

THESES OF PhD DISSERTATION

Texts and textiles **The literacy of virtuous women in the 17th–18th centuries**

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a, The aim of the dissertation, delineation of the subject

In my dissertation, I endeavor to examine women's literacy in the early modern period and locate the role of textile production as a major activity of virtuous women. The paper fundamentally focuses on the 17th-18th centuries, with occasional outlooks into previous centuries. Given the interdisciplinary and cultural viewpoint of the dissertation, various fields and methods meet during the examination of the subject.

As a broader context, I am going to present the European, Hungarian and Transylvanian possibilities of female education, which were closely interconnected. I primarily focus on written sources when analyzing the picture of the ideal woman that circulates across Europe. The question of female literacy is inseparable from the contemporary assessment of upbringing girls and its varying methods hence, these will also be reviewed. Upon this examination becomes particularly visible that textile fabrication and embroidery are present in all forms of girl parenting, without exception. At the same time, it also points out that the expression and representation of women's education must be sought in material culture as much as in the written sources. Thus, hereinafter, on the one hand, I am going to look at the various moral theological and cultural-historical meanings of embroidery, while on the other trying to create a dialogue between texts and textiles, highlighting that their joint interpretation brings additional perspectives to our current knowledge.

From the 18th-century patronesses, the figure of Kata Bethlen spectacularly shows the result of the "fusion" of texts and textiles. Therefore, my primary goal is to present the validity of this method through the examination of her church donations. With the revelation of the micro contextual medium of the given settlement and the study of threaded works, we can get a hold on the intention of the contributor, and to some extent, the role that the gift itself played in the community. The figure of Kata Wesselényi shows the continuity of tradition and the additional enforceability of the approach, marking out the direction of further research at the same time. On the whole, the objective of the dissertation is to make a contribution to the Kata Bethlen studies and to further complete the picture of the patroness. Furthermore, it strives to present novel ways to approach the already known source groups and to increase our knowledge of women's history.

b, Delineation of the applied methods

The literary, cultural, educational, and art-historical viewpoints that prevail in the dissertation inevitably involve the methods and approaches of these scientific fields. In the IInd chapter of

the thesis, which unravels the possibilities of female literacy, text-based mediums play a central role, and mainly their philological and cultural-historical analysis is applied. The methodology of new material culture studies that come from both art history and social sciences is present. The dissertation wishes to shed light on the strongly descriptive nature of art historical and ethnographic approaches with the methods of the far more dynamic viewpoint of new material culture studies. Within the research that focuses on material mediums, the international results of textile examinations become particularly important for the purposes of the thesis. In foreign professional literature, the standpoint, which sees the various textile works as a tool of self-expression and a way of identity formation is becoming more and more determining, thus attaching the highest importance to the chosen material, techniques, colors, depicted forms, figures, and scenes.

The main perceptual-methodological novelty of the dissertation is that it strives to integrate these seemingly distant approaches that do not reflect to one another, which helps us to have an overview of certain objects and phenomena. In other words, the acknowledgments of the abovementioned directions and scientific fields do not appear separately, but as a whole, creating an interpretative relation with each other. Hence, the perceptual novelty of the dissertation is the interpretation and the dialogue of textiles as a whole. This approach takes the results of literary studies, art history, and history into account, and, with a strict micro contextual analysis, endeavors to unveil the readings of threaded works in a given context. And in a broader sense, it tries to approach the question of European female education in the early modern period by applying this idea.

c, List of results

Chapter I: The introductory chapter includes an overview of research history and methodology, which helps to place the dissertation in the domestic and international context. I briefly display the difficulties of the research and the obstacles of female education – which are not entirely independent of the problems of acquiring knowledge of the past. Research focusing on women's education, their role in the family and their cultural and economic roles have become more and more intensive in the past decades, which in return produced significant results regarding the early modern period as well. The concepts of female way of writing, female literature and female library appeared, which enabled this segment of culture and education to be examinable on its own. The numerous domestic exhibitions, publications, research groups, conferences, and other events, university courses, theses, and dissertations indicate the growing interest in the subject. Basically, in cultural perception that is linked to

