

Bad Wives and Wise Maidens

Outline

- “Peter and Fevronia of Murom”
- “Wise Maiden” Tales
 - Riddles
 - “The Wise Little Girl”
- “Bad Wife” Tales
 - “The Wondrous Wonder, the Marvelous Marvel”
- A special case?
 - “Vasilisa the Priest’s Daughter”

“Peter and Fevronia of Murom”

- Mid-fifteenth-century
- Four Parts
 - The Evil Serpent
 - Miraculous Healing
 - Political Intrigues
 - Death and Posthumous Miracles
- Mixture of hagiographic and folkloric traditions
- What is folkloric and what is hagiographic?

Hagiography

- Life of a Saint (Latin: "vita")
- Pseudo-biography
 - Idealized image of saintly ideal
 - Purpose is not to describe the life of the person, but to argue that the person was saintly
- Commonplaces

Hagiographic Commonplaces

- Simple birth
- Prays from within the womb
- Alienation from other children
- Disciplined for ascetic piety
- Modesty, humility
- Posthumous miracles (especially absence of bodily corruption after death)

Hagiography vs Biography

- Hagiography, like biography, is supposed to be the story of someone's life, but ...
 - Events are not expected to be factual
 - Demonstrate the saintliness of the subject, even through fictionalization
- Hagiography and canonization
- Princes, martyrs, monks

Wise Maiden? Or Smart Aleck?

- How does Peter’s servant find Fevronia?
 - Abstract style: Everything happens at just the right time
- How does Fevronia make her appearance as a wise maiden?
 - Wisdom or blather?
- How does Fevronia prove her wisdom?
 - What is she asked to do?
 - How does she respond?

Happily Ever After?

- Fevronia’s common origin
 - Peter tries to jilt her the first time she cures him
 - Peter’s boyars dislike her because of her low birth
- “... both of them went to Peter’s native city of Murom, and there they lived extremely piously, closely obeying the commandments of God.”

Political Intrigue

- Crumbs turn to myrrh and incense
- “... Fevronia’s miraculous gift of healing, which she had received from God not only for this life but even for after death.”
- Fevronia as mind-reader
- How is the political intrigue overcome?

The Death of Peter and Fevronia

- Truth, humility, love of and devotion to the poor
- Deathbed monastic vows
- How are they buried?

Wise Maiden Tales 1

- Woman as hero(ine)
- Riddles as a test
- Variable role of magic

Wise Maiden Tales 2

- Young (how young?) woman
- Type of wisdom
 - Practical
 - Riddler
- What is the result of her wisdom?
- Whom does she marry?
- How might a feminist critic look at Wise Maiden tales?

“The Wise Little Girl”

- Whom does the older brother consult in finding out the answers to the riddles?
 - What kind of answers does he get?
 - What kind of “knowledge” do they convey?
 - What is suggested by this?
- What kind of answers does the little girl give?
 - How are they arrived at?
 - What kind of knowledge do they convey?
 - What makes the wise girl wise?
- How is she rewarded for her wisdom?
 - How might feminist critics regard such a resolution?

Fairy Tales and Genre

- How does the same anecdote of the spinning function differently in “Peter and Fevronia” and “The Wise Little Girl”?
- How is Fevronia the same as the “wise little girl” and how is she different? How are the texts different?
- Plot, character, function, genre

Some Features of Bad Wives

- Disobedient
- Adulterous
- Ungrateful
- Gossipy
- Bossy
- Greedy/selfish
- Gullible/stupid
- Stubborn
- Unruly/untamed
- Dishonest
- Defiant
- Sneaky

Structure of Bad Wife Tales

- Misogynistic portrayal of women
- Anecdotal
- Different social function from traditional fairy tales
 - Punishment of bad wife
 - Does the “bad” wife have a “good” husband?
- Not concerned with personal formation
 - No psychological development
 - No hero or villain in the traditional sense
- Variable role of magic

“The Wondrous Wonder, the Marvelous Marvel”

- Thrice nine lands, thrice tenth kingdom
- What’s the point?
- Why is the woman a bad wife? Is her husband a good husband?
- Who would have told these tales?

“Vasilisa, the Priest’s Daughter”

- Gender bending
 - Vasilisa or Vasily?
 - Vodka and gender
 - “Womanish fiddle-faddle”
 - King Barkhat (= “King Velvet”)
- “The little old back yard witch”
- What does Vasilisa look like, and when do we learn about her appearance?
- Does Vasilisa live happily ever after?
