

Menyhért, Anna. 2020. *Women's Literary Tradition and Twentieth-Century Hungarian Writers: Renée Erdős, Ágnes Nemes-Nagy, Minka Czóbel, Ilona Harmos-Kosztolányi, Anna Lesznai*. Trans. Anna Bentley. Leiden: Brill. 339 pp.

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Anna Menyhért's book reaches the English-speaking readers seven years after the publication of the Hungarian original (*Női irodalmi hagyomány: Erdős Renée, Nemes Nagy Ágnes, Czóbel Minka, Kosztolányiné Harmos Ilona, Lesznai Anna*; Budapest: Napvilág, 2013). Menyhért, who is both an academic (she is a Professor of Trauma Studies at the University of Jewish Studies in Budapest) and a poet, sets herself a dual goal in this important study and reflection on the place of women poets and prose writers in Hungarian literary history. Accordingly, the author defines her book as a "combination of essay, literary study and an educational academic work" (18). On the one hand, she engages in gynocriticism, i.e. she writes literary criticism of texts authored by women; and on the other hand, she offers a new approach to gynocriticism in that she interprets the selected five authors as characters in their respective life stories. She deconstructs the dominant images about both their works and their personae that (mostly male) Hungarian literary critics have created, images that still permeate the perceptions that Hungarian readers and the general public maintain to this day about these (and other) for the most part unduly understudied and often wrongly classified women poets and writers. The result is a fascinating reading about important stations in the selected writers' lives and careers along with Menyhért's well-reflected challenging of their existing place in the Hungarian literary canon and her convincing arguments for the place they deserve in that very same canon. She undertakes this re-evaluation not only for the sake of demonstrating the shortcomings and narrow-mindedness of the existing canon but also to offer herself and other women writing today some literary predecessors of their own gender they can build on, both in terms of language and literary imagery and technique, and from whom they can take their inspiration. She demonstrates, against the oft-reiterated argument (by both male and some female literary critics and writers) that there is only *one* literature irrespective of the author's gender, that gender matters, and that it matters to a very important degree when it comes to who is allowed entry into the canon and who, and why, is pushed to its margins or altogether out of it.

The book is divided into six chapters that are preceded by a foreword written by Nadezhda Alexandrova and Suzan van Dijk. In the first chapter, "A Tradition of One's Own," Menyhért calls the exclusion of women writers from Hungarian cultural memory a "case of collective amnesia" (2). She explains that the literary canon is far from being a neutral creation, essentially formulating in her own words what Terry Eagleton famously stated about the canon, namely, that it is a construct created by people in positions of decision-making power using certain criteria that are defined as, but in effect are far from, being objective. Women's work (as



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well as writing by various marginalized groups) in particular misses the benchmarks set by these allegedly objective criteria. Menyhért effectively showcases how the writers she selected for her study were pigeonholed outside of any thorough and fair aesthetic evaluation into boxes based on sexist and misogynist stereotypes. Thus, Renée Erdős became known as the "erotic pulp fiction" writer, Ágnes Nemes Nagy as the "masculine" woman poet, Minka Czóbel as "the ugly old maid," Ilona Harmos-Kosztolányi as "the writer's wife," and Anna Lesznai as "the talented lady émigrée" (16). The following five chapters are each dedicated to one of the featured writers. With the exception of Ágnes Nemes-Nagy, all of them belong to the generation that shaped the literary and art scene of the early twentieth century. Each chapter is completed by photographs and other illustrations (renderings of letters and paintings). The very term of canon figures prominently in each chapter title: 2. "Between Love and the Canon: Renée Erdős (1879-1956);" 3. "In the Canon with Secrets: Ágnes Nemes Nagy (1922-1991) and Women's Literary Tradition;" 4. "No Canon for Otherness – The Witch: Minka Czóbel (1855-1947);" 5. "Mirror, Body, Trauma – A Writer's Wife at the Edge of the Canon: Ilona Harmos Kosztolányi (1885-1967); and 6. "Museum, Cult, Memory – Locked in the Canon: Anna Lesznai (1885-1966)." Menyhért sees all these five poets and writers as her predecessors. She proceeds to seek out connections between them as well as between them and canonical male literary figures.

