

Metamorphosis amid myths, initiation rites and Romanian folk tales

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Abstract: In the discussion on myth-rite relations, the concept of metamorphosis occupies a significant place. The abundance of shape changings in myths and folktales leads to the hypothesis that they echo practices of initiation rites. This paper attempts to analyze the motif of transformations flight as found in myths and folktales and its connection with rites of passage. On a mythical level, the most common example of transformations flight is between a reluctant goddess or nymph and a god as seducer, best illustrated by the myth of Zeus and Nemesis. On a folklore level, the motif of transformations flight could show traces of a rite of initiation; special attention is given to Romanian folktales.

Keywords: Initiation rites, the transformations flight, metamorphosis, Greek myths, Roman myths, Indo-Iranian myths, German myths, European folklore, Romanian folktales.

Résumé: Dans la discussion sur les rapports entre mythe et rite, le concept de métamorphose occupe une place importante. L'abondance des changements d'aspect dans les mythes et les contes conduit à émettre l'hypothèse qu'ils font écho à des pratiques issues de rites d'initiation. Le présent article tente d'analyser le motif de l'envol via une métamorphose, que l'on retrouve dans les mythes et les contes, et de son lien avec les rites de passage. Sur le plan mythique, l'exemple le plus commun de ce type de transformation est celui d'une déesse réticente ou d'une nymphe, et d'un dieu séducteur, un exemple connu étant celui de Nemesis et Zeus. Sur le plan du folklore, le motif de l'envol après transformation pourrait montrer des traces d'un rite d'initiation. Une attention particulière est accordée aux contes roumains.

Mots clés: Rites initiatiques, transformation pour voler, métamorphose, mythes grecs, mythes romains, mythes indo-iraniens, mythes allemands, folklore européen, contes roumains.

The inherent need of human intellect to comprehend the origins of every aspect of the surroundings dominates the mind, from conceptualizing myths of creation to theorizing on myth formation and function.

The 'origins' of the continuous dispute between whether rite or myth came first must refer to James G. Frazer and his followers, the Cambridge Ritualists School, for whom rituals are the source of myth. While many researchers agree that "myth...is the counterpart of ritual; myth implies ritual, ritual implies myth, they are one and the same"¹, others may not, though they still consider them essentially connected. Among others, G. Kirk cautions against expediently associating myth and ritual as their "relations are complex and varied..." but if mythical and folkloric material cooperate in the story, rite-myth is validated². In

1. Leach, 1954, p. 13-14.

2. Kirk, 1970, p. 16-17.

the same direction V. Propp extended the field, maintaining that fairy tales are the texts that accompanied rituals³. In agreement with the importance of folkloric data in myth-rite corroboration, I will follow the motif of transformations flight and argue its possible relationship with rites of youth initiation as found in myths and folklore, with examples from Romanian folktales.

Initiation rituals operated with specific sets of controlled visual and verbal expressions of human values. Physical actions associated with rituals were conveyed into verbal forms of expression. The story telling uses language tropes, symbols, metaphors, allegories and the like, elements of communication able to amplify the abstract and religious thoughts embedded within cultural heritage. Entangled in a sacred net with animals and their surroundings the social group was transmitting through the initiation process their traditions and religious beliefs using both physical and verbal forms of expression. As M. Eliade argues, myth was the narration of the sacred story of events that happened in primordial times when supernatural beings took part in the creation of the cosmos, humans, and social institutions, while rituals helped man recreate those primordial actions, immersing him in the powers of the divine⁴.

Initiation process and symbolic transformations

The process of initiating young people began at the end of childhood and the beginning of adolescence, the most important moment in the life of the teens. Organized during major feasts, the initiation practices were intended to induct the novice into the sacred myths and heroic stories of the social group. Generally, at this age, the novice was considered asexual, in a transitional stage, in a sphere of ambiguity. Socially, novices did not belong to any category and metaphysically, they were crossing a period similar to a cosmic chaos⁵ from which they needed to be reborn into a new beginning. This ambiguous stage positioned the novices outside the social and the sacral order, on a limb associated with the primordial chaos, a state potentially dangerous and threatening for the entire group's well-being. Thus, they needed to be isolated. To restore cosmic and social order in the community it was imperative for the novices to successfully pass through and complete the initiation rite. The ritual reenactment of divine creation helped the novices to step into a new ontological experience, to receive mythical concepts needed to understand the existential human condition and the expectations of the group. They were introduced to the world of the sacred, to myths of the creation of humans and the cosmos, myths of social foundations, and the heroic actions of their ancestors. In the end, the initiation practices through sacred rites of passage

3. Propp, 1957.

4. Eliade, 1963.

5. Van Gennep, 1960.

resulted in establishing the novice's new role in the community, be it that of a bride, a groom, a warrior, or a king.

