

Evaluation of Emese Gyimesi's TEMA Master's Thesis

The Social Spaces of Female Careers in Mid Nineteenth Century Pest-Buda

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Emese Gyimesi's masters' thesis focuses on three Hungarian female intellectuals, placing their lives and careers into contemporary social, cultural and, above all, spatial context. Gyimesi's main question is how residence, origin, and the experience of places such as certain towns, cities and regions influenced her protagonists' life choices and how their experiences were reflected in their writings.

The clear setting of goals is one of the great strengths of the thesis. In the introduction, and then at the beginning of each section afterwards, Gyimesi formulates the main questions which she wishes to investigate; she then concludes each chapter by summarizing her findings at the end and also in the final conclusion. That kind of discursive pattern, although it occasionally leads to repetitions, leaves no doubt about Gyimesi's conscious and controlled handling of her sources, and contributes to the clear-cut structure of the whole work.

As far as theory and methodology is concerned, Gyimesi is well-prepared and well-informed; the thesis is backed up by a truly impressive amount of reading. One can trace several elements of knowledge that Gyimesi presumably acquired during her graduate studies in Hungary as well as in the Czech Republic and France, and she uses her diverse knowledge in an expert way to provide interpretative frameworks for her study.

One central element which Gyimesi's work is founded upon is the spatial approach in history. She is closely familiar with the concept of mental mapping as well as with the literature on the use of (public and private) space. As the mental maps of her protagonists are placed in the focus of the thesis, Gyimesi finds it essential to go back to the roots, i. e. to the initial work of Kevin Lynch on mental maps (a conscientious gesture that can only be appreciated); she then uses that theory in a creative way, commenting on the limits to which Lynch's concepts might be used in (19th-century Hungarian) cultural history. One of Gyimesi's ingenious idea is that "*the mental map can influence life choices and decisions*" (p. 12). As far as the use of space is concerned, one of Gyimesi's great assets is her critical approach. Relying on recent works in the field, she criticizes the formerly dominant historical narratives about the gendered use of space, and challenges the view that the male versus female, public versus private spheres were strictly separated in 19th-century European cities.

There are other theories skillfully woven into the structure of the thesis, supporting the arguments in certain sections; one such auxiliary framework is e. g. palimpsest theory (page 60).

It is a definite plus that Gyimesi applies theories and models in a considerate and understanding way. Instead of just using them as fashionable and decorative ornaments, she uses them as tools, always presenting models in a way that leaves no doubt about her thorough understanding of the given theory.

One great merit of Gyimesi's work is clearly the amount of original research the thesis is based upon. Gyimesi has exploited various manuscript archives, and found diaries, correspondence, and unpublished memoirs related to her topic; these unpublished sources have been augmented by a wide range of published source material.

Perhaps the most enjoyable aspect of the thesis is the presentation and analysis of the protagonists' life stories, based upon the above-mentioned "ego documents", but also upon biographical and other literature. Although the protagonists of Gyimesi's thesis are relatively well known in Hungarian history, their full life stories – as the reader becomes quite aware while reading Gyimesi's chapters - are not well known at all. Szendrey has gone down in history primarily as Sándor Petőfi's love, later wife and widow, but we actually know very little about her later life and in fact very little about the everyday aspects of her marriage with Petőfi. By placing female figures such as Szendrey, Kánya, and Prielle into the limelight, their lives and careers suddenly appear as coherent life stories, in which their strategies, ambitions, desires, and difficulties are analyzed by Gyimesi in a very reflective and empathic way. Especially in a case like Szendrey's, it is extremely interesting to see a woman, traditionally regarded only as muse or, in the best case, the intellectual companion of a great poet, to be presented as a later writer in her own right; we also understand better than ever the circumstances which forced Szendrey into her second marriage and the pressures she had to cope with during the post-1849 phase of her life. Gyimesi's interpretation is at this point very much in line with recent trends of literary and cultural history, characterized by the revision of earlier, established canons and the by the effort to elevate less known (or unjustly forgotten) female authors / artists into the focus of historical attention.

