

Public and Personal Grief in Sixteenth-Century Neo-Latin *Epicedia* of Hungarian Students*

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Abstract. In the sixteenth-century *respublica litteraria*, occasional poetry emerged as the principal medium for social representation and managing intellectual networks. Within a system rooted in classical topoi and structured by the rules of epideictic rhetoric, virtually any significant life event could be transformed into poetry. In Early Modern Hungary, the exploration of specific themes—such as travel—was closely tied to the Protestant educational context, whereas the expression of mourning remained a central concern for both Protestant and Catholic authors. This article examines the sixteenth-century Latin funerary corpus, tracing its development from the early influence of Wittenberg to the establishment of local traditions, such as Debrecen and Kolozsvár. Drawing upon a range of case studies, the study investigates how Protestant authors utilized classical topoi and Scaligerian poetics to construct an appropriate model for expressing sorrow and grief. The research demonstrates that Latin funeral poetry transformed private mourning into a public ritual of penance and consolation, creating a moral example of the early modern Protestant intellectual elite.

Keywords: epitaph, funeral poetry, *respublica litteraria*, University of Wittenberg, Neo-Latin literature

Introduction

In literary history, the *epicedium*, or funeral ode, is defined as a form of occasional poetry, characterised by its use of loci communes and representational function. This poetic practice is considered a gift economy of the *respublica litteraria*, which played a significant role in early modern education in both Protestant and Catholic traditions. Professors and students were eager to compose poetry to commemorate graduations, travel, marriages or funerals.¹ Funeral poetry, which specifically addresses the collective memory of the deceased, was among the richest and most significant genres.

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1 Kirwan, *Empowerment and Representation*; Kirwan, *Scholarly Self-Fashioning*.

Nonetheless, *epicedia* were generally regarded as being of greater value when integrated into a larger literary corpus; occasional poetry was deemed superior when accompanied by subsequent literary works.² Because of the rich biographical information they provide, these works have long been used as historical sources in Neo-Latin studies.³ Recent scholarship has shifted its focus toward the role of classical quotations and their representation,⁴ as well as the literary communication techniques employed in occasional poetry.⁵ The relationship between occasional and epic poetry has also been thoroughly investigated. Incorporating recent developments in the history of emotions, *epicedia* have also been examined through the lenses of humour and grief.⁶ Despite these advancements, *epicedia* continue to be studied almost exclusively as social *phenomena*, with a primary focus on printed materials.⁷

Hungarian literary history is no exception to these trends. The occasional poetry of Albert Szenci Molnár—who published his seminal psalm collection at the beginning of the seventeenth century—has been examined in detail.⁸ Furthermore, Johannes Filiczki's oeuvre, which consists exclusively of occasional poetry, has been the subject of a monographic study.⁹ The Hungarian funeral print commemorating Bálint Balassi has also undergone extensive analysis, and the relationship between Hungarian *epicedia* and their Latin counterparts has inspired various comparative studies.¹⁰

Existing scholarship seldom provides a detailed textual analysis of individual funeral odes, typically emphasising their prescriptive and didactic qualities instead. For instance, Gábor Székely presented the archetype of the ideal woman as articulated in an *epicedium* composed for a pastor's deceased spouse.¹¹ His work illustrated the poetic application of Pauline ideals while revealing the educational role of the genre in Protestantism and its associated societal expectations.

2 Aside from a dissertation from 1955, the research regarding the Melanchthonian poetry circle is ongoing. See: Springer, "Studien zur humanistischen"; Holzberg, *Ein vergessener Schüler*; Fuchs, *Philipp Melanchthon als*; Ludwig, "Das protestantische Bild"; Scheible, *Melanchthon in seinen*; Trillitzsch, "Rezeption und Apatation"; Zon, *Petrus Lotichius Secundus*.

