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EMANCIPATORY FEMALE FIGURES IN MACEDONIAN FOLKLORE OR A FEMINIST RE-READING OF THE-SHIFT-OF-SEX MOTIF AND THE-WOMAN-WARRIOR MOTIF

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Abstract: This paper examines the identification and analysis of several subversive female (and transgender) figures in Macedonian folklore, whose narratives, choices, trials and resolutions, along with the pedagogical messages they convey and the subversive potential they have carried across centuries, challenge the traditionalist and patriarchal values typically reproduced through folklore. Although statistically marginal when compared to the numerous characters that reinforce conventional gender norms and the socially prescribed role of women, these selected female figures embody the emancipatory potential of negativity. They construct an imagologically and symbolically rich counter-narrative which, on both pedagogical and ideological levels, serves as a remarkably potent counterbalance.

The analysis focuses on female characters who undergo gender transformation (motif AT 514), as well as examples involving episodes of transvestism and androgyny, as seen in figures such as the maiden-soldier, the maiden-warrior, and similar variants (motif AT 884B).

Keywords: folklore, subversion, patriarchy, gender

Tales centered on female characters who are forced to conceal their gender and live disguised as men and later, through a curse (rarely, a blessing), are physically transformed into men are present across many cultural traditions. In Macedonian folklore, several variations of this narrative exist, all of which share a common plot structure. Typically, the story begins with a father departing, bidding farewell to his pregnant wife with the expectation that she will bear him a son. He threatens that, should she give birth to a daughter, he will kill her (in some versions, he threatens to kill the child or commands the mother to do so herself). The woman gives birth alone, delivers a daughter, and decides to conceal the child's sex, raising her as if she were a boy. Upon the father's return, the mother and daughter succeed in maintaining the deception for several years, until the father eventually decides that his "son" is of marriageable age. Despite the "son's" protests – claiming to be too young for marriage – the father arranges a wedding. As the marriage remains unconsummated, the bride complains to her father-in-law, who, ashamed of his son's apparent inability, sends him on a series of perilous quests meant to result in his death. These trials often involve encounters with magical beasts and creatures, while the daughter's magical horse frequently serves as her helper

or guide. The protagonist overcomes these challenges, but following the third ordeal, she is typically cursed by a supernatural being (often a chthonic figure such as a *lamia*, a woodland fairy [*vila*, *samodiva*], or a serpent) and transformed into a man as punishment. Transformed into a male, she returns, punishes his father, and ultimately consummates his marriage.

The trials endured by the protagonist are, in fact, initiatory challenges. Upon successfully overcoming them, the neophyte (the girl) reaches a successful initiatory outcome: she is transformed into a man (Стојановиќ-Лафазановска 2001: 279). Lafazanovska identifies variations in the nature of these initiatory trials across different versions of the tale:

> In the tale recorded by Šapkarev (example no. 95), the hero – a girl must reach a spring guarded by two wild horses. Subsequent trials include a fairy pumpkin hanging from the sky, suspended by a chain. Ultimately, the curse that resolves all initiatory entanglements is pronounced by the youngest of the three woodland fairies (*samodivi*). In the version collected by Verković (example no. 37), the trials include the search for the water of life, the taming of a wild mare, and the retrieval of the golden apple from the *lamia*'s garden. In this variant, the gender transformation is the result of a curse cast by the *lamia*, whose golden apples have been stolen by the protagonist: "Ah, God! Who has torn the branch with the ten apples? If it is a woman, let her become a man; if it is a man, let him become a woman" (4, 1985: 201). In a second tale from Verković's collection (example no. 69), additional motifs appear, such as the magical horse given as a gift by the king of snakes, and the golden apple guarded by serpents. As in the previous version, the metamorphosis is again caused by a curse, this time by a snake whose golden apple has been stolen by the heroine-hero: "Ah! For nine hundred years I have guarded the golden apple, and now it has been stolen from me! Whoever stole it – if a man, let him become a woman; if a woman, let her become a man" (4, 1985: 331)

(Стојановиќ-Лафазановска 2001: 279).[1]

At the very outset of the tale, power relations are established in which the man (the father) embodies the patriarchy in its' most brutal form, as the one who calmly determines who shall live and who shall die. From the beginning of the action, expressed through language and the father's verbalizations and declarations, the values of the Symbolic Order[2] are revealed to the reader. In contrast, the mother appears as the embodiment of the crack within this order, a disruption further emphasized by her silent

[1] The translation from Macedonian is by the author.

[2] For more on the Lacanian concepts of the formation of the Symbolic Order, the constitution of the subject, and rupture as a constitutive element of the subject and the process of separation, see L. Frčkoska. 2025. *Kolizija na emancipatorskite i konzervativni ideologii vo sovremenite bajki za deca i mladi*. Skopje: UKIM [doktorska disertacija] (L. Frčkoska. 2025. *The Collision of Emancipatory and Conservative Ideologies in Contemporary Fairy Tales for Children and Young Adults*. Ss. "Cyril and Methodius" University in Skopje [Doctoral thesis]).

subversion and covert actions. The mother decides to give birth in secrecy and to conceal the truth about her child's gender, keeping it hidden. Her subversion lies in the conscious choice to defy the mandates of the Symbolic Order, acting quietly but deliberately against it. The Mother further appears as the embodiment of the Lacanian idea of rupture, since her primary decision to quietly resist results in the upbringing and formation of a figure who later transforms into a man (the new patriarch).

