

Elena Rodica Colta, *Vâlve, vârcolaci, strigoi. Imaginar popular central-european* [Faeries, Werewolves, Undead. Central European Folk Imagination], București, Editura Etnologică, 2023, 299 p., ISBN 978-606-067-045-2

What are the Romanian *vâlve*? In how many kinds of evil spirits do the Romanians believe in? What is the connection between these imaginary representations and those in other European cultures? What do the narratives with these supernatural beings tell us about the way these populations, in the past, viewed and related to the world? These are just some of the questions that Elena Rodica Colta tries to answer in this book. She is an ethnologist with a rich field experience from the Arad County Cultural Center and also a specialist in museography regarding old books and icons on glass from the Arad Museum Complex.

The study deals with the imaginary of traditional societies in Arad. It refers to several accounts from this region, but also placing them in a broader context, by relating to the images, beliefs, practices, similarities and differences with other Romanian communities, for which it also presents testimonies starting from the end of the 19th century, as well as to neighboring and distant populations from various

historical periods. Elena Rodica Colta argues in favor of a European imaginary, which expanded and evolved starting from the 16th-17th centuries, but which was actually part of a larger archaic Indo-European background. Currently, people are in a continuous process of abandoning the old way of understanding the world: “the Romanian or other ethnic peasant, contaminated by modernity, no longer knows, no longer recognizes and no longer believes in the existence of the old imaginary beings, and this detachment, distancing and even oblivion determines changes in the system of symbols and, implicitly, in the old system of values” (p. 9). However, rural societies still conserve traces of archaic behavior in the form of superstitions, beliefs and taboos, of magical-religious structure and origin, as well as degraded ritualisms, which have often lost their previous sacred meaning. Thus, Elena Rodica Colta aims to identify “fragments of mythology hidden in the narrative, knowing that these are structuring old cultural forms, assumed by different populations, as parts of their own cultural model” (p. 18).

The author took as reference the better-preserved variants of the national imaginary, through which the zonal representations were analyzed. The latter were taken over, diluted and interpreted as we observe the situation towards the Western part of the country. After a first chapter of theoretical specifications, the material, which thematically is very rich, is structured into five major categories. The Supernatural includes Archaic Divinities Camouflaged in Animals (the mythical snake, the bear, the wolf etc.), Archaic Inferior Divinities (luck – misfortune, good market – bad market), Other Divinities and Semi-Divinities of Nature (such as *Paparuda*, an ancient rain deity from Romanian mythology, or *Ielele*, the Romanian equivalent of the wind fairies or nymphs, or the werewolf, a dog-like animal, an unbaptized child born of unwed parents or a mutant who transforms into a wolf in the night, that resembles the archaic monsters which people believed that ate the sun and the moon) and Semi-Divinities and Aquatic Spirits (like *Știma apei*, a kind of sweetwater mermaid, which falls into the category of female aquatic demons). Here we also learn about *vâlve*: “it is also a faerie. The name is found especially in the Apuseni Mountains [...], where it was believed that they were phantasmal women, without a precise identity, wandering the hills at night” (p. 91). They are divided into “white faeries”, which are good, and “black faeries”, which are bad. But the classification extends even further: there is the Water Fairy, the Forest Fairy, the Plague Fairy, the Wolves Fairy, the Wind Fairy, the Treasure Fairy, the Fortress Fairy, the Food Fairy and the Mine Fairy. According to the monography of Tisa village in Arad County, in Hălmațiu Land, which is an ethnographic region in this county, there was a belief that if treasures were buried in the ground for too long, they would get faeries. These faeries guarded the money from thieves. It is only on Easter Night that these creatures sleep for an hour and then the treasures light up and throw out flames of fire (Ioan Arpaș, Ioan Cotoc, 2020, *apud*. Elena Rodica Colta, *op. cit.*, p. 91-92). The subcategory Beings from the Otherworld includes, among other creatures, the dead *strigoi*, which are undead, the deceased who come out of the grave at night and the *moroi*, which are the souls of children who died either through abortion or unbaptized and who have transformed into smaller *strigoi*. In the Romanian imaginary, the undead are represented in the same way in all regions of

