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Slavonic and East European Review, Volume 100, Number 4, October 2022, pp. 654-673 (Article)

Published by Modern Humanities Research Association



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Petr and Fevroniia's Unorthodox Marriage

NICK MAYHEW

As part of a broader sexual politics promoting ostensibly 'traditional' family values and denigrating 'non-traditional sexual relations', in 2008 the Russian parliament approved unanimously the instatement of a new national festival called the 'Day of Family, Love and Fidelity'. Since then, every year on 8 July major televised concerts and events have taken place throughout the Russian Federation celebrating the country's allegedly 'traditional' family model: a man and a woman wedded according to Orthodox custom, entering a long-term monogamous union that bears children. It is no accident that the festival falls on 8 July. Prior to the instatement of the festival, this date had long marked the day of the liturgical ceremony commemorating the married saints Petr and Fevroniia. First canonized in 1547, since 2008 the couple has become Russia's patron saints of marriage and 'models of marital fidelity, reciprocal love and family happiness' ('obraztsy supruzheskoi vernosti, vzaimnoi liubvi i semeinogo schast'ia').¹ The Russian state, with the enthusiastic support of the Orthodox Church, has transformed an Orthodox liturgical ceremony into a nominally secular nationwide celebration. The festival blurs Orthodox hagiography with a generic, conservative view of romance, tying them in a moralizing loop: Petr and Fevroniia are venerable because they embody a contemporary moral standard, and that standard is clearly right because it is embodied by a pair of officially recognized saints.

Scholars have already pointed out how curious it is that Petr and Fevroniia were chosen as the figureheads of this festival, along with the pronatalist vision of family that it promotes, given that the couple's marriage did not bear any children. As Diana Dukhanova has suggested, the clash between the festival and its figureheads points to an incompatibility

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¹ '8 iulia den' sem'i, liubvi i vernosti' <<https://densemyi.ru/>> [accessed 21 October 2021] (para. 4 of 4).

between 'Orthodox matrimonial theology' and the politicized way in which reproduction is promoted by the Russian state in the twenty-first century through reference to supposed Orthodox 'tradition', in this case to Petr and Fevroniia.² While scholars like Dukhanova have paid attention to the contemporary moment, showing how the Russian state has harnessed premodern Orthodox culture to further its promotion of allegedly 'traditional' family values, to the best of my knowledge there are no detailed studies of the original cultural artefacts themselves that are sensitive to their politicization in the twenty-first century.

Typically, scholars who have written about Petr and Fevroniia's early modern cult have tended to adopt one of two stances. On the one hand, some critics have either anticipated or reiterated the view of the saints put forth by the Russian state. For example, beginning with the Russian medievalist Dmitrii Likhachev, scholars have often read the first version of Petr and Fevroniia's hagiography, along with the early cult of the saints more generally, as a connected celebration of idealized romantic attraction and holy matrimony, reading into depictions of Fevroniia's garb 'a particular emotional overtone' and suggesting that the saints were 'always revered as holy spouses'.³ On the other hand, other critics have suggested that Petr and Fevroniia represent some kind of 'original' or 'authentic' view of Orthodox marriage that the Russian state has now tainted. The most influential study belonging to this category remains an article published by Lyubomira Parpulova Gribble in 1995. Parpulova Gribble disentangled contemporary social ideas about romance and early modern religious ideas about marriage, arguing that Petr and Fevroniia's original hagiography was precisely 'not a story focused upon romantic love or some other kind of idealized sexual attraction, but upon the Christian ideal of marriage'.⁴ She placed their hagiography in the historical context of the early modern period, in which the Russian Orthodox Church was ostensibly fighting to defend the ecclesiastical model of marriage against Russian aristocratic marital practices that were not always aligned with Church doctrine. In

² Diana Dukhanova, 'Petr and Fevronia, and the Day of Family, Love and Faithfulness: Pronatalism and Unstable Gender Order in Today's Russia', *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov' v Rossii i za rubezhom*, 36, 2018, 2, pp. 194–220.

³ O. I. Podobedova, 'Povest' o Petre i Fevronii kak literaturnyi istochnik zhitiinykh ikon XVII veka', *Trudy otdela Drevnerusskoi literatury*, 10, 1954, p. 293, and O. A. Sukhova, 'Dosug muromtsev v XVII veke – vremia lichnogo blagochestiia i sozdaniia obshchego kul'turnogo prostranstva goroda', in *Semia v traditsionnoi kul'ture i sovremennom mire: materialy vserossiiskoi nauchnoi konferentsii*, Murom, 2011, pp. 14–32.

⁴ Lyubomira Parpulova Gribble, 'Žitie Petra i Fevronii: A Love Story or an Apologia of Marriage?', *Russian Language Journal*, 49, 1995, 162/4, p. 92.

this context, Parpulova Gribble argued that the hagiography ‘was not just an edifying story about Christian marriage, but an apologia of the ecclesiastical model of marriage as well’.⁵ The problem with this kind of reading is that it is equally essentializing as the state-oriented reading: both stances take for granted that it is plausible to pin down a single, all-encompassing Russian Orthodox (or broader still, ‘Christian’) model of marriage, which in both cases is unwaveringly heteronormative.

Focusing mainly on the first extant version of Petr and Fevroniia’s hagiography from the mid sixteenth century, this article presents an alternative reading to these two schools of interpretation. I want to suggest that it is plausible to read Petr and Fevroniia’s early modern hagiography as contradictory of contemporaneous Russian Orthodox ideas about marriage. On the one hand, I agree with Parpulova Gribble that the saints’ marriage is ‘unorthodox’ in the sense that it undermines marital norms associated with the upper echelons of Muscovite society. However, I also argue that its vision of marriage is not unambiguously in line with contemporaneous ecclesiastical views of marriage either. Instead, I suggest that the hagiography subverts certain ecclesiastical ideas about marital sex, depicting a marital union that is rather less chaste than the view of marriage often set out by the Church. In my reading, then, the first hagiography of Petr and Fevroniia was doubly unorthodox: unorthodox with a small ‘o’ in its challenge to elite social practices, and un-Orthodox with a capital ‘O’ in its sexual understanding of marriage. As I go on to show, both these unorthodox features were redacted out of the hagiography during the early modern period. Even so, when one compares the liturgical celebration of the saints that was eventually settled upon in the early eighteenth century with today’s liturgical veneration of them, there remains a gulf between modern-day notions of supposedly ‘traditional’ family values and Petr and Fevroniia’s liturgical tradition.

