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*“Because if we write folk songs, why not folktales?”*  
*The folktale in Hungarian literature in the 1840s*

Ph.D. Dissertation

*Summary*

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## *The problem under survey*

The dissertation investigates a segment of textual tradition in a period that is usually labelled as the era of the “discovery of folk poetry” or that of “literary folklorism” by representatives of literary history and folklore studies. Whatever descriptive notions are applied for this period, the shared feature of these designations is that they report of the same phenomenon, i.e. (1) the assessment of folk poetry as valuable entity since it is seen as the bearer of the specific national textual tradition, and (2) this perception is accompanied with an endeavour trying to record this oral textual tradition (or certain elements of it) in literacy in order to promote the establishment of such a national literature that relies on the principle that an organic and well-functioning community must be built upon tradition.

In case our further objective is the identification of the texts of folklore recorded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century before the institutional establishment of ethnography and folklore studies, it is necessary to get to know and understand the presumptions of the contemporary literary and cultural elite about folk poetry, and their conceptual framework reflected in the practice of editing and publishing folklore texts, since to gain access to 19<sup>th</sup> century oral culture and folklore is only possible via those texts that were put down and/or published by this cultural elite.

The endeavour to set certain text types of oral tradition into the medium of literacy emerged in this period not only in the form of academic investigations, but also as part of artistic objectives, since folk poetry as a model (and sometimes ideal) made a considerable impact on the stylistic conventions and poetic system of literature as well. Accordingly, in the generic system of Hungarian literature new genres emerged (e.g. folk song, ballad, tale) in the period between 1820 and 1880 with more or less success. The encounter with the textual tradition of folklore in this way offered possibilities to make use of folklore, integrating it into literature aesthetically and poetically. According to my assumption, tale (i.e. in this case: fairy tales or tales of magic) was or could have been a part of the canon of narrative genres of Hungarian literature in this period. The system of narrative genres of Hungarian literature was changing from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, formerly unknown narrative genres emerged (e. g. short story, *Sage*/legend, romance etc.), and fairy tale as a genre of the marvellous, and a text type with supernatural/fantastic/marvellous protagonists and plot was not by chance a creative model for Romantic literature (as it was observable in German literature, for instance). Altogether, fairy tale as (1) narrative, (2) folk, (3) fantastic and marvellous text type could have been utilized for the Hungarian literature as well in this period.

The dissertation investigates what attempts were made in the second half of the 1840s in Hungarian culture to insert a folk genre, i.e. the genre of fairy tale, into the generic-aesthetical system of literature. The folkloristic implications of this endeavour may presumably be not too relevant at the first or second sight, yet the dissertation, among other things, wishes to present that such an investigation may reveal relevant data and relations for the knowledge and use of fairy tales in the given period. The folkloristic relevance of the investigation of this type of sources may be derived from the fact that until 1850 only few fairy tales are known in Hungarian literacy, the number of the published fairy tales is only some dozen. Apart from sporadic publications in periodicals, Hungarian folk fairy tales in Hungarian were published for the first time between 1846–1848 in the three volumes of *Népdalok és mondák* (‘Folk songs and narratives’) edited by János Erdélyi, in a context that regards folk poetry as a textual tradition valuable for national culture and literature, and the first treatise on Hungarian folktales was published in 1847 by Imre Henszlmann (the next paper on Hungarian folktales was published only two decades later by László Arany). Whereas interest in folk songs was

considerable even in the previous decades, folk tales began to be published in Hungarian only from the second half of the 1850s.

Thus there are only few folktales known from this period and even fewer texts are known that reflected upon the genre of tale. This gap of folkloristic sources may be bridged, if only partly, by sources that are made up by those tales that were published as literary pieces of art imitating folk tales in the 1840s and the critical opinions worded about these literary fairy tales. Therefore the dissertation, in particular, investigates such texts that were published in the 1840s in an epic verse form, by literary authors, with explicit generic designation (*folktale*) in the texts' subtitles. Although the phrase *literary folktale* or *folktale in literature* may seem to be an oxymoron for today's readers, for this dissertation, adapting the definition used by János Horváth in his history of Hungarian literature ("The basic question that is worth answering: *when* and *what* was considered as literature historically, and in this respect it is irrelevant what it is that *we* consider as literature"): all texts are regarded as folk tales in case in the period under survey they were considered as such.

