

Júlia Apraxin's Unknown Radical Folk Drama in 19th-Century Hungary: The Reimagining of Roma Identity¹

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ABSTRACT

In the latter half of the 19th century, the restructuring of society and the spread of democratic ideals forced a reassessment of the aristocracy's role. Values such as honor, courage, and nobility—long viewed as the preserve of the elite—were redefined and applied to groups that had previously been excluded from such moral recognition. This article explores one striking dimension of this cultural transformation: the literary representation of the “Gypsy” in 19th-century Hungarian literature. It focuses on the startlingly unconventional depiction of Roma identity in *Corra, the Gypsy*, a recently rediscovered manuscript folk drama by Júlia Apraxin—an aristocratic yet radical female author of mid-19th-century Hungary.

Keywords: Romani representation; theater; Júlia Apraxin; folk drama; People's Theatre (*Népszínház*); 19th-century Hungarian literature

1. Introduction

Canonical literary depictions of marginalized groups are inseparable from a society's own self-understanding. Societies often project onto others precisely those traits they cannot—or will not—acknowledge in themselves, thereby constructing “otherness” as a mirror of their own disavowed qualities. Because self-representations are largely produced by dominant elites, portrayals of vulnerable groups inevitably reflect the interpretive framework of those elites. The literary history of Roma/

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Gypsy representation must therefore be read as a function of this dominant self-conception.²

In European literature more broadly, 19th-century Roma figures are usually understood through a handful of emblematic stereotypes—often mutually contradictory. The Roma may appear as the “noble savage,” the embodiment of freedom, the bohemian artist, the dangerous seducer,³ or the thief. Frequently, Gypsies are depicted as emblems of nomadic freedom, closeness to nature, and social marginality. They function as an “idealized Other,” at once alluring and threatening. Such portrayals rely on an exoticizing discourse that simultaneously admires and demonizes their difference.⁴

In most cases, the representations of Gypsy female figures also carry a double stereotype: they are both objects of erotic desire and moral threats, for example, Carmen’s independence ultimately leads to her death, which is interpreted as the destruction of free female identity in the work. Female Gypsy characters, in particular, are subjected to a double stereotype: eroticized as objects of desire yet condemned as moral threats. The paradigmatic case is Carmen, whose independence culminates in her death—a symbolic annihilation of female autonomy. While Western European literature often orientalized and romanticized Roma figures, Hungarian literature developed its own variations. Chief among these was the “comic Gypsy,” a stock character inherited from earlier European traditions but adapted into 19th-century Hungarian cultural contexts. As Sarah Houghton-Walker has shown, early 18th-century texts often cast the Gypsy as an “amusing villain.” By the Victorian era, however, shifting socio-political contexts transformed this figure into one embedded in a romantic-nostalgic tradition of representation.⁵

2 The term “Gypsy” is used in this study solely to reflect the historical terminology of the 19th century, while acknowledging the contemporary scholarly and cultural preference for “Roma.”

3 For example Prosper Mérimée: *Carmen*, 1845.

4 Social exclusion and vulnerability are defining features of what is perhaps the most influential Western European representation of the Gypsy: the figure of Esmeralda. (Victor Hugo *Notre-Dame in Paris*, 1831).

5 “The date from which my analysis of the Romantic-period gypsy begins is fixed and significant: 1783 was an important year for the public perception of gypsies for various reasons, and this importance is demonstrated in William Cowper’s depiction of a group of gypsies written in the same year. The other end of the period of interest is more difficult to set: unsurprisingly, perceptions take a long time to change, and they do not change consistently or completely. As a rough guide, I have posited the year 1830, as the effects of the 1824 Vagrancy Act were beginning to bite (this Act transferred the focus from gypsies per se to their habits of life: pre-eminently, wandering, but also hawking and begging, camping in the wrong place or sleeping in tents or carts, and fortune-telling), though some of the works I consider post-date this marker. In these (approximately) fifty years, something quite different happens to representations of gypsies, and those representations are intimately tied to their historical context. [...] Amongst all of the other concerns they are used to articulate and explore, portrayals of gypsies

This study examines a Hungarian folk drama written in 1863 for the People's Theatre (*Népszínház*) *Corra, a' cigány, vagy a' halász leány* [*Corra, the Gypsy, or the Fisherman's Daughter*]. Its author, Countess Júlia Batthyány Apraxin—a Russian-born aristocrat educated in Western Europe—composed the work both as a contribution to nation-building and in support of the fledgling People's Theatre.⁶ I argue that Apraxin's drama offers an exceptional case in Hungarian letters—and arguably a unique one in European literature. Drawing on her familiarity with Western European literary trends, Apraxin crafted Gypsy figures not as confirmations of existing stereotypes but as deliberate refutations of them.

2.1. The History of a Manuscript Once Thought Lost

The official theatrical journal *Színházi Látcső* [*Theatre Spyglass*] reported on 13 April 1863 that “In Buda, a folk drama entitled *Korru, a cigány, vagy a halász leány* [*Korru the Gypsy or the Fisherwoman*] is being prepared. The author is Júlia B. Apraxin”⁷. The very next day, however, *Sürgöny* [*Telegram*] issued a correction: “The title of B. Apraxin's new original play to be performed at the Buda People's Theatre is not *Korru*, as the papers say, but *Cora*. Whether it is a boy or a girl we do not know”⁸.

