FEMME FATALE: WOMAN, MORTALITY, AND MALE FANTASY IN *THE MAKROPULOS CASE*

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The reputation and popularity of the Czech prose-writer and dramatist Karel Čapek (1890–1938) reached a high-point between the two World Wars. Among Čapek's principal social concerns are fears about out-of-control technology following the destructive use to which scientific progress had been put in World War I. In his native Czechoslovakia, Čapek is also considered an important dramatist of ideas as illustrated in the robot play *R. U. R.* (1920), which addresses the advantages and drawbacks of artificial intelligence, and *Věc Makropulos* (The Makropulos Case) (1922) which questions the legitimacy of longevity at a time when advances in medical science were permitting human beings to have a longer life span. Both of these plays provide a democratic discussion of these questions in the spirit of Čapek's early belief in philosophical relativism[1].

As scholars have been quick to remark, the inevitable price to be paid for Čapek's use of drama as a forum for the discussion of social and philosophical issues is a lack of dramatic spontaneity and power. Geared to preordained relativist conclusions, both *R. U. R.* and *The Makropulos Case* have anti-climactic plots, *a priori* endings and characters who are little more than symbolic pegs onto which the author hangs his ideas[2]. Generally speaking, Čapek is uninterested in the emotional lives of his characters; and where he does attempt to provide an element of psychological and sexual motivation, the results are usually wooden and unconvincing.

Critics of Čapek's drama have tended to concur with the author's own view of the plays, sharing his idealistic desire for a philosophical conclusion in which man's rational qualities triumph. Sergei Nikolskij's book-length study of Čapek's satire and science fiction, for example, perceives a seamless unity between the author's fantastic plots of artificial men *(R. U. R.)* and eternal youth *(The Makropulos Case)* and his philosophical treatment of these stories[3]. Departing from Nikolskij's view of Čapek's drama as a unity of fantastic and philosophical elements, this essay will argue that there is a discrepancy between the fantastic plot of *The Makropulos Case* and its philosophical treatment. We will explain the latter not as a conscious and rational mode of

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[1] For the Czech edition of *Věc Makropulos* referred to in this essay, see Čapek, Karel: Dramata [Dramas]. Praha 1992, 179–260 (Spisy vol. VII).

[2] For Čapek's unsuccessful dramatic endings, see Janoušek, Pavel: Studie o dramatu [Studies of the Drama]. Praha 1992, 39–71.

[3] Nikolskij, Sergej: Fantastika a satira v díle Karla Čapka [Science Fiction and Satire in the Work of Karel Čapek]. Praha 1978, 121–142.

thought but as an *unconscious* and *irrational desire* to repress the true theme of the play, which is not the rejection of longevity but the yearning for it.

Woman, Mortality, and Male Fantasy

Recent post-Freudian psychoanalytic theories have attempted to highlight the phallocentric assumptions in many of Freud's original insights into the workings of the unconscious. Several critics, for example, have sought to reread Freud's work in the light of male subjectivity[4]. According to Laplanche and Pontalis, projections are those "qualities, feelings, wishes, objects, which the subject refuses to accept in himself [and which] are expelled from the self and located in another person or thing"[5]. Women are thus the objects of male fantasy or – as Lacan would say – the place where lack is projected[6]. The male author disowns his own experience and, as a result, produces both an idealized and/or denigrated image of woman.

Post-Freudian psychoanalysis has emphasized the extent to which male authors (including Freud himself) repress while exposing their greatest fears in the form of fantasy. In her essay "La fiction et ses fantômes: *l'Unheimliche* de Freud"[7], Cixous argues that, in attempting to provide a unified analysis of Hoffmann's *The Sandman*, Freud elides, and thereby represses, those uncanny *(unheimlich)* aspects of the story which are most familiar *(heimlich)* to the unconscious, namely, the fear of death. For Cixous, the proximity of mortality to our lives is symbolized by the doll Olympia which is both inanimate (dead) and animate (alive). Cixous sees the dread of death, even more than sexual anxiety, as the key both to Hoffmann's story and Freud's essay. Hence Freud fixes on the narrator Nathaniel's fear of torn-out bloody eyes (symbols of castration) but overlooks the importance of the doll Olympia. Cixous' essay concludes that Freud elides the realization that male identity is hollowed out by a lack or void culminating in death.

