

THESES OF PHD THESIS

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LITERARY AND MYTHOLOGICAL ALLUSIONS IN IMRE SARKADI'S DRAMAS



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I. The purpose of the thesis; the circumscription of the subject

This present thesis is dwelling upon Imre Sarkadi's dramatic oeuvre and is investigating its influences and typological coincidences with other works and endeavours to point to the intertextual presence of certain mythical texts. The problems outlined have already been referred to in the reception of the works. This thesis is discussing them in detail and is enlarging the field of the questions but also takes into consideration the existing results of criticism. I will purpose to approach Imre Sarkadi's career as a dramatist in a way that is different from the foregoing although appropriates the conclusions and so to connect my work with an already existing tradition. In addition to this I will try to emphasize the importance of Sarkadi's life-work in our country's dramatic literature because it does not only find shape in works that are ideologically committed.

Monographies printed in the seventies relate the biographical background and if possible in the case of Sarkadi to investigate his personality, his relationship with his parents, relatives and friends, the history of his family and his marriage so that this may be a basis for analysing the works. Introducing the biographical data goes along with the chronological review of the works. Later the most important point is becoming the analysis of the Sarkadi-oeuvre within this the last period of the work-life is more emphasized as well as those plays that were written in the fifties. Yet the analyses do not neglect the detailed but unnecessary introduction of the social, historical and political milieu of the period. In many cases works are commented on with the use of historical context.

In the years and decades after Sarkadi's death a great deal of literature was published which sketched the central problems of the oeuvre in a competent way. The seventies proved to be the most fertile period. Then the writer's life-work was published together with two monographies. Since the eighties, however, the number of those studies and volumes of essays was decreasing steadily that might enrich the studies of Sarkadi's works, except for the memorial issue of the *Alföld* in 1981 and Tamás Tarján's articles on Sarkadi's late dramas. In the 1990s only Tamás Bécsy evaluated Sarkadi's plays in his work entitled *Adventures with Drama* (1996), and then Zsuzsa Radnóti published her *Rebellious Dramaturgies. Portraits of Dramatists* (2003) in which she devoted a whole chapter to Sarkadi's dramas. Let me add that she also analysed especially the last plays as the representatives works of the oeuvre — similarly to Tarján and Bécsy. In case of the Sarkadi-reception a tendency can be observed that consider the late dramas (mostly *Simeon the Stylite* and *Paradise Lost*) the peak of the

oeuvre — supposedly with reason. That is why the life-work is declared to be interrupted or unfinished because the writer did not live to see his most remarkable plays theatricalized.

As I mentioned before, the monographies of the seventies approach the plays from the author's life and personality and outline historical and social mechanisms as the background of the dramas. Tamás Bécsy analyses *Simeon the Stylite* from the point of view of dramatic speech and fate in situation, Zsuzsa Radnóti insert it in the tradition created by Milán Füst, Miklós Mészöly and István Örkény, referring to important literary antecedents.

This present thesis is not only elaborating on the most analysed *Simeon the Stylite* but also those works which meet the criteria of a dramatic text (thus the radio plays as well that were left from the oeuvre-volume). It is not only investigating literary analogies — on the basis of the mythical attributes of the characters — but also the act of myth-making and the presence of myth.

In the latter case the presence of the biblical-Christian rhetoric and motives can be observed in works such as *The Prophet*, *Kelemen the Bricklayer* (which also derives from the ballad-tradition as a mythical breeding ground), *Simeon the Stylite* and *Paradise Lost*, but can also be found in the “social realistic” plays because of the ideology imbued with messianism.

The dramas represent important contacts with other literary works. Gabriella Hima discusses the relationship of the oeuvre and existentialist philosophy in detail in the memorial issue of *Alföld* in 1981. The problems appearing in the writings of Camus and Sartre (the freedom of human will and the problem of man's autonomy) are the most important driving force of the figures' meditations and then acts.

Olga Siklós mentions only two of Sarkadi's plays in her monography of 1970: *Road from the Farms* and *September*. She refers to Sarkadi as a “peasant writer” and his dramas as “peasant-plays” and she analyses the social-political causes of the acts. Although the *Road from the Farms* and *September* were very popular in the fifties are only a segment of the life-work. Tamás Bécsy discusses a very different period in 1996. Considering subject-matter he emphasizes works that represents the inner crisis of the intellectuals, thus the most prototypical example is *Simeon the Stylite*. He does not refer to social and political mechanisms but he points out the presence of transcendental or metaphysical fatefulness which evokes the experience of “disintegration” of life. It is independent of external reality and involves some mythical attributes. He discusses Sarkadi's works together with those of Hubay and Mészöly.

Zsuzsa Radnóti is inserted in the “tradition” begun by Tamás Bécsy, who, also ignoring the “peasant-plays”, declares *Simeon the Stylite* the first Hungarian existentialist

play, the relative of Sartre's, Camus's and Beckett's works, considers Füst and Mészöly as Sarkadi's antecedents. She also emphasizes the problems of the intellectuals and the act of self-destruction as the strange way of crisis management. Radnóti, however, investigates the era and denominates *Simeon the Stylite* as a typical representative of the period. The reactionless reception of the 1948 novel version and the debate on its "perverse and decadent" subject is a consequence of the ideological influence of the historical context and the fact that the dramas of the fifties were popular in the early period of the reception. Later works spreading atmosphere of existentialist crisis became more interesting.

