

**The Frame of the Story, the Story of the Frame:
Hungarian Variants of *The Seven Sages of Rome****

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Keywords: *The History of Emperor Pontianus*, *Historia septem sapientum*, *The Seven Sages of Rome*, frame narrative, auxiliary preaching material, parable, exemplum, strategy, decision, knowing the truth

Abstract: The paper discusses the story cycle set in a frame narrative known by Hungarian literary history as *The History of Emperor Pontianus* and by international research as *Historia septem sapientum*. One of the two Hungarian variants was done by Gáspár Heltai, the author of the other is unknown. After a survey of the medieval and early modern Latin, German, and Hungarian textual variants and possible uses of this work – the moralized versions could be used as auxiliary preaching materials and read as mirror for princes – the study presents the interpretational horizons of the frame story.

The second part of the paper focuses on the similarity of the embedded stories to parables and exempla, in fact on the seven sages' and the empress' argumentative strategies. The text and the story as well as the prefaces of the two Hungarian translations published in mid 16th century reveal that reception in the Renaissance Age also focused on the entertaining aspect of this work; its main issue, however, was the necessity and possibility of making decisions, the search for truth and the limits of this search.

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“Repetition is the mother of learning”

The present paper, as the title reveals, is going to discuss a/some well-known work/s (using the singular or the plural this time is not a grammatical, but an interpretational question): the story cycle set in a frame narrative called *The Seven Sages of Rome*, or *The History of Emperor Pontianus*. The eastern and/or medieval origin of this story cycle is universally accepted by researchers. It has a considerable number of Latin and vernacular versions in manuscript and printed form, having gone through an interesting transformation in the course of its history: while in the Middle Ages – according to scholars – it was considered an edifying work read according to the allegorical interpretation model used in the case of the Bible, its early modern and mainly vernacular editions were canonized by literary history as a masterpiece of secular

* While writing this study the author was a Domus Hungarica Artium et Scientiarum grantee. I should like to thank Ágnes Baricz, István Bartók, and Örs Dóczy for their help which granted me access to sources which would have required difficult logistic activity and much time to obtain.

literature having entertainment as a function. And we know of a rather exceptional case when it was used as a parable of a personal tragedy, a broken marriage.¹

The plot of the story cycle, realistic despite its fairy tale like character, facilitates this reinterpretation. Let us sum it up. Roman emperor Pontianus has a very beautiful wife and a son popular with the people named Diocletianus. As his wife died young, the emperor remarries and entrusts his son to seven sages who instruct him far from home for seven years in the seven liberal arts. Complying with his second wife's request the emperor summons his son home who, however, learns from the stars that he will die unless he refrains from speaking for seven days. Arriving home therefore, to his father's and the court's amazement he does not utter a single word. The empress takes the youth to her chamber and tries to persuade him to make love to her. Being unsuccessful, she accuses her stepson – demanding his life – before the emperor of having tried to rape her. The emperor hastily declares the death sentence, but while they are going towards the scaffold, the first sage arrives and tells a parable before the emperor saving thus the prince's life for a day: Pontianus postpones the execution for a day. Hearing this, the empress answers with a new tale, which results in the emperor's ordering again the sentence to be carried out. It is, however, deferred once again by the emperor, thanks to the second sage's intercession and story. Then, after the empress' next story the young man is sent again to the scaffold. The pronouncement and suspension of the sentence is repeated according to this rhythm and rite for seven days, seven stories being told by the empress and seven by the sages in alternate order. On the seventh day Diocletianus can finally speak and expose the deceitful empress and her lover disguised as a woman, and he tells his own parable too – the fifteenth in the structure of the whole work –, fictionalizing his own fate. The conclusion is optimistic and unambiguous: after struggles and dangers truth is revealed, the good is rewarded and the evil receives exemplary punishment.

The story, extremely popular in Europe, had Hungarian versions as well. By way of introduction let us sum up briefly what has already been clarified by researchers regarding the authorship (more precisely, the translation) and textual tradition of the Pontianus stories in Hungarian. József Waldapfel in his study, published in 1938, raised the possibility that the Pontianus editions preserved in 17th century publications issued in Lőcse (Levoča)² may have been translated from German by Gáspár Heltai.³ This

¹ Emese Egyed, “‘Isten veled’. Kéziratos Ponciánus – 1784. Drág” (‘Farewell’. A Handwritten Pontianus – 1784. Drág), in: *Emlékezet és devóció a régi magyar irodalomban* (Memory and Devotion in Old Hungarian Literature), ed. Mihály Balázs and Csilla Gábor (Kolozsvár: Egyetemi Műhely Kiadó, 2007), 539–554.

² *Ponciánvs csaszar historiaia. Mikeppen az ő fiának Dioclecianusnak hét bölcs és tudos mestereket fogada, kik azt tanyitának az hét és nemes tudományokra* (The History of Emperor Pontianus. How he hired seven wise and learned masters to instruct his son, Diocletianus in the seven and noble sciences), Lőcse, 1633, 1653, 1676, 1679. (RMNY 1571, 2472, ill. RMK I. 1203, 1238.). [The RMNY number refers to the *Régi Magyarországi Nyomtatványok* (Bibliography of Early Hungarian Prints), eds. Gedeon Borsa et al. (vols. 1 and 2), János Heltai (vol. 3.) (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1971; 1983; 2000); RMK numbers to an older bibliographic work, *Régi Magyar Könyvtár* (Old Hungarian Bibliography), vol. I–III., ed. Károly Szabó (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1879–1898). Translator's note.]

³ Gáspár Heltai (1510?–1574): writer, typographer. As owner of the press in Kolozsvár (Cluj) he edited over 80 issues, mostly in Hungarian, in the service of Reformation. His writings are mostly autonomous adaptations from German originals (his mother tongue): *A reszegseg nec es*

supposition seems to be also supported by observations from the field of book history and by typographical arguments as well.¹ The text of this publication group therefore cannot be the same as the 16th century translation made on the basis of the Latin original and published at the beginning of the year 1573 in Vienna.² The translator's identity can only be guessed at: it is good enough if we can identify the intended readership or the possible circle of authors.³

When Béla Holl discovered in the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences a fragment of the Pontianus-history printed in Heltai's typography,⁴ its text being identical with editions published in Lőcse in 1633 and later on,⁵ Waldapfel's conjecture was clearly proved. Based on this István Nemeskürty could indeed proudly state: "it has been decided once and for all that *The Seven Sages of Rome* story cycle has two Hungarian translations from the 1570s" despite the fact that "our 16th century literature is quite deficient in entertaining and narrative prose works."⁶ And the proven fact demanded a comparative analysis: this was carried out by Nemeskürty in the continuation of the study, as he himself said: comparing "from an aesthetic point of view"⁷ the German Pontianus-versions with Heltai's translation looking for individual authorial inventiveness, then collating Heltai's variant and the Vienna edition whose author in his opinion belonged to Péter Bornemisza's⁸ circle. One of the important conclusions resulting from the comparison of the Hungarian Pontianus-stories, enhanced by typographical reasons too, was that "the two translations were made for *different readership*"⁹ (namely, for aristocratic and bourgeois readers), and that "*the first attempts*

tobzodásnac veszedelmes vóltárol valo dialogus (Dialogue about the Dangers of Drunkenness and Orgy), Kolozsvár, 1552; *Szaz fabula* (One Hundred Fables), Kolozsvár, 1566; *Poncianvs tsaszar historiaia* (The Story of Emperor Poncianus), Kolozsvár, 1571/74.

