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The Russian Folktale by Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp (review)

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values, and formed their own strategies. Their habitus, or manners of behavior and thinking that they acquired from birth in a particular setting, did not prevent them from creating their own stories. And these stories, often widespread tale types in Europe, became their own ecotypes or variants that indicated something special about the storytellers and their environment. Hopkin uses performance theory in each chapter to distinguish what is historically significant in the tales told and collected in different regions of France in about the same time period.

For Hopkin the tales told, songs sung, and riddles created were social and historical acts connected to a particular location and time. Thanks to his exhaustive research, his careful and original use of methods from folklore and history, and his insistence that voices from below must be heard if we are to grasp the intricacies of social and cultural history, we can now gain a better understanding of the diverse aspects of national cultures and how we have stereotyped the folk, peasantry, and even the sovereign classes of imagined nation-states.

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The Russian Folktale. By Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp. Edited and translated by Sibelan Forrester. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012. 416 pp.

After the Grimms and their successors in the nineteenth century discovered how many folktales were being told in all languages, they realized that “the folk” had an incalculably enormous memory for stories. How were computerless scholars to handle this huge mass? As one answer, Finnish scholars invented a system known as tale types, which catalog up to 2,400 recurrent plots. A more attractive answer, if you did not want to spend your life tracing the versions and variants of a single plot, was the discovery of Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp (1895–1970), whose 1928 book *Morphology of the Folktale* reduced the hundreds of plots of wonder tales, or magic tales, to a constant compositional structure. A hero or heroine leaves home, undergoes adventures, and achieves success. Scholars quickly saw the applicability of Propp’s sort of analysis to films and graphic novels, and the author became known as a Russian formalist literary critic. But he was insistently a folklorist; he rejected the formalist label. In the book under review he barks, “There was no *formal school* in the proper sense of the word in Soviet folkloristics” (79; my emphasis). His mode of analysis was inseparable from historicizing particular tales, indeed historicizing the whole genre: “Descriptive and historical studies do not exclude each other; rather, they depend on one another” (81). Partial translation of his *Historical Roots*

of the *Wonder Tale* (1946) helped to correct his image. So did translations of other writings (*Transformations in Fairy Tales*, 1972; "The Historical Bases of Some Russian Religious Festivals," 1974; *Theory and History of Folklore*, 1984; *On the Comic and Laughter*, 2009). *The Russian Folktale*, edited after Propp's death by his Russian colleagues, now fully and accurately translated by Sibelan Forrester, reveals that Propp was an encyclopedic folklorist.

The book adheres strictly to its title. First, the author lists approved criteria for defining the genre of folktale: (1) the folktale is not believed true, (2) historically, myth is prior, and (3) the folktale is for entertainment, in contrast to myth, which "has sacral meaning" (19), a distinction confirmed by innumerable storytellers and audiences around the world. Reflecting the contributions of colonial ethnography, Propp states that (4) myths come from "aboriginal peoples" and have "religious and magical significance" (20). In literate societies such as ancient Greece, he adds that (5) the characters in myth are "deities or semideities" (21). Finally, (6) myth can develop into folktale by losing its social significance (24). In this book Propp refines his formulation of the myth-folktale relationship. He may be responding to the review of the *Morphology* in which Claude Lévi-Strauss rendered homage to Propp's great discovery. As to the genre of legend, treated briefly in *The Russian Folktale* (27–29), Propp argued elsewhere that the term should be limited to narratives treating characters associated with Christianity (L. J. Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 1989: 128).

After that introduction comes a clear, informative history of collecting in Russia. Chapter 2 gives a valuable critical history of the study of folktales, concentrating again on Russia but not ignoring European authorities. Some nineteenth-century definitions, says Propp, of the folktale genre were "distinguished by total fantasy" with respect to its early history (72). Wilhelm Grimm's editorial practices, so much castigated by Western scholars (Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, 1987: 36–37), display "great tact and taste" (91). Propp fundamentally rejects the Finnish method of studying plots one by one; it is "a methodological error" (126–27) that diminishes the social meaning of a tale (255). It is an irony of history that Stith Thompson, the foremost English-language practitioner of tale typing, showed that incidents and characters are mobile and turn up in plot after plot (Stith Thompson, *The Folktale*, 1946). What, then, is the integrity of the "type"? The concept seems to disintegrate in the latest revision of the catalog (H. J. Uther's *Types of International Folktales*, 2004), reviewed in *Marvels & Tales* in 2006 (v. 20.1).

