

Homer's Influence on Naim Frashëri's Poem 'History of Skanderbeg'

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Abstract

Naim Frashëri—the most ardent sonneteer of the beauty and antiquity of Albanian language, of his fatherland's countryside, of the charm and antiquity of Albania's most gorgeous cities and locations, of its national historical figures, of its lofty ideals of freedom, independence, and education—is certainly the apostle of the Albanian people's newly-found faith in its literature and cultural history. The Naimian literary work is an oeuvre of high purposes and values, in that it "seeks and finds its purpose in the outside self"; it is "the esthetic, moral and meaningful nimbus" of the great Albanian Renaissance Literature, but not only. (Qosja 2000). Naim's influence on Albanian writers has been and will continue to be extraordinary. From the time he was alive, many of his verses were set to music and performed as folk songs, while bringing the Albanian language up to the level of a beautifully weaved literary language. An interesting object of study for the experienced and new researcher alike would be the influence of Greek and Roman antiquity and philosophy on the poet's humanist and literary formation, even though an Eastern influence appeared to be stronger. In comparative studies, Naim has often been aligned with Hesiod or some other ancient poet, but unfortunately we see a serious void and absence in illuminating this brilliant figure. More than other Greek and Roman writings, Naim studied and estimated Homer's writings. Homer would become his true guide in the world of epic poetry.

Keywords: Naim Frashëri, Homer, Skanderbeg, Greek and Roman antiquity, epic poetry.

1. Introduction

An interesting object of study for the experienced and new researcher alike would be the influence of Greek and Roman antiquity and philosophy on the poet's humanist and literary formation, even though an Eastern influence appeared to be stronger. In comparative studies, Naim has often been aligned with Hesiod or some other ancient poet, but unfortunately we see a serious void and absence in illuminating this brilliant figure.

Researcher Ali Aliu is of the opinion that: "...we have not encountered any particular paper devoted to this subject, neither about his connection to Greek antiquity in general or to Homer in particular." (Aliu 1979) On the other hand, G. Gradilanone and S. Sylejmani believe that Naim "has received instruction" mostly in Virgil's school that and he has been influenced more by his poetry than by Homeric lyrics.

"Foreign language publications were dominant in the first period of his creative work", (Elsie 2001) but the poet also wrote "under the influence of an oriental environment, in the spirit and traditional practice of Persian and Turkish-Arabic poetry." (Jorgaqi 1978)

Even in his later works, Naim was influenced by Dalip Frashëri's *Hadikaja* and by Hasan Zyko Kamberi, while acclaiming the latter as the greatest Albanian poet in his prologue to *Iliad's* publication.

2. Naim Frashëri and the Greek and Roman antiquity

A number of Albanian intellectuals like Thimi Mitko, Kristoforidhi, Jani Vreto, Naum Veqilharxhi, Çajupi, and others, pursued their studies in Greek schools in Albania. *His five consecutive years of education in Janina (Zholi 1970)*, made of Naim a model of the brilliant intellectual. *This is where he would study Modern and Old Greek (Elsie 2001)* and would become passionate about Homer's and Virgil's works, as Dhimitër Shuteriqi says: "he would imitate or later render them into Albanian". As a founder, but also as an intellectual of the Albanian national literature and culture, Naim studied particular motifs "....in order to find support in the culture which would ensure the implementation of his *mos humane visions*". (Sedaj 1984). Naim considered Homer as "the father of poetry". He could not find a greater writer among the greatest in world literature. Homer would become his true mentor in the world of epic poetry. French researcher Lyis Benleoj, in regards to the magnificent poem *History of Skanderbeg*, would state that "....now Albanians have their own *Iliad*" (Dhima 1971).

Research studies on the Homeric subject that take historical, linguistic, historical-literary, and artistic approaches can be found in *The Prologue and The Epilogue to the publication of the First Song of Homer's Iliad*, which was translated by Naim in *Istori e Shqipërisë [History of Albania]*, in *Istori e Përgjithshme [General History]*, as well as in other works the poet authored.

The Albanian and Arbëreshë authors that came before Naim are influenced by Homer's epic poetry, but they did not write any particular papers about Homer. In the Prologue to *The Iliad*, Naim Frashëri talks more about Homer and the contents of *Iliad*, this "long poem", as he calls it. Furthermore, he makes a good effort to present this work also based on legends and myths by other authors, which are not made known because of *The Iliad*. Thus the legend about *The Golden Apple* and the selection of the beautiful girl, which were, the real causes of Helen's abduction from Paris and the Trojan War.

In the Prologue to the publication, he displays the contents of Homeric songs, while trying to combine and complete them in all respects. Thus, he studies with a comparative approach Homer, Hesiod, Virgil, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Herodotus and Tukidid. He makes comparisons between ancient Roman and Greek writers, between Dante and Lamartini, between world literature and Albanian literature. "Firdevs is a friend of Homer and Virgil", he writes in Prologue. Even further on, he compares him to Homer through comparing Shahmaje's content to *The Iliad's* and *The Aeneid's* content. Therefore, he views "Rustem in the place of Agilent, Isfendiyar in the place of Heraklion," etc.:

Sa Herkulë, sa Akilë, sa Rustemë [How many of the Heraklions, how many of the Achilleuses, how many of the Rustems]

Nga të Marsit shitz e pallë – u vranë, u prenë! [From March's spear and sword - were killed, and were cut!] (Frashëri 1978).

He compares Homer to Hasan Zyko Kamberi and indirectly considers him as the greatest of Albanian poets.

