

Vörösmarty's Forgotten Dramas

Doctoral Thesis

Abstract

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I. The Subject of the Thesis and the Goal of the Research

The thesis is a text analysis of Vörösmarty's lesser-known plays – we can say unknown plays to the average reader of today. Some of these works did not arouse much interest in their own time either, whereas some others achieved considerable success on period stages. That success is now long forgotten, the dust settling on the tragic works analysed here is only blown away at university literature seminars, or the plays are only taken off the shelves to be bettered, adjusted or modernised by established authors such as *A fátyol titkai* (*Secrets of the Veil*) and *Czillei és a Hunyadiak* (*Czillei and the Hunyadis*) by Gábor Görgei or György Spiró respectively. Nevertheless, these rewritten, adjusted plays manage to stay on stage for a short time rather due to their rarity than to success achieved in their own right. The man of the street knows almost nothing about the activities of Vörösmarty as a playwright who left a significant number of plays to posterity. There exists only one Vörösmarty-play for the average-educated citizen and that is *Csongor és Tünde* (*Csongor and Tünde*). More highly-educated people or those who have a special interest in literature can name more dramas by the author but they deal with them offhandedly because in scientific literature – as well as in literary public knowledge – a slightly unfavourable opinion predominates concerning Vörösmarty's plays. The observation according to which these are weak, clumsily structured second- or third-rate plays also lacking in character-drawing is now almost common.

The main goal of the thesis is to provide a more balanced judgement of the plays with the help of detailed analysis as well as to draw attention to the assets and peculiarities of the texts on which little light has been cast.

II. The Method and Nature of the Research

In the focus of the text analyses, you can read below, is the text itself, the internal connection among the lines. All other circumstances which are beyond the scope of the text such as the circumstances of the creation, the production and the reception of the work only play a minor role. I have found the problems which arise from the internal dynamics of the texts a very interesting question to be answered. How does the text reflect upon itself? How does the text unveil itself – sometimes against the author's will? How do words, collocations and sentences cast a light on hidden motifs?

What I also wanted to find an answer for in each text analysis was why the texts contradict the content conveyed by them. In various cases there is a contradiction between the actions appearing in the text (*actio*) and the words of the characters (*dictio*). If we study the contradictions, a number of which will be cited in the thesis, carefully, though, we will realise that it is not about contradictions, but deeper, hidden layers of the texts in question, which enrich the text and put it in a different, new light.

There are texts in which the frequent repetition and central role of a metaphor attract attention to the importance of the content conveyed by it, such as the sky-earth symbolism in *A bujdosók* (*The Fugitives*) or the angel-devil comparison in the *Czillei és a Hunyadiak* (*Czillei and the Hunyadis*). In other cases, the unusually high number of mis-asides, misunderstandings, misinterpretations and disappointments can attract our attention to a hidden content. A good example of the former is the comedy *A fátyol titkai* (*Secrets of the Veil*), for the latter, the tragedy, *Az áldozat* (*The Victim*). It cannot be a coincidence either that sometimes the text is made up of smaller or larger, far-reaching stories such as in *Vérnász* (*Incestuous marriage*), or that it is full of guest-texts – books, letters, newspapers and contracts – as in *A fátyol titkai* (*Secrets of the Veil*). Why is it like this? What is the message?

I have intended to answer these questions in my thesis, that is to unveil layers of the texts that cannot be seen for the first time and to offer a subjective and disputable explanation to such phenomena which the scientific literature has not considered previously. I insist, though, that each conclusion found in the analyses is only one of the possible answers.

When the concept of the thesis, the text analysis of the plays by Vörösmarty, began to form, I had to realise that, contrary to my original plan, I cannot analyse all the plays because the fragmented, incomplete texts lack the most important criterion, which makes a text a whole, the completion. At the same time, I also came to the conclusion that no matter how hard I try to concentrate on the text itself, I cannot neglect its nature due to its genre, as in most of the cases the texts are not closet dramas, but plays intended for the stage. The quality of the plays by the author is greatly influenced by how well they complied with the requirements of dramatisation. Having considered these points, I finally came to the conclusion that I will disregard fragmented, incomplete texts, and will instead focus on those which met the requirements of dramatisation and were indeed staged.

