

Magic Questions: The Rhetoric of Authority in South Slavic Epic Song

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People who pose questions and practitioners of magic have one thing in common: they claim power and authority over others. They lay their claim using language that positions them as speakers with access to, and control over, the unknown. Analyzing questions in multiple versions of “The Song of Bagdad,” a South Slavic epic, and comparing their use to the authority-building effects of words of power in magic rites, I explore the mechanisms by which questions both affirm and assert the authority of the speaker in “The Song of Bagdad,” South Slavic epic song more generally, and beyond. Three categories of authority emerge in the process of posing questions: social authority affirms one’s status; narrative authority demonstrates access to the tradition; and epic authority asserts an emerging power. The three categories unveil the source of authority behind questions as they bring into focus the interplay of formal and fictional aspects of the question-and-answer form that bridges the known and the unknown. Speakers use questions as a magic wand with which they mediate between the real on the one hand and the fictive, fantastical, and imaginary on the other. Just as a magician utters magic words to render physical acts of magic “real,” so a speaker uses the authority inherent in question-posing as a tool to render that which is imagined—be it an abstraction, ideal, or fiction—part of reality.

I begin with a synopsis of “The Song of Bagdad” through the lens of speech acts, and proceed to three sections expounding on three types of authority—social, narrative, and epic—each followed by a section on a special case of the type. As I unpack the types of authority, two facets of the authority-forming mechanics become clear. One is that the authority arises from the rhetorical but is eventually appropriated by all questions, including information-seeking ones. The other is that questions mark authority imperceptibly, without explicitly referring to it or disclosing themselves as authority markers. Alongside analyzing the interrogative discourse in the song, I compare the logic behind the function of questions as authority markers to that of magic spells as more overt instances of using language to assert power and authority. The essay concludes with the contention that the speakers’ posing of questions serves to claim their moral authority by implicitly stating their clout over the unknown and, by extension, the right, the ideal, the proper—that which others ought to follow.¹

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Introduction

Words conjure power. They enact things in the real world, as J. L. Austin (1975 [1955]) claims applying his theory of performatives—later redefined by John R. Searle (1969) as speech acts—to a limited number of verbs, but ultimately expanding the scope of their applicability to all of language. The ability of words to produce actions imparts to them power well beyond that of communication. On an extreme end of such power lies magic, where words combine with object manipulation to constitute magical rites through which their practitioners both assert and exert power. Examining magic formulas, S. J. Tambiah finds that there need not be a qualitative difference between ordinary language and magical formulas (1968:188). After all, according to Annette B. Weiner, “[b]elief in the force and the perceived efficacy of magic is rooted in the *perception* that speech acts have power to disrupt and destroy, or to persuade, influence and convince others” (1983:705, emphasis mine). But a belief in magic ritual is not the only factor imbuing speech acts with additional power. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl says that “[e]very word, every formula uttered aloud acts like a force and more than ever when the words are of a sacred or magical character” (Lévy-Bruhl 1936:184, quoted in Wilson 2000:429), allowing for the possibility that some words can be intrinsically more forceful. Functioning as magic spells outside contexts of the sacred or the magical, questions constitute one such category of speech acts that conjure power.

In literary studies, rhetorical questions are seen primarily as figures of emphasis, while information-seeking questions have attracted little if any attention. Following Austin and Searle, work on questions has yielded long lists of types and categories of illocutionary force behind questions, particularly rhetorical ones. Beyond the rubrics of linguistics and rhetoric, the closest that literary analysis has come to examining them is through Roland Barthes’ hermeneutic code, which comprises “all the units whose function it is to articulate in various ways a question, its response, and the variety of chance events which can either formulate the question or delay its answer; or even, constitute an enigma and lead to its solution” (1974:17). Barthes thus identifies and codifies a narrative function of the enigma as indicating a question that the rest of the narrative addresses and resolves. Susan Ervin-Tripp too examines language—specifically speech acts—that communicates through connotation rather than denotation, a process that runs counter to the principle of economy in communication. Similar to how Barthes analyzes a work of fiction through narrative codes, Ervin-Tripp analyzes everyday language through polysemy, concluding that one of its functions is to “communicat[e] major social relationships” (1976:150). Conveying the same message using entirely different expressions (for example, a direct order vs. a polite hint, or a statement vs. a question) “assert[s] *actual or claimed features of social relationships* without making those assertions focal or topical” (141, emphasis mine). As two features of the social relationships’ power dynamic, “actual” and “claimed” combine in South Slavic epic song, manifesting themselves through three types of authority of the speaker: one actual (social), one claimed (epic), and one hybrid (narrative).

Epic song and magic both arise in oral societies. They take elements of ordinary language and imbue it with power. I use the concept of magic spells, where the relation to authority

through summoning power for oneself and wielding it over others is overt, to examine questions in epic song, where their mechanism of functioning as a tool of power is covert, and their effects connotative. I thus use three lenses to analyze the oral-traditional material in this essay: literary, sociolinguistic, and anthropological. I approach questions as a form of ritual communication, which, through a “poetic-pragmatic view,” Gunter Senft and Ellen B. Basso (2009:1) define as

artful, performed semiosis, predominantly but not only involving speech, that is formulaic and repetitive and therefore anticipated within particular contexts of social interaction. Ritual communication thus has anticipated (but not always achieved) consequences. As performance, it is subject to evaluation by participants according to standards defined in part by language ideologies, local aesthetics, contexts of use, and, especially, relations of power among participants.

Questions are one manifestation of such “artful, performed semiosis” that, based on their illocutionary force, have “anticipated . . . consequences” predicated on “relations of power among participants.” The artistic, performative aspect of epic songs renders them language whose functions and effects can then be scrutinized as ritual and performative linguistic features.

The only text I have found to directly address the use of questions in South Slavic epic is Luka Zima’s nineteenth-century volume on rhetoric (1880:143-45). Zima excludes non-rhetorical (in other words information-seeking) questions outright from the category of stylistic figures. While I agree that rhetorical questions are more powerful as poetic devices, information-seeking questions too prove to be germane as I demonstrate here. The lack of scholarly attention to questions in South Slavic epic song means that I have had to develop a method to read for them. I began the project by tabulating all instances of questions in the available versions of “The Song of Bagdad” and, to some extent, in South Slavic epic song more widely.² Considering that there is really no illocutionary force of a question, especially a rhetorical one, that cannot be expressed as a statement or a request (or, at the very least, as an indirect question), I avoided comparing the content of interrogative statements to the same or similar content expressed in the indicative or imperative. Rather, I traced speaking voices, an approach that soon yielded clear patterns of who poses questions, who does not, and why. Not only does this approach bring into focus the centrality of authority to the use of interrogative form, it also makes it possible to tie the use and functions of questions to the song’s oral-traditional context and the questions’ roots to the “words of power” used in magic rites.

The oral nature of the object of my analysis, the focus on power in interpersonal relations, and the interdisciplinary approach to the inquiry have shaped my method into that of

² Looking at the form (questions) first and then intuiting its illocutionary force is the reverse of how Elizabeth Minchin (2002) begins her elucidating analysis of rebukes, in which she identifies rebukes (that is, a particular illocutionary force) first and then notes the consistency of their form, before moving on to draw connections with everyday speech and conclusions about how form functions in conveying meaning and mediating interpersonal relations among speakers in both poetic and non-poetic discourse. Minchin’s essay is particularly helpful for this study for it establishes that both in oral epic and in everyday speech, “[e]ach speech act format [what she refers to as “prefabricated or, more accurately, prepatterned speech,” such as questions] is a schematic representation of a particular pattern of organization, a way to proceed when we wish to express, for example, a rebuke, an apology, an invitation, a threat, or words of consolation or reassurance,” leaving the speaker “to find the words and phrases that will give expression to the ideas generated by the format” (90-91).

discourse analysis. Discourse analysis examines what language—spoken and written—is used for through its two fundamental and often synchronous functions of (a) communicating information and (b) expressing and negotiating individual roles and attitudes and social relations (Brown and Yule 1983:1-14). It is, as Barbara Johnstone defines it, “a systematic, rigorous way of suggesting answers to research questions . . . about language, about speakers, and about society and culture . . . posed in and across disciplines” by means of “paying close and systematic attention to particular situations and particular utterances or sets of utterances.” The situations and utterances Johnstone refers to prominently include those about power as a negotiable “aspect of social relatedness” that individuals use “to claim membership in groups” (2002:xi-xii, 112-13). The goal of this essay is to analyze the effects that utterances achieve through their form rather than just their connotation, namely the force that questions as speech acts enact not only through individual utterances, but as a type of speech. My approach closely resembles what Minchin (2002:71-72) describes as application of discourse analysis: an analysis of the ways language is used and processed by individuals as a tool of building, maintaining, and reshaping social relations—a way to establish a typology of spoken discourse based on the patterns in utterances, that is, by tracing structural resemblances of speech acts to identify the role they fulfill beyond signification.

Two reasons account for using the South Slavic epic “The Song of Bagdad” as the launching pad and centerpiece of this study. One is that it demonstrates remarkable consistency in the use of questions as markers of speakers’ authority, be it as indicators of social status (social authority), through the articulation of right vs. wrong (epic authority), or by harnessing the creative force of mediating between reality and fiction (narrative authority). The other is that the thoroughly documented multiformity of “The Song of Bagdad” allows for analysis of questions across multiple versions and performers, lending credibility to the extension of conclusions about the functions of questions beyond a particular singer or rendition of the song to the whole genre, at least within the South Slavic epic tradition. Oral tradition precedes literature historically and conceptually. And while only the latter is the case with “The Song of Bagdad” (the texts analyzed here were recorded in the 1930s and in 1950), and there are clear limitations to using such a small model (Foley 2002:6), as an oral epic (rather than oral-derived or written) the song allows me to develop a framework for analyzing an essential function of questions that can go beyond the South Slavic epic and oral traditions. This is in keeping with the intentions of Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord for the corpus of songs they collected in the former Yugoslavia, in which “The Song of Bagdad” holds a prominent place: they intended their collection to serve as a source of “evidence on the basis of which could be drawn a series of generalities applicable to all oral poetries” (Parry 1971:440).

“The Song of Bagdad” (“Pjesma od Bagdata”) belongs to the Muslim tradition of South Slavic epic song. Multiple versions of it were originally collected in Yugoslavia in 1934 and 1935 by Parry and Lord. Several versions were published in the first two volumes of the series *Serbocroatian Heroic Songs* (*SCHS*; English translations appeared in volume 1, the original texts in volume 2). The six versions of the song presented in these volumes range in length from 710 to 1,620 decasyllabic lines. Three have been transcribed as sung or dictated by Salih Ugljanin (Parry and Lord 1953:8-25, 26-39, 40-54). Two versions by Sulejman Fortić and one by Sulejman Makić recount the same story (*ibid.*:198-207, 208-16, 260-67). An additional five

versions are available in the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature (MPCOL), housed at Harvard University's Widener Library; they have not been published but have been kindly provided on request and have since been made available online. These are by Mustafa Čelebić (PN 12404), Šaćir Dupljak (PN 12422), Murat Kurtagić (LN 15—this is the only version that was recorded during Lord's subsequent visit in 1950, and with its 2,540 verses it is also the longest one), and two by Hajro Ferizović (PN 12406, PN 12444). Story lines and casts of characters in these five versions are more divergent than the ones published in *SCHS*. I use the spelling "Bagdad" to remain consistent with the original translation in *SCHS*.

