“PLAYING-CARDS ARE MY CALENDAR AND PRAYERBOOK”

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“A kártyát továbbá világ tükrének
mondhatom és abban képit sok rendeknek
láthatom”

(Cards to be the world’s mirror,
as one thinks,
which reflects without error
many things.)

(From a poem by István Koháry [1649–1731])
RMKT XYII/16 – p. 160, strophe 242

The international tale type catalogue lists a joke or anecdote with the words of the title of my paper. The same explanation of cards, within a similar story is known in the French, English, Irish, Swedish, Danish, German, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Icelandic popular literature of the 19th century. As Bolte, the grand master of comparative folklore research, has shown in his studies (1901, 1903), which serve even today as the basic list of old variants, the “spiritual explanation of the playing cards” theme was very popular in Europe in the 19th century. The oldest known version (analyzed by Gaïdoz) is a chapbook printed by David Jones (1766) Cydymaith diddan. According to Bolte the oldest French Version was the Explication morale du jeu de Cartes (1809), and the German one was the chapbook Das Kartenspiel in der Kirche (1805–1814). György1 has shown that Könyi (a Hungarian writer publishing the first Hungarian variant) was using an older German publication, the seven volumes collection of German anecdotes, Vade mecum (1764–1772 by Friedrich Nicolai in Berlin), where in volume VII, p. 130 (published 1777) the same anecdote appeared as Karten-Encyclopädie. Exactly the same text was reprinted in another German collection of anecdotes (Säke mit Anekdoten gefüllt, 1788 in first group “Erster Sack”, pp. 82–83, as nr. 116). Only the German variants mention the following equivalents, which are different in other European publications:

3 = three youth in fiery furnace (elsewhere: Holy Trinity, three graces, Jonah’s three days staying in the whale),

King = Frederick of Prussia (elsewhere: Lord, or the local sovereign).

Two other features of the German text: jack (knave) is interpreted as the stupid parson, and suits are not particularly interpreted. Könyi has carefully followed the

1 The recent reprint edition of György’s studies (1988) does not give new data, that is why I am not referring to it. It was not my aim to give here a full literature on Könyi or on other topics. The best available edition of today is Könyi (1981: 241–243). The text was slightly modernized and published without commentaries.
German version (which can be traced back to the English version, with a “grenadier Richard”).

In spite of the several reprints of KÖNYI’s book, the anecdote of card explanation was not popular in other Hungarian publications. According to GYÖRGY (1932: 64) it was because of its length. He was able to find only one later publication: BAKA-humor. Összegyújté a Rokkant Huszár (Soldier Humour. Collected by an Invalid Huszar), Budapest, 1878. p. 106. GYÖRGY (1934: 146) added later another reference. József CSUKÁSS: A magyar clerus adomákbann (Anecdotes on Hungarian Clergymen) Budapest, 1879. p. 272 was mentioning the story, but without retelling it in full. GYÖRGY (1938: 53–55) published KÖNYI’s version in a popular anthology of Hungarian anecdotes, too.

The Grand Hungarian Master of Jewish philology, Sándor (Alexander) SCHEIBER gave further references to the topic. Studying the Hungarian variants of the so called “Catechism Song” (for folk tale study it is a well-known type of cumulative tales) he duly refers to THOMPSON (1961: 522), type number 2010 “Ehod mi yodea (One; who knows?) Le dodici parole della verità. Las doce palabras retornadas. The numbers from one to twelve are brought into relation with various objects, often of religious significance.”
The philological literature on the Circum-European variants of the Catechism Song is in fact endless. In his well-known summary of cumulative tales, Archer TAYLOR (1935: 171, 173; see especially note 37: references to older literature) lists the “explanation of cards” theme as among the secondary forms of the Catechism Song. SCHEIBER (first in 1947, best available publication 1977: 207; see also 1996: 582–601) connected the two motifs. Later on in different papers he was gathering various data to the Hungarian and Jewish variants of the Catechism Song.

