

Faith Wigzell. *Reading Russian Fortunes: Print Culture, Gender, and Divination in Russia from 1765.* New York and Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xi + 250 pp. \$64.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-58123-3.



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As a twelve-year old eccentric genius, Ivan Babichev, the representative of doomed, Old Regime romanticism in Yuri Olesha's 1927 satire, *Envy*, purports to invent a device that can make a person dream whatever its user wishes. Babichev's father, a stern classicist, asks for a dream of the Battle of Pharsalus but threatens harsh punishment if the dream does not appear. Unfortunately for Ivan, the dream comes not to the father but to a servant, who interprets the horses in the battle as a sign that her would-be fiancée will lie to her. The father beats Ivan, the mother goes into shock, and the maid rejects her suitor's request for her hand. A few weeks later, Ivan manages to convince his father that a hot-air balloon flying over their hometown is actually a gigantic soapbubble of his, the son's, creation. That night, the battle of Pharsalus does come to the father, albeit in a disturbing vision that "makes fun of history": "the battle was decided by Balearic slingsmen who arrived in hot-air balloons." [1]

For Olesha's contemporaries, as Wigzell makes clear in her *Reading Russian Fortunes*, this

miniature comedy of errors depended in part on a series of cultural inversions. The dream replays a scene from the past rather than revealing the future. Not only are dreams induced rather than interpreted, but the "sorcerer" is only a callow male apprentice rather than the usual wizened matron. The skeptical father nonetheless submits to the dream inducer while the mother remains on the sidelines, even though in many Russian households, as Wigzell shows, women were the most avid participants in dream-magic. Only the uneducated servant is cast to type, and her earnest belief in the dream's divinatory nature makes her, like her predecessors scattered throughout Russian belles lettres, into an object of humor for those enlightened enough to be in on the joke. [2]

Yet those who, like Ivan's father, seek to invert the normal process of dream magic, or who, even more ambitious like Wigzell, seek to invert all Russian divinatory practices by interpreting the interpreters --in short, all would-be scholars of dreams and divination should pay heed to the outcome of the comedy, in which the dream "makes fun of history." Unlike the future itself,

how people have tried and still try to predict the future may be knowable. Nonetheless, like the dreams which commonly serve as their object, divinatory cultures and practices are fraught with ambiguity, and the scholar who would assay them need bring a wide range of sources and finely-tuned analytical tools to bear.

Though highly informative, Wizgell's history of Russian divinatory culture from the eighteenth century to the present fails to capture her subject's rich antinomies. *Reading Russian Fortunes* begins with the publication in Russia of the first texts that claimed to hold the keys to the future. She explores the range of fortune-telling books that appeared in Russia thereafter, from geomantic oracles to instructions on how to read coffee grounds, from cartomantic tomes to the dream-books (*sonniki*) that became the Russian fortune-telling genre par excellence. Narrowly focused on these texts and the "secondary" oral culture they support, she only considers pre-existing "folk" divinatory cultures as "a context and cultural residue" (p. 3) and virtually ignores the arguably parallel elite cultures of theosophy, spiritualism, and the occult. She finds that, unlike other popular subcultures, which are ostensibly obsessed with novelty, fortune-telling was remarkably "conservative," with readers preferring the old reliable interpretations and the (generally foreign) prophets who made them (pp. 1-2 and ch. 7).

As enlightened elites became disdainful of the threat to rationality posed by divinatory books, she argues, fortune-telling itself became increasingly feminine and strategically "trivialized," a practice of women around kitchen tables that posed as a "harmless" domestic diversion. Divinatory practices thus became unworthy of the effort to extirpate them, at least until 1917. The apostles of a "scientific" means of predicting the future who seized power that year could not bear competitors, and so they deprived divinatory culture of its texts and forced it underground. But as the Communist edifice began to crumble in the late

1980s, this furtive and remarkably hardy culture began to spring through the cracks. Today, as Russia's future becomes ever more uncertain, fortune-telling is enjoying a renaissance.

