

Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Humanities

THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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**BORDER IDENTITIES AND WALKING THE BORDERLAND
IN THE OUVRE OF MINKA CZÓBEL**

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I. The topic and framework of the dissertation, the aim of the research

Paradoxically, the memory of Minka Czóbel focuses on being undeservedly forgotten. This rhetoric, which has been repeated over and over since the 1970s, results in Czóbel's admirers-analysts mostly speaking from a defensive-compensatory position about the oeuvre. The corpus of the oeuvre published in print was for a long time only available in a few public collections, but is now almost entirely freely available on the World Wide Web, so the accessibility of texts has recently improved significantly. Czóbel's figure also lives fertiley in the local memory community, with an institutionalized system in its narrower patriarch to ensure that this figure is preserved in a way that fits into the community's presumed norm system, endowing the writer's memory with a local identity. The oeuvre was not forgotten in the wider medium beyond local memory: from time to time we come across literary, theatrical, and musical adaptations of Czóbel's figure and texts; and even the name itself evokes creative initiatives, even when detached from the oeuvre and the author behind it.

The aim of the research is to examine Minka Czóbel and her oeuvre as a border crosser (and not as a border violator) on a spectrum where norms and taboos and the boundaries intertwined between them are assumed to be complex, multi-layered systems rather than two endpoints. The theoretical framework builds on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of *carnival*, which has a special meaning in cultural theory, the notion of abjection by Julia Kristeva, and the writings of George Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, and Michel Foucault, which provide a basis for conceptual clarification of boundaries and transgression. At the same time, the approach to the text is mainly characterized by the gender critical approaches of the 2000s, which further critique the ideas of Elaine Showalter, Ellen Moers, Susan Gilbert, Sandra Gubar's foundations, and the concept of *écriture féminine*, focusing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Susan Lanser's approaches.

II. Method and scope

Reflecting the paradigm shift in feminist literary criticism over the past two decades, the dissertation does not discriminate along male-female oppositions while studying the oeuvre of the writer. In its stead, it turns towards the queering attitude, which first became known through queer studies but has become more widely used since then.. This theoretical framework is not very well-known in Hungarian academia; however, it has stepped beyond mere experimental articles in international, especially English speaking/Anglo-Saxon circles.

It is important to emphasize that talking about queer subjects, queer space and time management, taking advantage of the potential of interdisciplinarity is an exciting and productive thought experiment that can help research incorporate narrower, text-centred analyses into a broader, socially and culturally productive discourse.

An important lesson from recent research in the field of literary and cultural studies is that queering as a critical mode of reading / interpretation is not necessarily closely related to sexual identity and sexual attraction, and can be successfully applied to texts earlier than postmodern as well. At the same time, the specific aim of the dissertation is to move Czóbel's figure from the position of a lonely, unaccompanied spinster through a metaphorical reading of the narrow meaning of queer. However, instead of analysing assumptions about the writer's assumed sexual identity (focusing on the fact that Czóbel shared a significant part of her life with German-born painter Helen Büttner), it is more important to outline alternative ways of interpreting *lesbian* identity, and to read it together with the phenomena traditionally often understood as artist-friendship.

III. Structure and results

The first chapter describes the process of how the figure of Minka Czóbel is formed, with what identity images, by what means and for what purposes the creation of memory is built, and how the image of Czóbel read from the autographs fits into this. The chapter covers three topics. First, it looks at Czóbel's network of textual publications, the process by which the author takes place in the literary space with her texts from the first volume in 1890 to the online publications of 2018 (copyright time limit expires); and analyses the process of memory creation in this context, which works against oblivion by rebuilding the figure of Czóbel. The connection between the two is justified by the fact that the gestures of memory formation are strongly influenced by the presence, which is weakened / strengthened by the degree of accessibility of the published texts. The second part focuses on Czóbel's handwritten journals, looking closely at the records of 1914, previously only accessible at the Manuscript Collection of the National Széchényi Library. These records can be found in their entirety in the appendix with annotations. The third part of the chapter looks at reception and analyses it with quantitative methods.

