

Claremont Colleges

Scholarship @ Claremont

Scripps Senior Theses

Scripps Student Scholarship

2023

Baba Yaga: An Ecofeminist Analysis of the Witch of the Woods

Maya Lozinsky
Scripps College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses



Part of the [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Forestry and Forest Sciences Commons](#), and the [Russian Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lozinsky, Maya, "Baba Yaga: An Ecofeminist Analysis of the Witch of the Woods" (2023). *Scripps Senior Theses*. 2101.

https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/2101

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Scripps Student Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scripps Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

**Baba Yaga: an Ecofeminist Analysis of the Witch of
the Woods**

By

Maya Lozinsky

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

Professor Roselli
Professor Rudova
Professor Chu

April 21, 2023

Acknowledgements & Author's Note

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Russia's actions in occupying sovereign Ukrainian land is a political and humanitarian tragedy and cannot be justified under any circumstances. In this thesis, terms such as Rus' will be used to reference historically unified territory under Russia of what is modern-day Ukraine. However, this history does not justify nor excuse the actions of the Russian Federation. Although this thesis focuses on Russia, it is important to acknowledge that much of the folklore and knowledge discussed in this thesis would not exist as it does today without the contribution of Ukrainian citizens.

I would like to extend a thank you to my thesis readers, who have been extremely supportive, helpful, and patient while I navigate writing this thesis. I would like to thank Professor Roselli for his guidance in synthesizing this interdisciplinary work, Professor Chu for her endless helpful resources and insight, and Professor Rudova for her unwavering confidence in my abilities.

I would like to thank Professors Glenn Simshaw and Pam Bromely for helping me grow as a writer and a person. The Writing Center has been an integral part of my college experience, and an absolute privilege to be a part of. Without their help, I would not have been able to accomplish this paper and create this knowledge. I would also like to thank my wonderful adviser, Marina Perez de Mendiola, who encouraged me to pursue a Humanities major, and who guided my college experience since I arrived at Scripps.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for their endless encouragement, inspiration, and patience. Specifically, I would like to thank my sister, Becca, my mom, and my dad for always cheering me on. I would also like to thank Lena Herwagen for supporting my creativity since I was a child, and for providing me with much of the inspiration for this thesis. I would also like to thank my best friend, Manya Herwagen, for answering my questions pertaining to Russian history and language.

Introduction

The impending climate crisis will ultimately affect all aspects of the natural world and human society. However, these effects will not be distributed evenly across the human population. One notable discrepancy resulting from climate change is how different genders will be impacted by shifts in the environment. Across the globe, women are predicted to bear most of the burden of displacement, migration, and famine. Furthermore, when floods and droughts impact agricultural outputs, “women and girls face socio-economic insecurity and inequalities and become far more vulnerable” to violence, sexual assault, early marriage, and more (*Annual Full-Day Discussion on the Human Rights of Women | OHCHR*). Issues like this will only be exacerbated in countries with pervasive and existing gender inequality, like Russia (Gaard). The Russian Federation is a particularly interesting case study through which to understand the intersections of gender and climate change, especially when considering that solutions to these two structural issues may overlap.

The complex issues arising from the intersection of gender inequality and climate change require an interdisciplinary analysis to fully understand. One way this can be addressed is through a branch of ecology called ecofeminism, which examines the commonalities between the exploitation, domination, and abuse of women and nature. Coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, the foundational work of ecofeminism, *Feminism or Death*, assigns blame to the patriarchy for these concurrent dominations.¹ D'Eaubonne names the sudden suppression of female-dominated societies approximately 5,000 years ago and the consolidation of power into the hands of men as the catalyst for the type of ecological destruction we see now (Bachofen, as referenced in d'Eaubonne, foreword). This shift had cataclysmic effects, one of the

¹ Other ecofeminist writings assign blame to other structural systems of oppression such as capitalism (Norgaard and York 509)

most damaging of which, according to d'Eaubonne, is men's control of female reproductive rights.² Modern ecofeminists place similar blame on male-dominated society, but the diversity of the field allows for scholars to expand their scope to focus on other issues and inequalities pertinent to the women's movement. Ecofeminist remedies to these problems vary and can range from radical propositions like transferring all social, political, and economic power into the hands of women, to subtle ideological shifts like breaking down the dualist divide between nature and humanity into a more reciprocal model (d'Eaubonne, foreword).

Insight into gender inequality and environmental degradation may lie in reconnecting with one of the most ancient and fascinating parts of Russia's culture: its folklore. One specific character has great potential to provide insight into the domination of both women and nature while also resisting these systems of oppression. Baba Yaga, the witch of the woods, is one of the most ancient and well-known manifestations of Slavic folklore. It is hard to overstate the prominence of Baba Yaga in Russia.

As the child of a Russian immigrant, I grew up hearing and reading bedtime stories about this elusive witch, and I grew up playing a Russian phonics computer game called "Baba Yaga Learns to Read" (Lozinsky). The influence of Baba Yaga extends past Russia, however. For example, in Studio Ghibli's hit 2001 film, "Spirited Away," the witch who runs the bathhouse, Yubaba, resembles Baba Yaga to a striking degree. From her occupation, to her zoomorphic abilities, it is likely director and writer Hayao Miyazaki modeled Yubaba after Baba Yaga. The interpretation present in "Spirited Away" is one of many that goes to show how ancient, how well-known, and how powerful Baba Yaga's influence is.

² The conversation about women's reproductive rights is key to any ecofeminist analysis, but in the context of overpopulation, this argument is largely problematic, and will be addressed in greater detail in section IV.



Title screen from the computer game, “Baba Yaga Learns to Read” complete with her hut depicted in her home of the forest.

In this thesis, I will argue that Baba Yaga’s prevalence in Russia’s culture and media provide a unique opportunity to gain insight into the junctures between the climate crisis and gender inequality in Russia. Despite the persistent gender inequities present in current Russian society, ecofeminist frameworks and ideologies are already deeply embedded in Russian culture. Women, as a group, have always been politically active in Russia, from resisting the introduction of Christianity in the 9th century, to the feminist resistance group Pussy Riot founded in 2011. I will examine Baba Yaga’s history, her role in the Russian folktale, and her associated symbols and objects through an ecofeminist lens. To do this, I will examine the unique qualities of the folklore genre, analyze two famous folktales containing Baba Yaga that exemplify her potential as an ecofeminist icon, and briefly discuss the significance of the environment where Baba Yaga lives.

Methods

This thesis has five key parts and, thus, requires multiple methods of investigation. First, I undertook an analysis of genre to understand how folklore functions, its cultural and narrational significance, its genesis. This ancient tradition predates much written history. As a result, there are limited records to document how this tradition came to be. One key author whose work is crucial to my understanding of folklore is Vladimir Propp, a famous Soviet folklorist of the 20th century. His two works, *The Morphology of the Folktale*, and *Theory and History of Folklore*, are instrumental in framing my analysis of folklore as it operates in Russian culture. By comparing this genre to literature, I was able to distinguish the unique qualities of the folklore genre pertaining to its evolution and authorship.

To understand Baba Yaga specifically and her connection to ecofeminism, I conducted a case study of two prominent folktales: “Vasilisa the Beautiful” and “Prince Danila-Govorila.” These stories are emblematic of many folkloric archetypes, Baba Yaga’s powers, and ground her lore in tangible narratives. I conducted a literary analysis of these stories to fuse aspects of Baba Yaga with core features of ecofeminism.

I then conducted a brief survey of a variety of ecofeminist texts to understand the main tenets of the theory. I read large portions of Françoise d’Eaubonne’s work, *Feminism or Death*, to understand the key tenets of this philosophy. However, d’Eaubonne’s work is largely structured on an argument against overpopulation, which has since been generally disregarded as a problematic argument. D’Eaubonne’s work maintains that “phallogocentric systems” led to “the appropriation of women’s systems and organs, resulting in overpopulation and the destruction of natural resources” (Merchant, as quoted in d’Eaubonne, foreword). Although reproductive justice is an essential part of the feminist movement, when discussed in the context of

overpopulation, the argument often becomes unscrupulous. The overpopulation argument maintains that too many people on the planet will stress the Earth's resources, but crucially ignores how "80% of the world's population (the global South) has generated a mere 20% of global greenhouse gas emissions" (Gaard). This discrepancy inherently targets women in developing nations and limits their reproductive agency by discouraging them to have children. Essentially, this argument does not take into account the impact of greenhouse gasses emitted by developed countries, and quickly devolves into an "elitist rhetorical distraction from the more fundamental and intersecting problems of gender, sexuality, and interspecies justice" (Gaard). As a result, I examined more modern texts that address other aspects of the intersection between feminism and ecology without focusing on the overpopulation argument. Themes from these other texts include the importance of female agency, humans' connection to and relationship with nature, and the role that dualism plays in epistemological constructions of humans' perceptions of nature. Next, I applied elements of ecofeminism to Baba Yaga's stories to understand how she embodies the values of ecofeminism.

Finally, I examined the environmental and cultural importance of the Russian forests, the environment where Baba Yaga mostly lives. In my view, in order to fully appreciate the ecofeminist potential of Baba Yaga, it is essential to also examine the forests where she dwells. This must be done in two spheres: within the folkloric canon, and outside of it. Within the canon, pagan and spiritual meanings of certain trees and creatures give Baba Yaga's powers a new significance. From an environmental perspective, however, Russia's boreal forests are a formidable environmental power, and a crucial global carbon sink (*Russia's Boreal Forests*)

Part I: Genre

Oral Tradition: Folklore versus Other Genres

One of the most interesting parts of Russian culture is its folklore, which predates much of Russia's written history. Folktales, which are generally defined as stories passed down through oral tradition, take on multiple forms in the Russian tradition. *Bylinas*, which "[give] a transcript of reality according to epic laws," is one of the main branches of Russian folklore (Propp et al. 29). These stories often featured epic heroes and originated between the 10th and 12th century in Russia (*Bylina | Russian Poetry | Britannica*). Although all folklore is in some form a reflection of reality, the *bylina* distinguishes itself because "the content of the *bylina* is fictitious but the circumstances are historical" (Propp 52). The central tenants of these stories are a reflection and manifestation of the central beliefs of the community which produced the *bylina*. Another iteration of folklore, the wondertale, differentiates itself from the *bylina* in that it follows a specific formula in its structure.³ The typical structure of a wondertale is as follows:

"A wondertale begins with some harm or villainy done to someone (for example, abduction or banishment)...and develops through the hero's departure from home and encounters with the donor, who provides him with a magic agent that helps the hero find the object of the search. Further along, the tale includes combat with an adversary (the most important form is slaying a dragon), a return, and a pursuit" (Propp et al. 102).

This archetypal character arc is prevalent throughout hundreds of Russian folktales. In this way, the wondertale is more similar to our modern-day fairy tales where universally-recognized

³ In this thesis, the terms folklore, folktales, and wondertale will be used interchangeably.

characters such as the evil step-mother or witch reoccur in various iterations but in different roles.

One important distinction here is between myth and wondertales or folktales. Myth, on one hand, is defined as “a tale about divinities or divine beings in whose reality people believe” (Propp et al. 109). Wondertales, on the other hand, never claim to be an accurate depiction of real events. What is interesting, though, is that “myth and the wondertale differ in social function, not in form” (Propp et al. 109). Myths, traditionally, are told as a way to understand and explain the ineffable. Sometimes, myths include a moral or lesson about human nature or heed some other warning. On the other hand, wondertales are more often a reinterpretation of rituals and religious beliefs and infrequently come with a moral. The differences between these interpretations are often a reflection of a change in the character’s motivation. For example:

“the hero of a wondertale sews himself into the skin of a cow or horse to escape from a hole or reach a faraway kingdom. He is then seized by a bird; the skin, with the hero inside, is taken to some place on a mountain or beyond the sea that the hero would not have been able to reach in any other way. There is a well-known custom of sewing corpses in a skin” (Propp et al. 106).

The key difference between the ancient custom of sewing corpses into skin, and the wondertale interpretation is that in the ritual, it is a deceased body which uses another’s body as a way to guarantee entrance into the underworld (Propp et al. 106). Although both instances use another’s body to travel to a foreign land, their presentations play a key role in determining their genre as either ritual, myth, or wondertale. The distinction between wondertales and myths is especially pertinent when we understand Baba Yaga as an overseer of rites and rituals.

Creation: Folklore vs Literature

At first glance, it might seem that folklore is similar to literature. However, folklore is unique in its creation and preservation. Emerging before the dominance of the written word, folklore is a form of cultural art distinct from literature due both to its lack of authorship, and also to its continuous evolution. Vladimir Propp notes that folklore predates literature, and may even be seen as a precursor to modern literature, meaning that “literature is born of folklore,” and not the other way around (Propp et al. 14). Historically, literary authors occupy relatively high social classes and attain advanced levels of education. Most notably, they were all *literate*. In contrast, Russian ethnographers and anthropologists agree that “folklore is the output of all strata of the population except the ruling one...Folklore is first and foremost, the art of the oppressed classes, both peasants and workers,” the majority of whom were illiterate (Propp et al. 4–5). Furthermore, where modern literature denotes individual authors, folklore benefited from multiple contributors as the story was molded through each retelling. Viewing folklore as a type of “communal creation” also provides insight into the type of communities creating these ancient traditions (Jakobson 8). Where literary authors in Russia were revered, peasants were often “looked upon with great suspicion by the governmental authorities, the church, and the upper classes,” especially in the decades leading up to the Russian Revolution of 1917 (Forrester et al., ix). Despite the differences in their authorship, both folklore and literature can deeply impact a culture.

The oral nature of folkloric tradition further differentiates it from literature by allowing it to evolve. Literature becomes a static piece of work once it is published, as the words on the page never change. On the other hand, folklore becomes a relevant tool for sociological study when we understand how folklore is a reflection of reality. Some aspects of these parallels are

self-explanatory. For example, much of the Russian peasantry lived in rural forests, so it follows that much of their folklore also centers on forest environments. Furthermore, folklore is an always-evolving process that requires continuous input from the community. Authors Jakobson and Bogatyrev claim that “an item of folklore, per se begins its existence only after it has been adopted by a given community, and only in those of its aspects which the community has accepted” (Jakobson and Bogatyrev, 4-5). The vetting process that a folktale endures ensures that elements which are retained “hold a functional value for the given community” ((Jakobson and Bogatyrev 4). As a result, folklore can reveal a communities’ views and moral principles. Propp confirms this by saying that “like any genuine art, folklore possesses not only artistic perfection but also a profound message. The discovery of this message is one of the objectives of the science of folklore” (Propp et al. 14). At the same time, the act of keeping folklore alive is a continuous process, and without constant reiteration, the tradition may die out without any hope for revival (Jakobson and Bogatyrev 7). As a result, this ancient tradition must still be somewhat relevant to modern-day life, or ‘hold a functional value for the given community,’ if aspects of this tradition are still alive today.