In recent studies of Freud's essay on the uncanny and his related work on the repetition compulsion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), critics have discerned that the notion of a death instinct in Freud is not a comforting one[8]. Freud originally envisaged the death instinct arising from the organism's wish to return to a desireless stable state. But later he saw it as taking the form of a destructive will through sadistic or masochistic

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[4] See, for example, Silverman, Kaja: Male Subjectivity at the Margins. New York-London 1992. The spearhead of post-Freudian revisionism concerning male subjectivity was Jacques Lacan. See, for example, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (eds.): Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne. Translated by Jacqueline Rose. New York-London 1982.

[5] Laplanche, Jean/Pontalis, Jean-Baptiste: The Language of Psycho-Analysis. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. London 1973, 249.

[6] See Rose's illuminating introduction to Feminine Sexuality.

[7] Cixous, Hélène: La fiction et ses fantômes: *l'Unheimliche* de Freud. Poétique 10 (1972) 199–216. Translated as Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche*. New Literary History 7, 525–48.

[8] See Wright, Elizabeth: Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice. London-New York 1984, 143–144.

aggression. In posing a threat to the ego's narcissistic desire for omnipotence, and hence immortality, the death instinct will keep desire circling round its lost object instead of becoming fixated on the self.

As we shall see, it is the repressed fear of death wich informs Čapek's fantastic plot in *The Makropulos Case*. Consistent with the post-Freudian theory of male fantasy, we shall argue that this fear of death (and the concomitant longing for eternal life) are disguised by being projected onto the female protagonist Emilia, whose desperate pursuit of the mysterious formula is equivalent to the aggressive death instinct which circles around its lost object. Her eventual rejection of eternal life and the immolation of the formula by Kristina signal, not philosophical resolution to the theme of longevity, but the irrational desire to dispense with the anxiety altogether. This unconscious, irrational adjustment to an ostensibly rational theme is also projected onto the female characters, since it is Emilia and Kristina whose actions bring the play to a necessary closure. Thus, both the search for and rejection of the secret of longevity can be seen as a projection of male fantasy onto women[9].

The Makropulos Case

The Makropulos Case is conventionally understood to be *pièce à thèse* in the tradition of Ibsen, Shaw and Brecht on the ethical and philosophical consequences of the attainment of eternal life. The theme of longevity was topical at the time the play was written; for example, George Bernard Shaw had just completed an optimistic piece on the same theme unknown to Čapek, *Back to Methuselah* (1922)[10]. But the story of the eternally youthful *femme fatale,* Emilia Marty, has sources and analogues in many works of European fantasy literature. František Langer's collection of short stories *Snílci a vrahové* (Dreamers and Murderers) (1921) includes a tale entitled *Věčné mládí* (Eternal Youth) in which a beautiful, young woman, Monna Lisetta, has lived for two centuries under a variety of names and disguises, but has remained in the prime of youth by bathing in the blood of murdered little girls[11]. The idea of a man or a woman cursed to live forever has captivated many Romantic writers up to the present, including Percy Bysshe Shelley's early narrative poem *Queen Mab,* (1810); Eugène Sue's classic novel *Le juif errant* (The Wandering Jew 1844), which tells of the Old Testament Jewish king Ahasuerus doomed to inhabit the earth until the second coming of Christ; Hans Christian Andersen's *Angel of Doubt* (1848) and James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1933).

