

Russian Women Poets of the
Eighteenth and Early
Nineteenth Centuries:
A Bilingual Edition



Edited and translated by

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Introduction

No one has placed the female mind in chains.
What law states that ladies should not write?
Minerva is a woman;
On Mount Helicon not a single man resides
among the whole host of Muses.
Write! You shall be no less beautiful for doing so...
—A. P. Sumarokov, 1761¹

The Russian Historical Context

The inclusion of eighteenth-century Russian poets in a series dedicated to early modern Europe will necessarily raise eyebrows. First, there is the question of geography. Can Russia, whose landmass sprawls from the Baltic Sea to the shores of the Pacific Ocean, truly be considered part of Europe? And what of Russian culture? Can Russians claim the same basic cultural heritage as France, Germany, and Italy? After all, with roots in the Eastern Orthodox rather than Roman Catholic Church, Russia famously missed out on the Renaissance, the Reformation, and, many would claim, much of the European Enlightenment as well. Then, of course, there is the issue of timing. If the rubric “early modern” refers to the period from roughly 1300 to 1700, how can poets writing in the late 1700s and early 1800s qualify? The answers to these questions lie in Russia’s relatively late arrival on the European stage, a tardiness that generated an anxiety and an ambivalence toward the West that persist to this day.²

Prior to the reign of Peter the Great (1689–1725), Russia remained for most Europeans an exotic, barbaric land, part of an “Oriental and even mythological domain.”³ Although historians continue to debate whether the Westernization of Peter’s reign should be seen as continuity or abrupt revolution, all agree that with his reforms

1. Sumarokov, “Lisitsa i statuia,” 213, <http://rvb.ru/18vek/sumarokov/01text/01versus/17parables/101.htm>.

2. For a useful introduction in English to the problem of Russia and the West, see *Russia and Western Civilization*.

3. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 10.

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Russia at last moved to join Europe.⁴ But Russia had a lot of catching up to do. Consider that at the dawn of the early modern period in Europe, as European women first began to reject the misogynistic culture inherited from the ancients, the Roman Catholic Church, and the emerging humanist Renaissance, Russia still lay largely isolated from Western Europe with no established tradition of secular literature, art, or civic life. When European women first raised voices in protest against reigning male prejudice, as seen in the many volumes in the *Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* series, even powerful, wealthy *men* in Russia had yet to publish a book.

Russian women would debut in print a good four centuries after their European counterparts. Still, this enormous chronological lag notwithstanding, there are good reasons for drawing Russian women into the European fold: like their Western European counterparts Russian women faced centuries of entrenched misogyny from their church, the Russian Orthodox Church. They too faced domestic, legal, and social institutions that deemed women subservient to men. And with Russia's rapid Westernization in the eighteenth century, educated Russian women found themselves in positions analogous to those of European ladies, negotiating a place for themselves in the literary gatherings and journals of the capitals St. Petersburg and Moscow, moving slowly toward the expression of an "other voice" in response to male-dominated cultural discourses and institutions.⁵

The Misogynist Tradition in Russia

Before Russia's relatively late Christianization in 988, women held a place of respect and status in Russian culture related not only to their role as mothers and wives but also to the complex pantheon of local pagan worship, in which female goddesses played an important role.

4. For more on Peter the Great and the Westernization of Russia, see Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great*; and Hughes, *Peter the Great and the West*.

5. Peter the Great founded St. Petersburg in 1703. Ten years later he declared his new city the capital of Russia, thus demoting ancient Moscow. Peter's beloved new city maintained its status for over two centuries, until the Bolsheviks returned the capital to Moscow in 1918. Although Moscow remains the capital of the Russian Federation, the two cities are frequently referred to in the plural as "the capitals."

Indeed, images of fertile Mother Earth are central to Russian identity, and to this day some characterize Russia as a deeply matriarchal culture.⁶ With the advent of Christianization, the position of women in Russian society began a misogynistic trajectory analogous to that of women in Western Europe. Like the Roman Catholic Church, the Russian Orthodox Church excluded women from active service and sought to reinforce their subordination to men. Orthodoxy presented women either as sinful and polluted temptresses or as ideal “good women”—hardworking, obedient, pious, silent, and virtuous wives and mothers.⁷

As elsewhere, women in medieval Muscovy—whether merchant wives, serfs, or from elite boyar families—were bound by the common expectations and demands of marriage and children. The resulting absence of women from the public sphere led to exclusion from traditional histories of pre-Petrine Russia. More recent scholarship seeks to address that lacuna, arguing that upper-class women wielded considerable power within the domestic realm allotted to them.⁸ Behind the scenes, women exerted profound influence over important public decisions like marital alliances between noble families.⁹ This volume focuses on the elite because they were, throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the only women with access to basic instruction and, occasionally, to the European-style education that prepared them to try their hand at poetry.

Despite the many parallels between the low status of European and Russian women, pre-Petrine Russian conditions were more restrictive in significant ways. As Nancy Kollmann notes, “Muscovite elite women never enjoyed the mobility, varied opportunities and personal development that their European counterparts possessed.”¹⁰ First, unlike Europe, Russia never had a tradition of convents that

6. On the high status of women in pre-Christian Russia, see McKenzie, “Women’s Image in Russian Medieval Literature,” 19. See also Hubbs, *Mother Russia*; and Pushkareva, “Women in the Medieval Russian Family of the Tenth through Fifteenth Centuries,” 29–43.

7. Engel, “Petrine Revolution,” in Engel, *Women in Russia*, 8–9. For more on the conflicting messages within Russian Orthodoxy on the subject of women, see *Domstroi*.

