

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**PERSPECTIVES FOR RETHINKING THE LITERARY HISTORICAL ROLE
OF THE HUNGARIAN EPIC IN VERSE (16TH CENTURY)**

Czintos Emese

Supervisor: Dr. Bitskey István



DEBRECENI EGYETEM

Irodalomtudományok Doktori Iskola

I. Aims of the thesis

The aim of the thesis is to map the place of popular, entertaining readings in the context of theories, or rather discourses, of literary thinking in 16th-century Hungary. The most popular type of secular readings in this century was the so-called historical song (epic in verse), therefore this paper seeks to investigate this genre, and primarily its subtype of amorous or adventurous subject. My primary interest is to disclose the role of this genre in its own age in terms of the history of genres, ideas and readings, what were the influences that led to its formation, and which were the techniques by which it could integrate a topic and rhetorical or poetical role or discourse utterly foreign to its original generic or ideological context. The paper discusses the appearance and context of an *intent*, whose relevance for the 16th-century history of literature stands in that it was the first appearance in the history of Hungarian literature of a literary form as a preliminary of “literature” in the modern sense, which had the intention to invent and offer *readings* to the audience, in addition to the customary applicative mode of being of early modern literacy. The analysis of this mostly implicit, although at times also explicit, textually expressed intention of *offering readings* needs several approaches, raising, among others, theoretical and methodology issues. For one, how can one formulate questions emerging under the influence of contemporary literary studies and theoretical apparatus in such a way that it may not be foreign for the literary studies and theoretical apparatus of the examined age as well?

The analysis of the texts of 16th century epic in verse and their historical context guided my attention to how a new and previously unknown discourse appeared in this written textual form, which cannot be described either by the criteria of a situational, applicative, religious literacy, or by the pattern of the functionality of scientific or didactic genres. Seeking then how this Hungarian textual type of epic in verse form can be described in order to distinguish it from other textual types of the age, I found that the difference could be an *intent*, that these texts, beyond their applicative value, offer themselves as readings. The paper examines therefore the source of this intent, its realization, and the place and manner of its appearance in the material under scrutiny. It offers perspectives, marks directions other than the customary genre historical framework for the analysis of the role of 16th-century epic in verse in the history of Hungarian literature.

The intention of offering *reading material* is an interpreter’s, observer’s formulation given by an external viewpoint, which, in order to be valid for 16th-century written texts, must be grasped in a theoretical terminological framework which was available for the authors and

readers of that age. This is basically the terminology of early modern rhetoric and poetics, or more precisely the rhetorical-poetical distinctions on the functionality of a text. Theories on the reception mechanisms of written texts are found in the rhetorical and poetical manuals of the examined age. These regulate how a prose or poetic work must influence its audience, what kind of thoughts, feelings or reactions it must trigger – to teach, delight and move, *docere, delectare, movere/flectere* – in accordance with its subject, the type of the text, and the characteristics of the audience.

The second term of both terminological systems – delight, *delectare*, the function referred to by Horace's term *dulce* – gains special importance from this paper's perspective. Taking delight in reading as one purpose and meaning of a written text, of literature, has always been attached to secular and vernacular literature. However, it was never as self-explicit as this statement may imply. Moreover, it was precisely the Hungarian literary thinking of the 16th century which left very little room to delight or entertainment besides the salutary role of teaching. The theoretical formulation of delight or entertainment taken in reading never appeared in such a pure form in early modern theoreticians' writings. In a functional insight, the two concepts denote in fact the same purpose of a literary work, in a different light: "delight" is the translation of *delectare*, contained in both poetical and rhetorical works, the (anachronistically speaking) aesthetic delight taken in reading a text, which can be obtained by the feature of *dulce*, pleasantness. At the same time, this is the function of the literary work which, throughout the history of literary thinking at least as late as early modernity never meant the sole cause or purpose of literature.

The entertaining nature of a work of literature is a less elevated, less theoretical formulation of the same aspect, which considers reading or literary pursuits important firstly because of reasons of good health (today we should say: of mental hygiene) or dietetics, in addition to such other activities as hunting.

However, although not in the manner of theoretical reflections, the Hungarian popular literature of the 16th century was aware of forms of literary production meant for delight or entertainment.

II. Methodological considerations

My investigations drew together the researches, approaches and methodology of several disciplines, and the findings of these were corroborated with textual analytical methods.

Researches in the histories of ideas, genres, readings, or typography, rhetorical and poetical analyses and the textual examination of historical songs were placed side by side; that is to say, the paper intended to interpret the role of the analyzed genre in the 16th-century literary production at the crossing point of a historical reading and an analytical, discursive one.

The first chapter of the thesis (The historical song as discourse) discusses thus the terminological and generic problems connected to the historical song, as a summary and partly also criticism of previous research. This first part also analyzes the legitimating techniques that the historical song uses to be able to integrate the traces of a discourse originally foreign from their own discourse: delectation.

The printing press of Gáspár Heltai had an outstanding role in the popularization of the historical song, especially in the period when the press was taken over by the widow of the notable priest and printer. Therefore the publishing activity of Heltai and then his widow are treated in a separate chapter within the thesis, this is the second one, entitled History of reading and publishing policies. The Heltai-print. The discussion of Mrs. Heltai's activity also fills a gap in the history of Hungarian typography, because the operation of the press after Heltai's death is quite sketchily treated in the literature. Mrs. Heltai's activity is discussed in a reception historical approach, examining the possible audience of her many historical songs, hypothesizing about a possible female audience. At the end of this chapter I offer a brief overview of the afterlife of this typography in the 17th century, trying to explain the decline of the genre and marking one direction of possible future research.

