

ARTICLES

GENDER AND POWER IN THE BALKAN RETURN SONG

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The return song is a widespread, ancient story rendered most famously in Homer's *Odyssey*.¹ The *Odyssey* tells how the Greek hero Odysseus returns home in disguise finding his household in disarray and his wife Penelope confronted by the suitors whom she has long resisted. He successfully defeats them, rescuing his faithful wife and home. Return songs formed part of a flourishing narrative culture of ancient Greece.² They are also found in places and times far outside of Greek antiquity and in a variety of both prose and poetic genres. A rich culture of return songs comprises part of the oral epic tradition in the Balkans, where the narrative was collected extensively in the 19th and 20th centuries. Even though these epics are only a fraction of the length of the *Odyssey*, the essential return story remains. A hero, absent from home, finds out that his wife is about to remarry. He returns incognito and, through deceptive stories or cunning, tests her fidelity. Recognition takes place and he is reunited with her or kills her if she has been unfaithful. The story applauds human will and fortitude, as well as return and reunion. It celebrates the power and honor of the hero and the virtues and persistence of the heroine, his steadfast wife. The epic extols marriage, family, and community.

In this article, I examine the return song in the Balkans as a socially normative narrative that charts traditional gender roles and behavior. While much has been written especially on the Serbo-Croatian Muslim return song, this research is based largely on compositional and comparative structural analyses, as well as considerations of how oral tradition as a framework informs meaning in the epic (Lord 1951, 1960; J. M. Foley 1990, 1991, 1999). I approach the epic from an alternative angle, exploring how it provides prescriptive roles for men as husbands and patriarchs, as well as

for women as wives, daughters-in-law, and mothers within the traditional social framework of marriage and family. Folktale, one of the forms in which the return narrative has often been expressed,³ is a genre that, as Jack Zipes notes, has “always symbolically depicted the nature of power relationships within a given society” (67). I argue that as a narrative that celebrates marriage and the family, the return song offers a powerful form of social discourse that symbolically reinforces gender hierarchies in the Balkans. Exploiting socially-defined gender roles, the epic endorses strict gender stratification and patriarchal authority. It proclaims the triumph of male privilege and power and the preservation of male honor. Moreover, it exemplifies women whose obeisance and loyalty to patriarchy contribute to social order and cohesion. But the return song also presents counter-examples of the conventional female paragon through the occasional appearance of the unfaithful wife, a woman who momentarily challenges her returning husband’s ego, authority, and honor but is ultimately condemned.

Feminist literary criticism endeavors to portray, illuminate, and at times redefine women’s experience as depicted primarily in narrative literature, often in works that traditionally have been viewed from a largely male point of view. As Lillian Doherty observes, feminist criticism of literature frequently takes two forms: critical and utopian (40). Critical or “closed” feminist readings show how women in literature reflect gender constraints; such readings underscore ways in which male power is imposed on female society. Sheila Murnaghan’s closed or oppositional feminist reading of the *Odyssey*, for example, explores how Penelope’s behavior is prescribed by gendered social circumstances. Indeed, as the most crucial actor in Odysseus’s plot of return, Penelope is paradoxically “not let in on the plot until it is over” (1987b: 118), a condition, Murnaghan argues, that is illuminated by a consideration of gender (1987b). By contrast, utopian or “open” feminist readings seek nuances within literature that allow for new affirmations of identity. An open feminist reading, according to Doherty, is an interpretation that offers “a form of resistance to cultural norms” (12) in its endeavor to reconceive the text; it seeks to “identify openings that undercut ostensible patterns of meaning” in the narrative (23). John J. Winkler’s affirmative feminist reading of Penelope, for instance, is presented “in the light of modern feminist anthropology, which is learning to see the resourcefulness of women in cultures where they had hitherto been reported to be passive victims of male manipulation” (139). Murnaghan, Doherty, Winkler, and other classicists⁴ have focused their readings on the quintessentially canonical *Odyssey*, yet they have done so in distinctly uncanonical and innovative ways: through the depiction, interpretation, and reinterpretation of women’s experience. The *Odyssey* is a masterpiece of poetry and story that presents such a rich display of relations between men and women

of diverse classes and ages that, though composed millennia ago, it lends itself quite naturally to feminist critique.

I approach the return song in its modern, rather brief Balkan form, also from a feminist perspective, exploiting both critical and utopian readings of the narrative and figures within it. I explore, for example, the gendered nature of power relations surrounding the central action: a hero returns home and regains his former position in his marriage and family. These are events that occur in the context of traditional, overtly patriarchal culture and are informed at times by critical or oppositional readings. I also examine “openings” in the return song, reading the epic from a perspective that seeks insight into gender roles within seemingly patterned contexts. The heroine waits continually for her absent husband, for instance, but at times also becomes impatient and ambivalent about his return, providing circumstances and meanings that are articulated through utopian or affirmative readings. Indeed, as orally composed epics, the perpetually changing forms of the return songs in countless performances over time and space (available in written transcriptions) underscore the extent to which open, utopian readings can be effectively employed.

The return song—be it the *Odyssey* or the numerous shorter modern Balkan versions of it—is a narrative that addresses concerns that are of profound significance, namely the survival and continuity of society. Traditional society is sustained by families—social structures that rely not only on obvious male-female marital bonds but also on other crucial gendered pairs (mother/son, daughter-in-law/mother-in-law, and so on). Mirroring this society, the Balkan return songs provide fertile ground for the examination of gender. And, though the return songs reference a traditional world that has long faded in many parts of the Balkans, they provided—and still do, to some extent—forceful metaphors for gender relations that resonate on a variety of levels. It is my goal, then, to provide feminist readings that contribute new and insightful ways of interpreting the Balkan return song.

I suggest that the gender roles promoted in the return song, including both the conventional male hegemony and female deference, as well as the openings that allow for the momentary disruption of this gender hierarchy, provide not only commentary on the social reality of gender relations in marriage and the family, but also a collective understanding of the inherent conflicts that arise when men, women, and other family members live together in challenging situations. The epic presents a set of social norms—assumptions and standards—for gendered behavior in the highly ambiguous situation that the return song depicts (a husband is absent for years on end or is presumed dead while his wife is left at home, sometimes with a child, waiting for his return). The normative dimension of the return song as a charter for conduct in marriage and the family furnishes a powerful

means by which expectations and rules governing behavior in situations of uncertainty and crisis are conveyed. Yet the same narrative also occasionally allows for the violation of this norm, as women step out of passive, victimized roles and momentarily express agency in situations that also speak loudly to the realities of traditional society.

Balkan Return Songs

Oral epic in the South Slavic and Romanian traditions, including Muslim and Christian song, was widespread in the past, though by the late 20th century, the genre—with a few exceptions—had died out. Epic singers in the Balkans were male and accompanied themselves on stringed instruments; in Bulgaria, women also sang, particularly in the 20th century (*Romanska*). Muslim epic was performed by singers whose ancestors converted to Islam during the Ottoman period, mainly in Bosnia. They sang in largely, though not exclusively, male settings, especially in private homes (where audiences could be multi-gendered), as well as in *kafane* (coffee houses) and taverns, frequented mostly by men.⁵ Christian epic was typical in Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia, and Romania; it was performed, by contrast, at family celebrations—especially weddings—and gatherings such as at open-air marketplaces, venues that were by nature multi-gendered. In southern Romania, where epic is still occasionally sung at weddings, singers are professional Romani (Gypsy) musicians who are accompanied by small instrumental ensembles (Beissinger).

