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Mihály Babits' Latin-Derived Translations in *Erato*

Doctoral Thesis (PhD)

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1. Background of the Research, Problem

Statement

Mihály Babits's *Erato*¹, one of his most well-known (and notorious) collection of translations, was among his most significant works due to its erotic and risqué themes and its diverse corpus spanning different languages and time periods. Babits likely received the commission to compile and translate this anthology in early 1919, and the contract included a confidentiality clause, so only his friends – primarily Lőrinc Szabó and Árpád Tóth, who also contributed to the translations – were aware of the preparations. Babits was slow to complete the volume due to other commitments, such as translating *Purgatorio*, compiling *A nyugtalanság völgye* and *Karácsonyi Madonna*, writing *Timár Virgil fia*, and planning *Halálfiái*. The translation of *Les Fleurs du Mal* also delayed the publication of *Erato*.

Since the preparation of *Erato* was conducted in secret and its distribution was limited to only 500 copies by subscription, it received absolutely no press coverage upon release. It was only years later, in the April 1, 1924 issue of *Nyugat*, that the work was mentioned in an advertisement recommending Babits's works. Additionally, József Révay, in his essay examining the Latin elements in Babits's poetry, dedicated a separate section to the Latin translations, thus referencing the related poems in *Erato*.

¹ BABITS Mihály, *Erato: Az erotikus világköltészet remekei*, Wien, Hellas, [1921].

From today's perspective, the lawsuit connected to *Erato*'s reception, which began in June 1925 and concluded with a postal regulation issued on July 23, 1927, is particularly amusing. The 248th paragraph of the 1878 V. law regulated offenses against decency, and *Erato* violated the law due to its risqué content. Therefore, when Babits's volume was confiscated in 1925, along with several other books of similar themes, it immediately became the focus of media attention. However, there was a provision in the law stating that if the publication was produced abroad, the author could not be held legally responsible. This explains why the publication of Hungarian erotica flourished abroad, especially in Vienna, allowing Hungarian authors, including Babits, to avoid prosecution.

The volume contains sixty-six poems by forty-three poets, but the authorship of the translations is problematic, since it is well-known that Lőrinc Szabó and Árpád Tóth also contributed to the preparation of *Erato*, however, no records exist detailing the division of work. Of these sixty-six translations, fifteen were published a second time, and five more were republished during Babits's lifetime, meaning that Babits published at least twenty of the *Erato* poems twice. Based on the research of Lóránt Kabdebó, it is known that another twenty-one translations are available in the Manuscripts Archive of the National Széchényi Library (OSZK) and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA) in Babits's handwriting or with his signature, confirming that he translated them as well. Based on the above, forty-one of the anthology's sixty-six poems are certainly Babits's translations, five are Lőrinc Szabó's, one poem's translation is mostly the work of Árpád

Tóth, but the authorship of nineteen additional poems is very difficult to determine due to a lack of physical evidence. Among the Latin-origin translations relevant to the topic of this paper, one poem each by Cornelius Gallus, Martial, and Petronius Arbiter (*Uxor legitimus...*) belongs to this latter group. Thus, the research examined the likelihood that Babits translated these poems.

Regarding the composition of the volume, it is striking that the Homeric *Hymn to Aphrodite* appears as the first poem, acting as a kind of motto and disrupting the chronological order of literary history in the collection by preceding the translation of the *Song of Songs*. The *Song of Songs* is followed by the Greek poems, arranged in an order governed by a logic that goes beyond mere chronology, and the same is true for the Latin cycle that follows the Greek: Catullus with three translations, followed by Cornelius Gallus, Ovid, Propertius, Martial, and finally Petronius, each also with three poems. The sequence of the Latin authors mostly adheres to chronological order, although Ovid is usually placed after Propertius, and Martial after Petronius.

After the ancient authors, the Middle Ages is represented by a single German author, Vogelweide, followed by Italian, English, French, and German authors, ranging from the Renaissance through Classicism, Romanticism, and Symbolism, all the way to Babits's contemporaries. Thus, the *Erato* anthology is characterized by linguistic, generic, and literary-historical diversity, with Babits's translations primarily linked by their common erotic, often risqué themes and motifs.