Katalin Barna, the monographer of Apraxin's oeuvre, claimed the manuscript had been lost: “*Korru, a cigány vagy a halászleány* [*Korru, the Gypsy or the Fisherwoman*]. Vaudeville populaire. (Perdu.) 1863” (Barna 1964, 169). Fortunately, however, the original manuscript—with its cast list for the People's Theatre and the individual role scripts—survives in

are significantly inflected by contemporary unease about what Englishness might be, and therefore offer us as readers a way of understanding perceptions of Englishness as well as of gypsies at a particular moment in history. Rather than focus on the Victorian situation as recent scholarship has done, then, this book explores a window of time between those eighteenth-century accounts in which gypsies are figured as amusing rogues, and the nostalgic, romanticized gypsy form (which has abandoned its sublimity in favour of the bucolic fantasy prompted and propagated by George Borrow and the founder members of the Gypsy Lore Society) which we find in the early Victorian period. Between these two situations, the gypsy is used by writers and artists to articulate various dilemmas and anxieties, which take various forms. What these different dilemmas and anxieties have in common is their connection to ideas of knowing, to definition, and to understanding identities which are mutable and troubling.” (Houghton-Walker 2014, 10–11, 12–13).

6 On the relationship between the opening of the People's Theatre (*Népszínház*) in Buda and historical Hungarian nation-building, see Heltai 2009.

7 „Budán *Korru a cigány, vagy a halászleány* című népies drámára készülnek. Szerzője: B. Apraxin Júlia.” (*Színházi Látcső*, 13 Apr. 1863, no. 8).

8 „B. Apraxin új, a budai népszínházban előadandó eredeti darabjának címe nem *Korru*, mint a lapok írják, hanem *Cora*. Már hogy fiú vagy leány azt bizony magunk se tudjuk.” (*Sürgöny*, 14 Apr. 1863, no. 85).

the Theatre Collection of the Arad Museum Complex (inventory no. 13413) in Arad County, Romania.⁹

The surviving manuscript, bearing the seal of the Arad Theatre Association, gives the exact title as: *Corra, a' czigány vagy a' halász leány Népies dráma 4 fölvonásban. Írta Batthyányi Júlia* [*Corra, the Gypsy or the Fisherwoman. A folk drama in four acts. Written by Júlia Batthyányi*]. Notably, Apraxin herself labeled the piece a *népies dráma* ('folk drama'), which contrasts with the term *vaudeville* used by Barna. Whereas the French *vaudeville* evoked associations with musical theatre, the Hungarian category of "folk drama" at the time referred to popular stage works, often but not necessarily with musical or song interludes.

The manuscript's front page also records the evaluations and signatures of the drama committee:¹⁰ Bolnai approved the play;¹¹ Győző Kempelen rejected it;¹² and Gyula Bulyovszky endorsed it,¹³ though explicitly noting that his acceptance was offered only out of respect for the author. The manuscript, which suggests the play was never staged, includes a cast list: Corra was assigned to István Együd; his Romani mother, Iszturka, to Mrs. Vinczéné; Lidi the fisherwoman to Laura Szépné Mátray; Márton, the scheming wealthy peasant, to István Bihari; and the two Fegyveressy counts to Ádám Takács and István Bényei. All belonged to the company of the People's Theatre, just as the committee members did. This overlap makes it clear that the original manuscript of the People's Theatre somehow found its way to Arad. The most plausible explanation is that it was taken there by György Molnár, a prominent and innovative theatre director-actor of the period. Molnár not only served as stage director but also founded the People's Theatre in Buda. Molnár visited Arad multiple times during his career, including at least one occasion in 1863 when he traveled with Júlia Apraxin. At the time, the two were partners both personally and professionally, making this drama a valuable document of their intimate relationship as well as their theatrical collaboration (see also Molnár 1880, 1881).

9 A textbook bound in a hardback blue cardboard cover, containing the text of the drama written in black ink, with later additions, corrections, and erasures made in black ink, red ink, and graphite pencil.

10 In the theaters of the period, drama committees played a crucial role. Their task was to make a preliminary assessment of plays proposed for performance and to decide whether a given work could be staged. The repertoire was highly varied, with productions changing frequently and often being presented almost daily. In this fast-paced environment, it was essential to have a professional committee that evaluated both the aesthetic quality and the political acceptability of the works. (For further discussion, see Pukánszky Kádár 1939.)

11 The pseudonym of Miklós Bethlen—actor, editor of the periodical *Magyar Sajtó* [*Hungarian Press*], and member of the drama committee of the People's Theatre.

12 He was a staff member of the periodical *Hon* [*Homeland*], working as a journalist and editor, and also served as a member of the People's Theatre drama committee.

