

# The theme of the *Old Woman and March* in Greek folklore

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## ABSTRACT

*The narrative of the old shepherdess who makes fun of March and is punished by being turned to stone or frozen has been told in various Mediterranean areas since at least the 16th century. Greece contributes to this tradition with two types of the legend, which differ from each other in terms of the figure of the old woman and the comical or tragic tone of the narrative. We should add a third Byzantine written narrative (12<sup>th</sup> century) to these two branches, discussed by the Byzantinologist Ilias Anagnostakis, which also portrays the disrespectful old shepherdess but in a different role. This third text, which is probably a literary reworking of elements from oral legends, and testimony to the age of the legend in Greek culture and the mythological aspect of the female leading figure.*

*In this paper we will examine the Greek oral narratives as well as some ritual acts that accompany them in several regions of Greece, to understand the uses of these legends and the world view that they transmit.*

## KEYWORDS

*legends; proverbs; folktales; weather legends; etiological legends; March*

## RESUM

*La narració de la vella pastora que es burla del març i que és petrificada/congelada per aquest mes per castigar-la s'explica a diverses zones mediterrànies des de, com a mínim, el segle XVI. Grècia s'uneix a aquesta tradició amb dos tipus de llegenda, que es diferencien entre si pel que fa a la figura de la vella i al to còmic o tràgic de la narració. En aquestes dues branques cal afegir-hi una tercera narració escrita bizantina (segle XII), comentada pel bizantinòleg Ilias Anagnostakis, on també trobem la vella pastora irrespectuosa amb un paper diferent. Aquest tercer text, que probablement és una elaboració literària d'elements de llegendes orals, és un testimoni de l'època de la llegenda en la cultura grega i de l'aspecte mitològic de la protagonista femenina.*

*En aquest article examinarem les narracions orals gregues, així com alguns actes rituals que les acompanyen en diverses zones gregues, per entendre els usos d'aquestes llegendes i la visió del món que transmeten.*

## PARAULES CLAU

*llegendes; refranys; rondalles; llegendes meteorològiques; llegendes etiològiques; març*

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## 1. Legends, proverbs, and ritual acts

In the first branch of the legend of *the old shepherdess and March*, there are many oral texts from all over Greece and Asia Minor, which portray a poor old woman who dares to make fun of March. Here is a version of this type:

An old shepherdess had had a very hard winter, and when March, the month she was afraid of more than any other, was over she couldn't help but joyfully cry out: "Pritsi,<sup>1</sup> March, overwintered my little goats!". March got furious because the old woman had insulted him, and he borrowed some days from February (which is why they call February lame). That winter the weather got so cold, that the poor woman hid under a cauldron. Even so, she was frozen and petrified together with her goats. Today we can see the cauldron and the petrified goats on the mountain over Fragovryso.<sup>2</sup>

Since 1871<sup>3</sup> there have been many recordings of this narrative; the month offended by the old woman may differ from one area to another, and that obviously depends on the meteorological conditions. In the Dodecanese islands (southeastern Aegean Sea) the old shepherdess makes fun of February, because the weather there is warmer than in North Greece and spring comes earlier. February gets angry, asks March to give him a day and gives him two back. The legend is therefore an etiological one, explaining why February has fewer days than the other months of the year. It begins to rain so hard that the old woman hides under the cauldron. All the sheep die, except one, and when the weather calms down, the woman says: "when February comes, you can 'smell' summer, but if February gets angry, he covers us with snow!" February is calmed by the praise, and the sheep that survives provides as much milk as a whole flock.<sup>4</sup>

Some stories have comical extensions: when the old shepherdess hides under the cauldron, a chicken gets into it. The chicken eats corn and makes so much noise that the woman thinks that it has started hailing!<sup>5</sup>

The insulting but at the same time comical phrase "Pritsi, March, overwintered my little goats" became a proverb (Venizelos 1867, n. 252: 198, 264; Politis 1980: 390-391) as did the phrases "March (or February) put the old woman (or the shepherd) under the cauldron"<sup>6</sup> (which means metaphorically that the weather gets very cold at the end of March or February), and "when February arrives, you

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1 The word is scatological and mocking.

