

## A Call for Functional Differentiation of the South Slavic *Vila*

Dorian Jurić

*McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada*

This article seeks to clarify the often confused understanding of the Serbo-Croatian *vila* and elucidate her position within the archaic South Slavic world view. Through a survey of her functional traits within the Serbo-Croatian epics, the article attempts to typify her actions in the epic sphere, and weigh those against her conception in the folkloric sphere, making a case for the understanding and study of the *vila* as one distinct figure divided into two typological facets – one mythological in nature, the other a product of folk custom.

Whether a casual reader or a scholar, anyone who works with Serbo-Croatian oral traditions will quickly learn the name of the *vila*. Drifting in a sea of Christian symbolism and static, stereotypical female characters, the *vila* (pl. *vile*) stands out in the corpora as extremely archaic, pagan, and unique. Yet, for all her appeal, the *vila* remains one of the most obscure and misunderstood characters in European mythology and folklore. Scholars following in the footsteps of Milman Parry and Albert Lord most often relegate her to footnotes, branding her a South Slavic nymph or fairy. Those who attempt to elucidate her character more thoroughly seem to produce uniformly contradictory opinions. This article will attempt to rectify and clarify the role of the *vila* in the Serbo-Croatian folk tradition by elucidating the position of the *vila* as existing in two typologically unique functions. This article advocates the need to split the conception of the *vila* into two distinct components before appropriate analyses can be performed. Where one figure exists on a folkloric level and deserves the title of nymph, the other *vila*, the *vila* of the epics (*narodne pjesme/pesme* in Croatian and Serbian, lit., folk songs) and ballads, represents a separate and unique figure with mythological implications. This article will act primarily as an outline of the functional traits of the *vila* as she appears in the Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian epics. By typifying her actions

*The Journal of Indo-European Studies*

in the epic sphere and weighing them against her conception in the folkloric sphere, it will set forth an argument for isolating the two formats and will suggest opportunities for further enquiry and understanding.

An etymological comparison would be nothing but advantageous to such a study, were it feasible. Sadly, the name of the *vila* is most likely a shifted epithet for a long forgotten name. Etymologically *vila* would reflect a Proto-European form of *\*wi-l-ā*, the *\*wi-* designating a holy, as well as a more ghostly aspect,<sup>1</sup> while the *\*-l-* and *\*-ā* serve respectively as a diminutive and a feminine ending, with the overall meaning of ‘little holy woman’ or ‘little supernatural woman’.<sup>2</sup> The etymologies of similar folk figures in Slavic cultures, which are often equated with the *vila*, offer equally vague insight, so that the analysis must rely on typological and functional scrutiny alone.

### The Vila

In the appendix to Avdo Međedović’s version of *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho*, the translators, Albert Lord and David Bynum, refer to the *vila* as “a white female spirit, dwelling in mountain lakes. They have wings and fly. They are sometimes helpful to mortals, even becoming sisters-in-blood with, or marrying, mortal men. Sometimes they may be malicious, especially if their lakes are violated” (Međedović 1974: 252, n. 12). This depiction stands in rather stark contrast to the picture Jan Máchal paints of *vile* as the “souls of the departed [that] Serbian legends declare [were originally] proud maidens who incurred the curse of God” (2006: 91). And what then is to be made of Zora Zimmerman’s statement that *vile* are connected to certain natural environments and that “the magic they are capable of is appropriate to the environment in which they are found” (1979: 169)? Or Š. Kulišić *et al.*’s description of her “ugly legs, which she tries to hide” (1970: 66) (usually those of a horse, donkey, or goat). Elizabeth Barber speaks of the *vila* as though she were indistinguishable from the Russian *rusalka* (1997). Truly the representation of the *vila* seems profoundly confused, yet the

<sup>1</sup>The same *\*wi-* root most likely informs the name of the Norse *Vé*, one of *Óðinn*’s brothers, and may also be the root of the Indic *Vishnu*.

<sup>2</sup>I owe this etymological break-down and a number of others in my work, in part or in whole, to the insights of my mentor and instructor Dr. John Colarusso.

one aspect that these studies lack, and which provides the necessary clarity, is an acknowledgement of the formats within which this material is being transmitted.

### **The Vila in Folklore and Folk-custom**

The earliest mention of *vile* in written record comes from Procopius, the Byzantine historian, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century whose *De Bello Gottorum* describes a Slavic tribe encountered near the Danube who worshiped and offered sacrifice to beings similar to Greek nymphs (270-271). The *vila* of folk-custom and lore is at her core a nature spirit, something fairly common among Slavic groups, and the necessity for her propitiation has been carried with the South Slavs into rather recent history.<sup>3</sup> In his article on female deities of the South Slavs, Joseph Conrad cites a region of Bosnia where belief in *vile* as forest spirits carried into the 1970s (2000: 27). Conrad's depiction of the *vila* is a rare one that entirely focuses on ethnographic material and folk-custom. According to him, *vile* are shape-shifters who live in the forests, dance the *kolo* (a Slavic circle dance that is attributed to both forms of the *vila*) and interact with shepherds (27). They are portrayed in local memorates as harmful creatures that destroy crops with hail, tickle men to death, or turn them into stones or trees (27). Braiding horse's tails into tight knots, leaving fairy rings (*vilensko igrišće* or *plesališće*) and similar fairy-type behaviour is also connected with them (27).<sup>4</sup> Conrad also cites a crucial point: that in the Janj region of Bosnia "the *vile* are considered non-human, but resemble tall, thin and very beautiful girls who wear their long, black hair, *unbraided*" (27). Conrad places emphasis on the *vila*'s loose hair, but as we shall see, the more important feature for this argument is the colour.

The Bulgarians retain a similar figure in their epics,

---

<sup>3</sup>Propitiation is, however, not the only form of interaction attested between humans and *vile*. Zoran Čiča (2002) chronicles church attestations, dating as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, of a shamanistic cult in Croatia where local healers (*Vilenice* and *Vilenjaci*) are said to derive their powers from *vile* (who are known in the epics for their knowledge of herbs and magic). The connection between folk healers and *vile* still exist in certain localities today (see Petreska 2008).

<sup>4</sup>To this day in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia the *vila*'s name is used as a blanket term for fairies, nymphs and sprites from other countries and cultures. On my last visit to Croatia, a girl, assuming I knew nothing of the culture, tried to explain a *vila* to me by informing me that Cinderella had a '*vila* godmother'.

known as *samovila*, or sometimes as *samodiva*. The *samovila*, though sometimes functionally divergent, shares enough resemblance to the Serbo-Croatian *vila* to provide insight into some of her more obscure aspects. While *diva* is semantically linked to Indo-European *\*dyēus* in a feminine form, meaning goddess, *samo* in Slavic languages bears the meaning of only, just or merely, or can sometimes be connected to veracity or originality. The names would then be ‘the real/true little holy woman’ or ‘the real/true goddess’. Although these two terms will have appealing implications further in this argument, etymologically they provide little of worth.

In Assen Nicoloff’s book of Bulgarian folklore, the *samovila*’s mythological and folk-custom traits receive the same conflation that the *vila* often receives, although there are some important folkloric aspects addressed. He states that they live on mountains near springs, and that they dance the *kolo* (in Bulgaria the dance is the *horo*) (1975: 10-11). He also outlines the tendency for shepherds in the local memorates to enter into contests with the *samovili*, where they challenge the shepherds’ talents on the flute against their talents of dance. If the shepherds win, they most often receive the *samovili* as brides (11). Most of the material provided by Nicoloff, however, involves the mythological *samovila* and her ties to the folk hero Krali Marko (the Bulgarian variant of the Serbo-Croatian hero Marko Kraljević).

In his early study of archaic Slavic belief, Jan Máchal suggests the idea that *vile* originate from dead maidens. “The Bulgarians believe that the Samovily are girls who have died unbaptized, and among the Slovaks there is a wide-spread story that the fairies are souls of brides who died after their betrothal, and finding no rest, are doomed to roam about at night” (2006: 91). He also discusses another aspect of folk belief regarding the hair of *vile* [*vilina kosa*]: “their life and strength are believed to depend upon it, so that if a fairy loses a single hair, she will die. The Slovenians, however, assert that a Vila will show herself in her true shape to anyone who succeeds in cutting off her hair” (92). Máchal’s article reveals a number of intriguing points of local lore, but, like many texts of its type, it amalgamates material from the folk-culture and the epics indiscriminately.

