

THE *TALE OF GOD* AS A PRAYER, A CHARM, A FAIRYTALE. CONSIDERATIONS ON A MULTIPLE GENERIC APPURTENANCE.

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Abstract: The goal of this article is to epistemologically discuss the couple “folk prayer” and “charm” in the specific case of the narrative incantations whose main protagonist is a holy figure. In this regard, I have chosen a certain structure known among Romanians as “The Tale of God”, “The Mother of God prayer” or “The Mother of God charm”, which agglutinates episodes from Virgin Mary cycle of apocrypha legends together with images that depict scenes of divination and bibliomancy performed in a consecrated but uncommon space (e.g., a church with nine altars). The text also presents structural and functional similarities with the “Dream of the Mother of God”, especially as respects the Passions disclosure and the formalized ending demands for ritual delivering the ‘story’ under certain conditions of time, space and performance.

In the beginning, the analysis focuses on those aspects that predispose this prayer to embed references to charming incantations and practices, as well. Then, based on ethnographic references, the discussion goes towards the process of putting the ‘prayer’ in practice within a story telling event which, at its turn, is assigned with devotional purposes and magic finalities.

In the end, emic terms of ‘faith’ and ‘emotion’ are taken into consideration as pertinent parameters to (self)evaluating of faith, sacred communication and expectations that go beyond both theological and ethnological etic distinctions.

Keywords: folk prayer, narrative charm, fairytale, storytelling, Mother of God, Romanian folklore

The Holy Mary's presence in Christian incantations is not uncommon: either her name occurs in the final wording formula (*The charm is from me, the cure / remedy is from Mother of God*¹), or she appears as a character directly involved in the very curative performance (she teaches the charmer – sometime even indicating her/his concrete name in the *real* life; she performs by herself the action of washing/purifying the victim of the pathogen agents), the entire charming act is placed by the very people who use it and trust in its efficiency under Mother of God protection and benefic power. In the meantime, her strong worship and presence in prayers contaminates these charms with religious meanings.

Among the Romanian corpus of narrative charms especially performed for curative and for beauty purposes, a well-represented category consists in structures that analogically describe a victim as walking on a path, then being attacked by evil agents who disturb his/her state of healthy or of beauty, then crying and lamenting, then being heard by the Mother of God who descend from the heaven and restores the situation and the human being equilibrium. But in this article, I have chosen to explore a contrasting image, that depicts Mother of God herself as a walking figure who, at her turn, deeply laments on her path, where she encounters different characters that, depending on how they behave, benefit from her blessing and protection, or, on the contrary, become victims of her vindictive authority. The scenery is specific to a narrative structure known among Romanians as “The Tale of God/Christ” (*Povestea lui Dumnezeu*), “The Tale of the Mother of God”, “The prayer of the Mother of God” (*Rugăciunea Maicii Domnului*) or “The incantation of the Mother of God” (*Descântecul Maicii Domnului*). The narrative, whose major event is represented by Jesus's Passions, iterates the almost universal theme of the mother in search of her lost child.

My analysis is based on a corpus of 48 Romanian oral variants recorded all over the country dominantly from rural milieu. Their majority comes from the period between the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, whereas a few of them have been recorded at the beginning of the 21st century, when its circulation already decreased (I myself recorded a fragment in 2016 from a village woman, 67 years old, Orthodox Christian confession²). Having a strong religious subject, it was difficult to be recorded during the atheistic communist regime, so the poor presence of *Tale of God* in anthologies and folk archives during the second half of the 20th century is not representative for its circulation in genuine contexts. Thirty-three of the variants are long versified texts (around 400 lines), while those in prose still contain

versified fragments. Stylistic and lexical elements of its first part (the text's composition will be detailed below) suggest clerical and scholarly influences.



Unlike the canonical Gospels, among which John explicitly suggests Mary's presence at the feet of the Calvary cross – “Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son!” (John, 19:25–26) –, the text I deal with here actuates an apocryphal tradition according to which she wasn't there and that she only *post factum* learned about the Passions from the witnesses she met on her wandering journey or from those who, at their turn, heard what happened.

Within these frames, the *Tale of God* agglutinates and recontextualized medieval hagiographies and folk legends of Virgin Mary: during her journey, she blessed the blacksmith because the nails he made for Jesus crucifixion were light and thin³; she cursed the carpenter because the cross made by him was heavy; she encountered and blessed the frog who wasn't aware about the Passion event, but, once learning about it from Mother of God, solaced her and made her laugh; some variants narrates her encounter with the male lark, the single bird who can tell about her son; she blessed the willow (because the willow felt compassion for Mary's sorrow) and cursed the walnut, or other trees; her tears turned to basil or to holy myrrh or to golden apple or to bees, the field turned green while she stepped. Her journey is marked by grief and Mother of God is hypostatized as a mourner, “crying and sobbing, / Scratching her white face, / Unbraiding her blonde hair” (Marian 2003: 123). Some variants recount that, full of despair, she intended to commit suicide, but the entire nature opposed to this attempt (she climbed a peak in order to pierce her heart, but the mountain melted to wax and then harden to gold/stone; she wanted to drown herself into de sea, but the water split). At the end of the journey, she reaches Pilate's court – some variants speak about Jerusalem or Jordan River –, where she “kicked the gate with her left foot / and the gate turned close / She kicked the gate with her right foot / and the gate opened”. Here she found Jesus on the cross, and they have a dialogue which presents stylistic and lexical similarities with the dialogue embedded by another apocrypha

