# And They Lived Queerly Ever After: Disrupting Heteronormativity with Russian Fairy Tales

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SQS
2/2011

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QueerScope
Articles



## Russian fairy tales and their uses

Aleksandr Nikolaevich Afanas'ev[1] (1826–1871) is to Russian fairy tales what the Brothers Grimm are to German tales and Charles Perrault is to French tales. Although he collected the narratives for only ten fairy tales himself, between 1855 and 1864 Afanas'ev edited and published over 600 diverse stories based on oral Russian folk tradition (Jakobson 1945, 637). His quintessential compiled tales have provided a trove of inspiration to Russian authors, poets, playwrights, composers, and filmmakers since the nineteenth century.

These Russian fairy-tale narratives contain the same sort of fantastical elements present in Western varieties. Consequently, the tales' imaginative storylines made them a target of the early Bolshevik education policy in the 1920s and early 1930s when they were deemed "backward art forms detrimental to children's education" (Prokhorov 2008, 135). Stalin-era artists and advocates, such as Samuil Marshak and Evgenii Shvarts, however, sought to recuperate fairy-tale themes into children's literature, theater, and film (Tippner 2008, 131–135). They were able to do so because the fairy-tale protagonist, often striving toward some lofty goal, mapped well onto the prevailing Stalinist narrative of the "New Soviet Man" (Tippner 2008, 312), who was to build a bright socialist future and inspire others in doing so. Fairy-tale influences on art were thus permitted and exuberantly appropriated by the Soviet system because their plotlines often mirrored "Stalinist culture's spirit of miraculous reality" (Prokhorov 2008, 135). Pre-revolutionary fairy-tale narratives no longer rankled the censors with their fantasy and were appropriated into the Soviet Union's didactic and assiduously policed system of textual production and circulation, which foretold of a happy and triumphant future.

Afanas'ev, however, anonymously published another set of Russian folk stories in Geneva, Switzerland in 1872 (Perkov 1988, 13). Collecting these tales simultaneously with the now canonical entries, Afanas'ev kept a log of *zavetnye skazki* (forbidden tales), which contained anti-aristocratic, "anti-clerical," "erotic[,] or scatological themes" (Perkov 1988, 14). These themes would never have passed muster with tsarist (or later, Soviet) censors. The forbidden tales, as translated by Yury Perkov (1988), brim with elements of kinky, irreverent, or otherwise "deviant" sexuality, including same-sex intercourse. Moreover, they mock the upper classes and the Orthodox priesthood by placing them in degrading situations involving sexual and

1 This article employs the United States Library of Congress transliteration system for Russian throughout.

excretory bodily functions. Their purpose could not have been to proffer edifying lessons to impressionable young Russian ears or to instill in them normative sexual practices and roles, but rather simply to induce a hearty laugh at the expense of the nobility and clergy whilst gleefully vociferating a panoply of sexual taboos. Indeed, if the forbidden tales contain material that skewered the patriarchy and sexual norms, then the officially sanctioned tales – which emerged from the same communal sensibilities and were collected simultaneously – might also harbor elements that, when viewed queerly, destabilize the institution of (heterosexual) marriage that Vladimir Propp identifies as fairy tales' universal concluding structural element (1928, 71–73). This article will demonstrate that even some of the tales Afanas'ev was able to publish openly in Russia – those, which inspired so much art, children's and otherwise, and which were later repurposed to support and propagate the prevailing sociopolitical discourse – can pack a queer punch to the patriarchal compulsion to heterosexual marriage and its concomitant sexual dynamics.

## Fairy tales and "the system"

Focusing on Western fairy tales Jack Zipes writes: "Originally the folk tale was (and is) an oral narrative form cultivated by non-literate and literate people to express the manner in which they perceived and perceive nature and their social order and their wish to satisfy their needs and wants" (Zipes 2002, 7). These narratives contained and contain elements that audiences with more "civilized" sensibilities might consider unduly bloody, sexually aberrant, or otherwise inappropriate for children's ears. Zipes contends that as various documenters began to record, embellish, and edit these tales, the narratives "were made into didactic fairy tales for children so that they would not be harmed by the violence, crudity, and fantastic exaggeration of the originals. Essentially the contents and structure of these saccharine tales upheld the Victorian values of the status quo" (Zipes 2002, 18). Thus, fairy tales came to be sanitized of their more outrageous elements and to be geared toward indoctrinating youngsters with the dominant sociopolitical order via moral lessons and examples.