During these ritual enactments, a significant role was played by the symbolic transformations associated with changes in the novice's appearance, for example cutting the hair, dressing in special garments, covering in animal skins and such. Reminiscences of ritual change in the young persons' appearance are to be found as part of the initiation ceremonies in ancient Greece: during the festival of Apatouria, a festival of *phratries*, young men changed their apparel. The enrolment into the *phratries* was linked to the rite of *koureia*, when boys went through the *koureion* "cutting ceremony," the haircut, after which the boys were recognized as citizens of the *polis*⁶. Prior to this ceremony, young boys not only had long hair but they wore girls' outfits, as in the well known story of Achilles, who, for the first part of his life, was hidden dressed as a girl among the daughters of Lycomedes; or Theseus who was ridiculed as a girl until he hurled a sacrificial animal up in the air⁷. Following the "cutting ceremony," the young men, or *kouroi*, offered their locks of hair to traditional heroes rather than to gods, whereas the girls performed their offerings to their protective goddess.

The Greek girls' initiation is described as *arkteia*, the "bear (*arktos*) ritual," during which they raced semi-nude in honor of Artemis, the goddess of purity and childbirth. This is reminiscent of the myth of Callisto, the virginal companion of the goddess, who was seduced by Zeus and turned into a bear. Young girls 'playing bear' before their wedding or 'serving as a bear' are attested in the late 5th Century B.C.⁸.

Besides the hair cutting and fraternity ceremonies, Greek tradition knows the 'shape shifting warriors', recently described by Reyes Bertolin Cebrián as skin-covered youth contingents, the Wolf-People, the 'long-haired' Achaeans, Myrmidones and Lykians found in the *Iliad*⁹. These shape shifting warriors may show reminiscences of fighters' initiations: "use of animal skins, which allowed the warriors to assume the nature of the animal." The most commonly used were wolf warriors or bear-skin warriors, also known in the Norse tradition as berserkers. The "long hair or strange hairdos which were supposed to give them a horrifying aspect" or "...impersonated ghosts or dead ancestors" were physical changes that "made them fight in a state of fury that increased their performance"¹⁰. Here we have to include the Roman *Lupercalia*, celebrated on February 15 when a band of young men called *Luperci*, ran wild wearing only goatskins "about Rome in a mitigated form of flagellant ritual, striking especially women as a magical aid to procreation"¹¹.

6. Gernet, 1998.

7. Burkert, 1985, p. 261

8. *Initiation in Ancient Greek Rituals*, 2003, p. 51

9. Cebrián, 2010.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Puhvel, 1987, p. 160.

Practices of this kind are relevant to our discussion: young men wearing animal skins 'become' that animal, acquiring the animal's force and qualities, while getting closer to other worlds, to their dead ancestors -- these are practices related to rites of initiation. It was believed that through these practices the novice was ingurgitated by a totemic primordial animal that would regurgitate him initiated: "In other words, the mythical animal returns to life together with the initiate"¹². Such ritual enactment of covering in animal skins symbolizing the ingurgitation and regurgitation by a primordial totemic animal is most likely related to the mythical motif of metamorphosis from myths and folktales.

According to recent studies, in Australia not long ago rites of passage were performed that could be relevant to a better understanding of this phenomenon: after the novice is in a state of apparent death "he is resurrected and taught how to live, but differently than in childhood." The death and rebirth rite would allow the youth to connect to the world of the dead and the mysterious, to acquire "the 'spirit' who is the protector of the entire clan..."¹³. The novice enters the world of the divine, contacting the *sacra*, be it by a 'bull-roarer', or by bull's blood poured over him, and coming out as if coming from his mother's womb, covered with blood, reborn, empowered with the animal's or/and the dead ancestors' secret powers and inspiration. Hence, we can assume that animal skin covers which played a central part in the initiation rites and the motif of metamorphosis from myths and folktales belong to the same thematic pool.

