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Marginalized Texts of a Glorified Genre: the Valorization of the (Folk)tale in Hungary

Abstract

Attention towards and interest in the genre of the tale began rather belatedly in Hungarian culture. This paper provides a concise overview of the history of the assigning of value to this narrative genre: how it was transformed from a trivial genre of idle amusement for the uneducated into a precious cultural item that is an essential part of the national heritage, and which is safeguarded and studied from a number of perspectives. Parallel with the rise of the genre, a decline of the earliest known tales has taken place, due to certain authenticity criteria retrospectively applied by newly formed disciplines, as well as the standardization and naturalization of a specific mode of narration.

Keywords: folktale, fairy tale, authenticity, forgery, marginalization

The folktale (and especially its subgenre, the fairy tale)¹ enjoys a distinguished position in Hungarian culture. It has a central place in the canon of folk genres, and is a major subject of folklore studies. In the first part of the paper,² I provide an overview of the discourses within which the valorization of a narrative *genre* of oral tradition has taken place since the end of the 18th century. The second part presents the way a segment of *texts* belonging to this genre became marginalized (and, in some cases, stigmatized) as a result of the enforcement of inconsistent and anachronic authenticity criteria.

¹ The term *fairy tale* in this paper refers to *eigentliche Märchen* or *tales of magic* (ATU 300–749). In Hungarian, these types of tale are named literally ‘fairy tales’ (*tündérmese*). The tale as such is very often identified with this prioritized subgenre.

² Proofreader: George Seel.



That the tale is a valuable genre is not a self-evident statement. In Hungarian culture, this positive evaluation is the outcome of the history of ideas over the past two centuries. Fairy tales in Hungarian were recorded only from the end of the 18th century,³ but they remained in manuscripts and were used for the private entertainment of families and friends.⁴ Tales emerged in cheap prints (almanacs) in the second half of the 18th century,⁵ then in magazines and popular journals,⁶ but did not enter the elite literature scene until the 1820s.

From the second half of the 18th century, more and more learned men reported on a new vogue of reading and telling fairy tales.⁷ The early history and sources of the Hungarian tale tradition have not been explored thoroughly, but these remarks may refer to the emergence of *Feenmärchen*, involving French and Italian fairy tales, with the mediation of popular German translations.⁸ According to these accounts, worded in a rather derogatory sense, telling fairy tales was a habitual past-time of the uneducated, a social group which included peasants, maids, and servants.

While typically presented as a cultural item belonging to the “lower” social classes, this type of narrative as a means of social entertainment was well-known in isolated communities of educated people as well: for instance, in higher education boarding schools and in mansions of noble families in the countryside.⁹ Despite this existing practice, representatives of the cultural elite, if they mentioned fairy tales at all, usually did so briefly and with contempt.

³ Cf. the first manuscript collection of tales was recorded in 1789; Gulyás 1917; Gulyás 1931; Benedek K. (ed.) 2003.

⁴ Bernáth 1902.

⁵ Perrault's *Les Fées* was published in Hungarian in 1763 in an almanac printed in Kassa (Košice). Turóczi-Trostler 1927; 1939.

⁶ Gulyás 2008.

⁷ Dézsi 1896; Gulyás 1925; Turóczi-Trostler 1927; Turóczi-Trostler 1939: 93, 369.

⁸ János Kónyi, a sergeant, translated and published some tales by Mme d'Aulnoy from German between 1774 and 1794. Vörös 1987: 106–119. Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, the most important poet of the late 18th century, in 1798 reported on the popularity of *Feengeschichte mit einem saubern Tittelkupfer* sold at fairs, in the foreword to his comic epic entitled *Dorottya, vagyis a dámák diadalma a járságon* (*Dorothy, or, the victory of ladies during Carnival*). Csokonai inserted a fragment of a fairy tale on the grateful dead in one of his plays, evoking oral storytelling in a mansion. Csokonai 1978: 258, 288–289. On German translations of *conte de fées* in the 18th century cf. Grätz 1988.

