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# Jókai's drama of the Hungarian conquest period, *Levente*

“Let the stage be a bit of a podium for a good audience. To learn the history of their ancestors...”<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The five-act dramatic poem *Levente* by Mór Jókai is centred on the death of Árpád's four adult sons in the ethnic clashes of the Hungarian Conquest Period. The work was written to mark the millennium of the Hungarian Landtaking, or Conquest, and although the National Theatre announced its premiere several times in 1898, and even prepared a musical version, it was never performed there or on any other stage. Reading the text from today's perspective, its performance could at best be imagined as a Gesamtkunstwerk of “poetic theatre.” As in all his works, Jókai also indulged in linguistic antiquities. *Levente* thus remained a book drama for those interested in linguistic archaisms. This study also covers the afterlife of the dramatic poem.

**Keywords:** Mór Jókai, *Levente*, historical dramatic poem, linguistic archaisation, language of the Hungarian Conquest Period, medial transformations

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<sup>1</sup> Jókai's letter to Antal Váradi, see Jókai 1987, 390.

## Introduction

Mór Jókai wrote *Levente*, a five-act historical dramatic poem, consisting of seven sections, for the National Theatre on the occasion of the Millennium (millennial celebrations) of the Hungarian Landtaking (the Hungarian Conquest of the Carpathian Basin). He intended it to be a synthesis and a retrospective work, crowning his oeuvre. For forty years, he had been carrying within him the idea of a Hungarian *Nibelung*, a romantic vision akin to the world of Wagner's *Ring*. His youthful attempts at painting were awakened. He was the one to inspire the idea for his relative, Árpád Feszty's circular panoramic painting *Arrival of the Hungarians*. According to one opinion, Feszty's *Cyclorama* can be seen as an illustration of *Levente*. Here, Jókai tells the story of the sons of Árpád, the Chieftain, and the conquest of the territory occupied by the Khazars, based on his own research and ideas. The dramatic (ethical) core of the story is the death of Árpád's four adult sons in the context of the ethnic clashes of the Conquest Period, their sacrifice for the sake of the new homeland. But the drama lacks true drama, the "eternal human." *Levente*'s character is not well developed; he is not a true tragic hero, he has done nothing wrong, yet he must die. Jókai also strove to create the illusion of the language of the Conquest Period. As in all his works, he revels in linguistic antiquities. He himself felt the awkwardness of this, so he offered the actors a simplification of the text ("dialect"). Although the National Theatre announced the premiere of *Levente* several times in 1898, and even made a musical version of it, it was never staged there or elsewhere. The dramatic poem, read from today's perspective, could at best be imagined as a performance of a Gesamtkunstwerk of "poetic theatre." Jókai added a lengthy afterword (a kind of explanation, an instruction for interpretation) to the drama, in which—against the Finno-Ugric linguistic theory that was gaining strength at the time—he fervently professed his belief in the Hungarian nature of the Hungarian people and language. He also read this text at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, but his appearance and opinion were not enthusiastically received by the linguists of the time. *Levente* has remained a book drama for those interested in linguistic archaisms, having no reception, no resonance—and probably no readers, either. It is an exciting question, however, how a historical event can be transformed into a painting, prose, dramatic poem and musical theatre.

