

Nestan Ratiani (Tbilisi)

THE PHENOMENON OF MARRIAGE IN THE EPICS OF HOMER

Wedding ritual holds a special place in the epics of Homer. As a matter of fact no wedding process is described in his work, but we can compile the information creating quite an interesting and, to our mind, universal idea about one of the most significant phenomenon of the human life.

It is of particular interest that here the picture of marriage as a phenomenon is multivariant.

Accordingly Homer embraces not only one definite variant or scheme of the wedding act realization, but represents the versatile and extremely broad possibilities of its achievement.

If we consider the ritual to be the culmination of the marriage phenomenon, then this phenomenon is worth noting to develop in the definite period of time before the point of culmination – i.e. the ritual – and after it as well. It is just three phases that are shown in their different levels of development in time with the possible exactness.

It is worth nothing that in relation with the term “the wedding” Homer is not distinguished with the diversity of epithets. He mainly uses the two epithets: πολυήρατος¹ and στυγερός².

It is quite natural as both of these epithets themselves comprise a lot of feelings or emotions. Consequently the fact that the marriage may be desirable or undesirable is shown in phrases indicating the right of the choice either by the man or the woman during the marriage³.

In all other cases the marriage is perceived with joyful events⁴ linked with the feast⁵ despite the further development of the fate of the spouses, the wedding itself is connected with joy and revels. twenty-third song of “Odyssey”, serve as an example to show that Odysseus calls his servants for dancing and singing to create the illusion of the wedding⁶.

As regards to the phenomenon of marriage itself, here Homer describes various relations. In “Iliad” several cardinal lines have been figured, describing the destinies of the following couples from the point of view of the marriage phenomenon. These are: Menelaus – Helen; Alexander – Helen; Hector – Andromache; Achilles – Briseis. The history of all of them is extremely interesting as it provides an excellent illustration of the fact that there exists no identical pattern of their fate and it is individual for each of them. However their culmination is mainly similar – the relationship is legalized. It seems to be an important stage for the couple and for the woman in particular (as it is noted by the persons lacking the statues of wife). However it would be exaggeration to say that in the case of the illegality the harmony between the couple is broken and they are not care taken or revealing their feelings to each other. Helen, who leaves her legal husband (the couple is broken) and marries Alexander (the new couple is created, which is predestined to break), who steals treasure and handmaids from Menelaus’s house, is not blamed by Homer. Helen for Homer is perceived as a victim of goddess, obeying her will. That is why Helen sympathizes the Achaeans. And in one episode presenting the scene if her reluctance to enter her second husband's room, she finally obeys his will again inspired by Aphrodite. Here even the rebuke sounds in her tone when addressing the goddess.⁷

¹ “Lo, I too give this gift, dear child, a remembrance of the hands of Helen, against the day of they longed-for marriage, for thy bride to wear it...”, Od. 15, 126; Homer, *The Odyssey*, with an English translation by A. T. Murray, 1946;

² “And she neither refuses the hateful marriage”, Od. 16, 126; “The night shall come when a hateful marriage shall fall to the lot of me accursed, whose happiness Zeus has taken away”, Od. 18, 272;

³ Od. 20, 74; 18, 270; 20, 372 etc.

⁴ “...follow thou after the lovely works of marriage”, Il.5,429, Homer, *The Iliad*, with an English translation by A. T. Murray, 1963;

⁵ “In the one there were marriages and feastings”, Il. 18, 491;

⁶ Od. 23; 135,149;

⁷ Il. 3, 399-402;

Helen repeatedly mentions that she has become the reason for misery and demolition. She often uses negative epithets while speaking about herself.

Helen is a spouse of the two men and both of them are in love with her. Her beloved husband is Menelaus. They had a daughter, their common child. However, mother's affection towards her child is left beyond the author's attention. In their relationship child should not be supposed to play a decisive role. The problem of having a child is not a decisive factor in the relationship Helen and Alexander either. They, have no children and accordingly Alexander's behaviour is based on affection towards the woman. When the Troians get together and Antenor advises: "Come ye now, let us give Argive Helen and the treasure with her unto the sons of Atreus to take away".⁸

Alexander is ready to give the treasure back adding that of his own if only to have his wife beside him.⁹

Alexander's speech comes to be decisive and Idaeus gives the following answer to Agamemnon: "The treasure that Alexander brought to Troy in his hollow ships-would that he had perished first! – all this he is minded to give, and to add thereto from his own store; But the wedded wife of glorious Menelaus, he declares he will not give; though verily the Troians".¹⁰