Through the successful sexual relation with his wife, he is further confirmed as a man, and within the household (as a microcosm and an extended line of the system) he inherits the father's position as the new head of the family. Yet immediately afterward, he directly opposes him, criticizing his previous actions. In both the first and the second versions, out of the three variants of the fairy tale recorded by Vroclavski (Вроцлавски 1984, st. no. 15 [I – III]), the son expels the father, having previously problematized his treatment of the mother, his threats to kill her if she were to bear a daughter, as well as his sending the son to perish. Through such confrontation, she breaks the old values and establishes new ones.

Already in the first few sentences of the tale, relations of power are both established and subtly undermined. Psyche Z. Ready, in her analysis of motif AT 514 (Ready 2021), examining similar variants of this tale, identifies a primary and a secondary (i.e., obscure, coded) narrative. While the primary would be a reading of the tale outside a social context, or simply as "the adventures of a transsexual protagonist that culminate in his transformation into a man" (Ready 2021: 229), the secondary narrative is an obscure and coded expression of the threats and restrictions imposed by the patriarchal system (Ready 2021: 229). According to her, the primary narrative of the tale establishes a playful context under which are buried the agonies produced by the patriarchal system and the gender-restricted roles it distributes into six sub-themes: strict rules of marriage, limited mobility, heterosexism, gender stereotypes, femicide, and violent patriarchs. These themes are already evident in the very dialogue between the parents.

Of course, a key theme of the secondary narrative intended for recipients living in a period when patriarchy and gender roles were far more strictly established than today, though not directly thematized, is ever-present: the theme of gender change. And not presented more subtly, for example, as a sense of androgyny, an episode of transvestism, or gender or sexual ambiguity (themes that this tale certainly opens up), but as a literal, physical change of sex. Furthermore, this tale raises perfectly contemporary (and at the same time timeless) questions that today are being intensely re-actualized: the distinction between sex as a biological category versus gender as a psychological and emotional one; their overlap, but also their divergence; gender fluidity; the impossibility of choosing 'just one'. In this way, the indirect (secondary) opening of the theme and the posing of questions about potential gender fluctuations – opposed to the conservative and patriarchal idea of binary pairs and clear, fixed identities – renders this

tale exceptionally subversive. Moreover, considering that folklore often serves as an argument within conservative ideologies, used to attest to 'how it has always been' and given that this is a folkloric creation, the question arises whether the idea of gender as a separate category, independent of sex, has long been present in Macedonian narrative tradition. The tendency of this fairy tale to pose questions without offering a clear answer, which is not common in folklore, makes it the subject of opposing interpretations. In an attempt to reduce the interpretations of this fairy tale to two dominant lines, Ready notes that one group of feminist critics believes that the fairy tale essentially reinforces heteronormative and sexist patriarchal gender-restrictive roles (Ready 2021: 221–222). This position is likely based on the ending of the tale, namely on the fact that the confrontation with the father is preceded by the daughter's change of gender. Thus, it is not the daughter but the son who undermines his authority. In this way, the system is not completely brought to its knees and transformed into something fundamentally different, since the figure of power and authority remains a man, while the merits (the three previously successfully completed trials) were accomplished by a woman. In other words, for the patriarchal symbol of power – the father – to be dethroned, a male successor – the son – must appear. The opposing thesis to this is that the message of the fairy tale represents a threat to the patriarchal system, because "the protagonist of ATU 514 is a transgressive character with transgender capacity and that the tale approves and rewards these transgressions through the concluding happily-ever-after" (Ready 2021: 222). Fairy tales often, through the consequences that follow transgressive behavior, convey the message that surpassing socially established restrictions usually comes at a high price, and that the Symbolic order continuously attempts to reassert itself and to swallow up the small and hard-won spaces of freedom. Thus, another variant, often the resolution in the tale of the maiden-soldier, is the re-establishment of the previous gender restrictions after they had been displaced. In the more commonly attested version of that tale, the girl disguises herself as a soldier, becomes the best soldier, successfully overcomes several distinctly "male" trials, and then meets a prince who falls in love with her and she becomes his bride. Here, the system allows a small departure from the expectations tied to female characters, but only to re-established them through marriage as the happy ending. But these tales convey the message that transvestism and gender fluidity are merely episodes after which the woman once again becomes aware of herself and joyfully accepts the previously established female identity. Nevertheless, the shift and the act of taking on the role of a soldier (or, in some versions, a duke), although limited in duration, certainly carry an emancipatory pedagogy with regard to the idea of the woman's position and role. However, in the case of gender transformation, the happy ending granted as a reward for the change constitutes a profoundly subversive form of

pedagogy. According to Ready "this radical story has accompanied humanity for generations, being told and retold across the world. I believe that because of its transgressions of assigned gender and gender roles, this tale type creates a space in which radical, non-normative, and transgender selfhoods are not only possible but also deserving of happy endings" (Ready 2021: 222). What is particularly interesting for interpretation is that the version of this tale found in Macedonian folklore opens space for additional, even contradictory, readings of its pedagogy. Namely, the change of sex occurs as the result of a curse cast by a dragon (*lamja*), a serpent, or a *samodiva* (a synonym for *villa*), that is, by a being that is either chthonic (the dragon and serpent in most folklore appear as negative symbolizations of Otherness) or that operates within a liminal, morally and ethically ambiguous domain (the *samodiva*). In other words, what transforms the daughter into a son is a curse which later turns out to function as a blessing for her. It is precisely here, perhaps, that one can discern the patriarchal pedagogy of folklore, which does not allow the happy ending of a transgender figure to be articulated as an explicit blessing. Thus, despite the tale's striking subversiveness, certain patriarchal values still persist within it. Taken out of context, if we consider only the moment of transformation, there are folktales from other cultural traditions in which this very change is directly the result of a blessing. Some of these tales are noted by Stojanović-Lafazanovska:

> After presenting the variants from narrative folklore, Polívka turns to the analogous motif, offering a recapitulation of the most significant examples from the history of world literature, placing particular emphasis on ancient Eastern literature (Indian), and then on the classical period (Ovid's 'Metamorphoses'). He discusses the case of Ligdus, who, much like in our own examples, threatens his wife that he will kill her if she gives birth to a daughter. Consequently, their girl is named Iphis and raised as a boy. The gender transformation in this story is brought about by a goddess. Polívka then proceeds to examples from Western European medieval literature, where, though motivated differently, this motif still appears in recognizable form (see Polívka 1927: 19–22). Moreover, the cited variants from Western European medieval literature closely resemble the types of stories classified as AT 881 A, 883 A, and 510 B, because in them the girl's cross-dressing as a boy is prompted by the perversity of her incestuous father. In one variant, in accordance with the medieval dualistic concept of good and evil, the figure of an angel appears, announcing that God, through His mercy, changes the girl's sex and thus resolves this initiatory conflict. In the related Italian variant, during the verification of the bride-groom girl's sex in the bath, a lioness appears, leading the heroine into the forest and effecting the transformation in the guise of an angel. In the related French chanson, a white stag appears – the Archangel Michael (1927: 21–22). All of this provides further support for our position regarding the universally widespread phenomenon under discussion
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> (Стојановиќ-Лафазановска 2001: 280).

Ready identifies a further intensified element of blessing, reminiscent of a baptismal ritual, in a Chilean variant of the tale entitled *Florinda*.

> In Florinda the protagonist carries a beloved crucifix with them everywhere, and when they face the final test of nudity, the crucifix came flying over the waters. With that, Florinda stood up in the river and found herself turned into a man (Pino – Saavedra 107)
>
> (Ready 2021: 221–222).

Additionally, interesting for the analysis is the process of moving from gender ambiguity toward gender change. At the beginning, the girl is forced to be disguised as a boy and to adapt, that is, to internalize the behavior considered characteristic of male children. Certain interpretative approaches suggest that this tale draws from traditions (present in several cultural traditions, including in India, Afghanistan [where this tradition is called *bacha posh*], the Middle East, Albania, Montenegro), where in families without male children, one girl, most often one of the younger ones, would be raised and brought up as if she were a boy. According to Propp, myths undergo transformation when social attitudes toward a given custom change, so here, what was once regarded as tradition, through the figure of the father, is interpreted as a necessary consequence of violence. When the father returns, the daughter refuses to marry, and when she is compelled to wed, she refuses to have physical relations with her wife. The first elements of gender ambiguity are recognized, the father forces her to leave the household, and she must undergo three trials. The departure from home may also be interpreted as a departure from the rules imposed by the system, as well as a gradual process of liberation. In the variants of the tale recorded by Vroclavski (1984, st. no. 15 [I – III]), the daughter possesses a magical foal. The first trial she overcomes, following the foal's advice, is to saddle a magical mare in such a way that it does not devour her. The second time, she succeeds in intoxicating and chaining several dragons. The third time, she rides her father's fairy-horse and manages to break a branch from a tree growing in the middle of a lake guarded by a *lamia*. The *lamia* becomes enraged but fails to catch her, and in turn curses her. Riding a magical horse, saddling a furious horse, and incapacitating dragons are images and motifs typically associated with male heroes in fairy tales. Here, however, they are successfully accomplished by a woman which, considering the fortunate resolution of circumstances in her favor, may be interpreted as the first signs of gender ambiguity. The gradation in the complexity of the trials can be read as symbolizing the gradation of her gradual transformation from woman to man.

The Russian formalist Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp, in his seminal study *The Historical Roots of the Fairy Tale*, concludes that the majority of fairy tales originate from initiation rituals. This tale is undoubtedly an initiation tale – that is, one concerned with the symbolic, but also essential,

transition from one stage to another and the acquisition of a new, higher status within the group. Analyzing variants of initiation in oral literature, Stojanović-Lafazanovska observes that here "the protagonist – the neophyte – must always encounter death, must die, in order to be born again. Most often, the symbolism of death is expressed precisely through the metaphor of the lower world, the underworld, the devouring of the neophyte by some monster, and similar motifs" (Стојановиќ-Лафазановска 2001: 20). With regard to initiations in general, regardless of their classification (tribal, initiation into secret societies, or religious), she notes that "all the above-mentioned initiations share a common specificity: in all of them we discover symbolic death and rebirth into a new, higher form" (Стојановиќ Лафазановска 2001: 25). For contemporary Macedonian folk creativity, she identifies puberty, heroic, and wedding initiation as the most paradigmatic (Стојановиќ Лафазановска 2001: 25).