While Muslim and Christian epics in the Balkans fundamentally tell the same stories, there are two main differences. The first concerns the ethno-religious orientation of the heroes: in the Muslim epic, Muslim heroes uphold the Ottoman Empire, while Christian epics tell of heroes who are anti-“Turk.” The second is that the Muslim epics are generally longer and more elaborate than the Christian. Despite the overall structural similarity of the return songs, I designate three sub-types:⁶ 1. “Muslim” return songs (in Serbo-Croatian), 2. “Soldier” (Christian) return songs (in Serbo-Croatian, Bulgarian, and Romanian), and 3. “Marko Kraljević” (Christian) return songs (in Serbo-Croatian, Bulgarian, and Romanian). The songs that I have examined are from Bosnia, where singers and epic were Muslim, as well as Serbia, western Bulgaria, and southern Romania, where Orthodox Christian singers performed. They were all collected in the 19th and 20th centuries, including contributions from my own fieldwork.⁷

In the Muslim return songs, the hero is introduced as he languishes in prison. A new prisoner typically arrives who brings word that the hero’s wife will remarry shortly. Upon hearing this, the hero shouts repeatedly in anguish, which becomes so unbearable that he is finally released with a ransom promised to his captor. He journeys home in disguise as a beggar. Once there, he tells deceptive stories of his “own” death in order to check

the loyalty of his family and household. His wife eventually recognizes him and, depending on whether she has remained faithful or not, either joins him, or both she and her suitor are slain. The return sequence sometimes is followed by another narrative, such as the rescue of the hero's young son who has been captured during his absence.

In the Soldier (Christian) return songs, the hero departs to the army (becoming a soldier) soon after his marriage, usually instructing his wife that if he has not returned by a certain number of years, she may remarry. Shortly before or just when the designated time has elapsed, his wife weds again. In many versions, the hero's father, despondent over his daughter-in-law's remarriage, deserts the wedding party and goes to his vineyard to uproot the vines.⁸ Just then the soldier — the hero who remains incognito — arrives there and learns from his father that his wife is about to remarry. He joins the wedding festivities and discloses his identity. His wife responds either by joyfully remarrying him or rejecting him to marry her new love, in which case the hero kills both her and the rival groom.

Marko Kraljević return songs feature the fabled hero Marko Kraljević, a 14th-century vassal of the sultan who paradoxically epitomized Serbian Christendom.⁹ In the return song, Marko is typically inducted into the army or goes to war, leaving his wife at home. He later hears of devastation there or returns, discovering that his household has been pillaged and his wife kidnapped by a local "Turk." Marko disguises himself as a monk and proceeds to the Turk's dwelling where he finds his wife. There he fabricates a story of "Marko's" death. His wife either responds with sadness (demonstrating fidelity) or pleasure (revealing infidelity) and is thus either accepted back by Marko as his wife or killed along with the Turk.

The absence of the hero in the return song mirrors a social reality in the Balkans that continued for centuries, including throughout the 19th and 20th centuries when the epics were collected: men were frequently inducted into the army, fought in wars, or were imprisoned, leaving wives and families at home for considerable periods of time. During my own recent fieldwork, a woman, who grew up in a village in Transylvania, told me that her father went to war in 1941 and disappeared the following year. Her mother finally remarried in 1948, although official word about her first husband's death has still never been confirmed.¹⁰ Or, as the sister (born 1904) of a Bulgarian soldier who fought during World War I recalled, his family and fiancée received no word from him for months on end. Then, as the sister recollected, one day "he came home and we had the wedding, and then he went back again. And he left his bride with us" (Forsyth 60). Likewise, a Serbian villager (born 1866) "took part in three wars" from 1885 through 1941; another was a prisoner of war for several years during World War I (Halpern 205–9). Yet another village Serb recounted how, while in the army in the 1930s, he received a letter from home telling of the

birth of a son (Halpern 220). Such dramas, from the everyday lives of countless Balkan villagers who faced uncertainty and doubt as family members were repeatedly separated, formed the real-life parallels to the narratives of the return songs. The narratives depict social dilemmas that resonated deeply in the traditional world in which they were performed.

The Hero: Husband and Patriarch

Balkan society, as Andrei Simić observes, is “overtly machistic and male-oriented” (13). Men in Balkan society traditionally dominated the women around them — especially their wives and female kin. They fostered a patriarchy in which, as Bette Denich has noted, each “household unit centers on males and articulates this focus in ritualized female deference and male dominance within the household” (256). The authority of men is further consolidated in the public arena. As a form of collective male discourse, men articulate their identity through gendered social interaction, participating in what Michael Herzfeld, in his work in rural Greece, calls a “strongly androcentric public ideology” (52).

Generally speaking, the extended family in traditional Balkan society was, as Vera Erlich has termed it, a “patriarchal regime” (31 ff.). It was a structure based on patrilocality, thus ensuring the successive generations of males within their own extended families and households. Patrilocal society is still found in parts of the Balkans today. A wife joins her husband’s home as a stranger who “initially occupies an inferior position” (Simić 18) as she becomes a new member of the workforce of the household. The extended family was organized in a hierarchical manner, where rank was determined primarily by gender and secondarily by age. As Erlich has pointedly remarked, the gender criterion for rank was “stronger than the age criterion; all males were superior to any womenfolk” (32). Moreover, the father of the family held a supreme position; he enjoyed the greatest power, respect, and authority in the household (Erlich 60). Simić observes that even in the contemporary period, the social organization of the Balkan family depends on a “system of intense reciprocal ties linking family members and kin” (15). The male supremacy in the household is paramount; until they reach old age, men display an “aggressiveness and vitality that is so valued in machistic societies” (Simić 20).

The primacy given the male heroic voice in the return song imposes a gender hierarchy on the world in which the narratives were performed. The epic is told from the hero’s distinctly male point of view; it is *his* story. As the “subject” of the narrative, he never leaves center stage. He is a privileged character, with a comparatively large range of prerogatives and choices. The hero is deeply driven to regain his former position as husband and patriarch in his marriage and home; he is also intent on reaffirming his honor and power, including control over his own property.¹¹ His wife, of course, plays a

central role in his return. Penelope, as Gregory Nagy and other classicists have pointed out, "is the key not only to the *nóstos* [homecoming] but also to the *kléos* [glory] of Odysseus" (38). Indeed, the question of whether the hero's wife has been faithful or not causes the hero significant grief — from the moment he learns that she is betrothed to another (which, in the Muslim return song, prompts him to shout in distress for "tri dana bijela" — three white, i.e., whole, days) until he is fully assured of her loyalty following his masquerade. The hero controls the perspective from which the return song is told — a perspective that centers on his own uncertainty about his wife. Winkler shrewdly notes that in the *Odyssey*, "the story is told one-sidedly from the point of view of male anxiety" (159).

