

UNIVERSITY OF SZEGED – FACULTY OF ARTS

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**CONTEXTS OF LITERARY & RECEPTION HISTORY
IN MIHÁLY VÖRÖSMARTY’S *EPIC PERIOD***

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Mihály Vörösmarty's epic works are undoubtedly among the most significant achievements in Hungarian literary history. This is not only made obvious by the importance and epoch-making influence of the particular works within the writer's oeuvre but also by a rather complex project aimed at the creation and the definition of national literature; an intention that partially became manifested in Vörösmarty's epic works from the 1820's. The epic works of the writer are informed by Kazinczy's Classicism, many also consider them the source of Hungarian Romanticism, and at the same time, the "popularist" understanding of the genre of the epic and that of tradition in general was partially created out of a confrontation with Vörösmarty's works. Generations of poets and literary historians have discussed the merits of Vörösmarty's epic works and their canonical position in our national literature. Despite Kazinczy, who regarded the mythology in Vörösmarty's epics as a weak "supplement," these works were always viewed within the context of national literature, as in Ferenc Toldy's ground-breaking study and in others who followed Toldy, like Erdélyi, Pál Gyulai and János Arany. While there were critical debates about the epic, for a long period of time *Zalán futása* was generally and traditionally regarded as a reference point in discussions about Vörösmarty's epic works that allowed for the mapping out of the internal network of relations (within his oeuvre) and the external (national) relationship of values, i.e., similarities and differences. The heterogeneity of critical reception and the nature of (ideological) canon formation were primarily influenced by the fact that literary critics with a national preference considered the very creation of a national epic a political and literary achievement that made aesthetic judgements unnecessary, while latter-day, mostly popularist reviewers focused on aesthetic shortcomings, problems with the creation of mythology, and the verse form of hexameter, and viewed *Zalán futása* rather as an experiment, a sort of generic predecessor for a more comprehensive, "more national" and organic work – primarily expected from János Arany. The epic of *Zalán futása* still remained a reference point when explaining other works by Vörösmarty, and this central position became even more explicit; it is only the approach to the epic that changed. After the epic was judged as a failure on account of considering it an arbitrary and inorganic mixture of elegiac-lyric elements and national thematic, this duality permeated the reception of nearly all of the epic works by the writer: the more explicitly historical works were received as the continuation of the latter, while the more mythological texts were interpreted as the outcome and completion of the former; that gave rise to a long lasting interpretative tradition of reading the epic works within the same duality.

The starting point of the dissertation, the analysis of the writer's oeuvre from the perspectives of literary- and reception history, basically focuses on the creation and the formation of this breakpoint, as well as its influence upon the process of canon formation in national literature. The history of Vörösmarty's epic works practically runs parallel with the history of national literature: the end of his epic period in 1831 also marks the end of the epic period in national literature and the beginning of a new period. The dissertation intends to offer interpretations of this commonplace of literary history by rethinking some of the former considerations of reception history, and thus we hope to contribute to a possible reconsideration of the network of references in the writer's epic works and to point out new contexts that may assist in the understanding of works produced by the writer in his later periods. This, somewhat malleable objective, together with its further modifications throughout the research, can be blamed for the relative lack of a unified methodology and a stabile focus on the object of investigation in the dissertation – while it remains within the frames of the particular historical period. It seemed essential for instance to reconsider a literary tradition, together with its latent components that are hardly recognizable today, originating from Pál Gyulai, the first editor of the Vörösmarty oeuvre after the writer's death. While it may be one of the most often quoted volumes of literature on Vörösmarty, no interpretation has yet been made about Gyulai's Vörösmarty-biography with a focus on its approach to literature, its portrait of the writer and use of sources. While examining the system of values pertaining to literary history and the biographical narrative

present in this work we come across the problems of authorization and publishing rights, and hence, the role of Ferenc Deák in the publication history. Deák's "literary" undertaking after Vörösmarty's death was not only a unique case of writerly solidarity and national piety, but – by Deák taking guardianship of the Vörösmarty-orphans – it became an important part of the history of publication rights. It was due to the unclear times of the 1850's, when guardianship rights functioned as a means of national resistance, that the publication of the Vörösmarty-oeuvre did not begin for an unusually long period of eight years, and that Deák granted the right for the publication to Pál Gyulai, who belonged to his literary-political circles, and not to Ferenc Toldy, who urged the publication as early as in 1856, directly after Vörösmarty's death. The relatively well-documented history of this authorization symbolically presents a series of conflicts of literary history between Gyulai, Kemény, Csengery, the writers of the the so-called literary Deák Party on one hand, and Ferenc Toldy on the other, with regard to the interpretation of the developments in Hungarian literary history. The analysis of publication history also allows us to perform a short comparison of the history of the Vörösmarty-legacy with an earlier process of authorization related to the death of Károly Kisfaludy, a context that is usually discussed only in relation to the Aurora Trial.

