

Acta Ethnographica Hungarica, 44 (1–2), pp. 237–245 (1999)

“PLAYING-CARDS ARE MY CALENDAR AND PRAYERBOOK”

Vilmos VOIGT

Department of Folklore, Eötvös Loránd University
H-1052 Budapest, Piarista köz 1, Hungary

*“A kártyát továbbá világ tükörének
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 GAIDOZ) 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 KÓNYI (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. KÓNYI 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 KÓNYI or on other topics. The best available edition of today is KÓNYI (1981: 241–243). The text was slightly modernized and published without commentaries.

FRANCZIA KÁRTYÁK

JELENTÉSEINEK KIMAGYARÁZÁSA,

M E L L Y E T

bizonyos közkatona; midőn azokkal imádságoskönyv helyet élne a Templomban, 's a Strázsamester meglátná, három más le-gény által a Major úrhoz vitetné, annak jelenlétében a maga mentségére adott, mint ezt a következő előadásban láthatni.



B U D Á N,

nyomatott Gyurián és Bagó betűivel 1846

Fig. 1

German version (which can be traced back to the English version, with a “grenadier Richard”).

In spite of the several reprints of KÓNYI'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. Összegyűjté a Rokkant Huszár* (Soldier Humour. Collected by an Invalid Huszar), Budapest, 1878. p. 106. GYÖRGY (1934: 146) added later another reference. József CSUKÁSSI: *A magyar clerus adomákban* (Anecdotes on Hungarian Clergymen) Budapest, 1879. p. 272 was mentioning the story, but without retelling it in full. GYÖRGY (1938: 53–55) published KÓNYI'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 retorneadas.* 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 TAYLOR² (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. *Francia kártyák jelentéseinek kimagyarázása* (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 KÓNYI. 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).

SCHEIBER³ refers to KÓNYI (and Lajos GYÖRGY) duly, mentioning also a third Hungarian variant of the KÓNYI 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 francia 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: KÓNYI’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).



Auslegung der französischen Karten,

welche ein gemeiner Soldat in der Kirche anstatt des Gebetbuches gebraucht, dabei aber von dem Feldwebel ersehen worden, ließ er ihm sogleich durch drei Mann zum Herrn Major führen, wo er sich wegen des Spielens in der Kirche verantworten mußte, wie in der Auslegung solches geschehen.

Ein Regiment Soldaten machte an einem Sonntage eine Kirchenparade,

Fig. 2

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: Üstökös version (French Jesuits).

1878: Invalid Hussar version.

1879: CSUKÁSSI 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 KÓNYI, 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 KÓNYI’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, attending divine service, with the rest of the regiment, at a church in Glasgow, instead of pulling out a bible, like his brother soldiers to find the parson's text (great a pack of cards before him. This singular behaviour did not long pass unnoticed, both by the clergyman and the sergeant of the company to which he belonged. The latter in particular commended him to put up the cards, and on his refusal, conducted him after church before the Major, to whom he presented a formal complaint of RICHARD's indecent behaviour during divine service. Well soldier, (said the Major) what excuse have you for this strange lewdish behaviour? If you can make any apology, or assign any reason for it, it's well. If you cannot, assure yourself that I will cause you without delay to be severely punished for it. Since your honour is so good, replied RICHARD, I will inform you I have been eight days on march, with a bare allowance of 4d per day; which your Honour will surely allow is hardly sufficient to maintain a man in meat, drink, washing, and other necessaries that consequently he may want without a bible, prayer book, or any other good book. On saying this, RICHARD drew out his pack of cards, and presenting one of the Aces to the Major, continued his address to the magistrate as follows.

WHEN I see an Ace may it please your Honour, it reminds me that there is only one God; and when I look upon a Two or a Three, the former puts me in mind of the Father and Son; and the latter of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. A four, calls to remembrance the Four Evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.—A Five the Five wife Virgins, who were ordered to trim their lamps; there were ten indeed; but five, your Worship may remember, were wise, and five were foolish.—A Six that in six days God created Heaven and Earth.—A Seven, that on the seventh day he rested from all that he had made, An Eight, of the eight righteous persons perferred from the deluge viz Noah and his Wife, with his three Sons and their Wives.—A Nine, of the nine Lepers, cleansed by our Saviour; there were ten, but one only remained to offer his tribute of thanks.—And a Ten, of the ten Commandments that God gave Moses on Mount Sinai, on the two tables of stone. He took the Knave and put it aside: when I see the Queen, it puts me in mind of the Queen of Sheba, who came from the furthestmost part of the World, to ear the wisdom of Solomon, for she was as wife a woman as he a man: for she brought fifty boys and fifty girls, all clothed in girls' apparel, to shew before King Solomon, for him to tell which were boys and which were girls, but he could not, until he called for water to wash themselves: the girls washed up to their elbows, and the boys only up to the wrist of their hands, so King Solomon told by that. And when I see the King, it puts me in mind of the great King of heaven and earth, which is God Almighty I and likewise, his Majesty King George, to pray for him. Well said the major, you have given a good description of all the cards, except one, which is lacking. Which is that, said the soldier; The Knave said the major.

If your Honour will not be angry with me, returned RICHARD, I can give you the same satisfaction on that as any in the pack? No, said the major. Well returned the soldier, the greatest Knave, I know, is the Sergeant who brought me before you. I dont know, replied the Major, whether he be the greatest knave or no, but I am sure he is the greatest fool.

