



# Hungarian Book Review

# The Ballads

The medieval Hungarian monarchy had strong connections with the West, due to its geographical position and dynastic ties. Its historical development was special since the state of the peasantry — favourable in the Middle Ages — was conserved until the beginning of the modern era, due to the stagnation of the development in Eastern Europe. When dealing thoroughly with the almost unknown ballads, connections that created a web in the European and American ballads can be discovered. The many connections and ties between medieval Hungary and the Walloon regions made it possible for the Hungarians to become acquainted with many excellent ballads directly from the Walloon-Northern French sources. This led to the discovery of the development centre of the ballads in the Walloon and Northern French regions, where the peasantry was highly developed. This is how the period of the birth of the first ballads could be put at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The genre fully developed and became widespread in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The exact period of time when the ballads came into existence, thus determined, can be connected to the great changes in the life of the peasantry which took place between the mid-thirteenth century and the mid-fourteenth century. Every characteristic and important ballad of this type deals with the problems of this change. Everything which differs from these in topic, aspect and style and represents a different genre — mythical songs of heroes, stories, legends, late feudal epics, Renaissance "bella istoria" — appear only in a few people's popular poetry. Hundreds of such pieces came into the complete ballad publications of the West. The author separates them from the real ballads in the English, German and especially the Danish material, where complete publications were published based on the former views. And where such publications were not made, e.g. concerning the French ballads, which, however, are very important from the point of view of theoretical and historical orientation, the author has made a catalogue of the different types. He deals with the connections in the European ballad material by a comparative method, drawing conclusions by investigating the material of the Latin, Germanic and Slavic language territories. And in cases where the former romance, the *chanson de toile*, the *chanson de geste* and mainly the Eastern heroic epics turned into ballads, he then had to include other genres in the comparison from Western Europe to Central Asia.

The book also deals with theoretical problems. In the chapter "Place of the ballad in the literary and folklore genres" the author separates the different literary and folklore genres, in the first place the heroic epic, which was succeeded by the ballad in tradition. He discusses its connection with the romance and the *chanson de toile*. He makes a poetic and stylistic analysis of the genre of the ballad by comparing it to the whole of folk poetry, mainly lyrical poetry. He points out its inner relationship to this last in their community of aspect, interest focussed on man, style and "viewing things from above". The chapter "The method of comparison" discusses the results and problems of comparison and the changes which show adoption. Based on this and on the detailed ballad monographs of the second volume, he is able to summarize in the chapter "Chronological order of Hungarian ballad types" the questions of the origin of Hungarian ballads. There are ballads which contain Eastern elements from before the Conquest of Hungary, topics and motifs showing French origin, which have Western parallels but which cannot be deduced from them and probably have a common literary source, the rare German, Moravian and Rumanian adoptions as well as original Hungarian ballads. Added to this chapter there is a map and list of facts about the medieval French-Walloon settlements in Hungary. The chapter "Trend and centre of dissemination" deals with the process of development and spreading of the European ballad with a summary of French-Iberian, French-Italian, French-English, French-German, French-Danish (Scandinavian) and French-Hungarian (and through this last, Eastern European) adoptions. The chapter "When and why the ballad emerged" deals with the dates of appearance of the ballads or parts of the ballads, and other written information about them as well as important facts which emerged as the result of the comparison. The author explains the writing down of the ballads with the growing popularity of this folk genre in well-educated circles. The genre could not come into existence earlier than the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but perfectly composed pieces have been written already in the fourteenth century. Analysing the common and individual subjects of the nations, it is proved that the ballad is a reflection of the well-being of the peasantry in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and of its division into a wealthy leading group and poor labourers, and of the breaking up of the joint families.

Then follows the Danish ballad material, the main source opinions are greatly divided. The author shows in a detailed thematic and stylistic analysis, what belongs to other genres from this material. After a detailed explanation, he separates the mythical heroic epics, late feudal epics, romances, Renaissance "bella istoria", legends and



Illustrations to ballads by György Buday (1935)

fantastic epics from the real ballads in a Table. (According to the numbers of the large Danish ballad collection DgF.)

There is ample proof for the peasant origin of the ballad. From the style analysis of the medieval minstrels' songs and the testimony of the Serbian singers all the way to the evidence of the spreading process of the ballad and its spiritual identity with folk poetry, everything indicates that the ballad was created by medieval peasant communities. That is also where they were discovered in the nineteenth century. He proves the development of ballads in the process of variation by following the path of the creation of new ballads and by comparisons of old ballads, and at the same time summarizes the common parts "thememotif-wording" of the Hungarian classic ballads in a Table.

"The afterlife of the genre" deals with questions such as whether the ballads changed in the course of the centuries (became shorter or demythicized), or what new types came into existence in Hungarian folk poetry. The chapter "Ballad areas and ballad styles" indicates the regional differences within the Hungarian material; it then deals with Europe's main national ballad areas, characterizing them by the objective figures of themes and formal features (length, dialogue, use of common formulas, etc.), giving objective figures. The author then gives a list of the French ballad, types along with their bibliographical facts. At the end, the "Tune and dance" chapter shows the connection of the Hungarian folk-song types and the ballad. Through this, very often questions of origin especially of medieval origin are cleared up. In connection with dance, he indicates that it does not necessarily belong to the ballad-

as a genre. If the rhythm of the melody was good for dancing, they danced to it, along with other lyric songs. (A considerable part of Hungarian and French ballad melodies is not suitable for dancing.)

The volume is closed by a short survey of Hungarian ballad research and a bibliography. The other, larger volume deals with 134 Hungarian ballad types. Every type introduces 1-2, if necessary, 8-10 variations, if possible, with variations along with the melodies. The author lists all varieties of the types according to the place where they were discovered, and gives all written-down melodies as well as the main differences in the texts. After this comes the detailed listing of the European parallels, and the analysis of the ballads from a comparative, historical and ethnographical point of view, often in the form of a short monograph. The topics: medieval ballads, ballad-like old songs, seventeenth-nineteenth-century broadside ballads, highwaymen's ballads and new ballads. An Appendix explains why the author did not deal with imitation ballads. At the end of the book, a "Conflict, plots and themes" catalogue of the Hungarian ballads can be found.

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