

Péterfy, Gergely. 2014. *Kitömött barbár: regény* [Stuffed Barbarian: a Novel]. Budapest: Kalligram. 448 pp.

Reviewed by Enikő M. Basa, Library of Congress

In a novel that explores the life of Hungarian language-reformer and Enlightenment figure, Ferenc Kazinczy (1759-1831), Gergely Péterfy takes an unusual angle. Kazinczy's widow, Sophie Török (1780-1842), visits the Imperial Natural History Collection in Vienna where she views the stuffed skin of her late husband's friend, Angelo Soliman (c. 1721-1796), an African who achieved prominence in eighteenth-century Viennese society but in the end was perpetuated only as a curiosity: the "Stuffed Barbarian" of the book's title. Soliman thus becomes a catalyst in the story of Kazinczy's conflict with the regressive forces of society and of his own family.

Standing in front of the figure, Sophie recalls her husband's life as well as that of his African friend and fellow Freemason. In fact, it is Kazinczy's involvement with the Masons that led to his being implicated in the Martinovics conspiracy, named after one of the leaders of the anti-feudal failed revolt of 1794, and landed him in prison for over seven years. During this time Soliman died and willed his skin to his Hungarian friend but the Court of Justice then requested it from the learned man. Péterfy takes the opportunity of the deliberations around the final owner and rest of Soliman's skin to point out the irony of the Court's action: "Let them just think that they decided to what point one is human, and where the animal begins. But the Court is shortsighted. Everyone is shortsighted who does not view the world from the ideals of freedom and equality: they are the prisoners of their own worldview and narrow mindedness, and because of this they will lose" [*Higyék csak azt, hogy ők határozzák meg, meddig tart az ember, és honnan kezdődik az állat. Az udvar azonban rövidlátó. Mindenki rövidlátó, aki nem a szabadság és az egyenlőség eszméi felől szemléli a világot: világnézetük és kicsinyességük foglyai ők, ezért veszíteni fognak*] (431).

Facing the figure of Soliman at the museum, Sophie recalls her long-gone life with Kazinczy and also recounts the story of the African man's life, which her husband has shared with her just before his own death of cholera. It was this story that years later prompted her to go to Vienna and view the remains of her husband's friend. Péterfy connects the death of the prominent African scholar treated as no more than a curiosity with the fate of Kazinczy, the man of progressive ideas, thus claiming that both these outstanding men were misunderstood in their time. While Ferenc was alive, there was no need for his wife to visit the African man's remains, but after her husband's death she seeks to come to a fuller realization of his mission and of his spiritual comrade. Kazinczy's Enlightenment ideas, his work as a language reformer and his desire to bring progressive ideas and values to Hungary are central and recurrent issues in this novel. His estate, Széphalom, was for a while the center of intellectual life through his voluminous correspondence, but Sophie sees mostly the hardships that his dedication to art brought on the family. In an interview in *Irodalmi Jelen* [*The Literary Present*] carrying the title of "Az első modern magyar értelmiségi: Kazinczy Ferenc" ['The First Modern Hungarian Intellectual: Ferenc Kazinczy'], of July 21-23, 2015, Péterfy states that through the pairing of Kazinczy and Soliman he wished to show that both of them were "foreign bodies in the fabric of



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society" [*idegen test a társadalom szövetében*] and therefore fated to be misunderstood: "what for Ferenc Kazinczy is beauty and culture is for the man of the earth an infection, an epidemic, the scandal of foreignness, a danger threatening its own identity" [*ami Kazinczy Ferenc számára a szépség és a kultúra, az a föld derék népe számára a fertőzet, a ragály, az idegenség botránya, a saját identitásukat fenyegető veszély*] (2). In many senses, therefore, both were "others" for the society of their time.

The novel abounds in contrasts between forces representing the two contrasting worldviews featured in it: mobs storm and ruin Széphalom, the Kazinczy estate deteriorating to decay; Ferenc's brother and family keep planning murderous attacks on their Enlightenment-figure relative because he is the representative of a world-order they strongly oppose; the village people hold Kazinczy responsible for the break of a cholera epidemic in the area through his supposed witchcraft, etc. Soliman's life is also presented as a case of victimization by the brutality and ignorance of eighteenth-century society and its rejection of enlightened, progressive ideas. Even though he had attained financial and social success, Soliman's ultimate value is as a stuffed exhibit in the Imperial Museum. In conjuring up the past, therefore, Sophie Török exposes the depth of deprivation and brutality involved in the political persecution of Kazinczy, Soliman and other Enlightenment persons in the Habsburg Empire of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This plot also seeks to present the dichotomous nature of the Habsburg Empire: in many ways progressive yet clinging to the feudal age in political and social-reform matters.