In his English publication (first 1952, better available in a reprint edition 1985: 26–33) “A Hungarian Encyclopedia of Cards. On the Parodies of Catechism Song” he was able to publish a Hungarian chapbook on the same topic. Franckia kártyák jelen- téseinek kimutatása (Explanation of the Meaning of the French Cards) Buda, 1846, 8°, pp. 4. (Gyurián and Bagó, printers) follows the topic in a form different from that by KÖNYI. Here a private soldier is accused by his sergeant, and the major questions him about his scandalous behaviour. The explanations show that the unknown Hungarian translator worked from a German text. In fact, we know about a similar German chapbook, printed in West-Hungary: Auslegung der französischen Karten (Ungarisch-Altenburg, 1855, 16°, pp. 8). Its text is more complete than of the Hungarian publication, thus SCHEIBER admits that perhaps an earlier edition of the Ungarisch-Altenburg German print was the direct source for the 1846 Hungarian publication. (Fig. 2).

SCHEIBER refers to KÖNYI (and Lajos GYÖRGY) duly, mentioning also a third Hungarian variant of the KÖNYI story, which remained unknown to GYÖRGY. The famous Hungarian satirical newspaper Üstökös (Comet) was publishing a short anecdote (Vol. XX. 1877: 221) under the following title: A jezsuita atyák magyarázata szerint – under pseudonym “Filco Pater” – A franczia játékkártyák (The French Playing Cards. Explained by Jesuit Fathers). SCHEIBER refers to another, indirect case, too (remembered by the Hungarian historian of cards, Vilmos ZOLNAY). The two chapbooks were kept at the Hungarian National Library (Széchényi Könyvtár, Budapest). (Fig. 1).

Feeling that his English paper was not available in Hungary, later SCHEIBER published an updated version in a Hungarian literary journal (1983). (This version is better available as: 1984: 23–28). His data and conclusion in 1984 are equivalent to those of the 1952 paper.

If we sum up the available Hungarian data we could give the following list:

1782: KÖNYI’s version, from a German (Prussian) anecdote, later editions even in the 19th century.

2 TAYLOR (1935: 172) lists the important folklore studies on “the twelve numbers”, and not a special list of “spiritual card explanations”. It would be the task of a separate study to collect all the publications about that particular theme.

3 Professor SCHEIBER’s unbelievably rich activity is exactly reflected in his bibliographies (1977:Vol. II. 507–573; 1984: Vol. III. 587–608, still not complete), with references to his studies on the “symbolic card explanations”. His dissertation “Mikszáth Kálmán és a keleti folklór” was published first in book form (1949), its first chapter deals with the Catechism Song, and was separately published before (1947).
1840: A dandy in Pest explains the playing cards with geographical and political allusions (see ZOLNAY 1928: 252–253).
1846: Buda print (from another German print).
1855: Ungarisch-Altenburg German print (perhaps in older prints, too).
1877: Üstököös version (French Jesuits).
1878: Invalid Hussar version.
1879: CSUKÁSSÍ version (with clergymen).

SCHEIBER (1952, later 1985: 29–33) published the full text of the 1855 version, together with a facsimile of the 1846 and 1855 frontispieces. The complete text of the 1846 version was published in SCHEIBER (1983, later 1984: 23–29). Péter
POGÁNY in his summary of Hungarian chap literature (1978: 239, 240) repeats the conclusions of SCHEIBER and prints the 1846 frontispiece. When VEHMAS and BENEDEK (1988: 187) neglected to refer to versions other than that of KÖNYI, they were wrong. On the other hand, to my best knowledge, no Hungarian version from oral tradition was yet published (see, however ZOLNAY and CSUKÁSSI). Since the recent Enzyklopädie des Märchens published the entry “Kartenspiel” after finishing my original paper, with excellent references of international variants (BREDNICH 1993), it is not necessary to list all the international data, which have been accumulated after the summaries of BOLTE, TAYLOR and THOMPSON, mentioned above. AARNE–THOMPSON’s tale type number 1613 (already by AARNE 1910: 56) is well known at least in the following traditions: Finnish, Finnish–Swedish, Swedish, Danish, Icelandic, Scottish, Irish, English, French, Catalan, Walloon, German, Russian, English–American, Spanish–American [THOMPSON 1961: 460].