The project of shielding children from "questionable" fairy-tale elements in the past in no way differs from the current tendency in Russia either to vilify or else obscure "sexual minorities," under the pretext that they pose an existential threat to society. Naysayers forecast injurious social repercussions of a culture in which, sexually speaking, "anything goes." Current Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has even blamed homosexuality for Russia's meteoric population decline following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Ireland 2007, n. pag.). In summary, critics of non-heterosexual sex and unions argue that the discursive legitimization of queer sexualities harms incoming generations thusly: first, it somehow authorizes the choice of "corruptive" alternative relationship configurations and second, it threatens the very future of Russia since procreation is putatively either not non-hetero unions' *raison d'être* or else biologically infeasible for them. In both the cases of sexual minorities and fairy tales, elements deemed deleterious to children's development by the prevailing value system must be excised, whitewashed, or denied.

But does the anti-queer-sexuality contingent assume too cavalierly that all children will be amenable to its agenda, conveniently ignoring the occurrence of dissenting offspring whose own drives may run counter to its own? Children do not spring from the womb with a burning commitment to so-called "family values." Early queer theorist Guy Hocquenghem reminds readers that Sigmund Freud himself discovered that children's desire is "polymorphously perverse" (Hocquenghem 1993, 74). More recently, Kathryn Bond Stockton has called out adults' projection of their own values onto childhood, asserting, "The child is precisely who

we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back. It is a ghostly, unreachable fancy" (Stockton 2009, 5). Hocquenghem and Stockton recognize that children themselves may, in fact, be queer, a topic Stockton points out has been bandied about even in such banal venues as American daytime television talk shows (Stockton 2009, 7–8). Indeed, children's psyches are full of untrammeled urges, desires, and ideations that do not necessarily hew to a heteronormative paradigm. Fairy tales, which originally trafficked in the realm of unbounded fantasy, appear tailor-made to engage children's developing imaginations and unacculturated desires.

## Uses of fairy tales

In his thought-provoking but duly criticized (see Zipes 2002, 179–205) study *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1975), Bruno Bettelheim advances this very argument. Positing Freud's Oedipal drama as the pathway to maturity, Bettelheim asserts that fairy tales provide children on the road to adulthood with material "for achieving a more mature consciousness to civilize the chaotic pressures of their unconscious" (Bettleheim 1975, 23). He argues that moral judgment toward seemingly bizarre, often thinly veiled sexual narratives is suspended in fairy tales in order to help children understand how their own similar, potentially psychologically "harmful" fantasies can be quashed, sublimated, or aligned with "healthy" gender aspirations in a world where adult heterosexual relationships are *de rigueur*. Bettleheim insists that fairy tales do this while concurrently furnishing a release valve for children's subversive desires, allowing them to purge themselves of such drives before they grow up. (Here it is crucial to note that fairy tales are not limited to children's consumption. Nothing bars adults from enjoying them as well.)

Zipes, summarizing feminist criticisms of fairy-tale genres, has taken a more skeptical stance on the instrumentalizations of fairy tales, arguing that the tales' commodified literary and cinematic adaptations serve to mold children into compliant members of an adult culture with gendered behavioral expectations that serve governing ideologies (Zipes 1986, 2–3). His position is that "ever since the late seventeenth century, the self-serving interests of the dominant class (first aristocracy, then bourgeoisie) have undermined the subversive potential of the popular genre (i.e., folk) fairy tale through appropriatory revision" (quoted in Goscilo 2005, 8). Thus, rather than viewing fairy tales as a venue in which children might securely explore their fantasies, Zipes concludes that fairy-tale narratives have been usurped to instill in children normative social behaviors and attitudes, forging them into pliant subjects of "patriarchal" capitalist institutions (Zipes 2002, 4, 15).

Fairy tales, frequently featuring adventurous lads and damsels in distress, reinforce the gender stereotypes inherent in heteronormative courtship and marriage, fairly universal institutions fraught with notions of patriarchy and exchange. Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz argue: "Children's fairy tales, which emphasize such things as women's passivity and beauty, are indeed gendered scripts and serve to legitimatize and support the dominant gender system" (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003, 711). In *Don't Bet on the Prince* (1986), Zipes writes of fairy tale characters, with whom children are meant to identify:

> These socially conditioned roles prepare females to become passive, self-denying, obedient, and self-sacrificial (to name some of the negative qualities) as well as nurturing, caring, and responsible in personal situations (the more positive qualities). They prepare males to become competitive, authoritarian, and power-hungry as well as rational, abstract, and principled. (Zipes 1986, 3)

In the same book, Zipes compiles the work of feminist scholars such as Karen Rowe and Marcia Lieberman, who contemplate how fairy tales

generally conclude with a happy marriage, depicted as the crowning achievement of maturation. Rowe states: "Traditional fairy tales fuse morality with romantic fantasy in order to portray cultural ideals for human relationships" (Rowe 1986, 209) – *heterosexual* relationships. Lieberman points out that "marriage is the fulcrum and major event of nearly every fairy tale; it is the reward for girls, or sometimes their punishment" (Lieberman 1986, 189). Vladimir Propp, not a feminist scholar but a Russian structuralist, concludes as much in his groundbreaking study of Russian fairy tales *Morfologiia skazki* (*The Morphology of the Folktale*, 1928); marriage is the thirty-first and capstone function in his structural morphology, which seeks to categorize and order universal fairy-tale plot points (Propp 1928, 71–73).

