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Laundry Ladies in Medieval Poland

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Abstract

Usually considered to be “women’s work”, this paper takes a close look at how laundry was done in medieval Poland, calling into question common historical stereotypes. Washerwomen have all too often been portrayed as helpless victims in modern scholarship, forced by circumstances into an impoverishing, dirty profession eventually flowing into a downward spiral towards prostitution. However, evidence from medieval Poland argues that this paradigm ought perhaps to be re-examined. Employed by a wide section of society (for instance, students, clergy, and even the royal court) these women who scrubbed, rubbed, and bleached for a living were a constant fixture in any urban community. This paper explores who did laundry in medieval Poland and how, the status of the women who did it, and contemporary views of these “other” women.

Keywords: Washerwomen; Laundry; Soap; Cleaning; Poland; Prostitution; Middle Ages.

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Introduction

Laundry has long been considered “women’s work.” As a household chore, the creation and cleaning of garments has been the purview of female hands from time immemorial, it would seem. The image of a group of women with large bundles by the riverbank chatting whilst scrubbing away has become iconic. The laundry site has emerged as a female space par excellence, where news, gossip, and advice could be swapped away from the prying male gaze. On the other hand, laundresses have often been portrayed as victims and poor menial labourers whose lowly task exposed them to harassment, scandal, and a sudsy slide into prostitution. But are these stereotypical tropes really accurate? In light of these preconceived notions, the aim of this study is to examine the status of laundry, washerwomen (and even a few washermen) and the question of contemporary opinions in medieval Polish society from the thirteenth through the sixteenth century.

As with many quotidian aspects of medieval life, evidence of laundry practices is not something contemporary writers dedicated a great deal of parchment space to. No fabulous legend exists dedicated to a washerwoman who could slay even the mightiest of stains or chronicles heroizing wielders of soap and water. Nevertheless, the diligent historian will find evidence of laundry appearing in a surprising variety of places. Court records describe chemises that went missing in the wash, account books document what amounted to contemporary dry-cleaning bills, washerwomen step in and out of hagiographical accounts and can be sometimes spotted peeking from the backgrounds of paintings. Polish records are rich in this regard; while they indicate that laundering was a primarily female activity, they also present a

different image from the impoverished laundress of loose morals who so often appear in historiography.¹

Doing the Wash

In the past, bundles were trundled down to the waterside, then scrubbed, rubbed, stamped, and beaten with heavy wooden bats to get out the dirt before being rung out and laid out to dry in the sun. Common practice across Europe, the majority of the laundry done in rural Poland was done by the waterside, privately by women, for their own households; this was the case even until the twentieth century.



Fig. 1. Woman washing laundry (14th century)
Cod. Pal. germ. 794 [Ulrich] Boner Edelstein (Schwaben Oberrhein
[Upper Rhine]) Fol 30v

¹ For sources consulted, see the Primary Sources section of the bibliography.

While rural women continued to make use of local streams and pools for their washing needs, the situation was somewhat different in towns.² In towns and among the more prosperous peasants, laundry could be done at home using heated water and soap. A miracle story recorded in the fifteenth century attributed to the famous Polish martyr Saint Stanislaus offers a clear picture of how laundry was then done in the environs of Krakow.



**Fig. 2. Polish Village Woman Washing Laundry (1959),
Okolice Czarno lasu praczka**

Paweł Pierściński Zyciorys <http://pierscinski.pl/?galleries=zdjecia-dawnej-wsi>

“There was a woman from Kazimierz, from the parish of St Stanislaus, who led a decent life and enjoyed a good reputation and was deeply devoted to her parish. One day she wanted to wash her linen clothes, so she sent her female servant named Piechna to fetch some water from

² The paucity of sources from the countryside of medieval Poland means by unfortunate necessity the bulk of this article deals with women laundering in an urban environment.

the Vistula River. Piechna had only recently come to town from her village and did not know the way to the river, and so she went to St Stanislaus' lake and drew water from it. On her return, her mistress, unaware of the servant's mistake, put some soap into the water and placed it over the fire to bring it to the boil. When she wanted to immerse the clothes, she looked inside the cauldron and saw a multitude of crickets."³