In the present case, initiation entails a symbolic death (of the neophyte – in this instance, the girl) and a rebirth on another level (the son). The very fact that the metamorphosis of gender occurs as the result of a curse uttered by the dragon recalls initiatory encounters with the monster, which symbolically devours the protagonist, after which he is reborn. On a deeper level of analysis, the motif of gender transformation in the fairy tale under consideration constitutes a hybrid form, combining elements of both pubertal and heroic initiation. Pubertal initiation, in the sense of the transition from childhood to sexual maturity, is subtly suggested through the successful sexual union, although the fairy tale explicitly states that the daughter avoids intercourse while still biologically a woman. Heroic initiation, as she successfully overcomes the three ordeals, displaying the attributes of the male hero, such as riding a magical horse and subduing dragons. Yet, the key form of initiation, which transcends the other three manifestations, is, of course, the metamorphosis of gender itself. Since initiation generally entails the passage from a lower to a higher status, one of the implied messages that the recipient of the tale is expected to grasp is that the woman has succeeded in attaining a higher social position – that of a man. However, this is but a small part of the pedagogical dimension carried by this fairy tale. The position of the man is here achieved through the woman's successful passage through three (in some versions two) traditionally male trials, which fundamentally destabilizes the foundations of gender-based roles and restrictions. In other words, the woman already carries male capacities within herself before she is transformed into a man. Or, as Stojanović-Lafazanovska concludes in her analysis of this motif "the category of man and woman is neither homogeneous nor statically universal, but rather a heterogeneous, stratified category that may assume different forms and occupy various positions and roles both synchronically and diachronically. All of this points to the specific historical dynamics of gender relations, where the relation of subordination and domination can

vary in accordance with different cultural patterns of masculinity and femininity” (Стојановиќ-Лафазановска 2001: 286–287).

The motif of gender change carries exceptional hermeneutic potential, and through various methods of its deconstruction important questions arise regarding the ideology and political nature of the motif. In this context, Ready’s perspective is interesting – the approach to the character of the girl who changes her gender as a trickster figure. According to *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*, the female trickster starts as an amorphous being, he gradually discovers his own identity, oscillating between female and male, but eventually preferring his masculinity. This gives him a higher degree of autonomy and mobility in the public sphere, allowing him to mock and subvert the existing political, social, and economic structures. (…) Frequently, female tricksters transgress the boundaries between men’s and women’s spheres and enter public space. These figures represent women’s struggle for autonomy from men (Fernandez 2008: 994). Apart from the trickster traits of mocking and relativizing firmly established categories and power relations, the existence of a character who changes gender, spends a period as a transvestite (regardless of whether they fully transform into the opposite sex or return to their biological one), subtly opens up the theme of androgyny and potential gender fluidity – the possibilities the character may carry before finally manifesting them physically. This once again leads us back to the theme of unstable identities. Marjorie Garber, similarly, argues that the presence of a cross-dressing character in a text “indicates a category crisis elsewhere, an irresolvable conflict or epistemological crux that destabilizes comfortable binarity, and displaces the resulting discomfort onto a figure that already inhabits, indeed incarnates, the margin” (Garber 1992: 17). “One of the most consistent and effective functions of the transvestite in culture is to indicate the place of what I call ‘category crisis’, disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances” writes Garber (1992: 16).

By successfully navigating challenges that are inherently coded as male while still identifying as a woman – prior to the final transition of gender – the daughter exposes the absurdity of rigid gender role divisions. In doing so, she highlights the fundamental porosity where patriarchy insists on strict distinctions. While patriarchy enforces an exaggerated separation between the categories of male and female – emphasized through power relations in the initial dialogue between the father and the mother – the daughter draws attention to the inherent problems of such rigid categorization.

What is important to emphasize is that, considering the history of art, mythology, and global folk literature, this fairy tale – in its various versions – reveals the porosity of boundaries, specifically the supposedly firm and clearly defined boundary between genders. The persistent recurrence of this theme in the literature of the ancient world, along with the scholarly and

critical interest it continues to generate, suggests that it remains a latent – albeit rarely included in commercially curated or children's fairy tale collections – yet enduring subject of inquiry. According to American folklorist Alan Dundes, folklore provides a socially sanctioned framework for articulating critical issues that provoke collective anxiety (Петрушевски 2014: 54). In this context, the folkloric narrative operates on two levels: as a mechanism for releasing repressed emotions and as a tool for denying those same emotions when they are deemed socially unacceptable within prevailing behavioral norms.

The marginal, yet consistent, presence of the ATU 514 motif suggests that the theme – as well as the associated emotions and the desire for gender transformation – is as old as culture itself. While it provokes anxiety within the collective (in Macedonian variants, the transformation is often the result of a curse from a chthonic being), for the individual who experiences psychological, emotional, or even practical need for change, it is a blessing. Dundes's interpretation aligns with that of Kay Turner, Pauline Greenhill, and Jennifer Anderson-Grégoire, who argue that this motif "expresses transgender imagination and transgender possibility quite explicitly throughout" (Greenhill & Anderson-Grégoire 2014: 63). For them, transgender imagination is defined as "thinking about or expressing the idea that a person, self or other, is or could be a different sex/gender than it appears" (Greenhill & Anderson-Grégoire 2014: 56).

If we wish to engage in a more detailed analysis of this fairy tale, certain elements concerning the daughter's – and later the son's – relationship to sex can be interpreted through the perspective of Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill. In their study *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*, the authors argue that the fairy tale owes much of its longevity to contingencies and contradictions associated with desire and pleasure. "We might even say that the fairytale genre conjured the postmodern in its early signaling of the contingent nature of signs and systems of representation, especially in the realm of sex and social relations" (Turner & Greenhill 2012: 22). In the context of the tale's contradictory relationship to pleasure, a transformation in the protagonist's attitude toward sex becomes particularly evident. While still female, the very idea of sexual intimacy is rejected; however, once transformed into a male, sexual intercourse with the bride becomes the first act that affirms the gender transition as complete – within the microcosm of the most private sphere, which inevitably mirrors broader social power relations. Only afterward does the protagonist confront and "dethrone" the father. Of course, bearing in mind that within the fantastic realm time and space function differently than in reality, it is nevertheless analytically significant that the shift in the protagonist's attitude toward sex occurs suddenly and without gradual development. There is no transitional period that would suggest psychological maturation or emotional transformation toward accepting the new body. Instead, what previously evoked aversion and anxiety is suddenly replaced by pleasure.