whose written and oral circulation was (and still is) vivid, namely the Dream of Mother of God: Mary asks why He agreed to be crucified and Christ confessed His sacrifice was on behalf of the humankind. Eight variants contain the peculiar detail that when seeing Holy Mary, Jesus laughed and divulged that they are in the heaven: in other words, not only spiritually, but also corporeally she entered God's kingdom, an idea in concordance with the "centuries-old belief that Mary is in heaven, which is why people can pray to her. She is the intercessor, who prays for people and mediates for them to God" (Vuola 2019: 28).

By and large, variants of this legend are known among South-East Christian people. The vitality of the Tale of the Mother of God in searching her son among Romanians until the first part of the 20th century was remarkable.

For a better introduction in the issues the article will debate, allow me to reproduce one variant in the left colon of the table below, and also to point to other versions – transcribed with italics in the middle and on the right colons –, so as to catch more details provided by the integral corpus of texts.

There was a big man	There went Holy Great Mary
And he took a big axe	
And went to the big forest/And cut a big wood	
And made a big monastery.	With nine doors/With nine altars.
In the smallest altar/There is sitting the Holy Small Mary,	
In the biggest altar/There is sitting the Holy Big Mary.	
And she reads/And continuously reads,	
And she can read and see all the sons in the world	
Except her son/The God's son,	
She can't read/And see.	
Realizing that she cannot read him	

And that she cannot see him	<p>But she couldn't see her son/And God's./ She couldn't see/The Lord of the sky/ And of the earth,/But she saw John/ Saint John,/The God's godfather/And asked him: – John/Saint John!/Haven't you see, Haven't you heard/About your godson, About my son,/And God's,/ The lord of the heaven/And of the hearth?/ Because as much I was looking for him/I didn't see him anywhere. – To see, I didn't see him/to hear,/I heard that/The Jews,/The pagans/Caught him/ And tortured him/And then crucified him/ At Pilate's gate/On a big fir cross. When Mother of God heard this (...)/She turned deeply grieved/And went away crying/Lamenting,/Wringing her hands, Scratching her white face/With flowing tears from black eyes/Sighing heartily, Walking on the path,/Looking for our Lord Christ (Marian 2003: 207)</p>
She went/On a high and sharp mountain	
As sharp as the blade of a knife/All crying and lamenting,	
With tears flowing from black eyes/ Scratching her white face,	
Unbraiding yellow hair,/Looking for her son.	<p>While she went on the field/With a walk- ing stick in her hand,/The meadows turned green,/The birds started sing- ing,/Her tears/were gushing out on the ground/And turned to golden apples (Marian 2003: 157).</p>
And she walked/Until the sun went down.	<p>And she reached the Final Stone,/To end her life,/To no live any longer./But as the Stone realized what she wanted/It suddenly melted like the wax/And then hardened like the ice (the gold)/And she couldn't kill herself.</p>
And while she was walking/She met a famous carpenter	

[Here are the three encounters with the carpenter, the ironsmith and the frog. The Calvary is described through their dialogue.]	
And she kept walking	
Until she reached the Jordan's gate	The Pilate's gate (Marian 2003: 153) The city of Jerusalem (Marian 2003: 186)
And she kicked the gate with her left foot/and the gate didn't open.	
She kicked the gate with her right foot/and the gate opened.	
And as she entered/She saw her son	[As she entered] The holy Lord won/And resurrected. And he laughed: –Neither fairy bird/Or earthly human's soul/Entered here,/But you, my beloved Mother,/I see you came by yourself,/With your soul,/With your body (Marian 2003:192).
Tormented and crucified.	
And she asked:	
– Oh, my son,/My beloved son!/Why did you let yourself be caught	
By the pagans	
Who tortured you/And crucified you?	
– Oh, my mother,/My beloved!	
I did let myself be tortured	Since they tortured me/And crucified me,/The springs spring up/The meadows grass,/The mothers take care of their children,/The cows take care of the calves,/The sheep take care of the lambs (Marian 2003:153).
Neither for me,/Or for you	
But I did let myself be tortured	
For the entire world (...). (Marian 2003:138) ⁴	

The text is composed by two parts: the above quoted narrative is joined by a final formula: "And the one who listened / And learned / These words / And will say them / In the evening at the bedtime / And in the morning at the weak-up time, / Each week, / Each month, / Each half a year / And each year, / I will take that one / By the right hand / And will lead him(her) / On the right path / To bright houses, / To settled tables / To lit torches / To full glasses / Where the right ones rest.

