

THE COMPLETE RUSSIAN FOLKTALE

# Russian Wondertales

## II. Tales of Magic and the Supernatural

Edited by **Jack V. Haney**

ROUTLEDGE  


# Russian Wondertales

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# THE COMPLETE RUSSIAN FOLKTALE

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This splendid multivolume work will acquaint readers with a rich folktale tradition that has not been easily accessible or well known in the West.

In the first volume of the series, *An Introduction to the Russian Folktale*, Jack V. Haney discusses the origin, structure, and language of folktales; the “discovery” and collection of folktales; Russian tale-tellers and their audiences; the relationship of folktales to ritual life; and the major folktale types.

Compared to other European traditions, the East Slavs have an extremely large number of tale types. Using the Russian version of the Aarne-Thompson index to folktale types, and drawing on both archival and written sources dating back to the early sixteenth century, Haney has collected examples of the full range of Russian animal tales, wondertales, legends, and tales about everyday life. These tales are translated in the volumes of *The Complete Russian Folktale*.

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## II. Tales of Magic and the Supernatural

Edited and Translated  
with an  
Introduction by  
**Jack V. Haney**

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## PREFACE

Volumes 3 and 4 of *The Complete Russian Folktale* are devoted to wondertales. Volume 1, *An Introduction to the Russian Folktale*, and Volume 2, *Russian Animal Tales*, appeared in 1999. Subsequent volumes will feature Russian legends, anecdotes, and tales of everyday life.

The aim of Volumes 3 and 4 is to present to the English-reading public at least one example of every type of wondertale known to have existed in the vast Russian folktale corpus.

I have received assistance from many friends and colleagues in the preparation of this volume. I am especially indebted to the Interlibrary Borrowing Division of the Henry Suzzallo Library of the University of Washington for locating and obtaining many rare collections of tales; to Dr. Michael Biggins of the library for his assistance in obtaining microform copies of tales from Russia; to A.A. Nikiforov of St. Petersburg, Russia, for permission to use materials from the archives of his late father, A.I. Nikiforov; to Aleksandr Finchenko and Tatiana Bogomazova of TASK, and especially to my friend Aleksandr Bobrov of the Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg. I also owe much to the enthusiasm and encouragement of many students at the University of Washington over the past quarter-century, some of whom provided early drafts of tales included in this volume. Again my wife, Barbara, has been extremely helpful in more ways than I can mention, and my son Andrew served too many times as my technical advisor when the word processor did not want to do what I thought it ought. They deserve my special gratitude.



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## TECHNICAL NOTE

Several tale-numbering systems are used in these volumes. This brief explanation is offered for the convenience of readers who are not already familiar with these conventions.

The tales that are translated in the successive volumes of *The Complete Russian Folktale* are numbered sequentially.

When making reference to a type of tale in general and not some specific rendition of it, I will cite an Aarne–Thompson (A–T) type number. This number is given in its Russian (SUS) version. Sometimes the tale-type number may be followed by a subscript, a Latin letter, and/or asterisks, indicating a particular variant or subclassification.

Reference to a specific rendition of a tale is to the printed collection (e.g., Onchukov 110). The tales collected by Afanas'ev have been published in a number of editions, but the tale number is always the same regardless of edition. Thus, Afanas'ev 363 invariably refers to “The Vampire.” When a tale appears without an identifying number in a collection, reference is made to the pages in the edition (e.g., Korol'kova, p. 152, “Fenist the Bright Falcon,” or Sokolov 1932:147–50, “How the Landlord Gave Birth to a Calf”).

When referring to a book or article in the text, I give the title in English; in the bibliography I cite the language of the original. The transliteration system used here is the Library of Congress system, with some simplifications to enhance readability. Variant spellings of some common names will be encountered in the forms used in the original texts. Thus, Koshchei, Kashchei, and Kasheshe.



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# GLOSSARY

<i>Ataman</i>	headman, leader, especially in Southwest Russia and Ukraine
<i>Batiushka</i>	Father, used of Tsar and Priest
<i>Bogatyr</i>	warrior, especially in the epics (byliny)
<i>Bylina</i>	heroic epic
<i>Chervonets</i>	probably ten rubles
<i>Dead and living waters</i>	The former ends “chaos” and brings form, while the latter provides the life force.
<i>Devichnik</i>	pre-nuptial social occasion for bride and friends, equivalent to a shower
<i>Esaul</i>	Cossack captain
<i>Grivennik</i>	ten-kopeck coin
<i>Gubernia</i>	a large administrative unit in tsarist Russia
<i>Gusli</i>	traditional musical instrument resembling a small harp
<i>Hegumen</i>	head of an Orthodox monastery
<i>Idolishche</i>	giant, villain, hostile warrior, pagan warrior, in tales or heroic epics, in #151, a serpent
<i>Kalin Bridge</i>	the locus of fights between hero and villains, especially in A–T 300 and 301 tales
<i>Kasha</i>	porridge often made of buckwheat, staple of peasant life
<i>Kokoshnik</i>	headdress of North Russian married woman
<i>Kupala</i>	St. John’s Eve
<i>Kvass</i>	slightly alcoholic brew made from stale rye bread
<i>Lapti</i>	bast boots or shoes
<i>Leshii</i>	forest spirit
<i>Lubok</i>	chapbook; a booklet made from bast, stripped from the inner bark of the lime tree
<i>Makhorka</i>	coarse tobacco, twisted

<i>Matushka</i>	priest's wife
<i>Mizinets</i>	little finger or toe. Amputated in ancient times in initiatory rites
<i>Pertsovka</i>	vodka flavored with hot peppers
<i>Poezd</i>	train; here, a Wedding Train, or procession
<i>Pood</i>	weight equivalent to thirty-three pounds
<i>Postel' nichii</i>	guardian of the nuptial chamber (chamberlain)
<i>Sarafan</i>	pinafore dress of peasant women
<i>Sazhen'</i>	length equivalent to 2.13 meters
<i>Shchi</i>	cabbage soup
<i>Shirinka</i>	embroidered towel or covering; part of a trousseau
<i>Skazochnik</i>	teller of folktales
<i>Skomorokh</i>	a jester, purveyor of pre-Christian lore, entertainer in Muscovite Russia
<i>Skomoroshina</i>	a text preserved in what is thought to be the style of the skomorokhs
<i>Starosta</i>	commune leader; a mayor
<i>Station</i>	postal station where horses were changed, meals served, and beds provided
<i>Svad'ba</i>	the peasant wedding, reflecting many pre-Christian customs and beliefs
<i>Taiga</i>	the vast forest zone of northern Russia and Siberia
<i>Venchanie</i>	the crowning or wreathing—a Christian wedding rite conducted by the priest
<i>Venik</i>	small bundle of dried leaves and branches used to “tease” the skin in the baths
<i>Verst</i>	length equivalent to 3,500 feet
<i>Vodianoï</i>	undersea or underwater spirit or deity
<i>Volshebnaia skazka</i>	wondertale
<i>Wine/Vodka</i>	used interchangeably in the tales for vodka
<i>Wreathing</i>	<i>see</i> Venchanie
<i>Yurt</i>	the round felt hut of the Mongols, a ger

# INTRODUCTION

*“Is maith sceal go dti sceal eile.”*  
*(A tale is good until another is told.)*

Tales like those included in *The Complete Russian Folktale* under the rubric wondertales are popularly referred to in English as “fairy” tales, following the archaic use of the word *faerie*, which meant “enchanted.” Certainly, there were never many fairies in the tales, although a number do involve some very peculiar characters as well as enchantments of various sorts. English scholars of the English tales still use the term fairy tale occasionally. Katharine Briggs, for example, justified her usage as being rooted in English tradition and let it go at that. The senior American student of the folktale, Stith Thompson, generally avoided the term in his influential *The Folktale*, referring instead to Tales of Magic, which are subsumed in his classificatory system under Ordinary Folktales, a concept he claims is covered by the German *Märchen*. If Thompson is consistent in distinguishing Tales of Magic, Animal Tales, and the many other sorts of folktales, other Americans are not. Jack Zipes’s translations of the Grimms’ tales were published as *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, even though many of the tales in the collection are generally classified as animal tales, legends, or jokes, and not fairy tales.

In the volumes comprising *The Complete Russian Folktale* consistency has been maintained as far as possible. All the tales translated for the various volumes are folktales. They were thus told, and not composed in written form (which is not to say that some of them were not derived from written sources). They were oral, traditional, and popular. We do know who actually told some of the tales, as this information was sometimes recorded for preservation along with the tale itself. Occasionally we know that a tale has been incorporated into the Russian oral tradition from some other tradition, but in

most cases we do not know by whom, or when, or how, a given tale was first told. This does not really matter. In pre-modern Russia a painting was never signed, all music before that time is anonymous (although we can guess), and only a very few literary texts are identified by author—and such attributions are often mere conjecture or wishful thinking on the part of subsequent readers. Even the architects of the great cathedrals are phantoms save in a few exceptional cases when an eyewitness recorded the name of the master builder. What distinguishes the folktales from these other types of anonymous artistic endeavor is that they have been preserved in the oral tradition, with all the vagaries implied by that. One can never know who first told a tale, and, indeed, the notion of authorship is generally regarded as irrelevant. In the Russian tradition tales are usually referred to by their collector's name: Sokolova, Afanas'ev, Onchukov. Occasionally, one will find reference to a tale told by a particular narrator: Korol'kova, Vinokurova, Novopol'tsev.

Aside from the most general categorization, folktale, four terms are used in English to classify the material collected here. In addition to the unfortunate "fairy tale," other terms are "tale of enchantment," "wondertale," and "tale of transformation." "Fairy tale" is not an appropriate term for the Russian tales in this grouping. Whatever a fairy is in folklore, it is not met in the Russian tradition.

"Tale of enchantment" probably comes closest to the Russian term, *volshebnaia skazka*. It is quite true that many of the Russian tales involve magic spells of various sorts, but by no means all do. The first great compiler of Russian folktales, A.N. Afanas'ev, intuitively ordered his many tales so that these tales came together after the animal tales, but he nonetheless gave them no special classification. Twentieth-century Russian editors and compilers almost universally use the term *volshebnaia skazka*, although popular editions are not so consistent.

The leading twentieth-century Russian scholar of the folktale, V.Ia. Propp, referred to the *volshebnaia skazka*, while at the same time arguing that the essential feature of the genre was a transformation that takes place in the tale. These transformations are of great interest. Russian scholars have established a large number of binary pairs, opposites, to which ancient Russian societies gave value, either positive or negative. The task in these folktales is for the hero/heroine to obey the rules of the world in which he/she finds himself/herself, thus obtaining the power to transform certain negative "baggage" into its positive opposite. Defeating a villain, gaining a wife, acquiring wealth, discovering privileged information, or undergoing the physical alterations that change a youth into an adult constitute some of these transformations. The binary pairs also provide the storyteller with structuring elements that serve as a shorthand between him and his savvy audience, for

whom the tales are scarcely unfamiliar. Certain activities are associated with the hut in the forest; other activities always take place at the tsar's palace. It is because of this system of binary opposites, which seems to be part of the linguistic and psychological makeup of the Slavs from pre-historic times, that heroes and heroines invariably succeed against the greatest of odds. However, almost without exception, they return to society as changed individuals: transformation is the key to their success.