The Makropulos Case begins with an expostition of a century-old lawsuit over the estate of a Baron Josef Prus, who died intestate and without issue in 1827. A relative's claim to the estate was contested by Prus's ward Ferdinand Gregor on the grounds that he had once been introduced by Prus as his prospective heir; the relative contended

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[9] The definitive study of male fantasy is Klaus Theleweit: Male Fantasies. Vol. I. Translated by Stephen Conway. Minneapolis 1987.

[10] For the background to and influences on *The Makropulos Case,* see: Harkins, William E.: Karel Čapek. New York-London 1962, 110–111.

[11] Langer, František: Snílci a vrahové [Dreamers and Murderers]. Praha 1921, 148–155.

that it was not Ferdinand but one Mach Gregor who was so meant and who never turned up. The suit is still before the courts as the play opens, at the turn of the twentieth century. When the lawyer of Ferdinand Gregor's grandson Albert Gregor recounts the story of the famous opera singer Emilia Marty, she mysteriously asserts that Ferdinand Gregor was actually the baron's son by the singer Ellian MacGregor, so that he was the unknown "Mach" Gregor; and that a will in his favour may be found in a sealed yellow envelope in the Prus house. It is found and does designate the testator's illegitimate son Ferdinand as the heir, but Emilia Marty refuses all rewards; she is only interested in finding still another envelope, one containing a Greek manuscript, which she believes must be in the same house. Challenged to offer proof that the said Ferdinand is identical with Ellian MacGregor's son, she promises to produce one. But her opponent, a descendant of the Prus family, learns that the birth register shows the son's name as Ferdinand Makropulos, not Gregor. Emilia insists that she can clear that up as well, but first Prus must find and sell her the Greek manuscript; she asks him to name his own price. He proposes a night with her, to which she coolly assents; and so she gets the manuscript at last. In a series of subplots, Emilia is depicted as an icy *femme fatale*, cold to all men, including Prus's son Janek, who shoots himself when he learns that his chief rival is his own father. The proof of identity she now produces is an evident fake – although backdated a century, it is in her handwriting – and a search of her luggage yields letters addressed to various women, whose initials are all E. M.

Emilia now explains that she was born in Crete in 1575, the daughter of Dr. Hieronymus Makropulos, who became the court physician to the emperor Rudolf II and provided him with a recipe for an elixir that would allow the emperor to remain young for three hundred years. The emperor ordered it to be tried on the physician's daughter first and, when she lost consciousness for several days, jailed her father as an impostor. But the daughter recovered, the emperor went mad, and Emilia lived on under various aliases – Ekaterina Mishkina, Else Müller, Eugenia Montez, Ellian MacGregor and Emilia Marty. She lent the formula to her lover Baron Prus and has been frantic to recover it because she is beginning to age. But she realizes that she no longer wants it – and neither does anybody else. An aspiring young female singer Kristina (the dead Janek's fiancée) takes it from her and burns it – and Emilia cries "The end of immortality". With these philosophically resigned words, the play comes to an end.

Curiously, the social and ethical issue of longevity is raised only in the second scene of the last act, when the male characters are offered and reject the magic formula of eternal life. Their reactions reflect Čapek's belief in relativism: Vítek, the lawyer's clerk, an optimist and a socialist, sees the disadvantages of a normal life span; his employer, Dr. Kolenatý, is more practical and ridicules the idea of longevity from a legal and economic point of view; Baron Prus claims that the formula should be reserved for the exclusive use of an "aristocracy", doubtless a satirical reference to the Wellsian and Shavian concept of the "superman", derived from Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. Many critics have seen Čapek's play as a philosophical repudiation of Shaw's optimistic endorsement of the advantages of longevity. Writing about the denouement of *The Makropulos Case*, Maria Angelo Ripellino states that "the order of existence must not be upset. In the great ontological dilemma tormenting the world, death is necessary if

only to give life beauty"[12]. Yet Ripellino's claim that the characters accept death as a necessary reminder of man's limitations is not validated by the plot itself but by the *a priori* conclusion.