The third chapter of the dissertation, On the edge of exemplum and fiction: the *széphistória* deals with the generic and thematic issues of the genre of par excellence *delectatio*, the *széphistória*. After presenting the entire 16th-century corpus of such histories of amorous or adventurous subjects, I wish to highlight how the appearance of a new subject influenced and changed the textual type of the historical song. The basis of my analysis is one colligate of the Teleki-Bolyai Library in Târgu Mureș, which contains four histories in verse written between 1539 and 1577, and printed between 1574 and 1577. These are completed by three other histories which have one of Boccaccio's novellas as a source (one of these is also found in the colligate), this way the paper also touches upon the problem of Boccaccio's Hungarian reception in the 16th century.

Finally, in chapter four, Rhetoric, poetics, ideology: the Eurialus and Lucretia, as a case study, I present the mutual operation of genre and ideology in one of the most representative

histories in verse of the age, the story and Eurialus and Lucretia, in the moment of its happening, as an illustration of the claims of this thesis.

III. Findings

My basic hypothesis was to answer a question that can equally be relevant for the history of literature or the sociology of reading: namely, whether the appearance of the requirement of *delectatio* resulted in any kind of long, process-like change in the formation of “aesthetic reading” in the history of Hungarian literature. Originally, I wanted to find how the changes occurring in one particular age regarding literary thinking related to such ideas of earlier ages, or how they shaped the literary thinking of ages to come. Furthermore, I also sought to ask if the appearance of the traces of a new discourse was able to have its short- or long-term effects and influence the reading habits and the requirements that both authors and readers expected from genres of secular literature. It seems meaningful to ask these questions with regard to the preliminaries, since there are indeed connections and causal relations, cultural or literary historical parallels or preliminaries, which may explain the nature of the Hungarian genre of the historical song, or in a wider scope, the Hungarian literature of the 16th century, as it formed at the crossing points of various ideologies and discourses. It is more difficult however to answer these questions if we look at the afterlife of the historical song. As seen at the end of the second chapter, the beginning of the 17th century shows a completely different picture, which renders relative the meaning of the previous question, namely, whether the historical song had an important role in a process, that of the formation of “aesthetic reading”. The answer to this question looks beyond the limits of this paper, pointing to further research in the directions highlighted in it, poetics, rhetoric, genre history, or the history of reading: some such directions are further insights into the *historia–fabula* poetical dichotomy, the rhetorical background and application of the three purposes of teaching–delight–moving, more detailed research on typological questions discussed in chapter I, or the comparative analysis of Hungarian popular writings on a religious nature, such as catechisms or prayer books, based on criteria similar to those applied in this paper. On the basis of these investigations, one could also answer the question whether the popularity of the genre of the historical song in the 16th century was indeed the starting point of a process, or we should be content with the statement that they were efficient in their own time, satisfying momentary needs for reading material and erudition, but without becoming parts of a wider literary historical process.

Although these questions cannot be reassuringly answered as yet, I still consider that the most important conclusion of the dissertation is the way that it outlines, in the mirror of various historical and analytical readings, the ideological background of the historical song and within it pre-eminently its amorous type, the *széphistória*, while it sheds light on how a new genre is formed by the mobilization and combination of various poetical and rhetorical traditions, which meant for the 16th-century Hungarian reader a completely new realm, a previously unknown means of acquiring information, reading, and, last but not least, entertainment.

IV. The author's publications in this subject

Czintos Emese, *Műfaj és ideológia viszonya a levél műfajában: Az Eurialus és Lucretia szerelmes levelei*, (Genre and ideology in the genre of the letter: love letters in the *Eurialus and Lucretia*) LKKT (A kolozsvári Láthatatlan Kollégium elméleti folyóirata) 5 2001/5, 16-20.

G. Czintos Emese, *Istoria lecturii și politici editoriale în Transilvania sec. al XVI-lea* (History of reading and publishing policy in 16th century Transylvania) = *Hermeneutica Bibliothecaria: Antologie Philobiblon*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană-BCU „Lucian Blaga”, 2004, 389-422.

G. Czintos Emese, *A szerelem retorikája: a levélműfaj alakváltozatai az Eurialus és Lucretiá-ban* (The rhetoric of love: shapes of the genre of the letter in the *Eurialus and Lucretia*) = *A történetmondás rétegei a kora újkorban*, szerk. Gábor Csilla, Kolozsvár: Scientia Kiadó, 2005, 141-171.

G. Czintos Emese, *Exemplum és fikció határán: a széphistória* (On the edge of exemplum and fiction: the history in verse) = *Szöveghagyomány és íráskultúra a korai újkorban*, szerk. Gábor Csilla, Kolozsvár: Egyetemi Műhely Kiadó, 2007, 9-36.

G. Czintos Emese, *A históriás ének mint beszéd mód: A delectatio nyomai a 16. századi históriás énekek kiadásában* (The historical song as discourse: Traces of *delectatio* in 16th century

historical songs) = *Tinódi Sebestyén és a régi magyar verses epika*, szerk. Csörsz Rumen István, Kolozsvár: Kriterion, 2008, 31-42.

G. Czintos Emese, *Erdélyi széphistória-kiadások* (Transylvanian editions of the history in verse) = *Erdély reneszánsza*, 2. kötet, szerk. Gábor Csilla, Luffy Katalin, Sipos Gábor, Kolozsvár: EME, 2009, 251–256.

G. Czintos Emese, Kolumbán Judit. *Popular Literature in Decline: 17th Century Popular Books In the Collections of the Lucian Blaga Central University Library Cluj*, Philobiblon – Transylvanian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Humanities, 2009/14, 150–159.

G. Czintos Emese, *History of Reading and Publishing Policies in 16th Century Transylvania (Or: The Name of Mrs Heltai)*, Philobiblon – Transylvanian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Humanities, 2011/1, 26–53.