3 Ijsewijn and Sacré, *Companion to Neo-Latin*, 2:100.

4 Urban-Godziek, "The amicitia elysea."

5 Robert, "Künstlerlob als soziale Praxis."

6 Sasso, "Between Fleeting and Compound."

7 Posta, "Tradíció és reprezentáció"; Móré, *Utazás és hírnév*, Móré, "Farewell Poems Among."

8 P. Vászárhelyi, "Költői barátság vagy"; P. Vászárhelyi, "Das Antikenbild des 17. Jahrhunderts."

9 Molnár, *Versőrlő malomkőnek korpája?*; Molnár, "Johannes Filiczki's 1614 Book."

10 Imre, "A Balassi-kánon első"; Ács, "»Egy út készítettik«."

11 Székely, "A protestáns humanizmus nőképe..."

As Neo-Latin studies have largely focused on the *epicedium* as a medium for expressing social prestige and its educational role, this study reorients the analysis toward the poetic articulation of emotion. Specifically, it investigates how sixteenth-century Hungarian Protestant *epicedia* mediated the experience of grief. I aim to illustrate how the poetic portrayal of mourning was changed due to the Protestant *ars moriendi* and the nuanced literary strategies employed to convey religious emotion.

Latin *epicedia* in sixteenth-century Hungary

Protestant Latin funeral poetry was mostly an established social custom in sixteenth-century Hungary. The popularity of occasional poetry is connected to the influence of Philipp Melanchthon, who argued that poetry is a communicative instrument and therefore occasional poetry was a regular part of the curriculum at the University of Wittenberg. The poems were published through the efforts of university students and churches, and most of them were printed in Wittenberg and the developing Protestant cultural communities in the Hungarian Kingdom, such as Bártfa (today: Bardejov, SK), Kolozsvár (today: Cluj-Napoca, RO) and Debrecen.

In the classical literary tradition, *epicedium* and *epitaphium* were considered two separate genres. *Epicedium* was a poem presented before the funeral ceremony, and *epitaphium* was a short epigram written on the tombstone. In late antiquity, funeral poetry took on a more pronounced panegyric character; furthermore, some of the classic *topoi* can be traced to this period, such as heroic *similes*.¹² *Epicedia* were separately discussed in the early modern poetic handbooks as well, which also shows their enduring popularity. Julius Caesar Scaliger in *Poetices libri septem* discusses *epicedium*, *epitaphium*, *monodia*, *inferiae*, *parentalia*, *threni* and *naeniae* together.¹³ He defines thematic norms based on late-Antique works such as Menander and Statius' *Silvae*. According to him, in order to write a funeral poem, the poet must express praise (*laudes*), grief, emotional loss (*iacturae demonstratio*) and misery (*luctus*), but he also needs to include consolation (*consolatio*) and encouragement (*exhortatio*). He emphasises the differences between the various funeral poems; however, he also discusses contemporary and anniversary *epicedia*. In the anniversary *epicedia*, Scaliger advises omitting *luctus*, as grief rarely lasts longer than a year. After that point, the portrayed grief cannot be an authentic emotion. This five-part structure was used flexibly: the most common variation was a three-part structure, focusing on praise, misery and consolation.¹⁴

12 Posta, "Tradíció és reprezentáció."

13 Scaliger, *Poetices libri septem*, 3:122. Regarding the use of commonplace books among the Hungarian students at the University of Wittenberg, see: Kiss, "Pious Resolutions."

