

Robert Chandler and Elizabeth Chandler with Sibelan Forrester, Anna Gunin and Olga Meerson (trans.). *Russian Magic Tales from Pushkin to Platonov*. London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 2013. Introduction. Appendix. xxi+448pp. \$14.99 (paper). ISBN: 978-0141442235.

The tradition of translating Russian folktales goes back to the 19th century. Today, the number of translations of this genre is quite impressive and includes well-illustrated volumes for children and more thorough works such as Haney's *Complete Russian Folktale*. The present book differs from other publications due to its original structure. It is a combination of the best examples of the known collections of authentic magic tales with the selected fiction of classical writers of the Golden and Silver Ages, as well as the Soviet times. It includes a rich variety of magic tales, ranging from early recorded versions to authors' reworkings and adaptations. The seven parts of this book are arranged chronologically.

The first part contains two of A. Pushkin's tales in verse, the "Tale about a Priest and his Servant Balda," which is based on Pskov folklore, and his "Tale about a Fisherman and a Fish" of German origin. The first is challenging for any translator due to its poetic style that imitates the language of the popular print (*lubok*). The translation is good, though the replacement of the lines from the final version about the priest losing his mind with the draft's graphic expression "plastering the wall with his brain" is questionable. It is known that in Pushkin's notes the final parts of the authentic tales (5 texts, 1824-25) were more humane than similar records, perhaps due to the storyteller Arina Rodionovna Yakovleva's style.

The second part of the book includes eleven tales from A. Afanasiev's collection and two from I. Khudyakov's. Afanasiev's tales are jewels for any collection, though the presence of a typical animal tale "The Crane and the Heron" looks accidental in spite of the translator's justification of this choice due to the quality of the text. In many places the editors did not include certain information in their notes, likely because of limitations placed by the publisher. For example, the notes to "Misery" do not take into account the *Comparative Index of Tales. The East Slavic Folktale* (1979). The tale is classified as 330D* ("Man (Solomon) and Death") by R. Nazirov, and could also be linked to the A-T 330B, A-T 332F and A-T 331. The tale "Wise Girl" shows traces of social satire, and the notes could have mentioned its similarity to the "Tale of Peter and Fevronia" from the 16th century.

The third section contains publications from "Zhivaia Starina" and the collections of N. Onchukov, O. Ozarovskaya, and D. Zelenin. The texts present the magic tales tradition from a variety of Russian regions. The next part includes fiction by Nadezhda Teffi. Her humorous "When a Crawfish Whistled: A Christmas Horror" (1911) differs from a folktale, and plays upon the meaning of the analogous figure of speech "When pigs fly" that is based on an embodied hypertrophied metaphor. The other stories include standard folklore characters. In this part are adaptations of magic tales and the satire on the Communist regime. "The Dog" is a mystery love story with a shape-shifting motif set in post-Revolutionary Petrograd. In "A Little Fairy Tale," the folklore characters have

adjusted to the new regime, e.g. the dragon Zmei Gorynych worked for the secret police. The note about Zmei Gorynych mentions that it is the green three-headed dragon, but the number of heads can vary (3, 9, and 12), its color is not specified in folklore, and even I. Bilibin depicted it as either red or green.

One could disagree with the choice of Teffi and the omitting of the magic tales of contemporaries; such as Aleksey Tolstoy (for example, his “Mermaid’s Tales”), Nikolai Gumilev (“The Dragon”) or Fedor Sologub (“The White Dog”). Those authors’ tales using folk motifs could together make an original separate publication, which could also include the late Soviet period, like Vasily Shukshin’s “Before the Cockcrow” (*Do tretikh petukhov*), which is close in its parody style to Teffi’s.

The fifth part contains tales (*skazy*) by Pavel Bazhov from the 1930s. They are an alloy of the Urals miners’ and indigenous legends, mostly of the Bashkirs. The introduction to Bazhov’s tales, as well as the note about the artist Boris Sveshnikov, the Gulag victim, stand apart from traditional analysis of the writer’s stories. It takes a social and political approach, following Mark Lipovetsky’s view of the *skazy* in their relation to Bazhov’s life and his supposed subconscious desire to depict the horrors of Stalin’s Purges. The notes could have mentioned that the events in “The Mistress of the Copper Mountain” could be dated 1836, when at the Mednorudyansky Mine a huge malachite boulder was found. In this tale, “Gumeshki” is Gumeshevsky Mine in the City of Polevskoi. “The Mountain Master” could also add the comment that “Kolyvan” is Kolyvan lapidary factory in the Altai region (known for its outstanding decorative stone vases).

The sixth part contains tales from the Soviet period, including examples from the Bashkir Republic (by E. Pomerantseva), Southern Urals (A. Bardin), the North (I. Karnaukhova and D. Balashov), and the Don Cossacks region (F. Tumilevich). There are precious examples of the narrative containing mythological motifs and charms, such as “Snake-Man”. Here some of the notes give extensive details on the story-teller, while others only point at the source and classification.

The seventh part of the book contains tales by Andrei Platonov, such as “Ivan the Wonder,” “Magic Ring,” and “No-Arms.” They are supplied with detailed commentaries, though it is questionable whether in “Ivan the Wonder” Platonov alludes to Stalin’s slogan “Life has become better, life has become merrier.” It is unlikely because Stalin showed a furious reaction to Platonov’s stories of 1929-30, and the idea of the author’s being sarcastic seems illogical in that situation, since Platonov found himself later being forced to repent.

The book includes the appendix “Baba Yaga: the Wild Witch of the East” by Sibelan Forrester. This essay demonstrates that Baba Yaga’s features are unique among other witch-like characters. The goal of this essay is to explore the character of this female spirit of magic tales by examining her attributes, such as her mortar and pestle. Listing their possible symbolic meanings, the author does not discuss their possible erotic connotation (wedding rituals) or use of a pestle as a weapon. Forrester also argues that Baba Yaga’s role as a helper was a reflection of Christian moral influence softening a plot. Undoubtedly, this can be explained by her function both as a “border guard” between the real and the Other World

and a “tester” in initiation rituals. This logically explains Baba Yaga’s role switching from threatening to helping as a reward for the protagonist’s knowledge of proper behavior.

Overall, “Russian Magic Tales: from Pushkin to Platonov” publication leaves a pleasant impression. It compiles nice examples from magic tale collections of the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as interesting texts from folklore-based fiction. The translation work is of high quality, the book is logically organized and supplied with detailed notes that provide information about the collector or the author and the peculiarities of the text itself: the A-T classification, a storyteller’s portrait, and recording time and circumstances. Some notes could have included more information on toponyms and dialectisms, and some commentaries could have been less politically oriented. At the same time, the idea itself of this mixture of pure folklore tales and writers’ texts can raise doubts about the approach from the point of view of compatibility of such heterogeneous material under the same cover. Nevertheless, this collection is a valuable source for studies of Russian folklore, culture and literature.

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