

**Popular Literature in Decline  
17<sup>th</sup> Century Popular Books in the Collections of the  
Lucian Blaga Central University Library Cluj**

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**Abstract**

The present paper is a preliminary study endeavouring to find some possible interpretations, both cultural and historical, for the 17<sup>th</sup> century decline in publishing popular literature. The basis of this preliminary study is those few extant copies of popular books published by the Heltai press in the 17<sup>th</sup> century which are housed by the Special Collections Department of the Lucian Blaga Central University Library in Cluj.

This outline has the purpose of putting forward a problem, namely that something happened after the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries which radically cut down the number of such works. The paper concludes that, besides economic reasons, this process was rather explained by a complex set of social-historical reasons (religious wars and disputes, influencing both the general “mood” and interest of readers and writers alike), an assumption which indicates the direction of further research.

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In the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, beginning with the 1570s, it was the printing press of Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca, RO), then inherited by Mrs Caspar Heltai, the widow of the famous writer and printer of the city, which started publishing a great number of popular secular works in the vernacular (i.e., Hungarian) in cheap editions, reminiscent of the early modern chapbooks of Western printing history. The initiative was not hers in fact, as her late husband had already begun printing such “trifles” instead of the much more instructive and, considering the ardent religious

disputes of the century, also quite timely religious books, forced mainly by the political circumstances of the Catholic István Báthory's accession to the princely throne of Transylvania. However, his printing policy had a clear and well defined literary character, in accord with Protestantism's promotion of vernacular literacy.

Mrs Heltai's endeavour, as much as it can be assessed on the basis of the very little direct evidence, notwithstanding the publications of her press, did not have such an erudite purpose; it was arguably more focused on entertainment and profit. In this respect it was the continuation of Debrecen printer András Komlós's enterprise, who also at the beginning of the 1570s and also forced by political circumstances, started printing these low-cost, cheap, and indeed not very high standard books. Whether or not it was the political circumstances only, or it occurred also as a response to a new need in reading habits, it remains hard to assess. However, it is a literary historical fact that the range of popular secular books in the vernacular within all printed publications highly increased in the 1570s.

The most popular genre of such books (around 90 % of all secular popular books, I would say) was the so called "históriás ének" (historical song or history of verse), of which, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, plenty appeared in the printing presses of Kolozsvár and Debrecen. This is a collective genre, comprising epic stories in verse on historical, amorous, adventurous, or mythological subjects or contemporary accounts of the period's most timely issue, the fights with the Turks.<sup>1</sup>

The Heltai press continued its activity under the heirs of Mrs Heltai (first her son, then members of the Heltai family) until well into the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, although it gradually lost its outstanding position to other, more flourishing printing presses in Bártfa (Bardejov, SK), Lőcse (Levoča, SK), Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia, RO), Brassó (Braşov, RO) or Szeben (Sibiu, RO). At the same time, the publication of popular histories in verse also lasted only until the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, their number radically decreased after the turn of the century. This change did not occur at the Heltai press alone, as the radical decrease in the number of histories in verse, so it seems, was an overall characteristic of 17<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian literature, as compared to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, the change was all the more surprising for the

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<sup>1</sup> Some numbers illustrative of the amount of such works in Mrs Heltai's publishing and printing policy: during her eight years of activity (1575-1582), around 75 % of all her publications (36 out of 47) were histories in verse, the remaining were mostly schoolbooks, and only two works had a religious subject.

