

## THE APPARENT ABSENCE OF HEIRS – A CENTRAL MOTIF IN CERTAIN ROMANIAN FAIRY-TALES

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**Abstract:** A central motif present in some fairy-tales is that of the absence of heirs; either we deal with an old man and an old lady, an emperor and an empress, the both couples suffer from the same reason – the lack of continuity in this world, through children. We are going to analyze several fairy-tales, trying to unravel the main aspects for which this motif is present in them.

**Keywords:** fairy-tales, symbolic representatives, heirs, immaculate conception, mentality.

A central motif present in some fairy-tales is that of the absence of heirs; either we deal with an old man and an old lady, an emperor and an empress, the both couples suffer from the same reason – the lack of continuity in this world, through children. Further on, we are going to analyze several fairy-tales, trying to unravel the main aspects for which this motif is present in them.

The fairy-tale “Prince Charming the Lost”<sup>1</sup>, tells the story of two people who could not have children: “Once upon a time, there was a couple, very hard-working. As it is often the will of God (...). They would have liked to have a child, but it proved to be impossible”<sup>2</sup>. At some point in the story, the old man meets a sorcerer, who gives them an apple: “Your wife, and only her, should eat this apple. But pay great attention, no other creature of this world, ought to have a tiny bite of it”<sup>3</sup>. Nonetheless, not only his wife, but also the mare eats from the apple, and, thus, a child and a wonderful foal are miraculously born. The child grows up miraculously, “when he was one year old, he looked as if he were five, and when he was five, as if he were fifteen” and “he could learn as much as no one other, from this white world. He barely heard something from his teacher, that he immediately learnt”. One day, he rushes, along with his wonderful foal, far away

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<sup>1</sup> *Cele mai frumoase basme românești. Basme de aur*, Bucharest, ERC Press, 2008, p. 73

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

from his house, he gets lost and the foal leads him towards the palace of some fairies, and advises him to become their servant. Here, he baths in the fairies' water, when they are gone from the house and becomes even more handsome, with golden hair, he steals three miraculous nuts, which are actually hiding royal clothes, made of copper, silver and gold. He runs away, from the fairies, and becomes the gardener of an emperor, whose daughter finds his secret and falls in love with him. He finds his parents and marries the emperor's daughter.

The motif of the miraculous birth and the exceeding of the initial condition, can be met in this fairy-tale. His extraordinary birth, assures him a different destiny, from that of the common people, being all the time under the protection of the supernatural forces, being always accompanied by his wonderful foal, whose birth is also a miraculous one.

The fairy-tale "The Wonder Grimalkin"<sup>4</sup> is part of the same series of fairy-tales in which the heirs are missing... at least for the moment, in our story: "Once upon a time, there was a husband and a wife who didn't have children. One day, being merrier than usually, the man says to his wife: "The goodwill of God didn't descend upon us, we can't have children. Let's go on the field, and take whatever we find, and that should be our baby (...)"<sup>5</sup>. So, they found a lean-and-lank dirty kitten, and took him home. They took care of him and brought him up, as if he had been their child. The time was passing, and the kitten was getting nicer and nicer, until he became a gorgeous grimalkin. At some point, the woman "became pregnant. The joy you could see! The woman gave birth to a chubby beautiful and healthy child"<sup>6</sup>. The child was playing with the cat, as they had become mates, and "after a while", the child and the cat remained on their own.

The grimalkin helps the boy to find a situation and, through different tricks that remember of the popular anecdotes, he arranges the marriage of the boy with the daughter of a great boyar, he cunningly obtains the entire fortune of some dragons, which he chases away. The motive of the heirs absence gains, in this fairy tale, new interpretation, the care for the "lean-and-lank" kitten, which was belonging to the profane world and which proved to be magical, he talks, he transforms himself, plans trickeries for helping his master to be regarded favourably. The goodwill that he was shown, in the household of the two common people, is rewarded as regarding their son, a supernatural "plot" specific for the fairy-tales, which places the narration under the sign of "as the work, so the pay", a good deed has the same good consequences, the good is always victorious.

