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McKean, Thomas

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Contexts and Interpretations:
The Walled-Up Wife Ballad and Other Related Texts

Nicolae Constantinescu

In Cântecul eroic, the catalog of Romanian verse narratives, Amzulescu listed no fewer than 211 types of heroic song and 173 of the “family ballad” (1981, 1983). Including the so-called oral journals, Fochi arrives at a total of 401 types, “the second largest stock, after Denmark, in the field of folk-epic poetry” and concludes that Romania should be added to the seven main “ballad areas” of Europe (1985: 9, 115). Although more than one hundred of these types seem to be found only in the Romanian repertoire, the epic tradition of Romania is undoubtedly deeply rooted in European and world tradition. This essay discusses the motif of the walled-up wife in its cultural context(s), taking into account, first, not only the Balkan versions of the ballad (as in most classic studies of this motif) but also its extra-European (Indian) variants, as suggested by Alan Dundes (1995); and second, not only the ballad but also other folklore forms, such as Christmas carols or winter-solstice songs, laments, legends, and contemporary legends involving the motif.

It is not simply by chance that tens, perhaps hundreds, of books and essays have been written on this old and widely distributed motif in the century and a half since the Serbian ballad was “discovered” by the renowned folklorist Vuk Stefanovic Karadzic. It captured the interest of learned men of those times, Jacob Grimm and Goethe among the earliest. In the last few years alone, two major works have appeared: Alan Dundes’s The Walled-Up Wife: A Casebook (1996), and Corpusul variantelor românești (1997), the second volume of Ion Taloș’s Meșterul Manole. Contribuții la studiul unei teme de folclor european. One may assume that Dundes’s casebook and his two previous essays on this theme (1989, 1995) are better known to Western readers than the work of the Romanian-born Taloș, now a professor of comparative literature at the University of Cologne, although the content of his first book is summarized in an extended resumené (Taloș 1973: 393–412, and related studies have been published elsewhere (for example, Taloș 1981; 1983: 577–82). But, though highly praised by Mircea Eliade himself and partly known to Dundes, Taloș and his work did not feature in the Casebook, the language barrier no doubt playing its familiar role.
The Casebook contains a wide selection of studies, enlarging the territory of the ballad (traditionally confined to Europe and, even more narrowly, to southeastern Europe or the Balkans) toward the East, specifically to India where the motif appears in connection with the construction, or digging, of a spring or well, a detail to be kept in mind by those who agree with the latest psychoanalytic interpretation (“Men fear that they may not be able to sustain an erection especially at night, a time for lovemaking” [Dundes 1995: 50]).

On the other hand, the “discovery” of the Indian variants of the walled-up wife motif led to at least two conclusions: one plainly expressed by Dundes in the very title of his 1995 article, “How Indic Parallels to the Ballad of the ‘Walled-Up Wife’ Reveal the Pitfalls of Parochial Nationalistic Folkloristics.” The other, suggested by B. J. Gilliat-Smith and W. R. Halliday (Dundes 1996: 27–34), argues for the Indic origins for European folktales and offers “the possibility of oral transport of the tale by Gypsies” (Bottigheimer 1999: 102).

Above all, as one can see from the Casebook’s essays and Dundes’s own concluding contribution, the most debated aspect of this ballad concerns its origins, a large group of scholars using it “to illustrate a conventional myth-ritual thesis that the story represented a survival from an actual practice of the past of offering a human sacrifice in order to appease supernatural spirits who were believed to be involved in or threatened by the proposal to build some kind of structure, for example, a bridge” (Dundes 1995: 40). Although the myth-ritual theory basically derives from the so-called anthropological or polygenetic theory, assuming multiple possible origins of a single folk motif in different places with different peoples, the walled-up wife motif, embodied in the Balkan area mainly as a ballad, gave birth, in the second half of the nineteenth century, to a long-lasting debate over the poem’s national origin.

