

The Language of Magic

Edited by Eleonora Cianci and Nicholas Wolf

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MAGIC AS A STATEMENT OF POWER AND WEAPONS OF THE WEAK: HEROINES OF THE RUSSIAN EPOS

Inna Veselova

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ABSTRACT

The focus of the article is motifs and plots of Russian heroic epos, where female protagonists act by magic means. The acts of heroines have been examined, taking into consideration M. de Certeau's concept of two modes of practices – tactical and strategic – and J. Scott's concept of “the weapons of the weak”. Following de Certeau, the author claims that the singer of epos informs his/her audience about the *modi operandi* existing under various circumstances and the ethical evaluation of those modes. The author compares the magic described in the epic plots with the magical practices that have existed and still exist in the Russian rural culture. The article is based on the material of *bylina* texts from the Corpus of Russian Folklore Epos and on the records of magical rituals and texts from the Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg State University. Heroes and heroines of Russian epos use magic knowledge as tactical and strategic *modi operandi*. In the epos, the success of magic actions depends on the ethical evaluation of the character, which is explicated in his/her epithets and definitions. The epic ethos claims that magical skills themselves are an ordinary part of human knowledge, but the magic abilities and the success of magic depend on the balance of power. In the poetic world of the Russian epos, power is secured in the hands of the elders and the virtuous, both men and women. The main prerequisites for the role of a successful epic magician are their age and chastity (those of saints, pilgrims, widows and widowers, honest wives and virgin brides).

Keywords: magic motifs; Russian *bylina*; Russian heroic epic; verbal magic.

In this article, I will show how magic practices and words work in the epic motifs and plots of a Russian *bylina*. *Bylina* is a genre of Russian epic poetry characterized by heroic themes. In Russian folklore, epic genres

include ballads, spiritual poems, historical songs, but the most famous epic genre is a *bylina*. The main heroes of the *bylina* are *bogatyrs*, who most often serve as Prince Vladimir's warriors, but there are also other *bogatyr* characters – merchants (*Sadko*), farmers (*Mikula Selianinovich*), and foreign guests (*Duc Stepanivich*). The texts of the Russian epos were first published at the beginning of the 19th century under the title “Kirsha Danilov's Collection of the Ancient Russian Poems”. This anthology included *bylinas* and other epic poems dated back to the mid-18th century (*Drevnie Rossiyskie stikhotvorenia*). More than half a century passed until P. Rybnikov discovered the *bylina* as a folklore phenomenon still alive – just 300 kms from the then capital of Russia (St. Petersburg), in the Olonets province (Rybnikov). These texts were recorded by local peasants.

The territories, on which the epos was recorded (the Russian North, Siberia, the South of Russia, e.g., the Don basin) happened to coincide with the places of residence of the so-called “state peasants” (i.e. the peasants who had never been serfs) and the Old Believers (i.e. those who did not support the Church reforms of Patriarch Nikon in the 17th century and left for the periphery of the Russian empire in order to escape persecution). This means that the performance of epos and the act of listening to it, as well as the phenomenon of epos singing as such, were characterized by the personal freedom of the practitioners of this genre.

The last recordings of *bylina* performance were made at the beginning of the 1980s. In the last one hundred years, thousands of *bylina* text recordings have been collected and published – mostly the ones from the abovementioned regions. There are more than forty plots of the Russian heroic epos that have been published to date.

Below, I will demonstrate how the epic motifs describing magic rites and actions of both male and female epic characters reflect certain magic practices still preserved in Russian villages; I will also discuss the attitude towards such practices. Following Michel de Certeau's idea, I assume that narrating *bylinas* serves the task of verbalizing the mode of action and the way of thinking in real life. “Tales and legends [...] are deployed, like games, in a space outside of and isolated from a daily competition, that of the past, the marvellous, the original. In that space can thus be revealed, dressed as gods or heroes, the models of good or bad ruses that can be used every day”¹. The narrator of the *bylinas* informs his/her audience first, about the *modi operandi* known to him/her from various life circumstances of his/her own, and, second, about the underlying values governing the choice of this

