

Analytical Paper  
Heather Stewart Russian Fairy Tales, Russian 0090  
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““The Merchant’s Daughter and the Maidservant” is about a Merchant’s beautiful daughter who has the amazing ability to guess what any man is thinking. The Merchant marries his daughter off, but little does he know that it is not his daughter whom he marries off; but instead, a maidservant who looks much like his true daughter. The Maidservant uses a sleeping potion and cuts out the Merchant’s daughter’s eyes in order to marry the King. Soon, the Merchant’s Daughter recovers, and this news spreads to the Maidservant. The evil Maidservant is infuriated and so cuts the girl into pieces, keeping only her heart. But, to the surprise of the Maidservant, the Merchant’s Daughter once again survives. This time the Merchant’s Daughter gets revenge, and the Maidservant is brutally punished. Punished in ways that model how she maltreated the Merchant’s Daughter. In this tale the Maidservant plays the part of the powerful evil woman” (Afanasev 327).

““Baba Yaga” is a tale about an old man who remarries to a wicked woman, who of course is then considered the wicked stepmother, or the powerful evil woman. The stepmother tries destroying the young girl by giving her impossible or treacherous tasks. She sends the young girl to such as to her aunt’s house, and it turns out that the aunt is Baba Yaga, a woman who enjoys eating little Russian girls. Well, the young girl outsmarts Baba Yaga with her kindness, and with the help of a cat, a comb, and a towel. After escaping Baba Yaga the young girl father discovers what his wife has done to his daughter, and so he shoots the wicked woman” (Afanasev 363).

““Prince Danila Govorila” is a fairy tale about a wicked witch who wants to destroy two children. The children’s mother is connived, by an evil witch, into making her son wear a ring. The son is told to place this special ring on numerous girls’ fingers, and whichever girl the ring fits he is to marry. Well, it turns out the ring fits his sister’s finger the best. The sister cannot imagine marrying her own brother. She ends up sinking into the ground where she meets a young maiden who protects and saves her from the witch who also lives underground. The two girls run away from the witch and are reacquainted with the brother. The brother does not marry his sister; he winds up marrying the maiden, and marrying his sister off to a different good man. The powerful evil witch is not heard from again” (Afanasev 351).

The previous summaries are of three similar fairy tales, which portray the Russian Fairy Tale inclusion of powerful evil women, such as witches and stepmothers. These three fairy tales can be analyzed from a psychological point of view, such as Bruno Bettelheim’s...or from a social point of view, such as Marina Warner’s. Bettelheim claims that powerful evil women represent the split personality of a mother. He argues that these women represent the child’s way of coping with changes in their biological mother’s attitude—helping make sense of the world for children. Warner takes a different view for the inclusion of powerful evil women. She claims that powerful evil women represent the vulnerability of women, and the struggle between younger and older women—opening our eyes to the realities of the world. Bettelheim and Warner take two differing approaches in explaining the purpose of particular elements in Russian Fairy

Tales. Warner with a socially oriented approach, and Bettelheim with a more psychological approach—there views are *social* versus *psychological*.

Marina Warner was born in London in 1946, and is a “prize-winning writer of fiction, criticism and history; her works include novels and short stories as well as studies of female myths and symbols” (Marina 1). Warner is famous for her ideas concerning fairy tales and the myths of how women are portrayed in them. She says, “It’s important to take part through words, and pictures made of words, and ideas made of both” (Marina 1). Warner’s views are apparent within her many writings, specifically in From the Beast to the Blonde, which “deals mostly...with the female role in preserving and transmitting fairy tales and with the role of women within the tales themselves” (Eclectica Magazine 1).

When complying with Warner’s ideas, we see throughout fairy tales a struggle between younger women and older women. When the younger female marries she moves into her husband’s house, which usually means moving in with her mother in law, and or stepmother. At this moment the younger woman is the most vulnerable because she is under the roof, and under the power, of the older woman. The older woman views the younger woman similar to an intruder, either because the younger woman is moving in on the stepmothers son, or like in “The Merchant’s Daughter and the Maidservant” when the King brags that he has met a maiden who “no matter what one is thinking, she knows it” (Afanasev 330). In this tale the intrusion is that of attention—the younger woman has the attention of the King, not the wife. The King speaks of a beautiful and intelligent maiden, and so the Queen feels her identity is at stake

