

A COMPARATIVE APPROACH TO THE BALLAD OF
THE HIDDEN DEATH:
MEANING, STRUCTURE, TECHNIQUES

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Key words: ballad poetics, ballad structure, ballad techniques, gender, West European and Slavic ballads

Summary: The article is focused on a ballad fairly widely distributed in Western Europe and known under various titles: *The Hidden Death*, *Le Roi Renaud*, *Sir Oluf*, *Clerk Colvill*, etc. The analysis seeks to determine its structural features, narrative types, semantic oppositions, characters, gender perspective, structural analogues in the South Slavic tradition, its overall meaning and consider certain aspects of ballad poetics in the context of comparative studies.

Кључне речи: поетика баладе, структура баладе, технике баладе, род, западно-европске и словенске баладе

Апстракт: Чланак је посвећен истраживању једне баладе, прилично распрострањене у Западној Европи, која је позната под разним насловима: *Скривена смрт*, *Краљ Рено*, *Сер Олуф*, *Госнар Колвил* итд. Анализа настоји да утврди њене структурне одлике, наративне типове, семантичке опозиције, ликове, родну перспективу, структурне аналогije у јужнословенској традицији, њено опште значење, као и да размотри извесне аспекте поетике баладе у контексту компаративног истраживања.

1. Introduction

The ballad known in the Hispanic tradition as *The Hidden Death* (*La muerte ocultada*) is found in other European traditions, where it appears under various titles: *Le Roi Renaud* (France), *Sir Oluf* (Scandinavia), *Clerk Colvill* (England), *Don Pedro e D. Leonarda* (Portugal), *Aoutrou Nann Hag Gorrigan* (Brittany in France), diverse names (Italy), while in some Slavic traditions (Bohemian and Wendish) it is known as *The Doleful Wedding* or *The Weeping Bride*. This ballad has attracted the attention of a number of outstanding scholars: G. Doncieux, F. J. Child, E. J. Entwistle, L. Pineau, R.

Menéndez Pidal, Diego Catalan and more recently Beatriz Mariscal de Rhett, whose excellent study *La Muerte Ocultada* was published in 1985.¹

Child brought attention to a long German poem from 1300, *The Knight of Staufenberg*, which he considers as a precursor of the ballad (Child, 1882–1898: 372–374). On his way to mass the protagonist meets a water nymph of extraordinary beauty sitting on a rock by the wayside. He instantly falls in love with her and the lady accepts his wish to be with her “and never know trouble or sickness”, but under the condition that he never marry. If he married, he would die in three days. So, he accepts. Later, however, he is urged by relatives and the king to marry, and although he tries to evade this, he is finally pressured into marrying the king’s niece. At the wedding feast, knowing he would die, he begs his bride and wedding guests to stay for his funeral. After his death, the bride returns to her country to spend the rest of her life in a cloister.

Among the Scandinavian versions of *Sir Oluf*, the oldest “is derived from a Danish manuscript of 1550, two centuries and a half later than the Staufenberg poem, but two earlier than Clerk Colvill, the oldest ballad outside the Scandinavian area” (Child, 1882–1898: 374). These versions basically describe the same conflict. The protagonist returns home only to die, while his mother and bride die later. However, Child indicates that the oldest Danish version as well as “most Danish and Swedish versions, and a good number of the Norwegian, interpose an affecting scene between the death of the hero and that of his bride and his mother” (Child, 1882–1898: 375). As the bridal escort approaches the groom’s home, they hear bells and see women weeping, but the bride is told Oluf has gone to the woods “with his hawk and hound” and will soon be back. Finally, in the evening she goes to the bridal room only to find Oluf’s brother there. She then realizes Oluf is dead and she too dies of shock and sorrow.

