A New Perspective on the Old Documents Concerning the Analysis of Animal Folk Masquerade

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Ancient rituals and ceremonies are studied by folklore scholars and social historians as relics coming from a remote age, valued in the reconstitution of archaic phase of the human culture. When the adequate sources to document that distant time are scarce, "that primitive knowledge will be found to fill up the considerable gap left in our past by the foreign sources of the civilized world" (Vulcănescu, Simionescu 1973: 199). Folklore research imbued with romantic antiquarianism and evolutionary anthropology was determined to find and put to the test data from historians and archeologists that would fill the gap between the contemporary traditional cultures and difficult to grasp past. This survivalist viewpoint was also popular in the Romanian folkloristics interested to analyze folk performances that were likely connected with those of Antiquity, and the interpretations of these rituals frequently advertised ideas about pagan-like manifestations with ancient mythological elements.

The traditional celebrations of winter holidays in modern and contemporary Romania were an important topic on this survivalist agenda since the beginning of Romanian folkloristics around the second half of the 19th century. The collectively displayed rituals of pagan-looking masked men dressed in animal skins and imitating animal sounds became a reliable argument for arguing in favor of the pagan religiosity surviving until late in the Christian era. It is nevertheless difficult to assume such a strong conclusion just based on exterior facts and second hand information, especially given the fact it could not be acknowledged by the maskers themselves. One of the most important researchers of the English folk drama, Alex Helm notes that the winter animal masquerade "is almost completely misunderstood by performers and witnesses alike" (Helm 1980: 1). Already in the late Middle Ages, stag-guise was not performed by people with a precise purpose, but just as a pastime or "for luck" and by the 18th century, when it started to be recorded "the observance had decayed to such an extant that it was meaningless" (Helm 1980: 4).

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As a most likely retrospective task, this branch of folklore research cannot ever reach clear-cut knowledge about the winter customs of supposed archaic demeanor. In order to have a more reliable image of how these rituals looked centuries ago, the documents at hand are not able to give exact details, but they definitely show the ubiquity of the animal masquerade across Europe, an image that could also be, as some analysts believe, an effect of a well established pattern in the penitential literature that circulated almost unchanged within the Christian world. The attempt to provide a reliable image of the past poses serious obstacles for any reconstitutive undertaking, such as considering the social and cultural changes brought by the development of these European societies over centuries. It is therefore mandatory to use the existing sources with critical scrutiny and the care of contextualizing the moving patterns.

The old data is nevertheless necessary in the complex process of explaining the important number of audio and visual documents recording texts of folk drama and zoomorphic masquerades hosted by folklore archives in Romania[1]. Traditional midwinter visiting customs, within which protagonists demand gifts of food, drink, or money, named frequently mummers' plays or folk drama in the Western literature are well spread across Europe. They correspond to the Polish *Dziady*, the Swiss *Silvesterklausen*, the Slovenian *Kurenti*, the Greek *Kokkeri*, and the animal masks in the English Mummers' Plays. They have in common animal-skin coats wearing and imitation of animal behavior in terms of sounds (roars, grunts) and movement, combining domestic and wild zoological traits, and human and animal characteristics.

During the last century, students of British mumming saw the masking within the larger frame of ritual processions, and underlined the „rite-play" characteristics of the guisers' actions, considered survivals of a primitive rite (Sharp, MacIlwaine 1912: 13). The medieval English folk play was richly studied by folklore and theatre scholars, which tended to acknowledge an early ritualistic element in this special theatrical product. The origins of the English folk play were also connected with fertility religion and a hidden witch cult (Malin 1968: 12–14), especially due to the death-rebirth plot of the play's protagonist found in many representations of this kind. Many scholars of the last century underlined the pagan character of the animal disguised characters (Kennedy 1950: 43–44) because of a seemingly pagan-like significance of the 18th, 19th, and 20th century recorded mummers' play, even in the absence of other proofs in the intervening centuries between the actual pagan times and the first recorded folk dramas.

[1] For details on the organization and the academic aims of the Folklore Archive of Moldavia and Bucovina, see Ciubotaru 1980. For more information on the Romanian archives of folklore hosted by the Romanian Academy, see Ispas 1998–1999. The Bucharest folklore archive was created in the 1940s, and the one in Cluj was set up in 1929.