2. Research Methods

As evident from the list above, the source languages of the poems in *Erato* include several European languages: Latin, Greek, German, Italian, English, and French. Given Babits's extensive knowledge of these languages, few are as well-versed in them as he was. The author of this thesis, however, chose not to venture into the fields of Germanic, Romance, or English studies, instead primarily focusing on the classical Latin-origin translations.

Another important premise of this thesis is that it is hybrid in genre: it deals with an interdisciplinary area, requiring classical philological knowledge for understanding Roman literature, while Babits, as a pivotal figure of modern Hungarian literature, also demands a literary-historical approach.

A key objective of this thesis was to examine the Roman authors featured in *Erato* and their impact on Babits before and after the anthology. Several phrases and epithets used in the translations also appear in Babits's original poems, not labeled as translations. The research also explored whether there are quotations, allusions, or reminiscences connected to Catullus, Gallus, Ovid, Propertius, Martial, or Petronius in Babits's letters, essays, novels, poems, and other works, and how these relate to the translations published in *Erato*. Were these authors significant in Babits's body of work, or did he translate them solely for *Erato*, with their appearance being unique or recurring?

The theoretical foundation for analyzing the translations was provided by András Kappanyos's monographs *Bajuszbögre*,

Lefordítatlan: Műfordítás adaptáció, kulturális transzfer, and Túl a sövényen, as well as Anikó Polgár's *Catullus noster*.

Kappanyos suggests that the translation tradition of Nyugat (The West) demonstrates a domesticating tendency, yet it also highly values translational virtuosity, which is in direct contrast to the goal of invisibility. Polgár, observing this duality, referred to the Nyugat paradigm as integration, illustrating the triumph of the target text with the "metaphor of plunder." In this thesis, I examined where in Babits's translation practice—sometimes even within a single translation—the domesticating strategy appeared and where the foreignizing strategy was used, and what tools demonstrate the virtuosity mentioned by Kappanyos or the "metaphor of plunder" named by Polgár.

Another strategic question raised by Kappanyos, which is important in the context of Babits, is the difference between the reference-following and attitude-following strategies. The two strategies differ in that reference-following translation considers structural components like verse form, sound, or cultural allusions secondary, and thus may disregard them, while the attitude-following strategy seeks compromise between preserving the core meaning and reconstructing additional structures deemed secondary. However, for the attitude-following strategy, the preservation of the semantic-logical base structure is paramount, as it forms the identity of the source text. The thesis also explored whether Babits translated according to the reference-following or attitude-following strategy.

In addition to translation strategy, Kappanyos's criteria for evaluating translations from the perspective of outcome rather than the

creative process were also considered. Whether a translation meets the basic criteria of adequacy (general linguistic correctness, metrical order), accuracy, and vividness are the two measures by which the result can be evaluated. Accuracy is characterized by the alignment of macrostructures between the target and source texts, not only in terms of narrative but also at the level of sentences and paragraphs (or stanzas in the case of poems). Extreme accuracy may fail to meet the vividness criterion, as form and musicality are integral parts of the original work that evoke aesthetic experience. On the other hand, prioritizing vividness can easily lead to excessive domestication. Therefore, the translator must strive for a balance between accuracy and vividness to ensure that the translation corresponds to the original and retains its aesthetic value.

3. Results

Among the authors examined, Catullus had the most significant impact on Babits, though Petronius, Ovidius, and Martial also played important roles during transitional periods. However, the translations selected from these latter poets and their presence in Babits' oeuvre show less consistency and commitment from Babits compared to Catullus. In Babits' oeuvre, Petronius held a special place due to his translation of the *Satyricon*, which he never completed, and the portion that was finished has been lost. However, this connection with the translated epigrams is only incidental. Nevertheless, *Nászdal* ("Ite, agite...") was republished in several volumes, indicating its non-negligible influence on Babits' oeuvre.

Ovidius became important to Babits during his transfer to Fogaras, as he felt a sense of shared destiny due to Ovidius' exile to Tomis, as revealed in his correspondence. Despite this, Babits only translated *Am.* 1.5 by Ovidius, which appeared in *Erato* and thematically does not relate to exile, as it is from the early stage of the Roman poet's career. Babits did not republish this translation later.

Martial came to Babits' attention during his high school years when the young poet translated three of his epigrams, adhering at the time to Csengeri's principles of domestication. Additionally, Babits frequently referred to other verses by Martial in his essay *Szagokról, illatokról*, but the translation only appeared in *Erato*, with no manuscript surviving, making it uncertain whether Babits translated it.

