

A History of
Women's Writing in
Russia

Edited by

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Contents

Notes on contributors ix

Acknowledgments xiii

Note on transliteration xiv

List of abbreviations xv

Introduction 1

ADELE MARIE BARKER *and* JEHANNE M GHEITH

- 1 Women's image in Russian medieval literature 16
ROSALIND MCKENZIE
- 2 Sappho, Corinna, and Niobe: genres and personae in Russian women's writing, 1760–1820 37
CATRIONA KELLY
- 3 The inexperienced muse: Russian women and poetry in the first half of the nineteenth century 62
JUDITH VOWLES
- 4 Women of the 1830s and 1850s: alternative periodizations 85
JEHANNE M GHEITH
- 5 “A particle of our soul”: prerevolutionary autobiography by Russian women writers 100
MARY ZIRIN
- 6 The women of Russian Montparnasse (Paris, 1920–1940) 117
CATHERINE CIEPIELA
- 7 Women in Russian Symbolism: beyond the algebra of love 134
JENIFER PRESTO
- 8 The eastern path of exile: Russian women's writing in China 153
OLGA BAKICH *and* CAROL UELAND

- 9 Realist prose writers, 1881–1929 175
ROSALIND MARSH
- 10 Women and gender in post-symbolist poetry and the Stalin era 207
KATHARINE HODGSON
- 11 Writing the female body politic (1945–1985) 225
BETH HOLMGREN
- 12 In their own words? Soviet women writers and the search for self 243
ANNA KRYLOVA
- 13 Women’s poetry since the sixties 264
STEPHANIE SANDLER
- 14 The persistence of memory: women’s prose since the sixties 277
ADELE MARIE BARKER
- 15 Perestroika and post-Soviet prose: from dazzle to dispersal 297
HELENA GOSCILO
- Bibliographical guide to writers and their works* 313
Guide to further reading 365
Index 380

Women's image in Russian medieval literature

Until comparatively recently, both literary and historical criticism of the female image in medieval Russia has too often drawn a gloomy picture of inequality, repression, and suffering. With very limited exception, prerevolutionary analysis of the female image was occupied with women's legal, sociopolitical, and family status. Even the stalwarts of twentieth-century criticism, such as D. S. Likhachev and I. P. Eremin, produced no specific examination of the evolution of female characters, concentrating rather on questions of form and generic classification.¹ Furthermore, the absence of women writers in the medieval period and a preponderance of ecclesiastical female stereotypes have encouraged primarily historically based analysis, to the detriment of the literary portrait.

No work of literature written by a woman has come down to us; indeed, it was very rare for women to be literate as access to education was denied to them. In the cases where aristocratic ladies were taught to read, this was solely for devotional purposes such as reading of the Holy Scriptures and life-stories of the Orthodox saints. Until the seventeenth century, there was little alternative reading material – only a few travel accounts and historical works. Writing (and reading) was quite simply considered neither a profession, nor a general instructive or pleasurable activity; rather, it was a sacred task undertaken by the male clergy for the teaching and dissemination of Orthodox Christianity. The seventeenth century, the beginning of the modern period, saw the gradual appearance of creative secular writing as literacy became more widespread and foreign cultural influences gained more attention; yet only in the eighteenth century did women start producing creative literature, doubtless spurred on by the determination of Catherine II finally to establish a formal system of education for women.

Thus, throughout the medieval era, the portrayal of the female literary image and identity was dependent upon men working in a strictly patriarchal and ecclesiastical environment which did little to promote the less stereotypical image of women. Pre-seventeenth-century literary characters tended to be based (albeit at times very loosely) on historical figures whose sociopolitical status was reflected in the portrayals in the literary text. In the case of women, these spheres were restricted and controlled, resulting in likewise limited literary depictions.

How is it, then, that such inauspicious beginnings spawned so many original, admirable and enduring female literary prototypes, recognizable in both men and women's writing throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Whether as a reflection of prevailing social conditions or a study in psychological analysis, there are countless examples of modern heroines who have inherited characteristics from their medieval counterparts. The treatment of early prototypes has varied depending on the sociopolitical situation, whether the author is male or female, and whether the response to earlier models is positive or negative. With the advent of Socialist Realism, many of the traditional female role models were no longer appropriate, and modern prototypes were created, more suitable for the political and cultural ethos of Communism. Having evolved in diverse ways over nine centuries, the original prototypes were not easily usurped, and they surface in literature throughout the Soviet period, re-emerging once again with Russia herself in the 1990s.

This chapter will discuss in detail the most important female literary prototypes of the medieval period and point to some of the later works in Russian literature which draw inspiration from them. The main sociopolitical influences that affected women and their literary portrayal will also be mentioned, for their significance cannot be ignored in the construction of any medieval literary characters.

The creation of female prototypes was, of course, never a conscious exercise, but rather a response and/or reaction to the contemporary needs and desires of the author. Neither did the evolution of the female image run a smooth course; the earliest female literary characters were subjected to constant and most often unjustified misogyny for centuries. This did not lead to unchallenged submission on the part of women, however, even if a written response was not an option available to them. "Love your wives, but give them no power over you": these words, attributed to Vladimir Monomakh and found *sub anno 1096* in the *Povest' vremennykh let* (Primary Chronicle), strongly indicate that the wise and respected

Monomakh had come to the conclusion even at this early date that women were not so powerless and held considerably more influence over their menfolk than many contemporary historians would care to admit.

Reinforcing this distrust of women, the first seven centuries of medieval Russian literature saw the rapid development of an ever-present tradition of the denigration of women, in comparison to which Monomakh's words are in fact comparatively meek. Far less ambiguous, for example, was the anonymous author of the twelfth-century *Molenie Daniila Zatochnika* (Supplication of Daniil the Exile), who seldom hesitated to employ imaginative descriptions in his tirades against the fairer sex. The *Slovo o zhenakh o dobrykh i o zlykh* (Discourse on Women, both Good and Evil) continued the misogynistic tradition, claiming that a virtuous wife is more valuable than precious gems, while an evil wife is like an aggravating itch. The fourteenth-century *Izmaragd* (Emerald), a miscellany of devotional readings, warned unsuspecting husbands to beware of the perfidious intentions of malicious-tongued women; and the sixteenth-century *Domostroi* (Household Management) offered advice to husbands on how they might best whip their erring wives to keep them under control and left no doubt as to who remained master of the household. Variations on this theme continued well into the seventeenth century when works such as the *Beseda ottsa s synom o zhenskoi zlobe* (A Father's Conversation with his Son about Woman's Evil) merely presented a more sophisticated and narratively detailed version of the *Slovo o zhenakh*.

