

# *Hamlet*, Petőfi and the Poet's Mandate: Poems by János Arany, Éva Finta and Gábor Tompa

Márta Minier  
(University of South Wales)

## Central Texts and Cultural Deities

In *Translating Literature*, a lesser-known item of his pragmatically theoretical output, the notable translation scholar André Lefevere focuses attention on the so-called central texts of a particular culture or cultural sphere:

Which texts does a culture consider central to its identity as a culture? Do they include only ideological texts (the King James version of the Bible, for instance), or literary texts (Shakespeare) as well? If the central texts embody the identity of a culture, what measures does that culture try to take to ensure that those texts survive and flourish? (1992, 143)<sup>1</sup>

Lefevere does not theorise the *central text* as a term in a thoroughgoing way, since the work in which it is presented is a textbook-like publication in Translation Studies. Nonetheless, one notices that it is the Bible and Shakespeare that he posits as central texts, the former as the religious sacred text of the West, the latter as a set of texts around which a secular yet, in its workings, semi-religious cult is centred.<sup>2</sup> The scholarly study of literary cults has become a particularly strong research field in Hungary over the past two decades.<sup>3</sup> In what is perhaps the foundation text of Hungarian literary cult studies, *Isten másodszülöttje [God's second-born]*<sup>4</sup> and in the follow-up English language study from 1998, *The Romantic Cult*

---

<sup>1</sup>While I find Lefevere's idea of central texts very helpful, I do not perceive a sharp dividing line between ideological and literary texts. The literary merits of the Bible are recognised, and Shakespeare's texts and their rewrites are associated with different ideologies.

<sup>2</sup>Based on very different intellectual traditions, Frank Kermode, Harold Bloom, Douglas Robinson, Péter Dávidházi, and, in a cursory remark, Susan Bassnett also seek to posit the sacred or central status that certain texts or textual networks acquire in Western culture, and they all mention, or even theorise, the notion with reference to the texts of Shakespeare. This conceptual field has a wider scope than institutionalised canonisation, though it may contain that element (especially in Bloom and in Dávidházi's system).

<sup>3</sup>Some of its key practitioners are Péter Dávidházi, Orsolya Karafiáth, István Margócsi, György Tverdota, Ferenc Kerényi, Ferenc Botka, Zsuzsa Kalla, Rita Ratzky, Csilla E. Csorba, József Takáts and Lajos Lakner. The role played by the national literary museum which bears the name of Sándor Petőfi (Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum) in organising conferences and editing publications in this field is noteworthy.

<sup>4</sup>All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

of *Shakespeare*, Péter Dávidházi examines the Hungarian Shakespeare bardolatry as a quasi-religious cult. The other “cultural deity” (Levine qtd. in Fischlin and Fortier 8) who will be central to this article is the Hungarian Sándor Petőfi mentioned as “the gods’ Hungarian favourite” (“az istenek magyar kedvence”) by the literary critic Béla Németh G. (qtd. in Margócsy 135).

Lefevere is not the only thinker who juxtaposes the Bible and Shakespeare in the context of translation. The Calvinist bishop and literary translator Károly Szász, when giving his inaugural address at the Hungarian Academy in 1859, brought the issues of Bible translation and Shakespeare translation together, oddly enough jumping from the former to the latter, without providing any thematic linkage. The title of his talk was “A műfordításról, különös tekintettel Shakespeare és a biblia fordítására” [“On translation, with specific reference to the translation of Shakespeare and the Bible”]. For Szász it was quite natural to couple biblical translation and Shakespeare translation together without indicating the nature of any analogy and to present a presumed kinship between them. Harold Bloom, too, cherishes the notion that the secular sacred texts of the Western canon have proved to be those of Shakespeare: “Shakespeare’s works have been termed the secular Scripture, or more simply the fixed centre of the Western canon” (Bloom 1999, 3). He succinctly contends in an often criticised but much cited idiom that “If any author has become a mortal God, it must be Shakespeare” (Bloom 1999, 3). Frank Kermode emphasises that there is a parallel between ecclesiastical constraints on Bible interpretation and the institutional control on Shakespeare criticism (159–60). When highlighting some of the areas of Shakespeare’s influence on German culture, Klaus Bartenschlager expresses a kindred view. The main tenets of his statement seem pertinent to Hungarian culture too:

[I]t must be enough only to hint at Shakespeare’s place in the history of German literature and literary theory, his influence on drama from Lessing to Brecht, his presence on the German stage (year after year he is still the most frequently played author in the German-speaking countries), *his role in the history and theory of translation (comparable to the Bible itself)*, and last but not least at the tradition of German Shakespearean studies. (326–27, emphasis added)

The rhetoric that compares Shakespeare’s importance to that of the Bible can be detected throughout the Hungarian reception of Shakespeare, although it is less characteristic of what Dávidházi terms the period of iconoclasm. This is a representative example of that rhetoric from the Hungarian poet Dezső Keresztury:

Like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the Greek tragedies or the Bible, these plays have grown over the years into impersonal creations that are treasured by all mankind. *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Caliban* and *Prospero* live on in today’s world as so many radiant models of human nature, of the human condition—like *Ruth* or *Job*, *David*, *Daniel* and *Magdalene* (Keresztury 1963, 8)

So what would *Hamlet* be at the centre of, then, in our context? Working with Lefevere's promise of a critical construct, *Hamlet* is seen as a text contributing to the narration of modern, enlightened nationhood. In Hungarian culture, as in Central and Eastern Europe generally, Shakespeare has been nostrified<sup>5</sup> and "*Hamlet* serves as a 'text of identity'" (Minier 31). Shakespeare and indeed *Hamlet* have played a pivotal role in the redefinition of Hungarian culture from the Enlightenment onwards, at least since the language reformer Ferenc Kazinczy's 1790 translation prepared not from the English but from Friedrich Ludwig Schroeder's rather liberal adaptation. It was, however, the poet János Arany's 1867 translation that became part of Hungarian cultural heritage and is widely cited and recycled across various fields of cultural production even today, from soap opera scripts to political speeches.<sup>6</sup>

