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Juniper Guthrie
Georgia College & State University

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DROWNED MAIDENS AND MOTHER EARTH: THE ROOTS OF SEXISM IN RUSSIAN FOLKLORE STUDIES

JUNIPER GUTHRIE

Baba Yaga: in modern Russia, the name calls to mind an ominous, hunched-over old woman living in a hut on chicken legs—the kind of one-dimensional bogeyman parents warn their children about to keep them in line for fear of departing from strict social norms. The folkloric figure of Baba Yaga, however, is much different, collapsing hundreds of years of gender roles, religious expectations, and ideas about social structure into a notorious, stereotype-defying witch. The common understanding of the Baba Yaga figure as a malicious deviant from gender norms is just one example of the manifold ways in which Russian folk tales and the women who tell them have been misconstrued, vilified, and removed from their original context to further a misogynistic narrative. Although women were the most common purveyors of folk tales, the female context has been historically underrepresented in scholarship. This progression from the soft power of women tale-tellers to sexist stereotypes coloring cultural icons rests on the construction of religion as a Russian cultural cornerstone, the gender politics of rural village life, and the unquestioned prejudices of male-dominated academia.

Views of religion, pagan and institutional, shaped Russian culture and gender from the days of the ninth-century Kyivan Rus' into the twentieth century. In the eyes of the Eastern Orthodox church, all people were weak and imperfect due to their attachment to their physical forms. Sexuality of any kind was demonized, the church going so far as to separate the causality between sexual acts and pregnancy. The proposed binary of men and women created two inherently flawed beings: men in their lack of connection to the spiritual world and women in their capacity for reproduction grounding them to the physical world. This supposed doctrinal equality did not, however,

extend to social or systemic realization. Men could be separated from their role in reproduction, but women were inescapably tied to their inherent sexuality. Eastern Orthodoxy's vilification of sexuality and sex acts, in or out of wedlock, clashed with Slavic pre-Christian beliefs that understood sex, on a spiritual level, as a natural element of life. Slavic pagan practices sometimes included supervised ritual intercourse as a representation of creation. However, a patriarchal structure still surrounded these same beliefs, delineating nonritual sex as only acceptable between a married couple.

With the political introduction of Eastern Orthodoxy promoting discipline and adherence to power structures, the two belief systems gradually interwove to form a complexly layered cultural view of sex and gender that created rigid gender roles, deviation from which would result in severe consequences. Both systems relied on a patriarchal socioeconomic structure based around inheritance and exchange of property through marriage, as well as the understanding of social gender and physical sex as interchangeable elements. For a culture so performatively steeped in the worship of Mary as the Mother of God, the place of women in Russian history is overlooked in the pre-Soviet national narrative. The combined mythology of the Eastern Orthodox church and communal oral folklore provide the opportunity for a feminist and revisionist view of the ways in which women's roles have changed since the introduction of the Orthodox Church in the tenth century. Within this broader cultural context, Russian women used oral storytelling to pass down values, uphold traditions, and exercise control over a cultural narrative within their communities. However, male collections of folk tales center on professional male storytellers, regarding women's involvement in the practice

as “tarnish[ing] this precious cultural wealth”.¹ Tales told by women were “colonized by men, their own voices were rarely heard; their own knowledge was misread.”² The collection of folktales by men (writing down oral stories from women) robs the stories and the women—of their voice, the nuance of the tales, the control over how they are told, the ownership of their creativity in altering the tales—and represents a larger silencing of women in history, especially lower-class women, by turning them into passive players despite their massive influence.

Women in widely known Russian folklore are, with few exceptions, robbed of their narrative agency and independence. There are many tales in which women are altogether absent as characters, and some where they are mentioned only by their physical appearance or relationship to a male character (in contrast, there are no tales without male characters). Most commonly, women in traditional Russian folk tales act only under the directions of men or expectations of society, never with their own lives and interests at heart. This kind of subjugation is typical of European and Orthodox gender roles of this era, but is made particularly Russian with the emphasis on community over self, magic intertwined with Christianity, and spiritual connection to the land.

In discussing the heavily contextual subject of gender, a Marxist approach to the field of women’s history carries the most weight in considering the interplay of complex societal factors. Rather than focusing on individuals as examples of their historical context, understanding the way previous thought systems influenced the actions of women of the era and seeing them as products of their time provides historical empathy and the depth necessary to conduct a nuanced analysis. The concept of gender represents a complex set of societal norms and expectations specific to location and historical period, acting in concert with the idea of physical sex as a grouped set of primary and secondary sex characteristics. Within the context of Russian society through the Imperial period, gender and sex were understood to be inextricably linked and are therefore often conflated (women were those who menstruated and gave birth, and men were those who

impregnated them). The word “woman” indicated a person who understood themselves within the context of their society to play the role assigned to them, including sexual and reproductive responsibilities. While people whose assigned sex did not match their expression of gender did exist in the discussed period, they have systematically been excluded from the historical narrative and social considerations of gender, and do not factor into the major patterns of structural power regarding gender. The terms “Russia” and “Russian” refer to the historical state of Russia, from its first inception as Kyivan Rus’ and Muscovy to the imperial State of Russia established under the tsars. While the borders have shifted and redefined, the consistent thread of cultural values and identification with the geographical or cultural group is understood to be what defines something as “Russian.”

