

Morris's 'A King's Lesson': A Hungarian Perspective

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The quality which first strikes the Hungarian reader of Morris's prose romance 'A King's Lesson', is the author's familiarity with his theme: the great Renaissance king of Hungary, Mátyás Hunyadi (Matthias Corvinus), and the legend of how he made his lords work hard at vine-dressing. The direct source of Morris's short story (published as 'An Old Story Retold' in the 18 September 1886 issue of *Commonweal*) is originally thought to have been tracked down by Helen A. Timo, on the basis of a comment in H. Halliday Sparling's recollections of the Kelmscott Press.¹ '... *A King's Lesson*,' Sparling writes, 'sprang and flowered into poignancy and charm from a chance-met "fill-up" at the foot of a column in Dickens's *Household Words*.'² The article in question, 'The Golden Age of Hungary', was published in the 1852 Christmas number of the paper,³ at the time when, following the ultimate defeat of the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence in 1849, and the consequent flight of some of its prominent leaders to England, the nation was much in the focus of attention. Although Timo supposes that the article in question was 'read by Morris ... when he was only a very young man',⁴ the close correspondence between it and Morris's own writing, suggests that this happened rather at the time of Morris's work for *Commonweal*, in 1886. Morris's short story incorporates such particulars from the article as the illegitimate origin of king Matthias's father, John of Hunyad, and a reference to the king's renowned legion, the so-called Black Band, details of which play no direct role in the plot or the moral of the romance.

Notwithstanding the clear connection between the two writings, one is also aware that Dickens's article could not have been Morris's only source. Whereas the account in *Household Words* summarises the tale of King Matthias's visit to Gömör in two short paragraphs, Morris tells a story at least twenty times that length. Whilst some of the details he adds are taken from the historical account given in the rest of the article, and many others are undeniably of his own invention, in certain points, as well as in basic attitude, his story strongly recalls the fable as it is known in its more complete form all over Hungary.

The legends which have evolved around the figure of Matthias Corvinus could

be called 'anecdotes',⁵ but their definite aim is not just to provide entertainment to readers, but also to offer a moral lesson.⁶ They are built on frameworks such as: 'the king rewards the poor while dispossessing the avaricious, he makes the gluttonous and the fastidious live on a meagre diet, puts the bumptious to shame, or reprimands the selfish'.⁷ In the case of this particular story, Matthias makes fun of his tyrannous, conceited lords in order to demonstrate their own triviality, and to illustrate the value of the serfs and their work. As he emerges from the stories, King Matthias does not just appreciate the work and wisdom of the peasants, but often lives and works in disguise amongst ordinary people. The image of 'Matthias, the Just', friend of the people, also possesses some historical basis: Bonfini, the king's Italian chronicler recounts how the royal court was open to everyone, how anyone could approach and address the king, and how he heeded the complaints and redressed the wrongs of even his lowest serf.⁸

Morris's portrait of the king is very similar: he depicts Matthias as a 'friend' and a defender of the people, who plays a 'game' with his haughty lords in order to give them a lesson. The peasants fear their lords, but, on recognising him, they do not fear their king. The difference between Morris's idea of the king (as well as the traditional Hungarian concept of him), and that suggested by *Household Words* is important. In the first case, the king demonstrates regard for the peasants and their work. In Dickens's article, however, he appears rather artful and selfish, regarding work as painful and degrading. At the end of the game, he says to his lords: 'treat [the serfs] with kindness and forbearance, lest you destroy the source of your wealth and thus be compelled to perform the labour yourself'.⁹

Given Morris's deviation from the moral suggested by the article, and his thoroughness in everything he did, it is very likely that he made further inquiries about the legend of King Matthias, and relied on other sources as well as *Household Words*. The article itself mentions that the time of Matthias ('Hungary's golden age'), was 'often sung of by poets'.¹⁰ Its author might have had in mind, amongst others, János Garay's poem, 'Mátyás király Gömörben' [King Matthias in Gömör], which was by far the most popular adaptation of the story in mid-nineteenth century, and which also sets the story in the small town of Gömör. Although, in Hungarian folk tradition, the legend is connected to several places very distant from each other, on the success of Garay's poem, Gömör became closely associated with the story.

