

From Folklore to Fantasy: How *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale*
move beyond retellings

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Abstract

Fairy tales have long influenced fantasy literature, providing a foundation for storytelling that blends the mystical with the moral. This thesis examines how two English-language fantasy novels, Naomi Novik's *Spinning Silver* (2019) and Katherine Arden's *The Bear and the Nightingale* (2017), draw upon fairy tale structures and Slavic folklore to create fantasy narratives. By analysing these fantasy novels through a close reading, this research uncovers how contemporary fantasy literature reinterprets folkloric storytelling elements, such as narrative functions, motifs, and characters. It argues that both authors move beyond retellings, using fairy tale logic and folklore to construct immersive, morally complex worlds that reflect and reinterpret folklore for a contemporary audience.

Keywords: Naomi Novik, Katherine Arden, fairy tales, folklore, fantasy, Slavic folklore, fairy tale structures

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1. Introduction

Fairy tales and folklore have long served as a means of cultural transmission, reflecting societal values, fears, and traditions while evolving across generations.¹ Slavic folklore, in particular, is deeply tied to oral storytelling traditions.² Families would gather around the stove fire and listen to tales told by their elders. These tales often contained supernatural beings and spirits, such as Baba Yaga (an ogress), Frost (the demon of winter), and the Leshii (a forest spirit), who played significant roles in shaping cultural beliefs.³ As fairy tales transitioned into literary forms in early modern Europe, they began to settle into recognisable narrative conventions and motifs. These stories, often populated by archetypal characters and structured around trials or moral lessons, maintained their relevance by adapting to changing historical and cultural periods, yet staying true to the now conventional narrative form.⁴ Fantasy literature has long drawn inspiration from fairy tales and folklore, using their structures, motifs, and logic to create imaginative worlds.⁵ In recent years, fantasy novels have particularly shown a renewed interest in the inclusion of fairy tales, especially Slavic ones.⁶ This trend can be seen in the increased use of Slavic settings, mythology, and traditional world-view, particularly among Western authors writing in English.

This thesis is situated at the intersection of fantasy and folklore studies, with a particular focus on Russian folklore and its presence in English-language fantasy. Within this academic field, scholars such as Jack Zipes and Maria Nikolajeva have examined the re-presentation of fairy tales in contemporary literature. Zipes researched the shift from oral storytelling to literary novels, and Nikolajeva researched how the straightforwardness of fairy tales changed into the moral ambiguity and psychological depth that denotes the fantasy genre.⁷ Meanwhile, Max Lüthi laid the groundwork for understanding the aesthetic qualities and formal features of fairy tales, and Vladimir Propp founded the creation of a morphology for the folktale.⁸ These theories offer tools to trace how newer texts inherit, subvert, or

¹ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* (University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

² Elizabeth Warner, *Russian Myths* (University of Texas Press, 2002).

³ Warner, *Russian Myths*.

⁴ Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*.

⁵ Maria Nikolajeva, "Fairy Tale and Fantasy: From Archaic to Postmodern," *Marvels & Tales* 17, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 138–56, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mat.2003.0014>; Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*.

⁶ Larisa Fialkova, "Rus, Russia, and Ukraine in Alternative Slavic Fantasy by English-Language Writers," *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 24 (October 4, 2021): 24, <https://doi.org/10.3986/sms20212403>.

⁷ Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*; Nikolajeva, "Fairy Tale and Fantasy: From Archaic to Postmodern,".

⁸ Max Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature* (Indiana University Press, 1986); Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition* (University of Texas Press, 2010).

reshape these conventions. Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* further demonstrates the persistence of recurring narrative elements, motifs, across time and geography.⁹ However, much of the existing scholarship continues to focus on direct retellings of fairy tales or canonically Western tales, such as research done by Karen E. Rowe on the portrayal of feminism in Western fairy tales.¹⁰ Furthermore, as Larisa Fialkova points out, Slavic folklore has been significantly under-researched in English-language contemporary fantasy, despite its growing prominence in the genre.¹¹ This leaves a research gap on how contemporary fantasy novels, notably those with a Slavic cultural background, reconfigure and incorporate fairy tale structures in more implicit forms to construct new narratives. Some recent studies have begun to address this intersection, such as Fialkova's article "Rus, Russia, and Ukraine in Alternative Slavic Fantasy by English-Language Writers". She writes on the logic of interaction between characters of Ukrainian and Russian descent and Slavic folk plots.¹² However, none have applied the structural and stylistic approaches mentioned previously alongside cultural frameworks in the analysis of contemporary Slavic-inspired fantasy. This thesis aims to contribute to that growing area of research by analysing two contemporary fantasy novels that do not merely reference traditional tales but build upon their narratives and worldviews.

To explore these ideas, this thesis focuses on two English-language novels from American authors: Naomi Novik's *Spinning Silver* (2019) and Katherine Arden's *The Bear and the Nightingale* (2017).¹³ Both novels are contemporary fantasy narratives situated in Eastern Europe, and both have mainly taken inspiration from Russian folklore. *Spinning Silver*, set in Lithvas, a medieval Eastern European inspired kingdom, follows three young women: Miryem, a moneylender's daughter who claims she can turn silver into gold; Irina, a noblewoman forced to marry a tsar who is possessed by a fire demon called the devourer; and Wanda, a peasant girl escaping an abusive home. Their fates become entangled as magical forces threaten their world. When Miryem is taken to the Staryk realm of winter as a result of a magical bargain, she must use cunning to survive in a world bound by strange magical laws. Irina, who discovered her ability to move between realms using jewellery made from Staryk

⁹ Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folk Tales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-books, and Local Legends* (Bloomington, Ind, 1932), https://ia600301.us.archive.org/18/items/Thompson2016MotifIndex/Thompson_2016_Motif-Index.pdf

¹⁰ Karen E. Rowe, "Feminism and Fairy Tales," *Women S Studies* 6, no. 3 (January 1, 1979), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.1979.9978487>.

¹¹ Fialkova, "Rus, Russia, and Ukraine in Alternative Slavic Fantasy by English-Language Writers.", 24.

¹² Fialkova, "Rus, Russia, and Ukraine in Alternative Slavic Fantasy by English-Language Writers."

¹³ Naomi Novik, *Spinning Silver* (Pan Books, 2019); Katherine Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale* (New York: Del Rey, 2017).

silver, works to outwit the demon inside her husband and prevent the destruction of her world. As the winter realm encroaches upon the mortal world and the fire demon seeks to consume all, the three heroines draw on their resilience and cleverness to confront supernatural threats and reshape their own destinies.¹⁴ *The Bear and the Nightingale* follows Vasya, a girl in fourteenth-century Rus' who has the ability to see and speak to spirits and creatures found in Russian folklore. As Christianity tightens its grip on her village, the old ways are abandoned, weakening the spirits that protect the community. Vasya's stepmother, who also sees the spirits but believes them to be demons, and an ambitious priest, Konstantin, continuously try to suppress Vasya. Meanwhile, Medved¹⁵, the Bear, a chaotic being of death and destruction, begins to awaken. Vasya finds an unlikely ally in Morozko, a frost being of death, who saves her twice from Medved's clutches. As fear spreads and the village falls into danger, Vasya must embrace her gift and beliefs and defy social expectations to protect her family and confront the rising darkness.¹⁶ These novels are not retellings of single tales, but imaginative reworkings of traditional stories and folkloric imagery. Their engagement with fairy tale logic and Slavic myth invites reconsideration of the role folklore plays in fantasy literature, whether as narrative scaffolding, a form of cultural expression, or a vehicle for moral guidance

This leads to the main question this thesis tries to answer: How do *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale* adapt and expand upon traditional fairy tale structures and Russian folkloric elements within the context of contemporary fantasy literature? This thesis argues that *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale* reimagine and expand upon traditional fairy tales and Slavic folklore by integrating narrative functions, stylistic features, and mythological figures into richly layered fantasy worlds. This thesis uses close reading as its primary method of analysis, drawing on a range of theoretical frameworks to interpret how structure, characters, and settings are shaped by fairy tales and folklore. Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* offers a model for analysing recurring narrative functions in fairy tales, while Max Lüthi's *The European Folktale: Form and Nature* identifies five key stylistic features that characterise traditional storytelling. Stith Thompson's motif-index serves as a catalogue for identifying the motifs that persist in these narratives. Elizabeth Warner's *Russian Myths* and Larisa Fialkova's research on the use of Slavic folklore in Western fantasy

¹⁴ Novik, *Spinning Silver*; This thesis focusses mainly on the storyline of Miryem.

