

CONTEST OF THE WINE AND THE WATER. BACCHUS AND NEPTUNE IN SOME DENOMINATIONAL SCHOOL PLAYS

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What could we have done if we were Catholic monk teachers in the 18th century and we did not want our students to wildly roister in Carnival? We would have stood to the lead in celebration, organized a theatrical play, steered a new direction to the turbulence. These were the best prescriptions of the denominational tutors in those times. Therefore the carnival performances were better and better in all faith-based schools. In this presentation we analyze the appearances of Bacchus in the denominational school plays. The Pauline monk Dániel Borss interconnects two traditions: the European which was named “literary expression” of the folk laughter-culture by Mikhail Bakhtin and the Hungarian folk tradition of the Carnival. In the earliest texts there was a debate and duel between Bacchus and Neptune – Carnival and Lent – exorbitance and temperance. Not only the important action items but the attributes of main characters are analogues to each other. The play named Bakhvs expresses the requisites of the 18th century, adapts to the claim of the public and leads towards fantastic-grotesque and folkloristic manifestations of the 19th century. While in the earlier comedies there were only dialogues, in this play the actions are important. This drama is worthy ancestor of the folk-play. (A folk-play is the famous Hungarian actor and dramatist Szigligeti’s own word for vernacular topic dramas in Hungarian: népszínmű.)

Keywords: school drama, Carnival tradition, denominational pedagogy, history of drama, folk-play

In our essay we would like deal with a comedy known as *Bakhvs*, which is connected to Dániel Borss, a Pauline monk teacher. We examine the drama’s cultural environment, as well. At the end of the 18th century important changes occurred in the school plays of denomination schools. Till then mainly pious and didactical dramas were performed, but these were gradually replaced with entertaining, cheerful plays. Audiences and the students who performed in them preferred these. For the teachers compiling texts, these comedies provided a good opportunity to try out new dramaturgical principles. The comedies appeared on the stages more and more frequently. As there are relatively several belief-creatures in 17-18th century literary works, and in several works the belief creature is the most important character, we have to consider the opinion of Imre Nagy. He talks

about an „associative cluster” which serves the function of bringing the creators and the receivers of the texts to the „horizon” of folklore’s common knowledge (Nagy, 2007).

The two worldviews connect easily to each other because folklore also includes so-called „comical spurious belief-sagas” and impostors disguised as a belief-creature. *Éva Pócs* (1977) mentions such texts, too. In her opinion the spurious belief-sagas connect to authentic belief-sagas (to their characters, to their stories) by texts or theme but we cannot consider them „true” belief-stories. Their most obvious element is the comicality. Simultaneously a humorous and true belief-saga does not exist because it has been excluded by supernatural experience and its authentic interpretation. Specifically, false belief-stories do not weaken true beliefs. These are connected to belief-sagas because they presume existence of the collective tradition, experience and faith in another sphere, and among them fellowship expects precise knowledge of these. So without belief the spurious belief-saga could not exist.

A special group of the false belief-stories relates to deliberate fraud. The main purpose of these stories is to ridicule the fools so that they serve an *entertaining* and *didactic* function as school comedies. An important group of the spurious belief-sagas make the former faith comical, and therefore, they are performed in a profane setting. An important condition of the comic effects is precise knowledge of the previous beliefs. These are texts about bygone antique gods. The other types are well received by believers. They do not dispute the belief but rather speak about misunderstanding (for example, the storyteller believes Will o’ the Wisp are automobile headlights) or an outwardly supernatural event and figure is central to their story, in which swindlers bring on maliciously (Pócs, 1977). The belief-creatures, those who appear in denominational, especially Catholic school, comedies obviously bear specificities of both categories. Their actions did not insult the audience, because it was a familiar, ordinary thing for them. Therefore, the local public was more willing to accept the new dramaturgical elements and the didactic-moral message.

According to *István Kilián* (1988), folk culture and school plays mutually interact. There is a constant movement of the texts between the two levels. This happens, because the writers came from their own low social class to the school bringing along the linguistic and social culture of a previous discourse. These authors in „the most natural way” include in the dramatic texts the features of that message.