## Jókai as a playwright

When one turns to Jókai's dramas, the question inevitably arises: Jókai as a playwright? After all, no one knows him for that. There is hardly anyone who knows a single drama by Jókai. How is it that he was also popular as a playwright in his own time, working for the theatre throughout his writing career? His most successful play, *Az arany ember* (*The Man with the Golden Touch*), was performed by the National Theatre two hundred and fifty-two times between 1884 and 1937 (Szalisznyó 2023, 69) but has since been withdrawn from the stages. Jenő Pintér had already given the answer in 1934: "As a playwright, he did not create long-lived works. In his time, he rendered a valuable service to the developing Hungarian stage, but later he was relegated from the prominent position to which he had been elevated by the dramaturgs and theatre-goers of the era of authoritarianism and the Austro-Hungarian Compromise. His playwriting was romantic dramatic art, presenting life with the exaggerations of imagination" (Pintér 1934). Perhaps the only one on stage is *A cigánybáró* (*The Gypsy Baron*) (Jr. Johann Strauss's operetta, written by Ignaz Schnitzer based on Jókai's short story *Szaffi*, although very few people associate it with Jókai (Zentai 2023). "Research on Jókai still owes us a systematic inventory of theatrical, musical, musical theatre, film, cartoon, comic and hybrid adaptations, as well as an assessment of how these transpositions and medial transfers have influenced the evaluation and interpretation of the texts" (ibid., 8). The inventory is complicated by the fact that the second volume of the dramas (1861–1887) was never published (for the others, see: Jókai 1971; 1974; 1987). Jókai's career as a playwright began at the age of seventeen with *A zsidó fiú* (*The Jewish Boy*), a five-act romantic historical drama, and continued until *Levente*. According to the calculations of József Perényi (1926), he wrote twenty-six plays, but there are more than that, and there is no precise list. Historical plays: *A zsidó fiú* (revised version: *A kincstárnok* [The Treasurer]), *A varchoniták* (*The Varchonites*), *Manlius Sinister*, *Könyves Kálmán* (Coloman, the Learned), *Dózsa György* (György Dózsa), *A szigetvári vértanúk* (*The Martyrs of Szigetvár*), *Milton*, *Az aradi hős nők* (*The Heroic Women of Arad*), *A murányi hölgy* (*The Lady of Murány*), and *Levente*. His dramatised works from short stories and novels: *Dalma*, *Szép Mihál* (*Beautiful Michal*), *Az arany ember*, *Fekete gyémántok* (*Black Diamonds*), *A bolondok grófja* (*The Count of Fools*), *Keresd a szíved* (*Search Your Heart*), *Fekete vér* (*Black Blood*) and *Helvila*. Folk theatre works: *A két gyám* (*The Two*

Guardians), *A földönfutó* (The Runaway), *Világszép leányok* (Beautiful Girls). Plays written for occasions: *Hős Pálffy* (Heroic Pálffy), *A jószívű ember* (The Good-hearted Man), *Olympi verseny* (Olympian Race), *Thespis kordéja* (Thespis's Cart), *Földönjáró csillagok* (Stars Walking on Earth), *Harangok* (Bells). Social drama: *A hulla férje* (The husband of the corpse). Of course, there are more dramas, such as *A gazdag szegények* (The Rich Poor) and *A Barangok, vagy a peoniai vojvoda* (The Barangs, or The Peonial Voivode), but in addition to these, there were other plays (*Alina*, *Immetullah*, *Keresd a szíved*) and plays written after *Levente* (*Helvila*, *Melyiket a kilenc közül?* [Which of the Nine?], *Fekete vér*). "Why did these dramatisations fail? The answer to this question is that because characterisation and justification are Jókai's weakest points, even though these are the fundamentals on which the essence of drama is based. By dramatising, Jókai in fact ruins his novels. The brightest parts of his novels become void in the dramas. Of all his dramatised novels, only one, *Az arany ember*, remained on stage, the others... were taken off the programme after a few performances" (Perényi 1926, 74). But then why did some of them succeed in their own time?

"He spoke in a voice that always found its way to the hearts of his listeners... At that time, the National Theatre was in fact the only place where the national spirit, the national life, could find expression. In those bleak and sad times, Jókai, together with a few others, revived national sentiment and nourished the national spirit with his dramas as well as his novels... The audience of that time did not just want to be entertained, but rather to be inspired and to draw hope. In fact, historical dramas encouraged, inspired and taught. The National Theatre became the true school of the nation, with playwrights and actors as master-teachers, whose words of comfort and encouragement were eagerly awaited. In the 1850s, no one could write more magnificently, captivatingly, and with greater suggestive power to the hearts of the Hungarian audience than Jókai. His eloquent poems could be recited effectively, and at the same time no one could recite as beautifully as Jókai's wife, Róza Laborfalvi. Jókai's dramas were valuable in their time." (Perényi 1926, 75–76.)

