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The Corporeal Reality of Post-feudal Clientelism

The (Body)Language of Fidelity. A case study

"The body is man's first and most natural instrument."[1]

Introduction

Medieval feudalism, as an overall governing pattern of social and cultural life, transmitted a long-lasting heritage to early modern society. In particular, the institution of patronage involving three major actors: the patron, the client, and the broker proved to be the major driving force in shaping post-feudal, early modern society. (Kettering 1986, 3–11) Accordingly, social promotion in early modern times, on the whole, followed the medieval practice in terms of strategies and quest for interest alliances. Moreover, the so-called clientelism, in its early modern version as well, presupposed the same complicated relation between the patron and his client based upon the exchange of benefits and gratitude expressed in a highly rhetorical discourse culminating in the declaration of fidelity. (Herman 1995, 9–12) It is this rhetorical language and the ensuing conduct of the clients that reveal a special discourse involving a particular corporeal intimacy as a medium for delivering the message of unconditioned and ultimate loyalty.

Thus the aim of this article is to decipher the complex relationship of feudal loyalty/fidelity between early modern patrons and clients in order to provide a historical-anthropological explanation of this peculiar mutual dependence worked. In doing so, I shall focus on the multiple functions performed by human

1 Mauss 1979,120.

bodies, and the corporeal reality articulated by them. As a starting point, I shall examine two cases recorded in early modern memoires, exhibiting the special conduct of both patrons and their clients as men of trust in liminal or extreme situations. I shall argue that there was a complex code for using bodily intimacy by performing certain gestures to demonstrate, reassure, and accomplish loyalty. The body itself, whether alive or dead, within the social, mental, and anthropological context of patronage, it seems to me, functioned as a complex iconographic representation of post-feudal fidelity.

I. Focus on the body: some theoretically oriented remarks

Ever since the Annales School decisively marked off a pole position for body historiography, there has been a continuous, though somehow fluctuating interest persisting with the multidisciplinary examination of corporeality. Despite the reasonable sounding of such terms as corporeal or somatic turn usually associated with postmodern scholarship (Martin 2006, 337; Cooter 2010, 394), there is an almost century-old impressive tradition from history, including all its subdisciplines, to sociology dealing with the various methods and theories of examining bodies.[2] Therefore, the history of the body, as Roy Porter justly pointed out (Porter 1991, 223–226), is still in full progress, with a research agenda positing new thematic perspectives and further challenges for its students. (Punday 2003, Le Goff and Truong, 2007, Veltri and Diemling 2009) Some of the major claims of this historiography, such as the problematic and antagonistic hierarchy projected on the relation between mental, spiritual, and ideal vs. corporeal, somatic, and material have been influenced by the findings of other disciplines such as anthropology. Marcel Mauss' concept of "les techniques du corps/techniques of the body" has undoubtedly proved to be a determining source of inspiration for this historiography. (Mauss 1979, 106–123)

As a consequence of this rich and multidisciplinary scholarship, any student of early modern culture preoccupied with the investigation of body in a diachronic perspective has gained the possibility of combining the findings of the examined

2 Marc Bloch's famous book about the royal touch, "puissance royale," set forth an attractive perspective for scholars coming from several fields other than history. (Bloch 1983) Consequently, anthropology, sociology, or political theology found their own way to contribute to this historiography. (Kantorowicz 1957; Elias 1994; Douglas 1996)

sources with this variety of approaches. Still, the early modern character of the phenomenon under examination imposes some methodological restraints. It is almost certain that a thorough source criticism should be complemented with a historical anthropological approach in order to eliminate misleading anachronisms, and come closer to a plausible answer, concerning the cultural and social functions of early modern bodies and the peculiar corporeal intimacy related to them. Consequently, while examining early modern gestures performed by clients on their patrons' bodies, I shall observe these methodological rules in order to provide an analysis claiming that the early modern body had been mediated through cultural sign systems. My paramount ambition is to provide a sort of cultural history of the gesture (Bremmen and Roodenburg 1992), so that I could contribute to the thesis that early modern individuals might have regarded bodies and corporeality as an intermediary device between self and society. Early modern clients did rely on corporeality to prove fidelity and improve their chances for social promotion.