¹⁵ The word 'medved' means bear in several Slavic languages such as, Slovene, Slovak, Russian Ukrainian, Serbian, and Czech.

¹⁶ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

provide essential cultural and mythological context, shedding light on the significance and transformation of Slavic folkloric material in English-language fantasy.¹⁷

Chapter 2 of this thesis expands upon the key concepts and theoretical frameworks used in this study. After which chapter 3 analyses how *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale* adapt, subvert, or reject fairy tale structures, features, and motifs. Following that, chapter 4 explores the use of Russian folklore and fairy tales in both novels. It will conclude by reflecting on how Novik and Arden have adapted fairy tales in their respective narratives.

¹⁷ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*; Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*; Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folk Tales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-books, and Local Legends*; Warner, *Russian Myths*; Fialkova, "Rus, Russia, and Ukraine in Alternative Slavic Fantasy by English-Language Writers."

2. Fairy tales, Folklore, and Fantasy: Defining the Frameworks

The novels discussed in this thesis are inspired by fairy tales and their characters, drawing on the supernatural, and folk-literature motifs to shape their narratives. To properly examine how these elements function in Naomi Novik's *Spinning Silver* and Katherine Arden's *The Bear and the Nightingale*, this chapter will lay out the theoretical foundation and methodology. It begins by defining key concepts such as the genre definitions of folklore, fairy tales, and fantasy. It will then outline four theoretical models used to study fairy tales' form, content, and context. Propp's structuralist approach and Lüthi's stylistic analysis offer essential tools for understanding narrative functions and motifs, while Thompson's classification system provides further insight into recurring folkloric elements, and Warner's work on Russian myths contextualises the cultural materials reimaged by the novels.¹⁸ Together, these theories will form the conceptual foundation for this thesis, offering a multi-dimensional approach to analysing how Novik and Arden employ and transform fairy tale elements within their respective fantasy narratives.

2.1 Defining key concepts

As Tzvetan Todorov notes, "a genre is always defined in relation to the genres adjacent to it",¹⁹ suggesting that genres do not exist in isolation but acquire meaning through their differences and similarities with related forms. In the case of this thesis, folklore, fairy tales, and fantasy are deeply interconnected yet distinct in their narrative functions, styles, and cultural significance. Understanding how these genres overlap and diverge is necessary for analysing how fantasy literature reinterprets folkloric storytelling elements.

¹⁸ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*; Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*; Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folk Tales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-books, and Local Legends*; Warner, *Russian Myths*.

¹⁹ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Cornell University Press, 1975), 27.

2.1.1 Folklore

‘Folklore’ refers to an overarching genre that encompasses many forms of cultural expression that are based on oral tradition.²⁰ It is a term for the body of traditional beliefs, customs, stories, superstitions, and songs of a community that are passed on from one generation to the next by process of repetition.²¹ Folklore includes folk songs, myths, legends, proverbs, spells, rituals, beliefs, and folktales which are traditional stories passed on from mouth to mouth, such as fables and fairy tales.²² Well-known examples from English folklore include stories of King Arthur, Robin Hood, and Beowulf, which illustrate how such narratives often blend mythic, heroic, and moral elements that reflect a community’s values, fears, social norms, and culture.²³ However, this thesis shall use the general definition of folklore as: “the traditional stories and culture of a group of people”²⁴ that are shared orally.

2.1.2 Fairy tale

Fairy tales are narratives that “have their roots in archaic society”²⁵ and originated in oral folk tradition as a subcategory of folktales. Nevertheless, oral tradition is not what defines fairy tales, but it does influence their brevity and clarity, as they were designed with a rigid, formulaic style in order to aid the storyteller.²⁶ Jack Zipes explains that the change from oral fairy tales into their literary forms was started by women in the late 17th century.²⁷ They were initially meant for the literary adult, and later were readjusted for children.²⁸ At first glance, it might seem that the adjustment was made for entertainment purposes only, but according to Zipes fairy tales also had a didactic function and served to educate through entertainment.²⁹ Fairy tales similarly addressed “social issues such as obligation, sex roles, class differences, power, and decorum”.³⁰ Karen E. Rowe agrees with Zipes and goes even further by arguing that fairy tales “have always been one of culture’s primary mechanisms for inculcating roles and behaviors”.³¹ She reinforces this by stating that traditional western fairy tales promote

²⁰ Chris Baldick, “folklore,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780198715443.001.0001>.

²¹ Baldick, “folklore.”

²² Baldick, “folklore.”

²³ Warner, *Russian Myths*.

²⁴ “Folklore,” March 5, 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/folklore>.

²⁵ Nikolajeva, “Fairy Tale and Fantasy: From Archaic to Postmodern,” 138.

²⁶ Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*, 100.

²⁷ Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*, 21.

²⁸ Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*, 18.

²⁹ Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*, 32.

³⁰ Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*, 33.

³¹ Rowe, “Feminism and Fairy Tales,” 210.

ideals of passive grace, beauty, and submission as female virtues, showing that fairy tales represent idealised forms of social conduct and relationships of their time.³² Both *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale* clearly echo these social functions—Miryam’s bargains and Vasya’s obedience to household spirits both reflect classical motifs of fairy tales—yet each novel reconfigures these motifs to grant agency and moral complexity to its heroine.³³

Fairy tales possess their own distinguishing characteristics. They often employ a minimal description of setting, rely on archetypal roles, such as the hero, the villain, and the magical helper, and conclude with a symbolic resolution, which is often a ‘happily ever after’. These characteristics distinguish them from myths, which explain the origin of the world, and legends, which claim historical integrity.³⁴

As this thesis will demonstrate, the novels examined in this study draw upon a recognisable set of fairy tale conventions, even though no single definition can capture every variation of the fairy tale genre. Both *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale* feature bargains with supernatural beings, magical transformations of objects/animals and people, clear moral stakes, and archetypal figures, all hallmarks of traditional fairy tales as described by Zipes, Lüthi and Rowe.³⁵ This study therefore adopts a working definition of the fairy tale as: a concise traditional narrative, set in a magical realm, in which archetypal characters converse with supernatural beings and perform tasks set to them.

2.1.3 Fantasy

Although fairy tales and fantasy are terms that have been used interchangeably, fantasy literature differs from fairy tales and folklore in many ways.³⁶ If fairy tales are narratives stemming from archaic society and thoughts, then fantasy seems to be a genre that continuously changes with the times. It appears to be influenced by the tremendous changes that the modern world has undergone.³⁷ Traditional fairy tales typically aim to remain close to the original narrative, although storytellers often introduce individual nuances, and each retelling is shaped by the cultural and historical context in which it emerges.³⁸ In contrast,

³² Rowe, “Feminism and Fairy Tales”.

³³ Novik, *Spinning Silver*; Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

³⁴ Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*.

³⁵ Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*, Lüthi; *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*; Rowe, “Feminism and Fairy Tales”.

³⁶ Nikolajeva, “Fairy Tale and Fantasy: From Archaic to Postmodern,” 138.

³⁷ Nikolajeva, “Fairy Tale and Fantasy: From Archaic to Postmodern,” 139–140.

³⁸ Nikolajeva, “Fairy Tale and Fantasy: From Archaic to Postmodern,” 139.

