Copper, Silver and Gold: Metal Woods Set to a New Purpose in Hungarian Folk Fantasy

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Introduction

With its intricate mixture of Central and Eastern European traditions, Hungarian folklore offers unique possibilities for modern fantasy authors. However, partly due to the socialist regime's distrust of literary manifestations of the fantastic (with the scarce exception of certain science fiction), fantasy appeared relatively late on the Hungarian literary palette. Even the Hungarian translation of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–55) came out only in 1981. As a consequence, the first boom of fantasy dates back to the 1990s. In this period, most authors stuck with imitating Anglo-American sword-and-sorcery narratives and wrote under foreign pseudonyms. András Gáspár (under pen names: Wayne Chapman, Damien Forrestal, Ed Fisher, Lampert Gordon) and Zsolt Kornya (pen name Raoul Renier) are prominent figures of this early period, and their work both in fiction and in the Hungarian RPG community remains within the heroic tradition. Thus, formula fantasy became the norm for the wider audience, and up to this day, there is a rather poor selection of more sophisticated Western fantasy fiction available in Hungarian. The situation appears to be especially dire regarding folk-mythic fantasy: the first Hungarian edition of Peter S. Beagle's *The Last Unicorn* (1968) was published in 2004; Patricia A. McKillip's *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld* (1974), the winner of the first World Fantasy Award in 1975, reached Hungarian readers in 2008; whilst Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood* (1984) had its Hungarian debut in 2013, and only one of the later Mythago novels have been published since then (Lavondyss, 2015). As for Hungarian fantasy authors, readers had to wait until the 2010s for writers to gradually break down the limitations of formulaic storytelling and engage in more innovative structures and themes.

This transformation towards a more creative understanding of fantasy enabled previously marginalised topics and motifs to gain more attention, thus Hungarian folklore slowly but surely found its way into critically acknowledged fantasy texts. Starting with the 2007 anthology of Hungarian folktale retellings, *77–Hetvenhét* [*Seventy-Seven*] (edited by Csilla Kleinheincz and Csaba Járdán), a great variety of Hungarian fantasy fiction applies folklore as a core component. The better-known novels include a witty urban fantasy series by Ágnes Gaura[1] that is loosely based on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, yet applies a distinctly Hungarian setting and social satire; Emília Virág's whimsical *Hétvilág-trilógia* [*Sevenworlds trilogy*][2]; and Krisztina Timár's first volume of a would-be trilogy, *A látszat mesterei* [*Masters of Delusion*] (2016), a unique attempt at mingling elements of Hungarian literary tradition with heroic fantasy. With regard to short fiction, Alfonz I. Fekete's short story collection, *A mosolygó zsonglőr* [*The Smiling Juggler*] (2016) offers a New Wave fabulist take on lesser-known Hungarian folk creatures and beliefs. The year's best speculative

short fiction anthologies published by GABO (2018–) and edited by Csilla Kleinheincz and Gábor Roboz also include multiple folk fantasy texts both by well-known and debut authors. For instance, Attila Veres's 2018 story, "Fekete talán" [Black Mayhap] adds a folk horror twist to visiting the Hungarian countryside, whilst László R. Palágyi's "A róna gyermeke" [Child of the Plain] (2020) slightly resembles Sapkowski's *Witcher* series in a Hungarian, pre-industrial setting. As Ursula K. Le Guin observes, "[w]hat fantasy generally does that the realistic novel generally cannot do is include the nonhuman as essential" (87). Fortunately, most of 2010s Hungarian folk fantasy texts follow these lines quite literally and seem to revel in the possibility of placing the nonhuman in the spotlight. Unsurprisingly though, most representations of the nonhuman remain either anthropomorphic or bestial, like the various depictions of the 'táltos,' the shaman figure of Hungarian folklore or the Hungarian folktale dragon that is able to switch between reptilian and human form. This paper ventures to lesser trodden paths and uncovers the vegetal other by comparing and contrasting two folk fantasies that include an interesting re-interpretation of plant imagery: Csilla Kleinheincz's *Ólomerdő* [*Leadenwood*] trilogy (*Ólomerdő* [*Leadenwood*], 2007; *Üveghegy* [*Glass Mountain*], 2014; *Ezüstkéz* [*Silverhand*], 2019) and Ágnes Gaura's single novel, *Túlontúl* [*Beyondest*] (2017).[3] Kleinheincz and Gaura offer an individual take on the metal woods of Hungarian folktales. The three woods (made of copper, silver and gold, respectively) are traditionally represented as the otherworldly dominions of anthropomorphic dragons and serve as mere backgrounds. The *Ólomerdő* trilogy and *Túlontúl* populate the metal woods with sinister, human-sized fairies magically connected to their wooden realm. The paper argues that these folk fantasy novels bring plants to the foreground and turn them into literal ties that link human and nonhuman communities through space and time. To this end, the analysis tracks down the roots of plant imagery in Hungarian folklore, then moves on to discuss the various representations of vegetal otherness in the primary texts, and finally, it reveals how otherness turns into oneness through trans-corporeality.