II. Bodies and touches

I am proposing two early modern cases, in fact, examples providing graphic illustrations of apparently unusual touches between patrons and their clients. Furthermore, the gestures in question, that is intimate touches were performed by the same early modern individual, János Komáromi (?–1710), who had first served Mihály Teleki, and then Imre Thököly (1657–1705) as a secretary/secretarius, that is, a man of trust. The first case was recorded by the allegedly eyewitness Mihály Cserei (1667–1756), the second one by Komáromi himself who narrated the episode in his diary.

The aftermath of the battle of Zernyest (22nd of August, 1690) must have been a horrifying experience, dominated by the image of the battlefield, populated with decomposing and rotten bodies, both Christian and Pagan. The victor, Imre Thököly, was informed that his great political rival and enemy, Mihály Teleki, had also fallen on the battlefield, and there was a cadaver which needed to be identified as it might have been the remnants of Teleki. Teleki's secretary and man of trust, János Komáromi, had already been taken prisoner, thus he was given the task of identifying the dead body. In Cserei's account, written sometimes between 1709 and 1712, this memorable episode reads like this:

> As they started robbing the corpses, there had already been a rumour about Teleki's death. Thököly sent János Komáromi - who used to be Teleki's man of trust, and was captured during the battle - together with some men to search for the body, which was quite difficult as the corpse in question, especially its face, was disfigured by ugly wounds. Komáromi knew that Teleki was suffering from scorbut and lost all his teeth, therefore put his fingers into the mouth of the disfigured corpse to palpate whether there were any teeth inside. Having found no teeth at all, he identified the corpse as Teleki's body. Thököly gave his own shirt and boots, and ordered that the body would properly be dressed up, put in a coffin and sent to Teleki's widow in Görgény.[3] (Cserei 1852, 199–203)

The same Komáromi, who had become Thököly's secretarius and man of trust after the battle of Zernyest, appeared in an almost identical situation thirteen years later. As he followed his new patron into political exile in Constantinople and Nicomedia, he devoutly served not only Thököly, but his wife, Ilona Zrínyi (1643–1703), as well. Komáromi's diary contains the description of an episode during which, as he was caring for his patron's moribund wife, he performed the same gesture putting his fingers into the mouth of the dying woman. This passage in the diary, which recorded the events of 12–13th February, 1703, reads like this:

> I was sitting next to her bed when she gave me a look and grabbed my neck and whispered into my ear, as speaking was extremely difficult for her, because of the thick saliva, she could not swallow or spit out. (I frequently used to help her by putting my finger into her mouth and removing the suffocating fluid from her throat). She tardily whispered to me that she had always been faithful to his husband. (..) After three days she said good bye to me, too. She gave me a hug and kissed me on both cheeks and said to me: 'God bless you for your kindness to me, *for your true fidelity and service;* I could not reward you for these in this mortal life, may God reward you instead of me...' (Komáromi 1861, 80; emphasis added).

3 All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

Even at a superficial glance, it is clear that there are some similarities between these two cases. It is worth, I believe, surveying the identical and the differing features of the two examples in order to reveal the hidden contexts that could offer a more refined understanding of the connotations of these cases. Apart from the aforementioned fact that Komáromi was the main actor of these situations, as he was the one who had performed these gestures, his social status was identical in both cases, he was a client, a courtier, and a man of trust who, it seems to me, had the privilege of touching his patrons or the patrons' body, whether dead or alive. It is of equal significance that, in both cases, he was touching his patrons, that is, his lords towards whom he was related in the same manner. Komáromi was their client and servant depending on his patrons in a feudal sense, as in exchange for his loyal service and fidelity, he could expect social promotion. However, the quoted passages clearly reveal the fact that either Komáromi was ordered or expected to perform those gestures, everybody agreed that it was his duty, or even privilege as a man of trust to do so. The nature of both gestures is daringly intimate, for it is a kind of penetration, just like during sexual intercourse, almost unifying the two bodies as the physical contact transgresses the outer boundaries of the bodies. Still, there was no sign of embarrassment or any refusal either on the side of the subjects, or on behalf of the entourage assisting to the act.

