The Theater of the Old and Its Transitions: Measure for Measure within Gombrowicz’s Pornografia

Abstract

The article presents a comparative analysis of Witold Gombrowicz’s Pornografia (1960) and Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure. The renowned play provides a framework for reinterpreting Gombrowicz’s late novel. While previous readings of Pornografia focused mainly on Nietzschean intertexts, analysing it through references to Measure for Measure allows the novel to be seen as a political treatise addressing the phenomenon of biopolitics.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Gombrowicz, biopolitics, Measure for Measure, Pornografia

Introduction: “The heavens give safety to your purposes”¹

“Let there be some more test made of my mettle/ Before so noble and so great a figure/ Be stamped upon it”² is the plea of Angelo, the antagonist of Shakespeare’s dark comedy, to Duke Vincentio. Its title, Measure for Measure, is inspired by the Book of Matthew. Angelo’s reaction is completely justified. Duke Vincentio has decided to leave his city, Vienna, and has for the time of his absence handed over all his prerogatives to Angelo who, while regarded as just and virtuous, is an inexperienced young man. Angelo worries whether he can live up to the task. He expects mounting difficulties, but doesn’t expect a scheme to play out.

The quote from the unsure Angelo, demanding further trials of his abilities, could be paraphrased by all the researchers tackling even a single Shakespearean work,

² Shakespeare, Measure for Measure, 10–11.
for each of them has become overgrown over the centuries with commentaries, interpretations, etc. In addition to the effort of entering into dialogue with Shakespeare, when the perspective of including a work by Witold Gombrowicz – thus confronting the legacy of Gombrowicz-ology, also rich in voices and exegeses – the situation of daredevilry would appear extremely difficult. Then again, at times courage is rewarded, however rarely. May what follows show such courage; its aim is to reveal relations between Shakespeare’s play and Gombrowicz’s novel *Pornografia* (1960), while reflecting on how the two works illuminate one another and on what type of relations they enter.

Comparing works by Gombrowicz with Shakespeare’s legacy is not a novel concept. These relations, William’s influence on the work of “Witoldo”, has been captured, problematized, and thoroughly analysed numerous times, as evidenced by Jerzy Jarzębski’s inspiring work “Gombrowicz i Szekspir”\(^5\), which pinpointed Shakespearean inspirations in Gombrowicz works. These appear at the level of quotations, the construction of plays, overt and hidden references, and perhaps most importantly in the later writer’s philosophy, whose “interpersonal church”, with particular emphasis on issues of form, shows considerable correspondence to the Shakespearean *theatrum mundi*.

Jarzębski’s analysis may be the most exhaustive of attempts to trace the “presence” of Shakespeare in Gombrowicz’s writing; however, some gaps remain. These, in turn, provide the chance to supplement discoveries concerning the Bard’s influence upon the Polish author. This impact has been most thoroughly traced and described in the context of Gombrowicz’s dramas (construction, references, plot devices, etc.), yet the same has yet to be done with his novels, apart from the level of quotations, or rather cryptic quotations. *Pornografia* provides an interesting example\(^4\), especially when read with constant reference to Gombrowicz’s favorite Shakespeare play, *Measure for Measure*.

**“I have an idea [...] for a screenplay”\(^5\): About the theater of the old**

It is not enough to juxtapose these two particular works, however, due to the fact that Gombrowicz often referenced Shakespeare works (mainly the dramas), infusing his works with more or less exact quotations and cryptic quotations from those writings, along with the fact that their literary philosophies correspond in some ways. And the particular sentiment with which Polish literature’s enfant terrible treated *Measure for Measure* – not an obvious choice, given claims about its structural deficiencies raised by critics and literary scholars, and alleged lapses in the creation of the main characters\(^6\) – isn’t enough of a basis for comparison. *Pornografia* is a dense, hermetic text, full of intertextual references.

