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THE ENIGMAS OF PUŠKIN'S 'TALE OF THE GOLDEN COCKEREL'

Eric de Haard

1 Introduction

The present article is devoted to Puškin's 'Skazka o zolotom petuške' ('Tale of the Golden Cockerel'), the last of the six *skazki* Puškin wrote from 1830 to 1834.¹ It was written in September 1834 and published in 1835 in the May issue of the journal *Biblioteka dlja čtenija*. For this tale Puškin chose a four-foot trochee, with coupled rhymes, alternately masculine and feminine, in all 224 verse lines.

While the narrative unfolds in the simple, clear and laconical style typical of Puškin's prose, the tale is enigmatic, complex and ambiguous in several respects. A brief outline of the basic events will reveal the puzzling gaps and indeterminacies in the story.

Tsar Dadon, ruler of a kingdom, belligerent in his younger years, in old age becomes tired of fighting the enemies surrounding him and desires only peace and quiet. He summons a "мудрец" ("wise man") a "звездочет и скопец" ("astrologer and eunuch"; ll. 27-28), who gives the Tsar a golden cockerel, who (or which?), placed on a spire, serves successfully as a watchman and starts crowing whenever dangers from some side threaten the kingdom. One time the cockerel raises extreme alarm: there is "беда" ("trouble, disaster"; l. 71) in the East. Tsar Dadon sends his eldest son with an army, and as nothing is heard of them, then sends his younger son with an army. As there is no sign of them either, Dadon goes to the East himself with an army. In the mountains he finds the armies. All have been killed and he also finds his two sons, who have plunged their swords into each other (ll. 115-121). Then, from a silken tent there appears a maiden, the "Шамаханская царица" ("Šamachan queen"; l. 134). She invites Tsar Dadon, who has been lamenting the death of his two sons, but he immediately forgets about them and is totally enchanted. He spends a week with her ("пировал";

l. 152), enjoying delicious food and a “парчовая кровать” (“brocade bed”; l. 148) and returns with her to his capital in a chariot. Near the gates the astrologer turns up and demands the promised reward for his service: none other than the Šamachan queen. Tsar Dadon refuses: “И зачем тебе девица?” (“What do you want the maiden for?”; l. 186) and when the astrologer insists, gets angry and kills him with his sceptre, to the great amusement of the queen. However, when they enter the gates, the golden cockerel flies from its perch and pecks Tsar Dadon in the head. He dies too. The queen then vanishes into thin air: “Будто вовсе не бывало” (“as though she had never been there”; l. 222).

It may appear that the events are explicit and unambiguous, but there are lacunae in the logic of relations between them: whereas chronological relations are unproblematical, causal relations between events (that would safeguard a clear and coherent plot), are fuzzy and indeterminate. For instance, we must infer that the tsar’s sons have killed each other for the sake of the Šamachan queen, but how are we to explain that their whole armies have perished? If we look for closure, three main characters are dead or have disappeared, but we are left in the dark about the fate of the cockerel. These uncertainties are entirely determined by the ambiguities, not to say, the complete mist surrounding three characters, with respect to their basic identity and their actantial roles: astrologer, cockerel and Šamachan queen, their mutual relations, their goals and desires that might drive the plot.

The mysteries undermining plot coherence are compounded by other indeterminacies. In part these are characteristic of traditional folk- and fairytales:

1) Time: the usual lack of concreteness of time. Historical time remains unspecified. One may infer: some time in the Middle Ages, as military designations and equipment provide some clues (the archaic word “рать” for “army” (l. 16), “swords” and “armour”). However, this does not mean that plot time is unspecified. On the contrary, after the start of events “one-two years” pass, the main events then occur “after 8 days”, once more “after 8 days”, then after “a week” Tsar Dadon returns.²

2) Space: correspondingly, spatial data are partly unspecified. In the opening lines, the geographical anonymity common in Russian fairytales is maintained:

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“Негде, в тридевятом-тридесятом царстве” (“Somewhere, in the thrice-ninth kingdom, in the thrice-tenth realm” ll. 1-2) is the folk cliché of Russian fairytales, however, in the course of Puškin’s tale, space becomes more concretized. The kingdom is represented as centre, the periphery is referred to as the surrounding territories inhabited by enemies. These threaten from “the South” and “the East”, while foes might also invade “from the sea” (ll. 19-23), implying a coastal region West or North. Tsar Dadon’s kingdom has a capital as its first and last setting, presumably walled, as in the final stage he enters the “gate”. As the main episode begins, “беда” (“disaster, misfortune, trouble”; l. 71) is located in “The East”, which assumes more concrete features as the region is described as mountainous, and the female protagonist appearing in this particular setting is named “Шамаханская царица” (“Šamachan queen”), which unambiguously refers to the ancient city in Azerbaijan (see also note 12 below).

3) Characters: the plot with its lacunae and ambiguities hinges upon the identity and mode of existence of the characters, their mutual relations and their roles as actants:

a) Tsar Dadon poses no problems as regards his identity, there is no mystery surrounding him, and initially his desire for peace amounts to the avoidance of any plot development. Admittedly, his actantial role as beneficiary is ambiguous, as it is the converse of the astrologer’s dubious role as donor. Otherwise he is an open book, as his actions and reactions are quite “realistic”, even when he is “околдован” (“bewitched”; l. 151) by the Šamachan queen and suffers the consequences.