8. Worobec, “Accommodation and Resistance,” 17–28.

9. *Domstroi*, 29. See also Kollmann, “Seclusion of Elite Muscovite Women,” 179–86.

10. Kollmann, “Seclusion of Elite Muscovite Women,” 177.

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served a secondary function as shelter for unmarried daughters. While convents and unofficial “female communities” did exist as an alternative to life in patriarchal society, they never developed as centers of intellectual engagement along the European model.¹¹ Thus, in eighteenth-century Russia, convents did not offer a locus for nascent feminist dissent as they did in Europe.¹²

The practice among elite Russian families of cloistering women into separate quarters, the *terem* (*lit.*, “chamber”), marks another significant departure from Western practice.¹³ The *terem* was long interpreted, especially by foreign visitors to Muscovy, as enslavement, yet another example of Muscovite “barbarism.” More recently, historians have moved beyond the notion of *terem* as symbol of female victimhood to reveal a complex social, financial, and spiritual center within the elite Russian household.¹⁴ Whether oppressive slavery or secret power base, the existence of the *terem* suggests that, prior to 1700, elite Russian women lived largely in the company of other women. They wore concealing clothing. They worshipped apart from men and took no part in public life at court.¹⁵ Then, with Peter’s Westernizing

11. See *Domstroi*, 17–19. See Engel, “Petrine Revolution,” 40, for a discussion of the unofficial female communities, or “obshchiny.” Although some Russian convents maintained libraries, there is no evidence that nuns were involved in any kind of copying or composition (McKenzie, “Women’s Image in Russian Medieval Literature,” 21).

12. Brenda Meehan notes that as part of the reforms granting the government increased power over the church in the eighteenth century, the number of women’s monasteries was reduced from 203 in 1762 to just 67 two years later. She then notes the appearance of over 220 unofficial “women’s communities” from 1764 to 1917, which brought with them an increased proportion of non-elite women choosing a life of monasticism. Although Meehan notes a higher-than-average literacy rate among women living in these communities, she does not suggest any literary production among their inhabitants. She does, however, argue for a certain feminist sensibility in these women’s decision to assert their own autonomy, even if they themselves would have “disclaimed any feminist goals.” Meehan, *Holy Women of Russia*, 11–15.

13. The seclusion of elite women into separate living quarters had at least one parallel in Europe, as it was practiced by Frankish society in the medieval period. Kollmann, “Seclusion of Elite Muscovite Women,” 173.

14. For the acclaimed study of royal Muscovite women that inaugurated this new approach to scholarship on the *terem*, see Thyrêt, *Between God and Tsar*.

15. See Kollmann, “Seclusion of Elite Muscovite Women,” 170–87.

reforms (1689–1725) the doors to the *terem* were, in effect, blown open, and women were forced to emerge into the public sphere.

Russian Women and Peter the Great's Westernization

Peter the Great's Westernization of Russia has been studied from every imaginable angle. Whether viewed in terms of continuity or revolution, all agree that he ushered in an age of unprecedented change in everything from his prized military arts and shipbuilding to architecture, religion, language, and basic structures of everyday life among the Russian nobility.¹⁶ The various reactions and assimilations of these new European ideas and customs by Russian men has long been a staple of scholarly discussion. Analogous studies of Petrine women, which have appeared only since the turn of the twenty-first century, raise important questions about women's unusual predicament and their emergence from the *terem* as both instigating and reflecting major changes in politics at the Russian court.¹⁷

Imagine the puzzlement and anxiety of the Petrine-era noblewoman when forced out of the *terem* and into mixed-company entertainments. In one ear, she hears traditional Orthodox sermons about chastity and humility, while in the other she learns of new laws decreeing she must dance, wear revealing dresses, and make small talk with men.¹⁸ In a study of Petrine women's sartorial transformation, Lindsey

16. The scholarship on Peter the Great is vast, but a solid introduction to the period can be found in general histories and edited volumes on Peter and his reforms: Cracraft, *Peter the Great Transforms Russia*; Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great*; and Riasanovsky, *Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought*.

17. Petrine women left no firsthand accounts of their reaction to Petrine cultural reforms, so historians must glean insights from "women's fashion, court rituals, portraiture, lubki, inventories of dowry agreements." Marrese, "Women and Westernization in Petrine Russia," 1: 111. For more on Petrine women, see Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great*, 193–202, as well as her two articles on the subject, "From Caftans into Corsets," and "'The Crown of Maidenly Honour and Virtue.'"

18. For an example of such eighteenth-century sermons on women, see "On Chastity," in *Russian Women, 1698–1917*, 21–22. Hughes discusses the conflicting messages for men and women in the Petrine behavior manual *The Honorable Mirror for Youth* in "Redefining Femininity," 45. For an English translation, see Kollmann, "Etiquette for Peter's Time," 63–84. See also Engel, "Petrine Revolution."

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Hughes helps contemporary readers appreciate the shock experienced by women newly released from the *terem*:

The Petrine reforms demanded of all urban women significant cultural and psychological reorientation away from old Muscovite values. This included the baring of bosoms, arms, and heads, which had once been chastely concealed, and drinking and dancing with men in public. It is rather like well-brought-up Victorian ladies being forced to don short skirts or devout Muslim women being robbed of their veils and required to drink quantities of neat spirits.¹⁹

Nor was this transformation limited to the elite. In 1700 all Russians, with the exception of clergy and peasants who worked the fields, were required to adopt Western dress.²⁰ As evidenced from the Petrine behavior manual *The Honorable Mirror of Youth*, codes of conduct for young men had changed drastically since the pre-Petrine era, while expectations for women, decrees on low necklines and dancing notwithstanding, had changed little. Women were still expected to remain chaste, pious, and silent.²¹

Female Rule: The Age of Empresses

Despite the absence of women from public life before the reign of Peter the Great, the Russian eighteenth century emerged as the age of empresses. Women occupied the throne with only brief interruptions from Peter's death in 1725 until the death of Catherine the Great in

19. Hughes, "From Caftans to Corsets," 28. For Westernization of women as a brand of "state service," see Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great*, 202.

