DOI: 10.11649/sm.3294

Slavia Meridionalis 24, 2024
Article No.: 3294

Citation:
Hensel, L. (2024). Laughter closed up in horror: The case of the Hungarian ballad about a walled-up woman. *Slavia Meridionalis*, *24*, Article 3294. https://doi.org/10.11649/sm.3294

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Laughter Closed up in Horror: The Case of the Hungarian Ballad about a Walled-up Woman

> "Laughter has deep philosophical meaning; it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint."
>
> M. Bakhtin (1965/1984, p. 66)

As the French neurologist Henri Rubinstein states in his work on the psychosomatics of laughter: "laughter is the stimulation of the pleasure centres, and its vital function is based on this. We laugh in order to feel pleasure in both pleasant and unpleasant situations, to retain our pleasure in spite of everything" (Rubinstein, 1983, p. 36, as cited in Grzybowski, 2013, p. 128). With this in mind, I am going to consider how this extremely important vital function, namely laughter, was sought in Hungary, finding it in a folk ballad that is closer to horror than to a humorous sketch.

When the Hungarian variant of the ballad about the walled-up woman, *Kőmives Kelemenné* (about Kelemen Mason's wife), was first published in 1862,

This work was supported by a grant "The topos of an immured woman in the cultures of Southeastern Europe and Hungary" from the National Science Centre, Poland (2020/37/B/HS2/00152).

Competing interests: no competing interests have been declared.

Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences.

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it received much attention from the Hungarian world of science and culture. However, allegations quickly arose that the publisher of the collection of folk songs containing this ballad, the Unitarian bishop János Kriza, had committed fraud by publishing, as an original work, a Hungarian translation of an already well-known Romanian ballad about the master mason Manole. The discussion among Hungarian folklorists and song-collecting enthusiasts of the time – called the 'Grozescu process' after the Romanian critic of the authenticity of the Hungarian ballad – was accompanied not only by the discovery of new variants of this piece, but also by the first comparative studies of texts containing the topos of the walled-up woman, which is found in Hungarian, Greek, Albanian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Serbian and Croatian cultures.

One important element of this research was the issue of the sources of the origin and dissemination of this type of ballad in the Balkans. For example, György Sarudy, a pedagogue and researcher of Hungarian folk texts, claims that such a cruel custom could not be Hungarian. He admits, indeed, that he is familiar with the use of animal blood in Hungary as a reinforcing substance for the structure under construction (he himself saw such a procedure in Sopron, where a bowling alley built of clay was poured with animal blood brought from a slaughterhouse) (Sarudy, 1899, pp. 41–71). However, he regards as barbaric the use of human blood as a binder. Searching for the origins of this custom, he directs his gaze southwards:

> but it is possible when it comes to people from the south. The Albanians settle their feuds through bloody revenge, which is still raging here with full force. Murder, abduction of girls, rape and adultery are the crimes of these cruel tribes. […] With such peoples, violence and burning of women can occur. […] The Serbian legend (of the walled-up woman – author's note) is an extension of the Albanian one. It was brought to Transylvania by the Wallachians.[1] (Sarudy, 1899, pp. 61–62)

Researchers also point out the differences between the Hungarian ballads and their variants among the Balkan peoples, which, "according to their nature", lure by trickery the victim destined to be walled up (Sz–cs. G–a., 1888, p. 177). In most Hungarian ballads, in contrast, upon arriving at the construc-

[1] "Ellenben a délvidékiekről föltételezhető. Az albánok a viszályokat vérbosszúval intézik el, mely itt még teljes erejében dühöng. Gyilkolás, leányrablás, erőszaktétel, házasságtörés bűneit ezzel intézik el e marcona, aristokratikus függetlenségben élő törzsek. […] Ilyen nép közi előfordulhat a kegyetlenség, a nőégetés. […] A szerb monda az albánnak továbbfejlesztése. Erdélybe pedig az oláhok hozták."

tion site Kelemen Mason's wife is informed of what awaits her, and only then is she murdered. Her ashes, mixed after burning with lime, form the mortar with which the walls of the castle of Déva are hardened. Such 'technology' is supposed to guarantee its indestructibility.