The metamorphoses in myths and folktales can be separated in two kinds: those performed at will to escape from a dangerous more powerful follower, and those resulting from a punishment by a divine or magical force.

The flight of transformations at will in myth

The myths and folktales in which characters change shapes at will in an effort to escape a more powerful adversary are called *transformations flight* in the Aarne-Thompson catalog of folk data¹⁴, a formulation adopted in this discussion as well. In folk data this type of narrative records a female or a male character, or both as a couple, going through a series of transformations at will in order to avoid a follower, who consequently changes his/her shape into a larger, more powerful adversary, but is in the end deceived and overwhelmed.

On a mythical level, the most common example of transformations flight is between a reluctant goddess or nymph and a god-seducer. One need only think of the numerous Greek stories in which Zeus pursues and overpowers goddesses or nymphs taking different shapes, such as a cow, a swan, and an eagle to name

12. Eliade, 1972, p. 14.

13. Van Gennep, 1960, p. 75-77.

14. Aarne and Thompson, 1961.

a few. Among these, the famous myth of Zeus and Nemesis, perhaps the oldest, offers a more complete example of the transformations flight.

Most of the sources of antiquity report the following sequence of events: Nemesis did not want to receive Zeus's love and ran away from him; first she threw herself into waters turning into a fish, Zeus followed her as an otter; then she escaped turning into a wild beast, but he turned into an even more ferocious animal; finally Nemesis rose in the air as a wild goose, but Zeus managed to overpower her as a swan (Stasinus of Cyprus or Hegesias of Aegina, *Cypria Fragment* 8). To complicate the matter somewhat, there is another version of this myth according to which Zeus stages his own transformations flight because Nemesis ignored his advances. He turns himself into a swan and then asks Aphrodite to hunt him as an eagle. Pretending to be terrified, he seeks salvation under Nemesis' protection. Impressed by the beauty of the animal, the goddess guards him but while asleep she receives his love. From this union the goddess gives birth to an egg that Hermes will drop onto Leda's lap, from which Helen comes into being (Hyginus, *Astronomica* 2.8). This version is confirmed by the existence of a 4th Century B.C. statue representing a goddess that seems to protect a swan while her eyes are watching the sky¹⁵.

There are quite a few other stories about goddesses fleeing Zeus or other gods' advances, such as a story told in Arcadia: Demeter was pursued by Poseidon, and to escape she turned into a mare but was overpowered by the god in the shape of a horse (Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 8. 25. 5). Metis, like Nemesis, had the art of changing herself into many different shapes, yet Zeus overwhelmed her and thus led to the birth of Pallas Athena (Apollodorus, *The Library* 1. 20). Zeus also sought to seduce Leto's sister, Asteria, who turned herself into a quail, fell into the sea, and remained hidden beneath the waves, thus becoming the island Ortygia 'the quail' island; but according to other sources it was Delos, 'visible', as by rising from the depths it became visible (Apollodorus 1.4). Thetis, the Nereid mother of Achilles, was courted by Zeus and Poseidon together, but because they were told she would have a son more powerful than his father, they gave her up and made her marry the mortal Peleus. Not agreeing with this arrangement, Thetis put up a transformations flight in order to avoid the marriage; she took various shapes, as fire and water, lion, serpent, until she was finally caught by Peleus as a cuttlefish (Apollodorus, *The Library* 3. 168).

In Hindu tradition we encounter a story that may shed additional light on the meaning of these transformations: in the beginnings, the first being, Prajapati, was all alone and in need of a companion; he decided to split his body in two, giving rise to a husband and wife; from their union human beings were born. The wife realized that her husband begat her from his own body thus making their union morally wrong and she decided to hide from him. First she took the shape

15. Graves, 1960.

of a cow, but he turned into a bull and from their union the cattle were born; then she took the form of a mare and he a stallion, she turned into a female donkey, he a male donkey creating the one-hoofed animals; thus it continued with goats, sheep and so on, creating all the female/male pairs in existence (*Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* 1:4:2-6). This myth could indicate the existence of an Indo-European creation myth preserved in more detail in the Indian tradition, from which the European grounds kept only the motif of transformations flight.

