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# Holding up the Aegis: On the Construction of Social Roles by Polish IT-professionals and the Change in Agency

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**Abstract**

This paper takes up the self-construction of the social roles of Polish IT professionals. We conducted an ethnographic study and observed that many of our interviewees defined their roles by negation and by invoking the internal and often hermetic aspects of their profession. Labeling this practice “holding up the shield,” we trace its archetypical roots. The recurrent use of this practice makes a change in agency in the process of constructing the role possible, to the benefit of the IT professionals.

What thus snaky-headed Gorgon-shield
That wise Minerva wore, unconquered virgin,
Wherewith she freezed her foes to congealed stone,
But rigid looks of chaste austerity,
And noble grace that dashed brute violence
With sudden adoration and blank awe!

Milton, *Comus*[2]

## Introduction

The number of people employed in the IT and knowledge sectors is growing exponentially on a global scale, which represents a major change in terms of professions (Postuła, 2010; Jemielniak & Kociatkiewicz, 2008). These roles are influencing the role sets of some of the creative areas of management and organizing. This new profession develops some

[2] Milton, John (1636/2007) *Milton’s Comus*. BiblioBazaar, p.43.

cultural characteristics, taking the shape of themes and responses to perceived expectations of the audiences. This paper presents a recurring theme in the field identified during an ethnographic study among Polish IT professionals. The ethnographic study showed how professionally active women in post-transformation Poland have chosen to deal with changing expectations in terms of how their social roles should be played: by deflecting the societal gaze by holding up a shield of professionalism (Kostera et al., 1994). During our study of Polish IT specialists, we found that they were using a similar tactics; they parried unwanted or problematic elements of what they experienced as expectations from other groups by invoking their own professional categories. We conclude that the archetype of the magical shield provides a metaphorical depth that shows the profound cultural roots of such a defense against undesired influences in the enactment of social roles of professionals.

We seek to answer the following questions: How do the Polish IT professionals present their professional role? How do they construct, change, and preserve their agency within a wider organizational context? Do they make use of any recurrent themes in this process, and can these themes be seen in archetypical terms?

In order to answer these questions, we first present professions in terms of the social construction of their social roles since the professional is a relatively autonomous social actor with considerable agency to define his or her role standards. We then present IT workers as an emerging profession distinguished by their particular concern with their peers in their role construction. We introduce ethnography as our research method and our interpretation of it as a narrative project. We then present the results of our inquiry, focusing on how IT professionals talk about their own social roles in terms of relationships with other groups of social actors. In analyzing our findings, we utilize the metaphor of Aegis, the professional shield, as a way of dealing with attempts to impose undesired roles from some of the audiences they deal with in their work, including, most notably, managers. We end our discussion by reflecting on the changes in agency brought about through the use of the professional shield.

## Professionals, social roles and IT workers

For the purposes of this paper, we regard professions as occupational groups that define their own organizational fields and the knowledge that is relevant in that field (Hellberg et al., 1999). Professions hold an agency, which is a kind of collective consciousness and intentionality developed and strengthened over time. Authors such as Goode (1957), Vollmer & Mills (1966), Schein (1968), Abbott (1988), Friedson (1994), Kreiner & Tryggestad (1999), and Daley (2001), have all stress the relative autonomy and the focus on certain standards (ethical and/or technical and educational), as well as the agency in defining those standards, as characteristic of professions. Jonnergård (2008) contended that there are different ideal types of professions that are based on different notions of legitimacy, ethical codes and positions in society. Professionals can be said to be working for the client, the common good or the organization; the career of knowledge may be the professional or organizational; and the ethics may be traditional or based on professional norms or on organizational ones. However, all such notions include autonomy as a central idea, even though the basis for autonomy may be tradition, superior knowledge, or the impossibility of giving detailed instructions for work. The position of the professional has, according to Mike Dent and Stephen Whitehead (2002), somewhat lost its independence and it has become more subject to external influence than before. (Among the groups with the most to say about other professionals are managers.) At the same time, professionalism has not lost its cultural and societal importance—it may even have gained importance. Concepts such as performativity, discourse, power, knowledge, identity, accountability, and autonomy tend to define much of the professional's identity today.

