

SIN AND PUNISHMENT IN FOLK BALLADS

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Abstract: The value of virginity and the value of wealth are two types of human attitudes in Medieval Age, reflected in folk ballads. Both make conflicts among people and appear in folklore. 1. In the ballad the girl who offers her virginity to deliver the condemned to death is furious, when she realises that her offer was in vain. 2. In the ballad of the heartless mother, in case of danger, the mother leaves the children alone in the woods and runs away with her money.

The specific meaning of ballad text originates from textual context, explained by actions in tragic attitude and by cathartic emotions at the end. Moral issues in ballads are close to the Christian rules, they are understandable in cultural, historical and textual contexts. In ballads the lonely persons stand in the focus of action and the hero/heroine are responsible for their own sin. By strong passion a hero can cause sin. The ethical norms of society are against those who are not obedient.

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Folk ballads are highly varied and it is difficult to make generalisations, but to really get to know the genre we need to analyse concrete examples from a number of angles. One of the themes of this Conference, *Ethics and Moral Issues*, offers a new perspective for this. I would like to discuss the moral attitude that can be found in ballads, their portrayal of sin and punishment and its representation independently of time. (BUCHAN 1972: 207).

A considerable part of the ballads recount individual tragedies which seemingly arise from the behaviour of the individual and from conflict with the expectations of the social environment. Conflict can arise between parent and child, between mother and daughter, between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, between lovers and mother-in-law (BOWRA 1967: 321). Many more examples could be given, but it is only at first sight that these appear to be conflicts between the persons involved: in reality they represent two different forms of social behaviour (BURLASOVA 1998). There is human behaviour behind the conflicts, but the general trends can be perceived and interpreted through the concrete examples. At a given time society accepts only one of the two different mentalities and rejects the other. This is why the ballads are clear and understandable. Through the action someone committed a sin and the consequence of sin is punishment (THOMSON 1962: 129).

I would like to illustrate the relativity of the sin and the objectivity of the punishment through two specific examples. In this connection it should be noted that the sin can only be regarded as sin in a certain context; seen from another angle the same deed is not a sin but part of the socially accepted consensus. The two examples selected express general human emotions and formulate values despite the fact that

the specific subject of the ballad always applies to a particular event and seemingly occurs in historical time. One example involves the sacrifice of virginity and the other focuses on the obligation imposed with the burden of motherhood.

The first concrete example is a Hungarian ballad known throughout the country, near to one thousand variants were noticed (VARGYAS 1983: II. 354). The title of ballad is: The sister of the man condemned to death.



1. László Fehér stole a horse
At the foot of the Black-hill.
His whip cracked so loud
That its sound was heard by the town Gönc.
2. He was taken to merry town Eger
He was thrown into the jail of merry Eger.
Anna Fehér got the news
About her brother having been taken prisoner.
3. At once Anna Fehér went
To the rail of the jail,
Brother, my brother, László Fehér,
Are you alive or are you dead?
I am neither alive nor dead,
I am always thinking of you.
4. Brother, my brother, László Fehér,
Who is the judge here,
Miklós Török is the judge here,
And he is a man worthy of the gallows!

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5. Then she went to the judge,
Right to the desk of the judge.
Judge, judge, honourable judge,
Pray, set free my brother.
I shall measure gold by the bowl,
And silver coins by the bushel.
 6. I do not want your bowl of gold,
Nor your bushel of silver coins.
Spend a night in bed with me
And I shall let him free in a month.
 7. Anna Fehér did not listen to him any longer,
She ran down to the door of the cell.
Brother, my brother, László Fehér
The judge said:
If I spend a night in bed with him
You will be let free in a month.
 8. László Fehér replied:
Don't you spend a night with him in bed!
He will tale your maidenhood,
Yet he will have your brother killed.
 9. Anna Fehér did not listen to him any longer,
She spent a night with him in bed.
At a time around midnight
She heard loud noise of something rattling in the courtyard.
 10. Judge, judge, honourable judge,
What's that rattling in the courtyard?
They are taking my horse to drink at the well,
The bit is rattling in its mouth.
 11. Anna Fehér did not listen to him any longer,
She ran down to the door of the cell.
Brother, my brother, László Fehér,
Are you alive or are you dead?
 12. The jailer spoke up and said:
Don't look for your brother in this place,
Sooner you'll find him at the edge of the wood, in the plain meadow,
On top of the gallows-tree.

13. Judge, judge, you false and faithless judge,
May the righteous Lord be heavy on you!
You have robbed me of my maidenhood,
Yet you had my brother killed!

14. May your washing water turn into blood,
May your towel burst into flames,
May the Lord deny you His grace,
May the Lord deny you His grace!