However, the other main actors are enigmatic with regard to their very identity, their mode of existence, their actantial roles:

b) The astrologer, “wise man” and “eunuch”, is depicted as Oriental, wearing a “сарачинск[ая] шапк[а] бел[ая]” (“white Saracen hat”; l. 165). He is the only character that undergoes a change – in the last scene he is “поседель” (“grown grey”; l. 166) and old, like Tsar Dadon. He possesses and donates a magical and fantastic object, the golden cockerel, while his role as donor turns out to be a mixed blessing. As in the end he expresses his desire for the Šamachan queen,

there may be grounds for suspecting that there is or has been a hidden relation between them as well.

c) The golden cockerel is enigmatic, by its/his simultaneous existence from metal toy to feathered animal, then to being gifted with human speech. Its role is seemingly that of helper/instrument, but switches to avenger/enemy. It raises the question if the “верный сторож” (“true watchman”; l. 56) was not a false helper and a poisoned gift in the first place. In the end the enigma of the golden cockerel is deepened: we are not told what happened to it/him after the killing of the Tsar.

d) The Šamachan queen is defined by her name and then by the direct characteristic “Вся сияя как заря” (“all shining like the dawn”; l. 135), but otherwise she is only defined by her acts: she smiles, takes Tsar Dadon by the hand, regales him and lays him down to rest on the brocaded bed in her tent. The “девиц[а] молод[ая]” (“young maiden”; l. 155) remains silent until she reacts to the killing of the astrologer by Tsar Dadon: “Хи-хи-хи да ха-ха-ха!” (“‘Hee, hee, hee!’ and ‘Ha, ha, ha!’”; l. 207), followed by the comment “Не боится, знать, греха” (“She clearly has no fear of sin”; l. 208). Ultimately her very existence is put into doubt: “А царица вдруг пропала, / Будто вовсе не бывало” (“But the queen suddenly disappeared, as though she had never been there”; ll. 220-221).

All these uncertainties, lacunae and ambiguities have given rise to various analyses and interpretations, which are naturally much concerned with deeper meanings and the symbolic value of the mysterious characters, and Puškin’s *skazka* as a whole. It has been studied in the frameworks of actual and possible sources and influences, of Puškin’s other works, of his biographical and political circumstances, with the application of various methodologies.

2 Secondary Literature

All these above-mentioned aspects have been dealt with in intratextual, contextual, intertextual, and generally interpretative studies, a number of which I will discuss briefly (and necessarily selectively) in chronological order.

In 1933, Anna Achmatova (1977a) disclosed the primary origin of Puškin’s *skazka*, which may have come as a surprise for some and was a courageous thing to do in the political context of the time. Though Puškin was fully canonized as

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national genius only in 1937, the centenary of his death, it was embarrassing for some (Soviet) quarters to learn that crucial sections of the plot originated in the 'Tale of the Arabian Astrologer' by the American Romantic writer Washington Irving. Irving's tale was preceded by a brief note, 'The House with the Weathercock'. Both were part of Irving's book *Tales of the Alhambra*, consisting of notes, tales and descriptions, all connected with the history of, and legends about the city of Granada. It was published in 1832 in several places at once: *The Alhambra: a series of tales and sketches of the Moors and Spaniards* was published in May 1832 in the United States by publishers Lea & Carey and concurrently in England by Henry Colburn.³ In the same year a French translation also appeared, which is known to have been part of Puškin's library. This testifies to the immense popularity of Irving worldwide, including Russia. Reviews of the book appeared in Russia in the same year, as well as Russian translations of separate stories (Achmatova 1977: 9-11).

Achmatova (1977) carried out a detailed comparison with Irving's tale, establishing the common core of plot, characters and several motifs. To mention the main points: the Muslim ruler of Granada Aben Habuz "languishes for repose" but is attacked by enemies. The Arabian astrologer/sorcerer Ibrahim arrives at his court and helps the king out by providing him with a bronze horseman, placed on a pivot, armed with a shield and lance, who points his lance in the direction from which dangers are threatening.⁴ This helps the king to repel all his enemies. Then one day the bronze horseman points his lance towards approaching danger in the mountains, but no enemies are to be found there, only a beautiful "Gothic" (Christian) princess. The king falls for her completely and spends Granada's whole treasury on her. Then the astrologer demands the princess as a reward for his services. When the king refuses, the astrologer and the princess disappear in a hole and the earth closes over them. Later King Aben Habuz dies.⁵

Through Achmatova's analysis the differences – Puškin's innovations – come to the fore. These amount mainly to the elimination of a number of episodes and the almost total reduction of Irving's elaborate characterization of both sorcerer/astrologer and the "damsel of surpassing beauty". Among the differences

between Irving's and Puškin's texts Achmatova also notes such significant changes as the fact that the cockerel made of metal is more human: it *speaks* (as opposed to the gestures of Irving's bronze horseman). She discusses the different portraiture of the astrologer, whose previous exploits and role in the present are eliminated by Puškin. However, merely as an aside (at the end of her article and in connection with Puškin's drafts to his *skazka*) she mentions one highly significant addition only in passing (Achmatova 1977a: 38), viz. that Puškin turned the astrologer (a lecher in Irving's original) into a eunuch ("сконей"; l. 28 and repeated in l. 167), if only to allow for the joke of the eunuch demanding the Šamachan queen as a reward for his services. Possibly this detail was too delicate to discuss in 1933.

Achmatova also noted further differences with the poetics of authentic Russian folk- and fairytales and pointed to the largely colloquial and ironic style of Puškin's tale. She advanced the tale's interpretation as a veiled political satire, inevitably also entailing a strong biographical-personal component: Puškin's precarious relationships with the successive "real" tsars Alexander I and Nicholas I, the first being the embodiment of a "lazy tsar", the second – of an autocratic ruler.⁶

Roman Jakobson (1987) added a significant dimension to the literature on 'The Tale of the Golden Cockerel' in his article 'The Statue in Puškin's Poetic Mythology' (first published in Czech in 1937; an English translation revised in 1975), as he placed it firmly within the framework of Puškin's oeuvre, in particular three of his works in which "the title indicates not a living person but a statue, a plastic representation, [...] in each case an epithet defines the material of which the statue is made" (1987: 321): 'The Stone Guest', 'The Bronze Horseman' and 'The Tale of the Golden Cockerel', more or less belonging to the same period (1830-1834). All three are "destructive statues", that are made of a specific material, but all three come alive too. They are also the real heroes of their tales, rather than the male characters figuring in them. In fact, the three works share the same "plot kernel". As formulated by Jakobson (1987: 321-325): "1) A man is weary, he settles down, he longs for rest, and this motif is intertwined with desire for a woman". "2) The statue, more precisely the being which is inseparably connected with the statue, has a supernatural, unfathomable power over this

