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THE MORAL EDUCATION OF YOUTH IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY CRACOW UNIVERSITY SERMONS*

In my previous studies of university sermons that were held at Cracow University in the fifteenth century, I concentrated on the self-image of the University professor as evident in these sermons.¹ However, these sermons also show the perceptions that professors held of their students. Few medieval documents have been examined as to their views on children and adolescents. Since the Cracow sermons present a unified if multi-faceted view of children, I think an examination of these sermons is justified. In my considerations on this subject, I will refer to the contents of all types of university sermons held at the University of Cracow in the fifteenth century : ordinary sermons for the university clergy and for the students, introductory lectures, speeches made by rectors and deans on special occasions, promotion speeches at the Faculty of Law, and those at the Faculty of Arts.² Especially useful are the promotion speeches at the Faculty of Arts, as they contain abundant information on opinions concerning children and adolescents.

Opinions concerning youths were expressed mainly in the context of an ethical education and were based on philosophical and theological considerations. Authors concentrated on the process of character building and the moral maturation of their students. Children—as a rule—were considered to have many faults and, therefore, were inferior to adults. (In fact, since evil is contagious, children might even exert a bad influence on adults.) The elimination of these faults was a continuous process, lasting until maturity. The respon-

* Paper read at the University in Honolulu, 24 March 1986.

¹ Cf. J. Drewnowski, *Uczony w świadomości polskiego środowiska naukowego pierwszej połowy XV wieku* [*The Scholar in the Consciousness of the Polish Scientific Milieu in the First Half of the 15th Century*], Wrocław, 1987.

² Cf. M. Kowalczyk, *Krakowskie mowy uniwersyteckie z pierwszej połowy XV wieku* [*The Cracow University Speeches from the First Half of the 15th Century*], Wrocław, 1970, pp. 7—13.

sibility for this process rested with all persons engaged in education, either at home or at school and the enormity of this task was openly stated.

The process of education was to begin at birth and was to go on continually until maturity. Like the theoreticians of education today, the fifteenth-century Cracow authors were convinced that the first weeks and months of a child's life would determine the directions of its further development. The role of the parents was considered very important. Like Juan Luis Vives in the sixteenth century, the Cracow authors were of the opinion that the susceptibility to good and evil was not only inherited but was also transmitted through chaperons since the first days of child's life. Therefore, nurses had to be carefully chosen.³

Once in school, children continued to be characterized as immature human beings. Based on Aristotle's *Book of Ethics*, a student was compared most often to a *tabula rasa* or to a trunk of a young tree that still can be bent in any direction, or to a clay pot which will preserve forever the smell of that food with which it is filled first. Such considerations on the plasticity of the young mind led to the conclusion that habits were formed at an early age, good habits as well as bad ones. Some, citing Seneca, held that young children ought to be rebuked and restrained, this being a precondition for proper psychological and ethical development.⁴

There was little deviation from the above view on children, although the Cracow scholars of the fifteenth century differed in their opinion on human nature in general and on its ability to develop morally. For example, Stanislaus of Scarbimiria (d. 1431), first rector of the reestablished Jagiellonian University in Cracow, assumed that human nature tended to show an overpowering inclination to evil. In one of his sermons, he points out all the moral shortcomings that are typical for the various stages of life. These stages show a certain hierarchy of morality. Most virtuous is old age. Manhood is more virtuous than adolescence. Adolescence is usually sinful. Childhood occupies the lowest place in Stanislaus' hierarchy: he does not hesitate to call it a "criminal age" (*aetas nefandissima*). "There is not a crime, he says, that a child would not commit, if he feels like it, or would commit even for the fun of it."⁵ His contemporary, Bartholomaeus of Jasło (d. around 1407), represents those Cracow scholars who believed in the ability of each person to overcome this inclination to evil through exercise (*exercitium*) and the power of the ratio. He stated that each baby brings into the world something comparable to a programme of its own spiritual development. This programme was often explained by the Aristotelian theory of matter and form, matter being the child's inherent characteristics and form

³ Stanislaus of Scarbimiria, *Sermones sapientiales*, edited with introduction and critical notes by B. Chmielowska, Warsaw, 1979, part 2, pp. 262—264, l. 1—63.