The “interposing scene” is a very important addition as it establishes a new two-part structure of the ballad. For the sake of analysis, we would like to call the death of the male character (groom) *primary death* and the death of the female character (bride) *secondary death*, as the latter is a direct consequence of the former. The function of the new segment is to develop dramatic tension leading to the secondary death. This is done by introducing signs of the primary death, which are deliberately misinterpreted in order to delay the bride’s realization that her beloved is to be buried on their wedding day. The

¹ B. Mariscal de Rhett provides a commented overview of previous research focused on this ballad in the second chapter of her book (Mariscal de Rhett, 1984–1985: 31–56). Catalan’s commentary on “La Muerte Ocultada” can be found on the Cuesta del Zarzal website (<http://cuestadelzarzal.blogia.com/temas/ii.-la-muerte-ocultada/>).

bride's death is thus the culmination and closure of the emotional build-up achieved by the use of antithesis. Here we have a case in which antithesis, a figure of style, assumes the role of a structuring principle (Vidaković-Petrov, 1988). The new two-part structure now contains two stories: the *primary story* in which the groom dies due to a conflict with the water-nymph, and the *secondary story* in which the bride dies on realizing that her wedding is actually a funeral and her groom deceased. Just as there are two stories, there are also two main protagonists: the *primary protagonist*, a male character whose death appears as a punishment for his transgression, and the *secondary protagonist*, a female character whose death is a result of the cognition of the primary death. Therefore, the relationship of primary-secondary is manifested on three levels: story, cause of death and characters.

However, the ballad does not assume this two-part structure in all its versions.

English versions (*Clerk Colvill*) contain only the primary story. Child described the versions of *Clerk Colvill* as “deplorably imperfect”, adding that were it's story “fully told” it would “closely resemble” that of the *Knight of Staufenberg* (Child, 1882–1898: 372). In other words, the second part of the ballad is missing altogether. On the other hand, the Breton ballad, which highlights a transition from the Scandinavian to the pan-Romanic versions, does have a two-part structure. Here the protagonist is already married and his wife gives birth to a child. The husband goes hunting for deer in order to fulfill his wife's wish of having a special meal. While hunting he comes to a stream guarded by a water nymph. His transgression consists of drinking the water to quench his thirst i.e. “upsetting” the stream, which amounts to a breach of a taboo. He comes home, dies and asks his mother to protect his wife and just born child by concealing his death for a certain period. The second part consists mainly of a dialogue between two female characters: mother and wife. The latter asks why the bells are tolling and the priests singing. The mother explains it is because “a beggar” hosted in their home has died. When she asks why her husband has not come home, the mother replies it is because he has “gone to town”, but will soon be back. When they prepare to go to church, the mother suggests that she wear a black dress. At the cemetery, the wife notices the earth on the family grave had been moved recently, so she asks which member of the family has been buried there. Finally she realizes it is her husband. The ballad concludes with a formula-motif.² The French ballad is another intermediary leading towards the Hispanic and Ital-

² Husband and wife are buried in the same grave, two pines grow from it, two white doves on the branches are singing, and at dawn fly off into the sky (a metaphor of their loving souls ascending to heaven).

ian versions.

As indicated by Mariscal de Rhett, Hispanic versions of *The Hidden Death* can be divided into two groups according to their meter: those in hexasyllabic and those in octosyllabic lines. The following is a summary of their main features (Mariscal de Rhett, 1984–1985: 19–30).

Texts using the six-syllable line (not typical for the Romancero) tend to be organized in couplets or quartets. The more archaic hexasyllabic versions, organized in couplets, are distributed in fringe areas and preserve in one form or another the supernatural motif of the primary story. In these texts the protagonist, sometimes called Don Bueso, goes hunting in the woods where he encounters a supernatural being (in Sephardic versions – *El Huerco*, personified Death), that controls the “other world”; he breaks a taboo (drinks water from a brook or passes from one side of the water boundary to the other), or is engaged in some kind of conflict with his supernatural opponent; he returns home only to die. Some Sephardic versions end at this point. They contain only the primary story. On the other hand, some Catalanian versions consist only of the secondary story.

The less archaic and more numerous hexasyllabic versions organized in quartets – distributed in various areas of the Peninsula, the Western Sephardic area and even Central America – have suppressed the supernatural motif. The protagonist, Don Pedro, is wounded in war, returns home, and dies. The secondary story consists of a dialogue between his mother and his wife, who is at childbirth. The motivation for hiding Don Pedro’s death is to spare the young mother and secure that the child is properly cared for during a certain period of time (“one year and a day”). Only after this period has elapsed, the wife can find out she has been a widow for over a year, and she dies.

