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**JOVAN STERIJA POPOVIĆ AND GEORGE CASTRIOT
SKANDERBEG ¹**

The works of one of the best Serbian playwrights, Jovan Sterija Popović (1806-1856) about the Albanian hero George Castriot Skanderbeg (1405-1468) merit much greater consideration than what they have so far received from Southern Slav scholars.

Sterija is generally considered to be the founder of Serbian drama, but he is also the author of poems and novels and other texts of morphologically different literary genres (Ivanić 2007: 273). His earliest dramaturgical works were the dramatizations of popular poems such as *Nevinost*, *Svetislav i Mileva*, *Miloš Obilić* and *Nahod Simeon*. His later historical dramas, such as *Smrt Stefana Dečanskog*, *Vladislav*, *Lahan* (the subject is from Bulgarian history), are undoubtedly better and were well received by Serbian audiences. However, his most notable contribution is in comedies, such as *Laža e paralaža*, *Tvrđica*, *Pokondirana tikva*, *Kir Janja*, *Rodoljupci*. His dramas revolve around the cult of sentiments (Sterija was much influenced by the work of Samuel Richardson) and nature, the idealization of life, friendship and love.

The Albanian hero George Castriot Skanderbeg was the subject of two of Sterija's works (see Schmaus 1968) produced in two distinct phases of his activity. In the first phase, from 1825-30, indicated as the study phase, when he was studying in Kežmarok and when he was oriented towards historical themes, Sterija wrote and published a biography of the Albanian hero (1828), while in the third phase, from 1840 to 1849, the phase linked to the city of Belgrade, he returned to his literary ideals of the first phase and to an interest in historical

¹ This presentation is part of the discourse segment.

tragedies, eventually writing the historical drama *Skenderberg*, which was published posthumously.

The biography, entitled *Život i vitežka voevanija slavog kneza epirskoga Đorđa Kastriota Skenderbega* (Life and chivalrous battles of the famous Epirote leader George Castriot Skanderbeg) was published in Buda by the press of the Royal University of Pesth in 1828 (Popović 1828). The cover page reports that the cost of publication was borne by Josif Milovuk. Milovuk (1787/93-1850) was a Serbian printer, publisher and benefactor originally from Croatia, known as one of the founders of Matica srpska, the oldest Serbian cultural institution (founded in 1826 in Pesth). On December 4, 1827, in Pesth Milovuk announced the imminent publication of the biography of Skanderbeg, specifying that in Buda the *Life of George Castriot*, “the famous Albanian king”, was being printed and would be ready for the fair of St. Joseph in Pesth. Milovuk also emphasized that this historical biography was based on facts that had been uncovered about the important historical figure of Castriot who in more than 25 years of fighting against Turks, Venetians and French was always victorious and who had been given the name “Skanderbeg”, meaning “the new Alexander” by his Turkish enemies and had also been proclaimed the “shield of Christianity” since he protected the whole of Europe with his courage. The publisher Milovuk also expressed his hope that the biography would be an important contribution to Serbian history since the “Albanians had close ties with the Serbs”. He further mentions the fact that a copper plate print of Skanderbeg would certainly enhance the importance of the publication. The volume bears the date of January 2, 1828 and the Imprimatur was given by the censor Jovan Vitković (1785-1849)².

The same date appears in Sterija’s preface which he begins with the author’s acknowledgment that the biography of Skanderbeg had come out at the request of the Pesth merchant Milovuk. Sterija then expresses his hope that he will fulfill the desire of the readers to whom he is offering his description of the life of man whose courage amazed and inspired admiration in the whole of Europe. Sterija further states that all

² “Ioannes Vitkovits m.p. graeci n.u. Ritus Par. Budens. et Interim. Libr. Illyric. ac Graec, R. Censor.” Jovan Vitković / János Vitkovics (1785-1849) was a priest, writer and censor of Serbian books. His brother was the Serbian-Hungarian writer Mihailo Vitković (1778-1829).

