

<http://dx.doi.org/10.16926/em.2025.20.04>

Ewelina MACIĄG-SZCZEPANIK

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8544-9821>

Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa, Poland

e-mail: ewelina.szczepanik@onet.pl

From a 19th-century hymnal. A song about Ewa Turkowa

This is a translation of an article published in this volume:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.16926/em.2025.20.03>

How to cite: E. Maciąg-Szczepanik, *From a 19th-century hymnal. A song about Ewa Turkowa*, "Edukacja Muzyczna" 2025, vol. 20, pp. 87–100, <http://dx.doi.org/10.16926/em.2025.20.04>.

Abstract

The aim of this article is to interpret the meaning of a 19th-century song by Jan Wilhelm Alexius, published in *Pieśni księga czyli kancyonał gdański...* (1803) [Songbook or Gdańsk Hymnal... (1803)], as a work of religious poetry and as a cultural text.

The major part of the article is devoted to discussing the connections between Alexius' song and the tradition of the Old and New Testaments, as well as the poetry and prose of 15th- and 16th-century authors.

Keywords: religious song, religious poetry, hymnal, Old Testament, New Testament, Psalms of David

The Song for a Certain Unfortunate Woman, Ewa Turkowa, née Cybulszczanka from Burdąg in the Jedwabno parish, who was executed with a sword on May 27, 1791, for poisoning her husband, was first published in the form of

Date of submission: 15.12.2024

Review 1 sent/received: 4.04.2025/8.05.2025

Review 2 sent/received: 4.04.2025/8.04.2025

Date of acceptance: 7.09.2025

a leaflet by its author, Jan Wilhelm Alexius, who had served as cantor in the Evangelical parish in Nidzica since 1757. Burdąg, the place of residence of Ewa Turkowa, was subject to the Nidzica manorial office, where the Judicial Commission competent for that district was also based.¹ It is therefore very likely that the trial of the woman accused of murdering her husband took place in Nidzica and that the local Polish preacher, Deacon Jan Wilhelm Alexius, prepared the convicted woman for death. However, the author of the song about Ewa Turkowa was not only an Evangelical clergyman and rector of the parish school in Nidzica, but also one of the first authors to create "secular works in Polish for the Masurian people."²

Published in 1791 or 1792 in Königsberg, the leaflet with the lyrics of the song has not survived to our times. A few years later, it was reprinted by Krzysztof Celestyn Mrongowiusz in *Pieśnioksiąg...*³ (1803), and then appeared in the Königsberg *Nowy pieśnioksiąg...*⁴ [New Songbook... Songs from the Prussian Province, 1840], where the story of the husband-killer was titled *Lament of the poor sinner Ewa Turkowa from Burdąg in the parish of Jedwabno, who was executed with a sword on May 27, 1791, for poisoning her husband*. Mrongowiusz introduced numerous corrections in this edition, and rewrote the thirteenth and fourteenth verses of the song.

In 1848, Gustaw Gizewiusz compiled both of Mrongowiusz's versions and published the song about Ewa Turkowa together with Claude Joseph Dorat's text *Letter from Bernawet to his friend Truman, written from prison. The original English text was translated from French by the late Jakób Jasiński*. In this version, the song about the husband-killer is entitled *Gorzkie żale ubogiej grzesznicy Ewy Turkowej rodzonej Cybulszczanki z Burdąga w jedwabieńskiej parafii, która z przyczyny otrucia własnego małżonka mieczem stracona została na dniu 27-go maja roku 1791* [The bitter lamentations of the poor sinner Ewa Turkowa, born Cybulszczanka from Burdąg in the parish of Jedwabno, who was executed by sword on May 27, 1791, for poisoning her own husband].⁵

¹ G. Leyding, *Z dawnych wieków*, [in:] *Szczytno. Z dziejów miasta i powiatu*, ed. J. Jałoszyński, Olsztyn 1962, pp. 141–142, 221.

² T. Oracki, *Słownik biograficzny Warmii, Prus Książęcych i Ziemi Malborskiej od połowy XV w. do końca XVIII w.*, vol. 1, Wydawnictwo Pojezierze, Olsztyn 1984, p. 5.

³ *Pieśnioksiąg czyli kancynał gdański zamykający w sobie treść i wybór pieśni nabożnych, z większej części starych, tak teraz wyporządkowany, że może obok prusko-polskiego, tudzież łącznie z nowym pruskim pieśnioksięgiem przy nabożeństwie być używany, oraz modlitwami, kolektami i dogodnemi trzema rejestrami opatrzoney*, Gdańsk 1803, pp. 683–684.

