

New trends on medieval theatre in Poland

The origins of Polish medieval theatre are doubtless full of unexplained places, motifs and riddles. Moreover the Polish research of medieval theatre barely began in the 19th Century. I should emphasize that a great amount of manuscripts was lost during the II World War. All these factors have influenced Polish research. Despite these unfortunate circumstances researchers have tried to apply some newer methods.

I feel the need to describe in a very short way the first period of Polish studies on medieval theatre. The first researcher to be mentioned should be Stanisław Windakiewicz, who worked intensely on sources and was able to give a brief description of the late medieval Polish stage and acting. But his papers present first of all the “pure” description, without any attempts to interpret the examined sources¹. We should remember, that 19th Century was an epoche of positivism and the humanities should have been treated like sciences. Furthermore the works of Windakiewicz were the first relatively well-documented studies on medieval theatre and they should invoke some questions.

Unfortunately for the next step of research we had to wait almost fifty years. After the II World War the most important task was the preservation and catalogue of existing manuscripts. Investigations showed clearly not only how many sources were lost, but also helped to describe the remaining manuscripts. In this period the scientists attempted for the first time to divide the corpus of sources into clearly defined groups. A few years later one of the first researchers Zenon Modzelewski, examined the aesthetic values of *Visitatio Sepulchri*. His paper² for many years remained an unreachable pattern for the next generations of Polish scholars. Modzelewski not only precisely described each form of *Processio in Ramis Palmarum*, showing how a little change affected the whole performance, but also he suggested the doubtless existence of similarities between

1 S. Windakiewicz, “Dramat liturgiczny w Polsce Średniowiecznej,” *Roczniki Akademii Umiejętności* 34 (1902): 340–356; “Teatr ludowy w dawnej Polsce,” *Roczniki Akademii Umiejętności* 36 (1904): 1–231.

2 Z. Modzelewski (SAC), “Estetyka średniowiecznego dramatu liturgicznego. (Cykl Wielkiego Tygodnia),” *Roczniki Humanistyczne* 12 (1964, No. 1): 5–63.

medieval theatre and so called “epic theatre” by Brecht³.

In fact the structure of liturgical drama is based not on a dramatic sequence, but it depicts the narrative story founded on the Holy Script. Because of this feature the combining of particular scenes is similar to narration about historical facts. I would like to emphasize this statement, because the contemporary studies are based on this phenomenon. I will resume to it in the later part of my paper.

In the sixties Julian Lewański, who undertook long years of research and whose papers are still inspiring not only for Polish scholars, published a monograph of main genres of medieval theatre⁴. In a preface he divided all performances into separate structures, according to a particular semiotic system. As a result it is possible to describe each sign-system individually and in this way to put a border on various genres. I suppose that it is necessary to recall these particular semiotic systems. The first of them presents a combination of language and intonation, the second is combined with music and vocal and lastly the third consists of space and fine arts forms⁵. This attempt makes it possible to describe each genre using a category *heterogeneity* vs. *homogeneity*, which allows us to characterize not only a single performance, but also a whole group of them or a separate genre.

Moreover using this procedure allows us to build a diagram, which presents specific relationships between various medieval theatrical forms. For example the miracle play is the opposite of the liturgical drama, because the first form has a completely heterogeneous structure and the second homogeneous⁶. I would like to recall a very complicated semiotic system of the play consisting of voice, music, gesture, vocal and scenery. All mentioned factors can be mutual amplified or reduced. A quite different situation can be found in the liturgical drama, in which all systems build a harmony⁷.

Theoretically each of the described media can be analysed separately. Though

3 Ibid., p. 62; for further reference, see: W. Benjamin, “Was ist das epische Theater?,” in *Angelus Novus. Ausgewählte Schriften 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966), p. 344–351.

4 *Średniowieczne gatunki dramatyczno-teatralne*, ed. by J. Lewański, No. 1 “Dramat liturgiczny,” No. 2 “Komedia elegijna,” No. 3 “Misterium” (Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków: Ossolineum, 1966–1969).