But the one who know them / And won't say them / In the evening at the bedtime / And in the morning at the weak-up time, / washing his(her) face / Each week, / Each month, / Each half a year / And each year, / I will take that one / By the left hand / And will take him(her) / On the crooked path / To unlit houses / To cleared tables / And to extinguished torches, / To empty glasses / To the hell of cold / Where the worm never sleep. / There will he(he) live / There will he(he) live forever." (Marian 2003: 120)⁵

The story may be contextualized in lineages with the Byzantine medieval Virgin Mary's Weeping Songs, "a lengthy non-ecclesiastical medieval rhymed poem possible of scholarly origin" (Karpodini-Dimitriadi 1977), and with the medieval group of Passions Plays, at their turn related to the Greek *Gesta Pilati B*, composed "not later than the 5th century. Here, already, are many of the principal features of the latter lamentations: John announces to Mary the seizure of Christ; they sat out with the other Marys to go to him; Mary laments and calls upon the people to join on her grief; she sees Christ on the cross and begs to be allowed to die with him; she addresses the cross, entreating it to bow down so that she can embrace Christ; Jews drive the mourners away; Mary laments that she cannot see Christ's face again, and asks women to weep with her" (Brooks 1901: 415). Except John announcing Virgin Mary about Christ's seizure, other episodes are not included into the Romanian variants of the story, which depict Mary as walking alone. Secondly, *The Tale of God* doesn't contain any lament, but depicts Mother of God in the stereotyped posture of the women when they ritually lament in real funeral contexts: she is "howling in pain / crying and roaring / tearing yellow hair / with the tears down to the ground / with the voice up to the sky."

At the epic level, similarities between the Romanian *Tale of God* and the ancient myth of Demeter and Persephone, as narrated within the Homeric hymns, probably delivered among Romanian and Balkans

areas through Byzantine channels, have been underlined by Andrei Timotin, who also suggests they interfered with local oral traditions (Timotin 1999: 91–92): Kora's abduction in the inferno vs. Jesus's crucifixion and descent to the hell; Demeter's despair and her wondering searching vs. Mary's despair and wondering searching; the encounter with a hilarious character, who makes both mothers to laugh; the two mothers found their child. To the already identified narrative similarities, there can be added the image of the turning green meadow as Mother of God is walking on it and contaminates it with her numinous power.

Even if of interests, the filiations of the Romanian narrative about Mother of God (or a *mother*) searching her lost son within the European and larger Christian tradition exceeds the topic of the present article, whose interest goes to another issue, namely the multiple generic appurtenance of the *Tale of God*, whose composition, images, formulas, and ritualized performances endowed it with incantation features that points both to folk prayer's and to charm's markers. The first goal is to underline them, one by one.

TEXTUAL OCCURENCES

First of all, there can be identified small verbal images and formulas shared by distinct genres, so that the occurrence of such structure in a text that dominantly belongs to a certain genre induces to the respective text, at least evocatively, features and functions conventionally assigned to the other genres in which that verbal structure can be contextualized. In this regard, we may speak about inter-generic intertextuality that affects the *Tale of God* meanings. Here are two examples:

1) *There was a big man / With a big axe / Who entered the big forest / And cut a big wood.* The same incipit, whose presence is almost general for the versified version of the *Tale of God*, is common to some therapeutic (e. g. for erysipelas, epilepsy) and protective incantations, such this one recorded in Moldavia (a region where *Mother of God in searching her son* was well attested): "There went a big man / To the big forest / With a big axe / To cut a big wood / To make a big plow"⁶ (Gorovei 1990: 257). The charm continues with a different narrative scenario, but the shared opening words induces mutual interferences concerning the generic appurtenance of the two texts: the very charm is enhanced by those who say and by those who listen to it with the numinous power of *Tale of God* and the authority of its characters, on

the one hand, and the *Tale of God* is drawn in the charming category performed for therapeutic reasons.

2) *And he made a big church / With nine doors, / With nine altars.* Similar shrine is described by Romanian Christmas ritual songs (Ro. *colinde*) as the sacred space for foundation the Christian age marked by the very presence of the Mother of God. “A monastery with nine altars / With the doors facing the sea [...] / Who sings the holy mass / In the biggest altar? / There sings a God and a Lord. / But who listens to? / There is the Holy Mother / With an infant son in her arms”⁷ (Viciu 1913: 54). There is to add that, indeed, short versions of the *Tale of God* were sung on Christmas Eve.

RITUAL SIMILARITIES: DIVINATION READING

Secondly, the *Tale of God* contains sequences that allude to extra-textual rituals which, considering their effectiveness, resonate with the magic sphere, but that are part of the vernacular corpus of religious practices, as well.

The oldest representation of Virgin Mary spinning in the Temple when Angel came to announce her that she was chosen to become Christ’s mother (5th century) was gradually replace, starting with the 13th century, in Western Europe with that of reading Mary, while the Easter Christianity preserved and used both models⁸.

