

Toldi's Tale: A Hungarian Version of Chivalric Ideals

Amedeo Di Francesco

Whether we intend to consider the story of Miklós Toldi as a historical episode or an allegory of King Louis the Great's heroic era, we must begin with the common, widely known literary sources. The first one is the 16th-century verse chronicle of Péter Ilosvai Selymes, the second, János Arany's popular romantic epic.¹ Even if we refrain from the comparison of a primitive and incomplete early poem with an elaborate historical vision from the 19th century, we must realize that the thematic approach of the two poets to the semi-mythical hero also radically differs. In other words, both the artistic achievement and the narrative elements of the two poetic chronicles seem to defy the possibility of comparison.

What then, if anything, makes them comparable? It is the intention of the poets to insert powerful symbols of individual heroism and past glory into the literary consciousness of their age. In both centuries—the 16th and the 19th—Hungary as a political power was threatened with eventual dismemberment, and people were looking for ideals and solutions for themselves and their nation.

Here I shall limit my inquiry to the critical interpretation of Ilosvai's verse chronicle to demonstrate the particularly expressive symbolic representation of contemporary chivalric ideals in 16th-century Hungarian epic poetry.²

The 1500s saw at least one-third of Hungary occupied by the Ottoman Empire, the division of Christian Hungary into two parts and religious polemics gaining ground with the Reformation. Although this century has been stereotyped in the Hungarian historical consciousness as one full of tragic circumstance, objectively speaking it also manifested fascinating social tensions and the kind of typical cultural phenomena that characterize transitional periods. One major phenomenon of the 16th century was that for the first time in their history and, ironically, precisely when their united

statehood was in dissolution, Hungarians gradually developed their own national consciousness, idealizing the previous centuries of glory and power, and mythologizing the age of King Louis the Great and King Matthias.³ Such nostalgia characterized both 16th-century Hungarian historiography and epic literature; however, this return to the past was exempt from the speculative ideologies which influenced developments in the 19th century.

A manifestation of this nostalgic myth-making was Ilosvai's *Toldi*, which grew out of the demand of Hungarian renaissance culture to recreate the world of chivalry and fit these ideals into contemporary reality, instead of assigning them to the sphere of poetic fantasy.⁴

In Italy, the reputed greatness of Hungary during the Angevin kings was adequately treated not only by chroniclers but also by renaissance prose literature. At the same time, in renaissance Hungary the figure of Louis the Great influenced literature to a lesser extent than that of King Matthias.⁵ Louis's name was usually listed among other rulers, typically with some epithet, yet presented not as an individual hero but an embodiment of the country's national greatness and fame. One example is András Farkas's treatise from 1538, *Az zsidó és magyar nemzetéről* (About the Jewish and Hungarian Nations), in which the author mentions Louis the Great among those kings who were, in accordance with Protestant dogma, tools of divine providence when they contributed to Hungary's greatness. Even more interesting is Farkas's characterization of Louis the Great as a pious king, while elsewhere he mentions that the king also extended Hungary's borders.⁶

Another writer who provided a distinct and positive picture of Louis the Great was István Székely, in his *Chronica ez világnak jeles dolgairól* (Chronicle About the Famous Events of This World, 1559). Like Farkas, Székely too was obliged to mention the king's contradictions. On the one hand, Louis was a virtuous ruler, on the other, he waged wars, most notably against Joanna of Naples to take revenge for his slain brother Endre.⁷

These two examples notwithstanding, 16th-century Hungarian literature had little to say about Louis the Great. Even Sebestyén Tinódi, best-known author of epic historical songs, neglected Louis's ventures, although in his "Zsigmond király és császár krónikája" (Chronicle of the King and Emperor Sigismund, 1552), he made reference to the Angevin era preceding Sigismund's rule.⁸ Tinódi characterized Louis as "good king Louis" and referred to the discords following his death, implying that Louis's rule was synonymous with decades of relative peace for Hungary.

Compared with such works which treat Louis's rule superficially and casually, the significance of Ilosvai's *Toldi Miklósról való história* ("The History of Miklós Toldi," an abbreviated "working version" of the longer original title) gains particular importance. It appears as the first poetic attempt to recall Toldi's legendary figure and, through his adventures, direct attention to the Angevin period. Even more important, however, it evokes

a distant, idealized era to provide values for a new nobility and aristocracy. This upper stratum of Hungarian society, which emerged as a direct result of cataclysmic national events, believed it found its identity in the old chivalric ideals. Consequently, it was receptive to literary works that rekindled nostalgia for the vanished age of knighthood. Ilosvai's epic was such a work, serving contemporary expectations and demands: to reconcile the conflicts of the new aristocracy, improve the morale of civic life, and reinterpret the concept of true nobility.