The octosyllabic versions, feature a wide distribution. They reduce the primary story to very brief introduction telling how the male protagonist went hunting, but for some unexplained reason returned home not only empty handed, but also suffering from “*el mal de la muerte*”. At home he addresses his mother in a monologue, saying he would soon die. He asks her to conceal his death from his young wife (who is preparing for childbirth) for “one year and a day”. The mother delays the revelation of her son’s death. This is done by means of a dialogue consisting of a series of questions – for whom the “sad” bells toll, why she cannot go outside for “one year and a day”, what color of dress she should wear to mass, for whom so many candles have been lit – posed by the wife and the mother’s answers evading the truth. When the mother finally reveals the identity of the deceased, the wife realizes she is a widow and she dies.

Regarding the French ballad and the pan-Hispanic romance, Mariscal de

Rhett highlights the importance of the process of hiding death in the overall structure of the French ballad and the pan-Hispanic romance:

El núcleo de la fábula, tanto en el romance como en la balada, es el proceso de ocultación, que consta de tres momentos o etapas que aparecen fundidas en la narración y que reciben mayor o menor atención en las dos tradiciones. Estas etapas son: ocultación en el momento de la muerte; ocultación en el período de encierro de la jóven; ocultación en el momento en que la jóven va a entrar en el contacto con el mundo exterior. (Mariscal de Rhett, 1984–1985: 39–40)

2. Structure, narrative types and dramatization

Whereas death is a widespread motif in folksongs, including ballads, there are important differences regarding the function of this motif in the overall structure of a particular ballad. In the case of *The Hidden Death*, the specific elaboration of this motif – hiding it and delaying its revelation – should be considered in terms of motif analysis, but even more so in terms of ballad poetics and structure.

As we have seen, this motif does not have the same status in all versions of this ballad. In fact, we can discern two different functions of the primary death. In versions consisting of only the primary story based on a conflict between the male protagonist and a water nymph, the primary death is the *closing* of the story. The emphasis is on the conflict i.e. the breach of a taboo and the punishment of the transgressor. In versions consisting almost entirely of the secondary story, the primary death is there only to provide an *opening*. In contrast to the drama in the primary story that is based on an opposition between two characters (male versus female, human versus supernatural), the drama in the second part involves not opposition, but the contrast between two characters, both female and members of the same family (mother and wife of the deceased man). The contrast is drawn from the awareness/non-awareness of the primary death: while the mother *knows* her son is dead, the daughter-in-law is led to believe he is alive, despite multiple albeit ambiguous signs to the contrary. The dramatic quality of the secondary story is generated not by a conflict between the mother and the wife of the deceased, because there is none, but by the tension created by coding (on the part of the mother) and decoding (on the part of the wife) the information on the death of a key family member (son, husband). It is in fact an example of dramatizing the process of cognition (decoding information or interpreting signs). It is an example of the adaptation of a basically psychological, emotional, lyrical substance – typical for lyrical poetry – to the requirements of ballad poetics.

In other words, it is an adaptation of lyrical substance from the lyrical to the ballad structural model.

The structure of this ballad considering all of its versions is not uniform. There are versions consisting only of the primary story (the English *Clerk Colvill*, the *Sephardic Don Bueso*). That could be marked as type A. However, most versions contain both primary and secondary stories connected in a relationship of relative balance, exhibiting a clear two-part structure (the Danish versions), that could be marked as type B. Finally, those versions consisting almost entirely of the secondary story could be marked as type C. The majority of Hispanic versions, especially those in octosyllable meter, belong to the latter.

Transformation from type B to type C involves the suppression of the supernatural element, while this in turn entails the elimination of the female character as well as of the conflict between the latter and the male protagonist (a conflict crucial for Type A). The conflict is thus transformed into a hunting accident, although reminiscences of the original conflict remain embedded in the story. One of them is the setting: the woods and the stream, symbols of the supernatural realm of the water nymph, are still there, but only as a *locus* of a hunt gone sour. Other versions replace the hunting ground with a battlefield (substituting hunting by warfare), but the result is equivalent: the protagonist is wounded and on his deathbed. In type C it is important to introduce the primary death as a fact, but there is no interest in elaborating the details of this event. The emphasis is shifted from the cause of the primary death (of the male character) to the effect of the latter on others (female characters), placing it on the response family members to the primary death. This entails a shift of interest from the male world, identified with activities such as hunting/warfare, to the female world of home, family and kinship relations (mother-son and wife-husband). The primary death therefore assumes the function of triggering a drama focused on a female character and culminating in the latter's death. This points to a clearly feminine perspective involving feminine tasks: maintaining family unity and stability, securing offspring, dealing with emotional dimensions of kinship relations.