Such a sustained level of misogyny was not, however, a feature inherited from Slavonic antiquity. When Vladimir I, Grand Prince of Kiev, instituted Orthodoxy as the official Russian religion in 988, he also opened the door to Byzantine cultural influence which entered the earliest Russian state of Kievan Rus' alongside the wider transplantation of necessary ecclesiastical texts.² As the eastern territory of the Holy Roman Empire, Byzantium was subject to canon law, and Orthodox Christianity proved to be no less misogynistic than its predecessor in Rome. Byzantine thought, for example, subscribed to a Neoplatonic asceticism regarding sexuality, which claimed that "women's reproductive function tied them more intimately to the physical world and made them even less capable [than men] of spiritual growth,"³ rendering women more vulnerable to satanic forces and impurity. Many translations of misogynistic Byzantine sermons found in tenth-century Kievan collections stress the weakness of woman and her propensity to sin. The clergy actively disseminated this notion in Rus'—with evident success if judged by the mere

handful of female native Russian saints compared with the array of male saints, several hundred strong.⁴ The process of selective translation of only the most necessary texts for the teaching of Christianity further reinforced this prototype: deprived of the wider Byzantine literary heritage (the vast collections of philosophy, historical works or classical literature which were not translated), Rus' was provided only with a very specific ecclesiastical model for female characters.

The Byzantine model conflicted strongly with the traditions of Slavonic antiquity where it appears that women enjoyed respect and status in society. This was not merely connected with the importance of their role as mothers and home-keepers, but was rather deeply embedded in the complex hierarchy of ancient pagan gods and goddesses. Various sources have unearthed pagan goddesses worshiped in Rus', including the popular and important Mokosh', goddess of fertility, women, childbirth, and woman's work such as spinning. The worship of Mokosh' possibly grew out of the ancient Slavonic cult of Damp Mother Earth (*Mat' syra zemlia*), all-powerful and creative embodiment of fertility and spring. These female pagan images commanded great reverence, their powers being regularly invoked to help, heal, and comfort. With the arrival in Rus' of the Christian Church, however, such powers were decried as witchcraft, the devil's work, and every aspect of pagan worship was denounced by the Orthodox authorities. Vladimir I, perhaps sensing an opportunity to weaken matriarchal domestic-based power and shift control to a more state-governed basis, supported this concept.

This transition was not without problems. Confusion arose between traditional pagan practices and nascent Russian Christianity, leading to a phenomenon known as *dvoeverie* (double faith) in which pagan ritual was carried over and mingled with Christian practices. Disparities in the teaching and acceptance of the new faith became an issue between rural and urban societies, upper and lower social classes, and it was not until the fifteenth century that the state and Church began in earnest to work together – ultimately in vain – to eradicate *dvoeverie*.⁵ One of the best-known female Orthodox images strongly influenced by *dvoeverie* is Saint Paraskeva Piatnitsa: identified with many of the powers attributed to Mokosh', Paraskeva protected those who obeyed her rules of work, but most horribly punished those who broke them (a good example of pagan-style retribution in a supposedly Christian saint).

This change of attitude to women was reinforced by the exclusively male clergy responsible for copying manuscripts and ecclesiastical texts,

and for disseminating the teachings of the Orthodox Church. Early Christian literature is hardly famed for impartial generosity towards the female image: stark black and white contrasts in many early Russian literary works tended to associate women either with Mary Mother of God (although no earthly woman could ever hope to approach her degree of perfection), or with the fallen figure of Eve, the temptress and destructor of good men. This duality may have felt more like a vicious circle for medieval Russian women who could never hope to attain the respected position of mother without participating in the sins of Eve. This idealization–reality conflict is frequently found in later female characters as well. Many of Fedor Dostoevsky’s heroines, for example, both reflect and further complicate this dilemma as can be seen in the case of the prostitute Sonia in *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* (Crime and Punishment, 1866); for all her saintly goodness and compassion, which play a critical role in the redemption of Raskolnikov, Dostoevsky also marks her as the fallen woman, the prostitute.

Mention should briefly be made here, however, of the twelfth-century apocryphal tale *Khozhdenie bogoroditsy po mukam* (Travels of the Virgin Around Hell) found in early translated collections. In the tale, Mary attempts to intercede on behalf of those suffering in hell after she witnesses their torments. Although finally successful, alone she is unable to persuade God and Christ to take heed of her pleas—only when the angels and male saints join in does Christ relent and grant an annual period of leniency. Thus, we see even Mary portrayed as a weaker and less effectual character in the divine hierarchy—although far greater in compassion. The importance of compassion and intercession provided by female characters held great attraction for later writers: Dostoevsky’s Ivan in *Brat’ia Karamazovy* (The Brothers Karamazov, 1881), for example, cites the unwillingness of God and Christ to release man from suffering (as opposed to Mary’s determination to provide relief) in this apocryphal tale as one justification for rejecting the teachings of Christ.