A discrepancy arises, therefore, between the fantastic plot and the philosophical conclusion. In his preface to the play Čapek mentions that he initially conceived it as a novel[13]; and the mysterious, even expressionist, quality of *The Makropulos Case* recalls Čapek's earlier forays into fiction, exemplified by *Boží muka (Wayside Crosses)* (1917) and *Trapné povídky* (Awkward Tales) (1921)[14]. There is also a modernist conundrum of identity in the tug-of-war between the rivals for Prus's estate. The outcome of the lawsuit depends upon the necessity of establishing with certainty that Albert Gregor is the legal descendant of Baron Prus, itself contingent on the need to prove that Albert's grandfather, Ferdinand Gregor, was the son of the baron. This elaborate chain of uncertainty is itself contingent on the mysterious identity of Ellian MacGregor, the alleged mother of the illegitimate Ferdinand. But Ellian's identity is equally a mystery. It finally emerges that she is the same person as the singer Emilia Marty.

Emilia and the mysterious formula coincide for most of the action. Čapek reinforces the symbiosis which exists between them by stressing the ambiguous indeterminacy of the title word *věc*. Early in the play, for example, when Gregor asks Emilia why she is interested in the law case, she mysteriously retorts "To je má věc" ("That's my business")[15]. Not only is this laconic response consistent with her inscrutable persona as a *femme fatale;* it also reinforces her identification with the legal case or formula since the Czech word for "business" in this sense *(věc)* also means "case" or "affair" in the legal sense.

The primary meaning of the word *věc* is simply "thing" so that it can equally refer to the physical document on which the mysterious formula is written. Thus the Czech word *věc* occupies an oxymoronic tension between the abstract "case" or "affair" and the concrete "thing". Oxymoron is the basic trope of fantasy. As Rosemary Jackson puts it, "it is a figure of speech which holds together contradictions and sustains them in an impossible unity, without progressing toward synthesis"[16]. The "thing" cannot be defined in words. When Emilia is pressed to do so under interrogation by Hauk-Šendorf in the final scene, it is clear that even she is unable to find an "objective correlative" to the trauma it evokes:

> *Emilia:* No, a když začal stárnout, tak... hledal pořád elixír života či co. Aby zase omládl, víte? A tehdy k němu přišel můj otec a napsal pro něj tu... věc, to kouzlo, aby zůstal tři sta let mlád. Ale císař Rudolf se bál, že by ho to kouzlo

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[12] Ripellino, Maria Angelo: Magic Prague. Translated by David Newton Marinelli and edited by Michael Henry Heim. Berkeley-Los Angeles 1994, 108–109.

[13] Čapek: Dramata 181.

[14] Čapek, Karel: Boží muka, Trapné povídky [Wayside Crosses, Awkward Tales]. Praha 1981 (Spisy vol. I).

[15] Čapek: Dramata 200.

[16] Jackson, Rosemary: Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion. London-New York 1981, 21.

otrávilo, a poručil: Zkus to nejdříve na své dceři. To jsem byla ja; tehdy mně bylo šestnáct let. Tak tedy to otec na mně zkusil. Tehdy tomu říkali "kouzlo", ale byla to docela jiná věc.

Hauk: Co to bylo?

Emilia (zachvěje se): To neřeknu! To se nemůže říci![17]

Emilia: Well, when the emperor started to get old, he began trying to find an elixir of life, or something, that would make him young again, you see? And so my father went to him and wrote that... that thing for him, that "magic", so that he could stay young for three hundred years. But Emperor Rudolf was afraid that this "magic" might poison him, and so he made my father try it out on his daughter. That was me. I was sixteen years old. So father tried it on me. Then they all said it was magic, but it wasn't any such thing, it was something else entirely.

Hank-Šendorf: What was it?

Emilia (shudders): I cannot say. No one can.

At the beginning of her speech, Emilia paraphrases *věc* as "magic" *(kouzlo)* but by the end of it she has rejected the word as inadequate so that *věc* is merely repeated: "ale byla to docelá jiná věc" ("but it was something else entirely"). Like Emilia, English translators of the play try to paraphrase the word *věc* as "miracle", "magic", "case" and so on. But in so doing they are faced with the same predicament as the heroine herself, seeking to say in words what cannot be expressed[18].

