

Croatian Written Heritage as a Historical Source: Occasional Verse and the Austrian Empire in the First Half of the 19th Century

When Dalmatia became an integral part of the Austrian Empire by a decision of the Congress of Vienna in 1815, rigorous censorship affected book production in Dalmatia too. It remained both quantitatively and qualitatively behind much of Central and Western Europe. Its most significant part belonged to the occasional verse. Comprising approximately forty percent of the overall book production, it seemed to be the most popular (and acceptable) genre of the period, and it is one of the reasons why the 19th century has sometimes been called the “golden” age of the occasional verse. Occasional poetry was written for or prompted by a special occasion such as the Emperor’s birthday, a coronation, an anniversary, his arrival in the city, a funeral, etc. However, occasional poetry was also written to celebrate the engagements or weddings of the members of upper-class families or other significant events of their personal lives, to commemorate their funerals, etc. It was also produced for special occasions, such as bishop investiture, first mass of Catholic priests, etc. In spite of such great popularity, it can rarely be found in the collections of the most significant lyric poetry, being qualified as poetry without larger esthetic value. Only recently has it attracted the interest of researchers, mainly literary historians and Latinists. However, historians place it on the margins of their interest, although occasional verse may be regarded as a very precious historical source, which is the main point of this paper as well. The paper analyses occasional poetry from three aspects – socio-political, cultural and communicational, suggesting that it does not only reflect the age when it was written but also the past times. The analysis has been carried out on occasional verse printed in all three publishing and printing centres in Dalmatia of the period (1815–1850) – Zadar, Split and Dubrovnik. Research has shown that occasional verse was usually written in Italian and Latin and rarely in Croatian. A large part of occasional poetry was dedicated to the Habsburg Emperors Franjo I and Ferdinand I, the former Emperor being obviously more popular among the authors. The paper discusses the reasons for this popularity, suggesting that this kind of “court” occasional poetry was more common in Zadar and Split. On the other hand, Dubrovnik noted more occasional verse written to celebrate the important events in the lives of their patrician families, which suggests a strong aristocratic spirit of the historical Republic of Dubrovnik. The paper provides several examples of both kinds of occasional verse, and ends with the conclusion that occasional poetry does reflect the local (Dalmatian) spirit and can thus be considered an important historical source.

Key words: Dalmatia, occasional poetry, Austrian Empire, 19th century