With the gradual spread and entrenchment of ecclesiastical misogyny, the spheres of influence women had enjoyed in pagan Rus’ were drastically curtailed, and women were forced to adapt to a system in which their role was always secondary. One of the most potent factors which contributed to the downward spiral of pre-Christian female authority and which nurtured the rise of misogynistic literature was the practice of selective literacy. The zeal with which manuscripts were composed and copied in the monasteries of Rus’ was not to be found in the convents, as

women were excluded from all such literary activity. While convents were often known to have libraries, thus indicating the possibility of at least some nuns being literate, there is no evidence to suggest that they also engaged in composition or copying of any type. A statement in the twelfth-century saint's life *Zhitie Evfrosinii Polotskoi* (Life of Evfrosiniia of Polotsk) that Evfrosiniia "wrote books in her own hand" is intriguing, but sadly cannot be substantiated. The *beresty* (birchbark documents, dating from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries) discovered in the old city of Novgorod, on the other hand, do provide conclusive evidence that some women were actively literate. Messages, written and received by both men and women, were almost always for purposes of commerce, jurisdiction, and household management, rather than recreation or even devotional pursuit, although there are a small number of intimate letters such as one recently discovered in Novgorod. It is written by a woman who gently but insistently asks a gentleman friend why he has not come to see her – she has already written three times. Emotive yet frank, she appears anxious that she has offended him in some way and cannot understand his silence. Such fragmentary relics penned by women are not overly unusual in Novgorod, although even here no substantial evidence has come to light to suggest an active participation in the far more extensive official ecclesiastical literature.

It thus appears that women's contribution to early written culture was of a limited and practical nature. This understandably led to an imbalance of authorial perspective: the literary image of woman was seen almost exclusively through the prism of the Orthodox Church. The final and inevitably distorted impression cannot be considered an accurate reflection of reality, but rather the product of imagination, fear, fantasy, discrimination, and desire on the part of the male clergy. This distortion was possibly further promoted by some secular social structures such as the *terem*, loosely defined as the part of elite households where female members of the family lived and entertained their lady friends. Commonly blamed for the introduction of the *terem* tradition into medieval Russia are either Byzantine cultural influences or else the invading Tatar Hordes; and it is often assumed that the *terem* simply dealt women yet another misogynistic blow in the form of enforced control, "banishment" from the public arena, thus effectively depriving them of opportunity to become actively involved within a wider social context. These are, however, dangerously simplistic explanations which mask a far more complex issue: did the *terem* function purely as a repressive tool against

women, or was it also designed and employed to protect female members of a patriarchal society where the importance of pure bloodline and arranged marriage was still paramount to ensure vital political allegiance among the various branches of the aristocracy? Furthermore, how did women react to the limited freedom of movement imposed upon them? Nancy Shields Kollmann convincingly suggests that the *terem* tradition may have grown up in Russia as “a native response to the development of elite society,” citing, for example, “its utility in the political context and its compatibility with Russian Orthodox values about women.”⁶ As for women’s reaction, it is very possible that within their physically restricted lives, they did enjoy power and sway in several important matters: they were largely responsible for selecting future spouses for their children and arranging the marriages; and they could ingratiate themselves with other families whenever need arose. Whatever the possible advantages of the *terem*, however, physical isolation still meant that there was little opportunity to record the positive aspects of woman’s life, or to influence literary activity in the outside world where woman’s image remained distinctly disadvantaged: increasingly absent in real life from the social arena, female literary characters through many centuries of Christianized Rus’ continued to be depicted for the greater part as pious – and silent – wives of the heroic male protagonist. This was only to change when Peter the Great denounced the *terem* tradition and brought the elite women out into society at the end of the seventeenth century.

The restricted medieval perspective, however, did not mean that the literary image of women was purely negative. An exploration of female characters throughout the medieval period uncovers many exceptions to the black and white Christian stereotyping of women and presents enlightening and positive portraits. The oldest documented record of an influential woman, for instance, is the richly detailed legend surrounding Princess Ol’ga of Kiev, wife of Prince Igor. The colorful entry *sub anno 945* in the *Primary Chronicle* (*Povest’ vremennykh let*), has more than a hint of folkloric motif, attributing many of the traditional *mudraia devitsa* (Wise Maiden)⁷ characteristics to Ol’ga, including an element of cunning which neatly complements her natural intelligence. She is respected for her gracious nature, yet remembered more for her resourceful and imaginative acts of revenge against the Derevliaus who had slain Igor in battle. By dint of superior wit and tactical maneuvering, Ol’ga is ultimately far more effective than all her husband’s warriors: according to the chronicle, she prevents the lands of Rus’ from falling into enemy hands and upholds the

honor of her dead husband. For this, she is compared favorably to any man, yet still retains all the traditionally attractive qualities of a woman.

Although hers is far from the perfect image of women advocated by the Church, the chronicler clearly relishes Ol'ga's feats of vengeance and recounts the tale with great enthusiasm. It must be emphasized, however, that Ol'ga undoubtedly received preferential treatment (not to mention leniency in the face of her un-Christian actions) from the ecclesiastical scribes, as she was the first member of the Rus' nobility to convert to Christianity. It was certainly politically astute for the relatively young Orthodox Church to make the most of such a popular and strong figure as Ol'ga, protector of the Kievan lands, who chose conversion: her example, correctly used, could well have helped to shore up the Church's efforts to instill Orthodoxy in Rus'.

One of Ol'ga's most popular traits is her similarity to figures from Russian folklore: as mentioned above, she possesses the wit and ingenuity of the Wise Maiden; her unconquerable warlike spirit casts her in the role of a *polenitsa* (legendary female warrior); and her leadership and annihilation of the enemy men recall the exploits of the legendary Amazons.⁸ A similar early exception to the silently pious female character, and one who shares Ol'ga's dichotomous roots in ecclesiastical literature and folkloric tradition, is the mother of Feodosii of the Kievan Caves. In Nestor's revered twelfth-century saint's life *Zhitie Feodosia Pecherskogo* (Life of Feodosii of the [Kievan] Caves), she is portrayed as an overpoweringly strong character of the negative type: determined to prevent her son from entering a monastery, she beats and abuses him mercilessly, attempting to break his religious resolve. A masculine, monster-like harridan, she must surely embody many of the clergy's worst apprehensions about women, and only when she takes the veil is she finally brought under control. To find such vivid violent descriptions in the hagiography of such an important ecclesiastical figure as Feodosii is unprecedented: hagiographical canons dictated that all individual characteristics be erased in favor of a common stereotypical embodiment of Christian values. Nestor, however, did not hesitate to contrast a bold catalogue of this mother's Herculean strength and attempts at selfish emotional blackmail to prevent her child leaving her for the Church, with the meekness and genuine humility of her son's temperament along with his determination to devote his life to God. The final effect is, of course, that Feodosii triumphs over his mother's iron rule (in a stark gender reversal of Ol'ga's triumph over the Derevlian Prince Mal), and the terrible excesses of his mother's

character serve simply to emphasize the goodness of his own.⁹ The Church is also left with an unforgettable portrait of a woman who acts directly against the Christian forces of Good, until repentance (or enlightenment) forces her to take the veil.