Prior to the advent of Christianity altering the ideological landscape of Russian belief, Slavic pagan rites were widespread. Having sprung from the early agricultural societies of the Chalcolithic Period, early Slavs had a pantheon of their own, notably including (at least one) goddesses. The most recognized and revered was the fertility goddess Mokosh, or the Damp Mother Earth. Associated closely with agriculture, Mokosh’s legacy progressed through the centuries, worshipped by farmers for a successful crop yield, and by women for her fertility and blessings.³ Before Christianity, Mokosh’s place in Kyivan Rus’ life was well-established. She was also recognized as a household goddess, with her worship occasionally including ritual sex.⁴ Physical representations of Mokosh were often abstract, relying on symbolism rather than literal depictions of female fertility. While some early statues of the goddess followed in the “Venus” representation of fertility goddesses, Mokosh was more often represented as a triangular figure wearing a skirt. Following the introduction of Christianity, all pagan deities were seen as heretical and officially condemned by the church. However, Mokosh cults continued to operate in secret, as the Eastern Orthodox church offered little in the way of female expressions of power and sexuality.

1 Laura J. Olson and S. B. Adon’eva. *The Worlds of Russian Village Women: Tradition, Transgression, Compromise*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2013, 24.

2 Ibid.

3 Mary Kilbourne Matossian. “In the Beginning, God Was a Woman.” *Journal of Social History* 6, no. 3 (1973): 325-43. Accessed February 22, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3786544>.

4 Eve Levin. *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs 900–1700*. ITHACA; LONDON: Cornell University Press, 1989. Accessed February 9, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv5rdxvf.6>, 39.

Mokosh was not the only female deity worshipped by the Slavs. Rozhinitza represented sexual fertility, deemed the “mother of many children.”⁵ As such, many of her representations include a daughter goddess. Another goddess, Berehinia, was associated with water and birds, longtime Slavic divine symbols. In traditional symbolism, Berehinia is accompanied by a daughter goddess or other unidentified female figures, suggesting a role in a larger pantheon.⁶ However, Rozhinitza and Berehinia did not enjoy the same longevity of worship as Mokosh, and all but disappeared within the sweep of Christianity.

These representations of female deities, and particularly fertility goddesses, are at odds with the way their interpretations were demonized in the Christian institution. Worship of fertility goddesses was supposed to represent the reprehensible practices of loose morals, unrestrained sexuality, and non-monogamous sexual relationships.⁷ However, the patriarchal practice of institutional monogamous marriage (and subsequent transfer of inheritance) was a well-established practice in pre-Orthodox Russia, so the conviction that pagan worship equated to non-monogamy and licentious behavior was entirely unfounded.⁸ Despite its lack of veracity, the association between pagan belief and sexual disobedience was fostered by the Orthodox church in hopes of eradicating “heretical” pagan ways. The message was clear: anyone who celebrated womanhood or venerated women outside of the strict patriarchal guidelines was sexually deviant and unchristian.

Eastern Orthodox Christianity was established as the state religion in 988 CE, remaining a powerful force in Kyivan Rus’ (and later Russian) society and culture through the nineteenth century. In relation to women’s position in society, Orthodoxy did not provide a monumental change; rather, it built off previous Slavic beliefs about sex, gender, and the differences between men and women. The oft-cited academic concept of *dvoeverie*, or “double faith,” misunderstands the relationship between Orthodoxy

and pagan belief. Rather than a usurpation, the two conglomerated to form a uniquely Russian belief structure, where “the crucial opposition was not between Christian and pagan, but between beneficial and harmful, ‘clean’ and ‘unclean.’”⁹ Within this combination of belief, the prominent female symbols of Mokosh and Mary were compared and sometimes conflated, creating a kind of syncretic worship. Although forms of governance changed over time, the connection of Eastern Orthodoxy to the Russian identity remained unaffected.¹⁰ However, the actual observance of everyday Russians did not always follow the ideal. Prior to the sixteenth century, there existed no parish churches to serve rural areas, allowing for a greater degree of independence in belief.¹¹ The ways in which women shared their beliefs relied not on an external patriarchal structure like the Church, but rather took the more subtle form of intergenerational transfer of morals and expectations, primarily through oral storytelling. Consistently barred from the male sphere of ownership and economy, women could only lay claim to that which they created. The heavily decorated elements of a woman’s dowry (towels, pillowcases, formal clothing) were a major form of communication and memorialization of a woman’s life and her beliefs. From this dowry sprung “an encyclopedia of motifs,” and the tradition of a new bride adding “her unique interpretations to the repertoire.”¹²

The interplay between traditional Slavic and imported Orthodox ideas about sex and gender points to an agreed upon view of women’s place within a religious society. Women were perceived to be the weaker sex—more susceptible to the temptations of the Devil—and their sexual purity was more stringently regulated. Inherently sexual and dangerous, menstrual cycles further alienated those who experienced them from society. Women’s bodies were stigmatized and demonized in ways that men’s bodies were not, with actively menstruating people banned from attending church and new mothers not allowed to worship for forty days, requiring them to miss the baptism of their child.¹³ Women’s reproductive function, while essential to

5 Mary B. Kelly. “Goddess Embroideries of Russia and the Ukraine.” *Woman’s Art Journal* 4, no. 2 (1983): 10-13. Accessed February 22, 2021. doi:10.2307/1357939.

6 Ibid.

7 Levin, *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs 900–1700*, 4.

8 Ibid.

9 Linda J. Ivanits. *Russian Folk Belief* (Routledge, 1992), 127.

10 Isaiah Gruber. *Orthodox Russia in Crisis: Church and Nation in the Time of Troubles*. DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012. <https://search.ebscohost-com.gcsu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip.shib&db=nlebk&AN=2239048&site=eds-live&scope=site>, chapter 1.