⁴ *Nowy pieśnioksiąg czyli kancynał prusko-polski zamykający w sobie treść i wybór pieśni nabożnych starych i nowych oraz modlitwami, kolektami i trzema rejestrami opatrzoney*, Królewiec 1840, pp. 425–427.

⁵ *Gorzkie żale ubogiej grzesznicy Ewy Turkowej, rodzonej Cybulszczanki z Burdąga w jedwabieńskiej parafii, która z przyczyny otrucia własnego małżonka mieczem stracona została na dniu*

The first, original title includes a specific genre designation for the work – song. At the time Alexius was writing, this genre was still closely associated with music and was defined as a verse form intended for singing,⁶ with emphasis placed on the connection between poetry and music. Alexius' work, therefore, seems to be a classic example of the genre in terms of its structure. It is divided into twenty-seven four-line stanzas written in minor sapphic verse, is distinctly rhythmic, contains syntactic parallelisms and includes the author's instructions for performance (Note: *Boże moy, racz się*⁷).

However, over time, the additional, expiatory function of Alexius' song began to be emphasized more. The text, read or sung together with biblical quotations indicated in the text by the author, could stimulate personal acts of penance and inspire reflection on the nature of sin and redemption. *Lament of a poor sinner...* or *Bitter lamentations of a poor sinner...* replaced the original version of the title to emphasize the main theme of the work, its usefulness and practicality.

The use of the term "lament" directs the reader's attention to the main character, who, although she addresses God directly in her monologue, also seeks the reader's sympathy. Her statement can be treated as an expression of despair over her own moral defeat.⁸ An empathetic reader moved by the woman's story should remind the lesson that appears in the final part of the work: "Let everyone, seeing what is happening, resist sin in time!"⁹ The emotional, expressive nature of the speaker's words should also prompt the reader to reflect on human nature, sin, penance, and divine mercy.

On the other hand, the expression "bitter regrets" used in the final version of the title emphasizes the contemplative, meditative qualities of Alexius' song and the universality of the protagonist's story. On the one hand, the suffering of the speaker comes to the fore – her sin, remorse, shame, despair, sadness, regret, enormous fear of condemnation and rejection, and anxiety about the approaching execution. On the other hand, however, the narrator reminds the reader of the Passion of Jesus Christ, his bloody sacrifice ("By your bloody sacrifice / Intercede for me!"¹⁰), thanks to which even the greatest sinner can hope for forgiveness. The song is therefore intended to encourage meditation on the belief, which is very important in Lutheranism, that man gains salvation through the Passion and Sacrifice of Christ, and not through his own deeds.

27 maja 1791 roku, [in:] *Karnawał dziadowski. Pieśni wędrownych śpiewaków (XIX–XX w.)*, ed. S. Nyrkowski, Warszawa 1977, pp. 42–44.

⁶ *Pieśń (Song)*, [in:] *Słownik terminów literackich*, ed. J. Sławiński, Wrocław 1976, p. 304.

⁷ *Gorzkie żale ubogiej grzesznicy...*, p. 42.

⁸ *Lament*, [in:] *Słownik terminów literackich*, ed. J. Sławiński, Wrocław 1976, p. 210.

⁹ *Gorzkie żale ubogiej grzesznicy...*, vv. 99–100.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, vv. 107–108.

The protagonist, the narrator of the song, is a real person, named by her first and last name, a murderer who was executed in the market square in Nidzica on May 27, 1791. The poisoner, who was sentenced to be beheaded, came from the town of Burdąg, which at the end of the 18th century was within the borders of the Kingdom of Prussia.

Ewa Turkowa's monologue begins with a direct address to God, to whom the protagonist directs almost her entire speech. Other recipients she addresses are listeners/readers ("Do not curse me for frightening you. Forgive me, all whom I have scandalized"¹¹), her mother ("My heart is still fainting, dear mother..."¹²) and Jesus Christ ("You, my Jesus, accepted sinners..."¹³). The circumstances of the statement and the lyrical situation are revealed to the reader in two lines of the eleventh stanza, which indicate that the protagonist of the song has been sentenced to be beheaded and that the sentence will be carried out at any moment ("Ah, bloody torments will rightly come upon me; / I can already see the executioner's sword flashing"¹⁴).