Finally there is the term "wondertale." It is certainly not as accurate as "tale of transformation" to describe what takes place in these tales, but it would seem to encompass something of the notions of enchantment and otherworldliness that most readers associate with the tales. I have therefore elected to use the term wondertales for these tales as it appears to be the most neutral of the four terms. Which tales are included here and in what order depends on their actual classification.

### Classification

For nearly a century there has been a convention much used by folklorists to classify folktales. This system, which was inspired by the pioneering work on folktales of A.N. Afanas'ev, was first worked out by the Finnish scholar Antti Aarne, and then expanded and modified by an American, Stith Thompson. This Aarne-Thompson system (A-T) seeks to classify all folktales on the basis of perceived similarity of structure and coincidence of motifs. The system assigns numbers 1-300 to the animal tales (see Vol. 2 of *The Complete Russian Folktale*). A-T numbers 300-750 comprise the wondertales (of necessity they extend here over two volumes, Vol. 3 and Vol. 4). Legendary tales are classified 750-849, novellistic tales 859-999, tales about deceived or outwitted devils 1000-1199, and then anecdotes and jokes conclude the system, 1200-2400. (These will be covered in future volumes.)

The contemporary standard Russian index to the folktale, the *Comparative Index of Types. The East Slavic Folktale* (Barag et al. 1979), known by its Russian abbreviation SUS, catalogues only two hundred twenty-five types of wondertale, but some of these also have variants that are so different from the basic types as to warrant separate numbers, if the overall system had room for that. *The Complete Russian Folktale* includes two hundred fifty wondertales, reflecting some new additions to the SUS catalogue and a few tale types duplicated for reasons given in the commentaries. The commentaries will also indicate a number of tales not attested in any tradition other than Russian. It is to be noted that a Western index to tale types will not necessarily list all the types known in the Russian tradition. Unfortunately, no up-to-date composite index for the world's tales exists.

Within the category of folktales known as wondertales there are a number of subdivisions. The tales in the first three subdivisions (ranging over A–T numbers 300–499) may be thematically characterized as tales about heroes and villains. These appear in Volume 3 of *The Complete Russian Folktale*.

Tales numbered 300–399 in the A–T system feature supernatural adversaries such as serpents, ogres, giants, Death, or the Slavic prince of darkness, Koshchei. This is by far the most popular type of wondertale in the Russian tradition, as regards both the number of types and the number of recordings.

Tale types 400–459 are concerned with enchanted relatives, especially spouses. Here one will encounter tales about maidens released from otherworldly forms, the lovely story of Fenis the Bright Falcon, and maidens doomed to marry serpents, crayfish, or worms.

Tale types 460–499 are characterized by a strange, outlandish, most often otherworldly task that is set for the hero or heroine. One group of tales in this category, 480 and related forms, features stepsisters, one of whom the stepmother seeks to destroy but who returns unharmed and enriched while the stepmother's own ill-mannered child is destroyed. In a very fine version of this tale the test for manners involves sharing a meager meal with a mouse and then encountering a bear in wedding dances or a raucous round of blindman's bluff. The audience knows, if the modern English reader does not, that when the girl leaps from a bench into a pinafore (*sarafan*), she is performing a part of a pre-nuptial ritual still practiced in Russia. Even today in parts of Russia and Belarus, newlyweds may be referred to as bears. As for the game, it is still encountered at weddings in Russia (see Vol. 1:117).

In Volume 4 the emphasis shifts to magic, with four subdivisions of tale types (A–T nos. 500 to 750).

Tale types 500–559 are united by there being a helper whose assistance enables the hero to succeed where he otherwise might have failed. In the Russian tales dwarves are common helpers, but so are many animals, including the horse and the wolf. The Russian version of the well-known European story of Cinderella falls into this group, even if the helper is in fact a fish!

Quite closely related to the tales where a helper is of paramount importance are tales where the hero needs, or needs to acquire, a magic agent (560–649). Not infrequently these magic agents are phallic in nature, emphasizing the initiatory origins of many of the wondertales. Common among the agents are rings, sacks or bags, a fife for herding rabbits, a magic fiddle or flute, or various fruits.

Although there is a miscellaneous “catch-all” category (700–749), the final true grouping of wondertales (650–699) features the possession of magic powers or know-how. Ivan the Bear's Son simply does not know his own strength; several tales deal with hypnosis; a youth runs metaphorically not

like a deer but having been actually transformed into one, or into a hare or a bird, as is appropriate. A boy interprets dreams; a maiden asks riddles; a poor peasant can understand the language of the animals and birds.

The A–T classification system would be a true work of genius if not for several drawbacks. The chief of these, and one that is universally agreed, is that very few actual renditions of tales consist of merely the one *sujet*, the one simple plot. One example of just such a simple tale is “Alionushka and Her Little Brother,” A–T 450, in an early nineteenth-century version preserved by I.A. Khudiakov.<sup>1</sup>

From his first wife this peasant had these two children and once he undertook to marry again. He got married. And then his wife said, “Take your children away, wherever you like!”

So he agreed to take them off. He took them into the forest. “Go wherever you like, my children,” he said, “and collect berries while I chop some wood.” Then he made this wooden thing [that sounded like wood being chopped when the wind blew], and the children picked and picked their berries and they listened and listened. “No,” they said, “our father is still chopping wood over there.” It got late and they started calling him. They called and called, but they didn’t find him. Their father had ridden off long ago, he had left them.

The sister took her brother by the hand and started leading him down the road. As they were going down the road, he said, “I want a drink!”

She said to him, “You can’t drink from the wagon ruts (in the road where the wheels go) or else you’ll become a wheel!”

So they walked on. They saw some goat hoof prints. “Sister, sister! I really want to drink!”

“Don’t drink, brother, or you’ll become a goat.” But he drank his fill: he had really wanted that drink! And he became a goat. They went along together.

Some gentlemen were coming along the road. “Beautiful maiden! Where did you catch that goat?”

She said, “This is my brother.” She told them all about it. So these gentlemen put her in their carriage with them and they put the goat on the running board. One of them brought her to his home and she was such a beauty that he married her. And then he went away somewhere.

But the servants took stones and put them in her pinafore and threw her in the pond. And one of the servants, a young girl, had a similar face, and she dressed in her clothing and pretended to be his wife. The master came back and she behaved around him as if she were his wife. And she prompted him to slaughter the goat because the servants were afraid the goat would tell everything. But the master wouldn’t agree.

So the goat came and said, “Master, master! Let me go down to the pond to get a drink, to wash my guts!” And he let him go. So off he went and he shouted, “Alionushka, little sister! Come out to me, talk to me! They are sharpening their steel knives, they want to slaughter me, the goat.”

“Oh, my brother Ivanushka! I can’t come out to you. Fierce serpents are sucking at my breasts, a burning stone drags me to the bottom!” So then he went off home. And the next time he asked, he went to the pond again. And the third time, too. The master noticed it and went after him and heard it all. He dragged Alionushka out of the pond, and he tied the other girl to a horse’s tail and ordered her scattered over the steppe.

Only a few Russian wondertales can be classified so simply, although none is as complicated as “The Fox and the Wolf” (tale no. 1 in Volume 2), which actually consists of eight A–T types strung together to constitute one tale. The Russian tradition does know, however, wondertales that have as many as four types: 302 + 554 + 518 + 552A. For example, the popular tale *Maria Morevna* begins with the death of *Koshchei*, followed by an episode where the young man spares the lives of various animals who help him fulfill some difficult tasks, after which some devils or other world spirits are defeated, and finally the hero’s three brothers-in-law (all birds) rescue him from his last brush with death. Russian authorities classify this tale under the 552A category for reasons that are not necessarily clear. In a tale featuring a combination of several tale types, either one arbitrarily selects one type to identify the entire tale and ignores what the Russians call the “contaminants,” or one might catalogue the tale under each of the four rubrics, which will make the system very unwieldy. For the most part I have selected one type to identify the tale, while also indicating the contaminants.

### **The Structure of the Wondertales**

Anyone who has the opportunity to listen to an expert teller of folktales is soon aware of the structure of tales and the importance that structure has for the narration. Even very small children will quickly comprehend that structure and be able to replicate it. A.I. Nikiforov found that in the Russian North children as young as eight or nine could tell their own wondertales perfectly well although they were illiterate (Nikiforov 1961).

Two types of structure are important for the discussion here: structures that are part of the Russian oral tradition but not part of a given tale’s syntax; and the wondertale’s syntax as such.

Many observers have noted that the language of folklore as inherited from the ancient oral tradition contains much that is remembered, learned from a previous generation or another performer and then incorporated into an artist’s

own language and performance. Outside its specific context the language of the wondertales becomes cliché ridden. In the English tradition, “Once upon a time, in a far-off land” is just such an opening formula and is a cliché, as is the traditional “And they lived happily ever after.” So, too, are such phrases as “the big, bad wolf” or “the deep, dark forest.” The Russian tradition knows its own elaborate formulae, including “In the thrice-nine tsardom, in the thrice-ten land, there lived and dwelt a tsar,” or the humorous ending formula to many a folktale concluding with a wedding: “I was there; I drank mead and beer; it ran through my moustaches and none got into my mouth.” Originally this was not a very subtle hint that the narrator would like a drink for his efforts. In more modern times with women increasingly telling wondertales in Russia, their repetition of the formula shows the power of the tradition and suggests that the female narrator was more concerned about following it than about the literal meaning of what she was saying!

In between these epithetical beginnings and endings one finds the stock characters of the wondertales: wicked stepmothers and witches, handsome tsareviches and beautiful tsarevnas, crystal bridges, deep woods or forests, and the three-, six-, nine-, or even twelve-headed serpent just waiting for the hero to lop off those heads. In the Russian tradition whole utterances are connected with these stereotypical figures. There is a formula that will gain Ivan Tsarevich or Ivan the Peasant’s Son access to the witch’s hut, and it will be found in tales from the White Sea to the Lower Volga.

It is worth pointing out that these formulae are generally associated with situations in the tales and not with particular tale types. The reader will soon recognize them as he or she moves through the collections, and it will soon become clear that they are a major structuring device for the narrator as well as for the audience, eager to understand the course of events in the tale. Two tales in this collection, told by a mother and daughter, illustrate this clearly. They show the constant features within the tradition as well as the innovation that can take place. Reference is to tales 305 and 306. Tale no. 305 was told before 1915 to Mark Azadovskii by the fabled narrator Natal’ia Osipovna Vinokurova, an impoverished peasant from a tiny village on the Kulenga River, not far from Verkholsk, Yakutia. Tale no. 306 was recorded by L. Suprun from Raisa Egorovna Shemetova, the daughter of this same Vinokurova. Moreover, the two women tell the same tale, Siberian versions of a tale well known in the English-speaking world as “Prince Ivan and the Firebird” or “Ivan Tsarevich and the Gray Wolf.”<sup>2</sup>

Vinokurova’s tale bears evidence of *lubok* (chapbook) influence, as does Shemetova’s, but apparently nothing is known of the exact source. Vinokurova’s tale was first published in 1926; Shemetova’s tales were published in 1974, posthumously. There is no question that Shemetova learned

most if not all of her tales from her mother, but the published literature tells nothing more of the actual circumstances under which that took place.

