

THE HISTORY OF HUNGARIAN LITERATURE IN THE ROMANIAN-HUNGARIAN TRANSCULTURAL CONTEXT: HUNGARIAN LITERATURE IN THE BAROQUE ERA



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Abstract: *The study presents the history of Hungarian literature from the Baroque era from a Romanian-Hungarian transcultural perspective. The importance of the study is revealed by the fact that even today there is no history of Hungarian literature in Romanian. Attempts so far have been sporadic and primarily aimed only at Hungarian literature in Romania, or only at some Romanian-Hungarian literary confluences. Due to this fact, a group of Hungarian philologists from universities and research institutes in Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia and Germany decided to write a history of Hungarian literature. The work under preparation will not be a literary history in the classical sense of the term, but will be a history of Hungarian literature dedicated specifically to the Romanian public. The history of Hungarian literary phenomena will be presented in a Romanian-Hungarian transcultural context. The present study is a chapter of this monograph.*

Keywords: History of Hungarian literature, Baroque in literature and art, rhetoric, comparative literature, transculturality, Romanian-Hungarian literary confluences

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1. Introduction

To this day, there is no history of Hungarian literature in Romanian. Attempts so far have been sporadic and have focused primarily on Hungarian literature in Romania¹, or on Romanian-Hungarian literary confluences such as “Ady Endre or Petőfi Sándor in Hungarian literature”, etc.² The most serious presentation of Hungarian literature for the Romanian public is found in the Dictionary of 20th Century Central European Novels, except that the 14 prose writers and 21 novels presented in the volume — as the title suggests — are authors and works from the

¹ Chinezu 1930; Balotă 1996.

² Todor 1983; Köllő 1993; Popa 1998; Pomogáts 2002; Trifescu, 2022; Nagy 2015.

20th century³. There is almost nothing available in Romanian about Hungarian literature from the Middle Ages to the end of World War I. The only exception is the monograph by Kristóf György (professor of Hungarian literature at the University of Cluj between 1922 and 1945)⁴, which unfortunately was a total failure: neither at the time of publication nor later was it read by almost anyone, and today even philologists are unaware of it and do not refer to it. This is primarily due to the fact that the book was written in Romanian full of forced Hungarianisms and grammatical errors. Because of this, a group of Hungarian philologists from universities and research institutes in Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Germany decided to write a history of Hungarian literature. The work in progress will not be a literary history in the classical sense of the term, but will be a history of Hungarian literature dedicated specifically to the Romanian public. The history of Hungarian literary phenomena will be presented in a Romanian-Hungarian transcultural context.

Thus, the history of Hungarian literature will not be considered a history that unfolds in a vacuum, separate from the evolution of Romanian literature. We emphasize those literary and cultural phenomena through which Hungarian literature is linked not only to the literatures of Western Europe, but primarily to those of Central Europe.

2. Baroque and Hungarian Literature – Historical and Artistic Context

The characteristics of Hungarian literature during the Baroque period (17th–18th centuries) were strongly influenced by the situation in which the Hungarian state found itself at the time. The medieval Hungarian kingdom began to fall apart after the fatal battle of Mohács in 1526 and the occupation of the kingdom's capital (the city of Buda) in 1541. On August 29 1526, the Hungarian army suffered a catastrophic defeat on the plain near the town of Mohács at the hands of the Ottoman army led by Suleiman the Magnificent. Seven bishops and 30 high-ranking prelates were left dead on the battlefield. The young king of Hungary, Louis II (1506-1526) – whose secretary was Nicolaus Olahus – drowned in the Csele stream, which had overflowed due to rain. The lost battle was the main cause of the collapse of the medieval Hungarian Kingdom. Gheorghe Șincai considered the disaster at Mohács a true catastrophe also for “the poor Romanians of Transylvania, who because of this defeat now groan under the heavy yoke of the earthly lords”⁵. In other words, according to Șincai, the Romanian serfs of the Grand Principality of Transylvania at the end of the 18th century had a worse fate than those of the Hungarian Kingdom. The battle had a great

³ Babeți 2022.