20. Hughes, "Redefining Femininity," 36.

21. A comparison of the sixteenth-century behavior model, *The Domostroi*, to the eighteenth-century text *Honorable Mirror of Youth* is quite revealing in this regard. See *Domostroi*; and Kollman, "Etiquette for Peter's Time." Hughes and Marrese argue that the apparent "emancipation" of Petrine women was illusory—that new clothes and behaviors merely masked the persistence of traditional attitudes and laws about women. See Marrese, "Women and Westernization," 111.

1796.²² Tempting as it might be to imagine Russian empresses adopting the role of Maecenas toward their poet-sisters, there is little to suggest such broad encouragement of women writers *per se*.²³ Catherine the Great worked to increase literacy among young noble girls, but her efforts aimed at forming women into proper wives and mothers, not at drawing them into the public sphere.²⁴ Of course, Catherine herself was a prolific writer, but there is nothing to suggest that she either inspired or encouraged women to follow her lead.²⁵

Catherine could hardly serve as role model for the average noblewoman, because she was not an ordinary woman. As monarch, she could certainly exploit her feminine role as mother or gentle protectress when it served her, but like so many female monarchs before her, Catherine cultivated her image as an Amazon warrior, courting praise for her “masculine” turn of mind and martial demeanor. Like the early nineteenth-century poet Anna P. Bunina, who distanced herself from women in part to sidestep marginalization as a “female”

22. In *Scenarios of Power* Richard Wortman casts a rather gentle light on the problem: “It is no accident that women rulers proved able to fuse the personae of conquering and conserving monarchs, for only they could claim to defend Peter’s heritage without threatening a return of his punitive fury.” He further notes that “empresses served as exemplars of both cathartic force and disarming mildness and love, reflecting a classical conception of the identity of the sexes and sexual ambiguity.” Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, 85–86. For a more detailed discussion, see Meehan-Waters, “Catherine the Great and the Problem of Female Rule”; Alexander, “Favourites, Favouritism, and Female Rule in Russia, 1725–1796,” *idem*, “Amazon Autocratrices”; and Marker, *Imperial Saint*.

23. For example, Göpfert’s title notwithstanding, he makes no connection between Catherine and the women who took up the pen during her reign: Göpfert, “Catherine II et les femmes-écrivains de son temps.”

24. With the notable exception of appointing her erstwhile friend, Princess Dashkova, to head the Russian Academy, Catherine made no grand gestures to bring women into Russian letters. This is not to say that women never benefited from her patronage. The poet Maria Sushkova, who was the sister of her secretary, A. V. Khrapovitskii, did come to Catherine’s attention, but Catherine did not single out women, as a group, for patronage. For Catherine’s intentions for female education, see Nash, “Educating New Mothers.”

25. For more on the subject, see Catherine II, *Memoirs of Catherine the Great*; Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great*; Dashkova, *Memoirs of Princess Dashkova*; and a forthcoming volume in this series, an anthology of works by Catherine the Great to be edited and translated by Marcus Levitt.

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writer, perhaps Catherine avoided offering patronage to women to deter unwelcome attention to her gender.²⁶

As background for the many poems in this volume that were composed during Catherine's reign, we should bear in mind that her more than three decades in power were notable less for her gender than for her ceaseless efforts to foster education, the arts, and Enlightenment values.²⁷ Nonetheless, as early as 1773 her ideals were tested by the massive uprising known as the Pugachev Rebellion.²⁸ A decade later, in the years leading up to and immediately following the French Revolution of 1789, Catherine felt increasingly ill at ease with events in Europe and moved to crack down on political dissent.²⁹ In what Isabel de Madariaga calls "the first really serious case of intellectual persecution" in Catherine's reign, the writer and intellectual Aleksandr N. Radishchev was arrested for his 1790 *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* (*Puteshestvie iz Peterburga v Moskvu*), which was interpreted as an exposé on the evils of serfdom. Originally sentenced to be executed, he was instead sent to exile in Siberia.³⁰ The

26. Catherine's inattention to Russian women was another aspect of her general neglect of native Russian artists and poets. One of the most renowned male writers of her day, A. P. Sumarokov, lamented her lack of support for Russian writers and actors in favor of foreigners.

27. Viktor Zhivov argues that Catherine managed to transplant the European Enlightenment in Russia in such a way that it bolstered rather than threatened her power. Zhivov, "Gosudarstvennyi mif v epokhu prosveshcheniia," 149–59.

28. The Pugachev rebellion, or *Pugachevshchina*, was led by the Cossack Emelian Ivanovich Pugachev, who claimed to be Peter III, Catherine's husband, who was murdered as part of the palace coup that brought her to power. There is great disparity in estimates about the number of people actively involved in the revolt, with estimates ranging from as little as 20,000 all the way up to three million participants. Whatever the case, Madariaga notes that "no other eighteenth- or nineteenth-century popular revolt attained such dimensions anywhere else in Europe." Madariaga, *Catherine the Great*, 64. The rebellion was eventually put down when Pugachev was captured in 1774. He was then executed in 1775 in Moscow.