13 He was a journalist and editor, as well as a member of the drama committee of the People's Theatre.

2.2. The Plot and Literary Novelty of *Corra, the Gypsy or the Fisherwoman* — Corra as an Atypical Gypsy

The play's protagonist is Corra, the son of a Romani mother and a Hungarian aristocratic father. He is torn between the prejudices attached to his mixed heritage and the aristocratic upbringing he has received, and his story revolves around his quest for both love and a secure place in society. In line with the conventions of folk drama—as well as Apraxin's other works—the narrative unfolds on the shores of Lake Balaton and follows a tangled love story. Corra is enamored of Lidi, a fisherman's daughter, though at first her affections lie with Márton, a wealthy peasant. Over time, however, Lidi grows disillusioned with Márton, and Corra gradually wins her heart through his honesty and chivalry.

Yet the seemingly conventional love story should not obscure the play's innovations. Apraxin's *Corra* transforms the folk-drama form in striking ways and opens avenues for rich interpretation. Although it appears never to have been staged and thus lacks historical reception, the text remains an important source for literary history, theater history, women's history, and social history alike. From a literary-historical perspective, the interplay of genre and representation is especially significant. When placed within the broader context of Roma portrayals in 19th-century Hungarian folk drama, Apraxin's play proves exceptional: its characterizations depart sharply from contemporary stereotypes, and its social critique is at times nothing short of astonishing. The drama also raises questions of women's and theater history—concerning its genesis, its theatrical trajectory, and the author's possible motivations. I will return to these interwoven dimensions later.

The play begins with Corra being summoned home from the count's mansion, where he has been raised, by his Romani mother, Iszturka. As an infant, Corra was taken in by Count György Fegyveressy, who convinced Iszturka to give him the child—fathered, as it is revealed at the end of the drama, by György's brother, Count Antal Fegyveressy. Raised as an aristocrat, Corra consistently conducts himself as such. He refuses to answer, let alone internalize, the prejudices directed at him because of his Romani origins and darker skin. Instead, he seeks to affirm his gentlemanly honor, as in the following scene:

“Márton: Well, just look at that—the cigány is playing the lord again!

Corra: I am playing the part of an honest man. You swore love to this girl; now you abandon her without reason. At least listen to what she has to say—or you will regret it! ... I will show you that Corra demands obedience when he defends the weak. *To the musicians and dancers.* Enough of the music now—step back a little. Márton wishes to speak with Lidi. *They obey.*

Márton (*angrily*): What is the meaning of this?

Corra: It means that people respect me, but they despise you. *He takes Maris by the hand.* Come over here to the back; they wish to speak

with one another. *Everyone except Márton and Lidi withdraws to the rear of the stage.*"(Act I, Scene 3)¹⁴

The passage above illustrates how the play both employs and subverts conventional Hungarian stage tropes. Instead of reproducing the prevailing stereotype—Roma as vulnerable, marginalized, and morally suspect outsiders governed by inscrutable codes—Apraxin inverts it. In Apraxin's drama, the noblest and wisest figures—the ones who embody bourgeois-Christian virtue—are precisely those of Romani origin. Where secondary literature does mention the play, it tends to interpret this strategy as a democratic mode of representation,¹⁵ akin to what we find in Ede Szigligeti's invaluable folk play *The Gypsy* (1853). Szigligeti's drama, while not entirely free of stereotype, ultimately associates its Romani characters with values aligned to bourgeois-Christian ideals and with a spiritual depth that approximates a modern notion of subjectivity. At the outset of Szigligeti's play, Roma figures are framed in terms of linguistic and situational comedy, their actions marked by compulsion and moral fragility. Yet as the plot unfolds, these elements are progressively overturned. By the conclusion, audiences encounter an honest, self-sacrificing Roma artist who ennobles the world through his craft, and a gypsy heroine, Rózsi, endowed with psychological depth and spiritual complexity.¹⁶ In contrast, *Corra* sharply limits humor in the depiction of its Romani figures. Instead, comedy—whether situational or linguistic—is reserved for representatives of power: the judge, notary, and guards who seek to imprison Corra are rendered in caricatured terms:

Count György. All right—let them in. (*They enter and bow.*) Good day, and thank you for coming... But tell me, what has this Gypsy done?

Judge. He stole!

Count György. (*to Corra*) Is that true?

Corra. To such a question—I cannot answer!... And Your Lordship knows it already, whether I speak or not.

Judge. Is that the way to answer the noble lord count?

Corra. I answer as I am asked.

14 "Márton. No nézzétek csak, a cigány megint a grófot játssza!

Corra. Én azt játszom, hogy becsületes ember vagyok. Te e leánynak szerelmet esküdtél; most minden ok nélkül elhagyod; hallgasd meg legalább, amit mondani akar, vagy különben megbánod!... Megmutatom neked, hogy Corra engedelmességet akar, midőn ő a gyöngéket védelmezi. A zenészekhez és táncosokhoz szól. Most elég volt már a zenéből, vonuljatok kissé hátra. Márton Lidivel akar beszélni. Azok engedelmeskednek.

Márton. dühösen. Hát mit jelent ez?

Corra. Azt, hogy engem az emberek becsülnek, téged pedig megvetnek. Marist kézen fogja. Gyere amoda hátra, ezek beszélni akarnak egymással. Mártont és Lidit kivéve mindenki a színpad háttérébe vonult."

15 For a summary of this issue, see Szabóné Kármán 2016, 235–54, especially 245–49.

16 In a previous paper, I analyzed the contemporary novelty of the representation of Rózsi's love affliction (Zabán 2020).