¹ de Certeau 1894, 23.

or that mode of action. While telling stories about *bogatyr*s to the audience, the singers speak not just about the archaic world order and the “good old times”, but about the values and standards of their own reality. I examine each epic plot as a device that the singers employ to communicate their own personal common life experiences to their audience. And here I would like to repeat after Albert Lord: “[...] every performance is a separate song; for every performance is unique, and every performance bears the signature of its poet singer”². The performer uses the possibilities of the genre to convey his knowledge of the world to the audience. Mikhail Bakhtin introduces the concept of speech genres through the category of dialogue. He draws attention to the fact that a person comprehends reality and reflects on it with the help of particular statements: “It is possible to understand certain aspects of reality only in connection with certain ways of expressing it. On the other hand, these modes of expression are applicable only to certain aspects of reality”³. There is the reality of the genre and the reality available to the genre. The genre of *bylinas* becomes a special way of seeing and understanding reality. Thus, my task is to show how the magical techniques used in the epos are connected with the reality of the singers and their listeners.

- In what follows, first, I choose epic motives and plots, where the characters act by using magic means. In accordance with the idea of formulaic analysis, I examine these motifs both as part of the epic poetics and as part of the reality, in which the singers lived.
- Second, I specify what particular magic rites and tools are popular among the epic heroes.
- Then I compare epic magic motives with real magic practices, which my folklore team and I focused on during our fieldwork in the Russian North-West⁴.
- I focus on those motifs and plots, where women happen to be actors. I analyze the evaluation of their actions by both the *bylina* singers and by scholars of the genre.

Russian epic plots are full of magic formulas and motifs, such as miraculous birth and healing, shapeshifting, love magic, the use of magic potions (the wine of oblivion), and others. When exploring the concept of an epic motif, Boris Putilov called a “typical, formulaic character” one of

² Lord 1960, 58.

³ Bakhtin - Medvedev 1928, 182.

⁴ The fieldwork was organized by the folklorists from St. Petersburg State University. These interviews are stored in the Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg State University and in the Electronic Archive “Russian Everyday Life” (<http://daytodaydata.ru>).

its most important features, while “any (or almost any) epic motif exists not only as a narrative element of a given work, but also as an element of a given epic in general”⁵. In further analysis, I claim that the magic motifs are, on the one hand, representations of the oral-formulaic epic poetics and as such have metaphorical meanings, and on the other hand, they are a statement of behavioural stereotypes and ethical evaluations.

The inclusion of descriptions of the real magic practices into epic plots has been mentioned by many *bylina* scholars (Markov 1903; Toporkov 1998). A folklore theorist Yeleazar Meletinsky classified epic plots into archaic and classical ones based on the presence of magic elements. He thinks that “in archaic epos [...] main plot is all about the combats involving demonic *bogatyrs*-monsters; protagonists act using magic quasi-sorcerer means”, while “the classic epic heroes, typical *bogatyrs*, usually do not practice any magic and resort to their extraordinary physical strength and daring courage” (Meletinsky 1998, 12-13).

As Meletinsky mentioned, archaic *bogatyrs* often display a range of magic features: miraculous birth, miraculous childhood, miraculous healing, shapeshifting, and the receipt of supernatural powers. In the typically “archaic” Russian *bylina* “Volkh Vseslavievich” the protagonist is born from a woman and a serpent, then miraculously grows up so quickly that he refuses to be swaddled just one and a half hours after birth; at the age of seven he can read, and at the age of ten can turn into a wild ox, a falcon and a wolf; and at the age of twelve he puts together his private army (*druzhina*) (Drevnie Rossiyskie stikhotvorenia, 32-36). The scholars emphasize the archaic elements of the Volkh *bylina*, while the singers pay homage to the magic skills of the hero and his wisdom (Propp, 70). This plot is full of motifs of a miraculous birth (from the father-serpent), miraculous childhood and shapeshifting, but it’s also worth paying attention to the way the performers (and researchers) DO NOT categorize the hero. The *bogatyry* with a supernatural lineage and abilities has never been called a “sorcerer” or a “werewolf”.

