

# St. Elijah and the Fairies. Understanding a Charm Through Legends<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The images, characters, and events featured in a charm enter into mutual, organic relations with other images, characters, and events that are not explicitly included in the given text but contribute implicitly to the overall significance of the charm. The aim of the current article is to reveal the unspoken components of St. Elijah narrative file embedded in the deep horizon of beliefs and knowledge implied by a given charm. Following the charm step by step, I point out items that imply the unvoiced – but still present – level of images and beliefs taken from the non-charming narrative corpus.

**Keywords:** charms, St. Elijah, folk beliefs, fairies, meteorology, magic therapy, Romanian folklore

As a strong biblical character, St. Elijah (who is present in both the Old and New Testaments and also suggested in the Apocalypse) is the protagonist of a rich canonical and apocryphal legendary corpus developed in Hebrew, Christian, and Muslim traditions through written, oral, and figurative means. At least in the case of Romanian folklore, this corpus is still active. Recently I wrote a typological monograph of St. Elijah’s profile in Romanian folklore, which I hope to be useful for further comparative studies dedicated to this figure with a trans-cultural and trans-religious presence. It is not my intention to further develop the topic here, but a brief description might be useful for a better understanding of the charm my article deals with.

The research will be published as a book (typology, comments, corpus of texts) in early 2020. Here is the typological scheme: I – St. Elijah is a religious vindicator and revenger

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through the mediation of celestial fire.<sup>2</sup> His actions lead to indirect meteorological effects; II – St. Elijah promotes monotheism and baptizes pagan communities; III – St. Elijah, pluvial mediator, stops and brings rain as well; IV – Still alive, St. Elijah is taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire pulled by horses of fire, where he will remain until doomsday; V – St. Elijah supports the pillars of the earth; VI – St. Elijah is an agent of cosmogony; VII – St. Elijah is a divine messenger who reclaims/steals the contract (*zapisul*) between God and Satan / who got the solution for humanity's salvation (from the devil) ("when a maiden gives birth"); VIII – St. Elijah regains the signs of divine authority that had been stolen by Satan from heaven: the sun, the moon, the stars, heaven's keys, the judgment seat; IX – St. Elijah is an apocalyptic warrior who fights against the Antichrist. Elijah's blood will make the earth burn. The igneous nature of St. Elijah;<sup>3</sup> X – St. Elijah has great power and a hot temper that lead to excessive actions, endangering the world's balance. St. Elijah's power is diminished by God, who paralyses his right hand (hence he is left-handed). XI – St. Elijah commits a crime against his parents. His penitence absolves him. He asks God to give him arms (thunder, light) to punish devils; XII – St. Elijah has different roles (wagoner, shepherd, thief, soldier, master of skinners, etc.), all having in common the idea of itinerancy. He travels accross the sky with his carriage, he travels/flies from sky to earth, etc.; XIII – St. Elijah rewards good people. St. Elijah's nature blends human and angelic features and functions, while his actions have meteorological secondary consequences: thunder, lightning. Among Romanians, the belief that St. Elijah fights against earthly water dragons is not very widespread. But he can control the ones in the sky whose nature is a mix of fire and water.

Obviously, Elijah's figure combines biblical episodes (developed or almost totally transformed) with other traditions. Concurrently, St. Elijah is the receiver of collective prayers for rain — raised by the priests in a liturgical context. This represents a ritual reiteration of the Old Testament episode relating to the three-year drought followed by a rain given by God in answer to Elijah's asking.

Looking at the Romanian folklore, within the corpus of 445 variants I worked with, around 91% belong to legend genres, while the other 8% are Christmas ritual songs. More or less unexpectable — since he is mostly active in meteorological or cosmic affairs on the one hand, and receives collective (not individual) prayers on the other hand — I found St. Elijah as a protagonist of four *therapeutic* and *individual* charms (possibly more, but not many). Here is *The one of fairies*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For Romanians, as for other Orthodox and South European Christians, St. Elijah is mostly represented as a warrior against devils — a demonization of the 450 priests of Baal and 400 prophets of the goddess Asherah defeated in the name of the one true God (1 Kings 18:20–40) on Mount Carmel, later massacred by Elijah himself: Elijah chased them through the air or on the sky road, driving a carriage, probably the same in which he has been raptured, and lashed them or stabs them with his arrow. This theme has iconological representation in the Romanian, Eastern Slavic, and Balkan areas.

