

ENGLISH LITERATURE AND ITS HUNGARIAN RECEPTION

Az angol irodalom története. Vols. III and IV. Az 1640-es évektől az 1830-as évekig. [‘History of English Literature. Vols. III and IV. From the 1640s to the 1830s.’] 2 vols. Edited by Zsolt Komáromy, Bálint Gárdos and Miklós Péti. Editors in chief: Tamás Bényei and Géza Kállay. Budapest: Kijárat, 2021. Pp. 516 and 412. ISBN: 978-615-5160-79-0, 978-615-5160-80-6.

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With the recent publication of the first four volumes of *Az angol irodalom története* (‘History of English Literature’¹) and three more volumes coming soon, a long-overdue project—the brainchild of the late Géza Kállay—is nearing completion. The last endeavour that aimed at synthesising the long and variegated history of English literature into an informative and thorough yet manageably sized book for the Hungarian public was in 1972, when Miklós Szenczi, Tibor Szobotka and Anna Katona published *Az angol irodalom története*. This was a single-volume study of 700 pages—roughly the same length as the two volumes (volumes 3 and 4) under review here, which “only” cover the period between 1640 and 1830. (The first two volumes deal with the medieval and Renaissance periods, while the last three will address the literature of the past two centuries.)

Although seemingly excessive, the 800-page count sounds much more reasonable if we consider that the volumes cover nearly 200 years: they include the overview and analysis of such diverse literary works as *Samson Agonistes*, *The Rape of the Lock* and *Frankenstein*, all the while aiming at incorporating and introducing lesser-known figures from the period. The study encompasses the periods traditionally known as the Commonwealth, the Restoration, the Augustan Age, the Age of Johnson and Romanticism in their entirety, as well as including the end of the Renaissance and offering a few remarks on the early Victorian era.

Az angol irodalom története: Az 1640-es évektől az 1830-as évekig features an ensemble of 29 authors, all of them experts in the field of English studies. Despite the large number of authors and the careful coordination that a project of such magnitude requires, the tone of the books is smooth and homogeneous; there are no jarring stylistic jumps between chapters written by different authors. The sense

¹ For the purposes of this review, I have translated the title of the Hungarian series and all relevant quotations into English – Brigitta Gyimesi.

of unity is also promoted by the extensive use of cross-references alongside the main body of the text to other chapters throughout the volumes of the series. This hypertextual quality, besides the detailed index at the end of each volume, facilitates nonlinear reading: interconnections between different chapters are explicitly pointed out to the reader, which amplifies the searchability and, by extension, the usefulness of the book. This approach, as acknowledged by the authors as well, inevitably breeds repetition, but their actual number throughout the study is kept to a bare minimum.

The combination of length, the amount of literary texts covered and the high number of authors has led to one disadvantage: there is a slight but perceptible bias towards the poetry of the period, with 270 pages comprising the “Poetry” section, as opposed to 180 pages of “Prose” (of which 100 pages deal explicitly with novels), and 100 pages of “Drama.” Thus, for instance, while 14 pages are dedicated to the life and working environment of Wordsworth and Coleridge, with their numerous works analysed separately elsewhere, the biography and oeuvre of Richardson, Fielding and Sterne are discussed in six pages *in toto*, with a few cursory allusions elsewhere in the volumes. There is a separate section in the first volume for “authorial circles,” which aims to show the context in which famous figureheads lived and created (Gárdos et al 1:140),² but all of these circles bear the names of poets. One explanation might be the prestigious status poetry enjoyed during these two centuries, whereas prose, and especially novels, were considered for a long time a middle- or even lowbrow form of literature. Since writing poetry was essentially the only means of attaining fame and prestige, talented authors chose to engage in poetic endeavours, resulting in a higher number of poetic works worthy of inspection. But given that the birth and rise of the novel occurred in the period under scrutiny—indeed, the publication and consumption of novels increased exponentially throughout the decades, as is mentioned several times by the various authors of the volume (Hartvig 2:188; Ruttkay 2:267 and 2:272)—more might have been said on the characteristics of individual novelistic approaches. Judging by the cross-references within the prose section, however, readers can hope for a more balanced treatment of poetry and fiction in the forthcoming volumes.

