

BEATA WOJCIECHOWSKA

Faculty of History

Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce

MARRIAGE CEREMONIES IN MEDIEVAL POLAND

A noteworthy and dignified event that changed the rhythm of life and dispersed the clouds of daily routine, marriage was an important milestone in the familial cycle, initiating the betrothed couple into new circumstances and new social roles¹.

Marriage was preceded by betrothal – a promise and foretoken of marriage. One of the key criteria at the initial stage of matchmaking was their social background, most notably their financial status. The final say on the choice of the future spouse belonged to the parents, who would make their decision upon counseling with the more distant relatives.

According to the early 15th-century statutes of the Diocese of Gniezno, prenuptial negotiations among the Polish nobility were usually a long-term process². In traditional culture, these arrangements were known as *zmówiny*, and involved the signing of prenuptial contracts determining the value of the dowry and trousseau brought by the bride's parents, on the one hand, and that of the bride price and bride wealth brought by the groom. A vital role in these negotiations was played by the paranymp (*dziewosłęb*), who acted as the matchmaker and supervised the wedding ceremony (*swadźba*), which included the handover of the bride to the groom, marked by a festive celebration (*zdawiny*), consummation (*pokładziny*), and the relocation of the bride to her husband's house. The crucial part of the secular ceremony was the spousal handshake and the exchange of wreaths, performed by the paranymp or the newlyweds to validate the matrimonial consent³. Rooted in the common law and entrenched in ludic customs and numerous practices, wedding songs, charms, and different types of fortune-saying, these secular rituals left a lasting mark on traditional customs.

From the 13th century on, the sacramental form of wedding prevailed, gradually deprecating and marginalizing the traditional concubinage. After the 4th Lateran Council (1215), the Catholic Church banned clandestine marriages and prohibited priests from assisting in such ceremonies. Furthermore, the presbyters were instructed to publically announce the upcoming matrimonyes and their dates, so as to enable third parties to state any legal grounds preventing the sacrament from being administered. It also fell on the presbyters to verify any potential obstacles for the sacrament and, in the event of reasonable doubt, prevent the

¹ A. van Gennep, *Obrzędy przejścia. Systematyczne studium ceremonii*, trans. B. Biały, Warszawa 2006, passim.

² *Najdawniejsze statuty synodalne archidiecezji gnieźnieńskiej oraz statuty z rękopisu Oss. no. 1627 z uwzględnieniem materiałów zebranych przez ś. p. B. Ulanowskiego*, ed. W. Abraham, Kraków 1920, p. 28.

³ W. Abraham, *Dziewosłęb. Studium z dziejów pierwotnego prawa małżeńskiego w Polsce*, Lwów 1927, pp. 3-47; tenże, *Zawarcie małżeństwa w pierwotnym prawie polskim*, Lwów 1925, passim; M. Koczerska, *Zawarcie małżeństwa wśród szlachty w Polsce późnego średniowiecza*, "Przegląd Historyczny", 66/1975, vol. 1, pp. 1-24.

marital contract from being performed until their superiors decided on the matter. The 4th Lateran Council also set the consanguinity and affinity impediments to the fourth degree by canonical computation, i.e. to the great-grandsons of any two or more siblings⁴. The decision was doctrinally substantiated by St. Augustine's writings on marriage, which he saw as a union of persons and families that were alien to each other prior to the event, in order to join them by the bonds of love⁵. The Decretals of Gregory IX (1234) specified the norms of essence and validity for the holy matrimony, stipulating that a sterling marriage is established the expression, in the present tense, of the spouses' agreement to an indissoluble marital relationship, complemented by a sexual relation between them⁶.