⁹ On tale-telling in Protestant boarding schools in Debrecen, Sárospatak and Székelykeresztúr (Cristuru Secuiesc) at the turn of the 18th–19th centuries cf. Gulyás 2010: 128–130.

The tale was regarded as such a low-brow genre, even decades later, that when some texts were published in a distinguished literary journal at the end of the 1820s, the subscribers wrote letters to the editor threatening to end their subscriptions.¹⁰ At the end of the 1840s, the act of publishing a fairy tale as an epic poem (written by the most famous poet of the contemporary literary scene)¹¹ in a separate volume was evaluated laconically by possible readers: “Anyone who prints such a thing is a fool.”¹² Altogether, the tale was of no cultural value and of no interest for the majority of the learned who had access to literacy and *belles lettres*. Fairy tales were associated with people who were excluded from elite culture and literature, i.e., members of the lower social classes, together with middle-class children and women.

Change in this respect began with a definite *German cultural impact* from the 1820s, and it is observable how in the following half century the status of tale slowly but gradually changed due to various strategies that assigned value and meaning to this genre.

In the 1820s two collections of Hungarian tales translated into German were published in Vienna¹³ and in Brünn¹⁴ by editors living abroad who were familiar with the work and concept of *Volks poesie* elaborated by the Brothers Grimm. Georg von Gaal and Johann Grafen von Mailáth presented the tales they (or their collectors) had recorded from male tale-tellers, i.e. soldiers and herdsman, to a foreign reading audience. Back in Hungary, the reception of these books that intended to represent a national (*Magyarische*) tale repertoire abroad was hardly noticeable, and this attempt at collecting and publishing (folk)tales for an educated reading audience proved to be a failure for several decades.

The first representative collection of folk poetry in Hungarian, edited by János Erdélyi, was published in three volumes between 1846 and 1848, selecting from about 8000–10,000 texts that had been sent by collectors throughout the country.¹⁵ Altogether 33 folktales (primarily fairy tales) were published in this collection, and the editor noted that the first two tales published at the end of the first volume were intended to function only as a sort

¹⁰ Gulyás 2006.

¹¹ Petőfi Sándor: *János vitéz; Népmese* (‘John, the Valliant: A Folktale’); the poem was published in 1845.

¹² Gulyás 2010: 64.

¹³ Gaal 1822.

¹⁴ Mailáth 1825. The second, extended edition was published (also in German) in Stuttgart und Tübingen in 1837.

¹⁵ Erdélyi (ed.) 1846–1848.

of illustrative sample for collectors to promote the collection of folktales (which had been the subject of general disinterest).

Another initiative under the impact of *German Romantic literature* attempted to introduce the fairy tale (either in prose or in verse) as a new narrative genre into literature. Some sporadic literary experiments were published between the 1820s and the 1850s, in a period in which the various genres of short prose fiction were becoming accepted as literature. Although reputed authors of the literary canon (such as Mihály Vörösmarty, Sándor Petőfi, Mihály Tompa, or János Arany) experimented with the poetic possibilities of the genre of the fairy tale in a philosophical dramatic or in a versified form, the introduction of the fairy tale into the narrative genres of literature eventually failed, since these works of art were received with indifference, perplexity, or rejection. Some readers continued to maintain that the fairy tale was too low-brow a genre to be represented in literature, while other readers simply could not find a proper mode of reading: even if the plot of the literary fairy tale was about separated and tortured lovers, their flight and death, it was read as a comical story,¹⁶ because a tale, after all, even if written by a distinguished poet, could not be taken seriously; it was just a plaything.