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desired woman". "3) After a vain resistance the man perishes through the intervention of the statue, which has miraculously set itself into motion, and the woman vanishes". Jakobson further notes some details that these works have in common: e.g. the events take place in capitals (327) and he points to the important motif of the astrologer being castrated (328).⁷

One may object that 'The Tale of the Golden Cockerel' does not completely fit in this scheme: as to 1), Tsar Dadon's life of peace and quiet is not so much intertwined with desire for a woman, as fatally upturned by it. As to 2), from the scant clues Puškin provides us with, we may interpret the Šamachan queen as a fully autonomous female figure. Like Tsar Dadon, the astrologer, "even though" he is castrated, falls victim to her irresistible charm. If the astrologer has a secret bond with, or power over her (all three – astrologer, queen and cockerel – participating in some diabolical pact), then he certainly loses control in the final stages of the story. This takes nothing away from the common core, which implies that, like in Puškin's other two works, there is an inseparable (in fact metonymical (1987: 322 and 525n.)) bond between astrologer and cockerel and that the latter is certainly a "destructive statue" like the Commander (Don Al'var) and The Bronze Horseman (Peter I). Thus Jakobson located 'The Tale of the Golden Cockerel' quite firmly in Puškin's personal – sculptural – myth, not ignoring its biographical aspects (1987: 330ff.): Puškin's marital and financial affairs and inevitably, his complicated relations with Tsar and court, his wish to become (court) historian (already dealt with by Achmatova 1977: 28-34).

Andrew Kodjak (Kodžak 1978) carried out an extensive analysis of stylistic registers in Puškin's tale, showing the great variety in the linguistic repertoire of the narrator and the characters. Very much unlike traditional folktales, Puškin exploits vulgar, colloquial, folksy, officialese, bookish, "literary", speech. This does not lead to a mere indiscriminate mixture of these registers, but results in individualized speech, including the narrator's, who adopts and moves between various points of view, as he incorporates stylistic features of the character (mainly Tsar Dadon, but e.g. "the people", as a collective, as well). This finds expression in dialogue (direct discourse) and also in forms of free indirect discourse, which are uncharacteristic of traditional folk- and fairytales. In a separate section Kodjak

examines other linguo-stylistic features of Puškin's tale, such as the use of prepositional constructions and the pervasive occurrence of ternary structuring on the morphological, lexical, syntactic, and narrative levels. In his conclusion Kodjak states that 'The Tale of the Golden Cockerel' should be read in a political-historical-philosophical key, rather than as a "simple" satire. Ultimately, the main themes are the exposure of degradation of the ruler and eventual regicide, thus linking the tale not so much to Puškin's other *skazki* as to 'The Bronze Horseman' and *Boris Godunov* (1978: 371-372).

In the wake of perestroika there was room in Russia for other than the stereotyped Soviet views on Puškin's tale. These had usually amounted to stating that Puškin's message was a critique of the tsarist regime (motivated by his personal sufferings) and attempting to read it as a realistic and very serious text. This approach required ignoring essential aspects of the text such as its non-Russian origins, black humour, plot incoherence, absurdity and eroticism. Both Russian and Western scholars now turned increasingly towards these and other features.

In her article from 1992 'K probleme značeniya simvola "zolotoj petušok" v skazke Puškina' ('On the Problem of the Meaning of the Symbol "the Golden Cockerel" in Puškin's Tale') Elena Pogosjan focuses on the manifold characteristics and functions of the golden cockerel, as the semantic lacunae in the tale require filling-in, in order to establish its symbolic meaning. Firstly, the cockerel functions as watchman ("stopож"; l. 36), a role fulfilled by a bird of paradise ("райская птица") in poems by Deržavin and Lermontov. Puškin's own earlier works provide clues to the symbolic meanings of the golden cockerel. Passages in 'Ruslan and Ljudmila' and the 'Gavriiliada' support its interpretation as an erotic symbol. When the astrologer donates the cockerel to Tsar Dadon this embodies a transfer of potency to the old Tsar. In the finale, it is emphasized that the astrologer has become old as well. In the end, according to Pogosjan, the cockerel also stands as a symbol of (tsarist) power – it has also been regarded as a caricature of the double-headed eagle, the symbol of the Russian state. Finally, the cockerel can be seen as an evil power that is instrumental in destroying Tsar Dadon's capital. Here Pogosjan draws attention to Voltaire's tale 'The Princess of

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Babylon', in which a fantastic bird plays a comparable fatal role. Pogosjan emphasizes that these symbolic values of the title character may be all valid but do not fit into a single clear plot. On the contrary, she concludes that "Puškin intentionally destroys any consistent movement of semantics and plot in 'Zolotoj petušok'" (1992: 107).

Departing from Jakobson's statement about the metonymical relationship between astrologer and the cockerel, in his brief note from 1992 "Žezlom po lbu" ("With his Sceptre on the Forehead") Michail Bezrodnyj concretizes this relationship as a synecdoche, more precisely a *pars pro toto*: the cockerel is a (disjointed) part of its owner. Bezrodnyj further adduces the worldwide mythological symbolism of the cock(ere): "vitality, vigilance, perspicacity, bellicosity" (1992: 23), but also "creativity, sex, power, lust". Focusing on the erotic/sexual meanings, he points to the use of "петух" ("cock") as male organ in "children's folklore and wedding rituals" (24).⁸ Bezrodnyj connects this with the whole repertoire of bird comparisons and metaphors that Puškin crams into the limited space of 'The Tale of the Golden Cockerel'. Indeed, a whole aviary is represented here. Besides the golden cockerel we find Dadon's sons: "[...] Попались в сети / Оба наши сокола" ("[...] Both our falcons have fallen into snares", ll. 126-127). Immediately afterwards Tsar Dadon himself is likened to a bird: "Как пред солнцем птица ночи / Царь умолк" ("Like a bird of night before the sun the Tsar fell silent"; ll. 137-138). And finally about the astrologer: "Весь как лебедь поседелый / Старый друг его, скопец" ("with his hair all white like a swan, his old friend the eunuch"; ll. 166-167). For further analogies Bezrodnyj points to the occurrence of the "independent" life of sexual organs in Puškin's "unprintable" "Tsar Nikita and his Forty Daughters" (1992: 25). And in the obscene – equally unprintable – national epic 'Luka Mudiščev' a character is struck on the forehead with a male organ – to which Puškin alludes with Tsar Dadon striking the astrologer "жезлом по лбу" ("with his sceptre on the forehead"; ll. 203-204). The same motif is prominent in one of Puškin's other *skazki* – 'Skazka' o pope i rabotnike ego Balde' ('The Tale of the Priest and His Workman Balda'; see below) where the workman has the right to give the priest "three raps" on the head if he fulfils all the tasks assigned to him. Bezrodnyj's focus

on sexual/erotic meanings leads him to find (feminine) erotic symbolism in the mountains and ravine which provide the setting for the appearance of the Šamachan queen. Thus Bezrodnyj, we might say, gives a maximally erotic/sexual interpretation of ‘The Tale of the Golden Cockerel’.