As a high priestess and as the “mother of the Christian church, a familiar idea within the orthodox Christianity” (Ispas 1998: 117) who officiates a religious service inside the consecrated space of an unusual church with nine doors and nine altars (probable rooted in the figurative image of the Holy of the Holiest Temple; see Kateusz 2020: 24). Virgin Mary is depicted in Romanian Christmas ritual songs: “There is a white monastery / With nine altars. / Who sings the holy mass? / There is the holy Mother the one who sings it”⁹ (Viciu 1913: 39). We can suppose that here she is singing by the Gospel book. Yet, the reading event, as it is presented in the *Tale of God*, is not a liturgical mass but a divination one:

*And she reads / She continuously reads / And she can read and
see all the sons in the world, / Only one of them, / Only her son
/ And God’s / She can’t read / And see.*

According to another variant in which the ritual preparations are more obvious,

Holy Immaculate Mother / Woke up in the morning, / Washed her white face / Combed her yellow hair, / Worshiped God, / Entered the monastery / Took the book in her hands / And searched in the book / Searched around, / To see her son / And God's. / And she saw all the bugs / And all the insects, / But she didn't see anyone from the humankind, / Except John, / Saint John, / God's godfather. / And when she saw him, / She recognized him. (Marian 2003: 121)

Through ritual preparations and ceaseless ("She read/and keeps reading"¹⁰), almost ecstatic reading, Mary aims to access other spaces and times than the ones where the concrete reading process takes place. In some variants she manages to see St. John, as the agent who makes her aware about the event the son she was looking for already went through, while in other variants she fails in seeing either John or Jesus, so she has to undertake her concrete journey.

Still, Mother of God owns clairvoyant abilities mediated by ritual reading, as she is described in a group of charms, where her vigilance goes towards the evil spirits:

„Against all diseases

Big Ustur¹¹ and Immaculate Mother / On a high mountain. / She seeks in the book, / She seeks around / She seeks all around, / For where should see / Nine evil spirits, / With nine little bad dogs, / Nine she-wolves / With nine bad wolves. / Mother of God shouted / Loudly: / You, don't spoil him, / Don't sting him, / Don't stab him, / But take all the twinges, / All the stabs / And take them away / To the Galar hill [...]"¹² (Recorded in North Moldavia, Romania; Gorovei 1990: 250).

Combined effects of intertextuality and ritual similarity between the *Tale*... and those performed in extra-textual contexts reinforce inter-genres fluidity. For example, a therapeutic incantation whose incipit mentions the famous *anargyroi* physicians Cosmas and Damian, consists in a reiteration of the *Tale of God* opening formula – here explicitly designated as a charm – and of its divination fragment:

The big counting:

Amen, Amen, / Cosmas of amen¹³. / The healers of God. / The Holy Mother's charm [...]

There went a big man, / With a big axe, / In a big forest, / With nine windows [sic!] / With nine little windows, / With nine gratings, / With nine little gratings, / With nine doors, / With nine altars, / With nine little altars.

Holy Mary / The mother of God came / And entered the church, / Set on a golden chair, / Set at a golden table, / Found a big golden book, / Found a middle golden book, / Found a small golden book. / Mother of God sought in the golden books, / And found all the saints, / In which part of the world they were. / She only didn't find / Her and our son.

And she went away, / Crying and sighing / As the water sources cry. / She went on the way, / and where she stepped / The field turned green.¹⁴ (Gorovei 1990: 286–287)

The episode of Passions is missing from this charm, while the emphasis is on the curative water directly related with the Mother of God power to purify and to fertilize the earth, an image that through analogy aims to restore the healthy state and the patient's vitality.

The textual topos of divination is articulated with the very divination function assigned to the text's wording, which may be defined as a *performancy* event (Jiga Iliescu 2022: 153): "The words of this variant [recorded in the Western Romania, LJ. I.] are recited at the bed of a moribund by someone who knows them by heart. If the reciter stumbles or mistakes, then it is believed that the patient will die; but if he/she recites fluently, then it is believed that the patient will recover" (Marian 2003: 259).

CLOSING FORMULA, PERFORMANCE AND MORE GENERIC CONVERGENCES

The presence of the closing formula brings the *Tale of God* closer to the category named by Zsuzsanna Erdélyi "archaic prayers" (apud Kapalo 2011: 85–86), where the term "archaic" is justified by their origin in the apocryphal religious literature of medieval Europe. Disclaimed by official hierarchy of the Church (because of their apocryphal origin and also because of their magic, mechanistic manipulation potential expresses by the benefits to be gained by the simple reciting/copying the story), yet more or less avowed by local priests until modern times, they were involved in devotional practices as part of vernacular religiosity. Mostly autonomous units deeply involved in creating what Haralam-

pos Passalis identified as the fluid space between the narrative and the performative context (Passalis 2011: 49), the “junctional passage connecting the text with the processes of its reiterations and actuation (Jiga Iliescu 2020: 145), closing formulas demand for the text’s performance (Jiga Iliescu 2020).

