

WOMEN IN  
**RUSSIAN**  
LITERATURE  
1780-1863



JOE ANDREW

# Women in Russian Literature, 1780–1863

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PRESS

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# 1

## Introduction

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Since its re-emergence as an important cultural and political force in the late 1960s, feminism has presented 'incontestably the most important challenge'<sup>1</sup> in recent years to accepted academic approaches to literary studies. In the course of the last two decades several 'feminisms' have emerged, but each in its own way may be said to have the aim of radically reinterpreting established literary practices, strategies and analyses. As Carolyn Heilbrunn said of *Sexual Politics*: 'for the first time we have been asked to look at literature as women; we, men, women, Ph.D's have always read it as men.'<sup>2</sup> Underlying this view are a number of assumptions, well summarised by Greene and Kahn:

Feminist literary criticism is one branch of interdisciplinary enquiry which takes gender as a fundamental organizing category of experience. This enquiry holds two related premisses about gender. One is that inequality of the sexes is neither a biological given nor a divine mandate, but a cultural construct, and therefore a proper study for any humanistic discipline. The second is that a male perspective, assumed to be 'universal', has dominated fields of knowledge, shaping their paradigms and methods. Feminist scholarship, then, . . . revises concepts previously thought universal but now seen as originating in particular cultures and serving particular purposes.<sup>3</sup>

The present volume has as its aim a reading, from a feminist perspective, of a number of major works of Russian literature of the last century, with a view to understanding the 'particular purposes' of the way women were represented in this culture. Central to this enterprise will be the notion that literary texts have an impact on contemporary and later audiences' perceptions of the world, including such matters as the roles of women in society. This impact occurs irrespective of the authors' intentions. By rereading works, by reproducing meanings in this way, we achieve two things: we see the images of women in a particular culture (and we can assess the

purposes of these images); and we derive a new perspective on the world of the work concerned.

It is important to re-evaluate works in this way, especially those which have been 'canonised' as having 'universal' significance. This 'universality' is something of a myth as de Beauvoir maintains: 'Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view which they confuse with absolute truth.'<sup>4</sup> We may be trained to read the works of our cultural history as if they were of universal significance, whereas they are usually partial, if not distorted, representations of humanity.

However, this approach to literature begs other, underlying questions; in particular, the relationship between an artistic product and the society for which it is produced. Assuming that art does have some effect on its consumers, we may see it as having one of two relationships with society. Art either challenges existing patterns and models, it acts as 'an alternative government',<sup>5</sup> or even undermines accepted notions of reality itself and creates other worlds, 'anti-worlds'; or else it operates as part of the process of social control. My present argument will run along these latter lines. For these purposes, I will consider literature as an element of the ideological processes in society by which a group or class maintains its power over other groups. In the present instance, the dominant group is the patriarchy.

This term has had a variety of definitions and different applications throughout history. For our purposes it can be described as 'a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women'.<sup>6</sup> Patriarchy, which would seem to have existed, and to exist, in all human societies,<sup>7</sup> has also been described as 'the oldest, most rigid class/caste system . . . the class system based on sex – a system consolidated over thousands of years, lending the archetypal male and female roles an undeserved legitimacy and seeming permanence'.<sup>8</sup> In Engels, and in Marx, this system was also considered as the prototype of all subsequent power systems.<sup>9</sup> Patriarchy, given its longevity and ubiquitousness, must therefore be seen not as accidental phenomenon, but as one that is *systematic*. Consequently, it permeates all aspects of culture, including, of course, literature. Women, perennially the subordinate if not actively dominated group, are seen as, and are represented as, the

Other, from primitive times, to the present day.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, as de Beauvoir again argues: 'Men have always held the lot of woman in their hands; they have determined what it should be, not according to her interest, but rather with regard to their own projects, their fears, and their needs.'<sup>11</sup>

Although Fetterley may argue that 'The history of civilization is the drama of male robbery of female power',<sup>12</sup> the transactions between men and women have not always been marked by the use of crude force which her metaphor suggests. In ways similar to other ruling groups, the patriarchy has established and maintained its supremacy by much more subtle means. Central to these means of control is the concept of *hegemony* most fully developed by Gramsci:

By hegemony Gramsci meant the permeation throughout civil society – including a whole range of structures and activities like trade unions, schools, the churches and the family – of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs, morality etc. that is in one way or another supportive of the established order and the class interests that dominate it.<sup>13</sup>

As Boggs here suggests, these values permeate *all* aspects of society, including culture and, subsumed within this, literature. Rule is not by force, but by consent, so that the oppressed willingly accept their oppression. This is because the institutions of society work 'to shape, directly or indirectly, the cognitive and affective structures, whereby men [sic] perceive and evaluate problematic social reality'.<sup>14</sup> Increasingly, Gramsci came to see hegemony as the important face of power, with actual force only resorted to in extremes. Deriving this point from Marx and Engels, he further argued that control of the means of material production has important consequences for the overall ideology of society. Marx and Engels had stated: 'The class having the means of material production has also control over the means of intellectual production, so that it also controls, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of intellectual production.'<sup>15</sup> Women, along with other groups who experience this lack, are thereby persuaded to accept the legitimacy of their subordination. Indeed, they *actively* consent to it.

In almost all known societies, therefore, there exist two basic discourses, that of the 'dominant' group and that of the 'muted' group,<sup>16</sup> in this instance, male and female. Usually only the

dominant code will be heard or listened to and, what is worse, the muted/female group, in order to gain a hearing, must express itself in the dominant code rather than in one it might develop itself. Its own occupations and concerns are trivialised, and the restrictions placed on this group play a vital role in ensuring its submission to the dominant, hegemonistic culture.

As has already been argued, this dominance permeates *all* manifestations of societies and their cultures. Philosophy is another case in point. Okin argues that 'the great tradition of political philosophy consists, generally speaking, of writings by men, for men and about men'.<sup>17</sup> Language, and sign systems more generally, can also be said to play an hegemonic function. Tanner puts this view succinctly: 'we can say that men owned the signs that defined women and determined their role and position in society'.<sup>18</sup> In a patriarchal society, the Word of the Father is absolute.

It would seem to be incontestable that in all literate societies literature plays a central part, either explicitly or implicitly, by intention or effect, in expressing the dominant code. The novel, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, functioned – amongst other things – as an instrument of education and socialisation and, thereby, helped in the general process of policing women, of persuading them to consent to their subordination. Literature, that is, acted (and still acts) as a reinforcing mechanism of established social roles long after primary myths had lost their power and relevance: 'fiction not only reflects and expresses values but transmits them to future generations'.<sup>19</sup> This had many implications for the writers and consumers of the fiction of the period which concerns us, whether we look at Russia, Western Europe or America. As Gorsky puts it: 'To protect and enhance the social tradition – the goal of marriage, the ideal of home – seems part of the purpose of these novels.'<sup>20</sup> Popular writers, such as Trollope in England, were deemed to have 'played a commanding role in reinforcing prevailing literary stereotypes',<sup>21</sup> while, at times, it seemed almost impossible to write a novel which completely defied the sex-role system, 'for society everywhere upholds this system and social realities are staples of the realistic novel'.<sup>22</sup> The hegemony of patriarchal culture did, indeed, reach everywhere – the basic level of language, as we have already seen – but other primary ingredients of fiction as well. Lieberman notes: 'The most subtle, pervasive level at which sexism affects literature, however, is that of literary convention.'<sup>23</sup> In other words, a writer (whether male or



female) does not create a work *ex nihilo*, but has to use the codes, the sign systems and linguistic materials available in the culture. All of these are expressions of the dominant/male code.

As feminism has developed as a body of critical theory and practice, the effect of this on consumers of literature (especially the muted/female group) has been well documented. Adrienne Rich has encapsulated the problems of the feminist reader admirably:

Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves . . . A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live . . . how we have *been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us*. [my italics]<sup>24</sup>

It is the aim, then, of this book to look at key works of Russian literature, to see how they have 'led [us] to imagine ourselves', to see to what extent they were an expression of hegemonistic, patriarchal culture in its nineteenth-century Russian variation. In order to assess the extent to which this culture reflects the central themes of patriarchy, or whether it displays more radical variations, it is important to offer a brief overview of the images of women in recorded cultures. How have women been represented?

