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MIKOŁAJ REJ AND HIS *KUPIEC* AND RELIGIOUS TOPICS ON THE POLISH STAGE

ABSTRACT. Bering Piotr, *Mikołaj Rej and his “Kupiec” and Religious Topics on the Polish Stage (Kupiec Mikołaja Reja i tematyka religijna na polskiej scenie)*.

The present paper focuses on the Polish religious polemic during the first phase of the Reformation period. Today we know only a few plays from this period. Fortunately, they do allow us, nevertheless, to analyse the main topic and to reconstruct their hypothetical staging.

Keywords: Reformation; staging; theology; Reformation; 16th century; Poland

The role played by the Reformation in the 16th century is commonly accepted. It shaped European culture profoundly, in all aspects of life, including the theatre. The stage was (and is nowadays) a powerful instrument for any form of propaganda. In this particular case, propaganda has a neutral meaning. Theatre has a “special” position in society, which means only a possibility to disseminate many ideas.¹ Due to these circumstances, theatre was able to be involved in Germany in a vivid confessional debate. The aim of Protestants was to create a new witness of the true Christian faith.²

It seems that the biggest influence of religious plays may be noted in regions in which the reformed Church eventually achieved a victory. Of extreme importance were the polemical plays in the cradle of the Reformation – Germany. The Protestants sought to present historical martyrs in a dramatic way.³ In Bohemia, polemical literature flourished rather than that from militant parts.⁴ At first glance, Poland should not be included here, because it had long been Catholic. However, in fact, in the early decades of the 16th century, there

¹ For more on this topic, see *Nowe światy. Sztuki performatywne jako polityczne przestrzenie konfliktu, dialogu i troski...*

² Dietl 2014.

³ Freund 2014.

⁴ Vlček (1960: 281–290).

were plenty of religious polemics in almost all possible forms in the country. Contrary to Germany, Calvinism gained the biggest popularity in Poland. Lutheranism was popular among urban inhabitants, but the Polish nobility opted for Calvinism. Taking into consideration the prominent political position of the nobility, scholars have admitted that the Polish nobility was the most vigorous part of society in spreading new religious ideas.⁵

Moreover, the nobility was the most educated social strata, and was familiar with the literary output of the time. But the social spectrum of religious authors was broader. Among them were also townspeople. This social position was common for Catholics and Protestants, and for laymen and priests. Both sides published many polemical works, including some dialogues and plays.

I would like to present the two main protagonists here. Polish evangelical thought is presented in a unique work *Kupiec (The Merchant)*, which combines a morality play with religious polemic. It was published in 1549 in Königsberg in Prussia, where the majority of Protestant books were printed and later sent to Poland. The work was printed during the first phase of Polish Reformation, named “Lutheranism without Luther”.⁶ The Catholic side was presented by *Rozmowy polskie lacińskim językiem przeplatane (Polish dialogues mixed with Latin)* composed in the form of a dialogue. Some significant features of inner textual organization testify to the very real possibility of its being staged. It was printed four years later (1553). Hence, the Protestants were the leaders who might bring religious debate to the stage. *Kupiec* was written by Mikołaj Rej, a man belonging to the middle strata of the nobility, who was traditionally named the “Father of Polish literature”. The author of *Rozmowy polskie* was Wit (Vitus) Korczewski, who Julian Lewański⁷ tried to identify with the Dominican monk Gorczewski. It should be added that the Dominicans recruited mostly from the nobility.⁸

Rozmowy was printed firstly in 1889⁹ without any critical apparatus. Scholars had to wait over a hundred years for the modern critical edition. In 2002, Korczewski’s work was published in a volume bringing together Catholic polemical dramas.¹⁰ Rej’s work *Kupiec* was printed as a whole work in 1898 and 1924, and some limited passages from this huge book (over 9000 lines) in an anthology of Old-Polish drama in 1959,¹¹ but never with comprehensive critical

⁵An outline of Polish Reformation is presented by Tazbir (1973); important and up-to-date remarks can be found in *Luteranizm w kulturze Pierwszej Rzeczypospolitej...*

⁶Ptaszyński (2017: 57).