At the rhetorical level, neither the narrative part of the texts or the formulas contain verbal structures that express „pleading, begging or requesting” (Kapalo 2011:91) directly addressed to a divine authority, as it happen in consecrated prayer. Consequently, none personal request is explicitly made. Instead, closing formulas assert good or negative consequences conditioned by the compliance or, on the contrary, the non-compliance with the demand to perform the text.

In comparison with other texts in this category – among Romanian *The Legend of the Sunday*, *The Dream of the Mother of God* are the most known –, whose closing formulas are cumulative and open, and can migrate from a text to another especially because the benefits are almost the same (remission of sins, protection against enemies, diseases and calamities, the alleviation of suffering or final salvation, etc.), irrespective of the content of the very text they are attached to, in the case of *The Tale of God* the closing formula is unique and it strictly refers to the psychopomp role assigned to Mother of God/of Jesus, a role which is mediated – and conditioned – by the ritual performance of telling the story under given circumstances of purity and of time.

The next step of my investigation aims to get a closer understanding of a possible intrinsic connection between the two parts of the Mother of God’s prayer/incantation. We remember that

[T]he one who says the story / will be taken by the Mother of God
/ On the right path / To the laid tables / with lighting candles,
/ with filled glasses, etc.

On the contrary, [T]he one who won’t say the story / I [Mother
of God or Christ] will take her [or him] / By the left hand / And
will lead him [or her] / On the crooked path / To unlit houses
/ To cleared tables / And to extinguished torches, / To empty
glasses, etc.

Within the Romanian corpus of funerary ritual songs (all performed by women) the one entitled *Of the Journey*¹⁵ guides the individual traveller soul to the *good* realm, which is described through similar formalized verbal images – “laid tables, / lighting candles, / filled glasses” – as a space of light and communication through commensality. This coinci-

dence contaminates the very *Tale of God* with funerary meanings and restates the psychopomp role assigned to Mother of God. In this regard it is relevant to underline the interesting correspondence between the women who sing and lament within the frames of the burial ritual, the same women who word or maybe sing the *Tale of Mother of God*, and the mourning posture of Mother of God herself, at her turn a traveler from mundane to numinous, mythic register of the world, like the soul of the deceased is. We remember those variants in which she is depicted in the heaven together with his found Son. Hence, being able to move between worlds, the psychopomp role of Mother of God – who paradigmatically embody all lamenter women – is justified and, not the least, the connection between the narrative part and the closing formula of the *Tale*... is made. Speaking about Orthodox Karelian tradition of Mother of God's peregrination to find Christ, Lotte Tarkka mentioned a similar situation: "The search by the Virgin for her child is the only example in the epic tradition of an active journey by a woman to the otherworld" (Tarkka 1994: 279, apud Vuola 2019: 149).

SAYING THE TALE OF GOD

Among Romanians, the *Tale of God* did not circulate in written form, either as medieval manuscripts or as later printed editions (at least according to my knowledge), as happened with the *Legend of the Sunday* (first attestation in the 16th century) and the *Dream of the Mother of God* (attested in the 18th century)¹⁶. Neither the demands for copying the text as a guarantee for its promises, or for keeping the written artifact as an amulet is included in its final part. The request is to *say* the story, either in solitude or for an audience. And to *say* the *Tale of God* supposes to word its final formula, as well hence to reinforce its efficiency. However, not all the reasons for ritually telling the story are expressed by the closing part, but there have been recorded local developments that, indirectly, enrich the meanings of the very story. For example, "people from Maramureş believe that the shepherd who will say this tale each evening and each morning, since the sheep mate until they deliver, among his lambs there will be a fairy one, who will step all the time in front of the sheep. It is to be underlined that the fairy lamb will be known only by the shepherd who said *the prayer* (sic!), namely The Tale of the Immaculate Mother. That lamb will reveal to the shepherd all dangers the sheep will be exposed to during that year and many other important things it will reveal to him, but only at

the crowing time of the Christmas and Easter nights, when the sky is open”¹⁷ (Marian 2003: 267). A similar tradition was recorded in South East Romania, Brăila region: “if someone continuously says the Tale of God for 40 days, each evening, one of his sheep will deliver two golden lambs” (Bîrlea, 1981: 140).

Some variants of the *Tale of God* explicitly express the preponderance (but not the exclusiveness) of women as story tellers:

“Holy Mother (...) gave them an advice, / That anyone who will tell her story, / Especially the women, / Will be well rewarded, / Will be saved from many evil, / And their children will be lucky / If they will mention the Holy Mother / Each evening at the sleep / Each morning at the waking up / She will take their right hand / Concerning the maternity status shared by Mother of God and a woman who tells the story” etc. (Marian 2003: 267). In the same respect of maternity shared with Mother of God, telling the *Tale*... creates the premises of a miraculous birth: “The woman who will say this tale with all her heart, so that it will be accepted, will have a fairy child.” (Marian 2003: 267)

Coming back to the demand of *saying* the *Tale of God*, the generic continuity between prayer (which is not addressed to Mother of God) and charm, the text as such claims to introduce into discussion a third genre of folk narratives, namely the fairytale, whose performance is (more precisely it *was*) charged, at its turn, with numinous power and ritual efficiency. In concordance with the method used hitherto, which interweaves verbal and functional levels, I will explore the formulaic components of the *Tale*... that point to its performance conventions and functions.

