

# **Iberian Seventh-Born Children, Werewolves, and the Dragon Slayer: A Case Study in the Comparative Interpretation of Symbolic Praxis and Fairytales<sup>[1]</sup>**

*Francisco Vaz da Silva*

## ***Abstract***

This article examines an obscure custom found in Iberian ethnography: that of having one's eldest children serve as godparents for their own youngest siblings, starting with the seventh. The paper's main working hypothesis is that this custom is to be understood in the context of underlying conceptions that fairytales convey in a symbolical guise. The argument highlights the relationship of examined notions with the "Dragon Slayer" theme, to bring out stable themata concerning ontological complexity and metamorphosis, in the light of which the Iberian custom is interpreted.

The primary subject matter of this paper is an obscure custom that I found in western Iberia in the 1980s: that of choosing one's eldest children to serve as godparents for their own youngest siblings, starting with the seventh. At the time, this custom attracted my attention because it seemed to shun the possibility of using the idiom of spiritual kinship, as is commonly done in southern Europe, to promote and renew social ties across households within small communities. Indeed, I will argue that this particular custom is to be understood from an altogether different angle: that of fundamental concepts of a metaphysical sort, which inform the behaviour of flesh and blood people in their daily lives. In this article, I propose to make sense of such concepts on their own terms. One important means for this task is the tracing of symbolic redundancy on different levels of cultural life, such as social practices (think of so-called customs and rites), everyday notions (such as so-called beliefs or superstitions), and narrative folklore (such as fairytales). This entails the heuristic hypothesis that use of, say, fairytales is of help in explaining the behaviour of actual people in traditional settings. Such is, indeed, one strong assumption underlying my present attempt to generalise from an obscure custom, which seemed to me intractable at first, to a theoretical model. Moreover, I assume that the tracing of symbolic redundancy entails a comparative stance—for it takes a consideration of the endless variability of folklore on a pan-European scale to grasp its stable themata.

### *An Ethnographical Singularity*

While I was doing ethnological fieldwork in northern Portugal in the 1980s, I found that, in families with many children, eldest siblings would tend to serve as godparents for the youngest—usually starting with the seventh or ninth child. Eventually, after much asking around, I came to understand that this relates to the idea that seventh children might turn into werewolves or witches—but, unfortunately, not much helpful information on this was forthcoming at first from my informants.

Then I found that the strange custom I had stumbled upon fits within a wider West European pattern whereby one ceases using the rules available for the choice of godparents to one's own children when a certain number of children has been born. Here is one example. Françoise Zonabend informs us that in Burgundy, until the First World War, "one took for the first child the paternal grandfather and the maternal grandmother, and for the second one the father's elder brother and the mother's elder sister, then for the others one would pick at a greater distance [*on s'écartait*]" (Zonabend 1990b, 229). [2] Moreover, Zonabend states that the last-born of many siblings—starting with a seventh child in the actual case she provides—are not to have ordinary godparents and, therefore, strangers are often accepted for the task. In addition, she mentions the fact that fairytales often present the plight of parents with too many children who—not knowing whom to ask for godparents to their last-born—accept some supernatural foreigner. She notes, too, apropos a series of seven children, that eldest siblings frequently act as godparents to the youngest (Zonabend 1990b, 217 and 238–9). Another report, concerning the Pyrenean region between 1740 and 1940, states likewise that people would choose their children's godparents among grandparents and parents' siblings and then would go on to having their own elder children act as godparents for the younger siblings (Fine 1984, 111).

Parenthetically, note that the rarity of the examples here presented does not imply the scarceness of the custom. It has been rarely noted because, I suggest, on the one hand, ethnologists are likely to disregard a residual mode of baptism not directly involving social relations; and, on the other, historians dealing with birth registers would have no particular reason to notice the custom as such—unless, of course, they knew anything about the folklore concerning extraordinary children in the first place.

In Portugal, at any rate, the situation is clear enough. Here, as in France, local fairytales deal with the plight of a man endowed with so many sons and daughters that, as one more child is born, he finds supernatural godparents for them. As Ernesto Veiga de Oliveira informs us, "according to custom, godparents are usually close kin to the child—siblings, uncles or grandparents" (Veiga de Oliveira 1959, 158). However, he adds, the choice of siblings as godparents is a special case in connection with "supernatural" and "archaic" elements. "In numerous localities, the son or daughter being born after seven siblings of the same sex must become godson [goddaughter] to his elder brother or sister, lest he or she be doomed to 'run the fate,' that is, be a 'werewolf' or 'witch'"—and be, moreover, prone to epileptic fits (Veiga de Oliveira 1959, 159–60).

Overall, then, we see that a special mode of baptism shunning the usual rules for the choice of godparents among kin and social peers would apply for

seventh children, who would be given unusual godparents: strangers or siblings. Now, we have to relate this to a wider set of ideas regarding seventh children. Iona Opie and Moira Tatem mention one British mid-thirteenth-century source relating seventh sons to healing powers and present other sources, from the sixteenth century onwards, which explicitly connect such children with the healing of the “King’s Evil” (Opie and Tatem 1989, 346–7). Marc Bloch, following this trend in 1924, has called attention to the “supernatural power ... attributed to the seventh son ... sometimes also ... to the seventh daughter, appearing ... after an uninterrupted series of the same sex,” and has remarked that seventh-born children were credited with a “particular supernatural power” (Bloch 1983, 293 and 296).

