

Gere, Zsolt. 2013. Vörösmarty Mihály Epikus Korszakának Irodalom és Recepciótörténeti Kontextusai (The Writing and Reception Contexts of Mihály Vörösmarty 's Epic Writing) Ph.D Dissertation. Szeged: Szeged University. 275 pp. Illus. (<http://doktori.bibl.u-szeged.hu/1781/1/Gere%20Zsolt%20-%20PhD-dolgozat.pdf>) [Szébb idők - Vörösmarty epikus korszakának rétegei; Budapest: Argumentum Kiadó, 2013]

Reviewed by Enikő M. Basa

Mihály Vörösmarty (1800-1855), one of Hungary's major poets, emerged as an intellectual and poetical leader of the opposition to the Habsburg rule and its centralizing efforts in the early nineteenth century. As a representative of the Hungarian nationalistic circles, his poetry had an enormous influence on Hungarian intellectual life and especially on its national literature. Vörösmarty's poetry ranges from the lyrical to the dramatic and from the personal to the communal, yet his commitment to national ideals never wavers. He is the author of what is considered to be the second Hungarian national anthem, 'Szózat' ["Appeal"] and of exquisite love lyrics like 'Laurához' ["To Laura"] and 'A merengőhöz' ["To the Daydreamer"]. His poems reverberate of folk songs and lore as well as allude to classical works and forms. As a person of the minor nobility whose father was a manager and later a renter of Mihály Nádasdy's estates, Vörösmarty had some ties with common people. His father's early death, however, left the family destitute and forced him to assume responsibility for his younger siblings. Vörösmarty was educated in the humanistic tradition of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, eventually earning a law degree, yet his salaried positions were as a tutor to prominent families, at least until he decided to make literature his vocation. In 1825 he published his heroic poem, *Zalán futása* [Zalán's Flight], chronicling the conquest of Hungary by Chieftain Árpád and the seven tribes united under him. Basing the poem's narrative plot on medieval records, primarily the twelfth century chronicle of a scribe known only as Anonymous, Vörösmarty expanded this narrative with romantic and fanciful elements. This epic captured the imagination of the intelligentsia of his time and he soon became the *de facto* Hungarian national poet of the first half of the nineteenth century.

Zsolt Gere of Szeged University explores in this extensive doctoral study (recently published as *Szébb idők -Vörösmarty epikus korszakának rétegei* [Beautiful Times – Layers of Vörösmarty's Epic Writing]; Budapest: Argumentum Kiadó, 2013) of Mihály Vörösmarty's heroic poems the intellectual and patriotic milieu of the Reform Era in which Vörösmarty worked and which he, in turn, significantly influenced. Gere examines the poet's correspondence with important literary critics and cultural arbiters of the day such as Ferenc Toldy (Schedel), Károly



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Kisfaludy, Pál Gyulai, or financial supporters such as György Stettner. Gere also looks at Vörösmarty's connections with publishers and cites the poet's family history, to complete the picture of Vörösmarty's ideas, concerns and reception in the 1820s and 1830s.

Gere's work is divided into nine chapters that are further subdivided into secondary subsets. After a foreword, in which he sets out his goals, the author reviews the perceptions of Vörösmarty's heroic poems, both by his contemporaries and by later critics, down to the present day. Gere also addresses issues of literary history, particularly those relating to Vörösmarty's literary legacy. Gere's comments on Károly Kisfaludi, Vörösmarty's friend, illustrator, sounding board and at times publisher, reveal much about the politics of publishing in the Reform Era. The views of Ferenc Toldi and Pál Gyulai, two important nineteenth-century literary critics and arbiters of taste, are also presented, followed by a summary of their central arguments.

Gere argues that Vörösmarty's poetry is permeated by Christian stoicism, which mandates a life choice. Translated into nationalistic and political terms, this creed means that the person who seeks personal happiness is equated with the one who fights for the preservation of his people's national values, meaning, primarily, the people's language and ethnic identity. András Martinkó, a recent critic, ascribes the realization of this goal to the concept of *földi menny* [earthly heaven] hailed by Vörösmarty (and some of his contemporaries), as exemplified in his fairy drama *Csongor és Tünde* [Csongor and Tünde], composed around 1830. Gere suggests that the emulation of this practical-celestial concept was the culmination of a long debate about the significance of preserving and developing the Hungarian language to maintain and enhance Hungarian national pride (233).

The Vörösmarty works examined in Gere's dissertation range from *Zalán futása* (1825) to *Csongor és Tünde* (early 1830s), and Gere argues that all of Vörösmarty's works of this period, whether entire poems or short fragments, and particularly the heroic poems, show a concern for the presentation of Hungarian history and national evolution, even if this process is sometimes couched in mythological and mystical terms. The author admits that he concentrates on the mythological background or infrastructure of these works because it enables him to address such theoretical issues as ancient concepts of what nowadays might be seen as state-foundation narratives.

Gere's fifth chapter addresses the epic *Zalán futása* not only as a national epic but also as one that points and leads to Vörösmarty's later epic-heroic works, which depart from the classical epic format. The later works seek to create a pre-history, or rather a mythologized history of the Hungarian nation, based partly on the work of István Horváth (1784-1846), who sought to strengthen the claims of Hungarian nobility to precedence within the Monarchy by fanciful arguments referring to Biblical figures in the Book of Genesis. In Vörösmarty's work there is no evidence of subscribing to these more extreme views, though he does adopt some of Horváth's creative mythology (80-101).