By arguing that one can read Petr and Fevroniia’s hagiography as un-Orthodox (depending on what sources one chooses to prioritize), I want to call into question the very idea that one can in principle establish a single and unwavering Russian Orthodox view of marriage (and by extension, of gender and sexuality) based on early modern sources. In this sense, I am motivated by a queer epistemological commitment to ‘complexity and messiness’,⁶ hence I present my reading of the text as an

⁵ Ibid., p. 100.

⁶ M. W. Bychowski, Howard Chiang, Jack Halberstam, Jacob Lau, Kathleen P. Long, Marcia Ochoa and C. Riley Snorton, ‘Trans*historicities: A Roundtable Discussion’, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 5, 2018, 4, p. 673.

addition, not contradiction to those outlined above. This is part of the article's argument: when it comes to gender and sexuality, early modern Russian sources do not provide firm ground for absolute conclusions. Such an approach is underpinned theoretically by the work of Valerie Traub, who promotes freeing early modern texts from their usual interpretive constraints by illuminating unknowability in the historical context, such as the frequently inconsistent ways in which sex is moralized.⁷ Thus while the reading I present is certainly historical (I use contemporaneous sources to aid in the interpretation of Petr and Fevroniia's hagiography, for example), it is not historicist, calling into question essentializing heteronormative historical narration.

The text on which this article mainly focuses is known as the *Tale of the Life of Petr and Fevroniia* (*Povest' o zhitii Petra i Fevronii*, hereafter, the *Life*). The hagiography was disseminated widely in Russia during the early modern period, and it is preserved in several different versions in over 350 manuscripts dating to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁸ Although the *Life* was constantly reworked, its basic narrative as preserved in the first, mid-sixteenth-century version of the text runs as follows.

Petr is the brother of the Prince of Murom, whose name is Pavel. A serpent disguised as Pavel tries to seduce his wife and tempt her to commit adultery. Petr takes a magical sword and slays the serpent, saving his sister-in-law from fornication. But some of the serpent's blood spills onto Petr, who becomes infected and soon falls seriously ill. He is taken to find a doctor, but no doctor can heal him. On his search for a doctor, Petr stumbles across Fevroniia, a peasant girl. She offers to cure Petr, but only if he agrees to marry her. After initial resistance, Petr has no choice but to agree to her demand, his recovery depending on it. The couple elope and become Prince and Princess of Murom. They return to the town, but the boyars' wives quickly take a dislike to Fevroniia. The boyars issue Petr an ultimatum: leave his wife or leave Murom. Petr remains loyal to his wife, and the couple leaves Murom. In Petr's absence, the boyars descend into conflict. Desperate, they go and find Petr, begging him and Fevroniia to return to Murom. The couple agrees, returning and ruling over the town for the rest of their life. When the time of their death comes, Petr and Fevroniia perish in quick succession. Shortly before their death, they are tonsured as monk and nun. Petr and Fevroniia are buried separately, but

⁷ Valerie Traub, 'The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies', *Publications of the Modern Languages Association*, 128, 2013, 1, pp. 21–39.

⁸ R. P. Dmitrieva, *Povest' o Petre i Fevronii. Podgotovka tekstov i issledovanie*, Leningrad, 1979, pp. 119–45.

miraculously their bodies are then discovered lying together in one grave. They are placed in separate graves once more, but again they are found lying side-by-side. At last, the couple is left in peace to reside in their shared grave.

Marriage in Muscovy

To understand how the *Life* of Petr and Fevroniia can be read as subversive, it stands firstly to identify what ideals of marriage existed around the time the hagiography was composed. I pay attention first to the gender dynamic of marriage, and second to the ethics of marital sex. Some scholars, among them Parpulova Gribble, have suggested that there were (at least) two opposing views of marriage in Muscovy: an ecclesiastical model on the one hand, and a lay model practised by the Russian nobility on the other.⁹ How distinct or opposed were ecclesiastical and aristocratic marital practices?

There were certainly clashes between clerics and secular authorities over marriages. For example, Parpulova Gribble alluded to the controversial marriage of Grand Prince Vasiliï III, who in 1525 divorced his first legal wife (who had not born any children) and married for a second time. Several ecclesiastical figures who were against the new marriage would go on to be suppressed. The eminent cleric Maksim Grek, for example, who criticized Vasiliï's second marriage, was convicted of heresy and exiled. However, there was no ecclesiastical consensus that Vasiliï's second marriage was unlawful. For example, a text appeared shortly afterwards praising the marriage extensively, that scholars agree was written by a cleric and possibly endorsed by the Metropolitan himself.¹⁰ What is more, when Vasiliï's successor Ivan IV asked for permission to marry for a fourth time in 1572, the Church council gave him permission to do so, even though fourth marriages were strictly forbidden in canon law.¹¹

Looking beyond royal marriages specifically to aristocratic marriage customs more broadly, one finds a symbiosis of ecclesiastical and lay aristocratic models. The two primary documents regulating aristocratic marriage in early modern Russia were the *Domostroi*, a sixteenth-century household handbook for the upper echelons of Muscovite society, and the noble *Wedding Ceremonial* (*Chin svadebnyi*). The two sources are often

⁹ Ibid., p. 100.

¹⁰ Iu. K. Begunov, 'Povest' o vtorom brake Vasiliia III', *Trudy otdela Drevnerusskoi literatury*, 25, 1970, p. 106.

¹¹ 'Sobornoe opredelenie o chetvertom brake Tsaria Ioanna Vasil'evicha', in *Akty, sobrannye v bibliotekakh i arkhivakh Rossiiskoi Imperii Arkheograficheskoiu Ekspeditsieiu. Tom pervyi. 1294–1598*, St Petersburg, 1836, p. 330.

preserved alongside each other in manuscripts. Together, they present a unified ecclesiastical and aristocratic vision of both wedding procedure and married life: the *Domostroi* was edited by a cleric; the *Wedding Ceremonial* includes explicit reference to Orthodox wedding ritual, and both texts articulate the same view of the gender dynamic of spousal relations.

