

Title:           Ambivalent Patriots: Tiutchev and Slowacki's "Agamemnon" Poems about the Polish Uprising

Author:         Catherine O'Neil, United States Naval Academy

This presentation offers an examination of the theme of "family tragedy" in Russian and Polish poetic treatments of the Polish Uprising of 1830-31. This a well-known trope in both Polish and Russian approaches to the Uprising; it is most famously treated by the Polish poet Juliusz Slowacki ("Agamemnon's Tomb," published 1840) -- and most infamously reflected in Pushkin's poem "To the Slanderers of Russia" ("Klevetnikam Rossii," 1831). To these canonical texts, so crucial to national self-identity in Poland and Russia alike, a third, less-known poem about the Uprising may be added: "Agamemnon's sacrifice" ("Kak doch' rodnuiu na zaklan'e," 1831) by Fedor Tiutchev. Although this poem has been studied by Tiutchev scholars (for example Richard Gregg, who contrasts it favorably to Pushkin's more controversial poem), the place of this early poem in the development of Tiutchev's thought and politics has not been closely investigated before.

In "Agamemnon's Tomb" Slowacki uses the story of Agamemnon as a starting point to criticize the lack of unity among the Poles before and during the Uprising. Comparing the Uprising to battles from antiquity, he presents the Poles as Greeks and posits the Russians, alternately, as Persians (the Battle of Thermopylae) and as Macedonians under King Philip (the Battle of Chaeronea). In Tiutchev's poem, Agamemnon represents Russia and the daughter he sacrifices for a "greater cause," Iphigenia, represents Poland. The shared motif of Agamemnon in these poems reveals underlying ambivalence on the part of both poets toward the politics and history of their respective nations.