Perhaps the first and most obvious point to be made is to repeat that women have generally been represented either by men, or within the context of the dominant male code. Rarely are they seen from a female point of view, and male writers, on the whole, have not understood women.<sup>25</sup> Paradoxically, women have been one of the central themes of art, precisely because of their problematic place in culture. Consequently, one of the central myths surrounding women is their enigmatic, mysterious nature: 'the beliefs that women are emotional, irrational, and closer to nature are near cultural universals', as Stewart argues.<sup>26</sup> In more particular terms, *coherence* of female characterisation is relatively rare, because women are perceived and represented within an alien culture, that of patriarchy, as 'Mirrors for men, they serve to indicate the involutions of the male psyche with which literature is primarily concerned, and their characters and identities shift accordingly. They are projections, not people.'<sup>27</sup>

Given that women tend to exist in art – as in culture more generally – in relation to men, they are all too often represented if

not as subordinate, then as 'The Other – she is passivity confronting activity, diversity that destroys unity, matter as opposed to form, disorder against order'.<sup>28</sup> And so, woman is viewed with profound ambivalence, and therefore has a double and deceptive image, all that man desires and all he does not attain. She is both the prize the questing hero seeks, and also the obstacle in the path of his quest. She is the archetypal outsider, on the edge of culture, allied to nature, the irrational and evil; 'Her condition is isolation . . . that is the consequence of the patriarchal predication that to be human is to be male.'<sup>29</sup>

Central to these paradoxes and dilemmas is female sexuality. Ancient myths from Eve, Delilah and Pandora onwards (and so too in other cultures), tend to see female sexuality as desirable but *therefore* dangerous. The female (sexual) principle is a curse, disruptive, destructive. Indeed, both the mirror images – the *alter egos*, the sisters of Virgin and Whore, Mother and Seductress – are defined by their sexuality, which produces 'romantic idealisation and embittered, accusatory disgust'.<sup>30</sup> Woman is both (sometimes simultaneously) angel and demon. This may be considered by some to be a reflection of reality. In fact, it is once more a product of the overriding tendency of a male view of women. In this instance man has projected onto these opposites 'all that is worst in man's own inner view of himself, all that is primitive, immature, degrading'.<sup>31</sup>

All in all, then, women have tended to be represented by men as partial creations, as projections of their own fears and fantasies, as stereotypes – the temptress, the virgin, the goddess – associated with the natural, the passive, the irrational or the insane. She is a shrew, a witch, the Muse, 'The Angel in the House'. This last phrase is particularly associated with the image of the rather sickly Victorian heroine, and it is the case that many of the stereotypes have persisted into the period with which we are concerned, if in a modified form.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the common view was that women were mentally inferior, and so were morally superior.<sup>32</sup> The principal types could be said to be the angels, the saints and the martyrs. Alongside these positive images remained their polar opposite, the demon destroyer (who was rarely allowed a full measure of happiness<sup>33</sup>). More complex *characters* did, of course, emerge, such as Dorothea Brooke or Anna Karenina, who were able to combine several conflicting stereotypes. But sexuality remained the cornerstone of women's being:<sup>34</sup> women were seen as

chaste and pure, or potentially polluting and destructive. The nineteenth century continued the ancient tendency of the dangerously sexual woman, in the *femme fatale*, the Dark Lady, whose beauty was narcissistic and, therefore, not under male control.

