

The pirate maiden and the philosophers

Twelve plagiarised papers and a pirated PhD thesis have so far been uncovered among the scholar's dozen-odd publications.

by Marek Wroński

Published in *Academic Forum* 01/2013¹

Translated from the Polish by Anna Schneider

This sinister intrigue has been the subject of vehement discussions at the Scientific Council meetings of the Institute of Philosophy, the University of Wrocław, since the end of October 2012. Stealth and mind-manipulation were employed to repeatedly plunder intellectual property from unsuspecting academics, the affair embroiling several senior researchers, among them, the Institute Director, Prof. Dr. Hab. Leon Miodoński.

The central figure in the drama is a former PhD student and a philosophy graduate, a 30-year-old Magdalena Otlewska, who, in the years 2007-2012, was working on her doctoral dissertation at the Faculty of Social Sciences. In mid-2007, Ms. Otlewska completed her master's thesis, *Desiderium - the story of lost harmony. God, the world and man in the eyes of St. Hildegard of Bingen*, under the supervision of Prof. Janina Gajda-Krynicka, a pre-platonic philosophy expert. After receiving her master's degree, the talented graduate had been admitted directly into the full time PhD Program at the Institute of Philosophy. Hence, for the next 5 years, the young researcher delved further into the writings of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), a nun and a prioress of the first Benedictine monastery. Ms. Otlewska's dissertation topic, *The theophany of creation of Hildegard of Bingen*, had been approved in the Spring of 2009 and Prof. Janina Gajda-Krynicka had been again assigned as the supervisor. On her recommendation, in May 2010, the Minister for Science and Higher Education awarded the studious PhD candidate a special, two-year scholarship in the amount of 23 thousand zł. The thesis had been completed in June 2012 and approved by Prof. Janina Gajda-Krynicka who, impressed, spoke of Magdalena's accomplishment in glowing terms. The doctorate dissertation was then submitted to the reviewers: Prof. Dr. Hab. Agnieszka Kijewska from the Faculty of Philosophy of the Catholic University of Lublin and Prof. Dr. Hab. Małgorzata Kowalewska from the Institute of Philosophy, the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin. Prof. Janina Gajda-Krynicka retired at that time.

Pirate plagiarism

In October 2012, a new academic year began, and the reviewers settled to the task of evaluating Ms. Otlewska's thesis. Prof. Kowalewska opened the manuscript, started to read the first words of the dissertation and a feeling of profound astonishment overwhelmed her at the unexpected sight, the sensation gradually turning into disbelief and horror. From the very first sentence of the 14-page introduction, the text in front of her eyes appeared to be a word-

1 This is an English translation of an article published originally in the Polish language in a monthly magazine for Poland's academics, *Academic Forum*, in January 2013. (*Piratka wśród filozofów* Marek Wroński FA 01/2013 Forum Akademickie, Lublin: Akademyka Oficyna Wydawnicza, ISBN:1233-0930. Retrieved on 15 Jun 2013 from <http://forumakademickie.pl/fa/2013/01/piratka-wsrod-filozofow/>).

for-word copy of the introduction to her own book, *God - Cosmos – Man in the works of Hildegard of Bingen*. It was published in Lublin in 2007 and was a dissertation for which she received her postdoctoral habilitation degree. Upset and confused, Prof. Kowalewska made a decision to contact me. In the letter, which I received at the beginning of December 2012, she explained: 'the thesis introduction is not a summary of my monograph. Nor has my book been paraphrased by Ms. Otlewska. I have no doubt that this is a word-for-word copy as it contains the typographical errors I have missed during proofreading. For example, I omitted the letter "e" from "Karen Horney" in the book. In the doctorate manuscript, the name: "Karen Horny" has been misspelled in exactly the same way. Somewhere else, I left out by mistake the word "Comment", and thus attributed a treatise, not to the author who wrote it, but to the one who commented on it. In the doctoral thesis, this sentence misses the same word.'

The fact that Prof. Kowalewska's typos found their way into the plagiarised doctorate seemed to indicate that Magdalena simply scanned the habilitation monograph! A careful comparison revealed that, indeed, 151 out of 253 pages in thesis were word-for-word copies.