The ballad I am interested in is relatively quickly recognised as extremely important for Hungarian culture and was included in school curricula as early as 1895. Its characteristic structure, its message, as well as the individual structural elements of the narrative, the devices used, begin to spread to Hungarian culture and everyday life, flowing in a wide stream through Hungarian literature (prose, poetry, drama). They also become an inspiration for humorous works in the broad sense of the word as they are perceived by, for example, John Lippitt, who in defining his field of research on humour restricts himself to the succinct statement that he is going to deal with all "what is perceived, thought of or experienced, as funny or amusing" (Lippitt, 1991, p. 10). For Rod A. Martin, the topic requires a slightly broader view:

> humour is a broad term that refers to anything that people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus, and also the affective response involved in the enjoyment of it. (Martin, 2007, p. 5)

Before moving on to the right topic, I would like to remark that in writing about humour in a culture that is alien to us, we face the problem of understanding. For as Raskin notes:

> Nothing is laughable in itself: the laughable borrows its special quality from some persons or group of persons who happen to laugh at it, and, unless you happen also to know a good deal about this person or group of persons you cannot by any means guarantee the laugh beforehand. It is only people with the same social heritage who laugh easily at the same kind of jokes. That is why laughter so often balks at national frontiers and dies away with the passage of time. (Raskin, 1985, p. 2)[2]

It can therefore be stated that translated humour is often unintelligible, that is, *de facto* untranslatable. However, it fulfils a vitally important function in social life and therefore, when addressing the functioning of the topos of the walled-up woman in Hungarian culture, it is impossible to ignore this issue.

[2] This is pointed out, among others, by Seham El Kareh, Cultural Clash between Humour and Translation, p. 1 in the introduction to the grant project Cultural Clash between Humor and Translation carried out at Alexandria University, Egypt (El Kareh, n.d.).

The ballad of Kelemen Mason's wife in satirical and humorous texts

The humorous potential of the ballad about Kelemen Mason's wife was discovered as early as the beginning of the 20th century, when it was used in the political satire *Kőmives Kelemen (régi ballada nyomán)* [Kelemen Mason (based on the old ballad)],[3] published anonymously in 1911 in the then-popular satirical magazine *Borszem Jankó*. The old folk ballad becomes a pretext for the author to write an allegorical text in which he depicts the work of his contemporary masons building a 'castle of light' of not stones but thoughts. This can be interpreted to mean that underneath their figures there are politicians hiding who are building an 'edifice of the state'. This interpretation is justified by the fact that when their work does not give the expected results (as in the old ballad "what they erected by day crumbled away at night; what was built by night collapsed in the morning"), they decide – as a foundation sacrifice – to wall up a politician ("Kőmives Kelemen (régi ballada nyomán"), 1911, p. 13).

The political recycling of the ballad is rather marginal in its humorous use. Another example of this is the 1990 text by P. S. Föld, *Néhány név a listáról: kik voltak a besugók* [Several Names from a List: Who Was an Informer], published in another popular humour magazine *Ludas Matyi* (Föld, 1990, p. 7). It takes up the then-topical subject of the search for secret collaborators of the communist state services. Its protagonist is a famous representative of the parliamentary opposition, lawyer József Torgyán, suspected of such collaboration. His case is reported by a secret informer with the pseudonym dr Mária Incognitó, who when speaking of his 'walling-up/planting/co-operation' states that he was not an informer, namely he was 'walled-up/planted' not 'in department III/III'[4] but during the construction

[3] Various functions of political humour – through the prism of the Arabic 'Laughing Revolution' – are presented in the article by Dalia E. Hammoud, Egyptianising Politics/Politicising Egyptians: An analysis of political jokes, IOSR Journal of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) (Hammoud, 2014, pp. 20–31).

[4] This department, within the militia structure of the Hungarian Ministry of Internal Affairs, among other things, uncovered the anti-communist milieu. In 1991, a film entitled "Beépitett ügynök" – "Bodyguard" appeared in Új Ludas Matyi in the film news section, in

of his villa, when 'some drunken mason mistook him for Kelemen Mason's wife. Fortunately, by sheer chance, 34,000 peasants with a Zetor tractor were passing that way and freed the lawyer".[5] According to Raskin, political jokes fall into two groups: denigration jokes and exposure jokes (Raskin, 1985). It seems that the two examples quoted here can be placed in the latter category. It should be noted, however, that they had a significant drawback. As Freud writes in his definition of a good joke, "a good joke makes, as it were, a *total* impression of enjoyment on us, without our being able to decide at once what share of the pleasure arises from its joking form and what share from its apt thought-content" (Freud, 1905/1960, p. 132). However, years later, such an assessment of political texts has serious limitations as the political context in which they were created dims and it is more difficult to judge such jokes in terms of their quality (Raskin, 2023).

Let us look at some other humorous uses of the ballad. My journey through the Hungarian Land of Smiles with the theme of the walled-up woman in the background will be started with a lexical joke, to which Freud devoted much space in his works.

