

# EPIC AND ETHIC IN BALLADS: THE “UNFAITHFUL WIFE” CASE

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**Abstract:** Although in AMZULESCU's "Catalogue of the Narrative Subjects and Variants" (1983) *The Unfaithful Wife* is rightly registered as a "family ballad", type 134 (291), with three sub-types, I will refer here to an epic or bravery song thematically belonging to the family ballad, but registered as a heroic epic song. The type 205 (286), *Ghiță Cătănuță*, knows hundreds of variants published in collections and magazines, or stored on tapes in the Archive of the "Constantin Brăiloiu" Institute of Ethnography and Folklore. Structural analysis of the poem led AMZULESCU (1981) to the conclusion that this is a heroic ballad, the main character of which is a brave man who fights his enemy and wins, punishing at last his young wife who did not help him in a crucial, provoked or unprovoked episode of the struggle. The inter-play of the cultural, archaic context and the social, performing context shows how the singers, in different cultural and emotional contexts, slightly but firmly moved the emphasis either on the ethic or the heroic meaning of the story. As the ballad is mainly sung by men, and the traditional occasions of performing it were the wedding party (feast) or men gatherings, most of the versions of the ballad *Ghiță Cătănuță* show a strongly male oriented attitude. The cruelty with which the young wife and her mother are punished stands, sometimes, against the moral values of the modern times.

**Keywords:** punishment in folk ballads, ballads in wedding, emotion of ballad hero

Although in AMZULESCU's "Catalogue of the Narrative Subjects and Variants" (1983), *The Unfaithful Wife* is correctly registered as a "family ballad", type 134 (291), with three sub-types, I will refer here to an epic or bravery song thematically belonging to the family ballad, but registered as a heroic epic song. The type 205 (286), *Ghiță Cătănuță*, knows hundreds of variants (precisely 347 versions) published in collections and magazines, or stored on tapes in the Archive of the "Constantin Brăiloiu" Institute of Ethnography and Folklore.

The structural analysis of the poem led Amzulescu to the conclusion that this is a heroic ballad, the main character of which is a brave man who fights his enemy and wins, punishing at last his young wife who did not help him in a crucial, provoked or unprovoked, episode of the struggle. Here is the summary of this type: "Wishing to visit his in-laws, Ghiță (Stoian, Petrea etc.) asks his wife, Vidra (Vida, Neda, Savina etc.) to prepare knotted-bread and pretzels as ritual gifts (offerings) and start their journey through the deep forest. (The beginning differs sometimes: the couple walks in the mountains.) The husband asks his wife to sing, but she refuses, being afraid that her older suitors will hear her voice. He insists and she starts singing, her song bringing up the old suitor (pretendent). The two men initiate a fight. During the fight, either for testing his wife's fidelity, or just by haphazard, the husband's belt

loosens, and he asks his wife to help him. The woman answers that she prefers as husband the one who wins without her help. Embittered by this answer, the husband defeats his enemy, then cuts off his wife's head, putting it in his wallet. Once arrived at his mother-in-law's place, he asks her to prepare a good meal using his wife's meat. Understanding the unhappy faith of her daughter, the old woman curses on her for not having taken her advise and for having married out that who has become her butcher. In some variants, the son-in-law kills his wife's mother too" (AMZULESCU 1981: 161).

Quite a bloody story, isn't it! Love, death, pride, justice, cruelty, men and women – the husband–wife couple, parents and children – the mother–daughter couple, all these make type 205 (286) a complex story with deep roots in the ancient traditional mentality. In fact, the first collector of the ballad, poet Vasile Alecsandri, gives two rather different versions of the theme. In the former (no. VIII), bearing the name of the victorious man, *Păunașul Codrilor*, the husband is defeated and killed by the suitor, who takes the young woman. The second (no. XXVII), *Vidra*, preserves in the title the name of the wife, instead of that of the husband, but matches the general *scenario* of the type. Some useful suggestions are to be found in Alecsandri's notes accompanying the texts published 135 years ago (ALECSANDRI [1866] 1973 I: 40–41; 126–130), from mythology, as he derives the name of the suitor, *Păunașul Codrilor*, from the Greek god of forests, Pan, to the wedding traditions in which the ritual bread plays an important role.

Therefore, one can assume that the main motifs of the ballad are rooted in old forms of life, preserved as such by the poem itself. Using the so called *historical reconstruction method*, we can revive, up to a certain level, the *genetic* or *cultural context* ("context of culture", cf. B. Malinowski) that gave birth to this ballad.