The indeterminate "thing" would appear to correspond to Freud's definition of the "uncanny" in his famous essay on Hoffmann's story *The Sandman.* It is both strange *(unheimlich)* and familiar *(heimlich),* possessing the characteristics of a ghost. At the very end of the play, as the formula burns, Hauk-Šendorf detects a smell that is both strange *(unheimlich)* and yet familiar *(heimlich):* "Račte dovolit... tady to... tak divně páchne-"[19] ("Excuse me, but there is such a strange smell in here... a smell like..."). Again words are inadequate, and the sentence trails away. Helene Cixous' redefinition of the uncanny perfectly explains the indeterminacy of the "thing":

> Un signifiant relationnel: car *l'Unheimliche* est en effet composite, il s'infiltre aux interstices, il affirme le bâillement ou l'on voudrait s'assurer de la jointure[20].

> A relational signifier; for the uncanny is in effect composite, it infiltrates itself in between things, in the interstices, it asserts a gap where one would like to be assured of unity.

The uncanny removes structure; it empties the "real" of its meaning; it leaves signs without significance. Cixous presents its unfamiliarity not merely as displaced sexual

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[17] Čapek: Dramata 245–246.

[18] See, for example, the English translation of *The Makropulos Case* by Yveta Synek Graff and Robert T. Jones. In: Peter Kussi (ed.): Toward the Radical Center. Highland Park, NJ 1991, 110–177.

[19] Čapek: Dramata 259.

[20] Cixous: La fiction 208.

anxiety, but as a rehearsal of an encounter with death, which is pure absence. Death cannot be portrayed directly: it appears in medieval literature as a skeleton or decaying corpse, in Gothic fiction as a ghost or a doll and in modern literature as pure space. In the uncanny we discover our latent death, our hidden lack of being, for nothing is both better-known *(heimlich)* and stranger *(unheimlich)* to thought than mortality. In Cixous' words, "notre inconscient n' a pas de place pour la représentation de notre mortalité" ("our unconscious has no room for a representation of our mortality")[21].

Like the uncanny *věc*, the three-hundred-year singer Emilia is identified with death. Her singing technique is flawless yet cold, her life prolonged yet loveless. In Romantic literature we find many stories about women whose perfect voices connote the finality of death, for example, Novalis's, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, Kleist's *Die heilige Cäcilie oder die Gewalt der Musik* (St Cecilia or the Force of Music) and Hoffmann's *Rat Krespel* (Counsellor Krespel)[22]. From eastern Europe comes the folk tale of *Rusalka* – made into an opera by Dvořák (1900) – recalling the German Lorelei who lures men to their deaths with her siren's song. In all these myths and stories, the female body – and the female voice – connote perfection and, by extension, the finality of death itself. In *The Makropulos Case*, for example, Gregor, having spent the night with the lovely Emilia, is disgusted because she is as cold and unfeeling as a corpse.

Like the famous Sibyl of Cumae, Emilia is weary of life and desires death. And yet, paradoxically, the play consists entirely in her attempt to recover the formula that is allegedly concealed in a secret place at Prus's house. If she really wants to die, why does she seek the means to keep herself young and alive? When asked this question, Emilia states (somewhat unconvincingly) that she is "afraid of death". Emilia's desperate quest does not make coherent dramatic sense as long as we insist that it is her fear; but once we understand that it is the manifestation of the author's repressed fear of death projected onto the female protagonist, the paradox makes perfect sense.

In most stories and myths of *femmes fatales*, the female protagonists die or go mad in order to provide the necessary closure to male fantasy[23]. Their death is thus a reification of a fear/fantasy which cannot be acknowledged on the conscious level. In Čapek's case, repression appears to function in a rather more complex fashion. Instead of dying or going insane, Emilia remains alive and attains rational insight into her predicament. Her symbiotic relationship with the "thing" sundered, she exclaims as the curtain falls: "Hahaha, konec nesmrtelnosti" ("Ha-ha-ha, the end of immortality")[24].