Ewa Turkowa's situation was the result of earlier events, which the narrator describes succinctly. All that is known is that the woman poisoned her own husband and was sentenced to death by beheading for this act. The reasons for the murder cannot be deduced from the content of the song, but the inhabitants of Nidzica, who stage the execution of Ewa Turkowa every year in the town square¹⁵, pass on a more detailed version of the story of her crime. The motive for the murder committed by the young woman was revenge on her unfaithful husband and his affair with the miller's daughter.¹⁶ Ewa Turkowa confessed to poisoning her husband with a plant added to his food. Perhaps it was the root of spotted hemlock, which resembles parsley (also carrot or parsnip) and paralyzes the muscles and respiratory center.¹⁷ Purchased from one of the herbalists living in the area ("Almost every village has one or more people, usually disabled or with conspicuous physical defects, whom the local population turns to for help [...]. Witches or wizards are capable of doing the worst to people with an evil glance, a breath, a touch, a sprinkling, or by giving them some food"¹⁸), thrown into a dish from which the spouses ate together, caused the rapid death of Tomasz Turek.

¹¹ Ibidem, vv. 93–94.

¹² Ibidem, vv. 89.

¹³ Ibidem, vv. 105.

¹⁴ Ibidem, vv. 41–42.

¹⁵ Source: <http://nidzica.wm.pl/600669,Scieto-glowne-Ewie-Turkowej.html> [accessed 10.06.2024].

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ B. Broda, J. Mowszowicz, *Przewodnik do oznaczania roślin leczniczych, trujących i użytkowych*, Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, Warszawa 1985, p. 475.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 407.

The manner in which Turkowa caused her husband's death is emphasized several times in the song. The narrator recognizes the particular cruelty and perfidy of her actions, knowing that she abused the trust that the other person had placed in her. The bond between people based on mutual oaths, sharing a table and a bed, seems to be a special bond, yet under the influence of "evil desires," it is abused and broken. The exceptional baseness of the act is emphasized in a separate verse – an overt bandit seems less deserving of condemnation than the one who uses poison ("Everyone protects themselves from an overt bandit, [...] But who can protect themselves from such a hidden death by poisoning?"¹⁹).

For centuries, poisoning was considered a particularly vile act and was associated primarily with the female domain. The stereotype of the female assassin was mainly influenced by Judeo-Christian tradition and the ancient cultures of Greece and Rome. Theologians claimed that women, due to the way they were created, were not equal to men, but rather a defective version of them, and therefore did not have such a strong moral backbone. On the other hand, the patriarchal culture of antiquity, especially its mythology, had a strong influence on the creation of associations between femininity and the concept of evil.²⁰ It was also believed that the physically weaker, naturally cowardly female sex was incapable of committing murder in any other way than through assassination. Women were therefore perceived as more inclined to cross moral boundaries, commit crimes, be devious and deceitful, unable to control their urges and impulses, and animalistic.

Therefore, an important element of the lyrical narrator's statement is to emphasize the manner and circumstances in which the murder took place. Once again, the particular meanness and perfidy of the poisoner, who takes the life of an unsuspecting and defenseless man ("To him, [...] With whom I was to eat from the same pot, / She gave poison!"²¹).

By committing murder, the speaker excludes herself from the human community, which includes beings endowed with reason, members of the Christian community, and those with a conscience. The song contains verses emphasizing the brutality of Turkowa's act ("That is, even in the world, a fierce forest animal, / Causes such mortal fear to its own kind"²²), the monstrosity and perversity of her crime. The human and animal worlds seem to be places that the speaker consciously does not want to defile with her presence. As part of her repentance and penance, the protagonist of the song excludes herself from an area to which only those beings who act in accordance with divine commandments and con-

¹⁹ *Gorzkie żale ubogiej grzesznicy...*, vv. 37–40.

²⁰ M. Bogucka, *Gorsza pięć. Kobieta w dziejach Europy od antyku po wiek XXI*, Wydawnictwo Trio, Warszawa 2005, pp. 13–28.

²¹ *Gorzkie żale ubogiej grzesznicy...*, vv. 13–16.

²² *Ibidem*, vv. 17–18.

science have a symbolic right to belong. She says of herself: "[I] am unworthy that the earth carries me [...]"²³

The song's protagonist also attempts to answer the question of why she took the life of her own husband ("What did I allow into my heart? / That I murdered my husband, to whom I gave my hand in marriage?"²⁴). Although the narrator does not mention the direct motive, there are passages in the work that allow us to infer the indirect reasons for the crime. The moral theme is kept to a minimum, as the author's intention was not so much to inform about the event itself and its circumstances, but to use the events as a backdrop for statements with an educational, didactic, and meditative function.

The protagonist of the song does not explain her act as madness, but as a momentary lapse of reason (affect?), which probably prevented her from properly assessing the situation in accordance with Christian values ("I was blinded, having my own mind"²⁵). She herself seems unable to believe that she was capable of committing such a terrible crime, violating God's commandments and her own conscience.

