

# The Noble Witch Reflected in Different Mirrors. The Transformation of the Motif of Veronika of Desenice in the Slovenian Cultural Canon<sup>1</sup>

Kilmingosios raganos atspindys skirtinguose veidrodžiuose:  
Veronikos iš Desenicės motyvo transformacija slovenų  
kultūros kanone

MACIEJ BOLESŁAW OLSZEWSKI

Anthropos Doctoral School and Institute of Slavic Studies of Polish Academy of Sciences

[maciej.olszewski@ispan.edu.pl](mailto:maciej.olszewski@ispan.edu.pl)

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-2184-6346>

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*Abstract:* The fate of Veronika of Desenice, a Medieval lady who was tried (and subsequently acquitted) in the first witchcraft trial on Slovenian soil, has been a profound source of inspiration for Slovenian folklore and culture since the 15th century. Over time, it has gradually evolved into one of the culture's most enduring and canonical motifs. An impressive array of more than 25 texts, spanning various genres such as dramas, operas and novels, has emerged in the modern era, which has its beginnings in Slovenia 1848. In this article, I aim to examine the use of the motif of Veronika in modern texts, and elucidate the transformation of the narratives associated with it over time. The article specifically investigates the shifting focus on different aspects of the story, and the evolving techniques employed in its re-telling. Approximately half of these texts came into existence before the Second World War, while about five were produced during the period

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of communist Yugoslavia, with the remaining works originating in the era of independent Slovenia. In addition, several of these texts were written by authors in exile. Drawing upon this extensive material, the study presents an exploration of the similarities and differences in the portrayal of Veronika of Desenice in changing circumstances, with a particular emphasis on works from the eras of communist and independent Slovenia.

*Keywords:* Veronika of Desenice, Counts of Cilli, Slovenian canon.

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*Anotacija:* Pirmosios Viduramžių Slovėnijos žemėse už raganavimą teistos (o vėliau išteisintos) Veronikos iš Desenicės likimas jau nuo XV a. tapo įkvėpimo šaltiniu slovėnų folklorui ir kultūrai. Laikui bėgant, ši istorija virto vienu iš kanoninių slovėnų kultūros motyvų. Moderniaisiais laikais, kurių pradžia siekia 1848 metus, apie Veroniką iš Desenicės buvo sukurtas įspūdingas įvairių žanrų (drama, opera, romanas) kūrinių kiekis (viso daugiau nei 25 tekstai). Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kaip Veronikos motyvas naudojamas moderniojoje slovėnų kultūroje, analizuojamos šio naratyvo transformacijos laikui bėgant. Straipsnyje aptariami kintantys Veronikos iš Desenicės istorijos aspektai ir jų pasakojimo būdai. Maždaug pusė minėtų kūrinių buvo sukurti prieš Antrąjį pasaulinį karą, penki parašyti komunistinės Jugoslavijos laikotarpiu, likusieji kūriniai atsirado jau nepriklausomos Slovėnijos laikais. Keletą iš šių tekstų parašė išeivijoje gyvenantys autoriai. Remiantis gausia tyrimo medžiaga, straipsnyje nagrinėjami Veronikos iš Desenicės vaidavimo panašumai ir skirtumai keičiantis politinėms aplinkybėms, didžiausią dėmesį skiriant komunistinės ir nepriklausomos Slovėnijos laikotarpiu parašytiems kūriniams.

*Raktažodžiai:* Veronika iš Desenicės, Celės kunigaikščiai, slovėnų kanonas.

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‘What is so interesting in the almost banal, half-fairytales story of Veronika?

What has always been. What has upset people from then until now: even in the case of the biggest problems there are only banal practical solutions. Everyone wants to be a hero, but there are no heroes. Everyone wants to be a great lover, but the most they can do is get what others get.’

From the introduction to the drama *Veronika* by Franček Rudolf (1974)<sup>2</sup>

The motif of Veronika of Desenice has a prominent position in Slovenian culture, spanning various forms of artistic expression, including prose, poetry, drama, operas, musicals, and even a comic book.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of hundreds

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<sup>2</sup> Translated from Slovenian by the author.