Notary. Silence!

Count György. Let him speak. – Corra, you know how dearly I love you... Tell me—do you still deserve that love? Speak!

Corra. Answer? I?... No—no!... Would *you*, my lord, answer such a question?

Judge. Insolent wretch!

Notary. Remember—you are speaking to the noble lord count!

Corra. Ha! What care I for titles!... Count or no count—I speak to the man, and I demand justice! I have stolen nothing, nor shall I ever steal; and I will not suffer such disgraceful accusations!

Count György. Be calm, Corra, my son!... I know your honesty. It is not before me you must defend yourself. Yet still—you must answer *them*.

Judge. (*elbows the notary*) Hear that, Mr. Notary—how the count speaks with him!

Notary. (*softly, aside to the judge*) Indeed—this changes everything.

Corra. I thank you, my lord... Now I see again the noble benefactor to whom I owe my answer. But in truth—I do not know what these men want of me.” (Act IV. Scene 11.)¹⁷

A central source of dramatic conflict lies in the competing interpretations of social hierarchy. The antagonists equate wealth and power with honor, treating privilege as evidence of moral worth. By contrast, the play’s exemplary figures expose the dangers of conflating economic status with genuine honor. The judge and notary, as local agents of authority, unthinkingly assume that an ethnic Gypsy cannot act honorably. They trust the Hungarian character’s word without hesitation,

17 “György gróf. Jól van, engedd be őket. Azok bejönnek. Köszönnek. Jó napot, köszönöm fáradságukat... de hát mit vétett ez a cigány?

Bíró. Lopott!

György gróf. Corrához. Igaz ez?

Corra. Ilyen kérdésre nem felelhetek!... Aztán úgy is tudja Méltóságod, ha nem is felelek.

Bíró. Hát így kell felelni a méltóságos gróf úrnak?

Corra. Úgy felelek, ahogyan kérdeznak.

Jegyző. Hallgass!

György gróf. Hagyják beszélni. – Corra, te tudod, mennyire szeretlek... felelj, megérdemled-e még ezt a szeretetet?... felelj!

Corra. Feleljek?... én?... Nem, nem!... felelné-e Méltóságod ily kérdésre?

Bíró. Ejnye te szemtelen!

Jegyző. Gondold meg, hogy a méltóságos gróffal beszélsz!

Corra. Eh! mit nekem!... gróf!... Én az emberrel beszélek és igazságot követelek! Én nem loptam semmit, nem is fogok lopni soha; és én nem engedem, hogy ilyen gyalázatossággal vádoljanak!

György gróf. Csendesülj, Corra; fiam!... én ismerem becsületességedet; és nem is velem szemben kell magadat védelmezned; hanem ezeknek itt mégis csak felelned kell.

Bíró. könyökével meglöki a jegyzőt. Hallja, nótárius uram, hogy beszél vele a gróf.

Jegyző. lassan a bíróhoz. Persze, hogy ez már nagy fordítást tesz a dolgon!

Corra. Köszönöm, méltóságos uram;... most nemes jótevőmre ismerek, kinek felelettel tartozom; de én valóban nem tudom, mit akarnak ez emberek velem.”

while Corra's integrity is automatically doubted. Here Apraxin's aims align in part with Szigligeti's. Like him, she seeks to depict a marginalized community in order to reveal that the vices projected onto them are equally present within the "respectable" society that ostracizes them. Their vulnerable position, she suggests, gives their sense of honor an even sharper urgency. Yet Apraxin presses beyond Szigligeti. Through Corra, his brother Jordán, and their mother Iszturka, she presents characters stripped of every conventional "Gypsy" stereotype. Still, their ethnicity remains constantly thematized by the surrounding world—and just as constantly dismantled, scene by scene. Unlike Szigligeti—and unlike Lajos Kövér in *Indiana* (see Kövér 1860)¹⁸—Apraxin neither exoticizes nor romanticizes. In *Corra*, the Roma are not portrayed as a charming otherness but as fundamentally indistinguishable from Hungarians. The play insists that the stereotypical traits do not exist at all, thereby casting doubt on the legitimacy of the very social hierarchies that presume them.

The drama asserts that regardless of ethnicity, color, wealth, or birth, all human beings are fundamentally alike and equal. What corrupts this equality is the lust for domination: those who exploit others inevitably forfeit their honor. This dynamic defines Márton's role: he exploits the women around him, attempts sexual violence (the text leaves the exact form ambiguous), and falsely accuses Corra of theft. In so doing, Márton—not Corra—emerges as the true fraud, incapable of treating either women or Roma as equals. Although the title suggests a drama about the Roma's struggle for social respectability, the deeper conflict lies elsewhere: between gentleman and rogue, honesty and deceit. In this moral economy, the Roma characters prove far closer to the true aristocratic gentleman than to the rapist, swindler, self-serving peasant, or corrupt officials who wield authority:

“Corra. The count adopted me as his son... he was never married... he grew very fond of me; I was brought up as if I had been his own child, and I learned the ways of high society.

Márton. And what do those consist of?

Corra. To know how to lie perfectly; to smile at the one you hate; and to scorn the one you love and respect, if by birth they are beneath your rank.