Synopsis: Interrogative Speech Acts in "The Song of Bagdad"

Both information-seeking and rhetorical questions appear in "The Song of Bagdad." Their signification as speech acts, in addition to the literal meaning, includes illocutionary force, in other words "how [the utterance] is to be taken" (Austin 1975 [1955]:73). I will start with the information-seeking questions.

Twenty years have passed since the Ottoman army surrounded the city of Bagdad. In his palace the sultan ponders whether to continue the siege or withdraw his troops. A councilor suggests to call on Đerđelez Alija, a Bosnian hero.³ The sultan dispatches the imperial messenger Suka. As he reaches Alija's hometown, Suka inquires:

Bozdrđana upita tatarin:	The messenger asked the shopkeeper:
"Kamo dvore Đerđeljez Aljije?"	"Where is the house of Đerđelez Alija?"
(27, lines 120-21; also in narrator's voice at 41, lines 108, 113) ⁴	

Following the shopkeeper's directions, Suka reaches Alija's home, greets his mother, and asks about his whereabouts:

Kam' gazije Đerđeljez Aljije,	Where is the champion Đerđelez Alija,
Da teslimim careva fermana?	So I may deliver the imperial firman?
(9, lines 149-50; also 27, lines 137-38; 41, line 127)	

Alija's mother points him to the local mosque. There Alija receives the sultan's requests to assemble an army. He goes back home, asks for his mother's advice and blessing, and then

³ Alija is a stock hero character in the epic oral tradition of South Slavic Muslims. For the historical background of Alija as the first bey (sandžak beg) of the then Ottoman province of Serbia, see Maretić 1966 [1909]: 164.

⁴ Verse quotations of "The Song of Bagdad" are cited by page and line number from Parry and Lord 1953. Citations of identical verses in multiple versions of the song are separated with a semi-colon. Citations of verses from a different version of the song with a different wording but the same meaning are preceded by "also." Quotes from unpublished texts are quoted by their archival catalogue numbers (prefixed by "PN" or "LN"). Translations are mine, although I owe the translation of a few obscure words to Lord's translation in Parry and Lord 1954.

dispatches a messenger to his betrothed, Fatima, who lives in the city of Buda, with a question for her:

Da lj' me moreš s ržom pričekati	Can you wait for me with honor?
Jod dušmana Lauš đenerala?	From the foe, general Lauš
Da lj' se moreš branit' sa Budima?	Can you defend yourself and Buda?

(28, lines 231-33; also 11, lines 326-28)

When the messenger reaches Fatima's home, he greets the servants, asking:

Je lji doma Budimka Fatima?	Is Fatima of the city of Buda home?
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(28, line 254; also 11, lines 353-54; 43, lines 263-65)

Fatima dispatches the messenger back to Alija, urging him in her response to set off to the sultan's aid. But, as Alija's vassals and their armies gather, Fatima sets into motion a plan of her own. She shaves off her hair and purchases a "winged" horse that used to belong to Budimlija Mujo, who has been convicted by the sultanate and is on the run. She departs the city and soon arrives at the army's gathering place. Not recognizing her, Alija greets her:

Barjaktare, sa koje si strane,	Oh standard-bearer, whence do you come
A s kojega grada carevoga,	And from which imperial city,
A kako te po imenu viču?	And by what name do they call you?

(17, lines 843-45)

All the questions above contain illocutionary force. Messengers' questions, like questions in general, are, in Searle's words, "a special case of requesting," as are Alija's when he asks the newcomer to his camp (Fatima in disguise) for his name (1969:69). Alija's first question to Fatima is not merely a yes/no question, but an appeal to wait for him, while the second doubles as an expression of concern.

Information-seeking questions are interspersed with rhetorical ones. For example, at the beginning of the song, the sultan summons a messenger with a question:

Đe si, Suka, carev tatarine?	Where are you, o Suka, the emperor's messenger?
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(9, line 98; also 41, line 77)

When Suka delivers the firman, the local priest reads it silently first and bursts into tears. Alija speaks to him:

Stari hodža, vais efendija,	Old priest, venerable effendi,
Rašta plačeš, te suze ronahu?	Why do you cry, then shed tears?

(10, lines 201-02)

And after Alija returns home to consult his mother, he expresses doubt to her about his ability to fulfill the sultan's request:

Kako ću mu vojsku pokupiti,	How will I gather an army for him,
I sa vojskom pod Bagdat otići?	And with the army go to Bagdad? ⁵
(42, lines 223-24)	

None of these rhetorical questions is answered in terms of the literal object of inquiry: the whereabouts of the messenger, the reason for shedding tears, the logistics of the task. But they do receive responses to what their illocutionary force conveys: a summons is followed by Suka's appearance, curiosity about the content of the letter is followed by the priest's exposition, and concern about how to proceed next is followed by Alija's mother's advice to write a letter to Fatima. While interlocutors' responses make it easy to identify the perlocutionary force of questions (the effect they accomplish on the interlocutor), my analysis focuses on their illocutionary force (the effect intended and attempted by the speaker). Both information-seeking and rhetorical questions in "The Song of Bagdad" carry illocutionary force—often multiple ones—and they both elicit responses (with only information-seeking questions receiving direct answers), thus determining future actions. But before I examine both types of question, whither do Alija and Fatima go?

After Fatima joins Alija's troops disguised as Budimlija Mujo, together with Alija's seven vassals and the army of one hundred thousand they depart for Istanbul to present themselves to the sultan.⁶ When the army sets up camp outside the city, the sultan summons Alija. However, Alija is not aware that the audience with the sultan is also a test. After he submits to the guards' request to fully disarm, the sultan concludes that his lack of wiliness makes him unsuitable to conquer Bagdad. As the standard-bearer, Fatima is brought in next. Noticing Alija's robes in the palace, Fatima infers what happened. She slays the guards and approaches the sultan to kiss his hand. The sultan acknowledges her valor and cunning, commissioning her with the siege of Bagdad. Fatima procures the release of Alija, and they head for Bagdad with their army. As they approach the city, Fatima sets off on her own to find the hidden city gate. Outside the city's bulwark she receives a sign from heaven, secretly enters the city, and finds her way to the queen. When the queen offers to buy the "winged" horse, Fatima jumps at the opportunity to trick her into riding the horse with her. Fatima then abducts the queen and takes her to Alija's camp. She breaks one of the queen's necklaces in half for Alija and herself to keep as a token of friendship. Fatima heads back to Istanbul with the queen, while Alija proceeds toward Bagdad with the keys to the gates that will allow him to occupy the city in the sultan's name. Fatima arrives at the sultan's palace, surrenders the queen to the sultan, then leaves for Buda. Shortly afterward, Alija too arrives at the sultan's palace, presenting him with the keys to and spoils from the city. Alija then returns home. With no news from Fatima, he writes to her. Fatima rejoices at the news that

⁵ This rhetorical question is followed by Alija's expression of concern for Fatima. His mother responds to the latter but not the former.

⁶ Fatima moves in the guise of Budimlija Mujo through most of the song. Her identity is known to the singer and the audience, but is revealed to the other characters only at the very end.

Alija is safely back home, and replies that she has waited for him “with honor” and that he can begin to gather the wedding party. She assembles her dowry and departs. The wedding takes place upon her arrival. However, on their wedding night, Alija discovers that Fatima’s hair has been cut (she cut it, of course, as part of her disguise). He immediately exits the bride-chamber and asks his mother to negotiate Fatima’s return. She attempts to do so, but Fatima insists on talking directly to Alija. Fatima reprimands him for not recognizing that it was she who made his victory at Bagdad possible, and presents her half of the queen’s necklace as proof of her identity. Alija begs her for forgiveness, and the song ends with the singer’s blessing for the happy future of the young couple.

Social Authority

It quickly becomes apparent in “The Song of Bagdad” that the right to ask questions tends to correlate directly with the authority of the speaker: the person posing a question is the one of higher social status. The sultan asks his messenger, the imperial messenger asks the shopkeeper, Alija asks the newcomer to the camp (Fatima), and so forth. Social authority includes authority-by-proxy, as with messengers: the imperial messenger has a higher status than the shopkeeper in Alija’s hometown and Alija’s mother, and Alija’s messenger is above Fatima’s servants; but they are not above the recipient of the message (Alija, Fatima), who by definition is closer in status to the dispatcher (sultan, Alija).

However, there are exceptions. When Suka, the imperial messenger, knocks on the gate of Alija’s home, Alija’s mother responds:

Ko mi halku dira na kapiji?	Who touches the knocker on my gate?
Doma nema Đerđeljez Aljije.	Đerđelez Alija is not at home.
(9, lines 145-46; also 27, lines 132-34, 41, lines 123-24)	

The two not yet having met face to face, the mother is directing her question not to the imperial messenger, but to a newcomer of unknown identity and does so on her territory (similar to how Alija, in his camp, asks the newcomer). Once they establish mutual hierarchy, only Suka poses questions. In contexts without sufficient hierarchical information, this kind of situational authority—in this case based on territory—takes precedence.

Another inconsistency—more glaring for being conceptual—arises with information-seeking questions. Asking for information or advice comes across as asking for help (in remedying one’s deficiency of knowledge). After all, knowledge and wisdom are associated with age and social seniority, and one would be justified in expecting people asking for information to acknowledge the authority of the respondent rather than assert their own. Yet questions are as a rule posed by social seniors. Whatever deficiency the act of asking a question might admit on behalf of the speaker, it is only temporary and comes second to the more established social superiority of the interrogator. Consequently, the illocutionary force common to questions (regardless of any other—more particular and context based—illocutionary forces that each

question might carry) lies in summoning and projecting the authority of the speaker. In the examples examined above, that authority derives from social status.

I have not encountered any studies that link authority to questions in South Slavic epics or even in oral tradition. Tomo Maretić brings up a contrastive example of kissing in South Slavic epic, often as a part of a greeting: typically the person of lower status kisses the hand or the edge of the robe, “skut,” of a social elder (1966 [1909]:299-301). However, scenes of kissing are described only in indirect discourse. The elements of direct speech in South Slavic epic most closely related to authority are two exclamation words, “more” and “bre,” “which the higher [in status] or elder says to the lower or younger; the former is from the Greek language and means ‘you fool,’ while the latter is from Turkish (where it is an exclamation meaning: *hey*)” (313).⁷ Comparable to them is the Greek interjection *ō* in Homer and Hesiod, which is used only by those in positions of authority, including deities (Scott 1903:192-95). But the closest sociolinguistic analogs I have found are magic spells. Spells and speech acts, in addition to sharing the feature that words do something, are linguistic practices that both depend on and exercise special powers closely correlated with social status. Roman Jakobson, in connecting metaphor and metonymy with Frazer’s two laws of magic, similarity and contagion/contiguity—laws that according to Stephen Wilson still stand today as basic principles of magic (Wilson 2000:xxx)—shows that magical practices reflect cognitive aspects of language (Jakobson 1956:81). Tambiah adds that “ritual acts and magic rites are of the ‘illocutionary’ or ‘performative’ sort” (1973:221), thus foreshadowing the premise of this essay that, in contrast to the more contemporary examples and scenarios that Austin and Searle adduce, magic spells make for more apt exempla and comparanda for the examination of the illocutionary force of authority in questions as speech acts in the context of oral tradition. The two most prominent points of correspondence between magic spells and questions as authoritative speech acts are the roles of summoning the authority of the speaker and wielding power over the interlocutor.⁸

In magic spells as well as in questions, the speaker summons authority in two ways: by asserting the social status built over time and affirmed by the community, and by appealing to the unknown. In the context of magic, the practitioner’s status is of someone holding magic powers: from magicians uttering spells to priests uttering consecration, the power of the more commonly used words of power, such as blessings and curses, “depended in part on the position of the

⁷ This and subsequent quotes from secondary sources published in a language other than English are mine.