### **Petőfi, a Shakespearean *poeta vates***

It is no coincidence that Shakespeare, the universal, yet naturalised national poet of Hungary,<sup>7</sup> and Sándor Petőfi, the epitome of the Hungarian national poet, are invoked side by side in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century poems discussed in this article. The emergence of the Hungarian Shakespeare as a cultural construct has a great deal to do with the translation of Shakespearean works by leading Hungarian poets, mainly the Romantic triumvirate of Arany, Petőfi and Mihály Vörösmarty.<sup>8</sup> The semi-identification of these writers with the Hungarian Shakespeare has special relevance to my reading of the poems to be discussed here. Translating Shakespeare at the time was a considerable undertaking intended to gain internal as well as external prestige for a recently renewed—or in a modern sense, established—literary language. It served as during the Renaissance the translation of the Bible into the vernacular had, as a litmus test of a language's maturity and hence its nearing a similar level of prestige to the three *linguae sacrae* of Hebrew, Greek and Latin. The Hungarian Romantic and populist poet Petőfi<sup>9</sup> made a translation of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, intended to translate *Othello* and translated extracts from *Romeo and Juliet* (see Szigethy 1979), but did not make a translation

---

<sup>5</sup>For instance, Manfred Pfister (19) revisits the theatre director Franz Dingelstedt's term "Nos-trifizierung" [nostrification] when discussing the Germans' and the Poles' close connection with Shakespeare and *Hamlet*.

<sup>6</sup>An episode of the Hungarian soap opera *Barátok közt* [*Among Friends*] running on the commercial channel RTL Klub on 5 Sept. 2002 included the phrase "vérnősző barom", Arany's now classic and archaic solution for Shakespeare's "that incestuous, that adulterate beast", which was said by one character when describing another character in the soap.

<sup>7</sup>In his contribution to *The New Hungarian Quarterly's* Shakespeare memorial issue, Alexander Sinclair, a British cultural diplomat from Scotland serving in Hungary in the 1960s, uses the terms "naturalisation", "nationalisation" and "Shakespeare's adoption in Hungary" to describe how intertwined Shakespeare and Hungarian culture are.

<sup>8</sup>For a recent critical overview of the history of Hungarian Shakespeare translation from the vantage point of the nineteenth-century classics, see Kállay.

<sup>9</sup>Mihály Szegedy-Maszák (236) mentions Petőfi as a populist poet bringing stylistic and thematic change after—or rather overlapping with—the more straightforward Romanticism of Mihály Vörösmarty.

of *Hamlet*. However, he wrote some poems that are reminiscent of the play.<sup>10</sup> His life and work, as well as the myth of his sacrificial death motivated by patriotism in the 1848–49 anti-Habsburg revolution and war of independence, also sparked off poems not long after his death, as well as closer to our time, that fuse the ever growing Hungarian *Hamlet* intertext with a pan-European travelling text, namely the *Hamlet* metanarrative. Great importance is attached in Hungarian culture to the role of the *poeta vates*, the seer-poet or prophet-poet, who, as an intellectual and almost spiritual leader of the nation, provides ideological guidance at difficult moments in history. Petőfi ostensibly envisaged himself in the *vates* role, for example in his 1847 programmatic poem entitled “A XIX. század költői” [“The Poets of the 19th Century”]. István Margócsy points out that

Petőfi életének igen sok döntő mozzanata [. . .] felkínálta magát a kultikus értelmezésre (az olyan történelmi szemléletet, mely Petőfi életének egészét és halálát mint megtervezett és tudatosan szervezett stratégiát kezeli, alighanem a legmélyebben kultikusnak kell tartanunk). Legfontosabb életrajzi adatainak bizonytalansága szinte példátlan: nemigen található még egy olyan modern költő, kinek sem születése, sem halála nem pontosítható sem időben, sem térben—egy mitikus szemlélet nyilván hajlamos lehet akár ebben is a történelmen kívüli halhatatlanságnak ígéretét, a kezdet- és végnélküliség csodáját látni; [. . .] legnagyobb sikerének és tragikus halálának pillanata és jelenete oly pontosan egybeesett a nemzet sikerének és bukásának aktusával, hogy alakjának mitikussá és szimbolikussá formálása tulajdonképpen kézenfekvő volt. (Margócsy 151)

[Very many decisive moments of Petőfi's life almost offered themselves to cultic interpretation (the kind of historical perception that treats Petőfi's whole life and death as a planned and consciously organised strategy ought to be seen, methinks, as most profoundly cultic). The uncertainty of his most important biographical data is almost unrivalled: we hardly find another modern poet whose date and place of neither birth nor death can be identified with certainty. Naturally a mythical perception might well tend to view this as the promise of extrahistorical immortality and the miracle of being without beginning or end. The moment and scene of his greatest success and tragic death overlapped with the nation's victory and fall so precisely that his transformation into a figure mythic and symbolic went without saying.]

The concept of the *poeta vates* originates in antiquity (Newman 1341) and may be strongly connected to Virgil's sense of poetic mission, among others. During Romanticism it was revisited and appropriated in the context of the East-Central European national awakening across various cultures in the region, including by Hungarians, Romanians and Poles. The concept has been applied to Walt Whitman but is not irrelevant to Petőfi's idolised Byron or Shelley either. Christoph Loreck resorts to the term in relation to John Keats's *Endymion*: “This [. . .] is

---

<sup>10</sup>Shakespeare's influences on Petőfi, including allusions in his poetry, are discussed in Szigethy. Horváth identifies numerous Shakespearean loci in Petőfi. From even earlier, Tolnai and Földesi are worthwhile reads.

what Keats's *vatic* stance revolves around—the divinely inspired visionary truth of the poeta vates. The poet thereby is endowed with the authority to utter truths which often were highly relevant to society” (211). The poems this article looks at are interlinked by this same sense of mission, which attaches to the role of the poet in a long tradition within Hungarian poetry and is a conceit fertilised by what *Hamlet* and Petőfi stand for in Hungarian cultural memory. The poems by Arany (1817–1882), Éva Finta (born 1954) and Gábor Tompa (born 1957) will be read in light of the cultic status of Shakespeare and Petőfi as two cults permeating and re-activating each other.