14 Krummacher, "Das barocke Epicedium."

The first funeral poem in the Kingdom of Hungary was composed by Christophorus Preyss in 1537 and subsequently published at Wittenberg. Following the establishment of the formal student community (*natio Ungarica*) in 1555, fourteen additional prints were published. These poetry anthologies highlighted the deceased's social networks while establishing their posthumous public reputation. The publications usually honoured university alumni or their family members; however, in certain instances, the students were included in anthologies dedicated to renowned professors, such as Philipp Melanchthon and Johann Sturm, in order to signal their connection to the *respublica litteraria*.¹⁵

These prints generally have a uniform appearance. Their design is plain, devoid of decorations, images, or woodcuts. This decision supported the concept of achieving everlasting fame through literature, in this case, occasional poetry. When the poets talk about poetry as a means to remembrance, they use Horace's idea of "exegi monumentum aere perennius" (*Carminibus vivunt heroes; vivit Achilles, / Carminibus vivax nomen, honosque venit*).¹⁶ Students typically employed the elegiac distich, although they occasionally used Sapphic meters. By the end of the sixteenth century, the number of publications, including *epicedia*, significantly diminished due to confessional shifts within the university. From 1570 onwards, the university administration implemented policies favouring Lutherans, which prompted Hungarian students, who had Crypto-Calvinist tendencies, to seek education elsewhere. Nevertheless, Lutheran communities, including towns in Upper Hungary, continued to study in Wittenberg. Consequently, throughout the seventeenth century following the dissolution of the *natio Ungarica* (1613), occasional poetry continued to be published;¹⁷ however, during this period, German gradually replaced Latin as the primary language of these works.

Funeral poetry encompasses both public and private discourse. This phenomenon is rooted not only in the public nature of occasional poetry but also in the fact that these poems were composed from a collective perspective, either that of a city or a university student organisation.

15 In 1560, György Albani Csirke commemorated Melanchthon in his *Fletus Uraniae*, while János Baranyai Decsi composed a poem in remembrance of Sturm in 1590. Although literary scholarship has seldom examined these poems in depth, Ágnes Ritoókné Szalay and András Szabó regularly published studies on the subject. Ritoókné emphasised the significance of writing a poetic tribute to Melanchthon, while Szabó analysed student networks and their influence on Protestant cultural life in early modern Hungary. See: Ritoókné Szalay, "Albani Csirke György."

16 Berexasii, *Epicedion excellenti doctore*, A2r.

17 Nagy, *Tisztviselői életpályák*, 48–52, 64–81.

Expressing Grief in Epicedia

The Pauline epistles served as a framework for the protestants regarding the management and proper expression of grief. 2 Corinthians contained the details of consolation for the community, and Thessalonians demonstrated the appropriate grief in order to help the flock avoid unregulated, extensive emotions, which were deemed heretical.¹⁸ This conflict is not present in the funeral poem of Georg Purkircher honouring the death of Leonhard Stöckel, who was a renowned professor in Bártfa. The town of Bártfa played a significant role in the Hungarian Reformation, characterised by the early adoption of Lutheran doctrine, the formulation of confessions, and the funding of a highly erudite Protestant school. Among its most prominent figures was Leonhard Stöckel, who was memorialised by both Georg Purkircher and Christian Schesaeus. Purkircher composed an *epicedium*, which explicitly links Stöckel to Melancthon in its title, referencing the year of Stöckel's death in relation to Melancthon's: "[...] qui obiit Bartphae, anno Christi 1560, die 7. Iunii, qui est quinquagesimus dies mortem d. Philippi Melanthonis, praeceptoris eiusdem."¹⁹ The *epicedium* portrays Melancthon as Stöckel's mentor, a depiction that aligns with the poem's broader narrative: the community of Bártfa and the church mourn Stöckel as the preeminent scholar of the municipal school. The metaphors depicting the deceased (*unica voluptas, pius Delphinus, sincerus iudex*) and the simile emphasising the Herculean labours (*Arduus Herculeo stravit fera monstra labore*) praise Stöckel's contributions to the community. The short epigram views Stöckel's life through a communal lens: it depicts his family, particularly his children, as being obligated to uphold his legacy, thereby presenting his life as a moral paradigm. Consequently, the family's private sorrow is integrated into the collective mourning of the community.

