

Court Jesters in the Service of the Transylvanian Nobility

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to provide a brief overview of the jesters found in the Principality of Transylvania. Our analysis is largely based on memoirs, autobiographies and chronicles written by Transylvanian nobles and intellectuals, and occasionally on princely charters. The earliest records on court fools in the principality date to the 16th century, while the latest are from the 19th century. Two types of fools can be encountered in the sources: *natural* and *artificial* ones. Dwarfs, mentally ill, ugly or slow-minded adults fall in the first category. In contrast, the artificial or *wise fools*, as they are referred to, possessed special skills, and they were not only good entertainers, but often educated people, sometimes even members of the nobility. They distinguished themselves from their colleagues by the intimacy they manifested around the prince or nobles, and their freedom to comment and criticize politics, to offer advice and in general to speak freely.

Keywords: court jester, Transylvania, dwarfs, cultural history, foolery

Rezumat: Scopul lucrării noastre este de a oferi o scurtă prezentare a bufonilor din Principatul Transilvaniei. Analiza noastră se bazează în mare parte pe memorii, autobiografii și cronici (redactate de nobili și intelectuali transilvăneni), respectiv diplome princiare. Cele mai vechi înregistrări despre bufonii de curte din principat datează din secolul al XVI-lea, iar cele mai recente sunt din secolul al XIX-lea. Sursele noastre relatează despre *bufoni naturali* și *artificiali*. Din prima categorie fac parte piticii, persoanele cu boli mintale, diforme sau lente la minte. În contrast, bufonii înțelepți erau buni oratori, glumeți, adesea proveneau din familii nobiliare și de obicei erau educați.

Aceștia se deosebeau de ceilalți curteni prin intimitatea pe care o manifestau în jurul principelui, sau al nobililor, și prin libertatea de a comenta și critica deciziile lor politice, de a oferi sfaturi și, în general, de a vorbi liber, atunci când alții nu îndrăzneau.

Cuvinte cheie: bufon, nebun de curte, Transilvania, pitici, istorie culturală

The court jester is a universal but elusive phenomenon, encountered in many cultures and historical eras.¹ Even though the figure of the jester was already known in some respects in the antiquity, and the jester of the Middle Ages fits into this tradition, medieval jesters also played a special role in addition to their talents: they were allowed to offer a critique of the era, the society and, to a certain extent, the church. From a rather early period, Renaissance Italian courts had a fascination for court jesters. According to the Italian historians, the so called *giullari*, *buffoni* or *folli* were extremely important for the society, not only because they provided the main form of entertainment, but also because they were the sole repository of the ancient theatrical heritage that survived “the cultural genocide wrought by the medieval Church”.² The Spanish Court also has a long jester history, going back to the 6th century. The *bufón*, *albardán* or *truhan* was described as a man without shame, honour or respect, having a license to say whatever he pleases, sometimes paying a high price for these liberties, but his position was otherwise considered to be a fortunate one.³ Thanks to Philip II’s real fascination for them, we have some ideas about how they looked, since most of the beloved buffoons are immortalized in paintings.⁴ In England, *court jesters*, *fools*, *clowns*, and *madcaps* were studied more from the perspective of literature and theatre studies, because most of the evidence about fools are to be found in poems and plays, and only occasionally in letters and account books.⁵ This would certainly explain the universal perception of jesters, strongly influenced by Shakespeare’s fools as multi-talented courtiers, madcaps free from conventions, mostly drunk and witty, tools for both social criticism and comic relief. They possessed a various range of talents, from singing, dancing, storytelling, and acrobatics, beside having a “theatrical” wardrobe full of motley costumes, brightly coloured clothes paired with specific hats

¹ Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World* (Chicago, 2001), xvii.

² Francesco Massip, “Giullari, folli e buffoni” (Book review of Tito Saffioti, *Gli occhi della follia. Giullari e buffoni di corte nella storia e nell’arte*, (Milano, 2009) in *Artifara*, vol. 10 (2010).

³ Victoriano Roncero López and Esther Cadahía, “The Court Jester in 16th and 17th Century Spain: History, Painting, and Literature” in *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 72 (2007): 94.

