

BECOMING (NON)HUMAN. ANIMAL REPRESENTATIONS IN THE ATU 514 FAIRY TALE

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Article history: Received 15 February 2022; Revised 10 May 2022; Accepted 14 May 2022; Available online 30 June 2022; Available print 30 June 2022.

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ABSTRACT. *Becoming (Non)Human. Animal Representations in the ATU 514 Fairy Tale.* Within the rising ecocriticism in literary studies, a valuable resource for reconfiguring what it means to be (non)human is found in fairy tales, featuring animal agency, transspecies interactions, hybridities, and shapeshifting. With this in mind, the present paper tackles the nonhuman imaginary in the Romanian version of the ATU 514 tale type, *i.e.* shift of sex, which clearly deviates from the heroic pattern, since the protagonist is the emperor's daughter, who is cross-dressed and then metamorphosed into Prince Charming. But does this relaxation of gender norms generate a similar disruption of the position of the animal in magical thinking? In a close reading of the fairy tale corpus, human-nonhuman animal relations are examined bidirectionally, focusing on the one hand, on the master initiator's transbiology (the emperor disguised in animal form) and on the other hand, on two opposite anthropomorphic animals (the wise guide vs. the villain, the horse vs. the genie). Through a hybrid methodology, these transgressive possibilities are explored by combining ritualistic-anthropological, corporeal, and psycho-social aspects with current posthuman concerns. Overall, the analysis of such ontologically ambiguous narratives reveals one of the ways in which these old tales can still be read today to subvert traditional anthropocentric structures.

Keywords: *animal studies, fairy tales, posthumanism, ATU 514 tale type, human-animal relations*

REZUMAT. *A deveni (non)uman. Reprezentări animale în basmul ATU 514.* În cadrul ecocriticii din studiile literare, basmele reprezintă o resursă valoroasă în reconfigurarea noțiunii de (non)uman, întrucât acordă autonomie personajelor

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animale, favorizează interacțiunile dintre specii și imaginează o paletă largă de hibridități și metamorfoze. În aceasta ramă ideatică, studiul de față urmărește imaginarul non uman din anumite versiuni românești ale basmului ATU 514, *i.e.* schimbare de sex, care deviază în mod evident de la tiparul eroic, având-o ca protagonistă pe fiica cea mică a împăratului, deghizată în băiat și ulterior transformată de-a dreptul în Făt-Frumos. Posibil ca această relaxare a normelor de gen să producă o dislocare similară și în privința poziției animalului în mentalul fantastic? Într-o lectură îndeaproape a corpusului selectat, relațiile dintre uman și non umanul animal sunt examinate bidirecțional, observând, pe de o parte, transbiologia maestrului inițiator (împăratul deghizat în animale), iar pe de altă parte, două animale antropomorfizate cu funcții antitetice în economia basmului (adjuvantul vs. antieroul, calul vs. zmeul). Prin intermediul unei metodologii hibride, aceste posibilități transgresive sunt explorate prin juxtapunerea aspectelor ritualic-antropologice, corporale și psiho-sociale cu preocupări postumaniste actuale. În cele din urmă, analiza acestor narațiuni centrate pe figuri ambigue din punct de vedere ontologic scoate la iveală unul din modurile în care astfel de texte vechi mai pot fi citite și astăzi în cheie subversivă la adresa structurilor antropocentrice tradiționale.

Cuvinte-cheie: studii despre animale, basm, postumanism, basmul ATU 514, relații om-animale

A ubiquitous presence in our daily life, nonhuman animals permeate the overwhelming majority of literary discourses, be they within scientific rhetoric or part of a fictional story, in realistic or imaginary representations, intended for adult or young readerships, imparting factual information or having an implicit moral lesson. In fact, our perception, understanding, and interaction with other species is undoubtedly culturally mediated, or better said, conditioned, with literary and other artistic products reinforcing the hegemonic worldview or overtly destabilizing it or both at times. In a general view on the narratives that look beyond the human, folk and fairy tales serve as an excellent narrative laboratory for closely observing posthuman concerns, as the world of fantasy infuses magic into species-specific facts, intermingles unknown elements with familiar ones, and endorses a great deal of species combinations, biomutations, cross-overs, hybridities, cooperative or oppositional multispecies relationships.

Despite a rise in interest in children's literature and culture in recent literary studies, there is still much to be explored and exploited, including the animal imaginary of folk and fairy tales. The fairy tale genre still occupying a peripheral position even within literary and ecocritical research, the pressures

to conform to the normative center are lower and it is precisely this marginality that allows for greater experimentation, more far-fetched imaginary projections, transgressive ambitions, perplexing heterogeneity and altogether subversive scenarios. However, what has been recorded by traditional fairy tale criticism is the reproduction of cosmogonic myths, the staging of rite-like gestures, the portrayal of human archetypes, and all in all, the articulation of folk ethos, with the later addition of feminist and ecological issues due to the last paradigm shifts.

