

DEATH OBJECTIFIED, LIFE AFFIRMED:
MORTALITY AND MATERIALISM IN RUSSIAN FOLKTALES FEATURING
KOSCHEI THE DEATHLESS

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Death Objectified, Life Affirmed: Mortality and Materialism in Russian Folktales

Featuring Koschei the Deathless

Koschei the Deathless, a stock villain of Russian folklore, is a powerful sorcerer who achieves immortality by physically hiding his death, which is treated as an object rather than an event. This project investigates the objectification of Koschei's death as a product of cultural anxieties about the uncertainties of peasant life in the Late Tsarist period. The project has two parts, the first a literary analysis of the portrayal of Koschei the Deathless in early English translations of Russian folktales and their subsequent adaptations, and the second investigates how specific social factors (including literacy and mortality rates) may have influenced particular narrative attributes. This project uses the function-oriented methodology popularized by Soviet folklorist Vladimir Propp. Propp's method for deconstructing folktales relies on identifying the function, or role, performed by specific narrative elements in a given story. Whereas Propp's analysis of the Russian folktale was concerned solely with the literal functions of its narrative elements, this project is concerned instead with symbolic function, assessing the metaphorical value of particular aspects of the Koschei tales. The Koschei tales provide insight into attitudes among the Russian peasantry towards death and dependence on material resources during the mid-19th century. These stories portray a consistently negative view of immortality, emphasizing the value of a finite lifespan and ultimately helping the peasantry confront the fact of mortality. The life-affirming qualities of these folktales enables their persistence in contemporary Russian literature and popular culture.

A STATEMENT OF RELEVANCE: WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

Whenever folklore is accorded some measure of critical attention, the question of *why* inevitably arises. Although it is regarded as an important source of insight among cultural anthropologists, oral folklore and its written transcriptions have long been the subject of derision in literary circles – folklore is never *elevated* enough or thematically broad enough in scope to warrant the same attention as the great epics: Beowulf and the works of Homer, for instance. Such a comparison is reductive and short-sighted, least of all because the Odyssey, Beowulf, and folktales are *not the same type* of story.

I. On the Differences and Similarities Between Mythology and Folklore

For the purposes of this project, it is imperative that the reader understand how mythology differs categorically from folklore. Without this understanding, one cannot evaluate the project's central goal of investigating the subversive functions of a particular series of folktales. Therefore, it is necessary to define terms. One early theory from the mythologist school of folklore studies proposed that folktales were unfortunate byproducts of what Wilhelm Grimm called "diseased myths," and that they "were really about astronomical, meteorological, and geographical phenomena dating back to ancient times when men feared and revered thunder, the sun, winds, and rain as gods and goddesses" (Haney xxxi). In other words, this theory posited that folktales are derived from myths that were discarded by their own peoples: almost a form of mythological apocrypha. However, this theory is somewhat tone-deaf because it fails to recognize that myth and folktale exist for different purposes in society, and it is not widely accepted

today. The precise nature and parameters of the folktale are still debated, but there are a handful of demarcating characteristics which distinguish folklore from other forms of oral storytelling - namely, whether the events described in the story were once thought to be factual accounts of distant history. William Bascom discusses these definitions in his 1965 essay *Forms of Folklore*, published in the *Journal of American Folklore*:

Folktales are prose narratives regarded as fiction...Myths are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past...Legends are prose narratives which, like myths, are regarded as true by the narrator and his audience, but they are set in a period considered less remote, when the world was much as it is today (2).

According to Bascom's definitions, stories akin to the abduction of the Greek goddess Persephone or the transformation of Arachne into a spider would be considered myths, while the story of Beowulf falls into the legend category, and Aesop's Fables are folktales.

Such definitions provide clear narrative parameters, but another important factor in distinguishing these types of stories ought to be mentioned: breadth of scope, insofar as *worldbuilding* is concerned. Mythologies include creation tales, stories that inform their societies of how the world came into being, stories that explain natural phenomena and usually hold some kind of religious significance. In other words, mythologies are all-encompassing; they seek to explain everything. Legends, on the other hand, exist only to recount a series of events revolving around a central figure which, though believed to be true, do not include an explanation of how the world began or how the world will end. Folktales are never regarded as historical truth, and do not attempt to explain anything; they exist to entertain, and occasionally to caution or advise the listener.

To that effect, it is a waste of time to decry the folktale in comparison to the great epics of the Greeks or the Anglo-Saxons or the ancient Mesopotamians. These narratives belong to entirely separate categories of storytelling; they cannot be held up and asked to testify against one another.

I. Clerical Revisionism and the Subversive Functions of Folklore

In her essay *Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking*, Alicia Ostriker writes about the power derived from narrative changes made to stories. She describes how the capacity to recite or rewrite a story is an act of power, not unlike an ability to reshape time and space - however, the ability to widely disseminate one's version of a story is perhaps a more powerful one. And while the former ability is available to all people from all walks of life, the latter ability is a highly restricted privilege, as it requires (in most cases) considerable financial resources:

Historic and quasi-historic figures like Napoleon and Sappho are in this sense mythic, as are folktales, legends, and Scripture. Like the gods and goddesses of classical mythology, all such material has double power. It exists or appears to exist objectively, in the public sphere, and consequently confers on the writer the sort of authority unavailable to someone who writes "merely" of the private self. Myth belongs to "high" culture and is handed "down" through the ages by religious, literary, and educational authority. At the same time, myth is quintessentially intimate material, the stuff of dream life, forbidden desire, inexplicable motivation - everything in the psyche that to rational consciousness is unreal, crazed, or abominable (71).

Although Ostriker primarily employs feminist theory when examining the practice of revisionism, much of what she says can be applied to storytelling outside of a feminist context. Here, Ostriker distinguishes mythology from folklore by who the stories are accessible to. Myth is a controlled substance, carefully filtered and audited and passed

to the common people through religious and educational institutions. Folklore, on the other hand, exists in the oral sphere, the domestic sphere, the rural sphere, the working class sphere. Folklore encompasses the stories of the illiterate: those who could not, due to lack of access to education, trade stories through reading and writing, and for whom the oral tradition was the only means of engaging in a broad conversation or shared narrative.

But Ostriker also unites mythology and folklore in asserting that each tradition openly explores its thematic material in ways considered taboo by other forms of narrative. Myth and folktale constitute for both teller and audience a platform from which to explore themes such as madness, sexuality, and authority *without necessarily condemning them* – a function not provided by the sovereign word of church doctrine or government mandate.

Ostriker also writes that “whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends...initially satisfying the thirst for the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible,” (72). Ostriker makes a striking observation here, but what she fails to point out is that the appropriation of Classical myth (the mythology of the Romans in particular) occurred very early on in the spread of Christianity in the West, as part of the Christianization process, wherein pagan religions of the Celts and the Anglo-Saxons and the Greeks and the fractured peoples who populated their lands thereafter were incorporated into Christian stories, folded neatly into the narrative conventions of the Abrahamic tradition and thus revised as early as 500 AD or earlier. An amalgamation

of pre-Christian fertility rites became Easter, just as Saturnalia became Christmas (Salisbury 6). Such is the process of revisionist mythmaking Ostriker explains in her essay.

Again, however, what Ostriker neglects to mention is that, considering the history of Western Christendom and its dissemination, we have no reason to believe that Classical mythology was not already “revised,” and had been in a cycle of constant revision for hundreds and hundreds of years before the contemporary poets of the twentieth century decided to conduct their own revisions. As Ostriker mentions earlier in the same essay, “myth belongs to high culture and is handed down” by institutions of authority. Such institutions hand down myths which are told in a way that perpetuates the worldview of those selfsame institutions: a kind of self-reinforcing revisionism. Because of this, the myths of many pagan religions were considered “safe” in the eyes of the various literary and clerical establishments – such stories were safe to be told, to be passed around, least of all because they were the stories of a pre-Christian people, and could therefore be considered not truly pagan at all, as their cultures did not have the option of Christianity at the time. As historian Peter Brown discusses in *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity*, adherence of Christianized peoples to *paideia* (the ideal socialization and education process for pagan Greeks) offered valuable life lessons, “drawn from the history and literature of Greece, on serious issues...which no notable – Christian or polytheist, bishop or layman – could afford to ignore,” (122). Starting in the fourth century and continuing well past the Middle Ages, Europe and Asia Minor saw a slew of texts defending the reliance of Christian doctrine on its pagan predecessors – including St. Basil of Caesarea’s address *To Young Men, on How They Might Derive*

Profit from Pagan Literature, to name one of the more influential examples (Brown 122). This is the reason so many of Shakespeare's characters are named for the heroes and heroines of Classical antiquity; for Early Modern writers, such myths were not only safe to play with, but could be worn as badges of honor. References to such myths in Early Modern writing were displayed as certificates, proving the writer an educated person, versed in Latin and familiar with the stories of old (Gillespie 204-207, 251-254, 390-391).

No such rules apply to folklore. Folktales, like any other product of human imagination and communication, must have undergone revision by tellers and retellers – but any revision folktales were subjected to was carried out not by institutions, artists, or authority figures, but by an entirely different demographic. Folklore is unregulated; it escaped the net of clerical revisionism, of bureaucratic revisionism. Revisionist folktales are the product of *individuals*, and in that regard they are unique.

That is not to say God (the God of Christendom) does not exist in European folklore – quite the opposite is true, in fact. References to God are scattered frequently throughout the European folk tradition, and these references are by no means limited to the tales this project means to address. However, these mentions of God are largely superficial. God's name is invoked, taken in vain, and used colloquially and conversationally in various common expressions. Examples specific to Russian folklore include an occasion when an old man cries "God speed you!" as a euphemism for "Hurry!" or "Good luck!" in Norbert Guterman's translation of the tale *Prince Ivan and Princess Martha* (81). In a similar instance, the protagonist's brother-in-law asks "How hast God dealt with thee these past three years?" as a way of inquiring after the hero's

general fortune in Post Wheeler's translation of the tale *Maria Morevna* (28). Certainly, these stories acknowledge the existence of a Christian God by way of their language and phrasing – but the invocation of God's name holds a degree of irreverence, and seldom does God play an active role in the stories. On rare occasions, the rituals associated with Christianity (like baptism, for instance) serve a function in a tale – one such instance occurs in Wheeler's translation of *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, wherein a blessing aids heroine Vasilisa's survival, prompting her adversary, the witch Baba Yaga, to cry out, "Get thee out of my house this moment! I want no one who bears a blessing to cross my threshold!" (17). But the blessing in question that keeps Vasilisa safe is her late mother's, not God's, and was administered to Vasilisa not by a priest, but beside her mother's deathbed (15). In fact, the exact mechanism of the blessing is distinctly pagan: it was not bestowed upon Vasilisa directly, but upon a little wooden doll which, when given something to eat and drink, springs to life to protect its bearer, often by offering advice or completing dangerous or difficult tasks (Wheeler 5). Although the text leaves the question of whether Baba Yaga's fear of the blessing is related to an implied association with God ambiguous, it is worth noting that the story makes no mention of God in the initial blessing scene, and the indirect way in which the blessing protects Vasilisa is especially pre-Christian. This exemplifies how Russian folklore can be considered *adjacent* to Christianity without being particularly Christian in tone or content.

