SOME BRITISH AND ROMANIAN FANTASTIC CHARACTERS (WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO FAIRIES)

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Rezumat

Studiul încearcă o trecere în revistă a celor mai populare personaje ce populează atât basmele româneşti cât şi cele britanice, cu aplecare deosebită asupra zânelor, care par sa fie mai des întâlnite în insulele britanice. S-au trecut în revistă caracteristicile lor fizice şi de comportament, credinţele populare bazate pe aceste poveşti. Exemplele au fost luate din poveştile cele mai cunoscute ale celor două popoare.

Fairy tales are a projection of man's imagination during his early years of life with his dreams, hopes, desires as well as his fears, dreads and fantastic explanations of the unknown. The fairy tales of the adult change into myths - his ideals are embodied in legendary heroes and his fears and desires in superstitions. They differ according to the geographical environment and historical events.

The fairy tales were an important way of entertainment enriched by the voice of the storyteller and the sounds of the strings. In many Irish villages there used to be until quite recently a trained traditional bard who, helped by his natural gift, produced rhymed tales on the inspiration of the moment. A story told with a regional accent and hiding unpredictable happenings had a special flavour that has faded away. Generated spontaneously and inspired by everyday life, the tales passed from mouth to mouth, from parents to children until they were written down and lost their faculty of improvisation. (White 1976: 5)

Young people today would hardly understand that even the longest winter evening was too short for the entertainment which people were able to provide for themselves in the past with singing, music and dancing, playing cards and games, with talk and gossip around the fire, with storytelling. Since the most part of the rural people knew neither reading nor writing, their memories were very keen and they could remember a story word for word for the rest of their lives. In this way legends were passed on for hundreds of years almost unchanged, but often gaining a wealth of colourful detail.

English fairy tales are peopled with a picturesque world: giants and dwarfs, talking animals and witches, fairies and saints, shepherds, soldiers, miners, fishermen and kings. They are mixed together with historical events, shapes of the land, implacable weather and country humour. The tales of the British Isles do not contain splendid palaces or smart fairies, handsome princes and aspiring peasant brides. There are no wicked stepmothers, noble knights and beldames waiting to be saved, no bears, camels or griffins. Everything is popular and the heroes and heroines are as wild, untidy, simple, hardworking and superstitious as they probably were. (White 1976: 7)

A particular personage of fairy tales who lent its name to denominate this genre is the fairy, present all over the world: Persia (Peri), Greece (Fata), Spain (Hada), etc. In the English folklore 'fairy' is a generic name for all kinds of creatures, mastering their own selves: pixies,

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Irish leprechauns or sidhe, Scottish brownies, sprites, elves, goblins. They live in troops or solitary. They can be ruled by kings and queens as in the north-eastern tale *The Magic Ointment,* where we meet the King of the Bad Fairies.

In Greece mortals called the blood-thirsting Furies, the Eumenides or "the kindly ones" in the hope that they would not destroy their lands or people. In Ireland the title "the good people" has the same function. The fairies can be quickly offended and they must be calmed or satisfied otherwise they can destroy the crops or cause mortal children to get sick and die. What is good for a fairy may be fatal for a mortal. By flattering them, they must think of us favourably.

The simple and honest people are most likely to encounter the fairies. They hate qualities they do not possess and appear only to those as passionate and straightforward as they are. When a mortal comes closer to a fairy he should greet him politely with no sign of fear. Fairies have great power over those who are coward or show rudeness, uncleanness or dishonesty. A good example can be found in a tale from the south-east of England, *The Hyter Sprites*:

> "Hyter sprites was the name they went by, but nobody talked about 'en at all- 'twadn't considered lucky, any more than Somerset folk do talk too freely about the pixies. Reckon they was some kind of kin. They could appear man-size to play their tricks but most times they was about knee-high. And if 'ee had to travel night times, what with they reeds and water and green eyes all a-watch, it wadn't very nice."

And their song was:

"Give a Promise
Live a Promise
Do very well
Make a Promise
Break a Promise
Go down to Hell."
(*Folk-tales of the British Isles* 1987: 75-6)

Although they enjoy eating and feasting they are always moderate and do not get drunk or gain weight. For them only present time exists and their moments are vividly lived and never blurred by regrets or memories of former experiences. They do not understand mortals and use them as instruments of their own pleasure, being careless in consulting their wants and needs. They lavishly reward the people who are generous and do not intend evil although they have a particular harsh form of justice. The harm they inflict is never as horrific or deadly as that of other foreign spirits found, for instance, in Scotland or Germany. A man or woman need only say "God bless you" or make the sign of cross three times and they are safe from the fairy's power.