<sup>3</sup> Other prominent traditions of literary motifs in Slovenian literature, like Fair Vida, King Mathias, Črtomir or the Water Man, due to the limitations of this paper, are not discussed here.

of years, it has become deeply ingrained in the cultural canon.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, my focus is on examining how the story of Veronika of Desenice has been presented in these diverse works of art, with a particular emphasis on the changes that have occurred over time in terms of what this motif conveyed, especially in the period following the Second World War.

Writings related to the story and to the history of the Counts of Cilli, with which it is associated, boast a longstanding tradition. Numerous research studies have been conducted with regard solely to dramas centered around Veronika: notable works were written by Frank Wollman, Alfonz Gorup, Martin Jevnikar, Anton Slodnjak, Lino Lengiša, Dušan Moravec, Matjaž Kmecl, Bruno Hartman and Barbara Šifrar. The discussion on the role of the Counts of Cilli in the history of the Slovenes has endured since the beginning of Slovenian historiography, and even earlier in German scholarship. The chronicle of the Counts of Cilli, written in German in the middle of the 15th century, commissioned by the family itself, serves as a symbolic starting point, with extracts later used by the polymaths Hieronymus Megiser and Janez Vajkard Valvasor in the 17th century in their works. Numerous studies were conducted in the 18th and 19th centuries, including the most exhaustive work *Die Freien von Saneck und ihre Chronik als Grafen von Cilli* (The Lords of Sanneck and their Chronicle as Counts of Cilli, 1883) by Franz Krones Ritter von Marchland. It is important to note that German writings did not raise the issue of the Slavic origins of the Counts of Cilli or of their potential aspirations to establish a (Yugo)Slavic state.

Conversely, the emerging Slovenian historiography, represented by authors like Krempl, Trdina and Šubic, if it did not specifically endeavour to ascertain the Slavic lineage of the Counts of Cilli, sought to demonstrate their intention to unite southern Slavs under their authority, or highlight their conflicts with the Habsburgs. In a sense, the Counts of Cilli gradually became champions of Yugoslavism in the eyes of some. However, the influence of Marxism contributed to the scrutiny of the ahistoricity of such perspectives, and thus, subsequently, the scholarly discourse on the Counts of Cilli veered towards alternative avenues of investigation. Due to the limitations of this paper, the history of the historiography related to this family, as well as the discussion of literary works related to the Counts of Cilli will be covered only very briefly. Interested readers are referred, for example, to Bruno Hartman's work *Celjski*

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4 The motif of Veronika also exists in German, Croatian and Czech culture.

*grofje v slovenski dramatiki* (Counts of Cilli in Slovenian Drama, 1977), which delves more deeply into this theme. Additionally, Matjaž Kmecl's essay *Esej o Deseniški Veroniki* (Essay on Veronika of Desenice, 1974), and two articles by Mija Oter Gorenčič, 'Skrivnostni grob Veronike Deseniške' (The Mysterious Grave of Veronika of Desenice, 2021) and 'The role of the Counts of Cilli in the architectural development of the Jurklošter Carthusian monastery's great cloister and the question of the location of Veronika of Desnice's grave. The archaeological method as an aid to art-historical interpretation' (2020) served as my primary reference points for analysing the portrayal of Veronika of Desenice.

The aim of this paper, as previously stated, is to unravel the underlying message embedded in works centered around Veronika, and to assess its consistency over time. I undertake this endeavour in order to address a notable gap in the existing research. The initial deficiency lies in the predominant focus on dramas, while the second deficiency pertains to the lack of coverage of more recent artistic production. It is important to emphasise that, due to its limitations, this paper does not focus on the variety of literary trends and genres as such, or the quality of the works themselves. Rather, the analysis centres primarily on the content, and seeks to draw comparisons. Through this approach, the intention has been to elucidate whether the treatment of this canonical theme has undergone any transformations over time, and if so, in what way.

