

# Comparing Women In Culture

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In the mid-nineteenth-century, in Germany and all across Europe, a well known ethic at the time was the idea of silenced women in society. Ruth B. Bottigheimer goes on to explain this ethic in her essay entitled “‘Silenced Women in the Grimms’ Tales: The ‘Fit’ Between Fairy Tales and Society in Their Historical Context,” as “[a] wide acceptance in all social classes in the dukedoms, principalities, and free cities . . .” (116). Bottigheimer explores the Grimm Tales in an effort to show the passive and silent nature of women in the German society. The Grimm Tales can be used to show the silent nature of women in German culture, but through the collected tales of Alexander Afanas’ev, one can also see that this silent nature of women was not limited just to the German culture, but also expand to the Russian culture.

The question may arise of what exact attributes silent women possessed in the mid-nineteenth-century. Silent women possessed many attributes, some of which people would now take offense to and see as negative, but as Bottigheimer states, “silence [was seen] as a positive feminine attribute . . .” In the times, “too much chatter could be punished . . . [and] even if a woman were a genius . . . she would be told to sit quietly and knit” (116). Bottigheimer uses examples from the Grimm Tales to show how women who talked too much were associated with witches, and often were burned at the stake (116-7). Good women had silent attributes whereas evil women, such as witches were associated with attributes such as chattering. This lead to the belief that women who talked a lot were associated with witches at the time (Bottigheimer 123). It is not that men could not be silent too, men could be silent upon their choice, but “women were silenced” (Bottigheimer 118).

Why the women were silenced varies tale by tale, but according to Bottigheimer there are three main reasons for silence in the Grimm Tales. The first reason for the silence of a woman in the tales is the character being cursed with it. Bottigheimer uses the example of “The Virgin’s Child” to illustrate this idea. In the tale, a child opens a forbidden door and refuses to admit to doing it. Because of her refusal the Virgin Mary casts her out of heaven and takes away her speech (Bottigheimer 120). This shows the “curse” of silence in women within the Grimm Tales. It is only through confessing to the sin that the girl was saved before being burned at the stake. Bottigheimer uses the example of “The Twelve Brothers” to further her argument in which a sister must go seven years of silence to save her brother from death.

Bottigheimer’s second category of silence shows up in the tales is the distribution of speech: “next are the silences within the text resulting from the author or editor’s distribution of direct and indirect speech” (120). This category focuses mainly, on a broad sense, how often characters in a text speak both directly and indirectly, regardless of the verbs used. This analysis has led to the application to the Grimm Tales which showed that wicked women “spoke” a lot more than women in general, and men “spoke” more often than proper women in general (Bottigheimer 125).

The third reason that Bottigheimer presents “is the manner in which the lexical context colors what is said” (120). What Bottigheimer is referring to here the number of times a character uses certain speaking verbs such as “speak,” “say,” “ask,” “answer,” and “cry out.” For example, one could go through a tale and count the number of times “speak” occurs in conjunction with a character in the tale. By doing this, one can clearly see how speech and silence among women was looked at. Counting the verb “speak,” as

Bottigheimer did by counting “sprechen” in seven tales, shows that evil women such as witches use the word more than boys and princes, who use it more than fathers or kings, and girls and mothers use the verb “sprechen” the least (126). By looking at the speech verbs in the tales, one can see more than just a distribution of speech, but women tend to “answer” more frequently and cry out more often than males (Bottigheimer 127).

Now that we have examined Bottigheimer’s categories of silence and the basic ethics in the society of the time that dealt with women and silence, an application can now be made to Russian Tales. Several tales were taken from the Afanas’ev collection of Russian Tales to illustrate and further Bottigheimer’s ideas on silence of women at the time. Though the German and Russian tales show similarities, one will also see the differences between the two sets of tales. By looking at tales from the Afanas’ev collection, one can see that women in Russia were also preferred to be silent and passive. As will be shown, women who did speak a lot were also seen as witches and were often punished.