Specifically, Bloch noted that from at least the sixteenth century onwards, children born into a seventh position in their family supposedly had—like sacred kings—a power to heal by touch. Such extraordinary children, often deemed sorcerers—even “devils”—and referred to by expressions such as *panseux de secret*, “healers of secret,” clearly had the ambivalent privilege of tapping invisible powers. Theirs was a healing and divinatory power, which could entail animal metamorphosis (Bloch 1983, 293–4). Now, this risk is exactly what, according to Portuguese data, the custom of choosing the eldest children to act as godparents to last-born siblings seeks to avoid. Another method in use was to give such children special names, like *Narciso* or *Bento*. Note that a *bento* is both a healer and a soothsayer (Leite de Vasconcelos 1980, 102–3; Pedroso 1988, 187 and 193). The special baptism given to seventh children relates, therefore, to their twofold distinctiveness: powers of healing or prophecy on the one hand, and danger of metamorphosis on the other.

How far is it possible to unravel the rationale of this idea? This is where the ethnologist has to double as a folklorist, for this inquiry is bound to have us inspect the internal workings of ideas variously expressed in social practices and, as we have seen, in fairytales. While I was still in the field, it became clear to me that Portuguese fairytales actually helped me make some sense of what seemed so hopelessly obscure. At length, I realised that such texts are in turn part of an international web of tales, the formal and thematic coherence of which is outstanding. And I understood that this coherent realm might be a reliable guide to the “why” of real people’s apparently strange behaviour and utterances in other instances, too—for fairytales are, as I was to find out, apt to reveal a cyclic ontology in the light of which apparently odd behaviours by flesh and blood people could start to make sense. Therefore, I will now attempt a joint analysis of social practices, so-called superstitions, and fairytales in order to unravel the intriguing ethnographic problem I had found.

### *Extraordinary Children in Praxis and in Fairytales*

To start with, it may be well to ask: why should there be anything at all so special about being a seventh child? Then, in order to understand why they should turn into werewolves or witches, I shall consider some known traits of Iberian witches and werewolves and see how these correlate to the properties of extraordinary children.

What is so special about the seventh child must be understood within a wider

numerical series. Consider, for example, this statement collected in northern Portugal: "As soon as three male sons are born one after the other, the third should be named Adam [*Adão*]; if nevertheless this was skipped, then, when the series of seven is completed, the first-born should act as godparent to the last-born" (Coelho 1993, 355). Here the third son prefigures the seventh. Furthermore, I was told during my fieldwork that the ninth is the virtual werewolf.

Such equivalence between numbers three, seven and nine I propose to understand in light of the triune, or "three-in-one," concept (see Dundes 1980, 137; Zimmer 1993, 284). Such adages as *três é o número que Deus fez* ("three is the number God made") and *não há duas sem três* ("there are no two without [an upcoming] three") indicate that "three" is a number of perfection which, being odd, implies nevertheless a dynamism that allows for renewal. Hence, in fairytales the third sibling tends to be opposed to the two elders, he or she alone being able to tap the hidden forces required to execute renewal:  $3 = [(1 + 1) + 1]$ . Moreover, if the first two units were conceived in terms of the "three-in-one" notion, the series would add up to *seven*:  $7 = [(3 + 3) + 1]$ . Finally, if the surplus unit itself were thought of in the same terms, the child in excess would be the *ninth* sibling:  $9 = [(3 + 3) + (2 + 1)]$ . The structural principle underlying such empirical variations is, then, that of "three" as a number of dynamic unity, with the consequence that the last element both completes and transcends the series.

One implication, made clear in the fairytale theme (usual in both tale types AT 314 and AT 332) of the last-born of many siblings being given to Godfather/Godmother Death, is that the last-born is not truly integrated into a social position and, therefore, maintains a connection with the world of the dead whence stem his or her prophetic and/or healing and/or metamorphosing powers. Note that someone having had for some reason an imperfect baptism—being, therefore, not fully integrated in the community of the living—will likewise be prone to be a werewolf, to see "things at night," and to wander in the procession of the dead. Seemingly, the necessity of making the first child act as godfather/godmother to the last-born sibling relates to the wish of fully integrating the surplus child with the living, by placing him or her in a clearly defined family position. This, in turn, implies the idea that a "normal" series of siblings has a limited number of available positions—and that any further children will find themselves, as it were, in excess.

During my field-work, I heard three reasons for the practice of making the first child act as godfather/godmother to the last-born sibling: first, the wish to avoid the unpleasant fate, for the last-born, of becoming a werewolf or a witch; second, uneasiness at the idea of continuing to burden neighbours by asking them to perform as godparents—which reflects the idea, as expressed in both the praxis of Burgundy and in fairytales, that extraordinary children are somehow beyond the realm of ordinary godparents; and, third, the wish to cease having children—in other words, a family planning preoccupation. I will assume that, given three different explanations for one act, a single principle should underlie all three. Let me begin with the second formulation, expressing the notion that one would bother neighbours by asking them to perform as godparents after a certain number of children had been born. This suggests that the normal reproductive cycle, during which neighbours and other relations willingly serve

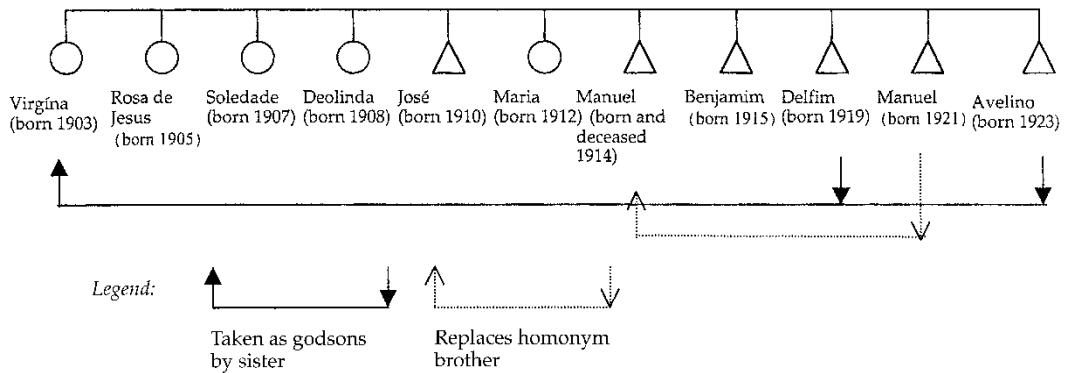


Figure 1 Flesh and Blood Surplus Children. The *Casanova* siblings, 1903–1923.

as godparents, ought to have terminated. In other words, children are now being born in excess of a limited number of family positions. Therefore, and we are now dealing with the first formulation, eldest siblings must take all children beyond six (or eight) in charge in order to integrate them into the regular series and hence cut the lingering link to the dead, expressed as the fate of becoming werewolf or witch, that plagues those born without a place in the community of the living. Furthermore, with the last-born children united by a mystical relation to first-born siblings, the series of siblings comes full circle—is complete—which explains the birth-control connotation of the practice.