The theme is found from the 16th century (1578 in Hungarian text) to the present: a woman in a difficult situation submits to the will of a violent man (ZOLNAI 1917: 405). The Hungarian ballad has three actors in general, one is the outlaw who has been imprisoned for stealing a horse and his sister undertakes to free him. The third is the cruel judge, the person who has imprisoned him, the representative of the “authorities”, declares that he will not release him for money but will let him go free in return for the girl’s virginity. The girl trusts the promise and sacrifices her innocence. On the very night this happens her brother is executed. In her anger she curses the man who broke his promise.

The action is simple and has many international parallels. In the different variants the woman is the lover of the condemned man, or his wife, or even a stranger. I shall not deal with these questions as much philological research has been devoted to their comparison. What I would like to stress is that behind the words we can always feel the social significance of virginity which is equivalent to moral purity, innocence, and marital fidelity, but the expression of these values is not given sufficient space, they are expressed only indirectly. The Hungarian ballad mentions only three actors. Everyone is guilty and everyone is punished:

- The horse thief is hanged.
- The girl voluntarily loses her carefully guarded treasure, her virginity, but in vain.
- The third person representing the authorities, who kills his rival, and defiles the girl is cursed with an illness lasting all his life.

The three actors represent three different moral worlds and their aims differ but when their paths cross *it causes conflict and leads to tragedy* (KRÍZA 1991: 37).

The representation of virginity as a value is an accepted fact of late mediaeval and early modern society. For women the status of marriage was linked to virginity. Society condemned those who broke the written rule. Many expressions in linguistic use refer to the moral judgement of society. It is said, for example in a proverb: someone who is no longer a virgin has “lost her maidenhood”. A well known mediaeval custom was the “*ius primae noctis*”. It meant: the serf girls had to spend the first night of their marriage with the landowner or lord. Another mediaeval legal custom related to executions was that an offer of marriage from a virgin could obtain

the release of someone condemned to death. I will not list any more examples, except to add that in bourgeois society among the symbols of marriage, only virgins were entitled to the flower or wreath symbolising clearness and innocence.

The different societies took virginity very strictly in different ways and there were considerable differences between the social strata. The ballad is an extreme example. The surprising choice of theme achieved the effect which evoked the desired response or catharsis.

According to the Hungarian ballad, a horse thief can be ransomed by sacrificing virginity. Who makes the offer and under what circumstances are no doubt of great importance. In this way the woman's social status and the relationship between the thief and the woman influence the deed and the relationship with the man symbolising social justice.

This very transparent, simple ballad came to acquire symbolical significance in the years before the change of the communist regime, precisely because of its moral message. The virginity is acceptable in symbolic meaning. As a musical play composed in 1986 before political changing in socialist countries had the title of *Fehér Anna*, based wholly on folklore elements, it reinterpreted and updated the well known subject containing a mediaeval story. The representatives of the authorities capture a man who has been forced to steal out of need and imprison him to gain advantage for themselves. The starting point simultaneously expresses the social inequality which is the source of the sin. Theft condemned by the community is given a new interpretation in the strict punishment. The size of the crime and the extent of the punishment are not in logical proportion with each other since the authorities wish to set an example to intimidate those who oppose them. The innocent girl symbolises the innocent society, whose greatest value is purity and belief. Everything embodied in the figurative sense of virginity, becomes involved in this power struggle. Two antagonistically opposed sets of values come into conflict. In 1987 the figurative meaning of the staged ballad was seen to be an act of opposition to the communist regime. This is not by chance, since the message of the ballad is much more general than its particular subject.

In the ballad the naive struggle in opposition to the authorities is expressed in the refrains repeated almost to the point of boredom. The musical used artistic means to raise this to a high level. The ballad relates the characteristic feature of the society: the stronger wins, the weak fails but the moral victory goes to the downtrodden. The ballad places great emphasis on the curse that strikes the seeming victor, the man who can be generalised to the point of becoming impersonal.

The curse has a special role in the ballad. In classical antiquity the curse was separate as a genre in the Greek dramas. It was still of significance in the Middle Ages. It is sufficient to think of the consequences of papal excommunication, or of curses by parents in the family, or simply of curses from the enemy and evil omens. The reality and its poetical projection lead to punishment in the ballad.

The tiny symbols find a response in the society where traditional folk culture still lives, where they convey a message for the whole community. In this way the ballad is not just a creation which can be found in books or heard on tape, but is capable of

conveying general human emotions and influencing contemporary culture with its message. The curse is one kind of the protection against the power.

Putting attention to the sin in modern society, it is possible to understand why the folk ballad with old topics became popular. Here is the other example. It concerns the conscious acceptance of motherhood. The title of the ballad is: The heartless mother.



1. Ilona Budai was leaning out of her window,
She receives news of enemy looting in the neighbourhood.
She thinks at once of her jewel case,
She takes her jewel case under her arm.