⁸ To these two I should add a curious third one: their connection to crossroads. Crossroads are associated with magic and considered to both catalyze it and to carry magical powers themselves (for a succinct account of the role of crossroads in magic, see Wilson 2000:456). Christoph Bode and Rainer Dietrich (2013), in their analysis of narrative structure, claim that the main difference between narrative recountings of events and real-world ones is that the narrative is composed of events that are connected causally, while real life comprises nodes: moments in the sequence of events when the agent is faced with a choice that will determine the outcome. With the outcome not predetermined (as in narratives), one finds oneself facing the challenge of making the “right” choice: one is at a deontic crossroads. Questions are such a crossroads. Questions mediate between what is unknown (question) and known (answer), between a hypothetical possibility that is (to be) left behind and the road (to be) taken. They are a metaphorical crossroads where one must take one path and abandon others. Crossroads thus make for an intriguing connection between questions and magic, but only tangential to the consideration of authority in questions, especially considering that, unlike magic spells, a crossroads is a physical place that relates to questions only in its metaphorical iteration.

[speaker] and on his or her relationship to the [interlocutor]” (Wilson 2000:435). Spells thus must meet one of the felicity requirements of speech acts: that the speaker be authorized to make the pronouncement. In a twist of circular logic, speech-act pronouncements retrospectively affirm the status that the speaker needed to make the pronouncement in the first place: to utter this speech act I must be authorized to utter it; I have just uttered it; therefore, I must have been authorized to utter it. The latter two parts of this syllogism make ritual pronouncements prone to manipulation, as John B. Haviland demonstrates by examining uses of ritual language used to assert authority. In the case of an entertainer (mis)using priestly language, his utterances are technically infelicitous in that the speech acts cannot be taken to have fulfilled their purported religious effect, but are nevertheless effective in achieving not only their illocutionary but also their perlocutionary force, as the audience in this case is convinced of the swindler-entertainer’s authority to make such pronouncements (2009:22-24). In a different case of an inebriated uncle uttering ceremonial, wedding-style admonitions in a quotidian (non-ceremonial, and thus infelicitous) situation, his niece deflects his authoritative statement, thus nullifying the perlocutionary force of the utterance (34-35). Even if the locution turns out to be infelicitous and the perlocutionary force is not achieved, that does not invalidate the illocutionary force of his utterance. In both cases, by using ceremonial language, the speaker projects the illocutionary force of asserting his authority. The ritual language is so powerful that it takes effect even in cases when the words are used outside sanctioned contexts, or when the felicity requirement of the speaker to be authorized to make the pronouncement is not met.

The summoning of authority that comes from uttering words of power is amplified by the speaker’s invocation of the unknown. Henk S. Versnel describes “a process of explosive creativity in which divine powers emerge from powerful words” (2002:114). He identifies “strange and incomprehensible sounds, words, phrases” as “one of the most characteristic features of magic” (117; cf. Ogden 1999:46-47; Wilson 2000:438-39; and Tambiah 1968:177-78; for the role of mystery in magic, see Wilson 2000:449-50). Originally non-referential, incomprehensible, strange words without prior meaning become magical words of power. Questions are not words that lexically have no signified (such as *abracadabra* or *hocus-pocus*), but are their syntactical equivalent: a grammatical mood that invokes the unknown. Versnel (2002:145) claims that magical words are semantically empty because their purpose is not to refer to a person or an object, but “to a world” that is outside our realm of reality. Words that belong to or at least enable communication with this other world, according to Richard Gordon, “do not have a meaning expressible in other terms” (1999:243). They are, by definition, out of this world. And by uttering them, the practitioners of magic imply access to that other world. According to Crystal Addey, the “ritual utterance [of the “unknowable names” of gods, for example,] operates as a powerful speech-act: enabling the human to assume a divine role by ascending, through similarity, to the divine” (2011:289). Addey argues against the premise that the utterance of unknowable names “summon[s or] compel[s deities] by force”; rather, it imbues the speaker with divine powers (281, 287). Those in control of words of power—be they mysterious or unknowable—position themselves as gatekeepers to the world of the unknown. In language, questions and answers are the bridge between the worlds of the known and the unknown. The difference between information-seeking and rhetorical questions, and the disproportionate authority that comes with the latter, comes into focus here. Posing rhetorical

questions—questions the right answer to which is determined by the speaker—places the speaker in the position of power by taking control over both ends of the known and unknown. This power dynamic, rather than elevating the speaker toward and closer to the gods, as “unknowable names” do, raises the speaker above and away from the interlocutor(s). And just as the power of magic spells extends to all magic words, even the infelicitous ones manipulated by those not authorized to use them, so the power that rhetorical questions imply over the unknown extends to all questions, even information-seeking ones.

The second correspondence between magic spells and questions is the power that the practitioner of magic or the speaker wields over another person. The assumption that a particular utterance or act by one person can exert power over another (or over objects and events related to them through the metonymic logic of contagion) is the foundation of magic. One of the more ubiquitous magic rites relying on this assumption is name taboo: interdiction of uttering the name of a person, living or dead, to forestall sway over them (note that it is the act of uttering the name, and not merely knowing it, that is typically subject to the taboo). In hierarchical societies the logic of name taboos is reflected in the social norm where not just the individual name but also the personal pronoun becomes the object of taboo in addressing the social superiors to whom one must show deference; they are replaced with the title occasionally combined with the formal (family) name. Queen Elizabeth I, for example, in writing to the few toward whom she took a deferential attitude before ascending to the throne—her father, stepmother, older stepbrother, and older stepsister—pointedly avoids personal pronouns, adhering instead to a combination of a possessive pronoun and the title; to others, however, she is unencumbered in dispensing personal pronouns once she has addressed or mentioned them by their title and/or name as addressees or in the third person (Harrison 1968).

But name taboos are specific to a person. A generalized linguistic equivalent expressing the asymmetrical power of the speakers is found in many European languages in the use of second-person singular personal pronouns based, according to Roger Brown and Albert Gilman, on Latin *tu* and *vos* (1960). The pervasiveness of these verbal indicators of relative rank and their dependence on all participants of a verbal exchange (they require active participation by the interlocutor) shows that they are no longer about a one-off and unilateral exertion of influence as is the case with magic spells, but about infusing discourse with a linguistic feature that asserts and maintains a power dynamic between the speakers through relative status—one that is based on interlocutors with different levels of social power using or being prohibited from using a particular linguistic feature. The more generalized a linguistic feature is, the more pervasive it becomes and, consequently, the more innocuous. When completely lacking a feature that explicitly communicates status, languages rely on polysemy and connotation. Brown and Gilman demonstrate that, even in the absence of the equivalents of *tu* and *vos*, “[i]n America and in Europe there are [other] forms of nonreciprocal address for all the dyads of asymmetrical power; customer and waiter, teacher and student, father and son, employer and employee” (1960:268). Robin Lakoff examines linguistic phenomena such as the particles *doch* in German, *ge* in Classical Greek, or *zo* in Japanese, honorifics, and other linguistic markers that do not offer “information content,” but rather “suggest the feelings of the speaker toward the situation of the speech act,” including “identity [and] respective social positions” of the speaker and interlocutor. She concludes that, without explicit markers available in a language, speakers express their

attitude “by forms used elsewhere for other purposes” (1972:907-09). Such connotative use of polysemous forms does not necessarily weaken their effect. According to Susan Ervin-Tripp, within directives, “one type [of politeness] is overt, and consists of names, tags, and imbeddings which decorate the bare command. The other type is the systematically framed question or statement which *does not refer* to the desired act” (1976:150). In the latter cases, it is the implicit illocutionary force of the expression that fulfills the function of communicating, asserting, or establishing social relations. Most importantly, Ervin-Tripp demonstrates that, in the case of directives, a more indirect or circumlocutory mode of expression is, perhaps counterintuitively, the more authoritative one. Questions are such connotative indicators of not only status, but the ability to wield power over the interlocutor. They perform their illocutionary force through their presence or absence, in other words either the speaker’s right to use them or their proscription, and through connotation made possible by their polysemous nature, achieving the effect of signifying and asserting authority—the power of the speaker—in an inconspicuous way, without overtly flaunting the authority they claim.

Questions and answers function along similar lines as magic spells in terms of their effect on beneficiaries/victims. According to James George Frazer’s foundational definition, magic rests on the “assum[ption] that things act on each other at a distance through a secret sympathy” (hence Frazer’s characterizing magic as sympathetic), with “the impulse being transmitted from one to the other by means of what we may conceive as a kind of invisible ether” (1951:14). In traversing the void, magic effects are typically one-directional: they travel from the practitioner of magic to its object as the evil eye travels from the seer to the seen. On either end are “transmitters” that function according to the metonymic law of contiguity/contagion. On the receiving end, the transmitter is typically a physical one—a doll, a strain of hair, a picture. For example, Trobrianders’ “hard words” (linguistically marked, powerful words), in order to achieve magic effects, “must be embedded in an object which enters the body of the victim” (Weiner 1983:704). Outside the context of magic, the transmitter can be a word: deictics, such as names and pronouns described above, refer to entities, and the use of and control over deictics by the speaker extends that control and power to the entities the deictics stand for. On the issuing end, the practitioners of magic use as transmitters words of power that, according to the same metonymic law of contiguity, stand in not for the flesh-and-blood practitioners of magic, but for the ones whose powers have been amplified by the special status that they hold and by the words they utter.

Together, questions and answers correspond to the totality of the basic principle of contagious magic that, according to Frazer, “proceeds upon the notion that things which have once been conjoined must remain ever afterwards, even when quite dissevered from each other, in such a sympathetic relation that whatever is done to the one must similarly affect the other” (1951:43). The initial connection between two parts endures in the case of magic. In questions and answers, it draws together the two parts that were initially conjoined but have since been separated. Questions are about the speaker: active, powerful, setting the topic and direction. Answers are about the interlocutor: responsive, under influence, and being directed in adhering to the topic and direction set by someone else. The nature of a question—and its grammatical as well as narrative function—is to cast a hook: expecting or even demanding a response makes it a one-sided linguistic act that asserts authority with or without the compliance

of the victim/interlocutor by obliging interlocutors to (a) act in order to complete the linguistic act that requires a response in words (in the case of information-seeking questions) or deed (in the case of rhetorical questions), and (b) do it in a way determined by the speaker, which by definition limits their scope of (re)action (the answer must match the question). The logic of a magic transaction thus extends to the two ends of questioning: actor and recipient, speaker and interlocutor. Questions cast a “spell” that is linguistically hard to escape and that draws the interlocutor into a social interaction in which the speaker has the upper hand, reifying the power over the interlocutor through a relatively pervasive interrogative form of expression.