29. For more on Catherine's reaction to the French Revolution, see Madariaga, *Catherine the Great*, 189–202.

30. Madariaga, *Catherine the Great*, 191. Radishchev remained in Siberia until just after Catherine's death, when her son Paul came to power and assiduously sought to undo as much of his mother's work as possible. Only with the ascension of Alexander I was Radishchev allowed back to St. Petersburg itself. He was invited to participate in a commission on drafting new laws, but his dissatisfaction with his ability to effect change apparently

arrest of Nikolai I. Novikov, whose myriad publishing activities supported many eighteenth-century Russian writers, stands as another case in point. Previously, Catherine had polemicized with Novikov intensely but cordially on the pages of her journal *All Sorts and Sundries* (*Vsiakaia viashchina*). Then, beginning in the 1780s, she lost patience with his promotion of Freemasonry and finally, in 1792, had him arrested and imprisoned.³¹

Given the significant cultural, political, and military challenges of Catherine's reign, it is perhaps unsurprising that she devoted little attention to the status of women writers. Yes, she herself was a writer and yes, she appointed her confidante Princess Dashkova to lead the Russian Academy. Still, Catherine as patron or as a woman writer herself seems to have had no direct effect on the poets whose work appears in this volume. Their poems should be read not with an eye to Catherine, but to the developing philosophical and aesthetic movements of Catherine's era. Panegyric poetry extolling Russian enlightenment, such as Sushkova's "Stanzas on the Founding of the Russian Academy," supports the monarch's efforts, prior to the French Revolution, to depict Russia as a modern European nation; the very incarnation of Enlightenment values. Few writers, men or women, openly challenged that idealized image, and those that did, like Novikov or Radishchev, were severely punished. Still, the new popularity of Sentimental lyrics in the 1780s and 1790s, at a time when the Russian state witnessed the unintended consequences of Enlightenment philosophy in Europe, stands as a reminder that larger political questions had become not only unfashionable, but unthinkable. That shift in attention largely reflects the rise of Sentimentalism

exacerbated his depression and led to his suicide in 1802. *Slovar' russkikh pisatelei XVIII veka*, s.v. "Radishchev, Aleksandr Nikolaevich," <http://www.pushkinskijdom.ru/Default.aspx?tabid=10376>.

31. As Lurana O'Malley points out, although Western and Soviet scholars long depicted Novikov as a sort of political and literary martyr—"a heroic figure fighting against Catherine's tyrannical censorship"—he in fact enjoyed many years of support from the empress. O'Malley, *Dramatic Works of Catherine the Great*, 75. It was only later, when he increasingly devoted himself to promulgating Masonic ideals (which some suspected were linked to revolution) that Catherine began to crack down. For a detailed overview of Novikov's life and career, see *Slovar' russkikh pisatelei XVIII veka*, s.v. "Novikov, Nikolai Ivanovich," <http://www.pushkinskijdom.ru/Default.aspx?tabid=962>.

across Europe and the increasing focus on the lyric persona in poetry. At the same time, this new silence about Russia's political stature might suggest that what had once seemed liberating and modern now appeared dangerous and rash.

*The Other Voice in Russia: Women in the Context of
Russia's Nascent Literary Culture*

Explicit protest against the patriarchal culture of domestic life, literary institutions, and the church did not appear in Russia until the turn of the nineteenth century. This postdates the "other voice" that arose in Western Europe by five hundred years, but it follows the emergence of modern Russian literature by mere decades.³² Peter the Great's celebrated program of Westernization notwithstanding, the promotion of literature simply was not on his agenda.³³ Rather than fine arts or belles lettres, Peter worked to transform everyday life (dress, manners, social customs) and reform military and government institutions. Thus, as French writers already lamented their lost golden age, represented by the mighty dramatists Racine and Molière, Russians had barely begun to contemplate a literary culture in 1725, the year of Peter's death. While Petrine Russia could not claim a world-class literature among its achievements, it could claim influence over the subsequent generation, which was moved by the mythology of a magnificent "new Russia" that they extolled and wished to serve.³⁴ The Petrine era also bequeathed a more tangible legacy in the linguistic reforms that paved the way for the modern literary language, as noted by Marcus Levitt: "In the eighteenth century, Russia created a new vernacular Russian literary language, the primary vehicle of Russia's modernization and

32. For an introduction to eighteenth-century Russian literature in Russian, see the classic work by Gukovskii, *Russkaia literatura XVIII veka*; and a recent study, Klein, *Russkaia literatura v XVIII veke*. For general introductions in English, see Serman, "Eighteenth Century"; and Brown, *History of Eighteenth-Century Russian Literature*.

33. See Klein, *Russkaia literatura v XVIII veke*, 26–28. For more detail on linguistic reforms and politics under Peter the Great, see Zhivov, *Iazik i kul'tura v Rossii XVIII veka*, 69–154. Zhivov's book was recently published in an English translation: *Language and Culture in Eighteenth-Century Russia*.

34. Reyfman, *Vasilii Trediakovskii*, 16. For more on the inspiring mythology of Petrine Russia, see Baehr, *Paradise Myth in Eighteenth-Century Russia*.

entry into the Western European cultural sphere that also made possible her extraordinary literary outpouring of creativity in the following century.”³⁵ The eighteenth-century Russian writer wrote in a period of intense literary and linguistic experimentation. If the women poets represented here occasionally struggle with orthography, grammar, punctuation, meter, rhyme, or *le mot juste*, then one should recall that their male colleagues confronted similar challenges and struggles. Their differences during these early years, I would argue, revolve around the issue of authority.