In accordance with canon law, synodal legislation stressed the legal and moral aspects of marriage, enumerated the impediments prohibiting its conclusion, obligated parishes to publish the banns of marriage, and demanded that matrimony be administered publically in churches, rather than in inns and at homes. The publically announced triple banns of marriage were instituted in Polish synodal legislation by the papal legate Jacques Pantaléon at the Council of Wrocław in 1248. Among the functions reserved for the parish priest was blessing marriages. The articles passed at the Council of Wrocław also instructed the clergy to abstain from blessing matrimony of non-parishioners for fear of overlooking possible marriage impediments⁷. The statutes passed by the papal legate Philip of Fermo in 1279 strictly prohibited clandestine marriages (*matrimonia clandestina*), i.e. those entered into without reading the banns, and forbade priests to assist in the conclusion of any such matrimony⁸.

Aside from the above, the 1320 synodal statutes passed by the Bishop of Krakow, Nanker, prohibited matrimonial ceremonies at specific times of the year, i.e. between the first Sunday of Advent and the Octave of Epiphany; between the third Sunday before Lent and the Octave of Easter; and between the Sunday preceding the Days of the Cross (Ascension Day) and the Octave of Pentecost⁹. Furthermore, the statutes detailed the impediments of consanguinity, affinity, and intercommunion, i.e. the prerequisite of active participation in the sacrament of

⁴ *Dokumenty soborów powszechnych*, ed. A. Baron, H. Pietras SJ, vol. 2, Kraków 2003, p. 290-293; B. Sikorski, *Kanoniczna przeszkoda pokrewieństwa naturalnego w rozwoju historycznym do IV soboru laterańskiego*, Poznań 1959, pp. 27-30, 49, 74-75, 100.

⁵ St. Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, trans. C.I. Cornish, Savage 2017, p. 1.

⁶ *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, ed. Ae. Friedberg, (hereinafter CIC), Graz 1955, vol. 2, X 4.1.30, 31, 32, col. 672.

⁷ Schlesisches Urkundenbuch, (hereinafter SUB), vol. 2, W. Irgang, Köln-Wien 1977, no. 346, cap. 16, 17; W. Góralski, *Statuty synodalne legata Jakuba z Leodium*, "Prawo Kanoniczne", 27/1984, no. 3-4, pp. 149-170.

⁸ *Starodawne prawa polskiego pomniki* (hereinafter SPPP) vol. 1, Z. Helcel, Warszawa- Kraków 1856, pp. 354-355; K. Gołąb, *Biskup Filip z Fermo i jego statuty legackie z 1279 r.*, "Roczniki Historyczne", 26/1960, pp. 255-264.

⁹ The periods of the year in which matrimony could be administered were specified in *Decretum Gratiani*. See. CIC, vol. 1, C.33 q.4.8-10, col.1249 and Raymond of Penyafort, *Summa de poenitentia et matrimonio (cum glossis Joannis de Friburgo)*, Rome 1603, pp. 564-565. The regulations banning the administration sacraments of marriage at specific times of the year were reiterated in the 1408 diocesan statutes of the Archbishop of Gniezno, Mikołaj Kurowski, see J. Sawicki, *Concilia Poloniae*, vol. V: *Synody archidiecezji gnieźnieńskiej i ich statuty*, Warszawa 1950, pp. 264-265; the 1416 diocesan statutes of the Bishop of Przemyśl, Maciej of Sandomierz, see. J. Sawicki, *Concilia Poloniae*, vol. VIII: *Synody diecezji przemyskiej obrządku łacińskiego i ich statuty*, Wrocław 1955, p. 132; the 1445 diocesan statutes of the Bishop of Chelm, Jan Biskupiec, see. J. Sawicki, *Concilia Poloniae*, vol. IV: *Najdawniejsze statuty synodalne diecezji chełmskiej z XV w.*, Lublin 1948, p. 211; and the 1516 synodal statutes of the Bishop of Wrocław, Maciej Drzewiecki, see *Statuta synodalia dioecesis Wladislaviensis et Pomeraniae*, Z. Chodyński, Varsaviae 1890, p. 32.

baptism or confirmation. Finally, the document prohibited men and women from entering into new matrimones on the grounds of protracted absence of their spouse¹⁰.

