CHRISTIAN FAMILY VALUES IN ROMANIAN FOLKLORE – PART II

Adrian M. Gheorghe
Ovidius University of Constanta

Abstract

This paper works as a sequel to an early investigation of Christian family values as illustrated in Romanian folklore. Both papers belong to a larger transdisciplinary research project in which I examine Christian values within the Romanian family, namely both Christian values as transmitted within and by the family and more general views about the family (as ultimately a sociogenic unit), with a view to identifying the extent to which Christian teachings have influenced the Romanian collective imagination as filtered and transmitted at family level also with the help of folkloric performance. If the early paper studies a number of texts which have enjoyed wide dissemination and popularity – the ballads Miorița *and* Meșterul Manole / Monastirea Argeșului*, and proverbs, this one looks in parallel at familiar popular creations like Petre Ispirescu's folktales (even though we may regard some texts as better known than others through subsequent dissemination) and at somewhat less familiar ones nowadays, especially in an urban milieu, like traditional songs belonging to the rite of passage – wedding orations and mourning songs – and exempla. A word of caution: my interest in folklore stems from the assumption of its relative conservatism, which renders it inherenly apt to preserve certain attitudes and beliefs that underpin the collective imagination of the Romanian people and thus afford a glimpse to the latter. As my analysis demonstrates, the Christian and patriarchal values crystallized in the collective imagination inform one another and moreover concur on legitimizing the social status quo. On the other hand, we should also remember that the dissemination and performance of folklore now is significantly different from what used to be the case barely 150 years ago. It may not be far-fetched to argue that, for many people, folklore is nowadays very much of a museum piece, even as remote rural areas may have remained thoroughly folkloric-minded at least regarding the rites of passage.*

Unsurprisingly, societal issues as those permeating Romanian folklore not only suggest the impact of Christianity on society at large, but also beg attention to the traditional gendering of actions, roles and identities. By way of consequence, the analysis proper is unavoidably gender aware and is implicitly informed by gender and especially feminist studies.

Key Words: *family values, Christianity, Romanian folklore, wedding orations, folktales, exempla*

This paper works as a sequel to an early investigation of Christian family values as illustrated in Romanian folklore. Both papers belong to a larger transdisciplinary research project in which I examine Christian values within the Romanian family, namely both Christian values as transmitted within and by the family and more general views about the family (as ultimately a sociogenic unit), with a view to identifying the extent to which Christian teachings have influenced the Romanian collective imagination as filtered and transmitted at family level also with the help of folkloric performance. If the early paper studies a number of texts which have enjoyed wide dissemination and popularity – the ballads *Miorița* and *Meșterul Manole* / *Monastirea Argeșului*, and proverbs, this one looks in parallel at familiar popular creations like Petre Ispirescu's folktales (even though we may regard some texts as better known than others through subsequent dissemination) and at somewhat less familiar ones nowadays, especially in an urban milieu, like traditional songs belonging to the rite of passage – wedding orations and mourning songs – and exempla (a genre intended to teach

BDD-A22751 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:28:52 UTC)

Christian values by means of examples of virtuous or sinful behaviour). A word of caution: my interest in folklore stems from the assumption of its relative conservatism,[1] which renders it inherenly apt to preserve certain attitudes and beliefs that underpin the collective imagination of the Romanian people and thus afford a glimpse to the latter. As my analysis demonstrates, the Christian and patriarchal values crystallized in the collective imagination inform one another and moreover concur on legitimizing the social *status quo*. On the other hand, we should also remember that the dissemination and performance of folklore now is significantly different from what used to be the case barely 150 years ago. It may not be far-fetched to argue that, for many people, folklore is nowadays very much of a museum piece, even as remote rural areas may have remained thoroughly folkloric-minded at least regarding the rites of passage.

Unsurprisingly, societal issues as those permeating Romanian folklore not only suggest the impact of Christianity on society at large, but also beg attention to the traditional gendering of actions, roles and identities. By way of consequence, the analysis proper is unavoidably gender aware and is implicitly informed by gender and especially feminist studies.

Christian values enshrined in the rite of passage

A salient case of dissemination of Christian values of and within the family are wedding orations like "the great oration" – the so-called "oraţia de *conăcăşie*" [2] – anthologized in a reader, *Folclor vechi românesc* (135-143),[3] somewhat unfamiliar to the general public. The oration includes passages from the Book of Genesis which seem to ground the institution of the family *in illo tempore*, thus embedding the family in the events of the mythical times of world creation; such intertextuality therefore traces a quasi-mythical history of the family and, through the biblical *argumentum ad verecundiam*, successfully vindicates its social role. Paradoxically, though, the legitimation works through the glaring omission of the incriminating scene of eating the forbidden fruit (Genesis 2:16-17), which in the Hebrew Scriptures is the very reason for the constitution of the "family."

Allegorized, in accordance with the Romanian folkloric tradition of wedding songs, as delivered by imperial envoys (actually the best man and his brethren), the oration organizes its plot around the metaphor of the quest for a suitable bride as a royal hunting party (engaged in by the young emperor). Within this metaphorical frame, the beast track ("urma de fiară," *FVR* 136) which the young man spots is, in fact, left by a fairy, "urmă de zină," who is meant to become the good wedded wife of the emperor, "fie împăratului nostru / [Soţâie] di bună

[1] This is not to say that folklore is a static, unproductive phenomenon nowadays. For an understanding of its dynamism and creative potential, one should only read the American sociologist Gail Kligman's study of rites of passage where it examines recent creations which adapt and update the traditional content to a changing social reality.