¹ "Between 1577 and 1636 several publications issued by the printing office of Kolozsvár contained eight woodcuts of identical size (55x68 mm), each representing a scene from *The History of Pontianus* the model of which can be found—all mirror images with one exception—in the 1565 and 1570 Frankfurt editions of *Die sieben weisen Meister*." Béla Holl, "Ponciánus históriája XVI. századi kolozsvári kiadásának töredékéről" (On the Fragment of The History of Pontianus Edited in Kolozsvár in the 16th Century), *Magyar Könyvszemle* 83 (1966): 255.

² *Poncianvs historiaia: az az Het Bölch Mestereknek, mondasit chiwda szep hazonlatossagoual foglaluan, mimodon, az Chazar Fiat Diocletianust hetzer halaltul meg mentettet legien* (The History of Pontianus: Namely containing the sayings of the seven wise masters with great usefulness, how they saved the emperor's son seven times from death) (Vienna, 1573). (RMNY 322.) Modern edition published by Gusztáv Heinrich, Budapest, 1898.

³ József Waldapfel, "Heltai Gáspár és a magyar nyelvű Ponciánus" (Gáspár Heltai and the Hungarian Pontianus), *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* (1938): 31–44; 119–129.

⁴ [Gáspár Heltai, *Ponciánus históriája* (The History of Pontianus), Kolozsvár 1571–1574.] (RMNY 314.).

⁵ Holl, "Ponciánus históriája...": 255–260.

⁶ István Nemeskürty, "Heltai Ponciánusa és a magyar reneszánsz szórakoztató próza" (Heltai's Pontianus and the Hungarian Renaissance Entertaining Prose) In: István Nemeskürty, "Olvasók és olvasmányok: Tanulmányok a régi magyar irodalomról" (Readers and Readings: Studies on the Old Hungarian Literature) (Budapest: Magvető, 1984), 118–119.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁸ Péter Bornemisza (1535–1584): poet, playwright, Lutheran preacher. He worked as the preacher of several noble families in Royal Hungary, was the founder of a press in Sempste. He authored a huge corpus of sermons; he also wrote church songs, disputes, and a catechism.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

to write entertaining prose in Hungarian literature were made within the circles of the best two prose writers of the age.”¹ Of course, the obligatory ranking could not be omitted: obviously, Heltai carried off the palm, while the Vienna version “if not a masterpiece, however offers to the reader a fluent, rich prose.”²

The Seven Sages of Rome in Latin and German

In order to be able to place the Hungarian Pontianus-stories in a wider context after some analyses focusing on the details,³ it may be useful to take a look at the Latin and German texts. This overview is all the more reasonable since especially German research presented numerous remarkable results regarding the European textual variants; the outcomes of these investigations may furnish our approach, which also takes into consideration the European contexts, to the Hungarian Pontianus-cycles with important guidelines.

Detlef Roth’s edition of the Latin versions⁴ operates with 72 handwritten and 11 printed (published between 1473 and 1526)—that is, with 85, mainly medieval—European sources. Among the 15th century manuscripts there is one preserved in Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia)⁵ and one in Budapest.⁶ The notes offer data on textual and transmission history, concluding that the Latin texts can be divided in four groups, which contain texts differing in their acoustic and textual form.⁷ The first group contains the most complete text with detailed interpretations and the allegorical-moral application of the story. The second is close to the first with respect to its text, but the interpretations of the empress and the prince are given in separate paragraphs; this suggests a different view on the text in comparison to the first group. The third group can be traced back to a manuscript of the second group, but here the moral applications are different from the former ones and are organically embedded in the text. Finally, the text of the fourth group greatly differs from the others, it slightly shortens the text, and the moralizations are secondary.⁸

¹ Ibid., 140.

² Ibid., 142.

³ See recently: Margit S. Sárdi, “Régi gyöngyök új foglalatban” (Old Gems in New Setting), <http://magyar-irodalom.elte.hu/erdy-kodex/html/dolgozatok/gyorgyrol.html> (accessed on July 5th, 2008). The author discusses the different versions in which one of the story cycle’s embedded stories, the *Amici* survived.

⁴ “*Historia septem sapientum*” *Überlieferung und textgeschichtliche Edition*, I–II, ed. Detlef Roth (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2004).

⁵ The rather damaged miscellaneous manuscript in Batthyaneum Library, bearing the shelf mark R II.75, contains the story of the seven sages of Rome on pages 183ra–212rb.

⁶ The codex made in 1474 in Nagyvárad (Oradea), copied probably by Mihály Sztárai commissioned by László Egervári, Bishop of Nagyvárad is preserved in the University Library of Budapest under the shelf mark Cod. Lat. 25. In it the story of the seven sages can be read on pages 83vb–104va. The codex was presented to the University Library (or more precisely given back) by Sultan Abdul-Hamid II with other Corvina-codices. The fact that it was copied by a Hungarian man is proven by “the sigh written in red: ‘How much I should like a drink (Hogyh yhatnam)’” [Gusztáv Heinrich, “Bevezetés” (Introduction), in *Poncianus historiája Bécs 1573* (The History of Pontianus, Vienna, 1573), ed. Gusztáv Heinrich (Budapest, 1898), 35.]

⁷ Roth, “*Historia septem sapientum*”..., I. 15–91.

⁸ Cf. *Sieben weise Meister: Eine bairische und eine elsässische Fassung der “Historia septem sapientum”*, ed. Detlef Roth (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2008), X–XI.

Besides examining the connections between the different groups, we must emphasize that the medieval versions from each type added spiritual explanations (*reductio*, in other variants *moralitas*) known from sermons either to the frame story or to the embedded stories¹—and these comments belonged organically to the work and were related to the medieval practice of preferring texts for the moral lessons they contained.² This characteristic of the literary work helps at the same time to identify the editor of the earliest western variant: he must have been a Franciscan friar,³ the later 14th century variants also originate from monastic – Cistercian, Franciscan, Benedictine – circles.⁴ In this context Roth's observation that in medieval manuscript sources the *Historia septem sapientum* was alongside the *Gesta Romanorum*⁵ and that the latter too became popular due to its possible moral meanings will become relevant.

To verify this it is worth casting a glance on the content of the Gyulafehérvár and Budapest manuscripts: in the former the *Historia septem sapientum* is placed after a commentary on the *Book of Psalms*, of course with rhythmically inserted *moralizations*, to be followed then by the *Gesta Romanorum* also *cum moralizacionibus* and by a Pseudo-Bernard *sermo* “de Assumptione Beatae virginis”.⁶ In the story variant of the *Seven Sages of Rome* belonging to the first group the *Moralizations* and the embedded stories divide the text similarly: the unknown scribe marked the morals as well as the number and the narrator of the embedded stories as titles, moreover he emphasized them with red initials, and by this he placed the embedded stories and their spiritual teaching to the same level. The concluding sentence of the *Gesta* – “Expliciunt Gesta romanorum imperatorum moralizata a quodam fratre minorum et cetera” (293ra) – indicates the Franciscan origin of the codex. The Budapest codex also contains the story of the seven sages together with the *Gesta Romanorum*, its peculiarity being that it divides the story and the moralizations declaredly into separate structural units: “Explicit historia septem sapientum ad textum. Et incipiunt narrationes morales predicte” (102r). And though the moral lessons, put into the annex, are fragmentary, and they end abruptly at the *reductio* of the fourth master's tale, the copyist's intention (or that of the source used by him) is obvious: to make both the story and the moral independent.

