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Balladic Forms of the *Bugarštica* and Epic Songs

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According to the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, the characteristics of oral ballads in the European tradition are as follows: the ballad is a poem which is sung; it contains an action, which unfolds during the course of various scenes until it reaches a climax or conflict; and, finally, the ballad lives in oral tradition (Brednich 1977:1152-53).¹ In the same text it is stated that because of the fact that the art of improvisation is still alive among Serbs and Croats, “the boundaries between ballad and epic are often still fluid” (col. 1163). In a study of ballad and epic, Erich Seemann affirmed that in countries in which epic poetry is still a living tradition no stylistic difference exists between short songs (*Lieder*) and songs that resemble a small epic because of their length. He singled out the Serbo-Croatian language region as typical of this phenomenon (1955:172-73). In an examination of Seemann’s study, however, I noted the need for attempting to determine “to what extent the essential features of the ballad are dominant in our songs and to what extent those of epic poetry prevail in them” (1960:106). On that occasion I pointed out that some of the songs designated by Seemann as ballads belong to that category because of their stylistic features while others are, in fact, epic songs (107).² Subsequently, in a comparison of a number of variants of Croatian and Serbian songs having the same plot, Mira Sertić demonstrated how the stylistic boundaries of ballad and epic texts in those traditions can be defined (1965:320-30;

¹ A German version of the present text was read at a meeting of the Commission for Oral Poetry of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore held in Rovinj, Yugoslavia, in the summer of 1987. The principal theme of the meeting was the ballad’s relationship to other genres. Because of the participation of scholars who were unfamiliar with specific aspects of oral poetry in Serbo-Croatian, basic information is occasionally provided in this text about some matters that are generally well known in the study of Serbo-Croatian oral poetry (e.g., the nature of the *bugarštice*).

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² One of the songs referred to there—the one about Marko Kraljević and Minja of Kostur—is discussed below.

348-49).

The problematic character of the relation of epic songs and ballads in the Serbo-Croatian oral tradition has been viewed by Alois Schmaus from a different perspective. It is clear that in the area of the so-called epic dominant (the central, or Dinaric, zone, roughly speaking) “the narrative posture conditions structure and style.” There heroic epic songs about battles and exploits are thematically different from songs whose themes center on family matters, but stylistically both groups are the same. Such style is “clearly narrative, it avoids reduction, makes use of formulas and repetitive techniques, its events take place gradually, step by step at an even pace, it does not permit leaping or rushing to the conclusion” (Schmaus 1971:414). No matter what the theme, that style is epic and not balladic. On the contrary, in some regions, particularly in Adriatic and village zones, another type of song is present “with a tendency toward compression of the action, reduction, temporal concision, and foreshadowing,” whereby the “desired lyric effects” are achieved. “The subject matter that, as if by its very nature, demands a narrative style here [. . .] is rendered lyrically, freed from epic weight” (415).³ In other words, in the region of the epic dominant, even songs that according to their familial-private content would be suitable for the ballad genre are cast in epic form, while in the areas of the lyric dominant, epic subject matter is freed from its epic form and is transformed into ballads. Therefore, the observation on the fluid nature of the boundary between epic songs and ballads is correct, but these songs are, at the same time, identifiable and shaped in accordance with one model or the other.

A similar difference between two types of narrative song is to some degree also present in Russian oral poetry in the case of the archaic epic *byliny* and ballads. In a comparative analysis of their verses made by D. M. Balašov in two exemplary studies, fundamental differences are clearly present (1963:7-13; 1966:5-14). At the thematic level, the ballad, in contrast to the *bylina*, does not represent events of general national significance but instead concentrates on individual human destinies or familial relations, through which broader national, ethical, or social meaning is revealed. From the standpoint of style, ballads are narrative songs that are dramatic in character. While the *bylina* unfolds gradually and branches off into series of episodes, the ballad is concentrated, condensed, dynamic; it is reduced to a single conflict without description of the events that preceded it or follow it; the action is interrupted and is often developed in dialogue form; repetitions show gradation and an increase in dramatic quality, whereas in the *bylina* they retard the action. Reasons for

³ For differentiating between the ballad and epic narrative song in the Balkans, especially in the Serbo-Croatian language areas, see also Schmaus 1973:espec. 28.

the conflict in the ballad are often only partially revealed, so that it unfolds enigmatically and in understated form. While the hero of the epic song is exaggerated and idealized in epic fashion, as is also the description of his person with weapons, clothing, and horse, the hero of the ballad is portrayed as a real person, who is “depicted” only through his conduct.