The next popular magic tool used by archaic *bogatyrs* is the “transfer of magic power”. In the *bylina* named “Sviatogor and Ilia Muromets” the older *bogatyry* Sviatogor transmits his supernatural physical strength to the younger *bogatyry* via his saliva or the “froth of death”. This way of “power transfer” is similar to the way mentioned in our own field interview about sorcerers and the transfer of magic knowledge to the “successors”:

⁵ Putilov 1975, 144-145.

In regard to Sasba Deriagin's father, I don't know who transmitted this diabolism to him, whether it was his grandfather or someone else. This relative apparently approached him, but Sasba was squeamish or something. Well, they agreed to do it right there in the bathhouse. And the bathhouse, they preheated it and that relative told Sasba: go wash yourself, and whatever they give you there – eat everything.

<Was it the power transfer process, or was something else going on?>

Yes, the transfer. "Well, I went," he says, "to the bathhouse, and there, uh, how it was transmitted there, I don't know ... I run in," he says, "and there are three dogs at the door, and they vomited, he tells me ..."

<God!>

And they ran away.

<And he was told to eat it?>

Here, he says, here, eat – you understand.

<It can't be true! Yep, that's... >

He didn't, you know. He says, he ate it after one of the dogs, but then he was disgusted or something, and he ate no more.⁶

Since *bogatyr*s are born of serpents, their ability to shape-shift and the supernatural origin of their power do not make them possessors of chthonic powers, "witches", or "heretics" in the eyes of the singers. The supernatural powers of the *bogatyr*s have been seen as a certain behavioural trait. Consequently, magic motifs involving male protagonists in the Russian epos are rather frequent. Certainly, such motifs as the motif of a miraculous birth from a serpent have no analogues in actual ritual practices, but metaphorically they denote the supernatural character of the hero⁷. Other motifs – like the motif of the transfer of power from the elder to the younger – have direct parallels in ritual practices of the Russian villages. Neither in the metaphorical meanings of magical motifs, nor in the description of actions similar to actually existing rituals, are male protagonists called sorcerers or snake offspring; they aren't characterized by singers using any negative epithets either (filthy, snake, etc.).

Now I will focus on motifs and plots, where women act using magic means. I will provide a retelling of epic stories from the *Anthology of Rus-*

⁶ Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg State University. Mez 19-9, Mez 24-96. Recorded from N.I. Okulov (born in 1956) in the village of Kimzha, Mezen district, Arkhangelsk region. July 16, 2007 by E.E. Lavrova and N.O. Bukavneva.

⁷ "Volkh is born because his mother, descending from a stone, inadvertently steps on a serpent. The serpent wraps around her leg, and she conceives. Volkh is born with the rise of the sun or the moon. [...] This beginning is preserved, of course, not because the belief in such a birth has been preserved, but because this picture is full of majesty. V.G. Belinsky noted its artistry in his retelling of the plot of this song. "This is the apotheosis of a heroic birth, full of greatness, strength," – this is how he writes about this beginning" (Propp, 70).

sian Folk Epics (by J. Bailey - T. Ivanova) in order to briefly introduce the plot of this *bylina*. I chose those plots where magic is practiced by heroines who have some kind of relationship with a serpent. In addition, the heroines appear in these plots in different social statuses and roles, which allows me to consider this factor in my analysis. I chose two popular plots, which are known in numerous versions – “Dobrynya and Marinka” and “Mikhaylo Potyk (and Maria the White Swan)”.

Dobrynya and Marinka

The song “Dobrynya and Marinka” is a story about a **supernatural witch, enticing courtesan, alluring sorceress, or enchanting shaman** who uses her magical powers to turn an epic hero into an animal. In many cases his mother or sister, who possesses even stronger magic, forces the sorceress to turn the hero back into a human being. There are many variations on this theme in magic tales and in epics, perhaps the most notable one appearing in the tenth book of the *Odyssey*, where the goddess Circe transforms some of Odysseus’s men into pigs. What may be involved in an ancient story about a temptress or seductive woman who acts in a **sexually provocative manner**.