The importance of the spiritual applications is well exemplified by a Marburg manuscript of the story cycle, which does not contain the story(s), only the *Moralisations*.⁷ A good example to the contamination of the two stories is the fact that,

¹ These are instances when the narrator “speaks out from the text” turning directly to the audience (“Karissimi!”), then using associations in line with the methods of medieval Bible exegesis: e.g. Roth, ‘*Historia septem sapientum*’, I. 249 (in the frame story), and 257 (in an embedded story). II. 487, 493.

² Roth, “*Historia septem sapientum*”..., I. 2.

³ The codex is at present preserved in the University Library of Innsbruck; its shelf mark is Cod. 310; it was made in 1342. Cf. Ibid. I. 7.

⁴ Roth, “*Historia septem sapientum*”..., I. 13.

⁵ Ibid., I. 3., 11.

⁶ Commentary on the psalms: 2ra–182rb; *Historia septem sapientum*: 183ra–212rb; *Gesta Romanorum*: 212rb–293ra; Pseudo-Bernard sermon: 293va–295ra. Cf. also Roth, ‘*Historia septem sapientum*’, I. 23.

⁷ Ibid., I. 58–59.

in certain cases, some of the stories of the *Historia* were merged into the *Gesta Romanorum* without the frame story.¹

We can also encounter more complicated cases: a manuscript to be found in Hanover contains excerpts from the *Historia* and the *Gesta Romanorum*, both *moralizata*, together with texts related to the cult of Charlemagne and the legend of Emperor Louis the Pious.² It is not possible for us to discuss this question in detail here, therefore we only mention briefly that such a context (may open) opens new horizons for the interpretations not to be neglected: accordingly we can also interpret both the *Historia* and the *Gesta Romanorum* as a special case of mirrors for princes.

Regarding the tradition of German language texts, we may find detailed information yet again in Detlef Roth's research results, in the introductory study and the notes accompanying the edition of a Bavarian and an Alsatian variant of the text³ (and of course in the text itself). Accordingly, eight prose and three versed variants of the story cycle have been preserved in German from the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period; all of them can be traced back to the first and second group of the Latin variants.⁴ The contexts of the Brünn (first half of the 15th century) and Colmar manuscript (1468–1469) – treatises, legends, and the *Gesta Romanorum* are to be found in their neighbourhood – suggest that they were translated in order to edify the readers and not to entertain them. The story, in its turn, makes such an approach possible, as it focuses on values such as the love of wisdom, resistance to temptation, silence, patience, etc. The content of the codices where these medieval manuscripts are to be found favours this in any case. Therefore it is easy for us to agree with the German researcher in whose opinion the entertaining function appeared as a result of the printed versions circulated in laic circles where moral interpretations were rarer.⁵ (We are going to examine the validity of this statement to the Hungarian versions soon, analyzing the paratexts.)

The great number of German translations is meaningful: considering that the work was popular and widely spread and as well as complex in its form and content (which makes possible several lines of interpretation), we should not be surprised that two Hungarian variants were made. This characterizes the dynamics of the Hungarian reception, and of course the differences in size between the Hungarian and Western culture... The Latin text preserved in Budapest, originating from Várad shows that the Hungarian versions had their antecedents in this region; the Hungarian reception of this popular story began in the Late Middle Ages.

A few words on moralisation

How are the moralisations we often mentioned connected to the story? What does the Latin term *moralisationes* mean in fact? Is it what we should imagine today: drawing a moral conclusion deriving from the didactic character of the work? A 15th century manuscript to be found in Uppsala has the following incipit: "Sequitur prologus hystorie septem sapientum moralizata secundum spiritualem jntellectum"⁶ – that is, the

¹ Details: Ibid., I. 110–119.

² Ibid., I. 48.

³ Roth, *Sieben weise Meister*...

⁴ Ibid., XI–XII.

⁵ Ibid., XXVI.

⁶ Roth, "*Historia septem sapientum*"..., I. 63.

moralisation is to be understood *in a spiritual sense*. And the following subtitles and marginal notes explicitly draw attention to the spiritual aspects, for example: *Narracio primi Magistri que docet hominem fugere laqueos dyaboli* (The first master's narration teaches man to fly from the snare of the devil); *Secunda narracio Imperatricis et docet hominem quomodo debet dyabolum necare* (The empress' second story teaches man how he must gainsay the devil); *Narracio Imperatricis et reduccio ad mundum et ad septem peccata mortalia* (The empress' story and its application to the world and the seven deadly sins) – and so on and so forth throughout the story.¹ It seems therefore that these texts partly outside the story, which were not at all meant to help solving the conflict of the story or understanding it, sometimes seemingly totally unconnected with the issues of the main text, relate the history of the seven sages and of the other characters to moral theology (too) as a field of science.

This conjecture is furthermore confirmed by the moralizations themselves. According to the text accompanying the frame story, the emperor means any Christian, his only son is his soul, which must be nursed by the seven acts of mercy as by the seven sages in order to obtain salvation. The seven liberal arts correspond to the seven virtues, three of which are theological, four cardinal ones...² And while retelling the plot completed with the artistically matched correspondences, this text guides in fact the reader through the topic list of medieval theological *summas*.³

It is worth examining the moralizing interpretation of one of the embedded stories; for example of the first tale, *Arbor*, narrated by the empress. According to this the burgher means any man whose garden is the heart cleansed by baptism. The tree full of fruit is perfect love; the young tree is evilness growing in the garden of the heart. The gardener is human reason; but reason wounded by sensual desires prunes the branches of the tree, that is, the virtues, thus love finally perishes and gets cold. According to the other interpretation variant, the burgher signifies the first man, Adam, whose delightful garden is the paradise; its noble tree is that of knowledge, the fruit of which is forbidden to eat. The young tree is avarice,⁴ while the gardener is the devil at whose urging the virtues obtained by the first man are destroyed: and this is spiritual annihilation. Furthermore, there is also a third *reductio* of this parable: according to this the gardener is the preacher, who has to sermonize on sin and virtue; the burgher is the high priest whose garden is the church, and the trees are the Christian people who must bear useful fruit in the appropriate time: donations, tithe, alms. The young tree signifies the heretics growing in the shade of the big tree, who attack, undermine the true doctrine.⁵

