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***Walled-in Wives, Dragon's Brides, and Wild Fairies:
Women in the Bulgarian Folk Tradition***

Introduction

During the Ottoman invasion of Bulgaria (1393-1877) folklore remained the most important repository of the Bulgarian spirit – it both preserved and sustained Bulgarian cultural identity throughout the five-century occupation. On the other hand, the lawlessness of the Ottoman rule and the numerous atrocities committed by the Turks inspired a set of folk songs and legends, narratives of forceful conversion, abduction, rape, and manslaughter. Perhaps the most harrowing Bulgarian folk song, “Mountaineer Iovo” (Balkandzhi Iovo), tells of Iovo who refuses to surrender his beautiful sister Iana to the Turkish faith. After his first refusal to give up Iana, the Turks chop off his two hands. When he refuses again, they cut off his two legs. After his third refusal, they poke out his eyes and take Iana. Iovo’s words to the Turkish captain constitute the refrain repeated three times in the song: “Hey, Captain, I will give my head / But I will not give up Iana to the Turkish faith.”¹

In “Mountaineer Iovo” as well as in other folk songs from the period of Ottoman captivity the Bulgarian woman’s beauty and virtues seal her fate as a victim of the Turkish cruelty. However, many Bulgarian folk songs present the Bulgarian woman as wielding a fantastic power – perhaps as a testament to her ability to endure and transcend the limitations of national, historical, and political circumstances, and to become a symbol of loyalty, permanence, and survival. The woman in Bulgarian folklore becomes the vital binding element, the force that ensures an outlasting order in the human world; she is also a magical creature that may test or aid men’s power; last but not least, she is seen as a chosen one, a mediator between the earth and the sky, the natural and the supernatural. At present, I will discuss three important images of women that populate Bulgarian folk songs, beliefs, and legends: the walled-in wife, the wild fairy, and the dragon’s bride.

The Walled-in Wife (Vgradena Neviasta)

The Bulgarian folk song or ballad of the “Walled-in Wife” narrates the story of a young woman’s sacrifice to ensure the successful construction of a large building such as a church, bridge, house, or fountain. The ballad is based on the folk belief that the walling-in, that is, the immurement of a woman within the foundation of a construction site, will secure the building’s future durability and permanence. For instance, “Struna the Bride” (Struna Neviasta), one variation of the ballad, tells the story of three brothers-builders, who are in the process of constructing a citadel. However, their work is mysteriously undone every night and they cannot

¹ The original is “More voivodo, glava si davam, / Iana ne davam na Turska vera.” The text of the song can be found in Bulgarian and in English translation in Thomas Butler, Monumenta Bulgarica, Michigan Slavic Publications, 1966, pp. 542-543.

finish the citadel until a woman is sacrificed. The brothers agree that whoever of their wives comes first to the construction site in the morning will be walled in. The two elder brothers, however, warn their wives, who stay away from the construction. The youngest brother keeps his promise and does not inform his nursing wife, who then becomes the victim. As his bride nears the site, the youngest brother is devastated but remains true to his word. He pretends to have dropped his wedding ring within the unfinished walls and asks his wife to recover it for him. She is subsequently immured. At the end of the folk song, the young mother makes a request that reveals her double role as a mother and a unifying, stabilizing force that will sustain both the construction and her suckling-son:

Take away the stones on the right side
on the right side of the fair citadel
so I can feed my little child –
feed my little child fresh milk.¹

The plot of the walled-in bride raises a number of questions about the role and representation of women in the Bulgarian folk tradition. Bulgarian folklorist Lyubomira Parpulova-Gribble has collected and examined 180 versions of the walled-in wife.² All the songs she has studied invariably share important elements. The song always features a man-husband-brother-builder, a woman-wife-mother (nursing mother), and a child-son-suckling. The construction cannot be completed unless it is reinforced through a supporting and unifying force that requires the sacrifice of the woman-victim. The immured woman provides the necessary unifying element and the building is completed successfully. Hence, a certain affinity emerges between the wife's body and the success of her husband's or brother's work.