Historically, folk craft and lore have proven difficult to curtail by virtue of their oral nature: what is not recorded might as well not exist, and how does one govern a body of knowledge which, for all intents and purposes, does not exist? (Moss 119-124). Unlike myth, which was repurposed to suit the needs of the church, folklore exists not in favor of

or in opposition to Christianity, but adjacent to it. Thus, myth and folktale performed very different functions throughout the course of history. In the same way that Russian folktales are laced with traces of pre-Christian practice, there is no textual evidence to suggest that, had Russia adopted a religion other than Christianity, these tales would have behaved any differently (Moss 42-48). The underlying pagan quality of early Russian Christendom is sometimes called *dvoeverie*, or double-faith (Moss 44). Folklore subverts the clerical/anticlerical dichotomy that dominated European political life for the greater part of the continent's history.

III. Why We Study Folktales

So, again, what makes folktales worth studying? First of all, their subversive functions are significant: folktales facilitate a collective creative life outside of state institutions, and outside the limitations of illiteracy. Secondly, we study folktales because, at least from the perspective of the cultural anthropologist, all human behaviors are worthy of study. This is one of the central tenets of anthropology, the idea that to overlook a human activity is to overlook an aspect of human nature. But perhaps most importantly, folklore warrants further research because it is composed of stories, and stories have been shown time and time again to exert a considerable force on the human psyche.

Mankind has told stories since the dawn of time, in every possible circumstance – in times of peace and in times of war, in times of famine and in times of prosperity. Because of this fact, stories are something of a renewable resource: ask an anthropologist, and they would say with complete confidence that people will continue telling stories

until there are no people left. This is quite a breathtaking phenomenon, as the same cannot be said of many other human activities over the course of history, outside of those considered necessary to our survival, like eating and having children. The act of storytelling holds extreme ritual significance. We marry, we bury our dead, we tell stories. Folktales matter because they are a faculty of the human condition and must be studied as such, that we might learn more about our past and present selves.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of Russian folklore is vast and well-populated, its primary cast of characters consisting mostly of talking animals, cunning maidens, quick-witted peasant folk, errant knights, and brave youths named Ivan. Among these common figures is a motley villain class, of whom the most infamous is naturally Baba Yaga: simultaneous witch and grandmother, as instantly recognizable as she is inscrutable. But the secondary and marginally lesser-known stock villain of the Russian canon is Koschei the Deathless, an enigmatic figure and the primary vehicle for this literary analysis.

Sometimes described as a demon, sometimes a wizard, Koschei the Deathless appears as a skeletal, elderly man of varying stature, whose propensity for kidnapping women (usually of noble birth) prompts the hero (usually an Ivan) to journey far away in search of Koschei's hidden death. The death in question, very literally concealed inside a series of real objects and living creatures, has the power to render Koschei's immortality null and void, allowing Ivan to vanquish his foe and rescue his beloved.

These tales are typically characterized by long stretches of travel, oddly emotional or comedic observations about the characters' inner and family lives, and transactional relationships wherein Ivan is asked to spare a creature's life in return for a favor repaid to him at a later (but crucial) junction in the story. The exact details vary between accounts, but the central elements of the story tend to stay the same, one of them being the presence of Koschei.

Koschei – sometimes Koschey, Kashchei, Koshchei, Kashesi, or Koshchey – casts a strange shadow over the stories he inhabits, because descriptions of him remain

largely unchanged between versions, while the precise nature of his being and history go utterly unexplained. The story of how he discovered the secret to immortality is untold. His relationship with the monumental Baba Yaga is never clarified, although the tales hint at a power dynamic that leaves Koschei subordinate to the witch in terms of ability, but a free agent in terms of what could be called professional affiliation. Perhaps most disturbing of all is that we never truly find out *what he is*. Not unlike Baba Yaga, Koschei is no primordial force representative of pre-Christian weather deities native to Slavic paganism (a theory propagated by mid-19th century romantics and promptly dismissed as oversimplified), but is implied to be something else entirely: some unseelie half-life, something that may once have even been human (Guterman 649).

In the most popular versions of the tales, in English translation of course, Koschei lives in a castle, or an expansive house, employing household servants to complete domestic tasks and shepherds to guard his land (Guterman 487-488, Wheeler 28). He owns a steed that can carry him so fast that he could sew, reap, and bake bread from wheat, and still have time to overtake his enemies on horseback (Guterman 558, Wheeler 29). In the popular versions of the tales, Koschei was gifted this steed by Baba Yaga, as a reward for vigilantly watching her herds as they grazed in the pasture, preventing a single colt from escaping (Guterman 559, Wheeler 32). In some versions of the story, the key to defeating Koschei is obtaining a similar horse from Baba Yaga's herd, a colt fast enough to outrun Koschei's. In other versions, the key to defeating him is discovering where he keeps his death, which, once obtained and destroyed, will render Koschei weak and easy to best in combat.

Such details, considered altogether, paint an enigmatic portrait. Scholars have remarked over the years that the wizard's name is remarkably similar to that of *koshchiuny*, the god of the underworld in one of the Kievan 'Rus pre-Christian creation myths (Haney xxxix). A so-called "Slavic prince of darkness," Koschei inhabits a quasi-liminal space between warlock and god (Haney xviii). He does not align precisely with any known archetype, and this makes us uncomfortable. It is important to note, however, that always Koschei is referred to with the title "the Deathless," signifying the shared significance of his immortality in the tales, and implying that whatever the circumstances, Koschei remains staunchly the same character throughout. He is always deathless; it is his defining feature, a rare immutable trait in a narrative landscape of shifting plots.

BACKGROUND & METHOD OF ANALYSIS

I. Russian Folklore in a Historical Context

The first written collection of Russian folktales ever published was recorded not in Russian, but in English. The classic canon of Russian folklore – that is, the most widely known tales and their popular variants – was compiled by ethnographer Alexandr Nikolayevich Afanasiev, and was published in Russian serially between 1855 and 1864. A lawyer by education, Afanasiev himself recorded only ten of the folktales he compiled, but his collection drew from the wealth of folktales accumulated by the Russian Geographical society and other sources (Guterman 637-638). But almost two hundred years earlier, English scholar Samuel Collins posthumously published the first compendium of the same material, in an essay titled *The Current State of Russia*, in 1671. Collins, a doctor of medicine by trade and an Oxford graduate, lived and worked in Moscow during the 1660s, where he was employed by Tsar Aleksey Mikhailovich as court physician (Guterman 632).

The question of why Russian oral tales weren't recorded in Russian earlier than the late 19th century is a significant and puzzling one. Translator Norbert Guterman, whose 1976 volume of Russian folklore remains one of the most relevant and acclaimed anglophone anthologies to date, theorizes that this may have been the result of heavy-handed church oversight and related social pressures:

For many centuries Russian written literature was almost entirely subordinated to the church: with all its wealth and high artistry, the Old Russian literary heritage is almost wholly concerned with the lives of saints and pious men, with devotional legends, prayers, sermons, ecclesiastical discourses, and chronicles in a monastic vein. The old Russian laity, however, possessed a copious, original, manifold, and

highly artistic fiction, but the only medium for its diffusion was oral transmission (632).

There is some evidence, Guterman asserts, that thirteenth century Russian apocryphal art made space, through the creation of religious-*adjacent* rather than simply *religious* work, for the development of secular poetry during the period before the Tatar invasions - but ultimately the notion of utilizing the written word for secular material was “thoroughly alien to the Russian tradition” (Guterman 633).

The first tangible attempts at written secular fiction in the Muscovite empire came during the seventeenth century, when the boundaries between the clerical and the secular began to blur – as did the boundaries between foreign and native. This era produced a series of bizarre and remarkable hybrid works, which combined narrative and stylistic elements formerly characteristic of *either* secular (oral) or ecclesiastical (written) literature (Guterman 634). From this tradition grew what we have come to identify as a Russian literary canon.

Medieval Russian scholar Jack Haney, in the introduction to the first volume of his substantial compendium of Russian “wondertales,” observes the value of anonymity – it lends a tale permission to be malleable; the anonymity of the storyteller validates the mutability of the story. “Occasionally we know that a tale has been incorporated into the Russian oral tradition from some other tradition,” Haney writes, “but in most cases we do not know by whom, or when, or how, a given tale was first told. This does not really matter...The notion of authorship is generally regarded as irrelevant” (xvi). He observes that in pre-modern Russia, paintings often went unsigned and almost all music predating modernity was authorless, and he further asserts that nearly all cases in which pre-modern Russian literary texts are accredited to a specific author are “mere conjecture or wishful

thinking on the part of subsequent readers” (xvi). But in his observations about the pervasiveness and inherent value of anonymity, Haney acknowledges certain anomalies in the pattern: in some instances, a teller of a particular folktale is known because such information was included by the folklorist in the preservation initiative itself, and therefore recorded along with the tale. In some rare circumstances, a date and location of the recording may also be available. Haney recounts, for instance, a tale which was “told before 1915 to [collector] Mark Azadovskii by the fabled narrator Natal’ia Osipovna Vinokurova, an impoverished peasant from a tiny village on the Kulenga River, not far from Verkholsk, Yakutia” (xxi). Such individuals are not necessarily the original authors, so to speak, of the tales they tell – but they ought to be credited at least as contributors, considering that the circulation of an oral story is a collaborative creative effort.

Much of the discourse surrounding European folktales during the so-called “golden age of the wondertale” (roughly the first half of the 20th century, when major efforts to analyze and deconstruct folktales were undertaken on a global scale) revolved around the question of how old folktales might be. As folklore scholars have noted in the past, the subject matter of the wondertale is excessively similar to that of ancient legends and myths (Haney xxvii). This fact isn’t easy to ignore, and raised questions regarding the precise age of folklore as a genre of fiction. In *Theory and History of Folklore*, Vladimir Propp, the great folklorist of his day, argues that folktales are newer, younger, a more recent a historical category than myths. Other scholars (for example Lévi-Strauss, who responded to and contradicted many of Propp’s claims made in *Morphology of the Folktale*) believe differently (78). In 1989, the European Folktale Society convened for a

conference in Wilhelmsbad for the express purpose of discussing the theme “How Old Are Our Folktales?”, but found themselves unable to come to a consensus (Haney xxvii). Haney, in the introduction to his anthology, recalls that some attendees, folklorist Rainer Wehse among them, made an attempt at dating particular tales to as old as five thousand years ago by identifying elements shared between folktales and archaic mythologies. But, as Haney put it, “many of these [elements] are in fact the common property of all human beings,” and efforts to ascribe an exact date to a specific series of tales have ultimately proved intriguing but fruitless. Such scholarship is unscientific because it isn’t falsifiable; as of yet, we have no way to verify the origin of a piece of oral fiction. Propp himself remarks on this in *Theory and History of Folklore*, saying, “any dead religious phenomenon is older than its artistic reflection in a modern wondertale. This statement cannot be *proved*; it can only be *shown* on a mass of material” (84). We cannot radiocarbon-date a story.

Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that there must be some prehistoric thematic materials implanted in folktales – otherwise, there would be no explanation for similar narrative attributes popping up so frequently across cultures that are, for all intents and purposes, quite geographically distinct from one another. Wilhelm Grimm argued as early as 1819 that there must be common aspects of the human experience – existentially, philosophically – in order to explain how human culture “produces time and time again similar narratives” (Haney xxxi).