Christian Schesaeus chose a different approach, as his poems usually reflect on the dynamic between grief and theology. While his literary reputation rests primarily upon his epic poem, *Ruina Pannonica*,²⁰ his oeuvre also contains a significant corpus of occasional poetry, largely inspired by biblical paradigms. One notable example is the *Elegia de falsis prophetis*, published in 1558 in Kolozsvár.²¹ Categorised as Late Humanist *sacra poetica*, the elegy offers a humanist reinterpretation of the Matthean narrative concerning false prophets (Matt 7:15).²² This work was composed for Schesaeus' patron at the time, Vincent Aurifaber, who served as a pastor

18 Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Feeling*, 195–202.

19 Purkircher, *Opera quae supersunt*, 91; Addendum to the critical edition: Orbán, "Új levelek és versek."

20 Recent studies: Tomkó, "Kalapács és üllő"; Virovecz, "Kendy Anna históriájának." On the Neo-Latin poetry of Schesaeus, see: Poelchau, "Christian Schesaeus."

21 Schesaeus, *Elegia de falsis prophetis*. Critical edition: Schesaeus, *Opera quae supersunt*, 46–60.

22 Posta, "Psalm Paraphrases"; Posta, "Latin Paraphrases."

in Szászmujsna (today: Moşna, RO). The original publication contains manuscript marginalia of a historical lexicon, Georg Haner's *Scriptores rerum Hungaricarum et Transylvanicarum*. The main text is accompanied by a paratextual apparatus: a preface dedicated to the Protestant minister, Ferenc Dávid, two additional *epicedia* for Aurifaber, and a lyrical reflection on human frailty. The edition concludes with the woodcut crest of Kolozsvár. Lore Poelchau pointed out the use of epic poetry in *epicedium*, such as invoking the Muses or enumeration.²³

Schesaeus's opening poem articulates a filial farewell, and its invocation is not merely a formal requirement. His Muses transcend their obligatory role in Neo-Latin poetry when they serve not just as allegories for erudition and *humanitas*, but are deeply integrated into the ritual of mourning as well. While maintaining the traditional *invocatio*, the poet employs the Muses as primary agents of emotional expression, tasked with articulating the magnitude of communal loss. The poem indicates the influence of Wittenberg's historical thought, asking why such a devastating fate was not visited upon the Papacy or the Ottomans. In a striking metapoetic moment, Schesaeus admonishes his own lamenting Muse – Quo raperis mea Musa? – to maintain decorum. The latter half of the poem utilises *prosopopeia* to allow the deceased to attest his faith before Christ. Ultimately, the work concludes by rejecting excessive sorrow as redundant; echoing well-known Protestant tropes, it characterises earthly existence as *carcer* (prison), where death is celebrated as the only path to salvation. Aside from incorporating a story from the Gospel of Matthew, Schesaeus alluded to the Book of Job, describing human life as *militia*.

Mundus hic a duri nil quidquam carcere differt,
Militia haec vita est perpetuusque labor.
Compactos, cupio, cita mors ut fis trahet artus,
ut tecum possim, Christe, quiete frui.²⁴

The warfare imagery runs throughout the poem, as the *epicedium* portrays Aurifaber's life as perpetually in danger, employing allusions to Ovid.²⁵

The Use of Nature Imagery in Epicedia

In the 1570s, signing the *Formula Concordiae* was a prerequisite for enrolling at the University of Wittenberg. This was such an unfavourable shift for the Hungarian student community that it reduced the number of printed materials, which were