The second chapter examines the peculiarities of Czóbel's representation of the subject, primarily by analysing the corpus of poems. In Minka Czóbel's works, the boundaries are not

sharp, the contours of the spaces are loose, the planes of time slide into each other, reality and mystique are washed into each other, the boundaries of the subject are open. The aim of this chapter is to illuminate subject management by analysing boundary phenomena and transgressive gestures, such as attempts to cross between possible worlds, dream representation, time management, and the mirror phenomenon. The chapter analyses the mechanisms through which the boundaries of subjects are realized in three parts. First, the phenomenon of the decentralized subject formation is placed in a historical-theoretical space, in the world of the inescapable self of the turn of the century. Then the chapter analyses in detail the sliding of time planes, the phenomenon of the dream as an intermediate existence, and the mirror as a gateway. Finally, attempts to read together M. C. Escher's lithograph 'The Encounter' and Czóbel's '*Kik erre járnak*' [Thos who walk here] to reinterpret - through the play of poetry and pictorial language - Czóbel's decentralized subjects as queer subjects formed in queer time and space. My research proves that Czóbel's subject representation, which is alien to classical modernism, but often uses poetic solutions that tend to be more modern, can be effectively modelled with the approach of performative identity theories or queer theories.

The third chapter relates the so-called phenomenon of the language crisis of the turn of the century to the concept of *écriture féminine*. Although both theories have weaknesses, these theories help to model the fact that women writers began to shape their own subjective voice at the very time when the inadequacy of language itself became an issue. The analysis focuses on those parts of the lyrical oeuvre which express the uncertainty of language use and / or which use formal means to show the breaking of language, the muting of sound, and the intensification of silence. The first part of the chapter deals with the concept of *écriture féminine* itself, summarizing the theory that female writing breaks away from the symbol system of the male language and uses a pre-linguistic, semiotic language. This simplistic model, read from the point of view of queer narratology, seems less essentialist, opening up to a broader concept that truly loosens binary oppositions. The second part of the chapter examines the phenomena of the language formed in the texts that cannot be covered by the standards of symbolic language use: it seeks empty spaces, silences and their formal means in Czóbel's poems, and reflects on their fragmentation. It analyses in detail the phenomenon of white as a synaesthesia: a device that functions as both colour and sound (silence). The chapter draws on the help of Emily Dickinson's poetry, which, by creating a rhetoric of silence, offers a fruitful analogy to the analysis of Czóbel Minka's poems. Finally, the third

part examines the logic of dream formation, especially in regard to the phenomenon of the uncertainty of the use of conventional language in dreams, and the formation of a semiotic language with its own logic.

The fourth chapter analyses Minka Czóbel's representation of space, looking for spaces and boundaries of space in the poems that form the fabric of dreams-reality-imagination. Minka Czóbel's last volume of poems, *Az erdő hangja* (1914) [The Voice of the Forest], takes the reader into uncanny [unheimlich] spaces in the Freudian sense. The first cycle, which is the title cycle of the volume, apparently presents external spaces, where nature, the forest, is at once liberating but frightening, while the second cycle, About Mirrors and Rooms, leads into built interiors. In both cases the poems take the reader into depths of the subject. Heterotopic spaces (forest, mirror, ruins, roads) open into each other, multiply each other, projecting the depth of time into space, and project the repetitions of the spaces, their closures into each other and into themselves into time (paths-corridors, continuously repeating, recurring space elements). This mode of representation is characteristic of Gothic writing, the features of which - although Hungarian literary history writing traditionally considers it to be of little interpretability in Hungarian literature - can also be seen in the texts of Minka Czóbel. Analysing the gothic spatial experience and representation of Czóbel's texts, it can be stated that these spaces can be reinterpreted as queer space. The essence of queer spatial and time perception is that even in postmodern queer communities, a separate experience of space and time is created here, which differs from the perception considered normal and exclusive: linearity is foreign to it, it is more cyclical, and it focuses not so much on each stage of the (life) path as on the journey itself.

The fifth chapter analyses Minka Czóbel's attempts to create a world in a broader interpretation of the concept of Bakhtin's carnival known in the cultural sciences. The focus is on those world-building formations that, when encountered with the normal world order, show anomalies, an abjectional relationship is formed between them. Minka Czóbel's female / queer characters, be they allegorical, fairy-tale, or realistic figures, usually move across borders, transcend norms, exist differently, and have a special relationship with the existing order of power. The first part analyses the allegorical figure of the witch as otherness in Czóbel's poems, approaching her existence with the concept of hiding and coming out introduced by Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick. The second part in *Két arany hajszál* [The Two Golden Hairs] shows how alternative, carnival worlds are created in the novel, constructed against the rules of the normal world, and what kind of space is formed at the boundary

between these two worlds, what transitions are possible. The third part mainly analyses the shapes of the feeling of alienation in the drama *Donna Juanna*: the (dramaturgically significantly overwhelmed) title character combines the difference and social exile of the witch, the experience of acceptance, the possibilities and impossibilities of love, life-death-birth experience its cyclicity. The fourth part connects the female figures in the short story volume *Pókhálók* [Cobwebs] with the issue of withdrawal from society, exile, feelings of alienation, the struggle of earthly life, and death as a way out.