Let's take a closer look to some of these motifs and try to find out where they have originated from. In most of the variants, the first episode presents a young couple making a trip to the wife's parents, most often to her mother. I'll let aside, for the moment, this detail, although it is a significant one, as we'll see later. The newly-weds' journey to the bride's home, on the first Sunday after the wedding, is a ritual act of consecration of the new couple, as man and wife, in front of the community. Not only that this journey must take place at a certain time, but some ritual food, especially knotted-bread and pretzels must be prepared on this occasion. I briefly note here that this aspect is strongly emphasized in a Bulgarian version of *Militza and Iskren*: "Militza, dear Militza, / Knead a white bread / Pour some yellow wine in the bottle / And let's go/To your mother, to your father / For, nine years since we married, / We haven't paid any visit to them" (A. DOZON, *Bălgarski narodni pesni / Chansons populaires bulgares*, 1875, in TEODORESCU [1885] 1982: 685; Cf. also FOCHI 1975: 169). It is true that this detail occurs in a relatively small number of the Romanian versions of the ballad, among which the oldest one, published by Alecsandri, for the first time in 1850 (ALECSANDRI [1866] 1973: 121), other two registered at the end of the 19th century (1896) (DENSUȘIANU 1975: 178, 181), and the third one, shorter and fragmentary, of the same period of time (TOCILESCU [1900] 1980 I: 376). All this can prove the ancience of the motif, as it springs from an old,

traditional custom, evoked as such by several versions: "He comes from his father/And goes to his father-in-law" (TOCILESCU [1900] 1980 I: 378) or "By that hill, by that slope/ Ghiță Cătănuță passes / With his sweet / ... / They go to his in-laws" (TOCILESCU [1900] 1980 I: 369).

In the newer versions, the couple simply takes a walk or a leisure trip, over the mountains or through the woods, which means that singers didn't pay so much attention to the ritual circumstances of the voyage, but were more interested in enlarging the narrative setting. For, as we can see, the spouses are accompanied by seven or twelve fiddlers ('lăutari'), they eat and drink, make merry. Sometimes the husband is unhappy with the singers and asks his wife to sing a song, but most often he is requesting it without any specific reason. This is a crucial point of the plot, for this (the wife) refuses to do so, arguing that she has a loud (strong) voice that could be heard by her old suitors or by the local outlaws who could cause trouble: "...If I start singing, / The wells will get troubled, / The forests will tremble, / The outlaws will come out, / They will slay you / And will take me" (TOCILESCU [1900] 1980 I: 376), or, in other versions: "If I start singing, / The mountains will crash, / The orchards will tangle, / The waters will get troubled, / The forests will resound". The strange effects of this woman's voice were related to those of the brave men in the forests, involving thus the idea that Cătănuță's wife belonged, once, to that group, i.e. the outlaws group, the habits and the behaviors of which she learned and performed. Let's note that it was exclusively a group of men and the presence of women was strictly forbidden; when, however, they were admitted, they had to become 'men', to behave like them. Since she (the hero's wife) was taken from there, married, and reinstalled in the village, domestic, family life, she changed her status and had to obey new rules. "By marriage, she lost her old status. Recovered for the socialized domestic space, she was forbidden to sing outlaws' songs. Here there lies the destroying effect of her song: it was something done against the nature of things that will lead to demolishing the general harmony of nature." (COMAN 1980: 169) In fact, I think that here we encounter an example of the way in which "the epic laws" – not necessarily in Axel Olrik's meaning – work. For, the woman's reluctance to sing on the road, in the forest, or in the mountains was a pure reflex of every woman of the Romanian traditional society to sing in a public place, outside her home. The *Bride's Song* of the wedding ceremonial warns the wife-to-be to sing her songs before getting married: "Sing, you, girls, your songs, / As long as you are like flowers, / For, after you get married, / You will not dare to sing, / In the house because of your mother-in-law, / In the yard because of your father-in-law, / On the road because of your dumb husband." These lines simply express a code of behavior of married women in the old traditional society. Or, the husband's request of singing was a challenge. He had to know, and he knew, that his wife could not sing under such conditions. However, he keeps asking her to do so. He is forcing her to break the rules, and she is not resisting his demands. Or, all this game enters the narrative schema of the ballad, raising the epic tension of the song. Actually, if she did not sing, we would not have the ballad at all! But the performers of the song, as poem-makers, moved the emphasis from the current and general rule (married women don't sing in public places, out-

side the house), to the special position of that woman who, before getting married, was with the outlaws, sometimes, as it is suggested, as the lover of the group's head. New actors enter the scene, and the plot gets new dimensions. Adrian Fochi draws a general conclusion from this situation, seeing in this a confirmation of Axel Olrik's so called "law of two to a scene" ('das Gesetz der szenischen Zweiheit' cf. Axel OLRIK, *Epic Laws of Folk Narrative* [1909] in DUNDES 1965: 129–140). The epic tension grows with this new character and the 'pair of functions' – in V. I. Propp terminology – "struggle/victory" appears, that made Al. I. Amzulescu include this subject in the heroic epic.