Over the course of the “golden age of wondertales,” several other notable figures emerged, whose work made a significant impact on the discourses surrounding folklore. Among them is Belgian scholar Arnold van Gennep, who in 1922 argued that analogous

sections of folktales are a result of shared derivation in arcane ritual (Haney xxxii).

Another of these scholars is German folklorist Theodore Benfey, who argued in 1859 that European folktales are “overwhelmingly derived from India and the Indian tradition”, and attempted to track the geographical spread of certain narrative elements across the Near East and eventually into Europe (Haney xxxi). Regardless of whether or not theories like van Gennep’s and Benfey’s are still held in high esteem, these men and their contemporaries paved the way for the continued study of folk tradition, and without them folklore studies likely would not have established itself as a field of anthropological knowledge or discipline in its own right.

II. Methodology

Of paramount importance in studies of the Russian oral tradition are the tale collectors of the 19th and 20th centuries – people like Afanasiev and his Soviet successors, Nikiforov and the Sokolov brothers, who went out and conducted surveys, listened to stories being told, and eventually published the material they collected. The folktales published by Afanasiev alone number over six hundred. These men, and their contemporaries, are responsible for preserving the Russian folktale for the generations to come. But of equal importance are the people who analyzed and dissected these folktales, taking them apart as one might dismantle a clock to see how it worked. In the latter regard, few have done as much for the study of folklore than Vladimir Propp, the Soviet scholar who made a career of breaking stories down into their most basic and irreducible narrative components. More than half a century has elapsed since the publication of Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, and in that time the methodology the book proposes

has become indispensable to narrative analysis (Bremont 1). Haney, who for many years acted as chairman of the department for Russian language at the University of Washington, Seattle, said of Propp's work, "rarely has a scholarly book written by a Russian had such an impact on the rest of the world, an impact that goes beyond the study of folklore to find applications in the study of Shakespeare or the French novel" (xxiii). In *Theory and History of Folklore*, a later work of Propp's, the author discusses three major concepts, which serve as the vehicle for his analysis: first, he establishes what is meant by 'function.' Secondly, he describes 'binary function.' Third, he differentiates between 'plot' and 'composition.'

To explain this first item, Propp gives the example of a tale in which a king refuses to allow the hero to marry his daughter unless the hero performs a task: say, retrieves a treasure from a dragon. Then, consider two parallel examples, wherein the king refuses to allow the marriage unless the hero bests a giant in single combat or captures a celestial body like the sun or moon. Propp uses such variations to illustrate the concept of "logical determinable unity" (73). Although these tales differ in detail, they follow the same sequence of function, wherein the acts of retrieving treasure from a dragon, defeating a giant, and capturing the moon do not perform separate functions. Each of these acts perform the single function of being a perilous or seemingly impossible task, which the hero must successfully complete as a necessary part of the courtship ritual (Propp 73-74).

Binary function, on the other hand, refers simply to circumstances in which a single element of a tale results in two opposite actions. To illustrate this concept, Propp gives the example of the true hero versus the false hero. In a given tale, a perilous task is

imposed upon two men. The hero of the story completes the task through valor, while the false hero (or foil) fails to complete the task – or else completes the task by way of treachery or cheating. “The binary functions,” writes Propp, “are performed by different people; e.g. the difficult task is imposed by one character and resolved by another” (75). Essentially, the binary function perpetuates the idea that an event arises in a folktale for a particular reason; rarely are there superfluous plot elements. This idea ironically echoes the narrative principle known as Chekhov’s Gun: the idea that, just as a gun must never be introduced or referenced onstage unless it goes off during the course of a play, no element ought to be introduced into a story unless it performs the action or function it was created to perform. The imposition of a task upon a hero, in a folktale, will always result in one of two endings: the hero’s failure or the hero’s success. But never is there a chance that the hero will refuse to undertake the task to begin with; to even entertain such a possibility puts us in the realm of postmodernism. Jack Haney likewise argued that binary pairs ensure the structural integrity of a tale; they “serve as a shorthand between [the storyteller] and his savvy audience, for whom the tales are scarcely unfamiliar...It is because of this system of binary opposites...that heroes and heroines invariably succeed against the greatest of odds” (xvi-xvii). In other words, mechanisms like function and binary function are rules which, acting together, form the blueprint or template that molds the course of the story. Audiences who made a regular habit of listening to oral tales would have understood these rules as unconsciously and naturally as speakers of a particular language understand the syntactical rules which allow them to construct sentences in their native tongue (Haney xx-xxi).

On the subject of composition, Propp asserts that “composition is a constant factor; the plot, a variable one” (75). Such a definition relies again on Propp’s earlier definition of function as the cause-and-effect-based role a particular element plays in a tale’s sequence of events. Here Propp gives the example of a hypothetical tale in which a dragon carries off a king’s daughter. This prompts the king to appeal to his subjects for help, which prompts a peasant boy to journey away from his home in search of the princess. On his journey, the peasant comes across an elderly crone who asks him to guard her horses, and rewards the youth with a horse of his own when he completes the task successfully. His horse then carries him away to the location of the dragon and the princess, where the youth slays the dragon. He brings the princess home and is rewarded by her father. The aforementioned events are the *plot* of the tale. The tale’s composition is as follows: a misfortune occurs, the hero’s aid is requested, the hero sets off, the hero encounters someone along the way who puts him to the test and rewards him with a magic tool or oath of loyalty, the hero finds the sought-after object with the help of the oath/tool, the hero returns and is again rewarded (Propp 74-75). This is what is meant by composition: the tale stripped of all narrative ornamentation, stripped of everything but its bare bones. “By composition I mean the sequence of functions as given in the tale itself,” Propp writes (73). The plot, on the other hand, refers to the literal actions and events of the story, to which functions belong.

In addressing these items, Propp’s goal was “to establish which functions appear in the wondertale, and to determine whether they are limited in number and what sequence they follow” (73). The goal of this project is adjacent: where Propp was concerned with *literal function*, this project is concerned with *symbolic* or *metaphorical*

function. Take, for example, the tale of Vasilisa Kirbitievna, wherein the titular heroine is abducted by Koschei the Deathless. The hero's only hope of recovering Vasilisa is to locate Koschei's death, that it may be used against the wizard in combat. Our hero eventually finds Koschei's death hidden inside an egg, inside of a duck locked in a chest, which sits on a remote island. The *literal* function of Koschei's death – its function insofar as Propp would be concerned – is that it presents a seemingly insurmountable obstacle for our hero; Koschei's death functions as the secondary object of the hero's quest, without which he cannot rescue his bride. Thus, the literal function of a figure or event in a folktale is relatively easy to determine. However, this project is concerned with symbolic function rather than literal: i.e. what are the implications of a function beyond the sequence of events in a story? What does a character's function say about the people who created it? Yes, Koschei's death is an obstacle and sought-for object for the hero – but what does it truly mean to treat death as an object in the first place? Moreover, do the symbolic implications of objectifying death speak in any tangible way about a connection between materialism and legacy? If *materialism* is taken to mean a physical reliance on the availability of material resources, and *legacy* is taken to mean the existential idea of an individual's ability to impact future events taking place after their death, can we look at a story that treats death as a material resource and claim that the story in question reveals cultural anxieties surrounding the relationship between material possessions and mortality? Such is the manner of question this project seeks to address by the application of Propp's methodology.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will examine six versions of the same wondertale: Norbert Guterman's translations of *Maria Morevna* and *Koshchey the Deathless*, Post Wheeler's translation of *Maria Morevna*, Jack Haney's translations of *Tsarevich Ivan and Elena the Beautiful* and *Maria Morevna*, and Guterman's translation of *Prince Ivan and Princess Martha*. Seeing as there are many different ways to spell the villain's name, please note that this project will refer to the character as Koschei, unless directly quoting another text which spells the character's name differently. There is no need for variations in spelling to become a source of confusion.

I. Norbert Guterman's "Koshchey the Deathless"

In Russian folklore, the heroes are named Ivan. This changes rarely, if at all. But one of the tales translated by Guterman, titled simply and aptly *Koshchey the Deathless*, revolves not around Ivan (though he is present), but around a figure called Bulat the Brave. In this version of a typical Koschei tale, Prince Ivan hears tell of a beautiful princess named Vasilisa Kirbitievna.¹ When he reaches his majority, Ivan departs his own

¹ Not coincidentally, Vasilisa is also a very common name for heroines in Russian folklore. In some of the more prominent Baba Yaga tales, Vasilisa goes toe-to-toe with the witch. In the Koschei tales, Vasilisa and Marya Morevna (and sometimes, as in a handful of tales from Haney's translation, Elena the Wise or Most Beautiful) perform the same literal function: they are the object of the hero's quest, spirited away and in need of rescue. Interestingly, however, this function differs somewhat between Vasilisas and Maryas, insofar as that heroines named Vasilisa are usually noble-hearted peasant girls or princesses, whereas heroines named Marya are always warrior queens and commanders of armies. Unfortunately, both are ultimately reduced to damsels in distress by the narrative. However, an interpretation of why this difference might be would not go amiss in studies of the Russian wondertale.

kingdom in search of her. On the way to Vasilisa's kingdom, Ivan stops in a village, where he watches a man being publicly flogged. Ivan is informed by a bystander that the man is being punished for failing to pay back a loan of rubles, and that the bride of whoever redeems him "will be carried off by Koshchey the Deathless". This last detail is presented to both Ivan and the audience at large as common knowledge, which again brings the exact nature of Koschei into question and simultaneously exemplifies Propp's principle of function: first of all, what aspect of Koschei's nature compels him to get involved in monetary disputes between townspeople? But second of all, take notice of how a reason both for Vasilisa's eventual kidnapping and for why Ivan must redeem the man's debt is instantaneously fulfilled by the storyteller's decision to involve Koschei. A function needed to be provided, and was: such are the mechanisms of story.

The flogged man, whose name we learn is Bulat the Brave, is inevitably redeemed by our hero, Prince Ivan, who as of yet has no wife and therefore figures none can be taken from him. Bulat the Brave joins Ivan on his quest, and helps Ivan woo Vasilisa Kirbitievna, ultimately securing her for the Prince. Things appear to be going smoothly, until night falls and darkness overtakes the traveling party. Prince Ivan makes the mistake of falling asleep while guarding the tent; instantly, "Koshchey the Deathless appear[s] and carry[s] off Vasilisa Kirbitievna", mysteriously fulfilling the superstitions (or perhaps the *expectations*) of the townspeople from Bulat's village (485-487).

When Bulat awakens to find Ivan weeping at the loss of his bride, Bulat reprimands the Prince, saying, "I told you to keep watch. This is the work of Koshchey the Deathless; let us set out to find the old rattlebones." Interestingly, both men are already aware of exactly who Koschei is. When the men locate Vasilisa, they implore her

to ask Koschei where his death is hidden, before having to hide in the wizard's house themselves. The first thing Koschei says when he returns from hunting is "Fie, fie! Formerly, there was no breath of anything Russian here, nor could a glimpse be seen of it, but now something Russian has come here and is offending my nose." This line is remarkably reminiscent of the giant's cry, "Fee, fie, fo, fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman!" in the story *Jack and the Beanstalk*, which is reflective of the importance of nationality in folktales generally, as well as the misguided (but retrospectively amusing) turn-of-the-century idea that the peoples of different European nations were *racially* different in a handful of essential ways (Foote).

