
NEW HUNGARIAN NARRATIVES IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

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 Bényei and Géza Kállay. Budapest: Kijárat, 2020. Pp. 411. ISBN 978-615-5160-77-6.

Az angol irodalom története. Vol. II. A kora újkor. [‘History of English Literature. Vol. II. The Early Modern Period.’] Edited by Attila Atilla Kiss and György Endre Szőnyi. Editors in chief: Tamás Bényei and Géza Kállay. Budapest: Kijárat, 2020. Pp. 501. ISBN 978-615-5160-78-3.

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The idea of publishing a Hungarian academic book series that provides an overview of the history of English literature was conceived by Géza Kállay, who intended to involve all Hungarian scholars in the field of English studies, and remained the heart and soul of this academic group until his untimely passing in 2017. Nicknamed HUH—*the Hungarian History of English Literature*—by its contributors, the project supported by the Hungarian National Research Fund was eventually completed under the supervision of Tamás Bényei. The writing, editing and publication of this series proved to be an outstanding achievement in many respects. First of all, it fills a gap in Hungarian scholarship because, since the single-volume handbook edited by Miklós Szenczi, Tibor Szobotka and Anna Katona in 1972, there has not been any academic account available in Hungarian to offer a comprehensive history of English literature void of those ideologically and politically biased filters that cultural policies in the pre-1989 era demanded in Hungary. Secondly, every volume of the series was written by a group of experts, the majority of whom are not only researchers but also lecturers at English departments of Hungarian universities all over the country. Thus, the style and content of their contributions have been positively influenced by their teaching experiences. Thirdly, this historical account is innovative and exceptional because, except for a very few chapters, rather than drafting monographic portraits of individual authors in a chronological order, the contributors survey circles or schools of English authors and their works as they were embedded in their specific social and cultural contexts. Last but not least, all scholars and editors involved intended to share their knowledge in a manner that is not only philologically accurate and academically well-grounded,

but also intelligible and reader-friendly. This approach explains both the lack of lengthy footnotes as well as the presence of editorial boxes, in which references to further chapters in the same series are placed, as if they were print substitutes for hyperlinks widely used in digital humanities today. In order to give guidance to readers interested in further details, instead of a bibliography at the end of each chapter, there is only one list of the secondary sources cited at the end of every volume, accompanied by a very useful index of authors and subjects.

The first two volumes in the series offer 21st-century insights into medieval and early modern English literature. As Tamás Karáth explains in his introduction to the first volume, which he co-edited with Katalin Halácsy, the authors were asked to share their general knowledge about British literary history, as well as research outcomes they have accumulated since the cultural turn in English studies in the 1980s. The past fifty years called attention to a number of changes in academic circles, including, for example, a shift in our approach to the concept of literature and texts that are regarded as works of literature, the ways in which gender concerns influence generic discourses, or the blurred dichotomy between classic and popular literature. All six contributors to the first volume, on the one hand, wish to remove the deep-rooted prejudice that the medieval era was dark, and, on the other hand, call attention to references to and cultural counterparts in Hungarian works written in the same period. The volume discusses oral and written literature over 900 years in two main thematic sections, the first of which focuses on Old English Literature from the beginnings until the 11th century, while the second focuses on Middle English Literature, until the end of the 15th century. All chapters on old English poetry and three relatively short chapters on old English prose were written by Andrea Nagy and Halácsy, respectively, while the literacy and monastic culture of the period was surveyed by Tibor Tarcsay. In the section devoted to Middle English Literature, the lengthiest part of this volume, Hungarian experts discuss topics that are at the heart of their own research and teaching interests. Karáth authors the chapters on devotional literature, drama and theatre; Zsuzsanna Simonkay summarises her knowledge on romances; and, last but not least, Halácsy and Zsuzsanna Péri-Nagy portray the heritage of Geoffrey Chaucer. Perhaps one of the most surprising yet brilliant and original chapters is the last one, entitled ‘Worlds of Vision,’ in which Karáth focuses on those texts from both the Old and Middle English periods that are best described as “visionary,” and discusses at length the role of pictures—including drawings and illustrations in historic records, images and visuality—and their influence on authors and writing conventions.

