

THE MAGICAL AND AESTHETIC IN THE FOLKLORE OF BALKAN SLAVS

Papers of International Conference



Belgrade
Library Vuk Karadžić
1994

The Magical and Aesthetic in the Folklore of Balkan Slavs, Belgrade, 1994, pp. 39-44.

Mirjana Detelić

WHAT DOES LITERATURE DO TO MAGIC AND WHY
(on example of epic poems about heroic weddings with obstacles)

If, by a chance or God's will, circumstances should occur under which it'd be suddenly possible to gather together whole magic practice, everything that is called magic all over the world, that occasion should unbiasedly show that *magic is not a system*, at least not a system like any of those which we are commonly used to, as religious, scientific, literary, and alike. This enormous data base could offer but two general conclusion: 1) that world is ruled by a potent and hidden power of chaos and 2) that special people and special knowledge exist that can control this power in somebody's favor or against it. Main obstacle to structuring such a system is not the modest number of its elements, but their scarce semiosis on the base of which no model of universe could be reconstructed specific enough as to be called magical (or pertaining to magic).

On the other hand, it could also be shown that magic itself is very flexible which enables it to fit any system when need be. In that case, the system supplies the context and additional semiosis, which it should by definition be able to do anyway. Therefore the creolization of magic and religion, magic and ritual, even magic and science becomes possible. Submitting itself to this and similar procedures, magic doesn't lose its initial, code information, it even doesn't integrate completely into new context, and doing so it remains recognizable (as a practice or a technic) in various types of contexts. Keeping this in mind, we could almost say that magic is older than any system, or that the form in which it reaches us comes from an imaginary protosystem about which we shall never know anything at all.

At this particular point it is very important for the topic to bear in mind that magic, being flexible, *might enter the process of literary modeling* and that there it should *keep its code information*.

As far as it concerns Serbian oral epic, this information can neither be transferred into poem nor read out of it directly. Magical acts, objects, powers or beings could be mentioned, even dramatized in the poem, but there they usually remain on the surface, they are not its subject, and they do not participate in the literary modeling procedure. In other words, they may be a part of its idiom, but they are never the element of its structure.

Specific rules of epic literary modeling, which doesn't choose for its original a part of real life but a ready-made non-literary model, ask for a quite different approach to the material. Therefore magic as a topic, if it should reach the poem at all, must enter the procedure as a part of such a

model. This is most easily observed when the original is chosen among the blocks of complex ritual behavior (as weddings and funerals usually are). Glued to some of the rituals which are numerous on such occasions, a magical act, deed or an object might - on the basis of choosing from the original - enter the process of literary modeling. In that case they share original's destiny itself: they are exposed to the influences of literary norm, they suffer its domination, and they gain a new, literary function. Code information, which is carried on from the former context, doesn't get lost but is transferred to margins and, therefore, is no more easily reached. Being only the readers and interpreters of an epic poem, we are never given the opportunity to spot the epic in the making, but we can always try to reconstruct it. An example of such a reconstruction is presented in this work.

Poems about heroic wedding with obstacles form a specific type in Serbian oral epic. They share the same original, namely the "groom's text" of the wedding ritual. Among the given elements, as the process of modeling continues, they choose only some, and always the same: asking girl's hand in marriage, gathering of wedding guests, and two kinds of obstacles (in front of bride's home and on the way to groom's house). These few points are considered obligatory and no poem can omit them by any means. However, when it comes to the structuring the poem itself, rules are not as strict: any particular poem is free to organize its material as it's pleased, which leaves us with only three poems with identical structure (*Ženidba Dušanova*, Vuk II,29; *Ženidba Sibirjanin Janka*; MH I,70; *Ženidba Mata Srijemca*, MH I,71). That which distinguishes them among the others is the role of mediator in person of the third nephew.

In poems with this kind of structure, the third nephew is first mentioned as the youngest brother and the best hero who tends sheep high in the mountains. The image of the nobleman-shepherd thus formed represents a union of two figures of different background, with the first coming from the fairy tale (the third son, seemingly incompetent, proves to be the best), and the second probably from the ancient tradition of divine shepherds.

The ancient, mythical image of the god-shepherd is so widespread we can almost consider it universal. It is present in the traditions of various peoples, whereas the classical cultures offer us a direct coupling of a nobleman-shepherd in the figure of Tsar Edipus, Paris, Tsar David and other similar figures, correspondent to whom (according to some characteristics) are the Serbian heroes St.Sava (by legend) and Prince Marko (in the epics).