Although it is agreed upon that peasants were the main group involved in folkloric creation, this does not mean that these peasant communities were uniform. In fact, “Russian ethnographers...can provide a great deal of information concerning the connection between a rich and vital folklore repertoire and the variety of social, economic, ideological, and even moral differentiations among the peasantry” (Jakobson and Bogatyrev 17). Since the emergence of folklore as a genre, history has erased much of these nuances and consolidated the genre into a more streamline set of stories. As a result, it is important to keep in mind that the versions of the stories presented in this thesis are only one of their *many* iterations.

Two big events for folklore: Christianity and Revolution

Two main historical events were critical to the evolution of folklore in Russia. The first was the arrival of Christianity in Russia around the 9th century when Vladimir of Kiev Christianized his territory. Prior to the arrival of Christianity in Russia between the 8th and 13th century, the dominant spiritual-religious practice was Slavic Paganism (Jakobson). Paganism at large is defined as a religious practice outside “one of the main religions of the world,” specifically a “non-Christian or pre-Christian religion” with a “particular affinity for or sensitivity to the supposed spiritual or mystical aspects of nature.” (Oxford English Dictionary). In this context, main world religions are classified as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. The Christian church disapproved of the peasant populations mostly because of their ties to pagan traditions, much of which contained themes of magic, rituals, divine feminine deities, and supernatural activities – all of which threatened the authority of the church. However, it is difficult to stop “oral dissemination of wondertales that were deeply rooted in pagan traditions” (Forrester et al., ix). As Christianity took hold in early Russia, Christian advocates attempted to convert pagans to the dominant religion.

Many groups continued to resist until the twelfth century, however. Specifically, “the women of Kiev, like their peasant sisters, resisted the imposition of Christianity with great stubbornness” (Hubbs 90). This resistance, historian Joanna Hubbs postulates, is related to the lack of female representation, specifically martyrs, in the Russian adoption of Christianity, especially in contrast to the Christianity of the Roman Empire. Notably, pre-Christian pagan religions were largely matriarchal and empowered women in various ways. Under Vladimir of Kiev, children were removed from their families “in order to instruct them in his own schools,” presumably for Christian indoctrination (Hubbs 91). Some of these attacks were successful in

dismantling systems of worship, but “the mother-centered family seems to have been perceived by pagan Slavs as the microcosm of the divine order whose patron was the fertility goddess” (Hubbs 91). Incredibly, within households, two religions were often observed. Husbands, who were more likely to convert to Christianity found themselves married to women who “refused to comply” (Hubbs 92). As a consequence, the “clergy fought back by damning all those whose wives continued to exercise the pagan faith” (Hubbs 92). Ultimately, the introduction of Christianity became a catalyst for the development of Russian folklore. To preserve pagan traditions, many practitioners encrypted elements of their religious practices into folktales, which, as a genre, never “passes itself off as reality” (Propp et al. 16). In this way, pagans could evade religious persecution by disguising their practices into a benign tradition that did not threaten the church.

The second major event that influenced the course of folklore in Russian history was the Revolution of 1917. Propp notes that before the Russian Revolution of 1917, folklore was created by “illiterate peasants, soldiers, artisans” and other low-class groups (Propp et al. 100). After the Revolution however, social classes were restructured, which resulted in a major shift in the understanding of folklore as a production of the lower classes. Propp explains how “under socialism, folklore loses its specific features as a product of the lower strata since in a socialist society, there are neither upper nor lower strata, just the people” (Propp et al. 5). Before the implementation of socialism, folklore was a product of class struggle, but the answer to the question of whether Soviet folklore exists is murky. Propp expands upon this nuanced question by stating “Soviet folklore exists, as evidenced by an army of folklorists, and at the same time it does not, because there is no class struggle in the country” (Propp 1). As the whole nation now contributes to the authorship of these stories, elements rendered irrelevant to socialist society

may cease to exist. The remnants of this tradition undergo significant modifications and “come closer to literature” than to a distinct genre of its own prior to the Revolution (Propp et al. 5). Furthermore, the abolition of religion under the Soviet state further complicates folklore’s connection to the people – especially considering the close ties between paganism and folklore. As a result, the study of Soviet folklore takes on a different political, social, and spiritual dimension which surpasses the scope of this thesis. Despite these monumental changes within Russias’ social structure and political regimes, some folkloric characters are so iconic and integral to the Russian tradition they transcend genres, national borders, and withstood the test of time. One of these characters is Baba Yaga.

Part II: Baba Yaga

Who is Baba Yaga?

Baba Yaga, (also sometimes spelled Baba Iaga, Baba Jaga, and many other ways), is a quintessential cornerstone of Slavic mythology and folklore.⁴ Despite being one of the most ancient characters, Baba Yaga is still present today in “riddles, children’s rhymes, byliny, seasonal songs, and has made forays into Russian ‘high’ culture (such as Pushkin’s poetry)” (Johns 21). Although one of the most interesting characteristics of Baba Yaga pertains to the variety of roles she occupies within the folktale, some qualities stay consistent across stories.

First and foremost, Baba Yaga is described as a repugnant witch who can be found in a peculiar hut which spins on chicken legs often located deep in the forest.⁵ Where western witches usually were “beautiful and seductive, cruel and vicious,” Baba Yaga establishes herself in

⁴ For the purpose of this thesis, I will use the spelling ‘Baba Yaga’ unless quoting from another source. All spellings of Baba Yaga refer to the same character.

⁵ Although Baba Yaga is most often found in the woods, this only reflects her primary home in the mortal realm. In reality, Baba Yaga dwells in the land of the dead or on the border between the world of the living and the dead.

opposition to these expectations (Forrester et al., viii). Nearly all accounts of Baba Yaga's appearance concur that she is a ghastly creature. She has "drooping breasts, a hideous long nose, and sharp iron teeth" which she sharpens before attempting to eat those who cross her after cooking them in her oven (Forrester et al., viii). One of Baba Yaga's epithets, "bony leg," (*kostianaia noga*) has been interpreted to mean that one of her legs may actually just be a bone with no skin or muscles covering it, which adds a haunting dimension to this woman's appearance (Forrester et al., xxvi). She is often depicted as old and decrepit, often with ratty loose hair, tattered clothes, and a weathered face. Some speculations suggest that Baba Yaga's loose hair is actually a symbol of her power. According to ancient traditions, "unfastened hair was the symbol of magic powers" associated strongly with "marriage, death and burial, saving the lives of livestock, people and the world" (Ivanova 1863).⁶ Indeed, the illustrations of Baba Yaga vary from an old tattered grandmother-like figure to a gruesome hag.

Another interesting peculiarity of Baba Yaga is her method of transportation. Where western witches fly on a broom, Baba Yaga flies around in a mortar, with a pestle as a makeshift oar through the air. Sometimes, she is depicted standing or crouching in a bucket, using a mop or broom to propel herself. These two depictions are often interchangeable within the folkloric canon.

⁶ As we will see later, these associations play an important role in understanding Baba Yaga's origins.



Two contrasting images of Baba Yaga. On the left, Baba Yaga pictured with her loyal creatures of the forest, holding her broom. On the right, Baba Yaga wielding her mortar and pestle for transportation, flying through the forest (Forrester et al. 129).

Apart from her unsettling appearance, Baba Yaga is associated with many other peculiarities. Perhaps the most famous of which is her house. Baba Yaga's dwelling, in Russian called an *izba*, (or endearingly- *izbushka*) is a hut. But this is no ordinary hut because it stands on two massive chicken legs, and often is found spinning (Forrester et al., xxvii). Most commonly, the *izba* is found located in the forest or near the sea. Crucially, these locations have two main qualities: "they are far from the original home of the hero or heroine, on the border of another world" (Forrester et al., xxviii). To gain entry into the hut, the hero or protagonist of the story must speak a riddle to get the house to stop spinning and reveal its door. Manifestations of this riddle vary across stories. One such variation is, "hut, stand the old way, the way mother put you! With your back to the forest, your front towards me" (Johns 22). When Baba Yaga is found lying inside her hut, the proportions of her body become strikingly unusual. Despite being a relatively

frail-looking woman, when she is inside, she “often lies on the stove, her body stretching from one corner of the hut to the other, with her nose sticking into the ceiling” (Johns 22). These proportions parallel those of a carcass within a coffin where the body is positioned nose-up in tight quarters.

From a historic perspective, the *izba* could be an embellished variation of an ancient storage shed which historically stood facing away from the deep forest and towards the trail so “that the entrance can be approached from a river or wood trail” (Ivanova). The odd chicken legs may have had a more practical purpose before their animalization: their raised structures were effective at keeping animals away from these burials and storehouses (Ivanova).



Illustration by prominent Russian artist, Ivan Biblin (1876-1942). Baba Yaga is depicted on the left, talking to a nobleman (right), with the izba pictured in the background (Bilibin, Cover from the Book, “Stories of the Izba”).

History of Baba Yaga's Home

Much like Baba Yaga in popular culture, the forests in which she is found are also ever-present in the Russian psyche. It is hard to conceptualize how much the Russian landscape influences Russian culture, however “many scholars believe that the role of the Russian forest is ‘foundational in understanding Russian culture’” (Wallhager and College). This may explain part of why Russia’s forests have been maintained so well. The World Wildlife Fund estimates that between “70 to 75 percent of Siberia’s boreal ecosystems ‘remain close to their natural state’ and include ‘the largest expanse of untouched boreal forest in the world’” (“Will Russia’s Forests Be an Asset or an Obstacle in Climate Fight?”). The importance of the Russian forests permeates into language as well. The Russian language “contains a number of folk-inspired words for specific types of forests” (Brain 21). For example, *bor* refers to “a pine forest or sandy soil” which distinguishes itself from *dubrava* forests which consist of oak trees “with an admixture of other wide-leaved deciduous species on rich soil” (Brain 21). Other Russian environmentalists and historians remark that “Russia is unimaginable without its forests,” and “the forests (not unlike the frontier for the American historian Fredrick Jackson Turner) shaped the very way that Russians think” (V.O. Kliuchevskii, as referenced in Brain 5). In other words, the Russian had to find a space for himself within the landscape, and contend with the challenges of a wild environment in order to survive.

Origins: Etymology

All Baba Yaga’s peculiarities and associations beg the question: where did this creature come from? Let’s first examine the etymology of Baba Yaga’s name. First, the word “Baba in traditional Russian culture meant a married peasant woman, one at least old enough to have

children" (Forrester et al., xxii).⁷ Nowadays, the word 'baba' is an offensive way to refer to an older woman, often implying aging of an ungraceful sort or someone behaving in an unrefined manner. The meaning of the word 'Yaga' is more obscure because there is no direct translation in the Russian language. Instead, some have speculated that the verb "to yagat" might mean "to shout loudly, to cry during birth. People enrage themselves in a similar fashion before fighting or during the fight in order not to feel pain" (Ivanova). Indeed, Baba Yaga does have ties to childbirth, and often is depicted as a ferocious and combative figure, so this analysis does have some merit. Furthermore, Forrester notes that Baba Yaga's name is uncapitalized in Russian, suggesting that it is not her given name, but a characterization translating to "old lady yaga, or perhaps, scary old woman" (Forrester et al., xxiii). Upon further examination, the etymology of the Russian word for witch, *vedma*, also reveals something about Baba Yaga's character.

Forrester notes that the root "ved- means 'to know'" and is connected to modern Russian words like news, *novosti*, or truth, *pravda* (Forrester et al., xxi). It is also interesting to examine the roots associated with Baba Yaga's *izba*. Johns notes how "the word time in Russian, *vremia*, comes from the same vr- root of turning and returning as the word for spindle, *vereteno*. A spindle holding up a rotating house where a fighting old woman tests her visitors and dispenses wisdom suggests a deep ritual past" indicates Baba Yaga's connection to ancient knowledge and wisdom (Forrester et al., xxvii). The multi-faceted meanings tied to Baba Yaga's name largely parallel her various roles in Russian folklore. Baba Yaga becomes one of the most interesting characters in Russian folklore when we understand the nuances of her ambiguity. Although the descriptions of her physicality are relatively uniform, her role within the folktale itself is not.

Where other established characters are decidedly evil or benevolent, Baba Yaga blurs the line of

⁷ The connotation associated with being a woman of child-bearing age will become more relevant later when discussing Baba Yaga's relationship with gender.

moral ambiguity and straddles many archetypal roles within the folktale, which make her a great character for ecofeminist analysis.⁸

Baba Yaga in the Folktale

Baba Yaga's role within the folktale is ambiguous both morally and categorically. At large, and in modern pop-culture adaptations, Baba Yaga is considered an evil character. However, this is not an accurate representation of her role within Russian folklore. In some stories she appears "as a donor, in others as a villain" (Johns 23). This complication is best understood through Vladimir Propp's framework of function. Although some elements of the story remain the same such as the hero's "dispatch and departure on a quest," other characters may fulfill a variety of roles (Propp et al. 83). The ways in which each functional character first appears is unique. Meaning, "each category employs certain means to introduce a character into the course of action" (Propp 84). These entrances are key in helping us identify which characters fulfill which functions across a variety of wondertales. One of the most basic examples of function is the villain. The villain is responsible for instigating the initial damage to the hero or hero's kin, and has a unique entrance in the narrative, thus confirming its role as an archetypal function. We will see Baba Yaga's role as a villain in the story "Prince Danila-Govorila." However, Baba Yaga is never confined to just one function across folktales, nor is she limited to the restraints of what each function entails.

Stories: Vasilisa the Beautiful

Aside from the villain, another common function Baba Yaga is as the donor. The donor is responsible for gifting the hero a magical object or power which will assist them in their quest. Usually, the donor is seen as a benevolent character in that they assist the hero in their mission.

⁸ Established characters meaning they "[possess] a consistent name and set of typical characteristics" (Johns 22).

The donor's unique entrance is defined by the location in which the hero encounters them, and the manner in which the hero crosses paths with the donor. Typically, "the *donor* is encountered accidentally, most often in the forest (in a hut), or else in a field, on the roadway, in the street" (Propp 84). Furthermore, the hut itself is an association with the *donor*, which further cements the ties between Baba Yaga and this function. Propp explicitly says that "morphologically, the hut represents the abode of the donor" (Propp et al. 89). Baba Yaga fulfills the function of the donor in the story of "Vasilisa the Beautiful" when she gives Vasilisa fire in the form of a lit-up skull.

Vasilisa's original quest began when her evil step-sisters sent her into the forest to fetch fire from Baba Yaga. While walking in the forest to Baba Yaga's hut, Vasilisa comes across three horsemen: one with a white horse clad in white garb, one red horsemen with a crimson horse just as the sun began to rise, and finally, a horseman dressed in black on an obsidian horse as night approached. Upon approaching the skull-adorned gates of Baba Yaga's hut, "a dreadful noise came from the forest. The trees cracked, the dry leaves rustled. Baba Yaga rode out of the forest; she was riding in a mortar, driving with a pestle, sweeping her tracks away with a broom" (Forrester et al. 175). Baba Yaga emerges from the forest riding her mortar and smelling the air yells "Foo, Foo! It smells of a Russian soul! Who's here?" (Afanas'ev 176). Vasilisa begs for some fire, and Baba Yaga promises it to her, on the condition that she remains at the hut and works for Baba Yaga. If not, Baba Yaga threatens to eat Vasilisa. Overwhelmed with the chores outlined for her to complete, Vasilisa invokes the help of a tiny doll her mother had gifted to her on her deathbed. The doll, when fed, assists Vasilisa in the completion of her chores. When Baba Yaga returned for the night, she "examined everything and was unhappy that she had nothing to be angry about" (Afanas'ev 176). Baba Yaga then gives Vasilisa the same tasks for the next day,

but with the addition of “[taking the] poppy seed from the bin and [cleaning] it of dirt grain by grain” (Afanas’ev 176). The doll once again aids Vasilisa in her chores.