Toldi's story itself, which had been part of the oral tradition until the 16th century, was once the cultural manifestation of the ascending Angevin aristocracy. This elite restricted chivalric ideals to the cult of power and courage in order to justify its existence. The Toldi story evolved out of the necessity to legitimize and integrate the newly developing 14th-century nobility.⁹ Two centuries later, when the upper stratum of the country was again in the process of restructuring itself, Ilosvai adapted the Toldi tradition to suit the aspirations of the newly emerging aristocracy. The ultimate aspiration was to steer the country out of its chaotic and threatened situation. The regrouping and rearrangement of different social classes, however, created irreconcilable conflicts which should have been handled with a series of normative, educative, reformist measures. Since a didactic prose tradition did not exist in Hungary at that time, the identification of such goals and measures appeared in the genre of historical poetry, whose outstanding representative was Péter Ilosvai Selymes. In such a context, the debate about virtue and true nobility became a predominant literary theme.

Participants in this far-reaching debate included such eminent humanists as Pál Istvánfi and György Enyedi, who discussed at length the connection between culture and political power.¹⁰ These and other authors also argued that inherited and inherent nobility were two different things, with true nobility deriving not from social privilege but individual quality. As a statement, however, this was insufficient without clarification of what this quality was. There was a tendency to measure the virtue of true nobility by culture and science; another tendency emphasized good morals; while those firmly entrenched in contemporary Hungarian reality and all its necessities regarded valour as the key. All participants agreed, though, that inherited nobility lost much of its value in Hungary while nobility acquired through participation in the country's military defense gained respect.¹¹ The logical conclusion was that the country needed moral renewal, a reassessment of values, since its future existence depended on these measures.

As for the historical poems, they can be characterized generally in the same way as medieval literature, in which "history, the novel and short story were indistinguishable . . . [since] chronicles and all kinds of literary stories are interpreted as true historical events."¹² In this tradition, there were no

generic distinctions, even if the chivalric novel element was missing from the Hungarian poems. This synthetic genre fused the romantic tales of antiquity, chronicles of anti-Turkish wars and informative poems, resulting in the peculiar Hungarian popular-naive epic of the 1500s. While this epic hailed valour in its heroes, politeness and culture only became part of the traditional ideal later. In this respect, Ilosvai was a pioneer: by writing *Historia Alexandri Magni* and Toldi's story, he proved what great "need there [was] for new moral principles, both for the class and its representative hero."¹³ At the same time, Ilosvai's heroes never became perfect allegories of chivalric ideals. And we shall see why.

One of Ilosvai's literary devices for injecting a new moral message into classical myth and Hungarian historical chronicles was contrast. In the case of Alexander the Great, on the one hand, Ilosvai emphasized the king's bravery, justice and morality, on the other hand, his weakness for drinking and womanizing which eventually caused his decline.¹⁴ Similarly, in *Toldi* we learn that the hero's weakness was his leaning towards alcohol:

His big sin was his drunkenness,
Without wine, his life was meaningless.
It drained Toldi's enormous strength,
and thus he couldn't increase his wealth.¹⁵

Such representation of human shortcomings and transgressions coincides with the thesis of Hungarian Reformation: that the Ottoman menace was nothing but God's punishment for Hungarian vices. (In general, it is also well known how much Protestantism condemned debauchery and advocated moderation in all aspects of life.) This set of theses inspired the lengthy chronicles of the nation's wickedness in 16th-century Hungarian literature, although at least equally voluminous were the works praising Hungarian heroism in the struggle against the Turks.

It seems inappropriate to consider Ilosvai's *Toldi* as a product of Western European chivalric ideals. This hero was modelled after the typical 16th-century Hungarian warrior, credited with virtues as well as vices. Toldi shared his controversial character with Hungarian heroes of the anti-Turkish struggle. His ideals were the same as those of the defenders of the Christian frontiers. His myth was that of a new Hungarian nation which was trying to emerge from crushing defeats, political crises and feudal anarchy.

Naturally, this is a controversial myth which may shock and mislead the modern reader. According to Ferenc Zemplényi, "Toldi is a glutton, drunkard, repeated murderer, a despoiler of tombs, participant in a scurrilous adventure (whether or not an interpolation from Boccaccio), unchivalrous in a duel since he coolly chopped off the head of his opponent who surrendered and prayed for mercy, and so on. In short, Ilosvai shows a stunning lack of chivalrous characteristics in Toldi."¹⁶

These (and other similar) critical observations do not take into consideration either the everyday realities or, in particular, the socio-cultural situation in late 16th-century Hungary. Such critiques run astray when they adopt the perspective of medieval Western European chivalric literature in defining the courtly and knightly – consequently, they are unable to reveal the underlying message of Ilosvai's *Toldi*. Nothing was farther from this author's intention than the creation of a classic chivalric tale. While this genre was absent from 16th-century Hungarian literature, other works about heroes and lovers – such as Ilosvai's *Toldi* – took over their role. In other words, being less abstract and fantastic than in the West, Hungarian poetry emphasized strength and courage.

