

BRONISLAVA KERBELYTE, *THE TYPES OF FOLK LEGENDS: THE STRUCTURAL-SEMANTIC CLASSIFICATION OF LITHUANIAN AETIOLOGICAL, MYTHOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL LEGENDS*, Saint-Petersburg, Europeyskiy Dom, 2001, 606 pp.

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Lithuanian scholar of folkloristics Bronislava Kerbelyte appeared in the very first issue of *E.L.O.*, in 1995, with a paper expounding, in an inevitably condensed form, her new concept of classification of folktales, stemming from a specific system of analysis and description of narrative texts.¹ Professor Kerbelyte's model was translated into Russian ("Historical Development of the Structure and Semantics of Folk Tales", 1991) and has been successfully tested with her classification of a huge *corpus* of Lithuanian folktales. Apart from papers or resumés explaining this system of classification and the theory underlying it, the non-Russian or Lithuanian speaking world has been deprived of any translation of either Kerbelyte's Catalogue of Lithuanian Folktales using her system of classification, nor to a manual that we could follow should we want to make use of it. The ignorance that "the west" maintains to this publications may well stem from the fact that there is little hope of ever having a consensual scientific index of folktales; Propp's attempt was a turning-point in the study of fairytales and much more, but nothing changed when it came to classifying folktales. When it comes to European folktales, we tend not to think twice and use the "Aarne & Thompson", which, with all its shortcomings, became the consensual *lingua franca* for the use of (at least European) folktale scholars. All one hopes is that the new revision under way will improve it and enlarge its scope.

But when it comes to classifying legends (or, for that matter, non-European folktales), folklorists are still uncertain. And Bronislava Kerbelyte may have an answer: *The Types of Folk Legends* is a bilingual Index of Lithuanian legends, published in both Russian and English, which unfolds her model allowing one to follow the method of its practice.

The work starts with a fundamental introduction — followed by its 15 page translation — which explains the author's principles of classification as applied to the legends. B. Kerbelyte had first organised the *corpus* of over thirty thousand Lithuanian legends according to the recommendations of the International Commission as it appeared in *Fabula* 1960, Bd. 3. Legends were therefore first divided into aetiological, mythological and historical; the aetiological were then subdivided according to the objects whose origin they explain (cosmic objects, natural phenomena, the earth, etc); the mythological were organised according to the mythical characters (fate, fortune, misfortune,

¹ "Structural-Semantic Principles of Formation of the Types of the Folktale", *Estudos de Literatura Oral*, 1 (1995), pp. 125-130.

death, etc); the historical legends were subdivided into legends about natural monuments, historical monuments, etc. (B. Kerbelyte, "The Catalogue of Lithuanian Local Legends", 1973). These sub-headings proved however to be ineffectual, as the same plot applied to different aetiologies, to different mythical characters and to different historical situations. "Thus, the classification of texts by both the objects they explain and by particular mythical beings considerably impedes the discernment of plot types. (...) For example, a person's encounter with a water or forest spirit makes up especially popular legends in Russian folklore, while the devil, an old man, a monster, etc. figure in similar plots of Lithuanian legends. Thus, in order to find the analogous variants of a particular plot in the legends of some particular nation, it is necessary to study all of that genre's plot descriptions in the catalogue" (pp. 25-26).

In her classification of legends, Kerbelyte maintains the three main headings of Aetiological, Mythological and Historical legends, and she goes on to assign the same three sub-headings to each of them: Correct- (1), Incorrect- (2) and Neutral Conduct (3) according to the subject's behaviour during the conflict. The classification then proceeds following what Kerbelyte named the "structural-semantic" system of analysis and classification of texts, by following a system of minimal plot descriptions, what she names *elementary plots* (EP), "i.e., independent plots or fragments of complex plots in which a single conflict of two characters or two character groups arises when the hero strives towards some single goal" (p. 28). In order to be analysed, a legend is subdivided into its elementary plots (EPs) and then first described in a concrete level. The structural-semantic analysis which will then take place consists of a gradual process of abstraction which takes place in three successive stages. The cast of Propp's character's roles is drastically reduced to two: the *hero* — the character whose fate is of interest in the EP — and the *antipode* — the character who conflicts with the hero (p. 29). When we arrive to the third level of abstraction of the narrative, we have its type: "all the EPs in which the hero's acts are interpreted the same way on the third semantic level belong to the same EP type." (p. 32). Based on her analysis of thousands of Lithuanian folk narratives, the author has compiled 152 elementary plot types, with several versions (we would call them sub-types) each. On the structural level, Kerbelyte established the existence of six *simple structures* depending on the different articulation of EPs within the plot, and these also enter in the classification of the type.