In Svetozar Koljević’s opus *The Epic in the Making*, he uses the folkloric conception of the *vila* to define her, but then

proceeds to list a number of her epic functions. He explains that (folkloric) *vile* live in mountains, plants, trees, clouds and lakes, that they are “born out of dew and herbs” (347), and notes the earlier mentioned feature of possessing hideous legs (1980:347).<sup>5</sup> The same treatment is found in Woislav Petrovitch’s brief explanation in his 1914 classic *Heroes and Legends of the Serbians* (16-18). In the most comprehensive study of the *vila* that exists in English, Zora Zimmerman outlines a number of important aspects of the *vila*, although she too oscillates between mythic and folkloric functions of the *vila*, with only an occasional notation of how drastically different those aspects can be. Her article, “The Changing Role of the ‘Vila’ in Serbian Traditional Literature”, offers a respectable study of the *vila* in the epics and some insight into the folk beliefs, albeit, augmented by an odd literary analysis on the distribution of *vile* in South Slavic epics.<sup>6</sup> She suggests that there existed a specialization of *vile*, based on their natural elements (much like Greek nymphs), so that ‘cloud *vile*’ cause wind and hail, ‘water *vile*’ bathe and turn into swans, and ‘forest *vile*’ will turn into wolves and deer (1979: 169-170). This same idea was pursued much earlier by Veselin Čajkanović in his survey of Serbian demonology (1994: 228-230), who saw the traditional roots of the *vila* as a ‘coin-toss’ between the nymphic forest spirit, or the dead maiden.

Dejan Ajdačić (2001) suggests that the only way to account for the many aspects of the *vila* is to either attribute them to changes over time or else assume that multiple beings have been subsumed by the *vila* name (208). Although a few aspects of the *vila* may be borrowings from other folk creatures, her functions are not as varied as Ajdačić suggests. If the split is made between the folkloric and mythological

---

<sup>5</sup>Koljević takes this point from the Serbian Mythological Dictionary (Kulišić, *et al.* 1977), yet these two texts are the only ones I have read which mention this curious aspect. It seems on the surface to resemble the kinds of demonization that the church is fond of ascribing to pagan figures.

<sup>6</sup>Zimmerman questions the absence of the *vila* in the Kosovo cycle, deciding that the sombre tone of the epics are not consonant with the *vila*’s character. This argument treats the corpora as though they are all contemporaneous and ignores the fact that although the historical Marko lived most of his life after the Battle of Kosovo, the Marko tales are mostly older songs with Marko’s name pasted over those of other heroes. The Kosovo cycle is historical and completely based in a specific time, unlike the timeless, and often archaic, Marko songs.

aspects of the *vila*, the two show themselves to be rather similar to analogues in other European and Slavic folk beliefs.

Finally, an important article by Elizabeth Barber continues the work of Marija Gimbutas and tries to connect the *vila* and the Russian *rusalka* (she treats the two as synonymous figures) to a fertility ritual. Barber suggests that the *vile* and *rusalki* are the souls of girls who died before having children, and whose unused 'fertility potential' is employed in a spring festival (called *Rusali*) so that it may be transferred into the crops (1997: 14-18). Her evidence focuses heavily on the Russian material, only using the South Slavic material as support, yet there are important issues addressed in the article. Aspects of the tie between the *rusalka* and the *vila* (specifically the folklore variant) are well-founded and fascinating, and the attribution of the *vila/rusalka* motif to calendrical fertility rites is illuminating. Indeed, the *rusalka* has much to tell us about the folkloric *vila*, but with such conflated accounts of the *vila* in scholarly studies it is hard to determine which traits truly belong to her folkloric aspects. Few ethnographic accounts of folk belief exist regarding *vile*, yet a wealth of epics have been collected over the last 500 years. So it is to the mythic *vila* that this study turns for some much-needed clarity.

### **The Vila in Myth**

Although there is bound to be some overlap, the *vila* that appears in the epics and ballads of the Serbs and Croats is a highly divergent figure with more markedly defined characteristics than the folkloric *vila*. By addressing what the mythic *vila* is, we are able to garner what she is *not* – traits that belong strictly to the folkloric use of the figure. The following is an outline of the traits and functions of the mythic *vila*.

### **Supernatural character**

First and foremost the *vila* is a supernatural being. She has magical properties. She exists on a liminal plane between nature and culture, between god(s) and humans, calling out from or travelling between one realm and the other to interact with the heroes and villains of the epics. Despite the Christian nature of the Serbo-Croatian epics, the *vila* has always been the pagan 'sore thumb' sticking out of each song in which she appears. Although *vile* often take part in genial

interactions with humans, they are still otherworldly and foreign. In the ballad *Ivanova Vila* [Ivan's Vila] (MH V pt. II, #22, 27), the protagonist Ivan brings his prospective *vila* bride to his manor, but at the sight of her, his mother invokes God and Mary, which blinds the *vila* and sends her fleeing. In the South Slavic folk imagination, there is no question that the *vila* belongs to the old world, and not to the new.

This factor also informs the actions which the *vile* perform in the epics. I reject the propensity for some scholars to categorize *vile* as good or bad, black or white (as Holton and Mihailovich do in their commentaries), depending on the actions they take within the songs. Like the Arabic *djinn* or the Celtic *sídhe*, the *vile* of the epics are seen as another race. Like humans they are impelled by their own motivations. They may be good, bad or indifferent, and may display any emotion that a human character in the songs may show. Koljević calls the *vila* the most morally ambiguous mythic figure in the epic songs (1980: 150). Certainly the actions of the *vile* set them apart, and their motives may not always be clear, but this is a testament to their supernatural otherness.

### Whiteness

In every epic and ballad in which the *vila* appears she is referred to as white. Her hair, her clothing, her skin is not only *bijela* [white] but *prebijela* [more than white, very white, too white]; the overall impression is one of an ethereal, glowing presence. It is difficult to find an epic involving the *vila* that does not contain the phrase *prebijela vila*. In one song, this glowing presence is employed by a *vila* to blind an imposing villain so that her *pobratim* may kill him (SNP III, #5, 76).<sup>7</sup> Here we see the folkloric *vila*'s dark hair in stark contrast with the mythological *vila*'s overwhelming bloneness.

### Beauty

The *vila* of the epics, like the *vila* of folklore, is known for her exceptional beauty. Not only is the figure herself often said to be beautiful in the songs, but beautiful human characters are also questioned as to whether they are *vile*, or are compared to them. In Međedović's *Wedding of Smailagić*

<sup>7</sup>The concept of the *pobratim/posestrima* is one of kinship through non-sanguinal ties, best translated in the epics as blood-brother/sister, or brother/sister in battle/God.

*Meho*, all of the beautiful women are referred to as *vile*, and in fact so are most of the young male heroes! Albert Lord cites a famous ballad, in *The Singer Resumes the Tale*, where a young woman sitting by herself muses aloud, amongst a number of riddles, whether anyone is more beautiful than herself. She is quickly replied to by a *vila* on a mountain who answers all of her riddles, but not before perfunctorily stating, “*I ja sam lepša od tebe*” [I am more beautiful than you] (1995: 49).

### Mountain/Cloud dwelling

At their core, mythological *vile* are specifically celestial beings. Although they are also connected very firmly with water, *vile* should not be confused with water spirits. The waters that they idle by, bathe in, and often protect are always mountain lakes and *vile* in the songs are capable of being drowned, a problem that should hardly be a concern for a water spirit (MH V pt. II, #29, 40).