The cult of free personality reappears in the writer's works — with an existentialist inspiration. In his early dramas he endeavours to introduce this ideal with the historical figures of Hannibal and Tarquinius. In the 1950s the person determining oneself is replaced by political and ideological problems and a communal attitude represented sometimes heroically, sometimes critically. In the last period of his dramas the interrupted question of personality comes into prominence again. Then his most well-known plays were written together with his novels of similar problems (*Peasant Beast, Fool and Monster*). In *Simeon the Stylite* and *Paradise Lost*, however, the free and sovereign personality is defeated and the self-destruction of hedonism is revealed. Although in *The Prophet* he scorns inactivity and greets the "great personality" in the figures of Tarquinius, Orestes and Hannibal, the fall of this type of hero is foreshadowed in 1948. János Kis reaps the fruit of his acts and Zoltán Sebők is nearly collapsing due to his moral crisis.

Imre Sarkadi's works that he wrote as a publicist are also significant beside his epic and dramatic writings. Most of them deal with literature especially the conditions of Hungarian drama and theatre in the 1940s but his dramatic principles and the basic theoretical concepts he made essential can also be sketched in his works. The introductory chapter of the thesis reflects these works and the principles laid down in them.

Sarkadi's "Theatrical Notes" are not without antecedents. They are inserted in an already existing critical tradition. The prominent theatre critic of the first half of the twentieth century, László Németh had published his critics urging on reforms in theatrical life in the 1940s in *Híd*. These writings do not only evaluate plays but also report on the conditions of Hungarian theatres mostly condemning them and expressing the aims. Most of Sarkadi's theatre critics elaborate on drama as a genre. The concept of drama and the scale of values a dramatist must consider are outlined in his writings.

Sarkadi was interested in the problem of determination and free will. The questions conceived in his works in many cases give evidence on the influence of existentialism.

Determination as a theological term derives from Protestant dogmas with which he might become in contact by his religious education. The genius who can beat determination and predestination is the Sarkadi-ideal about whom he wrote in connection with James Joyce's *Ulysses* ("the person who determines himself").

One of the most important question of existentialism is whether the human agent is free or not. As regards for the relationship between the agent and the transcendental world, this latter not being, a person can feel totally independent of values and attitudes legalized by God. Several works of Sarkadi's, e. g. *The Prophet*, *Lucretia*, the *Hannibal*-plays, *Electra*, *House Near the Town*, *Simeon the Stylite*, *Paradise Lost* among his dramas, *Simeon the Stylite*, *Peasant Beast*, *Fool and Monster* among his novels, *Descending to Hell*, *Oedipus Getting Blind* among his short stories propagate moral nihilism.

In the first period of his life-work most of his writings take place in the ancient Greek-Roman age, but they mention typically actual problems in the same time. He uses the story of military leader Hannibal as raw material for two of his dramas. He applies the classical story of Electra that has several times been reinterpreted so far — in both Hungarian and world literature. The figure of ancient Roman king Tarquinius also revives in a fragmentary piece of his as an example of the great free Hannibal-like personality.

The existentialist hero of free will who propagates the utmost pleasure of life is less important in *Kelemen the Bricklayer*. Although free will does exist, it manifests itself in another way. In this fragmentary drama the author tries to create not only the ideal of active man conquering circumstances but also the ideal of constructing man who produces worth by his work even at the price of sacrifice. He creates the opposite of the comfort-loving and pacifist attitude of Hannibal and Tarquinius with the use of the Hungarian folk ballad.

This present thesis also endeavours to point out the mythical-biblical motives represented in most of Sarkadi's dramas. The opening piece *The Prophet* evokes the typical Old Testament figure of the Scripture and represents his traditional attitude in an awkward and ironical way. The problems of the evil, the demonic, the satanic attitude of temptation enrich the series of biblical motifs in the author's several works (from *The Prophet* onwards *Descent to Hell* and *Simeon the Stylite*) together with the motive of the lost paradise and the frequent emergence of the garden of Eden metaphor. The ironic representation of trading with faith, repentance and confession is dealt with in *The Treachery of Menyhárt Balassi*. In the pieces on co-operatives the sacredness of earth has a dominant role, eventually some characteristics of work ethic subsisting on Protestant faith and morality pervade several works especially social ones.

The thesis is reflecting on the inspiration of the “redundant person” of the Russian literature driven by decadent attitude. In case of Aldous Huxley’s early novels intertextual references can be found in some of Sarkadi’s texts. World views such as cynicism, nihilism, egotism, attitudes such as asceticism, hedonism, moral liberalism and relativism together with the problem of freedom-seeking, the conscious following of the evil and diabolism are present in the repertory of all of the three life-works.

