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Exploring the Biography and Works of József Kováts

Theses

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Thesis subject

About the Transdanubian-born József Kováts’s life (1780-1809), poetry and the role he played in early 19th century literary life not many authors wrote or not much was written in the past two centuries, although, after his death his poetry was very popular for several decades with the students of reformed church-run boarding schools. His poems have been preserved in more than a hundred hand-written collections within and beyond our borders.

Although there was strong interest in Kováts as a person and in his poetry for a long time in the past, no monograph has been written about him until today. Mostly he appears as a casual figure in literary studies and literary historians usually consider him a Csokonai epigone or a representative of form-and-rhyme-oriented poetry. Until the present, his works have not been assessed, nor have all his poems been published. The collection of poems published in 1817 and 1835 did not contain all his poems and the majority of his works exists only in manuscript form.

The studies and encyclopaedia entries published on Kováts in the past two centuries can mainly be characterized by repetitions and variations. The authors, often relying on each other’s studies, used the same clichéd phrases, therefore, these pieces of work contained plenty of inaccuracies and mistakes regarding both the biography and the works of the poet. The anecdotes and inaccurate biographical details are repeated in the different studies so often that after a while no-one questioned their authenticity. Tradition often attributes poems to Kováts which were written by other poets so in many cases the opinion formed about his poetry or his poetic talent is based on inaccurate information.

Due to the above-mentioned problematic issues, the main purpose of this study is to explore József Kováts’s life by applying a monographic approach as well as to assess his works.
Research methods

It would be impossible to ‘reassess’ József Kováts’s life and works if we relied on printed sources only. If this study applied this method, it would only reinforce the centuries-long legends about the poet and his poetry. So in Kováts’s case, relying only on secondary sources to collect information would lead us no further and would probably prove to be a futile effort.

Monographic approach requires that we examine Kováts’s life from a new viewpoint. Contrary to earlier studies, the purpose now is not to highlight only certain life events in the poet’s life but to provide readers with a more comprehensive and complex Kováts picture.

Regarding methodology, when writing about Kovats’s life, it is the microhistorical approach that has proved to be most suitable since microhistory most often emphasizes the importance of the person himself. This method also proves to be useful when we attempt to reconstruct the life events and works of a forgotten and marginalized poet like Kováts, thus making it possible that he can step out of the shadow of his anecdotal existence and re-emerge as a different person for contemporary literary historians.

In this study, where possible, the change-of-scale method has also been applied so micro-level statements about Kováts have been compared with macro-level information. For instance, when writing about Kováts’s school years, a parallel is drawn with contemporary boarding school life and the same method is applied when his work as a teacher or assistant pastor is paralleled with the career prospects of reformed church-run boarding school graduates. The same principle is applied when his criminal trial and imprisonment are dealt with.

During my work, the biographies applying the microhistorical method on Kálmán Lisznyai and Mihály Csokonai Vitéz written by Márton Szilágyi have proved very helpful. The existence of these two excellent books shows clearly that the microhistorical method can be applied not only when dealing with a historical subject but also when writing a literary figure’s biography.

During my research and my work it was a great dilemma and question for me whether this study can be written on the basis of such few sources. Even if József Kováts had some diaries, notes or memoirs, these have not been passed on to posterity or have not been found yet. Nor does exist any comprehensive, lengthy and detailed document that could serve as a research basis.
What has remained is only three letters written by Kováts, some autograph copies of his poems, and an autograph poetry book. Even the latter one contains only poems as no other notes written by the poet can be found in it. A relatively informative material from the last years of his life is the trial document, in which he is mentioned as the accused. From research point of view, it is very fortunate that he was involved in at least one law suit – even if he himself would think otherwise – because in this way plenty of material is available at least about a certain period of his life.

Due to the fact that the greatest difficulty was the lack of egodocuments, in addition to the very few direct sources, several indirect sources also needed to be involved in the research. Undoubtedly, the microhistorical approach can be applied more successfully in the case of poets and writers who left a large number of autograph documents to posterity. In Kovats’s case, however, research work was very special as it had to be started at the very beginning by searching for and finding new sources. I hope that this study will demonstrate convincingly that only a very thorough in-depth research in archives and manuscripts archives can add new details to the Kovats image we are familiar with. I also hope that the modest details this study reveals will contribute to forming a clearer picture about Kováts and can offer answers to questions raised by literary historians.

Chapters of the Thesis

The introductory chapter (Introduction) deals with the problems and issues related to the Kováts research, the purpose of this study, and the microhistorical method applied. It also attempts to explain why the poet’s biography and works have been dealt with separately.

