

GISTORIJA O ROSSIJSKOM MATROSSE VASSILII KORIOTSKOM AND THE RUSSIAN FOLKTALE

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Gistorija o rossijskom matrosse Vassilii Koriotskom, a literary work written during the reign of Peter the Great (1682-1725), is considered the best of the 'tales of the time of Peter' ('petrovskie povesti').¹ Since the criteria used by literary scholars for defining this group of tales vary, the list of titles associated with the group varies too, but *Gistorija o Vassilii* is always included. Moreover, according to G. Moiseeva, only three should be considered as 'petrovskie povesti' *per se*, namely: *Gistorija o dvorjanine Aleksandre*, *Gistorija o nekoem šljaxetskom syne*, and *Gistorija o Vassilii*.²

The 'petrovskie povesti' are related to a larger group of tales which appeared in the seventeenth century and flourished during the eighteenth. Literary historians unanimously agree with A. Pypin's view that the tales are "a transitional stage between the Old Muscovite time and the new period" of Russian literature.³ They use two different approaches to the works, however. Some consider the tales mostly as translations and imitations of Western works, while others prefer to analyze them in terms of their connection with the narrative literary and folklore tradition. This dichotomy is valid for the *Gistorija o Vassilii*, too. For instance, Pypin thought it to be just an imitation of *Gistorija o znanogo rodu gišpanskom šljaxtice Doltorne*. Later generations of scholars, though, do not accept his opinion. They emphasize the original features of the tale and its relations with the Russian folktale.

In spite of the attention that has been paid to the connection between the *Gistorija o Vassilii* and the Russian folktale, however, the question has not yet been sufficiently clarified. Scholars either make very general remarks or bring up various details; but they never analyze the basis for those parallels, namely, the morphology of the plot.⁴

This paper will compare *Gistorija o rossijskom matrosse Vassilii Koriotskom* and the Russian folktale in terms of the morphology of the plot and of the system of *dramatis personae*, as well as in terms of the diachronic transformations of the mode of narration and of the individual motifs.

1

Compared to the metaplot of the folk fairy tale, as described by V.Ja. Propp, *Gistorija o Vassilii* displays an analogous morphological structure.⁵ The analysis below demonstrates how the plot structure of the *Gistorija* was determined (here, V = Vassilij, I = Iraklija):

Introductory part: a5 (V's family is poor, i.e., lack of money); e3 (for this reason "a young member of the family leaves"); B3 (the father gives him his blessing to go to seek a job, i.e., money); S ↑ (V goes to Peterburg); B2 (he becomes a sailor and the tsar sends him abroad); a6 (V lacks education; the tsar needs educated people); S ↑ (V leaves for Holland); al (V is not married, which is a third kind of lack, namely a lack of wife; this exists, although it is not emphasized in the introduction).

Preliminary test: G7 (V's apprenticeship in the merchant's house in Holland = "reaction of the hero to the test"); D7 (the merchant as an instructor = "first function of the donor");

Z (earning a great deal of money = “obtaining miraculous means”); R (V moves to the location of the classical object of the quest of the fairy-tale hero, the princess-bride).

At this point an inconsistency in the plot occurs. It is a serious flaw from the point of view of literary poetics. Instead of telling about the elimination of the lack of money and the lack of education, the author leaves these plot lines unfinished and uses the potential lack of wife to develop the plot further. Obviously in the eighteenth century this inconsistency bothered neither the author nor the readers of *Gistorija o Vassilii*. Contemporaries did not judge the inconsistency from the point of view of modern literature, but as a ‘blind’ folktale motif.⁶ Hence, one may conclude that the author and the readers of the time were familiar with the poetics of the folktale. Moreover, they knew the folktale not just from written sources, but also directly from the oral tradition, since blind motifs are much more common in the latter.⁷

The main task of the hero: B (V enters into a contest with a band of robbers in order to free Princess Iraklija, whom they had abducted); P (V wins and leaves the island with her); Pr (the “pursuit” of V and I); Sp (the “rescue” from the robbers); L ↓ (“elimination of the lack,” i.e., V is going to marry I).

The main task of the hero needs an explanation. It is not presented in terms of the classical combat with the enemy, but is rather a test of cleverness. Accordingly, in order to win the contest, the hero uses the money which he had sewn into his coat instead of a “magical agent.”

Concluding part: K (“branding of the hero” = I teaches V to play the harp); bis *A1 (the object of the quest, the princess, is stolen again); S ↑ (V leaves on the second quest); R (transportation); X (arriving incognito at the location); F (the false hero, i.e., the general from Florence, pretends that he has saved I); U (I recognizes V through his song and playing of the harp); O (the false hero is exposed); T (V acquires a new appearance, i.e., is dressed as a courtier); C* (V marries I and succeeds her father on the throne).