23 Poelchau, "Christian Schesaeus," 213–14.

24 Schesaeus, *Opera quae supersunt*, 60.

25 The poem mentions Orpheus (Ov., Met X.) and at a later point the phrase "languida membra" (Ov., Heroides).

published only sporadically until the mid-1580s. In this decade, only one *epicedium* was created, in 1575, to mourn the passing of Johannes Balsaráti Vitus, who had studied in Wittenberg around 1550. After finishing his medical studies in Italy, he returned to Sárospatak, where he originally practised medicine and later served as a pastor. Following the founding of the Protestant school in Sárospatak, the first few generations of teachers were all educated in Wittenberg, including Balsaráti's brother-in-law, Basilius Szikszai Fabricius. Alongside an anthology of funeral poems, a Latin funeral oration for Balsaráti's passing was also composed by Szikszai. The primary poem in the *epicedia* collection was authored by Péter Beregszászi, an assistant teacher and former student of the institution. The title page indicates that the poem was recited at the funeral and thereafter sent to Wittenberg for publication. This was a common practice; often, the couriers were students leaving for university, as there was no established printing press in Sárospatak at that time.²⁶

Portraying nature's mourning as an answer to human bereavement has been a cornerstone of the pastoral tradition since antiquity. While Ovid and Vergil used the myth of Orpheus, in early modern *epicedia*, these descriptions do not merely provide a backdrop; they serve to quantify the significant loss suffered by the community. In his *Epicedion* for Balsaráti, Péter Beregszászi contextualises the physician's death within both macrocosmic and microcosmic frameworks. The poem's *exordium* laments the desolation of Pannonia, subverting the traditional imagery of pastoral poetry, often referencing Virgil's *Bucolica*. This lament is constantly interrupted by the speaker's metapoetical reflections using the figures of *recusatio* and *occupatio*: "Sed quid ego coner multas percurrere amoeni / Delicias veris? facies hae aurea mundi est / Aurea temperies, qualis fuit, omnia quando / Confusae vultum posuere voraginis et cum / Distinctis speciem res accepere figuris."²⁷ Here, Beregszászi invokes the Golden Age topos only to contrast it with a fractured present that fails to meet the idyllic standards of the *antiquitas*. Notably, the Golden Age is not anchored to a specific mythological geography; rather, it serves as a foil to the contemporary, suffering Pannonia, echoing the Wittenberg historical thought, particularly the Melanchthonian view of world ages (*aetates mundi*), moral decay, and subsequent divine retribution. Within this teleology, Balsaráti's demise is presented not as an isolated tragedy, but as a link in a chain of divine punishments depriving Pannonia of its intellectual elite. This idea is underscored through the use of dactylic hexameter, indicating epic poetry rather than elegiac distichs typically associated with funeral poems.

Beregszászi's descriptive passages serve a didactic purpose, elucidating the causes of grief through the sympathy of a mourning nature. The references to the Orphic myth and the nightingale carry significance; for the Wittenberg-educated

26 Szabó, *A késő humanizmus irodalma*.

27 Berexasius (Beregszászi), *Epicedion excellenti doctore*, B3r–v.

coetus, the nightingale (*Philomela*) was a specific metaphor for Philipp Melanchthon.²⁸ The poem's structural hinge occurs in the second half, where the focus shifts from the description of a lost Golden Age to the visceral expression of human emotion. The transition is marked by a change in register: instead of the visual of grieving nature, the poem describes the loud wailing of the student community, which is mostly characterised by weeping and praying.

Te nitidi colles, te pascua lata, nemusque,
Te gelidi montes, habitataque rura Camoenis,
Te deflent undis declivia flumina rapis. [...]
Nos alios multo tenuari tempore luctus
Sentimus, vigiles sed de te incendere curas
Longa dies nobis iam iam incipit, anxioque alius
Corda dolor tundens nullo cum fine fatigat.²⁹

The communal “loud wailing” and prayers are shown to disturb the very harmony of nature, suggesting that human misery in the face of death can supersede even the collective grief of the Pannonian landscape.

A similar representation of nature appears in the 1587 volume commemorating István Félegyházi, the Rector of Debrecen.³⁰ Alongside the primary *epicedion*—authored by István's brother, Tamás Félegyházi—the Wittenberg publication includes a sophisticated paratextual apparatus provided by the student community. The dedication to the Senate of Debrecen underscores the sociopolitical dimensions of Neo-Latin verse: first, it frames the collection as a commissioned act of civic duty; second, it validates the personal expression of fraternal sorrow; and third, it addresses the reception of the work, noting that the Senate engages with such poetry not for mere personal enjoyment, but as an act of *pietas* associated with their office.