The next attempt to assign meaning and value to fairy tales emerged not within the realm of the production of tales but in the field of reflection on these texts. In 1847 the first Hungarian treatise on folk and literary tales was published in a journal of literary theory and criticism.¹⁷ The author, Imre Henszlmann, a physician, literary critic, art historian, and archaeologist, compared Slovak, Romanian and Hungarian tales,¹⁸ and argued that all fairy tales are symbolically encoded and derived from the same original type of plot that presents the clash of the four classical elements (fire, water, earth, air) with special emphasis on the symbolic conflict of sun and winter. Accordingly, fairy tales are remnants of ancient pagan mythology. This treatise was the first scholarly attempt in Hungarian culture to present and interpret tales as a subject of academic interest by assigning an underlying, hidden, symbolic meaning to them.

Such an approach had remarkable implications: if a hidden meaning of texts exists, it calls for the deciphering of the code, and it justifies the close reading of tales. The value of the folktale, and especially the fairy tale, is thus, in this case, derived from its being bestowed with a new identity: it is no longer perceived as a popular, entertaining form of prose fiction, but rather

¹⁶ Gulyás 2010: 83–103.

¹⁷ Henszlmann 1847.

¹⁸ Henszlmann relied on *Walachische Märchen* by Arthur and Albert Schott (Stuttgart, 1845) and *Slovenske Povesi* by Jan Rimauski (i.e., Ján Francisci, Lőcse, 1845); cf. Gulyás 2017a.

as a source document, whose study may give *access to the pre-Christian mythological structures and narratives*, as well as to *historical-ethnographical knowledge*. In this way, this interpretation of tales belonged to the typical program of the period which aimed at the reconstruction of the national past and the construction of national identity. While Henszlmann's long and complicated treatise was received with critical acclaim, its effect was later hardly noticeable, and the symbolic-mythological interpretation of tales became discredited by the end of the 19th century.

In the second half of the 19th century, three major discourses lent significance to tales; each one was connected to the agenda of cultural nationalism. The first argued for the establishment of Hungarian *children's literature*. Specific literary texts for children began to be published only from the 1840s in Hungary, and most of them were translations of German texts. One reason for this was that not only were the majority of urban middle-class families of German origin, but almost the whole publishing industry (including printers, publishing houses and booksellers) was as well, therefore both the reception and publication of children's literature relied profoundly on German cultural and literary trends.¹⁹ When a claim to produce children's literature in Hungarian emerged, it was soon tied to the literary re-creation of traditional texts transmitted from mouth to ear by mothers and nannies: songs, rhymes, and tales.

The emergence of fairy tales (and folktales) in children's literature was also connected to an antifeminist standpoint: as the first endeavors on behalf of women to become professional writers and the possibility of a female literary career appeared at the end of the 1850s, they became the subject of heated debates. Some men of letters considered it a dangerous challenge which threatened the traditional role models within families and would eventually lead to a social crisis. The solution they offered was that women should not be authors, but if they insist, then they should write tales for children. According to this argumentation, if an author happens to be a woman, then writing for children may justify the act of writing and seeking publicity. In this way, motherhood, the mother tongue, and a restricted and controlled female authorship became interconnected.²⁰ Taken together, the extension and diversification of literary production in terms of authors, readers, and genres observable in the middle of the 19th century presented the tale as a licensed genre suitable for women and children.

¹⁹ Drescher 1934; Domokos 2019.

²⁰ Gulyás 2019.

On the other hand, in the 1860s the fairy tale began to be interpreted as a *substitution*: as an oral form that may offer narrative techniques, themes, and motifs for the literary re-creation of the eagerly sought-for, still missing, national heroic epic that should narrate the common past via the deeds of an ancestor of the national community, and therefore has a legitimizing power.²¹ This quest for the orally transmitted and preserved ancient heroic epic determined Hungarian cultural and literary tendencies in the context of nation-building throughout the 19th century – in vain, as hardly any traces of the supposed pre-Christian national heroic epic could be detected in oral tradition. The lack of a heroic epic – the most prestigious genre in a tradition-oriented literary canon – meant that it had to be replaced by elements of other traditional narrative genres that also enjoyed the required narrative authenticity and legitimacy (tales, historical legends, aetiological legends, belief legends, and classical ballads).