The present work to cast a new light on these old tales is conducted in the spirit of the research trend that reconsiders samples from the artistic archives in order to question their sustainability, bring them up to date, and expose potential representational gaps and incongruences. In this sense, my paper partially subscribes to this approach, as it takes a retrospective look at one of the most long-lived forms of storytelling and at an equally persistent image, *i.e.* the nonhuman animal in its various forms, but with the purpose of prompting and negotiating new interpretative valences and thus adding ideas of posthumanity to the network of fairy tale meanings and uses, besides mytho-symbolic and ritual-anthropologic ones. Although containing a dose of anthropomorphism, these narratives entail a more profound connection between the human and the nonhuman than other animal-centered stories and implicitly, reimagine animals as more than mere echoes of humanity (Sax 2017, 461; Blount 1975, 23).

Studies on fairy tales usually favor the most notorious ones, an approach which is justified in its way, for stories of Prince Charming and Iliane of the Golden Tresses (Făt-Frumos and Ileana Cosânzeana/Sâmbuziana) function as cultural memes in today's Romania. Yet, there is the risk of omitting fairy tales with a lower degree of fame and dissemination, but perhaps with a greater subversive potential or relevance for current socio-political debates. Aside from the disproportionate treatment of Romanian fairy tales centered on an active heroine, there is also a bias in literary animal studies worth stressing: an inclination towards a narrow selection of nonhuman animal species, especially those deemed charismatic by the general public (Herman 2018, 7). In a simple explanation, much of this preference for birds and mammals owes to their closeness to the human in everyday real contexts – a relation which is, of course, reproduced in the imaginary realm – which indicates a stronger bond, either in the form of friendship or exploitation (Barcz 2015, 259), as in the case for the hero-horse helper bond.

Referring to the nonhuman animal in such narratives, the thorny representational issue affects not only storytellers engaged in the construction of fairy tale animality, but also critics and scholars juggling with quite a few conceptual options. Among these, anthropocentrism seems to monopolize the interpretative discourse, slotting animals in the role of humanity's double (Barcz 2015, 257) or the externalized version of the animal other within the human

(McHugh 2009, 489; Barcz 2015 253, 257), silenced, subordinated, literarily domesticated. Essentially, far too few attempts have been made to recognize, understand, and assess such fictional creatures as actual agents, and even fewer to pay attention to animal helpers and villains, despite the crucial part they play in the protagonist's quest and in the comprehension of the plot itself (Davidson 2003, 99).

In a blend of these theoretical issues, more-than-human configurations within folk mentality will be investigated here through the ATU 514 tale type, *i.e.* the shift of sex, as cited in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther catalogue (2004, 301-303) in order to emphasize how narratives can – and do – either change or perpetuate certain modes of thinking about the human, the animal, and the intermixtures of the two categories. Despite the intercultural circulation of this story pattern, the scope of analysis is restricted to a few Romanian literary samples which broadly reiterate the same narrative structure (Bîrlea 1966, 149-157, 158-167; Ispirescu 2006, 32-54; Marian 1968, 122-135; Nijloveanu 1982, 76-82, 222-228; Pop-Reteganul 1997, 126-139; Păun and Angelescu 1989, 222-228; Teodorescu 2007, 5-26).²

It is true that a substantial number of fairy tales do insert nonhuman figures, with the animal helper and people in animal drag as the most common configurations within the Romanian folk imaginary. Nonetheless, the choice of these gender-bending tales for the study of literary animals is justifiable precisely due to the inherently subversive interpretations it can prompt by promoting a different heroic prototype, namely the emperor's youngest daughter – who, after a series of trials, is transformed into a man.³ Seeing how female intelligence, curiosity, and physical force are too often constructed in negative terms, while masculine bravery leads to benefic heroic acts, this fluidization of gender ideology carries emancipatory possibilities, straying away from the androcentric formula of Prince Charming saving the princess in distress. In short, the symbolic capital of this tale of feminine heroism is multiplied by activating notions of gender performativity, fluid identity, bodily autonomy, and ongoing becomings, all under the promise of a truly subversive plot, which is only partially fulfilled, as I concluded elsewhere (Kocsis 2021, 290-291).

Given these gaps in research, then, the comparative analysis of the selected corpus attends to different forms of animal manifestation in Romanian folk

² The comparative analysis will emphasize the commonalities shared by these texts and references to individual fragments will be made only when necessary to pinpoint relevant differences. Also, any quotations used to support an argument will be taken from the following English translation: Ispirescu 1917, 241-284, which is closer to the Romanian version.

³ Among studies that investigate the subversive potential of the ATU 514 fairy tale, the following are worth consulting: Greenhill and Anderson-Grégoire 2014; Pan 2013; Ready 2021.

imaginary. Due to a tolerant attitude towards fluctuating sexual and gender selves in these narratives, the same hypothesis could be applied in the hope of uncovering or even creating a conceptual space where human and animal life are understood as intrinsically intertwined. In the end, such instances of hybridities and crossing-overs disprove the complete separateness of the two spheres. Within this framework, the premise of this paper resides in the active process of becoming more-than-human, pivoting around interpenetrations between the human and the nonhuman animal, interspecies links, possibilities of becoming, ambiguous identities, and marginal positions – as suggested by the title of this essay.