The shift is immediate and unmediated. This is particularly evident in the third version of the tale collected by Vrocławski (1984, variant no. 15 [III]), where, during the confrontation with the father, the son states: "Let the girl stay with me now. She is dear to me too," he said, "not just to you." (Вроцлавски 1984: 105).

This seemingly marginal detail – given the rapidity of the protagonist's emotional transformation – suggests the presence of a latent affection for the bride that may have existed even during the protagonist's time as a woman. Such uncertainty surrounding pleasure, subtly embedded as a secondary narrative thread, opens space for the theme of lesbian desire and for the notion of gender fluidity, which may manifest as inhibition resulting from a sense of entrapment in the wrong body.

Certain tales present a choice to turn away from heteronormativity. Fairytales reference same-sex erotic attraction, symbolically yet multivocally (Turner & Greenhill 2012: 9). This further supports Ready's claim that "the persistence of ATU 514 demonstrates an ongoing human fascination with gender; it is not a modern inclination to observe conventional bodies, identities, and behaviors and ask, "is that all there is?" ATU 514 and tales like it deserve further scholarly attention and questioning so that we may deepen our understanding of the history of the human relationship with gender" (Ready 2021: 233).

Analysis of the Maiden-Warrior Motif

One of the motifs through which aspects of transvestism and androgyny in folklore can be analyzed is that of the maiden-soldier. While fairy tales that involve a complete change of sex remain marginalized in the production of commercial adaptations, the story of a girl who disguises herself as a man and becomes a hero in battle – though less commonly represented than more widespread tales, such as the one about the girl and the twelve months – still appears in certain collections adapted for young children. This is the case because such narratives deconstruct rigid, socially constructed gender roles and the limitations imposed by the social construction of gender. However, they do not go so far as to completely negate or physically alter the biological given – namely, sex. The maiden-soldier motif in Macedonian folklore appears in several variations, including those recorded by Šapkarev (5, 1976, example no. 3, *Three Maidens and Their Father – the Youngest Becomes Empress*), Verković (4, 1985, example no. 19, *Maiden-Soldier*, pp. 127–131), and Cepenkov (5, 1980, example no. 328, *Maiden-Soldier*, pp. 209–212). A common element in all three fairy tales is that the period during which the heroine is disguised as a man (a soldier) ends once the battle is won, after which the girl returns to her previous social role. In Cepenkov's version, she subsequently marries the son of the king from the kingdom against which she had fought, whereas

in Verković's version, she rejects the prince, but he abducts her – an event that is followed by additional details that are important for further analysis.

In both versions, the first two daughters show no interest in activities beyond the socially and politically predetermined domain of women's roles. In contrast, the third and youngest daughter expresses interest in matters considered beyond the scope of female concern. This signals her subsequent engagement in actions that are subversive and situated outside the realm of traditional femininity.

> Don't you worry at all while I'm still alive! Quickly send a message to the emperor, and have a set of men's clothes made for me. Choose the best horse you can find – then you'll see what kind of daughter you have, and the emperor will see what kind of hero I am. When the emperor heard these brave words from his daughter, he was greatly relieved. He sent a letter back to the rival emperor, accepting the challenge to battle, stating that his army would be ready in a few days. He armed his daughter thoroughly and appointed her as commander of the army. They marched to where the opposing forces were stationed, and the two armies immediately clashed in fierce combat. As the soldiers of the emperor's army began to retreat, the emperor caught his daughter's eye. She drew her sword, spurred her horse in all four directions, and charged into the enemy ranks. As she began to strike, she cut down enemies left and right, cutting through the crowd as if harvesting grain. When the opposing soldiers witnessed such heroism, they broke into retreat, and peace was established

(Цепенков 1980: 210–211).

> „Father, don't worry about that. Just go to the marketplace and buy me a small greyhound, a swift mare, a sharp sword, and some men's clothes. I shall go and join the army". Her father went to the market and bought her a small greyhound, a swift mare, a sharp sword, and men's attire. She girded herself with the sword, mounted the swift horse, and set off, with the greyhound following behind. She arrived at the place where the heroes were assembled, along with all the other maidens. She entered into a duel with the king's son. Neither yielded to the other – neither she to him, nor he to her. The king's son began to grow suspicious and, somewhat perplexed, went to his mother and said: "Mother, I suspect that this might be a maiden. They may look like a hero, but something about them smells of a woman

(Верковиќ 1985: 128).

In both versions, the youngest daughter expresses interest in actions beyond the domain of traditionally feminine activity and proves herself to be, at the very least, equal to the men, and even more capable. This alone is enough to problematize the pedagogy embedded in a dominant strand of oral tradition, in which heroism is primarily linked to being born male. This renders the tale profoundly subversive. Moreover, it calls into question the credibility of the entire patriarchal framework and the ideological structures behind the construction of femininity in opposition to masculinity. Through

the image of a girl who needs only the camouflage of male appearance to destabilize the gender binary, the tale radically unsettles the presumed fixity and biological grounding of gender identity. Even in the opening scenes of these two tales, several features emerge that Greenwood's *Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* identifies as characteristic of female transvestism in folklore – such as the noble birth of the daughters and, in Cepenkov's version, the restoration of political and social order in the kingdom, which the father, despite being a king, fails to achieve himself.

