

Of “Monsters” and Men

The rationale behind some of my choices revolves around the actions of monsters and of men and I decided to explore the boundaries that lie in between. What makes a monster? What makes a man? In these fairytales, there are monsters who are kind and men who aren't so heroic. Thus, it is fascinating to see how stereotypes are subverted.

Title: “**The Story of King Frost**” from *The Yellow Fairy Book*

Author: Andrew Lang

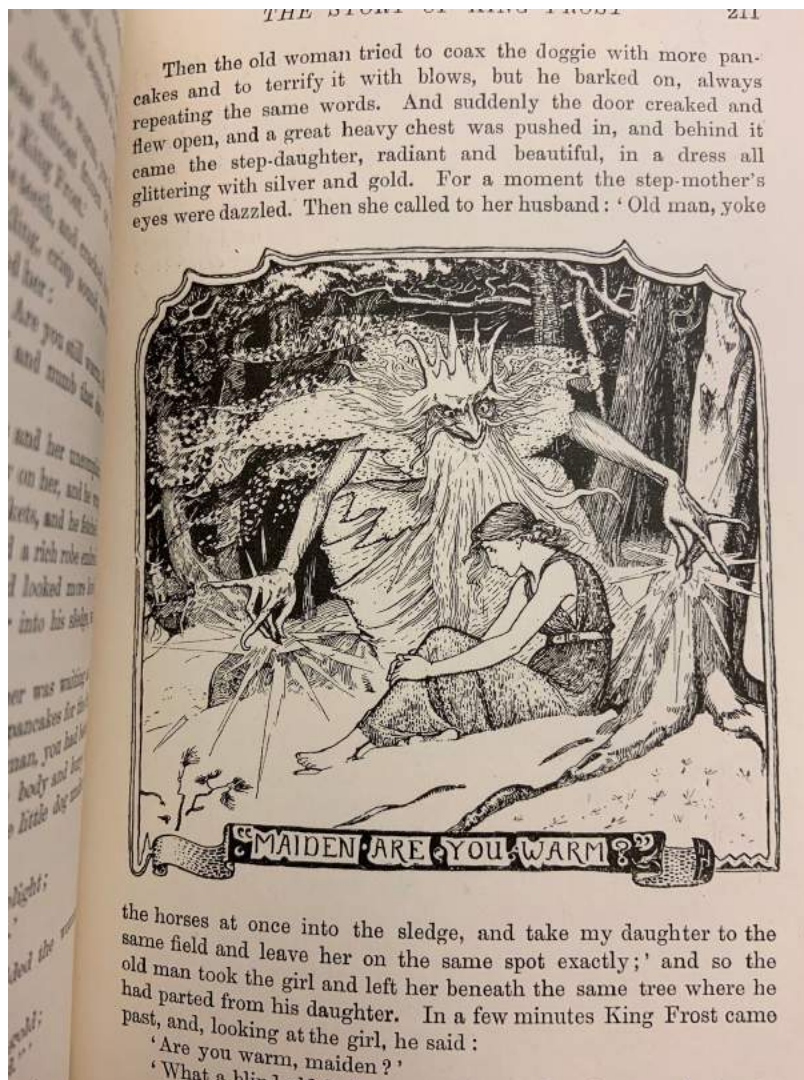
Place of Publication: London

Publisher: Longmans, Green.

Publication Date: 1894

UBC Library Call Number: PR10.Q4 L3 1894 Y4

UBC Library Permalink: <http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=1743709>



King Frost is one of my favourite characters in Russian storytelling tradition. Like with many other archetypal figures, he can play both malevolent and benevolent roles. In this version, King Frost initially appears as a great and terrible figure. The wicked step-mother sends her into the clutches of King Frost by convincing the father to leave her out to die in the winter fields, killed by “the cutting frost”. The girl is sent out and meets King Frost who intimidates her, thrice asking her variations of “Maiden, are you warm?” The girl answers positively with great politeness each time, effectively winning

King Frost's good graces. He wraps her up in furs and sends her back to her family with riches. Upon returning, the step-mother flies into a great rage and sends her own daughter to the very same spot, assuming that the same thing will happen again. This child, however, meets King Frost's questions with great rudeness and as a consequence, freezes to death.

In the image that accompanies the story, King Frost is set up to be the villain; he is monstrous, materializing out from the snowy backdrop to menace the girl with glee, with eyes sparkling and claw-like hands outstretched, crackling with power. His expression is mischievous and he looms over the girl as if he were floating. His cloak and crown are constructed from snow and ice and as his name suggests, his connection and command of the elements seems to imply that he is not entirely "human" in the most traditional sense. However, the end of the story shows how in truth, it is human greed that is the greatest evil and that King Frost merely seeks to punish and correct such evil. What I enjoy the most about this story is the potential in King Frost; he is capable of both punishment and reward, and this time, he chooses to respond to kindness with kindness.

Title: **Vol'ga**

Author: Unknown (Artist/Contributor: Ivan Bilibin)

Place of Publication: Petrograd (Now known as St.Petersburg)

Publisher: Izd. I.I. Bilibina,

Publication Date: 1904

UBC Call Number: PZ63.7 .V65 1904

UBC Library Permalink: <http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=684643>



The "Epic of Vol'ga" is an interesting example that blurs the boundaries between folklore, history, fairytale, and literary epic. The version I found in the RBSC is illustrated by Ivan Bilibin, who has also illustrated numerous other Russian Fairytales, and is shelved in the historical children's literature collection. The text, however, does not defer too much from the original epic. The story is

about a legendary figure named Lord Vol'ga, a wizard and shapeshifter born of a human mother and a serpent father. Through his shapeshifting, he earns great wealth for his town and eventually uses the same skills to spy on the Turkish Tzar, who had plans to invade Russia. Upon witnessing all of this, Vol'ga then shifts into various sorts of animals and wreaks havoc in the Tzar's palace, tearing out the throats of steeds as a wolf and destroying the armoury as an ermine/stoat. He then flies back to his town, gathers his men and conquers the Turkish lands. The story ends with him and his men determining the monetary value of swords and women as their spoils of war, preparing to sell both off.

