

SKANDERBEG, AN EMBLEM IN WORLD LITERATURE

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Abstract

Since ancient times, it has been a tradition among the nations to create songs that pay homage to their princes and their tribunes. Such a tradition was probably more pronounced among small countries that had large enemies, such as the Albanian nation. For writers, history has always been an inexhaustible fount of inspiration as well as of temptation. A plethora of historical figures have turned into characters in various literary works and, due to the creative power of their writers, they have even been transformed into myths. George Kastrioti, also known by his war name Skanderbeg, has a great resonance in his time. His fame and feats were mostly spread by word of mouth, of course even being overmagnified, hyperbolized, and legendized in the meanwhile. Even some serious historians who lived as contemporaries of the warrior lord were from time to time captivated and geared toward legends and oral tradition, unable to keep to strict principles of logic that are needed in authentic historical writings. The Glory of the Albanian braveheart was so great that research works focusing on his fame and exploits would last endlessly in the course of the centuries. Thus, the representative of "the Great Epoch of Arbanon" would rise to the level of immortality and would be labeled in historical studies and European research studies as the "Balkan's Dragon", "The Freedom Writer", and "The Defender of Christianity". The Great amount of works (about 1,000), which directly or indirectly refer to Skanderbeg, written in 20 different languages, serve as living proof of the amount of interest generated by the image of the Albanian National Hero.

Keywords: Skanderbeg, world literature, dramaturgy, French

Introduction

Since ancient times, it has been a tradition among the nations to create songs that pay homage to their princes and their tribunes. Such a tradition was probably more pronounced among small countries that had large enemies, such as the Albanian nation. For writers, history has always been an inexhaustible fount of inspiration as well as of temptation. A plethora of historical figures have turned into characters in various literary works and, due to the creative power of their writers, they have even been transformed into myths.

George Kastrioti, also known by his war name Skanderbeg, has a great resonance in his time. His fame and feats were mostly spread by word of mouth, of course even being overmagnified, hyperbolized, and legendized in the meanwhile. Even some serious historians who lived as contemporaries of the warrior lord were from time to time captivated and geared toward legends and oral tradition, unable to keep to strict principles of logic that are needed in authentic historical writings. The numerous testimonies that have been passed down to us by historians, publicists, and European travel guides confirm that the triumphs accomplished by Skanderbeg and the men he led were celebrated in songs and dances during their lifetime. Marin Barleti himself, the historian who lived and also experienced at a certain extent the events related to the headman, served as the primary reference source for the authors and researchers that wrote after him.

The intention to perpetuate the image of this “steel armour on Europe’s chest” prompted Barleti to write and publish in Latin the first monograph on the Albanian hero, a piece of work that served as a basis and a starting point for almost all research that was written later on about Skanderbeg. [1]

Dhimitër Franku wrote a short monograph in Latin on the leader and published it in 1539 as an anonymous work that was translated into Italian. Both of these studies, especially Barleti’s monographs saw the publishing light of day in many languages.

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Skanderbeg in World Literature

The first writings dedicated to the Albanian hero are two poems written in Latin and published at the beginning of Barleti's literary work by his two Italian friends. Writers from various epochs and movements have approached this historical figure by generating a multitude of literary types and genres.

A whole range of fiction works will appear in the 16th century, some of the most prominent of which being sonnets by Renaissance poets, writings by the Frenchman Pierre Ronsard (1576) and works by the Englishman E. Spencer (1596), which elevate the hero by comparing him with the great heroes of antiquity. The list continues with the Italian Antonio Possenti, who published the novel *The Horror of Turks* (1548); the poet Margherita Sarrocchi, which represents Skanderbeg as a noble knight and a true hero in her poem *Skënderbeiada*, published in 1623, in Rome; the German Jacob Kokert in his *Pride Songs* (1643); the Frenchman Jean Bysier with his poem *Skanderbeg* (1658). In the same century, the well-known British playwright Christopher Marlowe published his drama *The True History of George Kastrioti Skanderbeg*.

According to the available data, Skanderbeg is the protagonist or the principal hero in an infinite number of literary writings by French, Italian, Spanish, Swedish, Polish, Greek authors, etc.

It is worth mentioning the great Spanish writer Lope de Vega who wrote *Prince Skanderbeg*, which was included in the list of his most famous plays. In the same 17th century, topics focusing on Skanderbeg also appeared in prose by authors such as the Frenchman Yrben Chevron (*Skanderbeg*, 1644), as well as an anonymous Russian writer who published *Tales of Skanderbeg, the Albanian Prince*.

“Unlike any of the great men, the son of a small but eager and freedom-loving people living in a restricted geographical area, with a national life that was battered by foreign invasions, would have the rare chance of being reborn.” [2]

In the 17th century, the image of the great leader attracted the attention of a number of Italian and French playwrights. Antonio Zamboni wrote and published *The Feats of Prince Skanderbeg, Who Triumphed Over Sultan Murat* (1730), Maurizio Gerardini wrote *Skanderbeg, Prince of Albania* (1770), Paul Debussyon wrote *Skanderbeg* (1786).