The subject of the present article is not a general comparison of epic songs and ballads in Serbo-Croatian oral poetry, a relatively easier task, but rather the investigation of certain *bugarštica* ballads.⁴ *Bugarštice* are a specific type of oral song with a long verse line of fifteen or sixteen syllables, which shows some fluctuation; they often have a refrain. They were first recorded at the end of the fifteenth century and ceased to exist in the eighteenth. Until recently the earliest recordings were thought to be those from the island of Hvar, published in 1568 in the lengthy poem of the Croatian poet Petar Hektorović, *Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje* [*Fishing and Fishermen's Conversations*]. Recently, however, an important *bugarštica* fragment of ten lines, which had been recorded in 1497 among emigrants from Dalmatia to southern Italy, was discovered and published by Miroslav Pantić (1977).⁵

All *bugarštice* from the territory of present-day Yugoslavia were recorded along the eastern Adriatic coast—in central and southern Dalmatia and in the Gulf of Kotor region—with one exception, which is from the interior of Croatia. Whether they in fact also originated in that and neighboring regions or were brought to those areas from the interior has been the subject of much debate, and will not be considered here.⁶ The discussion at hand is concerned with the generic features of the *bugarštica*.

More recent recordings of Croatian oral poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from the Adriatic coast show that there are no epic songs in the northern littoral area, whereas oral poetry in central and southern Dalmatia—where, as noted above, *bugarštice* too were recorded—is characterized by both balladic and epic styles. *Bugarštice* are

⁴ For English versions of forty-one *bugarštice*, see Miletich 1990.

⁵ For information on the ethnic and regional origins of the singers of this song, based on linguistic and anthroponymical analysis, see the fundamental study by Petar Šimunović (1984). The term *bugarštica* is a later, nineteenth-century form based on the original *bugarščica*, used by Hektorović in the mid-sixteenth century. The consonantal cluster *šč* does not exist in contemporary standard Serbo-Croatian, and so, like the majority of previous investigators, I use the form *bugarštica* in technical discussion, as suggested to me by the linguist Šimunović in an oral communication. The term *bugarščica* has recently come into use again to a limited degree. It is appropriate especially in contexts in which the historical aspect is emphasized, as, for example, in Šimunović's study, referred to above.

⁶ I have dealt elsewhere with most of the differing opinions expressed in previous discussions of this question, including some of my own (1975:7-25).

typologically older than the epic songs in the heroic decasyllabic meter known to us today and do not lend themselves automatically to a comparison with the latter, but, nevertheless, some *bugarštice* show a tendency toward epic style, while others, which are more significant, clearly display balladic features.

Schmaus, who very perceptively noted and differentiated epic and lyric dominants in particular zones of Serbo-Croatian oral poetry, overlooked that problem in relation to the *bugarštica*. Moreover, he believed that the *bugarštice* are heroic songs, among which he also included “the earliest recordings from the middle of the sixteenth century,” that is, those of Hektorović (1973:36). Although he had origin and not style in mind in that context, nevertheless, in my opinion, the two cannot be separated in a clear-cut way, at least when it is a question of pure ballads, as Hektorović’s *bugarštica* texts clearly are.

