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## **Politicizing Magic: An Anthology of Russian and Soviet Fairy Tales (review)**

Sibelan Forrester

Marvels & Tales, Volume 22, Number 2, 2008, pp. 324-326 (Review)

Published by Wayne State University Press



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a high level of shared knowledge is assumed, this book does not exclude all but a specialized academic audience.

In bringing Latin folktales back into the fold, Jan M. Ziolkowski has effectively done for medieval folklore studies what his endower did for Romanesque art. In this seminal work, the ways in which tradition and transmission in the Middle Ages are understood are forever enhanced. In short, *Fairy Tales from Before Fairy Tales: The Medieval Latin Past of Wonderful Lies* is a milestone.

Maria Teresa Agozzino  
*American Folklore Society/The Ohio State University*

***Politicizing Magic: An Anthology of Russian and Soviet Fairy Tales.*** Edited by Marina Balina, Helena Goscilo, and Mark Lipovetsky. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005. xiv + 418 pp.

Now that the kind of cachet that Russia had during the Cold War has moved to new languages and regions, many Russian programs on college and university campuses have discovered that Russian fairy tales make a popular undergraduate or general education topic. A number of courses now taught in the United States descended from one originally created by Helena Goscilo, professor of Slavic at the University of Pittsburgh. *Politicizing Magic: An Anthology of Russian and Soviet Fairy Tales* aims partly to serve such classes and partly to do much more. It includes translations by a number of individuals, some done expressly for this book, framed with theoretical essays by three editors who are all prominent scholars of Russian literature and culture. As these origins suggest, the book may serve as a required or supplemental text in courses on folklore, culture, and literature in a framework of Russian or Slavic studies but also as Russian material in a comparative course. It can also be profitably employed for pleasure reading, individual study, or research, particularly the enlightening and richly footnoted section introductions.

The book's three sections present "Folkloric Fairy Tales," "Fairy Tales of Socialist Realism," and "Fairy Tales in Critique of Soviet Culture," followed by brief notes on the translators and sources. Goscilo points out (xii) that the editors chose to exclude nineteenth-century Russian literary fairy tales, such as Pushkin's tales in verse or Aksakov's version of "Beauty and the Beast," "The Little Scarlet Flower," since that line of development does not lead neatly to the Soviet uses of folklore forms. Goscilo provides the edition's foreword (ix–xiv) and introduces the section of folkloric fairy tales, presenting them largely in terms of the course she created, with a description and evaluation of Russian and Western European folklore theory and analysis. The subsequent twelve translations by Goscilo include some of the tales that are most popular among Russian and other readers and some that have been adapted by

Russian composers for opera, ballet, or orchestral treatment: “Vasilisa the Beautiful,” “The Tale of Prince Ivan, the Firebird, and the Gray Wolf.” Goscilo also includes “The Magic Ring,” a cheerful example of Aleksandr Afanas’ev’s bawdy folktales, which have been published more than once in English translation but never combined with the “censored” general collection. Goscilo’s translations are brisk and pragmatic, with an occasional slip in style (anachronistic expressions, run-on sentences), but enjoyably readable as she captures the down-to-earth style of the originals.

Marina Balina (professor of Russian and German at Illinois Wesleyan University) introduces the Socialist Realist tales that Richard Dorson might have described as “fakelore.” Balina’s well-informed survey outlines the Soviet adoption of fairy tales for propaganda purposes and explains in elegant detail how propaganda functions in each of the five tales that follow. This section shows vividly how inapt the English term “Fairy Tales” is for many Russian examples—“magical tales” is a better rendering of the term *volshebnye skazki*. These Stalinist creations show the era’s ambition to force once-imaginary wonders into reality, as magic beings or objects illustrate the transition to new social norms or teach class consciousness and properly unselfish behavior (Valentin Kataev’s “Flower of Seven Colors”). Fairy tales have even served to provide vocabulary: the Russian word *samolët* (literally “self-flyer”), used in tales of flying carpets, replaced the borrowed, foreign term *aero*, “airplane,” in the 1930s. One Stalin-era tale, “The Old Genie Khottabych,” is excerpted here. Another, Pavel Bazhov’s “The Malachite Casket” (adapted from a 1949 translation by Eve Manning), is set in the pre-Revolutionary past and has a true fairy-tale feeling, flattened psychology, and a folkloric plot alongside its literary features and careful adherence to a Soviet view of social class; the magical ending even gives it a touch of shamanism, appropriate to the tale’s Ural setting.