because of the young girl's beauty and brains. "The Queen [is] full of spite" (Afanasev 330) because she feels threatened by the other female. The Queen realizes that with the Merchant's Daughter alive and well her secret is at stake. For the Queen could not bear for anyone to discover that she was not the real Queen. Due to this threat, jealousy and envy arise, and so predictable conflicts also arise. The Queen cuts out the young maiden's eyes, and cuts her body into little pieces. This tale shows the vulnerability of the Merchant's Daughter because the Merchant's Daughter is defenseless against the tortures of the Queen. But, the vulnerability of the Queen is also quite apparent through this tale. Through the jealousy, envy, and stress the Merchant's daughter causes the Queen, we witness the Queen become enraged due to her inability to get rid of the Merchant's Daughter. Through this inability we see the Queens vulnerability. The Queen's insecurity is also evident at the end of this fairy tale when the Queen, now former Queen, begs the Merchant's Daughter she treated so terribly for forgiveness and to spare her life—"The Queen fell at her feet. "Forgive me," she said (Afanasev 331).

The struggle between younger and older women in fairy tales is also apparent in "Baba Yaga" when an old man marries a new wife, and this new wife, the wicked stepmother, "dislikes the girl, beats her, and ponders how she might destroy her" (Afanasev 363). Tactics of powerful evil woman that lead to the vulnerability of the younger woman are also obvious in "Prince Danila Govorila" when a wicked witch "ponders and ponders as to how she can lead" a son and daughter "into evil ways and destroy them" (Afanasev 351). Evil

schemes such as these are used by the insecure older, uglier women against the more beautiful maiden's. Use of these tactics show, on one hand, the younger woman's vulnerability in that she must subdue to an evil woman's plans and on the other hand; evil doings show the vulnerability of the older woman because the resentful deeds are motivated by an underlying jealousy the older woman has toward the younger woman's beauty. This resentfulness of young, fair, beautiful, pure girls provides evidence of the older woman's insecurity, which in turn portrays the older woman's vulnerability.

Bruno Bettelheim was an American developmental psychologist, and "authored a number of influential works on child development" (encyclopedia.com 1). He killed himself in "1990 at the age of 86" (First Things 1). He published a book called the Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales, in which he psycho analyzes many fairy tales. His book conveys the benefits of fairy tales to children, and the meaning and significance tales play in a child's life. His writings pertaining to fairy tales help us to understand our childhood, and to better relate to the children of our time.

When looking at evil stepmother tales from a Bettelheim perspective, the stepmother is viewed as a split personality. Bettelheim asserts that the wicked mother, in the child's eyes, is the side of the mother that the child fears or dislikes. Such as the side that appears when a mother is punishing or reprimanding her kid, or when the mother will not allow the child to do something. When a child is being punished they tend to exaggerate the meaning

of their scolding. They may take their reprimand as a symbol of their mother hating them. It is difficult for a child to comprehend that their own mother, who is supposed to love and care for them, could be talking to them in such a harsh tone or treating them in such a stern fashion. And so the child gives their mother a split personality in the form of a whole new character. The child pretends the scolding mother is an evil woman in order to preserve their image of a loving, maternal mother who does not discipline them.

For instance, a young girl who happens to marry a man whose mother is cranky and hard to impress may try to justify her stepmother's behavior as evil. But, the young girl may have done something to her mother in law to make her act in this evil way. Such as, cheating on her husband, which would of course anger the mother because the young girl would be betraying her mother in law's son? Fairy tales leave everything open to individual interpretation, including the possibility that maybe the younger woman is the evil one, that maybe the younger more beautiful woman has done something wrong to cause the older woman's madness. Also, the wicked witches in fairy tales may just be the portrayal of a frustrated mother whose son or daughter will not listen or behave. And so, in fairy tales the wicked witch or stepmother is portrayed as evil because it gives reason and rationalization to the evil tendencies of any normal mother's rage toward her child when he or she does not do as they are asked. A child never wants to believe that their very own mother could be evil—evil, in this sense, meaning a woman's attitude toward her child when she is unhappy with them. By creating, in their head, an entirely separate evil,

villainous woman, a young child can make sense of the change in attitude or personality of their mother.

As in “Prince Danila Govorila” when the witch uses the ring in attempting to destroy the young girl and boy, it is quite possible that this tale elevated from a child’s experience of his or her mother telling them that if they eat all their vegetables they will grow up to be strong and healthy adults. In this same manner that many mothers use to get their children to do what they ask of them, the witch uses this same such form of bribery—“My little dove, my dear friend, here is a ring for you; put it on your son’s finger. With its help he will be healthy and wealthy” (Afanasev 351). The child isn’t asked to eat his vegetables to become big and strong, but rather he is asked to wear a ring in order to be healthy and wealthy. If the boy does not eat his vegetables he is told to sit at the dinner table until he finishes, or told that he will not grow. And so, it is possible that a tale arises from this boy’s punishment. He doesn’t eat the vegetables; He will not grow up strong. He doesn’t wear the ring; He will not marry and become wealthy. His mother is angry and so makes him sit at the dinner table for not finishing his meal; His mother is angry and so makes him marry his sister.

