

St. Hedwig of Silesia: The Ducal Ideal of a Wife in Light of 15th-century “Sermones de sancta Hedwigis”

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Abstract. A collection of 15th-century Latin sermons for the day of St. Hedwig of Silesia (“Sermones de s. Hedwigis”) constitutes the source material for an analysis of matrimonial role models and the ideal of a wife (uxor) in medieval culture. The collection includes 84 sermons about St. Hedwig, preserved in 45 codices of Silesian provenance. The corpus of sermons on St. Hedwig is supplemented by 61 edited versions of “Vita sanctae Hedwigis” written in 47 manuscripts. The present article includes an analysis of St. Hedwig as a married woman, the ideal of a pious wife avoiding the pleasures of the flesh and observing moral norms in marriage, above all in sexual relations.

Keywords: medieval marriage; St. Hedwig of Silesia; medieval preaching.

Introduction

St. Hedwig of Silesia, aunt of St. Elisabeth of Hungary, was born between 1178 and 1180 to Duke Berthold IV of Andechs (Gottschalk, 1964, Suchoń, 1980, Walter 1982). She was betrothed to the future Duke of Silesia, Henry I the Bearded, whom she married at twelve. She bore him six or seven children, but only two of them: Henry II the Pious and Gertrude, reached adulthood. After the requirements of posterity had been met, Henry agreed to wife’s chaste vocation, and in 1209 the couple took a solemn vow of chastity. From this point onwards, Hedwig resided primarily at a Cistercian nunnery in Trzebnica, which Henry had established in 1202 at Hedwig’s request. Her legend details a vivid admiration for the monastic life and conviction that religious emanate holiness.

Consequently, Hedwig made sure to stay in proximity to the regulars. However, much to the bewilderment of associates, she did not take monastic vows after Henry’s death in

1238. This decision was motivated by the desire to dispose freely of her fortune towards almsgiving and serve the poor, seen as Christ-like figures. The Duchess sparked popular devotion in her lifetime, which became a basis for relatively swift canonization in 1267. Pope Clement IV imposed the obligation of liturgical worship in all German, Polish and Czech dioceses. However, St. Hedwig has vied as a particular patroness of her domain – Silesia.

Although hagiography and the cult of St. Hedwig of Silesia became the subject of a vast number of scholarly works, there are still unexplored source materials that could shed further light on the development of her cult. Texts of sermons, redactions of *Vita* and other preaching materials about St. Hedwig of Silesia have been largely neglected in the studies mentioned above, despite repeatedly formulated research postulates (Manikowska, 1978, Mrozowicz, 1995). Thus, a crucial factor in the construction and actualisation of her image as a saint has been omitted from the analysis. The aim of the present article, based on the doctoral dissertation (Kaczor, 2021), is to partially amend the existing omission.

1. Source material

A collection of 15th-century Latin sermons for the day of St. Hedwig of Silesia constitutes the source material for an analysis of matrimonial role models and the ideal of a wife (*uxor*) in medieval culture. The corpus includes 74 Medieval Latin sermons and 10 prothemes de Sancta Hedwigis contained in 45 manuscripts, mostly of Silesian medieval origin. The corpus of sermons about St. Hedwig of Silesia is supplemented by 61 edited versions of *Vita sanctae Hedvigis* written in 47 manuscripts. The search query was carried out in the University Library in Wrocław (BUWr.), the Chapter Library in Wrocław (BKWr) and the Ossolineum (Boss.).

Previous research of the source materials about St. Hedwig, including sermons, was carried out by Joseph Gottschalk (Gottschalk, 1982, pp. 129–164; Gottschalk, 1964, pp. 120–139; Gottschalk, 1957, pp. 15–35; Gottschalk, 1950, pp. 26–56; Urban, 1973, pp. 247–251), Joseph Klapper (Klapper, Gottschalk, 1969, pp. 272–285; Klapper, 1961, pp. 53–61; Klapper, 1957, pp. 36–43), Halina Manikowska (Manikowska, 1978, pp. 154–171) and Wojciech Mrozowicz (Mrozowicz, 1995, pp. 233–249; Mrozowicz, 2018, pp. 119–135; Mrozowicz, 2017, pp. 37–48; Mrozowicz, 1996, pp. 55–78). Inventory works concerning the legacy of manuscripts resulted in the publication of three abridged Latin versions of *Vita sanctae Hedvigis* on which, for obvious reasons, preaching heavily depended (Klapper, Gottschalk, 1969, pp. 274–282; Klapper, 1961, pp. 54–56; Mrozowicz, 1996, pp. 66–78). Apart from the primary Latin editions, there were also some publications in Old German (*Legenda o św. Jadwidze*, 2000; *Rudolf Wintnauers Übersetzung*, 2003; *Die Legende der heiligen Hedwig*, 2016; Gottschalk, 1969, pp. 233–244; *Die grosse Legende der heiligen Frau Sankt Hedwig*, 1963; Ehlert, 1995, pp. 151–174; Seppelt, 1914, pp. 1–18) and Old Czech as well as translations into German and Polish (Ms. BUWr IV Q 177, in: Ehlert, 1995, pp. 172–174; *Legenda św. Jadwigi*, ed. S. Seelebach, 2006-2010; *Żywot św. Jadwigi z XV w. (Fragmenty)*, 1970, pp. 174–176). Numerous works on St. Hedwig