The hero exploits deceit and cunning as well as retribution and prowess in his return home. Arriving incognito, he is enabled to check allegiances, thus simultaneously arranging events which he can control until he is ready to reveal his identity. The most elaborate sequences of deceptive stories are found in the Muslim return songs, where, as in the *Odyssey*, the disguised hero moves from person to person (even to horses) through the household, repeatedly telling his fictitious tale. The hero anticipates instant outpourings of grief from his wife and family — responses that not only convince him of their devotion to him but also reassure him of a favorable climate for resuming his previous role. The hero prolongs the recognition scene, as if reveling in the sorrow expressed for what only *he* knows is a contrived tale of his death. The irony of this situation elevates his ego, providing him with a sense of power and authority. Through deception, he denies his wife control over the events that unfold; he has her suspended, in a sense, as he decides whether she is still worthy of him. Murnaghan aptly notes that the "depiction of Odysseus concealing his return from Penelope makes it clear that he is treating Penelope as if she were like Clytemnestra even though he knows that she is not" (1987b: 125).¹²

In "Ropstvo Djulić Ibrahima" ("The Captivity of Djulić Ibrahim," Serbo-Croatian, Muslim), after the steward, mother, and sister of the hero Djulić have expressed their sorrow at the news of his "death," his wife hears the same as he tells her:

". . . Ej, davno j' Djulić svijet mijenijo,
 Ima doba tri godine dana.
 Na mom krilu ispala mu duša.
 Na mazgale kosti izbacijo.
 Eto čisto haber donijo ti."¹³

(" . . . Well, long ago Djulić passed to another world,
 It was three years ago.
 In my arms his spirit departed from him.
 I threw his bones through the embrasure.
 Look, I've told you the whole story.")

The heroine sobs dutifully at this "story" ("haber" = news, tidings) and gives him money for alms, at which he tests her again, asking her whether the money is for Halil, her suitor, and whether she rejoices in her upcoming marriage to Halil. Her tearful answer proclaiming her utter loyalty to Djulić finally satisfies him; it is only then that he reveals his identity. Such acquiescence by the heroine furnished an expressive means for the public reinforcing of male authority.

Even when the hero is not in an overt disguise telling a blatantly false tale about himself, such as in the Muslim and Marko return songs, he smugly employs secrecy, posing as an uninvited guest at his own wife's wedding, his routine in the Soldier return songs. Duplicity by returning heroes is evidently sanctioned, though unacceptable by heroines. In a paradoxical inversion, lying provides a justifiable means by which heroes seek, and indeed demand, the *truth* about their wives, that is, whether they have been faithful or not. The hero asserts a control over his wife through his own ironic disguise and mendacity. His ability to dominate her throughout the recognition scene suggests that he will also preserve his honor in the community.

Albert Lord proposed that the recurrent structure and depth of tradition in the return song provide a framework within which episodes such as the return of the hero, complete with his false tales and persistent probings, make sense. The "lengthy deceptive story may seem merciless to us," Lord observed, but it is an "integral . . . part of the recognition scene"; noting the tenacity of the traditional elements ("themes") of the story pattern, Lord argued that "whatever the reason may be for the deceptive story in return songs, it is . . . part of the thematic complex" (1960: 178). This is, of course, true, but the deceitful masquerade habitually performed by the returning hero serves another purpose as well. One might also interpret the recognition episode from the point of view of power dynamics within the gender hierarchy. Returning husbands deceive wives and households because in so doing they are enabled to assume control over them. When the hero first arrives home, he is unsure as to how he will be received. Through duplicity and manipulation, he is empowered to establish his authority. Moreover, he basically distrusts his wife. He is in no way content to assume that she has remained steadfast during his absence; he must probe her. Indeed, in the Muslim and many of the Marko narratives, the hero is motivated to return home precisely because he has heard that his wife will soon remarry (Muslim songs) or that she and his household have been besieged by a suitor (Marko songs). In other words, in many cases, there are clearly some grounds for the hero's apprehensions. The male voice that dominates the epic accordingly projects this fundamental suspicion and anxiety from beginning to end.

The identity of the hero in the return song is likewise tied to his physical prowess. It is often demonstrated as a metaphor for reclaiming his wife and

reestablishing himself as a patriarch. For instance, before he arrives home, Marko Kraljević's might in battle is frequently depicted in hyperbolic terms. Moreover, in the Muslim return songs, the hero often subdues bandits as he journeys home. Sometimes he engages in competitive games (throwing stones and jumping) with the wedding guests at his wife's remarriage when he first arrives in disguise. He is victorious in all of them, just as he shortly will be victorious in reclaiming his own wife (a scene that is reminiscent of the contests in which Odysseus competes in Phaeacia).

The hero's prowess is also displayed in the songs in which he finds out or infers that his wife has been disloyal. Given his sexual monopoly of her and threat of shame should that monopoly be violated, he treats even the suggestion of her betrayal as if it were adultery. Erlich's study of traditional Balkan family patterns includes vivid testimonials of how villagers viewed adultery. In the Muslim and Orthodox Christian areas, if a wife committed adultery, the husband typically severely beat, abandoned, or killed her. Moreover, her extramarital relationship brought public disgrace and dishonor to her husband and family (Erlich 323–28). In her work on Balkan culture, Denich also has pointed out that when "marriage takes place, fidelity is required from the wife. Death was formerly the ultimate penalty for the adulterous wife" (254). In the return song, the hero's honor and authority are so critical that he deems them restored only when he slays a wife who is or appears to be unfaithful to him — even one who believes, in good faith, that her husband will never return and that she may legitimately remarry; he also kills her suitor.

The return-song hero, of course, is not always a solely machistic and aggressive tyrant, mercilessly seeking to humiliate or chastise his wife. Though driven at virtually any cost to reestablish his role as husband and patriarch in his home and family, he, like his wife, is also a victim at times. Regardless of the punishment he may impose on her for real or inferred infidelity, the hero is himself also publicly disgraced since his wife's behavior, judged harshly by the community, thoroughly shames him. Moreover, he is typically expected to respond severely should his wife "dishonor" him and in some contexts is considered cowardly if he does not (Erlich 324). Thus, while the heroine-judged-adulteress is victimized by her husband's suspicions and rage, the hero is also victimized by public opinion and expectations imposed on him as a husband in a strongly hierarchical and gender-conscious society. He is trapped by cultural conditions and demands that he must conform to, even, perhaps, if he personally would not always choose to.

The Heroine: Wife, Daughter-in-Law, and Mother

A number of distinct family relationships, all of which include women, are crucial to the traditional Balkan family: wife/husband, daughter-in-law/

mother-in-law, and mother/son. All are depicted in the return song. Indeed, Doina Harsanyi observes that in the Balkans, a woman “is always subordinate to at least one man, and as a daughter-in-law she submits to the mother-in-law’s authority as well” (39). Women in the Balkans traditionally were expected to be passive and obedient in a world publicly dominated by men. Virtually the only socially-accepted spheres of female activity were the family and household. Traditional society for women in Romania “included a patriarchal extended family structure, a clear division of labor,” as well as “strictly defined gender roles and suppression of women’s sexuality” (Fischer 169). In Bulgaria, traditional “ideal” “women are considered first as mothers who bear children, perform domestic work, and obey their husbands in all matters that fall outside their own tightly circumscribed sphere” (Daskalova 350). Indeed, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and into the present, women have continued to be assigned socially-conditioned, traditional gender roles. A strict gender hierarchy reinforces attitudes that subordinate women’s roles and continues, in many respects, to sanctify patriarchy. Speaking of the “Yugo-male mindset” that has resisted emending its views of the traditional roles and position of women during the course of the 20th century, Dubravka Ugrešić caustically remarks that “in this male mindset woman has the fixed, unchanging status of an inferior being” (114). Indeed, the sexual enslavement and rape of women during the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s also provide extreme examples of female subordination in the Balkans.¹⁴

The return-song heroine represents a virtuous, loyal, and submissive feminine ideal—a woman who patiently waits for her absent husband while deferring to her mother-in-law and nurturing her children. The roles that the heroine assumes in the return song impose a normative framework for the roles that women play out in traditional society. Female choices in the epic and in real life, unlike male ones, are generally limited and circumscribed. The gender world of the return song is highly stratified and enforces a rigid hierarchy. The heroine is dominated by her husband, restricted in her spheres of activity, and often deprived of agency. While the hero in the song is a “subject” (in a grammatical sense), the heroine is typically depicted as an “object;” she is expected to be obedient and dutiful. Despite her structurally indispensable role in the hero’s return, the heroine has little direct voice in the narrative. She figures in a gender hierarchy in which men, particularly her hero-husband, dominate. Appearing in scenes governed by men, she rarely acts independently of the male characters who encircle her. Like Penelope, the Balkan heroines are assigned paradoxical and, in some way, impossible roles. As wives in patriarchal societies who are separated for long periods from their husbands, they are expected to be steadfast, yet it is unclear to them when their husbands will return. They must be strong, yet they have little power. They must not

be desired, yet they must still be desirable. Most are portrayed as virtuous wives and obedient daughters-in-law, some also as caring mothers. In these traditional female roles, the heroines are associated with several quintessentially “female” traits: powerlessness and endurance.