The mistress of the houses soon realizes the error, and understanding that the crickets are a sign of displeasure from the saint the entire family rushes out to pour the cauldron back to the saint's sacred pond and beg for forgiveness. This apocryphal tale helpfully reveals how laundry was carried out in the homes of the relatively well to do; servants might be sent to gather water but the washing itself was performed by the mistress of the house. This is unsurprising if we consider the preciousness of fabric at the time. Pre-industrial textile creation was a laborious, multi-stage, and costly process involving the work of many people. Part of a servant's pay was factored as a new suit of clothing they received once a year. Within the guild system, apprentice contracts often stipulated that the master must provide sufficient garments.⁴ Garments, particularly high-quality or luxurious ones, were often handed down in families or even donated as pious bequests.⁵ The greater preciousness of fabric overall during the period,

³ The original hagiographical account was recorded by the Krakow canon and chronicler Jan Długosz. Joannes Długosz, "Vita sanctissimi Stanislai Cracoviensis Episcopi," in *Opera Omnia*, eds. Aleksander Przezdziecki, Ignatius Polkowski and Zegota Pauli (Krakow: Typographia "Czas" F. Klurzycki, 1887), 167. The translation used was helpfully made by: Urszula Sowina, *Water, Towns and People: Polish Lands against a European Background until the Mid-16th Century*, trans. Justyna Woldanska (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition, 2016), 397-398.

⁴ For example, the 1457 statute of the weavers guild of Kazimierz required that masters supply their apprentices sufficiently with both shoes and clothes and after three years, a proper suit worth at least a full mark. *Kodeks dyplomatyczny miasta Krakowa 1257-1506* [Records of the City of Krakow 1257-1506] vol 2, ed. Franciszek Piekosiński (Krakow: Akad. Umiejętności, 1882), nr. 347.

⁵ Rafał Kubicki, "W trosce o zbawienie—testamenty kupców Gdańska i Elbląga z drugiej połowy XV i początku XVI wieku [For the sake of salvation—wills of the merchants of Gdańsk and Elbląg from the second half of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century]," *Przegląd Zachodniopomorski* 1 (2016): 111-128.

meant that laundry and the maintenance of clothing was far more of an important matter than we might at first assume.⁶ With large amounts of the household's wealth tied up in clothing, it could thus easily remain the duty of the wife of a burgher family to do much of the washing herself, even if she could afford to employ a servant. As time went on, the expected number of linens and garments owned by a household increased and with it the amount of laundry that needed to be done. By 1547, Anna Salomonowa, the widow of a Krakow city counselor, had three separate tripod cauldrons dedicated specifically for laundry in her own household.⁷ With more and more garments to wash, the demand for soap (*sapo/smigmata*), also grew. It was dissolved in water in large wooden tubs to treat colored clothes or added to a roiling boil to bleach linens. An official soap-makers guild formed in Krakow in 1436. It was full of men and women who rendered animal fat and mixed it with lye produced by slowing pouring water through wood-ashes or potash.⁸ Their products were so popular that in coming years, interventions by the city council to control the price of the city's increasingly popular soap would be made multiple times.⁹ Such work, performed by mistresses and their servants, became easier across

⁶ For the state of research on Polish medieval clothing and fashion see: Wyszynska, Anna. "Ubiór w kulturze późnego średniowiecza i wczesnego renesansu—stan i metodologia badań [Dress in the culture of the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance - the status and methodology of research]." In *Meandry Historii Starożytność – Średniowiecze – Nowożytność Referaty wygłoszone na XX Ogólnopolskim Zjeździe Historyków Studentów w Katowicach* Edited by Anna Kubica and Łukasz Jończyk 27-40. Wydawnictwo: Avalon, 2013. For the relative costs of various types of fabric on the Polish market see: Francis W. Carter, *Trade and urban development in Poland: an economic geography of Cracow, from its origins to 1795*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 143-153.

⁷ The items, "*caldaria pro ablendis vestibus cum tripode*," were included in her will registered in 1547. One was located in the kitchen and the other two kept in an ancillary room. *Cracovia artificum 1501-1550*, ed. Jan Ptaśnik and Martyan Friedberg (Wrocław: Zakł. Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1948), nr. 1471.