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If we try to trace the origins of why Romanian guisers were identified with the form and content of the Christian devil according to the scholars' explanations, we may assume that the demonic apparitions that stood out in some people's eyes were obviously occasioned by the winter solstice, a time when the human world is heavily populated with unwelcome spirits. The temporary return of the dead and the active presence of supernatural beings representing nature's hidden powers had a positive role in bringing out fertility and increasing the success of magic and divination, even contemporary scholars of eastern Europe assume, following Manhardt, Liungman or Martin P. Nillson (Pócs 2015: 507–518). Both domestic scholars and foreign ones treating Romanian winter holidays in the last decades were certain about this animistic quality of the Twelve Days (Ghinoiu 1995: 463–465), having both holy and unholy features. Harry Senn, an American folklorist doing fieldwork in Romania in the late 1970s in order to find werewolf legends, acknowledges that he was seeking "to furnish a more complete image of the Romanian traditions which integrate magical beings into the villagers' consciousness and make them a part of the surrounding communal setting" (Senn 1982: 207).

Looking for the first main motivation of masked merrymaking became a fascinating undertaking for scholars of a historical and evolutionist perspective always tending to find out more about this interesting survival of paganism. Their goal was to detect and describe that lost phase when wearing masks generated a magical quality to the protagonist, a phase which no doubt is far away from the festivalized spectacular masking ceremonies of the last century. Understanding the newer phases of these manifestations is hindered by the gradual process that transforms ritual into pure spectacle, sophistication and formal organization into social pastime. The gradual steps of this evolution are, according to Charles Baskervill: the pagan ritual phase, still preserved in certain folk customs, the second being the festival customs, influenced by the result of advancing culture and the modification of pagan festivals by the church, a phase that already captures the appearance and content of social pastimes. The third momentum happens when the festival celebration became professionalized and was undertaken by village performers, minstrels, and players. Beyond the value of this careful classification, the medieval sources prove that the "prohibitions and satire of the medieval period constantly picture for us at the same time pure paganism on the one hand and social and professional pastimes on the other" (Baskervill 1920: 20).

Almost an impossible task, this archeological operation was as much erratic as it was captivating for the past generation of ritual masquerades researchers. The only available action would be investigating all the existing documents, documents that are inevitably fragmentary, partial, ambiguous, even contradictory, and that could give us only glimpses to the researched practices. The inevitable distortion of this daring analysis is caused especially by

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the gap of information between the beginning and the end of medieval era, as Alex Helm acknowledges: "One of the saddest features of the study of the ceremonial is the inability of students to find any reference to it before the 1700s", so „we can only assume that there was something before" (Helm 1980: 7).

In the Western academia, the scholars of masking rituals suggested functional classification of these manifestations. Edward C. Cawte, in his famous monography *Ritual Animal Disguise* (1977), arranged the ritual customs in three categories: **ritual dances** (such as Morris and Sword dances), **ritual drama** (including a rather constant spoken text and a patterned staging) and **animal rituals** (Cawte 1977: 2). The British scholar is also including in the last category rituals involving animal masks that are not part of an organized ritual, i.e. *party games* described as several examples of animals which were "practical jokers" chasing young girls, breaking pipes, spilling bears, or pricking people: "These beasts have features in common; the pattern seems to be that they appear at social gatherings, seek out people, and frighten or assault them" (Cawte 1977: 193). In conclusion, it is possible that the lack of organization or text of the animal masquerade does not indicate necessarily a gap in the existing sources, but it is precisely a characteristic of the ritual itself in its ancient and cotemporary shape.

Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter, the authors of a very important book on the masks and masking in medieval and early Tudor England, realize that studying English masking practices cannot be considered in isolation, because it is a multi-faceted and multi-national cultural phenomenon. Historical documents show that people from the 5th to the 15th centuries from Sweden to Sicily "put on heads of wild animals" (Twycross, Carpenter 2002: 1). They also notice that the scattered fragments of available evidence are not enough to draw a complete picture of this complex phenomenon which should be enriched by other records of the linguistic, cultural, religious and political context that supported its development (Twycross, Carpenter 2002: 4).

Most of these data tend to prove a pattern of the residual pre-Christian practices still active in the time of the early Church. Numerous complaints of early churchmen against animal guisers of their time characterized as relics of earlier pagan rituals are a very persuasive evidence for scholars of folk masking. Graphic evidences of animal impersonation date from prehistory and then from the classical period, combined with a vast array of masking activities stretching across time and space. It was proven though that the character masks in the ancient Greek and Roman theatre were especially death masks of ancestors displayed during funeral processions (Balsdon 2002: 126–127), and that they have not had an influence over the pre-Christian seasonal folk plays (Harris 2011: 13). Therefore, the Kalends masquerades of the early Christian empire are the first evidence of seasonal folk play involving masks anywhere in Europe (Twycross and Carpenter 2002: 14). The Christianized Roman Empire

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offers therefore the first consistent sources of this seasonal tradition. The ludic turn and the encouraging of public ridicule of the ancient play received a higher status within the later versions of folk dramatization. The January Kalends during the late Roman Empire – the world where the Christendom was to be established – was a highly cherished holiday celebrated with a lot of fast, "a fiesta spilling over the whole Christian empire" (Meslin 1970: 69).