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Fairies always enjoy the sympathetic human attention. In *The Tulip Pixies*, a tale from the West Country we have such an example: the care of an old woman for the tulips in her garden, which were treasured by the pixies.

> *"She noticed that the tulips did not fade so quickly as the other flowers in the garden. Indeed, it seemed as though they would never wither. And one day, as she bent to have a look at them, the old woman noticed that the pixies had made them even lovelier by breathing over them. Now they smelled as fragrant as lilies or roses do."* (*Folk-tales of the British Isles* 1987: 35)

Fairies spirit away beautiful young women, handsome men and children. Some of them go away from the villages to lonely places and never return. Most of them are bewitched and a copy of themselves seems to sicken and die while their real selves live on the evergreen lands of the fairy kingdom. The children abducted are generally replaced by phonies as in *Egg-shell Pottage*, a tale from Wales.

Because they like youth and beauty so much, fairy chiefs marry mortal women, and mortal men fairy queens. Most of them return after seven years, a number that is very often met in the English fairy tales and not only there, with their beauty drained by the contact with the fairies. The aged who lived long in fairyland eventually return home and die. We find this motif in two well-known Welsh tales, *The Legend of Pantannas* and *Taffy Ap Sion and the Fairy Ring:*

> *" 'I am Rhyderch.' 'Rhyderch?', said the aged man. 'Rhyderch? I know you not. There is no Rhyderch living in this place, nor have I ever known any man of that name. The only Rhyderch I ever heard of was one who, my grandfather said, had disappeared suddenly from this place, no one knew where, many scores of years ago.' Rhyderch sank down upon a chair and wept. The old man's heart went out to him in his grief, and he rose to comfort him. Nevertheless, as he put his hand upon his shoulder, lo! The weeping figure crumbled into dust."* (*Folk-tales of the British Isles* 1987: 95)

Those who return and live are endowed with great gifts. They become famous poets, musicians and fairy doctors as in the tale *Lutey and the Merrymaid* from the West Country. But those who visit the fairyland are never quite the same. They are strange and silent, with a wild look in their eyes, and are given to wandering the hills alone in search of the gentle fairy places.

> *"Some people said that at times she would have a faraway look about her, as if she was listening voices or music that nobody but herself could hear, but her mother and father said she was no different and she was dearer to them than ever, both for herself and for what had happened to be."* (*Folk-tales of the British Isles* 1987: 234)

Fairies never have casual relationships with mortals and people should consider carefully whether they want to make the fairies 'intimate acquaintances'. In *The Fairy Funeral*, a tale from Lancashire, two men set out to walk home to the remote village of Longton. It was midnight when they encountered a fairy funeral. The younger one saw that the face of the figure borne by the fairies closely resembled his own. When he stretched out his arm to touch

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their leader, they vanished. About a month afterwards he fell from a stack and after lingering some time he dozed away.

Fairies are often heard singing beautiful songs and this seems to be one of their major occupations. Sometimes they do not like to be interrupted, but if it is done with skill and talent, it can prove to be a blessing. For example, Lusmore the Humpback, who joined their singing and what he sang was pleasant to the fairies' ears, got rid of his hump.

> *"Presently there rose a wild strain of unearthly melody upon the ear of little Lusmore; he listened, and he thought that he had never heard such ravishing music before.*
>
> *'Da Luan, Da Mort*
>
> *Da Luan, Da Mort,*
>
> *Da Luan, Da Mort.'*
>
> *Lusmore listened attentively, scarcely drawing his breath lest he might lose the slightest note.*
>
> *[…] so availing himself of the pause when Da Luan, Da Mort, had been sung three times, he*
>
> *took up the tune, and raised it with the words*
>
> *Augus Da Dardeen."* (*Folk-tales of the British Isles* 1987: 263)

But if the song is spoiled, as it was the case of the two rhymes added by Jack Madden, Augus Da Dardeen, Augus Da Hena, the fairies get angry and reward the wretched intruder with two humps.

