

Menyhért, Anna. Séllei, Nóra. *“Miért félünk a farkastól”: feminista irodalomszemlélet itt és most* [Why Are We Afraid of (Virginia) Wolf? Feminist Literary Views Here and Now]. Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 2007. Pp. 280. AHEA: E-journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 5 (2012): <http://ahea.net/e-journal/volume-5-2012>

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This book is an important landmark of Nóra Séllei's professional career. For several years Nóra Séllei has been progressing straight ahead on the path that she mapped out for herself as a feminist scholar, and her enterprise is indeed worthy of respect. She explored the possibilities offered by feminist literary criticism, writing three monographs (*Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf: A Personal and Professional Bond*, 1996; *The Middle-Class Woman Began to Write': Essays on Novels by 19th-Century British Women Writers*, 1999; *'Mirror, Mirror on the Wall ...': Women Writers' Autobiographies from the Early Twentieth Century*, 2001), has edited two anthologies (*The Junctures of Feminism – A Reader in Feminism and the (Post)modern*, 2006; *Woman as Subject, the Female Subject*, 2007.), has translated Virginia Woolf, has organized gender-oriented interdisciplinary conferences, and she holds graduate and postgraduate courses on gender topics at the University of Debrecen. Everything considered, Hungarian (feminist) literary criticism owes a lot to her. With this volume, Nóra Séllei goes well beyond the limits of her previous work, while staying within the area of feminist criticism but at the same time examining it from an outside point of view. *Why Are We Afraid of (Virginia) Wolf?* maps the situation and the inner problems of feminist literary studies in today's Hungary, taking the foreign context into consideration. The various case studies in the volume are gender-conscious analyses of women's literature, inspired by the author's personal commitment and (self)critical outspokenness. The question that Nóra Séllei asks is the following: why is there such a great resistance against feminist approach in the Hungarian cultural subconscious – *why are we afraid of the wolf?* In most Western countries feminism has a much more established institutional background and therefore legitimacy than in Hungary, and everyday gender-consciousness and the gender-sensitivity in collective consciousness are also much stronger. As feminism is so diverse, we cannot refer to it using a singular word, but instead we should talk about feminisms, and 'maybe it is this very diversity that helped feminist – or gender-oriented – literary approach to evolve into an almost all-pervasive method of analysis that has fundamentally changed the discourse of literary and cultural studies, whereby nowadays it has become impossible to contribute to Anglo-Saxon cultural theory with total blindness toward gender.' Unfortunately, as Séllei discusses, the situation in Hungary is very different and here, 'there is no substantial difference between the sexist presuppositions, both hidden and straightforward, in different genres of public speech, from tabloids to literary.' One of the most typical characteristic features of Séllei's book is to situate every emerging paradigm of feminism and each one's most important authors and theories into the Hungarian context, from the gynocriticism of the 70's (which deals with texts by female writers and hunts for the authentic female voices) through the so-called third wave of feminism, or post-feminism, which came into existence in the 90's, a form of feminism informed by new theories of subjectivity.

It is not easy to summarize the ideas of the book, perhaps due to the very richness of topics it discusses, and although the text is enjoyable and easy to read, the sentences are often long, abundant in co-ordinate clauses and sometimes redundant, as if every sentence were pointing into more than one direction simultaneously. The most important theoretical