18 This drama also differs in genre from Apraxin's: it is a four-act historical play, first performed at the National Theatre on 9 September 1858, a few years before its publication in this volume. The comic element is unmistakable in the text, and contemporary reviews confirm that audiences likewise perceived the play's representation of the Gypsy as comic: “A szomorújátékban sok a víg elem, nem azért, mert sok benne a cigány, [...] hanem, mert tulajdonképp a mű nem csekély részben sikerült genrekép a cigányok életéből vagy ha úgy tetszik – történetéből.” [“The tragedy contains many comic elements, not because there are many Gypsies in it [...] but because the play is, to a large extent, a successful genre portrait of the life—or, if you prefer, the history—of the Gypsies.”] (Nemzeti színház. Sept. 9. Először: *Indiana*. Ered. regényes szomorújáték 4 felv. Írta Kövér Lajos. [National Theatre. 9 Sept. Premiere: *Indiana*. Original novelistic tragedy in four acts. Written by Lajos Kövér], *Pesti Napló*, 11 Sept. 1858, no. 2575.)

Márton. Oh! really?

Corra. I could never grow accustomed to life among these people who—like monkeys shut up in a cage—wish each other good day with a grimace; whose conversation is nothing but empty chatter, and when they try to be interesting, they tear each other to pieces!... Better to step aside from a rabid beast!” (Act I, Scene 2.)¹⁹

The lens through which the play interprets both the Roma’s condition and elite attitudes is telling. For decades, the forced separation of Romani children from their families had been a brutal instrument of state-led integration and assimilation (Szabóné Kármán 2016, 124–129). Apraxin frames this practice within the play as an act of nobility, generosity, and chivalry. This reveals how questions of integration and emancipation are filtered through the worldview of the upper strata, shaped by their ideals rather than by Roma experiences. Consequently, the drama does not ask what the Roma themselves require, what their internal logics or aspirations might be. Instead, it posits that they possess no inherent group specificity at all—that every difference is the product of oppression and segregation. Hence the separation of Corra from his mother is portrayed as morally legitimate: adopted and raised by a count, he absorbs aristocratic codes of honor as if they were natural law.

Yet precisely as an outsider, the emancipated Corra gains the authority to critique aristocratic life. The drama inverts expectations: the aristocrats and wealthy appear as cowardly thieves masquerading as gentlemen, while the Roma embody the moral code of an authentic “dueling society.” (see Elias 1996, 44–120). Through Corra’s eyes, the play even engages in a kind of reverse exoticization. Aristocrats are likened to apes, rabid beasts, and irrationally exotic creatures—figures of degeneration rather than refinement.

2.3. The Romani Character as Critic of the Aristocracy

Apraxin herself was of aristocratic birth, yet by the early 1860s she had become a social outcast.²⁰ In the drama’s most intense conflicts, she underscores the elite’s responsibility toward society at large. Those who wield power, she insists, must recognize the corruption of existing structures and transform them into a system grounded in morality—a

19 “*Corra.* A gróf fiává fogadott... soha sem volt nő... engem igen megszeretett; úgy neveltetett, mintha saját fia lettem volna, és a nagyvilág szokásait sajátítottam el.

Márton. S miben állanak azok?

Corra. Hogy tökéletesen tudj hazudni; tudj mosolyogni arra, akit gyűlölsz; és azt, akit szeretsz és becsülsz, de aki születésénél fogva rangodon aluli, meg tudd vetni.

Márton. Ej! igazán?

Corra. Soha sem tudtam megszokni az életet ezek között az emberek között, akik – mint kalitkába zárt majmok – fintorogva kívánnak jó napot egymásnak; akiknek társalgása csupa haszontalanságról folyik, és ha érdekes akar lenni, egymást marcangolják szét!... Jobb a veszett állat elől kitérni!”

20 Recent research on the unusual life of this rebellious aristocratic authoress includes Kovács 2013 and Kovács (MS).

system that, upon closer inspection, closely resembles the aristocratic code of honor of her own era:

Lidi. Your mother just went to plead with the Count for you... and she crossed paths with his younger brother. They knew each other at once. The Count, full of remorse, begged her forgiveness... he wants to make amends for the past... he claims you as his son... and you are to be Count Fegyveressy.

Corra. I... Count Fegyveressy?... My head is spinning... I can't grasp it...

Lidi. You must see now that you cannot marry the poor fisherman's daughter.

Corra. And must I become dishonorable if I accept that title?... Never! I will not!

Lidi. You owe me nothing. And who knows if your father would even approve?

Corra. A father who would rip love out of my heart would be no father to me!

Lidi. But think of the duties that come with your new rank!

Corra. I'll meet them. I've learned the people's hardships—I know their burdens. I can ease them. And I can be true to my duty just as I am true to my love.

(At the back of the stage, Márton appears, a musket in his hand.)

Lidi. Such a noble heart... no wonder you are worthy of love!

Corra. Now I can call myself a Hungarian, like them. Now I can live for my homeland. And if one day I must die for it—then to shed my blood for the freedom of my people will be my joy!