11 Matossian, “In the Beginning, God Was a Woman,” 127.

12 Kelly, “Goddess Embroideries of Russia and the Ukraine,” 11.

13 Levin, *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs 900–1700*, 169.

their nature and to all roles included within the Orthodox conception of gender and sex, made women inherently flawed—ranking below men in a way they could never hope to alleviate. While sexual temptation was recognized as a feature inherent to womanhood, a pious woman was expected to fight against their innate desires in order to remain pure. Despite women’s inherent sexuality, however, Orthodox belief seemed not to understand that women could experience sexuality independent of men. This strange conception is clear in the church’s consequences surrounding female homosexuality: it was “not deemed to be a serious violation...usually categorized as a type of masturbation.”¹⁴ While there were punishments for both homosexual acts and masturbation, the focus was on the disobedience of the woman, as well as the association of female homosexuality with pagan rituals.¹⁵ Comparing female homosexuality to masturbation (while the same was not true of male homosexuality) points to the idea that women were interchangeable—an idea which is visible in both cultural ideas surrounding marriage, as well as folkloric themes. Female sexuality was not seen as a threat to the more “natural” heterosexual relationship, unlike male homosexuality. These scriptural regulations show how female homosexual relationships were stigmatized for their lack of adherence to male sexuality and possible deviation from Orthodoxy. They also highlight the difference between attitudes towards women in scripture as opposed to practice, quasi-equality in the written word and demonization in reality.

The lives of rural Russians were segmented according to their age and marital status, the two major indicators of one’s place in society. For women, this imposed idea constructed girlhood as stretching from birth to marriage, marriage until the birth of the first child, mistress of the household, and old woman, from physical infirmity until death. Age played just as important a role as gender within rural villages, as women in different stages of life occupied very different positions in society.

From birth until marriage, girls (*devki*) occupied a tenuous place in the social structure. Their manifold duties included helping with the upkeep of the home, learning the skills necessary to prepare for marriage, and participating in

social gatherings to advertise themselves as potential wives—all without stepping over the lines of acceptable social conduct. Tales of “ruined girls,” those who had transgressed the social code, acted as facets of the patriarchal superstructure to intimidate women into frightened subservience.¹⁶ *Devki* were the lowest rung of the gender/age hierarchy, girls and women who were yet to prove their “worth” to society by fulfilling gender expectations through marriage and childbirth. Once married, they became *molodki*, married women, prior to the birth of their first child. Having achieved one facet of womanhood (marriage, thus gaining social and economic power through association with a man), these women were now on equal social footing with their parents, becoming instead subservient to the husband’s family, particularly the mother-in-law.¹⁷

The relationships between new brides and their mothers-in-law, and between daughters and stepmothers, are portrayed almost universally antagonistically in Russian folklore. In reality, these relationships could be tense and complicated, but not unequivocally hostile. While male interpretations of rural culture played on sexist stereotypes about the lack of cooperation between women, the actual accounts of women reflect a much more nuanced reality. The patriarchal structure was one which unflinchingly pitted women against each other—the marriage rite of the “bride’s trial” is a direct reflection of this sentiment, in which the mother-in-law and other older women in the family dirty the house to test the new bride’s abilities to clean and perform femininity.¹⁸ However, this ritual suggests more about the codification of female hostility than it does about actual behavior. The mutual dependence between the wife and the mother-in-law to maintain the smooth running of a household encourages more cooperation than competition, and the transfer of power when a *baba* (married woman with children) becomes a *bol’shukha* (head of the household) requires some level of collaboration between women as household knowledge travels between generations. The transfer of the *bol’shukha* title afforded older women a degree of autonomy, as they could theoretically choose when their responsibility would end. Animosity existed between *bol’shukhi* of different

14 Ibid, 203.

15 Ibid, 204.

16 Olson and Adon’eva, *The Worlds of Russian Village Women*, 52.

17 Ibid, 53.

18 Ibid, 54.

households; there existed no “community of equals” as there did for men.¹⁹ *Bol'shukhi* were evaluated against each other, creating a built-in sense of competition and hostility between women.

When a *bol'shukha* gave up the running of her household to her daughter-in-law, she became a *starukha*.²⁰ These women, although without a dependent family, still felt the pressure of gendered expectations. Some kept cows as a symbol of their caretaking ability; others became community storytellers—whatever it was, *starukhi* were expected to continue serving the community in some form.²¹

Such strictly enforced gender roles held a kind of cultural necessity. Much of rural Russian life relied heavily on labor-intensive subsistence farming, exacerbating the perceived difference between the strength of men and women into a patriarchal hierarchy. As time and tradition wore on, “the peasantry’s burdensome obligations to family, community, and state reinforced rigid and oppressive power relations within the village, including ones based upon gender.”²² The combination of an established power structure and a difficult natural environment necessitated women’s cooperation. Despite the visibly detrimental effects of conforming to patriarchal norms, “mothers and wives are held accountable for performing invisible labor that reproduces the patriarchal conditions that demand this labor from them in the first place.”²³ Living in an ouroborically oppressive system, the importance of feminine expression only grows.

Within the Eastern Orthodox church, women were not permitted to hold a position, or even to “have a significant active role in the church.”²⁴ This restriction was justified by the Orthodox belief that women were inherently sinful and sexual, their religious views “based on superstition

rather than real religion,” and that women’s place was to obey men in all things, especially spiritual matters.²⁵ Such a claim further reinforced the idea that women, especially deviant women, were inherently linked to pagan beliefs and practices.