The major difference between these two cases was that the almost similar gesture was performed first on a corpse, then on a living body. Furthermore, the aim of the gestures also differed, as in the first case Komáromi had identified a body, and in the second case, he had executed some kind of a medical or first aid "manoeuvre," or a kind of body technique, so that he would ease the pain of the suffering woman.[4] At this particular point, I prefer to confine my analysis only for suggesting that these two cases allude to a certain type of cultural otherness, which deserves to be examined within new relevant contexts. For the historical anthropological approach, that I claim to follow and apply, suggests that this particular "otherness" should be interpreted relying on some historical and cultural contexts construing the symbolic and hidden meanings, functions, and references comprised in this particular case.

4 Komáromi's gesture comes very close to what Marcell Maus defined as the technique of the care of the abnormal. (Mauss 1979, 119)

III. Post-feudal clientelism: mentality and service

Despite the differences of the two cases, we need to reiterate the fact that the similar features of the gestures approve the idea that there was an implied context justifying Komáromi's conduct and the assistance's behaviour as well. This particular context is a social one, as the social status of the people involved was the determining factor that contributed to the performance of the gestures. As I have already referred to, Komáromi as a secretarius was not only a man of trust, but he was also a client and some kind of page. The early modern institution of "clientelism" was a late development of a feudal relation. This institution carried on with the practice of medieval feudalism, based upon the same mentality, transposed into a particular relation between the patron and his client or in a different configuration, the broker, too. The client of noble origin usually looked for a more powerful and influential patron and offered his service. The term "noble-servant" used by early modern Hungarians convincingly suggests that this commitment was often like an introduction into the Men's world, for the noble-servant, having satisfactorily fulfilled the assigned tasks, and proved his loyalty, could hope for social promotion. The longer the relationship the more intimate the link – in almost every possible sense – between the Patron and the client, and that frequently turned into a mutual dependency. We have a number of early modern cases, and Komáromi serving first Teleki, then Thököly, is certainly one of them, suggesting that due to the prolonged service during which all the intimate secrets of the patron were revealed in front of the noble-servant who was advanced to the status of man of trust, the relationship between the Patron and his Client gradually transformed into a basic commitment integrated in the feudal society. The social promotion of the client, and the services offered to the Patron] shaped a particular dependence based on the needs, priorities and interests of both parties. As Arthur Herman has justly pointed out, there was an exchange of benefits and gratitude among the otherwise unequal members of the feudal society. (Herman, 1995, 12)

The pathetic construction of faithful service, or fidelity, could mean a large variety of services undertaken and fulfilled by the noble-servant, which implied not only attending combat and defending the patron in a battle, but supervising and protecting all the official, legal or illicit affairs of the Patron as well. Accordingly, a discreet secretarius with a good command of Latin, and versatility in the field of law, was a much appreciated person, first of all, by his patron. For such a secretarius was able to sustain a network of relations by writing letters in sev-

eral languages to very different persons and destinations, or could supervise the booking of the Patron's businesses. Furthermore, every noble nurturing political ambitions needed a good secretarius who could manage the establishment and maintenance of any kind of political influence.

This type of relationship built upon reciprocity and a mutual dependence between the patron and his client was certainly the early modern imitation of the medieval feudal society's inner structure and basic concept. For the medieval King as the utmost Patron demanded service from the aristocracy as well, but he was oftentimes dependent on the aristocracy's loyalty or obedience which had its own price. Thus, the whole medieval society was organized upon this particular hierarchy, where the patrons may have had the final world in many issues, still, they, too, depended on their clients. As French historians have justly claimed, feudalism in this respect was a mentality which and influenced the shaping of medieval society. Early modern society also preserved this mentality, the institution of clientelism was apparently very popular; for several individuals it seemed an attractive strategy for survival and social promotion. As a matter of fact, there was a ruthless competition amongst all this noble-servants either to gain the exclusive trust of the mutual patron, or to find the most influential patron before the other competitors did. Everything had a price, for even being accepted by a patron the client would not know or have any guarantee for his promotion. In order to have assurance, one needed to gain trust and intimacy in his relationship to the Patron.[5]

