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# Fairytales Fantasy, Secondary History, and Female Empowerment: Discovering the Many Dimensions of Anna Brzezińska's *Wody głębokie jak niebo*

**Abstract.** The aim of the following paper is to examine Anna Brzezińska's *Wody głębokie jak niebo*—a collection of short stories set in a fantastic world resembling Renaissance Italy. The paper will, first of all, present Brzezińska's work as being representative of the sub-genre of fairytale fantasy. Secondly, it will investigate how the interplay of history, religion, and magic developed in the collection affects the shape of Brzezińska's imaginary world. Thirdly, it will analyze the theme of female empowerment, which reappears in subsequent stories.

**Key words:** Anna Brzezińska, fairytale fantasy, secondary history, female empowerment.

Anna Brzezińska (b. 1971), a medievalist and writer of fantasy fiction, made her literary debut with the short story "A kochał ją, że strach," published in 1998, for which she soon received the Janusz A. Zajdel Award.<sup>1</sup> Her following works also quickly gained critical recognition, and Brzezińska was awarded the Zajdel for the novel *Żmijowa harfa* (2000)—the third volume in her series about the adventures of Twardokęsek, a bandit living in a quasi-medieval world—and another one for the short story "Wody głębokie jak niebo" (2004). Brzezińska later included that story in a collection which she also entitled *Wody głębokie jak niebo* (*Waters as Deep as the Sky*, 2005).<sup>2</sup> Set in a realm reminiscent of Renaissance Italy, the collection depicts the fate of heroes involved in

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<sup>1</sup> The Janusz A. Zajdel Award is an annual prize which the Polish fandom of science fiction and fantasy gives to the authors of the best novel and short story published in a given year.

<sup>2</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, the Polish titles are translated by the author of this paper.

the affairs of mages whose gradual rise and eventual downfall the stories loosely chronicle. The aim of this paper is, first of all, to present *Wody głębokie jak niebo* as a representative of the sub-genre of fairytale fantasy. Secondly, this paper will investigate how the interplay of history, religion, and magic developed in the collection affects the shape of Brzezińska's imaginary world (whose complexity and richness deserve critical attention). Finally, since the majority of the collection's protagonists are females who struggle to survive in a world dominated by men, the proposed analysis will also investigate the theme of female empowerment, which Brzezińska subtly develops throughout the volume.

### ***Wody głębokie jak niebo* as fairytale fantasy**

According to Małgorzata Tkacz, Brzezińska's fiction represents two out of the three sub-genres which dominate in Polish fantasy literature, i.e. high fantasy and fairytale fantasy (2012: 18).<sup>3</sup> The stories collected in *Wody głębokie jak niebo* clearly exemplify the latter. Tkacz defines fairytale fantasy as a sub-genre operating with motifs and figures typical for fairy stories and folktales, depicting an often hostile secondary world, and relating dramatic events which seldom lead the protagonist to a happy ending (2012: 18). The borrowings from fairy stories and folktales are often significantly modified in comparison to the elements identified by Vladimir Propp<sup>4</sup> as characteristic of folktales; for instance, in fairytale fantasy the witch might be young and pretty rather than old and ugly, and the hero might not receive a just reward for his endeavors (Tkacz 2012: 112-114). By modifying well-known figures and motifs, Polish writers of fairytale fantasy intend to surprise, shock, or entertain the adult reader who is the assumed recipient of the story.<sup>5</sup> Also, only adult (or more knowledgeable) readers will be able to discover the inter-textual references which frequently appear in fairytale fantasy (Tkacz 2012: 12-124). Finally, Polish fairytale fantasy is also characterized by elements of humor and irony, as well as by scenes of or references to violence and sexuality (Tkacz 2012: 129). The seven stories comprising Brzezińska's *Wody głębokie jak niebo* display all of the abovementioned traits.