⁸ Susan Verberg, "A most copious and exact compendium of sope." (2017): 1-63. Accessed 8/26/2017.

https://www.academia.edu/27795669/A_most_Copious_and_Exact_Compndium_of_Sope_-_Medieval_Soap_Recipes.

⁹ *Dzieje Krakowa* [The History of Krakow] vol 1, eds. Jerzy Wyrozumski, Janina Bieniarzówna, and Jan M. Malecki (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1998), 336. Attempts were made to limit prices in 1491, 1495, and 1498. *Kodeks dyplomatyczny...*, nr. 311, 351, 354.

Poland starting in the late fourteenth century with the development of elaborate public well and piped water systems in towns; but it still remained laborious.¹⁰

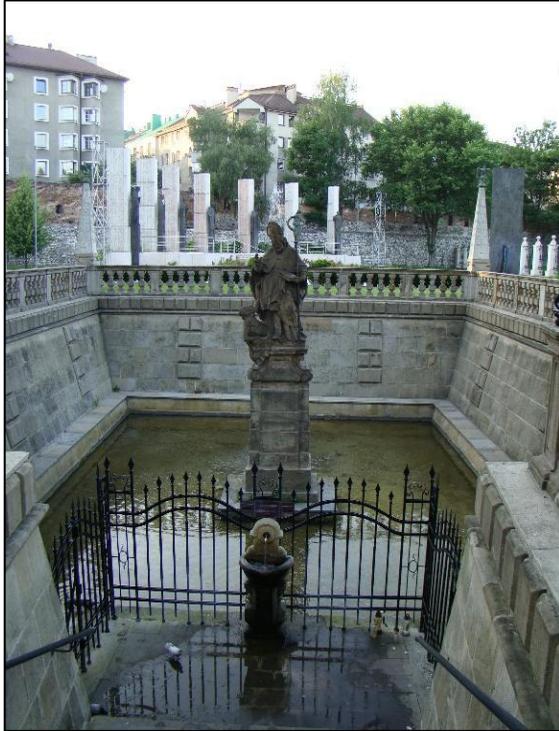


Fig. 3. The sacred pond of St. Stanislaus in Krakow as it looks today (wikimedia)

¹⁰ Elblag (1288), Torun (1342), Gdansk (1379), Krakow (1380's), Poznan (1398), Lviv (1407), rank among the earliest; for a complete list see: Urszula Sowina, *Water, Towns and People: Polish Lands against a European Background until the Mid-16th Century*. Trans. Justyna Woldanska (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition, 2016), 284-287.



Fig. 4. Woman preparing a bath in a tub also used for washing
St. Mary Altarpiece in Krakow by Veit Stoss (1477-84)

Professional Washerwomen

Perhaps due to its laborious nature, not everyone apparently did their laundry themselves; some instead chose to employ a professional washer woman. These women – called in Latin *Ablutrix* or *Lotrix*, in German *Washerin*, or in Polish *Praczątka* – took in laundry as a means of earning income. Archival sources relate that they ranged in age from old ladies (*vetula*) to young girls (*filia*) and could be unmarried, widows, or wives of local artisans.¹¹ This wide spectrum of age and social

¹¹ Bożena Wyrozumska, ed. *Zydzi W Średniowiecznym Krakowie: Wypisy Źródłowe Z Ksiąg Miejskich Krakowskich* [The Jews in Medieval Krakow: Selected Records from the Cracow Municipal Archives] (Krakow: Polska Akademia Umiejętności, 1995), nr. 806, 839, 1141.

position flies in the face of the common conception of laundresses being primarily young, unmarried women. Clients meanwhile, tended to be overwhelmingly unmarried men – those who had no wife or daughter at home to take on such duties. Visiting merchants could employ local women to launder their things while priests and monks were also common clients. In university towns, masters and students whose lodgings and dormitories provided no place to do washing were the most popular customers. Then, as now, students whose families lived close by might have their washing done at home. The original 1364 statutes of Poland's oldest University in Krakow included the special privilege that students would be able to receive packages of supplies from their friends and families free from all the usual tolls and taxes; but for those from further afield, this was too cumbersome.¹² To see their university gowns properly freed from spots and dirt, students and masters were forced to look to the local washerwomen in town. Accounts show that students paid on average ¼- ½ grosz per week for a lady to handle their wash, a not inconsiderable amount.¹³ Such interactions of course raised the potential for sparks to fly between young male students and laundresses, a moral danger faced by all universities. In England, the University of Cambridge discouraged any woman from entering the college but specifically forbade *lotrices mulieres*, i.e. laundresses. The colleges at Oxford recommended that a female *lotrix* be employed only when a man could not be found.¹⁴ Krakow University's statutes were a bit more lax, however; only "women of ill-repute" were forbidden from entering the college grounds.¹⁵ Yet, while ill-famed women raised specters of moral panic and Krakow

