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KIRSHA DANILOV AND THE WRATH OF IVAN THE TERRIBLE

Пришил [цар] корьем ногу правую .........................
К половине ко дубовой, ......................................
Пришишьи ногу правую ......................................
К половине ко дубовой, ......................................
Стал его спрашивать: .................................
"Ох ты гон еси, дядюшка, ......................
Мода Никита Романович! . . . .
Тут воскринкул наш Грозный царь,
"Есть у меня лекари и докторы?
Лечите дядюшке ногу правую,
А с Малюты Скурлюуткина
Снимите с живого шкуру!"

"Song of Ivan’s Wrath," variant ending from Simbirsk Guberniia, published 1864

The wrath of Ivan the Terrible (gnev Groznogo) is the subject of a Russian folk song known in about eighty transcripts (1740s to 1956). The fullest versions begin with panegyric, celebrating Ivan for conquering Tatar strongholds and suppressing “treason” in Russian cities, concentrating at last on Moscow. In the capital, denunciations never substantiated and often clearly false (when brought by the stock villain and executioner Skuratov) are lodged at last against Ivan’s son—usually Fedor—who is summarily condemned to death. The main plot involves the son’s fairytale rescue by his uncle, Nikita Romanovich, and Ivan’s reckoning with Nikita.

1. Some of my observations in this article date back to my seminar on the Kirsha Danilov songbook at Harvard (1965), and some were tentatively expressed in my article, “A Russian Bawdy Song of the Eighteenth Century,” Slavic and East European Journal 20 (1976): 353-70 (nn. 13-16). Further dimensions are explored in a paper presented at a conference on Russian pornography at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, May 22-24, 1998 entitled “Kirsha’s Bawdy Song, Again and Again,” forthcoming in a proceedings ed. Marcus C. Levitt. The present article owes much to the inspiration and example of Norman W. Ingham, University of Chicago, with whom I have exchanged more than a dozen long letters about these materials, beginning in 1989. His view of the matter I expect to see in print before long. Meanwhile, a few of his insights are mentioned and duly credited here.

The song of Ivan’s wrath has been discussed at some length in major Soviet periodicals by the eminent folklorists V. Ia. Propp and B. N. Putilov early in the period of “thaw” when the material could be aired with impunity. A decade ago, many aspects of the matter were reviewed by Maureen Perrie in her book about Ivan’s folkloric image, and Norman Ingham richly and convincingly analyzed the multifarious concept of Ivan’s groza in its historic and artistic dimensions.3 My observations below focus mainly on one variant of the folk song about Ivan’s wrath, from the eighteenth century. This is the text transcribed for the Kirsha Danilov songbook, no later than 1768, bearing a title still enigmatic to folklorists, “Nikite Romanovichu dano selo Preobrazhenskoe.”4 Ultimately the whole plot of this song, in most variants, hinges upon the reversal of Ivan’s wrath, its conversion into benign magnanimity and a reward for Uncle Nikita, who acted against the tsar’s will to save the tsar’s son—from the tsar’s own explosive wrath. The riddle here is the designation of Nikita’s reward as Preobrazhenskoe, a toponym used only in Kirsha’s variant (among eighty), but used as the climax and in a title (added perhaps by a scribe) which further highlights this enigmatic, culminating image. Contextual materials will enable us to propose a meaning.

Kirsha’s variant is in a sense pivotal, because on the one hand it is the earliest full text among the eighty transcripts of “Ivan’s wrath” made in the two centuries down to our own time, and on the other hand, it belongs to Kirsha’s known repertory of seventy highly diverse songs, the fountainhead of modern Russian folklore scholarship, facilitating another tack into our earliest variant of “Ivan’s wrath.”5 Stylistic features of the whole anthology may suggest at least certain potentials of tone and artistic strategy in Kirsha’s item no. 45.


5. M. K. Azadovskii regarded the Kirsha Danilov anthology as “the most remarkable landmark in the study of Russian folklore”: Ocherki po istorii russkoi fol’kloristiki (Moscow: Uchpedgiz, 1958), 85 n. See 171–73, 358–90, and the sequel: Istoriia russkoi fol’kloristiki, t. 2 (Moscow: Uchpedgiz, 1963), index (“Kirsha Danilov”). Further background material and commentary are to be found in articles included in Kirsha Danilov 1901 and Kirsha Danilov 1958.