of Silesia constitute literature that is impressive in size, the image of which is presented through some published bibliographic compilations (Gustaw, 1971, pp. 475–485; Irgang, 2000, pp. 52–61; Skiba, 2002, pp. 129–139; Gottschalk, Schodrok, 1958, pp. 177–180; Schodrok, 1963, pp. 123–124). Various anniversaries, which brought about a number of publications following anniversary symposia and scientific conferences, provided an opportunity to intensify conducted research and studies (*Księga Jadwiżańska; Das Bild der Heiligen Hedwig*, 1996; *Wkład św. Jadwigi Śląskiej w kulturowe dziedzictwo*, 2017; *Studia Salvatoriana*, 2017; *Święta Jadwiga Śląska. Pamięć*, 2018; *Cysterki w dziejach*, 2004).

Unfortunately, apart from some contributions and references included in other works, the studies on preaching legacy were not continued and were not explicitly included in the context of the studies on St. Hedwig. Although sermons form a significant collection, the medieval sermons about St. Hedwig of Silesia have not yet been included and discussed in a separate monograph.

2. Model of a married woman in sermons on St. Hedwig of Silesia

Among the many virtues which, in light of medieval sermons, St. Hedwig of Silesia was blessed with, the model of a married woman seems particularly justified for analytical presentation. She was joined in matrimony to Duke Henry the Bearded of Silesia. The model of family and piety they presented and the cultural patterns of behaviour they set were extolled by preachers as the ideal of Christian marriage and proof of sanctity of the Duchess. In the sermons, she was depicted not only as a wife but also, before getting married, as the ideal of a virgin, and later as a devoted widow, as well as the follower and the Bride of Christ, and the patroness of Silesia and Poland. With her ducal pedigree, St. Hedwig became an authority and a role model for women. The ideal she espoused became credible, worth following – even ennobling those who followed it. The sermons on St. Hedwig of Silesia may have enjoyed limited reception, but they nonetheless remain an interesting document of her cult and, in a broader sense, medieval attitudes towards women. They adhere to the applicable canon of holiness and the religious climate of their time and marriage customs regulated by Christian norms.

So what did 15th-century preachers say about the Saint Duchess as a wife? A Dominican preacher from Wrocław referred to St. Augustine's three goods of marriage, i.e. offspring (*proles*), fidelity (*fides*) and the sacrament (Augustinus, *De bono coniugali*, col. 394), to present St. Hedwig of Silesia as a model for all married women (Ms. BUWr. I O 52, f. 173r–175v). He explained that these goods allowed St. Hedwig to preserve God's grace even though she entered into marriage, the consent of not only souls, but also the union of bodies. The preacher praised the Saint for being able to please her husband without arousing God's anger. It was because her marital life did not lead to achieving pleasure but to the realisation of the mentioned above three goods of marriage. According to the Dominican preacher, this was evidenced by the fact that the Duchess persuaded her husband to take a vow of celibacy after the birth of her children. The presentation of the

exemplary attitude of St. Hedwig ended with a preaching instruction addressed to married women urging them to learn the fear of God from the Saint so that they would engage in sexual acts in order to have children and not for pleasure (Ms. BUWr. I O 52, f. f. 174v).