### Arany's Hamletean Commemoration of Petőfi

Arany's Romantic poem “A honvéd özvegye” [“The Widow of the Defender of the Homeland”] of 1850 features a ghostly appearance, whereby the titular widow appears as a Gertrude character, remarrying not long after her late husband's allegedly heroic death on the battlefield. This is a case of motif-based intertextuality with Shakespeare, but also with at least two poems by Arany's close friend Petőfi, who many would regard as the national poet of Hungary. These poems are “Egy gondolat bánt engemet” [“I'm Troubled by One Thought”] of 1846 and “Szeptember végén” [“At the End of September”] of 1847. Arany's Petőfiesque “betét-elégia” [“inset-elegy”] (see Szörényi 211) of the longer narrative poem, the singer-narrator of which may already connect us to a more atavistic, mythic landscape, seems to channel us towards reading the text in the light of Petőfi's biography, more precisely, in the light of what happened to his wife and son after he vanished. He most probably passed away in the battle at the Transylvanian Segesvár, but his corpse has never been found, despite various efforts. Petőfi's widow, Júlia Szendrey, in fact, married the historian and university professor Árpád Horvát in 1850, just a year after Petőfi's disappearance, which caused great uproar and can also be seen as a pretext for Arany's poem, which was termed “a hűtlenség balladája” [“the ballad of infidelity”] by Keresztury (1967, 295).<sup>11</sup> The motif of the widow of an honourable person remarrying at wicked speed has a close connection with *Hamlet*. The widow with a son from her first marriage is common to both Shakespeare's play and Petőfi's life.

Légy anyja és nem mostohája,  
Nehogy eljőjjenek egy napon,  
És elvezessem kézen fogva  
Őt is oda, hol én lakom!<sup>12</sup>

(Arany 136)

---

<sup>11</sup>Arany submitted the poem to a literary magazine's editor, Sándor Szilágyi, but then changed his mind and withdrew it before it could be published. Clearly, he did not want to offend with the poem.

<sup>12</sup>The whole of this extract is in internal quotation marks in the poem. The speaker of the poem quotes the ghost of the soldier (whom most criticism identifies with Petőfi) as he or she recounts and comments on the apparition. By using quotation marks, Arany differentiates this part from the rest of the speaker's narration.

[Be his mother and not his stepmother,  
Lest I turn up one day  
And lead him by the hand  
To where I live too!]

In contrast with *Hamlet*, the ghost here admonishes not the son but the widow, because he is hurt and embittered as she has entered into a new conjugal commitment so early. In fact, the ghost in *Hamlet* specifically warns the protagonist against torturing his mother and this warning appears to be his chief purpose in the closet scene. While all of old Hamlet's angst is directed against his murderer, a disloyal brother and his widow's new husband, the ghost in Arany's poem only and exclusively criticises the widow, the "szép özvegy" ["beautiful widow"], who proves not to have deserved the late soldier's devotion. It is thus logical that the widow in this poem sees the ghost clearly, while in *Hamlet* the queen thinks Hamlet is hallucinating. Another different element is that in Arany's poem the third party—the new husband—was neither involved in the soldier's death, nor had a relationship with the widow before the soldier's death, as some would argue Claudius and Gertrude may have had. As Petőfi's poem "I'm Troubled by One Thought" expresses the speaker's desire not to die in a bed surrounded by pillows but on a battlefield, in Arany's poem the dying soldier, after being shot, has the same thought. Arany invokes Petőfi's poem almost word by word. In contrast, the death old Hamlet recounts is not sacrificial but murderous; it serves Claudius's agenda as opposed to a common cause. The soldier in Arany's poem may be read as returning so as to confirm that he is dead, since there were no witnesses to Petőfi's fall at Segesvár. There were rumours about Petőfi's possible survival and about him wandering under a pseudonym; the time Arany wrote his poem was the time of various fake Petőfis.

In the poem, it is during the wedding party celebrating the new marriage that the soldier, or rather his ghost, appears. The motif of the wedding itself recalls *Hamlet*, in particular the reference to the "funeral bak'd meats" that "coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" in Act 1, Scene 2; and the merrymaking *Hamlet* refers to when talking to the night wardens in Act 1, Scene 4. Claudius himself says in Act 1, Scene 2, that he intends to drink in Hamlet's honour when Hamlet reluctantly agrees to stay in Denmark. Memory is very important in this poem on different levels: on the one hand, the ghost thinks that forgetting happens far too early to his memory, while on the other, the poem also testifies to Arany's creative memory of Petőfi's poems and of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The intertextual link with *Hamlet* is made overt in the epigraph to the poem, which is a quotation from Hamlet's derision of his mother's action from his first soliloquy in Act 1, Scene 2. Arany quotes Hamlet's words in his own translation:

Gyarlóság, asszony a neved!  
Csak egy rövid hó : még a gyász cipő sem  
Szakadt el, melyben könnyé olvadt  
Niobeként kísérte ki szegény

Atyám holttestét : s ím ő, épen ő

Férjhez megyen

(Arany 120)<sup>13</sup>

[Frailty, your name is woman!

Only a short month: the mourning shoes—in which she accompanied

my poor father's corpse like a Niobe melting into tears –

haven't even been torn.

