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Motifs in Albanian and Anglo-Saxon Ballads**

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Similarities and Differences of the Themes and Motifs in Albanian and Anglo-Saxon Ballads

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Abstract

People often express themselves differently by using literature, singing, painting or any other form of art. Nowadays we see them as they are in the form that they already have but they have made a long path in history and tradition. One of the most important and essential means of communication was, is and will definitely continue to be word. Today people have the possibility to express and communicate in many different ways while at that time word of mouth was very important. Oral communication was the most fundamental and the most essential basis of literature. Among the earliest forms is the ballad which in many cases was accompanied by melody. They were often meant to be sung and with the passing of the time they were collected and written down. Usually they were short compared to epics and their main theme was simple and understandable.

There are folk, literary, historical and romantic ballads. Some of the most important themes and motifs were: love, marriage, death, murder, immurement, revenge, magic, cruelty, betrayal, disaster, bravery, sacrifice, superstition and morality. There are cases when these themes and motifs are intertwined together. They are anonymous, they expressed people's daily life turned into lines of poetry and through them we have the possibility to understand the mentality of that time.

In many cases we may find similar themes and motifs in Albanian and Anglo-Saxon ballads. They began to appear during the Middle Ages because of social and historical conditions. The ballad singers were simple people whose main aim was to transmit something important that had a certain impact on their lives. They often do not have a beginning but they begin at the middle of the story.

Keywords: Middle Ages, literature, oral, Albanian, Anglo-Saxon

People often express themselves differently by using literature, singing, painting or any other form of art. Nowadays we see these pieces of art as they are, in the form that they already have but they have made a long path in history and tradition. One of the most important, essential and leading means of communication was, is and will definitely continue to be word. Today people have the possibility to express and communicate and be recorded in many different ways while at that time word of mouth was very important. Oral communication was the most fundamental and the most essential basis of literature. Among the earliest forms of literature is the ballad which in many cases was accompanied by melody. They were often meant to be sung and with the passing of the time they were collected and written down and if it is spoken about their form they were usually short compared to epics and their main theme was simple and understandable and there was no need to have big heroes. With the passing of the time and as a consequence of oral transmission they submitted changes which were mainly reflected in the content of the verses but they did not change the main theme and they can be seen that today the same ballad is presented in some different variants.

There are folk, literary, historical and romantic ballads. Some of the most important themes and motifs present in ballads were: love, marriage, death, murder, immurement, revenge, magic, cruelty, betrayal, disaster, bravery, sacrifice, metamorphosis, revival, renewed acquaintance, superstition, morality and the cases when these themes and motifs are intertwined together, are not rare. Middle Age ballads are anonymous, they express people's daily life which are turned into lines of poetry and through them there is the possibility to understand the mentality, the behavior and the way people communicated with one- another in that time and they are good means and evidence to help make studies and researches.

Although Albanians and Anglo-Saxons were not border neighbours and there was a distance between them similarities can frequently be found in ballad themes and motifs. Ballads began to appear during the Middle Ages as a result of evolving developments and the social and historical conditions which left their traces that were immediately reflected in literature. The ballad singers were simple people whose main aim was to transmit orally something important that had a certain impact on their lives. They often do not have a beginning but they begin at the middle of the story. There are different kinds of themes which express also the relationships that they had. There are ballads that express the relationships between mother- daughter, mother- son, father- daughter, father- son, relationships between siblings, husband- wife, lovers and so on. In the majority of the cases there is a dramatic theme with a tragic ending as their texts are also based on important everyday themes such as love, betrayal, death, suicide, hangings, faith, and in some cases even supernatural themes.

One of the most important themes reflected and which also has to do with the character of the Albanian people but not only, is that of the faith (besa) which is so important that does not leave people alone even after their death. It is the duty of a person who has vowed to do something and he or she has to keep his or her promise (mostly men). One of the most representative typical

examples of keeping a promise even after death is in the ballad 'Kostandini and Doruntina'. Doruntina is the only girl amongst 12 brothers. As for every young girl, there comes the time to get married. She has many proposals and there also comes a young man to ask her hand but her mother does not want to accept that proposal as the candidate is living far away but one of the brothers, Kostandin, asks his mother to allow their marriage to be fulfilled because he will bring his sister to meet and stay there in her house whenever she wants. But life in some cases is cruel and all the brothers die because of participating in a war or in other variants because of a disease. The mother remains alone with none of her sons nor her daughter. She is mourning and in her laments she asks for her son's promise. The tombstone for Kostandin becomes very heavy to be carried because he has left his oath unaccomplished so one night, he gets out of his grave takes his horse and rides it to go to his sister and bring her back home to his mother. When they are coming back home Doruntina understands that there is something weird in her brother's behaviour and the way he speaks and acts. Although his sister asks him about the latest news he does not tell her anything about the catastrophic misfortunes that have happened. When Doruntina arrives home calls her mother who does not believe that her daughter is there and asks her who she is, if she is a ghost because it is impossible to be her daughter. Doruntina in turn tells that there is no ghost but her daughter herself and Kostandin kept the promise. Her mother again does not believe her and it is written that they both died embraced in the threshold. But this is not the only case when faith is mentioned. Another good example to be mentioned would be that of 'Rozafa's legend. Three brothers are building a bridge. They work every day and when, the next day comes they go to work to continue where they left they find it destroyed. An old man passes and tells them that the reason why everything is destroyed is because it requires a human sacrifice that means one of their wives to be immured. So they decided that the one who would bring their bread the following day would be the woman that had to be immured but they did not have to tell to their wives about this. However the two eldest brothers break the promise and tell their wives not to go because they would die while the wife of the third one keeps it and the third one goes and is the one who is to be sacrificed. Apart from keeping the promise theme also the immurement one is present. In other ballads the girls, fiancés, wives are asked to wait for their boyfriends, fiancés and husbands when they are in emigration or exile or even in prison. Sometimes they are asked to wait for a long time such as 9 years, 9 months and 9 days.