Brzezińska never directly describes the imaginary world that serves as the setting of her tales. It is only because of the Italian-sounding names (e.g. Graziano, Bosco Nero, Porta d'Argento, Valle delle Lacrime) and brief glimpses of lofty, ornate structures that readers can eventually recognize the realm—simply called the Peninsula—as inspired by and reminiscent of Renaissance Italy. Brzezińska's world is permeated by magic: the realm is ruled by blue-eyed prince-mages who can enslave demons and lock them into various forms according to their own desires. Buildings and objects bound with a demon gain beauty and permanence, whereas people fused with these super-

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<sup>3</sup> The third dominant category is historical fantasy (Tkacz 2012: 18).

<sup>4</sup> See Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928; English translation available in 1958).

<sup>5</sup> Of course, Polish fantasists are not alone in their attempts at transforming and retelling traditional fairy stories. For a note on British and American writers with a similar objective see Clute and Grant (1997: 332-333) and Stabelford (2005: 141-143).

natural beings become completely obedient to the mage. Because demons dwell among the stars (where they can be traced only through meticulous calculations provided by maps of heaven), and are described with names such as choirs, cherubim, and seraphs (Brzezińska 2005: 28, 123), it can be concluded that they are, in fact, angelic beings whom mages summon and trap in the physical world (an act which the fictional church is, therefore, right to condemn). According to the rules governing Brzezińska's world, a mage can enslave and command a demon only three times. Afterwards, the being regains its freedom and can attack its former master. In Brzezińska's world only men are granted access to magic, and any woman trying to usurp their power is cruelly punished. Finally, apart from demons, the imaginary realm is inhabited by beasts and monsters (werewolves, gnomes, stregas and many more) that dwell in the wilderness and pose a constant threat to the human communities. All in all, the imaginary world crafted by Brzezińska is one in which the breathtaking beauty of the mages' work is overshadowed only by their cruelty and insatiable thirst for power. Living in such a world, the protagonists suffer and struggle to protect what they hold dear, all the while knowing that for all their efforts, they might never win against the magic-wielding rulers of the Peninsula.

It is necessary to briefly discuss the plot of all seven stories in order to demonstrate how they subvert the patterns of traditional fairy stories and to prepare a background for further analysis. The first story, "Życzenie" ("A Wish"), begins when young Graziano learns that long before his birth the village was threatened by a golden dragon. Eventually, one of the shepherds, aided by a princess kidnapped by the dragon, managed to kill the beast with a magic sword and was rewarded by the princess with a promise that he and his descendants would have a single wish fulfilled once in their lives. Graziano, ostracized by his village because he was born during the plague, discovers that he is one of those descendants. Thus, one day, unable to bear the harsh treatment any longer, the boy uses the dragon wish to liberate himself from his miserable life. As a result, his village is attacked by a group of mercenaries, and his parents are killed. Before he leaves his shattered community, Graziano learns that the tale about the dragon and the princess was never true. It was the princess who was the beast that, when defeated, cursed her slayer with the fatal promise of wishes fulfilled, since death and destruction always follow in the wake of a dragon wish. Graziano, who ultimately becomes a ruthless warrior, is doomed to suffer the consequences of his own desires. His fate is an implicit warning against naïve belief in fairy tales and their deceptive promises.

In "Róże dla Sirocco" ("Roses for Sirocco"), the eponymous daughter of a mage ruling the city of Brionia flees from Duilio di Monti Serpillini, who defeated her father and thus can claim all of his treasures. In the usual manner of fairy tales, the kind-hearted and well-mannered Sirocco is aided in her escape by people and animals. Yet eventually there is no place left to run. When Duilio finally approaches her, the girl learns that he has been following her not for the maps of heaven that she stole, but because he fell in love with her. To prove his feelings, he bestows on Sirocco his silver daggers (a symbol of his life and death) and she accepts. Their marital bliss lasts for years, until Duilio is challenged by a younger mage, Ercole. Yet it is not Ercole who ultimately

kills Duilio, but Sirocco. To prolong his own life, a mage can sacrifice his offspring. Recognizing that Duilio is gradually becoming a threat to their sons, Sirocco kills her husband to protect their love and their children. Afterwards, she commits suicide. While classic fairy stories usually end with a remark that the protagonists lived happily ever after, in Brzezińska's story even pure love is eventually overpowered by ambition, greed, and fear.