For example, a variant recorded in East Romania, Moldavia region, begins with an invocation that placed the entire performance of the *Tale*... under same benefic power of the spoken fairytale: “Story, story / Fairytale in the heaven, / Fairytale on the earth / Gold and pearl are flowing. / There was a big man / with a big axe, etc.” (Marian 2003: 206). Furthermore, this incipit plays similar function with the opening formulas of the fairytales, namely to make the listeners aware they will enter within special coordinates of time and space actuated by the story telling event.

In some variants of the *Tale of God* there are inserted similar median formulas with those used during the oral performance of fairytales: “The story has much more words ahead / as it is wonderfully recites. /

God comes to us, / sits on the threshold / and listen to it with love”¹⁸ (Marian 2003: 159, 144).

To mention God as one of the listeners, places the entire audience under His authority, and indirectly expresses the devotional component of telling the story, which thus gets a prayer like status. In fact, the above quoted words are consonant with a larger belief according to which “God is present in every house where people recite tales” (Ciubotaru, Ciubotaru 2018: 8). Although it is not precisely clear what kind of “tales” are to be shared, the belief resonates with those relating to fairytales¹⁹ performances. “There was a habit when I was a boy. They said that you have to recite three tales, because they hold their hands and run around the sheepfold you are in, and no evil spirit can enter there, and you can sleep safely. This is what they believed. [...] They say that it is very good to recite long, complete stories in the evening, because it is as if you say a prayer. With that story God surrounds the house three time and no unclean thing can enter” (Bîrlea 1981: 140). The spoken tale gets material corporeality that barrier the space where the story is worded. Similar apotropaic power activated through the performance of the *Tale of God*, is strengthened by the very words with which some of its variants begin: “The story of the stories / Stays against the evil spirits / with iron teeth [...] / There is a house / A beautiful house / But it is not a house, / It is a fort, / [...] / But who is sitting in the fort? / the Holy Mother is sitting / With a white book / In her right hand / etc.”²⁰ (Marian 2003: 195).

In other words, while orally sharing a fairytale works as a devotional and apotropaic act, telling the *Tale of God* works as saying a fairytale.

Telling stories have also been assigned with the role to mediate relations between the world of the living and the world of the dead: “It is the same to pay a sermon at the church in behalf of the dead, or to recite a tale” (Bîrlea 1981: 140). Consequently, the efforts made by the storyteller to recite and to travel for giving tales – “to go to visit people for telling them stories is like offering alms” – is rewarded in terms of salvation: “God forgives the sins of those who tell stories” (Ciubotaru, Ciubotaru 2018: 9). Such beliefs give additional reasons to the closing formula of the *Tale of God* itself: “this story was told by my aunt Marghioala P. Furtună [...] She says it each morning and each evening at the end of her prayers. She also says it to the women²¹ in the village” (Pamfile 1914: 15) with the hope her name will be mentioned in the prayers of those who learned the *Tale...* from her. The psychopomp role assigned to Mother of God through the closing formula of the *Tale...* is

in resonance with the meanings of saying it as alms. Therefore, no matter how it is entitled, the *Tale of God*, the *Prayer of the Mother of God* or the *Incantation of the Mother of God*, this text entered the praying context of vernacular religion practices.



For a deeper understanding the role and the impact the *Tale of God* might has had over those who said it and who listened to it, the lived experience incorporated by the performance event might of importance. To tell and to listen to *this* story firstly means to feel sorrow on Christ's torments and to suffer together with Mother of God, as a proof of personal faith and, when women are the actants, as a manifestation of maternal love. It also means to reiterate and to testify the own belief in the truth delivered by the mythic story of Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection, being it delivered by canonical or non-canonical sources. Not least, it might incorporate the unworded hope to enter the realm of light and to be blessed by Mother of God as the willow, the carpenter, the frog and all merciful characters of the story have been blessed.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on its textual and functional features, the *Tale of God* is anchored at the confluence of three genres: folk ("archaic") prayers, charming incantations, and (fairy) tales. The shared goal for redemption and the aspiration for final salvation (and for getting an oracular lamb or a miraculous child, as well), together with the central figure of the wanderer Mary, predispose to such junctions, that reveal aspects of a folk Marian theology in which Mother of God, the one who entered the heaven in body and soul, is by herself a figure of liminality.

The analyses undertaken in this article revealed a hybrid, interstitial space filled by verbal structure which, under specific textual and ritual performances and functions, are susceptible to multiple genre appurtenance.