Medieval thinkers defined the legitimate sexual act as the one that was aimed at reproduction, which allowed the preservation of chastity (*castitas*) in marriage. Although the idea of chastity was closely related to virginity, the two were not identical, and the former could have been applied to every person. The term *castitas coniugalis* referred to marital fidelity and sexual abstinence. Sexual activity, which was performed for the wrong reasons or when such acts were forbidden by the Church, was treated as a kind of fornication (*luxuria, fornicatio*) that posed a threat to the salvation of the spouses. In this context, St. Hedwig was presented as a paragon of chastity in marriage. In *Vita sanctae Hedvigis* the hagiographer meticulously listed periods when there were no sexual relations between the couple (*Vita sanctae Hedvigis*, 1961, pp. 514–516). Similar remarks were also included in sermons on St. Hedwig attributed to different preachers, such as Meffreth and Jan Wetziger. The celebrations in honour of the Duchess became an opportunity to familiarise faithful Christians with the calendar of so-called forbidden time.

In a sermon opening with the verse *Omnis lapis preciosus operimentum eius* (Ezekiel 28:13), Meffreth praised the Dutchess who, despite marrying Duke Henry the Bearded, remained chaste. In support of this statement, the preacher cited the legend of the separation of St. Hedwig from the conjugal bed after a sexual act for a period of six or seven weeks. This attitude was expected from all those who were married ("*discant coniugati ab hanc sancta principe coniugalem castitatem*") as the life of the children was at stake because, according to the preacher, adherence to the rules of marriage would result in glorious offspring. In his statement, Meffreth expressed popular in the Middle Ages opinion that the act of conception was reflected in one's offspring. Adherence to the principles set by the Church governing the choice of time, place and form of procreation was to bring a reward in the form of healthy and God-fearing children. The birth of a child, who in some respects deviated from the norm, was *a posteriori*, evidence that they had been conceived at the wrong time and in an illegal manner (Bracha, 2007, pp. 243–246; Theis, 1976, p. 15; Matwiejczuk, 2007, pp. 55–56; Pac, 2013, pp. 75–81).

Meffreth preached sexual abstinence during fasting and processions ("*tempus processionum et ieiuniorum*") and he explained this command with an appropriate excerpt from canon law (*Decreti secunda pars*, C. 33, qu. 4, c. 5, col. 1248; Brundage, 1987, pp. 239–242). The faithful were to devote this time to prayer, following St. Hedwig, who would leave her husband to pray in silent contemplation. Then, the preacher ordered those he taught to resign from sexual activity during the time of taking Communion and follow the principles of sacramental fasting. Menstruation, premature ejaculation and masturbation made it impossible for the faithful to take Communion. In the case of Easter Communion, sexual chastity was to be observed throughout the entire Lent period. In other cases, abstinence was supposed to last from three to eight days before receiving the Eucharist (Skierska, 2003, pp. 250–257).

The third forbidden period, according to Meffreth, fell on days dedicated to Christ, Mary and the saints. Finally, the periods of pregnancy and postpartum were proscribed. Blood and semen were considered to be impure substances, and mixing them would create poison leading to stillbirths and giving birth to children who were sick, of angry nature, lepers, lunatics and demon-possessed (*Nota de octo*, f. 179ra: “mulieres menstruosas debent vitare maritos, quia ex hoc generantur pueri leprosi, et cum demonibus nascuntur, vel aliquas maculas in corpore habebunt, et erunt lunatici, et iracunde nature, et quandoque in utero matris moriuntur, ergo prohibere debet”; Bracha, 2007, pp. 242–244; Zaremska, 1997, p. 569). The extension of the prohibition to include the postpartum period resulted from the adoption of the provisions of Mosaic Law. Contact with blood and other bodily fluids at the time of childbirth resulted in cultic impurity, which usually lasted about 30 to 40 days. After this time, a rite of liturgical purification (*purificatio*) could be performed (Skierska, 2003, pp. 64–66, 254–255). In his sermon, Meffreth explained that although sexual activity which occurred before the rite of purification was not a mortal sin, husbands should refrain from it; otherwise, they would commit the sin of fornication (Mss. BUWr.: I F 597, t. 2, f. 263vb; I F 651, f. 170va-b; I Q 332, f. 376r: “Quartum est tempus pregnacionis et puerperii dis ad enixe. Attamen dicit Wilhelmus vir cognoscens uxorem suam ante purificacionem non peccat mortaliter. Sed tamen de honestate et consilio debet abstinere, nisi fornicacio timeatur, ut dicit questio, distinccio 5 ad eius”).

The above observation ended Meffreth’s lecture on the calendar of the time during which sexual activity was forbidden in marriage. The restrictions listed did not exhaust the subject of the principles to be observed by the faithful when choosing the time, place and form of procreation. Meffreth felt that the issues raised in the sermon were sufficient for preaching purposes. He was afraid that a longer and more detailed argument might endanger the mental purity of the virgins attending his sermons (Ms. BUWr. I Q 332, f. 376r: “Hic sit tantus predicator hanc materiam populo proponendo ne virginum vulneret castas mentes”).