Correlating female identities with nonhuman animal alterities, such a reading of the ATU 514 tale gives voice to peripheral categories dominated by the male gaze within an anthropocentric and androcentric system (Herman 2018, 85). Thus, the main objective of this work is to determine the extent to which a parallel can be drawn between the depiction of male and female social functions and the treatment of literary animals. Particularly, at a textual level, I am interested to see how the unsettling identity of the rider, *i.e.* the emperor's daughter disguised in male clothes, affects the position of her animal helper and in a broader sense, whether the redefinition of gender boundaries (of the human) catalyzes a seism of similar magnitude with regard to the nonhuman.

To broach questions of boundary redistribution, then, the focus of the analysis is two-fold, as it observes transgression in both ways: human shapeshifters and humanoid animal characters. With attention to human-nonhuman trespasses, the emperor disguised in animal form possesses supernatural powers and portrays the father who is the master initiator of his three daughters. Taking it one step further, this autometamorphosis insinuates, from a posthumanist perspective, something more than just animal drag, specifically it is a case of animal trans⁴ (a term proposed in Greenhill and Allen 2018) and the relational subject is becoming animal. Conversely, to tease out the connotations given to animal characters that resemble their human interlocutors, two anthropomorphic figures stand out in the ATU 514 storyline: on the one hand, the horse as helper and guide and on the other hand, the *zmeu*⁵ together with his maternal variant. In both cases, their relationship with the girl-boy heeds some posthumanist interpretations, as well as mytho-folkloric and symbolic nuances. To problematize anthropomorphism as either beneficial or detrimental, I review notions of

⁴ For more on animal trans, see Greenhill 2014; Turner and Greenhill 2012; Murai and Kato 2019.

⁵ In brief, *zmeu* designates a typical Romanian dragon-like character, *i.e.* the antagonist, yet different from other dragons in Western literature (see Stanciu 2013; Sax 2013; Hulubaş 2009; Danciu 2017, 2019). The Romanian word will be used sometimes interchangeably with the English version (“dragon,” while in Ispirescu 1917 it is referred to as “genie”), but keep in mind this particularity of Romanian folklore.

animal-human interconnectedness, empathy, relationality, animal speech distribution, and agency as a way of recycling fairy tales other than allegorically or psychoanalytically.

“Now, the old emperor was, in truth, a magician.”⁶ The transspecies human

In a survey of female portraits within the pages of fantastic stories, the daughter-turned-Prince-Charming is certainly a striking presence, belonging to the entourage of warrior virgins, together with Arăpușca and other resembling heroines (Cioancă 2015; Șăineanu 1978). Giving prominence to the youngest daughter as an active female character, this tale of becoming brings an alternative to the stereotypical formative discourses, which are generally centered on a male protagonist. Then, at a textual level, the details of the initiatory journey further stress this idea, in the hope that the animal imaginary, too, reveals the same degree of subversion, deviating from other fairy tale formulas.

To summarize the storyline, as it appears in the majority of the corpus, world harmony is disturbed when the emperor is requested to send one of his sons to serve at another emperor’s court – note that the former has no male heirs but three daughters. Thus, in order to save their father's honor, each of them embarks – or at least tries to – on the mission, adopts a masculine appearance, but the eldest and the middle daughters return home after being confronted by their father disguised as fierce animals. It is the youngest who triumphs over the three beasts embodied by the emperor, with the help of the horse from her father's youth. Successfully passing this pre-initiation stage, the girl-boy later acquires another helper, a younger horse, then passes a series of gender tests (generally demanded by *zmeoaica*, who deduces the female sex under men's clothing). At the sovereign's court, another series of trials involves apparently impossible tasks, among which the following are the most relevant: the rescue of Iliane of the Golden Tresses (Ilena Sânziana/Cosânzeana) from another *zmeu* and its mother and the last test (requested by the recovered princess), which entails stealing a sacred object. Because of the sacrilegious nature of this deed, the object’s guardian casts a curse of cosmic proportions, which settles the heroine’s previously fluctuating gender identity once and for all by transforming her into a man. As expected, the fairy tale ends with the coronation of the princess-turned-Prince-Charming and his marriage with Iliane, to form the archetypal couple.

By no means restricted to the Romanian space, the ATU 514 folk tale, shift of sex, has circulated in numerous communities, with minimal modification (Pan 2013, 167; Cioancă 2015, 52-55; Kocsis 2021, 278) and the recycled aspects

⁶ Ispirescu 1917, 246.

include: the emperor's political and familial crisis, female inferiority and the advantages of the opposite sex, the act of travesty, the magical horse's impact on the neophyte's identity, gender examination, typical male trials in tripartite structures and finally, the intersexual mutation caused by a curse.

The first stop in the exploration of the nonhuman fairy tale imaginary is the magical transformation of the father into more or less realistic animals in order to probe his daughters' bravery before venturing on the quest. Concerning this sequence, two main interpretation routes are laid out: firstly, by integrating theoretical support from fields such as mythology and anthropology, with an eye to the symbolic connotations of certain textual details in the initiatory journey and likewise, to the father as a shapeshifting initiator (Hulubaş 2009, 276). Secondly, inasmuch as it is not just a simple case of drag by putting on animal skin or fur – just as the girl wearing masculine armor entails something more than cross-dressing – the expansion of the self beyond the human sphere is as real as it can be “even if the animal the human being becomes is not” (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 238). Distinct from an imitation or identification with the animal other, such a molecular change is conjugated rather using the verb “become” than “be”, so that it actualizes a new mode of subjectivity in a relational, transversal sense, that is in a posthumanist reading of the phenomenon (Marca 2020, 1; Deleuze and Guattari 2005).