One of the most prominent illocutionary forces of questions posed with social authority in “The Song of Bagdad” is chastising. Frazer’s (1951:54) description of the societal context of the practice of magic sheds light on how chastising in the form of questions works to maintain social norms and established authority (the status quo):

The old notion that the savage is the freest of mankind is the reverse of the truth. He is a slave, not indeed to a visible master, but to the past, to the spirits of his dead forefathers, who haunt his steps from birth to death, and rule him with a rod of iron. What they did is the pattern of right, the unwritten law to which he yields a blind unquestioning obedience.

Frazer goes on to criticize the “unquestionable pattern of right” as a cradle of mediocrity. With questions in the hands of the stewards of tradition, change and challenge are forestalled. One way to explain the effect of the illocutionary force of social authority in rhetorical questions in particular is following J. M. Kertzer, who claims that the speaker “encourages agreement,” creates “pressure to conform to [the speaker’s] judgement,” and “encourages us to agree,” thus indicating that a rhetorical question “summons authority” for the speaker (1987:246, 247, 248, 250). Furthermore, by forestalling answers, rhetorical questions both nullify the admission of the need for help (for information and knowledge) and deny the interlocutor reciprocal status in a dialogic act. Rhetorical questions thus extend the air of one-sided imposition, driving home the authority-signifying illocutionary force imposed by the speaker. They flip the curiosity-driven, open-ended nature of information-seeking questions, and provide a linguistic form that channels the weight of the tradition and its mores by asserting the social authority of the speaker as the mouthpiece of tradition and the community. Information-seeking questions, too, even though maintaining their primary function of requesting information, draw on the authority-asserting power that appears to derive from rhetorical questions. Name taboos, title and personal pronoun use, as well as different politeness registers are relatively overt ways of asserting social authority or indicating a lack of it. Questions—and particularly rhetorical questions—belong on that list as more subtle but equally powerful indicators of the social authority of the speaker, relatively inconspicuously establishing relative rank with the speaker in the position of authority.

Special Case of Social Authority: Greetings

Questions as a medium of claiming social authority appear even in contexts where social hierarchy might be expected to give way to the spirit of reciprocity, such as in greetings.

Considering the ubiquity of greetings in epic song, it comes as no surprise that there is a wealth of expressions to describe them in indirect discourse (narration). It is worth surveying some of these expressions before looking at the interrogative form in direct speech:

Berberinu seljam naturila,
I berbera Bogom bratimila
(31, lines 490-91)

Upon the barber, she pressed a salaam,
And called the barber a blood brother by God.

Ej! Svi skočiše, seljam prifatiše.
Hoždeldije dodaju tataru.
(10, lines 168-71)

Hey! All jumped to their feet, accepted the salaam.
A welcome they extend to the messenger.

Greetings are often thought of and referred to as questions. For example, in cases where one of the greeters holds the authority-by-proxy, social norms dictate that a question be posed about the third party whose authority the character represents:

Kad Fatima slježe na kapiju,
Kahru tome hoždeldije daje,
A pita ga za mir i za zdravlje,
Za gaziju Đerđeljez Aljiju.
(28-9, lines 259-62)

When Fatima arrived at the gate,
She extends welcome to Kahro
And asks him for peace and health,
For the champion Đerđelez Alija.

But short of the presence of the authority-by-proxy, a common greeting is a reciprocal action, often overtly manifesting its inherent give-and-take nature:

I svijema hoždeldiju daje.
Oni njemu bolje prifaćaju.
(43, lines 353-54)

To all he gives welcome.
They accept and return twofold.

Seljam dade Budimki Fatimi,
Primi Fata, poleće joj k ruci.
(53, lines 1313-14)

Salaam she gave to Fatima of Buda
Fatima accepted, leaping to her hand.

Reciprocity is so ingrained in the nature of the greeting that, when it is referred to in indirect discourse, the verb often takes a grammatically reflexive form:

E! Pitaju se za mir i za zdravlje.
(37, line 1062; also 42, line 260)

Well! They ask [each other] for peace and health.

Za mirno se zdravlje jupituju.
(11, line 351)

For peaceful health they ask [each other].

Yet, when a greeting in a song appears as a question in direct speech, it is uttered only by one person:

Zar ti lji si Komljen bajraktare?
(20, line 1204; by the queen)

Is that you, standard-bearer Komljen?

Aljo skoći, ruke raširijo,
Raširijo, te je zagrljijo.
“Jesi l’, brate, u životu, Mujo?”
(50, lines 969-71)

Alija jumped, spread his arms,
Spread them, and wrapped them around her.
“Are you alive, brother Mujo?”

Sultan skoći, na koljena stade.
“De s’, gazijo, Budimlija Mujo?”
(50, lines 999-1000)

The sultan jumped, and stood on his knees.
“Where have you been, hero Budimlija Mujo?”

Even though greetings are often formulaic (neither is information sought, nor is action demanded), and even though once a greeting is set into motion the parties involved are bound by custom to follow through with it, the expectation of an equivalent phrase in return seems to disappear into thin air the moment a greeting is uttered as a question in direct speech. Greetings in interrogative form in direct speech come exclusively from characters in positions of social authority, and are not followed by responses. Thus, in dialogue, the spirit of reciprocity that lies at the core of greetings succumbs to the power of the interrogative form and its illocutionary force of summoning and projecting the social authority of the speaker.

Narrative Authority

In addition to direct discourse, questions appear in narration, where they harness authority of a different kind. Questions posed by the singer are inherently rhetorical. When Alija’s messenger Kahro arrives at Fatima’s house, he is greeted by the servants, at which point the singer asks:

A što Kahro reće bajraktare?
(11, line 352)

And what did Kahro the standard-bearer say?

After Fatima reads the letter, she withdraws into her chamber and is about to write back to Alija. The singer retells the content of her letter beginning with the phrase:

I šta beše u knjigu udarila?
(43, line 278; also 23, line 1480)

What did she strike in the letter?

Alija receives her response and decides to summon his army, dispatching seven messengers to seven of his vassals. As he readies himself to dictate the letters, the narrator asks:

De će koju knjigu jopraviti?
(12, line 442)

Which way will he dispatch which letter?

The singer then lists the vassals and summarizes Alija's message to each of them. While the first example above does no more than draw attention to particular details of narration, the other two are followed by long descriptive passages: Fatima's speech and a catalog of Alija's vassals. The singer uses his prerogative as a story-teller to highlight with questions a scene or a sub-plot in the song. Even though they are not social superiors, singers possess the knowledge of the tradition and the art of story-telling. Having something valuable to convey gives them the right to assume a different type of questioning authority: narrative authority.

But rhetorical questions are also used by characters in direct discourse to broach a topic they are about to address at length. Thus in both cases they perform a topic-setting function. When Alija receives the imperial firman and speaks to his mother, she follows her blessing with a question:

A šta ćeš ti knjigi udariti?
(11, line 316)

And what will you strike in the letter?

She then instructs him what to write to Fatima: about her maidenly honor, his heroic honor and duty, possible death, and aiding the empire. It is a speech, similar to the one that Pasha Sehidija gives to the sultan at the beginning of the song advising him to commission Alija. Unlike Alija's mother speaking to her son, the pasha does not have social authority in relation to the sultan, yet he prefaces his proposal with a question:

Na koga ćeš ferman opraviti?
(9, line 70)

To whom should you dispatch the firman?

This is one of the rare cases where a direct question is directed to a higher-up—the ultimate higher-up, no less. The content of the letter turns out to be about the valor of Bosnia and its capability to come to the aid of the sultanate. The picture the pasha paints is of a mythical beast sleeping in a cave that will awaken and, properly harnessed, accomplish a great deed for the good of the empire. Like Alija's mother's advice, the pasha's letter is an example of a *muthos*, the way Richard Martin defines it: “a speech-act indicating authority, performed at length, usually in public, with a focus on full attention to every detail” (1989:12). A topic-setting question posed with narrative authority indicates that the character is temporarily leaving dialogue and entering a speech. What these speeches communicate is more important and universal than any single character in the song, consequently allowing characters—even those with lesser social authority, as is the case with Pasha Sehidija—to preface their speeches with a question. In the *muthos*-type speeches topic-setting questions mark authoritative beginnings the way Edward W. Said conceptualizes them: as combining the power-wielding kind of authority with the kind that recognizes the author as “a begetter, beginner” (1975:83). Narrative authority is the second type of question-posing authority, used as a mark of taking on speech-making or

story-telling authority either within the diegetic space of the song (by the hero or another character) or without (by the singer).

While speakers claiming social authority do so from both ends of the magic/questioning process—both asserting their own power and wielding that power over the interlocutor by implying access to the world of the unknown—speakers claiming narrative authority can only rely on their ability to wield authority over others but cannot claim a position of social authority. Social authority is accumulated through a combination of deeds and words, while narrative authority is grounded in words since it derives from knowledge, in other words access to what for others is the unknown. This is no surprise since narrative authority is most often encountered in narration—in other words, it belongs to the singer—and thus has tenuous social authority to lean on. Susan Slyomovics (1987) summarizes the social status of the professional singer across oral traditions when she identifies him as a social outcast. This status remains well into the twentieth century, such as in Upper Egypt, with the singer °Awaḍallah °Abd aj-Jalīl °Ali, whom Slyomovics followed during her fieldwork; with Himalayan performers who in relation to their socially superior patrons, according to Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, are “situated at opposite extremes of the social hierarchy within the caste organization” (2016:211); or with the carriers of the longest surviving Balkan epic tradition, the Romanian *lăutari* (professional Romany singers; Beissinger 1991:15-39). Slyomovics defines a social outcast as someone who generally “defines social boundaries [and] serves as a focus for group feelings,” and who in the case of performers is “the artistic bearer of his group’s cultural history” (1987:6). This definition applies to South Slavic singers even though by the 1930s, when Parry and Lord first recorded “The Song of Bagdad,” professional singers among South Slavs were already a thing of the olden days of a burgeoning Ottoman local gentry who could afford to patronize them. As Matija Murko notes in his account of his fieldwork in the Balkans in 1930-32, “[a]s for the occupation of the singers, there is no status that is not represented. . . . [P]easants . . . land owners, former Muslim beys, now impoverished, owners, rich peasants (*gazda*), but also poor folk, shepherds . . . land laborers, road workers”—the list goes on (1951:61). South Slavic singers at this point in history come from all walks of life; some can claim social authority, but many cannot.⁹ As Slyomovics notes, “What one says, as far as its truth is concerned, is not affected by who one is, whether gypsy, poet or beggar. °Awaḍallah’s story is respected; °Awaḍallah is not. This is contrary to everyday experience where the weight of a man’s words depends upon his status within the community” (1987:18). But those who speak with narrative authority have more to show in terms of their ability to wield power over others. Social-authority speakers imply access to the unknown by the use of questions that are, more often than not, rhetorical and thus not followed by answers. Narrative-authority speakers too pose rhetorical questions, but since they typically double as topic-setting questions, they follow the questions with answers, usually extensive, speech-like ones. Thus they do not merely imply connection with the unknown, but actively demonstrate their access to it.