Taking his treasure back is a significant factor for Menelaus,¹¹ though we cannot say that it is a decisive factor at all for anyone in this war, because the answer of Diomedes to the messenger of the Troians is following: "Let no man now accept the treasure from Alexander, nay, nor Helen".¹²

We meet image of Helen in "odyssey" as well. Here she is already a wife of Menelaus. When Telemachus visits them in Sparta, she is a wife of Menelaus. Without knowing the prehistory of this ideal picture, we would consider them to be a happy family making plans about the marriage and happiness of their children. However, here too Helen blames herself using just, reproaching words and considers that she is an apple of discord not without reason.¹³

Troian war caused the separation of many spouses. In the poem great importance is attached to the marital relationship between Hector and Andromache which is interrupted by the war. Their love creates the contrasting picture of marital bliss with the city devastated by the war.

However the hundred lines describing this scene makes us feel that their happiness is short as every word addressed to each other is full of pain and regret, seized with fear that death will separate them. Apart from their affection they are united by the common child. Besides, they represent not only the happy spouses linked only with love, but they are the happy family as well owing to their child with Hector being a thoughtful father amusing his child who at time makes him forget misfortune and intensifying the fear for the future danger simultaneously. Still Hector is a loving husband first of all.¹⁴ His affection towards Andromache is superior to everything.¹⁵

Not only the legal wife and husband love each other. This is a leading line in "Iliad" when Achilles flies into a rage after Bryseis has been taken away from him. She is not Achill's legal wife, though as it comes clear, Bryseis never loses hope, because when she cries over the dead body of Patroclus she declares about her concern regarding her illegal status. Otherwise why does she need to be consoled by Patroclus?¹⁶

It is hard to say that Achilles aimed at marrying her. He seems to accept his father's proposal and marry a maiden chosen by him.¹⁷

And still the parting with Bryseis causes such boundless fury that it was the death of his friend Patroclus that could put down fury by another fury. Achilles is surprised that his feeling is incomprehensible for sons Atreus – it was the woman who caused their invasion, was not it? No matter that Helen was a legal wife: "But why must the Argives wage war against the Troians? Why hath he gathered and led hither his host, this son of Atreus? Was it not for fair-haired Helen's sake? Do they then alone of mortal men love their wives, these sons of Atreus?"¹⁸

⁸ Il. 7, 350;

⁹ Il. 7, 362-364;

¹⁰ Il. 7, 389-393;

¹¹ Il. 3, 70-72;

¹² Il. 7, 400-401;

¹³ Od. 4, 145;

¹⁴ Il. 6, 429-430;

¹⁵ Il. 6, 450-454;

¹⁶ Il. 19, 297-299;

¹⁷ Il. 9, 393-394; 397-399;

¹⁸ Il. 9, 338-341;

Neither in his fury put down when he learns through Odysseus that he would grant him the huge treasure in Troy¹⁹ and after capturing it there would be some added²⁰ and: "he will honour thee even as Orestes...his son well-beloved... and he will furthermore give a dower full rich, such as no man ever yet gave with his daughter".²¹

Phoenix compares Achilles's fury with that of Aetolian Meleager, who after the discord with his mother, locked himself up together with his beautiful wife – Cleopatra. Nobody could put his fury. Neither the nobles as the messengers, nor promised gifts, old parents, beloved sisters and friends singled out and esteemed by him. Only the request of his young wife mollified him to rescue the town from the Curetes.²² The action of Helen and Deiphobus is based on the power of the voices. when she, inspired by god, calls Achaeans hidden in the horse, imitating their wives voices. This is the only option to rescue the Troians and nearly achieve their aim if not the reasonable action of Odysseus.²³

The ritual of wedding as a culmination of the happiness is easily seen in "Iliad". Against the background of the exhausted warriors and the bloody battles, the wedding scene reflected on Achilles's shield appears in a contrast manner. In fact, the shield of Achilles is believed to present the universe.²⁴ It comprises the sun and the moon as well as the heaven and the earth. And in this world one of the central places is occupied by the picture of the two towns. One of them is described to be peaceful and the illusion of calmness and happiness is created through the wedding scene. It is quite clear – as the wedding is the most exciting and elevated stage in the human life – the period when, as a rule, both - the direct participants and observers are equally happy. Homer provided an excellent illustration of this: "Therein fashioned he also two cities of mortal men exceeding fair. In the one there were marriages and feasts, and by the light of the blazing torches they were leading the brides from their bowers through the city, and loud rose the bridal song. And young men were whirling in the dance, and in their midst flutes and lyres sounded continually; and there the women stood each before her door and marvelled".²⁵

One cannot help noticing that the elements of wedding are often described in epics of Homer. And this especially applies to "Odyssey" where alongside with long and dangerous journey of Odysseus before returning home, another significant line – repeated marriage of Odysseus and Penelope preceded by a series of dangerous adventures – is developed. Due to this factor the elements of the wedding ritual are often described in this work.