3. Ballad poetics in “The Hidden Death”

Type C approaches the primary death as the opening of a subsequent drama evolving in terms of cognition. Namely, the primary death appears as a relationship between referent (dead husband) and multiple signs (bells tolling, women weeping, etc.); then the first referent is replaced by a second false one, whereby death is *concealed*; then there is a reversal to the first

referent, whereby death is *revealed*; the revelation of the truth (death of husband) causes the secondary death (death of wife).

To show the difference between the structure of the primary and secondary story, it is useful to have in mind the distinction between two types of motifs – dynamic and static – as defined by Boris Tomashevsky in his *Theory of Literature* (Tomashevsky, 1972: 256)³. Narration is developed by the use dynamic motifs that are defined not as denoting any action, but more specifically action producing a significant change in the relationship between the characters. These changes marked by dynamic motifs move the story/narrative forward. In addition, dynamic motifs are connected by a cause-effect relationship.

The primary story in the ballad of the *Hidden Death* consists of three dynamic motifs: the drawing of an overt or implied “contract” between the male protagonist and the water nymph, the breaching of the latter, and the resulting death (punishment) of the transgressor. When the first two dynamic motifs are suppressed, the narrative structure is reduced to a single situation motif: the male protagonist has died of a cause that is not elaborated (of wounds sustained in hunting/battle, both activities implying competition, conflict and violence). This is the opening situation. Then the ballad introduces a set of static motifs, all referring to the primary death as signs of the latter, presented as references/signs in the direct speech conducted by two female characters that have not witnessed the primary death. The dialogue between mother and wife deals with the *interpretation* of the signs and their deliberated misinterpretation by the mother wishing to conceal her son’s death. Finally, the only dynamic motif, the one that causes the death of the wife, is her cognition of the truth (the primary death), and this is a highly emotional cognitive event. Therefore, type C structure consists of three segments: the opening situation (the narrator introduces the primary death as a fact), the concealment of the primary death (in the dialogue), the revelation of the latter (also in the dialogue), and the closing situation (the narrator reports the secondary death). The narrator’s role is to present the opening and closing situation i.e. the two deaths. The drama, however, is developed in the dialogue, and its protagonist is information.

The middle segment is the most interesting one in terms of poetics. It is “interposed” between the two death events. It dramatizes cognition by employing two techniques: dialogue as direct speech involving two characters engaged in it and parallelism as a structural principle. Dialogue is important because it allows for the treatment of primary death as *information* availa-

³ Tomashevsky is quoted from the Serbian translation of his study on the theory of literature as both the original Russian and the English translation were unavailable to the author.

ble to one character (the mother), but not to the other (the wife). While the opening segment presents death as an event (action), the dialogue presents it as a series of *signs*: the absence of the husband (when he should be present), the tolling of bells (sad, as if associated with a funeral), people weeping, lit candles, freshly moved earth on the grave, etc. The dramatic build-up occurs due to the deliberate misinterpretation of these signs in *communication* (dialogue) between mother and wife. Although the narrator could present the signs of death in his narration (indirect speech), they are presented in the mother-wife dialogue as topics of the question-answer series. This kind of presentation is necessary because it enables the deliberate misinterpretation of the signs. This stresses the crucial role of dialogue in the structuring of the drama. The second technique is parallelism i.e. repetition involving variation, contrast and ultimate opposition (between life as illusion and death as fact). The questions posed by the wife refer to sign's of her husband's death as the question-answer pattern is repeated several times. The answers involve substitutions that generate a set of contrasts: the toll of bells indicates the death of "a beggar", *not* that of the husband (substitution of person), or the husband is absent because "he has gone to the woods with his horses and hounds", *not* because he has died (substitution of status of person). In this way the signs are dissociated from their referent (death of the husband) as their true meaning is disguised in ambiguity. This highlights the main opposition – between true and false, between facts and their interpretation. Parallelism involving repetition, variation, substitution and contrast is used to dramatize the emotional response to death when it finally occurs. What it dramatizes is the *realization of death* – the key event in the secondary story.