The return-song heroine is often defenseless and victimized within the boundaries placed around her by men. Murnaghan notes that Penelope is “a victim . . . of her social situation;” she is “victimized by circumstances beyond her control” (1987a: 112). The return-song heroine is dominated intermittently by the will of her husband and her suitor. Before departing, the hero often leaves instructions for his wife regarding how long she should wait before she may remarry. He also frequently requests that she obey his mother while he is gone. Once the hero has departed, his vulnerable wife is abducted or courted by a suitor. As if locked into male-dominated maneuvers, she is effectively transferred from one man’s control to another’s, yet she demonstrates little resistance. Displaying endless patience and remarkable endurance, she is expected to resist the advances of her suitors as she awaits the return of her husband. Harsanyi remarks that in the Balkans “the ideal woman is nurturing and loving, but also passive, enduring, and obedient” (40). The return-song heroine, as steadfast wife, is expected to conform to the social norms of marital propriety; regardless of what her husband does while he is away from home, she is expected to be chaste and respectable.

A quintessentially faithful and enduring wife is presented in “Ropstvo Djulić Ibrahima” (“The Captivity of Djulić Ibrahim,” Serbo-Croatian, Muslim). After hearing Djulić tell her of his own “death,”

Suze valja niz oba obraza.
Sljivaju se niz bijelo lice.¹⁵

(Tears rolled down both of her cheeks.
They glided down her white face.)

Several verses later, she explicitly spells out the depth of her loyalty and perseverance when she tells Djulić (still in disguise):

“ . . . Teže muke nalazit’ me neće,
Ka’ mog muža Djulić bajraktara;
Bi ga mlogo vakta pričekala,
Vakta mlogo, dok ni je vijeka.
Dok bi čula ju Djulić dušu,
Ja se nikad ne bi preudala,
Toga muža nabavit’ ne mogu. . .”¹⁶

(“ . . . No greater sadness will ever be mine
Than for my husband, Djulić the standard-bearer;
I would have waited for him for many years,
For many years, even as long as life lasted.

If I had not heard of Djulić's death,
I would never have married again.
Such a husband I could never find again. . .")

The heroine's loyalty to her husband and capacity for endurance are exemplary.

In "Moșneagul" ("The Old Man," Romanian, Soldier), after the returning hero offers his ring to his wife, who is about to marry someone else, she recognizes him as her husband. The heroine is portrayed as magnanimous, dutifully yielding to her husband at once, even after more than nine years:

Vreme multă nu pierdea,
Lacrămile o-podidea,
De la masă se scula
Și din gură că-mi striga:
"Beți, meseni, vă ospătați,
Veselia nu-'ncetați, . . .
Nouă ai am așteptat
Și mai zece-am suspinat;
Dar azi vremea c-a venit,
Soțiorul mi-a sosit. . ."17

(She lost no time.
Tears rolled down her face,
She got up from the wedding table
And called out:
"Drink, my guests, enjoy yourselves,
Continue making merry, . . .
For nine years I waited
And in the tenth year I lost hope;
But today the time has come;
My dear husband has returned. . .")

The singer, Petrea Crețu Șolcan—considered among the finest of Romanian (Romani) epic singers—presents a heroine who responds graciously to an unexpected and awkward situation, enabling her husband, whom she presumed dead, to reclaim with dignity his previous role as husband. She allows for the smooth transition from absent soldier to returned husband. In a parallel to this, Murnaghan points out that Odysseus's "success is threatened by his need to depend on his wife" and that his "marriage is at once the most crucial and the most vulnerable of the relationships that allow him to recover his former position" (1987b: 122).

As part of her persona, the virtuous return-song heroine also defers to the hero's kin, especially her mother-in-law. A mother-in-law in traditional Balkan society dictated much of her daughter-in-law's activities: "the husband's mother was a mother-in-law with a senior position of authority, and

from that relationship arose conflicts, difficulties, struggles" (Erlich 95). Indeed, Simić suggests that it is still true in the Balkans that "the success of a marriage depends to a great degree on the ability of a daughter-in-law to get along with her husband's mother" (23). In "Ropstvo Jankovića Stojana" ("The Captivity of Stojan Janković," Serbo-Croatian, Soldier) by an unknown Serbian singer, after running incognito into his mother in the vineyard, the returning hero Stojan arrives at his wife's wedding. He employs a metaphor to allude to his own identity, which the heroine immediately understands: "Doseti se ljuba Stojanova"¹⁸ (Stojan's wife figured it out). She then dashes off to tell his sister that he has returned. Sister and brother engage in an emotional reunion, mirroring traditional sibling ties in the Balkans.¹⁹ Mother and son also lovingly come together, thanks to Stojan's wife, who makes her next and last appearance when she informs her mother-in-law that Stojan is back. The grateful old woman promptly dies from the joy of seeing her son again.²⁰ The song soon ends not with the hero happily reunited with his wife; rather, he dutifully buries his mother as a worthy son should. Stojan's steadfast wife mediates, then, between him and his mother and sister. Her loyalty to her husband is exemplary, but her deference to her mother- and sister-in-law is also exemplary and is certainly portrayed with more pathos by this anonymous singer than is her relationship with her husband. This depiction also reflects traditional family dynamics in especially patriarchal communities, where husbands and wives frequently expressed little or no affection in public.²¹

Arguably woman's most ennobled and idealized persona in Balkan traditional culture is that of mother. Young mothers, who are traditionally sandwiched between their domineering husbands and mothers-in-law, cultivate intense and affective reciprocal ties with their children, particularly sons. These ties are bolstered over time, due in part to the significant role of sons in patrilocal households.²² Consequently, the bond between a mother and her sons forms one of the most hallowed social relationships.²³ Women gain influence through their bearing of sons; this influence is increased years later when they become mothers-in-law. In her study of the epics about Marko Kraljević, Tatyana Popović interpreted the hero's mother as "the embodiment of goodness" (70) and the mother/son relationship as a "picture of perfect harmony" (85).

Like virtuous wives, virtuous mothers in the return songs are also ideals of female behavior. In "Ropstvo Ćetić Osmanbega," ("The Captivity of Ćetić Osmanbey," Serbo-Croatian, Muslim), the heroine has just tearfully demonstrated her fidelity to her returning husband when her continued weeping becomes a transitional passage between tears of joy that her long-absent husband has returned and tears of pain as she reveals that their son Ahmetbey was abducted years ago and still remains a captive:

“Ho, sokole, Ćetić Osmanbeže!
 Čekah tebe dvanajes godina.
 Bi čekala dvades i četiri,
 Da se mlada ne bi preudala.
 No ja plaćem i nevolja mi je.
 Iza tebe trudna ostanula.
 Ej, pa kad je bila jedna godinica,
 A muško se čedo nalazilo. . .”²⁴

(“Oh, my falcon, Ćetić Osmanbey!
 I waited for you for twelve years.
 I would have waited twenty-four
 Before I married again when I was still young.
 But I weep and am troubled.
 [When you departed,] I was left pregnant with your child.
 And so, when a year had passed,
 A little boy was born. . .”)