While the main focus of the article is not the comprehensive exploration of the history of the Counts of Cilli, I provide a brief overview here to give a contextual background to the story of Veronika of Desenice, and to highlight the potential significance that the motives of the Counts of Cilli and Veronika hold in modern Slovenian narratives. The influence of this Styrian noble family began to grow in the early 14th century due to a well-executed dynastic policy and successful alliances. On top of that, they established connections with numerous ruling houses in Europe, and in 1436 they were elevated to the rank of Princes of the Holy Roman Empire, eventually asserting independence from the Habsburgs, whose vassals (and main rivals) they had been in the region for many years. The lineage of the Counts of Cilli came to an end with the assassination of Ulrich II, the last Count of Cilli, in 1456. From the perspective of the story of Veronika of Desenice, the individuals of most importance, on whom this article will partly focus in relation to cultural texts, are Herman II (1360–1435), his son Frederick II (1379–1454), his daughter Barbara (1392–

1451, the wife of the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund of Luxembourg), and his grandson Ulrich II (1406–1456). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the fact that their origins lie in predominantly Slav-inhabited regions, and that their properties were located in these areas, has been incorporated into narratives related to them in the modern era, as will be demonstrated later in this article.

Before delving into the presentation of Veronika of Desenice in Slovenian canonical cultural texts, I feel it is essential to offer a concise summary of pertinent historical facts surrounding her, as documented in historiography.<sup>5</sup> Veronika was the second wife of Count Frederick II of Cilli. According to Bogo Grafenauer's descriptive profile of her in the Slovenian Biography Lexicon (Grafenauer 2013), she was born into the noble family between 1380 and 1400.<sup>6</sup> Frederick II (born circa 1365 or, as other sources say, 1379, which seems more probable, and died 1454) married Elizabeth, who came from a prominent aristocratic Frankopan family, around the year 1405. The couple had one son, Ulrich II, who survived into adulthood, becoming the last male member of the Cilli family. However, their marriage was not a happy one, and Elizabeth and Frederick lived separately. In 1422 (or 1423), Elizabeth passed away, with a rumour circulating that she had been killed by her husband, who was already in love with Veronika. Due to this rumour, Frederick faced accusations from the Frankopans, claiming that he had murdered his wife, and the case was brought before Sigismund's court. Frederick was not convicted; nevertheless, fearing for their safety, he and Veronika, whom he had already married, against his father's wishes, sought asylum in Venice. Even so, Frederick was captured by Sigismund and imprisoned by his father in Cilli. Herman demolished his main seat at Friedrichstein, apprehended Veronika, and put her on trial, where she was accused of witchcraft, with the indictment purporting her use of magic to influence the affections of Frederick II, and accusing her of an attempt to poison Herman II. Through the intervention of a so-called *besednik*, a legal assistant

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- 5 This paragraph was based mainly on Veronika's biography in the Slovenian Biography Lexicon (Grafenauer 2013). The main original source relating to the Counts of Cilli is *Die Kronik der Grafen von Cilli* (The Chronicle of Cilli) from the second half of the 15th century, written in German by the count's scribe, which was then cited by all subsequent authors, as well as in all contemporary literature. The other sources are, for example, the writings of Enea Silvio de Piccolomini (later Pope Pius II), writings found in Vatican archives, and monastery records.
- 6 Various theories have emerged regarding her birthplace. Recent research by Oter Gorenčič (2021), however, suggests that her origins lie in Desnice (present-day Dišnik), south of Bjelovar in Croatia, approximately 100 kilometres east of Zagreb.

of sorts (though not a lawyer in today's sense),<sup>7</sup> Veronika was acquitted by the court. Regardless, Herman ordered her imprisonment in Ojstrica Castle, and issued a directive for her execution, specifically by drowning her in a bathtub. As a result of these orders, she met her demise on 17 October 1425 or 1428. Initially, she was buried in Braslovče, but a few years later, after Frederick II's release from prison, he had her remains reinterred in the Carthusian monastery at Jurklošter. As was previously mentioned, Frederick's marriage to Veronika was in defiance of his father's wishes. It is worth examining the potential motivations behind his father's reluctance to accept his son's choice.<sup>8</sup>

The most probable explanation for the situation lies in the difference in social class between them. According to most research, Veronika was from a lower social class than her husband. Although she was a noblewoman, her family's social standing was considerably lower than the Counts of Cilli. Thus, their union was deemed a misalliance. And for Herman II, who sought to enhance the glory of his house through the marriages of his children and cousins, this misalliance constituted high treason. Frederick's actions disrupted the social hierarchy and challenged the rule of obedience of the first-born son, the heir to the father. Furthermore, the death of Elizabeth, regardless of Frederick's guilt in the matter, caused strained relations with the Frankopans. Some researchers also perceive elements of political intrigue involving Sigismund of Luxemburg and Herman II, positing that both may have orchestrated the entire affair to forge closer political contacts with the Republic of Venice. Whether considered separately or jointly, these factors provided ample cause for Herman II to express discontent with Frederick's decision. Importantly, Frederick and Veronika were not the sole protagonists to tread this fatal path in the pages of cultural works.