Mark Lipovetsky (associate professor of Russian at the University of Colorado) introduces the final section, of works that employ magical or fairy-tale elements in critique of Soviet society, what he calls “the *anti-totalitarian* vector of the fairy-tale tradition in Soviet culture” (234). Lipovetsky addresses the development and psychological function of fairy tales throughout Russian and Soviet history and the long relationship of folklore to education of the masses. His illuminating and quotable observations on fairy-tale discourse in Soviet culture, official and dissident, map its place from the point of view of cultural studies. The five texts provided are quite various, from Yevgeny Zamyatin’s stylistically persuasive *Fairy-Tales for Grown-Up Children* (1922) and part of Yevgeny Shvarts’s play *The Dragon* to works from the 1970s. The length of most of these compels the editors to print only excerpts, and, unfortunately, the cuts impact the works’ artistic value, though they do prove that fairy-tale elements may lurk in works that lack the tale’s characteristic brevity. Vasily

Shukshin's "Before the Cock Crows Thrice" amusingly combines in a single tale a mass of classic Russian folktale figures living in a library (the fate of oral culture in a literate society?), somewhat like the movie *Shrek*. Grigory Gorin's play *That Very Munchausen*, on the other hand, has fantastic elements galore but resembles Cyrano de Bergerac's trip to the moon more than anything in Russian folklore.

Indeed, what may become most clear from *Politicizing Magic* is that later appropriations of fairy tales are not folklore at all and provide a very different experience. Readers seeking fairy tales proper may be disappointed in the later sections of the book; enjoying them requires preparation to understand the significance of their exploitation, recycling, or canny citation of fairy tales. The introductions are therefore essential to this collection, no matter how it is to be used. Rich and informative, *Politicizing Magic* will be of value both for studying this essential element in Russian and Soviet culture, and as an example of how fairy tales may be and have been used and abused.

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***In Quest of Indian Folktales: Pandit Ram Gharib Chaube and William Crooke.*** By Sadhana Naithani. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. xi + 328 pp.

"In 1996, I located the handwritten manuscripts of William Crooke's famed collection of the folktales of northern India in the archive of the Folklore Society, London" (vii). So begins the preface to Sadhana Naithani's recent study and tale collection, *In Quest of Indian Folktales: Pandit Ram Gharib Chaube and William Crooke*. Forty years ago, and in a very different cultural moment, Richard Dorson opened his preface to the seminal folkloric study, *The British Folklorists: A History* (London: Routledge, 1968), in strikingly similar terms. "This book began a long time ago," Dorson wrote, "in the summer of 1948, when on a casual visit to my sister who lived in London I stumbled across the library of The Folk-Lore Society" (v). Whether it is intentional or not, Naithani's prefatory echo of her prestigious forerunner is revealing, both because it indicates the extent to which these two studies are working in the same tradition, and because it reminds us, simultaneously, how far folklore studies has traveled in the intervening years. On the one hand, this echo draws our attention to the fact that these two studies have similar objects in view: both are works of scholarly "detection" in which an archival discovery sparks a long and wide-ranging quest for information, both seek to contribute something new to our understanding of the history of folk-narrative collection, and both are, at least partially, works of literary biography that aim to reconstruct the lives of notable folklore scholars who had hitherto remained in the shadows. Even as these parallels became