"Zaćmienie serca" ("The Eclipse of the Heart") is set in the city of Brionia, restored by Ercole after his victory. The protagonist, Arachne, is told by her mother that she and her brother (all blue-eyed) are descendants of one of Sirocco's exiled sons. Arachne's difficult, yet happy life changes drastically after both her brother and mother die. Alone in the world, the girl earns her living with embroidery and devotes herself to the pursuit of magic. She sacrifices years of work and even her virginity to buy several maps of heaven from a usurer, because her goal is to enslave a demon and kill Severo (Ercole's son). However, contrary to fairy stories, the rightful heir is unable to avenge her family and reclaim her heritage. Though thanks to Arachne's efforts Ercole falls in love with her, he binds the girl with a demon, so that she will never betray him. Thus, Brzezińska subverts the fairytale ending of a marriage between the prince and the oppressed female into a tragic finale, in which the protagonists forsake their chances of finding true love, because they are marred by their fears and hatred.

In "Jej cień" ("Her Shadow") a scribe documents the miraculous life of Luana—the prioress of a cloister established in the ruined Brionia after the death of Ercole and Arachne's last descendants. Though the scribe secretly hates the old woman for her affinity with magic, he believes that her story should be written down as a warning for future generations. The plotline, focusing on Luana and the scribe, is interwoven with the narrative that follows the events that led to the fall of Brionia. Diamante, the only son of Rocco di Brionia, is weak and unable to use magic, which is a tangible sign of the family's demise. Imprisoned by his father, the boy is visited by the ghost of Arachne, who—like the godmother figure of fairy tales—offers him consolation and protection. Young Luana is Diamante's cousin and fiancé. In the course of the story they are eventually forced to get married. But again there is no romantic happy ending for the prince and the princess: Diamante is accidentally killed by his father during the wedding feast, the city is destroyed by demons, and Luana—the sole survivor of the ensuing massacre—devotes herself to religion and celibacy.

"Filary Nieba" ("Pillars of Heaven") starts with a short note on how the Peninsula has been ravaged by wars and demons after the fall of Brionia. Only a few places, Valle delle Fiamme among them, remain relatively safe and prosperous. When the prince-mage of the valley dies in a tragic accident, his children—Nino and Fiametta—are taken captive by Igino, the new ruler. Nino, blinded by the mage, is sent to a monastery, whereas Fiametta, corrupted by Igino's power, becomes his wife. It is not until several years pass that the siblings are reunited. Fiametta comes to Nino's monastery to seek protection for her son, because, though blinded, her brother still possesses in-born powers which he unknowingly weaves into his hymns. Unable to make sense of Fiametta's and Igino's intrigues, Nino eventually confronts them, armed only in his faith in God and music. Standing on a holy bridge, the monk signs one of his hymns and asks for truth. In response to his prayer, a pillar of fire comes from the sky, and spares only the protagonist, leav-

ing him on a fragment of the ruined bridge, where he presumably remains for the rest of his life. Though it can be argued that Nino manages to avenge himself on Iginio, his fate is far from a fairytale happy ending.

Because the previous stories repeatedly commented on the growing animosity between mages and the church, the friendship of master Benilde and fra Gioele presented in “Śmierć czarnoksiężnika” (“The Sorcerer’s Death”) is all the more surprising. Benilde and fra Gioele, two old men who find pleasure in their long disputes and currant wine, live in Askalon—a city ruined by years of domestic wars and currently threatened by an invasion from the Arimaspi, who are led by a man on a holy mission to eliminate all mages. When attacked, the citizens of Askalon want Benilde to surrender himself for their sake. But fra Gioele discovers that the old mage is already dead. In order to protect the city, fra Gioele approaches the leader of the Arimaspi as Askalon’s mage. During their conversation, the monk learns that the leader is, in fact, also a mage who intends to enslave all demons in jars and throw them into the sea. Horrified by the man’s cruelty and arrogance, fra Gioele manages to free the demons, for which he is later tortured and killed. Though the monk is no great warrior, by a twist of events his death brings about the destruction of the Arimaspi and their malevolent leader.