Valtazar (Baldo) Bogišić, who, in the nineteenth century, published the most important collection of *bugarštice* to date, noticed from his observation of the texts themselves a series of stylistic traits that we recognize as balladic, although he did not have in mind the theoretical literary model of the ballad. He remarked that *bugarštice* are considerably shorter than decasyllabic epic songs; they do not have the kind of extensive repetitions that the decasyllabic songs have and repetition in them is not stereotyped but allows “a greater or lesser degree of change”; there is less of the marvelous and the exaggerated than in the decasyllabic songs; in contrast to the decasyllabic epic, rarely do the *bugarštice* have “beginnings with questions and answers,” that is, with the figure of antithesis so common in epic poetry (1878: introd., chaps. viii, xiii, xviii, xix, xxi). As a typical nineteenth-century scholar, with a legacy of Romantic views, Bogišić saw in the *bugarštice* “a lack of true poetic beauty” when compared with the heroic decasyllabic epic (61), an assessment that is certainly unwarranted. However, his aesthetic evaluation is irrelevant in the context of this discussion, which centers on features that have a bearing on the balladic character of the *bugarštica* (or at least on a considerable part of its corpus).

Let us now turn to the texts themselves. I shall compare the generic features of a number of *bugarštica* ballads and decasyllabic epic songs with the same plot. The most characteristic *bugarštica* ballads—which at the same time are aesthetically the best—will be treated only in part since both ballads and epic heroic songs tend toward their proper thematic material, and mutual plot correspondences are thus not especially frequent although they do exist. On the other hand, in instances in which there is a plot correspondence in the *bugarštica* and the decasyllabic song, either an epic or a balladic style is at times dominant in both cases, so that such examples

are also unsuitable for generic comparison.⁷

One of the earliest and most aesthetically successful *bugarštice*, the song about Marko Kraljević and his brother Andrijaš from Hektorović's *Ribanje*, is a true ballad. On the basis of its theme, it could conditionally be classified among the haiduk songs, which are clearly epic in the Croatian and Serbian decasyllabic oral tradition, but in its entire construction and noble, knightly tone, it is completely different and remote from the haiduk epic. It deals with two brothers who quarrel about the division of booty, and Marko strikes his brother Andrijaš in the heart with his sword. As he dies, Andrijaš utters a deeply moving speech to his brother, which constitutes the principal part of the ballad. The song is totally enigmatic and understated. There is not a word about how the brothers acquired the booty for which they quarrel. After some brief introductory information about the quarrel, the wounded Andrijaš speaks "po tihora" ["softly"] to Prince Marko: he implores him to conceal his evil deed from their mother, to lie to her, saying that his sword is covered with blood because he struck in the heart a "tihoga jelenka" ["peaceful little deer"], who did not wish to yield to him on the road, and that Andrijaš has remained in a foreign land:

“‘ostao je,’ reci, ‘junak, mila majko, u tujoj zemlji,
iz koje se ne može od milin’ja odiliti

Andrijašu;

onde mi je obljudio jednu gizdavu devojkju.
I odkle je junak tuj devojkju obljudio,
nikad veće nije pošal sa mnome vojevati,
i sa mnome nije veće ni plinka razdilio.
Ona t’ mu je dala mnoga bil’ja nepoznana
i onoga vinca junaku od zabitja,

gizdava devojka.

Li uskori mu se hoćeš, mila majko, nadijati.”

(Bošković-Stulli 1975:8)

[“‘the hero,’ say, ‘dear mother, has stayed in a foreign land,
from which he cannot take his leave for pleasure’s sake,

Andrijaš;

he fell in love there with a fair maiden.
And ever since the hero fell in love with that maiden,
he never again went off with me to battle,
and did not ever even share booty with me.

⁷ Such, for example, are *bugarštica* No. 1 of Bogišić's collection with its 253 verses and the song about Musić Stefan from Vuk Karadžić's collection (1895:No. 46), which are both epic in character. On the other hand, the following are balladic in character: the two *bugarštice* about the marvelous selection of Matijaš as king (Bogišić 1878:Nos. 30, 31) and the songs with the same plot in the heroic decasyllabic meter (*HNP* 1896:No. 67; *HNP* 1942:No. 12; Gezeman 1925:No. 75 = Bošković-Stulli 1964:No. 11); such balladic character is due, perhaps, to the fabulous non-heroic subject matter or to the "non-heroic" region in which the songs about Matijaš's selection were recorded, or to both of these reasons.