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reference point for Séllei's work is Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of culture. For example, in the chapter *That's how we write – (self)representation of Hungarian feminist literary studies*, Séllei utilizes Bourdieu's notions to analyze the ambivalent position of feminist literary studies in Hungary, where feminism has been present only for less than two decades, too short a period for feminist scholarship to gain adequate legitimacy, even when practiced by senior scholars who, to use Bourdieu's terminology, already possess some symbolic capital in the culture. In such a short period, young feminist scholars entering the profession, particularly because they had no teachers from whom they could learn as university students and who could help them to enter the field, have not managed to get into decision-making positions. This means that even as university education was in transformation during the first decade of the new century, there were virtually no feminist scholars employed as university professors who could launch gender courses. The university and academic institutions are very rigid in Hungary, with academic branches still classified according to nineteenth-century criteria, hence feminist studies literally remains unclassifiable and “illegitimate” and consequently it cannot have departments, fellowships, journals or research funds, and because the field does not have institutional standing feminist scholars cannot easily even apply for European funding or join international research projects. Because those few academics who have training in feminism have usually received their training abroad as scholars of English or other foreign languages, feminism in Hungary ends up being taught primarily in foreign language departments, which – according to the academic classification – belong to the branch of modern philology, which is utterly incompatible with European/American practice. Additional problems working against the establishment of feminist studies as an academic discipline in Hungary are that, ‘modern philology’ is generally considered a less important discipline when compared to researching Hungarian literature, and also that the reigning schools of literary studies continue to put up resistance against any theory that pays attention to the political aspects of literature-related discourse, because these theories point out that literary science is neither universal nor genderless, nor independent of all particular interests (on this see further, Györgyi Horváth. “Women Authors with/without Gendered Studies: The Gendered Regimes of Authority in Literary Criticism Today,” in the volume 4 (2011) of this journal). That apart from Central European University (not funded by Hungary) and Corvinus University there are no gender departments in Hungary, is a sorry situation for which Séllei's book provides a multi-level historical, cultural, and theoretical explanation. At the majority of other universities it is merely individual teachers who might hold isolated gender-related courses in different departments, which students may at best find by chance, but it is never the case that a student can set out become a gender researcher. This leads to isolation, as people working in gender can contact one another only if they know one another personally or from their writing, which can at least partly explain the phenomena that Nóra Séllei discusses in the other part of the chapter, namely that feminist professionals do not rely on one another. As she points out, many end up enjoying placing themselves in the role of pioneers and prefer to quote foreign literature and criticize the Hungarian scholarship. In the long term professionals undermine their own position with these gestures, as this ‘rhetoric of erasure’ works against the legitimacy of feminism as a research field and such gestures help (male) professors in positions of power to dismiss feminism and to say ‘let the women settle it among themselves,’ condemning feminist debates as quarrels in which serious male scholars should not take part. (It is another matter that similar dissensions also exist within ‘serious male scholarship’ but such disagreements are perceived as belonging to the sphere of scholarship and not of the kitchen.) The neglect of existing feminist scholarship in Hungarian is a situation that Séllei tries to redress with a fifty-page *Bibliography of feminist theory*,

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*feminist history and gender studies in Hungarian.* Nóra Séllei had been collecting material for this bibliography from mailing lists and at conferences for years.)

Nóra Séllei examines how the mechanisms of academic antifeminism work in everyday life, in the press, in journalism and in the literary world, for example in the case of a controversial review by Gábor Németh in the influential Hungarian literary journal *Élet és Irodalom* about novels written by four female writers and about an anthology in which twelve female literary critics discuss twelve novels by male writers. She also discusses the influential philosopher Ágnes Heller's scourging evaluations about American gender departments, which in her 'nothing but kitchens, even if good paying ones., where a woman has to be proficient in nothing but women and relations between women and men. She has to learn how to scold men in a well educated manner...' (118). Utterly uninformed and 'hair-raising blunders' by both male and female professionals, such as these and others that Séllei cites from her private correspondence are often unconscious, therefore even potentially more destructive than open statements, which could be countered. Séllei, although she shared some personal experience manages not to personalize, and her goal is rather to raise attention to the importance of gender-consciousness and to the fact that the lack of it can have serious effect in our personal lives as well as in the development of scholarship.

One of the case studies is about the bestselling novel by Zsuzsa Rácz, *Stop Mom Theresa* (2002) in the context of chic lit. Séllei underlines the importance of opening canons, including popular literature. Hungarian literary criticism was way behind in this respect at the time *Stop Mom Theresa* was published, and even when Séllei wrote her book. (The situation has slightly improved by now.) *Stop Mom Theresa* was the one and only real hit of chic lit in Hungary. Prejudice caused primarily by the huge number of copies sold and the great success of the novel among young female readers prevented reviewers to take it seriously and from recognizing its novelty in many aspects, such as the irony of the character deriving from her funny self-conscious way of speech, and its deeper meaning that frames a postmodern subject position in a bestseller resulting in a unique cross genre construction.

Feminism is both an academic field oriented toward cultural criticism and a social movement, which is in part what makes its role in the Hungarian academic structure problematic. Nóra Séllei is right when she maintains that we are 'afraid of the wolf' and 'afraid of accepting that sexuality is a part of our identity.' Feminism wants more than a 'room of its own'. Or to be more precise, it has come to realize that having a room of its own can only be brought about through a transformation of public opinion. By writing *Why are We Afraid of (Virginia) Wolf?*, the author has collected such a great amount of symbolic capital that it is enough to break the rules of the field, thus to modify and re-form them. Because the change is up to books like this.

*Translated by Ferenc Marczali*