Narrative authenticity, or, epic credit, a central category of the literary theory of the period, suggested that a historically oriented narrative work of art should rely on traditional, orally transmitted narratives that had been organically (i.e., not under a foreign influence) shaped, used, and accepted by the Hungarian-speaking community over generations; otherwise it would remain alien to the Hungarian character. Despite this conceptual framework, the fairy tale eventually could not substitute heroic epic in this cultural context. Its failure, in my view, might have been due to a large extent to the fact that a fairy tale narrates the adventures of an individual, and this hero does not represent a community. Therefore, this contrasted with the basic drive of Hungarian literature of the period which needed the kind of major epic form that presented a hero (either in the undefined mythical or in the historical past) who had acted in the name of and for the sake of his (national) *community*.

The third discourse that assigned value and self-transcending significance to fairy tales defined them as part of a narrowly interpreted oral tradition, i.e., *folklore*. In this case, folklore, in general, could function as *proof*. Hungarian literacy, apart from some scarce texts, could be dated back to the 14th century, but until the last decades of the 19th century, literary production had never been so extensive as in western Europe or the Mediterranean area. Therefore, orally transmitted texts of the presumably illiterate peasants served as historical evidence for the existence of a specific national textual tradition that had organically developed and was supposed to be exempt from foreign influences, meanwhile reflecting the soul and character of the nation under-

²¹ Gulyás 2017b.

stood as a living creature. In this way, certain verbal expressive forms of a given social class (peasants) became idealized, and their representations acquired a central position in the culture, while this social class was otherwise legally and economically marginalized within the same society.²²

A shared feature of all the discourses presented above is that throughout the 19th century, with differing argumentation, they tried to present the fairy tale as a valuable cultural item. Some of these arguments were accepted, while some of them failed, were rejected, or were simply ignored. Nevertheless, the result of these multiple interpretations was that slowly, by the end of the century, the idea that the fairy tale has a value had become widely held, and the fairy tale began its career as the kind of national cultural item that is worth being protected, saved, and also bought and sold.

Three new phenomena accompanied this new status of the tale: success at the cash register, the emergence of forgery, and experts. While in the first half of the 19th century collections of tales simply found no publisher to print them, by this time they had become bestsellers. The dissemination of folktales in literacy (reworked for middle-class schoolchildren in illustrated books or published in penny magazines and cheap print “for the people”) made a definite and clearly identifiable impact on oral storytelling as well.²³

In the meantime, by the 1890s, the study of folk poetry and folktales had qualified as a discipline, with the establishment of a professional society, a journal, a department in the national museum, and some university courses. Experts in the new discipline were engaged in debates about whether certain folktale collections were apocryphal, fake, or authentic (depending on the extent and manner of textualization). The point, in this case, is not whether – or which – scholars were right or not. The mere existence of such controversies indicated a change in the perception of the value of tales, since only what is perceived as valuable can be subject to forgery. For the newly established discipline, the authenticity of the tales under examination was crucial for its own legitimacy. If the corpus is not valid, or cannot be presented as valid, because it has been subject to authorial-type modifications, then no valid statements can be made about it. It could have undermined the disciplinary status of folklore studies, which was rather weak anyway: it was a new discipline whose experts investigated the expressions of people and communities set at the bottom or on the margin of feudalistic-capitalistic society (peasants, shepherds, maids, beggars); moreover, they studied *orally transmitted* expressions, i.e., information which was difficult to retrace and check.

²² Gulyás 2011a.

²³ Kovács 1969; Kovács 1977.