This text focuses on how a professional group–Polish IT specialists, defines its social roles. We understand social roles in the classic Goffmanesque way, as patterns of acting, traced a priori, relating to a social actor (1959/2000). Enacting the role means the participation of an actor in a given situation with the intent of influencing other participants. We agree with Czarniawska-Joerges that "every person who undertakes to play one of these roles, plays it anew, tentatively" (1992, p. 125). However, what others are perceived to do and expect of the actor influences the way the performance takes shape. The expectations of others and social norms about how to behave in a specific role are not necessarily automatically accepted, but they need to be recognized in order for the performance to go on. People interpret and make sense of the networks of meaning in which they take part (Smircich, 1987) and may have more or less agency to improvise and/or shape their roles. This text addresses a professional group's active sense-making processes (Weick, 1995) in the face of social roles they are expected to play but that they interpret as unacceptable. We are interested in finding out how they enhance their agency as professionals in the process of role construction.

Kostera (1996) proposed three dimensions of professionals' social roles: the societal (dominating scenarios for role construction within the broader cultural context), the professional (the way the professionals themselves choose to construct their roles) and the organizational (the way organizations employing the professionals see their place in the social structure) (Table 1).

**Table 1.** The dimensions of a professional's social role

| *Dimension of the social role* | The audience defining the dimension of the role | Content |
|---|---|---|
| *Societal* | *Stakeholders*<br>society/ local community | How the professional group should/ should not act<br>How important they are for society |
| *Professional* | Professional community; peers | The rules of the game: how a professional should act and what is moral/ important/desired |
| *Organizational* | Organization (employer) | Cultural norms and values<br>Place in social structure<br>Work description<br>Remuneration |

Source: adapted from Kostera (1996) and Postuła (2010)

In the case of Polish IT professionals, our interviews revealed that the most influential social groups that direct expectations to IT professional as to how to fulfill the societal dimension of their role were clients, families and friends, and other groups, including mass media and popular culture. The most influential professional groups were other IT professionals at large and IT professionals who work together as one team. The professional group, usually considered the most important, directed expectations issues that can be categorized into two main groups: task-related (what peers should do at work) and standard-related (educational and ethical standards as to how the work should be done and who should do it). As we will see, these categories vary a great deal in terms of the different sub-groups of IT professionals that the peers themselves considered crucial; in fact, most interviewees denied the existence of the IT profession as such, preferring the sub-groups. Finally, as to the organizational dimension of the role, our interviewees regarded managers and non-IT-competent colleagues as their main audiences. Before we proceed to presenting our findings, we briefly address the IT profession as seen by other ethnographers with regard to the theme that interests us most: how the IT workers see their profession in the context of the expectations they perceive that key audiences direct at them.

Autonomy and self-rule, as well as the agency to define their roles that is typical of most professions, are often pointed to as crucial for IT professionals. Barley and Kunda (2006) presented highly qualified IT professionals as highly autonomous contractors fully capable of using their independent position to their advantage. IT professionals criticize management and resist attempts at controlling their demeanor or the content of their work (Jemielniak, 2007). Jemielniak and Kociatkiewicz (2008) pointed to how managerial rhetoric and IT professionals' language have remained at odds as IT professionals resent the idea of being manipulated and engineered and invoke the indispensability of their knowledge. Folz (2008) showed how high-tech workers resist management policies aimed at interfering with the contents of their work. While this resistance may not be organized in the sense of organized labor—they are not always willing to identify with organized labor—they tend to identify against management. Their knowledge may be an important factor in maintaining their strong autonomous position. Pineiro and Case (2008) argued that the position of high-tech workers is based on their unique knowledge, which runs contrary to the tendency of management to simplify and limit jobs and relocate knowledge to supervisors. Not surprisingly, this knowledge is regarded as crucial by the IT professionals, who wish to maintain their relatively autonomous and strong professional position within organizations. Hierarchy and management intervention have been described as detrimental not only from the point of view of the IT workers' professional identities but as it relates to the character of their work, which demands free communication and flexible cooperation (Brohm, 2005). Other groups have also been described as having a potentially negative influence on the content of IT professionals' work; for example, IT workers denounce clients as incompetent partners in the process of creating IT solutions (Jemielniak, 2008a). Another issue is that of how IT workers identify their roles. Scholarios & Marks (2004) demonstrated how the boundaries between work and private life become more blurred in the case of IT workers and how the intrusion of work into their private sphere influences how they perceive their work roles and whether they are treated fairly by their employer or not. The typical IT professional identifies much more strongly with the profession than with his or her employer, but the commitment to the employer may grow if the employer shows respect for the IT professional's autonomy and private life.