And behold: she, exactly she, is getting married.]

The epigraph is not in inverted commas, but after an ellipsis Arany indicates that it is from *Hamlet* the play or from Hamlet the character and Shakespeare's name itself does not appear.

The other Petőfi poem that “The Widow of the Defender of the Homeland” altercates with is “At the End of September”. Petőfi's speaker in this elegiac love poem wonders if his wife will throw away his name, a name which was so precious to her once. Arany, in his poem, puts this as a complaint into the soldier's mouth. Petőfi's recontextualised words were originally written during his honeymoon, yet they carry the undertone of the idea of dying a heroic death for the liberty of his nation. The melancholy speaker of the poem suggests that he would return from death and haunt his widow should she decide to remove her veil of mourning. In the translation by Adam Makkai and Valerie Becker Makkai he declares, “I shall rise from the darkness” (Makkai 383). As Petőfi expert János Horváth suggests, Petőfi's poems written broadly in this period abound with instances of Shakespearean self-fashioning. This particular instance of Hamletean self-fashioning is closely interrelated with his vision of himself as a *poeta vates* and an isolated individual responsible for a whole community.

### **Yorick and the Petőfian *poeta vates***

Éva Finta's 2000 poem “Hamlet királyfi Barguzinban” [“Prince Hamlet in Barguzin”] gives voice to the worries of a Hungarian poet, originally from the Hungarian minority community in the Ukraine, regarding the role of the poet as a chronicler of her time—and thus as a *poeta vates* of sorts. Finta's poem is deeply intertextual as it is reminiscent of *Hamlet*, Petőfi, István Kormos's well-known poem about Yorick, and possibly also István Baka's Yorick poems. It abounds in further allusions to, among others, the modernist poet and translator Mihály Babits and the myth of Attila the Hun. As poet and translator Adam Makkai summarises, “Petőfi's presence still haunts the national consciousness of Hungarians” (364). In order to clarify the importance of Petőfi's haunting presence in Finta's poem, we need to mention a late twentieth-century issue in relation to the Petőfi cult. According to

---

<sup>13</sup>There are differences between this and Arany's *Hamlet* translation published in 1867. Firstly the passage is abridged for the epigraph so that it becomes more focused, more pointed, and the clause containing a reference to Niobe is reformulated in the translation of the whole play. In all likelihood Arany translated this particular fragment of *Hamlet* for the sake of providing a suitable epigraph for the poem as he was not considering the idea of translating *Hamlet* before 1865–66 (see Géher 2005).

a nineteenth-century rumour that grew into a powerful myth, Petőfi did not die an heroic death in the Hungarian War of Independence, but was taken as a prisoner of war to Russia and died there decades later. The anxiety caused by the loss of Petőfi as a national hero—alongside defeat in the War of Independence—may account, at least partially, for the hope latent in this myth that he was still alive for longer. Acting on a range of sources, in 1985 the Hungarian businessman and later politician Ferenc Morvai, initially together with the filmmaker András Balajthy, acted upon the actress and self-taught historian Edit Kéri's encouragement and decided to investigate whether a suspicious skeleton found in Siberia, at Barguzin, was Petőfi's (cf. Makkai 364).<sup>14</sup> Nothing irrefutable emerged; nevertheless, public sentiment was aroused around the possibility of the long-standing myth of the quintessential Magyar poet dying in a battle during the Hungarian War of Independence being proved untrue. This constitutes a major subtext of Finta's poem.

The poem "Prince Hamlet in Barguzin", for some readers, may underline the idea that finding Petőfi's tomb would imply coming to terms with part of the nation's past, but also that the past escapes us. Taking stock of it may not be straightforward. "Valahol lenni kell a sírnak" ["The tomb has to be somewhere"] the speaker asserts, but then the following line emphasises that one may not find the grave, especially if it is the grave of a legendary person such as Petőfi appears to be in public consciousness.<sup>15</sup> And "Attila koporsója sincsen" [Attila's grave hasn't been found either]. The speaker of the poem surmises that "Ezek a sírok vándorolnak" [These graves are wandering around], and one may find the spirits of these personages wherever one digs. Yet, this might also suggest that it is not essential to find the graves of the great ones; it might be better sometimes not to find them and let the mythical uncertainty live on. The phrase "kis magyar tetemrehívás" [little Hungarian confrontation with the corpse] refers to the title and subject matter of Arany's 1877 ballad entitled "Tetemre hívás" ["Confrontation with the Corpse"].<sup>16</sup> In this poem a folk belief is revitalised, according to which the wound of the murdered person reacts by bleeding when the killer appears. Finta's poem recontextualises this literary reference to comment on the turmoil caused by the sensationalist press coverage of Petőfi's afterlife. In a metaphorical sentence, the speaker of the poem admits, if somewhat bitterly, that the late Petőfi could have spent some time in Siberia. The poet also highlighted to me that she played with the idea of different fates in the poem.<sup>17</sup> Her line "Az ember olykor el is törhet" [Humans can even break sometimes] suggests that if Petőfi did in fact relocate to

---

<sup>14</sup>The literature (journalistic, grassroots and academic) connected to the topic of Petőfi in Siberia is enormous and would deserve to be studied in its own right, even if only for the complex rhetoric used on both sides of the argument. Some significant publications are Kéri, Kiszely (1993 and 2000), and Kovács.

<sup>15</sup>As Margócsy reminds us, Arany in his 1855 "Emlények III" talks of Petőfi as "nem közénk való" [not one of us], preparing the ground (most probably unwittingly) for decades of cultic discourse, implying that Petőfi is beyond criticism (Margócsy 147).

<sup>16</sup>This is the title of the translation by Peter Zollman, in Makkai (330–32). The literary historian Lóránt Czigány discusses the poem under the same title (204).