Baba Yaga returns back to the hut, and while eating dinner, Vasilisa asks about the three horsemen. Baba Yaga explains that the white horse is her “bright day,” the red horse is her “red sun,” and the black horse is her “dark night. All of them are [her] trusted servants” (Afanas’ev 177). Baba Yaga then inquires about how Vasilisa completes her chores, and Vasilisa confesses that her “mother’s blessing helps [her]” (Afanas’ev 177). Suddenly hostile, Baba Yaga kicks her out of the hut, sticks a skull from her fence onto a stake, and sends Vasilisa home with the makeshift torch. Vasilisa entered her house and attempts to start a fire, but the “eyes in the skull looked at the stepmother and her daughters [so] that they were burned... by morning they were all burned up into charcoal. Only Vasilisa wasn’t touched” (Afanas’ev 177). The next morning, Vasilisa buries the skull in the ground, and eventually, moves into the nearby village and marries the tzar, where “until the end of her life she always carried the doll in her pocket” (Afanas’ev 179).



Illustration of Vasilisa returning from Baba Yaga's with the magical skull. In the background, Baba Yaga's izba, adorned with a fence of skulls and human bones (Bilibin, Illustration for the fairy tale "Vasilisa the Beautiful").

The story of Vasilisa the Beautiful reveals a number of important themes and functions related to Baba Yaga. First and foremost, despite her unfriendly behavior, Baba Yaga ultimately does fulfill the role of the donor by providing Vasilisa with the fire she originally sought. Although Vasilisa's encounter with Baba Yaga is not explicitly accidental, she does stumble upon Baba Yaga outside her hut unexpectedly. Notably, the translation provided by Afanas'ev uses the word 'suddenly' to introduce Baba Yaga, which adds an element of unpredictability to this first encounter.

Furthermore, Baba Yaga rarely donates the hero's coveted item without a price, which complicates her position as a donor. In this context, she threatens Vasilisa with death if she does

not complete the arduous list of chores. She orders Vasilisa to “clean the yard, sweep the hut, cook the dinner, get the linens ready, and go to grain bins and take a quarter of wheat and clean the weeds out of it” (Afanas’ev 175). Vasilisa, to her credit, is able to complete the tasks, but only with the help of her doll. Without this external assistance, she would be doomed to be Baba Yaga’s next meal. Baba Yaga, who returned to the hut on the first night, “unhappy that she had nothing to be angry about,” clearly did not expect Vasilisa to pass her test (Afanas’ev 175). This then begs the question— how much of a donor really is Baba Yaga? The word donor itself implies that there is no payment requested for the donation. If there was, it would be a transaction, not a donation. However, it is important to note that Baba Yaga is incredibly powerful and could easily complete the tasks she gave to Vasilisa. Thus, Baba Yaga is better characterized as a hostile donor in this context.

Baba Yaga’s status as a donor is also perplexing when we consider the role of the skull. When carrying the skull home, Vasilisa frets that “they have no need for fire anymore at home” due to her long absence (Afanas’ev 177). Surprisingly, the skull responds to her, saying, “don’t toss me away. Carry me to your stepmother” (Afanas’ev 177). After the skull burns her stepsisters and stepmother, Vasilisa finds great fortune and eventually marries the local czar. At the beginning of the story, we see Vasilisa lamenting to her doll, saying, “I live in a house with my father, but I see no happiness. My evil stepmother is chasing me off the face of the earth” (Afanas’ev 173). The skull, no doubt an extension of Baba Yaga’s power and will, rids Vasilisa of her oppressors who limit her agency and happiness in life. In this way, Vasilisa follows both a heroic and a tragic arc, venturing into the forest to face a dangerous task, and returning with a newfound power and wisdom. Despite throwing Vasilisa out of her house, Baba Yaga still is a net positive force in Vasilisa’s life. Baba Yaga not only aids Vasilisa in her quest, but also frees

her from her abusive family. Furthermore, Vasilisa leaves the *izba* with knowledge of the three horsemen.

The three horsemen do not reveal anything about Baba Yaga's position as a donor, but do exemplify her powers. As described in the story, the three horsemen are Baba Yaga's faithful servants, and each represent a time of day. The white night brings daylight, the red knight brings sunrise, and the black night brings darkness. If they are loyal to Baba Yaga, this means that she commands time itself. Notably, this knowledge is not widely available and therefore, Vasilisa now holds wisdom pertaining to the inner workings of the natural world.

Story: Prince Danila Govorila

In "Prince Dalina-Govorila," Baba Yaga's character is more explicitly sinister. At the beginning of the story, Baba Yaga, disguised as a fox, gives young prince Danila a ring, saying that "it'll make him rich and quick on the uptake if only he never takes it off and if he marries the girl whose finger fits the ring" (Forrester et al. 68). Unable to find a suitable woman whose finger fits the ring, the prince's sister, Katerina, tries on the ring jokingly. At that moment, "the ring tightened, shone, and fit on her hand as if it had been poured on purpose just for her" (Forrester et al. 68). The prince takes this as a sign that he should marry his sister. Appalled, the princess runs away crying and seeks advice from some old women. They advise her to "make four dolls, set them in the four corners," and to obey unhurriedly when her brother, Danila, calls her to "join him under the marriage crown" (Forrester et al. 68). When the prince calls for his sister, the dolls start to chant, and the ground splits open to swallow her whole. All the meanwhile, the dolls chant:

"Cuckoo, Prince Danila!

Cuckoo, Govorila!

Cuckoo, you want to marry,
Cuckoo, your own sister,
Cuckoo, earth split open,
Cuckoo, sister fall through!”

Danila, angered by the delay, storms into the sisters room, and upon seeing that she is nowhere to be found, he “grabbed an axe, cut off the [dolls’] heads, and threw them all into the stove” (Forrester et al. 68). Meanwhile, the sister walked underground until she came across a house perched on chicken legs: Baba Yaga’s izba. Inside the hut, however, Katerina found a maiden embroidering, not Baba Yaga. The maiden welcomes the princess and offers to host her “as long as [her] mother isn’t here” for her “mother’s a witch!” (Forrester et al. 69). After some time, the witch returns and calls from outside the hut: “My good daughter, my comely daughter! It smells of bones from Rus’!” (Forrester et al. 69).⁹ The maiden lies to Baba Yaga, but the witch eventually returns to see the princess and orders the maiden to “stoke the stove as hot as can be!” (Forrester et al. 70). Baba Yaga instructs the princess to sit on a large wooden paddle and tries to stick her in the stove. Obstinate, the princess “put one leg into the oven and the other onto the stove” so that the witch couldn’t cook her. Baba Yaga then demonstrates how she wants the princess to sit on the paddle, and the princess and the maiden “[shove] her into the oven, set her down there, closed the latches, piled up logs, smeared and sealed it with pitch, and set off at a run” (Forrester et al. 70). In their haste, however, they grab the “embroidered cloth, a brush, and a comb” (Forrester et al. 70). Breaking free, Baba Yaga begins to chase them.

⁹ Rus’, refers to the ancient territory of Russia and Ukraine. Throughout time, this definition has shifted to encompass or exclude other territories under the Russian empire (“Rus’ History”)

The young women threw down the brush behind them and it grew into an impenetrable field of reeds. Undeterred, Baba Yaga uses her claws to get through. Next, the maiden throws the brush, which turns into a dense oak forest. Baba Yaga evades this obstacle by gnawing through the thicket and uprooting trees as she goes; the chase continues. Finally, the young women throw the golden embroidered cloth, which turns into a deep, fiery sea. Unable to cross the sea, Baba Yaga “fell down into the fire and burned up” (Forrester et al. 70). Exhausted by their plight, the women sit down. A man approaches them, and notices how similar the women look. He leaves and returns with Prince Danila. Unable to tell the two women apart, he devises a plan to feign an injury which will reveal his true sister to him. When Katerina runs to his aide, he embraces her and “[gives] her in marriage to a good man, while he married her friend, whose hand fit the ring perfectly” (Forrester et al. 71). After this, all of the characters live peacefully for the rest of their lives.

First and foremost, it is important to note that the witch at the beginning of “Prince Danila-Govorila” is Baba Yaga. Although she is not named at the beginning of the story, she is the only witch ever mentioned in the tale, which implies that she is fulfilling the role of the villain in the story. According to Propp, the villain specifically “appears twice during the course of action. First he makes a sudden appearance from outside (flies to the scene, sneaks up on someone, etc.), and then disappears. His second appearance in the tale is as a person who *has been sought out*” (Propp 84). This formula fits nicely into the tale of “Prince Danila-Govorila.” The first time the witch enters the story, she technically “turned herself into a fox” to give the ring to the royal family with the intention of “[ruining] them” (Forrester et al. 67). This disguise may be interpreted as the first appearance of the villain.

The second appearance of the villain occurs when the sister roams beneath the ground to find refuge from her incestuous brother. Desperate for help, Katerina “walked and walked” underground until she approached the *izba* (Forrester et al. 69). Despite the threat of Baba Yaga’s return, the text explicitly states that “she had nowhere else to go” (Forrester et al. 69). Although Katerina may not have explicitly sought out Baba Yaga, she did seek refuge that inadvertently led her to this evil witch.

Within the story, the location of Baba Yaga’s hut, underground, is specifically important. First and foremost, Baba Yaga does not technically dwell in the forest. Although her hut is predominantly found nestled between thick trees, Baba Yaga technically lives on any border between the world of the living and the world of the dead. This is furthered by Baba Yaga’s first dialogue with her daughter when she notes that “it smells of bones from Rus’!” (Forrester et al. 69). This phrase confirms that Baba Yaga herself does not dwell in Rus. The lore of Baba Yaga is rife with associations with death and the underworld, and she is a warden guarding the boundary between the world of the living and that of the dead. It is important to note that in the Pagan tradition, the name of the underworld roughly translates to “close-under-place” which “suggests a world or afterworld in the near underground” (Forrester et al., xxxiii). This is why her house is often found at a border between worlds – the forest is said to be the pagan entrance to the underworld and a place of initiation, and similarly, beaches constitute a border between the marine and terrestrial worlds. It would follow then, that in order to find Baba Yaga, Katerina would need to travel below the earth.

Baba Yaga occupies a unique position because she is able to “sneak into Rus’ herself, mastering the path there and back; other times she is unable to cross and must stop pursuing the hero or heroine at the border” (Forrester et al., xxxv). When she is in a benevolent mood, Baba

Yaga may aid the hero's journey across these borders, assisting with this transition "so that living human beings may cross it and return, alive but in possession of new wisdom, or 'reborn' into a new status" (Forrester et al., xxxiv). Only Baba Yaga, a master of rituals and overseer of initiation, can assist in the duties of crossing between realms. In this context, Baba Yaga, although not benevolent, does assist in the characters obtaining new status. After Baba Yaga perishes, both Katerina and Danila are able to return back to the world of the living newly engaged. During the pagan era, marriage was not only a romantic rite of passage, but also a way to gain new economic status – especially for young women.

The stove is also a significant feature of this story with a rich history within pagan culture. The stove is already associated with fostering good fortune from one's ancestors, but may also act as a "repository of dead souls, the ancestors. Even more than an ordinary peasant stove, Baba Yaga's is a conduit from death to rebirth" (Forrester et al., xxxi). Most obviously, Baba Yaga is a notorious cannibal, who bakes her victims and then eats them. This transformation of cooking a human to create sustenance for oneself is one way to interpret the stove as a conduit. By ending one's life, Baba Yaga is able to sustain her own. Moreover, the stove also serves to remind us of Baba Yaga's potential barbarism, which reinforces her villainy in the story.

Finally, it is important to discuss the three magical objects stolen from Baba Yaga's house and their role in deterring her pursuit. Both the brush and the comb, which transform into the field of reeds and the oak forest respectively depict Baba Yaga's unrelenting power and her quasi-human characteristics. She uses brute force to power through these elements, ripping them apart with her teeth and claws. Only the fiery river is able to deter her. Even then, one has to wonder whether the maidens would have met a different end if Baba Yaga had access to her

mortar and pestle to fly over the river. Nevertheless, all three magical objects manifested as natural phenomena. These all position Baba Yaga to have strong ties to the natural environment around her.

Stories: Synthesis

These stories reveal a number of constant themes central to Baba Yaga's lore. Perhaps the most important theme is Baba Yaga's connection with death. Not only is her house surrounded by a fence of human bones, but Baba Yaga's name itself alludes to her connection with death. Her epithet, bony leg or *kostianaia noga*, is perhaps the most obvious connection between Baba Yaga and death.¹⁰ Notably, bones are the last to decompose from a body, but can also be "a repository of life force, a link between two incarnations" (Forrester et al., xxvi). This characteristic further solidifies Baba Yaga's positionality as a character who occupies both the world of the living, and the world of the dead. Finally, Baba Yaga takes flirtation with death to a whole new level. The canon never confirms any romantic relationship concerning Baba Yaga, but it is rumored that she is romantically or sexually involved with *Kashchei Bessmertnyi*, or "Koschechei the Deathless" (Forrester et al., xxvi). Kaschei Bessmertnyi, as his name suggests, is a dubious character, an immortal underking whose powers and recognition rival that of Baba Yaga's. Whatever the nature of their relationship, though, Baba Yaga's sexual and romantic life is never confirmed beyond this ambiguous speculation. Baba Yaga's relationship with death and the underworld will become a core tenant of her potential to be an ecofeminist symbol.

