

*Damiani Benessae poemata*, ed. Vlado Rezar. Split: Književni krug, 2017. Pages 345.

*Književni krug* in Split has earned a distinguished publishing reputation over the years by issuing the *Colloquia Marulliana* scholarly journal, along with the thematic monographs devoted to the colossal work of Marko Marulić. Thanks to the broad perspectives of the editors of the *Marulianum* editorial series headed by Bratislav Lučin, a new series focussing on Croatian humanists, Marulić's contemporaries, has been launched. Priority has been given to a collection of poems by the Ragusan Damjan Benessa, edited by Vladimir Rezar, Associate Professor at the Classical Philology Department of the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zagreb.

The research interests of Rezar mainly focus on the Ragusan humanistic heritage. With his research on the legacy of the Benedictine Ludovik Cerva Tubero, and a significant contribution to the interpretation of the capital work *Commentarii de temporibus suis* based on the analysis of a manuscript from the Marciana Library in Venice and a magnificent translation accompanied by appropriate commentaries (Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2001), Rezar has, fairly early, earned a reputation of being an exceptional authority on classical historiography of Dubrovnik. His results have not only vastly contributed to our knowledge of the political history of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, but also to our understanding of the spiritual culture, mentality and the feeling of religious tolerance of that time. After this narrative challenge, Rezar embarked upon the study of the poetic legacy of Tubero's contemporaries, starting first with a critical edition of Benessa's epic *De morte Christi* (Zagreb: *Ex libris*, 2006). What we have before us is a published collection of shorter poems composed by the mentioned Ragusan Latinist. In this way Rezar has completed his research on the voluminous work of Damjan Benessa, one of the four Ragusan poets along with Karlo Pozza, Ilija Lampridijev Cerva and Jakov Bona, whose verses, written between the end of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, have survived to date. If Benessa's 185 poems from this edition, comprising an impressive number of 7,700 verses, are added to the previously published epic *De morte Christi*, we come to an opus composed of over sixteen thousand verses, hence distinguishing Benessa as one of the most fruitful Ragusan Latinists in general.

This edition, which Academician Darko Novaković in his review acclaims to have been prepared according to the standards of modern neo-Latinist scholarship, is based on the autograph. Compiled in this volume are almost two hundred poems composed by Benessa, diversified in terms of content, theme and poetic metre. They have been divided into several different groups: three books of epigrams (*Epigrammatum liber* 1-3, including 122 epigrams), a book of eclogues (i.e. of bucolics, formal pastoral poems; *Bucholicon carmen*, including 11 poems), two books of lyric poems (*Odarum liber* 1-2, including 36 poems), a collection of satires (*Sermonum liber*, including 10 poems), and a group of poems of miscellaneous content (*Miscellaneorum liber*, including 13 poems and a closing epilogue). These poems are accompanied by a narrative epilogue, in addition to a text of the partially preserved letter that Benessa addressed to Bartolino Tacolleti from Cremona, headmaster of the Dubrovnik public school between 1519 and 1525, in which he assessed the work of the famous Roman rhetoricians—Crassus, Cicero and Quintilian.

The edition is accompanied by a double critical apparatus consisting of a list of sources upon which the poet drew, as well as a note on the persons, localities and events that inspired Benessa in some of his poems. Additionally, the critical apparatus in the narrow sense of the word has been provided with a survey of the editor's interventions in the text. Rezar has followed the usual path currently adopted in the preparation of critical editions, marked by minimal intrusions into the original text, having confined himself to mere corrections of interpunction, minuscules and majuscules according to modern writing guidelines. In doing so, however, he had to overcome a whole series of difficulties pertaining to Benessa's numerous inconsistencies of either orthographic

or metric nature. This is one of the reasons why not a single verse was published during the poet's lifetime, apart from the three occasional epigrams in the incunabulum of the Franciscan conventual Juraj Dragišić *On the Nature of the Celestial Spirits We Call Angels* (*De natura caelestium spirituum quos angelos vocamus*).

From the hands of the poet's heirs, the autograph first reappeared in the library of the Jesuit *Collegium Ragusinum*. It was there that in the mid-eighteenth century the autograph caught the attention of the erudite Ivan Marija Matijašević, who entitled it *Damiani Benessae Paschalis filii patritii Ragusini poemata autographa* ("Autograph Poems of the Ragusan Nobleman Damjan Benessa, Son of Pasko") as the title page was missing. After the temporary abolition of the Society of Jesus in 1773, like many other valuable documents it was housed at the library of the Franciscan Monastery, where it has remained to this day, as evidenced by Rezar's meticulously reconstructed history of the manuscript.

The fact that the manuscript was restored in 1999 has largely helped the editor, although in order to resolve some of the illegible and faded places he also had to lean on a copy left by the Franciscan Antun Agić, Benessa's most adverse critic from the early nineteenth century. Thus Agić played a double role in the history of Benessa's poetic work, as the editor of this edition rightly warns: to his zeal only do we owe the filling of many gaps due to the autograph's poor condition which, otherwise, we would not have been able to resolve, yet at the same time we blame his critical appraisal for the fact that these verses come to light five hundred years after they had been composed.

