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Patientia et misericordia, poena et signum. The picture of a diseased person and the disease in Mediaeval narrative sources

Abstract

The article presents the manner of showing disease and the suffering of a person by Mediaeval narrative sources. The basis for the article are various national chronicles, monastic historiography and hagiography written in the Middle Ages. The analysed works are the lives of Saint Kinga of Poland, Anne of Bohemia, Salomea of Poland and Saint Francis of Assisi, three monastic chronicles written by canons regulars in the monasteries in Kłodzko, Żagań and Wrocław, and chronicles describing the Polish history by Gallus Anonymous, Jan Długosz and Jan of Czarneków. The author describes the attitude of the society towards the ill person and the attitude of the ill towards their suffering. The article presents also the description of disease and the attempt (or the lack of attempt) to provide medical causes of the illnesses. The indication of pathogenesis of the disease is very rare in the medieval narrative sources. The authors of these works often appeal to God in this matter, they look for an explanation in the Lord's wrath or divine providence. The author of the article shows the differences in presenting the disease in the sources given in the article depending on the kind of works and its purposes.

Key words: Middle Ages, diseases, historiography, hagiography, Mediaeval sources

Introduction

Knowledge of the past is drawn from historical sources and written sources constitute the major part of them. The characteristics of source

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materials usually determine the shape of the world that an author presented in his relation. The picture of the past portrayed in documents, lists and records is different than in texts with a plot and a narration presenting the events in a particular chronological order. Facts, deeds and characters are described in historical narrative sources. It is not a rough message of places, dates and names. These texts are literary works in which authors comment on reality and create their story according to their beliefs, needs and intentions (Kürbis 1994: 268–276, Cetwiński 2008: 45–52). The aim of the article is the analysis of the method of presenting disease in such texts. The author intends to answer the question if the genre of the narrative source influences the method in which this theme is displayed by authors. The question is whether suffering caused by disease is an important element of narration or it changes the perception of the historical source. The aspect of presenting the image of an ill person and a disease is worth taking a look at with the remarks given above.

Poena et signum – diseases as a sign from God for punishment for sins

In his *Chronicle* Gallus Anonymous mentions the infertility of the Polish ruler Władysław I Herman and his wife Judith. The duke and duchess tried at length to have a baby without result. The Gaul describes the despair of the couple caused by the lack of a child in detail. The whole court and dignitaries were worried about the duchess's infertility as well. It was only God's intervention that healed the duke and his wife. The couple fasted for a long time, prayed to God and gave generous alms to the needy in order to receive God's forgiveness. They managed to do so after the advice given by one of the bishops to send envoys with generous donations to the St. Giles monastery in France. At that time in Europe, Saint Giles was known as the patron of sterile women, who – thanks to intercession with God – were able to receive the gift of maternity. The monks in the monastery received the gifts, fasted for three days and prayed for Władysław and Judith. The monks' actions were so effective that the envoys did not leave Provence, and the duchess in Poland fell pregnant. (*Galli Anonymi* 1954: 56–59) We can see that Bolesław III Wrymouth, an important figure for the chronicler, was brought into the world in extraordinary conditions. Infertility – the illness of duchess Judith – is also the pretext for an occurrence of God's power and the emphasis of the Bolesław's special place in Polish history.

Illness, especially sudden and unexpected, is often presented as God's retribution in Mediaeval works. God wants to punish sinners, show them that they should change their lives or protect other Christians from their behaviour. (Brzeziński 1988: 143–148; Szumowski 2008: 203–208)

In the late Middle Ages in Wrocław *Chronica abbatum Beatae Mariae Virginis in Arena* was written. It presents the history of the monastery of Canons Regular who settled there. One of the abbots described in this work, Piotr Czarzewicz was not positively judged by the chronicler. He is presented negatively, as an impulsive and quarrelsome man. (*Chronica abbatum* 1839: 214–215) Czarzewicz must have resigned his position because of the conflict between him and the convent. The resignation did not solve the conflict. Piotr was about to visit the papal curia when, as the chronicler writes: „[...] ex permissione divina in infirmaria subito apoplexia eum tetigit.” (*Chronica abbatum* 1839: 216) The chronicler is visibly delighted by this fact. He claims that the well-connected, educated and eloquent abbot might incur large losses for the monastery if he managed to arrive in Rome.