The Bacchus-themes about which we speak in our essay are related to such spurious belief-sagas which have a sacral effect: the author, according to a tradition which is more ancient than Christianity, freely jokes with his audience. Their common laughter becomes a tool of an almost sacred community experience. The most important vehicle and background of such a laughing-culture are the Carnival-like festivities. These arise from a primordial cult act, which *Mikhail Bakhtin* (1965) called *ritual laughter*. These ancient feasts, in fact, focus on the crises and extreme incidents of human life: for example birth, nutrition, defecation, sexuality, illness, death. The representations of crisis-symptoms are never scary as their purpose is rather the depiction of the eternal cycle: in birth you can count on death and in the death you can expect the possibility of rebirth, too. A part of this cult is the cheerful defamation, caricaturing, and stultifying of the gods, myths and heroes. In early societies the double disposition (serious and comical) of the cult and the myth was equally part of sacrality. This approach left traces in the later appearance of mythology

When the statehood in the Middle Ages developed, these two aspects did not remain equal: the comical forms fell out from the sacred feasts and became barely tolerated – were forced to the folk culture of laughter then. The forms of the Carnival could not stay inside the official festivities: these formed into parody and caricature of the authority, the ecclesiastic hierarchy and the cult. The Carnival became a sort of „canal” through which one could conduct the stress that accumulated during the year. In this short period the order of the official life could be caught up, and in a special kind of public entertainment, all members of the community could let off steam. A proper language and symbolism of the medieval Carnival evolved which expressed the „worldview” of Carnival. The essence of this is the idea of the „inverted world”. According to Bakhtin (1965), in the early centuries of Christianity the comic language coinages appeared which connected the scenes and emblems of Carnival. Initially anonyms appeared, and later the authors who undertook their names, for example François Rabelais and Miguel Cervantes. Bakhtin interpreted the novel *Don Quixote* as a late appearance of this creation-form, in which the two main characters of the festivities, the Carnival and the Lent incarnate. The absolutely material and tubby Sancho Panza is the corporeal life, while the barebones and introverted Don Quixote stands for the unreal idealism, which draws strength from the full-blood life-affirmation of Carnival the following year (Bakhtin, 1965).

So we can establish that the author of *Bakhys* acts as inheritor of this literary tradition. He occupies the creator-position of the traditional folk laughing-culture’s written form, so he ties „high” literature into the local tradition. We must note, the drama is not printed: it is a manuscript. This is an important literary attitude, which is not extraordinary in school plays. The author assigns to the performance more importance and the text is considered separately as the raw material of this or he counts the drama as „*semi-litterature*,” and thus emphasises the act of linking the two traditions. (The *semi-litterature* is a sort of „half literature”, which is between high literature and folklore and links these to each other.) This hypothesis is also supported by a pre-study of *Tekla Dömötör* (Dömötör, 1964).

The creator of *Bakhys* not only draws on the European tradition, but Hungarian folklore also. The figure of Bacchus, probably after the presence of Christianity, has been linked with the Carnival festivities. In Hungary the Carnival appeared in the Middle Ages, with the first sources being from the 13th century, St. Margaret’s period (Voigt, 1992). According to Tekla Dömötör (1964) some of our popular customs have earlier origins, even before the Hungarian Conquest. The Carnival traditions in Hungary are rather attachments to Central and Eastern Europe but the "Eastern" elements probably remained among them, too. For example, the masked figures of the Eastern Szeklers are personifications of diseases. Additionally, some Carnival masks similarities resemble to the shamanic masks of our Eastern language relatives. Dömötör (1964) also gives evidence that the connection of Carnival and Bacchus is part of our ancient tradition, and she quotes Péter Bod, who in the 16th century wrote about the Carnival in his religious disputant poem, which he named *Bacchanalia – Feast of Bacchus*. The woman author also mentions the tradition of the war of *Cibere vajda* (voivod Civet) and *Csont király* (king Bone). She observes that in Transylvania under this title (Voivod Civet and King Bone Wars) a dramatic play had been presented in every Carnival until the 50’s. András Szkhárosi Horváth wrote about this contest in his poem (*Az kétféle hitről – About the Two Types of Faith*) in the 1540s. An important point is that, the Carnival struggle of Bacchus and Neptune was a great tradition for our Czech neighbours. The custom of the dramatic plays in Hungary is mostly