⁴ *Ibid.* 97–98.

⁵ Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere*, xx.

and a marotte. This classical archetype is not remotely similar to the image provided by historical sources, even if these representations are still associated with the common perception of court jesters. A new sort of jester emerges in the French Court around the 13th century, where the *bouffon*, *fou du roi* or simply *fou* is usually a product of “breeding”. Thus, in this story, the name of the town Troyes emerges, although the charter that gave the town the privilege to train fools for the court turned out to be a forgery.⁶ Nonetheless, fool-breeding is only present in French culture, and it could be explained by the fact that French kings enjoyed ugly and deformed but trained *bouffons*. According to Friedrich Flögels’ *Geschichte der Hoffnarren* (1789) – the first study on court fools – jesters appeared to satisfy a universal need for laughter and comedy.⁷ Laughter could be caused deliberately or unintentionally, only by looking at something unconventional or ridiculous in itself – and this is probably the reason people found grotesque bodies amusing. It was in the early modern period when Germans started to appreciate different talents in their jesters too. The *Hoffnarr* or *Narr* had to be a witty and humorous character, who held up a mirror to their rulers and was often as knowledgeable in political and diplomatic matters as the rest of the court. This is the time when the so-called *artificial fools* started to overshadow the *natural* ones.⁸

This short prelude served as a point of reference for our brief overview on the Transylvanian jesters because we believe that western jester-culture had a great impact on the princes of the region. We approach this topic from a chronological, rather than a thematical perspective, given the lack of similar studies regarding Transylvanian court fools.⁹ It is also important to mention that this study is not intended to be exhaustive. We gathered as much data as we could, but we are certain that more stories are waiting to be found. Our earliest records on court jesters date back to the 16th century, to the very beginning of the principality, after which they appear rarely but constantly in chronicles, memoirs, court diaries and occasionally in charters. Most frequently, they were called *bolond* [Hun.: fool], but sometimes were referred to as *jádzdi* [Hun.: playful man], *markalf* [marcolf], *bohóc* [clown], or *puja* and *törpe* [both meaning dwarf].

The first record on the presence of a fool in Transylvania refers to a nobleman called György Truppay, who was in the service of cardinal

⁶ Maurcie Lever, *Korona és csörgősipka* [Le spectre et la marotte] (Budapest, 1989), 105–107.

⁷ Karl Friedrich Flögel, *Geschichte der Hofnarren* (Liegnitz–Leipzig, 1789), 5.

⁸ Ruth von Bernuth, “Über Zwerge, rachitische Ungeheuer und Blödsinn lacht Man nincht: zu Karl Friedrich Flögels “Geschichte der Hoffnarren” von 1789” in *Traverse*, vol. 13 (2006), 70.

⁹ See also: Andrea Fehér, “elől bolond – hátul bolond.” *Udvari bolondok az erdélyi nemesség szolgálatában* in *Korunk*, vol. 34 (2003).

George Martinuzzi (Fráter), archbishop of Esztergom, legal guardian of the Transylvanian prince John Sigismund Zápolya (Szapolyai). Truppay “lost his mind” due to a head injury, and could no longer perform military duties, but this trauma made him “clownish”, and therefore was kept in the Transylvanian castle of the cardinal, in Vințu de Jos [Hun.: Alvincz, Alba County].¹⁰ According to a contemporary chronicle, the cardinal was very fond of Truppay, even calling him his “brother”, and taking him along everywhere. The bond was so strong that the former soldier predicted the violent death of his master, but as the prophecy annoyed the cardinal, the fool was sent to the dungeon, only for history to prove him right.¹¹ However, Truppay is clearly not a typical court jester, but rather an unfortunate man, forced to take this course, and probably kept in the court out of pity, but mostly to entertain others.

