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Chapter 3

A CHILD’S DEATH, THE POET’S IMMORTALITY

Jan Kochanowski’s Laments

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The European humanist as a grieving father

Jan Kochanowski, the greatest Polish Renaissance poet and an exemplary humanist, studied liberal arts at the University of Kraków, the University of Padua, and the University of Königsberg. He had an excellent command of Greek and Latin. His apparent detachment from religious issues and disputes is partly attributable to the general climate of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, arguably the most tolerant country in Europe at the time.

Kochanowski might be called a European humanist who wrote poetry in Polish and Latin, with the Italian Quattrocento providing a source for his poetic images, metaphors, and thematic inspirations. His enormous contribution to the development of Polish poetry also extended to the realm of form, as he provided practical guidelines for Polish versification, experimenting with a wide range of verse forms that would later become canonical. Kochanowski’s language and syntax are still comprehensible to modern readers, whereas the works of Mikołaj Rej (1505–1569), who was only twenty-five years older than Kochanowski, often demand the assistance of Old Polish dictionaries.

Kochanowski gained recognition during his lifetime, a privilege not bestowed on every poet. He owed this fame largely to his songs (Pieśni) and David’s Psalter (Psalterz Dawidów, 1579), a vernacular paraphrase of the Book of Psalms. The Polish Renaissance composer Mikołaj Gomółka (c. 1535–c. 1609) set Kochanowski’s psalms to music, and they were sung in both Catholic and Protestant churches. Kochanowski also wrote several elegiac poems, including a cycle dedicated to his daughter, Orszula (most critics have stubbornly referred to her using the later spelling of Urszula). The Laments (Treny, 1580) perhaps constitute his most famous poetry collection today. In a Latin couplet, Kochanowski wrote that the early Italian Renaissance poet Petrarch (1304–1374) had owed his immortality to the death of his love, Laura: “When you lament your Laura’s untimely death / Oh Petrarch, you bring immortality to her and to yourself.” We do not know if these lines were written before or after the deaths of Orszula and Hanna, another of Kochanowski’s daughters who died at a young age. However, the two poets shared analogous misfortunes, and the paradox of achieving immortality by writing about the ephemerality of young lives cut tragically short.
Jan Kochanowski’s Laments

Kochanowski and Petrarch (1304–1374) – the Polish poet was without a doubt familiar with the work of Francesco Petrarca, or Petrarch, the leading poet of the early Italian Renaissance, who wrote in both Latin and his national language. In their respective mourning verses, Petrarch laments his muse, his beloved Laura, while Kochanowski mourns his little daughter. Though their specific expressions of grief and general tone are not comparable, the works of the two poets contain some analogous images and topoi – for instance, resentment toward death for having taken someone dear to them, and the appearance of the deceased in a dream.

After extensive travels throughout Europe, and many years at the Polish royal court, Kochanowski married Dorota Podlodowska and settled down at his country estate of Czarnolas, near Zwolen, in what is now central Poland. Time passed quietly. He continued to write paraphrases of the psalms, and each year a new child was born into the family. This idyll was shattered by the deaths of his two young daughters. We know little about how they died. We know nothing about Hanna’s death. Orszula died when she was thirty months old; her parents apparently knew she was dying, excluding the possibility of sudden death. From Lament V of the cycle, we can deduce that she died of an infectious disease:

Growing before her parents’ carrying eyes,
She’d barely risen above ground when Death
Felled the dear child with his infectious breath
At our very feet. Hard-eyed Persephone,
Were all those tears of no avail to me?
(Kochanowski 1995, V, 11–13)

Od ziemie się co wznióswszy, duchem zaraźliwym
Srogiej śmiertci otchniona, rodzicom troskliwym
U nog martwa upadła. O żła Persefono,
Mogłabie tak wielu łzam dać upłynąć płono?
(V, 11–13)

Kochanowski’s reflections on the earlier death of his second daughter, Hanna, are perhaps preserved in Epigram XCIII:

I was a father not long ago; today I have no one
To call me by that name […] Death has devoured my all.