## Gendered roles in marriage

But marriage is not as ideologically neutral as it may appear in a structuralist study, and, as the above critics maintain, fairy tales can be viewed as one of the cultural apparatuses that enjoin the sexes to enter into and maintain marital unions in which the wife affords passive deference to her husband. Far from being a whimsical, romantic affiliation between two young equals (of the opposite sex), marriage has rather been an imperative union. In her essay "The Traffic of Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy of Sex'" (1975), Gayle Rubin considers how women historically have been regarded as objects and symbols of exchange between men (Rubin 1975, 174). She asserts that, through marriages, men "exchange sexual access, genealogical statuses, lineage names and ancestors, rights, and *people*", as well as "peace" and items of monetary value (ibid., 173–174, 177 italics in original). The institution of marriage, then, which traditionally has positioned woman as gift, bestows upon men their status as participating patriarchs in society. Why would women, who comprise roughly half of the population, be complicit in this enterprise, which ignores their will and reduces them to chattel? Adrienne Rich (2003, 26) identifies a network of social practices and discourses created to ensure that men have sexual access to women. She names this state of affairs "compulsory heterosexuality," which can be understood as "the covert socializations and the overt forces which have channelled [sic] women into marriage and heterosexual romance, pressures ranging from the selling of daughters to the silences of literature to the images of the television screen" (Rich 2003, 17). Furthermore, she states that "the ideology of heterosexual romance" is rampant in culture, and girls are indoctrinated with it "from childhood out of *fairy tales*, television, films, advertising, popular songs, wedding pageantry," and so forth (italics added, Rich 2003, 24). Fairy tales, then, as they have been appropriated in print and the mass media, serve as one of the cultural texts that inculcate in children the exhortation to heterosexual marriage.

But even if some female characters occasionally challenge prescriptive gender roles – as might be the case with recent Disney-animated princesses, or even in traditional Russian fairy tales, as this article will demonstrate, with their occasional wise damsels, maiden tsars, and agentive heroines – heterosexual marriage by and large remains a salient, rewarding plot feature, the uncontested coda of the tale. Propp confirms as much stating that basic fairy-tale forms can be reversed over time, but the narrative morphology undergoes no essential destabilization. Even if "female members of the cast are replaced by males, and vice versa" (Propp 2002, 82), the structure and ordering of the functions remains undisturbed, and marriage retains its paramount function and significance. To combine the conclusions of Bettelheim, Zipes, feminist critics, and Propp, one may summarily argue that fairy tales give children a space to sort through their desires in order to integrate themselves inevitably into the realm of heteronormativity and to internalize the imperative to marry.

But what of children who do not feel attracted to the opposite sex, do not aspire to heterosexual marriage, or otherwise exhibit unorthodox gender ideations? Regardless of the degree to which "compulsory heterosexuality" prevails in a society, or even of the example rendered by parents in the home, certainly there often emerge children with non-conformist sexual proclivities and gender identifications, as Stockton (2009, 5–8) has suggested. If early fairy-tale texts offer *all* children suitably amoral, but directed material with which to process their fantasies and desires, could they also provide *queer* children with a space for questioning society's mandate of heterosexual monogamous marriage, and permit them to come to grips with their own alternative sexual identifications? Can queer children read in fairy tales narratives that merely toy with gender, despite a fundamentally intact structure as Propp (2002, 82) suggests, or might queer children actually latch onto and glean inspiration that disturbs heteronormative prescriptions? Can fairy tales, which have traditionally been seen to reinforce heterosexual matrimony and female passivity despite their more fantastical elements, harbor clandestine opportunities to imagine another choice? This paper argues that they do, and will consider three such Russian fairy tales from the collection by Afanas'ev to demonstrate that queer readers/listeners may indeed uncover alternative sexual practices and relationship configurations in these narratives.

## Deploying queer challenges

Queer manifestations and responses can be found in a variety of desires, phenomena, and texts that at first blush appear to align with the mandate of heterosexuality. To this end, Jason Schneidermann asserts: "Queer identity does not preclude gay identity, lesbian identity, etc. Rather 'queer' as I comprehend it is a big tent [sic] approach to sexual minorities" (Schneidermann 2010, 14). Queerness can thus account for all of heteronormativity's malcontents, whether transitorily or permanently dissenting, homosexual or heterosexual. Alan Sinfield (1994) provides a framework for apportioning out queer space in heteronormative fields by considering queer appropriations of English literature, focusing on the ways that various social groups have deployed the works of Shakespeare and other canonical authors. Sinfield asserts that queers can and do attune interpretations of texts to their own needs, invoking a "radical decoding system," in resistance to the "dominant" (1994, 67), to represent and consume a text. If the device of radical decoding is applied here, then fairy tales, which the above scholars have argued have come to undergird heteronormativity, could provide imaginative fodder for queer responses, interpretations, and appropriations. In spite of fairy tales' being one of heteronormativity's tools by which to impose gender, some queer readers/listeners may react positively to characters or plot events that they interpret to jostle expected gender roles and relations.