We do not know if the young prince Zápolya had any memories of the fool Truppay, but it seems that once he reached maturity, he also got a court jester for himself, who: “was an experienced and knowledgeable man. [...] He was also a good musician, but when he started to play comedy, he sometimes got a beating. He knew many farces”.¹² The above quote is to be found in the verses of the Polish poet Jan Gruszczyński, who spent some time in the service of the prince and was quite fascinated by the court life of Alba-Iulia [Hun.: Gyulafehérvár]. The Court of the prince John Sigismund Zápolya, grandson of an Italian princess and a Polish king of the Lithuanian dynasty was a vibrant centre of Renaissance culture, full of Hungarian, Italian and Polish nobles and artists. The one who stands out from among these courtiers was “Bal Horos”, the fool, who must have been very popular at the court, because, in his poem, Gruszczyński devoted more than twice as many lines to him than to other courtiers. We are unsure whether this buffoon was Hungarian or Polish, but he was probably the latter, since, according to the poem, he was accounted with the jester of the Polish king, Sigismund Augustus, named Guzman.¹³ We do not know what kind of fool-tradition the Polish kingdom had, but we do know, on the one hand, that Charles V of Spain gave a dwarf jester to Sigismund, king of Poland, grandfather of the Transylvanian prince.¹⁴ On the other hand, the influence of the Italian Bona Sforza (grandmother

¹⁰ József Bíró, *Erdélyi kastélyok* (Budapest, 1943), 146.

¹¹ Ferenc Forgách, “Emlékirat Magyarország állapotáról”, in Péter Kulcsár (ed.), *Humanista történetírók* (Budapest, 1977), 590–591.

¹² Helena Kapeluś, “Zápolya Zsigmond udvara Gruszczyński epigrammáiban”, in István Csapláros, Lajos Hopp and László Sziklay (eds.), *Tanulmányok a lengyel-magyar irodalmi kapcsolatok köréből* (Budapest, 1969) 149, 157–158.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ López and Cadahía, “The Court Jester in 16th and 17th Century Spain”, 97.

of John) on the royal courts of Krakow is well known to us, therefore the tradition of keeping a buffoon can probably be traced back to her,¹⁵ since, in this century, Italian courts out-rivalled others in the fashion of buffoons and clowns.¹⁶

The next piece of data regarding court fools is to be found in the chronicles of István Szamosközy. In his register from 1597, he recorded the names of the Italians serving in the court of Sigismund Báthory, among whom there was a fool “whose name was Sicilia, and who was also paid a handsome salary.”¹⁷ Szamosközy, as well as his fellow chronicler Ambrus Somogyi, was scandalized by the sums Báthory was willing to pay to “all sorts of useless Italians”, mostly musicians, considering them the main reason for the depraved morality of the prince and for the decline of the principality.¹⁸ We must read these records carefully, since the criticism of the court life has a prolonged history in Hungarian historical writing. It became fashionable in this era to scourge princely courts, especially if they were showing western influences. This was done at the highest level by those who had spent years courting princes themselves.¹⁹ In the meantime, the court of Báthory was well-regarded by foreign chronicles, who were delighted by the Italophilia of the controverted prince and praised his good taste and refinement.²⁰

While John Sigismund Zápolya had a Polish buffoon, Sigismund Báthory had an Italian one. After their reign, a paradigm shift can be noted, since, according to our data, *domestic* fools invaded courts. Their characteristics changed as well: the artistic Italian or Polish buffoons are replaced with lowly truth-teller jokers and dwarfs. From then on, fools were to be found not only in the princely households but in different noble courts as well.

¹⁵ Mónika Molnár, “Isabella and Her Italian Connections”, in Ágnes Máté and Teréz Oborni (eds.), *Isabella Jagiellon, Queen of Hungary (1539–1559)*. *Studies* (Budapest, 2020), 163–172.

¹⁶ Sylvia Konarska-Zimnicka, “Ugly Jester – Funny Jester? The Question of the Comic Nature of Ugliness in the Middle Ages and Renaissance” in *Holy Cross University Periodical Publications*, vol. 29 (2012): 129.

¹⁷ István Szamosközy: “Az olaszok nevei, kik Bátori Zsigmondnál Erdélyben egyszer is másszor is laktanak” in Sándor Szilágyi (ed.), *Szamosközy István történeti maradványai. 1542–1608* (Budapest, 1880), 77.