Byłem ojcem niedawno, dziś nie mam nikogo,
Co by mię tak zwał […] Wszyscy mi śmierć pożarła.
(Kochanowski 1960, 166, 3–4)

But these are merely hypotheses. Kochanowski expressed his grief after Orszula’s passing in the Laments, a long cycle of poems, or threnodies, while he wrote about Hanna’s death only in the short lines above.

The Laments, Kochanowski’s last work, were published in 1580, only four years before his own death. In this cycle, he describes the many facets of pain and grief endured after the loss of his beloved daughter, drawing on both ancient and Christian metaphors, and using the principles of elegiac poetry in new ways. Laments is a cycle of nineteen poems of different
lengths and versification structures, setting them apart from Petrarch’s individual or loosely connected sonnets about Laura; and from the assorted poems of the French poet Pierre de Ronsard (1524–1585) on the death of Marie, a country girl with whom he was in love. Any comparisons with these poems are of limited use, since both Petrarch’s Laura and Ronsard’s Marie were not daughters, but lovers, either real or imagined. In Kochanowski’s poems, the lyric subject’s relationship to the deceased is very different, as the death of a child seems fundamentally to violate the natural order of things. There are some similarities in the imagery used by the three poets, but these result primarily from their shared knowledge of ancient culture.

Kochanowski and Pierre de Ronsard (1524–1585) – both the Polish poet and Ronsard – a leading poet of the French Renaissance, and a founder of La Pléiade, a group of authors striving to establish literary French as an equal to the classical languages – had a major impact on the development of their national languages and literatures. They also show similar cultural, poetic, and linguistic interests in their works. The passing of Marie de Clèves, a lover of King Henry III, inspired Ronsard to write a collection of poems, chiefly sonnets, entitled On the Death of Marie (Sur la mort de Marie, 1578), in which the poet recalls his own former lover, Marie l’Angevine. The deceased woman is a literary construct here, and the overall tone is more lyrical than in Kochanowski’s Laments. The poet’s grief also remains more personally grounded, not reaching for the heights of the absolute. Ronsard’s poetic speaker does not quarrel with the natural order or pose large metaphysical questions, nor does Ronsard’s verse contain the numerous classical allusions that characterize Kochanowski’s Laments.

Kochanowski wrote other elegiac poems, too: “On Jan Tarnowski’s Death” (“O śmiertci Jana Tarnowskiego,” 1561), “In Memory of Jan of Tęczyn” (“Pamiątka Janowi na Tęczynie,” c. 1570), “On a Funeral” (“Przy pogrzebie rzecz,” 1590). These works belong to the genre of the so-called epicedia – texts that are “spoken once” – dedicated to important figures (personae graves) who have died after reaching a mature age. Such poems praise the lives and achievements of their subjects, while offering comfort to their loved ones. In the Laments, Kochanowski uses the lofty tones of this genre to chronicle the death of a child, in a clear departure from established conventions. He refers to ancient gods and heroes, evoking Persephone and Niobe, citing Orpheus, and arguing with Cicero, a Stoic grieving the death of his daughter, Tullia. Here, Kochanowski, the despondent father, seemed to feel that the death of his child gave him license to abandon the accepted principles of elegiac poetry, which reserved this form for the mourning of more “significant” personages.

The very title of the cycle – “laments,” not “sorrows” – immediately suggests that Kochanowski is treating his daughter as if she were a renowned figure deserving of metaphors drawn from antiquity. This was an innovative gesture at a time when high mortality rates among children, especially infants, deprived their deaths of great significance or general interest. The traditional place of children in the social hierarchy was designated in the medieval Danse Macabre, or Dance of Death, which emphasized the equality of all in the face of ultimate realities. The personified Death embraced successive figures in this dance, with their order typically reflecting a strict social hierarchy – beginning with the poet, then the emperor, the king, the duke, and so on. It was not until the very end that an infant in a cradle appeared (Latin: puer in cunabulo). Kochanowski’s Laments invert this order, making the young child the most important or “serious” figure (persona gravis).
**Danse Macabre** ("Dance of Death") – a medieval motif in literature and painting that appeared in France and Germany, especially after the Black Death pandemic of the mid-fourteenth century. Apart from the “dance” itself, the subject matter of death and the vanity of human life shaped various literary genres and motifs, including conversations with death, sermons condemning the material world (the so-called *contemptus mundi*), and the triumph of death (Italian: *Triumpho della morte*). Death usually appears in these “macabre” works in the form of a skeleton or highly decomposed corpse holding a scythe or musical instrument and abducting the living. In Polish literature, the only known pseudo-Dance of Death is *Master Polikarp’s Dialogue with Death* (Rozmowa Mistrza Polikarpa ze Śmiertią), which dates to the Late Middle Ages.

