

FATALISM AND INACTION ASSOCIATIONS WITH THE ROMANIAN BALLAD OF THE LITTLE EWE

Radu SILAGHI-DUMITRESCU

Babeş-Bolyai University, ROMANIA

Abstract. The ballad of the Little Ewe is generally noted as one of the distinctive features of the Romanian culture. Its facts are simple and few, if any: a little ewe warns its shepherd that his two associates intend to kill him for his possessions. The discussion that follows between the shepherd and the ewe is what draws attention – in that there is no mention whatsoever on any precise plans to resist the foretold murder; instead, the shepherd cares to provide instructions for things to happen after his death, in a particularly long lyrical monologue. This latter attitude has prompted many critics to label it as fatalism – and wide cultural implications have been claimed on that account – going to the point where public requests have been made to dismiss the ballad from public conscience as toxic. Discussing the text, we argue here that any such fatalism has to do with the eye of the respective critic – and that if indeed toxicity and eradication need to be mentioned, they would at best be associated with the respective critics rather than with the ballad itself.

Keywords: Romania, Little Ewe, Miorița, ballad, fatalism, popular

The popular (anonymous) ballad of the Little Ewe is generally noted as a distinctive feature of the Romanian culture. Public references to it range from textbooks of Romanian literature in schools, to scholars (Blaga, 1965; Eliade, 1995; Kernbach, 1996) and often to public speech on topics of sociology and politics (Patapievici, 1998). A search on the internet for instance reveals more than 400 000 pages containing the word “Miorița” (translated to English usually as Little ewe). Notably, many of these will no longer refer to the ballad directly, but rather refer to people, places or institutions whose names are inspired by the ballad. A less diminutive version of the name, Mioara, is also in use in Romania (an internet search will reveal over 500000 pages referring to it).¹⁾

Like most enduring oral traditions, “Miorița” entails many variations, mostly depending on the region where it was recorded in writing (Fochi, 1964). The facts described in the ballad are very simple. A little ewe magically talks to its shepherd, to warn him that his two associates, jealous of his better skills and results, intend to murder him treacherously in order to take over his possessions. The ballad ends, arguably in a baffling way, with the shepherd giving a very extended account of what he wishes to happen after his death – in very simple and lyrical terms, and with no active revolt or revenge anywhere in sight. The lack of any mention of revenge or of making a bold stand against the evildoers has been taken by many critics as a manifestation of fatalism; this is often taken further, to interpret “Miorița” as a manifesto of inaction and hence an indication of a weak, inefficient spirit with no historical horizon. We, however, wish to revisit the topic in order to reveal that if any propensity towards fatalism (or the other shortcomings) may be mentioned, it pertains more to the critics than to the literary text of the ballad.

The text of The Little Ewe is roughly divided in three parts. The first part is a very short exposition of the setting, generally in regions of hillsides near the mountains, specific for transhumance, and in general commented to be closely-knitted with Romanian cultural tradition (Blaga, 1965).

“Near a low foothill
At Heaven’s doorsill,
Where the trail’s descending
To the plain and ending”²⁾

*“Pe-un picior de plai,
Pe-o gură de rai,
Iată vin în cale,
Se cobor la vale”*

and of the characters, who are three shepherds moving their flocks together, invariably one being marked as better-achieving positive character – so much so that the other two have contrived plans to treacherously murder him

“Here three shepherds keep
Their three flocks of sheep,
One, Moldavian,
One, Transylvanian
And one, Vrancean.
Now, the Vrancean
And the Transylvanian
In their thoughts, conniving,
Have laid plans, contriving
At the close of day
To ambush and slay
The Moldavian;
He, the wealthier one,
Had more flocks to keep,
Handsome, long-horned sheep,
Horses, trained and sound,
And the fiercest hounds.”²⁾

*“Trei turme de miei,
Cu trei ciobănei.
Unu-i moldovan,
Unu-i ungurean
Și unu-i vrâncean.
Iar cel ungurean
Și cu ce-l vrâncean,
Mări, se vorbiră,
Ei se sfătuiră
Pe l-apus de soare
Ca să mi-l omoare
Pe cel moldovan,
Că-i mai ortoman
Ș-are oi mai multe,
Mândre și cornute,
Și cai învățați,
Și câni mai bărbați”*

Names are not given for the shepherds. They are instead referred to by their regions of origin – which while all within Romanian territory still do vary

between the various versions of the ballad, depending on the region where they were recorded.