The last story in the collection, “Wody głębokie jak niebo” (“Waters as deep as the sky”), focuses on Sancha, a girl from a fishing village. Because the village is tormented by beasts and sea monsters, its inhabitants live in constant fear, which father Barnabo uses to sustain his control over them. One day, the village is visited by a storyteller (presumably a former mage). His stories shed more light on the nature of monsters and their relationship with Sancha’s people, but it is not until it is too late that the girl understands the truth. Only after Sancha’s friend, Bianco, is revealed to possess a third eye (for which he is crucified on the village’s holy tree) does the girl realize that the islanders have mixed their blood with monsters for decades. Thus, in Brzezińska’s story the boundaries between humanity and monstrosity are successfully blurred, and readers may suspect that ultimately Sancha will also fall prey to her village’s hypocrisy.

When all seven stories are taken into consideration, it becomes clear that the magical enchantment woven into Brzezińska’s tales is balanced by ubiquitous violence, indifference to suffering, and threat of death. There is no “happily ever after” for the protagonists, and no reward for their efforts and perseverance. The orphans and the downtrodden do not achieve fame and success, and true love does not conquer all. Instead, generations come and go, splendor turns into ruin, the magnificent city of Brionia is destroyed and rebuilt only to be destroyed again, and even magic gradually but inevitably fades from the world. Though Brzezińska’s imaginary realm is not altogether ominous and hostile,<sup>6</sup> the heroes cannot expect to be delivered from trouble by divine providence, and readers cannot hope that anyone will be spared from suffering and death. But it is

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<sup>6</sup> While analyzing Brzezińska’s other works, Tkacz notes that they contain no evil creatures, only dangerous ones, and that it is mostly people who are responsible for evil (2005: 182). The same can be said about the world depicted in *Wody głębokie jak niebo*: evil and grief have their source in people’s desires and obsessions.

precisely because the protagonists live in such a world that their little acts of defiance and heroism are so dramatic and poignant.

### **The interplay of history, religion, and magic**

Though every story features a different character, by depicting the fate of individuals from subsequent generations the seven tales form a loose chronicle of the Peninsula's history. Much of this chronicle follows the fate of Sirocco and Duilio's descendants, until their bloodline—like everything else in Brzezińska's world—comes to an end. Though the protagonists of every story deal with their private desires and misfortunes, their struggles are presented against the backdrop of historical transformations, among which the growing animosity between magic and religion (strongly resembling Christianity) has the greatest impact on the condition of the imaginary realm. Readers observe how the descendants of Sirocco and Duilio (named the Principi dell'Arazzo, because Arachne wove a grand tapestry which was supposed to protect the family) gradually gain and lose their power and status, till they are completely supplanted by the church and its servants who wish to liberate the Peninsula from the corruption of magic. The city of Brionia becomes a striking symbol of this shift in power. Once the greatest of cities, it is ultimately destroyed by demons and only an abbey is later built among the ruins. Unable to enslave demons or to cast great spells, mages eventually yield to the domination of the priests. If the old storyteller appearing in Brzezińska's last tale is truly a former mage as the text suggests, then his poverty, frailty, and meekness stand in bitter contrast to the pride, majesty, and audacity of his predecessors.