Queer analysis of fairy-tale texts is still in its infancy, but several scholars have been working in this area. According to Jennifer Orme, "Queer theory has yet to significantly influence fairy-tale studies, but there are indications that our readings are beginning to change" (Orme 2010, 121). Orme performs an elucidating queer reading of Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997). She asserts that through its "structural framing devices", this anthology of tales, "narrated by and to woman-identified women [,] disturb the unquestioned and normative binary of *sexual relations* that they reveal" (Orme 2010, 119). Her analysis uncovers narratives of women desiring and sharing desires with other women. Another scholar, Roderick McGillis, analyzes the fairy-tale writings of George McDonald, which do not challenge heterosexual marriage *per se* but in which McGillis (2003, 94) reads "an indictment of masculine aggressiveness". He describes the "masculine characters in McDonald's fairy tales" as "'fairies'" (ibid., 92). Although McGillis emphasizes that the

male characters in McDonald's Victorian-era literary tales are indubitably "straight," he does raise the issue that their performance of gender "subverts the manly figure that prepares for life on the playing fields of Eton" (ibid., 87). They ultimately question the imperative of rugged masculinity for men and model an alternative.

Pauline Greenhill provides a comprehensive and compelling queer reading of several of the fairy tales compiled by the Brothers Grimm. According to her, in "Fitcher's Bird" heterosexual marriage and husbands are lethal for young women, casting the worth of the institution itself into doubt (Greenhill 2008, 151–153). Sisterly bonds appear as more secure and appealing than marriage, as the female characters find solace in each other, not in the brutal sorcerer-husband. Greenhill also notes elements of cross-dressing, as the youngest sister dons feathers, and thus an alternate identity, as well as the sorcerer's non-normative sexual appetites, which include necrophilia and bestiality (ibid., 156–159). She concludes that the narrative of "Fitcher's Bird" "subverts patriarchy, heterosexuality, femininity, and masculinity alike" (ibid., 147).

The foregoing examples of queer readings have emerged only in the last decade and, moreover, (to my knowledge) have been limited to Western fairy tales. Still, they demonstrate that fairy tales do hold queer possibilities. This paper contributes to the scholarship by engaging with non-Western-European examples of fairy tales in search of further queer potential in the genre as it appears in other cultures. It reveals that just as Russian fairy tales occasionally subvert gender norms with wise, powerful, and agentive female characters, they may also at times sabotage sociosexual expectations with characters who challenge traditional sexuality and marriage. This article adds to the growing collection of queer fairy-tale readings by apportioning a space for queer responses in the texts of old Russian culture – an arguably non-Western culture, but one that is no less prone to shaming and eradicating internal queerness. The subsequent analysis will treat the canonical Russian fairy tales "The Maiden Tsar," "Danilo the Luckless," and "Maria Morevna."

## The maiden tsar

As is evidenced by its title alone, "Tsar'-Devitsa" ("The Maiden Tsar")[2] is one such Russian fairy tale that contests notions of feminine passivity. As a matter of fact, it relegates men to the passive role in a heterosexual couple's sexual dynamics and toys with gender and language. The eponymous character engages in many behaviors not conventionally expected of young women, even a woman of privileged royalty. First, she conspicuously bears the title of a masculine monarch – she is no tsarina, despite references with feminine-inflected nouns and adjectives in the Russian text. She has thirty warships at her disposal and can command them on a whim to set sail and put down anchor whenever she pleases. Imperious and decisive, upon her instant attraction to the hero Vasilii's remarkable handsomeness, she immediately proposes marriage to him. Yet even though the Maiden Tsar bends gender by her actions, the narrative still posits marriage as the reward at its conclusion. Indeed, young Vasilii must pursue the Maiden Tsar and locate (read: earn or kindle) her capacity to love – not an easy task, since it is impounded in a rather inaccessible location: "On the other side of the sea there's an oak, and in the oak there's a chest, and in the chest there's a hare, and in the hare there's a duck, and in the duck there's an egg, and in the egg is the maiden tsar's love" (Balina 2005, 94).

2 The version of "The Maiden Tsar" in Afanas'ev's 1999 collection by Buslaev differs somewhat from the English-translation 2005 collection by Balina, Goscilo, and Lipovetsky. For this paper, all direct English citations from the tales will be taken from *Politicizing Magic: An Anthology of Russian and Soviet Fairy Tales*, but I am working between this English collection and Buslaev's Russian compilation.