Fairies favour all the beautiful and talented in the real land and they honour most the musicians. To them they mean prosperity and success in love. Since they cannot always spend their time eavesdropping or waylaying fiddlers on their way home from a dance, they steal our finest musicians to provide exclusive and continuous performances in fairyland. (White 1976: 37)

Fairies claim all beautiful things, including humans, as their own and they always need fine, strong women to nurse the stolen young. Thus, beautiful women and nursing mothers often find a place to live in fairyland or help them:

> *"Lang, lang,, syne, a young woman of Nithsdale was singing and rocking her bairn when a*
>
> *wee body cam' tae the door, and asked her if she could gie her a wee drap o' milk for her wean.*
>
> *'Give my bonny thing a sook,' says the Fairy."* (*Folk-tales of the British Isles* 1987: 216)

Romanian fairy-tales usually have a king and a queen as main characters or a prince and princess. The king bears names got from the colour spectre: The White King, The Red King, seldom The Green King or The Yellow King. There is not a Black King, his negative role being taken by The Red King. Sometimes we have other characters: the son of a great boyar, an old man and an old woman, a hermit, etc. But all of them will eventually reach the top of the society.

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Parents usually have three sons or three daughters. The youngest of them always succeed in their enterprises. And nowhere else is the saying " Appearances are deceptive" more real than in our fairy-tales: an ugly outfit and dumb looks hide the most noble and heroic souls. And this applies both to animals, things and people.

Among the enemies of the heroes we can count the dragons, the ogres, anthropophagous giants or dwarfs, bad fairies who abduct people. The devil is not so important and is often taken in through its own imbecility. Death is also mocked at and God is a kind old man lacking his religious halo.

Vampires and were-wolves do not exist in the Romanian mythology. In Roman Jacobson's opinion there is a common Slavic inheritance and tradition in ghosts. The Fatal Sisters, who influence the destiny of a child, are also found in the Slovenian and Germanic traditions. What can be found in Illinois and Mississippi about witchcraft is almost identical with what is found in Romanian and Slavic stories: witches shaped as hogs or rabbits; they steal the milk of the cows, leaving them weak and sick. (Senn 1982 63-77)

There are two distinct worlds: the world beyond, under the ground, The Black Realm which differs very much from our real world, and The White World. The atmosphere is peopled by personified physical phenomena: The Wind, The White Frost, The Frost, The Sun and The Moon.

On his way to accomplish the tasks, Prince Charming, a frequently met good character of Romanian fairy tales, meets a variety of animals (fish, raven, frog, bee, etc.) which he helps and then is helped by them. He is also helped by supernatural companions such as The Wood-bender, The Stone-breaker, The Frosty Man, The Hungry Man, The Thirsty Man. The blackamoor, of Oriental origin, is a peculiar character in Romanian fairy tales. He appears when a ring is touched and carries out his master's orders. The main characters are also helped by a series of tokens: peasant's sandals to cross the water, the hat to become invisible, the belt with which you can do everything. The feats are infinite and they are meant to emphasize Prince Charming's manliness, which is shared with his helpers.

The real notions of time and space are not known in the fairy-tales. A year becomes a day, an hour three centuries, a minute half an eternity (in the fairy-tale "The Mother Built up Alive").

Numbers are also important as in other mythologies and mystical faiths. Number *three* has a sacred value. In our fairy tales the king has almost always three sons or daughters and the hero's feats are three in number. He has three companions and he meets three devils, who quarrel for three magical things. He visits three saints (usually Holy Wednesday, Holy Friday, and Holy Sunday) who give him three tokens to get rid of the pursuer. Other numbers found in our folklore are *nine* as in the fairy-tale "The Layman Dawn", where a girl watches over a prince for nine years, nine months, nine weeks and nine days; *twelve* and *seven* (Peter the Brave slaughters seven ogres).

Some of the most used phenomena to animate the hero is *the living water* splashed after *the dead water* has gathered the chopped body. The *strong water* gives the hero power. Sometimes the animation part is played by *the blood* or by *the weed of life*.

In the Romanian mythology the fairies are shaped as women and placed under the two ethical categories, the good and the evil. The good fairies, more numerous, are beautiful virgins, very young and endowed with magic powers. They are always in favour of the honest hero, and have solutions at hand for the perils in which the perfect male character is (usually Prince Charming-Fãt Frumos). But it happens that sometimes they punish the person who breaks a ritual (for example the forbidden entrance onto their territories). The usual punishment is blindness.