The second examiner, Prof. Agnieszka Kijewska, was also stunned. In addition to the extensive wrongful appropriations described above, she came across two pages that had been literally lifted from her own book, *Erigena*, (Warsaw 2005). Further, 27 pages had been copied from the monograph, *Hildegard of Bingen. The Theology of Music* (Kraków 2003), authored by a Dominican priest and classical philologist, Father Błażej Matusiak, a former abbot of the Dominican Monastery in Warsaw. Finally, even the table of contents for the dissertation had been composed of the tables from the books of the examiners.

In her review report, Prof. Kijewska stated that the PhD thesis was plagiarised and attached to the analysis a 10-page list of wrongful appropriations. She concluded that 'the doctorate cannot be considered an original and unique accomplishment. Hence, it is recommended to terminate the PhD candidature irrevocably.'

Prof. Małgorzata Kowalewska added that 'the dissertation, cannot constitute the basis for granting Ms. Magdalena Otlewska a PhD degree, because many parts of the thesis are identical with the text in the book [...] *God - Cosmos – Man, in the works of Hildegard of Bingen*, published in Lublin in 2007 by UMCS Press'. Attaching a list of the lifted pages, the reviewer emphasized that, except for the last chapter and individual subsections in the first part, her whole monograph had become a subsection of Magdalena Otlewska's dissertation.

Next, Prof. Kowalewska pointed out that Chapter IV, Part 6, pages 109-110 and 139-147, of another of her books, *The creation of the world in the context of the Biblical story*, was blatantly appropriated by Magdalena to compile the article, *The creator and the creature – a commentary to the Biblical account of creation (Gen. 1-7) in Hildegard Bingen's "Liber divinorum operum"*. It appeared online in "HYBRIS - Online Philosophy Magazine" (No. 14/2011), a journal maintained by a team of young scientists from the Institute of Philosophy, the University of Lodz. The counterfeited article was then reprinted in another publication, "Studies Philosophica Wratislaviensia", in Issue 1/2012.

Further, the reviewer revealed that Ms. Otlewska's article, *The theophany of creation of Hildegard of Bingen*, published in "The Scientific Journal for PhD Candidates" UJ 2/2011, Special Issue 3, proved to be an amalgamation of excerpts lifted word-for-word, including typographical errors, from different pages of that same book.

1st meeting of the Scientific Council

A tremendous confusion ensued in the early November 2012, after both reviews had reached the Institute of Philosophy. It seemed unfathomable that the fastest-rising star on the Wrocław's philosophical firmament committed such a monstrous and insolent piracy.

Many recalled the written note of Magdalena's PhD supervisor, Prof. Janina Gajda-Krynicka, which had reached the Institute Council at the end of June 2012, and recommended the thesis be approved. The letter pronounced: 'The dissertation had been successfully completed. It conforms to the requirements of a Doctoral thesis. The scientific research is of high quality. The work has been based on a thorough analysis of Latin sources – the latest critical editions of the letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Latin and Greek writings of classical philosophers, the Fathers of the Church, medieval philosophers, and on encyclopedic texts [...] Ms. Otlewska's dissertation is the first Polish monograph that succeeded to assemble a complete set of the philosophical thoughts of Hildegard of Bingen and organised this collection into a coherent entity'.

To underline the irony, on 6 November 2012, the Ministry for Science and Higher Education announced grants from the National Programme for the Development of Humanities. Magdalena Otlewska's name was among the twelve Wrocław University finalist grantees and the message informed that she had received 28 625 zł to research the theme, *The cosmos theories of Hildegard of Bingen and their relationship to the other early medieval cosmologies*.

In view of the seriousness of the developments, Prof. Jerzy Juchnowski, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, arranged to attend the meeting of the Institute of Philosophy on November 14, to which he had been accompanied by Deputy Dean, Prof. Robert Wiszniowski. However, the two reviewers had not been invited!