Nevertheless, nonstandard and fluid sexualities abound in "The Maiden Tsar". The theme of (quasi-) incest arises between the evil stepmother and Vasilii, belying an Oedipal undercurrent, but instances of actual sexual contact are more detectable between Vasilii and his male tutor. Vasilii's stepmother is a powerful woman, and technically there can be no Oedipal intrigue between them, but she commands the tutor to obstruct Vasilii's budding romance by sticking an enchanted pin into his lapel whenever the Maiden Tsar sails near. The pin causes Vasilii to fall into a comatose sleep, and the Maiden Tsar's passionate kisses and caresses prove impotent at rousing, or arousing, the quiescent Vasilii. Indeed, if the tale is considered metaphorically, the motif of the tutor's penetrating or sticking Vasilii with a pin intimates homosexual activity in which Vasilii is the passive. If, according to Bettelheim, sleeping or dormancy is a fairy-tale metaphor for maturation (1975, 75–76), then Vasilii's inert state could easily signify not just post-coital slumber but rather a phase of homosexual activity that precedes adulthood and heterosexual desire. This reverses the paradigm established by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1984, 229), in which men pass through heterosexual marriage to enter the system of homosocial relations. Furthermore, the coded homosexual activity in this passage leaves lasting effects on Vasilii's sexuality into adulthood, as his sexual passivity remains ingrained even after he kills the tutor and pursues the Maiden Tsar. She holds the power in their relationship, and Vasilii's pursuit of her, despite her desire to rip him to shreds, can be read as a masochistic drive to be dominated or penetrated by an active sexual partner of any sex. Fluid sexuality, shifting objects of desire, and male sexual passivity are queer potentialities in this tale, offering themselves to be claimed by boys who refuse to participate in the exchange of women.

But the powerful Maiden Tsar herself may be a queer hero in more regards than merely challenging gender dynamics in marriage. She is presented foremost as a woman who happens to take on the role/guise of a tsar, a male sovereign. Could she not also be considered as a tsar who happens to appropriate some of the qualities of a maiden, a sort of transvestite ruler? She is either a diva or a female impersonator, but in either case gender is blurred. Such an inversion may smack slightly of an anachronistic projection of modern-day drag culture onto ancient fairy tales, but the concept of radical decoding as mentioned by Sinfield facilitates such extrapolations and adoptions. Furthermore, uniformed gender-bending was not unheard of in early nineteenth-century Russia, as, for example, Nadezhda Durova, "the famous Amazon who successfully masqueraded as a Russian officer during the Napoleonic wars" (Holmgren 2005, 37), was a noted author and social presence. In any case, even though the Maiden Tsar speaks for herself and is referenced with feminine Russian endings for adjectives and verbs, such is also the case for many Russian and non-Russian transvestites and homosexual men, who employ feminine-marked grammar in their communications. Significant, however, is the notion that this tale, which arose among the illiterate agrarian populace, provides a release valve for those who may feel repressed by gender prescriptions in marriage. The narrative and characters in "The Maiden Tsar," accommodate a queer response that destabilizes gender, while configuring alternative heterosexual relationships of power and penetration. The tale demonstrates that women and men may be the pursuers in erotic relationships in which men need not adopt a definitively active sex role in the bedroom.

Not all instances of toying with gender roles in literature, however, can be taken as unequivocally queer. Kerry Mallan notes that cross-gender play and cross-dressing are not always as subversive as they seem in children's literature. She reviews several books in which boy protagonists dress in feminine clothing, acquire long, curly hair, or are otherwise treated as young misses. The boys are forced to endure the rigors of girlhood, but this all happens for comedy's sake. Furthermore, the hapless protagonists are permitted to return to their former boy selves and clothing at the end

of the narratives (Mallan 2006, 252–255, 265). Mallan assesses that the gender-bending in these children's stories is only temporary and intended primarily to elicit laughter from young readers: "These stories may disrupt and confuse the categories of gender for the amusement of their audiences, but their recuperative closures limit their transgressiveness and the potential to unsettle dominant patterns of gender performance and identity" (Mallan 2006, 265). As to girls' donning boys' attire Victoria Flanagan observes, "The recurring nature of the female-to-male children's cross-dressing is due to the prevalence of patriarchal social structures in both the literary realm and historical actuality" (Flanagan 1999, 5). Thus, cross-dressing, especially that of female-to-male, rather than queering gender, can be seen at times to reinforce gender stereotypes and cannot be taken prima facie as queer.

