

ODES TO THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY BY
M.K. SARBIJEVIJUS: REFLECTIONS OF THE DEVELOPMENT
OF CHRISTIAN POETRY (*STELLA MARIS*)

Summary

Poetical compositions of religious character constitute probably the most interesting and complicated, although not the largest, part of the poetical heritage by Motiejus Kazimieras Sarbievijus. His odes and epodes dedicated to the Holy Virgin should be segregated into a separate thematical and semantical group. Four odes from the second book of *Lyricorum libri IV* (Antverpiae, 1634) have been directly dedicated to the Holy Virgin Mary (*Ad D. Virginem Matrem*), i.e. Nos. 11, 14, 18, 62; she is also an addressee of the ode II, 13 – *Ad Julium Rosam*. Besides, six odes from the fourth book (Nos. 18, 20, 22, 24, 25, 33) have also been dedicated to the Holy Virgin, while motives related to her could as well be discerned in the 21st one, inspired by the Song of Songs: here, just like in one ode of the six mentioned above (No. 25), the author uses symbols from the Song of Songs, traditionally related to the Blessed Virgin. And finally, Mary is an addressee of the cycle of four epodes, *Quattuor leucae Virginis Matris*, inspired by the personal experiences of the author while participating in one of the rhapsodic processions from Vilnius to the Church of the Blessed Virgin in Trakai, arranged by Jesuits.

The religious poetry by Sarbievijus is characterized by a special quality: even his single-sided, “shallow” texts, at first sight presenting nothing else than close imitations of certain Horatian hymns, upon closer scrutiny reveal numerous hidden semantical, verbal and visual layers. Thus, in his rather early ode (II, 11), besides clear imitations of Horatian texts (*Carm.* I, 35 and III, 4), one can discern the glorious image of the Virgin Mary being depicted; while in ode II, 13, which also imitates Horace (*Carm.* III, 28) rather closely, the biblical images and iconographic patterns can be revealed under the multileveled poetical words: Mary is depicted here as standing on the moon and shrouded in the sun like a wrap (cf. Apr 12, 1 and *toga* in the Sarbievian text). These poems by Sarbievijus are very expressive, both visually and verbally, thus demonstrating the baroque synthesis of image and word. In ode 14 from the second book, written upon the occasion of Andriejus Rudamina leaving for the Eastern missions, wherein Mary is asked to guard his ship and protect it from storms, the favourite Italian humanist motive of Mary as the sea star, *stella maris*, the guardian of seafarers, is elaborated upon, covered in Horatian lexical expressions (esp. *Carm.* III, 22, IV). Thus we come upon the main image of the liturgical hymn *Ave maris stella* here. This popular medieval hymn has already absorbed the earlier invocations addressed to Mary and probably the previously devised Christian textual images; variations of separate strophes from this hymn can be found in earlier hymns to Mary, created by Venancijus Fortunatus in the 6th century A.D., by Paul Deacon in 799 and by some others. During the Renaissance, rewriting of this hymn in classical Latin and metres used to be especially favoured; its images were commented upon in various editions of *Aurea expositio hymnorum* in the 16th century. Tradition of rewriting the hymn *Ave maris stella* in antique metres was also quite tenacious: antiphon in elegiac distich *Alma redemptoris mater* written by Herimannus Contractus in 1054 could be named as probably the most famous and poetical example, while *Alma Dei genetrix* composed by Matthaëus Ronto in 1443 presents a case of particularly close imitation of *Ave maris stella*.

The author of the article analyses the 9th epode by Sarbievijus, or the 1st mile of the Virgin Mother. The comparison of this Sarbievian composition with the text of *Ave maris stella* shows the strophes 4–10 of the 9th epode presenting a close variation of images from *Ave maris stella* in Sapphic verse, strictly adhering to their original sequence, while the last, 11th strophe of Sarbievian epode takes us back to the procession, travelling at the time along the valleys of Paneriai and presumably singing hymn to Mary – the sea star. By comparing images from the original hymn with their elaboration in Sarbievian text, the possible intermediate texts can be guessed at, testifying to the continuity of the Mariologic tradition and its rendering by the poetic pieces in question. This tradition comprises various texts dedicated to Mary, sermons, treatises, comments to the Song of Songs and other parts of the Holy Writ by the church fathers and by other authors from different centuries, and especially poetical texts: hymns, songs, antiphons. The author of this article attempted to confine himself to the samples of Christian poetry from different centuries.

The comparison of the 9th epode by Sarbievijus and the text of *Ave maris stella* clearly proves the Sarbievian piece being composed not only as an expression of personal piety and intimate relationship with the object of adoration, but also as an imitation of medieval hymn. Respectfully written using sparing means, so typical to the early Christian hymns, yet in the manner of baroque poetry, the Sarbievian text visually paraphrases the images of *Ave maris stella* and can be regarded as a reflection of their earlier development in the religious poetry, reverberating traditional and stylistic elements from various centuries.