widespread in the *palóc* region (in Northern Hungary), where they have named the Carnival figures *bakus* after Bacchus. (Here we should mention that our drama originated in Sátoraljaújhely and it was performed in the same place.) (Dömötör, 1964; about the Hungarian Carnival additionally: Ferenczi & Ujváry, 1962) *Géza Vámszer*, when he demonstrates the folklore of *Csik* (in Eastern Transylvania, Szeklerland), mentions that in the case of two processions meeting, the fellows playfully fight each other. This probably symbolises the struggle of Neptune and Bacchus (Vámszer, 1959).

The figures of Dionysus and Bacchus almost „offer themselves” to stage show. On the one hand because the European theatrical tradition is connected to the name of Dionysus, and on the other hand because he has the richest iconography among the gods of the ancient world. Therefore, his emblem is not one-dimensional. Containing throughout his mythology and his religion sacral and profane elements, he is easily identifiable with Christ though he has a demonic face, too (Pintér, 2009, 2010). According to Imre Nagy he is a figure with many messages because his victory or failure carries several meanings in the Carnival comedies (Nagy, 2009).

In the reconstruction of staging, the most important source of the researchers is the *Iconologia* of Cesare Ripa (Its full titles: *Iconologia overo Descrittione di diverse Imagini cavate dall' antichità, & di propria inventione, Trovate, & dichiarate da Cesare Ripa Perugino, Cavaliere de Santi Maurizio & Lazaro*. Rome, 1603), in which you can find directions for the staging of allegoric characters. It was a main source of supplementary material for the denominational teachers. For example, Antonius Hellmayr copied a short description of more than one hundred allegoric characters' costumes and dress from it to his note in *Szokolca*. Regarding the figure of Bacchus, Ripa instructs that the god of wine be displayed as a cheerful and nice young man because the wine should „never be old” and if it is „consumed in moderation” „it makes you to joyful your heart” and it „increases the strength” as well. The god's carriage was pulled by panthers and tigers that „symbolize the brutality of drunks, because there is nobody who can beat the wine” (Pintér, 2010).

The description paints a nice and noble appearance of the god of wine and ecstasy but the references which have been made to the effects of wine are not very positive: showing the shameless behaviour, the loss of property, the unbridled frenzy, which are the negative results of drunkenness and their source is intemperance.

Bacchus is the most often evoked figure of the Hungarian theatricals of the 18th century, among the gods of mythology he appears most of the time on Hungarian school stages (Pintér, 2009, 2010; according to Kilián the Carnival-fun was standard routine all in denominational schools, you can see more detail in Kilián, 1988). He appeared in more than 40 plays. In addition, dozens of details of Carnival remained from which we can ascertain that the students played *actio bacchanalistica* about Bacchus. Apart from the Latin language performances, there are five known Hungarian language dramas and Hungarian dramatic programs with Bacchus, three of which are Protestant: *Thetys és Lyaeus*; *Bachúsnak Neptunusnál való czivódása, az annak meg-fontolása, ha vallyon a Bór é az elsőbb vagy a víz* (Fight of Bacchus and Neptune Namely the Consideration of the Leader of Wine or the Water); *Neptunus és Bacchus vetélkedése* (Competition of Neptune and Bacchus, in Varga, 1989); two are Catholic, one of these is Paulaner: *Bakhvs* (Kilián & Varga, 1990; also mentions Pintér, 2010); the other is Minorit: *Az Erdélyországban való borszükérről* (About the Absence of Wine in Transylvania) (Kilián, 1989). The dramatic program is of Piarist origin:

Bachusnak víg birodalma (Merry Empire of Bacchus) (Czibula, Demeter, Kilián & Pintér, 2007).

