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INSTRUMENTUM CRITICUM

Katarzyna JASIŃSKA-ZDUN & Konrad KOKOSZKIEWICZ

A 'POETICAL PLAY'? CRITICAL NOTES TO A LETTER OF IOANNES DANTISCUS*

On 23 April 1536 Iohannes Dantiscus, bishop of Chełmno (Kulm in Prussia), wrote a letter to Johann Magnus, archbishop of Uppsala. As Johann Kolberg states in the preface to his edition, a large part — slightly less than a half — of the letter contains Dantiscus' 'gloomy thoughts about the international situation', and it is 'lightly and gently thrown on paper in poetical form, with the use of biblical and ancient reminiscences: a poetical play'.¹ When one casts an eye on the text², that opinion looks justified at first: we find no poem there, just a page of unordered dactylic metre, parts of verses, sometimes a hexameter or an elegiac couplet, sometimes only a line forming the characteristic clausula, and all this intermixed with prose. At the end we read Dantiscus' suggestion that all this was a result of an improvisation: 'quomodo ista exciderint calamo, nescimus', which probably have greatly contributed to Kolberg's diagnose.

That section of the letter begins at the bottom page 35 in Kolberg's edition and ends at approximately the same place on page 36. The text is printed nearly as if it was normal prose, not being clearly subdivided into verses, or 'poetic' and 'prosaic' parts; and the manuscript, which

* This paper is a part of the research project *Registration and publication of the correspondence of Ioannes Dantiscus (1485-1548)*, being carried on in the Laboratory for Editing Sources in the Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies 'Artes Liberales' (IBI AL), University of Warsaw, Poland. We are greatly indebted to Dr Anna Skolimowska of IBI AL for all her help.

¹ Johann Kolberg, *Aus dem Briefwechsel der Erzbischöfe von Uppsala, Johann und Olaus Magnus, mit dem Bischof Johannes Dantiscus von Kulm und Ermland*, in *Verzeichnis der Vorlesungen an der Königlichen Akademie zu Braunsberg im Sommer-Semester 1915* (Braunsberg, 1915), p. 8.

² Kolberg, *Aus dem Briefwechsel*, letter 3, pp. 35-36

Kolberg was using, arranges the text quite similarly.³ But, first of all, a collation of that manuscript with the print reveals twenty (!) textual differences in the part in question (a detailed list of the differences will be given later on).

It is difficult to say what part of them are merely transcription errors, and what part is due to Kolberg's changes. Whatever the origin was, the alterations must naturally have contributed to difficulties Kolberg apparently had when trying to analyse the formal structure of the text, and this in turn made at least some of his amendments — if there were any — misguided. In fact, nearly two thirds of these twenty places turn up to be misread in a way that influences the quantitative values of the text; or, in other words, in a way that corrupts the metre to such extent, that only re-reading the manuscript reveals that what Kolberg calls 'dichterische Spielerei' is not a form of prose mixed with verse, but simply a poem consisting of 24 elegiac couplets.

As the text was previously known only in the mangled form printed by Kolberg, and, what is more, as it is not a part of any collection of Dantiscus' poetry, we are now happy to present it as his 'new' poem, or rather a newly discovered one:

Quandoquidem⁴, volumus saltem si vera fateri,
 haec merito patimur, res facit ipsa fidem.
 Non frustra penitus Germanis crevit in oris
 haeresis haec, quae iam virus ubique vomit,
 5 nec causas opus est afferre scientibus illas:
 ex capite hic fluxum noxius umor habet,
 inficit et reliquos corrupti corporis artus,
 unde subit rediens haec pituita caput,
 quod modo sic tremula vertigine iure laborat
 10 inque vicem capit hoc, quod dedit ante, malum.
 Pharmaca ni vitiis superi curantia pulsus
 praestiterint, actum (quod procul absit) erit:
 Suetica non solum vel Danica sive Britanna
 regna, sed in bellum cuncta sub orbe ruunt.

³ Ms BCz 244 p. 93-94, an autograph preserved in Biblioteka Czarotorskich in Kraków. Kolberg tried to subdivide the text into some sort of verses by printing a dot at the end of what he probably understood as a complete poetical phrase. The manuscript has no signs which could suggest such division.

⁴ The poem begins at page 93, line 26. The text before runs thus: 'susque deque immo et patienter, quae pro peccatis nostris iuste affliguntur, sustinenda ferendaque esse nobis existimo, quae Deus contra nos, ut fierent, permisit'. It seems that the intended meaning of the first couplet is 'quandoquidem, saltem si (= si quidem) vera fateri volumus, haec merito patimur' etc.

- 15 Ultima non procul esse potest iam iudicis hora,
 praemia qui cunctis, ut meruere, dabit.
 Gens contra gentem surgit, Mars saevit ubique,
 integritas, virtus et pudor omnis abest.
- 20 In summum vix ulla fides pietasve Tonantem,
 rarus et est nostrae religionis honor,
 spernuntur pia dicta patrum, stata tempora, leges
 atque sacri ritus, qui viguere prius.
 Concita sese effert nebulonum daemonis oestro
 turba ingens, sibi quae cuncta licere putat.
- 25 [p. 94] Est odio verum, simul exulat aequum et honestum,
 cum luxu, fast[u] regnat et aeris amor,
 omnia confuso volvu<n>tur turbinis aest[u],
 impietas dum sic vi sacra nostra quatit.
- 30 Haec qui restit[uet] vel qui reparabit (ut ordo,
 qui fuerat, redeat), laude colendus erit.
 Res haec sed nostris est longe viribus imp[ar],
 proderit ingenium consiliumve parum.
 In primis ponenda forent tot crimina nobis,
 sumenda et melior vita (relicta alia),
- 35 linquenda ambitio mundique amor, ardor habend[i],
 quaeque referre pudet, plurima nota satis.
 Imploranda Dei clementia, saepe precanda
 suppliciter multis cum lacrimis venia.
 Cum patribus nostris graviter peccavimus omnes,
 40 hinc mala, quae ferimus, iusta dat ira Dei.
 Haec no[s] per saevos castigat saepe tyrannos
 et subdit duro coll[a] superba iugo.
 Quod si non Deus hic iustis plerumque pepercit,
 quid faceret, numquam qui sine labe sumus?
- 45 Exspectat ta[men], ut doleamus, seque benignum
 offert, si volumus linquere iniqua, patrem.
 Hactenus haec, ne sus forsán docuisse Minervam
 dicatur: sapiens non monitoris eget.