The middle section of the dissertation offers interpretations of the epic works written after *Zalán futása*, and its methodology is based upon an effort to *disregard* István Horvát's historical views dominating the reception history of the writer for a long period of time. The influence of István Horvát's historical views on Vörösmarty's generation has been noted and documented in the literature about Vörösmarty since Toldy and Gyulai. But certain details of reception history remained in the blind spot due to the academic neglect of the writer's historical achievements, and the marginalization of his etymological approach to language. Horvát's idealized historical views survived in large-scale, hectoring citations that made rereading unnecessary for a long time, and in the case of Vörösmarty's works it created a critical dead end in which works written after the national epic are read as documents of a period of search and crisis but cannot be viewed as constituting an independent section within the writer's oeuvre. The dissertation intends to expand the philological work revealed in the notes to the critical edition of *Magyarvár*, the "great epic" after *Zalán futása*, and to briefly discuss aspects of language philosophy and language creation in this influence.

Partially due to this apparently fruitful direction of research in language philosophy, as well as due to the well documented relationships between *Csongor és Tünde* and the epic works, the chapters closing the analysis of the epic works are followed by and provide material for the reconsideration of certain elements of the literary historical tradition surrounding the creation and reception of *Csongor és Tünde*. Our interpretation of the creation and the context of the work intends to provide a *background* for the formulation of a new periodization within the epic works, as well as to reconsider the relationship of this generically unique work with the epic material. The dissertation offers an analysis of the so-called "primary contexts" of the work, its publication history and planned illustrations based on Ferenc Toldy's letter-fragment written to Vörösmarty in 1829 while taking a round-trip in Western Europe, in which he discusses the plan to publish the work in Paris and mentions the copper engraving to be created for the publication. This document has not yet been referred to in the literature about *Csongor és Tünde*. Based on an effort to identify the illustration mentioned in the Toldy-letter and to be created by Károly Kisfaludy, the Vörösmarty-text, and the interpretation of some of the motives of the works, the dissertation proposes to consider the contextual and narrative relationships among the so-called Y-parable, the *Hercules at the Crossroads* story and *Csongor és Tünde*. Vörösmarty first used the basic version of the latter story in his poem, *Volt tanítványaimhoz*, and we believe the same story served as a structural frame for the scenes in *Csongor és Tünde* set around the threefold crossroads. The dissertation also proposes to view the decision made in a dream at the beginning of the work as a reference to this mythological scene, and to read the story originated from the time of the pagan

Cuman people that shows the temporary dominance of the theme of love over the Night's tragic cosmogony and concept of the human person as a part of the process of literary reinterpretation of the switch in the 19th Century between a wild and a civilized period, an important and transitory phase in the development of our national culture. The dissertation does not undertake a complete exploration of this relationship, such as the reinterpretation of the relationship with the source; it only focuses on the characteristics of this work within the context of national literature, its generic change and the tensions within upcoming generic interpretations.

Relevant Publications & Public Lectures

- 1, Az öreg halász és a part (Invenció és irodalomtörténet), In: Duplafedél. Papírborítás II. Szeged, 1996. 51-56.
- 2, „Hat gím jöve sebtén elébe” (Vörösmarty eposzterve és őstörténeti felfogása a Zalán futását követően), ItK 2000/3-4, 454-497.
- 3, „Maglehet, köztársasága volnánk anygali lényeknek”. Vörösmarty történetfilozófiai felfogásának néhány jellemzőjéről, In: Vörösmarty és a romantika, szerk. Takáts József, Művészetek Háza, Pécs-Budapest, 2001, 171-179.
- 4, Örökké Romokban kell hevernie mindennek. In: A Rom, szerk. Füzi Izabella-Odorics Ferenc, deKON-Könyvek 26, Gondolat-Pompeji, 2003, 196-205.
- 5, A szépség tudományának mitizálási kísérletei. Schedius Lajos János filozófiájának fogalom- és narratívaképző szerepe Vörösmartynál, It, 2007, 3-50.
- 6, Nemzettörténet és mitológia határpontjain (Vörösmarty Mihály: Zalán futása), In: A magyar irodalom története 1800-tól 1919ig, szerk. Szegedy-Maszák Mihály, Veres András, Gondolat Kiadó, Bp., 2007, 137-153.
- 7, Műfajküszöb. A Csongor és Tünde kontextusairól, Színház, 2010/3.
- 8, A Csongor és Tünde kontextusairól, 2011. (Átdolgozott, bővített változat) http://arkadia.pt.ehu/magyar/cikkek/gere_csongor_es_tunde
- 9, Vörösmarty meghal – az életmű hagyományozódásának kérdései, Klasszikus Magyar Estvék, Szegedi Tudományegyetem, 2012. (Public Lecture)
- 10, Vörösmarty és Kisfaludy Károly, Pécsi Egyetem (Dec. 2011) Konferencia a magyarországi romantikáról (Public Lecture)