Heltai press, as that had been the foremost forum for the publication of such works. (It must be noted that the greatest number of such stories in the 17<sup>th</sup> century appeared at the newly founded printing press of Lorenz Brewer in Lőcse). As a comparison, let us look at some statistics for the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The *Répertoire de la poesie hongroise ancienne* (A régi magyar vers repertórium, Repertory of Early Hungarian poetry) lists a number of 101 epical histories in verse with historical and non-historical (37) subjects for the period preceding 1601, but roughly comprising only 30 years (1570-1600), as the publication of such histories had not been that “fashionable” preceding this date. The case for the 17<sup>th</sup> century is completely different: the Bibliography of Early Hungarian Prints (*Régi Magyarországi Nyomtatványok*, eds. Gedeon Borsa et al. (vols. 1 and 2), János Heltai (vol. 3.), Budapest: Akadémiai, 1971; 1983; 2000. Henceforth. RMNy I, II, III.), vols. 2 (1601-1635) and 3 (1636-1655) lists only 23 such works, of which 13 are of an amorous, adventurous, or mythological character, the remaining ten deal with historical or contemporary subjects.<sup>1</sup>

The reasons for this change are not very clear; indeed, I have not found many attempts in literary history to explain this situation. The following pages are but a preliminary study endeavouring to find some possible interpretations, both cultural and historical, for this 17<sup>th</sup> century decline in publishing popular literature.

The basis of this preliminary study (an overview, rather, which requires further research) is those few extant copies of popular books published by the Heltai press in the 17<sup>th</sup> century which are housed by the Special Collections Department of the Lucian Blaga Central University Library in Kolozsvár. This means an amount of only five books (of which two cannot properly be called historical songs on account of not being epical in their plot – one is the dialogue of *Virtus* and *Voluptas*, the other a laudation of women, one of the few in the period, as it is). To complete these five, I have also included one other, a history in verse of *Astiares and Cyrus*, published in Lőcse in 1629, a copy of which also exists in the University Library’s collections. It should be added, however, that these six books are all that the Library possesses of 17<sup>th</sup> century secular popular literature in the vernacular – which is a very low number compared to the copies of 16<sup>th</sup> century similar books.

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<sup>1</sup> Some inconsistency in numbers might occur from the fact that the *Répertoire* also includes some non-printed works; this however does not change at all the proportional difference of these numbers.

A brief overview of the 17<sup>th</sup> century history of the Heltai-press may assist in forming a clearer image on the conditions that ruled the printing press once it lost its two outstanding owners, Mr and Mrs Heltai.

The first name to be mentioned in relation to the 17<sup>th</sup> century typography in Kolozsvár is that of Caspar Heltai Junior. He started his activity probably in 1586, as this is the first year that his name appears in the impressum of the publications. His publications took on a slightly more scientific orientation, besides religious works, or for example the publication of the so popular collection of Cato's wise sayings, *Catonis libellvs elegantissimvs de preaeceptis vitae communis Erasmo Roterodamo castigatore et interprete* (RMNy 868).

Although disparately, popular literature is also represented among his publications, for instance Ráskai's history in verse, *Vitéz Franciskó*, in 1601. The next similar publication only appeared in 1610, the dialogue of Virtus and Voluptas, authored by János Petki. This was the last secular publication of Heltai Jr.'s printing press. Although he died in 1618, he conducted the typography only until 1611, leaving it to his daughter, Anna Heltai (Lang). Her husband, Tamás Lang (Hosszú) probably employed a printer who worked under his own name, in the person of János Makai Nyírő. After Lang's death in 1621, the widow, Anna Heltai, took over the print, but her name only appeared once in the impressum, next to the name of András Szilvási, in the 1624 edition of Péter Huszti's *Aeneis*. After the presupposed death of Makai Nyírő in 1622, András Válaszúti Szilvási became the master printer probably until 1627. It was not until 1624 that a history in verse, now with an amorous subject, was again published by the Heltai-press, György Enyedi's History of Gismunda and Gisquardus, again a 16<sup>th</sup> century re-publication (RMNy 1311). The Library has no copy of it.

