

Le fiabe sono vere... Storia popolare italiana

Fairy Tales Are True... Italian Folk History

In Depth (summaries)

10. THE MAGICAL WORLD: MAKING A PACT WITH THE UNKNOWN

Ex-Voto

Recognized for their power, amulets, talismans, and *ex-voto* were tools believed to influence fate. *Ex-voto* in particular served to protect, heal, and attract fortune, expressing the hope of overcoming suffering through popular religious devotion. Made from various materials, they could depict the dangers faced by those seeking divine intervention or represent the human body—either realistically or symbolically—taking anthropomorphic or zoomorphic forms.

The Magical World

A world where things are not always as they seem—this is the “magical world,” where human experiences, with all their uncertainties and risks, gain meaning through ritual. In this realm, personal struggles are not faced in isolation but become woven into a shared system of traditions and beliefs that offer solace and reassurance. The question is not whether spirits exist in our world, but whether we acknowledge that an alternative form of reality is possible. In this sense, spirits may be real for those who imagine and experience them. Cultural anthropology encourages us to examine magical practices across different societies, not to dismiss them, but to understand their function within each culture.

Wild Thought

The term “wild thought” does not imply an inferior or primitive form of reasoning, but rather a logical and coherent system for making sense of the world—a kind of secret language of reality, revealing its intrinsic diversity and discontinuity. In this perspective, there are no rigid divisions between categories, but rather a continuous transition between them. This language, though simple, is highly effective, capable of conveying any message through a system of oppositions, where content and form are inseparable.

Hernia Ritual

The *hernia ritual* was a traditional magical-healing practice widespread in Italy and across Europe, used to treat hernias in children and adolescents. More than just a cure, it was also a rite of passage, overseen by a *comparatrico* (a godfather or godmother) within the family. The ritual involved passing the child three times through two branches of an oak, elm, or willow tree—an act symbolically known as the *passata*. Beyond its physical aim, the ritual carried a deeper symbolic significance, addressing fears related to potential impotence or male infertility, both traditionally associated with hernias. As such, it served as a cultural response to anxieties surrounding health, masculinity, and virility.

Witches and Sorcerers

According to certain beliefs, witches and sorcerers would gather at night in remote places such as fields and mountains. Some tales claimed they arrived flying through the air after anointing their bodies with magical ointments, riding broomsticks or wooden staffs, or even mounting animals. Others suggested they could transform into animals themselves. Folklore held that those attending these *sabbaths* for the first time had to renounce the Christian faith, desecrate the sacraments, and pledge allegiance to the devil before partaking in feasts, dances, and orgies. These notions of witchcraft can be traced back to ancient shamanic traditions, with elements like magical flight and animal transformations deeply rooted in popular culture.

Tarantism and Mass Society

Anthropologist Annabella Rossi, a colleague of Ernesto de Martino, conducted extensive research on *tarantism* in Salento and the perception of sin in Basilicata, developing a keen interest in the intersection between ancient traditions and modern society. As an official at the National Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions and a professor at the University of Salerno, she played a crucial role in collecting photographic and video documentation of Italian folklore. Her fieldwork in southern Italy provided in-depth insights into popular religiosity and cultural expressions, with a particular focus on rituals and festivals among the poor and peasant communities. Additionally, she explored the significance of everyday objects, such as souvenirs and market stall trinkets, viewing them as valuable testimonies of Italy's evolving social landscape.