A sub-theme of the struggle motif appears, involving, once more, the woman who is not let to be a simple assistant to the fight, but is asked again by her husband to intervene in his favor and tie the belt that, by hazard or by intention, loosened. But she takes no one's part, saying that her man will be the one who wins. Adrian FOCHI (1985: 74) thinks that this ballad "reflects a fundamental psychological situation: the woman always makes the option for the stronger one, even if she has to encroach upon her marital faith." But this is just an assumption that should be proved. In any case, the wife's position opens a vivid debate about her moral standing: was she right or bad when not helping her husband? Ovidiu Bârlea thinks that two different positions can be seen in this ballad's many versions: one expressing the heroic standing of olden times, when a real man had never asked a woman for help, another one expressing a moral standing according to which a married woman must help her husband unconditionally, under any circumstances.

It seems to me that, as in some other cases, the poet Vasile Alecsandri, credited as the first collector and publisher of Romanian ballads (1852–53, and 1866), had a fine intuition when in his version named *Păunașul Codrilor* (The Brave Man of the Forest) the victory is won by the one who kills the husband and takes the wife, as she herself predicted: "Anyone who wins / That one I will love (or I'll make love with him)". Unfortunately, we know very little about the occasion of singing, about the context of saying that song – singer, time, place, audience. Or, every version is a result of the so-called performative or performing or situational context, and all the factors mentioned before – singer, time, place, audience – leave their marks on the concrete text. Not to speak of the collector himself whose personal views, ideology, feelings etc. leave their imprints, in the process of textualization, on the text as such.

Little is also known about the performative context of the other type of variants, ethically oriented, in which the wife's attitude of not helping her husband is drastically punished. But, at a general level, the ballad or the olden times song was sung, in Romania and in South-Eastern Europe as well, up to modern times, at wedding parties. Some epic subjects have actually been attracted into the wedding repertory, being often requested and carefully listened to by the participants. A subject like this perfectly fitted the occasion and this explains why the ballad of *Ghiță Cătănuță* is/was so often sung at wedding parties, where it "offered a matrimonial lesson". "The circumstances of the erotic drama are very close to the wedding situation, for the two partners go to the in-laws, on their 'primary way', soon after their wedding. The bloody punishment of the opportunistic wife, ready to take the part of the stronger

one – writes Ovidiu BÂRLEA (1973: 85) – sounded as a severe warning for the newlyweds, especially because the guests at table started misogynic (women hater like) comments”. We can give credit to Ovidiu Bârlea, who had a huge field experience, and, probably, although he doesn’t mention this, he has encountered such situations, in which the listeners of the ballad, “started their misogynic comments”.

Anyhow, a strong male-oriented attitude results from every variant of the ballad, and it is more obvious when we take a look at the bloody punishment reserved to the ‘unfaithful wife’. With very few exceptions, she is beheaded: “The blade he sharpened, / And took her head off” (TOCILESCU [1900] 1980 I: 375); “Her head with the blade he cut off” (TOCILESCU: 373); “He pulled the sword out / And took his sweetie’s head off “ (TOCILESCU: 371); “Yathagan (Turkish sword) from scabbard pulled out / And nicely cut her head off” (DENSUȘIANU 1975: 181) etc. In a rather small number of variants she is stabbed in her chest: “He set the loving women next to the Pasha / And stabbed her in the chest” (BRĂILOIU 1932: 177). But death alone seems not to be enough, for the young and let’s say unfaithful wife also suffers a mutilation. The winning, and let’s say again, betrayed husband cuts off her chest or more explicitly her breasts and, once he arrives at his mother-in-law’s place, he asks her to prepare a special meal using her daughter flash: “Here is your daughter! / You, mother, my mother / Do you still have some cabbage (sauerkraut) / To prepare it with the fat meat / Of your lovely daughter / Who had such a foolish mind” (TOCILESCU [1900] 1980 I: 373). In different variants, not only the breast is detached, but also a finger with the ring (the wedding ring) and the tress – both signs of femininity.

I will not enter into more details, but it must be added that, in the conclusions of a very insightful study of the history of beheading (*Histoire de la décapitation*), it is stated that, either as a political or a ritual act, beheading was reserved only to men: “we have to remember that neither women, nor girls are beheaded. As for young boys, they were decapitated especially when it was about to extinguish the king or royal line. It can be added also that the beheading is associated in a large majority of cases with war, and the war is done by men” (STAHL 1986: 188). The Romanian ballad, and some South-Eastern European versions of it contain an episode in which the main character’s enemy – in many cases, the head of the outlaws – is, at the end of the fight, beheaded, that enters the general pattern of heroic behavior. And, if we take into account that the name of the hero is *Ghiță*, a hypocoristic of Gheorghe (George) with all its military meanings, and *Cătănuță*, a derivative of ‘cătană’, from Magyar *katona*, ‘soldier’, we can conclude that warlike conditions are fulfilled. As for the skull of the young wife, it is not taken as a trophy, but settled on the top of a hayrick (haycock), that entirely changes the meaning of this part of the poem. The soldier Cătănuță, who fights the outlaws or defends the border, is, in his private life, a peasant, or a small landlord who works his field and makes his hay.

Different layers of the ballad and a possible evolution of this was foreseen, long time ago, by Ovidiu Bârlea who deciphers two types: a heroic one and a novel-like one (BÂRLEA 1957).

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