

A medieval-style illustration depicting the Virgin Mary holding a lily, with a man kneeling before her in a church setting. The Virgin Mary is shown in a long, flowing white robe with a blue mantle, holding a white lily. She has a halo and is looking down at the man. The man is kneeling, wearing a dark tunic with a red and black diamond pattern, and looking up at her. In the background, several men in white robes are watching. The scene is set in a church with stone walls and a large window.

JAN M. ZIOLKOWSKI

READING THE JUGGLER OF NOTRE DAME

Medieval Miracles and Modern Remakings



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14. The Hungarian Tale of “The Fool”

[Dezső Malonyay](#), a writer from Hungary who lived from 1866 to 1916, produced prolifically in such disparate fields as folk art, art history, and French and Hungarian literary history.



Fig. 19: Ferenczy Károly, *Portrait of Dezső Malonyay*, 1904. Oil on canvas, 104.5 × 80 cm. Budapest, Magyar Nemzeti Galéria. Image from Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Malonyai_Dezs%C5%91.jpg

Late in the fin de siècle, he composed a piece of short fiction that relates intriguingly to both the medieval “Our Lady’s Tumbler” and Anatole France’s “The Juggler of Notre Dame.”

Malonyay’s “[The Fool](#)” appeared in a Budapest daily on December 10, 1897. The date, doubtless not coincidentally, fell just two weeks before Christmas Eve. When the tale was first printed in his native land, the author was resident in Paris. That circumstance played a role in the nearly simultaneous publication in France of [a French translation](#)

of his text, likewise in December of 1897, in the special illustrated Christmas edition of the Parisian morning newspaper, *Le Figaro*. The translator was the French symbolist writer and journal editor Adrien Remacle. This prose was embellished with five illustrations in art nouveau style by the Czech artist Alphonse Mucha, internationally chic and astonishingly prolific. It was also enlivened further by the music for a dance song, courtesy of the Hungarian composer [Károly Agghàzy](#). Malonyay would have been hard pressed to imagine a more prestigious team for positioning his story to be attractive and attention-grabbing across the media of literature, art, and music.

In both the original and the translation, the fiction makes no explicit literary references. Similarly, it leaves the *dramatis personae* nameless. The title character is a youthful man who earns his living through physical comedy. This protagonist, a somewhat buffoonish character, falls head over heels in love with a mysterious young woman. Though not identified explicitly as belonging to any specific ethnic group, she may well have been assumed by many of Malonyay's readers to be a gypsy woman, in French *bohème* or *gitane*. All three terms are now avoided as slurs, with the most commonly preferred ethnonyms (without any gender specificity) being Roma and Romany. In nineteenth-century French literature, such women carried associations of [exoticism and freedom](#), both qualities that align with Malonyay's depiction of his leading lady as a witch and vagabond. By implication, she is cast as being somehow alien.

Eventually, another man becomes attracted to this enchantress and takes her overseas. He is seemingly rich, with much money to offer for her dancing performance. In addition, he is impressively large and muscular, attributes he applies to good effect when he deals a mighty blow to a sailor who ventures uninvited to accost his bewitching companion. This mystery man takes her off on a boat that he owns.

Bereft of his beloved, the forlorn fool who plays the lead in this little soap opera pours himself into his art and becomes wealthy: he earns more as a sad clown than ever before. Even so, he remains disconsolate. One day, drawn by the clanging of bells, he enters a church, donates all his wealth to the sacristan monk, and goes before the altar to the Virgin, where he performs an extraordinary acrobatic routine. Eventually he blacks out and bangs his skull against the altar steps. The Madonna [dismounts from her pedestal](#) to care for him.

In 1898, this story of a clownish protagonist was recast into a kind of comic opera that was staged in theaters in Hungary. [The libretto was by Jenő Rákosi](#), editor-in-chief of the same Budapest daily in which Malonyay's short story had debuted in the original Hungarian. In this quasi-operatic form, the main couple are called Bimbo and Bimbilla, names comically reminiscent of the Italian for "baby, little boy" in the masculine and "baby, little girl" in the feminine. The connotations of both words at the time were largely unrelated to shades of meaning that bimbo has picked up in English.

Western European literature, from its very beginnings, has confounded interpreters who have sought to pin down what priority and relative weight to assign to oral as opposed to written sources. In the French rendering, "The Fool" is qualified with a

subtitle that labels it a "Hungarian legend." What are we to make of this? Malonyay may indeed have encountered in his native land a popular tale, perhaps imbued in traditions of [holy fools](#), that happened to be intriguingly analogous to the medieval poem as adapted by Anatole France. Then again, he may have read the already famous French short story and calqued his version on it.