The Dean, in a short speech, made the audience aware of the gravity of Magdalena Otlewska's offence. Next spoke the PhD supervisor, Prof. Janina-Krynicka Gajda, who expressed her bewilderment at the developments. She stressed that Ms. Otlewska had researched the sources zealously and had excellent knowledge of Latin, while Prof. Kowalewska's monograph was not a philosophical but a historical and descriptive treatise. Although not familiar with the book of Fr. Matusiak, *The theology of music*, she was certain that the Dominican priest had written a letter to the PhD candidate, in which he had stated that he had not been able to identify in Magdalena's manuscript any plagiarism or borrowings from his work. What's more, during research and writing, Ms. Otlewska remained in regular contact with Prof. Kowalewska, and had been forwarding the chapters of her dissertation, as she had been completing them, and not once did the reviewer complain. Further, Prof. Gajda pointed to the difference between the way Hildegard's writings were analysed in the habilitation monograph and the candidate's doctorate thesis.

In his turn, Prof. Adam Chmielewski proclaimed the two reviews ominous. Prof. Bogusław Paż said that the Council's conduct should serve to increase undergraduate and PhD students' understanding of the gravity of research misconduct and the Council's response should convey a clear, accurate, and thorough message. According to Prof. Leon Miodoński, two aspects had to be considered. The first one was the disciplinary action, which was a separate investigation from the Council's inquiry. The second was the requirement to refer to the documents from the meetings at which the PhD submission had been approved and the reviewers appointed, in order to aid further arbitration. The original resolutions also needed to be studied. Dean Juchnowski, referring to the discussion, concluded that the Council must set up a commission to carefully assess the reviews in order to arrive at the final decision. It must be possible to

establish if this was a situation in which the reviewers erred and thus wrongly identified a massive plagiarism. However, if their assessments proved correct, the PhD candidature must be terminated. After a short discussion, the two deans left the meeting, and Prof. Miodoński, as Chairman of the Scientific Council, proposed to introduce an item on the agenda: "Termination of the doctoral candidature of Magdalena Otlewska due to two negative reviews. Doctorate topic: *The theophany of creation of Hildegard of Bingen*;" After the proposition had been accepted, a secret ballot was held, in which by a vote of 9-0, with two abstentions, the item had been approved.

The statement from the PhD student

Two days before the next Council meeting, Ms. Otlewska submitted a seven-page letter, dated 25 November 2012, in which she responded to the allegations of the two reviewers. The exposition had been made available through the internet to all the members of the Scientific Council, but not to the reviewers! In the riposte the PhD candidate pointed out that when writing her thesis she did not intend to replicate the book of Prof. Kowalewska, *God - Cosmos - Man in the works of Hildegard of Bingen*, nor copy from the publication of Fr. Błażej Matusiak *Hildegard Bingen. The theology of music*. These are two classic Polish literature positions devoted to the thought and works of Hildegard and they inspired and encouraged me while I applied myself to the dissertation – thus the unintended similarities in the structures, formulation of thoughts and the citations, sometimes substantial, from the both works. For seven years, since I have commenced the work on my master's thesis and including the period devoted to the preparation of the PhD dissertation I have concentrated on the writings of Hildegard of Bingen. I believe that during this time I have become influenced by the commonplace phenomenon where works of classical authors had been copied by scholars in the Middle Ages - I have embraced this custom. However, I have always strived to adopt a different perspective when researching and interpreting the fragments of works of the visionary of Bingen, quoted in the before mentioned monographs, after having had referred to their interpretations encompassed in the books of Prof. Kowalewska and Father Matusiak. At the same time I made every effort to ensure that my text did not contain more than 10% of the material on the thought of Hildegard that had originated from the works of the authors: this I had been taught in the third year of my doctoral studies.(...) Both reviews were bitter lessons for me and I am deeply sorry for transcribing these fragments from the two books for which I have not cited the original sources.' On the remaining six pages the PhD candidate disposed of the allegations of plagiarism, claiming that she had used the original sources as well as the works of German authors, 'that is why, despite many quotations from the treatise, *God - Cosmos - Man* a large part of the analysis and translations of Hildegard's works is mine [...].' She repeated Fr. Matusiak's statement that the thesis sent to him did not plagiarise his book, and added his letter as an attachment.

