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The Motif of Poisoning in Ukrainian Ballads

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Poisoning for infidelity is a motif found throughout European tradition in both narratives and songs. One of the most popular ballads on this theme, “O Do Not Go, Hryts,” is considered the classic example of its type and is found not only in the Ukraine but also in the ballad traditions of many other, particularly Slavic, nations. In this essay, I propose to examine versions of this song and some of the theories about its origins.

In The Ukrainian Folk Ballad, folklorist Oleksii Dei singles out the poisoning motif for special attention in the chapter “Love Ballads and Premarital Relations”:

I-B: Witchcraft. Poisoning through witchcraft.
I-B–1: The calling of the dead lover for a date (“The Dead Lover”).
   The versions:
   A) The dead warrior takes his lover to the grave;
   B) The girl finds her lover’s grave and talks to him.
I-B–2: The return (the defection) of a sweetheart by sorcery.
I-B–3: The boy has been poisoned with a love-potion, food and drinks.
I-B–4: The boy who loved two or three girls was poisoned by jealousy (girlfriend).
I-B–5: The girl poisons one of (the three of) those who were enamoured of her (with sorcery).
I-B–6: The girl is poisoned by sorcery at her wedding.
I-B–7: The sister poisons her brother, or the wife poisons her husband, as a consequence of her lover’s calumny. (1986: 65–66)

The first print appearance of “O Do Not Go, Hryts” is in an early nineteenth-century Russian collection published by the merchant Sergei Petrov (1805: 21). Its central motif spread into Ukrainian folklore in the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, and, by the nineteenth, the song existed in the collections of almost all the Slavic nations. Thereafter, it migrated into western Europe as well.

So popular has the ballad been that it has been translated many times, first into German. The song also appeared, with a tune, in the Lvov Catholic calendar
Pielgrzym Lwowski of 1822, and Austrian, German, and Hungarian musicians later borrowed the melody. In the 1840s, for example, after a tour of the Ukraine, Franz Liszt composed “The Ukrainian Ballad,” whose melody is based on “O Do Not Go, Hrytsiu” (M. Fintsytski translated the text into Hungarian). 1

When Ukrainian Poles emigrated to France and England after the defeat of November 1831, “Hryts” went with them and was subsequently cited in various essays and letters as a symbol of Ukrainian tradition and, indeed, the Ukraine itself. The ballad was also translated into French by the Polish poet Julius Slowacki, who mentions a “Cossack song” in a letter to his mother (1883: 30).

According to folklorist Hryhorij Nudha, an English version of the ballad was first published in London in Henryk Krasinski’s The Cossacks and Ukraine (1848), a text which then appeared in various later editions. In 1916 it was published by Canadian poet F. R. Livesay under the title “The Daughter of the Witch.” In 1935 it was published in a German “best songs of the world” collection after its performance by a group of Swiss musicians at the international exhibition in Brussels, where it captured the public imagination and was awarded first prize (Nudha 1967: 132).

Thus, the text of “O Do Not Go, Hryts” became the personification of the Cossack spirit in various nations of the world. Hryts was often referred to in Ukrainian ballads as exemplifying the glorious Cossack, a young, handsome man who is loved by many women at the same time:

Oh, get up, Hrytsenku, glorious Cossack,
Many woman are crying for you. (Dei and Lasenchuk 1987: 65)

One must note that, despite the girl’s treachery, Hryts remains a hero beloved by friends; his death is often seen not as an act of revenge but as destiny. The weeds given him by his sweetheart primarily function as a love potion to bind him to the girl and turn him away from other lovers. His death is not always seen by the girl as a personal tragedy, in contrast to her mother, who asks why she poisoned him. She answers,

Oh, mother, mother, the sorrow has no measure,
Do not let Hryts love both at once. (Dei and Lasenchuk 1987: 66)

After his death, Hryts belongs to her alone, despite the fact that other girls constantly visit his grave. This ballad also has a kind of magical function because the text is often intertwined with the words of folk incantations.
Symbolism in the Ukrainian folk ballad is extremely rich and diversified, and it undoubtedly plays an important role in texts featuring the poisoning motif. It may be said that the female is the principal character in the Hryts ballad, despite the fact that the title bears his name. “The woman is basically the custodian of rituals and customs from the ancient days of confirmed, and already unfathomable, paganism” (Potebna 1976: 224). In this feminist cultural conceptualization, the poisoning is not only revenge but also an echo of ancient traditions about the woman sovereign and her influence over a male’s fate.

In another version, “Oyo, There’s a Well in a Field,” the man who wants to marry proposes that his intended poison her brother since he would undoubtedly stand in Hryts’s way. She replies,

Oh, be not daunted by my brother,
I’ll poison him myself.

And there is an unexpected symbolic comparison at the end:

Oh, there are two guelder roses in the field,
There were two vipers twisted together.

(Bodianski and Bodianski 1978: 188)

The girl becomes a personification of the malign forces that can punish and pardon, both loving and hating her partner, at once neglecting both her mother’s advice and society’s morals. Incidentally, Marusia, the heroine in most versions of “O Do Not Go, Hryts” is one of the most popular names in the Ukraine, revealing one possible sign of the character’s universal appeal.

