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MARULIĆ'S *JUDITH* AS *MILES CHRISTI*

The mature poetic expression of Marulić's *Judith* laid the foundation for Croatian literature, earning its author the venerable title of »the father of Croatian literature«. Its expressive beauty, its richness, its complex form, its multilevel meaning, and, above all, its openness to new readings, have long since confirmed its status as a classic work. Although it has been subject to numerous studies and interpretations, no one has been able to give definite answers to the questions of why Marulić picked for his subject-matter — of all biblical stories — the »history of Judith«, what kind of audience it was aimed at, and with what particular purpose.

Though not contesting the opinion that Marulić picked the story of Judith for its gripping plot and its dramatic and dynamic potentials, which made it ideal for autonomous poetic creation and an equally perfect medium for conveying a message of hope and courage to the Croats faced with the Turkish invasion, the author proposes a fresh interpretation of Marulić's poem, as he says, *par lui même*, bearing in mind the general scope of Marulić's oeuvre: to instigate chastity (virtue) and to deter from vice. He also reminds the reader that less than a year elapsed between his completion of the translation of Thomas a Kempis' *De imitatione Christi* (1500), commissioned by his friend Dujam Balistrilić, and that of the *Judith* (1501), dedicated to Balistrilić, and that in 1500, which was also a Jubilee Year, he journeyed to Rome. Therefore, the composing of *Judith* in the »holy days of Lent« could have been, for him, a psychological extension of this period of penitence.

Therefore, the epic could be understood as a personal expression of religious fervor and spiritual zeal, flared up by Marulić's translation of *De imitatione Christi* and by his writing of the homonymous work of his own. This obviously added credibility to his lenten call on the citizens who had yielded to the Renaissance spirit of »vanity« to embrace humbleness and penitence. In the Christian tradition Judith figures as a *typos* of Church defeating Satan and a personification of virtue. Marulić clearly used this »flower of chastity«, the idealized figure of the »saintly, chaste and noble« heroine, as an elevated example of *miles Christi*, the model Christian following in the steps of the Master. The dramatic circumstances of her position, which the poet celebrates, her noble and unselfish gesture and the happy ending conveyed an unequivocal yet challenging message: Strutting with power and vanity is despotic and pharisaical. Judith, therefore, gave an exemplary response to the crossroad dilemma. She chose the tortuous path of virtue over the easy path of vice, because only fidelity and self-sacrifice can earn us a place at the eschatological feast. Marulić conveyed this Christian message (moral) in the vernacular because it was much closer to the ear and heart of common man than it was the »scholarly«, speculative Latin of the day.