

# The Repetition Game. An Essay on the Czech Tandariáš<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

### **Das Wiederholungsspiel. Ein Versuch über den tschechischen Tandariáš.**

In dem Essay lese ich den tschechischen *Tandariáš* nicht im Vergleich zu dem längeren Quelltext des Pleier, sondern versuche eine eigenständige Interpretation. Diese kurze Fassung rückt das Element der Wiederholung stark in den Fokus, das in der längeren deutschen Version oft untergeht. Wiederholungen werden so zum zentralen Merkmal des Texts. Als Vergleich (sicher nicht als Quelle) rekurriere ich auf *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in dem sich ähnliche Strukturen finden. Schließlich diskutiere ich mögliche Interpretationen dieser Wiederholungen, die von poetologischen Implikationen bis hin zum Versuch reichen, eine (rituelle, beschwörende) Evokation ritterlicher Ideale zu erzeugen, die jedoch gleichzeitig kritisiert werden.

## SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER

Tandariáš; Wiederholung; Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

## ABSTRACT

In this essay, I try to read the Czech *Tandariáš* not in relation to its much longer German model, but on its own right. The short version brings an element to the fore which is lost in the longer German text, namely its repetitive nature. Repetition thus becomes the main element of the text. Certainly not as a source (or reflection of a common source), but as a parallel phenomenon I look for comparison to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Concluding, I discuss possible reasons for the foregrounding of repetitions, ranging from poetological implications to the (ritualistic, incantational) evocation and, at the same time, criticism of knightly values.

## KEY WORDS

Tandariáš; repetition; Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

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1 Since I am not a Bohemist, I have to rely on a translation and on comments of my colleagues. The following essay was presented at a conference in Prague, “Central European Arthurian Texts in a Changing World”. I am indebted to the organizers, namely Matouš Jaluška, Matouš Turek, and Martin Šorm and the Czech Academy of Science for their hospitality. This essay tries to look at the *Tandariáš* from a new perspective and much of the original oral form is retained in this printed version.

All is well that ends well – Arthurian literature usually follows this principle and the Czech *Tandariáš* is no exception. Often, this *lieto fine* is an all-encompassing marriage ceremony (Wolfram started this trend in German Arthurian Literature with his *Parzival*<sup>2</sup>), a finale that at least reminds me of the mechanics of later comedies, comic operas or operettas. This is also true for the *Tandariáš*, and, depending on which manuscript you read, this is emphasized in the closing lines. Especially Ms. A has a short scribal subscription which comments on this operetta-like levity: „Love binds, but poverty even more. I have written this, sitting like a vulture. Might somebody buy me a beer for a heller“ (Bamborschke 1982).<sup>3</sup> But *Tandariáš* not only follows this rule, it also follows its Middle High German counterpart, and Lena Zudrell has this close relation as a focus of her article.<sup>4</sup> What I want to do is something else: I want to look at *Tandariáš*, forgetting the relation to its much longer and at least in some aspects much more elaborate German counterpart, but instead reading it as a poem in its own right and then asking, how this reading fits into the literary European Arthurian landscape.

The allusion to operetta is not merely prompted by the obtrusive happy ending, in which marriages prevail: During the course of the final scene of the text, not only the many ladies that sheltered *Tandariáš* and hoped for a marriage with the protagonist are married off to other knights – the last lady, who kept him alive against the will of her brother, is married off to a hapless suitor of *Tandariáš*'s wife Floribella –, but even the dwarf who beleaguered one of the ladies is married to a female dwarf suddenly procured by King Artuš. The usual mechanics of an operetta have, after an auspicious start of a love affair, a stream of complications that, at the end of the second act, seem all but unsolvable. In the third act, usually by the machinations of a third act comic, they are resolved (without introducing any new musical material) and dissolved into a string of marriages. This resolute resolution can also be found in *Tandariáš*. However, it is not a third act comic, but the uncle of *Tandariáš*'s captor, who brings this final solution about (and, like the third act comic, leaves the stage before the actual happy ending takes place). Albeit, for the rest of the romance this rather modern generic sub-text is, of course, not an apt description of what happens in the Czech text.