The resulting inference is that children born in excess of a conceptual limit are to be drawn back into the series in connection with an elder sibling. Is this supported by empirical data? The situation is complex, for the underlying ideas I am trying to shed light on are expressed in different versions, as is the wont of folklore: the first extraordinary child is either the seventh or the ninth; all children or only those of the same sex are counted; and only living children matter or else dead ones do, too. Moreover, whatever version is taken, its application impinges on the varied daily lives and practical concerns, including social strategies, mortality rates, and so forth, of different family constellations. Even so, in some cases the notions are clear enough in praxis. Consider, for example, the following family constellation as reconstituted by myself from both parish registers and oral inquiry in Arcos de Valdevez, northern Portugal, in the early 1980s (Figure 1).

When I met Virginia, the eldest sister, as an elderly woman, she told me that the ninth is the problematic position in a series of siblings. This fits with the fact that her eighth sibling was named “Benjamin,” with the connotation “youngest.” Note also that the unusual delay before the next birth suggests a deliberate attempt at birth control at this point. Moreover, Virginia acted as godmother to her ninth and eleventh siblings—but not to the tenth (Manuel), who had been named after a previously dead infant. Such facts demand a unitary interpretation. The one I propose is that Manuel did not need to be integrated into the series by his elder sister because he had already taken up, as it were, his homonymous dead brother’s seventh position. In other words, the three sons

born after the theoretical “youngest” (Benjamin) were all integrated into the regular series, either in Virginia’s position or in that of a previously dead brother. The implication is, again, that series of siblings are to be conceived in terms of a limited number of available positions, marked by names, in which newborns are to be socially integrated by baptism. If indeed the act of nomination “is primarily a rite of aggregation and delivers a family identity” (Zonabend 1984, 24), then the custom of transmitting the names of deceased children to subsequently born siblings (which was common practice in Portugal and Galicia, as well as in France) suggests, as Zonabend puts it, that “within the group positions ought to be always occupied” (Zonabend 1990a, 254). Thus, series of siblings appear to comprise a limited number of, to use Claude Lévi-Strauss’s happy expression, “classes of positions ... successively occupied by living occupants” (Lévi-Strauss 1962, 261–2). Consequently, siblings born to no available position—to whom I have referred as “extraordinary children”—maintain a lingering contact with the world of the dead, the nefarious aspect of which is to be warded off by a special procedure of integration set up on their behalf. Such is, I suggest, the primary reason for having first-born children act as godparents for the last-born.

So far, the foregoing analysis has suggested that flesh-and-blood surplus children with no place in family positions are led to social integration by means of extraordinary godparents who are their own siblings, at the very core of closest kin, in so far as their parents attempt to spare them a hard fate. But this is only one dimension of the overall idea that godparents for extraordinary children must come from beyond the universe of social peers—either from inside the nuclear family or from outside of the moral community. Therefore, we still have to address the fact that extraordinary godparents may be distant ones. In doing so, it is most useful to realise that fairytales clearly present a model of supernatural godparents that is the paradigm, really, of all flesh-and-blood distant godparents. And it will become apparent, as we examine fairytales in which surplus children fight werewolves and witches in the theatre of imagination, that the choice of both consanguine and distant godparents, in praxis as well as in stories, must be understood in the light of stable ideas regarding metamorphosis. Let us lend an ear to such tales.

My first remark is that Perrault’s well-known “Le Petit Poucet” (AT 327) illustrates much of my argument concerning seventh children. Perrault playfully presents a series of *seven* boys, all born within *three* years, the youngest of whom is *seven* years old. As, moreover, six of these children were born in pairs, the series comprises one main group of three twin births, plus a *seventh* child. Finally, the last-born of this excessively large series is someone special—no bigger than a thumb and yet “endowed with more subtlety and a greater share of wisdom than all his brothers” (Perrault 1977, 101). Furthermore, oral versions make it clear that a supernatural godparent hovers behind this theme. In several French texts, the surplus children depart to the forest on the advice of a godmother (Delarue 1985, 310–24). Likewise, a Portuguese tale that translates the dilemma in Perrault of a couple unable to feed an excessive number of children into the recurring plight of a man unable to find godparents for the last-born children—in accordance with, again, the notion that flesh and blood people feel embarrassed in seeking godparents for seventh children—explicitly has Saint

Anthony volunteer for the task on condition that the surplus brother and sister be sent away to a certain mountain, where they are to meet a female Cyclops. The ogress attempts to kill and cook them, but the children throw her into the heated oven. As she burns, her eyes become two dogs, which later will help the boy to slay a seven-headed serpent, *bicha de sete cabeças*, and to get married (Leite de Vasconcelos 1986, 301–4). Still other Portuguese oral versions have the last-born—a third son, or else a seventh child named Dedo (“Finger”)—defeat a werewolf, from whom he obtains riches (Leite de Vasconcelos 1986, 294–6). And, while in Grimms’ “Hänsel und Gretel” the abandoned children famously defeat a witch by throwing her into the heated oven and obtaining riches, another German variant presents a wolf in the same “involuntary donor” role. Likewise, French versions feature a wolf or a werewolf (Delarue 1985, 310 and 321). What is more, the Grimms in their notes connect Hänsel with a seventh child (Hunt 1968, 1:355–6; Grimm 1989, 3:26); and their version implies that the whole adventure happens in the otherworld, whence the children return—as also happens in French tradition—by crossing the classic stretch of water (Delarue 1985, 306–9 and 311).