That dynamic is defined by the misogynistic idea that a wife should be subservient to her husband. The *Wedding Ceremonial* stipulates that a bride should not under any circumstances be present at the nuptial agreement (paying testimony to her passive and commodified status) and that she must remain veiled or otherwise concealed before the groom's entourage throughout the proceedings. This foreshadows her seclusion from society as a married woman, laid out in the *Domostroi*, which forbids wives from leaving the house without the permission of their husbands, defiance of which could serve as legal grounds for divorce. These instructions circulated widely, and adherence to them is also noted as taking place in reality by foreign visitors to Russia.¹² The most disturbing and extreme example of uxorial subservience appears in instructions to husbands to beat their wives. For example, the *Domostroi* states: 'Punish her, thrashing her with a lash fairly and carefully, but if her misdeed is severe, do it painfully, terrifyingly and with great force' ('Plet'iu s nakazaniem berezhno biti; i razumno, i bolno, i strashno, i zdorova, a tolko velikaia vina').¹³ The early modern Russian Orthodox rite of marriage (called the *chin venchaniia*), which was extended and standardized over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, similarly places wives in subservience to their husbands. It describes the husband as the head of his wife, and like the *Domostroi* it instructs wives to obey their husbands in everything.¹⁴

How did the Orthodox rite of marriage itself conceive of marital sex? By looking at East Slavonic church books from the medieval and early modern periods, in particular *trebniki* (service books containing non-calendrical liturgical rites), one sees first of all that sex came to be referenced in marriage rites with increasing frequency. Between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, marriage rites were extended to include at least an extra four allusions to procreation. These references frame procreation as a miraculous occurrence, in two ways. First, children are described as a

¹² Sigmund von Herberstein, *Description of Moscow and Muscovy 1557*, trans. J. B. C. Grundy, London, 1969, p. 40.

¹³ *Domostroi. Sostavlenie, vstupidel'naia stat'ia, perevody i kommentarii*, eds V. V. Kolesov, V. V. Rozhdestvenskaia and M. V. Pimenova, Moscow, 1990, p. 155.

¹⁴ 'Chin obrucheniiu i venchaniuu', in *Sluzhebnik*, Moscow, 1623, f. 486r.

gift from God, the result of divine will, literally produced by the volition of God.¹⁵ Second, procreation is described in the miraculous terms of the Old Testament through allusions to Biblical couples to whom God granted children. If, in the thirteenth century, typically only one or two such couples were referenced in marriage rites, then by the seventeenth century six married couples from Scripture are evoked consistently: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Joseph and Aseneth, Zacharias and Elizabeth and Joachim and Anna.¹⁶ Stories about these couples that were meant for oration in church also came to focus explicitly on the miraculous nature of their births, especially accounts of miraculous birth in spite of old age or infertility, a motif encountered not only in the hagiographies of Old Testament couples, but also in Muscovite literature more broadly.¹⁷ In short, Muscovite marriage rites alluded to sex only in the context of procreation, and even then, they did so with unease, circumnavigating sex itself through references to childbirth not through sex, but in spite of sex.

There is no reason to assume that marital sex would necessarily have been considered permissible for any reason other than procreation, and there is at least some evidence suggesting the opposite. For example, one cleric writing in the mid-sixteenth century commented that ‘God created humankind and the seed for the birth of children’ (‘Bog sotvoril cheloveka i semia v nem na chadorodie’).¹⁸ Some texts on reproduction alluded to the idea that semen itself possessed a soul and was therefore sacred. For example, one medical text in circulation from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries warned: ‘Let nobody think that the seed does not possess a soul, for it falls into the womb ensouled’ (‘Nikto zhe da ne pshchuet bezdushnu byti semeni, odushevleno bo vpadaet v utrobu’).¹⁹ Furthermore, canon law did not make clear, sustained distinctions between marital and non-marital sex, but rather issued penances for almost every imaginable sex act that was not explicitly procreative.²⁰ As Slavonic historian Eve Levin has

¹⁵ Ibid., f. 469.

¹⁶ ‘Chin obrucheniiu i venchaniiu’, in *Trebnik*, Moscow, 1662, f. 78r.

¹⁷ *Stepennaia kniga tsarskogo rodosloviia po drevneishim spiskam. Teksty i kommentarii. Tom vtoroi*, eds G. D. Lenhoff and N. N. Pokrovskii, Moscow, 2008, p. 315.

¹⁸ ‘Poslanie startsa Filofeiiia’, in *Biblioteka literatury Drevnei Rusi, Tom 9*, ed. V. V. Kolesov, St Petersburg, 2000, p. 305.

¹⁹ *Lechebnik*, Moscow, 1665, f. 1.

²⁰ The moral conception of sex as a marital and extramarital binary came to be more concisely and widely articulated in the eighteenth century starting with the reforms of Peter I, when a positive view of marital sex (i.e., a view of sex as positive by virtue of it being marital) came to be disseminated in Russia through the import of seventeenth-century German natural law appraisals of marriage. See Marianna Muravyeva, ‘Sex,

noted, often sex was liable to be branded unnatural in Muscovite canon law if it 'precluded procreation'.²¹ During the sixteenth century, marital sex for procreative purposes came to be referred to as a form of chastity, in Russian *tselomudrie*,²² in marriage rites and beyond.²³

In what follows, I consider how far these two marital ideals are upheld in the *Life* of Petr and Fevroniia: first, a gender dynamic defined by female subservience, and second, a sexual ethics defined by immaculate conception. The first section looks at how the text is unorthodox with a small 'o' in its defiance of the aristocratic practices and gender inequality of the time, and the second section looks at how the text can be read as un-Orthodox with a capital 'O' in its view of sex specifically.