**Orszula’s gradual disappearance**

Much has been written about the structure of Kochanowski’s cycle. A brief thematic analysis of the individual poems suggests a tripartite structure: lamentation (I–XIV), reflection (IX, XI, XV, XVI), and Christian consolation (XIX). The first thirteen laments are connected to Orszula in various ways, but she does not appear in the four that follow. The composition of Kochanowski’s cycle has been described in terms borrowed from classical rhetoric, and especially in reference to Italian Renaissance scholar Julius Caesar Scaliger’s *Seven Books on Poetics* (*Poetices libri septem*, 1561), which outlines the principles of elegiac poetry in the Greek and Latin traditions:

> The introduction (*exordium*) is followed by praise of the deceased (*laudatio*), consisting of two basic motifs: praise (*laudes*) and demonstration of the magnitude of the loss (*iacturae demonstratio*). The latter already represents a transition to the section of lamentation (*comploratio*), which is, above all, meant to show great grief (*luctus*). This is to be followed by consolation (*consolatio*) and exhortation (*exhortatio*).

*(Pelc 1987, 441)*

In accordance with these principles, the structure of *Laments* can be characterized as follows:

Demonstration of the magnitude of the loss (Laments I and II), grief (III, IV, V), praise (VI), expression of loss (VII, VIII), exhortation (IX, XI), praise and demonstration of the magnitude of the loss (XII, XIII), and grief (XIV). Laments XVII and XVIII maintain a psalmic tone, leading into the crucial consolatory lament – Lament XIX, entitled “Dream” (“Sen”).

*(Ziomek 1973, 318)*

In light of Kochanowski’s Hellenic education, one can also attempt to organize the *Laments* in accordance with the stages of Greek tragedy: the hero’s struggle against the enemy (*agon*, I), suffering (*pathos*, II–IV), “the messenger,” or death, agony, burial (*angelos*, VII), lamentations (*threnos*, VIII–XV), the discovery of truth and the questioning of values (*anagnorisis*, XVI–XVIII), and, finally, the arrival of a new order (*theophania*, XIX) *(Pelic 1969, 191)*.

Both of these descriptions capture aspects of the structure of the *Laments* – representing a certain chronology of feelings and actions – but only to a certain extent. On the one hand, the order of the individual poems does not correspond precisely to the principles of epicedial
poetry; on the other, the “lamentation” stage contains as many as eight poems with diverse themes and structures.

Departing from this erudite context, one might view the order of the Laments as an image of Orszula’s gradual disappearance, following a more specific chronological structure in this biographical sense. However, the chronology of when the individual parts of the cycle were written is impossible to establish, as there are no surviving manuscripts, alternative versions, or commentaries left by the poet. Stanisław Lempicki writes of a “natural order” in the Laments based on the progression of Orszula’s illness and death: sudden illness (Lament V), final moments (VI), dressing the body and laying it in a coffin (VII), the funeral (XII), and the laying of a tombstone (XIII) (Pelc 1969, 236–48).

In contrast to the epicedial analysis, this chronological approach puts Orszula, and not the lyric subject, at the center of attention. If we extend the sequence of events to include not only “natural” phenomena, but also supernatural, mythological, or religious events, then we can reproduce the path Orszula traveled from the moment of her death until her appearance in her father’s dream in Lament XIX – and thus her gradual disappearance or movement from the visible to the represented world.

