Is There a Place for the Other in Fokloristics?

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An attempt will be made in this paper to identify the frameworks within which it is possible to introduce the concept of the Other into folkloristics. The Other is discussed primarily as a psychoanalytic term coined by Jacques Lacan, a notion that is very productive in the interpretation of diverse aspects of culture and folklore phenomena, which are not, for their part, fully explicable only with the help of historical, political and social factors.

This paper deals with the ways in which Lacan's categories can be used in reading narratives and oral stories about supernatural beings, especially witches. The psychological dimensions of the construction of witches have not been properly taken into consideration, although witch-trial records, narratives about witches, oral stories and Malleus Maleficarum in particular would allow such analysis. Witches are represented as an extreme, as particularly evil or harmful, as beings that undermine the social order. Their construction as the Other can be read as a means of establishing the social order, a way of maintaining and preserving cultural norms.

This paper deals with possible readings of "folk culture" from the perspective of psychoanalytic criticism. More specifically it explores whether and, if so, to what extent, folkloristics can be fruitfully approached using Lacan's theoretical constructs, to be more precise, his concept of the Other.

Psychoanalytic ambition to explain folklore is certainly not new: the links between folkloristics and Freud's psychoanalytic theory and method were noted by early psychoanalysts. For them, the interrelationship between psychoanalysis and folklore was reciprocally beneficial: Freud and his followers were drawing upon folklore phenomena to support a certain theoretical problem in psychoanalytic theory, and vice versa. This is clearly evident in many of Freud's works, and in his tenth lecture of *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis* he made his debt to folklore explicit: "My reply is that we learn from different sources – from fairy tales and myths, from buffoonery and jokes, from folklore (that is, from knowledge about popular manners and customs, sayings and songs) and from poetic and colloquial linguistic usage. In all these directions we come upon the same symbolism, and in some of them we can understand it without further instruction. If we go into these sources in detail, we shall find so many parallels to dream symbolism that we cannot fail to be convinced of our interpretations" (Freud 1916: 158–159).

One of his earliest works on folklore - *Dreams in Folklore*, which Freud and David Ernst Oppenheim, a secondary school teacher from Vienna, co-authored around 1911 (the paper was found and published much later, in 1958) - was an analysis of dreams in folktales that Oppenheim took from *Anthropophyteia*, an "obscene" folklore journal pub-

lished from 1904 to 1913. This was a clear application of Freud's oft-repeated claim that the source of the people's unconscious symbolism was, in fact, folklore: "The symbolism employed in these dreams coincides completely with that accepted by psychoanalysis and … a number of these dreams are understood by the common people in the same way as they would be interpreted by psychoanalysis – that is, not as premonitions about a still unrevealed future, but as the fulfillment of wishes …" (Freud & Oppenheim 1958: 25).

Many of Freud's followers also applied psychoanalytic theory to folkloristics, including, for instance, Otto Rank (*The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, 1909), Karl Abraham and Ernest Jones ("Psycho-Analysis and Folklore", 1928), to mention but a few. Géza Róheim is considered the first psychoanalytic folklorist, who, among other things, investigated dreams, superstitions, rituals etc. (*The Gates of the Dream* (1952), *Fire in the Dragon and Other Psychoanalytic Essays on Folklore* (1992) etc.).

Folktales, especially fairytales, proved particularly amenable to psychoanalytic criticism, as seen in the works of Bruno Bettelheim (*The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, 1976), Erich Fromm (*The Forgotten Language: An Introduction to the Understanding of Dreams, Fairy Tales and Myths*, 1951), Marie-Louise von Franz (*Interpretation of Fairy Tales,* 1996), Alan Dundes (*Parsing through Customs,* 1987; *From Game to War,* 1997; *Bloody Mary in the Mirror*, 2002) and many others.

However, despite the fact that Freud himself, like many other psychoanalysts, was involved in folklore research, psychoanalysis never gained a firm foothold in folkloristics.

Part of the problem probably lies in the fact that Freud and his followers accepted the unilinear evolutionary theory of their time and found folklore as a mere survival from times of "savagery". In this, psychoanalysis coincides with the framework of late nineteenth-century folkloristics, which was mostly focused on the historical reconstruction of the past, believing that all people had passed through the same stages, evolving from savagery into civilization (see, for example: Lévy-Bruhl and his work *La mentalité primitive* (1922), Ernest Jones's "Psycho-Analysis and Folklore" (1928), Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Karl Abraham's *Dreams and Myths: A Study in Race Psychology* (1913)*,* etc.). But still one can find many of Freud's concepts, such as displacement and projection, very fruitful for the analysis of culture and folklore phenomena.