> The transvestite heroine resembles the classic underdog of the marvelous universe, who overcomes her limits through heroic or extraordinary means. In this case, her tactics involve passing as a man for a portion of the story. She is often the youngest of the family and must rely on her natural ingenuity and/or physical prowess to make her way, graced sometimes with a fairy's magical intervention. Yet, cross-dressing stands apart from other tale theatricality such as metamorphosis or other forms of disguise and trickery. At least two features distinguish tale cross-dressing from these broader motifs common to myth, legend, and folklore. First, the cross-dressed girl/woman plays the role of heroine and hero in the story. Second, the girl masquerading as a man violates the most basic rules of social order: gender distinction and the dominance of the masculine over the feminine. Unlike the categories of rich/poor, noble/peasant, and human/animal, breached liberally in the realm of the marvelous, the hierarchy of the sexes remains a defining element of tale morphology (the active prince saves the passive maiden in distress) and is rarely reversed. Transvestite heroine tales alter the traditional romantic plot by sending the princess out on the prince's journey, but they tidy up the narrative in the end by returning her to female attire

(Haase [ed.] 2008: 242).

As Hasse concludes, in both the versions recorded by Cepenkov and Verković, the daughters return to their former female roles; however, from that point onward, the narratives begin to diverge. Specifically, in Cepenkov's version, during the dinner following the battle, the son of the emperor from the other kingdom recognizes – by the voice of the still-disguised daughter – that she is a woman and falls in love with her, though he is too ashamed to approach her in such a manner.

> The trumpets sounded from the army's camp as a signal to depart, and the warriors bid each other farewell with a handshake, saying: Go in good health. Once the girl had distanced herself from the emperor's son, she let down her hair and addressed him in the following way: - Ah, son of the emperor, a wild forest partridge came into your hands, yet you failed to catch it and place it in a cage. I was a maiden, and a maiden I remain – look at my hair, look at my breasts, and now farewell. Having said this, she spurred her valiant horse. Before she had even finished speaking, the emperor's son threw a golden ring at her, striking her directly in the teeth, which as a result became gilded. In time, the emperor's son disguised as a beggar, eventually

> seeking her out. By a stroke of luck, she appeared before him with a smiling face, and he saw her gilded teeth. He sent for his attendants, arranged a wedding, and took her as his wife. After he married her, the emperor and his court reconciled with the union and no longer raised any objections
>
> (Цепенков 1980: 211–212).

The excerpt cited above is included here due to an intriguing detail in the development of events following the battle – specifically, the girl's speech – which appears in a markedly different form in the version recorded by Verković. In this instance, the girl employs irony to highlight the emperor's son's inability to see beyond appearances and recognize what is right before his eyes. Through her emphasis on her loosened hair and breasts, she subtly alludes to her own attractiveness and sexuality. After delivering her speech, she departs, but the text emphasizes that the emperor's son throws a golden ring and succeeds in hitting her. This moment leaves the impression that her words and the allusions to her sensuality and sexuality are articulated in a manner that is simultaneously subtle and clear enough to be understood. Paradoxically, it seems that the period of cross-dressing as a man heightens her awareness and affirmation of aspects of her own femininity. While the prince remains shy and hesitant, she is direct – once again in a way that transgresses the boundaries of socially accepted feminine speech. Her transgression of these boundaries results in a reversal of power dynamics: the prince later disguises himself as a beggar in order to find her. According to the patriarchal ideology dominant during the period in which these tales were transmitted – when fairy tales served as an important tool for communicating cultural norms and educating generations – the story must end with the conventional "happy ending" in which the couple marries. However, in this context, the marriage appears to be encouraged, if not initiated, by the emperor's daughter herself. Her experience of donning male attire and triumphing on the battlefield appears to have transformed the heroine internally. As Victoria Flanagan argues, her character evolves "through a dialogic exchange between masculine and feminine subject positions" (Flanagan 2008: 14) both of which are present within herself.

Yet, while Cepenkov's version concludes with a mutually accepted marriage, and the preceding deconstruction of patriarchal power relations suggests that the marriage will be based on equality, the narrative development in Verković's tale is considerably more complex. In this version, the prince suspects that the warrior might be a woman, but following their duel, she successfully overcomes the three subsequent challenges he sets for her, all without revealing her identity. As expected, she completes each of these trials in the manner a man would, once again conveying the message that gender-restricted roles are, to a large extent, grounded not in biological determinism – as is often argued – but rather in sociopolitical constructs. After passing the third trial, the girl reveals her

identity voluntarily, declaring: “I came to war as a maiden, and I return to my father still a maiden!” (Верковиќ 1985: 129). Notably, she expresses no romantic interest in the prince, nor does the narrator suggest any such inclination. It is the prince who falls in love. Disguising himself as a spindle seller, he eventually finds her and, one night while she is asleep, he sprinkles her with “dead water” and abducts her. She awakens in his carriage, and the narrator recounts: “When she jumped up, what did she see? The emperor’s son had her hidden in the carriage, and from the shame of what she had once said to him, she did not speak another word to him for three years, no matter how much he pleaded. In the end, seeing no change, the emperor’s son married another” (Верковиќ 1985: 129).