Dundes is right in asserting the “ethnocentric subjectivity” of those who “claim that one national version of a cross-cultural distributed folk song is more ‘beautiful’ or ‘esthetically pleasing’ than that of another nation” (1995: 45). In his turn, reviewing recent studies of the ballad which have appeared since 1973, Talos rejects, in similar terms, the conclusions of a book by the Greek scholar G. Megas, whose work takes “a partisan stand, being conceived in the old manner of...Balkan folkloristics, obsessed by the problem of the origin and of the ways of transmission, a folklore study where “every researcher claims merits for his own people” (Talos 1997: ix). I

There is no doubt that no interpretation of a folklore text can be separated from its cultural context. This is clearly reflected by the text itself. The meaning of the national or local variants comes from their intimate relationship to the
national or local cultural context that generated the text. It is thus not accidental
that, in the Balkan or southeastern European ballad, an edifice (bridge, strong-
hold, or church) is erected, while in the Indian versions a well or water tank is
dug. Though this may be an apparently insignificant detail (as, it seems for some
interpreters, is the fact that the interred person is the wife of the head mason, his
sister, or a sister-in-law?), it cannot be set aside if one really wants to see and
understand the differences.

On the other hand, the scholar’s ideological stand puts its mark on inter-
pretation as well. It is clear that in rejecting the so-called parochial nationalistic
point of view, even a great scholar such as Alan Dundes cannot escape other
pitfalls, although he is certainly correct in his theoretical approach: “Just as
there is not one correct ‘text’ of an item of folklore, there is no one correct
‘interpretation’ of an item of folklore. Folklorists must accustom themselves to
accepting multiple interpretations just as they have learned to accept the exis-
tence of multiple versions of texts” (Dundes 1995: 49–50). (The question of what
constitutes a “correct” interpretation is best set aside for the moment.)

Returning to first principles, we must agree that accuracy of interpretation
depends upon the number of variants/versions taken into account. As a rule, we
can arrive at a better understanding of a folklore item if comprehensive materials
are consulted, in other words, if all the variants known at a certain time are taken
into consideration. At this point, it is worth mentioning that Georgios Megas, for
example, makes reference to no less than 328 Greek variants of the ballad of the
bridge of Arta (1976); Papulova noted 180 Bulgarian variants (1983), while Talos
included 165 Romanian variants in his catalog (1973). Twenty-five years later, the
number of Romanian variants had risen from 165 to 280, including 38 prose
legends (Talos 1997).

But what makes the difference is the fact that the texts belong to two, or even
three, separate categories or genres. Usually appearing in ballad form, as an epic
narrative song, the walled-up wife motif also surfaces in Romanian folklore as a
colind, a Christmas carol or, to avoid any confusion, for the Christian content is
far from obvious, as a winter-solstice song, a well-wishing song performed on
the eve of Christmas or the New Year. The colind version is known only in
Transylvania, more precisely in the northern and northwestern areas of this
province, whence come most of the variants collected and published so far (Bihor,
fourteen examples; Sălaj, forty-two; Lăpuș-Soneș-Bistrița, thirty-four; Năsăud-
Mureș, seventeen; and so on; see Talos 1997: 3–138).

Compared with the ballad version from southern Transylvania (twelve vari-
ants), Banat (ten), and Oltenia-Wallachia-Moldavia (sixty-seven), the colind
version is more “primitive” or “archaic,” both in structure and shape. Three master masons erect a building of unspecified type; the walls constructed by day collapse by night; the head mason informs his fellows they have to bury in the foundation the first wife who comes to the site next day; the head mason’s wife comes first; he un成功fully tries to stop her; she is buried in the walls; her last thoughts go out to her infant, who is often left to the elements. To sum up, the main motifs or episodes of the plot are present, but, compared to the ballad, the colind versions are shorter, artistically less elaborated, and more direct in their cruel message. These features lead to an assumption that the colinds are older than the ballad version, and, consequently, as old as the most archaic variants of the ballad, those found in Greece. This may be true, and there is no reason to deny it, but this kind of judgment evokes the long-running and meaningless debate over age, the priority of one national version over the other.

I would rather not follow this path but instead suggest taking a closer look at the performance context of the colind version in Romanian tradition. Usually Christmas carols, or Christmas songs, performed all over the Christian world, celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25, expressing joy at the event and praising his later life and deeds. Alongside these religious, Christian songs (called in Romanian colinde, from Latin Calendrae, through Slavonic koleda, koljada), Romanian tradition has preserved a large stock of pre-Christian, “heathen” or “pagan” themes and motifs sung as carols at Christmas and on New Year’s Eve. Among these is found “the foundation sacrifice” (no. 35 in the Typological and Bibliographical Index of the Colinda): “At night, the work done by some masons (very often brothers) is reduced to nothing. In order to be able to finish the construction, Siminic (Micăuș, Manole, the Great Mason...) must bury alive his own wife. In most variants, the baby of the buried woman is left to the elements. Sweet winds will rock the orphan and does will suckle him” (Brătulescu 1981: 187-88, with twelve variants recorded, as against more than a hundred noted by Tălăș in the same area [1997]).