The structure of the study is based on a threefold chronology, with each successive run through the years becoming more and more detailed. First, there is a general overview of the canonical periods covered in the study, which contrasts them with the traditional Hungarian/European periods. The next subsection starts again from the beginning: it does not yet address specific authors or texts but gives an indispensable insight into the historical, religious, philosophical, social, artistic and

² All references to the various chapters of *Az angol irodalom története: Az 1640-es évektől az 1830-as évekig* include the author's name in an acknowledgement of their contribution.

scientific milieu of the period, contextualising the works that will be analysed in the later sections. The sections mentioned so far could be useful even for readers who do not specialise in English literature but wish to expand their general knowledge of the era without being bogged down by lengthy literary analyses. Next comes the section of the above-mentioned “authorial circles,” which is followed by the “Poetry,” “Drama” and “Prose” sections (“Drama” and “Prose” comprising the second volume), each of which starts again from the 17th century but now concentrates exclusively on literature.

One of the chief concepts governing the study is continuity, as opposed to segmentation and rigid categorisation, which many of the authors emphasise in their respective chapters. The study discards the idea that authors can be assigned to a single stylistic period with well-defined boundaries. This approach would risk placing contemporaneous authors within different literary periods, which in turn gives the illusion of total separation. The governing idea applied here, instead, is that of stylistic coexistence: authors living around the same time constantly influence each other, and periods that are traditionally considered incompatible (such as “Neoclassicism” and “Romanticism”) are, in fact, developing side-by-side for decades on end. This approach also means the rejection of the “revolutionary event” principle, which has been governing Western periodisation, i.e. that one event, or a limited number of nearly contemporaneous events (e.g. the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads*), marks out such a shift in history that the birth of a new period must be announced from that moment on (Komáromy 1:31–33).

Another key endeavour of the study is the revision and expansion of the artistic canon by employing “alternative and subversive reading methods that are, at least in Hungary, often met with strong resistance” (Gárdos et al 1:69). Apart from the well-known personages of the period, the volumes include numerous lesser-known or marginalised authors. Notwithstanding the word “English” in the title, there is a welcome effort to introduce Scottish and Irish authors and historical events,³ and there is an even greater emphasis on incorporating female writers and thinkers into the mainstream, male-dominated history of literature. Women, both in terms of readership and authorship, had a considerable influence on the literary market of the 17th and 18th centuries: their reading habits governed publishing trends and they could, and indeed did, become celebrated authors. At the beginning of the 19th century, however, women were re-confined to the house and the private sphere; thus, their previous achievements as well as their relative liberty were practically

³ For more information on the connotations of the word “English,” see Tamás Bényei’s clarification in the first volume of the series: *A középkor irodalma a kezdetektől a 15. század végéig*, edited by Tamás Káráth and Katalin Halácsy (Budapest: Kijarat Kiadó, 2020), 20–23.

censored from later texts and remained forgotten until well into the 20th century (Komáromy 1:62; Pálincás 1:225–26). The rediscovery of these female texts is still a work in progress, but the consequences of this process have already been reflected upon in the present study. It should not only bring about a re-assessment of the traditional period features (Pálincás 1:229), but also provoke a reconsideration of the role women played in historical events (Séllei 2:227–28) and in the development of the novelistic genre (Séllei 2:229).

The quest for expanding the canon is discernible in terms of genres, as well. The prose section discusses texts that today fall outside the category of what we call “literature.” Back then, however, they were not peripheral but integral to literature and culture *per se*—one should think here of genres like diaries, autobiographies, letters, pamphlets, treatises, ethical, religious and philosophical texts, and even scientific works. There is a separate chapter on musical dramatic genres, which are often mentioned only perfunctorily in drama anthologies, and two refreshing and illuminating chapters are dedicated to the history of painting and landscape gardening, both of which wielded a huge influence on the literature of the period.

Although circumstances have changed enormously since 1830, many aspects of our 21st-century life that today we take for granted came into existence during the period covered in the study. Besides being the cradle of the modern novel, this was a period of semantic shifts when many of our concepts acquired their modern meaning. Definitions of such fundamental concepts as “literature,” “author and reader” and “text” underwent a slow but unstoppable change (for these changes in detail see Komáromy 1:36, 1:50 and 1:53). These two centuries were also the age of institutionalisation. The idea of the public library was born, facilitating the emergence of an ever-expanding readership (Hartvig 2:115); the publishing industry and the spread of periodicals and journals have their roots in this period; and the birth of the modern literary critic and the demand for critical pieces, without which this present review could not have been written, can also be dated back to this time. By the early 19th century, “modern science, with its peculiar system of institutions, forms of communication and publishing practices (e.g. peer-review) had evolved” (Zemplén 2:168).

The two-volume *Az angol irodalom története az 1640-es évektől az 1830-as évekig* is an accessible companion for university students and interested readers alike. It can be purchased from Kijárat Kiadó, with the last three volumes expected to come out in 2023.