The flight of transformations at will in folklore

The mythical motif of shape changing flight between a reluctant heroine and a seducer can be recognized in many European folk songs and stories: in a dialogue with her seducer, the girl says that to avoid him she will run away as a bird, a fish, a flower, or turn into a chapel, and the lad responds that he will catch her as a hunter, a fisherman, a gardener, a monk. These are essentially the most common transformations used in folksongs, leading researchers to consider the roots of Greek myth to be in folktales¹⁶. An excellent example of this kind of magical transformation is found in Francis James Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, # 44, the *Two Magicians*. This poem tells the story of a blacksmith threatening to take a lady who vows to keep herself a maiden, and she states the shape changing she will use to run away: she will run as a hare followed by him as a greyhound, a duck and a water dog or drake. In the end she does not escape his chase. Variations of this ballad are known in Italy, Greece, Poland, and Romania.

The motif of transformations flight is widespread in fairy tales as well: the daughter of a monster, devil, or witch runs away with a lad, and they go through a series of metamorphoses to escape their follower. This type of folktale is well preserved in European and Indian folklore, but judging by the number of versions listed in the Aarne-Thompson catalog, they are predominantly present in the European areas.

A similar set of transformations flights is found in folk stories in which the pursued is a male character, an apprentice or servant, as in the famous *Song of Taliesin*: Gwion, a servant of the Old Witch, is accidentally splashed with a few drops of her boiling potion; consequently, he gains some of her powers, forcing him to run away; at this point the transformations flight begins. First, he runs away as a hare followed by the witch as a greyhound, he turns into an otter, followed by her as a hound, then he is a bird and she is a hawk, then he turns into a grain of wheat in a heap of chaff, and she a hen who swallows him. Inside her womb he begins to dream: after nine months she will give birth to a child, who will be the famous poet Taliesin¹⁷.

16. Forbes Irving, 1990, p. 172.

17. Matthews, 2001.

Male initiation and transformations flight

A more complex set of transformations flights of a male character occurs in the Romanian folk tale entitled *Oh* or *The Boy at the Devil's School* ¹⁸. The story begins with a poor man who decides to take his boy to a school to learn a craft. On their way they stop by a well, where the father groans, 'Oh', which brings out from the well a little red bearded man, whose name is *Oh* or the Devil. He offers to take the child into his school for a year or two to teach him his craft. During the training period, the Devil teaches the boy to change his shape into various animals. At the end of the schooling period, the father comes to get back his son, the wizard objects to this and forces the father to recognize his son from a group of seven or twelve children absolutely identical to his own. To overcome this obstacle the boy reveals to his father a secret gesture by which he can be identified. The father complies and they go home. Once home, the boy teaches his father to sell him as a bull for a good price, after which he will come back home as himself. When the money is spent, the boy tells his father to again sell him at the market, this time as a horse. However, the father must not give away the horse reined so that he could come back home, and most importantly, the father must not sell the boy-horse to the wizard. But the wizard offers the father a large amount of money and he forgets his son's warnings, selling the horse reined. At this point, the transformations flight begins: when the boy/horse crosses a bridge or the bridle is released to let the animal drink from a river, he turns into a fish and gets away; the wizard follows him as a bigger fish; the boy turns into a dove and flies away; the wizard follows him as a hawk; the boy drops as a ring into a princess's lap, the wizard goes to the king and claims the ring. Following the boy's instructions, the princess refuses to give away the ring and throws it to the floor; the ring turns into wheat, the wizard turns into a rooster and starts eating the wheat, but one seed hidden under the leg of the princess's chair turns into a fox and eats the rooster/wizard. Then the fox turns into the young man again and marries the princess.

The antiquity of the motif of the father selling his child in various animal forms, as found in the Romanian version, is confirmed by the story of Erysichthon (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VIII, 738-878) who sells his daughter in many shapes, as a mare, bird, cow, and deer.