## Method

The material on which this paper is based comes from an ethnographic study (Czarniawska, 2008; Van Maanen, 1988), carried out by one of the authors under the supervision of the other. Ethnography describes groups by collecting local knowledge and information about the processes that led to their development and construction (Watson, 1994/1997; Yanow, 2000). An ethnographic study is based on an intensive immersion in the field (Rosen, 2000). The present study began at the end of 2002, lasted until the end of 2004 and consisted of two stages: extensive observations and interviews in a Polish software firm, and interviews of IT professionals who were working as contractors and/or were employed by non-IT-focused companies. In all, 32 interviews with 34 persons were carried out, 18 in the first and 14 in the second stage. The main methods used, apart from in-depth interviews, were direct observation (Rosen, 2000) and shadowing (Czarniawska, 2008). The first stage of the study focused on a small Polish software firm, a highly innovative specialist organization whose owner is an IT worker himself. The other interviews were conducted in order to avoid an exclusive focus on professionals employed by an IT firm since we knew from our first-stage interviews how important a distinction that could be in the perception of IT professionals' professional identity. Therefore, we also spoke to such high-tech workers as programmers employed by non-IT-firms, entrepreneurs, and freelancers.

During data-gathering, as well as in the process of interpretation, we adopted a narrative perspective (Boje, 2003; Czarniawska, 2004); in other words, we focused on the collection of stories from our interviewees (Gabriel, 2000), looked actively for narratives and ante-narratives during our observations (Boje, 2001), and interpreted our material through a narrative lens (Czarniawska, 2004; Boje, 2001). Narratives are a way of knowing and communicating (Boje, 2001; Boje, 2003; Czarniawska, 2008). A story is a kind of narrative, equipped with a plot (Boje, 2001; Czarniawska, 2008) and characters (Gabriel, 2000). Narratives are a form of memory in that they rationalize what happened, whereas ante-narratives are fragmented proto-stories lived and in-the-making, concurrent with life itself (Boje, 2001). We were interested in the collection all of these forms, particularly ante-narratives, but chose the archetypal tale as our main interpretive tool. Archetypes, understood in the Jungian (1968) sense, are

> common patterns containing hidden images of all human motivations and inspirations. They are concealed in the collective unconscious domain of reality and shared by all humans. They are the substance that myths and symbols are constructed of and because of their universality they have the capacity of turning individuals into a group and can be seen as the underpinning of culture and society (Kostera, 2007, p. 67).

Archetypes are like riverbeds – empty slots ready to embrace fundamental images, ideas and stories. They often give birth to myths and legends, and they inspire art and the creative inventions of the human mind. They are deeply rooted in culture and have an ability to touch profound strings in the psyche. They often inspire the ways we think of and about organizations, so they can be used to understand the human side of organizing better, to see what is missing or lost in the ways our organizations work. They help us realize the dangers lurking from our own collective–and often unconscious, making. Finally, they may point out new and sometimes unexpected ways of change (Kostera, 2008a). For an overview of uses of archetypes in organization studies, see Table 2.