<sup>17</sup>E-mail communication from Finta to the author, 30 May 2012.



foreign parts, this compromise may have been due to a defect in his personality, a case of giving up his main objectives and mission to serve the Hungarian nation and labour for its independence. This disintegration of personality is suggested with an understanding, forgiving overtone. The speaker of the poem calls Petőfi a poet prince and visualises him on soft, warm female laps. This conjures up the image of another poet prince, Hamlet, in the mousetrap scene of Act 3, Scene 2, where he asks Ophelia if he can lie in her lap. The culturally dominant image of the Hungarian national poet is shifted so that he becomes a fragile icon—here literally a sacred image and an indispensable cultic object in Orthodox religion. Sándor Petőfi or, in his new culture, Alekszander, “egy másik sorsba átsodorva” [drifted into another fate] but is still pictured in this poem as a figure important enough to be commemorated in an icon. Potentially disturbingly for some of the general public, he is celebrated as iconic in a culture other than that he perceived as his own. While the poem tries to reach the human core beneath the myth, it is at the same time partaking of the revitalisation of a myth, displaying yet another face of the idolatrous attitude to Petőfi.<sup>18</sup> The poem touches on the uneasy but very contemporary theme of uprooting and immigration, something the author herself has experienced, though in the opposite direction to the Petőfi of her poem, namely from the former Soviet Union, to the mother country of Hungary.

It is worth noting here as part of the discussion of the breach of the personality that one of the paratexts of the poem offers interesting reading. The text is dedicated to the internationally renowned anthropologist István Kiszely, the professional leader of the excavations in the Siberian cemetery. He left his work at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences as his view that the corpse was indeed Petőfi's met with a hostile response there. The telling paratext does not render Finta's poem less open to interpretation, but it adds a different dimension to it, which has to do with the cultural politics of the time. When I asked Finta about the genesis of her poem, she emphasised her intentions: “Én a magam módján lezártam a vitát, s ebben az is benne foglaltatik, hogy bárminemű igazságról is lenne szó, az Petőfi alakját, műveinek értékét, *személyiségének hitelességét* nem érinti.” [I closed down this debate in my own way, and this also implies that, whatever the truth is, it does not interfere with Petőfi's figure, the value of his works or *the authenticity of his personality*].<sup>19</sup>

Importantly, in this poem two robust and time-tested Petőfi myths come together: that of his transfer to Siberia as a prisoner of war and that of him as a poet on a mission, dying as a martyr for his nation. Finta's poem picturing an alternative fate is read against this more widespread, official version. To see the extent of the martyrdom-focused *vita*, it suffices to look at examples of nineteenth-century fine art depicting Petőfi. As Csilla E. Csorba highlights, these lithographs either capture

---

<sup>18</sup> Parenthetically, the phrase “kis magyar tetemrehívás” [little Hungarian ordeal by blood] coterminously recalls the title of Péter Esterházy's accomplished prose work written during the socialist era in Hungary, *Kis magyar pornográfia* [*A Little Hungarian Pornography*]. The work was translated into English by Judith Sollosy under this very respectful title.

<sup>19</sup> E-mail communication from Finta to the author, 30 May 2012, with emphasis added.

a moment on the battlefield with Petőfi dying or already dead and surrounded by the muses or other symbolic figures that officiate at his apotheosis, or they portray him as a resurrected figure (quite literally in Lipót Pálffy's *Petőfi ébredése* [Petőfi's Awakening]) in a pantheon of much respected Hungarian historical figures. This sacralising representation in fine art was accompanied by a similar deifying rhetoric in criticism, poetic laudations (such as Jókai's poem "Apotheosis" from 1899) and other genres of public discourse (Csorba, especially 38–47).

In Finta's poem the motif of the snow that blocks the roads also alludes to Vörösmarty's 1850–51 poem "Előszó" ["Prologue"], where the motif of snow and winter connotes the muted and crippled situation of the Hungarian intellectual under the Austrian autocracy. This was written not long after Petőfi's disappearance. Vörösmarty's line "Most tél van és csend és hó és halál" [Now it is winter and silence and snow and death] (Pándi 476) is highly metaphorical and, indeed, a reflection on the times. This poetic image is also indicative of how isolated Siberia is from the rest of Europe over winter. It is in a dense intertextual context that the poem questions the essence and contemporary relevance of being a poet: "«Mit ér az ember», hogyha költő?— / Kilóg a sírból koponyája" ["What is a person worth, if he/she's a poet?— / His/Her skull lolls out of the tomb]. These lines stand in an intertextual relationship with the gravediggers' scene and specifically with Yorick. The allusion points to the transience of humans, a fate not escaped by poets, and if anything, this poem suggests, poets may not be allowed the peaceful rest enjoyed by others if we need them as transcendentalised, sacralised icons to look up to. Those familiar with Hungarian poetry are reminded of István Kormos's poem and its identification of the poet-speaker with Yorick (1984, 88–89). In Kormos's work the witty yet vulnerable figure of the jester becomes an allegory of the Hungarian poet. The question of one's worth is already a quotation, recognisable by the use of inverted commas, and a Hungarian topos that has had many apparitions in Hungarian literature from the baroque epic poet Miklós Zrínyi, to the symbolist and modernist Endre Ady, to Finta. The original question was "Mit ér az ember, ha magyar?" [What is one worth if a Hungarian?]. In the poem, the question seems more preoccupied with worth as a Hungarian poet. Finta, like Kormos, plays with the traditional sense of the Hungarian poet as someone with a mandate, who is supposed to serve the people, to "set right" whatever is "out of joint", someone with a grave mission, like that of the Prince of Denmark.

In Finta's topsy-turvy *ars poetica*, however, the persona senses no need to shoulder the formidable task of supporting and giving directions to the community, and this troubles the speaker, who is in a vacuum, left alone without a clear-cut vocation:

És éjjel van. Mindenki alszik.  
Pegazusom se kérne enni.  
Seni se bánja, ha nem írok.  
Senki se bánja, hogyha elhal  
gondolat, tálentum, törekvés—  
az idő önmagát felejt.