⁴ Kristóf 1934.

⁵ Șincai 1969, 204.

impact on Hungarian folklore and literature. There is hardly a notable Hungarian writer who has not written something about the disaster at Mohács. This tradition gave rise to the following saying, first recorded in 1844: *Több is veszett Mohácsnál.* – Even more was lost at Mohács. That is, we should not be saddened if misfortune strikes us, because the greatest misfortune that befell the Hungarians was the Battle of Mohács, which the Hungarians managed to overcome.

After two disasters (the Battle of Mohács and the occupation of Buda, the country's capital), the central and southeastern parts of the medieval Hungarian Kingdom became a pashalic and were integrated into the Ottoman Empire. The southwestern and northeastern parts of medieval Hungary were incorporated into the Habsburg Monarchy. From the medieval voivodeship of Transylvania and some areas of Sătmar, Maramureş, and Banat (Partium), a state was formed under the name of the Principality of Transylvania, which was independent but at the same time a vassal of the Ottoman Empire until 1690. The legal status of the Principality of Transylvania was similar in many respects to that of the two Romanian principalities: like Moldavia and Wallachia, Transylvania paid tribute to the sultan. In 1686, the city of Buda was liberated from the Ottoman rule. By the end of the century, Austrian and Hungarian troops had recovered all the territories of the old Hungarian kingdom occupied by the Ottomans. After 1690, Transylvania was integrated into the Habsburg Monarchy under the name of the Grand Principality of Transylvania. Its status as an autonomous principality within the Habsburg Monarchy was maintained until the outbreak of the 1848 revolution.

The anecdote below vividly illustrates the essential feature of Baroque art and literature. If someone in Rome enters an old church and sees a beautiful reddish marble column from afar, and upon approaching the column realizes that it is indeed made of marble, then we are talking about a Renaissance column. If, in another church in Rome, we see another beautiful reddish marble column from a distance, and as we approach it we realize that it is actually a column made of wood but painted red, then that column is a Baroque column. In other words, the main method of Baroque art and literature is the creation of illusions. All Baroque literature strives to demonstrate that nothing is what it seems at first glance. Thus, for example, the authors of religious writings tried to convince their readers/ listeners (in the case of sermons) that evil is not evil. That is, the sufferings and trials that man goes through are not bad things, but are in fact signs of God's grace. Suffering even becomes the condition for salvation: "I [God] mock and torment those whom I love. From this you will know that you are not bastards, but my sons and daughters, that is, my chosen ones", wrote Count Bethlen Miklós (1642-1716), one of the most important Hungarian memoirists of the time, in his prayer book.⁶

⁶ Bethlen 1955, 230.

To accomplish this nearly impossible task, Baroque writers resorted to rhetoric. Since ancient times, rhetoric, being the art of persuasion, aimed to influence the reader /listener through teaching (*docere*), emotion (*movere*), and entertainment (*delectare*). In Baroque literature, the emphasis is on emotion and entertainment. To achieve the desired effect, writers mainly used aphorisms, metaphors, and amusing expressions. The most commonly used metaphor in Baroque poetry is the so-called *conchetto*, which meant comparing and connecting bizarre things that at first glance had no connection⁷. For example, in a poem (*A Vadász és Echo – The Hunter and Echo*) by Zrínyi Miklós (1620-1664), the legs of the beloved woman are compared to the Pillars of Hercules (which in ancient and Baroque literature metaphorically referred to the rocks in the Strait of Gibraltar), and the act of love is described as an analogy of the collapse of a marble palace: “Two beautiful legs/ Unmatched under the sun/ With those she walks./ Hercules’ column/ Which is non plus ultra/ Resembles them./ I wished for my beautiful marble palace/ To fall into my arms/ As Samson’s fell.”⁸

