

## REVIEWS

W. F. Ryan. The Bathhouse at Midnight: Magic in Russia. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999. 504 pages. ISBN 0271019662. \$71.50 (Hardback). 0271019670 (Paper). \$24.95.

Why does Pushkin's Tat'iana turn pale on seeing the horned moon to her left? Why did the Dostoevskii family consider their father's sudden return from a trip to the village of Darovoe a bad omen? Why do Chekhov's peasants make the sign of the cross when they yawn? One can find the answers to these and hundreds of similar questions in The Bathhouse at Midnight. Will Ryan's superb study of Russian magic takes its title from the most propitious time and place for magic in the Russian village. It represents the culmination of a career of scholarship devoted in good part to magic and rituals in Russia, beginning with his doctoral dissertation on Old Russian astrological and astronomical terminology and continuing through a series of studies on the history of science and magic texts in Russia.<sup>(1)</sup> His Bathhouse will remain the standard work in English on Russian magic for some time to come. The breadth of its grasp, the depth of its treatment of specific subjects, and the good judgment and erudition Ryan displays throughout make it an essential reference book for Slavists and folklorists.

Ryan opts for a descriptive and, to a large extent, comparative approach and wisely avoids squeezing his material into a neat interpretative system. For, while it is possible to represent specific beliefs, rites, places, objects, and texts associated with magic with a good degree of concreteness, one treads on shaky ground in attempting to superimpose a particular anthropological, social, or psychological grid on this material. Ryan's familiarity with the classical and patristic traditions as well as with the texts concerning magic in Europe since the Middle Ages enables him to situate the Russian tradition within a broad context. In addition to Russia's Byzantine inheritance, he discusses the Oriental and, especially, European texts that seem to have made an impact on Russian practice, and he rather quickly dispels preconceptions about the uniquely Slavic quality of Russian magic. He notes that at the outset of his endeavor he was forced to confront the "banal truth" that "there are few magical texts, practices, beliefs or objects which are exclusive to Russia or even to the Slavs, or for that matter anywhere else: after allowing for elements of natural selection as a result of local climate, flora, fauna, language and historical circumstance, most things can be seen either to derive from, or have analogues or cognates in other cultures."<sup>(1)</sup> Ryan thus concedes that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to sift out indigenous traditions from those which are "borrowed," and, since the oral and written traditions readily swap material, attempts to determine what "originated" in popular practice and what belongs to the legacy of the written word tend to be just as frustrating.

For Ryan magic seems integral to the whole human experience. Ancient civilizations left records of occult practices, and magic continues to flourish in post-Soviet Russia. The multiple attempts of the Eastern and Western Churches to put the breaks on magic as a remnant of pre-Christianity were futile, and, ironically, the lower clergy often figured among its more avid practitioners. In fact, particular uses of religious objects and gestures sometimes blurred the line between magic and religion, as in the employment of wonder-working icons

for protection and victory in battle or the sign of the cross as a defense against devils [238, 229]. Another indistinct boundary Ryan elaborates on is that between magic and politics, since, it was believed, witchcraft could be used to the detriment of the tsar and his family. Ivan the Terrible both practiced magic and persecuted those he believed guilty of practicing magic [244]; Boris Godunov instituted an oath against the practice of sorcery for those in his service [413]. During the reign of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich one of the tsaritsa's servants was tortured on suspicion of practicing harmful magic when she stole a mushroom and some salt from her mistress and then spilled the salt [415]. Ryan includes many other instances of this sort.

The organization of The Bathhouse at Midnight is practical and facilitates its usefulness as a handy reference work. It is divided into sixteen chapters that cover, among other things, popular magic and the evil eye; the functions of wizards and witches and Russian's extensive terminology for them; divinations, omens, and signs; dreams and predictions from the human body (itches, twitches, sneezing and the like); spells and curses (including a discussion of the structure of the *zagovor* and abundant translated texts); talismans and amulets; *materia magica* (with a very lengthy and useful roster of real and fantastic plants prescribed for magic rites); texts as magic (including "The Letters of Christ to Abgar," "The Letter to St. Peter/St. Nicholas," "The Dream of the Virgin," "and "The Twelve Fridays"), numerology, geomancy, alchemy, and astrology; and a final chapter on the church, the law and the state (including a roster of witchcraft cases that the Synodal court dealt with in the 18<sup>th</sup> century). To account for the overlapping nature of sub-divisions within magic, the individual chapters contain a good deal of cross-referencing and there is an extensive index at the back of the book. The book includes a general bibliography in addition to the informative footnotes that accompany each chapter. Eighteen illustrations complement the discussion by helping us visualize New Year's divinations, *zmeevik* amulets, *triasavitsy* (supposed daughters of Herod responsible for illnesses), the circle of Solomon, and other things. All in all, Ryan's book is a marvelous contribution to Slavic studies. It is great fun to read as well.

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