What hampers Wizgell's ability to peer into this fascinating subculture are the restricted range of materials and questions she considers. Having scoured Russia for these fortune-telling books -- even Imperial depository libraries often did not acquire copies -- Wizgell understandably wanted to train her analytical spotlight on them. Books, however, can only tell us so much of how their readers understood and used them. Wizgell ruefully notes the lack of direct references to fortune-telling books in literary and other descriptions of everyday life, even though publishing statistics show that divinatory texts were always big sellers. Those references which survive are often throw-away lines --like the quatrain in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* on Tat'iana's devotion to Martyn Zadeka's book of predictions-- that dismiss fortune-telling as vulgar, feminine superstition. Clearly, these are neither revealing nor trustworthy. Though Wizgell was able to find some suggestive depictions, much about fortune-telling remains enshrouded in mystery. Wizgell attempts to sidestep this gap by giving a cursory diachronic analysis of changes in fortune-telling books and an overly involved description of the sages who supposedly wrote them.

Wizgell refuses to make deeper forays into elite culture to explain not just how fortune-telling books were received but how, more generally, fortune-telling practices and beliefs were understood. In Wizgell's rather simplistic account, the cultural force of the Enlightenment, with its disdain for popular irrationalism, conquers the imagination of Russia's intelligentsia after the 1830s. The occasional waves of elite interest in magic and the paranormal that followed are dismissed out of hand as fads that quickly "faded from view or failed ever to attract a broader clientele" (p. 8). In fact, as a recently published collec-

tion on the occult in Russian culture makes clear, elite fascination with secret knowledge that could, among other things, reveal the future, had deep roots and influenced the arts and society throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[3]

The emergence and early popularity among the elite of fortune-telling books in the mid- to late- eighteenth century traced by Wizgell may well have been an important phase in the development of this fascination with irrationalism. Once they became the common property of petty tradesmen and provincial noblewomen, however, the fortune-telling books lost their cachet. In their place, spiritualist impresarios such as Madame Blavatskaia offered more "refined" methods of peering into the future to clients anxious to preserve their elite status. In other words, popular fortune-telling books may have served as a key backdrop against which newly emerging occult practices distinguished themselves. Wizgell never considers the possibility that the fortune-telling books played a role in a larger cultural system (albeit an elite one) and thus misses an opportunity to further illuminate her sources.

Of course, elite disciples of irrationalism were not confined to occultists. From the early nineteenth century on, romantics insisted that the soul could apprehend a more profound truth than that available to the senses and the intellect. Not surprisingly, such a *weltanschauung* lent credibility to fortune-telling; Pushkin, for example, read dreambooks and patronized fortune-tellers (pp. 71, 140) [4]. Wizgell suggests that such romantic sentiments cooled after 1830, and that thereafter elite critics denounced fortune-telling books as obscurantist trash which drove out "good" Russian literature (p. 76).

But merely because cultural elites announced their superiority to this popular subculture does not mean that they were unaffected by it. In vain will the reader wait for Wizgell to explore possible connections between the most popular forms of fortune-telling texts, dreambooks, and the fasci-

nation with dreams that pervades Russian literature from Pushkin onward. Not only would it be interesting to know if dreambooks constituted an unacknowledged "code" that explains the symbolism in dreams in literature, but such an exploration might provide evidence on the degree to which various groups believed in dream divination.[5] At the very least, placing dreambooks in the larger context of belles lettres might allow one to trace the development of a psychological, rather than premonitory, interpretation of dreams in Russia. As it stands, Wizgell too often assumes that interpreting dreams serves the much the same therapeutic function as it does for those of us living in the post-Freudian West, even though the exegeses suggested by dreambooks direct the dreamer's attention to the outside world rather than the inner self (see, for example, p. 50).