The tale itself is not particularly common in the European Russian oral tradition. It is more frequently recorded in Siberia and is known in Ukrainian and Belarusian. Of the two versions included here, that of the mother (no. 305) is less artistically told. The episode of the middle brother's standing watch over the golden apple tree through the night is largely omitted, and it is not an error, for the narrator says, "In short, the same thing happened with Mitia." Her tale is noteworthy for the attention she pays to the psychological and physical states of the characters in the tale; they are much more than just the traditional figures in tales. Oddly enough, she seems very much attracted to the tsar, who is so distraught that he has given up eating and drinking on account of the theft of the apples. Shemetova's version is extremely similar. She does, it is true, fill in some parts of her mother's narrative that she may have felt were too sparse, restoring the second brother's vigil, for instance. Her true originality lies in the tale's ending, however, and here she creates something that I think is quite unique in Russian wondertales. The gray wolf has just delivered Ivan Tsarevich to his father's court and disappeared. Ivan Tsarevich appears at the court and is recognized by Elena the Beautiful, who pronounces him her future groom. But then Ivan Tsarevich holds up the wedding until his "dear guest" arrives, and that dear guest is none other than the gray wolf. The ending is drawn out by Shemetova's having the tsarevich beg his father to behave politely toward this guest when he arrives.

The gray wolf's arrival is spectacular: "They saw a troika of horses flying up, and a gold carriage. All the guests went out to welcome him. And in the golden carriage sat the gray wolf. The guests were frightened. 'Oh, what sort of guest is that?'" Of course, there are thousands of versions of the Russian wondertales, but this is the only one I have encountered where the hero's helper, the gray wolf, is an honored guest at his wedding! The function of the episode seems clear enough: to delay the conclusion of the tale and provide an element of surprise for the audience.

Any reader of wondertales will quickly note the propensity of wondertales to triplification. Tsarevich Ivan may be asked to herd Baba Yaga's horses three times. The unnamed girl of "The Swan-Geese" encounters three potential helpers. Serpents have heads in multiples of three. There are three places action may take place: in the forest, in the thrice-ten land, at the tsar's court. This fixation on threes is very characteristic of the Indo-European tradition as a whole and is deeply imbedded in the languages, mythologies, and social structures of all those peoples. What the tripling means is less certain. In the wondertales tripling plays at least four roles. It clearly is intended to protract the tale for the general pleasure of the audience. There is evidence from

among the Russians that in the twentieth century a longer, more convoluted tale was prized more than the simple, straightforward one. Furthermore, within the oral tradition in general this kind of repetition permitted the teller of the tales to gather his thoughts. He had no notes of any kind and there were severe limits on his freedom to extemporize. At the same time, the triple repetition assured that the audience would grasp the meaning of the narrative. Finally, I suspect that favorite parts were repeated for the sheer joy of it, the jingles, rhymes, and songs especially.

The formal structural study of the Russian folktale, specifically the wondertales, is associated with Vladimir Propp, whose *Morphology of the Folktale* first appeared in 1928. Rarely has a scholarly book written by a Russian had such an impact on the rest of the world, an impact that goes beyond the study of the folktale to find applications in the study of Shakespeare or the French novel.

Despite its title, Propp's book is about the wondertales, and among wondertales he looks only at some of those in the three-volume edition of Afanas'ev. The originality of Propp's approach lies in his use of what he termed functions, and what are here called predicatives, to analyze a tale. Propp points out that there are a limited number of actions take place but those actions can be performed by a variety of actors in different tales. Only those predicatives that are connected to the hero of the tale are relevant to his study. Propp then argued that the predicatives invariably occur in the same order, and thus all Russian wondertales are of the same type. Variations in the tales come from there being different actors and different combinations of predicatives.

Propp identified thirty-one predicatives and only seven classes of actors in the wondertale.<sup>3</sup> The fact that many of the predicatives are found only in conjunction with one or another of the actors further limits the structural possibilities of the tale. Indeed, several of Propp's successors have argued that the original system consists largely of binary pairs that can be combined, thus reducing the number of possible functions nearly by half. Thus, there is no Russian tale where the pursuit of the hero is not followed by his rescue. A difficult task is invariably followed by its resolution by the hero. Propp's system can best be understood by applying it to an actual tale, in this case "The Swan Geese," no. 267 in this volume.

In Propp's notation this tale "reads"

$$A^1 B^4 C \uparrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} D^1 E^1 F^1 \\ d^7 e^7 f^9 \end{array} \right\} G^4 K^1 \downarrow Pr^1 Rs^4_3$$

Which may be interpreted as: A<sup>1</sup> a kidnapping takes place, followed by an announcement of the misfortune in various forms, B<sup>4</sup>. Then someone "con-

sents” to Counteraction, C. The upward-pointing arrow means a departure. The sequence  $D^1 E^1 F^1$  represents a testing sequence of the donor, whose main function is to provide the magic agent to the would-be hero who can pass the test, but in this tale the little girl fails the test three times and only at  $d^7 e^7 f^9$  with the encounter with the hedgehog does she succeed.  $G^4$  indicates that the route somewhere, in this tale to the hut of Baba Yaga, is shown to the hero. The  $K^1$  means that the misfortune (the kidnapping) was liquidated by force or cunning. The downward arrow says there is a return, and the Pr, a Pursuit through the air, followed by a Rs, a rescue accompanied by concealment. This is among the simplest of tales, consisting of just one misfortune and its liquidation ( $A^1 \sim K^1$ ). (I have ignored the initial part of the tale as it does little to show the overall structure.) (Propp 1969:86–89)

Many tales contain multiple misfortunes; three or four are not uncommon. The point is that each negative predicative is at some point neutralized by its opposite: a pursuit is followed by a rescue, something lost or stolen is followed by something found or recovered, and so to the end. The wondertales thus are defined by their binary structure, or what V.Ia. Propp has called “wondertale balance.”

From the hero’s departure in search of a bride or fortune to his return, he has either one or three encounters, and each of these consists of a series of predicatives that make up a test. In the fullest case, the hero will first encounter the wicked witch, Baba Yaga, who lives in the thrice-nine tsardom in her unforgettable little hut on cock’s legs. The hero will be tested for his ability to follow instructions and/or demonstrate his command of social manners. He will pass all the tests, and after having been fed, given something to drink, and “steamed” in the bathhouse, he will typically be given some item that will enable him to succeed on his next testing ground. The exception will be when this single episode completes the tale. In “The Swan-Geese” what is lacking just at the beginning is the little boy, who has been kidnapped by the birds. The girl’s testing along the way allows her to rescue her little brother, liquidating the lack, in Propp’s terms, and to return home just in time for her reward: a bun from her parents or grandparents, in some versions of the tale. In many tales, however, there will be two further encounters (never just one more; the wondertale’s balance does not permit that). In such tales the central episode involves the struggle with the villain, any sort of villain. The hero is invariably victorious, but he is never successful of his own accord. He will always need to make use of the magic agent he received from his tester in the first encounter. And if that encounter was in fact a test of manners and learning, the central test is one of arms. He must prove himself the fittest to mate with the tsarevna, for that is what the classical wondertales are about. Not all of these contests with the villain are tests

of physical superiority. Some of them involve outwitting the enemy, often employing techniques that have little to do with the good manners or deportment our hero displayed at the hut of Baba Yaga.

But what if the hero defeats the ogre only to discover that the tsarevna not only does not wish to be rescued but that she is bent on mutilating him or even killing him? Russian tradition knows many such young ladies. Their peculiar behavior is to be explained only in conjunction with the final test, one that typically takes place “back at the palace” and concerns the recognition of the true tsarevich and the unmasking of any possible false heroes. When this test has been performed, there is little left to do: the hero weds the tsarevna, the tsar dies, and he is succeeded by the hero. The reluctance of the daughter is bound up in her knowledge that her marriage to the hero will lead to the death of her father.

There are many variants of this basic structure of the thirty-one predicatives clustered around one or three testing episodes; but, his detractors notwithstanding, Propp’s system has done a great deal to shed light on the wondertales from many different points of view. I have selected a few new approaches that are based on Propp’s work, namely those by Holbek, Meletinskii, and Bremond.

Among the critics, the Danish scholar Bengt Holbek has been one of the most positive, arguing that Propp’s original analysis remains essentially valid even today (Holbek 1987; 1989). In general his concerns really need not detain us here, but his own work may be regarded as a continuation of Propp’s thought to its next logical level. Holbek’s approach is to combine Propp’s analysis with the paradigmatic approach of the Canadian Elli Kōngäs Maranda, which is based on three sets of binary oppositions (Maranda and Maranda 1971). These are sex, age, and social position, seen as oppositions between male and female, younger and older, low-born and high-born. From just these three sets of oppositions Kōngäs Maranda proposed to define all the characters of the wondertales, and Holbek’s research supports that contention.

The Kōngäs Maranda argument differs from Propp’s notably in that the Russian scholar defined his seven spheres of influence by reference to the predicatives he saw underlying the structure of the tale. Kōngäs-Maranda’s scheme is based on semantic notions. Holbek does a masterful job of employing these paradigmatic distinctions to define the roles of the actors in the wondertales. He notes that in tales where the hero is masculine, which can be defined as those where the impetus to action comes from a male character, the lead characters, as Holbek sees them, will inevitably be a low-born young male and a high-born young female, or LYM and HYF. The parents of a low-born male (LAM and LAF) will fill the tale role of donor. When the combination is LYM + LAF or LYF + LAM, then the relationship between

the two tends to be friendly, although there may be sexual overtones. When both the young person and the parent are of the same sex, the relationship is usually hostile. When the tale deals with high-born parents (HAM and HAF), they are the guardians of their children (HYM and HYF), and they are frequently hostile toward low-born interlopers. Some tale types are identified precisely by the relationships among these eight character types.

Yet another way of looking at the structure of the wondertales was proposed by E.M. Meletinskii (1969). Meletinskii established that four criteria were sufficient to distinguish most wondertale types: the Object (a female, a magic agent, or none at all—if the hero is a victim or exile); the opposition Selfless or Selfish with regard to the hero; a “normal” family situation or one in which the hero is persecuted, perhaps by older brothers or a stepmother; and finally the mythological or non-mythological nature of the crucial testing sequence. The dragon-slaying types (A–T 300–303) are characterized by the quest for a female by a selfless hero from an unhappy family and a mythological test in the middle of the tale. They differ therefore from tales like “Tsarevich Ivan, the Firebird, and the Gray Wolf,” only in that the object of the second group is not a female human being but a bird (the marriage to a princess is generally a reward for the hero’s success). If there is no object sought and if the hero is selfish, the family an unhappy one, and a mythological world the nexus for the central test, then the stories are A–T 311, 312, 314, 327, stories featuring children in the clutches of cannibals and witches.

