Tóth, Orsolya. "The Pimpernel from Árkod. A comparative analysis of Magda Szabó's novel *Abigail* and Emma Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel*." *Hungarian Cultural Studies.* Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 17 (2024): http://ahea.pitt.edu DOI: 10.5195/ahea.2024.559

The Pimpernel from Árkod

A comparative analysis of Magda Szabó's novel *Abigail* and Emma Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel*

Orsolya Tóth

Abstract: The paper focuses on the registered but barely discussed intertextual aspects of Magda Szabó's prose, which can be linked to the popular culture of the first half of the twentieth century. The comparative analysis compares one of her most famous novels, *Abigail*, with Baroness Emma Orczy's Pimpernel stories and the relatively late entry in the Pimpernel franchise, the 1941 film *"Pimpernel" Smith*, directed by and starring Leslie Howard. The paper concludes that The Scarlet Pimpernel may have influenced the story and characterization of *Abigail*, particularly the portrayal of the dual-identity hero, Mr. Kőnig. It is also suggested that the novel's schematic historical representation can be linked to Magda Szabó's choice of literary template.

***Keywords**: Magda Szabó, Emma Orczy, middlebrow literature, popular culture, Twentieth-century Hungarian novel, intertextual aspects, dual-identity hero*

Biography: Orsolya Tóth is an Associate Professor at the Department of Classical Literature History and Comparative Literature, University of Pécs, Hungary. Her main area of research is eighteenth and nineteenth-century Hungarian literature and philology, especially the works of Ferenc Kazinczy. Her books are *The Ephemeral and the Imperishable* (The Discursive Limits of the Literary Approach of Kazinczy and his Contemporaries) (In Hungarian); 2009, *Past and Present* (Studies on 19th Century Hungarian Literature) (In Hungarian), 2017. Toth.orsolya@pte.hu

Magda Szabó and the success of her prose abroad have recently been associated with middlebrow literature, a characteristic phenomenon of contemporary literary production that is difficult to describe (Schein 2022: 676; Szilágyi 2019:139). Middlebrow is a metaphorical term that is associated with the field of phrenology from the Nineteenth century, which hypothesized that a high forehead signified high intellect and culture. In contrast, a low forehead implied the opposite. The cultural discourse of the late Nineteenth century used these arguments to form categories describing cultural varieties. (Holmes 2017; Levine 2002: 221-222). In short, middlebrow literature refers to works of entertainment that are understandable for the general public but carefully written with a literary feel (Krusovszky 2018). Although it is debatable to

New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

This journal is published by the University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program and is cosponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Press

ISSN 2471-965X (online)

what extent and in what way Magda Szabó’s prose can be linked to middlebrow literature, research conducted with the concept of middlebrow kept in mind can be fruitful because it can draw attention to the noted but little-understood intertextual aspects of Magda Szabó’s prose, which can be linked to middlebrow literature or popular culture of the first half of the twentieth century.

Magdolna, the narrator of *Für Elise*, not only includes the *Iliad* but also *Egy magyar nábob* [A Hungarian Nabob], *Don Carlos*, and *The Prince of Homburg* among the literature she read in her childhood, along with Baroness Emma Orczy’s novel *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 bestseller *Gone with the Wind*. The latter is significant from the point of view of the world of the novel, if only because the duo of Scarlett O’Hara and Melanie Hamilton could well be the inspiration for Magda Szabó’s recurring, self-willed autobiographical figure, next to whom, as Edit V. Gilbert puts it, there is always the blonde, soft, delicate, feminine other, with whom she is ambivalently infatuated or cannot escape (Gilbert 2019: 316).

Margaret Mitchell’s novel and Emma Orczy’s works can be discussed as part of middlebrow and popular culture, considering the genre categories of historical romance in the former and detective story and adventure novel in the latter. In this study, I will compare Emma Orczy’s Pimpernel stories and the relatively late entry in the Pimpernel franchise, the 1941 film “*Pimpernel” Smith* (*Mister V* in the US, *Modern Pimpernel* in the Hungarian version), directed by and starring Leslie Howard, with one of Magda Szabó’s most famous novels, *Abigail*.

The creator of the Pimpernel figure, Baroness Emma Orczy, was born in 1865 in Tarnaörs, the child of Baron Bódog Orczy and Countess Emma Wass, and according to her autobiography, she traced her ancestry back to the conquest of Hungary. She was 15 when she and her parents settled permanently in London after a few detours to Brussels and Paris. Her youth was marked by a passion for music, theater, and painting before turning to writing. She considered England her new homeland and produced her oeuvre in English, comprising nearly 60 volumes. Her works were translated into many languages, and the *Pesti Hírlap* [Pest Newspaper] reported that:

> Her books were distributed in huge numbers, and on the great steamships, in the carriages of the Swiss railways, in the fine hotel lobbies, and in the seats of the vast carriages of Cook & Company, one could always find a distinguished lady with one of the latest novels of Emma Orczy in her hand.
>
> [Könyveit óriási példányszámban kapkodták szét s a nagy gőzhajókon, a svájci vasutak kupéiban, a finom hotel-hallokban és a hatalmas Cook-kocsik ülésein mindig talált az ember néhány előkelő ladyt, aki az Orczy Emma valamelyik legújabb regényét tartotta a kezében.] ([Sz-y I-n] 1916: 11; all quotations translated into English by Réka Boglárka Simon).

