

## THE FUNCTIONS OF WATER IN ROMANIAN FAIRY TALE: A STUDY OF DUMITRU STĂNCESCU AND PETRE ISPIRESCU COLLECTIONS<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article investigates the symbolic, narrative, and ethical functions of water in Romanian fairy tales, drawing on a corpus collected by Dumitru Stăncescu (2010) and Petre Ispirescu (1984), with selective comparative reference to Germanic and Slavic traditions researched in Brothers Grimm (2011) and Aleksandr Afanasyev (2020) fairy tales. Water emerges as a central organizing principle of narrative imagination, functioning in multiple, interrelated roles that structure plot development, mediate moral testing, and facilitate transformation. The study employs a motif-based methodology, systematically cataloguing narrative sequences in which water appears and analyzing them according to functional typologies. The approach allows for an integrated understanding of water as a dynamic agent within the narrative economy rather than as a static symbol.

In Romanian fairy tales, water often operates as a liminal threshold, marking various transitions. Aspects and bodies of water (rivers, brooks, lakes and wells) define spatial and temporal boundaries, signalling the onset of trials, quests or transformative experiences. Immersion, bathing or proximity to water is regularly associated with shifts in identity, especially for female characters, and may precede changes in physical appearance, social or marital status, or even human and non-human embodiment. Sometimes, water functions as a site of moral testing, where enchanted or forbidden waters activate narrative crises, whose outcome depend solely on the dispositions of the characters. Consuming or coming into contact with forbidden water leads to immediate repercussions, frequently manifesting as transformation, illness, or social alienation. Certain narratives illustrate that restoration is either postponed or contingent, emphasizing water's function as a mediating element in moral assessment rather than as a neutral or inherently advantageous entity. This is demonstrated in fairy tales such as *Busuioc și Musuioc* from Stăncescu's collection, where the brothers' engagement with water shapes the moral and spatial outcomes of the story, ultimately resulting in their irrevocable separation from the human realm instead of their reintegration.

A related function pertains to the role of water in resurrection and deferred restoration. Water serves to preserve bodes or identities, facilitating eventual reconstitutions through extended narrative processes. Stories that involve the repeated death and transformation of children exemplify how water mediates a prolonged suspension of life, postponing restoration until specific narrative and moral conditions are met. Likewise, enchanted waters offer promises of rejuvenation and renewal.

A comparative analysis reveals that Romanian fairy tales set themselves apart from Germanic and Slavic traditions through their narrative restraint and ethical mediation. In contrast to the narratives of Brothers Grimm or Afanasyev, which frequently depict water as a striking or pivotal magical force, Romanian tales focus on ambiguity, gradual change, and conditional restoration. In these stories, water serves as a medium through which moral, social and narrative repercussions emerge, thereby contributing to a unique poetics characterized by process, restraint, and ethical contemplation.

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Through a systematic examination of the various roles of water, this study illustrates its significance within the Romanian fairy tale tradition and establishes a foundation for future comparative investigations into water, symbolism, narrative agency, and the interplay of ritual, gender, and spatial dynamics in oral narrative traditions.

**Keywords:** aquatic symbolism; liminality; Romanian folklore; comparative research; gendered transformation; enchanted water.

## 1. Introduction

Water occupies a privileged position within the symbolic economy of traditional narratives, functioning as one of the most persistent and polyvalent elements of the imaginary. In fairy tales, water is rarely a neutral or decorative presence; rather, it operates as a charged narrative space where transitions occur, identities are tested, and transformations are enacted. Rivers, wells, springs, ponds and enchanted waters repeatedly appear at decisive moments of the plot, making thresholds between world, mediating encounters with alterity, and structuring symbolic rites of passage embedded in narrative form.

In Romanian fairy tales, water symbolism proves especially complex and narratively active. Transmitted within an oral-tradition framework and later recorded by folklorists, these narratives preserve a symbolic logic in which water mediates fundamental oppositions: life and death, purity and danger, order and chaos, the human and the otherworldly. The present article focuses on a corpus of fairy tales collected by Dumitru Stăncescu and Petre Ispirescu in the Romanian region of Muntenia, a geographical and cultural area characterized by a coherent folkloric horizon. By limiting the corpus to a clearly delimited regional space and to two major collectors, the study aims to ensure both internal consistency and symbolic representativeness. Rather than approaching water as a universal archetype detached from cultural context, this article examines how water functions within the internal logic of Romanian fairy tale narratives from Muntenia. Particular attention is paid to narrative sequences in which water appears as a decisive element – triggering action, imposing interdictions, testing moral conduct, or enabling transformation. In these contexts, water functions not merely as a setting, but as a liminal operator embedded in specific symbolic, ethical, and ritual structures.

While water symbolism has been extensively discussed in mythological and religious studies, fairy tales require a distinct analytical approach. Unlike myths, which tend to articulate cosmogonic explanations and sacred origins, fairy tales dramatize individual and social transformation through symbolic trials. Within this narrative economy, water frequently appears at moments of crisis or transition: as a boundary that must be crossed, an ordeal that must be endured or a medium through which metamorphosis becomes possible. The recurrent presence of such configurations in the Muntenian fairy-tale corpus suggests the existence of a coherent symbolic system governing narrative progression and character development. The significance of water as a narrative resource extends into contemporary literary studies as well, where it has been explored across genres and media (Bâgiu, 2023).

An important aspect of this system concerns the relationship between water and gendered transformation. In a number of Romanian fairy tales from Muntenia, water mediates crucial moments in the transformation of female characters, whether through enchantment, testing, displacement, or reintegration into a new social or existential state. These episodes not only reflect narrative convention but articulate culturally specific representations of femininity,

liminality, and moral evaluation. Water thus emerges as a symbolic space where individual destiny intersects with collective norms and values.

Although the primary focus of this article remains firmly on Romanian fairy tales from Muntenia, selective comparisons with Germanic and Slavic fairy tale traditions are introduced in order to contextualize and clarify the specificity of the Romanian material. Fairy tales collected by the Brothers Grimm and selected Slavic narratives offer structurally analogous motifs, such as wells leading to otherworldly realms, enchanted or forbidden waters, and water-bound trials, that allow for a controlled comparative assessment. These references are not intended to establish lines of influence or diffusion but to illuminate how shared narrative motifs are reconfigured within distinct cultural imaginaries.