“fantasy literature is a conscious creation”³⁹, in which authors intentionally select the narrative structures that best align with their creative intentions. Furthermore, fantasy not only borrows traits from fairy tales, but also from romance novels, mythology, gothic novels, science fiction, mysteries, etc., integrating elements that appear incompatible within a singular narrative.⁴⁰

The fantasy genre can be subcategorised in many ways, but the subcategories most used are high and low fantasy.⁴¹ As Stephan Ekman, a fantasy scholar, explains, these fantasy subgenres often involve a dual structure: a ‘primary world’ that only exists in literature, and whose setting resembles that of our own reality, and a ‘secondary world’, governed by unique physical, temporal, or magical laws also referred to as “the fantasy setting”.⁴² A high fantasy novel, such as *Spinning Silver* and *The Hobbit*, would mainly be set in a secondary world, whereas the setting of a low fantasy novel, such as *The Bear and the Nightingale* and *Harry Potter*, would be primarily in a primary world.⁴³ It should be mentioned that there is a clear distinction between the ‘actual world’ and a ‘primary world’, because no fictional narrative takes place in the actual world.⁴⁴ He further notes that fantasy requires a mapping of the unknown through world-building. World-building refers to the creative process by which authors invent the geography, cultures, languages, and histories of the fictional world.⁴⁵ This thesis thus treats fantasy as a type of narrative that takes place in a fictional world, often creating new societies and cultures, frequently making use of traditional folklore and fairy tale elements, such as magical creatures, plot structures, and patterns, and occasionally incorporating concepts or historical references from the actual world, particularly those associated with the medieval era.⁴⁶

2.2 Key theories

To study the selected novels’ form, content, and context, this thesis makes use of several key theories and frameworks. First, Propp’s structuralist approach and Lüthi’s stylistic analysis offer essential tools for understanding narrative functions and motifs.

³⁹ Nikolajeva, “Fairy Tale and Fantasy: From Archaic to Postmodern,” 139.

⁴⁰ Nikolajeva, “Fairy Tale and Fantasy: From Archaic to Postmodern,” 139.

⁴¹ Stefan Ekman, “Here Be Dragons: Exploring Fantasy Maps and Settings,” *Choice Reviews Online* 50, no. 12 (July 23, 2013): 10, <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.50-6590>.

⁴² Ekman, “Here Be Dragons: Exploring Fantasy Maps and Settings,” 10.

⁴³ Ekman, “Here Be Dragons: Exploring Fantasy Maps and Settings,” 10.

⁴⁴ Ekman, “Here Be Dragons: Exploring Fantasy Maps and Settings,” 10.

⁴⁵ “World-building,” April 23, 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/world-building>.

⁴⁶ “Fantasy,” April 9, 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fantasy>.

Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968) presents a systematic analysis of Russian fairy tales.⁴⁷ Propp argued that all these tales share a common structure based on recurring narrative functions—such as interdictions, violations, misfortunes, magical helpers, deceptions, and quests—that appear in a fixed order.⁴⁸ He identified 31 of these functions, which serve as the building blocks of fairy tale plots. Fairy tales, according to Propp, have to be constructed through the proper sequence of these narrative functions, with some functions omitted within them and repeated in others.⁴⁹ For example, in both *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale*, the narratives start with Propp's first three functions, however only in *The Bear and the Nightingale* these are repeated. Thus, mapping narrative events from the novels onto Propp's functions allows for a deeper analysis of the narrative structures, revealing their adherence to, and departure from, Propp's fairy tale functions.

Where Propp focuses on narrative structure, Max Lüthi's formalist approach explores the stylistic and aesthetic features that give fairy tales their distinctive tone and feeling. In *The European Folktale: Form and Nature* (1986), Lüthi identifies five key features that collectively define the aesthetic and narrative quality of European folktales.⁵⁰ These are one-dimensionality, depthlessness, abstraction, isolation, and sublimation.⁵¹ Together, these five features form the stylistic foundation of the European fairy tale, shaping not only how stories are told but how readers are invited to engage with them. Lüthi argues that these qualities contribute to the universal and timeless appeal of fairy tales, as they allow for a symbolic rather than a realistic portrayal of human experience.⁵² Lüthi's concepts can be applied to observe how texts either retain or subvert these stylistic features. For example, while fairy tales might leave character motivations unexamined, authors such as Novik and Arden tend to imbue their characters with greater psychological depth, even when they echo classic narrative archetypes. Lüthi's analysis therefore becomes a tool for measuring the extent to which contemporary fantasy novels, such as *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale*, have adopted, modified, enriched, or rejected the aesthetic conventions of the folktale.

Additionally, Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (1932) allows for a comparative study of content. His index introduces another interesting dimension to the study

⁴⁷ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*.

⁴⁸ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*.

⁴⁹ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*, 99.

⁵⁰ Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*.

⁵¹ Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*.

⁵² Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*.

of fairy tales: the identification and classification of recurring narrative motifs. Thompson's comprehensive index catalogues thousands of motifs, such as magical transformations, cruel stepmothers, or impossible tasks, that appear across a wide range of folk and fairy tales.⁵³ These motifs serve as a common language, linking works from diverse cultures and historical periods. For example, the motif of the imposed task or that of bargains and promises, which appear frequently in fairy tales, can be traced and compared to similar structures in *Spinning Silver*, which will be expanded upon in the following chapter. Thompson's system offers a method for deconstructing narratives into their constituent motifs. Through this lens, it becomes possible to analyse how the protagonists in contemporary fantasy engage with inherited narrative devices: adapting, reinterpreting, or sometimes subverting the old motifs to create new stories.

Furthermore, Warner's work on Russian myths contextualises the cultural materials reimagined by the novels. In contrast to the structural and thematic approaches of Propp and Lüthi, Elizabeth Warner offers a culturally grounded framework for understanding the mythological and folkloric elements embedded within Slavic, and particularly Russian, traditions. Her book *Russian Myths* (2002) explores how myths, beliefs, and rituals intertwine in Russian culture and folk narratives, with a focus on the figures that populate them. Warner explains that mythological themes and characters are often found in the rituals and beliefs of everyday life.⁵⁴ Figures such as the domovoi (a household spirit and guardian of the family), the rusalka (a water spirit), and Morozko (a frost spirit) are not merely present in fictional narratives but are actual representations of Russian beliefs and customs.⁵⁵ In *The Bear and the Nightingale*, the presence of these beings is integrated into the fabric of daily life, and the conflict between pagan traditions and the rising influence of Orthodox Christianity becomes a central theme. *Spinning Silver*, although less overtly situated in Russia, also draws from the Russian cultural sphere, borrowing motifs and atmospheric details that evoke mythic traditions. The figure of the Staryk king for example, parallels Morozko. Warner's work helps contextualise the symbolic role of such figures, particularly their association with nature and the thin boundaries between the human and supernatural worlds.⁵⁶

⁵³ Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folk Tales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-books, and Local Legends*.

⁵⁴ Warner, *Russian Myths*, 8.

⁵⁵ Warner, *Russian Myths*, 33–44.

⁵⁶ Warner, *Russian Myths*.

2.3 Methodology

This thesis employs a close reading methodology to examine Naomi Novik's *Spinning Silver* and Katherine Arden's *The Bear and the Nightingale*. The novels have been annotated and colour-coded with a focus on narrative structures, fairy tales, and Slavic folklore. This thesis further examines these findings by using the theoretical frameworks outlined above as lenses through which it analyses both novels. Additionally, this thesis compares these novels to traditional fairy tales to assess how they transform and reinterpret elements from fairy tales for contemporary English-language fantasy literature. Ultimately, the aim is to demonstrate how *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale* do not merely borrow from fairy tales but reinterpret and transform their elements, creating original fantasy narratives.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the next chapter will examine how these fairy tale structures and features are employed within the narratives of *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

3. Fairy tale structures in *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale*

Fairy tales form a foundation for both Naomi Novik's *Spinning Silver* and Katherine Arden's *The Bear and the Nightingale*. *Spinning Silver* follows Miryem, the daughter of a moneylender, who transforms poverty into power through a series of magical bargains that entangle her with a winter fae realm. *The Bear and the Nightingale* centres on Vasya, a girl in medieval Rus' who can see spirits and must confront the growing threat of malevolent supernatural forces. Although these novels create original fantasy narratives, their storytelling is deeply informed by traditional fairy tale frameworks. Understanding how these structures are adapted offers insight into the way contemporary fantasy authors engage with and transform folkloric elements. This chapter examines how fairy tale conventions shape the narratives of both novels by applying three theoretical models: Vladimir Propp's theory of narrative functions, Max Lüthi's formal characteristics, and Stith Thompson's motif-index classification system. By examining the novels through these three lenses, this chapter will demonstrate how *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale* honour, reject, and innovate upon the structures of traditional fairy tales to create immersive fantasy worlds.

