

Introduction to the Cluster

Inside and Outside the Patriarchal Box: On Hungarian Historical, Literary, and Filmic Constructions of Gender

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Our thematic cluster is devoted to ways gender has been constructed in Hungarian history, literature, and culture over the past century. The authors examine historical figures, literary personae, and filmic characters as to how they conform to or subvert prevailing gender norms. Following a chronological order, we begin with two historical studies on two extraordinary women, Transylvanian baroness Karola Szilvássy and Jewish beauty queen Böske Simon. In their case studies of Hungarian women's history, authors Réka M. Cristian and Louise O. Vasvári place these historical figures in the context of World War I, followed by the dissolution of the Dual Monarchy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. For Hungarians, especially Hungarians of Transylvania, this era was marked by the Trianon Treaty, whereby the country lost much of its territory and population to the surrounding states. This post-Monarchy state affected not only the aristocracy but also the middle class, including the Jewish bourgeoisie, inside and outside post-Trianon Hungary, who had lived in the most multiethnic towns of this multiethnic empire. As such, the lives of the two figures under discussion were marked by a feeling of in-betweenness, the loss of a common cultural home they had taken for granted and the sense of an eerie calm before the devastating storm.

Karola Szilvássy (1876 – 1948) was born into one of the wealthiest Hungarian families, in Transylvania's capital, Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca / Klausenburg), and then at age twenty married the Baron Elemér Bornemissza (1868 – 1938). By all accounts, Szilvássy was an outstanding woman: intelligent, strong, with a powerful personality, a true maverick, the center point of the progressive social-literary groups *Erdélyi Helikon* and *Óváry-szalon*. As an actress, she performed on stage and in films; as a film director, she created a silent film in the early years of cinema history. Devoted to the cause of women's suffrage, she fought for women's emancipation as the non-conformist president of Kolozsvár's Women Association. A modern woman, she held offices in a variety of social and cultural groups, supporting and sponsoring causes of equality for the lower classes. A cultural polyglot and active internationalist, she spoke Hungarian, German, French, English, and Italian, using these languages in her writings and during her travels in Europe. A gourmet cook, she compiled her recipes with what Cristian calls "a pragmatic cosmopolitanism along with a detectable Transylvanianist tendency"; that is, she revived traditional Transylvanian recipes and combined them with flavors from other cultures,

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always with an attention to healthy cooking that reflected a foresight of many decades. A trendsetter in fashion, her leading-edge style was the talk of town while providing headlines in dailies and magazines. With an insatiable hunger for adventure, Szilvássy was the first Hungarian woman to fly in an airplane, that of Blériot, in 1909. Szilvássy's life was memorialized in several fictional works, most notably in Aladár Kuncz's *Felleg a város felett* ['Cloud Over Town'] and Miklós Bánffy's *Erdélyi trilógia* ['The Transylvanian Trilogy'], the latter depicting the love triangle between an aristocratic woman and two men of Transylvanian nobility (in real life they were Bornemissza, the husband, and the author Bánffy himself). History demanded that she go through a series of self-transformations. With professional training in nursing and a medical degree in midwifery, she worked as a surgical nurse in casualty clearing stations in World War I. She raised funds and collected the support of fellow aristocrats in the service of orphanages, and saved the children of the famous Theresianum Orphanage of Szeben (Sibiu) under siege during the War, among others. After the war, she returned to Kolozsvár, now part of Romania, fully devoting herself to cultural causes. In the mid-war years she was active as the patroness of *Erdélyi Helikon* but with the outbreak of the WWII she withdrew from public life. After the communist take-over, her house was nationalized, forcing her to move into the Deaconess Institute of the Reformed Church, where she died in 1948.

Böske Simon (1909 – 1970) was winner of the first national-level beauty pageant in Hungary, who as the first *Miss Magyarország/Miss Hungária* was also elected as *Miss Europa* in the same year in Paris. Coming from a middle-class Jewish family of Keszthely, Simon received an education in a finishing school in Vienna, where she was taught languages and sports required of a proper *úrilány* ['gentlewoman'] at the time. She was a modest young woman celebrated by contemporary mainstream media, which praised her purity and naturalness, as well as her patriotic feelings for the nation torn apart by the Treaty of Trianon. Jewish newspapers, especially assimilationist, liberal ones, celebrated her as an educated sportswoman (with sports, as Vasvári claims, acting as the symbol of both modernity and good upbringing), whose elegance and charm could make her a national icon, while only far-right conservative outlets denouncing beauty pageants as well as a Jewish beauty queen. After giving a detailed account of Simon's post-pageant life, her two marriages and her survival of the Holocaust, Vasvári investigates the gendered socio-cultural meaning of beauty contests in the 1920s in Central Europe. By comparing Simon to Lisl Goldarbeiter, who was *Miss Austria* in 1929 and *Miss Universe* in 1929, and Magda Demetrescu, *Miss Romania* in 1929, Vasvári presents the paths of Simon and Goldarbeiter as parallel, describing the Viennese girl as the historical counterpart to Simon in terms of their Jewish background (Goldarbeiter was the daughter of a Hungarian Jew from Szeged, who emigrated to Vienna), their sponsorship by newspapers and their declaration of wholesome innocence and rejection of supposed cosmopolitanism.