The forbidden calendar presented by Jan Wetziger in his sermon for the day of St. Hedwig of Silesia was slightly different from the one referred to above. The list presented in it began with an injunction against sexual activity in the times of taking Communion and prayer. Then, the preacher extended it to all holy days, the time of fasting, processions and so-called Days of the Cross, i.e. the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday preceding the Ascension of the Lord (*litanie minores*). The last prohibitions listed in the sermon concerned the periods of postpartum and menstruation (Ms. BUWr I Q 137, f. 364r–364v: “Ideo coniugati christiani debent abstinere primo tempore oracionis et communionis [...] Item diebus sacris [...] Item tempore ieiuniorum et rogacionum [...] Glosa: tempus ablactacionis dicitur tempore post partum, quando mulier nimis habundat in lacte, et nisi extraheretur per puerum, oportet eam infirmari. Ideo per illum textum prohibetur accessus ad menstruatam”). Individual prohibitions were provided with appropriate canons. The preaching lecture on marital chastity ended with a description of the exemplary marital relationship of St. Hedwig and Duke Henry the Bearded. The preacher reported that the Saint had six children, and as soon as she felt she was pregnant, she immediately left her

conjugal bed until the end of postpartum. The couple was to refrain from sexual activity on Sundays, days of Christian celebrations, Lent and Advent. In addition, the Duchess prayed at night and constantly urged her husband to remain in chastity, which sometimes resulted in no sexual activity between them for a period of up to eight weeks. After the birth of six children, the couple took a vow of chastity before the bishop of Wrocław, which they abided by for 30 years. The preacher explained that from that moment on, the Duke, like a convert, would wear a tonsure and a long beard, which earned him his nickname. The Duchess, in her husband's house, lived the life of a nun (Ms. BUWr I Q 137, f. 364v: "Nam tres habuit filios, scilicet: Boleslaum, Conradum, Henricum, et tres filias Agnes, Gerdrude, Zophia. Et postquam sensi me concepisse, mox a lecto mariti contineri usque post puerperium, eciam singulis diebus dominicis, festis, ieiuniorum, in quadragesima, in adventu. Ideo bene dicitur de ea: 'gracia super gratiam' etc. [...] Post sex pueros continenciam voverant in manibus episcopi Wratislaviensis, et post per 30 annos simul in castitate vixerunt. Ex tunc vir eius tonsuram, quasi conversus, et longam barbam detuliret, ideo dictus est Henricus cum barba. Ex post numquam sola cum solo locuta est, sed presentibus pluribus proprie suspicionis hominum. Ex tunc quasi claustralem et honestissimum vitam duxit cum omni sua familia, quasi religiosa in domo viri sui").

Meffreth's sermon on rightful sexual acts within marriage was supplemented with a list of obstacles for those spouses who wished to live chastely. First, there were beautiful clothes, but the preacher primarily criticised women's clothes. He explained that the immodest dress did not apply to St. Hedwig of Silesia as she never wore silk or purple dresses. Thus, the Duchess voluntarily rejected her sign of wealth and class. Then, Meffreth pointed out that her example should not be treated as an order for women to give up all their fancy dresses. Instead, he instructed them to dress according to the class they belonged to and follow prevailing customs. Finally, he warned them against arousing desire through clothes during fasting and the so-called holy days (Ms. BUWr.: I F 597, vol. 2, f. 264ra; I F 651, f. 170vb; I Q 332, f. 376r: "Et est notandum: multa sunt, que impediunt castitatem. Primum vestis pulchra, nam venerabilis Bohecius in libri De disciplina scholarum dicit: 'In ornatu vestum unam consistere speciem incontencie'. Propter quod beata Hedwigis licet esset iuvenecula numquam tamen usa est purpureis, vel eciam sericeis vestimentis, nec tamen hoc ideo dico ne mulieres se ornaret pulchris vestimentis, sed post se quelibet pro statu suo se ornare, dum non sit contra consuetudinem aut ex inordinato affectu, ut dicit sanctus Thomas 2 2 questio CLXIX. Sed propterea dixi consulendo ne exornatu allicient concupiscencias virorum in diebus ieiuniorum et festorum"). Meffreth presented a moderate position, which, paradoxically, stood out against the preacher's admonitions on the issue of dress cited in the subject literature (Bracha, 2007, pp. 349–352; Brückner, 1896, p. 2). The above discourse ensured Meffreth safeguarded the established social order in which dress was an important referent of identity. Moderately praising the Duchess, the preacher did not urge the faithful to take a literal example of her. This only shows that Hedwig's asceticism, while arousing opposition at her court, also continued to provoke scepticism in the 15th century. The fact that Meffreth's sermon was to serve as a model for other preachers suggests that this approach to the subject was not exceptional at that time.