Among folklorists, psychoanalysts are few and far between in many countries; indeed, in Croatian folkloristics – I mean in folkloristics in the narrow sense of the term, i.e., in the study of oral literature, but also oral tradition – psychoanalysis has failed to find its niche. In Croatia, oral literature, including all its genres, was interpreted and studied as part of philology, with special attention being given to its esthetic component in comparison to written literature. In the mid-20th century, in addition to core research activities – collecting and recording folklore – Croatian folkloristics opened out to theoretical approaches, including, e.g., Russian Formalism, Prague Functionalism, the so-called Finnish School and the American contextual approach (Lozica and Marks 1998). For a very long time, folklore (and literary) studies in Croatia were characterized by a certain immanentism**,** resistance to the recent cultural studies approaches, although a purely synchronic approach has always been taken with caution. It was not until the 1990s that the scholarly paradigm changed and research became more open to inter- and transdisciplinarity focusing on literary anthropology, gender and cultural studies, and to a certain extent on Imagology, which marked a change in folkloristics as a discipline, a similar change that

is also evident today. However, even during this period of opening up, psychoanalysis has been left on the periphery, as not quite acceptable or "not entirely scientific". Stereotypes about psychoanalysis and its reductionism are apparently still too common for it to become an accepted interpretative method in Croatia. Psychoanalysis indeed is interpretation, which should also be one of the tasks of folkloristics, rather than it being merely collecting, recording and classifying folklore. As Alan Dundes says, "the 'meaning' or 'meanings' (plural) of folklore were not investigated to any great extent by folklorists" (Dundes 2002: 9).

I believe that the psychoanalytic approach can provide a fresh look at folklore phenomena, and in this sense I will now turn to the very fruitful notion of the Other.

The term seems to have come into use in the discourse of various humanities quite independently of its psychoanalytic background. Its meaning within these discourses, especially when spelled with a capital O, seems to be a matter of tacit agreement. However, practice paints a different picture. When reading theoretical texts dealing with society, culture or philosophy from the 1960s until today, it is much easier to find places where the Other has not been mentioned, while finding consistency in the various approaches where it has been used seems an equally arduous task (Van Zyl 1998: 80–81).

The notion of the Other dates back at least to Plato's *Sophist*, where the Stranger takes part in a dialogue on the ontological problems of being and non-being, of the One and the Other.

Still, the notion of the Other was largely introduced into contemporary theory by hermeneutics and psychoanalysis (from their respective points of view). It was especially popular in post-structuralism, in agreement with the post-structuralist comprehensive transdisciplinary aspirations.

Of course, it is difficult if not impossible to make generalizations based on all the concepts of the Other, which have been analyzed by authors as different as Hegel, Husserl, Nietzsche, Bakhtin, Adorno, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Barthes, Said, Greenblatt, and Lévinas, to mention but a few. Still, the overall scope of the term Other may be, to make a gross simplification, boiled down to three points:

1. the issue of interaction of one person with another, whether it be ethical, psychological or social – i.e., a philosophical, psychological or social issue;

2. the issue of interaction with a text, which is a literary theoretical issue, and,

3. the issue of communication between temporally or spatially distant cultures, which is primarily an anthropological issue (Biti 2000: 98).

However, psychoanalysis is typical for connecting the Self and Otherness through the dimensions of culture, text, ethics, language and sociology, which is in complete disagreement with the charges of reductionism.

In this respect, Jacques Lacan's place in the history of alterity is particularly exceptional, if not emblematic. It is also unique, because Lacan insists on a decentering of Otherness. Specifically, Lacan explores an intrapsychic Otherness different from the Other of interpersonal theories of identity and distinct from the philosophical problem of the Other. Having that in mind, I will recapitulate the basic tenets of his theory in order to draw attention to several crucial questions pertaining to the relevance of (a potential) psychoanalytic interpretation of folklore. These are: How can Lacan be used not only in reading the symptoms of contemporary society – which is a largely Žižekian endeavor – but also in reading the symptoms of previous social orders, as well as in reading the logic

of desire, an important index of how social, cultural and political forms are created, which affects any interaction between the Self and Other(s).

Can his categories be used in reading narratives about supernatural beings? According to Lacan, mistaken belief in our integrity, which results in misrecognition, projections, transitivism, loss, lack and aggressivity between the Self and the Other is not a mere developmental phase, but a continuous play which characterizes the relationships between people, both real and imaginary.