⁷Lewański (1981: 247).

⁸For the close relationship between Dominicans and nobility, see: *Kościół w Polsce...*, 632 and in a broader social perspective, Sinkewycz 2009.

⁹Korczewski 1889.

¹⁰Korczewski 2002.

¹¹Detailed data can be found in the bibliography.

notes. Luckily, the situation changed for the better when first a facsimile of the old print (2008) and a year later a contemporary edition with splendid critical apparatus (2009)¹² were printed. Despite its previously limited printing, *Kupiec* has been many times analysed by scholars.¹³ Naturally, their investigations focused on religious and literary topics, while problems related to the stage were often marginalized.

The dramatic features of both texts were first emphasized many years ago by Julian Lewański, who compiled a well-documented history of Polish medieval and Renaissance theatre.¹⁴ A couple of years ago, *Kupiec* was also included by Andrzej Dąbrówka in his studies on the “theatre of death”.¹⁵ Following these scholars, I will try to analyse the main topic of theological controversy, which is more evident in Rej. The second task is more difficult, because in both works direct instructions on staging are rare.

However, even a superficial analysis of the written texts leads us to state the more than possible staging. In the text, persons are enumerated and their speeches are properly set in dialogue. *Kupiec* was primarily divided into only two parts. The critical edition makes it possible to reconstruct and graphically present all the inner parts in this work.¹⁶ Due to a method used in a critical edition of *Rozmowy*, similar remarks cannot be formulated for this work. But there is another clue to thinking in categories of the stage. The whole work consists of two separate parts named *Rozmowa pierwsza* and *Rozmowa wtóra* (a first conversation, a second conversation). The theological topic was explained completely in both parts. In each part, different persons are present. It seems that in *Rozmowy* there can often be three or more persons acting in the same scene.

Mikołaj Rej was not the true originator of the stories presented. The well-known work *Mercator*, written by the German humanist and evangelical theologian Thomas Naogeorgus, was used as a template.¹⁷ Rej decided not to translate the tragedy word for word, but modified it to a large extent. What is very significant is the comparison of the size of both works: the Polish text is almost three times longer than the German one. Moreover, some plots are reduced and some expanded by the Polish author.¹⁸ He also resigned from partitioning the play into acts and scenes (which luckily were reconstructed in a critical edition).¹⁹ The unique nature of *Kupiec*, and what distinguishes it, resulted from a rare combination of morality play and play devoted to religious matters. The highly topical subject-matter

¹² Facsimile of old print: Rej 2008, critical edition: Rej 2009.

¹³ See selected bibliography collected by the editor in (Rej 2009).

¹⁴ Lewański 1981.

¹⁵ Dąbrówka 2007.

¹⁶ Rej 2009.

¹⁷ Naogeorgus 1927.

¹⁸ Rej (2009: 12). It is emphasized by Maciuszko (2002: 239–271).

¹⁹ Rej (2009: 14–17).

was enormously important for Rej. He tried to give an outline of evangelical doctrine. The different characters representing nobility, the clerical hierarchy and townspeople are faced with death, but only the titular hero is involved in what amounts to a serious religious dispute. Some passages focused seriously on religious polemics. The most impressive is the scene in which a local Catholic priest advises the titular merchant to confess his sins in a sacramental way. The early Christian heroes – St. Paul and Cosmas – do not appreciate this sacrament: they both emphasize the value of real inner contrition and penitence (v. 4364–5687). Early Christian and martyrs for “true faith” were quite often presented as a religious authority in German evangelical dramaturgy.²⁰