Documentary research permits us to place the animal masquerade at the earliest during the early Christian times. Canon books, penitential manuals, decrees of church councils describing the necessity for Christians to disdain their old pagan merrymaking are the main early source to inform us about animal masquerade. This tradition is described by ecclesiastical witnesses as idols or demons impersonation, a clear sign of the weak Christian faith shown by early Christians. Probably the first to combat the pagan masquerades was John Chrysostom, the later famous bishop of Constantinople and talented church rhetorician. While preaching in Antioch, in the last decade of the 4th century, he denounced the "demons marching in processions in the market-place… the all-night devilish comedy" (John Chrysostom, *En tais kalandais*, *apud* Harris 2011: 14). After that moment, most of the existing evidences come from the custom described in the New Year sermons as *cervulum faciens*, explained by scholars as "playing the stag" or "putting on the head of a stag to imitate the form of a wild beast", in territories of today's France, Italy or Spain during the time period between the 4th to the 9th century.

According to Hieronymus, in *De viris illustribus*, one of the first church writers, bishop Paciano of Barcelona devoted a special work, at the end of the 4th century, to the "Cervus", pointing out the sinful activities associated with this custom (Jerome 1896: 666). Though the short treatise is lost today we know that the author found himself in the strange position to realize that his book had the opposite effect than the one he intended, i.e. the booklet grew the popularity of the heathen tradition: "I think they would not have known how to do the Little Stag if I had not shown them by censuring it" (Pacian, *Praenesis, sive Exhortatorius libellus, ad poenitentiam*, *apud* Harris 2011: 17).

During almost the same time, Pacian's contemporary, Bishop Ambrose of Milan mentions, in his sermon *De interpellatione David*, the stag as an important figure of the beast-mimicry during the January Kalends. Another saint trying to reform his diocese eliminating the pagan survivals was Hilarus of Mende, a contemporary of Ceasarius of Arles and living around the same southern part of what is today France, in the first half of the 6th century. According to his biography, Hilarus struggled to stop the villagers in his area "who decked themselves out in the heads of stags to resemble in their appearance wild beasts" ("cervi capite ad imitandum ferae formam") (*Vita B. Hilari episcopi*, *apud* Arbesmann 1979: 92).

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Other ecclesiastical works also acknowledge the high role played by the stag mask among other similar zoomorphic representations, such as the January Kalends sermon by Maximus of Turin included in his Latin *Patrology*, written around 420. In the decree of the Synod of Auxerre in 578 we read how the church fathers forbade the New Year's masquerade involving animal masks: "It is not permitted to play the heifer or the stag at the Kalends of January" (Harris 2011: 20). Caesarius, the famous preacher in Merovingien Gaul also complains about Christians "clothed in the manner of wild beasts and become like roe deer or stag" (Harris 2011: 19), urging Christians not to open their doors to such demonic presences.

Analyzing this sort of documents, Arbesmann notices that, even though the custom is mentioned quite often in the ancient Christian literature, "its original significance was already buried in oblivion, both for those who practiced it and for those who were active in working for its supression" (Arbesmann 1979: 90). Also Max Harris suggests that, even if the church fathers insisted in persuading their flock of the pagan character of this tradition unworthy of good Christians, it is also possible that "wearing animal masks and dressing as women for New Year masquerades may have had no ritual connotation, pagan or otherwise", yet that these masks were chosen "simply because they were the cheapest and most readily available forms of disguise" (Harris 2011: 18). Other commentators consider also a more practical motivation for these manifestations, i.e. that they were created and preserved out of the lower-class urge to find a way to make the upper classes more charitable towards them. Klingshirn, the biographer of Ceasarius, believes that these popular practices were "clearly no more than an alternative form of Christian devotion" (Klingshirn 1994: 201, 224, 217–218). In penitentials of the next centuries, wearing animal masks is clearly defined as a deadly sin to Christians. For example, a later source is the canon of Saint Theodor, bishop of Canterbury at the end of the 7th century, who also establishes three years of penance for people guilty of animal masquerade.

Given the amount of documents coming from the same European area, experts in early church history tend to emphasize the configuration of a recurring motif of Frankish penitentials. Over a dozen documents reiterate the information about the penances for those practicing masking. It is, for example, the case of the *Penitential of Pseudo-Theodore*, from north-east France, written in the early ninth-century. This type of evidence makes Arbesmann decide that "the wording of the canon in the penitentials leaves no doubt that its ultimate source is not Ceasarius, but the canon of the Syond of Auxerre" (Arbesmann 1979: 96, 100).