The folkloristic relevance of revealing the authors' and the readers' opinion, doubts, assessments about literary pieces of art published as folktales may come from that fact that indirectly these may at least partly reveal the generic competence of the collectors, publishers and readers of folktales in the period, since, for instance, texts by János Arany and Mihály Tompa are the first published versions of the given tale type in Hungarian, and the critics evaluated these poems relying on their own knowledge of folk tales as well. The investigation of this generic competence may shed some light upon those presumptions, which the editors and publishers of folktale collections had, and these presumptions differ from the textological principles and practices of the later institutionalised folklore studies.

With the investigation of texts marginalised both by literary as well as folklore studies, and an overview of the related authorial endeavours and strategies of interpretation, my aim was to reach a deeper understanding of what role a genre of the epic folklore played in the formation of national literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### *The subject matter and structure of the dissertation*

The starting point for the dissertation was a remark made by the literary historian János Horváth in 1927 in his monograph about the history of Hungarian literary folklorism in the 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries: „Folktales, apart from the above mentioned German collections, were hardly collected in this period. But under titles and subtitles such as *folk tale* or *fairy tale* a lot of literary tales were written and published. In these texts the generic features of tale, legend, short story are mixed without any reflection” – and limiting the period he referred to (1820s/1840s), tried to document and interpret the creation and reception of literary authors' epic poems published under the (sub)title *folktale* in the second half of the 1840s.

The dissertation is made up of five larger units: the first chapter gives an overview about the history of research about the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian tales, as well as the various definitions of folktale/literary tale, and their adaptability on the texts under survey, taking into consideration the consequences of the shift from orality to literacy, and the retrospective use of authenticity criteria on these texts. The next three chapters give case studies with special regard to the creation and reception of *János vitéz* ('John, the Valiant, a Folktale' by Sándor Petőfi, published in 1845), *Népregék, népmondák* ('Folk legends, folk narratives' by Mihály Tompa, published in 1846) and *Rózsa és Ibolya* ('Rose and Violet, a Folktale' by János Arany, published in 1847). The fifth chapter investigates the only treatise on tales published in Hungary in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Imre Henszlmann (*A népmese Magyarországon*, 'The folktale in Hungary', 1847), which analyzed the so far published folk

and literary tales. His statements and critical remarks related to *János vitéz* and *Rózsa és Ibolya* are discussed in detail in the chapters about these two texts.

Although the period indicated in the title of the dissertation is the decade of the 1840s, on the one hand, as it can be seen, it investigates texts that were published in course of only three years (1845–1847), on the other hand, temporal limits are expanded in the case studies if it seemed relevant. Thus, to the understanding of the historical interpretation of the genre of *János vitéz*, reviews from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are also analysed, just as well as generic experiments carried out by Mihály Tompa in the first half of the 1850s, since these experiments report of the modification of his concept, while in the case of *Rózsa és Ibolya* variants of the tale type recorded until the first World War are also comparatively discussed, and Imre Henszlmann's remarks on fairy tales in the middle of the 1860s are also inserted into the analysis.

The dissertation does not discuss two obviously relevant sources that were published in the 1840s. First, besides the three highlighted authors of the literary canon, it would be fundamentally important to enrich the context with documentation and interpretation of such forgotten texts that were published in periodicals using motifs or plots of fairy tales and/or referring to this fact in the title or subtitle of the text. The second type of texts are made up of those manuscript and published tales that are related to the folklore collection *Népdalok és mondák*, edited by János Erdélyi. There are two reasons why these texts have not been discussed in this dissertation. First, these texts have always been classified as folk tales, whereas this dissertation focuses upon those ambivalent texts that were literary pieces of art, yet, were published as *folk tales*, as the authors labelled them. On the other hand, the folklore collections edited by Erdélyi János (not only *Népdalok és mondák*, but also *Magyar Népmesék* 'Hungarian folktales', 1855, the first volume in Hungarian that exclusively consisted of folk tales) would deserve monographic interpretation because of their size and relevance, yet, most trivial problems are not even clarified in this respect either.