Methodologically, the article adopts a motif-based and symbolic-hermeneutic approach, drawing on theories of liminality and rites of passage (van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969), material imaginary (Bachelard, 1942), and the anthropology of the sacred (Eliade, 1949/2025), complemented by perspectives on purity, danger, and boundary transgression (Douglas, 1966). By analyzing a carefully constructed corpus of Muntenian fairy tales, the study argues that water functions as a dynamic narrative agent that structures transition, regulates transformation, and articulates culturally specific meanings within the Romanian fairy tale tradition. Through this analysis, the article seeks to contribute to folklore and fairy tale studies by offering a focused examination of water symbolism as a key organizing principle of Romanian narrative imaginary, while situating these findings in a broader, yet deliberately restrained, European comparative framework.

## **2. Corpus Construction and Analytical Framework**

The analysis presented in this article is based on a systematically constructed database of narrative sequences extracted from Romanian fairy tales collected by Dumitru Stăncescu and Petre Ispirescu in the region of Muntenia. Rather than treating the fairy tale as a homogenous textual unit, the study adopts a micro-analytical approach, focusing on those narrative sequences in which water appears as a meaningful element of the plot. This methodological choice allows for a more precise examination of water's symbolic and functional roles within the narrative economy of the fairy tale.

The corpus was constructed through a close reading of the selected fairy tales, during which all episodes involving water (such as rivers, springs, ponds, enchanted waters, or water-related interdictions) were identified and extracted. Each occurrence of water was treated as a separate analytical unit, even when multiple instances appeared within the same tale. This approach made it possible to observe recurring patterns of symbolic usage across different narratives and collections, while avoiding the risk of reducing water symbolism to a single, overarching meaning per tale.

All identified narrative sequences were entered into a structured database, which served as the primary analytical tool for the study. For each sequence, the database records the title of the fairy tale, the collector, the narrative context in which water appears, the specific water motif involved, the characters affected by the encounter with water and preliminary interpretive observations. Organizing the material in this way ensured consistency in analysis and facilitated the comparative examination of motifs across the corpus. The database thus functions not only as a repository of examples but also as an intermediary analytical stage between textual reading and symbolic interpretation.

The decision to include fairy tales collected by both Stăncescu and Ispirescu was motivated by the desire to balance ethnographic proximity to oral tradition with canonical literary mediation. While Stăncescu's collection often preserves a more immediate folkloric

texture, Ispirescu's tales reflect processes of narrative stabilization and stylistic refinement. The recurrence of similar water motifs and functions across both collections strengthens the argument that the symbolic patterns identified are not the result of individual editorial choices but are ingrained in a shared regional narrative imaginary.

From the database, a typology of water functions was inductively developed. This typology does not impose predefined symbolic meanings but emerges from the repeated narrative roles that water assumes within the corpus. While individual motifs may vary in form, they tend to converge around a limited number of symbolic functions, which structure narrative progression and character transformation. These functions can be summarized as follows.

Initially, water frequently acts as a liminal threshold, delineating the boundary between various narrative or ontological realms. Rivers, wells, and ponds often indicate the shift from the known human domain to a realm of peril, trials, or otherworldly encounters. Approaching or crossing such waters initiates narrative progression and subjects characters to transformation. Moreover, water serves as an initiatory challenge, particularly in scenarios involving immersion, perilous crossings, or interactions with forbidden waters. In these instances, water places the character in a precarious situation, testing their endurance, moral integrity, or compliance. Typically, survival or successful navigation precedes rewards, knowledge, or advancement within the story.

Furthermore, water acts as a catalyst for transformation, facilitating changes that may be physical, moral, or existential. This role is evident in fairy tales featuring female protagonists, where water enables enchantment, metamorphosis, or transition into a new social or symbolic status. In this context, water functions as an active agent of change rather than a mere passive environment. Additionally, water emerges as a locus of moral and symbolic testing, often organized around prohibitions. Enchanted, poisoned, or forbidden waters necessitate ethical discernment, and the character's reaction influences narrative outcomes. In these cases, water serves as a judge of moral order within the fairy tale universe.

Water represents a realm of symbolic ambiguity, positioned between the sacred and the perilous. Wells and springs may provide healing or life, yet they also conceal threats and supernatural entities. This duality reflects broader cultural perceptions of water as a medium capable of both regeneration and destruction. Ultimately, in certain narratives, water takes on a destructive or chaotic role, manifesting as a force that disrupts order through floods, engulfment, or mortal peril. These instances often signify narrative crises that necessitate the restoration of balance through heroic or moral intervention.

This typology provides the analytical framework for the sections that follow. Rather than treating these functions as mutually exclusive, the analysis acknowledges that a single narrative sequence may activate multiple symbolic roles simultaneously. By grounding interpretation in a systematically organized corpus and inductively derived typology, this article aims to demonstrate how water operates as a key organizing principle of the Romanian fairy-tale narrative imaginary in Muntenia.

### **3. Water as a Liminal Threshold**

One of the most stable and structurally significant functions of water in the Romanian fairy-tale corpus analyzed is its role as a liminal threshold, indicating the transition between narrative worlds, states of being, or phases of the protagonist's journey. In the fairy tales collected by Stăncescu and Ispirescu from Muntenia, water repeatedly appears at moments of departure, encounter, or irreversible choice, functioning less as a decorative motif and more as a narrative operator of passage. Unlike clearly guarded thresholds (gates, castles, or explicit prohibitions), water in these tales often constitutes a naturalized boundary, one that must be

crossed, approached, or negotiated without overt instruction. Its liminality is therefore implicit, revealed only through narrative consequences.

In several tales, *wells and water sources* serve as sites of full decisive encounters between the human protagonist and otherworldly figures. In *Sur-Vultur* (Stăncescu, 2010), the well functions as a meeting point between human and demonic spheres, where the young hero comes into contact with Tartacot, a devilish figure connected to subterranean forces. The well here is not just a utilitarian structure but a vertical axis, linking the surface world with infernal or chthonic realm. The act of approaching or drawing water implicitly places the hero at crossroads: the encounter initiates a narrative trajectory from which return is no longer possible. Importantly, no explicit warning marks the well as dangerous; its liminal nature is revealed retroactively, through the transformation of the plot that follows. A similar logic operates in *Cerbul de Aur* [The golden stag] (Stăncescu, 2010), where an enchanted water source becomes the point at which the protagonists' fate diverges. Lost in the forest, the children encounter a spring whose water is unequivocally marked as dangerous through interdiction. The decision to drink or abstain from the water works as a threshold act, separating survival from enchantment, human continuity from metamorphic suspension. Here, water mediated the transition from familial space into the forest's symbolic otherness.

Flowing water, such as brooks and rivers, frequently appears at the beginning or midpoint of journeys, marking the passage from *social marginality into narrative centrality*. In *Fratele Bucățică* [Brother Morsel] (Stăncescu, 2010), the encounter with a brook occurs during a journey undertaken by two beggars, a blind man and a lame man. When the blind man drops his last piece of bread into the water and the lame man chases it, the narrative situates them at a boundary:

The blind man was tearing off pieces from a log of dry bread [...] The cripple went hobbling after it—hobble, hobble; the water carried it along, he followed it, and the blind man stumbled after him, holding onto the rags of his clothes<sup>2</sup> (Stăncescu 2010, p. 27, our translation).

