

“NEM JOBB Ő IS A DEÁKNÉ VÁSZNÁNÁL”

A HUNGARIAN FIDDLER’S SONG BEFORE 1580

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“Ego ac tu idem trahimus iugum.”

“Asinus asinum non prehendit.”

“Qualis vervex, talis offa, tanti offa, quanti intinctus panis.”

Abstract: There is probably only one idiomatic phrase in the proverb collection by János Baranyai Decsi that doubtless originates in contemporary everyday Hungarian language and the 16th century literary background of which can be clearly identified. The phrase “Nem jobb ő is a deákné vásznánál” (“Not a whit better than anybody else”) has always been popular since the 16th century. The funny, sarcastic poem (*The cloth of the famous deákné*, written before 1580) recounts the fatal marriage of a certain Máté *deák* – partly in the form of dialogue. This poem is one of the oldest Hungarian women mocking songs within the genre of wedding songs. It demonstrates all the characteristics of the old Hungarian *trufa* genre: it can be performed as a farce, the joke has its cream and it is based on mummery and pretence: it provides a parody of a well-known human type. It is possible that this *trufa* was a stock play of contemporary popular tricksters and jugglers. It mocked the wife of Máté *deák* who was “lazy to weave”.

Keywords: Latin proverbs, Hungarian proverbs, literary background, context, manuscript song-books, fiddler’s songs, vernacular poetry, Protestant wedding songs, women mocking songs, *trufa* genre, Baranyai Decsi

The proverb collection by János BARANYAI DECSI includes proverbs that have their connections with Hungarian literary works of the 16th century: These proverbs indicate a clear-cut reference to a wider context. However, there is probably only one idiomatic phrase in the book that doubtless originates in contemporary everyday Hungarian language (that is to say, it is not a translation or an adaptation) and the 16th century literary background of which can be clearly identified.

The phrase “Nem jobb ő is a deákné vásznánál”¹ has always been popular since the 16th century. János BARANYAI DECSI related it to three different Latin proverbs, but always with the definite aim to explain the essence of the Latin proverbs with a well-known Hungarian proverb understandable to all. There is not any word by word correlation between the Latin and the Hungarian texts.²

Although “deákné vászna” is mentioned even today quite often, as it is a living and popular phrase in Hungarian, its origin and meaning have become obscure in the course of the centuries. It is no wonder that witty but baseless etymologies ap-

¹ “Nem jobb ő is a Deákné vásznánál.” – approximately: “Not a whit better than anybody else.” Word by word: “Not a whit better than Mrs Deák’s cloth.” Or: “Not a whit better than the cloth of the teacher’s wife.”

² BARANYAI DECSI (1598: 204, 395)

peared one after the other: the proverbial “Deákné” was considered to depict the woman beating, paddling her husband.³

However interested proverb researchers were in the anecdote hidden in the background of the proverb, the origins of the story about the cloth of *deákné* remained completely unknown for long: “Who the certain Mrs Deák” (or may be the wife of the “teacher”) was, to whose cloth we compare a reproachable man or someone with a finger in the pie will probably remain a secret. It is certain though that if she was a living person at all, she must have lived before the middle of the 16th century.” – wrote Gábor O. NAGY in 1967,⁴ although the old poem written in Hungarian, a fiddler’s song about the cloth of the famous *deákné* had been known for about 100 years at that time. The poem was copied into a manuscript songbook on the turn of the 17th and 18th century.⁵

The funny, sarcastic poem recounts the fatal marriage of a certain Máté *deák* (i.e. a teacher, any person who has studied e.g. Latin grammar) – partly in the form of dialogue. Once Máté goes to the neighbouring village, to find a wife. He instantly falls for Ilkó, the beautiful but spoiled daughter of a widow. The beauty of the girl dazzles him so much so he marries her immediately. Ilkó arrives with heaps of trousseau to Máté, which they live up in the course of the years and finally they become poor as the darnedly lazy and impertinent woman had not learnt to weave or spin and does not show any inclination to do so even now. At that time plague is devastating the vicinity. Máté is often invited to funeral feasts, and it is this that gives him the idea of pretending to be dead in order to try Ilkó. The woman is frightened, not really because she thinks she became a widow, but because even she knows that “the dead are covered with a shroud in the coffin” and she herself will have to weave this shroud. Catching at every straw, she takes the little yarn left from her trousseau and nooses it around Máté’s teeth at the top and to his toes at the bottom. Thus she tries to weave a shroud for him but in the meantime slanders her “dead” husband who is not even good for a loom. Máté *deák* resurrects at this point and gives the woman a sound drubbing, but even this could not make her start spinning and weaving.

The connection between the poem and the proverb was only realised by researchers when the poem appeared in a popular treasury in 1982.⁶ Following the publication of the text by Béla VARJAS, a noted linguist, Ferenc A. MOLNÁR clarified the connection of the song and the proverb in a thorough article pointing out that this most comedy like poem must have been among the most effective ones in the category of similar songs and the proverb twice recorded by János BARANYAI DECSI finds its direct origin in this song.⁷

Ferenc A. MOLNÁR also indicated that the poem preceded the proverb in time. Similarly to Béla VARJAS, he also set the date of the origin of the poem to the mid-

³ A. MOLNÁR, Ferenc (1980: 105); JÓKAI, Mór (1992: 273)

⁴ O. NAGY, Gábor (1979: 112–114)

⁵ STOLL, Béla 1963 No. 111

⁶ VARJAS, Béla (1979: Vol. II. 965–969); the critical edition of the poem see ÁCS, Pál 1999 No. 24

⁷ A. MOLNÁR, Ferenc 1980

dle or the second third of the 16th century. Today we know much more about the origins of both the song and the funny anecdote constituting its base. We can also accurately set the literary genres from which the proverb first recorded by János BARANYAI DECSI originates.