5. She led her pretty daughter on her right hand,
She took her bonny son on her left hand,
She is walking, walking, walking through a thick pine forest,
Along a desolate path in dark forest.
Aye, she thinks she hears the drumming of horses' hoofs.

10. And forthwith she puts down her little daughter.
Her pretty daughter spoke up, weeping:
Mother, dear mother, do not leave me back on the way,
Let your heart take pity on me, do not leave me here!
I do leave you here, my daughter,

15. For God gives me daughter instead of a daughter,
But God does not restore my money for nothing!
She is walking, she is walking through the thick pine forest,
Along the desolate path in dark forest.
Aye, she thinks she hears the drumming of horses' hoofs.

20. And forthwith she puts down her little son.
Her bonny son spoke up weeping:
Mother, dear mother, do not leave me back on the way,
Let your heart take pity on me, do not leave me here!
I do leave you here, my son,

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25. For God gives son instead of a son,
But God does not restore my money for nothing!
She is walking, she is walking through the thick pine forest,
On the desolate path in the dark forest,
And she arrives at a beautiful, spacious meadow.
30. Aye, there was a caw-buffalo coming down there,
Carrying her this year's calf between her horns,
And mooing to her last year's calf to follow.
This beholding, Ilona Budai!
Cast herself down upon the ground and began to weep with bitter tears.
35. Weeping with bitter tears, she blamed herself:
A callous beast will not forsake her calf,
My God, My God, my dear God,
How could I, a soulful creature forsake my child?!
With this, she turned back on her way in the thick pine forest.
40. On the desolate path in the dark forest,
She soon reached the place and extending her hand
She began to call her bonny son,
Aye, I will not go, for you have not been a true mother to me!
Had you been a true mother, you would not have left me here!
45. She is walking, she is walking through the thick pine forest,
On the desolate path through the dark forest,
She soon reached the place and extending her hand,
She began to call her pretty daughter with many a kind word.
Aye, I will not go for you have not have been a true mother to me.
50. Had you been a true mother, you would not have left me here!
When she heard these words, she began to cry:
I am like a tree by the road,
Anyone passing may break down my twigs,
Anyone may break my twigs and tread them into the mud!
(KRIZA 1911: 585).

The ballad was collected with only some variants, exclusively in Transylvania or in Moldavia (both belong today to Romania.). Oddly, in the wake of the folklore revival numerous new recordings and performances have appeared in the last two decades (VARGYAS 1983. II: 88). The phenomenon speaks for itself and is the reason why I have chosen this from the many examples available. The subject of the ballad can be summed up briefly. A woman flees from her persecutors, taking her children and her treasures with her. After a while she grows tired, puts the children

down and continues with the money, saying: For God will give me a son for a son, But God will not restore my treasure at all. In her flight she meets a cow carrying its calves and realises that in time of trouble even the animals rescue their offspring first of all. She returns to her abandoned children but they reject their mother and she is left alone.

Research so far has shown that the ballad contains a theme of mediaeval origin and is characteristic of a society where interest in money has come to be placed above traditional values. The ballad was found only sporadically in Hungarian oral tradition in the 19th century but it has been made fashionable by new performances. Through settings and its inclusion in the school books its role increased and it has now become an integral part of the repertoire of folklore singers.

Motherhood, which lost its role played in traditional culture in the 20th century, appeals to listeners through the example of sin and punishment. Every element of the simple text has symbolical meaning. The ballad does not give the identity of the enemy driving the woman out of her home. (The enemy could be anyone or anything.) The woman flees to the forest (also a symbolical place) and tells the children she is abandoning that the beasts of the forest will give them food, the rain will wash them and the wind will comb their hair. The ballad uses repetition to stress the conscious action (the fact that in her difficult situation the mother chooses the treasure rather than her children). She bids farewell to her son and daughter with harsh words that give the listener a cathartic experience. The sin that the mother commits cannot be made good; she returns to the starting point in vain, there is no return in the figurative sense. The ballad makes it clear that parenthood is not an object that can be put down and then picked up again when the occasion arises, but is an unbreakable bond. The sin committed once is followed by punishment lasting forever.

Sin is not an accidental deed, but the result of a conscious decision. The mother knew that she should not abandon her children, but justifies her decision with her difficult situation and so she has to accept the punishment. Naturally, external factors can play a part in evoking the conflict, but in the given situation it is the individual who decides and bears the responsibility and the consequences. The ballad shows that the punishment lasts for a lifetime.

As a conclusion I have to stress: in this respect the ballad shares a common feature with the world view of the ancient Greek tragedies. In simple textual form the ballad is capable of doing something that we know only from the best dramas: through the fate and emotions of a single person it expresses the appearance of sin, its conscious acceptance and the punishment that inevitably ensues. The moral message of folk ballads is a part of the genre and the many different ballads give many different answers to the moral approach. I have chosen only two of these to show that the portrayal of sin committed by the individual and punishment are inseparable in the folk ballad.

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