Such was the inciting drama, *Dózsa György*, which was presented by the National Theatre on 3 November 1857, to overwhelming success, with packed houses and thunderous applause greeting Dózsa's words at the beginning and end

of the play. A further sign of success is that Ferenc Erkel composed his opera about Dózsa, which was staged in 1867, based on Jókai's drama (to a libretto by Szigligeti). Despite this, others also believe that Jókai's "dramatic talent is undoubtedly weak" (Nemeskürty 1983, 536). So does a summary of the literary history of the sixties: "Drama was not a genre suited to Jókai's talent, and his loud stage successes (e.g. *A szigetvári vértanúk*, 1860) were soon forgotten, but his initiatives and diversity nevertheless had an impact on his contemporaries, especially on Szigligeti" (N., M. 1965, 4/294).

With regard to *Levente*, it is objected that although the title is *Levente*, he is not the central character in the drama, his character is not well developed, he has done nothing wrong and yet, he must die (JÖM 1987, 407, 409); "the hero falls in a petty love complication." "The reading of the play is tiresome, because of its far-fetched antiquity... The whole work is overcrowded, it is full of poetry, and the story of the Hungarian Conquest is shrouded in a rosy cloud of fairy tales" (Perényi 1926, 74). Along with others, Ferenc Zsigmond (1924, 322) notes: Jókai can never portray a complex character correctly. The author of the JÖM study, Edit Mályuszné Császár, notes that *Levente* is "a work refined into a book drama," "a nice book drama, possibly a good film script" (JÖM 1987, 394).

## The plot of *Levente*

*Levente* is set in the time of the Hungarian Conquest. The main players are: Grand Prince Árpád ("Lord of Hungary"), Regehű (wife), sons: Levente (twenty-five years old), Jellek (twenty-three years old), Jutócs (twenty-one years old), Tarkóc (eighteen years old), Zsolt (four years old), Jahel (Jellek's wife), Ménmarót csakán (the Khazar Grand Prince, Lord of Bihar County), his son: Csombord and five daughters: Búvellő, Illangó, Szemőke, Délibáb, and Estilla (four years old); then there is Göncöl (Árpád's kincsur [treasurer]), Táltos [shaman], Halvaél (the daughter of the táltos); Árpád's six chieftains: Tas, Szabolcs, Gyula, Kund, Örs, Töhötöm; son of Tas: Chieftain Lehel, three Székely rabonbáns: Upolet, Apor, Ugron; six Hungarian lieutenants: Tana, Zila, Tahó, Kerencs, Sudár, Dancs; Kund (Kuman envoy), Tarcál (plain envoy), Privina (Svatopluk's envoy), Főbokolábrás (in Marót's court); Kurut (Marót's clown) and two Karsar guards: Bagó and Cikás.

It is already clear from the list that the large cast of characters includes special titles and names that were not even known at that time: csakán, kincsur, főbokolábrás, rabonbán; followed by a list of people with occupations that are

sometimes difficult to decipher: Khazar őrpata, geisa, cifra, legyezős, tömlős, igreces, bokolábrás, garabonc, lyüki, paszkonca, horkáz, billogos, gyászleány, etc. Four daughters of Ménrót: alirumna. Alirumnas are magical women among the Huns, here they are evil fairies. Jókai read about them in Arnold Ipolyi's *Magyar mythologia* (Hungarian Mythology), and Ipolyi in Jordanes' *Getica*. In the Hungarian translation of *Getica*, their name is haliurunna (zegernyei 2015). In addition to the unusual names, the drama contains more than a hundred special words, which Jókai explains in two hundred and twenty-six footnotes (JÖM 1987, 417–468).

The basic idea of the drama stems from the probably erroneous assumption that Árpád's four sons did not live to see the Hungarian Conquest, only the fifth son Zsolt, born in the Carpathian Basin.

Act One: In the northern Carpathians (beyond Verecke). Halvael, the daughter of the *táltos* (who has a speaking name ['live dead']), foretells the death of the four sons of Árpád.

ÁRPÁD Who can understand this? If all four of my sons  
Fall victim in the battle to conquer the homeland,  
How can a long line of country leaders  
Descended from my blood follow in my footsteps?

Jahel (Jellek's Jewish wife) doesn't believe the prophecy, but Jellek's body is already being brought in.

Act Two: Munkács. Hungarians arrive in the new homeland.

