

THE IMAGE OF CUCKOO IN FOLKLORE

LILJA KUDIRKIENĖ

Summary

Unlike some other images, such as those of the Sun, an orphan, etc., there is no unanimous interpretation of the cuckoo's image in folklore; no clear dominant can be discerned: neither in terms of values or aesthetics, nor in semantical functional aspect. The diversity and inconsistency of the cuckoo's image could be explained by motivation stemming from different sources: in some cases it is based on mythical beliefs, whereas in others – on the natural peculiarities of a real cuckoo.

Almost all the European peoples see cuckoo as a fortune-teller: by its call the cuckoo predicts the coming year to be good or bad, warns of a famine or war, disease or death (more frequently it predicts bad things than good ones). According to the cuckoo's call and its various circumstances (*Kuckuck ueber dem Stock... Kuckuck ueberm Huegel... 'Cuckoo [calling] on a stake... Cuckoo [calling] on a hill'*) the length of a human life or its different stages (e.g. girlhood, shepherding) is conjectured. The negative consequences of hearing a cuckoo's call on an empty stomach or while strapped for cash were shunned of. This is also where the figurative images of "cuckoo's bite" and "cuckoo's money" come from.

The call of the cuckoo sounds sad, yet pleasant to the ears of Lithuanians, Latvians and Slavs. Meanwhile Germans regard it as ugly and boring, and therefore the bird itself is deemed as common, slow and is often sneered at. The Balts and Slavs, however, regard cuckoo as a symbol of a grieving person, more frequently a female (a widow, a mother, a daughter-in-law, an orphaned girl, etc.).

True, Latvians have an unfavorable image of a "famine cuckoo", more or less familiar to Lithuanians as well (derived upon generalization of a complaining function, attributed to the cuckoo in folklore), whereas Lithuanians and Slavs have a similarly uncomplimentary image of a "nocturnal cuckoo" (based upon an aspect of femininity associated with cuckoos). Moreover, Germans and some Slavic peoples regard cuckoo as a liar and fraud, breaker of its promises (this interpretation originates from imagining cuckoo as a fortune-teller). Germans reproach cuckoo with ingratitude (this being related to the natural peculiarities of a real cuckoo). The fact that cuckoos in nature laid their eggs in the nests of other birds, not hatching and nurturing the little ones by themselves, motivated association of this bird with adultery in German folklore tradition, or portraying it as a frivolous female and an irresponsible mother by Lithuanians and some Slavs.

While cuckoo is related or even identified with the devil in German tradition, Lithuanian and Latvian folklore contains just meagre remnants of such connection, whereas Slavic proverbs and songs do not display it at all. However, cuckoo is almost universally associated with hawk or falcon, although not always unanimously. Cuckoo is believed to be able to turn into a hawk, or even considered as the same species by Germans, Slavs and the Balts (cf. Lithuanian *Per dieną kukavo, vakare vištą pagavo* 'Cuckoo called the whole day through and caught a chicken in the evening'; Latvian *Tas pats kūko, tas pats vistas lūko* 'The same one cuckooes, the same one waits to catch chickens'). Nevertheless, numerous proverbs consider cuckoo and hawk/falcon as opposites according to the value scale, except that Germans regard cuckoo as worthless, whereas according to the Baltic and Slavic tradition, the negative connotation is mostly applied to the hawk (although contrary cases also occur, as in the Russian proverb *Кукушка не ястреб, а неуч не мастер* 'Cuckoo is no hawk, and bungler's no master'). Whereas in both Lithuanian and Latvian folk songs cuckoo and hawk/falcon can be imagined as a couple, paralleled to the bride and a groom during the wedding. In Lithuanian tradition, especially in Lithuanian folk songs, cuckoo can appear as an object of admiration and delight as well.

Thus, cuckoo is interpreted in quite different ways by various kinds and genres of folklore, especially in regard to the values and the ethical aspect. The image of cuckoo varies in this respect also in different national traditions. Among them, the German folklore treats cuckoo in the most unfavorable way.