It is important to note that the plays about Bacchus were performed mostly in the towns of famous wine regions (for example: Eger, Sárospatak) and in the important centres of the wine-trade (for example: Kassa, Eperjes). The attributes of the god (barrel, grape leaves) appeared here in the crest or the flag, and these are important ingredients of conscious identity. In other towns there are often plays being set mostly at the time of Carnival, too. At this time the constraints eased and different forms of entertainment had been permitted even in the strictest schools (Pintér, 2009). In addition, the pedagogical sense was to assist in creating the joy: the Protestant and Catholic teachers probably believed that it would be better to take the lead in celebration and to steer the turbulence of the students in a new direction. In genre perspective, most of the Carnival plays are *myth-parody* or *certamen*.

At the end of the 18th century, the most frequent theme of the *certamens* was *A bor és a víz vetélkedése* – Rivalry of the Wine and the Water. Countless variations of this theme were performed on the school stages. (János, 2009). As one of the most important antecedents of this topic, Nagy Imre specified as „especially valuable” the humanist declamation of Bálint Hagymási (*Opusculum de laudibus et vitupero vini et aquae* – A Little Work about the Shame and Glory of Wine and Water, Hagenau, 1517) (Nagy, 2009).

According to the form of *certamen*, it can vary its name too: it is usually a two-player *dialogus*, multiplayer *disputa*, *certamen*, *consultation* or *lawsuit*. According to mode of appearance it can be a theatrical performance or a dramatic folk tradition. There is close interaction between the two in the 18th century. As to the staging of the Carnival plays, the time and the preparation opportunities are significantly less than that of the other mid-year solemn presentations. The *certamen* is a popular pageant-type because it requires less actors and more simple scenic apparatus. At the same time it is a grateful genre because its outcome can change according to the time, the occasion and the purpose, and it can arouse the audience’s interest as well as coax them to the play.

The Carnival is the turning-point of the lack of restraint and the self-discipline, therefore the most common theme of it is the dispute between the abundance and the starvation, greed and temperance. The oldest and most popular variant of the Carnival *certamens* is the dispute between the wine and the water. Belonging to these is the *Goliae dialogus inter Aquam et Vinum*, which came from the Middle Ages, which Márta Pintér called „one of the oldest and purest versions.” Their effect was that in Hungary the dialogs were spread through countless pulp fiction versions. Also the group of writing about the discussion between the Carnival and the Lent is medieval origin. As Márta Pintér notes, in the Hungarian culture-region it survived in the shrove-tide folk-tradition (fight of king Quarry with voivod Civet) which is a predecessor of the former custom. In the denominational schools, king Quarry was identified with the god of wine (Bacchus, in the Protestant plays: Lyæus) and voivod Civet with the symbols of the water god Neptune (in the Protestant plays: Thetys) (Pintér, 2009).

For example, *Bachusnak Neptunusnál való czivódása, az az annak megfontolása, ha vallyon a Bór é az elsőbb vagy a víz* (The Jarring of Bacchus with Neptune or Consideration of Whether the Wine is First or the Water) a Protestant school-play was performed at the Carnival, and its fundamental element is its hilarity. It was staged in 1793 at shrove-tide. In the comedies which were played in the beginning of Carnival, the wine usually won, but at

the „tail of Carnival” it was necessary for the water and abstinence to conquer even if the Protestants were not fasting.

Among the texts that speak of the battle of the Carnival and the Lent, an above-mentioned Minorit drama slightly stands out, *Az Erdélyországban való borszűkéről*. (About the Absence-of-Wine in Transylvania, Kanta, 14.02.1773.) Márta Pintér’s view is that this is a myth-parody which reflects current conditions (the absence of wine) and it ends based in morality: the angel of God appears in vain to exhort to the good, all the characters fall to the Hell as a result of the machinations of Bacchus (Pintér, 2010). This play was staged in Kanta under the direction of the Minorit monk teacher Czrirják Kertso. István Kilián suggests that it is closest to the comedy of Jacobus Masenius (*Bacchi Schola eversa* – Bacchus Subvert the School) which belongs to a common „theme-bush” with Bakhvs of Dániel Borss, meaning you can regard it as god parody (Kilián, 1989). But in the text there is no reference to Carnival and the habits of Carnival or the fight of Bacchus and Neptune: the idea of the fast and penitent was conceived by the angel (Angelus), and in the end the characters who side with Bacchus are punished. Actually there is no comical conclusion of the play, rather the end is a *comic-tragedy*.