Korczewski wrote a much smaller work, which consists of two parts (as mentioned previously) and combines speeches in Polish and in Latin. This specific feature can be useful for the dramatical presentation of the characters. In the play, Peasant (*Chłop*), an illiterate man speaks with his son, *Kilian*, a student coming from Germany, only in Polish. But the student and a local priest have a theological argument in Latin. It is intriguing whether this choice of language resulted from the topic in question. This kind of linguistic variation can be found in other Polish plays from the 16th century, mainly in *Historyja*.²¹ The Latin parties are mostly not translated into Polish, and only the most important statements are summarized in Polish, presumably in view of the wider audience. It is likely that Latin was only more suitable for more sophisticated theological questions. Moreover, Latin and Polish could interplay in a different and very complicated way, which scholars can only partially explain.²² Another reason for such a choice was related to contrast between the well-educated and simple folk. Early Catholic anti-protestant works were composed in Latin.

As was mentioned above, stage directions for actors are rare. Fortunately, some kinds of stage movements, voice intonation, and even gestures can be reconstructed from the existing dialogues. In contrast to Korczewski, Rej gives some remarks on the reactions of his characters. It is a risky but rewarding matter to reconstruct some of these traces of the acting.²³ The dialogues and remarks for interlocutors often use verbs demonstrating different people’s activities: *piwa nalej* (pour some beer), *pyta, płacze* (asks, cries), *leży* (is lying) *pulsu macają* (feel a pulse).

²⁰They were even constructed, and Saint Pura is already described by name. Another popular hero, but coming from the 15th century, was Jan Hus; see (Dietl 2014), (Freud 2014). Martyrdom as a topic of religious polemic was presented by Stylianou (2017).

²¹Bering 2021. The broader perspective on Latin-Polish coexistence is presented in *Kazania świętokrzyskie*. I mention only two: (Krażyńska, Mika 2018) and (Mika 2012).

²²Mika (2012: 51–79), and Mejer (2015: 51–88). The former author represents Polish linguistics, the latter Medieval Latin literary studies.

²³This is analysed almost perfectly by (Lipiński 1974). In the debate on a staging of *Kupiec Maciuszko* (2002: 249–250) argued against this possibility.

Jacek Lipiński thoughtfully analysed the text of *Kupiec* and, based only on verbs describing physical movement, reconstructed four different pantomimes acted in order to teach the audience.²⁴ The last statement creates a strong argument for the important role of stage movement in medieval theatre. This very complicated topic (doubtless including religious aspects) should be presented and explicated in many various ways. It should be borne in mind that there was some difficulty in fully understanding liturgical plays spoken exclusively in Latin.²⁵ An *ad oculos* presentation, without words, might have been easier for an illiterate audience.

What is quite similar are the remarks presented on staging in Korczewski's work. But in his text, we can also encounter some stage gestures. For example, when the student and his father (*Chłop*) come to a local priest (*Pleban*), the latter is reading some books. The Peasant (*Chłop*) says: *bo na księgi spoglądacie* (you are looking into books). When the priest prays for the student, who supports Luther, he is probably looking upwards. This statement made by Lipiński can be generally supported by elementary signs and techniques presented by medieval and modern actors.²⁶ A few words later, he says to the Student: "*imprudens tace!*", with the sign to be silent. There is also what Lipiński's terminology refers to as a "self-deixis" gesture, which the actors display on themselves.²⁷ But the strongest argument for the staging of this work can be found directly in four verses from the beginning of *Rozmowa wtóra* (second conversation):

Przeto pokornie prosimy,
Byście pomilczeń raczyli,
A posłuchać tu **naszej gry**,
Acz prostej, ale prawdziwej (v. 5–9)

(You are asked politely to be silent and to listen to **our play**; however simple, it is true).

Unfortunately, we do not have any direct testimony confirming the details of the play. Due to the lack of this, any reconstruction of a stage, a place, or time of playing is a matter of pure hypothesis. Without doubt, however, both plays were enacted in cities. Both plays were addressed to townspeople and they could not have been "too sophisticated". Both texts (much more Korczewski's work) contain a huge portion of didactic matter, which makes the dramatic features weaker. The lack of these features must be compensated by stage movement. For

²⁴Lipiński (1974: 159–161).