Lexical jokes

The lexical jokes that refer to our ballad are created by the use of polysemes. Jolanta Krzyżewska and Seweryn Krzyżewski define this type of humorous measure as 'operation without operation', that is the ability of polysemes or homonyms to produce a humorous effect by means of the mere 'automatic redirection of meaning' (Krzyżewska & Krzyżewski, 2014, p. 87).

In the area of interest, jokes are based on three polysemes: 'fal', 'beépitett', and 'vár'. Let us start with the word 'fal'. In the noun form it means 'a wall, a partition (wall)'; however, it is also a verb and in this form it means 'to gobble, to devour' (figuratively – 'to devour books'), while in the dialectal form it simply means 'to eat'. I will quote one example: "Kelemen Mason's family is having breakfast. The father says – Eat, my little boy, your mum is already

which Kelemen the Mason's wife was alleged to be a collaborator of the communist services, precisely of department III/III ("Az Új Ludas Matyi filmajánlata", 1991, p. 6).

[5] "egy részeg malterosfiú összszetévesztette Kőmíves Kelemen feleségével. Szerencsére, tiszta véletlenségből, éppen arra járt 34 ezer parasztember, retorral, és kiszabadították az ügyvédet."

eating/is the wall" (Rónaky, 2003, p. 28).[6] In recent years, another form of this joke has been circulating on the internet, built on the double meaning of the word 'vár', which means 'castle' but also 'to wait' ("Let's go, son, because mother is already waiting/is already a castle"[7]).

More potential is contained in the word 'beépitett', which is a participle of the verb 'to build in' and means 'walled in', 'installed', and in a figurative form also someone 'installed, built-in, planted', that is a 'plain-clothes man, undercover agent'. For example, in a joke asking about the washing machine owned by Kelemen Mason, the answer is 'beépitett', meaning 'built-in' ("Humor", 2003, p. 16). In turn, in the joke "What will be the title of the Hollywood version of Kelemen Mason?" the answer is "Installed beauty",[8] which should be understood as a "beautiful undercover woman".[9]

Lexical jokes, including those quoted above, are dedicated jokes. According to Krzyżewska and Krzyżewski, the teller of such jokes most often expects only that the recipient, while decoding them, will have a sense of some spiritual community with their author. At the same time, understanding joke-teller's message leads to boosting the recipient's intellectual potential (Krzyżewska & Krzyżewski, 2014, p. 94). Such a situation results in the fact that jokes often associated with the ballad's protagonists are in fact not very amusing but they contain many stereotypes and are firmly rooted in culture. Many of them are discriminatory and sexist.

This approach becomes even more apparent in longer comical pieces. It is evident how the problem of the woman who sacrifices her life so that her husband can achieve his goal vanishes completely. There is a denial of the act of devotion of the woman; her place is taken by submission to the man's will, and this is followed by the trivial problem that builders have faced for centuries – shortages of building materials. The woman dies because they have to build 'out of something'. The woman's body is reduced to dead bricklaying matter. In fact, we are dealing here with the dehumanisation of Kelemen Mason's wife. Pál Peterdi went the furthest in this direction. By comparing the protagonists of his series of stories about pioneers to characters from the ballad about Kelemen Mason's

[6] "Kőmives Kelemennék reggeliznek. Az apa megszólal: – Egyél kisfiam, anyád már fal."

[7] *Induljunk, fiam mert anyád már vár* (n.d.).

[8] "A nap vice" (2003, p. 16).

[9] The joke appeared, probably, after 2000, when, under the title 'Beépitett szépség' or 'Built-in Beauty', the popular film 'Miss Congeniality', starring Sandra Bullock, was shown in Hungary.

wife, he decided to explain to his readers who Manson's wife was: "she was raw material for the construction industry. At a time when manufacturers of prefabricated elements were putting mothers of families into the walls of the castle instead of prefabricated concrete elements" (Peterdi, 1962, p. 4).

The texts linking the walling up of a woman with the solution to two of Kelemen Mason's problems – building and marital – have the longest tradition in Hungary. The earliest text of this type that I was able to find dates back to 1942. In the New Year's Eve issue of *Szentesi Napló* magazine, there is an article about how a humourist sees the problem of material shortages through the prism of literature. Referring to the ballad about Kelemen Mason's wife, József Kiss states that the construction of the castle by Kelemen and his team failed due to the use of bad mortar. Faced with the threat of serious financial consequences, the masons decided to solve the problem by mixing mortar with the ashes of a burnt woman: the first of their wives who arrived at the construction site. Since Kelemen Mason's wife was the first to come, it was she who became that necessary binder, the 'substitute material' (pótanyag). In conclusion, the author playfully remarks that two deductions result from this: one that the method used is noteworthy because a durable castle has been built; the other that a woman comes out of it badly when she is constantly checking on her husband (Kiss, 1942, p. 5).