The specific sequence of the shape changings in the Romanian story, mirroring the metamorphoses in myth, points to a metaphysical journey through the entire spectrum of life embodied by animals living on the earth, in the water and the sky. Various explanations have been offered for the heroes' and heroines' transformations from the result of pure imagination to a manner by which to

18. Bârlea, 1966, p. 493.

avoid death¹⁹. Yet the most articulated explanation may be given by Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, XV:

“...All things are always changing,
But nothing dies. The spirit comes and goes,
Is housed wherever it wills, shifts residence
From beast to men, from men to beasts, but always
It keeps on living...”

This paragraph suggests that embedded within the cultural heritage since pre-historic times lies a way of understanding the existence of humans, animals and harvests intertwined in a sacred net. As part of this conceptual milieu, embodiment in various surrounding entities by symbolic metamorphoses plays an important role in rituals of initiation, particularly if associated with myths of gods and goddesses creating all beings on earth. Transformations of heroes and heroines onto beings from land, water and air — thus the entire spectrum of life — are common to many myths and fairytales, describing a journey through nature.

The Romanian story discussed above presents an interesting sequence of events: the hero first goes underground where he acquires “the animal powers,” then he is confronted by an opposing force from the otherworld, the wizard, who threatens to keep him in an animal shape and whom he has to overwhelm so he can enter a normal course of life; he must go through the entire set of transformations — earth, water, air, earth — again, a journey of initiation that ends in marriage as the creation myth of gods and goddesses suggest. In most of the folk stories the transformations flight brings the best result for the young people in their new role, be that as a wife/queen or a husband/king.

Could this mythical motif and the specific sequence of transformations reflect a symbolic reenactment of some pre-marital ceremonies? There may be an answer in the Hindu myth discussed earlier and the copulation between divinities in animal shape, resulting in the creation of all beings. In addition to myth evidence stands the well-documented archaic rites involving symbolic copulation between gods in the shape of animals and/or humans. For example, the Indian Aśvamedha rite during which a white stallion was sacrificed, and the queen symbolically lay down under covers with the animal while people chanted and bantered²⁰. Likewise, there was the ceremony performed in Athens during the Choes early spring festival in which the king's wife underwent a ritual marriage to a representation of Dionysos, the god of growth and fertility. The success of the rite depended on the queen's mating with either the king taking the god's place or, in a symbolic scenario, a statue, an animal, a goat or a bull, representing the god²¹.

19. Forbes Irving, 1990.

20. Puhvel, 1987, p. 271.

21. West, 2007, p. 417.

Such rites, involving the queen-goddess's copulation with a divinity in the shape of an animal resulting in a king instatement and his capacity to bring growth and fertility to the community, validate the story described above in which the metamorphoses of the characters bring a change in the heroes' situation.

Bridegroom animal transformation as punishment: female initiation and/or marriage ritual?

The second type of shape change, as a result of punishment by a divine or magic character, is quite common, as in some of the most famous Greek tales: Artemis turning Actaeon into a stag, or Callisto into a bear, and let us not forget the metamorphosis of Odysseus' sailors into pigs on Circe's island. On the folk level, the shape changing as the result of punishment is most commonly found in the folktale the *Monster (Animal) as a Bridegroom*, or *Beauty and the Beast*, the story of the marriage of a prince in the shape of an animal to a beautiful girl.

In the Romanian folklore, this story is known as *The Enchanted Pig*²²: the princess marries an enchanted pig, in actuality a prince under a witch's spell, who turns into a man at night. This folktale offers similarities with the Greek or the Indian fertility ritual discussed above: like the queen from the ancient ritual, the princess must lie in bed under covers with the animal.