In the quoted stanza, certain elements are metaphorically linked — parts of the human body with geographical concepts, biblical characters (Samson) and mythological characters (Hercules) — with the beloved woman and the lyrical self, elements that, based on everyday logic, are mutually exclusive. The combination of the world of ancient mythology with the world of the Christian Bible is also a characteristic feature of Baroque literature. This literary heterodoxy results in the disappearance of perspective and unified discourse in the representation and description of reality. Discourse about reality becomes more important than reality itself, facts being replaced by interpretations, arguments by feelings, and experience by illusion. Religion is divided into denominations, and in political discourse, ethics is replaced by propaganda and manipulation. In Baroque literature, contradictions are present simultaneously: heroism is mixed with irony, and firm faith with doubt. The canonical characters of Hungarian literature from the Baroque era are representatives of these paradigms at different stages.

3. Pázmány Péter (1570-1637)

One of these writers is Pázmány Péter, the most prominent representative of Hungarian religious prose of that period. He was born in Oradea into a Calvinist family, but converted to Catholicism at the age of 12. He began his studies at the Jesuit gymnasium in Cluj, then continued in Krakow, Vienna, and Rome. After completing his studies, he began his academic career at the University of Graz. In 1616, he became

⁷ Kibédi 1964, 34-52.

⁸ See the original: Zrínyi 1958, 379.

Archbishop of Strigonia (Esztergom), and in 1629, he was appointed cardinal by Pope Urban VIII. He made significant contributions to both the institutional reorganization of the Roman Catholic Church and the reform of Catholic education in Hungary. In 1623, he founded the Catholic college for seminarians in Hungary in Vienna, which still operates today under the name Collegium Pazmanianum. After the union of the Transylvanian Romanians with the Church of Rome in the 18th and 19th centuries, several prominent Greek Catholic intellectuals studied at the college: Samuil Micu, Ioan Giurgiu Patachi, Atanasie Rednic, etc. The first university to survive on the territory of the Hungarian Kingdom was also founded by Pázmány in Nagyszombat (Tranava, Slovakia) in 1635. In the 17th century, the university had a Romanian student: Gabriel Ivul (1619/ 1620–1678) from Caransebeș, who was also dean of the Faculty of Theology between 1669 and 1672.⁹

Pázmány was a prolific writer: he penned no fewer than 40 theological disputes (the most popular genre of religious literature at the time, in which authors addressed both religious and confessional issues, as well as certain political problems). All were written in Hungarian and saw the light of print. The importance of this fact can be understood when we consider that, at the time, the language of science and theology was still Latin and that the vast majority of texts were not printed. The fact that Pázmány wrote these disputations in Hungarian and that they were published contributed to a previously unknown dissemination of Pázmány's works, which also brought considerable notoriety to the author, to whom his opponents in the Protestant camp – Magyari István (1565-1605), preacher in Sárvár; Alvinczi Péter (1570-1634), court preacher to prince Ștefan Bocskai (1605-1606) and Gabriel Bethlen (1613-1629) – were forced to respond.

The main issue of the dispute was: who was to blame for the collapse of medieval Hungary? The Catholic Church had strayed from the original teachings of Christ, thus sinking into an ocean of sin. Seeing this, God sent the Turks to punish the sinful Hungarians, so the Ottoman occupation of the country was God's punishment for the sins committed by the Catholics, argued the Protestant preachers. During the reign of the Catholic kings (from St. Stephen to Matthias Corvinus), Hungary was a large and powerful state, Pázmány replied, and the country's decline began with the emergence and spread of Protestantism in Hungary. God's punishment is therefore due to the fact that Protestants rebelled against the true religion, which is, of course, Catholicism.