I used the same method to analyse all the plays: I paid special attention to frequently appearing, repeated language and content elements in order to cast a new light on deeper connections of each text. Starting from

the assumption that if the text is taken as an independent, organic whole, than each element of that whole not only functions as a small building brick, with which a larger structure forms slowly, but the phenomenon is present the other way round too – the elements carry the message of the whole. In other words, the whole text itself is hidden in each of its elements. With the help of a more thorough investigation of the elements, we can get a more complex picture of the whole, not incidentally, a sometimes more balanced and fresher picture than what has been previously suggested by the scientific literature of Vörösmarty.

III. The Structure of the Thesis and the Main Findings of Each Chapter

In the *Introduction*, I give the broad outlines of the circumstances which inspired Mihály Vörösmarty to write plays and introduce the contradiction between his practice as a playwright and his theoretical knowledge of drama. I then put the plays into three categories followed by a description of the considerations based on which I selected the works analysed in the thesis. I also present the concept and my method of analysis in greater detail.

In *Chapter One*, through the analysis of *Salamon Király (King Solomon)*, a historical drama, I drew attention to mistakes and dramaturgical errors which characterised the author's whole career as a playwright. Yet, motifs can also be found in this early play which will later appear in other, more mature dramas. All details of a good historical play are present in *Salamon Király (King Solomon)*; nevertheless, due to the inexperience of a young author who also lacked actual experience of the stage and mainly because of the lack of influence of the county reform movement and his naïve attitude towards history, these details fail to form a whole.

On the contrary, *Chapter Two*, in which I presented the so-called Zsigmond-era dramas, that is *Zsigmond (Sigmund)* and *A bujdosók (The Fugitives)*, bears testimony to the complete change in the author's attitude towards history and the increase in his courage as an author. The aim of the analysis is to cast a light on the elements of the system of motif relations in the Zsigmond-era dramas, which can be traced in the most spectacular way in the symbols of nature. In *Zsigmond (Sigmund)*, a "siege-drama", which can be considered the forerunner of the next play, we can already see many of preceding events of the actions in *A bujdosók (The Fugitives)*. Moreover, the analysis of language use also casts a light on hidden thoughts in the system of symbols that puts the events and characters of the first play into a new light based on the system of symbols of the second play. Apart from these elements, the chapter also deals with the question of self identity, which can be traced in *Zsigmond (Sigmund)* as a motif and then unfolds in *A bujdosók (The Fugitives)* and also with the parallels with *Hamlet* and *Bánk Bán*.

In *Chapter Three*, you can read the analysis of the philosophical play, *Kincskeresők (Treasure-hunters)*. The reviews generally dismissed this play as one doomed to failure and diverted attention to its shortcomings. It is true that the revision of the text did not do credit to it. In the first version in 1832 the emphasis was on the action which was intended to be interesting and exciting; nevertheless, in the final version published in 1840, the pensive parts took over. The result is a somewhat strange play. The analysis attempts to present the deeper, philosophical layer of the text disregarding the complicated plot and sketchy characters. Its other goal is to investigate the symbols of treasure, treasure hunt and treasure hunters.

Vérnász (Incestuous marriage), the next play in the chronological order, is in the focus of *Chapter Four*. This play earned Vörösmarty 100 gold with the first prize of the first drama competition of the Academy in 1833. The winner play appeared in print in the following year as the first volume of the *Eredeti Játékszín (Original Stage)* series published by the Academy. It was Vörösmarty's first success as a playwright, although Gyulai talks about one of its weaknesses: "it is so much under the influence of the past that the actions merely present us with the consequences". This opinion precisely describes an important characteristic of *Vérnász (Incestuous marriage)*: the duality of the narration. It tells us two stories all the way through, a family tragedy in the past and another story in the present which is so much influenced by the former that we can say it is merely a new chapter of it. This is what accounts for the duality of the text: details of the story of the past appear frequently. In the beginning, these just interrupt the main plot; later, these interruptions carry events in the present forward. The attitude of storytelling is present in the whole text, small stories keep to appear which have a patchwork effect on the homespun of the narration. I believe that the tragic, intense and sinister atmosphere of *Vérnász (Incestuous marriage)* is not only due to the sorrowful events but also to the torn, detailed, elusive narrative technique, which necessarily makes the reader intense and disturbed. The analysis presents the duality of the narration in detail and deals with the typical characteristics of a fate drama present in the text.