Depicting the fate of subsequent generations, Brzezińska managed to create an "organic" secondary world which changes and evolves together with the heroes. Consequently, her creation offers the reader an illusion of historical continuity. This continuity is perpetuated not only by references to certain figures and events from the past, but also by recurring items and phrases. For instance, white roses are a symbol which reappears on several occasions and becomes a thread that leads the reader from one narrative to another. These flowers appear for the first time in the story of Sirocco, when she tricks Ercole into sparing her people by having him promise that he will spare her roses. During the invasion, Sirocco gives a white rose to every man, woman and child, which guarantees them safe passage through Ercole's army. Afterwards, white roses become associated with Sirocco, and Brzezińska uses them in an indirect manner to identify her descendants. Arachne weaves white roses into her hair before attending a ball, during which she plans to challenge Severo. The prioress Luana cultivates white roses in her garden. Nino, the last descendant of Sirocco's line, cherishes a single rosebush growing in the little garden of his monastery (Brzezińska 2005: 237). What is more, the collection begins and ends with stories that feature child protagonists (Graziano and Sancha) who are mistreated by their villages and doomed by their own misinformed actions. And when Sancha begs the old storyteller for help by

saying: “Whatever I am, I am real” (Brzezińska 2005: 356),<sup>7</sup> her words are an echo of the words spoken centuries ago by Sirocco when she announced that the love and happiness shared by her and Duilio had been real (Brzezińska 2005: 61).

By discovering that the figures and events presented in every new story depend, in one way or another, on the previous tales, the reader gradually becomes immersed in the unstoppable flow of (fictional) time and gains intimate knowledge of the secondary world’s past. Intimate, because while the inhabitants of Brzezińska’s world distort their own history and transform it into myths, the reader is put into the position of an omniscient witness who is the only one to know and remember the truth about the past. For instance, subsequent generations remember the gentle and kind-hearted Sirocco as a malevolent strega (witch). Moreover, even her own descendants do not know that it was Sirocco who killed her husband, and they believe that after Duilio’s fall she tried to fight with her husband’s murderer. Thus, just three generations after their death, the truth about Sirocco and Duilio’s fate is already lost. The same happens in the case of Arachne and Severo. While the official version of history claims that both died when they protected the Peninsula from an invasion, Diamante learns that it was the demon in Arachne who actually killed Severo, thus fulfilling the girl’s initial wish. Nino’s confrontation with his sister and her husband is remembered as a battle between a saint and a possessed woman protected by demons (Brzezińska 2005: 349). Fra Gioele, who defeated the Arimaspi invaders only because of a lucky coincidence, is later also hailed as a great saint, and his triumph continues to rekindle people’s religiosity. Thus, Brzezińska indirectly presents history as a mixture of manipulations, exaggerations and wishful thinking, in which certain individuals are venerated and others condemned through no fault or merit of their own. Yet seldom are Brzezińska’s heroes happy when they discover the truth about the past, because the truth is often less attractive than the fiction they have come to accept as fact. Faced with this relativism of fictional history, the reader is also left to wonder to what extent his/her own knowledge of the past can be questioned and potentially invalidated.

When public memory fails to account for the past, individual memory in the form of storytelling can become a defense mechanism against the process of forgetting. Yet in Brzezińska’s world the stories passed between characters also present a distorted or only fragmentary version of the past, which always proves more harmful than helpful. Graziano (from “*Życzenie*”) learns how dangerous it might be to put too much trust in a story. The tale about the dragon and the princess is eventually revealed to be a lie. It is not clear if Graziano’s mother deliberately modified the story so as to forget about the tragedy which she caused when she used the dragon wish, or if she was also oblivious to the truth and only wanted to console her ostracized son with a tale in which he becomes someone important. Either way, because Graziano’s knowledge of the past is distorted, he is doomed to repeat the mistakes of his predecessors, thus perpetuating his family’s cycle of sin and grief. While Graziano is too dependent on a story, Rocco, from “*Jej cień*”, disregards stories altogether, which also proves fatal. Readers learn that there are two legends pertaining to the tap-

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<sup>7</sup> Translation mine.

estry woven by Arachne. According to the first one, Severo infused Arachne's work with demons, apparently to provide their family with everlasting protection. According to a different source, Arachne told her firstborn son that the tapestry contains the glory and the fall of the family, and should therefore be protected (Brzezińska 2005: 145). Rocco disregards both stories and foolishly destroys the tapestry to manifest his power, which results in his death and the destruction of Brionia. While Rocco does not heed the warnings offered by legends, Sancha and the villagers from "Wody głębokie jak niebo" are unable to perceive the truth about their monstrous heritage hidden in the tales of the old storyteller. This inability highlights not only their own ignorance and hypocrisy, but also the ineffectuality of storytelling as a means for preserving memories and instructing the younger generations.