Bezrodnyj also refers to the article by Igor’ P. Smirnov from 1991, ‘Kastracionnyj kompleks v lirike Puškina (Metodologičeskie zametki)’ (‘The Castration Complex in Puškin’s Lyric Poetry (Methodological Notes)’; expanded version in Smirnov 1994). Here one might expect to find some comments on Puškin’s tale. However, Smirnov distinguishes between direct and oblique reflections of the “castration complex” (1994: 28) and is mainly concerned with its oblique reflections in Puškin’s lyric poetry (in particular his poems about love and creativity; 22), and ultimately, in the whole movement of Romanticism, the defining feature of which is this very castration complex, according to Smirnov.

In his article “Skazka o zolotom petuške” (opyt analiza sjužetnoj semantiki)’ (‘“The Tale of the Golden Cockerel” (Towards an Analysis of the Semantics of the Plot)’ from 1995, V. È. Vacuro is concerned with several aspects of the tale that have been treated in the secondary literature. He refers to one simple interpretation: S. Bondi’s statement that the tale’s moral is just to show the devastating effects of female charms in a humourous form (1995: 121). This is also the explanation of the tale’s famous final distich: “Сказка ложь, да в ней намек! / Добрым молодцам урок” (‘The tale is not true, but there’s a hint in it, a lesson for fine lads!’; ll. 223-224). One may add here that at least the censor Nikitenko thought much more of it – as having a political dimension – and crossed out these lines in the first publication. Further Vacuro expands Achmatova’s findings of Irving as a source, and discusses some of Irving’s own sources in turn. The author mentions another probable pre-text (discussed by the scholar M. P. Alekseev, actually also treated by A. Mazon in 1939), the Sturm-und-Drang writer Friedrich Maximilian Klingler’s *Geschichte vom Goldenen Hahn* (1784), later revised as *Sabir* (1797).⁹

Vacuro warns against fruitless attempts to look for the individual-psychological principle as the narrative dominant of ‘The Tale of the Golden Cockerel’ (1995: 126), however, he is interested in its moral aspects, rejecting the

view of its “merely facetious” character (133). Not taking the title designation “skazka” for granted, Vacuro measures the tale against the genre specifics of the Russian fairytale in order to evaluate the characters and to establish who is the main hero. This is not Tsar Dadon, though he is the “bearer of the plot”: a tsar cannot be the hero in a fairytale (he only gives tasks to the young hero and rewards), so Dadon is a parody of a fairytale tsar, also because of being old and lazy. The astrologer plays his role (Propp’s function of donor), but his donation has dubious consequences. Vacuro speaks of an “обманный договор” (“fraudulent pact”; 129), and, though he recognises that “it is a tale without positive heroes” (128), he denies that the astrologer is simply a villain (cf. Achmatova’s impression that the narrator speaks of him “с нежностью” (“with tenderness”); Achmatova 1977a: 23). Finally, the Šamachan queen is a parody of the Russian fairytale’s “Царь-девица” (“Tsar-maiden”; Vacuro 1995: 131). She is first introduced as such (according to the cliché of gallant invitation and feeding the “hero”), but sets the final “grotesque” events in motion by evoking “лихорадка любовной страсти” (“the fever of amorous passion”; 133), as Vacuro puts it.

In his article from 2007 “Skazka o zolotom petuške” A. S. Puškina: sjužet o dobyvanii bedy’ (‘A. S. Puškin’s “Tale of The Golden Cockerel”: a Plot about the Acquisition of Misfortune’), O. B. Zaslavskij, like V. Ė. Vacuro, takes the traditional Russian fairytale scheme as a point of departure, and states that in the literature the fact of the astrologer’s castratedness has either been neglected (with the exception of Bezrodnyj 1992) or irrelevantly connected with the *skopcy* sect. Actually, “castration” is, apart from a thematic entity, the whole constructive principle on both macro- and microlevel of the tale. The plot is constructed through “castrating” deformation of the (common) fairytale plot. What takes place is the inversion, defectiveness or absence of the plot principle. The events occurring to Tsar Dadon are inevitable, in fact the inversion of the “normal” plot consists in Dadon seeking, striving towards, “беда” (“misfortune, disaster”). And this “беда” is the key motif in the whole story. This is already hinted at in the lines saying that the cockerel is there to warn against military dangers “[...] *Иль* другой беды незваной” (“or another uncalled-for disaster”; l. 42). Soon the Šamachan

queen turns out to be the personified real disaster (2007: 244). The abstract nature of the “беда-царица” (“misfortune-maiden”) is enhanced by the complete lack of portraiture of the Šamachan queen, and by her disappearance at the end of the tale (245). Thus the paradoxical plot impulse is a “недостача беды” (“deficit of misfortune/disaster”). The road towards “disaster” is indicated by the cockerel, who in turn has been provided by the astrologer/eunuch, whose basic characteristic is precisely a physical “нехватка” (“lack”; 250). If Tsar Dadon would yield the queen to the astrologer, it would mean one other motif of “deprivation”. But not only Tsar Dadon looks for disaster, the astrologer from donor changes also into an “искатель” (“seeker”) of “беда” (250). Zaslavskij concludes that in Puškin’s tale common elements of the Russian fairytale are integrated into a whole, that fundamentally distorts the standard fairytale structure.

