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Power, freedom and death in The Jester and the Queen

Film reception and interpretation scope

Věra Chytilová's film *The Jester and the Queen* (Šašek a královna, 1987) is based on a theatre play of the same name performed by the Divadlo na provázku theatre. The storyline of the play takes place in the Middle Ages; Chytilová's film adds another layer to it, one taking place in the 1980s. The characters of the Jester (Boleslav Polívka), the Queen (Chantal Poullain) and the King (Jiří Kodet) are substituted by the castle manager Slach and the arriving foreigners Regina and König in this new layer, portrayed by the same actors. The medieval storyline is presented as Slach's visions of his former self. Only at the end of the film do we learn that the contemporary line was just a dream – when the third alter ego of the jester, called Slach as well, wakes up and welcomes yet another variation of the other two characters, the foreigners named Jeanette and Kaiser. To make it easier for the reader when these characters come back in the text, the following chart provides a better picture of the individual storylines and the respective characters:

Medieval line Contemporary line (dream) Contemporary line (reality)

Jester	Slach	(awake) Slach
Queen	Regina	Jeanette
King	König	Kaiser

The complexity of the film enhances its strongly ambiguous nature, which was already noted by contemporary critics. Many interpretations have been drafted with no further discussion, such as the intertwining of dreams and reality, the influence of the imagination on one's life, the fight between genders for dominance, and the fight between power and servitude, between freedom and the good, between art and

violence.[1]

The established interpretation of the film is that it is full of allegoric references to the socialism of the era. The original theatre play could be interpreted this way as well; nonetheless, the contemporary storyline in the film emphasises it. Stanislava Přádná, for example, considers the company in the pub to which the story repeatedly comes back to be a substitute for the socialist model of society: “Within the intent of updating, the phenomenon of the Czech pubs serves as a public forum in which the voice of people is to be heard. [...] The socialist pub full of regulars, sitting around and drinking, [...] is portrayed utterly realistically in the film, without the picturesque and idealized atmosphere of the ‘Czech village pub’. [...] In these sketched miniatures, a group of members of the socialist United Agricultural Cooperatives acts as back-seat drivers holding to their pints while subserviently bowing to foreigners and their foreign currencies.”[2] Even the audience of the original theatre play could interpret the Queen’s behaviour as an allegory of communist power, but the film strengthened this aspect with the updated line. This is what Zdena Škapová writes about when describing the analogy of the human mind-set in the contemporary and medieval parts of the story: “the false rituals of welcoming a foreigner, the pretended merriment, and the embarrassing bootlicking at the pub festivities seem to reproduce the toadying of the shapeless entourage of the Queen [...]”[3] In his study focusing on allegory in the reconstruction period films, Luboš Ptáček adopts another view: “Chytilová points to the practices of the era when people were willing to forget any ideological principles for gains and sell parts of the country’s natural wealth for foreign currency [König wants to hunt a deer in Bohemia]. The criticism does not present itself as a political allegory, though, but rather as a communal satire; the regime’s principles are not doubted in the slightest.”[4] Ptáček sees the core allegory as a general one since it lacks a reference to a specific historical situation: “The allegories and metaphors on the lower levels of the two storylines are very colourful, and as they mingle with each other, a space emerges allowing various allegorical meanings that are of no direct relationship to the main topic of the film [...]”[5] What makes it even harder to contemplate the Queen and the King as allegoric representatives of communist power is the fact that they represent the Western world – not only with the countries of their origin (the Queen is French, the King is German) but also with their connection to capital and monarchism. On the other hand, the

Queen's behaviour refers to materialism (such as love of money) and totalitarianism, which are essential both to monarchism and the socialist regime of the era.

In this study, I would like to follow up with the thesis of the "general allegory." The tension between power and freedom as well as the related issue of death are prominent themes in *The Jester and the Queen*. The following interpretation regards the themes as more general, existential categories, ignoring their potential political dimensions. It is theoretically based in G. W. F. Hegel's dialectic of Master and Slave. [6] In addition, I differentiate between "freedom from" and "freedom for." Originally introduced by Friedrich Nietzsche, [7] these two terms were later more comprehensibly explained by Isaiah Berlin as negative versus positive freedom. The former one refers to "[...] liberty from [...]. The defence of liberty consists in the 'negative' goal of warding off interference." [8] This concept of freedom is commonly applied to freedom of expression and to equality. The latter one concerns the inner, personal freedom of an individual, described by Berlin as follows: "I wish to be a subject, not an object [...]. I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for his choices and able to explain them by reference to his own ideas and purposes." [9] The themes of power, freedom and death pervade all of Chytilová's works. My goal is to take a closer look at them through the case interpretation of *The Jester and the Queen* without denying the above-mentioned political aspects. The themes will be mainly interpreted based on the relationships between the Jester and the Queen, Slach and Regina, and (awake) Slach and Jeanette, and their approach towards each other.