The chronicle of Jan of Czarneków from the fourteenth century mentions the illness of the bishop from Poznań – Mikołaj of Kórnik. The bishop is presented in a bad light – as an evil, quarrelsome and dishonest man (*Joannis de Czarnekow* 1872: 707–709, 711–712). The man with such characteristics, especially as a shepherd, must have taken the consequences of his behaviour into account. According to the chronicler, God was the one who punished the bishop. He sent down an illness to these parts of his body he used for sins, and, as Jan of Czarneków says: “Et sicut duobus membris illicita invecunde perpetrabat, ita in eisdem fuit usque ad mortem miserabiliter ultione divina punitus, ut infra patebit. Nam peccatum fornicatorium et praecipue deflorationes virginum non vitabat, ideo morbo cancris fuit tactus; et quia pronus et loquax in prolatione illicitorum extitit, idcirco in lingua et gutture ulcerationes fuit passus in tantum, proud dicitur, quod ante mortem cuam vix loqui seu potum potuit diglutire nec os claudere poterat.” (*Joannis de Czarnekow*, 1872: 709).

The behaviour of the Pomeranians described in Wincenty Kadłubek's *Chronica Polonorum* (Magistri Vincenti 1994: 95–96) and later repeated similarly by Długosz (*Joannis Długossii* 1970: 231–233) was treated also as a punishment for sins. The Pomeranians were reluctant to the Christian religion forced on them and tried to kidnap the Gniezno archbishop Michał, profaned a house of God and stole liturgical vessels. The Lord of Revenge – Dominus ultionum - as chronicler writes

(*Magistri Vincenti* 1994: 96), sent the attack of fury on them. The Pomeranian warriors and their families wallowed on the ground, injured and tried to kill themselves or their company. The situation lasted until they realized their faults and the reason for the sent illness. Wincenty Kadłubek leaves the reader in no doubt that it was a punishment: “Tamque diu uexati sunt, donec supplicii causa intellecta et sancta sanctorum cim omni surellectile pontifici remittuntur et quantam ad diocete poposcerant pecunie quantitatem uiolate mulctam immunitatis polificentur”. The fury left only when they returned the vessels, committed to provide compensation for the losses and became zealous Christians.

God intervened also in the case of Martin Rinkenberg, the abbot in the monastery of Canons Regular in Żagań. The abbot Martin was an educated man and properly administered the property. However, he had many flaws – he led a secular lifestyle, he did not avoid alcohol, and, unacceptably for the chronicler, the company of women. He gave a bad example to his subordinates and made the monastery infamous. Brethren tried to affect the superior and change his behaviour into the life of a clergyman. It had no effect. Only God’s intervention brought the change. One night, Rinkenberg had a stroke – the chronicler defines it as: “gravissimum fluxum, quem guttam vel apoplexiam” (*Catalogus abbatum* 1835: 388). As a result, the abbot had a paralysis in almost half of his body and difficulties with speech. He did not cease to be clever. The intervention of medics and a long rehabilitation allowed Martin to regain partial fitness. He was able to walk by himself but he used only his left hand to eat and write. He lived in this condition for six more years. The chronicler claims that “fuit hoc pyo flagello, haut dubium divinitus sibi dato”. (*Catalogus abbatum* 1835: 388) The abbot’s behaviour changed immeasurably following his stroke. He still was impulsive and impatient, but he forewent secular pleasures, avoided women, he restrained food and drinks. He dedicated his life completely to medical studies, which he had began to study earlier, with the profit for himself and others. He regained his good name. The illness made its point – it helped Martin to change his behaviour and live properly.