This leads to the observation that choosing a distant godfather has supernatural implications even in social practice. In Northern Portugal it was usual for women wishing to become pregnant, or fearing for the life of their embryo, to have the first person appearing after midnight on a certain bridge, allegedly built by the Devil, perform an ad hoc baptism on their belly (Fontes 1979, 82–3; cf. de Castro n.d., 115–8). Note that this unknown godfather issues from darkness on a bridge built by the Devil to protect a problematic embryo, and the saintly godfather in fairytales causes an ogre to provide for the social insertion of problematic children. Furthermore, the connection of the unknown godfather with the Devil repeats that of the saintly godfather with the ogre—and a French version of AT 327 clarifies this as it unabashedly depicts the godmother as a witch (Delarue 1985, 321).

Hence, just as in fairytales a distant godparent executes the insertion into society of problematic children by defeating werewolves or witches, so in social practice a close godparent carries out the social insertion of surplus children, as a result keeping these from becoming werewolves or witches. This parallelism suggests that the social practice attempts, as we have already seen, to overcome a werewolf/witch nature in flesh-and-blood seventh children. Indeed, often the eldest sibling must bleed the seventh child’s little finger (Leite de Vasconcelos 1980, 393; Pedroso 1988, 187). This is noteworthy because one way to “break the fate” (*quebrar o fado*) of a werewolf is, precisely, to cause him to bleed—often, to bleed his tail (Leite de Vasconcelos 1980, 213–4; Pedroso 1988, 191; Coelho 1993, 357; cf. Frazer 1984, 428, note 4). Furthermore, when the werewolf resumes human shape, his little finger is supposedly either wounded or missing (Leite de Vasconcelos 1980, 211; 1986, 290; Pedroso 1988, 191). This, in turn, correlates with the fact that the very small victor over a werewolf in fairytales is called “Finger.” And, if to bleed/cut the little finger is to excise the werewolf nature of a person, then a small hero called “Finger” who slays a werewolf on his way to social integration presumably presents a nature similar to his victim’s ghostly essence.

In short: just as in fairytales children born in excess often get supernatural

godparents and are made to defeat werewolves and witches, so in real life surplus children have at least part of their werewolf/witch nature excised when their elder siblings bleed them and take them as godchildren. Furthermore, note that fairytale heroes are—as Marie-Louise Tenèze notes—inherently endowed with foresight (Tenèze 1970, 20–4). The little finger, too, can supposedly disclose the occult (Leite de Vasconcelos 1938, 480–84; 1985, 66; Veiga de Oliveira 1955, 13, note 8) and, of course, seventh sons may perform as soothsayers (Leite de Vasconcelos 1980, 102–3; cf. Pedroso 1988, 187 and 193). Hence, we are back to the fundamental connection of problematic children with the otherworld.

### *The Supernatural Dimension of Extraordinary Children*

Still, we have to see why this focuses so much on werewolves and witches. Let us examine some characteristic traits of these. By now, we know that the hosts of werewolves are supposedly recruited among surplus children as well as persons afflicted with an incomplete baptism. It remains to note that werewolves are also children born of sexual relations carrying an incestuous overtone, mainly between in-laws or people who are spiritually kindred through the baptismal rite (Leite de Vasconcelos 1986, 292; Pedroso 1988, 186; cf. Héritier 1999, chaps 3 and 8). Werewolves are, then, creatures that should not have been born, are in any case unable to occupy an available social position, and thus remain in touch with the otherworld as they alternate between two opposed realms, as days alternate with nights, for seven years. One corresponding fate for seventh daughters is that of becoming *peeiras de lobos*, “wolf-keepers” (Leite de Vasconcelos 1980, 386; 1986, 300; Pedroso 1988, 197–8). I heard such a fate described as a *degrede* (“exile”)—an expression that also refers to the last seven years of a person’s life, in which that person’s double takes to wandering by itself and appears in the “procession of the dead.” Moreover, people whose baptism was incomplete also participate in this “procession of the dead,” are thus able to see what goes on in “the otherworld,” and risk of course becoming werewolves (Leite de Vasconcelos 1980, 214; 1986, 291; Pedroso 1988, 283; Coelho 1993, 459).

Turning now to the females among extraordinary children, we may note that the notion of *peira* shades into a stereotype of girls who, being considered ravenous in either an alimentary or a sexual sense, are cursed into actually turning into the she-wolf entity they metaphorically stand for. The information, collected in northern Portugal, that in Galicia it is a terrible curse to say that someone will be a wolf-keeper in the wilderness, synthesises the two closely related themes of the curse sent on “lupine” girls and of the wolf-keeper exile characteristic of *peeiras* (Pedroso 1988, 193). Indeed, one particularly rich account from Galicia specifies that a girl too eager for meat is one of many sisters. After her father curses her, so the narrative goes, the girl turns “into a fate” (*volveuse unha fada*) and alternates henceforth between wolf and human shapes, periodically leading the wolves in their attacks and restraining them from doing harm to humans and their flocks. When, finally, someone makes her paw bleed, her fate is lifted and she resumes human shape for good (Risco 1971, 22). This is precisely what happens to werewolves, of whom clearly this woman alternating



between the states of *peeira* and she-wolf in the wilderness (during a seven-year “fate” or “exile”) is a feminine version (cf. Frazer 1984, 179).