As regards Serbian traditionary culture, the mythical layers on the face of the shepherd are recognizable primarily in his magical and ritual functions at Christmas. The shepherd is the authentic, archaic visitor, and in that function, wrapped in animal skin, he performs the ritual slicing of the first piece of bread kneaded for the fertility of the cattle, he slaughters the sacrificial sheep of keeps the head of the Christmas roast-meat, which is described in literature as characteristic of a mythical, i.e. divine being. Regardless of this, the shepherd is in many respects considered

exceptional in folk tradition. Above all, the shepherd spends his time in the mountain, which is, by definition ("desolate highland") a mythical, chthonic space. As a being adapted to life in such a place, he acquires some of its traits, and is thus often brought into connection with fairies (either marries them or keeps company with them) and with magic, as magical knowledge and powers are ascribed to him (understanding the language of animals, knowing medicinal and miraculous herbs, soothsaying around the cattle and its owner, communicating with the sprites of the water, forest, field etc.). Because of all this, the shepherd is both a necessary and dangerous figure, very close to the notion of sacredness in the original sense of the word (formidable, dangerous), thus his ambivalent nature is reflected chiefly in the infeasibility to link him simply to any side of an entire series of oppositions which regulate man's social and cultural status (human-animal, cultural-natural, community-individual, etc.). Contrary to this, his position is quite definite in the spatial divisions of this kind, as it is linked to the mountain, which is unequivocally a savage, desolate and chthonic place, the habitat of animals and unnatural beings, equivalent to the other world.

Viewed from this perspective, it is clear why the figure of the shepherd in our poems had to be balanced with the figure of the nobleman. As a mediator in the own and alien relationships performing a delicate duty of surmounting obstacles in front of bride's house, where the *own* is by definition in the open and ineffective, and the *alien* in closed space and in the advantage - the mediator must be sovereign in both terrains and wont to the rules of conduct in both types of situations. The combination nobleman-shepherd meets these requirements and neutralizes all the essential oppositions: closed-open, cultural-natural, city-field and, finally, own-alien (nobleman: own, shepherd: seemingly alien).

We are left with the question why poems about heroic weddings with obstacles specifically need the shepherd to be the bearer of the principle of open space, when almost none of his specific attributes are activated in the epic division of roles, and when we can think of at least two other figures, equally good, in similar functions: the hunter and outlaw (e.g. both united in the hero of the poem *John and the Giants' Chief*, Vuk II,8; MH I,45). Although one can never be too careful in approaching such a delicate issue, we opine that the answer must be sought in the substance of a poem's narration, i.e. in the fact that their subject is a wedding. In addition to everything that is linked to him in the diverse layers of traditional culture (as we have just mentioned), the shepherd occupies a place both as a figure and a mas in the ancient and deepest layers of the wedding ritual complex. We must remember that one of the oldest images of the god-shepherd is linked to the myth about Tammuz and Ishtar (Osiris and Isis, Adonis and Aphrodite), and through him to the cults of fertility and of the dead (in the image of god who dies and resurrects) until an image is formed in direct sequel of the master of the underworld as the divine shepherd of dead souls and psychopompos. Both of these mythic lines - the line of the nuptials of the divine ancestors and the line of mediation between the two worlds - are preserved in Serbian ethnic space. During the Lent wedding processions, for example, the ritual masks of the

grandfathers and husbands' brothers (and their functions could be considered isomorphic) are made up of animal skin and a stick, the most frequent symbols of divine mediators in the form of shepherds, whether this be Dionis, Hermes, the Illyrian Sylvian or the shepherd visitor. If the memory of the mythical arch-pattern might have been preserved and transposed to the epic, the choice of the shepherd as mediator would be its trail.

In the poem, the third nephew is first actualized as the mediator in the dressing scene. As we know, he dons over his shining golden knightly suit a black Bulgar-hood and thus acquires not only a double identity (Miloš Vojinović and the black Bulgar, the young Bulgar, the black Hungarian; Nino and the black Arab) but, on a higher semantic level, on the level of a mythical image, he becomes a being that combines solar (knightly and golden) and chthonic (animal and black) qualities.

As with any mask, this combination is temporary, but its manner of resolving is important: in the complex figure of Miloš the shepherd, his golden appearance is, actually, only apparent, and becomes unnecessary when his identity is disclosed. Carried away by the development of the epic story, we realize only in the end, when all the illusions disperse, that Miloš's/Nino's real home is the mountain, and his true image - that of a shepherd:

Miloš thanked him for everything
and of his uncle took leave
to return to his sheep in the hills (No 3: 451-453)

In other words, his true nature is chthonic (as his habitat is), and the solar side is only temporary. Considering it incorporates both images, the mask neutralizes the difference between them and thus appears, in a sense, at a higher level of existence. This "surplus" is precisely what makes an ordinary actor, however interesting, a mediator.

If we disregard as universal and unspecific the obstacles posed by the bride's family to test the heroism of the groom's family (duel, jump, shooting), the first opportunity for the mediator's true action in the poem arises when the bride should be recognized among similar maidens. This action is not rendered specific by the mere obstacle (it is part of the classical wedding repertoire), but by a series of three circumstances: the incompetence of those whose duty it is to respond to it (Todor the vizier and the bridegroom), the unmasking and the direct contact with the bride. At this particular moment it is of utmost importance for us to give an answer to the question why does Miloš take off his Bulgar-hood before Roksana, i.e. why he does so *only* before her.