This punishment of “chatty” women or disrespectful women can be seen through two tales in the Afanas’ev collection. In the first tale entitled “The Lazy Maiden,” the girl, referred to as “lazybones” by the author, is characterized and known as someone, “who did not like to work but only to chatter and gossip” (Afanas’ev 423). The tale opens up with the Lazybones inviting girls to her house to spin, but the conversation “began to turn on the subject of who of them was the boldest” (Afanas’ev 423). The Lazybones quickly claims that she is the boldest, and the girls challenge her to go steal an icon from the graveyard. The Lazybones does so, disturbing a corpse by taking a shroud from it, and then goes back to the house to show the other spinners. The corpse

then comes to the two times, asking the Lazybones for his shroud back, but the girl refuses both times to give it back to him. On the third day, the Lazybones goes to church with her family and a huge whirlwind begins to sweep through the church: “The wind seized the girl and threw her down too. In a trice she disappeared completely; only her braid remained” (Afanas’ev 425). This tale clearly shows how women who chattered and did not do what society saw them as appropriately doing, were punished like in most Grimm Tale cases, severely by death.

A second case is seen in the Afanas’ev tales in the tale entitled “The Stubborn Wife.” Though an extremely short tale, the tale shows the role of women of the times and how women who spoke out too often were punished. The tale opens up with a husband asking his wife to look at how well he shaved. The woman then talks back to her husband saying that he did not really shave, and that he only clipped: “But you haven’t shaved, you have only clipped your beard!” (Afanas’ev 280). The husband then replies by again, saying that he did shave it. The woman talks back repeatedly until finally drowns his wife. This clearly shows that in the society at the time, women were supposed to be silent, and those who spoke out were punished.

With these examples of how women were also supposed to be silent in Russia, the three categories for silenced women by Bottigheimer can now be applied to other Russian Tales. The first category in which a character is cursed with silence, is not seen very often in the Afanas’ev collection. In fact I could only find one example of it, and it is not an extremely concrete example. It comes from the tale “The Princess Who Never Smiled.” Though it never specifies why the princess never smiled, nor talked, it may seem to infer that God made her that way. The princess was extremely wealthy, and

according to the author, “how great is God’s world . . . the wealthy ones live in idleness” (Afanas’ev 360). The princess “never smiled and never laughed,” seeming to represent a silence in the tale. The silence remains with the girl, never laughing or smiling for any man who came to try and break what seems like a curse from God for being greedy: “she had everything her heart desired. Yet she never smiled and never laughed,” possibly showing this greed or stubbornness (Afanas’ev 361). What finally breaks this curse is a man who never took anything he felt like he did not earn. He worked hard and the employer would offer him as much money as he wanted, but he would only take one coin. He would accidentally drop the coins in a well after he earned them, but after he worked his hardest the third time, the coins floated to the top of the well and he picked them up. It says that “God had rewarded him for his labors” (Afanas’ev 362). It is only through this hard work that the man meets the princess and breaks the spell and she bursts out laughing.

The evidence that Bottigheimer found in German tales that women could be cursed with silence does not show up in the Afanas’ev tales that I could find. This could show a slight difference between the two cultures. As Bottigheimer stated, women who failed to do something or sinned, were silenced until they confessed (120). Bottigheimer, again, used the example of when the Virgin Mary punished a girl for not confessing to a sin by cursing her with silence. This seems slightly contradictory to the belief that evil women chatter, and proper women are silent. Bottigheimer repeatedly showed that evil women spoke more. Then why is this sinful girl given the attribute of a proper lady, such as silence?

