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**A FEW REMARKS ON THE ROMANIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY  
AND THE WAY IT IS REFLECTED IN FAIRY TALES**

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**Abstract**

*The present paper attempts to touch upon some aspects related to well-known fairy tales and to the ways in which these reflect a people's national identity, as well as common national stereotypes. We start from the assumption that fairy tales constitute the most common expression of Romanian traditional folklore, being representative of a typically oral culture.*

*Fairy tales seem to appear predominantly in developed societies, where the individual tends to partly distance himself from the community as a whole. In fairy tales, the individual's moral fibre, as well as his emotions, does not solely apply to the characters in the narrative story, but also extend to the narrator himself. We shall focus on two of the most common Romanian fairy tale characters, referring also to the two-fold nature of the story: on the one hand, the conscious and maybe superficial purpose of entertaining the reader, and on the other hand, their deep, unconscious cathartic nature.*

**Key-words:** Romanian folklore, myths, archetypal figures, fairy tale characters

## 1. Introductory remarks

The present article starts from the assumption that fairy tales play an important part in defining a nation's cultural profile. The genesis of the very concept of culture allows it to be viewed, among other things, as "the collective body of arts and intellectual work within any one society; (...) it includes a firmly established notion of culture as the realm of the produced and sedimented symbolic; albeit the esoteric symbolism of a society."<sup>1</sup> We shall further look into some features recurrent in many Romanian fairy tales, focusing on those aspects we believe shed light on our national identity. Also, one facet we shall bring into discussion pertains to the mythical traces to be found in fairy tale stereotypes.

## 2. From myths to fairy tales

A huge formal and psychological distance separates fairy tales from myths, as it happens with all spiritual writings that belong to different cultural eras. In a culture, myths always come before fairy tales. Any continuity between them is always uncertain and may be misleading, just like the resemblance between folkloric tales pertaining to remote geographical regions that have no connection with one another.

Judging by more recent traces, a reconstruction of the early thinking has been attempted. "A myth, in its simplest definition, is a story with a meaning attached to it other than it seems to have at first; and the fact that it has such a meaning is generally marked by some of its circumstances being extraordinary, or, in the common use of the word, unnatural." This definition was given by John Ruskin, in 1869, in *The Queen of the Air*<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, we can say that, in its most ancient stage, myth seemed to appear as an explanatory instance of narrative work, pre-rational and pre-moral, making no difference between the real and the imaginary, endowed with pragmatic as well as religious purposes. "In a traditional approach, this myth would be presented in the form of a canonical version arrived at by selectively synthesizing the various versions collected. Such a canonical version is an abstract object, without existence in the society studied."<sup>3</sup> Contrary to what we might think today, myth did not serve a poetic function, nor did it aim to create some kind of ambiguity; quite the opposite, it aimed to put forward a clarification of things. In its tendency towards creating or imposing recommendations

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<sup>1</sup> C. Jenks, 1994, p. 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> <http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/religionmythology/g/mythdefinition.htm>

<sup>3</sup> D. Sperber, 1999, p. 27-29

or prohibitions, one can see the beginnings of what will later turn into religion, then morality. The confusion between what is real and what is imaginary has undoubtedly been enhanced, or even generated, by the phenomenon of dreaming, which is little known even today.

Mythology represents a later stage, where old narratives not only change and extend their horizon, but also acquire new dimensions (moral, logical and even aesthetic) that transform their nature. However, they still preserve some irrational and pre-rational elements that represent a real supply of symbols to which psychoanalysis will subsequently turn. We only need to look at the way Hesiod speaks of the origins in his *Theogony*<sup>4</sup> to become aware of the extent to which all previous beliefs appear to be transformed, interrelated and organized.

A decisive break occurs, at least in Europe, between mythology and the world of fairy tales: the Christianization of the population (both local residents and invaders). The storyteller is no longer a pagan priest or an ancient rhapsodist. His Christian education forbids him to see reality in the characters or actions he speaks about. Therefore, his attitude becomes two-fold: towards his adult audience, the purpose of the narration is that of phantasmatic compensation – intertwined with the exorcising of unspoken fears; towards children, there exists a quasi-initiating purpose (the child is presented with a model of courage leading to success); still, a certain ambiguity is often present (the listener may be purposefully frightened), as well as an ironic distance from the narrated events.