Meletinskii’s proposal was to use his system to study the structure of all the wondertales. He thought that his formula (any particular combination of the four criteria mentioned here) might lead to a different understanding of the dynamics of the wondertale, but he himself never carried the study beyond the initial stages presented in his postscript to the 1969 edition of Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (Propp 1969:134–62). A fuller study of the tales along the lines proposed by Meletinskii might lead in the direction of recovering some of the basic myths that gave rise to the wondertales some centuries ago.

In 1977 the French folklorist Claude Bremond proposed quite a different approach to the structure of the wondertale, or fairy tale as he calls it. Bremond presented an “ethical model” holding that wondertales, with the “optimistic requirement of a happy ending” (1977:49), were structured such that deterioration leads to improvement in condition, merit to reward, and unworthiness to punishment. Thus the plight of the victim leads to an improvement in status; the villain is eventually punished while the hero receives his reward. Although Bremond’s scheme appears to be applicable to the French tales, such a simplification of the materials in the Russian tradition runs the risk of obscuring the corpus of tales themselves.

There are no doubt other attempts to describe the structure of the wondertales, but the above have been the most widely accepted. It is worth noting that, despite its faults, the system proposed by Vladimir Propp is still widely recognized as valid.

### The Age of Wondertales

No one contends that folktales are a modern phenomenon in human society. On the other hand, it is extremely difficult to prove that a given tale is of any great antiquity unless, of course, there is a written record of it. The evidence is strong that Aesop's fables are more than two thousand years old, and the Sanskrit *Panchatantra* is of similar antiquity. There is no evidence that wondertales are of such great antiquity. At this point it is important to stress that wondertales are not myths. They feature real people who, with assistance from a mysterious otherworld figure, perform quite outlandish actions, but these actions and the people who perform them are not part of any religious or mythic system. By and large the people who tell wondertales and their audience know full well that they are fictive. But the subject matter of the wondertales is extremely similar to that of the ancient myths of heroes who rescue maidens from dragons or other monsters: the plots are similar. The structures are similar, too. Writing his *Historical Roots of the Wondertale* (1946), Vladimir Propp was aware that the materials that make up the wondertales are in many instances extremely ancient and found throughout the entire world, but he was careful to refer to the "roots" of the wondertales without suggesting that the Russian wondertales were particularly old.

A major effort to answer the question was undertaken in 1989 by the European Folktale Society, which held a conference in Wilhelmsbad on the theme "How Old Are Our Folktales?" (see Oberfeld 1990). Rainer Wehse (1990) described efforts to date the tales to five thousand years ago through identification of elements of the tales with elements from archaic cultures, ancient rituals, and ancient beliefs. Many of these are in fact the common property of all human beings, but it seems that their significance within a culture may have altered enormously over such immense periods of time just as the actual elements may change.

Nevertheless, it can scarcely be denied that materials from prehistoric times are imbedded in the wondertales. Scholars such as Pierre Saintyves (1923) and Vladimir Propp (1946) amassed an enormous amount of material to prove this.<sup>4</sup> Although Propp's work appeared later, it seems that, probably because he was working in Stalinist Russia, he did not have access to much West European work, and he was forced to approach Saintyves from the ideologically approved position of his day. Propp's book is a logical continu-

ation of his *Morphology of the Folktale*. In that book, which is to be read “action by action,” the wondertale’s structure is seen to reflect a young man’s adventures after he departs from his parents’ home (Propp ignored wondertales about young girls with one or two exceptions). He is tested three times before his reintegration into society takes place: at the little hut in the forest presided over by Baba Yaga, where his mental awareness is proved; either deep in the forest or beyond the thrice-nine tsardom in the thrice-ten tsardom of death, where his physical prowess is established; and finally at the court, where his sexual maturity is tested. Propp knew that the wondertales dealt with the preparations of a young man about sixteen years of age for a rite or rites of passage into manhood, in Russian a combination of puberty and initiation rites, and he also knew that many of those rites were still alive in one form or another in mid-twentieth-century Russia. They had been carefully described by the Russian ethnographers, some of whom had been Propp’s teachers and others his colleagues and contemporaries.

It is too often assumed that by puberty only physical puberty is meant. With regard to the Russian wondertales, it is clear that the physical aspects of the process are of little consequence. As van Gennep pointed out nearly a century ago, this is the case with a great many societies, but, nevertheless, there has long been a tendency to confuse the physical attainment of puberty with initiation rites.<sup>5</sup> In the Russian experience the ritualistic moments in the wondertales may not only reflect rites contemporary to the telling of the tales; they also reflect rites of infancy and childhood. Thus, in the wondertale the hero may receive a new name. This is perhaps analogous to his receiving a new name at eight days old, and then a second in his teenage years, the pattern in many Russian villages even today.

Propp did not date the formation of the wondertales; that has been done by E.A. Tudorovskaia (1965) in a most interesting way. Tudorovskaia noted that the Russian wondertale knows but four kinds of hero and that each occurs in a distinct social milieu. The first of these she terms the archaic. These tales feature a total lack of conflict among humans. The hero acts for his human society as a whole in his struggle against the forces of nature as personified by such figures as Morozko (Frost), Vodianoï (Water spirit or god), or Baba Yaga, the Russian witch who was also guardian of the forest and its animals. Such stories as “Morozko” (A–T 480\*B) and “About the Sea Tsar and Vasilisa the Most Wise” (A–T 313) clearly illustrate the type. Closely related are tales where the hero must obtain something of communal value, such as fire, from a hostile force, usually a witch. Perhaps the hero is sent into the dangerous forest to obtain fire and on the way he or she will encounter natural phenomena personified by men riding on horses of various colors. Alternatively, the hero must guard some precious object from an enemy in-

tent on stealing it—in the tale “The Witch and the Sun’s Sister,” that very same fire (A–T 313J\*). Typically in tales of the archaic type the hero does not actually fight his opponent. Rather, he flees, relying on trickery to succeed against the hostile forces of the natural world. The archaic tales are often set in the forest or some other untamed space, and not in the city. Some of them emphasize ancient rituals that are thought to have gone out of practice before the beginning of the Tatar–Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century. Thus, A–T 502 (see tale no. 281 in Vol. 4, “A Prince and His Uncle”) describes the relationship between a young prince and his “uncle” or foster parent. This is not to say that vestiges of the practice of mentoring did not survive, but it was evidently highly institutionalized among the court nobles in ancient Russia.

The second group of tales features a hero in physical combat with a monster—a gigantic serpent with multiple heads, or the skeletal Koshchei, or perhaps an enemy known by name only and with little or no physical description. In these tales the hero tends to act alone and in his own interests. There is little sense of any social background unless one considers that the hero is often forced to right a wrong done to him. Tales such as “Tsarevich Ivan, the Firebird, and the Gray Wolf” (A–T 550) are good examples of this type. This second type of wondertale is often set at the royal court, where there is a tsar and the hero is most frequently a tsarevich. In none of the tales is there a grand prince or even duke ([*velikii*] *kniaz*’), the title used by the rulers of Kievan and Muscovite Rus to 1547. In that year Ivan IV (the Terrible) became the first tsar of the Russians. Tudorovskaia certainly does not suggest that all these wondertales were composed in the sixteenth century, but this does appear a likely time to begin looking for them, especially when one considers that it was precisely in the sixteenth century that the Christianization of the Russian peasantry reached its greatest intensity and this might have provided some impetus for the creation of different kinds of tales.

Family conflict dominates the third type of wondertales, according to Tudorovskaia. She argues that such tales could not appear in societies organized along clan lines. In these tales a single member of a family, most frequently a young girl, is persecuted by other members of the group, most frequently a stepmother. Many of the tales of the 480 type fit here, especially those dealing with the persecution of the “good” girl and the punishment of the “bad” or naughty stepsister.

The most recent wondertales, which comprise the fourth category, are very much about social conflict. In these tales the hero, often a soldier or a peasant, is socially inferior to the heroine. His opponent may well be an evil tsar, or perhaps a haughty tsarevna. The hero’s task is made more difficult by the intervention of a supernatural force on the side of the opponent. The

latter often ends up siding with the hero, however, tipping the balance in his favor. Within this group of tales Tudorovskaia would place those featuring a hero sent out to perform a task involving a class or social conflict, such as a farm laborer sent out to collect the rents from devils. Frequently the hero is an audacious young man with a handicap. He may be stupid, he may not be able to speak, he may be the third son in a society in which everything is inherited by the first son. The tasks set this young man may be the same as those given the tsarevich, but the world in which he operates is a more complex one. There may be social tensions, although there are no distinct social classes as a rule. This is the kind of world and the kind of hero that appeared in Muscovy in the second half of the seventeenth century, with high adventure and high jinks, the Russian picaresque, where a low-born young man could gamble with his life, win, and prosper.

A variant in this fourth and final stage in the development of the wondertales is focused on tradesmen or other gainfully occupied men. Occasionally these are merchants, or, more accurately, the sons of merchants. More frequently we find soldiers. The soldiers are no longer young; they have been away from their wives for a long time, and here we find a curious fact: they have just completed their term of service in the army, set by Catherine II at twenty-five years. Often their wives have taken other lovers and the plot centers on the soldier's attempts to win back his bride. Sometimes, however, the soldier deserts, is caught and beaten. He runs away again, to another land, one of milk and honey—or, more likely, strong drink.

As Tudorovskaia and others have noted, this fourth kind of tale stands closest to the novella and to the short story, which were to develop in Russia only from the later seventeenth century.

In conclusion, there is no direct evidence of the age of most Russian wondertales, but it is not too much to state that, although their roots may go very deeply into the past, the tales are products of later times. And in the end, a tale is only as old as its particular telling.

### **The Question of Analogues**

The application of Vladimir Propp's structural morphology to folktales around the world established that wondertales are not found in every human culture. They have been found, however, from India and Iran in the east to Ireland and Iceland in the west. Was the distribution of the phenomenon of the wondertales to be explained by their having a common point of origin, by diffusion, or by some creative impulse embedded in the national psyches of many peoples? The existence of similar motifs among cultures geographically distant from each other might easily be explained, but the appearance

of tales so structurally similar as to be indistinguishable is more difficult. In the nineteenth century many scholars in Europe and in Russia as well were convinced that the wondertales were all part of their Indo-European heritage, and indeed it cannot be denied that all languages descendant from ancient Indo-European today possess wondertales of a remarkable similarity. Yet the wondertales themselves, as I have pointed out above, cannot be said to be so very old, suggesting that the Indo-European theory is in need of adjustment.