Prior to reunion, both heroes are in danger. In the one hand it is Odysseus, who after the long voyage finds himself in the nymph Calypso's captivity. For a long time he is unable to escape, though the nymph herself is well aware of Odysseus's grief²⁶ and desire to return to his beloved wife.

After escaping from the nymph Odysseus found himself in the country of Phaeacians. In this fertile country the feeling of happiness and freedom is perceived through depicting the marital bliss and describing the pre-wedding period. The ideal variant of marital love is the relationship between king Alcinous and Arete.²⁷ We consider that there is much information referring the elements of the wedding ritual in the sixth song of "Odyssey". The princess of the country of Phaeacians is Nausicaa, who by the inspiration of the goddess Athena is assured, that her wedding day is coming up. Together with her friends she goes to the bank of water. Having laundry and bathe they start to play with a ball standing naked. Odysseus awoken by the noise of the thrown ball, comes out of the hiding place and thus their acquaintance begins.²⁸

The following moments are singled out here: Nausicaa goes to water, plays with a ball naked. Why did the maidens play ball just naked?

In many ethnocultural traditions it is considered that the maiden's sex power impacts the fertility of the land. Though scant, but there still exist some fixed facts regarding the belief of some people about the magic power of the naked body. This power too is directed to influence the fertility of the land. The outlook of the agricultural people was based upon the fertility of the land as well. The woman born in the archaic age was identified with the earth – i.e. giving birth to a new life. It was the woman

¹⁹ Il. 9, 264-265, 270-271;

²⁰ Il. 9, 281-282;

²¹ Il. 9, 289-290;

²² Il. 9, 530-599;

²³ Od. 4, 277-287;

²⁴ Taplin Oliver, *The Shield of Achilles Within the Iliad*, GaR 27, 1980;

²⁵ Il. 18, 490-496;

²⁶ Od. 5, 206-213;

²⁷ Od. 7, 66-68;

²⁸ Od. 6, 96-100;

who was perceived as the bearer of the idea of the constant cycle of the life. The woman - the symbol of the land was predestined to become the mother in order to get the crop. In the agricultural community sexual relation was the model perceived as the analogy of the Natural phenomena. We can mention the data of ritual habits as well as numerous ornamental drawings which are revealed in the tribes and peoples staying on the lower levels of development.

The agrarian objective of many erotica habits are revealed in present holidays of some European people, though the motivation of these habits are mostly forgotten.

Among many others there existed such a rule: the naked maiden used to run around the sown field thus stimulating the increase of fertility. Some phallic habits are traced as well, which served the same purpose. The widely spread idea implied the theory that the human fertility had a direct, magic impact on the fertility of the land. This concept was mainly spread among the agricultural peoples.

The direct, naturalistic, primitive expression is marked in the countries of Africa and Oceania in Ethnographic recordings throw additional light on the magic power of the human influence upon the fertility of the land. We consider, that the nudity of Nausicaa and her attendants bears in itself the same idea. Odysseus lying nearby is naked by chance as well.

In this episode the fact that the nudity of Odysseus frightens everybody except Nausicaa, is of interest as well. She is ready (her inner self) to meet the future fiancée. By her Odysseus is perceived as a future husband (though this idea is wrongly inculcated by goddess Athena).

Now let us turn to the maidens playing with a ball. The author presumably applies the story with the ball to develop the plot - the noise of the ball dropped into the water awakes Odysseus.²⁹ To our mind these lines serve as an additional information as well. Is the ball-game connected with the pre-wedding period? Could its appearance in the ritual be of secondary meaning or does it happen at random? We suppose that the ritual including the game is connected with the sun. But the ball has the organic ties with the other objects as well, with an egg, for instance. In the new Greek folk-lore an egg is one of the most essential elements of the ritual. The rolling of the egg in the wedding is simply replaced by the presence of the egg in the wedding. Had not been the play with rolling eggs between the sexes, we would not probably link it with the ball, as an egg itself is an archaic symbol with a good deal of functions. Obviously the rolling of the eggs is associated with the semantics of the unification of the sexes. It is hard to determine which of the above-mentioned elements (the ball, the egg) is believed to exist prior to the other.