It is clear, that the reduction in length without jettisoning much of the actual plot of the German text has one effect: it foregrounds the structure of the text. Since I started this paper at the end of the romance, I will progress from there to the beginning. The last larger episode starts as *Tandariáš*, again helping a damsel in distress, is overpowered (somewhat unconvincingly, after his permanent success) by a count and his retinue wanting to abduct a damsel in *Tandariáš*'s company, who was recently saved by the protagonist. *Tandariáš* can, after a prolonged fight against an overpowering

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2 One could also point to Hartmann von Aue's *Iwein*, especially the alternative ending with the double marriage of Iwein and Laudine, Lunete and the nameless count that suddenly pops up. This might be earlier than Wolfram, if it is an original ending by Hartmann, or an early reaction to Wolfram's over the top finale.

3 These closing lines in Ms. A of the *Tandariáš* quoted by Bamborschke, start with a flippant comment and then move on to the social and financial situation of the scribe (thus highlighting the economic trend of the romance, as shown by Lena Zudrell in this volume). The longer addendum at the end of the romance in Ms. B also highlights the ubiquity of love but with an emphasis on courtly love. Ms. C offers, in a completely different vein, a concluding prayer. – The English translations offered here follow Bamborschke's German translations.

4 Cf. the article by Zudrell in this volume, also for further references.

majority, only secure her safe passage by giving himself up to this treacherous count. He is thrown into a dungeon and left to starve to death. But he is rescued by the sister of this count who takes him up into her rooms, dresses his wounds and feeds him. We are at the end of the romance, and Tandariáš has already received Artuš's pardon. To lure him back to Artuš's court, Artuš announces three tournaments, and Tandariáš receives permission by his lady-rescuer to enter all three if he promises to return. He creates a new blazon, bows on a surface, which he uses in different colour schemes in all three tournaments. While his capturer (who presumes him long dead) also rides to the tournament, Tandariáš is spirited away from the castle by the help of the lady's uncle. On the first event, he carries his heavy armour alone, until he meets two other knights and the three form a group. They take up camp in an old unused mill (traces of *Erec* here<sup>5</sup>), and perform well. The queen recognizes Tandariáš, but Floribella does not want to watch the tournament. Tandariáš in his incognito nearly kills his capturer, and then returns, keeping his promise to the lady who has rescued him. She bathes him and playfully chastises him with a blade of grass – the text states, that with this playful behaviour she feels nearer to him and loves him in her own way (cf. ll. 1447–1454; 1529f.). This sequence is repeated identically three times as there are three tournaments, including the 'beating' with a blade of grass. The only difference is that during the third tournament, Floribella is present and Tandariáš for a short time loses his wits and falls into a love trance. But even the third time brings no resolution – this comes only, as Artuš promises a reward for those procuring Tandariáš, which then brings the uncle of the capturer into play a second time. One may well ask, why the sequence is repeated three times and why Tandariáš does not return to Artuš at least at the end of the third tournament. One answer is, that the offered reward is vital to the return of the hostage (and one can then think about the mindset of the audience that needs such a reward as a motivation<sup>6</sup>). For at the end of the third tournament, everything seems to be ready for the happy ending – even Floribella has left her chamber to watch the tournament and has recognized her lover and the count who had captured Tandariáš is nearly dead, so that nothing could hinder the happy ending here (the lady who kept Tandariáš poses the same problem here or later). Another answer is even more simple (and, from my point of view even more important): King Artuš proposed three tournaments, and this created a narrative sequence, which then has to be repeated three times. However, the sequence does not end with the tournament, but with the bathing scene. Thus, a final denouement at the end of the third tournament would cut the sequence short.

This observation is, of course, strengthened by everything that has happened before in the text, which thrives on almost verbatim repetition. Until his capture and the change of blazon, each knight who has been defeated by Tandariáš, representatives of each castle or city that has been freed, are sent to Floribella at Artuš's court and repeat the same phrase: "A nobleman who wears on his helmet a red virgin, emblazoned with gold in a green field, has sent us to you as your prisoner, to do with us as you like or, if you wish, to be freed by you."<sup>7</sup> And each time, after giving her news about

5 I refer, of course, to *Erec*'s initial inability to find lodgings during the first tournament in Tulmein.

6 This ties in with the general idea of the importance of economics in *Tandariáš*, which Lena Zudrell follows in her article in this volume.