While Orthodox female saints were much less common than their male counterparts, they nonetheless maintained an important role in the church. They made up the subjects of one-tenth of new hymns produced between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁶ One female saint, St. Paraskeva, became a popular figure within the combined Orthodox-pagan tradition, celebrating “women’s work and the fruit of the earth.”²⁷ Women were supposed to refrain from work on her feast day, risking a divine punishment blighting the eyes or fingers to prevent the woman from spinning textiles.²⁸ Paraskeva was later denounced for her supposed pagan origins by male figures within the church, uncomfortable as they were with a symbol of female power.²⁹

Mary, as understood by Eastern Orthodoxy, was the virginal Mother of God, deified for her holiness, purity, and role in bringing Christ into the world. She is attributed as a “protectress,” “all-merciful,” and “most pure.” Prayers devoted to her praise the comfort she brings, her deliverance from harm, and the refuge she provides from a harsh world.³⁰ These aspects illustrate the highest, most holy example of what a woman should be: a mother who never lowered herself to the base need for sex, kind and comforting, existing solely for the needs of others. These standards are unattainable for an earthly woman, generating a cultural justification for women’s treatment.

Like most practices in pre-Soviet Russia, manners of storytelling differed according to gender. Men and women told similar stories in very different ways. Men used

19 Ibid, 66.

20 Ibid, 49.

21 Ibid, 71.

22 Ibid, 15.

23 Jennifer Utrata. “Invisible Labor and Women’s Double Binds: Collusive Femininity and Masculine Drinking in Russia.” *Gender & Society* 33, no. 6 (December 2019): 911–34. doi:10.1177/0891243219869311.

24 Elena Chernyak. “What Is a Woman Created For? The Image of Women in Russia through the Lens of the Russian Orthodox Church.” *Feminist Theology: The Journal of the Britain & Ireland School of Feminist Theology* 24, no. 3 (May 2016): 299–313. doi:10.1177/0966735015627953, 308.

25 Ibid, 310.

26 Vera Shevzov. “Akathist to the Most Holy Birth-Giver of God in Honor of Her Miracle-Working Icon Named “Kazan”.” In *Orthodox Christianity in Imperial Russia: A Source Book on Lived Religion*, edited by Coleman Heather J., 131-38. Indiana University Press, 2014. Accessed February 17, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16gzbm1.15>, 132.

27 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 33.

28 Ibid, 34.

29 Eve Levin. “The Christian Sources of the Cult of St Paraskeva.” In *Letters from Heaven: Popular Religion in Russia and Ukraine*, edited by Himka John-Paul and Zayarnuk Andriy, 126-45. Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2006. Accessed February 22, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/9781442676640.10>.

30 Shevzov. “Akathist to the Most Holy Birth-Giver of God in Honor of Her Miracle-Working Icon Named “Kazan”,” 134.

folktales and *byliny* (epics) as entertainment during work in the field, or became professional storytellers, *skomorokhi*, that operated in the public sphere.³¹ For men, folklore was seen as a culturally important and respected profession, ultimately one of many modes of communication available. For women, the practice of storytelling was “a means of transmitting values to future generations.”³² Women of all ages participated in the storytelling tradition, though they were confined to the female-only private sphere. Adolescent girls told folktales to children or gathered in groups to listen to one gifted teller. Young married women learned folklore in the form of household magic from their mothers-in-law. Public demonstration of female knowledge through storytelling was “considered improper” within rural communities, clearly drawing the line between public knowledge and that which was female, and therefore private.³³ Some women took up the tradition of laments, a genre of folktales told only by women to remember the dead.³⁴ Unlike *skomorokhi*, lamenters were “never done for pay,” and were highly improvisational, personalized to the dead.³⁵ Despite the difficult nature of the job, lamenters did not receive the same community support (payment) as male *skomorokhi*, nor have they been studied, recorded, and respected in the same way by folklorists. Women also claimed the genre of folk songs, including *chastushki* (limericks), wedding songs and holiday songs, and lyrical songs about deviant women.³⁶ These performances, though public, were communal, whereas male public performance was typically solo. This contrast points to both the perception of women as interchangeable elements of a homogenous group (whereas men were individuals unto themselves), and to the ways in which male researchers built their analyses around a false perception of female folklore.

Magical traditions were easily misunderstood by outsiders, given their feminine association. Those prevailing traditions in rural Russia clung tightly to gender roles, and in the post-Christian period, were confined mainly to the home. Women learned healing and protection magic as a facet of motherhood; it was only after the birth of the new wife’s first child that the mother-in-law transferred the power

conferred to her by magical knowledge to the younger wife.³⁷ Within this belief system, motherhood and magic are implicitly intertwined; magic is necessary for the mother to protect her children and household, but also to protect herself: “a new mother must learn a manner of behavior that is different from the roles that she had already actively mastered for successful existence in society.”³⁸ In tandem with this new social world of motherhood, the new mother discovers the spiritual world; the mother-in-law teaches her how to exert control over both. In this way, magical traditions function as a representation of the power mothers hold in rural Russian society—their power stems from their relation to men (marriage) and their completion of a woman’s role (childbearing and rearing), and is only realized within their delineated sphere (the home). Household magic, in its function within a patriarchal system, doubles as “laws for categorizing the world,” drawing lines between the beneficial and harmful, the accepted and the shunned.³⁹ Still, the predominance of magical belief in folktales and everyday stories indicates a cultural reliance on these beliefs, lending an unprecedented amount of power to the mother-in-law. Within the act of teaching household magic to the young mother, the mother-in-law is symbolically giving up her power in the family, transferring the responsibility to the next generation. Much like the stories exchanged by adolescent girls, this iteration of folk belief has largely been ignored by male researchers in examinations of folklore.