She then recalls how their son Ahmetbey was abducted by a band of Hungarian raiders and still has not been rescued:

“. . . Te mi hudo dijete porobilji.
 Evo doba četiri godine, . . .
 Zarobi ga Janoka bane,
 Eh ludo mi dijete preverijo.
 Ej! Kad to plaćem i nevolja mi [je].”²⁵

(“. . . And they captured my poor child.
 Look, four years have passed, . . .
 The Ban of Janok captured him,
 And changed my helpless child’s faith.
 So! This is why I weep and am troubled.”)

The bridge between the narrative of return and rescue narrative of Ahmetbey is masterfully crafted by the Muslim singer, Alija Fjuljanin, merging not only two separate narratives into a compound song but also two compassionate faces of the heroine: wife and mother.

The Anti-Heroine: “Adulteress” and “Dead-Beat Mom”

A reading that focuses only on the loyalty, submission, and endurance of the Balkan return-song heroine does not do justice to the subtleties and subversions expressed in the songs since she also occasionally expresses agency in the narrative, independently defining her own identity. Paralleling what Seth Schein argues, “it would be simplistic to adopt the standard, patriarchal reading of Penelope,” since the *Odyssey* “also shows a Penelope with a mind of her own, not merely one in harmony with her husband’s” (25).

In the South Slavic and Romanian traditions, “white” or “grass” widows are wives whose husbands are away from home for an extended period.²⁶

Generally speaking, such “widows” were expected to remain faithful to their absent husbands, even for lengthy periods of time (Erlich 307–12). In many cases, the return-song heroine waits for years on end or has even been informed (though erroneously) that her husband is dead. In other words, when she finally decides to remarry, her behavior may very well be justifiable. As a “white” or “grass” widow, she lacks the socially and economically supportive role that a husband-in-residence provides and is sometimes even rearing a fatherless child—situations she may wish to rectify.²⁷ But her return-song husband (and other men, such as his father) see things somewhat differently. A wife who decides to remarry, even if it appears that her husband will not return, is frequently viewed by the male voice of the epic as a potential adulteress. Froma Zeitlin points out the asymmetric male perspective from which the question of Penelope’s justifiable thoughts on remarriage is viewed. As she puts it, Penelope’s “perfectly legitimate choice” to remarry (since Odysseus has been gone for twenty years and is not likely to return, and their son Telemachus has come of age) “is continually undermined by the intimation that to do so would constitute a betrayal of Odysseus, whose fate is still unknown” (127). Zeitlin concludes that this “suspense” about Penelope’s fidelity is “culturally speaking, based on the profound mistrust of women” (139).²⁸

The return-song heroine inherently threatens her husband’s honor in part since the ambiguity of whether she has been faithful or not always looms. As long as she attracts men, she risks dishonoring her husband through involvement with another man—a situation that her husband dreads. He is anxious about his wife’s sexuality and potential adultery, which could challenge his own masculinity. In a more material sense, the hero is also concerned about the fate of his property during his absence, especially if his wife is about to remarry.²⁹ The heroine is thus surrounded by an ambiguity that implicitly embraces both fidelity and infidelity. But this ambiguity also empowers her, since her own behavior, and what it implicitly says about her husband’s, governs, to a great extent, his social honor and standing.³⁰

A contested situation of considerable uncertainty and challenge emerges when the return-song heroine (wielding implicit power yet unsure as to when and even if her husband will return) and the long-absent hero (anxious to reassert his own power and honor, not only over his wife and family but also his property) finally meet again. The ambiguity of the reunion is augmented by both hero’s and heroine’s skepticism and ambivalence, as well as the heroine’s imminent remarriage. In most of the return songs, a relatively smooth disguise, deception, and recognition ensue. But in some, the traditional gender ideology of the epic is subverted when the “anti-heroine” confronts the ambiguity of the situation by expressing her own agency. That is, she deviates from the more traditional role of the passive and dutiful wife

and emerges instead as one who initiates action and is not interminably steadfast. She undercuts the conventional narrative hierarchy and is privileged, though only temporarily, to rearrange narrative events.

In the denouement of the epic, the heroine is always on the verge of remarrying, a situation that creates the moments of greatest tension in the narrative. Frequently the heroine is coerced by her suitor into marrying him. But at times *she* makes up her mind to remarry, thus defining her own actions. Her decision to take a new husband and thus disrupt the more typical path of fidelity is the primary arena in which her initiative is expressed. In some songs, the heroine almost remarries, due to her own volition, but retracts her decision when her husband returns. In others, she boldly resolves to remarry, sometimes brazenly rejecting her returning husband. When this happens, gender power in the epic is temporarily inverted. But not for long: even as an agent, the return-song heroine operates under limited conditions since her husband always eventually has the last word.

On occasion, the return-song heroine wishes to break the chains that social norms of propriety have put around her. In "Девет години войник" ("A Soldier for Nine Years," Bulgarian, Soldier), Gyuro and Mara are about to be married when Gyuro is sent to the army. He instructs his mother to watch over Mara during his absence. Mara waits faithfully for Gyuro for nine years. One day when she goes to the well to get water, her female cronies ridicule her since she still remains unmarried and of course has no children, while they are long-time wives and mothers. Humiliated, Mara returns to her future mother-in-law and announces her intention to marry someone else at once:

"Таком бога, моя стара мале,
ке се женим, нема да го чекам. . ." ³¹

("Oh, my dear old mother[-in-law],
I'm getting married; I'm not waiting for him any longer. . .")

Just as she pronounces these words, Gyuro arrives and the wedding is on. Thus, one type of social pressure (the expectations of fidelity) comes into direct conflict with another (remaining unmarried too long). Mara is cornered not only by male-imposed expectations, implicitly channeled through her mother-in-law, but also by female peer pressure. Indeed, the gendered meaning in this narrative is augmented by the fact that it was sung by a woman (Zdravka Svilenova), lending a female voice to the clash between a woman's individual will and social constraints. Mara attempts to escape her predicament when she finally asserts her own agenda. On the brink of controlling events, though, she is prevented from doing so by the timely arrival of the hero, her fiancé.

Some heroines are portrayed as coming dangerously close to violating the ideal of the steadfast wife. In “Dragnea” (“Dragnea,” Romanian, Soldier), the hero, Dragnea, leaves his wife Stanca in the care of his mother when he is called into the army. Not having been left with instructions regarding when she may remarry, Stanca waits for her husband until her patience runs out:

Nouă ani că-mi văduvea,
Nici mai mult că nu ținea,
Și cu altul logodea.³²

(For nine years she was widowed,
But could not hold out any longer,
And so she became engaged to another.)

Stanca independently chooses to remarry. When Dragnea returns, her wedding is taking place. In the vineyard, he — incognito — meets his father, who tells him:

“. . . Ș-am avut d-o noră rea,
Și azi e nuntă la ea.”³³

(“. . . I had a wicked daughter-in-law.
Today her wedding is taking place.”)

Hearing this, Dragnea rushes to the wedding where Stanca recognizes him. She is overcome with emotion:

Îmi intra Stanca-n cămară
Și-mi plîngea pînă-n diseară.³⁴

(Stanca went into a room [of the house]
And wept there until nightfall.)