Many Hungarian humourists followed Kiss. In his short story, *A Kelemen brigád esete Déva várával* [The Case of Kelemen Team Related to Déva Castle] (Gőz, 1987, pp. 118–119), József Gőz decides to discover the 'whole truth' about the story of Kelemen Mason's wife. He does this by presenting the reflections of the last living member of the masons' team that built Déva Castle. He reveals that Kelemen Mason purposefully decided to kill the first wife who came to her husband and then wall her up as he was convinced that this woman would be his wife. So finally, by walling up his wife, Kelemen – the narrator concludes the story – became the happiest man as he completed the castle, freed himself from his wife, and did not have to share the obtained wealth with her. Kelemen Mason, from László Feleki's poem, also solved his problems "using the method of Kelemen". After the construction of the castle was completed, he led a serene life working in the garden and explained to his astonished co-workers that he had once loved his wife but that he had now "fenced himself off from her with a wall" (Feleki, 1970, p. 9).

A separate group is texts focused on the figure of Kelemen Mason. At first, he was presented as a symbol of a construction worker unlucky at work, such as in a text by an anonymous author entitled *Még egy Kőmives Kelemen* [Another

Kelemen Mason], which may have been influenced by the stage adaptation of the ballad about Kelemen Mason's wife by the Hungarian writer and columnist Ernő Ábrahám, which had premiered two months earlier. The titular Kelemen Mason is a man who appears at the editorial office of *Új Nemzedék* newspaper seeking help with the matter of materials stolen from him at the construction site. His name immediately evokes in the editor associations with the story known from the ballad and theatre, so he surprises the visitor by telling him that he knows perfectly well that he is a mason and has a problem with building a house. The man treats the editor like a clairvoyant (NN, 1923, p. 6).

In some works, there is an element of self-justification in the figure of Kelemen Mason for his brutal behaviour towards his wife. This is a reference to the stereotypical view of the subordinate role of women and, at the same time, a manipulation of self-image. As Zbigniew Nęcki notes: "The essence of defence mechanisms is the reduction of mental tension caused by negative images of reality; not by changing the situation, but by changing the perception and interpretation of unwanted events" (Nęcki, 2018, p. 133).

In an anonymous text from 1968, the defence mechanism takes the form of rationalisation. Kelemen Mason attributes his behaviour towards his wife to force majeure. The building under construction was falling apart due to material shortages. Faced with the Central Office's threat that if he does not come up with new technology and the construction is not completed, the workers will be deprived of their bonuses; faced with his wife's threat that he will be chased out of the house, he had to find a solution. It turned out that this could be walling up his wife. The hero believes that, to some extent, she only had herself to blame because she ignored his warnings contained in the passage of the ballad quoted to her: "we'll catch you fine, we'll throw you in the fire, we'll mix your miserable ashes with lime"[10] and, in addition, she was "insufficiently aware, she did not immediately understand the importance of this matter for the socialist economy".[11] Finally, he sums up the whole story like this: "My beloved wife always said, Kelemen, Kelemen, you'll get into something one day… And you see, in the end she got into something herself" (Novo, 1968b, p. 3).[12]

[10] "Most szépen megfogunk, bédobunk a tűzbe A te gyenge hamvad, keverjük a mészbe…"

[11] "Persze az asszony nem volt elég fejlett, nem értette meg mindjárt a dolog népgazdasági jelentőségét."

[12] "Drága jó feleségem mindig azt hajtogatta: Kelemen, Kelemen, egyszer még belekeveredsz valamibe… És lássa, a végén ő keveredett bele" – The text was also published Kisalföld (Novo, 1968a, p. 10). In turn, in 1969, as a text signed by Vilmos Novák (1969, p. 8).