the writers of that period agree that Castriot was the greatest hero of his century and that he rightly deserved the name the new Alexander because in those dangerous times, when the Turkish forces terrorized Europe, he was capable with only a handful of his faithful men to repel the armies of two terrible sultans and free the country from that scourge. Albania thereby showed that it could rise wisely and shine, but it quickly plunged into darkness after Skanderbeg's death. This sudden change created the doubt among historians that accounts of his deeds had been merely legend, but the fact that many towns in Epirus raised monuments to him should have confirmed his deeds. On that occasion Sterija mentions that in Potsdam a certain "Milord Kaid" had placed a portrait of Skanderbeg between one of Julius Caesar and another of William I, wanting to show the great glory of this hero (IV-V). Most likely it was the Scottish nobleman George Keith, 10th Earl Marischal (1692/3?-1778), Scottish and Prussian officer and diplomat, friend and patron of Rousseau. At the invitation of Frederick of Prussia, Lord Keith came to live in Potsdam where the king gave him a house (and where he died) and it is very likely that here³ the nobleman hung the portraits of Julius Caesar, Skanderbeg and William I next to each other.

At this point Sterija lists his sources, primarily Marin Barleti (1450-1513), Albanian writer and clergyman who had published an *Historia de vita et gestis Scanderbegi Epirutarvm Principis* (1508-1510) in Rome, as Sterija emphasizes, "26 years after the death of Castriot!". Curiously Sterija reports the year of publication as 1493 (!). Several times the question of which of the translations of Barleti's work Sterija could have read has arisen. Since Sterija knew numerous languages (including Latin which he also taught) and Barleti's text on Skanderberg had been translated into German, Italian, French, English, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, Polish and Russian there are numerous possibilities. Barleti's work was well known throughout Europe and can still be considered today as the most important source of information on the life and deeds of the Albanian hero. Almost all the translations of this work date from the 16th and 17th centuries. However,

³The house is in Lennéstrasse 9 (Potsdam), near Sanssouci.

the importance of the Zagreb edition of this work, published in Latin in 1743, should not be underestimated⁴.

“Sagred” and “Bussieres” are two of the other sources that Sterija mentions. Miron Flašar (1988: 103) identified the first one: it is Giovanni Sagredo (1616-1682), procurator and ambassador of the Republic of Venice to the main European courts (France, England, Austria), author of *Memorie istoriche de' monarchi Ottomani* (Venice 1673). Staying on the mainland, where in 1660 he had begun the construction of a sumptuous country residence in Conselve, near Padua, he devoted himself to literary studies. The result of those years of idleness were precisely these historical memoirs of Ottoman monarchs that reconstruct the events of the East from the 14th century to 1646 on the basis of the most famous Western European authors, but with a wealth of details regarding recent times, especially where he reports of diplomatic relations between Venice and the Ottomans drawing on diplomatic correspondence. The work shows a strong sympathy for the Turks considering the particular historical moment that the Serenissima was undergoing and the personal experiences of the author. It was nevertheless a successful publication, being reissued six times during the 17th century and translated into French.

“Bussieres”, the other source mentioned by Sterija, has been identified by Flašar (1988: 107) as Ioannes de Bussieres, or Jean de Bussières (1607-1678), a Jesuit who published a poem in hexameters, entitled *Scaenderbegus* in Lyon in 1643 [sic!]⁵.

Other sources to which Sterija refers, but within the work itself, are “Dufresne” (71), “Maurourbin” (15, 71) and “Pauel Vitezović” (15), as well as the “History” by Jovan Rajić. Flašar identified the first source as Carolus / Charles du Fresne, but gives no details about him. Charles du Fresne, sieur du Cange (1610-1688) was a French historian, linguist and philologist, author of *Histoire de l'Empire de Constantinople sous les empereurs français* (1657), *Historia byzantina* (1680) and *Illyricum vetus et nuovumsiue, Historia regnorum Dalmatiae, Croatiae, Slavoniae, Bosniae, Serviae, atque Bulgariae* (1746). Since du Fresne wrote in Latin he used the Latin name of Skanderbeg calling the

⁴*Vita et res praeclare gestae Georgii Castrioti, Zagabriae* 1743.V. Stojanović 2007, 153-154.

⁵It seems that the first edition of the poem is from 1656 (Lyon). See Braun 2007: 482.