Interpreting the meanings of power, freedom, and death

Hegel says that the most inherent notion of the society was based on the principle of fight, later transformed into the Master and Slave relationship. He who defeats his fear of death becomes a master while the master spares the slave's life – first and foremost to have somebody to respect him. [10] Being constantly threatened with execution, the Jester obediently accepts his role. Out of the three alter egos, he is the one closest to slavery since he has the least choice, i.e. he is the one experiencing negative freedom – freedom from the constraints imposed by the Queen. While the Queen only enjoys temporary satisfaction of her needs, the Jester pursues artistic performances. Even though the performances are forced, he discovers his

spirit through them. Judging from his opening soliloquy, he detests this forced labour; on the other hand, though, he can let loose this positive freedom of his when creating his original performances: freedom to be personally artistically creative. Thanks to the art, he can communicate with the Queen in an original way and present her with existentially related topics such as flying, which illustrates his positive attitude towards life. Through this acting of his, he can be constantly aware of himself as of a creative subject. When he says, "They can do nothing worse to me than to execute me," it is as if he dismisses the Queen's power and downplays the importance of the negative freedom, thus indirectly emphasizing the value of the inner one.

The motif of death is present in the contemporary storyline as well. Slach's fear of death is based on his visions of the Jester's execution. There are also several other motifs evoking death, especially the scene with the skull and crossbones, the scene where Regina poses with the scythe, and the repeated motif of Death beheading a man. Despite these motifs, though, Slach finds himself in a different social situation than the Jester. Yes, he must comply with the mayor's orders; but since nobody directly threatens him with death, his negative freedom is much less limited. In other words, he is obviously freer from the local powerful ones than the Jester. This means that the dialectic of Master and Slave is more explicit in the medieval storyline than in the contemporary one. Thanks to this, it is clear that Slach's humility, kindness and desire to help are not forced by the society but are freely constituted personality traits of his. Slach's efforts result in him being different from other locals through his education, range of knowledge, relative independence, and philosophical efforts. Příkladná even likens him to a good-hearted Jack resisting impure temptations.^[11]

What also connects the two characters – the Jester and Slach – is their close relationship with nature. Slach even tries to make friends with various animals (a horse, a hare, a deer, birds) and sometimes also to communicate with them. Nature is not considered the opposite of common sense (i.e. instincts) but represents life, the higher order, the good. Slach often relies on his brains and comes across as an ascetic resistant to all desires and passions: alcohol, smoking, and sex.

Both the Jester and Slach are characteristic of their inferiority, which compels them constantly to put effort into something. In their overburdened lives, their creations and attitudes raise them above the average in the society. The only difference is in

their motifs: the Jester must serve while Slach wants to serve. Not much is known about the second Slach, who appears only for a while at the end of the film; nonetheless, it seems clear that unlike his previous alter egos, he tries not to be inferior – he is independent, less humble, and indulges in biological urges (he is a smoker even though the first Slach was against it for a long time).

With the Queen and Regina, the desire to dominate is apparent not only in their attitudes towards the Jester and Slach but also in their approach to nature: when the Queen wants to kill a spider, the Jester tries to protect it, defending it as a useful animal. Regina appeals for an ant to be killed, and in the medieval line, people are compared to ants, which are hated by the Queen. These attitudes show us that both the alter egos are controlled by the instinct of death. When Regina wants Slach to repeatedly play Death beheading a man, one knows that it satisfies this instinct of hers. By contrast, the Jester and Slach celebrate life when simulating the flight of a bird. Jiří Blažek describes the Queen as a woman seeking purpose in life through wealth, while the Jester does the same with people and nature. The Jester represents the creative approach; the Queen, on the other hand, adopts a destructive, “necrophilous” stance.^[12] This distinction is not absolute, though, since there are situations in which both the Queen and Regina show their desire for love (even though rather for the bodily, passionate kind) and, during the deer hunt, even the ability to be compassionate. Too little is known about Jeanette, the third alter ego. She is in a wheelchair, which emphasizes her inferiority, yet at the same time there are hints telling us that she wants to be dominant.