⁹ For an insightful discussion of an additional layer of authority dynamic, albeit in an ethnographic rather than a performative context—between the collector (Parry), the translator (Nikola Vujnović), and the singer (Salih)—see Ranković 2012. Even after repeatedly submitting to the interviewers’ social authority, Salih, “invoking the ultimate authority of tradition as the bottom line,” unrelentingly asserts his narrative authority (45).

Special Case of Narrative Authority: Slavic Antithesis

In South Slavic epic song, questions posed with narrative authority include a sub-category that has earned a name of its own. Sulejman Makić sings a somewhat different introduction to “The Song of Bagdad”; in it the sultan appears to be in great pain and the imperial imam asks him:

Sultan care, stari gospodare!	Sultan-emperor, old overlord!
Jesi l' lašnje, da lj' moš' preboljeti,	Are you better, will you recover,
Alj' si mučno, hoćeš umrijeti?	Or are you worse, will you die?
(260, lines 12-14)	

A few lines later, the sultan's son Ibrahim is summoned, and he directs the same question in the same words to his father.¹⁰ This makes for a puzzling example because not one but two characters without social authority direct questions at the same higher-up, the sultan. When his father informs him that he is about to die, Ibrahim expands his initial question:

Babo, care, zemlje gospodare!	Father, emperor, the master of the land!
Pa što tebe osta najžaljije?	What do you leave behind that causes you sorrow?
Je lj' ti žao što ćeš umrijeti?	Are you sorry that you are about to die?
Je lj' ti žao bijela pajtahta?	Are you sorry for the white capital?
Je lj' ti žao tvoja carevina?	Are you sorry for your empire?
Je lj' ti žao tvoja vjerna ljuba?	Are you sorry for your faithful beloved?
Je lj' ti žao tvoje sultanije,	Are you sorry for your queen consort,
Alj' najviše sina Ibrahima,	Or, above all, for your son Ibrahim,
Što ostade grdan sirotinja?	For he will remain a wretched orphan?
(261, lines 46-54)	

The sultan responds in the negative to Ibrahim's question line-for-line, and then reveals that his one “lingering wound” is the unfinished siege of Bagdad, at which point the sultan charges Ibrahim with fulfilling his will by conquering it.¹¹ The exposition of this “remaining wound”

¹⁰ The only difference is that the son addresses the sultan in the first line as “[f]ather, emperor” instead of “[s]ultan-emperor” (261, lines 39-41).

¹¹ These *prima facie* information-seeking questions thus turn out to be rhetorical. Rhetorical questions are followed by answers more commonly when posed by singers than by characters in a song. S. G. Armistead (1987) provides a comparative sample of the question-and-answer form in Hispanic epics and ballads and, more broadly, in European traditional narratives (in the case of which, he traces the form to their oral-traditional roots). Such examples offer a valuable insight into the logic of rhetorical questions, which imply answers even when they do not spell them out.

takes no fewer than 159 lines (72-230).¹² At the point where the sultan negates Ibrahim's question and begins to reveal what hangs heavily on his mind, it becomes clear that the questions by the imam and Ibrahim are part of a foreshadowing strategy aimed at emphasizing the forthcoming deathbed speech. Questions are uttered and answers provided with perfect parallelism, initiating an extended version of what is known as Slavic antithesis.

Slavic antithesis is arguably the most stylized among the formulaic patterns of expression in South Slavic epic. It takes the form of A?→not A→but B: a question including typically two options is followed first by a negation of the proposed option(s), and then by an answer that reflects the real state of affairs.¹³ It is a variant of a topic-setting question followed by a speech, but between the question and the answer appear optional answers and a negation of those options. In agonistic dialogues it makes sense that speakers begin their speeches by asserting their authority, in other words with a rhetorical (topic-setting) question. But for the authoritative character to deliver the speech in the form of a Slavic antithesis, the question needs to be posed by an interlocutor in order to give the speaker the opportunity to negate the options offered in the questions before presenting the speech (*muthos*). With no antagonism between the speakers, according to Martin, the speech "takes on the appearance of harmless and pleasant fiction" (1989:55), consequently negating the need to assert individual authority and instead establishing narrative authority in the service of poetic stylization.¹⁴ This pleasant speech in the form of Slavic antithesis is also poetically powerful; and for the full force of it to be delivered through negation and then assertion by the character in the position of authority, it has carved out an exception for the question to be posed by the interlocutor while paradoxically reinforcing the narrative authority of the main speaker.

Epic Authority

The third type of questioning authority is the epic one: the authority of the hero in a song. Both Alija at the beginning and end of the song and Fatima in the episode of capturing the queen pose questions to their social superiors: Alija to his mother, and Fatima to the queen. Like social authority, epic authority appears in direct speech. It stems from words and actions that in the given context claim to represent the spirit of the tradition and its *nomos* better than does the

¹² In Kurtagić's version, LN 15, the sultan expounds on his "remaining wound" to Vizier Ćuprić in 264 lines (81-344), and then charges his son Ibrahim with conquering Bagdad in another 64 lines (375-82, 385-440).

¹³ For a definition and analysis of Slavic antithesis as negative parallelism, see Jovanović 1968. The only point in her argument I would dispute is the claim that "[i]t is true, *albeit not important*, that often the first part of this figure is expressed in the form of a question" (378, emphasis mine). For a more recent overview of Slavic antithesis, its parallels, non-standard forms, a summary of scholarship, and brief references to examples in non-South-Slavic traditions (such as Homeric, Moldovan, and Russian), see Janićijević 2009:21-34.

¹⁴ Questions can be used in this fashion even without launching a Slavic antithesis, such as in the song "Fiery Mary in Hell" (Огњена Марија у паклу) in Vuk Stefanović Karadžić's collection, where her questions to St. Peter serve as a springboard for his exposition (1969 [1845-62]:II, 17-18, 49-50); cf. a similar scene in the song "Wedding of Ivan Rišnjani" (Женидба Ивана Ришњанина) between a servant, Rade, posing a question to his master, Ivan, to elicit a lengthy speech (III, 167).

social status of the interlocutor, and thus receive social approbation that overrides lack of individual status. In direct opposition to social authority, epic authority thus challenges the applicability of social hierarchy.¹⁵ Maja Bošković-Stulli notes that “junak” (hero, champion) signifies a “young man” or a “lad,” which implies that epic authority is inherently positioned to go against social seniority, which privileges age over youth (1971a:13). All speech acts aim to prompt a (re)action, and in doing so they presume the prerogative of the speaker to make such pronouncements. The difference between social and epic authority is not tied to the narrative role of the character (it is not always the hero who speaks with epic authority), but to the character’s power positionality. If a character holds established authority, he or she speaks with social authority. If he or she establishes a claim to it in the moment of speaking, the authority is epic. In confronting social authority, epic authority takes on the strategy of fighting fire with fire. It borrows the stance of righteousness from social authority and then goes against that social authority using its own weapon of choice: questions. It can do so because, as words of power, questions on their own—regardless of the context—carry the weight of authority.

The tension between social and epic authority appears prominently in the *muthoi* in the *Iliad*. According to Martin, *muthos* is as much “the speech of one in power” (social authority) as it is of those “laying claim to power,” that is, heroes (epic authority; 1989:22); one important way to exert one’s status is not only to “be a doer of deeds” but also “a speaker . . . not of words, but of *muthoi*, ‘authoritative speech-acts’” (26). But South Slavic epics are considerably shorter than Homeric ones and consequently contain fewer lengthy speeches. South Slavic heroes in agonistic scenes are therefore left to assert their authority with rhetorical questions. Like a *muthos*, which is “the kind of speech that focuses on the speaker,” a rhetorical question foregoes the need for a response, thus downplaying or excluding the interlocutor’s contribution and effectively keeping the focus on the speaker (14). Martin even cites examples of questions, saying by way of explanation that, while “[s]ome people always make their directives into imperatives[, s]ome have more tact” (33). The posers of rhetorical questions in “The Song of Bagdad” exercise restraint from rashness, demonstrating control over their words. But tact ought not to be confused with a lack of force: questions are not muted imperatives. Ervin-Tripp’s analysis (1976) has opened the door to the possibility that, in performing the function of directives (in other words making the interlocutor do something), rhetorical questions achieve not less but more than imperatives. Imperatives direct, while questions direct and convey emotion and attitude, intensifying the power of words, and consequently the authority of the speaker. The most powerful instances of the use of epic authority include challenging the actions of superiors; and on a smaller scale, heroes and heroines use epic authority to announce important actions they are about to undertake. While social authority carries the intensity of moral indignation that seeks affirmation, epic authority projects the emotional charge of injustice in need of rectification.

¹⁵ Not every challenge to social authority results in the establishment of epic authority by the speaker. Songs in the epic cycle on *hajduks* and *uskoks* (local bandits that arose as an identifiable demographic in the seventeenth century; Karadžić 1969 [1845-62], vol. 3) tread the line between two types of defiance of authority: anarchistic vs. heroic. According to Svetozar Koljević (1974:216-27), the former grows out of frustration with unjust laws but then deviates into heedless violence. Only the latter can be said to act within the acceptable limits of violence against oppression, struggling to become the expression of nobility.

Social and epic authority reflect the tension between two aspects of sympathetic magic articulated by Frazer. Describing what he refers to as savage society (in other words a societal structure before stratification based on status), Frazer claims that in such a society “[t]he least possible scope is . . . afforded to superior talent to change old customs for the better. The ablest man is dragged down by the weakest and dullest, who necessarily sets the standard, since he cannot rise, while the other can fall” (1951:54). It is only with the rise of status-based social hierarchy that, according to Frazer, arises “the Golden age of humanity, everything that helps to raise society by opening a career to talent and proportioning the degrees of authority to men’s natural abilities” (*ibid.*). In his distinctly nineteenth-century view of “savage” societies, Frazer identifies two aspects of a society that gives rise to social and epic authority. On the one hand is the oral society, with its rule of tradition over the individual. On the other is a hierarchical structure that, under certain circumstances, allows an aptly positioned and able individual to crack a few traditional steps on his way to a position of power. The society of South Slavic epic song, as an oral yet hierarchical society, embodies both aspects, and the two modes of authority claimed by characters in song reflect them. The invisible force that the former obeys and the latter subverts to its will is, according to Frazer, “the pattern of right”; this “unwritten law” is about power with its roots in ethics (*ibid.*). Questions, like magic, “ope[n] a career to talent and proportio[n] the degrees of authority to men’s natural abilities”: they allow those with status to endorse the system, and those without to use their skill to improve it. Questions are a form that both propels the tradition by asserting the authority of those who are inducted into positions of power, by dint of age, experience, birth, or other standards sanctioned by tradition (social authority), and also provides a venue for opposing, countering, and improving the tradition (epic authority).

