

ISTVÁN BOLDOG-BERNÁD – GÁBOR MÉSZÁROS
AN EARLY POLITICAL COMEDY – ON ZSIGMOND
BEÖTHY'S *KÖVETVÁLASZTÁS (LEGATE'S ELECTION)*¹

Zsigmond Beöthy (17 February, 1819–29 January, 1896) is a mostly forgotten author of the nineteenth century. Beöthy was a political figure in Komárom, he was an active author of Hungarian literature, and a member of Gábor Kazinczy's circle, the Young Hungary movement, which consisted of literati interested in world literature, who also cultivated close political connections.² Following the 1848 revolution, he was even appointed to a government position. The 1848–49 revolution and war of independence brought on significant political and social changes in Hungary; thus, the period until 1849 forms a natural unit in Beöthy's career: the still young author also embarked on writing his autobiography around this time. When presenting his life, he is proud to mention his work *Követválasztás (Legate's Election)*: "From my literary workings during this time [...] I should mention my political comedy »Követválasztás«[.]"³ The play was also published in print at the time and did not lack a reaction, although it can hardly be considered well-known. The poor reception is highlighted by the fact that although Hungarian playwright and literary historian György Spiró dedicates a separate section to the genre of election comedy in his monograph *A közép-kelet európai dráma (Central and Eastern European drama)*, he does not even mention this play, nor does he mention Beöthy's name in the volume;⁴ although, if anywhere, this is where it should have been reviewed.

One characteristic of this type of comedy is that they used syntagms that had a clear political connotation at the time. Spiró draws attention to the fact that in Central and Eastern Europe, the manipulated electoral system constituted the basic motif of these plays, which was true both for small communities and higher fora, and so the audience had direct experience of it.⁵ According to Spiró's taxonomy, the Central and Eastern European election comedy is wholly Central and Eastern European in nature, and it does not fit the Western European tradition. Election comedies were written for specific purposes of contemporary politics, and if the

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² T. ERDÉLYI 1965.

³ BEÖTHY 2019a. *Válogatott írások (1839–1849) (Selected works (1839–1849))* also contains the political comedy *Követválasztás (Legate's Election)*: BEÖTHY 2019b.

⁴ SPIRÓ 1986, 127–143.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

election of representatives was not the topic of these plays, their script would be identical to those of classical Western European comedies.⁶ Hungarian election comedies typically pit conservatives and liberals against each other, so *Követválasztás* (*Legate's Election*) seems to be a dramatization of the liberal-conservative debate, and an analysis of the syntagms of the play (using contemporary journalistic language as a control group) takes us close to the authentic political language of the 1840s.

Both the Beöthy play and the genre of *Követválasztás* (*Legate's Election*) have disappeared from the canonical drama types in Hungary; thus, election comedy as a dramatic genre is a scarcely researched part of the history of drama. Gyula Romhányi discusses political comedies in his study published in 1930, including Beöthy's *Követválasztás* (*Legate's Election*). He claims that they play had no impact and believes that "it was the final occurrence of the election of officials as the topic of a comedy".⁷ György Spiró takes Ignác Nagy's *Tisztújítás* (*Election of officials*) and József Eötvös's *Éljen az egyenlőség* (*Long live equality!*) as starting points in his overview of the history of the Hungarian election comedy, but, as mentioned above, he does not include Beöthy's play.⁸ He also does not include Imre Vahot's *Országgyűlési szállás* (*Parliament lodging*) among the works analyzed, or József Gaal's *Vén sas* (*Old eagle*), performed a few months after *Követválasztás* (*Legate's Election*).⁹ According to Spiró's logic, Ignác Nagy's play serves as the model, discussing József Eötvös's comedy following it.¹⁰ As pointed out by Márton Szilágyi, although Eötvös's play is dated earlier, it was staged later than Ignác Nagy's *Tisztújítás* (*Election of officials*), thus, it was incorrectly considered as the earlier play.¹¹ Beöthy wrote *Követválasztás* (*Legate's Election*) in 1843, i.e. one year after Ignác Nagy had written *Tisztújítás* (*Election of officials*), which Spiró considers the archetype of political comedy.¹²

Követválasztás (*Legate's Election*) was already staged in Komárom on August 2, 1843, before it had been published in print. One audience member reviewed the performance under the pseudonym Vidéky, praising the members of the Komlóssy troupe that staged the play¹³, also highlighting Beöthy's courage, since he was brave enough to stage a play in his own town, where "part of the audience might

⁶ Ibid., 1986, 127–128.