Scholars have observed that Kochanowski did not have a particularly developed visual imagination (Weintraub 1977, 150–72; Ziomek 1973, 263). The sole surviving contemporaneous portrait of the poet himself is a memorial bust (Walecki 1973, 135–42). His own limited ability to convey images is reflected in the very meager description in the Laments of Orszula’s physical appearance. It would be impossible to sketch the girl’s portrait on the basis of this description, as it seems to refer to a certain idealization rather than to the real child. As a humanist, Kochanowski saw the surrounding world through the prism of convention and ancient culture. This perspective formed part of the ideal of the “Renaissance man,” who viewed reality, including death, in a much more abstract way than his medieval predecessors.

In the Laments, death is ubiquitous, but it does not resemble the terrifying figure from the medieval Danse Macabre. Instead, it is closer to the ancient figure of death – abstract and impersonal, eliciting neither fear nor disgust, but only impotent rage. In Kochanowski’s cycle, death is never described, but frequently evoked – either directly, as “death” (“śmierć”), or hidden behind mythological figures (Persephone, Pluto), characterized as “impious” (“niepobożna”) or “stern” (“sroga”). Orszula and death meet in two metaphorical situations: in Lament I, death takes the form of a dragon (“the snake when he finds a hidden nest / Of fledgling nightingales, rears and strikes fast” [“Słowiczki liche zbiera, a swe schläge / Gardło pasie”]); in Lament V, it is represented as a gardener who brandishes “the swift sickle’s blade” (“sadownik […] ukwapliwy (który) podcina “oliwk(ą) mal(ą),” V, 1–2). The image of death as a dragon belongs to the Christian imaginary, while the second image points to ancient or Mediterranean texts. The “enemy” mentioned in Lament XI, frequently identified with doom, may be a reference to the devil, or simply to death as it was understood in the Middle Ages (Delumeau 1978). In Lament XVI, in which the figure of Cicero appears, we see death “knocking at the door,” as in the Danse Macabre. The figure of the Grim Reaper tends to be associated with natural inevitability, with a reality that must be accepted. However, in Lament XII, Orszula encounters the Reaper far too early. Her untimely passing makes the acceptance of death impossible:

Such a rich wreath of virtues; their bright crown
Imposed so heavily, she was brought down
Much before harvest. Little ear of grain,
Before your time, I sow you once again.

(Kochanowski 1995, XII, 21–23)
In subsequent laments, the image of death becomes syncretic, mixing ancient and Christian images. By Lament XIX, the final poem of the cycle, only the Christian vision remains.

The description of Orszula’s physical appearance seems meager, but her portrait in the realm of sound is far more developed. The girl hums and twitters (VIII, 5), “eager to babble, sing, even compose rhymes” (XII, 6), and “says prayers” (XII, 12) – though in Lament XIX she is “still a child learning to speak” (XIX, 38). Subjective, perhaps hyperbolic reconstruction collides with simple, objective statements. The poet provides few details, using very general expressions and often resorting to clichéd diminutives: the girl is “dear” (“ucieszna”); she has “tiny arms and legs” (“członeczki”); her “small soul” (“mała olwika”). These are not descriptive elements in any strict sense, but rather they testify to a subjective, lyrical vision. The poet almost always represents Orszula in motion: “your words,” “your curtsies,” “your young lady’s pose.” The only exception here is the concluding Lament XIX, in which the child becomes entirely still and silent (Kochanowski 1960, 615). The poetic cycle itself reveals the reasons for the lack – or indeed impossibility – of any adequate description:

Ungodly Death, my eyes have been defiled
By having had to watch my best loved child
Die! Watch you like a robber stalk the house
And shake the green fruit from her parents’ boughs.

(Kochanowski 1995, IV, 1–4)

Zgwałciłaś, niepobożna śmiercią, oczy moje,
Żem widział umierające mile dziecię swoje!
Widziałem, kiedyś trzęsła owoc niedordzały,
A rodzicom nieszczęsnym serca się krajały.

(IV, 1–4)

The father’s eyes lose their ability to see because they have observed the child growing like an “olive seedling” (V, 1) or a “little ear of grain” (XII, 23), and then witnessed the unfathomable. This loss of vision leaves the poet unable to convey anything about his beloved child in images. At most, he can describe the “pathetic garments” that Orszula “once wore” (VII, 14), and the “gold-clasped belt” (VII, 15) that has no further use after her passing (VIII, 2).