Several decades ago, the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp showed that the fairy tales of all nations display and repeat an almost unique pattern where the dangers and threats that the hero faces represent the consequence of an initial transgression (either the violation of an initial prohibition, or a condition that is hard to meet, or a target that is hard to attain). The usually arbitrary and cruel nature of the interdiction (condition) imposed reveals it to be a remaining trace of an era in which taboos were still fully archaic: they required no rational foundation, and the cost of breaching them was life itself. This implacable characteristic undoubtedly reflects an inner state of **fear**. Like any taboo, the interdiction itself reflects, on the surface, the deep obsession of a permanent state of guilt – “*the need to rationalise the unexplained feelings of guilt which (...) were prevalent during the Archaic Age*<sup>5</sup>”.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.msu.edu/~tyrrell/theogon.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> E.R. Dodds, 1951, p.151

The archaic fear we see in fairy tale prohibitions is more difficult to trace in many myths. One of the reasons may be that the main trigger behind the creation of myths seems to be curiosity, the ancient manifestation of conscience. However, only indirectly can we recognise this curiosity, since myths aim to explain – a fact which implies the existence of a desire to understand, not explicitly expressed in myths, since myths display a detached, impersonal tone. (By contrast, fairy tales constantly reveal the presence of the story-teller). It was curiosity that led to the fall of Adam and Eve, the emblematic couple of humankind; however, it is not curiosity, but archaic fear that appears to be the hidden link between fairy tales and myths.

It logically follows that, in fairy tales, the surface level is easier to distinguish from the deep level. The former is the level of clichés, since in fairy-tales, the ending is known to be happy; thus, the narrative incentive in this case remains **adventure**. However, its backbone is **fear**. Here, we come across the distinction we have mentioned before, between:

- a. *A formal fear inspired by stereotypes*: dragons, monsters, ogres, whose defeat by the main hero stirs no emotion; this fear only works for children, and
- b. *A deep fear springing from sinister elements*: cannibalism, vampirism, punishment by death; this fear has not been completely annihilated by the use of clichés. A few examples would include the row of pillars with human heads on top (victims who have been unable to solve the riddle); spending the night in the cannibal's home; the hero and his betrothed being pursued by the witch; the desperate race of the knight –ghost at the break of dawn, before the cock sings, etc.

In our national culture, where both tradition and creation could be found, for centuries on end, only in villages and in the anonymous rural culture, (whilst the city appeared much later and was long deprived of an original culture), popular fairy tales and subsequently cultural ones have gathered many more specific and significant elements than in urban cultures, such as Western European ones. Therefore, even a quick look at our national stories can provide a profile of the local cultural identity.

### **3. Archetypal figures in Romanian fairy tales: *Muma Pădurii* and *Făt Frumos***

If we were to identify a bipolar typology of fairy tale characters, at the negative pole we would come across archetypal figures such as *Zmeul* (the Dragon), *Muma Pădurii* (The Old Hag), or *Omul Rău* (the Evil Man, hardly ever present, since it lacks the fantastic dimension – for

instance, The Glabrous man in “Harap Alb”; this dimension can be compensated for by other assets – for instance, an important hierarchical position, such as is the case with the Red Emperor in the same story).

We shall further illustrate the *Muma Pădurii* character by means of the following, terror-generating extract:

*Since night had fallen, and the girl saw her parents weren't returning from the fair, she climbed on the hut and started shouting:*

*“Come, sister, come sleep by my side, my mom and dad have gone to the fair and I'm all alone and feeling lonely...”*

*No one answered.*

*The girl shouted again:*

*“Come, sister, come sleep by my side, my mom and dad have gone to the fair and I'm all alone and feeling lonely...”*

*The sister, God knows why, still did not show up.*

*When the girl started shouting the third time, to her horror she heard moaning and screaming.*

*She was terrified and ran into the hut.*

*Hardly had she arrived there, when she heard the entrance door creak, and the next moment she was facing a huge, horrible beast and she started shaking with fear.*

*As soon as it walked in, the beast said:*

*“Good day, girl!”*

*“Good day, but who are you?”*

*“I am the sister you have called for”.*

*“No, you're not”.*

*“Yes, I am a sister too”.*

*And it sat down by the fire.*

*What could the poor girl do? She was frozen with terror, but could still speak, since she uttered in awe:*

*“Oh, my! Your hands are so big!”*

*“They're big, for many hands have I eaten... “*

*“Oh, my! Your feet are so big!”*

*“They’re big, for many feet have I eaten...”*

*“And your head... it’s so big!”*

*“It’s big, for many heads have I eaten...”*

*“And your mouth is big too...”*

*“It’s big, for I’ve used it to eat so many girls and boys, and I’m going to use it to get you too.”*

*Having said that, it swooped upon the girl and started sucking her blood.*<sup>6</sup>

The very character of *Muma Pădurii* embodies one of the facets of the Romanian peasant’s two-fold view of the forest: on the one hand, we have here an evil, threatening, dark and gloomy area, while the other way to picture the woods appears in the Green Forest of the popular folklore (*Codrul verde*) – a region that is beneficial and full of light.

In the excerpt quoted above, we can see how strong terror can become in fairy tales; however, this terror is not displayed to be kept up, but only to be exorcised. The role of exorcising our fears that fairy tales have (fear that has been caused or brought about by the narrated events) is carried out in two ways, both part of the conventions of fairy tales (therefore, well known to the listener / reader):

- a. The formal irreality of the genre (the listener knows, or has been warned, that he is about to listen to an imaginary story);
- b. The denouement, that is known to be positive, according to the rules of the same genre. Besides, the fixed phrases that appear in all fairy tales (at the beginning, at the end, and sometimes in the middle of the narration) serve the same purpose: they keep reminding us of the fictional nature of the story.