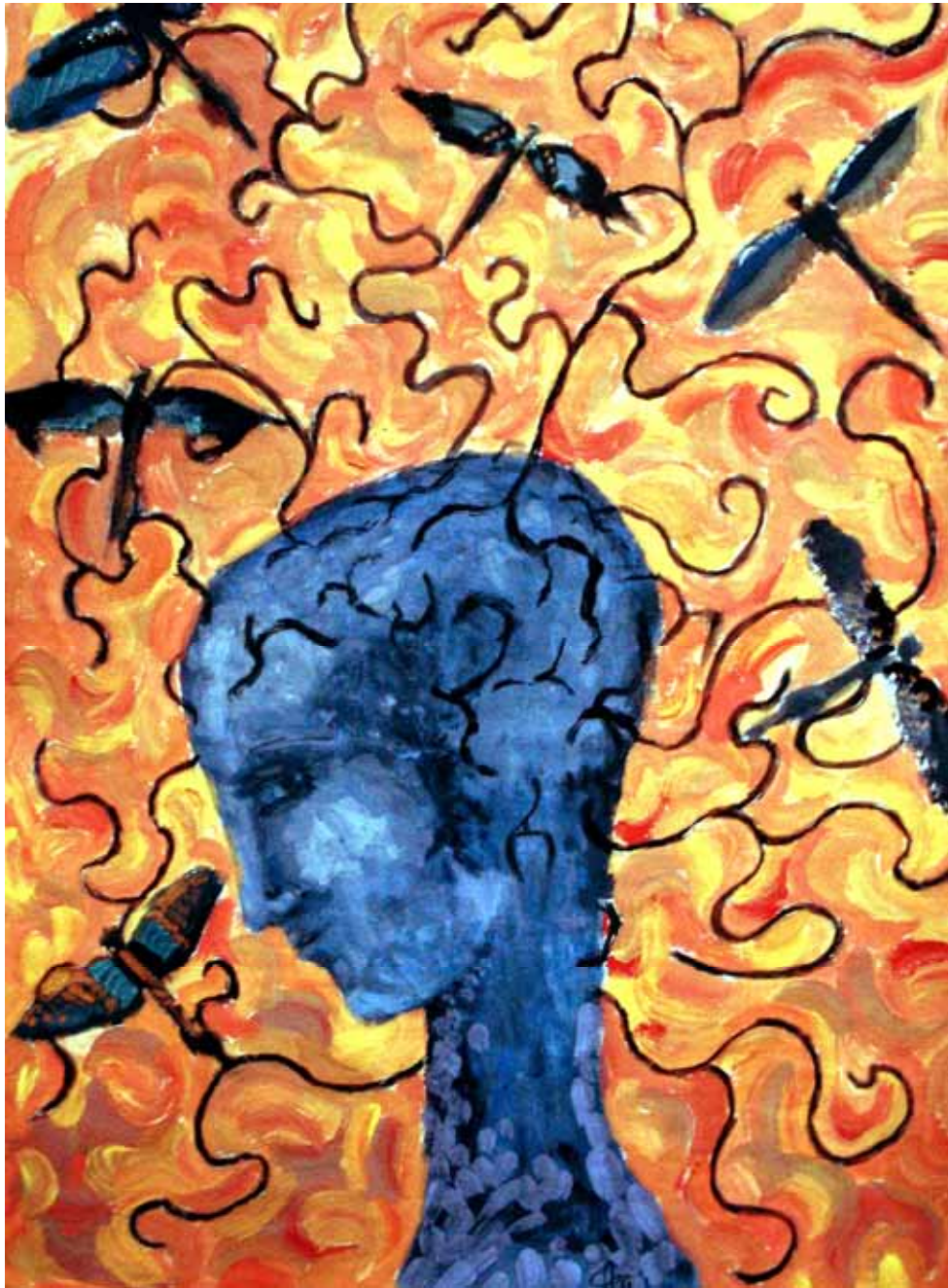
¹ Ibid., I. 63.

² The parallel can be continued: the *septem artes liberales* also have 3+4 constituents as the system of virtues.

³ See as a sample the introduction: “Karissimi! Per istum imperatorem debemus intelligere quemlibet Christianum, qui habet vnicum filium, id est animam, quem debet septem operibus misericordie ad nutriendum, doctrinandum tradere, per que possit salutem eternam addiscere. (...)” The complete text: Roth, ‘Historia septem sapientum’, I. 249–251.

⁴ The Latin text contains *avaritia*, though pride (*superbia*) would be more appropriate – but from the point of view of the application method this is not really important.

⁵ “Burgensis ille potest dici quilibet mundanus, qui habet ortum, id est suum cor per baptismum lotum, in quo debet esse arbor fructu plena, id est caritas perfecta. (...) Sed sepe pinella, id est viciū, sub caritate crescit in orto cordis (...) Ortulanus ille est ratio in homine, que habet euellere vicia et inserere virtutes. Sed aliquando per sensualitatem ratio subpeditatur in tantum,



Ana-Maria Călinescu, *The Phemerides*
Tempera-gouache on paper (297 × 420 mm.)

quod rami, id est bone virtutes, scinduntur et in fine karitas annihilatur et frigescit..." The whole text in: Roth, 'Historia septem sapientum', I. 257–259.

This mode of interpretation, as we may see, goes beyond drawing the obvious conclusions; it attributes to the tale(s) a meaning far beyond the plot, and we may find it similar to the four-step Bible interpretation methods (tracing the true nature of mystery, which hides and reveals itself at the same time), which had had antique origins, but came to flourish in the Middle Ages. Let us recall the short medieval didactic poem: “Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.”¹ Separating the different steps: the literal sense is the narrated story itself (in our case the frame story or the embedded stories); the allegorical sense illustrates the truths of faith (according to this, the relationship between the emperor and his son would express the organic connection between body and soul); the moral meaning reveals what we must do for our salvation (this aspect is contained mainly by the prescriptive marginal notes); finally, the anagogic sense signifies the four last things, eternity coming to the foreground as a perspective. Because of the structural parallelism thus created, our history is dominated by the consistently carried out allegorical interpretation. Of course, with the not at all insignificant difference that, while during the allegorical interpretation of the Bible themes and motifs resulting from one another are related, in our case the only basis for correspondence is the structural parallelism which permits even arbitrary interpretations. This may account for the fact that in one of the examples cited above the *moralisatio* offered three interpretations to the story. And maybe the interpretation’s vulnerability was perceived in the version which, at the beginning of the *reductio*, used the conditional saying: “potest dici”.²

Although not even international research has given sufficient attention to moralisations so far,³ it is not possible for us to discuss it in more detail within the limits of this study, tempting though as this may be.

Edifying moral lessons – the guidelines offered by the paratexts

After the lengthy digression let us return to the Hungarian texts: first of all, let us examine what line of interpretation the paratexts, that is, the prefaces of the Vienna and the Kolozsvár/Lőcse editions suggest.⁴ These publications naturally do not contain moralisations. The approach of the Vienna edition’s translator can be deduced from the dedicatory letter addressed to Count Salm-Neuburg Eck, commander of the castle of Pozsony (today Bratislava, Slovakia), captain-general of Transdanubia and Győr: it says that the difficulties and cares of life cannot be continuously carried unless we moderate them with some rest and pleasant respite (“nisi relaxatione quada, et suavi intermissione temperetur”⁵), for, even according to the wise, man needs pleasant readings to refresh

¹ This extremely popular verse is referred to in numerous scholarly writings; on its historical development see: Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, Volume 3 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), especially 90–160.

² Cf. Roth, “*Historia septem sapientum*”..., I. 419: “Karissimi! iste miles potest dici dominus noster Ihesus Christus...”

³ This was observed for example by Ralf-Henning Steinmetz, *Exempel und Auslegung: Studien zu den ‘Sieben weisen Meistern’* (Freiburg Schweiz: Univ.-Verl. 2000), 48.