In both stories, Baba Yaga threatens to eat the hero of the story. Although this is a sinister promise, it is notable that Baba Yaga does not outright kill her victims. This may be partially due to her connection with the life cycle and nature as a whole. Many scholars claim that Baba Yaga

¹⁰ Additionally, keep in mind the connections between Baba Yaga's *izba* and coffins.

is a descendant of the pagan goddess, Mokosh, who underwent a transformation during the arrival of Christianity in Russia during the 8th Century BCE. Peasant women presided “over the seasonal ceremonies linked to the bringing of nature’s fertility from field and forest into the community and the family itself” which celebrated this chief goddess (Hubbs 14). Mokosh, who is associated with harvest, death, and helping seeds germinate during the long winters, played a role in the pagan understanding of the life cycle. Mokosh may be associated with “*mat’syra zemlya*,” which translates to ‘mother moist earth.’ This invocation is present in “songs and traditional proverbs that concern planting or burial” which highlights Mokosh’s role in the two phases of life: the beginning through planting, and the end via burial (Forrester et al., xxxiii). In this way, Mokosh– or mother moist earth– becomes the maternal conduit in which spring seeds are planted. Notably, this earth is also a “mother’s body to which the dead return – a cold, clammy body, unlike the body of the human mother” (Forrester et al., xxxiii). Where Mokosh was key in assisting plants thrive and grow, Baba Yaga can be a donor to human subjects to help them achieve the goals of their journeys. The reinterpretation of Mokosh into Baba Yaga reveals a comparison between seeds and people. Once we see this comparison between seeds and humans, we can see how “as Moist Mother Earth ‘eats’ the bodies of the dead, so Baba Yaga eats human beings” (Forrester et al., xxxiii) Indeed, this may provide some insight into Baba Yaga’s cannibalistic tendencies. Ultimately, *mat’syra zemlya* and Mokosh are the location of the source of life, and also the repository for bodies at the end of their lives. Both characters are deeply connected with the life cycle and the natural world, although these connections manifest in different ways.

Similarly, where Mokosh assists with the successful germination of plants and their harvesting, Baba Yaga performs a similar function in relation to birth and fertility. Instead of

presiding over a great harvest, Baba Yaga is associated with childbirth and fertility through the bathhouse. The bath house is not present in either “Vasilisa the Beautiful” and “Prince Danila-Govorila,” but in other stories, Baba Yaga requests the hero prepare a bath for her, or even Baba Yaga herself offers to bathe the hero. Baba Yaga’s relation with the bathhouse seems strange until it is revealed that the bathhouse was traditionally a place where peasant women would give birth (Forrester et al., xli).¹¹ Historically, the bathhouse was particularly popular as a birthing place because it was “warm, relatively clean and private” (Forrester et al., xli). However, Baba Yaga’s spiritual presence in a birthing location has a dual meaning. Although the bathhouse was meant to be a place of renewal and a place where new life came to be, historically, this was also a time where many infants did not survive (Forrester et al., xli).

Baba Yaga’s hut is further associated with totemic rituals, and even provides some insight into the role of the doll in these two key stories. Although peculiar, Baba Yaga’s *izba* has roots in ancient burial rituals traditions. During this time, “wooden coffins would be covered with wooden huts and stand in rows “as if huts in a village” (Ivanova). Furthermore, the pagan slavs also had ceremonial huts that were decorated in a way that resembled the *izba* even more. Typically, these huts contained “dolls dressed in national fur clothing” (Ivanova). In both “Vasilisa the Beautiful” and “Prince Danila-Govorila,” the doll plays a crucial role in the story. Although the dolls are not present in all Baba Yaga stories, they do have a historical significance in relation to Baba Yaga. These dolls had a similar relationship to Baba Yaga’s with her hut because it is reported that “the doll occupied almost the whole barn,” not unlike how Baba Yaga’s body takes up the majority of space within her hut (Ivanova). These dolls are further

¹¹ When considering popular culture, see Miyazaki Hayao’s portrayal of Yubaba and her role in running the bathhouse.

connected with burial rituals when it is revealed that they served “as a container for the soul of the departed until it is reborn in a child” (Ivanova).

As we’ve established, Baba Yaga is able to command various elements (such as the three horsemen of time) to do her bidding. However, Baba Yaga is also able to command all forest creatures. Both Siblán Forrester and Andreas Johns refer to Baba Yaga as a ‘Great Mother.’ Perhaps this comes from the fact that Baba Yaga is known to be “the mother to monsters” (Ivanova 1860). Similarly, Propp “considers Baba Iaga a mother of animals, a mistress of beasts,” (Johns 24). In some stories, Baba Yaga births the beasts herself, whereas in others, the animals venerate her as a queen. Creatures fictional and non-fictional alike seem to at least acknowledge the power that Baba Yaga possesses within the realm of the forest. Baba Yaga’s power is not limited to controlling animals. Ivanova notes that “the character of Baba Yaga [is] the mistress of the woods, birds, and animals. Not only creatures, but also nature elements follow her will” (Ivanova 1858). These animals may play a role in the transportation of souls across the border from the land of the living to the land of the dead. One interpretation states that “Baba Yaga’s birds— geese, swans, eagles— are not just hunting birds. They are psychopomps who bear a dead person on a soul journey or a living person to the other world” (Forrester et al., xliii). For example, in the story “The Geese and Swans,” evil geese kidnap the hero’s little brother on Baba Yaga’s orders (Forrester et al. 128). After rescuing her brother, the geese and swans chase after the protagonist until they narrowly make it back to safety. Not only are these birds able to transport children into the realm of Baba Yaga, but undoubtedly they also symbolize the fatal end the brother would have endured if not rescued by his sister. The folktale notes that “these geese and swans had had a bad reputation for a long time; they did a lot of harm and would steal little

children” (Forrester et al. 128). Thus, the birds are not only modes of transportation, but also omens of a foreboding future.

In folkloric tales where Baba Yaga is encountered, the hero walks away with new wisdom, perspectives, and experiences. After encountering Baba Yaga and the forest which she commands, the heroine is undoubtedly changed. In the case of “Vasilisa the Beautiful,” the protagonist not only returns to the outside world to marry into a higher status, but she also returns with new wisdom about how Baba Yaga commands the three horsemen of time. In “Prince Danila-Govorila,” Katerina also returns back to the above-ground world to remarry. Furthermore, Katerina is spared from the fate of marrying her brother after her encounter with Baba Yaga.

Part IV: Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism: Why we need it and why it is relevant in Russia

Across the globe, women are more likely to be burdened by a changing climate than men. Figures from the United Nations “indicate that 80% of people displaced by climate change are women” and this is largely due to women’s “roles as primary caregivers and providers of food and fuel” (Halton). As the climate warms, more extreme weather and prolonged periods of drought and floods impact people’s homes and sources of food. In Russia specifically, as of February 2021, women ages 15 and up reported spending 18.4% of their time on “unpaid domestic chores and care work” whereas men reported only spending 8.13% of their time on similar tasks (*Country Fact Sheet | UN Women Data Hub*). This divide exemplifies the ways in which Russian women will be impacted by a changing climate. A framework such as ecofeminism will not only help mitigate the effects of climate change, but will do so with a focus on ending patriarchal domination of women.

Russia reports relatively low numbers of gender inequality, especially in the economy. Within the last ten years, the unemployment rate for women aged 15 and older is 4.3% whereas the unemployment rate for men of the same age is 4.7% (*Country Fact Sheet | UN Women Data Hub*). Although this seems like a relative achievement, when combined with the fact that women still do the majority of care-related work in Russia, this places a disproportionate burden of labor on the backs of women who now must balance careers with the majority of care-related work. Considering the fact that most of the labor performed in the domestic sphere is uncompensated.

Gender inequality is not simply characterized by division of labor, however. Another major subject of gender equality is freedom from violence. In Russia, preventing domestic violence is not a legislative priority, despite NGO's "reporting a doubling of domestic violence cases" during the lockdown of 2020 due to the Coronavirus pandemic ("Russia: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report"). A staggering 80% of incarcerated women in Russia are in jail for "[killing] their abusers in self-defense" ("Russia: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report"). Additionally, in 2017, lawmakers passed a law that "decriminalized acts of domestic violence that do not result in permanent physical harm," essentially enabling domestic violence ("Russia: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report"). Due to the curbed free press in Russia, there is limited coverage, statistics, and advocacy for more protections against domestic abuse.

On the backdrop of Christianity as a pivotal moment in Russian history and culture, it is essential to notice the shifts in rhetoric as the Church erased female-dominated religions. Christianity obscured and shamed female sexuality and fertility. Previously, women enjoyed relative sexual freedom, but under Christian rhetorics, "[man] must rule over her and master his bestial nature" in order to be saved from a lifetime of sin (Hubbs 92). Even in these ancient ideologies, the narrative of dominating nature, of subduing women at the same time is the path to

salvation. The Christian denigration of women was no benign task. Writings claimed that “no wild beast can equal a malicious and bitter-tongued woman” (Hubbs 93). This sentence implies that not only are beasts themselves immoral beings, but that women, and specifically those who express their opinions, are worse. The word ‘beast’ itself holds negative connotations connected with barbarism, savageness, and violence. To claim that women are worse than these beasts is to propagate a misogynistic narrative.

Russia is an interesting subject of ecofeminist study for a number of reasons. First, the gendered nature of the Russian language provides an interesting lens through which to analyze connections between feminization and the Earth. Due to the gendered language, the connections between femininity and nature are especially prevalent in Russian culture. For example, the word for Earth, *zemlya*, is feminine. As a result, the connotations of the Earth are also feminine. Similar words such as nature, *priroda*, and environment, *okruzhayushchaya sreda*, are also feminine.

Second, the effect of climate change on Russia will be imminent and intense. The territory of the Russian Federation is “warming 2.5 times faster than the rest of the world” (Conley and Newlin). The most direct threats to the population of Russia will manifest in a number of ways, the most significant of which are increased forest fires and displacement, intense flash floods, destruction of infrastructure and permafrost thaw, and decreased agricultural output in southern Russia due to intensified droughts (Conley and Newlin). Despite these imminent threats, Russia has conspicuously passed no progressive climate policy. Regardless of a lack of federal legislation, the Russian public seems relatively engaged in the conversation surrounding climate change. A study conducted in 2016 by the European Social Survey found that roughly 83.5% of Russians “believed that the climate is ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ changing”

(Semenov). Notably, only “16-17 percent of Russians believe that environmental protests in their region” would be effective (Semenov). Without safe avenues to demonstrate against and lobby for government action, the Russian government stays stagnant on climate action. The tension between an engaged citizenry and a lack of comprehensive legislation is another reason Russia is a particularly interesting subject for ecofeminist analysis.

Part III: Ecofeminism

Introduction & Benefits of Ecofeminism

A concise definition of ecofeminism is difficult to pin down due to the diverse branches of the field. Ecofeminism was first developed by Françoise d’Eaubonne, a French feminist who first used the term ‘ecofeminism’ in 1974 (Warren). Born in 1920, d’Eaubonne was a member of the French Communist Party, and spearheaded many initiatives such as the “front homosexuel d’action révolutionnaire” and the Ecology-Feminism Center in Paris in 1971 and 1972 respectively (d’Eaubonne 223). Although the definition of ecofeminism has evolved into various subsections since its inception in 1974, it is, at its core, an intersectional framework that aims to examine the connections between the unjust treatment of nature and women. A distilled definition of ecofeminism is as follows:

“Ecofeminism developed as a movement led by women and with the participation of men around the world taking actions to address gender-based issues and to conserve and preserve human and nonhuman habitats. These actions exposed the links between the oppression of women and the exploitation of natural environments” (Vakoch and Mickey).

What is most important here, is to understand and address the root of both the exploitation and mistreatment of women, and of nature respectively. The context of the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s deeply influenced the writings of Françoise d'Eaubonne. As a result, the intended audience and target of her writings was the patriarchy and male-dominated society at large. In the 1994 foreword of d'Eaubonne's translated work, Carolyn Merchant writes that "d'Eaubonne placed the problem of the death of the planet squarely on the shoulders of male society" (Merchant, as quoted in d'Eaubonne, foreword). Notably, d'Eaubonne made a point to acknowledge the sudden suppression of female-dominated societies approximately 5,000 years ago and claims that this is the catalyst for the type of ecological destruction we see now.

Ecofeminism themes are not entirely novel concepts in Russia. For example, one of Soviet Russia's earliest foresters, Georgii Fedrovich Morozov, espoused ecofeminist values pertaining to living in harmony with nature, emphasizing "humanity's ability to alter nature not for selfish gain, but to benefit humanity and nature alike by fostering an ideal state wherein nature and humanity work to improve one another" (Brain 35). This idea debuted the philosophy "that the Russian people possessed a closer cultural, historical, and spiritual connection to the forest than the prevailing management system recognized" (Brain 12). As a result, a reverence for the "vast openness...unmanicured nature of dense forests only lightly brushed by human habitation" took root in Russia's psyche (Ely 7). In fact, Morozov intentionally drew his research from "the peasantry's intimate knowledge of the forest" and was impressed by "their ability to orient in northern Russia's vast trackless woods" (Brain 33). The peasants, specifically in the north were "born in a wooden house, grown in a wooden cradle, [ate] his food by wooden spoons... so the relations with forests were deep and important" (Brain 31). This cultural tie

heavily influences the stories about Baba Yaga, as seen by her deep connections to the environment around her.



FIGURE 6. A picture advertising Forest Day in 1928

Example of reverence for Russian forests, as illustrated by this poster for Forest Day, still celebrated annually on March 21st in Russia (Brain 107). Forest Day is similar to Earth Day in the United States often accompanied by clean-up efforts. The poster reads “welcome [to] forest day!” (Lozinsky).

Ecofeminism: Criticisms

D’Eaubonne’s thesis is multifaceted and connects industrialization, ecological destruction, and reproductive rights. She asserts that “that destruction of the environment is the consequence of a phallogocentric system that originates in the masculine and pre-capitalist farming techniques,” which ultimately led to “the appropriation of women’s reproductive systems and organs, resulting in overpopulation and the destruction of natural resources” (d’Eaubonne, forward). One key aspect of d’Eaubonne’s perspective on ecological destruction is her reliance on an argument of overpopulation. Although d’Eaubonne recognizes that overpopulation is not just a problem of developing nations, this argument is still largely problematic. The

overpopulation argument fails to recognize the violent history of colonialism, racism, and reproductive (in)justice across the world, and further neglects to mention that the majority of ecological destruction and carbon emissions are produced by a very small, very wealthy subset of the population. Furthermore, it is very easy to see how the overpopulation argument inherently applauds women who choose not to have children – thereby denying women agency in their own reproductive health. The argument against overpopulation is a dangerous track that often leads into fascism and eugenics. For this reason, more modern ecofeminist texts are more relevant to the focus of this thesis, since they focus on reproductive justice in a more equitable way.

Another major criticism of the ecofeminist movement pertains to the question of essentialism. Essentialism states that for any given category, there is an essence, or “a universal validity” that exists inherently outside of “being a social, ideological, or intellectual construct” (“Oxford English Dictionary”). An example of a gendered essentialist framework may state that women are inherently nurturing and motherly while men are inherently aggressive and less emotional. Essentialism has been weaponized as a way to relegate women to a limited sphere of life, claiming that their biology dictates them to be homemakers, mothers, and caretakers. As the conversation about the gender binary evolves, essentialism has fallen out of favor for many people who cite that it ignores the power of gender socialization. In the context of ecofeminism, essentialism presents a unique challenge. In arguing that men, and their associated inherent traits, are responsible for the destruction of the planet, are we arguing that women are inherently more qualified to care for the Earth? Does this not reinforce women’s rigid gender roles that the feminist movement aims to dismantle in the first place? For example, Carolyn Merchant questions how “the essentialist perception of women as closer to nature, as a result of the biological functions of reproduction, has historically been used in the service of domination to

limit their social roles” (Merchant, as quoted in d’Eaubonne, forward). Moreover, is it true that women truly possess a closer and more intimate understanding of the natural world that is exclusive to their biologically-determined sex? Additionally, where do non-binary and transgender members of the world fit into this narrative? This interpretation of ecofeminism seems regressive, and is still the topic of debate amongst feminist scholars today.