In order to explain her method of analysing and classifying a legend by gradually distilling it into its semantic and structural components, Kerbelyte starts with the following sample text:

A girl was weaving on Saturday evening. She suddenly sees a very grey little woman crawl out from underneath the stove. The old woman says to the girl: "Let me, dear daughter, I shall weave a little for you." Oh, but the old woman can weave fast! The shuttle falls to the ground. She says: "Hand it to me." The girl bends down and sees — this old woman has a tail and hooves. She understands that this is a devil. She runs away fast, crawls underneath the stove, and grabs a rooster. The rooster crows. The old woman says: "Your good fortune, girl. I would have showed you how to weave on a Saturday evening". (p. 28)

The text is then clarified and divided into its elementary plots:

- A. It is Saturday evening; a girl is present [To weave or do any kind of work on Saturday evening is forbidden.] The girl weaves. The girl suddenly sees a little old woman crawl out from underneath the stove. The old woman starts to weave instead of the girl.
- B. The old woman who has crawled out from underneath the stove weaves very fast. The shuttle falls down to the ground. The old woman tells the girl to hand it to her. The girl bends down [to pick the shuttle] and sees that the old woman has a tail and hooves. The girl understands that the old woman is the devil.
- C. The grey old woman with a tail and hooves weaves very fast. The girl runs away, crawls underneath the stove, and grabs a rooster. The rooster crows. The old woman says that this is the girl's good fortune because she would have punished her for weaving on a Saturday night. [The old woman disappears]

I shall now partly transcribe the description of EPs (A, B and C) on the first semantic level:

- A. *Initial Situation:* It is Saturday evening, a hero — a young person with ordinary abilities — is present.
Command Act: [It is forbidden to weave on Saturday evening.]
Hero's Act: The hero weaves on Saturday evening. The antipode — old, [with more than ordinary abilities], foreign to the hero [wanting to punish the hero] — crawls out from a place where people usually do not go. The antipode weaves in the hero's place.
Result: The hero is beside the strande antipode.
- B. *Initial Situation:* The antipode completes the hero's job faster than the hero.
Hero's Act: The antipode accidentally drops a work tool and asks the hero to hand it to him. ...
Etc. ...

Second semantic level, also partly transcribed:

- A. *Initial Situation:* It is a special time, the hero is present
Command Act: [The hero is forbidden to work.]
Hero's Act: The hero demonstrates that he is disregarding the prohibition to work at a particular time.
Result: The hero finds himself in an unforeseen situation
- B. *Initial Situation:* The hero is beside the antipode of uncertain nature and extraordinary abilities.
Hero's Act: The hero finds himself in the situation where he notices the antipode's peculiar characteristics.
Result: The hero gets information.
Etc. ...

Third semantic level:

- A. *The hero demonstrates that he does not uphold tradition.*
- B. *The hero creates the situation in which the antipode's true characteristics are revealed*
- C. *The hero affects the antipode by a special action or means. (pp. 28-30)*

The hierarchical description of the legend singles out "A" as the principal elementary plot (EP) and therefore the one that determines the type. This legend

type appears, therefore, within the second group, Mythological Legends, in the Incorrect Conduct block, where it appears under the heading 3.2.0.3. *The Hero Demonstrates that he Does Not Uphold Tradition*, where it is placed according to its connection with the EP determining the final result (C, also numbered) and the legend's macrostructure, defined as "The hero finds himself in a dangerous situation → the hero liberates himself".

This very rough idea of how the system works shouldn't defeat the reader, it intends solely to give an outline of what already is an outline, the author's preliminary explanation of her cataloguing system, behind which there is a theory well-tested in practice. Bronislava Kerbelyte's book is not a manual, nor an Index that we can easily apply to our regional *corpora*; it is a catalogue of the Lithuanian legends which applies a classificatory model which makes sense and works. It is Propp's dream insofar as it provides a coherent, hierarchical, "scientific" grid for classifying oral narratives. It is particularly tempting as no consensus has been reached yet as to the classification of legends and it is developed within the main groupings familiar to all (Aetiological, Mythological and Historical legends), the same grid of a maximum of 152 types being applied to each of them. We don't have the translation of a manual for Kerbelyte's Semantic-Structural model; but we now have a compacted explanation of her model in the Introduction of *The Types of the Folk Legends*; we don't have an Index by which we can try our own material; but we now have, side by side with the Russian language (and awkward for the reader because of that), the application of an Index in a Catalogue, which is a very impressive demonstration that the system works, showing the model at work, a model that we cannot help but having a go at testing. We now look forward to the translations that will open the doors to a path-finding option of understanding and classifying folktales and legends. May we just hope that they won't take 40 years to appear, as did Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*.