From folk tale type catalogues published more recently we can add various other traditions, too, e.g. Latvian, White Russian, Frisian, French–Canadian, etc. The Hungarian versions should be listed, too. Still it is interesting, that in some traditions, surrounded with variants (as e.g. in the Norwegian) the carefully constructed tale type indices give no “explanation or cards” tale type reference. In most cases the number of the variants within the given tradition is relatively small, which calls for a later (and written) origin of the type. In this respect the Hungarian data are also of paradigmatic character.

When summarizing the crucial motif of the plot, THOMPSON in his Motif-Index (2nd edition, 1955–58: Vol. 3, p. 434) gave a short summary listed under the headline “Symbolic interpretations”. As motif number H603 we read the following: “Symbolic interpretation of playing cards. Soldier reproved for playing cards during church service says that playing cards are his prayerbook and calendar. Ace: one God, one Faith, one Baptism; 2: old and new Testaments; 3: Trinity; 4: evangelists; 5: wise virgins; 6: days of creation; 7: sabbath; 8: Noah’s family; 9: ungrateful lepers; 10: commandments; knave (jack): Judas; queen: (of Sheba); king: God; 12 face cards: 12 months; etc.”

For our recent paper it is important to notice that KÖNYI’s version, just as his German source, follow carefully the general pattern. Even in details (as e.g., identifying the parson with Judah and with Jack, mentioning the Queen of Sheba) the German original (from Vade mecum collection of anecdotes) reflects the basic European structure.

But folklorists made a serious fault in most of the previous studies on the topic. They were not paying the necessary attention to the proper history of playing cards in Europe, in order to understand the motivation of the story.

Perhaps the only exception was the English research tradition. When Katharine M. BRIGGS published the greatest anthology of English folk tales and legends, she presented one full version (“The Perpetual Almanack or Gentleman Soldier’s Prayer Book”) and two further references (the ELLIOT notebooks’ version under the title “The Soldier’s Bible” another version “The religious Card-Player” – see BRIGGS (1971: Part B. Volume 2, 107–109). When she described the material available for
Cards Spiritualized; OR THE SOLDIER'S ALMANACK,
Bible and Prayer Book.

RICHARD MIDDLETON, A soldier, unwillingly drives fortune, with the help of the regiment, to a church in Chippen, instead of pulling out a lottery, like the honest soldiers, to lend the priests some money. He was a poor man, left behind the camp. This happy behavior did not long pass unnoticed, both by the generals and some of his trusted friends, which he belonged. The latter, in particular, remembered him to the soldiers, and in his stead, conducted them into church before the Major, to whom he presented a bound volume of Roger’s & Oliver’s Beulah behawder during divers notions. Well, Major, said the Major, what value have you for this foreign hand-book behawder? If you cannot make any apology or allege any reason for it, it’s well. If you cannot, don’t puish it; I will only you without dure to be severely puished for it. Since your honour is so good reputed as you are, I will inform you, you have b[ch]t eight days so mooch, with a bare absence of 48 per day, which your Honour will turn shrewdly be hardly believe to maintain a man in meat, drink, lodging, and other necessaries contrary he may want without a bible, prayer book, or any other good book. I’m telling this, Major, for my benefit of all the soldiers who are privy, and which I know to be a good, true, and honest man. As far as I see, it is a man of a couple of good days in church, where he is now present, and where you see him sit, to the service of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. A man, born in memory dear to this present kind, Master, Miss, Lake, and John. — A man, the first with Virginia, who, when ordered to trim their house, there were no indifferent, but few. — Miss,场所 any memory: are, with, and few were finish. — A man that in 8 days God, parents handsome and good. — A man, that in the seventh day, he call from all that he had made, in E" induce, of the sight eighteenth persons to the Olivia, and the Bible, with his three books and whose 8 years. — A man, of the two reasons, to be and other, there was one, but two men. — A man, the first with Virginia, who, when ordered to trim their house, there were no indifferent, but few. — Miss,场所 any memory: are, with, and few were finish. — A man that in 8 days God, parents handsome and good. — A man, that in the seventh day, he call from all that he had made, in E" induce, of the sight eighteenth persons to the Olivia, and the Bible, with his three books and whose 8 years. — A man, of the two reasons, to be and other, there was one, but two men. — A man, the first with Virginia, who, when ordered to trim their house, there were no indifferent, but few.

