

NAMES OF CHARACTERS IN PLAYS BY MOLNÁR

Elizabeth M. Rajec
 City College
 of the
 City University of New York

Ferenc Molnár's most popular but somewhat bittersweet play Liliom, first staged in 1909, has inspired numerous theater and film productions, ranging from A Trip to Paradise (a silent movie produced by Metro Pictures), to Carousel, a melodramatic musical play of yesteryear by Rodgers and Hammerstein, to Daisy, a London adaptation, to a modern mystery play interpretation by Fassbinder - to mention only a few of the outstanding variations.

The original title, Liliom, apparently contributed to its legendary "bloom" of seventy-five years, because it encapsulates with great precision the complex theme of an unusual plot. "Liliom" is the Hungarian word for the flower "lily." The New Testament book of Matthew (6:28, 29) states: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow, they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet, I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of them." However, Shakespeare, in Sonnet xciv, points to the fact

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that "lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds." Around this paradox of beauty and decay, respectively life and death, this double image embedded in the namesake of the main protagonist, rotates the plot of the drama.

The swaggering hero of the play, nicknamed Liliom, is a shiftless sharper, but also a barker of pure heart, employed at a carousel at an amusement park on the outskirts of Budapest. As the unusual plot develops, Liliom, the ne'er-do-well, befriends an innocent seventeen-year-old servant girl, almost unwillingly marries her, makes her pregnant, and repeatedly batters her. He loses his barker job, participates in a crime, gets trapped by police, despairs, and commits suicide. He is sentenced to fifteen years in purgatory but is permitted to return to earth to compensate for his sins. In his pathetic attempt to make up for past misdeeds, he endearingly carries a star as a present for his child. He returns, as Odysseus did, unrecognized. When his daughter Luise refuses to take the star, he slaps her. The brutal side of his personality thus wins again and, like Faust, he too is damned forever.

Robert C. Benchley correctly points to the fact that in American slang "lily" means "roughneck" or "rubberneck."¹ Eric Partridge confirms this, emphasizing that the most important characteristics of such a person are that he is ignorant and uncultivated, and a rowdy.² Benjamin Glazer, the

translator of the legend into English, cleverly incorporated the slang meaning into the play.³

"Liliom" is derived from the Latin lilium and can be traced back to the somewhat obscure Greek origin of leirion. A very distinctive plant, the lily blooms on a tall stalk. For the Romans it was the symbol of hope; later for the Christians it was the mark of purity. In European folklore, the lily is placed on graves of the unwed; it is thus also known as the "dead-flower." Various of these symbolic images are easily traceable throughout the plot. Julie, the innocent girl, hopes to bring about a change in Liliom's way of life. To some extent she succeeds, as the prospect of fatherhood inspires him to reach out for the stars. Nonetheless, he fails tragically.

It might be of some interest to point out here that Julie's family name "Zeller" means "celery," like "lily" the name of a plant. In medicine, an extract from this herbaceous plant is used as a nerve sedative. Julie Zeller indeed is the soothing element in Liliom's life. The roughneck rascal of the merry-go-round lives an unproductive life and is inarticulate in his love. In spite of it, Julie tries - here literally - to pull the rowdy out of the gutter. Instead of caressing her, he repeatedly beats her. Although Liliom becomes euphoric - has an almost animalistic outburst - when informed of his

impending fatherhood, in his machismo, Liliom considers tenderness a betrayal of manhood, and he is unable to change even after his return from Heaven's anteroom.

When caught by the police, Liliom reveals that his real name is Andreas Zavoczki. "Andreas" is of Greek origin and means "manly, virile." Folklore has it that on November 30, the name day of Andreas, girls and boys can catch sight of their future husbands or wives. When Julie saw the handsome Liliom, she knew that her fate was determined forever. But so did Liliom in his own dawdling way.

For a Hungarian play the name "Zavoczki" is rather unusual. It is Slavic in origin and can be associated with "competition," as in a contest (závod). The suffix "-czki" stresses the masculine version of the name. Our macho hero competes even for the star. However, because of his quick-tempered rough nature, he becomes a loser in life's contest. The paradox of beauty and decay embedded in the onoma of the protagonist stimulates the confrontation but also spurs the tragic climax. Julie, in principle, is altruistic, Liliom egoistic. Liliom basically is the story of an "outsider" who lives his life without a purpose, as the lily of the field does. Julie, on the other hand, is the "insider," a homely mother. The tragic clash is therefore inevitable.