But is it possible that the limited visual dimension of the Laments is an intentional device, as Orszula’s gradual disappearance makes all description impossible? The answer to this question can be found in the chronology of the individual poems.

From the very beginning of the cycle, the final line of the dedication – “Thou art no more, my Urszula” (“Nie masz cię, Orszulo moja”) – emphasizes the absence of the dead child. After Lament I, the figure of the girl appears in Lament II: “Why did you have to snatch away my small / Girl who had hardly learned to live at all” (“żyć na świecie / Nie umiawszy, musiała w ranym umrzeć lecie,” lines 23–24). We see and hear her in Lament III, in which the descriptions convey dynamism: “Your words, your curtsies, your young lady’s pose” (“O słowa! o zabawo! o
wdzięczne ukłony,” line 7). In Lament IV, the father sees his dying daughter (lines 1–2); and in Lament V, the child is “felled” (line 12).

In Lament VI, Orszula’s absence is symbolized by silence. Again, we see her in motion, this time compared to a “Slavic Sappho,” until suddenly the singing stops. In this silence, the imagined image of the fully grown daughter appears, speaking words that Kochanowski most likely borrowed from a ritual wedding song (Kochanowski 1972, 14). Orszula’s description thus goes hand in hand with the construction of her idealized image.

In Lament VII, the clothes worn by Orszula when she was still alive are compared to the “shroud” in which she is buried. We can still see traces of a bygone existence: her body is still present, visible, but deprived of life and its former dress. In Lament VIII, the poet mentions the silence that envelops the house when the father is alone; in Lament IX, his “worldview is in crisis” (Ziomek 1973, 316). The next time Orszula appears, in Lament X, she is already in the other world, her presence only signaled by the form of the vocative. Up until Lament VIII, she can still appear in the world of the living, although she no longer belongs to it. The poet’s many questions suggest the medieval *ubi sunt* motif, with its rhetorical, “Where are those who were before us?” (*Ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt?*). In Lament X, he entreats her to return, in whatever form: “Wherever you may be – if you exist” (“Gdzieśkolwiek jest, jeśli jesteś”).

The girl’s funeral, or her final departure from the visible world, is described in Lament XII, which is the chronological continuation of Laments VII and VIII: “For you will never, never sprout nor bloom / Again, to light my eyes’ unending gloom” (“Bo już nigdy nie wzndziesz przed mojem [:…] oczema”). In this poem, we find many details concerning visual and auditory impressions – the last instance of such impressions in the entire cycle. Perhaps the poet repeats these details to preserve the image of his daughter in memory, since she will forever remain invisible.

Lament XIII refers to the time after the funeral, focusing on the tombstone that commemorates the girl. The tombstone supposedly has the final quatrain of the poem etched into it – a quatrain that emphasizes the inversion of the natural order of things. Orszula thus irrevocably belongs to the world of the dead, while the poet, in Lament XIV, compares himself to Orpheus in his efforts to find her: “Your singer now; now we must both assert / Our rights before stern Pluto, soften him / With songs and tears until his own eyes swim” (“Ale ze mną pospolu póżd aż do pokoja / Surowego Plutona: owa go [to] łzami, / To temi żalosnemi zmickywia pieśniami, / Żę mi moją namiłszu dziewczę jeszcze wróci†”). In Lament XV, Kochanowski calls out to “Golden-haired Erato” (perhaps this was the color of Orszula’s hair), evoking the Greek muse of lyric and erotic poetry, while this time comparing himself to Niobe, who, unable to die and descend into the world of the dead, turns to stone, becoming her own tomb. In other words, the poet himself, petrified with grief, becomes his daughter’s tombstone.

In Lament XVI, the poet, who has come to accept Orszula’s absence, abandons the mythological image of Niobe: “Man is not stone; his wounds run deep” (“Człowiek nie kamień†††”). The speaker assumes that people change with the passage of time, and that time is the “father of forgetfulness,” bringing with it consolation. In Lament XVII, Orszula has not only disappeared from the lyric subject’s eyes, but has also been removed from his ears and from the very text itself. God appears in her place. His silent presence is emphasized by the psalmic tone of Lament XVIII.