Chapter Five presents the only comedy *A fátyol titkai (Secrets of the Veil)*. Apart from *Ypsilon háború (Why War)* of uncertain genre and *Az elbúsult deák (The Sad Student)*, this is the only true comedy by Vörösmarty. *A fátyol titkai (Secrets of the Veil)* is more substantial than the formers, its story more entertaining, its characters more

elaborated. Its length is unconventional, almost four thousand lines. The choice of the topic is very felicitous; it contains various exploitable comic situations. The only criticism against the plot could be that the subplot overshadows the main story because it is much funnier, more interesting and better composed. You can feel some clumsiness in the main plot, whereas the subtlety, the comic situations and the abundance of dialogues in the subplot impress even the contemporary reader. In the analysis, I intend to cast a light on the importance of language elements, Vörösmarty's method of character description, the trinity of speech, writing and hidden thought, the role of code switching, the examples of intertextuality and the symbiosis of language use, character and culture – common in the comedies of the Age of Reform.

In *Chapter Six*, I enlist the elements which make *Marót Bán* a revenge drama, a popular genre in Vörösmarty's time. I attempted to answer the question whether the female lead of the drama can be considered the main character. I also cast a light on the transcendent, sacred references of the love triangle. Finally, I examined how it is possible that Marót bán who becomes a monster in front of our eyes does not suffer; on the contrary, at the end of the play, the author rewards him with an incentive to live instead of collapse.

Chapter Seven presents *Az áldozat (The Victim)*, which stands out from all other plays with its melancholic, elegiac tone and proves the author's skill to create an atmosphere. The story is about passions, love, infidelity, betrayal, revenge and madness; yet, the text of the play radiates such calm majesty which is not present in any of the earlier plays. One of the reasons for this is the description of the characters: the main players are all over the love of their lives; what is more, they are all suffering from its negative consequences. The play is the drama of past emotions and disappointments in love. All the conflicts originate in the fact that the characters' emotions and passions are not directed towards the suitable person and that their illusions let them all down. To put it in another way, love is a deception which leads you astray, ruins you and leads to tragedy. In this text, love is not happiness or Heaven on Earth; it is pain, humiliation, a boring liaison, a dangerous, mysterious bond which contains later disappointment. There is a strikingly high number of misunderstandings, misinterpreted words and scenes in the play. The whole of the play can be interpreted as a metaphor: love itself is deception, the lover does not find happiness but sorrow, does not find a partner but disappointment. What you can read in all the lines of the play is the loss of illusion concerning love and the author's (private) resignation about the topic of love.

Finally, in *Chapter Eight*, I focus on the author's last, completed drama, the historical play, *Czillei és a Hunyadiak (Czillei and the Hunyadis)*. The author goes back to the theme of his earlier historical plays, that of the safeguarding of national interest against a foreign and/or bad king. However, the elaboration of the topic and the character description are completely different; they demonstrate much more mature political thoughts than those present in the earlier plays. The nation is no longer equal to the nation of nobility; common soldiers and peasants are also included. The national hero is no longer the feudal lord who questions the king about the grievances of the nobility but the popular, almost folklore figure János Hunyadi from a poor background. It is Vörösmarty's virtuosity that he can make János Hunyadi the main character of the play in a way that he does not appear on stage; what is more, in the first act, he is said to be dead. He is admired like a mythical, sacred figure, the people who know him consider him to be a father, a god, a guardian angel. His counterpart is the satanic Czillei who defines himself as a "devil" and as such consciously takes up the position contrary to Hunyadi in the transcendent force field of the play. The analysis also focuses on the interpretation of the various father-son relationships which are emphatic in the text as well as in the plot. It also gives us an explanation of the transcendent (king = God) and patriarchal (king = Father) relationships between the people and the ruler.

IV. Publications

"Seductive words, emotional entreaties, flattering sayings" – The Relationship Between Words and Reality, or the Language as the Veil Revealing Reality in the Comedy, A fátyol titkai (Secrets of the Veil) by Mihály Vörösmarty, Filológiai Közlöny (Philological Gazette), 3-4/2007, p 253-272

"The sky does not know me, the earth denies me": The Relationship of Motifs in the Text of Zsigmond-era Dramas by Vörösmarty, Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények (Publications of Literary History), 2008, Volume CXII Issue 3, p 338-356

"If you allow me, I would put these clothes down" – Two Layers of the Text of A Kincskeresők (The Treasure Hunters), Iskolakultúra (School Culture), 7-8/2009, p 76-86

The Justice of Fate or the Duality of Narration in the Tragedy, Várnász (Incestuous Marriage) by Vörösmarty
Published on the publication forum of the **Doctoral School of Hungarian Literary Scholarship**

Vörösmarty's Marót Bán: a Classic Revenge Drama
Published on the publication forum of the **Doctoral School of Hungarian Literary Scholarship**