Following this line of thought, the first migration between the human and nonhuman realms is found in the context of the bridge trial. It may not always present the father disguised as three different animals waiting for his youngest daughter at three different bridges (made of three types of metal) as it is in the tale collected by Petre Ispirescu – which, I would argue, is the most elaborate version – yet, this sequence surely resembles the staged pattern of primitive pubertal rites of passage, “where becoming itself becomes” (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 249). In short, the neophyte is isolated from the familial environment, perhaps even departs on a long journey for this purpose, and his/her identity is neutralized. Next, in the liminal stage he/she engages in test-type situations occurring in the sacred space, as the two diametric principles are reunited within the novice's body, allegorically or actually as in fairy tales. The process ends with the restoration of world balance, the recently initiated subject is aggregated to the community (a return to the profane space).⁷ The magical universe of folk tales, as an extension of the ancient myth, is populated by a multitude of characters, some initiated and others on the verge of social and biological puberty, in search of initiatory guides or confronted with malevolent already initiated beings.

⁷ See Gennep 1960; Eliade 1963.

Under these circumstances, the character who catalyzes the heroine's initiation belongs to the familial space and the opposite sex, even though in the version collected by him, Ion Pop-Reteganul casts an old woman in that role (1997, 128-129). Endowed with supernatural powers, the emperor practically "becomes one with the beast he represents,"⁸ symbolically performing the archetypal hero-monster conflict, here reenacted by the youngest daughter and her father in animal skin. In fact, the progress from the brass bridge to the silver and golden one is coupled with an identical movement in the animals acted out by the master initiator, which are more and more ferocious and less and less plausible: wolf, lion, many-headed dragon (Kocsis 2021, 282). The latter evidently belongs to the world of fantasy, but as a matter of fact, even a real interspecies interaction always prompts two identities in human perception: on the one hand, the animal being perceived and on the other one, what is left unseen by the human eye, for its inner self and the gaps are filled by imagination (Sax 2013, 61).

Although this may be true, there is nothing make-believe or frivolous about the emperor's auto-metamorphosis, because even from the beginning, before having crossed over to the animal side, the subject can be conceived as an amalgamation of heterogeneous elements waiting to enter "the contact zone" (Haraway 2008, 4) or "zone of proximity" (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 274) with other matters and agents. In and of himself, the shapeshifting man occupies a liminal space or better said, "a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities" (249). Therefore, the act of zoomorphization brings forth multiple conceptualizations of the human-animal closeness, such as restoration of the inherent animality, lying in a latent state within the emperor, or of a preternatural connection between the species. When discussing a similar episode in another sample taken from children's literature, Amy Ratelle, too, detects this puzzling identity of the one making the ontological and epistemological leap, a neither-nor state (2015, 63). An equally valid option is rendering this zoo-travesty as exemplification of the notion of bioluminescence: the entanglement between the human and nonhuman domains resembles more "a kind of replacement-change" than a one-plus-one-equals-two type of hybridity, as stressed by David Herman (2018, 51).

Moreover, in the absence of any textual clues indicating filiation between the human and the animals to which he is transforming (wolf, lion, dragon), the "becoming with" on affective grounds (Haraway 2008, 16) is not entirely supported within the ATU 514 plot, but this does not exclude, though, a physical and metaphysical contact on a higher level, an alliance between two species, not individuals, two multiplicities involved in an involutory, rhizomatic exchange (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 238-239).

⁸ Hulubaş 2009, 275, "devine una cu fiara reprezentată" (my translation)

In any case, corroborating the mythological-anthropological aspects of the paternal guide and the act of zoomorphism with fragments taken from current theories in the field of animal studies articulates a transversal poetics. In this vein, the initial ontological state of the emperor and the new condition accessed after the metamorphosis is done, both pale in comparison with the importance granted to the intermediate phase of the process of becoming. Assuming a nonhuman appearance to test the three daughters further problematizes the very idea of transition, that in-betweenness postulated by Deleuze and Guattari as the core of becoming (animal) molecular (2005, 293). Accordingly, the interpenetration between human molecules and other species decentralizes the former in an ecosystemic view, establishes a network of interconnected selves and others, and dismantles the strict demarcations between nature and culture, in the name of a natureculture type of coexistence (Haraway 2003, 8). Having met forms of otherness, neither party remains unchanged, just as the heroine is definitely altered after the combat with the three animal-obstacles, besides having proven herself apt for the next stages of the initiation rite. With categorical frontiers being disrupted, this occurrence of animal drag performed by the emperor with shamanic powers engages the human in a non-hierarchical exchange, where the self is defined in a continuous relationship with the nonhuman. So, in a post-anthropocentric vision, it coagulates the defining elements of the posthuman subject, always in relation and changing (Ratelle 2015, 13; Marca 2020, 1-2) – engaged in a system similar to that proposed by Fawcett, that is personalism, where “humans are continuous with nature and not the most important member” (1989, 15).