¹⁸ Ambrus Somogyi, “Báthori Zsigmond első évei”, in László Makkai (ed.): *Erdély Öröksége. Erdélyi Emlékirók Erdélyről. II. Sárkányfogak* (Budapest, 1993), 68.

¹⁹ István Tringli, “A bolondok hajója. Kultúrkritika a középkor végén” in *Történelmi szemle*, vol. 54 (2012): 180. Péter Erdősi, “Az itáliai erényekben vétkesnek mondott erdélyi fejedelem (Az olasz udvari emberek helyzete, tevékenysége és megítélése Erdélyben Báthory Zsigmond uralkodása idején)” in *Sic itur ad Astra*, vol. 1–3 (1996): 12–13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 23–24; 31. The same narrative is to be found in the case of Bona Sforza, who was depicted by the Polish chronicles as a depraved woman, while other contemporaries considered her to be gracious, insightful and a keen political observer. Molnár, “Isabella and Her Italian Connections”, 165.

As mentioned before, Szamosközy was scandalized because of the large sums spent on follies, but no chronicler seemed to be bothered by the fact that the next prince, István Bocskai ennobled some of the jesters. He granted nobility to the dwarfish brothers István, Márton and János Kys [*Little*]. The charter of 1606 reveals that of the three siblings, János was the only one who lived a peasant life. The agile and sharp-witted Márton made a career in the court of István Csáki – the inner councillor of the prince – because he was “hilarious and a natural entertainer.” István worked at the pigsty when Margit Hagymássy, István Bocskai’s wife found him. After the death of Hagymássy, the dwarf entered the service of Bocskai, where he served not only as a jester but also as a bodyguard – rather an “honorary” task, giving the physical aptitudes of István. On his coat of arms, he was depicted in noble attire, wearing a green dress and scarlet trousers, with a broom in one hand and a lily in the other, and a key hanging from a silk cord around his neck, suggesting that he was the guardian of the prince’s innermost apartments.²¹ The broom symbolizes his courtly duties and the lily, the honesty and sincerity of his service. We would expect the coat of arms to depict a “traditional” representation of the jester, yet what we get is a dwarf dressed in Hungarian noble garments. Sources suggest that Transylvanian court fools were dressed as any courtier, in everyday servant’s dress. In this century, the representative jester’s clothes were not common: we have only one occurrence of a harlequin dress from the end of the 18th century; otherwise, the expenses recorded regarding the wardrobe of the fools suggest no extravagancy. But there was no cause for complaint, since according to the household account books, nobles spent considerable sums on their fools.²²

Not only Bocskai granted privileges to jesters, but also his successor. The multi-talented Gergely Telek, the servant of the chancellor János Petki, was exempted in 1607 from military service and tax-paying by Sigismund Rákóczi to entertain the “gentlemen exhausted by their very difficult occupations” with his “invented jokes.” There was only one condition stipulated in this exemption, i.e. that this “Aesopian talent” should always be at the side of the chancellor and the councillors, equipped with a sickle-shaped axe, and to be “ready to go,” wherever his services are required.²³ We do not know what the significance of the axe

²¹ Éva Gyulai, “Bocskai-armálisok az Erdélyi Királyi Könyvekben (Letters patent granting armorial bearings of Prince Bocskai in the Libri regii of Transylvania)” in *Publicationes Universitatis Miskolcensis Sectio Philosophica*, vol. 13 (2008), 43.

²² Lever, *Korona és csörgősipka*, 45, 49.

²³ “Rákóczi Zsigmond királyi könyvei” in Éva Gyulai (ed.), *Az Erdélyi fejedelmek oklevelei (1560–1689) – Erdélyi Királyi Könyvek. DVD-ROM (Budapest, 2005) vol. VII. r. 205.*

was, since the only equipment Telek needed was his sharp mind and witty humour.