In her meticulously researched study, Vasvári places beauty contests in the context of public spectacles that had become widespread since the 1850s, when P. T. Barnum initiated the first American beauty contest, a "popular institution for the culturally-sanctioned public display of women and their bodies." Moreover, fashion photography captured the contests, allowing art and consumer culture to intersect. This was a field, Vasvári emphasizes, in which Jews, and especially, "Jewish women, were disproportionately overrepresented," widely promoting "new ways of seeing and new ideals of beauty." The author discusses beauty pageants as sites of national masquerade that gave gendered representations of national identity. At the same time, beauty queens came to be, especially in the US, the embodiments of the New Woman: pre-

adolescent looking tomboys, or stylish flappers with bobbed hair. In Central Europe, where anti-Semitic slurs often accompanied public celebrations of Jewish beauty queens, anomalies of modernity were perceived to be linked to Jewish cosmopolitanism. Here the Modern Girl was denounced for her representation of "everything that society found threatening, visualized discursively as a sexually promiscuous, smoking, independent working girl who appeared to disregard roles of daughter, wife and mother." This is why Böske Simon "was caught between tradition and modernity," representing "the contradictory images of traditional young *Magyar* womanhood and the international Modern Girl."

Moving on to the region connecting history with literature, we have Dávid Szolláth's article on a celebrated literary couple, fiction writer Miklós Mészöly and psychologist and writer Alaine Polcz. By surveying three travel narratives and the voluminous correspondence between husband and wife, Szolláth identifies the nature of this particular "creative relationship" as well as their ideas on male and female roles. Mészöly has long been considered an outstanding prose writer and innovator of narrative imagination and style in Hungarian literature. Polcz, on the other hand, was only belatedly acknowledged as a writer herself, having been a "late bloomer" who dutifully put her service as a good wife before her professional career as a psychologist. She was nearly seventy when she published her first book, which then brought her instant success as a writer on her own account. This was *Asszony a fronton* ['One Woman in the War'], a semi-documentary/semi-fictional narrative of sexual abuse suffered by women in World War II. Not only was Polcz celebrated for her individual writing style but also for her courageous breaking of the silence about the mass violence committed by Soviet soldiers. Polcz was a proper Hungarian *írófeleség* ['writer's wife'], who assisted her husband's work in many ways, among them, by making tape recordings with the explicit purpose of providing him with "raw materials." Mészöly's *Pontos történetek, útközben* ['Accurate Stories on the Road'] came about directly from Polcz's recordings, yet the book appeared as written by Mészöly only. *Karácsonyi utazás* ['Christmas Travel'] contains Polcz's "raw materials" that never came to be used by Mészöly. Yet Polcz still published it not as her own text but as "part of her husband's literary estate." Only the third travel narrative, *Két utazás Erdélyben* ['Two Journeys in Transylvania'] came out as authored by Polcz herself (probably because it was published after the writer's death). Szolláth identifies the ways in which Mészöly changed Polcz's style in *Accurate Stories on the Road*, while also specifying the recurrences, among them, characters and places, which Mészöly appropriated and which, according to Szolláth, ultimately create "a densely interconnected transtextual system" out of the two separate texts. The recurring themes and gestures, including a focused attention to death (always resisted by Mészöly but embraced, professionally as well as personally, by Polcz), prove Polcz's definite presence behind the passages claimed by Mészöly. It is these shared topoi that grew out of the "creative relationship" of Mészöly and Polcz, Szolláth claims.