<sup>3</sup> He is an agent of miraculous water and fire cohabitation (thunder and rain together, burning water, baptizer through water and fire, etc.). According to Menologues, Elijah was fed with fire by angels when he was a baby, hence his blood (water-based) has a celestial igneous nature.

<sup>4</sup> Recorded in Hodac, Mureș County.

“Beyond the sea  
 There were all the saints,  
 There were all the fathers lunching,  
 They were eating  
 Around a beautiful table.  
 Then Ilie, Saint Ilie walked outside.  
 And heard coming from below  
 Nine *strigoi*  
 With nine arrows in their mouths,  
 With nine diseases in their hands.  
 – Where are you going?  
 – We are going to Ion,  
 To drink his blood,  
 To eat his bones and flesh!  
 – You won’t go there,  
 But you will go back.  
 Because if you won’t go back,  
 Then I will curse you  
 With the name of the Father!  
 Ion will remain pure,  
 Luminous  
 As the Mother, who gave him birth,  
 As the Lord, who created him” (MUŞLEA 2004:394).<sup>5</sup>

The images, characters, and events featured in the charm enter into mutual, organic relations with other images, characters, and events that are not explicitly included in the given text but implicitly contribute, as a belief background, to the overall significance of the charm. This article aims to reveal the unspoken components of St. Elijah narrative file, embedded in the deep horizon of beliefs and knowledge implied by this very charm.

Which of his features – as asserted by the hagiographic accounts – are activated by this charm in order to achieve the desired effect? In other words, what recommends St. Elijah as protagonist of this therapeutic charm? The implicit and explicit meanings of the charm are in relation with the other protagonists of the story, namely those against whom St. Elijah acts. In fact, only within this relation can Elijah’s dynamic profile be entirely revealed.

Hereinafter, following the texts of the charms step by step, I will point out some items that imply the unspoken – but still present – level of images and beliefs taken from the non-charming narrative corpus and activated during the performance of “saying” the charm.

<sup>5</sup> Ro. “Hăl din Iele. / Dincolo de mare, prânzea tăţ sfinţi, / Tăt părinţi; / Prânzea şi amni’eze, / Frumoasă masă-ave. / Iesă Ilie Sânt Ilie pân-afară / Aude viind d’in jos / Noo strigoi, / Cu noo săjeţ în gură, / Cu noo nepu’iņ în mână. / – Da’ voi un’e meret? / – Noi la Ion merem. / Sânjele să i-l bem, / Oasăle şi carnea să i le mănă! / – Acolo nu meret, / Şi napoi vă-nturnaţ, / Că de nu ve-ţ înturna, / Ieu cu numele Tatălui v-oi blăstăma! / Ion să rămăia curat, / Lumn’inat, / Ca maica şe l-o dat / Şi ca Domnu şe l-o lăsat.”

## THE TABLE IN PARADISE

“Beyond the sea  
There were all the saints,  
There were all the fathers lunching,  
They were eating  
Around a beautiful table.”

The table in Paradise motif also represents the opening of a certain group of Romanian Christmas ritual songs [Ro. *Colindă*, Eng. *Carol*]. Here is one example attested in the same area with the charm discussed:

“(…) there is a silk table,  
'Round the table there are chairs.  
Who sit on the chairs?  
There sit all the saints.  
All of them are drinking and lunching  
The entire summer day.  
In the evening  
There came an epistle!  
Judah entered the heaven.”<sup>6</sup> (NAVREA 2012:88–89)

The plot of the *colinda* shows St. Elijah regaining either the moon and the sun, or the marks of divine authority (the judgment seat, the keys of heaven), which have been stolen by the devils, who moved them to hell; consequently, heaven remained dark and hell turned light (type VIII in my classification).

The *colinda* is performed during two coinciding, symbolically interrelated events: Jesus' birth and the fragile moment of winter's darkest day. Equipped with weapons like the cannon and the bow with arrows that God gave him, Elijah recovers the divine objects of authority and, implicitly, the balance between light and dark. The *similia similibus* transfer from the *colinda* to the charm is implicit: placed at the very beginning of our charm, the motif anticipates the evolution of the given dangerous situation of disease – a consequence of evil entities' attack on the patient's equilibrium – towards healing, namely a clean (light), balanced body: “Ion will remain pure, / Shiny / As the Mother, who gave him birth, / As the Lord, who created him”.