Debates on the textualization strategies and textual authenticity of folktales helped to legitimize the status of folklore studies and scholars of folklore since they were the ones who, relying on their expertise, could recognize and identify forgery. Forgery acts *as if* it was authentic; therefore, it could be interpreted as an illusion, pretension, or crime, and then a moral-criminal discourse was built around it, creating for the participants the roles of prosecutor, accused, and judge. In this way, the expert became not only a professional, but also a moral authority, a guardian of the endangered items of folk culture – another feature that makes him/her indispensable (or contributes to his/her becoming some kind of a hero, who, as a protagonist of a salvage paradigm, in the last but one moment recognizes, saves and brings back the precious, disappearing object of the quest).²⁴

A glorified genre with discredited texts

By the end of the 19th century, the assessment of the genre of the tale had changed in a positive way, and it had become a valuable cultural item that was a legitimate subject of ‘heritagization’ and academic study. Meanwhile, an underlying concept of the *proper* folktale was also created, which led to the marginalization of certain texts and collectors. Paradoxically, while folklore was seen as a repository of surviving elements from an *ancient* (definitely not modern) culture, it was precisely the *earliest* recorded tales (approximately 300 texts from the period between 1780 and 1860) that became marginalized.

This existence on the periphery of the folklore canon meant that for over one and a half centuries these collections did not have a second edition (the first one generally proved to be the last one as well), and apart from a few attempts, they were not investigated thoroughly, nor were fundamental philological problems addressed (although the majority of the manuscripts were and are preserved in central, easily available archives). Moreover, the primary cultural context of these collections was unexplored (in most cases even the essential data are unknown: exactly how many texts constitute the corpus, or who the collectors were, etc.). These collections were from time to time registered, mentioned, and referred to in overviews of the history of Hungarian folklore research, but the acknowledgment of their importance proved to be an empty gesture without real research interest.

²⁴ Bendix 1997; Gulyás 2011b.

This neglect is not a problem in itself and can be explained by the other justified priorities of folktale research. The problem, in this respect, is that while none of these early collections of tales was subject to scholarly attention and a thorough investigation, they were, nonetheless, endowed with negative labels that were transmitted almost automatically, without any further reflection for over a century, being referred to as not proper, not authentic folktales.

In between two disciplines

Literary history

The basic double division of tales as belonging to either folklore or children's literature became fixed by the end of the 19th century in Hungarian culture and academia. In the next century it became a self-evident ("natural") classification, obscuring the fact that until the second half of the 19th century, tales had been recorded, published, and used for different purposes as well, and it was not only these two functions (the entertainment/education of children and the documentation of folk poetry) which determined the emergence of tales in literacy.

Tales recorded in the period between 1780 and 1860 became the subject matter of either literary history or folkloristics. In this disciplinary framework, authorial tales produced in literature (*Kunstmärchen*, literary tales) were allocated to the field of literary history, while orally transmitted tales with no identifiable author (folktales) were assigned to the field of folkloristics. This categorization of tales ignored or obliterated those transitional and intermediary forms that existed between oral and literary tradition.

Apart from some exceptions,²⁵ those working in the field of literary history did not pay much attention to 19th-century tales, which were usually regarded as some kind of auxiliary texts or raw material for literary works of art. In the second half of the 19th century (by the time the institutionalization of literary history as a discipline had taken place), the tale genre had been relegated to a peripheral position within the literary canon, which might explain this low-key research interest.

²⁵ Benedek M. 1907; Elek 1914; Elek 1915; Elek 1916; Turóczi-Trostler 1927; 1939; György 1934.

Formerly, in the period between 1820 and 1850, there were attempts and experiments which could have introduced the (fairy) tale as a legitimate narrative genre into the literary canon. There were at least three reasons why fairy tales could have been integrated into literature. First, the system of *narrative* genres at the beginning of the 19th century changed, and previously unknown narrative genres emerged in Hungarian literature (e.g. the short story, *Sage*, legend, romance, and narrative reports of contemporary urban life). Secondly, in these decades, *folk poetry* to a large extent influenced the poetic capacities of literature (cf. the massive success of *Volkslied*, ‘folk song’ in literature). Finally, fairy tale as the genre of wonder and magic (in terms of characters, topography, and actions) could have been welcomed into a *Romantic* literature.