With a few notable exceptions, women play a narratively passive role in folk tales. Much like the difference between the historic impact of women and their systematic erasure from the historical record, these passive roles can hold a deeper meaning. However, many archetypes are simply what they appear to be at first glance: the captured princess, the daughter waiting to be married, the old woman hosting the story’s protagonists. Each archetype repeated across different tales speaks to a different expectation for women within Russian society. One commonality between motifs is women’s lack of names. Folk tales typically omit names altogether, using only epithets to refer to each character. However, there are

31 Olson, *The Worlds of Russian Village Women*, 30.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid, 40.

36 Ibid, 43.

37 Ibid, 196.

38 Ibid, 197.

39 Ibid, 208.

also many tales which give names only to male characters and leave the female ones unnamed, robbing the women of their individuality and personhood. Without a name, a woman must be identified some other way, most often by her physical appearance.

The most common depiction of a female character in Russian fairy tales refers to a girl as “the fair” or “the beautiful.” Named characters (Vasilisa the Fair, Elena the Fair, Lizaveta the Fair) play larger narrative roles, but there exist many stories wherein the only female character mentioned is “the fair maiden” wed to the named male protagonist. In “The Tsarevich and Dyad’ka,” the main female character is only referred to as “the fair Tsarevna [princess],” while the male characters (even the monster) are all named.⁴⁰ This convention reaffirms the idea that physical beauty is a woman’s only worthwhile trait, while men play larger narrative and social roles.

When women in folklore deviate from their prescribed roles, a punishment follows. In “Ilya Muromets and Svyatogor the Knight,” Svyatogor’s unnamed wife seduces Ilya while her husband is sleeping.⁴¹ Her husband promptly “cut[s] off her unruly head, [breaks] up her white body into four parts, and scatter[s] them on the bare fields.”⁴² The dancing princesses in “The Midnight Dance,” who leave the palace each night without their father’s permission, are found guilty of defying their prescribed roles, and as a result, their ability to escape from palace life (and societal expectations) is taken from them.⁴³ A notable exception to this rule is “Vasilisa Popovna.” The daughter of a priest, Vasilisa Vasilyevna defies every gender norm presented to her: dressing like a man, shooting a gun, even going so far as to drink vodka.⁴⁴ This last deviation is particularly egregious, as “Russian men ‘do gender’ [through drinking], distinguishing themselves from nondrinkers and women.”⁴⁵ In typical fairytale fashion, she is put through a series of trials as a man attempts to prove that she is, in fact, a woman. Vasilisa passes each test, and her gender is never revealed. The tale, unlike nearly every other, does not

end with her marriage, or even a cessation of her gender nonconformity. Other than the man testing her, no one else seems to find issue with this blatant disregard for society’s rules. Even stranger is the fact that her father is an esteemed religious leader, and would therefore be expected to uphold gender norms to a high standard. Perhaps it is this fortunate parentage that allows her the freedom to defy the rules that appear so strict for everyone else. There does not appear to be any kind of reversal of this tale—that is, a man assuming women’s gender roles. It may be, then, that Vasilisa’s behavior was acceptable because she aspired to be a man, thereby acknowledging that women were inferior. Transgressive women were most commonly used as a warning, but these stories were told with interest implying that “the ‘bad woman’ [held] special fascination as a transgressor of community norms.”⁴⁶ Stories of boundary-breaking women were one of the only avenues for ordinary women to explore such disobedience without facing consequences.

Rusalki play an important role in Russian folklore, suggesting the cultural opinion of transgressive women. These creatures were purported to be “the souls of unbaptized or stillborn babies and drowned maidens,” demonstrating a clear interaction between Orthodoxy and folk belief.⁴⁷ Their creation is also attributed to young women who commit suicide by drowning, “usually because [they] became pregnant out of wedlock and was then abandoned by [their] lover[s],” or those who die during Rusal’naia Week (the week before Trinity Sunday).⁴⁸ *Rusalki*, unlike most female figures in Russian folklore, have agency and take independent action within their stories. They vary in representation from seductive sirens who lure men into the forest to drown them, vicious monsters who tear apart innocent young girls, to powerful manifestations of female virginity.^{49 50 51} The variation in origin and representation is typical of folkloric archetypes, but each version points to an aspect of cultural disobedience. Unbaptized—and therefore unchristian—children and deviant women risked becoming a danger to patriarchal society. Women who violated the

40 Aleksander Afanas’ev. *Russian Folk Tales*. Translated by Leonard A Magnus. London, England: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, Ltd., 1916, 141.

41 Ibid, 125.

42 Ibid, 126.

43 Ibid, 108.

44 Ibid, 150.

45 Utrata, “Invisible Labor and Women’s Double Binds: Collusive Femininity and Masculine Drinking in Russia,” 920.

46 Olson, *The Worlds of Russian Village Women*, 34.

47 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 75.

48 Kononenko, *Slavic Folklore*, 18.

49 Ibid, 19.

50 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 186.