As the name suggests, holy fools—their holiness often undetected and unacknowledged by the public—made fools of themselves by feigning madness, drunkenness, and other forms of impairment. In western Europe the phenomenon had an analogue in the clowning of Saint Francis, who presented himself as a jongleur of God. But this kind of foolery was far more widespread in Christian lands far from Assisi. The first hotbed of such foolishness lay in the Greek East, where Symeon the Holy Fool comes immediately to mind. Only after his death in about 570 CE was the true holiness of his life recognized. Later fools for Christ made their mark in Russia, thanks to their unconventional behavior. Such eastern European traditions could have seeped into Hungary. Malonyay may come upon the peculiar story of his fool while playing the amateur ethnographer, investigating the popular religion and folktales in his native land. Then again, he may not have sought out or followed any authentic indigenous tradition. Instead, reading Anatole France's "Le Jongleur de Notre Dame" may have inspired him to concoct an imitation set in Hungary.

The Hungarian original has been translated by Réka Forrai. Though neither it nor the French translation has had much resonance when compared with the short story of Anatole France, the libretto of the opera by Jules Massenet, or the medieval poem as translated into English repeatedly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it raises intriguing questions about the diffusion of both "Our Lady's Tumbler" and "The Juggler of Notre Dame."

Dezső Malonyay, "The Fool"

Once there lived a fool. He wandered from fair to fair, always cheerful, sunny and rainy days alike. If the mud was too deep, he was welcome in any cart heading to the fair, since he could contort his face into so many wrinkles, even the deaf and blind were cheered up.

Upon arrival, he would first stop in front of the pretzel woman. He would make one of his faces, where his eyebrows would sink all the way down to the corner of his mouth and his nose flattened out so much that his face became just like a pretzel. The pretzel woman rolled over with laughter. She would then give him a pretzel for his performance, but he would just gape, turn around, and vanish like [camphor](#). They would look for him everywhere, only to find him under the cloak of a passing monk. He would hang there on the [big beads of the monk's rosary](#).

"Don't fool with me, otherwise ..." And the holy man would curse, because at that time, holy men were not yet shy to curse if they got angry.

But the fool would kneel before him, cross himself, and regret his evil deed. The monk would even forgive his sin, because at that time monks still forgave, when asked, but then the fool would start [pulling lengths of blue and red ribbons](#) from the monk's cloak, the kind girls would weave into their hair for Sunday Mass.

And what reverent expression would follow this godless deed! But by the time the monk grabbed him by the hair, he was already at the tenth tent, standing on his hands, waving to the shocked monk with his legs.

"Someday you'll fall into my hands, by God!" yelled the monk.

But he never did. The fool rushed like the wind from here to there, one could never guess where.

Once this fool met on the road a little wildflower, belonging to no one, thrown to the winds.

"Where are you going, girl?"

"Nowhere."

"To whom do you belong?"

"To no one."

She was tousled and sweet, just perfect for him.

From then on, they travelled around the world together, the fool and the little witch. She remained tousled and hungry, although they always shared the pretzels and even acquired a comb at a fair. She learned to play music on the comb, but never to comb herself, not even when she grew tall and beautiful.

With a little piece of red ribbon, she could tie her strong, thick black hair in such a way that it was more beautiful even than if she had pleated it with a golden comb in a silver mirror. But she did this only before entering the city gates, using her own shadow as her mirror.

At the fairs she was followed by flocks of lads. She would jiggle colorful stones in her apron and tell them their future. But they didn't want to know their future, they only wanted a strand of her hair, though it was a thousandfold more expensive.

"Just one strand of your hair, beautiful witch, and my soul will be yours in return."

"The devil wants your soul," laughed the witch, her white teeth shining wickedly, and her blood-red, hot mouth steaming.

Alongside, the fool did his somersaults, rattled his hundred rattles, and offered handfuls of his own straw hair to the lads – for a kiss!

Then they left, like the wind.

They quite contentedly slept under the bushes. The witch would wash herself in the morning dew and dry it in the sunshine. And so she danced from fair to fair with her fool.

This is how they reached the city with the most beautiful church in the whole world, the city where there are always celebrations on the streets.

God, if only they could have avoided going there!

It was just at the time of the city's annual six-day fair.