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What academic studies concerned with the book bring to the fore is its Nietzschean path, all but a key to the entire novel. As writers including Jacek Łagowski and Michał Głowiński have shown, numerous parts of the text, with particular emphasis on paragraphs in which the protagonist (purposefully) named Fryderyk speak, are full of paraphrases and quotations from Nietzsche’s works. The memorable scene in the rural church (discussed below), in which a spectacular “breaking” of the mystery of the Mass takes place, also clearly connects the novel with the philosopher’s concepts. However, this Nietzschean path need not invalidate traces of Shakespearean inspirations, although they are somewhat more difficult to grasp. While Nietzsche’s words echo widely in Pornografia, locating direct references to Shakespeare and to Measure... is problematic – a similar level of reference is virtually nonexistent. In the process of comparative analysis, I located only one paraphrase from Shakespeare’s play within the novel. This circumstantial evidence may be misleading, given Gombrowicz’s predilection to quote Shakespeare in his own works, while having known sizeable passages of the plays by heart, as Jarzębski states. Gombrowicz quite often “wrote in Shakespeare”. The presence of one imprecise quotation does not necessarily mean that he “thought” Measure for Measure during the work on Pornografia (a difficult process, according to his Diary). It is certainly a lead, although quite a weak one.

An inducement to couple these two works thus does not come from direct references. The basis for such a practice may, however, be similarities and transformations of related storyline solutions in both works, as well as convergences of the main motif around which their action is organized. In both works, the issue of relations between “old age” and “youth” comes to the fore, and, as a consequence of this relationship, a specific “theater” which, for the purposes of the present article, I will refer to as “the theater of the old”.

“How would you live, Pompey? By being a bawd?”: about the elder’s frolic

The play’s plot is not the easiest to reconstruct, especially when one takes into account the considerable complexity of the action and the multitude of characters entering

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9 “Dar’st thou die? The sense of death is most in apprehension,/ And the poor beetle that we tread upon/ In corporal sufferance finds a pang as great/ As when a giant dies” (Shakespeare, op. cit., 99), says Isabella, a main character in the play; “pain, suffering are as terrible in a worm’s body as in the body of a giant” (Gombrowicz, Pornografia, 54), states Witold, the novel’s narrator, trying to penetrate Fryderyk’s thoughts while looking at a worm being crushed.
10 See Jarzębski, Gombrowicz i...
12 Shakespeare, Measure..., 53.
various, often ambiguous arrangements and configurations. The scenic “happen-
ing” connects with Duke Vincentio’s decision to leave Vienna immediately. This is ac-
accompanied by his transfer of power to the young man with a good reputation among
the people, the virtuous Angelo, who is to be helped by but subordinated to an experi-
enced politician, Escalus. Importantly, Duke Vincentio also entrusts the young man with
a certain mission. Angelo is to restore to power an exceptionally restrictive law, unen-
forced for the past fourteen years: extramarital relationships are to be punished, even
by death, and brothels must move outside the city walls. Immediately after the Duke’s de-
parture, the young official implements the law with the utmost ruthlessness and enthusi-
asm. In reality, however, the Duke does not leave, but roams the Vienna streets disguised
as a friar, controlling the law’s restoration and its consequences.

Why the Duke entrusted this difficult mission to the inexperienced Angelo is not obvi-
ous. On one hand, Vincentio, as he declares in a conversation with Friar Thomas, war-
den of Vienna’s friars, he does not feel “in the right” to impose rules he had not followed
and does not care about. “Sith ‘twas my fault to give the people scope,/ ‘Twould be my
tyranny to strike and gall them/ For what I bid them do; for we bid this be done/ When
ever deeds have their permissive pass/ And not the punishment”\(^{13}\). With this, another
circumstance is explicitly revealed in the Duke’s dialogue with Thomas. “Therefore, in-
deed, my father,/ I have on Angelo imposed the office,/ Who may in th’ ambush of my
name strike home,/ And yet my nature never in the fight/ To do in slander”\(^{14}\). What is
easy to state is that the Duke completely absorbed Machiavelli’s wisdom\(^{15}\). He delegates
unpopular decisions to officials, and escapes any criticism. But why Angelo? Why this
choice? Angelo is young, popular, and enjoys great renown. A thesis seems justi-
\(^{15}\) See Nowak, “Bogowie…”.
\(^{16}\) See Nowak, “Bogowie…”.
\(^{17}\) See Nowak, “Bogowie…”, and Jan Kott, “Głowa za wianek i wianek za głowę”, in: Płeć Rozalindy (Kraków:

From the very beginning, roles are distributed and the finale is also foreseen. Young
Angelo stands no chance in a clash with a demiurgic older man\(^{17}\). However, tension
in the Vincentio-Angelo dyad isn’t the play’s only plotline. The restrictive law’s blade,
onece set in motion, quickly takes its toll: among others, Claudio, a young aristocrat with
a good reputation and considerable connections, is sentenced to death. Angelo, despite
many voices asking for Claudio’s pardon, demands that the penalty be carried out,
with the stubbornness and zeal typical of young people, for the law must afford no exceptions. Finally, Claudio’s sister Isabella, known in public as a beautiful, wise novice nun, comes to ask for her brother’s pardon. Angelo initially rejects Isabella’s pleas. Finally, whether testing her or truly smitten by her qualities – or initially testing her then both engulfed in lust and relishing his own power – he makes an immoral proposal. Isabella is to give herself to him in return for her brother’s life (her brother also pleads for Isabella to give herself).

The novice nun does not agree to this. However, Vincentio, hidden under his friar’s hood, learns about the whole affair. To Isabella, he offers a solution that is ethically dubious although acceptable both in the law’s eyes and in the context of her beliefs – virtue, but only her own, as it seems, is a priority for Isabella\(^\text{18}\). Her tryst with Angelo would take place under cover of darkness. At the last moment, the nun is to be replaced in the role of Angelo’s lover by Mariana, Angelo’s former fiancée (who, interestingly enough, is also willing to accept this proposal). Therefore, we have more theatrics and another transaction, “garland for garland, head for head”, as Jan Kott wrote in his structural analysis of the play. First, it is Isabella’s brother chasing Angelo’s sister, then the sister, who is almost a nun, chases Mariana, as does the Duke. All these games, in which sex and death are at stake, are observed – and have been arranged – by a perverse and obscene director, Vincentio.

It would be futile to describe the adventures that follow the act of this carefully directed tryst-transaction in their entirety – this article would then turn into an elaborate summary of Shakespeare’s work. However, the play’s finale is worth noting. It holds Vincentio’s triumphant “return”: his overturning the death sentence; Angelo’s humiliation, forced to marry Mariana, a woman he does not want; a pardon but also the marriage of Claudio to his pregnant beloved; and finally the Duke’s marriage who, without asking the opinion of Isabella, the would-be nun, tells her she will become his wife. With the old man’s sovereign power reasserted and the restrictive law introduced and maintained, Vincentio grants himself the right to overrule it – one might say the Duke introduces a selective state of emergency in his realm – and as the perverse director he “snatches” the beautiful Isabella from God, probably on a whim. Theatrical intrigues arranged by Vincentio (in many ways) end with the cynical old man’s complete success.

Pornografia, in contrast to the Shakespearean play, now somewhat neglected, shows a different order, at least in its starting point. Instead of a Vienna consumed by harlotry, the novel takes place in war-torn Poland. Instead of a cynical duke, we have two intellectuals, Fryderyk and Witold (the narrator), who are leaving Warsaw for the countryside. Why they’re leaving is less important here. The protagonists’ dyad\(^\text{19}\) is carried out

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\(^\text{18}\) See Nowak, “Bogowie…”.

