

ANTI-JEWISH MOTIFS IN THE POETRY OF BLESSED WŁADYSŁAW OF GIELNIÓW (c. 1440-1505)

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As Majer Bałaban wrote, “the period of Władysław Jagiełło’s reign was not the happiest for the Jews in Cracow and for the Polish Jews in general.”¹ In Western Europe, the persecution of Jews intensified in the second half of the fifteenth century and the news of it, together with the hostile attitudes, were increasingly pervading Poland, which had hitherto been relatively tolerant to the Jews. The impact of western atrocities and the anti-Jewish writings of Christian authors led also in Poland to accusations against the Jews for desecrating the host (Poznań, 1399), so the kings started to refuse or to take back privileges. Accusations of host desecration were a common pretext for massacres and expulsions throughout the Middle Ages.

Jewish bankers and usurers had been earning their living that way almost from the eleventh century onwards. It is known that there were twenty Jews lending at interest in Cracow in the fourteenth century, and later this number grew. Not only townsmen and nobility were running into debts, but also kings like Kazimierz the Great, Louis I the Great, or Jadwiga of Poland. The situation continued into the fifteenth century. This frustrating financial dependence on Jews, along with the increasingly hostile attitudes coming from abroad, created an explosive mixture, which became particularly dangerous in the middle of the fifteenth century. Apart from the anti-Jewish activity of Zbigniew Oleśnicki, prominent bishop and politician, a significant role in fanning the aversion against the Jews was played by a distinguished and charismatic Italian reformer from the Franciscan order, called “the scourge of the Judeans, Turks, and heretics” – John Capistran.²

¹ Majer Bałaban, *Historja Żydów w Krakowie i na Kazimierzu 1304-1868* (The History of Jews in Cracow and in Kazimierz 1304-1868), vol. 1 (Cracow: „Nadzieja”, 1931), 29.

² On Capistran’s arrival and stay in Cracow, see: Kamil Kantak, *Bernardyni polscy* (The Polish Observants), vol. 1 (1453-1572) (Lviv: Nakładem Prowincji Polskiej OO. Bernardynów, 1933), 1-25; Bałaban, *Historja*, 40-65; see also *Klasztory bernardyńskie w Polsce w jej granicach historycznych* (The Observant Monasteries in Poland in Its Historical Borders), ed. Hieronim Eugeniusz Wyczawski (Kalwaria Zebrzydowska: Wydawnictwo Bernardynów Calvarianum, 1985).

John Capistran and His Anti-Jewish Activity

In the second half of the 1440s, John Capistran was travelling through Germany as a papal legate. Apart from encouraging the population to embrace piety, poverty, and prayers, and promoting the reforms endorsed by the Franciscan order, he focused on inviting people to fight the infidels. Capistran was a very fervent preacher and deserved the aforementioned name of the scourge of the Judeans, Turks, and heretics. His sermons, held in the open air, were throwing the crowds into rapture. Women were throwing off their clothes and jewellery, luxuries were thrown onto piles and burned. Capistran's path was marked by pogroms of Jews. The ones that became well-known and much discussed in Europe of the time were those against the Jewish communities of Wrocław and other Silesian cities (Świdnica, Strzegom, Jawor, Lwówek). Jews were accused of desecrating the host and poisoning the town's well.³ During these pogroms, 41 Jews were burned in Wrocław, 17 in Świdnica, and in Legnica some died in the fire that was set to the prison. All those who survived were banished.

Kazimierz Jagiellończyk, king of Poland, and Zbigniew Oleśnicki, were investing considerable efforts in drawing John Capistran to Poland. His triumphal arrival to Cracow took place on 28 August 1453. He was marshalled into the town by the king, the queen, and the cardinal, and that happening in presence of a huge crowd. During his stay in Poland, Capistran was repeatedly preaching and encouraging not only to penance and life-improvement, but also to fight against the infidels. His sermons were translated into Polish by a priest standing next to him. According to Lucas Wadding, Capistran was repeatedly telling the king that all calamities in Poland were caused by the excessive kindness he was showing to the Jews and Jewish usury.⁴ Capistran's stay in Cracow had wide repercussions in the contemporary sources, such as the calendar of the Cracow Chapter, or the largest and most important late medieval chronicle of Poland, that of Jan Długosz. Capistran's individuality as a charismatic preacher exerted a great influence on the faithful, who were burning their