This movement across the brook signals a shift from itinerant vulnerability toward narrative agency, *marking a spatial and symbolic transition* before they reach the palace:

The sun seemed to be casting its rays upon a tin roof: it was a strikingly beautiful house. "Listen, blind man, let us stop quarrelling. Look, there is a palace over there—let's go that way and see; perhaps we too might obtain something"<sup>3</sup> (Stăncescu, 2010, p. 28, our translation).

The brook functions as a silent delimiter between worlds: the wandering life of marginality and the structured, morally charged world of power. This pattern recurs throughout the corpus: water crossings tend to precede encounters with royalty, supernatural beings, or decisive trials, reinforcing water's role as a preliminary threshold rather than a climatic obstacle.

A striking feature of the Romanian material is the *relative absence of anthropomorphic guardians* at water thresholds. Unlike Germanic fairy tales, where bridges or rivers may be guarded by trolls or demand tolls, Muntenian fairy tales often present water as unguarded but not neutral. The burden of recognition falls on the protagonist, whose moral disposition or

<sup>2</sup> Original Romanian text: „Orbul rupea dintr-un codru de pline uscată [...] Șchiopul, șontâc, șontâc, după ea; apa o ducea, el după ea și orbul d-a-n boue după el se ținea de zdrențele lui.”

<sup>3</sup> Original Romanian text: „Pasămite soarele își lăsa razele pe un acoperiș de tinichea : era o casă frumoasă de speriat. — Ia ascultă, orbule, să nu ne mai batem, uite un palat ; ai într-acolo să vedem, poate-om căpăta și noi ceva.”

attentiveness determines the outcome. In *Fratele Bucățică* [Brother Morsel] (Stăncescu, 2010), nothing guards the brook and nothing announces the transition explicitly; instead, the shift depends on perception. It is the lame man who suddenly “He closed his eyes, for something shone so brightly that it dazzled him”, dazzled by the light reflected from the palace roof. The palace is not concealed, yet neither is it self-evident: “The sun seemed to be casting its rays upon a tin roof: it was a strikingly beautiful house.”<sup>4</sup> (Stăncescu, 2010, p. 28, our translation).

The threshold demands interpretation, not context; entry into the new social order becomes possible only when the shining object is recognized as *palace* and named as such “Look, there’s a palace—let’s go over there and see”<sup>5</sup> (rather ironic since one of them is blind). In the palace they discover twelve enchanted pigeons that transform into young men, one of them being Bucățică itself. In this sense, water does not impose an external trial; it precedes a moment of perceptual and moral discernment, transferring responsibility from a guardian figure to the protagonists themselves. The narrative strategy internalizes liminality: water does not block passage; it reveals readiness. The threshold is crossed not through force or trickery, but through choice, sometimes informed, sometimes transgressive.

Across the analyzed tales, once water has been crossed, approached, or consumed, the narrative rarely allows a simple return to the initial state. Whether the result is enchantment (*Cerbul de aur* [The golden stag]), pact (*Sur-Vultur*), or social ascent (*Fratele Bucățică* [Brother Morsel]), water marks moments of irreversible transition. In *Fratele Bucățică* [Brother Morsel], the irreversibility of the water transition becomes clear once the characters enter the *baths* of „Cucoana miloasă” (*The kind lady*). The offer – “You take a bath, and when you leave, she gives you a set of clothes as well.”<sup>6</sup> (Stăncescu, 2010, p. 30, our translation) – frames immersion as exchange and transformation. After bathing, the narrative emphasizes their altered status: “Both the blind man and the cripple bathed; after they came out... she cut their nails, trimmed their hair, combed them, gave them a set of clothes, and then took them, thus transformed, into a room”<sup>7</sup> (Stăncescu, 2010, p. 30, our translation). The phrase „așa schimbați” (*thus changed*) signals more than physical cleansing because it marks a shift in social visibility and narrative function. No longer anonymous beggars on the roadside, they are admitted into an interior space where storytelling circulates as symbolic capital: “The lady then asked them, too, to tell what they knew”<sup>8</sup> (Stăncescu, 2010, p. 30, our translation), water operating as an initiatory medium. Once immersed, the protagonists cannot return to their former marginality; they have crossed into a new economy of exchange, recognition and narrative agency.

The same logic of irreversibility governs *Cerbul de aur* [The golden stag]. Unlike *Fratele Bucățică* [Brother Morsel], where water mediates social ascent, here water produces ontological rupture. The boy resists twice, heeding his sister’s warnings: “Do not drink, little brother... or you will turn into a fox” and later “for you will turn into a bear”, but the third time he yields to thirst. The act of drinking marks a point of no return: “but he could no longer resist and drank. And as soon as he drank, he turned into a stag.”<sup>9</sup> (Stăncescu, 2010, p. 15, our translation). The repetition underscores the element of choice; the transformation is not imposed by a guardian or spell but triggered by his decision. Once the water is consumed,

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<sup>4</sup> Original Romanian text: „închise ochii, că-i lucea ceva de-i lua vederile”; “Pasămite soarele își lăsa razele pe un acoperiș de tinichea: era o casă frumoasă de speriat.”

<sup>5</sup> Original Romanian text: „uite un palat ; hai într-acolo să vedem.”

<sup>6</sup> Original Romanian text: „faci baie și când pleci îți dă ș-un rând de haine pe d-asupra.”

<sup>7</sup> Original Romanian text: „Făcură baie și orbul și șchiopul ; după ce ieșiră... le tăie unghiile, îi tunse, îi pieptănă, le dădu rându de haine și-i luă de-i duse așa schimbați într-o odaie.”

<sup>8</sup> Original Romanian text: „cucoana le zise și lor să spuie ce știe.”

<sup>9</sup> Original Romanian text: „Nu bea, frățiorule ... că te faci vulpe”; „că te faci urs”; „dar el nu mai putu răbda și bău. Dacă bău, cum bău se făcu cerb.”

reversal is impossible. The narrative does not suspend the change or mitigate it, but it aestheticizes “Such was the beauty of the stag that the wind itself might have stopped in its blowing.”<sup>10</sup> (Stăncescu, 2010, p. 15, our translation). Water is, in this case, an agent of metamorphosis that seals fate instantly. If in *Fratele Bucăţică* [Brother Morsel] immersion leads to incorporation into a new social order, in *Cerbul de aur* [The golden Stag] ingestion produces a permanent shift of being. In both cases, however, water marks the hinge beyond which the initial state cannot be restored. When compared with Germanic and Slavic fairy tales, the Romanian representations of water as a liminal threshold reveal both shared structural patterns and culturally specific emphases. In all three traditions, water frequently marks a boundary between the familiar world and the realm of trials, functioning as a transitional space that initiates narrative transformation (Propp, 1968).

