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Carpathian Collusion: Magyars Mischievously Modify Myth

The Hungarian Folk Tale “Forget-me-not” promotes cultural unity and a unique Hungarian national identity by interpreting mythic elements from Greco-Roman, Germanic, and Slavic cultures within traditional Hungarian frameworks. In order to properly understand the implications of these intercultural elements, one must first understand the context in which this story was published. The first and only officially published version of “Forget-me-not” appeared in Baroness Emmuska Orczy’s 1895 *Old Hungarian Fairy Tales*. Hungary during this time composed roughly half of the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary, and had not been a fully independent nation since 1526. However, the 19th century was a period of radical reform for the nation - widespread revolutions during the year 1848 triggered a war for independence from the Austrian empire, eventually resulting in political reform and partial sovereignty via the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867. Because of Hungary’s several hundred years of outside rule, the concept of a cohesive Hungarian nationality was poorly defined and mostly limited to nobility. This changed with a little something called Magyarization, a movement that gained traction after the 1867 Compromise and sought to properly establish Hungary’s national identity. The aim was to create a strong nation-state with a single common culture by assimilating nearby smaller nationalities into Hungarian ways of life, similar to many Western European countries of the time. However, unlike Western European countries, Hungary was (at least for a short period of time) actually tolerant of its minority groups. In fact, the modern world’s first minority rights

laws were enacted in revolutionary Hungary during 1849. The ideas of Magyarization, a strong unified state, and rights for underrepresented ethnic groups were all simultaneously coming to a head at precisely the time “Forget-me-not” was published. The story reflects these ideals in due turn, particularly through how other cultures manifest themselves throughout the tale.

The first and most evident way in which “Forget-me-not” borrows from other mythologies is Forget-me-not’s sister, named Narcissa. Narcissa is an unapologetic ripoff of Narcissus from Greco-Roman mythology. She’s described as “the most beautiful of all the fairies in the world!” and draws the affection of other people just like Narcissus does. However, the story’s rendition of Narcissus differs from the classic Greek myth in several key ways. Whereas Narcissus was smitten with himself from the very beginning, Narcissa became so after being worshipped by nearly every living thing. Her vanity is explicitly described as a result of others’ comments, with the story saying “all this praise and admiration had a very bad effect on Narcissa.” This changes the message of the tale from “don’t be obsessed with yourself” to “don’t pay other people too many compliments or it will go to their head.” This conveys a similar moral to the Germanic myth “Snow White,” which the story also borrows from heavily. The fish in the lake fill exactly the same role as the magic mirror, even down to the syntax used to ask them questions, with Narcissa asking “Goldfish, goldfish, tell me where, Is the fairest of the fair?” and the goldfish replying in turn.

Even though “Forget-me-not” uses the same characters and concepts as myths in Germanic and Greco-Roman mythology, the story it tells is significantly different, and more in line with other traditional Hungarian tales. The narrative uses Narcissa as a foil to highlight the proper behavior of the main character, Forget-me-not. Whereas Narcissa “pelts the fish and

water sprites with [pebbles],” the worst thing Forget-me-not does is “forget to thank the goldfish and water sprites for their lovely music.” Contrasting good and bad siblings is a common trope in Hungarian tales, seen in other stories such as “Two Princes with Hair of Gold,” “The Diligent Girl and the Lazy Girl,” and many others. This interpretation of Greco-Roman and Germanic stories exemplifies unique aspects of Hungarian culture, and as such helps cultivate a strong national identity. However, this isn’t the only point where the story borrows from other myths.

When Narcissa pushes Forget-me-not down the well, she crosses a threshold into what Joseph Campbell describes as the unknown world: here, that world is apparently Russia. Soon after emerging from this liminal well, Forget-me-not meets an old witch who fills the role of Baba Yaga from Slavic mythology. The witch is described as having “large bony hands and feet, with long nails like a bird's claws,” as well as “a very big hook nose, [...] so prominent and long that it quite frightened poor little Forget-me-not.” This portrayal is similar to how Baba Yaga is often described, with an off-putting nose, long appendages, and a leg of bone. It is worth noting that the method by which Forget-me-not encounters this witch is not typical of Slavic mythology. In the majority of Slavic tales, including “Vasilisa the Beautiful,” “Baba Yaga and the Brave Youth,” and “The Maiden Tsar,” the protagonist either directly seeks Baba Yaga out or happens upon her on their travels. This tale flips that; the Baba Yaga figure finds lonely Forget-me-not sitting next to the well, as she “did not dare venture through the thick masses of undergrowth.” This may seem inconsequential, but is indicative of how the narrative transforms Slavic culture to fit traditional Hungarian ideals. Isolation and loneliness form an important part of the Hungarian identity. According to Antal Orkeny in his 2006 paper “Hungarian National Identity: Old and New Challenges”, “It can be summarized as ‘we are all alone’ and is based on

historical reasons and the ‘otherness’ of the language and the origins of Hungarians” (10). The ‘otherness’ of Hungarians Orkeny refers to is largely due to the fact that Hungarian is the only major Uralic language on mainland continental Europe, and as such has little in common with the many Indo-European cultures that surround it. The Magyar people that would eventually form modern Hungary originally migrated from somewhere near the Urals, so being in unfamiliar and foreign lands is also a staple of Hungarian stories. Forget-me-not’s encounter with Baba Yaga exemplifies this loneliness and unfamiliarity, as the narrator comments, “perhaps she never would meet a friend who would be kind to her, and take her home.” She even initially refuses the witch’s offer, leaving her “more desolate and lonely than before.” By adding Hungarian motifs to a traditionally Slavic paradigm, “Forget-me-not” provides common ground for members of both cultures to relate to, promoting cultural unity and assimilation to Hungarian ideals, especially at the time of the story’s publication.

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Appendix

“Forget-me-not” is a traditional Hungarian folk tale. The version used in this paper was published in 1895 by Baroness Emmuska Orczy, and goes as follows: Once upon a time, thousands of years ago, there was a lake which acted as a perfect mirror. Every day, Narcissa would go to the lake and look at her reflection, and ask the fish: “goldfish, goldfish, living under the lake, who will the prize for beauty take?” They would respond “Narcissa.” She let this go to her head and become a total jerk, and her parents couldn’t take it any more and wished for a new child. Lo and behold, Forget-me-not was born, and she was even prettier than her sister. One day, she found the lake and the fish realized she was a cutie pie, which made Narcissa extremely upset. She pushed Forget-me-not down a well, and she fell through the entire world and ended up next to a well on the other side. She seemingly travelled from Greek mythology into Russian folk tales, because she then met an old witch who took her in and made her cook, clean, and sew for her. She lived at the witch’s glass palace, along with the witch’s son, who was the most handsome prince she had ever seen. Sadly, the witch knew they would fall in love if they ever saw each other, so Forget-me-not had to wear a bat skin at all times. One night, she snuck into the prince’s room while he was sleeping and left him a laurel of forget-me-nots. The prince realized he had to find her, and left the castle looking for her. He looked until he ended up back at the mirror lake, where he found Narcissa still there. Forget-me-not secretly followed him back, but as soon as Narcissa saw her she freaked out and pushed her into the lake. The prince saved her from drowning, and the two fell in love, got married, and lived happily ever after in his glass castle (glastle?).