Nor could this be called a fleeting success. *The Scarlet Pimpernel* was republished in 2018 in the Oxford World’s Classic series, edited by Nicholas Daly, with a detailed introductory essay (Orczy 2018). It is often said that Emma Orczy is the best-known Hungarian writer in the world, and it is no coincidence that the first Hungarian translation of her autobiography states the same on the book’s cover (Orczy 2023).

As Ágnes Strickland-Pajtók notes, Orczy is one of the few native Hungarian authors who have successfully switched languages. Despite the change in identity, however, she still emphasized her Hungarian roots. A sign of this is that, although she had the chance to take the surname of her English husband, Montagu Barstow, she decided to keep her author-name as Emma/Emmuska Orczy (Strickland-Pajtók 2022: 86-88; Srtickland-Pajtók 2021: 135-142). She began her literary career with tales and detective stories inspired by the stories of Conan Doyle, but her worldwide success came with the Pimpernel series. Her first play, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, was first performed on stage in London in 1903, and after its huge success, it was published as a novel in 1905, followed by 17 sequels.

The protagonist of the Pimpernel series, Sir Percy Blakeney, is an English nobleman who risks his life to rescue the victims of the Terror from Paris during the French Revolution and sails with them to the safety of Albion. Sir Percy wears a mask. He appears to be a stupid, phlegmatic, and “inane fop” (Orczy 2018: 62; Orczy 2006: 78), but this mask conceals an intelligent adventurer. One of the stakes of the first volume is whether Marguerite, Sir Percy’s wife, will recognize her husband as the man whose pluck and audacity had become almost fabulous (Orczy 2018: 4; Orczy 2006: 9), the man “behind a perfectly acted comedy, [with] his almost superhuman strength of will and marvelous ingenuity” (Orczy 2018: 214; Orczy 2006: 261). One recurring character in the Pimpernel stories, besides the helpers, is the figure who plays the role of the opponent: Chauvelin, the head of the French secret police, a “clever, shrewd-looking personality” (Orczy 2018: 65; Orczy 2006: 82), who, despite his cunning machinations, is unable to outwit the Scarlet Pimpernel.

In the history of popular culture, Emma Orczy has become an indispensable author, essentially by creating the prototype of the dual-identity hero. Sir Percy Blakeney would later be an example for Zorro, Batman, and Superman (Srickland-Pajtók 2022: 86; Daly 2018: xxv–xxvi; Benyovszky 2019: 110-112; Dugan 2012: 1, 234-235). Because of her Hungarian roots, one might ask whether Mór Jókai’s novel *Szegény gazdagok* [The Poor Plutocrats], which Emma Orczy could have read in two English translations at the turn of the century, might have played a role in the creation of the dual-identity male portrait (Kádár 1991: 224-228). The novel’s female protagonist, Henriette Lapussa, is blackmailed by her family into becoming the wife of Baron Hátszegi, who has something mysterious about his whole being. Henriette tries to get close to the man, but always fails. Hátszegi’s figure gradually becomes recognizable as that of Fatia Negra, the mask-wearing leader of a counterfeiting gang, whose mask is finally torn off by Henriette. The figure of Baron Hátszegi/Fatia Negra can be interpreted retrospectively as a diabolical version of Sir Percy/Pimpernel, while Henriette’s role in understanding her husband is comparable to Marguerite’s, but with tragic consequences. However, the influence of Jókai on the Pimpernel stories cannot yet be verified by philological arguments.

The original Pimpernel, rescuing aristocrats during the French Revolution, was the hero of 15 novels by Emma Orczy. Even within Orczy’s oeuvre, however, there is a noticeable shift, a rewriting, which does not alter the basic features of the story but places it in different periods and contexts. The protagonist of *The Laughing Cavalier* (1914) and *The First Sir Percy* (1921) is the 17th century Sir Percy, while the protagonist of *Pimpernel and Rosemary* (1924), enthusiastically welcomed by Hungarian critics of the time, is Péter, the late successor of the Pimpernel, who practices his miraculous activity in post-Trianon Transylvania.

The popularity of the Pimpernel story grew through books, theater productions, and various film versions. Silent films were made in 1917 and 1928, but the most popular was the 1934 version, directed by Harold Young. In it, Sir Blakeney was played by Leslie Howard. Leslie

Howard was also the director, producer, and lead actor in *"Pimpernel" Smith,* released in 1941, which dates the basic story to the spring of 1939 and is set in Nazi Germany. Its protagonist is Horatio Smith, an absent-minded archaeology professor who, as he repeatedly says, is only attracted to one woman, a statue he has found of the goddess Aphrodite. However, his bachelor's life is not only about independence but also about protecting others, and his hiding in plain sight is particularly useful for his secret activities. The professor visits an archaeological site in Germany with his students during the summer holidays. However, his real aim is to get persecuted scientists out of the country and into England. The antagonist here is General von Graum, who tasks a young girl with unmasking the Pimpernel. Miss Kohls, alias Ludmilla Koslowski, is blackmailed into serving the Nazis due to threats against the life of her father, a Polish journalist, held in a concentration camp. She uncovers the secret identity of Professor Smith, who rescues her father and later aids in her escape from Germany. She admires the modern Pimpernel, and the professor is not indifferent to her either. After the war, *"Pimpernel" Smith* was played constantly in Hungarian cinemas, and later on, it was broadcast several times on television. It was unavoidable, especially for a Leslie Howard fan (Szabó 2011: 628) like Magda Szabó.