51 Levin, *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs 900-1700*, 39.

stringent expectations on sex before marriage would turn into vicious seductresses, inhabiting the succubine potential Orthodoxy believed all women held within them.⁵² The mythology of Rusal'naia Week seems less connected to gender norms, and more so to the folkloric convention of magic being confined to a specific period of time. Other tales include men conquering a *rusalka* by putting crosses on them, only to lose their prisoner during the next year's Rusal'naia Week.⁵³ This iteration of the *rusalka* tale implies the power of Christianity to defeat what many saw as an "unclean force," but could very well represent the inferiority of pagan tradition as a whole.⁵⁴ Considering the feminine connotation of pagan beliefs in the eyes of the masculine church, the repeated motif of Christianity vanquishing unruly spirits can be seen as an explicit manifestation of patriarchal power.

The Baba Yaga (or laga) as an essential element of Slavic folklore speaks volumes about the way a woman in her circumstances was viewed in imperial Russian culture. The Baba Yaga is always portrayed as unmarried, sometimes with a daughter (or daughters). She lives without a man in an isolated home in the woods, far from society. Varying in persona from story to story, she is a witch, a cannibal, or associated with the devil. Sometimes her hut is on chicken legs, or it is surrounded by a fence of skulls from men she has killed. When she is physically described, she is "an ancient, bony, blue-nosed hag,"; "ugly...she is thin and hairy"; "the Bony-Legged".^{55 56 57} Not only is she old and unmarried, but physically unattractive as well. What sets the Baba Yaga apart from other female archetypes is that her physical appearance is not her most remarked-upon trait. Rather, it is her magical powers and fearsome nature that make her notable. She defies the gender norms of submitting to men as easily as she defies societal norms by eating other people and living divorced from society. Somewhat paradoxically, the Baba Yaga also "tests young women and men and confers tokens of accomplishment," functioning as a kind of mentor or respected elder.⁵⁸

Despite eschewing all social and gender roles, she still inhabits a role within the social structure of folklore worlds. From a revisionist perspective, the Baba Yaga demonstrates female agency despite the forces acting against her, showing a possibility of adherence to positive gender roles while defying harmful ones.

The Baba Yaga's relationship with other women is complex. In "Baba Yaga and Zamoryshek," she offers her forty-one daughters as brides for the male protagonists.⁵⁹ This iteration of the Baba Yaga implies that although she has removed herself from the constraints of society, she still understands and follows the norms of the patriarchy, freely using her daughters as currency. In "Chufil-Filyushka," the Baba Yaga has only one daughter, who assists her in cooking the protagonist.⁶⁰ The daughter is never named or given any attributes beside her parentage, but is killed at the end of the tale—a common fate for unnamed women in folk tales. In "By Command of the Prince Daniel," the daughter deceives the Baba Yaga by hiding a fair maiden from her until the two women can escape together.⁶¹ The daughter is later married to Prince Daniel, rewarded with the benefits of proper society after escaping and defying her deviant mother. The fact that the Baba Yaga has children while being unmarried reflects society's disapproval for women bearing children out of wedlock. The message is not so literal as to claim that bearing a child without a father would make one a cannibalistic witch living in an enchanted hut, but the association between defied norms and evil is clear.

In tales where she is childless, the Baba Yaga often interacts with young, unmarried women. She puts them through various tests: in "Vasilisa the Fair," the Baba Yaga makes Vasilisa clean the hut, sift the oats, and harvest the hay.⁶² In return, she gives her fire to light her stepsisters' weaving at night. Other tales are similar: in "female" stories (so identified by folklorist Vladimir Propp), "the test has the character of domestic work: making up a bed, beating the

52 Ibid, 54.

53 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 188.

54 Ibid, 75.

55 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 99.

56 Natalie Kononenko. *Slavic Folklore: A Handbook* (Greenwood, 2007), 27.

57 Marina Balina, Helena Gosciolo, and Mark Lipovetsky, eds. *Politicizing Magic: An Anthology of Russian and Soviet Fairy Tales*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005, 32.

58 Kononenko, *Slavic Folklore*, 27.

59 Afanas'ev, *Russian Folk Tales*, 50.

60 Ibid, 230.

61 Ibid, 67.

62 Ibid, 116.

featherbed, hauling water, stoking the stove, and so on.”⁶³ This role is reminiscent of a *baba* or *bol'shukha*, testing a young girl to determine her worth by patriarchal standards.

Stepmothers and stepsisters in Russian fairytales function the same way as in Western tales. The original women in the family are immediately at odds with the newcomers. Often, the stepmother takes on a mother-in-law-like role towards the original daughter—setting her a series of tasks, much like the tradition of the bride’s trial. In “The Dun Cow” and “Vasilisa the Beautiful,” stepmothers arrange difficult tasks to humiliate or prove the worth of the original daughter. Notable too is the physical appearance of the stepfamily. “The Dun Cow” describes the stepsisters as having one, two, and three eyes respectively, marking them as aberrant.⁶⁴ The sisters in “Vasilisa the Beautiful” are thin and ugly in contrast to Vasilisa’s plump beauty.⁶⁵ “Donotknow” is a rare tale featuring a son standing in opposition to the stepmother, but the relationship remains the same—animosity and impossible tasks.⁶⁶ Stepmothers are also commonly associated with magic and witches, a clear reference to the societal transgression and implicit femininity of pagan beliefs. The combination of these characteristics clearly show how Russian society regarded the interloping woman in an unconventional family structure; she preys on the socially reinforced animosity and competition between women, vying for male attention and influence. These archetypes, or iterations of gender expression, do not necessarily reflect the values or ideas of the women who told them, but rather their understanding of the systems and world around them. Folktales often juxtapose ordinary women with mythic or deified figures, putting their differing qualities—and corresponding societal roles—in stark relief.

