

Imagináció és imitáció Zrínyi eposzában [Imagination and Imitation in Zrínyi's Epic]. By Farkas Gábor Kiss. Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2012. 298 pp.

At the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, at the dawn of modern Hungarian literary criticism and literary history, the interpretation of the poetry of Miklós Zrínyi (1620–64), which until then seemed to have been left in a Sleeping-beauty slumber, suddenly became a topic of pressing interest. One of the key issues of the discourse that emerged was the question of originality versus imitation in his compositions. This debate would not have created waves that can be felt to the present day had the issue of originality versus imitation been merely a question of literary theory. The topic at hand was not simply the methods of writing used by a single poet (Zrínyi), but rather the question of the national character of all of Hungarian culture and its relationship to the literary cultures of Western Europe.

According to poet, literary historian and theorist Ferenc Kölcsey (1790–1838), one can only speak of genuine originality in the case of the ancient Greeks (for instance Homer), since every other literary culture borrowed from its fires to light their torches.¹ Thus imitation, Kölcsey felt, was hardly something of which to be ashamed, since every literature imitated. Some fifty years later, however, Hungarian poet János Arany (1817–82), having compared Zrínyi's epic *Szigeti veszedelem* (1651; translated into English by László Körössy as *The Siege of Sziget*, 2011) with Torquato Tasso's (1544–95) *Gerusalemme liberata* (1575), came to the conclusion that Zrínyi's epic was a “meeker moon” that snatched its pale fire from the sun (meaning Tasso's epic). One can sense in Arany's remarks the inferiority complex that authors from all of the literary traditions of Central Europe felt when confronted with the cultures of Western Europe.

In his book, Farkas Gábor Kiss persuasively argues that the nineteenth-century and twentieth-century debates concerning Zrínyi's originality were indeed nineteenth-century and twentieth-century debates, and had little to do with the questions raised by authors of the seventeenth century. As he notes, originality “was not an essential product or value-creating element of the independent use

1 Ferenc Kölcsey, “Nemzeti hagyományok” [National Traditions], in idem, *Irodalmi kritikák és esztétikai írások* [Literary Critics and Essays on Aesthetics], ed. László Gyapay (Budapest: Universitas Kiadó, 2003), 517.

of the imagination or novel innovation in the seventeenth century” (p.12). The term “originality” was not even used in the Classical poetics or Classical rhetoric. The word “originality” was first used (by late Christian authors) to denote original sin. The first instance of the use of the French word *originalité* in writing is from 1699, and it was used to mean strange and bizarre and had more of a negative connotation than a positive one. Since the creation of something from nothing was the prerogative of God and God alone, every practitioner of the arts worked with borrowed material. Authors could choose one of two methods: either they could imitate works that had been written by authors of Antiquity or they could find an object worthy of imitation in nature, i.e. in the world around them. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, emphasis had shifted away from imitation of the ancients (imitation of something that had already been composed) to imitation of nature, of the real world. In this context, originality meant that authors turned from the virtual (ancient texts) towards the real world. This process of composition can be described with broad brushstrokes in the following manner: using one’s mind, one discovered perfect beauty (truth) and then sought the manifestation of this perfect beauty in nature and either painted it or narrated it in words. This perfect beauty and depictions of it, of course, could be found not only in nature, but also in the works of the authors of Antiquity.

The texts of the eras before the emergence of originality as the most important artistic criteria meet par excellence the criteria of auto-poetic literature. Literature is a world unto itself. Authors read one another’s writings and rewrite them. No one is interested in knowing what a real encounter on the battlefield would be like, or a real siege or war hero. The poet wishes to know only how to depict them in words. It is an intertextual paradise. It is therefore hardly surprising that postmodern literary theorists also like to deal with the question of imitation. Kiss provides a refreshingly concise and clear summary of these theories, of which the ideas of Thomas M. Green seem the most interesting and useful to me. According to Green, the success of imitation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was due to the emergence of historical consciousness, as well as the outbreak and spread of the fear that it might well prove impossible to conjure the precise meaning and significance of the texts of Antiquity.

The first two chapters of the book contain an essay on the Renaissance and Baroque theories of imitation, an essay that has long been much needed in Hungarian scholarship on literary theory and history. The essay is in some

ways an echo of an essay written by Imre Bán over a quarter of a century ago.² The next two chapters, *Az imitáció elmélete és gyakorlata a Szigeti veszedelemben* (The Theory and Practice of Imitation in *The Siege of Sziget*) and *Imitáció és petrarkizmus Balassi költészetében* (Imitation and Petrarchism in the Poetry of Balassi), offer concrete examples of the practice of imitation. Arany revealed Zrínyi's source, Kiss examines how he used it. He merits praise for having included, in general, interpretations alongside a list of the examples of imitation in Zrínyi's work (for instance his interpretations of the Cumilla-Dido or the Juranics and Radivoj-Nisus and Euryalus parallels: pp.42–43, pp.77–81). While reading the brilliantly done presentation of the examples of parallels, I was struck by the question, how could the search for similarities and differences be broadened? Is the endless semiosis (à la Kristeva and Derrida) not perhaps a trap (Umberto Eco)? There is a risk that the interpreter will be swept up by the comparative approach to interpretation and will compare everything in one work with everything in the other, in spite of the fact that it is not immediately obvious that something that resembles some other thing (or is even its apparent opposite) has anything in particular to do with that other thing. Is it not possible that we see connections where there are none? Of course the “recognition” of a similarity always depends on the aptitude and erudition of the interpreter, but where does interpretation end and over-interpretation begin? When does text awaiting interpretation become pretext for confabulation?