The murder of Kelemen Mason's wife seems to be treated by Hungarian satirists in a similar way to how today's generation, familiar with computer games, approaches the issue of death. They tame it and take it not quite seriously. An example is András Kürti's article entitled *Bünügy* (*Crime*), published in *Ludas Matyi* (Kürti, 1968, p. 5). It consists of a series of short press releases that reconstruct how newspapers and magazines of the time might have reacted to this tragic event. He begins with one of the most popular newspapers at the time, the Budapest evening paper *Esti Hirlap*. The information about the event would have been given the intriguing title *Cement helyett asszonyt!* [Woman instead of cement]. With this title, the shooting of his wife by Kelemen Mason would be described. The perpetrator who appears before the court is portrayed as a money-grubbing businessman who, as a mitigating circumstance, points out that in committing the crime he acted out of concern for the victim, reassuring her to remain calm because she would only be immured into a wall. In the women's press, in perhaps the most popular weekly newspaper in communist Hungary, *Nők Lapja*, the news about Kelemen Mason's wife would appear under the title *Ahol a nő csak kötőanyag!* [Where a woman is only a binder!]. Here, the 'crime' would be limited to the husband's domestic violence (euphemistically described as 'improper and harsh treatment'/'helytelen és maradi bánásmód'), and the whole problem would be shown against the background of a presentation of the achievements of women employed on a state-owned farm confronted with their marginal participation in the company's authorities. *Ludas Matyi* magazine would react to the case with a press announcement by Kelemen Mason's son: "Anyone knows anything about my great-grandmother, Mrs. Kelemen Mason, who brought provisions for my great-grandfather to the castle in Déva and I have been looking for in vain ever since…"[13]

Construction jokes, using Freud's typology, can be categorised as exposing jokes (Freud, 1905/1960, p. 97). They criticise the organisation of work on construction sites and the attitude to the work ethics of masons themselves. This can be seen, for example, in Pál Somogyi's version of the ballad. His hero, Kelemen Mason, is building a skyscraper with his crew. The traditional place of the wife in this piece is taken by cards. The cards disturb the work, and the verdict is reached against them, because, as Kelemen says, "The job isn't

[13] "Ki tud valamit idesanyámról, Kőmíves Kelemennéről, aki elemózsiát vitt idesapámékhoz Dévavárba, és azóta hiába keresem a dunántúli szaküzletekben, sehol nincs."

going well because we keep getting good cards".[14] The "guilty" cards are walled up. This is done by Kelemen Mason: "When he was halfway through walling them up, they thought it was a joke. When they were no longer visible, they thought he was crazy; when the seven of hearts was walled up, they believed it".[15] As the author concludes, this is how the skyscraper was built (Somogyi, 1967, p. 10).

Humorous drawings

Humorous drawings that allude to the ballad about the walled-up woman began to appear in the Hungarian press in the early 1960s. Cartoonists were particularly interested in the 'act of walling up" itself. As it seems, the forerunner of this type of joke was a cartoonist who signed with the initials SZA. He used the ballad to jokingly depict how a well-known Hungarian builder, Kelemen Mason, devised a technique for getting rid of unwanted women. Kelemen Mason's mother-in-law was the first to act in this role. A drawing in *Kisalföld* magazine shows a mason running uphill towards a castle, dragging a woman behind him. Someone in the watching crowd compliments Kelemen Mason for his smartness as he will get rid of his mother-in-law by walling her up in the castle wall ("Építő jellegi népballada", 1960, p. 8). Another drawing, by Balázs-Piri, shows an attempt to get rid of the wife 'by Kelemen Mason's method' and depicts a construction worker who, pointing to an elderly woman standing next to him, explains to an elegantly dressed couple that if they allow him to wall his wife into the villa under construction, the house will be more durable (Balázs-Piri, 1985, p. 4).

Like the authors of the written texts, the cartoonists also portrayed the woman's immurement as some technological solution. The only female graphic artist I have been able to find who has taken up a theme relating to the ballad about Kelemen's wife, Ibolya Dallos, shows a conversation between two young workers. One of them boasts about having seen the ballad about Kelemen

[14] "Nem megyen a munka, mert megyen a kártya."

[15] "Amíg félig rakta, csak tréfára vették. Mikor már nem látszott, bolondságra vették. Mikorra a piros hetest bevakolta Már valóra vették." The words are a paraphrase of the text of the ballad about Kelemen Mason's wife.

Mason's wife[16] and delightedly extols the great construction technology used in it (Dallas, 1976, p. 5). József Csillag expresses the problem in 'technological' terms. His Kelemen Mason walls up his wife, who – peeping through the last part of the wall that has not yet been bricked up, with tears in her eyes – asks him to use rapid hardening clay cement (Csillag, 1968, p. 4). Here, the woman completely submits to her husband's will and, by insisting on the use of the right cement, additionally ensures that the bricklaying process is carried out to the highest construction standards.

Other drawings presenting Kelemen Mason's wife are firmly rooted in the patriarchal approach to women. As his wife, she is the property of her husband and completely subject to his will. Through the act of walling up, her ownership changes. In such drawings there is a kind of 'nationalisation' of her: the attached signatures mean she becomes "the property" of the offices responsible for building administration. Two such drawings were created by József Szűr Szabó. Both show the same situation. We can see the outline of a human figure walled up in a wall. In front of it, there are masons who explain to their interlocutors that the woman is subject no longer to them but to the estate administration offices – HIG (Szabó, 1961, p. 1) and HKI ("Kőmives Kelemen", 1968, p. 15).

