

RELIGIOUS POETRY OF LITERARY ORIGIN IN THE MANUSCRIPT TRADITION OF THE RUSSIAN OLD BELIEVERS

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ABSTRACT

The current research focuses on a little-known area of studies, didactic poetry by the Russian Old Believers that originated from the medieval Russian literary tradition. In particular, it aims to bring to light and examine two previously unknown and unpublished religious poems of a literary origin: "Why We Need to Endure so Much Sadness and Trouble (An Anecdotal Story about Pakhom and Stepanida)" and "A Poem About a Desperate Sinner". Both texts were discovered in manuscripts (by the Russian Old Believers) that are held in the Drevlekhranilishche IRLI (Pushkinskii Dom, St Petersburg, Russia). The research employs the comparative method to establish the origin of these two poems and examine the adaptation techniques of some popular didactic plots by the Old Believer men of letters. It examines, compares and contrasts plots, motives and characters' interpretations in the above named poems with selected stories from "The Great Mirror", popular reading of the 17th–18th centuries. The poem "An Anecdotal Story about Pakhom and Stepanida" is additionally examined in comparison with the folk tale, "The Little Mouse" and the fable "About Those Who Condemn Other People" by the Russian poet V. Maikov. The current work also aims to use these newly discovered poems as examples of some lesser studied groups of texts that were known to the Russian Old Believers.

Keywords: poems, folk, authored, manuscript, the Russian Old Believers

INTRODUCTION

The comparative method is one of the essential tools that is widely used in many areas of study of the humanities, including liberal art and social sciences. Comparison has proven to be especially beneficial when dealing with literal and folklore texts of a complex nature or unknown origin. In particular, the comparative method may be a helpful tool for establishing the origins of folk texts or literal works by anonymous authors. The large body of folk and authored religious poetry that has been known and circulated in manuscripts among various branches of the Russian Old Believers can serve as an example of complex text groups that have been borrowed from a broad range of written sources and mainstream Russian folklore. The mainstream religious folk poems (*dukhovnye stikhi*) and penitential poems (*pokaiznnye stikhi*) were particularly cherished and enjoyed great popularity in the Russian Old Believer communities. They were acknowledged by Old Believer men of letters as meeting the norms of religious devotion. Singing or reading these texts promoted a pastime, which was, in the words of the Old Believers “good for the soul”. On the basis of this tradition, they created their own religious folk poetry and literature tradition. Moreover, in the Old Believer communities, religious poetry became an area of popular and creative work, which continued to develop as a living tradition over the centuries and produced a large number of poems by anonymous Old Believer writers whose identity may not be possible to establish. Implementation of the comparative method in examining plots, motives, text structure, and linguistic particularities of religious poems known to the Old Believers helps us to establish the origin of many texts and the ways in which they were recorded, edited and circulated in the Old Believer manuscript tradition.

THE COMPLEXITY OF THE REPERTOIRE OF THE RELIGIOUS FOLK AND AUTHORED POETRY BY THE RUSSIAN OLD BELIEVERS

The current research focuses on a little-known area of studies, didactic poetry by the Russian Old Believers that originated from the medieval Russian literary tradition. In particular, I would like to bring to light and examine two previously unknown religious poems of a literary origin: “Why We Need to Endure so Much Sadness and Trouble (An Anecdotal Story about Pakhom and Stepanida)” and “A Poem

About a Desperate Sinner". I came across both poems while working with the Old Believer manuscripts in the Drevlekhranilishche IRLI (Pushkinskii Dom, St Petersburg, Russia). Both texts were included in manuscript volumes of religious folk poetry ("Stikhovniki") alongside popular mainstream poems (a poem about St Iosaaf; a poem about St Alexii, the poems about the separation of the soul and body and many others). Both volumes are dated to the end of the 19th century – beginning of the 20th century. The characteristics of the versification, the well-known literary origin of the texts and the fact that they were not circulated beyond local manuscript traditions may prove that they were authored. It is likely that both poems were either produced by an anonymous Old Believer author or copied from a literary magazine of that period (for example, "The Niva" magazine) or from a popular religious pamphlet by a scribe.