The name Cornelius Gallus is never mentioned in Babits' oeuvre, and Propertius appears mostly in correspondence from his university years when Babits attended Géza Némethy's Propertius lectures. Beyond that, Propertius is mentioned only in *Az európai irodalom története*, making his appearance in *Erato* episodic as well.

According to the analysis of this study, the composition of the Latin cycle was partly determined by the chronological order of literary history, as Silver Age authors like Martial and Petronius appear at the end of the cycle, following Catullus or Ovidius. However, the poem attributed to Cornelius Gallus is a 13th–14th century forgery, disrupting the chronological order, although logically following Catullus as their historical sequence would suggest. The subsequent order of the translations of Ovidius and Propertius, however, requires explanation. Although they were contemporaries, they are conventionally presented in reversed order, with Propertius typically preceding Ovidius in most literary histories. Even in *Az európai irodalom története*, Babits presents Ovidius' poetry only after Propertius. Babits likely switched the order of the two translations because Ovidius' and Propertius' elegies are thematically very similar. However, *Am.* 1.5 occurs at midday (*fele útvát járta a nap*), while *Prop.* 2.15 happens at night (*Éjjeli boldog idő!*), making the order of the translations harmonize with the times of day. Additionally, the opening line of the Ovidius translation is metapoetic, suggesting in the context of *Erato* that the reader is halfway through the cycle: *Forró nyár, fele útvát járta meg a nap az égen.*

The metapoetic interpretation can also be applied to the Propertius text, as it is the opening verse of the second half of the Latin cycle, mirroring the translation of Ovid. The axis of symmetry between the two verses lies precisely in the middle of the cycle. A similar parallelism can be observed between the three Catullus and Petronius translations that appear at the two ends of the cycle, framing the Latin poems. Among the six verses forming the frame, *Lesbiához* ("Quaeris, quot mihi...") and *A valódi gyönyörűség* ("Foeda est in coitu...") are the closest to each other, as both are written in hendecasyllables—also true for the poem "Caeli, Lesbia nostra..."—and both wish for the endless accumulation of the pleasures of love and embraces.

However, the three verses also correspond to each other in groups. The selected Catullus translations depict the budding of the Lesbia love (c. 7), the deepening of jealousy (c. 87 + 75), and Catullus' complete disillusionment (c. 58), as the *dugott szerelem* (furtivos amores) from Catullus' perspective becomes marital fidelity (mulier, fides, foedere, officio) and finally, in the most degraded situation (glubit), he realizes that Lesbia is no longer the woman he once loved. In contrast, Petronius' verses seem to respond to Catullus' text. *A hitves és a fizetés* ("Uxor legitimus...") questions the ideal of marriage, while *Nászdal* ("Ite, agite...") returns to the moment after the wedding, the wedding night, and it is as if the third Petronius translation admonishes patience in response to the previous poem's urgency. Opposite Catullus' experience of love as a "marriage," stand Petronius' thoughts on actual marriage and the wedding night. The dream and the reality

stand opposite each other at the two ends of the Latin translations cycle, just as Ovidius and Propertius occupy the middle of the composition. Furthermore, the last words of the final verse also reinforce the metapoetic interpretation: "újra kezdődik, soha sincsen vége..."

Cornelius Gallus' and Martial's poems also have a place in the above composition. In the context of *Erato*, both translations have intertextual connections with the poems of Ovid and Propertius in the middle of the cycle. Gallus' poem, with its continuous pleading for disrobing, primarily references the recurring motif of nudity in the elegies of Ovid and Propertius. Martial's poem, on the other hand, from an external perspective, as if observing the events of the two poems, sees the speakers of the poems of Ovid and Propertius in similar situations with the same woman, and identifies the two characters with Phyllis' impatient clients. These intertextual connections are, of course, only valid in the context of *Erato*, the composition Babits arranged himself, as such relationships between the Latin poems would be too coincidental if they were not placed next to each other in this anthology.