\(^\text{19}\) The term dyad may be misleading here. Although the ontological status of “pairs” of characters in Gombrowicz’s works may not be entirely clear, and of the characters in Pornografia Fryderyk is closest to Witold in the sense of worldviews, he does not identify himself completely with him – it is impossible to fully equate the two characters with each other. In the novel, at the narrative layer, there are signs of Witold’s distance from Fryderyk. These appear, among other junctures, at the end of the text. I owe this observation to Prof. Zaneta Nalewajk-Turecka, whom I sincerely thank.
in a Polish village where, despite the turmoil of the war, structures of old, traditional rural forms are maintained (albeit barely, a theme that became a set feature in Gombrowicz’s work). Hence, we have family, an arranged engagement, the rhythm determined by weekly expeditions to church... It is during one such expedition that Pornografia’s spectacular sequence takes place, the one that sets everything in motion. As the narrator states, Fryderyk (the name necessarily evokes Nietzschean associations) “breaks” the sacrament:

This time his kneeling had a crushing effect, like killing a hen, and the Mass rolled on, though struck mortally and babbling like a madman. Ite missa est. And ... oh, what triumph! What victory over the Mass! What pride! As if its abolition was, for me, a longed-for ending of sorts: finally I was alone, by myself, without anyone or anything but me, alone in absolute darkness ... so I have reached my limit and attained darkness! [...] The holy service was coming to an end, I looked around sleepily, I was tired, oh, we’ll have to leave, ride home, to Poworna, on the sandy road ... but all of a sudden my gaze ... my eyes ... my eyes, panicky and heavy. Yes, something was pulling at me... [...]. God, and a miracle! God and a miracle! What was it, though? It was ... part of a cheek and the nape of a neck ... it belonged to someone standing in front of us, in the crowd, a few steps away ...Oh, I almost choked! It was ... (a boy).20

In the world of the main characters, a world of fossilized, stifling, distinctly anachronistic though still valid forms, the annihilation of the absolute, or rather the deletion of its presence, even if it’s a petrified presence, causes another deity to emerge: the young – youth. Elsewhere in his writing, Gombrowicz, interpreting his own novel, claimed enigmatically that man is torn between god (fullness, the absolute) and young (unfullness, but beauty).21 Pornografia’s protagonists now follow this liberating, seductive, exciting unfullness, or rather a twisted stream of desire for the young, for youth. They do this in a peculiar way.

Since the moment of “overcoming”, “breaking” the Mass, all the Fryderyk-Witold dyad’s aspirations concentrate on attempts to “unite” two young people: Henia, who is engaged to a lawyer, Waclaw, and Karol. In the process of “matching”, the main characters see an opportunity to establish relations between their senile lives and the others’ invigorating, tempting (in its unshaped-ness) youth. When these attempts fail, Fryderyk and Witold come up with a concept to make these two young bodies “touch by means of crime”. From that moment, everything leads to a bloody finale in which a “carousel of corpses” crowns the theatrical project of “playing” a boy and a girl.22

20 Gombrowicz, Pornografia, 33.
22 See Jarzębski, Gra w Gombrowicza.
“Truth or lie? Help or treason?”25: a hypothesis of hidden relations between the works

It is easy to declare that the fictional solutions of Measure for Measure and Pornografia don’t line up. It is difficult to think of a match between Shakespeare’s Elizabethan drama and the plot of Gombrowicz’s novel, completed in 1958. However, a more detailed reading allows us to discover important shared traits between the texts. Most often, Shakespeare’s drama (categorized as a “problem comedy”) is read as a work about wielding power.24 Duke Vincentio, bearing in mind Machiavelli’s teachings, is establishing his sovereign position as ruler of Vienna. It’s probably no exaggeration to define the methods of his operation as biopolitics. The basic question concerns why the Duke wanted to unexpectedly impose restrictive laws in Vienna to end acts of harlotry. Was this caused by a deep moral or ethical need? Perhaps – although in the Shakespearean world such decisions usually have different motivations. Vincentio introduces cruel regulations because he has realized that it is simply easier to manage a society effectively structured by family-oriented order (“basic social cell”). When reterritorialized, to speak in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms25, home and hearth make individuals less inclined to rebel. Instead of using their own energy, and therefore the energy of their desire, in acts of revolution, they use their energy to support their families. This thesis is confirmed by the final series of marriages, concluded according to the ruler. These marriages are largely against the will of the spouses-to-be. All of the Duke’s biopolitics takes young people as its object, unsurprisingly. Young people, perhaps not infantile in their youth, glorified and confessed by Gombrowicz’s protagonists, are always young.