The Bakhvs belongs to that group, in which there are burlesque-like plays that combine the features of the *certamen*-, *lawsuit*- and the *dialogus*, with the Bakhtin-described (1965) „carnavalesque” nature appearing in them. Its personal touch is also that in its action Bacchus first tends to be out of favour – he has been banished from the celestial circle, and he finally dies but his doom is not a mournful event: it carries the promise of next year’s resurrection and the merry Carnival. To Márta Pintér this kind of comedy is classified as the topics of „Bacchus’s getting off to the underworld” and „Bacchus’s dead”.

Dániel Borss, a Pauline monk teacher, directed the *Bakhvs* Pauline comedy in Sátoraljaújhely. It is possible that the author was not Borss. The *Bakhvs* comedy was presented on shrove Tuesday, the 19th 1765, and the *Omnia vincit Amor* had been staged in the middle of the Carnival. Borss, himself, performed too during the interlude of this second drama, which is titled: *Kocsonya Mihály házassága* (Michael Jelly’s Marriage), in the role of the judge. Márta Pintér believes that there is evidence that both plays were written by Borss. We have to mention the name of Mihály Torkos, a student in Sátoraljaújhely who played the title roles of *Kocsonya Mihály* and *Bakhvs* (Pintér, 2009).

The exact source of the drama is unknown. During the act, Bacchus (sic!) is conflicted with his father, the jealous Jupiter, who being afraid of the power of his popular son, first deprives him of a god’s power, and later sends him illness and kills him. The failure of Bacchus symbolises the momentary triumph of Lent over the Carnival. In the *Bakhvs* not only does the main character become comical – for example, the fuming Jupiter’s thunders are sounds of his fart – but other gods also get one’s gruel. Mercury appears as the God of the flutter-mice (bat), Neptune as a skin washing tanner, and Ariadna (Ariadne) as a virago who scuffles with the maidservant, etc. Among the school plays connected to our topic, there are frequent profane comedies, parodies of gods which only partly follow the classical patterns; and these mostly fall back on folklore. Not only has pagan mythology been portrayed caricature-like in these, but the Christian liturgy has as well. István János just gives *Bakhvs* as a typical example. According to Imre Nagy it is probably the author of *Bakhvs* who „inspired by the folk-tradition”, „whose work could react to the folk games” (Nagy, 2009; in this topic you can see: János, 2009; Ujváry, 1975, 1991).

In the drama there are some elements which appear to belong to Hungarian folk tradition but they are of European origin. We could mention first the dress and tools of Bacchus. By the author's instruction, the protagonist, with stuffed belly and riding on a barrel, was brought to the stage. His attributes include a pork ham and a big wine jug. Bacon has been larded into his „throne”. The bacon is a symbol of the hearty meal of Carnival, because it is a frequent accessory of Carnival processions. For example, Zoltán Ujváry mentioned in his essay that the lads of Borsod carry with them a spear-like, long spit to the masked procession which in drabs and drabs has been covered with bacon (Ujváry, 1957).

One of the main scenes of the drama, which happens in the First Act, fifth scene, could be called the fight between the Carnival and Lent. (You can see on Brueghel's picture: *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* too.) The fight does not appear physically in the text, *certamen* only – a word-duel – takes place, in which Bacchus superciliously vanquishes. During the performance the players may jokingly imitate a fight, because in the instruction of the Latin author's text there are some references to a farce-like performance. An interesting feature of the comedy is that, Bacchus not only fights/argues with Neptune of the Lent but also with Apollo who symbolizes the faith with sciences in the Second Act, first scene. In this word-duel Apollo wallops Bacchus. This moment is a reflection of the monk teacher's educational and moral point of view: that blind faith without knowledge (the Lent) cannot defeat the Lord of the inebriation, the gluttony and the celebration of the carnality – the Carnival; however, he cannot be Apollo's opponent, who is otherwise the only character without comical features. After losing the fight with Apollo, Bacchus becomes sick, and this is the beginning of his downgrade.

