

The main points of the doctoral thesis

***METASTASIO'S THEATRICAL PLAYS IN HUNGARY***  
***(THE EFFECT OF THE MELODRAMA RELATED TO METASTASIO***  
***ON THE HUNGARIAN DRAMA AND THEATRE OF THE 18-19TH***  
***CENTURY)***

*by*

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## I. SELECTING THE THEME FOR THE DISSERTATION

These theses are parts of the project led by Dr habil. Imre Madarász, the head of the Centre of Italian Enlightenment and Romanticism of the Faculty of Italian of Debrecen University. The researchers working for the Centre – Imre Madarász, István Bitskey, László Nyerges, István Puskás – focus on the reception of the Italian literature and the Italian-Hungarian cultural links as well, giving a special priority to the literal aspect.

The objective of our thesis is to present a particular period of drama and history of dramatics ranging from the second third of the 18th century to the first half of 19th century. The most outstanding figures of the 18th century Italian theatre were Carlo Goldoni, Vittorio Alfieri and Pietro Metastasio. The lifeworks of Goldoni and Alfieri are no longer an uncovered area for Hungarian men of letters, thanks to László Nyerges, (Goldoni's works) and Imre Madarász (Alfieri's works); however, this is not the case with Pietro Metastasio, whose life and plays have not yet been dealt with in the form of a monograph, unlike the aforementioned playwrights.

The lack of this monograph becomes more obvious if we regard the wealth of the data obtained in the course of different research in relation with the significant influence of Metastasio's works on the vanguard of Hungarian literature. It was József Szauder (1977), who drew attention to the lasting influence of the *poeta cesareo* in contemporary Hungarian literature, and it was also him who urged in-depth research on Metastasio's poetry. Since then, a number of studies, primarily focusing on a particular detail or the lyrical presence of Metastasio, have been published. Yet, the effects Metastasio's works exercised on contemporary Hungarian theatrical life have not been treated, and accordingly, we are left with an insufficient mosaic picture of the significance of Metastasio's works.

The thesis, in harmony with the doctoral program in Comparative Literary Studies, aims to highlight the presence of Metastasio's plays in the then Hungarian theatrical life, although the study presenting the aforementioned influence precedes the Hungarian-speaking monograph presenting Metastasio's lifework.

Instead of analyzing Metastasio's lyrical and theoretical works, the thesis will concentrate on the genres of drama from the point of Metastasio's life-work that is to say: the three-act *melodramas*, the one-act *azione teatrali* and *oratorios* related to a religious subject.

In terms of the temporal dimensions, our thesis will present the period between 1741, the year of the first debuts of Metastasio's works in Hungary, and 1856, when his last complete work was translated into Hungarian.

## II. THE METHODS APPLIED IN THE THESIS

Our thesis is divided into two parts. First (Chapter 2), we will make an attempt to describe melodrama as a genre with a view to its characteristics, and then we will analyze its development in Metastasio's work as a kind of compensation for the lack of the monograph on Metastasio. Secondly (Chapter 3-6) we will consider the impact of Metastasio's works on the different forms of the then contemporary (18th century) Hungarian theatre. We think that the presentation of the three different forms – school drama, castle theatre and bourgeois or civic theatre – in three different chapters makes it easier to describe the various interpretations of Metastasio's works. We will point out – whenever it is relevant – the interrelatedness of the different forms of the interpretations as well the differences between them. The order of the forms reflects the chronology of their appearance.

In the 18th century, there was, for some time, a co-existence of the legacy of the 17th century school drama and the castle theatre with a developed theatrical infrastructure, but the appearance of the bourgeois theatre caused them to give way to the new and popular form.

Within the relevant chapters we will follow the principle of chronology. This makes it possible for us to be authentic in presenting the changes not only in terms of the literary taste and approaches but also in the interpretations in relation with Metastasio's works. We will attempt to avoid the overlaps originating from the application of this method.

Because of the features of Metastasio-type melodrama, we have to apply a *complex attitude*. Metastasio's librettos, basically analyzed by history of literature were special since Metastasio had to follow the rules and conventions of the contemporary musical theatre. This is why we have to take into consideration aspects of both music and the history of theatre in our analysis. In the presentation of the adoption of Metastasio's works on Hungarian stages, we have tried to apply a holistic approach which takes into account the characteristics of literature, theatre and music, even if the complexity of the then melodrama was never seen in full. We will give an analysis to the original texts, adaptations, the handwritten and printed versions of Metastasio's translations, as well as the plays based on them.