4. Semantic oppositions: weddings and funerals

As mentioned above, in some versions the protagonists of the two stories are husband and wife, while in others they are groom and bride. The latter combination highlights two important and semantically opposed rituals in the life of a family: the wedding and the funeral. It is interesting to note that in some cultures, in the Balkan traditions for example, the two are often connected. In the old Serbian tradition the merry wedding songs performed at the moment the groom's procession comes to pick up the bride to take her to his house (where the wedding is to be celebrated), the mother of the bride performs laments as if her daughter has died. Death in this case is symbolical: the bride "dies" in her own family in order to be "reborn" in the family of her husband. It is the passage from status of daughter to status of daughter-in-law, involving the severance of her ties with her own family followed by the

establishment of ties with the in-laws (Vidaković-Petrov, 1994). Just as Serbian wedding songs include these specific laments, funeral laments include motifs typical of wedding songs. If the deceased was a young unmarried man, the custom was to present his departure for burial as a departure for a wedding (Vidaković-Petrov, 1989: 102, 109–110). The “posthumous wedding” is known in many traditions, especially in Slavic traditions, including Serbian (Đokić, 1998).⁴ The association of wedding and funeral is also reflected in Serbian ballads, where the death of a young man is sometimes rendered metaphorically as his marriage to a bride in a distant land, the latter indicating “the other world” (the habitat of the dead) or, more concretely, as his marriage to the “earth” (perceived as a feminine entity).⁵ In the Danish version of *The Hidden Death*, where the protagonists are groom and bride, we find the same association of wedding and funeral: the bride’s company arrives in expectation of a wedding celebration while the groom’s family is preparing his funeral. In these versions the dramatic contrast is stronger than in versions in which the protagonists are husband and wife and it even seems, considering the precursor of the ballad and some of its oldest versions, that the original combination might have been groom-bride rather than husband-wife. By opting for the second combination the Hispanic versions have shifted the emphasis, devising a new explanation of why it is necessary to delay the revelation of the truth to the wife for “one year and a day”.

5. Characters and gender

The main protagonist of the primary story is always a male character. The primary story implies a symbolic division of space with interesting gender implications. First of all, there is the *interior* space identified with society and family (as a social unit based on kinship relations). In traditional society this space is regulated by the dominant male order that relegates women to a secondary status. This is the space of “the cooked” – culture – as opposed to the “raw” realm of the natural and supernatural. In second place is the *exterior* space positioned outside the realm of society and family. It is perceived

4 “This pattern was known among all Slavs and other peoples which means it belongs to the oldest layers of ritual practice” (Đokić, 1998: 136). The comparative study of Slavic and Hispanic folklore is very rare. Some analogies in funeral traditions are discussed in Vidaković-Petrov, 2007: 11–43, including the obligatory joyful dancing around the coffin of a deceased (young unmarried) woman during the wake; this Galician custom was considered as “a reminiscence of the pagan past”.

5 In the Serbian language the grammatical gender of the word *zemlja* (“earth”) is feminine. Traditionally, earth is perceived as a feminine entity.

as a “wilderness” outside the control of culture. It is populated by natural as well as supernatural beings that can and do interfere in the life of humans, especially if the latter do something to displease them. The boundary between the natural and supernatural world in special terms is often marked by running water as a visible sign of liminality: water flowing between two banks marks the boundary that simultaneously connects and separates two worlds.