²⁵Lewański (1981: 45–50), compare (Hardison 1965). The sacral stage and its role are analysed by (Vennebusch 2021).

²⁶Lipiński (1974: 198). For more on gesture from *Codex Bembinus*, see: (Dodwell 2000).

²⁷Lipiński (1974: 197–203).

instance, in *Rozmowy* one of the main characters says: *idźże tedy do stodoły, a ja też pójdę do szkoły* (you go to a barn, and I will go to a school).²⁸

Both plays are divided into two main parts. *Kupiec* begins with a journey of God's envy, informing about a coming death. People are met in different circumstances: *Książę* (Prince) is on the battlefield, *Biskup* (Bishop) in his palace, *Gardyjan* (Guardian of the Franciscans) in a convent, and the main character, *Kupiec* (Merchant), in his house. The second part presents doomsday. Anna Kochan, the editor of this play, remarks that the first part could represent Saturday, and the final part can represent Sunday, the day devoted to God's service.²⁹ This is naturally a stage chronology. In fact, the main idea of the dramatical dichotomy is accurate. It could also result in a play set over two days. Precisely the same situation exists in *Rozmowy*, because the two parts can be performed separately. Even if the text is short, it could be acted as the interlude belonging to a bigger entirety.³⁰ It is worth adding that in Germany polemical topics were also combined with comic ones. This combination is perfectly suited for smaller stage forms, like *Fastnachtspiel*.³¹

Another topic is related to the potential scenography and stage arrangement. Jacek Lipiński states without any doubt that *Kupiec* was performed on a simultaneous stage. The separate mansions represent the bishop's palace, heaven, hell, a convent, and the merchant's house.³² I myself am more cautious in this matter. In no place in the text is *mansio* or *locum/loca* mentioned. Moreover, a combination of a polemical drama with a morality play might be very easily performed on a "standard" stage. It should also be emphasized that the best Polish mystery play *Historyja o chwalebnyim Zmartwychwstaniu Pańskim* (*History of the Glorious Resurrection of the Lord*) was, according to the stage directions, performed in an open place, even "in a churchyard".³³ Doubtless both plays would require quite frequent changes of props. In the 16th century, the Terentian stage was already known in Poland,³⁴ which also was suitable for the staging of polemical plays. The status of polemical dialogues is not unequivocal. As dialogues they have a potential for being performed. They were suitable for *persuasio* of opponents.³⁵

²⁸ Lipiński (1974: 200) contains a more comprehensive analysis of this movement.

²⁹ Rej, *Kupiec*. Ed. A. Kochan..., 23–24.

³⁰ For more on the Polish interlude, see Lewański (1981: 389–411).

³¹ Catholy (1969: 82–93). A similar construction combining comic with religious matters in Polish culture is presented in *Komedia o mięsopuasa*. Lewański writes about this (1981: 248, 250–251, 259, 262–263). For the cross-over between different dramatic genres, see Abramowska (1974: 31–32).

³² Lipiński (1974: 158).

³³ *Historyja o chwalebnyim Zmartwychwstaniu Pańskim...*, see also the recently published book *Wokół Mikołaja z Wilkowiecka. Analizy i porównania...*

³⁴ Lipiński (1974: 9–73).