Nevertheless, with a retrospective glance from the 21st century, not all of the above-mentioned narrative genres were able to become a strong one, and not all of them became canonized. I presume that the fairy tale as a literary genre was a possibility in Hungarian literature in the first half of the 19th century, which, despite some highly ranked poetic experiments,²⁶ eventually failed. Therefore, by the last decades of the 19th century, the tale was not part of the system of literary genres, but due to the expansion of folktale collections and children’s literature, it began to be perceived as either a genre of folklore or children’s literature.

Folkloristics

Since literary history did not recognize the tale as a valid literary genre, and the study of children’s literature has practically been *terra incognita* in Hungary until the 21st century, the study of tales was primarily assigned to folkloristics throughout the 20th century. Folklore studies, in compliance with its disciplinary target, focused upon *folktales*, but in doing so the investigation of the historical, archival folktales (from the 18th and 19th centuries) proved to be of secondary importance. The priority of Hungarian folklore studies from its institutionalization²⁷ until the 21st century was the recording and documentation of *contemporary* folklore, including folktales. As far as the method of investigation is concerned, at the beginning of the 20th century, the historical-geographic method²⁸ required the recording of a large number of variants for

²⁶ Gulyás 2010: 59–117, 203–300.

²⁷ Kósa 1989: 11–32; Kósa 2001: 103–118.

²⁸ Katona 1903; Honti 1928; Berze Nagy 1957.

its comparative investigations. It also demanded (in theory) the word-for-word authenticity of texts and the indication of some primary data of the context of tale-telling (e.g. the name, age, educational background, and occupation of the tale-teller), which previously had only been very rarely recorded by collectors of folktales. In the period between the two world wars, special efforts were made to identify traces of the Eastern (i.e., Asian nomadic) heritage and pagan Hungarian mythology as preserved in folktales.²⁹

In the 1940s, a new trend of tale research became dominant. The so-called Budapest school of folktale study established by Gyula Ortutay focused on the pragmatics, use, and variation of folktales and the process of oral transmission. Highlighting the tale-teller, the audience, and the performance of tales in a socio-cultural context, this approach to tales also promoted the comprehensive collection of tales in contemporary rural society.³⁰ Historical and archival tales were of secondary importance since they usually lacked the data that had provided an insight into the context and use of tales in a given community.

Altogether, the study of early tales had been of secondary importance since the institutionalization of folklore studies because Hungarian folktale research focused on two major projects. The first aimed at the documentation of tale-telling still functioning in some rural communities until the 1970s, while the second research project was implemented to accomplish the typological classification of previously recorded and contemporary tales.³¹

The proper, authentic folktale

Besides the research priorities of folklore studies in the 20th century,³² there might have been another reason that led to a low-key interest in early tales. This is a conceptual problem: folklore studies ignored the vast majority of tales recorded before the 1860s because it was not able to unequivocally determine the status of these tales, i.e., whether a text can be classified as a *folktale* or not. Furthermore, if it is not considered an authentic product of *folklore* and *folk* culture, then it is difficult to decide whether its investigation should fall under the competence of folklore studies or not.

²⁹ Posthumous editions: Solymosy 1991; Berze Nagy 1958.

³⁰ Dégh 1995.

³¹ Uther 1997: 217.

³² On the history of and trends in Hungarian folktale research: Ortutay 1972; Voigt 2010.