The congratulatory poem by Johannes Csaholyi further explores the tension between private and public mourning. While the epigram's *exordium* addresses the outward signs of fraternal grief (tears and lamentation), the poet insists upon the regulation of such emotions through the lens of faith. This “institutionalised grieving” aims to illuminate the path to salvation through dogmatic compliance. The collection culminates in the eschatological certainty that, for the faithful, death is a transition (Namque piis mors est ad vitam transitus illam / Quae manet, aeterno non peritura die).³¹

28 Coppel, “Philomela in Bologna”; Fleischer, “Melanchthon as Praeceptor”; Skaftø Jensen, “Melanchthon, the Muses.”

29 Berexasii, *Epicedion excellenti doctore*, D3. See also Verg. Ecl. X.

30 Szabó, *Natio Ungarica*, 171–73.

31 Félegyházi, *Epicedion in obitum*, A2v.

Félegyházi's funeral poem does not contrast nature descriptions with human bereavement; instead, it argues that humanity is inextricably bound by the universal laws of mortality. The poem centres on the inevitability of death, mirroring Csaholyi's sentiment by depicting the end of life as a transitory state. In the second half of the epicedium, the modality shifts toward the affective, addressing the deceased as *frater amande mihi*. Here, Félegyházi employs classical *topoi* of everlasting friendship, identifying his brother with the archetypal figures of Theseus and Achates. Notably, the prosopopoeia does not grant the deceased a direct voice; rather, it functions through a surrogate, recalling a colleague who reiterates the Rector's final valediction. Like Schesaeus, the poet portrays mourning as an overwhelming emotion, signalling his perceived inability to maintain emotional *decorum*. The closing parts of the poem place István Félegyházi's career within the broader historiography of the Reformation. While enumerating his spiritual predecessors, he creates an intellectual pantheon: "Hac sub mole Petrus iacet, Hellowpoeus et ipse, / Hic etiam Stephani Chrysopoei membra quiescunt, / Qui Dominum pura coluerunt mente potentem, / Quive suum populum scriptis, fidoque labore / Iuverunt, donec potuerunt vivere, sed nunc / Proh dolor, illorum vita defuncta quiescunt / Membra, sed ipsa tamen fiet bona fama perennis."³² The publication originated in a personal relationship; still, it is predominantly shaped by Félegyházi's ecclesiastical standing. The text consistently refers to his pastoral identity, employing honorifics such as *Debrecini pastor ovilis* or *clarissimi Theologi*, thereby transforming personal loss into a monument of confessional identity.

Interestingly, this Wittenberg volume exists in dialogue with a 1586 Debrecen publication. Like the Wittenberg publication, it was dedicated to the city, but the earlier one was published by the rector of the Protestant school. In other words, one is more official in nature, while the other is more personal in context, with the author being a family member. While both are dedicated to the city, they represent two distinct modes of Neo-Latin commemoration: the former, issued by the school rector, is an official, institutional tribute; the latter, authored by a relative, is intended to offer a more intimate, psychological portrait of loss.

Mourning in a Community

During the 1580s, Rudolph Hoffhalter—son of the prominent typographer, Raphael Hoffhalter—operated one of the printing houses in the town of Debrecen. His output generally consisted of biblical histories and postils composed in Hungarian.³³

32 Félegyházi, *Epicedion in obitum*, B4r.

33 V. Ecsedy, *A könyvnyomtatás története*, 61–61. For further research regarding the Hoffhalters, see: Bánfi, *A bécsi császári udvar*.