In the beginning Dobrynya’s mother warns him not to go to Marinka’s streets because she is a sorceress and turns nine young men into a wild ox. Dobrynya accepts the dare and goes anyway. At Marinka palace he sees a pair of doves, usually a symbol of lovers, he shoots an arrow⁸ that misses the doves but kills Marinka’s lover Zmei (the Serpent). Dobrynya insists on retrieving his arrow, insults Marinka, who may offer herself in marriage, and leaves. Then Marinka cuts out a piece of the wooden floor where he stood and burns it in a stove while reciting an incantation to make Dobrynya fall in love with her. [...] Dobrynya returns to her as a compliant lover whom she transforms into a wild animal as a wild ox with golden horns. [...] A female Dobrynya’s relative, who has superior magical powers, comes to Marinka and demands that she restore Dobrynya to his human form, and threatens to turn Marinka herself into an animal (bitch in period of heat). Marinka promises to return Dobrynya to his normal state if he will marry her. Dobrynya agrees but later kills her.⁹

First of all, it is worth mentioning that Bailey and Ivanova classify this *bylina* as a tale of a supernatural sorceress rather than a *bogatyr* whose name is mentioned in its title in the first place. Bailey and Ivanova repeatedly call the heroine a “witch”, using Marinka’s designations used by epic singers. However, such characteristics as “seductive courtesan” and “seductive

⁸ An arrow is a symbol of male sexual power in Russian folklore and rituals (because his arrow is with her now – IV).

⁹ Bailey - Ivanova 1998, 98-99.

woman acting in a sexually provocative manner” are not folklore formulas, but the explanations given by the researchers.

According to the majority of the plot versions, Marinka uses magic only in response to Dobrynya’s insult. Dobrynya has violated her privacy by his arrow and also killed her lover. Marinka finds herself in a weak position without the male support and has to defend herself using her own devices. “Then Marinka cuts out a piece of the wooden floor in the place where he stood and burns it in a stove while reciting an incantation to make Dobrynya fall in love with her”. This description is close to a magical love spell called *prisushka* (“drying-toward”), which is still actively used, and which Russian villagers are still actively talking about¹⁰. According to the interview from the Folklore Archive, love magic is used when sexual attraction hasn’t worked or when former partners break out their relationships. In such cases, the former lover or the ignored admirer resorts to magic actions. The one being in a weak position in the domain of love relationships resorts to the argument of magic powers.

In Vytegra, Vaska Ignatov’s mother was a witch. He said so himself. If you want the girl to love you, count her ninth footprint. Take the dirt from it and seal a crack in the stove with it. At the same time, you should say: “Like a footprint dries out, so you get dried for me.” (Traditsionnaia russkaia magia v zapisiakh kontsa XX veka, 556).

From the behavioral point of view, Marinka’s use of magic in this *bylina* represents enforced self-defence. Metaphorically, the transformation of Dobrynya into a wild ox reveals the essence of his “wild” behavior: he is not transformed into a beast – he has acted as a “beast”. The threat of Dobrynya’s female relative to turn Marinka into a “bitch in heat” is also nothing more than a comparison of the heroine’s sexual activities to uncontrolled animal behaviour. As we can see, on the level of *bylina* poetics, the hero and the heroine are worth each other. Now, following de Certeau’s ideas, let’s take a look at this situation as “the models of good or bad ruses that can be used every day”: the positions of the male and female protagonists in a society and in the development of the plot are very different. The consequences of premarital sexual intercourse, in which a girl lost her virginity, in most cases were irreversibly damaging for her reputation.

<So they didn’t marry such women?>

MT Yes, yes. If a woman is “famous” for that, if it’s known that she sinned, then men stay away from her.

¹⁰ Toporkov 1998.