¹² Bożena Wyrozumska, *Najstarsze przywileje Uniwersytetu Krakowskiego* [The oldest charters of the University of Cracow], trans. Teresa Baluk-Ulewiczowa (Krakow: Biuro Jubileuszowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2000), 28.

¹³ The total cost for 2 years was 27 grosz. For comparison, the amount spent on books was around 100 grosz. Zofia Budkowa and Adam Wolff, "Rachunki studenta z czasów odrodzenia [Student accounts of the Renaissance]." *Rocznik Krakowski* 49 (1978): 52, 54-55.

¹⁴ Documents Relating to the University and Colleges of Cambridge, 3 vols. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1852), 2:30. Statutes of the Colleges of Oxford, 3 vols. (London: Longman, 1853), 1:All Souls College 58, 2: Magdalen 26.

¹⁵ "Nullus in domum mulieres inonestas introducat sub poena exclusionis." *Ustawy Bursy Krakowskiej "Jeruzalem": (1453-1841)* [The Krakow University Statutes of the "Jerusalem" college (1453-1841)] Antoni Karbowski (Krakow: nakl. aut, 1888), 23.

professor's fears of students engaging in illicit sex, other women, referred to with the polite honorary title "*honesta*" were permitted on campus. One among these being the laundress Margaretha.¹⁶ Here again, while women in general were considered suspect entering an all male environment, washerwomen are not singled out in Polish sources as particularly worrisome. In another surprising twist, Christian women appear to have regularly washed clothes for Jewish families.¹⁷ While it might be taken for granted that on both sides that questions of impurity and impropriety would prevent Jews and Christians from mixing clothes in the wash, this was evidently not the case.



Fig. 5. Pracznica (Washerwoman) Metsu, Gabriel 1629-1667. From the gallery of the Polish King Stanisława Augusta

¹⁶ Men, in corollary, were granted the honorary title of *honorabilis* or *egregious*. *Acta rector alia almae Universitatis Studii Cracoviensis inde ab anno MCCCCLXIX*. eds. Władysław Wisłocki and Stanisław Estreicher (Kraków: Sumptibus Academiae Litterarum Cracoviensis, 1893), nr. 3156, 3176-3177.

¹⁷ Bożena Wyzomska, ed. *Zydzi W Średniowiecznym Krakowie: Wypisy Źródłowe Z Książ Miejskich Krakowskich* [The Jews in Medieval Krakow: Selected Records from the Cracow Municipal Archives] (Kraków: Polska Akademia Umiejętności, 1995), nr. 806, 839, 1141.

A special category of professional washerwoman worked for large courts or church institutions. These women can be considered in a class above apart, far removed from rural women beating out dirt at the river-side but also different than the urban women who took in laundry as an aside. True professionals, they worked full-time cleaning cloth and were responsible for cleaning both fine silk robes and fustian towelettes. Such laundresses needed to be strong enough to handle the back-breaking labor of bleaching mountains of linens, but they also needed to apply special soaps to get out stains without ruining precious fabrics. As finery became ever more elaborate, the ability to clean cloth of gold, mink, or scarlets without damaging them became an ever more appreciated and highly paid skill. Furthermore, aside from washing, certain pieces like ladies' headdresses, popular long fustian towels, and napkins also needed to be starched. For this, ladies prepared a concoction of *Arum Italicum*, a type of ornamental hibiscus originally imported from Southern Europe but transplanted to Poland during the Middle Ages and used together with heavy glass or stone linen smoothers to give a fine finish.¹⁸ These increasingly specialized tasks led royal laundry women to be very well paid according to contemporary standards. The earliest royal account books of the Polish court date from 1388 during the reign of Queen Jadwiga (r. 1384-1399) and Władysław II Jagiello (r. 1386-1434). The royal court employed a variable number of washerwomen who either travelled with the King and Queen on their numerous journeys, or were hired on an ad hoc basis in each town.¹⁹ By the time of Queen Bona Sforza (d. 1557) and King Sigismund the Old (r. 1507-48), the new Renaissance style Wawel Castle included a furnace powered wash room equipped with copious numbers of wooden tubs and sponges., This impressive facility was further staffed by a small army of women who were employed full-time and housed in the castle's lower court.²⁰ Surprisingly, the account