In response to her father’s earlier request from Lament X – “Comfort me, haunt me; you whom I have lost / Come back again, be shadow, dream, or ghost” – Orszula appears again in Lament XIX, the poem that closes the entire cycle, this time as a pleasant “dream,” as a shadow or fleeting phantom. However, she remains entirely passive, folded in her mother’s arms. She
is now nothing but a frozen memory, and thus she submits to description, though only in the form of a rather banal image:

Daughter, in white nightgown, gold-curled hair, 
Rose-petal skin, eyes bright as a new day. 
(Kochanowski 1995, XIX, 9–10)

Giezleczyk białe na niej, włoski pokręcone, 
Twarz rumiana, a oczy ku śmiechu skłonione. 
(XIX, 9–10)

The price of Orszula's reappearance is immobilization – we no longer see the girl but only her coffin portrait.

**Coffin portrait** – although the tradition can be traced back to ancient Egypt, Polish aristocratic culture made the coffin portrait a unique phenomenon on a global scale between the early seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries. Often painted on tin and displayed during elaborate funeral ceremonies (attached to the shorter side of the coffin found on the catafalque, or the so-called “castle of grief,” *castrum doloris*), the portrait symbolized the connectedness of the spiritual and material worlds. After the funeral, portraits and plaques often formed epitaphs placed in churches. Their forms and production techniques varied over time, and depending on the status and wealth of the deceased’s family.

In a certain sense, the *Laments* are a chronicle of Orszula’s departure, absence, and disappearance: from her death to the laying of her body in the coffin and the grave (with the significant omission of any religious ritual), to the placing of the tombstone, all the way to her final disappearance, and then reappearance in dreams alone.

**Laments, or mourning for oneself**

The lyric subject himself, left bereft by the death of his daughter, is omnipresent throughout the cycle of Kochanowski’s *Laments*. He addresses Orszula in Laments III, VI, VIII, XII, and XIII, and refers to her in Laments I, II, IV, V, XIV, and XIX. Yet Orszula herself does not appear at all in Laments VI, VIII–XIII, and XV–XVIII – that is, in the majority of the cycle’s poems.

Both the girl’s presence and the forms of her absence affect the uses of grammatical tenses: the present predominates in reflective fragments, while the poems in which Orszula does not appear are filled with verbs in the past tense. This is unsurprising, since these poems express reminiscences of times irretrievable, at least until Lament XIX, in which the past tense refers to events that never actually took place. Only infrequently do verbs appear in the future tense, and always in the negative insofar as they concern Orszula:

For you, my comfort, you will never more 
Come back to warm my old heart to its core 
(Kochanowski 1995, III, 9–10)
A ty pociecho moja, już mi się nie wrócisz
Na wieki ani mojej tesknice okrócisz

(III, 9–10)

They miss her body warmth; and so do I
(Kochanowski 1995, VII, 5)

Już ona członeczków swych wami nie odzieje
(VII, 5)

For you will never, never sprout nor bloom
Again, to light my eyes’ unending gloom.
(Kochanowski 1995, XII, 27–28)

Bo już nigdy nie wznidziesz ani przed mojema
Wiekom wiecznie zakwitniesz smutnemi oczema
(XII, 27–28)

The father recalls his daughter’s former activities, listing the things she will never do again. In Lament XIX, in turn, the poet’s mother enumerates a whole series of potential sufferings that Orszula did not have to experience in her short life, expressing these grieving negations through verbs in the past tense.