Elite marriage practices and gender equality in the 'Life'

The first version of the *Life* of Petr and Fevroniia was likely written in the late 1540s or 1550s. It was authored by a monk from Pskov named Ermolai-Erazm, who is attested as working for the cathedral church in Moscow by 1555.²⁴ The circumstances surrounding the composition of the text remain uncertain, but it is likely that the Metropolitan Makarii either instructed Ermolai-Erazm to write the hagiography, or at the least gave it his blessing.²⁵ However, the text did not appear in any form in Makarii's official compendium of hagiography. The potential reasons why it was not included continue to be debated. It is largely due to its absence in Makarii's compendium that scholars have often argued that the text cannot be classified as a hagiography at all.²⁶ This article does classify the text as hagiographical insofar as it is about a widely venerated and officially

Crime and the Law: Russian and European Early Modern Legal Thought on Sex Crimes', *Comparative Legal History*, 1, 2013, 1, p. 89.

²¹ Eve Levin, *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs, 900–1700*, Ithaca, NY, 1989, p. 198.

²² Note that I use the English term 'chastity' to translate the Russian word *tselomudrie*, which I interpret to mean religiously or morally permissible sexual conduct, distinct from 'celibacy', meaning complete abstinence from sex, which I use to translate the Russian word *devstvo*.

²³ V. Zhmakin, *Mitropolit Daniil i ego sochineniia*, Moscow, 1881, p. 650.

²⁴ I. M. Rysin, "Pochemu Povesti o Petre i Fevronii net v Velikikh Mineiakh Chetiikh?", *Elektronnyi zhurnal Iazyk i tekst*, 3, 2014, p. 8.

²⁵ 'Pravitel'nitsa', in *Biblioteka literatury Drevnei Rusi, Tom 9*, eds L. A. Dmitriev and D. S. Likhachev, St Petersburg, 2000, pp. 474–85.

²⁶ I. G. Fefelova, 'Povest' o Petre i Fevronii v kontekste traditsionnoi obriadovoi praktiki', in *Ruskaia agiografiia. Issledovaniia, publikatsii, polemika*, eds T. R. Rudi and S. A. Semiachko, 2005, pp. 428–83, and O. V. Gladkova, 'K voprosu ob istochnikakh i simvolicheskom podteskte "Povesti ot zhitii Petra i Fevronii" Ermolaia-Erazma', *Germenevtika drevnerusskoi literatury*, 13, 2008, pp. 537–69.

canonized pair that went on to serve as the basis for a later liturgical text commemorating them (in a hagiographical compendium produced under Boris Godunov, in the latter part of the sixteenth century), as well as the basis of hagiographical icons of the saints that were displayed in churches. I suggest that one possible reason why the *Life* was not included in Makarii's collection could have been its subversive handling of marriage, and through marriage, of gender and sexuality.

The *Life* references a total of four ceremonial features of Muscovite noble marriage ritual, and Petr and Fevroniia subvert every one of them. These ceremonial features are, in order of their appearance in the text: Petr's inability to mount his horse when leaving Murom in search of a doctor; the nuptial agreement made by the protagonists when they meet; the cleansing of Petr in a *bania*, and the celebratory feast after the couple elopes on their arrival in Murom. This section considers each of these four episodes in turn.

The *Wedding Ceremonial* for the Muscovite nobility outlines that 'when the nuptial agreement takes place, the groom arrives [...] and the meeting takes place on horseback' ('kak byvaet zgovor, priedet zhenikh k testiu na dvor [...] i vstrecha byvaet u konia').²⁷ In the *Life*, after Petr becomes infected with the serpent's blood, he sets out on a journey to find healing that soon concludes with a nuptial agreement and his marriage to Fevroniia. Petr orders his men to carry him on the journey 'because he was not himself able to mount his horse due to his significant illness' ('ne be bo sam moshchen na koni sideti ot velikiia bolezni').²⁸ Noble marriage ritual is immediately disrupted, as Petr is unable to perform his masculine duty as a groom. (Note that his inability to mount his horse also has an important sexual connotation, which is addressed in the next section below.)

Petr's docile departure foreshadows the unorthodox (and un-Orthodox) nuptial agreement that follows. The *Wedding Ceremonial* stresses that the bride categorically must not be present at the agreement. Moreover, her absence is identified as a marker of social status: the *Ceremonial* warns that the practice of the bride taking part in the nuptial agreement is associated with peasants.²⁹ In the *Life*, not only is Fevroniia present at the agreement, but she is directly responsible for devising it and dictating all its terms, a degree of female agency that is prohibited in contemporaneous marriage rituals, both noble and ecclesiastical. Petr attempts to trick Fevroniia. He

²⁷ 'Chin svadebnyi', in *Biblioteka literatury Drevnei Rusi, Tom 10*, ed. V. V. Kolesov, St Petersburg, 2000, p. 216.

²⁸ Dmitrieva, *Povest' o Petre i Fevronii*, p. 213.

²⁹ 'Chin svadebnyi', p. 217.

agrees to marry her so that she will heal him, but he then goes back on his promise, not wanting to marry somebody he deems to be significantly below his station. But after Petr breaks his promise to Fevroniia, he again falls ill and is left with no choice but to agree to marry her. The *Life* thus challenges both the notion of subservient uxorial femininity found in the *Domostroi*, *Ceremonial* and Orthodox rites of marriage, as well as class inequality. It disregards one basis for social reproduction, namely the policing of marriage based on class, forcing a man substantially above a woman on the social hierarchy to agree to her socially subversive demands.

Just like in the *Wedding Ceremonial*, after Petr and Fevroniia's nuptial agreement follows a purification ritual. In the *Ceremonial*, the boyars and the whole of the groom's entourage prepare a *bania* for the groom, in anticipation of the consummation of the marriage.³⁰ But in the *Life*, it is Fevroniia herself who prepares the *bania* for Petr. Once more the text articulates a dominant uxorial role where the social norms of the Muscovite elite excluded the possibility of female agency. Moreover, in contrast to the normative paradigm whereby a husband takes responsibility for his wife's chastity (forbidding her from leaving the house, for example), in the *Life* Fevroniia takes charge of ensuring her groom's chastity by preparing his *bania* herself.