In this paper, Naim appears with a well-formed individuality, with clearly and explicitly defined inclinations and interests, by incarnating original, clear, and simple ideas of expression. Regarding the Homeric subject, Naim does not mention any of the researchers engaged in this issue, from Herodotus to those of his own time. He writes: "Even Homer's motherland is unknown; instead, many say that he was from Smyrna." Also, he adds that Homer was a blind man that went door to door singing *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey's* sonnets, even though he did not write those songs, but Lycurgus, King of Sparta, who later assembled them together.

First of all, Naim's interest in Homer is due to the place and importance that he has in world literature. The Homeric world and its significant historical elements are of secondary importance, therefore when comparing it with Hesiod, Naim says that he: "could not win the fame that Homer had." "Besides Homer, among the Greeks" Naim said, "there were many other poets, such as: Pindar, Euripides, Sophocles, etc, while among the Romans, whose civilization comes after the Greeks", "the first among poets is Virgil, which has been called 'the second Homer'." After mentioning the well-known ancient and modern poets (Pindar, Sophocles, Virgil, Horace, Dante, Petrarch, Milton, Lamartini), Naim states that "they followed Homer and Virgil's steps." Regarding *Aeneid*, he says: "The first half, which narrates Enis' escape, resembles with *The Odyssey*, while the second half, which describes the wars, resembles with *The Iliad*." In the Epilogue, the author clearly and concisely presents nearly all the content of Homer's two epic poems. He loved *The Iliad* more than *The Odyssey*, because he thought that *The Odyssey* "does not have the same flavor and value that *The Iliad* has."

3. The Iliad's influence on Naim's epic poetry

The Iliad's influence on Naim's epic poetry was much stronger than *The Odyssey* regarding the formation of its characters, its heroes, its gods as well as its compositional aspects. This fact can be clearly seen in the *History of Skanderbeg*, the thematic source of which was the history of the Albanian people, Marin Barleti, etc.

Since ancient times, it has been a tradition for the nations to sing to their princes and heroes, but this phenomenon has been more familiar among small nations with large enemies, as was the Albanian nation. The figure of George Kastrioti, as that of many other great people distinguished in liberating wars, was sung, was praised and was turned into a legend, even while he was still alive. "This was happening in the normal everyday life and relationships between the princes and their people. Heroes were always rewarded by the common people with songs, respect and hyperbolization." (Shkurtaj 2009).

His immortal feats and all of his era are similar to Greek tribal wars in the XII century B.C., led by Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, against Asian Trojans. If seen in a different light, the Trojan struggle to protect their land, led by Hector, which was representative of a more civilized world, is similar to the Albanian war for self preservation in the XV century".

Naim studied and admired Homer's and Virgil's epics more than other Greek-Roman works of epic, therefore it is important that every scholar of the Naimian epoch conduct their parallelism of the ancient Greek and Roman literature to Homer, Virgil, or other Greek tragedians, such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, etc.

Istori e Skënderbeut [History of Skanderbeg] is a historical epic poem, which also constitutes the poet's political testament. Naim narrates at length and this biography of 22 sonnets, written in 8-syllable verse at length and chronologically, and it became the most read book in Albania at that time. Compositionally and stylistically speaking, Naim, just like Homer in *The Iliad*, in the introduction to the poem evokes the angel and announces that he will sing to "the wisdom", to "all the blessings", and to "Skanderbeg's bravery." In these moments, he is as close as he is distant with Homer, because his concern is "the management of the common conflict of the Balkan people, especially concerning Albania, against the Asian intruder."

The poem *History of Skanderbeg* lacks a title, unlike Homeric epics and Virgil's *Aeneid*. The *Iliad's* events take place in 51 days; in *The Odyssey*, events occur in 41 days, while in the Albanian poet's masterpiece they start from his birth and end to his death.

As an ardent patriot, his heroes are either absolutely good or absolutely bad, which limits the possibility of presenting them in their realistic condition, like Homer does. Naim holds a contemptuous attitude and expresses a deep hate toward his enemies. By contrast, Homer presents Trojans often as more humane, more honest, because they protect their land. According to researcher Rexhep Qosja: "Unlike, say, Achilles—who distinguished himself for his bravery, or *Odyssey*—who distinguished himself for his wisdom, or *Aeneas*—who distinguished himself for his high moral standards, Naim Frashëri's *Skanderbeg* is a summary of all of their virtues and abilities." [20]

*Gjithë ç'janë mirësitë [All that is kindness]
e të tërë trimëritë [and all that is bravery]
urtësit'e dituritë, [all that is wisdom and knowledge]
bukurin' e njerëzinë, [all that is beauty and humanism]
duke e mbledhurë me dorë, [were hand picked]
gjithë tok i kish përzierë, [and mixed together]
i kish tretur si dëborë, [melted into one like snow]
Pa kish bërë këtë herë [combined all together]
trim' e mirë, Skënder-benë. [in the good brave fellow, Skanderbeg.] [21]*

Influences from *The Iliad's* on the *History of Skanderbeg* is also noticed in some new phrase formations and epithets, such as: këmbë-çpejti [adj. meaning fast-runner] (regarding Achilles), sy-qen [adj. meaning dog-eyed] (attributed to Agamemnon), sy-bardhë [adj. meaning white-eyed] (attributed to Athens), shpirt-madhë [adj. meaning generous] (attributed to Skanderbeg, while in *The Iliad* this has been attributed to Hector), buкуроshi [adj. meaning handsome] (attributed to Uran, while in *The Iliad* this is attributed to Paris), shpatullgjerë [adj. meaning wide-shouldered] (attributed to Manesh, while in *The Iliad* this has been attributed to Ajax), etc.

To sum up, Ëngjëll Sedaj draws a correct conclusion when stating that: "Even though Naim starts from the shoulders of giants in order to achieve his own, he remains his own man in order to sing the great epic poems as if he were Homer or Virgil." [22]

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