In addition to the aforementioned qualities of the jesters, we can enumerate their whimsical nature and wittiness. We have no specific description of their physical appearance – other than dwarfishness, but the ‘next generation’ court jesters also distinguished themselves through ugliness. Born with such “monstrous deformities” was Mihály, Gabriel Bethlen’s jester, who was a descendent of a noble family and lived in one of the best houses in the princely seat,²⁴ which suggests his privileged position in the court. This hideously ugly man, a dwarf who was a mere one and a half meters tall, is depicted in John Kemény’s autobiography [also a Transylvanian prince] as “a very fine master, a playful man, but with a hideously ugly figure, short in stature.”²⁵ Kemény recorded a quarrel that took place at the second wedding of the prince Gabriel Bethlen, between Mihály and Cserkesz, the court buffoon of the horse-master Ferenc Balási. The two made quite a spectacle with their fight, which was won by Cserkesz, who punched Mihály so hard in the nose that “he became much uglier afterwards”. His physical appearance probably made him even more suitable for his buffoonish tasks.²⁶

The court fool of Bethlen performs not only at his master’s wedding but at his funeral as well. Despite the possibility that the story written by the Pauline monk András Francisci, who attended the “solemn but whimsical” event, might not be entirely true, it is still worth referencing.²⁷ The prince’s coffin was followed by the nobles, among whom was the court jester as well. He was dressed in mourning clothes, but he was in good spirits, mocking the fact that the prince requested to be buried in purple, proving himself “dumber than his fool.”²⁸ This record, on the one hand, suggests that it was accepted or even expected from court jesters, to attend less

²⁴ Charter from 20 December 1652 regarding the houses of the noble elite in Alba Iulia. Archives of the Chapter of Gyulafehérvár [Rom.: Alba Iulia] Hungarian National Archives. Transylvanian Princely Charters. Libri regii vol. 29. 121–122.

²⁵ “Kemény János Önéletírása” in Éva V. Windisch, *Kemény János és Bethlen Miklós művei* (Budapest, 1980), 63.

²⁶ Cserkesz at the time of his glorious fight was in the service of Ferenc Balási, and was also known as a talented violinist, who later entered the services of another nobleman, Ferenc Bethlen, serving in his household until his violent death – he drowned drunk in the Someş river. *Ibid.* 63. Therefore, he had more than one master, a common feature of the early modern fools.

²⁷ The letter is preserved in the Roman Archives (Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide) and was published by István György Tóth, “Bethlen Gábor mókás temetési menete” [Gábor Bethlen’s funny funeral procession] in *Történelmi Szemle*, vol. 39 (1997): 121–130. We have to emphasize again, that the source is written by a catholic monk, probably for a catholic archbishop Péter Pázmány, or the Bosnian bishop János Tomkó Marnavich, who both did not liked the protestant prince Bethlen.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 124, 126.

pleasant events, and also to mourn their masters.²⁹ On the other hand, the source underlines the general popularity of Bethlen's jester as well.

The next jester distinguished himself by his vulgar roguishness. János Szalárdi gives a thorough description on George I Rákóczi's "ingenious fool", Gazsi, who was "very lame on both legs, cripple, but with an impenitent tongue."³⁰ He served, or, more precisely, was raised – at the court of an influent Hungarian noble, Ádám Forgách, the enemy of the Transylvanian prince in the Thirty Years' War. Forgách complained to Emperor Ferdinand III that his soldiers were deserting him in favour of Rákóczi's side, and it seems that the deserters included his jester as well, who, according to the chronicle, "fell out somehow of Forgách's court and stuck in the princely household." The fool and his former master met during the peace treaty, where Forgách took leave of Gazsi: "Well Gazsi, it seems that after all, your mother was also a whore!"³¹ He was probably referring to the cowardly desertion of the buffoon, who preferred to serve the promising Transylvanian prince, rather than the Hungarian general.

Another jester of the Rákóczi family, Géczi became part of the history of the principality due to his gloomy prophecy, i.e. he foretold the unfortunate outcome of George II Rákóczi's campaign in Poland.³² According to the Saxon chronicler Georg Kraus, only the fool saw that the prince acted like "the greedy dog in Aesop's tale, who grabbed his own reflection in the water, and dropped the bone from his mouth," and since Géczi made a disturbing prophecy on the loss of the principality, he was almost hanged. The jester was saved then by the future prince John Kemény. Rákóczi's campaign had a disastrous end, most of the Transylvanian nobles participating in the Polish war were taken prisoners into Tartary – this included s Géczi, who, according to Kraus, found his death there. In this story, there are several rhetorical similarities with previous cases. The name of Aesop is mentioned, just as in Telek's case, who possessed *Aesopian talent*, which suggests that in the common perception court fools had whimsical wisdom. The other interesting common feature is that Géczi's life was endangered by his prophecy, just as Truppay's was when he predicted the violent death of the archbishop Martinuzzi, suggesting that the real fools