The compositional connection presented above might answer the question of whether the three Latin poems that were not published or issued elsewhere in Babits' lifetime—and therefore cannot be definitively attributed to him—were indeed his works. Based on the study's findings, it is highly likely that Babits wrote them, because the cohesion within the Latin cycle is so strong, and the poems by Cornelius Gallus, Martial, and Petronius ("Uxor legitimus...") are so in-

tertextually connected with the other translations in *Erato* that it is improbable that they were not translated by Babits. Moreover, Babits had previously worked on other translations of Martial's and Petronius' works, so it is reasonable to assume that he translated these poems as well. Their republication was likely omitted because the Gallus and Petronius translations (the former due to its false origin, the latter due to its brevity) are less significant from a literary history perspective, and the Martial epigram is one of the most obscene works in *Erato*.

The study also revealed that Babits might have used sources that included not only the Latin text but also various commentaries. This is how it could happen that, according to the manuscript evidence, Babits very accurately understood the meaning of the word *glubit* in c. 58, even though its sexual interpretation appears only in Ausonius. Another good example of using commentaries is the mention of Janus in the Martial translation, which was not Babits' poetic invention, as earlier French commentaries also used this example. Babits' university professor, Géza Némethy, likely had a significant influence on the creation of the Latin cycle, particularly in the selection of the Ovid-Propertius pair of poems. Némethy's commentary on Ovid quotes precisely the Propertius poem that Babits included in *Erato*, and his student, Imre Schröder, also wrote a doctoral dissertation on the relationship between Ovid's and Propertius' poems. Since the Roman love elegy genre is a crucial connecting element between the Catullus, Gallus, Ovid, and Propertius translations, Némethy's lectures must have had a significant impact on Babits as a university student.

Besides the commentary literature, Babits did not shy away from using earlier Hungarian translations either. In the case of Catullus, similar solutions can be found between the translations of Csengeri and Molnár, but it cannot be said that Babits imitated any of his predecessors in every poem. Anikó Polgár classified Babits into the *Nyugat* paradigm and characterized his translation work with the procedure of integration based on his Catullus translations. However, this classification holds true for the other Latin poems in *Erato* as well. Although Babits leaned towards domestication with his rhymed Martial translations during his high school years, as a mature poet, he adhered to the formal constraints of the source text. At the same time, his translations are characterized by a tendency to generalize or omit more complex mythological and historical references, avoid word repetition, and freely add adjectives and other symbolic expressions. These additions often connect to other Babits poems or translations. According to the preface of *Pávatollak*, Babits refers to the poems in the collection as translations only because he "does not dare" to call them original works.

Based on Kappanyos's strategic dilemmas, Babits tends to translate based on meaning (rather than literally), employs a domesticating approach (rather than a foreignizing one), and prioritizes attitude over reference. By Kappanyos's standards, Babits's translations clearly meet the basic criteria of adequacy (which is more than expected from one of the greatest figures in Hungarian literature), yet they often lean toward vividness rather than strict accuracy. This

choice of vividness is understandable: the complex temporal and spatial distance between antiquity and modern Hungarian culture would be difficult to bridge without philological knowledge. However, Babits's *Erato* is easily accessible, and while the translator often modestly omits or euphemizes the risqué or occasionally obscene eroticism, the vividness and literary value of the translated poems are undeniable.

4. Publication Activity on the Topic

1. GÁBOR Dávid, *A fordítás nehézségeiről: Fontosabb-e Caecilius, mint Lesbia? = Phyllobolia: A Collegium Hungaricum Societatis Europaeae Studiosorum Philologiae Classicae nyolcadik országos konferenciáján elhangzott előadások*, szerk. Adorjáni Zsolt, Piliscsaba, Avicenna Közel-Kelet Kutatások Intézete, 2014, 108–116.

2. GÁBOR Dávid, *Lesbia karja: Babits Catullus-fordításainak forrása = Amphidromia: A Collegium Hungaricum Societatis Europaeae Studiosorum Philologiae Classicae XI. országos konferenciáján elhangzott előadások*, szerk. TUHÁRI Attila, Bp., ELTE Eötvös József Collegium, 2018, 65–73.

3. GÁBOR Dávid, *Babits Mihály Propertius-fordításának (II, 15) forrása és a fordító költői invenciói*, AntTan, 2022, 279–293.

4. GÁBOR Dávid, *Babits, a tanár = Az Antik nevelés öröksége*, szerk. TÓTH Orsolya, FORISEK Péter, Debrecen, Debreceni Egyetem Bölcsészettudományi Kar, Klasszika-filológiai és Ókortörténeti Tanszék, 2022, 157–176.