The approach we will apply has marked the range of *sources*. Our starting point is to examine the main bodies of texts from the point of history of literature, covering Italian-speaking publications, the Latin and Hungarian-speaking adaptations and translations and, in addition, other types of indirect sources such as letters and diaries. Apart from these sources we have made use of contemporary playbills, school registers, prompt-copies, performance-related scripts, stage-designs, and last but not least scores. A good number of texts and scripts used in the course of our analysis can be found in manuscripts.

Because of the comparative nature of the thesis, we have endeavored to reveal all the relevant data obtainable in the Italian and Hungarian speaking sources. As including other references (English, German and French) would have resulted in there being more pages than allowed, we have not been able to deal with them.

We have attached two inserts consisting of Hungarian Metastasio-translations and the Hungarian adaptations of Metastasio's works. The translations indicate the success Metastasio's works achieved among the literary translators, the second one illustrates the reception of Metastasio's melodramas on Hungarian stages.

### **III. THE MOST IMPORTANT CONCLUSIONS AND FINDINGS OF THE THESIS**

1. Metastasio's lifework is considered to be unique in the 18th century's court theatre which later saw decline. He is one of the last imperial poets, whose art marks the end of a literary tradition with such poets as Petrarch and Tasso, who based their poetry on the principle of imitation.

Working up Metastasio's lifework cannot be done without defining the genre *melodrama*, which was created by Metastasio. This genre – considered to be irregular by harsh classicist critics – was built on script and music, and it met with an unprecedented success in the 18th century. What really was inventive about Metastasio's genre-reform is that he combined the elements of tragedy with the traditions of opera, which, anyway, went through a crisis at that time. His creative powers did not lack the influence of the Baroque, the playful elements of rococo style of poetry (favored in saloons), and his craft also drew on the „Cartesian” rationalism when it came to describing the delicacy of sentiments. In terms of his tragedy interpretations he employed much of the Classicism, at the same time he could render a kind of idyllic sensitivity as well. In the light of these it becomes obvious why his lifework associated with Neo-Classicism or the so-called "Arcadic" Classicism is considered to be the most significant chapter in the period called *Settecento minore* in the Italian literature, in spite of the fact that many of his works were produced for the imperial theatre in Vienna.

2. This aforementioned geographical vicinity, the Italian-culture loving Vienna paved the way for the Metastasio's works to become known not only among the elite of Hungarian intelligentsia educated in Italia but also among the less fortunate Hungarian intellectuals. Although there were only few – both secular and non-secular – who studied in Italia like Ferenc Faludi, Ádám Patatich, Gánóczy, Imre Kreskay, János Hannulik, yet their role in making Metastasio's works known for the public was invaluable by being the first literary translators of Metastasio's melodramas.

The other key factor contributing to the success of the Metastasio's librettos was the influence of the Italian culture – by the mediation of Vienna – reached more people, including the aristocrats often appearing in the royal court, the civil servants belonging to the class of the landed gentry, and the Queen's bodyguards who were writers at that.

3. Domestic Metastasio reception can be outlined through two approaches. Metastasio's dramatic works were always adapted with performance in mind, therefore the approach to the texts were primarily influenced by the objectives of the performance, the audience and its expectations as well as the technical possibilities. The first reception method was established by the *domestic court culture and its medium*, where the art of Metastasio, remaining in its original environment, preserved its original court function and characteristics: the works made it to the stage following minor changes in a musical performance and Italian language. The Hungarian premieres (1741, Bratislava) were the import items of the emperor's court, then the nascent theatrical infrastructure established the conditions of domestic acceptance. Metastasio arias were first performed in concert halls, the complete works arrived with the performances of traveling Italian opera companies, then bishop Ádám Patatich defined the style in his Latin arcadic opera between 1765 and 1769, which finally became a part of the repertoire in the most important domestic castle theatre, in Eszterháza from the 1770's.

4. The other reception approach to the art of Metastasio was shaped by the environment outside the court and different cultural mediums: first it was school theatricals, then the civic theatre which was based on multiple elements of the former and carried on its methods. The new reception mediums modified the melodramatic genre at two basic points: first they treated it as basic prosaic dramatic text then instead of performing in Italian; they were first performed in Latin then in *Hungarian*.