Common peasant women are primarily introduced by their physical characteristics— “Oh, you old fatty!” “the Swan, the fair maiden,” “finely dressed and clever,” “a fair maiden looked out,” “he had twelve daughters: each was fairer than the others,” “give me a kiss, fair maiden!”⁶⁷ Depictions of repeated figures like the Baba Yaga vary between physical descriptions of ugliness, and correspondingly evil personality traits. Holy women, like

Mary, are only illustrated in non-physical terms, praised for their virtue, cleanliness, purity, gentility, tenderness, and motherly attributes. Pagan deities like Mokosh occupied a metaphysical descriptive space; rather than commentary on their physical form, they are praised for the “moist earth” they represented. These differences in portrayals corresponds to Orthodox beliefs of women as more physical due to their reproductive capacities. Holy women are perceived as lacking that physicality, having overcome their inherent female nature to achieve an exalted place in society.

While archetypes have long been a fundamental aspect of folklore and mythology analysis, popularized by Jungian ideas of globally common mythologies, they have been used as more than just a universal idea about humanity. Vladimir Propp, in his landmark works on Russian folklore, followed this idea about the universality of archetypes, allowing for “an avoidance of historical, psychological and cultural explanations of the text...to search for a structure that arranges the plot in all fairy-tales.”⁶⁸ Propp also rejected the idea that a narrator was essential to understanding the intricacies and implications of folklore, claiming that “writing belongs not to the individual author, but to the splintered subject of the unconscious.”⁶⁹ Propp and Jung fixated on a Platonic ideal of archetypes as something that could exist independent from their context, which robbed the stories of their context and the stereotypes of their real societal effects. The use and study of archetypes are intrinsically linked to patriarchal systems of power and the ways in which women were allowed to exist in society, and to remove their essential context further erases the nuance of women’s stories and the actualities of their oppression.

As with all aspects of academia, men have historically dominated the fields of folklore studies and ethnography. This is especially true in Russia. During the mid-nineteenth century, the Russian intelligentsia began to lean towards Slavophilic studies in their pursuit of Russian nationalism. The 1860s saw the first patriarchally-recognized foray into the collection of Russian folklore. Predominant collectors included Pavel Rybnikov, Ivan and Pyotr Kireyevski, Ivan

63 V. I. A. Propp, Sibelan E. S. Forrester, and Jack Zipes. *The Russian Folktale*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2012.

64 Afanas'ev, *Russian Folk Tales*, 3.

65 Ibid, 109.

66 Ibid, 242.

67 Ibid, 20, 23, 33, 66, 106, 143.

68 Dmitri Olshansky. “The Birth of Structuralism from the Analysis of Fairy-Tales.” *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 25 (2008). <https://search-ebshost-com.gcsu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=mzh&AN=2009831082&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

69 Ibid.

Sakharov, Pyotr Bezsonov, and Alexasandr Afanas'ev.⁷⁰ Their motivations for studying folklore informed many of their methods, analytical frameworks, and resulting publications. The Kireyevski brothers were members of Slavophilic salons; however, Pyotr saw Russia as deficient in cultural heritage, claiming that Russia "[could] and should join Europe" in its new avenues of intellectual growth.⁷¹ The idea of Russia as a culturally adolescent nation with its nascent formal intellectual field lays bare the classist and sexist conception of what defined "culture" to these philosopher-ethnographers: peer-reviewed academically produced works written within a scholarly structure. Anything else was "folk" culture, for peasants and the common people, contributing to "the image of Russia as a 'fabulous' and 'mythical' realm," not one to be academically respected on an international stage.⁷² This academic field was, of course, male-dominated and male-controlled, and works written by anyone else were very rarely published or assigned value.

The driving thesis of the Slavophilic movement sought to embrace Slavic (and for Russian nationalists, specifically Russian) culture and roots, pushing back against the Petrine and Catherine movements towards Westernization. A crucial element of this mythic Slavic culture that often went unquestioned was the strict code of its gender norms. The intelligentsia found wisdom in the lives of the peasants, unmarred by the muddying influence of academia and Western culture, yet inherently inferior and childlike in their "backwards" nature. These factors assured them that these non-Westernized individuals knew the "correct" way to live. Therefore, none of their examinations of "traditional" culture challenged existing gender roles and practices, and the branch of folklore studies was no different. Academics saw peasant women as "quintessential sources of tradition," yet thought that "women's imperfect guardianship [of folklore] tarnished this precious cultural wealth".⁷³ This view exposes the one-dimensional way that Slavophilic scholars understood their subjects of study, male and female: as sources for them to

mine, symbols of a bygone era, never as real people equal to themselves.

Significant folklore collectors brought their class and gender biases along with them. They held very specific beliefs regarding "real" folklore and "proper" performances of tales, imposing their intellectual structure onto a culture alien to that type of categorization. Simply put, it did not fit. Academics often created their own terms to describe concepts they saw as "new," which were, in reality, only new to them. Perhaps the most egregious example of this nominative hegemony is the scholarly term for an epic—*bylina*, "a term almost certainly initiated by scholars," whereas those who performed the epics referred to them as *starina*.⁷⁴ Rather than assessing each story for its unique contribution and viewpoint, collectors "determined quality by the extent to which the tales held to the principles of ritual" which they themselves developed, considering this cohesion "evidence of the greatest time depth".⁷⁵ They assumed that the only tales worth recording were from those they identified as "professionals," which excluded women almost entirely. Scholars were aware that women were avid tale-tellers, especially in social situations, but "saw these as less essential to the maintenance of the tradition, since they believed these settings did not allow for exchanges of tales between masterful tellers".⁷⁶ They assumed that no true intellectual activity could happen outside of the male-coded professional sphere, and certainly not within the female-coded domestic sphere. Researchers saw female tellers as "less skilled, less experienced" than men, both due to their gender and their predominant audience of children.⁷⁷ However, this view oversimplifies gender distinctions within the folkloric tradition, ignoring the *chastushki* performances commonly done by women for an entire village, the improvised laments at funerals, the storytelling among older women and between generations. Additionally, by focusing on public performance of folklore, and due to the fact that all researchers at the time were male, female sources were discounted or simply omitted by virtue of social norms.