NOTES

¹ Ro. Descântecul de la mine/Leacul de la Maica Domnului.

² Metadata concerning the social provenience, education, age, religious affiliation of the informants are only sporadically mentioned in the 19th century- first years of the 20th century

anthologies I consulted. The gender of the informants can be deduced from the informants' names, and it is dominantly feminine.

³ In the Greek tradition, a similar legend is included in the Lament of Virgin Mary, with the difference that here the blacksmith is cursed because he forged the nails for the Cross (Beaton, 1980, 142).

⁴ Ro.

Era odată un om mare	S-o luat Sântă Măria Mare
Și a luat un topor mare	
Și a mers la pădurea mare/ Și a tăiat un lemn mare	
Și a făcut o mănăstire mare.	
În altarul cel mai mic/ Șade Sfântă Măria Mică,/	
În altarul cel mai mare/ Șade Sântă Măria Mare.	
Și cetește/ Procetește,	
Pe toți fiii adeverește	
Numai pe unul, fiul său,/ Pe fiul lui Dumnezeu,	
Nu-l poate ceti/ Și adeveri.	
Văzând ea că nu-l cetește	
Și că nu-l adeverește	<p>Dar ea pe fiul său/Și al lui Dumnezeu,/Domnul cerului/Și al pământului,/Nu l-o văzut,/Ci o văzut pe Ion/Sânt Ion/Nănașul lui Dumnezeu/Și a fiului său,/ Și l-a întrebat:</p> <p>– Ioane,/Sânt Ioane!/N-ai văzut,/N-ai auzit/De finul tău,/De fiul meu/Și al lui Dumnezeu?/ Domnul cerului/Și al pământului./Că eu oricât l-am cătat,/ Nicăieri nu l-am aflat.</p> <p>– De văzut nu l-am văzut/De auzit/Am auzit/Că jidovii/Păgânii/L-au prins și l-au chinuit/Și apoi l-au răstignit/Lângă poarta lui Pilat/Pe o cruce mare de brad./Maica Domnului (...)/Cum l-o auzit,/Tare s-o scârbit/Și s-o luat/Și-o plecat/Hăulind/Dăulind./ Mânele frângând,/Fața alba zgâriind/Din ochi negri lăcrimând,/De la inimă oftând,/Pe cărare mergând,/ Pe Domnul Christos cătând.</p>
S-a luat și s-a pornit/ Pe un deal mare ascuțit,	
Ca o smice de cuțit,/ Tot plângând și tânguind	
Din ochi negri lăcrimând/ Fața alba zgâriind	
Și păr galben despletind,/ Pe fiul său căutând.	<p>Și pe câmp ea cum mergea,/Toiag în mâni sprijinea/ Fânațele înverzea,/ Păsările glăsuia,/Lacrimile-o năpădea/Șuroiu pe jos curgea,/mere de aur să făcea.</p>

Și s-a dus și s-a tot dus/ Pân ce soarele a apus	Și a ajuns/La Piatra izbăvească,/Viața ca să își sfârșească,/Mai mult să nu mai trăiască./Iară Piatra izbăvească,/Cum a văzut ce voiește/Și de ce se pregătește./Pe loc s-a topit ca ceara/Și mi s-a sleit ca ghiața (aurul),/nu-și putu face seama
Și mergând s-a întâlnit/ Cu un meșter de lemn vestit	
[Urmează cele trei întâlniri, cu meșterul de lemn, cu fierarul și cu broasca]	
Și s-o dus și s-o tot dus	
Până ce la urmă a ajuns/La poarta lui Iordan	Până la Pilat din Pont Din târgul Rusalimului
Și a dat cu piciorul stâng/Și nu i s-o deschis poarta	
Și a dat cu piriocul drept,/Și îndată s-a deschis poarta	
Și ea înuntru cum a intrat,/De fiul său a și dat	[înăuntru cum a intrat] Domnul sfânt a învins/Și înviind a răs:-Pasăre măiastră/Pe aici n-o ajuns,/Nici suflet de om pământean/Aici n-o pătruns,/Dar tu, Maica mea iubită,/Văd că singură ai venit,/Cu sufletul tău./Și cu trupul tău.
Chinuit/Și răstignit.	
Și de dânsul cum a dat,/Deauna a și întrebat:	
- O fiule,/Iubitule!/ Da cum de te-ai dat,/Cum te-ai lăsat	
De te-au prins câinii/Păgânii/ Și te-au chinuit/Și te-au răstignit?	
- O, maica mea,/Iubita mea!/ Eu nu m-am dat,/Nu m-am lăsat	
Nici pentru mine,/Nici pentru tine	Dar de când m-au chinut/Și de când m-au răstignit,/ Izvoarele izvorăsc,/Câmpurile otăvesc,/ (...),/Mamele de prunci grijesc,/Vacile caută de viței/Și oile caută de miei
Ci eu m-am dat/Și m-am lăsat	
Pentru toată lumea (...).	