When looking at the Hungarian reception of *Abigail*, the story of the Pimpernel does not initially appear as a possible parallel. This makes the blog post from a reader of the English translation of the novel so much more fascinating; the reader claims that if you have read *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, you will decipher Abigail's identity early on (Katcoff 2020). Part of the reason for this duality is undoubtedly the different reception of Orczy's novels compared to those of Magda Szabó. The Hungarian translation of the two volumes of the Pimpernel series was completed almost immediately. The *Scarlet Pimpernel* had already appeared in book form in 1907 and was simultaneously published in *Uj Idők* [Modern Times], a literary weekly, in serial form, followed a year later by a volume called *Megfizetek* [I Will Repay]. The Pimpernel novels were almost exclusively reviewed positively in book reviews for publicity purposes. The Hungarian press of the 1910s, however, referred to Emma Orczy as the author of pulp fiction and nauseating, sentimental works. The reception seemed to have reversed with the publication of *Pimpernel and Rosemary*. A critic of the *Katolikus Szemle* [Catholic Review] "considers it an excellent irredentist work" (Szűcs 1927: 187). Lajos Kéky's critique of the work praises her work as a defense of the crushed Transylvanian Hungarian's cause and compliments the virtues of justice and fairness (Kéky 1927: 355-356). After the Second World War, neither Emma Orczy's aristocratic origins nor an appreciation of her works could align with the cultural policy of the time. It is no coincidence that it was only after the regime change in Hungary that Baroness Orczy's novels were published again in new translations.

In the case of *Abigail*, neither interviews with Magda Szabó nor the publication known as *Színképelemzés* [Spectrometry], which explores the genesis of the novel, refer to literary and film backgrounds, and it is clear that Magda Szabó was primarily interested in affirming the autobiographical background of the work and not in exploring possible literary models. However, she does refer to the Pimpernel stories but typically does so only after the regime change. In an interview with the journal *Jelenkor* [Contemporaneity] in 1997, she uses them as an analogy, but in reference to her own life, when she details the fate of her *Freskó* [Fresco] manuscript and her forced silence in the 1950s, which was explained by political reasons: "Balázs Lengyel, Kálnoky, and Ottlik guarded it, depending on who had it at the time. We lived with our hidden works like the *Scarlet Pimpernel*; what I wrote was life-threatening to read" [Lengyel Balázsék, Kálnoky, Ottlik őrizték, mikor kihez került, úgy éltünk rejtegetett

alkotásainkkal akkor, mint a Vörös Pimpernel; amit én írtam, azt életveszélyes volt elolvasni is.] (Szabó 1997a: 820; see also Szabó 1997b: 33). Géza Ottlik earned the codename "Pimpernelly Nelly" among Szabó's friends because he was a close equivalent to the Scarlet Pimpernel. Ottlik "constantly denied that he had rescued anyone in World War II, but his series of rescues was so well known that we just scoffed at his attempts at denial" [állandóan tagadta, hogy bárkit is megmentett volna a II. világháborúban, de emberszabadítási akciói sorozata annyira köztudomású volt, hogy csak legyintettünk], she wrote in her essay: *Adalék az Ottlikiászhoz: Ludány* [An Addition to Ottlik's Iliad: Ludány] (Szabó 1994: 857). In 1991, Magda Szabó dedicated a separate essay to the Pimpernel story, which is essentially a rigorous critique of the 1982 film adaptation directed by Clive Donner. From this, we learn that in her youth, she had read Emma Orczy's works (at least in their English original) at her teacher's suggestion as a form of language practice (Szabó 1991: 34).

According to the critics, Szabo was eager to discover whether her childhood favorite reading material and the film experience of her youth stand the test of time. Unfortunately, re-reading the book does not live up to her expectations. She writes about Emma Orczy's "amicable dilettantism" [kedves dilettantizmus] and claims that her novel is not to be taken seriously and that her "frothy pale blue" [habos-halványkék] literary devices are problematic. However, two undisputed merits remain. The first concerns characterization: Orczy does not split Sir Percy's character into two but keeps it intact throughout the story. The other merit is linked to moral principles because it is "a very genuine English ethical requirement, capturing a mentality that introduced the concept of fair play to Europe at the time" [nagyon is hiteles angol etikai követelmény, egy mentalitás rögzítése, amely annak idején megismertette Európával a fair play fogalmát] (Szabó 1991: 35-36). Magda Szabó, who has a good sense for identifying literary characters, recognizes one of the characters of the Arthurian legend (Percy-Percival), who embodies chivalric virtues. The fundamental lesson of the novel is that:

> We must be involved in the great moments of humanity in our private lives, too; we must be among the actors in significant historical situations. It does not matter that our castle in Brighton is far from the heart of disaster and that we live in safety; we must not stand idly by and watch the extermination and imprisonment of innocents and the destruction of a culture. Nor accept that some people, reasoning with the law of large numbers, forget that life is our human right.
>
> [közünk kell, hogy legyen az emberiség nagy pillanataihoz a magánéletünkben is, ott a helyünk a cselekvők között a nagy történelmi szituációkban, nem számít, hogy brightoni kastélyunk messze van a katasztrófák epicentrumától, és mi biztonságban élünk, nem szabad tétlenül nézni ártatlanok kiirtását, börtönben tartását, egy kultúra megsemmisítését, sem elfogadni, hogy egyesek a nagy számok törvényével érvelve elfelejtsék, hogy az élet emberi jogunk] (Szabó 1991: 36)

The Scarlet Pimpernel is the head of a "band of Englishmen." In *"Pimpernel" Smith*, Horatio Smith is the leader of a quickly assembled student group, while in *Abigail*, Mr. Kőnig is the leader of the resistance in Árkod. Members of all three groups describe their relationship to their leader almost as a thesis statement: Sir Andrew and his companions are ready to lay down their lives for the Scarlet Pimpernel at any time (Orczy 2018: 171; Orczy 2006: 208), while according to a Cambridge student, Horatio Smith is the finest man who has ever lived on earth. Mici Horn expresses a similar view in the final chapter of *Abigail*: Kőnig is "the bravest and the

most noble-hearted man" [a legbátrabb és a legtisztább szívű férfi] (Szabó 2020: 441; Szabó 2009: 393).

The most striking similarity between the *Abigail* and the Pimpernel stories is undoubtedly the portrayal of the dual-identity protagonist, Mr. Kőnig. Among the most critical external attributes of Emma Orczy's character, Blakeney, are that he is unusually tall, broad-shouldered, and strong (Orczy 2018: 42-43, 47; Orczy 2006: 55, 62). The former factor was so crucial for Orczy that, according to her autobiography, she did not support the casting of Leslie Howard for the leading role in the film because he was too short (Orczy 2023: 199). The height of Mr. Kőnig is referred to when Gina first sees him: "He was tall and broad-shouldered" [Magas volt, valósággal kitoronylott a padból] (Szabó 2020: 69; Szabó 2009: 62). She notices his strength when the teacher takes her from the station after her escape attempt: "She trembled in the grip of his enormous hands. They held her drenched shoulders with a firmness that astonished her. The man had unexpected strength, and now he was intent on steering her back inside" [Reszketett a két nagy tenyér között, mely váratlan erővel tartotta agyonázott vállát. Kőnig meglepően erős volt, most elkezdte kormányozni visszafele] (Szabó 2020: 138; Szabó 2009: 123).

Sir Percy is an "unusually good-looking" man, although his features are distorted by "a certain lazy expression in his [deep-set blue] eyes," his "perpetual inane laugh," his fashion fads, and his intellectual limitations (Orczy 2018: 43-47; Orczy 2006: 57-62). The latter assumption is also reflected in Gina's view of Mr. Kőnig, whom she finds dull. She only mentions "the dazzling sharpness of his wit" [szellemének sziporkázó élessége] ironically in the grotesque portrait (Szabó 2020: 236; Szabó 2009: 125, 210). Kőnig's "sleepy glance"[álmos tekintete] also reminds us of Sir Percy, and in a high-stakes situation, when a patrol is searching for the resistance in Árkod, Mr. Kőnig also suppresses a (misleading) yawn (Szabó 2018: 218, 436; Szabó 2009: 194, 388).

Other features of Kőnig's character are more reminiscent of Horatio Smith. They are both teachers and admirers of ancient Greco-Roman culture and literature, which can be contrasted with Hitler's empire and, later, with the devastations of the war. Kőnig is a bachelor, similar to the English professor, who, by his own confession, is answerable to no one. A similar sentiment keeps the resistance in Árkod away from Zsuzsanna, the deaconess. Compared to the Pimpernel stories, Magda Szabó doubles the female protagonists. The identity of "Abigail" and of the resistance in Árkod is a mystery not only to Gina but also to Zsuzsanna, who merely knows that someone is behind the statue. Zsuzsanna is shocked by this realization, just like the female characters in the Pimpernel stories: Marguerite in the novel and Ludmilla Koslowski in the film. Since the focalization of the narrative is linked chiefly to Gina's awareness (Schein 2022: 679), the love story of Kőnig and the deaconess, Zsuzsanna, remains largely hidden from us. The deaconess, after the exposure of the double essays—essays which entail the act of writing two versions: one to meet school expectations and another, often satirical, for personal amusement or to entertain peers—recognizes the generosity of the teacher and gives the following description of Kőnig: noble-hearted, forgiving, and magnanimous. (Szabó 2020: 253; Szabó 2009: 225). At the end of the novel, Mici Horn points out to Gina that Zsuzsanna loves "Abigail" and knew and worried about "Abigail" even before everyone believed his farce. Zsuzsanna is the one who sees behind his mask and recognizes Kőnig's noble character without precisely knowing the reason behind his role-playing.