Not being creative in any way, the Queen depends on her servant’s productivity, just like in Hegel’s dialectic of Master and Slave. This does not mean that she is not free, though. As for that, Jiří Cieslar ponders the way in which the Queen loses her independence: “Loneliness is hidden in this eternal sovereign, whether she be dressed in a royal robe or a modern chic attire. Her need for playfulness denies her need for amorousness (for love?) and, in the end, also her desire to break free from her role of a leader in a relationship – at least for one ‘playful’ moment! [...] In the contemporary line, she is completely beaten since her ‘clownish opponent’ Slach possesses what she so desperately misses: the sweet experience of happiness, which means autonomy, independence.”^[13] The reason behind the female characters not being able to achieve self-confidence is in the loss of their positive freedom – unlike

the servants, they cannot fight their desire for power and the instinct of death from the inside. Regina evinces her uncertainty, her need for the “significant other”, even more obviously than the Queen. The following dialogue depicts it most precisely:

Regina: Why do you not like me?

Slach: I do like you. But you do not like me.

Regina: [...] Because you are such a clown! [...] I am alone!

(Slach starts signing to buck up her spirits – he is creative once again.)

Regina: You are a happy man. You have a life of your own while me, I have nothing at all!

Slach: [...] Then find yourself some goddamn job, finally!^[14]

Since neither the Queen nor Regina work (create), unlike the Jester, they are not certain in their self-confidence; they lack some creations of their own to seal the deal for them. That is why they ask the Jester and Slach to confirm that they are in power:

Regina: Who do you think I am?

Slach: The Queen. My Queen! (Kneels down.)^[15]

This confirmation of their power cannot be enough, though, as Hegel’s concept clearly requires respect to be shown by another, respected person. And because neither the Jester nor Slach are considered full-blown men by the Queen and Regina, the dominant ones receive no acknowledgement. In result of this, they remain lacking in confidence despite their dominant positions.

The final scenes demonstrate the most significant manifestation of positive freedom. After the King dies, the Queen asks the Jester to pretend he is the king. The Jester complies but only to a certain extent – he refuses to copulate with the Queen because to dishonour the King’s memory means to blaspheme against death itself in his mind (i.e. against the higher principle once again, such as nature as depicted by the film, not only against the common biological instinct of death). Despite the displayed fear of death, the Queen orders him to be executed in the end. One must point out one of

the Jester's previous performances depicting two notions of death here: the physical death of the body falling on the ground, and the metaphysical death of the spirit leaving the Earth. At the end of the film, the Jester is practically dying, but since his last decision was moral, his metaphysical spirit rises up. This corresponds with the above-mentioned opening line of his: "They can do nothing worse to me than to execute me,"^[16] which is probably an allusion to the physical type of death and not the metaphysical one. Slach also manages to resist Regina in the end because it would be immoral to participate in adultery. Slach's commentary makes his moral statute and his inner freedom one and the same at this place: "I am a jester but not a slave!"^[17] The freedom to act morally is therefore possible even when Slach finds himself under the pressure of the manipulative Regina.

At the end of the film, Chytilová casts doubts on the Slach's idealized moral statute drawn so far, and his commitment to servitude in particular. Disguised as a jester, Slach presents Regina as an inferior of his, ridicules her, and puts himself into the position of the dominant one. He takes a cigarette from her, saying overconfidently: "A medieval jester is a potential smoker. Just like a man is a potential jester."^[18] The line not only refers to the ambiguous relationship between a Master and a Slave but also to the ambiguous nature of their moral statute. Slach presents his dominance with a symbol in the form of a cigarette he has impudently taken from her. This gesture with which the character likens himself to a ruler means the metaphysical death. The second Slach in the last storyline then represents a man who has come to be dominant, and even though he can decide the fate of others (Jeanette, the disabled woman), he loses the inner freedom, which is shown by his instinctive nature (he is a smoker, unlike his ascetic alter ego). In other words, the last variation stops being a jester and gives room to the inner kind of slavery. The Jester, living in a more repressive political regime, does not have this choice, and therefore there is no turn like this in the medieval line. It could only happen if he remains in the role of the king as forced by the Queen. But he does not surrender to her, which proves his former claim that the jester exudes maximum positive freedom.