In order to comprehend this, we must bear in mind that even the wedding ritual complex - more so an epic wedding - is, in fact, a drama in which two adverse sides struggle for power over the bride (and everything this includes). It is well known how this is displayed in a folklore wedding, and now is the time to outline what happens in the poems about heroic wedding with obstacles. There, a chthonic female sequence is formed, though discretely: the journey to fetch the bride leads over highlands and seas, to a faraway land (as is often encountered in the epic as an equivalent to the *other world*); she is, however, viewed at *night*, in the dark, though

only in *Stephen Dushan's Wedding*, protecting the bride, or aiming to seize her, is an unnatural *chthonic* being (the obstinate Arab, Balačko the Duke, dragon, giant), etc. As the groom's representative, the mediator is the one most competent to form a sequence contrary to this one - which he does, at the *only* possible point: when he confronts the bride (male-female), by day (day-night) and in the light (light-dark) and when he discloses his golden face before her (sun-moon, solar and lunar cycles). It remains to be seen why this is the *only* moment the mediator is required to show his light side.

First of all, if this detail were absent, his dual mask would be entirely superfluous. But the mask is a very serious thing which renders certain powers to its subject, including the strength and sacredness of the figure it assumes, the right to behave in accordance with it and to fight against it. It is very hard to believe that its misuse could by any means be performed in folklore. In our case, considering the antagonism of the participants in the marital drama, the mask enables the mediator to respond to any challenge and to neutralize its negative effect without changing its code, i.e. by exhibiting himself as superior in the opponent's terrain. This kind of parrying is best seen in the first and third points of the proposed chthonic sequence: if the bride's country over the sea is equivalent to the other world, so is the shepherd's highland, to the same extent; if the origin of the fantastic tree-headed being is chthonic, so is the shepherd's, as we saw earlier. So, why then, is it necessary to reveal the golden face before Roksana, the bearer of a chthonic sequence? Mostly because the solar component in Miloš's mask is apparent (and the chthonic one is real), thus its revealing in only this case is probably a response to an illusion similar in kind. And, indeed, the bride - to whom this action is directed - is not in her nature a chthonic being. During the wedding she is *at one point* exposed to the influence of chthonic powers, but she does not belong to them either before or after. In other words, we might regard her chthonic qualities as apparent and temporary, just as the solar figure of the mediator's mask is defined as apparent and temporary.

This mythical game of illusion and truth, so appropriate to the nuptials of divine ancestors which generated the very idea of wedding ritual, is used by epic as a base upon which to build and complete the pattern of royal wedding. To fulfill this aim, epic had to start from a fact (which in real life is by now losing its proper meaning) that under given circumstances, one or more times during the wedding, its participants put on the masks with different chthonic characteristics. But what in living practice is easily overlooked and explained by mere "it should be done", "it's good", "it's for the best", is the fact that these masks are performed to counteract the magically potent person - the bride. As a being dangerous both for herself and the others, bride is always veiled (her eyes are both the target and the source of mighty spells), and when the liminary faze is over, this mask is changed for the mas of a married woman (*kaica, procevlje, trvelje*).

In afore mentioned poems, bride's dangerous position is expressed directly, as a menace coming from her family:

You'll neither leave nor live,

not even take the bride

because epic doesn't have proper means to show multifold conditionals and complexities of ritual, which - by the way - is never its subject taken as a whole. In fact, every epic wedding is unic as an excess worth remembering. To accomplish this, the singer has to act as a so called "reliable narrator". If his task were to sing about Demeter and Persephone, for example, this narrative strategy should force him to go far beyond Eleusinian mysteries and to follow the action all along, finishing his narration before the mysteries were even founded. Neither to him nor to his audience this should seem unusual because the fulfilling the pattern is in fact what a poem ought to and what it's expected to do.

In the same way, the mediator in epic wedding is expected to neutralize evil influence of the opposite side. That which is possible in the epic strategy but not in ritual practice (for it has no means to accomplish it), is in fact the game with mediator's double mask. Through this one personage the epic builds semantic triade shepherd-nobleman-mediator (black-white-neutral) and, opposing him to a magically potent protagonist, piles on him three different functions: of magician who performs magic in answer to a similar performance (shepherd), of vehicle by which the magic is performed (nobleman), and of a recipient who neutralizes its effects (mediator). Any doubt in this assumption, and it is presumably connected with magical nature of mediator, is abolished by duel scene Miloš-Balačko, which comes immediately after recognizing the bride and departure of wedding guests. Balačko, a chthonic being par excellence, approaches Miloš as his equal, an enemy and hero of the same origin, and thus he definitely confirms his chthonic nature. For that reason and from that point of view even Miloš's return to high mountain at the end of the poem is seen as an anticlimax.

At this finishing point the answer to our initial question: what does literature do to magic, has to be - it pulls the other's leg. First of all, it remodeled magic's code information twice: once into a mythical image, and next time into an epic pattern; then, it changed magic's analytic mode into a syncretic one; and finally, it made magic's weak functional potential into a strong one - namely, it changed the ritual context into the context of an epic poem. However, these two contexts can be paralleled only on the norm level (i.e. on the level of ritual and literary norms), which made here presented analysis possible.