²⁹ This data is also important, because we usually know of analogies that suggest that the monarchs mourned their favourite fools, or fools mourned each other (John Doran, *The History of Court Fools* (London, 1858), 10, 343), but there is no description on court jesters at royal or noble funerals.

³⁰ János Szalárdi, *Siralmas magyar krónikája*, (ed. by. Ferenc Szakály) (Budapest, 1980), 212.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Georg Kraus, *Erdélyi Krónika. 1608–1665*, (ed. trans. by Sándor Vogel), (Csíkszereda, 2008), 351.

in both cases were the masters, who were blind to see the impending tragedies.

The name of Prince John Kemény emerged twice in this paper. He gave us a vivid description on Gabriel Bethlen's fool, and we also know from a Saxon chronicle that he saved the life of George II Rákóczi's jester, yet we have no information regarding his own court fools. However, his opponent, prince Michael I Apafi, did enjoy the company of fools. He even had a favourite one "whom he used to feed," and who indirectly saved the life of the Saxon count and royal judge of Sibiu [Hun.: Szeben; Ger.: Hermannstadt], Andreas Fleisher. The court fool attending breakfast on the morning Fleisher was taken prisoner, asked plainly, to the astonishment of the participants "if the royal judge had breakfast on that morning before he has undertaken a trip to Deva?"³³ It seems that at the table no one else knew about the imprisonment of Fleisher, but the fool, who attended a secret meeting between the prince and two of his trusted courtiers. This once again emphasises the liberties jesters had in princely courts. Thanks to the fool's intervention, the prince reconsidered his decision, mostly due to the insistences of the princess, Anna Bornemissza, who had a great influence on her husband.

However, when it comes to jesters and court influence, the greatest impact must be attributed to István Vida, the best-known court fool in the history of the principality. Stories regarding Vida are to be found in every major biographical enterprise of the century. He is described by Péter Apor as "a court jester, a great playful man", and by Mihály Cserei as "a famous playful man".³⁴ Miklós Bethlen portrayed him as "a worthy nobleman of Turda [Hun.: Torda], an intelligent man, a lawyer, well known everywhere, an illustrious, humorous, foolish man".³⁵ György Wass remarks in his diary that "he served with a good heart and a silver tongue those able to grease his palm better," suggesting his highly opportunistic character.³⁶ József Dienes Hermányi, who was already fond of collecting unpleasant stories about prominent people, dedicated a few lines to Vida's stories as well, "so that they would not be easily forgotten".³⁷ But the one who immortalized Vida is János Kolumbán, who collected all the stories related

³³ János Bethlen, *Erdély története*, (ed. by. József Jankovics) (Budapest, 1993), 357.

³⁴ Péter Apor, "Syntagma vivorum", in Lajos Szádeczky (ed.), *br. Apor Péter verses művei és levelei (1676–1752)*. Vol. I. (Budapest, 1903), 200; "Cserei Mihály névsora", in *Ibid.* 268.

³⁵ *The autobiography of Miklós Bethlen*, (trans. by Bernard Adams) (London, New York, 2004), 391.

³⁶ Czegei Wass György és Wass László Naplóí 1659–1739 (ed. by Gyula Nagy) (Budapest, 1896), 217.