LEVENTE Well, father Gönczöl, now it's your turn to speak.  
Break camp, get the people moving,  
Buglers, blow the horn.  
Let the mountains proclaim to the plains,  
Now Hungarians descend into their ancient inheritance. (W1)

Act Three ("historical illustration"): The plain below Ungvár. The settlement. Árpád makes a blood oath with the seven chieftains, the Slavs, the Huns, living here since the time of Attila, and the Seklers pay homage, and the fifth son, Zsolt, is born.

ÁRPÁD Gönczöl, my friend, now take your reed pen  
And then write that the seven Hungarians  
Had restamped the old covenant  
In their new homeland, with their mingled blood. (W1)

Act Four (the climax of the drama): Biharland: Marót's castle. Two of Árpád's prince sons, Levente and the boyish Tarkóc, go to the dirty, untidy and immoral court of the Khazar Prince Marót. Levente asks Délibáb to marry him. Levente and Marót's son, Csombord, get into a fight. Illangó poisons Tarkóc, who strangles the girl during sex.

LEVENTE (Lifts Tarkócz onto his arms.)  
My dear little one, my loving beautiful brother!  
I curse the day I brought you here,  
How do I account for you to our dear mother?  
But for your corrupted innocent soul  
I will take strong revenge! I swear to God! From this skull castle. (W1)

Levente and Délibáb leave Marót's castle in a hurry.

Act Five: Bihar Castle. Árpád and his leaders continue the Conquest, Levente lives with his wife in Bihar Castle, his task (besides hunting) is to reconcile the Khazar people. Jahel brings news: Marót supports Árpád's opponents, Szemőke's daughter assassinated the third Árpád-offspring, Jutócs in a battle. Marót is an old man, Levente duels with Csombord. Levente kills his brother-in-law (who is protected by Solomon's magic ring), and the mourning Bűvellő wounds Levente with a poisoned dagger. Levente and Délibáb, who sucked out his wound, die.

LEVENTE And then the faithful maidens  
Cover our graves with walnut leaves,  
Raising a large mound, with flowery lawn,  
"Tell my mother she was my last word."  
[...]

JAHEL (Lamenting.)

Terrible homeland! How many more sacrifices  
Do you demand from us, of the noblest blood? (W1)

Act Five ("historical illustration"): Alpár plain, meandering Tisza. Levente and Délibáb are buried according to pagan rites. The broken, blind Marót appears at the funeral feast (on a camel's back). He brings his sixth and last child, Estilla, and offers her and Biharland to Árpád's fifth son, Zsolt. In the conclusion, they ask God's blessing on the Hungarian people and their new homeland. In the first version Jahl, in the last Jahl and Árpád say the solemn final words:

JAHEL Curses were my daily prayer!  
There were curses at dawn and at dusk.  
But now they have turned into blessings. Jehovah is a great God!  
Bless this land, this nation!

ÁRPÁD God of Hungarians! Whom we see everywhere,  
In heaven, in earth, in water, in the works of your hands,  
Pour out your soul on this nation!  
May it flourish for centuries upon centuries,  
Whenever it falls, lift it up again.  
Protect it from its enemy, protect it from itself!  
Cover it with your heaven, enrich its earth!  
Immortalise the glorious tribe of Árpád upon it.  
As long as the world is the world, as long as Hungarians are Hungarians,  
May you reign over it for all eternity. (W1)

Of all the quirky, mysterious twists and turns characteristic of Jókai, the Ring of Solomon is the one that heightens the tension the most. Jahl gives the ring to her husband, Jutocs, to make him invulnerable:

JAHEL My husband, Jellek, will not be taken by a weapon.  
I gave him a talisman in a ring,  
Left to me by my great-grandfather, Eliezer.  
It bears the seal of the wise king, Solomon,



Whose name is engraved in clear stone.  
He who wears it becomes invulnerable.

Jutocs is killed anyway. How could it happen? Jutocs cheated on his wife with Marót's eldest daughter, Bűvellő, and gave her the ring, leaving himself unprotected, so Bűvellő was able to kill him. (The same Bűvellő is also the lover of her brother, Csombord.)

LEHEL ...by the time the moon had risen,  
The charm ring was on Bűvellő's finger,  
And her ring on Jellek's finger.  
[...]