She also wonders ("And what put this evil thought in my heart?"²⁶) how the monstrous thought of murder sprouted in her mind. She comes to the conclusion that the cause was succumbing to evil desires and disregarding her marriage vows ("That I listened to evil desires, / That I did not take my vows seriously, / That I violated him"²⁷). In the twenty-fifth stanza, she addresses the reader directly, using the story of her fate as an example: "Let everyone resist sin, seeing what happens!"²⁸.

Alexius' song can be divided into two parts in terms of imagery. The first part is dominated by a mood of despair and horror. God is portrayed as a just Judge who severely punishes sinners ("I know that with You, the ungodly are ready / For severe judgment"²⁹). The protagonist of the song seems to be without hope ("It seems to me, Lord, that you are not moved at all, / No longer merciful to me, the wicked"³⁰), because she understands how grave her sin is ("For my sin, inhuman and grave, / There is no equal"³¹). The narrator mentions the blood that has been shed and to which the Creator cannot remain indifferent. This is a reference to the words God addresses to Cain in the *Book of Genesis*: "The voice of

²³ Ibidem, v. 7.

²⁴ Ibidem, vv. 10–12.

²⁵ Ibidem, vv. 21.

²⁶ Ibidem, vv. 25.

²⁷ Ibidem, vv. 26–28.

²⁸ Ibidem, vv. 99.

²⁹ Ibidem, vv. 3–4.

³⁰ Ibidem, vv. 33–34.

³¹ Ibidem, vv. 35–36.

your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground" (Genesis 4:10). The eighth stanza ends with a meaningful statement – "And the voice of his blood [...] [of the murdered] suffocates me."³² The fear and horror that arise at the thought of the crime committed are even manifested through somatic reactions – they prevent the murderer from catching her breath.

Although Turkowa has come to terms with her fate ("Ah, bloody torment will rightly come upon me!"³³), she feels terror at the thought of her execution ("My heart fears a violent death, / And my young blood fears a terrible execution..."³⁴). Both the moment of death itself and the idea of what will happen to her corpse after the sentence is carried out fill her with dread. The thirteenth stanza contains a gruesome description of an image conjured up by Turkowa's fevered imagination – in this terrifying vision, the body after execution, woven into the gallows, torn apart and devoured by ravens, is put on public display.

The first part of the work culminates in references to passages *from the Apocalypse* of St. John, which paint a picture of the damned (husband killers) suffering in a lake of fire and brimstone. There is no hope for them, their torment and punishment will be endless. This passage from the *Revelation* of St. John (Rev. 21:8)³⁵ is quoted almost verbatim in the song. It is supplemented by verses in which the evangelist lists those who will not be allowed to enter the New Jerusalem ("Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood"³⁶), whose rejection and exclusion is complete and irrevocable, affecting both the physical and spiritual dimensions of their existence.

On the one hand, Turkowa is convinced of her guilt and inevitable condemnation („I deserve it, for my guilt is bloody..."³⁷), but on the other hand, she begins the next part of her monologue by quoting a rather optimistic passage from the Gospel of St. Matthew. The parable to which Alexius refers tells of Jesus' encounter with a Canaanite woman (Canaanite here means a pagan or, in the sense of nationality, a Phoenician³⁸), who begs him to heal her possessed daughter. Christ initially dismisses her, explaining that he was sent to save the people of Israel first and foremost and that "it is not right to take the children's bread

³² Ibidem, vv. 31–32.

³³ Ibidem, v. 41.

³⁴ Ibidem, vv. 45–46.

³⁵ "And as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death," *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, National Council of Churches, New York 1989, Rev. 21:8.

³⁶ Rev. 22:15.

³⁷ *Gorzkie żale ubogiej grzesznicy...*, p. 61.

³⁸ A. Paciorek, *Uniwersalizm zbawczy w Mateuszowej perykopie o kananejskiej kobiecie (15,21–28)*, "Verbum Vitae" 2006, no. 10, p. 101.

and throw it to the dogs" (Mt 15:26). However, the woman does not give up and paraphrases the words of the song: "Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (Mt 15:27). In response, Jesus says: "Woman, your faith is great; let it be done for you as you wish" (Mt 15:28). The passage conveys an important message to the reader – the perseverance of the suppliant and, above all, their faith are important.