[2] This wedding oration is captioned "oraţie de *conăcăşie*" in Romanian Academy Library Slavonic MS 36 (compiled in the first half of the 18th century): the oration's species name derives from *conac*, "manor"; another major allophone is "oraţia de *colocărie*," with a term derived from *colac*, the knot-shaped bread used especially for ritual purposes. Romanian folklorists are not agreed on which term is correct, nor on whether the wedding oration is of literary or popular origin. Of all wedding orations, "the great oration" appears to have enjoyed the widest popularity with both noble and ordinary folk, as its frequent inclusion in manuscripts seems to attest. Delivered at the gates of the bride's house by the so-called "vornic," "staroste" or "colăcer" (namely the best man as crier), the oration deploys the hunting allegory, soon replaced by that of the flower – or, in some versions, the tree – transplanted from the parents' garden into the emperor's (the groom's) to make her (*sic*) blossom. See Ciuchindel's Introduction to *Folclor vechi românesc* (xiii-xvi), as well as chapter 2, "The Wedding," in Gail Kligman's monograph on rites of passage in Ieud village, Maramureş (in the north-east of Romania).

[3] All subsequent quotations come from this reader (abbreviated *FVR*) and indicate page rather than line numbers since such anthologies typically do not provide line numbering.

BDD-A22751 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:28:52 UTC)

împreună" (136), as his councillors explain, or rather one left by a heavenly flower for the same purpose, "urmă de floare de rai / Ca să fie împăratului nostru / [Soţâie] de bun trai" (136), according to his philosophers, or, as other members of the hunting party contend, the track left by a rare flower for the young emperor to dine with that very night, "urmă de floare aleasă / Ca să şază cu împăratul nostru / diseară la masă" (136). The envoys explain to the hosts that they have come to woo the latter's daughter, the metaphorical flower which (or rather *who*), once transplanted into the young emperor's gardens, will blossom and fruit in all her (*sic*) beauty, "a îmboboci / şi a înflori / şi frumos a rodi" (138), namely will successfully fulfil her "natural" gender identity as a patriarchal society abiding by the Judaeo-Christian precepts expects her to: to give birth to (beautiful) children within the wedlock.

Yet there is more to this oration than the ostensible bride wooing, alongside the naturalization of societal strictures, since the song is in fact performed as an invitation to the wedding reception. This is, within the oration economy, the episode which includes, if couched in the terms of an aetiological legend (and through structural hybridization with the latter genre), the conjoined biblical accounts of the Creation and the birth of the Adamic couple. Given its relevance to my investigation, I quote the episode in full:

> Că Dumneziu întîi au făcut
> Ceriul şi pămîntul numai cu cuvîntul,
> Şi au împodobit ceriul
> Cu soare şi cu luna,
> Pre care îl prăvim noi totdeauna.
> Şi au mai împodobit
> Cu lucefiri şi cu stele,
> Pre cari îşi dau rază şi mai curăţele,
> Şi au mai împodobit Dumneziu şi pămîntul,
> Pre carele şidem noi pre dînsul,
> Cu munţi înalţi, cu măgurile
> În carele lăcuiesc fierile,
> Cu văi adînci,
> Cu izvoară de ape răci,
> Cu pomi roditori,
> Cu glasuri de cîntători,
> Cari pomi îşi dau roasa sa,
> La vremea sa,
> Că aşa au poroncit sfinţia sa.
> Osibit di aceste di toate,
> Ca Dumneziu cel ce poate,
> Au făcut
> Şi rai la răsărit
> Osăbit
> Di acist pomăt
> Şi într-insul au zidit
> Pre strămoşul nostru, pre Adam
> Din care ni tragem şi noi toţi
> Dintr-acil niam.
> Şi zidi din opt stihuri
> Trupul din pămînt,
> Oasăle din piatră,
> Sîngele din soare,
> Ochii din mare,
> Înfrumuseţarea trupului
> Dîndu-i cugetul
> Din iuţime îngerilor
> Cu păru din razile soarelui
> Şi suflă Dumneziu cu duhul
> Şi învia trupul.

BDD-A22751 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:28:52 UTC)

