

“A STORY ABOUT PETER AND FEVRONIA”: STYLISTIC FEATURES

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The hagiographical Tale of Peter and Febronia has come down to us in the work of the sixteenth-century writer and publicist Ermolai-Erasmus. There is scant information about this writer's life. He came to Moscow from Pskov in the middle of the sixteenth century and became an archpriest in the court cathedral in Moscow, by the early 1560s took monastic vows (under the name of Erasmus) and possibly left the capital. His most important publicistic work was a treatise, in which he expresses the idea that peasants are the foundation of society: “First of all, the peasants are essential: from their labours comes bread, and from them most good things... and the whole country from the tsar down to the common folk is fed.” Believing the social inequality by which the peasant feeds his masters to be an inevitable phenomenon, Ermolai nevertheless suggests that the peasant's payments and taxes should be strictly defined and that he should be protected from oppression by state land surveyors and tax collectors. Such measures, in his opinion, would reduce “all manner of rebellion”.

As well as publicistic works Ermolai-Erasmus also wrote hagiographical ones, The Tale of Bishop Basil of Ryazan (later included in The Life of Prince Constantine of Murom) and The Tale of Peter and Febronia, which appear to have been based on a fifteenth-century vita.

The existence of a story of Peter and Febronia compiled before the end of the fifteenth century can be deduced from the fact that there is a fifteenth-century church service dedicated to Prince Peter of Murom who killed a dragon and to his wise wife Febronia, with whom Peter was buried in the same coffin. Evidently the basic subject of the tale dates back earlier than Ermolai-Erasmus.

The Tale of Peter and Febronia was closely connected with folklore and also related to the “itinerant subjects” of world literature. With regard to Russian folk tales it is closest to The Seven-Year-Old Girl and The Shorn Maid which are also about the marriage of a person of noble birth to a peasant girl who proves her wisdom by solving difficult tasks; here too is the motif of exiling the heroine who takes her dearest possession—her husband. The untraditional nature of the hagiographical Tale of Peter and Febronia evidently made it unsuitable for the hagiographical canons of the sixteenth century. Although created at the same time as the final version of The Great Menology (the Assumption and Tsar's menologies), it was not included in them. The folklore elements in the tale, its brevity, and lack of conventional features made it unsuitable for the hagiographical school of Metropolitan Macarius. But it is precisely these features that make The Tale of Peter and Febronia one of the finest works of Old Russian literature.

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