learn her thoughts ("Who am I?"), but usually Konstancja's voice is "hidden" in indirect speech and, even more often, the girl is talked about by other characters. Paradoxically, despite the fact that Konstancja

⁷ Interesting examples of "herstories" that refer to Greek mythology and works of Homer and Virgil are the following novels: *Homer's Daughter* by Robert Graves (1955), *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood (2005), and *Lavinia* by Ursula K. Le Guin (2008). Graves and Atwood retell the *Odyssey*, the former relating the life of Nausicaä, a young woman from Western Sicily – the "true" author of the *Odyssey*, while the latter presents Penelope who reminisces on, among other things, the events described in Homer's work. Le Guin refers to Virgil's *Aeneid* and focuses on Lavinia, daughter of the king of the Latins of Laurentum.

has become famous for her exceptionally beautiful voice, in the narratological sense we cannot “hear” it. She does not talk about herself but, significantly, other people talk about her instead and, what is more, other people talk on her behalf. Therefore, this literary strategy applied by Czerwińska-Rydel leads to another intertextual association with Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid*. As we remember, the heroine of this tale loses her tongue in exchange for a human body and an existence in a human society, thus she becomes mute.⁸ In a way, the heroine of *The Baltic Siren* is mute as well; she is a mysterious “beast” living among people and, in a cultural sense, she lives in silence. As we can assume, the words of all songs she sings are someone else’s words. We can reconstruct her image by relying on other characters’ opinions and guesses revealed by the author. It is not accidentally that the visual narrative created, as we mentioned above, by Ignerska in the first part of the book begins with a significant quotation from the second (literary) part. The stallholder asks a person from Konstancja’s closest circle: “Were you present at the birth?” (Czerwińska-Rydel 2014a, 5). Thus, the story of the “Baltic Siren” begins with rumours. In this context, it is worth mentioning that, as Esther Fritsch indicates:

Over time [gossip] became associated with women’s speech, referring to women present at a birth and, starting in the nineteenth-century, to idle talk especially among women, acquiring a pejorative meaning in the process. The themes of gossip are mostly transgressions of social norms, making gossip a site where these norms are maintained and negotiated and participation in it becomes a sign of social membership. (2005, 207)

Gossip (probably spread, we can assume, mostly by women) accompanies Konstancja from the moment of her birth and becomes an important, integral part of her existence. Moreover, it is exactly gossip where the border between the protagonist’s “normality” and her “monstrosity” is maintained and negotiated. These rumours, these voices of the seventeenth-century society of Gdańsk as reconstructed by Czerwińska-Rydel, create the myth and the legend of Konstancja Czireberg’s life. As Carolyn G. Heilbrun puts it: “One cannot make up stories: one can only retell in new ways the stories one has already heard. Let us agree on this: that we live our lives through texts” (1990, 109, quoted in Tatar 1992, 230). We can relate this reflection to Czerwińska-Rydel who tells the story about the “Baltic Siren”, to the citizens of Gdańsk, and to Konstancja herself. They all live their lives through texts, that is, diverse texts of culture. That is exactly how Konstancja’s “herstory” has been created.

Significantly, the first time we hear Konstancja’s voice (in a form of a direct speech) in the literary part of the book is when she discusses with her father the paintings they saw in the town hall:

⁸ On other tales and myths including such a motif, see Warner (1994, 396–397).

Konstancja was fascinated by the town hall, paintings, and what her father had told her. She liked the serious way he treated her, as if she was almost an adult, and that he let her enter a place where only men meet, as women were not allowed to be in power.

‘Why, father?’ she asked when they were coming back home. ‘Can’t women be just, wise, godly, and steadfast? Aren’t they too able to strive for freedom and harmony? Aren’t they judicious enough to make important decisions?’ (Czerwińska-Rydel 2014a, 66)

As we can see, when Konstancja speaks for the first time, she does it as a mature, wise, and insightful woman. This bewilders her father, for the girl appears to be an emancipationist who is ahead of her time. In this she violates the social norms that persisted in the seventeenth century. When she dies, she loses her exceptional voice for ever, but in a way she had never had a voice. Would her contemporaries accept a woman who was not only an artist of many talents, but also an emancipationist who overturns patriarchal norms?

