

Marina Balina, Helena Goscilo, and Mark Lipovetsky, eds. Politicizing Magic: An Anthology of Russian and Soviet Fairy Tales. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2005. 418 pp. \$24.95 (paper). ISBN 0-8101-2032-1.

Fairy tales seem so innocent. We often view them as pure entertainment, a chance to escape from political realities to a fanciful, imagined world. Yet, as scholars have shown, tales have serious repercussions in real life, inculcating socially acceptable gender roles, advocating submission to authority, and so forth. The editors of this book propose to show the use of fairy tales by the Soviets. The magical “thrice-ninth” kingdom of the traditional Russian folktale, they point out, had features in common with the utopia that Soviets presented as their future. Soviet writers, therefore, worked with this connection, creating tales for children that advocate proper Soviet behavior and mores. As Soviets used tales for their purposes, so tales were used against them. The book’s editors contend that writers who wished to express their discontent set the action of their satirical stories in fanciful, tale-like kingdoms so that they could not be accused of speaking against the Soviet state. To support their premises, the editors present translations of three groups of tales: those taken from collections of real folklore, tales written with serious intent and meant to educate children, and tales and plays intended for an adult audience that ridicule the Soviet system, especially its bureaucracy. Thus there are three sections to this book and each has an introduction where the tales included are briefly discussed. The book structure implies that section one should give us a sense of pre-Soviet, unpoliticized lore so that we can compare Soviet tales to this material and thus better understand how political intent was realized in story.

The premise that tales were used for political purposes by the Soviets and by those who wished to speak against them is certainly valid, but this book fails to present it in a convincing manner. The most fundamental issue is a fuzzy definition of what constitutes folklore. We never learn what the editors consider to be a real Russian fairytale. As a result, the relationship between folklore and its various literary reworkings is never clear. Tales, both folk and literary, seem to be selected at random, sometimes using one criterion, sometimes another, and one never gets a sense of how magic was politicized, one never learns how either the Soviet system, or the protests against it, worked.

Section one presents twelve stories that are said to be translations of true folktales taken from Afanas'ev, the classic collection published toward the end of the nineteenth century. Russian magic tales are numerous indeed. Why were these particular narratives selected for this book? This question is not answered. Do the editors feel that the tales they chose exemplify the idea of a fanciful, utopian other-world particularly well? Do they believe that these tales were especially popular during the Soviet era and thus typify the sort of traditional lore to which people would have been exposed? Perhaps. Almost all are indeed well-known tales. But then "The Magic Ring," a tale with blatant discussions of sexuality, does not belong. Obscene tales were prohibited during both the Soviet and tsarist periods and were available only in editions published abroad. And it is even questionable whether most of the texts are, in fact, translations. They read like retellings and all we are told about them is that they were "translated...from Narodnye russkie skazki A. N. Afanas'eva v 3-kh tomakh." Full identification of sources is given for the last two tales only.

Section two presents stories that are not folklore, but written by known authors and meant to socialize children, teaching them how to be good citizens of the Soviet state. What is the relationship of the stories in this section to the ones in section one? None of them can be considered a reworking of a folktale. "The Malachite Casket" is the narrative most like Russian fairytales, with the Mistress of the Copper Mountain recalling the copper kingdom of the tale printed on pages 28-31 of section one. But the two tale plots are radically different and there is no discussion of the relationship between them. "The Adventures of Buratino" and "The Old Genie Khottabych," both of which are quite popular, but published here only in excerpted form, are indeed well-known tales consciously rewritten to deliver a Soviet message. But Buratino is an adaptation of Pinocchio and Khottabych is loosely based on Aladdin. Can these be considered Russian folktales? Russians would have known them from literary sources and the originals are most certainly not Russian. Perhaps we are supposed to view fairytales as children's literature and section two as what became of children's literature when Soviet guidance was imposed. Malchish-Kibalchish, a story that contains essentially no magic, seems to be included only because it is children's literature. But true folktales were never exclusively children's literature, though they have come to be associated with children in more recent times, and "The Magic Ring" cannot be considered a children's story under any circumstances.

Several of the writers whose stories were selected for inclusion in the section of protest fairytales consciously used folklore in their written work. Zamiatin's bitter "Tales for Grown-Ups," excerpted here, depend on a knowledge of folklore to underscore the absurdity of actions such as legislating cholera away. Shukshin's lighter "Before the Cock Crows Thrice," also excerpted, shows the archetypical Ivan on a tale-like quest – only his mission is the acquisition of a very Soviet "*bumazhka*" (paper): he must obtain a certificate of knowledge; knowledge itself is not the issue. The remaining three selections do not claim a relationship to fairytales and two are not tales at all, but plays. In them we find fanciful elements that might possibly be associated with folklore. Lancelot battles a dragon in Schvarts's play of that name and seeks to rescue a maiden. The Troika in the story by the Strugatskys rules in a magically removed kingdom which is on an impossibly high floor of a building rather than laterally distant and located thrice-nine kingdoms away. But the connection to folklore is not discussed. The introductions discuss the relationship of the tales in that section to each other; they do not deal with relationships across sections. What "That Very Munchausen," another play, has to do with folklore is not clear. Munchausen does make things happen by willing them, but this brings it closer to Zamiatin's literary *skazki* than to fairytales.

The book under review seems to be a print version of readings assembled for a course. As such, the texts here were presumably accompanied by explanations, discussions, other readings, other texts: information that overcame the problems noted above. Without supplementary material, this book might be used as a reader by others if they are careful to provide their own context. Special care should be taken to contextualize the folk materials published here. As already noted, folktales are not treated with the same care as literary works, making them seem less valid as texts. Soviet engineering of folklore itself, a topic treated by Frank Miller in Folklore for Stalin, is ignored, as if only Soviet literary works are important.

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