The fact that Kőnig takes on a role, at least in part, is hinted at in three details in the novel. The first hint comes from Matula"s old gatekeeper, Piroska Torma, who always said about

Kőnig that "not even Jesus could understand how he turned out to be such a coward because he had not been like that in his younger days" [Jézus se érti, hogy lett belőle ilyen nyavalyás, nem ilyen volt az fiatalabb korában] (Szabó 2020: 227; Szabó 2009: 201). The second hint relates to the failed rescue of Zsuzsanna when she stumbles and falls off the edge of the railway embankment while harvesting apples. Kőnig's "shoulders flinched, and his hands moved as if to catch and hold her until she regained her balance, but he just looked on helplessly…" [Kőnig válla megrezdült, a keze is, mintha súrolta volna tudatát a gondolat: ha utánakapna, tán fenntarthatná, míg visszanyeri az egyensúlyát, de csak bámult gyámoltalanul…]. Following this, "he had almost leaped after her, thought better of it and held himself back, before clambering up from between the rails and rushing to the side of the embankment and standing there staring down at the deaconess with a look of anxious enquiry" [majdnem a prefekta után ugrott, de csak majdnem, mert aztán meggondolta magát, csupán odalépett a töltés szélére, és onnan nézett a diakonissza után rémülten és érdeklődve] (Szabó 2020: 219; Szabó 2009: 194). Kőnig's body language can be interpreted as an effort not to show the affection he feels towards Zsuzsanna (Nagy 2018: 166). The teacher's hesitation, however, may also suggest that he had accurately assessed the danger for Zsuzsanna, which was not significant enough for him to leave behind his "accursed" [Isten gyámoltalanja] role (Szabó 2020: 221; Szabó 2009: 197). The third of these hints is linked to the visit that Gina, Kalmár, and Zsuzsanna made to the staff residence. Just as Gina had been surprised by the teacher's strength earlier, she is now surprised by his interior decor: "His room was beautiful, fitted out with exquisite taste" [A szoba szép, jó ízléssel berendezett]; it does not match the character that Gina attributed to him (Szabó 2020: 251; Szabó 2009: 223). The scene is similar to the one in which Marguerite (with some allusions to the Bluebeard story) enters into the room she has been locked out of, that is, Sir Percy's study:

> […] she was struck by the severe simplicity of everything around her: the dark and heavy hangings, the massive oak furniture, the one or two maps on the wall, in no way recalled to her mind the lazy man about town, the lover of racecourses, the dandified leader of fashion, that was the outward representation of Sir Percy Blakeney." (Orczy 2018: 154; Orczy 2006: 187).
>
> The tidy desk is evidence of the man's sense of practicality; this is the moment when Marguerite realizes that in Sir Percy's "worldly inanities, his foppish ways, and foolish talk, he was not only wearing a mask but was playing a deliberate and studied part" (Orczy 2018: 155; Orczy 2006: 188).

One of the challenges of the Pimpernel stories can be connected to physiognomic discourse: What kind of body can the real hero inhabit? The students at Matula think about this in the spirit of *kalokagathia*. For them, bravery and beauty go hand in hand, as do a dull personality and an insignificant appearance. Unlike them, the female protagonist of *"Pimpernel" Smith*, who tries to recognize the hero she has never seen at the British Embassy ball, takes a different view. General von Graum's profile of the man suggests that he is a guardsman, a socialite, or perhaps an explorer, determined and taciturn. The general's description fits Lieutenant Kuncz from *Abigail* better than the absent-minded archaeology professor. Miss Koslowski can also find the modern Pimpernel because, by her own admission, she is looking for brains, not brawn.

Of course, not all the typical elements of the Pimpernel stories can be found in Magda Szabó's novel. Although Lieutenant Kuncz fills the role of the antagonist, there is no interaction

with Kőnig comparable to that of Blakeney and Chauvelin or Smith and General von Graum. It is noteworthy, however, that while the figure of the English gentleman in Orczy's novel and Howard's film is strongly defined against the French and the Germans (Dugan 2012: 32), in Magda Szabó's novel, the opponent is the Hungarian Lieutenant Kuncz, who blindly obeys the Germans' orders, while Kőnig, who bears a distinctly German surname, becomes the leader of the resistance. Similarly, the nationality of the characters in Emma Orczy's novel does not foreshadow which side the characters are on. Despite her French origins, Marguerite stands by her English husband.

Abigail also lacks the character transformation familiar from the Orczy novels and *"Pimpernel" Smith*. Sir Percy, like a chameleon, sometimes becomes a soldier, sometimes a worker, sometimes a peasant woman (Strickland-Pajtók 2022: 88), in which we can recognize the brilliance of Sherlock Holmes's power of disguise. In Magda Szabó's novel, the transformation of characters is more metaphorical: the general is revealed to be the instigator of the military resistance, and at the end of the book, the hidden identities of Mici Horn, Mr. Mráz, and, of course, Kőnig are revealed.