⁷ ROMHÁNYI 1930, 295.

⁸ SPIRÓ 1986, 133–134.

⁹ ROMHÁNYI 1930, 293–295.

¹⁰ SPIRÓ 1986, 134.

¹¹ See SZILÁGYI 2013, 513–521.

¹² SPIRÓ 1986, 133.

¹³ Ferenc Komlóssy's (1797–1860) troupe. Komlóssy was an active member of the provincial theater scene from 1811. According to Szinnyei, Komlóssy and his wife Erzsébet Czégényi ran a traveling theater troupe between 1839 and 1844. He had also been the director of the Komárom troupe in 1827. See SZINNYEI 1899, 847–848.

have been motivated to view the performance of the play by jealous sentiments.”¹⁴ However, there was likely no trace of this following the performance because the play “made a good impression, and the well-directed although somewhat lengthy noble procession was also met with applause.”¹⁵ The success had also been mentioned in the previous issue of *Honderű* and in its column *Pesti Salon’ Heti Szemléje* (*The Weekly Review of the Pest Salon*): “We also add the news from the countryside to today’s review that Zsigmond Beöthy’s comedy »Követválasztás« was performed to applause in Komárom. More detail will be provided in our upcoming issue.”¹⁶ In his short description, Vidéky praised the fact that Beöthy’s comedy resembled Ignác Nagy’s *Tisztújítás* (*Election of officials*). He also gave some advice, for example, he recommended putting more emphasis on Veteráni’s and Katicza’s roles, so that the print version of the play become even more outstanding.¹⁷

Követválasztás (*Legate’s Election*) was also staged to a full house in Győr December 3 of the same year, exactly two days before Ignác Nagy’s *Tisztújítás* (*Election of officials*).¹⁸ Beöthy also mentions the Komárom and Győr performances in his autobiography, and although he notes that his subsequently published play “was attacked by reviews from several sides”, he does not consider it without impact, since in addition to several countryside theater troupes, Mrs. Komlóssy also requested the play to be staged in Kolozsvár as a “bonus performance” for her daughter, Ida Komlóssy.¹⁹ However, Beöthy did not mention the fact that his play was not successful in Kolozsvár; according to *Pesti Divatlap*: “Beöthy Zs’s »Követválasztás (Legate’s Election)«, upon staging, failed.”²⁰ The comedy might have been performed in several other towns as well, and according to an 1843 article in *Honderű*, it was expected to be staged both in Lubló and in Székesfehérvár.²¹

Követválasztás (*Legate’s Election*) was indeed an early, prominent example of Hungarian political comedy, regardless of whether Beöthy had been familiar with the precursors of the genre fashionable at the time. Despite its technical and aesthetic clumsiness, it deserves a reinterpretation in terms of the history of drama.

The practice of *acclamatio* appears in both Beöthy’s and Ignác Nagy’s play, according to which the person whose name is shouted the loudest wins during an election (and thus for example becomes the legate of the county, i.e. its representative in parliament). *Acclamatio* was an established element of contemporary political life,

¹⁴ VIDÉKY, 1843:8, 254.

¹⁵ Ibid., 255.

¹⁶ “*Pesti Salon’ Heti Szemléje* (*The Weekly Review of the Pest Salon*)”, 1843:6, 185.

¹⁷ VIDÉKY, 1843:8, 255.

¹⁸ Z.....y, 1843:26, 841.

¹⁹ BEÖTHY 2019a, 47–48.

²⁰ SZINYEI 1845, 64.

²¹ “*Pesti Salon’ Heti Szemléje...*” 1843:11, 369.

and the audience of the play also immediately must have recognized the anomalies of the system. The option of voting also appears in parallel with the practice of *acclamatio* in *Követválasztás (Legate's Election)* if that is to bring a more favorable result, as does the threat of using armed forces. In fact, it was not unusual for the two sides to start a brawl and for the supremus comes to bring in the military:

Máté Szakál (Matthew Beard) (raising his hatchet). ...Now my friends, we must hasten that our foes do not shout louder than us, and that we can practice our noble freedom and rights without military force; or if our adversaries somehow have more roar in their throat, we can bring the issue to a vote because we will for certain be thrice their number, especially if the district of Érköz also joins us. [...]