Of the early folktale collections, it was László Arany's (*Eredeti népmesék*, 'Authentic folktales') and János Kriza's collection (*Vadrózsák*, 'Briar roses: A collection of Székely folk poetry') published in 1862 and 1863, respectively, that have been classified as containing *authentic* texts that mirror the traditional way folk (i.e., peasants) told tales.³³ Previous tale collections by György Gaal (1822, 1857–1860), János Mailáth (1825, 1837, 1864), János Erdélyi (1846–1848, 1855), and László Merényi (1861, 1862, 1863–1864) were labeled as “not folk-like”, “not natural”, “alien-like”, “over-elaborate”, “artificial”, “re-written”, “stylistically modified”, or “influenced by literature”. This retrospectively applied evaluation which was – in most cases – based upon impressions, defined a set of stylistic expectations, and if the tales did not meet these stylistic requirements, then they were deprived of the status of authentic folktale (i.e., they were not considered as the true imprint of oral tradition), which led to their marginalization.

Georg von Gaal translated and published 17 tales in German from his collection in 1822 in Vienna. The manuscript corpus was considerably larger; it was made up of more than one hundred texts. No Hungarian edition was published until 1857–1860 when Ferenc Toldy (the leading literary historian of the period and a relative of Gaal) and Gábor Kazinczy (a devotee of folktales as a translator and collector) published 53 tales from Gaal's manuscript legacy. Since its publication, this three-volume collection has been repeatedly criticized, with its critics arguing that Toldy and Kazinczy stylized (and ruined) the tales, as a result of which the textual outcome became alien to the nature of real folktales. In contrast to this widely held view, the autopsy and the comparative philological investigation of the manuscript and published variants of the Gaal collection performed only recently has come to the conclusion that the texts Toldy and Kazinczy published are, in most cases, word-for-word transcriptions of the manuscript tales that had been recorded from and by Hungarian soldiers stationed in Vienna in the 1810s. Therefore what has been criticized as not authentic (not “folk-like”) narration was not the narrative mode elaborated by Toldy and Kazinczy but that of the Hungarian soldiers of the 1810s.³⁴

János Erdélyi, the editor of the first Hungarian collection of folk poetry, added, supplemented, contaminated, and deleted lines and strophes from the lyrical texts he published. Therefore it was also claimed that he had modified the tales as well; as Gyula Ortutay expressed it: “... one can feel the polishing

³³ Kósa 2001: 79.

³⁴ Domokos 2005.

hand of the editor”³⁵. Taking a closer look at the manuscript and published variants of the tales in this collection, it turns out that Erdélyi did not perform textual modification with respect to the tales: he published them verbatim with very few modifications (spelling, punctuation, and in some cases deleting or altering some words or one or two sentences). What has been identified (and criticized) as the editor’s narrative (and improper) style again proved to be the style of either the collectors or the informants – the tale-tellers themselves.

László Merényi, in the 1860s, published several volumes of folktales he had collected, but these collections have been completely neglected over one and a half centuries and have only been referred to as a classic example of inauthentic folktales. This stigmatization of Merényi and his tales has relied on a review published in 1861 in which János Arany (the national poet as well as an authority on, and master of, the Hungarian language) criticized Merényi for the textual modifications he had performed, owing to which the folktales Merényi published received an over-decorated, artificial, too complicated and mannerist style (which did not reflect the characteristics of oral storytelling of the folk).³⁶ Later, this review was generally interpreted as if Arany had totally rejected Merényi’s folktale collection.

Yet from a close reading of Arany’s review, it is evident (because it was literally stated by the author) that Arany had a generally positive opinion of Merényi’s collection and even supported his further work. It is also clear that what Arany criticized was not the fact that Merényi modified the tales. His problem was that Merényi did not modify the tales *properly*. In Arany’s view, editors were not simply allowed but also required to correct the mistakes the storyteller had made: the editor may/should amend narration but cannot intervene in the plot and composition of the tales. From this perspective, the shortcoming of Merényi’s folktale collection was that he did not have the appropriate linguistic and genre competence to properly modify the text in a way that evokes the *oral* tradition of the tale-telling of the *folk* in the medium of print literacy.