Furthermore, there is the way the Duke “plays” his part with Angelo, Isabella, and Claudio: this sadistic game he plays also belongs to the order in which the main tension is determined by the polarity of old age–youth. A similar situation can be observed in Pornografia, where youth (Franek, Henia, and later Skuziak), though not without obstacles, is directed, “played”, by the “old men” dyad of Fryderyk and Witold. Along with tense relations between the old and the young, we have a corresponding way of acting initiated by “old age”. This is how we understand “theater”, in Measure for Measure and in Pornografia. The theater of the old in which they play or try to play the demiurgical-director role. For example, Vincentio “preparing” Mariana/Isabella for her tryst with Angelo finds its equivalent in Pornografia when a pantomime scene is arranged by Fryderyk, and in the disturbing sequence of “rolling up the pants leg”.27

It may also be important to point out that this “theater of the old” uses related “technical means” to create the planned composition, the desired “arrangement”

25 Gombrowicz, Pornografia, 121.
26 Shakespeare, Measure…, 86–88
27 Gombrowicz, Pornografia, 53–54
of the young (and of their bodies). Vincentio’s system is governed by the logic of transaction: exchange/swap. As Jan Kott wrote: “measure for measure, garland for garland, head for head, bawd for bawd... and so on”\textsuperscript{28}. The Fryderyk-Witold dyad also makes up a directing technique, however subjected it may be to the right of substitution (young for old) and to the right of addition (knife to knife, young to young, leg to leg, death to death\textsuperscript{29}). In both Gombrowicz’s world and Shakespeare’s imagination, theater – a biopolitical theatre – is the only means of bringing the “old” closer\textsuperscript{30} to “youth”.

It is noteworthy that the Vincentio and Fryderyk characters also correspond to each other in some respects – as opposites. The ruler of Vienna is hiding under a friar’s cloak – and regardless of whether he is dressed up or not, he continually invokes the absolute\textsuperscript{31}. Fryderyk, on the other hand, manifests his atheism/agnosticism, and lives in a world without a god – a “significant” (significant) god organizing reality. Even when he kneels during Mass (in the scene of “breaking” the sacrament), his gesture actually contradicts the idea of the absolute, undermining it. Vincentio binds individual couples into a static family structure, where, Fryderyk and Witold, in their directorial effort, destroy the “basic social unit” – Henia’s engagement to Waclaw – which is yet to come to fruition.

Moreover, the initiative that sums up the whole of Vincentio’s theatrical composition is, as may be recalled, his decision to marry Isabella. This decision is, in a way, the conclusion of the Duke’s entire authorial “drama”, in which the monarch’s sovereign power and his triumph over the “young” is celebrated and reasserted. This act by Vincentio may be matched on the set of Pornografia when Fryderyk murders – this time resulting from helplessness\textsuperscript{32} – Skuziak (a young farmhand, “entangled” in the “pornographic” happening); “throwing a piece of meat into the soup”, as Gombrowicz described the scene years later\textsuperscript{33}.

**“We looked into each other’s eyes”\textsuperscript{34}: community questioned**

At this point, the most noticeable difference is at once core and catalyst of Gombrowicz’s problematization of Measure for Measure, covertly inscribed into Pornografia’s storyline structure. Shakespeare’s world is a reality in which God, the power that structures reality, has not been erased, canceled. This does not mean his dramas, or even the particular work discussed here, are imbued with Christian heat. The important thing is that the world he creates (out of necessity, given his historical period) does not “disappear into thin air”. In that reality, no one has even whispered “God is dead”, which Nietzsche would stridently announce to the world near the end of the nineteenth century.