The heart of *The Russian Folktale* is Propp's exposition of folktale genres (Chapters 3–6). The divisions and subdivisions are strangely illogical, as Propp knows. The traditional categories for the folklorist of animal tales,

wonder (magic) tales, and cumulative tales continually overlap. Character types too, Propp points out, are an unreliable way of classifying; how can “a householder and his hired man as antagonists” constitute a group of tales (252–53)? For wonder tales (147–224), Propp gives his students, and us, an elegant and handy summary of his morphological analysis (147–74); then he turns to a discussion of language and style and to a detailed survey of the most popular Russian plots. These lectures must have been a pleasure to hear when the author, who was obviously a practiced lecturer, stopped analyzing and instead told one of the stories in summary. Although occasionally Propp’s concentration on Russia trips him up (for instance, he treats introductory formulas as though they were not worldwide), much of his presentation is valid for many tale traditions.

More problematic is the category treated in Chapter 4, “novellistic” tales. This word at first appears to be a translator’s misspelling of the word denoting “pertaining to a novel.” In literature the Boccaccio-style novella is normally defined as “a prose work . . . depicting an unprecedented, extraordinary, or ambiguous event” (M. McCarthy, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, 2005: 404). But Propp means realistic or everyday. Tales organized around riddles are an example of the novellistic. Divisions between realism and fantasy are never firm, but Propp makes one plausible distinction: in wonder tales heroes acquire magical helpers or magic objects, whereas in novellistic tales they act alone (236). Perhaps the Russian repertoire supports this distinction for scholarly analysis better than others do.

The final chapter, “The Life of the Folktale,” sets the tale in social context. Already in 1961, in reconstructing the historical context of Russian lyrics, Propp declared that performance was primary: “The social material determines even the poetics” (Propp, *Down Along the Mother Volga*, 1975: 3). For both lyrics and tales, analysis of performance supports Propp’s analysis of folk artistry. Then when he expounds on the social setting of tale performance (305–310), the reader wonders about the degree of Marxist-Leninist pressure on the author. “How much Propp personally believed in it all [says his translator reasonably] is hard to say” (xviii). Propp criticizes the ardor of Soviet folklorists for glorifying the “striking, talented representatives of the folk creative art” (Y. M. Sokolov, *Russian Folklore*, 1950: 710): “The tale,” Propp asserts, “lives its full life not just in the person of expert narrators” (304). *The Russian Folktale* contains few chunks of inserted Soviet doctrine and much convincing treatment of social context.

The editors’ and the translator’s notes are full and excellent. I wish Sibelan Forrester had included in the ample bibliography the English translations of Propp’s other works (mentioned in this review). Isn’t the reader of her

translation the folktale enthusiast who has no access to Russian-language sources? But the book is so clearly written and informative that it can be read without trouble by students and scholars, who will then find on the Internet the bibliographic aids they need. Reading *The Russian Folktale* makes me dream of a one-volume survey on the history and theory of folktales around the world, which would be as comprehensive, readable, and authoritative as this book is about Russia.

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Textualité et intertextualité des contes: Perrault, Apulée, La Fontaine, Lhéritier . . . By Ute Heidmann and Jean-Michel Adam. Paris: Editions Classiques Garnier, 2010. 400 pp.

In this unusual, often insightful, and sometimes polemical book, Ute Heidmann and Jean-Michel Adam take up many of the problems that have long dogged criticism of Charles Perrault's fairy tales. Both the sources and interpretation of his *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* have generated an ever-expanding body of scholarship and with it a number of seemingly intractable questions. Did Perrault base his tales on oral tradition? What were his literary sources, if any? What sort of social critique is performed by his fairy tales? And specifically, is Perrault a (proto-) feminist? These are some of the most prominent questions addressed by Heidmann and Adam, who use the tools of comparative philology, genetic criticism, and discursive analysis to scrutinize the textual fabric of this collection. Through intricate analyses of individual tales and the relationships between them and with other texts, the authors shed new light on this corpus and position themselves against many received notions in Perrault criticism and fairy-tale studies more generally.

The most fundamental notion that Heidmann and Adam question is the possibility of defining what a fairy tale is. As a point of departure, the authors assert, the question of how to define a fairy tale reinforces a universalizing perspective that obscures the textual specificity and variety of the texts we call fairy tales. For Heidmann and Adam, then, it is less productive to ask *what* fairy tales are and much more productive to ask *how* they use and dialogue with a range of linguistic and literary discourses. Focusing on the textual workings of Perrault's prose tales also leads the authors to reject commonplace assertions of a debt to the oral tradition; instead, Heidmann and Adam prefer to analyze the historically contingent intertextual and interdiscursive references that are obscured by the (supposedly) universalizing and thematic approach of folklore studies. Rather than tale types, then, Heidmann and Adam use a limited number