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# ECHILIBRUL ÎNTRE ANTITEZE

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## ***Bel Ami* in the Austro-Hungarian Empire: Sándor Bródy's Novel *The Knight of the Day* as a Maupassant Adaptation**

**M**aupassant's *Bel Ami* was an instant and tremendous success not only in France but all around Europe. When it was published in 1885, it had 37 printings in the first four months. Translations were made within a couple of years, and Hungary was no exemption. In 1895 the first translation by Gyula P. Zempéni appeared with the title *Asszonyok kegyeltje*<sup>1</sup>, which already sounded rather archaic at the time of its publication and could mean both „whom women love” and „gigolo”. Zempléni (1856-1902) was a journalist and a prolific translator from four languages. From French he translated not only George Ohnet and Jules Verne, but also Émil Zola and other works by Maupassant too. The three subsequent translations had either the title *A szép fiú* („the handsome boy”<sup>2</sup>) or *A szépfíú* („the beau”<sup>3</sup>). The frequent re-translations and their numerous editions suggest that the Hungarian audience shared the European fascination about the novel. What I would like to discuss here, however, is not the Hungarian reception of Maupassant's book in general, but a Hungarian novella that transposed the story into a Central-European environment in a rather sophisticated way.

In Maupassant's novel it is hardly more than an accidental circumstance that the protagonist has a career as a journalist. He has no qualification for any job in his desperate starting situation, and he receives friendly help in this particular area. We might regard it as a kind of criticism that he can make such a great career without any talent or preparation as a journalist, but actually this is not the point. It is female

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1. Guy de Maupassant, *Asszonyok kegyeltje*, transl. Gyula P. Zempéni, Budapest, Minta-Antiquarium, 1895.

2. *Id.*, *A szép fiú*, transl. Zoltán Somlyó, Budapest, Kultúra, 1918.

3. *Id.*, *A szépfíú*, transl. Marcell Benedek, Budapest, Athenaeum, 1923; *Id.*, *A szépfíú*, transl. Bognár Róbert, Budapest, Ulpius-Ház, 2007.

help that promotes his career, rather than his professional achievement, and this could happen in any area of activity. It is not the world of the press which allows his particular progress, but French society. Sándor Bródy (1863-1924) in *The Knight of the Day* (*A nap lovagja*), however, transformed the story into a novel on the special way in which journalists lived in the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the turn of the century.

The story takes place in a convalescent pleasure resort, where the protagonist, Aurél Asztalos, is recovering after a nervous breakdown. He incurs the good favour of a prince there (by seducing the prince's mistress), who makes him popular among the elite, and helps him get elected as a member of the parliament. Using his popularity Asztalos seems set to have a good job, as well as the prospect of marrying a young, naïve, and very rich girl. The girl's brother, however, challenges him to a duel and kills him. From this short plot summary it cannot be seen that there are actually two journalists who play important roles in the novel. The second appears as an antithesis of the protagonist. When they first meet, the narration presents the other from Asztalos's viewpoint, making clear why Asztalos does not like him:

Under a big black hat a shadow in a ragged but huge coat started speaking. The young man recognized in him someone he hardly knew, a journalist of fifth rank, an insipid, unsociable, grim fellow, who could not really make any friends at home. That little man with a fatal disease was always like frozen bile: burning or souring everyone. Most of his money was spent on medicine and duels<sup>1</sup>.

The emotional and intellectual zenith of the novella, which narrates the story of Asztalos' almost-career, is a long night discussion between the two journalists. Asztalos has to face a duel the next morning, and he has nobody to speak to among his new friends, patron, allies, and lovers about his mortal anxiety, only a colleague, although they are not friends. This night talk becomes intimate when Asztalos asks the question: „Tell me, János, why are you angry at me?”<sup>2</sup> It is the first time we even come across the name of the other journalist, so that he becomes a real person only in this late phase of the plot. His family name is never communicated, only the nickname he has in the professional community: „Helynélküli János” (roughly, John Lackplace or Jobless<sup>3</sup>). This is easily understandable from the portrait drawn by the narrator (but probably focalized by Asztalos):

1. Sándor Bródy, „A nap lovagja”, in B. S., *Színészvér – Az ezüst kecske – A nap lovagja*, ed. Juhász, Ferencné, Budapest, Szépirodalmi, 1969, p. 430.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 537.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 533.

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[...] the minor journalist [...] could not make himself at home in any newspaper. He quit as soon as he „noticed” something. He could never accept that a newspaper is not always an ideal institution, but also a business enterprise. He hated the principle that the audience should be continuously courted, and he would bang the desks with his thick stick in his furious anger that not everybody loved the homeland seriously enough<sup>1</sup>.