¹⁸ Maria Dembinska, *Food and Drink in Medieval Poland: Rediscovering a Cuisine of the Past*, Trans. Magdalena Thomas, revised by William Woys Weaver (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 55.

¹⁹ *Rachunki dworu Króla Władysława Jagiełły i Królowej Jadwigi z lat 1388 do 1420* [The Royal account books of King Władysław Jagiellonian and Queen Jadwiga 1388-1420], ed. Franciszek Piekosinski, (New York, NY [u.a.]: Johnson, 1965), 45-46, 73.

²⁰ *Rachunki Budowy Zamku Krakowskiego 1531* [The building accounts of Krakow castle 1531], ed Marek Ferenc, (Krakow: Zamek Królewski na Wawelu Państwowe Zbiory

registers also reveal that the most common items to be washed were not clothes, as one might suspect, but rather sheets (*lintheaminus*) along with numerous long white linen or fustian table cloths (*mensalins*) and hand towels (*manutergium*) used by servants and guests during feasts. When bleached a brilliant white, these linens were a sign of high status reflected in the fact that keeping them in clean shape cost the crown a pretty penny.²¹ Churches similarly employed washerwomen for cleaning hand towels and delicate altar-cloths used during mass. One had to be careful when you sent out the wash however, as a priest from the village of Bresko in Malopolska learned in 1430. Someone noticed all the churches' altar cloths had vanished and he was accused of having absconded with the church's goods. He was saved only when he explained to the ecclesiastical court that he had simply given the cloths to a local laundress to be washed.²² Monasteries as well as churches were also regular customers of the local *ablutrices*.²³ Indeed, for large institutions and especially cathedrals, where numerous endowed altars set with altar cloths were in constant use, a full time staffer might need to be employed. So important was this duty, that in 1417, Elisabeth Duchess of Monstereberg, donated a house to the Wawel cathedral canons, conveniently located just behind the Krakow's great cathedral where the church's laundress was to reside.²⁴

Washermen

So far into this research, there has not been an instance where the male forms of the various terms used for washerwomen have been used.

Sztuki, 2000), 45-46, 73. *Rachunki Wielkorządowe Jana Bonera, 1558* [The great account book of Jana Bona, 1558], eds. Jan Boner and Józef Garbacik (Krakow: Nakł. Ministerstwa Kultury i Sztuki, 1974), 17, 172, 176.

²¹ The cost for the cleaning of the queen sheets alone was 1 scot in 1389, while the cleaning of the combined royal household linens in 1394 from the period of Carnival, a time of intense feasting, was a full 1 mark. *Rachunki dworu Krola...*, 77, 188.

²² *Acta indiciorum ecclesiasticorum dioecesium plocensis, vladislavensis et gneznenzsis (1422-1533): Vol. 3, Ps. 1.* ed. Bolesław Ulanowski, (Krakow: Akademia Umiejętności, 1908), 232.

²³ *Percepta Et Distributa Conventus Fratrum Eremitarum S. Augustini Ad S. Catharinam in Casimiria 1506-1508.* Ed. Krystyna Jelonek-Litewka and Aleksander Litewka, (Krakow: Tow. Miłośników Historii i Zabytków Krakowa, 2002), 88, 93.

²⁴ *Kodeks dyplomatyczny katedry krakowskiej św. Wacława*, [Records of Krakow Cathedral of St. Wenceslaus] vol. 2, ed. Franciszek Piekosiński, Monumenta Mediae Aevi Historica, 1.1, VIII, (Krakow: Akad. Umiejętności, 1874), nr. 572.