⁴ As the 1633 Lőcse edition of the Pontianus-story is not easily accessible for me, I shall use a copy of the 1653 edition preserved in Marosvásárhely: *Poncianvs tsaszar historiaia mikeppen az ő fianak Diocletianusnak hét bölts és tudós Mestereket fogada, kik azt tanitanák az hét Nemes Tudományokra...* (Lőcse, 1653) (RMNY 2472).

⁵ *Poncianvs historiaia...*, 67.

his soul (“Philosophorum iudicio iniicienda sunt iucunda et libera, quorum lectione collectus animus duret”¹). These considerations seem to place the entertaining aspect of the work in the foreground, but the text continues by referring to *inter fabulosa et historica interiecta disciplina*,² teaching situated at the boundary between fable and history,³ which will serve as a lesson or at least as an honourable memory for the Salm-Neuburg Eck couple’s descendants (a reference to the fact that the work is a wedding-present for the addressees), “ista Pontiana, vel ad institutionem, vel saltem honorificam memoriam inseruitura sunt”.⁴ These brief observations already emphasize the edifying aspects; however, if we consider the history of the textual tradition presented above, we must consider them to be more than some obligatorily recited, but empty formulas. We must realize, as the preface writer did, that this work is suitable to carry spiritual-edifying, or even philosophical contents without the didactic-moralizing appendix as well.

Heltai’s “greeting” to the kind reader,⁵ on the other hand, tells clearly how the history *must* be read. For brevity’s sake, we are not going to comment on the introductory apologies (often discussed by literary historians⁶), “that we have other tasks we should perform” and on the observation that “the printing of this work, Emperor Pontianus’ History will be disliked by many people”.⁷ The next sentence, however, deserves our full attention, mainly if we take into consideration the following part of the greeting. For the translator mentions, he did not publish this history without a reason: “if some people wish to measure [that is, to consider, beyond entertainment] these things truly, it clearly contains excellent and most important lessons regarding this *worldly life, honest life, and excellent morals*”.⁸ Then these excellent and most important lessons are discussed one by one: in Pontianus it is a “beautiful quality”⁹ that he considers the problem of succession to the throne, and even that “after him too there should be someone to take care wisely of the empire”;¹⁰ it is afterwards discussed why wisdom is

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

³ I mention as an interesting parallel that Bea Lundt referred to this same duality when she regarded this work a mixture of entertaining stories and didacticism which guided the reader in everyday Christian life: “Diese Mischform zwischen einer komischen und unterhaltenden Vita und zugleich Didaxe, korrekter christlicher Lehre, die im alltäglichen Leben von Nutzen sein sollte...”, Bea Lundt, “Herrschaft, Weisheit, Männlichkeit: ‘Die sieben Weisen Meister’ im 15. Jahrhundert”, in *Geschichtsbilder: Festschrift für Michael Salewski zum 65. Geburtstag*, eds. Thomas Stamm-Kuhlmann, Jürgen, Birgit Aschmann and Jens Hohensee (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2003), 511.

⁴ *Poncianvs historiaia...*, 68.

⁵ *Poncianvs tsaszar...*, A2r.

⁶ E.g. Béla Varjas, *A magyar reneszánsz irodalom társadalmi gyökerei* (The Social Roots of Hungarian Renaissance Literature) (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1982), 225–227.

⁷ “hogy egyéb dolgaink volnának, melyekben kellene foglaltosoknak lennünk”; “ez az munka, az Ponciánus Tsászár Historiájának ki-nyomtatása, sok embernek nem fog tétteni”. *Poncianvs tsaszar...*, A2r.

⁸ “valakik ezeket ez dolgokat igazán meg akarják mértékleni, nyilván jeles és fő tanulságok ez világi életre, igaz életre, és jeles erkölcsökre valók, vadnak benne foglalva”. Ibid. (Italics are mine, Cs. G.)

⁹ “szép jószág ez”. Ibid.

¹⁰ “utána-is légyen, ki böltsen tudgyon gondot viselni az birodalomra”. Ibid.

necessary to the sovereign and in what this consists: “for he sees and realizes that without fine and noble sciences Princes are naught, and without literacy their rule is quite weak”,¹ therefore the fact that he “committed him [his son] to the teachings of the Sages” is an educational principle to be followed.² Another train of ideas refers to the character forming role of education with respect to the son: “Is it not a great benefit that he obtained such a steadfast heart from his good education”,³ then it concludes: “Let Diocletianus be thus an example for every youth, and mainly for their parents.”⁴ It is almost unnecessary to repeat that these observations start from the possible interpretation of the history as a mirror for princes, extending the validity of the educational principles both to young people and their parents in general.

Criticism is also present in the “greetings” Pontianus being blamed on the one hand: “It is a despicable thing in Emperor Pontianus that he is so inconstant, so wavering in his judgement as water in the trough”,⁵ for remarrying he forgets about his much loved first wife, moreover “He is so attached to the new woman that she puts a bridle on his head and bit in his mouth, and drives him hither and thither as a beast, to false and awful things.”⁶ On the other hand (or further on) the text mentions the empress’ thirst for power and her lustfulness among the deterrent negative aspects, formulating general conclusions “about the perfidy and wickedness of women”.⁷

Besides that which he explicitly formulated in the preface, the things Heltai remained silent about may also be informative: apart from a lightly dropped adjective (that is, *meek*) he did not dwell on the character of the first wife, neither did he mention the sages. For the former omission Heltai’s much discussed misogyny (to which we may add, not only with reference to the Hungarian translations, but also to the story in general, and in line with a marked European research trend,⁸ the fact that exactly the two female characters are anonymous in all the versions) may account; but what to make of the preface’s silence with respect to the sages? Especially, if we take into consideration that the Latin versions and their vernacular translations focus exactly on them⁹ mentioning them in the title.

¹ “mert látta és eszébe vészi, hogy szép és nemes tudományok nélkül semmik az Fejedelmek, és írás tudás nélkül igen gyarló dolog az ő birodalmok”. Ibid.

² “bölts Mesterek tanítása alája adta”. Ibid.

³ “Nem de nagy haszoné ez, hogy az jó nevelésből olyan álhatatos szívet vött”. Ibid., A2v.

⁴ “Példa légyen ezokáért Diocletianus minden iffiaknak, sőt fő képpen az szüléknek.” Ibid.

⁵ “Hitván dolog pedig ez Ponciánus Tsászárban, hogy olly igen álhatatlan, és az ítéletben ollyan igen hajlandozó, mint az tekenő béli víz”. Ibid., A2r.

⁶ “Ugy kötelezi pedig magát az új menyetskéhez, hogy az ugyan féket vet fejébe, és zabolát szájába, és tétova hajtogattya, mint egy barmot, hitván hamis és éktelen dolgokra.” Ibid., A2v.

⁷ “az aszszonyi-állatoknak álnoksága és gonossága felől”. Ibid., A3r.

⁸ Besides other (social and mentality historical) approaches in line exactly with gender studies, the history of the seven sages is analyzed, from the point of view of its misogynous tendencies for example by Bea Lundt, Weiser und Weib. Weisheit und Geschlecht am Beispiel der Erzähltradition von den »Sieben Weisen Meistern« (12.–15. Jahrhundert) (München: Fink, 2002).