Notably, the *epicedia* honouring Tamás Félegyházi represents the only instance of Latin occasional poetry published by the Hoffhalter press. The work's title, *Ecclesia Debrecina moesta queritur*, suggests a personified lament: it is the Reformed Church itself that grieves and bids farewell to the deceased. The dedication to the Senate further articulates the collection's primary intent: to depict public mourning while paying tribute to the departed rector.

“[...] partim ut communem luctum omnium in hoc oppido nostro fidelium ob mortem fidelissimi pastoris nostri aliquomodo depingerem, aliisque has pagellas inspecturis testatum facerem, partim vero ut meam erga virum hunc haud dubie in beatam illam piarum animarum coloniam translatum, hoc qualicunque testimonio declarare observantiam ac pietatem.”³⁴

The shift between the singular and plural perspectives effectively obliterates the distinction between the lyrical speaker and his audience. The poem is characterised by emotional intensity, culminating in the topos of ineffability: the poet's grief is described as so profound that it renders expression impossible, thereby altering standard conventions of funeral poetry. Within the text, tropes of stuttering, the “muted voice” (*mea lingua silebit*), and the physical struggle of articulation (*extorsit verba dolor*) serve as symbols for the impossibility of conveying the experience of loss.

The author articulates the emotional upheaval through the use of *simile* and *anaphora*, namely the reiterated exhortation “lugete,” to establish a framework for public grieving:

Quare age Debrecii mecum lugete fideles;
Affici enim Natos Matre dolente decet.
Debrecii lugete pii, nunc lugeat omnis
Turba virum, iuvenum, cum puerisque senum.³⁵

The anguish of the “Mother Church” and her “children” (the religious congregation) transforms private sorrow into a collective sentiment, wherein the public spectacle of weeping becomes a necessity. The absence of such socially accepted mourning is portrayed as a lack of emotion, described through the classical imagery of a “stony” or “iron” heart (*saxeus, ferreus*).

Occidit ille meae Dux et moderator habenae,
Saxeus est quem mors permovet ista nihil.
Occidit heu; iacet en miserabile corpus in urna:
Ferreus est viso qui tenet hoc lacrymas.

34 Gyulai, *OPHNOS* [!] *ecclesiae Debrecinae*, A1v.

35 Gyulai, *OPHNOS* [!] *ecclesiae Debrecinae*, A4r.

Abluite hos lymphis cineres lustralibus, illas
 Sed flentes totas suppeditent oculi.
 Quam vellem, fierent lachrymarum lumina fontes:
 Nunc falsus nobis quis dabit esse latex?³⁶

Concurrently, the *epicedium* situates the passing of Tamás Félegyházi within a broader theological context: the plague is interpreted as a sign of divine wrath. The “Black Death” is presented as a punishment for the community’s sins (*telum ... Tonantis*). This reflects a broader historical reality; sixteenth-century Central Europe was repeatedly ravaged by plague outbreaks, many of which were commemorated in contemporary publications.³⁷ In the Kingdom of Hungary, a few such prints were produced in the years 1577 and 1585, the latter proving damaging for the intellectual elite in both the Kingdom and the Principality of Transylvania. In these works, suffering is usually met with calls for penitence and prayer. Furthermore, these authors—usually Protestants—often interpreted such developments and threats as the inevitable consequence of papal heresy.

Ultimately, the funeral poem is transformed into a public reflection on penance. The rector’s death is viewed as an integral part of the divine judgment imposed upon Debrecen. In this context, the devastation of the plague serves as a catalyst for public repentance in the community. While personal sorrow and emotions may have rendered appropriate poetic expression difficult, the public version of that same emotion provided a socially and theologically acceptable path.

Mourning of Family Members

Influenced by Julius Caesar Scaliger’s poetical handbook, the Protestant application of the *epicedium* centred upon praise and consolation. Within this framework, formal praise served as a poetic instrument to temper excessive emotions. When examining *epicedia* connected to domestic contexts—particularly those mourning wives and children—one observes that the emphasis often shifts slightly from laudation toward consolation. In these works, the life of a family member is inextricably linked to the religious office of the patriarch. Consequently, the virtues and piety of the deceased are presented as extensions of the pastor’s own standing; their conduct serves as a mirror, reflecting the pastor’s own commitment to faith and duty. Furthermore, these family members are cast as exemplars of virtue for the whole community, transforming private loss into a public moral lesson.