³⁷ József Dienes Hermányi, "Nagy Enyedi siró Heráklitus, és - Hól mosolygó s hól kacagó Demokritos" in Margit S. Sárdi (ed.), *Hermányi Dienes József szépprózai munkái* (Budapest, 1992), 308–309.

to this “wise fool”, and published *The Facets of György Vida*, – a very popular book of that time, given the fact that it had – in only a few decades – five editions (1759, 1770, 1780, 1789, 1793).³⁸ Kolumbán deliberately changed the name of the fool from István to György, but otherwise tried to “render the actual facts”. He did, however, face certain difficulties after the first edition, because the Teleki family felt offended by the stories regarding the liberties Vida took around their greatest ancestor, Mihály Teleki, probably the most influential politician in the court of Michael Apafi. Kolumbán defended himself by offering the Teleki family the possibility to oversee the contents of the second edition, although: “I could only write the history as I had heard it from others. I can certainly acknowledge that, after so much time has passed, enough falsehood attached itself to everything that had indeed happened; For that [...] which I now understand or know to be [...] derogatory to the worthy family, I rewrote, revised, and corrected.”³⁹ Ironically, Vida was discovered by Teleki himself, to whom he owed his illustrious prankster career. Vida, unlike most of the previous jesters, came from a respected noble family, and had a normal physical appearance. He first worked in the chancellery, and then, for a time, as a lawyer. He did not win his trials, but his jokes attracted the attention of Transylvanian lords, including Mihály Teleki, who introduced him to the court, where he became an occasional entertainer for various nobles, because: “he played April’s Fool with everyone, he didn’t mind being beaten or locked up for it.”⁴⁰ Fortunately for Teleki, not all his fools gave him a hard time, although the expenses regarding his other fools do not reflect the quality of their performances, but merely the amounts of money spent on them. Mihály Teleki’s household-accounts (1674–1676), contain the expenses regarding the fools, András and Saul. Most of the entries refer to clothing, and, as mentioned before, the colourful clown dresses we know from the illustrations are not to be found in these account books either. The jesters’ clothing reflected their courtly duties, in colour and quality. In 1674, András got “soaked linen fabric,” and “a short cloak, dolman, trousers,” and in the next year, the chancellor gave his “little fool” a horse, too.⁴¹ For the year 1676, the data records the name of another court jester, Saul, who’s existence can also be deduced from the expenses caused by the additions to his wardrobe, as he received a “white dolman and trousers.”⁴²

³⁸ Sándor Dömötör, *Vida György facetiái* (Cluj-Kolozsvár, 1932), 3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Teleki Mihály udvartartási naplója (1673–1681)* (ed. by János Fehér) (Kolozsvár, 2007), 157, 186, 60.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 293.

Most of our data on court jesters are from the 16th and 17th centuries, as if the end of the principality also brought about the end of this court office too. In the beginning of the 18th century, there is only one reference to a marcolf [Hun.: *markalf*], living in the entourage of the governor György Bánffy. The jester named Piszli made his appearance at the wedding of Ádám Székely and the daughter of the governor from 1702,⁴³ and caught the attention of the guests due to his skills in the fir-climbing game,⁴⁴ but there are no other records of his existence. Moreover, if Miklós Jósika had not collected anecdotes about the jesters, it would have seemed that in Transylvania, just as in Western Europe, this courtly office disappeared after the Enlightenment.

The first chapter of Miklós Jósika's memoir, the one which contains stories from the childhood of the author, lists the jesters who served in the main Transylvanian households in the early 19th century. The baron was most impressed by the Romanian court jester of Antal Haller, named Tronf, who was dressed, as one would expect from a court fool, in "veritable harlequin costume of black and yellow gowns, wearing a genuine cap with bells".⁴⁵ He was an educated jester, who also read magazines and was a great admirer of Napoleon. During his lectures on the French emperor, he often shouted: "what a great guy!" Haller was also very fond of his jester and took him everywhere on his carriage as a valet. Some jesters had humorous masters as well. Dániel Horváth Petrichevich, for instance, had a leather belt made for one of his jesters, embroidered with the words 'fool in front, fool behind'. And the anonymous jester often stood between two gentlemen and repeated aloud the words embroidered on his belt. The only female jester we have knowledge of served in the Petrichevich household. She was a dwarf, who, according to the baron's memoir, was a very sensitive spirit. Another dwarf, Kozma, the smallest dwarf Jósika had ever seen, served in the court of Leopold Bornemissza and was famous for his amorous nature. Jósika makes a clear distinction between dwarfs [Hun.: *puja, törpe*] and jesters, suggesting that the former were kept as a curiosity, and, since they had no responsibilities, they spent their days "eating, drinking and doing nothing", while the buffoons were in charge of the entertainment. Such a figure must have been Buci, the gipsy, whose "main act was that he quarrelled with himself and then threw himself out of the room". Miklós Jósika also mentions several fools in Cluj-Napoca

⁴³ Péter Apor, *Metamorphosis Transylvaniae* (transl. By Bernard Adams), (London–New York, 2010), 74.