The transformation between musical and prosaic dramaturgy was made possible by strengthened recitatives of Metastasio and dialogues based on real communication. Prosaic deduction also occurred in antique Greek tragedy and its modern performances, and this tradition in tragedy also made Metastasio's genre suitable for changes especially affecting its essential elements. The elements of antique tragedy, based on the principle imitation, in the melodramas of Metastasio (attractions and obligations of heroes and emperors, moral teachings, patriotism, loyalty of dependants etc.) were lifted onto the musical stage that largely builds on emotions. The period interpreted his works based on such content characteristics as tragedy, although the pathetic language in his melodramas was refined with the conversational style of parlour poetry and the tragedy content solely became a background for the emotional description of the private sphere and all this was aimed at triggering emotional identification in the receivers through the musicality and sentimentalism of rococo poetry. The acceptance of domestic, non-court theatrical mediums was determined by the simplified tragic content and the didactic possibilities inherent in the worldly moral themes of the works. The poetical layer, the arcadic-rococo lyre completely gets lost in the school dramatic reception and was even eliminated by the civic theatre which primarily concentrates on dramatic elements.

5. The first domestic, accepting medium of Metastasio's art was *school theatricals*, primarily the schools of Jesuits, Cistercian, Piarists and Paulites. The significant presence of

Metastasio-adaptations (Zambra, 1919), the characteristics of adaptations concentrating on the priorities of the content (Szauder, 1977) were already included in previous research. It can be established that feudal aristocratic values, unconditional loyalty towards the sacral emperor and the Latin, prosaic school dramatic adaptation of tragedy-like dramas depicted in heroic stories that draw from antique mythology or history only concentrated on the didactic teachings inherent in the themes and did not perceive the rococo, arcadic *poesis*.

Our examination revealed a new aspect. We know the domestic adaptation of almost all Metastasio melodramas from the 1750's that were produced up to that point and even the ones based on the love of heroines (*Didone abbandonata*, *Olimpiade*, *Demofonte*, *Issipile*, *Zenobia*) were transferred to the school-dramatic corpus, though they were adaptable for school stage. The need for "translating all" prevailed rather than moral or didactic selection in the 1750's, when a veritable Metastasio-cult came into existence. One-third of the Jesuit Bartakovics-codex, copied after 1753, can be traced back to a Metastasio work. In the background of the success of these worldly, virtuous pieces the inner renewal of the Jesuit school drama laicization can be identified, that points to modernization and the Metastasio oeuvre was an ideal material for this purpose. The two heroic melodramas, the *Attilio Regolo* and the *La clemenza di Tito*, particularly received attention, and these became the first Hungarian adaptations.

6. One of the most important projections of laicization was the birth of adaptations into Hungarian. The development of the *Hungarian literary language*, the poetical and translation principles, changes in the cognition of target language and source language can be traced through Metastasio-adaptations in the period between 1750 and 1856. The first Hungarian versions were based on the Latin texts that left out or transformed the love thread and the female performers (Mózes Lestyán: *Attilius Regulus*, the anonymus of Gyulaféhérvár: *The mercy of Titus*) and accurately followed the order of scenes; however, the dialogues were reproduced with unlimited freedom, in difficult baroque-like, Hungarian prose, resembling the period prior to neology. Slow changes could be detected in the approach, translation concept and the quality of implementation of the fewer school-dramatic Metastasio translations between 1760 and 1770. These include: the exclusivity of native language, the discipline in linguistic copiousness (János Illei *The mercy of Titus*), the early reception of the original poetry, supplementing or leaving the arias untouched (unknown: *The hero of Sinai*), the independent dramaturgy solutions (Bernát Benyák: *Joás, king of Judae*), all typical of the development route.

The continuity of the transition between school dramatic and the new, literary thinking in the 1770's is highlighted by the Metastasio-translations of Imre Kreskay. Metastasio's oeuvre has been offering patriotic and moral pieces thematically for over half a century, when primarily due to Kreskay, new reserves of the Italian Sophocles became accessible: Kreskay's translation work, that roots in the soil of school dramatic tradition and leading to poetry, was the first to highlight the playful musicality and rococo forms of Metastasio's works and made these pieces appear as the formal school of arcadic poetry.