Fictional character construction provides the focus of the two studies in literary criticism. Since characters are read as the embodiments of ideologies on the one hand and as actors who establish social relations on the other, character analyses are substantiated by discourse studies. Enikő Bollobás and Pál Hegyi explore the hidden gender codes in the discourse of near-contemporary authors, with special attention to ways cultural assumptions of gender inform talk about men and women, as well as constructions of male and female characters. In some cases, widely assumed cultural assumptions like sexism and classism are foregrounded and enlarged, while in others a clash between conventional and unconventional gender traits is showcased by

silence and ambiguity, which catalyzes a revisionist interpretation for both characters and readers. The former happens in some pieces of fiction written by Péter Esterházy, in which sexual power relations are linked to political power relations and sexuality is presented as a mode of domination. The latter applies to the three contemporary short stories that establish a particular distancing technique by leaving the gender of a narrator or character unaddressed, and by presenting characters, male and female, whose subversion of traditional gender scripts is interpreted as failure in normative discourse.

Sexual politics in Péter Esterházy's fiction is explored by Enikő Bollobás, who identifies versions of sexist discourse in two major works by the author. Responding as a feminist scholar to the call of Hungarian critics to reflect upon Esterházy's at times one-dimensional gender discourse and provocative narrative assignment of gender roles, Bollobás reads these books in terms of their implicit sexual politics and gender codes. The fiction writer uses *double entendre*, a narrative figure closely related to the Central European *Witz* tradition, both to hide and to reveal gender politics and gender codes. In *Kis Magyar pornográfia* ['A Little Hungarian Pornography'], the first work under discussion, both sex and politics have a double meaning, with sexual pornography and political pornography referring both to themselves and to each other. Esterházy ridicules social conditions by identifying them with abusive sex, while he also ridicules pornographic sex by identifying it with communist politics. The codes that make up the discourse of sexual pornography include such topoi as female ugliness, female body, especially breasts, buttocks, and genitals, as well as repulsive sex. Discrepancies between depictions of the female and the male body are telling elements of the gendered code: woman is predominantly the object of the narrator's gaze, while he, the male narrator, takes the subject position, only rarely objectivizing the male body. In the other text, *Egy nő* ['She Loves Me'], pornographic sex functions as both thematics and medium. Thematically, woman's vulnerability grounded in the body is first ridiculed, and then gets transferred to man: now he is presented as well as parodied via the *double entendre* mode as defenseless, at the mercy of his own corporeality. Rhetorically, all stories are reduced to the one possible story, the story of pornography, told in permutational alternatives; in this reductionist-tautological language game, pornography acts as a language hiding the single untellable story, that of true love.

While focusing on distancing narrative strategies for crossing gender boundaries, Pál Hegyi discusses two short stories by contemporary Hungarian prose writers, *Karambol* ['Crash'] by Ádám Berta and *Pertu* ['On Intimate Terms'] by Edina Szvoren,. Before the close-readings, Hegyi contextualizes the works, placing them in the tradition of male writers assuming female personas. He singles out Sándor Weöres, whose verse-novel *Psyche* was purportedly written by Erzsébet Lónyay; Péter Esterházy, whose *Tizenhét hattyúk* ['Seventeen Swans'] was supposedly authored by Lili Csokonai; and Lajos Parti Nagy, whose *A test angyala* ['The Angel of the Body'] was released under the name of Jolán Sárbogárdi. All these writers took female authorial positions whereby an assumed woman's perspective and woman's language were constructed. The short stories discussed here problematize gender as a thematic. Ádám Berta's story "Crash," published in 2015, negotiates the conflict of gendered polarities by relegating gendered differences to the semiotic dimension of the text. What is conspicuous in the story is how long gender is left unaddressed, leaving the reader in an uncertainty as to whether the protagonist is a man or a woman. The first person speaker's recognition of her own gender (as female) comes late, while the second narrator's gender is only revealed (as male) retrospectively in the penultimate paragraph. Hegyi interprets this gender construction as catachretic, instrumental in

deconstructing any metaphorical reading of the plot in Berta's short fiction. Edina Szvoren's "On Intimate Terms" tells the story of a father and mother from a Hungarian town in Slovakia visiting their divorced daughter in Budapest. The six-year-old son's traumatic absence (he decided to live with his father) permeates the narrative. Interpersonal relations prove extremely difficult, with an unbridgeable emotional divide between each family member. Silences and compulsive repetitions inform dialogues, while racist and sexist slurs and tantrums put a halt on conversations. The single daughter's gender identity as both woman and mother is questioned and ridiculed in a blaming game conducted by the parents.

