Pázmány Péter Catholic University

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Judit Hernády

The Hungarian Court Poetry of the 17th Century

Doctoral (PhD) theses

Dissertation Supervisor: Emil Hargittay DSc., Professor
Emeritus

Doctoral School of Literary Studies

Head of Department: István Dobos DSc., Professor, Head of
the Institute

Budapest

2025

1. Background of the Research, Problem Statement

This dissertation examines the Hungarian-language poetry of five 17th-century authors, namely László Listius, Péter Beniczky, Count Bálint Balassa, Pál Esterházy, and István Koháry. Their works were categorized under the umbrella term "court poetry" in the academic handbook edited by Tibor Klaniczay. This designation refers to a group of poets who, while writing in Hungarian, were part of a characteristic Baroque courtly environment and often served in noble courts but did not form an actual literary community. For these poets, writing poetry was primarily an activity embedded in court life. The relevant chapter in *Hungarian Literature*, edited by Tibor Gintli, classifies their works partly under the heading of "Zrínyi-followers" and partly under "courtly poetry". The latter category is characterized more by artistic awareness, Baroque imitation, and the conception of larger compositional units rather than by social class affiliation.

Scholars dealing with 17th-century poetry from a broader perspective have applied even more extensive approaches. Zsolt Alszeghy, in *The Hungarian Lyric Poetry of the 17th Century*, distinguishes between two types of poets: one category includes those, like Péter Beniczky and István Koháry, who engaged in poetry mainly as a pastime; the other corresponds to Zrínyi's learned poetics. Endre Angyal, in *Hungarian Baroque Poets*, did not establish narrower subcategories, as his focus was on the general characteristics of the period. Since the works of Alszeghy and Angyal, no comprehensive study has been undertaken on Hungarian-language Baroque court poetry, even

though the poets of this period played a significant role in literary history.

Due to the size of the corpus, my dissertation does not aim to provide a monographic study of the entire Hungarian-language Baroque court poetry. Although Miklós Zrínyi's oeuvre is closely linked to court poetry, his high level of poetic awareness sets him apart from this group. Similarly, recent research suggests that István Gyöngyösi should also be classified among learned poets. For these reasons, and given the extensive scholarship already available on these two poets, I have omitted their works from my dissertation. My main objective was to conduct an in-depth analysis of those poets who left behind a significant body of work both quantitatively and qualitatively, yet whose oeuvre has not been studied in a comprehensive manner beyond fragmentary analyses.

Additionally, my dissertation does not examine the poetry of Pál Kőszeghy, a Protestant poet who moved in a different courtly milieu from his Catholic counterparts. His poetry survives only in fragments and consists of a single epic poem. Consequently, my research focuses specifically on Catholic courtly poets who, in addition to composing epic works, also created poetry organized into cycles or collections.

2. Methodology and Structure of the Dissertation

The analyses in this dissertation apply a varying balance of text-centered reading and contextual interpretation, depending on the specific literary work and research focus. The analytical approaches differ for each author, depending on the scholarly problems or questions that have arisen in the literature and on the most productive method for studying their oeuvre. Where possible, I have examined larger compositional structures (such as book composition and cycle structures) to gain a better understanding of the general characteristics of the period.

The dissertation begins with shorter chapters that each offer insight into one aspect of the works of three poets. For László Listius, I focus on the genre and poetic-rhetorical issues of *Clades Mohachiana*; for Péter Beniczky, I reassess scholarly claims about his versifications of Pázmány's prayers; and for Count Bálint Balassa, due to space constraints, I limit my analysis to his Ovidian paraphrases, which are also present in Listius's works, and the religious supplications.

The final two, longer chapters of the dissertation examine the works of Pál Esterházy and István Koháry, though not exhaustively. In the case of Esterházy, I analyze the workings of an imitative textual technique that 19th-century positivist literary scholars once dismissed as plagiarism. I conduct detailed investigations into texts that employ a large-scale, irregular mode of textual borrowing, as well as cases of

self-paraphrase and a poem that fits within the category of "regular" imitation.

For István Koháry, I found it essential to first address the widely debated philological issues (such as the use of chronograms and later textual revisions). I then examine selected works within various thematic groups—dream poetry, death poetry, and liturgical cycles—highlighting significant poetic compositions. Although Koháry was a prolific poet whose works were published, his epic narratives and lyrical cycles have received little scholarly attention. The large volume of his oeuvre, as well as his notable artistic awareness in invention and disposition, justify the significant focus on his works in this dissertation.

3. New Findings of the Dissertation

The dissertation argues that, despite its flaws and weaknesses, László Listius's *Clades Mohachiana* exhibits careful structuring and traces of an individual poetic approach. His additions to the source material, along with the poetic concept they reveal, support Gergely Tóth's view that it was not the choice of topic but rather the mode of execution – the rigid adherence to the source text – that was inherently flawed. I demonstrate that Listius employed a poetic strategy that combined praise and criticism, mirroring the juxtaposition of chivalric excellence and severe defeat.

The analysis of Balassa's Ovidian paraphrase sheds light on both the early modern reception of classical authors and the characteristics of Baroque textual construction, while also revealing the poet's individual perspective on classical tradition.

A close textual comparison of Beniczky's verses and the Pázmány prayers referenced in the literature suggests that, contrary to scholarly claims, Beniczky employed direct textual borrowing less frequently than previously thought. Additionally, in poems that do contain borrowings, both the textual composition and the method of borrowing differ from case to case. This indicates that none of these poems can be reduced to mere versification of prose prayers, and each requires individual study. The fact that Imre Pécseli Király also paraphrased the same Pázmány prayer suggests a broader literary trend that merits further comprehensive investigation.