It is to be made clear what the word *mese* ('tale') denotes in this dissertation. The dissertation investigates such texts that consist of motifs or plots of fairy tale types (ATU 300–749). The dissertation does not deal with the emergence of several other (sub)genres of tale in contemporary literature, and similarly, it does not investigate the genre of *fable* (named also as *mese* in the period), which has a clearly distinguishable textual tradition, and was very popular until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Hungary. At the same time, due to some characteristics of the texts under survey, the dissertation touches upon the genres of belief legend and historical legend as well, since they seem to have been quite strongly related to the genre of fairy tale in the period.

### *The outcome of the investigation*

First, after discussing the main issues of research history, I argue that in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the record of tales in literacy could have different functions than the later fixed ones, which classify tales under the category of folklore or children's literature in Hungarian culture, and the retrospective use of the categories *folk tale/literary tale* is not too adequate in the case of early 19<sup>th</sup> century records of tales, because, on the one hand, along disciplinary boundaries fixed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it sets them into a marginal position, because of which these texts got on the verge of both literary and folklore studies, on the other hand, the steps in the shift between orality and literacy were not clearly marked in the case of early 19<sup>th</sup> century tales, and, finally, because the use of a dichotomy of *literary tale* and *folk tale* implies such retrospective expectations, which these texts cannot meet, since the later established authenticity criteria were irrelevant in the period under survey. I also argue that due to the

textualisation of orally transmitted tales in literacy, written variants of oral texts were created, which has simply technical reasons (since word-to-word authenticity while recording tales was technically impossible in this period), but also was a result of the contemporary notion of folklore text (i.e. having no author, it is subject to free modification in literacy as well).

The first case study interprets *János vitéz* by Sándor Petőfi as a determinative text of a generic experiment. At first I show that those episodes of the text that have been traditionally considered as alien to the nature of tale by most of the professional readers have got relevant function, taking into consideration the values of the poem and the typical solutions of folk poetry. As an only exception I identify the scene, where the outcast hero meets bandits, who offer him to join them, which the hero seemingly accepts, but at night he leaves behind the bandits and their stolen treasure putting on fire the house where the drunken bandits are sleeping. In this scene the (otherwise rather dubious moralistic) motivation of the hero contradicts the strategies and views of the heroes of Hungarian folktales. Analysing the major symbolic motifs of the epic poem, I also point out that the hero, as his lover died, may regain love (as the principal value) only in *Fairy land*, which seems to be realm of the blessed dead. Altogether I interpret *János vitéz* as part of a textual tradition, whose emblematic text is *Csongor és Tünde* (a drama based on a fairy tale written by Mihály Vörösmarty 15 years earlier), which fragmented textual tradition was able to express major problems of human existence in the form of fairy tale. In the next unit I investigate the 19<sup>th</sup> century reception of *János vitéz*, with special regard to the opinions formed about the genre of the text (the authorial designation was *folktale*). As I point out, the authorial identification of the text with the genre of folk tale continuously caused trouble and disorientation for the readers. The text was interpreted as comic epopee or as fairy tale in the 1840s, later it was read as a comic epopee for two decades until the middle of the 1860s, after which it was identified as epopee, legend or myth, which all refer to the fact that the authorial identification of the text with the genre of folk tale violated the readers' generic competence and they were unable to insert the text in canonical literary genres. I argue that the efforts to read *János vitéz* as an epopee was due to a process that characterised the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian literature, i.e. the demand for representative national narratives, which authors tried to fulfil in various genres (epopee, literary history, reconstructions of the pre-Christian Hungarian mythology, historical novels etc.), but the genre of fairy tale was unable to meet these expectations, since its hero is an individual who does not represent any community. This could be a reason why the genre of tale became marginalised in Hungarian literature.