“Only listen to me.”⁹ The nonhuman companion

If the previous part of the analysis dealt with the multifaceted human-animal mutation, the following section tackles the nonhuman animal as supported by two anthropomorphic projections in the ATU 514 tales, albeit recurrent in other Romanian wonder tales: the horse and the *zmeu-zmeoaică* pair, the helper and the epitome of evil. Irrespective of their status within the plot, these secondary characters constitute a crucial presence throughout the heroine’s initiation and, equally important, they thematize notions of animal agency and anthropocentrism, besides the already discussed human-nonhuman intersections.

Before delving into the above-mentioned animal occurrences, some remarks on anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism in children’s literature are noteworthy, as points of reference for this discussion. It is not only that our perception and understanding of real life animals is heavily reliant on cultural

⁹ Ispirescu 1917, 263.

products depicting such images, but also that the nonhuman animal is frequently employed in a symbolical sense to represent, decode and resolve human-specific experiences, so that literary representations of animality reflect paradigm shifts, be it in the form of interspecies mutations or hybrid identities (Sax 2013, 46). Hence, there is an on-going debate within academia whether stories featuring nonhuman characters and entanglements with the human reinforce an anthropocentric view (Barcz 2015, 267), or potentially promote a biocentric mindset (Greenhill and Allen 2018, 227).

Whether one argument is favored over the other, what is clear is that the connotations carried by anthropomorphism are in no way clearly delineated as either beneficial or counterproductive even within animal studies. Having said that, it could be viewed as a necessary means of making sense of the world, combining factual information with imaginary humanoid animals, the known and the unknown, to explore what is beyond immediate perception with the help of fantasy (Bortolussi 1986, 36). Being so “good to think with,” in Lévi-Strauss’s words (1991, 83), nonhuman characters with human attributes might uncover issues and transmit values related more to the human domain than the life of actual animals (Ratelle 2015, 63). From the point of view of psychonarratology, nonhuman-focused narratives and images facilitate children’s identification, as they assimilate (human) moral tenets via human-like animals (Ratelle 2015, 10; Herman 2018, 68; Sax 2013, 46) as much as they use human experiences as a template for understanding other forms of being (Bettelheim 1974, 46). Returning to the making of imaginary animals, anthropomorphism appears to be a prerequisite of the phenomenon, having an affective basis found in cross-species empathy, a sort of biophilia, or even child-like kindness (Ratelle 2015, 7-9; Sax 2018, 44, 60) or simply, it sheds light on some unknown aspects of animals (Barcz 2015, 267; Herman 2018, 6).

Setting up my analysis along these lines, it becomes quite obvious that reading the animal guide and antagonist in the ATU 514 text is both annexed to an allegorical vision – conveying moral lessons – and extended beyond anthropocentrism – animal agency, companionship – marking a zone of convergence between the two realms. In order of appearance, the magical horse is a continuation of paternal advice beyond the borders of the kingdom, a more involved version of the master initiator. With strong mythical ties to other stallions from heroic epics (Ellis Davidson 2003, 100) and to the solar principle, it channels symbolic undertones of traditional masculinity, compared to the girl-boy’s fluid gender.

In an overview of the corpus, in most cases two distinct horses intervene in the protagonist’s actions, the one that would accompany and aid the emperor in his past adventures and another one, a younger version of the

first one. No matter the number of such supernatural characters or even their species – as in one of the tales there is a dog instead (Bîrlea 1966, 154-155) – what matters most is the role of spiritual guide and the assistance offered along the way, as maintained by Propp (2009, 82). In accordance with the majority of male-oriented fairy tales, the anthropomorphized nonhuman constitutes a source of absolute knowledge and at the same time a depository of magical objects, all in all, the animal mystagogue, expert strategist, endowed with unlimited power.

Adopting here a more species-focused approach, the fact that the horse from her father's youth remained unused for a long time resulted in the loss of vitality, a physical degradation that reflects not the economic functionality of the horse, but oddly enough, the animal's need to be of service to its master, its human counterpart, in heroic deeds. After being taken care of and fed wonder food, the rusty horse is rejuvenated, who in some versions even solicits the daughter to take an additional test of wit (Teodorescu 2007, 10). The symbolic potential invested in the Făt-Frumos-horse dyad in mytho-folkloric thinking is here reproduced by the heroine's ability to recognize her animal double, in a hidden corner in the regal stables, and strengthened by the fact that both the youngest daughter and "the decrepit old beast" (Ispirescu 1917, 286) are posited as the misfit, the underdog among their peers, utterly underestimated, but triumphant in the end (Călinescu 2006, 166).

This amounts to the conceptualization of the nonhuman animal, in the example of the two steeds, as a mirror of its rider and in a broader sense, bearer of human traditional values. In view of this, the second horse inserted in these texts represents an index of the (masculine) solar principle, by virtue of its name, Sunbeam (Galben-de-Soare and other variations) and is an indirect sign for the imminence of the girl-boy's gender and sex shift. Still, the horse's interventions are decisive throughout the androgynous phase of initiation, urging the main character to repress any feminine impulses to guarantee that the male disguise is as convincing as possible (Kocsis 2021, 283).