Despite the large number of variants collected in the past forty years or so, we still have little information on how this song functioned as a colind. It is, however, clear that the poem was also sung in this setting, as is evident in the final formula of a Christmas variant collected by Gottfried Habenicht in 1963 (Tălăș 1997: 66):

Și dând veste bună
La tot neamu’ d’impreună
S-avem haznă și folos
D’e naștere Domn[ului] Hristos E. With the occasion of Christ’s birth.

And giving the good news
To all kin
Let’s have plenty and prosperity
With the occasion of Christ’s birth.
Most contributors consider that this is a colinda: in Brebi-Maramureș, "o ziceau tinerii. O corindau fectori și fete. Era tare mândră corinda” [it was sung by young people. Young boys and girls were caroling it. It was a very nice colinda] (Taloș 1997: 41). Another argument favoring the idea that this text belongs to the Christmas carol genre is the presence of the refrain/chorus, a line or verse repeated after each verse of the poem, as in, for instance, “Zuuărel de zuă” [Little dawn of the day] (Taloș 1997: 62; see also the example of “Maria Măștei,” recorded by Habenicht in 1963).

Brătulescu included this type in the section “Professional Colinda” (1981) and suggested that “the foundation sacrifice” carol had a “funeral function,” an idea that can generally be sustained by the contributors’ comments, too (see Taloș 1997: 27–28: “it is a ‘sad’ colinda,” “Lodovica Pop, Prodanaști, Sâla; it is a very sad one,” “Irina Lucaci, Cigilean, Sâla”). It is also worth mentioning that, unlike most of the Christmas carols which are sung mainly by young men, this special colinda belonged to the women’s repertoire: “It was sung only by women and young girls; the lads did not sing it” (Taloș 1997: 26). The addressees of the carol were women, too: “I loved this carol; I sung and I cried, too. Women cried in the house when caroling it.” Although no valid general conclusions can be drawn on the basis of such scarce information, the feminist-oriented interpretation of the walled-up wife motif may count this as another sustaining argument.

Long before the Yugoslav (Balkan) crises erupted, Alan Dundes provisionally stated that “if the women of the Balkan wish to cease being buried alive in a world constructed by and for men, there will have to be drastic changes in traditional Balkan social organization and in the standard roles assigned to men and women” (Dundes 1989: 163).

This “feminist-symbolic reading” of “The Building of Skadar” may be correct, but a small, but vital, fact remains to be explained. The performance context of that song shows that the ballad entered the men’s repertoire exclusively— it is performed by male professional singers (Romanian lăutari, Serbo-Croatian guslar) for a male audience in special circumstances, from wedding parties to men’s gatherings at coffee shops or inns. The performance context reinterprets the text and is responsible for the endless chain of individual variants of every text and the meaning of each variant. From this perspective, it is hard to find a feminine point of view in the Balkan ballad of the interred wife.

However, if we take into account the colind version, the perspective changes. Shorter than the ballad versions of the motif, the colind versions slightly change the emphasis from the mason’s and master mason’s deeds to the wife’s acts: her determination to bring her husband’s lunch against all obstacles (a wolf, heavy
rain) and her responsibility to the infant left behind. All these changes in textual content can be seen as proof of the role played by the situational performance context in the continuous reellation of a song.

Such analysis confirms, once more, that folk-epic texts interpret their cultural context, while the performing, situational context interprets the texts, and shows how the interplay between the two environments is responsible for variations in meaning, at both the levels of myriad individual variants and local, ethnic, or national versions.

Notes
1. Opposed to this “parochial nationalistic” perspective is the “cross-cultural interpretation”; Alan Dundes opens a door at least half opened by Mircea Eliade’s earlier studies (1943, 1972), Paul G. Brewster (Dundes 1996: 35–62), and Taboš (1973) regarding the worldwide distribution of the beliefs, ritual practices, and legends connected with the building sacrifice. See Motiff-Index of Folk Literature, S 261: Foundation Sacrifice. A human being buried alive at the base of the foundation of a building or bridge (Thompson 1955–58).

Works cited
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