Lidi. And I will be proud to dedicate myself with you to so sacred a cause. (Act IV. Scene 13.)²¹

21 *"Lidi.* Éppen az imént anyád, ki feljött, hogy a grófot miattad megkérje, találkozott a gróf öccsével... és megismerték egymást. A tettét megbánt gróf anyád bocsánatáért esdekelt... a múltat jóvá akarja tenni... és téged elismer fiának... és te Fegyveressy gróf leszel...

Corra. Én Fegyveressy gróf!... fejem kábul... nem tudom megfogni...

Lidi. No már most beláthatod, hogy nem veheted nőül a szegény halász leányát.

Corra. Becstelen embernek kell-e lennem, ha az említett címet elfogadom?... Soha nem leszek az!

Lidi. Irányomban semmi kötelezettséged sincs, és ki tudja, atyád bele egyezik-e?

Corra. Oly atya, ki szívemből szerelmemet akarná kitépni, az nem lenne atyám!

Lidi. De gondoldj új rangod kötelességeire!

Corra. Eleget fogok nekik tenni, mert megtanultam ismerni a nép életének ínségeit; meg tudom – könnyíteni terheiket, és hű tudok maradni kötelességeimhez szintúgy, mint szerelmemhez. *A színpad hátsó részében Márton jelenik meg kezében puskával.*

Lidi. Nemes szívű ember!... mily méltó vagy a szerelemre!

Corra. Most magyarnak mondhatom magamat, mint ők; most hazámnak élhetek, és ha egykor meg kellene érte halni, hazámfiái szabadságáért vérem onthatni boldogságom lesz!

Lidi. És én büszke leszek magamat veled együtt ily szent ügynek szentelni!"

When Corra learns that he is in fact the son of a Hungarian count, what delights him most is not the title itself but the chance to serve his country. He can now call himself a patriot and claim full belonging within the Hungarian nation. The drama thus implicitly questions the liberal-democratic assumption that extending civil rights to the Roma would, in itself, ensure full and positive emancipation. By this logic, Apraxin lifts her Roma characters out of the stock comic roles typical of the genre (see L. Cselle 2021).²² Instead, she situates them within a broader Western European tradition of Roma representation (see Epstein Nord 2006; Basford 2022) and, arguably, anticipates developments beyond her own time (Houghton-Walker 2014). The play organizes its values within a hierarchy of bourgeois-democratic ideals, drawing attention to the lack of state structures that protect all citizens equally. It underscores the absence of fundamental rights—equality before the law, civil liberty—and the failure of those in power to embody civic morality:

“Iszturka. They hauled him off with guards — straight to prison, straight to trial.

Lidi. Corrá? On what charge?

Iszturka. The only charge that counts: the power of the strong.

Lidi. No. I believe an honest person is stronger than that.

Iszturka. Not here. Not yet.

Lidi. But it will be! ... I believe the poor and honest have *more* right to demand justice than anyone else! ... So tell me—what’s the accusation?” (Act IV. Scene 5.)²³

In the latter half of the 19th century, the aristocracy’s role was redefined amid social restructuring and the spread of democratic ideals. The ethical category of honor—once tied almost exclusively to the elite—was reinterpreted and extended to groups previously excluded from such recognition. Apraxin’s drama sketches a democratic social ideal, grounded in libertarian principles yet articulated through aristocratic vocabulary.²⁴ The gentleman’s honor becomes synonymous with the fundamental rights of all humans—above all the right to dignity. Within the drama, the status of “gentleman with honor” emerges as

22 An interesting and instructive early twentieth-century summary of the issue can be found in Fleischmann 1912.

23 *“Iszturka.* Örökökkel vezették el, hogy börtönbe zárják, elítélik.

Lidi. Corrá? és mi joggal?

Iszturka. Az erősebb jogával!

Lidi. Én azt hiszem, hogy a becsületes ember legerősebb!

Iszturka. Nálunk még nem úgy van!

Lidi. De úgy lesz!... Én azt hiszem, hogy a szegény és becsületes még több joggal követelhet igazságot mint a többi ember!.. És mily vád terheli?”

24 Apraxin is known to have corresponded with Lajos Kossuth, one of the leaders of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, who went into exile after its defeat. According to his reply letter, she deeply agreed with his aspirations and political views. (See Lajos Kossuth’s letter to Júlia Apraxin, published on several occasions and in different contexts; one of its earliest publications is Molnár 1881, 386.)

the universal goal, the mark of full citizenship—what Corra himself calls “living for one’s country.” Apraxin’s vision is thus both integrative and exclusive: integrative, in that it admits marginalized groups into the civic community; exclusive, in that it grounds social belonging not in natural law or universal rights but in ethical and moral performance. The play therefore does not advocate the erasure of social difference, but its moral reordering. In the world of *Corra*, social mobility cannot be secured by order alone, nor by the accumulation of wealth. Only moral excellence confers elevation.

Yet the drama ultimately resolves Corra’s story in a conventional way: beyond winning the hand of the woman he loves, he is revealed to be of noble birth—a narrative closure consistent with similar tales of the era. His repeatedly emphasized nobility of soul²⁵ therefore proves to be an aristocratic inheritance. By the drama’s close, honesty, justice, and refusal to submit to humiliation are fused with patriotism in his character. This resolution is reinforced by the play’s steady dismantling of every entrenched stereotype: Corra is not a thief, not a trickster, not a wandering musician, not naïve, not servile. A Roma representation this free of stereotype or comic reduction is unparalleled in 19th-century Hungarian literature.²⁶ The play combines a strikingly progressive social outlook with the patriotic imperative of its time.