If the results of the morphological analysis of the plot are summarized, it become clear that, with certain amplifications, the plot follows the model of the “one move (*odnoxodovaja*) fairy tale” whose central episode is the binary set of functions “struggle” (B) - “victory” (P):

[a1]a5e3B3S ↑ (a6B2S)D7G7ZRB-PL ↓ Pr-SpK*A1S ↑ RXFUOTC*

This formula is very close to that of the metaplot of the fairy tale (Propp 94):

ABS ↑ DGZRBKPL ↓ Pr-SpXFUOTNC*

The system of *dramatis personae* in *Gistorija o Vassilii* is parallel to that of the fairy tale, as well. Here is how *Gistorija* relays the seven-character fairy tale system:

1) The “villain:” the role is taken by the band of robbers. Two of the three functions constituting the role are present, namely “struggle” (B) and “pursuit” (Pr). The third function, i.e., “villainy” (A), is replaced by its alternative, “the lack” (a).

2) The “donor:” the role is taken by the Dutch merchant and consists of the functions “preparation for giving the magical agent” (D) and “supplying the agent” (Z).

3) The “helper:” the functions of this role are divided between several of the characters: the merchant takes the “transportation” (R) and the “liquidation of the lack” (L); the

fishermen take the second "transportation" (R) and the "rescue" (Sp), and the old fisherman also takes a "transportation" (R).

Two different structuring trends work in roles 2 and 3, namely one role is divided among several characters, and one character (e.g., the merchant) combines more than one role. Both features are traditional to the poetics of the fairy tale (Propp 73-74).

4) The "princess" = "object of the quest". The role is attached to Princess Iraklija, who performs the functions of "branding the hero" (K), "exposing the false hero" (O), "recognition of the hero" (U), and "wedding" (C*). The text does not include two of the five functions that belong to this role, namely "posing a difficult task" (Zad) and "punishing the second antagonist" (N). The reason for this is that Iraklija follows the model of the "good princess" which, usually, does not include these two functions.

5) The "dispatcher:" the role is distributed between V's father and the tsar (the name of Peter I is not mentioned in the text). The father and the tsar become functional doubles.

6) The "hero:" the role is taken by Vassilij. He carries out the functions "leaving for the quest" (S ↑), "reaction to the task of the donor" (G), and "wedding" (C*), and thus fully represents the circle of functions which Propp attributes to the fairy-tale hero.

7) The "false hero": this role belongs to the general from Florence. From the package of functions pertaining to this role, he takes "leaving on a quest" (S) and "pretending to be a hero" (F), but the "reaction to the task of the donor" (G) is missing. The fact that some of the functions are missing should not disturb the analyst, since Propp emphatically states that it is not obligatory that all of the functions are present in the individual fairy tales. After all, he gives the formulae of the metaplot and of the metasystem of the *dramatis personae*.

The analysis of *Gistorija o Vassilii* demonstrates that there are very close parallels between its structure and that of the Russian fairy tale. Moreover, it provides a basis for the conclusion that *Gistorija o Vassilii* follows the morphology of the fairy tale closer than either of the other 'petrovskie povesti.'

However, an important question arises here. Are these parallels sufficient proof of ties with the *Russian* fairy tale, specifically, and with the *fairy tale* in general? For one thing, Propp himself pointed out that the formulae are valid for any fairy tale, in spite of the fact that they were discovered on the basis of the analysis of Russian fairy tales. For another, the French structuralists demonstrated that, with some modification, Propp's formulae can be applied to almost any narrative genre.

The first part of this question is not hard to answer, since scholars have pointed out a considerable number of stylistic details which obviously came from the Russian folktale tradition. In order to answer the second part of the question, however, one must consider the transformations of the mode of narration and of the poetic devices.

2

The absence of any supernatural, 'fairy' component in the *Gistorija o Vassilii* speaks against a direct genetic connection with the fairy tale. The fantastic element exists in this work, but it never transcends the boundaries of the real world. It ranges from strange to highly unlikely. This leads to the conclusion that the direct source of the folktale influence is not the fairy tale, but the adventure story. Here is Pomeranceva's description of the genre of adventure tale (*avantjurnaja skazka*):