Taking into consideration the afore-discussed details raises the question – how does the non-conforming, fluctuating gender of the neophyte disturb the position of the literary animal? In other words, one of my working assumptions is that the ATU 514 tale type prompts a spectral understanding of gender role distribution that can induce a likewise open perception of the nonhuman. Based on subordination in the patriarchal human-centered system, links between women and animals have already been established numerous times (Herman 2018, 85; Kadyrbekova 2018, 411), for imaginative anthropomorphism can give voice and power to underprivileged categories. In this sense, the mythical lineage of these narratives (Eliade 1963) engenders rather non-anthropocentric

scenarios, tributary to the ancient belief in human-nature communion, which is resuscitated in contemporary animal studies.

As long as the interactive relationship between the caballine guide and the androgynous heroine emphasizes the incompetence of the novice and the expertise of the steed, the model of “companion species” (Haraway 2008, 16), based on reciprocity and equality, is more accurate herein than a traditionally hierarchical master-animal rapport. Rather surprisingly, at times the magical horses display considerably more assertion, seeing how in most texts the human character rarely takes initiative and acts only after consulting her instructors. Set against a psychological background, the helpers’ behavior too can be measured in terms of agency, as they contain all the criteria charted by Steward: bodily possession, the development of some form of subjectivity, also self-control over instinctual drives and acting out of their own will above environmental stimuli (2009, 14-16). Perhaps the most edifying moments of autonomy are those when it is the horse who initiates the conversation, devises the best strategy to carry out the tripartite tasks or even when the transvestite’s words are summarized indirectly, while the horse’s are rendered as such.

With human-like qualities extending as far as verbal abilities in fairy tale horses and other species, the communicational gap with humans is bridged and similarities are fortified, “animals talk quite naturally, answering humans back and being accepted as semi-equals” (Blount 1975, 24). Being given a voice equals being recognized as having a certain degree of power, along the lines of Bottigheimer’s assessment of discourse as “a form of domination, and speech (...) as an index of social values and the distribution of power within a society” (1987, 51). The Derridean distinction between animal language as mere reaction and proper response has stirred up polarizing debates in the field (Derrida 2008, 8), but perhaps factoring in the notion of companion animals, the marvelous horses too hold a certain “point of view regarding [the human]” (11). For this reason, not every anthropomorphic instance is to be judged as monopolizing, effacing the animal’s standpoint; instead, the present corpus seems to picture the nonhuman helpers as active participants in the heroic deeds, not as mere bystanders. This is confirmed by the cardinal role of the steeds as wise counselors and decision-makers, with a tremendous influence on the heroine’s formative process, voicing their opinions and being truly respected. For each obstacle encountered in their travels, the horse, without hesitation, utters the optimal solution to it. As for the repetition of the imperative “listen to me” (Ispirescu 1917, 252, 262-263) multiple times, it carries the presumption that the horse would not be otherwise listened to by the young heroine or, in a more empowering reading, it proves an unusual self-awareness of the helper, which realizes its own indispensability as companion animal.

After all, the nonhuman animal still acts independently, even cast in the helper role, it gives instructions, and initiates action as the emperor's daughter finds herself incapable of surmounting the trials and executing the tasks demanded by the sovereign emperor or Iliane. For the most part, this model of the nonhuman undermines the restricted view on imaginary animals as nothing more than indicators of human potentiality and axiology, in order to reframe them in terms of agency, activity, and power. Thus, destabilizing anthropocentrism is coupled with empowering the nonhuman animal – similarly to Kadyrbekova's conclusions (2018) – whose position within magical thinking and the real context is renegotiated. A humanized portrayal of the animal can indeed be beneficial in some ways; assuredly it is better than no animal representation at all (Herman 2018, 6). As previously highlighted, the hybridization of human and nonhuman elements illustrated by the fairy tale helper challenges and redesigns ontological borders to envisage unity in biodiversity. In an ecosystemic conviction, animals are extrapolated as actual co-creators and participants in culture (McHugh 2009, 490), as partners of humans, since the two domains, in fact, collaborate towards the same goal, be it defeating evil forces in fantasy or leading a peaceful life in reality.

“There they met the genie.”¹⁰ The humanoid dragon

Since fairy tales are by no means detached from the cultural-historical context, neither is their conception about the nonhuman animal, as factual data and fragments of the collective imaginary are incorporated in fantastic projections. In view of the situations found in the ATU 514 texts, tales abounding with nonhuman elements not only reveal the permeability between subject and otherness, the continuous change as a way of existence, but also refer to the coexistence with animals as “a structure of being-in-the-world” – one of Derrida's inferences (2008, 79). Correspondingly, the story world also contains adversaries which are zoomorphic and anthropomorphic characters that do not abide by ethical norms and are automatically indexed to the principle of evil – an idea that underscores the function of imaginary animals as reflectors of human values and defects.