[And now it's night-time. All are asleep.  
My Pegasus won't want feeding.  
No one minds if I don't write.  
No one minds if thought, talent  
and aspiration die out—  
time forgets itself.]

This poem highlights the struggle of a rather traditional poet figure with a strong sense of mission, who finds that there is no need to be a chronicler of the times, where any traditional values are relativised and a writer's authority in public life cannot be taken for granted. A similar sentiment and more confident if melancholy voice is apparent in the following interview extract, where Finta laments:

[O]tthon is, mint Magyarországon, nagy zűrzavar uralkodik az értékek piacán. A mai fiatal nehezebben igazodik el, mert nincs kikiáltott, felmutatott minőség. Jó kocsik vannak. Jó nők, intelligens mosóporok. Mintha már József Attila is találkozott volna ezzel a jelenséggel. . .<sup>20</sup> Az ifjúság tehát arra szédül, amerre éppen viszi a sodrás, hajlama vagy tehetsége. Nem látok tisztán, nem tudom megmondani, 'ki viszi át fogában tartva', hogy Nagy Lászlót idézzem. Saját helyemet pedig egyáltalán nem szándékozom meghatározni. Részint, mert még élek, és még rengeteg feladatot érzek az ujjaimban. Másrészt ez nem is az én dolgom. [ . . . ] Tudom a dolgomat. (Peremiczki)

[At home [in the Ukraine], as in Hungary, there is great confusion over what is valuable. The young person of today finds it harder to orientate because there isn't one pronounced and upheld quality to follow. There are good cars. There are cool girls, intelligent washing powders. As though Attila József had already encountered this phenomenon. . . Youths, then, drift with the flow, with aptitude or with talent. I don't see clearly, I cannot tell 'who carries it across between their teeth' [to the other side of the river], to cite László Nagy. I also have absolutely no inclination to define my own place, partly because I am still alive and I still feel numerous tasks in my fingers, and partly because this really isn't my job. [ . . . ] I know what my job is.]

The poem as a revisiting of the *ars poetica* genre reflects on postmodern times without embracing overtly postmodern aesthetics.

In a metatextual gesture, the epilogue to the poem, somewhat reminiscent of the commendation at the end of a Villonesque ballad, admits that there has been a game with cultural references in the poem. Yorick is named here, with the Shakespearean epithet, famous from Arany's translation and Kormos's poem, "szegény" [poor, miserable]. The mention of Yorick tolerating the speaker's intertextual game might suggest that Yorick is alive, through memory of his puns and the mark he has left on language. He is a role to step into again and again, a mask to assume repeatedly. This might also indicate the eternal life of poets in general, which is another topos recycled by Shakespeare in his sonnets and in a very different configuration in John

---

<sup>20</sup>Attila József is a modernist poet who has also been framed in some criticism as a Petőfi-like vatic figure (see Tverdota 1998).

Dryden's 1686 "Ode to the Memory of Mistress Anne Killigrew", among others. Both Hamlet and Yorick are epitomes of the poet in Finta's work, as the epilogue asserts:

Eljátszottam e téli éjen  
Elárult, rossz szavak hadával  
És szent maradt a szent a képen.  
Szegény Yorick eltűri vétkem.  
[I've been playing this winter night  
With a swarm of betrayed, bad words  
And the saint in the picture remained a saint.  
Poor Yorick will tolerate my sin.]

The high cultural status of the so-called saint, Petőfi, remained intact, no matter the hypothetical possibilities negotiated in this poem. Its outcome reminds one of the sacred position of Shakespeare and *Hamlet* (and Hamlet), which is intertwined here with the sacredness of the Hungarian canonical poet.

### **Chroniclers, Fools, Hamlet-poets**

The theatre director, poet, essayist and academic Gábor Tompa has directed *Hamlet* three times in three different languages: in Hungarian (1987, Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca), in Romanian (1997, Craiova) and in English (1994, Tramway Theatre, Glasgow). The actor who performed Hamlet in his Hungarian production, Sándor Héjja (1942–1996), was a talented performer and intellectual, who did not hide his aversion to the Ceaușescu dictatorship which suppressed Hungarians generally, alongside other ethnic minorities, and had a policy of cleansing the nation of ethnic minorities by melting everybody into a homogenous Romanian population. As a politically subversive figure, Héjja had no choice but leave for Hungary in 1988. Both the hamletised poems that I have found in Tompa's oeuvre so far—"Horatio levele Dániából" ["Horatio's Letter from Denmark"] from the "Theatrum Mundi" cycle and "Levél Hamlethez" ["A Letter to Hamlet"]—are strongly connected to Héjja. Both epistolary poems are written from the perspective of Hamlet's appointed chronicler Horatio, in the case of the former poem overtly, as the title indicates the speaker. Tompa's "A Letter to Hamlet" of 2001 is dedicated to Héjja's memory, which speaks volumes for the cultural contents that *Hamlet* is evoked to bring forth.<sup>21</sup>

In "A Letter to Hamlet" it is not the skull that appears as a motif but the clown or fool himself. The poem's speaker addresses Hamlet as "Királyfi! Dánom! Hamlet! Hercegem!" [Prince! My Dane! Hamlet! My prince!]. Given the historical circumstances, the speaker who is most probably Horatio as somebody who seems to be entrusted with a mandate, finds it necessary to put on a clown costume. This

---

<sup>21</sup>The poem has been published at least twice, with some modification. The 1996 edition in a collection of Tompa's poetry contains no dedication and follows a relaxed Petrarchan sonnet structure.

implied situation is all the more likely given the intriguing auterist directorial decision to have Horatio read out Hamlet's letter to Ophelia in Tompa's 1987 production. The speaker mentions the imminent end of an era: "utolsó futam / készülődik már évek óta itt" [a final race / has been in preparation here for years]. The speaker finds fighting for power futile: "A trón üres [. . .] Bolond, ki arra tör" [The throne is empty. Anyone who attempts to take it is a fool]. The covert allusion to Yorick, not only from Shakespeare's and Arany's but also from Kormos's work, facilitates the punning on *fool* as the poem, apart from suggesting merely foolish or unwise behaviour, implicitly also refers to Hamlet's pretended madness, as well as the fragile and vulnerable position of a fool at court. Tompa's poem highlights how the wisdom bordering on insanity that the fool and Hamlet may share gives an example of how to survive tyranny.