The second case study is about the conception and reception of a more or less forgotten volume of thirty epic poems written by Mihály Tompa (*Népregék, népmondák*, 1846), which was extremely popular both with the reading audience and the literary critics in the 1840s. On the basis of the recollections of Tompa and his contemporaries (referring to the end of the 1830s), I present the practice of tale telling among noblemen in the countryside and students of Protestant colleges in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, arguing that tale telling (in contrast to the later generally accepted view) emerged not at all only in peasant communities at that time. I investigate in what way the author tried to give his poems "epic credit", relying on orally transmitted traditional narratives. He put emphasis on that the sources he used were traditional narratives known in the oral culture of a given settlement, micro-region or region. To achieve this objective, Tompa asked friends via correspondence to send him such narratives. (Later, when writing epic poems based on historical plots, Tompa relied upon written historical sources.) I make an attempt to identify the sources of the narratives Tompa was informed of in 1844–1845 in Eperjes (Prešov), with special regard to the variants of *The Singing Bone* (ATU 780, MNK 721\*), since Tompa published a poem in his volume that included the whole sujet of that tale type. I present contemporary reflections about the genre of folk legend and Tompa's experiments in this respect. I analyse the critical reviews that were published about

the book in 1846–1847, which shared the opinion that besides its aesthetical values the volume is to be interpreted as an ethnographic document. And this may lead to the conclusion again, that the outstanding success of this book was due to a great extent to the fact that through the historical-local legends the author used for the majority of his poems, he was able to satisfy the readers' demand for national-historical epic, while the less successful literary fairy tales were unable to do so. The last unit of the chapter deals with five poems entitled *Tündérrege, néprege* (*Fairy tale, Folk legend*) written by Tompa at the turn of the 1840s–1850s, with special regard to his planned (yet unfulfilled) set of narrative poems entitled *Tündérország* (*Fairy Land*), with which he intended to create a so-called Hungarian Fairy Mythology in verse. In this case I argue that due to the lack of coherent Hungarian heroic epic (only some fragments survived) the contemporary literary authors had to rely on the textual base of the genres of fairy tale, belief legend and historical legend in case they wished to create a specific national literature that is organically rooted in the textual tradition of oral culture. Altogether, the texts written by Tompa between 1845 and 1847 show that this author creatively experimented with the literary integration of various genres of folk epic, at the same time, as far as the genre of tale is concerned, this experiment of his came to a halt in the middle of the 1850s, after which he no longer was interested in the poetic capacities inherent in the genre of fairy tale.

The third case study investigates the epic poem entitled *Rózsa és Ibolya* by János Arany, published in 1847, also with a generic designation: *folk tale*. First, I argue that both the creation and the reception of *Rózsa és Ibolya* was strongly determined by that incredible literary success and the related expectations that surrounded his former work of art, an epopee entitled *Toldi*. The literary critics dealt with *Rózsa és Ibolya* intolerantly, since they regarded smaller epic poems of his as redundant texts of an extremely talented poet, whose mission should have been to write further historical epopees, although these smaller epic poems (seen as a waste of energy and time by the critics) were part of the author's literary experiments and would have made it possible to base his livelihood on literary career (Arany was a deputy-notary in a south-eastern Hungarian market town, Nagyszalonta, Salonta). I present in the chapter those data that refer to Arany's and his relatives' and friends' knowledge of the genre of tale. With the comparative investigation of the European and Hungarian variants of the tale type of his epic poem (AaTh 313C/ATU 313, *The Magic Flight*, including the plot of the *Forgotten Fiancée*) I tried to present what the narrative tradition was like, compared to which the author's poetical innovations can be interpreted. It is to be noted that Arany's wife, Julianna Ercsey, presumably in the 1850s put down a long manuscript version of the same tale type (her variant's plot is not identical with that of her husband's), which later was published in 1862 by their son, László Arany in his volume, *Eredeti népmesék* ('Authentic folktales'). I try to document the textualisation strategies with which László Arany created a canonical version out of his mother's manuscript tale when he edited it for publication. I also discuss the problem of the variants of ATU 313 collected during the first World War in Salonta, since from the comparison of the manuscript and published versions it turns out, that the editors considerably changed the text of the published version (besides stylistic changes they modified the major motifs and plot of the manuscript variant) in a way that the published version resembled *Rózsa és Ibolya*, the epic poem of the (by then) unambiguously acclaimed national poet, János Arany. Just like in the case of *János vitéz*, I also try to present that *Rózsa és Ibolya* can be seen as part of a textual tradition that was established by Mihály Vörösmarty's *Csongor és Tünde* written in 1830. Since international references show that the tale type ATU 313 resembles the Greek myth of Iason and Medea, I try to read Arany's epic poem in this context as well. I investigate in detail the interpretation of *Rózsa és Ibolya* given by Imre Henszlmann in his hundred-page-long treatise *A népmese Magyarországon* ('The folktale in Hungary', 1847), and point out that the main critical problems of Henszlmann