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The folklorist Simion Florea Marian in his *Basme populare romanesti* tells his readers that the Beautiful Ladies or the Little Beauties are music lovers, shrewd, and lure with their charms the casual travellers. People believe that they are invisible womanish creatures who live among the cliffs of the mountains and near the springs of the forests. They say that the Little Beauties wander singing divinely around the place where they live. If they come across a sleeping man they take him with them without delay. After they have offered him victuals and he has accepted to eat and drink, he becomes their property and his manly possessions are taken advantage of. (*Mitologia daco-romana* : 12-81)

They are creatures of the collective fantasy and are characterized by shrewdness, quick thinking, interested politeness, power of judgement, physical beauty. The myth of the Beauties is a native one and through their use in some legends, fairy tales and anecdotal short stories for children they begin to lose the mythical aura. Behaving like girls who want to get married they pass imperceptibly from the magic world of fiction into that of daily reality.

Marcu Beza in his *Paganism in Romanian Folklore* calls them nymphs and says that "though in many points very similar to the Celtic fairies, they differ from them in being always represented, not in diminutive form, but in full stature."(Beza 1928: 70) But they can have the shape of an animal when first encountering their lover: hind, tortoise, owl, white bird.

Common to the Balkan area and not only is the wedding of a fairy with a handsome shepherd who plays the flute. Usually he gets the fairy by stealing her garment (raiment, veil, kerchief, or scarf) and when she gets it back, through different means, she vanishes. In fact her powers are in her clothes and without them she is at the mercy of any mortal.

There are two incidents that occur very often. They are told either separately or together in a story.

> *"First, the incident of the golden apples. In the garden of an emperor there is an wondorous apple tree that bears fruit entirely of gold, but no sooner do they ripen than in the middle of the night they disappear. The emperor is grieved at heart to the point of giving up his throne to solve the mystery. Two of his sons watch in turn, but with no avail; the youngest son succeeds at last in catching sight of the seven nymphs, who come in the guise of seven birds and steal the golden apples. The incident is given much space in a popular Romanian book, The Story of the Most Handsome Arghir and Ilena. In English it is used in a somewhat changed form - instead of the stolen apples the grass being strangely trodden down by William Morris in The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon .*
>
> Then there is the incident of the forbidden chamber. An emperor, before leaving, gives his son a bunch of keys and tells him: 'Thou hast my permission to open all the chambers of the palace, except the one which unlocks with the golden key.' When the son is left alone he cannot refrain from entering that particular chamber, where he gets a glimpse of the enchanting fairy realm." *(Beza 1928: 77)*

The folk believe that fairies are born from flowers, their names being a good example (The Fairy of the Flowers, The Fairy of the Woods, etc.). The fairies have a queen named The Fairy of the Fairies or The Queen of the Fairies. She is forever young, due to her virginity.

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She will grow old only after marrying a mortal when she loses her magical powers as well. The Fairy of the Fairies lives in the fairyland, where nobody is born and nobody dies, an unalterable and timeless space. The few mortals that reach this realm cannot go back to the real world. They are changed into rocks or animals.

The folklorist Lazar Saineanu noticed that the fairies play a major role in the Romanian mythology. They are always young, dressed in white and of a ravishing beauty. At the same time they belong to different types and bear different names according to their way of living: in trees or under water, in the mountains or in the fields. He classifies the fairies in several groups, for example the tree-lassie, in the tale *The Girl from the Laurel Tree,* the bird-lassie in the tale *The Little Blackamoor* or *Arapusca*, the fish-lassie in *The Fairy of the Fairies*, Ileana Cosanzeana in *The Fairy of the World.* (Saineanu 1978:112)

The Romanian scholar and ruler Dimitrie Cantemir mentions the group of the good fairies in Chapter 3 of his *Descriptio Moldaviae*. He says the 'fairy' is a word which you could suppose to come from the name of Diana. However it is rarely used in the singular; most of the times they use the plural, fairies, and they say they are beautiful girls casting their charms on the others. (Cantemir 1974: 115)

The good fairies have a favourable influence on people: they help them, sometimes guide them, open the gates to the magical space beyond. The bad fairies are more often old, ugly, skinny; but they can also be luring, young and extremely beautiful, a cover up for wicked intentions. There is only one type of bad fairies, located in the Apuseni Mountains, Mamornita (The Black Beetle). This wicked type of fairies does not exist in the archaic level of the Romanian mythology, and the contamination was realized through "they fairies" - "iele".