Although their connection to water may pose some ambiguity, the mythological *vila*'s celestial traits are always explicit. Nearly as often as the *vila* is referred to as *bijela vila*, she is referred to by the epithets *vila iz oblaka*, *gorska vila* or *vila od planina* [*vila* from the clouds, mountain *vila* or *vila* from the mountain].<sup>8</sup> In one of the most famous and oldest *ženske pjesme* [women's songs], *Vilin Grad* [The Vila's City], the *vila* of the song is said to build a city “*ni na nebu ni na zemlji... neg u krajku u oblaku*” [neither in the sky nor on the ground... but rather on the edge of a cloud] (MH VII, #219, 125, lines 1-3). In another variant of the song, *Buna Žuda Grad* [The Vila Builds a City], the *vila*'s children are said to play like lightning and thunder (SNP I, #226, 150), further connecting her to the cloud motif. In both the epics and the folklore the *vile* are described as territorial, they often belong to a single mountain in the epics (and can protect these rather aggressively), while in the local lore of the former Yugoslav nations, all large mountains are said to have their own *vila*.<sup>9</sup> The mythological *vila* is also intrinsically connected to the fir tree, if she ever

---

<sup>8</sup>The term *planina* in the Serbian and Croatian language applies to large mountains, while *gora* is given to smaller tree-covered mountains, large hills, and the bases of mountains.

<sup>9</sup>The *Velebit* Mountains in Croatia are famously home to the *Vila Velebita* who is the subject of pop songs, and whose marketable name graces the label of a number of *rakija* [brandy] bottles.



sits or lands in a tree in the epics it is always a fir; if a hero pursues her in an epic, he will invariably hide in, or watch her from a fir tree.<sup>10</sup> The fact that firs primarily grow in mountain forests is less than a coincidence.

Although I believe that the concept of separate water, field, forest, and mountain *vile*, each living in their own topographic habitats, is a trait which only belongs to the folkloric *vila* (possibly a borrowing from the Greeks), the mythological *vile* most certainly possess aspects of nature spirits. Not only are they always found in nature in the songs, the *vile* of the epics converse with plants and animals and often seem protectors of nature. In a song where a *vila* compares the aspects of her upbringing with that of a beautiful human girl (MH V pt. II, #33, 44), she says:

„A mene <i>vila</i> rodila,	“But a <i>vila</i> gave birth to me,
U zelen listak povila.	In green leaves she swaddled me.
Meni su bile pelene	My diapers were
Od one trave zelene;	Of that green grass;
Meni su bile postelje	My beds were
Grančice tanke od jele;	Slender branches from firs;
Koji su vjetri puhali,	Winds that were blowing,
Oni su mene zibali;	They rocked me;
Koje su st'jene padale,	Boulders that fell,
One su sa mnom igrale;	They played with me;
Koje su rose rosile,	The dew that dropped,
One su mene dojile!“	It breast-fed me!”

(lines 30-41)

This role of nature spirit can, however, become ambiguous because of the *vila*'s harmful tendencies. In some of the Marko songs where the hero encounters a *vila* protecting a lake, after he has taken his fill of water and beaten or killed the *vila* for demanding a tax, there is often a sense in the songs that nature has been spoiled by the hero's transgression. And yet, in other songs the *vila* taxes all creatures for the water she controls and leaves every animal on the mountain miserable and thirsty (Petrović 1930: 70).

---

<sup>10</sup>Arguably, firs are equally present in songs without *vile*, but this does not negate their connection, in fact it adds weight to their mythological significance. For a rather prominent fir tree, see *Vila Strijela Markova Pobratima* (MH II pt. I, #3, 8).

### Dancing the *Kolo*

Another area of overlap between the folkloric and mythological *vila* is seen in the *vilinsko kolo*, and the idea that *vile* are both good singers and dancers. In many epics, such as *Ženidba Marka Kraljevića* [The Wedding of Marko Kraljević] (MH II pt. I, #19, 61), the hero stumbles upon a group of *vile* dancing a *kolo* in the mountains. In other songs the *vila* uses a *kolo* to enter or exit the *mise en scène* of the tale. In *Rodjenje Marka Kraljevića* [The Birth of Marko Kraljević], where Marko's mother is portrayed as a *vila*, she spins twice around in a *kolo*, and on the third spin she flies into the clouds and out of the story. The *vile* often playfully invite humans (particularly wounded heroes, a fact that speaks to the supernatural naiveté as well as the healing power that the *vile* often exhibit) to join their *kolo* circle. This propensity for dancing is matched with the functional role of singing that both the folkloric and mythological *vila* share, although the role of singing takes a strange form in the epics.

### Singing

While the *vila* of the folklore is said to be a beautiful singer, the *vila* of the epics seldom sings. She does, however, become furious when humans sing or rejoice on her mountain. In the famous song *Марко Краљевић и Вила* [Marko Kraljević and the Vila] (SNP II, #38, 158), Marko persuades his travelling companion Miloš Obilić to sing him a song despite Miloš's vehement claims that the *vila* Ravijojla<sup>11</sup> will shoot him with her arrows.<sup>12</sup> Invariably, the instant he starts singing the *vila* fires a pair of arrows into his throat and heart and Marko must chase her down and punish her. In the similar song *Vila Strijela Markova Pobratima* [A Vila Shoots Marko's Blood-Brother], Marko asks his companion (this time Relja Bošnjanine) to specifically sing *to the mountains*, and it is *this* that angers the local *vile*. Elsewhere, the *vila*'s anger is extended to all noise and merrymaking when, in another tale (MH II pt. I, #20, 68), Marko sends his *kum* [best man] and a

<sup>11</sup>Ravijojla is a common *vila* name and is most often the name of Marko's *posestrima vila*.

<sup>12</sup>Vuk Karadžić, attempting an explanation for the lack of context in this song, suggested that the *vila* and Miloš must have had a singing contest before the events of the epic, and the *vila* must have forbid the hero to sing due to jealousy of his fine voice (SNP II: 159 n. 31).

wedding party to deliver his fiancée to his wedding.<sup>13</sup> He sends them off with the strict warning that they are not to speak loudly, beat drums, play music or celebrate while passing over *Orlova Planina* [The Eagle's Mountain] because of the *vila* who resides there. These prescriptions of silence most likely have a deeper meaning than the superficial reading of a *vila*'s jealousy.

### Flight

The *vile* have wings and can fly, although sometimes the nature of their flight is vague in the epics. This point will receive more attention and elucidation further in the discussion.

### Retinue

There are many *vile*, and they gather together in groups, most often to dance the *kolo*, but also for meetings. In *A Vila Shoots Marko's Blood-Brother*, a gathering of thirty *vile* convene to decide who should deal with Relja Bošnjanine. The group has a leader, elected by seniority, who offers her position to any of the clan bold enough to attack a friend of Marko's. In the tale *Ženidba Marijana, Sestrića Marka Kraljevića* [The Marriage of Marijan, the Nephew (son of sister) of Marko Kraljević] (MH II pt. I, #69, 286-300), a *vila* leads a troupe of (again) thirty in the protection of a mythical lake on the peak of a mountain. Within most stories the *vile* are distinct enough to receive a number of individual names, although they are mostly common names (Mandalina, Anđelija, Gjurga etc.) that provide little assistance to mythological analysis.<sup>14</sup>

### Powerful Warriors

The largest role that the *vila* plays in the heroic songs, and the most surprising given the average passive depiction of women in South Slavic epics, is that of a warrior. The *vile* are seen as powerful, supernatural warriors whose might is only rivalled by the bravest of heroes. Often Kraljević Marko is the only hero said to frighten *vile*, and usually only after he has given one a reason to fear him, and yet, in one variant of *Smrt Marka Kraljevića* [The Death of Marko Kraljević] (MH II pt. I, #72, 316), it is an angry *vila* who ends the life of this most

<sup>13</sup>For traditional Serbian wedding practices, see Mijatović, 2007.

<sup>14</sup>For more on the names of *vile*, see Banašević, 1952.

famous hero.<sup>15</sup> The fact that the *vile* are said to gather in groups most likely suggests their involvement in a supernatural war-band. If *vile* do intervene violently in the epics their weapon of choice is always a bow and arrow and they are often described as wearing armour.<sup>16</sup>

In those epics that do not employ the *vila* as an enemy or love interest, her role is always that of a supernatural aid to the hero.<sup>17</sup> Most heroes in the corpora have a *vila* who acts as their *posestrima*, aiding them in battle (most often with secret knowledge rather than through action). This connection to heroes also informs a number of epics where a *vila* comes upon a wounded hero (often her *pobratim*) dying after a battle. In these songs the *vila* will extend the honour of last rites that any human hero would equally perform; she will either bring word of his death to the hero's family, or give him a proper burial. In one song a *vila* not only buries a hero, but builds a church and plants an orchard on his grave (Petrović 1930: 39).<sup>18</sup> Again, deeper meanings regarding this role may be shrouded in the past, as many songs hint at a *vila*'s possible role as psychopomp.