Some of the plot elements of the Pimpernel stories have been slightly modified in Szabó's novel. The predominant element of the *Scarlet Pimpernel* is blackmail. Chauvelin blackmails Margurite with the life of her brother Armand in exchange for her help in exposing the Scarlet Pimpernel. As we have seen, Ludmilla Koslowski is being blackmailed with her father's life. In the story of *Abigail*, however, General Vitay and the resistance in Árkod want to prevent the possibility of the father being blackmailed through his daughter. Another recurring element of the Pimpernel stories is the sacredness of promises since Sir Percy is not only the embodiment of chivalric virtues but also of the gentlemanly spirit. Sir Percy never, under no circumstances, goes back on his word, and *"Pimpernel" Smith* also relies on trust: if he has promised, he will return for Miss Koslowski. In the case of *Abigail*, this ethical norm is most characteristic of the school's headmaster, Gedeon Torma. However, it is a result of his profound Christian belief that he holds the agreement with the general sacred and refuses to deviate from it under any (worldly) threat.

A defining but not exclusive element of Magda Szabó's novel is the Pimpernel imitation, which combines the genre traits of the detective story and the adventure novel. The Pimpernel story, however, has an impact not only on the characterization but also on the historical representation of the novel. In the typical settings of the original stories and of *"Pimpernel" Smith*, the world of pubs and ballrooms becomes the stage for conspiracies. Sir Percy and Horatio Smith free prisoners from captivity without difficulty; in the latter' case, the concentration camp appears as a better-quality youth hostel. Both main characters engage in fascinating verbal warfare with their opponents, and every story is on a sure path towards a happy ending. There is only one brief but ominous hint at the end of *"Pimpernel" Smith* that the students may not return to the classroom; instead, they may have other tasks ahead of them. Neither *The Scarlet Pimpernel* nor *"Pimpernel" Smith* aims to be an authentic portrayal of historical reality. In the case of the latter, this is not even a possible expectation because of the time of its making, since the filmmakers had only fragments of information about the workings and function of the concentration camps.

In terms of the politics of memory in *Abigail*, however, Gábor Schein's criticism is justified. Despite what the novel suggests, according to historical records, there was no widespread and organized civil and military resistance in Hungary, and there was a particularly strong segregation of Jewish students in Calvinist schools. The picture that Magda Szabó paints

is as bright as it is false (Schein 2022: 679, Romsics 1999: 263), but it is not surprising given the schematic historical representation of the Pimpernel stories. It is another question, however, whether, in the 1960s and 1970s, the Pimpernel narrative could have been used to plot the events of the Second World War. Baroness Orczy's novel is also placed in an ironic context in the popular Hungarian film comedy of the period, *A tizedes meg a többiek* [The Corporal and the Others] (1965), directed by Márton Keleti. According to the famous remark from the butler Albert (Tamás Major) in the film, "As for the chair that has just been burned, there is a vandalism scene in Baroness Emma Orczy's novel, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*... But I will not describe it."

It is likely that the predominantly negative judgment of contemporary critics (Soltész 2018) also played a role in the fact that Magda Szabó later emphasized not the gesture of testimony but that of creating a memory:

> I wrote everything into *Abigail* that I should have done as a witness and a contemporary, but I became no more than a bystander with a feeling of guilt. If it is an indictment, I blame myself and others like me; if it is an accolade, it is for those who replaced the documents, saved countless Bánkis and countless Georgina Vitays, interfered with the hymn boards, repainted the writings, and defaced the statues.
>
> [Mindent beleírtam az Abigélbe, amit nekem kellett volna megtennem, aki tanú voltam és kortárs, de nem lettem több egy bűntudatos szemlélőnél. Ha vádirat lett, magamat vádolom és a magamhoz hasonlókat, ha elismerés, azoknak szól, akik kicserélték az okmányokat, megmentettek számtalan Bánkit, számtalan Vitay Georginát, átprogramoztak énekmutató táblákat, átfestették a feliratokat, meggallérozták a szobrokat] (Szabó 1978: 4).

A similar sentiment is highlighted in the text at the beginning of Leslie Howard's film, which claims that it is mere fantasy, "but it is based on the exploits of a number of courageous men who were and still are risking their lives daily to aid those unfortunate people of many nationalities who are being persecuted and exterminated by the Nazis." At the end of the text, Howard even adds, "To these champions of freedom, this story is dedicated."