In other treatments of the *femme fatale* myth, female madness or death is an essential feature of the plot. In his adaptation of *The Makropulos Case* as an opera (1923–25), Leoš Janáček introduces the convention of making Emilia the heroine collapse and die as the formula burns, just as, in his adaptation of Gabriela Preissová's

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[21] Cixous: La fiction 213.

[22] See Alice Kuzniar: Hearing Women's Voices in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. PMLA 107/5 (October, 1992), 1196–1207.

[23] For the manifestation of this phenomenon in operas such as *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Elektra*, see Heilbrun, Carolyn G.: Method in Madness. Opera News (January 22, 1994), 18–20. For the representation of madwomen in opera, see also McClary, Susan: Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality. Minnesota-Oxford 1991, 80–111.

[24] Čapek: Dramata 259.

play *Její Pastorkyňa* (Her Step-Daughter) (1894–1901), the Kostelnička becomes completely insane to provide an adequate psychological explanation for her murder of Jenůfa's new-born baby, while, in the original play, she merely suffers a bout of temporary insanity[25].

Fundamental to Janáček's tragic treatment of *The Makropulos Case* is the desire to preserve Emilia's status as a *femme fatale* to the very end of the play. As the opera critic John Tyrrell has pointed out, the principal difference between the play and the opera is the fact that the former is conceived as a universal comedy on the shortcomings of longevity while the latter is a tragic treatment of the heroine's fate[26]. Čapek's philosophical concerns were of no consequence to Janáček. He cuts the scene where Vítek, Kolenatý and Prus express their views on the advantages and drawbacks of immortality, while turning Čapek's lighthearted ending into a true tragedy of human mortality.

Janáček's adaptation of a philosophical comedy as a tragic opera inevitably involved the transformation of Emilia Marty into a tragic heroine. Čapek's Emilia, as we have seen, is merely the vehicle of the author's philosophical ideas, while Janáček's is an archetypal *femme fatale,* whose power over men depends upon her control of the formula and its whereabouts. Consider, for example, Emilia's triumphant speech in act three of the opera where she is presented as a *dominatrix* gloating over her acquisition of the formula:

Cha-cha-cha,	Ha-ha-ha,
cha-cha-cha,	ha-ha-ha!
já kašlu na to, že jsi můj!	I don't care a rap about your being my boy!
Což vím,	Do I know
kolik tisíc mojich trabantů	how many thousands of my brats
běhá po světě,	are scampering round the world,
těch mojich trabantů běhá po světě?	brats of mine scampering around the world?
(přitiskne obálku k srdci)	*(pressing the envelope to her heart)*
Ted' už jsi má,	Now you are mine,
ted' už jsi,	mine,
ted' už jsi má!	now you are mine!
To napsal můj otec	That is what my father wrote out
pro císaře Rudolfa[27].	for the emperor Rudolf.

Čapek's heroine is altogether less ruthless and single-minded:

> *Gregor:* A vy jste sem přišla jen pro tu řeckou věc?
>
> *Emilia:* Haha, ja vám ji nedám! Ted' je má! Jen si nemysli, Bertíku, že mně šlo o ten tvůj hloupý proces. Já kašlu na to, ze jsi můj. Já nevím, kolik tisíc mých harantů běhá po světě. Já chtěla dostat tu věc. Já ji musela dostat, nebo- nebo-

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[25] See Brušák: Karel: Drama into Libretto. In: John, Nicholas (ed.): Jenůfa/Katya Kabanová (English National Opera Guides 33). London-New York 1985, 13–20.

[26] See John Tyrrell's endnotes to the recording of the opera conducted by Sir Charles Makkerras with Elisabeth Söderström as Emilia Marty (Decca, 1979), p. 14.