In “Baba Yaga” When the stepmother tells her stepdaughter to go to her aunt’s house and ask for “a needle and some thread” (Afanasev 363), and the aunt turns out to be the wicked Baba Yaga who enjoys eating children, it shows the split personality a child attaches to his mother. Sure, this sounds like a typical scenario where a stepmother asks her daughter to do something

dangerous or impossible, portraying the stepmother as the evil one. But, what this could also mean is that a mother asks her child to do something that the child does not want to do, and therefore the stepmother threatens the child in order to make him or her obey. In this case, rather than a mother threatening the child with...clean your room or you are grounded for the weekend. The mother threatens the child with...go to your aunts house or you will be eaten.

Warner, when agreeing that fairy tales show the realities of society she means that fairy tales are representations of real life, and of what women and society are going through. If Warner were looking at any of the previous three fairy tales about marriage she would most likely say that the marriages are representations of earlier times. For example “Prince Danila Govorila,” and “The Merchant’s Daughter and the Maidservant,” tell of arranged marriages. In “Prince Danila Govorila” the boy’s wife is chosen based on whose finger the ring fits. And in “The Merchant’s Daughter and the Maidservant” the merchant volunteers his own daughter’s hand in marriage. Marriages are arranged in both these fairy tales—much like in the earlier times when parents and monarchies arranged marriages for their sons and daughters. “I have a beautiful daughter,” the Merchant says to the King, as if promoting his daughter’s hand in marriage. The King soon sends the Merchant’s Daughter a letter saying, “Make ready to get married,” she then “[bursts] into tears, and [prepares] to go” (Afanasev 320). This event shows the negation of love in marriage, and the importance of arranging marriages in order to heighten ones social class, hence why the Merchants daughter has no major objection to marrying a King,

for a King will make her rich and powerful. “And he must marry only that maiden whom the ring fits” (Afanasev 351)—this excerpt shows how the son does not have a choice in whom he marries, but instead must wed whomever *someone*, in this case *something* (the ring), chooses for him to marry. These fairy tales focusing on marriage display the ways of the times in which they were written and recited—the ways of society.

Bettelheim would not argue that fairy tales are representations of reality, but rather that fairy tales are representations of a child’s thinking. Bettelheim would say that evil characters exist in fairy tales in order to introduce a child to the evils of the world—sex and death. From these fairy tales children realize the world is not a perfect place, that not everyone is kind-hearted, and that people do die, and that there are consequences for actions. When the Maidservant says to the Merchant’s Daughter, “Let us take a walk on the island,” and at the island she gives the Merchants Daughter “sleeping potions, cut out her eyes, and put them in her pocket” (Afanasev 328), the Maidservant then impersonates the Merchants Daughter and marries the King. From a Bettelheim perspective this event could be a way of telling children that not everyone can be trusted.

Bettelheim is concerned with the portrayal of sex within fairy tales, particularly phallic symbols. “The girl took the towel and the comb and ran” (Afanasev 364)—with the inclusion of a comb as a magic device Bettelheim would most likely interpret as a symbol of the young girls sexuality, maybe even her virginity. The comb symbolizes the male. The young girl in

“Baba Yaga” throws the comb to save herself from Baba Yaga who is chasing her. The comb turns into a “deep and terrifying forest” (Afanasev 365), which protects her, much like a husband would protect his wife. The young girl throwing the comb could be a symbol of her giving away her virginity. She gives up the comb; she gains freedom and protection. She gives up her virginity; she gains love and devotion.

After examining these Russian Fairy Tales from Bettelheim’s perspective and from Warner’s perspective we see how the fairy tales work with the child’s psyche and also how they represent reality. From these tales the child can grow emotionally at their own pace. As the characters change and grow so does the child’s mind. The character learns from experience, and the child, upon hearing the tale, learns through the character’s experiences. These tales also provide a sort of history into how woman were treated and the social caste of the times. We also see the struggle between older and younger woman, stepmothers and stepdaughters, and beautiful and ugly women. Bettelheim and Warner’s views can coexist, and both help us make sense of ourselves and our world.

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