Chapter Two follows the bestselling author Renée Erdős (b. Regina Ehrental) from her early career as a poet, a career that, before the author's immense literary (and financial) success as a novelist in the 1920s (she sold more copies of her works than any contemporary writer) went through some rocky periods. In addition to presenting key themes in Erdős's prose (problems in male-female relationships, women's sexuality, difficulties faced by writing women), Menyhért disproves some prevalent opinions in the Erdős-scholarship regarding the latter's stormy relationship with Sándor Bródy and contends that Erdős was already an established poet before she had even met Bródy. Along with the laudations she received, she was, however, quickly attached the label of "erotic lady author," a label that has stuck to her to this day. Lesser known is the fact that Erdős both preceded and influenced Endre Ady in introducing the modernist poetic style in Hungarian literature commonly attributed to Ady. Yet unlike Ady, Erdős has been left out of the canon and her beautiful villa in Budapest, although it still carries the name "Erdős Renée house," contains very little that reminds of its once famous owner. It has not been turned into a Renée Erdős museum while there is an Ady Museum in Budapest. Similarly, unlike poems by Ady, no poems of Erdős are included in any Hungarian literature textbook.

Agnes Nemes Nagy is the subject of Chapter Three. Unlike Erdős, Nemes Nagy, as the title of the chapter suggests ("In the Canon with Secrets"), is included in the canon. She is the only woman whose poetry is taught in Hungarian schools and who is known in translation. However, as Menyhért argues, the poet had to pay a price for this inclusion. She became known as a disciplined, severe, in short "masculine" woman poet, an image put forth even by her husband and internalized by herself, which justified her being taken seriously by the literary establishment. Menyhért features a lesser-known part of her work, poems that only came to light posthumously, and examines why Nemes Nagy would not have published these during her lifetime. Published in 1995, these poems reveal a different aspect of the poet, a more intimate, emotional, "feminine" self. In Menyhért's opinion, these beautiful, powerful poems evoke both Erdős and the great Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, as well as Hungarian poets well entrenched in the canon such as Endre Ady or Dezső Kosztolányi. While Menyhért is interested in the personal background behind these poems, she reflects even more on the ways in which poetry is

interpreted and embedded in the Hungarian literary canon, a canon cemented in the 1970s that left no place for any poetry not considered "objective" and "intellectual" enough. The "feminine" in this framework is always associated with sentimentality and instincts and attributed a lower value in a constructed male-female dichotomy. According to this interpretative framework, women can exceptionally and occasionally touch those "masculine" heights (as was the case with Nemes Nagy's "masculine" poems), but the "feminine" will keep punching holes in this allegedly cerebral perfection that is reachable only for the real masters of poetry (meaning, of course, men) for as long as "women's literature" and "women's poetry" carries a negative connotation. Hence this label of "secret" poetry for this corpus of a renowned Hungarian woman-poet that is only now becoming available as yet another possible model for subsequent generations of women poets.

In Chapter Four, Menyhért critically engages with the dominant scholarship of a wonderful modernist poet, Minka Czóbel, who has been locked into the stereotype of the frustrated "ugly old maid" that has overshadowed her literary merits to this day. On the one hand, Menyhért convincingly sheds these stereotypes by providing the little-known evidence that Czóbel, who never married (and, as demonstrated by the author, by choice and not because she was "ugly"), lived a rather happy and fulfilled private life she shared for many years with another woman while also remaining physically and mentally active into her old age. Menyhért sees the hint of a lesbian relationship—a rarity in early twentieth century literature—in one of Czóbel's short stories entitled "*Pókhálók*" ['Spider Webs'] and argues that her poetry, which has influenced many a canonical Hungarian poet, definitely deserves to be included in the Hungarian secondary school curriculum.