JAHEL She who killed my husband, first took him from me,  
Charmed the talisman ring off his finger,  
Then lulled him to sleep in her lap and killed him...

Délibáb also tells the story of the journey of the ring:

DÉLIBÁB You gave a charm ring to your Jellek,  
Which made his body iron-clad in battle.  
[...]

Jahel, it would have been better,  
If, instead of his outer body,  
You had made his heart invulnerable

JAHEL And where is my ring that was taken from him?

DÉLIBÁB My sister took it home for her sweetheart. [That is, Bűvellő took it home to her lover: Csombord.]

JAHEL He is your brother!  
How could he be your sister's sweetheart?

DÉLIBÁB He is not her brother, as he was born to a different mother.  
It's the custom among the Khalil people,

To only recognise a sibling by the mother.  
The mother is certain: what is there to know about others?

JAHEL Are your religion, your customs sinful, a den of iniquity?  
You are God-deniers, incestuous,  
Marót csakán himself and all of his offspring!

So Bűvellő gives the ring to Csombord, who is now also protected. Levente can kill him by pushing him off the top of the bastion.

LEVENTE But I will not kill you with your own gun.  
[...]  
But, my dear brother-in-law, Csombord, you'll die!  
(He grabs his shield in both hands, rushes towards Csombord and pushes him off the top of the bastion.)

Levente is also killed by Bűvellő with a poisoned dagger:

DÉLIBÁB (Screams.) She stabbed Levente with a dagger of deadly poison. (W1)

## Sources and language

In the drama, Jókai wanted to convey the language of the Conquest Period (9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries). As there are no recorded Hungarian texts from this period, he turned to historical sources, mythological, ethnographic and linguistic works, as well as dialects. The critical edition has accurately reconstructed the sources he relied on (to which the author himself referred in the footnotes. Arnold Ipolyi's *Magyar mythologia* (1845) was a favourite reading of his, and he used the chronicles of Anonymus and Kézai, Mihály Horváth's historical work, Balázs Orbán's *Székelyföld* (Székely Land), *Csíki Székely Krónika* (Székely Chronicle of Csík; 1533?), Sámuel Diószeghy's *Magyar fűvész könyv* (Hungarian Herbarium), and dictionaries: Szinnyei's dictionary of dialects and Czuczor–Fogarasi dictionary, as well as the material from the witch trials.

This kind of archaic language creation is always anachronistic and generally unproductive, but it remains the subject of eternal stylistic debates: how historically accurate should a reconstruction of historical events be, especially

when we have no certain knowledge of the events and circumstances? When it comes to linguistic-stylistic assessment, it is customary to say that “signalling” is appropriate. Jókai did the same: he used archaic (partly dialectal) words and expressions to describe, or rather to give a sense of the fictitious, “Árpád-era” language. This is considered by some to be an exaggeration and a “contrived antiquity” (JÖM 1987, 410), but Jókai’s fans are happy to immerse themselves in this sea of language. Linguistically archaising storytelling continues to appear Hungarian literature later (and usually provokes controversy), as seen in the historical novels of Géza Gárdonyi, János Kodolányi, and Zsigmond Móricz.

Some examples of *Levente*’s sometimes truly excessive archaising ambitions:

TARKÓCZ But look, the storm is blowing after her,  
The dancing wind bride! Look how it spools!  
Her skirt sweeps the ground, her tousled head  
Scatters clouds. Isn’t that the wind mother?

APOR Foreign gods do not roam among us.

GÖNCZÖL I’d rather have him among us  
That Tarkócz kid, rather than him showing off over there  
Among the alirumna [enchanted women]! Those are murmuring [‘dauzsolnak’]  
[perhaps susurrating; charming, enchanting],  
They give kanatir [love potion] to an enchanted [corrupted] lad,  
They bewitch [‘ábrálnak’] [curse] with their eyes, they whisper [‘vahorásznak’]  
with their words [perhaps chuckle, cast a spell].