A selective collection of these disputes was published in 1613 in Pozsony (Bratislava, Slovakia) under the title *Isteni igazságra vezérlő kalauz* (Guide to Divine Truth). It became a very popular work: during Pázmány's lifetime alone, it was reprinted twice. This collection also contains two appendices, namely two works in

⁹ Radosav 2003, 123-154.

which Pázmány directs his arrows against Muslims (*A Mahomet vallásáról* – On the Religion of Mohammed) and the Orthodox (*A görögök szakadásáról* – On the Schism of the Greeks). He characterized the situation of the Eastern Church:

The Eastern Church is the noble part of Christianity, but it rebelled against the Roman Church, being rewarded for this rebellion on our part with great tenderness, and on the part of the Turks with slavery¹⁰.

The main reason for writing this short work was the fact that “not only outside Hungary, but also within it, there are some Christians of the Greek rite, such as the Russians, Serbs, and Vlachs, who are of Roman descent”¹¹. In his work *On the Schism of the Greeks*, he deals most extensively with the issue of the procession of the Holy Spirit, trying to prove that the holy fathers also accepted the filioque thesis, according to which the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son (Jesus). The work *On the Schism of the Greeks* must be placed in the context of Catholic propaganda supported by the Habsburgs, propaganda that aimed to unite the Orthodox Christians in Hungary and Transylvania with the Church of Rome, a union that would only be achieved among the Romanians of Transylvania at the end of the 17th century.

Apart from his disputes, we must mention two other important works by Pázmány: *Imádságoskönyv* – Prayer Book, Graz, 1606; and a volume of sermons (*Prédikációk*, Pozsony, 1636). The prayer book was intended for parishioners for the practice of individual piety. With the other volume, Pázmány wanted to help ordinary priests in writing the sermons that were delivered in churches. The volume contained a total of 101 sermons and 12 meditations on a wide variety of topics (drunkenness, raising children, crime, lust, slander, the devil’s temptations, etc.) aimed at the social discipline of parishioners. In the preface to the volume, Pázmány describes the techniques of writing sermons. His theses are important not only from the point of view of religious rhetoric, but also from that of literary communication. According to Pázmány’s theses, the main purpose of the sermon is not so much to convince the listener to accept abstract truths, but rather to enable him to realize in his daily life those truths (those good deeds) about which the priest spoke in his sermon. The sermon should be short, its style adapted to the cultural level of the listeners, and the priest should be knowledgeable. The most important thing, however, is the person of the priest, who must be morally impeccable, because parishioners “are more interested in the priest’s deeds than in his words”, so “a priest who does not live according to the stated precepts will destroy moral conduct of his parishioners.”¹²

¹⁰ Pázmány 1898, 359.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Pázmány 1903, XXXII.

The popularity and success of Pázmány's works was so great that some sermons and prayers were even adopted by Protestant writers, without citing the source. The Protestants' plagiarism was later exposed by Pázmány himself, thus the first dispute over plagiarism in Hungarian literature arose around Pázmány's works¹³. Pázmány's success and popularity were due in no small part to his talent as a prose writer and the lively style of his writings. We offer a single example to illustrate this point. Both he and his Calvinist opponent Alvinczi Péter repeatedly condemned drunkenness. Here is what Alvinczi wrote on this subject:

Look around you and see how many healthy people you find among the elderly. Where are the wise men? Where are the strong men? Nowhere, because they have all perished because of wine¹⁴.

Here is Pázmány's text:

If we took the entire army of the Ottoman emperor and led it into a large valley, and then flooded the valley with the amount of wine that was drunk at the various celebrations for Hungary's freedom, we would not need a flood [allusion to the biblical flood] to destroy the Turks, because the entire Ottoman army in that valley would drown in wine¹⁵.

Melancholic questions in a morose style in Alvinczi, an ingenious metaphor cloaked in bitter irony in Pázmány.