## THE REALMS OF THE INVADERS

“St. Elijah conjures the *strigoi*:  
– You won't go there,  
But you will go back,

<sup>6</sup> Ro: “Scriș-o Domnul, me (sic!) ce-o ma scrișu? / Scriș-o masă de mătasă. / Prejur mesei sunt scaune, / Da pe scaun cine șede? / Ședu, ședu toții sfinți, / Tăt își beau și-și dăluescu / Cât îi ziua de vară. / Când îi colea de cu sară / Și greu verșu de le picară! / C-o d-intrat Iuda în raiu.”

'Cause if you won't go back,  
Then I will curse you  
With the name of the Father."

Elijah doesn't threaten them with thunder, guns, or arrows, but with God's power ("with", not "in" the name of). He doesn't act as a meteorological saint but, consistent with his Biblical role, as a defender of the monotheistic faith in the only Lord the Father.

"Back" means somewhere "down", since the charm also asserts that when the saint walked outside, "he heard" them "coming from below". This spatial organisation of the world into two antagonistic realms ("up" is the saints' table, "down" are the evil entities) resonates with the above-mentioned Christmas *colinda*: as heaven has been invaded and usurped by devils and attempt to interchange hell with heaven (they move heavenly marks to hell), so have the *strigoi* left the space they belong in (below) and attack the victim's body; the curative process consists of sending them back to the space they came from. But what space is that?

## THE PATHOGENIC AGENTS

"We are going to Ion  
To drink his blood,  
To eat his bones and flesh!"

Among Romanians, such deeds are often attributed to revenants, also called *strigoi*, souls that are not entirely integrated into the realm of the dead – in folkloric parlance, the dark world [Ro. *lumea neagră*] – and invade the space of the living, namely the white, light world [Ro. *lumea albă*], in order to take new souls with them. But in the area the charm was recorded, the term *strigoi* mostly means living humans, men or "women like us (...) [but] with tail on their back or under the armpit"<sup>7</sup> (MUŞLEA 2004:351). They mainly magically steal the cows' milk and the soil's fertility, and have the strongest power on the eve of St. George's holiday. Other entities well documented in Southeastern and Central Europe also have relevance. For example, the snake or cow shape these "milk-stealing witches" may take in Slovakian and East-Hungarian legends about "the devil hiding among cows from St. Elijah's lightning arrow" (PÓCS 1995:367), or legends that also show them riding a cow, are not common in Romanian folklore.

The Romanian *strigoi* issue is broad and, as far as I know, a detailed description or systematization of them is not yet available for non-Romanian readers (there is, however, a scientific bibliography on them). Such a task would be beyond the scope of this article, so I just want to underline, first and foremost, the distinction between dead and live *strigoi* (witches). Both are characterized by a profound relation to vital fluids – blood, milk, water – whose absence leads to imbalances, expressed in animals' loss of fertility, the soil's lack of moisture, and humans' weakening health (or even death)<sup>8</sup> – all due to thirst.

<sup>7</sup> Recorded in Ibănești Pădure, Mureș County.

<sup>8</sup> For more on this, see the discussion launched in 1960 by Bošković-Stulli and further developed by Monika Kropiej (KROPEJ 2012:42–43).

Related to the characters of the charm I am analysing here, their status is ambiguous: on the one hand, they drink the victim's blood, as the death *strigoi* do, and on the other, they behave like demons of disease. Although the corpus of legends and beliefs about St. Elijah, namely the unspoken level of the charm, does not show this saint fighting with the death *strigoi*, nor with those who steal the cows' milk or the ground's fertility, but with a certain subcategory of live *strigoi* that could be named *weather strigoi*: they steal and stop the rain and retain water (type III.3.5 in my classification). More or less contradictory, they are also described as causing uninterrupted rains and hailstorms. In both situations, St. Elijah counteracts them and re-establishes the meteorological equilibrium: he either brings the rains back after a long drought,<sup>9</sup> or, during hailstorms, he splits the ice stones produced by the *strigoi*.<sup>10</sup>

At a more complex level of interpretation of St. Elijah's figure, which exceeds the thematic frame of this article but has some relevance for our charm, we would mention the (few) legends attested to in north-western Moldavia and north-eastern Transylvania that present him in a mythological hypostasis: he is the master of a giant celestial animal, an ox or a bull, whose running on the sky road leads to extraordinary meteorological phenomena. During tempests, people went outside the house and, together with certain small ritual gestures, howled: "Ho, Ilie, stop/calm down your bull!" (VORONCA 1998 [1903]:149). In this regard, St. Elijah gets the attributes of a weather wizard (PÓCS 1995).