In general, Fevroniia is endowed with significantly more autonomy and authority than elite marital customs or the early modern Orthodox marriage rite allowed for. For example, Petr is often described as deferential to Fevroniia: he acts 'according to the girl's orders' ('po poveleniiu devitsy') and when a boyar asks Petr to find a new wife, he replies 'tell that to Fevroniia and we will see what she has to say' ('da glagolita k Fevronii, i iakozhe rchet, togda slyshim').³¹ Moreover, when Petr and Fevroniia are in Murom, they are described as ruling over the town jointly, carrying out their duties grammatically in the dual.³² The text also ascribes several unambiguously masculine traits to Fevroniia. For example, the concluding encomium of the *Life* venerates Fevroniia for 'possessing the wisdom of holy men in a female head' ('v zhenstei glave sviatykh muzh mudrost' imela esi').³³ Although the description of a female saint possessing the 'wisdom of holy men' is by no means unique to this *Life*, here it functions as part of a sustained textual subversion of the image of the submissive wife.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 231.

³¹ Dmitrieva, *Povest' o Petre i Fevronii*, pp. 462 and 465.

³² Ibid., p. 220.

³³ Ibid., p. 222.

The *Life* venerates a married couple in which there reigns a far greater degree of gender equality than Muscovite elites promoted, nobles and clerics alike. In this regard, the text to some extent reflects Ermolai-Erazm's *oeuvre* more broadly, which occasionally challenges Muscovite gender inequalities. For example, in his *Chapters on Exhortation by the Tsar* (*Glavy o uveshchanii tsarem*), Ermolai-Erazm admonishes noblemen for rejoicing at the birth of a son but despairing at the birth of a daughter, arguing that the world needs women as much as it needs men.³⁴ In another text *On Love* (*Slovo o razsuzhdenii liubvi*), he opposes the entanglement of love and physical abuse of the kind that underpins domestic violence towards wives in the *Domostroi*, writing that 'whoever loves does not beat or abuse' ('kto sovershaet liuby, sii [...] ne b'et, ne nasil'stvuet').³⁵

The fourth and final elite marriage ritual to be undermined is the celebratory feast. The *Wedding Ceremonial* outlines that a feast should follow on directly after the betrothal.³⁶ This is the order of events in the *Life* as well: after they have eloped, Petr and Fevroniia arrive in Murom to partake in a feast with the boyars. Although the text itself does not describe the occasion as a marital feast specifically, this is how the episode was understood in the early modern period. For example, in a hagiographical icon based on the *Life* dating to 1618 there is an inscription accompanying the feast, describing it precisely as a 'wedding feast' ('pir na brake'). Fevroniia's behaviour at the feast disrupts the celebratory banquet. She collects crumbs in her hands from the table, and in so doing undermines the decadent nature of the occasion, for which she is scorned by the other guests. Indeed, her actions outwardly defy specific ceremonial rules associated with feasting outlined in the *Domostroi*, hence the boyars criticize her precisely for not adhering to ritual norms, complaining that she leaves the table in contravention of correct ritual ('ne po chinu').³⁷ Petr is shocked by the accusation that Fevroniia has collected crumbs from the table, so he checks her hands. When she opens them, miraculously they are covered in incense. Fevroniia's incense-covered hands show that her opposition to avarice and her defiance of marital norms are favoured by God. But they are scorned by the local nobility, and so the couple is forced to leave Murom society, in divinely approved rejection of its ceremonial norms that ritualize gender and class inequalities.

³⁴ A. I. Klibanov, 'Sbornik sochinenii Ermolaia-Erazma', *Trudy otdela Drevnerusskoi literatury*, 16, 1958, p. 204.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

³⁶ 'Chin svadebnyi', p. 218.

³⁷ Dmitrieva, *Povest' o Petre i Fevronii*, p. 217.

Ecclesiastical marriage and sex in the 'Life'

Not only does the text undermine patriarchal gender roles laid out in both noble and ecclesiastical marriage regulations, but it also subverts the sexual ethics of marriage laid out in some ecclesiastical sources in particular. To reiterate: some clerics stated that sex was for procreative purposes only;³⁸ canon law often found nonprocreative sex to be 'unnatural'³⁹ and the Orthodox marriage rite referenced sex only in the context of procreation, which it framed as a miraculous, non-sexual act through frequent references to births through infertility in the Old Testament.⁴⁰

Petr and Fevroniia's marriage does not bear any children. Despite this, the *Life* contains two sexual euphemisms indicating the couple might have marital sex. As mentioned above, when Petr sets out on his journey to heal his affliction, he is 'not himself able to mount his horse' ('ne be bo sam moshchen na koni sideti') and orders his people to carry him.⁴¹ Not only does this signify Petr's inability to adhere to the ceremony required of him in the *Wedding Ceremonial*, but it also implies his inability to perform sexually. Eve Levin has pointed out that 'on a horse' ('na kone') serves as a sexual metaphor in penitential literature of the time for sex in the missionary position, the only sexual position for procreative sex deemed permissible in canon law.⁴² After Fevroniia heals Petr, however, he no longer needs to be carried. Purified through the pre-marital *bania* ritual, he is once more able to mount his horse — that is, to enter sexual union with Fevroniia. The use of sexual euphemism in the context of a marital union that does not bear children implies a deviation from the ideal of procreative marital sex found in several Muscovite ecclesiastical sources.

There are further passages that suggest the *Life* does not sustain the moral stance articulated in some contemporaneous ecclesiastical sources that what makes sex permissible is its procreative outcome. Take, for example, the following episode, in which Petr and Fevroniia are travelling down the Oka river in a boat after they are forced to leave Murom:

A certain man was in the boat with Fevroniia, whose wife was in that very same boat. This man had been possessed by a crafty demon and looked

³⁸ 'Poslanie startsa Filofeiia', p. 305.

³⁹ Levin, *Sex and Society*, p. 198.

⁴⁰ 'Chin obrucheniiu i venchaniuu', in *Trebnik*, Moscow, 1662, f. 78r.

⁴¹ Dmitrieva, *Povest' o Petre i Fevronii*, p. 213.