Nonetheless, there does appear to have been a special category of men doing laundry at the royal court. Panasso, the personal bath attendant of Wladyslaw II Jagiello, was repeatedly tasked with washing the King's garments. The same is true of the many male retainers of King Sigismund the Old, during his time as prince, although both also employed professional laundresses.²⁵ It may be that washing the King's clothes was seen as some sort of honor similar to helping him mount a horse or carve his meat and thus favorites were granted the task. Otherwise, women dominated the laundry lines with washermen appearing only at the royal court.

The Reputation of Washerwomen

The common stereotype is that laundresses in particular suffered stigma and abuse during the medieval period because they were associated with hard manual labor, unclean places, and a level of poverty which forced them towards prostitution. Both Carole Rawcliffe and Ruth Mazo Karras have emphasized a perceived connection of laundresses with dirt and a crushing poverty that led to prostitution. Maintaining that, "The great majority led a hand-to-mouth existence...[and]... invited suspicion because of their potential for subversive behaviour."²⁶ Laundresses also gained "unsavory reputations" because they were "were especially closely connected with prostitution."²⁷ The evidence they put forward includes both normative legislation and literary sources. This does lend some weight to their argument, at least for

²⁵ *Rachunki dworu Króla...*20, 50. The many launderers of Sigismund Duke of Glogov, Opava, Silesia, and Lusatia (1500-5) in *Rationes curiae Sigismundi Jagellonici, ducis Glogoviensis et Opaviensis, Silesiae et Lusatarum summi capitanei, de annis (1493) 1500–1507/ Účty Dworu Prince Zikmunda Jagellonskeho, Vévody Hlobonskeho a Opavskeho, Nejvyššibo Hejtmana Slezska a Lužic, Z Let (1493) 1500-1507 Kritická Edice Pramene*, Ed. Petr Kozák, (Prague: Scriptorium, 2014), Byenyas (blasen) – 521, Chwiol Cristow (qui mensalia servat) - 451, 476, Maczyey Karuatt (cubicularius)- 143, 146, Nicolaus Psonka (curiensis) - 255, 303, Silvester Ozarowski (cubicularius) 126, 130, 248, 302, 492, Stanislaus Chroborski (curiensis), 126, 130,134,141, 191, 192, 224, 227, 247, 248, 249, 297, 298, 301-2, 328, 381, 450, 467, 471, , 147, 150, 156, 167, Mulieres (women)- 250,269, Praczka (laundress) - 147, 418, 479, 577, 580-1, 603, Schasnicy (curiensis) - 644.

²⁶ Carole Rawcliffe, "A Marginal Occupation? The Medieval Laundress and her Work," *Gender & History* 21.1 (2009): 163.

²⁷ Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common women: Prostitution and sexuality in Medieval England*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 54.

English cases, yet in the final balancing even here they are not overwhelmingly convincing for the experiences of all laundresses. In Poland, where similar evidence does not appear, the argument is even less satisfactory.²⁸ Indeed, the ease with which the popular image of the dirty and disparaged laundress adopted by scholars may have more to say about our modern views than feelings in the past. Raised in a society where laundry had become a marginalized and “dirty job”, scholars have made anachronistic assumptions. Certainly, the beating, lathering, and rinsing of clothes was laborious work but physical drudgery was hardly an outlier activity in an agricultural and craft-based society. The argument that working with “dirty laundry” tainted women who scrubbed stains became dirty by association also does not hold much water in a community where most people spent their days grubbing in the dirt. For, while pollution taboos answer only to their own internal logic, there is little evidence of such a negative association with laundry in Poland. In practical terms, laundresses would likely have been amongst the cleanest people in society as the nature of their work demanded it. This negative anachronizing may be a particularly Anglo-American view; as when asking a contemporary Pole’s impression of washerwomen, I was very surprised to hear that while considered lower class: “they are rather like priests no? They wash your garments as a priest washes your soul.” While obviously centuries removed from the medieval experience, the contrast in images is still jarring.