From Folklore to Fantasy

Historically speaking, there were two decisive periods that shaped present day Hungarian folk fantasy. First, as in most European countries, the cultural and political changes of the nineteenth century brought an increased interest in national folklore. In Hungary, this involved major attempts at recreating a mythic past. Hungarian folklore, however, is such an intricate mixture of Germanic, Slavic, and Turkish elements tied together by a Finno-Ugric language, that up to this day, scholars have failed to reconstruct the 'original' pantheon of mythic creatures. Nevertheless, even severely criticised nineteenth century works such as Arnold Ipolyi's *Magyar Mythologia* [*Hungarian Mythology*] (1854) remain an important source for fantasy authors. For them, the lack of information is an invitation to fill the gaps and creatively explain what folklorists left unexplained. Csilla Kleinheincz, author of the *Ólomerdő* trilogy, also admits in an interview that Ipolyi's work proved to be a "great help" in creating her story world (Ekultura.hu).

The other important period in the shaping of contemporary Hungarian folk fantasy was the socialist era from 1949 to 1989. On the one hand, the regime encouraged the documentation of

working class life. Despite the aggressive industrialization, a large percentage of the population was employed in agricultural cooperatives—and this situation helped folklorists get away with collecting the old folk traditions and beliefs of the countryside. Among the most prominent names are Tekla Dömötör, Vilmos Voigt, Vilmos Diószegi, and Géza Róheim, whose descriptions of the Hungarian supernatural sphere have inspired many fantasy authors. On the other hand, however, an exclusive focus on the realistic (and socialist) representation of the world banished all manifestations of the fantastic from canonised literature of the time. The supernatural dimensions of folklore were not tolerated beyond the scope of children's literature. These two factors lead to the dismissal of folk fantasy as children's literature, even among critics who claim to have studied speculative fiction.

Documented literary history of the metal woods dates back to the nineteenth century. László Arany's 1862 folktale collection, *Eredeti népmesék* [*Original Folktales*], already includes the best known folktale that presents the copper, silver, and golden woods: "Fehérlófia" [The Son of the White Mare]. The tale focuses on a human boy born of a white mare who goes on a quest to the underworld. Within the Aarne-Thompson-Uther typology, "Fehérlófia" is generally qualified as type 301B ("The Strong Man and his Companions"), and it exists in multiple varieties. Yet, each version includes the concept of vertically layered worlds, and the hero descends to the underworld realm of the three dragons to rescue three stolen princesses. The copper, silver, and golden woods are properties of these dragons who also own castles (and in some versions even pastures or meadows) made of the same metals. In addition to their value as precious metals, the choice of copper, silver, and gold might be justified by their association with the celestial bodies: copper refers to the Venus, silver denotes the moon, and gold is linked to the sun, suggesting that in their more ancient forms, the anthropomorphic dragons of "Fehérlófia" might have been gods of the upper world (Berze Nagy 91).