The second episode of the ballad entails the discussion between the “good” shepherd and one of his sheep – the little ewe magically able to speak and warn its owner of the danger:

“One small ewe-lamb, though,
Dappled gray as tow,
While three full days passed
Bleated loud and fast;
Would not touch the grass.
”Ewe-lamb, dapple-gray,
Muzzled black and gray,
While three full days passed
You bleat loud and fast;
Don’t you like this grass?
Are you too sick to eat,
Little lamb so sweet?”
”Oh my master dear,
Drive the flock out near
That field, dark to view,
Where the grass grows new,
Where there’s shade for you.
”Master, master dear,
Call a large hound near,
A fierce one and fearless,
Strong, loyal and peerless.
The Transylvanian
And the Vrancean

*“Dar cea mioriță,
Cu lână plăviță,
De trei zile-ncoace
Gura nu-i mai tace,
Iarba nu-i mai place.
- Mioriță laie,
Laie bucălaie,
De trei zile-ncoace
Gura nu-ți mai tace!
Ori iarba nu-ți place,
Ori ești bolnăvioară,
Drăguță mioară?
- Drăguțule bace,
Dă-ți oile-ncoace,
La negru zăvoi,
Că-i iarbă de noi
Și umbră de voi.
Stăpâne, stăpâne,
Îți cheamă ș-un câine,
Cel mai bărbătesc
Și cel mai frățesc,
Că l-apus de soare
Vreau să mi te-omoare*

When the daylight's through
Mean to murder you."²⁾

Baciul ungiurean
Și cu cel vrâncean!")

The third episode, by far taking most of the space of the ballad, entails a monologue of the shepherd. It is on this monologue, and on the lack of any reference to fighting his looming doom, that critics have often delved in pointing out that the shepherd is, beyond his lyrical attitude towards everything surrounding him (sheep, mountain, plants, sky, and, towards the end of the lamentation, his mother), essentially cowardly, lazy and fatalistic, and hence a negative role model - and, that moreover, by inference, the ballad itself has a bad influence. The significance of tying a central piece of Romanian literary culture to some inherently negative traits (cowardice and laziness) does not travel far from racism. It is on the relevance of these charges that we will delve in the remaining of the present text.

As already stated, the first part of the ballad describes briefly the ways in which the “good” shepherd has out-worked his two companions: a larger flock, better-fed sheep, better-trained and stronger dogs and horses – as illustrated above, as well as in the alternative version:

“He is hateful in their eyes,
For he is so rich and brave;
Many well-horned sheep he leads,
Trusty dogs and goodly steeds.”³⁾

There is no indication whatsoever in these lines for any trait of a negative role model; if anything, the indications are towards the opposite – both in terms of the fact that the achievements suggest sound judgment and hard work and in terms of direct statements relevant to the character. The second episode of the ballad, quoted above, with the discussion between the ewe and the shepherd,

also reveals a rather congenial character and holds no indication of the negative traits reproached by critics.

The third episode of the ballad has by far received the most attention, since it entails the remaining two thirds of the poem. The purely artistic value has not been disputed – nor is our intention to comment upon it. One thing that has caught the attention of critics is, however, the lack of any direct reference to the actual preparations that the endangered shepherd would make against the assault; moreover, the story is abruptly ended with the shepherd’s monologue on how he should be disposed of after death – again apparently leaving one to assume that an inevitable negative ending might indeed follow. It is here that we wish to point out a series of important facts and arguments:

(1) From the shepherd’s perspective, the data upon which action may be taken include two previously regular associates (the other two shepherds) and one talking sheep. We would therefore propose the *thought-experiment* of a version of the ballad where information provided from one single source –and a talking sheep at that – would be sufficient for a man to immediately take up arms and, if lucky, murder his business associates. While such a train of course would not be impossible from the point of view of modern literature or from the point of view of particularly violent ancient societies, it does, nevertheless suggest sheer lunacy to the regular reader of today. True, the reader/listener of the ballad is informed by the narrator that the sheep is telling the truth – but one must appreciate that within the given settings the shepherd does not benefit from the respective vantage point of hearing a narrator (lest lunacy be invoked again). The fact then, that we do not witness a man attempting murder on account of the fact that “the sheep told him so” may be argued to be a particularly positive element in favor of the ballad – and needs not take on any negative connotation of cowardice. We seem to be thus dealing with a cultural environment where violent crime and mystical events are not shuddered at, yet they are not taken as a model of conduit either. If, as the critics desire, one is to seek significance

from the ballad for the present state of the Romanian society, it appears to be a model for down-to-earth, evidence-directed attitude, where unnecessary violence is sentenced to oblivion.