More recently M. Paščenko (2009), in the article “Skazka o zolotom petuške”: skazka-lož’ i skazka-pravda’ (“The Tale of the Golden Cockerel”; Fairytale Lie and Fairytale Truth’), provided more background information that might help interpret Puškin’s tale concerning, among other things, the traditional symbolism of the cock(erel) and other birds, and Washington Irving’s oriental sources. The author also connects the figure of the golden cockerel with various creeds and beliefs. Some of these beliefs practice heliolatry and/or developed the concept of the “Evil Sun”. Puškin might have been familiar with these beliefs through his travels (Moldavia, Erzrum) and through his experience as a Freemason. Paščenko also points to Klinger’s novel as a possible pre-text.

Thus, from this multitude of different viewpoints and interpretations a choice between them as the only correct one(s) (in spite of claims to the contrary) appears impossible and unnecessary. Puškin’s tale remains an interpretative enigma, but only conditionally. To my mind, all these viewpoints contain valuable elements. All the structural gaps on the levels of semantic coherence, plot coherence, and characters’ identities, psychology and moral purport – whether regarded as contrary or contradictory – are inherent in the tale and, in spite of considerations of “authorial fallacy”, must fully be attributed to Puškin’s intentions.

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While some efforts to read the tale in a sexual/erotic and diabolical key may seem exaggerated, those who ignore or belittle this aspect seem to miss something. Apart from personal misgivings, this can be certainly explained by political difficulties and risks (perhaps in the case of Achmatova), as the Soviet scholarly tradition was determined by both prudence and ideological requirements. 'The Tale of the Golden Cockerel' was to be read as a satire about tsars, one should emphasize the "народность" ("national character") and not pay too much attention to the foreign origin of this and other works of Puškin.

At any rate, the characters make up a set of anti-heroes. The whole tale amounts to a depiction of most, if not all capital vices: sloth, greed, gluttony, lust, wrath and envy. Of course, most of these are punished in the end, but evil ("беда"-disaster) triumphs, even though it was "as if it/she did not exist". Besides, though violence in traditional fairytales is a staple ingredient, the savage killing in the tale is far above the average. All the more surprising is the reception of 'The Tale of the Golden Cockerel' in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when, along with Puškin's other *skazki*, it gradually slipped down into the domain of children's literature. This afterlife of the tale will be further discussed in section 4.

3 V. I. Bel'skij's libretto for Rimskij-Korsakov's Opera *Zolotoj petušok*

One particular important event in the afterlife of Puškin's 'Tale of the Golden Cockerel' is Rimskij-Korsakov's opera *Zolotoj petušok*, also known under the title *Le Coq d'or*. The opera may be regarded as a specific adaptation, and interpretation in the widest sense. As a widely known and prestigious cultural achievement it may have influenced in its turn the image and subsequent interpretations of Puškin's original tale.

The opera was written and composed in 1907-1908, based on the libretto by Vladimir Bel'skij, in a degree of cooperation with the composer. First the opera did not pass censorship, and only after Rimskij-Korsakov's death in 1908 the premiere took place, in 1909.¹⁰ Bel'skij and Rimskij-Korsakov had to turn Puškin's tale into a full-length opera, from 224 verse lines to three acts with a short prologue and epilogue. This required expanding Puškin's nucleus and

adding much new material. With respect to the versification – Puškin’s four-foot trochee with paired alternating masculine and feminine rhymes – Bel’skij quite successfully preserves these formal properties in the new parts he created, with the exception of a number of inserted songs in iambs in order to differentiate these from the more folksy trochee.

Some of Puškin’s lines and larger fragments are retained and integrated in the new text. Sometimes the direct discourse in Puškin’s text is used, other fragments have been adapted, for instance, Puškin’s narrator’s text is assigned to characters with a transposition of third person to first, mostly Dadon’s words. The plot of the libretto is essentially identical, but expansion is achieved by means of repetition and the introduction of new roles and characters.

Tsar Dodon¹¹ is now surrounded by boyars and servants, the people (“народ”) are given voices and they comment on the events. Dadon’s sons have names (Afron and Gvidon) and have been assigned rather comical roles, actually as spoiled idiots, who want to avoid all (military) activity and are more concerned with food, drink and girls. Nevertheless their fate is the same as in Puškin’s tale: they are sent on campaign to the East together, admonished by their father “not to quarrel” and obviously kill each other. Bel’skij also added the figure of the commander of Tsar Dodon’s army, named Polkan, who is a more down-to-earth character and provides comic relief in some scenes.

An important addition is the role of the tsar’s housekeeper Amelfa, who doubles the female presence in the story. On the one hand, she is introduced as a counterpart and contrasted with the Šamachan queen, on the other hand, she is also gifted with supernatural faculties (or she pretends to be). She understands the language of Tsar Dodon’s parrot (another addition to the whole collection of birds, obviously as a comical foil to the golden cockerel). It becomes clear that the tsar is entirely dependent upon Amelfa: she is the real power behind the throne, his partner in lazy slumber, “reads” Dodon’s erotic dream of a beautiful maiden. It can be regarded as a prophetic dream and an anticipation of future events.

As concerns Puškin’s original characters, Tsar Dodon remains essentially the same, but some of his basic features have been enlarged. Thus with the expansion of his speech and behaviour comes stronger autocratic despotism (“По законам?

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Что за слово?"; "According to the law? What kind of word is that?"), as he bosses around and intimidates his boyars and courtiers. His sloth and desire of rest and sleep are blown up, as he is resting, slumbering and dreaming on a bed, pampered by Amelfa (anticipating his seduction in the final act). Possibly Bel'skij was inspired here by a nineteenth-century literary character after Puškin's time, Gončarov's Oblomov.

The astrologer is basically the same with respect to his plot function, he donates the golden cockerel to the tsar and in the finale he claims the queen as a reward. But a significant difference is that Puškin's gag of his being castrated is omitted. However, in a dramatic innovation Bel'skij assigns an additional role as speaker in the prologue and epilogue (see below) to the astrologer. In the introduction to the opera, addressed to the public, he speaks of himself as "КОЛДУН" ("sorcerer"), and Puškin's final lines "Сказка ложь, да в ней намек / Добрым молодцам урок" ("The tale is not true, but there's a hint in it, a lesson for fine lads!") are used as a starting point.