One who rejected the theory of the Indo-Europeanists was the German scholar Theodor Benfey. Writing about the *Panchatantra* in 1859, Benfey insisted that the European folktale was overwhelmingly derived from India and Indian tradition and that it had fanned out from India through the Near East to Europe and from the Indian heartland eastward throughout Asia. The borrowing across linguistic lines was accomplished by traders and merchants, perhaps soldiers and even slaves, and took place over hundreds of years. In Russia such views were unattractive to those who saw the tales as products of a great Slavic past with a moral and spiritual authority far outshining anything to be found beyond Slavdom's borders. But for half a century or more Benfey's views were extremely prominent in West European thinking.

Early Russian folklorists were attracted to the writings of Wilhelm Grimm and his followers. As early as 1819 Grimm attempted to lay out his theory of the folktale, admitting the possibility of borrowing across national lines while at the same time arguing for the necessity of there being something deep within human cultures that produces time and time again similar narratives. All in all, Grimm advanced arguments that find many adherents even today, albeit in very different form. He argued for the existence of a large body of tales possessed by peoples of Indo-European origin and he also argued that folktales, particularly the wondertales, were in fact derived from discarded myths.

Looking back over the literature devoted to the folktale in the nineteenth century, one is tempted to regard Grimm's statements as among the sanest. Unfortunately, his notion that folktales were the product of diseased myths was particularly productive throughout European universities. Scholars of the "mythological school" found that the folktales, and by that they usually meant the wondertales, were really about astronomical, meteorological, and geographical phenomena dating back to ancient times when men feared and revered thunder, the sun, winds, and rain as gods and goddesses. The most prominent Russian "mythologist" was Aleksandr Afanas'ev, who as collector and compiler of the three-volume *Popular Russian Tales* may be regarded as Russia's equivalent to the Grimm brothers, while as compiler, editor, and author of *Poetic Views of the Slavs on Nature* he was the Russians' Sir James Frazer of *The Golden Bough* (Afanas'ev 1984; 1994). Afanas'ev's views

and those associated with the “mythological school” are no longer regarded seriously but this is not to say that there is no relationship between myths of various kinds and some folktales.

An important trend in wondertale scholarship was inaugurated by the Belgian scholar Arnold van Gennep in 1922. Van Gennep was fascinated by the obvious relationship between rituals and the highly ritualized wondertales. Postulating the universality of certain rituals, which he termed rites of passage, van Gennep suspected that many of the analogous passages in wondertales could be explained by their derivation from rites of similar form, structure, and content. The relationship among concepts such as myth and ritual, tale and custom, is still discussed today, not least by Russian scholars.<sup>6</sup>

The problem of analogues and the interpretation of the tales inspired the psychological or psychoanalytical approaches to the folktale, also dating from the nineteenth century. Both Sigmund Freud and C.J. Jung employed wondertales in everything from dream analysis to the study of trauma. In recent times their work has continued in studies by Marie-Louise von Franz, Joseph Campbell, and Bruno Bettelheim, a number of which directly relate to the wondertale.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the best that one can say about the problem of the analogues is that there is no tidy solution. Unquestionably some of the plots of the wondertales are extremely ancient and may well derive from an Indo-European past. Others are obviously borrowed, either in ancient times or more recently, from travelers and traders who have visited Russia over many centuries. Yet others seem to have developed out of earlier versions and have come to reflect changes in the social milieu that told them and preserved them.

### **The Narrator and the Tale’s Function**

Although the evidence is inconclusive, it appears that in Russia it was the *skomorokhi* (discussed in Vol. 1) who carried the ancient pre-Christian beliefs through the centuries, and one of their vehicles was the wondertale. Certainly until the very end of the eighteenth century wondertales were mostly related by men; indeed, women as narrators of wondertales became common only in the twentieth century. The reasons for this are associated with the function of the tales and the original audience. The evidence suggests that in pre-modern times the tales were told primarily to older boys and young men in all-male audiences. Often these might be the fishing or hunting parties in the far north that lasted for weeks at a time. They were also told at weddings, during the winter holiday period after St. Nicholas’s Day (6 December), or at various feasts. A fact connected to the association of the wondertales with magic and especially magic spells is the complete avoidance of the tales at

certain times of the year, particularly in spring and summer, or before sundown. As I pointed out in Volume 1 (pp. 40–41), in pre-revolutionary Russia it was not uncommon for the gentry or landowners to employ professional tellers of tales, and several of the tsaritsas maintained them at court through the eighteenth century.

It seems likely that narrators of tales were trained by masters of the art. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries much of this training took place at home, with women gradually taking over more and more of the narration. In this century parents and especially grandparents were the sources for tales. As a result the didactic elements in the wondertales were replaced by tales that were socially ambiguous, and thus telling the tales could become a public event.

Some of the storytellers were regarded as virtual magicians and their tales as magic. A number of tales make direct reference to this special regard with which stories and story telling were held, even in the twentieth century. One tale collected by Iurii and Boris Sokolov (Sokolovy 102) from the Belozersk (White Lake) region far north of Moscow<sup>8</sup> combines the ritualistic search for fire with a visit to a solitary old man wearing a fox fur trimmed with marten. The first two brothers fail because they cannot tell a story. In the excerpt below, from the tale “Fact and Fiction,” the third one, Ivan Durachok (the Fool), succeeds and wins the old man’s strange garments and strips of his hide to make a strap and a clasp. He returns to his father and brothers, who are lost in the woods, with the fire.

The third son was Ivan Durachok, the Fool. “You go round there, Vania, and find out why they [the two older brothers] are so long.”

Ivan found the little hut. He went in and there sat the old man in his fox fur with the marten collar. He asked him for some fire: “Grandfather, give me some fire,” he said.

“I’ll give you some fire if you can tell me fact and fiction, but if you don’t do that, I’ll cut a strap from your back and a clasp from your ass.”

“And if I tell you fact and fiction, grandfather, then I’ll take your fox fur, cut a strap from your back, and a clasp from your ass.

“Listen then. A father was walking with his three sons in the forest. They lost their way and could not find their way out to any dwellings. The father sent one of his sons to climb up a spruce tree to look for fire or some dwellings. He saw a little fire and set out after it. Now we are rich folk, we have lots of money. And we live well and we’ve got lots of money saved up. We’ve heard that overseas flies are expensive but cows are cheap. So I caught up a bag full of flies and set off overseas. I sold all the flies there and bought myself some cows. I herded them back to the sea. But the sea hadn’t frozen. There was no way for me to herd the cows over it, but if I

tried to get them to swim, they'd drown. So I took and cut off a pine whorl and shoved it up a cow's ass. I turned it around in there and pulled out a lump of fat on it. I threw it into the sea along with a lot more. So then the sea got hard with the fat and I herded the cows across. There was just the bull left behind. I felt sorry for the bull so I went back over the sea, where I had been. A wind came up. It carried all the fat away. There was no way to drive that bull across. I grabbed hold of the bull by the tail and twisted it right around. Then I flung the bull and it flew right over the sea, and I didn't let go of the tail so I flew across behind him! So I herded the cows home because it was time to feed them. It was haying time. I cut the hay field and it was time to take it in. I made some oat kasha and spread it over the field. Then some ravens flew up and some hawks and began to eat the kasha. They took it to this one spot and with their talons brought all the hay into a stack.

"Then I went after the hay. I harnessed my horse, and loaded up the hay, and set off for home. My cart got stuck in a stream bed. I sent the horse on, but it couldn't budge it. So then I whipped the horse and cut it right in two! I took and skinned this horse, cut the hide into straps, tied one end to the cart and the other I dragged home. It reached to the threshing floor. I tied the other end to the threshing floor and set the threshing barn alight. As the threshing barn burned, the horsehide strap began to shrink and it pulled the cart toward the threshing floor. But then I sensed that the gods in heaven had no boots and I needed to sew them some. So I slaughtered all the cows, skinned them, and cut them out. I made myself a ladder and set off for heaven. I made a little hole and climbed out in heaven. I sewed boots for all the gods and I sewed some boots for all the minor gods. They gave me masses of money for it. So I set off back home. I came to the little hole but the ladder was gone and there was no way for me to get back down. A peasant was burning oats and his threshing floor had no sides to it. So the chaff was being carried right to me. I started grabbing this chaff to braid a rope. I twisted this rope together and let it down through the hole, but it didn't quite reach earth. A wind came up and carried some sand. I grabbed some of the sand and wove it into the rope. Then I grabbed hold of the sand and let down the rope. It reached to the ground and I started letting myself down by the rope. While I had hold of the chaff rope, it held me, but when I started going down with the sand rope, it broke and I fell into a swamp. I sank right into the muck. And then a duck came and she wove a nest right on my head, but then a wolf chanced by, intending to eat up the eggs. He ate an egg and then he started scratching his ass on my teeth. I knew that he'd come to eat the last egg. I stretched and stretched my arms out of the mud. The wolf came to eat the last egg, and when he'd eaten it, he started scratching his ass on my teeth. I grabbed him by the tail and yanked. The wolf leapt up in fright and dragged me out of the muck. I fell down on my

knees and he took off running, I don't know where. So now, take off your fur coat, old man. I told you fact and fiction."

He took the fur coat off the old man, cut out a strap from his back and from his ass a clasp. Then he took some fire and set off to his father.

It is obvious that this tale is told in the manner of the medieval *skomoroshina*. The story is meant to be regarded as comic nonsense but it contains some deeply archaic materials that, in this case, have to do with the attitude of the Russian audience toward the tales themselves. The old man living alone in the woods, dressed in this strange garb of fox fur trimmed with marten, is the keeper of fire and apparently of other secrets as well. Many of the versions surviving in the Russian corpus feature the telling of stories in the woods in return for magic fire or a magic horse. A high percentage of these are wondertales. The final episode where the wolf pulls the lad out of a swamp is reminiscent of a very ancient theme. This "Cosmogonic Dive," as Mircea Eliade called it (1972:76–130), is known throughout most of the world. In many of the European versions a god forces an angel (or devil) to dive from heaven to the bottom of the sea and fetch up mud or earth from which the god proposes to create the earth. In the Russian variants a duck features prominently, sometimes even preceding the god and the devil in the story, although in other versions serving as the devil himself.

In A–T 552A the magic horse races away from the Russian witch:

Then he whinnied, stamped his legs and set off to catch up to Ivan Tsarevich. She got into her mortar and chased after him with her pestle. The horse got there first. "Well, Ivan Tsarevich, a rumor is spreading throughout the land that Yega Yegishna is after you. Wave your kerchief."

He waved the kerchief and a fiery river appeared. He managed to get away. "Now, where, Ivan Tsarevich? What is our destination?"

"We are headed for the ocean-sea. In the sea and in the ocean there is an oak, and beneath that oak is a trunk, and in the trunk is a hare, and in the hare a duck, and in the duck an egg. We must obtain that egg."

By the time he had managed to say all that, they had appeared there. The good horse tore out the oak and Ivan Tsarevich broke open the trunk. But the longears ran away into the forest. Suddenly out of nowhere appeared the bear—she had caught the hare and she brought it to him. So he killed the hare and took out the duck. He slaughtered the duck and took out the egg. He started rinsing it in the sea, but it slipped away. So the pike brought it back to him.