III. 1. Post-feudal corporeal intimacy: a possible iconography of early modern body

Perusing the memoires written by early modern influential personalities, politicians, statesmen, and military commanders, the historian quite often finds valuable passages that provide, unavoidably fictitious accounts about the years of service, in particular the ones undertaken as noble-servants. A thorough comparative analysis that I have performed suggests that the service undertaken and

5 The complexity of this relationship as a social-historical phenomenon produced its very own terminology. Early modern individuals were desperate to possess the *gratitude* of the patron for their committed service, or *fidelity*. As for the patrons, they were very much disturbed if one of their clients did not show and express the necessary gratefulness for having been promoted. Consequently, *ingratitude* was the worst possible charge against a client. (Herman, 1995, 11–13)

endured by these excellent men carved into their character and self-perception the major virtues necessary to succeed in a post-feudal society. For, indeed, they were the victors of a particular contest determined by some special cultural and social circumstances. Moreover, their example poignantly points out that finding the winning strategy has never been an easy task in (post)feudalism, and has always been associated with contest, rivalry, and competition.

They usually started their service as a page, with the duty of satisfying the needs of the patron, such as giving him food and drink, keeping watch while he was sleeping, helping him put his dress on and off. With the trust gained, intimacy also developed in terms of offering access to situations when the patron was experiencing some kind of corporeal vulnerability, such as being indisposed, sick, or even dying. Their task was to help the patron, especially when he was unable to control his bodily needs, or in any kind of extreme situations. In his memoires, János Kemény recalled a military campaign where his task as a page was to clean the latrine used by the Prince of Transylvania, Gábor Bethlen:

> As opposed to present-day servants, I did not find the service difficult, for I often took part in cleaning, making fire or even emptying and washing up the latrine of the prince. I have often berated a fellow page of mine, András Pap, who was not of noble origin, still he was serving with me - for his father had died in a battle, and the prince kept him at his court - so, when this fellow tried to help me emptying and washing up the latrine, he often threw up, which I could not stand. (Kemény 1986, 37)

Though Kemény probably exaggerates here, overemphasizing his absolute commitment to the prince as he bravely undertook and did the lowest jobs without any complain whatsoever or throwing up, yet this case is remarkable and very suggestive in that this young man of noble origin resolutely cleaning and washing up the latrine of the Prince of Transylvania was to become the Prince of Transylvania himself in 1661. János Kemény's career is the ultimate proof that the feudal mentality sustained a particular network of relations and interests that offered the possibility for those willing to subject themselves to the rules of clientelism to reach the very top of this post-feudal society.[6]

6 Though my paper exclusively focuses on the military and political careers of post-feudal clients, I

However, further examples would suggest that the service starting with the status of page ran in parallel with a certain pattern of growing intimacy. Though the page first of all helped, or satisfied the needs of the patron, he was allowed to see, touch, and interact with the patron in some special situations of corporeal vulnerability, too. From the usual routine service of cleaning after the patron to assist him while sick or dying, including the preparation of the body for funeral or witnessing the dissection of the body, it became clear, I believe, that the concept of 'a man of trust' referred to a very special socialization during which the trust had been won in parallel with a certain initiation reserved for the privileged ones. Intimacy, though primarily focused on the body of the patron, denoted a dialectic of trust and devoutness, a continuous confirmation and reconfirmation that the patron noticed the loyalty, and the client was worthy of the trust given.

Therefore, this intimacy, it seems to me, alongside with the mutual dependence of the feudal pact between the patron and his client, was a major component of this particular relationship, for it transmitted the needs, demands, and confirmations of the interaction between the two actors. Furthermore, relying on the examined sources I believe that one should differentiate three major types of intimacy. The first one could be defined as biological/corporeal intimacy pointing to the fact that the clients as men of trust often assisted their patrons in an explicit corporeal intimacy. I am referring to such cases when the clients had been performing the duties of a page or a servant.