<And other women no longer communicate with her?>

*Yes, yes, yes. But they still communicate, after all, in the village. But still the guys and their parents already know this thing about her.*¹¹

In the plot of the epos, Marinka's reputational losses are demonstrated in the episode of the duel between Marinka's magical abilities and those of the elder relative of the hero turned into a beast. The power of Dobrynya's mother (or godmother, or aunt) conquers Marinka's witchcraft. Older women belonging to the higher social strata of the "ladies of the house" are considered more powerful sorceresses. Both Marinka the witch, and the respectable female relative of Dobrynya's demonstrate the knowledge of the same magic devices. Their opposition is presented as a "battle," where not the magic skills are at stake, but the social hierarchy and reputation. The younger and the "wrong-doing" woman is being conquered by the older, "respectable" one. The "sexually provocative manner" of the heroine was considered unacceptable in the village community more than a hundred years ago (judging by the negative assessments of the actions of the heroine by storytellers) and socially frowned upon in the Soviet countryside until the end of the 20th century (judging by the opinions we recorded in the interviews). Marinka embodies transgression: she is sexually active outside of the marriage bonds, does not conceal this fact, and is brave enough to propose herself as a wife in a situation of violence in order to protect her reputation and then punish the abuser.

Now let's look at the plot featuring Marya the White Swan from the *bylina* "Mikhailo Potyk", in which the heroine is first shown as a girl engaged in witchcraft, and then as a married woman. Forty-one records of this plot are known; seven of them are taken from manuscripts and are very close to each other, while one is too short. I have studied thirty-three oral versions, which contain from 240 to 1500 verses.

First of all, let us study the plot retold by Bailey and Ivanova:

Mikhailo Potyk

Potykh sees a white swan and wants to shoot it, but "she" declares that she is a maiden, Marya the White Swan. She offers herself in marriage to Potyk if he will take a vow that the surviving spouse for a certain time has to enter the tomb of the spouse that dies first. The bogatyr agrees to Marya's condition, takes her to Kyiv, and marries her. When Potyk learns that Marya has died, without hesitation he returns home, prepares three metal rods, enters the tomb, and is sealed in with his wife. During the night, when a serpent

¹¹ Folklore Archive SPbGU DAu11-190_Arch-Lesh_11-07-17_KlokotovaMT.

comes to devour her body, Potyk beats the serpent with the rods and forces it to bring him “living water”, with which he revives his wife. After hearing Potyk shouts, the people of Kyiv open the tomb, releasing him and his wife. Marya the White Swan then becomes famous for her immortality. As a consequence suitor may come seeking her, including the king of Lithuania, who may abduct her. [...] Potyk pursues the pair and confronts his wife, who gives him a sleeping potion of drink, pronounces a spell over him, and turns him into a stone. Potyk’s sworn brothers meet an old pilgrim who is Saint Nicholas, who shatters the stone, thus freeing Potyk. (Potyk twice pursues his ex, twice drinks wine, and twice is defeated by her.) In the end, Nastasia the king’s daughter sets him free on the condition that he marries her.

Especially in variants where Marya transforms herself into a serpent the episode in the tomb exposes **her true nature** and shows that she is a sorceress and enchantress, that she comes from **the world of the dead**, and that she may be regarded as belonging to the **“living dead”** or as being a vampire.¹²

After a brief retelling of the plot, let us trace how the storytellers call Marya in all the versions. The singers called Marya (Martha/Avdotyia) the White Swan “the sorceress” four times, once – “the filthy bitch”, “the shameful wife” and “the heretic”, in other cases the storytellers just used the heroine’s own name. In four versions, the hero’s friends warn him, in response to the news of a forthcoming marriage, that his future wife was a “fierce snake”. These remarks made by the hero’s friends, show their annoyance with the misery of their comrade, rather than imply a **true serpentine nature** of the hero’s bride. In the version of this *bylina* sung by the famous Soviet singer Marfa Kryukova, the heroine’s reputation is ruined by the reputations of her mother and grandmother as “sorceresses” and “charmers”. It is clear that in this context Marya is seen as having inherited their magical powers. In the interviews with the villagers, we often hear that magical abilities are being inherited through the female line:

AA *This grandma knew a lot. We went to that one a lot. They go to her daughters now. And these grandmothers help when women can’t bear children. Here, in the village, I know this grandmother helped two of us. One is my nephew, she helped his wife. We went there ourselves. I went there myself.*

VA *It is inherited. After all, Grandmother Olya is their mother ... It’s all inherited.*

AA *They are transmitting [knowledge]. Parents die – they pass it on.*¹³

¹² Bailey - Ivanova 1998, 148-149.

¹³ Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg State University. Syam20a-17. Recorded from A.A. Kukin and V.A. Kukina on July 14, 2005, in Pigilinka village, Syamzhensky district, Vologda region, by D.K. Tuminas, A.S. Semenova, A.A. Chechik.

Thirty-three reviewed versions of the abovementioned plot provide us with the information about thirty-one singers: twenty-five men and five women. There are five times more recordings of this *bylina* performed by male narrators, but the longest version of 1,143 verses was sung by a woman – Anna Mikhailovna Pashkova (Astakhova 1941, 134). All the storytellers report that Marya the White Swan is a rare beauty. In her 1938 version, Marfa Kryukova called Marya the “all-Russian beauty”¹⁴.

In one of the male versions recorded at the Kuloi, the beauty of Marya is described using the formula of “male admiration” for the female body:

*He lived with Maryushka the White Swan –
And through the shirt the body and everything is visible
All bones are visible through the body
And through the bones bone marrow shimmers
And yes, Potyk wanted to get married.*¹⁵

In addition to mentioning her beauty, in one version Marya is described as “cunning and wise”, in three – simply as “wise”, in one – as a wife “seeking wisdom above her husband”. In more than ten plot variants, Marya outsmarted her husband trice in a competition. In general, the theme of the “female mind” appears regularly in this plot. The proverb “long hair – short mind” is cited in six versions in the context of the heroine’s faked repentance to her husband. “Women’s minds are insidious” – with this phrase, Mikhailo’s new wife warns of the cunning deeds of his ex-wife.

Marya the White Swan is an exogamous bride, whom Potyk takes as his wife without proper matchmaking. In some versions, the characters get married as a result of the matchmaking initiated by the bride. The normative type of marriage in Russian traditional village culture is patrilineal. Accordingly, matchmaking arrangements on the women’s part are anomalous (but still occurring sometimes). In the overwhelming majority of cases, the initiative of marriage should be taken by the groom:

*<Does it happen that the groom comes to the bride’s house?>
The groom, yes, it happens – he will come to her house. Then they do it without a wedding.
<So they don’t propose then?>
No. What about it? A woman is proposing to him, a girl. Natalya lived nearby, a neighbor, so she got married. This guy first went to propose in Zbikhovo – that*

¹⁴ Kryukova 1939, 546-556.

¹⁵ Recorded by A.D. Grigoriev on June 30, 1901, in Soyana village, Mezensky district, Archangelsk region, from Efim Kirillovich Melekhov, 30 years old (Svod russkogo fol’klora 2011, 234).

girl's name was Shurka. Shurka did not consent. Natalya smelled it and decided to jump in. She came to him: "Come on, let's go to my place!" And they are gone! That's how it was. She came, took the man away!