Passed eleven years later (1331), the synodal statutes of the Bishop of Krakow, Jan Grot emphatically banned clandestine marriages, entered into without reading out the banns, and authorized priests to verify any potential impediments, while also prohibiting them from administering the sacrament in inns and at homes. Priests were instructed to bless matrimones in public, in churches, upon notifying their parishioners of the upcoming marriages¹¹.

The principle of triple banns of marriage was adopted in the 1398 synodal statutes of Płock¹², the 1402 diocesan statutes of the Bishop of Włocławek, Mikołaj Kurowski¹³, and the 1420 statutes of the Bishop of Poznań, Andrzej Łaskarzowic¹⁴. The statutes passed between 1407 and 1411, possibly in 1408 by the Archbishop of Gniezno, Mikołaj Kurowski, offered exemptions from the obligation. While the legislators maintained the principle of triple banns in force, the banns were allowed to be read on three weekdays if fewer than three holidays fell in a given week, essentially shortening the procedure to a single week. Exempt from the triple reading of the banns were Polish nobles, on condition that the ceremony took place in church. Nobles were also allowed to enter into matrimones at homes, *coram populo*, upon prior reading of the banns¹⁵. Clergymen who failed to observe these norms risked being dismissed from their diocese, suspended from their parish, and removed from their office and benefice for a year¹⁶.

The reading of the banns was also ordered in the pastoral section of the compendium issued by the Bishop of Krakow, Wojciech Jastrzębiec (1420). The bishop's ruminations were part of the synodal statutes, which permitted exemptions from the banns of marriage due to the unpopularity of the rule among Polish nobility¹⁷. In article VII, titled *On the sacrament of marriage*, Jastrzębiec concluded that marriage becomes valid upon the utterance of the formula "I take thee as my wife/husband" or "I wish for thee to be my wife/husband", which he believed expressed matrimonial consent. Jastrzębiec emphasized the need to verbalize consent by anyone aside from mutes, given that *sacramentum res sensibilis est*, and as such it requires a clear sign from both spouses. The above utterances, treated as a form of

¹⁰ *Statuta Nankeri episcopi Cracoviensis Ann. MCCCXX*, in: SPPP, vol. IV, U. Heyzmann, Kraków 1875, p. 9.

¹¹ *Statuta Joannis IV. Grot episcopi Cracoviensis Ann. MCCCXXXI*, in: SPPP, vol. IV, p. 43.

¹² B. Ulanowski, *O pracach przygotowawczych do historii prawa kanonicznego w Polsce*, Kraków 1887, pp. 74-75.

¹³ J. Sawicki, *Concilia Poloniae*, vol. V, pp. 28-29, 264.

¹⁴ J. Sawicki, *Concilia Poloniae*, vol. VII: *Synody diecezji poznańskiej i ich statuty*, Poznań 1952, pp. 148, 159.

¹⁵ J. Sawicki, *Concilia Poloniae*, vol. V, pp. 29-31.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 264. These compromise formulas aimed to accommodate the postulates of nobility, passed at the Sejm of Piotrków in October 1406. See B. Ulanowski, *Zjazdy piotrkowskie z 1406 i 1407 r. i ich uchwały*, Kraków 1888, Dissertations of the Faculty of History and Philosophy of the Academy of Arts and Sciences in Krakow, vol. XXI, p. 322ff. The passages on to the triple reading of the banns, included in the statutes of Gniezno, passed by Mikołaj Kurowski in 1408, were reiterated in the diocesan statutes passed by the Bishop of Chełm, Jan Biskupiec, between 1434 and 1440. It was established that the banns were to be announced three times, and the marriages were to be concluded solely in church. Moreover, administering matrimones in the prohibited periods was forbidden, with the exemption of princes. See J. Sawicki, *Concilia Poloniae*, vol. IV, p. 163.