For both this type and her sister, the fair maiden, love and marriage, seduction and adultery, were the principal plot paradigms. In each case, the typical situation represented women as objects within a male discourse, either waiting for their lives to be filled by love and marriage, or experiencing the destruction of their sanity or their very being by seduction and betrayal. Women remained intimately allied to the world of feeling and of love. Even in the nineteenth century 'experience for women characters is still primarily tied to the erotic and the familial. The sexual *faux pas* is still a fatal step.'<sup>35</sup> Rarely, in whatever literature one looks, do women escape these discourses: 'Marriage, in fiction . . . has been the woman's adventure, the object of her quest, her journey's end.'<sup>36</sup>

As a result, the *Bildungsroman* for a woman is a rarity for many reasons. They are partial creations, stereotypes, projections, static rather than dynamic images. When they are the central protagonists, and are perceived and represented as *characters* rather than as mere images, their development remains severely circumscribed. When heroines do fight for a better life it is usually *within* the patriarchal system – a better husband, for example. Only in the later years of the nineteenth and in the present century, have female characters been allowed to aspire to a destiny of their own. Elaine Showalter offers an excellent typology of why this could not have happened before:

To waken from the drugged pleasant sleep of Victorian womanhood was agonising; in fiction it is much more likely to end in drowning than in discovery . . . [heroines] wake to worlds which offer no places for the women they wish to become; and rather than struggling they die. Female suffering thus becomes a kind of literary commodity which both men and women consume.<sup>37</sup>

However, the weight of over two thousand years of literary production and consumption need not be entirely oppressive. Meaning within a text is not static, for each new reading can produce new meanings, and the primary role of feminist criticism is to produce a meaning which would not have been possible before it came into existence. As Okin has put it: 'when women who have

always been minor characters in the social and political theory of a patriarchal world are transformed into major ones, the entire cast and the play in which it is acting look very different.<sup>38</sup> So too with literature. Feminist criticism has as its aim a transformation of our understanding of existing literature, the achievement of an awareness that the 'great tradition' is not a reflection of a universalist, humanistic culture, but of a predominantly male discourse. Within this, women are marginalised, subordinated and oppressed. As Fetterley has argued about American literature: 'Our literature neither leaves women alone nor allows them to participate. It insists on its universality at the same time that it defines that universality in specifically male terms.'<sup>39</sup>

But one can overcome these tendencies and become, to use Fetterley's apt term, 'a resisting reader': 'The first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted in us.'<sup>40</sup> Once we achieve this consciousness, we not only perceive a work and its world profoundly differently, but the work, and literature more generally, have a new effect on us. For Fetterley, such a feminist critical procedure has very far-reaching implications:

To expose and question that complex of ideas and mythologies about women and men which exist in our society and are confirmed in our literature is to make the system of power embodied in the literature open not only to discussion but even to change . . . In making available to women this power of naming reality, feminist criticism is revolutionary.<sup>41</sup>

It is the purpose, in the end, of the present collection of readings to offer new meanings and interpretations of the major works of Russian literature, in the hope that this enterprise will not merely shed new light on the works of fiction concerned, but will also alter our perception of the tradition which produced these works.

Most of the works considered here were first published, roughly speaking, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, that is, between the Decembrist Revolt in 1825 and the Emancipation of the Serfs in 1861. This period was the formative period of the 'great tradition' of Russian realism.<sup>42</sup> It is the period in which there was a high level of literary and aesthetic debate, experimentation with form, plot and character type. Consequently, it is a fascinating

proving ground for the applicability of any theory of literary criticism, including the feminist.<sup>43</sup> The texts considered are major works of the period – *Yevgeny Onegin*, *A Hero of Our Time*, Gogol's stories, Turgenev's second and third novels, as well as shorter works by the same writers. Preceding the major chapters is a brief survey of three earlier works (from the last two decades of the eighteenth century), while the final chapter concerns itself with the first novel of the century in Russian literature (or perhaps *any* literature) which addressed centrally the issues raised by my analysis, namely the images and roles of women in Russian literature. This is, of course, Chernyshevsky's *What Is To Be Done?*

One contradiction may immediately present itself to the 'assenting' or 'resisting' reader, feminist or otherwise. All twenty-four works discussed in the following pages were written by men. However, this merely reinforces the paradoxes already alluded to: in a patriarchal culture, the means of intellectual production were owned by men and, consequently, almost all works considered of major importance in this period were produced by men, often explicitly *for* men. And so it is highly appropriate that a feminist reading of Russian literature should commence with the dominant male code quite explicitly.<sup>44</sup>