The Soldier then continued as follows: When I count the number of dots in a pack of cards, there are 365: so many days are there in a year.—When I count how many cards are in a pack I find there are fifty-two so many weeks are there in a year.—When I reckon how many tricks are won by a pack, I find there are thirteen: so many months, are there in a year.—So that this pack of cards is both bible, almanack, and prayer book, to me.

The Major called his servants, ordered them to entertain the Soldier well: gave him a piece of money and said, he was the cleverest fellow he ever heard in his life. (Carrall, Printer, Walmgate, York.)





Fig. 3

her⁴ (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 (Sulzbach, 1603);

Dutch: The Spriritual 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 Soci  t  " 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

⁴ BRIGGS was based on the Norton Collection of rarity documents of English folk narratives, from various sources.

the actual packs of cards,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.

LITERATURE

- AARNE, Antti
1910: Verzeichnis der Märchentypen. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia. (FF Communications 3).
- BAUGHMAN, E. W.
1953: A Comparative Study of the Folktales of England and North America. Bloomington: Indiana University Dissertation.
1966: Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America. The Hague: Mouton.
- BOLTE, Johannes
1901: Eine geistliche Auslegung des Kartenspiels. Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde XI: 376–406.
1903: Zu den Karten- und Zahldeutungen. Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde XIII: 84–88.
- BREDNICH, Rolf Wilhelm
1993: “Kartenspiel” in: Enzyklopädie des Märchens. Hrsg. Rolf Wilhelm BREDNICH. Band 7, Lieferung 4/5 Sp. 1007–1011. Berlin–New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- BRIGGS, Katharine M.
1970: A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language. Part A – Folk Narratives – Volume I. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
1971: Part B – Folk Legends – Volume 2. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- GYÖRGY, Lajos
1932: Kónyi János Democritusa [A Hungarian “Democritus” by I. Kónyi]. Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia.
1934: A magyar anekdota története és egyetemes kapcsolatai [Historical and Comparative Study of Hungarian Anecdotes]. Budapest: Studium.
1938: Világjáró anekdoták [World-Wide Anecdotes]. Budapest, Kir. Magy. Egyetemi Nyomda.
1988: Az anekdota. A magyar regény előzményei. Tanulmányok. [The Anecdote. Origins of the Hungarian Novel. Studies by L. Gy.]. Bucureşti: Kriterion.
- HARGRAVE, Catherine Perry
1966: A History of Playing Cards and a Bibliography of Cards and Gaming. New York: Dover.
- HOFFMANN, Detlef
1983: Die Welt der Spielkarte. Eine Kulturgeschichte. München: Hugendubel. (First edition: Leipzig, Edition 1972.)
- KÓNYI, János
1981: A mindenkor nevető Demokritos [Democritus Ridens]. Budapest: Magvető. (Magyar Hírmondó).
- POGÁNY, Péter
1978: A magyar ponyva tüköre [Treasury of Hungarian Chap Literature]. Budapest, Magyar Helikon.
- SCHEIBER, Sándor
1947: Tárgytörténeti jegyzetek Mikszáth Kálmán műveire [Thematic Notes to K. Mikszáth’s Literary Works]. Irodalomtörténet 36: 48–54.
1949: Mikszáth Kálmán és a keleti folklór [Hungarian writer K. Mikszáth and Oriental Folklore]. Budapest, Magyar Irodalomtörténeti Társaság.

⁵ Oral communication of Sylvia MANN in the discussion of my paper in Kecske-mét at the Playing Card conference, 23rd March 1991.

- SCHEIBER, Alexander
1952: A Hungarian Encyclopedia of Cards. On the Parodies of Catechism Song. *Midwest Folklore* II: 93–100.
- SCHEIBER, Sándor
1977: *Folklór és tárgytörténet [Folklore and Motif History]* Vol. II. (2nd, enlarged edition) Budapest: Magyar Izraeliták Országos Képviselete.
1983: *Magyar Kártyaenciklopédia [Hungarian Encyclopedia of Cards]*. *Dunatáj* VI(2):48–51.
1984: *Folklór és tárgytörténet [Folklore and Motif History]*. Vol. III. Budapest: Magyar Izraeliták Országos Képviselete.
- SCHEIBER, Alexander
1985: *Essays on Jewish Folklore and Comparative Literature*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.
1996: *Folklór és tárgytörténet. Teljes kiadás [Folklore and Motif History. Complete Edition]*. Budapest, Makkabi.
- TAYLOR, E. S.
1865: *The History of Playing Cards*. London.
- TAYLOR, Archer
1935: "Formelmärchen" in: *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Märchens*. Hrsg.: Lutz MACKENSEN. Band. II. Lieferung 3. 164–191. Berlin und Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter et Co.
- THOMPSON, Stith
1955–1958: *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*. Vol. 1–6. Copenhagen and Bloomington: Rosenkilde and Bagger and Indiana University Press.
1961: *The Types of the Folktale. A Classification and Bibliography*. (Second Revision). Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia. (FF Communications 184).
- VEHMAS, Marja–BENEDEK, Katalin
1988: *A magyar népmesék trufa- és anekdótakatalógusa [Types of Hungarian Jokes and Anecdotes]* (Aath 1430–1639*). Budapest: MTA Néprajzi Kutató Csoport. (Magyar Népmesekatalógus 7/B).
- WILSON, E. M.
1939: *The Tale of the Religious Card-Player*. *Folk-Lore* L: 268.
- ZOLNAY, Vilmos
1928: *A kártya története és a kártyajátékok [History of the Cards and Card-Playing]*. Budapest: Pfeifer.