Book Reviews

“Raccontami una storia...” Fiabe, leggende e miti nella memoria dei popoli by Giovanna Motta.

Review by Elena DUMITRU
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1. Brief summary

The book “Raccontami una storia...” Fiabe, leggende e miti nella memoria dei popoli (“Tell Me a Story...” Fairy Tales, Legends and Myths in Peoples’ Memory) is the result of a vast project coordinated by Giovanna Motta – full professor at Sapienza University of Rome and director of the Phd Programme in History of Europe – and involves a large team of scholars from different countries and disciplinary formation aiming to present a variety of approaches regarding the reception and the significance of fairy tales, myths and legends in the history of different territories.

2. General considerations

The book is not a simple compilation of fairy tale texts, but a collection of studies that discuss historically and critically the evolution of fairy tales, their influence on popular beliefs, on the creation of a common “memory” of the peoples and also on the manner in which they perceive the world. What makes this book so relevant is that the authors offer an analytical perspective on this topic reminding us that folklore is not just for children and trying to connect the literary and emotive dimension of folktale to the wide cultural and historical treasure that each community maintains and transmits through generations because – as the coordinator emphasises in the introduction – legends and myths preserve the historical and anthropological identity of different communities.
3. The structure of the book

The book contains 28 essays that offer a careful analysis of the subject and bond different countries, European and not only, creating a wide literary-historical “network” from Portugal to Spain, France, Ireland, England, the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Poland, the Baltic countries, Austria, Italy, Hungary, Albania, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, Georgia, Ukraine, Russia, etc., in a multitude of interpretations that represent indeed a valuable contribution in this very particular field of inquiry. In this multicultural universe, the main idea that unites the various essays regards the theme of travel in fairy tales in order to describe and explain different circumstances when the emotive sensibility of the peoples becomes the expression of the natural need and will to discover themselves, but also the others, as well as to interact with elements that belong to a specific geographical space or a particular perception of the universe. For this reason, the fairy tales contain the deep roots of social groups and, even if we can easily find common elements such the use of imagination and magical transfiguration, these stories show us also the differences that determine cultural variety and social, historical, territorial, linguistic, educational multiplicity of the countries and peoples. The social and cultural background of the tales becomes in this way an important factor during the process of the formation of a specific identity.

4. Conclusions

The authors of the book reveal a deep knowledge and understanding of folklore and its implications in the creation of a national patrimony. It is an ambitious work that links literature and history and I recommend it to anyone who wants to learn more about this universe dominated by the struggle between Good and Evil, in a series of circumstances that acquire a symbolic dimension. From these different stories, the authors piece together the world view of an incredibly rich part of our civilization, of our cultural traditions. Moreover, this book is an excellent resource for students, scholars, professors and folk narrative enthusiasts.
Pap Levente and Tapodi Zsuzsa, eds. Kapcsolatok, képek – Imagológiai tanulmányok. [Connections, Images – Studies on Imagology.]

Pap Levente and Tapodi Zsuzsa, eds. Interculturalitatea și interetnicismul ieri și azi – Studii de contactologie și imagologie. [Interculturalism and Interethnicism Then and Now – Studies on Contactology and Imagology.]

Review by Árpád Kémenes
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The two volumes contain the proceedings of the conferences on imagology organised by the Department of Humanities of Sapientia University in the years 2007, 2009 and 2011. As the presentations were held either in Hungarian or in Romanian language, the first volume, Connections, Images – Studies on Imagology contains the studies delivered in Hungarian, while the second one, Interculturalism and Interethnicism Then and Now – Studies on Contactology and Imagology comprises the written forms of the presentations held in Romanian language as well as the Romanian translation of some presentations originally held in Hungarian. The conferences opened debates on issues such as self-mythology, the transformation of national myths, or the role of films and of the media in shaping the image of a nation. Stereotypes are also approached from a number of perspectives. The writers of the studies included in the two volumes seek answers to questions related to stereotypes that influence the formation of self-knowledge and the image of otherness, investigate the stereotypes that have penetrated the educational system and the media, and point out the role of arts and literature in developing ways of thinking based on stereotypes. Also, research has been carried out into the extent the image created about the Other living in our proximity has changed or has been changing in the course of the twenty-first century.

In the collection of studies written in Hungarian Zoltán Kövecses approaches the ideal and stereotype of the Hungarians from a cognitive linguistic perspective. A number of studies focus on issues connected to imagology as they appear in folk culture. Lajos Balázs argues that folklore and, generally, the entire folk culture has ‘escaped’ from the medium where it was born, and started to fulfil national functions. He also points out that folk culture can be regarded as an ‘antidote’ for
globalisation and homogenisation. Modernisation, the effects of economic, social and cultural changes on the traditional values of peasants are also investigated in Veronika Lajos’s writing entitled Complex Peasant Knowledge and Cultural Adaptation. Katalin Lajos analyses different versions the Romanian folk ballad Miorița, and discusses on the way the topic of conflict and the perception of the stranger appear in the analysed versions.