Finally, she reappears and addresses the wedding guests, affirming her allegiance to her returned husband. “Dragnea” presents a heroine who is both willful and vulnerable. She is clearly a victim of circumstances, to which her initial response at her husband’s unexpected return is utter bewilderment. In a sympathetic passage, she sobs for hours and then joins him, having resolved that he is her rightful husband. The singer employs the verb “a văduvi” (to become a widow) to describe what Stanca figuratively endures for nine years before she chooses to wed again. Even a symbolic “mourning period” of nine years far exceeds the minimum year that widows mourn a husband in the Orthodox Church. Yet Stanca’s father-in-law still pronounces her “wicked,” reflecting both male and social disapproval.

The normative value of his judgment is that Stanca should have waited—been a “widow”—perhaps indefinitely.³⁵

Even suspicions of a wife’s infidelity in the return song can provoke a husband’s rage and desire for retribution. In “Sužanjstvo Arnaut Osmana” (“The Captivity of Arnaut Osman,” Serbo-Croatian, Muslim), the hero Osman returns home after hearing that his wife will marry the *dizdar* (fortress commander) in fifteen days. A false report that Osman had died had circulated seven years earlier. Posing as a beggar, Osman deceptively tells his wife that he had known her husband, now “dead.” Osman’s wife, sometimes called “kučka” (bitch) by the singer, then gives him alms for “the health of the *dizdar*.” Assuming this to indicate her treachery, Osman beheads the *dizdar* and then seizes his wife:

A sagana je u mrčne podrume
Za direk je kosu zapučijo.³⁶

(And he drove her down to the dark stable
And tied her by the hair to a beam.)

In an incident that again underscores the influence of mothers-in-law, Osman leaves his wife to his mother, saying: “Od nje čini šta je tebi drago”³⁷ (“Do what you want to her”). Osman’s mother does not delay:

Izvede je na dišer avliju,
Pa pripali burundžuk košulju.
Od košulje kosa prifatila,
Te je živu vatrom zapalila.³⁸

(She led her out into the courtyard,
And lit her [daughter-in-law’s] fine silken shirt.
Her hair caught fire from the shirt,
And set fire to her whole body.)

Seen as a wife whose family allegiances have strayed irrevocably, this “anti-heroine” is cruelly punished by her mother-in-law. Indeed, Tone Bringa notes that in traditional Bosnian Muslim communities, the “strong control by a mother-in-law of her daughter-in-law is related” to “the fact that she is a stranger whose loyalty has hitherto lain elsewhere” (101). Moreover, while Balkan Muslim women engage in formal mourning for a husband for roughly six months (Sugarman 61), Osman purportedly had been dead for seven years. In other words, Osman’s “widow” could have perfectly legitimately married someone else by the time her presumed-dead husband appeared. The normative male voice, however, expresses something much more restrictive: metaphorically speaking, a “widow” should mourn her absent husband interminably.

At times, the return-song heroine is blatantly unfaithful and overtly subverts the norm of the loyal and submissive wife, having found and claiming allegiance to a new love. When her returning husband finds out, her fate is sealed. In “Марко погубва Беле от Костура” (“Marko Slays Bele of Kostura,” Bulgarian, Marko), Marko’s wife joyfully thanks the “monk” (i.e., disguised husband) for the news of Marko’s “death” since she may now marry Bele. Marko’s response is swift and final:

нал извади тая остра сабя,
разврте се налево-надесно,
сасече ги на мало големо,
колко може бърбиняк да носи.³⁹

(He pulled out his sharp sword,
He swung it from left to right,
He cut them [his wife and Bele] up in pieces large and small:
Pieces small enough for an ant to carry.)

The prescriptive dimension of this is apparent: a “grass” widow eager to remarry is not to be tolerated.

The notion that unfaithful women are profoundly evil is expressed in “Moşneagul” (“The Old Man,” Romanian, Soldier). The departing hero tells his wife to wait for him for nine years and nine days before she may remarry. The singer, who frequently calls her “curvă” (slut) continues:

Ia vezi curva ce-a făcut:
Nouă ai că i-a jînut,
nouă zile n-a mai vrut;
S-a plecat, s-a măritat,
Că i-a plăcut alt băiat.⁴⁰

(So look what the slut did:
She held out for nine years,
But didn’t want to wait nine more days;
She gave in, she got married,
Because she liked another fellow.)

When her husband appears as an uninvited guest at her wedding, the heroine recognizes him, groans loudly, and announces to the wedding guests that he has returned. But her actions have already gone too far for him; he drags her outside and ties her to a tree, cursing and berating her. Underscoring how deeply his personal honor and masculinity are demeaned by her behavior, the hero upbraids her, shouting expletives and asking: “De ce mi-ai făcut așa?”⁴¹ (“Why did you do this to me?”), continuing with: “N-ascultai de mumă-mea” (“You didn’t obey my mother”)⁴² — a telling reprimand within the traditional family hierarchy. The heroine is fatally punished once the

hero—in a righteous choice of words on the part of the singer—“judges” her:

După ce mi-o judeca,
Foc de la picioare că-i da,
Ardea pîn' s-astîmpăra.⁴³

(After he had judged her,
He lit a fire at her feet.
She burned until the flames died out.)

The male voice, of both the singer and the song, continues:

Cenușa i-o vîntura,
Ce n-o mai primi vîntu,
Mănînce și pamîntu.
Nici așa nu se sfișea,
Din ea rugi verzi că ieșea,
Care împiedica lumea,
D-a dracului ce erea.⁴⁴

(He scattered her ashes in the air.
What the wind didn't pick up
The ground took in [ate].
But that wasn't even the end of it.
Green brambles grew from where the ashes landed,
Which impeded everyone [on their way],
So accursed were they.)

The passage vividly conveys how a woman regarded as deviant defiles the world around her, since even from her ashes, prickly and obnoxious brambles grow and spread, symbolizing her ills. A husband's honor and family reputation hinge closely on the public perception of his wife's sexual conduct.

As an inversion of the tears of joy that customarily flow when the hero returns, in “Robovanje Kara Omerage” (“The Captivity of Kara Omeraga,” Serbo-Croatian, Muslim), the heroine weeps during the recognition scene, but her tears stem not from the joy that her husband Omer has returned but rather, as she makes clear, from dismay that he will spoil her upcoming marriage to Šarac, her suitor. Omer reprimands her: “Ti nijesi mogla pričekati?”⁴⁵ (“You couldn't wait any longer?”) and bitterly asks her:

“A jesi l' se opremila, hanko
Za udaje za Šarca Mahmuta,
Da ostaviš moga siromaha? . . .”⁴⁶

(“And have you gotten yourself ready [dressed up and packed], my lady,
For your marriage to Šarac Mahmut,
To leave my poor little son. . . ?”)

This passage articulates Omer's distress about his wife's betrayal, including his concern that she may take off with her dowry to a new husband. Moreover, the heroine's failings as a mother to "his" son are also expressed by Omer. Motherhood as a reflection of a woman's merit plays a significant role throughout this song; Omer's wife is often portrayed as maternally irresponsible. Earlier, when Omer is imprisoned, his mother, not his wife, writes him about the birth of his son and the boy's upbringing. Then a letter arrives in which she informs Omer that her daughter-in-law – intent on remarrying – will not protect the boy's interest as heir to his father's property:

“ . . . Tvoja ljuba, moja snaha mila,
Ona neće da ti čuva sina.
No je pošla da s' udaje mlada. . .”⁴⁷

(“ . . . Your wife, my dear daughter-in-law,
Will not protect your son.
Instead the young wife has in mind to get married. . .”)