<Who was in charge in this case?>

She was in charge. She was a fighting woman. A young woman.¹⁶

The behaviour of the young heroine of *bylina* manifests active defiance. Unlike Marinka in the previous story, Maria does not violate the norms of sexual behavior. She violates the norms of the traditional Russian wedding ceremony, according to which a man and his family should choose a bride. At the level of poetics, Marya regularly turns from a girl into a swan and back, but this does not bother anyone. Naming the bride a swan in Russian wedding lyrics is one of the most common formulas. The active matrimonial position in the first part of the plot represents only a potential danger for the hero, about which his friends are trying to warn him (she is a "fierce snake"). But at the next turn of the plot, the heroine's activity leads to a real reputational disaster and death. Marya marries for the second time and runs away from her ex-husband. Starting from this moment, her behaviour is replete with magic tricks, and this is where the assessment of her behaviour by the singers becomes extremely negative. The assessment of Potyk's reputation, judging by the opinions of all the singers, is also faulty. In one-third of the variants, he is shown as a bitter drunkard and never leaves the taverns. Michaylo is begging the prince for a reward in the form of his permission to drink for free in his subordinate taverns. Her husband's drinking is the reason why Marya prefers someone else to him. In two versions of the *bylina*, Michaylo is the first one to cheat on his wife, and she, upset, dies (but later magically resurrects). In two versions of the *bylina* Marya dies longing for her permanently absent husband. A new groom appears in a situation where the actual husband is constantly absent. The new groom deceives Marya by telling her false news about her husband's death. In other variants, he offers her more favourable conditions for a new marriage – offers her to become a queen instead of a washer of her husband's underwear. So the singers explain the situation of Marya leaving Potyk not by her serpentine nature, but by psychologically sound reasons. The singers describe the hero and the heroine of the *bylina* in detail and in a true-to-life manner, paying equal attention to both of them. Male drinking and cheating, women's tricks, a search for wisdom

¹⁶ Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg State University. DTxt08-002_Vol-Siam_08-05-20_Kuleshov. Recorded from I.I. Kuleshov, born in 1933, in the village of Nikulinskaya, Syamzhensky District, Vologda Region. August 20, 2008, A.V. Stepanov, O.G. Hon.

“above the husband”, foul play, even the disaster of the first marriage and a possibility of a second chance are all subject to the singers’ reflections.

At the first level of her magic skills, Marya the White Swan can turn into a swan and back into a woman. In metaphoric terms, it is not a shape-shifting attribute, but a confirmation of her bride status with the image borrowed from the Russian wedding lyrics. In two versions of the *bylina* Marya transforms not just herself, but turns the bridegroom into a hare, an ermine, a falcon, or a wolf during their first three nights after the wedding. The ermine and the hare are well-known male characters of erotic tales and wedding riddles. On the level of poetics, the transformation abilities of the heroine inform the audience of her bride status and sexual attractiveness, while each night spent with Marya costs her husband hours of running, hopping, or flying until dawn.

The next tier of Marya’s magic competencies is manifested in the status of a wife, especially when she becomes a wife who has left her husband. In the second part of the *bylina*, she makes him drink the “wine of oblivion” at the time when her husband overtakes her in the chase after her elopement. It is not a hard task because Potyk likes to drink wine; however, Marya fakes happiness from the “reunion” with him and plays a victim. Then she throws her husband, who is fast asleep from a lavish dose of wine, over her shoulder, turning him into a stone. In ten versions of the *bylina*, Marya accompanies her magic throw with “strong spells”. Marya repeats the gesture from the so-called “Cabala” rite. “Cabala” is a piece of birch bark, on which a practitioner of magic writes a message to a forest spirit seeking to find a man, a woman, or cattle lost in the woods. The cattle owner or a relative of a person who is lost in the forest shall take the imprinted Cabala in his left hand and throw it into the forest over his back or over the shoulder using a special “down and out” crisscross movement (*naopashku levukhoy naopaki-shu*) (Stepanov 2009). The same gesture is used in various rituals to throw food and gifts to the spirits who live in the forest or in the peasant’s yard.

Moreover, the *bogatyr*’s transformation into a stone is a metaphor for the deep and oblivious sleep after magic procedures – such sleep in Russian is called “stony”.

I spent the night in a house where there were a woman and her son, and the baby started crying and could not stop. I know a couple of things, so I thought: why not share them, so I said: “Put this water over him three times like this, wash him with water, and he will sleep like a stone.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg State University, DTxt11-203_Arch-Lesh_11-07-15. Recorded July 15, 2011 in Keba village, Leshukonsky district, Archangelsk region, from

Marya knows what any female head of a peasant household shall know: home calendar rituals and housekeeping rites. Her magic lore does not exceed the scope of normal magic skills of a mother and a mistress of the house.