“These are stories about unusual journeys, about difficult tasks, about cunning tricks, stories in which the hero becomes a winner not with the help of magic power, supernatural helpers, or magic objects, but because of his cunning, shrewdness, cleverness and wit. In these tales everything is unlikely, but the fantastic element in them is completely different from that in fairy tales. By analogy with the adventure novels about tricksters, one can call these tales ‘adventure folktales.’ It is an interesting fact that in publications from the eighteenth century and in cheap popular printed sources (*v lubočnyx izdanijax*) from the beginning of the nineteenth century there are already a number of adventure stories. Obviously they found a response among those broad circles of readers toward which the attention of the publishers was directed . . . As a rule, the adventure tales originated later than the majority of the fairy tales. But the sources of their origin are far from unified; on the contrary, they are rather diverse. Some of the sources are of literary origin, others come from the oral tradition. Some are connected with the feudal world, others display a definite link with a later period. Some come from Western sources, others from the East, and still others are purely Russian.”⁸

As one can see from Pomeranceva’s description, there are numerous similarities between the adventure folktales and ‘petrovskie povesti.’ The most noticeable are the thematic ones: appreciation of travel, trade, skill and wit; promotion of individual cleverness as a means that will help a lower-class man move to the top of the social pyramid, and so on.

Some of the similarities concern features that are common for both adventure and fairy tales. Besides the morphology of the plot and the system of *dramatis personae*, such features are the usage of the journey as a main compositional device, and the usage of the biography of the protagonist as a chronological axis of the plot. But the most important of these features is the general attitude toward life. The Swiss folklorist Max Luthi captures its essence better than anyone else, saying that the fairy tale gives to its characters not things, but opportunities.⁹ This attitude was perfectly suited to the needs of the literature at the time of Peter the Great and, in addition, provided a means for propagandizing the political and cultural goals of the tsar.¹⁰

The changes in the mode of narration result in specific changes to the traditional fairy-tale motifs. The song and the harp-playing motif, which functioned as a means for “recognizing the hero” (U), will be used as a sample for analyzing the transformation of the motifs.

Gistorija o Vassilii includes numerous motifs which belong to the stock of narrative motifs common to the nations of Europe and Asia. Most of these are present even in the oldest myths and rituals of mankind.¹¹ The abundance of material enables the researcher to follow the transformations that such motifs go through during their life in different cultural and poetic systems. For the purpose of this paper, however, it is not necessary to move into the field of myth and ritual; folklore provides sufficient data.

The earliest stage of the motif is present in the English ballad “The Two Sisters” and may be called ‘a magic instrument/song reveals a secret.’ A girl is drowned by her sister; a viol is made from the breastbone of the victim; it plays a song which reveals the secret/the murder.¹² The German tale “The Juniper Tree,” from the Brothers Grimm collection, contains a similar motif: a stepson is killed by his stepmother; a tree grows on his grave; a bird comes to the tree, and its song reveals the secret. The story of the king with animal ears renders another version of the motif: a man learns a secret about the king’s ears; he

tells the secret to a pit; a tree grows out of the pit; flutes made from its branches reveal the secret. At this stage, the motif connects a magic instrument and/or song with the 'revealing of the secret' theme.

If one compares these cases with *Gistorija*, two differences become apparent. First, the function of the motif is different; it is not "recognizing the hero," as in *Gistorija*. Second, and more important, in all these cases the mode of narration is different. The fantasy is of the miraculous, 'fairy-tale' kind, while in *Gistorija* it is strange but not at all supernatural.

At the second stage the song is simply an unusual code for communication. Often the text is rendered in verse amidst the prose narrative, and the characters who use it are lovers. "A Thousand and One Nights," as well as Turkish folktales, present many cases of this stage. The motif is not always used as the "recognizing the hero" morpheme, but it always retains the non-'fairy', i.e., the strange, type of fantasy.

At the third stage the motif preserves the verse form, while the motivation that it is a song, as well as the instrument, may be omitted. Instead of a revelation of a secret or of a coded message, the motif reveals mainly personal emotions. The switch from prose to verse marks what was formerly 'strange,' i.e., 'non-fairy,' fantasy as a mode of narration. The fantasy is transformed into a purely formal artistic code.

Nowadays the three stages co-exist; but if one accepts the idea that the miraculous/fairy kind of fantasy was the oldest mode of narration, then the diachronic model of their relations is the following. The oldest stage combines a magic musical instrument, a song, and a revelation of a secret. The intermediate stage loses the supernatural component, but preserves the musical instrument, the song (or verse), and the revelation of a secret. The situation is no longer supernatural: it becomes unusual or artificial, and is used to motivate the fact that not all the participants in the event understand the true meaning of the message. The latest stage preserves mostly the verse form; it may omit the instrument and the song, and definitely omits the revelation of the secret or the communication code becoming a means of expressing personal feelings. The mode of narration is limited to the opposition *verse vs. prose*.