Another point of caution in naming superficially deviant behaviors in literature, film, and so on as queer is the mainstream's tendency to appropriate dissident elements that would otherwise threaten its stranglehold on normative desires and acts. Mallan and McGillis point out that "[m]ainstream culture, through the avenues of fashion, film, advertising, and so on, has always found a way of assimilating subcultural codes and vernaculars, thus defusing them of their political and subversive potential" (Mallan & McGillis 2005, 6). With these points of caution duly noted, "The Maiden Tsar" still successfully queers what would otherwise appear as a standard fairy-tale relationship, bestowing the sexual agency with the Maiden Tsar and reversing the typical trajectory of desire to female-male. The tale shakes up fairy-tale gender expectations in the heroine, granting her the role of masculine autocrat and its concomitant duties and pastimes. These destabilizations are not committed manifestly for comedic effect, nor are they temporary. Vasilii retains his passive role in the relationship with the Maiden Tsar at the end of the tale. The narrative concludes with queered desires and behaviors firmly in place and undisparaged, ripe for radical decoding.

## Danilo the Luckless

"Danilo Besschastnyi" ("Danilo the Luckless") is another Russian fairy tale that subverts traditional gender roles, both within and outside the bonds of marriage. At the outset of the narrative, Prince Vladimir assigns Danilo the distaff task of sewing a fur coat out of sables that have not been prepared. But it is Danilo's wife, the Swan Maiden, who most frequently and markedly undermines traditional gender roles within the family. First, the marriage between her and Danilo is not a reward for any great feat by Danilo. A water monster simply bestows the Swan Maiden on Danilo as a spouse, and there is no actual exchange of women between (mortal) men. The Swan Maiden ends up wielding all the (magical) powers in their home, functioning almost as a modern-day construction contractor. With a flutter of the wings and a brisk shake of the head, she summons twelve men – carpenters, masons, and builders – to assemble a beautiful new house for the newlyweds. Afterward, it is the Swan Maiden who takes the sexual initiative and Danilo's hand, leading him to the honeymoon bed in the newly constructed abode. Further queering this moment is the Swan Maiden's partially animal nature. With the same flutter and shake, the Swan Maiden beckons to twelve more men to perform Danilo's task of assembling the fur coat for Prince Vladimir.

Her most subversive act transpires at the tale's climax, when Danilo, the Prince, his wife, and one Alesha Popovich[3] are waiting for the Swan Maiden to greet them in front of her house. Alesha remarks that she is taking too long to emerge, and that if she were his wife he would "teach" her deference to her husband. Incensed, the Swan Maiden swoops onto the porch and declares, "And here's how I teach husbands!" (Balina 2005, 84) She launches herself into the sky and leaves the menfolk in a desolate swamp.

3 *Alesha Popovich* is a noted *bogatyr'* (warrior hero) from the *byliny* (epic tales) of Russian folklore.

The Swan Maiden not only punishes Alesha Popovich's patriarchal views of marriage, but also claims the traditional masculine domain of the heavens, leaving the males in the Russian traditionally feminine stratum of "Damp Mother Earth" (Ivanits 1992, 15). The Swan Maiden's role reveals the sham of male privilege and power in marriage, as she performs all the labor for her husband's benefit. She takes revenge on the structure by dissolving the men's desired relationships and mocking the ones they are left in.

Despite the disruption of spousal roles, the storyline still hews superficially to a heteronormative trajectory of marriage in which the husband "owns" the wife. Indeed, Danilo and the Swan Maiden share a consummatory honeymoon and establish a household together. There is even patriarchal, homosocial intrigue between Danilo and Alesha Popovich, who quarrel with each other over the privilege of possessing the Swan Maiden as a wife. In spite of these elements, however, the tale provides ample moments that challenge the supremacy of faithful heterosexuality. The union between the Swan Maiden and Danilo may not be strictly monogamous, but rather open and even pansexual. The marriage occurs early in the tale, not at the end as a prize for some manly struggle, and immediately following the couple's honeymoon night the Swan Maiden presents Danilo with a golden egg, instructing him to give it to the person with whom he will spend the rest of his life. Upon exiting church services, Danilo gives the golden egg to Alesha Popovich, who is disguised as a beggar. This episode ignites several queer possibilities. First, the marital union between the Swan Maiden and Danilo is nullified and the institution as a whole is undermined: the Swan Maiden's instructions presuppose that Danilo will spend the rest of his life with someone else, not her, his wife, and this immediately following their honeymoon. Second, Danilo gives the egg to a man, suggesting that lifelong companionships can exist between two men – not necessarily gay marriage, but some sort of cohabitation between two adult males that neither precludes heterosexual marriage nor functions as some hegemonic homosocial bond that exploits women. A woman enables this bond to rid herself of her husband. Third, Danilo's choice of Alesha Popovich, who is in drag as a homeless beggar, alludes to non-standard desire and sexuality, even mysophilia, an attraction to disheveled, perhaps unwashed partners.