⁴ *Ibid.*, part 2, p. 159, l. 208—212; p. 213 l. 95. Cf. anonymous sermon in MS. BJ 2459, f. 263 v (59). Figure in brackets indicates the position in a catalogue of sermons by M. Kowalczyk, *op. cit.*

⁵ Stanislaus of Scarbimiria, *op. cit.*, part 2, p. 265, l. 75—87.

consisting of the character features of a fully mature person, who would be able to work on himself unaided.⁶

Most of the examples of sinful conduct, given by Stanislaus in his sermon on the stages of man, were trespasses against chastity. He reproached young men for their prodigality, their boastfulness, but especially for their uncontrollable attraction to women. He accused boys of a willingness to commit sins against nature (*contra naturam*) and of committing sins with the same sex (*cum sexu simili*).⁷ Cracow university students were told by their teachers that these sins should be regarded as crimes in the full sense of the word; they were even worse than murder, for they prevented the soul's salvation. Therefore, they could not even be mentioned by name.⁸

One other fault of children and adolescents was their lack of adaptability to life in a civilized society. Childhood and adolescence were regarded as a period of wildness and moral uncouthness. The word used for the process of upbringing (*eruditio*) means etymologically the "process of extraction from uncouthness." Such a process can be compared to cutting off branches from a trunk to turn it into a useful object. Thus a ceremony connected with the initiation of new candidates into a fraternity was called "shaking off." Cracow archives contain descriptions by the students themselves of these acts of initiation into civilization. One such description depicts a shy boy with such incredibly bad manners that decorum prevents me from mentioning them in detail.⁹

Measures to correct the typical shortcomings of children and adolescents were guided by the necessity for spiritual development. Mathias of Łabiszyn (d. between 1451—56) held that the possibility of a successful spiritual development was given to everyone, for the whole human race is provided with a free will and a ratio. According to Mathias, man was created to rise, as symbolized by the upright position of his body. A successful spiritual development, however, required great pain and effort and might not be accomplished since the human intellect as well as the will had been weakened by original sin. Moreover, the carnal nature of man pulled him down toward a pleasant and easy life. Young human beings, Matthias said, were singularly unable to withstand the temptations of sensual pleasures.¹⁰

Franciscus of Brzeg attributed this lack of resistance to the overabundance of young blood and vitality in the adolescent.¹¹ A proper development would be impossible if the child stayed in the company of his peers, which would be like

⁶ J. Drewnowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 115—122, 178—179.

⁷ Stanislaus of Scarbimiria, *op. cit.*, part 2, p. 213, l. 89—95. *Cf. ibid.*, part 1, p. 142, l. 123—125.

⁸ Anonymous speech by a rector, MS. BJ 1587, f. 135 v (27).

⁹ *Cf.* M. Kowalczyk, "Trzy zabytki prozy żakowskiej w rękopisach Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej" ["Three Relics of the Goliardic Prose in the Manuscripts of the Jagiellonian Library"], *Biuletyn Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej*, 19:1969, pp. 63—72.

¹⁰ MS. BJ 2231, f. 254—258 v (96); *Cf.* MS. BJ 2215, f. 168 (49).

¹¹ Franciscus of Brzeg, MS. BUWr I Q 380, f. 189 (99).