The similarities presented by Kiss are not forced, and he marshals other persuasive arguments in order to demonstrate that Zrínyi must indeed have read the passages in the works traces of which are found in *The Siege of Sziget* (or other compositions by Zrínyi). One obvious approach to the question, of course, was simply to examine the poet's library. In many cases, Kiss even found editions of the books from which Zrínyi borrowed with the relevant passages underlined. This is an example of superb carpentry that must have demanded considerable patience (on the part of both Zrínyi and Kiss), but the result is both striking and, more importantly, useful for future generations of scholars and readers. One of the great merits of this chapter is that Kiss demonstrates that in the case of Zrínyi one finds a whole repository of the techniques of imitation that were used at the time and taught in the schools.

2 Imre Bán, “Az imitatio mint a reneszánsz arisztotelizmus esztétikai kategóriája” [Imitation as an Aesthetic Category of Renaissance Aristotelianism], *Filológiai Közlemények* 21 (1975): 374–86.

One of the additional strengths of the book is that it examines how imitation and imagination functioned at the time not only in literature, but also in a pertinent example from the fine arts. In the chapter entitled “Imagery and imagination on the title page of the *Syrena* volume” (referring to a volume published by Zrínyi in 1651 entitled *Adriai tengernek syrenaia*, which could be translated as “Siren of the Adriatic Sea”), Kiss provides a thorough comparison of the title page of Vitorio Siri’s (1608–85) *Il Mercurio* and the engraving print used as the title page for Zrínyi’s work. He concludes that the two images bear very different meanings. In the case of Siri’s composition, the image is expressive of the poet’s *ars poetica*: in vain do the Sirens try to entice Mercury with material wealth (they offer him a horn of plenty), the messenger god continues to steer the boat with a confident hand. Put simply, the poet will write the truth and only the truth. In contrast, “Zrínyi may have found the Truth appealing, and the emphasis on historical accuracy in the image, for he himself asked the Virgin Mary to ‘let me write things as they were,’ but in its subject matter the arrangement of the entire image is as foreign to the epic as a newspaper is to a work of literature” (p.124). And indeed the image on the title page of his book embodies the *ars poetica* of the poet, not the journalist. Even imitation is a literary gesture: the model was the introduction to the second book of Giambattista Marino’s (1569–1625) *Galeria*, which deals with statues. The Sirens, who represent ambition, vanity (*superbia*), and bliss (*delizia*) try to entice the poet, depicted sitting in a boat (he is also a Siren). Kiss notes that this image is not simply an allegory for the poet, but also draws on the theological tradition according to which vanity is one of the worst sins, because it stems from scorn for God.

The whole question of the title page, however, becomes even more interesting if one also takes into consideration the *Syrena*, *Adrianszékoga mora Syrena*, which essentially is a translation of the Hungarian book into Croatian by Zrínyi’s brother, Péter. Kiss refers to it, but he offers no detailed discussion on the subject. It might have been worthwhile to have taken into consideration the observations that have been made by Croatian scholars. In an article that has been published in Croatian and Hungarian, Zrinka Blažević and Suzana Coha analyze the title pages of the two *Syrena* (the Hungarian and the Croatian).³ Hungarian scholars should take note of their observations in part simply because the two

3 Zrinka Blažević and Suzana Coha, “Zrínyi Péter – a hősteremtés irodalmi modelljei és stratégiái” [Péter Zrínyi—The Literary Models and Strategies for Creating Heroes], in *A Zrínyiek a magyar és a borvát történetében* [The Zrínyis in Hungarian and Croatian Historiography], ed. Sándor Bene and Gábor Hausner (Budapest: Zrínyi Kiadó, 2007), 137–65.