The most powerful use of epic authority in “The Song of Bagdad” is seen between the two heroes: Fatima and Alija. Fatima reproves Alija with questions four times in the course of the song. The first time is when she responds to Alija’s letter asking her whether he should go to the sultan’s aid:

A što pitaš Budimku Fatimu?	Why do you ask Fatima of Buda?
Aj, devljetu sljegni u hizmetu!	Go, be of service to the empire!
Ti pokupi Bosnu cip cijelu!	Gather Bosnia, all of it!
Sljegni z Bosnom caru jod indata,	Come down thundering to the emperor’s aid,
Pa prifati bijela Bagdata!	And conquer white Bagdad!
Fata će te s hrzom pričekati.	Fatima will wait for you with honor.
Dame skolju do tri kraljevine,	Even if three kingdoms surround me,
Braniću se sa Budima grada,	I will defend myself from the walls of Buda,
Niti odbit’ vara od duvara,	They will neither chip a stone from the wall,
A deljatim Budim prifatiti.	Let alone conquer Buda.
A ne boj’ se, careva gazijo!	And fear not, emperor’s hero!
Ako ne šće tako juraditi,	If you do not wish to do thusly,
Spremi mene kanalji dorata,	Send to me your dark-red bay horse,
A spremi mi sablju dimiškinju,	And send to me your Damascene saber,
A spremi mi siljah i oruže,	And send to me your wide belt and weapons,

I spremi mi tvojega dorata!	And send to me your bay horse!
Ja ću caru Bosnu pokupiti,	I shall gather Bosnia for the emperor,
I devljetu od indata sići,	And come to the aid of the empire,
Z božom pomoj prifatit' Bagdata.	With God's help capture Bagdad.
Ja ću tebe đerđef opremiti,	And to you I will send my tambour,
Spremit' đerđef i kudeljku moju,	Send to you the tambour and thread,
Pa ti predi s majkom u odaju!	You then embroider in a chamber with your mother!

(12, lines 377-98)

Fatima criticizes Alija for stalling, and incites him to action. She mocks him with a rhetorical flourish—the option of her going to war, and his taking over her handiwork duties in her place—beginning with a question and following with an agonistic speech as a direct challenge to Alija's thoughts, doubts, and uncertainties. She inverts the authority-balance between the hero and herself, taking over the role of determining the course of action for him.

Fatima chides Alija again when she first meets him in her disguise as Budimlija Mujo. Alija is so taken with her appearance that he asks her to carry the imperial standard:

Olj' mi primit' careva sandaka?	Will you accept the emperor's banner for me?
Begenišem tebe i dogata.	I have taken a liking to you and your white horse.

(32, lines 640-1)

She takes issue with his offer and declines; she thinks it too hasty of Alija to bestow such an honor upon someone who has not yet introduced himself properly:

Ti ne znadeš ko sam ni kako sam,	You know neither who I am nor how I am,
Ni s koje sam strane od svijeta.	Nor whence in the world I come from.
Kako ću ti sandak prifatiti?	How should I take on the banner for you?

(32-3, lines 643-5)

The two characters spar with questions seemingly over formality and decorum. Alija concedes, and reverts to proper etiquette with another question:

“Ko si, brate, dobar barjaktare?”	“Who are you, brother, fine standard-bearer?”
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(33, line 647; also 46, line 601-2)

Fatima responds with a lengthy formal introduction of herself as Mujo and eventually accepts the standard from Alija. Thus far we see that, to Alija posing his initial questions with social authority, Fatima counters with epic authority. Since a transgression has taken place, Fatima's questioning leads Alija to correct it by reminding him to follow the custom and, once he does, she reverts to statements.

Fatima reproves Alija a third time during the first audience with the sultan. Having procured Alija's release from the dungeon, she chides him for failing to fulfill his promise to obtain a pardon from the sultan for Budimlija Mujo (who she is disguised as):

Zašto si mi besu založijo,
Da mi vadiš itljak buruntiju?
(34, lines 801-2)

Why did you make me a promise,
To procure a pardon for me?

While captivity is *prima facie* a form of subverting the hero's authority, it is unsurprisingly often of crucial value to the plot in that it serves as a precondition for the hero's demonstration of valor.¹⁶ Here it is unusually also a way of positioning Fatima as a heroine and reversing the power dynamic between the two heroes: with his social authority temporarily taken away, there is no need for sparring with questions, so their exchange is resolved with a single one.¹⁷

Fatima's fourth and final reproach comes at the end of the song. On their wedding night, Alija sees Fatima's shaven head, leaves, and then dispatches his mother to Fatima's chamber to offer her recompense for returning home. Fatima refuses and demands to speak with Alija in person. Alija repeats the offer to her, to which she responds:

Ja ti podmir prifatiti neću.
Ko je s tobom u Bagdatu bijo?
(24, lines 1585-86)

I will not accept your recompense.
Who was with you in Bagdad?

She describes her adventures, from disguising herself as Budimlija Mujo to penetrating the city gates and abducting the queen of Bagdad, but this time the speech is issued as a powerful string of rhetorical questions:

¹⁶ For formulaic patterns of the hero's captivity that point to the rootedness of the motif in epic tradition, see Detelić 2011.

¹⁷ At this point it is clear that Fatima emerges as the hero in the song. In a version by Fortić, she formally takes on heroic status by introducing herself to Alija (and later the sultan) with a question: "Have you heard [of] Budimlija Mujo?" ("Jesi li čuo Budimliju Muju?," referring to herself disguised as Mujo: 212, line 384; 213, line 459). She is not a helper but a counterpoint to Alija. Heroes in South Slavic epic are occasionally paired with characters other than anti-heroes, such as another hero or, as is the case here, a heroine. Just as Alija is a stock hero figure in the Muslim versions of South Slavic epics, so is Fatima: Fatima was a common sobriquet for female warriors in medieval Arabic works (Jason 2011:237), a tradition that is reflected in the Muslim strain of the South Slavic epic songs. Even though Fatima in "The Song of Bagdad" is a different character, her name evokes many of the heroic traits associated with Fatima-the-warrior in the way Olga Levaniouk defines the term: "'evocation' . . . conveys the sense of activating notions and associations, of bringing to mind stories, characters, words, and actions that are not explicitly identified in the poem, but without necessarily presupposing any particular textual point of reference" (2011:8; cf. traditional referentiality in South Slavic epic song as presented by John Miles Foley in *Immanent Art* [1991:1-37]). Bošković-Stulli provides an overview of female characters who, disguised as men, go on to perform heroic deeds, interpreting the motif as an anti-patriarchal strain in South Slavic epic song—a strain which can be placed under the category of authority-challenging motifs and characters even if Fatima ends up obeying the patriarchal expectations of subsuming her role to that of her future husband (1971b:111). Such characters can be seen in traditions other than South Slavic and Arabic: Joanne Findon, for example, identifies in the Irish oral tradition two opposing currents, one "aligning [itself] with the wider misogynistic discourse endemic in the European Middle Ages" and the other offering "portrayal of strong, active women who have much to say" and who "play important roles in the tales" (1997:7). In Kurtagić's version, LN 15, which has a different cast of characters, the two female characters—the young sultana and Jela—both take on similarly authority-challenging roles, posing mocking and challenging questions to their male counterparts (292-302, 1860-63, 2077).

Ko je s tobom u Bagdatu bijo?	Who was with you in Bagdad?
Ko je tebi sandaktarom bijo?	Who was your banner-bearer?
Ko ti nađe od Bagdata vrata,	Who found the door to Bagdad for you,
I dobavi bagdatsku kraljicu,	And delivered the queen of Bagdad,
I dobavi ključke od Bagdata,	And delivered the keys to Bagdad,
I dade ti polu od đerdana	And gave you one half of the necklace
Od kraljice od Bagdata grada?	That belonged to the queen of Bagdad city?

(54, lines 1333-39)

This dramatic climax of the story takes the form of a pathos-filled challenge to Alija's authority.¹⁸ In the song, each time Alija makes a misstep, Fatima is there to help him become aware of it and to steer him toward the proper decision and action. Corresponding to Robert J. Fogelin's observation that rhetorical questions lead "the respondent . . . to acknowledge something . . . that is to his or her discredit" (1987:265), the four examples above reveal themselves to be not mere reproaches, but corrective speech acts.

"[T]he weapon of the wronged and oppressed against their more powerful enemies" is how Wilson defines curses (2000:436); they are the weapon of choice for those who claim new rather than assert established authority. Cursing—the quotidian analog of magic curses—is, according to Jack Katz, an emotional response in which the person reconnects with the community he or she feels excluded from while simultaneously claiming his or her own righteousness. Using two-lane traffic as a case study because of its propensity to serve as a metaphor and comparandum for dialogical interaction where conflict (road rage) occurs, Katz claims that cursing often provides emotional release because cursing "dramatize[s the person's] relationship to the offender in a way that emphasizes the offender's extraordinarily inferior moral status and by inference, his or her own superiority" (1999:60). The mental and emotional process leading to cursing—the cursing ritual so to speak—comprises three steps: first, by "[d]efining [themselves] as victimized, the [person] sneaks moral meaning into the situation before projecting a moralistic response"; second, "the immediate social situation is generalized" and thus "given transcendent significance"; the first two set "the stage for [the third step:] an attempt to reverse the moral and sensual process . . . Now the [person] can perform as a ritual actor before the general audience whose presence he or she has invoked" (48). Thus, "a loss of the taken-for-granted basis of action" is compensated by "call[ing] up moral energy to construct a drama of communal importance in the immediate situation, and then to clothe oneself in the role of avenging hero" (48-49). While this process takes on a ritualistic character, its most compelling feature is that it is effected almost exclusively through words rather than action, namely through verbal dramatization. Commenting on Katz's findings on the use of curses in contemporary contexts, Randall Collins notes that cursing "is a 'magical' act." Specifically, cursing, "for all its bad moral reputation in 'proper' social manners, is a moral act; it is carried out with a sense of self-righteousness, and a compulsory quality as if the curser is being pulled into the action by a

¹⁸ As Armistead notes, "[r]hetorical questions are perfectly consistent with other *guslar* techniques, such as repetition, as a means of creating narrative tension" (1987:52). Another technique that is often coupled with rhetorical questions and repetition, with the effect of building tension, is gradation.

larger force. . . . Cursing is a kind of primitive justice . . .” (2004:205-06). Just as “[c]ursing is the expression of taboo words[, which] call for attention because they break a barrier against what is supposed to be improper to utter” (207), so epic questions break the norm of social inferiors not posing them.