Garay's poem was first published in 1840, but was not translated into English during Morris's lifetime. Yet, taking a closer look at Morris's version of the tale, and Garay's, there still seems to be a connection. Describing the setting, Morris writes that: '[the king and his nobles] rode ... to the vineyards where men were working on the sunny slopes that went up from the river: my tale does not say whether that were Theiss, or Donau, or what river...'.¹¹ Neither *Household Words*, nor Garay, make mention of the town, and Morris would almost certainly

have had no idea where Gömör was, nor that it lies on the banks of the River Sajó. As the exact place possessed no relevance to him or his English readers, he simply did not name it. But Garay, though in a different context, mentions two other rivers, the Danube and the Tisza:

[The King] travelled about his beautiful country, and, like an angel of peace
 Enforced the law and did justice wherever he went,
 He travelled about the lands of the Danube and the Tisza
 And listened to the complaints of the peasants.¹²

Morris might also have thought that one of these rivers provided the background to his story. Giving more attention to his description, we also notice that for no understandable reason, he names the two Hungarian rivers in German: Theiss and Donau. This point leads to the possibility that he may have relied on a German source.

Garay's poem was available to Morris in German, in two translations. One appeared as 'Das Bankett in Gömör' in *Ungarische Heimats-, Liebes- und Heldenlieder* (1873) translated by G. W. Henning,¹³ the other as 'König Mátyás in Gömör' in *Kläenge aus dem Osten* (1855) translated by Demeter Dudumi.¹⁴ It is also interesting to note that Dudumi, who was born Paul Szakellariosz, and who belonged to a Greek minority in Hungary, settled in London in 1858.¹⁵ Morris, though, probably could not much read German. As he wrote in 1884 to Andreas Scheu: 'I wish I knew German, as I see I must learn it. Confound you chaps! What do you mean by being foreigners?'¹⁶ However, he was much surrounded during the 1880s by people of German and Austrian extraction. Apart from the Viennese refugee Andreas Scheu, the Socialist League also contained Karl Marx's younger daughter Eleanor as a prominent member, as well as Frank Kitz, son of a German exile, and Frederick Lessner, another refugee from Germany. With Scheu, as Thompson writes, Morris's 'acquaintance had ripened . . . into warm friendship. He was a frequent visitor to Kelmscott House at Hammersmith, translating to Morris passages from Marx and Engels and Lassalle: or entertaining the family by singing arias from Mozart or Austrian folk-songs and songs of German and Austrian revolutionaries'.¹⁷

In 1886, at the time of writing 'A King's Lesson', Morris was working with Ernest Belfort Bax on 'Socialism from the Root Up' for *Commonweal*. Although Bax was born in England, he too possessed a decisive German orientation, having studied German philosophy in Stuttgart, and when in London, he was a frequent visitor of Engels.¹⁸ According to Roger Aldous, and in the recollection of May Morris, Bax 'appears almost as a member of the Morris family',¹⁹ visiting Morris regularly in his Hammersmith home during the 1880s, and taking Morris on his 'compulsory Baxination'. In addition, Florence Boos suggests that Bax may have summarised Engels's *Der Ursprung* to Morris during their collaboration.²⁰ Given

what are probably daily contacts, either Scheu or Bax might easily have conveyed the contents of Garay's poem to Morris.

A closer comparison of the poem and Morris's romance seems to support this idea. Although Morris does not adopt the framework of Garay's piece (according to which Matthias attends a feast in Gömör, and, finding that they neglect to toast the serfs, decides to take the squires hoeing), there are other correspondences than the reference to the rivers already mentioned. Moreover, these parallels strongly relate to Morris's other concerns at the time: the value of useful work, the role of education in promoting revolution, and his painfully ambiguous position as both socialist and capitalist.

Hungarian folk tradition associates King Matthias with the people in opposition to his magnates. Garay does the same, yet this aspect of the story is neglected in the account in *Household Words*. Like Morris, Garay refers to the 'game' (*Scherz* in both German translations) which the king is about to play with his lords. He leads them to the hillside, where, to the great astonishment of the workers, they are commanded to take turns with the peasants working at vine-dressing. The serfs thus become witnesses to the humiliation of their feared lords, and in this way, they see the king rendering them justice. Moreover, both Garay and Morris depict the king as already accustomed to hard work: outdoing his lords in both strength and bearing. In this respect, as Andor Solt emphasises, in that it propagates the doctrine of István Széchenyi, the great intellect of that age – that work, even hoeing is noble – Garay's poem is a 'true mirror of the ideology of the Reform Period' which preceded the 1848 revolution in Hungary.²¹ Such a Carlylean view was also shared by Morris, who even expressed his appreciation of Saxon kings and 'Icelandic heroes and aristocrats', who not only ruled, but participated in everyday work.²² In this regard, Alice Chandler's claim that '[i]n *A King's Lesson*, the king learns by doing it [, just] how hard the peasants' work is'²³ needs to be revised. Morris's Matthias 'worked on doggedly' whilst his nobles had already exhausted themselves. In addition, Morris also points out that the king knew right at the beginning of the vine-dressing episode that a 'new knowledge will come out of it'; thus he deliberately wished to give his lords a lesson.