3. Patriotism and Cultural Mission

The theater played a central role in Hungarian nation-building: articulating national ideals, shaping narratives and canon, cultivating an audience capable of bourgeois sensibilities, and guiding the moral development of the country by defining social ideals and ethical norms. From this perspective, the theatrical construction of the Gypsy figure becomes crucial to understanding how the institution functioned. Apraxin’s work represents a far more conscious and ambitious effort: to craft a new image of the Roma and to tell their story with the explicit aim of reshaping public thought.

Patriotism functions not merely as theme or device; it is embedded in the drama’s logic through multiple contextual layers. The play emerged

²⁵ The fact that the work is not primarily about emancipation but rather about extending the value categories of the nobility to other social groups can be seen in such turns of phrase as when the text emphasizes the characters’ spiritual nobility. For example: „Lidi. [...] Corrába szerelmes nem vagyok; de ha az lennék is, korántsem szégyenleném barna bőrét, sőt szerelmem büszkeségem, dicsőségem lenne, mert *ezen barna bőr szép és nemes lelket rejt!*” [“Lidi. [...] I am not in love with Corra; but even if I were, I would not be ashamed of his brown skin, and my love would be my pride and glory, for *this brown skin conceals a beautiful and noble soul.*”] (Act III. Scene 4.) – „Lidi. *Nemes szívu ember!...* mily méltó vagy a szerelemre!” [Lidi. *Noble-hearted man!...* how worthy you are of my love!] (Act IV. Scene 13.) – [Emphasis mine – Z. M.]

²⁶ For a summary on the issue, see Szöllőssy 2002.

in a politically and culturally unsettled moment—most likely in 1862–63, during the bleakest years of the Schmerling era, immediately after the dissolution of the Diet. Apraxin composed it for the newly founded People's Theatre (*Népszínház*), an institution established by György Molnár that struggled chronically with finances. Simultaneously, Apraxin's relations with her family deteriorated. The press reported not only her literary efforts but also her initiatives intended to sustain the People's Theatre—and, in effect, to advance Molnár's plans. Contemporary coverage cast these gestures as a departure from aristocratic norms, even as it celebrated the “patriotic woman” as a model of middle-class virtue; patriotism thus veiled the author's radicalism as writer and thinker. During this turbulent period—professionally, socially, and privately—she published a novel, a short story, and then a drama, while newspapers reported her bout of typhus (*Pesti Napló*, 14 Jan. 1862, no. 3576) and a fire in her room (*Sürgöny*, 13 Feb. 1862, no. 36). Recent scholarship characterizes the ensuing half decade as strikingly radical, including, for example, writing provocative fiction and what has been described as the first Hungarian “art novel” with a sympathetic female artist protagonist authored by a woman.²⁷

27 Examples include *Hiába beszélnek...* [*They Speak in Vain...*] (*Nefelejts*, 1860); *Szerédy Ilma Naplója* [*The Diary of Ilma Szerédy*]; *Ilona*; *Két nőszív* [*Two Women's Hearts*] (1861); and *Bájlaki Zsigmond* (*Divatcsarnok*, 1861). In these works, the democratic social ideal that also appears in *Corra* is articulated through the aristocracy's assumption of responsibility and sacrifice. In *Bájlaki Zsigmond*, for example, Apraxin goes further: she not only insists on the responsibility of the elite but also formulates ideas of democratic reform and reinterprets the very role of the aristocracy from this perspective: “– Demokrata? Igen, az vagyok, és büszke vagyok rá s ha ön azt kárhoztatja bennem, akkor nem érti e szó magasztos jelentését, mely megnyitja előttünk mindannak ajtaját, a mi nagy és szép. Maga a vallás is, nem parancsolja-e nekünk ezen érzelmet, melyet a világ teljesen hamis fényben iparkodott feltüntetni előttünk? Pedig ellenkezőleg, e szó magában foglalja mindazt, a mi nemes és emelkedett van az emberi lélekben. Valóban fényes világban engedi láttatni az emberiséget, általa látszunk valamennyien egy Isten és egy atya gyermekeinek. Valamennyien testvérek vagyunk s a nemes ösztönök, a lélek emelkedett érzetei tesznek bennünket többé-kevésbé nagyokká, de nem a címek vagy a birtok. A pór, kit kifogástalan élete mintaképpé tesz polgártársai előtt, sokkal magasabban áll tiszteletemben mint a herceg, ki nem ismeri kötelességeit. Az előbbi elismerem hozzám hasonlóul, mesteremül, míg a másodikra csak megvetéssel tudnék tekinteni.” [“– A democrat? Yes, I am, and I am proud of it. And if you condemn me for it, then you do not understand the exalted meaning of this word, which opens before us the door to everything that is great and beautiful. Does not religion itself command us to embrace this sentiment—a sentiment that the world has striven to present to us in a completely false light? On the contrary, this word encompasses all that is noble and elevated in the human soul. It allows humanity to be seen in a radiant light; through it, we appear as the children of one God and one Father. We are all brothers, and it is noble instincts, the elevated feelings of the soul, that make us greater or lesser, not titles or property. The peasant whose blameless life makes him a model before his fellow citizens stands far higher in my esteem than the prince who does not know his duties. The former I acknowledge as my equal, even as my teacher, while the latter I could regard only with contempt.”] (Batthyány 1861,