While Wizgell does try to place fortune-telling practices in the context of pre-existing folk fortune-telling culture, she ties herself in knots explaining the early and abiding popularity of dreambooks in Russia. Initially, she claims that before one can answer the question of whether or not folk oneiromancy (dream divination) paved the way for the ready acceptance of dreambooks, one has "to establish that East Slav oneiromantic traditions were not contaminated by textual imports prior to the influx of translated texts" (p. 57).

But given the lack of sources on pre-modern folk dream divination beliefs and practices, in order to establish this claim Wizgell falls back on ethnographic sources from the late nineteenth century, a time when, as she notes in a later chapter, "a high proportion of the literate or semi-literate owned" at least one fortune-telling book (p. 108 and the notes on p. 204).[6] Then she boldly if contradictorily asserts that the possibility that the Slavs may have "acquired" oneiromantic culture from other peoples is irrelevant to her conclusion that "the Slavs possessed an indigenous tradition, little touched in historical times by outside influences, and retained in rural lore." (p. 58). Finally,

Wizgell argues that "common psychological processes offer the only credible explanation" for why dreambooks and folk oneiromancy overlap (p. 60). Even if her largely "contaminated" sources supported such a conclusion, it would hardly explain why dreambooks *in particular* were a popular fortune-telling text in Russia.

I have tried to untangle the thread of Wizgell's argument here because, I think, it reflects the inherent difficulties in the hunt for "authentic" Russian folk culture. Committed to such a concept, scholars often chase chimeras in suspect sources and reject out of hand alternative explanations that are equally plausible given the paucity of evidence. Uncovering more information on pre-modern Russian folk culture would, of course, be of great interest, but, at least as far as fortune-telling is concerned, it may not be possible.

More importantly, it may not be necessary. The genres of Russian fortune-telling literature were, as Wizgell argues, largely set in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when both the number of publishers and readers was relatively small. In such an undeveloped market, readers could not exert much leverage on presses to produce the kinds of books they wanted; indeed, insofar as printed books were a novelty, readers' tastes could, within reason, be shaped by what publishers offered. And even when the market became more developed in the middle of the nineteenth century, publishers retained enough power to channel readers' tastes in more profitable directions [7]. Moreover, as Wizgell herself argues, readers by the nineteenth century had been conditioned by the past "success" of certain collections of dream interpretations as reliable, and so they did not demand wholly new genres of divinatory texts.

The reality of publishers' market power (which should not, I should make clear, be confused with hegemony) means that we need not find some pre-existing oneiromantic template into which dreambooks fit to explain their lasting pop-

ularity. Pirated from foreign sources in the eighteenth century, dreambooks were comparatively cheap for publishers to produce. Readers were attracted by these books' claims to predict the future (which is indeed, as Wizgell suggests, a universal human desire), by their foreign origin, which gave them an almost magical aura of authority, and by their ease of use (everyone dreams).[8] Other factors, such as the relatively poor level of education in Russia, protected dreambooks from meaningful competition from divinatory genres that were popular elsewhere in Europe, such as astrology (pp. 36-8). Out of such seemingly superficial factors is the long-lasting popularity of some cultural forms forged.

Rather than engage in a largely futile quest for folk culture's contribution to the *origins* of a print-based, urban popular divinatory culture, a more rewarding area of study might be the *ongoing interaction* between the divinatory cultures of peasants, on the one hand, and those of literate urbanites, on the other. Wizgell makes some interesting observations on this score, showing, for example, how cartomancy (reading the future through cards) spread from the nobility to the peasantry via servants who traveled with their masters to the cities. But while she does not shy away from conjecture elsewhere in her book, she claims that speculation on whether or not dreambooks affected folk oneiromancy is "pointless" (p. 62). Finding sources on this interaction would indeed be difficult, but not impossible; one would have to move beyond works that directly refer to fortune-telling to those which describe everyday life more generally.[9] Wizgell's categorical refusal to take up the question of cultural interaction (her word for it is "contamination") suggests a deep-seated desire to preserve, as it were, a pure folk culture in the terms of her analysis.[10]