The title 'A King's Lesson' clearly shows that Morris's main purpose of telling the story was didactic. As a prominent member of the Socialist League, and the main voice of its paper, *Commonweal*, he intended to promote those things he believed necessary in order to make possible a socialist revolution: education, agitation and organisation – as the League's motto affirmed. Garay's poem definitely possesses a similar purpose. In the last two stanzas, the king himself draws the lesson for the lords – as well as for readers:

'The earth, my lords is hard to cultivate,
And who cultivates it does it in a bloody sweat.

Thus, when you drink the next time, do remember
 To toast the serf: Long live the people!
 Said the King, and the Lords minded the lesson.²⁴

Morris also wished to provide a lesson, but in preparation for a socialist revolution he needed to say more. Abandoning the framework of the poem, he opened up the story, and added a concluding moral in the form of a sermon. Actually, his first lesson is not so much a sermon as the workers' desperate reproach concerning their circumstances and the inequality of the classes. Its role in Morris's short story is clear: to bridge the temporal and spatial gap between sixteenth-century Hungarian serfs and Morris's nineteenth-century readers, thus making possible identification by the latter with the former. By introducing new characters – such as the captain and the headman – and creating dialogues, Morris allows the headman to articulate the workers' grievances, thus rendering their plea more powerful. Such identification is vital for Morris's final sermon, which, as in Garay's poem, is delivered by the king, and in which Morris calls for agitation and organisation:

'Carle, ... were I thou or such as thou, then I would take in my hand a sword or a spear, ... and bid the others do alike, a forth we would go; and since we would be so many, and with nought to lose save a miserable life, we would do battle and prevail, and make an end of the craft of kings and of usurers, and there should be but one craft in the world, to wit, to work merrily for ourselves and to live merrily thereby.'²⁵

The king is definitely Morris's spokesman, yet Morris's Matthias decides not to preach his sermon, lest he be taken to a madhouse. Concerning the inaction of the king, Alice Chandler writes that 'Morris's moral seems to be that you cannot trust the ruling class to reform itself, that only the worker can change society'.²⁶ Notwithstanding the legitimacy of Chandler's claim, Morris's identification with the king places the concluding moral in a broader context. The kinship of Corvinus and Morris is obvious: the Hungarian king's esteem for work, his sympathies with the oppressed, his promotion of education and literature – all that he could know from the *Household Words* article – must have appealed to Morris. Had he made further inquiries, he might have also been informed of the king's love of beautiful books, and his magnificent library.

Furthermore, Morris was much aware that being a capitalist he also prospered by 'robbing the poor'. When he joined the socialist movement, he was regarded by many as a madman, and his act an embarrassing folly. Tennyson, for example, was at first 'shocked to hear of ... Morris's Democratic Socialism', and then said that he 'has gone crazy'.²⁷ The parallel between Morris and Matthias Corvinus is thus too close to be neglected. And although it is true that in Morris's version

of the story, the king does not preach the final moral lesson to his people, Morris definitely does so by putting his own message into the mouth of the Renaissance king, and in this way telling it to his nineteenth-century working-class readers. The moral then seems to be that 'now the time has come, and I, although a capitalist, stand by you and tell you what should be done'. Charlotte Oberg called Morris a 'great adapter', a 'synthesiser of genius, for what he brought together gained new integrity and force under his hands'.²⁸ This is exactly what happened to the Hungarian legend: Morris turned it into socialist propaganda.

As such, this short romance seems to have been regarded by Morris as an important and effective piece, since, in 1888, it was published together with the much longer *A Dream of John Ball* in a book form. It then appeared in 1891 as a separate pamphlet, and again in 1892, once more attached to *A Dream of John Ball*, as one of the first volumes from the Kelmscott Press.²⁹ G.D.H. Cole considers 'A King's Lesson' 'an admirable example of Morris's best prose style, free from the over-artificiality of his tapestry romances and yet far more polished than his occasional writing'.³⁰ Its easy accessibility must have contributed to its significant role in Morris's promotion of socialism. At the same time, adapting the story of a distant country, yet showing that its events are so familiar, must have supported Morris's claim for the need of international socialism. As in 'The Manifesto of the Socialist League' he proclaimed: 'We come before you as a body advocating the principles of Revolutionary International Socialism; that is we seek a change in the basis of Society – a change which would destroy the distinctions of classes and nationalities'.³¹ In Morris's view, it is no matter whether English or Hungarian: inequality and injustice should be fought against, and should be fought together.