A thorough examination of Pál Esterházy's imitative textual practice reveals a high degree of artistic awareness, even among poets who wrote verse as a pastime. This is evident not only in the careful construction of poetic cycles but also in his deep familiarity with the works he imitated, his meticulous textual modifications, and the creation of lyrical narratives reflecting his own artistic vision. His self-paraphrase demonstrates an intention that goes beyond mere revision, aiming instead at rewriting and producing new works through significant content transformations. The application of regular imitation – alongside independently created works not discussed in the present dissertation – attests to Esterházy's textual flexibility. This

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demonstrates that his extensive borrowings were not driven by a lack of talent or literary skill but rather by a particular textual practice. While this practice can be linked to certain well-known phenomena of the period (such as imitation, cento, the compilation techniques of popular poetry and devotional literature, and parody) from different perspectives, it cannot be classified under any single category. However, as seen in the examples of Listius, Beniczky, and Imre Pécseli Király, this mode of creation was not unique to the period. Although contemporary literary scholarship evaluates textual borrowings with different criteria, considering the historical context, little is still known about the functioning of text-handling methods that resemble irregular imitation, as well as their reception within the broader literary environment of the time, in contrast to the artistic, regular imitation techniques employed by first-rank poets. The analyses in this dissertation contribute to a better understanding of this distinctive mode of textual creation, uncovering its methods of application and serving as a starting point for further inquiries in this direction.

I sought to approach István Koháry's work from multiple, differing perspectives. First, it was necessary to clarify philological issues related to his oeuvre, which is why I corrected the misleading and erroneous date attributions in the critical edition. Szilvia Maróthy had already pointed out that the designation of Koháry as a "doggerel poet" in the verses and paratexts is much more a playful-allegorical exploitation of the conventional formula of humility than a genuine

self-characterization. Comparing manuscripts and printed editions also suggests that certain statements in the poet's verses should be interpreted in the light of contemporary formulas. Earlier manuscript versions indicate that before being sent to print, the texts underwent linguistic and stylistic refinements, in some cases restructuring of verse order, or even the addition of new sections. The carefully composed structure of volumes and poetic cycles is also reflected in the lyrical narratives that emerge through the linear reading of the texts.

Koháry's epic works are particularly intriguing, which is why I subjected several of them to thorough analysis. I examined three of his dream poems from the perspective of Baroque dream poetry, which, despite sharing the same fundamental situation, highlight Koháry's original and inventive approach to the theme. While their core message and intention to dispel sorrow are identical, the poet employs different creative techniques in each piece: an epistemologically oriented philosophical reflection combined with the emblematic depiction of the authorial alter ego (*Ébren alva látott álom)*; lengthy, symbolically meaningful descriptions that reveal an underlying struggle with sorrow (*Rút heveréssel leírt versek)*; and an allegorical self-representation interwoven with numerous biblical and classical exempla (*Üdőmulatás közben szerzett versek)*.

Regarding the theme of death, one can observe the transformation of the medieval *danse macabre* and lyrical reflections on death into the Baroque literary language. A detailed analysis of Koháry's liturgical

cycle sheds light on his compositional principles and the functioning of the layered interplay of two different temporal dimensions. The final chapter explores the intellectual-historical background of the concept of sorrow, which plays a central role in the Koháry corpus, demonstrating that the poetic situation can most effectively be approached through the concept of *otium*, while the melancholy present in the verses, rather than signifying illness or a melancholic temperament, encapsulates the meaning of worldly sorrow. I have sought to highlight that Koháry István's poetry, rich in themes, provides valuable material for various approaches (*prison poetry, dream poetry, poetry of death*), while also offering significant insights into the early modern survival of the classical literary tradition.

4. Publications:

„Imitáció és jelentésalkotás Esterházy Pál költészetében: Az fülemile énekének magyarázattya". *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 122, 2. sz.(2018): 217–235.

„Koháry István lírai meditációi az emberi élet végéről: Elvénült embernek búsuló gondolati…". *Forrás* 10, 7–8. sz. (2018): 65–79.

„A haláltánc egy barokk változata Koháry István költészetében: Az halálnak horgával s hálójával [...] sétáló járásárul [...] szerzett versek". *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 123, 3. sz. (2019): 330–342.

„A vágyakozás természetrajza Koháry István barokk álomversében: Időmulatás közben szerzett versek". *Verso* 2, 2. sz. (2019): 109–120. URL: https://versofolyoirat.hu/verso2019_2.pdf

„Imitáció-típusok és önparafrázis Esterházy Pál lírájában". In *Imitáció és parafrázis: Szövegváltozatok a régiségben,* szerkesztette BARTÓK István, JANKOVITS László és PAP Balázs, 285–303. Pécs: PTE BTK Klasszikus Irodalomtörténeti és Összehasonlító Irodalomtudományi Tanszék, 2020.
URL: http://real.mtak.hu/111939/1/imitacio_es_parafrazis.pdf

„A liturgikus év ciklusformáló szerepe Koháry István költészetében". In *Az idő és tér szerepe a barokk kori lelkiség alakulásában*, szerkesztette SZELESTEI N. László, 55–68. Pázmány Irodalmi Műhely, Lelkiségtörténeti tanulmányok, 28. Budapest: MTA-PPKE Barokk Irodalom és Lelkiség Kutatócsoport, 2020.

„Koháry István kronogramjai". *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 124, 2. sz. (2020): 224–232.