Ol'ga and Feodosii's mother are two of a kind; they bridge the chasm created deliberately by the clergy's efforts to eliminate all traces of pagan culture from ecclesiastical texts. As the Church expanded and grew more powerful, however, the female role in literature was increasingly consigned to black and white background stereotypes, and the more vivid female characters were to be found predominantly in folklore, even though the colorful wealth of oral tradition is populated for the most part by men. The Russian *skazki* (fairy tales), for example, generally depict women as a trophy to be won. Fairy tales fall into three main groups: animal tales; *volshhebnye skazki* (magical tales), originating in pre-Christian times; and the later *bytovye skazki* (everyday tales), which incorporate a moral aspect—albeit of often dubious quality—and may also be satirical. The everyday and magical tales are the most pertinent to this study with the former tending to produce stereotypical female character casts, whilst the latter portray some positive heroines, such as in “Mar'ia Morevna.” Mar'ia is a beautiful princess and champion warrior who so impresses Ivan-Tsarevich that he marries her. The stereotype of woman as the weaker sex is frequently reversed in this tale: disobeying Mar'ia's instructions when she goes off to war, Ivan-Tsarevich unleashes a terrible ogre kept prisoner by Mar'ia, who is consequently carried off by the ogre. Ivan-Tsarevich, continually breaking down in tears when presented with yet another seemingly impossible task to perform, must spend many years being “tested” to win her back.

Females are also often cast in the “helper” role in fairy tales, where only they are able to save the hero. This is certainly the case in the tale “Mudraia zhena” (The Wise Wife), where the traditional *durak* (fool) marries a wise maiden capable of magical acts and who always saves him by offering precious advice or completing the necessary tasks herself. Mention should also briefly be made of Baba-Iaga, the evil witch who also, however, has her more generous moments.

Rather more fertile ground for a stronger depiction of women are the *byliny* (epic folk songs). The principal characters of these were the fearless *bogatyri* (warrior heroes) who reveled in traditional manly exploits and shows of unimaginable strength to overcome all the odds and win a woman and land for their king. Reminiscent once again of the legendary

Amazons, there is a sizable collection of *polenitsy* (warrior maidens), women who challenge the epic heroes and prove their physical superiority over them. Predictably, the warrior maidens are normally then “tamed” by the men who woo and win them. One famous Kievan *bogatyř*, for example, Dobrynia Nikitich, is challenged by a mysterious *bogatyř*, who is identified as the warrior maiden Nastas'ia just before they engage in battle. Dobrynia and Nastas'ia are eventually married, after which Nastas'ia hangs up her sword and rapidly settles into domesticity with her husband. In the *bylina* “Dunai,” however, the *bogatyř* weds his long-time love Nastas'ia, only to kill her later when she proves more skillful than her husband in archery. Dunai is seemingly unable to cope with the humiliation of his wife outdoing him, although when he realizes that Nastas'ia was carrying his child, he takes his own life in despair and grief. The image of the warrior maiden captured the imagination of many later writers, both men and women, and was used to great effect in, for example, Nadezhda Durova's early nineteenth-century *Kavalerist-devitsa: Proisshestvie v Rossii* (The Cavalry Maiden).

Another important female figure in *byliny* is the hero/heroine's mother. Invariably old and wise and often widowed, she is able to foresee calamities which will befall her child and offer advice. Examples of this are the widowed mothers of Dobrynia in “Dobrynia i zmei” (Dobrynia and the Dragon), and in “Vasilii Buslaev”: they warn their sons against certain actions and even take preventive measures to save them. These wise mother figures differ strongly from the weak-willed wives of countless *byliny*, who are lured into unfaithfulness either by evil spirits or more simply temptations of the flesh.

Occasionally elements of oral tradition did find their way into official Church literature, and among these fragments it is not unusual to discover laments (*prichitaniia* or *plachi*) sung by women. Included in the fourteenth-century hagiographical *Slovo o zhitii velikogo kniazia Dmitriia Ivanovicha* (Discourse on the Life of Grand Prince Dmitrii Ivanovich), for example, is the lament of his widow, Ovdotiia. Replete with themes and motifs from oral tradition, it also incorporates eloquent and sincere exhortations to Mary Mother of God not to forget Ovdotiia in her hour of need and miserable loneliness. Another widow, Iaroslavna, is found in the twelfth-century epic *Slovo o polku Igoreve* (Tale of Igor's Campaign) lamenting her husband Igor, believed to have been slain in battle against the Polovtsians. Her lyrical lament abounds with folklore imagery; amidst comparisons to the strength and beauty of nature, she likens herself to a seagull (the bird

of mourning) flying to tend her fallen husband and cleanse his wounds. These are among the earliest examples of recorded Russian oral traditions, and one may only speculate in what way the image of women in medieval Russian literature may have been improved had such poetic sentiment been more regularly recorded in written form.