The comedy, at first glance, does not end with comical elements: Bacchus falls into disease which begins with a painful and long defecation; afterwards, the barber-surgeon and Esculapius, the god of the chirurges (surgeons), then his son, Machaon, try to cure him. The cures are very bloody and rude; we can read all about these in the Latin author's speeches. Above all the barber-surgeon imitates phlebotomy at Bacchus's bottom, and the red-painted water deflates to a bowl. Esculapius does the same, but he already beats an angle to Bacchus's rump with a hammer. Meanwhile the barber-surgeon constantly stirs the deflated „blood” in the bowl such as is usual in pig-killing feasts. Finally, Machaon makes a hole with a corkscrew into Bacchus's stomach. Thereafter, Bacchus dies and a screaming little pig – which symbolizes the soul – escapes from the god's shirt where it had been hiding before. The ambushing Pluto snatches the piggy. The escape of piglet, however, anticipates Bacchus's possible rebirth as next to the motif of death appears the thought of the birth – continuity and cyclical of time.

The bloody finish of the drama is not strange compared to the habits of the Carnival. According to Ujváry's statement in the tradition of the Carnival-parade a false trial often occurred, during which several masked persons, puppets or animals were judged and executed. During the execution, the factual killing of the animals may have occurred. These trials were mostly typical in highland areas (the current Slovakia), in the Palóc region and Transylvania in the Kingdom of Hungary (Ujváry, 1991). These kind of traditions of the jocular- or false trials came from the ancient sin- and cursed-transferring ceremony called *pharmakos* (φαρμακός). It may have been a fertility-magician rite during which a member of the community seemingly or effectively had been sacrificed for the sake of the reparation for all sins of the collective. The execution-motif may refer to the death of winter, as well. (About the *pharmakos* more: Frazer, 1925; see also Ujváry

1997, 1957) After the change of the religious background the folk-play evolved from this rite. The images are creepily grotesque rather than funny. But if we examine the Hungarian Carnival-tradition we can see that actually the author and the arranger mostly suited these to the local tradition. Géza Vámszer – traditions related to the Carnival in Csík (Eastern-Transylvania) – describes in detail that one of the dramatic plays an imitated surgery occurred with spectacular gesticulations. Sometimes a lad dressed as a cow was „killed”, and red beetroot juice trickled from the „stomach” instead of blood and from it also tumbled out a little calf, which perhaps symbolized the soul. Thereafter was the Carnival’s funeral-ceremony, where the lad with the stuffed belly, whose carnival character was brought to the carcass cart, and after a humorous funeral speech, was finally „buried” (Vámszer, 1959).

In the case of *Bakhvs* the location (the Tokaj wine region) provides the subject, the time (the shrove-tide) and the end of the play. Bacchus, figuratively, died of dropsy but his failure does not mean the eternal victory of the Lent. Inasmuch as his death was not an eventual thing, but was a recurring incident of the ecclesiastical year (with the projection of his resurrection), the drama is thus comical and the occurrence „*also maximizes the possibilities of comical editing*” (Nagy, 2009). Here we need to comment that according to *István Kilián and György Székely* the Pauline comedies primarily want to amuse, and its teaching intention is secondary (Kilián & Székely, 1990).

On the *Bakhvs* funeral scene, the turns and styling elements of the commedia dell’ arte almost appear, which is confirmed by Tekla Dömötör (1954). Connected to the Bacchus-topic, Dömötör remarks that the author with a lucky hand chooses farce for his subject, „*one of the most popular motifs of the century*”. Dömötör also strongly emphasizes that the author of the play did not want to create a „literary” text but he consciously created his work for theatrical performance (Dömötör, 1954). Imre Nagy in demonstration of this also quotes the theatre historian József Bayer’s opinion, not merely Dömötör’s. (József Bayer was the first person to transmit the drama.) This statement arises as a demonstration of the relationship among the stage movements, actions and the text (Nagy, 2009).

In summary we can conclude, that the play titled *Bakhvs*, a Pauline comedy, is one of the most expressive school comedies that adapts to the expectations of the age, contemporary dramatic efforts and public demands. The author successfully smuggles into that his own moral attitude and value judgement without reducing enjoyment of the drama. We can assert that the text, when perceived from higher dimensions and brought to the stage through popular culture and grotesque imagery, can show the way to the popular and fantastic-grotesque manifestations of the 19th century.

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