While presenting the cultural, social and professional contexts of her protagonists' careers, Gyimesi offers several good analyses and original conclusions. For example, she offers a very convincing explanation for why women writers met a substantial amount of opposition on the part of both leading literary critics and the public in a certain period, whereas women *editors* were much more easily accepted as socially and culturally useful actors in the field of press and publishing. Gyimesi's views on the professionalization of each discussed group (i. e. writers, editors, and actors/actresses) in the course of the mid to late 19th century are well-founded and accurate.

Some key points of the process, however, remain strangely unexplained. The year 1857, for example, appears to be a turning point in Gyimesi's narrative, a time when several women writers entered the scene and begin to publish simultaneously, in much larger numbers than they did ever before. That is the time when Júlia Szendrey began – or re-started - her own independent publishing career as well. We also learn that male writers and literary figures responded to that wave with unprecedented malice the next year. But the reader never actually learns what happened around that time. Why 1857? What changed in the political and cultural climate of the neo-absolutist period that prompted such an eruption of female writing/publishing ambitions?

As far as the contextualization of the case studies is concerned, Gyimesi employs the technique of inserted comparisons in almost every main section of the thesis: e.g. Szendrey versus Lenke Bajza; Kánya versus Podmaniczky, Prielle versus Blaha etc. While this comparative technique has several advantages (especially the relative assessment of the protagonists' careers and writings), the choice of the characters/texts used as contrasts seems sometimes random, and is not always satisfactorily explained. Also, the comparisons in certain cases remain somewhat superficial, as the contrast texts (e. g. Baron Frigyes Podmaniczky or Lujza Blaha's memoirs) are not introduced in depth and not analyzed in detail.

Another weakness of the otherwise expert treatment of written sources is the lack of source criticism. Neither the main texts (upon which the main case studies are based) nor the auxiliary texts that serve as points of comparison (such as Baron Podmaniczky's memoirs or Lujza Blaha's reminiscences) are commented on from a critical point of view. There is a large amount of theoretical literature concerned with "ego documents" and with the problems of memory and remembering. In a thesis like Gyimesi's, it would have been necessary to comment on the characteristics of the analyzed "ego documents", and raise issues about the source value of such texts (e. g. what happens when a person's memoirs are written at a late age; how the retrospective interpretation of earlier life or career events serves the goals of identity construction, and can therefore be often distorting etc.)

Some recurring mistakes may also deserve attention. Emília Kánya is quoted repeatedly in the thesis as "the first female editor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire". That name of the political entity is certainly wrong for the period. Kánya's editorial career begins in 1860, but "Austro-Hungarian" is a term that is used only for the period of the Dual Monarchy (or Austro-Hungarian Monarchy), 1867-1918. For the previous era, Habsburg Empire or Habsburg Monarchy would be appropriate.

Besides all the above-mentioned minor weaknesses, the linguistic deficiencies of the thesis cannot be left unmentioned either – the latter, in fact, is a major problem concerning the text. Of course it cannot necessarily be expected of graduate students who are non-native English speakers to produce flawless academic texts in English. The masterful use of written English is not at all self-evident even in an international master's program like TEMA. The reviewer is fully aware of the difficulties students have to overcome in this respect, and she thoroughly sympathizes with students who are willing to meet the challenge. All that said, it COULD be justifiably expected of an MA candidate to hire a native editor and let his or her text go through a proofreading process. With the exception of the elegant introductory chapters, the text of Gyimesi's thesis is, especially in certain sections, mistakes such as wrong conjugation, non-matching verbs and subjects, and inappropriate phrases which either do not exist in English or are used in a different sense (e. g. "maintenance fee" instead of child support; "in spite of" instead of as opposed to etc.)

Usually, the reader can understand the meaning of sentences and can follow the lines of argument in the thesis even in the sections spoiled by frequent and disturbing grammatical mistakes. But the quality of English does often undermine the effectiveness of the arguments, and has a negative impact on the professionalism of the whole thesis.

All the mistakes could have been easily weeded out by an experienced proofreader, and the result would have been a much higher level text. The reviewer thus strongly recommends the candidate to spend some effort on the linguistic improvement of the thesis.

Questions to consider at the thesis defense:

- 1) What kind of causes led to the sudden increase of female publishing in Hungary in 1857-1858?
- 2) Can the candidate reflect on the problem of selective memory and retrospective re-interpretation in female memoirs in general and in her own sources in particular?

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