texts and literacy, women played a relatively minor role, because due to the roles given and assigned to them, learning and writing-reading skills did not receive special attention and were less widespread. That is why, in addition to the printed sources, research into women's literacy also has to take into account the decisive role of manuscripts, verbal and material culture – which outlines the sources of the dissertation. Craftworks were not only accepted but designated assignments for women, therefore, they were able to prevail in this field more easily. Primarily, art history and ethnography have dealt with these pieces, thanks to which many textiles are well documented and their patterns are thoroughly explored. The results of modern or new material cultural studies coming from social sciences are likewise revelatory, as this direction assumes that objects do not have a subordinated, marginal position in relation to the subject, but they are continually interacting with each other. As a result, they do not simply represent and express the subject, but also create it, contributing to the construction of the individual. An object can play a role in shaping social relations, which depends not only on its material dimension (material, color, design), but also on the current context, which can fundamentally change the meaning and role of the object. Thus, we can see not only the representations of the ever-evolving identity that is conceived as a social construct, but also its active creators; only in which sense we can speak of material identity. The two major contexts of the dissertation are the researches on literary- and women's history, and the results of art history, ethnography and social sciences on material culture. The dissertation intends to join these trends with its analyses.

Chapter II: The second chapter outlines the European – more specifically German – context of education, cultural, and literary history. The image of women in most parts of Europe, together with the prevalence of local specificities, provided a benchmark, influenced the determined behavioral patterns, knowledge, and roles for women. Accordingly, the IInd chapter deals in greater detail with the types of texts and publications which have become the mediators or bearers of this female image, may they either be prescriptive or descriptive. Intending to provide an overview, I touch upon the corpus of life-advisory books, death speeches, and female mirrors, which have influenced each other and were able to become sources for one another. Encyclopedic works, encyclopedias, and especially sample books for textiles are a less evident group of texts, as they are rarely found in Hungarian research, and even then they are merely cited as references or because of their art historical aspects, albeit, their effects are detectable. For this reason, it seems appropriate to introduce some editions in

more detail. The corpus of sample books is an important source not only for women's literacy, but also regarding textiles and embroidery, and indicates the inseparable unity of the two.

Prescriptive text types such as etiquette guides, women's mirrors and portraits, life-advisory books, death speeches, women's libraries (list of recommended reading), newspapers aiming at morality (*moralische Wochenschrifte*), and papers on women's issues (*querelle des femmes*), which – regarding their function not far from later educational regulations – are of high importance in Europe because of the absence of female education up until the middle of the 18th-century. Although, these are texts with different types of rhetorical, genre-specific rules, their – mostly – explicit goal is to draw a picture of a woman to follow, intended to be an educational and behavioral model.

Regarding both Europe and Hungary, as well as Transylvania, prescriptive writings, which in fact created the ideal woman, can be distinguished from the more descriptive texts, which recorded the realization and practical form of education and literacy. Our main sources for this latter category consists of letters, diaries, autographs, book lists, and women's literary activities, which have typically appeared in the writing and translation of prayers, reflections, and poems. Naturally, the two groups were not sharply separated, as, for example, literacy in a descriptive text type could become exemplary for others, and the compilation of women's readings and libraries could be heavily influenced by prescriptive lists, so different text types interacted with each other in a specific oscillation. As a result, textbooks, syllabuses, and alphabet books represent a frontier, the prescriptive character of which was strongly influenced by practical needs and experiences, thus, at the same time, they can also be considered as descriptive text types. From the beginning of the 18th-century, more and more pedagogical works were published, which also had prescriptive intentions, but in practice, they were regarded as recommendations that were applied with the appropriate additions and modifications.

Chapter III: The third chapter attempts to explore and position the role of the various techniques of textile production within women's literacy. Accordingly, it first gives a comprehensive picture of girls' education and other various forms of education, both in Europe and Hungary. Besides home- and ecclesiastic education, institutional public education became more and more important in the 18th-century, which, through its regulations and unifying aim, facilitates the tracing of the composition and contents of female literacy. This is considered to be the greatest novelty compared to the forms of education so far, which nevertheless remained in practice. Home and institutional education, ecclesiastic and public

education can be distinguished from each other, and each type had an impact on the content and curriculum of the training. Home education meant the greatest freedom and was the most personalized and tailor-made training for a later role and profession, so we can count it as the least uniform knowledge. Religious education was necessarily the most emphasized form of institutional ecclesiastic education, which was also complemented by high-quality education in other areas of knowledge. Religious education, while it did not necessarily become dominant in the curriculum, continued to play a role in urban, and later in public schools, and rather depended on the profile of the institution (e.g. vocational training). A historical overview of the different types of education and training helps us better understand what knowledge was available to girls and what opportunities were they provided with.