[27] See the libretto of the Decca recording, 172–173.

Gregor: Proč?

Emilia: Protože stárnu. Protože jsem na konci ...[28].

Gregor: And you came here just for the Greek thing?

Emilia: Ha! Well, I won't give it to you! It's mine now. Don't flatter yourself, Berti, that I ever gave a damn about your stupid lawsuit. I couldn't care less that you are mine. I don't know how many of my little ones are still running around this world. I wanted to get that thing. I had to get that thing, or ... or ...

Gregor: Or what?

Emilia: Or I'll get old. I'm at the end.

In the play Emilia's speech breaks off; and when she is pressed to continue, she confesses that she is dying. Her magnetism as a *femme fatale* evaporates as she becomes the object of male pity. Čapek's ending is anti-climactic, since Emilia gives up her three-hundred-year existence without a struggle. Janáček, however, excludes all expressions of doubt and fallibility in Emilia's soliloquy, beginning with the words "Then they all said it was magic" and ending "I cannot say. No one can."

For all their differences of approach to the theme of the *femme fatale,* both Karel Čapek – the playwright of ideas – and Leoš Janáček – the composer of Romantic opera – share the same male-centered need to disguise their own fear of death and desire for immortality by projecting these fantasies onto Emilia. From the first moment he saw Emilia on stage, Janáček was obsessed, fascinated and appalled by her. Was she not this cold, beautiful woman the very embodiment of what the composer both desired and feared-artistic perfection and its correlative, death? In a letter to his friend, Kamila Stösslová, he writes: "A 300-year-old beauty – but only burnt-out feeling! Brrr! Cold as ice! About such a woman shall write an opera [...]"[29]. And in subsequent letters to friends and associates, it is clear that Janáček was consumed with the thought of the icy *femme fatale* and her quest for eternal life[30]. Writing to another friend, Rosa Newmarch, Janáček confesses his frustration at not being able to reach an agreement with Čapek on the legal right to the opera; and then, in an aside which reveals his dread of creative death, he adds: "And when I do not have ideas for a new work, I am like an empty shell"[31].

Conclusion

Critics of Čapek's drama have conventionally argued that his endings leave a great deal to be desired. When Emilia relinquishes the formula and does not die on stage, the spectator yearns for a more satisfying, dramatic resolution to the play. Janáček offers us a more powerful ending in the form of the heroine's death. It seems to me, however, that there are valid reasons why Čapek's play and Janáček's opera

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[28] Čapek: Dramata 245.
[29] See Tyrrell, John: Janáček's Operas: A Documentary Account. Princeton 1992, 309.
[30] Tyrrell: Janáček's Operas 304–305.
[31] Tyrrell: Janáček's Operas 308.

conclude in the way they do, which have little to do with the difference between a philosophical and a Romantic treatment of the same fantastic plot. The real reason, I propose, lies within the male artists' shared fears and desires about death and immortality. Both Čapek and Janáček are impelled by the narcissistic desire for immortality but express this desire in different ways. While both men project onto Emilia their disguised fears and desires, only Janáček maintains the rigid symbiosis between the heroine and the *věc* to the very end of the play. Čapek, by contrast, liberates Emilia from her identification with the magic formula. Although she ceases to be the reification of death, the formula continues to perform the same *irrational* function in the play. There is thus a kind of double repression involved in this displacement from Emilia onto the formula. If Janáček permits a moment of catharsis in Emilia's tragic demise on stage, Čapek radically denies such an outcome. Čapek was opposed to the idea of the composer adapting his play as an opera, and resisted Janáček's importunate requests as long as he could[32]. The conventional wisdom is that the playwright feared the composer's greater success with the same material. But perhaps Čapek also feared that Janáček would highlight in a tragic form what he was unwilling – as the great dramatist of ideas – to confront and admit to himself – that his play was not so much about the rejection of longevity as the passionate yearning for it.

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[32] Ibid., p. 305–307.