The full title and introductory stanzas of *Toldi* already set the tone. The title mentions the hero's "illustrious deeds and championship" (*jeles cselekedetei és bajnoksága*). With this attributive construction, Ilosvai made it clear that he wanted to immortalize Toldi's bravery, not his virtuousness. At the same time, he also represented Toldi's military valour as a God-given quality – an example to his contemporaries, heroes of the anti-Turkish battles.¹⁷ Being selected by divine will for a great task, and being redeemed by the same, constitutes true chivalry. These motifs appear in Toldi's story not in the fantastic mesh of a dreamworld but in the context of concrete Hungarian reality. This is how Toldi becomes an example of the "brave hero" (*jó vitéz*) – a hero who performs his tasks in the full awareness of his mission, in the spirit of the *militia secularis* (secular virtue) of the anti-Turkish wars.

Toldi's figure is a version of this secular virtue. It is not courtly love that provides his strength of mind to perform his heroic deeds. Instead, he appears in Ilosvai's poem as a historical figure who, through his own virtue, wants to restore the country to order. There is no room for gallantry in this code of chivalry. On the other hand, the secular virtue did not have its distinct ethical meaning and effect. It constituted one kind of lay morality. Not associated with any particular belief, it did not become an argument for either party in the religious disputes, but expressed the shared, noble ideal of defending and reviving the Hungarian nation. Toldi's figure does not satisfy the requirements of a timeless, generalized chivalric code, but complies fully with the heroic standards of Hungary in Ilosvai's time. The hero's task was meant to be the construction of a new, strong and virtuous nation modelled on the golden age of the Angevin kings, and especially King Louis the Great.

Ilosvai (and later János Arany) described the splendour of Louis the Great's household as though it were King Arthur's mythical court. Louis's largess also gave knights of humble means and origin an opportunity to demonstrate their heroism. In Toldi's story both poets emphasized the simplicity of the hero's conditions from which he rose, after many adven-

tures, to King Louis's "shining court" to contribute to its brilliance and to Hungary's greatness. This court was ready to accept anybody, his origins notwithstanding, who was willing to adopt its chivalric order and identify with the Hungarian nation. This (embellished) vision of the Angevin era was already evident in Ilosvai's writing and became even more explicit in Arany's trilogy which examined the process of a people becoming a nation.

In Ilosvai's *Toldi* the adventure motif is a means by which the hero's exceptional prowess is manifested, no longer representing the qualities of a group but the whole nation. This is what makes Toldi a true national hero—a paragon badly needed by 16th-century Hungarian society and culture. This heroic ideal was a very pragmatic one, suiting the needs of a country in conflict with the Ottoman Empire, yet also modelled after classical conventions. Whether such heroes appeared as perfect or imperfect, matching the general, transcendental ethical ideals or deviating from them, it did not matter, as long as they accepted the soldiers' life and the task of defending their homeland in the true spirit of Hungarian chivalry. Such poetic intention explains the moralizing character of Ilosvai's work. The author did not develop Toldi's adventures with an eye to his final redemption, nor did he expound on the development of the hero's morality. Instead, he criticized some of Toldi's deeds and much of his morals, yet represented his hero as an admirable embodiment of strength and courage.

As it is well known, the glamour of medieval chivalry also concealed the realities of a brutal and tragic world. In the worlds of the Dutch historian and philosopher Huizinga, "14th and 15th century French chroniclers started their writings with the spirited intention of glorifying chivalric morals and the magnificent deeds of knights." They were unable, however, to realize their intention fully, since real life was permeated with "treason and cruelty, mean greed and violence, so that heroism only served hoarding treasures."¹⁸ As we have seen, this world was not that different from the circumstances of 16th-century Hungary. Ilosvai's true achievement was the accurate poetic recording of contemporary Hungary's virtues and vices, dreams and realities. In Toldi's figure he managed to merge the knight and the villain, two heroes who had earlier symbolized entirely different worlds. Even the hero is aware of the gulf between ideals and reality, knowing that his only way to rise above the situation is by taking risks. In *Toldi*, Ilosvai created the myth of an ascending hero who embodied the essential paradoxes of modern Hungary.

NOTES

- 1 Ilosvai, "Az híres neves Tholdi Miklósnak jeles cselekedeteiről és bajnokságáról való história" (1574; henceforth referred to as "Toldi"). *Régi Magyar Költők Tára* (Budapest, 1883), IV: pp. 241–53. Arany's epic trilogy is: "Toldi" (1846), "Toldi estéje" (1847–48), "Toldi szerelme" (1879). For the purpose of this paper

only the longest and last section, on Toldi's love, is relevant.