In the wave of liberation movements that swept through Europe in the 19th century, a greater interest was directed towards the leader of Albanians. The German Karl Sondershausen, in his drama *The Liberation of Greece* (1821), placed as a principal figure the image of the Albanian national hero; the Swedish F. G. Rudbek published his drama

Skanderbeg (1835); the German romantic poet Friedrich von Nidda published *Skanderbeg*, a heroic poem (1824).

About half a century later, the progressive Macedonian poet Grigor Parlichev wrote the drama in verses *Skanderbeg* (1861), in which the Albanian hero is represented as a great leader, but also as a modest person who mingled with his people. [3][4]

It is also worth mentioning the novels *The Captain of the Janissaries* (1887) by the Englishman G. Ludlow on the life of writer Thomas Jazh, the poem with Skanderbeg's name on its title written by Henry Longfellow (1873), which has also been translated by the great master of Albanian letters F. S. Noli, remains one of the best pieces of world literature.

Skanderbeg in French Dramaturgy

There is a significant amount of literary work that has been written in French, which is focused on Skanderbeg. The first literary work intended for a French audience is the translation of a monograph by Dhimitër Franku, published in 1544.

Also, the well-known poets Ronsari, Floran Kretini, and Amadis Zhameni have written verses on Skanderbeg. The hero is also mentioned by the well-noted 16th century prose writer Montenji.

Skanderbeg is the main character of six novels, as well as three literary fictions and seven theatrical parts written by French authors.

The reason that prompts us to choose as an object of study some of the dramaturgical works written by French authors lays with the fact that if such works have been publicly set on stage, the opportunity to communicate with the audience is even more considerable.

In French Literature, the drama works that referred to Skanderbeg surfaced much later than works belonging to other genres, such as novels, poems, or short stories.

The famous 17th century writer Antuan Udare wrote the first theatrical work in which Kruja's hero is the principal character. Unfortunately, he could not publish it during his lifetime.

The second theatrical work on Skanderbeg was written and was set on stage by the end of the 17th century, just as the French Revolution was strating, in 1786. Dubuisson, the author of a tragedy titled *Skanderbeg*, managed to put it on stage in one of the famous theaters in Paris, the François Theater (the French Theater). This work is of interest due to its highlighting of the heroic battle of Albanians for freedom. It is also interesting to notice that, just as I. Kadare did in his novel *The Castle*, so did Dubuisson two centuries ago by giving prominence to the Ottomans rather than to the Albanians. Through the desperation of the

Ottomans prior to the vain attempts to conquer the city of Kruja, the bravery of the Albanians is clearly underlined.

Another piece of theatrical play, whose main character is Skanderbeg, was published in the second half of the 19th century, being authored by a neoclassicist writer, namely Kazimir Pertys and titled *Skanderbeg*. Through this play, Pertys was attempting to restore its lost dignity to the genre of tragedy. As a main source of data on Skanderbeg, Pertys must have used the numerous stories on the Albanian hero, as well as the novels written by Deshan and Sheviji.

The most recent theatrical piece dedicated to the Albanian national hero is the historical drama titled *Skanderbeg or the Christian Hero* written by a priest, Rogasianus, who is a quite unknown author. The play we are discussing, which was published in 1891 is, to our knowledge, the only piece of written work he ever authored. As can be clearly seen from the title of the work and also from its content, the author's intention is to give a particular religious emphasis to it. What seems interesting in this piece of work is the depiction of the Ottoman conquest in Albania and the impoverishment of the feudal class.

Even though the above-mentioned work was authored by a non-sensational author with modest artistic qualities in France, it "caught the attention of the Albanians and it was entrusted with the strange mission of playing a mobilizing role at a time when the fate of Albania was being decided, since its publication occurred exactly in the same year when the Independence Flag was raised in Vlora, in 1912" [5]. In addition to this first publication, Roasianus' work circulated in two other editions at the eve of the 500th anniversary of Skanderbeg's death. Its translation published in Sofia, even though it can be considered as outdated and archaic, was republished in the *New Life* magazine.[6]

The well-known critic, Nonda Bulka, deals with the analysis of this drama work in his paper *Skanderbeg and the French Literature*. [7] In the same way Hasan Mekuli, on the occasion of its republishing in 1969 [8], gives his own assessment of the written piece.

The significant place that was given to the image of George Kastrioti in the history of French dramaturgy constitutes a clear testimony of the evident interest that was stirred up in the history of European Literature by the splendid character of George Kastrioti.

Conclusion

Thanks to literary studies and folk literature now it is possible to comprehend more deeply and shed more light into the greatness of the hero and the epoch he lived in, this

emblematic figure that compelled the centuries to talk about him, a hero that was as magnificent as he was legendary, as kind as he was merciful, embodying the best values of Albanism.

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