⁴² Eve Levin, 'Sexual Vocabulary in Medieval Russia', in *Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture*, eds Jane T. Costlow, Stephanie Sandler and Judith Vowles, Stanford, CA, 1993, p. 48.

lustfully onto the holy woman. Immediately seeing his depraved intention, she confronted him by saying: 'Scoop up some river water from this side of the boat.' He scooped it up and she ordered him to drink it. He drank it. Then she said to him: 'Now scoop up some river water from the other side of the boat.' He scooped it up and once more she ordered him to drink it. Then she asked him: 'Is the water the same or is it sweeter on one side?' He answered: 'The water is the same, miss.' She then spoke thus: 'And so female nature is all the same. Why have you forgotten about your own wife, thinking about another?'

Некто же бе человекъ у блаженныя княгини Февронии в судне, егоже и жена в томже судне бысть. Той же человекъ, приим помысль от лукаваго беса, возрев на святую с помыслом. Она же, разумев злый помысль его вскоре, обличи и, рече ему: 'Почерпи убо воды из руки сия с сю страну судна сего.' Он же почерпе. И повеле ему испити. Он же пит. Рече же паки она: 'Почерпи убо воды з другую страну судна сего.' Он же почерпе. И повеле ему паки испити. Он же пить. Она же рече: 'Равна ли убо си вода есть, или едина слажеш?' Он же рече: 'Едина есть, госпоже, вода.' Паки же она рече сице: 'И едино естество женское есть. Почто убо, свою жену оставя, чюжиа мыслиши?'⁴³

'Female nature' (*estestvo zhenskoe*) is another example of sexual euphemism. The word 'nature' (*estestvo*) served as a euphemism for genitalia in medieval and early modern Russian penitential and medical literature.⁴⁴ What Fevroniia is telling the man who desires her, then, is that her genitalia is the same as that belonging to his wife. In so doing, Fevroniia effectively presents marital sex as an antidote to adultery, in a black-and-white moral binary of sex as either marital or adulterous. This dichotomy is underscored by the passage that immediately precedes this episode, which states: 'Whoever abandons a wife who has not been accused of adultery and marries another woman, himself commits adultery' ('Izhe ashche pustit zhenu svoiu, razvie slovesi preliubodeinago, i ozhenitsia inoiu, preliuby tvorit').⁴⁵ This moral binary of marital and adulterous sex stands at odds against the moral binary of procreative and non-procreative sex which one finds in many ecclesiastical texts of the time, in which any kind of sex for pleasure's sake is often synonymous with adultery, which itself is sometimes described as a form of sodomy.⁴⁶

⁴³ Dmitrieva, *Povest' o Petre i Fevronii*, p. 466.

⁴⁴ Levin, 'Sexual Vocabulary', p. 49.

⁴⁵ Dmitrieva, *Povest' o Petre i Fevronii*, p. 466.

⁴⁶ See Stoglav: *issledovanie i tekst*, ed. E. V. Emchenko, Moscow, 2000.

The *Life* is also sexually subversive in that it undermines the notion of monastic celibacy. Before Petr and Fevroniia pass away, they are both tonsured, becoming a monk and nun. When Petr and Fevroniia are buried, they are placed in separate graves, as would have been the custom in Muscovy, where monks and nuns would not have been buried together. Part of the rationale for monastic gender segregation was to ensure adherence to celibacy, as evidenced by the many monastic rules forbidding women from entering male monastic spaces.⁴⁷ In the *Life*, after their initial burial in separate graves, the bodies of Petr and Fevroniia miraculously re-appear in a joint grave at the cathedral church in Murom. The townspeople separate their bodies once more, but yet again they miraculously reappear in their joint grave.⁴⁸ It was common for married couples (elite ones, at least) to be buried together in or around cathedral churches in early modern Russia.⁴⁹ But Petr and Fevroniia have by this point taken a monastic oath, and thus for them to rest together as monk and nun in a joint grave subverts the gender segregation intended for monastics, even in death, and insists on the eternity of their marital bond despite their monastic oath. As Petr and Fevroniia defy social and religious convention as a living married couple, so they continue to defy those conventions even as dead monastics.

In Muscovy, the distinction between a married man or woman on the one hand, and a monk or nun on the other, seems to have been integral to understanding the moral expectations to be placed on that person sexually. As the Metropolitan Daniil explained in the mid sixteenth century, there were two distinct forms of acceptable sexual practice: married couples should adhere to chastity (*tselomudrie*, which could involve procreative sex), whereas monastics should adhere to celibacy, meaning complete abstinence from sexual conduct of any kind.⁵⁰ The *Life* therefore leaves Petr and Fevroniia on uneasy sexual terrain. Throughout the narrative, monastic motifs are blended into the story of a married couple: Petr defeats a lustful serpent who infects him (borrowing from the standard monastic motif whereby a monk is tormented by a demon, often representing lust, over whom he ultimately triumphs); Petr and Fevroniia end up secluded in the wilderness (like the many monks who end up in remote corners far away from civilization), and they are literally tonsured, given new monastic names (David and Eufrosiniia) and buried accordingly. As such, the *Life*

⁴⁷ *Drevnerusskie inocheskie ustavy*, ed. Bishop Amvrosii, Moscow, 2001, p. 96.

⁴⁸ Dmitrieva, *Povest' o Petre i Fevronii*, p. 470.

⁴⁹ Cornelia Soldat, 'Sepulchral Monuments as a Means of Communicating Social and Political Power of Nobles in Early Modern Russia', in *Contested Spaces of Nobility in Early Modern Europe*, eds Matthew Romaniello and Charles Lipp, London, 2011, p. 118.

⁵⁰ Zhmakin, *Mitropolit Daniil*, p. 650.

not only subverts the sexual ideal of Orthodox marriage in Muscovy, but it also seems to undermine the ideal of monastic celibacy. In so doing, it destabilizes one of the grounds on which sexual morality was constructed, namely the distinction between marital and monastic forms of sexual behaviour.

Subsequent early modern accounts

Over the course of the early modern period, Ermolai-Erazm's *Life* of Petr and Fevroniia was edited significantly, and as a result its subversive features were gradually removed. Here I consider three later versions of the saints' hagiography: one from the second half of the sixteenth century, another from the late seventeenth century, and a final version from the start of the eighteenth century that became the standard liturgical commemoration of the saints in the Russian Orthodox Church.