³ Mateusz Goliński, *Wrocławskie spisy zastawów, długów i mienia żydowskiego z 1453 roku. Studium z historii kredytu i kultury materialnej* (The Wrocław Lists of Deposits, Debts and Jewish Belongings from 1453. A Study on the History of the Loan and Material Culture) (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2006), with a rich bibliography.

⁴ Lucas Wadding, *Annales Minorum seu trium ordinum a S. Francisco institutorum*, vol. 12 (Rome: Ad Claras Aquas [Quaracchi], 1731), 164: *Simili modo praedixit [Capistranus] Casimiro regi, etsi amicissimo, infortunam et clades, quia nimis Judaeis, eorumque perfidiae et usuries connivebat. Cave, inquit, ne haec mea monita spernenti, divinum instet supplicium.*

luxuries like in the West. One of the most important effects of his visit was the founding of the first Observant monastery in Poland.

Many candidates joined the order in the beginning of its existence in Poland. A considerable part of them was connected to the Cracow University. Władysław of Gielniów, an Observant and a distinguished Latin-Polish poet, was also studying at Cracow (although not at the University).

Władysław of Gielniów and the Anti-Jewish Motifs in His Poetry

Władysław of Gielniów was born around 1440. Probably in 1461, he joined the Observant Franciscan order and on 1 August 1462, he took the monastic vows.⁵ Władysław was doubtlessly an outstandingly fervent Observant. He fulfilled his monastic duties with enthusiasm and gained the fame of a distinguished preacher; in the history of Polish literature, he features as one of the most prominent medieval poets. What I would like to discuss here is a rarely investigated motif which appears in Władysław's works, namely that of his prejudice against Jews, common in the period, and the unfavourable epithets that were given to the Jews not only in Władysław's poetry, but also in poems composed by various anonymous Observants from his circle.⁶ His literary heritage contains nineteen poems: thirteen Latin and six composed in Polish. It is commonly accepted that the Latin poems were composed for the friars, while the Polish ones were intended for laymen. Traces of his unfavourable attitude towards the Jews can be found in both categories.

Several motifs occur in Władysław's versified commentary to the "Song of Songs". *Ad cantica canticorum* is an abecedarium, that is, a variety of the acrostic poem in which the initial letters of each verse or stanza are vertically arranged in alphabetic order. Władysław's poem contains 340 verses. Consecutive letters of the alphabet appear in every second verse,

⁵ On Władysław's life and works, see Wiesław Wydra, *Władysław z Gielniowa. Z dziejów średniowiecznej poezji polskiej* (Władysław of Gielniów. From the History of Medieval Polish Poetry) (Poznań: Bestseller, 1992) containing the most recent editions of the texts.

⁶ Hostile epithets directed against the Jews have been noted in: Teresa Michałowska, *Średniowiecze* (The Middle Ages) (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1997), 409 (hereafter: Michałowska, *Średniowiecze*); on the anti-Jewish motifs in *Ad Cantica canticorum*: Rafał Wójcik, "Władysława z Gielniowa komentarz do 'Pieśni nad pieśniami'" (The Commentary on the Song of Songs by Władysław of Gielniów), in: "*Cantando cum citbarista.*" *W pięćsetlecie śmierci Władysława z Gielniowa („Cantando cum citbarista.* On the Quintecenary of the Death of Władysław of Gielniów), ed. Roman Mazurkiewicz (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich, 2006), 79-92.

thus dividing the poem into distichs (or into four-verse stanzas). Its editors were the first to write about this mnemonic aspect of *Ad cantica canticorum*.⁷

The poem is a versified theological treatise containing an allegorical commentary to the „Song of Songs”. Certain scholars (Kowalewicz⁸, Liman⁹) have erroneously considered the whole poem as a versified paraphrase of the “Song of Songs”. However, *Ad cantica canticorum* is a commentary, and this term should be used in its case. Wiesław Wydra has rightly mentioned that only those fragments of the “Song of Songs” which were changed and inserted in the text could be called paraphrases of excerpts from the Vulgate, so one may use this term only for the lines on the woman and her lover.¹⁰ Of course, the woman is the Church and the lover is Christ in Władysław’s meaning.

