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On oral tradition and fairy tale in Greece*

Abstract

Oral tradition is the most comprehensive set of elements of culture that are transmitted in the oral language. The role of oral tradition is very important for the daily routine of the community because its members are informed and entertained, learn and acquire historical consciousness through it. The style of oral tradition is determined by expressive means of the body, as well as by the literary means themselves. The role of language is dominant, because it is a basic code of communication, which transfers knowledge and messages.

An oral text is transported inside and outside the boundaries of the community as well as from one generation to another, according to specific principles of social behavior. The first attempts to collect and publish folk tales began in the second half of the 19th century by Greeks and foreigners. On the part of Greeks, the collection of folklore material was used as a proof of our national continuity. Recording and research continues today with different goals.

The study of the fairy tale led, on the one hand to questions about its origination and dissemination and, on the other hand, its method of scientific analysis. The theories formulated in response to these questions were shaped by the intellectual orientation of the time, combined with the scientific interests of this study originators.

Key words: oral tradition / oral literature, fairy tale, narration.

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Oral tradition / Oral literature

Our reference to the oral tradition relates to the elements of culture that are transmitted through the spoken word. The term is complex and that is why we will define the concepts from the beginning, so what “tradition” and “oral” means (Δαμιανού, Παπαχριστοφόρου / Damianos and Papachristoforou, 2002).

Tradition is all the elements of a culture that are transferred from one generation to the next through reason or example. These elements relate to all areas of human life within the traditional community. The term *oral* refers to orality, namely the particular mode of transmission through verbal speech and speaking (*ibidem*).

Oral literature is a subdivision of oral tradition which can be defined as opposed to written literature. The main difference between them is the product itself. Written literature refers to a work that is inspired and created by only one person from the beginning to the end. The product, that is the literary composition, is disseminated in a written form through commerce. On the contrary, in the oral literature the work does not have a “creator”, because each time it is transmitted, the creator changes from mouth to mouth but the composition constantly remains the same. In this case, the creator is anonymous and resembles a craftsman who processes the work in a given way or with a performer who simply interprets an old work in his own personal way (*ibidem*).

Oral tradition plays an important role in the daily life of the community, because it translates much of the knowledge of community’s culture. The oral text circulates from mouth to mouth and from generation to generation, transferring the patterns and conceptions that have been imprinted on it. The types of oral tradition are: folk songs, spells, wishes and curses, expressive gestures and movements, riddles, proverbs, myths, storytelling, fairy tales, traditions and folklore names (*ibidem*).

The means of transmission of the above types of oral delivery is the language itself. Language is important both because it is a means of communication between members of the community and because it is a common code of expression. The code can be simple or complex. The complex language code can incorporate elements of other languages but can also be used within a particular group to be misunderstood by other community members.

Oral tradition conveys knowledge, so it requires the practice of memory, not only in memorizing the text itself, but also in assimilating the knowledge conveyed through it. The narrator must develop learning skills. Oral text can be transmitted as we said in the community,

from mouth to mouth and from generation to generation with minimal variations within the text, while outside the community is transmitted through people's movements. In this case the changes in the oral text are more serious, as the “foreign” community adapts it to its own data in order to appropriate it (Δαμιανού, Παπαχριστοφόρου / Damianos and Papachristoforou, 2002).

We can therefore conclude that oral tradition, and in particular oral literature, is a unified system of communication between members of a community in space and time. As everyday reality changes, the oral tradition is also reshaped. Today, many types of oral tradition have weakened or can be said to have been eradicated due to the dominance of the media. Certainly there are also several species such as the tale that survives either in their original form within the traditional community or shaped according to the needs of modern life in the big urban centers. (*ibidem*).

The fairy tale in Greece

In Greece, the interest in the fairy tale is part of the interest in, concentration on, and study of the creations of the Greek people, creations that contribute significantly to the formation of a national identity, according to a model imported from Germany, with which Greece was spiritually associated.