⁴⁴ On the traditional Transylvanian nuptial games, see: Andrea Fehér, "From Courtship till the Morning After: The Role of Family, Kin and Friends in the Marriages of László Székely" in *Hungarian Historical Review*, vol. 7 (2018): 795–799.

⁴⁵ Miklós Jósika, *Emlékirat*. Vol. I. (ed. by. János Győri) (Budapest, 1977), 23.

[Hun.: Kolozsvár; Ger.: Klausenburg], who were often invited to serve by acting out their jokes in the noble households. However, he also notes the existence of a delusional “miserable” fool, who used to “spend hours on the shores of the Someş river, dropping small pieces of wood into the water, exclaiming: let it be fish!” He therefore made another distinction between common fools and professional ones.⁴⁶ These stories recorded in the memoirs of Jósika suggest that the once indispensable buffoons were still present in a few noble households by the end of the 18th century, and that they belonged to eccentric nobles who themselves enjoyed fooling around. This eccentricity could probably explain the fact that – according to the art-historian József Bíró – in 1906 there was still one court fool in Transylvania, namely in the Bethlen castle from Bahnea [Hun.: Bonyha, Mureş County].⁴⁷

In conclusion, we can say that Transylvania has had its own jester-tradition. If we look at the jesters and their function, we can first note that court fools were encountered in different contexts. Most of our sources talk about court jesters, among whom we can occasionally find foreigners, such as Sicilia or Bal Horos. Sources mention house jesters too, as were the 18th century fools of the Haller, Horváth and the Bornemissza families presented by Jósika. Town jesters as Buczi also appear in the sources, and we have knowledge of jesters who played the role of the fool only periodically. The basic functions of these jesters did not differ greatly, but, nevertheless, they held different positions. The court jester was provided with a stable position, benefits, rights and duties, while the occasional or town jester got by, for better or for worse, with performances in private events. The main function of the jester was to provide entertainment. The majority did this through pranks, jokes, mockery, storytelling or even surprisingly profound statements, such as prophesies, as did Truppyay or Géczi. The object of mockery – as we have seen in Vida’s case – could be the jester’s employer himself. Thus, it was possible for the jester to offer a more or less candid critique, as did Gazsi, knowing that it implied certain risks as well. Jestors had to possess a number of skills, they had to be artistically talented, endowed with playfulness and a certain amount of spontaneity. Nevertheless, there was a distinction between the natural and the artificial fools. Natural jesters were those who were deformed (Gazsi), mentally handicapped (Truppyay), uncommonly ugly (Mihály) or those who were dwarfs (the Kys brothers) – and who thus for this reason alone provided amusement at court. The fool as a cripple thus refers, as mentioned, to the natural fool who, due to a congenital deformation or impairment, was

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

⁴⁷ Bíró, *Erdélyi kastélyok*, 147.

regarded as deviant, and this deviation served as amusement and entertainment.⁴⁸ In contrast, the “wise fools”, such as Telek or Vida, possessed special skills, and offered entertainment through their wittiness and intelligence, not by their appearance. Being an entertainer was not an easy task: not only did they have to know a large repertoire of amusing anecdotes, songs, and stories, but they also had to be able to improvise. These *wise fools*, as many authors call them, did not differentiate themselves from other courtiers, but they possessed a guaranteed freedom, which assured them that they would not be called to account for their “misdeeds”, as it would have happened to others in the court. They were supposed to make the court laugh, and to provide entertainment and fun, whenever the prince or the nobles desired.

⁴⁸ Doran, *The History of Court Fools*, 45; Konarska-Zimnicka, “Ugly Jester – Funny Jester?”, 125.