This seems to catch Bottigheimer contradicting the ideas she is presenting, though as she shows, silence as a punishment appears numerous times in the Grimm Tales. The fact that silence as a punishment does not show up in the Russian Tales may be due to an old Russian folk belief. In Germany, evil gave women silence. In Russia, evil gave women the exact opposite, that of the “shrieking illness.” This illness was documented throughout Russia by the medical doctor N.V. Krainskii, whose studies concluded that “‘thousands if not tens of thousands’” suffered from the illness (Ivanits 106). Linda J. Ivanits describes this illness in her book *Russian Folk Belief* as “a woman’s condition characterized by howling [and] cursing” (106). The people of Russia believed that this illness was brought about by evil. Once again, there is the relationship between evil and chatter. Though, the people inflicted with this illness were not shunned, instead “[they were] carried forward to the holy gates” (Ivanits 107). This forgiveness can again be seen where the Virgin Mary broke the curse of the young girl. Though the curses that evil inflicts on women are different in the two cultures, one can see from the “shrieking illness” why Russian Tales told by peasants never tell of evil causing silence.

The second category presented by Bottigheimer, “the author or editor’s distribution of direct and indirect speech,” can now be applied to several Russian Tales from the Afanas’ev collection. As Bottigheimer stressed, proper women spoke little, while evil women spoke the most out of any characters in a tale. The tale from the Afanas’ev collection, “The Bold Knight, the Apples of Youth, and the Water of Life,” can be used to show the distribution of direct and indirect speech to the characters (Afanas’ev 314). In the tale we have a witch, our hero, a heroine, and a king. The heroine, who shows the proper attributes of women of the time only speaks both directly

and indirectly four times. The witch, a chatty and evil character speaks nine times. The Hero speaks eight times, and the king speaks three times. Though one might think that the king would speak more than three times, one must take in to account that throughout the whole tale he is sick. This clearly shows that women seen as evil speak a lot, a proper woman speaks little, and a proper and brave man speaks often. Applying this to the tale of “The Stubborn Wife” that we looked at earlier, one can clearly see that the wife is evil by speaking four times, and the husband five times. Because of this, once again, the woman is drowned.

This can be applied to the tale of “Prince Danila Govorila” from the Afanas’ev collection also. In the tale there is again a witch, a heroine, and a son. The story opens up with a son of a princess looking for a wife. The son originally tries to marry his sister, but this only leads to trouble for the sister who journeys and has encounters with the witch (Afanas’ev 351-6). Within the story, the witch speaks a total of 15 times. The son of the tale speaks a total of 9 times. The sister (maiden) speaks 8 times. This again shows the proportionality of Bottigheimer where the evil woman speaks out the most, the son or hero of a tale speaks out the next lesser amount of times and non-evil women speak much less. What may be surprising is the fact that the son speaks 9 times and the female speaks 8 times. A possible reason for this will be examined with the third category.

The third category that Bottigheimer presents is the idea of the authority of a characters speech. Whether the character spoke with authority using verbs like “speak,” “say,” and “ask,” or the character used less authoritative verbs such as “answer” and “cry.” This is what Bottigheimer calls “the lexical context . . . [which is] the level least noticeable at first reading” (125). Like the second category, witches and authority figures

such as a prince and king will use more authoritative verbs such as “speak,” whereas a girl or mother will “speak” nearly half the number of times as a witch or prince.

However, non-evil women will “answer” more often than any other character in a tale: “In the Fairy Tales women answer with great frequency, they almost never pose a question, and their general helplessness leads them to cry out often” (Bottigheimer 127). This can now be applied to Russian Tales.

The first tale that we will apply this to is one of the tales we applied the second category to, “The Bold Knight, The Apples of Youth, and The Water of Life” from the Afanas’ev collection. The first verb that we will look at is the verb “say.” Throughout the tale, the knight uses the verb “say” the most, “saying” seven times. The witch uses the verb “say” the second most, using it six times. The maiden only uses the verb “say” twice. Though the knight / hero uses the verb one time more than the witch, men are not shunned and looked down upon for saying a lot, whereas one can clearly see the difference in the two women and the verb. The witch uses the verb six times and the maiden only uses it twice. This shows that the women who say a lot are seen as evil, and that evil women “say” more. The maiden on the other hand only “says” something twice, a big difference from the knight and the witch. This clearly shows that a proper woman, as depicted by a heroine in a tale, is quite silent.