In Germanic fairy tales, particularly those collected by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, water thresholds are often explicitly dramatized and externally marked. Rivers, wells, or descents into water operate as clearly delineated entry points into the supernatural realm, as in *The Frog King* or *Mother Holle*, where immersion or descent is followed by immediate narrative reorientation (Grimm & Grimm, 2011). In *Mother Holle*, the heroine jumps into the well she lost her spindle and she is transported into an enchanted realm. By contrast, Slavic fairy tales, as recorded in the nineteenth century collections such as those of Aleksandr Afanasyev, tend to associate water with zones of instability and latent danger. Rivers and lakes frequently mark the boundaries of territories inhabited by ambiguous or hostile beings, and crossing water often requires magical mediation or confrontation with supernatural forces (Afanasyev, 2020). Against this comparative background, the Romanian fairy tales from our corpus stand out for their naturalised and understated use of water as a liminal threshold. Instead of functioning as an explicitly guarded or moralized boundary, water operates through narrative consequence, confirming the structural observation that transitional functions in fairy tales often become legible only retrospectively, through their effects on narrative trajectory (Propp, 1968).

#### 4. Enchanted and Poisoned Waters: Moral Testing and Narrative Crisis

In addition to serving as a liminal threshold, water in the fairy tales compiled by Stăncescu and Ispirescu often acts as a locus for moral testing and narrative conflict. In these contexts, water is distinctly characterized as enchanted, forbidden, or perilous, thereby transforming a natural element into a pivotal force for ethical distinction. Encounters with such water lead to moments of crisis where obedience, restraint and moral judgement are challenged, resulting, most of the times, in irreversible outcomes. Unlike neutral thresholds, enchanted or poisoned waters are prominently highlighted through prohibition, warnings, or ritualistic contexts, rendering their symbolic significance immediately apparent. Nevertheless, the true importance of these waters is not solely rooted in their supernatural attributes, but in the human reactions they provoke.

A paradigmatic example of enchanted water as moral test appears in *Cerbul de Aur* [The golden stag] (Stăncescu, 2010), yet it is by no means an isolated case within the corpus. In this tale, two children lost in the forest encounter a water in an animal footprint: drinking the water results in a transformation. The interdiction is clearly articulated, and its violation results in immediate metamorphosis: the child who drinks is turned into a stag. The narrative foregrounds the causal link between disobedience and metamorphosis, establishing water as an ethical threshold rather than a neutral magical substance (Rogojină, 2024). What is significant is that the water itself is not described as inherently malicious: it appears simply as “a fox’s

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<sup>10</sup> Original Romanian text: „aşa frumuseţe de cerb că s-ar fi oprit vântul din adiere.”

footprint filled with rainwater,” later “a bear’s footprint, also filled with rainwater,” and finally “a stag’s footprint”<sup>11</sup> (Stăncescu, 2010, p. 15, our translation). Nothing in the narration attributes intrinsic danger to it. The threat emerges only through the sister’s verbal interdiction — “Do not drink, little brother... or you will turn into a fox”, “for you will turn into a bear,” “and he turned into a stag” — and the transformation occurs solely once the prohibition is broken: “but he could no longer resist and drank. And as soon as he drank, he turned into a stag”<sup>12</sup> (Stăncescu, 2010, p. 15, our translation). Its dangerous quality is activated through transgression, suggesting that enchantment operates *relationally*. Water becomes ‘poisoned’ not by nature, but by narrative rule. The transformation encodes a moral lesson: the magical effect derives not from a quality of the water itself but from the violation of the rule governing access to it.

This logic recurs across the corpus, where enchanted or cursed waters acquire symbolic charge only when ethical boundaries are crossed (Propp, 1968). Comparable mechanisms appear in *Ileana Simziana* (Ispirescu, 1984), where sacred or enchanted water is embedded in a sequence of ritual testing, and in *Broasca țestoasă cea fermecată* [The enchanted turtle] (Ispirescu, 1984), where an enchanted pond functions as the medium through which a curse is disclosed and moral truth revealed. In these narratives, water does not merely trigger transformation but exposes hidden transgressions and unresolved moral debts.

Beyond interdicted springs, the database I compiled records several instances in which *poisoned or corrupted waters* are deliberately instrumentalized to produce narrative crisis. In *Cerbul de aur* [The golden stag] (Stăncescu, 2010), the emperor’s mistress replaces potable water with poisoned water in an attempt to cause death to the empress, transforming water from a life-sustaining element into a covert instrument of betrayal. In Afanasyev’s (2020) *Sister Alyonushka and Brother Ivanushka*, a witch drowns Ivanushka and takes her place as the mistress of the house. This act initiates a prolonged narrative disruption that cannot be resolved through simple recognition or repentance. Similarly, in *Făt-Frumos cu carâta de sticlă* [Prince Charming with the glass coffin] (Ispirescu, 1984), enchanted waters appear within hostile magical strategies employed against antagonistic figures, reinforcing water’s association with *irreversibility and danger*. Once contaminated, water collapses moral choice and narrative consequence into a single moment, forcing the tale into extended sequences of trial, pursuit, or restitution:

The ogress did everything she could, gnawing at the trees, climbing from branch to branch and slipping through the thickets until she crossed over and set off after them. The horse flew like the wind, but the ogress followed them like a thought. Just as she was about to seize them, the girl threw her kerchief behind her. At once it became a great, vast expanse of water, so wide that its edge could scarcely be seen, and surrounded on all sides by fire. The ogress turned herself into boat and bridge and crossed it. Through fire and through water she went, still after them—always after them—and in her furious chase she never let them out of her sight<sup>13</sup> (Ispirescu, 1984, p. 148, our translation).

A recurring feature throughout the corpus is the unequal impact of enchanted waters on various characters. When several individuals come into contact with the same water source, the

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<sup>11</sup> Original Romanian text: „o urmă de vulpe, plină cu apă de ploaie,” ; “o urmă de urs tot cu apă de ploaie,” ; “o urmă de cerb.”

<sup>12</sup> Original Romanian text: „Nu bea, frățiorule ... că te faci vulpe” ; „că te faci urs”, “că se făcu cerb”; „dar el nu mai putu răbda și bău. Dacă bău, cum bău se făcu cerb.”