Marya is forced to defend herself in a situation where her new husband refuses to fight her ex-husband who is pursuing her. In one plot, Marya fights in an open battle and defeats the hero. In all other versions, she prefers tricks of false weakness, which J. Scott called “the weapons of the weak”¹⁸, plus some magic. In all versions where the heroine uses magic, the transformation of the *bogatyr* back to a human from a stone is performed by either an old pilgrim or St. Nikolas. The old man turns out to be a better specialist in magic than Marya.

Like in the “Marinka and Dobrynja”, in the “Mikhailo Potyk” plot, the evaluation of the heroine as “a sorceress” and “an evil serpent” is not pre-defined by her magic competence, but is based on her reputation and “anti-social” behaviour: Marya has left her husband (even though she had her reasons to do it).

The magic battle of Marinka with an elder woman and the confrontation of Marya the White Swan with the pilgrim/saint present the competition of reputations. Thus, the magic motifs in epos have two goals. First, at the level of poetics, motifs with shapeshifting are used to speak about the “unspeakable”: for example, they hint at sexual attraction, sexual power, or sexual freedom. Second, magic motifs tell the audience about the hierarchy of reputations and values, and about the improper behavior.

In epic plots about female “witchcraft” in situations where fight or direct resistance is, for some reason, impossible or ineffective, magic means turn out to be an effective argument in the dispute. Both Marya and Marinka find themselves in a weak position making their own life choices, while being unsupported by social institutions. Being in a position of a weak one, they resort to tactical behavior with the use of magic.

An independent choice of a sexual partner and husband made by a woman in a patriarchal society is out of the ordinary. These actions can be performed, according to the storytellers, only if one has magical skills. But even in the domain of magical interactions, the position of a younger

Yevdokiya Stepanovna Levkina, born 1929 by S.B. Adonyeva, A.Y. Balakin, E.D. Kaplan, I.S. Veselova.

¹⁸ James Scott’s (1985) concept of “the weapons of the weak” shows witty and effective practices of everyday peasants’ resistance to elite domination. In my article, the concept of the weapons of the weak is applied to the behavior of women in a patriarchal social order.

and independent woman turns out to be weak, vulnerable to the magic of a more “powerful sorcerer” (an older woman or man). Thus, the singers talk about the balance of power in a society and the results of the revolt against the social order.

The societal factor is manifested in the fact that the singers condemn the “asocial” behaviour of the heroines – their sexual and matrimonial agency. Moreover, if we look at the Northern Russian epic storytelling in terms of transmitted ethos, we may come to the same conclusion about the patriarchal values prevailing in the Russian epos as Laura Olson and Svetlana Adonyeva. These researchers studied the relations between the patriarchal ethics and special feminine knowledge. “The epic drama confirms not only nationality, but also the patriarchal social system itself, since in its depiction of the hero winning a wife, epic briefly entertains the possibility that the female family line might dominate. The personal female line does not win: the hero inevitably wins over his bride through battle, and patriarchy is validated”¹⁹.

The epic ethos claims that magical skills are a necessary part of everyday knowledge, along with the skills of power confrontation and cunning wisdom. But the balance of power in the patriarchal world of the epic is the same in the physical, social and magic realms. The elders in the hierarchy, men and women, always win, and the younger ones who violate social norms are defeated and punished.

The reality of the genre is as follows: those condemned for the use of magic are the ones without the confirmed social authority. Those whose behavior is condemned do not have authority, i.e., sexually provocative girls and cheating wives. On the contrary, older women, preferably widows, like Dobrynya’s mother or aunt, whose sexuality does not threaten anyone anymore, or older men, preferably monks or saints, like St. Nikolas or the wandering singers-storytellers (*kaliki*), who saved Potyk, have a moral permission to use their magic to the fullest extent.

¹⁹ Olson - Adonyeva 2012, 31.

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