Most probably, the nine *strigoi* involved in the events of the quoted charm have almost nothing to do with meteorology. Instead, we may presume a mechanism similar to the one in the beginning of the text, where the cosmological allusion anticipates the efficiency of the charm: meteorology works as a therapeutic metaphor. Through repetition, the charm increases its efficacy. In other words, the text makes indirect reference to the weather *strigoi* of the corpus of folk beliefs, those *strigoi* against whom St. Elijah wins each battle, but the entities referred to are, in fact, the pathogenic agents of the disease, which have to be deactivated.

## THE ARROWS

"There came  
(...) nine strigoi  
with nine arrows in their mouths,  
With nine diseases in their hands."

Firstly, there might be a reference to certain funeral gestures performed by women in order to prevent a dead person from coming back as a revenant [Ro. *de-strigoire*], or in order to avert the evil actions of presumably dead *strigoi*: they prick with pointed objects the defunct's fingers or ears, stab spindles in the tomb of an alleged *strigoi*. In this regard, the pathogenic agents do indeed seem to be dead *strigoi* armed with the very weapons used by women against them.

<sup>9</sup> At his turn, Elijah can stop the rains.

<sup>10</sup> Elijah acts alone or in tandem with Archangel Michael or St. Peter.

But, exploring the narratives of St. Elijah, the arrows mentioned in the charm are rather counteracted by the arrows Elijah himself uses against demons. Elijah's arrows are considered therapeutic remedies against sharp pains or joints (type I.4.5.1. in my classification): "When he thunders, he uses the three-score arrow, the glassy one. It enters the ground nine fathoms deep. After nine years, it emerges from the ground. The one who finds it keeps it, and when he or she feels stitches in the body, puts it in a glass of water, then drinks that water and turns healthy. The arrow is the length of a finger" (MUŞLEA – BÎRLEA 2010 [1970]:362).

## THE FAIRIES

The transcribed charm represents only the verbal component of an assortment of gestures and mechanisms performed in certain contexts, which remain obscure. Neither are the very diseases against which the charm is supposed to be efficient. The fact that it is called "The one of fairies" [Ro. *Hăl din Iele*] indicates that the charm points to a certain affliction caused by these fairies and not at all by death *strigoi*.

The imaginary portraits of the *Iele* (also named "The Holy Ones" [Ro. *Ale Sfinte*], "The Beautiful Ones" [Ro. *Ale Frumoase*], "The White Ones" [Ro. *Ale Albe*], "The Fairies" [Ro. *Măiestrele*]), as configured through supernatural encounter narratives (I have chosen this category because the charm I analyse also narrates such an encounter) and other legends, include certain constants: they are maidens who appear only during the aestival season and only in groups, walking or floating (they have no wings) through the air, playing wind instruments, dancing in a circle above-ground to music played by a young abducted boy who is urged to play until he is totally weakened. The *Iele* avoid domestic spaces, preferring the forest, the crossroads between lands, and the ruins outside settlements; in turn, humans have to stay away from these places. As in the case of St. Elijah, their nature combines fire (after their dance, the spot on the ground remains burnt) and water elements (they drink from certain abandoned fountains, which are forbidden to humans). According to an interesting group of etiologic legends created in connection with the Romanian versions of the *Alexander Romance*, the *Iele* are human: in the episode which describes Alexander's visit to Makaron Island (akin to the Earthly Paradise) inhabited by a religious community of naked men (*Gymnosophists*, *Nagomudres*), their king, Evant, offered Alexander a bottle with the miraculous water taken from the well under his throne: when one drinks a sip, he/she grows young again, to the age of 30 (CARTOJAN 1922:87). Yet, Alexander died at the age of 33, poisoned by two of his officers. In a manuscript copied around 1800, the scribe has inserted a legend he learned from oral tradition, which explains why Alexander didn't use the water in order to escape death: "some people say that Alexander's servants drank this water and they are still alive and will never die until the Doomsday" (GASTER 1883:28–29). The legends – spread over the entire Romanian territory – have been transmitted through a written series of copies and orally as well.<sup>11</sup> All variants classified by Tony Brill as type 13244 are structured around the narrative nucleus of the stolen water.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion of this oral/written process of the creation and transmission of folk legends, see *The written text's ambiguity and the creation of oral narrative structures* (JIGA ILIESCU 2006, chapter II).