<sup>13</sup> Original Romanian Text: „Zmeoaica făcu ce făcu, roase la copaci, cățărându-se din cracă în cracă și strecurându-se prin desiși, până ce trecu dincolo și să te ții după dânșii ! Calul zbura ca vântul, dară zmeoaica venea după dânșii ca gândul. Când să puie mâna pe dânșii, fata aruncă în urma ei basmaua. Odată se făcu o apa mare, mare de d-abia i se vedea marginea și de jur împrejur înconjurată de foc. Zmeoaica se făcu luntre și punte și trecu. Dete prin foc și prin apă, și după dânșii ! tot după dânșii, și din goană nu-i slăbea !”

result differ based on their moral character, level of obedience, and underlying intentions. Impulsive or malicious characters are punished, while restraint or ethical conduct mitigates or delays catastrophe. The pattern is also visible in *Cerbul de aur* [The golden stag] (Stăncescu, 2010), *Ileana Simziana* (Ispirescu, 1984), and *Broasca țestoasă cea fermecată* [The enchanted turtle] (Ispirescu, 1984), confirming that enchanted water operates as a mechanism of moral sorting, externalizing ethical judgment through narrative consequences. Such structuring aligns with the fairy tale testing function identified by Propp (1968), where differentiation between hero and non-hero emerges through trials and not through declarations. Comparatively, enchanted or poisoned waters are also well attested in Germanic and Slavic fairy tales. In Germanic narratives collected by the Brothers Grimm, forbidden water sources frequently serve as moral traps whose violations result in immediate punishment or enchantment (Grimm & Grimm, 2011).

A particularly relevant example is *Brother and Sister*, which corresponds structurally and thematically to *Cerbul de Aur* [The golden stag] in Stăncescu's collection. In both variants, the interdicted water functions as a decisive moral test, and the act of drinking from the forbidden source leads to the younger sibling's transformation into an animal, thereby initiating prolonged narrative crisis. Slavic fairy tales associate in the same manner dangerous waters with enchantment or death, often linking rivers, springs, or lakes to hostile supernatural entities and framing water crossings as zones of heightened peril (Afanasyev, 2020). In these narratives, water tends to function as an actively antagonistic force, frequently guarded or inhabited by supernatural beings. What distinguishes the Romanian examples, however, including *Cerbul de Aur* [The golden stag] (Stăncescu, 2010), is the economy of dramatization. The water is introduced without ominous atmosphere or supernatural mediation, merely as *rainwater* („apă de ploaie”) gathered in an animal's footprint. No voice emanates from it, no enchantress guards it, no curse is pronounced over it (as it happens in Grimm's *Brother and Sister*). The only marker of danger is the sister's simple warning (“Do not drink, little brother”) and the transformation follows without spectacle (“but he could no longer resist and drank. And as soon as he drank, he turned into a stag” (Stăncescu, 2010, p. 15)), as happens in its Russian fairy tale counterpart, *Sister Alyonushka and Brother Ivanushka* (Afanasyev, 2020). The dramatic charge is thus displaced from the environment onto the ethical act itself.

Enchanted waters are rarely personified or guarded; their danger is communicated through simple interdiction rather than spectacle. This narrative restraint places greater emphasis on ethical choice and responsibility, reinforcing water's role as an instrument of moral testing rather than an externalized supernatural threat. Even when the Romanian tale clearly shares a common narrative core with its Germanic counterpart (both being ATU 450 tale type), the symbolic handling of water reflects a distinct narrative sensibility within the Romanian imaginary.

## 5. Water as an Agent of Transformation. Gendered Configurations

A notably important subset of the Romanian fairy tales analyzed in these collections emphasizes water as a transformative agent, often intersecting with instances of female vulnerability, testing or redefinition. In these stories, water serves not only to cleanse or restore; instead, activities such as immersion, washing, drinking or being near enchanted water lead to changes in physical form, social standing, or existential state. Consequently, transformation is portrayed not as an abrupt magical break but as a process embedded in daily actions linked to care, obedience, or domestic responsibilities. This trend is evident in tales where female protagonists must engage with water as part of a task or challenge, blurring the line between ritual purification and metamorphic danger.

In *Răsplata Sfintei Vineri* [The reward of Saint Friday] (Stăncescu, 2010), water-mediated actions function as a decisive moral and narrative threshold. The female protagonist is instructed to wash a series of animals, an act that combines humility, patience, and bodily proximity. Although the water itself is not enchanted, its narrative function is transformative: the girl's careful washing mediates her passage from a marginal position to reward and recognition. Here, water eases a symbolic reconfiguration of status, not a literal change of form. Correspondingly, in *Fratele Bucăţică* [Brother Morsel] (Stăncescu, 2010), washing and cleansing scenes are closely tied to female endurance and moral discernment. The act of washing becomes a liminal gesture, situating the female character between servitude and elevation. Transformation unfolds gradually, encoded in narrative consequence rather than instantaneous magical effect. These examples suggest that Romanian fairy tales associate water-based tasks assigned to female characters with conditional transformation, a change that emerges over time and through sustained ethical behaviour.

More overt metamorphic dynamics appear in tales involving explicitly enchanted waters. In *Broasca ţestoasă cea fermecată* [The enchanted turtle] (Ispirescu, 1984), contact with pond water mediates a *reversible transformation*, oscillating between human and non-human states. The narrative resists definitive closure: transformation is neither wholly punitive nor fully liberating but remains contingent upon relational bonds and future actions. A similar ambiguity governs *Busuioc şi Musuioc* (Stăncescu, 2010), where drinking water initiates a chain of events affecting identity and recognition. The female character (mother of the tale's heroes) becomes pregnant after merely gazing at young man who was carrying a trough to fetch water. Interpreted as a transgression, this inexplicable conception leads to her expulsion from the parental household. Subsequently, she gives birth to two sons: the first is baptized by God and Saint Peter and named Busuioc, while the second is named Musuioc. Although not exclusively gendered, the narrative situates the female figure as particularly exposed to the consequences of enchanted water, reinforcing its role as a medium through which hidden conditions are revealed or tested.