Finally, "Danilo the Luckless" accommodates other non-heterosexual sex practices, which the Swan Maiden introduces or instigates. When she ascends into the sky after berating the men, she leaves them in the mud. The tale's narrator tells Prince Vladimir, who earlier had given Danilo the traditionally woman's task of sewing together a fur coat, to ride Danilo using the suggestive command, "Prince, better put aside your pride, mount Danilo for your ride!" (Balina 2005, 84) The prince's wife, who had traveled to the Swan Maiden's house together with him, is no longer mentioned in the narrative. The implied sexual activity at this point occurs entirely between two men. The metaphor of riding on someone's back as sex is not unfamiliar in Russian texts, occurring, for example, in the canonical novella of Nikolai Gogol's *Vii*, between the philosopher Khoma Brut and the witch (2007, 140–144). A final metaphorical reference to non-standard sex is the inclusion of mud. Danilo and Prince Vladimir are covered from head to toe in mud when the ride is finished, implying either an untidy bout of anal intercourse, or else coprophilia.

Thus, despite being ostensibly structured around heterosexual marriage and competition between suitors, "Danilo the Luckless" contains elements that actually challenge or reconsider the dynamics of heterosexual marriage. The relationship between the Swan Maiden and Danilo is not a stable, loving one in which children might be raised to replicate the dominant social structure. The Swan Maiden actually encourages an open, polyamorous relationship with Danilo by sending him out to find an alternate life partner. She also arranges for Danilo to be involved in several non-standard sex practices, which allow for the sublimation of homosexual

sex and non-procreative paraphilias. Men involved in patriarchal economies of heterosexuality – Danilo as a married man, Alesha Popovich as a lady's man, and Prince Vladimir as patriarch of a kingdom – can safely shirk their traditional masculine roles, neglect their marriages, and engage in queer sex. True, these thinly veiled intimations of homosexuality are likely present, at least to some degree, for comic effect just as in the forbidden tales, which debase the powerful classes via sexual and scatological humor. Yet, the Swan Maiden's agentive actions, as well as her mandate of open and alternative relationships, remains in force at the tale's conclusion, and it is she who sanctions all queer practices. The tale harbors legitimate queer moments and motifs.

## Maria Morevna

The tale of "Mariia Morevna" ("Maria Morevna") challenges standard definitions of femininity even without any queer implications. Maria Morevna is a warrior lady who charges forth to wage battle, leaving her husband, Prince Ivan, at home to attend to domestic chores. In a gender-reversing role mirroring "The Maiden Tsar" and "Danilo the Luckless," it is Maria Morevna who gives the standard fairy tale interdiction (Propp 1928, 36) to Ivan not to open her closet, where Koshchey the Deathless[4] is incarcerated. But despite Maria Morevna's aggressive masculine behavior, the tale is still structured around heterosexual marriage. Prince Ivan's three sisters all get married to dashing bird-princes, and Prince Ivan himself marries Maria Morevna and pursues her relentlessly after Koshchey the Deathless kidnaps her. Under this heteronormative surface, however, lurks a queer reading that involves Prince Ivan's identifying with and treasuring his feminine side and threatens the stable discourse of blissful marriage.

4 *Koshchey Bessmertnyi* (Koshchey the Deathless) is a recurring figure in Russian folklore. He is difficult to kill, as his soul is separated from his body. He often takes on the role of villain.

At the outset of the tale, Ivan dispatches his three sisters one by one to wed various princes, whose acquaintance he has made after his parents' death. As Ivan enters the world of masculine power and rubs shoulders with potent male figures, he allows the three sisters to leave his presence. Initially this may appear to represent the very exchange of women that Rubin and Sedgwick draw attention to. Ivan's female blood relatives could also be read as iterations of himself or his feminine side, which he feels he must relinquish as he negotiates the world of what R. W. Connell (2005, 77) calls "hegemonic masculinity." This is a tactic Bettleheim (1975, 101–102) suggests in accounting for multiple siblings in fairy tales, viewing various brothers as the dissected psyche of an individual. Despondent after sacrificing his feminine qualities in order to ingratiate himself into patriarchy, Ivan sets out to look for a wife, Maria Morevna, perhaps in order to substitute for his lost feminine traits. Ivan values her so much that he tracks her against all odds even after she is carried off by the fearsome Koshchey the Deathless. As Ivan begins his search for his ultimate feminine other half, he begins to connect with his lost sisters, leaving valuable silver tableware behind when he visits them.

Further reminders to Ivan of the importance of feminine traits arise later in the tale, and he is prompted to reunite with the feminine aspects he shed after his sisters left home. As Ivan is traveling to the witch Baba Iaga's house to obtain a swift steed, he meets three maternal animals – an exotic bird, a queen bee, and a lioness – all of whom he refrains from harming and who in turn assist him in his attempts to corral Baba Iaga's unruly mares. The exotic bird hails from overseas, likely has exceedingly beautiful plumage, and can be seen to express the stereotypical feminine gentleness and fragility. The queen bee can be considered to represent feminine royalty and domestic industriousness, the ability to manage a hive of workers who produce food. The lioness perhaps represents feminine strength and protectiveness of offspring. Ivan respects all these female creatures, as

well as their gentleness, industrious domesticity, and jealous protection of children. This respect saves his life, as the female animals drive the mares back to Baba Iaga and wake Ivan up to continue his journey. Ivan learns that feminine traits, perhaps even those within him, should be protected and honored, as they can speed him in his harrowing endeavors.