Reminiscent of Clytemnestra, who slighted her son Orestes, the heroine in this song, also absorbed in a new love, neglects her son and his interests. A mother who abandons her child for the sake of remarriage is, in the ethos of the traditional family and return song, unacceptable. As Helene Foley notes, women in the *Odyssey* (compared to men) are “notably less free to ignore moral pressures from others or to define themselves and to act apart from their families” (96). Balkan women gain their highest acclaim for being devoted mothers to sons. But Omer's wife in this song is guided by her own desires, thereby violating her role as both mother and wife. For this, she is tortured to death. Omer slays his wife, called “kučka” (bitch) by the singer just a few verses earlier:

Sablju gazi uze Omeraga
Pa udari svoju vijernicu.⁴⁸

(Omeraga the hero took his sword
And he struck his true love.)

He cuts her down the middle; then:

Pa prozore na dvor otvorijo,
Pa joj dvije pole prebacijo.⁴⁹

(He opened the window to the courtyard,
And threw her two halves out.)

Omer then instructs his mother and sister not to reveal his offense to his young son. Rather, he advises them, the boy should be told that his mother

went mad and killed herself. He then returns to his captor, informing him that the earlier news that his wife was about to get married had just been a "joke." In an ironic distortion, Omer's wife's marital dishonesty, for which he kills her, is something he himself facetiously lies about. In blaming his wife and accusing her of insanity, Omer shifts the blame of his own crime to her hysteria and instability, reflecting, one could argue, the extent of his own sense of guilt. Indeed, Avdo Medjedović, the Muslim singer of this epic—considered by Parry and Lord the most gifted singer they worked with (Lord 1960: 78)—depicted the actors in this painful and dramatic tale with a nuanced artistry. Avdo's Omer and his wife both become profoundly tragic victims of their own complexities and predicaments.

Society in a microcosm has been turned upside down in this epic as a woman, portrayed as overstepping the boundaries of her role as wife and mother, brings about chaos and destruction. H. Foley observes that "positive actions by women" in Homer "typically involve sacrifice and self control" (107). The actions by the heroine in Avdo's "Captivity of Kara Omeraga" involve neither sacrifice nor self control. Rather, the "anti-heroine" ignores her husband and son and pursues her own agenda, for which she is both killed and denounced for posterity. A strong message is thus conveyed: wives who express and undermine power ultimately also become victims of power. Viewed in the context of performance, this epic offered a means by which a gendered ideology of privilege and authority could be reinforced. Yet embedded in this male discourse are also other subtleties of event and character that transcend male-female dynamics and point to purely human emotions and dilemmas: weakness, desire, vulnerability, treachery, anger, guilt, and despair.

John Miles Foley argues that the heroine in the return song serves a primarily structural purpose. Claiming the heroine's (either faithful or unfaithful) role to be "automatic and functional" (1999: 125) in the traditional narrative patterning, Foley maintains that it is she, not the hero, "who drives the development of the narrative at the deepest and most fundamental level" since she is "the fulcrum on which the entire story balances" (1999: 148). This is, needless to say, a convincing argument; however, there is more to the heroine's role. The return song also provides a vivid form of prescriptive social discourse on conflicts of gender and power in marriage and the family in traditional society. The persona of the heroine is not one-dimensional, but rather allows for the depiction of a range of female roles (wife, daughter-in-law, mother, and sister-in-law). Moreover, the heroines in these varying roles, in consort with the hero, his family, and the suitor, provide lessons about the consequences of certain types of behavior, presented as either positive or negative, for the welfare of the community. The heroine plays out socially-conditioned positive gender ideologies as she portrays the dutiful wife, daughter-in-law, mother, and sister-in-law. But

she also is portrayed in negative terms, as the anti-heroine who subverts the narrative intentionally, making autonomous decisions regarding these roles and thus controlling, albeit temporarily, the events of the narrative.

Conclusion

The return song is profoundly rooted in Balkan tradition — from ancient Greece, to the present. But tradition in its functional role alone does not adequately explain the meaning of the narrative. Through a feminist reading of the return song, I have articulated issues of concern to the study of gender, epic, and Balkan society. I have argued that the epic speaks profoundly in ways that relate to gender and power, presenting messages of deep significance to its audiences in various times and places. My interpretations assert that gender roles and hierarchies of the epic normatively inform traditional male-female relations. Thus, I have responded to questions, such as why heroes of return songs consistently deceive or dupe their wives, or why some heroines are depicted as faithful while others are disloyal, not only with references to tradition and its impact, but rather with answers elucidated by the nature of gender and power relations in traditional society. I suggest that the hero relies on deception during his return in order to control and manipulate his wife and household and thus maintain his honor and power in situations of great ambivalence. He proceeds through the narrative surrounded by an incessant uncertainty which influences many, if not most, of his actions. Moreover, the heroine is presented as either steadfast or disloyal because these two faces underscore the ambivalent situation of the return song, a situation that, despite the heroine's agency, is ultimately resolved in a prescriptive manner that asserts male dominance and social cohesion. The heroine — like her husband — struggles in an inherently ambiguous situation to make choices that are in keeping with the circumstances around her. When, like Penelope, she realizes that many years have passed and her husband will probably not return, it is no surprise that she considers remarriage. She is not unreasonable in this assumption, nor is she yet an adulteress.

The return song is still sometimes performed at traditional weddings in southern Romania; in the past, it was virtually always included in the wedding repertoire. Elsewhere in the Balkans, it was also performed in public contexts, both multi-gendered and, at times, all-male. Sung at weddings, the epic conveyed (and conveys) potent directives about marriage and family to the nuptial couple; sung in the private home or *kafana*, it offered a discursive form of gender ideology. The return song articulates conflicts and tensions inherent in marriage. It presents arguably the most stressful situation possible: spouses separated from each other for an extended and undetermined period of time, with little concrete knowledge about when or if they will be reunited. On top of the anxiety created by

this, the return-song marriage is also assaulted by an enterprising suitor who courts the deserted wife and seeks both her affection and her property. The return song is a type of fable for marriage and married people in situations of uncertainty, where behavior and outcome are determined by gender and power.

Finally, the return song promotes conformity within conventional gender roles for cooperation and unity in the traditional family and community. A man is a patriarch of his household. He may periodically come and go, leaving his wife and family, but he demands deference and allegiance from them at all times. Moreover, a woman who is a steadfast wife, submitting to her mother-in-law and caring for her children, is a paragon. When, however, she seeks alternative and subversive ways of playing out her female roles, she brings disgrace and ignominy to her husband and family. The return song exemplifies what Denich observed in the Balkans, that traditional society "requires women's submission to group interests" (260). Many women surely comply with the interests of their group: husband, family, and community. Yet, women are not inherently submissive — not in the return song nor, as Denich noted, in real life: "if they were, elaborate control mechanisms would not be necessary" (260). If women were inately acquiescent and passive, departing heroes in the epic would not institute waiting periods for wives or ask their mothers to look after them. Returning heroes would not devise complex deceptive stories to test wives' loyalties since infidelity would not occur. The return song "exalts a certain, quite explicit ideal of marriage," as Winkler points out about the *Odyssey* (160). But it also allows for marriage and family that go tragically awry through irreconcilable conflicts between female and male wills in situations of ambiguity. The epic articulates and attempts to resolve the complexities of gender and power in male-female relationships; it is a deeply normative narrative which informs marriage, family, and community.

NOTES

I wish to thank Irene Masing-Delic, Gerald J. Janecek, and the anonymous readers for SEEJ for their helpful suggestions.