4. Zrínyi Miklós (1620-1664)

Literary legend has it that Zrínyi was Pázmány's disciple. In reality, the cardinal was "only" the chairman of the council that coordinated the careers of the Zrínyi brothers: Miklós and Péter. This council was formed after their father died in 1626 and the two minor brothers were placed under the council's guardianship. The Zrínyi family converted to Lutheranism in the second half of the 16th century, but Miklós's father, Zrínyi György, returned to Catholicism under Pázmány's personal influence. Thus, Miklós studied at the Jesuit colleges in Nagyszombat, Graz, and Vienna. After completing his studies in 1636, he took a long trip to Italy. This study trip was also organized by Pázmány. At the intervention of Cardinal Zrínyi, he was also received in audience by Pope Urban VIII, who, under the name of Maffeo Barberini, was also an important poet of the time. The volume of poems he received from the pope (*Poemata*, 1634) had a remarkable influence on Zrínyi's literary work¹⁶. Returning from Italy in 1648, he was elected Ban of Croatia, thus becoming, after the

¹³ Hargittay 2001, 251; Maczák 2003, 261-276

¹⁴ Alvinczi 1634, 342.

¹⁵ Pázmány 1903, 291.

¹⁶ Szörényi 2017, 449-460.

king and palatine, the third highest-ranking official in the Kingdom of Hungary, Croatia being part of the Kingdom of Hungary at the time.

His literary career also began during this period: in 1651, he published a volume in Vienna entitled *Adriai tengernelk Syrenaja: Groff Zrínyi Miklós* (*The Siren of the Adriatic Sea: Count Zrínyi Miklós*). This title suggests that it is an autobiographical volume. And indeed, the volume is structured in such a way that its composition reveals a lyrical biography of the Siren, that is, of the poet Zrínyi, the Siren being the allegorical name of the poet. However, this biography does not recount the life of the poet's body, but rather that of his soul, which first suffers because of love and then, in order to escape this suffering, goes to war, but even then does not escape. When his soul reaches despair because of love, like the mythological hero Orpheus, he descends into Hell, from where, like Christ, he is reborn, after which he bids farewell to both love and poetry, declaring at the end of the volume that he will continue to fight and sacrifice himself for the good of his country: "But I will not make my name with a pen alone,/ But with my sword, striking down the Ottoman race:/ As long as I live, I will fight to defeat the crescent moon –/ I will rest happily in my ancestral grave."¹⁷

The first poems in the volume are love poems, in which the lyrical self's love is rejected by a fictional woman named Viola. After this failed romantic assault, the lyrical self devotes himself to a military career, which is recounted in the epic poem *Obsidio Sighetiana* (*The Siege of Sziget*). In the epic's peroration, the author makes a direct reference to the love poems that were placed in the volume before the epic, suggesting to the reader that the composition of the volume is not random: "With my young mind before/ I played with sweet love poetry/ I struggled with Viola's cruelty/ But now with the louder voice of Mars/ I sing of battles and the soldier..."¹⁸

The epic tells a true story: in 1566, the fortress of Sziget was besieged by the Ottoman army led by Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566) himself. The captain of the fortress was none other than the poet's great-grandfather (also named Zrínyi Miklós). The garrison of the fortress, led by Captain Zrínyi, seeing that they could no longer hold the fortress, launched a suicidal counterattack and were slaughtered by the Turks. During the siege, Suleiman fell ill (probably with diarrhea) and died. In the invocation of the epic, the poet asks his muse, who is none other than

¹⁷ Translation by Dan George in Olariu, 1965, 264.

¹⁸ The translation is mine. For the Hungarian original, see: Zrínyi 1958, 35. Several fragments from *Obsidio Sighetiana* were also translated by George Dan, who, however, strays too far from the original text. I quote this version as well:

"I, who in my youth, impetuous by nature,
Played only with the sweet love of the nymphs,
My chest beating with Viola, my dear, cruelly caressing me;
From today I will shout fierce words with Mars,
I will sing the brave..."
(Olariu 1965, 251.)