(2) The shepherd's monologue starts with the phrase

“Lamb, my little ewe,
If this omen's true”²⁾

“*De ești năzdrăvană,
și de-a fi să mor*”

The English translation follows to mention “If I'm doomed to death” – but the most common Romanian version (collected by Vasile Alecsandri (1978)). “Si de-a fi sa mor” makes no direct reference to fate or doom; rather, it uses a dialect-specific conditional which is best translated (in less poetical form) as “If I should die”. This is the only reference made to the eventual outcome of the likely clash with the other two shepherds. One must appreciate the use of the conditional expression, suggesting that the outcome is not entirely decided – though clearly foreseeable given the imbalance between the two forces. In itself, this is not fatalism, but rather realism –hence again a sign of down-to-earth, evidence-directed attitude.

(3) Notably, earlier versions of the ballad have been quoted to had been centered on the ritual killing of the young shepherd by his seniors (Fochi, 1964).¹⁾ Such brutal events would be particularly common to the dawns of civilization in many places of the world. In that context, it is perhaps to be particularly noted that the original motif of the well-defined ritual murder, as a generally archaic motif, is, in the Romanian ballad of the Little Ewe, distilled to the point where the ritual character of the death sentence, and the idea of sentence itself, is invisible, the outcome of the event left undescribed, and the potential victim posed as a moral victor.

(4) The ballad does not specifically describe whether eventually a fight took place, and whether the shepherd prepared for it. One is left to make assumptions, according to one's own expectations and experience. This has indeed invited, but in no way justified, the "fatalism" interpretation, especially since the final two thirds of the ballad appear to be going to great length in avoiding the subject of violent action. Indeed, the emphasis on lyrical descriptions (with metaphors related to ancient rites of passage) has been indicated as a preference of the creators of the ballad to discuss the bad prospects ahead, as opposed to making plans for positive action. Yet, as pointed out above, given the balance of forces at work, this attitude is a sign of sanity. As for positive action, the first section of the ballad states brief but firm facts which the "fatalism-critics" too easily ignore, and which could not have arisen without a long-term commitment to positive action. It is perhaps a sign of modern urban (and for many decades improperly organized) society, that certain of its members, and indeed those trusted publicly with intellectual matters, should skim so easily over the weight of such words as

"He, the wealthier one,
Had more flocks to keep,
Handsome, long-horned sheep,
Horses, trained and sound,
And the fiercest hounds".

That the significant amount of work, skill (both work- and society-related) and courage required for achieving wealth of this sort, in the ever-changing sceneries of transhumance, with all its dangers, be put in balance with the concept of a few minutes' violent clash with other humans, and that the violent clash, regardless of outcome, be made to weigh more – may be argued to be

symptomatic of a society where work is no longer a prime asset, and where resources may be too easily distributed to the undeserving ones, under arbitrary will of those disposed to take unjust violent action. This latter description fits the totalitarian regimes of Romania for most of the 20th century (whether they were labeled fascist or communist) – regimes under which the fatalist theory surrounding the ballad of the Little Ewe has drawn most of the substance visible today. Therefore, if (and this is yet to be established) there is indeed a need to clear ill-chosen role-models off the Romanian literary market, the discussion should focus not on the ballad itself but rather on some of its commentators.

NOTES

1. <https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miori%C8%9Ba>
2. MIORITZA ["Little Ewe-Lamb"]. (Translated by William D. Snodgrass, Raphael Alberti et al). 62 pp., Editura Albatros in collaboration with the National Committee of UNESCO, Bucuresti, Romania. 1972.
3. The Little Lamb - English translation by Sophie Jewett. 1913.

REFERENCES

- Alecsandri, V. (1978). *Poezii si balade populare*. Bucharest: Academiei.
- Bлага, L. (1965). *Trilogia culturii*. Bucharest: Literatură Universală.
- Eliade, M. (1995). *Mioara năzdrăvană, în De la Zalmoxis la Genghis-Han - Studii comparative despre religiile și folclorul Daciei și Europei Occidentale (1970)*. București: Humanitas.
- Fochi, A. (1964). *Miorița*. București: Academiei.
- Kernbach, V. (1996). *Dicționar de mitologie generală*. București: Univers Enciclopedic.
- Patapievici, H.R. (1998). *Cerul vazut prin lentila*. Bucharest: Nemira.

✉ Dr.Radu Silaghi-Dumitrescu
Babeş-Bolyai University,
11 Arany Janos Str,
Cluj-Napoca 400028, Romania,
E-Mail: rsilaghi@chem.ubbcluj.ro

© 2016 Venets: Author