Notably, the body of the woman ensures the stability and wholeness of a man-made construction – a powerful image that hints at the pagan layer of Bulgarian folklore. Mircea Eliade has suggested that the plot of the ballad might be based on some cosmogonic legends about the creation of the world from a primordial female body. Russian folklorist L. Baiburin has contended that on the plane of semantics, constructed sacrifice evokes the whole complex of beliefs about the sacrosanctity of the house, the possibility to “derive” it from the body of the victim, and the structural equivalence between the house and the order of the world.³ Indeed, Bulgarian folklore envisions the creation of the world from a woman's body: the eyes of a dead fairy (samodiva) become lakes, her body grows into a tree, her hair, into clover. In Bulgarian cosmogony a woman's body both creates the world and maintains its stability in a way that implies that the Bulgarian woman occupied an important place in the ordering of the family, the house, and the universe. Her power to create, hold, and perpetuate emerges from her literal and symbolic role as the “keystone” in a building. As its merges with the foundation, the woman's immured or walled-in body becomes a unifying, binding material.

Some variants of the walled-in wife exemplify another aspect of woman's life – her passage from childhood into marriage and motherhood. Significantly, the woman in the ballad is a new bride or a nursing mother. Parpulova-Gribble has suggested that the marriage theme underlying the ballad can be traced to Bulgarian wedding songs, which present the bride-to-be as a “maiden in a tower” and in terms of her ritual separation (imprisonment within a building, immurement) before the marriage and subsequent symbolic destruction of the confining walls as she is released and integrated into her new family. As the walled-in wife becomes the building block and lays the foundation of a new order, a new family, or a new cosmos, so does she engender and maintain the lasting life of a building. Finally, the relevance of marriage to the plot and symbolism of the “walled-in wife” is manifest in the figure of the child-suckling, present in

many variations of the ballad. After the nursing mother is immured, her milk begins to trickle from the construction site to feed the child. The figure of the child perhaps refers to the folk belief that a marriage is not complete until the delivery of the first baby, or to the ritual separation of the mother and the child after the delivery.

The ballad of the walled-in wife has captivated the creative imagination of Bulgarian poets, who have explored the rich potential of its haunting plot. Petko Slaveikov, one of Bulgaria's most prominent nineteenth century writers, has used the motif of the walled-in wife in his narrative poem "The Spring of the White-Legged Woman." The poem tells of Gergana, a beautiful Bulgarian girl, who bravely stands up to a Turkish vizier to defend her native land, her family, and ultimately, her free will. Astonished by her loyalty, the Turkish vizier orders a fountain to be built to commemorate Gergana's courage. However, the builders of the fountain immure Gergana. Ironically, Gergana's sacrifice ensures the durability of her own fountain-memorial, dedicated to her astounding moral and physical beauty. Slaveikov's enchanting character of the immured girl has become an epitome of the Bulgarian woman's beauty and virtue.

To conclude, both scholarly studies of the origins of the "walled-in wife" and literary recreations of the folk song illuminate the woman's significance in Bulgarian folklore. She is envisaged as a kind of living "keystone" – a creative and unifying element not only in the construction process but also in the constructive role of the family, the house, and the Bulgarian folk universe. A woman's body solidifies and preserves the man-made bridge, church, or fountain. Hence, the woman's sacrifice becomes an act of creation and perpetuation of the man-made world. Despite her immurement, the walled-in wife is endowed with a mythical, primordial power to partake in life even beyond her death.

The Wild-Fairy (Samodiva, Samovila, Vila)

At the Quidditch World Cup in J. K. Rowling's book Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Harry Potter is struck with the Bulgarian team's mascots, the enthralling *veela*:

But a hundred veela were now gliding out onto the field, and Harry's question was answered for him. Veela were women. . . the most beautiful women Harry had ever seen. . . except that they weren't - they couldn't be - human. This puzzled Harry for a moment while he tried to guess what exactly they could be; what could make their skin shine moon-bright like that, or their white-gold hair fan out behind them without wind. . . but then the music started, and Harry stopped worrying about them not being human - in fact, he stopped worrying about anything at all.

The veela had started to dance, and Harry's mind had gone completely and blissfully blank. All that mattered in the world was that he kept watching the veela, because if they stopped dancing, terrible things would happen.