In the fairy tale, it is stated that she decides not to speak out of shame for something she said to the prince, although it is never revealed what that was. The only dialogues she has with him are her confession that she is a girl and a brief exchange about the price of the spindles when he disguises himself as a spindle seller. It remains a mystery what could have caused her such deep shame that it results in three years of silence. Furthermore, the prince wishes to marry her, which suggests that nothing she said truly disturbed him. Yet, the girl is deceived (by the false spindle seller), deeply asleep (drugged) after being sprayed with dead water, and abducted. The logical conclusion for the reader is that, having been so brutally overpowered, her silence becomes the only form through which she can express resistance – a refusal to enter into any kind of dialogue with the prince who deprived her of choice. However, in contrast to her earlier, typically masculine trials, her falling asleep, confinement in a coffin, and prolonged muteness are distinctly feminine ordeals. Here again, as in Cepenkov’s version of the tale, we encounter a heroine who returns to her female identity. Yet, whereas in Cepenkov’s tale the acceptance of femininity precedes the acceptance of marriage, here, through her silence, she in fact rejects marriage. Her silence – the consciously chosen muteness – represents perhaps the only means of remaining defiant and of refusing a marriage imposed through coercion. As the tale itself notes, the prince waited three years for her to speak, but eventually took another bride.

The same conclusion is reached by Jeana Jorgensen, who analyzes voluntary silence in her study *Strategic Silences: Voiceless Heroes in Fairy Tales*. Drawing on feminist, queer, and folkloristic theories, Jorgensen argues that “fairytale female hero who chooses to remain silent does so strategically in a coded protest against patriarchal norms and constraint” (Jorgensen 2014: 15). Although her analysis focuses more narrowly on motif ATU 451 (*The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers*), many of the features of the sister’s silence as she rescues her brothers resemble those found in Verković’s tale and lead to similar conclusions regarding the narrative function of silence.

> The narrative use of silence can signal a coded message, a discontent that is diverted somewhere less noticeable than an outright protest, which is especially interesting given that fairy tales are a fictional genre that often contains fantastic elements
>
> (Jorgensen 2014: 26).

Once again, through the motif of the maiden who searches for her brothers – and focusing on the heroine's decision to remain silent – Jorgensen explains that the story „shows how constructed identities are rent with conflicting desires and drives" (Jorgensen 2014: 26). The same applies to Verković's heroine, for whom the refusal to speak brings no joy but represents the only available form of resistance (perhaps, alongside suicide as the final possibility of freedom) the sole means of defiance that remains possible to her. In doing so, she deprives herself of a fundamental component of human existence: the fact that a person is a social being in need of some form of communication and exchange. Her decision to remain silent for three years is a choice made under pressure, within a severely limited range of options (if indeed any others existed that could ensure a measure of freedom or defiance), which suggests, at the very least, an ambivalent and conflicted attitude toward it. Furthermore, the struggle for freedom through three years of continuous deprivation itself evokes a deeply paradoxical emotional state. Jorgensen emphasizes the connection between silence and what she describes as an "interesting relationship" with oppression and trauma, further reflecting on the differing nature of imposed versus chosen silence.

> silence is not always a necessary component of the female hero's oppression in her marital home, though silence suggests an interesting relationship with trauma and oppression. It is with a queer eye toward the gaps and elisions of texts that I suggest that the spot that silence occupies in the structure of ATU 451 is a symptom of the female hero's oppression, and not its cause
>
> (Jorgensen 2014: 27).

The act of suddenly awakening in the prince's carriage is nothing short of a traumatic event, one that inevitably raises the question of why the girl, who had once been his equal on the battlefield, does not attempt to defend herself again. Yet the tale seems to suggest that, after returning to her father's home and renouncing her masculinity, any renewed manifestation of it while she is in female attire becomes impossible. Moreover, any opposition to the prince, who has already made the final decision, proves futile. In other words, direct and frontal resistance is rendered meaningless. Her being alone and drugged in the carriage with the prince, who was so determined to abduct her, leaves open the possibility of a second trauma, namely, that of sexual violence. Ultimately, it is precisely at that moment, in the carriage and out of shame, that she decides never to speak again, which leads to the assumption that her silence, in addition to

being a form of resistance, is also the result of trauma. It is important to emphasize once again that silence – the pedagogy of being quiet, of withholding speech, of accepting and reconciling oneself to the decisions of the dominant man – is an integral part of the patriarchal culture imposed upon women. Yet, unlike that form of silence, here silence takes on a completely opposite role. In this context, it becomes a symbol of resistance, defiance, and freedom – a persistent impulse toward liberation that neither abduction nor confinement can suppress. Thus, the silence, or rather the muteness the heroine chooses, is not an instrument of oppression nor a socially imposed constraint; rather, it is a choice that simultaneously embodies both the impulse and the means to achieve a certain freedom, while also standing as a consequence of the prior experience of subjugation. The metaphorical silence (the silencing enacted through the deprivation of freedom of choice via forced sleep, abduction, and captivity) represents the social and political silencing that constitutes oppression in itself. It is therefore of crucial importance to understand the underlying and essential distinction between these two forms of silence. The freely chosen silence, once again, emerges here as a form of struggle for freedom and justice.

After three years, at the prince's wedding – when she is finally freed from the risk of being taken as his wife – the heroine speaks at last, precisely at the moment when the bride addresses her. In doing so, she both expresses gratitude for having been released and subtly conveys to the bride that what awaits her is, in its own way, another form of silencing.