The first time Vasilisa asks Koschei where his death is, he tells her it is hidden inside a broom that sits on the threshold. Vasilisa recognizes this lie, and responds by lavishly decorating the broom. When Koschei returns home the following evening, he bursts into hysterical laughter to see the broom gilded, and assures Vasilisa that his death was never inside the broom (488-489). The second time Vasilisa asks Koschei where his death is, he tells her it is hidden inside the household goat. Vasilisa responds by decorating the goat, the sight of which sends Koschei into another fit of laughter. "Eh, you foolish woman," he says, "Your hair is long but your wit is short. My death is far away. In the sea there is an island, on that island stands an oak, under the oak a coffer is buried, in the coffer is a hare, in the hare is a duck, in the duck is an egg, and in the egg is my death" (489). Koschei then flies off, and Vasilisa relays the information to Ivan and Bulat, who go off in search of Koschei's death. The implication that Koschei gives in and divulges the true location of his death simply as a way of discouraging Vasilisa from continuing to decorate his house is an amusing one, and the humor of the situation would

not have been lost on the mid-19th century audiences who heard this version of the tale. Therein lies a (sexist, but harmless) joke about femininity, about activities traditionally coded as feminine, and about the derision with which men may have regarded these activities. But more importantly, *Vasilisa's cunning is coded as feminine*: her approach to Koschei's deception is feminine. She tackles a masculine problem with a feminine wit - and, moreover, with a *domestic* wit – and triumphs. This is no small detail, but rather a key plot point which has the potential to make or break the hero's fate.

During their travels, Prince Ivan and Bulat the Brave come across a wild dog and her young. They consider eating her, but she begs them to spare her life and in return offers a pledge of loyalty and aid, to be delivered at a later date. This series of events repeats twice more, first with an eagle and then with a lobster, occurring three times in total (489-490). Anyone with even a passing interest in fairy tales will notice their propensity for what Haney calls *triplification*. “This fixation on threes,” Haney writes, “is very characteristic of the Indo-European tradition as a whole, and is deeply imbedded in the languages, mythologies, and social structures of all those peoples” (xxii). It is also likely that the representation of the Holy Trinity by the number three played a role in reinforcing the presence of triplification in folklore, at least among societies that adopted Christianity. Haney interprets triplification as performing four central roles in a folkloric context: first of all, it prolonged the tale for the pleasure of the audience, as “a longer, more convoluted tale was prized more than the simple, straightforward one”. Second of all, in the oral tradition, repetition allowed the storyteller to gather their thoughts before continuing, as “[they] had no notes of any kind and there were severe limits on [their] freedom to extemporize”. Third, triple repetition assured the storyteller that “the audience

would grasp the meaning of the narrative” and would understand the gravity and importance of whatever portion was repeated. Finally Haney muses, “I suspect that favorite parts were repeated for the sheer joy of it, the jingles, rhymes, and songs especially” (xxiii). Although some of Haney’s conjectures are not absolutely verifiable, they make sense. The symbolic and ritualistic significance of repetition aside, oral storytellers are live performers with a myriad of practical concerns. If they forget a portion of a tale or decide to take a new direction, they must stall for time while they collect themselves. Musical interludes, question-and-answer exchanges between the teller and their audience, rhymes and triplification are all examples of ways oral storytellers might keep their audience engaged to the maximum. All are performative tropes that make up the formula a storyteller uses to support their tale, a kind of narrative infrastructure. One can read the script of a stage play, but ultimately a stage play is meant to be *watched* rather than read; in the same sense, written transcriptions of folktales (like the ones this project primarily works with) are something of a literary anomaly. We can read folktales, but we aren’t really *meant* to. Folklore is meant to be watched, listened to. In its truest form, it is closer to theater than literature. This is a vital concept to keep in mind when analyzing folklore, because there is little use in puzzling over the symbolic value of a narrative attribute that may simply have arisen due to the practical concerns of the performer.

At any rate, the dog, the eagle, and the lobster aid Ivan and Bulat in reaching the island and eventually obtaining the egg that contains Koschei’s death. “They took the egg, went to Koshchey the Deathless, struck him on the forehead with the egg, and instantly he fell sprawling to the ground and died” (490). In most other variations of this

tale (Wheeler's and Guterman's *Maria Morevna*, and Haney's *Tsarevich Ivan and Elena the Beautiful*, to name a few), the story ends here. Not so in this version. Dark night overtakes the traveling party once again, and they pitch a camp. While Bulat stands on guard duty, he observes a strange phenomenon:

At midnight twelve doves came flying, struck wing against wing, and turned into twelve maidens. "Now, Bulat the Brave and Prince Ivan," they said, "You have killed our brother, Koschey the Deathless, and stolen our sister-in-law, Vasilisa Kirbitievna. But you won't profit by it. When Prince Ivan comes home, he will order his favorite dog to be brought out, and she will break away from the dog keeper and tear the princess into little pieces. And he who hears this and tells it to the prince will become stone to the knees," (490).

This series of events repeats itself twice more, predictably occurring three times in total.

The following night, while Bulat stands guard, the twelve dove-maidens appear again and inform him that upon Prince Ivan's return to his kingdom, he will order his favorite horse brought out - the horse will trample the prince to death, and naturally if Bulat warns Prince Ivan of this, Bulat will become stone to the waist. The next night, Koschei's sisters appear again to inform Bulat that upon the party's arrival in Ivan's kingdom, the prince's favorite cow will wrench herself free of her cowherd and spear the prince with her horns, and anyone who warns Ivan will become stone altogether (492).

True enough, once the party reaches Ivan's kingdom and the couple are wedded officially (probably by way of official *venchanie* "wreathing" rite than through the pagan ceremony of *svad'ba*, as Haney's commentary suggests), Ivan offers to introduce his bride to his favored hound, horse, and cow (Haney xlvi). When Bulat slays all three creatures, Ivan orders that Bulat be executed at once. To this, Bulat replies that he would prefer to die by his own hand, and tells the couple the truth of the dove-maidens' curse. Bulat turns to stone, and the couple mourn him as if he were dead (493).

The tragedy resolves itself when, after many years have passed, Vasilisa and Ivan hear a voice coming from the stone statue of Bulat, instructing him how to save his life. The stone tells the couple to slaughter their children - a son and a daughter - and smear the blood on the stone. Vasilisa and Ivan do as told, and Bulat springs back to life. Then, in a curious and somewhat disturbing exchange, he inquires after the children, asking Vasilisa and Ivan whether they mourn the loss of their daughter and son. The couple reply that they are heartbroken, prompting Bulat to say, "Well then, let's go to their rooms" (493). Lo and behold, they find the children safe and unharmed. Overjoyed, the couple throw a feast, and the narrator's closing remark is "I was at that feast too, I drank mead and wine there; it ran down my mustache but did not go into my mouth, yet my soul was drunk and sated" (492). According to Haney, this type of first-person-perspective remark was a relatively common utterance on the part of the storyteller, and could occur at any point in the story. Aside from establishing false credibility as a comedic device (as the savvy audience would understand that the narrator did not really witness the events of the tale firsthand), this type of remark was usually an unsubtle hint that the storyteller would appreciate a drink for their troubles (Haney xxi).

There are many aspects of this tale worthy of note and further study, including the power and cunning of traditionally feminine-coded acts and domestic warfare, as well as the strict adherence to the rule of tripulation and the violent sacrifice of the children at the end. But more interesting and perhaps more significant are those aspects which shed insight on transactional relationships, and upon the figure of Koschei the Deathless himself.

The appearance of the dove-maidens is remarkable because no reference to Koschei's family can be found anywhere else in English translations of the tales. In many versions of *Maria Morevna*, Koschei mentions that he was employed by Baba Yaga as a herdsman for a time, but never is a familial relationship implied between the two. The fact that Koschei suddenly has twelve sisters is fascinating to say the least, and is a rare enough detail to warrant further study. Who are these women, and what are their stories? Are we safe to assume that, because Koschei is a wicked being, his sisters are likewise malicious creatures of evil intent – even though their revenge claim on Ivan's life is presented as fairly reasonable, considering the circumstances? There is no definitive answer to these questions, but one possible explanation for the origin of the dove-maidens is that they are *nav*, or *nawia*, the souls of the dead able to take the form of birds (Szyjewski). The name itself is believed to be derived from a Proto-Slavic word meaning “deceased”, and Polish folk scholarship in particular posits the idea that these creatures may be the souls of people who died tragically or prematurely (Strzelczyk). Again, this theory does not come close to answering the questions raised by the arrival of Koschei's sisters - but it does provide a potential mythological basis for their presence in the tale.

II. Norbert Guterman's “Maria Morevna”

Guterman's translation of the well-known tale *Maria Morevna* begins much as one might expect: in a certain kingdom lives a prince named Ivan and his three sisters, Olga, Maria, and Anna. Before their parents die of unspecified causes, the king and queen instruct their son to marry his sisters off quickly. After the funeral, Ivan and his sisters are walking in the royal garden when they are beset by a sudden and unexpected

thunderstorm. Ivan suggests they go home at once, but no sooner do they return than a thunderbolt strikes the rooftop of the castle, cutting the ceiling in twain. A bright falcon flies in through the fissure and transforms at once into a brave knight, saying, “Hail, Prince Ivan! Formerly I came here as a guest, but now I have come as a suitor; I want to woo your sister, Princess Maria.” Ivan replies, “If my sister finds you to her liking I do not oppose the marriage; let her go with God.”² Princess Maria consents, the falcon carries her off (553).

Naturally, this series of events happens three times in total, repeating first with Princess Olga, who is courted by a hawk, and then with Princess Anna, who is courted by a raven. Ivan does not stay contented for long. Ivan makes ready to travel, and leaves his own kingdom to visit his sisters. From there, things begin to get interesting.

He...walked and walked, and one day beheld a host of troops lying slain on the field. Prince Ivan said: “If any man is alive here, let him answer me. Who slew this great army?” One man answered him: “All this great army was slain by Maria Morevna, the beautiful queen.” Prince Ivan went farther, came upon white tents, and Maria Morevna, the beautiful queen, came out to meet him. “Hail, prince,” she said. “Whither is God taking you? And is it for your own will or by compulsion?” Prince Ivan answered her: “Brave knights do not travel by compulsion” (554).

Maria Morevna offers to let Ivan rest a while in her tents, and inevitably the two fall in love and are wed. After the marriage, Maria Morevna takes Ivan to her kingdom, where “they lived together for some time, then the queen decided to make war” (555). She leaves her household in Ivan’s care, instructing him to do as he pleases but never to look into her closet. Unable to restrain his curiosity, Ivan opens the closet as soon as she leaves. Lo and behold, inside the closet hangs chained Koschei the Deathless.

² Note the use of language here: God’s name is invoked, even though it is clearly meant as a turn of phrase rather than a religious or spiritual sentiment, as discussed previously.