#### **Omniscience and Secret Knowledge**

If the *vila*'s preeminent role in most epics is that of heroic aid, her main weapon is not the bow and arrow, but her secret knowledge and seeming ability to see all and know all. Most often her role in the epics is that of a disembodied voice. If a hero or villain has performed a disgraceful act, or erred in some way, a *vila* will call down to him from a mountain like a manifest conscience.

*Al mu vikne iz gorice vila:* But a *vila* from the mountain  
yelled to him:  
„Zlo ti jutro, mali Marijane!“Bad morning to you little  
Marijan!

---

<sup>15</sup> Strangely, the *vila* simply wills Marko's death, as though telekinetically. The hero's head begins to hurt as he ignores the *vila*'s demands and then he promptly falls dead. This is not the only epic containing this motif.

<sup>16</sup> See (MH II pt. I, #3, 11).

<sup>17</sup> For a richer analysis of heroic helpers, including the *vila*, refer to chapter 2 of Miller, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Respectively symbols of culture and nature, one of the many divides that the *vila* passes between.

<i>Uteće ti beže Sokoliću</i>	The beg Sokolić fled <sup>19</sup>
<i>U avliju, u bijelu kulu.</i>	To his courtyard, to his white tower.
<i>U njega je kamena avlija,</i>	His is a stone courtyard,
<i>Zatvorit će čelik i mandale,</i>	He is going to close steel and wood beams,
<i>Ti ga više ni viditi ne ćeš.“</i>	You will not see him again.”
	(MH VIII, #28, 176, lines 120-126)

The positive side of this trope is the *vila*'s ability to call down to her *pobratim* in a time of need. In the tale *Vidak Harambaša i Barun Franjo Trenk* [Vidak the Outlaw and Baron Franjo Trenk] (MH VIII, #13, 87), Franjo is saved from a secret ambush by his *vila*.

<i>Oni pošli Trenkovome dvoru,</i>	They went to Trenk's manor,
<i>Misle momci, nitko ih ne čuje,</i>	The lads thinking that no one hears them,
<i>Al to čula vila u planini,</i>	But a <i>vila</i> in the mountains heard,
<i>Pa je vila Trenka dozivala:</i>	Then the <i>vila</i> called to Trenk:
<i>„Pobratime, Trenkoviću Franjo!</i>	“Blood-brother Trenković Franjo!
<i>Zlo si sio i vino popio</i>	You have sown evil and drunk wine
<i>Eto na te gorski harambaše,</i>	Mountain outlaws are upon you,
<i>Pred njima je Vidak harambaša,</i>	Leading them is Vidak the Outlaw,
<i>Misle tvoje popalit timare,</i>	They intend to burn down your estate,
<i>Opkoliti tvoju b'jelu kulu,</i>	Surround your white tower,
<i>Pobiti će mlađane pandure,</i>	They will slaughter your young guards,
<i>Porušit će tvoju b'jelu kulu,</i>	They will reduce your white tower to rubble,
<i>A tebe će mlađa uhvatiti</i>	And you, young one, they will capture
<i>I tebi se ljuto osvetiti.</i>	And avenge their anger upon you.
<i>Već ti kupi, Trenkoviću Franjo,</i>	But gather, Franjo Trenković,

<sup>19</sup>Beg is a Turkish title, known in English as bey, denoting a district governor.

<i>Već ti kupi mlađane pandure,</i>	But gather the young guards,
<i>Pa ih meći u tajne busije</i>	Then place them into a secret ambush
<i>I zatvori na ćardaku vrata,</i>	And close the door of your manor,
<i>Pa kad dođu gorski harambaše,</i>	Then when the mountain outlaws arrive,
<i>Pospi na njih iz zasjede vatru!</i> <sup>20</sup>	Hasten upon them with ambush fire!”

(lines 63-82)

This secret knowledge, coupled with tactical advice, is the *vila*'s most characteristic aid in heroic epics. Perhaps the most familiar South Slavic epic to English language readers is that of Marko Kraljević's fight with Musa Kesedžija [Musa the Robber (lit. Purse-snatcher)] (SNP II, #67, 26). In this song, Marko is overcome by Musa, who is the more powerful warrior, and is near defeat, when he calls out to his *vila*, reprimanding her for deserting him after she has promised to protect him. In most variants the *vila* replies to Marko from the clouds above that she never fights on Sunday<sup>20</sup> and that two warriors attacking one is an unfair advantage. This does not preclude her involvement, however, and the *vila* reminds Marko of daggers that he has hidden upon him. Musa (an Albanian, which may explain his lack of *vila* familiarity<sup>21</sup>) looks to the clouds to see with whom Marko is conversing and Marko exploits the opportunity by disembowelling him.

This secret knowledge of the *vile* also notably encompasses botanical knowledge. Every song which involves a *vila* harming an acquaintance of Marko's will inevitably end in Marko beating the *vila* into submission and then forcing her to obtain secret herbs (or sometimes healing waters) to cure the victim. Tatyana Popović cites a song where Marko forces a *vila* to use this knowledge to raise a hero from the dead (1988: 126).

While the *vile* are privy to secret knowledge and are always watching events unfold in the world, this omniscience is matched with an equally potent prescience. Their

<sup>20</sup>The fact that the supernatural, pagan *vile* appear in the epics as devout Christians is a wonderful trope that surfaces frequently.

<sup>21</sup>The Albanians have their own *vila*-like figure, the *zona* (see Miller, 2009), but I suspect that a Serbian singer would assume any outsider to be unfamiliar.

proclamations to heroes in a number of songs hint at their knowledge of the future, but the most telling example is in Vuk Karadžić's favourite variant of *The Death of Marko Kraljević* (SNP II, #74, 314). Marko, being the great hero that he is, cannot be killed by a mere villain. In this famous song, Marko is travelling upon a mountain when his sure-footed steed, Šarac [lit. Pie-bald], begins to stumble and shed tears. Marko starts to reprimand his horse, but is interrupted by his *vila*, who informs him that Šarac is grieving the death of his master. Marko is unbelieving at first, but he is directed to a well where he sees the truth of his fate reflected. He kills and buries his horse (so that it may not fall into enemy hands), breaks his weapons, leaves a message and some money for the man who may find his body, and then lies down and dies.<sup>22</sup>

### Bestowers of Power

Along with the *vila*'s ability to tap into supernatural powers, she is also able to bestow this power upon mortals. In many of the stories of Marko's birth, his mother *Yevrosima*<sup>23</sup> is replaced by a *vila*. Some stories even tell that Marko (as well as many other South Slavic heroes) was born of the union of a *vila* and a dragon. This mythological parentage is explanation enough in the epics for a hero's magnificent strength and other attributes. In other stories where Marko is human-born, his strength is often bestowed upon him by a *vila*. In these tales, a young Marko is usually working as a shepherd when he comes upon a *vila* lying out in the sun, whom he shades with plants and flowers lest her beauty be sunburned. In other variants Marko finds a *vila*'s children lost in the heat of the day and shades them. As a gift, the *vila* will often give Marko a sword and his marvellous horse Šarac (Popović 1988: 72), or tell him where to go to capture or purchase his horse.<sup>24</sup> In a number of other origin songs, most likely the oldest and certainly the most important for mythological study, the *vila* repays Marko for his kindness to her by letting him suckle

<sup>22</sup>In line with the humorous mood of most Marko songs, his body remains there a week; all the passersby assuming Marko is sleeping and leaving him alone, for fear of his rage.

<sup>23</sup>See Popović, 1988 for more information on Marko's human parents and their implications regarding his heroic nature.