Summary: scepticism towards everlasting morality

From the very beginning, I did not want to question the political interpretations that take the Queen as an allegory of the communist power, i.e. the power restricting the

negative freedom of an individual. Nevertheless, I came to a finding in my interpretation that is in part contradictory to the political reading. In *The Jester and the Queen*, Chytilová puts more emphasis on the positive freedom while the negative one, the freedom commonly associated with democracy and liberalism, is sometimes trivialized. As such, the film says that it is not that important whether we are free from the manifestations of a repressive power (be it the communist power or any other) but whether we are free to act in a creative and moral way. The application of Berlin's positive and negative freedom dichotomy has therefore proved crucial. Both the Jester and Slach find thinking about death difficult. On the other hand, Chytilová seems to tell us that it is more important for the subject to be of the "inner free" constitution (both in his creations and moral attitudes) than to physically survive. The fear of death is thus a bitter burden the character must overcome to be able to behave ethically. Since the value system of the film prefers the positive freedom to the negative one, it can be said that there is an internal turnover happening in the dialectic of the Master and Slave: being aware of himself, the Jester is not a slave, and the dominant ruler lacks self-confidence. In the final rigmarole with Slach and his last alter ego becoming the dominant ones, we can observe the fragile moral statute of the Master's character. Within the intentions of the negative freedom, it is not complicated to grasp power – it is simple and instinctive, just like taking a cigarette from somebody. To the contrary, morality is not a matter of course at all and we must protect it constantly. The "jester's" turn to power, conditioned by the enslaving instinctiveness, speaks of a great scepticism toward the human ability to remain free inside.

Notes:

[1] Škapová, Zdena, Šašek a královna. *Záběr* 21, 1988, č. 2, s. 6.

[2] Příkladná, Stanislava, Balancování na hraně možného. Tvorba Věry Chytilové v období normalizace. In: Kopal, Petr (ed.). *Film a dějiny 4*. Praha: Casablanca, 2014, s. 64.

[3] Škapová, Zdena, Šašek a královna. *Záběr* 21, 1988, č. 2, s. 6.

[4] Ptáček, Luboš, Dvakrát nevstoupíš do stejné kinematografie. Defektnost alegorických prvků v českých filmech z období přestavby. In: Kopal, Petr a kol. *Film a dějiny 5. Perestrojka / přestavba*. Václav Žák – CASABLANKA, Ústav pro studium

totalitních režimů, 2016, s. 216.

[5] Ibid., s. 219.

[6] Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Fenomenologie ducha*. Praha: Nakladatelství Československé akademie věd, 1960, s. 154–161.

[7] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Tak pravil Zarathustra*. Olomouc: Votobia, 1995, s. 55

[8] Berlin, Isaiah, Dva pojmy svobody. In: Berlin, Isaiah. *Čtyři eseje o svobodě*. Praha: Prostor, 1999, s. 225–226.

[9] Ibid., s. 230–231.

[10] Kvůli Hegelově „temnému“ způsobu vyjadřování odkazují na monografii Petera Singera, který představil dialektiku pána a raba ve srozumitelnější formě: Singer, Peter. *Hegel*. Praha: Argo, 1995, s. 78–81.

[11] Přádňá, Stanislava, Balancování na hraně možného. Tvorba Věry Chytilové v období normalizace. In: Kopal, Petr (ed.). *Film a dějiny 4*. Praha: Casablanca, 2014, s. 65.

[12] Blažek, Jiří, Šašek a královna. *Film a doba* 33, 1987, č. 12, s. 657.

[13] Cieslar, Jiří. Šašek a královna. *Kmen* 1988, č. 1, s. 11.

[14] *Šašek a královna*, DVD Bontonfilm 2006, 01:34:56-01:36:15.

[15] Ibid., 01:37:06-01:37:16.

[16] Ibid., 00:04:55-00:04:59.

[17] Ibid., 01:38:04-01:38:08.

[18] Ibid., 01:44:33-01:44:47.