In order for the theses of the dissertation to be sufficiently substantiated from a philological point of view, the appendix contains several bibliographies in addition to the usual bibliography. One is a list of all Minka Czóbel's published and electronically accessible volumes, and the other is an itemized list of the entire reception. There is also a picture list in the appendix, which presents the spaces of local memory creation as an integral part of the first chapter, and gives some illustrative examples from diaries and letters.

IV. Publications Related to the Topic of the Dissertation

On Czóbel Minka

„»Tükörcú álmodás«. Érintkezési pontok Czóbel Minka és Szabó Magda lírájában”. In *Kitáruló ajtók*, szerkesztette KÖRÖMI Gabriella és KUSPER Judit, Eger: EKE Líceum Kiadó, 2018, 179–191.

„Határátlépések Czóbel Minka életművében”. In *A Selye János Egyetem Nemzetközi Doktorandusz Konferenciája (2016)*, szerkesztette NAGY Péter et al, Komárno: Selye János Egyetem, 2017, 149–161.

„Idősíkok és átjárók Czóbel Minka műveiben”. In *Az idő alakzatai és időtapasztalat a magyarságtudományokban*, szerkesztette BENE Sándor és DOBOS István, Budapest: Nemzetközi Magyarságtudományi Társaság, 2017, 186–202.

„Siess haza. Czóbel Minka kortársai kritikájának tükrében. Két torzító montázs”. In *Spanyolnátha: Művészeti folyóirat* 14, 1 (2017).; Másodközlés: *Különbön roppant kedvesek*, szerkesztette DEÁK-TAKÁCS Szilvia, Spanyolnátha könyvek; 27. Hernádkak: Példa Képfőiskola Művészeti Alapítvány, 2017, 29–37.

„Előszó”. In *Két arany hajszál*, Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2013, 7–10.

Women literature and gender critics

„»És oly fontos voltam magamnak akkor, mint fekélyborította sebek.«. Sebek és sebhelyek Kaffka Margit szövegei(be)n”. In *Kaffka 100*, szerkesztette MÉSZÁROS Zsolt, PARÁDI Andrea és RÁKAI Orsolya, PIM Studiolo, Budapest: Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum (PIM), 2020, 137–162.

„Az ezerhangú hárfá sikolya. Zenévé szublimált testélmény Erdős Renée két regényében”. In *Trauma, gender, irodalom*, szerkesztette GYÖRE Bori, MENYHÉRT Anna és SZABOLCSI Gergely, Budapest: ELTE Eötvös Kiadó, 2014, 25–42.

„A női test hangja a 19-20. század fordulójának magyar irodalmában”. *Társadalmi Nemek Tudománya: Interdiszciplináris E-folyóirat* 4, 1 (2014): 44–61.

„»Pillangó-nagyasszony borostyánba zárva«. Árva Bethlen Kata teremtett alakja a dzsenderkritika tükrében”. *Első Század* 13, 2 (2014): 87–105.

Reviews

„Menyhért, Anna. 2016: *Egy Szabad Nő, Erdős Renée Regényes Élete* (‘A Free Woman, The Remarkable Life of Renée Erdős’). Budapest: General Press. 231 Pp. Illus.” *Hungarian Cultural Studies: E-journal of the American Hungarian Educators Assosiation* 10 (2017): 213–216. <https://doi.org/10.5195/ahca.2017.304>.

„A Budapesti Úrinő Magánélete 1860-1914 (‘The Private Life of a Budapest Lady, 1860-1914’) Szécsi, Noémi and Eleonóra Géra. 2015, Budapest: Európa. 439 Pp. Illus.” *Hungarian Cultural Studies: E-journal of the American Hungarian Educators Assosiation* 9 (2016): 266–269. <https://doi.org/10.5195/ahca.2016.251>.

Webportal

MENYHÉRT Anna, KAPUS Erika, BALOGH Eszter, GYÖRE Bori, MÉSZÁROS Zsolt és VAJDA Károly. „Írók a hálón 1880-1945”, 2015, webportál.