It is worth noting that the Old Believer men of letters had developed a distinctive method for expanding their reading repertoire of non-sacred texts: religious poetry, legends, and moralistic didactic novels. Alongside mainstream popular religious folk poems (*dukhovnye stikhi*), they borrowed popular plots or whole texts from a broad range of sources, for example, literary magazines. They then edited the original to satisfy their tastes. The distinguished Old Believer publisher, V. Z. Iakzanov stated that: "The Old Believers have never being shy of including in their collections of religious poetry, poems by popular Russian authors, if these poems satisfied the criteria of moral principles and values of good Orthodox Christians" (Yakzanov 1911, 3). In another words, according to the Old Believers any reading for entertainment purposes must be "beneficial for the soul". It is interesting that this criterion is spelt out in the titles of the poems. The majority of the religious poems that were included in the poetry collections called among the Old Believers "Stikhovniki" had a phrase "a poem beneficial for the soul" (*stikh dushepoleznui*). This explains why the repertoire of non-sacred texts in the Old Believer tradition is so broad and inclusive. Besides the mainstream folk poetry included in "Stikhovniki" without mentioning the author or the source there are:

- Poems by Russian professional writers and poets: M. V. Lomonosov, M. Y. Lermontov, A. S. Pushkin etc.
- Poems by Old Believer ideological opponents, such as D. Rostovskii. For example, his poem "A Mortal Man, Look Diligently How Your Life is Passing by, and Your Death is on Your Doorstep" became one of the most beloved and popular poems by the Old Believers.

- Poems by anonymous writers of Old Believer origin. The authorship of some of these poems is difficult to establish due to the lack of any background information.

It is important to stress that all the authored poems were always included in their manuscripts as anonymized folk poems without any reference to their origin.

THE ORIGIN OF AN UNKNOWN DIDACTICAL POEM “AN ANECDOTAL STORY ABOUT PAKHOM AND STEPANIDA” BY THE RUSSIAN OLD BELIEVERS

The plots of both poems examined in this article (“An Anecdotal Story about Pakhom and Stepanida” and “A Poem About a Desperate Sinner”) have a striking similarity to two stories from a very popular reading of the 17–18th centuries, the book entitled “The Great Mirror” (“Velikoe Zertsalo”), which was translated from Polish into Russian in the 17th century [the comprehensive examination of “The Great Mirror” can be found in the following works: Vladimirov 1884; Derzhavina 1965; Romodanovskaya, 2004]. “The Great Mirror” contains a large collection of moralistic stories based on Biblical and New Testament fables. The didactical nature of these stories made them especially popular among the Old Believers.

The first poem “An Anecdotal Story about Pakhom and Stepanida” tells us the story about a bad wife who ruined her own and her husband’s prospect of a good life. It examines the origin of female naughtiness and mankind’s stupidity; and explains how all of mankind can be vulnerable in face of even the smallest of temptations. The poem contains three parts: an introduction outlining the topic of the poem; the main body that describes the weak and vulnerable nature of mankind who are so easily tempted and finally the conclusion with the moral of the story that is meant to be very instructive for all good Christians. The two leading characters of the poem are poor peasants, husband and wife, called Pakhom and Stepanida. The poem begins with the couple’s dispute about a timeless topic: who should be blamed for all men’s misfortunes and the hardship of life, Adam or Eve. Stepanida insists that Eve must be blamed for all men’s sins and considers that our suffering in life is unfair as God made the men suffer for somebody else’s sins:

<p>– Ах, за что мы переносим Столько горя и забот, Землю пашем, сено косим, Так что градом льет пот? Нас нужда бы не видала, Мы не видали бы труда, Если бы Ева не вкусила Запрещенного плода. Разве это не обида Нам терпеть за грех чужой? – Так ворчала Степанида, С поля идучи домой. (Karel'skaya № 506)</p>	<p><i>What we are enduring so much Suffering and troubles for; We plough land, mow the grass for hay As hard as our sweat is pouring down. We would not have experienced poverty, We would not have worked hard, If Eve would not have tasted The forbidden fruit. Is it unfair To suffer for someone's sin? – Stepanida was grumbling While going home from the field.</i></p>
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Unlike his wife, Pakhom insists on Adam's obvious fault, he was stupid enough to allow Eve to convince him and made the fatal mistake:

<p><i>И Адам не меньше в этом Виноват, – сказал Пахом, – Муж не жениным советом, А своим живи умом. Если бы этак не сгубили Долю праотец свою, Мы бы жили бы, да жили, Припеваючи, в раю. (Karel'skaya № 506)</i></p>	<p><i>Adam is equally guilty, – Said Pakhom. A husband must not be told by his wife, But he rather must use his own brain. If our forefather would not have Ruined his fate, We would have still be living happily In Paradise.</i></p>
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The couple left for work in field and kept arguing. Then the poem took a turn to a fairy tale. On their way, the couple came across a mysterious stranger, a rich, powerful and kind man, a sort of magic helper or benefactor that every Russian fairy tale has. The stranger entered the couple's dispute and pointed out that condemnation of one's actions is, itself, a sin. He also suggested that both Pakhom and Stepanida would have made the same mistakes if they had been Adam and Eve. Moreover, the "magic helper" offered the couple "a magic gift": a new easy and wealthy life without any difficulties or hard labor on one condition. Pakhom and Stepanida would be able to enjoy all the benefits of this great life, relax, sleep, eat and drink as much as they wish. However, they are not permitted to lift the lid of one mysterious dish that would be served at dinner each day. The couple could not believe in their luck and were very happy to accept the gift with this condition:

<i>Вот живет на новом месте</i>	<i>Here our good couple are:</i>
<i>Наша добрая чета,</i>	<i>They live in their new home,</i>
<i>Пьют, ядят, гуляют вместе,</i>	<i>They drink, eat, relax together.</i>
<i>Знать, их счастье – не мечта.</i>	<i>Their happiness is a reality, not a dream.</i>
<i>Им ни горя, ни заботы,</i>	<i>They are living carefree,</i>
<i>Ни нужды нет никакой,</i>	<i>They do not have any troubles,</i>
<i>Хоть валяйся без работы</i>	<i>They can relax doing nothing</i>
<i>С боку на бок день деньской.</i>	<i>All day long.</i>

(Karel'skaya № 506)

However, this poem has an unhappy ending. Pakhom and Stepanida have repeated the same mistake as Adam and Eve. Stepanida could not resist female naughtiness, and was tempted to look under the lid of the mysterious dish. Pakhom did not manage to stop his wife from such a stupid action. To their surprise, instead of magic dish they discovered a mouse on the plate. Immediately, the magic helper appeared in front of the shamed and disappointed couple. He lectured them on their bad behavior and the danger of condemnation by our ancestors and sent the ashamed couple back home to their old life full of poverty and hardship:

<i>И пошли они, вздыхая,</i>	<i>They set off, sighing,</i>
<i>В деревенский домик свой,</i>	<i>For their old peasant hut.</i>
<i>Как изгнанники из рая,</i>	<i>They felt like their ancestors who lost</i>
	<i>Paradise.</i>
<i>Со сокрушенною душой.</i>	<i>Regretting their deeds.</i>
<i>Путь их к хижине убогой</i>	<i>The way back home</i>
<i>Им теперь невесел был,</i>	<i>Appeared to be sad for them.</i>
<i>А Пахом жену дорогой,</i>	<i>Pakhom as he would be in the right,</i>
<i>Будьто правый, все корил</i>	<i>Was reproaching his wife.</i>

(Karel'skaya № 506)

In the concluding part of the poem Pakhom tells the readership the moral of the story:

<i>Полно плакать, не поможет, –</i>	<i>Stop crying, it won't help, –</i>
<i>Наконец, сказал он ей,</i>	<i>Finally, he said to her.</i>
<i>Осуждать-то всякий может,</i>	<i>Those who condemn the others</i>
<i>А не сделает умней.</i>	<i>Make the same mistakes</i>

(Karel'skaya № 506)

This original poem has, undoubtedly, strong connections with two literary stories and one folk tale:

- First, as I mentioned above, the poem's plot and motifs and the leading characters behavior are very close to a story entitled "Who Condemns Adam's Sin Became a Sinner". This fable is included in "The Great Mirror" under number 100 (Derzhavina 1965, 284–285; 143–144). This allows us to consider that the poem may be a poetic revision of this popular story.
- Second, it is important to point out striking similarities between the poem "An Anecdotal Story about Pakhom and Stepanida" and the fable "About Those Who Condemn Other People" by the Russian poet of the 18th century, V. I. Maikov [Maikov 1936, 162–164].
- Finally, the plot, motifs and characters of the poem about Pakhom and Stepanida have a lot in common with a Russian folk tale entitled "The Little Mouse". This folk tale, "The Little Mouse", was very popular in the Russian North and has been included in the Russian Folk Tale collection by Onchukov (Onchukov 1908, 457).