To finish the analysis of the components comprising Brzezińska's imaginary world it is necessary to indicate the borrowings from the Old Testament and classical myths, which enrich the author's creation and add another layer to its secondary history. As far as biblical stories are concerned, three major elements of Brzezińska's tales seem to be indebted to this tradition: the trumpets used by the Arimaspi invaders to destroy cities, the pillar of fire which appears in response to Nino's prayer, and Nino's fate after he prays for help. In the Bible, seven trumpets were used to destroy the city of Jericho (Ferber 1999: 221), and a pillar of fire signified divine presence (Ryken et al. 1998: 646). If the elements present in Brzezińska's stories are read through the prism of biblical tradition, they unveil the spiritual dimension of the conflicts in which the heroes participate. As for Nino, who spends the rest of his life on a pillar left from a destroyed bridge, he is reminiscent of St Simeon the Stylite and other eastern ascetics who lived on top of pillars (Child and Colles 1971: 167). This analogy reinforces the image of Nino as a (fictional) saint.

As for classical myths, Brzezińska borrowed a handful of figures and motifs, which strengthen the connection between the secondary world and the ancient worlds of Italy (the Roman Empire) and Greece. Firstly, Arachne, who is a talented embroideress, is clearly named after the girl who faced Athena in a weaving contest and was later transformed into a spider (Ferber 1999: 198). Though the latter does not happen to Brzezińska's protagonist, the image of a spider does appear: Arachne's mother, Despina (whose name is derived from Despoina—the daughter of Poseidon and Demeter), is likened by her son to a spider that sits in dark corners and cares for nothing except her webs (Brzezińska 2005: 82). Secondly, the storyteller from "Wody głębokie jak niebo" tells Sancha about Skylla—a girl that was turned into a monster because she spurned a mage who was in love with her. This tale is a reworked version of Greek myths which feature the monstrous Scylla (Cotterell 2006: 32). Thirdly, when the prince-mage from "Filarz nieba" dies, killed by a boar, his death is similar to that of Adonis, Aphrodite's beloved (Cotterell 2006: 19). In addition, when Luana is told by a demon that she will be safe as long as she follows him without opening her eyes, this warning is reminiscent of the conditions set on heroes who wish to emerge from the underworld, e.g. Orpheus, who is told not to look back at his beloved Eurydice (Cotterell 2006: 67).

Finally, it is worth noting that one of the tales recounted in "Wody głębokie jak niebo" is a reworked version of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844). Hawthorne's tale, set



in medieval Padua, revolves around the forbidden love between Giovanni and Beatrice. Beatrice, the eponymous character, lives in a garden created by her father. Because the garden contains poisonous plants (the most spectacular among them is a plant with purple flowers, which grows in the middle of the garden), after years of taking care of them the beautiful girl has also become poisonous. Rappaccini, blinded by his insatiable thirst for knowledge and his scientific ambitions, does not worry about the fate of his child. On the contrary, he secretly observes the development of Beatrice and Giovanni's relationship, treating it as yet another of his experiments. Needless to say, the love affair is terminated by Beatrice's untimely death.