Bugár.: Hear, hear, respected sir; we will indeed make noise, lest the tax is voted through.²²

It is clear from the text that the custom of *acclamatio* was already a source of humor at the time. *Acclamatio* as an outdated practice also appears in János Arany's *Az Elveszett alkotmány (The Lost Constitution)*:

And others like this: for the success of which
Three thousand votes opened their vixen throats.
A census was taken. Not in the old, battered manner,
Says the record, but to a new order, exactingly.
The list of names was then to be announced during voting
Alphabetically, and the individual was to vote accordingly.²³

József Eötvös's comedy *Éljen az egyenlőség (Long live equality!)* describes campaigning and getting voters drunk – although Beöthy's play does not criticize this practice harshly, it does refer to it: "Sir Professor, if you keep insisting and wish to provide my noble peers with articles of law instead of food and drink, I recommend

²² „Szakál Máté (fokosát fölemelve). ...Már most barátim, oda kell igyekeznünk, hogy az ellenfél benünket túl ne kiabáljon, 's a' mi nemesi szabadságunk és jogunk' gyakorlását fegyveres erő nélkül is véghez vihessük; vagy ha az ellenfél valahogy' harsányabb torokkal bírna, a dolgot szavazásra vihessük, mert mi bizonyosan három anynyi számmal leszünk, kivált ha az érközi járás is hozzánk csatlakoznék, mind amazok. [...] Bugár.: Ugy lesz, tekintetes uram; hiszen majd lármázunk mi, csak az adó keresztül ne menjen.” BEÖTHY 2019b, 71.

²³ „És több illyeseket: mellyek bizonyos sikeréül / Háromezer vótum tátott rám hárpia torkot. / Összeírás történt. Nem az elnyűtt régi modorban, / Így ir a jegyzőkönyv, hanem új rendben, szigorúan. / A névsor pedig a szavazás idején betűsorral / Volt kikiáltandó s az egyén akkép szavazandó.” ARANY 1951, 33–34.

that you leave us because we might ‘articulate’ you in jest, too...”²⁴ The text of the play presents virulent examples of contemporary political public discourse, parallels of which can be found in the editorials of *Pesti Hírlap* and *Jelenkor*, in the parlance of the 1840s. This was familiar ground for Beöthy since he also published in the political papers of the time.²⁵ The concept of *szűzvállasok* (‘virgin-shouldered’, i.e. noblemen resisting taxation) was a concept that often appeared in political public discourse²⁶. It applied to the nobility of the 1840s, referring to their tax exemption. The phrase also appears in János Arany’s *Az elveszett alkotmány* (*The Lost Constitution*), where one of the characters is called *Szűzváll*, while in Beöthy’s play the concept is mentioned in a poem:

He who takes on the tax,
Will see he will suffer a loss;
He who still has virgin shoulders,
Will not entertain tax.
So we don’t pay a dime,
And kick whoever does so in the head.²⁷

The expression *nothing about us without us* also appears in the play, which was an active part of everyday public discourse and was also used in the form *nihil de nobis sine nobis*, expressing the contemporary desire for participatory democracy. As Lajos Kossuth put it in 1841: “In times past, while the majority of our nation was lolling in idle repose, some individuals could direct the fate of the nation; but today we live a time of awakening and have come to realize our basic right, which ensures «nothing about us without us».”²⁸ In *Követválasztás* (*Legate’s Election*) the idea appears in the themes of politics and love at the same time since liberal politics and marrying for love become a shared interest of all: “Because, like with legislation, I also believe in the case of marriage contracts: nothing about us without us.”²⁹ This saying still exists in Hungarian today.

²⁴ BEÖTHY 2019b, 73.

²⁵ Previous work on Beöthy’s political career and publication activities: BOLDOG-BERNÁD–MÉSZÁROS 2018.