the Holy Virgin herself, to give him the strength to write the truth and only the truth: “Muse! You, who do not wear a crown of laurels, which wither away, nor of branches that break on the crown — But from holy stars that will never set in the sky,/ And from the moon and the sun you weave your crown!/ You, who are the Virgin Mother and gave birth to the Child,/ who has been forever, and loves his son/ as the King of the world, and yours, Virgin,/ Holy Empress, send your mercy upon me.”¹⁹

After a few lines, he assures us that he will write the truth, because the one who dictates the events to him is none other than the Holy Spirit: “My hand writes the deeds of the ban [and his great-grandfather was the ban of Croatia]/ through the words of the Holy Spirit”²⁰. However, this promise is merely a rhetorical feint, because Zrínyi, following the aforementioned Baroque paradigm (nothing is what it seems), transcribes real events. Thus, contrary to historical reality, in the epic, Sultan Suleiman is killed directly by Captain Zrínyi, and the fall of the city into the hands of the Turks is presented not as a failure of the Hungarians, but as a victory, given that the souls of the fallen Hungarian martyr soldiers are taken by angels to heaven, while the souls of the Turkish soldiers and the sultan end up in hell. So defeat is actually victory, and victory is actually defeat.

The transcription of reality served, on the one hand, family and political propaganda, and, on the other hand, imitated certain literary topoi. Zrínyi's most direct model was Torquato Tasso's epic poem *Gerusalemme liberata* (Jerusalem Delivered, published in 1581), which also tells of a victory of Christians over pagans who hold the Holy Sepulchre of the Saviour under their rule. The basic concept of Zrínyi's epic is closely related to Pázmány's polemic with Protestant preachers. Zrínyi refutes Martin Luther's thesis that the conquest of Christian countries by the Ottomans is God's punishment for the sins committed by Christians. Therefore, the Turks are God's instrument and, for this reason, they are militarily invincible. The Christians' fight against them is futile as long as they do not repent and renounce their sins. Only after a moral and religious rebirth will Christians be helped by God in their anti-Ottoman struggles, Luther asserts²¹. In the epic, Zrínyi presents us precisely this moral metamorphosis of the soldiers of Sziget, who, through their sacrifice in the fight against the Turks, show the way for the entire Hungarian nobility: to abandon their

¹⁹ Olariu 1965, 251.

²⁰ Zrínyi 1958, 314.

²¹ Luther had already spoken about the Turkish threat as early as the 1520s, although he had no direct contact with Muslims. In the fall of 1529, Ottoman troops were at the gates of Vienna, which came as a shock to the whole of Western Europe at the time. The Turkish advance prompted Luther to write three works dealing with the issue of military resistance against the Turks: *Vom Kriege wider die Türken* (The War against the Turks, 1528), *Heerpredigt wider die Türken* (Army Sermon against the Turks, 1530); *Vermahnung zum Gebet wider den Türken* (Exhortation to Prayer against the Turks, 1541). For more on the reception and adaptation of Luther's ideas in the Hungarian context, see: Dobrovits – Óze 2020.

religious quarrels and sins, because in this way they will succeed in defeating the Turks and restoring Hungary's former glory.

Another autobiographical element linked to the publication of *Syrena* is the fact that the volume was dedicated to the memory of Zrínyi's wife (Draskovich Mária Euzsébia), who died at the age of 20 in 1650. The volume was published exactly one year after the end of the mourning period. Thus, in the volume, the epic is followed by several love poems in memory of Euzsébia. With these poems, the lyrical self definitively turns away from love, and the poet Zrínyi from literature. "My profession is not to write poems, but to do greater and better things in the service of my country", he wrote in the preface to the volume²². By these great and good things, we must understand his political and military actions. After the publication of *Syrena*, Zrínyi turned away from poetry for good. The four works he would go on to write – *Vitéz hadnagy* (The Brave Captain, 1647-1652), *Mátyás király életéről való elmélkedések* (Meditations on the Life of King Matthias, 1656-1657), *A török áfium ellen való orvosság* (Remedy against Turkish Opium, 1661-1663), *Tábori kis trakta* (Small Military Treatise, 1664) – are historical, moral-philosophical, and military works. All of them remained in manuscript form, thus having little influence apart from the pamphlet *Áfium*, which was copied several times.