The second part of the monologue, which begins in this way, seems to convey an encouraging message. The grim image of a just and ruthless judge takes on a new dimension. The seventeenth stanza begins with rhetorical questions: "But who, O God, is equal to you in mercy?! / Who is so abundant in forgiving sins?"³⁹. In the following verses, the speaker describes the Creator as "in inexhaustible grace"⁴⁰ and praises His mercy and kindness. She praises the power of the divine word, which has the power to forgive the gravest sins ("Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool").⁴¹

Another of the "disobedient children," the protagonist of Jan Kochanowski's *Treny* (*Lamentations*), speaks to the Creator in a similar tone. This narrator also undergoes a transformation. First, however, he tries to rationalize the suffering after the death of his child, seeking an answer to the question of where innocent evil comes from in the world (the case of Job, lament XVII – "The Lord's hand has touched me"⁴²). Ultimately, deprived of all hope, he surrenders himself into God's hands (Elegy XVII "For I have lost all hope / That my reason might save me, / God alone can stop this"⁴³) – this is the only and last path left to him. Elegy XVIII shows a new side of the protagonist – he is a humble suppliant, begging for mercy from his stern Father, placing his hope in His infinite mercy ("My transgressions are great before You, / But Your mercy / Surpasses all *anger*"⁴⁴).

In the nineteenth verse, the protagonist of the song recalls the figure of the Israeli ruler, David, who "defiled his heart with adultery / And stained his hands with murder"⁴⁵ (the king had an affair with the married Bathsheba and then tricked her husband, Uriah the Hittite, into his death⁴⁶). God clearly condemned David's adultery and murder, but because the king of Israel understood his sin, took responsibility for the murder he had committed, and accepted punishment, his sins were forgiven. The reference to this story brings hope to the "poor sin-

³⁹ *Gorzkie żale...*, vv. 65–66.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, vv. 67.

⁴¹ Isa. 1:18.

⁴² J. Kochanowski, *Tren XVII*, [in:] *idem, Treny*, ed. J. Pelc, Wrocław 1979, p. 34, v. 1.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 37, vv. 50–52.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 39, vv. 25–27.

⁴⁵ *Gorzkie żale ubogiej grzesznicy...*, vv. 73–74.

⁴⁶ 2 Sam. 11:1–27.

ner" and to all listeners – those who sincerely repent and humbly do penance can count on God's inexhaustible mercy.

According to the author's instructions, this part of the song is supplemented by reading Psalm LI (*Have mercy on me, oh God*), more specifically verse 16, which contains the request: "Deliver me from bloodshed, oh God, my Savior".⁴⁷ In his *Prison Meditations*, Giacomo Savonarola interprets this verse as a plea for deliverance from sin, a request for mercy. Through the power of divine mercy, every sinner can be saved. The Florentine preacher also emphasizes that only those who place their hope in God can receive this grace.⁴⁸

The song ends with a heartfelt and poignant plea to God to remove the curse from the murderer's soul and "close hell,"⁴⁹ as well as a direct appeal to Jesus, in which the protagonist invokes the cleansing power of His blood ("And I said to him, 'Lord, you know. And he said to me, 'These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb'"⁵⁰). Turkowa also addresses her own mother, expressing regret that she contributed to her suffering. Ultimately, the addressees of her words are also all those whom the protagonist of the song frightened and scandalized with her actions. In the face of imminent death, she asks them for forgiveness and intercession, for prayers to God on her behalf ("Ask God not to punish me in His wrath, / to remember me with mercy"⁵¹).

The two final verses of the song are a dramatic summary of the situation of a woman condemned to a cruel death, who, facing imminent death, desperately begs: "But I cry out, I scream, until my last breath: / Do not reject me, Lord!"⁵². The song ends with a hopeful appeal to Christ – "Intercede for me"⁵³ and a reference to His saving sacrifice.

It seems that Alexius was directly inspired by Lutheran songs for repentant sinners and convicts included in hymnals – the Nidzica preacher refers to them in form and content. In the *Newly Published Prussian Hymnbook...*,⁵⁴ there is

⁴⁷ Ps. 51:16.

⁴⁸ G. Savonarola, *Komentarz do Psalmu 51 (Zmiłuj się nade mną, Boże)*, [in:] idem, *Medytacje więzienne. Komentarze do Psalmów 51 i 31*, trans. W. Olszaniec, Wydawnictwo Marek Derewiecki, Kęty 2010, p. 40.

⁴⁹ *Gorzkie żale ubogiej grzesznicy...*, v. 84.

⁵⁰ Rev. 7:14.

⁵¹ *Gorzkie żale ubogiej grzesznicy...*, vv. 95–96.

⁵² Ibidem, vv. 103–104.

⁵³ Ibidem, v. 108.