The sudden and mysterious illness of the bishop of Ostia and Velletri, Rinaldo di Conti, later the pope Alexander IV, was also a sign. Jan Długosz, extrapolating from the life of Saint Stanislaus (*Vita sancti Stanislai* 1884: 434–436), writes the efforts of the Polish episcopate to canonise the bishop Stanisław of Szczepanów in his monumental work *Annales seu Cronicae incliti Regni Poloniae* (*Ioannis Długossii* 1975: 82–85). All necessary documents were collected, prepared and sent with envoys to Roman Curia. The issue seemed clear, as the members of

board assured. However, the cardinal Rinaldo opposed the canonisation, saying that such a great and gifted-with-grace martyr should have been widely known in the world. And because he knew nothing about the Stanisław, the story probably was not true. Other cardinals and Pope Innocent IV agreed to his opinion. Envoys did not know what to do next. God and the future saint helped. Unexpectedly, bishop Rinaldo, the main opponent, suffered from a sudden and life-threatening illness. Doctors did not forecast a long life for the bishop. One night, Stanisław of Szczepanów appeared to him in pontifical clothes and the light of glory. Stanisław scolded Rinaldo, explained himself and ordered him to visit the pope and ask for a canonisation. Stanisław assured Rinaldo that we would recover soon. During the same night the bishop stood up on his own, mounted a horse, rode to the papal court and convinced His Holiness of the heroism of the future saint's virtues. (*Ioannis Długossii* 1975: 85).

Patientia et misericordia – diseases as an opportunity to show mercy and patience

Diseases give a chance in the historical work to present the personal attitude of the clergyman or future saint not only towards their own illness, but also towards the suffering of others. The illness provides the occasion to show mercy and patience. In the Żagań chronicle discussed above there was the description of the case of a monk Zachary (*Catalogus abbatum* 1835: 207). He fell so unluckily that his leg was seriously injured. He spent 10 weeks in bed unable to move from side to side. He could not eat or drink anything without the help of others. At one point, his broken leg started to stink and rot. Despite all the inconveniences, he did not act like Job, he did not sin or swear at God. He did not complain about his health, but he blessed God with his tongue and heart, as the chronicler claims. The readers do not know how the illness of Zachary ends. The Żagań chronicle does not describe his later story or health. It was not important for the chronicler. The important part was the edifying didactic example of the monk. The author says that the monk was a great example for others and that was the reason of mentioning him in the chronicle. He wanted to show the readers how much patience they should have during their illness - "Meruit frater ille in exemplum aliorum de eo in hiis scriptis specialem fieri memoriam propter ejus pacienciam singularem".

In the *Cronica monasterii canonicorum regularium (s. Augustini) in Glac* there is a fragment of the letters of one of the monastery's superi-

ors – the provost Piotr. Piotr in his letter to monastery in Kostomlaty mentions a worsening of his long-term illness. The provost's legs made him suffer, they often swelled and obstructed walking. More recently, his problem increased, he could not put on shoes or stockings or even walk. The chronicler compares the hurting provost to king Asa of Judah, who suffered from a similar problem. Asa, as the chronicler reminds using quotations from the Bible, did not look for God but for doctors (*Biblia Sacra*: 2 Chr 16.12). Whereas Piotr searched for help from God only, while bearing the pain patiently and piously. The chronicler quotes the next fragment of the provost's letter. Piotr trusts God in his pain and asks his brethren to pray for him. The chronicler underlines *exemplum paciencie* of the provost and his submission to God's will (*Cronica monasterii* 2003: 11–12).

Others, who patiently bore their illnesses, were the saints described in chronicles and hagiography. Saint Clare, as Thomas of Celano writes, accepted her illness with admirable virtue for almost 30 years. She did not complain during that time (*Legenda sanctae Clarae* 1995: 2437). Saint Salomea, the wife of Hungarian king Coloman, as the hagiographer claims: “In ipsa autem infirmitate pacientissima fuit, nec causa alicuius poterat ad iracundiam provocari” – during her illness, she was amazingly patient and nothing could make her lose her balance (*Vita sanctae Salomeae* 1884: 780). Saint Francis of Assisi, the man of faint health, was described by St. Bonaventure as a persistent and patient man during illness (Bonaventura 1886: 310–311).

Religious people and future saints described in chronicles and hagiography not only were patient and humble, but also merciful. Devout women from Mediaeval literature were full of mercy. Some of them loved to take care of ill patients. For example, Jadwiga, the wife of Silesian duke Henry the Bearded, according to her hagiographer, tried to put Christ's words “estote misericordes” (*Biblia Sacra*: Luke 6, 36) in life. She cared about the lepers, she sent them money and food many times. The biographer uses the quotation from the Gospel of Matthew: “infirmus fui et visitastis me” (*Biblia Sacra*: Matt 25, 36), which guided Jadwiga through her life. She visited the ill herself, she always had time, gifts and good words for them. She sent servants with gifts to places she was not able to visit herself. The author emphasizes that Jadwiga was very delicate and sympathetic towards the ill people, she never left them without the care and help (*Vita sanctae Hedwigis* 1884: 543–545).