Against the backdrop of these drawings, the humour from a weekly youth magazine, entitled *Rebranding*, is striking in its carefreeness. In front of a kiosk with the sign 'Inn', Kelemen Mason explains to a man that they built a great eatery instead of a castle because the castle was constantly falling apart (István, 1986, p. 13), which can be seen as a general criticism of masons whose buildings are made not quite according to plans.

The last drawing in this group, by József Sándor Békési, is intended to prove Kelemen Mason's mastery and should be categorised – referring to Freud's typology of jokes – as a nonsensical joke because "it consists […] in presenting something that is stupid and nonsensical, the sense of which lies in the revelation and demonstration of something else that is stupid and nonsensical" (Freud, 1905/1960, p. 58). The image shows a men's toilet. Next to the urinal there is a half-built-in figure facing away from the viewer, and next to this person there is a man with mason's tools who says, "Are you still saying I'm a bungler?"[17] (Békési, 1991, p. 12).

[16] This is probably a reference to the rock-opera Kőmives Kelemen (L. Szörényi–J. Bródy).
[17] "Kőmives Kelemen: Még most is asszongya, hogy kontár vagyok?"

Humour from the internet

In recent times, humour referring to the ballad of the walled-up woman has been moving to the internet, which used to record ideas that already existed in Hungarian culture.[18] For example: "What did Kelemen Mason say to his son when he wanted to get married? – Son, a woman is needed in the house…".[19] The interesting thing is that these jokes appear, among other things, on a website dedicated to so-called 'bizarre elephantine jokes'.[20] These jokes, like others occurring in the internet space, can be regarded as part of a contemporary form of folklore.

In addition to repetitions, new threads are emerging in the internet approach to the topic. Kelemen Mason gains his own entry in the Hungarian Nonsensopedia. His humorous biography reads that "he was a relatively well-known architect, sculptor and psychopathologist", as well as "an expert in female anatomy […] from an early age he showed a particular fascination with stones and women, and in his leisure time he wondered how to combine the pleasant with the useful" ("Kőmíves Kelemen", n.d.). He graduated from castle-building technical college and after some small-scale jobs was commissioned to build the castle in Déva. When it became apparent that "what is built within a day falls apart by morning", he suggested walling up the gravedigger's wife. Over the protest of the team members, who would gladly get rid of their wives in this way, ultimately Kelemen's wife was walled up. Upon completion of the construction, he was deprived of practicing his profession in the country, which meant that he carried out his later work abroad, because, as the adage goes, "no one is a prophet in their own land". In this way, using his 'unique

[18] It is worth noting here the research presented in the article by J. Drakett, B. Rickett, K. Day, K. Milnes, *Old jokes, new media – Online sexism and constructions of gender in Internet memes*, *Feminism & Psychology* (Drakett et al., 2018); these authors, based on an analysis of sexist memes on the internet, point out that new technology creates new opportunities to promote the exclusion of women.

[19] http://kecskefeszek.net/vicc/egysoros-viccek/komuves-kelemen-1.html (*Mit mondott Kőmives Kelemen a fiának, amikor az meg akart házasodni? – Kelle az asszony a házban fiam*, n.d.). Earlier, a similar joke was published by *Ludas Matyi*, 1984 (no. 5), p. 7.

[20] https://faviccek.hu/komives-kelemen.html (*Fárasztó Faviccek – Kőmíves Kelemen*, n.d.).

technology', he built such structures as 'the Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall, Hadrian's Wall and the Pyramid of Cheops'. As shorter forms, jokes in the form of 'humorous text messages' appear, such as "Thank you for using our services to build your house. Naturally, in its price of 80 million, the walling up of your mother-in-law is included".[21]

An important new medium for promoting parodic versions of the ballad about Kelemen Mason and his wife is the YouTube platform. Although the number of views of the new forms of the ballad appearing there oscillates only between a few thousand and several thousand, this platform is certainly a good tool to show that Hungarians still treat the ballad not only as an important element of their national cultural memory but also as an inspiration for entertainment during various socio-cultural events. The majority of playful interpretations of the ballad that have already been invented and described here come back again in the perspectives of more and less professional performers.