3.1 Structural Analysis: Propp's Narrative Functions

Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* demonstrates that fairy tales can be broken down into a fixed sequence of narrative functions—distinct plot events that recur across fairy tales in a predictable order.⁵⁷ When applied to *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale*, these functions reveal the extent to which each novel either adheres to or deviates from the classic fairy-tale plot. A close examination of both novels shows that they not only draw on these traditional elements but also creatively rework them to serve new emotional, thematic, and cultural purposes.

For example, both novels begin with a clear initial situation which establishes the heroine's social roles and environment.⁵⁸ In *Spinning Silver*, Miryem's family is on the brink of destitution due to her father's failing money-lending business.⁵⁹ In *The Bear and the Nightingale*, Vasya's family gathers around the hearth to hear tales from Dunya, the nanny,

⁵⁷ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*.

⁵⁸ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*, 25.

⁵⁹ Novik, *Spinning Silver*.

after having survived another winter on black bread and fermented cabbage.⁶⁰ Although this initial situation is technically not classified as one of Propp's functions,⁶¹ this kind of exposition is vital for anchoring the reader in a recognisable world; one that quickly gives way to the extraordinary. This is followed by Propp's first function, absention, the departure or loss of a member of the family.⁶² In *Spinning Silver*, Miryem's father leaves home to collect wood, which prompts Miryem's leave of home to take over her father's business of collecting debts.⁶³ In *The Bear and the Nightingale*, Marina gives birth to her second daughter, Vasya, and dies after delivering her child into the world.⁶⁴ These early disruptions indicate to the reader that change is imminent. Soon after, an interdiction, a rule, agreement, or boundary, and its violation, mark the transition from order to disorder.⁶⁵ Despite Miryem's parents worries on what the work would do to her heart, and their continuous efforts to prohibit her from collecting debts, she continues doing it.⁶⁶ Vasya, too, defies her nanny's and older sister's wishes to return home, and continues to explore the woods.⁶⁷ These early transgressions initiate the movement from safety into danger and mark the moment when each heroine's agency propels the narrative forward. For the reader, these transgressions are both compelling and emotionally resonant, as they reflect real-world struggles for autonomy and self-determination. Notably, *The Bear and the Nightingale* repeats this sequence multiple times. This repetition strengthens the reader's sense of thematic continuity and deepens Vasya's development as someone who repeatedly tests the limits of her world. Propp's sixth and seventh functions are another pair: trickery, an attempt to deceive by the villain, and complicity, the victim falls for this deception and unwittingly helps him out.⁶⁸ In Novik's story these functions can be found in a later moment in the novel, when Miryem finds out, after having turned silver into gold for the Staryk lord, that gold in the winter kingdom is used to prolong the winter in the sunlit world.⁶⁹ In Arden's narrative these functions are found when Vasya asks Medved, an evil spirit, to help her find her way home. Medved's response is to tell her he can help her, but only after she comes closer. Vasya warily does so, but before she reaches Medved she gets intercepted by Morozko, and

⁶⁰ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 3.

⁶¹ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*, 25.

⁶² Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*, 26.

⁶³ Novik, *Spinning Silver*.

⁶⁴ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

⁶⁵ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*, 26–28.

⁶⁶ Novik, *Spinning Silver*.

⁶⁷ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

⁶⁸ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*, 29–30.

⁶⁹ Novik, *Spinning Silver*.

is thus able to escape from Medved.⁷⁰ These moments of deception provoke a sense of vulnerability in the protagonists and tension for the reader, as they depict key narrative turning points.

Furthermore, Propp's eighth function, villainy: causing harm or injury, truly propels the tale forward.⁷¹ In Miryem's case, the Staryk lord leaves a bag of silver coins at her doorstep, wanting it turned to gold. Miryem and her family know that this is also a threat, as she will lose her life if the task is not completed. The actual harm that is done is taking Miryem away from her family when she has fulfilled his request three times.⁷² In Vasya's case this function is found later in the story, when Dunya dies. Instead of being taken peacefully by Morozko she is taken by Medved and turned into an upyr (spirit of the dead⁷³).⁷⁴ These acts of villainy are not only narrative functions, but they also serve to invite readers to invest more deeply in the protagonist's journey, by having something go wrong and showing how the protagonists deal with such situations. In *Spinning Silver* this function seems to be very similar to Propp's twelfth function, in which the hero is tested "which prepares for their receiving either a magical agent or helper".⁷⁵ Function twelve in *The Bear and the Nightingale* is found not long after the eighth. Vasya gets tested by Morozko on her endurance of pain and courage after escaping the clutches of Medved once again.⁷⁶ Additionally, both protagonists undertake a series of difficult tasks, which is Propp's 25th function, and with the tasks' completion we have the 26th function.⁷⁷ Miryem is set the task of changing three entire vaults of silver into gold in three days' time. She manages to finish this impossible task with the help of the three friends she made in the Staryk kingdom and a clever trick.⁷⁸ Vasya is asked by her stepmother to bring back a basket of snowdrops in the middle of winter. She was able to do so with the help of Morozko and his winter magic.⁷⁹ At the story's climax, the heroines confront their antagonists in a struggle, which is the 16th function.⁸⁰ Miryem cleverly traps the devourer and manages to almost completely heal the rift in the glass mountain, while Vasya rallies the spirits and creatures she helped, against

⁷⁰ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

⁷¹ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*, 30–36.

⁷² Novik, *Spinning Silver*.

⁷³ Warner, *Russian Myths*, 11.

⁷⁴ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

⁷⁵ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*, 39, 39–42.

⁷⁶ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

⁷⁷ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*, 60–62.

⁷⁸ Novik, *Spinning Silver*.

⁷⁹ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

⁸⁰ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*, 51–52.

Medved, leading to a battle between them.⁸¹ In each instance, victory is not merely physical but also symbolic, as it represents the heroine's mastery of both the magical and moral dimensions of their world. For the reader, this function offers emotional catharsis and a sense of narrative closure. Finally, both novels conclude with either the function of a wedding (31), or the departure function (11).⁸² At the end of *Spinning Silver*, when Miryem returns home to her family, the Staryk lord asks for her hand in marriage, which she accepts.⁸³ This mirrors the classic 'happily ever after' of fairy tales. At the end of *The Bear and the Nightingale* Vasya leaves her home and brother and sister, to protect them from her presence and to explore the world.⁸⁴ It should be mentioned that *The Bear and the Nightingale* is part of a trilogy and that this ending is simply one of three, and not the true ending of Vasya's story.

Nevertheless, both novels also reconfigure some of these traditional functions by building onto the rigid building blocks Propp has laid out. Take for example Propp's fourth and fifth function: The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance and the villain receives information about his victim.⁸⁵ In Novik's tale, the Staryk lord overhears Miryem say that she can turn silver into gold and decides to see if this is true for himself. So, he follows her back home and spies on her and her family, finding them talking one evening when Miryem's father says, "my daughter really can turn silver to gold",⁸⁶ finding his answer and thus fulfilling the fifth function. In Arden's novel, Vasya stumbles into the place where Medved, the bear, is bound to. Medved wakes because of her presence and mentions that it has been a long while since he has seen a Russian girl, which prompts Vasya to say who she is.⁸⁷ In both cases this slightly deviates from the description Propp attaches to these functions, as he explains them as direct questions and answers or interactions between the hero and the villain.⁸⁸ In Miryem's case there is no direct interaction until a little later in the story⁸⁹ and for Vasya the difference lies in that she finds Medved and not the other way around.⁹⁰ These deviations can remind the reader that this is not a simple fairy tale but a thoughtful reinvention of known stories.