Even though both Kleinheincz and Gaura rely on this tale in their fantasy novels, their depiction of the metal woods goes beyond picturing them as property or background. In the *Ólomerdő* trilogy, Kleinheincz raises the number of metal woods to seven (steel, silver, copper, iron, lead, gold, diamond) and they form a borderland between the horizontally positioned realms of humans and fairies. The human world is a realistic version of modern day Hungary, whereas fairyland features the pre-industrial setting of traditional folktales. The liminal space of Héterdő [Sevenwoods] is ruled by human-shaped dragons that are banished from both worlds.[4]

In her descriptions, Kleinheincz provides a vivid, sensory experience of the metal woods: trees emit a metallic odour, trunks are covered in rust, and you have to be careful not to cut yourself with the sharp metal leaves. The woods are corporeally linked to their owners through magic, and trees can serve as an extension of their lord's or lady's will. As opposed to Kleinheincz's increasing the number of metal woods, Gaura places a single wood within Túlontúl's fairy realm. This wood, however, is so closely related to its inhabitants that it changes its hue according to their mood: it turns copper when great sadness occurs, silver when fairies fall in love, and gold when the realm flourishes. There are no dragon rulers present, and the narrative focuses on the fairy

realm's historical parallels to Hungary (the land was broken into separate pieces similarly to what happened to Hungary following the Treaty of Trianon in 1920), whilst its spatial positioning in relation to the human world is undefined.

Despite these attempts at highlighting the vegetal, both Kleinheincz and Gaura create a mostly anthropomorphic, yet not quite anthropocentric secondary world. This seems to be in accordance with folklorist Tekla Dömötör's observation that the supernatural sphere of Hungarian folklore is dominated by anthropomorphic creatures (74). In addition to this, there is a limited number of magical forest dwellers described in folklore, and all of them are roughly human-shaped figures, such as the lichen-bearded tree man of Transylvanian folk belief that Géza Róheim describes (106). Following in these lines, Kleinheincz and Gaura do not include trees as central characters in their own right, yet within the hybrid bodies of the metal woods' inhabitants the vegetal becomes a significant component.

Facing Human-Vegetal Hybridity

With their parallel human and fairy realms that are linked through portals, Kleinheincz and Gaura follow classic fantasy tradition. Both the *Ólomerdő* trilogy and *Túlontúl* present a young, female protagonist (the teenage Emese[5] in the former, and early twenties Liliom [Lily] in the latter) who are expected to save the declining world of fairy. John Clute's definition of "thinning" might be adapted word for word to these places: "the secondary world is almost constantly under some threat of lessening, a threat frequently accompanied by mourning . . . and/or a sense of wrongness" (942). Interestingly though, thinning in Hungarian fantasy is in many cases equally applicable to the primary world, as the Hungarian perception of the historical past is loaded with a persistent feeling of loss.

Ólomerdő and *Túlontúl*, however, complicate the relation of their two worlds even further. From the protagonists' point of view, both stories can be defined as intrusive fantasies in which the metal woods are the intruding force. In her taxonomic system for fantasy, Farah Mendlesohn describes intrusion fantasy as a narrative in which "the world is ruptured by the intrusion, which disrupts normality and has to be negotiated with or defeated, sent back whence it came, or controlled" (115). This mirrors *Ólomerdő*'s protagonist, Emese's, experience when she first sees the metal woods intruding into her everyday reality: "A törzsek között tisztán látszottak a HÉV sínei mögött álló emeletes házak lapos tetői, a lámpasorok füzérei. A megszokott éjszakai világ előtt azonban ott derengett az erdő" [Beyond the tree trunks the tracks of the suburban railway, the flat-roofed blocks and the lines of streetlights remained clearly visible. And yet, the wood was looming in front of the ordinary night view.] (46). In *Túlontúl*, the trespasser is a so-called "travelling-book," a volume that is composed of leaves and smells like flowers. It was created by two pixie-like creatures with the intention to reunite the separated parts of the fairy realm.