In Brzezińska's version, the storyteller informs Sancha about the origins of dafnises. According to his tale, a long time ago a mage created beautiful and rare plants by combining ordinary vegetation with demons. His finest creation was a magnificent and lethally dangerous plant with purple flowers. One day, the mage's daughter, Dafne, was accidentally consumed by the demon in the plant, thus forever becoming a part of it (Brzezińska 2005: 343-346). Yet because the mage truly grieved for his lost child, he decided to forsake all of his work and magic. Brzezińska's tale is clearly a reworking of Hawthorne's story. Given her interest in the history and culture of Italy, it is not surprising that she found Hawthorne's work interesting and decided to incorporate it into her fictional Italy.

### **Female empowerment in a patriarchal world**

Brzezińska's imaginary world is not a good place for women to live in. Wives and daughters are expected to obey their husbands and fathers. The man is commonly recognized as the head of his family, and the woman should therefore act according to his wishes. If she does not, the man is fully entitled to punish her—if a husband beats his wife, inhabitants of the Peninsula will not interfere, believing that she deserves her punishment. In the case of mages, no one will dare voice any objection to how a mage treats his wives and daughters, because they are viewed as his "property" (and because no one will dare oppose a mage in anything). This social belief of women as inferior and subordinate to men partly stems from the teachings of the fictional church, which claim that women are weak creatures prone to sin and demonic temptation (Brzezińska 2005: 31), hence they require external control and discipline. What is more, because women are so easily corrupted, they are not allowed to learn how to read and write, lest they should reach for forbidden knowledge, i.e. magic. Consequently, even though it is generally asserted that women do not possess any magical power, any woman caught reading a book or dabbling in magic will be sentenced to death (Brzezińska 2005: 121). Education and magic are viewed as an exclusively male domain.

Even so, Brzezińska's heroines are far from being weak and subservient to men.<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, Sirocco, Arachne, Luana, and Sancha are brave, clever, and independent women who are not afraid of disregarding social norms and expectations in the pursuit of their own goals—even if it means risking their lives. When her father is defeated, Sirocco takes his maps of heaven and flees

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<sup>8</sup> Only one story, "Śmierć czarnoksiężnika", has no prominent female character.

from Duilio, eventually impressing him with her determination and perseverance. In Duilio, she finds a partner who respects her independence and her wishes (since he agrees to never rejuvenate her with his magic). Yet the woman is strong enough to sacrifice him for the sake of their children, and also clever enough to trick Ercole into sparing her people. Even long after her death, Ercole remembers her beauty and strength. Thus, though the men around her seem more powerful, it is Sirocco who actually has control over their hearts and minds. Similarly, Despina and Arachne are independent women who are able to earn their own living through embroidery. Despina also teaches her daughter how to read and write, thus offering her more power in a world that limits female education. The ability to read and write then becomes the means to Arachne's revenge on Severo: she diligently studies maps of heaven in search of a demon that she can enslave. Though in the end she does not manage to kill the man, she does manifest her freedom and independence, which—paired with her beauty—make Severo fall in love with her. To avoid demonic possession, in her final act of defiance Arachne throws herself into the fire. Luana also does not yield to her tormentors. Maltreated and threatened by her uncle, the girl still rebels against his orders, and this indirectly contributes to the man's downfall. She is then the only one to survive the destruction of Brionia. After years of solitary life in the ruins of the city, Luana—who was always very religious—becomes a prioress. Because of her kindness, charisma, and deep faith, after her death she is hailed as a saint. Even Sancha—who, as a poor peasant girl mistreated by others, is the least significant of Brzezińska's heroines—asserts her autonomy when she tries to rebel against her village's hypocrisy and injustice. Finally, it is worth adding that in two stories it is the female who serves as the antagonist: the dragon princess exacts her revenge on Graziano's family, and Fiametta tries to use her brother Nino as a pawn in the power-struggle with her husband. Still, it can be argued that these female antagonists are not motivated by inborn cruelty and malevolence, but by tragic circumstances: the princess was killed because she was betrayed by a man from Graziano's family, and Fiametta, initially fiercely protective of her brother, was "poisoned" by Igino's magic. Even so, both females have to be defeated, since they become a threat to innocent people.