⁵ Ro. Și cine o stat/De o ascultat/ Și o învățat/Aceste cuvinte/Și le va zice/Sara culcându-se/Dimineața sculându-se/ La săptămână,/La lună/ La jumătate de an/Și la un an/ Pe acela/L-oi lua/De mâna dreaptă/ Și l-oi duce/ Pe cărarea dreaptă/La case/Luminoase/ La mese întinse/ La făclii aprinse/ La pahare pline/ La cuvinte bune/ Unde se odihnesc dreptii./ Dar cine le-a ști/ Și nu le va zice/ Sara culcându-se,/ Dimineața sculându-se/ Și pe obraz spălându-se,/ La săptămână,/La lună/Și la un an/ Pe Acela/L-oi lua/De mâna stângă/ Și l-oi duce/Pe cărarea strâmbă/ La case/Întunecoase,/ La mese neîntinse/ Și la făclii stinse/ La pahare deșerte/La tartar de frig/ Unde viermele nu doarme,/ Acolo în veci să trăiască,/ Acolo să vecuiască.

⁶ Ro. Plecat-a un om mare/La pădurea mare/Cu toporul mare,/Să facă plug mare.

⁷ Ro. Mănăstire cu nouă altare/Cu ușile spre mare/ (...)/La altarul cel mai mare/Slujba sfântă cine-o cântă?/ Cântă-un zău și-un Dumnezeu./Dar de ascultat cine-o ascultă?/Dar ascultă Maica Sfântă/C-un fiuț micuț pe brațe.

⁸ Badalanova Geller 2004: 217.

⁹ Ro. Colo-n șesul cel frumos/Este o dalbă mănăstire/Cu 9 altare/Slujba sfântă cine-o cântă?/Cânt-o, cântă/ Maica sfântă.

¹⁰ Ro. Și citește/Procitește

¹¹ The word *ustur* may come from *usturime*, meaning ‘sting’.

¹² Ro. De toate bolile: Ustur mare și Maica Precista/Pe-un jii de deal,/Cată-n carte,/Cată-n parte/Cată-n toate părțile,/Unde a vedea/Nouă strigoaice/Cu nouă țânci răi (...).

¹³ Here the word *amin* is an alteration of the name *Damian*.

¹⁴ Ro. Amin, amin,/Corma de amin;/Vracii Domnului,/Descântecu Sfintei Mării (...)/

O plecat un om mare,/Cu săcure mare,/Într-o pădure mare,/Cu nouă ferești,/Cu nouă ferestuici,/Cu nouă zăbrele,/Cu nouă zăbreluici,/Cu nouă uși,/Cu nouă ușițe,Cu nouă altare,/Cu nouă altărele;/Sfânta Măria/Maica Domnului sosia,/Și în biserică se băga,/Pe scaun de aur ședea,/La masă de aur se așeza,/Carte mare de aur găsea,/Carte mijlocie de aur găsea,/Carte mică de aur găsea,/Maica Domnului în cărțile de aur căuta,/Și toți sfinții Domnului găsea,/Care în ce parte de pământ era./Numai de drag fiul ei/Și al nostru nu-l găsea,/Și ea pleca,/Plângea/Și suspina/Cum plâng izvoarele de apă;/Pornea,/Unde pășea/Câmpu-nverzea.

¹⁵ Ro. Al Drumului.

¹⁶ This doesn’t mean it was never handwritten, at the minimum for mnemonic purposes (in rural milieu, the domestic practice of writing started only in the second half of the 19th century).

¹⁷ This ritual of the fairy lamb is related with a Christmas song, The old dearest mother and with the ballad The Ewe, well spread among Romanian, which iterate the same theme of an old wondering mother searching for his son: lamenting, she asks all people she encounters about him. In the ballad, a shepherd was previously notified by his oracular ewe that he will be murdered or sacrificed by his comrades; he accepted. The interesting topic of the correlation between these songs and the Tale of Christ deserve an autonomous study.

¹⁸ Ro. Ca cuvântul din poveste, /că înainte mult mai este/și frumos ne povestește,/Dumnezeu la noi sosește/și se pune jos pe prag/și ascultă cu mult drag.

¹⁹ There is to be mentioned that Romanian word for fairy tale is *basma*, from sl. *Basnu* = invention, fabulation. This is the etic term, created and used mostly by folklorists in order to designate narratives coagulated around the convention of fantasy and fantastic. In emic parlance, it is only sporadically used; insider story tellers simply say “story”.

²⁰ Ro. Povestea poveștilor/Șede în calea străgilor/Cu măsele de oțel/Cu dinții de ciușele./Este-o casă/Prea frumoasă/Dară nu-i casă,/Că-i cetate/Cu fereștile ziuat,/Cu ușile ferecate./Da în cetate cine șede?Maica sfântă/Cu carte albă/În mâna dreaptă”.

²¹ It is to be noted, again, the women preponderance as performers of the Tale of God.

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