The theme of love between two individuals from different social classes who become victims of politics is a recurring theme in global culture. Still, two

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7 There are multiple theories of the identity of Veronika's defender. For example, as per Karel Gržan, probably a clergyman, as the only representative of the Church, could be powerful enough to act against Herman II (the afterword in Gržan's book *Friderik in Veronika* [Frederick and Veronika], 2006, 62).

8 Uncertainty remains as to whether Veronika and Frederick had any children. According to some researchers, Frederick III of Cilli, who died in his youth and was buried in another Carthusian monastery in Žice, was their son. More information relating to this topic can be found, for instance, in Mija Oter Gorenčič's article 'The role of the Counts of Cilli in the architectural development of the Jurklošter Carthusian monastery's great cloister and the question of the location of Veronika of Desnice's grave. The archaeological method as an aid to art-historical interpretation' (Oter Gorenčič 2020, 106-107).

love stories in particular bear a striking resemblance to the tale of Veronika and Frederick, drawing on historical facts. The first of these is from Bavaria, revolving around Agnes Bernauer and Albert III, Duke of Bavaria (which unfolded in the 1420s and 1430s in Bavaria). The second is from Portugal, centering on Inês de Castro and Pedro I of Portugal, who were entwined in a romance in the 1340s and 1350s. The first theme passed into folklore and later found its way into literature, gaining immense popularity, especially in the German-speaking world. The second story has served as the basis for over 200 literary works (excluding opera librettos), leaving an indelible mark on Spanish, French and English culture, among others. Nonetheless, neither Agnes' nor Inês' narratives had an impact on Slovenian culture, as the motif of Veronika was already present.<sup>9</sup>

Veronika's story has been referred to as 'the greatest Slovenian love story' by the Slovenian academic Matjaž Kmecl, who explored extensively the subject of Veronika as a literary scholar and as an active writer. Kmecl's work includes one of the most important texts on the presence of this motif in Slovenian culture (Kmecl, 1974), as well as a drama that incorporates it (*Friderik z Veroniko ali danes grof Celjski in nikdar več* [Frederick with Veronika or Today the Count of Cilli and Never Again], 1980). In Kmecl's words, albeit from a perhaps outdated perspective, 'she experienced everything a woman's heart could desire; she was more beautiful than the most beautiful women of her time; one of the most powerful and significant men fell in love with her [...] and finally, every woman's dream, she got into literature'<sup>10</sup> (Kmecl 1974: 117). This raises the question of how Veronika's story made its way into literature and culture, eventually becoming part of the Slovenian canon. There are over 25 cultural texts based on the motif of Veronika, and while my focus in this research is on those produced after the Second World War, it is important to acknowledge briefly the significance of earlier works that continue to influence Slovenian culture. By doing so, I aim to show how the approach to this motif by creators changed over time. To categorise these changes, I propose the following division into three main periods. Although I acknowledge the imperfections inherent in this division, I believe it is a justified framework for the examination of the motif.

9 Interested parties can refer, for example, to the article by Mojca Kovačič 'Veronika Deseniška – nesrečne ljubezni in prepovedane poroke v srednjem veku' (Veronika of Desinic: Unfortunate Love and Forbidden Marriages in the Middle Ages, 2008), or Bruno Hartman's work *Celjski grofje v slovenski dramatik* (The Counts of Cilli in Slovenian Drama, 1977).