In the same tale, oddly enough, which could have been due to translation which will be discussed later, no one “spoke” in the tale. The case is different though between the two verbs “ask” and “answer.” Throughout the tale, the knight and the heroine only “answer” once. The knight was answering to the witch, who in most cases asks more than any other character in a tale. The heroine on the other hand, answers to the knight.

Though there was not a lot of “answering” in the tale, the verb “ask” is used three times by the witch and only once by the knight. This again shows how both a hero and a witch are two large authority figures in a tale. Unsurprisingly, the verb “ask” is never used in conjunction with the heroine. Though the knight did “say” more than the witch, the witch only appeared through half of the tale, and the witch still only used the verb “say” one less than the knight.

The second tale that I will use to apply the third category of verb usage with authority figures is the tale “Prince Danila Govorila.” The tale tells a slightly different story of verb usage compared to the tale of the bold knight and the traditional Grimm Tales. Again, none of the characters ever “speak” throughout the tale. The verb “say” is used in conjunction with the witch seven times, and the sister, brother, and maiden all use the verb only twice. The idea of the traditional verb set of “say” and “speak” being used by authority figures in the tales by Bottigheimer and the Grimm Tales is slightly questioned here. But with a closer look at the story, just exactly how much authority does our hero or brother hold? If one looks closely, he does not have much authority like the traditional hero of Russian and German tales. The first thing that illustrates this is the fact that the brother cannot find a lovely maiden to marry so he tries to marry his sister. He is not “noble” like most heroes, the sister calls what he is doing a sin and that “one does not marry one’s own sister” (Afanas’ev 352). If anything, the sister holds just as much authority having to confront the witch. There may in fact be a feminine side to the brother which can be seen in a few different places. For one, the verb “cry” is used in association with him when he cries out for his sister to come to bed with him (Afanas’ev 352). The second thing that could possibly show his feminine and silent role in the tale is

what is done to bring his sister back. A servant must strike the brother with a knife (phallic) and blood will flow (initiation) and only then will his sister appear (356). It is only then that the brother finds a woman to marry, but only through his sister does he find this woman. The witch does cry out once, but is a demand to her daughter. The sister also cries out once when the brother brings her back. This tale does in fact distribute authority verbs properly to authority figures, the figures in this case are just not as traditional as one might expect.

Through Bottigheimer's application and analysis of silenced women in German society, we can also see silenced women in Russian society around the same times. This shows that silenced women were not just part of ethics in Germany. Though we saw how both cultures show silenced women, we also saw how they varied slightly. Women in German society seemed to have been punished with silence, whereas women in Russian culture seemed to have believed they were punished with uncontrolled speech and outbursts. Other things could have lead to slightly different analyses. For one, Bottigheimer was using the raw German text and looking for the German verbs to apply his analysis. I on the other hand did not have the raw Russian text to abstract Russian verbs directly from it for a count. The English translation had to be used, which could also contribute to slightly different results. Through translation, many words could have been translated and interpreted differently. This could cause a loss for exact verbs used within a tale. As an example, in the tale of "Tereshichka," the verb "intoned" is used in conjunction with the witch Chuvilikha's speech (Afanas'ev 390). Because the tales were collected from peasants, who most likely did not have a high education, there is a high doubt that the peasant used a Russian word that translates to "intoned." As was noted in

the verb application of both “Prince Danila Govorila” and “The Bold Knight . . .” the verb “Spoke” was never used, whereas Bottigheimer found it abundantly in the Grimm Tales. This again could be due to the fact that the English verbs were examined, and the Russian verb for “spoke” could have been lost in the translation to English. Through these applications and analyses, we can see both similar and conflicting ethics in Russian and German culture.

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