There are other songs with familial relations as their central interest, reflected in the ballad genre in the form of the *bugarštica*, while the same subject matter in its more recent decasyllabic form takes on epic features to a greater or lesser extent. The *bugarštica* about the conflict of the Jakšić brothers over their inability to reach an agreement on the division of a horse and falcon is a true family ballad; as Mitar goes off to hunt, he demands that his wife poison his brother Stjepan, but she does not do so, making peace between them instead (Bogišić 1878:No. 44). The text does not tell us what the wife intended to do after receiving that horrible command: “Brzo Jele biješe gospodara poslušala, / A objed pripravi u svojemu b’jelu dvoru” [“Jele quickly obeyed her husband, / And prepared the meal in her white court”]. Only afterwards, from her conversation with her brother-in-law during the meal, do we learn that she does not approve of killing him. The central event, therefore, is expressed through dialogue.

Two decasyllabic variants, one from a recording of Nikola Tommaseo and another from Vuk Karadžić’s collection, are also ballads—in addition, Tommaseo’s text from Dalmatia calls the brothers Kraljević Marko and Andrijaš, as in the *bugarštica* in Hektorović’s text—but epic tendencies are nonetheless evident in both of them (*HNP* 1897:No. 25; Karadžić 1895:No. 97). Whereas the *bugarštica* begins *in medias res*, the song in Vuk’s collection has a typical introductory formula about the conversation between the Moon and the Morning Star; the description of feudal possessions to be divided by the brothers is given in detail; in Vuk’s song we find the poetically very effective symbolic episode of the falcon left with only one wing who feels like the brother who has lost his brother, a feature that is, admittedly, characteristic of the ballad but which also expands the text. Finally, in Vuk’s text the sequence of events moves forward at an epic pace: in the course of ten verses Anđelija the wife reflects on her inability to do away with her own brother-in-law, and then goes and asks him to make her a gift of the horse and falcon, which he in fact does. The balladic dialogue of the preceding *bugarštica* example is replaced here by a series of events.

Another song-type about the Jakšić brothers, in which the loyalty of their wives is tested, also deals with familial subject matter. An eighteenth-century *bugarštica* is condensed in ballad fashion, whereas a decasyllabic song of the same century moves along broadly with typical epic repetitions.⁹ Each brother asks his wife whether she agrees that her brother-in-law should be given a costly horse, clothing, and arms, and while one wife turns out to be generous, the other is malevolent and tightfisted. Although both songs are approximately from the

⁹ In the first part of that *bugarštica* (Bogišić 1878:No. 41), verses 1-40 belong to a different type of ballad, which appears separately as No. 42 in Bogišić. The song in the heroic decasyllabic meter appears in the work of the Croatian writer from Slavonia, Matija Antun Reljković, published in 1762 (1779). Vuk took it from Reljković’s book and published it in his second volume of *Srpske narodne pjesme* [*Serbian Folk Songs*], alleging that he had recorded it “od jednoga momčeta iz Užičke nahije” [“from a young lad from the district of Užice”] (Karadžić 1895:No. 99; 624, n. 76).

course of events leaves no room at all for confusion. Furthermore, the substratum of this song is very archaic. Dagmar Burkhart interprets it as “an ancient shamanistic motif, that is, it refers to the soul’s departure from the body in the form of some animal. If the animal which represents the soul is killed, the one whose role it has assumed will also inevitably die” (1968:477).

Two *bugarštice* tell about the marriage of Despot Vuk (or Ognjeni Vuk [Fiery Vuk (Wolf)]), but in very different ways (Bogišić 1878:Nos. 12, 13). The action of the first song unfolds entirely in the lordly, feudal milieu of the Hungarian court of King Matijaš. Its solemn, stately, lordly atmosphere and the courteous bearing of its characters are typical of most *bugarštice* and are in accord with their slow, measured, plaintive discourse in contrast to the often cruel elemental nature of the decasyllabic epic. In that song King Matijaš marries off his vassal Vuk to Barbara, sister of a Bosnian ban, and gives him as gifts the estates of which he had been divested. In the second *bugarštica* Vuk marries the sister of the ban of Poljice. His sworn brother, the Turk Alibeg, carried away by the young bride’s beauty, tries to abduct her by taking her on horseback into the Danube. But Radosav, one of the wedding guests, forces him to give up the bride.