One piece of the stereotype, the link between laundry and poverty, also does not hold up under close scrutiny. Leaving aside rural women numbering household laundry among their many chores, those doing laundry in towns might be mistresses with domestic servants or professional washerwomen. Here it is important to draw a clear division between the two. Servants, like the hapless Piechna from the tale of St. Stanislaus, were often young women who left their home villages to seek work in nearby towns, particularly looking to raise money for a dowry. They would enter servant contracts on average a year in length where room and board was provided and they could earn between ½-1

²⁸ From a cursory study, I have so far found no Polish literary evidence decrying washerwomen, a further in-depth research would however be recommended.

grzywna of silver and a set of clothes.²⁹ This was a not an inconsiderable amount, as it was equivalent to 24-48 grosz when the average yearly income of a farming peasant household was around 107 grosz.³⁰ A professional laundry woman meanwhile, as we have seen, might charge a single student 14 grosz to keep him in fresh linens year-round.³¹ By taking in more than one client, such a woman could rapidly increase her earnings and thus ensure her status above that of contracted servants. That said, contracted serving women had greater stability than a self-employed laundress, but at the same time domestic servants were more exposed to abuse and sexual exploitation.³² One measure of this can be seen in statistics in Poland during the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries related to infanticide; 90% of cases were committed by maids in burgher households while the remaining 10% were working women, small shopkeepers, prostitutes, and seamstresses.³³ Professional washerwomen, whose names would be accompanied by the title *Pracząka* it must be noted, do not appear on this list. While many women suffered abuse, the records indicate that laundresses were no more stigmatized than other working women and were less likely to receive such treatment due to their relative wealth.

Other traces of the status of washerwomen in society survive in sources where things went awry and the parties became involved in a legal dispute. In 1486, a certain Master Germanus accused Hedwig *mulierem lotricem* in Lviv of having lost his clothes in the wash and

²⁹ The Polish *grzywna* was a weight and accounting measure, equivalent to 1 mark - roughly 48 grosz. Grzegorz Jawor, "Służba najemna w gospodarstwach chłopskich w Polsce w późnym średniowieczu (na przykładzie ziemi lubelskiej) [Wage service on peasant farms in Poland in the late Middle Ages (examples from Lublin)]." *Res Gestae* 3 (2015): 494-5.

³⁰ As these calculations, 107 grosz in the first half of the fifteenth century and by the end of the 16th century was up to 238 grosz, were made with data from the Malopolska region, they may not perfectly reflect the situation in Lublin where the servant pay data from the end of the fifteenth century and so should be considered with care. Piotr Guzowski, "A changing economy: models of peasant budgets in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Poland." *Continuity and Change* 20.1 (2005): 16-7.

³¹ See f.n. 16. As these numbers apply to the early sixteenth century, they should be best judged against Guzowski's 238 grosz peasant household income estimates.

³² Jawor, "Służba najemna...", 496-7.

³³ Andrzej Karpiński, "Child Abuse in Polish Towns, 16th-18th Centuries," *Acta Poloniae Historica* 88 (2003): 57.

demanded compensation.³⁴ In such regularly occurring cases, the judge sometimes sided with the client but on other occasions with the washerwoman. The daughter of Voytkoue for example, was obliged by the court to swear that she had never accepted clothes to be washed and then let go, while her less fortunate neighbor Kachna was forced to admit she had shorted her customer and had to pay a fine.³⁵ Laundresses in turn sometimes brought their clients to court over unpaid bills; in 1423, Paulus Lithuanus, a student at Krakow University, was ordered under threat of excommunication to pay the money he owed to Dorothea of Stradom, washerwoman to the Queen.³⁶ In another case from Krakow, the wife of Mathie the Carpenter, who worked as a washerwoman in the Wawel castle district, brought Johannes the royal chaplain to court in 1436 over his unpaid laundry bill.³⁷ Such cases, set alongside others involving women in Polish courts, show that these washerwomen held a place of some respect in society, secure enough in their position to find redress in both civic and ecclesiastical courts. The trial records show that they appeared in court frequently without a male representative bringing successful legal suits in their own right. That is not to say that there were not times where professional washerwomen were not taken advantage of, but the record shows they were not always the marginalized figures portrayed so frequently in the literature.