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\textsuperscript{28} See Kott, Głowa za wianek i wianek za głowę.
\textsuperscript{29} Gombrowicz, Pornografia, 146. See Gombrowicz, A Kind of Testament, 87.
\textsuperscript{30} Or starting a fight (which also means reducing distance) and then getting closer.
\textsuperscript{31} Shakespeare, Measure..., 9.
\textsuperscript{32} Gombrowicz, A Kind of Testament, 87.
\textsuperscript{33} See Gombrowicz, A Kind of Testament.
\textsuperscript{34} Gombrowicz, Pornografia, 162.
A good example of the effects of such a statement is Dostoevsky’s memorable quote from Demons (importantly, he could not have known Nietzsche’s writings). “If there is no God, how can I be a captain then?”\textsuperscript{55}, one character asks rhetorically. This is not about the very existence of a creator, but about its function of immobilization in certain senses of reality – in relation to words and so on, for example. With a god’s death, the annihilation of power occurs, giving certainty, a stable skeleton for imagining and thinking the world. The base disappears, “everything” disappears. Pornografia, openly Nietzschean, is an attempt to transfer some tropes from Measure... into a post-secular reality. Post-secular reality here means a kind of “liquid reality”, like the liquid order of Gombrowicz’s “interhuman church”.

Given these analogies, as well as the indirect quotation from Measure for Measure in Pornografia, and diagnoses made by the previous researchers concerning the frequent if not indelible “presence” of Shakespeare in Gombrowicz’s writing, indicating some kind of tension between these seemingly incompatible works, then the question arises as to what conclusions and which possible interpretative benefits such a diagnosis may bring. What key messages from Pornografia can be found by reading it with a constant reference to the text of Measure for Measure?

It is surely no exaggeration to suggest the play about the praxis of power is a play about community. The poles between which social relations in it are stretched and strained in a highly conventionalized community, a community of triumphant forms – royal power, nobility, the institution of church and, ultimately, law – are the figures of an old man (or a mature man finding himself already “on the side of death”, in Gombrowicz’s terms) and of the young (youth). That man “makes” his biopolitics, his “biopolitical theater”, on the human material of “youth”. Looking at Pornografia from this angle, the main issue it raises turns out to be a question that recurs recurrently in Gombrowicz’s writing, a question about relations between the old and the young, superiority and inferiority within a community where instances of “forms” from family to power, church, law, god, have been annihilated. Gombrowicz persistently creates a dietic world in which order, any central structuring reality in the form of a god or state power, for example, is not possible. The absolute is challenged by Fryderyk. The novel is set during the Second World War, the moment of European culture’s collapse, and at the same time the point where borders of states and all forms of power or law are challenged; naked forces has replaced law and power on the national and international stage. Instances and institutions, authorities and power are under interrogation. Gombrowicz’s core reality remains. A man stretched between inaccessible fullness – the Nietzschean, god-shaped “hole” in the human heart – and, as the writer desired, the young (“To the Young”). In other words, what remains is the tension between old age and maturity and incomplete, infantile youth, seductive in its amorphism (and desire

circulating between these poles, as Gombrowicz writes: Fryderyk and Witold follow the “line of tension”).

Radosław Sioma, when analyzing Pornografia, pointed out the key meaning of the novel’s disturbing last sentence. When the carousel of corpses slows to a halt – this carousel of corpses being in a way a consequence of the implosion of the world of forms and the advent of a radical interpersonal church (on the historical plane, an allegory of the Second World War can be seen) – when the young are “joined together” over Waclaw’s corpse, near that of Siemian (an underground leader who’s gone AWOL), and Fryderyk has already completed his biopolitical/erotic composition, the murder of Skuziak, Witold laconically narrates:

37 Gombrowicz, Pornografia, 162.
38 See Gombrowicz, A Kind of Testament, 83.

I looked at our little couple [Karol and Henia]. They were smiling. As the young do when faced with the difficulty of extricating themselves from a predicament. And for a second, they and we, in our catastrophe, looked into one another’s eyes.