Like so much else in modern Russian culture, literature did not evolve gradually or organically, but rather self-consciously and from above. Building a modern secular literature became a national project, with the three “founding fathers”—M. V. Lomonosov, V. K. Trediakovsky, and A. P. Sumarokov—battling for influence over the development of the literary language and Russian adaptations of established European genres.

The concern with genre reflects prevailing European literary trends adopted by Russia as a foundation for its own modern literature. The Russian tradition began in the 1730s–1750s with a heavy debt to French neoclassicism and its hierarchy of poetic genres and corresponding “styles,” themselves adapted from Aristotle’s *Poetics* by way of Boileau’s *L’art poétique* (1674). Following their European counterparts, Russian writers placed epic, tragedy, and ode at the top of this hierarchy and argued bitterly among themselves as to the appropriate corresponding linguistic styles for the Russian context. High genres not only dictated strict rules for style and structure (such as Aristotle’s famous dictum requiring unity of time and plot for tragedy), but also for characters; only great heroes or royalty were worthy of attention. Middle genres included lyric poetry, including the many pastoral genres represented in this volume, and demanded a corresponding refined conversational language, which Russians developed in the 1790s–1810s. At the bottom of the hierarchy stood low genres, including comedies, with their corresponding low-style (colloquialisms and vulgarity) and low-status characters.³⁶

35. Zhivov, *Language and Culture in Eighteenth-Century Russia*, v.

36. It should be noted that Lomonosov’s initial delineation of genres and styles grouped elegies among the high style, and demanded that vulgarity be omitted from literary language

12 Introduction

By the time Russia began to develop a national literature on the foundation of the neoclassical hierarchy of genres, such strict delineations were already on the way out in Europe. Indeed, during the second half of the eighteenth century, when Russians were hotly debating rules for genre and style, the great philosophes (with the notable exception of Voltaire) increasingly abandoned such concerns. In France and beyond, the age of the epic and tragedy was eclipsed by the rise of the novel, a literary phenomenon absent from the traditional hierarchy and considered a scandalous waste of time by many. It was not long before Russia followed suit. By the late 1790s, Russia had “caught up” with Europe in its fervor for Sentimental novels, tales, and other “tearful” and tender texts. The first two decades of the nineteenth century saw a further break down of the genre hierarchy in Russia.³⁷ The poems in this volume reflect this era of rapidly changing literary tides and women’s status as writers. High style genres were implicitly, if not explicitly, off-limits; only Urusova attempted to frame her work as epic or tragic. Low-style comedy was similarly taboo, as it would be unseemly for women to produce bawdy humor. It should thus come as no surprise that almost all the poems in this volume fall within the “safe” lyric middle genres.

As Irina Reyfman notes in her study of Trediakovsky, “the task of creating the ‘new’ Russian literature burdened eighteenth-century authors with an enormous responsibility. They believed everything they created had the status of a model and thus would determine the future of Russian literature.”³⁸ To be sure, pioneering poets like Trediakovsky and Sumarokov felt keenly that burden of setting precedent. During the heated polemic of the 1740s–1750s, the three founders and their acolytes shouted at one another in print, indulging in intense ad hominem attacks as they vied for status. Each wished to go down in history as the “father” of Russian literature.³⁹ Women,

altogether. For a brief overview in English of the hierarchy of genres and styles in eighteenth-century Russia, see Jones, “Russian Literature in the Eighteenth Century” 29–30.

37. Rayfield, “Golden Age of Russian Poetry,” 90–92.

38. Reyfman, *Vasilii Trediakovsky*, 17.

39. The polemic involving Trediakovsky, Lomonosov, and Sumarokov has generated numerous articles and books. For a discussion in English, see Reyfman, *Vasilii Trediakovsky*; and Ewington, *A Voltaire for Russia*, 13–18.

it should be noted, were completely absent from these acrimonious debates about language, genre, and authority. In those pioneering decades, no woman ever claimed to establish a genre or argued for her authority on literary matters. On the contrary, on the rare occasion that a woman in the 1750s–1770s addressed her right to wield a pen, it was to minimize her own authority with the kind of modesty *topoi* seen in male writers only much later, during the period of Sentimentalism that reigned in the 1770s–1790s.⁴⁰ Russian women writers simply did not participate in the frenzied land grab for genre and authority but instead quietly navigated the generic and linguistic models being set by men. They worked within these evolving male-defined genres, all the while trying to determine appropriately “feminine” language and themes, and that, too, with generous male guidance.

Although women staked no claim to authority, they were welcomed relatively eagerly and early into the literary realm—but welcomed by whom and on what terms? As in Western Europe, Russian women required male patronage and approbation to write. As Bunina, addressing her female readers, quipped at the dawn of the nineteenth century,

... You're no lower than they.
 But, ah!
 'Tis men, not you, preside among the judges.
 For an author's laurels
 And authorial glory are in their hands.⁴¹

Perhaps not surprisingly, the first woman to publish under her own name, Ekaterina A. Kniazhnina, enjoyed connections that included her father, Sumarokov, and her husband, the established playwright Iakov B. Kniazhnin.⁴² Her elegy, which begins “O you who always

40. The early modesty *topoi* of the type employed by Urusova is a topic awaiting investigation, but for the sincerity of women's modesty *topoi* during the era of Sentimentalism, see Andrew, “Crocodile in Flannel or a Dancing Monkey,” 58.