Frequently at that time the main heroes are hostages and consequently end up in prison. Although they are there, they feel they are obliged to get out of it because they have promised they will be in a certain place or near someone in a certain period of time that they have decided themselves. They get out of prison just for a certain number of days and as a guarantee that they will return is again by word of mouth but expressed in the form of faith, a promise.

In many instances the faith motif is accompanied by betrayal and abandonment. People consider it a part of the character and at the same time a part of normal virtues that somebody must have otherwise the ones who did not

keep it, were seen in contempt and disdain and subsequently it was not considered as a normal attitude. Even if a person who goes as a guest somewhere will be under the protection of the host for everything, who gives his promise nay to support one another and to maintain strong till the end of one's mission that requires courage and bravery.

The faith motif is also intertwined with the motif of renewed acquaintance. Love is one of the human feelings that has existed since antiquity. There are instances when renewed acquaintance occurs and in many cases it is accompanied by a tragedy as it is the example of Babylon. Babylon meets his three sisters in the woods. He asks the first one to marry him and then in turn he asks the second one to marry him but they do not accept so he kills them. Later he asks the third one who does not accept too and she threatens that she has a brother whom will take care and protect her and after he inquires who this brother is, he learns that he is the one and then he cannot bear the fact of what he has done and commits suicide.

This motif can be found in the young betrothed couples. In many cases ballads present them promising one- another that will be loyal and honest. So the king's daughter in 'Lord Bateman' declares her love to an imprisoned boy. He is set free and asks to meet her and get married after seven years. She arrives right at the time when he is getting married and tells the guard to tell Lord Bateman that she has asked for bread and wine. The watchman tells the message to him and says also that the girl keeps in her finger a ring that is worth all the country wealth. Bateman understands he is speaking about his girlfriend and remembers his promise, breaks the wedding and marries her instead. Also the main hero in 'Young Beichan' who is taken as a prisoner and promises to be a son to any married woman or a husband to any unmarried girl. He is rescued by the daughter of his captor.

The ballad of the dead brother is similar to 'Proud Lady Margaret'. The great longing that the brother has for his sister makes him come to take his sister although in the beginning he appears to be a lover who makes riddles to woo Margaret. Faith is an important aspect even during the Anglo- Saxon period and this can well be illustrated through the verses of the ballad: 'The loving ballad of the lord Bateman'.

She has got rings round ev'ry finger,
And on one finger she has got three:
With as much gay gould about her middle
As would buy half Northumberlee.

Lord Bateman then prepared another marriage,
With both their hearts so full of glee,
Saying, 'I will roam no more to foreign countries
Now that Sophia have crossed the sea.'¹

¹. W. Thackeray, Ch. Dickens, G. Cruikshank, *The loving ballad of Lord Bateman* (London: Methuen & Co., 1903).

In the cases of husband- wife renewed acquaintance ballads the motif of loyal spouses is combined with family painful events that turn up in difficult times when wars were developed far away the country. The renewed acquaintance brother- brother, sister- brother is present in Albanian ballads such as ‘Arnaut Osmani and Hyso Radoinca’, ‘Shega and Vllastari’, ‘Gjon Pretika’ while in Anglo- Saxon ones ‘Bonny Farday’, ‘Babylon’ ‘The Bonnie Banks o Fordie’. The fate of Farday is similar to that of Babylon who also kills his sisters because they do not accept to get married to him, in the end when he learns what he has done he declares he will kill himself because his life has no more sense and asks the third sister to put him in the same grave with his two killed sisters.

The main characters in Anglo-Saxon ballads sometimes belong to the middle class. In many cases they are asked what they are going to leave to the father, mother, wife, children after they die. The personal material interest can be clearly seen and understood and sometimes it is the one which wins over parental or fraternal love. The personages may be in difficult, critical and crucial moments of their lives and are in the dilemma of their life continuity and clear examples to be mentioned would be in ballads ‘Edward’ and ‘Lord Rendal’ and the question of their wealth and who is going to inherit it is the last thing that goes in their minds but in some cases the ownership feeling is stronger than the parental one.