Albanian hero 'Georgius Castriotus Scanderbegus' in his works. The Ragusean historian Mauro Orbini (1563-1614), on the other hand, is well known to southern Slavic historiography, thanks to his work *Il Regno degli Slavi* (The Kingdom of the Slavs, Pesaro 1601), where he also speaks of Skanderbeg. The third source, however, was Croatian writer, historian and linguist Pavao Ritter Vitezović (1652-1713) who had published, among other things, *Novus Skender-beg seu Illustrissimus Dominus, Dominus comes don Petrus Ricejardi, de Lika [...]*. This is a poem in honor of Pietro Ricciardi (see Schwedt 2017), a native of Ragusa, who had a successful career and was appointed by King Leopold patrician of the cities Senj, Rijeka and Trieste and also hereditary count of Lika. Vitezović congratulated him on this and called him the new Skanderbeg who in a short time would free Lika from the Turkish yoke (Klaić 1914: 49). The last source was *Istoriya raznih slavenskih narodov, naipače Bolgar, Horvatov i Serbov* (1794-1795) i.e. *The History of various Slavic peoples, particularly the Bulgarians, Croats and Serbs* by Jovan Rajić (1726-1801), Serbian writer, historian and pedagogue.

In the course of the narration, Sterija also speaks of a letter in Albanian that Skanderbeg had written to Mehmed. A number of writers had reported that this letter was in Montenegro and Sterija speculates about whether it is still there which he supposed to, be in Montenegro. It is non excluded that Sterija refers to the Cetinje Chronicle (see Martinović 1962), a collection of manuscripts (letters, documents, poems) compiled by the Montenegrin metropolitan bishop of Cetinje Vasilije Petrović (1709-1766). In the letter, as an answer to Mehmed who had offered him peace in 1460, Castriot replies:

Oh Turkish Sultan! I have received your letter, to which I am now sending you the answer. Actually, I don't like you much, but I wish you all the best and good health. For the honor you have given me, I thank you, but I do not ask you for your friendship, though if I did decide to be your friend I would remain a friend for life. With contempt – and not by my own choice but for the good of my people for whom I am responsibly the will of God and by my father's sword – I accept the offer of peace you sent to me, and in so doing I prove that I do not intend to magnify my own glory at the expense of my subjects. In my opinion, the glory of a sovereign is represented by the welfare

of his state. If you believe this too, then I can still hope for your friendship. May the hand of God guide you in all your actions. (51-52)

At the end of the description of Skanderbeg's life there is a description of his physical appearance: Sterija says that Castriot was particularly tall, so as to exceed all his soldiers in height. He had a long nose, a broad white body and red cheeks. He had a long beard and short hair and always slept with his sword. In times of peace he wore a long dress of green cloth and often without headgear; in combat he always wore a helmet on which he had had an enormous crest drawn. It is then said of him, Sterija continues, that he had a special strength, so that with his hands he could cut two Turks. The historian also relates that when peace was made between the Turks and the Albanians, Mehmed asked Skanderbeg to send him the sword with which he had accomplished such miracles in battle, but seeing nothing special in the sword, Mehmed returned it saying that it was not the one for which he had asked. Castriot replied that the sword was indeed the right one, but that it was not the right hand that had tried to manage it.

Sterija goes on to say that Castriot was of a particular nature and could go without eating or drinking for two or three days, and yet he managed to attack the Turks with such energy that, according to his soldiers, in his life he had cut 2000 heads. In the more than twenty fights in which he participated, he was only injured once on his leg. After his death when the Turks conquered Albania, they pulled his body from the tomb and dismembered it, thinking that they would become brave carrying a piece of his body.

Castriot, continues the author, was diligent, full of experience and wisdom, and when he entered Albania and conquered it all, he slept for only two hours. What remains of him, after all these years and so many changes have come to pass, are the memories among his people of his glory.

At the end of his biography Sterija included eight poems written by the Croatian poet Andrija Kačić Miošić (1704-1760), knowing, as he had emphasized in the preface, "that young people read them with joy" (VI). Kačić Miošić published *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga* (*Pleasant Conversation of Slavic People*) in Venice in 1756-59: it is based on both historical fact and legendary accounts. In the first part