70 Afanas'ev, *Russian Folk Tales*, v.

71 Andrew Kahn, Mark Lipovetsky, Irina Reyfman, and Stephanie Sandler. *A History of Russian Literature*. Vol. First edition. Oxford, U.K.: OUP Oxford, 2018. <https://search-ebscohost-com.gcsu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=nlebk&AN=1776323&site=eds-live&scope=site>, 359 and 512.

72 Ibid, 504.

73 Olson, *The Worlds of Russian Village Women*, 24.

74 Kahn, *A History of Russian Literature*, 137.

75 Olson, *The Worlds of Russian Village Women*, 25.

76 Ibid, 27.

77 Ibid, 26.

“Due to demands of modesty,” the predominant social code dictated that women should not engage in such a personal and intimate tradition as storytelling to an outsider, and a male one at that.⁷⁸ These combined forces led to the near-complete exclusion of women from the Russian folklore canon, as well as their systematic rejection from the academic sphere, further removing the female voice from analysis and study.

Vladimir Propp was a major voice in the analysis of folklore, introducing the ideas of morphemes and narratemes, or common elements in the structures of popular folkloric tales. He identified four “spheres,” or stages, of tales: introduction, body of the story, the donor sequence, and the hero’s return.⁷⁹ These concepts understood his knowledge base as all-encompassing, with the implicit belief that generalizations could apply to diverse tales from all parts of the country. Propp’s work followed the initial generation of rural folktale collection, constructing his theses based on stories attributed to male academics that had already been robbed of their context.

Historical male collection of folklore in Russian academia thus reinforced a patriarchal power structure in its collection methods, frame of analysis, and destruction of context. As has been demonstrated, assumptions about the role of women in rural Russian society shaped both the collection of works and the way said works have been analyzed in the anteceding period. While global conceptions of women and their place in society were changing rapidly during the major period of folktale collection, and gender roles within rural communities were shifting in similar patterns, the combined classism and sexism inherent to academic collecting minimized these changing ideas to create a static image of a people rooted in antiquity.

The narrative of Russian folklore and its studies had been intentionally shifted from narrator-centered to academia-centered, and this is visible in every element of the field, though none so clearly as citations. Tales are grouped by the academic (almost always male) who recorded them, rather than the name of the teller or their geographic location. While some ethnographers like Zelenin, Onchukov, and Sokolov took the time to record a biography of the

teller and the place and time of performance, this practice was typical of a later generation of recordings in the early twentieth century.⁸⁰ The “first” generation of academics who are so often referenced in folkloric studies —Afanas’ev, Rybnikov, Bezsonov—neglected this crucial contextual element. Even with the added context, later scholars like Sokolov thought women had a “particular sentimentality,” unable to remove subjectivity from their tales, and did not regard them as equal to male tellers.⁸¹

The formalized recording of a tradition so steeped in local culture and reliant on oral performance is unreliable at best, but it is the academized version of this method of communication that is most widely accessible. Removing folklore from its deeply informative context forces a patriarchal structure onto a subject not suited to its rigidity and insistence on categorization. It further removes women from the accepted narrative, as women had little place in academia in late nineteenth-century Russia. To the Russian village woman—already so alienated from modern methods of communication or real power in controlling her life, communicating values and expressing creativity through folktales (as almost every woman did)—an academic’s mere surface-level understanding of her intimately expressive art would have been both a slight and a relief, the indignity of a stolen work of art combined with the comfort of anonymity.⁸² Of course, this implies that a significant portion of the tales collected were ones narrated by women—it is purported over and over by male academics that “most major tale-tellers are men,” not intending that as a cultural reality, but as the view of a male outsider.⁸³

Another important element for female taletelling is the tellers’ ability to control and change the narrative by editing their words and messages through retellings. Formal collection of folktales removes this possibility entirely, as the tales become restricted to just one iteration. There is no opportunity for a change in views, a new message, or even the interpretation of a tale not as a static story with a fixed idea, but a vessel which carries a multitude of truths about life and the world around the woman.

Women have been almost universally silenced within the historical narrative. Russian collection of folktales

78 Ibid, 29.

79 V. Propp (1927). *Morphology of the Folktale*. Trans., Laurence Scott. 2nd ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968.

80 Propp, *The Russian Folktale*, 302.

81 Ibid, 304.

82 Ibid, 315.

83 Ibid, 319.

is but one iteration in a long history of women's non-history, of their invisible work and undervalued practices. Storytelling women have been praised as keepers of the national heritage, denounced as witches spreading pagan propaganda, or portrayed as infantile tale-tellers with audiences of children. Their stories have been systematically devalued and robbed of their true use and relevance within the societies of their origin, much in the

way that the women who told them were restricted from living rich, independent lives. The reality of the situation is that patriarchal assumptions go unquestioned thanks to their ubiquity and long-standing dominance, patronizing views towards rural Russians are accepted as fact, and oppressive, prejudiced patterns of thought are portrayed as the logical and irrefutable conclusion to a system built on women's invisible labor.

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