literary historians, whose work is otherwise excellent, at times seem to confuse the two title pages, and they attribute a message to the Hungarian version (and therefore to *The Siege of Sziget*) that is actually only relevant in the case of the Croatian version. “The very title page [of the Hungarian work] (by conjuring the iconological motif of the familiar half-human, half-animal Siren [...]) suggests that ambivalence may be the formal, content-related, and ideological structural principle that provides the key to the entire work. Iconographically, this fundamental idea is embodied on the title page by the allegorical figure of the armed hero who is steering the ship and who responds with utter indifference to the enticing gestures of the two Sirens, one of whom is trying to tempt him with beauty, while the other offers a crown. At the same time, paradoxically the figure of the hero, who is portrayed as unmoved by material wealth, contradicts the popular Baroque metaphor of the ‘state-boat,’ which is also evoked by the title page. This metaphor is unquestionably reference to the political ambitions of the helmsman, i.e. the ambitions of the Croatian viceroy, who had only recently assumed office, to become palatine, and at the same time represents the most important virtues of rule, constancy and modesty.”⁴ I would begin with a few factual errors. On the title page of the Hungarian *Syrena*, one of the Sirens is offering the figure of a man in the boat not a crown, but a perfectly ordinary shell. Kiss provides excellent commentary on the shell as one of the indispensable accoutrements of depictions of Venus: “Venus is clearly the symbol of luxury, wantonness, or, to use a term more expressive of the Hungarian language at the time, lasciviousness” (p.125). It is not at all clear that the boat on the title page of the Hungarian book is a metaphor for the state, or that it refers to the political ambitions of the helmsman (Zrínyi). In 1651, when the book was published in Vienna, the question of the position of palatine was entirely irrelevant. In the spring of 1649, Pál Pálffy had been elected palatine without any ado whatsoever. We have no reason to think that, while composing the book (1645–48), Zrínyi, who as of 1647 served as viceroy of Croatia, had any desire to achieve the rank of palatine. On September 25, 1645, János Draskovics had been elected to the position of palatine without any complications. On November 26, 1653, Pál Pálffy died, and this was followed by the national assembly in 1655, in the course of which a palatine was elected. This assembly, which took place in the midst of stormy commotion, has often been the subject of historical inquiries, and Zrínyi’s ambitions at the time to

4 Zrinka and Coša, *Zrínyi Péter*, 138.

achieve the position of palatine have been documented, even if some of the details are not entirely clear. But it would be temerity to claim that in 1651 he was using the title page of *Syrena* to communicate his later political aspirations to the Hungarian nobility.

In my view, the explanation for Blažević and Coha's mistakes and misinterpretations lies in the fact that they were searching, in the Hungarian *Syrena*, for ideas that are discernible in the Croatian version of the work. Clearly we will not have a complete overview of the subject at hand until literary historians have done a thorough comparative study of the two compositions, but it is quite clear on the basis of a comparison of the title pages that the observations made by Blažević and Coha are accurate in the case of the Croatian version. In this image, the Sirens do indeed offer a crown (as well as keys, an olive tree, and palm branches, all of which are symbols of power) to the figure sitting in the boat (Péter Zrínyi), who, unlike his brother Miklós, does not turn away, but rather looks with visible interest on the temptresses. His boat is a war galleon that is sailing for a bastion bearing a Croatian flag. In the upper left corner of the image one recognizes the boat from the title page of Miklós Zrínyi's *Syrena*, which is journeying towards a Hungarian bastion. The relationship between the two title pages and the political symbolism of the Croatian *Syrena*, which is undoubtedly layered, are subjects that still await clarification. What do the two crowns represent? The kingdom? But which kingdom, the Hungarian one or the Croatian? Why are the Sirens offering both crowns to Péter? Why is the Croatian title page more embellished with warlike imagery (a war galleon and the phrase *Vincere aut mori*, for instance, which means conquer or die)? Why does Péter Zrínyi not turn away from the Sirens who offer him the crowns? Furthermore, in the selection of the image for the title page of *Adrianszékoga mora Syrena*, both Péter's and Miklós' conceptions found expression. Sándor Iván Kovács has persuasively shown that the title page for the Croatian work was done by the same engraver, the Venetian Jacopo Puccini, who made the image on which György Subarics based his depiction when making the image for the title page of the Hungarian *Syrena*.⁵

In the case of *Adrianszékoga mora Syrena*, we are clearly dealing with political doublespeak: while the ideology of the book may seem to be pro-Habsburg, it nonetheless contains an anti-Habsburg discourse as well. In contrast, there is no such ambiguity in the Hungarian *Syrena*. This is hardly surprising, since *The*

5 Sándor Iván Kovács, *A lírikus Zrínyi* [The Lyricist Zrínyi] (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1985), 100.

Siege of Sziget is a composition that firmly resists ambivalent readings. Attempts have been made in the secondary literature to interpret the Hungarian *Syrena*, allegedly a “labyrinthine-volume” (Elréd Borián), as a political allegory, but Kiss’ conclusion is more persuasive in my view: “the language of Zrínyi’s epic is fundamentally one-layered. It does not permit ambivalent readings, and for this reason one cannot find parts in it that could be considered allegorical. A continuous allegory that involved the entire plot would clash with the tendency of the epic, which seems intentionally to simplify. [...] The only allegorical element of the *Syrena* volume in my assessment is the image on the title page” (pp.178–79). Thus Kiss Farkas disagrees completely with the interpretation of the two Croatian literary scholars, and a Hungarian–Croatian *Syrena* colloquium would no doubt give rise to engaging debates and yield provocative insights.

Levente Nagy

Translated by Thomas Cooper