Liliom's simplicity and naïveté come to the surface when

he is pitted against Ficsur, a sinister and crafty knife wielder who lures our hero to participate in a crime. A Mephistophelian character, Ficsur is the personification of evil. His name means "dandy, dude" and indeed he is a first-class tempter, cleverly using the somewhat hesitant Liliom as his bait.

Julie's counterpart is Mrs. Muskát, the proprietress of the carousel. "Muskát(li)" is the Hungarian word for the wild geranium plant. In Hungarian folklore the red geranium is a very popular flower mentioned frequently in ballads and folk-songs. Mrs. Muskát (note here without the diminutive) loves the handsome young hero. She manipulates him not only with her ripe body's carnal passion but also tempts him with bread and butter - thus assuring for Liliom an easy existence as well as using him to lure a crowd of young girls to the carousel, which, in return, ensures her livelihood. Again it is of interest to point out that the dried roots of the geranium are used in medicine as an astringent to contract blood vessels. Mrs. Muskát bids for Liliom with two powerful elements: sex and money. In spite of her clever temptations, the contract is won by Julie's innocence and youth.

The nomenclature of minor characters in the play can also be traced to horticulture. For instance, the photographic studio at the amusement park is owned by a Mrs. Hollunder. Holunder means "elder tree," which, when blooming, displays a cluster

of small white flowers that ripen to grape-like berries. When made into wine, it acts as a laxative. As the elder tree enriches and scents the countryside, so does Mrs. Hollunder's photo studio relax couples in love when posing for a snapshot to be carried home as a sweet memento.

In the supernatural court scene characters appear with simple descriptive names. Dr. Reich (meaning "rich" also "kingdom, empire") admits to being guilty of killing himself with a pistol because of heavy debts. A poor man by the name of Kádár (meaning "wine-cooper") confesses that for his crime he jumped out of a window. Basically, the names occurring in Liliom, be they outrightly descriptive or camouflaged behind plant names, not only support the plot but also reinforce the appropriateness of the original title, thus rotating around the essential core of the legend.

Liliom's fame enhanced Molnár's popularity a great deal. Puccini, for instance, wanted to compose an opera using the play as the basis for its libretto. Molnár refused the offer. However, when approached by Rodgers and Hammerstein, he gave his consent. First it was a successful stage production and later a film, the first CinemaScope movie ever produced. For the musical play Carousel, the original locale of Budapest was transplanted to an imaginary New England scene of 1875 to 1888. In this recreated Americana with a happy ending the characters were also renamed. Liliom became Billy Bigelow and Julie Zeller was re-

named Julie Jordan. Mrs. Muskát's name is Mrs. Mullin, and the villain Ficsur changes to Jigger Craigin, who, by the way, is always dressed in red. Needless to say, the continental patina got lost in this somewhat stylish Salem background. In his review, Harold Clurman stated that the "honeyed paprika" of the original play was transformed to a "pasteurized and sugared buttermilk."⁴ It is not the purpose of this study to compare the names of the two settings. However, the dualistic constellation of Big(e)low is worth mentioning here because it cleverly encompasses Liliom's rough and somewhat bittersweet character.

Other plays written by Molnár went through a similar metamorphosis. For instance, The Guardsman, when performed in Paris at the Comédie Royale in 1913, was transplanted from its Viennese atmosphere to that of St. Petersburg. The characters were also renamed. The journalist was named Kremoff, the female character was christened Sonia, and the nameless actor of the original version became Mirsky. Not only did it create a disturbing distortion but it also deprived the play of its natural Austro-Hungarian habitat. In some productions of Fashions for Men, the storekeeper's name was changed from Juhász (shepherd) to Berger (mountain man). The "goodness" of the almost biblical shepherd diminished somewhat in the characterization of the gentle storekeeper. Perhaps even more farfetched was the metamorphosis of One, Two, Three, a comedy written in 1929, to a silly post-World

War II movie version. The film was produced in 1961 at the peak of the East-West European crisis. The filmmakers reduced the crisis to a whirl of events between a rich American girl from Georgia named Scarlett Hazeltine, the daughter of a high-level executive of the Coca-Cola Company, and a boy from East Berlin named Otto Ludwig Piffel. Not only were the characters renamed, but the cosmopolitan setting of prewar Europe was completely distorted.

Molnár was born in Budapest on January 12, 1878, of a Jewish family named Neumann. As Behrman correctly points out, the shift from Neumann to Molnár "was a gesture of patriotic assertion rather than of escape."⁵ Molnár felt strongly that as a Hungarian writer he could not write under a German name! "Molnár," a common Hungarian name, stands for "miller." The name can also be traced to the playwright's favorite uncle.