Another case of documented folklore on a far more extensive level is found in one extraordinary work which stands out for its unique composite structure of fairy tales and hagiographical *topoi*. The mid-sixteenth-century *Povest' o Petre i Fevronii muromskikh* (Tale of Petr and Fevroniia of Murom) was composed by the cleric-publicist Ermolai-Erazm, ostensibly for the canonization of the thirteenth-century historical figures of the same name and about whom very little is known. It is clearly modeled, however, upon much older fairy tales and is of the same genus as Gottfried von Strassburg's tale of Tristan and Isolde, thus illustrating the widespread influence of migratory folklore motifs. Petr is a prince who is mortally wounded by a dragon while defending the honor of his sister-in-law and can be cured only by Fevroniia, a peasant girl who speaks in riddles and mixes magical potions for Petr, eventually making him – not too unwillingly – marry her. After a few troublesome social problems, in which Fevroniia's wit, cunning, and magical powers inevitably save the day, they live happily ever after. The tale was christianized in order to emphasize the supposed saintliness of the couple: the dragon is the devil, the magical curative potion a divine miracle, and the conclusion reads more like a moralistic religious parable than a fairy tale. The fusion of folklore and hagiography is not without its problems; the work is memorable principally for its rich and colorful folk motifs, with the hagiographical elements tending to be relegated to the background. This was clearly a highly successful formula, however; the number of extant manuscript copies, even allowing for natural loss over time, attests to great popular demand for the tale in the medieval era.¹⁰

Fevroniia is a complex character who contravenes most of the submissive female stereotypes of religious hagiographical literature, but does not fully conform to the usual mold of folkloric Wise Maiden. She comprises a synthesis of both sets of characteristics: intelligent yet cunning, proud yet humble, and always the stronger of the partnership. Indeed, after slaying the dragon, Petr is passive, almost a secondary character, all further action being initiated by the dominant figure of Fevroniia. Despite their harmonious and loving mutual relations, this appears to be exactly what Monomakh warned against, and, true enough,

it turns out to be the cause of great political problems. Petr's *boiars* (noblemen) claim that their wives do not approve of Fevroniia (coming from a peasant family, she is deemed too lowly to be queen), and they do not cease to harass their husbands until the latter persuade Petr to get rid of Fevroniia. The situation is turned on its head, however, when Fevroniia states that the one item she is permitted to take with her will be Petr. The ensuing inter-factional squabbling that breaks out between the *boiars* is sufficient to bring them to their senses and plead with Petr and Fevroniia to return and rule jointly over them. This appears to be authorial advocacy of the political concept of a centralized state, ruled over by an autocratic leader sufficiently strong and respected to put an end to interference and problems arising from the *boiar* ranks – suitable (not to mention sensible) approbation for the reign and policies of Ivan the Terrible. With the positive conclusion of the tale, Monomakh's notion is both confirmed – had the *boiars* not listened to their wives, they would not temporarily have lost Petr as their prince – and debunked, as Fevroniia remains the dominant half of a successful ruling partnership.

Only the tale of Ol'ga's revenge against the Derevlians can begin to rival the obvious hybrid of ecclesiastical and fairy-tale elements found in the *Povest' o Petre i Fevronii muromskikh*; no other extant work from the medieval period incorporates folkloric tradition to such a great degree. It must be remembered that local tales connected to the Church were easily confused with folklore in a society where the transmission of information, both fact and fiction, was predominantly oral. Thus, the possibility of ecclesiastical tales being filtered through and corrupted by popular myth was very likely, and complicated further by the subtleties and unconscious practice of two-fold belief.

The seventeenth century in Russia is marked as a time of definitive political, social, and ecclesiastical transition which brought the medieval era to an end and heralded the dawning of the modern period with the accession to the throne of Peter the Great in 1682. The Time of Troubles (1605–13) between the death of Boris Godunov and the accession of Mikhail Romanov to the throne dominated the beginning of the century with the terrors of invasion, civil war, and uncertainty. As a consequence, many Russians were left questioning long-held precepts concerning the political and moral state of Russian affairs. The religious revivals, and later the Schism¹¹ of the Orthodox Church simply compounded the confusion felt by a people who may have been justified in believing Russia, the Third Rome, was now floundering hopelessly.¹² Invasion from

the West resulted in renewed contact with the Catholic lands of Europe, and the accompanying influences of culture and education. A growing awareness of the secular world outside Russia slowly gave birth to dissatisfaction with the moralistic didacticism of previous centuries, and answers to the malaise of Russia and her people began to be sought beyond the confines of a purely ecclesiastical world view.

The radical sociopolitical changes of this time were equally reflected in literary developments; ecclesiastical dominance over literary activity began to wane and the rise of literacy in secular society introduced exciting new influences. In this respect, two works in particular mark an important milestone in the evolution of medieval literature: composed as hagiographies, both the *Povest' ob Ul'ianii Osor'inoi* (Tale of Ul'ianiiia Osor'ina) and the *Povest' o boiaryne Morozovoi* (Tale of the Boiaryna Morozova) present detailed portraits of strong and determined women as their protagonists. Both works testify to the birth of a new attitude towards literary heroines.

The *Tale of Ul'ianiiia Osor'ina* tells how Ul'ianiiia followed the expected course of marriage to a virtuous man, Georgii, and the raising of his children, while managing the household and estate with common sense and success during the frequent and prolonged absences of her husband. Following the death of two of their sons, Georgii refused Ul'ianiiia's request to retire to a convent, explaining to her that she still had a husband and family who needed her care. She accepted his decision and concentrated solely on her charitable deeds in the secular world. One extraordinary feature of this work, which purports to be a hagiography, is that neither protagonist nor author (Ul'ianiiia's son Kallistrat) ever took monastic vows, thus making it the first Russian hagiography both to be devoted to a layperson and composed by one. Unlike the majority of previous hagiographers, Kallistrat was thus able to present an unusually rich account of Ul'ianiiia's lifestyle, with far greater accuracy and fewer of the hagiographical clichés of embellishment used in cases where insufficient original material was available to the hagiographer. He builds up Ul'ianiiia's character in a way previously unseen in Russian literature: he describes how she relates to others, her family and servants; he is defensive of her goodness and saintly qualities as well as her practical nature; we hear how her actions stem from reasoned motive instead of divine pre-ordination; and we feel her despair as well as her happiness. Together, these factors present a very intimate picture of Ul'ianiiia, one sufficiently realistic for many women to be able to identify with.¹³

Ul'ianiia is the first genuinely good Russian heroine, cast in realistic terms of human value rather than simply in the ecclesiastical mold of sinful woman who must redeem herself. Practical common sense mixed with her irreproachable *smirenie* (humility; considered one of the most important virtues in Orthodox Christianity) is starkly at odds with the centuries-long formulaic patterns of inherent female wickedness and clearly marks a turning point in attitudes towards women. The emphasis placed upon her great feats of charity in the real world can further be seen as recognition that women, as well as men, could contribute positively, in a material and spiritual sense, to society.