In consonance with W. H. Auden’s claim that a “ritual is a sign of harmony between the aesthetic and the ethical . . .” (1948:408), epic questions show themselves to be an aesthetic (or at least formal) device (a ritual) that temporarily destabilizes the ethical (established social hierarchy) for the purpose of regaining its stability long-term (propriety and justice). Like cursing, this call to change breaks down the barriers of social status. In initiating rectification of actions, questions posed with epic authority resemble *muthoi* in the *Iliad*. Martin (1989:43-88) identifies three types of *muthoi* in Homer: commands, performances of memory, and flyting.¹⁹ He claims that the most prominent of the three is performance of memory (which corresponds to narrative authority), stating their length as proof. But in the South Slavic song, the authority-challenging questions and the corresponding epic authority carry the day. Rhetorical questions on their own can never be sustained as long as speeches in the indicative, even when bolstered with repetition and gradation, as in Fatima’s fourth and final challenge. But on their own, they make for powerful turning points, punctuating the ongoing narrative by either contrasting potential narratives to actual ones (Fatima contrasting Alija’s going to battle to his staying at her home), changing the course of the narrative (Fatima changing Alija’s mind about their wedding), or initiating new ones (Fatima’s third authority-challenging question to Alija marks the point in the narrative where she replaces him as the hero of the song). Cursing combines, according to Katz, embodied emotional experience with “a positive effort to construct a new meaning for the situation” (1999:24). Epic questions go even further: they demand a new narrative. To make an impact—in word and in deed—in face of the established authority, the speaker uses rhetorical questions that bestow moral affirmation upon the acts of change that mark the high turning points in a song narrative. They thus harness three elements: the power of opprobrium that the tradition imposes on the actions being reproached, the power of the interrogative mood to create the need for a new narrative, and the fighting spirit of the hero that the audience identifies with. Questions posed with epic authority thus model how a change can be enacted with the sanction of the tradition—the same tradition that discourages change by claiming to be unchangeable.

A Special Case of Epic Authority: The Battle of Questions

If questions posed with social authority can be brought under the umbrella of chastising and exhorting, and those with narrative authority are topic-setting, questions posed with epic authority are challenges. As catalysts for conflict based on self-righteousness, they constitute, as cursing does, “a move in the escalation of conflict in a direct confrontation. . . . [H]ere the ritual tends to entrain its recipient into the same kind of formulaic verbal expression” (Collins 2004:209). If the offender responds in (un)kind, the conflict escalates, and turns into a battle that

¹⁹ The three kinds of authority I identify here match the types of *muthoi*, identifying at least one—if not the most salient—criterion for Martin’s division into the three categories.

can only be resolved by one side declaring victory. The dialogical sparring with questions follows the logic not only of cursing but also of a different kind of song—bird song—which offers an analog for the power of epic authority, as demonstrated in studies by Beecher and Campbell (2005) and Burt et al. (2001). Male song sparrows are territorial birds. Each has a repertoire of songs, some of which are unique to the individual, and some of which he shares with a neighbor. Songs are power exchange tools that a bird uses to initiate territorial interactions with a neighbor as they “convey only one basic message, ‘I am an adult male of the species in possession of a territory’” (Beecher and Campbell 2005:1297). The neighbor can choose to engage or not. He can respond with a song unique to him—a signal that he is refusing to engage (dropping the topic, so to speak). But if he responds with a song from the shared repertoire, he signals the intention to pursue the interaction. At this point, if he responds with a different song from the shared repertoire (“repertoire matching”), he maintains communication (stays “on topic”) in a de-escalating manner. If, on the other hand, he responds with the same song that the other male sang (“type matching”), he is acting aggressively and confrontationally, escalating the interaction. Each subsequent “type matching” response brings the two closer to a physical confrontation. Weiner describes a similar approach to challenges in interactions among humans: Trobrianders’ “hard words” (such as accusations) can be either followed by the interlocutor’s attempt at suicide (the admission of defeat), met with silence (a de-escalation response), or matched by “hard words,” which lead to a physical confrontation (1983:693-95). Not only mirroring the attitude but doing so in the same form resembles responding to a question with a question with epic authority in South Slavic epic song: the speakers “perceive a type match from a neighbour as a challenge and [are] more likely to escalate” (Beecher and Campbell 2005:1298). In epic song, questions are the form that, when shot back, not only asserts the position of the speaker as superior in a given context (which all questions do) and challenges the attitude and actions of the interlocutor (which all epic questions do), but throws down the gauntlet, thus rendering the exchange a duel with the need for a clear resolution. The resolution can come in word or in deed, by reverting to the indicative (staying on topic but dropping the interrogative form) or by complying in action (effectively admitting the interlocutor’s authority). There needs to be a winner and a loser.

The power of authoritative questioning extends beyond “The Song of Bagdad” and beyond the South Slavic epic oral tradition. Posing questions to issue a heroic challenge leading to victory is seen in a scene in Book VI of *Gilgamesh*. Ishtar—the goddess of fertility, love, sex, and war—lays her eyes on the hero Gilgamesh and makes him an offer of marriage. Gilgamesh refuses. But he does not stop there; he calls on her cruelty in a speech punctuated with questions (lines 24-79 in the standard Old Babylonian version; translation from Foster et al. 2001:47 and Mitchell 2004:135)²⁰:

[What shall I give you] if I take you to wife?

...

²⁰ With the exception of the last line, the translation below is taken from Foster et al. 2001. Foster translates the last line of Gilgamesh’s speech in the imperative mood, even though it contains the interrogative word “why” (*mīnim*); I have therefore replaced it with Stephen Mitchell’s translation (2004).

[What would I get] if I marry you?

...

Which of your lovers [lasted] forever?

Which of your heroes went up [to heaven]?

...

And why would *my* fate be any different?

Gilgamesh's speech, according to Tzvi Abusch (1986:145), can be divided into three thematic sections. The first and the third begin and end with questions (the original text of the first section is broken, and the interrogative form is thus inferred from context, but the third contains explicit interrogatives), decrying the inappropriateness of Ishtar's proposal and recounting in sordid detail the eventual sufferings of each of her previous husbands. Gilgamesh's insult-laden challenge to Ishtar's authority, status, and the righteousness of her decisions and actions is delivered through questions with such force that it causes the powerful deity to run to her parents in tears. Ishtar subsequently engages Gilgamesh in a contest—a challenge that Gilgamesh wins in deed after he has won it in (questioning) words.²¹

Closer in time and familiarity is the Book of Job in the Hebrew Bible where Job engages in a veritable battle of questions with God as he poses arguably the most probing ethical question in the Bible: the paradox of the coexistence of evil and the justice of a benevolent God.²² Job begins by voicing his grievances against God to his friends, interspersing them with questions. Job's friends defend God, but they also match Job's questions with those of their own, calling into question Job's doubts and accusations. God has heard the exchange, and now responds with rhetorical question after rhetorical question (Job 38-41). After Job's sparring with his friends, God now delivers the final blow with an overwhelming salvo of questions that neither require nor receive answers. His questions do not respond to Job's accusations because more important than staying on topic is staying on top. The book ends with Job acknowledging God's authority, the ultimate justice of his actions, and the proper order (described as a balance between interrogatives and declaratives) is one where he will "[h]ear, and I [God] will speak; I [God] will question you [Job], and you declare to me" (Job 42:4 [Coogan 2007]). The effect of the questions is a demonstration of the grandeur of God and, most importantly, his unquestionable and thus ultimate authority. Asking questions is a hallmark of authority, but even questions can be questioned, and when that happens, the ultimate weapon is more elaborate questions. As in other

²¹ Abusch (1986:149-50) notes that Gilgamesh's speech comes in response to Ishtar's unexpectedly unilateral assertion of power, and is delivered in ritual form. Ishtar later initiates round two of the battle, in which Gilgamesh's blood brother Enkidu dies. But even though Gilgamesh loses his friend, he stands on high moral ground, not allowing Ishtar to have her way.

²² Kenneth M. Craig Jr. prefaces his volume on questions in the Hebrew Bible by noting that questions "may call attention to discrepancies in power" and "remind us . . . of the establishment of power, and of the exercise of authority" (2005:5, 9). However, his argument examines questions primarily as catalysts for characterization and plot development, bringing up the Book of Job only tangentially. Similarly, Lénart J. de Regt (1994:362) notes that rhetorical questions in the Book of Job position the speaker as someone to be listened to, implying their role in asserting the authority of the speaker, but not elaborating; he does provide a helpful overview of rhetorical questions (both marked and not marked by the interrogative particle) as well as the uses of the interrogative particle.

battles of questions, the last question makes for the last word. Unlike the pattern of epic authority challenging and changing social authority, here social authority wins over epic authority, driving home the paradoxical message of the book.

Beyond “The Song of Bagdad”

Not all questions in “The Song of Bagdad” fall neatly into one of the three categories; but rather than being exceptions they are as a rule outliers in relation to the three categories of questioning authority. One common case is when the rank of the characters is unclear. A topos where relative status becomes blurred if not irrelevant is the marketplace: in negotiations and transactions, such as when Fatima talks to the town criers who are about to sell Budimlija Mujo’s horse, interlocutors are considered to be on the same footing and can exchange questions without regard to their social status (PN 12406, lines 332, 343; PN 12422, lines 278-80). This can be taken as a special case of situational authority, in other words cases where questions are uttered before relative rank has been established through introductions. Another common case is when two adversaries of seemingly equal strength challenge each other, for example when Mehmed meets the imperial soldier in the longest South Slavic epic, “The Wedding of Smailagić Meho” (“Ženidba Smailagina sina”) by Avdo Međedović (Bynum and Lord 1974:141), or between the heroes Alija and Višnjić in Avdo’s “Wedding of Vlahinjić Alija” (“Ženidba Vlahinjić Alije”; Bynum 1980:25, lines 2212-20). An extended version of such a scene is found in Petar Petrović-Njegoš’s “Ogledalo srbsko” (1845, quoted in Zima 1880:56), where two cocky heroes issue challenges to each other:

Vako reče Orugdžiću Meho:
 “More vlašē! iz koje s’ nahije?
 Kako li se zoveš po imenu?
 Imadeš li ostarjelu majku?
 Jesi li se more oženio?
 Postaće ti majka kukavica,
 Ostaće ti ljuba udovica,
 S kijem si se danas počerao.”

Besjedi mu Pocerac Milošu:
 “Što me pitaš more poturico! . . .

Ti otkle si, iz koga li grada?
 Kako li se zoveš po imenu?
 Je li tebi u životu majka?
 Da se nisi skoro oženio?
 Postaće ti majka kukavica,
 Ostaće ti bula neljubljena,

Thus speaks Orugdžić Meho:
 “Hey you infidel! Which district are you from?
 By what name do they call you?
 Do you have an elderly mother?
 Are you already married?
 Your mother will wail like a cuckoo bird,
 Your beloved will remain a widow,
 Because of the one whom you have challenged
 today.”

Pocerac Miloš speaks to him:
 “Why do you ask me, you converted Turk! . . .

Where are you from, from which city?
 By which name do they call you?
 Is your mother still alive?
 Have you perchance gotten married recently?
 Your mother will wail like a cuckoo bird,
 Your beloved will remain untouched,

S kime si se danas počerao.”

Because of the one whom you have challenged
today.”