Molnár achieved international fame as early as 1907 with the play The Devil. Ermete Zacconi, the noted Italian actor, saw the play in Budapest and soon after premiered it in Turin, Italy. He played the part of the devil for over thirty years. The premiere in Turin attracted eminent theater personalities, and soon The Devil was playing in practically every European capital. In 1908, for instance, it premiered simultaneously in four theaters in New York: two English productions on Broadway, one German production, and a Yiddish version. In a single the-

ater season it was performed in about 800 theaters worldwide. The Devil attracted at least two movie producers. The first film version was produced in 1908 by American Mutoscope under the direction of D.W. Griffith. In a later version (Pathé Exchange, 1921) George Arliss portrayed the malicious devil. Needless to say, some productions transplanted the locale and renamed the characters. In the English version by Herford, noted by Clara Györgyey, the locale was changed to Vienna.⁶

In the original version, the devil introduces himself as Dr. Müller. The other heroes of the play have ordinary descriptive names. The artist, for instance, is simply called Mahler (painter); others are named Grosser (bigger), Besser (better), Lassen (omit, to leave), and Hofmann (courtier). Molnár, here in German camouflage, dares to expose a psychological study of evil. This Mephistophelian protagonist - in contrast to the vulgar Ficsur - appears on the stage in black evening attire. Only the red flashing lining and the red carnation in his buttonhole emphasize his satanic character. This malicious, elegant man "represents the Power of Evil in the minds of men and a woman who are being drawn together in illicit love."⁷ Edmund Wilson, who saw a revival of the play in Budapest, claims that Molnár "made to represent the hidden impulses of sincere passion which are at war with the social exactions."⁸

Molnár's adopted name obviously influenced The Red Mill,

a play in which Satan's Prime Minister rules. This elaborate extravaganza was produced in English by David Belasco on Broadway in 1928 under the title Mima. The characters of this tale of more than conjugal misfits appear either anonymously or are known by their first names only (Alfons, János, Ilonka, Etel, etc.). However, the staff of engineers, who manipulate the psycho-corrupter constellation of iron and steel, have meaningful, often hilariously witty Italian names (Rubicante, Calcabrina, Farfarello, Libicocco, etc.). Their tasks match their names. With the help of technology, they transfer "the purest of souls into complete fiendishness."⁹

Molnár was known to be superstitious. He believed in the lucky number seven and gave some of his plays seven-letter titles.¹⁰ He carried this to such an extreme that even some of the translated versions fit this pattern: Riviera, Olympia, A Doktor, Farsang, A Testőr, A Hattyú, Marsall, Az Őrdög, The Swan, Szinház, Marshal, The Wolf, Theater, and so on. Some plays are restricted to seven roles, also. The Guardsman or The Play's the Thing should suffice as illustration. Olympia's original version, called The Blue Eyed, had ten characters. Molnár rewrote it in order to reduce the protagonists to seven.¹¹ In the first version, the name picked for the heroine was Johanna. In spite of the magic seven letters, the author found the name insignificant and supposedly searched for quite a

while before he came across the name Olympia. To his satisfaction, it described exactly the character of an audacious, conceited, but also royal highness.

It should be stressed in conclusion that very few modern authors can match Ferenc Molnár's imposing list of successful writings. On Broadway alone his plays totaled 2,148 first-run performances.¹² About 50 films can be associated with his name. His works were translated into all major languages.

Molnár had "the ability to sustain suspense, to portray the intimate inconsistencies of human nature reflected in the conduct of 'polite' society and in the conduct of the underprivileged."¹³ Although his plays "showed originality in treatment of absurd situations in society,"¹⁴ they were often sentimental in nature, stressing the irrelevancies and trivialities of a bourgeois society. Thus, with time, enthusiasm for some of Molnár's plays diminished somewhat. However, Liliom, his masterpiece, did not shrivel away. The rowdy's joy, the universal feeling of fatherhood, the hope of a better future for a son or daughter so euphorically expressed, seem to have survived. The recent celebration of Broadway's best musicals at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., included Bigelow's song and proved again that the "lily" has neither faded nor withered away. The enthusiastic applause testified that Molnár's "lily" still blooms with all its dramatic splendor!

Elizabeth M. Rajec
City College
City University of New York

NOTES

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4. Harold Clurman, "Theater: 'Carousel'," Nation, 178 (June 26, 1954), p. 550.
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7. Ryan Walker, "'The Devil': A Powerful Drama of Mental Suggestion," The Arena, 40 (July-December, 1908), p. 536.
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