

Az angol irodalom története. I: A középkor.
[The history of English literature. The
Middle Ages], edited by Tamás Karáth and
Katalin Halácsy, Kijárat, Budapest, 2020.

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In the age where Wikipedia, big data, and ever-improving AI seem to make knowledge accessible at the click of a button, one might question the relevance of a traditional, paper-based literary history. This very issue is addressed in the editorial introduction to the first volume of the new Hungarian *History of English Literature*, a seven-volume project originally conceived by the late Géza Kállay and now carried forward under the general editorship of Tamás Bényei. While Bényei attempts to answer this query in the preface, it is through the content of the first volume, dedicated to medieval English literature, co-edited by Tamás Karáth and Katalin Halácsy, that we find a more nuanced and persuasive justification for such an enterprise.

The decision that an entire volume is dedicated to medieval literature is in itself a significant one, and one that is highly commendable. With younger generations immersed in the worlds of Tolkien, fantasy series, and medieval-themed games, there is no denying the resurgence of interest in all things medieval. Whether this medieval turn and breakthrough in popular culture has resulted in a deeper and more accurate knowledge of the Middle Ages is debatable. This volume is a rich storehouse of well-researched and engagingly presented material on medieval life, way of thinking and culture, offering a wealth of insights that will captivate readers on nearly every page. In addition to more traditional chapters organized around prose and poetry, the volume features sections on devotion, mysticism, and a concluding chapter by Tamás Karáth entitled “A képzelet világai” [Worlds of imagination], which discusses travel of all kinds – imaginary and real, otherworldly and lyrical. The chapters of the volume open new avenues of inquiry, even for those already well-versed in medieval English literature.

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Recognizing the impossibility of writing a single-narrative literary history in the wake of the postmodern turn, the volume embraces parallel narratives and avoids simplistic conclusions, consistently engaging with the inherent complexity and open-endedness of the research it addresses. This approach results in a nuanced and adept analysis that encourages further inquiry and exploration. The introductory chapter, “Bevezetés a középkor irodalmába” [Introduction to the literature of the Middle Ages] written by Tamás Karáth, is particularly effective in this regard. It explores themes of change and continuity in the Middle Ages while introducing fundamental concepts of literary genres and authorial roles. Additionally, all further chapters of the volume highlight the coexistence of multiple literary traditions during the medieval period.

Studying medieval literature resembles a form of time travel or an encounter with a science fiction universe where one navigates a world that feels at once familiar and distant. Much like in science fiction novels, the reader is equipped with essential rules and guidelines to safely explore this rich and multifaceted universe. Therefore, it is essential to emphasize the significant contribution that the editorial chapters – “Bevezetés a középkor irodalmába” by Tamás Karáth, “Bevezetés az óangol irodalomba” [Introduction to Old English literature] by Andrea Nagy and Tibor Tarcsay, and “Bevezetés a középkor irodalomba” [Introduction to Middle English literature] – make to the volume. Not only are they insightful and engaging, but they also provide a strong foundational framework for those embarking on their journey into medieval studies. Furthermore, they showcase solid examples of textual scholarship that are often so painfully lacking in online sources. This textual thoroughness is evident in all chapters. Furthermore, all authors in the volume (Katalin Halácsy, Tamás Karáth, Andrea Nagy, Zsuzsanna Péri-Nagy, Zsuzsanna Simonkay, and Tibor Tarcsay) aim to dispel common misconceptions about medieval literature, such as the belief that medieval authors avoided recognition, or the notion that medieval English theatre emerged solely from the rituals of the Catholic Church.

The result of this scholarly endeavour is a volume that serves as an invaluable reference for academics, who will appreciate its thoroughness, for students, who will benefit from its precision and comprehensive scope, and for the general public, who will enjoy the rich cultural context unveiled through the analyses. Indeed, it is the attention to context that distinguishes this work: frequent cross-references to different chapters within the volume and other volumes in the series establish meaningful connections far beyond what can be found in a Wikipedia entry.

Translator of *Beowulf* and literary scholar, Andrea Nagy's chapter "Óangol költészet" [Old English poetry] provides a comprehensive and thorough overlook of basically all works of Old English poetry, doing justice to a diverse and rich poetic tradition that is, she aptly describes, "unparalleled in contemporary Europe" (92). The section on Old English literature draws master and disciple into a dialogue, since the chapter on Old English prose is written by Katalin Halácsy, one of the founding figures of the Hungarian PhD program in Medieval English Literature in the 1990s. Her chapter "Óangol próza" [Old English prose] showcases lesser known, yet exciting information as for example the Hungarian connections of the Venerable Bede.

Zsuzsanna Simonkay writes the chapter on the romances ("A románc" [The romance]), a topic that will undoubtedly appeal to all fantasy enthusiasts. In addition to outlining the key themes, genres, and works of medieval English romance, Simonkay addresses their later adaptations, including parodies and balladic transformations. Tamás Karáth's chapter on religious and mystical writing ("Vallásos tanítás, áhítat és misztika" [Religious instruction, devotion and mysticism]) vividly brings personal religious experience to life, while introducing lesser known, yet highly influential texts to the reader. The joint chapter on Geoffrey Chaucer by Zsuzsanna Péri-Nagy and Katalin Halácsy is indispensable for all students of English, offering comprehensive highlights into Chaucer's works. Similarly, Karáth's chapter "Középkori angol dráma és színház" [Medieval English drama and theatre] is highly recommended for scholars of theatre history, too, as it dispels commonly held misconceptions and provides a state-of-the-art discussion of the subject. After Karáth's final chapter on the worlds of imagination, mentioned before, the volume is rounded off with an extensive bibliography and a useful index.

Launching the volume on medieval English literature as the inaugural instalment of the new Hungarian history of English literature was undoubtedly a sound decision, as its thorough, in-depth, and comprehensive research alone validates the project. The engaging prose and reader-friendly format ensure that this volume will serve as a reliable and enduring source of information and reference for generations of readers and scholars alike.