As we recall from the *Odyssey*, Odysseus, following Circe’s advice, ordered his companions to plug their ears with wax, and to tie him to his ship’s mast. In this way, Odysseus, who was curious to hear the siren’s voice, could listen to the alluring sounds yet not yield to them. Interestingly, as Warner points out:

The end the sirens bring is not identified as a fatal pleasure in Homer, though in Christian Europe has been read with these (sexual) overtones. The content of the song is knowledge, the threefold wisdom possessed by beings who are not subject to time: knowledge of the past, of the present, and of the future. Cicero stressed this, introducing the sirens into his argument that the human mind naturally thirst after knowledge. “It was the passion for learning,” he strives to persuade his audience, “that kept men rooted to sirens’ rocky shores.” He then went on to give a free verse translation of the Homeric episode into Latin. From their flowery meadow by the sea the sirens sing to Odysseus: “We have foreknowledge of all that is going to happen on this fruitful earth.” It is for this the hero struggles to join them, not for their personal charms. Yet, however promising that sounds, it means that they can give warning of disaster, too, and their meadow is strewn with the mouldering remains of their prey. Cicero, in the transmission of sirens’ mythology, failed to prevail over the more popular, Christian folklore portraying them as *femmes fatales*. (1994, 399)

These popular Christian associations with the siren, as well as the cultural controversies around this creature, are reflected in Czerwińska-Rydel’s work. Konstancja’s talent, knowledge, wisdom, and intelligence cannot compete with the social inclination towards stigmatizing her. The girl is the Other, hence she might pose a threat. Even Konstancja herself has negative associations with this mythological creature. When she first hears from an interlocutor that she resembles a siren, she is dismayed by the comparison, as she recalls from mythology that sirens can bring misfortune upon others. Significantly, the

chapter that includes this scene ends with a phrase taken from the *Odyssey*, book 12: “If any one unwarily draws in too close and hears the singing of the Sirens, his wife and children will never welcome him home again...” (Homer, ed. Pérezgonzález 2005, 97). Consequently, Konstancja begins to perceive herself as (*pace* the anachronism) a *femme fatale*.

As Warner concludes, “[p]assion and poetry: bane and boon. The anxiety about word-music and its lure – the fear of seductive speech – changes character and temper down the centuries, but the sirens’ reputation does not improve” (1994, 402). The comparisons to sirens that recur in the novel seem to be of great significance: Konstancja is as ambiguous as they are, beautiful but confusing, talented but hypothetically dangerous, interesting but baffling. And, just like historical “human monsters”, she gives people a shiver of both fear and excitement.

The Baltic Siren is a work which presents both the cultural and individual biography of the “beast”. In the first case, this “beast” is the siren, an ambiguous creature that appears throughout the book in many different forms, intertextually referring to various works of culture, including ancient ones. In the second case, Konstancja herself is presented as a “beast” in a way that refers to many narratives about so-called “human monsters”. All things considered, we can interpret this biographical novel as a universal story about otherness. The narration, as well as the intertexts, suggests that “monstrosity” is in the eye of the beholder. In fact, Konstancja is an exceptional woman, not a “beast”, but her society cannot see her this way. The otherness of the “Baltic Siren” is her womanhood, a feature that stops her from being a “normal” artist in the world of traditional conventions. Therefore, Czerwińska-Rydel’s book seems to suggest that the mythical sirens’ monstrosity can be seen as a convention too. Maybe these hybrid creatures, with their wonderful voices and animal features, were perceived as dangerous because they are females in a way which goes beyond gender stereotypes?

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