In addition to the picture of the ideal woman presented earlier, this chapter explores the haphazard nature and sometimes very different possibilities of women's education and knowledge. In every case, this knowledge included the acquisition of some - or even several - textile techniques, which, however, had different statuses, so their knowledge and application were related to the expression of rank and literacy. Terminologically it is also worth clarifying that the concept of textile making refers to a broad category, which includes fabric production, spinning, various weaving processes, and methods of decoration (e.g. embroidery, lace blending). The higher and more affluent was the social class that someone belonged to, the finer techniques she applied, which is especially relevant regarding embroidery. The aristocratic manor courts were the main locations of education and textile production, which, for the most part, were organized in a self-sufficient manner and according to their own rules and customs. Hiring a tutor was customary, who also taught the children of relatives and close acquaintances. The primary task of the girls was to learn household management, gracious living, and various embroidery techniques. Embroidery workshops operated in almost every manor court, where textiles were produced for the household and for supporting the church. All of these were elements of the patroness' status, which was an extensive, versatile role. This chapter leads to a deeper introduction, and text and textile examination of the two patronesses, Kata Bethlen and Kata Wesselényi.

Chapter IV: The first and foremost novelty of the dissertation is the chapter examining the donations of Kata Bethlen, which attempts to shed light on some – so far – unnoticed and unexplored connections. The figure of Kata Bethlen has outstanding source attributes amongst 18th-century noble and high-ranking women. Texts and textiles associated with her survived, including the only published autobiography by a woman from the early modern period written

in Hungarian. The patroness created works regularly in both fields, leaving well-documented, significant material base, which is particularly suited for such research. The joint reading of texts and textiles shades the settled interpretations and adds further results to previous research. In the case of Kata Bethlen's textiles from Fogaras, Olthévíz, and Debrecen, this approach can show how the donations have integrated into the representation of the patroness, how they became an expression of faith and denominational identity, and hence, a means of confessional polemic. In addition to analyzing the pattern, color and material use of threaded works, a more accurate interpretation is made possible through the inclusion of patronal letters, prayers, autographs, publications supported by, and contemporary texts related to her. It indicates that the given context can show and amplify the various tones of meaning that the textiles convey. It is important to emphasize, however, that due to the lack of sources, the interpretations presented in the dissertation merely represent a possible reading, which proves to be well-argued based on our currently known data. The concept could be further strengthened by involving the reception of textiles, which, if the sources are appropriate, can indicate whether the donations have played their designated role in the community or have been interpreted in accordance with the donor's intention.

The Kata Bethlen research points out on several occasions that the culture building and supporting activities of the noblewoman go well beyond the texts defining her canonization – above all, her autobiography. Her church supporting, book-gathering, and medical activities, as well as the fact that she operated a paper mill, supported the publishing of books, and set up a scholarship for the students of the Nagyenyed College, are of similar importance. Her patronal manifestations include congregation founding (Olthévíz), supporting church building and church equipment fabrication (Fogaras), donating equipment for the Holy Table (Debrecen), and sometimes converting people from other denominations (Olthévíz). From the well-known donations of Kata Bethlen, the textiles of Fogaras, Olthévíz, and Debrecen are studied and presented more thoroughly. Based on the use of materials, colors, and patterns, I strive to explore their meaning in the given context, taking the micro context and the creative intent of the creator into account.

The selected donations, although they bear different motifs, have the unanimous position in the literature that their iconography is not typical of early modern (mainly Hungarian) threaded works and that their decoration is not typical. The unusual motifs, which, however, seem to characterize the work of Kata Bethlen – above all the depiction of evangelist symbols – arouse interest, thus, in the following subchapters I endeavor to explore their possible

meanings. The Fogaras textiles – by all means amongst the Reformed – are unique because these were transformed, had an original purpose, and their patterns that are related to these facts make it clear that these textiles were not made for ecclesiastic use. On the contrary, the iconography of the donations from Olthévíz reveals that the tablecloth and the handkerchief, which depict the lamb with a flag and the symbols of the evangelists, were specifically intended for the Holy Table. This iconography is featured on the donations of Kata Bethlen frequently, and from all the textiles that have survived to date we first encounter this type on the 1735 piece.