This essentialist framework is a shallow reading of d’Eaubonne’s ambitions. In an ideal ecofeminist society, some assume that all political and social power would be consolidated in women’s hands. This is a partial reading of ecofeminist writings, and d’Eaubonne aims for a more progressive view of gender and power. D’Eaubonne notes that “a society in the feminine would not mean power in the hands of women but no power at all. The human being would be treated as a human being, not as a male or female” (d’Eaubonne, foreword). By implementing this framework, d’Eaubonne implies that this essentialist narrative that positions women as closer to nature is also a product of patriarchy. Dismantling this structure would allow people of all gender identities and expressions to facilitate a closer relationship to nature. Ultimately, this would disarm both the dominating tendencies of patriarchy, and also would end the exploitation of the natural world.

Other scholars may criticize the anthropocentric nature of ecofeminist philosophies. Anthropocentrism is an ideology that not only interprets the world with a “primary or exclusive focus on humanity,” but also espouses that humanity “is the central or most important element of existence,” especially in relation to the natural world (“Oxford English Dictionary”). This viewpoint stems from a deep history of man attempting to dominate nature. In 1978, ecofeminist scholars Mary Daly and Susan Griffin suggest that this is a manifestation of man grappling with mortality. Whereas “women secure their own immortality through childbearing,” men, on the

other hand, “use both women and nature to defy death and attain immortality” through domination and control (d’Eaubonne). Much of anthropocentric thought finds its roots in language similar to that of domination. These views can be distilled into three main points that claim that:

“[first], nonhuman nature has no value in itself, [second], humans (and/or God, if theistic) create what value their is, and [third], humans have the right (some would say the obligation) to do what they please with the nonhuman world as long as they do not harm other humans’ interests” (Sessions 91).

Here, diction such as ‘value,’ ‘obligation,’ and ‘right’ all denote a type of human arrogance that creates a hierarchy of beings with humans placed at the top. Notably, the third point in the quote above only delineates a boundary in regard to other humans, not other ecosystems or animals. Anthropocentric rhetoric not only removes humanity from nature, but also sees it as an endless resource to be used for the convenience of humankind.

The antithesis of anthropocentrism is a branch of environmentalism dubbed “deep ecology” by Norwegian thinker Arne Næss in 1973. Deep ecology aims to decenter the human experience in understanding nature, and works to re-evaluate nature outside of the sphere of what is useful to humans. Deep ecology has eight main tenants, but the first four summarize the philosophy quite well:

"(1) The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human Life on Earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes. (2) Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves. (3) Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital

needs. (4) The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease” (Sessions 91).¹²

Deep ecology embraces an egalitarian viewpoint of the natural world. Instead of a hierarchical structure determined by value of human utility, deep ecology espouses a philosophy which preaches that all natural beings and objects have value, regardless of their utility to humankind. Deep ecology is a countermeasure to anthropocentrism and a way to increase the value of the overlooked aspects of nature that humanity ignores due to this lack of ‘usefulness.’ Visually, anthropocentrism can be viewed as a pyramid structure with humans at the top, whereas deep ecology may be depicted as a flat web where all beings possess some intrinsic value.

Furthermore, deep ecology advocates for *restraint* when addressing nature and to only take what will “satisfy vital needs” (Sessions 91). This is a critical difference between the type of capitalistic exploitation we see in our day-to-day lives which values maximization of profits over conservation of public goods. Deep ecology remedies to anthropocentrism often point to uniting humanity with a higher, all-encompassing being or purpose that is congruent with philosophies such as Buddhism which reject the notion of the self (Sessions 92). This higher self aims to remedy the divide and estrangement between humans and nature.

Deep ecology is also criticized by ecofeminist scholars. Karen Warren, a prominent ecofeminist, writes that in order to address the root of our ecological crisis, we must take an intersectional approach that includes a feminist framework or else “the ecological movement will fail to take to make the conceptual connections between the oppression of women and the

¹² Notably, this philosophy echoes similar concerns about overpopulation as d’Eaubonne. However, this argument acknowledges that “human flourishing” generally can and should “occur without the destructive domination of nonhuman nature” (Sessions 92). A key difference to note is that this argument sees ways for the current population to coexist with the nonhuman world - methods like vegetarianism and veganism are often advocated for in the deep ecology sphere (Sessions 92).

oppression of nature” (Sessions 94). The strategy of appealing to a higher self will not appease ecofeminists without first addressing the systems of oppression that dominate all aspects of natural and female life. In other words, we cannot embrace a deep ecological ethos without also addressing the injustices of modern society. Where deep ecology views each individual organism, object, and natural phenomenon as individually valuable, ecofeminism views all beings in a web in which “everything is interconnected with everything else” (Sessions 94). Despite these differences, deep ecology and ecofeminism can be combined into a multipronged approach which not only decenters humanity’s exploitative tendencies, but specifically decenters *patriarchy’s* exploitative tendencies.

Ecofeminism Goals: Remediating Dualism

One of the key issues that ecofeminism addresses is the problem of dualism. In the context of ecofeminism, dualism is the separation between nature and humanity. This manifests in a number of different ways: as man’s domination of nature, as the devaluation of nature’s provisions, as exploitation of nature, and as a reverence for rigid binaries. Notably, dualism became much more prevalent during the Enlightenment and built upon the divide between man and nature already established by the spread of Christianity.¹³ As these movements emphasized rational thought and science, they “[laid] the foundation for the later development of the human/nature dualism” (Plumwood 105). In these systems, “children, animals, plants, and the earth itself with stars” are devalued (Vakoch and Mickey 79–80). This strict hierarchy places man at the top of the ecological food chain, presiding over his kingdom with no consequences for the blatant exploitation of natural resources.

¹³ It is important to note that philosophers such as Descartes and other dualist philosophers emerged much later than the pagan societies on which this paper focuses.

Baba Yaga actively combats the human/nature dualism paradigm which enables ecological abuse. First, however, we must understand man's domination of nature as a way to separate himself from it, thus creating the space to establish a binary between the human and natural world. Despite a growing awareness of the importance of preserving natural habitats, Val Plumwood, an Australian philosopher and ecofeminist argues that "the natural world and the biosphere have been treated as a dump" characterized as an "unimportant background to 'civilized' human life...setting or stage on which what is really important, the drama of human life and culture, is played out" (Plumwood 69). The significance of the stage 'on which' culture plays out not only suggests that nature is merely a tool for culture to develop upon, but does nothing to acknowledge the role that the stage plays in the *formation* of culture; in other words, the stage is merely taken for granted as a transient resource which humanity has evolved past needing. Some argue that this dualism is merely another expression of selfish anthropocentrism which stems from capitalism. Although it is true that capitalism views natural resources as an endless source of profit, its antithesis, socialism also espouses a nature/human binary. As a result, the human/nature binary is not contingent on a specific economic or political structure. Marx, in his writings, states how "neither nature objectively nor nature subjectively is given a form adequate to the human being" (Marx, as quoted in Salleh 71). Not only does this quote center human needs in the discussion about nature's existence, but it also emboldens humanity to transform the natural world according to their vision. As a result, man alters nature to make it suitable for himself.

What is conspicuously missing from all these analyses is the consequences of these actions upon nature. If nature was viewed as a sentient being, or even as a collection of sentient beings, Marx might have more reservations about adapting nature to man's tastes. In the

hierarchy of human/nature dualism, nature is seen as a “non-agentic, as passive, non-creative and inert, with action being imposed from without by an external force” (Plumwood 110). Because nature, in its conventional sense, cannot fight back, “it can be seen as something utterly neutral on which humans can and even must impose their own goals, purposes and significance” (Plumwood 110). The human/nature binary positions humanity above nature in value, agency, and worth. Consequently, nature is completely at the mercy of humanity’s desires. Significantly, humans are not considered a part of nature in these evaluations. Instead, nature is a resource which can be molded to man’s will.

The ecofeminist remedy to the human/nature dualism is relatively obvious: adopt a more inclusive viewpoint which does not alienate man from nature. This approach involves not only deconstructing an anthropocentric framework, which places the aspirations of humans at the center of the universe, but also re-establishing man’s reliance on nature and expanding the narrative surrounding nature's essence. Ecofeminist scholars point to many pagan practices as examples of this praxis. Pagan religions break down the human/nature divide by centering their rituals around nature. Religion as a remedy to dualism is an “attempt to reintegrate in the body of the world what this dualism has split apart, sometimes through the notion of God as immanence, of indwelling, pervasive spirit” (Plumwood 127). As we have already established, Mokosh, who is deeply connected with nature, was the cornerstone of pagan culture, thus negating the assumption that culture is built upon nature without its contribution. Without Mokosh, there would be no rituals of harvest, burial, and planting upon which pagan culture was based.

Another way to mitigate human/nature dualism is ambiguity, and expanding the narrative of nature’s essence. The characteristics and actions of Baba Yaga resist the dominant

human/nature divide. First, we can begin to deconstruct the notion of nature as a non-agentic entity though building a reciprocal relationship. Transforming the narrative around nature and its corresponding creatures and ecosystems is the first step in assuming a more ecofeminist and sustainable mindset. As we've already established, the dominant narrative claims that humanity acts upon nature, but nature does not reciprocate. For example, consider deforestation. When humans log forests, we walk away with provisional resources such as wood, land, and property. The landscape is undoubtedly altered by this interaction, yet man walks away unscathed and unchanged. In a reciprocal model, "we can encounter the earth other as a potential intentional subject, as one who can alter us as well as we it, and thus, can begin to conceive a potential for mutual and sustaining interchange with nature" (Plumwood 137). In the example concerning logging, this might be difficult to conceive of in practice. Baba Yaga provides a tangible narrative regarding a reciprocal relationship with nature.

Part IV: Baba Yaga- An Ecofeminist Icon

How does Baba Yaga Embodiment Ecofeminism?

Where a non-ecofeminist narrative paints nature as a passive stage for humanity to act upon, inserting Baba Yaga as the master of the forest into folkloric canon gives this landscape undoubtable agency, even if only symbolically. Baba Yaga has her own motives, goals, and ambitions which are mostly unknown to us—yet nevertheless influence her actions and the stories she dominates. As the mother of beasts, Baba Yaga is a tangible character who can help explain the actions of nature. Not only does Baba Yaga give natural landscapes agency, but she also characterizes the forest in a number of ways. For example, in "Prince Danila-Govorila," nature seems to aid the women in their plight from Baba Yaga. In this way, "Prince Danila-Govorila"

negates the narrative that nature is neutral, passive, and non-agentic. Instead, nature's role varies through various stories, just like Baba Yaga's character.

On the other hand, in "Vasilisa the Beautiful," we see how Baba Yaga extends her agency onto the three horsemen, and by extension, time itself. By calling them her 'trusted servants,' the three horsemen are aligned with Baba Yaga and appear loyal to her. Despite operating under Baba Yaga's command, the three horsemen do exhibit some agency. Through the personification of day, the sun, and night, the horsemen are seen as autonomous creatures. Consider, for example, how we would think differently about agency if Baba Yaga simply waved her hand to trigger daybreak or sundown. In other words, by giving these phenomena distinct characters under Baba Yaga's rule, we are forced to consider how nature exists outside of our perspectives as humans. Ambiguity is posited as an ecofeminist remedy to dualism in that it does not allow for a single narrative about nature and its essence (Vakoch and Mickey 81). Instead, nature can be given a fuller characterization which ultimately leads to a more accurate, and more reverent representation of its character.

Another reason Baba Yaga is such a powerful ecofeminist icon is because of how she addresses one of the core issues in this field: dualism. She is able to do this successfully thanks to her various ambiguities. The first crucial facet of her ambiguity is her moral character. Although most folkloric characters have a very binary moral character— either good or bad— Baba Yaga refuses to conform to this tradition. This is most obviously exemplified in the contrasting roles Baba Yaga embodies in "Vasilisa the Beautiful" and "Prince Danila-Govorila." By refusing to be defined by a single moral alignment, Baba Yaga takes on an unpredictable and volatile personality. The hero never knows what they will encounter when they enter Baba Yaga's realm. This not only allows Baba Yaga to have a fuller personality— something often denied to women

in male-dominated environments and stories– but it also allows her to occupy complex functions such as a ‘hostile donor,’ which is difficult to characterize morally and also complicates her motivations. Baba Yaga occupies a moral gray area where she is rarely completely good or completely evil, thereby inherently rejecting the moral binaries placed upon women at large and more traditional folkloric characters. In her writings about the interplay of humans and nature, Val Plumwood writes, “the earth other,” or any natural creature, “is a being whose company may be fearful or enticing, fruitful or bitter, intimate or indifferent, but whose presence is always more than the nullity and closure of the world presented by mechanism¹⁴” (Plumwood 139). If we replace the phrase ‘earth other’ with Baba Yaga, we find a perfect description of her behavior and ambiguity, and a non-dualistic example of ecofeminist thinking.

Baba Yaga also addresses the problem of dualism through her zoomorphic abilities. Human/nature dualism dismisses the inherently animalistic part of any human. Humans, after all, are also animals who need water, food, and shelter just like any other creature. Despite all our progress as a species, and despite all our reverence for logic, civility, and reason, we will never evolve past those needs. These basic human features connect us to all living things in the universe, in spite of what the human/nature dichotomy preaches. Baba Yaga’s ability and *willingness* to transform herself into various creatures is her strongest repudiation of this polarity yet. There is no evidence that Baba Yaga looks down upon this power of hers. Instead, it reaffirms her various capabilities and makes her even more powerful. The expression of this power can be seen in the beginning of “Prince Danila-Govorila,” when Baba Yaga, disguised as a fox, gifts the ring to the royal family. Baba Yaga’s ability to transform into animals at will can also be interpreted as a form of ambiguity as she blurs the lines between human and animal.

¹⁴ Mechanism is a reductive way of analyzing a subject which results in the non-agentic and empty view of nature dominant in today’s society.

Baba Yaga Dualism: Synthesis

Ultimately, Baba Yaga gives agency to a previously passive landscape, contributes a pluralistic view of nature and its essence, and rejects the mindset that humans are superior to nature. That Baba Yaga chooses to live in a forest landscape further emphasizes a key aspect of her ecofeminism: her alliance with the natural world. Her choice of home is significant when considered through a gendered lens. Stereotypically, “where for men there is an almost libidinal fantasy, an erotic discovery and possession of the new riches, women are after a sense of home, a search for harmony with that new environment” (Vakoch and Mickey 71). Baba Yaga quite literally makes a home for herself within the environment of the forest. Despite all her power, Baba Yaga does not command the forests and their beasts through coercion. Instead, they revere her as a mother, and she provides for them by protecting the forest. Baba Yaga does not establish dominance over her subjects, and there is no hierarchy within her relations with them, as evidenced through her willingness to transform into her loyal creatures.