**Table 2:** Uses of archetypes in organization studies

| | **Uses** | **Example** |
|---|---|---|
| **Archetypes** | Presentation of gaps and problems or the dark side of organization | loss of feminine aspects of contemporary organizations (Höpfl, 2002); the dark side of organizations (Bowles, 1991) |
| | Facilitation of communicating individuality in a collective narrative process | mythical characters reflecting values and virtues held in organizations (Bowles, 1993; Sievers, 1994) |
| | Making sense of the "mythologization" of organizations | tales of organizational virtues and vices, powers, attributes and abilities (Kostera, 2008b) |
| | Boosting inspiration and motivation, awakening imagination | tools for strategic managers to help them become more successful and sensitive leaders (Hatch, et al., 2005); tools for change/extension of agency in the construction of professional roles (current text) |

The archetypical tale is a story that uses an archetype as its recurrent theme; for example, stories of heroes or of magical artifacts are often archetypical tales. A particularly important kind of archetypical tale is the myth, a powerful tale that touches important strings in our psyche, expressing "in ways that we are not able to articulate, our feelings, thoughts, consciousness, or sense of our own behavior" (Bowles, 1993, p. 414).

During our observations, we collected all kinds of stories, but, in the process of interpretation, we looked for themes with an archetypical underpinning–not necessarily complete myths (since these are rare), but recurrent themes with a reference to an archetype. We found one such theme which we present in this paper. It was recurrent–many interviewees talked about it–and it could be linked to an archetype: in this case, a magical object. We selected all the narratives and ante-narratives that we could link to this archetype and re-read them in order to establish whether there was a broader plot topic that they could be seen as part of. We found such a topic (social role construction) and one plot (the undesired interference of others prevented with the use of a common ploy we link to the magical object). Some stories had a conclusion, while others (especially the ante-narratives) did not.

## Defining the profession: In the eyes of the field

When asked to define their role as IT professionals, some interviewees chose a broad characterization based on technological criteria:

> *IT professionals, you can say, are people using computers for their own sakes and not to achieve other ends. And I don't count money as these other things. If you treat computers as tools for writing or drawing or bookkeeping, then you're not an IT professional, because you use the computer as a tool. An IT professional would be someone who somehow creates these IT tools or manages them. (Antek)*

> *An IT professional is someone dealing with computers. (Tolek)*

Some interviewees limited their definitions to embrace only work with software, but without adding other qualifications. In their view, an IT professional is:

> *a person busy, let's say, with software engineering, someone […] whose task is not even necessarily to create such a program but rather thinking it up, planning it and inventing ways in which it's supposed to work. (Jarek)*

> *It's a person who creates algorithms of some kind and does not necessarily implement them. (Marek)*

Some referred to such characteristics as a unique knowledge or personal predispositions:

> *A kind of a criterion is, after all, the knowledge about IT, and further traits and interests, really, because some people like it, to fiddle at low level; that is, they like creating elementary things that are important too—software for different stuff—and this is what comes to mind when I think of IT people, this image: with a heap of empty pizza cartons, Coke, three monitors, a long beard, unshaved, etc. (Alek)*

Apart from these and similar positive attempts at defining the profession, we also encountered many instances of negative definitions, which surprised us at first until they grew more and more frequent and began to appeared to be the "standard." In particular, many of the interviewees rejected the label of "IT professional" altogether, pointing to the differences between themselves and others who bearing that label but work for non-IT-focused organizations:

> *You know what? I resent being called "IT professional." When the kids called me that once, IT-man, I felt quite disgusted because an IT-man is, for me, someone employed by the IT department of some corporation that does not deal with IT as its main area. That is, a bank, someplace where the main source of income is something other than IT. For example, I used to be an IT-man at Makro, Makro Cash and Carry, when then were installing…. There I was an IT person because I was selling this company a service—I was part of a firm of which the core business, as they call it, is not IT. That's an IT-man for me. (Darek)*

The term "IT professional" was criticized as a kind of linguistic garbage, lacking meaningful content:

> *It has to be said: the Polish language has been polluted by the word "IT worker," and if you want to say generally who an IT worker is, such a general definition, fitting for all IT people is that an IT person is someone who writes faster with a keyboard than the average user. (Franek)*

The term was also rejected on the grounds that it brings to mind the wrong associations.