In "Horatio's Letter from Denmark", Horatio knows that this letter is not going to reach a readership in what is implied to be a dictatorship: "a címzett ismeretlen, / s elkobzás lesz a sorsa krónikámnak" [the addressee is unknown, and the fate of the chronicle will be confiscation]. Recalling for the reader the myth of Petőfi's and other martyrs' sacrificial deaths for the survival of the nation, the poem makes a connection with the *vates* myth in its final prophetic lines:

s bár tettemért sötét zárkába zárnak,  
a dán királyfi óhaját betartom,  
kifulladásig győzve földi harcom!  
(Tompa 1990, 32)

[and although for my deeds I will be locked up in a dark cell,  
I will respect the Danish prince's wish,  
fighting my fight in this world to the point of suffocation]

This article has examined the spectrality of *Hamlet* in Hungarian poetry, reading the texts against the backdrop of the Hungarian cults of both Shakespeare and Petőfi. In Petőfi's cultic afterlife two different clusters of myths collide: Arany's poem seems to respond to the myth of the wandering Petőfi, while Finta's poem altercates with the legend of the exiled, prisoner-of-war Petőfi. Finta, among other rewriters of the Hamlet theme, associates the Hamletean spectre with a sense of intellectual mission. Specifically, Finta's text points to *Hamlet* as inscribed with cultural memory, the nation's past and the figure of the *poeta vates*, of which Petőfi is a prototype. It is also the vatic figure of the sacrificial soldier-poet who is dramatised in Arany's poem as he interrupts the noisy wedding of his widow and makes himself noticeable only to her. In a chain of transferences the main body of Finta's poem reflects on Petőfi as a *poeta vates*, while the title substitutes Hamlet for the Barguzin skeleton. Let us not forget that Hamlet himself held up the skull of the jester as a social commentator in the graveyard scene, in what one may perceive as an act of identification. In another contemporary Transylvanian poem, "Itthoni Hamlet" ["Home Hamlet"] by Árpád Farkas, which also has an implied rather than explicit poet-commentator as its poetic I, the motif of the upheld skull is transmuted into a smoky clod of earth as a metaphor for the globe with a few million

lonely hearts throbbing on it. Here the implied poet with a mandate has a universal, or rather glocal, outlook, which is also a strong aspect of the reception of Hamlet. Finta's and Tompa's modern-day redefinition of the role of the poet-chronicler, as well as Arany's balladic celebration of the spectral memory of his charismatic fellow poet Petőfi, link *Hamlet* to the story of the Hungarian nation and some of its great personages. Finta's and Tompa's works are also concerned with the state of the art of poetry and the vacuum in which contemporary poets may feel situated with regard to their mission. Tompa's "A Letter to Hamlet" recycles the topos of the Shakespearean fool and emphasises the seemingly paradoxical clarity of mind attached to this position, as well as the safety that a fool's robe may provide under tyranny. The fool's often critical and honest voice is close to what is expected of a *poeta vates*, or what the *poeta vates* may expect of him- or herself. During the play's rich and wide-ranging reception history, Hamlet has featured as an ur-intellectual of the Western cultural sphere. He has been seen as a prototype of the director, the playwright, the philosopher and, many a time, the poet. The Hungarian poems studied here show him as a prototype of the poet engaged in poetic and critical discourse on nationhood.

### Works Cited

- Arany, János. "A honvéd özvegye". *Arany János költői művei*. Vol. 1. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1986. 120. Print.
- Bartenschlager, Klaus. "Editing Shakespeare for 'Foreigners': The Case of the English-German *Studienausgabe* of Shakespeare's Plays". *Images of Shakespeare: Proceedings of the Third Congress of the International Shakespeare Association, 1986*. Ed. Werner Habicht, D. J. Palmer, and Roger Pringle. London: Associated University Presses, 1988: 314–24. Print.
- Bassnett, Susan. "An Introduction to Theatre Semiotics". *Theatre Quarterly* 38 (1981): 47–54. Print.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. Print.
- . *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. London: Fourth Estate, 1999. Print.
- Csorba, Csilla E. "A költészet apoteózisa". *Az irodalom ünnepei. Kultusztörténeti tanulmányok*. Ed. Zsuzsa Kalla. Budapest: Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum, 2000. 35–47. Print.
- Czigány, Lóránt. *The Oxford History of Hungarian Literature from the Earliest Times to the Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984. Print.
- Dávidházi, Péter. *Isten másodszülöttje: A magyar Shakespeare-kultusz természetrajza*. Budapest: Gondolat, 1989. Print.
- . *The Romantic Cult of Shakespeare: Literary Reception in Anthropological Perspective*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998. Print.
- Esterházy, Péter. *A Little Hungarian Pornography*. Trans. Judith Sollosy. London: Quartet Books, 1995. Print.