7. *Civic or bourgeois drama* preserved many elements of school dramatic Metastasio reception. Tragedy translators independent from the theatre, who started off as a literary movement, partly continued the selection from Metastasio's oeuvre based on the priorities of heroic thematic, on the other hand with the sweeping sentimentalism and enlightenment selected new works and gave new meanings to old ones. Three approaches can be outlined in the 1970's. The not so accurate but definitely correct translation, which pays special attention to the poetic solutions of the text (Baroness Karolina Rudnyánszky: *The' puszta island*, Ignác Egerváry: *Artaxerxes*, Pál Berzeviczy: *Alcides at the cross-roads*). The other two methods concentrated on specific fundamentals of the two pillar genre: one strictly sought the lyrical strength of the text, the harmony of arcadic *musica* and *form* (Csokonai: *Didone abbandonata*,

*Achille in Sciro, Galatea, Angelica, Il re pastore, Endimione*), while the other looked for the dramatic structure that carried the intellectual content in melodramas. (Kazinczy: *Mercyful Títusz, Themistocles*). The end of the century accepted new layers from the entirety of Metastasio's art in addition to the discoveries of the mid-century: music and poetic diversity, which served the enrichment of Hungarian literary vocabulary and style. While the school dramatic medium adopted contemporary and modern literature with the discovery of Metastasio, due to these poetic reserves the waning and obsolete genre of Metastasio still had its place in our literature beside French modernism as the school of form and content from the 1790's. The series of Metastasio translations from the 1790's had a new literary approach and lasted from Imre Kreskay until the late undertakings by Károly Döme. Metastasio's art could fulfill new ideological (rationalism, early nationalist tendencies) and new poetic needs (rococo, sentimental and classical style elements) during the period of Hungarian enlightenment, as a result of late and congested domestic development.

8. The conflict of literateurs within the translation movement regarding their approach to theatre and theoretical concepts soon became apparent and led to the failure of the Kazinczy's *tragedy program*. The tendencies of this process at the end of the 18th century in Hungary resemble the processes in Italy in the early 18th century. The tragedy program of Gian Vincenzo Gravina was similar in principle, theory and classicist aesthetics to that of Bessenyei or Kazinczy. They all saw theatre as a great possibility to educate the nation and develop aesthetics, but disregarded the needs of the audience, level of intellect and desire for entertainment, which in theory led to the practical „deformation” of the tragic genre. The failure of the Gravina tragedy program became the Metastasio-type melodrama, just as the failure of the Hungarian tragedy program became the Hungarian tragedy.

9. *The multilayered Metastasio's melodrama affected all four, basic types of play:* tragic play, drama of sentimentality, musical play and valiant play, all of which were born in the first two program layers of the Hungarian history of theatre. The heroic thematic, the opposition of obligation and morals, as well as the tragic elements enabled the transformation into tragic play; the idyllic sensitivity and depiction of emotions into a drama of sentimentality; the musical dramaturgy based on the priorities of the text into a musical play; the heroic oath and conflict of desires along with sacrifices for the mother country, heroism of the main character, the biblical or arcadic world into a valiant play. Of course, the effect of melodrama was not the sole shaping force behind these types of play but rather just one element of many influences deriving from various locations at different times and still had a decisive role in the dramatic development that paved the way for independent, Hungarian drama writing. Although the enlightenment and the romantic approach that moved towards originality and rejected the principle of imitation has surpassed the dramatic content of Metastasio works, a number of elements in language, style and structural solutions still lived on in the works of the following period.

#### IV. PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE THEME OF THE THESIS

##### Studies:

*Melodrama in the 18 th. century's Italian literature*, in *Italianistica Debreceniensis* VI, Debrecen, 1999, 77-93.

*The intuitive masterpiece, Pietro Metastasio: Didone abbandonata*, in *Italianistica Debreceniensis* VII, Debrecen, 2000, 151-175.

*The poet of the Royal Court. Metastasio in Charles the sixth's court*, in *Italianistica Debreceniensis* VIII, Debrecen, 2001, 162-194.

*Musicality and drama in Metastasio's melodramas (the written version of lecture delivered at the Alfieri conference, 2003)*, in *Italianistica Debreceniensis* XI, Debrecen, 2004, 156-170.

##### Other Italian drama and theatre-related articles:

*A comedy by Giordano Bruno translated by László Németh*, in *Italianistica Debreceniensis* I, Debrecen, 1994, 184-185.

*„An extremely elegant, noble and entertaining comedy”* (Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena: *Calandria*), in *Italianistica Debreceniensis* IV, Debrecen, 1997, 57-78.