"Maria Morevna" additionally insinuates that marriage is a potentially dangerous institution, even hazardous to one's health, and may result in the death of the young male protagonist. Before Ivan meets the three female animals, he has his own lethal encounter with his wife's kidnapper, Koshchey the Deathless, only to be cut up into tiny pieces, sealed in a barrel, and flung into the sea. Chasing marriage, or succumbing to this patriarchal structure, results in Ivan's death. Just as Greenhill (2008, 151) sees a valuing of alternative relationships in "Fitcher's Bird," so too does a queer reading of "Maria Morevna" hint that young men need alternative, homosocial relationships with their peers to revive them from the travail of wedded life. In this case, Ivan's brothers-in-law, whom he has bonded with following their marriages to his sisters, rush to his rescue. They assemble his sundry pieces and revive him with the waters of death and life. Thus, extramarital masculine relationships are proposed as a curative balm against the ravages of heterosexual marriage, and they actually resurrect Ivan from death caused by his quest for marriage.

A queer reading of "Maria Morevna," then, challenges heteronormative patriarchy in two significant ways. It suggests that men, even full-grown, married men must safeguard and value their feminine side. Second, it destabilizes marriage's unquestioned primacy by exposing its perils and intimating that extramarital relationships can actually counterbalance marriage's deleterious effects. After learning these two lessons, Ivan and Maria can mount their steeds together, side by side, a procession that can be viewed as a balance of power in a platonic marriage, and a taunting of the patriarchal family structure so often propagated in fairy tales, through blurring and equalizing the roles within marriage.

## Conclusion

Russian fairy tales, in spite of their sundry appropriations by mainstream (Victorian, communist, patriarchal, etc.) ideologies over the past centuries, are rooted in old folk texts, circulated orally until published by Afanas'ev. They demonstrate how Russian folk cultures "perceived and perceive nature and their social order and their wish to satisfy their needs and their wants" (Zipes 2002, 7). A queer reading of the tales, though, reveals that these "needs" and "wants" were not unswervingly heterosexual. Granted, the tales invoke gender-bending situations in order to regale listeners, but they also bespeak a cultural awareness of the burden of these gender roles and the impositions they can impress upon listeners – queer and otherwise. Queer readings of Russian fairy tales, at the risk of appearing revisionist, can unlock the potential for and cognizance of dissenting sexualities in the face of the heteronormative mandates of a virulently homophobic post-Soviet Russia.

Each of the tales considered above features heterosexual marriage – the dominant patriarchal social configuration – as a salient plot feature. It even appears that most of the heroes and heroines in the tales strive to enter into the institution and inhabit the enjoined, typically gendered roles of husband and wife. Indeed, fairy tales have been criticized for this (nearly) universal characteristic. But as the foregoing analyses have demonstrated, queer elements and responses emerge in texts heretofore presumed heteronormative. The Russian tales discussed here offer the possibility to imagine alternatives to and respites from the "archetypal" relationship of the husband-wife binary. Same-sex, sexually open, and active-feminine

relationships are present in the three tales, undermining marriage's primacy and even advocating for homosocial refuge relationships. The analysis of the tales offer further evidence that queerness can be located where least expected – even in didactic texts that have been purposed to influence a culture's young to enter into heterosexual marriages.

"The Maiden Tsar," "Danilo the Luckless," and "Maria Morevna" demonstrate that some Russian fairy tales do allow for radical decoding; queer individuals, even children, who do not conform to the prescriptions of idealizing heterosexual marriage or adopt a purely heterosexual identity can indeed find narrative material for their developing "aberrant" imaginations. They model that boys can be passive in sexuality and in relationships, and that girls can be active. From a conservative standpoint, especially one resistant to reception theory, such a reading may come off as extreme and even threatening. Yet it merely confirms that Zipes's conclusions about fairy tales in general holds true for some entries in the Russian canon: "They contain an emancipatory potential which can never be completely controlled or depleted unless human subjectivity itself is fully computerized and rendered impotent" (Zipes 2002, 21). A queer interpretation of Russian fairy tales, and their more recent artistic adaptations, may do well to remind anti-homophobic groups – such as those who seek to ban gay pride parades in Moscow, as well as the almost surreal coalition of icon-waving Orthodox babushkas and egg-flinging skinheads who harass patrons outside of gay bars in Russia (Grammaticus 2006, n. pag.) – that Russian literary patrimony accommodates the very sexualities they are vying to annihilate. Queer readings could also serve as gentle evidence to the vocal political class that the queer sexualities they publicly condemn can be accounted for in the popular history of Russian culture.

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