Koschei begs Prince Ivan to bring him a glass of water, lamenting that he has hung there for ten years without food and drink, tormented. Ivan brings him a whole keg of water, Koschei drinks it, and begs for more. After drinking his third keg, Koschei recovers his former strength and breaks all twelve chains at once. He says, “Thanks, Prince Ivan...now you will never see Maria Morevna again - not any more than you will see your own ears.” He flies out the window “in a terrible whirlwind”, overtakes Maria Morevna, and carries her off to his house. A distraught Ivan weeps and sets out to find his wife, and in the process consecutively stumbles into the kingdoms ruled by his three sisters and their bird husbands respectively. Ivan stays with each of his sisters for three days, leaving with each of them a trinke. With Maria and the falcon, he leaves a silver spoon. With Olga and the eagle, Ivan leaves a silver fork. With Anna and the raven, he leaves a silver snuffbox. Ivan continues on, and on the third day after leaving Anna’s kingdom Ivan arrives at the house of Koschei the Deathless. Ivan and Maria Morevna make their escape while Koschei is away hunting, but Koschei’s horse stumbles under him, alerting him to some form of trouble. When Koschei inquires further, the horse informs him that it senses Maria Morevna’s escape, but also that “We could sow wheat, wait til it grows, reap it, thresh it, grind it into flour, bake five ovenfuls of bread, eat that bread, and after all that set out in pursuit – and even then we would overtake them” (558).

When Koschei overtakes the couple, he declares, “the first time I forgive you, because of your kindness in having given me water to drink; the second time I forgive you too. But the third time, take care – I will cut you into little pieces” (558). Here, the principle of triplification truly sets in. Koschei gallops off with Maria Morevna, Ivan rescues her again, Koschei abducts her again, and so on, until finally Koschei slices Ivan

into little pieces, places his remains in a tarred barrel reinforced with iron hoops, and tosses the barrel into the sea. Immediately, the silver trinkets Ivan left with his sisters turn black, indicating that some misfortune has befallen Ivan. His brothers-in-law, the falcon and eagle and raven, retrieve the barrel and perform a unique and curious ritual.

All three of them gathered together in one place, broke the barrel, took out the pieces of Prince Ivan, washed them, and put them together in the right order. The raven sprinkled them with the water of death, and they grew together and joined; the falcon sprinkled the body with the water of life, and Prince Ivan shuddered, rose up, and said: “Ah, how long I have slept!” (559)

The waters of life and the waters of death are another anomaly in the Russian folk canon. They pop up sporadically throughout the tales, and do not appear to maintain an association with any particular figure, character, geographical landmark, creature, or weather phenomenon. In some stories, the water of life can bring someone back from the dead, and in some stories it merely restores up to thirty years’ worth of youth; never does it grant immortality, for the route to immortality is more convoluted, as will be discussed in later sections of this project.

The resurrected Ivan goes straight to Maria Morevna and requests that she discover how Koschei got himself such a fast horse. Koschei tells Maria, “Beyond thrice nine lands, in the thrice tenth kingdom, beyond a river of fire, lives Baba Yaga; she has a mare on which she flies around the world every day” (559). This type of language is so often used in Russian folklore that it has become something of a cliché, akin to its Anglophone equivalent, “once upon a time”, and is yet another example of performative repetition. Haney comments on this replication of language in *Russian Wondertales*, in the context of his discourse on syntactical structure:

Two types of structure are important for the discussion here: structures that are part of the Russian oral tradition but not part of a given tale’s

syntax; and the wondertale's syntax as such. Many observers have noted that the language of folklore as inherited from the ancient oral tradition contains much that is remembered, learned from a previous generation or another performer and then incorporated into an artist's own language and performance. Outside its specific context the language of the wondertales becomes cliché ridden. In the English tradition, "Once upon a time, in a far off land" is just such an opening formula and is a cliché, as is the traditional "And they lived happily ever after." So, too, are such phrases as "the big, bad wolf" or "the deep, dark forest." The Russian tradition knows its own elaborate formulae, including "In the thrice-nine tsardom, in the thrice-ten land, there lived and dwelt a tsar"... (xx-xxi)

Koschei explains that the witch also has many other fine mares, and that he received a colt as compensation for serving as her herdsman for three days. Maria Morevna repeats this to Ivan, and he sets off for Baba Yaga's domain. On the way, he encounters a seagull, a bee, and a lioness (559-560). At each junction, he tries to eat them (or, in the case of the bee, steal its honey), and Ivan spares each of the after they promise to be useful to him later on, directly mirroring the protagonist's encounter with the dog, eagle, and lobster in Guterman's *Koshchey the Deathless* (489-490).

When Ivan arrives at the witch's house, Baba Yaga already knows who he is. Ask anyone who's read a Russian fairy tale before, and they'll tell you: she's just like that. She casually and quite jovially tells him, "If you can tend my mares, I will give you a mighty steed; but if you cannot – don't hold it against me, but your head will go on the last stake" (560). She is of course referring to the stakes that form a makeshift fence around her chicken-footed house, upon which rest the heads of trespassers and unlucky travellers. Guarding the witch's mares is no easy task, but with help from the gull, the bee, and the lion, Ivan is able to prevent the horses from escaping. He takes a colt from Baba Yaga's stable and makes his way to the river of fire, where he waves his handkerchief (an enchanted possession of Koschei's, stolen for Ivan by Maria Morevna)

and causes a great bridge to rise up. Ivan crosses, waves the magic handkerchief again, the bridge becomes rickety and precarious once more. The next morning, when Baba Yaga realizes the colt is missing and runs off in pursuit, she falls through the rickety bridge into the river of fire and perishes (561-562).

Ivan straightaway rescues Maria Morevna, and the two make a run for it, seated on Ivan's newfound steed. Koschei's horse once again senses trouble, but has a difficult time catching up to Baba Yaga's magic colt. When he finally manages to track down the couple, Koschei attempts to cut Ivan down with his saber - but Ivan is protected by his own horse, who "swung a hood with all his strength and struck Koshchey the Deathless, smashing his head, and the prince finished him off with his mace." Ivan burns the wizard's body, scatters the ashes to the wind, and he and Maria Morevna are troubled by Koschei the Deathless no more (562).

This tale differs in a number of ways from Guterman's *Koshchey the Deathless*, namely because – technically speaking – they closer to different tales featuring a couple similarities than to variations of the same tale. The central action of *Koshchey the Deathless* revolves around Bulat's goal of aiding Ivan in attaining and then keeping his bride – defeating Koschei is only one of the challenges to be overcome by Ivan and Bulat the Brave. The central action of Guterman's *Maria Morevna*, on the other hand, is defeating Koschei; all other events of the story are milestones on the way to achieving that goal. To that effect, the fact that Koschei is defeated in this tale by force and not by revoking his immortality is no small matter.

III. Post Wheeler's "Maria Morevna"

Post Wheeler's version of the tale is extremely similar to Guterman's because both are translations of the same text, published by Alexander Afanasiev in the mid-19th century.

Minor changes include small details - altering the types of creatures the hero encounters, for instance. In Guterman's story, Ivan meets a dog, an eagle, and a lobster on the way to Baba Yaga's realm; in Wheeler's, the hero meets simply "a bird", a bee, and a crayfish (Wheeler 32-33). Additionally, the hero's brothers-in-laws are a hawk, an eagle and a crow, instead of Guterman's falcon, hawk, and raven (Wheeler 24).

Changes to the names of peripheral and central characters also occur between Wheeler's and Guterman's translations. In the Wheeler version, one of the hero's sisters is named Helena rather than Maria, presumably to avoid conflating the prince's sister with his wife. In Wheeler's translation, Ivan's name itself is changed, which is almost shocking in its rarity. To this day, this version of the tale is the only one I have come across in which the hero who defeats Koschei is named something other than Ivan. Puzzlingly, Wheeler calls his hero Alexei. How two translations of the same text could have ended up using heroes with different names is a mystery, but my guess is that Wheeler simply decided his anthology contained too many tales with heroes named Ivan. This reasoning is not verified, but is informed by the fact that Wheeler's translation is remarkably different from the others surveyed, which leads me to believe he took a great deal of creative license with Afanasiev's original text.

As far as step-by-step events and literal functions of the players, the tales are basically identical. Stylistically, however, they are quite different. The language Wheeler

uses is elevated – somewhat unnecessarily. Guterman’s language is typically very direct and straightforward, utilizing simple syntax and accessible vocabulary. Comparatively, Wheeler’s phrasing is very overwrought and formal, perhaps intended to add a newfound sense of gravity and weight to the folktales, which otherwise tend towards the more atmospherically lighthearted and jovial, even when murder and child sacrifice are involved.

The only major change Wheeler makes to the actual plot of the story is at the very end, where Koschei’s horse senses a mishap and stumbles. When questioned, it tells its master that it expects to encounter difficulty catching up to Alexei and Maria, because Alexei now possesses that horse’s younger brother. When Koschei and his horse eventually catch up to the prince, the prince’s horse cries out:

“O my brother! Why dost thou continue to serve such an unclean monster? Cast him from thy back and strike him with thy sharp hoofs.” And the horse of Koschei heard the counsel of his brother and threw his rider on the ground and lashed out with his hoofs so cruelly that the Wizard was forced to crawl back to his Castle on all fours (37).

IV. Jack Haney’s “Maria Morevna”

Haney’s translation of this story is much closer to Guterman’s than Wheeler’s in terms of language and phrasing, probably indicating that out of the three, Wheeler’s translation takes the greatest amount of liberties with the text. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing from a storytelling perspective (especially considering the fact that change is underwritten in the history of these stories), but it is important to note that Wheeler’s translation is not a particularly accurate reflection of the version of the tale published by Afanasiev.

Minor changes in Haney's translation are as follows: as in Guterman's version, here Ivan encounters a bird, a lion, and a bee on the way to Baba Yaga's house – as opposed to Wheeler's bird, bee, and crayfish (54-55). Also, Ivan's sisters marry a falcon, an eagle, and a raven – whereas in Guterman's tale one sister marries a hawk instead of an eagle, and in Wheeler's the sisters marry a crow, an eagle, and a hawk (50-51).

The only major change in Haney's version is that his ending more closely resembles Guterman's than Wheeler's: Ivan's horse kicks Koschei in the head, knocking out his brains, and Ivan finishes the wizard off with his mace. Afterwards, Ivan burns Koschei's body and scatters the ashes to the wind (57).

An element that ought to be taken into consideration when accounting for translational differences is *audience*. Both Haney's and Guterman's stories were published in huge compendiums of three hundred or more folktales, with substantial introductions and commentary sections which discuss the history of folktale collection in 19th century Russia. Wheeler's version of the story, on the other hand, can be found in a much smaller volume containing only five folktales, with full-page colored illustrations and a larger font size, and without an introduction or commentary section. Judging by these attributes, it can be inferred that Haney's and Guterman's anthologies are intended for *scholarly* use, whereas Wheeler's intended target audience is primarily composed of *children*. This explains why Koschei escapes with his life only in Wheeler's translation; it seems very likely that Wheeler considered bludgeoning someone to death with a mace a bit too violent for a children's book.

V. Jack Haney's "Tsarevich Ivan and Elena the Beautiful"

Of all the Koschei tales surveyed by this project, this one might just be the most overtly humorous. It revolves around yet another prince named Ivan who is tasked with marrying off his three sisters before he can get married himself. Eager to find a wife, Ivan sets off in search of husbands for his sisters and promptly marries the girls off to the first three mysterious knights he happens to meet (41-42). The couples are wed in the Orthodox wreathing ceremony called *venchanie*, and afterwards Ivan sets out to woo the famed Elena the Most Beautiful. Ivan faces trials and tribulations, but eventually manages to make Elena his wife. A month or so into their marriage, Elena instructs Ivan never to look into her cellar. By now, we should all know where this is going. Elena takes a walk in the garden, and in her absence Ivan immediately peeks into the forbidden cellar, where he finds "a little old man on a burning board" (46). The man offers to extend Ivan's lifespan times three if Ivan releases him. Ivan takes pity on him and lets him out, and immediately the man kidnaps Elena the Most Beautiful. Ivan tracks her down of course, but to no avail, as the old man easily overpowers him.