⁸¹ Novik, *Spinning Silver*; Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

⁸² Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*, 39 & 63.

⁸³ Novik, *Spinning Silver*.

⁸⁴ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

⁸⁵ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*, 28.

⁸⁶ Novik, *Spinning Silver*, 53.

⁸⁷ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

⁸⁸ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*, 28.

⁸⁹ Novik, *Spinning Silver*.

⁹⁰ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

By mapping the key events in *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale* onto Propp's functions, we gain a clear view of how each author both honours and reconfigures the folktale template. Miryem's bargain and trials align closely with Propp's functions of the donor, trickery, and the difficult test, while Vasya's initial loss and supernatural encounters echo the functions of absentation, interdiction, and villainy.⁹¹ Yet both authors exercise creative licence, shifting the order of certain functions, deepening the psychological stakes, and blending Propp's episodic structure into a continuous, character-driven narrative. Propp's functions do more than organise the plot—they affect how readers engage with the story's rhythm, anticipate outcomes, and connect with characters.⁹² Propp's functions also help to connect contemporary fantasy to the deeper tradition of storytelling, providing familiar touchstones even as the novels address other themes like agency, and moral ambiguity.

3.2 Stylistic Analysis: Lüthi's Five Principles

Max Lüthi's *The European Folktale: Form and Nature* isolates five stylistic features—one-dimensionality, depthlessness, abstraction, isolation, and sublimation—that distinguish traditional fairy tales from other narrative forms.⁹³ By examining *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale* through the lens of these features, we can trace how Naomi Novik and Katherine Arden both preserve some of the simplicity and universality of fairy tale storytelling while also expanding its emotional and cultural depth. Through a close examination of both novels, we can uncover which of Lüthi's features seem to be preserved, adjusted, or missing, revealing to what extent these novels rework the fairy tale aesthetic.

There is only one feature that seems to have been completely preserved, and only in one of the novels: one-dimensionality. It refers to how characters in fairy tales inhabit a world in which the natural and supernatural coexist without conflict. There is no psychological hesitation or disbelief when magical events occur. As Lüthi writes, "everything belongs to the same dimension,"⁹⁴ meaning that magical events are accepted with the same ease as everyday occurrences. In *Spinning Silver* this feature is generally adhered to, as we can see that Miryem and many other characters in the novel regard the Staryk only with a healthy dose of fear, the way we would regard bears. They are not that common and generally do not really

⁹¹ Novik, *Spinning Silver*; Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*; Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

⁹² Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale: Second Edition*.

⁹³ Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*.

⁹⁴ Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*, 7.

come near us, but we know they exist and know that they are dangerous. However, there is another type of sorcery/creature, the devourer. This character is not seen as natural, more like the way us humans regarded witches during the witch hunts. However it is still relatively easily accepted as something that is possible in their world.⁹⁵ In *The Bear and the Nightingale* however, the one-dimensionality is completely lacking. Arden's novel is set in fourteenth-century Rus', in a world very similar to ours, where magic and the supernatural are either feared, or looked upon with wonder. Not only do the people around Vasya question supernatural seeming events, but Vasya herself questions if what she sees is real, "There was no such thing as a domovoi? Of course there was ... If the domovoi wasn't real, then what about the others? The vodyanoy in the river, the twig-man in the trees? The rusalka, the polevik, the dvorovoi? Had she imagined them all? Was she mad?"⁹⁶ This demonstrates that the normalcy around the supernatural, seen in the feature of one-dimensionality is missing in in this narrative.

In addition, the specific sense of isolation that Lüthi defines does not seem to exist in either novel. He claims that isolation describes how fairy tale protagonists often operate alone, with minimal reference to extended families. The only real links between family members is that of plot, not of emotion.⁹⁷ We get extensive backgrounds and learn about the history of the protagonists' family. Not only do we learn the history of the main character, but these novels expand on the history of other characters as well as on the history of their worlds and royalty.⁹⁸ Furthermore, sublimation, which refers to the transformation of suffering into symbolic, emotionally distant events, that drives narrative progression,⁹⁹ seems to similarly have been left out of both narratives. Even though, in *Spinning Silver*, we read from a first-person perspective, and in *The Bear and the Nightingale* we read from a third-person perspective, in both novels we are presented with the thought processes behind actions, and feelings through which the reader experiences the psychological realism of Miryem's and Vasya's emotions.¹⁰⁰

Nevertheless, not all features are preserved or missing, some have been limited to certain characters or adjusted to fit the respective narratives. Abstraction, for example, describes the lack of specific spatial, temporal and descriptive markers. Settings are often

⁹⁵ Novik, *Spinning Silver*.

⁹⁶ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 114–115.

⁹⁷ Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*, 38.

⁹⁸ Novik, *Spinning Silver*; Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

⁹⁹ Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*, 79.

¹⁰⁰ Novik, *Spinning Silver*; Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

vaguely sketched, for example ‘a faraway kingdom’ or ‘a dark forest’, and time is typically undefined.¹⁰¹ In both novels we find that in most cases abstraction seems to have been limited. Some descriptions remain short, but almost never vague, and simplicity seems varied. In *Spinning Silver* we find more elaborate descriptions, such as “a big awful twanging sound”,¹⁰² “a loud angry crackling”,¹⁰³ and “the lonely peasant scullery-girls”,¹⁰⁴ but also simpler descriptions, such as “silver necklace”¹⁰⁵ and “dark forest”.¹⁰⁶ While in *The Bear and the Nightingale* we generally find more elaborate descriptions, such as “It was bigger and blacker and gnarled like a wicked old woman”¹⁰⁷ and “a greenish, woman-shaped ghost”.¹⁰⁸ However, in this novel, Morozko is written more alike the stylistic expectations that we have of fairy tales, e.g. “back of the north wind. The end of the world. Nowhere at all.”¹⁰⁹ And “the hour might have passed; the hour might never come”.¹¹⁰ By omitting or limiting the sense of abstraction, Novik creates a differing atmosphere from that of the fairy tale, while Arden’s story shows both an adherence to and a deviation from, what Lüthi calls, abstraction. Further adjustments on one of Lüthi’s features can be found in depthlessness, which refers to the tendency of folktale characters and landscapes to exist on a single plane of action, without emotional or psychological complexity. Lüthi mentions that in fairy tales everything is on the surface, meaning that neither characters nor settings invite deep introspection.¹¹¹ In *Spinning Silver*, Novik acknowledges this folktale simplicity in her early portrayal of Miryem. Miryem’s motives are immediately clear, greed shown as compassion, and her environment, a freezing, debt-ridden town, is rendered in broad, elemental strokes: “winter was always long and bitter; and every year I was old enough to remember was worse than the one before.”¹¹² Similarly, Arden’s Vasya is introduced through her bold actions, smuggling honey cakes from the kitchen and running away from her sister, rather than through interior reflection.¹¹³ Both authors, however, layer these one-dimensional sketches with enough detail to sustain richer character arcs as the novels progress. In Novik’s novel we learn about how

¹⁰¹ Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*.

¹⁰² Novik, *Spinning Silver*, 344.

¹⁰³ Novik, *Spinning Silver*, 166.

¹⁰⁴ Novik, *Spinning Silver*, 85.

¹⁰⁵ Novik, *Spinning Silver*, 92.

¹⁰⁶ Novik, *Spinning Silver*, 36.

¹⁰⁷ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 30.

¹⁰⁸ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 129.

¹⁰⁹ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 323.

¹¹⁰ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 69.

¹¹¹ Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*.

¹¹² Novik, *Spinning Silver*, 6.