Apart from allowing her heroines to demonstrate their independence and perseverance, Brzezińska empowers them in a literal sense: though the inhabitants of the Peninsula almost unanimously agree that women do not have any magical powers, Sirocco, Arachne, and Luana prove otherwise. These heroines do possess inborn magical skills, which they eventually use in an intuitive manner, because arcane knowledge and formal training are available only to men. Consequently, it is art that becomes an outlet for repressed female magic. Sirocco is a gifted musician, sensitive to the sounds of nature and voices of individual demons (Brzezińska 2005: 63). With her magic-infused music she is able to tame wild beasts (2005: 45), soothe demons (2005: 52), and even command them for a brief period of time. Ercole acknowledges her powers when he says that demons served her more willingly than they ever did him or Duilio (Brzezińska 2005: 62). Arachne's powers manifest themselves in her embroidery (which is a very feminine art). Initially, there is nothing supernatural about her works, as she obtained her skills through hard work. Yet when the girl begins her search for a demon, she creates several beautiful cloaks which she then exchanges

for maps of heaven. Devoted solely to her goal, Arachne fails to notice that embroidering and magic gradually become one: she unknowingly summons demons—each time a more powerful one—and imprisons them in the images embroidered on her cloaks. Even Severo is impressed by her work (Brzezińska 2005: 122). Luana is different from the previous characters, because faith, not art, becomes the embodiment of her innate strength. Yet like Sirocco and Arachne, the girl is aided by a demon even though she has never been trained to summon or enslave one. During the fall of Brionia, Luana is protected by a demon and given a precious pearl. With this pearl and her ardent faith she is capable of performing miracles, e.g. she purifies contaminated water. Finally, it should be mentioned that Nino, the last of Sirocco's line, also expresses his powers through art. Though Nino is a man, he is also deprived of access to formal training and he experiences repression (he is blinded by Iginio and placed in a monastery). Lacking any other outlet, his inborn powers are channeled through music: Nino's religious hymns heal and console people in need, and at the end of the story protect the man from danger. By and large, if spells and rituals are unavailable, in Brzezińska's world art becomes the alternative medium for repressed magic. Arguably, it is not the male way of formalized rituals and detailed maps of heaven, but the female way of art and creativity that produces some of the greatest mages of the Peninsula.

## Conclusions

Brzezińska's *Wody głębokie jak niebo* is a unique work in the body of Polish fantasy fiction. First and foremost, within the confines of a single volume,<sup>9</sup> Brzezińska managed to construe a rich and believable world filled with palpable history and several allusions to myths and religion. Though some might diminish her achievement by arguing that creating a secondary world based on a historical period in the development of an existing country does not take that much creative effort, it is enough to remind them that other writers who use similar premises for their fiction have written several volumes and they have yet to achieve the complexity of Brzezińska's work (Jacek Piekara's series about the adventures of Mordimer Madderdin is a case in point). Secondly, not many Polish fantasists have chosen Renaissance Italy as a model for their secondary worlds. Thus, Brzezińska's creation is both original and refreshing. Thirdly, by subverting patterns and motifs typically encountered in fairy tales and combining them with intertextual references, her stories play with the reader's expectations. By the end of the volume the reader is sure of one thing alone: there is no happily ever after for the protagonists, as every action and decision comes at a high price. Moreover, with its subtle themes of female empowerment the volume avoids perpetuating the stereotypical images of women as damsels in distress and objects of romantic love so often appearing in fantasy fiction. Brzezińska's heroines manage to assert their independence and power without having to reject their femininity. Finally, it is also worth adding that Brzezińska's writing style abounds in lyrical metaphors which evoke a myriad of striking images. All in all,

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<sup>9</sup> The book is 356 pages long, which is not much considering fantasy fiction's propensity for extensive world-building and multi-volume series.

*Wody głębokie jak niebo* is a fine literary achievement for which Anna Brzezińska deserves to be acknowledged and praised as a skilful fantasist.

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