However, the most frequently mentioned danger threatening seventh daughters is that of becoming witches (cf. Opie and Tatem 1989, 347). This, too, is understandable if one takes into account that witches are supposed to endure a seven-year fate in the course of which they turn at night into animals (such as cats and geese; Leite de Vasconcelos 1980, 129–30; 1986, 332, note 62; cf. Frazer 1984, 182–7). Moreover, the fact that the term *degredo* denotes both the seven-year fate of wolf-keepers and the terminal seven years of one’s life (during which the person’s double participates in the procession of the dead) implies that the wolf-keeper’s fate is a form of “death in life” in which a double endowed with materiality joins the dead—here represented as wolves. It is, then, comprehensible that there is no discontinuity between wolf-keepers, werewolves, and witches, the nightly transformation of which into animals sets them in the other world as supernatural creatures.

At this point, we may wrap up the foregoing discussion concerning the reason why seventh or ninth children risk turning into werewolves, *peeiras*, or witches, in the following way. Children born to no definite social position must remain between the living and the dead, Christian and pagan statuses, in the guise of creatures pertaining to two realms that baptism—by inserting people into social positions marked by Christian names—should have radically set apart. Note that this fits nicely within the bounds of a standard paradigm, most lucidly articulated by Mary Douglas (1966), which ascribes both danger and power to entities located between and betwixt recognised social categories. This is illuminating as far as it goes. However, beyond what is immediately made clear by this sort of Durkheim-inspired static social-classificatory grid, we have to deal with underlying dynamic assumptions concerning ontological complexity and metamorphosis. Shifty and elusive as these may be, it is possible to inquire as to their internal workings by examining certain pertinent themes of folklore that are recurrent on a pan-European scale. Here, again, the ethnographer must double as a folklorist in order to clarify notions that inform the everyday life of flesh-and-blood people and so build up a symbolic pattern that is part of a given worldview. At this point, let us broaden our horizons by adopting a pan-European approach.

### *The Complex Ontology of Werewolves and Witches*

In central and eastern Europe werewolves often are, as Éva Pócs sums up, “individuals born in a caul or, in other cases, with a ‘surplus of body parts’ ... a double set of teeth, or ... two hearts” (Pócs 1999, 34). According to Pócs, being born with a caul is also characteristic of the mostly female “*mora*,” creatures who are able to send their souls out at night while in a trance; on them the figure of the supernatural witch was probably based (Pócs 1999, 32–4). Being born with a caul, therefore, reveals an essential duality, which relates to the notion of being born in a “second skin” (Belmont 1971, 52–60). Indeed, a sixteenth-century author, Ambroise Paré, compares being stripped of the amniotic membrane during birth to a snake going through a narrow passage in order to slough its old skin (Belmont 1971, 23 and 205, note 104). Note that this analogy states that

the caul is like the snake's old skin, implying that birth wearing a caul carries into the world of the living the slough's "death" associations. An intimate relation between death and regeneration crystallises, then, in the image of the ever-rejuvenating snake.

In children born with a caul we find a second category of un-ordinary beings, the ambivalence of which matches that of seventh-born children. On the one hand, the naming of the caul as a *Glückshaut* and of its bearer as a *Glückskind*, to be found in Grimms' *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* no. 29, "The Devil with the Three Golden Hairs," emphasises the pan-European happy aspect of these people (Grimm 1989, 1: 167, 170; cf. Belmont 1971, 28). On the other hand, in central and eastern Europe, a disquieting dimension comes to the fore. Among Slavs "a child born with a caul is to have much luck ... but ... people are frightened at the demonic prospects such a child faces. They would rather resort to preventive magic to circumvent the supposed consequences of the caul" (Jakobson and Szeftel 1949, 67). As one might expect, this unpleasant side of being born with a caul, that is, "with a second shape beside his natural skin," has to do with being a werewolf (Jakobson and Szeftel 1949, 61, cf. n. 30). This takes us directly back to Iberia, where "preventive magic" was likewise applied—but in this case to seventh children, who share soothsaying and healing capacities with children born in a caul elsewhere (Belmont 1971, 43–4). Therefore, in the westernmost tip of continental Europe, birth in a caul having been dissociated from the unpleasant consequences of a werewolf fate, it is seventh siblings who assume this fate. This suggests a fundamental equivalence of supernumerary children and second-skinned beings on a pan-European scale.

In order to explore this, we do well to recall that, when a wounded werewolf resumes human shape, his little finger is supposedly either wounded or missing. Frequently, this missing finger corresponds to the cut-off tail of the zoomorphic werewolf. Hence, we have the means to understand the harmony between the notion that to bleed or cut a werewolf's tail—corresponding to the little finger when in human shape—is to excise the werewolf essence of a person, and the fairytale image of a small hero called "Finger" who slays a werewolf on his path to social integration. Indeed, this harmony suggests that the small finger is in excess in the body in so far as it symbolises the very same werewolf's essence that likewise imbues the surplus child in a family—whom, appropriately, fairytales name "Finger." This explains that—although the relationship of the werewolf with a second skin lingers in Portugal, for example, in the idea that to burn "the first shirt that children wear" would avoid the danger of being a werewolf (Leite de Vasconcelos 1986, 292)—the extra skin at birth does not symbolise the surplus nature of the werewolf so much as the extra birth itself does. In other words, in this context the werewolf's whole body appears in the same surplus situation at birth as the second skin does elsewhere, and so is fittingly assimilated to a finger in the imaginary realm of fairytales.