“applying fire to fire.”¹² Cracow authors unanimously believed that the greatest obstacle in the moral development of an immature person was the company of his peers. His contemporaries could pull the adolescent down toward pleasure and wrongdoing, or to laziness and idleness. Their topics of conversation were equally pernicious. Instead of thinking about learning and other difficult though useful matters, they fervently discussed girls, criticized their teachers, and jeered at them. Worst of all, they tempted those friends more virtuous than themselves to commit sins. Close friendship with a person of one’s age was supposed to be especially harmful. Bartholomaeus of Jasło tells the horrifying story of two boys, whose close friendship led to paralysis of both.¹³

The word “friendship” is rarely used in the Cracow university speeches and then usually in reference to adults, referring to a circle of friends rather than to friendship. This does not mean that mutual help and assistance were not encountered but such acts were explained as *caritas*, not *amicitia*. The authors stressed the need for adolescents to develop a proper emotional connection with a more mature person who could offer help and act as the stimulator of his spiritual development. Students owed their teachers love and gratefulness for all the help they received. Those students who preferred the companionship of their teachers to that of their peers were praised. Nicholas Tempelfeld cites as an example his student, who was also his younger brother, who, even during a wedding party, preferred to pass the time with him, rather than with his peers. In this instance, the ideal of brotherly love was connected with a pattern of an ideal relationship between pupil and teacher.¹⁴ The teacher provided not only a measure of control, but also a role model to be emulated. According to Bartholomaeus of Jasło, if a youth was inclined toward good, he would choose someone older to be his educator. Knowing the educator’s requirements and recommendations, he would try to think, feel, and act, as if this educator were constantly watching him.¹⁵

Cracow sermons sternly criticized those students who, instead of living in boarding houses with their instructors, rented rooms in pubs or inns.¹⁶ One of the reasons for criticism was that many of them were living with girls. Such behaviour was considered a sin against chastity, but interestingly enough, this was not the most important reason for criticism. Far more harmful was the supposedly overwhelming influence of passion on the will and the intellect. It would be impossible to use good judgement while under the influence of a woman.¹⁷ Thus

¹² Stanislaus of Scarbimiria, *op. cit.*, part 2, p. 159, l. 207—208.

¹³ Bartholomaeus of Jasło, *Tria sunt necessaria studentibus : natura, exercitium, disciplina*, MS. BJ 2192, f. 81 v.

¹⁴ Nicolaus Tempelfeld, MS. BUW I Q 380, f. 37 (65).

¹⁵ Bartholomaeus of Jasło, MS. BJ 2192, f. 82.

¹⁶ Stanislaus of Scarbimiria, MS. BJ 1272, f. 162 v (159); Nicolaus Tempelfeld, BUWr IQ 380, f. 54—54v (91).

¹⁷ Stanislaus of Scarbimiria, MS. BJ 192, f. 190—191 (26).

criticism was intended to warn against endangering the process of spiritual development.

It was taken for granted that such development could only be accomplished through continuous effort. In reality, however, learning was quite often interrupted by festivities; usually celebrated in time-honored form. But no trace can be found in the university sermons of the idea that such leisure activities would contribute to the maturation process. All such activities were criticized, even swimming.¹⁸

It was accepted that not all children would have the same difficulties in their spiritual development. Children were known to differ in inclinations and aptitudes. Such inclinations were called complexions (*complexio*), and in accordance with Aristotelian thought were thought to be related to physical build. It was presumed, for instance, that adolescents with an inclination to corpulence showed a tendency toward greediness, laziness, obtuseness, and ignorance.¹⁹ On the other hand, boys with a slim build were supposed to be especially well disposed toward an intellectual and ethical development. Stanislaus of Scarbimiria held that some people were born with a good complexion, whereas others were born with a bad one. Unlike Vives a century later, Stanislaus did not advocate preventing those born with a bad inclination from further study. He also emphasized the difficulties in distinguishing between those children born with a good *complexio* and those with a bad one.²⁰ Most of the fifteenth-century Cracow authors appear to believe that such inborn defects can be surmounted by great effort.²¹ Here Demosthenes and his fight against his speech impediment served as an example as did Socrates who had described himself as naturally ugly and as owing his moral decency only to sheer effort. Bartholomaeus of Jasło compared this process with the training of an animal. Through learning and exercise, animals, e.g., dogs and birds, acquire skills that are beyond their nature. By similar training, man can exceed the plan of the individual development given to him by nature.²² Even after the onset of humanistic pedagogy, introduced in Poland by Jan of Ludzisko—who was in turn influenced by Peter Vergerio the Younger—this tendency to accentuate inborn differences did not change much. It should be pointed out, however, that Jan of Ludzisko mentions among positive inborn features a tendency to diligence, humility, and obedience, and most of all a sense of dignity, which stirs a boy to noble deeds and to obtaining good results in his learning. This feature had not been mentioned before.²³