⁵⁴ *Nowo wydany kancyonat pruski zawierający w sobie wybór pieśni starych i nowych, w ziemi pruskiej i brandenburskiej zwyczajnych, z sentencją albo wierszem Pisma Świętego nad każdą pieśnią, z gorliwymi modlitwami kościelnymi pospolitymi i osobliwymi, wszystkim w ogóle słuszczymi, a oraz też z potrzebnymi rejestrami i przedmową nauczającą, jakim sposobem tego kancyonatu każdy ku zbudowaniu swemu zażywać ma*, Królewiec 1744.

a piece entitled *Song of a man sentenced to death or another great sinner*.⁵⁵ This composition, with the incipit *Dragon of my heart, fearful conscience...* dates from the 17th century⁵⁶ and is a lyrical confession of a man who "bled his brother's blood onto the earth."⁵⁷ The lyrics of the song do not reveal the details of the crimes committed; the subject of reflection is primarily despair and remorse caused by a "fearful conscience"⁵⁸ compared to a dragon.

Unhappy and overwhelmed by the enormity of his sins, the sinner describes himself as a descendant of Cain. To emphasize his own weakness and insignificance, he places himself in the same category as those who could not escape the flood in Noah's ark – "what am I? One of those who did not enter the ship of the drowned."⁵⁹ He compares himself to Ham, cursed by his father, to a stone from the Tower of Babel, and also confesses: "I know the streets and markets of Sodom, I have visited them all and the houses of Gomorrah."⁶⁰ The mortally terrified sinner realizes that at the moment of death he may not be as lucky as one of the thieves crucified with Christ. He fears that he will find himself before the throne of the terrible God completely unprepared, trapped by Satan like an animal during a hunt, at a moment when it will be too late to repent for his sins.

The penitent asks himself why he does not abandon once and for all the "thickets of unbridled anger,"⁶¹ why he remains "in the dangerous forest of transgressions"⁶² – after all, God's mercy and grace are greater than even the most serious sins. Lamentation, weeping, and shame accompany the memory of sins. The sad soul of a great sinner compares itself to the evangelical tax collector, does not dare to raise its eyes to God, and begs for mercy. The sinner realizes that no one is able to face such a severe and just judgment ("Everyone will cease if you take account of his debauchery"⁶³), so he begs for mercy. Bound by addictions, despite his fear and awareness of his mistakes, he is unable to escape the prison of sin on his own. His only salvation is Jesus, whom he begs to "lead him out of the pitiful bonds"⁶⁴ of sin.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, pp. 866–867.

⁵⁶ *Doskonały kancjonał polski zawierający w sobie pieśni, hymny y psalmy krześciańskie z toruńskich, gdańskich, krolewieckich starszych y nowszych kancjonałów zebrane y częścią poprawione, z przydatkiem świeżo przetłumaczonych piosneczek, także katechizmu y modlitew s., nawet y rejestrów potrzebnych Bogu w Trojcy S. Jedynemu na chwałę, a Kościołowi prawowiernemu na zbudowanie*, Brzeg 1673, pp. 1022–1029.

⁵⁷ *Nowo wydany kancjonał pruski...*, v. 6.

⁵⁸ Ibidem, v. 1.

⁵⁹ Ibidem, vv. 7–8.

⁶⁰ Ibidem, vv. 11–12.

⁶¹ Ibidem, v. 31.

⁶² Ibidem, vv. 33–34.

⁶³ Ibidem, vv. 53–54.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, v. 62.

However, doubts arise – what if repentance and penance are a futile effort, and the just God has already turned away from the disgusting human being "whose soul is completely disfigured by the leprosy of sin"?⁶⁵ The sinful soul is compared here to the prophetess Miriam, sister of Aaron and Moses, marked by Yahweh with leprosy (Num. 12:1–16). The unworthy, stigmatized penitent has nowhere to go ("I cannot look upon the holy place, for I am not worthy, I am a cursed sinner"⁶⁶). The only place where he can seek salvation is Golgotha. The blood of Christ shed there is a panacea for the soul. Jesus' sacrifice is also a model to follow and a signal to repent and improve, a hope for intercession and mercy.

Both songs combine a narrative theme with a religious one – the individual story is woven into a tale of suffering, terror, remorse, and repentance. References to the Old and New Testaments come to the fore. However, the anonymous sinner is more inclined to use examples of damned characters, and his statement is darker and more pessimistic than Ewa Turkowa's monologue. Nevertheless, both works express an idea that is essential to Lutheranism, namely that it is not deeds but the grace of faith that is the key to salvation or damnation.

Both songs also emphasize the infinity of divine mercy, and if we go back to the end of the 15th century, similar themes can be found in the works of Girolamo Savonarola – a Florentine preacher, Dominican friar, and one of the precursors of the Reformation movements who lived in the second half of the 15th century.