Here is a detailed list of discrepancies between the manuscript and Kolberg's print:

No.	Kolberg's reading		ms BCz 244		Poem's verse
	page/line	word	page/line	word	
1	35/35	id	93/29	iam	4
2	35/37	stabit	93/31	subit	8
3	35/37	capite	93/32	caput	8
4	36/4	sed	93/36	vel	13

No.	Kolberg's reading		ms BCz 244		Poem's verse
	page/line	word	page/line	word	
5	36/4	Britannica	93/36	Britanna	13
6	36/8	summa	93/40	summmum	19
7	36/9	Parentum	93/41	Tonantem	19
8	36/12	sibique	93/44	sibi quae	24
9	36/13	similiter	94/1	simul	25
10	36/14	repugnat	94/2	regnat	26
11	36/15	confuse	94/2	confuso	27
12	36/15	voluntatis	94/2	volvu<n>tur	27
13	36/15	viscera	94/3	vi sacra	28
14	36/16	rescit	94/3	restit[uet]	29
15	36/19	ponendum foret	94/6	ponenda forent	33
16	36/23	multis	94/10	suppliciter multis	38
17	36/23	patribus	94/11	patribus nostris	39
18	36/24	fecimus	94/12	ferimus	40
19	36/27	nusquam	94/15	numquam	44
20	36/31	monitorio	94/18	monitoris	48

Kolberg's errors can be partially explained by the fact that his manuscript, BCz 244 pp. 93-94, is a rough draft: to read Dantiscus' rough drafts one certainly needs experience, and the reading should be done with care. In this case, as it seems, whoever did the transcription, it first of all has not been done carefully enough: otherwise it is hard to understand, how anyone could, for instance, read *regnat* (v. 26 in the poem), a word very clearly written in the manuscript, as *repugnat*, which moreover does not make any sense in this context. Some other faulty readings seem to indicate that the transcription was being done purely on a word by word basis, without a serious attempt to understand the text. For example, there is a superfluous dot over the word *caput* (v. 8) in the manuscript, that probably has greatly contributed to Kolberg's meaningless and unmetrical *capite*. Yet other errors, such as *numquam* (v. 44) having been read as *nusquam* (where a part of the abbreviated *-quam* was understood as a long *s*), or the rounded final *-s* in *monitoris* (v. 48) interpreted as *-o*, point to the transcriber's either inexperience, or carelessness and haste. Similarly the unmetrical *Britannica* instead of the manuscript's *Britanna*

(v. 13) should be probably understood as Kolberg's deliberate change, or his amendment, principally misguided by his previous failure to recognize the text as a classicizing poem consisting of elegiac couplets.

As it is clear from the poem's transcription given above, some effort has been put by Kolberg into supplying parts of words missing due to the partial damage of the right margin on the manuscript page 94: even though words like *impar* (v. 31) or *tamen* (v. 45) are now partially unreadable in the manuscript, and in either place it is not immediately obvious, what a word should be understood there, Kolberg has printed them correctly and without any note indicating damage. It is not clear, whether the manuscript was in a better condition in his times, or perhaps he has supplied the missing letters by conjecture, but his faulty *rescit* (Kolberg's p. 36, 16) where out of *resituet* only *resitit* is visible in the manuscript, makes the latter hypothesis more probable.

Now a word needs to be said on the apparent Dantiscus' suggestion that the poem has been improvised while he was writing the letter. Two things count as evidence here:

- 1) the arrangement of the text in the manuscript: the poem has been written as if it was prose, not being subdivided into verses;
- 2) his words: 'quomodo ista exciderint calamo, nescimus', which directly follow the last pentameter and clearly suggest an improvisation.

The intention was probably indeed a form of a learned riddle or literary catch: Dantiscus has arranged the text in this way, just to see whether the addressee can recognize the metre and filter the poem out of the surrounding prose. But whatever the intention was, the manuscript speaks against its author making it evident that the poem has *not* been improvised, at least not at the time of writing the letter.

As it has been said above, the manuscript BCz 244, p. 93-94 is an autograph, and, what is more, a rough draft. As a rough draft it should feature many corrections, crossed-out passages, interlinear and marginal notes; and it really does, there is a total of 19 such alterations in the entire letter. With one exception: the text of the allegedly 'improvised' poem is free of alterations altogether. It is of course unbelievable that Dantiscus' could ex promptu have composed a poem occupying about 45% of the letter and in afterthought make no improvements whatsoever, whereas he has done so many to the (only slightly longer) prosaic part of the letter.

The conclusion to be drawn is that the poem has apparently been drafted earlier on a separate sheet, and later copied from that onto the rough draft of the letter. This explains why there are no alterations in the poem, as it was already complete when it was being copied; of course, any corrections made while it was being composed, had been applied to that separate sheet. Another thing it explains is a textual error: in the poem's verse 27 an abbreviation sign is missing over the *volvu<n>tur*. Such errors are less likely to occur during composition of the text, but are easy to do while copying it over.

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