5 Ibid., No. 1, p. 11 (footnote); a similar optic presents M. Pfister, *Das Drama. Theorie und Analyse*, 9th. ed. (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1997), p. 25–29.

6 This method precisely explained by J. Lewański, op. cit., No. 1: 14–17.

7 Some of typical examples of various relations analyses M. Pfister, op.cit., p. 39–41.

there are many inconveniences, sometimes this method is extremely profitable. As a clear evidence I would summarize an analysis made by Julian Lewański of one particular and specially interesting small change in *Visitatio Sepulchri* playing in Poznań in the beginning 16th Century⁸. According to rubrics, instead of Apostles running to Jesus Christ's tomb, the spectators can hear an antyphony, which contains only a story about Peter and John running. But the lack of one element, which was replaced by another, generates new and unexpected difficulties for the rest of play. In all “standard” versions of *Visitatio Sepulchri* a shroud and a canvas were thrown from the tomb by the Apostles. The author of our adaptation – who was a bishop of Poznań Jan Latański – used for this task angels appearing in the tomb. Angels announce the fact of Jesu's resurrection and they present as evidence the shroud and the canvas lying in the empty tomb.

An apparently small change results in a completely new communication between the stage and the audience. The spectators from medieval Poznań became a part of Jerusalem's inhabitants and the angels are announcing not only for witnesses living in the time of Jesus, but also for a whole audience living many centuries later. The “double communication” typical for liturgical drama was in this particular case extremely intensified⁹.

The distinction between homogeneous and heterogeneous forms could be combined with the category of *perspective*, which means the existing points of view of persons acting on stage. As well to the *perspective* belongs a real point of view of an audience and point of view which has been intended by an author¹⁰. Considering various *perspectives* we can differentiate an *open* from a *closed form* of play. The last one contains only a polyperspective and due to this feature does not include any signal

8 This source is preserved in a print *Agenda secundum cursum et rubricam Eccl. Cathedralis Posnaniensis*, Lipsiae 1533. J. Lewański described this play two times: op. cit., No. 1: 70 and *Dramat i teatr średniowiecza i renesansu w Polsce* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1981) p. 61.

9 Ibid. A situation, in which the audience becomes an eye-witness of Jesus resurrection analysed by H. Kindermann, *Theatergeschichte Europas*, 1 *Das Theater der Antike und des Mittelalters* (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1957): 216.

10 Detailed analysis of category *perspective* was given by M. Pfister, op. cit., p. 90–103. See also his excellent book *Studien zum Wandel der Perspektivenstruktur in Eilisabethanischen und Jakobäischen Komödien* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1974), in which he analyzed precisely various plays on Elizabethan stage.

making encoding easier for an audience. It seems to me necessary to remind that a very similar situation in the literary work was described many years ago by Polish literary scholar Roman Ingarden and some decades later by Wolfgang Iser¹¹.

By using both methods we can build a system consisting of particular signs, and in relatively easy way analyse how the structure of drama is presented (narrated) on the stage. This procedure is similar to an analysis of the structure of a written text widely practised in textual linguistics¹². As a result the researcher obtained a precisely depicted structure and noticed how particular systems are functioning in this complex structure. Unfortunately the described procedure is easier to characterize than introduce in every day practice. It still remains rather the theoretical model than useful tool.

In the early nineties I have examined an acting in old-Polish liturgical drama and miracle play, analyzing as well the main text as rubrics to recognize some basic parts of a communication between stage and audience¹³. Based on my own experiences I can state that any adaptation of mentioned model to a real existing medieval text is followed with many difficulties. Using computer terminology it is possible to talk about “partial compatibility”. The researcher must relatively often resign from sophisticated tools and choose a traditional descriptive model of analysis.