There is no data on the activity of the printing press between 1628 and 1629. The next publication came out in 1630, the calendar for the year 1631 printed now by György Abrugi. The data of the following publications never refer to the owner of the print. It is only certain that the printer master was György Abrugi, who mainly printed calendars and religious prints beginning with 1630. Secular popular literature remained very scarce even after this date, with the publication of István Szőlősi's history on Sinan pasha, one of the few exceptions written in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (written and published in 1635), and later again (between 1644 and 1648) István Kolosi Török's history in verse on the laudation of women. This was published in a period when the activity of the printing press was still systematic; Abrugi's name last appeared in 1551. After

this date the print's activity became irregular. Most publications continued to be of a religious nature, completed by a great number of calendars.<sup>1</sup>

Let us now see the description of the five books extant in the Special Collections of the Library:

**1. BMV 1310 (shelf reference)**

Ráskai, Gáspár: Egy szép historia az vitez Franciskoról és az ő feleségéről, és minémü czuda szerenczében forgattac egy ideiglen, ismet à szerenczének meg jövéséről és forgassáról.

Colosvarot: [Heltai], 1601, 4<sup>o</sup>

A1-3, B<sub>4</sub>, C<sub>1-4</sub>, D1

Fragments; pages A<sub>4</sub>, B<sub>1-3</sub>, D<sub>2</sub> missing

RMNy II 879

Notes:

Gáspár Ráskai's *History of Vitéz Franciskó* only has a fragmentary copy in the library collections. The missing pages were marked by blank pages in the binding.

Stamp: Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület

Old shelf reference: EME RMK I. Hung. Q 64 sz.

Binding: 19<sup>th</sup>-century, historicizing, pressed leather binding.

**2. BMV 1443 (shelf reference)**

Petki, János: Az virtusnak es voluptasnak egy massal valo vetekedések, kit az erdelyi nemes iffiaknak tanusagara, most fordítottak magyarul Silius Italicusbol.

Colosvarot: [typ. Heltai], 1610. [11] f. 4<sup>o</sup>

Stamp: Erdélyi Muzeum Könyvtára

RMNY II 1000

Notes:

One of the first editions of histories in verse in the University Library. According to the colophon, it was written in 1608. One of the few works written in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and not re-published from 16<sup>th</sup> century editions.

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<sup>1</sup> Presentation based on: Judit V. Ecsedy, *A könyvnyomtatás Magyarországon a kézisajtó korában, 1473-1800* (Bookprinting in Hungary in the age of the movable type, 1473-1800), (Budapest: Balassi, 1999).

Possessor notes: “Ugron Ferencz”, on title page, in blue ink, experienced handwriting; Below: “Ladis. Bako / 1748”, dim, schoolish handwriting.

Recto of unnumbered page 11: “Iuus. Deo Amen.”

Old shelf reference: EME RMK I. Hung. Q. 70 sz.

Binding: 19<sup>th</sup>-century, historicizing, pressed leather binding.

### **3. BMV 1763 (shelf reference)**

Huszt, Péter: Aeneis, az az az troiai Aeneas herczeg dolgai, melyben Troia vétele es romlása, troiaiaknak budosások Aeneással edgyüt, hadok Olasz országban, es Romanak eredeti, nagy szép diszes versekkel megh iratik.

Colosvarat: Heltai Anna asszony műhelyében, Szylvasi Andras, 1624.  
[36] f. 4<sup>o</sup>

RMNy II 1312

Notes:

This is the third edition of Huszti's history of Aeneas, after two 16<sup>th</sup> century editions from Bártfa and Debrecen (1582).

Complete copy, no notes.

Stamp: Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület

Old shelf reference: EME RMK I. Hung. Q. 88 sz.

Binding: 19<sup>th</sup>-century, historicizing, pressed leather binding.

### **4. BMV 2007 (shelf reference)**

Szólósi, István: Rövid historia, melyben megiratik, Szenan Bassanak, török csaszar ereiével, Havasalfödenek, és Erdely országának pusztítására valo ki jövelete, 1595 esztendőben, (...)

[Kolozsvár]: Nyomtatatot Abrugi György által, [typ. Heltai], [1635]. [9] f. 4<sup>o</sup>

RMNy II 1618.

Notes:

According to the colophon, Szólósi wrote this historical song in 1635. The RMNy entry claims that the work was probably published the same year in Abrugi's press.

Complete copy.

Stamp: Erdélyi Muzeum Egyesület

Old shelf reference: EME RMK I Hung. Q 104 sz.