The main source for *Meditations on the Life of King Matthias* was Antonio Bonfini's work *Rerum Ungaricarum decades*, completed in 1497 but first published in 1568. Where Bonfini discussed the Romanian origins of King Matthias' family, stating that the magnates of western Hungary (among whom Zrínyi belonged in the 17th century) reproached Matthias for his humble origins, saying that a "Wallachian ruler" (*regulus valachus*), Zrínyi made the following comment in the margin of Bonfini's text: "*ha disznó túrná is ki az embert, csak ember legyen -- It does not matter if someone is gnawed by a pig, as long as he is human*"²³. In other words, it does not matter what family someone comes from; when judging a person, what matters are their deeds and merits. In Zrínyi's view, it is irrelevant that Matia's family is of Romanian origin, as long as the members of this family are virtuous, exceptional people. A bizarre idea in the context of the 17th century, we might say, even protochronic.

In the winter of 1663-1664, Zrínyi led a glorious anti-Ottoman campaign. However, after initial successes, the Ottoman army counterattacked with great force, forcing the imperial army under the command of General Raimondo Montecucoli to intervene. In the battle of Szentgotthárd on August 1, 1664, Christian troops managed to stop the Ottoman army. Zrínyi, wounded in his pride by not being appointed commander-in-chief of all troops, did not participate in the battle, but withdrew to his

²² Zrínyi 1958, 9.

²³ Bibliotheca Zriniana, 164.

estate in Csáktornya²⁴. It is ironic that he, the brave soldier who was so eager to sacrifice himself on the battlefield fighting the Turks, was killed on November 18, 1664, in a tragicomic hunting accident by a wounded wild boar.

From a literary point of view, Zrínyi's most valuable work remains the volume *Syrena*. Its true aesthetic value would only be discovered in the 19th century thanks to prominent writers such as Kazinczy Ferenc, Kölcsey Ferenc, and Arany János. In the 17th century, Zrínyi had few readers. One of them was Gyöngyösi István.

5. Gyöngyösi István (1620-1704)

Gyöngyösi István was born into a Catholic noble family in Upper Hungary. He studied at the university founded by Pázmány in Nagyszombat. After completing his studies, he became a lawyer, spending his entire life in the service of aristocratic families. Between 1663 and 1670, he was secretary to Széchy Mária (1610-1679), wife of Palatine Wesselényi Ferenc (1605-1667). After Maria Gyöngyösi's death, he entered the service of the Andrassy family. All of Gyöngyösi's literary works are either about the lives of these aristocrats or dedicated to them. Gyöngyösi's first work, *Márssal társalkodó Murányi Vénus* (The Alliance of Venus of Murány with Mars), published in 1664 in Kassa (Košice, Slovakia)²⁵, is a novel in verse that tells the story of the marriage of Wesselényi (Mars) to Széchy Mária (Venus). The marriage took place in 1644 and caused quite a stir at the time, due to the fact that it was also a political betrayal. In that year, Transylvanian Prince George Rákóczi I launched a military campaign to conquer Upper Hungary. Wesselényi, as captain of the fortress of Fülek (Filakovo, Slovakia), was a supporter of the Habsburgs. However, the Széchy family's fortress in Murány (Muránsky hrad, Slovakia) was under Rákóczi's control. The prince was deceived by Széchy Mária, who surrendered the fortress to Wesselényi without any resistance. Two to three weeks after the capture of the fortress, Mária married Wesselényi.