This is all the more evident when focusing on the Romanian representation of *zmeu*, an anthropomorphized ophidian, a dragon-like being that is widely regarded as an amalgamation of repressed human qualities and actions. Taking a closer look at the Romanian samples of ATU 514, discrepancies in number and gender arise: in some texts there is only one, the typical princess-kidnapper,

¹⁰ Ispirescu 1917, 275.

meanwhile others introduce a second one accompanied by its mother, entourages of genies or even two quasi-identical ones that ask the heroine to settle a conflict and choose which one of them will live. It is interesting to note that this is the case for the Ispirescu rendering, but not for the rest of the corpus, where the duo varies in species: deer-lion (Teodorescu 2007), deer-dragon (Pop-Reteganul 1997), shepherd-dragon (Nijloveanu 1982; Marian 1986) – species inconsistency reflected also on the beast’s mother. Invariably, the girl-boy favors the one promising to grant her a new horse, as counseled by her current helper, but in the case of species differences, she saves precisely the creature pertaining to evil in Romanian folklore, for “traditional dragons [here, *zmeu*] are notoriously evil where regular animals [here, deer] are not” (Midkiff 2014, 44).

Beyond these dissimilarities, this mythical creature’s race remains ambiguous, especially referring to the Romanian *zmeu*, which, much like other Slavic ones, accumulates both human and nonhuman qualities – the former in terms of appearance, speech, mundane activities, and affectivity towards human princesses (Stanciu 2013, 96-98). Derived from anomalous births of animals and humans alike and the religious notion of unclean animals, such monstrous creatures are the epitome of alterity in most tales (Sax 2013, 95-96, 117). To clarify, the Romanian genie is classified as an ophidian character, at the top of the scale of infernal, telluric beings, above the snake and the *balaur* (Hulubaş 2009, 112-113). Besides the anthropological assessment, others emphasize its mythological ancestry, going as far as considering it a maniacal fallen God, trying to surround itself with adulating subjects (Danciu 2017, 86).

Whilst this dragon is the archetypal nemesis of the hero in the typical Făt-Frumos plots, the maternal version constitutes the other facet of the diptych of femininity in Romanian folklore, *i.e.* the negative double of the princess, comparable to the stepmother from other cultures. Here too the evil mother symbolizes female activity, physical strength, hideous appearance, uncontrollable instincts, and hyperbolized motherly protection. Although with a nonhuman identity, the Romanian she-dragon is reminiscent of the more earthly Aphrodite Pandemos, in other fairy tales promoting open sexuality (Danciu 2019, 59).

As might be expected, psychological interpretations engendered by such mythical meanings posit it as the negative of the human moral image, which is what contemporary anthropocentric observations attempt to surpass by focusing rather on issues of identity, corporality, and multispecies dynamics. In the ATU 514 tales with multiple dragon occurrences, such as the one collected by Ispirescu, meeting the girl-boy raises polarizing reactions: the *zmeu* might be tricked by his savior’s masculine aspect, but the *zmeoaică* is already planning her son’s marriage to the transvestite, intuiting the female sex under disguise. Even though the *zmeu* is bound to fail, its ability to execute human actions and

act on its desire to marry Iliane manifest selfhood and non-instinctive actions from Steward's list of criteria of agency (2009). On the contrary, the second *zmeu's* mother in the story seems to possess a lower level of self-control, because of the fact that the girl-boy stealing Iliane from the hands of her son arouses a mortal apoplectic attack (Hulubaş 2009, 115).

As one of the primary indicators of power within a narrative, the capacity to voice its opinions and wants means that this nonhuman character too is an animal agent. Invisible if silenced, "dragons (...) could not exist without language" (Midkiff 2014, 44), which makes speech quantity and quality all the more significant. In particular, the Ispirescu version does not include direct speech uttered by the dragons, with the exception of one instance: the two *zmei* addressing the heroine to ask for her help (Ispirescu 2006, 40). Even though most of the conversations in this text are indirectly reported, in other renderings, conversations between the genie and its mother during the gender examination are reproduced verbatim (Nijloveanu 1982, 78) and the English translation features same-species dialogue between the two (Ispirescu 1917, 260).

As a result, this disproportionate distribution echoes the general perception of unconventional humans, symbolically speaking, and hybrid species, from a posthuman stance. The supernatural adversaries unquestionably denote the unsettling side of heterogeneous identities as a humanized monster, parallel to the hero/-ine. As for the latter, the coexistence of two in one is only temporarily tolerated by traditional heteronormativity and a gender transformation is imperative for the neophyte to rejoin the community. But that is not the case for the anthropomorphized villain, which cannot change its species via an initiation rite and is banished to the periphery in folk mentality as the embodiment of evil forces.

On balance, the presence of supernatural destroyers in the marvelous realm prefigures the fight of the fairy tale hero, male or female, with the Otherworld monster. Related to anomalous human or nonhuman subjects found in nature, such characters comprise a potpourri of human defects, undesirable attitudes, and behaviors prohibited by social norms, a mixture signaled through physical appearance, species heterogeneity and moral connotations carried by the Romanian *zmeu*. Surveying the mythological-psychological symbolism generally associated with these characters in change-of-sex fairy tales, unfortunately, reveals an even greater temptation toward considering them distorted mirrors, shadows of humanity, anti-models for the reader. However, this androcentric view on semi-human animals can be gradually overcome by recognizing and evaluating aspects of agency. For all that, the Romanian dragon and its variants provide valuable insights into how deviant structures are perceived in the real world, because in both gender variants, both the *zmeu* and its mother, illustrate

the negative perception on species-queer individuals who are automatically indexed under the principle of evil, as the blurring of interspecies frontiers is deemed uncomfortable.