However, Leslie Howard did not remain on the sidelines as an external observer of events, unlike Magda Szabó. During the war, he regularly appeared in theater productions entertaining British soldiers and campaigned against the Nazi dictatorship both on the radio and in the press. On June 1, 1943, the Luftwaffe shot down a civilian plane, BOAC Flight 777, leaving Lisbon, on which Leslie Howard was returning from a trip to Portugal and Spain. According to Richard Raskin, there are three theories about the actor-director's death. The first theory directly links the film and his death: it was essentially an execution – the Germans murdered Leslie Howard because of *"Pimpernel" Smith*. This theory is also supported by the actor's son, Ronald Howard, who believes that Goebbels specifically pursued Howard, who had Hungarian-Jewish ancestry. Another theory is that the Germans realized too late that they were shooting at a civilian aircraft. A third possibility is that German agents mistook the other passenger on the plane, a colleague of Howard's, for the British Prime Minister returning home (Raskin 2009: 99-101). Although the circumstances of Leslie Howard's tragic death remain a mystery to this day, the fiction and stakes of the Pimpernel film are linked to the actual events of the Second World War. After the war, the film arrived in Hungarian cinemas almost immediately, and reports of Howard's death appeared, suggesting a direct link between the two.

In John Bierman’s biography, we read that *“Pimpernel” Smith* was a model for Raoul Wallenberg, who saw it at a private screening at the British Embassy in Stockholm in the winter of 1942. According to the recollection of Nina Lagergren, Wallenberg’s half-sister, on their trip home, he said that this was what he would like to do, and, by a strange twist of fate, he later got the chance to do it (Bierman 1982: 29). Although Richard Raskin’s study (again in consultation with Nina Lagergren) points out that one should be careful when considering the possibility of inspiration, there is a chance that the film played a role in Wallenberg’s devotion. In Raskin’s interpretation, this story suggests that the boundary between reality and fiction is not nearly as clear-cut as we usually assume (Raskin 2009: 102-103). Perhaps it is also worth considering whether we are not underestimating the role of “those works of art that raise awareness of right moral conduct” (Schein 2022: 682) when it comes to shaping history. What is certain is that Magda Szabó, who criticized the naïve portrayal of man and history in the 1982 film *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, was left with nothing but the hope and doubt expressed in the conclusion of her essay, which could even be applied to *Abigail*:

> The achieved effect was the success of the audience, who were tested by humanity, by the desire for pure love, by the need for romance, by the hope that the problem will be solved, that the bad is but a dream and will come to pass, and that humanity is actually good. God grant that the audience and the filmmaker are right. As I type these lines, one of the foreign news broadcasters is presenting the death toll of the civilian and non-civilian population in the Gulf crisis.
>
> [Az elért hatás a nézők sikere volt, akik emberségből vizsgáztak, a tiszta szerelem utáni vágyból, a romantika igényéből, a reményből, hogy a probléma megoldódik, a rosszat csak álmodjuk, majd elmúlik, s az ember voltaképpen jó. Adja Isten, hogy a közönségnek és a filmalkotónak legyen igaza. Míg ezeket a sorokat gépelem, valamelyik külföldi hírmagyarázó a Golf-válság civil és polgári lakossága halálozási számarányát ismerteti.] (Szabó 1991: 38)

In conclusion, Magda Szabó’s writings and interviews show that she was well acquainted with Baroness Emma Orczy’s Pimpernel novels. It is plausible that the figure of the Scarlet Pimpernel played a role in the creation of *Abigail*’s dual-identity protagonist, Mr. Kőnig, and influenced the novel’s depiction of history. Hungarian critics did not register this connection, but in the 1970s, *Abigail* may already have had readers in Hungary who perceived the parallels between both the protagonists and the historical settings of the two novels. However, Magda Szabó not only used but also reimagined the Pimpernel narrative. This is illustrated by the extension of role-playing, the doubling of the female protagonists, and the combining of the Pimpernel story (a combination of the detective story and adventure novel genres) with the *Bildungsroman*.

Translated by Réka Boglárka Simon

Works Cited

Benyovszky, Krisztián. 2019. *Megközelítési szempontok a populáris irodalom és kultúra tanulmányozásához* [‘Approaches to the study of popular literature and culture’]. Nyitra: Közép-európai Tanulmányok Kara, Nyitrai Konstantin Filozófus Egyetem.

Bierman, John. 1982. *Righteous Gentile. The Story of Raoul Wallenberg, Missing Hero of the Holocaust*. London: Penguin Books.

Daly, Nicholas. 2018. Introduction to *Baroness Orczy: The Scarlet Pimpernel*, edited by Nicholas Daly, vii–xxvi. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dugan, Sally. 2012. *Baroness Orczy’s The Scarlet Pimpernel. A Publishing History.* London: Routledge.

Gilbert, Edit V. 2019. “„Szabó Magda, a hiányzó folytonosság. [‘Magda Szabó, the missing continuity’]” In *Szabó Magda száz éve* [One hundred years of Magda Szabó], edited by Márton Soltész and Edit V. Gilbert Edit, pp. 305–19. Budapest: Széphalom Könyvműhely, Orpheusz Kiadó.

Holmes, Diana. 2017. “Introduction: European Middlebrow.” *Belphégor*. November 23, 2017. http://journals.openedition.org/belphegor/942.

Kádár, Judit. 1991. “Jókai regényei angolul. [Jókai's novels in English]” *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények [Literary History Publications]* 95, (1991/5-6): pp. 505-542.

Katcoff, Fredda. 2020. “The Scarlet Pimpernel of Axis Hungary: Abigail by Magda Szabo (1970).” *Second Chances* (blog), August 30, 2020. https://secondchances636.wordpress.com/2020/08/30/the-scarlet-pimpernel-of-axis-hungary-abigail-by-magda-szabo-1970/.