One such 'new interpretation' is the version presented by András Magai. It combines the text of a genuine folk ballad with the popular jokes I have already mentioned ("a woman is needed in the house"; "Come home, son, because mum is already a castle/is already waiting").[22] In a more elaborate form, a satirical adaptation of the ballad was presented in 2010 by Levente Moravecz.[23] Here, the construction problem is the lack of gravel not provided by the supply company. As in most stories about construction, the masons are interested in everything except the work, which is progressing slowly. In this version of the ballad, there is a need to 'use' a woman. Kelemen Manson is visited by his wife. An argument ensues. The husband complains that she does not care for him but takes his hard-earned money. Eventually, Kelemen, to the satisfaction of the listeners, pushes her into lime. As Jeanette Bicknell writes: "There is an element of malice in much humour. […] A good deal of our laughter in comedy is directed at misfortune, presented in such a way as to elicit amusement rather than outrage, tears or compassion" (Bicknell, 2007, p. 458, following Lintott, 2016, p. 347).

[21] "Köszönjük, hogy házát velünk építtette. Természetesen a 80 milliós árban az anyósa befalazása is bele van számolva: Kőműves Kelemen Bt." https://keptelenseg.hu/viccek/vicces-sms-ek-1904 (*Vicces SMS-ek*, n.d.).

[22] A. Magai, Kőmíves Kelemen Balladája Feldolgozás, recording of a concert at the Zalaegerszeg Poetry Days (2009). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lv-tweQogAA (Punctum3, 2009).

[23] Kőmives Kelemenné balladája: Moravecz Levente átiratában, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tS3uMkmjpEI (Aracsi Józsefné (Ircsi), 2010).

Online records of presentations of different variants of satirical adaptations of the ballad make it possible to observe how they are received by the audience. One such opportunity is provided by the version shown by three different performers, including members of the popular cabaret Markos & Nádas & Boncz. Here, twelve masons-losers rob their construction site; they eat and drink more than they work. Finally, they find that a woman is needed to make the work more original, but they do not know what to do with her when she turns up. "They smeared her with eau de cologne and shaving cream / treated her with ointment and ultra-septic powder / stood idly with long faces", the narrator reports. Ultimately, the construction does not end because, as we learn, no sponsor has been found for it.[24] Both the text itself and the artistic measure used, namely speaking with a lisp, result in the audience generally reacting with enthusiasm, as expected by the performer, with laughter.

In conclusion, it is worth recalling the lesson that the satirists of *Ludas Matyi* drew from the story of Kelemen Mason: "Marriage also has its good points. For example, if Kelemen Mason had remained a confirmed bachelor, a ballad would never have been written about him" (Dalmát, 1988, p. 12). One could go one step further and say that not only would the ballad about Kelemen Mason not have been created, but this article would not have been written either. Since it has been written, however, I will stop for a moment to reflect on the image of Hungarian society that emerges from the humour and jokes discussed here, which are a vital part of Hungarian popular culture (Mintz, 2008, pp. 281–301).

In Hungarian humorous texts and cartoons, we are confronted with a risky game with authorities – a dangerous entry into a field fortified by the power of taboos. We are faced with, as Edgar Morin put it, "plebeian barbarism" (Morin, 1965, p. 13). After a phase of captivation and fascination with the topos of the walled woman, in the 1960s we encounter in Hungary the beginning of a process that could be inscribed as the crisis of the "star system", which is perfectly described by Morin in his book *The Stars* (Morin, 2005). Treating the functioning of Kelemen Mason and his wife in Hungarian society as a kind

[24] Markos & Nádas & Boncz, 12 Kőmives (12Masons) (2009) and "Kőműves Kelemen" (2015). Respectively: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7ZWZy34EpY (sandorareemen, 2009); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJ3DPt4W3MY (Slagerek Valogatas, 2015). The recorded text was also broadcast as part of a Radio Cabaret programme in 2009. In another performance https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4IcHInL1UQ (Vincze Váraszó, 2011) as an excerpt from the carnival programme (2011).

of analogy of the world of movie stars described by this French philosopher, sociologist and political scientist, we can conclude that while in high culture, in poetry, drama and literature, these characters are still "idols" who are supposed to provide audiences with models of behaviour and sometimes even cure their complexes, in popular culture we observe the beginning of the process of their decline. Humorous texts dedicated to Kelemen Mason and his wife are like knocking these heroes down from Olympus. This fall is particularly painful for Mason's wife, whose image is mixed with gender stereotypes built around the subordinate role of women in social life.

Certainly, by analysing humorous materials we discover only one face of society. However, paraphrasing Pascal, it must be said that just as one cannot understand the whole without understanding the parts; one cannot understand Hungarian society without understanding the humorous approach to the characters of the folk ballad of Kelemen Mason's wife, which has become built in to the Hungarian cultural code by its presence in the Hungarian school system for 150 years.