The fairy-tale "The Emperor of the Snakes"<sup>7</sup> depicts the consequences suffered after stealing a child's soul: "Once upon a time, in a long forgotten hamlet, an old man and an old woman were living. They became poor, spending all they

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 91.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 117.

had gathered for having a son, but it was all in vain”<sup>8</sup>. At their old ages, they decide to go out on the field and to take whatever they will find, and to take care of their child. They find a baby snake. The snake grows and, one day, he thanks them for help and asks them to bring him back to the place he was found. Sadly, they take the snake back to the place where they found him. That was the emperor of the snakes and had miraculous powers, giving them, a hound that could spit golden coins, a hen that could lay golden eggs and a bat that could hit at the request: “Help me bludgeon”. They arrive to a jeweller, who steals first their dog, then the hen, and, eventually, the bat, which will in the end determine him to give back the gifts to their initial owners. And from now on, the old man and the old woman lived happily ever after.

We meet the same mentality horizon, in which the facts are rewarded accordingly, the heirless couple comforts their lack by taking care of a wild animal, which has fantastic powers. The reward for their deed will be according to it, without being exempted from certain delays that remind of the human malevolence – the stealing of miraculous objects. Yet, everything comes to a balance, and the reward of the old people is made complete.

The fairy-tale “The young man, born with a book in his hand”<sup>9</sup> talks about the miraculous birth and the fabulous life of a Prince Charming, born with a book in his hand: “Once upon a time, there was an old lady and an old man. Until their old ages, they hadn’t had a child”. They decide to go into the wide world, only to find a cure for their bareness. When they return home, the old lady gives birth to a child who was holding a book in his hand. The old man heard the Fate Fairies saying: “This child is going to be a Prince Charming, and he is going to be rich”, “This child, at the age of 12, will be abducted by the evil spirits”, “If he escapes from their imprisonment, he will be an emperor”<sup>10</sup>. The child grows up miraculously, being protected by all the people from the village, yet, the evil spirits manage to capture him. He succeeds in escaping from the evil spirits, but he gets into a cursed kingdom. The princess from that kingdom could not marry, because the man who was wooing her, had to sleep at least one night in her room, but, the next day none of the men were alive. He manages to break the curse, and he marries the emperor’s daughter. He returns to his parents, but the adventures still continue. He is able to get back to the emperor’s daughter and they live happily ever after... The motif of the miraculous birth and the supernatural protection of the baby can be found in this fairy-tale too, the wise child is protected by the entire community, he passes all the tests thanks to his strong will for reading from the holy book that he was holding when he was born, therefore his protection is infallible. His birth under the sign of miracle, leads him towards a blissful fulfilled destiny

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 125.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 127.

The fairy-tale “Stan Boulder” was collected by Ion Pop-Reteganul, heard from a shepherd from Reteagand written in Deva, while he was a teacher<sup>11</sup>. Thus, there was once a wealthy man, who didn’t have any children. He was praying to God every day, but it was all in vain, until, one day, he met with God and Saint Peter, who were willing to help him, asking: “Tell me, what is your wish? Because I am the One who can make any wish come true!”, he answers all the three times, the same: “I want children, Lord! Children are all I want!”. God listened to him: “Very well, children you will have, as you wished”, and Stan Boulder, as our character is called, gets one hundred children in his household, all of them telling him father, and asking him for food. The man sells his fortune and buys food for the children, but he realises that he has to work harder, in order to bring all up, therefore he decides to go into the wide world. The fairy-tale seems to originate from an anecdote, because Stan Boulder reminds us of Păcală (Merry Jester). Hence, he defeats an ogre by squeezing water out of a rock, a piece of cheese actually, he defeats the ogres, hyperbolising the trials that he had to pass: to throw the mace – he is afraid not to hit the Moon, to bring water inside the skin of a buffalo – Stan decides to take the entire well, for not wasting the time carrying the water from it, to bring logs from the forest, more than the ogre, whomanged to pluck the trees out of the ground – he wants to tie the entire forest with a chain and fetch it at home. All these tests, hyperbolised by Stan Boulder, scares the ogres, who want him dead, but he cunningly survives, and uses the ogres to carry at home an immense treasure – bags full of gold.