¹⁸ Franciscus of Brzeg, MS. BUWr IQ 381, f. 104–107 (9).

¹⁹ Bartholomaeus of Jasło, BJ 2215, f. 111. Cf. J. Drewnowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 104, 178.

²⁰ Stanislaus of Scarbimiria, MS. BJ 723, p. 367, 370 (119).

²¹ MS. BJ 2215, f. 111.

²² *Ibid.*, f. 111 v.

²³ Ioannes of Ludzisko, *Orationes*, ed. J. S. Bojarski, Wrocław, 1971, pp. 121–122.

Until now, I have discussed those theories of education that were based on the perception of youth in general. From the speeches held to commemorate the granting of various university degrees, it is also evident that an awareness existed of distinct stages of youth. The Baccalaureate in Arts was usually obtained between eighteen and twenty years of age. In speeches commemorating this event, crude references abound to the candidate's boyish weaknesses, to his plays, pranks, and practical jokes of previous years. In the speeches made on the occasion of conferring licentiates or Masters' Degrees, no remarks were made about frivolous behaviour or the appearance of the graduate, though occasionally a breach of moral principles could be criticized. The literary convention of promotion speeches at the Faculty of Law, where students were usually older, did not allow for a single word about any of the graduate's faults. The author might only mention that the newly promoted bachelor or doctor had fought valiantly against temptations and that he had come out the victor.²⁴ It was stressed that men, not boys, graduated from this faculty. It was also explained that maturity is not achieved until the age of thirty. Even Christ did not start teaching until he was at least twenty-eight. This thought was expressed most strongly by Jan Elgot (d. 1452) in his promotion speeches.²⁵ The literary and social conventions of the time make it appear that those promoted in the Faculty of Law were considered mature persons, not only because they had attained a certain age but also because they were considered spiritually mature. Moreover, the prestige of this Faculty demanded such consideration.

Those speeches, however, which were written with a singular concern for adolescents, e.g., promotional speeches and speeches by the Deans of the Faculty of Arts, warned that maturity might never be reached, that one might remain an eternal child, a *puer centum annorum*²⁶ (a term from the *Scriptures*), or, to use modern expression, a *puer aeternus*. This means that the progress of outgrowing boyhood was not thought to be automatic but had to be worked for, and that students should be encouraged and stimulated to do so. Nicholas Tempelfeld (d. 1471) said in one of his speeches that boys should reach for the summit (*pueri tolluntur in altum*).²⁷ Lucas of Wielki Koźmin (d. 1422), exhorted his young audience to become "a man in your soul" ("*indue mente virum*").²⁸ In his speech "*Ecce senex iuvenis*" ("Here is an old youngster") he advised his audience to work toward the restraint that comes with old age.²⁹ This was not meant to be a glorification of old age, but only of the mature restraint that comes with it. According to Lucas, youth with its vigour and efficiency is a virtue in spite of the need to suppress the sensual desires that come with it. Mathias of Łabiszyn

²⁴ About this literary convention see J. Drewnowski, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

²⁵ MS. BJ 2400, f. 182 v (169).

²⁶ Stanislaus of Scarbimiria, *op. cit.*, part 1, p. 43, l. 190—196.

²⁷ MS. BUWr I Q 380, f. 9—12 (93).

