

BOOK REVIEW

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This impressive collection of essays in *Ethno-Lore*, the Yearbook of the Institute of Ethnology of the Research Centre for the Humanities, is an excellent contribution to the field of folklore and literature that brings new insights into the ever-problematic distinction between popular and high culture. It has been occasioned by the bicentenary celebrations of the birth of János Arany (1817–1882), a defining voice of nineteenth-century literature elevated to the status of Hungary's national poet during his lifetime. The main objective of this conference proceeding comprising fifteen papers, a preface, and an introduction is to evaluate the presence of folkloristic elements in János Arany's oeuvre and the intersection of his writings with other forms of popular literature.

The discovery of folk culture during the nineteenth century, similar to other European countries, was an integral part of emerging Hungarian nationalism. The collection and research of folklore took off on a large scale during this time when folk culture was considered the very embodiment of the nature and character of a nation. Consequently, many Hungarian writers and poets of the so called 'popular-national' school, including János Arany, participated in the discourse of popular and national literature. They addressed the issue of the poetry of 'the people' and the possibilities of a return to it for the purposes of creating a 'national' literature. They also conceptualized the notion of 'popular-national' poetry, a kind of polished literature that self-consciously uses elements of folk or popular poetry in order to renew itself. Thus, during his successful career as Hungary's national poet, János Arany, an intellectual with a rural agricultural background, returned to popular tradition on many occasions in order to integrate its elements into a more cultivated 'national' literature. Arany, however, not only incorporated certain elements of folk poetry and popular literature into his work, but contributed to the discovery of popular culture on many other levels. As editor of two prestigious journals, *Szépirodalmi Figyelő* [Literary Observer] (1860–1862) and *Koszorú* [Garland] (1863–1865), he promoted the importance of the budding Hungarian folktale collections, while also publishing reviews of contemporaneous foreign collections of folklore materials. As head of the Kisfaludy Society, a literary society founded in 1836 in Pest and a major advocate of Hungarian literary life in the second half of the nineteenth century, Arany also encouraged the publication of

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collections of folktales. Additionally, he created his own *Dalgyűjtemény* [Songbook] in the 1870s (published posthumously in 1952), in which he recorded popular and folk songs that he remembered from his childhood and adolescence. Finally, many of his own works of poetry became popularized on the pages of nineteenth-century chapbooks or were used as political propaganda in twentieth-century communist education. As demonstrated by the papers in this volume, János Arany's entire oeuvre illustrates the plurality of overlapping cultures (popular culture as a quasi-mythical, rural 'folk culture,' or 'mass culture,' and a high culture becoming a significant institutional space in the second half of the nineteenth century), as well as the multiplicity and diversity of all cultural activity.

Accordingly, the authors of this volume explore not only the uses of certain folk motifs in János Arany's poetry, but also his engagement with other forms of popular literature, the popularization of his own works, as well as his family's involvement in the nineteenth-century collecting, recording, editing, and publication of folktales. Studies that explore Arany's reworkings and adaptations of particular motifs and folk beliefs concentrate on revealing intertextual connections and their poetic function within the poet's own writings (*Szilágyi, Mikos*). Some of the papers investigate the combination of written sources, such as medieval legends, and oral narratives, highlighting the ethnographic and cultural historical contexts of Arany's poems (*Magyar, Iancu*). The blending of orally transmitted folk beliefs with written sources in the process of creating a narrative poem is also presented in one of the studies that consider the folkloristic aspects of János Arany's poetry. As a former attendee of Debrecen Reformed College, the poet not only had extensive knowledge of the orally transmitted folk legends that circulated among students but was also well acquainted with the manuscript culture that flourished within their circles, often making use of these sources when composing his poems (*Landgraf*). Other essays demonstrate that even when displaying a scholarly discourse, Arany benefitted from his knowledge of folk and popular poetry by quoting entire passages of songs and poems while reflecting on the theoretical issues of prosody, literary history, and linguistics. Most of these quotes are related to his *Dalgyűjtemény* compiled in the 1870s and offer valuable insights into the early nineteenth-century musical culture of their recorder (*Csörsz, Küllös*). One of the interpretations focusing on János Arany's editorial undertakings examines how the issue of foreign (mainly Finnish) folk poetry translations and reception is being addressed in Arany's periodicals. Moreover, these translations were closely related to questions about the creation of the 'Hungarian literary language,' an idealized mixture of native and translated folk poetry for the sake of a more elaborate literary style (*Tamás*). Another examination of Arany's editorship presents his efforts to advocate for the significance of mid-nineteenth-century Hungarian folk poetry collections, with a special emphasis on the editor's Transylvanian network of collectors (*Szakál*).

Studies in this collection reveal that János Arany not only relied on his comprehensive understanding of folklore while composing his own works of poetry, but he himself contributed to the production of popular literature, and his own works became popularized in diverse media and historical contexts. Arany wrote several occasional poems throughout his career, and as a practitioner of light verse, he composed humorous short poems on trivial or playful themes aimed at entertaining and amusing his readers (*Czövek*). In other instances, he adapted chapbook narratives while writing his poems, but his own verses were also occasionally recycled and thus popularized on the pages of nineteenth-century chapbooks (*Chikány*). Finally, the collection also discloses how twentieth-century communist propaganda recontextualized the poet's



works through textual and visual elements for the purposes of cultural and political education of the 'working classes' (Eitler).

A final set of articles asserts that János Arany's multifarious contribution to the discovery of folk culture in mid-nineteenth-century Hungary impacted his family members as well. As a result, his son, László Arany, became the collector and editor of one of the most influential folktale collections, *Eredeti népmesék* [Original Folktales] published in 1862. Even more interestingly, the majority of these folktales, which included 79 riddles (of which only 54 were eventually published), were recorded by his mother and sister in the 1850s. Besides collecting folktales, László Arany formulated relevant principles for the publication of folktale collections in his reviews written in the 1860s, and elaborated his own concept of the folktale. Similar to many of János Arany's poems, László's tales, following their publication, were instantly popularized on the pages of children's books, fairy tale collections, and nineteenth-century textbooks, and have remained representative elements of this particular segment of the book market to this day (*Gulyás, Domokos, Vargha*).

All in all, this collection of fifteen papers examining the relationship of folklore and literature in the output of Hungary's most canonical poet offers useful findings for the study of overlaps between popular and elite culture. János Arany's mastery of various folkloristic elements alongside the practices of high literature, as well as the popularization of his own works supports the idea of shared cultures and a cultural interaction between high and low, learned and less learned. The studies in this volume all reinforce the idea of the circularity and appropriation of culture between different groups, with careful attention to transmission and exchange between orality and manuscript and print cultures. To conclude, this special issue of Ethno-Lore on the points of intersection of János Arany's oeuvre with folklore and popular literature is of remarkable significance for the multivalent character of culture that involves complex processes of acculturation, appropriation, assimilation, competition, control, dissemination, evaluation, or rejection of any given set of cultural values or practices.