To sum up: on the one hand, there are early collections of tales that have been evaluated (and marginalized) as inauthentic folktales because of the editors’ (supposed) textual intervention that resulted in an inadmissible creation instead of documentation, while on the other hand there are collections that have acquired a position in the center of the folklore canon and have served as a standard point of reference representing authentic folktales. Para-

³⁵ Ortutay 1960: 29.

³⁶ Arany 1968.

doxically (and probably ironically), close scrutiny (performed in the second half of the 20th century) revealed that these canonized collections proved to contain heavily re-written texts that had undergone extensive stylistic changes and had been subject to large-scale editorial intervention.

In 1908 Antal Horger, a folktale collector and professor of linguistics, on the basis of his fieldwork in Transylvania noted that the tales that had been published in 1863 in Kriza's canonical collection of Székely folk poetry were beautiful, but must have been edited and re-written since tale-tellers did not relate tales in that manner.³⁷ This remark triggered a heated debate among representatives of the new discipline – folklore studies – who generally rejected such an “insinuation”³⁸. In the second half of the 20th century, however, the exploration of the manuscripts of the tales³⁹ as well as Kriza and his fellow collectors' correspondence,⁴⁰ revealed that Kriza and his advisor, Pál Gyulai, had definitive stylistic expectations with regard to the mode of narration and that the texts had undergone considerable modifications by certain collectors in order to achieve the required stylistic outcome and to become suitable for publication.

As far as the tales of László Arany are concerned, which were qualified as being “the most properly narrated Hungarian folktales”, after the second world war, the manuscripts of this collection came to light, literally, in the basement of the palace of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The identification and investigation of the manuscripts led to some surprising discoveries. First, the tales were recorded by László Arany's sister and mother, and László Arany obviously used and corrected these manuscripts while compiling his book. The comparison of the manuscript and published variants of the tales attested that László Arany had carefully reworked the style of the tales (especially that of fairy tales) – in compliance with the guidelines János Arany (his father) had proposed a year before when reviewing Merényi's folktale collection.⁴¹

Ágnes Kovács, the editor-in-chief of *The Catalogue of Hungarian Folktales*, compared available manuscripts and published versions of tale collections from the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century and came to the conclusion that in almost each inspected case (including

³⁷ Horger (ed.) 1908: 456.

³⁸ Sebestyén 1912.

³⁹ Kovács 1982a.

⁴⁰ Szakál (ed.) 2012.

⁴¹ Kovács 1982b; Domokos–Gulyás 2018.

János Kriza and László Arany's collections) a considerable, authorial-type editorial intervention could be identified.⁴²

Both Kriza's and Arany's tales are representative examples of the category of *Buchmärchen* (in between *Kunstmärchen* and *Volksmärchen*), inasmuch as they claim to represent oral tradition (as a base of legitimacy), but in the course of the shift between oral transmission and literacy the textualization included profound editorial interventions which did not necessarily become transparent for the reading audience.⁴³

A major problem with the inconsistent, impressionistic, and non-transparent application of the criteria of *authentic/fake folktale* is that it determined whether a given folktale collection was set in the center (Kriza, Arany) or on the margins (Gaal, Erdélyi, Merényi) of the folktale canon. A scrutiny of the mechanisms of this evaluative classification may also reveal that this kind of distinction between tales was not backed by underlying philological investigations, and also that *authenticity*, as a matter of fact, corresponded to the existence of a certain *narrative style* which was (considered) folk-like, i.e., resembling storytelling within a given socio-cultural group (the usually illiterate agrarian population). This has resulted in the narrowing and discrediting of alternative ways of storytelling. Difference and diversity in terms of the mode of narration were perceived as an alienating otherness that should be distanced and set on the margin. The style of those texts that were set at the top of the hierarchy as authentic folktales has been increasingly standardized and gradually perceived as a "true", "real", "natural" mode of oral narration, implying that alterations from this canonized (and constructed) mode of narration are anomalies.

⁴² Kovács 1961: 432; Kovács 1982b.

⁴³ Bausinger 1979.

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