Ivan locates the hut of Yaga-Yagishna, who assigns him chores. Upon completing them, Ivan is gifted a colt of his own (48). The horse says to Ivan, "We'll now go up onto this mountain. And on this mountain there stands an oak, and in this oak there is a nest, and in this nest is Koshchei the Deathless's egg; that little old man is called Koshchei the Deathless" (49). They go up the mountain, and Ivan retrieves the egg. His horse says to him, "My brother serves Koshchei the Deathless. My brother is two-winged, but I am six-winged...If he, Koschei, is at home, strike him in the forehead with the egg. When the egg flies apart, he will disintegrate too" (49). They make for Koschei's house and, finding

him gone, make off with Elena the Most Beautiful. When Koschei returns and finds Elena gone, he sets out to catch Ivan. When he does, Ivan pulls the egg from his pocket and smacks Koschei on the forehead, killing him instantly. The tale is over and done with.

VI. Norbert Guterman's "Prince Ivan and Princess Martha"

This tale begins by establishing that for many years a tsar has kept under lock and key "a little peasant all made of copper, with iron hands and a steel head – a cunning man, a wizard of a man!" (79) One day, the tsar's son, Ivan, walks beside the prison and hears the little metal man calling out to him, begging Ivan to give him a drink. Ivan gives the metal man what he asks for, and immediately the man uses his restored power to vanish from the prison.

Upon discovering that his son has released the metal man, the tsar banishes Ivan from the kingdom. From this point onward, Ivan has many wonderful adventures, throughout which Ivan is continually aided by the metal man he released from jail at the beginning of the tale (84-85).

Koschei the Deathless goes unnamed in this tale, but he is present nevertheless. Small details (like the fact that Ivan releases the metal man from imprisonment in the royal dungeon) and seemingly throwaway lines (like the description of the metal peasant as "a wizard of a man") scattered throughout this tale lend themselves to an inevitable conjecture: the metal man has replaced Koschei. By being discovered by Ivan in jail and released from his torment by drinking water, the metal man effectively steps into the role traditionally occupied by Koschei.

Despite the fact that the metal man aids the hero rather than hinders him, and definitely does not fall into the villain archetype, the metal man is clearly a Koschei figure: his backstory (imprisonment by a sovereign, rescue by an unwitting protagonist, strength drawn from water) is the same, his ability to perform acts of magic is the same, and his state of deathlessness is the same. Whereas Koschei's immortality is derived from sorcery and objectification, the mechanical man's immortality is derived from the non-perishable nature of his metal body.

Guterman's anthology is a translation of tales published by Afanasiev, who drew most of his material from tales collected over several decades by Vladimir Dahl and the Russian Geographical Society (637). These people conducted fieldwork for several decades, and the location of the collection is only recorded in two-thirds of the tales that eventually made it into Afanasiev's collection (638). Because of this, there is no way to tell precisely when or where this particular variant was found – but it is entirely possible that this variant originated from an urbanized area more closely connected with technology. If this is the case, the shift in the narrative demonstrates cultural anxieties surrounding the onset of widespread industrialization during the 19th century. Tasks once completed with sorcery are now completed using machines. Magic becomes metal.

CONTEMPORARY ADAPTATIONS

Though perhaps less familiar to audiences than the instantly recognizable Baba Yaga, Koschei the Deathless has not faded from public consciousness, in Russia or anywhere else. This is evident in the myriad pieces of media that explicitly reference his name, his story, his death.

I. Russian Media in English Translation and Anglophone Adaptations

These works include Catherynne Valente's *Deathless* (2011), a novel-length Anglophone adaptation of Russian folklore set before and after the Siege of Leningrad, and the Strugatsky brothers' *Monday Begins on Saturday* (1964), a Soviet reflection on the relationship between science and magic. Both texts "investigate the remains of Russian folk culture after it passes through the crucible of the Bolshevik Revolution", pondering the interaction of bureaucracy and fairy tale in a nation until recently saturated with propaganda (Magyarody 338). Another such work is expatriate Ekaterina Sedia's *The Secret History of Moscow* (2007), an urban surrealist novel set in the underworld of capitalist Russia, where fairy tale figures live invisibly in the back alleys and defunct metro tunnels of Moscow.

The Strugatskys portray Koschei as a grotesque elderly man; this imagery is customary, practically expected, and follows a long tradition of similar portrayals in both illustration and text. Valente's Koschei is seductive and beautiful, intended perhaps to mirror what folklorist and literary critic Katherine Magyarody describes as the highly attractive imaginative freedom he offers the book's heroine, Marya (Magyarody 339).

Sedia's Koschei is somewhere in between; his countenance is not described in excessive detail, and the reader is left with more an atmospheric impression of the character than a visual one. But despite their differences, these texts ultimately address the same question: How did Russian folktales survive in the creative wasteland of Soviet censorship, and how did they emerge transformed afterwards?

Very recently, the image of Koschei pervades Western consciousness like never before: this pervasiveness is harkened by his appearance even in the Anglophone comics industry. The year 2018 saw the publication of *Koshchei the Deathless*, a six-issue comic by critically acclaimed American illustrator and concept artist Mike Mignola of *Hellboy* fame. Instead of looking at Koschei's story through the lens of sociopolitical reform (as Valente, Sedia, and the Strugatskys do), Mignola explores the preternatural qualities of Koschei's deathlessness. Operating under the assumption that Koschei may once have been human, the graphic novel plays devil's advocate with theories surrounding Koschei's past, spinning a dark biography of hubris and loss.

II. Sorcery and Cinema: Koschei in the Box Office

In 2017, a family-friendly comedy film called *Posledniy Bogatyr*, which translates roughly to both *The Last Knight* and *The Last Warrior*, received a wide theatrical release in Russia. The film tells the story of Ivan, a stage magician and con artist living a pampered but unfulfilling life in contemporary Moscow. Unbeknownst to Ivan, he is the son of Ilya Muromec (sometimes Muromets), the paramount knight errant of medieval Russian literature, and a figure of central importance in the Old Rus' epic poems. Summoned abruptly to the thrice-tenth kingdom of Russian folklore, Ivan must ally

himself with fairy tale characters in order to survive – among them Vasilisa, Baba Yaga, a vodyanoy river spirit, and Koschei the Deathless (Dyachenko).

The movie marked the Walt Disney Company's second foray into producing content exclusively for Russian audiences, and it quickly became an overnight sensation. Within a month of its release, the film surpassed Fyodor Bondarchuk's *Stalingrad* (2013) to become the highest-grossing Russian-language release of all time in the country, making 1.68 million rubles (28.8 million U.S. dollars) during its initial release and eventually bringing in a total revenue of \$29.5 million (Kozlov). The film set new records in the Russian box office, and a sequel was announced in February of 2018 (Kozlov).

Koschei has been the subject of films and stageplays many times over, but never before with such staggeringly successful financial results. Such figures go to show that Koschei the Deathless, and indeed the other characters emblematic of Russian folklore, have hardly gone extinct. On the contrary, they continue to thrive in the public consciousness, and remain incredibly pervasive symbols in Russia today. But the success of *Posledniy Bogatyr* must in part be attributed to its revisionist nature: the film is not a straight retelling of the classic folktales, but a subversion of them. The folkloric characters Ivan befriends over the course of the movie are not (with the exception of Vasilisa) the heroes of Russian folklore, but its villains. *Posledniy Bogatyr* takes fearsome, intimidating antagonists and exposes them as bumbling archetypes who are comically ignorant of their own roles in a fixed narrative. As Baba Yaga remarks in Valente's *Deathless*, creatures of folklore are destined to “run on a track...walk the same tale over and over, until [they] wear a groove in the world” (Valente 110). The characters

of *Posledniy Bogatyr* themselves are not aware that they are characters, but *the movie* is; just like Russian audiences, the film's protagonist recalls the folktales he was told as a child, and in this sense the movie is aware of the ritualistic narrative repetition that Valente describes. As such, the humor of *Posledniy Bogatyr* operates on pure subversiveness. By establishing an awareness of storytelling convention that is shared between the protagonist and the audience, the film proposes that Ivan and the moviegoers watching him are in on the same joke – a joke which is clearly at the expense of the fairy tale villains.

Here, a subversive function of folklore is again revealed: in its dissemination of a particular story canon, the oral tradition finds a platform from which infinite adaptations can be created with relative ease. The assumption of Russian audiences' prior knowledge of folklore dispenses with the need to spend screen-time on exposition; exposition is unnecessary because folklore has already done the work. The oral storytelling tradition unites communities – sometimes entire nations – through common knowledge; it constitutes a collective imaginative experience.

ANALYSIS

Russian folktales, like folktales from anywhere else, are wish-fulfillment spaces. Sometimes called *wondertales* and sometimes referred to as *vol'shebnaiia skazki* (“tales of enchantment”), they sustain a narrative space in which anything can occur, so long as the teller of the story decides so (Haney xvi). The mutable nature of oral storytelling enables wish-fulfillment in ways unparalleled by written fiction, because a new or altered event in a story told orally comes into being the moment the narrator speaks the necessary words, manifesting itself immediately – whereas making changes to written fiction requires a lengthy publication process at most and the learned skill of writing at the very least. If a story’s narrator doesn’t like the way the story ends – favors one character over another, for instance, or would prefer that everyone die or that everyone live – they simply change the course of the story, imposing their new version onto their listeners; the greater the audience present, the greater the likelihood that the narrator’s preferred version of the tale will be repeated by those listeners and thrive. If the narrator doesn’t like the story altogether, they may choose to tell an entirely different one, and this is how some stories live and others slowly die. In this sense, no writer in the world has so much power as the oral storyteller.

I. Transactional Relationships

Transactional relationships are by no means unique to Russian folklore; on the contrary, they can be found in fables all over the world, and the Koschei tales are especially heavy-handed when it comes to transactional relationships. In total, we see

repetitions of the same four: Bulat the Brave's loyalty to Ivan (on account of the prince redeeming his debt) in Guterman's *Koshchey the Deathless*; the loyalty of Ivan's brothers-in-law to the prince (this is a familial relationship with transactional obligations) in all three versions of *Maria Morevna*; the loyalty of the twelve dove-maidens to Koschei's memory (which is another familial relationship that comes with attached obligations) in Guterman's *Koshchey the Deathless*; and lastly there is the transactional relationship constituted by Ivan's encounters with creatures: the dog, eagle, lobster, crayfish, or bee, depending on whose version of the tales is being read. Their *literal function*, as Propp might have recognized it, is to help the hero overcome difficult tasks. Their *symbolic function*, however, is to represent the importance of both making and fulfilling promises. In other words, the relationship between the hero and the creature constitutes an immaterial transaction; Ivan takes the animals at their word when they promise to be useful to him, and spares their lives not out of mercy but out of self-interest. Self-interest is not to be conflated in this case with selfishness, but rather with a mutual acknowledgement of the desire to remain alive and to be successful.