The Soldier then answered as follows: Will you give me the three Scarlet in the three place so you are in the peak? No, said the Major. Well, measured the Soldier, the three Scarlet, I knew, in the Serpent who brought me before you. If I knew, replied the Major, whether he be the three Scarlet on me, but I am sure he is the greatest fool. The Major then answered as follows: When I count the number of days in a pack of cards, there are many more days than there is a year. When I count how many cards are in a pack, I find there are fifty-two cards in a pack. I find there are fifty-two weeks in a year. When I count how many months are in a year, there is a year. So that the pack of cards is in both calendars, and the lover is true. The Major then answered as follows: I have counted them, and there is no reason to suppose the Soldier well, gave this picture of money and told, he was the greatest fellow he ever heard in his life.

(W. B. F. W. W. Y.)

Fig. 3
Playing-Cards Are My Calendar and Prayerbook

...her (i.e. the so-called F. J. NORTON collection of rare English texts, where in volume V. on p. 140 sqq. the text was kept), she noticed (BRIGGS 1970: Part A. Volume 1, p. 62, labeled as type 1613) that NORTON took the story of “A New Game of Cards” from the famous English book on the history of cards (E. S. TAYLOR 1865). On the other hand, the text “The Religious Card Player” is an American version. She referred to WILSON (1939) with a more modern printed version, and to another local English publication. Based on WILSON’s paper BAUGHMAN (1953) was listing 4 English and 1 English–American versions; later (1966: 41) he gave a reference to an Illinois Negro variant, too.

The very origin of the story “Symbolic explanation of playing cards” derives from another symbolic interpretation of the numbers 1 to 12 (or more). It is a timeless old motif. On the other hand, there is a trend in European card printing to give a historical, educational moralizing, philosophical or religious motivation to the cards, both in illustrations and texts, sometimes in special rules of the game. Just to list some of the most important packs and prints (see for further details HARGRAVE 1966: 452. s.v. “Biblical playing cards”) I could refer to the following sets:

German: The “Geistliche-Deutsches Cartenspiel” by Andreas Strobl (Sulsbach, 1603);
Dutch: The Spiritual Card Game of Love (Antwerp, 1666);
Italian: Biblical Playing Cards by Francesco Zuccarelli (1748, with later new editions);
French: cards of the type “Jeu de Société” from 1772 on, with biblical texts and motifs;
English: biblical cards from about 1760;
American: “The Lottery of the Pious” (1744, Christopher Sower, Germantown) or “Spiritual Playing Cards” (1786, John and Charles Wesley).

When we compare the practice and the titles of some of the oldest text versions (e.g. Explication morale du jeu de Cartes, Paris, turn of 19th century; German “geistliche Auslegung des Kartenspiels”, etc.) the similarity will be even more striking.

According to our recent knowledge, most probably in the last third of the 18th century, the existing practice of the “moralizing” or “biblical” playing cards gave the idea to a writer to combine it with the already well known motif of the “symbolic interpretation of the numbers, etc.” Then a story in the genre of anecdote was created, and thanks to its witty theme, it became a hit among cheap (or chap) prints. HOFFMANN (1972, second edition 1983: 184, note 48) refers to HARDIN: Histoire du Jeu de Cartes du Grenadier Richard (Paris, 1811), and a printing block in the collection of Sylvia MANN “The Perpetual Almanack, or, Gentleman Soldier’s Prayer Book” (Printer J. Catnach, London, beginning of the 19th century). Unfortunately, this is a misleading reference. Miss Sylvia MANN’s rich collection (Fig. 3) does not contain...

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4 BRIGGS was based on the Norton Collection of rarity documents of English folk narratives, from various sources.
the actual packs of cards,\textsuperscript{5} but the already well known printed publications compiled under that label. Thus there is still a missing link between the literary and card traditions.

It seems to me, we both (see BREDNICH 1993) were writing at the same time somehow a new summary of AaTh 1613, sharing the view that the proper history of the playing cards will give new results in the comparative history of the theme. Of course there are further tasks of the research.

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