‘What d’ye leave to your mother, Lord Randal, my son?,
 What d’ye leave to your mother, my handsome young man?’
 ‘Four and twenty milk kye; mother mak my bed soon,
 For I am sick at the heart, and I fain wad lie down.’²

While Gjergj Elez Alia, a hero that lies in his bed with nine wounds taken in war, unlike Edward or Lord Rendal gives, as his last will, to his friends and relatives his tower and sister when he goes to defy the ‘baloz’ a man, an enemy coming from abroad, and because of his evil deeds he is considered as a monster that requires land and young girls every night otherwise he kills and destroys the country. Gjergj longs that his family and surname will continue to be honoured and mentioned for good values such as honour and bravery even after his death. Time passes and there comes the turn of Gjergj’s family but Gjergj does not accept to let his sister go there and decides to combat with the ‘baloz’ although he has nine wounds and takes into consideration that everything may happen including even his death which is nothing compared to honour and pride.

‘To you I bequeath and bestow all my money
 All my belongings and all of my cattle,
 And I assign you the sister of Gjergj Elez Alia,’
 The hero then turned and in a final effort,
 Threw his arms round the neck of his unlucky sister,

². Joseph De Roche, *The heath Introduction to poetry* (Massachusetts/Toronto: D.C. Heath and Company, Lexington, 1988).

At that very moment the two hearts ceased beating,
Dead to the ground bell both brother and sister,³

Kidnaping that has to do with the morality is a theme that is also present in ballads. In ‘Erdhi ania ne mes detit’ (There came a ship in the middle of the sea), a lady goes to choose jewellery in a ship and while she is looking at the jewellery the ship begins sailing slowly so that she does not understand and when she notices what is happening they are far away. This theme is frequent in Anglo- Saxon ballads. In many cases fathers do not agree to marry their daughters with a boy that they do not like and then there comes the kidnapping. In many cases the girl herself is not aware of the fact that she is admired or the risks that she has when passing somewhere as in the case of Tam Lin who kidnaps every girl who is passing by the wood without his permission. Kidnapping is not only committed by men but by women too as in ‘Alison Gross’ a witch (the queen of the fairies) who wants to seduce a man and when she does not succeed she transforms him.

Then out has she ta'en a silver wand,
An' she's turn'd her three times roun' and roun';
She mutter'd sic words till my strength it fail'd,
An' I fell down senseless upon the ground.

She's turn'd me into an ugly worm,
And gar'd me toddle about the tree;⁴

So transformation is present again in the ballad ‘The laily warm and the Machrel of the sea’ where a young boy is transformed into a warm by his stepmother and his sister into a mackerel. In Albanian ballads an instance to be mentioned is ‘Djali gjarpën’ (The snake boy) a snake that in fact is a really handsome young man who gets married and his mother is curious to learn how the young couple is behaving and how is it possible that the daughter in law is not complaining of anything. A night she stays somewhere in a hidden place and when she sees that her son during the night becomes a normal human being, takes his snake skin and burns it. But in fact she shouldn't have done that because in a way she kills her son who had to bear being under that snake skin for a few more years and then he would continue his life as everybody else.

Cruelty and jealousy can be found in ballads such as ‘The twa sisters’. Siblings normally are kind to one another but there are cases when they are jealous of one another as in the cited murder ballad where one of the sisters is drowned by the sea only because of her jealousy. Other cases of murder ballad are those of ‘Lord Rendal’, ‘Edward’.

³. R. Elsie, J. Mathie-Heck, *Songs of the frontier Worriers Wauconda* (Illinois: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2004).

⁴. A. Quiller-Couch, *The Oxford book of ballads* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2014).

Incest is another theme which in Albanian ballads is not executed because in the last moment there comes a bird saying that they are brother and sister while in Anglo- Saxon ballads it is realised as in the case of 'The king's dochter lady Jean' where a man meets Lady Jean and rapes her but later when they learn that they are brother and sister they both die.

There is a wide range of themes and motifs that can be found in the Middle Age Period. A lot are focused on everyday life and moral virtues such as: love, hatred, jealousy, murder, cruelty, honour, faith, promise, misfortune, disaster, magic, riddles, treachery, imprisonment, historical events, border, and cleverness being tested in the form of the riddles, death, disguise, incest, renewed acquaintance, magic, metamorphosis, humour and so on but they are not the only ones.

They usually represent everyday people's life. They were usually inspired by human beings and that is the reason why there is a large and diverse scale of themes and motifs some of them seem to be weird and inconceivable and only some of them are mentioned in this research. They reflect a reality and the majority of the themes and motifs are actual even nowadays. When studying these two cultures it is natural to observe that there are similarities which usually speak about human beings but also differences as there are two different nations which belong to different cultures with their own traditions and customs.

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