Finally, the tie proposed between laundresses and prostitution has been formed first and foremost by linking laundry to poverty and poverty to prostitution. Yet, as seen, professional washerwomen could make quite good wages and thus avoid economic pressure to become prostitutes. Ironically enough, the one clear case of a link between a laundress and untoward behavior I have found in Polish sources was not that of a poor girl down on her luck, but of a relationship between the laundress Clara and prince Sigismund I, the future King of Poland

³⁴ *Acta officii consistorialis Leopoliensis antiquissima*, Vol. 2. 1490-1498, ed. Wilhelm Rolny, (Lwow: sumptibus Societatis Litterarum, 1930), 335.

³⁵ *Żydzi w średniowiecznym....* no. 806 (1491), 839 (1493).

³⁶ *Cracovia artificum: supplementa* source texts for the history of art and culture of ancient offices of Krakow 1410-1412 and 1421-1424] eds. Bolesław Przybyszewski and Lech Kalinowski, (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1985), no. 227.

³⁷ *Cracovia artificum: Supplementa 1433-1440*, ed. Bolesław Przybyszewski, (Krakow: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1988), no. 147.

(r. 1506-1548). Clara began working at the court as a laundress but catching the Prince's eye, she was soon being showered with expensive gifts and receiving 48 florin for "services rendered" while the head Chef garnered only 4 florin.³⁸ After a bit, she refused to do laundry altogether and the work was handed off to other staff members.³⁹ Needless to say, this type of high class concubinage does not fit the impoverishment model.

The reason for Polish washerwomen having a better reputation than their western counterparts may reflect popular religious sentiments of the day. After all, two of Poland's most popular female saints, St. Elizabeth of Hungary (d. 1231) and St. Jadwiga of Silesia (d. 1243), were associated with caring for the poor and happily cleaning their bodies and bed coverings⁴⁰ Donors of altar cloths appear to have been equally comfortable including money to launder their covering cloths, a job which was done by women even in the great Cathedral of St. Stanislaus in Krakow.⁴¹ This stands in stark contrast for example with England, where there was some consternation about women touching these sacred church articles, stained perhaps with the transubstantiated blood of Christ. In Poland, religious statutes required only that the women be "honest" who performed this service.⁴² Laundry women in Poland thus appear to have suffered no greater stain to their reputation because of the nature of their work. They could earn at times significantly higher wages than other female service workers, bring successful cases to court, and were trusted enough by church

³⁸ The term "other services" is interestingly rendered in the vernacular implying perhaps some embarrassment or subterfuge on the part of the accountant. "Item in eodem recessu Clara praczka, quando sibi servicium edictum est alias wypowyedzyano, pro toto suo solario, quod ad illud tempus exservierat, ita quod amplius nichil sibi tenetur, dedi XLVIII flor., ut in ipsius stat registro." *Rationes curiae Sigismundi...*, 284, 287-8, 448.

³⁹ "Item ab ablucionemen salium et facietli, quando iam Clara praczka post solutionem nolebatabluere, dedi per manus Chrobroski II gr." *Rationes curiae Sigismundi...*, 450.

⁴⁰ Gábor Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses: Dynastic Cults in Medieval Central Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 250-254.

⁴¹ *Kodeks dyplomatyczny miasta...* vol. 3 no. 485.

⁴² *Constitutionum in Synodo Budensi a Philippo Episcopo Firmano apostolico legato anno 1271-* "Item linteamina altaris et indumenta sacerdotia lianonnisi a sacerdote vel a diacono vel aliqua honesta matrona vel virgine sine admicione, appositione aliorum pannorum convenienter quando opus fuerit, abluantur." *Starodawne Prawa Polskiego Pomniki* 1, ed. Antoni Z Helcel et all. (Warsaw: Nakl. Ksiegarni G. Sennewalda, 1856), 424-425.

authorities to handle sacred liturgical items. Far from dirty, desperate, and so poor they were forced to prostitute themselves, these women appear as comfortable members of the community.

Conclusion

Laundry during the medieval period was carried out on both riversides and over rows of steaming cauldrons in castles, primarily by women but under special circumstances also by men. While it should not be said that women doing the wash by the river, serving maids, or even professional laundry ladies were not at times the subject of ridicule abuse, or harassment, Polish evidence from the towns, the churches, and the royal court simply does not support the general stereotype that laundresses were particularly reviled, an argument that should perhaps be re-examined more broadly.

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