In verse 46, we read the woman’s words: *Sinagoga mea mater, Iudeus est meus frater* (Synagogue is my mother, Jew is my brother). Today’s interpretation of this fragment may be that of ecumenical reconciliation with the old brothers of faith. But if we look into the Vulgate and read Władysław’s comment on the fragment, we will see the following: *Nolite me considerare, quod fusca sim, quia decoloravit me sol. Filii matris meae pugnauerunt contra me, posuerunt me custodem in vineis* (Jakub Wujek’s translation into Polish from the sixteenth century, based on the Vulgate: *Nie patrzajcie na mnie, żem jest śniada, bo mię opaliło słońce. Synowie matki mojej walczyli przeciwko mnie* [emphasis mine], *postawili mię stróżem w winnicach*).¹¹ The word *pugnauerunt* – *fought* is significant here. Władysław commented the expression *decoloravit me sol* in terms of persecution (verse 42: *et hic solis adustio dicitur persecutio*).¹² An unfavourable attitude towards the Jews is also found in verse 50: *A Iudeis sum expulsa et possedi regna multa*.

⁷ See Rafał Wójcik, *Opusculum de arte memorativa Jana Szklarka. Bernardyński traktat mnemotechniczny z 1504 roku* (Jan Szklarek’s *Opusculum de arte memorativa*. The Observant Mnemonic Treatise from 1504.) (Poznań: Biblioteka Uniwersytecka and Wydawnictwo Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne, 2006), 41-43 and 82.

⁸ Henryk Kowalewicz, “Władysław z Gielniowa. “Ad Cantica canticorum”. Rymowana parafraza Pieśni nad Pieśniami” (Władysław of Gielniów. “Ad Cantica canticorum”. The Rhymed Paraphrase of the Song of songs), *Ze starych rękopisów: Silva Medii et Recentioris Aevi* 6 (1970): 4-38 (including an image of the manuscript).

⁹ Kazimierz Liman, ed., *Antologia poezji łacińskiej w Polsce. Średniowiecze* (An Anthology of Latin Poetry in Poland. The Middle Ages) (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Adama Mickiewicza, 2004), 513-517 and 528 (footnote 161).

¹⁰ Wydra, *Władysław*, 237.

¹¹ *Biblia w przekładzie księdza Jakuba Wujka z 1599 r* (The Bible in translation by Jakub Wujek from 1599); transcription of the type B of the original text and introduction by Janusz Frankowski (Warszawa: Vocatio, 2000), Sg 1:5.

¹² In Lewandowski’s translation into Polish, one reads *udręczenie* (*torment*) in this verse; Liman, *Antologia*, 515.

However, it must be mentioned that Władysław of Gielniów, while commenting on the person of the mother in the “Song of Songs,” admitted that the Jews and their faith were the predecessors of Christianity (verses 313-330), saying that the primitive Church was converted from Judaism (verse 329: *Ecclesia primitiua de Iudaismo conuersa*).

Pejorative epithets are also attributed to the Jews in Władysław’s Polish poetry. The Jews are depicted there as anti-heroes, the embodiment of cruelty, malice, and aversion to the true Saviour and Redeemer. These strong negative connotations can be found in the most popular of Władysław’s songs, *Jezusa Judasz sprzedał* (Judas delivered Jesus), which is similar and related to the Czech poem *Umučeni našeho Pána Jezu Krista*. In the Czech version, the Jews are spoken about in similar terms:¹³