> *"IT person" refers usually to a guy dealing with cables*[3] *and networks […]. I have studied IT […] and IT was about information, not cables. […] And these days, if you see "we want to hire an IT person" it means that they'll expect a guy who can put together 4 computers into one network, buy a router, and that all will be able to see the printer that is standing in the adjacent room. (Adam)*

The term may also be used to refer to inadequate education, to someone who

> *has finished some school in Little Backwoods, some course lasting for half a year, who can use Word and something else and you may call that person an IT specialist too. Such an IT person working for a corporation—that's what it's like quite often, that we have an IT specialist in the corporation and he or she is someone who can explain to Miss Sophie how to start Word for Windows. (Flora)*

The interviewees often emphasized how the term "IT professional" was far too broad to be of use, as it brings to mind too many associations of people who are outsiders to the profession. That alone caused a negative attitude towards the term itself and "silly" or absurd expectations from the outside audiences:

> *There's also the stereotype of an IT person, sitting in front of the computer, wearing glasses, blind to the world outside of the computer. (Gosia)*

> *If someone mentions the IT profession, I keep thinking of a guy working in a bank, in some company, some chain of stores, where, you know, in the IT section […] or if he or she works for an IT firm, then I'd they're a technical consultant. I wouldn't say they were an IT professional. Maybe because that brings to mind the image of someone working for an IT department in some non-IT company, and that makes me think of loafers, you know. (Darek)*

Some interviewees chose to define IT-professionals as not embracing exactly the same labels that some of the other interviewees selected to describe the profession. One interlocutor (Robert) stated that the category did not contain administrators, which another interviewee (Piotr) considered synonymous with IT professional. Another person (Bartek) spoke of programmers as not part of the profession, unless they also did other things, such as designs. One interviewee excluded designers

> *who write algorithms on paper. They've never seen a computer but they write algorithms on paper. (Marek)*

Webmasters were also denounced as not being part of the IT profession, even if they also possess an "uncanny knowledge" (Dora). However, other interviewees, when asked to define the IT profession, chose to include precisely those occupations. So, for some, a programmer was not an IT professional and, for others, programmers were the foremost example of IT professionals. There is no contradiction in this seeming incongruity: our interviewees preferred to define their professions themselves and did so by using technical and specialist labels and terms as both positive and negative descriptions. Thus, a programmer may say that IT was about programming but not administrating, and an administrator could say the opposite. However, a much more popular tendency was to denounce the IT profession as a macro category and instead define oneself as a specialist in some sub-area; for example, a programmer could say that he or she was a programmer, not an IT person and explain that an IT person deals with such issues as administration. In our study, 11 interviewees chose to define themselves as programmers (and not "IT people"), while others said they were designers, analysts, consultants or testers. Some adopted an even more specialized terminology and spoke of themselves as Java programmers, JTI programmers, documentation specialists, solution architects, and so on. These distinctions appeared to be important to them, even though–or, perhaps, because–they were conscious that their main audiences, such as clients and managers, were ignorant of them. These audiences, from the interviewees' perspective, needed to be treated cautiously and kept at a distance because they lack knowledge about the profession but can exert an influence—or try to do so. Marek's attitude toward clients was typical:

> *It is interesting; when one meets a client, they think that they know it all, but, actually–no way! The client doesn't know anything. They don't know what they need…. We have to direct him to an appropriate path, and not at all in order to make them pay a lot […], but so that they will agree and be happy. (Marek)*

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[3] Not that the Polish term for IT-professional (informatyk) embraces both hardware and software specialists. Part of this reaction was clearly directed against the broader connotation.

The client has a huge influence not only on what is being done and how, but on the definition of the IT work itself. However, he or she lacks the knowledge or the interest required to be a helpful audience and becomes a nuisance instead. Clients, in the viewpoint of our interviewees, have unrealistic expectations, change their minds during a project, insist on inferior solutions and generally lack what the IT-workers called an "IT consciousness." Still, IT workers' loyalty to their professional standards demands that they sometimes stand their ground:

> *We cannot agree to do something that we consider being substandard just because the client wants it. Of course, you work for the client, to satisfy them, but we cannot produce something that goes against our nature, see? It's a bit like with art. Until a point, you do what they pay for, but then something, like, hits you and you won't do it even for a thousand, ten thousand dollars. You just won't do something that goes against yourself. (Janek)*