⁹ Cf. *Historia septem sapientum, Die sieben weisen Meister, The seven sages of Rome*. In this respect both Hungarian translations are exceptional – or, more precisely, the Vienna edition signals some kind of intermediary phase. For Pontianus’ name figures on the title page, but the beginning of the text apostrophizes the sages: “Here begins the acts of the seven sages compiled

I cannot explain this phenomenon with the typographer Heltai's absentmindedness, inattention, or haste, I am rather inclined to think that thus he made the best of the paratexts' functionality – that is, he gave a preliminary interpretation of the story, tried to turn the readers' attention in a certain direction. By making Pontianus the title character and characterizing him in the preface, Heltai laid the strongest emphasis on the themes of the frame story as well as the values and motives related to the emperor – he may have suggested that these are more important than either the empress's or the sages', or even Diocletians' exemplum like embedded stories. And the importance of the frame story issues being increased, the work became, beyond its entertaining role, an edifying and problem raising reading as well according to Heltai's preliminary suggestion. For let us not forget that storytelling is a matter of life and death, of course, in a different manner as for example in *The Thousand and One Nights*: while in this King Shahryar must be distracted from reality, entranced with the aid of the stories, in the case of the *Pontianus*, the stories function as exempla; they have an argumentative role, and as a part of the argumentation, they have to influence the emperor's decisions.

One of the occurring problems is related to Pontianus' character: we are referring to his conduct called by Heltai in the preface *inconstant* and as such *despicable*, and which we should call undecided today. This feature is repeatedly problematized both in the Latin and German (and of course the Hungarian) versions. For the empress, before beginning to tell her second story, tells the emperor: "What is the use of it; I told your Majesty a parable yesterday too, but to no avail; Nevertheless, I am going to tell this too."¹ In this sentence reproach and urging is as much present as the provocation of the emperor's male pride and the empress' feigned forbearance. Somewhat later the emperor reacts to the observation, showing resoluteness and justifying the suspension of the death sentence for that day by referring to the circumspection required by lawfulness: "... but I would not like to break the law, yesterday I heard a parable, and I postponed the judgement because of it."² Afterwards the emperor accounts for his seeming indecision by referring to his duties as an emperor: "It is the duty of the Emperor to listen to each man and to get to the bottom of everything before pronouncing his judgement."³ Later he seems to capitulate recognizing his incapacity to decide: "I really do not know what to do. You quarrel with me each day to kill my son: the Sages, on the other hand advise me not to kill him: I do

with beautiful parables and uses" ("Kezdetik het bölchnek chelekedetik sep pelda besedekwel es haszonlatosságokwal, egyben szerkeoszteteh"). *Poncianvs historiaia...*, 69.

¹ "Mi haszon vagyon benne; tegnap is mondtam egy példát te Felségednek, de semmit nem használtam véle; De mind-azon-által ezt-is meg-beszéllem." *Poncianvs tsaszar...*, D1r. Similar sentences can be found in the Vienna edition, as well as in the Latin and German versions. I forbear quoting them making only reference to a few pages: *Poncianvs historiaia...*, 93; Roth, *Sieben weise Meister...*, 28; 29.

² "... nem-is akarnék törvénytelenkedni, tegnap hallottam egy példa beszédet, és az miatt hallasztottam-el az törvényt." *Poncianvs tsaszar...*, F1r. Elsewhere: *Poncianvs historiaia...*, 115–116; Roth, *Sieben weise Meister...*, 54, 55.

³ "Ez az Tsászárnak tisztí, hogy minden embert meghalgasson, és hogy minden dolgoknak jól végére mennyen, minek-előtte ki mondgya az törvényt." *Poncianvs tsaszar...*, G3v. Elsewhere: *Poncianvs historiaia...*, 134; Roth, *Sieben weise Meister...*, 80; 81.

not know what to do.”¹ Out of the variants available to me, the Brunn manuscript does not contain this passage, the formulation present in the Colmar version is, however, more explicit than Heltai’s; here the emperor’s behaviour is not motivated by inconstancy, but by the realization that the arguments of both parties seem to prove the truth, therefore the choice is extremely difficult: “kan nit wissen, an wellichem teil die worheit lit”² – for one cannot know, and it is even impossible to find out on what side truth lies. Besides the fact that Pontianus became the most important character of the story in this context, the problem opens to the epistemological horizon of truth seeking: is there such a thing as truth, can it be discovered, recognized at all? These dialogues also make palpable the pressure exercised by the empress and the sages on the emperor – the necessity of decision in a situation when he is unable to decide –, the two parties using different argumentation strategies of course; the situation is made even more complicated by the fact that both the accuser and the accused waiting for His Majesty’s decision are his family members.

The frame and the story

Our previous observations show that the *Seven Sages of Rome* without any paratext offers an interpretation which emphasizes the frame story. This is why it is a special case in the world of framed stories. For this text type is considered by professional consensus a background, a possibility for the controlled and successive narration of several stories which could exist separately as well: according to an American researcher of the genre, Bonnie D. Irwin, a frame story, though more than a story collection, is after all a fictional narrative conceived to serve as a pretext for presenting other narratives; the frame serves as a context for the embedded stories holding them together, in some cases determining the line of their interpretation; but without them it would remain weak and insignificant.³ The author of the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*’s relevant entry makes similar statements on the relationship of the frame story and the embedded story: typically the embedded story is the focal point of the text.⁴

In comparison with this how does our frame story look like? Let us examine first of all the structural division of the Latin, German, and Hungarian variants available for us.⁵ The narration of the German texts is continuous, the embedded stories dividing

¹ “Bizony nem tudok mit mivelni. Azon vesződöl minden nap velem, hogy fiamat meg ölessem: az bölts Mesterek pedig arra visznek tanatsokkal, hogy ne ölessem meg: Nem tudom, mit művellyek.” *Poncianvs tsaszar...*, H4v. Elsewhere: *Poncianvs historiaia...*, 148.

² Roth, *Sieben weise Meister...*, 97.

³ Cf. Bonnie D. Irwin, “What’s in a Frame? The Medieval Textualization of Traditional Storytelling”, *Oral Tradition* 10/1 (1995): 28: “A frame tale is not simply an anthology of stories. Rather, it is a fictional narrative... composed primarily for the purpose of presenting other narratives. The frame tale provides context for reading, listening, and, of course, interpreting the interior tales... the frame tale alone is rather weak.”

⁴ Rahmenerzählung, in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik VII*, ed. Gert Ueding (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2005), 560: “in eine intratextuelle rahmende Erzählung... ein Binnentext (üblicherweise eine Binnenerzählung) eingelagert ist, der – zumindest im prototypischen Fall – zugleich den Schwerpunkt des Textes bildet.”