erse	<i>Jezusa Judasz sprzedał</i>	<i>Umučeni našeho Pána Jezu Krista</i>
9-12	<i>Jezusa miłosnego gdy Żydowie jęli, Baranka niewinnego rwali i targali; Opak ręce swięzali Panu Niebieskiemu, Pędem wielkim bieźeli do miasta świętego.</i>	<i>Gežisse miłostnebo když gsú Žydé yali, Beranka niewinného bili gsú y rwali; Obie ruce swázali Pánu nebeskému, Tepúce trhagicze, pokoy ne byl gemu</i>
19-20	<i>Oczy mu zawięzali Żydowie okrutni, Poszyjki mu dawali, w lice jego bili.</i>	<i>Tu mu Žydé newěrnij ocy zawázali, Poličkugic, plwagic, gemu se rúbagic.</i>
24	<i>Żydowie jego soczyli, ale Jezus milczal.</i>	-
40	<i>Od Żydow jest naśmiewan, gdy na krzyżu wisiał</i>	-

Jews were also denigrated in the apocryphal acrostic poem composed for the Day of Mary’s Assumption: *Już się anjeli wiesielą* (Already the angels are cheering). In that song, the Jews and their “bishop” (*biskup*) wanted to burn Mary’s body, but Jesus struck them with blindness:

*Rzecz tę Żydowie uznali,
Którzy w Jeruzalem byli,
Tamo z biskupem bieźeli,
Spalić święte cialo chcieli.*

It was seen by those Jews
who were in Jerusalem,
they came there with their bishop,
they wanted to burn the holy body.

¹³ On the relations and connections between Polish and Czech transmissions, see: Wydra, *Władysław*, 63-79. According to Wydra, Władysław’s text is an excellent adaptation of the Czech original; *ibid.*, 78.

*Jezus Matkę swą obronił,
Żydy ślepotą zaraził,*

*Biskupowi ręce zschnęły,
A ku maram są przylnęły.*

Jesus defended his Mother,
He infected the Jews with
blindness,

the bishop's hands wasted away,
and they got stuck to the bier.

In the song on the birth of Our Lord, *Augustus kiedy krolował* (When August reigned), Władysław contrasted the Jews with the cattle. Animals that cannot write or read recognized the true God, unlike the false Jews, who are still mistaken and refuse to believe in the New Testament (v. 21-24):

*Falszywi Żydowie błędzą,
Pisma Świętego nie widzą;
Żwierzątka Boga poznały,
Gdy na kolana klękały.*

The false Jews are mistaken
They do not see the Holy Script:
The small animals recognize God,
As they fell on their knees.

It should be observed that Władysław uses the present tense in case of the Jews, and the past tense in that of animals.

Such voices, poems, interpretations of the Holy Scripture, and apocryphal stories resulted in unfavourable feelings against the Jews escalating into pogroms, as in the tragedy of Cracow in 1500, when Jan Szklarek was the Observant provincial (I will come back to this event). It was not directly Władysław of Gielniów's fault that the crowd attacked the Jews, but the hostile motifs present in many places in his poems reflect the prejudices that were common among laymen and clergymen alike. These prejudices were popular and fast-spreading. Epithets such as *Żydowie okrutni* (the cruel Jews), *falszywi Żydowie* (the false Jews), *rycerze niewierni* (the unfaithful knights) or *krzyżownicy* (the crucifiers) in songs that were very popular among people intensified the animosities and the anti-Jewish mood.¹⁴

Paradoxically, the most favourite and often-mentioned Władysław's watchword was *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*.¹⁵ The legend says that these words, once engraved on a wooden plate and nailed onto Christ's cross, were very much quoted by Władysław and that he used them exceedingly often in his sermons.

¹⁴ Michałowska, *Średniowiecze*, 409.

¹⁵ *Et per multos annos sue predicationis utebatur temate tam de tempore, quam de sanctis, Ihesus nazarenus rex Iudeorum et secundum ethimologiam prefati tituli, predicationes suas cum devocione et populi edificacione perficiebat, cantumque Ihesus Nazarenus ipse confecit contra paganos*, Jan of Komorowo, *Memoriale Ordinis Fratrum Minorum*, ed. Xawery Liske and Antoni Lorkiewicz, *Monumenta Poloniae Historica* 5 (Lwów: W Komisie Księgarni Gubrynowicza i Schmidta, 1888), 292.