Chapter 1 (Paths and Labyrinths) informs about manuscript and printed sources, further sub-divided into direct and non-direct categories, used during the research. The word paths in the chapter title refers to easy-to-use and reliable sources, while the word labyrinths refers to traps hidden in certain other sources. The three short sub-chapters in the second part of Chapter 1 aims to highlight the misunderstandings caused by ill-chosen sources as well as attempts to clear up three misconceptions about Kováts.

Chapter 2 (Biography) deals with Kováts’s life events from his birth to his death. During research several sources have emerged that provided further information on the poet’s social status, his student years in Pápa, his teaching jobs, his work as an assistant pastor, the reasons he was sentenced to imprisonment and the circumstances of his death.
Applying these sources also made it possible to confirm accurate life events or correct inaccuracies regarding his biography and works. This chapter also explores the poet’s social relations, sharing more details about his relationship with István Horváth, István Sárközy, and Ádám Pálóczi Horváth.

Chapter 3 (Works) attempts to assess the magnitude of Kováts’s works and to find out how well-known certain poems of his might have been in the early 19th century. The aesthetic evaluation of the poems is not in the scope of this study as it can be done in a more appropriate, more exact, and more effective manner once a future critical edition of all Kováts’s poetry is published.

Besides Kováts’ autograph poetry book, the poetry books published by Dávid Ferdős in 1817 and 1835 have also been analysed here. This chapter also highlights some other earlier attempts aiming to examine and assess Kováts’s works.

Although Kováts’s poems were published in print editions in the early 19th century, their popularity can mostly be attributed to their circulation in handwritten poetry collections. The existence of a large number of manuscript copies clearly shows that contemporary readers read the poems mainly in this form. For influence research purposes it has been more practical to rely on these sources. By looking into the poetry collections compiled by the Pápa, Sárospatak and Debrecen boarding-school students, I was able to get some information on which poems of Kováts were the most popular in those days or how these poems became part of public poetry. After examining more than a hundred manuscript collections, I have compiled a list of the poet’s most popular poems. Although these poems were written by one poet, due to their popularity, they also underwent certain changes. In fact, their folklorisation was a natural process from the moment they appeared in manuscript collections. This chapter also deals with the changes that Kováts’s poems underwent during time, and it closes with some thoughts on possible effects and after-effects, briefly mentioning literary figures like Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, Pál Szemere, and Mór Jókai.

Chapter 4 (Synopsis) summarizes the most important results of this study and the future tasks related to the research on József Kováts.

This chapter is followed by the final part (Supplements), which includes several lists (for instance, the list of the poet’s autograph documents, studies and encyclopaedia entries written about him, handwritten poetry collections that include his poems, etc.) as well as the poems that are dealt with in this study, and an illustration of an autograph poem.
Outlook

The aim of my work was not to contradict all that has been written about Kováts earlier but to confirm and support by reliable sources the accurate details related to his biography and works and to highlight certain inaccuracies. In order to do this, it was inevitable to deconstruct the centuries-long Kováts picture into small pieces and to reconstruct it step by step.

In this study, as available sources made it possible, some life events and some poems have received more attention, while others have not been highlighted as no new information related to them has been found. Unfortunately, these inconsistencies are characteristic of the poet’s biography and life, too. In spite of this, however, I am convinced that with the help of new data found during my research in the archives, plenty of valuable information on József Kováts have been revealed.

It would have been even more fortunate to find further details on the poet’s everyday activities, personality, interests, education, life plans, way of thinking, etc., however, the scarcity of available sources did not allow that.

The research, however, has not been completed. One of the purposes of this study is to provide help with a future critical edition of Kováts’s poetry. A thorough and in-depth research of the poet’s biography and works is an indispensable condition to publishing his poems. In other words, work is far from being finished... it has just begun.

I hope that in this study not only have I managed to achieve my initial goal to reconstruct the biography and works of the poet but also to present the untypical, but at the same time very typical, life of a Transdanubian student/poet whose life events and occasional breach of social norms will also shed light on the life and norms of contemporary society.
Thesis-related publications


József JÓKAY, *Kováts József, hazánk jeles poétájának emlékezetére*, (transcribed from manuscript and published by Andrea OROSZ, notes written by Ádám SZEREDY), in Irodalomismeret, 2000/1, 24-27.

Andrea OROSZ, „*Nincsen máshol, csak Pápán...” Emlékezés Kováts Józsefre*, in Lapok Pápa Történetéből, 2000/5. (special edition)

Andrea OROSZ, „*Patrióta, mint a flóta, fütyör...” Kísérlet Kováts József kéziratainak és versmásolatainak összegyűjtésére*, in Irodalomismeret, 2002/1, 42-44.


Andrea OROSZ, „*Ordo Juris amnestiam in nullius favorem”*. Kováts József büntetőpere a vallási és politikai harcok árnyékában, in Irodalomtörténet, 2006/4, 629-637.