"They fairies" are feminine creatures with magical powers. They are often met in superstitions and do not have a clearly shaped character and a definite mythological status. One of the explanations can be given by the abundance of folk variants where they are found. They are mostly represented by maidens with unchained instincts, great tentative capacity, having the attributes of nymphs, naiads, dryads and mermaids. They live in the air, in the woods or caves, in the mountains or on the banks of the rivers. Often enough they bathe in pure springs and during the night, in the moonlight, they dance in a circle (the counterpart of the English rings), in secluded places, naked or only with their breasts uncovered, with their hair let down. The spot where they danced is left scorched, as if burnt by the fire. The grass never grows there again and the boughs of the trees are leafless.

"They fairies" are sometimes visible, showing seductive bodies. In other circumstances they have the inconsistency of ghosts with an illusion of merry women. The folk imagination represents them as young, voluptuous, boisterous maidens, sometimes revengeful and mean, without being fundamentally malignant. Usually they are not considered as being wicked fairies. They take revenge only when provoked, offended or looked at while dancing. Then they punish the culprit by laming him after they have made him fall asleep with their singing and have danced three times around him. A magic charm, collected from the Romanian folklore by the poet V. Alecsandri, gives us a suggestive portrait of the fairies:

"You fairies,

You marvels of nature,

Foes of the mortals,

Masters of the wind,

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Ladies of the earth,

Flying through the air,

Gliding on the grass,

Treading on the waves,

Go a long way off,

To the pond, the reeds and the desert,

Where priests ring no bell,

Where maidens dance not,

Go with the mighty wind,

To the end of the world."

B. P. Hasdeu in *Etymologicum Magnum Romaniae* quotes a tradition from the county of Prahova, according to which the fairies often drink water from the wells at nighttime and whoever drinks after them gets disfigured.

The fairies are not lonely, they gather in gangs, being able to go from one place to another at a miraculous speed. Their name is shrouded in mystery, inaccessible. "They" is not a name but the third person plural of the Romanian pronoun *they*; it is spelled "ele" but pronounced "iele". From this pronunciation the name of the fairies derived: "Iele"- an approximate translation in English being "They fairies". Their real name is replaced, as V. Kernbach shows in *The Dictionary of General Mythology*, by attributive symbols classified in two groups: a) impartial similes-Them, They, Sweet Woodruffs, Whirls, Mires, Herodesses, Whitsuns, Pests, Tempests; b) flattering similes-Damsels, Marvels, Beauties, Pixies, Night Saints, Handsomes, Queens of the Air, etc.

There are some holidays dedicated to these fairies: Whitsun, the Marine Day, the Nine Thursdays after Easter, holidays that must be respected through discretion and rest. The fairies punish the breaking of these norms in different ways: those who work during the holidays are lifted in whirlwinds, tormented and driven mad. In other cases, men and animals die mysteriously or hail comes upon them, the house is set on fire, huge floods occur.

Those who succeed in learning the fairies' singing are abducted and disappear without any trace. People who insult fairies, sleep under their trees drink water from their springs or refuse their invitation to dance with them are subject to severe punishment. Even those who unwillingly hear their songs become dumb.

Remedies against the wicked actions of the fairies are various. They are either preventive, like the wormwood or garlic borne at the waist or hat, medical or through exorcism. Such is the Romanian folk dance "Calusarii"-the hobby horse dance, performed on a sick body. Another taming means is to thrust a horse skull in the gatepost. From the viewpoint of their characteristics - dancing, instinctual frenzy - the fairies seem to inherit the bacchantes (maenads) from the Greek mythology, sharing in common features also owned by other supernatural creatures from the European heritage.

What all fairy-tales share in common is imagination, which gives birth to fantastic circumstances, characters and solutions to our problems. People have always needed an escape from this trivial and dull world. They did it in the past inventing fairy-tales and myths, they do it today inventing new ones. But with the help of scientific devices they have the

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possibility of telling them on audio or video tapes. Skillful scriptwriters and film directors invent stories on the screen. We still have fairy-tales for our children but for the grown-ups they are called either science fiction books or films. They teem with alien creatures and ufo's that still abduct people like the old fairies and throw them into the world afterwards with stories that few people believe in or have never been proved as real.

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