A thirty-page introduction (*Damiani Benessae vita et opera*) is read, in places, as an adventure novel, for Rezar masterly reinvented the essential data on the poet's life, work and the fate of the valuable manuscript through an inserted autobiographical episode penned by the copyist, friar Agić. Having found himself in a quarantine on Malta in 1816, as he fled from the plague-stricken Corfu after having delivered a cycle of Lent sermons, diligent Agić bided his idle hours by copying Benessa's poems from the codex he had taken with him on the journey. Partly under the impact of his current hardship, and partly because of his bias against Benessa's more open humanistic views and attitude towards religion, Agić bitterly attacked the poet as a heretic. He was particularly harsh on Benessa's Latin and Greek, claiming that "many words he had prepared beforehand, trivial, yet they suited the metre he used" (p. 15), whilst Benessa's Greek was not even understood by the Vatican experts, such as Girolamo Amati, who around 1819, upon Agić's petition, scrutinised the work.

Also participating in the polemics surrounding Benessa's work were the poet's contemporaries. While the famous Ilija Lampridijev Cerva praised him, it appears that foreign masters at the head of the Ragusan school attacked him, as evidenced by Benessa's bitter response in the 26th epigram of Book Two, *In quendam ludi magistrum* ("Against One Teacher"). On his part, Rezar submitted appropriate reasons against Agić's attacks, arguing that Benessa the humanist emulated the views of his contemporaries, such as those of his fellow-citizen Jakov Bona in the epic *De vita et gestis Christi*, or the Italian Marco Girolamo Vida in the epic *Christias*, and blames Benessa's poor handwriting for his hardly legible Greek (this is vividly illustrated by the photographs of the autograph from the Franciscan Library, published in the appendix).

Benessa's inappropriate poetic forms have by far attracted the majority of objective remarks. For example, Rezar has established that "in the collection of epigrams are also the poems which, not even on the basis of the most flexible interpretation, could be included into epigrams: seven elegies, an eclogue on fishing entitled *Alieuticon*, other shorter poems and four poems for different occasions, in Sapphic and Asclepiadean stanza more common in odes" (p. 24). The same kind of objection the editor of this volume addresses to Benessa while reading his collection *Bucholicon carmen*: tenth eclogue, composed in the elegiac distich on the occasion of the death of young Miho

Zamagna (who died in a reckless sword play before his twentieth birthday), in terms of form and content tends to resemble elegy rather than eclogue. Similar departures have been observed in several other eclogues. Here we should also add an inappropriate length of some elegies, formally included in the group of epigrams, traditionally short poetic type composed of a fairly small number of verses. Thus the 29th epigram in Book Three, eclogue on the occasion of the death of Jakov Bona, has as many as 263 hexameters, whilst the 12th epigram in Book Two, as the final farewell to the young Roman orator Celsus Melinus, contains 151 hexameters. Of similar length is also the epitaph to the poet Ilija Lampridijev Cerva, composed of 104 elegiac distichs (13th epigram in Book Two).

Yet, a hostile critic such as Agić still found some good elements in Benessa's work: "a verse or two well composed", along with the fact that the poet mainly writes about his fellow-citizens, and thus promotes the glory of his native land. Benessa's adventurous life, most thoroughly reconstructed by Rezar, speaks of the points of departure of the poet's work. Many poems contain autobiographic elements. For instance, the years spent in trade and his wanderings between Asia and the British Isles, with a long-term stay in France, provided inspiration for many of his verses. In a love dialogue between Damon and Zana in the 25th epigram of Book One of epigrams (*De amore suo ad Zannam*), Benessa makes no attempt to hide his feelings for the French woman Jeanne, with whom he had once spent lovely days in Lyon (on this also in the 26th and 28th epigrams of Book One), and whom he consoles in the 29th epigram on the occasion of her husband's death. On the other hand, in the epitaph to Miho Pozza (*Epitaphium Michaelis Putei*, 11th epigram of Book Two), who, as a ship captain, drowned in 1520 miles away from home, he warns about the dangers at sea and corsair attacks, alluding to some of his own experiences.

A notable number of epitaphs written in honour of the deceased fellow-citizens, his good friends, bear witness to Benessa's emotional nature. Some of these persons he saved from oblivion, such as the mentioned Miho Zamagna, whose name had not even been entered yet into the official list of the Dubrovnik nobility (*Specchio*), as well as the noblewoman Ana Ragnina (*Epitaphium Annae*, 23rd and 24th epigram of Book Two, whose beauty he admired, though clouded by a misfortunate life), Miho Marinov Bona, who as a young man in 1519 left the recently started study of philosophy in order to join the Benedictine Order in Padua, but soon died in 1528 (7th ode of Book One), along with Tripun Andrijin Bonda (1469-after 1526), in all likelihood a Kotor-born poet, of whom he writes the 29th, 30th and 31st epigrams of Book Two. He also remembered the Greek merchant Constantine Mavrocordatos from the Island of Chios, who died in Dubrovnik in 1535, and left his testament at the Dubrovnik Notary (epitaph "To Constantine", 28th epigram of Book Three).