Similar to St. Jadwiga was her daughter-in-law, the duchess Anna. Hagiographic sources mention her establishing a hospital, equipping it and demonstrating a loving personal care for the ill. The reader can

find out that the decrepit duchess did not stop her help even when she was no longer able to walk. She ordered to carry her to the patients, who she nursed and vested with necessities. (*Vita Annae* 1844: 658–659). Saint Kinga of Poland, the wife of Bolesław V the Chaste, lovingly took care of patients and lepers, nursed them and dressed their wounds herself. Nothing could have discouraged her from visits to lepers, not even the perfidy of Satan who, in the shape of a pack of dogs, tried to stop her from her good deeds (*Vita et miracula* 1884: 692–693).

Jan Długosz also wrote about the need for mercy for the ill. In his *Annales*, in the section of the year 1412 he described the case of a Cracow bishop Piotr Wysz who fell seriously ill and had the symptoms of insanity. The king Władysław Jagiełło decided to move the bishop from the capital to a diocese in Poznań which was less prestigious. The anti-pope John XXIII (Baldassare Cossa) published the bull to confirm the transfer of the bishop. The chronicler claims that this situation caused indignation in the country, especially in clergy. The interference of the king in the Church positions was criticized by the chronicler. Długosz was particularly outraged with the treatment of an ill person by the Catholic king. Moreover, the ill person – in this case the bishop Wysz – was a good person and a man of merit of the country, so he should have been treated with the clemency and mercy (Klimecka 1997: 64). The chronicler believed that the bishop, even in a state of insanity, had the right to care and mercy (*Ioannis Dlugossii* 2001: 208–210).

Conclusions

In the Mediaeval narrative sources there are few fragments about the explanation of the pathogenesis of diseases known today. It does not mean that people of those days did not try to explain and understand the reasons of diseases and find the cure. However, that was what medical treatises and formularies were for. In the narrative texts the authors often connected diseases with sin and they believed God was the most important doctor. (Witek 1979: 235–236). They connected this with the incredible influence the Creator has on the fate of the world and people – the divine Providence „*providentia divina*” or „*providentia Dei*”. (Słomka 2002: 610–612). In Christian theology the term of the divine Providence always have contained the care of God over everything he created, so the loving watching over every creature and the guidance into the intended aim in every detail of their lives and actions (Bartnik 200: 136–160). The Mediaeval people did not have sufficient knowledge

about the laws of nature, they were not able to understand many rules of the universe. The world surrounding them, full of incomprehensible phenomena was perceived as a place impossible to understand, dangerous and threatening. The Creator gives his grace to the pious and punishes sinners. The miseries, plagues and diseases are the consequences of sins. However, a religious person could rely on God's help and care and trust their life in God's hands. (Le Goff 2008; Vauchez 1996: 44–46)

The examples of this opinion can be found in the works of the authors mentioned above. It is seen especially in the writings of Jan Długosz. The history written according to him was not only about the description of past events but also about preaching God's glory. God decides people's lives, provides the loving care and punishes strictly for their maleficence. (Borkowska 1983: 33–35; Koczerska 1971: 113–116)

Illness has a role to play in the world created by God and described by the chronicler. The way of presenting the illness was different depending on the purpose and the kind of writing. *Patientia et misericordia, poena et signum* – patience and mercy, punishment and sign – these are the terms which define the most frequent functions of diseases in the medieval narrative pieces. *Gesta principum Polonorum* by Gallus Anonymus has some features of *gesta*, which means it describes the characters' actions and deeds worth documenting (Skibiński 2009: 23–27). The foreground character in Gaul's story is the Polish prince Bolesław Wrymouth who is presented as the bravest ruler and the saviour of the country. The hero presented like this could not have been born in an ordinary way. His birth was a miracle. The infertility of the duchess Judith became a means of the aggrandisement of Bolesław, God's confirmation of his importance and greatness. This is also an example of divine Providence.