Although the Ukrainian ballad texts with this motif are relatively recent, the motif itself undoubtedly stretches back to ancient times, when the image of the girl concocting a potion can be seen in accounts of medieval sorceresses burnt at the stake. Female images in the majority of ballads in this cycle are negative. The moral chorus tries to warn Hryts:

Oh do not go to parties, Hrytsiu,
’Cause all the girls there, they are sorceresses:
They burn straw and concoct potions
And they will deprive you, Hrytsiu, of your health.

(Dei and Iasenchuk 1987: 65)
But Hryts neglects the warnings and continues courting the girls, inviting the tragic fate that awaits him.

It is significant that in “O Do Not Go, Hryts,” as in other ballads where this motif appears, poisoning is almost always depicted as a kind of specific ritual action, where each stage of the fearful substance’s preparation corresponds to a certain day of the week:

On Sunday morning, herbs were dug,
And on Monday the herbs were washed,
Tuesday had come—the potion was being cooked,
Wednesday had come—Hryts was poisoned,
Oh, Thursday has come—and Hryts is already dead,
And Friday has come—Hryts has already been buried.

(Dei and Iasenchuk 1987: 65)

Friday is, of course, a day of great significance in world folk belief, and in the ballad it becomes the day of the hero’s funeral. In some variants, the woman realizes the irreversibility of her act and engages in a dialog with an accusatory Hryts in the otherworld:

Oh, sweetheart, sweetheart, I sorrow for you,
Because you are lying in the coffin deep.
And [Hryts] replies from the depths
With such pity, he says to his girl:
Oh, step off, step off my tomb,
For I lie here for little reason! (Dei and Iasenchuk 1987: 67)

In some (atypical) versions, the heroine is apparently directed by a “third” power.

It is impossible to analyze this ballad without addressing the symbolism of fire, particular in meaning in both Slavic poetry and ritual, especially Kupala. A scene in which the girls/sorceresses are “burning straw” adds a certain mood to the whole song.

Incidentally, there is an interesting parallel to the Hryts ballad in Ivan Franko’s 1914 collection of Old Scotch Ballads, with an introduction and translations of the texts. Here we find “The Dead Sweetheart,” where Lady Marjory resembles Marusia and, in a similar episode, speaks with her dead sweetheart at his tomb. There she sees three other ladies whom he loved, who have also come to his tomb (Franco 1977: 167–68).
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Many academic and literary articles written on this topic since the late nineteenth century are dedicated to the geographical origins and authorship of the ballad. According to the main hypothesis, the song was written by the legendary folk poet Marusia Churay, an inhabitant of the Poltava region. She is known as an author of popular ballads, and some researchers feel that “O Do Not Go, Hryts” bears autobiographical features, even though the central female character appears in such a negative light. In recent years, the association with the poet Churay has gained great popularity in the Ukraine, especially after the appearance of the poem “Marusia Churay” by a contemporary poet. Master folk artists and professional painters now paint her portrait regularly.

Some interesting evidence regarding the connection appears in Shklyarevskyi’s 1877 essay “Marusia Churay,” where he tells of a childhood visit to the home of H. Kvitka-Osnovyanenko, where he saw a portrait of Marusia and heard stories about her (he could not remember the details, except that a man named Hryhoriy Ostapenko had been Marusia’s lover). However, Phylypovych was perfectly right in stating that Shklyarevskyi could have seen the portrait of Marusia in books such as Shakhover’s, where she appears with Hryts and her mother. Not all researchers agree, and many regard Marusia Churay as the same type of literary image as Natalka-Poltavka, the heroine of I. Kotlyarevskyi’s work (which was also turned into an opera by M. Lysenko). The popularity of Marusia Churay among writers can hardly be overestimated, however, and she has become the heroine of many historical novels, narratives, and poems. The Hryts ballad itself has inspired many generations of Ukrainian writers and particularly playwrights (for example, On Sunday Morn, Herbs Were Gathered by O. Kobylianska).

Perhaps the mystery of the ballad’s origins will never be solved since there is little contemporary evidence to associate the song with Churay. The city of Poltava, where she was born, was burnt to ashes in a great fire in the eighteenth century. There one could, perhaps, have found some documentary source material; only conjecture and hypothesis now remain. Regardless of whether the Hryts Marusia was a real historical character, the ballad has not lost its popularity. It is found in nearly thirty versions, both in the Ukraine and among the Ukrainian diaspora, and in Poland in particular. During an expedition to Podlyasze some years ago, we managed to record some variants of the song.

The motif of poisoning, as noted before, is universally found in European tradition. While creating dramatic action, it also becomes a determining factor in plot structure and development. In the Ukrainian ballad, the motif always indicates a predetermined end and its corresponding associations. The tragedy reinforces the drama, underlining the all-conquering power of love that often informs
the actions of the protagonists. There are undoubtedly many similar themes in
Ukrainian balladry that bear closer investigation. I hope I have shown that the
motif of poisoning is one. Ukrainian tradition shares many traits with its Slavic
and non-Slavic neighbors and, as such, is a rich source of comparative studies.

Notes
1. The building where he played in Odessa is preserved and now bears a memorial plaque
dedicated to the event.

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