Şi văzu Dumneziu că nu este bine
A fi omul sîngur în lume
Că cum ar fi on lucru fără stăpînire. Şi rîndui Dumneziu lui Adam somn greu, ca să facă pre soţul său. Şi întinsă Dumneziu mîna sa ci direaptă şi luă o coastă din coastele lui Adam din a stînga şi zidi pre strămoaşa noastră, pre Eva. Iară Adam dacă să diştiptă văzu pre Eva. Şi foarte să spăimîntă. Şi-i zisă Dumneziu: Adame, Adame, nu te spăimînta. Şi o primeşte pre ea că este os din oasăle tale, şi e carne din carnea ta şi sînge din sîngele tău. Şi ţi va chima ţie muiere pînă la al tău sfîrşit. Deci pentru aciasta va lăsa omul pre tatăl său şi pre mumă sa şi să va lipi de muiere sa şi vor fi amîndoi un trup. Că Dumneziu bine aşa au voit. Şi au zis Dumneziu:
Creştiţi şi vă înmulţiţi. Şi umpleţi pămîntul.
Şi stăpîniţi pre dînsul.
Creştiţi şi vă înmulţiţi. Şi umpleţi
pămîntul. Şi stăpîniţi pre dînsul
Ca năsipul mării,
Ca florile cîmpului,
Ca frunza codrului,
Ca iarba pămîntului.
Deci curgînd
Din viţă în viţă
Şi din neam în neam
Şi din rod în rod,
Pînă umplură pămîntul tot.
Aici au venit vreme
Şi ciasul au sosit
La acişti feciori a domniilor voastre
Cari lui Dumneziu să roagă
Cu genunche plecate
Cu lacrămi vărsate
Şi să roagă cu umilinţă ca să-i iertaţi
Şi să-i blagosloviţi
Precum au blagoslovit Dumneziu pre Avraam cu Sara şi pre Iacov cu Raveca şi au blagos[lo]vit Avraam pre Isaac şi Isaac pre Iacov şi Iacov pre cii dousprezece apostoli partrieşi cari erau de la Dumneziu aleşi din Cana Galilei cînd au înfrunzit toiagul în mîna lui Aron nefiind udat di dousprezeci ani şi cînd l-au blagoslovit în mînă au înfrunzit.
Amin, amin
Şi on păhar de vin ... (*Folclor vechi românesc* 141-143)
[That God first created / the sky and the earth by word alone, / and adorned the sky / with the sun and the moon, / which we always praise. / And He also adorned [it] / with the evening star and other stars / which illuminate [it] and are bright; / and God also adorned the earth / which we live on / with high mountains, with woods / where beasts dwell, / with deep dales, / with cold water springs, / with fruitful trees, / with bird song, / trees which are all fruitful / in good time, / as the Lord has commanded them. / Apart from all this, / as God omnipotent, / he also created / the heaven in the east / set apart / from all the other trees / and within it / he made our forefather, Adam, / from whose seed / we all come. / And he made him of eight elements / The body of clay, / the bones of stone, / the blood of the sun, / the eyes of the sea, / to beautify his body, / he gave him his wits / of the swiftness of the angels, / with hair of the sunshine. / And God breathed spirit / and the body came to life. / And God saw it was not good / to leave man alone in the world / as though a purposeless thing. And God sent Adam to a deep slumber, to make his consort. /
And God reached out his right hand to take one of Adam's ribs to make our foremother, Eve. And when Adam woke up he saw Eve and was greatly afraid. And God told him: Adam, Adam, do not fear, but welcome her as she is bone of your bones and flesh of your flesh and blood of your blood. And she shall be your wife to your end. And to this end man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife and they shall be one body. As thus God willed. And God said: /
Be fruitful and multiply. And fill the earth. / And subdue it. / Be fruitful and multiply. And fill / the earth. / And subdue it / like the grains of sand, / like the flowers in the field, / like the leaves in the woods, / like the grass of the earth. / And thus [they] seeped / from vine to vine / and stock to stock / and fruit to fruit / until they filled the whole earth. / Now the time / and the season have come / for these children of your lordships / who are praying to God, / on their knees / and with eyes in tears / and who are humbly begging of you to forgive them / and to bless them /

BDD-A22751 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:28:52 UTC)

> As God blessed Abraham with Sarah and Jacob with Rebekah and Abraham blessed Isaac and Isaac blessed Jacob and Jacob the twelve apostolic patriarchs that were chosen by God from Cana of Galilee when the rod blossomed in Aaron's hand though it hadn't been watered for twelve years and when he blessed it, it sprouted leaves in his hand. /
> Amen, amen, / And a glass of wine]

As is apparent, the prosodic features and the mythical events and rhythms invoked here converge on legitimizing the wedding (and marriage) as literally made in heaven. The wedding is represented as the first step in the process of obeying the divine command to the first humans, whom Christianity has dubbed the race's "parents": that to procreate, or, in the vetero-testamentary terms borrowed by the above oration and repeated twice, to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28).[4] Traditional patriarchal social imperatives – necessarily heteronormative[5] – are thus legitimized and even naturalized through the oration's incorporation of the relevant biblical text.

As Gail Kligman has amply demonstrated in her magisterial comparative analysis of the wedding and funeral rituals of Transylvania (including the "wedding of the dead"), the two major rites of passage show instances of structural parallelism – even if they may function negatively through inversion – which render them similar beyond the purely semantic level, at a *normative* level (Kligman 58). In the latter capacity the rites articulate, therefore, the Romanians' socio-cultural and ontological outlook. Kligman has repeatedly identified the patriarchalism of Romanian popular tradition and its Christian vindication – as already enshrined in St Paul's epistles – which thereby legitimizes the woman's social subordination.[6] Yet wedding orations indicate the *ontological* scope of such subordination: the popular Christian-patriarchal values of domestic hierarchy and feminine identity are explicitly assimilated to the death of the woman[7] through the social alienation forced on her by patrilocation.[8] Furthermore, the path the bride takes is strewn with thorns, "cu spini" (Kligman 37, 70),[9] as is that which the deceased *should avoid*: the way to hell (128).

At the other ritual pole, death is symbolically assimilated to a wedding, from the floral imagery – the flower metaphor, used in the wedding rite exclusively for the bride to connote her reproductive capacity, in mourning songs is repurposed negatively to connote the transience of human life (Kligman 108, 125, 131, 140, 147) – to the motif of the deceased's alienation, this time irrespective of gender. A compelling case is *the wedding of the dead*: the rite concerns the deceased of either gender of marriageable age who did not undergo the

[4] "[27] So God created man in His *own* image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. [28] Then God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth'" (Genesis 1:27-28 NKJV).

[5] Also see Kligman (165, 181).

[6] In Ieud, Maramureş, where two centuries ago the locals were coerced to conversion from the Eastern Orthodox to the Graeco-Catholic religion, the oaths taken in church maintain unambiguously the patriarchal tradition of the woman's domestic (and implicitly social) subordination: whereas the groom pledges fidelity, support and *protection* to his future wife, the bride pledges fidelity, help and *obedience* to him (Kligman 73).

[7] See Kligman (165) for the parallelism of the episodes which constitute the wedding and death rites, p. 72 for the verses addressed to the groom, similar in their imagery to funerary mourning ("bocete"), and pp. 127-128 for the latter.