7 The first time ll. 590–598.

Tandariáš, they are set free. Since at one time a whole army arrives with this message at Artuš's court, it is certainly a huge suspension of disbelief necessary not to ask the logical question: Why does the successful Tandariáš not finally attack Artuš to free his beloved from her constraint? The only possible answer is, of course, that the rules of repetition allow only repetition, but no real climax which would end in violence.

Many actions in the romance follow this rule of repetition, which is also inscribed into the geography of the lands the protagonist travels through. When Tandariáš leaves Christianity and goes forth into the heathen regions, he does so not entirely out of his own free will, but because he is compelled to rescue his retinue that has been abducted by a gang of robbers. They act for a heathen king, who longs for Christian women who have to labour for him (shades of the *pesme avanture* of the *Iwein*-tradition here). After Tandariáš has won a battle with them (with a tactic that he uses repeatedly in the text), they tell him how he can reach the abducted people: "Only a small causeway leads through this land full of swamps. Whosoever wants to reach its king will have to know the causeway, which is so small, that two carts can hardly meet. It is guarded by three castles, in which three giants reside as keepers, and they are two miles apart. In a fourth castle sits the giant king, who cannot be reached in any other way than through the three castles. And then one would have to be on guard against the giant king for whom your people are slaving away." (ll. 560–580) After having successfully beaten the first giant, Tandariáš is afraid that he will meet more resistance in the castle, but he only meets a group of Christians that are overjoyed to be finally free. This sequence is repeated the exact same way for the next two castles. Here, not Artuš's decree, but the geography of the land gives the reason for the repetition. It is even constructed in such a way that a foreshortening of the sequence (as happens in Stricker's *Daniel* in the fight against the land Cluse, which is governed by the time structure of a week) is impossible – the small causeway would make a general counter-attack of the remaining castles after Tandariáš's first victory rather problematic and probably unsuccessful anyway.

The repetitions start very early in the romance: After Tandariáš and Floribella have left Artuš's court and as Artuš starts his campaign against Tandariáš, the young knight meets the Arthurian army head on in search for single combat – and, of course, he finds a knight whom he can joust with and whom he can defeat, and, equally of course, he does not find only one knight, but three knights in a row, Kain, Gvan and Artuš's nephew Gavin. The splitting of Gawein into two figures is certainly nothing new, and that a knight has to fight against Arthurian knights (and often against Keie and Gawein) is typical for the beginning of a romance as a demonstration of the knight's ability to fit into Arthur's court. This is even present in *Parzival*, where this sequence of fight – this time with Keie, Segremors and, abandoned, with Gawan – is relegated into the middle part of the romance, but at a very important juncture, namely the episode of the three drops of blood in the snow.

The fact that an Arthurian romance has repetitions is unavoidable. There is only so much that can happen during a joust, and the constraints of the genre further limit the possible outcome of a fight (death is only possible for a very limited set of opponents, for instance). It is also clear, one might argue, that if a romance of nearly 20000 lines is cut down to a tenth of its original length, repetitions become more obvious. That is certainly true, but it is only one part of the picture, as the author of

the *Tandariáš* undertakes no special pains to avoid repetitions. He could have done so – either by reducing the sequence of three fights before the main adventure to just one fight or by omitting the preliminary fights altogether. But this option is not taken – which is usually superficially explained as a cutting down to a mere summary of the facts, but since we are dealing with works of fiction, fact is not a relevant category. Furthermore, the reduction of reflections, descriptions and other elements of *dilatatio materiae* and the reduction to an existing plot foregrounds the repetitiveness of this plot. But one can also argue that, if the individual fight takes place only over a few lines, then the fight as a fight has no intrinsic narrative value. To put in bluntly: to an audience interested in fights and action, the *Tandariáš* offers not much – even if the text is short, it offers less ‘fighting’ or emotional content than its longer source. I find it pretty obvious, that the poetic force of the text lies elsewhere. It is obvious that the repetitions in themselves are important for the author. He is very adamant in repeating the same phrase over and over again, when *Tandariáš* tells the knights he sends to Artuš’s court how to present themselves. This phrase is repeated throughout the text. These close repetitions are also very clearly marked, as I have already noted, in the tournament sequence. The same uninhabited mill, the same company, the same triumph over the count and even the same bathing scene. All this offers not a single instance of progress – only the added love-interest in the third tournament brings a variation, but it does not change the sequence.

If all this – combined with the rather short length of the text – leads to an overwhelming impression of repetition, one has to look for its function, since the text, transmitted in three manuscripts, certainly had found an audience.