Prior to the Revolution and a little later after 1850, folkloric information is found in the travel impressions of foreign travelers such as William Leake, Jacob Bartholdy, Pierre-Augustin De Guys and others, and in the works of the scholars of the Greek Enlightenment, such as Δημήτρης Καταρτζής / Dimitris Katartzis, Δημήτρης Φιλίπιδης / Dimitris Filippidis, Αδαμάντιος Κοραΐς / Adamandios Korais etc.

After the liberation of the nation, the interest in popular creation was found in the effort to prove the continuity of Hellenism from Antiquity to that time, relying on Fallmerayer theory (1790-1861) formulated in 1830. However, since 1850 without abandoning the effort to prove continuity with Antiquity, the gathering of folklore material begins with the purpose of presenting the newer folk creation with an independent value. The ambassador of Austria in Ioannina and then in Syros, Johann Georg von Hahn, began in 1848 to gather Greek and Albanian fairy tales from these areas which he published in a volume in German entitled *Greek and Albanian tales*. It is the first collection of folk tales in Greece. At the same time in the Greek area there are published periodicals and books such as *Pandora* (1850), *Chrysalis* (1863), *Ilissos* (1868), *Parthenon* (1871), which publish fairytales and folklore collections. Also, Νικόλαος Πολίτης /

Nikolaos Politis in cooperation with Γεώργιος Δροσίνης / Georgios Drosinis publish stories in a literary magazine (Δαμιανού, Παπαχριστοφόρου / Damianos and Papachristoforou, 2002).

The period of the last thirty years of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th century is the most fertile in terms of recording and rescuing folk tales. Emile Legrand says that “For ten years now, the Greeks, who had first left this care to foreigners, began themselves, with some sort of frenzy, to collect the many and varied products of folk literature. The collections of fairy tales, songs, puzzles, traditions, proverbs have multiplied in an unusual way” (Legrand, 1881).

Today, material of a large volume and value is concentrated in archives of institutions and schools such as the Folklore Society, the Folklore Archives of the Academy of Athens, The Center of Asia Minor Studies, the Folklore School founded by Professor Γεώργιος Μέγας / G. Megas. A lot of people can wonder who the ones who care about the fairy tale are. The answer is simple. Mostly researchers of folklore, ethnologists, social anthropologists, philologists, theater, dance and visual arts are only but a few. As you can understand, the fairy tale is timeless and finds great response and interest in our days, especially from the new narrators, people with talent in narration, telling stories in order to entertain children and adults.

Categories and types of fairy tales

Animal myths

Myths about animals are too old. Μιχάλης Γ. Μερakλής / Mixalis G. Meraklis writes that “the most ancient narrative material that we encounter in all the primitive peoples is the stories of animals, their idiosyncrasy, their power, their deeds, their lives and their struggles” (Μερakλής / Meraklis, 2001). Myth has a pedagogical value and is considered to be a carrier of folk bio-theory (Αυδίκος / Avdikos, 1997: 80).

Magical tales

These have magical elements and include descriptions and action of magical faces and objects. They are usually large in size, and their narrations speak of supernatural opponents.

Religious fairy tales

They refer to God, who in human or even divine qualities rewards or punishes, and to the devil. Other issues refer to the saints, to Christ, to Paradise, to the hero who makes moral or immoral deeds, and so on.

The novels

These are stories with more realistic content. The magical element is not missing but it is very closely mixed with elements of the real in the narrative. These are newer stories in which it is not the bravery of the hero of the magical tale that dominates, but the use of cunningness in everyday situations.

Enigmatic stories

As a key element of their structure and the evolution of myth include the solution of an enigma. The knowledge, which allows the solution of the enigma, supplies the hero with power over the magical being that sets the riddle. While the riddle itself refers to very distant periods of time, enigmatic stories are included in the novels in the sense that the bravery and the courage required by magic heroes here are replaced by their ability to resolve enigmas.

Conclusions

In Greece, the study of fairy tales first begun by foreigners and then by Greeks in the 19th century, when the first collections of Greek fairy tales were drafted and their research and collection was organized. Today, both the research and the study of fairy tales continue, because the fairy tale continues to interest a huge and varied audience. The approach of fairy tales reveals the importance of the genre and the multiplicity of its contribution to the social life of the traditional community.

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