the country and are recognized from the moment they die. In a research on *strigoi* in the Wineyard of Arad, we learn of one such case: “old woman Ghiula had died [...] but the redness on her face did not disappear, not even the next day following her death. On the second evening, the neighbors held a council [...] Then one of them said: «The old woman is not dead, you see that she is still warm, so she is definitely a *strigoi*!» The frightened women put a brick on her chest and then pierced her heart with a nail” (Corina Șeran, 2011, *apud.* Elena Rodica Colta, *op. cit.*, p. 143-144).

Although, at the end of the study, the author observes a general blending regarding the characteristics and functions of these imaginary beings, we noticed some disorders regarding the material organization. It is not clear to us why the author did not include in the subcategory dedicated to Divinities, Semi-Divinities and Spirits of Nature or did not separate into a distinct subcategory the creatures associated with the forest, such as, for example, *Muma Pădurii* [The Mother of the Woods], who, in Romanian culture, is a demon or an evil female spirit of the forest that eats people. In Gurahonț area, on August the 6th, when it is also a great Christian holiday, the Transfiguration of Christ, it is said that she mourns her daughters and on this day people are not allowed to eat hazelnuts, to break branches from trees, women are not allowed to comb their hair and men are not allowed to go to the forest. Those who dared to go were punished by her. The stories about these encounters are numerous. Two of them are from the village of Crocna and appear in a monography of Gurahonț and its surroundings. One is about a man named Ginga, who went to the forest on this day and all the hair on his head fell off, including the one from his eyebrows. Another story is about Ion, a local who went up the hill, to Fântânele, and *Muma Pădurii* carried him like a ghost, until he came home at night with an empty cart and a broken wheel (Nicușor Paul, 2001, *apud.* Elena Rodica Colta, *op. cit.*, p. 86). Regarding the structure of the study, we also wonder why the Devil is not included in the category Beings from the Otherworld and, instead, all these creatures that we mentioned above remain in the subcategory of Semi-Divinities and Aquatic Spirits.

The next category is dedicated to the Christian imaginary repertoire, where we find the Mother of God, which encompasses the ancient cult of the Great Mother, and other saints important to the Romanians. There is Saint Peter, who, like Saint Andrew, is seen as a lord of animals, the one who decides the animals' food for the rest of the year, Saint Elijah, who is said to hunt devils, etc. We do not agree with the affirmation about Saint Ignatius, whom the author despite indicating that is celebrated on December the 20th, she says is a false saint, who does not appear in the church calendar, being originally an archaic divinity. The cutting of a pig for Christmas, which is a custom practiced on this day, is indeed a substitute for an ancient rite performed for an agrarian spirit. The custom is in the sphere of sacrificial offerings addressed by humans to the divinity as a sign of gratitude for the harvest obtained and to obtain help for the future crop. However, Saint Ignatius of Antioch, also known as Ignatius Theophorus, does appear in the Christian Orthodox calendar, on this date, being celebrated together with the Forefeast of the Nativity, an important moment in the church services before the great winter holiday. He was a Christian writer and the third bishop of Antioch (in Syria). He died in Rome, in 107, during the persecution of Christians by Emperor Trajan, killed by lions in the Colosseum

of Rome. He was called Theophorus, which means “the one carried by God”, but also “bearer of God”. The first meaning is related to the fact that in church tradition it is believed that he was carried by Jesus Christ when he told the apostles, “Verily I say unto you, except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matthew 18: 3), after which he also said to them: “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me” (Mark 9: 35-37). The second meaning is that there is a story that the beasts left the saint’s heart untouched, and the soldiers, taking it and splitting it in two, found inside, on both sides, written in gold letters: “Jesus Christ”, thus showing that he was indeed a bearer of God (*Great Synaxarion of December*, 2014, p. 731-740).