Binding: 19<sup>th</sup>-century, historicizing, pressed leather binding.

**5. BMV 1876 (shelf reference)**

Kolosi Török, István: Az asszonyi nemnek nemessegéről, méltóságáról és ditsiretiről valo rythmusok.

Colosv[ar]: [Abrug]i György, [typ. Heltai], [1644–1648]

[1-5, 8-13] f. 4<sup>o</sup>

Fragment. Missing pages: B<sub>2,3</sub>

RMNy III 2143, App. 140.

Notes:

This work appeared in Abrugi's printing press without a date. Ilona Pavercsik's research supports the earlier assumption that it was published between 1644 and 1648.

This is the only extant copy of this print. The Hungarian Academy Library and the Hungarian National Library possesses copies made on the basis of this one.

Stamp: Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület

Old shelf reference: EME RMK I. Hung. Q 96 sz.

Binding: 19<sup>th</sup>-century, historicizing, pressed leather binding.

This short list could be completed with the work of Péter Kákonyi, the history of Astiages and Cyrus (RMNy 1416), published in Lőcse by Brewer in 1628, also a second edition of a 16<sup>th</sup> century book originally published in Debrecen, in 1574:

**6. BMV 1816 (shelf reference)**

Kákonyi, Péter: Igen Szep Historia Cirvs Kiralyrol, mikeppen akarta el veszteti Astiages kiraly. Énekben irattatot K. P. által. (Leutschoviae 1628) [Brewer].

A<sup>4</sup> B<sup>2</sup> = [6] fol. – 4<sup>o</sup>

Complete copy.

RMNy II. 1416

Stamp: Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület

Old shelf reference: EME RMK I. Hung. Q 93 sz

Binding: 19<sup>th</sup>-century, historicizing, pressed leather binding.

All six copies come from the collections of the Transylvanian Museum Society. They all contain the Society's stamp with the inscription *Erdélyi Múzeum Könyvtára*, as well as the old shelf reference. They all have 19<sup>th</sup>-century, historicizing, pressed leather bindings. The

white sheets used for binding preceding the title page bear the watermark *Görgény 1860*.

The bindings of the books as they appear today, with white sheets included at the end of the text to complete the missing pages of the folios, all seem to indicate that at least some of these books could have been originally bound together with other works, conceived as colligates probably by their readers. It was probably the meticulousness of positivist philology at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which considered it more appropriate to separate and bind them individually, a practice that could be supposed on the basis of some 16<sup>th</sup> century editions as well.

The first impression coming to mind on investigating these books is that almost none of them are newly written, they are mostly republications of stories from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Exceptions from this are Szölösi's history on Sinan pasha written in 1635, and the two bracketed texts (Petki [1608] and Kolosi Török [?]), neither of them a history in verse proper. The *Aeneis*, Kákonyi's *Astiages and Cyrus*, and Ráskai's *Vitéz Franciskó* had all been published earlier, in the course of the last decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, by Komlós in Debrecen (Kákonyi and Huszti), or Mrs Heltai in Kolozsvár (Ráskai). The case is the same with the entire corpus of the 23 histories in verse of the period between 1601 and 1655, and this situation may lead us to two conclusions: first, that the publication of such histories, albeit in a much smaller number, was a practice taken over as a direct and natural (not to say inertial) continuation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century popularity of this genre. Second, that although some market must have still existed for these products, the lack of new works clearly shows that something has changed either about their readership, or authorship, or both. The demands and preferences of the audience was most difficult to assess already for the 16<sup>th</sup> century; however, due to the great number of sources for that period, as well as based to some extent on what we knew of the authors of those works, it was easier to formulate some conclusions regarding this subject. But for the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the circumstances – low number of sources, most of them written much earlier – make it even more difficult to say something concrete about the readership of these books, perhaps besides the evident fact that the audience must have clearly lost interest in them for some reason. However, in the absence of thorough studies, I will not venture to make any assumptions on this matter yet. But as regards the authorship of such works, it seems clear that the authors of the period with possibly similar social status and education than those who half a century earlier