[8] In the patrilocation system the wife follows her husband to his parents' house, at least until the new family can afford their own house.

[9] "Rămâne drumu cu flori / Plin cu fete şî feciori. / Ieu [mireasa] mă duc p-un drum cu stini [*spini*] / Şî-oi trăi între străini" / "I [the bride] will leave the path strewn with flowers, / full of lasses and lads. / I will take the path strewn with thorns / and live among strangers" (Kligman 70). Also see Kligman (127-128) for mourning songs which describe the journey of the deceased, especially: "Sînt două drumurele / Unul îi bătut cu spini / Care duce la străini. / Altulu-i bătut cu flori / Care duce la surori / Şî la scumpii frăţiori" / "There are two paths, / one is strewn with thorns / which leads to strangers. / The other one is strewn with flowers / which leads to my sisters / and my dear brothers" [deceased and now denizens of heaven] (Kligman 127).

BDD-A22751 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:28:52 UTC)

wedding rite in this world. S/he is given a symbolic wedding – divine and especially ideal (Kligman 166, 168) for the young woman, since her condition replicates the Virgin Mary's – intended to benefit both the dead and the living, through "tam[ing] the soul of the deceased" (H. Stahl), otherwise dangerous to the community because of the untimely departure of the young person from a life which, in the absence of this rite, would have been wasted "unfulfilled" (H. Stahl, qtd. in Kligman 163). Like with the wedding proper, we can glimpse here the (hetero)normative role of the rite of passage (Kligman 164-165): the young deceased is called *groom* or *bride* (Kligman 167-173), as the case may be, and the young woman is also dressed as if for her wedding. The ritual wedding of the dead enacts symbolically for the young woman her "perfect marriage" to Christ (on the nun's template) (Kligman 166).[10] She is mourned thus: "Mirele-i fecior de crai / Te-a duce de mînă în rai" / "The groom's a prince / who will take you by the hand to heaven" (Kligman 167). The metaphor echoes the one used in the great wedding oration, in which the flower/girl is sought after by a young prince or emperor to be transplanted into the emperor's gardens where to finally fulfil its/her destiny to fruit (to procreate). The parallelism becomes explicit semantically in a mourning song improvised at the death of a young woman from Ieud, Maramureş, by her sister: "Ură sorucă şî mnireasă / Tu bine te-ai măritat / Dup-un fecior de-mpărat. / Iel ti-o dus la curtea lui / În fundu pămîntului" / "Alas, my sister and bride / you're married so well / to an emperor's son. / He has taken you to his courts / deep down in the ground" (Kligman 172). The groom may be assimilated to the son of the heavenly Lord. Yet beyond the positive symbolic potential inherent in the traditional assimilation of any young woman to the "bride of Christ" (in the famous ecclesiastical metaphor), the mourning songs delivered at the wedding of the dead "crown" the very Christian tradition of female subordination under patriarchy, considering that any bride, including the Church as the Bride of Christ, is enjoined to submit to her husband. By the same token, the matrimonial institution appears here as a normative Christian desideratum. The wedding of the dead confronts us therefore with a twofold paradox, if fully actualized exclusively in the case of young women. On the one hand, there is the social paradox identified by Gail Kligman: although, unlike in the real wedding, the deceased/bride is not truly "sold" out in marriage by her mother and will in fact be buried alongside *her* family,[11] the symbolic wedding of the dead *attains* "the cultural ideal" which valorizes the institution of matrimony (Kligman 173). Simply stated, "culture ensures its own reproduction" (Kligman 183), as also does the patriarchal society which generates such cultural representations of life and death. On the other hand, I submit that the wedding of the dead replicates, if under different circumstances, *Mioriţa*'s paradox of valorizing marriage in the least expected (or fortunate) context – death – through a wedding *un*consented to by either the family – as the mourning songs also attest (Kligman 170-172) – or the deceased, and moreover not consummated either, and thus doomed to remain unfruitful.

The idealization of traditional family and Christian values in Romanian folktales

The folktale engages with Christian family values as a function of its subject matter. Unsurprisingly, an initiation folktale like *Tinereţe fără bătrâneţe şi viaţă fără de moarte* (*Eternal Youth and Immortality*) – of the metaphysical breadth of *The Epic of Ghilgamesh* – which in a stroke of genius Petre Ispirescu[12] included first in his folktale collection *Legende sau basmele românilor* (1882), only briefly addresses family issues in order to focus on the

[10] There is no symmetry for the young man, who, on the contrary, is "given" symbolically a young unmarried woman as bride, often his very beloved (Kligman 168).
[11] The married woman is to be buried alongside her husband's family.
[12] Petre Ispirescu is not merely a collector of folktales, riddles, exempla and proverbs, but he is especially their talented reteller and disseminator, as Iorgu Iordan argues in his preface to Ispirescu's collection of folktales (Ispirescu viii-xiii).