KURUT Well then, brave Hungarian, now you may feast your eyes.  
At home you never see such derendóczia [strife].  
Lest you see when the geishas [fairies],  
Let them do the lapoczkás [dance], who then pull  
The kolcz [yarn] from the firogon [flax] on the distaff... (W1)

The name Estilla in the drama was coined by Mór Jókai after Esztella and is a first name that can be used today. Further examples of the revival of ancient Hungarian names:

TIVATULUS The great hero Levente bids you farewell,  
 Leaders, lieutenants, comrades in arms,  
 Botond, Zoárd, Bulcsú, Csák, Bór, Ugod, Csaba,  
 Zombor, Csanád, Keve, Opopofarkas, Ogmánd,  
 Kulpon, Bojta, Ösöb, Uzubu, Kadisa. (W1)

The dramatic text contains archaic folk poetry inserts: magic words ("Fog before me, fog behind me," "I flew flying," "I ran the plain running," "I walked with magic reins," "My steed is a red tomcat"), children's songs, Whitsun songs, greetings, and food rhymes. Proverbs and sayings appear in the text: "slowly with the body"; "we borrowed a cat in a bag"; "we have stars kicked" (straw is put between a sleeping person's toes and lit); "breaking fists" ("arm wrestling"); "I hear kisses clapping"; "two strong brothers don't kill but hug"; "the country of seven waters and seven forests", "seven mountains" (Transylvania); "The woman is like mother-of-pearl, if she breaks, there will be another." An apt example of the accumulation of sayings and proverbs from Act One:

TÁLTOS God kept three things for himself:  
 The choice of a leader, the birth of a son  
 And the triumph to be granted in war.  
 If you ask first, he will answer later.

TAS Man's intentions are blessed by a happy God.

SZABOLCS Where God guards, a cobweb protects.

GYULA What God gives, man takes.

KUND God is slow to come, but sure to come.

ÓRS There is no bargaining about God's word.

TÖHÖTÖM Whom God forsaketh, his hope faileth.

VÉRBULCSÚ God can create a man out of dust. (W1)

But above all, it is full of archaic words: "kurittuló" (wanderer), "kerteskő" ("garden stone"; altar), "berzsenytűz" (watchfire), "dinka" ("melon"), "napkő" (sunstone; "diamond"), "hajnalkacagás" (dawn's laughter; "dawn's awakening"), "tyúkverő" (hen-pecking; "end of the wedding"), "szemere" (clever), "koponyavár" (skull castle; "hell"), "alanyár" (gentle), "égedelembeszéd" (swearing), "bibola" (a lock of hair), "abrakcipó" (oat bread), "bábfogat" (pretzel), "bélemler" (a man who eats a lot), "dandalló" (strong, muscular), "derendócia" (discord, feud), "monnó" (both—a word known from *Jókai Codex*). There is a *Jókai Dictionary* (JókSz. 1990), but it does not include the vocabulary of *Levente*.

At times, Jókai's linguistic endeavours were indeed far-fetched. Literary scholars and linguists generally criticise his use of language. Linguist and style specialist Zoltán Szabó is the least critical: "The romantic cult of words is immediately apparent. He delights in unusual and beautiful words. He is not even bothered by the fact that they are not authentic [...]. His use of words is often exaggerated [...]. Contrast is characteristic [...]. The true power of contrasting meanings and contrasting word sounds is best conveyed by his talking names and the strongly contrasting characters" (Szabó 1999, 146–147). The linguist-literary historian Vilmos Tolnai attributes the failure of *Levente* to an exaggerated archaising linguistic endeavour: "He had a special concern to restore not only the original Hungarian mentality in *Levente*, but also the language. He seeks to use ancient words" (Tolnai 1925, 93); "These 'antiquities' are mainly due to Ipolyi's mythology, which is one of Jókai's most enduring and favourite readings" (Tolnai 1925, 90); "rumour has it that *Levente* was not performed on stage because the actors could not learn the strange words" (Tolnai 1925, 90).