Isn't it true that supernatural beings, especially female ones – like witches – play a crucial role in the construction and the structuring of identity, gender and aspirations through which society reproduces itself?

Unlike his contemporaries, Lacan postulates a gap between an Other ("the big Other") and an other ("the little other"), reflecting a gap between the Subject and the ego. These decenterings imply Lacan's symbolic and imaginary registers, since the "decentering of the Subject" actually means that the Subject and the ego inhabit disjunct registers. Likewise, the disjunction between the symbolic linguistic Other and the imaginary mirroring other signifies a decentering of the former from the latter. These two decenterings articulate an approach that is radically different from the approach that constructs the "Other" as a person, let alone as a person who is marginal or subversive in some way, as is characteristic of certain philosophical, sociological, feminist or anthropological approaches.

In contrast, the realms of symbolic and imaginary registers are concepts that are highly productive in dealing with phantasmatic constructions of folklore imagination.

Lacan based his work on "the return to Freud" and reread the core concepts of psychoanalysis. For him, psychoanalysis concerns itself above all else with the understanding of human speech, "and linguistics, rhetoric and poetics are its indispensable allies" (Bowie 1991:11). Using Freud's two theories on the psychic apparatus, Lacan had developed his own tripartite classification system around which all his theorizing revolves. His system includes three orders or registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real (*Séminaire 1*). They are not mental forces like the three agencies in Freud's structural model; they are primarily concerned with mental functioning. Although the three registers are profoundly heterogeneous, they are all structurally interdependent, i.e., each order must be defined by reference to the other two.

The basis of the imaginary order is the formation of the ego in the mirror stage, when the subject becomes alienated from himself by identifying with his counterpart, whom Lacan calls the little other or *objet petit a* (1996: 93-101). This little other "is the other who is not really other, but a reflection and projection of the ego (…). He is simultaneously the counterpart and the specular image" (Evans 1996:132-3). This misrecognition is a fundamental aspect of the structure of subjectivity and it gives rise thereby to an aggressive tension between the subject and the image. Unlike Freud, who found the roots of aggressivity in social interactions, Lacan considers aggressivity to be intrasubjective.

The big Other is symbolic insofar as it is particularized for each subject. "The Other is thus both another subject in his radical alterity and also the symbolic order which mediates the relationship with that other subject" (Evans 1996: 133).

It is important to note that Lacan also considers the Other to be "the Other sex", which is always *woman*, for both male and female subjects. "Man here acts as the relay

whereby the woman becomes this Other for herself as she is this Other for him" (Lacan 1975: 732). For Lacan, femininity is wholly a discursive construct and sexual identity is completely socially – symbolically – constructed.

Later Lacan states that "a woman is a symptom", more precisely, a woman is a symptom of a man, in the sense that a woman can only enter the psychic economy of men as a fantasy object, the cause of their desire. Definitions of masculinity and femininity are constituted via the symbolic order – with the man as a self-determining, autonomous agent, and the woman the lacking Other, the cause of desire. The political implications of such cultural fantasy are that a man imagines himself as unified, **projecting his sense of lack and otherness** onto a woman.

Female supernatural beings, let us take witches as an example, are represented as an extreme, as particularly evil or harmful, as beings that undermine the social order. Their construction as the Other can be read as a means of establishing the social order, a way of maintaining and preserving cultural norms. Starting with Lacan, perhaps it might be possible to show to what extent the Other (supernatural beings/witches) is a social and ideological construct that is given provisional stability by a "web of belief" (to use Daniel Dennett's term), and to what extent the representation of the demonized Other is based on directing and controlling the collective anxiety.

I believe that the psychological dimensions of the construction of supernatural beings, especially witches, have not been properly taken into consideration, although witch-trial records, narratives about witches, oral legends and *Malleus Maleficarum*, a medieval inquistors' manual, in particular would allow such analysis. I will not argue whether supernatural beings existed/exist, but rather I will suggest that they can be seen as a collective projection, as the Other that is a primary part in the construction of the Subject.

Detailed information contained in *Malleus Maleficarum* (printed for the first time in 1486), an inquisitor manual for witch prosecution, makes it clear that the central reason for the persecution of witches was a disguised interest in the witch as the "Other" and the fear of a witch/woman as an agent of castration, but also as the unattainable object of desire. For Lacan, desire emerges originally in the field of the Other, i.e., in the unconscious. But, what is the most important – desire is always a social product, which is constituted in a dialectical relationship with the perceived desires of other subjects. Witches were accused, among other things, of copulating with the devil, causing male impotence, causing the penis to disappear and of stealing men's penises – the latter crimes no doubt exemplifying the male fear of castration.