wrote the works now republished used their talent, if at all, for other kinds of writings. At the same time, it cannot be claimed that the scope or typology of popular secular genres became wider than in the previous century – adding, naturally, that the proportions have altered to some degree in favour of a greater number of secular works of education and science rather than popular literature, as a direct consequence of the foundation of the academic college of Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia, RO) in 1622 by Prince Gábor Bethlen. Several reasons may lie in the background of this disinterest, primarily social-historical and cultural ones: the effects of the continuous religious disputes and wars of the end of the 16<sup>th</sup>-beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the radical ecclesiastical changes in both the Catholic church and the Reformed churches in the same period, which brought about the complete transformation of the educational system, and resulted in a general decay of intellectual goods on all levels of the society.

As a matter of fact, the decline of secular, vernacular popular literature in this period is inscribed into a wider picture of cultural decline, as analyzed in Hungarian historiography by historian Katalin Péter,<sup>1</sup> who claims that the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century brought about a general cultural decay following the intellectually thriving period between 1570 and 1600. Her periodization supports my own in that she also finds that the year 1570 marked the beginning of a surprising increase in both the numbers and expectations of readers, leading to the formation of a vernacular popular culture available for even the lowest social strata, the serfs. Her comparative studies conducted on the typographic material collected by the first two volumes of the RMNy proved the same decline in matters of culture and popular readings in general that I highlighted for the case of the history in verse in particular as a representative genre of vernacular popular literature. In explaining the situation, she reclines on researches of economic history, which claims that culture always develops on the basis of the possibilities offered by economy; in this respect the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century –

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<sup>1</sup> Katalin Péter, “Aranykor és romlás a szellemi műveltség állapotaiban” (Golden age and decay in spiritual cultural conditions), In Katalin Péter, *Papok és nemesek. Magyar művelődéstörténeti tanulmányok a reformációval kezdődő másfél évszázadból* (Priests and nobles. Studies in Hungarian cultural history for the period of 150 years following the Reformation), (Budapest: Ráday Gyűjtemény, 1995), 77-97. See also her chapter on Hungary in Bob Scribner, Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich, eds. *The Reformation in National Context*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 155-167.

she claims – marked a decline in Hungary’s economic history, making it clear that it cannot keep up with the general industrial boom of the western countries. While accepting this explanation as logical, I also think it leaves open a question most important for finding the reasons of this decline: is this reason enough to change or eliminate an intellectual need that had just been created three decades earlier, and not only for the higher, more educated strata of the society, such as the nobility or burghers? Why did 17<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals stop writing such entertaining works so popular just a few years earlier? Or would it only show the reduced material possibilities in bookprinting? (In addition, it must be said that the total number of books published after the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century increased as compared to the last three decades of the previous century, due first of all to the huge number of calendars and the publication of Diet laws. As indicated by the case of the previous period, popular books could have been expected to make a nice profit for their publishers, just like calendars, so this reason alone does not seem to suffice to explain the decline.)

These and similar questions will certainly remain open, and perhaps quite impossible to be ultimately answered even in the event of further research. In conclusion, I should say that Katalin Péter’s wide and far-reaching analysis of the entire corpus of printed materials between 1529 and 1635, corroborated with my own findings limited to the case of popular, secular literary works is certainly enough to grasp the symptoms of an unquestionable cultural decline in the period following 1600 and leading well into at least the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. However, I suggest that the explanation of economic history might not be enough to account for all aspects of the fact that 17<sup>th</sup> century readers lost interest in reading entertaining, popular stories, and 17<sup>th</sup> century authors in writing them.

This short outline merely had the purpose of putting forward a problem, apparent after my previous studies into 16<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian popular literature, namely that something happened after the turn of the century that radically cut down the number of such works. My assumption is that, besides economic reasons, this process was rather explained by a complex set of social-historical reasons (religious wars and disputes, influencing both the general “mood” and interest of readers and writers alike), which should be verified however by much further research.