BDD-A22751 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:28:52 UTC)

protagonist's initiation journey. Even so, at its onset the text offers (or rather imposes) the *model* of the patriarchal family which it shares with countless other Romanian folktales: the young imperial couple desires to have a baby – in social and political terms, an heir (*sic*) – whom the empress strives in vain to conceive. Eventually, though, a crafty old man from a village offers her the magic potion which will enable her to conceive, yet he also warns the emperor that the latter's desire will deeply aggrieve him, since they will beget only once but before long will be parted from their son (Ispirescu 3-4). However, *Tinereţe fără bătrâneţe* introduces a twist to the motif of the magically conceived child: the latter refuses to be born until his father lures him with an incentive. In Ispirescu, all classical folktale offers intended to encourage (or perhaps to lure) the young men to risk their life to rescue the princess kidnapped by the dragon – half or even the entire kingdom/empire, namely wealth wedded to political power, which is one of the three demonic temptations Jesus withstood in the wilderness (Matthew 4:8; Luke 4:5-7), alongside the hand of the beautiful princess in a political alliance travestied erotically – fall on deaf ears. In Ispirescu the true incentive echoes another classical motif, known in Western Europe as "the fountain of youth": the baby will only consent to be born when he is promised what has become the title of this folktale, "tinereţe fără bătrâneţe şi viaţă fără de moarte" (Ispirescu 4) – the gift of immortality which Ghilgamesh, the protagonist of the Babylonian epic created before 3000 B.C., also received yet lost almost immediately. This is all the Romanian folktale has to say about either the reason for establishing a family or any Christian values, apart from the unsuccessful attempts of two monsters to marry their respective daughters to the prince who had vanquished the former but, merciful (in good Christian tradition), spared their lives,[13] and the prince's short-lived marriage to the youngest fairy.

Another folktale is much more promising with respect to illustrating the dissemination of Christian family values: *Sarea în bucate* (*Salt in Food*). Like *Tinereţe fără bătrâneţe*, this folktale may have a literary origin since the motif of the father who tries his three daughters' filial love by asking them to describe it recalls Shakespeare's *King Lear* (written in 1603-1606 and revised subsequently), whose own source was an English historiographical text, *Historia regum Britanniae* (*The History of the British Kings*, completed *c.* 1138), penned in Latin by Geoffrey of Monmouth.[14] In the Romanian folktale, the two older princesses eagerly reassure the emperor, to his great delight, about their love as sweet as honey and sugar, respectively, while the youngest daughter compares hers to salt, only to be instantly rebuked and repudiated.[15] In a European culture which appears to associate, if implicitly and class-bound, sweet foods with a tender age and/or feminine taste (thence a feminized or "effeminate" condition), and salty taste and crispy texture with adulthood, by extension a masculine condition,[16] the royal father may strike us as rather "effeminate," or perhaps

[13] The encounters with and vanquishing of the monsters work as trials along the initiation journey, meant to prove the prince worthy of engaging successfully in his quest for the gift of eternal youth and immortality.

[14] Geoffrey, of Welsh or Breton origin, was born at Monmouth in south-eastern Wales. It is noteworthy that the Lear plot also yielded to filmic adaptation in director Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985), whose very title means "madness" or "chaos," even as here the Lord's three heirs are male, not female.

[15] See Camp on the *foodways* branch of folklore studies for an introduction to the "consideration of how food and culture intersect – what food says about the people who prepare and consume it and how culture shapes the dietary choices people make" (Camp 367).

[16] See Bourdieu on an analysis of culinary habits in 20th-century France integrated to other patterns of consumption which together form one's habitus as a system of embodied dispositions. Although Bourdieu (79-80, 99-100, 178-200, 376) tends to discuss tastes in food in terms of cultural capital informed primarily by social class – thus, taste represents "a class culture turned into nature, that is, *embodied*," which accordingly "helps to shape the class body" (190, original emphasis) – he also broaches age and gender distinctions (190-2) in eating habits. For France, at least, Bourdieu (382-4) observes the correlation of working-class men's preference for "salty, substantial, clearly masculine foods" (382) with an image of virility as physical strength (384), as well as the professionals' and women's preference for sweet foods, typically coded as feminine, hence a certain degree

BDD-A22751 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:28:52 UTC)

genuinely aristocratic, through his early response – yet who won't easily stoop to flattery? – and will require a tacit yet firm correction, bordering on sadism, from the daughter he has unjustly repudiated. The adult male (and ruler!) is thus taught a lesson – by a young woman, in accordance with the medieval Christian topos *senex puer* ("old child," namely wise), and thus through a temporary gender role reversal[17] (*unacceptable* from the Pauline perspective which grounds the woman's marginalization in Christianity[18]) – that flaterry, even within the family, is not to be wished for. Yet before soon her unflattering answer will compensate through truth its otherwise unpalatable taste. The parable which the Romanian folktale offers could be read as much in political terms, like in the two above-mentioned English texts, as in allegorical and Christian fashion in the margin of the demonic temptations that Jesus withstands in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13). By way of consequence, *Sarea în bucate* not only cannot be reduced to one or another sense, but also suggests that the two overlap, hinging as they do on the primal structure of society: the family.

To anticipate the conclusion of the present paper, there is no danger of overstating that the primary role of the folktale and, generally, of folklore, is to endorse societal arrangements – such as gender identity and roles under traditional patriarchy. Secondarily, such endorsement and legitimation of the *status quo* may also invoke, and edify about, Christian moral values of the family or the larger values of a particular community.

Folktale challenges to the Christian values of/within the traditional family

As it happens, not all folktales idealize their characters' morals and conduct, such as true friendship and loyalty. On the contrary, some of Petre Ispirescu's folktales indicate how readily family relationships may deteriorate once marred by envy, which Christianity regards as a deadly sin. Such deterioration often occurs subsequently to an episode (a trial) that demonstrates the worth of the protagonist, like in *Prâslea cel voinic şi merele de aur* (*Junior the Valiant and the Golden Apples*) or in *Ţugulea, fiul unchiaşului şi al mătuşei* (*Ţugulea, the Son of the Old Man and the Old Woman*). In *Prâslea*, his two elder brothers grow envious on the protagonist when he proves to be the only one capable to successfully watch over the golden apples, which a dragon is wont to steal yearly. The brothers scheme to kill him on his return from the otherworld; only his wit, his fiancée's loyality and subsequently divine judgement will save Prâslea from certain death, social stigma and/or the lethal envy of his *inimical brothers*[19] (Ispirescu, esp. 78-82, 85-85).