41. See Bunina's poem “Conversation between Me and the Women” in this volume.

42. For more on Kniazhnin and his wife, the poet Ekaterina Kniazhnina, see the individual introduction to her in this volume. To contextualize Kniazhnin's fame as a playwright, it is worth briefly tracing the early history of modern Russian theater, which follows the

loved me,” appeared in her father’s journal, the *Industrious Bee*, in 1759. This pattern of women poets as well-connected relatives continued with the majority of poets represented in this volume, including Elizaveta V. Kheraskova (wife of the famous poet and publisher M. M. Kheraskov); Ekaterina S. Urusova (Kheraskov’s cousin); Maria V. Sushkova (sister of A. V. Khrapovistkii, a poet and influential secretary to Catherine II); Natalia L. and Aleksandra L. Magnitskaia (sisters of the poet Mikhail L. Magnitskii); Elizaveta M. Dolgorukova (sister to the poet Ivan M. Dolgorukov); Anna S. Zhukova and Elizaveta S. Neelova (wife and sister-in-law, respectively, of the poet Vasilii Zhukov); Varvara A. Karaulova (daughter-in-law of the Kniazhnins); and Bunina (aunt of Boris K. Blank, an influential member of Nikolai M. Karamzin’s literary circle). A few others (Maria A. Pospelova, Maria P. Bolotnikova, sisters Ekaterina P. and Anastasia P. Svin’ina, and sisters Elizaveta O. and Maria O. Moskvina) could boast no such useful family ties but nonetheless managed to secure the patronage of

same trajectory as that of modern Russian letters more broadly. In his own time and today Kniazhnina’s father, A. P. Sumarokov, was acknowledged as the father of the Russian theater. He composed the first secular Russian play, *Khorev* (1747) and his dramatic oeuvre eventually comprised over twenty works for the stage. As with Russian poetry, theatrical writing began with adaptations from neoclassical French and German tragedies, frequently reworked to a Russian setting. By the 1760s Sentimentalist trends were already disrupting this new “tradition.” Sumarokov soon outlived his own glory, witnessing the rise of “bourgeois dramas” and “tearful comedies.” Just as the late eighteenth century witnessed the break down of genres in poetry, so in theater too the separation of high/low and comic/tragic was being erased. Amidst these cultural shifts, Kniazhnin’s best known plays, the historical tragedies *Rosslav* (1784) and *Vadim of Novgorod* (Vadim Novogordoskii) (1789) were something of a throwback to his father-in-law’s style. The latter appeared only posthumously in 1793. Somehow slipping by the censors in this anxious time following the French Revolution, the play was discovered by Catherine II and immediately banned. As far as his comedies were concerned, Kniazhnin is best known for the 1779 comic-opera *Misfortune from a Coach* (*Neschastie ot karety*), which condemned the mistreatment of serfs. For a detailed discussion of Sumarokov’s contribution to the Russian theater, see my *A Voltaire for Russia*. Lamentably few introductions to eighteenth-century Russian theater have appeared in English: Leach and Borovsky, *History of Russian Theatre*; and Karlinsky, *Russian Drama from Its Beginnings to the Age of Pushkin*. For a more focused overview, see Wirtschafter, *Play of Ideas in Russian Enlightenment Theater*.

the famous Sentimentalist writer, publisher, and historian Karamzin or his literary confrères Blank and Vasiliï S. Podshivalov.⁴³

Thanks to supportive family, Russian women, unlike their Western European counterparts, began writing and publishing poetry at roughly the same time as their male compatriots. Of course, their poems did not appear in nearly the same numbers as those by men, but they did appear and, more often than not, in the very same journals and following the same conventions regarding genre, meter, style, and authorship. Still, these women quietly negotiated their own presence, if not yet their own voice, in their texts.⁴⁴ Like European women writers, Russian women attempted various entries to public authorship: translating, rather than creating original texts;⁴⁵ masking gender with a masculine lyric persona; publishing anonymously; hiding behind pseudonyms or cryptograms; and occasionally subverting expectations within acceptably “feminine” roles. To be sure, this progression was neither uniform nor linear. Not all women adopted all tactics, nor did any one approach belong to a single time period. Still, a basic pattern can be discerned. During the fifty years from 1750 to 1800, when Russian literature itself was in its infancy, most women poets challenged patriarchal institutions and perceptions subtly, if at all. Then, at the threshold of the nineteenth century, when Russia at last “caught up” with Europe and when the so-called “feminization of Russian literature,” wrought by Sentimentalism, was at its height, women’s poetry was marked by an emotional intimacy and specificity that surpassed the conventional “tearful” literature of male Sentimentalist writers.⁴⁶ Finally, at the turn of the century, a handful

43. The impact of mentors on specific poets will be discussed in the introductions to each author. For an overview of the vagaries of male patronage, see Rosslyn, “Making Their Way into Print,” 416–17.

44. Rosslyn meticulously details eighteenth-century Russian women writers’ arrival into print, noting their combination of “apparent submission with covert subversion.” Rosslyn, “Making Their Way into Print,” 407–38.

45. With the exception of Karaulova’s adaptation of Berquin’s “*Plaintes d’une mère auprès du berceau de son fils*,” Russian translations of poems will not be covered in this volume. For more about the context and history of translation among eighteenth-century Russian women, see Rosslyn, *Feats of Agreeable Usefulness*.