Baba Yaga also fulfills an ecofeminist role in regard to her relationship with gender. Through a gendered lens, Baba Yaga is clearly a practitioner of ecofeminist philosophies. Generally, ecofeminist scholars remark a distinction between interactions with nature across genders. Although some of these analyses are somewhat rigid in their assumptions of each gender, understanding how each gender relates to its natural environment is still an essential part of ecofeminism. Where “men’s ambition is to tame and subdue the wilderness by turning it into cultured space, women strive to preserve some of the wilderness’s own character, some ‘original beauty of the place’” (Vakoch and Mickey 71). Ecofeminism revolts against the idea of ‘subduing nature’ and, consequently, Baba Yaga is not one to be subdued. Instead, she is unapologetically herself and does not conform to the expectations of traditional women, nor of

nature. She rejects the role of the obedient wife by not marrying, since marriage was a way for men to control women after the arrival of Christianity in Russia (Hubbs 96). Baba Yaga cannot even be confined to the land of the living. She is able to move through the world of the living and the dead, and even the world of Rus' with relative ease.

The "original beauty of the place" can be reimagined as authenticity. Baba Yaga does not pretend to be someone she is not. Baba Yaga rejects not only the dominant narratives about nature as passive and non-retaliational, but she also rejects some aspects of femininity placed upon her. Yes, she adheres to some traditional values such as weaving at the loom, but in the majority of her portrayals, she reinterprets traditionally feminine objects in a new way. Her stove, or *pech'*, becomes a resting place where it is traditionally a location of female labor. Another example of Baba Yaga's resistance to traditional gender roles is through her mode of transportation. As Forrester notes, "for many centuries, the mortar and pestle were crucial parts of a woman's tool set, used to prepare herbs for cooking or medicine, or break grain for porridge or baking" (Forrester et al., xxix). However, Baba Yaga's mortar and pestle are not used for crushing herbs, but for traveling. Furthermore, her body itself is also a rejection of expectations. Instead of conforming to standard beauty expectations, her body is presented as a grotesque carcass. Furthermore, where women are generally expected to be polite and accommodating, Baba Yaga is commanding and threatening. In "Vasilisa the Beautiful," she wastes no time on pleasantries, and immediately threatens to eat Vasilisa. As a result, the image of 'original beauty,' may not be one of beauty in the traditional sense at all, but instead, a rejection of female oppression and gender roles.

More modern interpretations of Baba Yaga paint this rejection of gender roles in a whole new light. For example, in the 1939 film adaptation of "Vasilisa the Beautiful," the character of

Baba Yaga was played by male actor Georgy Frantsevich Millyar. Almost forty years later, Millyar returned to the iconic role. In 1972, Millyar played Baba Yaga in the adaptation of “Golden Horns.” Over the course of his career, Millyar played Baba Yaga over five times. Millyar’s performances were received extremely well across Russia, and “became a Soviet film and television legend because of his portrayals of Baba Yaga” (Armknacht et al. 71). These portrayals are in alignment with the ecofeminist vision of a future that does not rely on a rigid gender binary, but are also radical in their resistance to traditional female gender roles in Russia.

Baba Yaga further pushes the boundaries in resisting female domination in her sexual and reproductive health. As mentioned above, Baba Yaga is rumored to reproduce parthenogenetically (asexually) and does not rely on men to produce her offspring. Even her one main romantic partner, *Kashchei Bessmertnyi*, is never recorded as coercing Baba Yaga, nor controlling her relationships in any meaningful way. One of Francois d’Eaubonne’s biggest criticisms of dominant society is women’s lack of reproductive agency. She laments that “husbands who control women’s bodies and implant them with their seed, doctors who examine them, and male priests who call for large families are bearers of male power over women’s wombs” (d’Eaubonne). This is particularly poignant in the context of the rise of Christianity in which Baba Yaga was brought into being. In a pre-Christian society, women’s reproductive health was less influenced by men, and certainly not influenced by “male theologians and legislators” (Gates 9). In a world where the majority of childrearing and care is placed on the shoulders of women, the ability to control one’s reproductive health is a crucial tenet of feminist philosophies.

Baba Yaga’s ecofeminist tendencies and characteristics allow to function as both a feminist icon and also as an ecofeminist figure. Through reinterpreting traditionally feminine

objects to further her own agency, she is able to resist damaging expectations of obedient and subservient women. Her connections with nature and as a mother earth figure allow her to give nature an agentic form which disrupts the idea that nature is a passive entity. By reclaiming control over her own reproductive health, Baba Yaga harkens back to an era of female-dominated culture of fertility.

Part V: The Russian Landscape

Russia's Forests: Environmental Significance of Baba Yaga's Homeland

Baba Yaga is deeply tied to the natural environment. After all, she's not called the witch of the woods for nothing. Baba Yaga's home deserves its own examination, both within and outside the folkloric canon. Outside of folklore, Russia's forests are formidable. Today, Russia's forests contain "more than a fifth of the world's trees" ("Will Russia's Forests Be an Asset or an Obstacle in Climate Fight?"). Russia's boreal forests are populated mostly by five major species: "pine, cedar, spruce, Siberian spruce, Siberian fir, birch, and especially larch" (Pisarenko and Strakhov 1). These species are resilient both to freezing winters and to a variety of environments such as "transition zones to the tundra and on high altitudes" (Pisarenko and Strakhov 1). These massive forests are intrinsically tied to Russia's history, and to date, remain a major environmental and cultural resource for the country.

One of the biggest issues in the discussion about climate change is the concentration of carbon dioxide in the air. Interestingly, the environment in which Baba Yaga is found in the mortal realm is one of the biggest carbon sinks in the world. In the year 2000, the Woods Hole Research Center suggested that "Russia holds almost 50 per cent of the Northern Hemisphere's terrestrial carbon" (*Russia's Boreal Forests*). Over half of Russia is covered by forested land

which contains about 640 billion trees (“Will Russia’s Forests Be an Asset or an Obstacle in Climate Fight?”). These numbers are staggering, and cannot be ignored – especially when considering that Russia is the world’s fourth largest carbon emitter.

Within folklore, the forest is associated with fertility –specifically through the birch tree. Birch, one of the most common tree species in the Russian boreal forests, is associated with the *rusalka*, or mermaid. These *rusalki* acted as “fates,” and “decided who died and who would be reborn” as well as “who married and who would be barren” (Hubbs 33). The birch tree’s significance and symbolism, as Joanna Hubbs asserts, is similar to that of the Norse tree of life. Baba Yaga also connects herself to the birch tree and the *rusalki* through her broom, presumably made of birch twigs (Hubbs 39). This connection further emphasizes the gendered nature of Baba Yaga and the environmental narrative of folklore and pagan traditions.

Practical Application of Ecofeminism in Russia’s Forests

An ecofeminist analysis can also be applied to the Russian forests. Much like Baba Yaga, we are still struggling to understand the cultural role and environmental significance of the Russian boreal forests. One study, done by the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre, claims that Russia’s carbon sink likely resembles 180 million tons of CO₂ (“Will Russia’s Forests Be an Asset or an Obstacle in Climate Fight?”). Another study from the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis estimated an annual carbon sink of 1.7 billion tons resulting from Russia’s forests (Schepaschenko et al.). This discrepancy is significant, and furthers the parallel between Baba Yaga and the environment. Where at times we are unsure of Baba Yaga’s true role in the folktale, we are also unsure of the size and impact of the boreal carbon sink. Losing this resource would be catastrophic for the environment, especially when considering that the WWF states that “if all the methane currently stored in the permafrost of the western Siberian peat bog

were released, its warming effect would equal to 73 years of current man-made CO2 emissions” (*Russia’s Boreal Forests*).

Ecofeminism may hold some answers to mitigating the risks to the boreal forest. Namely, including more women in legislative decision making may prove to be a worthy strategy in increasing conservation efforts. A study by Gisela Szagun and Vladimir Pavlov in 1995 assessed the levels of environmental awareness between boys and girls. The study included over 500 participants and found that “Russian girls had higher levels of environmental awareness than boys” (Norgaard and York 509). This meant that women were both more cognizant of potential risks and also less “tolerant of imposing risks onto others than their male counterparts, even when age, training level, and attitudes towards technology are controlled” (Norgaard and York 509). As a result, this study concluded that promoting gender equality “may lead to more environmentally progressive policies as women put their views and values into action” (Norgaard and York 509). Russia stands to significantly improve their gender representation in their national legislative bodies. According to the United Nations, only 15.8% of “seats are held by women in national parliaments” (*Country Fact Sheet | UN Women Data Hub*). In 1990, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women “estimated that for women to influence key outcomes and be taken seriously, a threshold of 30 percent women in Parliament was required” (Norgaard and York 514). This would be nearly double what the current female representation in Russia’s national government is now.

Conclusion

Baba Yaga is more than just a boogeyman used to scare children. Her history and powers are the manifestation of a long-forgotten and oppressed pagan tradition. Despite her age, lessons from Baba Yaga are still relevant to today. Baba Yaga's ability to occupy multiple roles within the folktale is part of what allows us to analyze her character as it pertains to various systems of domination. Through an ecofeminist lens, it is possible to understand Baba Yaga not as a facet of the natural world, not as a human, but as a third, holistic character—one that is a part of nature, and also is able to influence it. Baba Yaga's connections to the environment allow her to function as a makeshift personification of the natural world. However, even Baba Yaga is not able to fully dominate nature, as we see her defeated by her own magical items at the end of "Prince Danila-Govorila" when she's swallowed by a fiery sea. By providing a symbolic 'agent,' who is responsible for the inner workings of the forest, the landscape is seen as retaliating against, and responding to the actions of humans. This narrative acts as a foil to the philosophy stating that nature is passive, to be acted upon merely as an expendable resource for human profit.

The second half of Baba Yaga's significance pertains to gender. Baba Yaga resists gender norms in a variety of ways. By rejecting standard norms of beauty, Baba Yaga challenges what it means to be a 'woman.' Her relative androgyny blurs the lines between human and animal, and her zoomorphic abilities further complicate this divide. Additionally, Baba Yaga's reinterpretation of traditionally oppressive symbols of the female condition, such as using the stove as a bed, further constitute a resistance to the patriarchy.

Today, in 2023, it's safe to say Russia is once again at a critical juncture. As Russia reconciles with its role in the international sphere, the environmental crisis, and with its citizens, Russia's landscape will come to the forefront more than ever. In the environmental sphere,

threats to Russia's landscape, specifically its forests, will continue to increase in the 21st century. In the period from 2014-2017, the European Forests Institute concluded that 63% of disturbances to Russia's forests were caused by fires, followed by "insects (15%), weather conditions (11%), disease (10%) and other factors such as industrial pollution (~1%)" (European Forest Institute). These threats will only increase as the climate becomes more volatile.

Russia's relationship to its citizens, especially its women, is in question. Because of sanctions imposed on Russian citizens, increasing illiberal conditions, and decreasing economic mobility, Russia's pregnant women are leaving the country at an unprecedented rate (The Associated Press). Some of these women cite fears that their children's fathers will be drafted to the war, and they will be left as single parents. Given the unequal distribution of domestic labor already present in Russia, raising a child alone in this country seems like a daunting task. NPR reports that "according to official figures, some 22,200 Russians entered Argentina over the last year, including 10,777 women — many of whom were in the advanced stages of pregnancy" (The Associated Press).

Since Putin regained office in 2012, Russia has become increasingly illiberal. The Freedom House, an international nonpartisan organization which assesses the level to which countries are democratic, demonstrates a decline in Russia's freedom democratic standing in recent years. Rankings from 2022 reveal that Russia scored a rank of 19 out of 100, clearly designating the country: "not free" ("Russia: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report"). With restricted rights to assembly, limited abilities to express dissatisfaction with their government, and "relentlessly persecuted NGOs," there are minimal avenues for Russian citizens to advocate for more progressive policies in relation to the climate ("Russia: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report").

The path forward lies in liberating both the environment and women. Empowering womens agency, either in their personal lives, or through increased representation in the Russian legislature will prove to be increasingly important as climate change threatens the wellbeing and livelihood of women.

Appendix 1: “Vasilisa the Beautiful,” translated by A.N. Afanas’ev

Haney, Jack V., editor. “Vasilisa the Beautiful.” *The Complete Folktales of A. N. Afanas’ev: Volume I*, University Press of Mississippi, 2014, pp. 173–79. *JSTOR*.

“In a certain tsardom, there lived and dwelt a merchant. He’d been married for twelve years and only had the one daughter, Vasilisa the Beautiful. When her mother died, the little girl was eight years old. As she was dying, the merchant’s wife called her daughter to her, took a doll from under the blanket, gave it to her, and said: “Listen, Vasilisushka! Remember me, and fulfill my last words. I am dying and am leaving you my mother’s blessing and this doll. Always keep it with you, and show it to no one. And when some misfortune befalls you, give the doll something to eat and ask its advice. The doll will eat and tell you how to help you in your woe.” Then the mother kissed her daughter and died.

After the death of his wife, the merchant grieved, as was appropriate, and then he thought about getting married again. He was a good man; he didn’t think of taking a young girl. More to his liking was this one widow. She was already mature, had two daughters of her own who were about the age of Vasilisa. Consequently, she would be an experienced mistress and mother. The merchant married the widow but was deceived, and he did not find in her a good mother for his Vasilisa. Vasilisa was the most beautiful girl in the village. Her stepmother and her sisters envied her beauty and tormented her with all possible labors, so that she would look the worse for her efforts and grow dark from the wind and sun. They gave her no life!

Vasilisa endured it all without complaint, and with every day grew more beautiful. And at the same time, the stepmother and her daughters got worse and more spiteful, despite the fact that they always just sat there with arms folded, like a fine lady. How did all this happen? Vasilisa’s little doll helped her! Without that, how could the girl manage with all that work! But Vasilisa herself didn’t eat most of the time, but saved the choicest morsel for the doll. And in the evening, when the others had all lain down, she would lock herself in a closet, where she lived, and entertain the doll, chanting: “Well, my doll, eat, hear my woe! I live in a house with my father, but I see no happiness. My evil stepmother is chasing me off the face of the earth. Tell me what to do and how to live.” The doll ate and then gave her advice and comforted her woes, and by morning had done all of Vasilisa’s work. Vasilisa just rested in the shade and picked flowers, while the doll weeded the beds and watered the cabbage, and fetched the water, and fired up the stove. Then the doll would show Vasilisa which herb to use against sunburn. She and the doll lived well.

Several years passed. Vasilisa grew up and reached a marriageable age. All the young men in the village courted Vasilisa, but no one even glanced at the stepmother’s daughters. This made the stepmother more spiteful than ever, and she said to all the suitors, “I won’t marry off the younger ones before the oldest.” So she saw the suitors off and brought more evil to Vasilisa with her blows. Then once the merchant had to go away from home for a long time on his trading business. The stepmother moved to another house, and next to this house was a dense forest, and in the forest in a glade there stood a little hut, and in that hut lived Baba Yaga. She let no one come near her and ate people like chicks. When she had moved into the new house, the merchant’s wife would constantly send the hateful Vasilisa into that forest for some reason or other. But Vasilisa always returned home safely: the doll showed her the way and didn’t let her go to Baba Yaga’s hut.