Considering that folktales were traditionally an oral currency of the illiterate, it is easy to see why transactional relationships like these crop up so often from story to story. The history of public education in pre-Revolutionary Russia is somewhat murky: initiatives to make trade and technical schooling more widely available were enacted as early as the reign of Peter the Great, and these efforts were continued during the reign of Catherine II (Shevchenko et al. 227). However, many 18th-century programs developed to address the lack of education systemically were drafted but never put into effect, and by 1828 only about 600 parochial schools were operational in the entire Russian Empire,

courtesy of Alexander I. According to a retrospective study conducted by Shevchenko et al., “the obligation of maintaining schools was [legally] imposed on local communities and their funds,” resulting in what the authors call a “passive attitude” towards standardized education in Russian villages (Shevchenko et al. 228). The situation took a turn for the better in the mid-19th century, when over 400 schools for the state and adjunct peasantry were created under Emperor Nicholas I; between them, these schools were attended by a total of 146,000 students each academic cycle (Shevchenko et al. 228). Although the aforementioned initiatives demonstrate significant change occurring within a relatively short period of time, students would only have begun formally exiting these schools around 1853. The majority of the tales discussed in this project were published by Afanasiev in the 1850s, collected by his sources from adult storytellers, and so the beneficiaries of the mid-19th century public education reforms were presumably not among the population involved in relating folklore to the ethnographers engaged in fieldwork at this time. In other words, it is certain that the folktales discussed here were, at the time of their transcription, told *by* the illiterate, *for* the illiterate.

This fact makes sense when considered alongside transactional relationships in folktales. In a community never given the opportunity to learn reading and writing, there could be no memorandums or written evidence that someone had made a promise – no receipts. People would have had to trust their fellows to keep verbal promises out of a personal sense of honor and obligation. The presence of transactional relationships in folktales would have reinforced a society’s tendency to trust, to put individual faith in the hands of other individuals and reasonably expect to be paid back.

As far as the family relations are concerned, these relationships are transactional in a different way. The obligation of Ivan's brothers-in-law to come to Ivan's aid, as well as the obligation of Koschei's sisters to avenge his death, constitute emotional transactions as well as philanthropic ones. Ivan's sisters' husbands must resurrect Ivan because the prince gave them his marital blessing; in return, the birds fulfill an obligation to Ivan's sisters to do their part to ensure the princesses' emotional wellbeing. The seven of them function in tandem as an emotional ecosystem – in other words, a family. Likewise, Koschei's sisters avenge his death to fulfill an emotional obligation not to themselves or to Ivan, but to Koschei's memory; vengeance constitutes a transaction which considers the memory of a deceased person as an active party to which a debt is owed and must be repaid.

Siblings aside, the paramount transactional relationship in these stories is the relationship between Prince Ivan and Bulat the Brave in Guterman's *Koschei the Deathless*. The tale's exposition suggests that Bulat is of peasant origin, but his conduct and character are very much aligned with ideals of chivalry and nobility. It is entirely possible that Bulat is a remnant of the *byliny*, old Rus' medieval epics which told of the legendary exploits of a *bogatyr*, or warrior. The *bogatyr* is something of a stock hero in the *byliny* tradition, analogous in many ways to the knight errant of Arthurian legend. Bulat's loyalty to Prince Ivan mirrors the fealty shown by a vassal warrior to his lord in the *byliny*. This parallel is further emphasized by the fact that Bulat uses only his own strength, combat skill, and wit to defeat Ivan's enemies – never magic. This is likely derived directly from the old epic poems, which tend to portray warriors as rarely using magic in order to maintain the impression that the events of the *bylina* really happened

long ago (Bailey, Ivanova). After all, the word *bylina* (singular) originates from a past-tense Russian being verb, implying acts occurring in the past, *something that once was* (Bailey, Ivanova). Because of this association, the *byliny* fall squarely into the category of legend rather than folklore, but that does not negate the strong possibility that figures like Bulat the Brave are symbolic descendants of the errant knights of old, so to speak.

Bulat's loyalty to his liege after Prince Ivan redeems the warrior's debt is unwavering, just as Ivan's loyalty to his vassal is shown to be unwavering when, later in the tale, Ivan is willing to kill his own children to restore Bulat to life. Their relationship is a decidedly feudal one, and it is therefore also a transactional one: Ivan protects Bulat financially and politically, while Bulat protects Ivan physically.

II. Materialism

Just like transactional relationships, an emphasis on objects is not at all unique to Russian folklore. Object-oriented stories can be found in folklore on a near-global scale, everywhere from Trinidad to Siberia. Nonetheless there is a difference between what this project will refer to as *objects of power* and *objects of meaning*. The handkerchief that Koschei (and then Ivan) uses to raise a bridge over Baba Yaga's river of fire is an object of power, whereas the ring given to Bulat the Brave by his mother is an object of meaning. Both are important, as each perform a function in their respective tales: the handkerchief's function is to provide a solution to a difficult task, whereas the ring's function is to serve as an excuse for Bulat to temporarily leave the traveling party in order to inconspicuously dispose of the prince's enemies. The difference between these two categories is that objects of power are significant because they are affiliated with the

supernatural or the divine – cursed or blessed, these objects are enchanted in some way and are therefore paranormal assets for whoever possesses them. An object that is significant in a tale for *any other reason* is merely an object of meaning.

To use an example from outside the Russian folkloric canon, a mirror which shows the hero “the village from which no traveler returns” in the Congolese folktale *The Twin Brothers* is an object of power (Philip 119). The hero’s pipe, on the other hand, is an object of meaning because the hero’s request that a witch light the pipe prompts her to slay him where he stands, thus driving the plot in a non-supernatural way (Philip 118-119). Similar examples from Russian tales specifically include a hair comb which grows into a thick forest when the heroine throws it onto the ground in one of the Baba Yaga tales, and a headscarf which the heroine trades Baba Yaga’s maid in order to win her aid in escaping the witch in the same tale (Philip 104-105). The comb enacts magic, so it is an object of power; the headscarf is a non-supernatural item which is integral to the plot, so it is an object of meaning.

Regardless of whether a particular object in a folktale is an object of power or simply of meaning, the importance of *things* – of tangible items – in the Russian folk tradition is undeniable. There are a couple of reasons that this is the case, the first of which relates to Propp’s analytic methodology of identifying function. In order for certain events to occur in a folktale, certain functions must be performed. Because the same function can be performed by a wide variety of different narrative elements (quite literally *anything* the storyteller wants), there is no reason why objects cannot perform these necessary functions – and so they often do. Basically, objects are important in

folktales because they hold the same narrative potential as sentient characters: they can perform significant functions which collectively help to drive the plot of the story along.

The second reason objects are so important in Russian folklore relates to low literacy rates in 19th-century Russia, as discussed previously. Fictional stories (just like historical and quasi-historical narratives) are an immaterial resource, which can be utilized to suit particular ends and have thus been fought over throughout history; this is a cultural-anthropological fact. But immaterial resources aside, it is possible to turn fiction into a *material* resource as well. When a word is written down, it becomes an object. A book is a story made physical, touchable, ownable. By this logic, illiterate communities lack the ability to document life in through literature; they must instead document life through material culture. In other words, an illiterate community cannot create an entire genre of objects (written and printed documents, including books, etc.), but is able to create and engage with nearly every other type of object. Such objects might be functional (shoes, tools, utensils) or they might be ornamental (musical instruments, decorations, adornments, toys), but either way, these things constitute material culture, and material culture is another method of documenting life.

III. Immortality

While transactional relationships and materialism are not unique to Russian folklore, the treatment of mortality and immortality in the tales of Koschei the Deathless may very well be. The tales generally do not take kindly to immortality as a concept – the only immortal character is, after all, a villain. Technically Ivan is restored to life by his brothers-in-law when they reassemble him and resurrect him using the waters of life and

death, but a resurrection is not synonymous with eternal living. The stories imply that Ivan's mortality has merely been restored, and that he can and will die again. Koschei, on the other hand, *cannot* die until his death is recovered.

In his mother tongue, Koschei the Deathless is called Koschei *Bessmertnyi*, a word which roughly translates to "without death" (Haney xxxix). To be deprived of death, or death-deficient (*bez-smert'*), suggests what Magyarody describes as "the displacement of death from the body" (341). This translation rings true, as Koschei's immortality is quite literally derived from displacement: his mortality is removed, hidden, locked away; it is the inaccessible nature of Koschei's mortality which grants him deathlessness. According to Haney, "this peculiarity may in fact reflect widespread Russian, and Slavic in general, beliefs in the separate existence of the soul" (xxxix).

At any rate, the treatment of death in the Koschei tales is an unexpected one: immortality is not glorified, likened to holiness or godliness, or sought after by the hero, but rather is regarded as an attribute of evil and wickedness. At no point in any of the stories surveyed do Ivan and his bride attempt to attain immortal status themselves. Prince Ivan regains life, but so too does he regain his ability to die – whereas Koschei is immortal but is also loathed and despised as an unnatural being. "In killing Koschei, the hero and heroine never defeat death itself; indeed, they affirm its presence in life," writes Magyarody in her recent essay evaluating Soviet-era and contemporary adaptations of classic Russian tales (341). Ultimately the value, or *symbolic function*, of Koschei's death is a life-affirming one. The ideas portrayed in the Koschei tales - of immortality as undesirable and conversely, of mortality as a wholesome and heroic trait - serve to alleviate the feelings of despair which naturally arise in the face of death.

Facing death was no small matter for the mid-19th century peasant. According to a 1995 retrospective study published by Oxford University Press, an average of forty-two people out of every thousand died in the year 1873 alone (Patterson 182, Fig.1), the majority of whom occupied rural areas (Patterson 181). Between 1871 and 1875, those numbers were as high as fifty in one thousand in some provinces (Patterson 183, Map 1). That's a very high mortality rate compared to contemporary figures. In 2017, the Russian population was around 144.5 million, with a mortality rate of twelve in one thousand and a life expectancy of seventy-two years on average. Of course it must be noted that any figures representative of mortality rates in the Late Tsarist period are sketchy at best, and ought to be taken with a grain of salt. Russia's first imperial census took place in 1897, and the survey was not repeated until 1925, nearly three decades later (Patterson 180). All data prior to the first census is an amalgamation of numbers collected by church officials from their local parishes, as Peter the Great mandated in 1722 that all clergy must collect and report available population data to the crown (Patterson 180). Historian David K. Patterson, who authored the Oxford study, explains that government initiatives to collect mortality trend data during the tsarist years were largely unsuccessful, as "peasants were intensely suspicious of officials, landlords, and even doctors, so clerical collection of demographic information was probably more effective than direct government measures would have been" (180). The clerical affiliations of population data comes with its own problems, as deaths not requiring religious ceremonies (like stillborn infants and suicides, for example) tended to be under-reported simply because such deaths were rendered unmemorable by the absence of ritual. Nevertheless, Patterson maintains confidence that despite statistical anomalies, limitations, and numerical blind spots, the data shown in

Figure 1 and Map 1 are to a reasonable extent representative of accurate mortality rates in Late Tsarist Russia (181-182).