In *Ţugulea*, the protagonist, crippled by the female dragon who stole his veins out of envy on hearing the birth prophecy of the baby's fate, yet capable to heal with his fairy

---

of "effeminacy" becomes "acceptable" the higher up one is positioned socially. As far as the Romanian folktale is concerned, though, we should proceed with caution due to cultural space and time differences from Bourdieu's corpus of analysis.

[17] We should not, however, generalize the value of such gender role reversal: even though of imperial stock, the youngest daughter will cook herself for her father – a guest at the wedding reception – the food where honey and sugar replace salt so as to teach him a lesson. Like in the Grimm Brothers' *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and like in countless Romanian and European folktales, here the woman's role – to tend to the man's needs and generally to serve the man – is both clearly delimited and impossible to transcend under patriarchy even for noblewomen.

[18] "Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. [35] And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church" (1 Corinthians 14:34-35).

"[11] Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. [12] And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. [13] For Adam was formed first, then Eve. [14] And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. [15] Nevertheless she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control" (1 Timothy 2:11-15).

[19] The phrase names a tellingly highly recurrent motif in folktales.

BDD-A22751 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:28:52 UTC)

godmother's aid, is initially the laughing stock of his elder brothers – in an instance of "displaced abjection"[20] – at a time when their destitute family is mocked by the entire village (Ispirescu 273). Neither the brothers, nor the villagers, seem to be conversant with ideal Christian values. In fact, nothing sets either party apart from the monster (the female dragon) as long as they are all driven by envy. Ispirescu's realism with respect to human psychology within society and family alike is here at its most incontrovertible, unlike in *Tinereţe fără bătrâneţe*, where human relationships appear idealized. Although perfectly aware of the meanness of his brothers, Ţugulea does not succumb himself to a similar attitude, but, on the contrary, offers them a Christian lesson of brotherly loyality and love: he doesn't allow his brothers to eat the appetizing (actually poisoned) foods lavished on them by the female dragon's daughters (Ispirescu 277). Yet this potential model is wasted on the brothers, who will never emulate it. Already green with envy when Ţugulea gives them money for their parents (Ispirescu 270), the brothers try unsuccessfully to kill him – fortunately they fail to behead him – when Ţugulea returns married into a fortune (287). It is the magic animals, the eagle and the bear, whom a kind-hearted Ţugulea has not killed, who help him heal and who become his true and loyal brothers. The same sin of envy also drives the emperor's councillors to persuade their lord that Ţugulea might soon lay a claim to the throne in reward for his assistance to the city. Yet the impossible task which the emperor assigns to the protagonist in an attempt to destroy him – to fetch to court the daughter of a certain emperor – will also divide the councillors when it is successfully accomplished: while an envious nobleman still insists to persuade the emperor to have Ţugulea poisoned, the other noblemen demand, on the contrary, that the valiant young man be justly rewarded for all the services he has brought to their empire. This time the emperor follows the righteous advice; in his turn Ţugulea will pledge his gratitude and loyalty to the emperor when allowed to marry the princess he has fought so hard to fetch (Ispirescu 285-286). Only now will Ţugulea's magic horse, loyal to his master yet also an instrument of providence, kill the two disloyal brothers; the scene strikes everyone as betokening "God's wrath" (289), the just divine punishment often invoked in folktales, such as in *Prâslea*, for the vanquishing of duplicitous characters. Would the audience of Ispirescu's folktale have resonated in the long run to its ethical imperatives? We should bear in mind both the expectations raised by generic folktale conventions, according to which the protagonist is the "good guy" whose exemplary conduct and attitudes will furnish a model, and the audience's world, hardly one inspired, and abiding, by the Christian precepts and values so asiduously taught in church.

We could ask the same question with regard to another Ispirescu folktale, *Copiii văduvului şi iepurele, vulpea, lupul şi ursul* (*The Widower's Children and the Hare, the Fox, the Wolf and the Bear*). Here the motif of the evil step-mother who wishes to get rid of her step-children (Ispirescu 291-292), shared by folktales as different as Ispirescu's *Fata moşului cea cu minte* (*The Old Man's Shrewd Daughter*, Ispirescu 303) and the Grimm Brothers' *Cinderella* and *Snow White*, should make us pause to wonder how recurrent such a social issue really was, and whether or not the community castigated blatant transgressions of the Christian imperative to love one's neighbour. Interestingly, in the most familiar folktales where this motif is used to instigate the action, the father gives in too readily to the pressures of his second wife, as if rather intent exclusively on ensuring his own psychic and domestic comfort. Framed within this interplay of matrimonial power and powerlessness, the husband appears to be emasculated, while the wife – a doubly illegitimate *mater familias*, as both domineering woman (evincing a masculine will-to-power) and heartless step-mother – is tacitly demonized and *fully* blamed for all the suffering caused to the children. Arguably this

[20] *Displaced abjection* (Stallybrass, White) names the instance of mocking and generally ostracizing not those who deserve it, but one's social inferiors, which ultimately feeds back into and strengthens relations of domination.