The *Malleus Malleficarum* also supplies a series of supposedly logical reasons why women are more inclined toward witchcraft than men. The reasons are related to the definition of a woman as the Other, the weaker but dangerous complement of a man. "What else is a woman but a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted with fair colors!" (*Malleus Maleficarum* 2009: 162) Here it is evident that an effort to exclude radical Otherness is made by using the language and knowledge about this threatening Other.

The witch is defined as an abject figure in that she is represented within patriarchal discourse as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order. It is not unimportant to mention that the Croatian word for witch is *vještica,* which means "woman who knows,

who is skillful" (Čiča 2002: 67). The witch sets out to unsettle the boundaries between the rational and irrational, symbolic and imaginary.

The monstrous-feminine is constructed as an abject figure because she threatens the symbolic order (Creed 1993).

The supernatural being, the witch in this case, draws attention to the "frailty of the symbolic order" through her evocation of the natural, animal order, which is part of the Imaginary, and its terrifying associations. And for that she must be severely punished.

The construction of witches' physical appearance in general is the same throughout Europe: "she is ugly, filthy, unkempt, with a large, hooked nose, warts, dressed in a long black dress, a shawl that covers her face etc." (Mencej 2006: 315) – an uncanny figure of death that threatens the Subject with dissolution. This demonic feminine stages an excessive presence of the dangers of the body, being the disruptive point of the symbolic realm. Both femininity and death inspire the fear of an ultimate loss of control, of a disruption of boundaries between Self and the Other, of a dissolution of an ordered and hierarchical world.

In many Croatian (and not only Croatian) narratives one can find descriptions of their power as a warning and a threat of the presence of death: "There are those who are wicked, who believe they can create evil, and create it they do: they are evildoers, poisoners, they kill unborn babies in the womb, they brew poisonous potions for money, which can cause death or illness. Some seek carnal pleasure keeping night trysts, fraying your nerves with secretive symbols and rituals, serving the evil spirit, the Satan, later called the devil." (Mažuranić 1975: 14).

Stereotypes concerning witches are representations of difference, which structure the world and localize anxiety at the body of another, at the site of Otherness. Stereotypes are a way of dealing with the instabilities arising from the division between self and non-self by preserving an illusion of control and order; the stereotype of the Other is used to create safe boundaries.

The construction of Woman/witch as the Other serves to dynamize a social order, while her death marks the end of the period of change: "Over her dead body, cultural norms are reconfirmed or secured, whether because the sacrifice of the virtuous, innocent woman serves a social critique and transformation or because the sacrifice of a dangerous woman reestablishes an order that was momentarily suspended due to her presence." (Bronfen 1992: 181).

(Croatian) Folklore phenomena dealing with supernatural beings is imaginatively very diverse, although it can, in principle, be reduced to the mentioned parameter of Otherness. I believe that in this context psychoanalytic criticism is welcome not only to diagnose the problem of Otherness, but also to explain its variant forms. Further analysis possibly could serve as an explanation of the long duration of such phenomena as the belief in witches is.

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Ima prostora za drugog u fokloristici?

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U tekstu se propituje je li i u kojoj mjeri u folkloristici interpretativno produktivan Lacanov instrumentarij, preciznije njegov pojam Drugoga. Dakako, psihoanalitičke ambicije da se protumače folklorni fenomeni nisu nove: veza Freuda te njegovih sljedbenika i folkloristike dobro je znana. No ipak, unatoč njihovu angažmanu, psihoanalitička kritika nikada nije ušla na velika vrata u tu discipline, ponajprije stoga što je mnogi, posve pogrešno, smatraju suviše redukcionističkom teorijom.

Autorica smatra kako, međutim, psihoanalitički pristup, oslanjajući se na Jacquesa Lacana, može donijeti novi pogled na određene folklorne pojave, kao što je vjerovanje u nadnaravna bića, prije svega u vještice. U tekstu se propituje koliko je moguće konstrukciju vještica kao Drugoga čitati kao sredstvo za uspostavljanje društvenoga reda, kao način utvrđivanja i osiguravanja kulturalnih normi te može li se pokazati koliko je vještica kao Drugi društvena i ideološka konstrukcija kojoj privremenu stabilnost daje "mreža vjerovanja", kao i to koliku ulogu u predstavljanju toga demoniziranoga Drugog ima upravo usmjeravanje i nadziranje kolektivne anksioznosti.