The image of the girl that emerges from these poems seems disjointed. In Lament XIX, we see, or rather hear, an infant (“when she was still a child learning how to speak” [“jeszcze słów nie domawiała”]), while Lament VI refers to a budding poet (“My Slavic Sappho, little poet-heiress” [“Ucieszna moja śpiewaczko! Safo słowieńska!”]) or to a young lady:

Dear mother, kiss me, I’ll no more be able
To do my tasks or sit here at your table;
I must give back my keys and go away,
Never return to where my parents stay.
(Kochanowski 1995, VI, 15–19)

Już ja tobie, moja matko, służyć nie będę
Ani za twym wdzięcznym stołem miejsca zasiędę;
Przyjdzie mi klucze położyć, samej precz jechać,
Domu rodziców swych miłych wiecznie zaniechać
(VI, 15–19)

The reason for the disjointed nature of these descriptions of Orszula is that they simultaneously refer to her actual (past) existence and to her unrealized (potential) lives – as a poet (VI) or as a woman experiencing the various tribulations associated with coming of age (XIX).

But who is addressing whom in these poems? Do they show a father speaking to his daughter? Or a poet speaking to a future poet? The father, it is worth noting, is in fact a poet, while the daughter becomes one only in his subjective vision, transforming an infant’s babbles into the songs of Sappho. Through this amplification, Kochanowski makes the girl his heir, or perhaps, in a sense, his image. In his other elegiac poems, the division of conventional roles is
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more distinct: a living man praises the departed and consoles the mourner-listeners, in the process persuading them to accept the fact that the deceased has already become an object. In the Laments, the role of consoler is played by the lyric subject’s mother, who speaks to him from the other world, visiting him in his dreams. He himself does not speak words of consolation. Instead, he is consumed with grief, lamenting not so much his dead daughter as his own grief-stricken state. Her departure has left him confronting emptiness, nothingness:

The void that fills my house is so immense
Now that my girl is gone. It baffles sense:
We all are here, yet no one is, I feel;
The flight of one small soul has tipped the scale.
(Kochanowski 1995, VIII, 1–4)

Wielkie śmiuciła pustki w domu moim,
Moja droga Orszulo, tym zniknieniem swoim!
Pełno nas, a jakoby nikogo nie było:
Jedną maluczką duszą tak wiele ubyło.
(VIII, 1–4)

It is unclear what Kochanowski meant when he wrote, in a letter to Jan Zamoyski, “You will not allow me to complain” (Kochanowski 1960, 801). Was he referring to the grief of losing his beloved daughter or to an illness? In any event, he died soon afterwards, perhaps supporting the hypothesis that his lament extended to both his child and himself. Orszula’s duality is thus a projection of Kochanowski himself, an announcement of his own death, since when a child dies, something in the parents dies as well. Accordingly, Orszula’s ambivalent image is not as disjointed as it may at first appear. By lamenting his daughter, the poet also laments himself. Only the death of a child can expose his own impermanence with such power.

A comparison of the Laments with Petrarch’s sonnets of Laura or Ronsard’s poems of Marie provides further evidence for the thesis that Kochanowski’s Laments contain more than just mourning for the poet’s child. Kochanowski used similar metaphors and formal solutions as the Italian and French poets (for example, the appearance of the beloved in a dream), but neither Laura’s nor Marie’s death led to the restoration of the natural order of things. In Laments, this order is only restored thanks to the poet’s mother, who speaks words of consolation in Lament XIX, attempting to mitigate her son’s partial identification with Orszula. In order to do so, she shows him his daughter as a young child, not as an imagined poet, emphasizing that he will never experience what she has experienced as a mother – something no male human being can experience. Thus relying on motherly prerogatives, she uses the imperative mood to tell her son to be human, and only human (“Bear humanly the human lot!” [“Ludzkie przygody / Ludzie noś!”]).

Despite the significant differences between them, both Kochanowski and Petrarch owe their immortal fame to the death of a beloved.