<sup>24</sup>Following a very common Indo-European motif, Šarac is often depicted as a mangy, unsightly horse until he is purchased by Marko who is aware of his true nature.

three times from her breast, thus imbuing him with his heroic strength (Lord 1991: 206).

### Power in Hair or Garments

Another shared feature between the myths and folk belief is that the hair or garments of a *vila* contain her power. Folklore materials place the most emphasis on the idea that a *vila*'s hair holds her supernatural power, and that control can be gained over her through the magic laws of contagion. There is some mention of this trait in the epics. In variants of Marko's battle with Musa Kesedžija, Marko's *vila* refuses to join the fight, for fear that Musa's more numerous *posestrime vile* will tear her hair out (Fisher 1990: 42). In one ballad, a mother's hasty wishes bring the sexual advances of a *vila* to her son (much to the chagrin of his fiancée). The mother's knife and the threat of shorn locks promptly remedies the situation (MH V pt. II, #23, 29). Yet most often within the epics, a *vila*'s clothing take on far more prominence than her hair. In a unique song, a *vila* becomes foster parent to her *pobratim*'s son when he is imprisoned (MH IX, #2, 11). When the child has grown old enough to rescue his father, the *vila* sets him off with a sword and horse and provides him with 'vila clothes' [*vilinsko odilo*] which magically camouflage him, making him unrecognizable. When he arrives to rescue his father, the Turkish enemies mistake him for a number of famous heroes, unable to see through his glamour until he reveals himself with his 'signature laugh'. A *vila*'s clothing, however, is a veritable repository of magic power and serves a much more important role.

### Marriage with Mortals

One of the most common functions that the *vile* serve in the epics has been hinted at earlier, that is, their ability to marry heroes, and bear them children. But it is the form of these unions that is most fascinating. One of the oldest motifs involving the *vila*, is that of a hero forcing her to marry him by stealing her garments while she bathes or sleeps. In some tales the garments are clothes, armour or a crown, in others (certainly the more mythologically important) it is her wings, a feather, or her bird garb. In *The Birth of Marko Kraljević*, Marko's father, King Vukašin, is directed to the lake of a mountain *vila* named Mandalina, where he finds her sleeping.



He steals her crown and wings and flees back to his castle, promptly hiding them from sight. The *vila* races to his manor, demands her clothing back and offers a trade, to which Vukašin, fully aware of the rules regarding *vile*, replies,

„Ne ću, <i>vilo</i> , nijednoga dara,	“I do not want any presents <i>vila</i> ,
Neg ako ćeš meni ljuba biti!“	But that you will be my love!”
Tužna <i>vila</i> u zlu se vidila,	The sad <i>vila</i> found herself caught in evil,
Ide za njim b'jelom njeg'vom dvoru,	She followed him into his white manor,
Vjenća <i>vilu</i> Vukašine kralju.	King Vukašin married the <i>vila</i> .
Dva je njemu porodila sina,	She gave him two sons,
Prvoga je Kraljevića Marka,	The first was Marko Kraljević,
A drugoga Andriju nejaka.	And the second Andrija the weak. <sup>25</sup>

(lines 38-45)

This tale also introduces the most crucial aspect of the marriage of heroes and *vile*, the fact that these marriages are temporary or conditional, and that the *vila* must inevitably return to her supernatural realm. After nineteen years Vukašin's *vila*-wife tricks him into returning her wings and crown and then, as mentioned earlier, dances a *kolo* in his courtyard before flying up to the sky. She calls down to him that although he shall never see her again, she shall return early in the mornings and late in the evenings to finish raising the infant Andrija.

In *The Wedding of Marko Kraljević* (MH II pt. I, #19, 61), Marko is similarly wed to a *vila*, only this time she is not forced

---

<sup>25</sup>Marko's brother Andrija, or Andrijaš, factors into many epics including the oldest recorded song (*Marko Kraljević i Brat Mu Andrijaš*, recorded from fishermen on the Croatian Island of Hvar and published in Vienna in 1568). His weakness here is in regard to his young age in the tale since Andrija is a hero in his own right.

into the marriage, but chooses him willingly as a mate. Marko sees the *vila* Nadanojla (here the leader of the *vile*) dancing a kolo in a group and he sends his falcon to steal her crown<sup>26</sup> and wings. She chases after Marko, but when she catches up to him she is far from angry. They return to Marko's castle and on the way she explains her unique marital stricture to him. She instructs Marko on how to greet each of the people she knows will meet him on their arrival; he is not to tell anyone that he is returning with a *vila* to marry (obviously an honour, the pride of which he must abstain from). As Marko meets the guard of his castle and his mother, they indeed react as the *vila* has foretold, each remarking on the *vila* at Marko's side. He responds (as she has instructed) incredulously that there is no *vila* with him, but only a young shepherd girl. A few years pass and Marko is holding a tripartite celebration, he has been given a son by his wife, he is giving his sister away in marriage and it is his name day.<sup>27</sup> Caught up in the merriment, Marko foolishly boasts that a *vila* has given him a child, and Nadanojla, enraged, seizes her crown and wings and leaves him. Marko does track her down, make amends and return with her to his castle at the end of this tale, but such an ending is unconventional and the original motif is still present.

While the mythological *vila* characteristically employs the swan maiden motif, the folkloric variant does not reflect this. The idea of marriage with *vile* does find its way into the folkloric portrayal of the *vila*, but the conception there is commonly vague. Bird aspects are seldom mentioned, and when this imagery is employed it is usually the acquisition of a feather from her wings that allows the protagonist to acquire his bride. The *samovili* are able to marry men, but are said to make bad wives and worse mothers, and it is said that they will not remain long (Nicoloff 1975: 10).

This point reveals another, albeit minute, difference between the folkloric and mythological *vila*. As a mother the *vila* of folk-custom is ill-suited, the *vila* of the epics however is quite nurturing. She must inevitably return to her own realm, yet seldom are the songs where the *vila* does not promise to continue raising her young children through secret visits. By

<sup>26</sup>Here titled *uzglavje*, which is usually a term for a pillow, but here is more a headdress.

<sup>27</sup>See Mijatović, 2007 for more on this and other cultural traits.

suckling a young shepherd Marko, the *vila* also displays a propensity for fosterage (a mother's milk being a common symbol of kinship ties in myths).<sup>28</sup> The role of the children themselves is also a vague but interesting concept that could benefit from more intensive enquiry. Although heroes are said to be the children of *vile*, there are no songs that tell of their rearing. Conversely, the *vila* is often pictured with anonymous children, yet to my knowledge no song describes the adulthood of such a child. Since there are no male *vile* it can be assumed that an Amazonian system applies – the male children stay on earth as men, the females become *vile*, but this is never explicit. Only one song, to my knowledge, addresses the question at all. In *Ivan's Vila*, after the *vila* has been chased away by the hero's mother, Ivan implores her to return,

<i>Progovara vili u oblaku:</i>	He said to the <i>vila</i> in the cloud:
„Vrat' se natrag, prebijela vilo! što će tvoja dva nejaka sina?“	“Turn back white <i>vila</i> ! What will become of your two weak sons?”
<i>Al govori vila iz oblaka:</i>	But the <i>vila</i> said from the cloud:
„Ne budali, lijepi Ivane!	“Don't be foolish, handsome Ivan!
<i>Moji sinci dobro će bez majke.</i>	My sons will be fine without a mother.
<i>Ako l' sinci moje krvi budu, Oni ć' naći svoju milu majku;</i>	If our sons are of my blood, They will find their dear mother;
<i>Naći će ju nebu u oblaci'.</i>	They will find her in the sky in the clouds.
<i>Ako l' sinci tvoje krvi budu,</i>	If our sons are of your blood,
<i>Ti ji' 'ráni sebi uz koljena!“</i>	You will nourish them by your knees!”