If we regard this story as describing a fertility ritual of initiation of a young woman, the 'beauty and the beast' type of folktale becomes significantly clearer. To corroborate this assessment are the details specific to the Romanian story that have embedded in it elements of ritual: one night after marrying the enchanted pig, the young woman oversteps her husband's interdiction and throws the pig skin onto a fire just a few days before the spell would have ended, triggering the beginning of her journey of initiation. Her action of burning the pig skin should be linked to the sacred functions of fire as a symbol of renewal from many rituals. A classic example is that of Demeter who holds the child Demophon in fire to make him immortal. There may be a possible relationship between the prince in pig-shape and Demeter's sacrificial animal — the pig — from the Eleusinian ceremonies, during which young piglets or a pregnant swine were cast into pits. When Hades seized Persephone while she was picking up flowers in the meadow, one of the witnesses to her kidnapping was Eubuleus, a swineherd (after some, another name for Hades), whose pigs were swallowed up by the earth along with Persephone. A three day harvest festival, Thesmophoria, held only by women, was dedicated to Demeter during which little pigs and phallic symbols were cast into a hole in the ground²³. A possible relationship between a ritual of fertility and the young man in a pig's skin from the Romanian story could be explored, given that Persephone is a fertility goddess.

22. Ispirescu, 1969, p. 46.

23. Frazer, 1971, p. 410.

The famous animal-groom folk tale motif may actually be recording a double initiation ritual, that of a husband and his wife, a marriage ritual. Although the core of the story is the wife's journey, it is clear that her husband's initiation had already begun as he is in a pig shape, and his initiation cannot be fulfilled without hers, since she burns the animal skin. Their ritual actions are entwined and interdependent on one another: she must burn his animal skin in order to start her journey as a pregnant woman, and he goes into isolation to the other world, similar to a seed, in accordance with the youth initiation rite. Akin to the Demeter/Persephone myth, when the young woman burns her husband's animal skin she performs an act of purification, ending a stage of his life. She begins her ritual journey by looking for him, a journey through her pregnancy. As the great goddess Demeter, she represents fertility, she treats her husband as harvested grain, and death by fire is the fate of grain in order to become baked bread, as in the Eleusinian initiatory ceremonies when people were reminded of the mystery of the immortal grain and of fire as the divine gift.

We should note that while the young man's initiation involves 'ingurgitation' or taking the shape of an animal, the girl's initiation and function is to take him out of that condition, burning the skin, helping him to become a husband. The heroine's journey following the departure of her husband has its mythical correspondences in *Cupid and Psyche* and the Egyptian story of Isis and Osiris. In the Romanian story we find more of the folktale pattern: after she spends some time as a maid, she begins her journey to the magic world, reaching the Moon, the Sun and the Wind's houses, and wasting three pairs of iron shoes, until she reaches her husband's house. It is a house without a door or windows, suggesting that it may be a tomb-womb. As Eliade explained, the male archaic initiation image was that of isolation in a womb, an introduction to the invisible world from which they would emerge anew, whereas female initiation entailed revelations of the secret meaning of natural phenomena, the visible²⁴ represented in our story by the houses of the Sun, the Moon, and the Wind. In front of his womb-tomb, the girl realizes that the only way to enter it is from on top, using a ladder made of chicken bones received from the miraculous helpers, the three cosmic houses. Like a goddess, she is the one taking him out of the womb, bringing him to life, reborn into his new role of a husband and a father, thus marking the end of their initiation journey. As mentioned before, in their initiation rites the Greek girls always sacrificed to a goddess, indicating that they were in the goddess's service, or even impersonating the goddess herself, whereas the boys sacrificed to past heroes, role models for future destiny.

Many other folk stories could offer similar examples, too many to be included in a short paper. In trying to decipher ritual elements hidden in the folk data the flight of transformations motif from these examples seems to be a possible path to

24. Eliade, 2005, p. 47-55.

understanding the intrinsic mechanism of an initiation rite: the metamorphoses into the respective animals of nature from land, water, and air, conveys the sacra of life to the adolescent consciousness, preparing him/her to occupy a new position in the community, whether that of a man among the men's group, a shaman, a warrior, a groom or that of a wife.

The challenge to connect these myths to ritual elements such as Zeus and Nemesis, or the Indian Prajapati myth, or Cupid and Psyche, could unveil the fragmented structure of their discourse and, as Kirk suggested, it may be difficult to draw certain conclusions if they do not concur with elements from folk data. The attempt made above may blur the line between myth and folk story to a certain extent. Is myth a reliable source of information in understanding archaic social and religious practices? Are the folk tales better depositories of old practices of initiations and marriage rites? Comparing and analyzing mythical motifs and folk data could generate a pool of information that can reveal the complexities of rite-myth relations and help clarify the old dilemma.

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