Ironically enough, Wizgell opens her study by noting that fortune-telling's association with the despised categories of the feminine, the urban, and the popular had until recently rendered it vir-

tually invisible to scholars. But a mere reevaluation of these categories cannot substitute for an attempt to move beyond them. By focusing so relentlessly on fortune-telling books and on the culture that sprung up around them, she has, in a sense, reinscribed the boundaries behind which divinatory culture was hidden. *Reading Russian Fortunes* provides a solid introduction to the subject as Wizgell defines it. Unfortunately, her conception is so narrow that her work is of only modest value to scholars of Russian culture.

NOTES

[1]. See Clarence Brown's translation of *Envy* in his edited collection, *The Portable Twentieth-Century Russian Reader* Revised and Updated Edition (New York and London, 1985), pp. 310-4. Wizgell does not refer to this novella in her work.

[2]. If Wizgell is right and elite and folk interpretations of horses in dreams uniformly agreed that horses were a symbol of enmity (p. 59), then it would appear that Olesha had not done his homework on dream symbolism. Perhaps in Odessa, whence hailed Olesha, horses in dreams do stand for prevarication.

[3]. See Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, ed., *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (Ithaca, NY, 1997). Wizgell does not cite this collection, perhaps because it appeared too late for her to discuss in her book. Her discussion of the parallels between Soviet Marxism and fortune-telling (pp. 165-7) strongly resembles Rosenthal's attempt to draw connections between the occult and Stalinism. See also Shoshana Keller, "Review of Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, ed., *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*," H-Russia, H-Net Reviews, March, 1998. URL: <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=16609890089662>.

[4]. Wizgell presents indirect literary evidence that other Romantic figures like Bestuzhev-Marlinksi and Lermontov may have also made use of divinatory practices; see pp. 52, 140.

[5]. Wizgell notes that it would be interesting to speculate on the degree to which dreambooks might have actually conditioned Russians to dream in certain ways, but never takes the next step to examine the literary sources that might shed light on this question; see pp. 29-30.

[6]. The only credible source on pre-existing folk oneiromantic culture that she was able to find was M. Chulkov's *Slovar' russkikh sueverii* (1782).

[7]. It bears noting that the publisher I. D. Sytin had a virtual monopoly on cheap books by 1915. While he could not have reached this pinnacle without meeting the demands of the market, the lack of serious competition meant that he could, within limits, continue to offer readers what he had done in the past. See Wizgell, pp. 104-7. Similar criticisms could be made of Jeffrey Brooks' pathbreaking *When Russia Learned to Read* (Princeton, 1985), which tends to rather simplistically equate the values in the books that sell well with the values of the readership. Though Wizgell disagrees with Brooks on some minor points, her analysis largely follows in his footsteps; see chapter 8.

[8]. As Richard Wortman's magisterial study of the symbolism of the autocracy makes clear, even before Peter I, "foreignness" had been invested with authority in Russia. See his *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, vol. 1 (Princeton, 1995).

[9]. The famous Tenishev ethnographic survey of the Russian peasantry, conducted in the late nineteenth century, contained a number of questions on divinatory practices; see B. M. Firsov and I. G. Kiseleva, *Byt velikorusskikh krest'ian-zemlepashchtsev: opisaniye materialov etnograficheskogo biuro kniazia V. N. Tenisheva* (St. Petersburg, 1993), pp. 405-409. Unfortunately, this particular collection does not contain answers to the pertinent questions on fortune-telling, though one can safely assume that the Tenishev archive

contains more than a few responses on these questions.

[9]. Such an attachment to a pure folk culture, it must be said, is somewhat hard to fathom, given her gentle but germane criticism of the Russian ethnolinguistic school's insistence on studying "integral" Russian folk culture; see p. 6.

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