A differently elaborate case of mutual questioning between heroes on equal footing occurs in Avdo's "Wedding of Smailagić Meho," in two consecutive dialogues between blood brothers, Tale and Osman, and then Tale and Hasan: the heroes exchange greetings and news, weaving in questions whose type ranges from greetings (social authority) and friendly rhetorical challenge (epic authority) to topic-setting (narrative authority; Bynum and Lord 1974:339-47, lines 10,643-924).

Questioning oneself is not uncommon in epic song. When part of a soliloquy, questions are typically at its beginning, serving as topic-setting questions followed by exposition, thus posed with narrative authority, as is the case when the imperial messenger beholds Fatima for the first time and expresses to himself words of wonder: "Whence the young fellow, whence his white horse? . . . If girls of Buda are like this, what are Buda's heroes like then?" (PN 12406, lines 400-01, 448-49). Karadžić's collection contains more examples of self-reflexive questions, including the one where "child Tadija" speaks to himself by addressing his "heart": "Why did you, oh heart of mine, take fright?" (1969 [1845-62]:III, 133). Speaking to "one's heart" is a way of challenging oneself in the form of a questioning dialogue, not unlike heroes in the *Iliad* who, rather than thinking aloud, establish an interlocutor within themselves, consequently speaking in question form "to the[ir] greathearted soul" (πρὸς ὃν μεγαλήτορα θυμόν: 11.403-07, 17.90-97, 18.5-7, 21.552-62, 22.98-122). Other impersonal interlocutors appear in addresses to inanimate objects, such as when Radivoje and Manojlo chastise a mountain (Karadžić 1969 [1845-62]:III, 14, 24), or to preternatural beings, as when Old Man Novak curses a nymph (*vila*; III, 27-28). These are questions delivered with epic authority, where characters challenge forces beyond their control.

The most frequent outliers are between masters and servants and male and female couples. Typically these are ephemeral instances of taking on epic authority, cut short when the master or the husband responds with a question, winning the battle and effectively retaking the baton of authority. In Avdo's "Wedding of Smailagić Meho," when Mehmed enters Fata's house for the first time, she asks him to dismount with—unusually—a question (Bynum and Lord 1974:165). Here, context matters. The question is preceded with a long description of the opulence of Fata's home, revealing the full weight of her high-born status to Mehmed and the audience, and at the same time creating a brief window of opportunity for her to switch to the interrogative. While epic authority by definition poses a challenge, it can be attenuated by the context. There are cases where the characters complement each other, such as with a hero and his mother (in a fatherless household, as in the case of Alija and his mother), a heroine with her mother (as in the case of Zlata and her mother in the "Wedding of Vlahinjić Alija" [Bynum 1980:13-16]), or a hero with a potential mother-in-law (as in the case of Mehmed and Fatima's mother in the "Wedding of Smailagić Meho" [Bynum and Lord 1974:170-75, 198-99, 202-04]), where youth and courage are paired with age and wisdom, making the battle of the questions caring and affable, sometimes even playful, rather than agonistic. (A similar situation is seen in Avdo's "Wedding of Smailagić Meho" between the hero Mehmed and his servant, who is also his protector and elder.) These characters pose questions with a corrective function in subplots

where the actions of the main hero require rectification. Consequently, they temporarily take on epic authority even though as characters they do not rise to the status of heroes.

Finally, there are questions which, posed by anti-heroes, are deceptive, such as when empress Milica attempts to seduce Dragon of Jastrebac (Karadžić 1969 [1845-62]:II, 163) or when Šćepan's wife deceives him leading eventually to his death (II, 394). Used in the guise of a challenge issued with epic authority, without the backing of traditional ethos, these questions end up being anti-heroic. A milder version can be seen in Avdo's "The Wedding of Vlahinjić Alija" where soldiers taunt their captain; here the intention is not corrupt, but the soldiers' inebriated state belies moral aspects of the epic authority of the question they are posing (Bynum and Lord 1974:24, lines 2124-25).²³

Overall, questions show a remarkable level of adherence to the three authority-based types in "The Song of Bagdad" and more broadly in songs from MPCOL.²⁴ But the adherence of questions to the three authority types does not stop there. In addition to the Muslim strain of South Slavic epic songs, Christian ones too—namely those in Karadžić's collection of epic songs—follow the same rules. Beyond the South Slavic oral tradition, the rule appears to apply to at least one non-South Slavic Muslim tradition, that of the Arab tribe of Bani Hilal in Upper Egypt, as illustrated in the small sample of a single performance in 1983 of the Hilali *sīra* (translated by Slyomovics as "saga, tale, epic, legend, history, biography") by the singer °Awadallah °Abd aj-Jalīl °Ali: all but two questions in his epic comport to the authority rules. Furthermore, *Gilgamesh* and the Book of Job are not merely accidental parallels—there is sufficient adherence to the three authority types outside the Muslim South Slavic oral epic tradition to warrant further analysis and refinement of the framework I propose here by including the material beyond the songs analyzed above, as the rules carry potential for wider applicability. "The Song of Bagdad" in its multiformity makes it possible to identify the three authority-based categories and consequently to elucidate with precision the overall functions of questions in the South Slavic oral epic tradition, as defined by its most eminent singers and songs, providing the foundation for further examination of the functions of questions in epic song and more broadly across oral traditions.

²³ This overview of outliers is by no means extensive; a more thorough analysis of the contexts of utterances would likely yield further insights. Minchin, for example, in her analysis of questions in the *Odyssey*, lists examples where the speaker follows her questions with an explanation for asking the question(s) (2004:29-31). Analyzing them through the lens of authority-type, it becomes clear that these are questions posed by social superiors at the moment when the interlocutor has just demonstrated their valor or worth in some way. The speaker asks the question(s) with social authority, but then follows them with a rationale for posing them, in effect attenuating the assertion of their authority and beginning the process of transferral of power to the hero interlocutor.

²⁴ For information on and an assessment of the work that went into creating these two collections, see Foley 2000. For a brief history of MPCOL, its curating process, accessibility, and potential for further research, see Elmer 2013.

Between Fantasy and Realism: Waving a Magic Wand

Questions assert the authority of the speaker while pointing to the unknown. The former effect derives from rhetorical, the latter from information-seeking questions. Yet all questions achieve both effects, evoking each other's features through common form, as well as a third effect: the deontic force. Rhetorical questions in "The Song of Bagdad" and South Slavic epic song systematically communicate the tension between what is and what ought to be. The speaker contrasts the actual state of affairs with the desired or ideal one (the lack of news vs. the expectation that there ought to be some), the actions that took place with proper ones in the given social context (you are asking me to be the standard-bearer, but you should first know who I am), or the interlocutor's inaction with the anticipated action (you are asking me whether you should go to the sultan's aid, but instead you ought to have acted upon his request already). Structurally, rhetorical questions rely on this antithesis. But the antithesis built on factual, physical, emotional or other elements is merely a superficial manifestation of the real contrast between what is and what ought to be, revealing that both the illocutionary force and the authority that questions carry are, at least in part, deontic.

Most questions—those posed with social and epic authority—demand actions; others, posed with narrative authority, serve as a starting point for an exposition on what is right and how things ought to be. This form of narrative authority—the authority of a word-weaver, one who often occupies positions of social inferiority and cultural superiority simultaneously, who traverses the realms of story and history, one who poses questions in the narrative rather than direct speech, and thus from a privileged narrative position—offers insight into another aspect of questioning authority: in addition to the ethical aspect of the deontic force, questions mobilize the tension between the fantastical and the real. Analyzing fantastical and preternatural elements in South Slavic epic, Koljević (1989) concludes that they serve four functions: they are episodic, introductory, framework-setting, and/or indicative of narrative twists.²⁵ The preternatural shares with the interrogative that they are devices of emphasis appearing in formally significant places: beginnings, framing statements, and high points. Koljević's four categories overlap with the three forms of authority with clear correspondence: the episodic function is homologous to social authority (punctuating the high points); introductory and framing motifs correspond to narrative authority (contextualizing and presenting the narrative); and narrative twists correspond to epic authority (highlighting turning points). Both the preternatural and questions are about the unreal: the former points to what is imaginary rather than real, while the latter points to something that is yet to be known (information-seeking questions) or is either hypothetical or yet to be realized (rhetorical questions). And within this tension between unreal and real, authority negotiates and mediates between the opposing ends of the antitheses that exist in lived life as in fiction: what is and what could be (imaginary), and what is and what ought to be (deontic). Koljević frames his analysis by contrasting the South Slavic epics' relatively "real[istic] content" to the "empire of imagination," as characterized by Goethe. But while preternatural elements "lend to [what is

²⁵ I disagree with Koljević's fifth category of tenor and color, the examples of which can be unambiguously placed under the first four categories. But apparently so does he as he eventually drops it altogether in the abstract to his article (1989:193-94, 198).

taken to be] a historical event the stamp/character of a ‘cosmic drama’” (191), emphasizing deeper ethical meaning through the imaginative (196), questions accentuate ethical issues, dilemmas, and tribulations, on the way to resolution.

Deontic authority is the authority of asserting the right thing, as well as of correcting, rectifying, ameliorating, of pushing things toward what they ought to be. It is the authority of diverting from the undesirable and steering it in the direction of the ideal. It is the authority of determining the future in a way approved by the past. It is the power to improve, not just because it is right, but because it is pleasing—as fiction ought to be—to those in the present. And as in fiction so in the real world: even within the (epic) oral tradition that claims to retain, the impulse is to improve, as Martin (1989:206-30) deftly demonstrates by defining the *Iliad* as the story of Achilles that improves on the myth of Heracles. Lord shows that singers, even while claiming with full honesty and confidence to tell the truth, no less strongly feel the urge to best each other (1974:17-18). And to improve one needs to build on rather than maintain, to change what is, and to change it for the better: to propel the endless cycle by which the “ought to” becomes the “is,” both in content (ethic) and in form (artistic skill based on rhetorical figures). This is the end toward which questions steer as they mediate between real and ideal.

In serving as a tool of transfer—“the appropriate action of changing the undesirable to the desirable” (Tambiah 1968:177)—questions double as a tool of control by the questioner-magician. Marcel Mauss identifies three ways in which individuals become magicians: through consecration as a gradual process sanctioned by the community; through tradition, when the person is a medium for a larger and older body of knowledge and power; and through revelation, whereby a person feels called upon to act in a capacity that incurs change (2001:50). The three paths reflect the three kinds of power behind the questioners and their authority—social approbation, the gravitas of the tradition, and individual righteousness—as well as the parallels between magicians and questioners as authority figures and power holders. Questions, like “the tools of a magician, which themselves always ended up having their own magical qualities,” can hold the power that “immediately transports us into a magical world” (59-60, 128). Even more than a magic spell, they are like a magic wand: an ordinary form made of ordinary substance (a piece of wood, a string of words) that under the right circumstances and in the right hands assumes and wields extraordinary powers. Questions transport us from the darkness of ignorance into the light of knowledge (with information-seeking questions and narrative authority), as well as from the murkiness of wrong into the clarity of right (with rhetorical questions and social or epic authority). Casting the spell of influence over the interlocutors, the magic wand of questioning marks its holder—the speaker—as someone with the authority to direct the addressee toward the right thing to know, say, and do. It is a tool of righteousness and power hiding in plain sight.

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