¹¹³ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 22–26.

poorly the townspeople treat Miryem's family and the poverty that drives Miryem's greed and hard heartedness.¹¹⁴ In Arden's novel we learn about Vasya's wildness and magical background that drives her disobedience and bold character.¹¹⁵

In examining these five features, it becomes evident that while *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale* might not find their roots in the stylistic traditions of the fairy tale, they do expand upon some of them, creating a richer narrative than the style of fairy tales allows. Novik and Arden largely depart from the formal constraints outlined by Lüthi, favouring a more realistic and psychologically detailed narrative style. Novik, however, tends to preserve more from the feature of one-dimensionality, while enriching it with deeper emotional and moral complexity. Both authors thus illustrate how select stylistic features of the fairy tale can be reinterpreted and expanded, using them not as strict templates, but as flexible narrative tools that contribute to more nuanced and emotionally resonant storytelling.

3.3 Motif Analysis: Thompson's Classification System

Motifs can examine the thematic building blocks that shape the symbolic resonance of a story. Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* provides a comprehensive classification of these recurring elements, ranging from magical transformations and supernatural beings to tests, taboos, and deceptions.¹¹⁶ By analysing *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale* with this index, we can identify which traditional motifs are preserved and which are transformed, and how these choices contribute to the novels' unique world-building and character development.

One of the most prominent motifs in both novels is: magic object received from supernatural being.¹¹⁷ These magical objects function not just as plot devices but as symbols of the protagonists' inner strength and connection to otherworldly forces. In *Spinning Silver*, this takes the form of Miryem's ability to turn silver into gold. According to the Staryk "a power claimed and challenged and thrice carried out is true; the proving makes it so"¹¹⁸, showing that Miryem gained her otherworldly power from proving her inner resilience and resourcefulness. Similarly, in *The Bear and the Nightingale*, Vasya is given a magical horse,

¹¹⁴ Novik, *Spinning Silver*, 7–11.

¹¹⁵ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 15–28.

¹¹⁶ Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folk Tales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-books, and Local Legends*.

¹¹⁷ Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folk Tales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-books, and Local Legends*.

¹¹⁸ Novik, *Spinning Silver*, 106.

Solovey by Morozko, who aids her in confronting the supernatural threat.¹¹⁹ Another key motif, particularly in *Spinning Silver* is “bargains and promises between mortals and supernatural beings”.¹²⁰ Miryem’s initial boast becomes a binding contract with the Staryk, mirroring the motif of bargains and promises seen in tales such as *Rumpelstiltskin*, where Rumpelstiltskin makes bargains with the miller’s daughter.¹²¹ The motif is reimaged here with greater psychological and ethical depth: rather than being a helpless victim, Miryem enters the bargain with intent and gradually gains leverage.¹²² In *The Bear and the Nightingale*, Vasya also engages in implicit bargains, particularly with Morozko, who aids her only after testing her resilience.¹²³ These interactions reflect the fairy tale motif, but they also deepen it by using consent and full understanding. Lastly, “supernatural helpers”¹²⁴ recurs throughout both narratives. Morozko and the domovoi are central examples in *The Bear and the Nightingale*, while in *Spinning Silver*, characters like Irina, and the Staryk themselves ultimately form a kind of magical alliance that assists in restoring balance.¹²⁵ The persistence of this motif reinforces the novels’ deep engagement with folkloric logic, even as the moral complexity of these “helpers” complicates traditional dichotomies of good and evil.

In sum, Thompson’s motif classifications serve as a valuable lens for identifying the narrative DNA of both novels. Novik and Arden clearly draw from an established folkloric repertoire, incorporating well-known patterns of magical objects, supernatural beings, bargains, and helpers. However, these motifs are not simply recycled, they are expanded upon and reconfigured to serve the thematic and psychological demands of contemporary fantasy.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that while *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale* are works of contemporary fantasy, their narrative structures, stylistic choices, and use of motifs are rooted in the fairy tale. By applying Vladimir Propp’s morphology of the folktale, we have seen how both novels engage with classic narrative functions, such as absentation,

¹¹⁹ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

¹²⁰ Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folk Tales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-books, and Local Legends*, 1970.

¹²¹ The Brothers Grimm, “Rumpelstiltskin,” in *Selected Tales*, trans. David Luke, 005 ed. (Penguin Random House UK, 2015), 1–3.

¹²² Novik, *Spinning Silver*.

¹²³ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 323–324.

¹²⁴ Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folk Tales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-books, and Local Legends*, 2051.

¹²⁵ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*; Novik, *Spinning Silver*.

interdiction, trickery, and the donor's test, while also deviating from them to foreground character agency and psychological complexity. Naomi Novik, in particular, retains many of Propp's structural functions, whereas Katherine Arden shows more flexibility in the order and implementation of these narrative elements. Turning to Max Lüthi's five stylistic features, we observed that neither novel adheres strictly to the traditional folktale aesthetic. One-dimensionality and depthlessness are partially preserved, especially in *Spinning Silver*, but are ultimately expanded upon through psychological realism and intricate world-building. Other features, such as abstraction, isolation, and sublimation, are set aside in favour of more immersive and emotionally resonant storytelling. In doing so, both authors move away from the concise, universal tone of fairy tales, instead crafting textured literary narratives that allow for individual character growth, moral ambiguity, and reader immersion. Furthermore, Stith Thompson's *motif index* further illustrates how these novels inherit and reinvent folkloric elements. Motifs such as magical gifts, supernatural bargains, and otherworldly helpers persist, but are transformed to reflect the protagonists' inner development and the novels' broader ethical concerns. Together, these three approaches show that fairy tale elements are not simply recycled in contemporary fantasy; they are actively engaged with, reshaped, and renewed, which supports the idea that the contemporary fantasy genre reflects upon the changing times. In *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale*, fairy tale forms function not as static blueprints but as dynamic narrative tools, capable of sustaining fantasy worlds that are as emotionally rich as they are structurally familiar.

4. Russian Folklore and Fairy Tales in *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale*

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, fairy tales and folklore in *The Bear and the Nightingale* and *Spinning Silver* are the very foundation upon which both narratives are built. Russian mythological figures such as the domovoi, the rusalka, and Morozko are central to Katherine Arden's depiction of a world on the brink of cultural and especially religious transformation, while Naomi Novik draws most of her inspiration from Eastern European fairy tales to shape a realm governed by magical bargains and folkloric logic. In Arden's novel, folklore is closely tied to places and beliefs: the household spirits that once protected homes are fading as Christianity spreads, while Morozko and his duality with Medved illustrate a deeper moral struggle. Novik's tale, though less directly grounded in specific mythological traditions, borrows fairy tale motifs such as impossible tasks, the rule of three, and magical bargains, which she reworks through a more abstract lens.

This chapter explores how American authors Naomi Novik and Katherine Arden engage with Russian folklore by investigating how mythological creatures function within the novels' world-building and thematic structures, with a focus on their origins, roles, and narrative significance, and by analysing fairy tales themselves, how they are retold, referenced, and embedded in the stories of each novel. By analysing these themes this chapter reveals how Arden and Novik draw from similar folkloric traditions to create distinct, resonant, and culturally rich fantasy worlds.

4.1 Mythological figures

Russian folklore has a wide variety of supernatural beings that reflect the relationship between the natural and supernatural world.¹²⁶ In *The Bear and the Nightingale*, Katherine Arden makes these beings part of her world, grounding the narrative in a landscape shaped by different spirits and creatures such as the domovoi, the rusalka, and the bannik.¹²⁷ These beings are not merely decorative, they are embedded within the life of the characters, providing protection, care, warnings, and/or danger, and almost all are traditionally associated with specific realms, spaces, or fairy tales. Arden has faithfully adapted many

¹²⁶ Warner, *Russian Myths*, 8.

¹²⁷ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 111, 128, 206, 228.

creatures and even created some herself. Additionally, introducing characters from different fairy tales as creatures living in her novel.