10 Translated by the author.

## Writings about Veronika of Desenice before the Second World War

The main emphasis in works related to Veronika's motif from this quite lengthy period can be seen from three points of view. Firstly, Veronika is portrayed as a symbol of the struggle for equality (particularly in a national context). This aspect is present mostly in early works, such as the short story 'Nedolžnost in sila' (Innocence and Force, 1851) by Josipina Toman Turnograjska, and in the epic poem *Veronika Deseniška* (Veronika of Desenice, 1863) by Jožef Iskrač-Frankolski. Veronika embodies a member of the bourgeoisie with peasant roots, which was characteristic of the emerging Slovenian middle class at this time, defying the hereditary laws of the feudal world. Veronika and Frederick's fight for the right to marry becomes a manifestation of the broader struggle for equality, where their conflict with Herman also represents a larger clash between the Slavs and the Germans. Interestingly, in this period, Frederick is often portrayed as a Slav opposing his German father Herman (*sic*). It is noteworthy, especially in Iskrač's poem, that Veronika is depicted as an active and independent figure.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, and especially after 1918, the motif is used in constructing the Slovenian and/or Yugoslavian identity. During this time, the motif is predominantly manifested in dramas. In Josip Jurčič's play *Veronika Deseniška* (Veronika of Desenice, 1880), and Anton Novačan's *Herman Celjski* (Herman of Cilli, 1928), written when the idea of Yugoslavism was being put into practice, the motif is explicitly used to highlight the building of the national identity. However, Novačan sees the Counts of Cilli more as rulers of the South Slavs rather than the promoters of a Yugoslav state. In his play *Veronika Deseniška* (Veronika of Desenice, 1924), Oton Župančič intended, as he stated, to show the birth and development of the Slovenian soul. These works, along with others created in a similar spirit, drew on the conflicts between the Counts of Cilli and the Habsburgs, as well as the fact that the history of the Cilli family took place mainly in Slavic lands, which they gradually acquired over time. Somehow, these works automatically positioned the Counts of Cilli as promoters of the Slavic, Yugoslavian or Slovenian identity, albeit presented in various ways. Remarkably, in Dragan Šanda's drama series *Grofov Celjskih pentalogija* (The Pentalogy of the Counts of Cilli, 1922–1933), the chance for Yugoslavia is lost when Frederick kills Elizabeth. By way of contrast, this



'national' perception of the motif is rejected as ahistorical by Bratko Kreft in his play *Celjski grofje* (The Counts of Cilli, 1932). Instead, from Kreft's pen, Veronika's story becomes a tale of awakening class consciousness, in which the main conflict arises between the degenerating feudal lords personified by Herman and the increasingly powerful bourgeoisie, represented by the craftsmen of Celje (thus recalling in a way the approach of Toman *Turnograjska* and *Iskrač*). These three dramas by Župančič, Novačan and Kreft resonated the most, both before the Second World War and to this day.

### Writings about Veronika of Desenice during the communist Yugoslavia era

During the first two postwar decades, no new works relating to this motif appeared on the literary scene. Perhaps, it had lost its appeal, for various reasons, or it could be that the cultural landscape was already sufficiently saturated by it, especially as Kreft's drama, which embraced a Marxist perspective, was constantly present in the public sphere, and was in line with the zeitgeist.<sup>11</sup> However, the theme was revitalised by two dramas written by Franček Rudolf: *Celjski grof na žrebcu* (The Count of Cilli on a Stallion, 1968) and *Veronika* (1974). In both works, which take an existentialist stance, the author deconstructs the myths related to this motif.<sup>12</sup> These pieces are characterised by an abundance of sarcasm and playful irony. Particularly intriguing is the treatment of Veronika in *Celjski grof na žrebcu* (The Count of Cilli on a Stallion), where she is absent as a character, despite being the catalyst for the action. Instead, the story focuses on mechanisms of power and intergenerational struggles. Conversely, *Veronika* places the emphasis on women, their power and their sexuality. Similar existentialist explorations were undertaken in other works, such as the novel *Z Desenic Veronika z Desenic* (With Veronika of Desenice, 1974) by Sandi Sitar, and Kmecl's drama *Friderik*

11 According to Bruno Hartman, it was played all over the country by almost all professional and semi-professional theatre companies. It was also played at openings and anniversaries of partisan gatherings or local holidays, and for many years enjoyed continued popularity (Hartman 1977: 51).