At that famous fair [one could see](#) Greeks with their red caps, coming up the [Ionian Sea](#) together with Italian sailors, bringing fat olives and meaty raisins. Turbaned men from [Trebizond](#), big, bearded Armenians, who brought silk and filigrees, and who always revile each other's products. There were traders even from the other side of Spain, from the [Bay of Cádiz](#), and merchants from the feet of the great [Caucasus Mountains](#), not to mention black-robed [Jews](#), who are always easy to find wherever there is trading, and who are often beaten by the hearty merchants and worthy sailors if found in the city in the evening, after the closing of the gates.

The bells were ringing, and all the people were merry and laughing at the fool's antics, and hundreds of lads pursued the beautiful witch, offering their soul for one strand of her hair.

But among the hundreds, there was one who didn't ask her anything, but looked at her like the noonday sun. She could feel his gaze even when he was behind her.

After dancing her fiery flamenco, she would do the rounds with her little drum decorated with ribbons and copper bells, in which people would throw even silver coins. When she passed in front of the stranger, she would close her eyes, shivering, and drop the little Spanish drum, scattering all the coins.

People helped collect the coins and gave them faithfully to the fool, and the stranger gave them an entire purse in return, but the fool got scared from the incident, stopped his somersaults and called the beautiful witch.

"Let's leave this town, because we won't feel good here."

At that moment a big sailor in the crowd tried to grab the beautiful witch's waist, but the one with the gaze of noonday sun took him by the shoulder and threw him among the merchants like a snowflake, with just a bare hand.

Now the fool really began to insist that they leave the town, insisting as never before.

"Don't go," whispered a voice she had never heard, a voice that was soft like a cloud in a clean morning sky, and deep like the sound of the forest at night.

He kept following them.

He told her that his ship was at the city gates under the covered bridge and was easy to recognize by the blue flag with silver stars flying on its mast.

"Will you recognize it?"

"Yes," she said, even though the fool could overhear it, then she danced the flamenco as if she had thousands of stomping devils inside her.

In the evening, after the people scattered, the fool followed his witch out of the city gates, making a sorry face, even though no one could see him.

"So, you are going away?"

"Yes."

"Should I accompany you to the boat?"

"Yes."

He accompanied her to the ship, and instead of asking her even more eloquently not to leave him on his own, he simply contorted his face into the strangest expressions. When they reached the shore, he couldn't utter a word, his mouth long and silent. He looked like a fool indeed.

The witch asked him not to jump into the river and promised to return, and then kissed him and hugged him and ran dancing to the ship.

The fool sat on shore and watched the ship leave. He kept following it, rattling his hundred rattles. He followed it for three days, all the way to the sea and watched the blue flag with the silver star until it vanished.

When nothing could be seen, he continued to watch for three days. Then, on the seventh day he slowly walked back to the city where the most beautiful church on earth can be found, and where there are always celebrations on the street, and he got many, many coins, because there is nothing funnier than a sad fool.

He went straight to the church. He knew from when he was still a jolly fool that whatever people ask for in that church will be fulfilled, that is why all those processions go there.

He wanted to join the procession, but they chased him away. Everyone could enter the church except for him, because they thought he was only joking, and they simply laughed.

He sat at the street corner, head hanging. He was so good at being sad that coins piled up in front of him.

In the evening, when the bells went silent and the church was empty, he snuck into the sacristy.

"What do you want here?" asked the sacristan monk.

He gave him all his coins and told him to let him into the church.

"What do you want to do there, you fool?"

"I too want to pray for something."

"But you don't even know how to pray!"

But he begged until the sacristan monk consented to let him into the church.

"What should I do there, in order to be heard?"

"What you know best, offer it on the altar of the Virgin."

The monk let him in through the side door and watched. The fool didn't think for long; he headed straight to the altar where the beautiful image of the Madonna hung.

The sacristan monk was so shocked that he couldn't move, when he saw the fool begin somersaulting, twisting his arms and legs, turning around, falling back, nearly breaking his back, bending his legs to his neck, standing on his hands, and not sparing himself in any way, **banging his head on the altar steps**, his face in a thousand wrinkles, his chest pounding, his rattles continuously rattling, now small like a barrel, now long, like a snake, mumbling something meaningless, his veins visible on his neck and temples, lying down finally on the marble floor covered in sweat.

And then all the bells in the church tower began to ring, all the candles lit up and a heavenly light emanated from the altar, and the Virgin stepped out from the frame and took her starry veil and gently dried the fool's sweat.



Fig. 20: Mary tends to the fallen juggler. Illustration by Alphonse Mucha, 1897. Published in Dezső Malonyay, "Le fou, légende hongroise," trans. Adrien Remacle, in *Le Figaro de Noël* (December 1897): 226.

But, oh God, once the beautiful witch was gone, how could the Virgin bring her back?