The second threat to a life of chastity was, according to the preacher, a “delicate” bed. Referring to a legend, the preacher explained that St. Hedwig never lay in a bed that was made for her and that would suit her status. The preacher stated that the Duchess was to remain clothed while resting in bed and that she would put her head on a bare footrest on the said bed (Ms. BUWr. I Q 332: “Quia dicit legenda, quamvis ei lectus pro dignitate sua pararetur, numquam tamen in illo iacuit, sed ante lectum vestita residens, solum caput fessum super nudem scabellum reclinavit). The presented sleep habits of the Duchess emphasised the intention indicated by the preacher. This type of practice was not mentioned in *Vita sanctae Hedvigis*, where, according to the hagiographer, St. Hedwig slept on a bare wooden floor, and if she was resting on a stone floor, she only used animal skin as bedding. During her illness, she would stop her practices and sleep on an ordinary mattress. The hagiographer treated the practices as one of the many ways of mortifying the body by the Duchess and did not associate them directly with marital chastity (*Vita sanctae Hedvigis*, 1961, pp. 501–651, 533–534).

Further in the lecture, Meffreth warned against excessive eating and drinking. Their relation to debauchery and the dire consequences that might follow were visible in the story of Sodom. St. Hedwig was, therefore, to submit to continuous fasting, the elements of which were specified by the preacher. Moreover, he assured the listeners that it was impossible to find information about the Saint drinking wine. Spouses who wanted to remain in chastity were also warned against idleness, which implied debauchery. According to St. Jerome, whose authority was cited by the preacher, sloth would lead to acts of the devil. Consequently, St. Jerome’s instruction to Rusticus, a young monk of Toulouse, to always be engaged in work so that the devil would never find him idle was of key importance (Hieronimus, *Epistolae*, col. 1078: “Facito aliquid operis, ut te semper diabolus inveniatur occupatum”). According to tradition, St. Hedwig was aware of the dangers inherent in being idle, and she accordingly devoted herself to constant work or prayer (Ms. BUWr.: I F 597, t. 2, f. 264rb; I F 651, f. 171ra; I Q 332, f. 376v: “Quartum, quod insidiatur castitati est ociositas [...] Quare haec beata mulier semper fuit in opere bono? Iuxta consilium beati Ieronimi, De consecracione, distincio 5, capitulum numquam, in quam: Facito aliquod operis, ut te diabolus inveniatur occupatum. Ipsa enim aut oravit pro salute omnium fidelium, aut visitabat cellas monialium, vel carceres vinculorum”). The sermon also mentions too much sleep as the final obstacle to the practice of chastity in marriage. According to Cato, oversleeping contributed to the development of other vices. For this reason, St. Hedwig, after a short rest, would get up in the middle of the night and pray. This and other examples from the life of St. Hedwig were referred to by Meffreth, not only to arouse admiration but also to be treated as an instruction for the faithful. In the conclusion of this part of the lecture, the preacher indicated that men and women should choose those examples that could be useful for them in maintaining chastity (Ms. BUWr.: I F 597, t. 2, f. 264va; I F 651, f. 171rb; I Q 332, f. 376v: “Ex hiis iam dictis eliciat quilibet vir, vel mulier quid sit sibi utile pro castitate retinenda”).

The above presentation of the preacher’s moralizing obviously fits into the canon of marriage instruction and sexual acts in marriage. The sermons about the Saint Duchess offer

teachings on the intimate matters of marital life as exemplified by the pious and devout life of the ducal couple. Their intimate life was discussed openly, without prudishness and with no inhibitions, discretion or respect that might be a ruler's due. The goal of these sermons was loftier than mere superficial prudery. After all, medieval preachers often engaged in discourse on sex and had no qualms about presenting naturalistic details. The most important goal was that of the instruction of the faithful based on the example of a wife, a holy woman, a duchess and a ruler. This instruction, from the very top of the social hierarchy of that time to the very bottom of the feudal ladder, was supposed, at least theoretically, to reinforce abstract teachings and ideals framed within a more tangible example. However, the preacher was not able or willing to assert what the practical effects of his teaching would be. This is because he perhaps knew that stringent admonitions and everyday practice are two realities that might be very difficult to marry.

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