came from the fact that he demanded the characteristic narrative solutions of another tale type (ATU 408). Arany reported later of his doubts about tale writing in a letter addressed to Tompa Mihály, whose reaction (“Because if we write *folk songs*, why not *folk tales*?”) summarised in one sentence the problem that is in the focus of the dissertation, i.e. since literature used the genre of folk song for a renewal of the lyrical literary genres, in a similar manner, it was an opportunity for contemporary authors to make use of a distinguished narrative genre of folklore, i. e. fairy tale, as well.

The last chapter presents the remarks and reviews about folk tales published in a periodical of literary theory and criticism (*Magyar Szépirodalmi Szemle*) and points out that by this time it was observable that the Hungarian cultural-literary elite began to recognize the significance of tale collections (e.g. quoting Jacob Grimm's foreword to the German edition of Basile's *Il Pentamerone*, or reviewing the German edition of Asbjørnsen's and Moe's Norwegian folktale collection). Then the chapter investigates the first treatise on tales in Hungarian (by Imre Henszlmann), its sources (e. g. German, Romanian, Slovak, Hungarian tales) and concept. In his interpretation of tales Henszlmann did not make distinction between literary and folk tales, he did not presuppose an ideal way of narration (as did the later researchers), he was interested in the structure and narrative logic of the tales under survey. I also argue that the art historian Henszlmann must have been motivated by his mythological interest when he wrote his treatise about the symbolic interpretation of tales that he considered as derivatives of ancient myths.

As a summary: In Hungarian literature in the 1840s several textual experiments were made to integrate epic folk genres (and, in this way, fairy tales as well) into the literary canon, and in course of this process some of these literary folktales proved to be the first published variants of a given tale type in Hungarian. *János vitéz* and *Rózsa és Ibolya* are such epic poems that were able to give basic problems of human existence a poetical form within the genre of fairy tale. Yet, in the Hungarian culture and literature of the period no sign of a perception of a coherent generic tradition of tale can be pointed out. These literary experiments (in the case of Arany and Tompa) were continued at the beginning of the 1850s, but eventually failed; fragmented texts or the lack of such texts indicate that the Hungarian literature was incapable of inserting the genre of fairy tale into its canon. In my view it can be explained by two major reasons: on the one hand, from the 1860s on, as more and more volumes of children's literature and folk poetry were published, tales began to be interpreted exclusively in this double context, and on the other hand, the demand for epic poetry preferred the historical legends about the community's (nation's) past, with protagonists who are heroes representing the whole nation and its historical or mythical past. Requirements that the genre of fairy tale was unable to meet.

## *Major publications of the author of the dissertation*

### *Articles*

A *János vitéz* morfológiai elemzése. [The morphological analysis of *János vitéz*.] In *Ethnolore XXII*. Ed. by Vargyas Gábor. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 2005. 257–301.

Népmese, bohózat, hősköltemény, (tündér)rege, mythos, monda, eposz. Műfaji kétségek a *János vitéz* 19. századi recepció-történetében. [Folk tale, comical epopee, fairy tale, myth, legend or epos? Generic problems in the 19<sup>th</sup> century reception of *János vitéz*.] In *Folklór és irodalom*. Ed. by Szemerkenyi Ágnes. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 2005. 192–227.