“When Alexander wanted to drink, he found the bottle empty, because his servants drank it and immediately flew through the air: this is why they are also called Șoimane” (BRILL 1965: 224).

It is noteworthy that some Transylvanian and South Romanian charms named “Șandru’s Maidens” as magical agents of disease [Ro. *Fetele lui Șandru*]; the name *Șandru* [Hungarian *Sándor*] comes from Alexander. Owners of knowledge of sacred provenance, made possible by the miraculous water they stole, the *Iele* are associated with the magical and empirical science of herbal therapeutic remedies. Figures of ambiguous sacredness (evil/helpful), in special circumstances (sometimes through a dream) they might reveal to humans the very places of medicinal herbs. But in the region where the charm has been recorded, the *Iele* are integrated in the larger category of charmers:

“They are *bosorcăni*. They live in deserted forests, where black roosters do not crow, where black cats don’t call. They are sent by God to stab you” (MUȘLEA 2004:242).

In northern Transylvania, the word *bosorcăn*, with Magyar etymology, means sorcerer; in this regard, *bosorcăni* are partially synonymous with the so-called live *strigoi*, in turn designated as a certain category of wizards (see above). We also noticed an important element for our analysis: the *Iele* are armed with arrows, as is St. Elijah. But while Elijah’s arrow is a therapeutic remedy, the fairies’ ones make humans sick, as in the case of our charm. The “Mild Ones” [Ro. *Milostivele*, another euphemistic term for *Iele*] are like that: they come to the human, at the hand or at the leg, and they thrill him/her and the hand becomes painful and he/she gets headaches and, in about nine days, the spot starts to swell. As if they bit you” (MUȘLEA 2004:242).

It is probable that the disease cured through our charm is rheumatic fever, with bites and stitches. This supposition is in concordance with a very widespread corpus of belief narratives according to which fairies punish with rheumatic diseases, partial paralysis, and epileptic seizures unvigilant people who enter the burned spot where the *Iele* danced, enter their wind, or drink water from their fountain (!), or break any other rules that mediate human contact with the fairies. In the south of Romania (in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the ritual was also found in eastern Romania), the fairies’ diseases are ritually cured by the *călușari* dance performed during Pentecost week. In Transylvania, where the charm transcription comes from, the *călușeri*<sup>12</sup> have no thaumaturgical functions. Charms against diseases provoked by the *Iele* are found over the entire space inhabited by Romanians, including the areas where the *călușari* dance can be found.

The Romanian emic expression for a fairies’ attack is “taken by *Iele*” [Ro. *luat din Iele*], which means to be abducted by them through the air. One of the symptoms is that the human walks very fast as an ecstatic state of mind. The expression “taken by the wind” is also found (ȘĂINEANU 2012 [1886]:70, 86), indicating apoplexy and communication with the spirits. “The *Iele* are the masters of the wind, who fly through the air” (ȘĂINEANU 2012 [1886]:105). We remember St. Elijah’s ascension through a whirlwind (type IV in our classification): “then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire “appeared” with horses of fire, and separated the

<sup>12</sup> Apart from the *călușari*, the *călușeri* also dance on the festive occasion of Christmas.



two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven” (2 Kings 2:11). Elijah (and not other figures) fighting against fairies is thus further explained: they share the same aerial space and, concurrently, the *Iele* provoke wind tornados, strong meteorological (and supernatural) phenomena, with dangerous potential for humans (in this respect, the windy fairies share some attributes with the weather *strigoi*).

## CONCLUSION

Through my analysis of a certain charm, I aimed to reconstruct, at the imaginary level, the assortment of beliefs which remained unspoken by the actual “text” of the incantation, but which are mentally evoked and activated during its performance, having the role of increasing the magical effects of the charm. Even if the charm is not supposed to have meteorological effects, its background and allusions are meteorological. I identified folk legends about St. Elijah expelling demonic beings, which are meteorological metaphors that convey the real reference of the charm – not the weather, but individual human illnesses and their healing.

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