In this light, *Corra, the Gypsy* was conceived to bolster the People's Theatre's finances, a goal Apraxin pursued on multiple fronts. She sold her jewelry and donated the proceeds to the theater (Molnár 1881, 321–406, esp. 346–47), appeared on its stage, and even organized a full tour—traceable in the press—through Kassa²⁸ (*Pesti Napló*, 17 Feb. 1863, no. 3903), Miskolc (*Budai Lapok*, 8 Mar. 1863, no. 7, p. 56), Debrecen (*Hölgyfutár*, 1863, 5, no. 28, p. 223), Kolozsvár²⁹ (*Budai Lapok*, 15 Mar. 1863, 8th issue, 63–64, here 63), Arad (*Hölgyfutár*, 14 Mar. 1863, no. 32, p. 255), Temesvár³⁰ (*Hölgyfutár*, 28 Mar. 1863, no. 38, p. 302), Szeged (*Szegedi Híradó*, 18 Mar. 1863, no. 22), Szabadka³¹ (*Szegedi Híradó*, 18 Mar. 1863, no. 22), Szeged again (*Hölgyfutár*, 31 Mar. 1863, no. 39, p. 310), and Kecskemét (*Hölgyfutár*, 28 Mar. 1863, no. 38, p. 302). After the tour—and before leaving for Paris—she gave several further performances at the People's Theatre. The proceeds supported the institution, making her a de facto ambassador for its financial revival. As part of the same effort, she wrote this folk drama, both to expand the repertoire and to increase revenue. The choice of folk-drama form was likely appealing because it could reach broad audiences while advancing democratic social ideals. *Corra, the Gypsy* thus condenses the through-lines of Apraxin's dramatic, prose, and civic commitments.

Across her writings, Apraxin consistently stresses the aristocracy's duty to Hungary (love of country), the need for an active elite, and the imperative of education—what she elsewhere calls an “aristocracy of mind.” Reception texts indicate that contemporary responses to her adoption of the patriotic woman's cultural mission (Mátay 2010; Kovács 2013; Bozsoki 2019) were far from uniform. Her extravagances—challenging social and gender norms—provoked ongoing debate. Even so, public perception softened when her literary and artistic ventures were framed as the “fervor of the Hungarian patriotic woman born in Russia” (*Hölgyfutár*, 1863, 31, no. 39, p. 310). Her efforts were cast as the heroic struggle of a foreign aristocrat who embraced a militant role in Hungarian nation-building and made substantial financial and moral sacrifices to “become” Hungarian.

Because the folk drama under analysis addresses Roma emancipation and the dismantling of Gypsy stereotypes, its reception would be invaluable: the play amounts to an explicit statement on behalf of social groups traditionally excluded from, and stigmatized by, nation-building. Unfortunately, no reception dossier has surfaced. Nonetheless, now that the text is available, we can begin to sketch the unusual position this unknown drama likely occupied—and may yet occupy—in the history

84) This is particularly telling when interpreted in light of *Corra*. On Apraxin and the emergence of the first Hungarian art novel written by a woman author and centered on a female artist, see Levente T. Szabó 2024.

28 Today: Košice, Slovakia.

29 Today: Cluj, Romania.

30 Today: Timișoara, Romania.

31 Today: Subotica, Slovakia.

of mid-19th-century popular theater and in the broader context of Roma representation.

4. Conclusions

In the work of Júlia Apraxin, the construction of the Gypsy figure is consciously aimed at dismantling the stereotypes of the period. This dismantling is not achieved by negating the problem or by remaining silent about it, but by making the stereotypes themselves visible and by refuting them one by one in the logic of the dramatic text. In the figure of Corra, the aristocratic code of honor is explicitly paired with the bourgeois-democratic canon of values. This pairing not only elevates the Roma protagonist above the ordinary level of characterization in contemporary folk drama, but at the same time turns him into a critic of the Hungarian aristocracy, making his position both exceptional and polemical within the cultural horizon of the period.

Júlia Apraxin's text can thus be regarded as a remarkable contribution to the ongoing construction of the canon of literary representation of the Gypsies. At the same time, it is also a remarkable document in the history of Hungarian theater, in the history of women's literature, and in the history of 19th-century social thought, because it reflects on questions of emancipation, of patriotism, and of the transformation of social ideals. The fact that this drama has remained unknown until now, without reception or influence in its own age, constitutes a significant loss within the cultural canon of the period. Its rediscovery, however, creates the possibility of revisiting, broadening, and re-evaluating our knowledge of the literary representation of the Roma in the 19th century, not only in the Hungarian context but also in a wider European horizon. And this is not such a surprising message coming from the pen of a Russian aristocratic lady who transformed herself into a radical Hungarian patriot, writer, and actress.

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