Next, adhering to the mythologists’ classifications, the author analyzes the Fairy Tale World or the Other Land, that is, some of the creatures from the Romanian fairy tales and of other countries from Central Europe, such as the ogre, who was believed to be half man, half dog, or *zmeul*, which is the last form of the snake (Ovidiu Bîrlea, 1976, p. 458), a being similar to a strong, ugly and not very smart man, both creatures being cannibals. After this, comes the Human category, divided into Beings Endowed with Powers since Birth, such as *solomonarul*, which Romanians believed to be a kind of sorcerer with meteorological functions. Then there is People with Magical Powers, where the author includes, among others, the priest, the shepherd and the hunter. In the Group of Knowledgeable Women, we find the witch, the enchantress, but also the old woman, who in Romanian folklore was a forgiven woman, a widow, who was considered to be the holder of certain knowledge and powers, intervening, for example, through prayers, in the case of the sick men who could not die. The last subcategory is dedicated to the Abnormal – Mutants and the Damned, where there is the living *strigoi* or the living undead, the most popular mutant in the European tradition. Romanians from Arad County and from villages that were previously predominantly Romanian, in Eastern Hungary, call them *bosorcă/bosorcoi*, a word borrowed from their neighbors. The people of Gurahonț, like the Romanians from other lands, recognize these mutants by their birthmarks. These children are born with a hump on their head or with their spine extended in the shape of a small tail (Nicușor Paul, 2001, *apud*. Elena Rodica Colta, *op. cit.*, p. 250). *Pricolici*, who is often confused with the living undead, has the power to transform into any animal. In the Winery of Arad, in Covăsânț village, there was a belief that *pricolici* steals lambs or puppies and eats them (Rodica Colta, Doru Sinaci, Natalia Tomi, 2012, *apud*. Elena Rodica Colta, *op. cit.*, p. 262). *Tricolici* is the child resulted from a wolf and a man and also in this category the werewolf appears again, in the wolf-man version. Although the present study has a diverse and complex theme and these productions of human imagination often intertwine as the result of common, human desires or fears, we still do not find it justified to have the same creature in two distinct categories.

Last but not least, the overall picture of the Romanian imaginary is completed by the author in an inspired way with a minimal botanical mythology, which includes important plants from a medicinal, therapeutic, but also magical, ritual point of view, along with the beliefs, names, narratives and practices associated with them.

Among these, we mention the hazelnut, a magical plant associated in Romanian folklore with the snake, the witch and the *solomonar*. Wheat is one of the plants that symbolizes Jesus Christ due to its grinding in the bread production. Also, it is a plant with sacred values that is present in all rites of passage. And garlic, which, in the author's opinion, is the plant with the most numerous protective values, is used all over the world. In Romania it is considered to be good for various diseases, but also against bad spirits, *strigoi*, and all sorts of evil.

At the end of her study, Elena Rodica Colta shows that, as we come closer to the present, the testimonies lose their certainty, the informants start to doubt their beliefs. On one hand, it is noted that there is a process of information blending related to these imaginary beings and, on the other hand, a process of simplification, the loss of meaning and even the oblivion of an important part of Romanian mythology. This last process unfolds differently from one region to another, in the West of the country certain creatures being forgotten, while in the East and North-East they existed until the end of the last century. The collective mind preserves only those beings that are considered still active. Therefore, certain fears and certain desires, as we said, are responsible for the creation of these imaginary beings. The creatures are preserved to this day in the memory of the villages, with the entire set of emotions they generate, becoming a subject of memories and discussions on every occasion in which the subject of fear appears, such as, for example, an encounter of man with a snake. In such a moment, the author states, the entire mythology related to the certain theme is reactivated, even if the narrative takes on new forms. "The modern man is used to make mythology and cannot completely give up on tradition. He constantly recovers everything that is significant and useful from these narratives, reinterpreting and reintegrating them into his world. However we look at things, there is a dark side to our modernity, with deep roots in a common past to all European people, a past that generates anxieties and fears, activating the imagination of each generation and producing new monsters according to the old patterns" (p. 286).