In short, there is equivalence between the ideas that a werewolf has a surplus of body parts, as is the case in Europe generally, and that its very existence is a part in excess in the body of siblings, as is the case in north-western Iberia specifically. Now it remains to relate this proposition to the underlying notion of metamorphosis, supposing a cyclic ontology. Note that Portuguese and Galician werewolves do not often put on a furry skin in order to turn into

animals—as would happen in much of Europe—but rather tend to achieve this by stripping naked and revert to human shape as soon as they resume their discarded clothing. This idea is certainly old, because Pliny the Elder mentions an Arcadian tradition whereby someone chosen “by casting lots among the family” hangs his clothes on an oak tree, swims across a marsh and is transformed into a wolf for nine years; then he swims back, resumes his shape, and—“fabulous detail ... he gets back the same clothes!” (Pliny 1983, 59 and 61). In twelfth-century “Bisclavret,” Marie de France stresses the relationship between retrieving clothes and resuming human shape (de France 1990, 117–33). Also from twelfth-century France is the cognate story of a man achieving animal transformation by stripping and rolling in the dirt at the new moon (Tilbury 1992, 139). In the same vein, a typical modern Portuguese variant says that a seventh son strips naked, leaves his clothes on a pine tree and rolls in the dirt, in order to metamorphose into the shape of the last animal that rolled there. Then, after “running the fate,” he fetches his clothes and “as soon as he grabs them, he returns to the human state” (Leite de Vasconcelos 1986, 292–3).

It is not by chance that Pliny mentions swimming across an expanse of water—the classic passage into the otherworld, here in the same structural position as rolling on the ground in other versions—just after discarding clothes and before retrieving them. Furthermore, Pliny’s “fabulous detail” that the werewolf, as he resumes human shape, retrieves the very same clothes he had discarded nine years before, fits with the Bisclavret’s claim that to lose his human clothes would entail wandering forever as a wolf. Taken together, these statements correspond to those uttered by Italian *benandanti*—those ecstatic fighters for fertility born with cauls, studied by Carlo Ginzburg—to the effect that souls wandering in animal shape would, if unable to re-enter the body, become vagrant (Ginzburg 1984, 38–9). Seemingly, it follows that the image of seventh children turned into animal shapes after discarding clothes corresponds to that of “souls” appearing in animal shape after leaving the inert body behind. Thus, we are back to the idea that, in western Europe, the birth of surplus children doomed to zoomorphism corresponds to the extra skin causing metamorphosis in most Eastern variants. Furthermore, we get to see that—as was already implied in the use of the term *degredo* for both the exile of the *peeira* and the flight of the double in the last seven years of one’s life—the animal shape of werewolves corresponds to a flight of the soul. Let us further explore this possibility.

To say that the discarded clothes of metamorphosis tales stand for the discarded human body of ecstatic narratives leads to the strong hypothesis that Portuguese werewolves leave behind their human clothes just as the zoomorphic souls of ecstatics leave their inert body. One consequence is that the body of a surplus Iberian child involved in seeing the procession of the dead and in participating in it, even while living, corresponds to a soul precariously anchored to this world by its fleeting envelope of human clothes—and, therefore, metamorphosed into animal shape as these are removed. This corresponds, of course, to the old idea of the soul as a material double that appears in animal shapes as it leaves the body. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie mentions fine examples of this concerning Montailou, an early fourteenth-century Pyrenean village (Ladurie 1975, 590, 605 and 608–9).

Likewise, complex Scandinavian notions imply that “the caul is the seat of the external soul, a guardian spirit eventually showing in an animal shape to the sleeping person” (Belmont 1971, 55–6; cf. Ginzburg 1984, 101; Klaniczay 1990, 137). Let me briefly examine these Northern notions as a convenient means for recasting my foregoing argument in the terms of recent discussions. The old Scandinavian notion of *hamr*, which Claude Lecouteux describes as “an internal shape determining external appearance and character,” denotes a skin or envelope (Lecouteux 1985, 22; cf. Dumézil 1985, 209; Boyer 1986, 39). Metamorphosis is, therefore, the conversion of “internal form” into external animal shape (Boyer 1981, 150–1; 1986, 43 and 45), which fits with the widespread notion of werewolves as “skin shifters” (Frazer 1984, 429, note 1). This supposes a basic equivalence between metamorphosis as a flight of the animal double from the body and as a change of skin. Indeed, Lecouteux proposes that in cases in which metamorphosis takes place by discarding human clothes, these clothes are substitutes for the lethargic body (Lecouteux 1992, 134). More precisely, it would seem, both stripped clothes and the dormant body stand for a discarded human form. As ecstasies take on animal forms, they discard their human shape as an empty envelope later to be re-entered; and this corresponds to the periodic inversions, characteristic of werewolves as *versipellis* (“skin-shifters”), whereby the internal skin becomes external (and vice versa). In both cases, double-skinned beings periodically alternate between opposite aspects of themselves.

Claude Gaignebet expresses this notion by saying that at the core of every such being lies “a double, his other aspect, ready to replace the aging envelope” (Gaignebet and Lajoux 1985, 104, note 48). The link between the notion of changing/discarding skins and the sloughing snake is, again, obvious. This, in turn, highlights the importance of Roman Jakobson’s perception with regard to the epic conception of a Russian werewolf prince:

A serpent paternity entirely fits with the caul and werewolf motifs: the serpent able to shed its skin brings into the world a son provided at his birth with a second skin, and afterwards enriched with a werewolf power to change his skin. It is worthy of note that in Serbian *košilja* “shirt” means both “caul” and “serpent skin” (Jakobson and Szeftel 1949, 64).

The “second skin,” characteristic of both those born in a caul and “skin shifters,” is, therefore, like a serpent skin. This concurs with the close relationship between werewolves and dragons in Eastern Europe, as well as with the fact that werewolf seers were characterised by “underworldly ‘snake initiation’” (Pócs 1989, 23–4; 1999, 143).

This, in turn, leads back to the connection between the “second skin” and a pervading theme of divination. Indeed, James Frazer’s incidental observation that “a Russian epic hero, whose father was a serpent, understands the language of birds, beasts and fishes” correlates with the fact that such Portuguese last-born children as are wont to turn into werewolves display a gift for divination; for to perceive the occult is what the understanding of the language of birds—granted by serpents—stands for (Frazer 1888, 163).