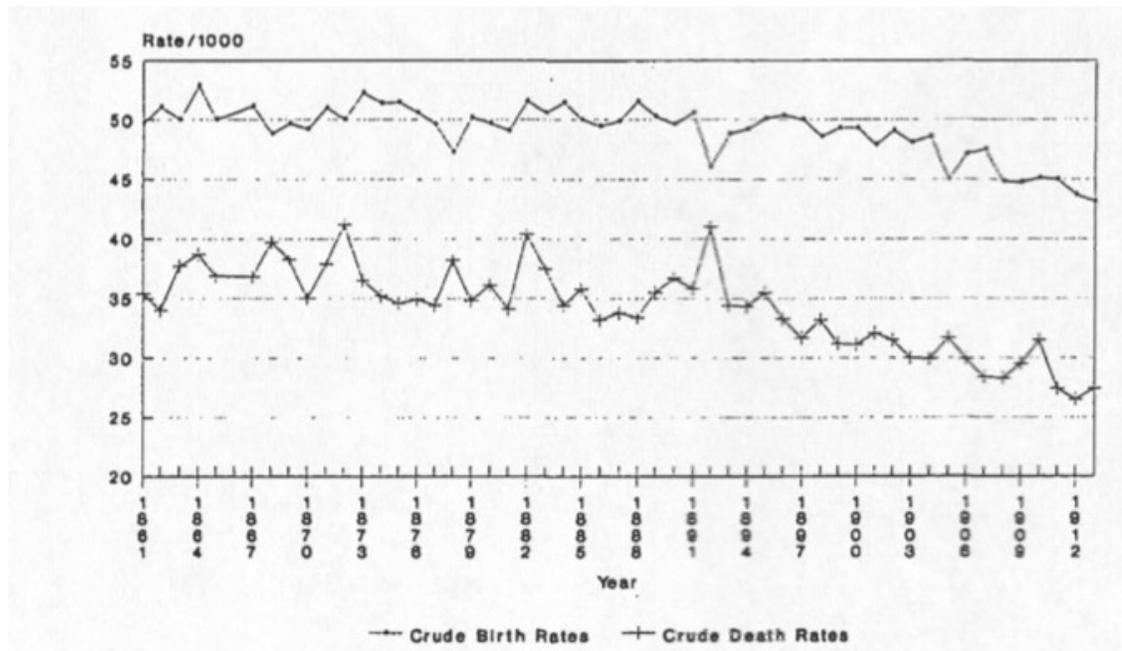
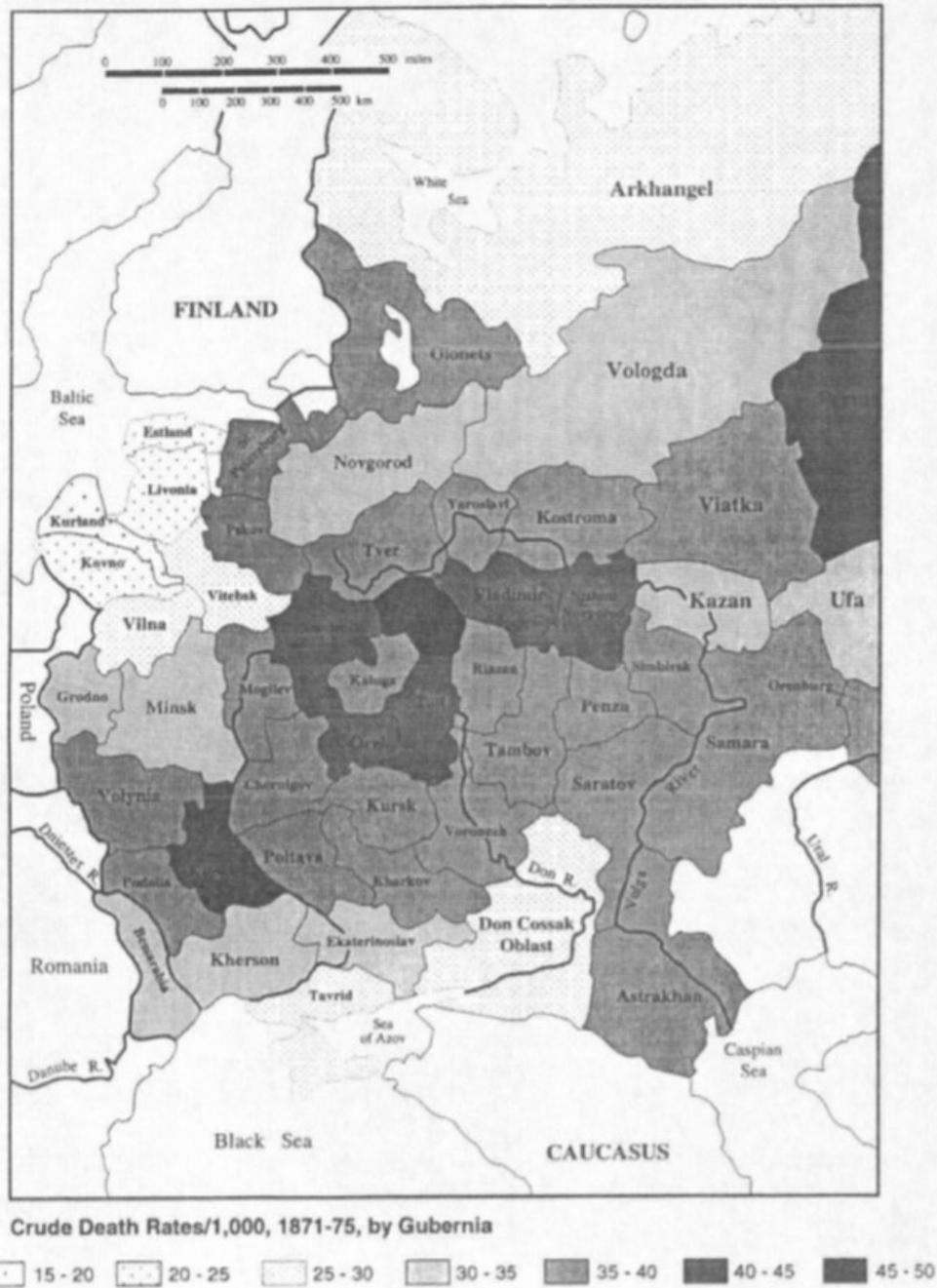


Figure 1: Crude birth and death rates per 1,000 in European Russia, 1861-1865, 1867-1913. Original source: Rashin, *Naselenie*, 155-6 (1866 missing).

Secondary source: Patterson, David K. "Mortality in late tsarist Russia: a reconnaissance." *Social history of medicine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.



Map 1: Crude death rates/1,000, 1871-75 by Gubernia

Source: Patterson, David K. "Mortality in late tsarist Russia: a reconnaissance." *Social history of medicine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Mortality rates in Late Tsarist Russia are especially relevant when discussing images of death in stories from that period, because these stories can inform current scholarship about how the Russian peasantry viewed death. In this case it seems clear that the Russian peasantry of the mid-19th century were determined to see mortality as a natural fact of the human experience, even in an era when life was full of uncertainty and death could come knocking at one's door at any moment. This type of philosophy is sometimes called *death positivity* – the idea that death is inevitable and unavoidable, and that living in fear of death is no way to live. Koschei's immortality renders him a monster in Russian folklore, just as the protagonists' willingness to risk their mortal lives in order to reach their goals renders them heroes. To that effect, the treatment of the mortal/immortal binary in the Koschei tales encourages the audience to maintain a death-positive attitude towards the uncertainties of 19th-century peasant life.

CONCLUSION

So what do transactional relationships, materialism, and mortality (or lack thereof) have to do with one another? In the tales of Koschei the Deathless, death itself is objectified literally, physically, and syntactically. Koschei's death is described in these folktales as being an object rather than event: his death is not something which happens, but something which *is*. Koschei's death can be held, can be hidden, can be picked up and dropped again – anything that can be done to a physical object can be done to Koschei's death.

Again, if *materialism* is taken to mean a reliance on the availability of material resources, and *legacy* is taken to mean the existential idea of an individual's ability to impact future events taking place after their death, stories that treat death as a material resource reveal cultural beliefs surrounding the relationship between material possessions and mortality. In the case of Russian folklore, the objectification of death results from anxieties among the Russian peasantry about legacy – anxieties arising from the daily uncertainty of living during an era when the statistical probability of dying an early death was very real. The onset of death prompts people to think about what evidence of their life they will leave behind; concerns of this sort demonstrate how the idea of legacy is bound up with material objects, as mankind looks to its possessions and its crafts for physical proof of having existed.³ Thus, the fact that Koschei's mortality is an object

³ People likewise tend to view *children* as evidence of having existed, as someone's children will carry on their legacy. But it is worth noting that in this context, legacy is yet another vehicle for objectification. The concept of legacy and the cultural anxieties surrounding it turn children into objects. This is why the ending of Guterman's "Koshchey the Deathless" is at once fascinating and predictable: Vasilisa and Ivan are willing to sacrifice their legacy to restore their stone friend to life. This is surprising,

mirrors the folk belief that life is made up of objects. “My death is far away,” the sorcerer says, “In the sea there is an island, on that island stands an oak, under the oak a coffer is buried, in the coffer is a hare, in the hare is a duck, in the duck is an egg, and in the egg is my death” (Guterman 489). Objects are side-effects of life which we create, use, and discard (or keep) throughout our lives; in this sense, objects embody mortality. But as side-effects of life which we leave behind after death, objects embody immortality as well.

The presence of transactional relationships in the Koschei tales is relevant in the context of object-oriented mortality because it further emphasizes the materialism already present in folklore. Transactional relationships are by definition a commodification of interpersonal relations – they are characterized by the mutually beneficial emotional contract entered into by two parties with opposing assets to offer. Basically, a transactional relationship is a promise, and the continued maintenance of the relationship depends entirely on the fulfillment of that promise. If either party fails to uphold their end of the contract and the expected transaction does not take place, then the relationship is void. Within the parameters of a transactional relationship, people treat each other as commodities – they *must*, in order for the relationship to function properly. In other words, transactional relationships transform individuals into *resources*, forcing characters to become objects themselves.

The symbolic implications of immortality in the tales are further emphasized by the possible origins of the wizard’s name. In the afterword to his anthology, Guterman

considering the cultural-material importance of legacy. But this plot twist is not so surprising when considered alongside the idea that legacy objectifies progeny. As cynical as it sounds, perhaps Vasilisa and Ivan are willing to kill their children because they never viewed their kids as real people in the first place.

notes that “the name of the chained and imprisoned demon *Koshchey* signified in Old Russian, as well as its Turkic prototype *koshchi*, simply prisoner” (649). Magyarody makes a similar observation, remarking on the likelihood that the wizard’s name may derive from the Old Russian word *koschchii*, meaning captive, slave, or servant (341). This detail is particularly telling, as it speaks to an idea which underpins all tales featuring Koschei: immortality is a prison. The villain is kept captive not only by the warrior queen Maria Morevna, but by his own deathlessness.

To conclude, the Koschei tales represent a thematic intersection of mortality, materialism, and transaction. Considering literacy and mortality rates during the Late Tsarist era, this intersection can be interpreted as having constructed a general attitude towards material legacy among the Russian peasantry. The portrayal of Koschei the Deathless in Russian folktales perpetuates a negative impression of immortality and a positive outlook on natural cycles of life and death, cycles which depend upon and leave behind material resources and objects. The Koschei tales consider immortality to be a dehumanizing and imprisoning force. In doing so, these tales paint a holistic portrait of a 19th-century Russian worldview which affirmed life through objectification. The life-affirming function of these folktales is what enables their persistence in contemporary popular culture.

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