Despite only partial fruitful results scholars explore deeper and more carefully each text of plays and examine its inner structure. In fact this intrinsic procedure is followed by an extrinsic research, which is focused on an audience. This kind of study has in Poland a relatively long tradition. The first conclusions were formulated by the above-mentioned Stanisław Windakiewicz¹⁴, who found in Kraków archives a record about financial support given by the city Kazimierz for *ludus pascalis* in 1377. Various levels and groups of an audience were analysed by Julian Lewański, especially

11 M. Pfister, *Das Drama. Theorie und Analyse*, p. 102–103; R. Ingarden, *O dziele literackim: badania z pogranicza ontologii, teorii języka i filozofii literatury* 2nd ed. (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1988) p. 316–326; W. Iser, *Die Appellstruktur der Texte. Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa* (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag, 1970), p. 15.

12 Because of the huge amount of works which focus on textual linguistic I cite only the most important books: T. Dobrzyńska, *Tekst – styl – poetyka* (Kraków: Universitas, 2003); R. De Beaugrande, W. U. Dressler, *Introduction to text linguistic* (London: Longman, 1981), in which the reader finds more references.

13 P. Bering, “Sztuka aktorska i reżyserska w świetle przekazów średniowiecznych i staropolskich,” *Symbolae Philologorum Posnaniensium Graecae et Latinae* 10 (1994): 127–136.

14 In his paper “Dramat liturgiczny w Polsce Średniowiecznej,” *Roczniki Akademii Umiejętności* 34 (1902): 355–356.

concentrating on people watching the elegiac comedies¹⁵.

This genre was and still is a subject of discussing, because the scientists can not agree, if it was presented on the stage or only existed as a literary work¹⁶. With this unclear and unexplained state is joined an additional question about a possible audience. Because all texts of elegiac comedies were written in a very correct Latin, automatically the audience was much more educated and closer than an audience of the liturgical drama or the miracle plays. This conclusion lets us search for spectators in the elite of medieval society. Fortunately the members of this high level quite often created written sources, which can be useful for our research. As a perfect example I would like to mention a record in a book of reports of Wrocław chapter, in which is preserved a “review” of Plautus and Terentius comedies directed by Laurentius Corvinus¹⁷.

But we know not only this testimony: In 1451 at Cracow University Adam Grzymała z Poznania (from Poznań) gave an academic lecture about comedy, theatre and the basic features of the stage. As a base he used a text of *Poliscena* written probably by Leonardo Bruni. For scholars the most interesting and most valuable is a commentary given by a medieval professor. It allows us to reconstruct a “theatrical consciousness” among the Polish intellectual elite in the late Middle Ages. It is striking that Polish opinions were very similar to judgements formulating in Europe. It is a clear evidence of vital relationship between Poland and Western Europe¹⁸.

Andrzej Dąbrówka did completely new research¹⁹. It was he tried to find in

15 J. Lewański, “Penetracje antyku do średniowiecznej kultury teatralnej (Na przykładzie losów komedii „Pamphilus” z XII wieku),” *Średniowiecze. Studia o kulturze* 1 (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1961): 239–262; “Wykład o teatrze w Krakowskiej Akademii w 1451 roku,” *Pogranicza i konteksty literatury polskiego średniowiecza*, ed. T. Michałowska (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1989), p. 319–337.

16 I would like to recall that an argument about this genre began already in the twenties. For a short presentation of scholars' opinions, see: M. Feo, “Elegienkomödie,” *Lexikon des Mittelalters* 3 (München–Zürich: Artemis Verlag, 1986): 1796–1798. The reader finds there also a basic bibliography.

17 Both records were edited in *Acta capituli Wratislaviensis 1500–1562. Die Sitzungsprotokolle des Breslauer Domkapitels in der ersten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts*, ed. A. Sabisch, vol. 1/1 1500–1513 (Köln–Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 1972), p. 10, 84; see also P. Bering, “Das Publikum der Elegienkomödie und der humanistischen Komödie im spätmittelalterlichen Polen,” *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* 33 (1995): 63–69.

18 A detailed analyse of this lecture gave: J. Lewański, “Wykład o teatrze w Krakowskiej Akademii w 1451 roku”. For a Polish-European relationship, see: *Uniwersalizm i swoistość kultury polskiej*, ed. J. Kłoczowski vol. 1–2 (Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL, 1989–1990).