- 1 I follow the definition of return song as set forth in *The Singer of Tales* by Albert Lord, who noted that the return category of narrative song is characterized by a basic pattern that has as its "focal point" the hero's return, which is "surrounded by (a) disguise, (b) deceptive story, and (c) recognition" (121). Lord outrightly recognized the parallels between the *Odyssey* and return songs of what he called the "Yugoslav tradition" (121).
- 2 I am concerned with the category of return song as interpreted by Lord, despite the diversity of other types of returns that abound in ancient Greek epic.
- 3 See work cited by Denys Page.
- 4 See the works cited by Helene Foley, Seth Schein, and Froma Zeitlin.

- 5 See Bynum 1974: xix and 1979: 2–3; see also Lord 1960:14–15. Lord noted occasionally encountering Muslim epic at weddings in Yugoslavia (1960: 15; 1954: 10).
- 6 Though the narratives within each sub-group follow more-or-less similar patterns, there is significant variation within each sub-group as well; and certainly not all of the motifs that I discuss here are necessarily present in all of the variants. This fluidity, of course, is a fundamental characteristic of oral tradition.
- 7 I investigated altogether 45 return songs: 14 Serbo-Croatian Muslim return songs, as well as 31 Christian return songs: 20 Soldier songs (1 Serbo-Croatian, 9 Bulgarian, and 10 Romanian) and 11 Marko Kraljević songs (1 Serbo-Croatian, 5 Bulgarian, and 5 Romanian). The texts are from both published and unpublished sources, cited ahead, including my own fieldwork; all of the song translations are mine.
- 8 In some versions, there is no father, but just the hero's mother, who also departs from the wedding and goes to a nearby vineyard, later reemerging when the soldier reveals his true identity; see "Ropstvo Jankovića Stojana" (Karadžić, 173–78).
- 9 See work cited by Tatyana Popović.
- 10 Personal communication; Bucharest, June 2001.
- 11 Considering the economic nature of marriage transactions in the traditional Balkans, one could argue that the returning hero's Angst about property rights, especially given the possible defection of his wife to another man and his household, is as pressing as his uneasiness about his wife's fidelity.
- 12 Clytemnestra, a potent symbol of marital infidelity who is repeatedly invoked in the *Odyssey*, is the treacherous wife whom Agamemnon finds upon his return from the Trojan War. With the aid of her lover Aegisthus, she slays Agamemnon but is later murdered, along with Aegisthus, by her son Orestes.
- 13 "Ropstvo Džulić Ibrahima," sung by Salih Ugljanin, Muslim, in Novi Pazar, Yugoslavia; collected by Milman Parry and Albert Lord, 1934; in Parry and Lord, I. 712–16, p. 62.
- 14 See U. N. Commission on Human Rights; see also Feldman, Prica, and Senjković.
- 15 "Ropstvo Džulić Ibrahima," sung by Salih Ugljanin, Muslim, in Novi Pazar, Yugoslavia; collected by Parry and Lord, 1934; in Parry and Lord, I. 718–19, p. 62.
- 16 *Ibid.*, I. 733–39, p. 62.
- 17 "Moşneagul," sung by Petrea Creţul Şolcan, Christian, in Bucharest, Romania; collected by G. Dem. Teodorescu, 1884; in Teodorescu, I. 475–80, 483–86, p. 621.
- 18 "Ropstvo Jankovića Stojana," unknown Christian singer, in Serbia; collected by Vuk St. Karadžić; first published 1823; in Karadžić, I. 99, p. 176.
- 19 See Erlich (122–43).
- 20 This is a common motif in South Slavic return songs; see, for example, "Ropstvo Džulić Ibrahima" in Parry and Lord 55–74.
- 21 See Erlich (174–226; 227–86).
- 22 Both Erlich (94–99) and Simić (21–23) point this out.
- 23 A parallel to this is found in Andalusia, in what Stanley Brandes calls an "intense, indissoluble bond between mother and son" (222), forming a near-sacrosanct relationship.
- 24 "Ropstvo Četić Osmanbega," sung by Alija Fjuljanin, Muslim, in Novi Pazar, Yugoslavia; collected by Parry and Lord, 1934; in Parry and Lord, I. 454–61, p. 321.
- 25 *Ibid.*, I. 474–75; 480–82, p. 321.
- 26 "Bela udovica" is "white widow" in Serbian; the expressions in both Bulgarian ("сламена вдовица") and Romanian ("văduvă de paie") translate as "straw [grass] widow."
- 27 Although "the strictest morals prevailed" among Muslims in Bosnia during a husband's absence, "white widows" were not expected to abstain for unreasonably long periods; Islamic law "enabled women to marry again after the husband's absence of one (or two) years" (Erlich 310).

- 28 Some classicists interpret this as misogyny in the *Odyssey*; see, for example, Murnaghan 1987a (110) and 1987b (124–25).
- 29 See Emmert (37) for a discussion of women's property rights in traditional Serbia.
- 30 In a telling parallel, Brandes notes in his study of traditional gender roles in Andalusia that though infidelity on the part of wives is actually rare, husbands are perpetually fearful of the possibility that their wives may commit adultery and in so doing deprive them of their honor. He notes that "this potentiality . . . invests [a wife] with an awesome power" (230).
- 31 "Девет години войник" sung by Zdravka Stoilova Svilenova, Christian, in Pasarel (Sofijsko), Bulgaria; collected by Stefana Stojkova, 1961; in *Romanska*, l. 42–43, p. 652.
- 32 "Dragnea," sung by unknown Christian singer in Titești (Pitești), Argeș; collected by C. N. Mateescu; first published 1909; in *Amzulescu*, l. 22–24, p. 307.
- 33 *Ibid.*, l. 42–43, p. 308.
- 34 *Ibid.*, l. 83–84, p. 309.
- 35 While widows in traditional Romania may remarry after a minimum of one year of mourning, "in actuality, most village women . . . remain widows" (Kligman 157).
- 36 "Sužanjstvo Arnaut Osmana," sung by Alibeg Begović, Muslim, in Bijelo Polje, Yugoslavia; collected by Parry and Lord, 1935; in *Milman Parry Collection*, Text No. 6818. l. 707–8, ms. p. 20.
- 37 *Ibid.*, l. 820, ms. p. 23.
- 38 *Ibid.*, l. 822–25, ms. p. 23.
- 39 "Марко погубва Беле от Костурпа" sung by Zlata Mladenova Jordanova, Christian, in Kostinbrod (Sofijsko), Bulgaria; collected by Rositsa Angelova, 1961; in *Romanska*, l. 124–27, p. 664.
- 40 "Moșneagul," sung by Anton Cojocaru, Christian, in Vădoia-Mehedinți, Romania; collected by Grigore Tocilescu, 1897; in *Tocilescu*, l. 36–40, p. 393.
- 41 *Ibid.*, l. 150, p. 395.
- 42 *Ibid.*, l. 151, p. 395.
- 43 *Ibid.*, l. 157–59, p. 395.
- 44 *Ibid.*, l. 161–67, p. 395.
- 45 "Robovanje Kara Omerage," sung by Avdo Medjedović, Muslim, in Bijelo Polje, Yugoslavia; collected by Parry and Lord, 1935; in *Milman Parry Collection*, Text No. 12465, l. 770, ms. p. 21.
- 46 *Ibid.*, l. 780–82, ms. p. 22.
- 47 *Ibid.*, l. 291–93, ms. p. 9.
- 48 *Ibid.*, l. 794–95, ms. p. 22.
- 49 *Ibid.*, l. 798–99, ms. p. 23.

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