The present work deliberately eschews any biography. The image of women in the writings of Gogol may or may not be a product of his alleged latent homosexuality; Pushkin's representation of women may mix romantic idealisation and accusatory disgust because of his youthful Don Juanism; Turgenev's view of women may have been coloured by his tyrannical mother – and so on. All these and other claims may or may not be valid. What the present work attempts is a reading of the *texts* produced by these men from a feminist point of view. The reason the chapters (with one exception) are author-based is partly for convenience, but also because it seemed likely that other works by the same man would illuminate the longer work. For the same reasons as the lack of biography, there is no real attempt to trace the sociology of women in the nineteenth century: the reader must look elsewhere for that.<sup>45</sup> I did not want to draw the banal conclusion that women are subordinate in Russian literature because they were in Russian society. Again, I wanted almost exclusively to look at the *texts* to see what they could tell us.

Finally, the academic reader may be surprised to find only a general bibliography and precious little secondary material in the

notes. In this respect I am following the 'procedure' of Tony Tanner in his *Adultery in the Novel*: 'the book is deliberately written "blind" because I wanted to try having my say in my own way'.<sup>46</sup> Of course, what follows is far from being entirely 'my own way': rather it is an attempt to read these works through feminist eyes. Where secondary works have already covered similar ground (as with Karlinsky's book on Gogol, to take just one example), I do refer to them, but on the whole not. As Tanner says, such a 'procedure' can hardly be termed a 'methodology'. What methodology there is in the ensuing pages (apart from the feminist underpinning) is a modified version of that compiled by Michael O'Toole (and previously used by myself and others), which in turn goes back to the Russian Formalists.<sup>47</sup> Each of the works considered is approached in terms of different levels of analysis, such as plot, narrative structure, point of view, theme, characterisation, setting and symbol. I have been eclectic within this methodology, dropping certain categories on occasion, and adding others where appropriate, in particular relations between male and female characters, and images of women, which subsumes 'character'. I do not claim to add anything to literary theory in these areas. Rather, I have used these categories as useful tools of analysis, to help me to unpack the feminist approach which has been my overall purpose.

It might be argued that feminist literary criticism is merely a passing fashion which will go the way of all those that have preceded it. However, it has been the contention of many recent feminist critics (and those of earlier incarnation) that they are *rediscovering* rather than inventing their approaches. Indeed, over a century ago Chernyshevsky was advocating feminist solutions to social and literary problems and, before him, Charles Fourier (amongst many others) argued most eloquently for the necessity of such principles in human society:

The change in an historical epoch can always be determined by the progress of women towards freedom, because in the relation of woman to man, of the weak to the strong, the victory of human nature over brutality is most evident. The degree of emancipation of women is the natural measure of general emancipation.<sup>48</sup>

To some it may seem that 'emancipation', female, general or otherwise, is not the business of literary criticism. Equally, however, if literary criticism has no bearing on the power structures

implicit (or explicit) within the literature it analyses, then it perhaps has no purpose at all. On a more limited front, the aim of the present volume is to offer new readings of nineteenth-century Russian literature so that we can appreciate the 'particular purposes' of this 'particular culture' more deeply and more fully.

One last personal point. Some feminist critics would argue that for a man to attempt to write a 'feminist' analysis of literature is merely yet another example of male colonisation of the female sphere, although Toril Moi for one allows 'that men *in principle* can be feminist critics', while arguing that feminists do not have 'to hire male liberals . . . on their behalf'.<sup>49</sup> There is, of course, a venerable tradition of male feminists (not an oxymoron in my view!) going back at least to Fourier, Mill and Engels, while Chernyshevsky was among the leading exponents of early Russian feminism.<sup>50</sup> While in no way wishing to place myself in such august company, I would argue that the contribution of these four men (as well as many others) to feminist theory and practice can hardly be ignored and does establish a worthy precedent. Moreover, and very regrettably, there is a marked dearth of feminist analysis of Russian literature, for political reasons perhaps in the Soviet Union, and for slightly less apparent reasons in the West. Apart from the excellent contributions of Barbara Heldt Monter and a few others, there is precious little extant work in this field. It seemed to me, therefore, that the present work simply needed to be done, and that my own gender was not a necessary impediment.