He wrapped it in his kerchief and said, "Now, take me to such and such a place."

He hadn't had time to turn about when he was there. Maria Marevna,

the Princess with the Pouch, met him. There was no point in their talking at length, so they got on the horse and rode away. Kashshei the Immortal came flying after them.

“Where is Maria Marevna, the Princess with the Pouch?”

“Ivan Tsarevich has carried her away.”

“Oh, those sons of bitches, those brothers-in-law have brought him to life. Go and ask my good horse when I need to set off to catch up to them.”

His good horse said, “Quickly, get on and we’ll see what we can do.”

They chased after them, and [Ivan’s] horse said, “Well, Ivan Tsarevich, only a little time remains. Kashshei the Immortal is nearby. It is time to hoist the egg.”

As Kashshei came nearer, Ivan Tsarevich raised the egg, and Kashshei began to die. One brother horse said to the other, “Wait, stop!” But Ivan Tsarevich took the egg, got up, and crushed it. Kashshei fell from his horse. So Ivan Tsarevich burned him, scattered the ashes, he all went up in smoke, and our tale resolved itself with that.

This tale is an interesting variant of the Sokolovs’ tale, but in this instance the “hero” of the story within the story falls from heaven into a swamp or pit of mud and he is stuck there. A duck comes along and builds her nest on top of his head. When a wolf steals the duck eggs, the hero manages to grab onto the wolf’s tail and the wolf frees him from the swamp. The abrupt ending to this story suggests that there was a continuation, but other versions of the story are equally incomplete. Suffice it to say that in both stories there are echoes of a Slavic creation myth that involves a cosmic egg laid by a diving duck. That some of these wondertales contain equally ancient mythic materials in the guise of “mere stories” can scarcely be doubted.

The attitude of the narrator to his wondertales is not always easy to know. Certainly most of the twentieth-century tale tellers were unwilling to argue for the veracity of all aspects of their tales, but caveats were recorded. Some said that although incidents related in the tales were unlikely, nonetheless they had been told the tales by their grandparents, and “why would the old folks start fibbing?” (see Vol. 1:5–6). There is a sense in which the wondertales repeat the old verities, however. The girl will be tested for her kindness and thoughtfulness, and her ability to follow the traditional patterns of life. Her adversaries are all from the men’s world, including the witch Baba Yaga and her lecherous male relatives. The hero must be willing to leave the comforts of home and mother and venture into the woods where he will be tested. He must dare to succeed, must remain alert and awake, and rely only on what he has earned the right to use. For the young men and women who succeed, the rewards are great. For the girls there is usually the wealth that becomes her dowry and thus her means to marriage. For the boy there is recognition as a

man and status in the community (either as a married man or a landowner, or both). Both boys and girls will experience their being part of the natural world, which is not without its terrors, but they will find the whole series of encounters a necessary part of growing up.

In reading the Russian wondertales one soon becomes aware of the differences an accomplished narrator makes. In some wondertales there is a poetic diction, a grand manner of delivery, while in others the narrator seems keen to finish and go on to something else. Several tales are truncated. Either the narrator has forgotten the tale—for any number of reasons—or perhaps the narration has been interrupted by something from outside, such as a knock at the door!

### **The Actors in the Russian Wondertale**

There are only a few classes of actors in the Russian wondertales. The only one who is absolutely essential is the hero or heroine, for the wondertale is utterly hero-centric. As Propp demonstrated in his work of 1928, and as others have reiterated, all actions in the wondertales take place in relation to the hero (Meletinskii et al. 1969:115–18). Frequently the hero will share much of the central act of the tale with an anti-hero, or, as Propp terms him, a false hero. In stories with a male hero one often encounters two older brothers who serve as the foil to the hero. Alternatively, a false hero might use a disguise and present himself as the hero at court, only to be unmasked in the nick of time. One of the more common tales, classified as A–T 480, features a heroine. In these, the heroine is the innocent young daughter of a widower who remarries. The stepmother seeks to destroy the girl while showering favors on her own, thoroughly spoiled, daughter. In these tales, the second girl is a polar opposite to the heroine, and, although she is confronted with all the same tests, she fails them miserably.

Because of his frequent appearance in the most popular wondertales, one might regard the tsarevich as the typical hero. He is certainly not the only hero, however. One encounters soldiers, fishermen and hunters, merchants' sons and peasants' sons, the sons of destitute widows, and the much-loved fool who prefers to occupy his time lying on the great Russian stove, swatting flies. There are some tales where the hero is juxtaposed to a cruel stepmother with magical powers. Social background is not the determining factor in these Russian wondertales. What these heroes all share is the quality of being underdogs. Each one must struggle through to win the rewards for success given at the end. The tsarevich's royal background is not necessarily an aid to him in his struggle with the nine-headed serpent. Nor is he the only hero who must confront a serpent or other fierce beast. Whether physically

incapacitated or lazy, most of the heroes encounter such dangers and all of them succeed.

The number of tales featuring heroines is limited in the Russian tradition. My list numbers only twenty-six types versus about two hundred with heroes.<sup>9</sup> Nearly all of these heroine-centered tales are set in a broken family, most typically a daughter and her father, and a stepmother and her daughter. Alternatively, one encounters a number of stories with the theme of incest. A boy is “ordered” to marry his sister, or a father or uncle seems destined to marry the daughter or niece. Some of these stories tend toward the gruesome but in the end the heroine of course receives her reward. Often that is a dowry, a necessary prelude to marriage in old Russia, but sometimes she actually marries at the conclusion of the tale.

There is also the heroine who corresponds to the well-known maidens of western wondertales such as Rose Red, Snow White, or Sleeping Beauty. Although the narrator often builds the story around these attractive figures, analysis shows that the heroines really do very little in the tales to direct their own destiny. They serve primarily as the object of the hero’s quest. In the Russian wondertales there are fewer such maidens than in the western wondertales and their characters are less vividly drawn, the narrative focus being on the young man. But still, Elena the Beautiful or Most Wise, Vasilisa the Beautiful or Most Wise, and Nastasia of the Golden Tresses are Russian maidens who fall into this heroine group. A maid such as Cinderella is different in that she is in dire need of rescue by the hero, but nonetheless she is in fact nothing more than the prince’s object.

It is not necessary for there to be a villain in Russian wondertales. Indeed, one can be sure of encountering an honest-to-goodness villain only in tales with three testing sequences of the hero. The villain will always appear in the second test. Nor is there invariably only one villain or one kind of villain. Some villains are mythological figures embodying the terrifying forces of the natural world: frost and whirlwinds, for instance. Because of their roles as progenitors and potential mates, bears appear in the role, especially in tales featuring heroines. Wolves, oddly, do not. Their role in the wondertales is quite different.

Two villains stand out: the serpent and Koshchei the Deathless. The serpent was described by an informant (an eyewitness, no doubt) from Saratov: “He is black, with the girth of a barrel. He’s two *sazhens* [four and a half meters] long, with an enormous human head. He sits on a curled-up tail and talks in a human voice but you can’t understand him” (Vlasova 1995:153).

This serpent occasionally breathes fire, but certainly his most notable feature in the wondertales is his multiple heads—3, 6, 9, or even 12. The hero dispatches these in multiples of three and with consummate ease. Often he

burns the corpse (as he will burn the skins of maidens transformed into swans by an evil force, or as his own frog skin will be burned to free him from a spell). Fire as a purgative is highly regarded by the Slavs and this explains its association with a number of rituals as well as its appearance in verbal texts (see above, “Fact and Fiction”).

Serpents come in two varieties—male and female. If the serpent (not a dragon) is in pursuit of a tsarevna or princesses for amorous reasons, the hero will confront a male serpent. But occasionally the serpent protects a brood of little serpents, and the hero is in conflict with a female serpent. Here he often compromises and does not kill the serpent. The males are always killed, although not necessarily immediately.

The serpent is not without defenses. He or she threatens to devour the hero or pound him into the ground! It should be noted that neither of these catastrophes has ever taken place in a Russian wondertale.

The wondertales are associated with water (lakes or rivers) and with mountains, which appear in the tales just as they are in the heroic epics or *byliny*. They clearly fly but there is no mention of wings. Some of them have patronymics, usually Gorynich, which suggests fire, but they are not prominently fire-breathing serpents. Some serpents have sisters. These turn out to pursue the hero after he has killed the villain, thus retarding the narrative.

The hero has two potent weapons: his sword and his horse. With the sword he slices off the serpent’s heads. His horse not only tramples little serpents, he also alerts the hero if he should fall asleep in the thrice-ten land of the dead, which is the abode of the serpent. Of course, the horse is also the most common vehicle to and from that ultimate testing ground. (Though not the only one: the wolf is a vehicle for the hero in a few stories, and there is one Siberian story in which the hero is transported across an enormous body of water by a beaver!)

Koshchei the Deathless is a more complicated figure. It is clear from the stories in which he figures as villain that he is a skeleton, that he flies, or perhaps he rides a flying horse that has only three legs, that he kidnaps women, and that the secret of his mortality is to be found “in a certain place [where] there stands an oak, and beneath the oak is a casket; in the casket is a hare, in the hare is a duck, in the duck is an egg, and in the egg is [my] death” (Afanas’ev 156; A–T 302<sub>1</sub> + 301). So on the one hand Koshchei is said to be a skeleton, but “without death,” or *Bessmertnyi*, while at the same time his mortality is contained in a duck’s egg. This peculiarity may in fact reflect widespread Russian, and Slavic in general, beliefs in the separate existence of the soul, beliefs that continue to the present time. The fact that, historically speaking, the image is derived from a pre-Christian creation myth and some equally ancient myths about a god of the underworld (*koshchiuny*)

does not explain the figure of Koshchei in Russian wondertales.<sup>10</sup> Like the serpent, Koshchei is a composite villain, Death with some Russian twists.

The most familiar of the Russian otherworld figures is certainly the witch, Baba Yaga. Actually, there are a number of variants to her name. In the north she is commonly known as Yegibishna. Russian folklorists have identified her with an ancient goddess of death, while Propp argued that she was distantly related to the ancient Hindu mistress of the forest. She lives in a tiny hut on cock's legs deep in the thrice-nine forest. This hut is capable of turning around. The witch is a frightening apparition. She has one skeletal leg and the other is made of excrement. She is blind and lies on her cot or on the ninth brick of her stove with her long, pointed nose stuck in the ceiling. She propels herself through the air riding in a mortar with a pestle tucked between her legs and with her broom she sweeps away her traces. Like her English counterpart she has an acute sense of smell. At the approach of Ivan or Masha she will shriek "Phoo! Phoo! Phoo! It reeks of a Russian one!"

Masha and any little children are definitely in a dangerous situation. Many of the A-T 480 tales are replete with dismembered girls and small children, barrels of their blood and severed heads. Ivan, however, may well be frightened by Baba Yaga, but she does nothing more than threaten him. She is absolutely essential for the success of his quest, and, whether she likes it or not, she will end up aiding him. She is in fact the guardian to the thrice-ten kingdom, the kingdom of the dead, or the underworld. Thus, she presides over the youth's initiation into manhood, which is seen as a journey to the land of the dead and back.