According to R. P. Dmitrieva, who has studied the textual history of the *Life* in detail, the first major variation on Ermolai-Erazm's original text dates to the latter part of the sixteenth century.⁵¹ This new version attempts to bring Petr and Fevroniia's marriage in line with Muscovite ceremonial and ecclesiastical norms.⁵² For example, it includes a new passage explaining that the saints married in accordance with Orthodox custom, following the church rite of marital crowning (*chin venchaniia*): 'Having reached the town of Murom, by the blessing of the bishop they entered into an honest marriage; Petr took the blessed Fevroniia as his wife and they were crowned in the cathedral and apostolic church' ('I doshedshe grada Muroma, blagosloveniem episkopa grada togo, sotvorisha brak chesten, poiat blazhennuiu v zhenu sebe, i venchan byst' s neiu v sobornei i apostol'stei tserkvi').⁵³ Not only does the passage allude to the Orthodox practice of marital crowning (*venchanie*), but it also refers to a second standard feature of descriptions of virtuous marriages in Muscovy, namely the participation of Church authorities in the wedding, which is found in numerous narrative accounts celebrating royal weddings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Dmitrieva, *Povest' o Petre i Fevronii*, pp. 250–64.

⁵² Note that the addition of this new passage could be explained in the context of attempts made by the Russian Orthodox Church to encourage laypeople to abide by Orthodox marriage rituals and regulations, which continued well into the seventeenth century. See, for example, among many others, Daniel Kaiser, 'Whose Wife Will She Be at the Resurrection? Marriage and Remarriage in Early Modern Russia', *Slavic Review*, 62, 2003, 2, pp. 302–23.

⁵³ Dmitrieva, *Povest' o Petre i Fevronii*, p. 258.

⁵⁴ *Stepennaia kniga*, pp. 352–53.

The next major redaction of the text dates to the end of the seventeenth century.⁵⁵ The new allusion to ecclesiastical marriage found in the late-sixteenth-century redaction is further embellished in this version, in two ways. First, the text inserts an additional liturgical ceremony into the account of the saints' wedding, describing that Petr and Fevroniia undergo the rite of betrothal (*chin obrucheniiia*) before their *venchanie*. It had long been the standard Church procedure for Orthodox marriage in Russia for there to be a betrothal (*obruchenie*) followed by a *venchanie*. The text therefore brings the *Life* further in line with the ritual norms of Church marriage. Accordingly, the text now also refers to Petr and Fevroniia's union as a 'lawful marriage' (*zakonnyi brak*), a term not used in the saints' *Life* prior. By the seventeenth century, the phrase 'lawful marriage' (*zakonnyi brak* or sometimes *zakonnoe supruzhestvo*) had become a standard way of referring to marriage in Orthodox marriage rites, in which 'lawful marriage' was sometimes even defined as a marital union 'that produces children' ('izhe iz nego chadotvorenie').⁵⁶ The seventeenth-century version of the *Life* thus subtly aligns Petr and Fevroniia's marriage with childbearing marriages (although their union remains childless). Simultaneously, it also omits some of the sexual euphemisms previously present in the text, most importantly the reference to Petr's inability to mount his horse. Sexually, the text was sanitized, distanced from the realm of sex per se and aligned instead with procreation.

The new redaction also ceased to challenge so starkly the decadent ritual norms of the Russian elite. Of the four subversions of noble marriage ceremony in Ermolai-Erazm's text (Petr's inability to mount his horse; Fevroniia's presence at the nuptial agreement; her arrangement of the purificatory *bania*, and her disruption of the marital feast), only two remain in the seventeenth-century version of the text, and they are the two that are most intrinsic to the plot of the narrative, namely those associated with Fevroniia healing Petr's 'affliction'. The omission of the episode where Fevroniia collects crumbs from the banquet even requires the editor to re-write the episode of the saints' exile from Murom in its entirety. In this version, the boyars and their wives no longer have a specific reason to dislike Fevroniia; now they are simply described as disliking her because they have been deceived by the devil.⁵⁷ The text thus became

⁵⁵ Dmitrieva, *Povest' o Petre i Fevronii*, pp. 287–98, and V. F. Rzhiga, 'Literaturnaia deiatel'nost' Ermolaia-Erazma', *Letopis' zaniatii Arkheograficheskoi komissii*, 33, 1926, pp. 138–43.

⁵⁶ 'Chin obrucheniiu i venchaniu', in *Trebnik*, Moscow, 1662, f. 71r.

⁵⁷ Dmitrieva, *Povest' o Petre i Fevronii*, p. 294.

less confrontational in its handling of aristocratic Muscovite customs, foreshadowing the altogether uncontroversial and sanitary form the saints' commemoration would take in the early eighteenth century, when Petr and Fevroniia appeared in a hagiographical compendium attributed to Bishop Dimitrii of Rostov, published in Moscow in 1711. Importantly, this text became the standard version of the saints' hagiography used to commemorate them every year thereafter on their feast day (previously 25 June, now 8 July). The text describes the saints' marital union as follows:

Come and praise our holy intercessors who were joined spiritually, the pious Petr who defeated the prideful serpent and Fevroniia, the miracle-workers of Murom who pursued chastity zealously. [...] Praise be to the holy Petr, joined with the most-wise Fevroniia, who were separated in body and united by grace, who defeated the serpent to preserve chastity, the reason why the two saints were united.