Whereas the explicit characteristics of the Šamachan¹² queen in Puškin's tale are limited to an absolute minimum ("девица [...] вся сияя как заря" – "a maiden [...] all shining like the dawn"; ll. 133-135) and her only utterance is "Хи-хи-хи да ха-ха-ха!" ("Hee, hee, hee!" and "Ha, ha, ha!"); l. 207) in reaction to the killing of the astrologer, in the opera her character is expanded to a full-blown role. The process of her enchanting Tsar Dodon is greatly enlarged into a whole episode, in which she offers food and drink, delivers monologues, sings a number of songs,¹³ dances, and proudly describes her own beauty (which results in a narcissistic verbal striptease), when Tsar Dodon is lost for words to do so. The episode shows her flirtatious play of attracting and repelling the helpless Dodon. However, the eroticism she displays in the scene is counterbalanced by the comical reactions of Dodon and the sobering realistic remarks by his general Polkan. Another addition that broadens the proportions of the opera is the queen's entourage of servants and strange creatures that also accompany her and the tsar on the return to the capital.

The golden cockerel is essentially the same character and plays the same role. Whereas in Puškin's tale it crows "Кири-ку-ку. / Царствуй, лежа на боку"

(“Kiri-ku-ku. Reign lying on your side”; ll. 59-60) a new variant is introduced in the libretto, as it also warns of danger: “Берегись, будь на чеку!” (“Be careful, be alert!”). And in the final scene it announces its deadly attack on the tsar: “В темя клюну старику!” (“I will peck the old man’s pate!”). The last act ends in “complete darkness”, and both the queen and the cockerel (unlike in Puškin’s tale) have vanished, leaving “the people” in disarray and (melo)dramatic lamenting and crying. But the libretto ends with an epilogue, in which the astrologer appears again, with an unexpected turn – in the same vein as Puškin’s original denouement, but in an exact inversion: “Разве я лишь да царица / были здесь живые лица, / остальные – бред, мечта, / призрак бледный, пустота...” (“Only the queen and I / were living persons here, / the rest of them are hallucination, dream, / pale vision, emptiness...”).

This ending, among other things, reflects the symbolist-decadent fashion of the first decade of the twentieth century. This is also strongly felt in the inserted songs and monologues of the Šamachan queen and in the elaborate impressionistic – often far from practical – stage directions. On the whole, Rimskij-Korsakov’s opera, and Bel’skij’s libretto in particular, remain true to Puškin’s original. However, they inevitably had to expand and modify the tale. Most importantly, they reinforce the political-satirical tendency and comical effects, but the erotic-hedonistic component as well.

4 Children’s Literature(?)

Puškin’s tale has led to a whole tradition of illustrations and, later, cartoons, which may be regarded as as many interpretations. New illustrations appear to the present day, which vary from highly sophisticated to childishly silly, but on the whole these tend to mollify the tale’s harsher aspects. This process runs parallel to the gradual expansion of Russian folk- and fairytales into the realm of children’s literature. In Russia children’s literature already existed in Puškin’s time, but his *skazki* were aimed at an adult reading public only.¹⁴

Thus an enigma of a different order than the meanings and purport of Puškin’s tale is posed by its inclusion in the domain of children’s literature. Even more surprising is its place in the school curriculum, from Soviet times¹⁵ to the

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present day, and even more so because it is treated in the fourth, even third classes (ten/eleven-year-olds). One explanation is that Puškin's authority and genius are a sufficient guarantee and reason to make all his works obligatory reading. Another, more concrete, explanation could be that Puškin's *skazki* have been adopted by parents and educators as a homogeneous group, on grounds of the genre designation in the titles. To a degree this could be justified by the fact that Puškin did not differentiate them and intended to publish them as one group in a prospective book or book section (cf. Puškin 1977: 434).

Three of Puškin's *skazki* (not in chronological order) are innocuous enough as to deem them suited for children: 'Skazka o medvediche' ('The Tale of the She-Bear'; ca. 1830; unfinished), 'Skazka o rybake i rybke' ('The Tale of the Fisherman and the Little Fish'; 1833) and 'Skazka o mertvoj carevne i o semi bogatyryach' ('The Tale of the Dead Tsarevna and the Seven Heroes'; 1833) – which is not to say that they cannot be appreciated by adult readers and do not require “adult” analysis and interpretation. The fourth, the longest and most popular, 'Skazka o care Saltane' ('The Tale of Tsar Saltan'; 1831), contains some cruelty, but as is generally known, many children will appreciate violence, especially if there is a happy ending and the villains are punished.¹⁶

The fifth tale, the absurd-fantastic 'Skazka o pope i rabotnike ego Balde' ('The Tale of the Priest and his Workman Balda'; 1830), is potentially embarrassing for those familiar with the folktale variants about these two characters that belong to the corpus of obscene Russian folktales (*zavetnye skazki*), in which the priest's wife and his daughter play their role ("Попадья Балдой не нахвалится, / Поповна о Балде лишь и печалится" ("The priest's wife is full of praise for Balda, / The priest's daughter only grieves about Balda"); Puškin 1977: 306; cf. Bezrodnyj 1992). It is worth noting that this is also a story about a very unpleasant reward, promised (admittedly, known in advance) for services rendered. Its rather cruel ending (after fulfilling all his tasks Balda is entitled to give the priest three raps on the head) is followed by an explicit moral: "Не гонялся бы ты, поп, за дешевизной" ("Priest, you shouldn't have hunted for a bargain"; Puškin 1977: 308). In Soviet times this ending was seen as a victory of the workers over the clergy and ruling classes.