the author describes the figure of Alexander the Great, whom he refers to as a “Slav king”, up to the fall of Constantinople (1453), dedicating ample space to the history of the Slavic peoples. The rest of the text concerns the war against the Turks up to the eighteenth century. The writing is characterized by a style composed of one hundred and thirty-six poems and pieces of descriptive prose. There is much praise and appreciation for the Republic of Venice and the heroic figure of George Castriot Skanderbeg in this work, and the Turks are also judged in a tolerant and benevolent way, and are described as brave and intelligent. The author was inspired by the above mentioned historical writings of Marin Barleti and Mauro Orbini, and by *Istoria di Giorgio Castrioto Scanderbeg-Begh* (Brescia 1742) by the Italian priest Giammaria Biemmi. Kačić’s book of poems was very successful throughout the South Slav region and in Europe. The work, is written in the Štokavian Ikavian dialect, and follows a chronological order: the first part, mostly in prose, contains the history of the Slavic peoples, the Slavic kings are mentioned and their relationships with other peoples, Hungarians, Albanians, Italians are described in a positive light. It is in this part of the text that we find the prose fragment whose title calls to mind Sterija’s biography of Skanderbeg (“Slidi čudnovati život, I vitežka vojevanja Jure Kastriotića, rečenoga Skenderbega [...]”). The second part of the book focuses on the war with the Turks and relations with the Ottoman Empire are presented as a persistent destabilizing factor.

After the poems of Kačić Miošić follows the list of the subscribers (see Vojinović 2007) to the volume where, among others, we find the names of Slovenian philologist Jernej Kopitar (1780-1844), Serbian linguist, ethnologist and writer Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787-1864), Orthodox Archimandrite Gerasim Zelić (1752-1828), Russian diplomat Jeremija Gagić (1783-1859), Czech writer and ethnographer Pavel Jozef Šafárik (1795-1861) as well as the Serbian writers Jovan Hadžić (1799-1869) and Đorđe Magarašević (1793-1830).

In analysing Sterija’s biography of Skanderbeg, Flašar (1988: 110, 112-113) deals with the relationship between historical facts and imagination, emphasizing that Sterija did not follow the model of his historical novels in this biography but instead from the outset he narrates in a linear and chronological order, beginning with Castriot’s

birth and following along to his death. The morphological and stylistic characteristics of the biography, together with the technique of narration, lead Flašar (115) to conclude that Sterija was under the influence of the Aristotelian concept that required, biography, unlike novels, to avoid flights into poetry.

However, although the writer is expected to be objective in his biography, Radomir Ivanović (1965-66:182) instead believes that the level of stylization of the character is far greater in the biography than in Sterija's drama about Skanderbeg. Almost twenty years after the release of the biography, Sterija, it seems, was not ready to abandon the theme of the Albanian hero and proceeded to write a drama on Skanderbeg that was published posthumously and staged for the first time on March 4, 1848 at the "Teatar kod Jelena" (Tokin 1956: 400). Sterija defined *Skanderbeg*, along with his other dramas such as *Miloš Obilić*, *Smrt Stefana Dečanskog*, or *Lahana* as one of his "serious dramas" ("žalostna pozorja"). Today the scholarly interest in this body of his work is more historical than literary, since after the first staging these dramas disappeared from the scene and were not re-published. In fact, critical interest in them is limited to the influences of Shakespeare and Schiller (Hristić 1976: 638) that can be found within them. Ivanović (1965-66: 182), however, maintains that Sterija-playwright surpasses Sterija-biographer; perhaps we can conclude that the biography completes the drama, written to express Sterija's most intimate concerns.

The main plot of this five-act drama, , is found in the second act, and involves the defense of Kruja, the Albanian capital of the time and the struggle of Murat against Skanderbeg. To achieve greater dramatic effect, Sterija introduced a number of characters and events into the drama that are not in the biography. Examples of these additions include the love between Atima and Skanderbeg, the love of Mamica and Topija and so on. Ivanović (184) even goes so far as to say that in the drama one can hear the influences of classical poems such as Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* and Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, but also the influence of Serbo-Croatian folk poetry in the choice of motifs, in marked situations, the characters, and in the relationships between the protagonists of the main events (Bojović 2007: 163-164).

Perhaps the best part of the drama is the dialogue in the introductory scene (Ivanović 1965-66: 184) where Sterija offers a series of details that explain the story of the Albanian hero exalting his heroism but also showing his wisdom, justice, mercy, nobility and compassion. However, Sterija does not maintain a continuity of style and not all the scenes are of the same intelligibility. Paradoxically some of the scenes, instead of being tragic, border on the comic, and for this reason Ivanović describes an ascending and descending curve, a continuous shifting of intensity.