Приидите д[у]ховне сошедшея днесь вернии наша заступники восхвалимъ, прегордаго змя поправшыя Петра бл[а]гочестиваго, вкупе съ Феврониею, чудотворцы муромския, яко целомудрия рачители. [...] Киими похвальными венцы, венчаемъ блаженнаго Петра, вкупе съ премудрою Феврониею, разделеныхъ теломъ и совокупленыхъ бл[а]г[о]д[а]тию, яко змя победившаго ову же яко целомудрия сохранницу, сего ради сошедшея.⁵⁸

During the sixteenth century the word 'chastity' (*tselomudrie*) had come to refer to any sexual conduct that was deemed pure (which, as stated above, could include procreative sex within marriage). It did not mean anything specific, but rather it was a generic word indicating sexual purity of some kind.⁵⁹ The word had not appeared in Petr and Fevroniia's *Life* before, perhaps unsurprisingly, given its arguably un-Orthodox content. But now, an un-Orthodox narrative was reduced to an emblem of sexual purity. Moreover, the commemoration makes clear that the couple is not 'chaste' in that they engage in procreation, but because they are celibate, 'separated in body and united by grace' ('razdelenykh telom i sovokuplenykh blagodatiiu'). Allusions to non-procreative marital sex in the first version of the *Life* were transformed into complete sexual abstinence in the

⁵⁸ Dimitrii Tuptalo, *Kniga zhitii sviatykh. Mesiats iun*, Moscow, 1711, f. 30.

⁵⁹ Nick Mayhew, 'Banning Spiritual Brotherhoods and Establishing Marital Chastity in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Muscovy and Ruthenia', *Palaeoslavica*, 25, 2017, 2, pp. 93–95.

liturgical text that was ultimately used to venerate the saints, evidencing an absolute and final sanitisation of Petr and Fevroniia's *Life*.

In 2012 the Russian Orthodox Church composed a new commemorative text to be read on the saints' feast day. In stark contrast to the previous version, it includes a prayer asking God to grant newlywedded couples 'unity of souls and bodies, a healthy family with the blessing of children' ('edinomysle dush i teles, [...] semia dolgozhiznennoe, o chadekh blagodat').⁶⁰ A marriage that since 1711 had been commemorated explicitly as a spiritual and not physical union has now once again become associated with the corporeal bond between husband and wife. But unlike in the original version of Petr and Fevroniia's *Life*, the allusion to bodily union does not undermine contemporaneous ideas about sexual morality, but rather it reinforces them. Petr and Fevroniia are being used to undergird conservative ideas about supposedly 'traditional' values and as an ancient example of a Russian Orthodox celebration of the nuclear family, a model that in reality Petr and Fevroniia's hagiography never represented, neither in its original, arguably sexually un-Orthodox version, nor in its eighteenth-century celibate reincarnation.

Concluding remarks

To argue that an Orthodox hagiography can be read as subverting sexual morals put forth by the Church, as this article has done, might seem surprising or perhaps contradictory. But the potential contradiction between the narrative and its ideological world yields several important conclusions. It is a reminder that one cannot assume Russian hagiographies reflect a fixed Orthodox worldview or set of moral values. Hagiographies tell stories about the lives of people who are extraordinary, sometimes in ways that challenge social and religious conventions. This is particularly the case when one takes gender and sexuality into consideration. Unlike perhaps in more directly instructional literature like canon law, in narrative texts like hagiography the nuances of gender dynamic and sexual desire are more liable to be manifest textually in subtle ways, beyond or despite the ideological world of the text.

Moreover, no single notion of marriage, gender, or sexuality can fully encapsulate the view of 'the Church' in any given period. Especially in the medieval and early modern periods, models for sexual behaviour were often ambiguously defined (using terminology lacking clear definition like

⁶⁰ 'Molitva ko sviatym blagovernym kniazem Petru i Fevronii', *Novye bogoslužebnye teksty*, 2013 <<https://nbt.rop.ru/nbt/?q=texts/chin/216>> [accessed 21 October 2021].

tselomudrie), incoherently articulated (especially for modern readers), not to mention inconsistently evidenced across the extant source materials. For example, although several scholars have argued that the Church fought to defend ‘the ecclesiastical model of marriage’ against Russian aristocratic practices in the early modern period, this article has suggested that sometimes ecclesiastical and noble ideas about marriage were closely aligned (for example, in their vision of the gender roles marriage entails). For the early modern period, the view of ‘the Church’ is found across a variety of different sources, from canon law to epistles and everything in between. A consensus between them is often lacking, if any one of the sources articulates a clear moral stance on sexual conduct to begin with. Sometimes scholars interpret such sources through a contemporary lens of ‘Christian ideals’ that are assumed to be stable throughout history (and even across cultures and denominations), such as what Parpulova Gribble called ‘the Christian ideal of marriage’.⁶¹ These so-called ‘ideals’ warrant historical interrogation.

Finally, the moment of contradiction between text and context is a queer moment. On the one hand, it is queer in an epistemological sense, destabilizing the grounds on which cultural and historical narratives are told by embracing the possibilities, gaps and dissonances inherent in the primary source materials. On the other hand, it is queer in a more precise sense. The *Life* of Petr and Fevroniia can be read as an example of what Patrick Cheng has coined ‘queer theology’, by which he refers to Christian culture that ‘challenges and deconstructs — through radical love — all kinds of binary categories that on the surface seem fixed and unchangeable, but that ultimately are fluid and malleable’.⁶² Petr and Fevroniia’s *Life* deconstructs three binaries. It disrupts the dichotomy of sexual morality laid out by the Metropolitan Daniil in the sixteenth century that there were two primary and distinguishable forms of permissible sexual behaviour, marital and monastic. It challenges the moral sexual binary of procreative and non-procreative sex found in different genres of Muscovite literature. And it also casts doubt on the contemporary Russian binary of ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ sexual relations (*(ne)traditsionnye seksual’nye otnosheniia*) that has become a rhetorical cornerstone in conservative sexual politics in Russia, which stigmatizes sexual minorities and could well be extended further to

⁶¹ Gribble, ‘Žitie Petra i Fevronii’, p. 92.

⁶² Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, New York, 2011, p. 10.

condemn heterosexual behaviours that the Church or State might deem to be unsanitary.⁶³ Petr and Fevroniia's hagiography begs the question: what really are 'traditional' Russian Orthodox values after all and where (and where not) can they be found?

⁶³ Nikolai Gorbachev, 'Normativity Production in the Discourse around the Ban on Homosexual Propaganda', in *Na pereput'e: metodologiya, teoriya i praktika LGBT i kvir-issledovaniy*, ed. A. A. Kondakov, St Petersburg, 2014, p. 99.