
THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE: A NEW APPROACH

Az angol irodalom története. Vol. I. A középkor. [‘History of English Literature. Vol. I. The Middle Ages.’] Edited by Tamás Karáth and Katalin Halácsy. Editors in chief: Tamás Béneyei and Géza Kállay. Budapest: Kijárat, 2020. Pp. 412. ISBN: 978-615-5160-77-6.

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This is the first book of a seven-volume English literary history series (*Az angol irodalom története*)¹ by Hungarian scholars, which is dedicated to medieval literature and is comprised of contributions by six scholars: Andrea Nagy, Tibor Tarcsay, Katalin Halácsy, Zsuzsanna Simonkay, Zsuzsanna Péri-Nagy and, authoring the most sections by far, Tamás Karáth. The volume aims to provide a comprehensive cultural and historical context for medieval English literature in three major chapters. The first, general chapter on cultural history (TK) provides an introduction to the medieval world and its communication models, as well as dedicating some pages to the understanding of medieval literature and the attitudes surrounding it. This theoretical framework is supplemented by the introductions to the chapters on Old and Middle English literature, and in the final section on Middle English, which is devoted to visuality, with more general interpretative methods and paradigms.

A great strength of the book is listing and using recent research results, databases and internet resources. The authors also pay attention to Hungarian literary and cultural history, sometimes in a highly detailed manner. For example, the recent (and yet to be proven) hypothesis that Chrétien de Troyes modeled the protagonist of his novel *Lancelot* on the Hungarian king Saint Ladislaus is also cited by Simonkay. Occasionally, minor philological remarks can also be found in the volume, such as Karáth’s corrections of the published Hungarian translation of Julian of Norwich’s mystical work. The volume allows the reader to learn about the history of Hungarian translations of medieval English literature, which is a unique and highly useful feature.

The approaches of the six authors are not uniform. Beyond the index at the end of the volume, cross-references on the margins also help the reader to locate and compare sections on the same texts and issues, even in other volumes of the series. This solution is strongly reminiscent of the codex era, rather than the age of print

¹ As such, it also includes general introductory sections and Géza Kállay’s theoretical grounding (in the appendix). Those sections, however, fall beyond the scope of the present review.

(or even digital) books. Of course, of the medieval languages of the British Isles, English is given the greatest prominence, and Latin less so, while Anglo-Norman, Welsh and other languages and their literatures are also briefly mentioned.

While the two main, large chapters on Old and Middle English Literature, respectively, mostly focus on texts, they also include historical summaries, discussing the most important events, social structures and linguistic background of each period in England, thus helping to understand the role of literature and arts in the Middle Ages. The chapter on Old English Literature by Nagy, Tarcsay and Halácsy is organised according to genre-specific aspects into respective sections on poetry and prose. The interdisciplinary nature of the volume is exemplified by the fact that the chapters on individual literary works and genres also reflect on history: for instance, the sub-chapter on Old English heroic poetry uses *Beowulf* to illustrate the heroic and societal ideal of the period, as well as the meaning of *comitatus*. A gendered reading also appears in the volume: this chapter repeatedly stresses that although Old English poetry is largely patriarchal, this “does not mean that there are no important and memorable female characters in Old English poetry” (53).² It points out, briefly mentioning a few examples like *Wealhtheow* and *Hildeburh*, that “[through some chapters of *Beowulf*] we also gain insight into the impact of the society of warriors who follow the heroic ideal on the lives of the women who live alongside them” (67). In the subchapter on elegies, the volume gives a detailed account of the poem “The Wife’s Lament,” which, in addition to its content, is also notable for its genre: “it does not meet Greenfield’s definition of an elegy [...] because [...] it ends with the permanence of sadness” (88).

After the introduction to the chapter on Middle English Literature, there are five large subchapters, some of which are linked to genres (romance, drama), others to thematic constraints (religious literature), while the longest subchapter is dedicated to Chaucer. The last chapter (‘The Worlds of Imagination’) brings together a very wide range of generically and thematically different texts in the context of medieval visuality.

The subchapter on medieval romance describes the development of the genre in 12th-century Europe, and the influence of French chivalric romances and courtly poetry on English romances. It discusses in detail the texts belonging to the three traditional *matières* introduced by the French *trouvère* Jean Bodel (Matter of Rome, France and Britain), as well as the Matter of England (romances based on a plot situated in medieval England). The section gives examples from both English and Old French literature and elaborates on its topic in a manner understandable to the lay reader. Although the definitions (136) draw a sharp distinction between the

² All translations from *Az angol irodalom története*, vol. I are mine – Mária Anna Finta.

thematic categories, the subchapters give a nuanced picture of the interrelationship of the three major matters.

The longest chapter on Chaucer – co-authored by Halácsy and Péri-Nagy – provides a chronological overview of the oeuvre after a biographical portrait. Somewhat differently from the other chapters, it offers summaries for most of the author's works, as well as commentaries that draw attention to the difficulties of interpretation due to the frequent ambiguities in Chaucer's poetry.

Religious literature is indeed the largest (most frequently copied, best preserved) corpus of surviving medieval literature, which explains the volume's striking emphasis on religious texts in sections authored by Karáth. Compared with the *Routledge Companion to Medieval English Literature* (edited by Raluca Radulescu, Sif Rikhardsdottir, 2023), which includes separate chapters for Chaucer, Gower, medieval lyric poetry, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and, for example, mystical poetry, here Chaucer is given 70 pages, mystical poetry 32 pages, lyrical poetry 12 pages and travelogues a 3-page subchapter. The mystical poetry of Julian of Norwich, Margery Kemp and some minor authors benefit from an in-depth interpretation and extensive contextualisation. The chapter on English medieval drama by Karáth discusses in detail liturgical plays, mystery plays, miracle plays and moralities, highlighting the process of detachment from liturgical texts, the increasing prominence of secular episodes and plot threads, and the different attitudes associated with stage performances. Importantly, the chapter introduces the related genres of medieval drama, the fabliau and the chivalric romance, which were also often performed orally: the examples of *Dame Sirith and the Weeping Bitch* and *Sir Orfeo* are used to illustrate this point.

Also written by Karáth, the most original, final subchapter of the volume describes contextual thinking as a general feature of medieval literature – one might even say that the most reliable method of interpreting medieval works is to consider them in their various (manuscript, hermeneutical, generic, intertextual) contexts. Here we find the presentation of scholarly treatises, travel literature and allegorical texts as well as lyric poetry. It also discusses the manuscript context of medieval literary and scientific texts and gives several examples of illustrations that form a close unit with the textual material.

Some minor errors in the book will certainly be corrected in the second edition, for instance when Dares Phrygius's name is translated into Hungarian as Dictys (223), or when Matthew Paris is suspected of taking inspiration from Marco Polo or Willem van Rubroek (320).

Overall, the project to create a comprehensive English literary history relevant to Hungarian readers is a worthy and niche endeavor. The volume will certainly be an important, valuable handbook for students of English literature and, hopefully, also for the wider public.