The thesis is calling attention to the creative influence of existential philosophy in Imre Sarkadi’s dramas. Relationship between man and woman sketched by Kierkegaard to a great extent influenced Sarkadi’s women figures. The problems that are present in the dramas, namely asceticism, the elimination of the conditioned reflexes, influencing circumstances instead of fatalism and the freedom of will are all the problems of existential philosophy.

II. Methods applied during the elaboration of the subject

This present thesis is only analysing Imre Sarkadi’s dramas in several respects. First of all for this it is necessary to consider the basic dramatic and dramaturgic principles. That is why I am outlining Sarkadi’s theatre criticism and the basic concepts that are important in other theoretical writings of his. Considering the statements of theoretical literature that is part of the reception the life-work of the critic and dramatist is addressed as a career that is inspired by existentialism and foreshadows the absurd. The thesis is analysing the dramatic texts’ literary and mythical analogies with other texts in the following chapters. In the early fragmentary dramas I endeavoured to point out not only the presence of myth and the connection with antique texts but also the presence of philosophical theses due to paraphrase. These plays of Sarkadi’s remind me of thesis-dramas in which some philosophical theses are significant in the dialogues yet acts are less determinant.

In case of some plays it already appears in their title that the drama is built on some kind of mythical text which — as a central motive — has an important role in the drama. This is the fact in *The Prophet* and *Paradise Lost* but the presence of biblical and religious motives is also well-marked in *The Treachery of Menyhárt Balassi* and the social plays i. e. *Road from the Farms*, *September*, etc.

The “redundant person” known from the novels of Goncharoff, Lermontoff and Dostoyevsky and the problem of diabolism leads on to the biblical allusions and existentialist thoughts. On one hand I tried to point to the intertextual connections in the case of novelists

above, on the other hand I emphasized the determinant role of the philosophical problems, e. g. in the case of *Simeon the Stylite*, *House near the Town*, etc.

III. The conclusion of the study

In my work I endeavoured to sketch some problems of a life-work that is outstanding yet for some reason seems to be forgotten. These problems are not only reflecting on the type-making mechanisms of the represented attitudes and seeking for the mutual marks of the dramatic figures (this way pointing out the type of “the man who determines himself”), but also describing the philosophical theses that are present in the plays and inspire the figures, e. g. existentialism. I also touched upon the intertextual allusions of the texts, thus the relationship with the figures and the philosophical problems of Aldous Huxley’s early novels and the creative influence of “the redundant person” and Dostoevsky’s diabolical heroes. Besides I considered important to declare the so-called “mythic brand” that is present in Sarkadi’s plays (this expression is known to have been used first by László Németh) because some dramas of his are explicit experiments for paraphrasing an original mythic text. There are a lot of allusions in the works that import a mythical story into the world of drama and thus enrich the figures and the references of the text. With my work I tried to show all the allusions from the prophet as a biblical figure onwards the motive of descending to hell and the metaphor of the garden of eden that appears in the in the dramas of the fifties.

The genre of historical drama revived by László Németh and Gyula Illyés can also be found in the life-work due to the Hannibal-plays, *Lucretia* and *The Treachery of Menyhárt Balassi* (the latter two enrich the repertory of György Spiró’s dramatic figures as well), in which action manifested in deeds is not stressed but figures as stereotypes of a philosophical attitude are very meaningful. I applied the label “social drama” for the plays of the fifties referring to Peter Szondi’s dramaturgical views and I tried to emphasize the social criticism represented by the texts and directed against communist ideology. I intended to dispel the preoccupation that Imre Sarkadi is a socialist realist writer who only created schematic texts to serve the communist ideas. I wished to point out a very different fact: the rightful place for Sarkadi in our country’s dramatic history is still missing and he can receive this place on the basis of the last period of his works. Because these “crisis-plays” bear marks of the classical form of László Németh’s and Gyula Illyés’s dramas, of course, reflecting the requirements Sarkadi himself laid special stress on. These works open towards the absurd of Mészöly and and constitute the significant achievement of Hungarian dramaturgy.

IV. The list of publications

1. The Testament of “the Lonely Fighter”. Tamás, Menyhért: *The Stone-Roller. Hitel.* 2002. January. p123-126
2. The Settled Debt. Vasy, Géza: *István Kormos. Hitel.* 2003. March. p124-126
3. “We have to discover it again.” *Descending to Hell. In memoriam Imre Sarkadi. Hitel.* 2003. June. p117-120
4. In the Enchantment of Omniscience. The Portrait of a Free-Thinker. *A Free Person. Writings on László Vekerdi. Hitel.* 2005. January. p107-109
5. The Analogies of Imre Sarkadi’s Dramas and Aldous Huxley’s Early Novels. *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények.* 2005. January. p22-34
6. “Writing Conceived in Pain.” *Tamás, Menyhért. Mikes. Tamási. Two Monodramas. Hitel.* 2005. July. p117-120
7. The Secrets of our Isolation. *Méhes, Károly. The Little Necromancer. Hitel.* 2005. July. p120-122
8. *Lack and Faith. In memoriam László Kertész. Hitel.* (in active preparation)