The vegetal, being an intruding force into normality in these narratives, manifests human fears of the plant kingdom that the protagonists are required to face through a trajectory of learning and acceptance. "Plants lurk in our blindspot," claims Dawn Keetley in her second thesis

of plant horror (10), and what Kleinheincz and Gaura do in their novels is mobilizing plants and moving them first into peripheral, then full view. The see-through image of the metal wood that Emese glimpses over the night street appears to be dreamlike and harmless, yet a leaf cuts her finger when she ventures to touch it (47). Later on, we learn that these trees, though rooted, pose a major threat to unwanted visitors by whipping them with their metal branches. Similarly, in *Túlontúl*, plants initially lurk on the margins of the human world: Liliom works at a company with all office interiors full of plants, she buys a book that smells like flowers and she meets an awkward, young artist who exhibits a painting of a lush, copper-coloured wood. As Liliom gathers more information about the fairy realm, the plant imagery multiplies until it becomes literally overwhelming once she crosses the portal. "Plants menace with their wild, purposeless growth," says Keetley's third thesis of plant horror (13), and in line with this, both narratives present a trajectory towards an ever greater proliferation of the vegetal. At various points of the plots this proliferation reaches the level of posing immediate threat to the protagonist: in the first volume of the *Ólomerdő* trilogy Emese is attacked by the leaden wood that is magically manipulated by her step-grandmother, whilst Liliom is almost squeezed to death by an oak tree that grows around her in the climactic scene of Túlontúl.

Despite plants repeatedly being pictured as an antagonistic force, protagonists of *Ólomerdő* and *Túlontúl* eventually come to terms with what Keetley's fourth thesis of plant horror encapsulates: "the human harbours the uncanny constitutive of the vegetal" (16). Kleinheincz and Gaura confront their readers with this corporeal hybridity on two levels. On the one hand, throughout the text, we are offered more and more details about this strange symbiosis of the metal woods and their inhabitants. For instance, here is what happens in *Ólomerdő*, when Emese's half-dragon step aunt, Firene inherits the metal woods that belonged to her mother: "rátekeredtek az erdők hatalomforrásaihoz vezető fonalak" [she was intertwined into the strands that lead to the power of the woods] (345). Later on, Firene's affection for her woods is made clear: "Halványan elmosolyodott, és megsimogatta erdeinek szívét. Nem volt teljesen egyedül" [She smiled faintly, and caressed the hearts of her woods. She was not completely alone.] (346). In *Túlontúl*, we learn that fairies are not immortal, yet when they die, their bodies do not decompose as an ordinary human body would, but immediately turn into a plant—as if the vegetal component was already hidden within, waiting for its time to come. On the other hand, both Emese and Liliom have to realize that the vegetal other they first perceived as an intruder into their everyday lives has been part of their being all along: both protagonists have fairy ancestors and in order to fulfil their quest they have to embrace their own inherent hybridity.

Learning Tree Wisdom

The dichotomy of self and other pervaded the 2010s social and political discourse of Hungary. Suppressed historical traumas, ongoing conflicts with religious and ethnic minorities, and the migration crisis all contributed to an increasing fear of the other—a phenomenon that has possibly contributed to the boom of Hungarian fantasy fiction in the same decade. Fantasy does not only offer alternatives to our world, but, as Rosemary Jackson highlights, it is able "to resist

separation and difference" and helps us "to re-discover a unity of self and other" (30). Folk fantasy gives multiple possibilities for such a re-discovery, yet most times it represents the other either in human or in animal form. Despite their anthropomorphism, Kleinheincz's and Gaura's novels are honourable exceptions that include clear traces of tree wisdom.

Secondly, both *Ólomerdő* and *Túlontúl* support the concept of rootedness. As plant philosopher Michael Marder observes, plants are linked to their immediate surroundings through an ontological dependency (106). Similarly, owners and inhabitants of the metal woods are existentially connected to their realm. For instance, in *Túlontúl*, as a consequence of an old curse, fairies are required to exchange some of their own children for human babies. These changelings remain unable to perfectly adjust to the human world and their life is burdened with a longing for their wooden realm. Similarly, *Ólomerdő* protagonist Emese realizes at the end of volume one, that even though she is able to move about in the human world after her return from the fairy realm, the uncanny image of the metal woods follows her wherever she goes (346). It is only among the trees of their respective wooden realms that these characters may feel interconnected with their natural environment.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the (half)human protagonists' recognition of the other within the self serves as a moment of trans-corporeality, a realization that "the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" and he "is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'" (Alaimo 2). The above-mentioned scene in *Túlontúl* when Liliom is nearly squeezed by the oak tree that rapidly grows around her body is particularly telling in this respect. The tree is clearly an antagonistic force and quite literally an intruder as it attempts to suck all moisture out of Liliom's body. A traditional male hero would definitely cut himself loose from the aggressive tree, but Gaura follows a different track in *Túlontúl*. In place of "The Son of the White Mare" and other folktale heroes that possess overtly masculine traits, Gaura consciously creates a heroine who is a great observer and values wit and perseverance over physical strength. Initially, these characteristics make her appear rather passive and indecisive even in vital situations, but by the time she reaches this climactic encounter with the oak tree, the very traits that made her slightly awkward in everyday events, enable Liliom to initiate connection with the tree and convince it to cooperate with her against the curse that keeps the fairy realm in its hold. With Liliom's guidance, the oak's growth rate accelerates further and its great roots seam together the formerly separated parts of the kingdom.