Another reason for which we consider having a certain connection with the anecdote, is the fact that the desire to have children is over exaggerated, being rewarded by God through a lot of children – 100 more precisely. This represents a fine sense of humour, inserted in the structure of the fairy-tale, because the needs, the concerns increase exponentially with the high number of children, being transformed into a matter of rationality (“And what *else* do you want?”, “Only children”): the power of God is great, He is mighty, He can offer everything, but it matters what you wish for. The obsession of having children is rewarded through a hyperbola in the number of children. Stan Boulder is “a well-to-do man”, his destiny is unbalanced by this lack of heirs, the absence of children becoming obsessive and disturbing the other plans too, darkening any perspective, any other value, his destiny looking as if it gets stuck in this issue. This is why, the obsessing, repeating answer “I want children”, to all God’s questions, seems a blockage that cannot be rewarded but through a hyperbola, as a lesson that our character, “well-to-do man”, has to learn. The equilibrium appears through the evidencing of a native cleverness, similar to Păcală, an initial stupidity, then shrewdness as the story unfolds, a character without fantastic qualities, but proving extraordinary cleverness in the confrontation with the ogres.

<sup>11</sup> Ion Pop-Reteganul, *Basme Ardelenești*, Bucharest, Poseidon Publishing, 2012, p. 110.

Moreover, it is a matter of belief: what kind of help does God offer you? What hopes do you have, which is your ideal? What ideals do you have? The fairy-tale is balancing itself on the way, because the cleverness surpasses the instinct, the richness saves all the 100 children, Stan Boulder wakes up from the impasse in front of God and St. Peter, he starts to realise the reality, life gains more ample values, he notices the way in which he can become a winner – which is actually a continuity between welfare and intelligence, both blessed by God, because he had learnt the lesson.

Another fairy-tale collected by Ion Pop Reteganul, is “Apple-Tree and Pear-Tree”, told by N. Trîmbițoiu, a primary school teacher in Varhely<sup>12</sup>. Thus, the fairy-tale depicts that: there was once an emperor and an empress, who didn't have any heirs, they were extremely rich, but the fear that “their bloodline, their family will vanish” was terrifying, especially because “all the people from their kingdom were grieving, because the emperor's line was disappearing; and they were good people, the emperor and his empress, with the hearts of gold! There was no one in the entire kingdom, who didn't benefit from their kindness, not a poor that they didn't help, not a sick that they didn't send a gift, as soon as they heard of his condition (...), they were afraid not to be replaced by malicious leaders, who would make their existence as bad, as good it had been so far”<sup>13</sup>. The instinct of procreation, of reproduction, the nature, the biological condition appears here from a cultural perspective – it is not about the saving of the species, but about the taming of the biological features, through the elimination of violence, through wisdom, through continuous kindness, through good deeds, through a rightful heritage, clear and obvious, towards the inheritors, lacking the violence, the fights for power that would weaken any kingdom, the extreme poverty, the violent nature, the violence.

One day, the empress is crossing a bridge, when she sees a beautiful fish in the water and orders to be caught. The cook, who was a gypsy woman, prepares the fish, but she also tastes the food. The empress eat the fish and they throw the bones to a lady-dog. After a while, the empress, the gypsy woman and the lady-bitch get pregnant. There is a great joy when, nine months after, Apple-Tree is born, the son of the emperor and empress: “The old people had reasons to be joyful, they had who to kiss, there was someone who would take their place for leading and who would inherit their fortune, and the people weren't afraid anymore that the good kin would disappear”<sup>14</sup>. The cook also gives birth to a child too, and she decides to call him Pear-Tree. The lady-dog had also given birth to six beautiful puppies. The children look the same, and even more, they start wearing the same clothes, they are good friends, they become sworn brothers and go hunting together, and each of them has three puppies with him. Nonetheless, the empress wants to make the difference between them, so she burns her son's hand.