In *Şarpele moşului* [The old man's snake] (Stăncescu, 2010), the presence of a brook operates as a quiet but persistent *metamorphic threshold*. The water itself does not instigate transformation; rather, it delineates the area where human and non-human entities converge. Female characters perceive this area as one of negotiation instead of domination, highlighting transformation as relational and temporary. After losing her husband due to excessive curiosity, the wife is fated to roam the world dressed entirely in iron garments, which serve as a material representation of penance and resilience. Her journey brings her to Saint Monday's house, a transitional helper figure who facilitates the connection between the human realm and the supernatural. Upon listening to the woman's story, the saint discloses the presence of a nearby brook, along whose banks resides a man accompanied by a fairy. This man persistently asserts that he was once wed to an emperor's daughter. This revelation turns the brook into a significant narrative landmark: a watery threshold where memory, enchantment, and displaced identity intersect. For the heroine, this revelation indicates the nearness of her lost husband and rekindles the potential for narrative restoration, shifting the tale from one of punitive wandering to one of hopeful pursuit. Until this moment, her trajectory is marked by exhaustion and expiation: "being utterly exhausted", she arrives at Saint Monday's house burdened by iron garments that materialize her guilt. The saint's disclosure, that "nearby, there is a small stream, and on its bank stands a man who lives with a fairy; and he keeps saying over and over that he was once married to a king's daughter"<sup>14</sup> (Ispirescu, 1984, p. 136, our translation), transforms

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<sup>14</sup> Original Romanian text: „fiind ostenită prăpădită”, „în apropiere se află o gărlă, şi pe marginea gărlii stă un om care trăieşte cu o zână, şi el tot spune întruna c-a fost însurat c-o fată de împărat.”

geographical space into emotional certainty. The brook is not only a liminal zone but a site of recognition, where displaced identity persists in memory. The heroine's reaction "The girl could barely contain her joy"<sup>15</sup> (Ispirescu, 1984, p. 136, our translation) signals a decisive tonal reversal. Her wandering is no longer a circular punishment but a linear quest. The watery threshold points out the transition from atonement to restoration, from passive endurance to active recovery of the lost marital bond.

Several tales in the database associate *immersion in water* (or merely contact) with a *reconfiguration of female identity*. In *Ileana Simziana* (Ispirescu, 1984), water plays a crucial role in ritualized testing and transformation. Contact with enchanted water precedes changes in the heroine's narrative status, marking her passage from vulnerability to recognition and from liminal existence to social reintegration (as van Gennep, 1960, and Turner, 1969 explain). Here, water does not mediate punishment but *initiation*, enabling a transition that is simultaneously bodily, social, and symbolic. In a similar manner is presented the cursed female figure bound to a water-associated space in *Broasca țestoasă cea fermecată* [The enchanted turtle] (Ispirescu, 1984). The enchanted pond is both a site of concealment and revelation, where the true identity of the transformed woman is disclosed. Notably, the transformation is not instantaneous nor final; instead. It unfolds through repeated encounters with water, emphasizing *process over resolution*. Water sustains the transformation while also holding the potential for its undoing. The fairy herself reveals that her condition is the result of enchantment rather than essence: "and I too am a king's daughter... But the cursed spells have covered our palace with this filthy water."<sup>16</sup> (Ispirescu, 1984, p. 34, our translation). While water works initially as concealment, submerging both palace and identity beneath its surface, the same aquatic space becomes the medium for disclosure and restoration. When she invokes the customary pre-marital bath ("It is our custom... to take a bath"<sup>17</sup>), the pond withdraws, revealing the hidden palaces, and immersion in the prepared baths precedes her luminous reappearance. Only after this ritual purification does the visible sign of her restored status emerge: "a morning star settled upon her forehead"<sup>18</sup> (p. 34, our translation).

Therefore, transformation is sustained, negotiated, and ritually completed through water. It is not a single magical rupture, but a gradual reconfiguration of identity mediated by concealment, revelation, and purification. In Romanian folk custom, the ritual of pre-marital bathing for the bride and groom serves as both a practical and symbolic act of purification. Typically performed in natural running waters (rivers) or prepared waters (drawn baths), the bath functions as a liminal space in which physical cleansing mirrors spiritual and social renewal: impurities and misfortunes are ritually washed away, while the couple is ritually prepared to enter communal life (Marian, 2019). Although bathing rituals appear in several Romanian fairy tales, they do not always involve water directly. In *Ileana Simziana* (Ispirescu, 1984), the heroine demands that a bath be prepared before marriage, specifying that it must contain the milk of her mares, thus deliberately replacing water with milk, a substance traditionally associated with fertility, nourishment, and abundance. The milk is itself linked to an earlier trial that the hero completed before the ritual bathing took place. This substitution suggests that the symbolic logic of purification in Romanian fairy tales extends beyond water alone, incorporating other life-giving liquids that signal renewal and transition. Consequently, while the scene participates in a broader ritual framework of bodily preparation before social transformation, it does not exemplify water symbolism in a strict sense.

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<sup>15</sup> Original Romanian text: „Pe față n-o mai încăpea casa de bucurie.”

<sup>16</sup> Original Romanian text: „și eu sunt față de împărat... Dară blestematele de farmece ne-a acoperit palaturile cu apa aceasta murdară.”

<sup>17</sup> Original Romanian text: „La noi este obiceiul... să ne îmbăiem.”

<sup>18</sup> Original Romanian text: „un luceafăr se așază pe fruntea ei”

Comparable motifs are attested in Germanic and Slavic fairy tales, most notably in *Brother and Sister* (Grimm & Grimm, 2011) and *Sister Alyonushka and Brother Ivanushka* (Afanasyev, 2020), direct analogues of *Cerbul de aur* [The golden stag] (Stăncescu, 2010), where drinking enchanted water results in animal transformation. Similarly, in *Mother Holle* (Grimm & Grimm, 2011), water-mediated labor functions as a crucial moral and narrative threshold. The diligent girl is tasked with shaking feathers from beds, a chore that entails attentiveness, perseverance, and close physical engagement. While the act does not involve magical transformation of her body, it sets the stage for a symbolic elevation: her steadfast work earns her reward and social recognition. As in *Răsplata Sfintei Vineri* [The reward of Saint Friday], the completion of various tasks (ones that also test her kindness) facilitates a passage from marginalization to acknowledged virtue, emphasizing the role of humble, patient labor in narrative and moral structuring. However, Romanian narratives tend to soften the finality of transformation, favouring ambiguity, reversibility, and moral endurance over irreversible enchantment.

## 6. Resurrection Waters and Deferred Restoration

In the examined corpus, water seldom functions as a means of immediate resurrection. Instead, it mediates processes of suspension, preservation, and gradual restoration, prioritizing delayed narrative repair over instantaneous reversal of death and enchantment. This restrained deployment sets resurrection waters apart as exceptional, placing them within wider patterns of ethical testing and endurance. A notable example can be found in *Voinicul fără de tată* [The stalwart without a father] (Ispirescu, 1984), where *water of death* is not used to revive the hero but to reassemble and preserve the body after dismemberment. Restoration remains conditional and incomplete until further narrative actions take place. Water thus signifies a transitional state between annihilation and recovery, emphasizing process over outcome. The tale foregrounds the fragility of revival and frames resurrection as hard-earned, multi-staged achievement not as a magical certainty.