At the opposite pole, of goodness and happiness, we find the ideal, emblematical figure of *Făt-Frumos* (Prince Charming), who often appears by the same name. As a mythical trace, *Făt-Frumos* is considered to be a human embodiment of the Sun. Most probably, the etymology of the Romanian word goes back to the Latin *foetus* (whose female equivalent is the Romanian *fată* – girl). Certain constant elements that define *Făt-Frumos*’s situation in all stories seem to be mythical in nature; for instance, his miraculous birth, the total lack of human flaws, or, in the narrative unfolding, “ *all the help that he receives from good mythical beings in his struggle for*

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<sup>6</sup> D. Stăncescu, 2010

*justice, honesty and kindness*”<sup>7</sup>. It may be interesting to notice that the help which comes from the outside can even lead to an imbalance among the story functions, up until the point where there emerges a „passive version” of *Făt-Frumos*, whose assignments are done by other people, like for instance in Harap Alb. (Are we then confronted with that deep, fatalist passivity, with that strange, inert resignation that the shepherd in Miorița has always been accused of?)

Among the symbols of *Făt-Frumos*’s supernatural powers, we find the **golden sword** (a solar weapon by definition), and the **enchanted horse**, endowed with human speech, “*who counsels his master, takes him where he needs to be taken, and rescues him from many dangers. (...) Făt-Frumos’s enchanted horse is not a copy of the Greek Pegasus, but a mythical creature with ancient local origins*”<sup>8</sup>. Starting from a statement by Pliny the Younger, who claimed that “*the country of winged horses was, according to old legends, Scythia, and especially the regions near Istros (the Danube)*”, which is prehistoric Dacia, the cited author also makes the surprising statement that “*this is also probably the origin of the Greek Pegasus*”<sup>9</sup>.

An allegorical image of inner beauty, *Făt-Frumos* is characterized by physical purity (as opposed to Apollo, his classical mythological counterpart). He is best described by the qualities attributed to the Sun in the *Ballad of the Sun and the Moon: You enlightened Sun / Body without sin*. Indeed, in fairy tales, the astral, mythical couple of the Sun and the Moon finds its counterpart in the fantastic, legendary couple of *Făt-Frumos* and *Ileana Cosânzeana*, elements of archaic origin that have been assimilated in popular Christian mythology. However, the fairy tale clears the myth of its dark ancient features, since *Ileana Cosânzeana*, embodiment of the Moon, was the Sun’s sister. The myth preserves more of its initial forms in ballads, where the Sun wishes to marry his sister<sup>10</sup>. *Ileana* refuses the incest and jumps into the well, since she would rather the fish ate her than marry her brother. God, however, takes her from the well and places her on the sky, so that she may never meet her brother again. Thus, the world of the ballads appears closer in nature to the cruelty of the primitive world.

One further remark refers to the fact that, in some cases, the good-evil polarization of fairy tales can occur within the nuclear family – good sister versus bad sister, for example, where their conflict is always resolved at the end of the storyline.

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<sup>7</sup> R. Vulcănescu, 1985, p. 384-390

<sup>8</sup> (ibidem, p. 389)

<sup>9</sup> ibid

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.versuri-si-creatii.ro/poezii/r/balade-populare-romanesti-6zuccsu/soarele-si-luna-6zuccsu.html#UgiVeNzn93w>

Also, concerning the frequent ending of fairy tales with *Făt-Frumos*'s counterparts in other cultures who, very much like our hero, obtain the Emperor's daughter as their wife as well as half of the kingdom (and are known to subsequently inherit the entire kingdom), A. Moret and G. Davy remind us that Frazer (*Totemism and Exogamy*, London 1910) saw in this a distant echo of an Aryan custom which allowed royal descent to be handed down through women, not through men; thus the empire passed down from one generation to another, each time to a man from a different family, maybe a foreigner, who, by marrying one of the princesses, reigned in the end over his wife's people<sup>11</sup>. Thus, in fairy tales, we encounter both religious and social archaic features.

#### 4. Conclusions

To conclude, we can say that certain archetypal mythical characters have survived into the domain of fairy tales. Variable in nature, these characters often acquire images that seem to contradict the initial scheme. For instance, *Făt-Frumos* may appear in the beginning as the most despised of all brothers, in the archaic pattern of brothers – enemies (such as in *Călin Nebunul*<sup>12</sup>), or going through unexpected metamorphoses, like in Ion Creanga's *Povestea Porcului*<sup>13</sup>. In some cases, even archetypal situations have been preserved in fairy tales; however, we do not find, in fairy tales, the amoral mentality and the almost inhuman detachment of myths; nor do we come across its narrative unfolding, which is usually irrational. The Christian fairy tale has incorporated pagan elements only by subordinating them to its own ethics. The closed, fatidic nature of myths has been replaced by the cathartic, redeeming structure of fairy tales.

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<sup>11</sup> A. Moret et G. Davy, 1923, p. 44

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