Although the second volume of the series on Early Modern Literature was co-edited by György Endre Szőnyi and Attila Atilla Kiss, the composition of the volume with its 62 chapters written by 23 contributors is credited to Ágnes Matuska. The volume

is divided into three main parts, the first of which, introduced and predominantly authored by György Endre Szőnyi, comprises various discourses on different elements of Renaissance English society and culture, including dress codes, discoveries, transfers of knowledge, science, occultism, and music etc. The second part is based on comprehensive yet not encyclopaedic reviews of literary genres, in which Miklós Péti, Zsolt Almási and Attila Atilla Kiss edited all chapters on poetry, prose and drama, respectively. The third part, introduced and edited by Natália Pikli, targets the afterlife of Renaissance literature as well as the Shakespearean legacy in academic circles.

One of the merits of this volume is the editorial decision to give voice to Hungarian scholars at their best. Thus, it does not take Hungarian readers by surprise that Miklós Péti is the author of chapters on early modern poetics, the influence of medieval poetry on early Tudor poetry, country house poems, and also the heritage of individual poets including John Skelton, Ben Jonson, the Cavalier poets, and John Milton before 1645. Among the chapters that Zsolt Almási wrote, the ones on apologetic prose, Thomas Nashe, the novels of Thomas Deloney, and the influence of the internet and digital humanities on Shakespeare scholarship are the most memorable. Attila Atilla Kiss displays his academic expertise on a wide range of topics that include spectacles, emblematic thinking in early modern theatre, Thomas Kyd and Stuart drama. Tibor Fabiny contributes with chapters on the Reformation, Puritan attacks on theatres, and emblem theory, while Péter Benedek Tóta shares his understanding of works by Thomas More, and Zoltán Márkus discusses the theatrical history of the period. Péter Szaffkó explores English national history on stage; András Kiséry reviews up-to-date academic knowledge on Renaissance orality and book printing, theatres in and outside of London, and the role of religious and political concerns that resulted in the closure of theatres; and Géza Kállay authors the chapter on the changes in Shakespeare scholarship over the centuries. Natália Pikli voices her academic insights on different aspects of popular culture and *The Merchant of Venice*, while Kinga Földváry is the author of the chapters on Tudor chronicles, Elizabethan comedies, and Shakespeare on film. Ágnes Matuska discusses early Tudor drama and the culture of the court, and Erzsébet Stróbl assesses the cult of Queen Elizabeth as well as the popularity of John Lyly's *Euphues* in the 1580s. Another merit of this volume is that it provided early-stage and emerging scholars with the opportunity to share the high-quality outcome of their academic research falling within the scope of the volume. Thus, Anikó Oroszlán surveys female authors in the early modern period; Ágnes BonácZ gives overviews of both pastorals and religious poetry in the first half of the 17th century; and Balázs Szigeti elaborates on his findings about the canonisation of Shakespeare. Last but not least, Annamária Hódosy, Bence Levente Bodó, Dávid Marno and Csaba Maczelka contributed chapters on sonnets, epyllions, metaphysical poetry and 16th-century utopias, respectively.

Although both volumes of the handbook series display an impressive diversity of scholarly and critical opinion, they have slightly different goals, which derive from the particular features of those two historical eras that they cover. While the editors and contributors of the first volume in the series intend to answer the question when and how texts become not only English but also works of literature, the second volume is more interested in shedding new light on texts that are either familiar to Hungarian readers or are most likely to attract interest. Perhaps the only feature that readers may regret is that, in spite of contemporary publication trends, this fascinating storehouse of Hungarian academic knowledge is currently not available in an electronic format to simplify the consulting and referencing process and thus make it more convenient.