Anti-Jewish Motifs in Two Anonymous Observant Poems

Pejorative expressions against the Jews also appear in anonymous works which were composed in the Observant circle of Władysław of Gielniów. The most telling examples can be found in two passion songs: *Pieśń o siedmiu słowach Pańskich* (Song on the seven words of Lord) and *Jezu Kryste krzyżowany* (Jesus Christ crucified). *Pieśń o siedmiu słowach Pańskich*, discovered by Wiesław Wydra, tells the story about the last words uttered by Christ on the cross.¹⁶ In the tenth stanza, we read the following:

<i>Ale okrutni Żydowie</i>	But the cruel Jews
<i>Mieli ocet pogotowie,</i>	had the vinegar ready at hand,
<i>Mirry z żółcią namieszali,</i>	they mixed myrrh with bile,
<i>Więc się Panu napić dali.</i>	and they gave it to Our Lord to drink.

As in Władysław's poems, the Jews are called here *okrutni* (cruel) and the whole situation is meant to show their malice and cunning. It needn't be emphasized that these words are not concordant with the Gospels, which say nothing about the Jews preparing the vinegar for the crucified Jesus. In Matthew's Gospel, one reads about the soldiers who mixed wine with bile (Mt 27:34), and then about "somebody standing there" (Mt 27:48) who took a sponge and soaked it with vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. A similar version of the story can be found in the other Gospels: in Mark, it is the soldiers (Mk 15:23) and then an unspecified somebody (Mk 15:36); in Luke, one reads directly that the soldiers gave the vinegar to Christ (Lk 23:36); and according to John, it was a non-specified person that offered the sponge to Christ to wet his mouth (Jn 19:29). Thus, it is an interesting example of manipulating the Gospels. The question is whether it was conscious, or rather a reflection of the attitudes and hostilities that were common in the contemporary perception of the Jews as the main perpetrators of the Christ's passion.

The song *Jezu Kryste krzyżowany* was also composed in the Observant circle of Władysław and it contains the four-times repeated acrostic *Jezus Maria*. It is worthwhile mentioning that composing poems in the form of an abecedarium or acrostic was the favourite literary form of Władysław of Gielniów. In the ninth stanza, the anonymous author ascribed the following words to Mary:

<i>Jezu Kryste, synu miły,</i>	Jesus Christ, my beloved son,
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¹⁶ Wiesław Wydra, „Dwie nieznanne staropolskie pieśni religijne” (Two Unknown Old-Polish Religious Poems), *Studia Polonistyczne* 20 (1994): 169-188.

<i>Jidziesz tam w niewierne Żydy,</i>	you are going there, to the unfaithful Jews
<i>Cierpieć męki, a i przez winy,</i>	to suffer torture and because of faults,
<i>Za nas wszyscy chrześcijany.</i>	For all of us Christians.

And we read in the following stanzas (16-18):

<i>Miłosny Jezus łaskawy, Od Judasza już wydany, Namawiał okrutne Żydy, By apostołów nie bili.</i>	Gracious and graceful Jesus delivered by Judas, asked the cruel Jews, Not to beat the apostles.
<i>Ale Żydowie złośliwi Jako baranka zwiqzali, Potukali gwałtem do miasta. [...] Rozbił lice Jezus miły Na kamieniu powalony, Żydowie n<ielutoś>ciwi Do Annasza ji postali.</i>	But the malicious Jews bound him like a lamb, And took him by force to town. Gracious Jesus, beaten on a stone had his face bleeding, the merciless Jews conducted him to Annas.