Managers are another powerful group that holds an influence over the IT professionals' work situation. Our interviewees tended to be appreciative of managers who were IT workers themselves, such as was the situation in the IT firm where we carried out the initial phase of the study:

> *A good manager … is a manager who is also an IT professional, […] who knows that I can do this task in one hour but another one in three weeks, even if someone, an outsider, might believe that what takes an hour should take three weeks and what takes three weeks should take one hour (Tolek)*

A good manager respects the IT professional's autonomy:

> *A good manager? […] For me, it's someone who doesn't interfere in what I do. We have a huge autonomy [in the IT firm]. [Our manager] does not aspire to know all the details of every project—here is too much of it. So every project runs its own course and the manager come in only when there are major problems. But on an everyday basis … he doesn't come every day and ask, "How's it going?" or ask, "Why is this or that not done yet?" […] It's just – not his job. (Bartek)*

The manager of the IT firm was also a programmer and was considered a knowledgeable and reasonable audience, but many also saw him as actually helpful in organizing and defining their work. They also commented generally in positive terms on the work climate and the relationships between people in the organization. However, other IT workers were much more negative. In their view, big corporations tend to be too impersonal, and the contacts are superficial while they also put too many demands on the IT professionals' private time. The big corporations, according to these interviewees, strive to put their employees in a uniform and make them work in supervised spaces such as office cubicles. Our interviewees considered such work conditions below their dignity, unless, as one interviewee remarked, the managers were willing to offer three times the salary he was earning in more autonomous employment. The IT workers we interviewed sometimes expressed an awareness of the stress that the job of managing entailed, but they emphasized that such a joyless career was a choice, after all, as was theirs. Generally, they expected to be respected by their managers and hoped for a greater understanding of the distinctiveness and demands of their work. This was well expressed in the positive evaluation of the current manager by one of the interviewees:

> *[He] doesn't contact us a lot. It's not like he's there all the time, controlling us, watching. He wants us to produce effects, and he offers a great trust to the employees. That's the impression we have, that he really trusts us. (Marek)*

## The professional shield of Polish IT specialists

The IT professionals we spoke to wanted to define their own profession autonomously and resisted others' categorizations, thus changing the agency of the role construction in their own favor. First and most important, they did not want to be thrown into common baskets, to "be like them." To deflect this "too broad" category, they hold smaller categories of their own choice, such as programmer or designer, as much more important. At the same time, they acknowledged that the broader public only sees the large, "unimportant" basket.

The invocation of specialization also serves as a fine-tuning tool on the intra-professional level when it comes to defining specializations. The professionals state what they are not and give technical reasons for the denouncement. In that way, they differentiate themselves from other, similar professionals, on their own terms and in categories that matter to them. They may or may not feel superior or inferior to these others, but they take care of their differences in their own company, keeping the "outsiders" out by using terms they do not understand.

There are also other important reasons for their insistence on naming their profession. We believe that, by doing so, the IT professionals exercise their autonomy and keep outsiders at a comfortable distance. The interviewees tended to reject the role that they feel comes with the label of “IT person”; to discourage outsiders from coming too close, they preferred to adopt own labels and categories that seem very specialist and are based on insider jargon or complicated technical issues. Like Garsten (1994), who found in her ethnographic study at Apple that IT professionals held strong normative codes and used an insider jargon, we believe that these characteristics are used to deflect undesired influence over their work and their profession.

Our interviewees exhibited a behavior similar to what Kostera et al (1994) said Polish professional women used: holding up a shield of professionalism to deflect society’s controlling and interfering gaze. We develop this metaphor and trace its archetypical roots in order to show how profound its cultural resonance can be.

