

## REVIEWS

Andreas Johns. Baba Yaga. The Ambiguous Mother and Witch of the Russian Folktale. (International Folkloristics 3). New York: Peter Lang, 2004. 352 pp. ISBN 0-8204-6769-3. \$29.95 (paper)

Andreas Johns' book contains a well-researched analysis of the character Baba Iaga (just one of many versions of her name, as Johns notes). The book opens with a discussion of previous analyses of the character, some of which inform Johns' own work and some of which he concludes are misguided or outdated. He then turns to a topic that is perhaps the most interesting in a fascinating book: an overview of Baba Iaga in the Slavic world. While the book's title refers to the Russian folktale, Johns examines the range of this figure in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus as well as similar characters in Slovak, Polish, Sorbian, Bulgarian, Bosnian and Slovenian tales. He then discusses similar characters in non-Slavic traditions, namely Hungarian, German, French and Romanian, Ural-Altaiic and Siberian.

Another rewarding feature of this book for specialists is the variety of textual sources Johns used. He draws data on Baba Iaga from tale collections, ritual, wood cuts (*lubki*) and even from epic song. Many of the tales discussed are not readily available in every western library or in translation, so that the book serves as an exhaustive survey of Iaga as she appears in collections from various East Slavic regions (as well as from farther afield, as noted above). He also provides some valuable translations of these texts in an appendix. However, it is his exhaustive knowledge of the texts that is ironically one of the downfalls of this book. At the beginning of the four chapters that contain his analysis, Johns provides extensive plot summaries of the tales relevant to that section. A reader may get lost in the minutiae and may overlook the main issues in the tale types under discussion. While Johns is to be commended for his attention to detail, the minor variants might have been presented most successfully either in an appendix or at the end of each chapter. The main tale features could have been highlighted at the beginning, with an index system for other (less significant) versions.

The bulk of the book is dedicated to an analysis of Iaga's role in Russian lore. Johns categorizes Baba Iaga tales into three types: the donor Iaga; the ambiguous Iaga; the evil witch Iaga. While this classification is not particularly revealing on the surface (nor very surprising to those who know Russian tales), Johns' extensive research helps to flesh out why these three versions of the character occur and in what type of tale. His analysis of the three types is informed by ethnographic material and by psychological theory. Johns concludes that the primary issue in the three types of Baba Iaga is the nature of the hero with whom she interacts. The most relevant factors include the age and sex of the protagonist. Johns argues that the Baba Iaga in tales with children represents a mother figure. For boys, Baba Iaga is overwhelmingly threatening, while for girls, she is much more ambiguous (she rewards good girls, but punishes the bad). It is here that Johns introduces ethnographic material as well as Freudian and developmental psychology. He observes that boys in Russian society need to separate from the mother more completely than daughters do in order to attain adulthood. Baba Iaga then represents the negative aspects of motherhood, so that the boy feels less guilty about asserting his masculinity and independence. By contrast, girls did not feel the same type of resentment toward their mothers, since they

left home to marry in the pre-revolutionary period, while boys remained in the household. As a result, the tales in which Iaga represents a girl's mother are much more balanced, since the conflicts between mother and daughter were fewer. In addition to ethnographic data, Johns also uses Freudian theory to support his claims; for example, a boy must learn that his sexual desire for his mother is unacceptable, and Iaga's hideous nature helps him to distance himself from the temptation of incest. While one may object to the Freudian bent, Johns' argument about the nature of the household and the role of children within it is convincing. The psychological pressure was intense on a boy who was growing up in a society that highly valued masculinity and yet was inextricably tied to his mother, who was still present in the household. This paradigm of the young male who disobeys his mother in order to enter into adulthood occurs frequently in Russian lore, from Dobrynia in epic song to the boys in Baba Iaga tales. One would only wish that Johns had done some more extensive research in ethnography. His sources are relatively limited (primarily Zorin (1981) on weddings and Tempest (1997, 2001) on gender and childhood). His argument would be bolstered by additional research from the wide variety of sources available. Given his assiduous work unearthing tales with Baba Iaga, the lack of completeness in ethnographic material is disappointing.

On the basis of his conclusions about Baba Iaga's attitude toward boys and girls, Johns expands his analysis to include tales in which she interacts with men and women. The donor type almost exclusively occurs with men who are searching for their brides, a fact that Johns asserts relates to the role of the Russian mother who helps to arrange her son's marriage. Baba Iaga is no longer negative, since the man has already asserted his adult status; now the mother helps the son to move toward independence and sexual maturity. By contrast, adult women are faced much more often, not with the positive donor, but with the ambiguous and villainous Baba Iaga figures. The ambiguous Iaga either helps a young woman find a husband (as with the male donor tales) or tries to prevent her from finding him (often in the same tale, various Baba Iagas help or hinder the heroine). Johns relates this fact once again to the social system of the Russian village. A daughter may continue to view a mother figure as ambiguous as she grows to adulthood. For an adult daughter, a mother is potentially both a competitor for male affection and an accomplice in finding it, due to women's roles in matchmaking and the marriage ritual. The villainous Baba Iaga, according to Johns, represents the mother-in-law. The evil image projected in these tales with women is a result of the fear of the mother-in-law and her power. Interestingly, often Baba Iaga asks the heroine to perform impossible domestic tasks. Young women may well have felt that their mother-in-law was demanding the impossible in her role as a worker in the new household; the evil witch helped them to cope with such conflicts. Where possible, Johns also connects the teller to the tale content; in some cases, collectors did not provide extensive information. However, his analysis of the interaction between the teller and the text is informative and enlightening.

Overall Johns' book is a welcome addition to the scholarship on the tale. While the monograph has some flaws, they are outweighed by thought-provoking analysis of Baba Iaga. If for no other reason, the wide variety of tale texts included in the volume make it a valuable contribution to the literature. Both specialists on the tale and Slavic folklorists will benefit from Johns' exploration of a wide variety of folk sources about this most fascinating of Russian tale characters.

## WORKS CITED

- Tempest, Snejana. 1997. "Stovelore in Russian Folklife." In Musya Glants and Joyce Toomre\_(eds), Food in Russian History and Culture. Bloomington: Indiana U.P., pp. 1-14.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001. "Acquiring an Identity: Gender Distinctions in Russian Childlore and Rituals." In Peter I. Barta (ed.), Gender and Sexuality in Russian Civilisation. London: Routledge, pp. 89-104.
- Zorin, Nikolai V. 1981. Ruskaia svad'ba v Srednem Povolzh'e. Kazan': Izdatel'stvo Kazanskogo Universiteta.

Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby  
University of Kentucky