Referring to issues brought up in Prof. Kowalewska's review concerning the articles, she denied that they had been plagiarised, writing that 'in the key areas the text differs from the book *God-Cosmos-Man in the works of Hildegard of Bingen*.'

2nd meeting of the Scientific Council

The 2nd meeting of the Institute Council devoted to the termination of Magdalena Otlewska's PhD candidature took place on November 28, 2012. Again, the reviewers were not invited! Prof. Miodoński gave the floor to Prof. Gajda-Krynicka, who said she always examined the theses of her graduate and PhD students. She mentioned that at the beginning the concept of

Ms. Otlewska's doctoral dissertation was entirely different, and suggested that, if the Council agreed not to terminate Magdalena's PhD candidature, it would be feasible to return to the original theme, that is the idea of epiphany, or in other words, of creation and its manifestation, in relation not only to Hildegard's philosophy, but to the entire medieval thought.

A discussion ensued. Prof. Radosław Kuliniak suggested that the best option was to terminate the candidature and close the case. In that outlook he had been supported by Dr. Hab. Damian Leszczyński, who asserted that he had inspected the dissertation and the reviews, and in his opinion the thesis had been plagiarised. This raised a question of research competencies of the PhD candidate. In his turn, Prof. Adam Chmielewski proposed a compromise solution to wait with the decision for the disciplinary officer's recommendation, because by the letter of law he had been charged with issuing the formal verdict. Once this was ready, it could then be used as guidance. Prof. Chmielewski's proposition had been supported by Dr. Hab. Leszek Kleszcz, The Institute Deputy Director for Science and by Prof. Leon Miodoński.

In the discussion with Prof. Bogusław Paż, Prof. Gajda-Krynicka admitted that the treatise pages were mostly copied word-for-word, but in her view this served the purpose of recording of the conclusions. Prof. Paż made it clear that plagiarism was a crime and should not be excused. He raised the issues of discipline and honesty, claiming that academics should self-impose scientific integrity as well as expect it from their students. Prof. Gajda-Krynicka stressed the PhD candidate's important achievements. Dr. Maria Kostyszak supported her, and said that the reviewer and the thesis' author remained in close contact the entire time. Similar was the view of Prof. Ryszard Różanowski who reinforced the necessity to delay the termination of Magdalena Otlewska's candidature.

In conclusion, the Council decided to postpone the matter until the next meeting, by which time some issues should have been cleared, as well as additional information would have arrived from the Disciplinary Officer for PhD Candidates, Dr. Hab. Mariusz Jabłoński from the Faculty of Law.

When on Dec 12, 2012, the Council met again, the number of the participants had been significantly lower. With only 10 people remaining, by a vote of 5-4, with one abstention, the ballot decided not to terminate the doctoral candidature of Magdalena Otlewska until the completion of the disciplinary proceedings.

Facts and comments

When, at the beginning of December 2012, I learned from Prof. Małgorzata Kowalewska of the unprecedented evasion tactics and the bizarre compromises of the Institute of Philosophy, aimed at circumventing imperceptibly the termination of the PhD candidate, I managed to find on the internet a lot of publications of Ms. Otlewska - mostly devoted to Hildegard of Bingen. In reply to my questions Prof. Leon Miodoński informed me that the Vice Chancellor of the University of Wrocław had been notified of the case, the Disciplinary Officer was investigating it and the termination of the PhD candidate was expected 'shortly'.

For her part, Ms. Magdalena Otlewska explained to me that she had believed, when preparing her doctorate dissertation, that plagiarism occurred when the use of another person's text exceeded 10%, and she admitted that she had made slight miscalculations in her estimation ... 'Now I understand that I was wrong. I devoted five years to my PhD. During this time I conducted library queries in Tübingen, Bingen am Rhein and Wiesbaden that took several months. I went for a 10-day long visit to Prof. Kowalewska to Lublin. I knew that she would be a reviewer. I gave her a near-final version of my dissertation, and she had no objections.