I absolutely adore Ivan Bilibin's artwork because his style really showcases the vibrancy of the subject matter and his use of colour really lends itself to emotional depth. Here, Lord Vol'ga is centered in the picture, surrounded by his troops. His armour and tack are more elaborate than that of the other soldiers and Bilibin really emphasizes detail, layering colours to create the depth needed to showcase the metallic hue of chainmail. I also love this image because it really captures the grandiose air of epics. Everything about this picture, from the widespread landscape background to the folkloric pattern at the bottom, invokes this sense of heroic patriotism, and justifiably so, considering the importance of the Epic in Russian history. By modern standards, the suggested element of human slavery would be deeply problematic. Nevertheless, the grandiose nature of Bilibin's artwork serves to remind us that as a figure of both historic and legendary proportions, Vol'ga lies outside the realm of mundanity.

Title: **"The Golden Bird" from *Household stories, From the Bros. Grimm***

Author: Grimm, Jacob, 1785-1863.

Place of Publication: London

Publisher: Macmillan & Co.

Publication Date: 1882.

UBC Call Number: PZ6 1882 G754

UBC Permalink: <http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=175579>



I chose “The Golden Bird” as one of my tales because the protagonist of the story never really learns his lesson. He repeatedly goes against the wisdom of the old Fox, who acts as his helper figure. However, his kindness and respect towards the fox ultimately prompts the fox into saving him again and again, contrasting with the fate of his older brothers, who ridicule and laugh at the fox. The picture in this version of Grimm’s story is beautifully placed as the header of the story. Of a smaller size, it nevertheless effectively caught my eye as I was slipping through the book. Here, the pose of the youngest son cuts a dashing figure. He reclines very suavely on the fox’s tail, with his legs crossed jauntily and a hand holding his hat in place. The fox looks very determined, with a lolling tongue, as he leaps tenaciously through the floral backdrop. I was also quite amused at how the depiction of the youngest son in the artwork really contrasts with his actual self in the tale; he is neither suave nor self-assured, needing to be rescued by the fox at almost every instance. Perhaps this discrepancy between artwork and story is an attempt to entice readers by catching their attention with the protagonist’s dashing good looks.

Title: “**The Green Serpent**” from *Fairy tales*

Author: Aulnoy, Madame d' (Marie-Catherine)

Place of Publication: London

Publisher: G. Routledge

Publication Date: 1868?

UBC Call Number: PZ6 1868 A845

UBC Permalink: <http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=142180>



GREEN SERPENT.

This story was really interesting to me because having no prior knowledge of the tale, I looked at the header illustration and started reading with prejudice, expecting a story about a monstrous creature. The image of the Green Serpent looks just like typical interpretations of a dragon. In the story itself, he is described having “green wings, a many-coloured body, ivory jaws, fiery eyes, and long, bristling hair.” The illustration emphasizes these monstrous features, with the dragon having very prominent fangs and a fierce expression. However, like “The Reluctant Dragon,” the tale plays with expectations of “monstrosity”. The serpent is nothing but courteous to Laidronette, who flinches away from him numerous times due to his appearance, and ironically so, considering how Laidronette has also been cursed to be the world’s ugliest woman. The serpent eventually saves Laidronette and spirits her away to be his wife. He visits her at night, conversing with her in the darkness and eventually, she falls in love despite having never seen his appearance. As the plot unwinds, we learn that the Green Serpent is really a handsome king who has been placed under enchantment. At the end of the tale, Laidronette descends into the underworld and brings back the Green Serpent, breaking the spell through the power of her love. I am deeply appreciative of Laidronette’s role in the story as she is not a character without faults. She is quick to judge and breaks her promise not to look at her husband. However, she also takes responsibility for her faults and corrects them, effectively becoming the hero of the story.

Title: “**The Lady of Shalott**” in *Poems*

Author: Alfred Tennyson

Place of Publication: London

Publisher: Edward Moxon

Publication Date: 1833

UBC Call Number: PR10.L9 T4 1830:2

UBC Permalink: <http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=306201>The Lady of Shalott

I actually have a bit of a love-hate relationship with this poem. On one hand, Tennyson's language is deeply wistful and rich with imagery. The poem effectively captures this air of romanticism. On the other hand, the poem illicitly evokes this personal feeling of anger and futility from me. I read the poem and I feel helpless because the Lady's fate is set in stone. Similarly, Lancelot's involvement in her death is not his fault. However, his reaction to finding her corpse is lackluster and he displays none of his knightly virtues that feature so prominently in Arturian tales. He cannot be the hero of this story. Nevertheless, the imagery and detail in the poem really does make up for my personal reaction, invoking this sense of mystery and yearning that I deeply appreciate. The two images found in the collection are mesmerizing in their details. In the first, the Lady lies tangled in her own weaving, ominously suggesting and foreshadowing her own participation in her fateful death. I also found the juxtaposition between the Lady and the image of Christ's crucifixion very interesting and to me, it suggests that there is inevitability in sacrifice. The second illustration shows Lancelot bending over the Lady, who lies peacefully in the boat. However, Lancelot, not knowing his part in her death, merely seems pensive and slightly melancholy.