However, ‘The Tale of the Golden Cockerel’ would seem to present more difficulties as (obligatory) reading for children.¹⁷ As pointed out above, there are no positive heroes, violence is excessive, a field is strewn with corpses and drenched with blood, two tsareviches manage to kill each other. The main characters are killed or killers, or both, the “heroine” is the cause of it all and the only sound she utters is her laughter at the killing of the astrologer. Even if we do not go to such lengths in interpretation as Bezrodnyj (1992), most potentially embarrassing for children and their educators would seem to be the erotic/sexual aspects of the story, in the person of the Šamachan queen, her fatal attraction leading to the mutual fratricide of the tsar’s sons, immediately forgotten by Tsar Dadon, the week spent in her tent, enjoying “all kinds of food” and her “brocaded bed”. Most difficult to grasp or explain would seem the sexual-physiological fact of the astrologer-wise man being castrated and its implications. What is a “скопец” (“eunuch”), a ten-year-old may ask. Even when this is explained, would he or she understand the joke, as the tsar asks what the eunuch needs the queen for?

In order to find some answers I consulted a limited – and perhaps not quite representative – number of reports, model lessons and recommendations for dealing with ‘The Tale of the Golden Cockerel’ in school. In all of these the more precarious motifs are absent. In one report a list of “archaic” (“not understandable for everybody”) words is included: here “скопец” is explained as the equivalent of “старец” (“elder”).¹⁸

In Soviet times, the focus would have been on a political-satirical interpretation and the tale would have been read as Puškin’s criticism of the tsarist autocracy, of Alexander I, Nicholas I and their despicable regime. Puškin’s “народность” (sympathy and understanding of “the common people”) would have been emphasized and perhaps his personal problems with the Tsars. More recent model lessons and reports hardly show a politicized view. On the whole they are almost exclusively concerned with the moral aspects of Tsar Dadon as actor and character. This is made explicit in the many claims that the reading and lesson should be aimed at the “нравственное воспитание” (“moral education”) of the pupils. Thus in one model lesson the pupils are asked to “analyse” the text (or told by the teacher) and list the characteristics of Tsar Dadon. He is

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“quarrelsome”, “threatening”, “helpless”, “greedy”, “злой” (interpreted as “evil”, rather than “angry”, cf. l. 22). He is “stupid”, “cruel”, “capricious”, and the children must identify the fragments, in which these qualifications (most of them not occurring in the text) become obvious.¹⁹

Thus the emphasis is all on the moral portraiture of Tsar Dadon. Accordingly, the focus in the finale of the story is on the punishment of the tsar. In one report the pupils are asked: who punished the tsar and why? The answer lies in his faults: “He is careless and cruel, he acts thoughtlessly and he does not really love his country, nor his sons.” Accordingly, the cockerel is seen as a “symbol of good and justice” and it rightly punishes the Tsar, who as a result “утомился” (“calmed down”), rather an understatement of the Tsar’s killing. Predictably, this moral is supported by Puškin’s final lines “Сказка ложь, да в ней намек! / Добрым молодцам урок” (“The tale is not true, but there’s a hint in it, a lesson for fine lads!”).²⁰

However, to do justice to some model lessons, sometimes more sophisticated aspects are touched upon, perhaps a little prematurely as it is intended for the third class. Suggestions here include paying attention to such aspects of the tale as the time structure, to the similes used in connection with the characters, symbolism, the proportions of the real and the fantastic, the differences between a literary fairytale and an original folktale. However, none of these points are concretized in possible instruction (or e.g. participation in a questionnaire) for the pupils.²¹ And for older children (seventh class) a lesson is devoted to a comparison of ‘The Tale of the Golden Cockerel’ and Irving’s ‘Tale of the Arabian Astrologer’, with fragments from Rimskij-Korsakov’s opera as background material.²²

Thus, in general, the touchier aspects of sex and excessive violence, as well as Puškin’s irony and ambiguities are all neglected, as Puškin’s *skazka* is mostly grossly simplified. It is used for simple moral lessons, such as “one should keep one’s promise” or “one should not give promises thoughtlessly”, or the simplest: “do good, don’t be bad and cruel.” At this early stage it is subordinated to educational purposes²³ and is part of the ongoing Puškin cult. To conclude, here is one specimen of obligatory Puškin glorification, which the children are invited to

sing:²⁴ “Пушкинская страна, / Пушкинская страна, / Это страна волшебных сказок, / Тайн и чудес полна. / Пушкинская страна, / Пушкинская страна, / Там, где всегда светло и ясно, / Где круглый год весна.” (“Puškin land, / Puškin land / It is the land of fairy tales, / Full of mysteries and miracles. / Puškin land, / Puškin land, / Where it’s always bright and clear, / Where it’s springtime all year long”).

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Notes

1 References are to Puškin (1977: 358-363), indicated by line numbers. I have used the prose translation by John Fennell (Pushkin 1964: 223-233). For an inventive verse rendition that retains Puškin’s original four-foot trochees with alternating masculine and feminine coupled rhymes, see Babette Deutsch’s translation in Pushkin (n.y.: 322-329). All other translations are my own. The term *skazka* may be translated as “tale”, “folk tale” or “fairy tale”. I will use these terms wherever one is preferable, or leave *skazka* untranslated.

2 This is very much reminiscent of the abundant exact time indications in Puškin’s ‘Pikovaja dama’ (‘Queen of Spades’) from a year earlier.

3 The full title of Irving’s book was *Alhambra or the New Sketchbook* (ed. Galignani. Paris. 1832), not mentioned by Achmatova.

4 It may be noted that in Puškin’s drawing of the golden cockerel (see Cjavlovskaja 1986: 111) he included a shield and a lance. Both do not occur in Puškin’s tale.

5 As already mentioned, a weathercock figures in the short note ‘The House with the Weathercock’, which precedes Irving’s ‘Tale of the Arabian Astrologer’, but it also occurs in the tale itself: the astrologer Ibrahim tells Aben Habuz about a construction he has seen in the city of Borsa in Egypt: “A great marvel devised by a pagan priestess of old [...] a figure of a ram, and above it a figure of a cock, both of molten brass, and turning upon a pivot. Whenever the country was threatened with invasion, the ram would turn in the direction of the enemy, and the cock would crow [...]” (Irving 2001: 113).

6 In another article, from 1939, Achmatova (1977b) discussed Puškin’s drafts for ‘The Golden Cockerel’ and revealed that motifs from Irving’s tale were used by Puškin in his unfinished poem from 1833 “Car’ uvidel pred soboj...” (“The tsar saw before him...”).