Unfortunately, fragments of Prof. Kowalewska's and Fr. Matusiak's books found their way into my thesis.'

When I suggested a meeting in Wrocław, in the holiday period, to facilitate an honest discussion on why she chose the path of academic misconduct, Ms. Otlewska declined, explaining that she had no more strength.

I also contacted Fr. Błażej Matusiak, who is now living in Prague, Czech Republic. To my surprise, he denied that he had read Ms. Otlewska's doctorate thesis or had sent her a letter in relation to her PhD. Prof. Kowalewska vehemently denied that she received any of the PhD candidate's dissertation chapters. Yes, she met Magdalena already around the 2009-2010 holiday season, when the student came to Lublin to confide that she was writing a doctorate on Hildegard of Bingen, and a few times after that. Ms. Otlewska made a good impression on the future reviewer who, from the depth of her heart, offered her for photocopying the rare source material painstakingly gathered over the years - about 2000 pages of Hildegard's writings. In 2011 they met at a conference in Poznań, where they presented on similar subjects and, in May 2012, Ms. Otlewska attended two conferences organised by the University of Lublin.

After discovering, in October 2012, the massive plagiarism in Magdalena's doctorate, Prof. Kowalewska examined the two manuscripts submitted to the organisers of the Lublin conferences and on discovering that they had been plagiarised from her book, requested the articles be deleted from the proceedings. Searching the internet led her to the discovery of the three plagiarisms described in the review. All of the journals concerned responded by rejecting the articles due to plagiarism and informed of the fact the Vice Chancellor of the University of Wrocław.

Probing further into Ms. Otlewska's peculiar initiatives, I discovered that at the beginning of October 2012 she was admitted to another PhD program, this time, cultural studies. Her application had been supported by Prof. Gajda-Krynicka's excellent references, while the achievements included a list of dozen-odd articles, either published or accepted for publication. The topic of the new doctorate is supposed to be *Imago mundi. The relationship between literary and iconographic models of the world in the early medieval cosmology*, and a well known Wrocław theater scholar, Prof. Mirosław Kocur has been chosen as a mentor and a potential supervisor. He wrote to me recently, 'I fight plagiarism, like you, but this case I am unable to comprehend! Especially if the scale of the piracy is as extensive, as you are postulating ... I do not know Prof. Gajda-Krynicka personally, but I do not doubt the astuteness of her judgement because Ms. Otlewska appears absolutely reliable and honest. She is also studious and conscientious ... a perfect PhD candidate.'

Previously, Prof. Kowalewska wrote in the same vein: 'To me, Magda seemed delightful, I had become attached to her. Obliging, gracious, amiable, considerate, sincere. A terrific girl. I never had an impression that she was dishonest with me.'

To this day, twelve papers and one PhD thesis has proved plagiarised out of Magdalena Otlewska's dozen-odd publications.

On January 16, 2013, the Scientific Council of the Institute of Philosophy will convene again in Wrocław, and finally, to this meeting Prof. Leon Miodoński invited the two reviewers. Again, on the agenda is the issue of termination of the PhD candidature of Ms. Otlewska, who, on January 7, herself requested termination. If I understand the regulations correctly, students are required to repay any funding that they have received on the basis of false or misleading information.

Mid December 2012, Prof. Kowalewska informed the Minister for Science, Prof. Barbara Kudrycka, of the case of a plagiarised PhD thesis, which had been written by a candidate who, on the basis of supervisor's favourable recommendation, had been supported by a special grant. The Vice Chancellor of the University of Wrocław, Prof. Marek Bojarski, was requested on January 2, this year, by the Secretary of State, Prof. Daria Nałęcz to elucidate in detail the circumstances surrounding the case of gross negligence on the part of the supervisor and to impose punishment if advisable.

In mid December, the Archives of Research Misconduct appealed to the president of the Ministerial Board, Prof. Grażyna Borkowska of the Institute of Literary Research, the Polish Academy of Sciences, who has awarded Ms. Otlewska another grant on the strength of the plagiarised publications, and requested to terminate it before a formal agreement is signed. We are awaiting a reply.

Marekwro@gmail.com