One possible explanation for the renowned oracular wisdom of serpents—for, in other words, their command of the language of prophetic birds—is that snakes are the natural prey of birds and “in nature the victims well understand the habits of their enemies that enable them to guard themselves against an

attack" (Mitra 1925–6, 86). Another possible explanation is that birds are the natural prey of serpents, which, therefore, learn the bird language as they eat birds and birds' eggs (Frazer 1888, 181). Each explanation is partly right in so far as the two proverbial enemies, continuously ingesting each other in an unending cycle, are ultimately identical. Hence, the alternation between predator and prey constitutes an image of endless death and regeneration involving the unity of fighting halves (Gaignebet and Lajoux 1985, 104), which indeed fairytales present indifferently as (among others) bird and serpent, two serpents, or two dragons (see Róheim 1992, 173). In this vein, Pócs notes:

The Serb, Bulgarian, and Macedonian ... snake, dragon, snake man ... magicians were reputedly born in cauls ... in a snakeskin, or even as a snake. Many were said to have wings. They might be an eagle, or their fathers might have been snakes, eagles, roosters, ganders, and so on (Pócs 1999, 130).

The identity of fighting halves amounts, in other words, to the skin-casting snake alias the dragon figure encompassing the sky, the underground, and the sea.

This is the point at which to note that the language of birds is typically granted to someone who, like the Greek soothsayer Melampus, rears young serpents even while being involved in the killing of old ones (Frazer 1888, 166–7). Whether the story-hero, as here, propitiates the serpent's regeneration or whether—as in Grimm no. 16, "The Three Snake Leaves"—the serpent grants means of resurrection to him, there is a constant involvement of the hero with the perennial snake. It is, consequently, most interesting to note that such means of life-restoration "could be inherited by the serpent slayer," for—as we just saw—the hero who propitiates the young serpent is also the slayer of the old snake (Mitra 1925–6, 87). In other words, he who gains supernatural knowledge and/or means of resurrection from serpents is inherently a dragon slayer. This explains why, in Eastern Europe, "snakes and other watery animals from the underworld ... are used before Saint George's day for knowledge ... within the context of the dragon ... that was conquered by Saint George" (Pócs 1999, 132). And, of course, the idea we are discussing is reminiscent of the Scandinavian image of dragon-slayer Sigurd learning the language of birds as he licks blood from the slain dragon's heart (Byock 1990, 65–6; Sturluson 1995, 101–2).

One implication is that the slaying of the old dragon is homologous to the snake's casting off the old skin. But then, the dragon slayer is himself like the young snake—as Vladimir Propp rightly perceived, "he who was born from the dragon will kill the dragon" (Propp 1983, 363, cf. 290–1). This, in turn, takes us back to the idea that the fairytale hero "Finger," who slays a werewolf, presents a nature similar to his victim's—and immediately reminds us that, in another quoted Portuguese version of AT 327 (the story of the boy helped by two dogs to slay a seven-headed serpent), the surplus child is in fact a dragon slayer. The same imagery is observable in Jakobson and Ružičić's demonstration that the Slavic werewolf begotten by a serpent is, more precisely, a "Dragon and Fiery Wolf"—one who sets out, as a proper dragon slayer, to kill his father (Jakobson and Ružičić 1950, 344 and 347–50).

In short, the equivalence of werewolves and dragons as double-skinned beings underlies an implicit homology of surplus children—assimilated in social

practice to witches and werewolves whom, in fairytales, they must kill—to dragon slayers. Therefore, as the outcome of this joint study of fairytales, so-called beliefs, and social practices, we realise that there is a symbolic equivalence between flesh-and-blood extraordinary children—credited with the nature of werewolves/witches, yet possessed of oracular and healing powers—and the widespread “Dragon Slayer” theme that Propp recognised at the heart of fairytales (Propp 1996, 89–90 and 114). Since this conclusion may seem strange and even nonsensical, it remains to suggest how the dragon-slayer theme may illuminate the link between seventh children and werewolves.

### *What about the Dragon?*

In checking the liminal status of extraordinary children in Iberia, we have found the dragon image in connection with metamorphosis. More precisely, we have seen that the alternation between predator and prey constitutes an image of endless death and regeneration equivalent to the snake’s casting off its old skin, a recurring image of which is the slaying of the old dragon by its scion. As Ananda Coomaraswamy recognised, this spells out that, in the act of dragon slaying, “the Sacrifice is always a willing victim and the passion self-imposed, at the same time that he is the innocent victim of a passion unjustly imposed upon him” (Coomaraswamy 1944, 107, note 3). This implies, in my terms, a notion of ontological complexity, such as that the replacement of the old dragon by its progeny amounts to the externalisation of the dragon’s inner and younger nature—much like a skin-shedding snake—and this, as I have argued, synthesises ideas regarding werewolves as both skin shifters and zoomorphic souls.

From a localised custom we have reached a more general notion of complex ontology linked to cyclic transformation, which the images of the sloughing snake and of dragon slaying convey in the clearest terms. In this sense, one might theoretically define as a dragon worldwide any creature that seems paradoxical, uniting—to use the words of Chris Knight—“the lowest creature (a snake) which was also the highest (an eagle, bat or other winged creature) ... death which was also new life, female which was also male, animal which was human, water which was fire, dark which was light—and so on” (Knight 1991, 7–8), while cyclically alternating between the opposite aspects of itself in an image of perpetual self-rejuvenation.