19 In his book *Teatr i sacrum w średniowieczu. Religia–cywilizacja–estetyka* (Wrocław: Fundacja, 2001), which was rewarded by *Fundacja Nauki Polskiej* (Foundation for Polish Science).

medieval religious plays a reflection of religious consciousness. This hypothesis is not only surprising for many researchers, but also it presents each play in quite a different light. The performance is no longer an evidence of rich liturgy, but a testimony of human devotion. The miracle play should retain all basic truth of the faith. Moreover he introduced the name “recapitulation play”, which presents the principal lecture on a sin and a redemption. Wide intellectual horizons, a perfect recognizing of the Dutch stage, which was extremely important for the development of medieval theatre and philological accuracy – all these factors belong to the inevitable advantages of the mentioned book. Before the publication of this work Polish researchers were mainly focused on particular Polish problems. On the other hand Andrzej Dąbrówka introduced universal questions to Polish studies. I feel the necessity to add that this book invoked a vital discussion among Polish scholars.

Another new branch in Polish research presents a study about the “borderland” between theatre and other arts. This kind of analysis is related to the multimedial nature of each theatrical performance²⁰. The scholars representing various academic areas and various main fields of their studies, in a team which had existed for only a few months, are trying to find and analyse such artistic forms which really belong to two different media. The struggle of this team is focused not only on traditional research fields like fine arts (sculpture, painting), music and songs, which are closely related to performance, but also take into consideration intellectual cultures (written texts) and social events and ceremonies²¹. It should be emphasized, that a research of social events and ceremonies as a semi-theatrical performances was intensely done in seventies and eighties by Polish historians. They examined king's funerals and coronations and religious processions (e. g. Corpus-Christi Day)²² suggesting semi-dramatic features of

20 As basic introduction to a phenomenon of multimediality in theatre, see: C. Balme, *Wprowadzenie do nauki o teatrze* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2002), p. 195–230.

21 Very similar light presents a model-like book *“Aufführung” und “Schrift” in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, ed. J.-D. Müller (Stuttgart–Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2000).

22 Due to large amounts of Polish works concentrated on this subject I cite only the basic papers: E. Śnieżyńska-Stolot, “Dworski ceremoniał pogrzebowy królów polskich w XIV wieku,” in *Sztuka i ideologia XIV wieku*, ed. P. Skubiszewski (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1975), p. 89–100; A. Gieysztor, “Spektakl i liturgia – polska koronacja królewska,” in *Kultura elitarna a kultura masowa w Polsce późnego średniowiecza*, ed. B. Geremek (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1978), p. 9–23; H. Zaremska, “Procesje Bożego Ciała w Krakowie w XIV–XVI wieku,” in *ibid.*, p. 25–40; U. Borkowska (OSU), “Ceremoniał pogrzebowy królów polskich w XIV–XVIII wieku,” in *Państwo, kościół, niepodległość*, ed. J. Skarbak, J. Ziółek (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 1986), p. 133–

these forms. This case seems to be very similar to the origins of Spanish *auto sacramental* plays, which combined a devotion, a religion and a *fiesta* with acting²³.

A quite different trend is presented in the examination of sources based on its inner textual structure. The chosen procedure allows us to recognize similarities between various forms of literacy. Particular fruitful have been studies about medieval chronicles. A quite long time ago the literary scholars noticed that narration in chronicle is very vital, dynamic and colourful. These features resulted into the possibility of dividing the text into a dialog or even a staging²⁴. But this kind of research is based only on the analysis of “surface structure”. The scholars were not interested in the “semantic level” or even the deep structure, which presents “a level of the organization of utterance”²⁵.