As a standard element in these penitentials and sermons, the condemnation of "making the stag" with its bad reputation for Christian orators does not become yet for some historians a definite proof of the actual practiced

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pagan ritual, but is interpreted as an outcome of the tradition of copying earlier versions of penitentials:

> The impressive sequence of prohibitions may be due not so much to the persistence of the custom itself however as to a bureaucratic inertia which persisted in repeating an originally necessary pronouncement in cultures and centuries to which it no longer applied (Pettitt 2004: 16).

The relevance of the mentioned Western ecclesiastical documents would not be proven solid for the Eastern Christendom without their actual presence in penitentials used and copied in this part of Europe. It is also important to avoid the exaggerate automatic transfer of the Western situation to the rest of the world, an operation often undertaken by local scholars. Fortunately, in this particular case there are evidences that Western penitentials were heavily colportated outside of the Western Roman Empire also reaching the edges of the Christian realm. The *Pidalion* of the Neamţ Monastery dated 1844 mentions the sinful travesty and of comical or satirical masks. The monastic source seems to be a later version of older documents, such as the "royal teachings" printed in 1640 by Matei Basarab describing the same travestying sin (Cojocaru 2008: 448).

It is known that these dangerous demonic games that had to be purged by the Church were already mentioned in a Russian historical writing in 1068, and still in 1648 these documents describe groups of masked dancers which were sinfully "making like the bears" (*Istoria teatrului* 1965: 48). Within the Romanian space, the Canon no. 38 of the Pravila de la Govora – a Romanian compilation of old Byzantine-Slavic canons – mentions that people dressed in animal skins were not allowed to enter in the church: "Everyone which will wear horse or donkey skins should not enter into the church, but stay outside with the women" (*apud* Olteanu 1992: 47).

Besides the written documents, another important type of document for acknowledging this argument is the visual one. The most famous source in the Western world is a mid-fourteenth-century Flemish manuscript of the Romance of Alexander (Bodleian Library MS Bodleian 264, *apud* James 1933: 14), painted by the illustrator Jehan de Gris. The manuscript page shows a troupe of masked dancers drawn on its margin: the actual stag performer, a musician playing on pipe and tabor in order to accompany the supposed choreography, and also spectators as indicated by a mother hurrying her children away from the scandalous performance as directed by the many church penitentials. In the same manuscript, there is a man hidden under an animal-skin hood holding an actual or a replica stag's head on a pole (Figure 3: MS. Bodl. 264, fol. 70r, *apud* James 1933: 23; *apud* Clark 2015: 7). The representation in the manuscript resembles the masks described in the last century by folklore research: either an actual horse's skull or a wooden carved head with clacking jaws. Edwin Cawte described exactly such a "mast horse" mask in his important monography:

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> A skull or carved wooden head is fixed to a pole, and the operator crouches behind, covered with a cloth attached to the base of the head. The jaw is hinged and has a bundle or spring so than the operator can move it (Cawte 1978: 8).

Real antlers that were probably worn as part of a stag costume were also discovered by archeologists, and connected with characters specific to some medieval English mystery plays. John Clark described a perforated antler from South Mimms Norman Castle in the English county of Middlesex, discovered during excavation ruled in the 1960s. The object was dated in the mid- to late 12th century, and interpreted as a possible proof of midwinter ritual for which it was used actual deer antler, even in the absence of a recorded custom of this sort in early medieval England (Clark 2015: 8). Among the existing information in different cultures, these masked characters in shape of animals come from costumes stretching from some mimicking the actual physical appearance of horses, bears, goats to only suggested traits through the use of symbols or adorned staff.

All these evidences are not able to clearly and surely explain the actual motivations of practice, the views of the actors playing the masks or of their contemporary audience, especially because of the obvious ecclesiastical observers' unsympathetic attitude towards pagan seasonal manifestations. In order to give a more adequate insight into the social and cultural reality of this phenomenon, it is important to carefully connect the incomplete images of the past with others closer to our times while avoiding straightforward comparative interpretations. After centuries documented by almost silent or inconclusive documents, the consecrated theories of today should be based on the encounter between old and new.

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Seasonal games acted out in Romanian villages by groups of men costumed as domestic or savage animals, similar with the more known English Mummers' Play, were considered by several generations of interpreters as pure relics, ancient curiosities, or serious rituals, life-cycle dramas proving a deep-rooted religious behavior with parallels in primitive and ancient societies. Leaving aside the actual relevance of the mythological theories meant to explain these zoomorphic masquerades in premodern and modern Europe, going back to the oldest available documents that scarcely describe this cultural phenomenon seems to be the most suitable undertaking. These scattered mentions coming from the early medieval times should therefore be appropriately connected with the available data in contemporary folk archives with the care of respecting the historical and geographical characteristic of the sources.

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