It is likely that the poem's author knew at least one of the above mentioned literary sources and/or a folk tale. It is accepted by scholars that the didactical fables that promoted Christian values, from the book "The Great Mirror", were very popular among the Russian readership, including the Old Believer communities. It is an accepted fact that many original and compiled stories from "The Great Mirror" were copied, included and circulated in the Old Believer manuscripts. The story "About Those Who Condemn Other People" by V. Maikov was published in the popular, among the Old Believer communities, journal entitled "The Good Entertainment". Especially, in the second part of the 18th century many moralistic / didactic poems about Christian values by the Russian poets V. D. Sankovskii, M. D. Chulkov, A. P. Sumarokov and others were published in this journal. At that time "The Good Entertainment" became an endless source for plots and characters for the Old Believer scribes and men of letters. It is also possible to consider that the author of the poem about Pakhom and Stepanida may know the folk tale "The Little Mouse" as both the poem and tale were circulated in the Russian North. A comparative text analysis of four texts would help us to examine what all texts have in common and how they differ (see table on page 56).

This table demonstrates that all four texts have many motifs in common. The plots of all texts develop in a similar way. However, the leading characters differ in these four texts. In the story from "The Great Mirror" there are only two characters: a servant who condemns Adam and his master who also plays the role of a magical

helper and teaches his servant a lesson. In the fable by V. Maikov an old man and woman are the two leading characters and the magical helper is absent. It appears that the poem “An Anecdotal Story about Pakhom and Stepanida” has two leading characters, a peasant couple called Pakhom and Stepanida. The magical helper has several functions: he sets the task, punishes the leading characters and teaches them a lesson. It is worth noting that the folk tale lacks any Christian moral, has no references to Adam and Eve, but keeps all the other mentioned motifs. This proves that the poem “An Anecdotal Story about Pakhom and Stepanida” shares many particularities of traditional mainstream religious folk poetry. Like the majority of religious folk poems, the poem has a written (literary) origin, and may share some motifs and characters with folk tales. However, unlike a folk tale the poem emphasizes the Christian values and teaches its readership to be, first of all, a good Christian.

Motifs	The story entitled “Who Condemns Adam’s sin became a sinner (“The Great Mirror”)	The fable “About Those Who Condemn Other People” by V. Maikov	The folk tale “The Little Mouse”	The poem “An Anecdotal Story about Pakhom and Stepanida”
Envy	+	+	+	+
Condemnation of Adam	+	+	-	+
Condemnation of Eve	-	+	-	+
An instruction given by a stranger to the person who condemns actions by other people	+	-	-	+
The trail	+	+	+	+
A forbidden object: vessel/cup/dish	+(vessel)	+(cup)	+(mug)	+(dish)
Breaking the ban/rule	+	+	+	+
The content of the forbidden object: bird/rat/mouse	+(bird)	+(rat)	+(bird)	+(two mice)
Punishment for breaking the ban/rule	+	+	-	+
Admonition of those who broke the ban	+	+	+	+

THE ORIGIN OF AN UNKNOWN DIDACTICAL POEM “A POEM ABOUT A DESPERATE SINNER” BY THE RUSSIAN OLD BELIEVERS

The second poem examined in this article entitled “A Poem about a Desperate Sinner” discusses the beneficial and powerful nature of confession for everybody and explains that even the Devil himself could be forgiven if he would confess and overcome his pride. The poem also has strong connections with the story number 107, included in “The Great Mirror” under the title “How Man Could Purify His Soul through a Sincere Confession and How the Devil Wanted to Confess” (Derzhavina 1965, 271–272). Both, the poem and story from “The Great Mirror” share the same idea about the beneficial power of confession. Both texts teach the readership humility, one of the core Christian values as according to Christian belief, God would accept a sincere repentance and would forgive the worst of man, a completely lost soul (Derzhavina 1965, 27–272). Both texts also follow the same pattern in the plot development. They tell us a story of how once upon a time, the Devil attempted to confess his sins, went to a priest for confession, but failed, because he could not overcome his pride and repent. However, the author of the poem “About a Desperate Sinner” has modified his characters: the priest from “The Great Mirror’s” story became St Anthony, who at first did not recognize the Devil. He also created a new character, the second Demon/Devil who converses with the Devil:

<i>Демон демону однажды,</i>	<i>Once upon time a Demon met another Demon</i>
<i>Встретясь, так сказал:</i>	<i>And told him:</i>
<i>«Эх, брат, мне давно уж знать желалось,</i>	<i>Brother, for a while I have been edging to know,</i>
<i>Коль из нас кто, бросив зло, Обратился к Богу, Что бы Бог на это отвечал».</i>	<i>If one of the Demon kind would give up the evil deeds and would come to God, What would God have told him?</i>
(Karel'skaya № 91)	

“A Poem about a Desperate Sinner” contains three parts. An unusually long introduction gives us a lesson on the value of being a humble and remorseful person:

<p>Не отчайся, грешник бедный, Хоть и много зол твоих, Будь хоть первый и последний Ты из грешников земных, всех грешней. Но не отчайся и нимало не крушишь. А пред Господом покаяйся И исправиться решишь. (Karel'skaya № 91)</p>	<p>Do not despair, poor sinner, In spite of many of your evil deeds. You could be the worst Among all the sinners. Do not despair, do not grieve. Instead repent to God And become a better person.</p>
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In the main body of the poem we learn the reason why the Devil failed to overcome his pride:

<p>Мне стоять, смиряясь, пред Богом? Мне смириться, старец злой? Как, опять в чину убогом быть мне Господу слугой? Нет, старик, я сам владыка Душ мне преданных грехом. Что до ангельского лика, если мой весь мир кругом. Екой новостью какою хватил меня, старик, Нет, быть Господу слугою я давным давно отвык. Да я рабствовать отвыкнул, старец злой, злой калугер, – И крутятся и бесясь, свистнул и исчезнул Зерефер. (Karel'skaya № 91)</p>	<p>Am I really to stand humbly in front of God? You, an evil old man, you are telling me that I must be humble? One more time, must I become a humble God's servant? No, the old man, I am the Master of All sinners' souls. I do not care about the Angel rank as I rule the world. You, the old man, tried to surprise me with such news, No, I fall out of the habit to be God's servant. No, I fall out of the habit to be a slave. You are the evil man, You are the Evil. Demon, turning round and raging, whistled and disappeared.</p>
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The poem arrives at a logical conclusion and repeats the idea that good Christians must be humble, confess their sins and ask God for forgiveness:

<i>Будь покоен, не отчайся,</i>	<i>Come down, do not despair,</i>
<i>умирительно молись,</i>	<i>pray with tears,</i>
<i>Не забудь, что ты искуплен</i>	<i>Do not forget, Christ shed his blood</i>
<i>кровью Бога твоего</i>	<i>for our sins.</i>
<i>Если дорого так куплен, значит,</i>	<i>If God paid such a high price for</i>
<i>мил ты для него.</i>	<i>you, it means you are dear to Him.</i>

(Karel'skaya № 91)

CONCLUSION

The two poems that I have briefly examined in this article serve as examples of a large and diverse body of folk and authored religious poetry of literary origin known to the Russian Old Believers. Many of the poems were produced by anonymous gifted writers whose names are difficult to trace. I would like to stress, one more time that the Old Believer tradition did not distinguish between the authored poems from the mainstream folk poetry. The religious poetry by well-known and anonymous Russian poets is not an alien element in the Old Believer reading repertoire. The authored poems were included in the Old Believer manuscripts, alongside folk poetry, without references to the origin of the poem. Therefore, it naturally fitted into the collections of poetry containing Christian folk poetry "Stikhovniki". I consider it would be appropriate to draw a parallel between the function of the religious folk poetry in mainstream folklore and the function of authorial and folk poetry that was created in the Old Believer communities. After the acceptance of Christianity in Russia, religious folk poetry became a bridge between the folk and Christian cultures. In the Old Believer tradition, in my opinion, the religious poetry, both authored and folk, became the sphere of folk creativity where educated gifted people could express, in an artistic form, their understanding of contemporary history, society, and the basic dogmas of Christianity. Therefore, more detailed research on the poetry by anonymous Old Believer writers and the Christian folk poetry is a very promising area of Russian Old Believer studies in particular and Russian cultural studies in general.

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