There is another denizen of the forest who will guide the hero on his way. This is the Old Man, probably identical to the Leshii or forest spirit. His function in the tale is to give the raw youth instruction. In one Olonets tale the youth's father clearly states it. "I thought it over and then decided to give him [the youth] to grandfather Leshii to be taught." The Leshii is also clearly in charge of the forest and the creatures who live there. Sometimes he is accompanied by a pack of wolves. One story from the Vologda district tells of a Leshii who would occasionally drop into a wayside tavern, drink a bucket of vodka, and then continue on driving his pack of wolves down the forest track (Pomerantseva 1975:29). There are many references to the Leshii's substituting for the devil (or vice versa) in such curses as "May the forest spirit [lesnoi] take you!"

The Leshii appears in a number of forms. Sometimes he is a giant with stars for his eyes and as he walks he causes the wind to blow. But he can also be dwarf size, the size of a mushroom as one tale has it. One curious reference suggests that he is capable of inverse perspective: at a distance he is huge but up close he is small! He is always a hairy creature and sometimes

his hair and beard are even “forest green.” Another text insists that he is covered over with moss.

The Leshii is a shape-shifter, appearing as various birds of the forest, even a calf, and, most significantly, a bear, who, like the Leshii, is also regarded as the “tsar of the forest.” Sometimes the Leshii is said to be married and even to have children. Of his wife it is said that she is a “fallen” maiden or a cursed woman, and his children are invariably cursed. Often they are the peasant children who have been stolen. One story tells of a village woman who is forced to attend the Leshii’s wife during childbirth.

The Leshii lives in or near the forest, but sometimes he inhabits the swamps, while other times he has an enormous palace. He and his comrades, the serpents and beasts who live in the forest, celebrate 27 September as their festival day, and peasants traditionally avoided venturing into the forests on that day for fear of meeting them. Encounters with the Leshii are not thought to be fatal to the peasant, however. The Leshii are more likely to frighten human beings, or to cause them to lose their way. Fortunately, there are some sure ways to drive them away: prayer alternating with the “mother curse,” and the application of salt and fire (Vlasova 1995:203–13).

The members of the older generation, the hero’s or heroine’s parents, play an important role in the wondertale, but it is invariably passive. As parents they often make an admonition to their son and then promptly die. The son is thus given impetus to depart on his quest. Sometimes when the tsar is the father and he is perplexed by a problem, he will send off his son or sons on a quest. This type of tale is unusual in that the hero will actually return to his ancestral home for the reward he then receives from a living father. In the majority of Russian tales the hero does not return to his own home but rather to that of the princess he rescues.

The social status of the parents makes little difference to the outcome of the tale. The hero is bound to succeed. Nor does marital status play any role. It appears that in cases where the aged parents are poor, they die almost simultaneously, and this is the case with the royal figures as well. In a large number of tales the hero’s mother is a widow, and it is the hero’s desire to alleviate the household’s poverty that propels the hero into action. Mention has already been made of tales where a widower and his kind and beautiful daughter find themselves in a household with a nasty widow and her boorish daughter. In absolutely all such tales the kind daughter of the widower will succeed in her tasks and win rich rewards, while the boorish daughter of the widow fails at all tasks and is penalized, sometimes even with death.

If the hero encounters a parental figure at the end of the tale who is not in fact his own father, then this figure will always be the father of the bride and bestower of rewards on the successful hero.

This brief overview does not exhaust the personae of the wondertale by any means. One will meet such figures as “Nikto,” equivalent to the unseen “Mr. Nobody” who hides keys, steals hot cookies while mother isn’t looking, or perhaps drops a dish. Russian mythology knows the Domovoi or household spirit and Mr. Nikto is perhaps a mild, much reduced in stature, relative of that ubiquitous spirit, who is very much alive in Russia even today. A number of giants come to the aid of the hero: Storm Warrior (Buria-bogatyr’), Young Man of Steel (Bulat). And there is the nasty dwarf: the Thumb-Sized Man with the beard long enough to trip him up at just the right moment. The remarkable thing about the characters in the Russian wondertales is how little variation one encounters among the hundreds of tales from such a vast area.

### **What the Wondertales Might Mean**

One should be wary of any attempt to characterize the Russian wondertales as a whole, but I would like to suggest that there are essentially three types, each with its own possible interpretation. In general, the meaning of each type is derived from its traditional function in the peasant society. Sometimes it is only certain particular features of a tale that allow us to classify it within an overall type and thus understand its meaning. For example, there is no question that all the tales belonging to the type A–T 480 are related by structure, but within that group one must differentiate between the ages of the female protagonists and the likely outcome of the story to arrive at a probable interpretation.

The first group of wondertales is small, consisting of tales that structurally resemble the classical wondertales with one major difference: the central characters are children and they undergo no transformation, without which the wondertale is really incomplete. These children’s tales are perhaps best named *cautionary* tales. The outstanding example in this collection is A–T 480A\*, “The Swan-Geese,” no. 117, or “The Little Boy at the Witch’s,” no. 118. As in most wondertales, the story begins with an admonition given by the elders to the children. The little girl is to watch her little brother and guard him from harm. In wondertales the admonition is given only to be disregarded, and she is easily distracted and the little brother is soon carried away to the house of the evil witch. His guilty sister sets out to rescue him. Her arrogance makes it difficult for her to answer the riddles set her along the way and only a good deed permits her to find brother Ivashka. The return is more successful as she now answers the questions. But she returns no different than she was when she set off to right her failure to look after her little brother. The point of such tales seems twofold: to teach obedience and to warn against premature ventures into the woods.

In the second group of wondertales the chief actor in the tale is a girl of marriageable age. These tales provide information about the ritual life of young women in Old Russia: many of them deal with aspects of the peasant wedding, but certainly not all of them. Recall that in A–T 480A\* (The Swan-Geese), the little girl is disobedient and pays for it dearly until she learns to respect the rules of the “natural world.” Her punishment, however, is hardly of an enduring sort when compared to that of the older girls in group two. A related tale, A–T 480B\* (Vasilisa the Beautiful), depicts a household where the fire has gone out and the teenage daughter, Vasilisa, is sent to fetch “new” fire, a ritual activity usually performed on the first of September. In the forest she encounters three horsemen, one dressed in white on a white horse, one dressed in red on a red horse, and one dressed in dark brown on a dark brown horse. Each warns Vasilisa not to persist in going to “the lout” (in some versions, Baba Yaga). She continues on and is ghoulishly murdered and eaten.

In the 480 category there are many tales in Russian in which there are a pair of stepsisters. In these tales only one of the pair is successful. They all feature the stepmother or mother sending two girls into the forest and a testing sequence that is the equivalent of the young boy’s first test. His second (fight with the serpent, beast, or champion) and third (recognition as marriage partner) would be inappropriate for a young girl. Abandoned in the forest, the girls may be tested in their ability to make porridge, their kindness to a mouse, and their ability to play games with a bear (see Vol. 1:58–59). Failure to win will cost the girl her life. If she wins, she will have a successful wedding. Indeed, the girl often returns to her father and stepmother with a casket of gold, as fitting a dowry as could be imagined. (As for the bear, in many parts of Russia the bride and groom were actually known as the he-bear and she-bear.) Alternatively, the “nice” girl may be forced to descend into the underworld to fetch a lost object, frequently her spindle or something else associated with “women’s work.” In any case, she will be tested in several ways and then she will invariably receive a fine reward, often a chest of gold or money. She will eventually find her way back home, to the consternation of the stepmother. The latter will inevitably be envious of the rewards her stepdaughter has obtained and thus she will send her own daughter on the same quest. But the stepmother’s daughter is rude and disobedient and she fails at every task. She may be eaten by a bear, burned by fire, or simply sent home in disgrace, but she receives no reward. Her well-behaved and mature stepsister may now marry, while the disgraced daughter never does. A clearer contrast could not be made.

And what of the stepmother? Her presence in so many wondertales can hardly be explained from the actual frequency with which stepmothers were

encountered in the peasant life of Russia of any era. Nor, of course, are all stepmothers “wicked”! Indeed, the figure of the wicked stepmother is restricted in Russian folk tradition to the character of a very few wondertale types. Jacqueline Schechtman, who knew nothing of the Russian tales, recognized that the stepmother of the West European wondertale has nothing at all to do with real stepmothers (1993:xviii), but then she went on to find the archetypal “wicked” stepmother in feminine figures of loss and bereavement, especially loss of beauty that comes with aging. She sees the relationship between the “stepmother” and the “stepdaughter” in terms of sexual rivalry and economic instability between mother and natural daughter, with husband and father providing the point of the rivalry.

There is, I believe, another candidate who fits the paradigm of the wondertale stepmother: the mother-in-law. There is little doubt that well into the nineteenth century the bride’s mother-in-law played a dominant and dominating role in her life. From the time when the future mother-in-law examined the prospective bride for her physical wholeness and haggled over the dowry, the mother-in-law made the decisions. If all went well and the weddings (church and traditional) took place, then the bride was expected to join her husband’s mother’s household. Here she would be treated as a very junior member of the kitchen staff, abused by her mother-in-law in far too many instances, and by her sisters-in-law as well. That was not her only concern. She had constantly to be alert for the predatory advances of her father-in-law, brothers-in-law, and uncles. This is attested to by many folktales and folk songs. If the wicked stepmother of the wondertale were in fact to represent the mother-in-law, then the message of these four hundred eighty tales becomes clear: obey the rules you encounter upon leaving your mother’s house and you will enjoy success in your new life. Insist on following the rules of your traditional household and you are bound to fail in your new surroundings.

It is not surprising that flight or disappearance is a major concern in tales where girls are the chief actors. This is a theme also met in lyrical songs. It is usually connected with incest, which is a theme unknown in tales with masculine heroes. Three male figures are encountered: the girl’s father, her uncle, and her brother. In her attempts to avoid “marriage” to the forbidden relative, the girl often disappears into the underworld. This then triggers the quest of the true hero. A good example is tale no. 177, “Prince Danila Govorila,” A–T 327A. In some of these strange and unsettling tales the girl is unable to avoid marriage to the relative, even though she undertakes to disappear in some very ingenious ways. The meaning of the stories could not, in any case, be expressed more clearly.

Many of the western wondertales have undergone a shift in narrative focus from the hero to the beautiful but utterly incapable (and usually supine)

maiden, and the English reader can be excused from failing to recognize the Russian analogues to familiar stories. The Russian equivalents of the popular Western wondertales are all here. “Cinderella” (Zamarashka, Zolushka) is 510A, “Snow White” is 709, “Beauty and the Beast” is 425C, and so on. Naturally, only the type is the same; the actual tale will vary in significant ways.