And as the veela danced faster and faster, wild, half-formed thoughts started chasing through Harry's dazed mind. He wanted to do something very impressive, right now. Jumping from the box into the stadium seemed a good idea. . . but would it be good enough?⁴

In this passage British writer J. K. Rowling describes very accurately the figure of the Bulgarian wild-fairy, which appears in Bulgarian folklore under three different names – *samodiva*,

samovila, and *vila*, depending on the geographic region. This wild fairy is called *samodiva* in Western Bulgaria, *samovila* and *vila* in Eastern and Southern Bulgaria. It is precisely this last one, the *vila*, that J. K. Rowling has used (*veela*) to depict the exotic supernatural women supporting the Bulgarian quidditch team. In fact, she has captured well the essence of these mythical female creatures.

Unlike the walled-in wife, whose body sustains the unity and integrity of the cosmos, the *samodiva* is a wild, independent creature of mythical power, who sometimes wreaks havoc in man's ordered life. She represents the free, untamed spirit necessary to maintain the balance in the universe. Bulgarian folk songs portray the *samodiva* as a beautiful woman with blond hair reaching up to her waste, clad in floating white, transparent robes. These wild fairies possess the power to fly but they might also ride deer or winged horses. The *samodiva* usually carries a whip of snakes as well as bow and arrows. Her power resides in her garments, more specifically, in her girdle or comb.⁵ The wild fairies are believed to inhabit forests, mountains, rivers and lakes in the spring and summer. According to folk belief, they can stir up the elements, causing strong winds and storms at sea; they live at the end of the world, in the golden palace of the Sun.⁶

The *samodiva* is a nocturnal creature, willful and capricious, fond of dancing and bathing. She comes out at night to play the line dance (*horo*) under old trees. The site of the fairies' line dance is designated as their playground and is avoided by mortals. If a mortal happens to step on the *samodiva*'s playground, he or she falls ill until the fairy is appeased through offerings such as a loaf of bread, a horseshoe, a pot of honey, or a bunch of basil, tied with a red string. The *samodiva* does not only dance at night but she also bathes in the forest lakes or rivers. When she bathes, she takes off her white garments thus relinquishing her power for the duration of the bath. Folk songs often tell of a shepherd capturing a *samodiva* by stealing her robes while she is bathing. Having lost her power, she agrees to marry the shepherd and to bear his children. However, she eventually finds her hidden belt, puts it back on to regain her magical power, and flies away from her home and children never to return. In other words, folk songs depict the *samodiva* as one who cannot be subjugated, domesticated, or contained within a traditional family structure.

She is also competitive and sometimes vengeful. The contest between a shepherd and a *samodiva* is a prominent folk motif, where the fairy challenges a shepherd to play the *kaval* for as long as she dances. Inevitably, the mortal, hence weak, shepherd loses the competition. However, the fairy could befriend a man of prowess (*iunak*); if she happens to nurse a human child, it acquires extraordinary physical strength. Bulgarian folk songs tell of the *samodiva* Dena and of Radka *samodiva*, who befriend heroes and shepherds; of Magda *samodiva*, who protects herb gatherers and healers; of Giura and Dimna, who marry shepherds. These wild fairies from Bulgarian folklore seek and find their equals among men.

The walled-in wife and the *samodiva* represent two opposing but complementary principles. The domestic woman who wields power within the contained world of human society (the microcosm) and the untamed, free woman who commands control over the elements (the macrocosm) both partake in the composition and continuation of the Bulgarian's cosmos. Similarly to the walled-in wife's body, which ensures the stability and permanence of a building, the *samodiva*'s dead body becomes a creative, constructive force as her different body parts form different parts of the natural world.

The Dragon's Bride (Zmeiova Bulka)