(lines 61-71)

### Connection to Birds

As has already been illustrated, the predilection of the *vile* to fly and the fact that they have wings is enough to link them

<sup>28</sup>In folk-custom the *Vilenice* healers in communities are often said to have been abducted for parts of their childhood by *vile*, during which time they are taught their magic and knowledge (Čića 2002: 44-45).

totemically and anthropomorphically to birds, but beyond that, there are specific references to *vile* taking on the form of birds. While the *vile* of folk custom are said to be able to change into swans, wolves, snakes and any number of other animals (Kulišić et al. 1970: 66), the *vile* of the epics transform exclusively into birds. A *vila*'s magic garments are interchangeable for wings in the epics, a point that should not be seen as a variation so much as a continuation of a single theme. The fact that control can be gained over a *vila* by acquiring a feather, clothing or wings from her is befitting the common European myth motif, but her warrior nature also connects her to the totemic transformations of Indo-European warriors. Where berserkers in Norse mythology may don a bear hide, the *vile* wear bird suits or use their clothing to transform into birds.

In a variant of *The Wedding of Marko Kraljević* mentioned earlier, Marko must save his fiancée from a *vila* who is holding her captive in a mountain lair, torturing her in retribution for the noise that her wedding party foolishly made in the mountains. While Marko is outside the *vila*'s cliff, trying to discover the secret entrance, she emerges and flies off. This *should* reveal the cave's entrance, and yet Marko remains confounded because the *vila* has quickly darted out of the rocks in the form of an eagle. Similarly, in an old variant of *Marko Kraljević and Mina of Kostur*, recorded in 1758 in Dubrovnik, a *vila* who comes to aid Marko in battle does not call to him from the heavens with her knowledge, but flies off from her mountain and lands on Marko's shoulder (MH II pt. I, #48, 210). It could be argued that the *vila* is in full womanly form, but the idea seems rather humorous. The context suggests that the *vila* has theriomorphically transformed into a bird and has flown down to whisper help into Marko's ear. Given the nature of the *vila*'s bathing habits, her affinity to water and her connection to the swan-maiden motif, the folklore conception of *vile* as swans would be rather fitting as well. Although I have not seen it explicitly mentioned in the epics, her connection to water resembles that of a swan or similar bird. There is another conception, however, which should be addressed. In the song *The Marriage of Marijan, the Nephew of Marko Kraljević*, the leader of the *vile* is said to sprout her wings from her shoulders. Although this description could be seen as contradictory, I believe that the idea of *vile* turning

into birds does not negate the possibility of epic singers imagining a transformational middle-ground.

### Sacrifice

Maybe the most alluring and archaic aspect that belongs to the *vila* of myth is the concept of sacrifice. The sacrifice to *vile* that Procopius attributed to the South Slavic tribe he encountered finds attestation in a number of forms in the epic songs. The most famous example is from the song *Зиданье Скадра* [The Building of Skadar] (SNP II, #26, 90) where the three Mrnjavčević brothers are attempting to erect a fortress at Skadar.<sup>29</sup> Following a common European myth motif, the fortress walls fall every night. Here, however, it is a *vila* from the mountain who ruins the architects' work. The *vila* calls down to the royal brothers from a mountain, and informs them that the building can only stand if twins are found, bearing the names Stojan and Stoja,<sup>30</sup> and buried under the foundation. When these twins cannot be located<sup>31</sup> the *vila* demands a surrogate sacrifice, telling the brothers that one of their wives must be walled into the foundation. It is at this point in the tale that most scholars will note the universal folklore motif of the 'walled-up wife' and contextualise it with evidence for human sacrifice in past European building practices (Zimmerman 1979b: 373), or the fact that in Montenegro, until fairly recently, a chicken or sheep was decapitated and its blood spread on the site of a future structure (Petrovitch 1914: 24). What is never addressed is the simple fact that, typologically, demanding sacrifice is part of the *vila's modus operandi*. Moreover, most scholars overlook the detail that the buildings that the *vile* demand sacrifice for are military fortifications. A sacrifice is never performed without a beneficial outcome and within this motif, the ability of the *vila* to bestow power on heroes reaches its macabre zenith.

We find the clearest sacrificial evidence in the tale *Mijat Spasava Kraljevića Marka* [Mijat Rescues Marko Kraljević] (MH VIII, #17, 103), when Marko is captured in the city of Karlovac

<sup>29</sup>For a more in-depth study of this song (specifically the moral aspects explored within it), see Zimmerman, 1979b.

<sup>30</sup>These names are derived from the verb *stojati*, to stand.

<sup>31</sup>The futility of this incident should immediately gather the attention of mythologists. See Colarusso 1998, for an explanation of how the small, odd details in myths often hold the most archaic implications.

by Turks, but sends word to a number of heroes who form a rescue party. When the hero Marijan informs Marko's brother Andrija, he is overheard by Marko's two sons, who become worried and race to gather horses to ride to Karlovac. As they ride off, five seemingly random lines are devoted to a *vila* who exits the song as quickly as she enters.

<i>Gledala ih vila iz oblaka,</i>	A <i>vila</i> watched them from a cloud,
<i>Sama sobom ona besidila:</i>	Alone to herself she said:
<i>„Koji bi se junak nahodio,</i>	“If there could be a hero found,
<i>Pogubio dvoje dice male,</i>	To kill the two little children,
<i>Dala bi mu pola snage svoje!“</i>	I would give him half my power!”

(lines 325-329)

Although it has no bearing whatsoever on the story or any of the characters, an old epic formula makes its way into this song – for a small sacrifice of two children, the *vila* would convey power to a hero; perhaps in the same manner that it was given to the young Marko as discussed earlier.

These ideas are found as well in the tales where a *vila* guards a secret mountain lake or spring. Most often thirsty heroes are directed to the lakes, but warned that the *vila* who guards them exacts a heavy toll or tax.<sup>32</sup> Usually the fee is the two eyes, or two arms of a hero, and his horse's legs, all crucial attributes and thus the highest of prices. In *The Birth of Marko Kraljević*, before King Vukašin forces the *vila* to marry him, he is sent to her lake by another *vila* to remedy his poor hunting prowess. He is told that the *vila* of the lake can teach him how to hunt, that is, for a small price, “from a hero, arm and muscle” (line 18). The sacrifice motif may even extend to the *vila*'s penchant for dancing the *kolo*. Yoffe and Krafczik suggest that the *kolo*'s roots lie in sacrificial dances (2003: 27-28), although I remain sceptical on the matter.

In one of the starkest examples of the sacrifice motif presented in the songs, a particularly cruel *vila* is building a

---

<sup>32</sup>In some rare songs this taxation is brought to an extreme and the *vila* is depicted as a water merchant (Popović 1988:10). Within the folk customs regarding *vile*, Čića outlines water taboos in Croatia requiring that *vile* be invoked as *posestrime* before the water may be touched (Čića 2002: 38).

city in the mountains, but not just any city, for her materials are the bones of heroes and their horses (MH V pt. II, #38, 51). When she runs short of these, she convinces her equally malicious *pobratim*, the *ban* Drinović,<sup>33</sup> to lead the wedding party of a rich man's daughter into the mountain where he is to ambush the party and kill everyone, "*sve pogubi malo i veliko*" [kill everyone, both small and big (young and old)] (line 25). When the *ban* and his bandits have murdered all but the young girl, she begs for her life and asks him if he knows of her brother, the *ban* Drinović. In this tragic moment, the *ban* learns of his *vila*'s true cruelty, that she has set him to murder everyone near and dear to his own, long lost sister. And yet the epics need not be so specific in their depiction of the *vila*'s desire for sacrifice; at the lowest level, her strong connection to war and battle (a blood ritual itself) is enough.

Aside from these firmly attested features of the mythological *vila*, there are some ambiguous aspects that should be addressed.

### Blinding

Although *vile* in the epics seem to enjoy blinding their victims, the tendency is far from exclusive. The concept of tearing out eyeballs is a general trope for South Slavic supernatural beings, which is fitting given the dramatic and gruesome nature of such an act. In the tale *Јован и Дивск Старјешина* [Jovan and the Leader of the Giants] (SNP II, #8, 29), the Giant and Jovan's deceptive mother tear his eyes out. It is in fact a *vila* who heals his wounds with sacred waters and asks God to grant Jovan new eyes. In another song a woman offers to give a *vila* one of three gifts: her wealth, her eyes, or her white hands if the *vila* will only heal her dying brother. The *vila* scoffs at all these gifts and asks instead for the girl's blonde hair, another testament to the power of hair in the lore of the *vila* (MH V pt. II, #25, 33).