A related, though less explicit, logic governs *Sur-Vultur* (Stăncescu, 2010), where the well functions as a site of loss, recognition, and symbolic restoration. Instead of reviving the dead, water facilitates the recovery of genealogical knowledge and disrupted identity. The restorative function operates at the level of narrative meaning, allowing lineage and social position to be reconstituted before any material resolution occurs. The well thus participates in a mode of deferred restoration that privileges epistemic and symbolic repair.

In *Aleodor împărat* [Emperor Aleodor] (Ispirescu, 1984), immersion in water works as a symbolic death, followed by re-emergence and renewed agency. Although no literal resurrection takes place, the sequence reproduces the *structural logic of annihilation and return*. Water operates as an initiatory medium that temporarily suspends the hero's status, enabling his transformation in a grasshopper through ordeal not through miraculous intervention. In a quite position is the hero of the homonymous tale *Irimia* (Stăncescu, 2010); the sea prolongs narrative crisis by delaying resolution and exposing the protagonist to repeated danger. Survival itself becomes a form of restoration, achieved through endurance, not necessarily enchantment. Water here resists closure, reinforcing the Romanian fairy tale tendency to stretch recovery across extended narrative sequences.

A distinctive and remarkable variant of water-mediated transformation appears in *Busuioc și Musuioc* (Stăncescu, 2010), a tale previously discussed. Water does not only suspend death at the end of the fairy tale or enable restoration but becomes the site of a definitive ontological decision. Following Musuioc's drowning at the hands of his brother, driven by jealousy and misrecognition, Busuioc plunges into the lake out of remorse,

anticipating his own demise. However, the submerged environment reveals itself to be non-lethal and entirely inhabitable: Musuioc survives beneath the water, and reconciliation becomes possible solely within the aquatic realm. Notably, divine intervention does not compel a return to the human world. While God bestows forgiveness and presents the opportunity for reintegration into earthly existence, both brothers decline, expressing their weariness with the moral decay of the world above. Their decision to remain submerged transforms the lake into a permanent alternative residence rather than a mere transitional threshold. In this part of the tale, water ceases to act as a medium of passage or delayed restoration but enables a *radical narrative closure* through withdrawal. The aquatic world is not a stage to be traversed but a sanctuary of ethical refuge, where reconciliation is achieved without reintegration. Ethically, their choice reflects a profound negotiation of responsibility and moral agency: they accept the consequences of past transgressions while refusing to participate in a society whose values they no longer endorse:

At that moment, behold, God and Saint Peter were at the bottom of the lake.  
— Peter, said God to the saint.  
— Yes, Lord!  
— Hey, aren't those our godchildren over there, embracing each other?  
And he put his hand to his forehead to see more clearly.  
— Yes, they are, Lord, said Saint Peter, looking closely as well.  
— But what are you doing here, godchildren?  
— We are seeking your forgiveness, Lord, said Busuioc, for look at the sin we have committed.  
And he told God about the wrongdoing he had done.  
— Forgive him, Lord, for he did not know what he was doing, prayed Musuioc.  
— He is forgiven! said the good Lord... But don't you want to return to the earth?  
— As for me, I am fed up, Lord, with the wrongdoings on earth, said Busuioc.  
— And I too, Lord, said Musuioc.  
— It is better that we remain here, both spoke in unison.  
— Remain you shall, said God, if that is your wish.  
And so, they remained until this day, for they never went back out<sup>19</sup> (Stăncescu, 2010, pp. 86-87, our translation).

This voluntary immersion exemplify an extreme form of restraint in Romanian fairy tales: restoration is offered but declined, and water envelops the characters into a liminal permanence that resists normative narrative return. This episode thus expands the logic of deferred restoration previously outlined, demonstrating that in the Romanian fairy tale imaginary water may preserve the possibility of return while, at the same time, legitimizing its refusal.

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<sup>19</sup> Original Romanian text: „În vremea asta iacă Dumnezeu și Sfântul Petre prin fundul lacului.

— Petre, zise Dumnezeu către sfânt.

— Poruncă, Doamne!

— Măi, nu sînt finii noștri ăia de se îmbrățișează colo? Și puse mîna la frunte să vadă mai bine.

— Ba ei sînt, Doamne, zise Sfîntul Petre uitîndu-se și el bine.

— Dar ce căutați p-aici, finilor?

— Iertare de la tine, Doamne, căutăm, zise Busuioc, că uite ce păcat am făcut. Și spuse lui Dumnezeu nelegiuirea ce săvârșise.

— Iartă-l, Doamne, că n-a știut ce face, se rugă Musuioc.

— Iertat să fie! zise bunul Dumnezeu... Ei! dar nu mai vreți să ieșiți pe pămînt?

— Eu unul sînt sătul, Doamne, de neleguirile după pămînt, zise Busuioc.

— Și eu, Doamne, zise Musuioc.

— Mai bine rămînem aici, grăiră amîndoi într-un glas.

— Rămăși să fiți, zise Dumnezeu, de voiți așa. Și rămăși au fost pînă în ziua de azi, că n-au mai ieșit.”

Another complex instance of deferred restoration is found in narratives where death is not a singular event, but a repeated condition and revival unfolds through successive metamorphic stages. In one such tale, *Înșir-te mărgărite cu dalbe flori aurite* [Unfold yourself, pearls with fair golden blossoms] (Stăncescu, 2010), the children of the imperial couple are killed multiple times, reemerging first in non-human forms (tree or animals) before their final restoration to human existence. Water plays a decisive mediating role in this process. After the children's remains are cast aside near a brook, a surge of water carries part of them downstream where it becomes lodged in the branches of a tree. When the water recedes, the remains generate new life: two children emerge, already bearing the tools and attributes of human labor and culture. Restoration, however, is not immediate nor miraculous in the conventional sense. It is achieved gradually, through vegetal and animal intermediaries and only reaches completion after lengthy displacement and repeated loss. Water thus functions not as a direct agent of resurrection, but as a preserving and redistributive force that enables life to reconstitute itself over time. The narrative emphasizes endurance and continuity, not immediate revival, reinforcing the Romanian fairy tale preference for postponed and processual restoration.

Same situation is found in the fairy tale named *Dan și bivoliă ai albi* [Dan and the white oxen] (Stăncescu, 2010), where water is an agent of enchanted preservation. Dan, whose apparent destruction culminates not in annihilation but in metamorphic survival is condemned to be burned; the hero transforms himself into a spark, entrusting an old woman with the task of carrying it out to a nearby brook. Once cast into the water, the spark becomes a golden duck, whose precious materiality and gem-like eyes signal its enchanted status. Therefore, water suspends the finality of death, converting fire's destructive force into a new non-human form of existence. The brook is a protective medium in which identity is displaced rather than erased, allowing Dan to persist in an altered embodiment.