²⁸ MS. BJ 2215, f. 243—246 v (58).

²⁹ MS. BJ 2215, f. 251—255 (53).

stressed that this youthful efficiency of senses and body could be a condition favouring spiritual development. But other authors did not seem to notice the merits of youth at all. Stanislaus of Scarbimiria, while praising medicine, never mentioned the physical health of most young people.³⁰

In sum we can draw the following conclusions about the concept of the pre-adult as expressed by scholars connected with Cracow University. First of all, in this period of life a human being was especially susceptible to good and bad influences, the effects of which could become fixed very easily. He was also morally inferior to an adult, because he could not control the temptations of the body and he lacked the ability to adapt to the demands of society. His good habits were not yet firmly rooted, his bad habits not yet uprooted. This is why a child was said to be a dangerous influence on his peers. To develop properly, a child had to stay under the constant supervision and guidance of adults, who were to act as supervisors, educators, and examples. Only a concerned and continuous effort could lead to spiritual development. If done properly, a child would realize the possibilities inherent in his human nature. The child might even overcome the limits marked by a lack of these inborn predispositions. On the other hand, negligence and improper influence from the outside would halt the child's development at any stage. According to the Cracow scholars, *the child was a human being, whose moral development was not simply predestined but given as a task*. This was true for adolescents as well.

In later times, philosophers and scientists often diverged from the views just discussed. Jean Jacques Rousseau and his optimistic educational individualism, Cesare Lombroso and his thesis about inborn criminality, and Ernst Kretschmer and his constitutionalism, all minimized the role of childrearing. Some modern pedagogical theories have done likewise, those that espouse an antiauthoritarian upbringing, or those advocating several types of paidocentrism. According to these theories, a child—like a plant—developes unaided and cultivation suffices. Compared with such theories, the medieval university writings appear multifaceted. Doubtlessly sketchy, devoid of many important details of description brought about only by modern science, they still evidence ongoing philosophical observations that had been gathered over many centuries. They reflect a primaeval experience which testifies to the greatness as well as the spiritual misery of man. Cracow authors were aware of this multiplicity when thinking of children and adolescents, and avoided simplifications that would have falsified human nature.

Historians today might be interested in instances when the medieval authors of these sermons provided details of everyday-life, in this case biographical details of student life. There are instances which show the authors' ability to note individual character features of certain students, or a sensibility to the difficult life of many of their pupils, especially those that were living in poverty. Such data can also be found in the sermons from the Prague University, which often served

³⁰ Cf. J. Drewnowski, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

as a model for the Cracow sermons. However, in the Prague sermons as well as the ones from Cracow, these details usually served only as an illustration of general ethical considerations or helped describe the characters of those who were about to graduate. In many cases, the author appears to have wanted to amuse his audience with a funny authentic anecdote. Such biographical details were, therefore, typical *exempla* and of the same kind as those appearing in the biographies of ancient philosophers. In fact, their occurrence in these ancient biographies legitimized the mention of any individual biographical detail at all, as this was otherwise not deemed proper in the scientific writing of the time. In some cases, we note a genuine fatherly concern, and an expressed need to observe carefully a child entrusted to one's care. The Cracow authors would have agreed with a Parisian scholar of the thirteenth century who said: "Students are ducklings bravely sailing forth to the middle of the pond, and their teacher resembles a terrified hen, who remains on shore."³¹

As we have seen, the Cracow sermons provide a wealth of detail about the concept of child and adolescent at the end of the Middle Ages, which throws additional light on the existence of this concept at the end of the Middle Ages. Any investigation should, however, be undertaken in the wider theoretical context that I have outlined here.**

³¹ Eudes de Chateauroux, MS, Bibliotheque Nationale Paris 338, f. 185 v.

** Abbreviations used in footnotes :

BJ—Biblioteka Jagiellońska (Jagiellonian Library)

BUWr—Biblioteka Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego (University Library, Wrocław)