46. I borrow the phrase from the seminal article by Vowles, “‘Feminization’ of Russian Literature.”

of women called forth with a clear other voice, demanding that men shed long-held prejudices and consider women their spiritual and intellectual equals under the laws of church and state as well as in the drawing rooms of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

In comparison to Western Europe, a clear and unmistakable other voice cries out in Russia only belatedly. Yet as has been discussed, this delayed emergence was to a great extent the result of the relatively late rise of modern Russian letters more generally. A secular literary culture developed in Russia only in the mid-eighteenth century. Fundamental debates about the literary language and versification began in the 1730s, while the first literary journal appeared in 1755. Within the context of this late entry by Russian *men* into the literary arena, the development of the other voice by Russian women appears quite rapid. Just a few decades after newly educated elite men began publishing, Russian women followed with challenges to male prejudice that were at first subtle, but within just a few decades, quite pointed and specific.⁴⁷

47. The disparaging term *zhenskaia poezia* (women's poetry) lives on in Russia. Although Russia can claim many great women poets, including Evdokiia Rostopchina and Karolina Pavlova in the nineteenth century, and Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva in the twentieth, it never developed a tradition of feminist solidarity among writers. Western critics shake their heads in despair and frustration at the Russian refusal to adopt their brand of feminism. In 1987 Barbara Heldt laments that "the methods and insights of feminist literary criticism that have evolved in the past decade in the West could be of great value in redefining Russian literature as a series of texts involving gender-based values" but that "Russian feminist criticism is almost nonexistent." Heldt, *Terrible Perfection*, 5. This aversion to Western-style feminist discourse may be explained partially as a reaction against Soviet-era rhetoric. Celebrating women's emancipation with great fanfare, the Soviet regime pushed women into the workplace, while doing little to alter fundamental sexist attitudes about their role at home, thus leading to the notorious "double burden." In her review of du Plessix Gray's *Soviet Women: Walking the Tightrope*, the Russian writer Tatyana Tolstaya sums up Russian hostility toward Western feminism: "In bewilderment they ask themselves: What do we need this ridiculous feminism for anyway? In order to do the work of two people? So men can lie on the sofa?" See Tolstaya's "Women's Lives," in *Pushkin's Children*, 2–3. This persistent distrust of feminism may have roots as far back as the mixed messages of Sentimentalism and Russia's centuries-long isolation from the West.

Genre in Early Modern Russian Literature

Implicit in the discussion above of poets' efforts to adapt European models to the Russian context is an understanding of the importance of genre in Russia's developing literary canon. If in Europe Rousseau was already making a splash with the novel, a genre unrecognized in the classical hierarchy, in Russia authors continued to proceed in accordance with established genres, however hazily conceived and defended.⁴⁸ Indeed, Joachim Klein notes in his monograph on the period that "genre remained for a long time the aesthetic category which most determined the creation of an artistic work as well as its reception."⁴⁹ With this centrality of genre in mind, the author introductions in this volume will review the meter, rhyme, and poetic genre for each poem. Still, a brief overview may prove useful.

By the time Sumarokov's daughter, Kniazhnina, opened the doors to women poets in 1759, debates about the basic foundations of Russian poetry had receded. No longer was anyone championing the syllabic verse that briefly held sway in the 1720s and 1730s.⁵⁰ Now all Russian poetry, regardless of genre, was composed according to the

48. For Sumarokov's attitude toward genre and taste, see Ewington, *A Voltaire for Russia*, 28–73. Sumarokov, following his mentor Voltaire, vehemently rejected the genre of the novel (41). For Rousseau's contemporary reception in Russia, see Barran, *Russia Reads Rousseau, 1762–1825*, 3–184.

49. Klein, *Russkaia literatura v XVIII veke*, 14.

50. For a good introduction to the basic chronology and principles of Russian syllabic verse, see Scherr, *Russian Poetry*, 33–39; or Wachtel, *Cambridge Introduction to Russian Poetry*, 17–18. Beginning with Antiokh D. Kantemir, modern Russian poetry adapted Poland's tradition of syllabic verse, which relied on three basic principles: a thirteen-syllable line; couplets of feminine rhyme (penultimate syllable stressed); and a caesura (word break) after the seventh or eighth syllable. The newly established tradition of syllabic poetry was quickly eclipsed in Russia by syllabotonic verse, introduced by Lomonosov by way of Germany. Unlike syllabic verse, which is grounded in the number of syllables per line, syllabotonic verse follows metrical "feet" which proceed according to patterns of accented (stressed) and unaccented (unstressed) syllables. As Wachtel (*Cambridge Introduction to Russian Poetry*, 18) notes, there are five possible patterns or "feet" of syllabotonic verse: the binary meters (iambic and trochaic) and ternary meters (dactylic, amphibrachic, and anapestic). Russian syllabotonic verse initially favored six-syllable trochaic lines, which mimicked French hexameters ("Alexandrine") but soon shifted toward iambic verse, with iambic tetrameter dominating for most of Russian literary history.

syllabotonic system, with various canonical meters and stanzaic structures signaling adherence to one or another genre.⁵¹ Russian women almost always confined themselves to the “light,” middle genres associated with pastoral verse, sonnets, and elegies, while largely steering clear of high-style genres, which included the triumphant ode, the epic, and tragedy. Within these accepted poetic forms women writers generally cast themselves as the “young unmarried woman; female friend; devout soul; sensitive observer of nature; mother; sorrowing widow; and sister, aunt, or godmother.”⁵² At a time when Russian men occasionally amused themselves with pornographic poetry and bawdy eclogues and demanded praise for their passionate tragedies, women, with the notable exception of Urusova’s *Heroides*, depicted even romantic love as sweetly innocent.⁵³ Regarding the ubiquitous theme of love in eighteenth-century poetry, women poets most often address not lovers, but God, children, absent husbands, and departed sisters. By the 1790s many of these poems were unusually personal and confessional, but earlier women’s poems were largely indistinguishable from those of men, steeped as they were in didactic, abstract, and universal themes associated with European neoclassicism.