It is very easy to go from repetitions to ritual. Rituals are governed by fixed gestures, by fixed scripts involving movement, and by fixed verbal formulas that are not only repeated but also usually thematize the symbolic function of the ritual, of the ritualistic actions. The symbolic meaning of a ritual is often connected to an element that transcends reality. And not only Christian rituals are governed by numeric symbolism, in Christianity often the number three – which is, of course, heavily present in *Tandariáš* as well. I am not going to argue that Christian elements play a role here – especially since – besides the mention of Christians and heathens – religion is completely absent from the text, or, to be more precise, religion only plays the role of a marker of good and bad: The heathens are the bad guys, but they hardly exist, since even in the heathen countries, the castles are filled with abducted Christians. Thus, *Tandariáš* would not even get a chance to work as a converter of heathens (as Wigalois gets at the end of his romance – and already Parzival has when he is part of the conversion of Feirefiz).<sup>8</sup>

But there is also another field where repetition plays a major role: in games. On a very superficial level, the first association between the *Tandariáš* and games is, that

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8 There is also another aspect to be taken into account: Reworkings, especially condensations, make basic structures (especially numeric structures) much more obvious. And a Czech speaking audience was well aware of this, as a comparison with the Old Czech *Tristan* shows: The adaptation shows a very high awareness of such basic numerical structures, as Kristýna Solomon has convincingly shown: They are either retained or reworked, but this is clearly not the result of slipshod work, but with a close understanding of the original; cf. Solomon (2016: esp. 181, but cf. also 181–200, on the number 2; on the number 3/the triangle, kept or reduced, cf. 228–232).

from a contemporary perspective the romance reads almost like a walk-through for an action-based computer game, a mild form of ego-shooter rather than the earlier adventure-games where there was much more interaction between the character you played and the surrounding world. This points to no more than the basic repetitive structure of both phenomena. But it is also clear that the *Tandariáš* is more than just aimless repetitions, for the repetitions are structured and connected with different worlds. That they tend to come in threes, is also obvious: Three Arthurian knights, three castles on the causeway, three Arthurian tournaments. It is, of course, a highly suggestive number, but here I hesitate: I do not want to put any religious emphasis into this game of threes.

But why three? Again, the basic answer is simple: one is a single event, two is suggestive, but a repetitive pattern needs three to be recognized as such. One could also argue, that three is the number needed to make absolutely clear that we are dealing with a progression (e.g. in the increase of difficulty of the task, the power of the opponents etc.). But for *Tandariáš*, this aspect is not as important as I thought it might be: repetitions are basically that, and the progressive element is played down. While on the one hand this seems like a possible effect of the reduction in length, again I would argue that this would not have to be the case. I rather think that this is a well-calculated effect by the author.

One possible intention could be comic: That repetition is one of the basic forms of the comic is made clear by the existence of running gags (and across Arthurian texts one of these running gags is the unhorsing of Keie). One such running gag that gets better every time – and is, indeed, accentuated in the third instance by a short variation the author introduces –, is the scene where *Tandariáš* is beaten by the blade of grass. I am not suggesting that every repetition is comic, but this one is, especially since the narrator plays with a possible climactic element as he points out, how much angrier the lady is during the third instance (cf. ll. 1640–1648). While to a modern reader, even the conception of a causeway with three castles might lead to at least a hint of the comical, I cannot see any medieval reader reading this as comic – or, to be more precise, I would have to construct a very special reader.

Taking the idea of a game structure into the realm of European Arthurian literature, one very soon comes across a text that is also late, short, and maybe somewhat on the margin of this corpus: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.<sup>9</sup> The text starts with and is structured by one of the oldest Arthurian games, the beheading game.<sup>10</sup> While repetition (and only one, since there are only two heads at stake) of the beheading is the essence of the game, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* we are treated to other aspects of repetition, for instance when Gawain is fitted out for his journey. And, what is more, the text is governed not by one game, but by two games that are intertwined: A beheading game and a game of give and take, played out at Sir Bertilacs castle, when Bertilac, the everyday form of the Green Knight, and Gawain have to exchange their catches of the day. This is also, by the way, a game of three exchanges. It is Gawain's basic problem in this romance that he does not know how these two games are really related to one another and that he is tricked by his opponents. These two games, while leaving Gawain victorious in the end, nevertheless question Arthurian