The domovoi, a spirit who protects the house, the family, their farm animals, and other properties, is one of the most faithfully adapted. In Russian folklore, the domovoi is a mischievous creature that would sometimes partake in wicked games at night, so to keep his good will, bits of bread or porridge would be left out in places he frequented.¹²⁸ Arden reflects this tradition by showing the domovoi weakening and almost vanishing as Vasya's family ceases their offerings, which was driven by the increasing control of the Christian priest in their village. The domovoi's decline thus underscores one of the novel's central concerns: the tensions between Pagan traditions and Christianity.¹²⁹ Spirits, such as the dvorovoi, polevik, and the bannik seem to have been adapted with a similar level of faithfulness as the domovoi, although less is known about them. The dvorovoi, a dooryard or farmyard spirit, and polevik, a field spirit, are only mentioned once in Arden's novel, therefore their representations could not be done differently or incorrectly.¹³⁰ The bannik, the spirit of the bathhouse, however, is given a slightly more prominent role. In Russian folklore, the bannik is connected to fortune telling and is described as a demon of the bath-house, who would drown or burn you if you bathed without permission.¹³¹ In *The Bear and the Nightingale*, the bannik gives Vasya a prophecy in return for her promise not to forget him.¹³² In the novel the bannik is similarly connected to fortune telling as in the myths, but its violent tendencies seem to have been downplayed or have completely disappeared.

Other spirits Arden has incorporated in her novel with slight adjustments are spirits such as the upyr, the leshy, the vodianoy, and the rusalka.¹³³ The upyri, dangerous spirits of the dead, are "forerunners of the vampire characteristic of later West and South Slav folklore".¹³⁴ In *The Bear and the Nightingale*, however, they are not only described as spirits of the dead, but also as "dead things", and as followers or creatures of Medved, building them more into the foundation of the world.¹³⁵ The leshy, in Russian folklore, is a shapeshifting forest-dwelling spirit, capable of both helping and harming. He was responsible for the

¹²⁸ Warner, *Russian Myths*, 36.

¹²⁹ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 150, 267–268, 302.

¹³⁰ Fialkova, "Rus, Russia, and Ukraine in Alternative Slavic Fantasy by English-Language writers.", 26; Warner, *Russian Myths*, 36; Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 115, 114.

¹³¹ Warner, *Russian Myths*, 38.

¹³² Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 206–207.

¹³³ I use the spelling used in *The Bear and the Nightingale* instead of the one used in *Russian Myths*: leshy instead of leshii, and vodianoy instead of vodyanoi.

¹³⁴ Warner, *Russian Myths*, 11.

¹³⁵ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 286, 288, 290, 297, 301–305, 388–391.

success or failure of the hunt but was mostly known for his ability to lead people and animals astray in the forest. Unlike the domovoi, this spirit was antagonistic towards humans unless persuaded otherwise.¹³⁶ The leshy is briefly mentioned once in *The Bear and the Nightingale* and mostly contributes to building the growing atmosphere of danger that arises halfway through the novel. In that regard it has a much smaller role within the narrative than it seems to have in Russian beliefs. Within the novel the leshy is described as dangerous and as a wood-guard, not spirit, and similar to the bannik, he gives almost the exact same advice to Vasya after she makes a promise not to forget him.¹³⁷ The vodianoy might be one of the most malevolent spirits that Arden incorporates in her novel. It is a river spirit, closely related to the bolotnik or swamp spirit, and is mostly known for drowning people for various reasons, such as swimming or bathing in the river at midday, after sunset, or at midnight. He is also known for his ability to guarantee fishermen a good catch and volatile tricks.¹³⁸ In *The Bear and the Nightingale* he is first introduced as “the river-king, who is always looking for little maidens to take to his castle under the riverbank”.¹³⁹ Vasya had seen him before, but never knew what he was called until Dunya informs her of his name and his origin from peasant stories. Later in the story the vodianoy is seen stealing fish from Vasya’s brother, playing a characteristic trick on him.¹⁴⁰ The vodianoy seems to be regarded in the novel with an amount of fear similarly to how people used to see him in Russia. The rusalka is typically portrayed as the vengeful spirit of a drowned woman or as an alluring water nymph.¹⁴¹ Being both a spirit of the dead and a water spirit, she retains her folkloric menace in *The Bear and the Nightingale*. She has an eerie presence in the local pond, is linked with danger and death, and has a taste for flesh. Though she plays a minor role, her inclusion adds depth to the novel’s folkloric nature. Her relationship with Vasya remains minor and in the background, until the end of the novel where it becomes a bigger plot point that ends up saving her brother’s life.¹⁴² Most significantly, Arden’s interpretation of Morozko, who is based on the fairy tale figure of Father Frost, embodies the novel’s synthesis of folklore and thematic depth. Traditionally a moralistic figure who punishes or rewards depending on a character’s virtue, Morozko in *The Bear and the Nightingale* becomes a complex, morally ambivalent character. He represents not only the harshness of winter, but the inevitability of death and the potential for

¹³⁶ Warner, *Russian Myths*, 38–40.

¹³⁷ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 226–228.

¹³⁸ Warner, *Russian Myths*, 40–42.

¹³⁹ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 107.

¹⁴⁰ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 106–107, 110.

¹⁴¹ Warner, *Russian Myths*, 42–44.

¹⁴² Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 128, 181, 198–200, 384–401.

transformation. His evolution from a stock figure into a nuanced character illustrates how folklore can be deepened in a contemporary narrative.¹⁴³

Moreover, not only did Arden adopt and adapt folkloric creatures and spirits, but she invented several as well, mainly the *vazila* and *Medved* the bear. The *vazila* is the spirit of horses, most likely inspired by the *domovoi* who was particularly partial to horses.¹⁴⁴ It seems that in *The Bear and the Nightingale*, the *vazila* has embodied this particular aspect of the *domovoi*'s duties and likes. He is one of the main spirits Vasya interacts with and teaches her the language of horses and how to ride them without saddles.¹⁴⁵ *Medved* is a character that is not necessarily based on any specific figure from mythology or folklore. However, his relationship with *Morozko* and their duality has been compared to that of *Belobog* and *Chernobog*, where *Belobog* is a god or force of good and *Chernobog* a god or force of evil.¹⁴⁶ Through these original creations, Arden not only enriches the folkloric texture of her world but also demonstrates how invented mythological figures can seamlessly coexist with traditional ones to support her novel's larger themes of balance, power, and belief.

In contrast, Naomi Novik's *Spinning Silver* engages with Russian folklore in a more abstract way. The *Saryk*, magical winter beings who rule a parallel realm, are original creations but clearly inspired by figures like Frost and broader European fae traditions. Like Father Frost, the *Saryk* lord tests the heroine, *Miryem*, through demanding tasks that hinge on survival, cleverness, and honour. Though not direct adaptations, the *Saryk* reflect the logic and values of fairy tales, particularly the importance of keeping one's word and the magical power of names, making them recognisable to the reader.¹⁴⁷

Taken together, these representations show that Arden's approach is rooted in both fidelity and creativity, honouring traditional beliefs while reworking or expanding them to fit the emotional and thematic profile of her novel. By embedding mythological creatures into the narrative structure, she brings cultural and spiritual depth to her version of medieval Rus', using folklore not merely as ornamentation but as an active, shaping force in her world. Novik, by contrast, draws from similar traditions to build a more allegorical and symbolic realm, where folkloric principles, such as magical naming and trial-based rewards govern the fantastical world of the *Saryk*. While the degree of specificity differs, both authors use

¹⁴³ Irina Zheleznova, ed., "VASILISA THE BEAUTIFUL," *Russian Fairy Tales*, 1966, 42–45, <https://www.arvindguptatoys.com/arvindgupta/65r.pdf>; Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

¹⁴⁴ Warner, *Russian Myths*, 36.

¹⁴⁵ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*.

¹⁴⁶ Fialkova, "Rus, Russia, and Ukraine in Alternative Slavic Fantasy by English-Language Writers.", 25, 21.