⁵ I shall use for this the already referred to Latin version, the two German (the Brunn and the Colmar) text, a German Potianus-edition based on a 15th century Heidelbergian source (*Die sieben weisen Meister, herausgegeben nach der Heidelberger Handschrift cod. pal. germ. 149*,

the text into subparts emphasized by subtitles or marked by recommencing numbering (too). Furthermore, they show the fact that the editors, translators and/or copyists of the texts were aware of the subordinate role of the embedded stories since they refer to them in terms borrowed from rhetoric as speech, example (*Rede, Beispiel, peispil, peyspil, bispel*¹). However, they omitted the moralizations – whether deliberately or because they were missing from the Latin source they used, remains an open question.²

The Latin texts also tell the frame story continuously up to point when the emperor declares the death sentence for the first time, when the above presented *Reductio*, highlighted as a subtitle interrupts the narration. Maybe it is not useless to repeat that each moment of the story corresponds to a moral or dogmatic tenet. The artistically shaped relationship between stories (the frame story and the embedded stories functioning as – and called³ – exempla) and morals is also made visible by the fact that the moral lessons enumerate the most widely spread moral theological clichés and stereotypes starting from the different details of the parables. Turning over the pages we can observe that the scribe attributed as much importance to the theologizing and moralizing *reductios* following each story when ordering the text on the page as to the sentences introducing the empress', the sages', and finally the prince's speech and tale. Considering all this, it may not be an exaggeration to say that the importance of the frame story and embedded stories is conferred by the moral lessons one can draw from them: despite being seemingly quite the opposite way, real emphasis is on the moral, all else is only background and illustration. Probably this function oriented structuring accounts for the fact that neither the copyists nor the readers of the text were shocked or tried to make excuses for the often romantic-erotic theme of the embedded stories.

The Hungarian language Vienna edition, as compared to the above discussed texts, highlighted some elements of the frame story as well giving them subtitles: "*Here how the Emperor entrusted his son to the seven sages for education*"; a little bit later: "*Here the Empress asks the emperor to send for his son and bring him quickly to her that she might see him*"; then: "*Here the Empress tears her garments and beats herself in her rage and the Emperor's son is carried away arrested*".⁴ Further on, the text announces the empress' and the sages' tales—which are most often called parallels (*hasonlatosság*), more rarely speeches (*beszed*)—as well as the fact that the prince is ceremoniously taken out to the scaffold. That is, if we consider the typographical ordering of the text, we may discover that the importance of the frame story and the embedded stories are in balance.

mit Berücksichtigung der Drucke des 15. Jahrhunderts und des cod. pal. germ. 106, Jena, 1911) and naturally the two Hungarian translations.

¹ *Die sieben weisen Meister...* 18, 23; Roth, *Sieben weise Meister...*, 18, 19, 38. etc.

² Cf. Roth, *Sieben weise Meister...*, XIX., XXIII.

³ E.g. the emperor requested the first sage to tell his story in this way: "Dic mihi, magister, si placet, illud exemplum!" The notion is used further on as well. Roth, "*Historia septem sapientum*"..., I. 256, 264, etc.

⁴ "Ith mimodon atta az Chiazar az het beolchnek az eo fiath tanitani"; "Ith keri azon chiazart az Chiazarne, hogy kwldene az eu fiaerth, es igen hamar hozatna eu hozzaia, had latna meg"; It az Chiazarne el zaggattia az eu ruhaia es haragiaban magat veri es az Chiazarfia foguea vitettetik". *Poncianvs historiaia...*, 73, 75, 82.

The Lőcse edition also divides the frame story into several episodes which have summarizing titles and are numbered.¹ The empress' first tale is embedded in Part IX and is italicized, moreover, it is labelled with a morally unfavourable observation.² Later the parables are also separated from the frame story by being italicized. The titles of the different parts refer alternately to the plot and the narrated parables. Therefore, while the different font styles direct the attention to the importance of the embedded stories (for the italicized parts catch the eye), the division made from the point of view of the content emphasizes the role of the frame story.

The importance of the frame story is also enhanced by the leisurely way, assuming the monotony of repetition (applying however minimal variations), it narrates again and again how the prince is taken to the scaffold, people seeing this "lament crying and wailing" ("sirván és jajgatván panaszolkodnak vala"), the prince observing the approaching sage "bows his head before him" ("fejet hajta néki"), the sage promises that he will save him "that day". But it is almost ritually repeated that episode as well when the emperor welcomes the entering sage with curses and threats, and the sage, before starting to tell the life-saving parable, alludes to the temporality of the young man's silence and to there being a cause for this dumbness "which cause may yet be revealed by God".³ On the other side, it narrates with the same leisureliness over and over again how the empress starts "crying and wailing bitterly" ("igen keservesen sirni és jajgatni") having heard that the emperor's son escaped, then how the emperor enters her "chamber" ("az Komorába") to sooth her, and what dialogue precedes the telling of the new parable.⁴

The structure is both parallel and contrasting; the narrators, as we know, try to convince the emperor of two diametrically opposed things. This is already the field of the story's application, interpretation – that is, the field where the argumentation strategies operate. Both the empress and the sages end their parable with such a formula: "Has Your Majesty realized what kind of parable I said and what does it mean?" Or: "Has Your Majesty understood my parable?"⁵ The emperor's answer is affirmative in each case, the narrator, however, expands on the meaning of the parable each time. Let us cite some of the empress' applications: "Your Majesty is the noble fruit tree... The sapling under the old fruit tree is Your Majesty's son..."⁶ Another: "The wild boar signifies Your Majesty's power that none can withstand. The Shepherd signifies Your

¹ Examples: "Part II. *How the emperor commended his son Diocletianus to the teachings of the seven sages.*" (II. RESZ. Mint ajánlotta a' tsaszar az ő fiat Diocletianust a' hét bölts Mestereknek a' tudományra.) Ibid., A4r. "Part III. *How they built a vaulted house on the mountain.*" (III. RESZ. Mint építettek a' Tsaszar fiának edgy Boltot a' hegyen.) Ibid., B1r. "Part IV. *How the Councillors advice the Emperor to remarry*" (IV. RESZ. Mint adnak a' Tanatsok a' Tsaszarnak tanátsot, hogy újonnan meg-házassullyon.) Ibid., B1v. And so on and so forth...

² "Part IX. *On the Empress' deceitful parable by which she tries to delude the Emperor to kill his son.*" (IX. RESZ. A Tsaszarnának alnaksagos példajáról, mellyel igyekezik a' Tsászárt meg tsalni, hogy a' fiát meg-ölesse.) Ibid., C1v.

³ "melly okot az Isten talám még ki jelent". First occurrence: Ibid., C2v–C3r.

⁴ First occurrence: Ibid., C4v–D1r.

⁵ "Eszébe vőttejé Felséged mitsoda példát mondék, és mit jelentsen?"; "Meg-értettejé felséged az én péda-beszédemet?" Ibid., C2r; G3r.

⁶ "Te Felséged ám amaz nemes gyümöls fa... A fiatalka az öreg gyümöls fa alatt a' te felséged fia..." Ibid., C2r–v.