Jókai justified his linguistic ambition in the afterword to *Levente*:

"The excellent characteristics of the Hungarian language, its richness in expressions, the adaptability of its words, and the accuracy with which it expresses meaning are the qualities that inspired the conviction in the minds of my fellow poets who were born in the same era, led by Petőfi, János Arany, who believed that the Hungarian vernacular, with its simple, understandable, and powerful expressions, could and indeed should be elevated to the language of literature and poetry, and that its rules should be accepted and applied, to express even the most sublime ideas in simplicity (which is not to be confused with the vulgarisation of literary language),

and at the same time to eliminate all foreign expressions, sentence structures, and even ways of thinking from Hungarian writing, and to especially seek Hungarian humour, in which the Hungarian vernacular, folk life, and spirit are so richly endowed, and to continue on the path trodden before us by Gvadányi, Csokonai, Vörösmarty, Károly Kisfaludy, and Fazekas. —Perhaps we have achieved some success with this.” (W1)

## The afterlife of *Levente*

Jókai submitted his dramatic poem *Levente* to the National Theatre in November 1897. It was announced in the press that it would be presented on 15 March 1898, then the presentation was postponed to 11 April, but it did not take place then, nor has it since. Jókai published his work in book form in 1898, and on 31 October 1898, he read the afterword at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, which provoked the displeasure of contemporary linguists, as it openly contradicted the Finno-Ugric language family theory that was gaining strength at the time. But the primary problem with the drama was its length and the large number of archaic linguistic expressions it contained. Jókai allowed the prologue to be deleted and the hundred or so old words to be replaced with “present currency” (JÖM 1987, 391). The revision was completed, the production of the director’s copy began, but for some reason the work was halted (JÖM 1987, 392). However, a musical version of *Levente* was also completed, which can be found in the theatre history collection of the Theatre History and Music Archive of the National Széchényi Library (Jókai n. d.) Jókai himself did not have enough confidence in the success of his dramas. He wrote in a letter addressed to Ignác Krecsányi on 8 September 1896: “I no longer have any confidence in my plays” (JÖM 1897, 383).

The afterword to the drama is part of the afterlife of *Levente*. This longer study (JÖM 1987: 156–178) is an abridged version of Jókai’s text written for a series presenting the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. On 31 October 1898, Mór Jókai read his essay *Mik voltak a magyarok ezer év előtt* (What were the Hungarians a thousand years ago) at MTA. According to the *Vasárnapi Ujság*, “the national theatre is preparing for the poet’s historical play ‘Levente.’ He wrote an afterword to this [...]. He read it at the academy.” The *Budapesti Szemle* responded with a five-page angry review. According to the list of the audience, the author could have been József Szinnyi, Zsigmond Simonyi or Bernát Munkácsi. The afterword contains

statements such as the language of Hungarians has always been Hungarian, and the Hungarian language has no relatives. Jókai first takes a stand against Turkish (language) kinship: "I find it impossible that the Hungarians could have spoken Turkish at the time of Árpád's Conquest." Then against the Finno-Ugric linguistic affinity: "But I find no basis for the arguments put forward by the opponents of Turkish linguistic affinity, the Finno-Ugric linguists either. [...] The inflection itself, the convergence of grammatical rules, does not prove this. Just as little does the often very forced semantic similarity of certain words in the Finnish, Vogul, Ostyak, Votyak, Zyrian, Chuvash, and Cheremis languages with Hungarian words. [...] But I do not deny my poor brothers, and if the infallible scientific world classifies us as one family of peoples, I accept the kinship, but I firmly assert that there is no identical origin between the Hungarian and Finno-Ugric languages, nor has there ever been." After rejecting the Finno-Ugric language family theory, Jókai goes on to demonstrate the extraordinary phenomena of the Hungarian language: the distinction between short and long vowels, the conjugation of "-ik" verbs, and the avoidance of consonant clusters, highlighting children's language and illustrating the unique synonymy of the Hungarian language by using words describing movement. He discusses the greatness of the Hungarian character, the lifestyle of our ancestors, and the glorious battles surrounding the Hungarian Conquest. The *Budapesti Szemle's* critic responds harshly to the writer: "Jókai is the darling of the public and the newspapers, and he believes that he can do whatever he wants. We can understand him exercising this privilege in his novels more than once, but we cannot understand him acting as a judge in a matter about which he is completely uninformed. This reading promises to be the afterword to a drama. Whether this drama will be a success, whether it will be better than Jókai's previous dramas, we do not know, but we would have wished that he had not given this reading; or once he had, painfully, given it, we would at least ask him not to print it" (zegernyei 2015).

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