Ul'ianiia provides the prototype for later literary characters such as Matrena in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's "Matrenin dvor" (Matryona's House, 1963). Matryona's life and total selflessness, mirroring those of Ul'ianiia, act as authorial expressions of morality and spiritual belief. Both Kallistrat and Solzhenitsyn, furthermore, choose to voice their dissatisfaction with elements of the Orthodox Church by creating female characters who have no strong links with the established Church, yet whose faith is undiminished and productive.

Far less subtle an attack than Kallistrat's against the Church was made by the author of the *Povest' o boiaryne Morozovoi*, which tells of the campaign waged against the ecclesiastical hierarchy by Feodosiia Morozova, seventeenth-century aristocratic courtier and most famous female Old Believer, in the aftermath of the Nikonian ecclesiastical reforms. As in the case of Ul'ianiia, the author of Feodosiia's hagiography was well-acquainted with her daily life and routine and thus able to furnish his tale with convincingly realistic detail. He describes how Feodosiia is moved from nunnery to nunnery in Moscow, before finally being exiled to the far northern territories. Further, he records many of the conversations Feodosiia has with her adversaries on this voyage of imprisonment. Slowly, a portrait emerges of a devoted mother, a loyal sister and friend, but also a supremely intelligent woman extremely well-versed in theology as well as the Holy Books, and a favorite debating partner of learned men. A rational thinker, she cannot accept the Nikonian reforms as they contravene traditional Orthodox rituals and would lead to blasphemy. Through an emotive and penetrating analysis of her thoughts and motives, the reader is encouraged to form a favorable and admiring impression of Feodosiia.

For all the emphasis laid upon the emotional and intellectual sides of her nature, however, Feodosiia is undoubtedly made of stern material; she stands her ground in the face of terrible persecution, eventually

starving to death in a desolate northern fortress dungeon. She is not the type of character to cede to another merely because she is a woman, never hesitating to contradict – albeit in a civil tone – the senior clergy and statesmen who attempt to dissuade her from her chosen path. Feodosiia is not, however, cast in the mold of earlier religious super-ascetics: the author creates a measured balance of tender “womanly” characteristics together with elements of great strength and fighting spirit, resulting in a genuinely multi-dimensional character. The author, himself an Old Believer, naturally wished to hold Feodosiia aloft as an example of fortitude and resolution, and by emphasizing her womanly qualities and virtues, he increases the impact and sympathy of the reader. This, in turn, imparts to the work a sense of realism; no longer are we dealing with literary ideals of womanly virtue but with virtue tested against the backdrop of real life. The first truly revolutionary female prototype in Russian literature, Feodosiia’s example may well have inspired later voices of protest against the seemingly invincible forces of state and Church.

It is worth noting that up to this point the greater majority of strong female literary characters are widows (Ol’ga from the *Povest’ vremennykh let*, Feodosii’s mother, Ovdotiia and Iaroslavna, Ul’ianiia and Feodosiia). This is a repeated pattern originating in the traditional respect afforded to elderly women – the usual time of widowhood. Widows were deemed to have fulfilled their duty to society, cared for husbands and raised families, and, more importantly, they were no longer considered a threat, either in terms of sexual temptation (leading potentially to family dishonor) or possible contamination of the bloodline, as their child-bearing years were considered to be past. Moreover, after the death of a husband, his widow would commonly shoulder the responsibilities and duties of managing the family estate and affairs if her sons were still minors. As a result, widows became more active members of the commercial and social spheres and even held higher positions at the royal courts than married women. The Church likewise decreed that the only women permitted to bake the communion host were widows aged fifty and over. The inherent implication in this attitude towards widows is that “desexualization” brings more privilege, influence, and freedom, in line with Neoplatonic ascetics regarding sexually active woman as a spiritual inferior. Monomakh would perhaps have been wiser to beware the widow rather than the wife.

One endearing seventeenth-century portrait of womanly tenderness and strength, however, is not that of a widow. The dynamic, belligerent, and fanatical Old Believer Archpriest Avvakum found his most patient

and devoted supporter in his wife Anastasiia Markovna. In his lengthy autobiographical *zhitie* (life), detailing his staunch and often violent protest against the Nikonian reforms, subsequent persecution, and exile in Siberia, Avvakum describes how Anastasiia faithfully followed him, sharing his privation with no complaint. Despite all of Avvakum's outward shows of strength and domination in the narrative, he hides from his wife neither his own insecurities nor the brutal truth that their hardships will end only when they die—he knows her to be sufficiently strong in mind and in faith to accept their fate—and his descriptions of Anastasiia are tender and admiring, recognizing both her patience and feats of endurance. She never offers unsolicited advice, yet always inspires him to continue teaching the true faith when he becomes discouraged; and Avvakum always complies with her advice.

Anastasiia can furthermore be seen as the earliest in a long tradition of compassionate female characters and writers who support their menfolk when all others have turned against them. Princess Natal'ia Dolgorukaia, for example, later recorded in her *Zapiski* (Notes) the hardships of exile in Siberia with her husband in the eighteenth century, and the wives of the Decembrists likewise stoically followed their husbands into exile.¹⁴ Slightly over one century later, Nadezhda Mandel'stam recounted the last four years of her husband Osip's life in exile in *Vospominaniia* (Hope Against Hope: a Memoir), at the same time as Evgeniia Ginzburg recorded her own experiences of life in the camps in the 1930–40s in *Krutoi marshrut* (Within the Whirlwind).

The later decades of the seventeenth century witnessed a dramatic acceleration of secular influences in Russia, prompted by the reforms of Peter the Great. Increased literacy outside the ranks of the clergy led to several compositions of a more secular nature; suddenly the characters, their motivation and the ability to entertain an audience with a compelling plot became important factors. This was the nascent form of a semi-secular genre, the *povesti* (tales), which no longer strove to nourish merely the spiritual requirements of the reader, but also the creative. One especially welcome development was in character portrayal; having already witnessed an apparent authorial desire to reflect a more realistic literary protagonist in the tales of Ul'ianiiia Osor'ina and Boiaryna Morozova, the later seventeenth-century *povesti* began to sweep aside many more of the medieval stereotypes of character depiction. A curiosity arose about the psychological motivation and rationale of the protagonist, as well as the psychology of human relations. Slowly, medieval stereotypes

became less viable which, in turn, meant that the image of woman as an evil inferior to man began to recede. It should be noted, though, that there were still no women writers and so even this new progressive female literary identity was still constructed from a male viewpoint.