The opposing figure to a „minor journalist” is not called major but a „journalist of position”, one who has a fixed place in the world of press, while the other never has a place. The nickname, through the reference to John Lackland, King of England, also suggests that he is a loser. In light of this long nightly conversation of two journalists, who obviously do not like each other, who have very different ideas on the profession, and who have rather different positions in the professional hierarchy, the title of the novella can be interpreted as also referring to journalists.

János explains that a journalist should be the knight of the day:

He accompanies the day in full armour. Fencing, fighting, suffering, killing or dying for the ideal it brings. One for this, one for that ideal, depending on which is handy. Watching the cause, waking, fighting for it. At a smart pace, like a gentleman and a soldier, as it suits a knight<sup>2</sup>.

The press has power, but those producing the newspapers should be worthy of that power: „those who seek vocation and martyrdom by the pine desks”<sup>3</sup>.

We should be priests, teachers, and soldiers in the same person. Wise, good, determined, and true believers. A sort of modern knights who volunteer to guard the day. The work should begun again every day. But we should finish every day with saying that the next will be better, cleaner, braver, and more beautiful<sup>4</sup>.

This ideal of the ascetic journalist who relentlessly fights for current ideas is obviously a personal obsession, not shared by his colleagues, a fact which also upsets János. And this description does not fit Aurél Asztalos at all. Indeed János tells him: „You are just a kind of fake knight of the day”<sup>5</sup>. The title therefore means „journalist”, but it refers only ironically to the protagonist, in fact with a double irony: the adjective *lovagias* („knightly” or „chivalrous”) derived from *lovag*

1. *Ibid.*, p. 536.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 541.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 542.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 542-543.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 541.

(„knight”) appears several times in the novel and mostly means „relating to a duel”. The journalist becomes a knight only for one day, to take part in a duel in which he is to be shot dead. For this reason he is the knight of *the* day – that is, of a single day. After his death the prince says of him: „The Hungarian nation is a chivalrous nation. This young man was a chivalrous member of it”<sup>1</sup>. Asztalos’ allegedly chivalrous behaviour seems to imply that he, as the son of a craftsman (a fact that the prince, of course, does not know), has successfully adapted to the elite behavioural code. The posthumous laudatory speech that John Lackplace, as his second, delivers at the site of the duel has a different implication, despite the similar content: „For a woman he had nothing to do with, he stood here. You must admit that means something. He behaved properly, didn’t he?”<sup>2</sup> This is what John says this after the duel, but Asztalos actually panics before the event, and John has to speak sharply to him: „You bring discredit on the profession you represent”<sup>3</sup>. After the tragedy John praises him not only because he behaved in keeping with the knightly code of the elite, but because he did it as a journalist, as a representative of the profession. From a fake knight of the day he becomes a true one – not through his committed daily work, but through his death. The conflict between the behavioural codes of different social strata is staged by the appearance of the child-Asztalos in the journalist-Asztalos in the state of panic that precedes his death; it is not the voice of the inner child but rather the voice of lower social groups: the son of a craftsman does not care about the elite value of bravery, and tries to avoid the duel to save his life.

However fine this posthumous praise may be, it is no substitute for what Asztalos sought in life. He chose the life of a journalist to make a living, to step up into a social class above his own, and when he seemed to be given the chance of a lifetime, to make a great career. Although the text always refers to him as a journalist, he is presented as a typical Hungarian (or rather Central-European) writer at the turn of the century. In an inner monologue he summarizes his achievements as follows:

You wrote three major political pamphlets, two volumes of lyric poetry, three volumes of verse drama, you won a prize from the Academy, you spent many nights translating the *Politische Correspondenz* and other news agency sources, you interviewed all the Balkan ministers, you call all the great actors by their first names, you were the lover of the second heroine, and once nominated to be a member of parliament. You have a great position in the public fora, your name is well known everywhere in Hungary, and your poor relatives call you „sir”<sup>4</sup>.

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 557.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 556.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 554.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 447.

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 43

2. *Ibid.*, p. 50

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Lyrical poet, playwright, political journalist seem inseparable roles in this overview. One can assume that Asztalos established intimacy with the leading actors as an author (although he may have had to write reviews of plays now and then). If it is so, there does not seem to be any basic difference between having good connections with actors as a playwright and to ministers as a journalist, between pamphlet and poetry. The Hungarian Academy of Sciences awarded many kinds of prizes in the 19th century, but winning any of them may suggest that Asztalos was a successful writer. The Academy's prize and the genre of verse drama, which was rather outdated, may position his success in a rather conservative institutional context. He does not regard literature as more important than journalism; rather they seem to be two aspects of the same activity.