9 Markus (2009); cf. also Vantuono (1999) and Putter (1996). Cf. also Meyer (2019: 197–199).

10 Earlier instances are to be found in the *Perceval Continuations* (as well as in the *Rappoltsteiner Parzival*) and in Heinrich von dem Türlin's *Diu Crône*.

morals: Gawain could only have won by giving up his only chance to win – and while his opponent, the Green Knight, and his peer group, Arthur's court, all recognize his quandary and even acknowledge his success, Gawain himself is not content with his own behaviour: He has lost his moral confidence (cf. ll. 2505–2512). All this seems very far from *Tandariáš*. This also holds true for the style, which in the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is self-consciously old-fashioned. But I wonder:

The twofold game structure of *Sir Gawain* is mirrored in the Czech romance in the break in the repetition game that comes about as *Tandariáš* is captured: While the first repetitions are governed by his exploits, his way far into the heathen realms and lead away from Artuš's court, the last repetitions are governed by Artuš and his attempts to bring *Tandariáš* back to his court. What is more: Both texts begin with the threat of a beheading:

While the Green Knight is being beheaded and gives out his invitation to Gawain's beheading as a headless monster, Floribella arrives at Artuš's court and begs the king to avenge her at any cost against aggressive suitors. Furthermore, both initial episodes are governed by the classic starting point of adventure, the king's refusal to eat before a new adventure hits the court and the rash boon motif. There is even a beheading present, since this is exactly the punishment Artuš offers to everybody who oversteps the rather severe limits, Floribella (or, rather, Artuš's wrath-filled interpretation of Floribella's wishes) have erected. And, as Lena Zudrell has shown in her article in this volume, one can also highlight the game of give and take in *Tandariáš*.

At last, *Tandariáš* also questions Arthurian morals, or, rather, the very strict adherence to a rash boon that has been granted but which acts now against the wishes of the person who asked for it: As *Sir Gawain*, *Tandariáš* is also a text about how inflexible ethics ruin society or individuals. At the end of the Czech romance, the protagonist triumphs – and he triumphs over Artuš and his questionable morals.

Pointing out all these parallels I am in no way suggesting a close connection between the two texts. Rather, they arrive at these similarities from different starting points. But they arrive there, because they not only question Arthurian (and, thus, high medieval courtly) values, but also because they follow an alternative aesthetic that allows for repetitions and formulas to work.

There is another aspect to the notion of games: Late medieval society, while already no longer adhering to many chivalric values, and while also inventing new forms of literature that point away from the core elements of courtly literature, is, in what I call, for want of a better word, 'real' life, obsessed with chivalry and, especially, with tournaments, which are a highly regulated affair, with rules for different social strata that could all enter this game (cf. Hable 2016: esp. 19–25; 275–303). This kind of tournament makes up the last game sequence within the text, but, of course, the earlier exploits of *Tandariáš* can also be read in this vein: A society that relishes the entertainment factor of knightly (and not so knightly) joust, where tournaments became a social event, can read a text like *Tandariáš* in this context: Not as a romance about tournaments, but as a text that is structured along the lines of tournaments. In this light, the last tournament sequence is also a poetological commentary.

There is one last aspect I want to mention, if only rather tentatively. A typical aesthetic phenomenon of the Middle Ages (also in Antiquity, and in other periods, but it is rather prominent in medieval literature) is: the list. We still have, besides

acknowledging their existence, and, as readers, often skipping them, and maybe pointing to a performance value of these lists as acoustic set pieces, no real grasp on their aesthetics.<sup>11</sup> I have the notion that repetitions might have a similar function. They might be – and here the circle closes – very similar to incantations, which also thrive on repetition: lists can be a way of creating an ordered world, and repetitions do the same: While Arthurian morals are questioned, the basic tenet of chivalry is not. Thus, the Czech *Tandariáš* manages to have the cake and eat it: Not a mean feat for a text not even 2000 lines long.

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11 See, however, Eva von Contzen's project "Towards a Listology" funded by an ERC Starting Grant (URL: <https://www.frias.uni-freiburg.de/de/aktuelles/mitteilungen-aktuell/listen-in-der-literatur-erc-starting-grant-fuer-frias-alumna-eva-von-contzen>) [20. 10. 2020].