Autumn came. The stepmother gave each of the three girls evening work. One of them was to tat lace, the second to knit stockings, and Vasilisa was to spin. All of these tasks had to be completed. She

would put out the fire in the house and leave just one candle where the girls were working, and then she'd go to sleep. The girls worked. When the candle began smoking, one of the stepmother's daughters took some tweezers to right the wick. But instead, she followed her mother's orders, and, as if accidentally, put out the light. "What are we to do now?" the girls said. "There's no light in the whole house and we haven't finished our tasks. We'll have to go get some fire from Baba Yaga!" "I've enough light from the pins," said the one who was tatting. "I won't go." "I won't go either," said the one who was knitting stockings. "I've enough light from my knitting needles." "You'll have to go for the fire," they both shouted. "Off you go to Baba Yaga!" And they pushed Vasilisa out of the parlor.

Vasilisa went to her closet, put a dinner she had prepared in front of the doll, and said, "Well, doll, eat and hear of my woe. They're sending me to Baba Yaga for fire, and Baba Yaga will eat me!" The doll ate, and her eyes flashed like two lights. "Don't be afraid, Vasilisushka!" the doll said. "Go wherever they send you, only always keep me with you. Having me with you, nothing will happen to you at Baba Yaga's." Vasilisa got ready, put the doll in her pocket, crossed herself, and set off into the deep forest. She walked along, trembling. Suddenly, a rider galloped by her: all white, all dressed in white, on a white horse, and the bridle on the horse was white. Everything became light.

She went on farther and another rider galloped by: all red, dressed in red, and on a red horse. The sun started to rise.

Vasilisa spent the whole night and all day walking, and only toward the next evening did she come out into the glade where Baba Yaga's hut stood. A high picket fence around the hut was made of human bones, and on the pickets people's skulls, with their eyes, had been stuck. In place of gate posts at the gates were human legs, instead of locks there were hands, instead of a keyhole there was a mouth with sharp teeth. Vasilisa froze in horror and stood there as if rooted to the ground. Suddenly, another rider: all black, all dressed in black, on a black horse. He galloped up to Baba Yaga's gates and disappeared as if into the earth, and it was night. But the darkness didn't last long. The eyes in the skulls lit up, and the whole glade was bathed in light as if at midday. Vasilisa shivered from fear, but not knowing where to run, she stayed right there.

Suddenly a terrible racket was heard from the forest. The trees shook, dry leaves rustled. Out of the forest rode Baba Yaga, riding in her mortar, guiding it with her pestle, sweeping her traces away with a broom. She rode up to the gates, stopped, and sniffing about her, shouted: "Foo, Foo! It smells of a Russian soul! Who's here?" Vasilisa went up to the old woman in fear, and bowing low said, "It's I Granny! My stepmother's daughters sent me to you for some fire." "Good," said Baba Yaga. "I know them. You stay here and work for me, and I'll give you some fire then. But if you won't, then I'll eat you!" Then she turned to the gates and shouted, "Hey, my strong locks, unlock yourselves. My wide gates, open up!" The gates opened, and Baba Yaga rode in, whistling. And Vasilisa came in after her, and then everything was locked up again. When she had entered the parlor, Baba Yaga stretched out and said to Vasilisa, "Put on the table whatever's in the stove. I want to eat."

Vasilisa lit a rush with the fire from one of the skulls that were on the pickets and began dragging stuff from the stove and setting out food for the yaga. And there was enough food prepared for about ten people. From the cellar she brought kvass, mead, beer, and wine. The old woman ate it all up, drank it all up. She left Vasilisa only a little cabbage soup, a crust of bread, and a piece of pork. Then the yaga started getting ready for bed, and she said, "When I leave in the morning, see that you clean the yard, sweep the hut, cook the dinner, get the linens ready, and go to grain bins and take a quarter of wheat and clean the weeds out of it. And make sure this is all done, or else—I'll eat you!" After such an order, Baba Yaga started snoring, and Vasilisa put the old woman's leftovers in front of the doll, broke into tears, and said:

“Well, dolly, eat and hear my woe! Baba Yaga’s given me a heavy task and threatens to eat me, if I don’t manage it all. Help me!” The doll answered, “Don’t be afraid, Vasilisa the Beautiful! Eat your supper, pray, and go to sleep. Morning is wiser than eventide!”

Vasilisa woke up pretty early in the morning, but Baba Yaga was already up and looking out the window. The light in the eyes in the skulls was dimming. The white horseman flashed by, and it was already daylight. Baba Yaga went out into the yard and whistled. In front of her there appeared the mortar and pestle and the broom. The red rider flashed by, and the sun came up. Baba Yaga got in her mortar and rode out of the yard, driving the mortar with the pestle and sweeping away her tracks with the broom. Vasilisa was left alone. She looked over Baba Yaga’s house and was surprised at the abundance of everything. And she stopped there and got to thinking: What work should she start in on first? She looked, and the work was all already done. The doll had taken out the last weed seeds from the wheat. “Oh, you are my savior!” said Vasilisa to the doll. “You have saved me from misfortune.” “You have only to cook the dinner,” answered the doll, climbing back into Vasilisa’s pocket. “Cook it with God’s aid and then rest.”

Toward evening, Vasilisa set everything out on the table and waited for Baba Yaga. Twilight fell, and the black rider flashed outside the gates. Darkness fell; only the skulls’ eyes shone brightly. The trees shook, the leaves trembled—Baba Yaga was coming! Vasilisa met her. “Is everything done?” the yaga asked. “See for yourself, Granny!” Vasilisa said. Baba Yaga examined everything and was unhappy that she had nothing to be angry about. She said, “Well, good!” Then she shouted, “My faithful servants, my true friends, grind my wheat!” Three pairs of hands appeared, took the wheat, and carried it out of sight. Baba Yaga ate and got ready to go to sleep, but first she gave another order to Vasilisa: “Tomorrow do the same tasks as today, and in addition take poppy seed from the bin and clean it of dirt grain by grain. Someone has mixed dirt in with it out of spite!” The old woman said this, turned to the wall, and started snoring, and Vasilisa started in feeding her doll. The doll ate and told her the same thing as the night before: “Pray to God and lie down to sleep. Morning is wiser than eventide. All will be done, Vasilisushka!”

In the morning, Baba Yaga once more left the yard in her mortar, and Vasilisa and the doll quickly dealt with all the work. The old woman returned, looked around, and shouted, “My true servants, my trusty friends, squeeze the oil out of the poppy seed.” Three pairs of hands appeared, took the poppy seed, and carried it out of sight. Baba Yaga sat down to dinner. While she was eating, Vasilisa stood silently. “Why don’t you ever talk with me?” said Baba Yaga. “You stand there as if dumb.” “I didn’t dare speak,” replied Vasilisa, “but if you will permit me, I would like to ask you about something.” “Ask. But not every question leads to something good. You can know a lot, but you’ll soon grow old!” “I want to ask you, Granny, only about what I’ve seen. When I was on my way to you, a rider on a white horse passed me by, and he was white and his clothes were white. Who is that?” “That is my bright day,” answered Baba Yaga. “Then another rider on a red horse, he himself red and all dressed in red, passed me by. Who is that?” “That is my red sun,” answered Baba Yaga. “And what does that black rider mean that passed me by your very gates, Granny?” “That is my dark night. All of them are my trusted servants.”

Vasilisa recalled the three pairs of hands and was silent. “What else do you want to ask me?” Baba Yaga said. “This will be my last. You yourself said that if you know a lot, you’ll soon grow old.” “Good,” said Baba Yaga. “It’s good that you only ask about what you’ve seen beyond the yard and not in the yard! I don’t like my dirty linens washed outside the yard, and I eat those who are too curious. And now I’ll ask you: How do you manage to do all the work I give you?” “My mother’s blessing helps me,” replied Vasilisa. “So that’s it! Get out of here, you blessed daughter! I don’t need anyone blessed.” She

dragged Vasilisa out of the parlor and shoved her out the gates, took a skull with its burning eyes from the fence, stuck it on a stick, gave it to her, and said: "Here's the fire for your stepmother's daughters—take it. That's what they sent you here for." Vasilisa ran off home with the light from the skull that went out only with the coming of daylight. And finally, toward evening of the next day, she reached her home. Coming up to the gates, she was about to throw the skull away. "Probably they have no need of fire any more at home," she thought to herself. But suddenly she heard a dull voice from the skull: "Don't toss me away. Carry me to your stepmother."

She looked at her stepmother's house, and seeing no light in any window, she decided to enter the house with the skull. At first, they met her with kindness and told her that since she had left the house, they'd had no fire in it. They couldn't start any up themselves, and the fire they carried from their neighbor's just went out as soon as they brought it into the parlor. "Perhaps your fire will keep going," said the stepmother. They brought the skull into the parlor, but the eyes in the skull so looked at the stepmother and her daughters that they were burned! They tried to hide, but wherever they went, the eyes were always just behind them and followed them. By morning they were all burned up into charcoal. Only Vasilisa wasn't touched.

In the morning, Vasilisa buried the skull in the ground, locked the house, and set off for the town, where she asked for shelter from an old childless woman. She lived there by herself, waiting for her father. Then once she said to the old woman, "I'm bored, Granny, sitting here with nothing to do! Go and buy me some of the very best flax. At least I can spin." The old woman bought some very good flax. Vasilisa got down to work, and it was as if work just burned in her, and the thread came out even and thin, like a hair. She spun a lot. It would be time to set to the weaving. But no comb could be found that would work for Vasilisa's threads, nor would anyone undertake to make one. Vasilisa asked her doll, and the doll said, "Bring me any old comb and an old shuttle and a horse's mane. I'll make it all for you."

Vasilisa soon got everything that was needed and lay down to sleep, and over the night the doll made a fine loom. By the end of winter, the linen had all been woven, and it was so fine that you could pass it through a needle rather than use a thread. In the spring the linen was bleached, and Vasilisa said to the old woman, "Granny, go and sell this linen, and keep the money for yourself." The old woman looked at the cloth and gasped, "No, my child. No one can wear such linen except the tsar. I'll take it to the palace."

The old woman went to the tsar's palace and walked back and forth beneath the windows. The tsar caught sight of her and asked, "What do you want, old woman?" "Your Royal Highness," the old woman replied, "I've brought a most amazing thing. I cannot show it to anyone but you." The tsar ordered her admitted to him, and when he looked at the linen, he was amazed. "What do you want for it?" asked the tsar. "There is no price on it, Father Tsar! I brought it to you as a gift." The tsar thanked her and sent the old woman away with gifts.

They began making shirts for the tsar. They cut them out, but nowhere could they find a seamstress who would take on the work. They searched for a long time. Finally the tsar summoned the old woman and said, "Since you knew how to spin and weave this linen, you must know how to sew shirts from it." "But it was not I, Sovereign, who spun and wove this linen," the old woman said, "This is the work of one I've taken in, a young girl." "Well, let her sew it then!" The old woman came back home and told Vasilisa about everything. "I knew that this work would not pass from my hands," Vasilisa said to her. She locked herself in her room and set to work. She sewed without putting down her hands, and soon a dozen shirts were ready.

The old woman carried the shirts to the tsar, and Vasilisa washed, combed her hair, dressed, and sat down next to the window. She sat there and waited to see what would happen. Then she saw a royal servant enter the old woman's yard. He entered the parlor and said, "The tsar and sovereign wishes to see the artist who made the shirts for him to reward her with his own hands." Vasilisa went and appeared before the tsar himself. When the tsar saw Vasilisa the Beautiful, he fell madly in love with her. "No," he said, "my beauty! I shall not part with you. You shall be my wife." So the tsar took Vasilisa by her white hands, placed her along side him, and then and there they put on the wedding. Vasilisa's father soon returned, rejoiced at her fate, and remained to live there with his daughter. Vasilisa brought the old woman to her as well, and until the end of her life she always carried the doll in her pocket.

Appendix 2: “Prince Danila-Govorila,” A.N. Afanas’ev

Afanas’ev, as quoted in Forrester, Sibelan. *Baba Yaga : The Wild Witch of the East in Russian Fairy Tales*, University Press of Mississippi, 2013. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, pp. 67-71

“Once there lived an old princess. She had a son and daughter who were still growing, both so noble and good.

An evil witch took a dislike to them and wondered how she could ruin them. She mulled it over and came up with an idea. She turned herself into a fox, went to their mother, and said, “My dear gossip! Here’s a little ring for you. Put it on your son’s finger. It’ll make him rich and quick on the uptake, if only he never takes it off and if he marries a girl whose finger fits the ring!”

The old woman believed her and was happy. As she was dying, she ordered her son to marry a girl whose finger fit the ring. Time passed, and her son was growing up. He came of age and started to look for a bride. One pleased him, another caught his eye, but when they tried on the ring it was either too small or too big. It didn’t fit one or the other. He traveled and traveled through towns and cities, tried all the lovely maidens, but didn’t find anyone to be his intended.

He came home and got pensive. “What are you upset about, brother?” asked his sister. He revealed his misfortune to her, told her his grief. “What odd kind of ring is this?” asked the sister. “Let me try it on.” She put it on her slender finger—and the ring tightened, shone, and fit on her hand as if it had been poured on purpose just for her.

“Ah, sister, you’re my intended, it’s you who’ll be my wife!”

“What are you saying, brother? Think about God, think about sin! Do people marry their own sisters?”

But her brother wouldn’t listen. He danced with joy and ordered the wedding preparations. She dissolved in bitter tears, left the sunlit room, and sat on the threshold. Her tears poured like a river! Some old pilgrim women were passing by. She invited them in to have some food and drink. They asked: what was troubling her, what was her sorrow? There was no point hiding it, so she told them everything.

“Well, don’t cry, don’t grieve, but listen to us. Make four dolls, set them in the four corners. When your brother starts calling you to join him under the marriage crown, go. When he starts to call you into the sunlit room, don’t be in a hurry. Hope in God. Farewell.” The old women went away.

The brother and sister got married. He went into the sunlit room and said, “Sister Katerina, come to bed!”

She answered, “In a moment, brother. Let me take off my earrings.” And the dolls in the four corners began to lament:

Cuckoo, Prince Danila!
Cuckoo, Govorila!
Cuckoo, you want to marry,
Cuckoo, your own sister.
Cuckoo, earth split open,
Cuckoo, sister fall through!

The earth began to split open, and the sister began to fall in. The brother shouted, “Sister Katerina, come to bed!” “In a moment, brother! Let me untie my belt!” The dolls kept on lamenting:

Cuckoo, Prince Danila!
Cuckoo, Govorila!
Cuckoo, you want to marry,
Cuckoo, your own sister.
Cuckoo, earth split open,
Cuckoo, sister fall through!

By now you couldn't see anything but her head. Her brother called again. "Dear sister Katerina, come to bed!"