Vassilij's song and harp-playing belong to the intermediary stage. Its theme, structure and function are connected with the folklore tradition. This is obvious if the motif is compared with another of the 'petrovskie povesti,' namely, *Gistorija ob Aleksandre*. There, the use of verse belongs to the third stage of the transformation of the motif and the link with the folk roots is much weaker.

The changes in the mode of narration and the transformation of the individual motifs reflect a tendency to rework the original adventure story/fairy-tale structure. This leads to alterations in the morphology of the narrative. The amplification of the episode of the trip to Holland, which almost turns into a 'first move of the plot,' (*pervyj xod sjužeta*), is one of those alterations.

It is important to note that even the changes in *Gistorija o Vassilii* obey the rules of fairy-tale morphology. According to Propp, the introductory part of the folktale is the most vulnerable to change, while then ending is the most conservative component. Consequently, all the alterations which connect the text with the time of Peter the Great are restricted to the beginning of the story, while the classic folktale ending, i.e., the hero marrying a princess and becoming a king, is intact. Once again, a comparison with *Gistorija ob Aleksandre* is helpful. In the latter, the happy ending is missing; it is replaced by a sentimentalized account of the death of the hero. This, together with the transformation of certain motifs (e.g., the instrument, song, and revelation of a secret), is one more

argument which supports the statement that *Gistorija o Vassilii* is closer to the folktale than any other of the 'petrovskie povesti.'

The last question that needs to be discussed here is the attitude of the author and readers towards the folktale connections of the work. In general, it follows the two major tendencies in Russian literary life of the time. The dominating tendency was to reject the old styles of life and art, and to introduce new ones. This attitude initiated numerous changes and innovations. Beside innovations inserted in the text, the very term *gistorija* instead of *povest'* (as used in medieval Russian literature) serves this tendency. It was intended to show that the work was a product of a new era. At the same time, it stressed the credibility of the story. It also marked an attempt to pull the work away from the folktale. Folktales were not perceived as true stories: as the proverb says,¹³ "Skazka - skladka." The folktale was also regarded as an old and even as a lower-class type of entertainment.

The second tendency concerned ways of implementing desirable changes in lifestyle. Since it was impossible to destroy the old entirely, it became necessary to find various ways of connecting old and new elements. One of these ways was to capitalize on the elements common to Old Russian and Western culture. Folk elements in literature were certainly common ground. As V. Levšin observed in the mid-eighteenth century,

"The tales about knights published in the *Parižskaja Vseobščaja Vivliofika Romanov* are nothing other than tales about *bogatyrs*; and the French *bibliothèque bleue* contains the same kinds of tales which are told among the simple people in our country."¹⁴

The author of *Gistorija o Vassilii* relied upon this common heritage of the literary and the folk traditions, and created his work by following not only foreign models, but his native folk tradition as well.

The widespread view about the manner in which the process of blending native and foreign elements was performed is stated concisely by V. Šklovskij:

"At that time the sources of so-called Russian tales were: French parodies of the folktale, which were translated in great numbers, tales which very often received pseudo-Arabic framings, tales of chivalry, then operas . . . and, finally, individual elements from existing Russian folktales."¹⁵

Šklovskij is right about the variety of genres that were perceived as related to Russian folktales, but his conclusion about the role of the native folktale tradition is incorrect. He limits its role to individual details, and does not consider the similarities in the morphology and the transformational process. It is, however, precisely those more general analogies that secure the process of transition/transplantation of the details.

The readers, like the author himself, must have been satisfied by the way in which old and new were interwoven in the text. They not only copied the work, but also co-authored it to a certain extent. Scholars have discovered eight manuscripts which belong to different versions of the text.¹⁶

One may assume that the connection with the Russian folktale was not a secret for eighteenth-century readers. The fact that the story was recorded as an oral folktale at the beginning of the twentieth century (type -958A**) serves as an indirect proof of this assumption.¹⁷

Blagoj states that the *lubok* tale about Portupej Praporščik was influenced by *Gistorija o Vassilii*.¹⁸ Since he does not provide any detailed analysis it is hard to judge which texts he relied upon for this conclusion. It looks as if he misinterpreted the fact that both the

Gistorija and the tale about Portupej contain features characteristic for the tale type 301D*, and assumed a direct influence in a case where the parallels were only typological.

The results of comparing *Gistorija o Vassilii* and the Russian folktale show that the literary work follows very closely the structure of the plot and of the system of *dramatis personae* of the fairy-tale, but that the transformations in the mode of narration specify the adventure story as a direct predecessor.