12 As Rudolf stated: 'I wrote this drama after I copied all that I liked from previously written dramas about the Counts of Cilli' (Hartman 1977: 107).

z *Veroniko ali danes Grof Celjski in nikdar več* (Frederick with Veronika or Today the Count of Cilli and Never Again, 1980). Here we might remark that Sitar's novel showcases formal innovation by multiplying characters across time and space, featuring multiple Veronikas, Fredericks, Elizabeths, and other central figures. The main narratives run along two tracks simultaneously in the Middle Ages and in the 20th century. Actually, throughout these works, weak male characters find self-confirmation through Veronika. Unlike the previous period, in the communist era the national theme is conspicuously absent, as the focus shifts toward exploring the more universal mechanisms governing human nature. It can be regarded as the most philosophical phase in the portrayal of Veronika.

### **Writings about Veronika of Desenice in the period of independent Slovenia**

In the aftermath of Slovenia's independence in 1991, the motif of Veronika of Desenice did not lose its canonical status, and continued to thrive, with the emergence of at least ten cultural texts since that time. However, its utilisation differs from previous approaches. In novels such as *Friderik in Veronika* (Frederick and Veronika, 2006) by Karel Gržan, children's books like *Veronika Deseniška* (Veronika of Desenice, 1996) by Dušan Čater, and *Grad nesrečne ljubezni: Friderik in Veronika na Fridrihštajnu* (The Castle of Unfortunate Love: Frederick and Veronika in Fridrihštajn, 2006) by Helena Štefanič, and even in comic strips, like *Friderik in Veronika* (Frederick and Veronika, 2019) by Juan Juvančič, Veronika is portrayed as the queen of people's hearts. Unlike in previous periods, when the fate of Veronika remained indifferent in the view of 'the common people' up until the point of her witchcraft trial in prior artistic works, now she is openly embraced and favoured by them from the beginning of the stories. One could even argue that the disneyfication of the story has taken place in many cases: everything is beautiful, the sun is always shining, and birds sing above Veronika's head. What is more, in most of the texts she is not a subject (as in the first period) or a kind of catalyst through which men find themselves (as in texts from the communist era). Instead, she becomes an object, an object that is loved and admired, but in a sense passive and reactive.

Naturally, the opposition of Veronika and Frederick versus Herman persists, but its contours have been smoothed over, as is seen in Čater's book, where Veronika is not killed on Herman's order, but is exiled instead. Some authors, like Ivan Sivec, who wrote two books related to this theme, the novel *Samotna divja roža* (A Lonely Wild Flower, 2016) and the collection of short stories *Zgodbe o celjskih grofih in knezih* (Stories about the Counts and Princes of Cilli, 2021), proclaim the end of the ideological approach to Veronika's story; however, the very same author has stated that the objective of his work is to foster Slovenian self-awareness. On the other hand, the short story *Enajsti otrok Veronike Deseniške* (The Eleventh Child of Veronika of Desenice, 2018) by Matej Krajc (an anarchistic retelling, both in form and content) does not herald such an end, as the fight against the privileges of the rulers prevails more than ever, this time transported to a futuristic world, spanning from the Middle Ages to an unspecified future era, when the Counts of Cilli brandish nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the national thread, constitutive especially for the first period, if present at all, recedes into the background. Indeed, the overall impression is that with the exception of Krajc's book, the post-communist era freed this canonical motif from ideological bonds. The story of Veronika of Desenice is now usually presented as a love story.

This period also pushes the boundaries of sexualisation in the Veronika motif. Of course, sexual excess has always been present, even in historical sources, such as in the writings of the Slovenian natural historian and polymath Janez Vajkard Valvasor, who refers to Frederick's debauchery. Sexual promiscuity appears, for example, in works by Kreft, Rudolf and Kmecl. However, in the novel *Tri zvezde* (Three Stars, 2008) by Lev Detela, a writer in exile, promiscuity features on an unprecedented scale within the context of the Veronika motif, involving not only Frederick but also other characters, such as Herman, Barbara and Veronika herself, sprawled over more than 500 pages. This period is also the most diverse when it comes to the range of genres; not only are novels, children's books, dramas and comic books represented, but also musical compositions, and even linguistically simplified reading material for foreigners learning Slovenian.