Conclusion

Csilla Kleinheincz's *Ólomerdő* trilogy and Ágnes Gaura's *Túlontúl* are prominent novels of the 2010s fantasy boom in Hungarian speculative fiction, and they are among the first narratives that creatively incorporate a large amount of folklore material. Both authors pay special attention to the representation of the nonhuman, but unlike other fantasy writers of the decade, they bring the vegetal other into focus by a reinterpretation of the ancient image of the three metal woods. Whilst in their main source text, the folktale "The Son of the White Mare," the woods remain in

the background, Kleinheincz and Gaura connect the woods' magical inhabitants with their realm on multiple levels. Emese and Liliom, the human protagonists of the novels, engage in a trajectory of learning that leads them from seeing the woods as an ominous intruding force, through a discovery and understanding of their otherness, to the recognition that they themselves are corporeally connected to the trees.

This arc of learning tree wisdom, however, is still a limited analysis of plant imagery in *Ólomerdő* and *Túlontúl*. Both narratives, but especially *Túlontúl* would enable a detailed inquiry into how the world tree concept of Hungarian myth is re-evoked, and in addition to the two protagonists, there are other characters in both stories whose relation to plants could raise interesting questions about human-nonhuman relationships. However, an analysis like this would highly benefit from an extensive history of Hungarian-language fantasy that identifies possible, pre- and post-Enlightenment taproot texts beyond folktales and regrettably, no such volume is available at the moment. Uncovering the roots of Hungarian fantasy fiction would be a great help to promising folk fantasy authors so that they may use mythic sources to their full potential. Nevertheless, Kleinheincz and Gaura have already made major steps in that direction by showing us that fantasy can offer a way to learn about and reconnect with the nonhuman others of the natural world.

Notes

1. Volumes of the series as of 2021 in successive order: *Vámpírok múzsája* [*Muse of the Vampires*] (2012); *Átkozott balszerencse* [*Cursed Misfortune*] (2013); *Lidércnyomás* [*Nightmare*] (2013), *Lángmarta örökség* [*Flame-Touched Inheritance*] (2014); *Attila koporsója* [*Attila's Coffin*] (2015).
2. *Sárkánycsalogató* [*Dragon-Baiter*] (2016); *Boszorkányszelídítő* [*Witch-Tamer*] (2016) and *Tündérfogó* [*Fairy-Catcher*] (2018).
3. As there is sadly no English translation of these texts, all primary source quotations in this paper were made by its author.
4. Dragons of Kleinheincz's secondary world are created, not born. When a dead person (either fairy or human) is revived with the magical herb of life and death, he returns to life as a dragon. Thus, the dragon is an undead creature that can appear both in human and bestial form, and he/she is destined to devour everybody he/she used to love in his/her previous life. As they bear the mark of death, dragons are banished from the fairy realm. Nevertheless, they are able to have children, if they manage to take a partner by force.

5. Emese is a Hungarian name of mythic origin. Emese was the ancestress of the Hungarian royal house of Árpád, the dynasty that founded the Kingdom of Hungary. Before she gave birth to high prince Álmos [Dreamer], she had a dream in which a *turul* (the sacral bird of Hungarian mythology) impregnated her. Kleinheincz, however, does not refer back to this myth in her trilogy, but instead she utilizes the pun component of the name: the 'mese' part of Emese is homophone with the Hungarian word for 'tale.'

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