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<sup>12</sup> Ion Pop-Reteganul, *Basme Ardelenești*, Bucharest, Poseidon Publishing, 2012, p. 143.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 112.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 113.

The symbolic birth from the fish is a sign of a miraculous and fortunate kinship, but the differentiation leads towards the loss of the original quality, therefore implying a symbolic death and an auspicious rebirth, a necessity to re-establish the initial miracle.

It becomes symbolic the importance of “being similar”, the idea to preserve the parents’ good genes. The violent gestures (the burnt) is punished because it breaks the initial balance – the birth from the same fish, the indistinct, the undifferentiated, the uniform quality (empress, gypsy woman, lady-dog) – the union into the miraculous:

“Mother, you chased away my luck! Unlucky I’ll be from now on, and I’ll have no rest until I find my luck again, because I can’t live without it. May God protect you! I’ll be on my way now, to live as quickly as I can my unfortunate life... for gaining again my fortunate existence”<sup>15</sup>.

The symbol of the fish – “the beautiful fish”, creates appetite, desire; it is recreated, it does not vanish, the idea of fecundity, luck, prosperity, continues the generational kindness. The fish is “the symbol of the element Water, in which it lives”, “the fish is also a symbol of life and fecundity (...). In the Indo-European peoples’ iconography, the fish, an emblem of water, it is the symbol of wisdom. Living hidden in the deepness of the Ocean, it is touched by the sacred power of the abyss, it supervises the fecundity of the world”<sup>16</sup>.

“In China, the fish is the symbol of fortune. The symbols of fish was also extended over the Christianity. The Greek word **ichthys** (fish), is interpreted by the Christians as an ideogram, each of its five letters being considered the initial letter of a word from the syntagma Iesous Christos TheouYiosSoter (Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Redeemer). This is considered the origin of numerous symbolic representations of fish on the old Christian monuments. It becomes the symbol of the Eucharistic meal too, where it appears next to the bread. Living in water, its symbol will be prolonged and it will be regarded in connection with the baptising: born from the baptising water, the Christian is identified with a fish, created similar to Jesus Christ Himself”<sup>17</sup>.

Apple-Tree leaves, but he gives a handkerchief to his brother, confessing him that he has to die, but if he looks at the handkerchief at the exact moment and sees the signs – three drops of blood – his brother will be able to save him, and he will be lucky again.

He leaves in the wide world and saves several communities from anogre, a wild bull, a seven-headed dragon. He meets the daughter of an emperor, who is sentenced to death, being given to the seven-headed dragon. Apple-Tree saves her from dying and he begins to have faith for a brighter future. Now, we meet the

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 117.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dicționar de simboluri*, Vol. III (P-Z), Bucharest, Artemis Publishing, 1994, p. 72-73.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 73.

exceptional quality of the royal people: the similarity with the angel and the motif of the sacrifice:

“a delicate young girl, you could think she is an angel descended from above. With her golden hair, flowing on her back, beautiful face, sky-blue eyes, thin and red lips, she didn’t have a pair among the other children of God”<sup>18</sup>.

Love gives him back the trust in the returning of luck, in rebirth, “Because we MUST live and be happy”<sup>19</sup>. Many questions can be asked about the signification of happiness: the advice “Rejoice” from the ancient prayers, in Christianity. About the meeting of the predestined one, it is a miracle written in the destiny of the character: “if it hadn’t been for me to save you, I wouldn’t have been alive either, not being able to forget you for the rest of my time on earth”<sup>20</sup>; the symbol of the unforgotten, the continuous presence in the memory, the love as the confident force for achievement.

The tests that he faces include demonic presences that troubles the balance of the communities, thorough these trials – doing good deeds, he will be forgiven and the equilibrium will be re-established, through his contribution for the defeating of the evil forces and the restoration of order into the community of people. The reaffirmation: Good always defeats evil! Yet, his trials do not stop here, he leaves to find the cure for the emperor’s daughter’s parents, who became ill at the thought that they might lose their daughter. Mother-Ogre, the mother of the three monsters that Apple-Tree defeated and killed, captures his powers and defeat him. His brother sees the signs of his death on the handkerchief, and leaves to look for him. He arrives at the saved communities, and the mentioning of his good deeds, transform Apple-Tree into an immortal being, “He was a good man” – is the remark of the dwellers. Before the burnt, he lived in a kind of atemporality, the time was uniform, equal, good. In the moment of the burning, he steps onto the time wheel, which can bring unexpected events. But he does good deeds, therefore the mentioning of his actions means remembrance, he is mentioned three times.