The impact of the coexistence of literary and oral versions of certain works on the literary process in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is an interesting question which has not yet been sufficiently clarified. But, before considering the general question, one needs data from a number of detailed studies of the relations between the literary and oral versions of each individual work. The analysis presented here of *Gistorija o Rossijskom Matrosse Vassilii Koriotskom*, in the context of the Russian folktale, is one such study.

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REFERENCES

1. Alternatively, 'povesti Petrovskogo vremeni'; the term was introduced by L.N. Majkov in "Neizvestnaja povest' Petrovskogo vremeni," *Žurnal ministerstva narodnogo prosvješćenija* 1878, čast' SS: 174-219.
2. G.N. Moiseeva, *Russkie povesti prvoj treći XVIII veka* (Moscow-Leningrad: Nauka, 1965) 17.
3. A.N. Pypin, *Bibliografičeskij spisok rukopisnyx romanov, povestej, skazok, poëm i pr., v osobennosti iz prvoj poloviny XVIII veka* (Moscow, 1888) iv.
4. In G.A. Gukovskij, *Russkaja literatura XVIII veka* (Moscow: Učpedgiz, 1939) 41, the introductory part and the outlaw scenes are related to both Old Russian tales and Russian folktales. In D.D. Blagoj, *Istorija ruskoj literatury XVIII veka* (Moscow, Učpedgiz, 1945) 29, 33, a number of features are related to Russian folktales about 'the successful nice young man;' it is argued that the episode on the outlaw's island, although borrowed from a foreign original, is rendered in the manner of Russian outlaw folklore, and that the process of translation/adaptation of the foreign originals is similar to the attitude of the story-tellers when they borrowed a migratory tale-type. Finally, Moiseeva 45-49 gives the most detailed comparison with a particular folktale text, and also has some general observations. Her conclusion is that the influence of the Russian folktale is concentrated in the part which follows the seastorm episode.
5. V.Ja. Propp, *Morfologija skazki*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Nauka, 1969).
6. Max Luthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*, trans. John D. Niles (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1982) 61-63.
7. Russian folktales were a favorite form of entertainment not only for the peasants, but also for the gentry, the aristocracy, even the tsar. For more information, see E.V. Pomeranceva, *Sud'by ruskoj skazki*. (Moscow: Nauka, 1965) 27, 32, 36, 37, and R.O. Jakobson, "On the Russian fairy tales," *Russian Fairy Tales* (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1945) 633, 635.
8. Pomeranceva, 94.
9. Luthi, 86.
10. Gukovskij speaks about the "political and propagandistic functions of the theater" of the time, and about the "educational functions" of the literary tales (Gukovskij, 29, 40). But the tales can have propagandistic functions too.
11. V.Ja. Propp, *Istoričeskie korni volšebnoj skazki* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1946); see especially the sections "Dom v lesu" (97-107), "Razbojniki" (104-05), "Zapretnyj čulan" (124-29), "Dva tipa carevny" (277-78), "Klejmienie geroja" (279-82), "Ložnyj geroj" (316) and "Prestolonasledie v skazke" (311-14).
12. Francis J. Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (New York: Dover), no. 10.
13. Pomeranceva, 7.
14. Pomeranceva, 46-47.
15. Pomeranceva, 38-39.

16. Moiseeva, 20.
17. L.G. Barag, et al., *Sravnitel'nyj ukazatel' sjužetov: Vostočnoslavjanskaja skazka* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1979). The summary of the tale is as follows: "Finding himself among robbers, he [the merchant] becomes their leader (*ataman*); he flees together with the captive queen; a king abducts her; the merchant is thrown into the sea; he survives and marries the queen." Without a careful comparison of the texts, it is impossible to say whether the folktale is a sample of a tradition that goes back to the eighteenth century, or is an oral version inspired by one of the earlier publications of the *Gistorija* (1878, 1889, 1905, 1914).
18. Blagoj, 29.

POVZETEK

GISTORIJA O ROSSIJSKOM MATROSSE VASSILII KORIOTSKOM IN RUSKA LJUDSKA PRAVLJICA

Analiza Gistorije o Vassilii kaže, da so obstajale zelo tesne vzporednice med njeno zgradbo in zgradbo ruske ljudske pravljice in da so ji oblikovne značilnosti te pravljice bližje kot katerekoli druge od 'petrovskih povesti'. Posebno v preoblikovanju enega od motivov, motiva 'prepoznavanja junaka', Gistorija odkriva tako vezi z ljudsko tvornostjo kot pripovedne prenovitve, ki avtorici omogočajo, da predpostavi bistveno globljo vez z zgodnjo rusko književnostjo, kot jo predlaga V. Šklovskij.