Unavoidably, in these situations the body, the naked or sick/dead body of a patron was touched by the client. As the patrons were rather vulnerable in their corporeal intimacy, the clients were trusted to assist them, thus the sometimes unpleasant experience of being confronted with this type of corporeality had been transformed into a privilege, a matter of trust and affiance. In his memoires, Mihály Cserei overtly complained that serving Mihály Teleki was the worst experience of his life. He had not only assisted Teleki while eating, sleeping, and dressing up, but he also had to clean after him, and wash Teleki's stinking chamber pot full of faecal matter and gleet. As it was historically proved that Teleki had been suffering of persisting digestive disorder, Cserei's graphic description about the content of the chamber pot may have well been accurate... (Cserei 1852, 169)

am aware of the fact that early modern cultural life often functioned according to the same principles, based on similar mentalities. Cultural clientelism was a familiar phenomenon for early modern artists and entrepreneurs as well, including the famous triangle of client, broker and patron, which often influenced their strategies for promotion as well. (Cole, 2007, 730–731)

In addition, this privilege of touching the patron's body was similarly applied to those situations when the patron died. The dead body often needed special care from cleaning it to preparing it for the funeral, thus several sources confirm the fact that it was the clients who either did it or assisted the procedure. Famous clients like János Kemény serving equally famous patrons like Gábor Bethlen, personally recorded these types of events and experiences. Kemény, for instance, attended the autopsy of Gábor Bethlen's body, just like Kelemen Mikes (1690–1761) did, after the death of Francis II. Rákóczi (1676–1735). Both of them narrated these experiences in their egodocuments. (Kemény 1986, 94; Mikes 1988, 212) A further relevant example is Miklós Zrínyi's death due to a hunting accident in November 1664. The two clients and men of trust Pál Zichy (1640-1684) and Miklós Bethlen (1642–1716), whose memoirs recorded this event (Bethlen 1986, 603), acted as if they were instructed for this kind of emergency. While Zichy had the difficult task of breaking the news to Zrínyi's wife, Miklós Bethlen took care of the body, holding it in his lap. Hungarian literary historian Sándor Iván Kovács described the scene recorded in Bethlen's written account as an early modern Hungarian Pietá. (Kovács 1994, 506)

The second type of intimacy could be defined as spiritual/confessional, for it denotes that despite the different confessional identities that patrons and clients might have had, they had often shared intimate moments of praying together or ritually observing occasions and religious celebrations. The ardent Calvinist Cserei had no choice but to attend Catholic masses and processions, as his patron, the rich and influential István Apor (1638–704), was a devoted Catholic. Furthermore, when there was no cultural otherness disuniting the ritual exercises of both patrons and clients, they often prayed together, as Mihály II. Apafi, Prince of Transylvania did with his client and secretarius, Albert Gulácsi. Gulácsi as a man of trust must have had access to the devotional writings of the young prince because he preserved a copy of a prayer entitled *A special prayer against the enemies of the prince, using the words of David the Psalmist*, written by the prince himself. The utmost expression of this spiritual intimacy is related to the situations when the patron was on his death, and he had been comforted by his client, especially when in exile or in any akin difficult situation. Assisting the moribund patron and praying with him, just like touching the sick or dead body, represented a strange mixture of privilege, intimacy, and duty. No wonder that János Komáromi did his best to convince the converted Imre Thököly to say his last prayer in the Lutheran way. (Komáromi 1861, 86)

As for the third type of intimacy, it may well be defined as an intellectual and political one, suggesting a mutual secrecy, the client's common but responsible access to the secret affairs of the patron. The development of this third type of intimacy was unavoidable with the progress of the patron-client relationship which provided that the reciprocal trust and responsibility similarly increased. Besides, the greater political or financial ambitions of the patron regularly demanded more trust and reliability from the clients. The patron's successful breakthrough coincided with the promotion of the contributing clients. Consequently, the most important political, economic or other kinds of secret intentions or plans had to be shared with those very few who might have had a significant contribution to the effort in bringing those plans to fruition. However, all the clients serving as secretaries and men of trust must have had access to the secrets of the Patron. A suggesting illustration is provided by the aforementioned Mihály Cserei. He had been serving count István Apor for eleven years, until the death of this rich nobleman. When Apor died in 1704, the huge fortune was inherited by Péter Apor, the nephew of the recently passed count. Péter Apor was very much preoccupied with convincing Cserei, István Apor's man of trust, to serve him as well because Cserei had the most detailed knowledge of the defunct Apor's affairs, businesses and undertakings.