### Riding Wild Animals

This is a somewhat difficult aspect to allocate to a depiction of the *vila* (folkloric or mythological), and one that requires more research. Although songs do on occasion depict

---

<sup>33</sup> *Ban* is a Slavic borrowing of the Avar *bajan*. It denotes a nobleman or land owner.

the *vila* riding on horseback, a number of texts (Zimmerman, Máchal and Nicoloff) describe *vile* as riding deer and battling upon them in forests. Commonly it is said that the *vile* ride deer, using serpents as reins. The concept is, to my knowledge, based upon two mythic tropes, whether it also belongs to the folkloric *vila* is an important question. The first example involves a number of Bulgarian songs where a *samovila* brings news to a hero, or weapons he requires in battle, which she delivers riding a deer (Nicoloff 1975: 11). Popović cites a song where a *samovila* delivers a message to Krali Marko riding a gray stag, “two vipers serve her as stirrups, yellow smoke is her whip...” (1988: 67).

The second example, which comes from the Serbo-Croatian songs, regards a number of variants of one epic, *Marko Kraljević i Vila Brodarica* [Marko Kraljević and the Vila Brodarica] (MH II pt. I, #2, 5) (also called *baždarkinja*, *bardarica* or *vodarica*, all terms implying a collector of a tax on water). In this tale, Marko faces off against a *vila* who rides a deer, uses snakes for reins, and fires snakes as arrows from her bow. This trope, however, is mirrored in the odd tale *Цар и Дјевојка* [The Czar and the Girl] (SNP I, #234, 155), in which a young (human) girl retreats to the woods to construct a pagan church. When the Czar leads an army to retrieve her she is quick to act:

<i>А кад и је млада угледала,</i>	And when the young girl
	saw (the army),
<i>она оде у зелену башчу:</i>	she went to her green
	garden:
<i>јелен-рогом шарца оседлала,</i>	she saddled her pie-bald
	with deer antlers,
<i>љутом га је змијом зауздала,</i>	with an angry snake she
	bridled him,
<i>још га љућом змијом ошибује.</i>	and with an angrier snake
	she spurred him.

(lines 30-34)

Later, when she captures the Czar himself, she tears out his eyes and leaves him blind to wander the forest. Where the true root of this motif lies is debatable. If it is a key aspect of the mythological *vila*, then the trope not only adds credence to her role as a warrior, it takes her heroic traits and elevates them in league with her supernatural aspects by having her



ride an animal that was deemed sacred by the South Slavs (Koljević 1980: 56 n.127). This trope would also create new questions regarding her sometimes ambiguous position as nature spirit.

Even considering these uncertain traits it is clear that typologically and functionally the *vila* of the myths and epics is a very distinct entity from the *vila* of folk customs. The implications of this suggest the need for an alteration to the way in which this figure is analyzed and described in academic work. Furthermore, this understanding sheds light on the connection that is often posited between the *vila* and the *rusalka*.

### The Rusalka

In Russian oral tradition we find the *rusalka*. Like the folkloric *vila* she is a dangerous creature who is said to drown unsuspecting people in water or drop on them from the branches of forest trees (Ivanits 1989: 75). *Rusalki* dance the *kolo* (in Russian *khorovod*), tickle people to death, have green or brown, wet hair and are said to be “the souls of unbaptized or stillborn babies and drowned maidens” (75). Although they are said to take humans as husbands, they take boys from villages and most often bring them to their underwater kingdoms (76). The *rusalki* are often thought to be the mistresses of the *vodianoi* (the Russian male water spirit), and their earliest conceptions connect them to fish. Most folk drawings depict them as mermaids, or similar half-fish creatures.

Etymologically the water aspect comes naturally to the *rusalka*, as her name is derived from the word *ruslo* [river bed/channel], the same root that may lie behind the Sanskrit word *rasa* [water]. The elusive figure *bereginya*, which is said to be a precursor to the *rusalka*, derives its name from the word *bereg* [shore],<sup>34</sup> relating it to a common depiction of the *rusalka* as a ghostly maiden, combing her hair on the bank of a river. Both these etymologies comfortably suit Russian demonology where every spirit is named for its abode (such as the *domovoi*, derived from *dom* [home/house]). In Northern Russia, *rusalki* are said to be hideous and have large pendulous

---

<sup>34</sup>This theory is not without controversy, Yoffe and Krafczik argue that the term *bereginya* was a distortion of *\*pergyni*, the name, they suggest, for the hills where the Slavic god *Perun* was worshipped (2003:19).

breasts, and indeed, the Russian scholar D. K. Zelenin found that many Russian tales lack suggestions of *rusalka* beauty, but always stress their status as unclean dead (1913). Zelenin not only emphasized the dead maiden aspect of *rusalki*, he also suggested that their closest mythological analogue is the sirens of Greece.

In addition, there is also the connection of the *rusalki* to fields and grain crops that is addressed in the Barber paper; Máchal stresses this point as well. “The Rusalky live in woods, meadows, fields, and waters. Generally appearing when the corn begins to ripen in the fields, and concealed amidst it, ready to punish him who wantonly plucks the ears... they frolic among the high-standing corn and, rocking upon it, make it wave to and fro” (2006: 90). He connects the *rusalki* to hail, bad weather and fairy-circles as Conrad did the folkloric aspects of the *vila*, as well as midnight dances to the music of shepherds. He in fact attributes a profusion of fairy characteristics to the *rusalki*, but they all fall into actions performed in three zones – fields, rivers and forests. The manner in which the *rusalki* are associated with these environs should instantly remind one of the folkloric *vila*. Moreover, the *rusalki* never appear in Russian epics, only in fairytales and memorates where their role as dangerous spirits is stressed. In the tale *A Lad Who Watched Rusalki*, translated by Jack V. Haney, they are depicted as giggling nymphs, easily fooled, preoccupied by footwear (an interesting motif), and frightening when they pursue the hero (Haney 2009: 249-252). Oinas explains that *rusalki* “are said to spare those who can solve... riddles posed to them” (1985: 109). While these traits lack any connection with the mythic *vila*, they bear striking resemblance to the folkloric depiction of the *vila*. Both figures are portrayed as having a preoccupation with their dark hair, both play simple games (tickling, scaring, tying knots) which can turn deadly, both may originate with the ghostly dead, and both are connected to fields, forests and water. All of these aspects suggest that the *rusalka* can only be compared to the *vila* if her folkloric aspects are being analyzed.

While the *rusalka* aligns so clearly with the folkloric *vila*, she never appears in epics as the *vila* does; it makes sense then to seek a Russian analogue for the mythic *vila*. Sadly, there exists no clear mythological version of the *vila* in the

Russian *byliny* [epics]. Though the *polyanitsy* or *bogatyry* are the most obvious female warriors in the *byliny*, they are specifically depicted as human, not supernatural. Although they may share some functions with the *vila* (blood-sisters and wives to heroes), their depiction as foreigners (often from Lithuania) and strong women (Bailey and Ivanova 1998:94-96) makes them a clearer analogue with the Amazons of Greek myth. There are, however, some possible vestiges of a *vila*-like figure, such as the disembodied voice from the heavens that provides Dobrynya Nikitich with tactical advice in the epic *Dobrynya and the Dragon* (91), or the supernatural swan woman that Mikhailo Potyk discovers while hunting and marries on a unique condition (156).<sup>35</sup> What this might suggest about the *vila* is debatable. Does the *vila* represent an out-growth of a Serbo-Croatian *rusalka* figure, altered over time to a new role in the epics, or conversely, has an epic *vila*, once the product of a professionalized bardic class, been taken on by the masses and given local functions as a nature spirit? Perhaps two distinct figures have been subsumed by one *vila* name. An intensive historical study could provide some insight, although the question may be unanswerable, too shrouded in a preliterate past.