36 Gyulai, *OPHNOS* [!] *ecclesiae Debrecinae*, A4r.

37 Kassai, *Elegia Pannoniae*; Szilvási, *Epicedion de morte*.

The most important structural innovation in these publications is their employment of *prosopopeia*. By granting a voice to the deceased, the poems create a fictive dialogue with both the surviving family members and the grieving community. This dialogic structure transforms a collection of verses into direct exchange, interspersed with formal consolatory poems. In certain instances, the perspective changes to a child grieving his mother, or even to paupers lamenting a deceased patron. Such cases emphasise the virtue of *caritas*, specifically the pious obligation of the elite to support the less fortunate and the mutual bond between the religious and the community.³⁸

This consolation rests mostly upon the hope of celestial reunion and the regulation of the emotional response. For example, the funeral anthology honouring Anna Siderius, the young daughter of a Wittenberg-educated pastor, describes bereavement through the trope of spiritual battle (*militia*). Here, victory is defined as the suppression of tears and the stoic acceptance of the divine will.³⁹ A similar emotional balance is emphasised in the *epicedium* of another student, Mihály Csibrádi. Writing from the perspective of the deceased daughter, Csibrádi addresses the parents directly, praising their hard work and success in providing their daughter with a proper Christian education, particularly an education in the art of preparing for death and the afterlife.

From a poetic perspective, these *epicedia* exhibit strong thematic parallels with the aforementioned examples, utilising the standard topoi of Neo-Latin funeral poetry, such as the description of socially accepted ritual grief and the virtues of religious piety. Occasionally, authors adapt pastoral or floral metaphors; for instance, the image of the rose serves as a stand-in for the virtuous but short life of a Protestant matron.

Ut rosa mane vicens pulcro decorata colore,
Sub medio marcet Sol, cadente cadit:
Sic matronarum medio flos optimus aevo
Extremum nuper clausit in orbe diem.⁴⁰

Such imagery was not confined to Latin *epicedia* but was frequently mirrored in vernacular Lutheran funeral poetry, suggesting a broad, cross-linguistic consensus on the visual language of mourning in the early modern period.⁴¹

38 *Memoriae nobilis, pudicissimae*, B3r, C1v.

39 “Ne lacrymes, sed fide Deo, sis fortis in istis / Casibus, et votis utere, victor eris. / Militiam esse scias, quodcunque hic vixeris aevi, / Propterea pugnes in statione tua. Mox Christus viridi tua cinget tempora lauro, / Et dabit aeterna prosperitate frui.” *Epitaphia scitissimae virgunculae*, A4r.

40 *Memoriae nobilis, pudicissimae*, B2v.

41 Regarding seasonal imagery and use of plants, see: Linton, *Poetry and Parental*, 139–53.

Conclusion

Concurrent with the advancement of the Reformation in the Kingdom of Hungary, a corpus of funeral poems appeared in the sixteenth century, composed generally for prominent pastors and their family members and prepared for the farewell by a particular community or pastor. The production of these collections was associated with the emergence of permanent and stable printing houses. It is apparent that the defining characteristics of these texts are not merely the employment of Neo-Latin *topoi*, but their shifting attitudes toward the expression of emotion. These *epicedia* frame mourning as a public obligation, placing significant importance on laudation to emphasise the deceased's religious piety and public service. The strategic use of heightened grief serves as a poetic contrast to the restrained, exemplary behaviour expected from the congregation. These poems demonstrate how the sixteenth-century Hungarian *respublica litteraria* utilised funeral poetry not only to honour the dead but to create a delicate balance between public and private sorrow.

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