> And then she lifted her eyes toward the heavens and said: "Please, God, make me into a swallow, so that in this very moment I may fly away!" And God commanded at once, and it seems He turned the wealthy man's daughter into a swallow, allowing her to take flight. The emperor's son reached out to seize her, managed to grasp her by the tail, and the tail remained in his hand, while the swallow soared into the sky

(Верковиќ 1985: 130–131).

The transformation into a swallow is an exceptionally rich moment for analysis, as it carries significant hermeneutic potential for multiple, even opposing, interpretations. On the one hand, it represents the choice of permanent silence: she becomes a creature that flies away, entirely rejecting human social bonds from which she seeks complete separation. Life as a human being – and as a woman – is embedded in power relations against which her only available resistance has been three years of silence and existence in a space not of her choosing. The metamorphosis into a swallow also signifies the death of her previous form – an interpretation closely aligned with the notion of freedom attainable only through death. The prince once again attempts to confine her, to restrain her, but this time he is left with just a single feather in his hand. On a symbolic level, he is left only with a memory, or with nothing at all. What further affirms the moral

validity of her decision, and thus the pedagogical message she conveys as an emancipatory female figure, is the fact that her transformation into a swallow occurs through God's intervention: He hears her prayer and grants her wish. Whereas in the tale of the girl who transforms into a man the final physical metamorphosis results from the fulfillment of a curse uttered by a chthonic being, here it is the supreme authority – God – who responds to (and thereby legitimizes) her prayer. Thus, the tale subtly conveys to its audience that her earlier decision to resist through silence is, in fact, morally, ethically, and politically justified. This religious moment functions as an additional subversive element, pointing to the emancipatory and feminist potential embedded within the tale. This heroine, although she succeeds in overturning the power dynamics in her initial duel with the prince and successfully passes all three trials, is unable to sustain the briefly reestablished balance of power once she returns to her father's home and reassumes her female identity. Her subversiveness lies in the fact that, even when asleep and abducted – reduced to a victim of the most brutal form of patriarchy – she nevertheless manages to locate defiance in silence. Ironically, she finds resistance precisely in what the prince had already taken from her entirely: the capacity to have her voice heard, that is, her opinion acknowledged. In the absence of voice – in silence – she discovers a mode of defiance and sustains a form of resistance against the prince's decision to marry her. In other words, as is often the case in fairy tales, Michel Foucault's assertion that where there is power, there is resistance that is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power (Foucault 1978: 95) is reaffirmed. For Foucault, every form of power generates its own forms of resistance, and the interplay between power and resistance yields outcomes that are always a compromise between the two. Here, power (embodied by the prince) imposes silence. The heroine transforms that silence into a mode of resistance and, through it, opposes him. Her persistence endures for three full years. And at the very first moment she speaks, she utters a prayer and manages to escape – finally achieving freedom in the form of a swallow. Her subversiveness lies in the persistence with which she defies the most paradigmatic form of patriarchal authority – the prince – and, even at the cost of her complete muteness, remains true to her own freedom. In doing so, she once again subtly manages to overturn the power relations. In her analysis of various forms of female silencing in fairy tales – specifically what she terms *rhetorical silence*, that is, silence that communicates a message – Crystal Stephens (Stephens 2014: 8) draws on Keith Grant-Davie, who distinguishes between strong and weak rhetorical silence. Silence is rhetorically stronger when: it is voluntary; it has a reason and is therefore not accidental; when it is a decision that the surrounding community does not expect or anticipate; when it is actively practiced and recognized by others (that is, it is not a complete withdrawal from society in a context that does not involve interlocutors who rely on verbal exchange as a form of everyday communication); and when the

silence is continuous rather than confined to a single topic. All five of these criteria for rhetorically powerful silence characterize the silence in the fairy tale under analysis, through which the heroine expresses her rebellion – one that, in this case, also constitutes a political commentary against the power and values of patriarchy, embodied in the figure of the prince.

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ЕМАНЦИПАТОРСКИ ЖЕНСКИ ЛИКОВИ ВО МАКЕДОНСКИОТ ФОЛКЛОР: ФЕМИНИСТИЧКО ПРЕЧИТУВАЊЕ НА МОТИВОТ *ПРОМЕНА НА ПОЛ* И МОТИВОТ *ЖЕНА-ВОЈНИК*

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Резиме

Во овој труд се насочуваме кон лоцирање и кон анализа на неколку субверзивни женски (и трансродови) ликови во македонскиот фолклор, чии: наративи, избори, искушенија и разрешници, заедно со педагошките пораки што ги пренесуваат и со субверзивниот потенцијал што го носат низ вековите, ги доведуваат во прашање традиционалистичките и патријархалните вредности што вообичаено се репродуцираат преку фолклорот. Иако статистички маргинални во споредба со бројните ликови што ги зацврстуваат конвенционалните родови норми и општествено пропишаната улога на

жената, овие женски фигури го отелотворуваат еманципаторскиот потенцијал на негативитетот. Тие конструираат имаголошки и симболички богат контранаратив, кој, на педагошко и на идеолошко рамниште, функционира како исклучително моќна противтежа. Анализата е фокусирана на женските ликови, кои поминуваат низ родова трансформација (мотив АТ 514), како и на примери што вклучуваат епизоди на трансвестизам и андрогинија, видливи кај ликовите како жената војник, жената војвода и сродни варијанти (мотив АТ 884B).