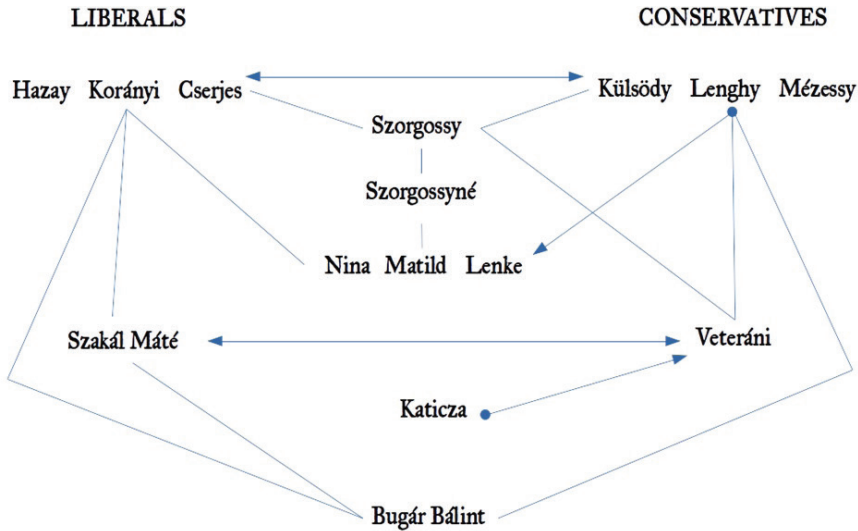
²⁶ Katalin Szabó P.’s study on the concept and its contemporary use: SZABÓ P. 2019, 254–272.

²⁷ „Ki az adót elvállalja, / Meglátja, hogy kárát vallja; / A’ kinek még szűz válla van, / Nem vesz az részt az adóban. / Mi hát fillért sem adózunk, / ’S ki adóz, fejére sózunk.” BEÖTHY 2019b, 90.

²⁸ „Hajdan, míg nemzetünk többsége tétlen nyugalomban tespedt, egyes emberek intézhették a’ nemzet sorsát; de ma már az ébredés korát éljük, eljutánk eszméletére alapjogunknak, melly biztosít, hogy «semmit rólunk nélkülünk».” KOSSUTH 1841, 122.

²⁹ „Mert hiszen én, mint a’ törvényhozás’ körében, a’ házassági szerződéseknél is azt tartom: semmit rólunk nélkülünk.” BEÖTHY 2019b, 113.

We cannot really talk about a dramatic arc regarding Beöthy's play, mask and character are one and the same, and the plot is limited to the intrigue. The negative characters are undoubtedly negative due to their political views, not due to their character flaws. The intrigue is based on judge of the regional court, Szorgossy, being a turncoat; however, the liberal young men com him with a twist to win his daughters' hand in marriage.



The characters around Szorgossy and his family as well as Bálint Bugár, a lieutenant of the nobility, all have their counterparts. Three fusty county officials are vying for the girls' hands, as do the three ambitious liberal young men. The campaigner helping the progressives has to face the fusty professor several times during the play. Several characters have speaking names, which instantly informs us about the moral framework of the given character and also serves as a source of humor in a given scene. For example, Hazay's (Domestic) priority is the progress of the homeland, while Külsödy (Outsider), Hazay's counterpart, represents the conservative side, hindering the progress of the homeland, and Veteráni (Veteran) is an old, fusty character. Beside them, the probably most conspicuous character for the contemporary audience might have been Máté Szakál (Matthew Beardville Beard), with a beard appearing both in his name and on his face, symbolizing reformers in opposition since the Greek revolution:

You cannot wish that Máté Szakál (Matthew Beard) should enter my parlors, whose beard conceals the little demons of liberalism, and from whose bushy head my mirrors would recoil if they had to flirt with such an image...³⁰

The play and its contemporary reception was fundamentally defined by the fact that it was based on references to contemporary politics, and the characters were typical of contemporary public life – the audience could easily recognize them and identify with the characters’ political views. In his analysis of the scripts dominant in the region, György Spiró concludes about the election comedy that if the topic was not the election of representatives, its script would be the same as that of comedies of Western European, German, and French origins.³¹ However, he adds that the closed structure of the classical comedy is expanded by elements outside the intrigue. These elements do not directly shape the plot, but they are authentic tools of expressing an opinion, and they are impressions of the language of contemporary politics.³² This is no different in the case of *Követválasztás* (*Legate’s Election*), which is an unjustly forgotten, representative example of the political comedies of the era, regardless of all the haphazardness of its script.

³⁰ „Tán csak nem kívánandja ön, hogy salonaimba Szakál Máté lépjen, kinek szakálában a’ liberalismus’ daemonkái rejteneznek, s’ kinek bozontos fejétől tűkreim irtóznának, hogy olly képpel kell kaczerkoddniok...” BEÖTHY 2019b, 85.

³¹ SPIRÓ 1986, 133.

³² Ibid.