The signification of the two young men’s names – the main characters of the fairy-tale, is also very important, the apple tree is miraculous in the popular tradition, being considered the tree of life, the tree of immortality, the tree of life secret. His brother, Pear-Tree is, as well, fantastic, because, as the Holy Sunday tells him, “a bright future expects you”<sup>21</sup>, he is “a loyal brother, as you are”<sup>22</sup>.

Apple-Tree loses his luck not when he starts his voyage, but when he forgets to do a good deed – to consolidate Holy Sunday’s house, who taught him well, and in the confrontation with Mother-Ogre, and saved on his own.

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<sup>18</sup> Ion Pop-Reteganul, *Basme Ardelenesti*, Bucharest, Poseidon Publishing, 2012, p. 125.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 126.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 128.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 135.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 140.

The hero from the fairy-tales, his existence, is “dominated by deeds and occurrences that belong to the field of”<sup>23</sup> the fantastic. His birth “is placed under the sign of fabulous or miraculous, Prince-Charming being often the result of an immaculate conception that leaves a mark, from the beginning, on his destiny. Usually, his parents obtain him in their old ages and through means that surpass “the normality”, as it is understood people”<sup>24</sup>. George Călinescu makes an inventory of the means, from a fairy-tale, in which a childless family can have an heir<sup>25</sup>, “the future mother prays to God, obtains an enchanted apple, she eats from it and becomes pregnant, drinks a plant tea, offered by a “plump-lipped blackamoor”, eats a golden fish, swallows a pepper seed or a tear dropped from Virgin Mary’s holy icon”<sup>26</sup>.

Ovidiu Bîrlea was also mentioning that the birth of Prince Charming is miraculous, “Prince Charming Ioviță is born from an empress after she tastes from a golden barbell (...). Prince-Charming seems to be conceived after the bath with a water in which a plant was boiled (...). A barren woman gives birth to *Prince Charming the Lost*, after getting an apple from a sorcerer”<sup>27</sup>.

“The immaculate conception and the miraculous birth provides a similarly important upbringing of the young man, making his relations with the parents, between the moment of birth and that of his leaving, to consume rapidly”<sup>28</sup>. The child gains fantastic attributes, he is precocious, he grows up in one year as other do in seven, he learns very fast from his teachers and the philosophers from the emperor’s court.

All these fairy-tales talk about the motif of the heir absence, the solving of this problem being a miraculous, immaculate birth, or the emerging of lots of children, who change the destiny of the person who suffered a crisis from this point of view, or a miraculous solution, or a hyperbolisation at the maximum dimension, according to the desire to have children. The fairy-tales offer miraculous, supernatural solutions in a characteristic way, the destiny of a child, born differently from the other children, opens the way towards the exceeding of the profane existence, and the entering into the fantastic one, which means the exceeding of his common condition.

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<sup>23</sup> Nicolae Constantinescu, *Relațiile de rudenie în societățile tradiționale. Reflexe în folclorul românesc*, Romanian Academy Publishing, 1987, p. 122.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> George Călinescu, *Estetica Basmului*, Bucharest, E.P.L., 1965, p. 186, *apud* Nicolae Constantinescu, *Relațiile de rudenie...*, p. 122.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 122.

<sup>27</sup> Ovidiu Bîrlea, *Mică enciclopedie a poveștilor românești*, Bucharest, Scientific and Enciclopedic Publishing, 1976, p. 179; *Apud* Nicolae Constantinescu, *Relațiile de rudenie...*, p. 122.

<sup>28</sup> Nicolae Constantinescu, *Relațiile de rudenie...*, p. 123.