³⁵ This feature is strongly supported by Lewański (1981: 247–251). For the complicated relations between dialogues and plays in the Middle Ages, see: *Pogranicza teatralności. Poezja, poetyka, praktyka...*

The hypothetical audience consisted of people living in towns. Their theological knowledge was rather poor, which meant they could not understand all theology's subtle distinctions, yet they were able to trace significant differences to them, or a lack of religious ceremonies. A comparable phenomenon has been related to *meditationes* of Christ's Passion. The primary Catholic forms were often composed for very simple people, without any form of education. The Reformers had to find a way how to deliver the new true faith to simple people.³⁶ This task resulted in the privileged role of using commonly accepted vocabulary, with only a minimal number of sophisticated words. Typically, during a play, the stage action had to be overacted. A religious play was first obliged to present, re-enact, and re-imagine the truth of the faith, and later to popularize it.³⁷

Such obligations did not allow composition in Latin. It should be emphasized that on the one hand, the religious polemic was mainly delivered in the mother tongue; on the other hand, in the 16th century, Latin gradually reduced in its use and became the language of the elite.³⁸

At the end of this article, I would like to return to the main theological controversy. Mikołaj Rej presented an outline of Protestant's doctrine in everyday circumstances. During *God's Court*, the duties of true Christians with regard to their social position are enumerated. A different place in the social hierarchy results with different tasks.³⁹ Bishops and eminent figures in the church are responsible for laymen; the great nobility may not spend the whole time on war and tournaments. The "simple" person should behave in an honest way. Thus, the titular hero presents this own position in society, and simultaneously represents the 'Everyman',⁴⁰ the main character in a morality play. The personal confession of sins to a priest has no value. Wit Korczewski focused rather on particular issues such as fasting, paying tithes or excommunication. In fact, the main focus is on the dispute over the Doctrine of Justification. This argument was eventually solved in 1999.⁴¹

From the vivid polemical output, I have chosen only two polemical plays, which have been preserved to the present day. They represent only very little evidence, but this prompts many new questions related to Polish polemical plays and some problems present in the history of the Polish Reformation and

³⁶ Stępień (2017: 177).

³⁷ Dąbrówka (2013: 294).

³⁸ For the remarkable position of Latin in Early Modern in Poland, see: *Łacina jako język elit...*; the role of Polish in religious writings is presented by Meller (2004).

³⁹ Maciuszko (2002: 261).

⁴⁰ Maciuszko (2002) indicates some inspirations and differences related to the Dutch *Elckerlijc*.

⁴¹ *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church 20th Anniversary Edition 2019...*

Counter-Reformation. Scholars have already written many valuable articles on evangelical and Catholic polemical dialogues and theatre. However, due to many unresolved questions, theatrical religious productions deserve an in-depth, comprehensive monograph.⁴² This remains a challenge for scholars.

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⁴² See on this: Rej (2009: 28).

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KUPIEC VON MIKOŁAJ REJ UND DAS RELIGIÖSE
AUF DER POLNISCHEN BÜHNE

Zusammenfassung

Im Beitrag versucht man die religiöse Thematik der ersten Phase polnischer Reformation in polemischen dramatischen Werken zu erläutern. Aus den zahlreichen Texten wurden nur zwei ausgewählt. Die Reformatorischen Strömungen wurden im von Mikołaj Rej verfassten Werk *Kupiec* (*Kaufmann*) deutlich vorgestellt. In der Tat ist *Kupiec* eine gelungene Überarbeitung des deutschen Werkes *Mercator* von Thomas Naogeorgus. Das polnische Werk ist viel größer und umfasst ca. 9000 Verse. Die katholische Seite wird von Vitus' Korczewski Werk *Rozmowy polskie łacińskim językiem przeplatane* (*Polnische Dialoge mit Latein verflochtene*) präsentiert. Beide Werke wurden in der Zeitspanne von vier Jahren veröffentlicht. In beiden fehlt es an genaue Regie- und Bühnenanweisungen, trotzdem haben diese Werke ein echtes Aufführungspotenzial. Die Rekonstruktion möglicher Aufführung bildet die Hauptfrage in diesem Beitrag. Andere, typisch theologische Frage, bezieht sich auf den Streit um die Rechtfertigungslehre. Sowohl diese als auch andere Forschungsfragen können leider nur teilweise beantwortet werden.