The move towards secular writing was gradual, however, and many *povesti* continued to rely upon traditional moralistic instruction for their denouement. The *Povest' o Savve Grudtsyne* (Tale of Savva Grudtsyn), for example, while presenting a detailed picaresque-style storyline, still cast the main female character in the mold of devil's advocate, and the didactic import was clearly that monastic retreat remained the only way to ensure salvation. The *Povest' o Karpe Sutulove* (Tale of Karp Sutulov), on the other hand,¹⁵ does illustrate the trend towards a more advanced type of secular composition, and at the same time it demonstrates that familiar international themes and plots had indeed penetrated Russian literary culture. In a satirical commentary upon corruption and dissolute behavior in both the merchant and clerical milieux, Tat'iana, loyal and loving wife of the wealthy merchant Karp, succeeds in reducing three lustful would-be seducers (a merchant, a priest, and an archbishop) to unwilling actors in an improvised pantomime. Taking advantage of her husband's absence and her need to take up a pre-arranged financial loan, all three of these traditionally respected characters demand to spend one night with her. She neatly and amusingly sidesteps their advances (even persuading the archbishop to dress up in her own clothes), takes their money and exposes their shameful intentions to the local *voevoda* (provincial governor), who recognizes not only Tat'iana's wit and intelligence, but also the humor of the situation. Karp likewise fully appreciates the talents of his extraordinary wife, applauding the fact that she acted independently of him and profited so handsomely—like Avvakum and Anastasiia, Karp and Tat'iana present another example of a positive and rewarding partnership.

What is most interesting about Tat'iana is that she is not the most obvious choice for a literary heroine. A perfectly ordinary woman—a merchant's wife who enjoys entertaining her well-to-do female friends while awaiting the return of her husband—she is described as increasingly perplexed at almost every turn, and she pursues the unadventurous path of seeking advice from her priest and then the archbishop. Only when these options simply further confuse the issue does she combine a daring mixture of impulse and improvisation. This works firmly in her favor as the reader does not necessarily expect Tat'iana to show such panache, yet at the same time remain in control of the situation. The

entire tale, in fact, illustrates just how far the female image had progressed from the medieval prototype, and how successful a woman could be in both business and self-defense: Tatiana secures the money she needs without compromising her honor, and even lectures the failed suitors on their moral conduct—in stark contrast to their vacuous honeyed words to her—before mischievously delivering them up to the *voevoda*.

At times reminiscent of Princess Ol'ga, Tat'iana's "revenge" is far more humorous and also free to address a serious contemporary issue in its outspoken condemnation of corruption in the Church. Seldom before had such senior ecclesiastical figures found themselves the butt of such humiliating escapades—and never before at the hands of a woman! No longer was the restrictive Byzantine female literary prototype fully enforceable: the ecclesiastical monopoly on literacy had been broken and lay writers were not subject to the strict censure of the Church. Female sexuality was recognized as more than simply an instrument of the devil, it became a part of real life and could be incorporated in more progressive literary works to great humorous effect. The author of this tale created a very suitable protagonist to expose corruption in the Church; so many centuries of repression by the Church of every type of female depiction would surely have made Tat'iana's revenge all the sweeter. On a wider scale, later in the eighteenth century female writers themselves took up the challenge and directed many satirical and witty epigrams against those male authors who still scorned the position and abilities of the fairer sex.

Annushka is the unusually strong female protagonist of another tale from the end of the seventeenth century, *Povest' o Frole Skobeeve* (Tale of Frol Skobeev), which presents a broader and colorful portrait of contemporary Muscovite society. Frol, infamous and incorrigible scoundrel, makes no attempt to disguise his scurrilous desire to obtain position and wealth by any available means. He cheats and bribes his way into marriage with Annushka, daughter of a Muscovite aristocrat, by dressing up in his sister's clothes and attending Annushka's name-day party which culminates in Frol's forcible—albeit hesitant—seduction of his innocent hostess. Cross-dressing per se is a daring and highly uncommon concept in medieval Russian literature: in the *Povest' o Karpe Sutulove*, it is used as a momentary stalling tactic (designed to buy time for Tat'iana until the next suitor arrives) just as much as an appropriately comic/moralistic device (making the archbishop exchange his long ecclesiastical robes for one of Tatiana's long dresses). For Frol, on the other hand, it is an important and calculated part of his seduction plan, which imbues it with a far more

risqué element. It is furthermore unusual to find cross-dressing of men as women, as opposed to women as men: in this case, however, it anticipates the future dominant/submissive roles of Annushka and Frol.

What Frol clearly does not count upon is the speed with which his new wife acquires from him the art of dissemblance and deception. She rapidly develops a talent for turning every situation to her advantage, exploiting every possibility. In fact, Annushka consistently appears to be the dominant character in their partnership both in terms of intelligence and emotional sensibility. On more than one occasion in the text, Annushka is described as feeling pity for Frol, which suggests at least some degree of emotional or rational superiority. In contrast to the other female characters of the tale, including her complicit nurse, Annushka is ready and determined to stand up for herself, risking parental rage and abandonment, in order to decide her own actions and fate.