¹⁴⁷ Novik, *Spinning Silver*; Zheleznova, "VASILISA THE BEAUTIFUL."

mythological figures not just to evoke atmosphere, but to anchor each novel in a richly imagined, culturally recognisable fantasy world.¹⁴⁸

4.2 Fairytales

Both *The Bear and the Nightingale* and *Spinning Silver* draw directly from the tradition of fairy tales, not only through the presence of mythological beings but also through the structure and content of the stories themselves. These novels do not merely reference fairy tales; they actively incorporate, retell, and expand them, embedding storytelling within the fabric of their worlds.

In *The Bear and the Nightingale*, storytelling is a crucial part of the narrative structure and cultural setting. Early in the novel, before Vasya is born, Dunya tells the tale of Father Frost/Morozko to Vasya's siblings and mother.¹⁴⁹ This story functions as both an exposition and foreshadowing. In the fairy tale, Morozko rewards the kind and punishes the cruel. Arden's version of Morozko retains some features of this traditional figure; he is cold, otherworldly, and capable of delivering death, but is greatly expanded. He is not merely a judge of character; he becomes a guardian, a teacher, and even a companion to Vasya. Because of Morozko's prominent place in the novel it would be easy to assume that the fairy tale is the main source of the novel's plot. There are, however several Morozko-related motifs that do not correspond to his fairy tale, such as Anna Ivanovna's (Vasya's stepmother) request to bring back snowdrops in the middle of winter and Vasya's growing sexual relationship with Morozko.¹⁵⁰ Other fairy tale echoes can be found throughout *The Bear and the Nightingale*, among them are *Finist the falcon*, *Ivan and the grey wolf*, *Firebird*, and *Marya Morevna*. The first three fairy tales are just mentioned by name in the very beginning of the novel, whereas *Marya Morevna's* tale seems more incorporated within the narrative.¹⁵¹ One of the characters from the fairy tale, Kaschei the deathless, has been referenced several times by different characters within the novel.¹⁵² This indicates a complete integration of fairy tales within the world that Arden has created.

In *Spinning Silver*, Novik engages most explicitly with the very well-known fairy tale of Rumpelstiltskin. The premise of a girl who can spin gold from hay is reimaged through

¹⁴⁸ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*; Novik, *Spinning Silver*.

¹⁴⁹ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 5–11.

¹⁵⁰ Fialkova, "Rus, Russia, and Ukraine in Alternative Slavic Fantasy by English-Language Writers.", 24; Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 315, 392.

¹⁵¹ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 4.

¹⁵² Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 25.

the character of Miryem, who claims she can turn silver into gold. This boast sets off a series of magical bargains with the Staryk lord, placing her in the role traditionally occupied by the helpless girl in the original tale. However, Novik's Miryem is no passive figure. She is self-assured, intelligent, and pragmatic, and her transformation from victim to negotiator radically reconfigures the original story's dynamics. Where Rumpelstiltskin's heroine relies on luck or external salvation, Miryem survives through cleverness and calculated risk.¹⁵³ Other fairy tale echoes can be found throughout *Spinning Silver*. The rule of three, a common fairy tale pattern,¹⁵⁴ is repeated twice in the tasks Miryem must complete for the Staryk. There are also hints of *Beauty and the Beast*, as Miryem is taken to the Staryk realm and eventually finds power, autonomy, and love within what initially appears to be imprisonment, and superficial references to *Rapunzel*, as Irina has hair longer than she is tall, and is rarely allowed to leave her rooms.¹⁵⁵ These intertextual references enrich the novel's world and character arcs, demonstrating how familiar narratives can be reworked to explore new themes such as economic power, cultural identity, and female agency.

Both novels use fairy tales not as simple source material but as a narrative framework through which to question tradition and offer new interpretations. In Arden's work, fairy tales are woven into oral tradition and collective memory, with characters recalling and acting upon stories passed down through generations. In Novik's novel, fairy tales become the architecture for an entirely new world, where familiar plot elements gain new relevance and depth. In sum, Arden and Novik treat fairy tales not as fixed templates but as living texts—flexible, expandable, and open to reinterpretation. Through these fairy tales, both authors preserve elements of cultural tradition while asserting their own creative authority, which results in two distinctive Anglophone fantasy novels.

4.3 Conclusion

In both *The Bear and the Nightingale* and *Spinning Silver*, folklore and fairy tales are not merely decorative or nostalgic references; they are integral to the construction of narrative, character, and meaning. Arden's novel draws deeply from Russian mythology, incorporating well-known spirits and fairy tale figures while also adapting and inventing new ones to suit

¹⁵³ The Brothers Grimm, "Rumpelstiltskin"; Novik, *Spinning Silver*.

¹⁵⁴ Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*, 32.

¹⁵⁵ Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot De Villeneuve, *The Beauty and the Beast*, 6th ed. (Harper Design, 2016); The Brothers Grimm, "Rapunzel," in *Selected Tales*, trans. David Luke, 005 ed. (Penguin Random House UK, 2015), 15–18; Novik, *Spinning Silver*, 73.

her thematic focus on belief, tradition, and transformation. Novik, meanwhile, engages with fairy tales and folkloric logic more abstractly, weaving together motifs, archetypes, and narrative patterns to craft a world governed by magical rules and moral consequences. While Arden embeds folklore within a culturally and historically grounded Rus', Novik creates a parallel world where fairy tale logic underpins the very structure of reality. In both novels, however, the authors do not simply retell old stories, they reimagine and expand upon them.

5. Conclusion

This thesis has examined the ways in which the American contemporary fantasy authors Naomi Novik and Katherine Arden incorporate and adapt fairy tale structures and Slavic folklore in *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the Nightingale*. By employing a close reading method and through a thorough analysis of narrative structures, formal stylistic features, folkloric motifs, mythological figures, and fairy tale references, it has become clear that both authors use folklore as a core structural and thematic foundation for their narratives.

Having applied Propp's morphology, it became clear that while both novels adopt classic functions such as interdiction, trials, and rewards, they rearrange and expand upon them to develop more morally ambiguous worlds. Lüthi's formal features, such as one-dimensionality and depthlessness, were similarly engaged with, but were more often ignored, changed, or enriched in order to produce deeper emotional connection between the reader and the characters. Thompson's motif-index helped to trace how traditional fairy tale motifs, such as magical objects, bargains, and supernatural helpers are not only preserved but given fresh ethical and narrative weight. Arden's novel in particular reflects a culturally embedded world where spirits and storytelling are part of the characters' daily life, while Novik's tale builds a more abstract but equally resonant magical world based on folkloric logic. Both novels not only borrow elements from folklore, but they also creatively transform it. Arden's work is deeply rooted in Russian mythology and history, working spirits and fairy tale references into a world filled with moral tensions. Novik's approach takes a more symbolic route. She reimagines stories like *Rumpelstiltskin* within an Eastern European setting that both honours and transcends its source materials. Together, both novels give examples of how contemporary fantasy could keep a connection with fairy tales and folklore, while pushing beyond their boundaries. Instead of simply retelling older stories, Novik and Arden transform them into something new: narratives that resonate with cultural memory but speak to contemporary audiences. Stories that grow from fairy tales' readers might recognise into fantasy novels that deal with modern concerns, such as autonomy, identity, and agency. They include characters that feel familiar, but instead of being passive recipients of magic and fate, they actively shape their own stories. The novels retain some of the structural clarity and moral tensions of fairy tales, while expanding their character development, moral ambiguity, and cultural context.

Ultimately, this thesis has argued that contemporary fantasy fiction can serve as a powerful space for the reinvention of folklore. *Spinning Silver* and *The Bear and the*

Nightingale are creative adaptations, through which Novik and Arden show that fairy tales can be reshaped, expanded upon, and made new, offering readers both the comfort of the familiar and the thrill of something new. In doing so, their novels not only keep folklore alive, but remind us of its evolving role in shaping cultural imagination.

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