Majesty's son who begins to deceive you with his treacherous knowledge.”¹ Sometimes the application is inserted in the tale itself, for example to the beginning of the empress' fourth parable: “Once upon a time there lived seven Sages in Rome who had power over almost the entire Empire, such as these present seven Sages try to get.”² Without enumerating more examples, it is clear: the explanations offer allegorical interpretations to the parables—in this respect they are related to the moralisations operating with allegorical correspondences—, it is not necessarily evident the conclusion arrived at; and the empress' applications revolve in turn around keeping or losing power.³ The empress uses her seventh tale too to prove an interest in power (this is the well known case of the imprisoned queen, the *Inclusa*); in Heltai's text: “Has Your Majesty heard the parable? Your Majesty trusts too much the seven Sages, as the King trusted his Steward, but I am afraid they only attempt to put both myself and Your Majesty to shame.”⁴ The application of the Vienna translation (and of some German texts) is even more concrete: “indeed, you will fare the same as the seven sages, who strive to defile me, for you would rather believe their words than your own eyes. You saw with your own eyes that your blackguard offspring tore my face, and you can see each day how your blackguard sages keep him alive, but nonetheless, you do not believe it.”⁵ Nevertheless, another interpretation could also have been possible, focusing on the cunning, lustful woman as a warning example – and such an interpretation can be met with in a 13th century Old French variant of the story, in the *Roman des sept sages de Rome*, where this story occurs as the sages' last parable.⁶

The sages, on the other hand, explain their own stories in the following way: “Verily, I say unto you that if you put your son to death on your wife's accusations, Your Majesty will fare worse than this nobleman who killed his faithful dog in an outburst of rage” –, because he believed his wife's words.⁷ And: “Verily, I say unto you

¹ “Az fene vadkan, jedzi az felséged hatalmát, mellynek ellene senki nem álhat. Az Pásztor jedzi az te felséged fiát, ki az ő álnok tudományával meg-kezdi tsalni felségedet.” Ibid., D1r–v.

² “Valának egyszer hét bölcs Mesterek Romába, kik majd az egész Tsászári birodalommal birnak vala, szintén ekképpen, mint ez mostani hét bölcs Mesterek igyekeznek tselekedni.” Ibid., F1v.

³ On the basis of this observation Hans R. Runte stated that the empress' tales on power-hungry sons and bad councillors direct the interpretation to a political field, while the sages' misogynistic stories open up the social dimension. Hans R. Runte, “From the Vernacular to Latin and Back: The Case of *The Seven Sages of Rome*”, in: *Medieval Translators and Their Craft*, ed. Jeanette Beer (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University, 1989), 104. Cf. also: Steinmetz, *Exemple und Auslegung...*, 26.

⁴ “Halláé felseged az példa-beszédet? Igen hiszen felseged az hét Mesternek, szinte mint az Király hün az Hopmesternek, De félek, hogy ök tsak ezen járnak, hogy mind engemet, mind felsegedet szégyenbe ejtsék.” *Poncianvs tsaszar...*, K3r–v.

⁵ “igaz igien iarz te az het beolchiekkel kik azon chielekednek hagi engem megh rutichianak mert tebbet hizez az ew bezedinek hagi nem mint az the szemednek Zemeddel latad hagi enneke[m] orchamat el zaggata az te lator magzatod es latod napon kent mint eltetik az te lator mesterid ewtet de azert nem hiszed.” *Poncianvs historiaia...*, 170. Cf. also: *Die sieben weisen Meister...*, 108: “Also wird euch geschehen von euren sieben Meistern. Ach, ihr glaubet ihren Reden mehr denn euren Augen, und sahst doch, wie ich zerkratzt und zerrissen war von eurem Sohn.”

⁶ Cf. Steinmetz, *Exemple und Auslegung...*, 113.

⁷ “Bizony én is meg mondom felségednek, hogy ha meg-öleted az te fiadat feleségednek vádlásáért, bizony gonoszban leszen te felségednek dolga, hogy nem mint ez nemes embernek, ki hirtelen haragbol meg-ölé az ő hiv ebét”. *Poncianvs tsaszar...*, C4v.

that if Your Majesty puts his son to death, you will fare worse than the old nobleman”¹ – who, because of his cunning wife’s scheme, was put in the pillory instead of the adulterous woman. From the part of the third sage the emperor needed no help in deciphering the meaning of the parable, Pontianus was quick on the uptake: “I have understood it [the parable and its meaning] well. To be sure, the Burgher’s wife was a cursed jade! Truly, I pity the poor innocent bird, the Magpie greatly that it had to die for telling the truth. And I promise you for sure that my son will not die today.”² The narration of the frame story is shaped in a manner that the sages’ stories interpret and apply themselves to the given situation without any allegorization or other logical acrobatics – for the characters and/or situations in the tales are identical with a character or with the basic situation of the frame story. For example, a noble knight “had a little son as Your Majesty has a son”;³ in another tale an old man has a young wife;⁴ a widower remarries at the council of his friends but his marriage remains childless.⁵ The application is aided by the fact that in almost every story there is an evil, lewd woman whom the sages can easily identify – and they do so indeed⁶ – with Pontianus’ wife. The object of the story (and of the interpretation) is in each case some kind of loss: a favourite animal,⁷ knowledge carried to the grave,⁸ or, in some cases, honour.⁹ The seemingly symmetrical structure thus “gives hints” to the reader: the construction imitating court decisions (where evidently Pontianus as a judge, having considered the arguments of the contending parties, has to declare his judgement) and encompassing the entire book suggests that truth lies where the illustrative exemplum can influence the will, where it can fulfil its function to move the listener (*movere*) without further aids.

Conclusion

It would be interesting, remaining close to the text, to examine the symbolism of the Pontianus-story (for example, number seven which is a multiple organizing principle), the parallels of some plot elements as well as their role and meaning in world literature,¹⁰ appreciating thus the artistic character of the work. Artistically, one may also reflect upon the influence of written and oral cultural models on the story starting from the fact that while the complex structure suggests that it may have been elaborated in writing, the ritual like development of the plot preserves the marks of orality. It is an

¹ “Bizony mondom, ha felséged meg öleti fiát, sokkal gonozban leszen felségednek dolga, hogy nem mint az vén nemes embernek”. Ibid., D4v.

² “Jól eszembe vöttem. Bezzeg átkozott álnok latorné volt az Polgárnak felesége! Bizony igen szánom az szegény ártatlan madarat, az Szarkát, hogy az igaz mondásért meg-kellet halni. Én-is bizonyosan ezt ígérem néked, hogy ez mai napon meg nem hal az én fiam.” Ibid., F1r.

³ “vala egy fiatskája, miképen felségednek is hogy egy fia vagyon”. Ibid., C3v.

⁴ Ibid., D2r.

⁵ This is the *Tentamina*, the fourth sage’s tale. Ibid., F4v.

⁶ They suggest the possibility of interpretation, application already at the beginning of the story with such formulas: an old noble knight has a young wife “as Your Majesty has” (“szinte mint felségednek vagyon”). Ibid., D2r.

⁷ As in the sages’ first tale (*Canis*).

⁸ In the fifth sage’s story (*Medicus*).

⁹ In the second sage’s story (*Puteus*).

¹⁰ Researchers have already analyzed the parallel between the empress’ relationship with Diocletianus and the story of Potiphar’s wife, but a parallel with the tale of Phaedra and Hippolytus can also be drawn.

equally promising interpretational horizon which regards this work as a tale of initiation: in this reading Diocletianus would be the main character who has to prove, by passing a series of tests, that he is suitable to inherit the imperial power after his father. Though to enlarge on these subjects would go beyond the limits of this paper, we may state that all these aspects, since they belong to the frame story, emphasize its importance. We may also add, that though it is possible to play (and amuse ourselves) with the examination of these internal and external relationships, it is fairly difficult not to observe the moral and existential messages coded into the text: a level of meaning which was not invalidated by the changed usage of the text in the Early Modern Age. In other words, the frame of the story – in the shape of the contextual changes it underwent – basically helped to preserve the original, we could say existential, character inherent to the story of the frame due to its epicity and its structure.

Translated by Ágnes Korondi