2 Version first published by N. Politis in 1871 and published again in Politis (1904, n. 298). From Arcadia, Peloponnese.

3 Politis (1904) notes another nine versions from different areas of Greece, dated from 1860 to 1902. There are many similar legends in the manuscripts of HFRC (Hellenic Folklore Research Centre, Academy of Athens, now digitalized in: <http://repository.kentrolaografias.gr/xmlui/handle/20.500.11853/3/discover?query=%CE%9C%CE%AC%CF%81%CF%84%CE%B7%CF%82&submit=&rpp=10> (in Greek).

The legend is still known these days and M. Kaplanoglou recorded many contemporary Greek variants

4 Kaplanoglou (1999: 62). Narration of P.S. from Salakos Rhodes.

5 Narration of Kallirroi Tsagaraki, born 1916, from the area of Proussa, Bithynia, recorded in August 1997 by Marianthi Kaplanoglou.

6 For example, Sofos (1996: 103), Michail-Dede (1984: 19), Stamatakis (2005).

can ‘smell’ the summer, but if February gets angry, you will be covered by snow” (Michail-Dede 1984: 18).

As we can see, an empirical meteorological observation (that the weather is unstable in March) sparks the creation of stories and proverbs, which are sometimes accompanied by acts that we could call ritual: in many areas of Greece, people go to the place where the old woman hid to save herself and her flock and take firewood, to help her keep warm. In the island of Chios<sup>7</sup> and in the region of Agrinio for example, this place is called “The Old Woman’s oven”.

The story also has a double etiological dimension, as it explains geological forms, rocks with strange shapes that in some areas of Greece are thought to represent the old shepherdess and her sheep in various areas of Greece,<sup>8</sup> as well as why February has fewer days than the other months. The last cold days of the insulted month are called “the days of the Old Woman”.

A typical feature of the first form of the narratives presented above is the comical element that sets the tone. The oral texts selected recently were told in a lighthearted style, even though the stories ended badly with the death of the old woman. This suggests that the old woman in the story is regarded as a familiar person, with whom everybody can identify, and is portrayed with feelings of both irony and sympathy. The fact that people take wood to the places where the old shepherdess died bears witness to this function of the legend.

The story also transmits the idea that humans are always subordinate to nature, absolutely dependent on natural forces which they must respect. Insulting nature is disgraceful behavior, an offence (Υβρις), which must be punished (Τις). This idea is common in almost every country in which the legend is told, except perhaps in Spain, where we find a slightly different version of the same story. The shepherd (almost always a man) who insults March is punished not because of a verbal insult, but because he promised to give March a sheep, if he kept the weather mild. At the end of the month, however, the shepherd broke his promise. The main idea of Spanish legends is that humans, instead of being submissive to and respectful of nature, interact with it in a give-and-take relationship.<sup>9</sup> This is an idea that we find to some extent in the contemporary Greek narrative presented above, when the old lady praises the months (February), and which is part of a Greek folktale that we will discuss below.

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7 Vios, S. (1997: 80-82).

8 For example, in locations near Ioannina (Politis 1904, n. 306), Peloponnese (Politis 1904, n. 298, 300). In the prefecture of Heraklion, Crete, the local people call the impressive geological formations near the village of Prinias, “the old woman’s cheese” or “the old woman’s pies”, while a nearby region is called “Votiros” from the butter which was spilled (Stamatakis 2005).

9 This idea prompted J. M. Pedrosa (1995: 276, 278-9) to compare the Spanish legend with the cult of the Virgin Mary. There are also probable links with certain cults and rites that were related in archaic times to the god Mars, whose root is common with that of March, where the element of the offer/sacrifice is predominant. See also N. Politis (1904: B’, notes on text n. 298) with reference to Albanian, Rumanian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Arabian, French, Belgian, Swiss, Spanish, Catalan, Italian and Corsican parallels.