The archetype of the shield is used in the mythical image of the Aegis, the powerful shield of Zeus and Athena. Medusa was one of the Gorgon sisters, once a beautiful maiden, turned into a monster by Athena in an act of revenge[4]. When Perseus took up the quest to kill Medusa, Athena lent him the shield so he would be able to defend himself. Medusa was famous for her lethal gaze–whomever she looked upon immediately fell dead from petrification. Perseus looked at her reflection in the shield instead of staring directly into her face and thereby avoided being turned into stone. After killing Medusa, he presented her severed head to Athena, who placed it on Aegis to serve as an additional defense for the shield-bearer: just looking at the shield could kill an opponent.

Aegis is an effective shield because it protects the user, hiding him or her from the gaze of the antagonist, but at the same time making the gazing very dangerous for the gazer. Similarly, the jargon the IT professionals used can terrorize audiences who might be tempted, for whatever reason, to look at them too closely. The Aegis can be an effective weapon against the managerialist Panopticon. The labels the IT people prefer wearing speak of knowledge that is not necessarily easy to grasp, reminding non-technical audiences of the horrors that mathematics and technical subjects imposed at school. They may be dazzled by the reflections in their own minds, the memories of which might almost petrify them and stop them in their tracks. Just as Medusa, who used to be beautiful, was turned into a monster, mathematics and technology are beautiful to those who are proficient at them but monstrous to those who are not. By insisting on the use of professional categories, the IT professionals turn the societal gaze against itself, the effect of which is more space for autonomous definitions of their social roles–which is what they are after. Aegis is powerful shield and an accurate weapon. As in Milton’s poem, quoted at the beginning of this text, it defends, and it inspires awe and adoration.

In a similar study, Jemielniak (2008b) observed a tendency among Polish IT workers to define themselves as artists, rather than as engineers. The engineering label had been imposed on them by managers who, by this act of naming, wanted to impress on them their rules and expectations. The IT professionals fled from this attempt at external control by adopting the “artist” label—one that has exactly opposite connotations from those of “engineer.” In our terms, Jemielniak’s IT professionals were holding up the Aegis of art to counterbalance an attempt to control them: as terrifying as arcane mathematics can be to a humanist, so can “fuzzy” and imprecise art be to an engineer. We believe that these instances of different self-labeling that have occurred among IT professionals show that, in the end, the label is not so important to them as the power it has to repel powerful audiences with a mind to manage their profession.

## Coda: The shield and the change in agency

We believe that Aegis may be an archetype widely used by many professionals to deflect the undesired attention of certain audiences and to maintain autonomy. However, more research on other professional groups would enable to say this with more certainty, as well as to present a typology of labels used by professionals to re-gain control: the “faces of Medusa.”

We also believe that the interpretive lens that we used in our paper enables us to see a hidden aspect of the well researched struggle for professional self-control. The advantages of using the archetypical lens are twofold: first, it shows the concealed power of the particular element of social role construction that we have portrayed in this text. It is derived from the collective unconscious or, for the anti-essentialists, as a special narrative power obtained from the role the archetype plays in culture. The fragment of the role construction process we have depicted as holding up the Aegis can also be used to draw even more symbolic power in the construction of culture and collective sense-making processes through the infusion of inspiration and the correspondence with other important ideas (Kostera, 2008). Second, the archetypical lens sheds light on the sense behind the seeming inconsistency in the professionals’ narratives; it is not the characters or even the plot itself that makes the self-labeling stories compelling, but the archetype underneath whose role is not to explain but to provide power.

[4] For a different reading of the myth of Medusa, see Höpfl (2008).

Finally, we have in mind that the carrier of Aegis becomes invincible, free to wander wherever he or she pleases, to disregard others or empathize with them. Its protection brings a sudden change in agency in favor of the IT professionals: a freedom to act, a freedom to feel, a freedom to be.

And thou, O warrior maid invincible,
Arm'd with the terrors of Almighty Jove,
Pallas, Minerva, maiden terrible,
Lov'st thou to walk the peaceful solemn grove,
In solemn gloom of branches interwove?
Or bear'st thy Aegis o'er the burning field,
Where, like the sea, the waves of battle move?
Or have thy soft piteous eyes beheld
The weary wanderer thro' the desert rove?
Or does th' afflicted man thy heav'nly bosom move?

*William Blake, An imitation of Spenser*[5]

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