The second part of the volume focuses on literature, media and films. Levente Pap analyses Saint Gerard’s legend, which is considered to contain the first written reference to the existence of their folk poetry both by the Hungarian and by the Romanian literary historians. Szilárd Szilágyi writes about the awareness of the relationship between the Turks and the Hungarians in the Turkish Turanist poetry. Several studies focus on stereotypes in literature. Lilla Bollemant writes about sexual and national stereotypes in Piroska Szentes’s novel Star on her Forehead, Zsuzsa Ajtony analyses the British stereotype as it appears in G. B. Shaw’s The Devil’s Disciple, while Zsuzsa Tapodi investigates the prejudices, the ethnic and national stereotypes that influence the critical reception of Albert Wass’s works. Angéla Ferencz examines the role of local media in forming the society after the fall of the communist regime, reaching the conclusion that media plays an important role not only in local and ethnic self-representation, but also in regional self-definition.

Approaching the concept of alterity from the point of view of image theories, Judit Pieldner examines the way the experience of foreignness and the representation of the Hungarian national image appear in András Jeles’s films. Films are in the focus of Imola Részeg’s writing, as well, in which the author investigates how the past political system and the social problems of that time are reflected in the works of contemporary young Romanian film directors.

The second volume, which contains the collection of studies written in Romanian language, largely relies on issues concerning literature. Zsuzsa Tapodi writes about the critical reception of Lóránd Daday’s works, and disproves opinions that label Daday as being hostile to the Romanians. Judit Pieldner examines the representation of Romanian women in the works of Hungarian authors, surveying the stereotypes of Romanian women as they appear in different literary genres. The way the image of alterity appears in some works belonging to contemporary Hungarian literature is investigated in Éva Bányai’s writing, while Mircea Breaz expounds on the image of the child’s world in the Romanian and Hungarian proverbs. Although the majority of the studies presented in the volume focus on the Hungarian and the Romanian cultures, Ştefania Custură investigates some aspects of Romanian-Saxon cultural interfaces in Brașov; Maria Anoca Dagmar, basing on literary works, scientific studies and newspaper articles written by Slovak authors, provides information on the self-reflection of Slovaks living in
Romania, and Elena Dumitru’s study deals with the image of the Romanians in the Italian newspapers.

The variety of topics presented in the two volumes offer food for thought for the readers interested in imagology, and provide proper basis for further research.

Review by Boróka Prohászka-Rád
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Genres in Changing Contexts – as the author, herself a teacher of English literary history, phrases it – responds to a challenge and a demand. The challenge consists in the task all of us teachers of literature face today: how to best assist our students in their journey of discovering, understanding, interpreting, and critically-analytically addressing works in an era when the skills and knowledge necessary for an adequate attitude towards literature, towards books in general are rarely focused on and students’ analytic mindset is often missing. Judit Pieldner’s book offers a frame and tools of aiding students in such a quest through a clear and easily accessible method: an introduction to basic literary terms, and overview of different dominant genres, followed by a discussion of the successive periods of English literature from its beginnings to the period of Romanticism.

The book also responds to a demand teachers of literature constantly face: troubled and bewildered by the multitude of sources available both in print and electronically on the Internet, students often get lost among such an abundance and fail to differentiate between veritable and reliable sources and most often authorless, ready-made interpretations of literary works that they take at face value accepting their accuracy and correctness without questions. Other times students just give up altogether, deeming bibliographic research and reading the available literature a burden best to avoid as it is often written in a language that seems inaccessible and fails to offer them guidance in understanding the text and its context.

The author’s aim is to initiate students as well as readers eager to immerse themselves in a systematic process of getting acquainted with the history of English literature into a method that aids the first-hand experience of reading and the practice of literary interpretation. The structure, style and discussions within the volume are adapted to the needs of undergraduate students familiarizing them with the adequate terminology and discourse of literary history and analysis. The first two sections of the book – Basic Literary Terms and Genres in Changing Contexts – adopt a theoretical approach to such issues as the concept of literature, literature and new media, literary canons, questions of authorship and different methods of
interpretation from the genealogical to the deconstructive, as well as a brief presentation of genres such as the heroic epic, the ballad, the romance, the framework story, the sonnet and the ode, the utopia, tragedy, comedy and the tragicomedy. The second part surveys main literary periods, trends, genres, and representative authors of the given periods in a chronological order.

This foundation course is highly recommended to students who wish to create their own path in studying English literature, to teachers of literature searching for efficient and fun ways of aiding their students, to college and university libraries, and the general public interested in fundamental concepts of literature and central themes, style, characteristics and prominent authors of the different ages.