NOTES

1. Helen A. Timo, '“A Not so Golden Age”: The Genesis of Morris's “A King's Lesson”', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, VII (4), 1988, pp. 16–18. (Afterwards Timo).
2. H. Halliday Sparling, *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master-Craftsman*, London: Macmillan, 1924, p. 97. (Afterwards Sparling)
3. 'The Golden Age of Hungary'. *Household Words*, 25 December 1852, pp. 342–44. (Afterwards *Household Words*)
4. Timo, p. 18.
5. Linda Dégh, Foreword to Linda Dégh, ed, *Folktales of Hungary*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965, p. xxxvii. All translations from Hungarian are my own.
6. Zoltán Ujváry, *Adomák Gömörböl* [Anecdotes from Gömör], Debrecen:

- Kossuth Lajos University, 1988, p. 27.
7. Ildikó Kriza, Postscript to *Mátyás, az igazságos* [Matthias, the just], Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1994, p. 197.
 8. Antonio Bonfini, *Mátyás király: Tíz könyv a Magyar Történet-ből* [King Matthias: Ten books from Hungarian History], transl. from Latin to Hungarian by László Geréb, Budapest: Magyar Helikon, 1959, p. 297.
 9. *Household Words*, p. 344.
 10. *ibid.*
 11. William Morris, 'A King's Lesson', in Clive Wilmer, ed, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, London: Penguin, 1998, p. 17. (Afterwards Wilmer)
 12. János Garay, *Költemények* [Poems], N.p.: Franklin-Társulat, n.d., p. 43. (Afterwards Garay, Poems)
 13. János Garay, 'Das Bankett in Gömör', in *Ungarische Heimats-, Lieben- und Heldenlieder*, trans. G. W. Henning, Vienna, Pest, Leipzig: Hartlebens Verlag, 1873, pp. 142–46.
 14. János Garay, 'König Mátyás in Gömör', in H. Geiber, ed, *Kläenge aus dem Osten*, trans. Demeter Dudumi, Pesth: 1855, pp. 19–23.
 15. See Anna Fábri, 'Eszmesúrlódások: A 19. századi magyar közirodalom a (pesti) társasélettről' [Conflicting ideas: Nineteenth-century Hungarian literature on social life in Pest], in *Budapesti Negyed*, 46, 2004/4, <http://www.bparchiv.hu/magyar/kiadvány/bpn/46/fabri.htm> [Last accessed 2 February 2009], and 'A Hariszisz-alapítványok és az újjörög filológiai tanulmányok' [The Hariszisz Foundations and the neo-Greek philological studies], in *Örökség-kultúra: Oktatási E-könyvtár* [Heritage – culture: educational e-library], http://www.sulinet.hu/oroksegtar/data/Magyarorszagi_nemzetisegek_kotelei/Kortanc_sorozat/Magyarorszagi_gorogok/page/oii_hariszisz.htm, [Last accessed 13 November 2008]
 16. E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd, 1955, p. 354.
 17. *ibid.*, p. 355.
 18. *ibid.*
 19. Roger Aldous, "'Compulsory Baxination": Morris and the Misogynist', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, XII (1), 1996, p. 37.
 20. Florence Boos, 'Morris's German Romances as Socialist History', *Victorian Studies*, vol. 27, Spring 1984, p. 331. (Afterwards Boos)
 21. Andor Solt, 'Mátyás király a magyar szépirodalomban' [King Matthias in Hungarian literature], in Imre Lukinich, ed, *Mátyás király emlékkönyv* [King Matthias memorial book on the fifth centenary of his birth], Budapest, Franklin, 1940, vol. II, p. 473.
 22. Boos, p. 334.
 23. Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century*

English Literature, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971, p. 228. (Afterwards Chandler)

24. Garay, *Poems*, p. 44.
25. Wilmer, p. 22.
26. Chandler, p. 228.
27. Quoted in William Allingham, *A Diary, 1824–1889*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985, pp. 326, 339.
28. Charlotte H. Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet: William Morris*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978, p. 167.
29. Sparling, p. 150; G. D. H. Cole, ed, *William Morris: Stories in Prose, Stories in Verse, Shorter Poems, Lectures and Essays*, New York: Random House, 1948, p. 2.
30. *ibid.*, Introduction, p. xviii.
31. <http://www.marxist.org/archive/morris/works/1885/manifest2.htm> [Last accessed 2 February 2009]