7 It has been observed that, somewhat surprisingly, Jakobson did not treat ‘The Queen of Spades’ (1833) under these aspects, since many, if not all, of his criteria apply to Puškin’s prose story (cf. Lotman 1995: 809). It may be objected that a playing card is not a “statue” (or “sculptural” entity), but then neither can the cockerel be called a “statue”. In the ‘Queen of Spades’ the countess is alternately mobile and immobile, winking twice – as a corpse and as a playing card (cf. Lotman: *ibid.*). It may be argued that matters are complicated by Puškin’s deliberate blurring of the exact nature of Germann’s material or sexual desires: Financial independence? Gold as material? Lizaveta Ivanovna? The countess herself as an object, rather than a means to an end?

8 Russian “петух” does not have the same common alternative meaning as English “cock”. Cf. the more veiled “cockerel” (“петушок”).

9 In Klinger’s fantastic-philosophical novel, *The Golden Cockerel* is the protector of the Circassian sultanate, ensuring “the peace of the sultan and his kingdom”. Long ago it has been given

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by the good fairy Morena. It is described as this "little golden cockerel, the minutest thing in the world: it was gold-coloured, with a beautiful blood-red crest and silver-grey little feet. It did not eat or drink, it lived on its sad thoughts, its lofty philosophical contemplations, its future prospects and hopes and crowed at the usual hours like every ordinary house cock" (Klinger 1842: 5; in the original "Hahn" and "Hähnchen" occur alternately). The cockerel is stolen and, when retrieved, it turns out to be the incarnation of Sahir, the first-born son of Eve, "the genius of enlightenment and humanity", who had been turned into a cock by the fairy Morena.

10 Here we limit ourselves to a brief comparison of the two texts, the original tale and the libretto. A fully detailed investigation should include analyses of Rimskij-Korsakov's musical composition (vocal and orchestral), of concrete performances, which add other layers of interpretation, for instance, with regard to attempting to follow (or ignore) Bel'skij's quite extensive and complicated stage directions. Some of these have a strong narrative and descriptive component, aimed at evoking atmosphere and mood, but are quite impressionistic, e.g. reflecting the inner life of characters. Further analysis of performances should consider choice of costumes, scenery, lighting, props, acting, choreography, etc.

11 Bel'skij spells "Додон" ("Dodón") instead of Puškin's "Дадон" ("Dadón"). Dodon is the usual spelling of the name of the tsar who figures in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century copies of the widely popular tale 'Bova Korolevič'. There is no difference in pronunciation. For a long time (as early as 1822 and as late as 1834) Puškin made plans for a *skazka* about this hero (1977: 291-293 and 431-433).

12 Bel'skij spells "Шемаханская царица" ("Šemachan queen") instead of Puškin's "Шамаханская" ("Šamachan"). This can be explained by the original name of the historic city in Azerbaijan, which in Azerbaijani is: "Şamaxı". In Russian there is little or no difference in pronunciation. In his translation (Pushkin 1964) Fennell tacitly corrects Puškin and writes "Shemakhan".

13 In the first song of the Šemachan queen she addresses the sun: "Ответь мне, зоркое светило" ("Answer me, all-seeing luminary"). The preceding stage direction reads: "The beautiful woman, as if she does not notice anything, turns to the bright sun, raises her arms in prayer". This would seem to support (or have inspired?) Paščenko's (2009) hypothesis of Puškin's allusions to sun-worshipping sects.

14 In general, there is a lack of socio-pedagogical explanation for this expansion from adult reading into the children's sphere in Russia. In his excellent history of children's literature in Russia, which is exceptional in dealing with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Ben Hellman does not pay special attention to this phenomenon in his discussion of Puškin's *skazki* (2013: 31-35).

15 With the exception of the twenties when Lenin's wife Krupskaja condemned fairytales as unrealistic and ideologically harmful.

16 Here one may think of the Freudian views of the Austrian-American psychologist Bruno Bettelheim (and his predecessors), who holds that violence in fairytales may have therapeutic value for children and helps them to prevent or overcome psychological traumas.

In the first chapter of her book *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, entitled 'Sex and Violence' (2003: 3-38), Maria Tatar describes how the Grimm brothers revised their first edition of fairytales, to make them suitable for children. They retained most of the horrors and violence, but deleted any sexual elements or allusions as much as possible.

17 To my knowledge, there is no practice of adapting or abridging the text.

18 O. I. Krasnova, 'Referat uroka po literaturnomu čteniju. A. S. Puškin. "Skazka o zolotom petuške". 4. klass'.

<http://nsportal.ru/nachalnaya-shkola/čtenie/2015/10/10/referat-uroka-po-literaturnomu-čteniju-a-s-pushkin-skazka>. Last accessed 10 July 2017.

- 19 S. F. Pavlova, 'Urok literaturnogo čtenija v 4-m klasse po skazke A. S. Puškina "Skazka o zolotom petuške"'.
<http://festival.1september.ru/articles/504526>. Last accessed 10 July 2017.
- 20 Krasnova. See note 18.
- 21 [Anonymous] 'Literaturnoe čtenie. Tema: A. S. Puškin. "Skazka o zolotom petuške". 3. klass'.
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- 22 S.I. Edrennikova, 'Urok literatury po teme: "A. S. Puškin "Skazka o zolotom petuške". Sravnenie s "Legendoj ob arabskom astrologe" V. Irvinga", 7-j klass.
<http://festival.1september.ru/articles/211362>. Last accessed 10 July 2017.
- 23 In one model lesson (Pavlova, see note 19; for the 4th class) the teacher should include a "физминутка" (a minute of physical exercise, common practice in lower classes to break a 45-minute period), in which the pupils are instructed to "impersonate the cockerel and show how it ruffles its feathers and flutters".
- Another quite special treatment of Puškin's tale can be seen on You Tube: some thirty children (2nd class: seven-to-eight-year olds) from a school in Yakutsk recite the 224 lines in turn, with just a few wobbles and omissions. (Школа читает Пушкина. 2 класс. Сказка о золотом петушке)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXYgKptZ-ZI>. Last accessed 10 July 2017.
- 24 Krasnova. See note 18.

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