It is hard not to ask a question about this puzzling look, so rare in the world of Gombrowicz’s imaginarium, in which intimate close-ups don’t usually occur. In this scene, one sees the moment of recognition, the moment of final connection: through blood, through murder, despite a series of failures, one perceives the connection of spheres that one would have thought cannot be connected: youth and old age. This was supposed to be a lasting moment of unity, difficult, perhaps even unthinkable, toward which the novel’s plot was striving. Unity can only be realized in circumstances this extreme – not to mention phantasmagoric and macabre. A perspective that could include reference to Shakespeare’s drama would render it necessary to see in this ending (“weak”, as some critics felt) an open question, not about the possibility of individual connection (occurring between individuals, that is) of the poles of old age and youth, but about the coming community order, perhaps political. As Jacques Derrida wrote at the close of his memorable piece “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”:

Here there is a kind of question, let us still call it historical, whose conception, formation, gestation and labor we are only catching a glimpse of today. I employ these words, I admit, with a glance toward the operations of childbearing – but also with a glance towards those who, in a society from which I do not exclude myself, turn their eyes away when faced by the as yet unnamable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity.
Derrida’s words can be applied to the problem in Pornografia’s finale. It is a question about community’s emergence after the implosion of forms. A community in which relations between old and young will not resemble those known by the former regime, having passed between the bombs and the smoke from crematoriums.

Measure for Measure’s social field is static, structured by state institutions. Functions and the flows of desire are reterritorialized in the family orders – at the ruler’s command. It cannot be overemphasized that the reality presented in the play is a world in which what is primarily “meaningful” – whether we call it a god or an absolute – does not lack ordering power. Even if Shakespeare’s imaginarius is in large part free of Christian bombast, seventeenth-century Europe didn’t yet know the consequences of the exalted scream of Zarathustra, not free of terror. It could not yet hear it.

In a stable, nonliquid world, transfers and investments of desire are regulated by the order of authorities, functions, splendors, and hierarchies. Sexual tension is played out among the cogs of a state machine, ultimately reaped in the shape of the ruler’s reasserted position. Thus Measure for Measure ends with the demiurgic old man’s indisputable triumph (evoked by his return from an alleged journey – in reality, taking off a costume – is the return of the obscene father of the primal horde in Freud’s writing). Therefore Vincentio can so easily “play out” particular sequences of his biopolitical theater, cast with the bodies of the youth, against their wills.

In Pornografia, the attempted biopolitical (or erotic?) theatrical performance takes place in a world where forms are extremely weakened. Any hierarchical force has fallen, and what was meaningful that ordered this world, whatever it was, is long gone. Only currents of deterritorialized desire remain within the uncentered universe following “along the line of tension”. Vincentio, manipulating the young, wants to reassert and affirm his position. The Fryderyk-Witold dyad, though, does not have any defensive position, except for the obvious misery of its old age, open to interpretation. This is why in Pornografia the deliberate scheme in Measure… changes, taking on a form of an attempted masturbation (figurative? actual?) of old men’s phantasms40.