The poems examined in the next chapter go even further in presenting Vörösmarty's understanding of Hungarian prehistory. These poems include: 'Magyarvár' ["Hungarian Fortress"] (a fragment, 1830), *A Rom* [The Ruin] (1830), and 'A Délsziget' ["The Southern Isle"] (a fragment, 1826); these fanciful poems later lead to the fairy drama *Csongor és Tünde*. This dramatic rather than heroic work is discussed by Gere as a culmination of Vörösmarty's heroic period in which the poet seeks, Gere argues, to create a sophisticated language and a Western

sentimentality, which would place Hungarian literature within the context of European romanticism (102-145).

According to Gere, Vörösmarty was concerned with the clash between paganism and Christianity in the Hungarian culture of his time, because Hungarian prehistory was rooted in pagan values, whereas its statehood phase presupposed Christian ethics. This clash is dramatically illustrated in Vörösmarty's *A Két Szomszédvár* [The Two Neighboring Castles] (1831), in which the protagonist, Tihamér, returns from the Crusades only to find out that his family was murdered by the rival Kaldor clan. Vowing revenge by calling upon the Christian God and by later invoking the Magyars' pagan god Hadúr as well, Tihamér receives the King's permission to settle the conflict with the offending clan in a single combat. He then first kills the sons of the rival clan, so that only Kaldor himself and his daughter Enikő are left alive and awaiting him. When the duel goes into the second day, Kaldor dons the armor of Tihamér's father that he attained at the earlier massacre. Upon killing Kaldor, Tihamér dons this armor as his own, and Enikő now admits him into the castle and dies of fright just as Tihamér kneels before her to ask her to forgive his rage. From this point on the ghost of Enikő, who represents Christian values throughout, haunts Tihamér and eventually forces him to face his doom. Finally, the two clans are destroyed and both castles fall into ruin, all because of paganism and its ethos of revenge (153-155).

In contrast to the disastrous ending of *A két szomszédvár*, in the *Csongor és Tünde* fairy drama, a solution is worked out for the rival parties. In this drama the dichotomy between earthly and spiritual principles is a major theme, allegorized in a masterful way so that although this central struggle in Vörösmarty's poetry is not resolved, it is made both concrete and sublime. The ideal, represented by Tünde -- whom Csongor envisions in a dream -- eventually becomes a flesh and blood maiden, whereas Csongor comes to realize the higher values represented by Tünde (159-224). The leading thread between *Zalán futása* and *Csongor és Tünde* is that in both works, notwithstanding their differences of genre, plot and mode, romantic notions receive major attention, and the difference between feminine and masculine love is a major issue. Moreover, the poet's treatment of romance in these two works seems to call for a change in the relationship between man and woman. Of no less importance, in both works Vörösmarty points at the possible transformation of ancient or mythological heroic themes into his own time and political reality (228).

Gere's detailed analyses of the illustrations in Vörösmarty's works, some of which were done by Kisfaludy, e.g., the image of Aurora in *A Rom* [A Ruin], reinforce the centrality of the theme of struggle between earthliness and spirituality, as happens in this fairy drama. The same effect is achieved by other illustrations, which Gere presents in the appendix of his study. These artistic works, including additional depictions of Aurora, oftentimes show similarities to the frontispiece of *A Rom*. The idealized pictures of the struggle between Heaven and Earth, good and evil, range from master painter Raphael's 1505 painting of dreaming knights to fifteenth and seventeenth century woodcuts (e.g. by Johannes Mantelius) presenting dreaming protagonists, invariably in the guise of idealized female figures (264-275).

A twenty-one page bibliography attests to the breadth of Gere's scholarship. Among the contemporary critics of Vörösmarty that he cites are János Arany and Ferenc Toldy, the latter being perhaps the most important literary critic and historian of the first half of the nineteenth

century; as well as prominent poets like Ferenc Kölcsey, Károly Kisfaludy, critics like Pál Gyulai and István Horváth, and political figures like István Szécsenyi. Other prominent critics referred to in this study include: Mihály Babits, János Erdélyi, János Horváth and Antal Szerb. The more recent scholars cited by Gere include everyone from cultural historian Pál Ács to Sándor Zsoldos, the editor of the Vörösmarty family letters (*Vörösmarty János családi iratai, 1850-1874*; n.p.: Árgus Kiadó & Vörösmarty Társaság, 2001). Other important contemporary critics include Péter Dávidházi, István Fried, Ferenc Kerényi and László Szörényi. The work's appendix includes an essay written by Vörösmarty on pagan Hungarian practices (258-263) and twelve pictures of relevance to the poet's works, particularly to *Csongor és Tünde* (264-275).

A densely packed examination of an important Hungarian poet, Gere's work should be more widely accessible than only as a Hungarian on-line dissertation, as it sheds significant light on the nation-forming Reform Generation of the early nineteenth century and on the concerns of its writers. Political awakening, language revival and a desire to establish Hungarian literature as an integral part of Central and Western European traditions all played a part in the literary life and creation of the time and place, to which Zsolt Gere's project offers a fascinating entree. I was struck by the many references and insights that shed light on my own research of this period's men of letters as poets of resistance. Others will no doubt find useful information for their own examinations of seminal works, personae and notions of this eventful century in Hungarian history.