The same pattern, layout, and use of materials can be seen on the Debrecen textiles, in which case the place of donation differs from the usual scheme, as in the past, the family manor itself, and/or contributions to church building and congregation support provided the personal contact, which explained the patronage. We do not know of such direct relationship to Debrecen, and the fact that it is a Reformed Center, is a moderately convincing reason, as we do not know of any *clenodias* that were donated to Cluj-Napoca or Sárospatak - although from a denominational point of view these are cities of similar importance, even though they are not so homogeneous. Finally, an important aspect was that the donations of Kata Bethlen from these three settlements are enhanced by autopsy, which is essential for analysis.

In the supplement list, this section is complemented by a table which contains all currently known Kata Bethlen donations. In the case of the patroness, our knowledge of *clenodias* is very haphazard, and we often only know that the donation happened, and the accounts are frequently inaccurate in this regard. In addition, the examination of the textiles, and tin and alloy items related to Kata Bethlen was often done separately, hence, the systematic record of the patroness' church donations have so far been lacking. The supplementary table of the dissertation thus attempts to summarize and systematize the church donations (be it textiles or metal objects) which, to our current knowledge, can be found in material and – sometimes exclusively – written sources and can be linked to the Reformed patroness. By arranging already published and scattered reports, autopsical confirmation and object description, the chapter seeks to provide a coherent picture of temple equipment which were donated by Kata Bethlen.

Chapter V: The figure of Kata Wesselényi compared to Zsuzsanna Lorántffy and her 18th-century contemporary Kata Bethlen, may have been in the background of professional interest and this is mainly due to her manuscript heritage; her prayer diary is still being kept in the Teleki Library in Târgu-Mureş. The figure of Kata Wesselényi is connected to this building in

several strands, as the building complex and library, which was later developed by Sámuel Teleki and Zsuzsanna Bethlen, was created by expanding the property inherited from Wesselényi. Archival sources do not clarify the date when Kata Wesselényi bought the land and the building, but it is certain that construction began in 1775, and ended sometime in the 1780s. In her will, she left the building in Târgu-Mureș to her cousin Zsuzsanna Bethlen of Iktár and her husband, and from 1799 to 1802 it was expanded and converted into the Teleki Library we see today. Furthermore, Zsuzsanna Bethlen also inherited the library of the patroness, thanks to which it is also part of the collection.

The activities of Kata Wesselényi were well-aligned with the patroness role of the 18th-century, quite similar to the case of Kata Bethlen, and her church support, book collection, construction activities, her letters, as well as her housekeeping, medical, and writer performance are all very significant. Beyond the temporal, social, regional, and denominational similarities, it appears that Kata Bethlen directly influenced her, since the *Védelmező erős Pais* [Strong Protecting Shield] is in the book list of Kata Wesselényi. We do not have data on whether she knew of the autobiography of Kata Bethlen; based on the catalogue of the library she did not have a copy, however, she could have known of the work. Thus, the relationship between the writings of the two patronesses is an example of a more direct and identifiable form of tradition inheritance. The examination of the narrative tradition of the two contemporary Transylvanian patronesses is more exciting and goes further than the similarities of the written, and necessarily selected and edited career description, which, regarding credibility, can easily be problematic. Beyond the concrete events, the need for (self) presentation, the intention of publishing, the linguistic form, and the topos usage of the life story become more interesting from the dissertation's point of view. Upon analyzing the prayer diaries of Kata Wesselényi, the texts of Kata Bethlen are primarily not to be considered as direct antecedents, but as a patterns that also influenced the patroness' writing, along with the similar social status, literacy, and family writing.

Textiles bearing the name of Kata Wesselényi and prayers and invocations closely related to her life are also known, but due to the manuscript form of the latter group of sources it has received less publicity. However, the persona of the patroness is well suited for a joint examination of texts and textiles, and to validate this comparative approach. An analysis that is similar to the one of Kata Bethlen donations is another tasks of the research, but this possibility may have already been demonstrated in the present form of the dissertation.

This way, the validity of the method becomes apparent in the cases of other noblewomen, furthermore, the fact that the relationship between the two patronesses allows the continuity of tradition to be shown is of crucial importance.