French translations of Laments

“I saw Ronsard” (“Ronsardum vidi” – “Ronsardam uwidył”), wrote Kochanowski, upon his return to Poland from Italy, in 1559 (Pelc 1987, 42). Yet none of Ronsard’s works, nor any contemporaneous accounts, contain even the briefest mention of Kochanowski being in France. It is unclear if Ronsard, the leading poet of the Pléiade group, in fact saw Kochanowski
If he did, he appears to have left no account of the meeting. In any case, it was the Italian Quattrocento, and not the later and more severe (today we might even say over-intellectualized) French Renaissance, that was Kochanowski’s true source of inspiration. He encountered Frenchmen on two other occasions during his relatively short life: in 1573, when Henry III of France was elected to the Polish throne (Kochanowski had favored the Habsburg candidate); and later, after Henry’s abdication and departure from Poland, when Kochanowski wrote the Latin poem “Gallo crocitanti,” or “A Reply to a Cackling Frenchman” (“Odpowiedź głączającemu Francuzowi”) (Kochanowski 1612, n.d.b.). The poem was a response to a rhymed lampoon, entitled “Farewell to Poland” (“Adieu à la Pologne”), written by Philippe Desportes, a poet in the employ of Henry III’s court. The word *gallus* refers not only to a Frenchman, but also to a rooster. So much for Kochanowski’s interest in France – and, for that matter, France’s interest in Kochanowski: there was, and continues to be, little interest in him among French readers. Jan of Czarnolas is known to only a small group of Polish literature specialists, despite the fact that his works have been translated into French.

Indeed, the leading poet of the Polish Renaissance was even forgotten in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth itself, only to be “rediscovered” during the Romantic era. The famous opening lines of Adam Mickiewicz’s epic poem, *Pan Tadeusz* (1834), bear similarities to the first lines of Kochanowski’s epigram “On Good Health” (“Na zdrowie”): “O, noble health, / Thou – all our wealth. / None thy taste cost, / Till thou are lost” (Kochanowski n.d.a.) [“Ślachetne zdrowie, / Nikt się nie dowie, / Jako smakujesz, / A ż się zepsujesz” (Kochanowski 1960, 225)]. Mickiewicz was probably also the first to translate fragments of Kochanowski’s poems into French, including some of the *Laments*. He devoted several lectures to Kochanowski in his course on Slavic literature, at the Collège de France in Paris, in 1840–1841. Mickiewicz’s translations and commentaries emphasize the folk character of Kochanowski’s work, effectively turning him into a kind of pre-Romantic poet (Zaremba 2000, 211–25). In any event, we do not know how French audiences reacted to this presentation. Even George Sand, who once compared Mickiewicz to Byron and Goethe, never mentions the lectures, much less Kochanowski himself.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, new French translations of the *Laments* appeared, authored by Wacław Gasztowtt (1884), Lucien Roquigny (1919), and Edmond Marek (1983). Roquigny stylized the language of his translation to resemble sixteenth-century French, although the result sounds more archaic than Ronsard’s language, perhaps even somewhat artificial. Gasztowtt’s rhymed translation is more accessible, despite its earlier date of publication: there is no archaization, and the translator often creates rhymes at the expense of fidelity to the original meanings. In the original version of Lament X, the lyric subject repeatedly addresses Orszula using the second-person singular; in Gasztowtt’s version, the second person appears only in the final four verses, though the questions that constitute Lament X are addressed only to the girl. The impossibility of providing an answer means that there is no answer – or, at least, no certain answer. The overall tonality of the translation faithfully renders the character of the original, though various semantic differences appear too frequently. In sum, Gasztowtt’s French translation is a good example of a “*belle infidèle*,” or “unfaithful beauty”: an elegant but inexact translation.

Edmond Marek’s 1983 unrhymed translation, in turn, is faithful and thorough. Unfortunately, it is only available in a few libraries, since it was published by a small Polish émigré press that no longer exists. In 1990, Marek published a small selection of Kochanowski’s poems with the same press. In an apparent attempt to resonate with French readers, the volume was entitled *Jan Kochanowski: An Emulator of Ronsard* (*Jan Kochanowski, un émule de Ronsard*), here meaning only that the work of both poets is based on similar principles – namely, humanism...
and the propagation of their respective national languages. In this shared ethos and purpose, Kochanowski may retrospectively take his place among the best-known poets of his age.

**Notes**

1 “Immatura tuae dum defles funera Laurae, / Illam immortalem teque, Petrarcha, facis” (Kochanowski 1584).
2 In fact, the French historian Philippe Ariès claims that, at least in French culture, the very concept of “childhood” is an invention of the eighteenth century (Ariès 1973).
3 Several centuries later, Adam Mickiewicz described an encounter with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, about which the latter left no account.

**References**