The main theme that undergoes change in the depiction of Veronika of Desenice is gender. Throughout the various periods, a number of male and female characters appear in the story. Herman and Sigismund (especially Herman) are consistently portrayed through all these periods as strong characters.

Interestingly, Frederick's characterisation differs, but this difference is not strictly tied to a specific period. Whenever another male character, referred to as the *pravdač*, appears, whether as a priest or not,<sup>13</sup> he is always depicted as a strong and independent individual. Ulrich typically resembles his grandfather Herman, while all the other male characters are usually subordinate to Herman or Frederick's will. The portrayal of Veronika, the main female character, undergoes changes over time. In the earlier works, she is active and powerful, as seen in the epic poem by Iskrač. However, as time progresses, she becomes increasingly helpless. In the communist Yugoslavia era, she takes on the role of a mirror, in which male characters see themselves and find self-confirmation in her. In Sitar's novel, she takes the form of a sort of demon, or even Fate. Despite the fact that in the majority of works she actively fights for her love, one can be left with the impression that, as is mentioned above, in recent times she often serves primarily as an ornament. Barbara, Herman's daughter and Sigismund's wife, if she appears, is more often than not a powerful character, and the most powerful, one could say, being more enterprising and cunning than others. Regularly portrayed as a liberated woman and an alchemist, she is truly a character who is much closer to people's popular notions of a witch than a mere sister-in-law. However, she is also the wife of an emperor, which makes her untouchable. Last but not least, there is Elizabeth, the perception of whom also varies across different works, although these perceptions are not related to the period from which the work originates. At times she is depicted as Frederick's helpless victim, while at other times she is a self-conscious woman who struggles to get on with her husband. In summary, it appears that the feminist potential of this story has not yet been fully explored.

In addition, when writing about the ways the motif of Veronika has been rendered, we cannot help but mention that it has been exploited to convey anti-Semitic sentiments in some cases, as is especially evident, even explicitly, in Novačan's drama, where a Jewish character named Aron serves as the main antagonist. This stems from the historical fact that Herman II expelled the Jewish people from his lands.

Furthermore, the existence of the motif of Veronika in the Slovenian cultural canon is also associated with the history of the search for her grave, which, for

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13 In the works in which he is a priest, the Church (or part of it) from the outset is on the side of Veronika and Frederick's love.

some reason, was of vital relevance to many. The importance of verifying whether Veronika is indeed buried in the monastery at Jurklošter led to research efforts in the 19th century by Bishop Anton Martin Slomšek, although without success. Gržan conducted his research at the turn of the 21st century, and announced that he had probably found her burial site. Recent archaeological findings show with great probability that the monastery does contain her grave. Moreover, Vatican archives contain documents revealing that Frederick wanted to be buried alongside Veronika. Unfortunately, his wishes were not fulfilled, and his remains lie in the Chapel of the Counts of Cilli in Celje. Interested parties can refer to the aforementioned article by Oter Gorenčič from 2021 for more details on this subject.

## Conclusions

From the analysis above, it is apparent that the use of the motif of Veronika of Desenice by writers has evolved over time, reflecting the prevailing societal needs and trends. The motif not only retains its canonical status, but also sustains its vitality, instilling a modicum of hope for its enduring legacy. What is more, it looks as if in the post-communist era it has finally become primarily a story about the love between two people, without any ideological background. However, there is the question of what form it will survive in, as some argue that the disneyfication of the story strips away its specificity. It is hard to predict if it will gain any new meanings or contexts in the future. Nevertheless, the motif lives on, not only in literature and in theatres, but also through outdoor performances (especially in Celje) and in museum activities (in Celje and Veliki Tabor).<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the Veronika Poetry Award, established by the City of Celje in 1997, continues to be given (although it is worth noting that only nine out of 25 recipients have been women). These aspects of the phenomenon are still ripe for further research and exploration.

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14 Its durability was confirmed even this year as Slovenia was represented on Eurovision Song Contest 2024 with the song named 'Veronika', referring to the motif of Veronika of Desenice, which led to a revival of discussion in the Slovenian public sphere about the story itself and its possible interpretations and – at the same time – presented it to a broader international audience.

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