Readers familiar with the European literary canon will immediately recognize in the poetry in this volume a predilection for pastoral genres and motifs among women. Shepherds, nymphs, and zephyrs abound. But whereas European pastoral poetry functioned as part of a developed salon culture and was often allegorically linked to specific individuals (much like a roman à clef), it has been argued that Russia had no salon culture and that therefore the pastoral began primarily as a laboratory for linguistic experimentation.⁵⁴ Yet it was precisely the pastoral genres’ thematic focus on love and virtue, more than the opportunity to experiment with form, that appealed to Russian women. As middle genres, idylls and eclogues did not require the authority

51. Scherr (*Russian Poetry*, 40–42) also reviews the development of syllabotonic poetry in Russia.

52. Rosslyn, “Making Their Way into Print,” 422.

53. See Schruba, “Porn in the Age of Enlightenment/‘Porno’ v epokhu prosveshcheniia.” In that same volume, see also Levitt, “Barkoviana and Russian Classicism.”

54. See Klein, “Pastoral’naia poeziia russkogo klassitsizma.” For the absence of a salon culture in eighteenth-century Russia, see Klein, *Russkaia literatura*, 289.

of the epic or tragedy nor the risky, ribald humor of low comedy. As in Europe, Russian pastoral poetry was situated in the requisite locus amoenus, an idealized world of gentle meadow or forest where shepherds and shepherdesses, who bore no resemblance to actual Russian peasants, toiled in harmony and peace. Yet despite this highly stylized landscape, some women poets pushed the boundaries of the pastoral. For example, as I will discuss in detail below, Urusova sets her five-canto poem *Polion, or The Misanthrope Enlightened* in a recognizably pastoral setting yet expands the form well beyond the usually brief love idyll and the message beyond a traditional concern with sentimental affection. Similarly, Anastasia P. Svin'ina subtly subverts the centrality of love in her short poem "The Innocent Shepherdess," suggesting the shepherdess can do without romance and thus claims the landscape for herself.

Pastoral genres were "safe" for women because they demanded no personal revelation, which would have been deemed unseemly. The epigram and epitaph, on the other hand, although middle genres, were less commonly taken up among women, perhaps, as Wendy Rosslyn suggests, because they demanded personal specificity and even autobiography.⁵⁵ Women did compose in these genres, if not prolifically. At times they followed their male mentors and at others deviated slightly from established models. Sumarokov, as is so often the case, established the basic contours. Gukovskii notes in his classic study of the period that Sumarokov's epigrams conformed to French tradition: They address a specific person and offer "short novellas in a few lines or rhymed anecdotes, or simply the poet's witty remarks on the themes of life ... Sumarokov's epigrams were humorous caricatures of everyday life."⁵⁶ But what right had women to comment on "everyday life," which, it goes without saying, meant a life deemed worthy of commentary—a man's life. Moreover, could a woman poke fun? The only epigram in this volume, written by one of the Moskvina sisters, follows Sumarokov's lead but specifically targets women's domestic life—a silly spat between female friends, which she ironically likens to a duel. That sort of playful, satirical edge is largely missing from this volume, and one cannot help wondering how many

55. Rosslyn, "Making Their Way into Print," 425.

56. Gukovskii, *Russkaia literatura XVIII veka*, 148.

published epigrams of the period might have been penned by women but attributed anonymously or pseudonymously.

Unlike the satirical epigram, the genre of the epitaph offered a voice more in keeping with women's traditional roles of mother and tender sister. The epitaph follows no specific metrical pattern or stanzaic structure but consistently expresses *memento mori* in a brief poem of one or two stanzas in length. The genre appeared in Russia in the 1660s, almost a century before the development of a Westernized, secular literature, with epitaphs by Simeon Polotskii and other distinguished churchmen. The genre grew in popularity by the late eighteenth century, reflecting the move away from the optimism of earlier Russian literature, with its shining Enlightenment faith in the future and its relatively rigid genre structures, toward the tearful texts of Sentimentalism.⁵⁷ Russian women only rarely wrote epitaphs; Dolgorukova and Anna A. Turchaninova offered examples of the genre with musings on the ephemeral nature of life. Elizaveta Moskvina too offers a poignantly personal epitaph to her deceased infant niece, which, were it longer, might better be designated an elegy.

As with so many other genres, Sumarokov helped set the model for the elegy in Russia, writing ten of his twenty-seven elegies in a single year, 1759. Interestingly, it was in December 1759 that his daughter, Kniazhnina, became the first Russian woman to publish under her own name, with a poem she explicitly categorized as an elegy, "O you who always loved me." It is not surprising that some reacted with suspicion to Kniazhnina's debut, suspecting her father had a hand in the creation of the poem. After all, her lament over lost love follows her father's model for the genre, which has been characterized as abstract, universal, and lacking evolution (in both story and psychology), narration, and a recognizable motivating framework.⁵⁸

57. Stephen Baehr connects the epitaph to the elegy, which reflected the end of the unusual optimism of early Russian poetry. The elegy, according to Baehr, "stressed the omnipresence of an ever-hungry death," while the epitaph similarly reflected "the general pessimism of the period." Baehr, *Paradise Myth in Eighteenth-Century Russia*, 148. For an overview of the epitaph's development in Russia, see Nikolaev and Tsar'kova, "Tri veka russkoi epitafii," 5–44. Tsar'kova also offers an overview of the genre's evolution and poetics in *Russkaia stikhotvornaia epitafii*.

58. Gukovskii, *Elegiia v XVIII veke*, 58–66. See also Klein, *Russkaia literatura v XVIII veke*, 169–71. Klein also discusses Sumarokov's love songs, 166–67. For more on the evolution of