It is intriguing to note that the Bulgarian figures may reflect a similar divide. Máchal, Barber and Ivanits agree that the core aspect of *rusalki* is their connection to the seasons and fertility rites of spring. Ivanits claims that the Bulgarian version of the *rusalka* lives on the edge of the world and brings moisture and fertility (1989: 78). As noted earlier, the Bulgarians have two names for their folk figure, both *samovila*, and *samodiva*. Assen Nicoloff concludes the section of his book on the *samovila* by addressing the two terms. "Similar to *samovilas* are the *samodivas*. They live on the plains and are likely to be found along rivers, pools, springs and wells. In autumn they depart for the end of the world and come back again next spring. They leave their abodes only at night in order to wash, bathe and dance. Later [historically] the term *samodiva* is used in place of *samovila*" (1975: 11). More research is needed to support Nicoloff's claim, but were the

---

<sup>35</sup>Potyk must vow that whichever of them may die first, the other will be buried with the deceased for three months, certainly not a condition reflected in *vila* tales, but the other aspects of the tale merit closer examination.

depictions so starkly divided it could support the division found between the functions of the *vila*. Where the one figure is connected to themes of fertility and inhabits plains, forests and water features, the other lives in the mountains and clouds and is linked to heroes and myths.

### Conclusion

If this argument can be accepted, then certainly more questions arise than are answered. A line between folkloric genres is never as clear in practice as it appears in theory; obviously aspects of time-depth, borrowings, bleed-over and regional variation must be taken into account. Document retention and the late date of epic annotation among the Serbs and Croats will ultimately leave some questions shrouded forever. Where the lines can be drawn on ambiguous features of the *vila* is difficult to say. It would be beneficial to study more ethnographic material regarding folk-practices, as well as to explore oral traditions that lie in the middle-ground between myth and folk-custom such as the fairytale depictions of the *vila*. Yet, the ability of epic songs to retain archaic material is often astounding and the oldest materials can be analyzed to create a relatively clear picture. The conclusions drawn here are not only plausible, but statistically consistent.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the distinction between the epic and legendary functions of the *vila* is highly productive in elucidating extensive parallels with homologous figures in the Indo-European world, namely the Norse *valkyrie* and the Indic *apsarā*, connections which I shall explore in a subsequent study.

Whatever the mysterious past of the *vila* may be, this article has elucidated enough of a functional divide to merit the separate study of the *vila* in the two formats, here sub-labelled as ‘folkloric’, belonging to folk custom, and ‘mythological’, belonging to the epics and ballads. While scholars in the past have created disorderly lists of every story, trait or aspect that has been associated with the name *vila*, by employing a simple designation of which role of the *vila* is

---

<sup>36</sup>Of the one hundred mythological and epic songs surveyed for this study only one did not conform to the trait parameters set forward in this paper. The song (a *women’s song*, which are removed from the bardic practice) involves a *vila* transforming into a snake to bite a hero who has trampled on clover and made the clover cry (MH V pt. II, #31, 42).

being analyzed, folkloric or mythological, studies overloaded with facts and conflicting ideas can become clear and unambiguous. Hopefully this article will act as an exhaustive study of the role of the *vila* in Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian epics, as well as suggesting a more cogent method for analyzing her aspects.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the people who have aided me in this work. First my instructor Dr. John Colarusso for his insight and aid; Dr. Ellen Badone, Dr. Dean Miller and Claire Andrews, for reading the piece and offering advice (editing can be such a thankless job); and to Maja Lah and Branka Marijan for fine-tuning my translations, any mistakes contained within are my own.

### Abbreviations

MH – Matica Hrvatska, SNP – Srpske Narodne Pjesme.

### References

Songs are referenced in this article by collection name, volume number, song number, and page number.

Ajdačić, Dejan

- 2001 O Vilama u Narodnim Baladama [About the Vila in Folk Ballads]. *Studia Mythologica Slavica* IV. Udine: 207-224.

Bailey, James and Tatyana Ivanova

- 1998 *An Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*. Armonk and London: M. E. Sharpe.

Banašević, Nikola

- 1952 O Imenima Vila u Narodnim Pesmama [About the Names of Vila in Folk Songs]. *Zbornik Radova SAN* XVII. Beograd: 143-152.

Barber, E. J. W.

- 1997 On the Origins of the *Vily/rusalki*. In *Journal of Indo-European Studies Monograph Number 19. Varia on the Indo-European Past: Papers in Memory of Marija Gimbutas*. Washington: Institute for the Study of Man: 6-47.

Colarusso, John

- 1998 Dumézil and the Details: An Analysis of the Comparative Technique in Linguistics and Mythology. *Cosmos* 14: 103-117.

Conrad, Joseph L.

- 2000 Female Figures Among the South Slavs. *The Journal of the Slavic and East European Folklore Association* 5(2): 27-34.

*The Journal of Indo-European Studies*

- Čajkanović, Veselin  
1994 *Стара Српска Религија и Митологија* [Old Serbian Religion and Mythology]. Београд: Београдски Издавачко-графички Завод.
- Čiča, Zoran  
2002 Vilenica and Vilenjak: Bearers of an Extinct Fairy Cult. *Narodna Umjetnost: Croatian Journal of Ethnology and Folklore Research* 39(1): 31-63.
- Fisher, Laura Gordon  
1990 *Marko Songs from Hercegovina a Century After Karadžić*. New York and London: Garland Publishing.
- Haney, Jack V.  
2009 *An Anthology of Russian Folktales*. Armonk and London: M. E. Sharpe.
- Holte, Milne and Vasa D. Mihailovich (eds.)  
1997 *Songs of the Serbian People: From the Collection of Vuk Karadžić*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Ivanits, Linda J.  
1989 *Russian Folk Belief*. New York: M. E. Sharpe.
- Karadžić, Vuk Stefanović  
1891-1901 *Српске Народне Пјесме* [Serbian Folk Songs]. 9 vols. 'State Edition.' Београд: Штампарија Краљевине Србије.
- Koljević, Svetozar  
1980 *The Epic in the Making*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Kulišić, Š. et al.  
1970 *Српски Митолошки Речник* [Serbian Mythological Dictionary]. Београд: Нолит.
- Lord, Albert Bates  
1991 *Epic Singers and Oral Traditions*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.  
1995 *The Singer Resumes the Tale*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Máchal, Jan  
2006 [1891] Slavic Mythology. In *Vampire Lore: From the Writings of Jan Louis Perkowski*. F. Krupička (trans.). Bloomington: Slavica Publishers.
- Matica Hrvatska  
1879-1942 *Hrvatske Narodne Pjesme* [Croatian Folk Songs]. 10 vols. Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska.

- Mededović, Avdo  
1974 *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho*. Albert B. Lord, Milman Parry and David E. Bynum (eds.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Mijatović, Čedomilj  
2007[1908] *Servia and the Servians*. New York: Cosimo Classics.
- Miller, Dean A.  
2000 *The Epic Hero*. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press.  
2009 Balkan Epic Hero and Supernatural Helper. *Indo European Studies Bulletin* 13(2): 10-16.
- Nicoloff, Assen  
1975 *Bulgarian Folklore: Folk Beliefs, Customs, Personal Names*. Cleveland: The Author.
- Oinas, Felix J.  
1985 Russian *Poludnica* 'Midday Spirit'. In *Essays on Russian Folklore and Mythology*. Columbus: Slavica Publishers: 103-110.
- Petreska, Vesna  
2008 The Secret Knowledge of Folk Healers in Macedonian Traditional Culture. *Folklorica: Journal of the Slavic and East European Folklore Association* 13: 25-50.
- Petrović, P. M. (ed.)  
1930 *Зборник Јуначких Епских Народних Песма* [Collection of Heroic Epic Folk Songs]. 12<sup>th</sup> ed. Београд: Народно Дело.
- Petrovitch, Woislav M.  
1914 *Hero Tales and Legends of the Serbians*. London: George G Harrap & Company.
- Popović, Tatyana  
1988 *Prince Marko: The Hero of South Slavic Epics*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Procopius  
1924 *History of the Wars, vol 4*. H. B. Dewing (trans.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Yoffe, Mark and Joseph Krafczik  
2003 *Perun: The God of Thunder*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Zimmerman, Zora Devernja  
1979 The Changing Role of the Vila in Serbian Traditional Literature. *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 16(3): 167-175.  
1979b Moral Vision in the Serbian Folk Epic: The Foundation Sacrifice of Skadar. *The Slavic and East European Journal* 23(3): 371-380.