BDD-A22751 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:28:52 UTC)

may be a fictional ploy to incriminate exclusively the woman and thereby warn against the evils of upsetting the patriarchal *status quo*, which might conceivably be doubly informed by the patriarchal culture that generated such folktales and Christianity (through the antifeminist exegesis of the Fall as systematically disseminated to the laity).[21]

Like in the Grimm Brothers' *Hansel and Grettel*, in Ispirescu the two children are repudiated by their father at the instigation of his second wife. Unlike in the German folktale, though, the sister will prove disloyal to her younger brother as soon as she falls in love with a dragon, with whom she wishes to enjoy privacy: she teaches the dragon how to kill her brother without facing the latter's "pets" (Ispirescu 294-295), namely the four magic beasts of the title, who, however, will tenaciously rescue their master from all perils. Once a good, loving and caring sister, now traitorous to and plotting against her brother, the young woman is eventually punished by her sibling: he blinds her with a hot iron and curses her how much to weep in atonement before healing. The protagonist departs, accompanied by his loyal pets, and behaves commendably, in truly Christian fashion: he fetches water from the dragon's spring to a thirsty old woman and rescues the princess offered to the dragon to appease him. Yet such active life of bravery and service to the needy won't obliterate the memory of his accursed sister, to whom the man returns to help her terminate her curse. Unfortunately, his kindness is ill rewarded. His sister, still driven by devilish ideas ("tot cu gândul dracului," Ispirescu 301), betrays him again: she pierces him lethally behind the ear with a dragon bone. Saved by his pets, the protagonist returns to his princely wife, this time entrusting the judgement of his sister to the councillors, who will sentence her to death.

As can be noticed, the folktale is virulently antifeminist in that it charges two women with criminal unchristian conduct against the protagonist. The sister's punishment will be entrusted not to divine judgement, seemingly a male preserve in folktales (as in *Prâslea*), but to a worldly institution, the noblemen's council, a political avatar of the early council of the elders. Christian values of and within the family are well nigh absent here, like in other Ispirescu folktales which show the brothers' disloyalty and envy, with the notable, if partial, exception of the protagonist. Yet, the latter provides a fairly disconcerting model of brotherly love: capable though he is to trust his sibling a second time, from the outset he demonstrates he is incapable to fully forgive her.

Does Romanian folklore, then, give free rein to patriarchal misogyny in its description of women's evil scheming? To test this hypothesis, let us look at another text where the woman is central to the plot: the exemplum[22] entitled by its modern editor "Burdujelul cu galbeni" / "The Pot of Money," preserved in a late 18th-century manuscript.[23] This Christian text exemplifies the nefarious consequences of avarice, here framed within the family structure and staged as a thirst for money literally quenched only in the afterlife. On his dying bed, a man commands his wife to take an oath: that she will remain obedient to him even in his death and will do as he bids her now. Subsequently he instructs his wife to have him

[21] We would be well advised to factor in the concept of *dependence* – here on the mother – which the Anglican theologian and feminist philosopher of religion Sarah Coakley (55-68) analyzes in Western *and* Eastern Christianity, especially since the Christian/patriarchal "*denial* of creaturely 'dependence' ... is as misleading as is its subordinationist misuse in human hands" (Coakley 61, original emphasis) – and this includes obliteration of ambiguities like the Virgin's spurious *fiat* in the Annunciation (60) and Christ's *depotentiation* in the Crucifixion (61-62).

[22] For a compact introduction to the exemplum genre and its importance to Christian, if Catholic, homiletics, see Ellis. The genre appears "exemplary" of the Catholic homiletic practice; in the Eastern Orthodox Church, homiletics seems to be pre-eminently exegetical, even though there also exist spiritual homilies and anti-Jewish homilies like St John Chrysostom's *Eight Homilies against the Jews*. There is no mention of exempla in reference books devoted to Eastern Orthodoxy (Prokurat *et al*.; McGuckin).

[23] Romanian Academy Library MS 1157. Unfortunately, the first part of the exemplum is missing due to manuscript deterioration (*Folclor vechi românesc*, 233-234).

BDD-A22751 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:28:52 UTC)

buried with a certain pot full of gold coins, his entire fortune in this world, of which, however, he has never whispered a word to her before. Used to all sorts of trials and tribulations, and convinced that God will help her henceforward, the wife unquestioningly – and loyally – follows his orders. Yet the gravediggers spot the treasure and resolve to return stealthily at nightfall: they are simply unmindful that by doing so they will transgress one of the ten commandments which Christianity has borrowed from the Torah to discipline the faithful in their social exchanges and thus to ensure communal well-being. Picture the surprise of the covetous gravediggers, then, to see the commotion around the grave in the dead of night. Having torn open the chest of the old miser, two demons were now pouring the money down his throat and tucking it into his heart, respectively, upbraiding him thus: "Enjoy it, you miser, for in your contemptible life you could not have enough of wealth, which you have also brought along in the grave!" / "Primește, lacomule, că în viaţa cea deşartă nu te mai săturai de avuţia, ce ţ-ai luat şi aice cu tine" (*FVR* 234). (The latter is a recurrent motif in medieval Catholic sermons, exempla and iconography.) Even in an exemplum on a Christian topic with strong social impact, the text frames its message by setting it in the family. Somewhat more subdued as to the latter, yet also with a less dramatic ending, the parable was borrowed by Barbu Ştefănescu Delavrancea to create his memorable character Hagi Tudose in the short story of that title (Ciuchindel, *FVR* xxi-xxii). What strikes me as particularly nefarious vis-à-vis the gender representation in the exemplum of the miser, though, is the inescapability of the woman's subordination to the husband even in his death.

I hope I have demonstrated that at least a small fraction of the female characters of Romanian folklore are not only not demonized, but shown to actively abide by Christian – or rather Christian-legitimized patriarchal – precepts. Furthermore, it ought to be stressed that the above-mentioned exemplum indicates not a gendered attribution of positive Christian attitudes or their infringement, but their attribution as a function of the character's role within the text economy. Thus, if the female character is the protagonist, or at least the necessary foil for the protagonist in an exemplum like the one above, then by generic convention she acts in the service of the good to teach a lesson about the importance of Christian values. Conversely, folktales may also highlight the breach of Christian values by male characters, whom it demonizes. Yet only rarely is a supporting female character shown in a favourable light, as is the case of the three fairies, actually the Moirai, in a highly atypical folktale like *Tinereţe fără bătrâneţe*.