The fifth chapter is devoted to Ilona Harmos Kosztolányi, the wife of Dezső Kosztolányi, who began publishing short stories in the journal *Nyugat* ['West'], but until recently was remembered in literary history only in her role as the "writer's wife." Menyhért gives Harmos a voice in particular as the writer of two memoirs that she published later in her life. The genre of memoir raises the discussion around literary "quality." Menyhért's analysis dismisses any argument concerning the purported lack of such quality in *Burokban születtem* ['Born with a Caul']—which thematizes a young girl's coming of age—by showing how Harmos masterfully implements various literary techniques and how innovative her text is regarding both its subject matter and its style. The second memoir under scrutiny, *Tüzes cipőben* ['In Red Hot Shoes'], is a woman's Holocaust memoir and a narrative of trauma. It challenges the normativity and universality of the largely male-inscribed Holocaust master narrative (211). Re-discovering Harmos the writer is thus important not only because it allows us to re-evaluate the literary place of the genre which she used for her literary expression but also because she wrote about two topics that were taboo for a long time: young women's experiences of their body and sexuality and women's Holocaust experiences.

The last chapter is about the still well-known woman writer and applied artist, Anna Lesznai (b. Amália Moscovitz). A wealth of scholarship is devoted to Lesznai's work and numerous important exhibitions of her artwork and embroidery have also been organized to the point of turning her into a cult figure. Menyhért examines Lesznai's autobiographical novel published in 1966 (with a storyline going back to the early twentieth century), *Kezdetben volt a kert* ['In the Beginning Was the Garden']. Menyhért argues that the novel offers a patchwork-style narrative rather than a linear one, using a structure resembling embroidery techniques, which in the eyes of the literary canon is often seen as a sign of weakness and lack of cohesion.

However, we find this narrative structure very much in women writers' texts, and not only in Hungarian literature. It is also a major technique in literary modernism. Lesznai's novel is of further interest as because of her life in emigration (in New York), she was cut off from linguistic developments in post-WWII Hungarian literature. The novel, on the one hand, essentially "preserves" a 1930s, interwar Hungarian literary language; and on the other hand, it is an important reflection on the various cultural influences to which Lesznai as an émigré artist was exposed and on the complex mechanisms of remembering expressed in her work.

While the connections Menyhért attempts to establish between the selected writers and their work may not always be obvious, what we can learn from this important study is how slowly (if at all) existing structures in the Hungarian literary and academic establishment and, by extension, the educational curriculum are changing when it comes to the place accorded to women in the Hungarian past—which of course impacts their place in the present. The present volume joins other, by now numerous important studies and monographs on Hungarian writers and other intellectual women from Hungarian literary and cultural history that have been published in recent decades both in Hungary and abroad. Among these are: Anna Fábri's groundbreaking volume, "*A szép tiltott táj felé: A magyar írónők története két századforduló között (1795-1905)*", on Hungarian women writers between 1795 and 1905 (1996); the volume edited by Margit Balogh and Katalin S. Nagy, *Asszonysorsok a 20. században*, on the lives and works of Hungarian women in science, art, literature and politics (2000); Agatha Schwartz's *Shifting Voices: Feminist Thought and Women's Writing in Fin-de-Siècle Austria and Hungary* (2008); Virág Varga and Zoltán Zsávolya's edited volume, *Nő, tükr, írás: Értelmezések a 20. század első felének női irodalmáról*, on women writers from the first half of the twentieth century (2009); Anna Borgos and Judit Szilágyi's *Nőírók és írónők: Irodalmi és női szerepek a Nyugatban*, an analysis of the contributions and roles played by women writers around the *Nyugat* literary magazine (2011); Judit Kádár's monograph, *Engedelmes lázadók: Magyar írónők és nőideál-konstrukciók a 20. század első felében*, on selected women writers from the first half of the twentieth century (2014); and Edit Zsadányi's *Gendered Narrative Subjectivity: Some Hungarian and American Women Writers* (2015), to mention but a few. Despite all these, the place accorded to women writers in the Hungarian public memory and imagination is still marginal, and more often than not they are doomed to exclusion and oblivion. A 2008 Christmas card (reproduced on page 21 of Menyhért's book) issued by the Petőfi Literary Museum features fifteen "great" Hungarian writers. None of them is a woman. Therefore, I would like to end with a quote from the same page that needs no further comment or interpretation: "If there was a card with just women writers pictured on it, it would say Hungarian Women Writers. There's nothing on this one saying Hungarian Male Writers. There's nothing written at all. No need. We know what we're looking at. This is, after all, the Museum of Hungarian Literature" (21).