It is obvious that only those in the 16th century could really appreciate the humour in the proverb “nem jobb ő is a deákné vásznánál” who knew the trick of *Máté deák*, who knew what sort of cloth did *deákné* of the story have or rather did not have. We can assume that János BARANYAI DECSI and the other users of the proverb of the time knew its origins, but we do not have any first hand proof of this. The *Dictionary* of Albert Molnár Szenci or the later proverb collection of Péter Kisviczay do not add to the text recorded by János BARANYAI DECSI and the same can be said of the old literary utilisation of the proverb: István Czeglédi a 17th century Protestant writer applied the proverb basically in its present-day form,⁸ and the free “prankish songs” of the 17th century quote it in the same form as well: “Az deákné vásznánál / Zsófi is nem jobb annál, / Ővéle megnyughatnál, Ha néki szépen szólnál.”⁹

On the other hand, the author of a fiddler's song dating from 1580 displays thorough knowledge of the literary background of the proverb. *Oeconomia coniugalis* by János PÉCSI was published by the printing house of the widow of Gáspár Heltai in Kolozsvár.¹⁰ Only one copy survived of the publication and even that is fragmentary. The missing leaf and half at the end of the song though was supplied in hand writing – probably still in the 16th century. The following stanza can be read in this hand written, ending section:

“Hallottuk régenten Máté deák vásznát,
Szűk bordában szótték, látá kevés hasznát,
Mer az felesége nem gyakorlta magát,
Fonással untatá gyenge két szép karját.”¹¹

János Pécsi did not only utilise the proverb but summed up the whole of the funny anecdote – thus providing the *terminus ante quem*: 1580 of the poem entitled *Az deákné vásznáról* – which is only known from a later copy version. This means that János PÉCSI had already known the name of the major character – Máté deák – of the poem in 1580 and what is more important, he knew the cream of the story, that the famous cloth of Mrs Deák was woven in “a narrow reed”, that is between the teeth and toes of Máté deák believed to be dead.

⁸ SZARVAS, Gábor–SIMONYI, Zsigmond (1890–1893, Vol. 3. p. 1030)

⁹ Approximately: “Zsófi is not a whit better than Deákné's cloth, if you said her nice words you could get happy with her.” STOLL, Béla (1961 No 119, 1984: 186)

¹⁰ PÉCSI, János 1580; ÁCS, Pál 1999 No. 7.

¹¹ Approximate translation: “We have known of Máté deák's cloth for a long time. It was woven in a narrow reed, there was no use of it because his wife didn't practice spinning, not tended to bore her hands with working.”

In 1580 he did not mention this joke as a new one as he said “hallottuk régen-ten” (i.e. known for a long time). The name “Máté deák” in itself suggests the period from which the text could originate. The Hungarian “deák” and the Latin “literatus” titles were wide spread among the citizens of the boroughs of the 16th century: it was not a personal name, but a title designating the secular “intelligentsia” graduating from local schools.¹² The poem entitled *Az deákné vásznáról* was most probably written a couple of decades before 1580, since it was copied into such a section of the manuscript song book, where other old fiddler’s songs were also collected: this poem comes after the wedding song of András Batizi dating from 1546.¹³

On the basis of the above it can be strongly suspected that the poem entitled *Az deákné vásznáról* belongs to the genre of Protestant wedding songs and originates sometime around the middle of the 16th century. As we have seen János PÉCSI quoted it in a wedding song in 1580 and its later copier recorded it among other wedding songs – thus it seems reasonable to consider it as a fiddler’s song, a funny wedding poem today as well. Both its theme – mocking women – and its goliardic meter list this work among wedding songs.¹⁴

This genre lies on the borderline of 16th century Hungarian professional poetry and that of folklore: partly ecclesiastic as it is about marriage, and partly it originates from goliardic poetry: these poems provide variations on the topics of drinks, women and revelry.

This poem is one of the oldest Hungarian women mocking songs within the genre of wedding songs. It demonstrates all the characteristics of the old Hungarian *trufa* genre: it can be performed as a farce, the joke has its cream and it is based on mummery and pretence: it provides a parody of a well-known human type.¹⁵ It is possible that this *trufa* was a stock play of contemporary popular tricksters and jugglers. It mocked the wife of Máté deák who was “lazy to weave”.

Although oral tradition kept the story of the “lazy wife”, no one identified the character with the Mrs Deák of the proverb.¹⁶ Not so in the 16th century, when everyone was familiar with the story. It must have been so popular that by the end of the century – that is the time of János BARANYAI DECSI – it had already been digested into a phrase, a proverb and most probably only the mentioning of the person’s name “Deákné” brought smiles to everybody’s face.

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¹² GERÉZDI, Rabán (1962: 32-33)

¹³ The manuscript song book “Illyés Bálint kolligátuma” was published in 1865 by János Barla Szabó in the *Vasárnapi Újság*: STOLL, Béla (1963 No. 111)

¹⁴ KODÁLY, Zoltán (1952: 50); SZABOLCSI, Bence (1959: 51-66), HORVÁTH, Iván (1992: No 4018)

¹⁵ KARDOS, Tibor 1955.

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