Although Russian wondertales do not end “and they lived happily ever after,” as so many in the English tradition do, marriage is the goal of both the tales focusing on a teenaged girl and those focusing on a teenaged boy. There is ample evidence from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that in the Russian village the process of growing up was regulated by social custom and ritual as far as possible. V.Ia. Propp could have found all the evidence right in the Russian countryside in support of his theory that the wondertales were derived from rituals, particularly those relating to puberty and marriage. This is therefore an appropriate moment to discuss the wedding rite or *svad'ba* as it took place in the nineteenth century, as aspects of it elucidate so many of the Russian wondertales in both groups two and three.

Although in the Muscovite period peasant weddings tended to be arranged affairs, as, of course, were those of the nobility and the court, in more modern times the boy and girl had considerable say in the final decision. Prior to actual courtship both young men and young women socialized primarily within groups of the same sex, groups in which the age ranged from early puberty to marriage. The older boys, especially, were charged with mentoring the younger boys in matters of social deportment. Social mixing of the sexes took place at holidays and on ritual occasions (Bernshtam 1998; Eremina 1991; Morozov 1998).

In nearly all regions of Russia females married earlier than males, often by three or four years. The peasant wedding was conducted over a rather long period of time, from several weeks to several months. When a young man and young woman decided to marry, female representatives from either side (the two mothers and typically two aunts) began the courtship rituals. The groom's party visited the prospective bride to ascertain the suitability of the bride—her physical health and economic well-being. As a result of this an agreement was drawn up and signed. The dowry was the major element in this. The date of the wedding was also agreed. This was not so difficult.

There were in fact few periods in the year when custom and the church allowed marriages. The period after St. Nicholas (6 December) was the most popular, but Shrovetide, Trinity, and All Saints days, Midsummer (Kupala, on 24 June), and St. Peter's (29 June) were also frequently chosen. Weddings during periods of church fasts or when there was heavy field work to be done were prohibited either by canon law or by local custom.

Once the date had been chosen, the bride began to prepare her trousseau and the groom to organize the *poezd* or train that would enact the major portions of the three-day ceremony. The girls gathered together to embroider the *shirinka*, hand towels or cloth, and to complete the *sarafan* and head dress that were obligatory in any wedding.

The groom's father usually provided horses for the *svad'ba*, the number depending on his economic status and the size of the wedding. The groom, now known as "young prince" or jocularly as "bear cub," would ride one horse, his best man a second, and there would be horses for his younger brothers, including cousins, and best friends. All this merry band was a survival from ancient days of bride stealing, but also a reflection of royal weddings.

Three days before the wedding, the "young princess" or "female bear cub" retired behind a curtain in her hut, dressed in sack cloth. From then until the beginning of the wedding she was considered to be dead, or in the underworld, undergoing the transformation from maiden to bride-to-be. She became a *nevesta*, unknown because dead. Her family and any guests referred to her in the past tense, and her girl friends sang the sad lamentations characteristic of the funeral.

The men appeared at a given time to "demand" the bedframe, and finally they all trooped into the bride's hut to purchase the bride, which they did for a pittance, and then there followed some ribaldry and play, usually involving the bride's youngest brother. The bedstead was taken to the groom's house, where in most cases he and the bride would begin their married life under the watchful eyes of his mother. There the groom's female relatives arranged the nuptial chamber. When all was ready, the room was sealed by the chamberlain (*postel'nichii*), often the groom's maternal uncle.

On the wedding day the young prince and his best man rode on their horses accompanied by a sleigh—regardless of the weather or season—to the bride's house. The sleigh figures in the earliest descriptions of weddings and funerals, from tenth- and eleventh-century sources. It was considered the ideal vehicle for rites of passage, which the wedding surely was. The bride, dressed in her best, with red, yellow, and green predominating, and accompanied by her own best man, and the groom rode to the church where they were married in the rite known as the *venchanie* or wreathing. There is evidence that this church ritual was performed at the insistence of the church and secular authorities and that the peasant youth regarded only the *svad'ba* as necessary.

For the rest of the day of the wedding the young prince and princess were feted, first at his house then at hers, dancing, eating, and drinking with friends and relatives alike. Finally, in the evening, the couple was led to the bed

chamber, where the wedding was consummated and that fact announced to one and all.

The second day featured the ritual baths of both groom and bride, but separately. On this occasion it was customary for the groom to give presents to the bride, usually utensils associated either with the bath or with the kitchen and commonly of copper.

Finally, on the third day, both families feasted together and by the end of the day the wedding was over. With its mixture of modern and archaic elements, and with the rituals of the funeral thoroughly combined with those of the wedding, the Russian *svad'ba* was an extraordinary affair, one that in some places is still being performed at the beginning of the twenty-first century.<sup>11</sup>

The third group of wondertales, the most numerous, contains tales where the chief actor is a young man who is a bachelor or an older man who has been away from home for many (twenty-five) years in service to the tsar. When one compares the beginnings of the wondertales with their ends, one discovers that in most cases a traditional family situation has been disrupted, or soon will be disrupted, either by death or by some other loss. In the end an “unexpected” young man will have emerged to claim a bride, a tsar’s throne and thus status, or riches. The beginning and the end are linked by the quest of that young man.

He sets off down a narrow path with no idea of his ultimate destination. In the course of his journey he will venture into a strange forest, often termed the “thrice-nine tsardom,” cross some formidable barrier into the thrice-ten tsardom of Death, and eventually return to human society, although rarely to the one he left. There are, of course, many variations.

In “Maria Morevna” he merely sets off to visit his three married sisters and quite out of the blue he meets and marries a bride from the otherworld whose injunctions he cannot at first obey, thus setting the scene for his own journeys to the thrice-nine and then thrice-ten tsardoms. He loses his bride to Koshchei the Deathless on account of his own inability to carry out orders, and so must visit the forest of Baba Yaga in search of a mighty warhorse that will enable him to outwit Koshchei and rescue his wife, Maria Morevna. He has some highly suspect dealings with a number of animals before he arrives at the witch’s hut. These turn out to be his helpers in performing the task Baba Yaga sets him, which is to herd her mares for three days. Although she hinders Ivan Tsarevich in every way, the mares are herded, and he takes the promised horse, in reality a mangy colt, and sets off for the thrice-ten tsardom. He flies, over a fiery river on the little colt, who has now become a warhorse, leaving the witch to plunge into the flames and perish, at least for the remainder of this tale. In this instance he manages to defeat Koshchei the Deathless, even destroy him, and he and his otherworldly wife return, but to no recognizable location.

As in “Maria Morevna,” there will be either one or three points in the third group of wondertales in which the hero is tested. At the witch’s hut he is given myriad strange tasks to perform and equally strange questions or riddles to answer to test his sociability and his knowledge of the social “catchism.” In the thrice-ten tsardom his strength and virility are tested, either in battle with the villain or in overcoming the reluctance of the maiden to give herself to him. Finally, at the court of a prospective father-in-law, he proves his suitability to be the tsar’s heir. In the overwhelming majority of cases he will then quickly marry and accept society’s obligations.

The purpose of the testing sequences is clearly to prepare the young man for integration into the society as a fully qualified adult. The lessons he is supposed to learn in the woods, as it were, are vigilance, courage, devotion, acceptance of his surroundings, willingness to take advice, the importance of cooperation, and altruism. None need fail and in fact none does fail, from lazybones on the stove, to a lad crippled since birth, to the son of some unlikely half-human and half-animal union. But noting these obvious features of the wondertale raises another question: is this the interpretation given the tales by the nineteenth-century peasants who enjoyed them in their natural setting? It is one thing for scholars or psychologists to decide the meaning of the tales but quite another to attribute that meaning to the tellers of tales and their audiences. I doubt very much that Russian peasants ever believed that young men went out slaying dragons. I am quite sure that Russian peasants knew very well that Baba Yaga was not a denizen of the Russian forest, much less of the Russian steppe, which is not to state that she did not play a role in some long-lost rite. If Koshchei is in some sense to be derived from an ancient pre-Christian religious system, his figure is reduced in the tales to a figure representing death and evil but there is certainly nothing of the negative divinity he might once have been. The Russian peasant seems to have accepted almost without question what the more sophisticated reader of the tales finds doubtful, uncertain, preposterous, and even irritatingly naive. This is not to say that he failed to find meaning in the tales. I am convinced that he found deep moral significance in them, something that goes deeper than the mere surface meaning attributed to him by scholars who have never experienced the totality of peasant life. Perhaps, in assuming a certain naivety on the part of the Russian peasant, the Western reader has failed to find the truth: that the truth and the pleasure of the Russian wondertale are in the understanding.

## Notes

1. Khudiakov 21, recorded in Mishino, Zarsk District. Cf. tale no. 251 in Vol. 3.
2. The title “Prince Ivan and the Firebird” is closely associated with the ballet by

Igor Stravinsky, but Ida Zeitlin's version (1926) is "Ivan Tsarevitch and the Gray Wolf." Afanas'ev's version combines them: "Ivan Tsarevich, the Firebird, and the Gray Wolf."

3. For a listing of the thirty-one functions see Propp 1990:149–55.

4. Saintyves's books are readily available in French. That of Propp is available in the original Russian (1946, reprint 1986) and in translations into German, Italian, Spanish, and French.

5. Van Gennep (1960:10–11) subdivides the rites of passage into rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation.

6. The translator of Grimms' folktales and several studies on the West European tradition, Jack Zipes, has offered a neo-Marxist (or perhaps a Marx-without-Engels) interpretation of the wondertale ringing with class warfare but shunning historical analysis that might take him beyond the peoples who in one way or another were affected by the Italian Renaissance. His provocative study *Fairy Tale as Myth. Myth as Fairy Tale* (1994) considers the impact the West European tales have had on American culture and includes a long, vitriolic, and highly amusing dissection (pp. 96–118) of Robert Bly's 1990 bestseller *Iron John: A Book About Men*. The reader will find herein the Russian equivalent of "Iron John" as tale no. 281, "A Prince and His Uncle." In general, had the Slavic analogues of this tale been known to Bly and Zipes, they might have seen that interpretations of the tale other than either of theirs are suggested.

7. See, for instance, Marie-Louise von Franz, *Interpretation of Fairytales* (1982), and *Shadow and Evil in Fairytales* (1980); Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949); and Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (1989). Certainly the most interesting recent work on the Russian wondertales using the theories of Freud is that by Andreas R.B. Johns. See his Ph.D. dissertation, "Baba Iaga, the Ambiguous Mother of the Russian Folktale," and related article, "Baba Iaga and the Russian Mother" (Johns 1996; 1998).

8. Narrated by Dmitrii Kirillovich Sirotkin, about sixty, from the village of Rogovskaia.

9. A–T types with females as heroes (including some not covered in this volume): 313C, 313E\*, 403, 403A\*, 480\*B, 480\*C, 480\*, 480A\*, 480A\*\*, 480B\*, 480C\*\*, 510A, 510B, 510B\*, 511, 706, 709, 712, 875, 875E\*, 875\*, 875\*\*, 883A, 883A\*, 883A\*, 883A\*\*\*, 883A\*\*\*\*, 883B.

10. Note the modern Russian *koshchunstvo* = blasphemy.

11. For a depiction of the sixteenth-century wedding see Kolesov 1985.

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