The dragon (zmei) occupies a prominent place in Bulgarian folk mythology.⁷ According to folk songs, legends, and tales the dragon is a male winged creature, conceived of as the mediator between the underworld and the heaven, the earth and the sky. In some folk beliefs the sky is carried by two giant dragons, while the earth is encircled by a serpent, who has swallowed its own tale. The dragon has one or three heads, golden wings, his trunk is covered with golden scales, while his tale resembles a snake or a fish tale. Some Bulgarian folk songs describe the dragon as a hybrid creature: a handsome man from the waist up, a snake from the waist down. He easily transforms into an animal, a peacock's feather, or a golden necklace. If a girl finds such a necklace, the dragon falls in love with her and she cannot go away from him.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the dragon mythology is the theme of the dragon's love. Ballads about the dragon's love are never love songs but rather present a haunting account of misfortune and affliction. Bulgarian folklore accords a special place to the woman loved by a dragon or the dragon's bride (*zmeiova bulka*) for she is seen as a mediating figure like the dragon himself. The union between a girl and a dragon is perceived in mystical terms. A dragon's love is considered demonic, a kind of a mysterious fatal sickness that befalls his chosen bride and unsettles her life. Folk songs and tales depict a dragon who falls in love with a mortal girl and abducts her from the village square, where she is dancing the *horo* with her girlfriends. In another folk motif, the dragon visits his bride at night under the guise of a handsome man and stays with her until early morning. The relationship between a dragon and a mortal woman may be consummated. The children of such a union are said to have wings under their arms, to command extraordinary strength and beauty, and to vanquish evil.

But a dragon's love wears out the bride as she suffers a form of what we would now term melancholia or depression. Pale and weary, as if jaded by her fantastic fate, the dragon's bride shies away from people and gradually pines away. On the other hand, she is ostracized from her community to be reintegrated only after she has been released from her condition. A dragon's bride may be healed with herbs or with a potion made of the dragon's scales. In folk mythology the dragon's love obstructs mortal marriage. While she is loved by a dragon, the dragon's bride is not allowed to marry a mortal; as a result, she becomes further alienated and separated from her social environment. If the dragon's bride betrays the dragon with a mortal groom, she dies on her wedding day. The tension between earthly marriage and otherworldly union is underscored in the following excerpt from a folk song from the region of Turnovo:

“You want to marry me off, mother,
but you do not ask me, mother,
whether I can marry or not,
I am, mother, loved by a Dragon.”

A dragon's love is always ambiguous: while it may engender the birth of a hero, it also causes the dragon's bride to languish. The dragon's bride is also an ambiguous, borderline figure – she has been chosen to mediate between the human world and the mythical realm. Through her association with the dragon, she acquires the spatial and symbolic coordinates of above and below, vertical and horizontal as she enacts the physical and spiritual link between the earth and the sky.

In his poem “Dragon” (Zmei), the Bulgarian poet Geo Milev (1895-1925) draws on the folk mythology of the dragon's love and weaves a modernist text of lust, violence, and doom. The poem opens with a line from the folk song quoted earlier, “I am loved, mother, by a Dragon...,” which becomes a mournful prophecy of the girl's fate. The monologue of the

dragon's bride reiterates the isolation, melancholy, and illicit passion that underlie the mystical union with the mythological creature and that are found in Bulgarian folk songs:

Leave me in peace!
 - Burning dragon makes love to me!
 In the middle of flames and rumbling thunders
 - Beastly dragons on white steeds
 Brides of dragons in golden carriages –
 With wings
 Waved
 Wide apart
 Each night
 He flies over to me (lines 1-10)⁸

Conclusion

The walled-in wife, the wild fairy, and the dragon's bride occupy a significant place in Bulgarian folk mythology. These female figures wield a mystical power and participate in the ordering of both the human and the mythical realm. Moreover, they are presented as the active agents in a mystical union with the constructive forces at work in the Bulgarian cosmos.

¹ The text of the song can be found in Bulgarian and in English translation in Thomas Butler, *Monumenta Bulgarica*, Michigan Slavic Publications, 1966, pp. 528-531.

² Lyubormira Parpulova-Gribble, "The Ballad of the Walled-Up Wife: Its Structure and Semantics" in Alan Dundes, ed., *The Walled-Up Bride. A Casebook*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996, pp. 169-184.

³ As cited in *Ibid.*, p. 174-175.

⁴ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, New York: Scholastic Press, 2000, p.103

⁵ See Mercia MacDermott, "Mythology and Demonology" in *Bulgarian Folk Customs*, Philadelphia and London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998.

⁶ See the entry under "samodiva" in Anani Stoinov, ed., *Bylgarska mitologiia: entsiklopedichen rechnik*. Sofia: 1994.

⁷ For a thorough study of the dragon and the dragon's bride see Milena Benovska-Subkova, *Zmeiat v Bulgarskii Folklor*. Sofia: BAN, 1992

⁸ Translated by Polina Dimova, University of California, Berkeley.