Some of Bródy's contemporaries wrote articles on the problem that the monotonous and time-consuming work of journalism ruined many talented writers. They regarded the tasks of a journalist and a writer as fundamentally different, notwithstanding the fact that the vast majority of writers made a living as journalists. It was exceptional if somebody did not. Asztalos does not seem to have any problem with this situation: he regards himself as a professional producer of texts, whether belletristic or journalistic. What he does not like is the uncertain, in-between social position the profession provides. His insight is correct: the social prestige of the journalists was in a transitory stage at the time. The discrepancy described here was real: those on the lower steps of the social ladder regarded journalists as members of the elite, but in reality they were not, neither financially, legally, nor socially. A journalist may have daily personal contact with those in power, but is not accepted as their equal, nor does he have a comparable income.

It is from this position that Asztalos tries to make a career shift on the basis of his acquaintance with a prince. He imagines the social rise in three stages. First he should be elected to the House of Commons, an opportunity which is actually offered to him by the prince. Although there are theoretically democratic elections in a constituency in which he is the only landlord, he will informally tell all the voters (his employees and tenants) who to elect. Asztalos calls being a member of parliament „the normal Hungarian career”<sup>1</sup>. In the Hungarian parliament at the turn of the century, a professional journalist was not a rare phenomenon, often due to good personal and/or political connections to the political parties and a well-known name. The daily allowance of a member of the parliament, however, was not enough for the life Asztalos strives for. His second step is therefore „to get a well-paid job”<sup>2</sup>.

1. *Ibid.*, p. 431.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 506.

This he imagines in the area he knows the best, namely the press: „to have a moderately liberal newspaper launched for him”<sup>1</sup>. You can obviously make more money making others work for you than working yourself, but it is not certain Asztalos thinks of that. The text does not say anything about the owners of the purported newspaper, but it is probable that he would not be one of them, but rather an editor-in-chief, employed and well paid by the investors. The owners may want their investments returned not necessarily through sales, but by gaining the favor of the prince or the imperial elite in general. The third step would be marriage, in order to receive the huge dowry of the rich Annie.

A piece of literature can reveal much about the functioning of the represented society, but even more about the ways in which that functioning was understood and interpreted in the given society. On the one hand, the relation between the two is usually questionable, as is the relation between the author’s ideas and the wider social discourse; on the other, it frequently happens that the features of a society represented in one piece of literature do not have their origin directly in the social experience but in other pieces of literature. Such literary narratives may, however, inform and influence the ways in which we experience social functioning. It is therefore often difficult to decide whether what we see in a literary work is the influence of another, or a genuine social experience seen through the narrative offered by another work. The latter seems to be the case with Bródy’s novel: it describes a specifically Hungarian (or Austro-Hungarian) experience through continuous references to Maupassant’s *Bel Ami*, interpreted here as the master narrative of a journalist’s career at the end of the 19th century. Maupassant’s protagonist Duroy has less misgiving in his social progress than Bródy’s Asztalos, and is much less professional as a journalist. At the beginning it is a woman (whom he later marries) who writes, or significantly revises his articles, and finds the information worth writing on his behalf. But he uses the same methods to get rich: eventually he finds a way to become editor-in-chief, and marries cleverly. He makes half a million francs through his first marriage (apart from other advantages), since he forces his wife to share the heritage of count Vaudrec, a „friend of the family”, and probably her lover. He then subsequently marries the young and naïve daughter of a rich family.

The most obvious difference is that while Charles Duroy successfully carries out the social climb of a journalist with female help, Asztalos ultimately fails. This difference is so obvious that at first glance it may prevent one from noticing another, poetic, difference in temporality which has significant consequences for the

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1. *Ibid.*

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construction of narrative. Maupassant tells the story of a decade, in great detail, linearly, while Bródy condenses the story – in half the length – into a couple of weeks. As a result, the women figures equivalent to Duroy's wives must have their affairs with the protagonist simultaneously. Duroy has many other affairs, for sure, some of them simultaneously too, but the narrative discusses his two wives one after the other. The first, Madeleine, can ease the career of a friend, later husband, as the lover of rich, powerful men of great influence. She seems to be the model for Juli, the mistress of the prince and the lover of Asztalos. Juli speaks of love, money and career in a very practical and rational manner, exactly like Madeleine Duroy does, although the only help she can or needs to offer is to secure the benevolence of the prince for Asztalos. The youth and naïveté of Susanne, the second wife, make her rather similar to Annie, Asztalos' would-be fiancée.