A further articulation of water's enchanted and quasi-sacred function appears in narratives where it promises radical renewal without guaranteeing fulfilment. In the tale *Fântâna Sticlișoarei* [Sticlișoara's Fountain] (Stăncescu, 2010), water is attributed rejuvenating properties: it is said to restore those who wash in it to the age of twelve. The emperor's yearning for this water stems not from a collective necessity but from a profound attachment to life and authority. While the fountain is depicted as having remarkable power, the story presents it as remote and challenging to reach, thereby converting rejuvenation into a postponed and conditional prospect rather than an instantaneous miracle. Water acts less as a spontaneous agent of renewal and more as a catalyst for a quest and moral revelation. Its sacred nature resides not only in its promise of transformation but also in its ability to challenge human perspectives on aging, power, and mortality. Consequently, the enchanted fountain aligns with the Romanian fairy tale tradition of moderating miraculous potential through narrative delay, ensuring that renewal is ethically and narratively mediated rather than freely granted.

As we can observe, water consistently mediates restoration indirectly: bodies are preserved, identities are recovered, agency is regained but rarely through a single, spectacular act. This pattern suggests a cultural preference for narrative moderation, in which transformation unfolds gradually, and restoration remains contingent upon moral, physical, or temporal trials. In contrast, Germanic and Slavic fairy tales more frequently deploy resurrection waters as explicit and efficient magical devices. In Afanasyev's *Sister Alyonushka and Brother Ivanushka* and Grimm's *Brother and Sister*, enchanted water effects immediate and visible transformation, while other Grimm narratives make recurrent use of *water of life* to reverse death decisively. A similar structuring of water as a site of moral and narrative testing appears in the Brothers Grimm tale *The Water of Life*. Like the fountain of Sticlișoara, the magical water promises radical renewal—in this case, the restoration of the ailing king's health, but only through the mediation of human effort and virtue. The youngest son's quest demonstrates that

access to the water is contingent on humility, perseverance, and ethical comportment, rather than on entitlement or authority.

From an ethical perspective, both tales underline the transformation is inseparable from the cultivation of virtue: the water's power is exercised in tandem with moral responsibility, and its rewards are contingent upon ethical action as much as upon questing skill. The water's transformative potential is therefore deferred and conditional, echoing the Sticlișoara motif: renewal is never automatic but must be earned, and the narrative rewards moral discernment alongside successful completion of the quest. Both tales emphasize that enchanted water functions less as an immediate miracle and more as a test of character, structuring the moral and narrative passage from aspiration to reward.

Slavic fairy tales collected by Afanasyev (2020) similarly feature paired waters of death and life, whose functions are clearly differentiated and narratively conclusive. Both the Russian tale *The Bold Knight, the Apples of Youth, and the Water of Life* (Afanasyev, 2020) and Stăncescu's *Fountain of Sticlișoara* exemplify the motif of resurrection waters and deferred restoration, in which water possesses the potential to heal, rejuvenate, or restore life, but only through a conditional and ethically mediated process. The Russian fairy tale is a very convoluted story, but the water of life can restore the youngest prince and his beloved to full health and wholeness, but only after a series of perilous trials, betrayal by the older brothers, and the intervention of patient ingenuity. In both narratives, the waters' transformative power is deferred, serving as a narrative mechanism that tests perseverance, virtue, and ethical judgment, reinforcing the idea that miraculous restoration is neither immediate nor unearned. What distinguishes the Romanian examples analysed here is not the absence of these motifs, but their narrative containment. Resurrection, when present, is delayed, partial or symbolic. Water does not dominate the plot through miraculous efficiency; instead, it marks transitional states and preserves the possibility of restoration without guaranteeing it. The restraint reinforces the ethical and experiential dimension of the narrative, aligning recovery with endurance rather than enchantment.

## 7. Conclusions

This article has examined the symbolic, narrative, and ethical functions of water in a selected corpus of Romanian fairy tales collected by Stăncescu (2010) and Ispirescu (1984), with comparative reference to Germanic and Slavic traditions where relevant. The analysis conceptualizes water as a multifaceted narrative agent, operating through distinct yet interrelated functions that contribute to both narrative structure and moral articulation. Across the corpus, water emerges first and foremost as a liminal medium. Rivers, brooks, wells and lakes consistently mark thresholds between worlds, states of being, or phases of the narrative. Passage through or contact with water signals transition instead of resolution, initiating processes of testing, transformation, or displacement. This liminal function situates water as a structural organizer of narrative movement rather than a passive backdrop.

Secondly, water frequently operates as an instrument of moral testing. Enchanted or forbidden waters activate narrative crisis not through inherent hostility, but through interdiction and transgression. Drinking, bathing, or approaching the wrong water sources produces immediate consequences, thereby externalizing ethical judgment through symbolic environments. This pattern aligns with fairy tale morphology while retaining a distinctive economy of expression within the Romanian tradition.

The analysis has further shown that water functions as a powerful agent of transformation, particularly in relation to female figures. Immersion, washing, or proximity to enchanted water often precedes shifts in bodily form, social position, or marital status, with

rare absolute or instantaneous transformations. Romanian fairy tales privilege gradual, ambiguous, or reversible metamorphoses, allowing identity to remain fluid across narrative stages.

A central contribution to this study is its examination of resurrection waters and deferred restoration. Although motifs of revival occur, water seldom produces immediate or unconditional resurrection. Instead, it preserved bodies, identities, or possibilities of return, enabling restoration only through extended narrative effort; sometimes, water becomes a space of permanent withdrawal as we can observe in *Busuioc și Musuioc* (Stăncescu, 2010), differentiating Romanian fairy tales from their German or Slavic counterparts.

The article also identifies a restrained but significant destructive or chaotic function of water. Romanian fairy tales avoid cosmic floods or total annihilation, favouring localized rupture instead: drowning, irreversible transformation or long exposure to danger. Even here, chaos remains narratively contained and ethically productive, generating endurance or displacement, not collapse. Sacred and enchanted waters – such as the rejuvenating fountain of Sticlișoara – further reveal water’s capacity to promise renewal. Access is distant, conditional, and morally charged.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Romanian fairy tales articulate a distinctive water symbolism marked by narrative restraint, ethical mediation, and processual transformation. Water rarely resolves conflict directly; instead, it suspends, tests, preserves, or redirects narrative. In contrast to traditions emphasizing spectacular enchantment or miraculous reversal, Romanian fairy tales integrate water into a disciplined symbolic economy in which meaning unfolds gradually and restoration remains contingent. By foregrounding water as a dynamic agent, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Romanian fairy tales poetics and offers a framework for future comparative research, including extensions to other regional corpora or intersections with ritual, gender, and space imagery.

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