Intrigue and plot are essential in this tale: a complex storyline with several detailed digressions provides not only variety and humor, but also an opportunity for diverse interaction between different characters. This in turn gradually reveals more about the psychology of the central characters, how they reason and react in different situations. The anonymous author offers neither commentary nor moral judgment on the behavior of his two wayward protagonists; instead he describes the thoughts and desires of the main characters as well as some secondary figures, allowing readers to come to their own conclusions—a freedom not found previously in Russian literature. He does, however, appear at times inclined to favor Annushka over Frol: while much of the humor of the latter's character rides on his reputation as the stereotypical rogue, Annushka is developed in a more distinctive manner. She is a more realistic figure, having to cope with pertinent female problems of the time ranging from undesirable amorous advances to arranged marriages. Neither Frol nor Annushka, however, show much respect for the traditions of honor and obedience, even though they succeed in establishing very comfortable lives at the expense of Annushka's family. While this may have been the expected behavior of a rogue such as Frol, to disobey one's parents is not appropriate for a lady of breeding such as Annushka, who can be seen as breaking completely with all medieval prototypes and clearing the path for more independent heroines in the future. The fact that the tale was immensely popular, and is known in many versions and copies, suggests that this theme was appreciated by a wide audience. Undoubtedly, the comic aspects of Muscovite high society would have been appealing, but

Annushka is such an attractive, daring, and novel type of heroine, it is very likely that her character also played an important role in its success.

In conclusion, it is clear that the literary image of medieval Russian women suffered mixed fortunes. What can be gleaned and interpreted from the earliest chronicles and folklore sources concerning women's status in pre-Christian times lends support to the notion that women enjoyed considerable sway in many spheres of life, but that the arrival of the Orthodox Church in Rus' began a long process of erosion of women's image and powers. Ecclesiastical propaganda nourished misogynistic attitudes and complex dilemmas of idealization *versus* condemnation, commonly reflected in both medieval and modern literary works. Despite much vilification, however, women slowly learned to function within the new parameters of Christianity and build upon their remaining areas of influence. Male writers, in turn, created several strong female literary prototypes, choosing to emphasize traditional folkloric elements alongside the ecclesiastical image of women.

In the seventeenth century the old-fashioned Christian stereotype of women finally gave way to a new and radically different literary heroine. Catering to a more sophisticated and increasingly secular audience, greater interest in psychological motivation and analysis of the individual characters became a focal point in literary endeavor. Throughout the seventeenth century, several important female literary protagonists mark a more modern and realistic form of expression and genre. By the time of Peter the Great, the female prototype had finally begun to "answer back," and to challenge the accepted Orthodox stereotype; Monomakh's words of warning had at last been rendered anachronistic and redundant.

NOTES

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1. For an overview of critical attitude, see N. L. Pushkareva, *Zhenshchiny drevnei Rusi* (Moscow, 1989), 177–209.
2. See D. S. Likhachev, "The Type and Character of the Byzantine Influence on Old Russian Literature," *Oxford Slavonic Papers* 12–13 (1965–7), 14–32.
3. See Eve Levin, *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs, 900–1700* (Ithaca, NY, 1989), 36; and Joanna Hubbs, *Mother Russia: The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture* (Bloomington, IN, 1988), 92.
4. This contrasts also with the Byzantine Orthodox calendar which dedicated many festivals to female saints.
5. See T. A. Bernshtam, "Russian Folk Culture and Folk Religion" in Marjorie Mandelshtam Balzer (ed.), *Russian Traditional Culture: Religion, Gender, and Customary Law*

- (Armonk, NY, 1992), 34–47; and Francis Conte, “Paganism and Christianity in Russia: ‘Double’ or ‘Triple’ Faith?” in *The Christianization of Ancient Russia. A Millennium: 988–1988* (Paris, 1992), 207–15.
6. For a history of the *terem* in Russia, see Nancy Shields Kollmann, “The Seclusion of Elite Muscovite Women,” *Russian History* 10: 2 (1983), 170–87.
 7. The Wise Maiden is a positive character found in Russian folktales; commonly of peasant origin, she speaks in riddles, possesses supernatural talents and offers precious advice to the hero (without which he would be lost), and often marries him.
 8. The Amazons were a nomadic tribe of female warriors who, according to Herodotus, operated a matriarchal society and roved the southern steppe of ancient Rus’ in the fifth century BC; see Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, Book IV, chapters 110–17.
 9. Twelfth-century scribes in Rus’ would have applied the canons of Byzantine rhetoric to their composition, one common feature of which was to provide exempla through contrast, an easily comprehensible and very effective means of differentiating good from bad for the reader.
 10. Manuscripts were expensive and time-consuming to produce, with very few literate scribes able to reproduce them. Thus, a manuscript which has survived extant in many copies indicates a popular demand for that particular work.
 11. The Schism in the Russian Orthodox Church came about in the mid-seventeenth century as a result of the reforms introduced by the Patriarch Nikon in an effort to bring the Russian Orthodox Church in line with other Orthodox communities. Nikon’s reforms brought about strong opposition from the more conservative elements in the church who, under the leadership of the Archpriest Avvakum, formed a group of schismatics known as the Old Believers.
 12. Moscow as The Third Rome was a doctrine developed in the sixteenth century which supplied the Muscovite autocracy and the church with both historical and genealogical justification. According to this doctrine the first Rome had fallen because it had betrayed true Christianity; Constantinople had fallen for similar reasons which left Moscow the only true remaining Christian capital, one that would rule forever.
 13. Kallistrat did not compose this masterpiece without a second agenda, however: it is likely that he supported the trans-Volga hermit movement, which repudiated the highly ritualistic form of worship commonly practiced in the established Orthodox Church during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and instead encouraged an individual striving towards salvation without need of holy vows. Thus, Kallistrat possibly chose Ul’ianiia as his subject not simply from filial admiration and love, but also precisely because he could offer a more realistic portrait of someone worthy of sainthood, yet who had lived and worked only in the secular world.
 14. The Decembrists were a group of army officers who, under the reign of Nicholas I, organized an uprising on December 14, 1825 in an effort to bring about a more liberal, constitutional Russia. Badly organized, the officers were arrested and subsequently were either hanged or exiled to Siberia.
 15. The subtitle of this *Povest’* is particularly interesting: “Povest’ o nekotorom goste bogatom i slavnom o Karpe Sutulove i o premudroi zhene ego, kako ne oskverni lozha muzha svoego” (The Tale of a Certain Rich and Famous Merchant Karp Sutulov and of his Extremely Wise Wife, Who Did Not Defile her Husband’s Bed). This is one of the very rare occasions in medieval Russian literature where a female character is mentioned in the title of a work.