This condensation serves not only to save space, but also to suggest that in the Austro-Hungarian social context a journalist has only one chance in life. There is only one day that offers opportunities; one cannot plan for several years. Asztalos has to consider the option of marriage with both women, but due to lack of time he can marry neither. His social climb seems to be prevented by a fortuitous event, namely his death in a duel, but it may be the logical consequence of his own strategy. In the social practice of the historical period, which we can detect both in contemporary literature and in newspaper reports, there was no need for a duel to be fatal to anyone<sup>1</sup>. People were killed in duels, of course, but that happened quite rarely, and if it did, it was always a sensation. It is more relevant how the novel itself speaks of fatality in duel. Asztalos tells himself in an inner monologue: „You had some duels, moreover you were second in a fatal one”<sup>2</sup>. It is said of John „Lackplace” that „he spent most of his money on medicine and duels”<sup>3</sup>, so he seems to have had many duels without any fatality worth mentioning. Not even a duel is necessary after the sort of verbal conflict Asztalos is involved in:

Journalists are the best seconds. The weakest character becomes a romantic hero as soon as he is in charge of a knightly affair. And they are incredibly clever; they frequently solve very complicated affairs – peacefully<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore the question is why the adversary, a cold-blooded sharpshooter, wants to kill Asztalos. Because there is absolutely no doubt about his intention all along.

1. Miklós Hadas, *A modern férfi születése*, Budapest, Helikon, 2003, pp. 85-108.

2. Bródy, *op. cit.*, p. 407.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 430.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 519-520.



The narrative itself offers some explanations, but apart from those there is an intertextual one too, which makes Bródy's novel a parody of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. This fortune-hunter Romeo, separated from the girl not by old enmity between their families but the even older enmity between social classes, is also involved in a duel with the girl's brother. The basic difference is that the tragic plot cannot develop further, since this Tybalt easily kills his opponent and ends all the conflicts in advance.

The text of the novel reflects twice on the possible motives of the baron. Aurél Asztalos wonders to himself:

Maybe what has been told was not the real reason, only a pretext. Did he want to wipe me out because of his sister? And he did not tell her a word. They are that way; they are capable of such actions. They are cold and silent as if made of iron<sup>1</sup>.

At the end of the novel, the narrator sketches some alternatives to continue the story. In one of them the brother has to explain his motive to his sister, and their dialogue starts as follows:

„Why did you do that? I want to know. Tell me!”

„He protected a woman.”

„A woman?”

„His lover. And she wanted to thrust herself upon you”<sup>2</sup>.

What the explanations have in common is that the journalist had to be dealt with in order to protect the prestige and social integrity of the family. But if it is so, Asztalos' attempt at a major career shift necessarily fails, due to a simple manoeuvre of defence on behalf of the elite he challenges. It remains unclear whether Annie's brother knew of her romantic commitment to the journalist. But this is not a really important question, after all. Juli knew of it, and that was her reason to provoke a conflict with the family of her rival. She started her own game to humiliate both Annie and Asztalos. And in the conflict he had no choice but to protect Juli and fight a duel.

A final question arises: Does Bródy's protagonist fail because he is socially awkward and impatient? Maybe he simply does not have the skills to manage two love affairs simultaneously without letting the women know of each other, and he cannot postpone the rich marriage until he has completely harvested what the first

1. *Ibid.*, p. 533.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 560.

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phase can offer him. Or is it the Austro-Hungarian social context that prevents a journalist from climbing so high with female help? Maybe a society that was much more closed than the French one of the period reacts more violently to attempts to overstep boundaries. This may also imply that rare opportunities must be exploited faster here, and in this case Asztalos acts so fast not due to his awkwardness, greed, or precipitation, but because of his realistic evaluation of his chances. However, his failure stems from his haste, from the fact that he attempts to do simultaneously what Duroy did successively, that he tries to achieve in a few days what the French model did over a decade. If the different strategy follows from the different social contexts, the situation is rather hopeless: one cannot proceed cautiously, yet haste increases the risks immensely.

Finally it is worth looking at the role of the prince in *The Knight of the Day*. However unprofessional a journalist Charles Duroy was at the beginning, his social rise depended on his success as a journalist too. Asztalos' professionalism is not profitable at all, but a relatively close relationship with a single member of the highest elite is enough to create the chance for a career jump, and this member of the aristocracy does not need to actually do anything to promote him apart from publicly demonstrating that he likes him. The snobbish, servile community will enthusiastically embrace a person liked by a prince – up to a point. If the only real chance for a journalist to rise socially in the turn-of-the-century Austria-Hungary is a rather improbable friendship with a prominent figure of the imperial-military aristocracy, it can be understood that there is no real chance at all.

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