The last section of our thematic block is assigned to the gender aspects of filmic character constructions. Zoltán Dragon and Vera Benczik scrutinize two different Hungarian filmmaking genres, the mode practiced by Academy Award winner István Szabó and the one adopted by young fantasy film creators; somewhat surprisingly, the authors find Szabó, who is supposedly a mainstream director, to be more subversive and fantasy filmmakers, supposedly more experimental artists, more conformist. Szabó chooses to contrast the audible voiceover narratives of three male generations with the visual focus of one woman living through all three generations, thereby assigning greater credibility to one woman's perception and judgment than to three men's interpretation. Fantasy filmmakers Isti Madarász and Károly Ujj Mészáros do not seem to present departures from gender normativity; they rather conform to traditional genre roles, allowing the quest to male figures only and reserving domesticity for their female characters.

Dragon explores a hitherto unidentified innovative feature in István Szabó's film *A napfény íze* ['Sunshine']. While seemingly continuing his own artistic tradition of tripling the focal male characters, Szabó assigns agency to one female character in the construction of the narrative and visual design. Indeed, this is a novelty that marks a turn in the director's career as he abandons the classical Hollywood filmmaking style of presenting the story of a young man facing turbulent times in history. As a semi-trilogy spanning three generations of the Sonnenschein family, *Sunshine* departs from the hidden gender codes of mainstream cinema by presenting the initiation rites of three men from the focal point of one female family member, who plays a key role in all of the generations. Vali, this curious photographer, frames the male narrative on a visual level by never passively waiting for the protagonists but appropriating narrative and visual agency to move the plot—of both life and film—forward. The woman's role, Dragon insists, is grounded in desire in that she is the primarily the subject of desire, securing the progression of the plot, but also its object and mediator. It is by desire that she gains agency and becomes a visual meta-organizer in the realm of the filmic world. Her structural position frames the three successive male stories to develop: it is by defying the objectifying male gaze that she herself becomes the structural point from which the photographic gaze emanates in *Sunshine*. Moreover, her subjectivity is performative, bringing about an ontologically new entity, female artistic agency. It is through her eyes that we follow the events that are actually narrated by a Sonnenschein boy; that is, Szabó inserts a gap between narrator and focalizer, separating narration and focalization along gender lines. By this gesture, the filmmaker not only foregrounds the focalizer but also the visual level, as opposed to the narrative voice, thereby giving priority to what a woman sees as opposed to what a man tells.

The gender representations of Hungarian fantasy films constitute the topic of Vera Benczik's contribution. Lacking for a long time the necessary budget as well as filmic tradition, Hungarian filmmaking, she points out, has only recently embraced the genre of the fantastic.

From the growing number of science fiction and fantasy films, the author picks two, *Hurok* ['Loop'] and *Liza, a rókatündér* ['Liza, the Fox-Fairy'], as sites where particular gendered representations, specifically the fictionalization of female quest, can be located. Benczik contextualizes her survey in both the normative tradition of the Western quest genre and the subversive tradition of American fantasy cinema, in which the latter has visibly appropriated male quest topoi to construct female questers in fantastic filmic narratives. However, what has become the norm in American cinema—to foreground strong women in quest of some higher goal or meaning—has not yet found its place in emerging Hungarian fantasy filmmaking. Although the genre would allow any departure from the existing patriarchal script—one would think fantasy is the very site where one is able to think outside the patriarchal box—not even do young Hungarian fantasy filmmakers venture into such far realms of visual imagination in order to depart from the gender norm: their female characters are neither transgressive nor subversive. Quest is still reserved for men, as the author's analysis of *Loop* demonstrates, while women rarely go on a quest, and if they do, they remain within the realm of domesticity, as Benczik's reading of *Liza, the Fox-Fairy* establishes. *Loop* is a time loop narrative allowing the protagonist, Ádám, to free himself from the trap of ever-repeating events relating to fatherhood. Unusual for a male quest, his search is for learning how to be a father, embracing commitment to the family. While Ádám's journey reverses the traditional male quest always pointing outside to the world, Anna's trajectory is not informed by a similar reversal. In fact, the narrative assumes a rigidly traditional approach to gender representation, putting Anna in the object position, objectifying her as sexual object, maternal principle, and helpless woman in need of the hero's protection. In *Liza, the Fox-Fairy* only the cityscape is fantastic but not the journey, with the questing hero who is a woman this time, Liza, in search of true love. As she searches for the right guy, she will find her own happiness in domesticity, becoming the embodiment of true womanhood of the heteronormative system.

The seven studies of our cluster cover diverse fields within the problematics of gender in twentieth and twenty first century Hungarian culture, each focusing on different aspects of history, literary history, and filmic history. We do not assume that the final picture is comprehensive, but certainly believe that the thematics is shown as complex and provocative, interpreted by methodologies that are equally grounded in theory on the one hand and historical and textual analysis on the other.