Let me give an example of what the dragon could be, in this extended perspective, by turning to a classic anthropological text. Victor Turner unambiguously states that liminal periods in rites of passage comprise “what cannot be defined in static terms,” and he contrasts the usual reification of sociological abstractions by anthropologists—as in “talk about persons ‘moving through structural positions in a hierarchical frame’ and the like”—to the recurring native understanding of such processes in terms of “an ontological transformation,” a “change in being” involving “an absorption of powers” (Turner 1977, 97–8 and 101). Interestingly, Turner relates such transformations to “logically antithetical processes of death and growth” represented by ever the same tokens, such as “by huts and tunnels that are at once tombs and wombs, by lunar symbolism (for the same moon waxes and wanes), by snake symbolism (for the snake appears to die, but only to shed its old skin and appear in a new one)”

(Turner 1977, 99). Moreover, Turner adds that neophytes during their “ontological transformation”—which is of the very same kind that folklore generally expresses through the image of casting or donning a skin—are supposedly brought “into close connection with deity or ... supernatural power” as expressed by masks, which “combine features of both sexes, have both animal and human attributes ... in a totally unique configuration, the monster or dragon” (Turner 1977, 98 and 105).

In this remarkable piece, Turner shows a sharp perception of the fundamental trait of the dragon worldwide—combination of opposites through cyclic conversion. Metamorphosis, being a reversible transition between contrasted aspects of the same being, entails opposites as alternating aspects of unitary entities. In this perspective, the dragon is simply the foremost of a host of complex entities endowed with ambiguous features, to be found in folklore generally, which reveal cyclical notions of time and being. Hence the association of werewolves with dragons in Eastern Europe; hence, too, the identity of werewolfish western-European extraordinary children with the dragon slayer in fairytales. From this point of view, the dragon clarifies the link between seventh children and werewolves in so far as it highlights a pervading ontology of perennial dynamism, transcending all binary oppositions, in a cyclic framework whereby one may expect to find in each being a complex nature and in each pair of opposites an underlying unity.

In light of this model, we are for the first time in a position to interpret the western Iberian practice of uniting last-born to first-born children by a relation of godparenthood. This mystical union of first-born and last-born in a single family position arguably constitutes a particular variation on the image of “two in one,” after the model of identity-cum-opposition, that underlies metamorphosis. This is why, I suggest, the godparenthood practice may be used as a benign alternative to this fate. Indeed, on the level of symbolic praxis, benign equivalents to metamorphosis are generally used as its symbolic antidote. For example, as we saw, to name a child “Bento” prevents him from “running a fate” as a werewolf. (Recall that a *bento*, being a soothsayer and a healer, retains the benign aspect of being born in surplus.) Another name used to the same effect, *Narciso* (Narcissus), implies the notion of having a mirror image—but one that is free of any gruesome zoomorphic connotation. And, in yet the same vein, the practice of burning the werewolf’s clothes in order to have him regain human shape amounts to withdrawing the extra skin that causes metamorphosis, just as to cut the finger is equivalent to getting rid of that extra body part (or surplus definition of the body) that constitutes the shape-shifter.

This perspective, in turn, may help to explain why the missing finger in human shape often corresponds to the tail in beast form, the cutting or bleeding of which, indeed, brings the werewolf back to human shape. However, it is important to realise that a tail recurrently symbolises a penis. For example, in the medieval *Le roman de Renart*, the sly fox causes the wolf’s loss of tail and then becomes the she-wolf’s lover (Paris 1986, 65, 114–7 and 250 sq.). This is in keeping with the old notion that the wolf’s tail contains “a love-poison” (Pliny 1983, 61)—as do the wolf’s genitals (Summers 1933, 70)—for the tail and the penis have appeared since antiquity in a long-standing metaphorical relationship (see Dumézil 1986, 182). In this perspective, to cut or simply to bleed the

finger or tail of the werewolf suggests emasculation and penis-bleeding, deemed equivalent. This equivalence may be understood if we realise that castration results in a wound that is symbolically equivalent to the female genitals. Thus, in a French folktale, the wolf explicitly regards the feminine pudenda as a “wound” following castration (Tenèze 1976, 420). This equivalence is pervasive enough for Freud to have made famous, or nowadays perhaps infamous, use of it (Freud 1991, 193–6, 320–1, 335–6 and 375–6). Moreover, a wounded penis “menstruates” in as much as it yields genital blood and menstruation is itself like a bleeding wound. Overall, then, bleeding the werewolf symbolically induces a genital bleeding equivalent to that of females. To bleed a werewolf is, then, to assimilate him to a menstrual woman. This leads to the observation that the traditional notion of metamorphosis as a conversion of internal shape to external form, and vice versa, neatly fits with the ancient idea that women are men turned outside in—and men women turned inside out (Gaignebet and Lajoux 1985, 104; Laqueur 1999, 4 and 25–8). Within the bounds of this one-sex model of the body, as Thomas Laqueur has termed it, metamorphosis and sex-swapping are equivalent modes of conversion.

Here ends my proposed interpretation of the obscure custom that took my attention in the 1980s. In the foregoing discussion I have attempted to use convergent approaches from ethnology and folklore to explain a localised custom in a given context, while pushing as far as possible towards theoretical generalisation. Indeed, I have argued that focused examination of even an odd ethnographical curiosity can disclose aspects of universal symbolism; that, to put it otherwise, in the realm of symbolic representations, one can perceive the structure of the universe in a grain of sand, even though no two grains are ever alike. This is why a comparative study has proved indispensable in showing in what sense any two different grains of sand may be said to reflect one universe.

### Notes

[1] This discussion was first drafted in 1999 for a symposium, “Demons, Spirits, Witches: Popular Mythology and Christian Demonology,” held at the Ethnographic Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest. During the academic year of 2001–2, I was fortunate to present nearly finished versions of this paper to wonderful audiences at the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Universidade do Algarve. For a fuller discussion, the interested reader is referred to chapters one and two of my *Metamorphosis: The Dynamics of Symbolism in European Fairy Tales* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

[2] Unless otherwise stated, all translations of quotations not in English are my own.

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### **Biographical Note**

*Francisco Vaz da Silva teaches anthropology and folklore at the University of Lisbon. He has written in English, French, and Portuguese for European and American professional journals and is the author of a recent book on fairytales.*