In the last decade of the 15th century, Florence became a republic, the Medici were deprived of power, and Charles VIII invaded Italy. From the content of Savonarola's sermons, it is clear that he wanted to reform the Church. He also hoped that the French monarch, an opponent of Pope Alexander VI, would support him in these efforts. It is also a fact that the preacher was a supporter and defender of the republican order (*Treatise on the Constitution and Manner of Government in the City of Florence*⁶⁷), and for a short time he was the head of the city and officially represented it.

His openly declared support for Charles VIII (the Dominican called him "the second Cyrus" in his sermons⁶⁸) influenced the monk's future. Pope Alexander VI of the Borgia family finally banned him from preaching in 1496. Less than two years later, Savonarola was imprisoned, tortured, and then declared a heretic and schismatic (his sermons on the *Book of Exodus*, delivered despite the ban on public speaking, had anti-papal overtones). The death sentence was carried

⁶⁵ Ibidem, vv. 71–72.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, vv. 73–74.

⁶⁷ A. Ostrowski, *Savonarola*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1976, p. 118.

⁶⁸ A. Ostrowski, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

out by hanging, the body was burned, and the ashes were thrown into the Arno River so that no relics of the preacher would remain.

However, while in prison between April and May 1498, Savonarola managed to write *Commentaries on Psalms 51 and 31*,⁶⁹ also known as *Prison Meditations*. The texts were made available to the public in manuscript form a few days after their creation, and were then published in print in the original Latin. Spanish, French, English, and German translations quickly appeared – the commentaries were a huge literary success, read, appreciated, and discussed among the greatest intellectuals of their time.⁷⁰

For a proper understanding of the commentaries, it is necessary to remember that they were written by a man who knew that the trial against him would end in a death sentence. They can therefore be seen as a way of preparing for his departure from the temporal world, as well as an attempt to come to terms with his own life and implore divine forgiveness.

The monk could not be accompanied by his brothers, he could not expect their support, he was not granted the grace of a good death – “[...] everyone should take care, to secure for themselves before death a relative or a suitable friend, trustworthy and pious, who would faithfully assist them in their agony.”⁷¹

According to the teachings derived from the lives of saints, the path to the Kingdom of Heaven was opened primarily by good deeds performed during one's lifetime (“He who always keeps in mind the ultimate end of life cares greatly for good deeds”⁷²). Savonarola rejects this point of view. He considers himself a sinner (“I dare not raise my eyes to heaven, for I have sinned greatly against it. I find no refuge on earth, for I have been a scandal to it”⁷³). In the face of doubt and fear, he wants to believe that God will judge him not by his deeds, but by the measure of infinite mercy (“God is merciful; my Savior is compassionate”⁷⁴). The same thought is expressed by the narrator of the *Song of a Man Condemned to Death...* (“Your mercy is indeed greater than all my grave sins”⁷⁵). A similar reflection appears in the work about Ewa Turkowa – “But who, God, is equal to you in mercy? / Who is so abundant in forgiving sins? / You are truly inexhaustible in grace [...]”⁷⁶ Reading each of these texts allows sensitive read-

⁶⁹ G. Savonarola, *Prison Meditations. Commentaries on Psalms 51 and 53*, trans. Wł. Olszaniec, Kęty 2010.

⁷⁰ L. Lazzerini, *Wstęp*, [in:] G. Savonarola, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁷¹ *Speculum artis bene moriendi* [...], Köln 1495, [in:] *Trzy traktaty o sztuce umierania*, trans. and ed. M. Włodarski, Kraków 2015, p. 194.

⁷² *Ars Moriendi ex variis scripturarum sententiis collecta cum figuris* [...], Leipzig 1497/1498, [in:] *Trzy traktaty o sztuce umierania*, trans. and ed. M. Włodarski, Kraków 2015, p. 72.

⁷³ G. Savonarola, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

⁷⁵ *Nowo wydany kancjonał pruski...*, vv. 39–40.

⁷⁶ *Gorzkie żale ubogiej grzesznicy...*, vv. 64–65.

ers to empathize with the characters and experience a whole range of emotions oscillating between despair and trust. Perhaps the words of a Florentine monk describe it best: "[...] for my soul wavers between hope and fear, and I lose hope out of fear of the sins I see in myself, and then I rise up in hope of Your mercy."⁷⁷

References

Printed Sources

Biblia Tysiąclecia. Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu, 5th ed., Pallottinum, Poznań 2003.