Interestingly, in Sterija's drama Skanderbeg is presented as a philosopher (Ivanović 1965-66: 188) who faces defeat wisely, referring to the wheel of fortune.

It is a fact, however, that Sterija was not happy with this drama, and it was not mere coincidence that he did not include it in the four volumes of his *Pozorišna dela* (1848-1853) that he had personally edited. In Matica srpska there is a manuscript of the drama (see Popović 2008: 55-62) which shows that the author revised it several times and from which it can be deduced that the drama *Skanderbeg* was borne over a long period of time (56), but definitely not after the year 1848 (57).

The question of why Sterija, a famous Serbian playwright, wrote a biography and a drama about an Albanian hero must be posed at this point. Sterija far from being confused about Skanderbeg's origins actually made a point of emphasising them. It is true that the Albanian and Serbian tradition have many points in common and that, above all in folk poetry, the motifs and characters are often similar. Links at various levels were present and must have been a reflection of a common tradition (Milošević-Đorđević 2013: 29). In the manuscript of the drama, too, we find Skanderbeg saying that when he is with the Turks he declares himself Turkish, but "in my heart I am the true Albanian and I will remain so until I die" (58). It must be said here that Sterija, at the time of the wars of liberation in the Balkans (1804-1830), closely followed the whole situation. Zoran Milisavac (1978: 909) believes that the publisher and businessman Milovuk had every reason to encourage Sterija to write about Skanderbeg, since at the time Serbia could be considered an independent principality, and also Greece had gained its independence and Montenegro was able to defend it, while

the Turkish power was still felt in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Bosnia, Herzegovina and Albania, where however the agitations were felt and the moment of liberation was approaching. The book about the life of the great Albanian military leader, politician, strategist and patriot Skanderbeg, concludes Milisavac, echoing Milovuk's opinion, could contribute to the maturation of the situation towards an open struggle and it is likely that Sterija had this idea. Milovuk believed that Sterija was indeed capable of writing such a book since the young writer, adopting the reform of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, had contributed to the diffusion of liberating and national, liberal and democratic ideas of the Serb bourgeoisie. So from 1827, when he had written Skanderbeg's biography, the forceful image of this extraordinary man would remain with Sterija and would eventually lead to his writing the drama, prompted no doubt by a new revolt in Albania in 1847 and the riots in Europe in 1848.

One could also speculate that Sterija, while basing his work on a national context, was actually looking further afield in terms of the formation of nations and the union of the Southern Slavs. Evidence of this can be seen most clearly in Sterija's writings on the year 1848. In his poem entitled *Godina 1848-a* ("Year 1848) he expressed a certain disappointment for the political consequences and the distrust that had developed in the movement of the masses (Đurković 2007: 560-562). Sterija could, in the manner of other Europeans, find a folk hero from the past who could inspire popular unity. Just as the Italians had found in Serbo-Croatian folk poetry an inspirational figure to provide the stimulus for their own struggle in the revolutionary ten-year period 1838-1849, so too could Sterija find in the past of the Albanian people similar inspiration. Just as the Italians had found a unifying symbol in the figure of the Serbian hero Marko Kraljević, a similar inspiration could be found for his own people in the figure of the Albanian hero Skanderbeg. As Milisavac observed (1978: 910), in Sterija's image of Skanderbeg, the liberation of the people is of primary importance and everything else is secondary: even Skanderbeg's infidelity towards the Turkish sultan finds its artistic and moral justification in the face of national needs. Sterija's "serious dramas" are imbued with the ideas of romanticism, patriotism, historicism and traditionalism (Blagojević 2007: 652-653), showing his affinity for the movements of the peoples

in the Balkans. He expressed his lament for the events preceding the liberation of the Bulgarian people, for example, and in his poems in wrote with fervour of the cause for Greek freedom. In his biography of Skanderbeg and even more so in his drama about the Albanian hero Sterija sets himself the very precise task of showing the people of the Balkans that once there was a very great leader, the Epirot Skanderbeg, who was courageous, good, honest and magnanimous, and that following his example was the direction the peoples of the Balkans had to undertake.

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