Conclusion

As suggested in the prequel to this paper, the moral values – in a broad (social) sense or in a narrow (Christian) one – which folklore crystallizes and promotes necessarily reflect the imperatives of the age as well as of the patriarchal culture that generates and disseminates it. To a certain extent, this may be ascribed to the traditional understanding of the family as a microcosm in relation to, and a mirror of, the social macrocosm. How do the two universes work in tandem in folklore? In most cases investigated here as in many others, the immediate setting for the events is the family. This is the case *par excellence* of the rites of passage, which proclaim the Christian values of the family and first of all the necessity to establish it, as much in wedding orations as in the paradoxical *wedding of the dead* (aimed at the young person who died unmarried), in folktales, ballads or carols as much as in exempla.

The texts analyzed here do not refute my early provisional conclusion. Diverse folkloric genres and species, as we have seen, promote the Christian valorization within the family of social virtues such as selflessness, commiseration with and support to the needy, and especially the Judaeo-Christian imperative to establish a family to procreate, as well as castigating the seven deadly sins, especially when they are manifested by family members and thus threaten the morals and even disrupt the existence of the family.

BDD-A22751 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:28:52 UTC)

Even the brief analysis undertaken in my two papers suggests, however, that certain Christian virtues such as the propensity for self-sacrifice are gender specific. Simply stated, especially women are expected – or rather tacitly persuaded to accept as natural – to manifest such virtues when (a member of) their family is at risk. There is no intimation that a man will adopt the Christic condition for a comparable cause. By the same token, although the evil and especially monstrous characters may be of either gender, in the particular case of the female ones their maleficence is compounded by their old age,[24] even as the text may merely suggest the age by introducing a marriageable daughter.

Although not apparent in the corpus I have examined, gender identity and roles as established in the Christian patriarchal society are faithfully mirrored in folkloric creations even where, as in some folktales, the women may be forced by hostile or politically charged circumstances to cross-dress and adopt a masculine lifestyle, often so as to save the face of their father. Typically, however, in such texts the masculinized female protagonist will be eventually "validated" as literal, "genuine" man through a curse to metamorphose into the other sex. Like in hagiography, the opposite transformation never occurs in folklore: while the active, valiant woman-turned-man may only be acceptable socially in rare and extreme circumstances that often jeopardise a man's political position, a man definitively "emasculated" is inconceivable.

By and large, while endorsing Christian (and) family values, Romanian folklore does not engage in idealizations of human moral virtues: siblings will attempt to kill their more fortunate brother/sister out of envy, step-mothers typically loathe and oppress their step-children, mothers-in-law (and husbands) will remain alienatingly hostile to the married woman. Nor do Christian family values challenge patriarchal arrangements but, on the contrary, legitimize them at every turn: folkloric creations insist on the necessary compliance of individuals with biblical models such as establishing a family for the sake of procreation and observing domestic hierarchy. However, in a stroke of commonsense, some popular creations will intimate that even the protagonist, for all his/her virtues, is not unblemished, but may stop short of forgiving their enemies, which transgresses the very moral imperative of the central Christian prayer. It will remain the task of further research to investigate how such Christian values as folklore preserves are transmitted nowadays by family members to other family members in what folklorists name *family folklore*, namely "[t]raditional expressive behavior and its products that ... pertain to relatives, family events, and family ways of being and doing" (Yocom 278).[25]

Works Cited

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

[24] Ageism – discrimination against the elderly – is particularly virulent against women. See also Gardner (s.v. "Age/Ageism").

[25] Family folklore "includes stories, jokes, and songs about family members and events, as well as the ways relatives share those items with one another; festivals the family celebrates, such as religious and national holidays; festivals that celebrate family, such as weddings, reunions, and funerals; foods, cooking instruction, ways of eating, and ways of gathering to eat within a family; family naming traditions; a family's ways of dancing; expressions and gestures a family uses; visual records of family life, such as arrangements of items inside and outside the home, photographs, photograph albums, videotapes, embroideries, and quilts; occupational, song, story, and craft traditions carried on within a family; and fieldwork methods used within family settings" (Yocom 278-279).

BDD-A22751 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:28:52 UTC)

Camp, Charles. “Foodways.” Green, ed., 1997. 366-372.

Coakley, Sarah. *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002.

Folclor vechi românesc. Ed. C. Ciuchindel. Bucureşti: Minerva, 1990.

Ellis, Bill. “Exemplum.” Green, ed., 1997. 266-267.

Gardner, Catherine Villanueva. *Historical Dictionary of Feminist Philosophy*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2006.

Green, Thomas A., ed. *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-Clio, Inc., 1997.

Holy Bible: The New King James Version, The (= NKJV). Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984.

Ispirescu, Petre. *Legende sau basmele românilor*. Ed. Aristiţa Avramescu. Bucureşti: Editura pentru literatură, 1968.

Kligman, Gail. *Nunta mortului: Ritual, poetică şi cultură în Transilvania*. 2nd ed. Trans. Mircea Boari *et al*. Iaşi: Polirom, 2005.

McGuckin, John Anthony, ed. *Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*. 2 vols. Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

Prokurat, Michael, Alexander Golitzin and Michael D. Peterson. *Historical Dictionary of the Orthodox Church*. Lanham, Md. and London: Scarecrow Press, 1996.

Stallybrass, Peter, Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. London: Methuen, 1986.

Yocom, Margaret R. “Family Folklore.” Green, ed., 1997. 278-285.

BDD-A22751 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:28:52 UTC)