¹⁷ In the Late Middle Ages, the reading of the banns became an especially acute problem, constituting the main bone of contention (along with tithes) between the clergy and the nobles. See A. Krawiec, *Seksualność w średniowiecznej Polsce*, Poznań 2000, pp. 73-74.

a wedding vow, were accompanied by gestures and different forms of celebration. Synodal statutes banned the clergy from participating in wedding feasts due to the profane behavior of the guests¹⁸.

In 1458, the Gniezno Consistory adjudicated on the case of Katarzyna of Grochowiska and Stanisław of Gostyczyna, who upon having the local priest read the banns of marriage twice before the ceremony, exchanged their wedding vows *per verba de presenti* in the presence of the woman's brother, and shook their hands to validate the sacrament. Katarzyna considered the matrimony binding, while Stanisław wished to invalidate his vows on account of failing to recall the entire situation as a result of inebriating himself prior to the ceremony. Conversely, Katarzyna claimed that she had only seen Stanisław drink beer at the wedding reception that followed the espousal¹⁹.

The solemn character of the marriage ceremony was determined by liturgical books: the rituals, which specified the rites celebrated outside of the Mass by regular priests, and the pontificals, which codified the ceremonies held by bishops. The ritual of the Bishop of Wrocław, Henryk I of Wierzba (1302-1319), issued as part of *Ordo benedictionis sponsum et sponsam* specified the order of the celebrations, which began with the consecration of the wedding rings and the blessing of the betrothed with holy water, followed by the priest asking the participants about any known matrimonial impediments. If none such were provided, the priest would ask the groom and the bride (in this order) if they wanted to enter into holy matrimony. The marriage was validated by affirmative answers from both spouses, sealed by a kiss. This was followed by a wedding Mass, concluded by the blessing of the newlyweds, who were shrouded by a veil²⁰.

Similarly, the pontifical of the Bishop of Lwów, Jan Rzeszowski (1414-1436), contained a section indicating the order of the wedding ceremony (*Ordo nuptiarum*): the *ante ecclesiam* ceremony, and the Mass that followed the espousal. At the beginning of the ceremony, the priest would ask if there were no consanguinity impediments between the betrothed, after which he would proceed to ask the bride's guardian if he wished to marry her off to the groom. The priest would then validate the spouses' intentions, asking the husband to pledge respect and fidelity to his wife, and the wife to swear obedience, love, and deference to her husband. Upon positive answers from both spouses and a confirmation from the bride's father as to the material arrangements between the families, the priest blessed the wedding ring with holy water, putting it in the right hand of the groom, who in turn placed it on the middle finger of the bride, uttering the words, "With this ring I marry you, offering you my wealth and adoration". The wedding Mass would usually conclude with the blessing of the wedding cakes, wine, and the newlyweds' bed²¹. The church ceremony was followed by a festive wedding feast, with the provision that the intricate espousal procedure detailed above was provisioned for princes and monarchs.

In 1454, the espousal of King Kazimierz Jagiellończyk with Elżbieta Rakuszanka was combined with the coronation of the latter. On Saturday, February 9, the bride was greeted

¹⁸ B. Wojciechowska, *Małżeństwo w ustawodawstwie synodalnym Kościoła polskiego w późnym średniowieczu*, "Czasopismo Prawno-Historyczne", 67/2015, vol. 1, pp. 21-29.

¹⁹ *Acta capitulorum nec non iudiciorum ecclesiasticorum selecta*, B. Ulanowski, vol. 2, Kraków 1902, no. 550.

²⁰ *Das Rituale des Bischofs Heinrich des Ersten von Breslau*, ed. A. Franz, Freiburg im Br. 1912, pp. 21-23.

