Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne
An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

On "Hasanaginica"

Thomas J. Butler

The "Hasanaginica" (Hasan Aga's Wife) is a folk ballad written in the ten-syllable heroic epic line. It first came to the attention of West Europeans when it was published by the abbot Alberto Fortis, in his two-volume Viaggio in Dalmazia (A Voyage in Dalmatia, Venice, 1774). Fortis gave the song both in Serbo-Croatian and in Italian translation. The Viaggio was translated into English in 1778 (republished by Arno Press in 1971), and into German, by Werthes (1775). It was Werthes's translation that Goethe used in preparing his own rendition of the poem, "Klagesang von der edlen Frauen des Asan Aga," published by Johann Herder in the first volume of his Volkslieder (1778). Sir Walter Scott also did a translation of the poem, very free and fanciful, based on Goethe. It was, fortunately, never published (see D. H. Low, Slavonic Review, III, Dec. 1924, for more on this).

The translation of the "Hasanaginica" into Italian, German, and English came at a time when all over Europe there was a growing interest in folklore, nurtured by the works of MacPherson, the brothers Grimm, and Herder. It is no surprise, then, that the highly-cultured Slovene, Jernej Kopitar, who first met Vuk Karadžić in Vienna in 1813, quickly persuaded his new disciple of the high value attached to folklore within cultured European circles. Vuk's first publication, Mala prostonarodnja slavenoserbska pjesmarica, included the "Hasanaginica," taken from Fortis's book. Now Fortis's version was probably copied from an ikavian text and altered to suit the style of language then prevailing in Dubrovnik; it contains a mixture of predominantly jekavian and some ikavian forms, as well as some misspellings. Vuk modified the poem, using jekavian forms throughout and changing some words; he even added a line of his own. We have decided to print Vuk's version, minus the added line, as given in Volume 3 of his Srpske narodne pjesme (Serbian Folksongs). Vuk's poem has the advantage, at least, of modern orthography and internal consistency.

Those interested in reading other poems about Hasan Aga and his wife may consult Gerhard Gaseman's publication of the Erlangenski rukopis (SKA, Zbornik za istoriju, jezik i književnost srpskoga naroda, prvo odeljenje, knj. XII, 1925). Also of interest will be an issue of Život (XXIII, 5, Sarajevo, 1974), which is devoted exclusively to the "Hasanaginica."

© 2007 Thomas Butler

Excerpted with permission of the author from MONUMENTA SERBOCROATICA: A BILIGUAL ANTHROLOGY OF SERBIAN AND CROATIAN TEXTS FROM THE 12TH TO THE 19TH CENTURY (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1980)

The preceding text is copyright of the author and/or translator and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.