Sophie remembers her husband as a champion of liberal ideals, a proponent of education, cultural reform and renewal, an enlightened collector of art, books and music. These traits of his were shared by Angelo Soliman, too. The dichotomy between the ideals represented by both Kazinczy and Soliman and the brutality and ignorance of their time is graphically illustrated and topped by the way in which Soliman's figure is preserved through taxidermy as just another curiosity in the cases of the Museum of Natural History. The iconic "barbarian" provides a counterpoint to Kazinczy: Angelo is the self-taught man of nature who achieved some recognition in civilized society but in the end is valued no more than the reformer Kazinczy whose ideas are regarded with suspicion and hostility by his society, neighbors and even his family.

The final words of the novel convey its concluding message. At the museum Sophie notes that she is finally confronting the major figure of her husband's life yet feels no jealousy. She reflects: "I did not feel any jealousy for why this leading role was not mine: maybe because as I finally stood in the attic storage space of the Natural History Museum, facing the black body which took a step toward me from the glowing depths of the scarlet cabinet, I knew that I stood facing myself" [*Nem éreztem féltékenységet, amiért ez a főszerep nem nekem jutott: talán azért, mert ahogy végül ott álltam a Természettudományi Múzeum tetőtéri raktárában, szemben a fekete testtel, amely a vörös szekrény izzó mélyéből lépett felém, már tudtam, hogy önmagam előtt állok*] (448). Probably the thirty-year gap between the events she recalls and the time of recalling as well as the process that she personally, and Hungarian society as a whole, went through in these three decades have done their work in mollifying whatever grudges she might have had about her husband's actions and choices in the 1800's.

I found some aspects of the novel off-putting, mainly the depictions of brutality and even savagery among most classes of society. The presentation of the society of Vienna and early eighteenth-century Europe in general as bestial and completely lacking in sympathy for one's

fellow man seems overdone. Even so-called more brutal ages exhibited compassion and noble instincts, not the bestiality depicted here. Péterfy undoubtedly presents such an extreme view to provide a contrast to his hero, just as he exaggerates the hostility of Kazinczy's family. In contrast to the ideals that were to eventually usher in a more humane worldview, the regressive policies of Vienna are emphasized and so is the backwardness of the people of the Hungarian countryside. Eighteenth century Vienna, as well as the entire Empire by extension, is presented as not only regressive but down-to-earth barbaric in that human life, even the life of the country's soldiers, is valued no more than the life of pigs or other animals, e.g. in scenes of gun trials using human subjects. Neither the Hungarian gentry nor the peasantry are fully exempt where ignorance, if not malice, reigns. Such extreme depictions are not always justified by the plot and in addition venality, promiscuity and bizarre sexuality dominate overly in the novel. While this characterization paints a possibly justifiable picture of what Kazinczy in his life-time, and Sophie after his death, had to contend with, it still seems to cater to the author's agenda of criticizing contemporary Hungarian society. As for Soliman, the contrast between his free actions and the suffering he was subjected to in his earlier life, as well as his limited range of action even as a mature counselor to the Court, all point to the hostile stereotyping of men like both Kazinczy and Soliman by their contemporaries.

The utter breakdown of human feelings among the villagers during the cholera epidemic also seems too dramatic, though maybe more true to life than the picture of Vienna as an absolute sink of abnormality. In general such scenes of depravity might be more motivated by the expectations of today's readers. Along the same lines, the brutal and perverse treatment of Kazinczy and Sophie by his brothers and mother, which Péterfy admits was overdone, seems to cater to reader's taste and desire to heighten the isolation and alienation of the hero rather than to reflect the actual life of this historical figure. Notwithstanding these issues of taste and measure, *Kitömött Barbár* is an interesting read, though maybe not to everyone's taste. If we take, however, the suggestion of the author to see his work as a springboard for our own examination of man, identity, the "other" and the tension between progressive and reactionary forces, then it is part of today's most compelling literary canon.