²¹ X.Z. Obertyński, *Pontificale arcybiskupa lwowskiego Jana Rzeszowskiego w Bibliotece kapitulnej w Gnieźnie*, Lwów 1930, pp. 92-93.

outside of the city walls by the king himself, accompanied by his mother, Queen Zofia, the archbishops of Gniezno and Lwów, and a number of Polish bishops, princes, high officials, and lords. All of them were lavishly dressed and sat on horses clad with capes shot with gold threads. Despite the falling rain, the future queen “was greeted by processions representing every church and every estate”²². Having shaken hands with Queen Zofia, Elżbieta was invited to join the queen in her coach, and taken to the Wawel Castle, accompanied by the royal trumpeters. Having arrived at the castle, she met the Cardinal of Poland and Bishop of Krakow, Zbigniew Oleśnicki, with whom she prayed and to whose diocese she offered a donation, Elżbieta was escorted to the Royal Palace. Scheduled to take place on the following day (Sunday), the espousal ceremony was nearly postponed on account of a dispute between Cardinal Oleśnicki and the Archbishop of Gniezno, Jan of Sprowa, who argued about the right to administer the sacrament of marriage and conduct the coronation. Customarily, the deed was to be performed by the archbishop. Eventually, it was agreed that the spouses would be blessed by John of Capistrano, who was staying in Krakow at the time, and that the questions to the newlyweds would be asked by Zbigniew Oleśnicki, who was fluent in German. On the other hand, Elżbieta was to be anointed and crowned by the archbishop of Gniezno. Following the ceremonies, the wedding guests spent the next eight days feasting and rejoicing²³.

Another flamboyant wedding was that of Kazimierz Jagiellończyk’s daughter, Jadwiga, with George of Bavaria in 1475, preceded by a ceremonious journey from Krakow to Landshut. A mile away from the Lower Bavarian capital, a carpet was unfolded for the bride, guarded by two rows of ducal soldiers. The groom celebrated Jadwiga’s arrival with an illustrious procession, graced by the presence of Emperor Frederick III, who greeted Jadwiga at the city gates, accompanied by a thousand cavalrymen. The wedding was sealed by a multi-day feast²⁴.

Marriage rites highlighted the momentous and unique moment in the life of an individual and their family, at the same time lending luster to the ceremony. The spousal handshake, the exchange of gifts in the form of wreaths, wedding rings or other gifts, and – above all – the public character of the sacrament, were the vital elements of the rite, provisioned by both secular and canon law.

In the Middle Ages, wedding ceremonies in Poland took on a time-honored ritual form, in which age-old local traditions merged with the more recent Christian influences, in light of which the marriage ceremony was perceived as a sacrament that not only dignified and elevated the rank of the event but also strove to ensure the happiness and prosperity of the newlyweds.

Marriage ceremonies were preceded by a triple public reading of the banns in church. It was required that the ceremony take place in church, in the presence of witnesses. Its main elements included the spousal handshake, the exchange of gifts in the form of wreaths, wedding rings or other gifts, and the utterance of the wedding formula: “I take thee as my husband/wife.”

²² Jan Długosz, *Roczniki czyli Kroniki sławnego Królestwa Polskiego*, book 12, 1445-1461, ed. J. Wyrozumski, Warszawa 2004, p. 201.

²³ *Ibidem*, pp. 202-203.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, book 12, 1462-1480, ed. J. Wyrozumski, Warszawa 2006, pp. 382-383.

Marriage ceremonies in medieval Poland

Summary

Marriage was an important milestone in the lives of two people who decided to establish a family and enter into new family and neighborhood arrangements. In the Middle Ages, wedding ceremonies in Poland took on a time-honored ritual form, in which local traditions merged with the more recent Christian influences. Matrimony was recognized as a sacrament which symbolically emphasized the importance of events and was promised to provide future happiness for the newlyweds. The wedding ceremony was preceded by three public announcements in church. It was stipulated that the ceremony be held in church, in the presence of witnesses. Its main elements included the spousal handshake, the exchange of gifts in the form of wreaths, wedding rings or other gifts, and the utterance of the wedding formula: *I take thee as my husband/wife*.

Keywords: wedding ceremonies, medieval marriage

Note on the Author: dr hab. Beata Wojciechowska is a an associate professor of medieval history at the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce. Her research interests include the history of religion in the Middle Ages, the history of canon law, and medieval medicine.

Translated by Józef Jaskulski