The task of monastic chronicles was to present the glorious history of its monastery and describe the reforms and emphasize their positive effects (Proksch 1994: 24–30). The chronicles were created for the use of the monastery. The residents of monasteries, monks and, first of all, superiors were supposed to be their future readers (Mrozowicz 2005: 91–101). The superiors should get the most benefits from the careful reading as it was an extremely helpful tool in managing the monastery. The aim of this kind of writing was, besides noting the changing financial position, showing the right way of behaviour, helpful advice and tips (Chmielewska 2015: 76–80). The chronicles, according to the words of the author of a chronicle, should be a collection of examples, based on which the readers should choose and follow the lives and good deeds of the monks and leave the example of bad lives and deeds – „[...] *studeant*

successores abbates, sprete vita malorum, bonorum vitam et actus fideliter imitari” (*Chronica abbatum* 1839: 156). A patient bearing a disease and its ailments is an example of the right behaviour and should be followed by all the residents of the monastery. The illness sent in the right moment by God on the bad inferior protected the whole congregation from the greater danger and misfortunes. Moreover, it was a clear sign which abbot’s actions were touched by the divine punishment and, as a result, which actions should be avoided.

Mediaeval hagiography and legends about the saints written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries presented the saint as an excellent example of evangelical life and the following of Christ’s teachings. The set of virtues of a future saint was usually conventional. (Dunin-Wąsowicz 1997: 98–99; Frost 1994: 69–79; Vauchez 2000: 401–428) Also his or her actions were conventional – helping the poor and the suffering. Every Mediaeval description of saint’s life contained fragments about acts of mercy. These are the typical motifs in the hagiography of this time. The aim of most biographies was not the truth but describing the person and actions of the saint which was supposed to increase piety and individual cult. Therefore, the enduring bearing of the illness and pain, humble surrender to the God’s will, and the deeds of mercy, such as helping the poor and suffering, were among the tasks ascribed to medieval hagiography.

The description of disease is the important element of the chronicler’s or hagiographer’s narration. The attitude towards illness and the actions taken in its presence emphasise both positive and negative character traits. We do not know if the events and people presented were the same in reality as in the writings. What we do know is that this is how they should be (Cetwiński 2001: 134; 2002: 130). It is worth quoting the words of the well-known Mediaeval literature researcher Clive Staples Lewis: “It follows that the distinction between history and fiction cannot, in its modern clarity, be applied to medieval books or to the spirit in which they were read.” (Lewis 1964: 179).

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Patientia et misericordia, poena et signum.

Obraz chorego i choroby w średniowiecznych źródłach narracyjnych

Streszczenie

Artykuł prezentuje sposób, w jaki różne średniowieczne źródła narracyjne ukazywały chorobę i cierpiącego na nią człowieka. Podstawą artykułu są spisane w średniowieczu różnego rodzaju kroniki narodowe, dziejopisarstwo klasztorne i żywoty świętych. Analizowane tu utwory to żywoty świętych: Kingi, Anny śląskiej, Salomei i Franciszka, trzy kroniki klasztorne spisane w klasztorach kanoników regularnych w Kłodzku, Żaganiu i Wrocławiu oraz kroniki opisujące dzieje Polski autorstwa Anonima zwanego Galem, Jana Długosza i Janka z Czarnekowa. Autorka omawia stosunek otoczenia do chore-

go człowieka i podejście samego chorego do swojego cierpienia. Przedstawia także pojawiający się w źródłach opis choroby oraz próbę (bądź też jej brak) podania medycznych przyczyn dolegliwości. W średniowiecznych źródłach narracyjnych wskazanie patogenezы choroby występuje niezwykle rzadko. Autorzy tych dzieł najczęściej odwołują się w tej kwestii do Boga, szukając wytłumaczenia w Bożym gniewie lub Bożej opatrności. Autorka wskazuje na zróżnicowane przedstawienie choroby w omawianych źródłach, całkowicie zależne od rodzaju utworu i celów, jakim ten utwór miał służyć.

Słowa kluczowe: średniowiecze, choroby, historiografia, hagiografia, źródła średniowieczne