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40 There is a certain hitch having to do with the novel’s title. The mysterious term Pornografia was read as the latest exemplification of perversity by the writer, whose first novel, Ferdydurke, had an inscrutable title. The novel’s title promised “portraying”, “showing” – while its plot remains distant from physical literalness, and even further from pornographic explicitness per se. While this lead does not seem fertile, a different reading is possible. The action, to put things so unfortunately, has en bloc a slightly masturbatory character and course. It is a stream of attempts to make the impossible real on a factual plan of phantasm, through thinking and composing particular arrangements of bodies (connecting with them, with the young, is an impossible aim for the Fryderyk-Witold dyad). When it fails, the recomposition of the entire painting follows (still made of bodies); this time, they invent a twining of the young in the context of a mutual crime. Ultimately, this invented and realized arrangement brings success/fulfillment, superficial and not very satisfying as this may be (often the case with autoerotic acts). On the action plane, bloody ejaculation takes place (the carousel of corpses) and, finally, confusion (“Omne animal triste post coitum”). What follows is a constatation of a “disaster”. The final question is also suggested of whether this bloody plantation, followed by mutual recognition between youth and the old, will reap some “harvest” on the historic plane and, if so, what could that be? Gombrowicz’s historical thinking is probably paired here with vivisecting the masturbation phantasm of “the old”. The analysis of collocability and separation of these plans, though problematic, would likely be possible – but would overstep the frames of this study.
A fact which seems significant in the context of relations between old age and youth is that while the Duke’s elaborate plan is realized with the utmost ruthlessness and precision, the Fryderyk-Witold dyad’s efforts often bear signs of some incompetence that results from facts including that they’ve also been seduced by the youth\textsuperscript{41}. Youth in Pornografia, as with other Gombrowicz works created in Argentina, gains a certain power, if not subjectivity and opportunity of agency. Being the “young one” in a world of hollow, impactless forms doesn’t only mean being patronized or humiliated from the outset, as in his earlier works.

Two theaters of the old remain, then, as modioperandi of mature age in regard to youth: that of Vincentio and that of Fryderyk-Witold. Their aims differ, however, as do differences in the effectiveness and artfulness of their creations. Demiurges (Fryderyk-Witold) lose their power – what remains is an open question about the future of the old and the young being together. The open question as to whether what will be born/is born on the historical plane is “only in the shape of shapelessness, in formless, mute, infant and scary shape of horror”. The question about the future community’s order.

“I couldn’t think of anything better’, he confessed, as if justifying himself”\textsuperscript{42}: a recapitulation

In conclusion, the statement may be risked that reading Pornografia in the context of Measure for Measure brings to the fore the problematization in the novel of radical change taking place in relations between the old and the young. Here, the question can also be posed about the nature and order of the community emerging after the disaster that was the Second World War, and about disaster in the world of forms. One certain conclusion is that these relations will undergo transformation (in the novel, the reader witnesses this transformation). What it will transform into – here lies the importance of and the terror in the final “look in the eyes” – neither the narrator nor Gombrowicz tell us. Reading Pornografia in a political context is also apt, as while he analyzes his novel in A Kind of Testament, Gombrowicz constantly references the West’s modern (for him) social situation, shaken by youth protests in the 1960s, in the years following the novel’s publication:

for me, youth is insufficiency and inferiority in everything, except for the one and only thing: in the fact, that one is young, in youth as it is. No wonder then, that their doings [student protests] are bungling as long as they are a political, social, ideological programme. But they are much more of a blind discharge beyond ideology, a kind of explosion. Yes, this is youth. To understand me, you have to look at it with the eyes of an artist, not a moralist. A boy throwing a rock, yes, this is good, this does not bother artistically. A boy delivering speeches and demanding the reconstruction of the world, no, this is bad, it’s naïve and pretentious. […] The monster of youth, the one we see

\textsuperscript{41} Felix Philipp Ingold, “Pornografia”, in: “Patagończyk w Berlinie”. Witold Gombrowicz w oczach krytyki niemieckiej (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 139.

\textsuperscript{42} Gombrowicz, Pornografia, 157
right now, is of our own choice. This crisis is more of an adults’ crisis than the youth’s. Primarily, it proves a surprising weakening of an adult human up against the youth.\textsuperscript{43}

These sentences help us in thinking of Pornografia as a text addressing political issues, a text in which the category of current community transformations becomes a fundamental question. An interpretation that is only reinforced by threads connecting Pornografia with Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure.

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\section*{Bibliography}


\textsuperscript{43} Gombrowicz, A Kind of Testament, 84.