Blurred lines

In the last analysis, by juxtaposing current posthumanist concerns with traditional interpretations of old tales, the assessment of literary animals in the Romanian versions of the ATU 514 tale type, *i.e.* shift of sex, admits the fact that both zoomorphic shifts and anthropomorphic animals are circumscribed to the human world, but also proposes alternatives to “unidirectional species thinking” (Greenhill and Allen 2018, 230). With ontological boundaries disintegrating and engaging in more complex human-nonhuman relationships, animal characters can be perceived as something more than just mirrors of human virtues, by rejecting a reductionist understanding of selfhood as only human and including other agents in gender- and “species-queer, posthuman, and transbiological” fairy tales (Greenhill and Allen 2018, 227).

Retracing the above arguments, the emphasis moves from the idea of being (fixed, eternal, immutable) to the evolutionary process implied by becoming (fluctuating, flexible, mutable) and this is the first step in reimagining heterogeneous individuals in terms of species and their encounters with other life forms. Thus, what comes under question is not only the conceptual barrier between the human and nonhuman realms, but the very idea of disconnectedness and hierarchical structures (Barcz 2015, 256). At a textual level, possibilities of relational ontologies are found in aspects related to the emperor’s animal disguise and metamorphosis, together with an anthropomorphic diptych, the helper and the antagonist, with imagination filling in gaps in knowledge about the animals.

Apart from the human-animal characters within the stories, the methodology here employed is equally hybridized, through the comparative observation of the selected texts to indicate the mythical lineage of the species-bending characters, their anthropological importance throughout the pubertal rite of passage, and frequently associated psychological interpretations. In an interdisciplinary approach, the fusion of fairy tale criticism and animal studies illuminates different layers of meaning going beyond traditional readings, seeing that such tales provide the raw materials for a posthumanist commentary on multispecies structures. On the other hand, the latter resuscitates these old stories, updating them even in a post-anthropocentric manner.

To summarize the preliminary findings, first, the master initiator’s mutation actualizes the nonhuman other within the human, in the name of interconnectedness and permeability. This reframes the act of animal drag with

mainly anthropological and symbolic functions as animal trans in a mytho-posthuman sense. Broadly speaking, the voluntary and temporary quality of the metamorphosis evinces becoming as the essential way of being in the world, not as a unique occurrence, and posits the subject as transversal, relational. Second, human-nonhuman intimacy is exemplified by the heroic dyad, the girl-boy and her horse(s) and the archetypal unbeatable duo corresponds to the notions of Derridean companion species or Haraway's significant otherness based on mutual affection, respect, and dependence. This kind of anthropomorphism "expresses something we receive from the animal, when we are situated together in mutual understanding" (Ratelle 2015, 1), subscribing to a posthumanism centered on human-nonhuman similarities, while the fairy-tale adversary marks rather the discrepancies between the two. Third, the other animal agent, the *zmeu*, illustrates the demonized hybrid, an unsettling identity, which is why its animalistic traits seem to prevail over the human ones, to keep with the uncanny and the dark side of mankind (Midkiff 2014, 45). Extrapolating, both animal agents participate not only in the initiation process within the plot or in the dialogues through the text, but also in cultural creation in the nonfictional world, belonging to nature (the wild dragon) and culture (the trusty horse companion) at the same time (Sax 2017, 468).

To give an answer to my research question regarding the potential overlap between transgender change and cross-species entanglements, both a gender- and animal-focused analysis report a certain fascination towards the eventuality of transgressing one's initial condition by reaching sexual maturity via a rite or by interacting with animal otherness. With attention to the humanoid animals, at times more agency is allotted to the steed than its androgynous rider, whose quest would have failed without the helper's intervention. To ignore monster-like characters reinforces species bias, for the dragons clearly partake much less in the dialogue than the trusty horse. There is also the gender implication of a she-dragon that epitomizes feminine physical superiority and the social stigma that comes with it in a patriarchal society. Consequently, the same Romanian fairy tales that can be read as channeling gender fluidity and performance can also envision the collapse of interspecies boundaries. For this reason, imaginary animals are the ideal test subjects on which to probe reconceptualizations of gender and the (non)human and fairy tales are the laboratory for testing the challenging and redrawing the limits of seemingly separate, impenetrable domains, feminine-masculine, human-nonhuman, nature-culture.

In essence, exorcising human-centered considerations – more precisely, allegorical and moralizing values that have been attributed to animal characters in most fairy tales – is not yet entirely possible when reading such narratives. The present essay seeks to destabilize such views, with reference to the ATU

514 tales, an interesting deviation from the usual Romanian formula. Although writing or collecting these narratives has undoubtedly been calibrated to the past cultural and ideological circumstances, reading varies from one paradigm to another, as today we can retrieve them from the archives and reread them subversively. And perhaps the moral lesson hereby imparted – if there is any – is precisely that becoming and being with the animal define the principal state of being in the world.

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