The plots of these two *bugarštica* ballads are merged in an extensive epic decasyllabic song (*HNP* 1896:No. 80). The differences between the two types, which are similar to those in the other examples discussed above but are here considerably more conspicuous, consist in the epic stringing together of events, in formulas, extended repetitions, and a different social milieu. On this occasion, I will not analyze those differences but only comment on one that is particularly outstanding. Whereas in the *bugarštica* (No. 13) the sworn brother attempts to abduct the bride almost against his own will, since he is carried away by her extraordinary beauty, at the same point in the decasyllabic song we find a true epic ambush with three hundred Turkish janissaries, who attack the wedding party on the mountain in order to abduct the bride. But Vuk heroically stops them:

Kad to vidi ognjeviti Vuče,
brijetku je ćordu povadio,
pa na Turke juriš učinio,
sve pos’ječe, n’jedan ne uteče.

[When the fiery Vuk saw that,
he drew his sharp sword,
and charged the Turks,
he slew all of them, not one escaped.]

A number of *bugarštica* ballads and their epic transformations have been compared up to this point. There are also cases in which differences between the *bugarštica* ballad and the decasyllabic epic song cannot be attributed solely to the nature of the *bugarštica* genre since an action may also be reduced because of the

inferior quality of the text. It seems that one such example is the *bugarštica* about Marko and the Moorish maiden, whom Marko kills even though she freed him from prison.¹¹

Just as the central theme of ballads—familial subject matter and individual human destinies—can be transformed from the *bugarštice* into later epic forms, so too, but conversely, the same heroic plots find their parallels in the *bugarštica* and the epic decasyllabic song. I will, however, put aside the questions of origin and dissemination of particular plots and focus our attention on the form that the epic heroic plot takes in the *bugarštica*. I have noted above that at times both the *bugarštica* and the decasyllabic song that have a plot in common appear in the same generic form, whether balladic or epic (for examples, see n. 7, above). These are, however, rare cases. For the most part, *bugarštice* show a preference for the balladic form. It goes without saying that songs with epic heroic subject matter cannot be true ballads like the ones we have examined above. It is sufficient to be able to identify a tendency toward the ballad style in the *bugarštice* that have such epic plots. This I will attempt to do below.

Two *bugarštice* contain the archaic heroic story about the groom who is not permitted to lead his bride away until he has fulfilled three difficult tasks: to shoot a golden apple down from a wall with a bow, to jump over twelve saddled horses, and to recognize the bride who is one of twelve maidens (or something similar). One or more heroes replace the groom in carrying out these ancient fabulous tasks (Bogišić 1878:Nos. 9, 26). These events are related briefly in the *bugarštice*, are inserted into a context with different subject matter, and are free of epic stylization, but also of a specific balladic form.

In 1756 in his *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga* [*Pleasant Recreation for the Slavic People*], Andrija Kačić Miošić published a decasyllabic song about the marriage of Sibirjanin Janko, which is very close in its chronology to the *bugarštice* just discussed (1967:126-29). The plots are essentially the same, but the text in Kačić Miošić is a genuine epic folk song with a slowly paced action, stylized epic repetition of episodes, and drawn-out plot, which will appear later in numerous variants of that heroic song.¹² As we saw earlier in the case of the song about the Jakšić brothers testing the loyalty of their wives, the importance of chronological proximity in recording the decasyllabic song and the *bugarštica* retreats in the face of the much more significant role of the reciprocal generic linkage of decasyllabic epic texts.

In addition to *bugarštice*, Bogišić's collection also contains decasyllabic songs from an eighteenth-century manuscript. Some of the latter have plots which are comparable to those of the *bugarštica*. Thus, one *bugarštica* and two decasyllabic texts in Bogišić's collection deal with Minja (Mihna) of Kostur, who

¹¹ Bogišić 1878:No. 5 (= *HNP* 1897:No. 13); Karadžić 1895:No. 63; *HNP* 1897:No. 14.