- Farkas, Árpád. "Itthoni Hamlet". *A szívárgásban. Versek*. Budapest: Püski Kiadó, 1991. 171. Print.
- Finta, Éva. "Hamlet királyfi Barguzinban". *Magyar Napló* 4 (2000). Web.  
<[http://www.inaplo.hu/mn/200004/09\\_Finta\\_Eva.html](http://www.inaplo.hu/mn/200004/09_Finta_Eva.html)>
- Fischlin, Daniel, and Mark Fortier, eds. *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A Critical Anthology of Plays from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Földesi, Gyula. "Petőfi és Shakespeare: Részlet Horváth J. Petőfi-könyvének bírálatából". *Nyugat* 16.1 (1923): 31–38. Print.
- Géher, István. "A magyar 'Hamlet': Arany János furcsa álcája". *Holmi* 16.12 (Dec. 2005). Web.  
<<http://www.holmi.org/2005/12/geher-istvan-a-magyar-hamlet-arany-janosfurcsa-alcaja-jegyzetek>>
- Horváth, János. *Petőfi Sándor*. Budapest: Pallas, 1922. Print.
- Kállay, Géza. "'Nem mintha már teljesen elégtelt volna dolgommal': 1866: Arany János Hamletje és Shakespeare drámáinak magyar fordításai". *A magyar irodalom története 1800-tól 1919-ig*. Ed. András Veres and Mihály Szegedy-Maszák. Budapest: Gondolat, 2007: 491–510. Print.
- Keresztury, Dezső. "Shakespeare and the Hungarians". *The New Hungarian Quarterly* 5.13 (Spring 1963): 3–8. Print.
- . *'S mi vagyok én...': Arany János 1817–1856*. Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1967. Print. Kéri, Edit. *Petőfi Szibériában?! Budapest: Eötvös, 1990. Print.*
- Kiszely, István. *Mégis Petőfi?: A szibériai Petőfi-kutatás irodalma időrendi sorrendben*. Székesfehérvár: Extra, 1993. Print.
- . *Meghalt Szibériában: Egy szomorú magyar szellemi kórkép: a szibériai Petőfi-kutatás eseményei és irodalma időrendi sorrendben*. Budapest: Magyar Ház, 2000. Print.
- Kovács, László, ed. *Nem Petőfi!: Tanulmányok az MTA Természettudományi Szakértői Bizottsága tagjai és felkért szakértők tollából*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1992. Print.
- Kermode, Frank. "Can We Say Absolutely Anything We Like?" *Essays on Fiction. 1971–82*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983. 156–67. Print.
- Kormos, István. *Szegény Yorick. Kormos István versei. Csohány Kálmán rajzai*. Salgótarján: Nógrád m. Tcs., 1984. Print.
- Loreck, Christoph. *Endymion and the 'Labyrinthian Path to Eminence in Art'*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005. Print.
- Makkai, Ádám, ed. *In Quest of the Miracle Stag: The Poetry of Hungary. An Anthology of Hungarian Poetry from the 13th Century to the Present Time in English Translation*. Vol. 1. 2nd, revised ed. Chicago: Atlantis-Centaur and Framo Publishing and Budapest: Tertia, 2000. Print.
- Margócsy, István. "A Petőfi-kultusz határtalanságáról". *Az irodalmi kultusz kutatás kézikönyve*. Ed. József Takáts. Budapest: Kijárat, 2003. 135–52. Print.

- Minier, Márta. "Tracing a Text of Identity: Hungarian Hamlet Poetry". *The Hamlet Zone: Reworking Hamlet for European Cultures*. Ed. Ruth J. Owen. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012. 31–43. Print.
- Newman, J. K. "Vates". *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Ed. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. 1341–42. Print.
- Pándi, Pál, ed. *A magyar irodalom története 1772-től 1849-ig*. 3rd ed. Budapest: Akadémiai, 1965. Print.
- Peremiczki, Adrienn. "Peremiczki Adrienn riportja Finta Évával". Web. <<http://www.fintaeva.extra.hu/peremiczki.htm>>
- Petőfi, Sándor. *Petőfi Sándor összes versei*. Ed. Ferenc Kerényi. Budapest: Osiris, 2001. Print.
- Pfister, Manfred. "Polish and German *Hamlets* in Dialogue". *Hamlet East-West*. Ed. Marta Gibińska and Jerzy Limon. Gdańsk: Theatrum Gedanense Foundation, 1998. 16–31. Print.
- Robinson, Douglas. *Translation and Taboo*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Trans. János Arany. Ed. Kálmán Ruttkay. *Arany János összes művei VII. Drámafordítások I. Shakespeare*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1961. 89–209. Print.
- . *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. The Arden Shakespeare. 3rd series. Ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. London: Thompson, 2006. Print.
- Sinclair, Alexander R. "Shakespeare and Arany". *The New Hungarian Quarterly* 5.13 (Spring 1964): 54–60. Print.
- Szász, Károly. "A műfordításról különös tekintettel Shakespeare és a biblia fordítására". *Magyar Sajtó* 219–23 (5–10 Nov. 1859): 890+. Print.
- Szegedy-Maszák, Mihály. "Romanticism in Hungary". *Romanticism in National Context*. Ed. Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 217–39. Print.
- Szigethy, Gábor. *A Shakespeare-t olvasó Petőfi*. Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1979. Print.
- Szörényi, László. "A humoros elégia (Visszatekintés)". *Az el nem ért bizonyosság: Elemzések Arany lírájának első szakaszából*. Ed. Béla Németh G. Budapest: Akadémiai, 1972. 201–90. Print.
- Tolnai, Vilmos. "Jegyzetek Petőfi és az angol irodalom viszonyához". *Irodalomtörténet* 7.3 (1918): 300–02. Print.
- Tompa, Gábor. "Horatio levele Dániából". *Készenlét*. Budapest: Héttorony Könyvkiadó, 1990. 32. Print.
- . "Levél Hamlethez". *Korunk*. (Jun. 2001). Web. <<http://epa.oszk.hu/00400/00458/00042/level.htm>>
- Tverdota, György. *A komor föltámadás titka: A József Attila-kultusz születése*. Budapest: Pannonica, 1998. Print.