The primary story of the ballad evolves as an opposition between two gender-marked characters and in two spaces (*interior-exterior*). In this conflict it is the female/exterior principle that overpowers the male protagonist. This is so because the control he exerts within society is invalid in the *exterior* space. Among the supernatural beings that control the supernatural world in *exterior* space are female entities such as water nymphs. Unlike their female counterparts bound by the male dominated social/cultural order, these women are free, powerful, uncontrollable and dangerous. Yet such female power is *only* possible outside the realm of society and culture. Versions considered less archaic transform or substitute the *exterior* space in which the encounter takes place, so the woods are no longer the scene of an encounter of the protagonist with a female supernatural being, but that of his encounter with a wild beast. However, the negative semantic marker of the protagonist’s endeavor is preserved as he returns from hunting empty-handed and wounded. In still other versions, the forest is transformed into a battlefield where he is wounded by a human enemy. Both hunting and warfare are typical male activities implying conflict, and while in the archaic primary story the conflict is a match of power between two worlds (*interior-exterior*) and genders (male-female), warfare suggests a more realistic environment in which a female protagonist has no role to play because in the real world of traditional society women were restricted to the realm of family.

Unlike the nymph in the primary story, the women in the secondary story (mother and wife) bear a positive marker as protectors of the social and family order dominated by the husband – head of the household and father authority. The wife assumes the role of victim of the husband’s death, appearing in the secondary story as a passive character quite in compliance with the dominant social order that puts her in a position of dependence on her husband as well as her mother-in-law. Versions containing only the secondary story and no trace of the supernatural female character of the primary story are in fact a clear confirmation of the male dominant order of traditional society. In this sense they are less archaic i.e. more modern.

Finally, one must keep in mind that in some versions of the *Hidden Death*, as mentioned above, the antagonist in the primary story is not a female character at all, but a entity of the highest order – death itself. The appearance of death (a beast) as a participant of the “mythical combat” (hunt taking place in the woods) is interpreted by Catalan as a pre-Christian element of this ballad, subsequently marginalized and abolished (in the French tradition), as the narrative was subsequently “adapted to the post-mythical world” (Catalan: <http://cuestadelzarzal.blogia.com/temas/ii.-la-muerte-ocultada>).⁶

However, the versions that feature a female antagonist in the primary story are actually more interesting because they highlight the feminine perspective, contrasting two aspects of the female status: one eluding the control of male dominated culture/society (the female antagonist) and another completely controlled by the latter (the mother and wife).⁷

6. Structural analogues

In type A of the ballad known in the Hispanic tradition as the *Hidden Death*, the bride dies on hearing the news that her beloved is deceased. Her death is presented merely as a statement in one or two lines. In another Hispanic ballad called *Childbirth in a Distant Land* we find the same motif in a slightly expanded form. In this ballad the mother is traveling in a hurry to reach her daughter who lives in “a distant land” before expected childbirth. As she is approaching, she hears bells. The mother asks for whom the bells are tolling and is told it is for a young woman who just died at childbirth. In both examples these motifs play a secondary role unlike type C of the *Hidden Death* where the concealment and revelation of the primary death have assumed a central role in the structuring of the text.

It is interesting, however, that the same type C structure is found in ballads probably genetically unrelated to the ballad of the *Hidden Death* and in traditions fairly distant from the Western European arena. We have in mind the Serbian tradition in the Balkans. One such example is *The Death*

6 The same point is highlighted by Mariscal de Rhett: “En el caso de *La muerte ocultada*, la crítica está de acuerdo en considerar al gwerz armoricano como punto de partida de la tradición peninsular y a la balada francesa como punto intermedio en la línea directa de derivación que va del gwerz al romance español” (Mariscal de Rhett, 1984–1985: 55). However, the emphasis in our article is on structural types rather than on genesis and “derivational lines”.

7 The feminine perspective in this ballad is extremely interesting and will be given due consideration in an expanded version of this article that will include various aspects that could not be discussed in full here due to limited space. The feminine perspective is partially discussed in our article Vidaković-Petrov, 2014.

