IN PIAM MEMORIAM

VIRI DOCTISSIMI

PAULI GERHARDI SCHMIDT

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LITTERARUM MEDIAE NECNON
RECENTIORIS AETATIS PERITISSIMI

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

On 23 April 1536 Iohannes Dantiscus, bishop of Chelmno (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

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* 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.


² Kolberg, Aus dem Briefwechsel, letter 3, pp. 35-36
Kolberg was using, arranges the text quite similarly. But, first of all, a
collation of that manuscript with the print reveals twenty (!) textual dif-
ferences 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 appar-
ently 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,
nec causas opus est afferre scientibus illas:
ex capite hic fluxum noxius umor habet,
inficit et reliquis corrupti corporis artus,
de subit rediens haec pituita caput,
quod modo sic tremula vertigine iure laborat
inque vicem capit hoc, quod dedit ante, malum.
Pharmaca ni vitiis superi curantia pulsis
praestiterint, actum (quod procul absit) erit:
Suetica non solum vel Danica sive Britanna
regna, sed in bellum cuncta sub orbe ruunt.

¹ Ms BCz 244 p. 93-94, an autograph preserved in Biblioteka Czartoryskich 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.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Kolberg’s reading</th>
<th>ms BCz 244</th>
<th>Poem’s verse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>page/line word</td>
<td>page/line word</td>
<td>verse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>35/35 id</td>
<td>93/29 iam</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>35/37 stabit</td>
<td>93/31 subit</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>35/37 capite</td>
<td>93/32 caput</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>36/4 sed</td>
<td>93/36 vel</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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*.

<table>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>page/line</td>
<td>page/line</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>36/4 Britannica</td>
<td>93/36 Britanna</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>36/8 summa</td>
<td>93/40 summum</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>36/9 Parentum</td>
<td>93/41 Tonantem</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>36/12 sibique</td>
<td>93/44 sibi quae</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>36/13 similiter</td>
<td>94/1 simul</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>36/14 repugnat</td>
<td>94/2 regnat</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>36/15 confuse</td>
<td>94/2 confuso</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>36/15 voluntatis</td>
<td>94/2 volvʉ&lt;n&gt;tur</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>36/15 viscera</td>
<td>94/3 vi sacra</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>36/16 rescit</td>
<td>94/3 restit[uet]</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>36/19 ponendum foret</td>
<td>94/6 ponenda forent</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>36/23 multis</td>
<td>94/10 suppliciter multis</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>36/23 patribus</td>
<td>94/11 patribus nostris</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>36/24 fecimus</td>
<td>94/12 ferimus</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>36/27 nusquam</td>
<td>94/15 numquam</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>36/31 monitorio</td>
<td>94/18 monitoris</td>
<td>48</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
(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 *restituet* only *restit* 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 \textit{volvum}\textit{turm}. Such errors are less likely to occur during composition of the text, but are easy to do while copying it over.

Katarzyna Jasińska-Zdun
Uniwersytet Warszawski
Instytut Badań Interdyscyplinarnych ‘Artes Liberales’
ul. Nowy Świat 69
PL-00-046 Warszawa
POLAND
camena@ibi.uw.edu.pl

Konrad Kokoszkiewicz
Uniwersytet Warszawski
Instytut Filologii Klasycznej
ul. Krakowskie Przedmieście 1
PL-00-927 Warszawa
POLAND
draco@ibi.uw.edu.pl