Kéky, Lajos. 1927. “Orczy Emma bárónő: Pimpernel Erdélyben. [Baroness Emma Orczy: Pimpernel in Transylvania]” *Napkelet* [Sunrise] 5, (1927/4.): pp. 355-356.

Krusovszky, Dénes. 2018. “Mitől boldogtalan a magyar író? [What makes a Hungarian writer unhappy?]” *Magyar Narancs [Hungarian Orange]*. October 13, 2018. https://magyarnarancs.hu/pislogo_szobrok/miert-nem-boldog-senki-a-magyar-irodalomban-114075.

Levine, Lawrence V. 2022. *Highbrow/Lowbrow. The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Nagy, Csilla. 2018. “Tér és testpoétika Szabó Magda Abigél című regényében. [The Poetics of Space and Body in Magda Szabó's novel Abigél]” In *Kitáruló ajtók. Tanulmányok Szabó Magda műveiről* [Doors opening. Studies on the works of Magda Szabó], edited by Gabriella Körömi and Judit Kusper, pp. 161–68. Eger: Líceum.

Orczy, Emma. 2006. *A Vörös Pimpernel* [The Scarlet Pimpernel]. Translated by Mária Borbás. Budapest: Ulpius-ház Könyvkiadó.

- - -. 2018. *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. London: Penguin Books.

- - -. 2023. *Életem láncszemei* [The links of my life]. Translated by Ágnes Strickland-Pajtók. Pozsony: Womanpress.

Raskin, Richard. 2009. “From Leslie Howard to Raoul Wallenberg: The Transmission and Adaptation of a Heroic Model.” *P.O.V. A Danish Journal of Film Studies* 28 (December): pp. 87–106.

Romsics, Ignác. 1999. *Magyarország története a XX. Században* [History of Hungary in the 20th century]. Budapest: Osiris

Schein, Gábor. 2022. “Az Abigél műfaji kódjai és emlékezetpolitikája. [The genre codes and memory politics of Abigél]” *Jelenkor* [Contemporaneity] 65 (6): pp. 676-682.

Soltész, Márton. 2017. “Debreceni Georgikon. Közelítések Szabó Magda Abigél című regényéhez. [Debrecen Georgikon. Approaches to Magda Szabó's novel Abigél.]” *Kortárs [Contemporary]* 61 (10): pp. 77-89.

Strickland-Pajtók, Ágnes. 2021. “Baroness Emma Orczy’s Divided Loyalties in the 1910s and 20s.” *Acta Philologica* 57: pp. 135–142.

---. 2022. “Báró Orczy Emma A Vörös Pimpernel sorozata. A kulturális hibriditás és a kettős identitású szuperhős létrejötte. [Baron Emma Orczy The Scarlet Pimpernel series. Cultural hybridity and the emergence of the dual identity superhero]” *Kalligram [Calligram]* 31 (3): pp. 86-91.

Szabó, Magda. 1978. “Színképelemzés: Abigél (II.) [Spectrometry: Abigél]., *Élet és Irodalom* [Life and Literature]22 (52): p. 4.

- - -. 1991. “A kalandfilm Pimpernel [The Pimpernel adventure film].” *Színházi Élet [Theatre Life]* 2 (7): pp. 34-38.

- - -. 1994. “Adalék az Ottlikiászhoz: Ludány. [An Addition to Ottlik’s Iliad: Ludány]” *Holmi [Belonging]* 6 (6): pp. 855-860.

- - -.1997a. “Hit és korszerűség, Aczél Judit beszélgetése. [Faith and modernity, in conversation with Judit Aczél]” *Jelenkor [Contemporaneity]* 40 (9): pp. 817-824.

- - -. 1997b. “Az ősz. Karácsony Ágnes beszélgetése. [Autumn. A conversation with Ágnes Karácsony]” *168 óra* 9 (39): pp. 32-33.

- - -. 2009. *Abigél [Abigail]*. Budapest: Móra Könyvkiadó.

- - -. 2011. *Liber Mortis, Naplók 1982. május 25.- 1990. február 27*. [Liber Mortis, Diaries 25 May 1982 - 27 February 1990.] Edited by Géza Tasi. Budapest: Európa.

- - -. 2020. *Abigail*. Translated by Len Rix: Quercus-London: Maclehose Press.

Szilágyi, Zsófia. 2019. “Szabó Magda határai. [The limits of Magda Szabó]” *Alföld* 70 (12): pp. 136-144.

[Sz-y I-n]. 1906. “A vörös Pimpernel szerzője [Author of The Scarlet Pimpernel].” *Pesti Hirlap [Pest Newspaper]*, November 19, 1916, p. 11.

Szűcs, Lajos. 1927. “Orczy Emma bárónő — Pogány K.: Pimpernel Erdélyben [Baroness Emma Orczy - Pogány K.: Pimpernel in Transylvania].” *Katolikus Szemle* [Catholic Review] 41 (3): pp. 186-187.