In my opinion the examination of this deeper structure can explain to us some misunderstood or “difficult” places in a text and show the parts containing a “hidden” theatricality. A specific organization of a text can be also an evidence of possible dramatic character. This kind of research should very precisely examine the semiotic value of words used. Moreover a privileged status of some verbs related to utterance can be proof of the dramatic feature of written texts. A very similar role is played by personal pronouns and speeches adressed to another (often precisely defined) person, which could be treated as dialog on a stage. It seems necessary to recall an idea of *performatives* formulated by Austin²⁶.

The next useful tool presents an idea of “projected performer”²⁷ formulated by a famous Polish literary scholar Jerzy Ziomek. Some narrative texts are composed like a

160; M. Rożek, *Polskie koronacje i korony* (Kraków: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1987).

23 In the Polish literature this subject was recently analysed by L. Biały: P. Calderon de la Barca, *Autos Sacramentales*, ed. L. Biały (Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków: Ossolineum, 1997).

24 In this place it seems necessary to mention a famous book written by E. Auerbach, *Mimesis; the representation of reality in Western literature* (Princeton: University Press, 1953 and many others editions), especially chapter IV “Sicharius and Chramnesindus”. In Polish literature remarkable is paper: G. Brogi-Bercoff, “<Teatralność> dziejopisarstwa renesansu i baroku,” in *Publiczność literacka i teatralna w dawnej Polsce*, ed. H. Dziechcińska (Warszawa–Łódź: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1985), p. 187–203.

25 I follow the terminology introduced by Noam Chomsky and commented (partially renamed) by Czech scholars: P. Sgall, E. Hajičová, E. Benešová, *Topic, Focus and Generative Semantics* (Kronberg Taunus: Scriptor Verlag & Co KG Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen, 1973), p. 9, 42.

26 J. L. Austin, *How to do things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson (London–Oxford–New York: Oxford Univeristy Press, 1971).

27 J. Ziomek, “Projekt wykonawcy w dziele literackim a problemy genologiczne,” in *Problemy odbioru i odbiorcy*, ed. T. Bujnicki and J. Sławiński (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1977), p. 73–92.

semi-dramatic or even full-dramatic texts. An idea of “hidden” theatricality must have previously existed in the author's mind and as a result of chosen narrative strategies, a non-dramatic text can exist like a text for stage. The traces of this author's intention are contained in deeper structures of literary work. Certainly the traces mentioned above belong to a phenomenon of orality, which was carefully analysed by Walter J. Ong²⁸ and in Polish literature by Teresa Michałowska²⁹. Using the various methods described allows us to find out elements typical for a stage in “pure” narrative texts like chronicles³⁰.

In the last years not only scholars are trying to use new techniques and methods; some Polish directors who are undertaking a stage production did not observe the traditional rules of medieval dramas at all. As a splendid example I would like to mention a staging of *Historyja o Chwalebnym Zmartwychwstaniu Pańskim* – a famous play written by Mikołaj z Wilkowiecka³¹, directed by Piotr Cieplak in *Teatr Współczesny* in Wrocław in 1993³². The scenery of this staging is semi-contemporary and semi-imaginative. The costumes mainly coming from our contemporary time and the music following the performance was played partially on electronic instruments. But this staging deserves attention in a separate paper.

To sum up I hope that the coming years will create for us some opportunities for new and inspiring research.

Piotr Bering

Adam-Mickiewicz-University Poznań

28 W. J. Ong, *Orality and literacy: the technologizing of the word* (London–New York: Routledge, 1999).

29 T. Michałowska, “Między słowem mówionym a pisanym. (O poezji polskiej późnego średniowiecza),” in *Literatura i kultura późnego średniowiecza w Polsce*, ed. T. Michałowska (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 1993), p. 83–124.

30 For more references and for an analysis of procedures used, see my paper: *Kronika–nieznany gatunek dramatyczny*, <http://www.mediewistyka.net/content/view/full/65/30/> (June 2005).

31 The best Polish edition: *Historyja o Chwalebnym Zmartwychwstaniu Pańskim*, ed. J. Okoń (Wrocław–Kraków: Ossolineum, 1971).

32 Adapted as a television play for *Teatr Telewizji* in 1995.