Stanzas 31 and 32 also show the Jews as cruel men and, similarly as in *Pieśń o siedmiu słowach Pańskich*, it is claimed that it was the Jews, not the soldiers, who gave vinegar and bile to Christ:

<i>Jezus <na krz>yż przybit nagi, Obieszon jest, przykowany, Żydowie ji <naśm>iewali, Żółci z octem napa <wa>li.</i>	Naked Jesus, nailed on the cross He is hanged and chained, The Jews ridiculed him They gave him bile with vinegar to drink.
<i>Eja, Żydowie, okru<tne> <I> nierozumne stworzenie, Niewinnej Śmierci ku <sici>e: iemia drży, nie świeci słońce.</i>	Ejah! Jews, you cruel and foolish beings, you seduce the innocent death: The earth is quaking, the sun stops shining.

Anti-Jewish Events at the Turn of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

The influences of John Capistran's activity seem evident from the very beginnings of the Observants' order in Poland. As it was mentioned above, Capistran preached severely against the Jews, Turks, and heretics. The danger of heresies was not as acute in Poland as it was in the Western Europe at the time, and therefore we cannot find many motifs directed

against the apostates in the poems composed at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. However, Poland was exposed to Turkish and Tatar attacks, which were reflected in the Observant literature. Among others, Władysław of Gielniów composed the song *O spustoszeniu Sambora* (About the devastation of Sambor) and the anthem *Contra paganos*, which was sung at the moments of Turkish threat.¹⁷ As I have argued, the animosity against the many Jews who lived in Poland at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth century was far more outspoken. It must be emphasized that Jews were coming in crowds to Poland to evade the disasters and tragedies that they had been suffering in the West and South (they were coming to Poland from Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia). Moreover, against the insistence of the Church and a large part of the nobility, the kings of Poland did not want to force the Jews to wear distinctive clothes and specific signs which would reveal their identity (a red or yellow circular patch).¹⁸ Although Poland was receiving these survivors and fugitives, the attitudes of laymen and clergymen alike were often hostile and sometimes they escalated into brutal pogroms and violence. Among the well-known raids, there were those from 1445 and 1448 (before the first Observants came to Poland), as well as the arson and robbery of the Jewish quarter in Cracow in 1454 and the crusade that was directed against the Turks, but eventually turned against the Jews, who were closer to the Poles and more vulnerable to bold attacks as the unprotected "Others". A similar tragedy took place in 1500. The Observant provincial in Poland was Jan Szklarek, the author of a famous treatise on the art of memory. It was during his office that the crusade against the Tatars was proclaimed. Many Observant friars fled from the order to take part in the defence of faith. As Kamil Kantak wrote: "The crusade finished disgracefully. Instead of chasing off the Tatars, it turned against the Jews of Cracow."¹⁹ Jan Szklarek expelled some Observants from the order, while others were severely punished. It happened five years after the expulsion of Jews from Cracow into the neighbouring Kazimierz. This district remained the Jewish part of town until World War II.

Why did the Polish Observants have such a hostile attitude only towards the Jews? It seems that there were two reasons, except for the accumulation of anti-Jewish sentiments throughout Europe. Firstly, Capistran's ideas had a huge resonance among the friars at the beginning of the order's existence in Poland. Secondly, it was easy to spread

¹⁷ Wydra, *Władysław*, 218-219.

¹⁸ Bałaban, *Historja*, 86-87.

¹⁹ Kamil Kantak, "Sylwetki bernardynów poznańskich. Jan Szklarek" (The Profiles of Polish Observants. Jan Szklarek), *Kronika Miasta Poznania* 6 (1928): 324.

animosities. There were favourable conditions for spreading the words of hostility and prejudice, and besides, the Jews could not defend themselves like the Turkish aggressors. The heretics were not as strong in Poland as to threaten the Church. The poems composed by Władysław of Gielniów and the anonymous Observant friars from his circle were only repeating these attitudes, but simultaneously they were fanning prejudice, if we consider that large crowds of people were lending ear to the Observants' sermons and songs in this period. It seems that John Capistran and the Observants, his Polish pupils, realized very well that people could be carried away not only by true piety, prayers, and the observance of poverty (the Observants were famous for these rules at their beginnings), but also by prejudice against the common enemies: the Turks, who presented a real threat to Poland; the Jews, unwilling to convert to Christianity and perceived as the torturers of Christ; and the heretics, whose success was at that time largely restricted to the West.