Benessa's poetic work, however, goes beyond the mere native setting (noteworthy is a short poem about the plague in Dubrovnik in 1527 in the 16th ode of Book One, in the epitaph to Augustin Pozza, brother of Benessa's wife Jakomina, who at the age of thirty died in England, and a fairly short 12th ode of Book Two, on the origin of the city of Dubrovnik), as well as the occasion. Benessa is most deeply immersed in his time and political pursuits, he feels called upon to offer advice contrary to the mainstream. He observes the large scale works on the Revelin Fortress with anxiety, anticipating a great siege like that of the War of Troy (41st epigram of Book Three, untitled), and recalls some of his personal experiences from his long-term career at the administrative apparatus of the Dubrovnik Republic through the work of the official valuers (20th epigram of Book One, *De publici calculi mensura*). Yet, foreign politics he finds most appealing: he dispatched a series of invitations to the most powerful rulers of Western Europe, king of France, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and Habsburg king, to sign an alliance against the Ottomans. While Benessa's epitaph to Sultan Selim I, whom "death took by surprise as he was about to impose laws upon the

whole world” (*Epitaphium Selimi Turcarum imperatoris*, 16th epigram of Book Two), remained within the framework of free poetic expression, the same cannot be said about the letters which under the pseudonym Angelo Caraffa he sent to Francesco Ricci at the court of King Ferdinand I Habsburg in Vienna. Had the Ragusan authorities known who stood behind these reports on the political circumstances in Serbia and Bosnia after the Ottoman invasion, Benessa most certainly would have been seriously punished, Rezar emphasises. However, we are inclined to believe that responsible individuals in the Republic, thanks to great diplomatic experience and available resources, did know about Benessa’s clandestine political activity yet turned a blind eye to it, as they considered that he had not crossed the line by which he would compromise the state before the foreign heads.

Struggle against the Ottomans Benessa also supported by religious reasons: as a vehement advocate of the Roman Church, he viewed Protestantism as “fierce pestilence” (*fera pestis*, 124th verse of the 8th eclogue), calling upon Charles V “to repair the damage caused to Christian faith” (*de fidei damnis reparandis*, 13th ode of Book Two), and with the same reason he addressed Pope Paul III (16th ode of Book Two). Truly pious, he has written several odes to the glory of the Blessed Virgin Mary (from 9th to 15th ode of Book One), though he is not so much drawn by contemplation, as he pursues concrete action even when bedazzled by the natural beauties of the islands of Šipan and Lopud, on which he served as the Republic count (8th ode of Book One), or when he addresses his son Pasko in the 10th satire, offering an obscure philosophical dispute about the secrets of Heaven, earth and human life.

As Rezar rightly observes, Benessa was so preoccupied by certain political themes that some of his poems do not owe their composition to poetic inspiration but to his intent to guise his political views into poetic fabric and thus convey his ideas more easily to the courts of the Roman pope, French king and German emperor (p. 32). However, satire, as a genre particularly suitable for communicating political messages and criticism of society, has its poetic rules which Benessa often bypassed. Although Benessa singled out Horace as model (evidenced by the title of the collection of ten satires, *Sermones*), the fact remains that only the first two poems bear likeness with the classical Roman satire, whereby the Ragusan poet speaks critically of the poor governing of state and ridicules various human defects. In all the rest (except for the last, in which he addresses his son and gives him wordly advice) Benessa follows the same thought, complaining about the decay of Christianity in general, addressing the Christian secular and Church leaders who perpetually fight against each other, prompting their alliance against the Ottomans. In the epilogue he underlined his main thought: will to repair faith and to liberate Christ’s glory (*voluntas mea reparandae fidei et asserendi Christi gloriae*, p. 320). In this light, Benessa’s poetry is a very rich and transparent testament to its time, also gaining in importance from the aspect of general history of Dubrovnik and the Dubrovnik Republic, and therefore we commend the editor on his efforts to bring Benessa to light. This successful edition, furnished with the index of names and useful additional notes made by Friar Antun Agić, may be approached as a valuable monument to Ragusan humanism.

Living in a time strongly marked by anglicisation, Rezar’s consistent use of Latin throughout the volume (in the introductory essay, in short commentaries to the text) some scholars could interpret as anachronism or academic exclusivism. I suggest that we read it rather as a challenge to the imposed framework and as an attempt towards a different approach and freer, critical mind. Acclaimed by the authorities as such, the editor of this volume has been rightly given the 2018 CASA award for the field of philological sciences.