Gyöngyösi next work, *Porábúl megéledett Főnix* (The Phoenix Reborn from its Own Ashes, written in 1670 and published in 1693)²⁶, recounts the marriage and heroic death of Transylvanian prince Ioan Kemény (1607–1662). Kemény married Lónyai Anna (died in 1687 or 1693) in 1659, and two years later he was elected prince of Transylvania. Gyöngyösi's verse novel depicts Kemény's battles with the Ottoman army. In the final battle at Nagyszőlős (Seleuş, Mureş County) on January 22, 1662, Kemény fell from his horse and died. In the two novels in verse, real historical events and characters are presented in a mythological context. Thus, for example, Wesselényi is characterized as follows: "His shoulders are like those of Atlas, and his

²⁴ Căzan 2005.

²⁵ Modern edition: Gyöngyösi 1998.

²⁶ Modern edition: Gyöngyösi 1999.

heart like that of Hercules/ His mind is like that of Antenor, and his speech like that of Ulysses/ He knows how to love like Paris, his stature resembles that of Titan/ In his home he is like Pylades, and he is Achilles on the battlefield.”²⁷

However, Captain Fülel did not carry the entire globe on his shoulders (like Atlas), he was not the son of Zeus, and he did not participate in a ten-year war like Paris, Achilles, or Ulysses. Wesselényi’s comparison with these mythical heroes adds a touch of irony to Gyöngyösi’s work. Just as the siege of Murány is a farce compared to the siege of Troy: when Wesselényi’s soldiers hear the first gunshots or encounter a bear, they get scared and run away. The irony and comedy are in stark contrast to the mythologization of the characters and events, but it is precisely because of this ambiguity that Gyöngyösi’s works were so successful in the 17th and 18th centuries, being reprinted several times. As the action of *The Reborn Phoenix* takes place in Transylvania, we find in the text of the novel some stereotypes about Transylvanian Romanians: they are robbers and cowards in battle, but they have good horses and beautiful, graceful dances²⁸. Their presence in Gyöngyösi shows that, at the time, these stereotypes were quite widespread, being known even to those Hungarian nobles and intellectuals who had no direct contact with Romanians (Gyöngyösi had never been to Transylvania).

On the other hand, the success of Gyöngyösi’s works is due to the fact that they describe scenes from the everyday life of the Hungarian nobility (marriage, weddings, hunting, parties, etc.). Contemporary readers could learn the rules of good marriage from his works: how to compose a love letter, how husband and wife should behave in marriage, how children should be educated, etc. Gyöngyösi’s entire literary work is an apology for marriage. The most eloquent example of this is the poem *A csalárd Cupido* (The Cunning Cupid, written in 1695, published in 1734), in which direct eroticism is cloaked in a mythological context, the moral of the poem being that the best remedy for the torments of love is marriage. The female voice in Hungarian literature appears for the first time in Gyöngyösi’s works. In the love poems of Balassi Bálint or Zrínyi Miklós, only the man in love speaks. In Gyöngyösi, however, female characters such as Széchy Mária or Lónyai Anna fully embrace their feelings of love and speak openly about them.

Just as Italy owes to Tasso, France to Voltaire, and Germany to [Martin] Opitz, so Hungary owes to Gyöngyösi. No one has written more beautiful verses than he. His poetry is eloquent, his thoughts are full of spirit. Not to mention his beautiful descriptions, in which he presents emotions such as love, hate, pity, and other sentimental fluctuations in such a way that we can almost see them with our own

²⁷ Gyöngyösi 1998, 19.

²⁸ Gyöngyösi 1998, 107; Gyöngyösi 1999, 23, 131.

eyes. Not even in the writings of the ancient poets do we find such beauty and color as in those of Gyöngyösi²⁹.

This is how Batsányi János presented Gyöngyösi to the French public in 1813 in the columns of the *Mercure Étranger* magazine. Batsányi's testimony shows that, until the beginning of the 19th century, Gyöngyösi was the most popular poet in Hungarian literature. During the 19th century, however, his fame began to fade, his place in the romantic literary canon being taken over by the work of Zrínyi Miklós.

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²⁹ Bérnay de 1813, 32.

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