¹² For some variants, see Karadžić 1895:Nos. 28, 78; *HNP* 1896:Nos. 70, 71.

carries off Marko Kraljević's wife, whom Marko, disguised as a monk, manages to regain (1878:Nos. 7, 86, 87). The same plot can also be found in Vuk Karadžić's collection (1895:No. 61). Without making a detailed comparison, I will note that the *bugarštica* is epic in character, but that it is, however, in some of its features, close to the balladic form as well. It is reduced to a key incident, whereas in the epic texts the action branches off into several secondary episodes, which are, of course, formulaic and repetitive. The heroic subject matter of the agon is attenuated in the *bugarštica*: there is no description of the combat with Minja and there are no soldiers (janissaries) to help Marko; Marko simply cuts off Minja's "glavicu" ["little head"].

We can also see a similar relationship between epic content and certain tendencies toward the balladic mode in the *bugarštica* in the well-known song about Banović Strahinja and his unfaithful wife.¹³ The difference between the *bugarštica* and the decasyllabic song is immediately evident from their lengths: the *bugarštica* comprises 131 verses and the text in Vuk's collection has 810. The songs deal with the abduction of Strahinja's wife by a Turk. The decasyllabic song depicts the event in the greatest poetically impressive epic detail, whereas the *bugarštica* begins *in medias res*: while at dinner, Strahinja's brother-in-law asks him why he is sulking: "Ali žališ, Strahinja, dvore tvoje porobljene? / Ali žališ, moj šura, ljubi tvoju zarobljenu?" ["Are you grieving over your looted court, Strahinja? / Or are you grieving over your captive wife, my brother-in-law?"]. The abduction has already taken place before the song begins and it is not described here. This stylistic ballad feature, of which there are a number of other instances, does not, however, change essentially the epic character of the *bugarštica* under discussion.

Sometimes, however, as in this final example, stylistic ballad features are so pronounced that to some degree they leave their stamp on an entire song whose subject matter is epic. In the decasyllabic song about the Jakšić brothers' ravaged court, we are told in epic fashion how Arap-aga looted their court and carried off their sister into captivity (Karadžić 1895:No. 96). The brothers then go and free her, killing Arap-aga and also the children their sister had with him: "Od zla roda nek nema poroda, / Od zla pseta nek nema šteneta" (ll. 168-69) ["From bad seed let there be no offspring, / From a bad dog let there be no pup"]. A *bugarštica* with the same plot is completely different (Bogišić 1878:No. 45). Its milieu is lordly and there is no trace of cruelty. The events are related through dialogue: the mother tells her son that the Turks abducted his sister when she was still just a child and that she is a slave in the court of a ban. The brother sets out to find his sister. The dialogue in which brother and sister recognize one another is the central "event" of the entire song. Together they flee without struggle or bloodshed. This *bugarštica* also contains a description of the fitting out of the hero, characteristic, moreover, of epic song, but instead of a warrior's outfit the

¹³ Bogišić 1878:No. 40; Karadžić 1895:No. 43; *HNP* 1896:No. 56.

hero decks himself out as if he were planning to visit some nobleman's court:

Na se mi je obuk'o od svile zlatne kavade,
Na glavu je stavio kamilovac bio klobuk,
Za klobuk je zadio svê pero od suha zlata. . . .

[He donned silken gold robes,
On his head he placed a white camel-hair hat,
In his hat he stuck a feather all of pure gold. . . .]

What are the consequences of all that has been said here up to this point? Among the *bugarštice* there are a goodly number of pure ballads, unsuitable for comparison with epic songs, and they have not been the object of our consideration here. However, *bugarštica* ballads exist that have parallels in epic decasyllabic songs with the same subject matter, and a comparison of both groups shows very clearly how they differ in style. Finally, there are also *bugarštice* that belong to the category of the heroic epic genre; a comparison of them with decasyllabic songs with the same subject matter shows, however, that they tend toward the balladic mode. What lies at the root of the *bugarštica*'s affinity for balladic form is a question for a separate and different type of discussion.

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