The ball as an archaic phenomenon was polyfunctional. It often merges with the other phenomenon showing resemblance in content. Consequently it bears an uncertain character on the final stage of the ritual evolution.

Ritual with the ball has been disappeared and the reason for it is unknown, even there are grounds to conclude the following considerations:

- a) During the ritual game the content has been lost after its transformation into everyday game;
- b) The ball has been replaced by the other elements.

What is the idea of the origin of the ball, where does the ball come from? Who is its owner? Eros is known to have been playing ball, who is a player in general. According to "Argonautica" by Apollonius Rhodius Aphrodite presents Eros with the ball to make him shoot Medea with an arrow resulting her inevitable affection towards Jason.³⁰

It is easy to see, that Eros has become the owner of the ball. Prior to him Aphrodite was the owner of the ball. Eros and Aphrodite, the ball had other owners as well. What are the most typical principles of the ball's emergence in the ritual?

As seen from the above-mentioned episode of "Argonautica", the ball bears golden stripes and it is blue at the stretches. After throwing the ball up in the sky the shining track is left. These colours in the sky remind us the colours of the sun. The ball mentioned in the eighth song of "Odyssey" is similarly of Phaeacian king Alcinous shows Odysseus many good traits of his people.³¹ He orders the dancers to dance. The fact itself that the dance with a ball follows the story of Aphrodite, is worth nothing.

²⁹ Od. 6, 115-126;

³⁰ "Come, be ready to perform for me the task I will tell thee of, and I will give thee Zeus' all-beautiful plaything-the one which his dear nurse Adrasteia made for him, while he still lived a child, with childish ways, in the Idaean cave - a well-rounded ball; no better toy will thou get from the hands of Hephaestus. All of gold are its zones, and round each double seam run in a circle; but the stitches are hidden, and a dark blue spiral overlays them all. But if thou shouldst cast it with thy hands, lo, like a star, it sends a flaming track through the sky. This I will give thee; and do thou strike with thy shaft and charm the daughter of Aetes with love for Iason", Apollonii Rhodii Argonautica, 3, 132-143, ed. by R. C. Seaton, 1954;

³¹ Od. 8, 370-380;

In the dance, following after the song about Aphrodite, the following moments can be singled out: the dance-playing with a ball was performed after the song dedicated to Aphrodite. Consequently this game might have been dedicated again to her as one of the protecting deity of love and marriage (not as an owner). In the sixth and eighth chapters of "Odyssey" Nausicaa does believe that Odysseus is her fiancée Alcinous is not against this fact either.³²

The ball is gift and it certainly reminds us of the sun. The consideration about the ball being the symbol of the female origin is quite acceptable. The ball is thrown up high in the sky and the player must not let it touch the ground. In general the necessity of jumping high was rather common in various countries of Europe. In all cases the direction of the erotic habits towards the fertility of the land is quite obvious.

Thus, we consider that the resemblance between the three elements (ball, sun, maiden) is singled out.

Similarly interesting is the fact after ball game players are placed in the circle and around them the noisy dancing is taking place. This ritual is characterised with noise, tapping. The bride-grooms are also placed in the circle and the songs are performed around them. The noisy people around the fire as well make us consider sometimes to be the symbol of the sun. This cases including the ball in the noisy ritual circle, probably are the remnants of the Solar cult.³³

There are grounds to consider: though the country of Pheacians - Scheria was inhabited with the descendants of Poseidon. It earned living not only by trade, but was at the same time fertile and consequently strong enough.

Various agrarian rituals might have been held here, which in turn, could have been connected with the wedding rituals as both of them is connected with the idea of fertility.

As it is known in the science, the epic of Homer is an attempt of modeling the universe. It shows all possible relations between the people. As a conclusion it should be noted, that in the epic of Homer, despite the fact that the information about the phenomenon of wedding is dispersed in various chapters, still it gives clear picture of the three stages of the wedding. But again we stress the fact that the picture is dispersed for a single reason - to achieve sequence of the plot.

³² Od. 7, 312-313;

³³ In detail see monography N. Ratiani, "Ritual in Ancient Greek Literature from Homer to Euripides" (In Georgian).