- 2 Basic works of the rich secondary literature on Toldi's story include: G. Birkás, "Ilosvai Toldija s az olasz és francia Rainouart-mondák," *Ethnographia* (1912), 277–89; E. Moór, *A Toldi-monda és német kapcsolatai* (Budapest, 1914); S. Solymossy, *Adalékok a Toldi-mondához* (Budapest, 1918); E. Mályusz, "A Toldi-monda történeti alapjai," *Hadtörténeti Közlemények* (1924), 3–32; S. Solymossy, "A Toldi-monda keletkezése," *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* (1924), 1–18, 81–96; I. Király, "A Toldi-monda és a francia hőseinek," *Egyetemes Philológiai Közlöny* (1934), 11–18; E. Mályusz, "A Toldi-monda," *A Bécsi Magyar Történeti Intézet Évkönyve* (1934), 126–49; S. Fest, "A Toldi-monda," *Budapesti Szemle* (1938), 305–37; B. Korompay, "Adalékok és jegyzetek a Toldi-mondához," *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* (1956), 20–27; L. Fóti, "A Toldi-monda problémája," *Filológiai Közlöny* (1958), 507–14. [Editor's note: for a rendering of János Arany's *Toldi* into English, by the late Watson Kirkconnell, see our journal, vol. IV, no. 2 (fall 1977), pp. 173–200, and vol. V, no. 1 (spring 1978, pp. 57–80.)]
- 3 T. Klaniczay, "A magyar reformáció irodalma," *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* (1957), pp. 12–47.
- 4 About Hungarian courtly and chivalric literature, see J. Horváth, *Az irodalmi műveltség megoszlása. Magyar humanizmus* (Budapest, 1935); J. Szűcs, *Nemzet és történelem* (Budapest, 1974); T. Klaniczay, *Hagyományok ébresztése* (Budapest, 1976); A. Varkonyi, ed., *Magyar reneszánsz udvari kultúra* (Budapest, 1987); A. Kurcz, *Lovagi kultúra Magyarországon a 13–14. században* (Budapest, 1988).
- 5 About this curious phenomenon, see T. Klaniczay, "A nagy személyiségek humanista kultusza a XV. században," *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* (1982), pp. 135–49; A. Di Francesco, "Il mito di Luigi il Grande nella letteratura ungherese," *Louis the Great, King of Hungary and Poland*, eds. S.B. Vardy et al. (New York, 1986).
- 6 For the most recent edition of Farkas's work, see *Balassi Bálint és a 16. század költői*, ed. B. Varjas (Budapest, 1979) I: pp. 383–95.
- 7 For the most recent edition of Székely's work, see its facsimile edition (Budapest, 1960): ref. to p. 191a.
- 8 *Régi Magyar Költők Tára*, ed. A. Szilády (Budapest, 1881) III: pp. 321–58.
- 9 Kurcz, *Lovagi kultúra*, pp. 221–66.
- 10 Istvánfi, *Historia regis Volter* (1539); Enyedi, *Historia elegantissima Gismundae regis Tancredi filiae* (1574).
- 11 Pertinent to the debate are: line 1134 of the Hungarian poetic version of Enea Silvio Piccolomini's, "Historia de duobus amantibus" (in *Balassi Bálint és a 16. század költői* II: pp. 456–557); and lines 371–72 of "Az Fortunatusról való szép história" (in *Régi Magyar Költők Tára*, ed. J. Dézsi (Budapest, 1930) VIII: pp. 337–433).
- 12 A. Viscardi, *Le letteratura d'Oc e d'Oil* (Florence, 1967), p. 13.
- 13 E. Köhler, *Ideal und Wirklichkeit in der höfischen Epik. Studien zur Form der frühen Artus- und Graldichtung* (Tübingen, 1970). Reference to the Italian edition, *L'avventura cavalleresca. Ideale e realtà nei poemi della Tavola Rotonda* (Bologna, 1985), pp. 97–98.

- 14 P. Ilosvai, "Historia Alexandri Magni," *Régi Magyar Költők Tára*, ed. A. Szilády (Budapest, 1883) IV, p. 118.
- 15 Ilosvai, "Toldi," p. 253.
- 16 Zemplényi, "A középkori udvari kultúra funkcióváltozása a reneszánszban," in *Magyar reneszánsz udvari kultúra*, pp. 52–85; quotation on p. 82.
- 17 Ilosvai, "Toldi," p. 241.
- 18 J. Huizinga, *Herfstij der Middeleeuwen* (Haarlem, 1919). Reference to the Italian edition, *L'autunno del Medio Evo* (Florence, 1961), pp. 86–87.