of *Sekula's Mother*.⁸

The latter is a *bugarštica* defined as a narrative song or ballad using the so-called long meter consisting of fifteen or sixteen syllables with a compulsory break (7+8 or 8+8) and often a refrain.⁹ Among the characters in this ballad are two historical figures: Janosh Hunyadi (1387–1456) known in Serbian folksongs as Janko, and his nephew Janosh Sekelyi known as Sekula.¹⁰ However, the main protagonist is a woman – Sekula's mother, known under various names, one of them being Rude, as she is referred to in this ballad. Unlike narrative folksongs focusing on the heroic aspect of the Hunyadi biographies, the ballad of *The Death of Sekula's Mother* shifts the emphasis to the emotional dimension of death. Nonetheless, by naming the two male characters as Janko and Sekula as well as specifying the Kosovo battlefield as the scene of death, the ballad draws into itself connotations of crucial historical events regarding the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans. The identities of the protagonists implicitly provide an explanation of the manner in which Sekula died (killed in battle), while the scene of death (Kosovo) anchors the ballad story in a high profile historical drama. However, the drama presented by the ballad unfolds after the epic battle; its protagonist is not a male warrior, but a woman/mother; and her own death results from the sudden confrontation with the death of her son. The ballad is a reference to the post-Kosovo

8 There are more ballads in the Serbian tradition that are related to the *Hidden Death* and this is a topic for our further comparative study of European and Serbian ballads. An early attempt to explore the possible Serbian analogues of the *Hidden Death* was that of Hersart de la Villemarqué (author of *Barzaz-Breiz. Chants populaires de la Bretagne*, Paris in 1923), whose work is briefly discussed in Mariscal de Rhett, 1984–1985: 47. Villemarqué suggested the Serbian “Kraljević Marko i vila brodarica” was an analogue of the *Hidden Death*; however, the Serbian song lacks the key motif of the “hidden death” and cannot be interpreted as an analogue of this particular European ballad.

9 The *bugaršticas* date from the 15th to the 18th century and are generally distinguished from the much more numerous songs – epic, lyrical and ballads – using the decasyllable meter which has maintained its dominance in the Serbian oral tradition to this day. For more information on these songs and the English translation of *The Death of Sekula's Mother* quoted in this article see John D. Miletich, *The Bugarštica. A Bilingual Anthology of the Earliest Extant South Slavic Folk Narrative Song*, edition, verse translation, introduction and bibliography J. S. Miletich, “Foreword” by A. B. Lord, “Afterword” by S. G. Armistead (Miletich, 1990).

10 Hunyadi was a Hungarian nobleman based in Transylvania, who fought and lost a battle against the Ottomans at Kosovo in 1448, almost sixty years after the first Battle of Kosovo in 1389 between the Serbian army and the Ottomans. The Serbian vassal ruler of the Serbian region Djurdj Branković refused to participate in the second battle of Kosovo based on his (correct) assessment that the military campaign against the Ottomans was ill-advised. Hunyadi's nephew died in Kosovo, but Hunyadi himself withdrew. Later he managed to reorganize his army and win the battle of Belgrade fought in 1456. However, due to plague and disease spreading among his army Hunyadi died several months later. Hunyadi's son Mathias Corvinus later became the King of Hungary. Janosh Hunyadi and his nephew appear as protagonists of a number of Serbian epic folksongs, where they are known as Sibinyanin Janko and Sekula.

situation of mourning for the dead in a tragedy of national proportions.

The character functions is analogous in *The Hidden Death* and *The Death of Sekula's Mother* belong to the same paradigm, although the latter features certain substitutions regarding the performers of the functions: the protagonist of the primary death is a son/nephew (Sekula); the protagonist of the secondary death is the mother of Sekula (Rude), while the intermediary conducting the “dialogue” with the mother is Sekula’s uncle (Janko).

In *The Death of Sekula's Mother* the primary death is introduced as information communicated in a dialogue between Rude and Janko. However, since the two are located in different places, the dialogue is conducted as an exchange of letters, whose contents are quoted in the ballad in the form of direct speech. The mother asks her brother Janko to release Sekula from his military duties, so he could come home to celebrate his wedding. Janko responds that Sekula has already married in Kosovo, where he has built Sekula “a white court” and in front of it “a white tomb”. He also says Sekula has made “a truly humble match” (Miletich, 1990: 105–108).¹¹ The information on the primary death is deliberately encoded or hidden in a metaphor whose meaning is ambiguous. Sekula’s mother misses its true meaning, Sekula’s death, because she is psychologically tuned to the expectation of celebrating his wedding. She is “cheered” at the news that her son has married and sets off to Kosovo with wedding gifts and servants carrying “drums and trumpets”. On reaching Kosovo, the servants (secondary characters playing the role of intermediaries), knowing the truth, attempt to warn her: “Sound not the trumpets or the drums, / But look across the level field, / Young widow, / And try to see your son’s white court!” She notices a white building in the distance, swiftly spurs her steed and reaches a monastery with monks inside (additional intermediaries) “saying vespers there”. When they come out she asks them who built the monastery. They reply it was Janko, who also built the tomb in which he buried Sekula. She asks them to open it and realizing it is her son’s grave, she dies. The realization of the primary death happens not in a dialogue, as in *The Hidden Death*, but as a decoding of the death sign from Janko’s letter in a confrontation with its true referent. Therefore, the ballad of *The Death of Sekula's Mother* evolves from encoding the information on the primary death into image (sign) to its decoding. The encoding-decoding is a two-way process leading from referent to image (disguising death) and then back to referent (revealing death). The revelation of death is