## 2. The greek oikotype Megas \*480 (cf. ATU 294, 2)

The main theme of humans confronting personified divisions of time is found in the folktale of “the two old women and the twelve months” (ATU \*480) (Angelopoulou & Brouskou 1999: 927-936), which is considered by G. A. Megas to be a Greek oikotype from the large circle of folktale type ATU 480 *The kind and Unkind Girls*: unlike other European (mainly East European and Balkan) versions, where the plot concerns a young girl who is sent by her stepmother to pick strawberries in winter and is helped by the twelve months (Roberts 1958: 150-152), in Greek narrative tradition it is usually about two old women, one of whom praises the twelve months and receives a sack full of gold coins, while the other reproaches them and in punishment is given a sack of snakes that eat her. In some versions a rich woman drives her poor sister (or neighbor) away from her light so that she cannot spin. In other versions a poor woman helps a rich one make her bread and plans to use the dough left on her hands to make bread for her children. She is ordered to wash her hands before leaving the house. When the poor woman departs in search of light or food for her children, she meets the twelve months on the mountain.

In an enduring tradition of this tale, each month is perceived in terms of the main events of rural life, especially sowing-time, harvest and the folk calendar. In a version of the tale told by an inhabitant of the village Artesiano in the region of Karditsa (central Greece)<sup>10</sup> we observe a combination of the tale with the legend, since an old woman praises all the months except March who, in punishment, turns her into stone along with her sheep which are still seen on a side of Mount Olympus.<sup>11</sup>

## 3. The second type of legend: a rich powerful shepherdess meeting Archangel Michael and the First Mother of the World

The observations above about the relationship between humans and nature as represented in the narratives to some extent hold true for the second type of the Greek form of those legends. Nevertheless, the representation of the old woman in these texts, some elements of the plot and the tone of the narration are different. For example:

Once upon a time an old woman used to live alone on the mountains, and she had a large flock of goats. When she made cheese, she would go to the beach to sell it and have it loaded into the ships. It was the size of a whole rock!

Once, in March, the weather was very cold and many animals died on the island. But the old woman's goats were all right, so she boasted to March: “Pourt,<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Unpublished version recorded by Marianthi Kaplanoglou.

<sup>11</sup> Jokes and anecdotes are also found among the thematic range of the old woman and March: in another Greek tale (ATU 1479\*) an old woman in search of a young lover is found out by her sons who punish her by spending the cold nights of March on the roof (Megas 1963/1964: 480); if she manages to survive, then her wish will be fulfilled. The old woman does not hesitate, and her answer has now become a proverb: “tonight with the wind tomorrow with the young man” (Meraklis 1980: 43-44).

<sup>12</sup> Another scatological mocking word.

March, you came, you left, you didn't freeze my goats". March got angry, borrowed two days from February and almost froze every single one of her goats, but the old woman had time to hide 3000 of them under her cauldron. And those survived. Ever since then, February has only had 28 days.

When the weather got better, the old woman, indignant, put all the cheeses she was going to have loaded into the ships one on top of the other and made a big heap, took a stick, climbed up to top of the heap and threatened God! God cursed her, and turned her and all the cheese into stone. It is the rock that they call "The old woman's cheese". The goats scattered and returned to the wild, and all wild goats these days in Imvros and Samothraki originate from that woman's goats because, at that time, Imvros and Samothraki were one island, and they were only divided later (Politis 1904, n. 303: 66).<sup>13</sup>

There is a second variant of this type of the legend, from the island of Thasos (Politis 1904, n. 305: 167).<sup>14</sup> It has some differences, but the main features are the same. In Cretan legends too, the old woman who offended God (Christ) by not offering him some milk or a piece of cheese as alms, is portrayed as a rich shepherdess, a Sarantapoichos (meaning forty cubits of length) or as the mother of Digenis Akritas, the hero of the Byzantine and Neohellenic epic tradition (Stamatakis 2005). In these texts, the poor old woman of the first type is replaced by a rich shepherdess, whom we may see as a figure of fertility and abundance. She is arrogant and insulting not only to March, and therefore nature, but also to God himself. This introduces a new element, the confrontation between a woman and God, disrespect for the divine. This particular feature of the peninsular narratives seems to be the one that prompted I. Anagnostakis (2011) to connect them with a Byzantine text written by Michael Choniates (c. 1140-1220). We translate the text as given in his article:

Man should admire the white sand of the river's springs that end at Chonae. Their white color does not seem to be a creation of nature. They say that a disrespectful shepherdess with many flocks wanted to destroy Archangel's (Michael) Temple. When the pagans (idolaters) joined the waters of the Lykos and Kapros rivers and guided them against the Temple (to no avail, though, because Archangel opened a tunnel and channeled the water in a different direction to save the temple), that disrespectful woman helped them with her flocks' milk. She milked every single goat and every single cow and emptied all that milk at the same time, creating a third river of milk, which joined the other two, Lykos and Kapros, and increased the destructive current.

From that incident, the area took the name Graos Gala (The Old Woman's Milk) and, as Ilias Anagnostakis says, Michael Choniates' text probably reflects a local version of the Miracle at Chonae, a popular etiological myth which completes the official Christian narrative of Archangel's Miracle (Anagnostakis 2011).

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<sup>13</sup> Version recorded in 1875 on the island of Imbros (North Aegean), which back then was Greek territory. After the Convention of Lausanne (1923) and the exchange of Greek and Turkish populations the island (now called *Gökçeada*) belongs to Turkey.

<sup>14</sup> From Thasos, island in North Aegean, recorded in 1860.

We should point out that the figure of the rich shepherdess from Imbrian, Thassian and Cretan legends became part of a different narrative before too many centuries had passed, but as the narrative of the *Old Woman who insulted March* is also very old, it is impossible to tell which one is the oldest. Even so, the figure has a mythological aspect in both Byzantine and Modern Greek texts from Imbros, Crete and Thasos.<sup>15</sup> In the texts from Imbros in particular, she clearly represents the Pagans. Could she be a reminiscence of a female goddess of fertility confronting an archangel of Christianity? It is not impossible. The figure of the old shepherdess seems to have adapted to different contexts, taking the form of a poor lady, a likeable, familiar character, or of an arrogant, terrible woman of supernatural power (ogress), a force of fertility, a mythological person. This last feature is also found in a different cultural area, and it will lead us to one last connection: to a mythological Mediterranean figure, the “First Mother of the World” from Kabylian mythology, which seems to combine the mythological, pagan features of a very powerful female with the episode of the confrontation with March, as we know it from the Greek texts of the first type.

In fact, one of the most important, powerful, and ambivalent figures in Kabylian mythology is the First Mother of the World (Yemma-t n dunnit). A woman who was good when young but evil when she got older, responsible for the many misfortunes of humanity. At the same time, she created the stars, the clouds and the sheep, but she also established the sacrifice of children, and even the death of old women (Lacoste-Dujardin 1981).<sup>16</sup> And how was she responsible for that? Because at the end of January, she said to a little lamb from her flock, which was cold: “Don’t be afraid! Our brave January is about to end! He won’t hurt you!” January got furious, borrowed a few days from February... and the story continuous as we already know. The First Mother of the World and her animals were turned to stone, and today we can see these rocks at Tibura La’nser (Frobenius 1997: 58-59).<sup>17</sup>

Attributed to a mythical powerful figure and part of the corpus of cosmogonic myths of the Berbers, the narrative that is told in so many areas and by so many peoples seems to transmit complicated image of the world, as regards the representations of nature and of the relationship between man, nature and time as well as, in a more anthropocentric manner, to comment on human relations and the characteristics of old age. In addition, the narrative adapted and survived through many different genres, like the myth, the legend and the folktale: in this framework the question about the boundaries between the so-called oral genres emerges again.

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<sup>15</sup> In the numerous versions narrated in central Crete the old shepherdess offends either a holy figure (Christ, a saint) or a month (February), see Stamatakis (2005).

<sup>16</sup> Yemma-t n dunnit <<http://tadukli.free.fr/>>

<sup>17</sup> Text quoted and translated in Spanish by Abenojar (2010: 56-58).

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