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On the whole, the dissertation intends to apply the results, theoretical considerations and approaches of the presented researches and tries to prove that, with the appropriate modifications, they can be successfully applied in the case of the Hungarian material as well, and they are able to reveal so far hidden relations. It derives from this methodology that the dissertation undertakes the close analysis of texts and textiles grasping the phenomenon more from the creative side rather than from the side of reception.

Appendix: The order of the appendices follows the structural logic of the dissertation and provide a more in-depth analysis for each chapter. The front sections of the various editions of the analyzed *Frauenzimmer-Lexicon* visually also indicate the designated areas of female education. The perspective shift of subsequent editions of the writing can also be traced visually, so an analysis of these sections is of high importance for the interpretation of the entire publication. The dedicated editions from the sample book corpus are examined in more detail. The various components and the image of the virtuous woman which appear in the dedications fall within the scope of the dissertation, therefore the purpose of this chapter is to explore its content and rhetorics. Accordingly, the original, transcribed text of the presented dedications is also included in the appendix.

This is followed by the aforementioned table that is connected to the chapter on the donations of Kata Bethlen. This is one of the important, and independent results of the dissertation. Photographs of the textiles that have been selected for further analysis are also included in the appendix to facilitate their interpretation. Finally, there is also a poem in the appendix, in connection with the chapter presenting the texts and textiles of Kata Wesselényi, titled *Magyar Ország Ditsérete* [Praise of Hungary], which can be found in the manuscript diary of the patroness. Since this text was never published, its inclusion amongst the appendices seems justifiable.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (4)

1. **Gesztelyi, H. Á.:** A 18. századi polgári és nemes nők műveltsége az 1715-ös Frauenzimmer-Lexicon alapján.
In: Lelkiség és oktatás a régi Magyarországon. Szerk.: Bajáki Rita, Báthory Orsolya, MTA-PPKE Barokk Irodalom és Lelkiség Kutatócsoport, Budapest, 83-98, 2018, (Pázmány irodalmi műhely. Lelkiségtörténeti tanulmányok, ISSN 2060-7385 ; 18.) ISBN: 9789635088904
2. **Gesztelyi, H. Á.:** Térítő terítő?: Bethlen Kata úrasztali abrosza az unitárius Olthévízen.
In: Szöveg, hordozó, közösség: Olvasóközönség és közösségi olvasmányok a régi magyar irodalomban : Fiatalok konferenciája 2015. Szerk.: Gesztelyi Hermina, Görög Dániel, Maróthy Szilvia, Reciti, Budapest, 33-40, 2016.
3. **Gesztelyi, H. Á.:** A női vallásosság lehetőségei és elvárt formái a hímzésmentakönyvek ajánlásai alapján a kora újkorban.
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Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (1)

5. **Gesztelyi, H. Á.:** Mit keres a szoknya az asztalon?: Bethlen Kata fogarasi adományainak elemzése.
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6. **Gesztelyi, H. Á.**: Bethlen Kata templomi adományai.

Erdélyi Múzeum. 80 (1), 88-109, 2018. ISSN: 1453-0969.

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Kereszt. Magvető. 123 (2-3), 345-358, 2017. ISSN: 1222-8370.

List of other publications

Hungarian books (1)

8. Szerk. **Gesztelyi, H. Á.**, Görög, D., Maróthy, S.: Szöveg, hordozó, közösség: olvasóközönség és közösségi olvasmányok a régi magyar irodalomban : Fiatalok konferenciája 2015. Reciti Kiadó, Budapest, 242 p., 2016. ISBN: 9786155478246

Hungarian book chapters (1)

9. **Gesztelyi, H. Á.**: "Gondoljunk az ország hölgyeire is, akik díványpárnát hímeznek a lelki üdvösségükért [...]": Rakovszky Zsuzsanna keszkenője és szövegei.
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Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (1)

10. **Gesztelyi, H. Á.**: Kettős önmegjelenítés: A Bethlen Katához köthető iparművészeti alkotások mint az egyéni és közösségi reprezentáció médiumai.
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11. Főszerk. Balajthy, Á.; Korpa, T., szerk. Barna, P., **Gesztelyi, H. Á.**, Jován, K.: Szkhonion: a DE-BTK HÖK művészeti és szakfolyóirata. Debrecen : [Debreceni Egyetem Bölcsészettudományi Kar], 2003-kötetek: 2013



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