„Én is élek még édes Ferim.” Adalékok egy 19. századi költő, meseíró, Szemere Krisztina életrajzához. [A biography of a 19<sup>th</sup> century poetess, tale-writer/collector, Christine Szemere.] In *Mindenek Gyűjtemény. II. Tanulmányok Küllös Imola tiszteletére*. Ed. by Gulyás Judit – Tóth Arnold. Budapest, ELTE Folklóre Tanszék, 2005. 191–248. (Artes Populares 22.)

„...úgy kívánhat helyt Muzarionban mint a' Galériákban a' Breughel ördögös és boszorkányos bohózkodásai”. A *Muzárion, Élet és Literatura* meseközlései és korabeli fogadtatásuk (1829–1833). [The reception of the tales published in *Muzárion, Élet és Literatura*, a periodical of literary theory and criticism, 1829–1833.] In *Teremtés. Szövegfolklorisztikai tanulmányok Nagy Ilona tiszteletére*. Ed. by Ekler Andrea – Mikos Éva – Vargyas Gábor. Budapest – Pécs, L' Harmattan, 2006. 497–547.

A 19. századi magyar meseanyag kutatásának eredményei, problémái és lehetőségei: népmese és irodalmi mese. [The achievements, problems and possibilities of the research on 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian tales: folktale and literary tale.] In *A meseszöveg változatai. Mesemondók, mesegyűjtők, meseírók*. (Második, átszerkesztett kiadás.) Ed. by Bálint Péter. Debrecen, Didakt, 2007. 158–197.

Tompa Mihály *Népregék, népmondák* című művének forrásai és egykorú fogadtatása. [The sources and contemporary reception of *Folk legends, folk narratives* by Mihály Tompa in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian literature.] In *Ethno-Lore XXIV*. Ed. by Vargyas Gábor – Berta Péter. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 2008. 117–169.

A *mese* szó használata a magyar írásbeliségben 1772–1850 között. (A magyar nyelv nagyszótárának történeti korpusza alapján.) [The usage of the word *mese* ('tale') in Hungarian literacy between 1772–1850.] In *Tanulmányok a 19. századi magyar szövegfolklórról*. Ed. by Gulyás Judit. Budapest, ELTE Folklóre Tanszék, 2008. 164–241. (Artes Populares, 23.)

Giovan Francesco Straparola és Gaal György meséi a *Hasznos Mulatságokban*. [The tales of Giovan Francesco Straparola and Georg von Gaal in *Hasznos Mulatságok*, 1818–1822.] In *Tanulmányok a 19. századi magyar szövegfolklórról*. Ed. by Gulyás Judit. Budapest, ELTE Folklóre Tanszék, 2008. 317–329. (Artes Populares, 23.)



Az Arany-család mesekéziratainak és Arany László *Eredeti népmesék* című művének kritikai kiadásáról. [On the critical edition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century manuscript and published tale collection of the Arany Family.] In *Ethno-lore* XXVI. Ed. by Berta Péter. Budapest, MTA Néprajzi Kutatóintézet, 2009. 11–77. (Co-author: Domokos Mariann)

### Reviews

Milbacher Róbert: „...Földben állasz mély gyököddel...” A magyar irodalmi népiesség genezisének akkulturációs metódusa és pórias hagyományának vázlata. [The acculturation methods of 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian literary folklorism.] *Ethnographia* 2003 CXIV. 169–173.

A történetek történetiségéről. [On the historicity of stories.] (Ruth B. Bottigheimer: Fairy Godfather. Straparola, Venice, and the Fairy Tale Tradition.) *Tabula* 2006. IX. 1. 114–123.

A tündérmese a 16–18. századi olasz és francia irodalomban. [Fairy tale in 16<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> century Italian and French literature.] (Out of the woods. The origins of the literary fairy tale in Italy and France. Edited by Nancy L. Canepa.) In *Tanulmányok a 19. századi magyar szövegfolklórról*. Ed. by Gulyás Judit. Budapest, ELTE Folklóre Tanszék, 2008. 381–411. (Artes Populares, 23.)