IV. Application

These patterns of intimacy constitute the proper historical anthropological context of the examples I have provided. Komáromi's (seemingly) unusual gesture was a normal one, presumably approved by everyone who shared the same view on the patron-client relationship. It is important to underline the fact that Komáromi was doing his duty when providing a last service to his patrons. Recalling the example of young Miklós Bethlen holding the body of Miklós Zrínyi, we found an antecedent and a strong argument sustaining the thesis that it was the client's privilege to take care of his patron's dead body.

In the second case, in a more complex situation, we are confronted with a similar example. Komáromi, due to the particular intimacy resulting from the patron-client relationship, simply penetrated the body of the moribund patron. This relationhip was so strong that not only did it allow this special touch, but also suspended the gender issue. For Ilona Zrínyi's attitude, notwithstanding the kisses on both cheeks and the hugs, had no gender orientation at all, these were

symbolic gestures performed by the *patron*, and not a *woman* – Ilona made it very clear when she was praising Komáromi's "true fidelity and service." The paramount argument is the very nature of this patron-client relationship. From this perspective, the dialogue between the dying Gábor Bethlen and his man of trust János Kemény is rather unfolding. Kemény was abroad in a mission, but upon his return he hurried to the sick prince. The dying prince, Gábor Bethlen was sort of rebuking János Kemény:

> Well, young man, we noticed that you so easily gave up on me, despite my deplorable condition. (Kemény 1986, 89)

Kemény's answer comprises the quintessence of this patron-client relationship:

> I did not Sire, and I would not, till the end of your life, till the end of mine. (Kemény 1986, 89)

The translation is, of course, not accurate for it was easier to use the construction "until death do us part." It would have been hilarious though to have Kemény pronounce the marriage vow to his patron, as according to our twenty-first-century thinking this is solely reserved to that special long term relation defined as marriage, yet we have to admit that in (post)feudal society and culture it was not marriage, but the patron-client relationship the most important link in society. Furthermore, the view that marriage as a lasting alliance between man and woman is the very basic unit of society is a late development, for medieval and early modern societies were built upon the network of functional and extended client-patron relationships or alliances. Loyalty, fidelity, and trust, though they were needed in medieval marriages as well, were, first of all, the attributes of clientelism nurturing the mutual dependency of the commitment between a Patron and his Client. The troubadour tradition and poetry have interestingly preserved the differences and similarities of marriage and feudal clientelism as commitments.

V. Conclusion

The historical anthropological interpretation I have just provided, I consider, has successfully construed the cultural otherness of this early modern phenomenon,

a seemingly unusual touch, involving a strange intimacy. From a methodological point of view, by examining the cases in culturally and historically relevant contexts, the contextual explanations brought about the articulation of a reliable answer. Thus, Komáromi's gestures were perfectly accurate and according to the norm, and every contemporary agreed upon that, for they shared the same mentality of clientelism, which, it seems, worked as a "collective representation" from the Middle Ages until the early modern period. The corporeal aspect of the gestures, the special intimacy ensuing from them, was perceived by everyone (Komáromi, the subjects of the touches, and the assisting entourage) as normal ones, without any deviant or sexual connotations. This was probably one of the very rare and special situations in which bodily intimacy, especially the case of penetration, had absolutely no sensual connotations, let alone sexual character. The corporeal reality or even the body proper functioned as a complex medium receiving and transmitting the message of loyalty, commitment, and fidelity alluding to the special relationship between the dead or sick patron and his devout client. The actor performing the touches, and the subjects of his touch (including the assistance or witnesses) were the contributors to a ritual happening with the social function of reconfirming a world order, a standard of normality. They were also supposed to promote a certain conduct. All these concepts revolved around the belief that loyalty was the most important virtue and mission a man could have or achieve in this mortal world.

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