Recordings of performances of humour texts available on websites show that the public generally reacts positively, and therefore approvingly, to the jokes heard. This leads to the conclusion that asymmetry between the male and female sexes persists in Hungarian society. The same phenomenon is pointed out by Emi Nursanti in her work on male jokes (it should be noted that almost 100 percent of the texts and cartoons analysed in this article are the work of men):

> Reflecting that most of the masculine identities and language features in sexist jokes represent men's superiority, this kind of humour can be a way to maintain gender asymmetry in society. Besides, although humour leads to laughter and is considered healthy, sexist humour is dangerous as the expressions subordinate women. (Nursanti, 2022, p. 255)

On the other hand, while observing Hungarian society as the recipient of such messages, it can be considered to be a creative society characterised by the qualities that Krzyżewska and Krzyżewski write about, such as:

> tolerance of a certain level of bizarreness (originality) of the stimulus, ensuring that the message of a linguistic joke is not immediately moved away from the perceptual field during the first contact; or, the use of such styles and levels of information encoding ensure the updating of the memory trace in unusual and even 'exotic' (and unexpected also for the subject themself) circumstances. (Krzyżewska & Krzyżewski, 2014, p. 91)

However, this does not obscure the fact that the Hungarian approach to the ballad of the walled-up woman should be seen as a phenomenon that documents sexism. The comical texts and images analysed are not only a way of showing men's power and control in the social sphere but are also an expression of prejudice against women, or even cynicism towards them. A fact that shows how deeply rooted and still widely accepted this approach is in Hungarian culture is the appearance of such texts also on internet accounts administered by women. But this is a different and even more intriguing topic.

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Humor zamknięty w horrorze. Przypadek węgierskiej ballady o zamurowanej kobiecie

Artykuł poświęcony jest pewnemu paradoksowi. Podejmując temat przemocy, w istocie próbuje odpowiedzieć na pytanie, czy i jaki sposób jest możliwe jej połączenie ze śmiechem. Do przyjęcia takiej perspektywy skłaniają badania nad różnymi rodzajami humorystycznego recyklingu jednego z najpopularniejszych utworów węgierskiej literatury ludowej – ballady *Kőmives Kelemenné* [Żona Kelemena Murarza]. Ballada opowiada o zamurowaniu żony mistrza murarskiego, aby mąż i jego współpracownicy mogli zbudować trwały zamek i otrzymać wysoką zapłatę za swoją pracę. Artykuł opiera się na bogatej bazie materiałowej, obejmującej

zarówno krótkie żarty leksykalne, jak i dłuższe satyry i humorystyczne skecze, które powstawały na Węgrzech od początku XX wieku do czasów współczesnych. Oprócz tekstów pisanych odwołuje się do humorystycznych rysunków publikowanych w gazetach i czasopismach oraz do wersji ballady obecnych w przestrzeni internetowej. Biorąc za podstawę prace teoretyczne m.in. S. Freuda, V. Raskina, R. A. Martina, autor poszukuje odpowiedzi na pytanie o obraz społeczeństwa węgierskiego, jaki odzwierciedlają analizowane materiały.

Słowa kluczowe: węgierska literatura i kultura; historia Węgier; płeć kulturowa; ofiara; antropologia śmiechu i humoru; przemoc; komunikacja interpersonalna

Laughter closed up in horror: The case of the Hungarian ballad about a walled-up woman

The paper is dedicated to a paradox. By approaching the topic of violence, I am actually trying to answer the question of whether and how it is possible to combine it with laughter. I was inspired to adopt this perspective by research on the different types of humorous recycling of one of the most popular works of Hungarian folk literature, the ballad *Kőmives Kelemenné* [Kelemen Mason's Wife], which is a story of men's violence against a woman: the walling-up of the master mason's wife so that the husband and his team could build a durable castle and receive the agreed payment for their work. The article is based on a rich material base, including both short lexical jokes and longer satires and humorous sketches that have been produced in Hungary since the beginning of the 20th century. In addition to written texts, it refers to humorous drawings published in newspapers and magazines and to versions of the ballad that are present in the internet space. Based on theoretical works by, among others, S. Freud, V. Raskin, R. A. Martin, it seeks an answer to the question of the image of Hungarian society that the analysed materials reflect.

Keywords: Hungarian literature and culture; Hungarian history; gender; sacrifice; anthropology of laughter and humour; violence; interpersonal communication

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1954-2024

Publication History: Received: 2023-05-02; Accepted: 2024-05-23; Published: 2024-12-20