Doskonały kancjonał polski zawierający w sobie pieśni, hymny y psalmy krześcijańskie z toruńskich, gdańskich, krolewiewskich starszych y nowszych kancjonałów zebrane y częścią poprawione, z przydatkiem świeżo przetłumaczonych piosneczek, także katechizmu y modlitew, nawet y rejestrów potrzebnych Bogu w Trojcy Świętej Jedyńemu na chwałę, a Kościołowi prawowier-nemu na zbudowanie, Brzeg 1673.

Nowo wydany kancjonał pruski zawierający w sobie wybór pieśni starych i nowych, w ziemi pruskiej i brandenburskiej zwyczajnych, z sentencją albo wierszem Pisma Świętego nad każdą pieśnią, z gorliwymi modlitwami kościelnymi pospolitymi i osobliwymi, wszystkim w ogóle służącymi, a oraz też z potrzebnymi rejestrami i przedmową nauczającą, jakim sposobem tego kancjonału każdy ku zbudowaniu swemu zażywać ma, Królewiec 1744.

Nowy pieśnioksiąż czyli kancjonał prusko-polski zamykający w sobie treść i wybór pieśni nabożnych starych i nowych oraz modlitwami, kolektami i trzema rejestrami opatrzoney, Królewiec 1840.

Pieśnioksiąż czyli kancjonał gdański zamykający w sobie treść i wybór pieśni nabożnych, z większej części starych, tak teraz wyporzędzony, że może obok prusko-polskiego, tudzież łącznie z nowym pruskim pieśnioksięgiem przy nabożeństwie być używany, oraz modlitwami, kolektami i dogodnymi trzema rejestrami opatrzoney, Gdańsk 1803.

Literary and Religious Sources (Editions and Commentaries)

Karnawał dziadowski. Pieśni wędrownych śpiewaków (19th–20th centuries), ed. S. Nyrkowski, Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1977.

Kochanowski Jan, *Treny*, ed. J. Pelc, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1979.

Savonarola Girolamo, *Medytacje więzienne. Komentarze do Psalmów 51 i 31*, trans. W. Olszaniec, Wydawnictwo Marek Derewiecki, Kęty 2010.

⁷⁷ G. Savonarola, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

Trzy traktaty o sztuce umierania, trans. and ed. M. Włodarski, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2015.

Scholarly Studies (Monographs and Dictionaries)

Bogucka Maria, *Gorsza płeć. Kobieta w dziejach Europy od antyku po wiek XXI*, Wydawnictwo Trio, Warszawa 2005.

Broda Bolesław, Mowszowicz Jakub, *Przewodnik do oznaczania roślin leczniczych, trujących i użytkowych*, Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, Warszawa 1985.

Oracki Tadeusz, *Słownik biograficzny Warmii, Prus Książęcych i Ziemi Malborskiej od połowy XV w. do końca XVIII w.*, vol. 1, Wydawnictwo Pojezierze, Olsztyn 1984.

Ostrowski Adam, *Savonarola*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1976.
Słownik terminów literackich, ed. J. Sławiński, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1976.

Articles and Chapters in Collective Volumes

Lazzerini Luigi, *Wstęp*, [in:] G. Savonarola, *Medytacje więzienne. Komentarze do Psalmów 51 i 31*, trans. W. Olszaniec, Wydawnictwo Marek Derewiecki, Kęty 2010, pp. 5–16.

Leyding Gustaw, *Z dawnych wieków*, [in:] *Szczytno. Z dziejów miasta i powiatu*, ed. J. Jałoszyński, Wydawnictwo Pojezierze, Olsztyn 1962, pp. 55–174.

Paciorek Antoni, *Uniwersalizm zbawczy w Mateuszowej perykopie o kananejskiej kobiecie (15,21–28)*, "Verbum Vitae" 2006, no. 10, pp. 95–113.

Online Sources

Source: <http://nidzica.wm.pl/600669,Scieto-glowe-Ewie-Turkowej.html> [accessed 04.04.2025].

Z XIX-wiecznego kancjonału. Pieśń o Ewie Turkowej

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest odczytanie sensu XIX-wiecznej pieśni autorstwa Jana Wilhelma Alexiusa, opublikowanej w *Pieśnioksięgu czyli kancyonale gdańskim...* (1803) – jako utworu z zakresu liryki religijnej i jako tekstu kultury.

Najwięcej miejsca poświęcono omówieniu związków pieśni Alexiusa z tradycją Starego i Nowego Testamentu oraz poezją i prozą XV- i XVI-wiecznych autorów.

Słowa kluczowe: pieśń religijna, poezja religijna, kancjonał, Stary Testament, Nowy Testament, Psalm Dawidowe.