¹¹ This is the English translation of the Serbian original that reads that he has married *jednu prepuklu sirotu*. It is difficult, if not impossible, to convey the connotations of this expression in another language. *Sirota* means poor, destitute, needy, meagre. *Prepukla* means broken – from pressure, stretching, draught – and is often used to describe the dry, cracked earth as well as a heart “broken” by grief.

presented as a physical experience i.e. literal contact of the mother with the “black earth” in which her dead son has been buried. So, here we see how a metaphor: the death of a young man presented as his “marriage” to a “bride” identified with the earth of the grave. The latter metaphor is typically found in another genre of the Serbian tradition – the lament, when it refers to a young unmarried man. In the lament the metaphor is expressed in the manner the deceased is dressed for burial, which is the apparel of a groom prepared for the wedding ceremony. However, it is also found in a number of Balkan ballads relying on the symbolic connection between two social events – weddings and funerals.¹² The connection is clearly expressed in traditional Serbian wedding laments referring to the bride’s passage from her own family to that of her inlaws.

Despite the fact that the main protagonists of the primary and secondary stories are not groom/husband or bride/wife, the *bugarštica* has found a perfect way of using the semantically antithetic wedding-funeral motifs. With respect to this shift in the characters (mother-son instead of wife-husband) it is of interest to note the refrain that refers to the mother of Sekula as a “young widow”. In other words, she is both *young* and a *widow*, which is incongruous with the expectation of a mother, not particularly young, dealing with the death of her son rather than husband. This invites speculation on the possibility that there might have been an older ballad that dealt with a young wife unaware that she has become a “young widow”. However, we have no evidence that such a ballad, a South Slavic version of *The Hidden Death*, existed.

Nonetheless, its hypothetical existence provides a missing link (intermediary) between the well-documented European tradition of *The Hidden Death* and the South Slavic text of *The Death of Sekula’s Mother*. The protagonists of the hypothetical intermediary would have been a husband (primary death) and a wife (secondary death), the latter fitting perfectly the image of the “young widow” from the *bugarštica* refrain. Due to the overwhelming resonance of the two Kosovo battles in the popular imagination of the Balkan region, this intermediary could have been reinterpreted in compliance with the historical background of the Kosovo battles. This would have been done by introducing two changes. One was the identification of anonymous protagonists with historical figures of the Hunyadi family. This would allow the ballad to draw into its semantic field references to relatively recent history

12 In his commentary of the *bugarštica* songs, S. G. Armistead points out that the concept of death as a marriage to the grave is a “vastly diffused motif in Balkan balladry”. Quoting Otto Schrader’s *Totenhochzeit* (Jena, 1904), he points out that it is of ancient origin, but “particularly” widespread in Slavic traditions (Armistead, 1990: 329–330).

or history as preserved in collective memory. The second change consists of replacing the relationship wife-husband with that of mother-son. This is a very important shift. Considering these two relationships – wife-husband and mother-child – the latter seems more important because the bond is not only social, but also biological. The mother-child relationship ultimately invokes the fundamental Christian image of the Virgin grieving over Christ after crucifixion (La Pietá). At the same time it moves the mother figure into a central position. In the context of historical events such as those associated with Kosovo, the collective tragedy – loss of massive numbers of young unmarried men (soldiers) – might have been a factor encouraging the focus on the mother-son relationship and the wedding-funeral images present in traditional laments.

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