"Right away, brother! Let me take off my slippers." The dolls kept on lamenting, and the earth closed over her. Her brother called again. He called even louder—no answer! He got angry, came running, slammed into the doors, and the doors flew open. He looked everywhere—but it was as if his sister had never been there. Only the dolls sat in the corners, and they kept on lamenting: "Earth split open, sister fall through!" He grabbed an axe, cut off their heads, and threw them all into the stove.

But the sister walked and walked under the ground, and she saw a house standing on chicken legs. It stood there and turned around. "Little house, little house! Stand with your back to the forest and your front to me." The house stood still, and the doors opened.

In the little house sat a lovely maiden. She was embroidering a piece of cloth with silver and gold. She greeted her guest kindly, sighed and said, "My dear, my little sister! My heart is glad to see you. I'll welcome you and treat you well, as long as my mother isn't here. But when she flies home, then woe to you and me both. My mother's a witch!"

Her guest was frightened to hear such words, but she had nowhere else to go. She sat down with her hostess at the piece of cloth. They sewed and chatted. For a long time or a short time, the hostess knew what time it was, she knew when her mother would come flying home. She turned her guest into a little needle, stuck it into a garland, and stood the garland in the corner.

No sooner had she put everything away than the witch was lurking at the door: "My good daughter, my comely daughter! It smells of bones from Rus'!"

"My lady mother! People were walking by. They came in to have a drink of water." "Why didn't you make them stay?"

"They were old, my dear, not to your taste."

"From now on see to it—call everyone into the yard, don't let anyone out of the yard. And I'll pick up my heels and go back out after plunder." She went away, and the girls sat down at the length of cloth, sewed, talked, and laughed.

The witch came flying. Sniff, sniff through the house. "My good daughter, my comely daughter! It smells of bones from Rus'!"

"Some old men just came in to warm their hands. I tried to make them stay, but they wouldn't."

The witch was hungry. She gave her daughter a tongue-lashing and flew away again. Her guest had been sitting hidden in the garland. They set right back to sewing the cloth. They sewed and made haste, and tried to figure out how they could escape from misfortune, run away from the wicked witch. They hadn't even managed to look at each other or whisper to each other when she was at the door, speak of the devil, and caught them by surprise.

"My good daughter, my comely daughter! It smells of a bone from Rus'!" "Well, you see, Mother, a fair maiden is waiting for you."

The fair maiden took a look at the old woman and was horror struck! There stood a Baba Yaga, bony leg, nose grown into the ceiling. “My good daughter, my comely daughter! Stoke the stove as hot as can be!” They brought firewood of oak and maple and built a fire. Flames flickered from the stove.

The witch took a wide paddle and began to entreat the guest, “Sit down, my beauty, on the paddle.” The beauty sat down. The witch pushed her toward the oven, but she put one leg into the oven and the other onto the stove. “What, girl, don’t you know how to sit? Sit down properly!” She changed her position and sat down properly.

The witch moved her into the opening, but once again she put one leg into the oven and the other under the stove. The witch flew into a rage and pulled her back out. “You’re playing around, playing around, young lady! Sit still, like this. Watch me!” She flopped down on the paddle and stuck out her legs. The maidens quickly shoved her into the oven, set her down there, closed the latches, piled up logs, smeared and sealed it with pitch, and set off at a run, taking along the embroidered cloth, a brush, and a comb.

They ran and ran, and then they took a look behind them. The evil woman had fought her way out. She caught sight of them and started to whistle: “Hi, hi, hi! You over there!”

What could they do? They threw down the brush, and it grew up into a thick, thick patch of reeds. She wouldn’t be able to crawl through. The witch put out her claws, pinched a path through, and she drew closer to them again . . . Where could they hide? They threw down the comb—it grew up into a dark, dark oak wood. A fly couldn’t have flown through it.

The witch sharpened her teeth and got to work. Whatever she grabbed, she’d pull a tree up by the roots! She tossed them in all directions, cleared a path and started chasing again . . . She got even closer!

They ran and ran, but there was nowhere to go. They had used up all their strength! They threw the gold-embroidered cloth, and it poured out into a wide sea, deep and fiery. The witch rose high up. She wanted to fly over it, but she fell down into the fire and burned up. The two maidens were left alone, homeless doves. They had to go somewhere, but where? They didn’t know. They sat down to rest.

Then a man came over to them, asked who they were, and reported to his master that there were not two migratory birds, but two young maidens, as beautiful as if they had been painted, sitting in his lands. They were just alike in height and nobility, brow for brow, eye for eye. “One of them must be your sister, but which one? We can’t figure it out.”

The master went to take a look and called them to him. He saw that one of them was his sister, the servant hadn’t lied, but which one? He couldn’t make it out, and she was angry and wouldn’t tell him. What was he to do?

“Well, here’s what, my lord! I’ll fill a ram’s bladder with blood and put it under your arm. You chat with your guests, and I’ll come up and catch you in the side with a knife. The blood will flow, and your sister will reveal herself!”

“All right!”

They did this just as they had planned it. The servant caught his master in the side, the blood spurted, and the brother fell down. The sister ran to embrace him, and she cried and lamented, “My dear, my incomparable one!”

But the brother jumped up neither burned nor hurt. He hugged his sister and gave her in marriage to a good man, while he married her friend, whose hand fit the ring perfectly. And they all lived marvelously ever after.”

Appendix 3: History of Russian forestry and shifting attitudes

At the beginning of Russia's history, Russians not only harbored indifferent, but also adverse attitudes towards their environment.¹⁵ In the same way that the forest was, and still is, a hostile environment, so were Russia's attitudes towards the forest (Costlow 9). Extremely low temperatures, combined with a lack of industrialization, led to a hard life (Pisarenko and Strakhov 1). Disdain for these forests was influenced by "long centuries of backbreaking labor in a milieu that unendingly resisted [Russians'] efforts at survival" (Costlow 8).

Part of this internalized hatred was a result of comparing Russia's landscape to that of Western Europe. Relevantly, the origins of Russian environmentalism came from France and Germany, the leading environmentalist nations at the time. Before the late 17th century, environmental policy in Western European countries such as France and Germany was described as "desultory" (Brain 12). As these practices developed, governments took a more active role in environmental management, with Jean-Baptiste Colbert and Louis XIV codifying a ban on cutting trees in royal forests (Brain 12). In the 17th century, this was considered a radical move, and one that instigated a more attentive look at forest management. What started in France, however, took off in Germany. During the next two centuries, Germany developed a field of forest scholarship "too vast and diverse to allow for an easy summary" (Brain 13). Russia came to adopt these Western European practices due to a "decided lack of know-how," which "plagued Russian forest management throughout the eighteenth century" (Brain 16).

Despite adhering to Western European ideologies regarding conservation, however, Russia's landscapes did not resemble those of Western Europe. As environmental historian Christopher Ely writes, "by the standards of generally accepted European aesthetic conventions,

¹⁵ Not unlike public sentiments about Baba Yaga when she first came to be in the public psyche.

the central heartland of Russia, with its thick forests, level plains, and harsh climate, represented some of the least pleasant and least picturesque natural space in Europe” (Ely 7). It would follow then, that a different landscape would require a different environmental approach. As Russia would experience an enormous amount of political volatility in the 20th century, the conception that “economic prerogatives should not determine forest policy or forest science, because Russia’s unique biological, social, and cultural considerations needed to be respected” was instrumental in “[distinguishing] early twentieth-century Russian forestry from its predecessors...in the pre-revolutionary period” (Brain 24). This central ideology not only exemplifies Russia’s intention of developing its own methods of forestry policy, but also shows the drastic shift in attitudes regarding Russia’s landscape.

The scale of Russia’s geographical area makes it difficult to characterize the landscape, although large portions of uniformity help. Despite the size of European Russia, its elevation never “[rises] much above one thousand feet” (Ely 6). The lack of elevation, combined with the harsh northern climate results in a homogenous landscape described by European tourists as “empty and monotonous” (Ely 6). Large areas of Russia’s geography can be characterized as plains. The West Siberian Plain, nestled between the Urals river and the Yenisey river, is described as “an absolutely flat lowland“ (Pisarenko and Strakhov 1). On the other hand, the Central Siberian Plateau, located “Between the Yenisey and the Lena rivers, is featured by a sharply elevated surface with some smooth hills” (Pisarenko and Strakhov 1). These open plains are not what make the majority of Russia’s landscape. Russia’s boreal forests, however, are far from empty.

The connection between Russian identity and a reverence for their landscape goes hand-in-hand. However, this does not come about as organically as one might think. The

Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 brought to the forefront the question of a Russian national identity. However, this mission started much before the events of the early 20th century. Feeling overshadowed by their Western European counterparts and their subsequent environmental aesthetics, Russia “[broke] with the dominance of European landscape aesthetics in order to create alternative aesthetic values capable of embracing the unique appearance of the native land” at the end of the 18th century (Ely 5). In doing so, Russia had to re-evaluate not only the valued aspects of its landscape, but also its relationship to Europe as a whole, and thus, to itself (Ely 5).

Bibliography

- Afanas'ev, Aleksandr. "Vasilisa the Beautiful." *The Complete Folktales of A. N. Afanas'ev*, edited by Jack V. Haney, University Press of Mississippi, 2014, pp. 173–79. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qhm7n.69>.
- Annual Full-Day Discussion on the Human Rights of Women | OHCHR*.
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/06/annual-full-day-discussion-human-rights-women>. Accessed 28 Mar. 2023.
- Armknrecht, Megan, et al. "Identifying Impressions of Baba Yaga: Navigating the Uses of Attachment and Wonder on Soviet and American Television." *Marvels & Tales*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2017, pp. 62–79. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.13110/marvelstales.31.1.0062>.
- Bilibin, Ivan. *Cover from the Book, "Stories of the Izba."* 1931,
https://casababayaga729123252.files.wordpress.com/2019/05/babayaga_1.jpg.
- . *Illustration for the fairy tale "Vasilisa the Beautiful."* 1900,
[https://uploads3.wikiart.org/images/ivan-bilibin/illustration-for-the-fairy-tale-vasilisa-the-beautiful-1900-3\(1\).jpg!Large.jpg](https://uploads3.wikiart.org/images/ivan-bilibin/illustration-for-the-fairy-tale-vasilisa-the-beautiful-1900-3(1).jpg!Large.jpg).
- Brain, Stephen. *Song of the Forest: Russian Forestry and Stalinist Environmentalism, 1905-1953*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011.
- Bylina | Russian Poetry | Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/art/bylina>. Accessed 19 Dec. 2022.
- Conley, Heather A., and Cyrus Newlin. *Climate Change Will Reshape Russia*. Jan. 2021.
www.csis.org, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/climate-change-will-reshape-russia>.
- Costlow, Jane. *Heart-Pine Russia: Walking and Writing the Nineteenth-Century Forest*. Cornell University Press, 2013.

Country Fact Sheet | UN Women Data Hub.

<https://data.unwomen.org/country/russian-federation>. Accessed 14 Mar. 2023.

d'Eaubonne, Françoise. *Feminism Or Death*. Verson, 2022.

Ely, Christopher. *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia*. Northern Illinois University Press, 2009.

European Forest Institute. *Russian Forests and Climate Change*. Edited by European Forest Institute et al., vol. 11, European Forest Institute, 2020. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.36333/wsctu11>.

Forrester, Sibelan, et al. *Baba Yaga: The Wild Witch of the East in Russian Fairy Tales*. University Press of Mississippi, 2013. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/claremont/detail.action?docID=1113458>.

Gaard, Greta. "Ecofeminism and Climate Change." *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 49, Mar. 2015, pp. 20–33. *ScienceDirect*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2015.02.004>.

Gates, Barbara T. "A Root of Ecofeminism: Écoféminisme." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1996, pp. 7–16.

Halton, Mary. "Climate Change 'Impacts Women More than Men.'" *BBC News*, 8 Mar. 2018. www.bbc.com, <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-43294221>.

Hubbs, Joanna. *Mother Russia : The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture*. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1988. *Internet Archive*, <http://archive.org/details/motherrussiafemi0000hubb>.

Ivanova, Evgenia. "The Problem of Mysteriousness of Baba Yaga Character in Religious Mythology." *Journal of Siberian Federal University. Humanities & Social Sciences*.

Jakobson, Roman. *Contributions to Comparative Mythology: Studies in Linguistics and*

- Philosophy*. 1985.
- Jakobson, Roman, and Petr Bogatyrev. "Folklore as a Special Form of Creativity." *The Hague: Mouton*, vol. Vol. IV, 1966, pp. 1–15.
- Johns, Andreas. "Baba Iaga and the Russian Mother." *Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 42, no. 1, Spring 1998, pp. 21–36.
- Norgaard, Kari, and Richard York. "Gender Equality and State Environmentalism." *Gender and Society*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2005, pp. 506–22.
- "Oxford English Dictionary." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press. *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/135980>. Accessed 19 Apr. 2023.
- Pisarenko, A. I., and V. V. Strakhov. *Socio-Economic Assessment of the Russian Boreal Forests*. 1996, p. 50.
- Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993.
- Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale*. Second Edition, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2009,
- . *Theory and History of Folklore*. NED-New edition, vol. 5, University of Minnesota Press, 1984. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttv14w>.
- "Rus' History." *Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, <https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CR%5CU%5CRushDA.htm>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2023.
- "Russia: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report." *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-world/2022>. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.
- Russia's Boreal Forests*. World Wildlife Fund, p. 4, https://wwfeu.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/russia_forest_cc_final_13nov07.pdf.

- Salleh, Ariel. *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern*. Zed Books Ltd., 2017.
- Schepaschenko, Dimitry, et al. “Russian Forests Sequesters Substantially More Carbon than Previously Reported.” *Scientific Reports*, vol. Nature Portfolio, 2021.
- Semenov, Andrei. *Russian Political Forces Meet Climate Change*. Apr. 2021. www.csis.org, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-political-forces-meet-climate-change>.
- Sessions, Robert. “Deep Ecology versus Ecofeminism: Healthy Differences or Incompatible Philosophies?” *Hypatia*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1991, pp. 90–107.
- The Associated Press. “Pregnant Russians Flock to Argentina, Seeking Passports — and Options — for Their Kids.” *NPR*, 23 Feb. 2023. *NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/23/1159072741/russians-argentina-birth-tourism-passports>.
- Vakoch, Douglas A., and Sam Mickey, editors. *Literature and Ecofeminism: Intersectional and International Voices*. Routledge, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351209755>.
- Wallhager, Julia, and Macalester College. *BABA YAGA: A MANIFESTATION OF THE RUSSIAN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PEASANTS’ COMING TO TERMS WITH INDUSTRIALIZATION*. p. 8.
- Warren, Karen J. “Feminist Environmental Philosophy.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2015, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2015. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/feminism-environmental/>.
- “Will Russia’s Forests Be an Asset or an Obstacle in Climate Fight?” *Yale E360*, <https://e360.yale.edu/features/will-russias-forests-be-an-asset-or-obstacle-in-the-climate-fight>. Accessed 18 Feb. 2023.