## 2

# Prelude: Radical Sentimentalism or Sentimental Radicalism?

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For most of the second half of the eighteenth century Russia was ruled by a woman, Catherine II. Her reign opened with liberal hopes, but, particularly after the shocks of Pugachev and 1789, ended in reaction. It also saw the flourishing of the arts and sciences conventionally known as the Russian Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> In literature cautious criticism became emboldened as, on the one hand, the reading public increased rapidly, and, on the other, political repression precluded most other forms of civic expression. Loyal Classicism shifted gradually into a kind of proto-Realism (Fonvizin, Novikov, Derzhavin) and a more fully formed Pre-Romanticism, or, to use the more traditional term, Sentimentalism (Radishchev, Karamzin).<sup>2</sup>

### 1. FONVIZIN

#### 1.1. Theme

Denis Fonvizin's second major play, *The Minor*,<sup>3</sup> was written in 1781, six years after the *Pugachevshchina* and at a time of growing reaction. Fonvizin himself has been termed 'the bold lord of satire . . . the friend of freedom',<sup>4</sup> and his play is conventionally seen as the first original Russian comedy<sup>5</sup> and the first *political* Russian comedy, especially in terms of its exposure of corruption and serf-abuse amongst the provincial nobility, as represented by the vicious Prostakov family. However, another reading seems as plausible. Even taking into account the possibility of self-censorship, much more emphasis is laid elsewhere. The play's opening situation may be seen, in the Prostakov family relationships, as an inversion of the natural patriarchal order, which is restored through the interven-



tion of the Wise Father, Starodum.<sup>6</sup> In the opening situation power lies in the hands of Prostakova (who abuses it) and by the end she has it taken away: she can be seen as an archetypal figure, the demon woman, the shrew, whose 'own men' are unable to tame her, and so the Law of the Father must be reinstated from outside. (By inference, this may also be seen as an allegorical discussion of the 'unnatural' order within Russia whereby a woman has usurped a rightfully male crown.) One important sub-theme within this is that of language and knowledge: Prostakova abuses the correct patriarchal discourse, as expounded by Starodum, and again she is defeated, and the power that knowledge confers is restored to its rightful male hands. (I shall return to this in more detail in the discussion of point of view.)

## 1.2. Narrative Structure

Although partially original in content the play follows the conventional Neo-Classical pattern of the three unities and five acts. Moreover, its structure charts the ancient five-part schema of prologue/exposition – complication/peripeteia – denouement – epilogue, the last being extremely brief.<sup>7</sup> This schema is parabolic in both senses of the term.

The prologue and exposition provide the setting of the play: Act One mainly concerns itself with delineating the foolishness and stupidity of the Prostakov men and the violence of Prostakova. Sofya, the demure heroine, is clearly set apart from this – by her silence, and her relatively late appearance, in Scene Six. Her quiet virtue is set in relief at once, but equally one of the variations on the theme of abuse of power and of violence is adumbrated, in that it is precisely Sofya's virtue which makes her vulnerable to the rapacious evil embodied in Prostakova.<sup>8</sup> Act One, particularly in the coarse, violent execrations of Prostakova, gives ample illustration of the 'false discourse' which also will be remedied in the latter parts of the play. Act Two sees the complication, with the gathering of the younger men of virtue, Pravdin and Milon, who guard Sofya as they await the coming of their 'leader' Starodum. His arrival at the opening of Act Three precipitates the peripeteia as the forces of good score an easy and, indeed, predetermined victory. This victory is marked by Starodum's initial anger, and then scornful laughter at the violent, noisy behaviour of his hostess (p. 135). Acts Four and Five provide minor renewed complications in the attempted abduc-